

ONE

Politics without Transcendence

The same Emerson who said that “society is everywhere in conspiracy against its members” also said, and in the same essay, “accept the place the divine Providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events.” Now, when events are taken in disconnection and considered apart from the interactions due to the selecting individual, they conspire against individuality. So does society when it is accepted as something already fixed in institutions. But “the connection of events,” and “the society of your contemporaries” as formed of moving and multiple associations, are the only means by which the possibilities of individuality can be realized. . . . To gain an integrated individuality, each of us needs to cultivate his own garden. But there is no fence about this garden: it is no sharply marked-off enclosure. Our garden is the world, in the angle at which it touches our own manner of being.

—John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*

Dewey’s remark¹ stands as one of those rare moments in the history of interpretations of Emerson when his familiar image as the master of self-reliant individualism momentarily gives way to another less familiar one, a figure who persistently sought to fathom the doubleness of individual existence, the uniqueness of personal circumstances and the social sources of the self.² It is to this other image of Emerson and Thoreau that I direct my attention in this study. Too often in our accounts of these figures we cling too closely to the various oppositions—society and solitude, freedom and fate, and so on—that Emerson and his contemporaries persistently attempted to work beyond. In recent years works have proliferated that emphasize the role of political and social reform to the careers of Emerson, Thoreau, and their peers. Yet an odd division of labor has been at work: those studies that emphasize the thought of Emerson rarely have much to say about his

political commitments, while those that emphasize Emerson the reformer often seem at a loss to use their insights to shed light on his more purely philosophical speculations. Perhaps because of the social cast of his own philosophizing, Dewey was particularly alert to this aspect of Emerson. Dewey understood the inseparability of Emerson the philosopher from Emerson the social thinker. He recognized that even to begin to approach Emerson as if these were two separate areas of speculation would make it impossible to come to terms with the true nature of his project.

Of modern readers of transcendentalism since Dewey, perhaps Stanley Cavell has come closest to uncovering the difficult and unfamiliar way in which the best writings of Emerson and Thoreau work to complicate the static conceptions of individual and society characteristic of traditional liberal thought. Cavell's account of Emerson and Thoreau sees them as not finally seeking transcendence of the finite as much as a recovery from skepticism in favor of a self-recovery through the return to the sometimes obscure but ever-present social character of our language, our criteria (in Wittgenstein's sense), and ultimately of our deepest self.³ These ties in a common culture and language that so profoundly bind us are, I wish to argue, crucial to understanding the mature works of Emerson and to a large extent those of Thoreau as well. The ultimate import of their rhetoric is not so much the assertion of personal autonomy and will in the face of all obstacles as it is a sustained reflection on the paradox of how one may be both within and outside of society, how one may be both the product and the transforming agent of culture.

Consequently, my emphasis here will largely be on the political nature of their writings, perhaps the most inclusive framework within which they may be considered. The particular form of political thought under consideration is liberalism, which in its resilience and adaptability remains the single most significant political philosophy of the modern era. Emerson and Thoreau each use their writings to examine certain problematic aspects of the liberal democracy they were born into. In both cases these inquiries lead to a new conception of the individual and its relation to its culture followed thereupon by a new understanding of the possibilities of democratic leadership.

Emerson and Thoreau faced the same dilemma in regard to liberal democracy that faced earlier thinkers from Rousseau to Mill and, in somewhat altered form, continues to face contemporary thinkers: how to maintain both a respect and appreciation for the individual and yet maintain as well the preeminence of the good of the whole community. Liberalism's defense of individual rights traditionally relied on a conception of the individual as ontologically prior to society and possessed of certain innate rights. In the basic liberal narrative of society, sometimes offered as fact and at other times as heuristic myth, the self formed the most basic unit of existence. It enters and leaves society at will and, given this

priority, justice requires that society be shaped by individuals and not vice versa. The traditional liberal culture that transcendentalism confronted severed the self's profoundest connections with its world in liberalism's enabling assumption that the individual preexists and constitutes a more fundamental category than its society. As a consequence, it became nearly impossible to fathom the sources of individual character since it seemed to appear from nowhere. Just as frustratingly, it seemed impossible to understand how individuals might consciously come together to form anything more than the most primitive social arrangements since only tenuous brief alliances were possible to such isolate selves. Taken to an extreme, such asocial individualism deprived the individual life of both a past and a future.

This has historically been among the knottiest of problems for liberal ideologists. We should hardly be surprised if Emerson and Thoreau took their time in coming to terms with it. After providing a very brief and schematic overview of classic liberalism's understanding of self and society, this chapter will trace how this question increasingly takes center stage in Emerson's thinking from the *Essays* (1841), where in an essay like "Self-Reliance" the problem seems to appear almost in spite of Emerson, as a sort of inadvertent outgrowth of his argument for individual independence, to the central phase of his career where in various lectures and the supremely important essay "Experience" in the 1844 volume the phantom reappearance of social context becomes pivotal to his explorations of the contingency of the self.

Admittedly, an argument that Emerson and in large part Thoreau are primarily concerned with liberal individualism risks seeming at once too reductive and too vague. Traditionally, generalizations about the fundamental nature of American transcendentalism have variously seen it as primarily a religious movement, as Perry Miller stressed, or as a social reform movement, as Anne C. Rose has argued. O. B. Frothingham, in his important early accounts of the movement, based his generalizations less on any guiding concern he saw in it than on the consequences transcendentalism had for American intellectual and literary history.⁴ Each of these generalizations, including the last one, contain more than a bit of truth, though my own contention here is that the unity, and the appearance of disunity, are ultimately subsumed in transcendentalism's deepest impulse: its confusing but genuine attempt to think beyond liberal conceptions of the self and its relation to others.

While conceding the validity of the approaches of critics like Miller or Rose who want to define transcendentalism within the boundaries of particular cultural discourses, I think it would be fairly easy if one were so inclined to show how in each of these various settings—intellectual, religious, or social history—the issues raised by Emerson and Thoreau are all chiefly variants of the same problem: the extent to which the individual's experience is socially mediated. The familiar topoi

of transcendentalism, such as the relationship of the individual to organized religion, or the poet's comparative allegiance to nature or the poetic tradition, each turn on the same basic intellectual problem. Not acknowledging the interrelatedness of their various inquiries misses the fundamental nature of the question that so concerned Emerson and Thoreau.⁵

Anyone who wishes to make a case for Emerson as an advocate of community has one seemingly insurmountable obstacle to get past: his emphatic refusal of George Ripley's invitation to join the Brook Farm experiment in communal living. Surprisingly, Emerson's essays and lectures, in all their prickly complexity, together with his reputed reluctance to intervene in specific political struggles have proven to be compatible with a sense of social duties and attractions. In spite of Emerson's various notorious remarks disavowing an interest in or aptitude for political struggles, recent scholarship, such as Len Gougeon's helpful and informative work, *Virtue's Hero* has shown that Emerson's commitment to antislavery, at least, was both earlier and more profound than had been previously realized. But the refusal of Ripley's proposal to join his group still appears as a firm and unapologetic defense on Emerson's part of the individual over community.

