

## INTRODUCTION

### Emerson and the Law of Freedom

#### 1. Twelve chapters and a dual theme

On the title page of Emerson's *Society and Solitude*<sup>1</sup> (with "society" receiving preeminence of place), the reader is informed that the book consists of "twelve chapters." The distinctness of the chapters is emphasized in, and over, the unity of the book in the original 1870 edition. The customary running header for the book title goes missing, and instead the chapter titles appear at the top of both the right-hand and the left-hand pages. Though there is certainly weaving of themes and figures of thought through the twelve essays, and the dual theme of the title essay appears repeatedly, overall thematic unity is not greatly emphasized.

According to the *Memoir* written by his son, Edward, "through all his life," Emerson weighed "the claims of the scholar's two handmaids, Society and Solitude," but "always favored the latter."<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, in the present book, Emerson resists the excesses of his own stronger inclination: the solitude of the scholar (and its unifying insight). Moral and intellectual failings connected with excesses of solitude are warned of on the opening pages in the story of the "humorist" who believed that the penalty of learning is to become as intolerant as an executioner who would kill the last man but one.

Solitude alone, without recourse to society, magnifies all differences and threatens loss of the broader context which establishes the individual's problems and aims—and makes them intelligible. That Emerson writes of execution by guillotine, in contrast with the hanging of Thomas Hood's poem, may also suggest a somewhat Burkean-Whig aversion to the terror of the French Revolution; and,

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1. First published in Boston by Fields, Osgood and Co. in February or March of 1870.

2. Edward W. Emerson 1888, *Emerson in Concord*, p. 27.

given Emerson's Protestant background and Whig sympathies, it further suggests that excesses of "solitude" or isolation exist for groups, including organizations of revolutionaries, as well as for individuals.<sup>3</sup>

Emerson believed in avoiding excessive engagement in society and in comradeship. Related criticisms, and his pleas for the virtues and advantages of solitude, are expected. Emerson is, after all, the great American advocate of individuality and self-reliance: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men," he wrote in 1841, "—that is genius."<sup>4</sup> It is less frequently recalled, that even in stating this message in "Self-Reliance": "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string," Emerson also advised the reader to "accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events," for "great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age."<sup>5</sup> Emerson's dual theme of *Society and Solitude* was not new in 1870. But we may fairly expect that it receives significant elaboration, greater precision, and a shift into prominence in the present book. Society is the corrective to the dogmatisms of solitude.

Solitude is impracticable, and society is fatal. We must keep our head in the one and our hands in the other. The conditions are met, if we keep our independence, yet do not lose our sympathy. These wonderful horses need to be driven by fine hands. We require such a solitude as shall hold us to its revelations when we are in the street and in palaces;...<sup>6</sup>

Understanding Emerson's dual theme requires exploring and appreciating the balance and tension between self-reliant, independence of mind and that social understanding and engagement which Emerson sought for himself and advised for his readers. There is always better and worse to society, which may raise us up, or also pull us down. "And if we recall the rare hours when we encountered the best persons, we then found ourselves, and then first society seemed to exist. That was

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3. Cf. "Courage," below, p. 165: "The political reigns of terror have been reigns of madness and malignity,—a total perversion of opinion; society is upside down, and its best men are thought too bad to live."

4. Emerson 1841, "Self-Reliance," in Bode and Cowley, *The Portable Emerson*, p. 138.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

6. "Society and Solitude," below, p. 9.

society, though in the transom of a brig, or on the Florida Keys.”<sup>7</sup> Emerson is set on aligning himself with what is best and strongest in society; and doing so, we achieve “simple strokes” of “the highest power,” if our “weak human hand touches, point by point, the eternal beams and rafters on which the whole structure of Nature and society is laid.”<sup>8</sup>

Beneath Emerson’s shifting emphases, and behind his movements between solitude and society, one ultimately finds the distinction, derived from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, between reason and the common-sense understanding. The talk of society and solitude is a common-sense version or reflection of the philosophical distinction. Emerson’s greater emphasis on common sense in the present book is reflected in his repeated references to figures such as Aristotle and Edmund Burke.

“Reason,” in a tradition following Coleridge,<sup>9</sup> contrasts with the philosophy of common-sense and the empiricist-realist, common-sense “understanding,” a term strongly related to the Lockean and Scottish, common-sense tradition established by the American Revolution. Emersonian “Reason,” paradigmatically experienced in solitude, functions to transcend or overcome the common-sense understanding, where it is compromised and where it preserves problems along with established positions and advantage. The scholar seeks solitude for insight sufficient to comprehend and overcome the common-sense view—where it preserves outstanding problems. But by the same token, it is social and intellectual engagement which allows us to access the common-sense of things, however well wrought or defective; and whatever solutions we may eventually arrive at require renewed

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7. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

8. “Eloquence,” below, p. 63.

9. See Emerson 1836, “Modern Aspects of Letters,” where he says of Coleridge: “He has made admirable definitions, and drawn indelible lines between things heretofore confounded. He thought and thought truly that all confusion of thought tended to confusion in action; and said that he had never observed an abuse of terms obtain currency without being followed by some practical error. He has enriched the English language and the English mind with an explanation of the object of philosophy; of the all important distinction between Reason and Understanding; the distinction of an idea and a conception; between Genius and Talent; between Fancy and Imagination; of the nature and end of Poetry; of the Idea of a State.”

social engagement and understanding in application and in practice. In this connection, we may best appreciate the fact that Emerson was engaged in a gigantic literature, and it is fair to say that this literature is centered in the Anglo-American tradition. If a philosophy is to prevail, it must critically rest upon what is already prevalent. Likewise, if a society is to reform itself and prosper, then it must appreciate its own historical strengths as well as its weaknesses and failings. Still, Emerson's readings range widely over world literature, and the Anglo-American is at best his particular focus and centering.

## 2. Emerson on law

According to Emerson, there is a "firm law" of the useful and beautiful arts, and the claim is of interest beyond aesthetics, since we may think of the useful and the fine arts, broadly construed, as encompassing all the reform or restructuring of nature and of experience which intelligence could aim to achieve.

