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TWELVE

EMERSON’S PLATONIZING OF AMERICAN THOUGHT

Where I grew up, the first question asked when you met someone was “What do you do?”

“I’m a philosopher.”

“Yeah, but what do you do?”

What do philosophers do? When philosophy first got hold of me, I became an argument-riffer. I learned to play arguments like scales on a guitar, and I learned their variations and modifications. I had an outstanding teacher of argument-riffing, Chris Russell. Russell was steeped in ancient and medieval logic, and made me read everything from Aristotle to Peter of Spain and Lewis Carroll. It was only some years later that I realized the importance of the histories Russell put me in touch with. Reading Plato’s dialogues as an argument-riffer is an entirely different experience from reading them as one attentive to time, place, and cultural setting. From Aristotle, Augustine, Hegel, and Peirce, I began to learn that doing philosophy could also mean engaging in a historical conversation.
In my ongoing encounters with the history of philosophy, I learned that the philosophers who kept me coming back for more readings provided more than argument and history—in some fashion they were engaged in “poetry” in the broad Greek sense of the term. The rich texture of Plato’s dialogues and the nearly untranslatable multiplicity of meaning in Augustine’s *Confessions* exemplify this other dimension of philosophy. The American tradition, even prior to Emerson’s “American Scholar,” appropriated this way of *doing* philosophy, and we see its import in thinkers as diverse as Jonathan Edwards and Richard Rorty. Its strongest and most intentional moment nevertheless appears in Emerson’s writings. This fact, however, brings us to a curious impasse, because for many argument-riffers and intellectual historians Emerson does not appear to be *doing* philosophy. For most of the twentieth century his work lived only in literature programs, never in philosophy programs. Indeed, this has not changed much even today. Emerson’s insistence on the poetic dimension of philosophy thus makes him a key figure for philosophy Americana, where the borders among “disciplines” are found to be, in a Peircean way, more indefinite and more fluid.

In his essay “Spires of Influence,” John McDermott says of James, Royce, and Dewey: “Despite their differences and disagreements, often extreme in both personal style and doctrine, these powerful and prescient philosophers did have at least one influence in common—the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson.” Others, such as Robert Pollock, Joseph Blau, and, more recently, Stanley Cavell, George Stack, and Russell Goodman, have described Emerson’s influence on subsequent philosophy both American and Continental. Cavell, for example, reads Emerson as foreshadowing themes and philosophical styles in Moore, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. Stack shows Nietzsche’s close dependence on Emerson’s early essays. Goodman, following Cavell, places Emerson in the Romantic tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth, and sees Emerson as foreshadowing a “romantic” side of the pragmatic tradition. Pollock and Blau, like McDermott, place Emerson more squarely in American thinking as an inspiration to classical American philosophy. Most recently, a debate has arisen concerning...
whether Emerson was a protopragmatist. Despite my interest in Emerson’s influence, I am not interested in this particular debate. Rather, I want to explore how Emerson more generally showed American thinkers another way of thinking about philosophical practice, one that reenvisioned philosophy in an American vein outside the trajectory established by rationalism and classical empiricism. In this, I follow the lead of John Dewey, who in 1903 openly defended Emerson’s status as the philosopher of democracy.2

What I want to show is that Emerson drew on the tradition of Platonism and on the ideas of his fellow Transcendentalists to reconstruct philosophical practice. To accomplish this task, I will examine parts of Essays: First and Second Series and Representative Men to suggest the ways in which this reconstruction occurred. In part, the revision has to do with how philosophy is actually defined. But it also has to do with how one goes about defining. Moreover, Emerson’s most persuasive forces are his writings and talks, not his arguments, especially if we mean by “argument” a formally structured set of propositions. Emerson’s attempt to gain ownership of his own version of religious practice is closely paralleled by his attempt to be his own kind of philosopher. He was not naïve, as he is sometimes portrayed by those who conflate logic and philosophy, but he was extremely subtle. Nevertheless, he was by and large excommunicated from the community of philosophy by the early commentators on his work. And despite the recovery of his work within American philosophy and despite Cavell’s important reconsideration of his instrumental value, Emerson still stands well outside the bounds of philosophy proper as conventionally understood. He is seldom read by philosophers in America, and his work is taught even less often than pragmatism. Since his story begins with this initial excommunication, let us turn to his early reception by philosophers in America.