Ripley wrote his famous letter inviting Emerson and describing his plans for the community in November of 1840, but he had broached the subject before then, though Emerson's uncertainty must have been obvious, for the urgent tone of this later and more extended appeal seems to anticipate Emerson's reluctance. Ripley justifies his writing to Emerson again, since their conversation in Concord had been "of such a general nature" that he feared Emerson "was not in complete possession of the idea of the Association which I wish to see established." As he launches into his exposition of the goals of the community, he knowingly couches his descriptions in ways that echo many of Emerson's own concerns and values as voiced in works like *Nature* and "The American Scholar":

Our objects, as you know, are to insure a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor than now exists; to combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual; to guarantee the highest moral freedom, by providing all with labor, adapted to their tastes and talents, and securing to them the fruits of their industry; to do away with the necessity of menial services, by opening the benefits of education and the profits of labor to all; and this to prepare a society of liberal, intelligent, and cultivated persons, whose relations with each other would permit a more simple and wholesome life, than can be led amidst the pressure of our competitive institutions.⁶

If Emerson's earlier pronouncements about the necessity of physical labor to the thinker, the advantages of interactions with physical nature, the importance of

a well-rounded life rather than the alienated and fragmented identities Emerson saw around him in an increasingly stratified and specialized America were sincere, then Ripley must have expected that Emerson would be drawn to this new life. Anything less would suggest hypocrisy.

But Ripley had been correct in his assessment of Emerson's reluctance to join the project. After meeting with Ripley and before receiving the above letter, Emerson wrote of his reservations in his journal entry for October 17:

I wished to be convinced, to be thawed, to be made nobly mad by the kindlings before my eye of a new dawn of human piety. But this scheme was arithmetic and comfort: this was a hint borrowed from the Tremont House and United States Hotel; a rage in our poverty and politics to live rich and gentlemanlike, an anchor leeward against a change of weather; a prudent forecast on the probable issue of the great questions of Pauperism and Poverty. And not *once* could I be inflamed, but sat aloof and thoughtless; my voice faltered and fell. It was not the cave of persecution which is the palace of spiritual power, but only a room in the Astor House hired for Transcendentalists.⁷

This passage suggests that Emerson understood his own lack of enthusiasm as not so much the protesting cry of individualism as it was the result of having seen the mechanistic and materialistic nature of this artificial community, as if all that were necessary for truer relations was to work the same fields and eat from the same trough. Particularly sharp is the analogy Emerson draws to American hotels, those quintessential images of American rootlessness and isolation. There too all reside under one roof with material and sensual needs met, but in reality it is the opposite of community—a willed anonymity. Similarly, Ripley's plan fails to alert Emerson to any preexistent connection between himself and those others who would live in community. Yet in a culture where an individual is understood from the outset as an autonomous and somehow more fundamental category than society, we can hardly fault Ripley for not representing his community in less formal or mechanistic terms.

But what is of interest here is the way in which this invitation pushes Emerson along intellectually. Here were several basic things he had demanded of society in order to renew both individual and community life, but now he was forced to see them as insufficient. Emerson needed in the face of this decision to understand what real connections of community would be. His earlier demands could, in light of Ripley's plan, now be seen as merely isolate complaints against extant society; remedying them was not in itself sufficient to renovate society as a whole.

Continuing his journal entry that October, Emerson wrote, in a now famous phrase,

I do not wish to remove from my present prison to a prison a little larger. I wish to break all prisons. I have not yet conquered my own house. It irks and repents me. Shall I raise the siege of the hencoop, and march baffled away to a pretended siege of Babylon? It seems to me that to do so were to dodge the problem I am set to solve, and to hide my impotency in the thick of a crowd. I can see too, afar,—that I should not find myself more than now,—no, not so much, in that select, but not by me selected fraternity. Moreover, to join this body would be to traverse all my long trumpeted theory, and the instinct which spoke from it, that one man is a counterpoise to a city,—that a man is stronger than a city, that his solititude is more prevalent and beneficent than the concert of crowds.

The shift from hotel to prison analogies adds emphasis to the dystopian qualities Emerson sees in Ripley's plan. Not only does it not promise to alleviate isolation but it would only confine him further. The mechanistic, artificial forms unifying Brook Farm only hinder, Emerson suspects, the possibilities of true community. Already the question posed to him by Ripley's invitation has helped him to establish two things about the new social relations he envisions. First, it is not chiefly to be a matter of material concerns. The prison image only reaffirms Emerson's commitment to a profounder transformation of ideas concerning self and world than relying upon mere bodily, material changes as the principle agent of true reform. Secondly, as the end of the previous passage indicates, Emerson's search for community would not be opposed to individual growth and self-culture, but rather an important aid to it. Knowledge of the self requires development of community and development of community requires self-knowledge. While self-culture has a social dimension in both Ripley and Emerson, only for Emerson does it have the added requirement of self-knowledge.⁸

When Emerson did finally offer a formal reply to Ripley, his language was far more muted than in his journals. There is no talk of Babylon or prisons in this letter of December 15, 1840. In fact, the surviving draft of the letter shows careful revision. Richardson also notes this and adds that "[t]he letter shows evidence of uncharacteristic indecision."⁹ Emerson weighed his words in responding—doubtlessly out of respect for Ripley, but it seems likely that his judiciousness was equally the result of his self-consciousness: he knew that his refusal might seem to contradict his earlier concerns about society. In fact, his awareness of the possible intellectual implications of his decision was so keen, that the opening paragraphs read at times more like a public lecture than a personal letter. Launching into his chief reasons for remaining behind, Emerson admits "to some remains of skepticism in regard to the general practicability of the plan" yet he insists that his chief reasons were not those but personal ones.¹⁰ There is a disingenuousness or at least a tendency to oversimplify when he says outright that "That which determines me

is the conviction that the community is not good for me.” He claims that he is not physically suited to such an arrangement and, more importantly, that temperamentally he can be unsociable, that he has “little skill to converse with people.”¹¹ The only communities he could fit comfortably into are “very large or very small and select.” While he mentions a few other reasons, his obligations to his wife and mother, his deep satisfaction in his current home and surrounding—his letter, with more politeness than candor, places the primary burden of the decision on the independent, individualistic nature of his own character, qualities that he almost presents as weaknesses or flaws.

