EMERSON AND EDUCATION[1]

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ABSTRACT: This essay is an attempt to reconnect our understanding of Ralph Waldo Emerson with his pragmatic roots through an emphasis upon his educational thought. After a brief introduction that emphasizes the importance of breadth for any philosophy, it considers the interactions within his value triad of Transcendentalism, Pragmatism, and Democracy. Turning more specifically to what education is and might be, we see Emerson's emphasis upon respect for the student. Emerson develops this most clearly in "The American Scholar," where he details the sources of education in nature, others, and action. Next comes a consideration of what he sees as the educational tasks of the scholar: to advance novelty and faith, to provide guidance and criticism, and to allow for self-exploration. Throughout Emerson's discussions of education, he always preserves the global implications of the philosophical life.

This essay is one of an ongoing series of attempts to explore what I take to be the pragmatic core of Emerson's work.[2] I have been particularly interested in understanding why later pragmatists (especially William James and John Dewey) were drawn to Emerson's thought, in the hope of recognizing his continued value to us.

This inquiry was inspired in part by my reading long ago of two volumes by Eduard Baumgarten (1898-1982), whose planned three-volume study of the American mind-set, *Die geistigen Grundlagen des amerikanischen Gemeinwesens*, was never completed. The published volumes were: Volume I - *Benjamin Franklin: Der Lehrmeister der amerikanischen Revolution* (1936), and Volume II - *Der Pragmatismus: R.W. Emerson, W, James, J. Dewey* (1938). The third volume, which proposed to explore other aspects of American intellectual life incorporating such figures as "Winthrop, Cotton, Ward; John Adams, Hamilton; Calhoun and so on; and perhaps Josiah Royce and others,"[3] was never completed. With specific regard to the pragmatism that is the subject of this paper, Baumgarten writes: "In the textbooks of philosophical history, Emerson is not included under the heading of pragmatism, but rather as an offshoot of German idealism. Certainly there lived in him a higher idealism, but it was independent of influences of a more formal and extrinsic sort, like Kantian or Hegelian. His was an idealism of an unmistakably pragmatic sort."[4]

I will begin with two points. The first is that the notion of "global philosophy" that is shaping our gathering conjures up for me a pair of different meanings. One is of a philosophy that is appropriate and useful anywhere on the globe, not tied to any specific locale, culture, or population. Of course, each of us is more-or-less grounded in one (or more) of these specifics; but each of us also has the possibility of transcending that narrowness. For my part, I will be presenting my ideas in terms of my own background in American philosophy; but I do not believe that these ideas are in any way fatally constrained by these roots. Rather, by explicitly recognizing our diverse roots, I think that we can increase interaction and foster outreach. A second understanding of "global philosophy" is of a philosophy that aims to analyze the full spectrum of familiar topics and problems. This ambitious goal may be delusional; but it remains important to recognize that all of our mental efforts are of potential global value, and that any approach to philosophy—whether it be in the fields of ethics or logic, or aesthetics or cosmology—that rejected in advance the possibility of global value would be a self-confessed failure.

My second point is that the philosophical pragmatism that is also guiding our efforts incorporates a broad spectrum of related perspectives. On the one hand, there are

[1] In this essay, I will be drawing upon the following pieces by Emerson: "Address on Education" (1837), *Early Lectures* [EL], 2:194-204; "The American Scholar" (1837), *Essays and Lectures* [E&L], 51-71; "Being and Seeming" (1838), EL 2:295-309; "Literary Ethics" (1838), E&L, 93-112; "Education" (1840), EL 3:286-301; "Man the Reformer" (1841), E&L, 133-150; "Lecture on the Times" (1841), E&L, 151-170; "Intellect" (1841), E&L, 415-428; "The Transcendentalist" (1842), E&L, 191-209; "Politics" (1844), E&L, 557-571; "New England Reformers" (1844), E&L, 589-609; "The Man of Letters" (1863), *Complete Works* [CW], X:239-258; "The Scholar" (1876), CW X:259-289; "Education" (1883), CW X:123-159.

[2] Cf. Campbell, 2006, 2020, 2022.

[3] *Die geistigen Grundlagen*, I:17n.

[4] *Ibid.*, I:239.

those perspectives prominent in the work of such figures as C.S. Peirce, C.I. Lewis, W.V.O. Quine, and Hilary Putnam, that incline toward logic, mathematics, science and technology. On the other, there are those perspectives within pragmatism that rest more comfortably adjacent to the humanities and the arts, and are represented by the work of such figures as Benjamin Franklin, William James, John Dewey—and Ralph Waldo Emerson.[5] Differently phrased, I find that there are two poles to the pragmatic approach to philosophizing that can be very roughly characterized as scientific pragmatism and social pragmatism. As will become apparent, I am personally more comfortable with the latter. My championing of Emerson here as one of the central pragmatists further requires our rejection of any evaluation of him as purely a transcendentalist.[6] My aim is also to rethink our sense of the larger relationship among Transcendentalism, Pragmatism, and Democracy, and thus Emerson's role within this triad of values.[7] One place where Emerson's contribution to this triad is particularly clear is in the area of educational philosophy. Although often discounted within philosophical circles, educational philosophy is behind all of my efforts today to recognize the value of pragmatism as a global philosophy.[8]

II

To explore this educational stance, we can consider a series of themes in Emerson's work that incorporates at various levels Transcendentalism, Pragmatism, and Democracy. I will begin with the following trio: the superiority of Reason to the Understanding, the role of the scholar as a prophet, and the primacy of the common over the elite.