The charge of being unphilosophical is of course one familiar to the ears of American philosophers. Doubt has at one time or another been cast on the philosophical authenticity of the work of Jonathan Edwards, Henry Thoreau, William James, and George Santayana.3 In a letter to Borden Bowne in 1908, J. Cook Wilson wrote the following
after hearing James lecture at Oxford: “I am glad I wasted no more time on the lectures. Indeed, I do not think the speculation of James worthy the valuable time or serious attention of anyone who knows even a moderate amount of philosophy.” Yet with Edwards we can at least, if we like, isolate his discussions of free will as truly philosophical even if we relegate (as I think we should not) his Treatise Concerning Religious Affections to the realm of neo–Calvinist apologetics. For Thoreau and Santayana we can find essays that directly address philosophical issues in politics, religion, poetry, and so on. And for James we can adduce any number of his discussions of free will, Hegel, and truth as evidence of his philosophical authenticity if not, as Cook Wilson would have it, of his competence. In Emerson’s case, however, the charge of being unphilosophical seems, by conventional standards, more fitting. Even in those places Emerson chose overtly philosophical titles—for example, “Politics” and “Nominalist and Realist”—his approach seems at first glance so oblique as to discredit the labels. Thus, historically Emerson’s work has been considered less than philosophical. As one reads commentaries on Emerson’s thinking from the 1840s to the present, one finds three central and related charges brought against his philosophical qualifications: that Emerson was too poetic to be philosophical; that Emerson was unable to define clearly or well; and that Emerson provided no philosophical system or doctrine. It is precisely Emerson’s Platonistic revision of philosophy that makes such charges seem plausible. But the charges more expressly reveal the narrowness of the accusers than any philosophical inadequacy on Emerson’s part.

I

In an 1876 essay O. B. Frothingham maintained: “Mr. Emerson’s place is among poetic, not philosophic minds. He belongs to the order of imaginative men. The imagination is his organ.” A bit later George Edward Woodberry asserted that “Emerson, as has been said, was fundamentally a poet with an imperfect faculty of expression.” And more recently Charles Feidelson, Jr., while acknowledging Emerson’s
son’s attempt at philosophy, argues that Emerson’s “theory has weight chiefly as a literary program.” Insofar as these merely describe Emerson’s writing, they are of course in part true. Emerson did intend to argue for the role of the poetic in ascertaining and disseminating wisdom and character, as is clearly evidenced in “The Poet.” However, he did not mean that mere poetry would suffice; Emerson shared with Plato a concern for the poet’s ignorance of her own wisdom (see, for example, CW, 4:35). In Ion, as in interviews on MTV and VH1, we can see the inarticulateness of the artist concerning his or her work. Sheer poetic aptitude can appear as the kind of mindless insightfulness that Theodore Parker—wrongly, I believe—attributed to Emerson when he said that “Emerson proceeds by way of intuition, sensational or spiritual.” This seems more appropriate as a description of Ion or Jim Morrison of The Doors than of Emerson. For Emerson, the poetic must work in concert with other powers, not in independence of them.

This distinction and its import can be seen more clearly if we turn to “Plato; or, The Philosopher” in Representative Men. The first thing to note on entering the essay is Emerson’s substitution of “Plato” for the scholastics’ “Aristotle” in conjunction with the nickname “the Philosopher.” Of the two, in all of the writings that have come down to us, Plato is, as we know, the more poetic in both structure and style. Emerson takes up this point explicitly in the essay:

Every man, who would do anything well, must come to it from a higher ground. A philosopher must be more than a philosopher. Plato is clothed with the powers of a poet, stands upon the highest place of the poet, and (though I doubt he wanted the decisive gift of lyric expression) mainly is not a poet, because he chose to use the poetic gift to an ulterior purpose. (CW, 4:25)

