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978-0-521-44497-2 - Emerson and the Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and Ethical Purpose in the Later Work

David M. Robinson

Excerpt

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Introduction

“Power, new power, is the good which the soul seeks” (*W*, 8:63).

A generation of scholars has come to read Emerson as a philosopher of power. The discovery that power was “Emerson’s True Grail,” as Barbara Packer put it,¹ has secured on quite new grounds his place as a founder of American culture. This new sense of Emerson is marked by a notable deemphasis on the elements of his philosophy that had constituted his achievement for earlier readers – his metaphysical idealism and his articulation of the transcendent sources of the human personality. Joel Porte broadly anticipated this emphasis in his reading of Emerson in terms of the ebb and flow of power in the human cycle of aging, and Emerson’s conception of power, both psychological and political, has come to be a central concern of many of Emerson’s readers. David Marr has argued that Emerson regarded the achievement of “power” as the “highest end of culture,” and has noted the difficult distinction between such personal power and egotism. Michael Lopez has remarked on the emphasis on force, power, and even war in Emerson’s thought and rhetoric, proposing that “nearly all of Emerson’s major essays can be read as fables of the self, the soul, the mind, man, or humankind in the process of struggling for, gaining, losing, or rewinning some form of power.” In this view, the important Emerson is no longer the philosopher of vision and the proponent of “Reason” as a new form of knowing, but a thinker who, in Cornel West’s words, “swerve[d] from the predominant epistemological concerns of European philosophers” and thereby “conceived of his project as a form of power.” This reconception of the basis of Emerson’s significance has made him, in West’s view, “first and foremost a cultural critic obsessed with new ways to generate forms of power.”² This new Emerson, conceived as a theorist of power, exists uneasily with the Emerson committed to a metaphysics of transcendental idealism. The

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result has been, in Lawrence Buell's apt characterization, a "de-Transcendentalized Emerson [who] is more in keeping with a 1980's mentality than a 1960's mentality." Buell's prediction that "we are going to see more of such criticism before we see less" seems to have been prophetic, and the reconception of Emerson now in progress marks a significant critical reorientation in American literary historiography, one that is as revealing, of course, of the concerns of our critical age as of Emerson himself.³ This realignment, however, is far from clarifying Emerson's achievement or settling the nature of his legacy.

In the past, the most pressing task of Emerson scholarship was to account for his foreground. The landscape of early American intellectual history has seemed one of disruptions; and Emerson, seen as the rebellious transcendentalist, a key disrupter. But since history encompasses even its deniers, Emerson's break with tradition has been read itself as a significant, and representative, part of the texture of American cultural history. Perry Miller's tracing of the subterranean route from Jonathan Edwards to Emerson is the most influential attempt to connect Emerson to an earlier American past, one under revision in the last two decades by closer examinations of the nature of New England Puritan self-conception, and more rigorous analyses of American liberal traditions, and American Unitarianism in particular.⁴ The focus of the question of Emerson's historical place seems now to have shifted to the problem of the next rupture in American intellectual history, the fading of transcendentalism in the rise of pragmatism. When William James brushed aside "all the great single-word answers to the world's riddle," his catalog of those misleading attempts to idolize "*The Truth*" had quite deliberate reference to Emerson. Indeed, almost every term that James consigns to the ash heap could well have been drawn from Emerson's journals: "God, the One, Reason, Law, Spirit, Matter, Nature, Polarity, the Dialectic Process, the Idea, the Self, the Over-soul."⁵ If Edwards was a precursor to Emerson, it was certainly by no direct continuity of ideas, as Miller had to admit; if Emerson anticipated William James, he must have done so in spite of James' rejection of Emerson's fundamental commitment to the metaphysics of transcendental idealism.

The most obvious account is of conflict: Transcendentalism is the repudiation of Calvinism; pragmatism, of transcendentalism. But even in a period when social disruption and historical discontinuity have provided appealing paradigms for intellectual work, this obvious account has not been satisfactory. Emerson insinuates himself into the pattern of American culture not only as an agent of rupture but also as an agent of fulfillment and as a facilitator of what came after him.