One dominant aspect of Emerson's work is a clear metaphysical distinction between what he takes to be levels of higher and lower importance, grounded in his sense of the roles of Reason and the Understanding. This distinction allows for a contemplative appraisal of more central values—intellectual, religious, and aesthetic—found in his broad approach to nature, and a discounting of the resulting lesser values. We can consider a pair of examples. In his June 1837 "Address on Education," as well as elsewhere in his thought, Emerson urges his audience to recognize the superiority of the higher over the lower faculties. "The disease of which the world lies sick," he stresses on this occasion, "is, the inaction of the higher faculties of man" that allows for "the usurpation by the senses of the entire practical energy of individu-

[5] For my take on this approach to pragmatism, see my volumes: *Recovering Benjamin Franklin* (1999); *Naturalizing Ralph Waldo Emerson*, [in preparation]; *Experiencing William James* (2017); and *Understanding John Dewey* (1995).

[6] Emerson himself admits in 1842 that "there is no pure Transcendentalist" but only "prophets and heralds of such a philosophy," only "harbingers and forerunners." The key to developing transcendentalism further, he continues, is "to respect the intuitions, and to give them, at least in our creed, all authority over our experience." He believed that we consequently need more Reason-based people. He writes: "in society, besides farmers, sailors, and weavers, there must be a few persons of purer fire kept specially as gauges and meters of character" whom we should "tolerate" as "solitary voices in the land, speaking for thoughts and principles not marketable or perishable …" ("The Transcendentalist," 197,199, 208).

[7] Here I am expanding on the dyadic position of Robert Dale Richardson, who writes: "there are two Emersons—one transcendental and idealistic, the other pragmatic and practical" (*First We Read*, 33). An earlier dyadic understanding of Emerson can be found in Frederic Ives Carpenter, who notes in 1934: "All of his essays had as their main theme the application of the scholarship, or wisdom of man, to the problems of the present." In this way, he continues, "Emerson's philosophy may perhaps be described as Pragmatic Mysticism. It is idealistic in that it puts the mystical experience first. It is dualistic in that it looks both ways from its position on the bridge between the soul and nature. It is monistic in that it maintains that this bridge is the only reality. But it is pragmatic in that it tests all truths (including the mystical belief in the value of life) by experience… . It remains to suggest that this pragmatic mysticism is essentially *the* American philosophy, or, as it has been called, 'the American Dream'" ("Introduction" to *Selections*, xiv, xxxvii).

[8] For John Dewey, all philosophy should be considered educational philosophy. He writes in "From Absolutism to Experimentalism" in 1930 that "philosophers in general, although they are themselves usually teachers, have not taken education with sufficient seriousness for it to occur to them that any rational person could actually think it possible that philosophizing should focus about education as the supreme human interest in which, moreover, other problems, cosmological, moral, logical, come to a head" (LW 5:156). He continues in this theme in "The Relation of Science and Philosophy as the Basis of Education" in 1938 that "[t]he philosophy of education is not a poor relation of general philosophy even though it is often so treated even by philosophers. It is ultimately the most significant phase of philosophy" (LW 13:282).

als." This failure results in the "prevalence of low and unworthy views of the manly character" (EL 2:196).[9] While he opines that America in the late 1830s was in a period of economic prosperity that was "without example in history," for him this progress represented the lower activity "*of the senses*, and devotion to the senses." This prosperity was thus confined to advances in fields of lesser importance like industry, technology, and economics; and it was combined with a "great hollowness in literature, politics, and religion" (EL 2:197). As a result, he believed that, in this purported progress humans were not elevated but degraded. As another example, we can consider a piece from 1840 simply entitled "Education," in which Emerson suggests how we might rectify these failings in value. He calls upon the members of his audience to recognize that their goals, especially their educational goals, were inadequate: "what is called Education in the world fails because of its low aim." He indicates that we need, instead to "draw on the eternal and universal Soul …" which "lies within,—it lies behind us all," available to "the dullest drone, the shallowest fop" (EL 3:299-300). His comments here might seem anti-democratic, except for his ongoing respect for the potential of all.

A second aspect of Emerson's position is his understanding of the scholar as prophet. In a brief Civil War era piece, "The Man of Letters" (1863), he presents the scholar as a forerunner of a better future. The scholar is "too good for the world," he writes, "he is in advance of his race; his function is prophetic." The scholar, he continues, "belongs to a superior society," but was "born one or two centuries early" and does not fit in with "the rough and sensual population into which he is thrown." As the representative of a better future, the scholar must emphasize the role of Reason and challenge the dominance of the Understanding, even while he admits that so far "nothing has been able to resist the tide with which the material prosperity of America in years past has beat down the hope of youth, the piety of learning." As a result, he continues, at the present time the potential contributions of the scholar are largely stillborn in America. In our industrial society, the pursuits of "convenience and luxury" have perverted our values, thus turning "the eyes downward to the earth, not upward to thought." He continues that "it is agreed that we are utilitarian; that we are skeptical, frivolous," and that in spite of "universal cheap education," our theology is "stringent" and our religion is "low." As a specific example of our failings, he offers the following: "Our profoundest philosophy (if it were not contradiction in terms) is skepticism" (CW X:241-245). Emerson concludes this piece on living the life of letters by reminding his audience that scholars "are idealists, and should stand for freedom, justice, and public good." From this standpoint of rationality and morality, he urges them to reject the failed servants of democracy in their contemporary society: "[t]he clerisy, the spiritual guides, the scholars, the seers [who] have been false to their trust" (CW X:254). In their place, he would have his listeners follow their own insights. "Rely on yourself," he proclaims. While admitting that "[t]here is respect due to your teachers," he reiterates that "every age is new, and has problems to solve, insoluble by the last age." As a result, he asserts that former guides—those whom he describes as "over forty"—cannot serve as "judges of a book written in a new spirit" (CW X:254-255).[10] Primary must be their own ideas. "Neither your teachers, nor the universal teachers, the laws, the customs or dogmas of nations, neither saint nor sage," he writes, "can compare with that counsel which is open to you." As a sign of the failures of these supposed leaders to follow their own insights, Emerson points out that they "were utterly ignorant of that which every boy or girl of fifteen knows perfectly,—the rights of men and women" (CW X:255-256).[11]

[9] Throughout all of the pieces that we will be considering, Emerson makes frequent and uncritical use of masculine forms and attributes to encompass all of humanity, an unfortunate practice that then represented culturally-supported style.