Emerson also says, “As a good chimney burns its own smoke, so a philosopher converts the value of all his fortunes into his intellectual performances” (CW, 4:25). Thus, philosophy is not an ejaculatory emotiveness for Emerson; but it is likewise not a narrowly analytical endeavor. The poet-not-a-poet moves into the realm of the intellect;
and the philosopher-more-than-a-philosopher extends her reach beyond logical argumentation. This interchange of poetry and logic is foreshadowed in *Essays* by the proximity and interplay of the essays “Intellect,” “Art,” and “The Poet.” In particular, we find the role of Emerson’s “intellect constructive” and the “poetic” to be the same: the dissemination of what one knows in and through experience. Here we see, on the one hand, that Emerson is working under the influence of Coleridge, Schelling, and Hegel; and, on the other hand, that, as Cavell and McDermott report, he foreshadows features of Nietzsche’s, Heidegger’s, and James’s thought.

Woodberry and others read Emerson’s poeticness as ejaculatory and uncontrolled—as “inspired”—and therefore see it as running counter to an intellectualist notion of philosophy in which the understanding must guard against the influences of feeling and will. Such a reading is no doubt related to the fact that twentieth-century philosophers of analysis have read Emerson, if at all, mostly for “pleasure,” as if pleasure and truth could not work together. However, just as Edwards’s emphasis on the affections did not preclude an important role for the understanding, so Emerson’s use of the poetic must be seen as tempering the intellect, not eliminating it. He is simply—and rationally—concerned with having philosophy address and take into account the workings of all human powers, not just that of the understanding alone. In “Experience” and elsewhere, Emerson takes empiricism away from its mechanical concern for impressions and ideas and into the richer realm of lived experience—of attention to moods, temperament, power, and illusion. It is precisely this broadening of the notion of experience that James and Dewey acquire from their encounters with Emerson’s work. Moreover, Emerson is suspicious of the finite understanding’s claims to foundational certainty since, in Kantian fashion, there is in human experience a “last fact behind which analysis cannot go” (*CW*, 2:137). One role for the poetic in philosophy is thus to deepen and broaden philosophy from its narrowly intellectualistic posture—a posture that often presumes to know more than it does. At the same time, he has no intent to slay reason or the understanding—to become an anti-philosopher. It is
Plato’s balance he admires: “In him the freest abandonment is united with the precision of the geometer” (JMN, 7:57; see also CW, 4:31).13

II

Given conventional accounts about the workings of human minds, it is easy to suppose that if one is overly poetic, one is not likely to qualify as a drawer of definitional distinctions. In the idiom of our day, one is either “right-brained” or “left-brained.” George Santayana, in considering Emerson’s work, pursued this line of description. In his 1900 essay “Emerson,” Santayana maintained that Emerson could not [define his own philosophical terms], and the consciousness of that incapacity was so lively within him that he never attempted to give articulation to his philosophy. His finer instinct kept him from doing this violence to his inspiration.14

Though it is clear that Santayana here intends to defend and praise the fineness of Emerson’s inspiration, I think he misses both Emerson’s outlook and his practice. Emerson was more than inspired, and he could be exceptionally “studied” and articulate. Furthermore, Santayana and others coupled this apparent incapacity for definition with an inability to handle serious philosophical themes:

They are intricate subjects, obscured by many emotional prejudices, so that the labour, impartiality, and precision which would be needed to elucidate them are to be looked for in scholastic rather than in inspired thinkers, and in Emerson least of all.15

Taken to an extreme, Santayana’s account of Emerson fits Charles Feidelson, Jr.’s, assessment that Emerson “could proceed at all only by a paradoxical method of self-contradiction.”16

If we take as our paradigms Aristotle, Locke, Hume, and Russell, we might say Emerson appears to be unable to define. The simplest way to redeem him would thus be to argue that definition is irrelevant to philosophy. But this is an avenue he closes off:

At last comes Plato, the distributor, who needs no barbaric paint, or tattoo, or whooping; for he can define. He leaves with Asia the
vast and superlative; he is the arrival of accuracy and intelligence. “He shall be as a god to me, who can rightly divide and define.” This defining is philosophy. (CW, 4:27)

The quarrel is not, then, about the need for definition and an ability to define; it is about what it means to define rightly. The attempt to read Emerson out of the role of philosophical definer seems to hinge on the assumption that “definition” means, and only means, connotative, lexical renderings of a term’s or an experience’s meaning. In response, Emerson foreshadowed some of Peirce’s more technical semiotic notions, such as the indeterminacy of general ideas and the vagueness of some signs. If nature is vague, we would be wrong to make our definitions of its contents too clear. Noting Plato’s affinity for leaving readers with aporiae to consider at the close of his dialogues is instructive. Emerson, like Plato, could be exceedingly precise and impartial, but he never allowed the desire for precision and clarity to override the had complexities of actual experience. Indeed, what is perhaps most notable about Plato’s dialogues is that while definitions are routinely sought, definitive answers are seldom forthcoming. The critics work with the assumption, roughly stated, that definition must take the form “A is ____” or “A is not ____” with clarity, distinctness, and sufficient sophistication, as if the cosmos itself has always to live by the law of excluded middle. There is a further assumption here that because Emerson did not work in this fashion, he could not. It seems to me far more likely, given Emerson’s familiarity with intellectual history, that he was unwilling to define in this way because it might mislead us from what he took to be philosophy’s appropriate task in defining. Indeed, in “Intellect” Emerson spoke directly to this issue:

When we are young we spend much time in filling our notebooks with all definitions of Religion, Poetry, Politics, Art, in the hope that in the course of a few years we shall have condensed into our own encyclopaedia the net value of all the theories at which the world has yet arrived. But year after year our tables get no completeness and at last we discover that our curve is a parabola whose arcs will never meet. (CW, 2:201)
Emerson suggests here the futility of a straightforward glossary of his terms. The incapacity, however, is not his, but that of language and the experienced realities themselves—the experienced realities that for Emerson, as later for Dewey, are both the origin and the test of philosophy. These realities have not been, and will not be, fully captured by linguistic measures. Again foreshadowing Peirce, Emerson regularly argued that language, despite its power and ability to grow, routinely and inevitably falls short of experience. In “The Over-Soul” he asked: “Why do men feel that the natural history of man has never been written, but always he is leaving behind what you have said of him, and it becomes old, and books of metaphysics worthless?” (CW, 2:159). Later, he answers: “Of this pure nature every man is at some time sensible. Language cannot paint it with his colors” (CW, 2:161). And:

An answer [concerning the nature of revelation] in words is delusive; it is really no answer to the question you ask. Do not require a description of the countries towards which you sail. The description does not describe them to you, and tomorrow you arrive there and know them by inhabiting them. (CW, 2:168)

Emerson takes quite seriously not the rejection of precise thinking, but the recognition that linguistic, and therefore philosophical, precision can be as misleading as imprecision. The “accuracy and intelligence” of the definer are not found in arbitrary confinement but in attention to what experience admits. It is for this reason that Emerson often defines with what Kenneth Marc Harris calls a “studied ambiguity.” Again, Emerson follows Plato and precedes Peirce in acknowledging that key terms of human experience are often most truly employed when they remain vague and are therefore able to survive inspection by way of a principle of noncontradiction. In this way, we can see the sense in Emerson’s claim that “a foolish consistency,” not just any consistency, “is the hobgoblin of little minds” (CW, 2:33). While I do not wish to attribute a logic of vagueness to Emerson, it seems clear that his vision of the philosopher as poet-not-a-poet was a direct and calculated response to rationalism and the En-
lightenment that, James Cox has suggested, Emerson “felt were enslaved to clarity, the mere light of understanding.” Given this, there is of course little mystery concerning Emerson’s absence from conversations in twentieth-century Anglo–American philosophy.