However, Emerson knew full well that his reasons were considerably more complex than those he had described to Ripley. So far from disliking shared living was Emerson, that at the same time he refused Ripley he was trying to get the Alcotts to move in with his family and thereby escape the narrow forms of family life. As I have suggested, Emerson was groping his way to a more authentic sense of communal bonds than comparatively superficial group labor and living arrangements could by themselves furnish.

His doubt about the efficacy of such external arrangements is put most succinctly in his article “Fourierism and the Socialists,” which would appear in *The Dial* in July 1842. His remarks on Fourier’s grand system shed useful light on his earlier decision about Brook Farm:

Our feeling was that Fourier had skipped no fact but one, namely, Life. He treats man as a plastic thing, something that may be put up or down, ripened or retarded, moulded, polished, made into solid, fluid, or gas, at the will of the leader; or, perhaps, as a vegetable, from which, though now a poor crab, a very good peach can by manure and exposure be in time produced, but skips the faculty of life, which spawns and scorns systems and system-makers, which eludes all conditions, which makes or supplants a thousand phalanxes and New-Harmonies with each pulsation. . . . But what is true and good must not only be begun by life, but must be conducted to its issues by life.¹²

Emerson objects in this passage to the artificial and rather undemocratic way in which society’s new blueprint comes about, but more tellingly, what he seems most deeply to be criticizing is the lack of any vital, organic connection between the critic of society, here Fourier and the society he would refashion. Since its source lies, if not in the heavens, then in the obscure source of Fourier’s genius, precisely how the mass of men are to be transformed remains ambiguous. To the extent that they echo extant social concerns, Fourier’s plans are on the one hand redundant. On the other hand, insofar as they appear unprecedented, they are not practicable, unless, that is, they are imposed upon society. Hence, Emerson’s emphasis on the

rather disrespectful, objectifying way Fourierism seems to treat society “as a plastic thing.” As Bercovitch notes, Emerson’s initial opposition to such communities “turns on means, not ends.”¹³

Emerson reaffirms his belief that true reform, workable reform, would reflect the existing values and desires of humanity:

[L]et us be lovers and servants of that which is just; and straightaway every man becomes a center of a holy and beneficent republic, which he sees to include all men in its law, like that of Plato, and of Christ. Before such a man the whole world becomes Fourierized or Christized or humanized, and in the obedience to his most private being, he finds himself, according to his presentiment, though against all sensuous probability, acting in strict conceit with all others who follow their private light.¹⁴

Emerson articulates a confidence here in a common human nature or common access to truth that belies his (and our) awareness of the diversity of conceptions of the good. Moreover, his reliance on extant moral understandings evades the hard question of just how society is to be reformed, whatever the time frame in question.

Obviously, some catalyst was needed to help men reinterpret their society, to goad them into the re-creation of society in a way that more closely accorded with their deepest values and goals. But this guidance or goading had to be accomplished through persuasion and shared experience; almost by definition a more just social order could not be imposed upon society by an isolate individual or force. Life called for a leader or prophet who would, to quote “The Poet,” apprise us “not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth.”¹⁵ At the time, Emerson was coming to a response in regard to Ripley’s invitation, he was also in the midst of writing his first series of essays, a project he had been working on since the middle of 1839. While the growth of a mind is too complex to be explained away in any simple cause-effect schema, and certainly Emerson’s ideas about the individual and society had roots in past ideas long predating the Brook Farm question, the contemporaneity of the two episodes, combined with certain shared questions, suggests that neither facet of Emerson’s reflections during this period can be fully appreciated without reference to the other. Above all, the temptation of Brook Farm helped Emerson to define more clearly his own purpose and talents. In 1839–1840 Emerson was still uncertain how best to understand the relation of the individual to society or the terms in which it was best discussed, but Ripley’s offer clarified for him that the relation was more elaborate and profound than a mere change in social arrangements could manage.¹⁶ The problem and its solution lay in the way in which we understood ourselves, in the very nature of what it meant to *be* a self.

Classic liberalism had always seen human character as consisting of two parts: reason and desire. Even liberal revisionists and utopians fail to escape entirely this division. As Roberto Unger observes,

All moderns are disciples of Rousseau in that they view the bridging of the gap between reason and sentiment as the foremost problem of the moral life. But it is a problem that continues unsolved. The fury visited on the classic liberal thinkers has not been enough to create an image of the self that truly dispenses with the principle of reason and desire.¹⁷

Put simply, in liberal thought, reason is by its nature general, permanent, and to an extent universal (men may differ in their ability to see the truth, but when they all see what is true, they are seeing the same thing). “Reason or understanding is the faculty by which the self determines what the world is like. The terms understanding and knowledge also describe the picture of things in the world produced by the use of reason.”¹⁸ Where reason is universal and forms the common basis of human thought, desires are private affairs and, by definition, incapable of absolute, universal justification. Because reason is purely objective and cannot authorize one desire over another, it is incapable of deciding the end toward which one will direct one’s actions; reason adjudicates solely between the various means available for accomplishing a particular desire. In classic liberal doctrine, reason risks ultimately becoming the servant of desire.