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The sense that he enabled, and even anticipated, later writers who rejected key parts of his vision can in part be accounted for in the changes that he himself underwent in a career of significant change. The present study concerns this shift. I hope to describe how the fading of visionary ecstasy as a reliable religious foundation eventuated in Emerson's gradual orientation toward ethical engagement as a means of spiritual fulfillment. It is important to note that this fading of the visionary was never complete, and that Emerson's pragmatic orientation was never absolute. Nor was the turn that I am describing linear. But in the early 1840s Emerson entered a period of crisis that centered on the viability of his program of self-culture and its connections to fulfillment in the visionary. "Experience" is the central articulation of this crisis, although it is anticipated significantly in "The Transcendentalist." In the late 1840s and early 1850s, Emerson responded to this crisis with an emphasis on ethical action and social criticism, a trend accelerated by his English lecture tour of 1847–8 and the American economic and political arena of the 1850s. If we look to Emerson for a solution that had finality for him, or promises it for us, we are likely to be disappointed. "I unsettle all things," he said defiantly in 1841 (*CW*, 2:188), though the defiance would gather increasing heaviness as the decade progressed. Unsettlement increasingly demanded action as its appropriate counterpart.

Although I have resorted to the term *pragmatist* to help describe Emerson's later reorientation as a moral philosopher, I also recognize that pragmatism is a multifarious and at times slippery term that has met a variety of critical needs for contemporary literary criticism. To argue for the connections between Emerson and James or later American pragmatists is beyond the scope of my study, though I note with interest the earlier and ongoing attempts to understand what Russell B. Goodman has called "a strong incipient pragmatism" in Emerson's work.⁶ Giles Gunn's recent definition of pragmatism as "a method for performing work in a world without absolutes" is relevant, I believe, to Emerson's struggle to translate his earlier commitment to vision into a more enabling valuation of ethical work.⁷ I have made more personal use of the problematic term *pragmatist* here because it has allowed me to chart the obvious changes in Emerson's career without devaluing his later work as a defeat or surrender. The term *pragmatic*, in other words, has enabled me to locate my dissatisfaction with Stephen E. Whicher's *Freedom and Fate*, the most sensitive portrayal we have yet had of Emerson's intellectual change. Whicher describes Emerson's transferral of hope to "larger and eternal good" as "the emotional basis of [his] later serenity." But his tone clearly communicates his disposition to read Emerson's achievement in the light of his most

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extreme mystical and individualist formulations of the 1830s, a standard that inevitably devalues what came before and what came after.

For Whicher, Emerson's shift toward an emphasis on the larger good "makes his earlier individualism and self-reliance meaningless; at the same time it still gives the lie direct to the hard facts of experience, and this without the supposed supporting evidence of unrealized human capacities to lend it plausibility. Failing to command the Power that will set him free, he falls back on a renewed submission to the Law which had always complemented it."⁸ The issue as Whicher presents it is power, but power defined, it seems to me, in distressingly narrow terms. Emerson's later career might better be described as a widening of his reference for power, an expansion rather than a falling back, and a turn toward the "hard facts of experience," especially as those take a social manifestation. Whicher's explanation of Emerson's achievement in the 1830s implied that its cost was resignation and acquiescence in the 1840s and 1850s. I argue here that Emerson's "transcendental" achievement was more fragile and complex than is often claimed, and his revision of it more astute and compelling.

This book bears a complicated but important relation to my previous study of Emerson's early theological development, *Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer* (1982). Conceived first as a sequel to that study, the present work seemed at moments to be developing into a repudiation of it. Those who have written about Emerson or taught his works will recognize the dismaying experience of finding that a close study of each new Emerson text seems to entail a revision of what one had felt about all his previous works. That, surely, is experiential testimony to Emerson's tireless achievement. My earlier work grounded Emerson in the context of nineteenth-century Unitarian theology, arguing that his developing transcendentalism was an extension of certain fundamental assumptions of Unitarianism, in particular its emphasis on the culture of the soul. But the 1840s saw an acceleration of Emerson's trajectory into secularism, and we find there a figure who seems less a theologian once removed into visionary romanticism than a protomodernist, struggling against skepticism for some new form of philosophical grounding. How much Unitarianism was left in Emerson, after all, when he commented, on hearing that Frederic Henry Hedge was intending to write "an Essay on the importance of a liturgy," that he would "add an Essay on the importance of a rattle in the throat" (*JMN*, 13:247)? But here is the complication: His radical propounding of visionary experience propelled him out of Unitarian circles in the 1830s, but "ecstasy," as he termed it in "The Method of Nature," rapidly proved itself to be unstable and self-defeating. Where, then, did he find himself? Unable to affirm continually the transcendental grounding of

