

Ralph Waldo Emerson: Philosophical Lessons for a Civilization in Crisis

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Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) is most often described by present day commentators as America's greatest essayist and lecturer. It would be difficult to find a more talented writer or speaker, but such titles fall far short of his true stature.

Was he a mystic? In certain of his moods, but this should not disqualify the breadth of his vision and the clarity of his intelligence. "Mysticism," Emerson explains, "consists in the mistake of an accidental and individual symbol for a universal one."¹ Despite his lifelong familiarity with mystical experience, Emerson never let his personal enthusiasm obscure the impartial intuition of the whole.

Was he a poet? He was a good one when the Muse struck, but seldom great. I doubt there are many alive today who would contest the claim that even Emerson's sublimest poetry was surpassed by the striking originality of Walt Whitman's free verse. No, Emerson was not principally a poet, or simply an essayist, a lecturer, or a man of letters. To introduce him as such is to miss a sorely needed opportunity for edification.

Emerson was, above all else, a *philosopher*—not what is today called a *professor* of philosophy mind you, but the genuine article. He was a devoted *lover of wisdom* (φιλόσοφος) who found his calling as America's philosopher just as academic knowledge was beginning to be professionalized by the modern university. By the 20th century, philosophy—once the mother of all the sciences—had become just another disciplinary specialization, and a marginal one at that. It was reduced to logical analysis or linguistic deconstruction, leaving the goings on of nature (including human nature) to the quantitative analyses of scientists. Aside from a few precious exceptions, over the past two centuries American professors of philosophy have gradually ceased worrying about the "big questions" concerning the meaning of existence to focus instead on trivial conceptual technicalities of no use to society at

¹ "The Poet" (All works by Ralph Waldo Emerson can be found at rwe.org).

large. One of the precious exceptions, Alfred North Whitehead, continually warned about the effect of such professionalization on university education. Universities in his day were in the business of mass producing “minds in a groove.” “To be mentally in a groove,” Whitehead wrote in 1925,

“is to live in contemplating a given set of abstractions. The groove prevents straying across country, and the abstraction abstracts from something to which no further attention is paid.”

Abstraction is impossible to avoid, and indeed essential for civilized life. But an educational system that forces students into water tight disciplinary tracks blinds them from the fullness of human existence. From Whitehead’s rather Emersonian perspective, the most deleterious result of the modern university’s turn away from philosophical breadth toward standardized specialization is that “we are left with no expansion of wisdom” despite being in “greater need of it” because of advances in technological power.² In a lecture in 1937, Whitehead was even more convinced that

“the increasing departmentalization of universities during the last hundred years, however necessary for administrative purposes, [has tended to] trivialize the mentality of the teaching profession.”³

Emerson was already regretting the effects of professionalization a century earlier. In his 1837 lecture “The American Scholar,” he spoke of the ideal “One Man” that the various members of a healthy society must remain always cognizant of, even while they pursue their diverse talents. “Unfortunately,” he said, “this original unit, this fountain of power,...has been so minutely subdivided...that it is spilled into drops, and cannot be gathered.” The state of society, mirrored by its universities,

“is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters,—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man.”⁴

In his later essay “Intellect,” Emerson remarked that, to avoid the “incipient insanity” which results from the exaggeration of a single topic of study, the intellect “must have

² *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 197-198.

³ *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), 131.

⁴ “The American Scholar”

the same wholeness which nature has.”⁵ Lacking such wholeness, intellectuals are liable to forget that the universe does not come pre-packaged so as to fit neatly within the artificial disciplinary boundaries of the modern university.

Emerson refused to reduce himself to an appendage by working on the assembly line of specialized academic knowledge production. He never held a university post. As far as he was concerned, the American university system was fast becoming “a system of despair” dismissive of creative genius and true depth of insight.⁶ Nonetheless, by his own account his audience consisted principally of “students and scholars,” that is “the reading and thinking class.” “And yet,” he added generously, “that is a class which comprises...every man in the best hours of his life.”⁷ Emerson’s idea of the philosophic or scholarly life is of a continual course of learning that traverses an endless series of seasonal cycles and graduations: sleep and dreams as much our teachers as waking rationality; birth and death just the outer reaches of the memories and sensations of our temporarily incarnated intellects; the splendor of earth and sky as critical to our curriculum as any printed book. Emerson was no ivory tower intellectual. He sought to bring philosophy to the people by revealing how the dirty details of everyday life were emblematic of heaven’s eternal ideas. As one of the last world-class philosophers to escape the disciplinary dismantling of the modern university, he made his living instead on the lyceum circuit as an itinerant lecturer.⁸ The wisdom he desired to share with his audiences, though difficult, was never abstract. Emerson’s most vital verbal expressions arose from his firsthand experiences of earthly life beneath the sky. With his words he sought only to gesture toward the natural facts of his life, and to enunciate the universe to which he and these facts belonged as the living symbol of an original spiritual act. His language transfigures the seemingly contradictory facts of nature into the harmonious breath of a unified spirit.