I hasten to state the principle which prescribes, through different means, its firm law to the useful and the beautiful arts. The law is this. The universal soul is the alone creator of the useful and the beautiful; therefore, to make anything useful or beautiful, the individual must be submitted to the universal mind.<sup>10</sup>

There is a tension here between submitting the individual to the universal mind, on the one hand, and believing, on the other, "that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men." Resolving this tension, as it may only be resolved in particular cases, is a key to understanding Emerson on society *and* solitude. Basically, it would make no sense to think of "submitting" the individual to a "universal mind," unless there was something distinctive to the individual in actual or possible contrast to "the universal mind." On the other hand, clearly, if we already knew the content of the "universal mind," in the sense of some established and salient truth of universal experience or divine wisdom, then there would be no need to consider what various individuals may think. As a general matter the tension will always persist. Though expressed in Emersonian and theological terms, it reflects the

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10. See "Art," below, p. 25.

tensions between insightful, plausible hypotheses and verification. Equally, it expresses the tension in human nature between the individual and the social. To fully appreciate this tension we ultimately need to recognize that whatever unifying view we may arrive at, and regardless of how widely our studies may range, the result is always incomplete in principle and subject to revision on the basis of further considerations.

The tension begins to resolve itself by considering the need to go through the individual mind, each of us through our own mind in particular, in order to eventually arrive at what we might consider to be a universal truth.<sup>11</sup> For Emerson, genuine individuality is a necessary condition of our arriving at the truth and of finding our appropriate place in society. Mere conformity will not suffice. Still, in developing genuine individuality, we need to orient ourselves to own cultural background and to the common-sense understanding. In particular cases, after submitting our ideas to scrutiny, we will find sufficient means to their evaluation.

The law of art which Emerson proposed is a general law of making or of poesy, in the original Greek sense which the word sometime carries, and it contains that element of freedom which arises from attending to our own thoughts and insights: thinking and doing as we each see the light to do. But this is no prohibition of our being aware of how others see the world or think and evaluate it. The dual theme of society *and* solitude tells us just the contrary. No one will regard our individual opinions, conclusions or claims to insight worth listening to, if we lack the relevant background knowledge and understanding on which to base a judgment. Yet there could be no socially accepted or established views, or socially shared knowledge, in a society totally lacking for independence of judgment and the freedom of thought and expression; “There is no prosperity, trade, art, city, or great material wealth of

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11. Cf. William James and the sense he gives to “humanism” in *A Pluralistic Universe*, 1909, pp. 317-318: “This is the philosophy of humanism in the widest sense. Our philosophies swell the current of being, add their character to it. They are part of all that we have met, of all that makes us be. As a French philosopher says, ‘*Nous sommes du réel dans le réel.*’ Our thoughts determine our acts, and our acts re-determine the previous nature of the world.”

any kind, says Emerson in “Success” below, “but if you trace it home, you will find it rooted in a thought of some individual man.”<sup>12</sup>

“Freedom is necessary,” wrote Emerson in his 1860 book, *The Conduct of Life*, risking the paradox: “If you please to plant yourself on the side of Fate, and say, Fate is all; then we say, a part of Fate is the freedom of man. Forever wells up the impulse of choosing and acting in the soul. Intellect annuls Fate. So far as a man thinks, he is free.”<sup>13</sup> The claim that freedom is necessary is not merely a somewhat paradoxical claim about the world or a description of human powers, though it is that; it is also a normative claim, and Emerson does not generally observe or accept any strict dichotomy of the factual and the normative, or of the “is” and the “ought.” Though we may emphasize that the merely descriptive “is” of factual discourse and natural science does not uniquely determine what we ought to do, or what we might best do, still in the form of scientific law, it does at least tell us what we can and cannot do, and there is certainly room to insist that “ought implies can.” We cannot sensibly feel, or be, obligated to do what we clearly see to be impossible. But, according to Emerson, freedom is not impossible. On the contrary, “freedom is necessary.” Again, while Human powers grow over time, at *any* given time, there are always things we can do and other things which we cannot do. Moreover, we have to choose among the possibilities open to us. There is both law, or “fate,” in Emerson’s philosophy and the necessity of choice. We need to understand the concept of law which could bring Emerson to hold that there is a law of freedom. This is a law, such that the “suicidal mischief”<sup>14</sup> involved in its denial, in theory or practice, brings the sure punishment of decline. We need to avoid such mischief, according to Emerson: “Work rather for those interests which the divinities honor and promote,—justice, love, freedom, knowledge, utility;”<sup>15</sup> because “security, freedom, and exhilaration,” are among the goods which “a healthy morality creates in society.”<sup>16</sup>

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12. See “Success,” below, p. 187.

13. See “Fate,” in Emerson 2006, *The Conduct of Life*, Callaway, H.G. ed., p. 12.

14. See “Civilization,” below, p. 22.

15. See “Civilization,” below, p. 19.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Emerson traces the concept of law from Plutarch through Montesquieu. Writing on Plutarch he observed that “Montesquieu drew from him his definition of law.”<sup>17</sup> Turning to Montesquieu, we find on the first page of *The Spirit of the Laws*, a corresponding quotation: “Law is king of mortal and immortal beings,” citing Plutarch’s “Discourse to an unlearned Prince.”<sup>18</sup> What we most easily take from this quotation is the idea that not only human beings but the gods too, the very ordering agencies of the world, are bound by the law. If so, then, so too is any constituting power of human affairs.

“Laws, in their most general signification,” according to Montesquieu, “are the necessary relations arising from the nature of things;” and in this sense, all beings have their laws: “the Deity His laws, the material world its laws, the intelligences superior to man their laws, the beasts their laws, man his laws.”<sup>19</sup> But though the world of matter has its motions directed by “invariable laws,” law is not to be generally equated with “blind fatality:” For, “They who assert that a blind fatality produced the various effects we behold in this world talk very absurdly; for can anything be more unreasonable than to pretend that a blind fatality could be productive of intelligent beings?”<sup>20</sup>

Particular intelligent beings may have laws of their own making, but they have some likewise which they never made. Before there were intelligent beings, they were possible; they had therefore possible relations, and consequently possible laws. Before laws were made, there were relations of possible justice. To say that there is nothing just or unjust but what is commanded or forbidden by positive laws, is the same as saying that before the describing of a circle all the radii were not equal.<sup>21</sup>

This conception of the laws of intelligent beings exemplifies the ancient tradition of natural law, which can be traced at least from Aristotle,<sup>22</sup> through St. Thomas, John Locke and Montesquieu, the American founding fathers, and a good deal of

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17. Emerson 1870, “Introduction” to *Plutarch’s Morals*, p. x.

18. Montesquieu 1949, *The Spirit of the Laws*, p. 1.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.* Also, cf. Raymond Aron 1968, *Main Currents of Sociological Thought*, vol. I., ch.1, which generally defends Montesquieu’s conception of law.