[10] Emerson (born on 25 May 1803) was himself over sixty years of age at this point.

[11] William James writes in 1897 that "Emerson's creed that everything that ever was or will be is here in the enveloping now;

A third aspect of Emerson's larger perspective is his democratic defense of the common and the ordinary against the power of elitism. He concludes his 1837 piece, "The American Scholar," with an explicit statement that an effective revaluation of our lives and our position within nature has to begin with a re-appreciation of the everyday and the normal as sources of insight. Not "the sublime and beautiful," he writes, but "the near, the low, the common" should be Aexplored and poetized." He continues that "[t]he literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time." In this spirit he announces that "I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low." In line with this praise of the *here*, Emerson urges us to better appreciate the *now*. "Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds," he writes. Thus, our knowledge needs should not focus upon the distant in time and place but "[t]he meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body" (E&L, 68-69).[12] Emerson's political corollary is his endorsement of "the elevation of what was called the lowest class in the state" (E&L, 68). This revelation of their and our situation requires the recognition of the primacy of the common individual, "the new importance given to the single person." Here he calls on us "to insulate the individual" from the powerful forces of elitism, "to surround him with barriers of natural respect, so that each man shall feel the world is his, and man shall treat with man as a sovereign state with a sovereign state." The scholar is for him that individual "who must take up into himself all the ability of the time, all the contributions of the past, all the hopes of the future. He must be an university of knowledges." For the scholar, insight is the key: "in yourself is the law of all nature, … in yourself slumbers the whole of Reason" (E&L, 70).

III

To enact these ideas on the superiority of Reason to the Understanding, the role of the scholar as a prophet, and the primacy of the common over the elite, Emerson believed that it was necessary to rethink our approach to education and to abandon many of the misguided practices that we had inherited.[13] In his 1838 piece, "Being and Seeming," for example, he presents a series of relevant themes. One of these is a criticism of contemporary efforts in the schools. We educate poorly because we repeat old ways of education, he writes, and we have no trust in ourselves to create better ways. We need to develop "a greater faith in human nature" that would enable us to "discriminate between what appears and what is," between that "which is the real and which the apparent" (EL 2:297). For Emerson, each individual must decide on his own path, "follow his own taste," even in the shadow of others' seemingly grander approaches. Living with such self-confidence will enable the young individual to resist the temptation "to feel ashamed of his inaction

that man has but to obey himself … is in like manner nothing but an exorcism of all scepticism as to the pertinency of one's natural faculties" *(The Will to Believe*, 74). James maintains this because, as he continues, for Emerson "[t]he great Cosmic Intellect terminates and houses itself in mortal men and passing hours. Each of us is an angle of its eternal vision, and the only way to be true to our Maker is to be Loyal to ourselves." As a consequence, "there is something in each and all of us, even the lowliest, that ought not to consent to borrowing traditions and living at second hand." James concludes by reminding us that "Emerson's revelation" is that "[t]he point of any pen can be an epitome of reality; the commonest person's act, if genuinely actuated, can lay hold on eternity" ("Emerson," 111, 115).

[12] The parallels here between Emerson and Walt Whitman should be obvious. Consider, for example, Whitman's emphasis upon insight over external authority: "That which really balances and conserves the social and political world is not so much legislation, police, treaties, and dread of punishment, as the latent eternal intuitional sense, in humanity, of fairness, manliness, decorum, etc. Indeed, this perennial regulation, control, and oversight, by self-suppliance, is *sine qua non* to democracy; and a highest, widest aim of democratic literature may well be to bring forth, cultivate, brace, and strengthen this sense, in individuals and society" (*Democratic Vistas*, 377).

[13] Benjamin Franklin writes in 1789 that "there is in Mankind an unaccountable Prejudice in favour of ancient Customs and Habitudes, which inclines to the Continuance of them after the Circumstances, which formerly made them useful, cease to exist" ("Observations relative to the Intentions of the Original Founders of the Academy in Philadelphia," 30).

and the slightness of his virtue when in the presence of the active and zealous leaders of the philanthropic enterprizes, of Universal Temperance, Peace, and Freedom" (EL 2:299). Persons must be true to themselves.

In his 1840 piece, "Education," Emerson considers the unfortunate products of this current system of mis-education. "What gloomy wrecks we daily meet drifting along this sea of life," he writes. "What parrots of routine, what men of pasteboard, what triflers, what madmen whose culture is only a paint or enamel that never ennobles the lump." The consequence of our failings is that the unfortunate students "are shut up in schools and college recitation rooms for ten or fifteen years and come out at last with a bag of wind, a memory of words, and do not know a thing," including how to use their hands, legs, eyes, or arms. The product of such mis-education is wasted lives; and he emphasizes "the sad spectacle" of a youth who, after years of "public education," leaves school unprepared "for his voyage of life" because the framework of that education was inadequate. A related pragmatic theme in this essay is his call for us to avoid what he sees as the inherent flaws of mass education. Emerson maintains that education should be an individual project. "Our modes of Education," on the contrary, "aim to expedite; to save labor; to do for the masses what can never be done for masses." Proper education, however, "must be done reverently,—one by one," because "the whole world is needed for the tuition of each pupil." When we attempt to educate on a larger scale, however, we are required to impose homogeneity on the developing individuals, and to "sacrifice the genius of the pupil, the unknown possibilities of his nature to a neat and safe uniformity" (EL 3:288-290). As he writes in "Education," published posthumously in 1883, when "[y]ou have to work for large classes instead of individuals; you must lower your flag and reef your sails to wait for the dull sailors" (CW X:150).