It is important here to remember that Emerson did not take this move to be original; rather, in spirit at least, he worked under the influence of Plato. *The Sophist* and *The Symposium* come to mind as exemplary dialogues that approach “definition” with the richness (and more) of an Emersonian essay. Nevertheless, Emerson was aware that narrower “definitions” within the fabric of the dialogues had tempted scholars to lift these from the text in analytic fashion and treat them as “philosophy” divorced from the rest of the work. Emerson resisted such readings of Plato. “The mind of Plato,” he maintained, “is not to be exhibited by a Chinese catalogue, but is to be apprehended by an original mind in the exercise of its original power” (CW, 4:32; see also JMN, 9:223). Given this resistance, it seems likely that Emerson, through his inclusion of poetic language, sought to dissuade others from reading his own work in this fragmented, analytic fashion.

Thus, while Emerson denied the possibility of Cartesian discursive clarity, he did not deny the possibility of definition. Just as Platonic dialogues, as he read them, bring us to consider the meaning of love, justice, piety, and so forth, so Emerson’s *Representative Men* and *Essays* are themselves defining: of the poet, of nature, of experience, and so on. For Emerson, that these definitions are denotative, exemplary, ironic, and poetic makes them more philosophical, not less. What some commentators object to is the style of definition that skates through the varieties of a term’s determinations. From Emerson’s angle of vision, much of what occurs under the name of philosophy is willing to pay the price of precision: loss of depth and breadth, or what James later called the thinness of conceptual clarity. Emerson was unwilling. He revered the unifying power of definition, but at the same time acknowledged the constraints that the complexity of experience placed on this power (see, for example, CW, 3:142). Foreshadowing Dewey, Emerson forced logic to follow experience and not
vice versa. As he saw it, Plato’s power lay in his ability to define without closing the doors on meaning. “Thought,” Emerson said, “seeks to show unity in unity; poetry to show it by variety; that is, always by an object or symbol. Plato keeps the two vases, one of aether and one of pigment, at his side, and invariably uses both” (CW, 4:32). So, while it may be correct to say that Emerson did not define in the way of Locke, Hume, and Russell, it is wrong, I think, to attribute this to ignorance and incapacity. Emerson does define, but with exemplary definitions he deemed appropriate to the vagueness of the terms and the Platonic cast of the philosopher.

III

If Emerson was too poetic and incapable of defining, it would not surprise us if he had neither the doctrine nor the system of a philosopher. Perhaps the earliest and best-known version of this criticism was that of Theodore Parker:

He lacks the power of orderly arrangements to a remarkable degree. Not only is there no obvious logical order, but there is no subtle psychological method by which the several parts of an essay are joined together; his deep sayings are jewels strung wholly at random. This often confuses the reader; this want appears the greatest defect of his mind.21

Matthew Arnold, preparing to praise Emerson, said: “Emerson cannot, I think, be called with justice a great philosophical writer. He cannot build; his arrangement of philosophical ideas has no progress in it, no evolution; he does not construct philosophy.”22 “There is,” says S. M. Crothers, “no Emersonian system of philosophy, only an Emersonian way of looking at things.”23 And Santayana, again perhaps in praise, argued that “At bottom he had no doctrine at all.”24

