Introduction
Through Emerson's Eye

> Experience . . . has a way of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulation.
>
> William James

I begin by returning to a well-trod tract of literary ground, "crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky," alongside Ralph Waldo Emerson. Without warning, this unremarkable scene is interrupted: in a vivid rush, Emerson is seized by a sense of "perfect exhilaration." A state of mind as undistinguished as the evening is suddenly overtaken by a gladness verging "on the brink of fear." Most strikingly, this influx of elation seems to appear from nowhere; Emerson emphasizes the bareness of the common and the absence of any triggering sense "of special good fortune."[1] Freed from the scripted constraint of causal logic or predictability, Emerson feels the full force of an unpresaged experience that takes him by surprise.

I recall anew this famous scene because it underlines two vital challenges – one to composition, one to reception – facing a writer like Emerson, who aims to seize his readers with a force akin to what surprised him on the common. The primary compositional problem Emerson faces is belatedness, the lag between life and its mimetic inscription. His sudden sense of exaltation hinges wholly on immediacy, yet his written account of the striking feeling must unfold over time and can only be reported after the fact. To even begin to reflect on the moment is to evaluate retrospectively an event that has passed. Emerson's first articulation of his experience on the common, a journal entry from the spring of 1835, is already belated, an interpretation subsequent to the experience; when he revises that initial impression a year later for the opening of *Nature* (1836), Emerson is at even further temporal remove from the suddenness of that seizing moment. For an author seeking to capture in writing what he describes as "an everlasting Now," these temporal delays in relaying the

sensation have the potential to derail the compositional process completely, precluding all efforts to accurately transmit the immediacy of his experience to a receptive reader.[2]

Let's say Emerson addresses the challenge posed by belatedness: he develops methods for employing composition itself to access his initial experience of surprise and to approximate its effects on the page, where it can in turn surprise his readers. Even if Emerson succeeds in seizing readers in their initial encounter with his work, the question remains whether the same passage can retain a capacity to surprise upon rereading, under repetitious circumstances of reception. Michael Clune states this problem succinctly: "Time poisons perception."[3] If richness and vivacity were diminished with each instance of exposure, this problem of familiarity would seem insurmountable in the reception of something as widely cited and circulated as Emerson's bare common scene. The very ubiquity of what Harold Bloom declares "the central passage in American literature" – reproduced on greeting cards and calendars as often as it is anthologized – would effectively threaten to cancel out its startling force.[4]

The inescapable ubiquity of the scene may in fact assure many readers that they already know what to expect in the sentences that come next in *Nature*:

> Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me . . . (*EL*, 10)

Given *Nature*'s omnipresence on high school and university curricula, this luminously strange figure of transparency may suffer an unavoidable weakening of voltage beneath classroom fluorescents and study lamps that wane as conduits of Universal Being. Recurrent exposure to the passage may foster a more intimate understanding, but overfamiliarity can just as easily dim its radiant peculiarity. To raise a dictum likewise fatigued by overcitation, is it possible to "Make it New," or more precisely, when returning again and again to scenes of literary surprise, to "Make it New Again?"

This book establishes the centrality of Emersonian surprise to a transatlantic tradition of writers who extend the newness-making imperative of modernism's defining credo by adding the dimension of reiteration: by emphasizing "again," by making newness a routine rather than a feat, these writers push beyond the one-off or short-lived forms of aesthetic novelty invoked by Pound's motto and address the evanescence and long-

term obsolescence of such forms. The historical ubiquity of the credo itself exemplifies how easily a rousing call for revolutionary newness becomes a tired catchphrase.[5] Recognition of how the thrill of immediacy can evaporate as ephemera or calcify into cliché is what motivates Emerson and literary modernists working in his wake to distinguish between newness that is fleeting and what Emerson describes as "perpetual surprise."[6]

How might an experience as impermanent as a sudden startle be renewed and potentially sustained – for a writer and for a reader? As I argue, questions like this stimulate formal experiments among some of Emerson's most responsive readers and give rise to a range of modernist hallmarks – including Baudelaire's flashes of *correspondance*, Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, Henry James's scenes of recognition, Nella Larsen's depictions of double consciousness, and Gertrude Stein's break from narrative form. These aesthetic innovations at the level of verb tense, grammatical mood, or scenic and syntactical structure all recall that the verb "to innovate" is rooted in the Latin *innovare*, which means not *new* or *form* but to *renew* or *reform*.[7] As I will demonstrate in the chapters that follow, renovations of narrative time and consciousness were for each of these writers spurred and guided by a twofold Emersonian insight. First, familiarity and belatedness can act as instigators rather than inhibitors of aesthetic surprise. And second, recasting apparent impediments as catalysts for unexpected encounters requires preparation and practice.