Only when we recognize that education is an individual process, he writes in that same essay, can we demonstrate that "the secret of Education lies in respecting the pupil" as "the new product of Nature." Emerson rejects the view that it is our job as parents and teachers "to choose what he shall know, what he shall do." On the contrary, he continues, each child "holds the key to his own secret"; and our role does not extend beyond guiding the student's choices. "Be not too much his parent," he continues. "Trespass not on his solitude." The notion of guidance is, of course, a difficult one to flesh out amidst ongoing calls from different segments of society for both expanding control and expanding freedom. Even so, we know that he would not have us "throw up the reins of public and private discipline." The teacher must remain a guide and it would be a mistake to "leave the young child to the mad career of his own passions and whimsies, and call this anarchy a respect for the child's nature …" Rejecting this pedagogical anarchy, Emerson responds: "Respect the child, respect him to the end, but also respect yourself" (CW X:143-144).[14] Summarizing his criticism of "the institutions and systems of education," he concludes, in "Education" in 1840, that effective education "transcends" the various methods on which our teachers have relied. In place of these mechanisms, he maintains that effective education is only possible if we turn to "higher sources than any routine of classbooks or academical exercises can ever supply" (EL 3:294), and make way for the possibilities of insight.

[14] In support of an Emersonian role for guidance in education, John Dewey notes, in *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), that "[t]he radical fallacy … is the supposition that we have no choice save either to leave the child to his own unguided spontaneity or to inspire direction upon him from without." For him, on the contrary, "[g]uidance is not external imposition. *It is freeing the life-process for its own most adequate fulfillment*" (MW 2:290, 281). In *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey continues that we must recognize "one of the special forms which the general function of education assumes: namely, that of direction, control, or guidance. Of these three words, … the last best conveys the idea of assisting through cooperation the natural capacities of the individuals guided" (MW 9:28). Later, he writes in *Experience and Education* (1938) that "guidance given by the teacher to the exercise of the pupils' intelligence is an aid to freedom, not a restriction upon it" (LW 13:46).

IV

Turning to a consideration of what Emerson believed education might become, he points, in "The American Scholar," to a series of three potential influences on the mind, of which the first—"[t]he first in time and the first in importance"—is nature. Our place within nature opens us to its systems. "Every day, the sun; and, after sunset, night and her stars," he writes. "Ever the wind blows; ever the grass grows." He continues that the scholar is the person "whom this spectacle most engages," because it is the scholar who has learned to recognize the complexity of the system. "To the young mind, every thing is individual, stands by itself," he writes. Gradually, the developing mind "finds how to join two things, and see in them one nature; then three, then three thousand." Drawn by "its own unifying instinct," the young mind "goes on trying things together, diminishing anomalies, discovering roots running under ground whereby contrary and remote things cohere, and flower out from one stem." The history of humanity "has been a constant accumulation and classifying of facts" by means of which we perceive "that these objects are not chaotic, and are not foreign, but have a law which is also a law of the human mind …" (E&L, 55).[15] If we hope to uncover the laws of our Divine System, we cannot confine our scholarly lives to narrow studies as the means to a practical career. Emerson requires that we attempt to experience the wholeness of nature via Reason, rather than limiting our intellectual analysis to the narrower means of the Understanding. As he writes, "[s]o much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess" (E&L, 56).

The second influence on the scholar to which Emerson points is the shared set of ideas that is transmitted via institutions like literature, art, lectures and especially books. In particular, he believes that we must not treat books as catalogues of information to be absorbed and later regurgitated. A book should function for us as a "guide," not as a "tyrant" (E&L, 57).[16] "The theory of books is noble," he writes. "The scholar of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again." The world "came into him, life; it went out from him, truth. It came to him, short-lived actions; it went out from him, immortal thoughts. It came to him, business; it went from him, poetry" (E&L, 56). Emerson cautions us, however, that there is a great potential problem with books because of their second-handedness. By means of books, the sacredness of creation—something in which we all should participate—can be forgotten or transformed into the worship of the creations of others. Thus, he points to the ongoing need for each generation to "write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding." Our failure here results in the idolization of past products to the detriment of the creative process. Consequently, he suggests that, even though the original author was thought to be "a just and wise spirit," we must be careful neither to let the book itself be seen as "perfect," nor our "love of the hero" be corrupted into "the worship of his statue." Should this happen, "the book becomes noxious." This is why, he continues, "[m]eek young men grow in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries, when they wrote these

[15] John J. McDermott develops this theme further in 1986: "Being in the world is not a position of stasis. It is active, energizing, and potentially creative… . For those of us who wish to become persons, the world does not come ready-made… . The lattice-work of nature is intriguing. Still more intriguing is the set of relations which we ourselves fashion, knead, and impose" ("Experience Grows by Its Edges," 388-389).

[16] William Ellery Channing writes in 1838 that "[b]ooks are chiefly useful as they help us to interpret what we see and experience." He continues that it is largely "through books that we enjoy intercourse with superior minds, and these invaluable means of communication are in the reach of all. In the best books great men talk to us, give us their most precious thoughts, and pour their souls into ours." As such, books "are the voices of the distant and the dead, and make us heirs of the spiritual life of past ages. Books are the true levelers" ("Self-Culture," 21, 23). In 1854, Henry David Thoreau writes in much the same fashion that "[b]ooks are the treasured wealth of the world and the fit inheritance of generations and nations" (*Walden*, 97).

books" (E&L, 56-57).[17] In consequence, Emerson urges us to find our own truth rather than to blindly mimic the philosophies of others. "Leave me alone," he writes in "Literary Ethics" (1838), "do not teach me out of Leibnitz or Schelling, and I shall find it all out myself." We should, of course, appreciate the inspirational work of our literary and philosophical heroes as "glorious manifestations of the mind" that gives us the courage to do our own work; but we should never see their work as constituting a set of final answers. Rather, we must recognize that "each admirable genius is but a successful diver in that sea whose floor of pearls is all your own" (E&L, 98).[18]

Returning to "The American Scholar," Emerson warns that, because of this worship of books, instead of developing into "Man Thinking," the misguided student can develop instead into "the bookworm"; and "the book-learned class"—those "who value books, as such; not as related to nature and the human constitution"—can produce "the bibliomaniacs of all degrees." He continues that we must recognize that books can be used well or ill. "Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst." For him, the proper use of books is "to inspire" us to find our own way. Thus, he continues, "I had better never seen a book, than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system" (E&L, 57).[19] Rejecting the passivity of the satellite, he calls for activity. "The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although, in almost all men, obstructed, and as yet unborn." The importance of the "soul active" is that it "sees absolute truth; and utters truth, or creates." In its activity, the soul is "genius" and "progressive" (E&L, 57).