It seems plausible that we might redeem Emerson here by aligning his work with contemporary suggestions in neopragmatism and some postmodern thought that systematic thinking is a danger, something to be avoided, in philosophy, not an important central feature of it. There are indeed dimensions of Emerson’s writing that lend them-
selves to such an interpretation. Nevertheless, Emerson, in his attention to Plato, Hegel, and others, seems to resist redemption from this quarter: “We want, in every man, a long logic; we cannot pardon the absence of it, but it must not be spoken” (CW, 2:195). Dewey seems right in maintaining that one who cannot see Emerson’s “logic” is blind to “a logic finely wrought.”25 As W. T. Harris argued, working under the influence of his own American Hegelianism: “While it is true that there is no parading of syllogistic reasoning in Emerson’s essays, and no ratiocination, there is quite sufficient unity of a higher kind if one will but once comprehend the thoughts with any degree of clearness.”26 That Emerson displays something of a dialectical doctrine should be evident in the previous discussions of the role of the poetic and the meaning of definition for philosophy. That is, both by example and by assertion Emerson claims an understanding of what philosophy is and how it ought to proceed. If we do not count this as doctrine, it is difficult to know what we would count. However, it is true that Emerson did not produce a historically dialectical system nor a geometrically whole system of the likes of Hegel’s or Spinoza’s. More important, he was decidedly not doctrinaire, as many “systematizers” are. Such systems seemed to him capable of being suggestive, but not of comprehensively capturing the nature of the universe. As William Barton rightly argues, drawing on a manuscript from 1848: “He did not think it possible to expect completeness in one’s view of things. The universe is open and changing. ‘I write metaphysics, but my method is purely expectant.’”27 This is a claim that aptly describes the metaphysics of Peirce, James, and Dewey. As Pollock puts it, reminding us of this line of influence, “In an Emersonian universe, in which the unexpected is always happening, knowledge as a finished product is unthinkable.”28 Again, it is not an incapacity that determines Emerson’s approach, but a considered account of what philosophy is and what the constraints placed on it by human experience are. This is confirmed, again, by his assessment of Plato as philosopher.

He said of Plato, “he has not a system” (CW, 4:43). Moreover, he added that the task that closed philosophical systems often set for
themselves—the general and full explanation of what is—may be impossible to complete from the vantage of the midworld of experience:

No power of genius has ever yet had the smallest measure of success in explaining existence. The perfect enigma remains. But there is an injustice in assuming this ambition for Plato. (CW, 4:44)

In short, Plato never was, as some analytic and idealistic readings might suggest, a “modern” philosopher. However, to deny the efficacy of closed teleological or explanatory systems is not to deny systematic thinking altogether. Rather than having philosophy seek to enclose experience and the world in explanation, Emerson would have it open up experience and the world for our inspection. In “Plato; New Readings” he again draws on Plato’s example. Plato, he argued, “is more than an expert, or a school-man, or a geometer, or the prophet of a peculiar message. He represents the privilege of the intellect, the power, namely, of carrying up every fact to successive platforms, and so disclosing, in every fact, a germ of expansion” (CW, 4: 46). If we look carefully at Essays, we can glimpse a part of Emerson’s “systematic” thinking in this vein.

In his insightful dissertation Glen Johnson reminds us that as early as 1824–1825 Emerson had “meditated a statement of his ‘first philosophy.’” Johnson also restates the traditional view that Nature was Emerson’s first full-fledged attempt to articulate this first philosophy, and that by June 1836 it “had become two extended essays, one on ‘Nature’ and one on ‘Spirit’ later bridged by the chapter on ‘Idealism.’” What begins to appear in Nature, then, is Emerson’s meditation on the relationship of the one (spirit) and the many (nature), a problem that, in its various guises and following the Greeks, Emerson took to be central to philosophy. This is clear, given the hindsight of Representative Men:

Philosophy is the account which the human mind gives to itself of the constitution of the world. Two cardinal facts lie forever at the base; the one, and the two.—1. Unity, or Identity; and, 2. Variety. It is impossible to speak, or to think, without embracing both. (CW, 4:27–28; see also JMN, 9:303, 332)
Unfortunately, having taken us this far, Johnson, whose interest is in the first series of Essays only, fails to pursue the line of reasoning he presents to its natural upshot in the philosophical structure of the Essays: First and Second Series. Instead, he contends that after Nature, Emerson “never again attempted a ‘first philosophy.’”

