Enthusiast!
David Herd

Published by Manchester University Press

Herd, David.
Enthusiast! Essays on Modern American literature.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/63324.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/63324

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2254758
Modern American literature began with a statement of enthusiasm.

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.1

Emerson's intention in writing *Nature*, and in writing its introductory section in particular – with its unanswered questions and its heightened demands – was to issue a provocation. His view was that American writers had not yet (by 1836) established their literature’s independence, that they had not yet answered to the fact of a new social and environmental circumstance. His object was to stir his audience, which he knew to consist largely of writers or those who would be writers, to new, more truthful, forms of expression and thought. *Nature* itself set out the elements of a new philosophy, or at least, the newly rearranged elements of existing Transcendental philosophies. But the book’s central achievement was rhetorical, Emerson's purpose being to announce a new beginning, and in so doing to raise in his readers new ambitions. *Nature* was a summons. It was a call to creativity. Its object in a modern, recognizable, secular sense – ‘The sun shines to-day also’ – was to enthuse.

*Nature’s* appeal, the way it construes and relates to its readership, quickly became characteristic of Emerson’s early writing. In the addresses and lectures he delivered in the late 1830s and early 1840s – in, for instance, such major documents in American literary history as ‘The American Scholar’ and ‘The
Divinity School Address’ – Emerson spoke directly to his listeners and readers, his manifest intention being to produce in them ideas which they would then seek to carry out into the world. He meant for them to leave the auditorium – the library, or the study – intent on continuing and communicating the thoughts they had found there. To inflect a word from Charles Olson, Emerson’s intention was that his writing should ‘project’, that it should act on his readers and listeners in such a way that they might act on others and in the world. Emerson himself had various words for the relationship he was trying to strike up with his audience, for the nature of the transmission he was trying to effect, but one to which he recurred throughout his career was enthusiasm. ‘Nothing great’, he asserts in ‘Circles’, an essay on, among other things, influence, ‘was ever achieved without enthusiasm. The way of life is wonderful; it is by abandonment.’

‘Enthusiasm’, in Emerson, is a knowing word. Sometimes its use is as description, invariably approving, of a historic form of religious experience. As when in ‘The Over-Soul’ he asserts that ‘a certain enthusiasm attends the individual’s consciousness of that divine presence’, and that ‘everywhere the history of religion betrays a tendency to enthusiasm’; ‘the experiences’, for instance, ‘of the Methodists ... that shudder of awe and delight with which the individual soul always mingles with the universal soul’. I will come to this informed, descriptive use of ‘enthusiasm’ later. For the moment it is the other use I am interested in, Emerson frequently turning to ‘enthusiasm’ when he is most keen to inspire – enthusing by raising the prospect and possibility of enthusiasm. Precisely the problem with the English, he wrote in English Traits, is that, ‘No enthusiasm is permitted except at the opera. ... They require a tone of voice that excites no attention in the room.’ This is clearly rhetorical, Emerson defining Englishness in terms of a state of mind he wants to make characteristic of American culture, the force and value of which he outlined in a late essay entitled ‘Inspiration’. There Emerson draws on Plato to make his case, Plato observing, ‘in his seventh Epistle’, that inspiration

is only accompanied by long familiarity with the objects of intellect, and a life according to the things themselves. ‘Then a light, as if leaping from a fire, will on a sudden be enkindled in the soul, and will then itself nourish itself.’ He said again, ‘The man who is his own master knocks in vain at the doors of poetry.’ The artists must be sacrificed to their art. Like bees, they must put their lives into the sting they give. What is a man good for without enthusiasm? and what is enthusiasm but this daring of ruin for its object?

I’ll be returning to all this, to the implications and connotations of Emerson’s remarks. The point for the moment, however, is to articulate this book’s
Introduction: a short essay on enthusiasm

opening claim: that Emerson’s central object and achievement as a writer was to inject enthusiasm into American literature; and that since that foundational moment, since the opening paragraph of Nature, modern American writing has been decisively shaped by its enthusiasts.

What is Enthusiasm?

To establish what is at stake in this claim, it is necessary to show what the word is being taken to mean. The OED defines ‘enthusiasm’, in its modern sense, as a ‘passionate eagerness in any pursuit, proceeding from an intense conviction of the worthiness of the object’. This modern sense will become important, especially when, later, the argument is made for the intrinsic importance of enthusiasm to Modern poetry; it being one of the claims of this book that Modern poetry (American in particular, but not exclusively so) needs to be understood enthusiastically, that enthusiasm throws light on aspects of poetic composition and transmission that tend to go insufficiently noticed by criticism. But the word’s much older sense, the sense arrived at through etymology, is crucial also, enthusiasm deriving from the Greek ‘enthusiasmos’ meaning to take, or more evocatively, to breathe in the god; enthusiasmos being then subsequently translated by the late Latin term ‘inspiration’, a word which preserves the sense of the inward breath, but which makes the object of the breath not the god, but the spirit – the divine as Emerson would have called it. A third meaning of the term is also important here, being the description of a religious practice – usually Protestant, and usually having its origins in the period of religious ferment which surrounded the English Civil War – in which and through which a person claims a particular closeness to, even an immediate relationship with, God. Martin Madan provided an eighteenth-century definition of this version of enthusiasm: ‘To equal the imaginations of men to the holy scripture of God, and think them as much the inspiration of God, as what was dictated as such, to the holy prophets and apostles, is strictly and properly Enthusiasm.’

To claim that, when Emerson wrote Nature, his aim and achievement was to inject enthusiasm into American literature, is to draw on each of these definitions. It is to identify in Emerson, and in his legacy to Modern American writing, a sense, carried through from the Greek, that in the act of composition words enter writing which have to be understood as coming from elsewhere. It is also to identify the thought in Emerson, and this is especially crucial to the particular writers discussed in this book-Thoreau, Melville, Pound, Marianne Moore, Frank O’Hara and James Schuyler — that in the act of composition, understood as an act of enthusiasm, the writer has, or is aiming at, a proximity to what O’Hara, writing about Pasternak, termed the work’s ‘condition of inspiration’. Finally, as is already indicated, Emerson’s
sense of enthusiasm was becoming modern, projective even, his object in writing (but also, sometimes, simply in using the term itself) being to create that ‘passionate eagerness ... proceeding from an intense conviction of the worthiness of an object’ which can, in certain circumstances, drive a person to act.