In attempting to overcome the conservative power of our inherited institutions, it should be of great concern to the scholar to realize, Emerson writes, that "[t]he book, the college, the school of art, the institution of any kind, stop with some past utterance of genius." These carry-overs from past experience, despite their general value, can only "look backward and not forward." For him, however, the important part is that "genius looks forward: the eyes of man are set in his forehead, not in his hindhead" (E&L, 57-58). Thus, he would have us recognize that books are most valuable when they are used as tools to reinvigorate us during our intellectual downtimes. "Books are for the scholar's idle times," he writes, for "the intervals of darkness." When we are fully cognizant of our place in nature and we can "read God directly," however, "the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings." He continues that we must recognize that, "as the seer's hour of vision is short and rare among heavy days and months, so is its record, perchance, the least part of his volume." To avoid the mounds of chaff, he suggests that in reading Plato or Shakespeare, for example, "[t]he discerning" individual will aim to find "the authentic utterances of the oracle" and to pass over all of the authors' other remarks, however accurate (E&L, 58-59).

[17] Elsewhere, Emerson writes in 1841: "The Bacon, the Spinoza, the Hume, Schelling, Kant, or whosoever propounds to you a philosophy of the mind, is only a more or less awkward translator of things in your consciousness, which you have also your way of seeing, perhaps of denominating. Say, then, instead of too timidly poring into his obscure sense, that he has not succeeded in rendering back to you your consciousness. He has not succeeded; now let another try. If Plato cannot, perhaps Spinoza will. If Spinoza cannot, then perhaps Kant. Anyhow, when at last it is done, you will find it is no recondite, but a simple, natural, common state, which the writer restores to you" ("Intellect," 427). John Dewey continues in a similar fashion in 1903: "The Bacon, the Spinoza, the Hume, Schelling, Kant, is only a more or less awkward translator of things in your consciousness. Say, then, instead of too timidly poring into his obscure sense, that he has not succeeded in rendering back to you your consciousness" ("Emerson," 188).

[18] Emerson continues that, unfortunately, many young scholars, intoxicated with their "admiration of a hero," are unable to realize that their admiration reflects "only a projection" of their own souls. He recognizes, however, that "I am tasting the self-same life,—its sweetness, its greatness, its pain, which I so admire in other men." He continues that "[t]he vision of genius comes by renouncing the too officious activity of the understanding, and giving leave and amplest privilege to the spontaneous sentiment" of Reason. When people "desert the tradition for a spontaneous thought, then poetry, wit, hope, virtue, learning, anecdote, all flock to their aid" ("Literary Ethics," 99-100).

[19] William Ellery Channing concurs: "When they [books] absorb men, as they sometimes do, and turn them from observation of nature and life, they generate a learned folly, for which the plain sense of the laborer could not be exchanged but at great loss" ("Self-Culture," 21).

Building upon his comments on the active soul, Emerson presents the life of action as the third influence on the scholar. He wants the scholar—indeed all of us—to become complete persons, to live life at first-hand and to experience life directly and fully. The life of the scholar is thus not to memorize and reproduce the thoughts of prior teachers, although we all have known teachers who expected exactly that from us. Our life as scholars requires that we find out for ourselves by means of practical engagement with nature and society. "There goes in the world a notion," he complains, "that the scholar should be a recluse, a valetudinarian." Such a sickly person would be "as unfit for any handiwork or public labor, as a penknife for an axe." As a result of this misguided notion, "[t]he so-called 'practical men' sneer at speculative men, as if, because they speculate or *see*, they could do nothing." While Emerson allows that this jaundiced view might offer an accurate accounting of the lives of some would-be scholars, he continues that it "is not just and wise" for the scholar to follow such a path. As he writes, "[o]nly so much do I know, as I have lived," only so much "as I know by experience." Thus for him, "[a]ction is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential" (E&L, 59-60).[20] By means of interaction with diverse aspects of the world, the scholar grows. "Life is our dictionary," he writes. "Years are well spent in country labors; in town,—in the insight into trades and manufactures; in frank intercourse with many men and women; in science; in art; to the one end of mastering in all their facts a language by which to illustrate and embody our perceptions." Life thus becomes for us "the quarry from whence we get tiles and copestones for the masonry of to-day" (E&L, 61-62).

[20] Ralph Leslie Rusk writes in 1949 that "for the benefit of the scholar," Emerson included in "The American Scholar" material that "might have served as a prospectus of William James and John Dewey: 'Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential'" (*The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 264).