Let us follow through on the picture Johnson presents. Nature was a failed attempt at “first philosophy,” and it failed for Emerson precisely because he tried, as Johnson and others maintain, to speak his philosophy in the voice of abstract thought. However, suppose Essays is a reconstructed attempt at “first philosophy,” but now in a voice that is capable of handling Emerson’s own doctrine of philosophy. Johnson simply fails to take Emerson’s journal remarks of 1839 and his own paraphrase of these seriously enough. Emerson wrote:

> The philosopher has a good deal of knowledge which cannot be abstractly imparted . . . as many emotions in the soul of Handel and Mozart are thousand voiced and utterly incapable of being told in a simple air on a lute. . . . As the musician avails himself of the concert, so the philosopher . . . becomes a poet; for . . . complex forms allow of the utterance of his knowledge of life by indirections as well [as] in the didactic way, and therefore express the fluxional quantities and values which the thesis or dissertation could never give. (JMN, 7:190)

Johnson responds: “The philosopher is no longer in tension with the poet, for he has become the poet.” Yet, it seems important to note again that Emerson does not reduce philosophy to poetry. If we recognize the “poet” here as the poet-not-a-poet who is the philosopher-more-than-a-philosopher, we see that the voice of Essays is, on Emerson’s own terms, philosophical (see JMN, 9:269). Moreover, in recalling Nature’s attempt to hold Spirit and Nature in the same gaze, and Representative Men’s locating of philosophy around the unity–variety question, we can begin to disclose a first philosophy in Essays, but one open to revision as history and experience qualify and constrain our thought and our conduct of life.

Essays: First Series addresses and prominently displays the side of unity (one, spirit, “the gravitation of the soul”), and Second Series,
the side of variety (other, nature, and “the power of nature”). This
duplicity is characterized, for example, by the central essays of each
series: “Self-Reliance” and “The Over-Soul” in the First and “Experi-
ence” and “Nature” in the Second. The former essays are character-
ized by a movement from direct, finite experience upward toward the
unifying soul; the latter attend to the variety of instantiations of the
One in human experience. Were it not for Emerson’s early attention
to these dual elements and his later confirmation of their importance,
we might be tempted to read the two series developmentally, as does
Stephen Whicher, arguing that the latter series compensates for the
overenthusiasm of the first. However, if we take seriously the endur-
ance of this attention through the course of Emerson’s writings, it
might make better sense to read Second Series as compensatory only
insofar as it is a complement to, and not a rejection of, the First.

Emerson’s radically empirical claim here is that we find ourselves
in a world that is at once various and unified: “We are amphibious
creatures, weaponed for two elements, having two sets of qualities,
the particular and the catholic” (CW, 3:135). Philosophical argumen-
tations have often maintained one side of this experience at the ex-
pense of the other—as, for example, in the historical caricatures of
Parmenides and Heraclitus. Despite the cleverness of such views, Em-
erson saw them as failing to answer to experience as we live it: “We
must reconcile the contradictions as we can, but their discord and
their concord introduce wild absurdities into our thinking and
speech. No sentence will hold the whole truth” (CW, 3:143; see also
“Circles”). Philosophy as pure understanding fails by leading us, at
best, to a collection of antinomies.

Emerson’s response to this fact, as we saw above, was to rein in the
understanding and to locate it, again foreshadowing Dewey, in the
midst of experience. Instead of argumentation in a narrow sense, phi-
losophy became, for Emerson, a dwelling on and a disclosing of the
traits of experience: “Neither by detachment, neither by aggregation
is the integrity of the intellect transmitted to its works, but by a vigi-
lance which brings intellect in its greatness and best state to operate
every moment” (CW, 2:201). The understanding becomes important
in its proficiency in “the perception of identity” (CW, 2:201). The vigil that is kept on experience, however, must reflect variety as well, and therefore the poet’s role of revealing the variety of experience’s truths, goods, and beauties is equally significant. Recall: “Thought seeks to know unity by unity; poetry to show it by variety” (CW, 4:642).

Emerson’s call for a vigilance of both elements also reveals his affinity for a dialectic that can find a place for both. However, as we saw earlier, he remained suspicious of systems that attempted to project closure on experience or the world. Emerson’s dialectic, therefore, is not a historical march toward some conclusion, but a vigilance that allows us to move from wherever we find ourselves to “higher platforms.” As he put it in an 1845 journal entry: “The philosophy we want is one of fluxions and mobility; not a house, but a ship in these billows we inhabit” (JMN, 9:222). If there is order in the cosmos, there is also surprise; if there is fate, there is also power. Philosophy’s task—and I see no reason not to call this a doctrine—is to continuously deepen or perhaps “heighten” (“to cheer, to raise”) human experience in its various historical settings, not to end it. It is easy at this juncture to think of Emerson’s import for Dewey, who valued a philosophy for its making experience more “significant . . . luminous,” enriched, and empowered (LW, 1:18).