But if these definitions help, as an initial sketching of the territory, they also get ahead of the argument, because what is needed in order to substantiate the claim that Emerson’s object and achievement was to inject enthusiasm into American literature, is a clear sense of the state of the idea at the point at which he took it up at the beginning of the nineteenth century. To arrive at which sense it is necessary to tell a brief history of enthusiasm, as it comes down from the Greeks and enters Anglo-American thinking. The point of such a history is partly to indicate how the term accumulated meanings. But it is partly also, in passing, to gather up a series of values and attitudes connected with the term which have come to inform a certain, highly characteristic strain of American writing; a complex of dispositions which it was Emerson’s intention to put to work in the new literature he meant to inaugurate. Nature went for the vein. The intention was to pump enthusiasm into the bloodstream of Modern American writing. We need to know what that substance was.

So: Emerson’s thinking about enthusiasm, as his essay on ‘Inspiration’ indicates, begins, quite properly, with Plato – the Ion, as commentators observe, being the locus classicus of discussions of enthusiasm. In this short early dialogue, Socrates is in discussion with the rhapsode ‘Ion’; a rhapsode being a reciter of, chiefly epic, poetry, who in the course of the performance would also sometimes offer commentary upon it. The dialogue centres on the question of enthusiasm, or inspiration, throughout, and is important not least because in it Socrates formulates one of the major tropes of enthusiasm:

The gift which you possess of speaking excellently about Homer is not an art, but, as I was just saying, an inspiration; there is a divinity moving you, like that contained in the stone which Euripides calls a magnet, but which is commonly known as the stone of Heraclea. This stone not only attracts iron rings, but also imparts to them a similar power of attracting other rings ... suspended from one another so as to form quite a long chain: and all of them derive their power of suspension from the original stone. In like manner the Muse first of all inspires men herself; and from these inspired persons a chain of other persons is suspended, who take the inspiration. For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed. And as the Corybantian revellers when they dance are not in their right mind, so the lyric poets are not in their right mind when they are composing their beautiful strains ... For the poet is a light and winged and
holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and reason is no longer in him; no man, while he retains that faculty, has the oracular gift of poetry.8

And so Socrates establishes the lines, or at least the outlines, along which arguments about enthusiasm, and poetry's relation to it, have continued to flow ever since. In the image of the inspired relation as a magnetic stone, he imports into enthusiasm at this outset of its intellectual trajectory, the ideas of communicability, circulation and transmission. To be in the mental state known as enthusiasm is to be ready to receive words, intimations and ideas, but it is also to be in a state to pass them on. The enthusiast, thus understood, is a circulator of thoughts, a person who keeps ideas and values moving. This meaning of enthusiasm, and the image of the enthusiast it throws up, is crucial to this book. Enthusiasm, it will be argued, and more particularly the enthusiast, are integral to the making but also the circulating of literary culture: witness those great American mobilizers Ezra Pound and Frank O'Hara.

It is not, however, the question of enthusiasm’s capacity for transmission that most concerns Socrates. What he wants to establish, rather, is the nature of the enthusiast’s state of mind. The point of the dialogue is to establish what the rhapsode, and prior to that the poet, knows, or rather doesn’t know. By a process of elimination Socrates demonstrates to Ion that he doesn’t, in any real sense, know anything about the works he recites – that he isn’t, for instance, as well placed as a charioteer to comment on Homeric renderings of charioteering, or as well placed as a fisherman to comment on passages about fish – and that, therefore, either he must concede that in having initially claimed knowledge he was lying, or that, in fact, as Socrates wants to insist, he is inspired. Not that this is a compliment. Poetry, and the performance of poetry, is not, from this Socratic point of view, an art; it does not require technical skill – the form a poem takes is equally a gift of the inspiring agency – but involves, rather, the abandonment of all shaping faculties. In enthusiasm the poet will be ‘out of his senses, and reason is no longer in him’. Poets, in other words, are as nothing: ‘God himself is the speaker, and ... through them he is addressing us’.9 The opposition is clear: the mental state known as enthusiasm, the state of poetic composition, is counterposed to reason, and requires that the poet be in some sense ‘out of his senses’, from which it follows for Plato – as for numerous subsequent commentators on enthusiasm – that the poet, or the enthusiast generally, doesn’t know anything, that he or she isn’t capable, in that state, of knowledge.

Except, of course, that the poet does know something. He or she does in some sense know the god, the inspiring divinity – in the sense, perhaps, that you might know your lover, or anybody else of whom you could issue a
reliable report. The possible implications of this statement are foreclosed by Plato, for the reason that he believes in such an agency – just as seventeenth-century religious critics of and apologists for enthusiasm alike foreclose the argument of enthusiastic religious knowledge because they are confident of the divine. Thus, as the argument runs in Plato, the rhapsodes, and the poets whose work they recite, are in possession of a knowledge of sorts – they know god. But god is god, and he does all the work, and so nothing more needs to be said. The question, however, the question that will emerge for American writers after Emerson, is: what if one does not foreclose the argument between enthusiasm and reason by defaulting to the divine? Enthusiasm, and the idea that composition is enthusiastic – that in some sense, when writing, the poet is outside his or her regular or regulated self – does not disappear with a historic loss of faith in God. The claim becomes less grandiloquent, but as in O’Hara, for instance, the understanding is still that in writing, in the state of composition, one takes a step away. Which means that the question of what the poet might know has to be gone into again, this time without the foreclosing move; that for reasons Plato could not foresee, it is possible to entertain the thought that the poet, in the act of enthusiasm, is in possession of knowledge. To carry Plato forward then, what he claims to prove about enthusiasm, and about writing produced in the enthusiastic state, is that it has a special capacity for communication and transmission. What he also allows for, however, despite himself, is that in enthusiasm resides the possibility of knowledge. It is a possibility, as will be argued chapter by chapter here, that the American writers discussed in this book took extremely seriously.

Plato’s flatteringly pejorative view of the poet, and of the state of mind in which the poet’s composition is possible – out of reason and without knowledge, but also divinely inspired – marks the earliest discussions of enthusiasm in the British philosophical tradition. Locke’s chapter, ‘Of Enthusiasm’, in An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1689), is consistent with other seventeenth-century reflections on the idea – Meric Casaubon’s A Treatise Concerning Enthusiasm (1653), Thomas More’s Enthusiasmus Triumphatus (1656) – in aiming to denigrate a term which had become descriptive of a form of religious worship by which individuals (typically members of radical Protestant sects) claimed (and here a distinction is necessary) a nearness to or an immediate relationship with God. Such modes of worship were born of a dissatisfaction with the progress of the Reformation – with the failure of, in particular, the Church of England fully to discard the apparatus and hierarchy of the Church of Rome — and were characterized, it is worth noting immediately, by ecstatic symptoms or behaviour (depending on one’s point of view) from which certain of the sects
in question took their names. Thus enthusiasm, the moment of acquaintance with the divine, sometimes presented itself bodily, as with the devotional quaking of the Quakers, but also, in almost all cases, vocally, such that in the state of divine possession the individual emitted sounds or gained a verbal fluency of which, otherwise, they were hardly capable. This was most true of the sect known as the Ranters, but at their inception the subsequently reticent Quakers were also known for their extraordinary verbal outbursts. William Penn noted how the ‘meanest of this people’ – and this distribution of eloquence was very largely, from all points of view, the issue – gained ‘an extraordinary understanding in divine things, and an admirable fluency’.10 ‘The Extasys expressed themselves’, as the Earl of Shaftesbury put it, ‘outwardly in the Quakings, Tremblings, Tossing of the Head and Limbs, Agitations and Fanatical Throws or Convulsions, extemporary Prayer, Prophesy and the like.’11 (I have in my mind a poetry reading, extemporary, agitated: Allen Ginsberg, say, in San Francisco).12