The Paradox of Preparation

How does one prepare to be surprised? "Surprises" are generally understood as events which preempt poise, events for which one is the opposite of prepared. To ready oneself for surprises would then seem to suggest transforming volatile phenomena into regular, even routinized experiences – to disarm their unpredictability and contain their impact. In other words, the task of preparing to be surprised is easily inverted into the task of preparing *not* to be surprised. I claim that Emerson provides a set of major modernist writers and intellectuals with practical strategies for avoiding such an inversion at transitional moments in their life and work. In reconstructing the practices that Emerson establishes, I revise two influential critical narratives that would assert the irreconcilability of preparation and surprise.

First, I contest a narrative that too readily casts Emerson as the primary literary inheritor and disseminator of a Puritan legacy of preparationism. According to this story, most forcefully narrated by the Americanist critic

Sacvan Bercovitch, Emerson perpetuates the literary equivalent of preparationist perception: an overvigilant, appropriative gaze that kills the surprise of spontaneous grace by working unceasingly toward its acquisition. By recasting Emerson's perceptual practices as powerful tools for cultivating spontaneity, I also recast Emerson's central role in the Bercovitchean story of Puritan inheritance and in turn reframe the model of receptivity taken up by writers working in an Emersonian lineage. Second, I contest Emerson's omission in a narrative of modernist shock that has occluded the importance of surprise by overlooking Emerson's crucial transatlantic influence. The pervasive paradigm of modernism, derived from Walter Benjamin, subsumes surprise into shock, making no distinction between the two affects, so that all sudden and seizing experiences must be preempted by perceptual defenses that are protective, but also deadening. While for scholars committed to these standing narratives Emerson epitomizes a provincial romanticism that has little relevance for the study of modernism, I follow the injunction of Baudelaire – Benjamin's shock poet par excellence – who claims the sage of Concord as a defining figure of transatlantic modernity. In my consideration, Emerson's strategies for embracing the unexpected similarly enable writers on both sides of the Atlantic to open themselves to the surprises of modernity.

In considering how surprise can paradoxically be facilitated by preparation and in tracing the influence of this paradox back to Emerson, I follow William James and John Dewey, both of whom invoke the famous figure of Emerson's transparent eyeball as a practical model for the "surprise of reception."[8] Only when one is receptive to surprises, they observe, are perceptual breakthroughs possible and then aesthetically or pedagogically repeatable. James and Dewey each notably refer to Emerson's bare common episode in lectures they devote to educational reform. The opening scene of *Nature* would first serve as the touchstone for a series of talks James delivered to teachers and students with the goal of putting his principles of psychology to practical use in the classroom.[9] Education is only useful, James insists, insofar as it enriches daily life. Several decades later, Dewey would invoke the same scene in a talk that inaugurated an annual Harvard lecture series named to honor the lifelong interlocutor he found in James (who taught in the university's psychology and philosophy departments until his death in 1910). Both lectures were influential in their time and have maintained a remarkable critical durability, recorded in two volumes that have never gone out of print: James's *Talks to Teachers on Psychology; and Talks to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (1899), and Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934).