Liberal moral theory specifically addresses this danger through ethical systems that attempt to mediate the competing claims of reason and desire. Desire-based theories aim at the satisfaction of the greatest number of desires, the maximization of pleasure and the minimization of pain. “The task of ethics in this view is to teach us how to organize life so that we shall approach contentment.”¹⁹ The most familiar form of desire-based morality is utilitarianism; the most familiar form of reason-based morality is Kantian. Because of liberal reason’s incapacity to formulate ends, it cannot tell us what the good is; it can merely define the criteria for what would constitute rational morality. Kant’s “categorical imperative, ‘act according to a maxim you might will to be a universal law,’ illustrates in the most general form what a rule in such a morality would be like, or rather the constitutional standard to which all its propositions would have to conform.”²⁰ Both of these moral theories are radically incomplete and yet the two are, by definition, incapable of synthesis. The result, as Unger says, is that “Each part of the self is condemned to war against the other.”²¹

Politically, the antinomy of reason and desire manifests itself in the difficulty of reconciling personal and public good. The same division in the individual is writ large in political life where each member of society is divided between public and private roles. The preeminence assigned to desire over reason is another aspect

of the enabling myth of liberalism, the priority of the individual. The particular isolate individual with its desires is taken as more fundamental than the society in which it exists. The social part of individual identity is relegated to a secondary position and is important only in making possible the accomplishment of individual desires. The function of government, for example, becomes primarily the protection of the individual from the encroachments of others. As the embodiment of political reason, government, at least in theory, does not and cannot adjudicate between different desires. Such is the origin of the myth of the social contract that assumes that individuals band together for a common good—the protection of themselves and their property from others. Although the various forms social contract theory has taken historically are innumerable, one key idea persists even in its transcendentalist version—society does not produce individuals, individuals produce society.

The myth of the social contract for Rousseau and the line of contract theorists who precede him addresses one basic problem, as Hannah Pitkin observes, “how to create or understand unity in multitude.”²² The social contract treats this question as basically a narrative one. The contract myth always tells the story of how naturally separate individuals join together to form society. Its perspective, that of classic liberalism generally, is atomistic rather than holistic; it assumes that smaller units are prior to and somehow more real than the larger structures they comprise. Such theories must also provide some sort of motivation for individuals to have first banded together. Most frequently, this motivation consists of self-interest or self-preservation from a hostile natural environment.

The natural law tradition as it comes down through Locke’s *Second Treatise on Government* postulates not one but two social contracts. The first, the *pactum societatis*, involves simply the commitment of a group of people to join together and form a society. The second, the *pactum subjectionis*, involves their establishing a government and consenting to make themselves subject to its decrees. That is, the subjects agree to let the government so instituted represent them. Rousseau’s most important and problematic innovation was to do away with this second contract. He writes that “[t]here is but one contract in the State, and that in the primitive contract of association.”²³ To abandon the second contract is to abandon political representation, as traditionally understood, in favor of self-presence. Every citizen is both subject and sovereign, represented and representative. However, this form of social organization requires that Rousseau posit the existence of a general will with which the population legislates for itself. “Sovereignty,” he argues, “cannot be represented, for the same reason that it cannot be alienated. It consists essentially of the general will, and will cannot be represented.”²⁴

Such an understanding of the citizen leads Rousseau to an elaboration of human character as essentially divided. Opposite the general will is the particular will, those individual preferences and needs, the maintenance of which first led

individuals to band together and form a society. The particular will does not disappear with the arrival of society. But by definition it is not social in its desires; it remains a permanent threat to the general will.²⁵ (These are Rousseau's counterparts to reason and desire.) Rousseau acknowledges that in the normal order of events the individual will exercises a more powerful role in the citizen's consciousness than does the general will. "This arrangement," he finds, "is directly contrary to the needs of the social order."²⁶

Consequently, one of the chief duties of government proves to be insuring that at no time does the will of particular individuals usurp the sovereign will. Rousseau offers two solutions to this dilemma. First, he directs his attention to the figure of the wise legislator whose principle function is to mediate the claims of these two contending forms of will. He must simply "change, as it were, the very stuff of human nature; to transform each individual who, in isolation, is a complete but solitary whole, into a part of something greater than himself, from which, in a sense, he denies his life and his being; to substitute a communal and moral existence for the purely physical and independent life with which we are all of us endowed by nature."²⁷ Reinstating man's social character proves to be exceedingly difficult once, as in the contract myth, you have in your first premise defined him as asocial in his origins. The division, at its most schematic, is simply one between body and spirit. Rousseau repeatedly stresses that for an individual to enter society is to leave brute nature behind and become a higher type of being. One curious effect of such an arrangement, then, is that the highest form of a human life is construed so as to be profoundly unlike human nature.

Rousseau is quite conscious of the theological sound of such an argument. Since human nature can no longer provide a natural basis for the origin of society, its origin must be metaphysical: "In short, only Gods can give laws to men."²⁸ One answer to the human need for the supra human is the legislator's "greatness of soul."²⁹ Rousseau's other more familiar solution is the idea of a civil religion, a combination of civil and theological allegiances requisite to citizenship. The demands of such belief would presumably establish individual allegiance to society over one's own self, or, more precisely, to one's public self over one's private self.

Another threat to the general will Rousseau perceived was factionalism, that great bogeyman of liberalism that persists in contemporary politics when one party accuses another of being controlled by "special interest groups." In an influential reading of *The Social Contract*, Louis Althusser specifically examines the fate of such group identities in Rousseau's argument. Noting the paradox of how "the particular interest is presented both as the foundation of the general interest and as its opposite." Althusser observes the way in which Rousseau's polarized conception of citizenship results in the effacement of those affiliations that are neither common to all members of society nor unique to an individual.³⁰ Consequently, both types of will become empty, purely formal categories. The general

will cannot derive its substance from the identity of individuals and thus remains without substance; the particular will deprived of all specific cultural affiliations is equally hollow. As Alasdair MacIntyre observes of the autonomous self of liberalism, “[t]he self thus conceived, utterly distinct on the one hand from its social embodiments and lacking on the other any rational history of its own, may seem to have a certain abstract and ghostly character.”³¹

As this discussion shows, the model of the liberal subject that Emerson took up was one in which freedom and autonomy had been purchased at a very dear price. Free yes, but free for what? With all actual cultural ties decreed as illegitimate factional interests and all real social bonds repressed by the myth of the autonomous self, it was unclear how the flawed reforms of Ripley or Fourier could be surpassed.

Breaking away from this dead-end of liberal utopianism, Emerson, and after him Thoreau, worked to reconceive the relation of self and society as something at once more simple and more complex than mere opposition. This view is most clear in his specifically political essays and lectures, but before we consider those, perhaps for the sake of argument we should consider a central essay like “Self-Reliance,” the essay Dewey quoted at the beginning of this chapter and whose very title suggests that here my communitarian Emerson stands to meet with the most resistance.