Such enthusiasm having spilt so devastatingly into English politics in the middle of the century – the radical democratic claims precipitating the Civil War being continuous with the enthusiastic impulse to unmediated worship – Locke, like Plato, aimed to distinguish between enthusiasm and reason. The enthusiast, in his or her delusion, ‘does Violence to his own Faculties, Tyrannizes over his own Mind, and usurps the Prerogative that belongs to Truth alone’.13 Steering enthusiasm towards the historically related term fanaticism, Locke construes the state of mind as an overpowering – the individual allowing him- or herself, or rather their reason, to be dominated by their ‘delusion’, and looking in turn to dominate others, ‘assuming an Authority of Dictating to others, and a forwardness to prescribe to their Opinions’.14 The sense of dictation, as Timothy Clark has observed, never goes out of enthusiasm.15 It is implicit in any claim, however measured, that a person’s words, whether in the act of worship, or composition, or conversation, originate somewhere else. Even as he works the idea of dictation to his advantage, however, Locke does not altogether want to deny the logic of enthusiasm, it being incumbent upon him as a Christian to permit the possibility that some people, at some times, have experienced the relationship with the divine that enthusiasm describes. Thus,

*Reason* is natural *Revelation*, whereby the eternal Father of Light, and Fountain of all Knowledge communicates to Mankind that portion of Truth, which he has laid within the reach of their natural Faculties; *Revelation* is natural *Reason* enlarged by a new set of Discoveries communicated by GOD immediately, which *Reason* vouches the Truth of, by the Testimony and Proofs it gives, that they come from GOD.16
Knowledge by Revelation is undeniable by Locke. Otherwise, what of the authority of the Bible? Otherwise, what of the wisdom of the prophets? The question arising from revelation, therefore, is not whether, but when, and to whom? Or as Emerson put it: ‘Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?’ Religiously speaking, one might think of this as the enthusiast’s question, to which Locke’s response, like that of numerous subsequent commentators, was to build a third possibility into Plato’s original distinction: that there was reason, and that there was revelation, but that there was also enthusiasm, which was a false claim to the latter. It was a form of argument that continued to hold some sway, the pejorative sense enthusiasm acquired during and immediately after the Civil War causing even those who wanted to assert the continued possibility of revelation much more forcefully than Locke to distinguish themselves against the idea of enthusiasm. Well aware of the charges to which Methodism was vulnerable, John Wesley, when he preached on ‘The Nature of Enthusiasm’ (1755), distinguished his brand of worship from both ‘a religion of form, a round of outward duties, performed in a decent manner’, and that which ‘not only dims but shuts the eyes of the understanding’. His argument, in other words, was with a religion which mistook procedure – form and outward duties – for insight, but his conclusion was a warning: ‘Do not imagine you have attained that grace of God which you have not attained.’

Wesley’s anxious characterization of it notwithstanding, prominent eighteenth-century commentators on enthusiasm – the Civil War becoming, with time, a less traumatizing memory — sought to rehabilitate the idea, investigating it not primarily for the religious insight it might permit, but as a mode of secularized knowledge and transmission. The Earl of Shaftesbury’s ‘A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm’ (1702) was decisive in this, Shaftesbury looking both to distinguish enthusiasm from its most feverish excesses, for which he introduces the word ‘panic’, and also to generalize the word’s application, reapplying it to poetry, as well as making it an element in all exalted performances: those of ‘Heroes, Statesmen, Poets, Orators, Musicians and even Philosophers themselves’. Shaftesbury’s argument in his ‘Letter’, as elsewhere in his writings, is against the hollow formalism and excessive scrutiny that he takes to characterize his age. ‘Never was there’, he asserts, ‘in our Nation a time known, when Folly and Extravagance of every kind were more sharply inspected.’ Against this age of inspection he wants to assert the sociability and communication of enthusiasm, from which ‘there follows always an Itch of imparting it, and kindling the same fire in other Breasts’. Enthusiasm is aroused, Shaftesbury argues, ‘when the Ideas or Images receiv’d are too big for the narrow human vessel to contain’. It is a mode of
knowledge and communication, he asserts, that breaches apparatus. [At which point what I have in my mind is a form, asking me to list my aims and objectives, to document the resulting transferable skills ... but we will come to that later.]

Writing ‘Of Superstition and Enthusiasm’ (1742), Hume argued along similarly proto-libertarian lines to Shaftesbury – if more trenchantly, less inclined to apology. Outlining contrasting religious errors – the first, superstition being ‘a gloomy and melancholy disposition’ which ‘where real objects of terror are wanting ... finds imaginary ones, to whose power and malevolence it sets no limits’; the second, enthusiasm, being ‘an unaccountable elevation ... from which arise raptures, transports, and surprising flights of fancy’ – Hume is in no question as to which is preferable: ‘My first reflection is, that superstition is favourable to priestly power, and enthusiasm not less, or rather more contrary to it, than sound reason and philosophy.’ From this it follows that ‘superstition is an enemy to civil liberty, and enthusiasm a friend to it’ because where ‘superstition groans under the dominion of priests ... enthusiasm is destructive of all ecclesiastical power’. The interest of Hume’s essay is that while he looks like he is talking about religion, what he actually has on his mind are secular modes of knowledge. Thus it is of little concern to him what claims either the superstitious or enthusiasts make to religious authority – he doesn’t believe either is acquainted with God. What matter, rather, are the epistemologies the differing forms of devotion imply. Thus, as enthusiasts freed themselves from ‘the yoke of ecclesiastics’, so they developed ‘a contempt of forms, ceremonies and traditions’, thus approaching the divinity ‘without any human mediator’, from which it has followed historically, he wants to insist, that, ‘our sectaries, who were formerly such dangerous bigots, are become very free reasoners; and the Quakers seem to approach the only regular body of Deists in the universe.’