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the soul through experience, he was forced back on the soul's ethical basis and on the workings of the moral sense. If Emerson's disenchantment with ecclesiastical institutions was permanent, this specific form of anti-institutionalism was complicated by an increasing recognition of the centrality of relational ethics and the power of social forces in his later works. The Unitarian ethos of character building and self-culture through ethical action that nurtured the early Emerson was reformulated in the 1840s into a form of ethical pragmatism, as his response to the crisis of his "flash-of-lightning faith" (*CW*, 1:213) of the 1830s.

If, as I have argued previously, the emergence of Emerson's transcendentalism was the result of a gradual expansion of the Unitarian philosophy of self-culture, that expansion can be explained by an increasing insistence in the late 1830s on the experiential realization, the mystical possession, of the transcendent nature of the self. Emerson's difference from his Unitarian contemporaries was less a question of doctrine, then, than of the intensity of his emphasis on ecstasy as a confirming mode of knowledge. The tradition of spiritual experience in nineteenth-century Unitarianism has been delineated in Daniel Walker Howe's discussion of the liberal adaptation of Christian pietism, and it is in ample evidence in two Unitarian ministers who had a direct effect on Emerson in his formative years, William Ellery Channing and Henry Ware, Jr. Emerson amplified their spiritual intensity, gave it a new and controversial vocabulary, and dehistoricized it from the Christian tradition. Although the latter moves were the most controversial, it was the first of them, the tension that he placed on spiritual ecstasy, that became increasingly harder for Emerson to sustain. "Experience" is the key text for understanding this change, and it has become the benchmark text for Emerson studies because of the precision with which it records his struggle to regain vision, or ascertain what to do without it.

"Doing without" became the spiritual condition to which Emerson responded in pragmatic terms. "The Transcendentalist" and "Experience" delineate the state of the "double consciousness" in which the self must bracket the ideal to cope with the recalcitrant real. What began in the early 1840s as the coping of a somewhat beleaguered idealist became, by the 1850s, both a moral perspective and a spiritual strategy. It was not without a sense of diminishment. "I am very content with knowing," he admitted, "if only I could know." But facing that blank wall, Emerson attempted, as he advised in "Fate" and other late essays, to transform a condition of limit into a springboard of power. His task thus became "the transformation of genius into practical power" (*CW*, 3:48–9).

Emerson's replacement of the private and visionary with the prag-

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matic entailed a growing valorization of the social aspects of experience, ranging from friendship to politics. The pragmatic Emerson, as I will discuss him here, is the social Emerson, best regarded as a moral or ethical philosopher who was beginning to see and assess the impact of larger social transformations on the moral life of the individual.⁹ In his later work, Emerson became a social critic. Len Gougeon has documented the extraordinary moral pressure exerted by the antislavery cause on Emerson's evolving concerns, and this political orientation was augmented by his growing awareness of the shifting forms of social life resulting from the growth of modern social conditions such as urban life and the industrial organization of work and the economy.¹⁰ The changes forced on Emerson by the social conditions of the 1840s have most recently been noted in Sacvan Bercovitch's important study of Emerson's shifting conception of "individualism," but Bercovitch describes "the radical early essays" as giving way to "the conservative 'later Emerson'" as he gradually articulated his "antipathy to socialism."¹¹ The "later Emerson" that I offer here is both more complex and more progressive than the standard conceptions might suggest. Emerson was at times prescient and at times obtuse or disappointingly silent in his social analysis, but the direction of his work was toward a salvaging of meaningful interpersonal relations, a shoring up of effective community, and an indictment of the caustic materialism and shallowly conformist models of self-definition of nineteenth-century America. An ethic of self-sacrifice, rooted in the doctrines of disinterested benevolence propounded earlier by Channing, and also in the New England Puritan tradition, continued to be a definitive standard for Emerson.