Though “Self-Reliance” is clearly a masterful essay, in regard to society and politics, it seems to display at least one serious contradiction. Emerson admonishes us to rely on ourselves but so rigorously antisocial does his conception of the self appear at times, that it is none too clear where the identity of this abstract self is to be derived from. In true Rousseau fashion we are advised to be original and bypass convention and conformity in order to establish our truest link to others in a common truth located in human nature. Conformity makes only a formal, superficial, inauthentic form of community. However, Emerson never really explains the alchemy that will transform private disposition into public reason. But the complexities of his rhetoric suggests some intriguing possible solutions.³²

Stanley Cavell offers a persuasive reading of how Emerson may understand the transition from isolate genius to common truth. In Cavell’s account, “Self-Reliance” is on one level a revision of Descartes’ argument/maxim for self-consciousness, “Cogito ergo sum.” Emerson’s unacknowledged allusion to Descartes in the passage, “Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say ‘I think,’ ‘I am,’ but quotes some saint or sage,” ironically undermines itself, for in this very statement Emerson is paraphrasing another writer, a fact Cavell reads as “suggesting that we are to overcome the binary opposition between saying and quoting, recognizing that each is always both, or that the difference is always undecidable.”³³ The underlying assumption then is that “language is an inheritance. Words are before I am; they are common.” This is, of

course, a rather Wittgensteinian view of language. Its political implications, especially in regard to the theory of the social contract, are no less evident. “Language seems to provide a model of membership,” Hannah Pitkin writes, “showing how norms can be learned, acquired without choice and without a real alternative, and yet end up being obligatory. . . . The rules of grammar [in Wittgenstein’s sense] seem to bind individual speakers even though they were never contractually adopted; we obey them because they have become part of ourselves. They are not obstacles to our freedom, but our very means of self-expression.”³⁴ But too monolithic an understanding of language would lead us to conventionalism—the antithesis of Emerson’s perspective. Again, Cavell supplies us with an interpretation that manages to resolve the problem. The key lies in Emerson’s “transformation of the idea of genius: Genius is not a special endowment like virtuosity, but a stance toward whatever endowment you discover is yours.”³⁵ It is in such a spirit that we should understand Emerson’s injunction that

[t]here is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried.³⁶

Genius so understood is not a valuation of an individual’s talent or skill but simply a description of the unique situation of each individual.³⁷ Understood as a particular position or perspective on the whole of society, genius is thus not in static opposition to community but only to those aspects of it that threaten to silence the individual voice. As Cayton writes, “More genius does not increase the *individuality* but the *community* of each mind.”³⁸ Emerson does not oppose society per se, but the false view of society as an entity greater than the collected lives of its members.

In order to come closer to Emerson’s perspective we must bring out two implicit assumptions at work here. First if language is both social and capable of allowing for this particular type of genius, language and society must be uneven or inherently diverse. They cannot accurately be accounted for as massive conventions because they are inherently plural and allow for conflict.³⁹ Yet they also imply the possibility of a sort of self-transcendence, or, more precisely, a redefinition of the self as sharing concerns and agreements with other selves.⁴⁰ These affiliations must be both constitutive of the self as well as being actively formed by the self. The notion of the state becomes a sort of ultimate horizon for such affiliations, the group identity that encompasses all other groupings.

But another strand of Emerson's argument impedes our final settlement of the state. The notion of a final form of political reason that transcends all particular identities is inherently formalist and as such it threatens to reimpose a profound division between particular and general. Moreover, it potentially establishes a source of meaning outside the community. Like Rousseau's utopia, such a state would establish an abstract and purportedly more authentic self outside of or in conflict with all specific individuals.

Emerson's understanding of community is quite the opposite. Profoundly antiformalist in its arguments, at its most basic level "Self-Reliance" presents a theory of communication and a theory of reading.⁴¹

Not for nothing one face, one character, one fact, makes much impression on him, and another none. This sculpture in the memory is not without preestablished harmony. The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray.⁴²

Emerson's call to our common culture in essays like the one under consideration or the "Divinity School Address," or "The American Scholar," is a call to constant interpretation. Meaning and values are not inherent in objects or possessed of some metaphysical grounding, but neither are they social in any simple sense. The individual, formed out of a set of specific social affiliations, must explore the meaning or value of a law, a book, or a face. Thus meaning is neither exclusively social nor private, but a subject of conversation and conflict.

"Self-Reliance," despite its rhetorical richness, never sufficiently frees itself from the idealist conception of the self to help us understand the relationship between the individual and either its social or natural circumstances.⁴³ The new self announced by Emerson and the consequent humanization of culture doesn't really receive its fullest development until *Essays, Second Series*. It is perhaps "Experience" where Emerson makes the best case for his faith in a new reign of freedom. Such a claim may strike some readers as odd, for from Stephen Whicher up to some of the finest and most persuasive contemporary accounts of this seminal essay, the emphasis has been almost unrelentingly on the sense of defeat the essay seems to express.⁴⁴ Not that anyone could ignore a certain disappointment, but rather that the essay's frustration over the inability to ever arrive at a foundation for the self in either private consciousness or experience ultimately leads to a renewed sense of power. As Stanley Cavell shrewdly observes, the work of mourning undertaken in "Experience" leads to a new morning, a new dawn of freedom.⁴⁵ The essay laments the loss of any foundation for belief or action, but then turns that very absence of foundations into the first condition of human freedom. Here freedom is not the knowledge of necessity as much as the knowledge of the absence of necessity in human thought. The skepticism of "Experi-

ence,” Barbara Packer argues, is of “a kind that increasingly seemed not the murderer of faith but rather its midwife.”⁴⁶ “Self-Reliance” leads in “Experience” to self-consciousness, “the discovery we have made that we exist . . . the Fall of Man,” but this discovery makes way for a culture free from the false necessity of the twin formalisms, idealist individualism and historical or materialist context-bound determinism.⁴⁷ Emerson assumes, as Cornel West eloquently puts it, “that the basic nature of things, the fundamental way the world is, is itself incomplete and in flux, always the result of and a beckon to the experimental makings, workings, and doings of human beings. Language, traditions, society, nature, and the self are shot through with contingency, change, and challenge.”⁴⁸

The desire for a philosophical foundation to the new state is now abolished. “Gladly would we anchor,” Emerson writes, “but the anchorage is quicksand.”⁴⁹ Only when we remember this thoroughgoing antifoundationalism can we see as something other than cynical passages of “Experience” like

We live amidst surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them. Under the oldest noblest conventions, a man of native force prospers just as well in the newest world, and that by will of handling and treatment.⁵⁰

The inadequacy of any false reliance on either the isolate individual or its inherited circumstances is made clear when Emerson continues “Life is a mixture of power and form and will not bear the least expense of either.” Freedom comes precisely from the indecisiveness of so-called determining conditions: “There are objections to every course of life and action, and the practical wisdom infers an indifference, from the omnipresence of objection,” or again, when Emerson phrases the false necessities in the form of past and future, insisting instead on the creative power of the moment: “We must set up the strong present tense against all the rumors of wrath, past or to come. So many things are unsettled which it is of the first importance to settle,—and, pending their settlement, we will do as we do.”⁵¹ The irony of the last sentence lies in its presenting as a mere temporary measure the freedom that “Experience” paints as characteristic of the human condition. This technique of presenting necessary indetermination as an afterthought ironically exemplifies the general direction of Emerson’s thinking as every rule gives way before the exception. In a world free from false necessity this is the only form in which it is possible to speak of rules.