⁵ “Intellect”

⁶ “New England Reformers”

⁷ "Seventh of March Speech on the Fugitive Slave Law, 7 March 1854." *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. 2 vols. Eds. Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson. Athens and London: University of Georgia, 2001. (vol. 1, pp. 333-47)

⁸ The American lyceum movement consisted of a series of voluntary local associations focused on adult education. It was at its height during the 19th century. In 1834, there were approximately 3,000 such associations in the northeastern and midwestern United States.

His ideas can appear abstract to the the common understanding,⁹ but they offer concrete realities when philosophically or spiritually intuited. The world he described is not some far off ideal, but is hidden right here among us behind the thin veil of our habitual neglect. One moment, we are simply walking home from a neighborhood errand, avoiding snow puddles on the ground. The next, a flash of lightning or brisk gust of wind blows open what Aldous Huxley called the “reducing valve” of our normal perception allowing “Mind at Large” to flood in.¹⁰ For Emerson, “all mean egotism vanishes”¹¹ in these mysterious ruptures in the everyday course of events. We discover, even if only for a moment, the true cosmic extent of our consciousness. Emerson described such an experience in his first book *Nature*. One evening, while “crossing a bare common, in snow puddles...under a clouded sky,” he found himself spontaneously transformed into “a transparent eye-ball”: “I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.”¹²

There is without doubt a strong dose of such mystical experience informing Emerson’s philosophical outlook. No one passes through life without at least a glimpse of the wonder offered by such experiences, but few of today’s academic philosophers are willing or able to speak openly of them. To do so would risk their professional reputations as disinterested specialists capable of deploying purely rational knowledge that is untainted by emotions, values, and especially religion. Despite the fallen state of philosophy in today’s universities, those who still consider themselves lovers of wisdom can affirm Whitehead’s even more Emersonian conclusion that, if mysticism be “direct insight into depths as yet unspoken,” then the task of philosophy is to make the mystical intellectually digestible.¹³ Following Emerson’s example, the philosophical transmutation of mysticism is to be accomplished, not by dismissing it, but by convincingly expressing it, bringing the meaning of those rare hours when we find ourselves unexpectedly encompassed by visions of a higher reality into common

⁹ That is, to those not initiated into the transcendental mode of consciousness inaugurated by Immanuel Kant and his German successors Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel (all major influences on Emerson).

¹⁰ Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception & Heaven and Hell* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 24.

¹¹ *Nature*, ch. 1

¹² *Nature*, ch. 1

¹³ *Modes of Thought*, 174.

speech, all the while still acknowledging their infinite mystery and grand impersonality. The mystical feeling was not celebrated for its own sake by Emerson, but was scoured for the practical and intellectual gifts it might offer us in other, less inspired hours.

Though he loved deeply and lost loved ones repeatedly,¹⁴ from the moment the philosophic itch arose in his soul, Emerson's gaze was fixed securely on the problem of existence as such. The mystical experiences he was privy to were not *his own*, did not *belong* to him. Rather, they revealed a perspective on things beyond the sentimentality of the merely personal:

“The considerations of time and place, of you and me, of profit and hurt, tyrannize over most men's minds. Intellect separates the fact considered from *you*.”¹⁵

A free-ranging and independent mind, Emerson's most important teacher was not a human being, but rather the soul of the world, the *inner* dimension of the natural world studied by science. His deepest thinking occurred not while reading the well worn grooves of history's Platos, Shakespeares, and Goethes, but while wandering pathless through the forest groves of Concord. *What is Nature? Who am I?*—these are Emerson's first and final questions. He spent all his able-minded life contemplating them. They are the most philosophical questions a human being can ask. Luckily for us, Emerson returned from his revelatory walks in the open air to the stillness of his study, where, after careful reflection, he left written traces of his journeywork so that we might follow him:

“What is nature to [the philosopher]? There is never a beginning, there is never an end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself.”¹⁶

In this returning to itself, Nature is mimicked by our own minds, “whose beginning, whose ending, [we] can never find,—so entire, so boundless.” From Emerson's perspective, the bond between mind and nature runs so deep that ignorance of the

¹⁴ His father died 13 days before his 9th birthday, he lost six siblings to various ailments before they reached 30, his first wife Ellen died of tuberculosis only two years after their marriage, his first son Waldo died of scarlet fever at age 5, and his best friend and most important influence, Henry David Thoreau, died at 44, also of tuberculosis.