21. Montesquieu 1949, p. 2.

22. According to Aristotle’s conception of demonstrable science, that “there is no science of the accidental is obvious; for all science is either of that which is always or of that which is for the most part” (*Metaphysics*, Book VI, ch. 2).

the Western intellectual and moral tradition. The quotation from Montesquieu illustrates the dynamic, developmental quality which Emerson emphasized in the concept of natural and moral law. We may fairly take from Montesquieu the idea that human beings can enter into new forms of relationship with the world and each other, new relations made possible by the growth of knowledge, for instance; but law can never be reduced to factual science or what is commanded in positive law, since the positive law can never foresee all the new possibilities arising. Still, the choices among new relations or kinds of relations, as they arise, are not merely arbitrary, since that would again reduce the normative law to arbitrary choice of possible positive law.

Montesquieu insists that “Before laws were made, there were relations of possible justice,” and we may conclude from this that our choice among new, possible relations to the world, and to other people, is sometimes a choice between new forms of justice and new forms of injustice. For example, the possibility has only recently arisen that human activities do, or will, exert a massive disruptive influence on the climate. In this new situation, the possibility also arises that we should meaningfully regulate human activities in light of their effect on the climate and the environment generally.

We have some new choices to make, on the supposition of massive human influence, and what we may formulate as new positive law in reaction to that fact may be just or unjust, accordingly as the possible regulation of the human effects on climate may be “better or worse,” given the configuration of the pre-existing values we have placed upon the production of wealth and on human well being as dependent on the existing climate. To suppose that our future policy decisions regarding positive law are arbitrary is to suppose that no system of regulation of human activities and relations is morally or prudentially better or worse, given the changed circumstance of the human power to influence the environment: for instance, that the absence of new laws would be just as good as any new positive law we may propose. Montesquieu and Emerson thus insist on the concept of an



emerging “higher law,”<sup>23</sup> by means of which we may judge of any existing or proposed positive law, and that is the crucial element in the conception of natural law under consideration. Common-sense and established custom may long resist the innovation, but human imagination and “reason” may foresee and institute needed improvements of law and behavior. Human freedom and power encompass this potentiality, and we ignore free inquiry on such matters, and the institution of required innovations of the positive law, only at great risk.

Arguably, freedom of inquiry and of moral profession enfold into the deeper meaning of freedom in Emerson, and he draws on the example of the martyrs of the Reformation to illustrate his point, seeing himself as standing in the same, long, religious and moral tradition:

The poor Puritan, Antony Parsons, at the stake, tied straw on his head, when the fire approached him, and said, “This is God’s hat.” Sacred courage indicates that a man loves an idea better than all things in the world; that he is aiming neither at self or comfort, but will venture all to put in act the invisible thought in his mind. He is everywhere a liberator, but of a freedom that is ideal; not seeking to have land or money or conveniences, but to have no other limitation than that which his own constitution imposes. He is free to speak truth; he is not free to lie. He wishes to break every yoke all over the world which hinders his brother from acting after his own thought.<sup>24</sup>

Seeking and supporting this “ideal freedom,” for Emerson, there can be no doubt that individuals can make a difference in the world. Moreover, Emerson was surely well aware that different peoples have differing cultures, which may facilitate or fail to support the needed freedom of individuals.

All departments of life at the present day,—Trade, Politics, Letters, Science, or Religion,—seem to feel, and to labor to express, the identity of their law. They are rays of one sun; they translate each into a new language the sense of the other. They are sublime when seen as emanations of a Necessity contradistinguished from the vulgar Fate, by being instant and

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23. Compare Emerson in “Worship,” in *The Conduct of Life*: Complaining that the late King of Naples, had “erected the negation of God into a system of government,” he remarks that “In this country, the like stupefaction was in the air, and the phrase ‘higher law’ became a political jibe.” Senator William Henry Seward of New York (later Lincoln’s Secretary of State) used the phrase “higher law” in a famous 1850 speech, against compromise with slavery; and his high rhetoric was equated with subversion of the constitutional status of slavery. Emerson equates rejection of higher law with “stupidity and lack of faith.”

24. See “Courage,” below, p. 175.

alive, and dissolving man, as well as his works, in its flowing beneficence. This influence is conspicuously visible in the principles and history of Art.<sup>25</sup>

In Emerson, the term “vulgar fate” suggests fearful passivity, and natural law, including the higher moral law, must be conceived as including a law of freedom, which may be expressed, more or less fully, in our positive laws and constitutions. Higher law, in general, is normative; and so far as it is known it appropriately guides our making and poesy, and it is expressed in art. If, in order “to make anything useful or beautiful, the individual must be submitted to the universal mind,” then, we might think of this as like the author of a work submitting it to publication and ultimately to the test of history. We make our best efforts, taking in what seems most salient by our own lights; we propose, and the larger world disposes. It is a pernicious illusion to think that an ultimate evaluation can be arranged, or managed, or engineered by any finite human group or power. As Emerson says of the art of eloquence, making a genuine contribution depends centrally on having something to say; and we must also act properly in our evaluations: “Next to the knowledge of the fact and its law is method, which constitutes the genius and efficiency of all remarkable men.”<sup>26</sup>

### 3. Reconstruction and diversity in the Union

Not all the titles of the essays in the present book emphasize Emerson’s most characteristic themes, and this may disappoint our high expectations of Emersonian eloquence. The volume starts with the relatively short title essay “Society and Solitude,” followed by “Civilization,” a shortened or sharpened adaptation of his article “American Civilization,” first published during the Civil War; and the high, inspiring points of Emerson’s philosophy thereafter are best reflected or most plausibly sought in the essays “Art,” “Eloquence,” “Works and Days,” “Courage,” and “Success.” That progression of more inspiring titles contrasts with

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25. See “Art,” below, p. 23.

26. See “Eloquence,” below, p. 57. Regarding “method,” see the conclusion of Emerson’s “Fate,” in Emerson 2006, *The Conduct of Life*, pp. 23-24; and my Introduction to the volume: “Emerson on Creativity in Thought and Action,” p. xxi-xxiii.

the others: “Domestic Life,” “Farming,” “Books” (an annotated bibliography of recommended readings), “Clubs,” and “Old Age.” Instead of striving for, or emphasizing an intensive thematic unity, the book initially strikes the reader as more relaxed and congenial: less theoretical and more practical. The diversity of the essays and themes suggests that diversity of human interests is to be expected under the conditions of genuine, and newly won, freedom.