Together, these lectures suggest that Emersonian surprise might serve as the antidote for modern perceptual experience, which for shock-oriented critics since the turn of the century has been threatened and limited by crisis and closure. By reading Emerson, both James and Dewey find themselves equipped to face two saboteurs of surprise: the Puritan forms of preconception that Bercovitch blames for American blindness and the sense of inauthentic belatedness that Benjamin identifies as the defining condition of urban modernity. As I will suggest, James and Dewey formalize the perceptual practices they learn from Emerson, first as a method of psychological investigation – the act of introspection – and later as what they would call "the method of pragmatism."[10]

Ancestral Blindness

Writing to an audience of psychologists at the beginning of his career, William James attributes the problem of preconception to physiology. In *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), he focuses on the adaptive function of "anticipatory preparation."[11] Quoting the German physiologist Wilhelm Wundt in his chapter on attention, James initially sets surprise in opposition to "anticipatory preparation": "The surprise which unexpected impressions give us is due essentially to the fact that our attention, at the moment when the impression occurs, is not accommodated for it" (*PP*, 440). If one's goal is to optimize response speed to sensory stimuli, as it was for Wundt, the most efficient form of preparation is what James calls "preperception." To perceive something, James asserts, is to call forth a preexisting idea or image of that thing. "The *preperception*," he estimates, is "half of the perception" (*PP*, 442). Framed by Wundt's concern with perceptual accommodation, James at first presents this startling claim as evidence of effective adaptation. However, he goes on to admit that the operations of preperception are double-edged. On the one hand, preperception provides ideational and sensory preparation, without which we would move through life in a state of perpetual disorientation. On the other hand, the experience of losing one's bearings, of exceeding previous frames of reference, is what facilitates discovery. As James worries, adept preperceivers "have no eyes but for those aspects of things which they have already been taught to discern" (*PP*, 443). It is not until James begins to consider the practical implications of his psychology of perception that he envisions how certain kinds of perceptual preparation might facilitate rather than foreclose the experience of surprise.

Two years after the publication of *Principles*, James puts his psychological insights to work in a pedagogical context. In his lectures on education, teachers are tasked with awakening "spontaneous attention" by knitting "novelties on to things of which [students] already have preperceptions" (*PP*, 447). This is to say that James advocates pedagogical practices that foster discovery by enmeshing the unexpected with what is already known. The classroom is framed as a practice ground that prepares students to have their perceptual paradigms continually unsettled. Addressing teachers, James advises: "Prepare yourself in the *subject so well that it shall be always on tap*; then in the class-room trust your spontaneity and fling away all farther care."[12] Here James overturns his earlier model of preparation; in order to learn, a thoroughly prepared perceptual apparatus must be receptive rather than defensive. As veteran teachers (similar to, say, proficient musicians) might attest, from a state of adaptive preparation and adept responsiveness, unforeseen spontaneity and inspiration can spring forth readily, even under the most familiar and reiterative circumstances. The goal of education, as James frames it, is to programmatically cultivate such spontaneity as a lifelong habit.

While James's *Talks to Teachers* focuses on the pedagogical challenges posed by his psychology of perception, his *Talks to Students* addresses a set of perceptual pitfalls he attributes to a specifically American inheritance. As James suggests, his countrymen have inherited from their Puritan predecessors "an ancestral blindness," a hardened insensibility to objects and others who threaten preconceived certainties (*WI*, 865). In the opening lecture of the series, James identifies "ancestral intolerances" as the source of "bad models" of perception he observes to be prevalent around him. He writes, "We, here in America, through following a succession of pattern-setters, whom it is not impossible to trace, and through influencing each other in a bad direction, have at last settled down collectively into . . . our own characteristic national type" (*WI*, 832). Unimpressed, James blames the Puritans for bestowing "bad habits" of perception that have resulted in the "defective training of our people" (*WI*, 832, 834). His condemnation of this "national type" is thus a withering diagnosis of his fellow Americans who have grown "stone-blind and insensible" toward "creatures and people different from ourselves" (*WI*, 832, 841).

In his first lecture to students, James's focus on an "over-contracted" field of American perception seems to dovetail with Bercovitch's account of the narrowing of national vision (*WI*, 831). As Bercovitch argues in the recently reissued *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975/2011), a direct line can be drawn between the Puritans' appropriative view of

the "New World" and the acquisitive cultural desire exemplified by Emerson's trope of transparent vision. This critical narrative marks the Emersonian Eye as the apotheosis of an expansionist ideology of exceptionalism. Bercovitch's seminal account has generated several decades' worth of scholarship so consistent in its condemnation of America's "self-serving blindness" that Elisa New has described this scholarly strain as a "genre" unto itself.[13] According to this Americanist narrative, which New dubs "vision with a vengeance," Emerson's expressed desire to "enjoy an original relation to the Universe" extends the origin story established by his New England ancestors: the myth of a nation divinely elected to realize its Manifest Destiny.[14] When American vision is projected as an agonistic force, the transparent eyeball annexes its purview to individualist and imperial interests. The Emersonian Eye, for this genre of criticism, is defined by a nationalist myopia.[15]