¹⁵ “Intellect”

¹⁶ “The American Scholar.”

workings of the latter is only evidence of unconsciousness in the former. As a result of this bond, Emerson declares that “the ancient precept ‘Know thyself,’ and the modern precept, ‘Study nature,’ become at last one maxim.”¹⁷

In his essay “Intellect,” Emerson asks his reader “What is the hardest task in the world?” If I were asking it of myself at the present time, the hardest task in the world would seem to be adding anything of even minor significance to what has already been said better by Emerson, America's national sage. Despite Whitehead's opinion that Emerson “was not so original”¹⁸ (he preferred Whitman on this count), and that William James was the true American Plato,¹⁹ it remains true that Whitman owed the better part of his philosophical tuition to Emerson, and that James, though a philosophical genius in his own right, also benefitted intellectually from Emerson, his godfather. How could anyone offer a treatment of his intellectual biography that might so much as approach the depth of Emerson's own study of the significant conceptual personae of history in his book *Representative Men*? In his late essay “Quotation and Originality” Emerson modestly wrote:

“How few thoughts! In a hundred years, millions of men and not a hundred lines of poetry, not a theory of philosophy that offers a solution of the great problems, not an art of education that fulfills the conditions.”

“In this delay and vacancy of thought,” continues Emerson, “we must make the best amends we can by seeking the wisdom of others to fill the time.” Today, many fellow lovers of wisdom make amends for our own turbidity by reading Emerson himself. He may very well be, to this day, America's most essential and most eloquent philosopher. In the course of writing this essay, I found myself with an incessant desire to excerpt his words, to let the man speak for himself. It is my opinion that one can never re-read Emerson's sentences too often. I hope my reader will forgive me for quoting liberally. What is left to think and to say after Emerson? In my own remarks, I have aspired only to give some sense of his personal karma and to amplify ideas expressed in his

¹⁷ “The American Scholar.”

¹⁸ *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead as Recorded by Lucien Price* (New York: Little, Brown, & Co., 1954), 24.

¹⁹ Hartshorne, Charles. *Whitehead's Philosophy: Selected Essays, 1935-1970* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), ix.

work that, as an American attempting to philosophize in the 21st century, I find it impossible to do without.

In a world overfull with fatalities, the greater part of the freedom that human beings are able muster is found in the asking of our own questions and posing of our own problems. Our most serious task is to ask, and ask again. Children continue to ask questions freely until they enter school and are told by their teachers to respond to problems imposed by standardized tests. Those who dutifully answer become the standard. Those who refuse these imposed problems and instead create their own partake of genuine learning. It is thus that the soul grows like a plant, from the inside out: “Man is endogenous, and education is his unfolding,” as Emerson said.²⁰ *The hardest task in the world*, according to him, is *thinking*.²¹ We are seldom able to achieve it. It grows only with rare fits and starts, in unexpected leaps. Our own greatest thoughts do not originate with us, but course through us, arriving from and departing to we know not where. Genuine thinking, for Emerson, hits us like a revelation, leaving us always “stupid with wonder.”²² Thinking is “always a miracle, which no frequency of occurrence or incessant study can ever familiarize.”²³ Thinking has a cosmic ground—it is “the advent of truth into the world, a form of thought now, for the first time, bursting into the universe.”²⁴

“I have observed,” Emerson tells us elsewhere, “persons who, in their character and actions, answer questions which I have not skill to put.”²⁵ Emerson himself was such a person, his characteristic style exemplifying for us more than mere skill, but true *genius*. His was no secular thinking, no passive reflection upon the inherited perceptions of his time. His life’s task was that of the scholar: “Man Thinking,” as he called it. “In the degenerate state, when the victim of society,” wrote Emerson, “[the philosopher] tends to become...the parrot of other men's thinking.”²⁶ Emerson’s task

²⁰ “Uses of Great Men”

²¹ “Intellect”

²² “Intellect”

²³ “Intellect”

²⁴ “Intellect”

²⁵ “Uses of Great Men”