This realization of the crucial place of the social sphere in human life was accelerated by Emerson's English lecture tour of 1847–8, in many ways a turning moment of his later thought. Both fascinated and confused by the industrial organization, enormous economic power, and comparative social density of England, Emerson was changed on his return to America. But it was less new ideas or insight that he found in England than the capacity to see more completely the importance of the social category of human experience. The building American political crisis of the next decade sustained this reorientation. There Emerson found an unambiguous unity between the moral and the political, and his most forceful political statements address this national crisis. Never entirely comfortable with the role of a political spokesman, he nevertheless oriented his lecturing in the 1850s to the moral choices posed to the individual by the national political crisis and quickly changing national economy. Largely overlooked or dismissed by earlier readers as part of a decline into the genteel, or a dulling of the edge

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of his earlier visionary witness, texts such as “Illusions,” “Wealth,” “Success,” “Domestic Life,” and his passionate addresses against the Fugitive Slave Act deserve a reconsideration in the charting of Emerson’s later career. These suggest the extent to which he had come to address political reform, daily experience, work, and community as the keys to his moral vision.

Readers may acknowledge with a kind of automatic quality my repeated emphasis on the complexity of Emerson’s development, but it must be kept in mind as this book is read. In almost every text, from his earliest sermons to his last lectures, elements of this pragmatic moral vision are present. Similarly, one encounters the visionary, never abandoned entirely, from first to last. I propose here a method of discussing shadings of emphasis and changing choices of subject matter, rather than the abandonment of one philosophy for another. The bedrock of consistency, Emerson’s faith in the moral sentiment, adapted in the 1820s from his schooling in Scottish commonsense philosophy, is an ever-near resource for most texts and a particularly important one for his later emphasis on the conduct of life.¹² But the epistemological crisis of “Experience” and the paralytic specter of “Fate,” the central statements of what we have come to know as the “skeptical” later Emerson, were the severest tests for this foundation, and Emerson’s pragmatic turn is in many respects the sign that he had emerged from that crisis – not having solved it, but having discovered the courage to act under the shadow of uncertainty. “Doubt is the evidence of a live mind,” wrote O.B. Frothingham, one of Emerson’s later followers in the Free Religion movement.¹³ Emerson’s crisis of doubt nurtured one of his most creative and important turns.

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*The Mystic and the Self-made Saint**THE INNER DIALOGUE OF SELF-CULTURE*

“I complain in my own experience of the feeble influence of thought on life, a ray as pale & ineffectual as that of the sun in our cold and bleak spring. They seem to lie – the actual life, & the intellectual intervals, in parallel lines & never meet” (*JMN*, 5:489).

In 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson proposed a new answer to a familiar question of the catechism: “His own Culture,—the unfolding of his nature, is the chief end of man. A divine impulse at the core of his being, impels him to this” (*EL*, 2:215). This doctrine of self-culture as the end of human existence had been growing in Emerson’s thinking since his entry into the ministry in the middle 1820s. It reached fruition in his lectures of the late 1830s, becoming the dominant model of the spiritual life among the liberal thinkers in New England. Its appeal was great. It offered a liberating sense of power and potential by wholly discrediting the Calvinist notion of innate depravity, yet its firm anchoring in the “divine impulse at the core” of human nature made it a spiritually nourishing vision. Its appeal to an intuitive sense of truth lessened the burdens of conventional moral standards, although it imposed its own, perhaps stricter, demands for moral progress. Self-culture was a fragile and synthetic idea, pulled in conflicting directions by questions about the means of sustaining it, and even deeper questions about the value, or even the possibility, of doing so. The texture of Emerson’s journals and essays of the late 1830s and early 1840s is a series of snarled confrontations with competing paradigms for this refashioned life of spiritual growth and, in deepening intensity, of struggles to salvage the entire vision of self-culture from the specter of doubt. How can we best make progress? ran one strand of dialogue. Is the concept of progress itself an illusion? echoed another.

The spiritual biography of Emerson in this period is thus no smooth

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curve of the ascent of the soul, nor a steady falling away from any achieved spiritual height. Emerson's continuous inner dialogue yielded discrete moments of faith and doubt, of tension and serenity, but we can find guideposts of a sort, the poles of intellectual attraction toward which he was pulled. Perhaps the most significant direction of his thinking, which I hope to trace in this study, was the growing conviction that spiritual truth had its life in moral action. This ethical and pragmatic orientation became increasingly central to Emerson in the 1840s, and it is reflected in his growing attention to questions of the conduct of life in his later work. My study will trace the way this ethical imperative, accelerated by a crisis of waning spiritual vision in the 1840s, pushed Emerson to modify and extend his doctrine of self-culture as he faced the philosophical and experiential problems inherent in it.