V

Returning to "Literary Ethics," we find Emerson considering what are to be the tasks of the scholar. He cautions us, first, not to assume that all the necessary work has been done already by prior scholars. In fact, he believed that the opposite of this conservative stance is the more accurate one. For him, it is a mistake to maintain "that all thought is already long ago adequately set down in books,—all imaginations in poems," or that our contributions only confirm the content "of this supposed complete body of literature." On the contrary, he notes, novelty is the essential point. As he writes, "all literature is yet to be written" and "[p]oetry has scarce chanted its first song" (E&L, 101).[21] If we study nature directly and minimize our dependence on the reports of others, however, we will recognize that "'[t]he world is new, untried.'" We should not "'believe the past,'" but realize that each of us receives "'the universe a virgin to-day.'" The work of the scholar is thus to create this new literature. He urges us to avoid the misleading nature of our inherited ideas and to "go into the forest," where we can find everything "new and undescribed." In this way, the scholar whose experiences are his own "seems to be the first man that ever stood on the shore, or entered a grove, his sensations and his world are so novel and strange." On the other hand, "[w]hilst I read the poets, I think that nothing new can be said about morning and evening." My personal, experiential encounters with "the daybreak" cannot be explored adequately at second-hand, even through the visions of Homer, Shakespeare, Milton, or Chaucer. Instead, when we are fully alive, we recognize how Emerson points us in the direction of the lonely and hard beauty of nature. "The noonday darkness of the American forest, the deep, echoing, aboriginal woods, where the living columns of the oak and the fir tower up from the ruins of the trees of

[21] This is one of the many places where Emerson's overheated surges of hyperbolic rhetoric can eclipse his sense of standard, but boring, logic.

the last millennium," he writes, offer us a different beauty. This "haggard and desert beauty," while available to all who remain open to experience, is a beauty that "has never been recorded by art" (E&L, 101-102).

In "The Man of Letters," Emerson calls for our recognition of new possibilities. "You are the carriers of ideas which are to fashion the mind and so the history of this breathing world." He continues that "[e]very man is a scholar potentially, and does not need any one good as much as this of right thought." Such right thought, however, does not automatically emerge from whatever manages to germinate in the naive minds of the uninformed. For him, a successful democracy requires the leadership of educators. "As certainly as water falls in rain on the tops of mountains and runs down into valleys, plains and pits, so does thought fall first on the best minds, and run down, from class to class, until it reaches the masses, and works revolutions" (CW X:248-249). Although this may appear to be a top-heavy variant of democracy, Emerson's conception does not allow for dictation to us by our supposed superiors any more than it would allow us to act without forethought and evaluation. His aim is to maintain the balance of a critical democracy that allows for mutual guidance among the members of the citizenry. In this larger process, the scholar represents "[t]he organ of ideas, the subtle force which creates Nature and men and states." In this role, the scholar functions as "consoler, upholder, imparting pulses of light and shocks of electricity, guidance and courage" (CW X:250). Rather than inclining the purpose of education toward the development of the students' "undertandings to the apprehension and comparison of some facts, to a skill in numbers, in words"—that is "to make accountants, attorneys, [and] engineers"—the posthumous essay, "Education," presents Emerson's aim simply to be "to make able, earnest, great-hearted men" (CW X:135). For him, "the end of human life," as he presents it in the "Address on Education," is similarly not to "make a fortune and beget children whose end is likewise to make fortunes." The "chief end of man" is "that he should explore himself" (EL 2:199). As he continues, again in the posthumously-published essay "Education," "[t]he great object of Education should be commensurate with the object of life." This means that the end of education "should be a moral one"—it should be "to teach self-trust: to inspire the youthful man with an interest in himself" (CW X:135).

Emerson explores in "The American Scholar" the question of the duties that the scholar has to self and others. Here, the scholar's aim should be to approximate what he calls "Man Thinking." He writes that "[t]he office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances." This task of leadership and criticism thus commits the scholar to "the slow, unhonored, and unpaid task of observation," a painstaking process that in our world often gains the scholar only "poverty and solitude." Rejecting "the ease and pleasure of treading the old road, accepting the fashions, the education, the religion of society" (E&L, 63), he calls upon the scholar to attempt to find the truth, and to help others find it as well.[22] The "offset" from this tougher life to which Emerson points is that the scholar will "find consolation in exercising the highest functions of human nature," in living the life of Reason. In this way, the critical scholar will be able "to resist the vulgar prosperity that retrogrades ever to barbarism" and the pursuit of "private considerations," and to fashion a life that "breathes and lives on public and illustrious thoughts." His scholar is thus "the world's eye … the world's heart," who can satisfy his duties by "preserving and communicating" (E&L, 63-64) the achievements of humanity and by recognizing the ongoing pronouncements of the Spirit.

On 28 June 1876, the 73 year-old, Emerson spoke at the University of Virginia.[23] He chose as his title on this oc-

[22] John Dewey writes in 1903: "Against creed and system, convention and institution, Emerson stands for restoring to the common man that which in the name of religion, of philosophy, of art and of morality, has been embezzled from the common store and appropriated to sectarian and class use" ("Emerson," 190).
[23] There is a long-recognized problem lurking in all of Emerson's later work. James Elliot Cabot notes in 1883, a year after Emer-

casion "The Scholar," and his focus was the topic of "the natural and permanent function of the Scholar, as he is no permissive or accidental appearance, but an organic agent in nature." As such, the scholar is "to be the beholder of the real; self-centred amidst the superficial." The scholar must recognize and "revere the domination of a serene necessity and be its pupil and apprentice." In this way will the scholar "be sobered, not by the cares of life … but by the depth of his draughts of the cup of immortality." Descending from these lofty phrases, Emerson admits that too often scholars feel "ashamed of their intellect," and wish to appear to be more like average people, dealing not with "the wise life" but with what they take to be "real life." On occasion, however, better scholars do pursue true success by "the piercing of the brass heavens of use and limitation" to admit "a beam of the pure eternity which burns up this limbo of shadows and chimeras in which we dwell" (CW X:264-266).

VI

I have been suggesting throughout this paper that Emerson's thought is grounded in a triad of fundamental values: Transcendentalism, Pragmatism, and Democracy. At times, he seems to emphasize all three as an integrated set of values; at other time his emphasis is more selective. At no time, however, is one of these values either completely supreme or completely omitted. Along the way, of course, there are some potential conflicts within this triad. Let me consider explicitly some occasions when he seems to downplay pragmatism or democracy in favor of transcendentalism.