²⁶ “The American Scholar”

was no social role, but a higher office which took orders from no one but the One. Fit expression of ideas makes them contagious, but Genius does not contract ideas like diseases: Genius *creates* them. But what sort of sacred thinking is it that would present itself as *the hardest task in the world?* Such thinking shares a common source with cosmogenesis. It is the creative power of the universe itself, risen to self-consciousness. With such thinking, the mind transmutes life into truth, distilling the eternal Idea from out of a flux of facts. The difficulty of thinking creatively results from the invisibility of this source, even to geniuses. “Man is a stream whose source is hidden,” said Emerson. “I am...but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water.”²⁷

A genius does not become infected by other people’s ideas, but nor does he or she simply make them through the power of his or her own will. Emerson rose to the level of Man Thinking through a love of freedom—not freedom as so many Americans presently understand it, as nothing more than the childish cry “Leave me alone!”—but that deeper freedom consisting in an obedience to the inner laws of the soul.

“To hazard the contradiction,—freedom is necessary. 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...So far as a man thinks, he is free.”²⁸

Thinking is the hardest task in the world. In most of our moods we shrink before it, preferring the easier route to social acceptance granted us by mimicry. Some put on a show of rebelliousness by railing against the values of their parents’ generation, but have not the courage, the creativity, or the commitment to replace them with something more virtuous. Today, with America facing its greatest identity crisis since the Civil War, are Emerson’s sublime expressions still audible to contemporary ears? The people, let us call them “Americans” for now, to whom Emerson delivered his famous address “The American Scholar” in 1837—a speech Oliver Wendell Holmes famously referred to as America’s “intellectual declaration of independence”—had not yet lived through the horrors of the Civil War, but the air was already tense in tragic anticipation. The late 1830s were marked by one of the worst recessions of the 19th century, and the need for the nation to finally face the ungodly institution of slavery was felt more strongly with each passing day. Contemporary America faces a similar

²⁷ “The Over-Soul”

²⁸ “Fate”

set of existential challenges. Consumer capitalism—our undisputed civil religion—has made money into the holiest of sacraments, more valuable than equality and freedom, culture and education, even earthly life itself. Parochial politics oriented toward the mob rather than the Mind continue to tear apart the social fabric. And finally—something Emerson and his fellow transcendentalists, in awe of the encompassing power of Nature, could hardly have foreseen—, a worsening ecological crisis threatens to prematurely pull the plug on the entire venture of human civilization. “We think our civilization near its meridian,” a confident Emerson could write in 1844, “but we are yet only at the cock-crowing and the morning star.”²⁹ One hundred and seventy years later, it has become clear that the industrial phase of civilization has irreversibly transformed the very geology of the planet.³⁰ Today’s thinking persons are having to take seriously the possibility that the civilization which seemed to Emerson a newborn Venus now has more in common with hell-bound Lucifer. The hope of a new dawn for Western civilization, still credible in Emerson’s pre-Civil War America, has, two world wars and an ecological crisis later, become increasingly difficult to imagine.

Can we, in an age of neuroscience, particle colliders, and geoengineering still make sense of his core convictions that “within man is the soul of the whole,” and that “every natural process is a version of a moral sentence”? If the latter is true, then what sort of sentence is anthropogenic climate change pronouncing upon our civilization? Where is this soul in me that Emerson claims can perceive the universe? Am I supposed to believe the whole world can fit inside my skull? There are not many Americans prepared to heed the Emersonian responses to such questions. We are knowingly allowing ourselves and our planet to be destroyed due to the sheer weight of cultural habit. Our lack of philosophical curiosity, our superficiality, our tendency to avoid thinking have allowed us to be lulled to sleep by the misenchanted materialistic mantras of industrial capitalism. “It is so wonderful to our neurologists,” Emerson wrote in 1844, “that a man can see without his eyes, that it does not occur to them, that it is just as wonderful, that he should see with them.”³¹ What are we missing? What is Emerson imploring us to see? He offers no easy solutions to today’s problems.

²⁹ “Politics”

³⁰ The world’s geologists are beginning to refer to the present epoch as the Anthropocene.