The composition of the book, still, is an expression of its general title theme: “Society and Solitude.” Solitude is the source and protector of scholarly and personal insight and of thematic unity in Emerson’s philosophy, though back and forth movement between society and solitude and the “dual consciousness” thus acquired is equally important. In spite of all his emphasis upon non-conformity, newness and innovation, the crucial roles of established society and prevailing culture in Emerson’s life and work are not to be denied. In “Clubs,” for instance, Emerson holds that “thought is the native air of the mind,” yet there can be too much of a good thing: “pure it is a poison to our mixed constitution, and soon burns up the bone-house of man, unless tempered with affection and coarse practice in the material world.”<sup>27</sup> “The flame of life burns too fast in pure oxygen,” he says, “and nature has tempered the air with nitrogen.”<sup>28</sup> Likewise, our existence in society is an antidote to the excesses of solitude.

“Varied foods, climates, beautiful objects,—and especially the alternation of a large variety of objects,” are needed, and “and of all the cordials known to us, the best, safest, and most exhilarating, with the least harm, is society.”<sup>29</sup> Emerson’s philosophy shifts in the present volume toward a gentler, survey-like overview of applications and life; and if we examine the varied essays, the tensions of the title theme will be found to return. Viewing *The Conduct of Life* as formulating Emerson’s aims and ideals of 1860, with the nation on the verge of war, then *Society and Solitude*, plausibly formulates, in moral terms, a post-war settlement.

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27. See “Clubs,” below, p. 143.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

In the essay “Civilization,” Emerson reiterates a central claim of his emphasis on solitude: “true liberty” comes with the illumination of Reason.<sup>30</sup> A comparable claim in his prior book, *The Conduct of Life*, is that “The revelation of Thought takes man out of servitude into freedom.”<sup>31</sup>

Thought dissolves the material universe, by carrying the mind up into a sphere where all is plastic. Of two men, each obeying his own thought, he whose thought is deepest will be the strongest character. Always one man more than another represents the will of Divine Providence to the period.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover civilization, freedom included, is ultimately an accomplishment of human thought. Quoting Montesquieu, “Countries are well cultivated, not as they are fertile, but as they are free;”<sup>33</sup> and civilization is not an accomplishment of isolated thought or insight. It “is the wisdom of man, in every instance of his labor, to hitch his wagon to a star,”<sup>34</sup>—to engage the forces of nature, society and culture. Insight requires its social and cultural background and application. For “as our handiworks borrow the elements, so all our social and political action leans on principles. To accomplish anything excellent, the will must work for catholic and universal ends.”<sup>35</sup> The Civil War and its near-fatal challenge to mid-nineteenth-century America was over. There is to be a return to society and newly established practical common-sense from the prior emphasis on insight and theoretical unity; but for Emerson, this is an expected turn of perspective from the more theoretical to the more practical. As he puts a related point in “Art:”

Every thought that arises in the mind, in its rising aims to pass out of the mind into act; just as every plant, in the moment of germination, struggles up to light. Thought is the seed of action; but action is as much its second form as thought is its first. It rises in thought, to the end that it may be uttered and acted.<sup>36</sup>

Thought is for the sake of action, and this is a proto-pragmatist theme in Emerson’s mature work. Emerson emphasizes practical aims in his “twelve

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30. See “Civilization,” below, p. 16.

31. Emerson 1860, “Fate,” in Emerson 2006, *The Conduct of Life.*, p. 13.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

33. “Civilization,” below, p. 22.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

35. *Ibid.*

36. “Art,” below, p. 23.

chapters,” but this practical emphasis on society is itself an implication of the theoretical perspective achieved. There is a persistent question of balance and this question has significant relation to the events of the times.

Consider the essay “Farming.” Farming is a humble profession:

The farmer’s office is precise and important, but you must not try to paint him in rose-color; you cannot make pretty compliments to fate and gravitation, whose minister he is. He represents the necessities. It is the beauty of the great economy of the world that makes his comeliness. He bends to the order of the seasons, the weather, the soils and crops, as the sails of a ship bend to the wind. He represents continuous hard labor, year in, year out, and small gains. He is a slow person, timed to nature, and not to city watches.<sup>37</sup>

Though the farmer often works in the solitude of the fields, his work is a direct engagement with nature and its forces in practice, and this is a far cry from the duties and tasks of the scholar’s solitude. While there is a small, very significant practical command over nature required to obtain one’s daily bread from the soil, there is a great deal more obedience to nature: “The farmer times himself to Nature, and acquires that livelong patience which belongs to her,” says Emerson; “Slow, narrow man, his rule is, that the earth shall feed and clothe him; and he must wait for his crop to grow.”<sup>38</sup> Though the farmer stands at considerable distance from the scholar’s aims, he also represented a large and crucial role and element of nineteenth-century American society.

Millions of soldiers, Northern and Southern, only recently out of uniform, naturally returned to the family farm,<sup>39</sup> and Emerson celebrates the nobility of the return. This celebration of the farmer is in the spirit of admiration for the Roman citizen-soldier Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, who after great victories, wanted not great honors and offices but only to return to his rural home and farm. A comparable figure of Puritan, non-conformist sympathies was the commander of the Parliamentary armies, Thomas Fairfax, who returned to his estate in Yorkshire

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37. “Farming,” below, p. 86.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Historian Samuel Eliot Morison remarks that “European observers were astonished at the quick demobilization of the Union army,” which was “reduced from a million men at the time of Appomattox to 183,000 on 10 November 1865, and by the end of 1866 to about 25,000, a number that remained constant for thirty years.” See Morison 1972, *The Oxford History of the American People*, vol. 2, pp. 498-499.

after the Puritan victory.<sup>40</sup> For Emerson, American Reconstruction was to be a comparable homecoming. The farmer's accustomed life and a nobler "Domestic Life" properly belonged to the peace dividend.

Yet the situation was far from ideal. In his letter to his British friend, Thomas Carlyle, written just after the Civil War in January 1866, Emerson comments that "my countrymen do not content me, but they are susceptible of inspirations,"

In the war, it was humanity that showed itself to advantage,—the leaders were prompted and corrected by the intuitions of the people,—they still demanding the more generous and decisive measure, and giving their sons and their estates, as we had no example before. In this heat, they had sharper perceptions of policy, of the ways and means, and the life of nations, and on every side we read or heard fate-words in private letters, in railway cars, or in the journals. We were proud of the people and believed they would not go down from this height. But peace came, and everyone ran back into his shop again, and can hardly be won to patriotism more, even to the point of chasing away the thieves that are stealing not only the public gold, but the newly won rights of the slave, and the new measures we had contrived to keep the planter from sucking his blood.<sup>41</sup>

The heroism of the war is now past, and Emerson's comments are note-worthy in their democratic sentiment. He and his Abolitionist friends were displeased with the administration of President Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's immediate successor, and unhappy with Johnson's opposition to the Reconstruction measures of the radical Republicans in Congress. With the war over, and the Southern agricultural interests defeated in battle, Northern commercial and manufacturing interests came to dominate, and Emerson, even in 1866, complains of thieves and exploitation. Given the traditional ideals of the Jeffersonian agricultural republic, Emerson's concern with farming pointed to an American normality.