The ironies of our condition that superficially appears so disabling persistently work to our greater advantage as even the most basic limitations give way before the new moment:

Tomorrow again, everything looks real and angular, the habitual standards are reinstated, common sense is as rare as genius,—is the basis of genius,

and experience is hands and feet to every enterprise;—and yet, he who should do his business on this understanding, would be quickly bankrupt.⁵²

The basis for the seeming self-evidence of experience is nothing any more or less stable than agreement, as Emerson's famous handling of the figure of Jesus suggests:

People forget that it is the eye which makes the horizon, and the rounding mind's eye which makes this or that man a type or representative of humanity with the name of hero or saint. Jesus the "providential man," is a good man on whom many people are agreed that these optical laws shall take effect.⁵³

But as the passage makes clear, such agreements and transformation are hardly acts of individual volition. The creative subject of the humanized world is neither entirely individual nor communal, since as Emerson presents it, the social agreements are not primarily seen in conflict with an individual.

The freedom one experiences in regard to one's own consciousness is not proven false by its apparent contradiction to the experience of outward necessity. Rather, the lack of determination sensed in one's own consciousness is the key to perceiving the false necessities of all experience. Outward necessity is never known objectively, nothing is, but it is instead the result of subjective interpretation. The point is confusing, but it should not surprise us that, given the ultimate source of human knowledge in the creative self, the individual consciousness should prove the key to freedom. As a consequence of this freedom, Emerson cites the three qualities of consciousness as mystery, creativity, and growth. Because individual identity is determined neither by its circumstances nor its history, it remains a constant mystery.⁵⁴ In response to the deterministic arguments of physicians and phrenologists with their "impudent knowingness," Emerson retorts that "I had fancied that the value of life lay in its inscrutable possibilities; in the fact that I never know, in addressing myself to a new individual, what may befall me."⁵⁵

It isn't that Emerson refutes predictive scientific claims about the individual. He treats scientific interpretation as a sort of rhetoric, true enough, given its way of framing problems, but emphatically a human interpretation and not an objective representation of reality. It is just another form created by humans and as such it would be an error to attribute independent agency to it. The creative power that created a theory of temperament is greater than temperament itself.

On its own level, or in the view of nature, temperament is final. I see not, if one be once caught in this trap of so-called sciences, any escape for the man from the links of the chain of physical necessity. Given such an embryo, such a history must follow. On this platform, one lives in a sty of sensualism,

and would soon come to suicide. But it impossible that the creative power should exclude itself. Into every intelligence there is a door which is never closed, through which the creator passes. The intellect, seeker of absolute truth, or the heart, lover of absolute good, intervenes for our succor, and at one whisper of these high powers, we awake from ineffectual struggles with this nightmare. We hurl it into its own hell, and cannot again contract ourselves to so base a state.⁵⁶

He further emphasizes the partiality of his own essay when he writes that “I am a fragment and this is a fragment of me.”

Again and again in “Experience,” the ultimate significance of an experience is a result of the degree of self-consciousness with which the individual thinks or acts. The “flux of moods” is always underwritten by a creative consciousness that must not be forgotten: “The sentiment from which it sprung determines the dignity of any deed, and the question ever is, not what you have done or forborne, but at whose command you have done or forborne it.”⁵⁷ Shortly after this statement, the lesson of self-reliance returns now somewhat more justified and even vindicated. Having cast away any support for the self in any false necessity one is thrown back upon one’s self:

And yet is the God the native of these bleak rocks. That need makes in morals the capital virtue of self-trust. We must hold hard to this poverty, however scandalous, and by more vigorous self-recoveries, after the sallies of action, possess our axis more firmly. The life of truth is cold, and so far mournful; but it is not the slave of tears, contritions, and perturbations. It does not attempt another’s work, nor adopt another’s facts. It is a main lesson of wisdom to know your own from another’s.⁵⁸

Two difficulties appear with this argument though. First, a truly free culture can never be created once and for all. To argue otherwise would suggest a contradiction, a conventionalized creativity. The antiformalist way must be continually reasserted, freedom constantly recreated. Thus the life of the creative self becomes eternally prospective or utopian: “in particulars, our greatness is always in a tendency or direction, not an action.”⁵⁹ In the words of his most astute and philosophical critic, “Emerson directed his work against every finality of thought or relationship.”⁶⁰ Surprisingly, however, Emerson still holds out the romantic promise of a world completely recollected into self-consciousness; he offers it as almost a religion:

So it is with us, neither skeptical, or without unity, because immersed in forms and effects all seeming to be of equal yet hostile value, and now

religious whilst in the reception of spiritual law. Bear with these distractions, with this coetaneous growth of the parts: they will one day be members and obey one will. On that one will, on that secret cause, they nail our attention and hope. Life is hereby meted into an expectation or religion.⁶¹

The second difficulty with Emerson's argument is that in order to avoid the contradiction of assigning a foundation or ground for freedom the self must, like its choices, appear as unmotivated or undetermined. The same gesture that removed the self from false necessity also removes it from any source of identity. As a result, motivations or grounds for action become mystified. Emerson frees human action from false necessity at the price of making the sources of action incomprehensible. "Power," he writes, "keeps quite another road than the turnpikes of choice and will, namely the subterranean and invisible tunnels and channels of life."⁶² That he then goes on to celebrate life as "a series of surprises" hardly relieves our frustration at finding our new-won freedom so quickly devalued. When it is not obscured beneath maddeningly imprecise terms like power and genius, the sources of action become overtly mystical: "The orders of piety agree at last with the coldest skepticism,—that nothing is of us or our works,—that all is of God."⁶³ We are given the promise of a truly human, self-conscious culture as a utopian goal, only to have our current situation taken firmly out of our hands and out of our understanding: "the individual is always mistaken. It turns out something new, and very unlike what he promised himself."⁶⁴

Fortunately, this is not the whole story for either us or Emerson. For if his overtly philosophical essays in the process of setting us free from objective constraints simultaneously deny us our subjective identity, his political and social writings suggest a way out of this impasse.