In his second lecture, James's approach to the Puritans' perceptual legacy veers away from the proto-Bercovitchean narrative; "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" – James's favorite of all his talks – presents the Emersonian Eye as a corrective to America's "ancestral blindness" rather than its exacerbation. Against those who would position Emerson as epitomizing the myopic closure of the American eye, James recovers the means by which Emerson in fact aims to correct such closure. James attributes to Emerson's words a startling force capable of breaking through a "hard externality," which too easily overtakes the "responsive sensibilities" that make life "worth living" (*WI*, 847, 856). Emerson's essays are eye-opening for James in the sense that they help him dissolve a cataract of heedlessness and recover a responsive and edifying acuity.

Attesting that narrow forms of nationalism and individualism have "been preached long enough in our New England," James looks to Emerson for better models (*WI*, 839). While inherited habits incline the "American character" toward grasping, James invokes the bare common passage to exemplify "the capacity of the soul *to be grasped*, to have its life-currents absorbed by what is given" (*WI*, 834, 855, emphasis added). Where the Puritans preached unrelenting vigilance, Emerson's essay delivers "the gospel of relaxation" (*WI*, 835). James names the watchword of this gospel: "*Unclamp*" (*WI*, 836). Instead of holding the visual field captive to a mastering gaze, Emerson exemplifies "esthetic surrender"; the eye relinquishes its capacity to seize objects of view so that it might itself be seized.[16] In this receptive state of surrender, the "I" disperses into the process of vision: "I am nothing; I see all" (*EL*, 10).

As James suggests, Emerson's prose has the potential to prepare readers to be similarly seized. In the scenes of reading that James describes, "this higher vision comes over a person suddenly; and . . . makes an epoch in his history" (*WI*, 848). While James emphasizes suddenness in this formulation, he makes clear that the spontaneous arrival of a "new perspective" is made possible by an established reading practice, one which allows the familiarity of one's own consciousness to commingle with another unfamiliar consciousness over the course of life (*WI*, 847). "We are trained to seek the choice, the rare, the exquisite exclusively, and to overlook the common," James observes, but Emerson's prose offers a new kind of training that instills "the individual fact and moment . . . with absolute radiance."[17] James locates Emerson's power of "transfiguration" – his capacity to transform the world into something "still new and untried" – in the processual aspect of his literary language (*WII*, 1125, 1121). James's lifelong engagement with Emerson's writing underscores the time it takes time to clear obscured vision; the "great cloud-bank of ancestral blindness weighing down upon us" lifts so imperceptibly that when formerly "invisible things" are revealed, it can come as a surprise (*WI*, 862, 849). Through this protracted process of reading, one gains gradual access to perceptions that are not preperceived: "Our self is riven and its narrow interests fly to pieces, then a new centre and a new perspective must be found" (*WI*, 847).

As I will elaborate in Chapter 1, Emerson's own account of his Puritan inheritance radically reframes his politics of perception and his corresponding vision of nationhood. Drawing a line from his ancestors to himself, Emerson reinvents Puritan methods of preparing the unregenerate soul for the surprise of spontaneous grace. As Emerson observes, the Puritans' overvigilant preparations for receiving grace left them finally unreceptive to the spontaneous spiritual encounters they sought. In my reading, Emerson's recurrent emphasis on cultivating receptivity represents his ongoing effort to correct the misapprehensions of his forebears. Revising free grace into a guiding principle of surprise, Emerson establishes an American lineage that privileges literature as the domain where the unfulfilled Puritan promise of spiritual plenitude and perceptive revelation might be redeemed. *Practices of Surprise* charts the development of this post-Emerson tradition through writers united by a common commitment to creating the conditions for "perpetual surprise" – a renewable receptivity to unexpected encounters.