The citizen-soldier's return to the farm was a predominant theme of American normality through much of the nineteenth century, since the citizen-farmer could be counted on to defend his plot against any potential invader or disruption. That had been a chief lesson of the American Revolution, when small Northern landholders massed to meet invading British armies, and the lesson had been recog-

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40. See John Wilson 1985, *Fairfax*, p. 162. Fairfax County in northern Virginia, the location of George Washington's home at Mount Vernon, is named for Thomas Fairfax.

41. See Emerson's letter to Thomas Carlyle of 7 January 1866 in Slater 1964, *The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle*, pp. 547-548.

nized and emphasized in the early division of the vast area of the old Northwest Territory, north of the Ohio and East of the Mississippi, into small farms for ordinary citizens. Jefferson had planned an even vaster “empire of liberty” in the Louisiana Territory, acquired from France in the year of Emerson’s birth.

Commenting on the farmer’s needed alignment with the forces of nature to do his work for him, Emerson comments, too, on similar forces in human beings and on a needed counter-balance. “The plants imbibe the materials which they want from the air and the ground. They burn, that is, exhale and decompose their own bodies into air and earth again. The animal burns, or undergoes the like perpetual consumption. The earth burns,—the mountains burn and decompose,—slower, but incessantly.” This vast power of nature and of human life requires moderating, restraining influences:

Nations burn with internal fire of thought and affection, which wastes while it works. We shall find finer combustion and finer fuel. Intellect is a fire: rash and pitiless it melts this wonderful bone-house which is called man. Genius even, as it is the greatest good, is the greatest harm. Whilst all thus burns,—the universe is a blaze kindled from the torch of the sun,—it needs a perpetual tempering, a phlegm, a sleep, atmosphere of azote, deluges of water, to check the fury of the conflagration; a hoarding to check the spending; a centripence equal to the centrifugence: and this is invariably supplied.<sup>42</sup>

Phlegm was one of the four “humors” of ancient physiology and considered to be the cold and moist principle of the body, responsible, when predominant, for a sluggish temperament. We easily imagine Emerson’s admiration for the burning intellect, but here we find his opposite admiration for the phlegmatic temperament of the farmer. The Emersonian universe, ablaze with the power and the fire of nature and of intellect, requires, too, “a sleep, atmosphere of azote” (or nitrogen) to avoid a general consumption of all in conflagration. There must be a balance of inwardly moving forces against those that disperse.

Though America is no longer plausibly viewed as the Jeffersonian agricultural republic with the independence and virtue of the citizen supported by ownership of small farms, we have not entirely lost the concept of an American normality, apart from foreign wars, and Cold Wars, and the intrusion of American arms and

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42. See “Farming,” below, p. 90.

aggressively globalizing interests into every corner of the planet. We likely think of homeownership in place of farms, and of smaller towns and cities and businesses of every description, continuing something of the Yankee spirit of enterprise and independence. We think of a spirit of innovation, open to the challenges of an ever-changing world and not rendered passive, fearful and dependent in the face of that world. In that context, it is worth observing that in his chapter on “Farming,” which pictures the normality of mid-nineteenth-century America, there is a clear indication of the dangerous alternatives arising with the failure to return to normality after the Civil War.

There is a premonition of the dire social consequences of the Gilded Age in Emerson’s 1866 complaints to Carlyle of thievery and exploitation. Emerson disputed the Malthusian notion that population must inevitably outrun the food supply with the consequence of inevitable and progressive general poverty, and he disputed the British economist, David Ricardo’s famous “Iron Law” of falling wages in the general population.<sup>43</sup> These remarks from “Farming” on Malthus and Ricardo dovetail with apparent complaints in “Civilization.” Emerson warned against “a country where knowledge cannot be diffused without perils of mob-law and statute-law,—where speech is not free,—where the post-office is violated, mail-bags opened, and letters tampered with,…”<sup>44</sup> Others among Emerson’s listing of “suicidal mischiefs” are clearly aimed at conditions arising after the Civil War—including concern that suffrage be free and equal, and with conflicts between black and white women. So, who might have been tampering with the mail? Overly zealous Republican-Abolitionists? Those who sought to control their influence?

Tampering with the mails is included among those “suicidal mischiefs” which would make a country “not civil, but barbarous” and such that “no advantages of soil, climate, or coast can resist” the dire consequences. Freedom, as a matter of principle, and as pervasive social law, unifies the diversity of Emerson’s particu-

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43. “Farming,” below, p. 93.

44. “Civilization,” below, p. 21.



lar concerns and focuses in this book. American freedom and the condition of the citizen-farmer must encompass the freedom of the former slave, but also that the laborer be “secured in the earnings of his own hands.”<sup>45</sup> With continually rising tariffs, or import taxes on manufactured goods, first during the Civil War, but continuing into the Gilded Age, the laborer was far from secure in his wages. Ever higher prices were paid for manufactured goods, either imported or domestically produced, and wages remained static. This was the economic mechanism of the Gilded Age which eventually produced wide-spread economic distress on American farms, and in the cities too, and it eventuated in American Populism and in the Progressivism of the new century to come.

Emerson, in the years leading up to the publication of *Society and Solitude*, was focused on the plight of the former slaves in the South, and, along with the radical Republicans generally, was so dissatisfied with President Johnson, that the election of President Grant in 1868 was greeted with joy. Unlike Johnson, Grant supported the radical Republicans in Congress, and their measures in support of African Americans, though the corruption of his years in office was later identified as a major factor in the domination of commercial and industrial interests over the nation. It is unclear to what extent Emerson was aware of the dangers posed. He wrote in his Journal in 1867-1868 as follows:

I have no knowledge of trade and there is not the sciolist<sup>46</sup> who cannot shut my mouth and my understanding by strings of facts that seem to prove the wisdom of tariffs. But my faith in freedom of trade, as the rule, returns always. If the Creator has made oranges, coffee, and pineapples in Cuba, and refused them to Massachusetts, I cannot see why we should put a fine on the Cubans for bringing these to us,—a fine so heavy as to enable Massachusetts men to build costly palm-houses and glass conservatories, under which to coax these poor plants to ripen under our hard skies, and thus discourage the poor planter from sending them to gladden the very cottages here. We punish the planter there and punish the merchant and consumer here for adding these benefits to life.