³¹ “Nature”

It is not simply that we must think harder or strive to be kinder to one another. Just as “we cannot make a planet, with atmosphere, rivers, and forest, by means of the best carpenters’ or engineers’ tools, with chemist’s laboratory and smith’s forge to boot,” so in the same way we cannot expect to construct a “heavenly society out of foolish, sick, selfish men and women, such as we know [ourselves] to be.”³² Emerson offers, rather, a means of dissolving poorly posed problems by calling us back before the posing to the uncanny ground of all our questioning: the feeling of wonder. Wonder allows us to stand in awe of this world again, to become mesmerized by the meeting place of green earth and blue sky. Wonder turns our attention away from the acquisition of things and toward their appreciation as such. Wonder leads us to “make friends with matter” rather than always rushing to dominate it. Wonder is the most philosophical mood because it is the strangest, the most thought-provoking and eye-opening. “The difference between the wise and the unwise,” according to Emerson, is that “the latter wonders at what is unusual,” while “the wise man wonders at the usual.” Natural science and industrial technology have progressed tremendously since Emerson’s day, but despite or perhaps because of their great successes, we have lost the ability to be amazed by the ordinary and to cherish what we could never acquire because it is already the very stuff of which we are made. If he saw the natural world as the soul’s “most ancient religion,” we can be sure that Emerson would respond to today’s ecological devastation with the same moral intensity he felt regarding abolition.

Were he alive today, Emerson would undoubtedly reaffirm his criticism of American culture’s “bad name for superficialness.”³³ We remain a people concerned more with the economic bottom line than the higher truths of philosophy, with what is convenient and profitable today rather than what holds for all time. But Emerson did not speak to us as Americans. He spoke to us, rather, as individuals, and to the highest part of our individuality. His essays are addressed not to nations or credal sects but to those singular, self-reliant men and women who refuse to be counted as members of any mass, to those for whom “society” and its party and institutional allegiances are but oppressive abstractions. He spoke to those

³² “Man the Reformer”

³³ “Fate”

“who can open their eyes wider than to a nationality, namely, to considerations of benefit to the human race [and] in the interest of civilization.”³⁴

On January 31st, 1862, nine months after the first shots of the Civil War were fired, Emerson delivered a speech at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. urging the immediate emancipation of the slaves, both for strategic, and, more importantly, for moral reasons. The speech, entitled “American Civilization,” won Emerson an audience with President Lincoln the following day. It would be another nine months before Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Two and a half years later, he would be assassinated. Emerson described Lincoln in his eulogy as

“an entirely public man; father of his country, the pulse of twenty millions throbbing in his heart, the thought of their minds articulated by his tongue.”³⁵

Unlike Lincoln the statesman, Emerson was not by nature a political person. He was a scholar and a philosopher. He was, or strove to be, “Man Thinking.” He was himself a passionate reformer despite being suspicious of other reformers and their movements. Having personally witnessed the largely failed attempts at socialist revolution in London and Paris during his trip to Europe in 1848, Emerson wrote in his journal that “It is always becoming evident that the permanent good is for the soul only and cannot be retained in any society or system.”³⁶ It is not a more perfect State that will solve the world’s political problems, Emerson thought, but wiser individuals. In his 1844 essay “Politics,” Emerson wrote:

“To educate the wise man, the State exists; and with the appearance of the wise man, the State expires. The appearance of character makes the State unnecessary.”

As fate would have it, Emerson found his fame and influence as a thinker rising just as his young nation began falling into its first major crisis since the Revolutionary War. The weight of the times forced him to find his political voice. In 1838, Emerson published an open letter to President Van Buren repudiating his administration’s plan

³⁴ “American Civilization”

³⁵ “Abraham Lincoln, Remarks at the funeral service of the President,” Concord, April 19, 1865.

³⁶ JMN, 10:310.

to forcibly remove the Cherokee Nation from its land. In the respectful but forthright letter, Emerson demanded to know

“whether all the attributes of reason, of civility, of justice, and even of mercy, shall be put off by the American people?...Will the American Government steal? Will it lie? Will it Kill?”³⁷

In 1844, he roused Concord’s abolitionists by delivering a passionate speech denouncing the evils of slavery. With the same metaphysical confidence that would lead Martin Luther King, Jr. to announce and evince the inevitable bending of the moral arc of the universe toward justice, Emerson declared to those unable to heed the cosmic call for Freedom: “Creep into your grave, the universe has no need of you!”³⁸ In 1851, after the passage of the infamous Fugitive Slave Law, several dozen citizens of Concord signed a petition urging Emerson to publicly speak out against it. He did: “America, the most prosperous country in the universe, has the greatest calamity in the universe, negro slavery.” The existence of slavery, continued Emerson, turns into “hollow American Brag” the notion that his countrymen “loved freedom, and believed in the Christian religion.”³⁹

By the time of his speech at the Smithsonian in 1862, which was perhaps both the climax of his political activity as well as the darkest period of the war, Emerson’s national stature was well established: nearly 60 years old, he was already considered *America’s philosopher*. Standing on the speaker’s platform of the Smithsonian lecture hall, Emerson again denounced the “conspiracy of slavery”: “They call it an institution; I call it a destitution.” “We live in a new and exceptional age,” he continued. “America is another word for Opportunity. Our whole history appears like a last effort of the Divine Providence on behalf of the human race.”