Though I offer only a suggestive sketch here, I think it reasonable, by developing the duplicity noted above, to read Essays as having taken up the vigil Emerson proposes. First, we should consider the “bookends” of “History” and “Nominalist and Realist,” whose opening lines are instructive concerning the reflective meditation Emerson calls to our attention. “History” opens up a series of essays that are involved with articulating the presence of unity, of Soul, in the cosmos: “There is one mind common to all men” (CW, 2:3). There is some irony here since we expect from history a description of temporal variety and detail; the irony keeps us in mind of the variety that is to come. “Nominalist and Realist” closes out the Second Series and suggests a reflection back to what “History” might have been: “I cannot often enough say, that a man is only a relative and representative
nature” (CW, 3:133). Emerson never seems willing to sacrifice either unity or variety for its other; his vigil calls for looking for one in the other. We can see this not only in the clear evidence of “Nominalist and Realist,” but also in almost every essay. In “Nature” there is dynamic interaction of *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*. In “Self-Reliance” and “Politics,” though the emphasis shifts, there is the necessity of both individual and community. Each discovery of unity makes sense of the variety; every discovery of variety yields a new angle of vision on unity. The philosopher’s task, using both of Plato’s “pallets” (palettes), is to move to “higher platforms” through the transactions and encounters of unity and variety. It is difficult, I think, to read the deepening reflection of *Essays: First and Second Series* as if two mirrors of different tint were set face to face, as merely accidental. A glance at the table of contents of the two sets of essays is revealing. There is an apparent facing of “The Over-Soul” and “Experience,” but neither refutes the other; we see each variously mirrored in the other. Less apparent are the fact that “Character” appears to show the lived surfaces of the internal centeredness of “Heroism” and the fact that “Gifts” and “Manners” do much the same for the spiritual laws of friendship, love, and even lowly prudence. “The Poet” takes up where “Intellect” leaves off, developing the variety of ways in which the influx of soul may be made public; poetry, in its widest sense, is constructive intellect that “produces thoughts, sentences, poems, plans, designs, systems” (CW, 2:198). Yet I do not think it necessary to force the issue here; the relatedness of the differences in tone and emphasis between the two series has been noted by most readers of Emerson, including those, such as Whicher, who see one as in some way dismissing or overcoming the other. My purpose is simply to suggest another way of interpreting this relatedness.

In reflecting briefly on the role of the philosopher in *Representative Men* and the structure of *Essays*, then, I mean to suggest that we can begin to see something of the dialectical “system” that Emerson has in mind. As Cavell suggests and as Goodman describes, there is a kind of categoriology at work in Emerson’s writing that is perhaps most obvious in the notion of “representative” men, but that appears also
in the structure of *Essays* as well as within the confines of particular essays. There is also a hint of Hegel in the articulation of moments of encounter and awakening by which experience moves us through an ascension to higher platforms: “Nature has a higher end in the production of new individuals than security,” Emerson says, “namely *ascension*, or, the passage of the soul into higher forms” (*CW*, 3:14).

There is a systematic complexity that is craftily and warily embedded in Emerson’s writing. It would indeed be a travesty to reduce Emerson’s thought—as some of the Platonists did Plato’s—to an underlying schema. At the same time, it is misleading to ignore the systematic dimension, for then we miss one of the “pallets” from which Emerson worked. That there are two “pallets” to which we need to attend suggests that there is much more philosophical work to be done in the reading of Emerson. For Emerson the task of philosophy is, through vigilance, to disclose germs of expansion and further reflection in an open-ended dialectic of experience. He is the philosopher who underwrites the philosophies of experience that follow in the American tradition.