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45. The Republican Congress had actively promoted protection even during the Civil War. With 102 of 146 House seats and 29 of 36 Senate seats in their hands, the protective tariffs were hiked in 1862 and further hiked in 1864, and working people suffered from high prices while wages lagged behind. Effective political opposition to high import taxes had traditionally come from the predominantly agricultural South.

46. “Sciolist”: pretender to learning or scholarship.

Tax opium, tax poison, tax brandy, gin, wine hashish, tobacco, and whatever articles of pure luxury, but not healthy and delicious food.<sup>47</sup>

Essentially the same reasoning would have shown Emerson the disadvantages to be expected from ever increasing import taxes directed against foreign manufactured goods: a kind of indirect subsidy to (costlier) domestic producers, at the expense of the domestic farmers, laborers and consumers. This danger had the potential of converting the Jeffersonian citizen-farmers into armies of impoverished industrial workers. Somewhat later, Emerson wrote in the same journal of new tasks for the poet:

I wish the American Poet should let old times go and write on Tariff; Universal suffrage; Woman's suffrage; Science shall not be abused to make guns. The poet shall bring out the blazing truth, that he who kills his brother commits suicide. The gold was not hid in the Black Mountains that one man should own it all. ... The laws shall hold men to their best, and fools shall not be allowed to administer what requires the wisdom of the wisest.<sup>48</sup>

Emerson's active literary career was essentially ended by 1872,<sup>49</sup> and it is not clear that he did ever fully understand the dangers the nation faced in the Gilded Age. But it is clear that he was wary of the dangers present in American society: high tariffs meant rising prices for manufactured goods, while wages and prices for farm produce remained essentially static.<sup>50</sup> These were the fundamental ingredients and factors of the American Gilded Age.

#### **4. Integrity, universality, normality, and the Anglo-American mind**

In his Lectures from the 1840's devoted to the theme of "New England," Emerson took up a related dilemma of the English and Anglo-American mind and character. "It is sometimes said that the American character is only the English character exaggerated. Are they lovers of freedom? We more. Are they lovers of

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47. See Bosco and Johnson eds. 1982, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Note Books of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. XVI., pp. 85-86.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

49. On the assumption that Emerson *knew* he was losing his memory (and ability to compose), even in 1870, then his shift to emphasis on society in this book would perhaps make sense on those personal grounds. The opening of the book might then be interpreted in that light.

50. For somewhat greater detail see Boyer, Clark *et al.* 1993, *The Enduring Vision, A History of the American People*, pp. 698-699.

commerce? We more. Are they lovers of utility? We more.”<sup>51</sup> Though this is an initial, impressionistic, and somewhat humorous summary, it is useful too, in eventually getting at the contrasts. Consider the political context of America in the 1840’s. Andrew Jackson, victor over the British at new Orleans in 1815, finished his second term as President in 1838, and he was followed in that office by his own man, President Martin van Buren. If Emerson had asked further in his lecture, “Are the English lovers of Empire?” or “Are they lovers of conformity and social honors above all? then in light of the Puritan (non-conformist) settlement of New England, the American Revolution, and the War of 1812, the obvious answer (leastwise in 1843) would have been “We less.” Still, the British propensity to empire grew from its love affair with freedom of commerce and utility, and as Emerson remarks, the similar American love affair is no less pronounced. However, America’s Anglophobic low points demonstrated, at the least, that we did not want to be subject to a British empire over the English-speaking world. Though the founding fathers spoke of empire, ours was to be chiefly an empire of freedom and of the independent citizen-farmer. Out of sympathy for this aim Emerson’s abolitionism grew.

Emerson generally emphasizes the positive relation of America and New England to the mother country, however; and his cultivation of British and of English sources, quite evident in his writings, is a key to understanding his great nineteenth-century success with the British reading public. When America was most dissatisfied with Britain, and the British still wounded by, and in self-doubt over, the loss of the American colonies, Emerson looked positively into the relationship and explored the cultural commonalities, on both sides of the conflicts, between non-conformists and cavaliers, leading back, at least, to the English Civil Wars of the 1640’s. Exploring a little further, then, we begin to see some of the traditional contrasts responsible for the Anglophobic low-points of American-British relations, and these are of equal import with the commonalities empha-

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51. Emerson 2001, “New England, 1843-1844” in Bosco and Myerson 2001, *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. I., p. 8.

sized in the Anglophile high points of American-British relations. In view of the prevalence of Anglophile attitudes in the twentieth century, it is better to view the conflicts and contrasts deriving from the English Civil Wars as ingredients of a common Anglo-American culture. Or at least, it is plausible to view Britain and American as standing at two poles of a common cultural continuum.

As a self-proclaimed non-conformist, Emerson most directly represented the Anglophobic inclinations of American society, as contrasted with the particularities of English and British society and culture (as the standing joke has it, the Church of England, to which the American protestants failed to conform, is “the Tory party at prayer”). We should not be surprised, then, that when the British Empire returned in strength in the late nineteenth century, along with the Gilded Age in America, appreciation of Emerson began to decline. It was only shortly after Emerson’s death that the British educator and social critic Mathew Arnold came to Boston in 1883 to praise Cardinal Newman, criticize Carlyle’s strenuousness, and to say (all in his essay “Emerson”) that “in truth, one of the legitimate poets, Emerson, in my opinion is not. His poetry is interesting, it makes one think; but it is not the poetry of one of the born poets.”<sup>52</sup> Even earlier, in 1876, the British Hegelian Idealist F. H. Bradley first published his *Ethical Studies*, including a strenuous rejection of individualism: his ethics of “my station and its duties.” It is not difficult to imagine that a rejection of Emerson and individualism suited the political mood of the rebuilding and expansion of the British Empire. Plausibly, it equally suited the political mood of America’s commercial and industrial expansions and concentrations during the Gilded Age.

Emerson’s characterization of the Anglo-American mind or character is broader than his initial statement might lead us to expect, and it is nicely stated in the following short paragraph from the same 1843 lecture on “New England.”

The British family is expanded but not altered. The national traits are the same for centuries. We see at this moment, only the demonstration of the thoughts which were already ripe in the beginning of the seventeenth century, when the Religious Wars drove the

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52. Mathew Arnold 1885, “Emerson,” in *Discourses in America*, p. 153.