This strand of pragmatism was the dialectical opposite of the mystical element of his faith and personality, which was never wholly submerged in the currents of doubt and reformulation that mark his thought in the 1840s. Throughout the period he explored the baffling comings and goings of moments of spiritual insight. This dialogue with mysticism or "ecstasy" was very often a struggle to come to terms with a sometimes dispiriting dualism of experience. The world Emerson confronted was often different from the world he had conceived. To complement, or replace, his slackening capacity for mystical insight, Emerson began to stress self-culture not only as a visionary proposition but also as a function of will and moral action. Thus at times we find in Emerson the mystic, whose fundamental spiritual posture is that of passive and quietistic attention to the submerged divinity of the self. But elsewhere we find the self-made saint, whose spiritual culture is wholly in his own hands. Emerson wrestled with this tension through the flexible media of the journal and essay, cultivating in both an open form that usefully mirrored his divisions of mind. Modern criticism has taught us the ironic and dramatic complexity of his essays, complicating any reading of them as a straight declarative philosophy or a simple narrative of the self. Instead, we must approach the essays as the sites at which Emerson hoped to work through his conflicting impulses.

Leonard Neufeldt's stress on the principle of "metamorphosis" as both an intellectual law in Emerson's philosophy and a principle of his literary construction is useful here, for it reminds us of the process of "unfolding" that is transpiring throughout the essay.¹⁴ The "meaning" of an essay is not entirely a reflection of the final position Emerson reaches, although that is important. But we have to comprehend in some way his process of reaching his conclusions. We can recognize the significance of the tonal shifts, the moments of tension and con-

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tradition and the dramatic interludes, if we keep in mind that these turns are true and necessary in a particular instant, given a particular context – and that their final weight must be assessed in the light of the entire course of the essay.

An Emerson essay is best thought of as a proving ground for the culture of the soul, in which a subject is educated or cultivated through confronting and responding to a series of intellectual and existential problems. Each response within an essay generates its own new problems. Something of the same thing happens, more spontaneously and more disjointedly, in the journals. In both cases we find the author who reports his experience and observations, building from them a vantage point from which to engender the work of self-culture in himself and in others. Emerson's continual reinvention of the essay was, he felt, a necessary gesture of communication with a larger audience for whom he continued to feel, in some respects, a pastoral concern.

Essays: First Series (1841) can in this light be considered a guidebook for the culture of the soul, in which will and acceptance form the poles of his central dilemma. The book is most often remembered as a hymn to strenuous and persistent effort, as the general popularity of "Self-Reliance" and the critical stature of "Circles" suggest. In both these essays, willed effort is at the center of the spiritual life, and Emerson's rhetorical purpose is to teach his readers to circumvent the various obstacles to that effort. Thus "conformity" and "consistency" are attacked as the chief hindrances to self-trust in "Self-Reliance," and the many "forms of old age" – "rest, conservatism, appropriation, inertia" (*CW*, 2:189) – are exposed as the enemies of the energetic pursuit of the new in "Circles." These essays have done much to define Emerson's place in intellectual history. Yet within that same book is the other Emerson who quietly affirmed in "Spiritual Laws" that "our moral nature is vitiated by any interference of our will" (*CW*, 2:78), and reduced the wisdom of "Compensation" to the maxim "I learn to be content" (*CW*, 2:70).

The sources of this intellectual tension reside in Emerson's original conviction, affirmed for him in the preaching of William Ellery Channing, that the possibility of self-culture arises from "a divine impulse at the core of our being." This vision affirmed human nature, finding divinity at its very core. But it also held that divinity manifests itself as energy or "metamorphosis" and that growth or expansion was its evidence.¹⁵ Even within that vision of growth or culture, a dichotomy existed between willed effort and passive will-lessness. Is the "unfolding" of the soul the product of strenuous moral effort, or is it better conceived as a coming to oneself in a quietist acceptance?

We might put this dilemma differently by noting that at times in