Emerson’s popularity surged during the war. One gets the impression, as his biographer Robert Richardson says, that by the height of his fame “there were two Emersons.”⁴⁰ The private mind was increasingly outpaced by the public image which

³⁷ Letter to Van Buren.

³⁸ “Address Delivered in Concord on the Anniversary of the Emancipation of the Negroes in The British West Indies,” August 1, 1844.

³⁹ “Address to the Citizen of Concord,” *Emerson’s Political Writings*, 138.

⁴⁰ Richardson, Robert. *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 548.

preceded it. According to Richardson, by 1863 “Emerson had become...an inescapable part—a fixture—of American public life.”⁴¹ In 1865, he would deliver an astonishing seventy-seven lectures, including Lincoln’s eulogy. In 1867, he lectured for eighty audiences in fourteen states. A morally wounded America lionized Emerson as its national hero after the war. He strengthened the souls of his fellow citizens by reminding them of the idealism the country had been founded upon. In the years following the war, “the public Emerson seemed more and more to be replacing the private one,” as Richardson put it.⁴² Emerson, reconciling the opposites within himself, wrote in 1871: “The most private self-searcher will be the most public and universal philosopher, if his study is real.”⁴³

Emerson scholar Richard Geldard begins his timely book *Emerson and the Dream of America* (2010) by reminding his readers that “Emerson was intelligent enough to know that the times seem perennially bad, especially as seen through the light infused prism of an irrepressible idealism.”⁴⁴ As Emerson himself put it, “The Times are the masquerade of the eternities; trivial to the dull, tokens of noble and majestic agents to the wise.” It is no surprise that our time appears to most everyone alive—whether liberal or conservative, religious or secular, young or old—to be deeply troubled, even catastrophic.

Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance” has long been praised by Americans for its defense of individualism. We should be careful not to oversimplify Emerson’s message, however. Individualist though he may have been, Emerson had as much distaste for wanton capitalism as he did for big government. His emphasis on self-reliance needs to be clearly distinguished from selfishness. Emerson’s individualism is not so superficial as to amount to a sort of “ethical egoism.” On the contrary, Emerson implores his readers to awaken from their mistaken identities, to get their selfish little egos out of the way so that a higher universal Self owned by no one in particular might pour its light into the soul. “When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do

⁴¹ Richardson, *Emerson*, 551.

⁴² Richardson, *Emerson*, 553.

⁴³ “Natural History of the Intellect”

⁴⁴ Geldard, Richard. *Emerson and the Dream of America: Finding Our Way to a New and Exceptional Age* (New York: Larson Publications, 2010), 15.

nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams,” wrote Emerson.⁴⁵ If the American experiment really is the last effort of the Divine Providence on behalf of the human race, we have precious little time remaining to make good on our promise. If the gravity of the times is not sufficient enough to do so from the outside, then it is to the inner light of the soul that we must turn to awaken us from this nightmare. No crusades against evil doers, nor simply new policies or legal measures alone can save us now. They treat symptoms, leaving the cause untouched. What are we to do? Despite the risk of sounding sentimental, I will draw this essay to a close by offering Emerson’s answer, which he repeated again and again in so many of his lectures: We are to love one another.

“We must be lovers, and at once the impossible becomes possible...Let our affection flow out to our fellows; it would operate in a day the greatest of all revolutions.”⁴⁶

All our social ills, according to Emerson, stem from our failure to love. Even the most religious among us lack a basic faith in the moral potential of human beings. We find ourselves unable to muster “a sufficient belief in the unity of things to persuade [us] that society can be maintained without artificial restraints, as well as the solar system.”⁴⁷ To succeed in loving is perhaps no less difficult than to succeed at thinking. Though a few shining exemplars of unconditional love, like Jesus, and transcendental thinking, like Emerson, assure humanity of their realizability, neither can finally be taught to us by others, since both depend upon the cultivation of self-knowledge. Loving and thinking are held far apart by our modern notions of academic knowledge. But for the philosopher, the lover of wisdom, they are never two.

⁴⁵ “Self-Reliance”

⁴⁶ “Man the Reformer”

⁴⁷ “Politics”