Restricting ourselves to four crucial lectures, "Man the Reformer" (1841), "Lecture on the Times" (1841), "The Conservative" (1841) and "The Transcendentalist" (1842), and the essay "Politics" (1844, though the earliest of the Second Series), we can draw out a vision of change and action that is both related to as well as a fuller development of ideas worked out in the more philosophical essays.⁶⁵ In his political thought Emerson is as in his other work concerned with the relationship between context and innovation, but in turning his attention to the broader framework of society he is able to avoid the false problems that affect the philosophical essays' emphasis on the solitary thinker.⁶⁶

Emerson has no illusions regarding the ultimate foundations of the state. Of the instruments of our government, "every one was once the act of a single man,"⁶⁷ he writes in "Politics" and similarly in "Lecture on the Times," "[e]very fact we have was brought here by some person."⁶⁸

But Emerson's view is not conventionalist. Our social order may be traditional but, as the opening of "Politics" makes clear, it is not absolutely constraining:

Society is an illusion to the young citizen. It lies before him in rigid repose, with certain names, men, and institutions, rooted like oak-trees to the center, round which all arraign themselves as best they can. But the old statesman knows that society is fluid; there are no such roots and centers; but any particle may suddenly become the center of the movement, and compel the system to gyrate around it, as every man of strong will like Psistratus, or Cromwell, does for a time, and every man of truth, like Plato, or Paul, does forever.⁶⁹

Emerson refuses any naturalistic vision of social institutions in dispelling the metaphors of “oak trees,” roots, centers, and explanations that rely on analogies between the movements of government and the law of physics. Yet just as Emerson is no conventionalist, neither is he a skeptic:

But politics rest in necessary foundations, and cannot be treated with levity. Republics abound in young civilians, who believe that the laws make the city, that grave modifications of the policy and modes of living, and employments of the population; that commerce, education, and religion may be voted in or out; and that any measure, though it were absurd, may be imposed on a people, if only you can get sufficient voices to make it a law.⁷⁰

Once again Emerson attempts to avoid the two types of formalism we have seen earlier. The first passage works against a false naturalization of human institutions, while the second veers away from the counterformalism that would turn the population into soft wax awaiting the impress of law. It is easy to be misled by the ironic invocation of “necessary foundations”—the necessity referred to here is the very absence of necessary foundations as we normally conceive them. As the word “imposed” suggests, the whole thrust of the passage is that politics rest in human choice. The only constraint is that the choice is collective, not private.

But the wise man knows that foolish legislation is a rope of sand, which perishes in the twisting; that the state must follow, and not lead the character and progress of the citizen; the strongest usurper is quickly got rid of; and they only who build on Ideas, build for eternity; and that the form of government which prevails, is the expression of what cultivation exists in the population which permits it. The law is only a memorandum. We are superstitious, and esteem the statute somewhat; so much life as it has in the character of living men, is its force.⁷¹

I know of no other moment in Emerson where his antiformalism, his insistence on human agency, is so explicit. Neither naturalistic necessity nor idealistic, legal

formalism can save us from the constant activity of choice.⁷² Human conventions cannot hide behind pretensions of transcendence or objectivity and all writing is subject to interpretation.

The statute stands there to say, yesterday we agreed so and so, but how feel ye this article today? Our statute is a currency, which we stamp with our own portrait: it soon becomes unrecognizable, and in process of time will return to the mint.⁷³

The mint, of course, is the site of human creation; the effort to stamp law with our own portrait is the all-too-human desire to objectify our will and thus to be relieved of our responsibility for our own institutions, having once chosen, never to choose again.

So reminded of the continual, collective responsibility for our institutions at the heart of Emerson's understanding of politics, we can better see the reasoning behind his emphasis on individuals. At first, this emphasis may seem to be at odds with the social theme of these particular essays and lectures, but rhapsodies about great men and the possibilities of the individual are simply the offshoot of this profound belief in human agency. At times his sense of the heroic may strike us as excessive such as when in "Lecture on the Times" (as he would come to call the introductory lecture to his series, "Lectures on the Times") he claims that "[t]here is no interest or institution so poor and withered, but if a new strong man could be born unto it, he would immediately redeem and replace it. A personal ascendancy,—that is the only fact much worth considering."⁷⁴ But if this individualism grates against our communitarian consciences, it is mitigated somewhat by its democratization and its hope:

I find the Age walking about in happy and hopeful natures, in strong eyes, and pleasant thoughts, and think I read it nearer and truer so, than in the statute-book, or in the investments of capital, which rather celebrate with mournful music the obsequies of the last age. . . . I think that only is real, which men love and rejoice in; not what they tolerate, but what they choose; what they embrace and avow, and not the things which chill, benumb, and terrify them.⁷⁵

Emerson announces: "There was never so great a thought laboring in the breasts of men, as now. It almost seems as if what was aforesaid spoken fabulously and hieroglyphically, was now spoken plainly, the doctrine, namely of the indwelling of the Creator in men."⁷⁶

The great man's distinction is that he makes the creative nature human, our responsibility for our own institutions, visible. "A strong person makes the law and

custom null before his own will.”⁷⁷ In the same essay he continues to develop this humanism writing that “[i]t will never make any difference to a hero what the laws are.”⁷⁸

In commenting on “Self-Reliance” and “Experience” I noted that while Emerson’s argument frees us from false necessity, it also deprives the self of any grounds for choosing one form of action over another. It is the chief contribution of the political essays to restore some sense of motivation to this free action. All of these essays, but particularly “Politics,” show us the self still free, but now socially and culturally situated. The Emersonian self is born into an inherited vocabulary and individual circumstances, but unlike Rousseau’s model of the self, the poles of particular interest and general will are not mutually exclusive necessities, but two dynamic forces engaging in a dialectic of form and change. In fact, to call it dialectical may risk overstatement. These two aspects of human life are virtually inseparable.