Puritans to America. The two main points by which the English nation was then distinguished, the two points by which they attached themselves to the heavens and the earth, to the mind and to matter, namely, Conscience and Common Sense, or in view of their objects, the love of Religion and the love of Commerce, Religion and Trade, are still the two hands by which they hold the dominion of the globe.<sup>53</sup>

While common sense and commerce look to expediency and utility, conscience and the love of religion, always “capable of enthusiasms,” look to principles; and it was a somewhat untypical intensity of religious devotion and enthusiasm (especially so by British lights) which was originally transplanted to New England by the Pilgrim fathers. The religious awakenings of American history may here be called in to testify to Emerson’s overall characterization, as may our history of dizzy economic and commercial expansions. We find a still familiar image. But there is also a considerable and persistent contrast between America and Britain regarding moralistic attitudes, religion, and the popular character of religion deriving from the large-scale immigration of British non-conformists to America.

It is as though the planting of New England was given that location, just north-east of New York City and the rest of the nation, in order to watch over and guard against our opposite proclivities and excesses. “The new is only the seed of the old,” says Emerson, “What is this abolition, non-resistance, and temperance” (and we might now add women’s suffrage, prohibition, feminism and civil rights) “but the continuation of Puritanism, though it operate the destruction of the church in which it grew as the new is always making the old superfluous.”<sup>54</sup> In particular, we might plausibly view America’s history of religious awakenings, including their emphasis on principle, law, and morality, as belonging to our history of reactions to our own economic and commercial excesses. But contemporary America differs from Emerson’s America in regard to the intellectual standing we attribute to our particularities of religious tradition. The claim that Americans are “non-conformists,” whether true or false, now lacks the religious connotation it doubtlessly had in Emerson’s times, and it seems to be that much less of a poten-

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53. Emerson 2001, “New England, 1843-1844,” p. 9.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

tial restraint on excesses of economic expansion and aggressively globalizing enterprise.

A point which needs some emphasis here is that the society in which Emerson lived was predominantly non-conformist in the sense in which both New England's Puritan-derived Congregationalism and its later Unitarian offshoots counted as "non-conformist" sects by the lights of the doctrine and liturgy of the Church of England—from which they departed and ultimately derived. Though Emerson certainly broadens and deepens the meaning of non-conformity for Americans, and made it appealing far beyond the boundaries of New England, there was every reason to think that his advocacy of non-conformity would naturally get a hearing from his immediate audience of New England readers. This twist in the meaning of Emersonian non-conformity helps to illuminate his mode of social consciousness. Emerson as individualist, Platonic, and pantheistic idealist remained ever in contact with his contemporary world of ordinary experience. His sociality is Stoic-protestant in character, with a keen eye for society's failures in living up to its professed ideals and to higher ideals. This keen eye was also a kind of critical engagement which comes to the fore in Emerson the reformer and abolitionist.

Emerson is a religious Platonist or neo-Platonist and retains a more Calvinistic and Stoic element from his non-conformist New England heritage—thus avoiding total immersion in his social causes. He is a New England Abolitionist and reformer and also a New England Whig-republican. We might even say he was the first thinker of America's liberal Republicans.<sup>55</sup> He is an advocate of the integrity and insight arising from solitude and yet appreciates the joys, sympathies, and exploration of human society and cultures. The reader of Emerson's ever popular early *Essays*, from the 1840's, will recall his distinctive rhetoric of individuality: "Whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be good-

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55. There is mention of Presidents John Adams and John Quincy Adams in the final chapter—who may be thought of as representing the Abolitionist Northern-Whig political tradition *from which* the Lincoln Republicans developed.

ness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world.”<sup>56</sup> But it is equally Emersonian to say, as he does below in the essay, “Art,” that

The artist who is to produce a work which is to be admired, not by his friends or his town-people or his contemporaries, but by all men, and which is to be more beautiful to the eye in proportion to its culture, must dis-individualize himself, and be a man of no party, and no manner, and no age, but one through whom the soul of all men circulates, as the common air through his lungs. He must work in the spirit in which we conceive a prophet to speak, or an angel of the Lord to act; that is, he is not to speak his own words, or do his own works, or think his own thoughts, but he is to be an organ through which the universal mind acts.<sup>57</sup>

Emerson is both individualist and universalist, and in a corresponding sense both radical pluralist and universalistic monist; he aims for the greatest possible universality. Though “nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind,” which is to continue through all development, that claim is very far from saying that integrity or unity and simplicity of perspective and attitudes may properly be purchased at the cost of provincial ignorance of the wider world or through lack of curiosity. On the contrary, integrity is crucial, because it is required if the “universal mind” is to act effectively through individuals.

Being an individual means Emersonian non-conformity, which is crucial to integrity; and integrity, in turn is crucial to progressively broader comprehension and expression—as this may be contrasted with merely impressionistic accumulation of diverse elements and simple-minded eclecticism. Broader comprehension of the world is not plausibly purchased at the price of endless complexity, and from that perspective we can understand that Emerson’s concern for integrity represents a methodological check on the progressive expansion of knowledge. Viewed in methodological perspective, Emersonian integrity represents the conservative theoretical virtues of simplicity and continuity with established knowledge, as these enter into the proposed expansion of knowledge. Likewise, Emerson’s neo-Platonic striving for universality, and the check it presents to individual insight or conviction,

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56. Emerson 1841, “Self Reliance,” in Bode and Cowley, p. 141.

57. “Art,” below, p. 31.

represents the competing theoretical virtue of greater comprehension. Since each of these competing theoretical virtues may be viewed as an ideal expectation placed upon the proposed results of our inquiries, there can be no general reconciliation: they stand in permanent tension. Yet in any given case, by settling on particular answers to our problems and questions, we manage to favor, say, greater continuity and simplicity, or greater comprehension, on that particular occasion.

Striving for practical universality, or expansion of practical command, we may sometimes produce only great confusion. That is a point fundamental to any stoic-derived ethical perspective. We come face to face with a wider world which we can neither comprehend nor control. If so, then it is time to get back to basics and the better known, more immediate world: we best shift from the universalistic and theoretical ambitions of solitude back to the commonalities of a known society. Great confusion and dislocation have sometime been the outcome of Anglo-American commercial and economic expansions. The Gilded Age is a case in point. Our relations to the world had been expanded, but we found, in consequence, that we were faced with a wider world which we did not sufficiently understand and which often presented a hostile and threatening face. As a general matter, this is the character of arguments for a return to normality subsequent to any generalizing expansion.