We can begin with instances when his transcendentalism largely displaces his pragmatism.[24]

Beginning with his emphasis upon contemplation rather than more practical attempts at problem-solving, we can examine his 1841 piece, "Intellect." Here, he defends a scholarly approach to life that is more passive than active. He considers intellect to be related to contemplation, and thus divorced from the practical problems of daily living. "Every man beholds his human condition with a degree of melancholy," he writes. "As a ship aground is battered by the waves, so man, imprisoned in mortal life, lies open to the mercy of coming events." He believes that recognizing the higher meaning of our lives requires that we step back and adopt a stance of contemplative analysis, using as our primary tool the mind rather than the senses. Our goal in this process should be to find Truth. As he writes, "a truth, separated by the intellect, is no longer a subject of destiny. We behold it as a god upraised above care and fear." These transcendental em-

son's death, that in the early 1870s Emerson was attempting, without much success, to assemble a collection of his writings that eventually appeared in 1875 as Letters and Social Aims. Cabot continues that "a sense of inability, more real than he knew, … was beginning to make itself felt" (CW VIII:ix-x). In addition to his diminished mental capacity, Emerson's house in Concord burned on 24 July 1872. The disruption caused by the destruction of his home, and the resultant chaos of his books and papers, worsened his mental problems. His subsequent trip to Egypt and Europe (October 1872-May 1873) may have brought some tranquility to his life, but it did not advance his work. Cabot continues that "[t]he proof-sheets showed that already before this accident his loss of memory and of mental grasp had gone so far as to make it unlikely that he would in any case have been able to accomplish what he had undertaken." Only "[b]y degrees and with some reluctance" did Emerson come to admit "the necessity of some assistance" (CW VIII:x-xi).

Fulfilling this role to assist Emerson in this project, Cabot worked almost alone, trying to produce a volume out of the collection of materials with which he had been presented (VIII:xi-ii). He remained committed to follow his conception of Emerson's intent and "to bring together under the particular heading whatever could be found that seemed in place there, without regard to the connection in which it was found." As a result "it happened sometimes that writing of very different dates was brought together." Cabot, however, denies making any additions to Emerson's pages: "There is nothing here that he did not write, and he gave his full approval to whatever was done in the way of selection and arrangement." Still, Cabot is forced to admit that he "cannot say that he [Emerson] applied his mind very closely to the matter. He was pleased, in a general way, that the work should go on, but it may be a question exactly how far he sanctioned it" (CW VIII:xii-xiii; cf. Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, II:651-656).

Edward Waldo Emerson continues the narrative in 1904, noting that in July 1874 it became obvious "that Mr. Emerson's working days were over; it was more and more difficult for him to apply his mind, and his memory was failing" (CW VIII:vi; cf. viii).

[24] For me, unlike for John Updike, Emerson's pragmatic aspects are a positive factor. Updike has a different view: "The famous American pragmatism and 'can do' optimism were given their most ardent and elegant expression by Emerson; his encouragements have their trace elements in the manifest sprawl we see on all sides" ("Emersonianism," 161).

phases are matters of intellectual consideration. "What is addressed to us for contemplation does not threaten us, but makes us intellectual beings" (E&L, 418).

We can point further to his position that the scholar, the intellectual, must pursue Truth rather than solutions of a pragmatic sort. As he writes, "[a] self-denial, no less austere than the saint's, is demanded of the scholar." The intellectual "must worship truth, and forego all things for that," and even accept "defeat and pain, so that his treasure in thought is thereby augmented." He also presents this transcendental point in a more poetic vein. "God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please,—you can never have both." As an example, he offers the individual "in whom the love of repose predominates." Such a passive individual will never feel challenged to seek Truth, but "will accept the first creed, the first philosophy, the first political party he meets,—most likely his father's." Whatever short-term values he may gain in this way, "he shuts the door of truth." On the other hand, however, the person "in whom the love of truth predominates will keep himself aloof from all moorings" and thereby "will abstain from dogmatism." The true scholar is able to tolerate "suspense and imperfect opinion" because, as "a candidate for truth," he is attempting to follow "the highest law of his being" (E&L, 425-426).

Emerson also believes that intellectual growth is spontaneous, through our relation to the Over-Soul. "The mind that grows could not predict the times, the means, the mode of that spontaneity," he writes. "God enters by a private door into every individual." Importantly, these spontaneous insights are pre-reflective, rather than the result of directed rationality. "Long prior to the age of reflection," he continues, "is the thinking of the mind," which arises "[o]ut of darkness … into the marvellous light of to-day" (E&L, 418). Moreover, because these insights are spontaneous, they are also necessarily intermittent. "There is an inequality, whose laws we do not yet know, between two men and between two moments of the same man, in respect to this faculty." He continues that, while "[i]n common hours, we have the same facts as in the uncommon or inspired," these facts "do not sit for their portraits; they are not detached, but lie in a web" (E&L, 423). Both with regard to contemplation and to spontaneity, where Emerson downplays his pragmatic instincts in favor of his transcendental instincts, he never fully rejects the importance of his pragmatism.

Similarly, we can consider instances when Emerson downplays his democratic instincts in favor of transcendentalism. For example, he distinguishes two aspects of the intellect that he characterizes as "constructive" and "receptive." All of us, he writes, possess the latter, receptive, intellect that enables us to discern and appreciate the valuable work of others; but fewer of us are able by the use of the constructive intellect or genius to produce novelty on our own. "The constructive intellect … is the generation of the mind, the marriage of thought with nature" that "produces thoughts, sentences, poems, plans, designs, systems" (E&L, 422); but he grants that "the constructive powers are rare, and it is given to few men to be [e.g.] poets." Still, he maintains that "every man is a receiver of this descending holy ghost, and may well study the laws of its influx." This limited range of inspiration explains why there are very few good books even though there are so many writers. Or, as he phrases it, although "the world has a million writers," we are still able to "count all our good books." From the opposite point of view, because we all have this receptive intellect, there are "many competent judges" although there are but "few writers of the best books" (E&L, 424-425). While this potentially elitist emphasis upon the constructive intellect might seem to narrow the importance of democracy and democratic social processes, Emerson never abandons the egalitarian significance of the receptive intellect to sort through what has been presented to the minds of the citizens.[25] His central emphasis remains on

[25] See also Merle Eugene Curti's 1943 emphasis on the democratic aspects of transcendentalism: "Transcendentalism did

experience over doctrine,[26] and on the role of the triad of Transcendentalism, Pragmatism, and Democracy.