The Challenge of Modernity

Where William James recalls Emerson to negotiate perceptual problems rooted in the past, John Dewey looks to Emerson to meet the perceptual demands of the present. For Dewey, the task of realizing the redemptive receptivity James finds in Emerson became freshly charged, but also newly challenged, by "the dislocations and divisions of modern life."[18] *Art as Experience* argues that a variety of "forces at work" – industrial, technological, psychological – have bifurcated perception: "Modern society operate[s] to create . . . a chasm between ordinary and esthetic experience."[19] As Dewey worries, the ever-increasing speed and density of stimulation has likewise asserted debilitating discontinuities between inner and outer life.

Dewey points to the bare common passage in his introduction to suggest how modern audiences might begin to bridge these gulfs and fill the blind spots they generate. In Dewey's reading, Emerson's writing invites a "spontaneous and uncorked esthetic response," which draws out the "natural continuity" between art and "normal processes of living"; Emerson's essays provide palpable evidence of the "immediate sensuous" reality of apparently "etherial things."[20] To recover these vital continuities between art and experience is to enrich one's perceptive faculties and expand one's perceptual field. However, Dewey's perpetual rereading of Emerson over the course of his life reveals that such enrichment and expansion rarely arrives in a single instant – as the eyeball episode might suggest when excerpted as a maxim – but rather develops gradually through ongoing practice.

Like James, Dewey receives from Emerson an extended "education of the human soul," which takes the form of attention training.[21] Emerson's approach to perceptual exercise helps James overturn his previous model of preperception; likewise, Emerson's antidote to preconception helps Dewey counteract the second major saboteur of surprise, belatedness, by affirming that a delayed response to disorientation may bring that disorientation into a sharper focus. As Dewey asserts, an artwork of "high esthetic value" often generates a "surprise that is disconcerting."[22] He describes the initial "seizure" of surprise like this: "The total overwhelming impression comes first . . . there is an impact that precedes all definite recognition of what it is about."[23] Yet, rather than privileging the overwhelming immediacy of first impact, Dewey insists that the "disconcerting" moment "you are seized" cannot be isolated from the process of preparation and reflection that precedes and follows.[24] The surprise of reception, in short, "takes time."[25]

For Dewey, "the temporal aspect of perception" distinguishes true reception from "mere recognition," the latter of which simply confirms what is already known: "In no case can there be perception of an object except in a process developing in time. Mere excitations, yes; but not as an object perceived, instead of just recognized as one of the familiar kind."[26] Like James, Dewey places "preparation" at the heart of "aesthetic education"; spontaneous reception is not possible unless "channels of response are prepared in advance."[27] As I will show, Deweyan reception unfolds according to the strange temporality of Emersonian surprise. The prepared perceptual apparatus is open to spontaneous seizure, and then to the disconcerting experience of disorientation, and then to a reorienting process of reflection upon what happened in the immediate moment of encounter. Dewey concludes *Art as Experience* by suggesting that a writer like Emerson allows his readers to inhabit time differently: "Literature conveys the meaning of the past that is significant in present experience and is prophetic of the larger movement of the future. Only imaginative vision elicits the possibilities that are interwoven within the texture of the actual."[28]

Dewey's model of a preparatory process that renews and improves reception provides a powerful alternative to the Benjaminian discourse of defensive perception that has proved so influential in critical narratives of modernist experience. In his essay, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1939), Benjamin generalizes and amplifies Sigmund Freud's concept of shock – trauma undergone in wartime – into the defining structure of modernity.[29] Modern consciousness, in Freud's conception, must act as a "protective shield" against relentless psychological incursions generated by the "excessive energies at work in the external world."[30] The onslaught of war, urbanization, and technological change at the turn of the twentieth century all contribute to a "crisis of experience," and in the face of this assault, perceptual preparation is tasked with "protection against stimuli" (*M*, 161).[31] As Benjamin deduces, however, guarding oneself against unanticipated experiences comes at the high cost of a generally dulled receptivity to all new encounters. Modernity's assault on receptive consciousness leaves only two experiential possibilities in the modern era: shock and its counter, "shock defense" (*M*, 163).

While Benjamin defined modern experience as a "series of shocks," and many signature moments of literary modernism have since been understood to correspondingly register sensory inundation and psychological breakage, Benjamin's essay also tellingly collapses any difference between surprise and shock by using the terms synonymously (*M*, 175). He quotes