Hume’s short essay doesn’t pursue any further than this the move that was already implicit in Ion (though unexplorable by Plato): that it might be possible to regard enthusiasm as a secular mode of knowledge; that it might be possible to think of the state of mind described as enthusiasm outside of a religious framework, and so to reconsider the claims to insight or acquaintance that it made. It required Kant to make that next move. What Hume’s essay points towards, even so, is an idea of knowledge unmediated by ‘forms, ceremonies and traditions’, an idea of knowledge, as it were, untroubled by bureaucracy.

Kant valued enthusiasm. It can look as if he doesn’t when he discusses the idea in The Critique of Judgement, enthusiasm being contrasted throughout that discussion with reason. He can sound like Plato, in other words, when he introduces enthusiasm as that ‘which we call sublime ... in internal nature’ as
being ‘a might of the mind enabling it to overcome this or that hindrance of sensibility by means of moral principles’. As in Plato, then, to be enthusiastic is to be out of one’s senses, except that here that description has a positive value, because what it promises is to ‘overcome this or that hindrance of sensibility’, the hindrance of sensibility by which the apparatus of human understanding was interposed between the mind and the thing itself being the central problem to emerge from *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Mind, as Kant proposes it there, knows things according to its own forms – the concepts (time and space) of the sensibility, and the categories of the understanding – such that the best that reason could claim was knowledge of things as they appeared. Enthusiasm, from this point of view, as it is presented in the third critique, is not in opposition to reason, but a possible supplement to it. Thus,

The idea of the good to which affection is superadded is *enthusiasm*. This state of mind appears to be sublime: so much so that there is a common saying that nothing great can be achieved without it. But now every affection is blind either as to the choice of its end, or, supposing this has been furnished by reason, in the way it is effected – for it is that mental movement whereby the exercise of free deliberation upon fundamental principles, with a view to determining oneself accordingly, is rendered impossible. On this account it cannot merit any delight on the part of reason. Yet, from an aesthetic point of view, enthusiasm is sublime, because it is an effort of one’s powers called forth by ideas which give to the mind an impetus of far stronger and more enduring efficacy than the stimulus afforded by sensible representations.  

We are almost back to Emerson here, almost back to the beginning of *Nature*, almost at the point at which he injected enthusiasm into American writing. Nothing great can be achieved without it, so Kant asserts and as Emerson asserted after him. But more than that, enthusiasm has now been successfully redirected, so that what it has come to offer intimacy with is not God, but the world, giving ‘to the mind an impetus of far stronger and more enduring efficacy than the stimulus afforded by sensible representations’. Which means what? Well, it almost means, or almost proposes, something Kant can’t bring himself quite to say: that in a state of enthusiasm, when a person is in an enthusiastic relation with things, their relation to those things, to things in general perhaps, is, what? stronger? more enduring? closer? more intimate? more real? than is that afforded by sensible representations. The problem in Kant is mediation, that reason’s knowledge is mediated by the mind’s operation, by its categories and concepts, so that things, flax and wool for instance, are not known in themselves. What the state of mind known as enthusiasm has always promised, not least because what it names is the condition of being out of one’s reason, is immediacy, an acquaintance with its
object untroubled by ‘forms, ceremonies and traditions’. What if, Kant seems
to propose, one were to take seriously an enthusiastic relation with things?
What if, in that state, mind was, however momentarily, by whatever
mechanism, to go out of itself? This is in some sense what Heidegger wanted
to say after Kant, when, in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, he contests that
‘Projective saying is poetry’, that poetry is ‘clearing projection’, that ‘The
work lets the earth be an earth’.22

But Kant doesn’t go further. He doesn’t go on to propose that in
enthusiasm is the prospect of non-alienation, the promise of continuity
between humans and things. Emerson, however, does go further, in one of the
most famously enthusiastic moments in all literature:

Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded
sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good
fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration.

In which state, or remembering which state, he finds it possible to assert that

The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the
suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not
alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me and I to them.23

In Kant, enthusiasm is not opposed to reason, but overrides it: the enthusiast,
in the moment of enthusiasm, is out of his or her senses, but to potentially
positive effect. The mechanisms of reason are momentarily suspended, and
the effect is an impetus far stronger and more enduring than the stimulus
afforded by sensible representations, which in another discourse one might
term a revelation, and for Emerson constituted an original, that is to say an
unmediated, relation to the universe. Which is not to take Emerson at his
word when he says that when he is in the woods the vegetables nod to him. It
is, though, to take seriously the idea that after Kant, and after Emerson’s Kant,
American literature set out to find what it, as opposed to other forms and
modes of thought and expression, knew.

But philosophy is only part of the story. The other part of the story, the other
aspect of an account of enthusiasm which shows what the term meant at the
point at which Emerson established it as a basis for Modern American
literature, is more strictly religious. Or to put this another way, fully to
understand what enthusiasm meant to Emerson at the point at which he took
it up, it is necessary not simply to hear what philosophers have to say about
the phenomenon of enthusiasm, but to appreciate it, as it were, as a variety of
religious experience. Charged as the term was in the two hundred years prior
to Emerson, almost all philosophical commentary on it during that period is
shaped by extrinsic, usually political concerns. What is needed is an account
of what, in practice, it means to enthuse. The account I will turn to, in a moment, is William Penn’s Preface to *The Journal of George Fox*. Consider, though, before that, the following luminous details.

**One:** in November 1637 (two hundred years before the publication of *Nature*), charged with prophesying – with claiming to speak as if from God – Anne Hutchinson stood before the Massachusetts General Court, headed by the newly elected governor John Winthrop, as the authorities sought to bring an end to the antinomian crisis. Asked how she knew the spirit had moved her, it is recorded she responded thus:

> Mrs. Hutchinson: How did Abraham know that it was God that bid him offer his son, being a breach of the sixth commandment?  
> Deputy Governor: By an immediate voice.  
> Mrs. Hutchinson: So to me by an immediate revelation.  
> Deputy Governor: How! an immediate revelation.  
> Mrs. Hutchinson: By the voice of his own spirit to my soul.