In spite of his overriding call to us to reform our personal lives, Emerson is still generally favorable to social reform movements; but, because of the intricate relationships among the triad of Transcendentalism, Democracy, and Pragmatism, he has a complex approach to the role of reformer. In his 1841 piece, "Man the Reformer," he wonders, "[w]hat is a man born for but to be a Reformer, a Re-maker of what man has made; a renouncer of lies; a restorer of truth and good"? He believes that the reforming individual is just "imitating that great Nature which embosoms us all, and which sleeps no moment on an old past, but every hour repairs herself, yielding us every morning a new day, and with every pulsation a new life …" (E&L, 146). Three years later, in "Politics," he offers a number of specific points indicating how he believed we should respond to our inherited political state. Among these points are the following: "that its institutions are not aboriginal, though they existed before we were born," "that they are not superior to the citizen," "that every one of them was once the act of a single man," that "every law and usage was a man's expedient to meet a particular case," and that all of its laws "are imitable, all alterable; we may make as good; we may make better." As a result of our recognition of all of its flaws, he continues that "[e]very actual State is corrupt," and it would thus be a grave mistake if "[g]ood men" were to "obey the laws too well" (E&L, 559, 563).[27] In spite of this generally-favorable account of reform, Emerson qualifies his position that same year in "New England Reformers" by suggesting a slightly-revised stance on reform. Here he maintains that all of our institutions have been corrupted. He writes that "there is no part of society or of life better than any other part. All our things are right and wrong together. The wave of evil washes all our institutions alike" (E&L, 596). Still, it seems to be a significant jump for him from the position that all of our institutions are *partially* evil to the position that all are *equally* evil, and thus that all reform would seem to be futile. A more balanced interpretation—a more Emersonian interpretation—would be that, as he continues in his "Lecture on the Times" that same year, "[t]he history of reform is always identical; it is the comparison of the idea with the fact." We recognize that "[o]ur modes of living are not agreeable to our imagination," and we suspect that it is our modes of living, and not our ideas, that are "unworthy" (E&L, 159) and in need of reform.

With regard to tactics, however, Emerson continues that "[t]he Reformers affirm the inward life, but they do not trust it, but use outward and vulgar means" (E&L, 162). Thus, "the reforming movement is sacred in its origin," but "in its management and details timid and profane." The reformers mistakenly "hope to raise man by improving his circumstances; by combination of that which is dead, they hope to make something alive." Here, he believes that they are operating "[i]n vain" (E&L, 164), or at least with diminished faith. In good pragmatic fashion, however, in a world of process, we should not expect any of these reforms to provide permanent solutions, only means toward melioration.[28]

not appeal in its philosophical form to the masses, yet there was much that was democratic in it. The exaltation of man, of all men; the doctrine that all power, all wisdom, comes from nature, with which man must establish an original and firsthand relationship; the relegation of books to a secondary place in the hierarchy of values; the insistence that instinct is good and must be obeyed rather than curbed in accordance with conventions and authority—all these ideas were closely related to the democratic impulse" (*The Growth of American Thought*, 304).

[26] Lawrence Buell writes in 1993 that Emerson was "guided by the view that formal argument counts for less than experience, and by the good Unitarian principle that beliefs are to be tested by their life-results. Emerson is therefore rightly seen as a harbinger of America's most distinctive philosophical tradition, pragmatism, several of whose major figures have claimed him as forefather" ("Introduction," 2).

[27] As Henry David Thoreau writes in 1849, "[i]t is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right" ("Civil Disobedience," 669).

[28] Benjamin Franklin displays pragmatic meliorism in 1751 when he writes: "We are in this World mutual Hosts to each other; the Circumstances and Fortunes of Men and Families are continually changing; in the Course of a few Years we have seen the Rich become Poor, and the Poor Rich; the Children of

Nor should we abandon our faith in the possibilities to be found in the sprawling approach of Emerson.[29] He writes of the promise of democratic education that: "the poor man, whom the law does not allow to take an ear of corn when starving, nor a pair of shoes for his freezing feet, is allowed to put his hand into the pocket of the rich, and say, You shall educate me, not as you will, but as I will: not alone in the elements, but, by further provision, in the languages, in sciences, in the useful and in elegant arts" (CW X:125). While we have yet to see the realization of this promise, its power remains central to any vision of democratic education.

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the Wealthy languishing in Want and Misery, and those of their Servants lifted into Estates, and abounding in the good Things of this Life. Since then, our present State, how prosperous soever, hath no Stability, but what depends on the good Providence of God, how careful should we be not to *harden our Hearts* against the Distresses of our Fellow Creatures" ("Appeal for the Hospital," 363).

[29] For Robert Ernest Spiller, writing in 1943, Emerson "reduced religion to practical ethics and he tested conduct by experience. Emerson, a mystic by temperament, founded his ethics, as his Puritan forefathers had done before him, on the same pragmatic base. It was left for William James to return to the foundations which Franklin had laid by the pattern of his life and to formulate a theory which Franklin had lived without formulation. There is much reason to believe that this modern pragmatism is the characteristic American philosophy, the one which our experience has dictated from the start" ("Benjamin Franklin," 102-103). Francis Otto Matthiessen writes in 1941 that James's hand-written notes in his copies of the Emerson volumes "show that he read with attention nearly everything that Emerson wrote; and … there is ample evidence that Emerson's idealism provided a more central root for pragmatism than has generally been assumed" (*American Renaissance*, 53n).

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