### **5. Art, the particular and the universal**

“There is but one Reason,” says Emerson, “The mind that made the world is not one mind, but *the* mind. Every man is an inlet to the same, and to all of the same.”<sup>58</sup> This concept of reason, contrasted with the common-sense understanding, derives from Emerson’s readings of Coleridge. The pantheistic, or quasi-pantheistic emphasis on “*the* mind” functions to support the claimed universality of reason. What is a matter of rational insight today, may count to common sense tomorrow, or next year, and there is no general rejection of the claims of common

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58. “Art,” below, p. 32.



sense in *Society and Solitude*. The mind, though every human being is an inlet to it, and to all of it, is not revealed all at once. “The mind” is “the mind that formed Nature,” a creative Deity or ruling power in nature. But if there is only *the* mind, and universal reason, we naturally ask, how is it that common sense, and our scientific understanding of the world, differs from time to time and from place to place? Moreover, how are we to understand the distinctively Emersonian emphasis on the individual?

Emerson continues the passage quoted above from “Art,” saying “Therefore we arrive at this conclusion, which I offer as a confirmation of the whole view, that the delight which a work of art affords, seems to arise from our recognizing in it the mind that formed Nature, again in active operation.”<sup>59</sup> But if there is only *the* mind, and one universal reason, why again does art vary so greatly in style and themes? Emerson stipulates that works of art differ from the works of Nature in that the works of nature “are organically reproductive;” still “spiritually,” art “is prolific by its powerful action on the intellects of men.”<sup>60</sup> Works of art do not reproduce of themselves they must be made by human beings, then, but Nature operates through “the intellects of men,” and our minds, as we know, differ from time to time and from place to place. Art propagates in its diverse modes through the diverse minds of human beings.

According to Emerson, Spirit animates Nature, and it is expressed in human works, though it is not expressed equally and at any time quite fully or completely. We might reasonably assume that Emerson persists in his doctrine from “Nominalist and Realist,” published in *Essays, Second Series* (1844): “the divine Providence, which keeps the universe open in every direction to the soul, conceals all the furniture and all the persons that do not concern a particular soul, from the senses of that individual.” We are to move from the particular to the universal, from the individual’s understanding or the common sense of the time to the more

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59. “Art,” below, p. 33.

60. *Ibid.*

fully rational, as best we can, and each starting from where he or she may stand; and it is in this spirit that Emerson wrote, in the same essay:

I assert, that every man is a partialist, that nature secures him as an instrument by self-conceit, preventing the tendencies to religion and science; and now further assert, that, each man's genius being nearly and affectionately explored, he is justified in his individuality, as his nature is found to be immense; and now I add, that every man is a universalist also, and, as our earth, whilst it spins on its own axis, spins all the time around the sun through the celestial spaces, so the least of its rational children, the most dedicated to his private affair, works out, though as it were under a disguise, the universal problem.<sup>61</sup>

The needed method, of moving from the partial to the universal, is closely related to the title theme, and essay, *Society and Solitude*: we must shift back and forth to gain perspective and insight. What is more to the point, presently, is that Emerson's conception of art, in the present work, commits him to the side of universal reason.

Writing early on as a professed "non-conformist," Emerson could appeal to his New England friends, neighbors and the founding spirit of his place in the world. New England had been founded by Calvinist dissidents from the Church of England, and in spite of his criticisms of Calvinism, that non-conformist spirit was something which Emerson relied upon. In the present book, the words "conformist" and "non-conformist" do not appear. There is an argument, in the opening essay, for Emersonian self-reliance, and the need for self-reliance is understood as a need for the solitude of the scholar as contrasted with the general influence of society. But in the present book, as we have seen, the predominant emphasis is on society, a return to normality, and the diversity of the free expressions of normality. Our problem is to understand, in that context, the tension produced by the emphasis placed upon universality in Emerson's essay on "Art." What room is there in this for diversity and particularity? Architecture seems a suitable case in point.

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61. Emerson 1844, "Nominalist and Realist," reprinted in Emerson 1995, *Essays and Poems*, p. 297.

In his book *English Traits*, Emerson quotes approvingly from a letter of Horatio Greenough which illustrate his proto-functionalist conception of architecture:

Here is my theory of structure: A scientific arrangement of spaces and forms to functions and to site; an emphasis of features proportioned to their *gradated* importance in function; color and ornament to be decided and arranged and varied by strictly organic laws, having a distinct reason for each decision; the entire and immediate banishment of all make-shift and make-believe.<sup>62</sup>

The dominance of function in this conception of structure is also a plea for transparency of function in structure, in view of the “emphasis of features proportioned to their *graded* importance in function.” Eliminating all “make-shift and make-believe,” the roles of color and decoration will also assist in the exhibition of the role of function in structure. Though it is consistent with what we might call Protestant simplicity in architecture and design, and carries some suggestion of this particularity, one might also take the view that functionalism, especially in its twentieth century forms, is a preeminently universalistic conception of architectural form responsible for crucial ingredients of the international style which has produced a great deal of uniformity in the world—at the worst, great strings of undistinguished glass and steel boxes spanning cities and continents.

But if the idea that form is to follow function is adopted as the first normative principle of architecture, as suggested by Emerson and Greenough, it does not follow that everything particular and distinctive of time, place and materials must be abstracted from each work so that we end up with universal uniformity and repetition. Neither is it plausibly an Emersonian solution, however, to introduce arbitrary or ironic elements of decoration and distraction or to simulate particularity by simply emulating past tradition—the nineteenth century paradigm of such an approach is the Victorian Gothic—and obscuring thereby our use of modern materials and technique. There is certainly a strong tendency in Emerson’s essay “Art,” to equate art in the fullest sense with its most abstract aspects and universal

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62. Emerson 1856, *English Traits*, p. 12; in the Harvard edition 1994, p. 3.

expressions, and to subtract from the artists' accomplishment all that is individual, particular or conventional—the direction of abstract modernism.

Perhaps the better side of Emerson is somewhat less universalistic and abstract in emphasis, in the spirit of “Nominalist and Realist,” allowing greater scope and recognition to the particularities of time and place—so that we will have universal aspirations, respect for scientific advances, modernity *and* those distinctive developments of diverse traditions plausibly consistent with our universal aspirations. The idea of one universal mind actualized in human culture may remain an appropriate normative ideal (though it is in fact never achieved), if it functions to subdue the excesses and obvious defects of our particularities. The pluralistic thought is that the evaluation of cultural traditions and their products only makes sense from within some particular tradition or other—though our particular traditions may be justly and usefully revised in light of broader encounters. From this perspective, it ever remains a distinctive human art, suggested by Emerson's vision of American social Reconstruction after the Civil War, to combine free diversity, by system, still avoiding repetitive uniformity. Such an art belongs to the design of any free society.