In response to which the 1637 Synod ruled that

> Immediate revelation without concurrence with the word, doth not onely countenance but confirme that opinion of Enthusianisme, justly refused by all the Churches, as being contrary to the perfection of the Scriptures, and perfection of Gods wisdome therein.²⁴

**Two:** in his *Plantation Work*, George Fox described America as ‘a peculiar and special work appointed for many in our day’.²⁵

**Three:** in *English Traits*, Emerson stated that:

> In the island, they never let out all the length of all the reins, there is no Berserkir rage, no abandonment or ecstasy of will or intellect ... But who would see the uncoiling of that tremendous spring, the explosion of their well-husbanded forces, must follow the swarms which, pouring now for two hundred years from the British islands, have sailed, and rode, and traded, and planted through all climates, mainly following the belt of empire.²⁶

**Four:** in ‘Transcendentalism’, a *Dial* essay of 1842, written in response to a Quaker correspondent, Emerson observes

> The identity, which the writer of this letter finds between the speculative opinions of serious persons at the present moment, and those entertained by the first Quakers, is indeed so striking as to have drawn a very general attention of late years to the history of that sect. Of course, in proportion to the depth of the experience, will be its independence on time and circumstances, yet one can hardly read George Fox’s *Journal*, or Sewel’s *History of the Quakers*, without many a rising of joyful surprise at the
correspondence of facts and expressions to states of thought and feeling, with which we are very familiar ... And so we add in regard to these works, that quite apart from the pleasure of reading modern history in old books, the reader will find another reward in the abundant illustration they furnish to the fact, that wherever the religious enthusiasm makes its appearance, it supplies the place of poetry and philosophy and of learned discipline, and inspires by .itself the same vastness of thinking, so that in learning the religious experiences of a strong but untaught mind, you seem to have suggested in turn all the sects of the philosophers.27

There is a narrative immanent in these details that is best not understood as orthodox history; not, though it could be told this way, as a chronological unfolding of events. It is better understood as something like a mark on the imagination, as an often recurring image or option that, once established, might always be taken up. From the beginning of the colonial period the enthusiast figures in American culture; or, to put it another way, in America, since colonialism, the enthusiast has always been a figure – claiming intimacy with the condition of their inspiration, running into confrontation, challenging the power of the state with their ‘extraordinary understanding’ and ‘admirable fluency’, with their ‘extraordinary Prayer, Prophesy and the like’. More than this, America was the place for it, ‘a special work appointed for many in our day’. With the restoration of the monarchy in England, enthusiasts had to look somewhere else, to a social environment where the ‘forms, ceremonies and traditions’ of state religion might not re-form quite so readily, not to such prompt and devastating effect, hence Emerson’s image of the exporting of ‘abandonment’ and ‘ecstasy’, the ‘uncoiling of that tremendous spring’ which accompanied the swarms ‘pouring now for two hundred years from the British Islands’. This is, in effect, to present the history of America as a history of the enthusiast – a secret history in which the enthusiast plays the decisive role — which current Emerson enters into as, with ‘joyful surprise’, he reads The Journal of George Fox. Enthusiasm, in other words, as Emerson encounters it and as he passes it on, is a living idea from America’s past – the enthusiast, the outline of a figure always waiting to be reinhabited – the meaning of which is best got at through presentations of the religious experience.

William Penn’s ‘Preface’ to The Journal of George Fox is a guide to American writing. Penn is valuable here because of his transitional status, articulating as he does the mindset that found it necessary to move from England to America. He is valuable also because he brings to the presentation of enthusiastic devotion a nuance of experience which philosophers, in their secondary literature, driven by cultural political concerns, tended to consider in terms of ranting stereotypes. From the outset, then, Penn’s story is complex: man, as he tells it, was originally undone by ‘the mediation of ...
man’s own nature and companion’. It is not the claim to immediacy, as the Massachusetts Synod would have had it, that is sinful, but rather, as Penn sets it out from the beginning, that in mediation is to be located sin. Likewise, the passage in divine history from original sin to redemption is the story of a growing closeness. The Old Testament was characterized by ‘an outward priesthood, and external rites and ceremonies’, whereas Christ brings in ‘a nearer testament and better hope’. That word ‘nearer’ is worth holding on to. For Stanley Cavell, what defines American literature is a desire for the near and the low, with Thoreau, as he argues in *The Senses of Walden*, getting beyond the Kantian problematic precisely by his extended experiment in and linguistic rendering of ‘nearness’. As Penn has it, ‘no more at old Jerusalem, nor at the mountain of Samaria, will God be worshipped, above other places ... He will come nearer than of old time, and he will write his law in the heart.’

‘Nearness’, as a principle and aim of worship, cuts two ways in discussions of enthusiasm. In the first place, for Penn as for Wesley after him, it is a criticism of ‘all formality in religion’, of the insistence on special sites and conventions of worship. Also, crucially, nearness is not oneness; it is not the assertion of identity with God. Thus there is no question that, in his Preface, Penn defends enthusiasm, and the prophesying – the inspired utterance – that follows from it: Quakerism precisely ‘allowed greater liberty to prophesy; for they admitted any member to speak or pray... even without the distinction of clergy or laity; persons of any trade, be it never so low and mechanical’. At the same time, he wants to distinguish Quakerism from such sects as the Ranters (who forgot their ‘humble dependence’), from antinomians and perfectionists who believed that in their worship, and at their moment of enthusiasm, they spoke not because moved by a divinity, but as if they were themselves in fact divine; ‘as if Christ came not to take away sin, but that we might sin more freely at his cost’. The distinction is crucial; one can think of it as the distinction Melville draws between Ishmael and Ahab. Antinomians and perfectionists claimed not nearness to God, but divine authority, divinity itself – from which it followed that they were beyond sin. Quakerism, on the other hand, as Penn presents it, though resolutely not formal in its worship, does not claim outright immediacy in its relation to God, but rather, it approaches to nearness through a practice Penn, following Fox, calls – happily – ‘experiment’: So that this people did not only in words more than equally press repentance, conversion, and holiness, but did it knowingly and experimentally ... They reached to the inward state and condition of people, which is an evidence of the virtue of their principle, and of their ministering from it, and not from their own imaginations, glosses, or comments upon Scripture.
The Quaker sense of experimental thought grafts on to the general sense of enthusiasm three ideas that have resonated long and deep in Modern American literature. In the first place, it describes a mode of thought – looking forward we can call it composition – that gains such authority as it has precisely by operating outside convention and form, Quaker worship being an act of waiting for the moment of appropriate and necessary speech, not a performance of established ritual. Second, as Penn implies, experiment as understood by Fox and in Quakerism implies a particular relation to scripture or text. The Bible was to be read not as God’s last word, but in conjunction with his latest word, as a guide and help in appreciating spiritual insight. Scripture, in other words, was to be understood not as finished, but as a draft – ‘a draft of a draft’ as Melville had it – on which spiritual experience could always work and improve. Which position, as David Lovejoy has observed, could, on the one hand, imply radical independence from textual commentators – priestcraft – but which could also topple, at the drop of a hat, into outright anti-intellectualism. The substance of Fox’s first ‘opening’, by which he means revelation, was that ‘being bred at Oxford or Cambridge was not enough to fit and qualify men to be ministers of Christ’ – hence the fact that he himself would ‘get into the orchards, or the fields, with my Bible, by myself’.31 The gist of this proposition seems unarguable. By the same token, as Lovejoy writes, ‘Education and learning were burdens the enthusiasts could do without, for nothing should clutter the path along which the spirit approached’.32 This too points forward to American poetry, which since Emerson has had, almost as an axiom of its existence, a vexed relation with the authority of the book. More suggestive still, however, in the Quaker sense of experiment, is the temporality of enthusiasm it gives rise to, the necessity of constantly revisiting the truth, of always reacquainting with the spirit. Penn puts it this way:

Nor is it enough that we have known the Divine gift, and in it have reached to the spirits in prison, and have been the instruments of the convincing of others of the way of God, if we keep not as low and poor in ourselves, and as depending upon the Lord as ever; since no memory, no repetitions of former openings, revelations, or enjoyments, will bring a soul to God.33

Which makes enthusiasm, curiously, but suggestively, not so much a claim to authority as a perpetual and necessary revisiting born of uncertainty, a function of the permanent, always fluctuating present. (And what I have in mind now is Frank O’Hara, ‘A Step Away From Them’: ‘A blonde chorus girl clicks: he / smiles and rubs his chin. Everything / suddenly honks: it is 12.40 of / a Thursday’.)

Contra Locke — for whom ‘immediate revelation’ had become the popular, because the easy, option – Penn presents the enthusiasm of the
Quakers as a most demanding practice, requiring of the individual a constant attention, calling on him or her always to be reacquainting with their condition of inspiration, to which end, towards the conclusion of his Preface, he offers pointers to appropriate worship which read now, in the age of creative writing, like guides to composition; or like answers in a *Paris Review* interview (‘When and where do you write?’); or like the concluding section of Emerson’s essay on ‘Inspiration’, where he notes that, ‘At home, I remember in my library the wants of the farm ... All the conditions must be right for my success, slight as that is.’

Thus, as Penn tells it, registering the delicate condition of inspiration, ‘Wherefore, brethren, let us be careful neither to out-go our Guide, nor yet loiter behind him; since he that makes haste may miss his way, and he that stays behind, lose his Guide’. As for where to situate yourself to best effect, remember, he says, that, ‘Jesus loved and chose solitudes; often going to mountains, to gardens, and seasides, to avoid crowds and hurries, to show his disciples it was good to be solitary, and sit loose in the world’. This phrase is irresistible, ‘and sit loose in the world’: where to sit, how to hold oneself, becoming crucial questions for American writers. Thoreau and O’Hara sat loose in the world, Schuyler looked out of his window. A reading of American literature in terms of enthusiasm is, in part, a study of its composition.

With all the foregoing in mind, there are three things to be said about the way, in his writing, Emerson handled enthusiasm. The first is that in *Nature*, but in the opening paragraph of his anonymously published little book in particular, Emerson provided a quite brilliant summation of the cultural potential of enthusiasm as it was handed down to him through a philosophical tradition culminating with Kant, and through a religious tradition whose richest expression he found in the Quakers. To hear that statement again, but this time with all the underpinning and archaeology in view:

> Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.
What is one to call this but a statement of enthusiasm, with its demand for ‘our own works and laws and worship’, with its call for ‘a poetry and philosophy of insight’, for ‘a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs’? What relation is struck with the world here, if not enthusiastic, when ‘God and nature’ are to be beheld ‘face to face’? What, if not the enthusiastic present, is offered by the image of the sun shining to-day also? In *Nature* Emerson put enthusiasm to work – nothing great, after all, could be achieved without it. He enthused in order to achieve a cultural awakening, an original, which is to say an unmediated relation to the universe; in effect, a new beginning.

But if *Nature* is a great cultural mobilising of the idea of enthusiasm as he inherited it at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it is more than arguable that Emerson himself, in his own writing, did not know where to carry the thought. If anything, in fact, as he crosses the bare common and becomes a transparent eyeball, what he offers up is a weak reading of enthusiasm, an antinomianism of sorts, lacking the nuances of Fox, but more so of William Penn. What Emerson didn’t work out, in other words, in his own writing, was how to modernize enthusiasm, how really to investigate its meaning and potential in an increasingly secular age. He sensed that a Modern American literature could not dispense with enthusiasm. What he couldn’t determine, as a writer, was what form or forms it should take. Thus for all its goadings and provocations, the late essay ‘Inspiration’ has reached an impasse, Emerson asking a series of perplexed questions: ‘Are these moods in any degree within control?’; ‘...where is the Franklin with kite or rod for this fluid?’ There are specific reasons why ‘Inspiration’ reads like an impasse. Emerson was old and tired when he wrote *Letters and Social Aims*, and hadn’t volunteered for the task, but had had it forced on him when the publisher, Routledge, proposed to issue a new volume of his writings unsanctioned. Even so, what ‘Inspiration’ confirms is what elsewhere his writing shows to be the case: that fully as he was in command of the preexisting meanings and cultural implications of the idea of enthusiasm, he wasn’t equipped himself – as a writer — to make the idea new. And so the third point is this: that when he wrote *Nature* Emerson presented future writers – starting just around the comer with Thoreau – with an immense resource, but also with a problem. He injected enthusiasm into American literature; he also gave few clues as to what an enthusiastic Modern literature might look like. Some answers to that question are the subject of this book.

**Our age is bureaucratic**

This book is neither a theory nor a history of enthusiasm. What it is, rather, is an exploration of a critical idea: an account of how enthusiasm, as
developed in the histories of philosophy and religion, entered and was altered by American writing. To put it another way, what this book offers is a portrait of the writer as an enthusiast, where the portrait, as will become clear, carries more than a hint of polemic. To sketch in the implications of the critical idea, the history of American literature is barely thinkable without its enthusiasts. There are numerous other writers it would have been appropriate to discuss here, numerous other writers who, for varying reasons, might have been named enthusiasts: Whitman, obviously, Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe, Adrienne Rich. One object in choosing to discuss the figures I have was to present a portrait of the writer as an enthusiast in various aspects, and so to consider quite different writers in quite different circumstances. It will probably be apparent already how Pound and O’Hara might fit the bill. Moore and Schuyler present other, not less valuable, versions of enthusiasm. A linking feature among the writers is the attention they gave to the act of composition: not a truism, I think, but a statement which indicates the fact that they not only contributed decisively to the history and directions of American writing, in its forms, themes, subjects and concerns, but fundamentally altered the way it was done. What this points to is Thoreau at Walden, Marianne Moore among the pamphlets and the guide books, Frank O’Hara at the typewriter in the middle of a party.

This, it seems to me, is one virtue of enthusiasm as a critical idea, that it points criticism back (or forwards) to the making of the work, towards the act of creation, that it obliges one to consider the processes by which writers enabled their work to come into being. Throughout the book what is described is a continuing sense of the writers in question allowing, or enabling, something to come through, where that process is not taken to be mysterious (or is certainly not treated as mysterious), but where the object is, nonetheless, to allow other agents, or other agencies’ words, or just language understood as another agency, into the work in progress. Invariably – Plato’s slur on poetic craft notwithstanding – the processes in question are technical, but where technique is understood generously, so as to include not just choice of form and metre, but also the situation of the writer, the time and place of writing, the way, in practice, for instance, they incorporate other people’s books. This opening of the work to other writers, speakers and their words, is, as Timothy Clark has discussed, something like a definition of the moment of composition itself, and a moment for which ‘enthusiasm’, and its derivative ‘inspiration’, remain, long after their divine connotations have dropped away, terms for which writers reach, or which, with little or no forcing, can be used to name the writer’s state of mind and practice in the act of composition.38 ‘Opening’ was George Fox’s word for the operations of the
divine spirit upon him, for the moment of enthusiasm. Modern, especially Modernist, compositions — with all their quotes and fragments and aleatory factors, their words coming from elsewhere, sometimes, seemingly, from nowhere at all — constitute hardly less an opening up. And if not an opening, then a clearing, in the manner of Thoreau at Walden Pond, or of that ‘state of clarity’, as O’Hara observed of Pollock, ‘in which there are no secrets’. Where, as O’Hara still wanted to insist in 1958, the ‘artist has reached a limitless space of air and light in which the spirit can act freely and with unpremeditated knowledge’.39

The great value, however, of enthusiasm as an element in literature, is its dynamic nature. To be enthused is to want to pass things on. Plato put it in terms of magnetic rings, Shaftesbury described it as ‘an itch of imparting’, of ‘kindling the same fire in other breasts’. William Duff, in his essay on genius, described an ‘intenseness and vigour of ... sensations ... which as it were hurries the mind out of itself’.40 Composition as enthusiasm is itself of course communication, an act of passing on, the publication of otherwise unavailable thought. More than that, though, enthusiasm describes a communicative relation with literature. Thus, a further reason for considering the various writers in this book is the great thought and energy they gave to the circulation of other people’s work, that they were enthused by it – seized, gripped or inspired by it — and wanted, for no more reason, often, than that they thought it was good, to pass it on. All of the writers here, one way or another, carry this impulse into the writing itself, circulating other works and others’ words through their practice of quotation. Pound and O’Hara made enthusiasm integral to their working existences: as editors, critics and curators, but also, more noisily, as boosters and promoters; as galvanisers generally, whose energy was crucial both to the transmission, and in some cases the existence of work they valued. Criticism historically, and understandably enough, has tended to reserve its attention for the end product. A reading of American literature from the point of view of enthusiasm takes seriously the fact that any given book once didn’t, but more to the point might have never come to, exist, that literary culture depends for its existence and perpetuation largely on the time and energy of its enthusiasts. The composer Morton Feldman said, with regard to creativity, that what’s important is, ‘to have someone like Frank [O’Hara] standing behind you. That’s what keeps you going.’41 Hemingway recalled, ‘Pound the major poet devoting, say, one fifth of his time to poetry. With the rest he tried to advance the fortunes, both material and artistic, of his friends.’42

This is part of Lewis Hyde’s point in his brilliant study The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property, at one point in which he touches
on the intersection between the gift and religious and literary enthusiasm. The gift, and gift exchange, as Hyde presents it, is a mode of circulation counter to money, with enthusiasm, in its itch to impart value directly, having an analogy with the gift. Or as he puts it, suggestively, ‘Cash exchange is to gift exchange what reason is to enthusiasm’. Enthusiasm, according to this view, is a mode of circulation other than cash exchange according to which values are not displaced and distorted (by the symbols effecting the exchange) but passed on. Not that the argument should be too readily closed off here. The view of enthusiasm Hyde implies is much closer to Hume’s cheerful view of it than to Locke’s, where what enthusiasm stands for is civil liberty and the free circulation of ideas, as opposed to the desire, in passing ideas on, to overpower another’s mind. Which is the difference, as Melville presents it, between Ishmael and Ahab. Which is the difference, perhaps, between O’Hara’s enthusiasm and the enthusiasm of the later Pound, where circulation of texts – as I discuss – becomes a much more vexed question. Even so, and especially in Pound’s case, a barely stoppable enthusiasm for other people’s works was decisive in the renovation of literary culture, enthusiasm being, precisely in the absence of money and significant monetary reward, the best available mode of circulation.

This question of circulation, and distortion by mediation, brings me to the contemporary argument for and of this book, to the British situation in which it is written, and so to its polemical, as opposed to its critical, base. Enthusiasm, historically, is a response to bureaucracy. Quakerism, as Fox conceived it, was a response to both the intermediary nature of the religious practices of the Church of England, and to the sects and sectarianism that evolved against it. Which is not to say that enthusiasm cannot degenerate into sects and bureaucracies of its own – clearly it can – but that in its purest form, the form William Penn presents for instance, enthusiasm, the enthusiastic life, is in revolt against the bureaucratic mindset in all its guises. To put it another way, as religious history testifies literally, and as literary history understands metaphorically (and not to put to fine a point on it), bureaucracy kills enthusiasm. It kills it, or tries to kill it, by its mediations, which is to say by what Hume called its ‘conventions’ and Penn calls its ‘external rites’; by its forms, by its panels of assessment, by its processes of review; by its quality assurance procedures, by its prescriptive languages, by its categories insensitive to specific truth; by its rating mechanisms, by its arbitrary evaluations, by its RAE. What enthusiasm promises is immediacy: between the individual and the divine originally, but subsequently between the creative person and the condition of inspiration, between readers and writers, teachers and readers. Plato’s image of magnetic rings to present the effect of enthusiasm is right; what he didn’t observe was the solidarity – arising out of
shared enthusiasm – which followed from his metaphor, and according to which enthusiasm can be thought of as foundational to ideal communities. Not (to rehearse an anxiety that necessarily runs through any argument for enthusiasm) that the term should be taken here in an untroubled sense – this book does not claim, on behalf of its writers, an immediacy between linguistic work and its subject or situation. What it does argue, however, is that in the compositional act, a knowledge, owing to proximity – one might call it intimacy – with words and things, is made possible. More than this, what the book comes to argue, at various points and in various ways, is that for the writers presented here at least – though one might mention many others – enthusiasm, the enthusiastic state, is literature’s way of knowing, that literature, after Kant, and in America after Emerson, has taken seriously the idea that, through its act of composition, it has knowledge, or knowledges, to impart. In this sense the book plots a trajectory, the writers in question refining a developing sense of the knowledge made possible by writing, and in composition. A trajectory which, here anyway, culminates with O’Hara arguing in relation to Fairfield Porter, but also reflexively, that ‘composition ... is the personal statement of the insight which observation and insight afford’; and with the claim that what Schuyler arrives at, in his Thoreau-like compositional state, is a writing one can think of as showing the world.44

And the point about bureaucracy is that it wrecks all of this. In its coercive mediations it constantly forces attention away from the terms writers have arrived at for and through their practice. Literature, in other words, in a British university setting at least, is rendered incapable of making its contribution to the human economy of knowledge because it is forced into forms of thought and expression inappropriate to its insight and understanding. Equally, such bureaucracy intrudes on, and practically shuts down, the enthusiastic circulation that literature depends upon. As relations between writers and critics, teachers and students are more and more mediated by terms alien to the subject, so those parties become alienated from one another: not connected by the enthusiastic impulse – the itch to impart – but sectioned off and compartmentalized by a managerial economy.

A final reason for this book’s investment in enthusiasm has to do with Modern poetry, and in particular with the argumentative apparatus that has overlain poetry for at least the past hundred years, and which, in Britain and America, has reduced to a standoff between difficulty and accessibility. In part it was out of sheer weariness with the oscillations of this debate that I began to want to think of a different point of entry into Modern writing, poetry in particular. Enthusiasm is a potentially controversial term in this respect in that, in its seventeenth-century origins at least, it signalled precisely a revolt against the priestcraft which endorsed and thrived on textual difficulty, and
which was understood then, by enthusiasts, as a euphemism for class. (On which point, for biographical reasons, I am glad at the implication that, however distantly, George Fox, a man of unremarkable background from southwest Leicestershire, should have had a hand in the origins of American literature; a fact indicating, as Emerson suggests, a trans-Atlantic diversion of English energies, and which I wonder doesn’t partly explain my own enthusiasms.) And yet if, in one of its intellectual origins, the idea running through this book is suspicious of claims implicit in the justification of difficulty, the book hardly opts for what might be thought (if it is worth thinking in this way) non-difficult texts. Rather, in its discussion of Modern American writers, it aims to chart a way through the practices and devices that characterize their work – often citational, or allusive, or aleatory – which understands such gestures in that spirit of circulation which, in one sense, constitutes writing’s enthusiasm.

There is a fundamental paradox in enthusiasm. On the one hand, what it claims is intimacy, even an immediate relation with, a condition of inspiration. On the other, the way such an inspiration is invariably held to manifest itself in the medium of language – often turned to excess — is as another voice, whether of the divinity, or a muse, or, as in Modern writing, in the quoted words of another book, or as words envisaged as originating elsewhere than the writing self. This book doesn’t attempt to make that paradox go away. Rather it acknowledges, from the point of view of the enthusiast, that such a paradox – the ambitions of direct acquaintance with the world, and of speaking in and through others’ words – is the true and precarious basis of Modern American writing. The intensification of this paradox has to do with voice, with the fact that, as Clark argues, enthusiasm never completely loses sight of its origin in an oracular tradition, and that as writing turns to enthusiasm certain tensions of concept and expression emerge. Again, these tensions don’t go away here. Rather, in their acts of composition, the writers in question are observed refining and complicating our sense of what it means to have a voice, until what we are talking about is not voice as such, but a mode of written utterance it is not improper to think of as voicing.

There is a single argument running through the essays that follow; the argument, to repeat, that when Emerson inaugurated Modern American literature he did so by mobilising what one can call, paradoxically, a tradition of enthusiasm, and that since that moment American writers, some very major ones at least, have sought to answer the question of what it means to be a Modern enthusiast. This said, the answers, as presented here – the answers of Thoreau, Melville, Pound, Moore, O’Hara and Schuyler – have differed quite radically from one another, and in the spirit of enthusiasm it has been my
intention not simply to fit different writing practices to a governing thesis, but to consider what the various writers look like when viewed through their enthusiasm. Nor is it my object in talking up enthusiasm to present it to the exclusion of other aspects of writing. In picturing the writer as an enthusiast I am not, as should become clear, obscuring portraits of the writer as, for instance, reader, reviser, editor and critic. This book, in other words, is not an argument against, but an argument for: for enthusiastic engagements with writing, for institutions and structures of debate that allow enthusiasms to be passed on.

Notes

2 Ibid., p. 414.
3 Ibid., pp. 382, 393.
4 Ibid., p. 827.
9 Ibid., p. 108.
14 Ibid.
15 See, in particular, the chapter on Derrida and Celan, in Clark, *Theory of Inspiration*, pp. 259-84.
Enthusiast! Essays on Modern American Literature

18 This rehabilitation of the idea of enthusiasm – he discusses it in terms of regulation – is Jon Mee’s subject in the first chapter of *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation*. See pp. 23-81.

19 Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, pp. 54, 9, 51, 54.


26 Emerson, *Essays*, p. 931. With this remark Emerson sketches in a continuation of the story Jon Mee tells in *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation*. Thus if the argument there is that it was the work of eighteenth-century commentators, and then Romanticism in turn, to regulate enthusiasm, which is to say, to draw it within the confines of polite conversation and society, the implication of Emerson’s remark is that for a deregulated enthusiasm one might turn to America, where in religion as well as literature formal constraints have arguably been less successfully imposed.


28 Penn, *Preface*, pp. 1, 2.

29 Ibid., pp. 6, 7, 8.

30 Ibid., p. 21.

31 Fox, *Journal*, p. 53.


35 Penn, ‘*Preface*’, pp. 38, 41.


37 For a recent theory of enthusiasm readers should go to Timothy Clark’s *The Theory of Inspiration*, and for recent histories of enthusiasm one might read Jon Mee’s *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation* or David Lovejoy’s *Religious Enthusiasm in the New World*, from all of which this book has benefited greatly.

38 Clark presents this moment as a crisis of subjectivity (see his chapter ‘Orientations: the space of composition’, pp. 14-39) from which starting point he stages an investigation into writers and theorists in a European tradition who have dwelt on and intensified the sense of subjectivity in crisis. My interest, in considering composition as a moment of enthusiasm, is in how works are made or come into being, from which it follows that this book is less concerned to pursue the dissolution of the subject as an effect of enthusiasm, than to consider how, through enthusiasm, works get made.


Humphrey Carpenter, *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound*, London, Faber and Faber, 1988, p. 188.