The opposed terms of this bifurcated self are well known to any reader of Emerson. In the essays under consideration here they are titled at various times materialist and idealist,⁷⁹ “the stationary class and the movement party,”⁸⁰ and, in “The Conservative,” “the opposition of Past and Future, of Memory and Hope, of the Understanding and Reason.” “It is,” he writes, “the primal antagonism, the appearance in trifles of the two poles of nature.”⁸¹ Although political decisions require that one commit oneself regularly to one side or the other, the duality is continually at work in each individual. “The war rages not only in battlefields, in national councils, and ecclesiastical synods, but agitates every man’s bosom with opposing advantages every hour.”⁸² Emerson characteristically sees the lapse from this complex duality into partisanship as the source of our impoverished political life, for these two forces are

so united that no man can continue to exist in whom both these elements do not work, yet men are not philosophers, but are rather very foolish children, who by reason of their partiality, see everything in the most absurd manner, and are the victims at all times of the nearest object.⁸³

Emerson’s reservations about such reform parties restates the antiformalism seen earlier. As he says in “Lecture on the Times,” “reform errs in trying for external forms to do the work of conscience.”⁸⁴ Only those political desires rooted in character rather than social pressures are worth considering. “We have all a certain intellection or presentiment of reform existing in the mind, which does not yet descend into the character, and those who throw themselves blindly on this lose themselves.”⁸⁵ But as we have seen, the insistence on antiformalist politics begs the question as to what are the grounds for political commitment. Emerson’s mystical vocabulary often compounds the problem as when he writes that “the origin of all

reform is in that mysterious fountain of the moral sentiment in man, which, amidst the natural, ever contains the supernatural for man.”⁸⁶ Ironically, Emerson’s clearest statement of the sources of social change comes not in his lectures and essays devoted specifically to the reform movement, but in his crucial lecture on “The Conservative.” Echoing the dialectical understanding of self and society we have seen elsewhere, Emerson states that “[t]hroughout nature the past combines in every creature with the present.”⁸⁷ The importance of this unstable view of reality is that the social and political world are inherently subject to change, indeed change is a crucial part of tradition.⁸⁸ In MacIntyre’s words, “[t]raditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict.”⁸⁹ Self and society are each formed out of a dialogue between an inherited vocabulary and circumstances and an innovation that now appears as grounded in the very desires and motives of that tradition. This becomes a political version of the idea given in “Self-Reliance”—we begin where we are, in our own specific circumstances, not in abstraction:

[s]o deep is the foundation of the existing social system, that it leaves no one out of it. . . . You who quarrel with the arrangements of society, and are willing to embroil all, and risk the indisputable good that exists, for the chance of better, live, move, and have your being in this, and your deeds contradict your words every day. For as you cannot jump from the ground without using the resistance of the ground, nor push out the boat to sea, without shoving from the shore, nor attain liberty without rejecting obligation, so you are under the necessity of using the Actual order of things, in order to disuse it; to live by it, whilst you wish to take away its life. The past has baked your loaf, and in the strength of its bread you would break up the oven. But you are betrayed by your own nature. You also are conservatives.⁹⁰

Emerson argues that the sources of political change lie in the very materials furnished by the inherited tradition. Consequently, we may infer that the tradition offers us a series of conflicting and changing goals. Furthermore, since the contradictions of tradition are part of individuals as well, we must as political subjects be formed from an unstable network of values. Transcendentalist politics, thus, derive not from transcendent but immanent criticism. “For although the commands of conscience are *essentially* absolute, they are historically liminary. Wisdom does not seek a literal rectitude, but a useful, that is, a conditional one, such a one as the constitution of things will warrant.”⁹¹ Antiformalist politics require not just the renunciation of determining contexts but also the claims of individual moral certitude. We must proceed, knowing that our values are necessarily and inescapably historically conditioned with an equal knowledge that our new reform must itself be available for reform later. Emersonian liberalism embraces infinite corrigibility as the only alternative to, on the one hand, conventionalism and, on the

other, abstract ahistorical idealism. Convention and skeptical reform become indispensable moments of political development. “[E]ach is a good half but an impossible whole.”⁹²

The attempt to read existing relations not simply as fixed symbols of spirit but dynamically as signs of an ongoing transformation is familiar to readers of Emerson’s more famous works like *Nature* or “The Poet.” It is the source of much of his initial interest in and later rejection of Swedenborg’s spiritual reading of the physical world. But in regard to Emerson’s understanding of society and politics we should look as well to a precedent even more relevant: the Constitution and the Federalist synthesis of liberal and Republican rhetoric.⁹³ The romantic and kinetic elements Gordon Wood has found in Madison’s understanding of the Constitution form the interpretive background from which Emerson’s political philosophy moves more deeply into romantic expressivism.

While Federalists emphasized the open-ended nature of the American Constitution, the practical understanding of just how the general will was to be represented remained largely tied to a conventional neoclassical conception of mimesis. Like an eighteenth-century painter, government would mirror the general will of the populace; in true classical fashion however, the general is reached through the particular and yet ultimately transcends mere particularity. This dual attention to both individual and general concerns makes possible, as a number of commentators have shown, the synthesis of both liberal and republican vocabularies. While a corporate purpose, be it virtue or the general will, is no longer the first premise of politics, the particular concerns of private or civil society, as mediated through the symbolic forms of the Constitution, become the productive source of the general will. Republican virtue then passes from being a foundation for political life to a goal, albeit one never to be fully achieved. Perfect representation of the common good remains utopian, a kind of faith even, and politics a pilgrimage.

When in his mature phase Emerson begins to consider the possibility of a general will, he does so with a significantly different epistemology than the founders had and, consequently, a different plan of action. The founders had been primarily concerned with establishing a government that could plausibly claim to represent the nation; their activities were primarily focused on perfecting the representation, the government, itself. Emerson, however, turns his attention less to the activity of representation of the general will than the means by which a general will might truly be brought into existence in the populace. The Constitution set up a government that was to be taken as the sole embodiment of the general will. Emerson, suspicious of all formalisms and institutions, sees the more urgent task as the establishment of true community. In other words, where the founders had concerned themselves with government as the source of the general will, Emerson sees the need for forming that corporate purpose in the constituency first.

The result is that Emerson's social and political writings are an instance of what Charles Taylor calls romantic expressivism applied to American political thought. In romantic expressivism, representation can no longer be thought of as strictly mimetic, but instead "as not only making manifest but also a making, a bringing of something to be."⁹⁴ Emerson's politics then emphatically present the general will as itself constantly developing in the populace. While Emerson has not entirely abandoned the notion of a common objective truth or spirit at work in the world, it is now presented as evolving or unfolding rather than static or mechanical.⁹⁵ Consequently, Emerson's view appears as a halfway point between Madison's view of the Constitution and Dewey's.⁹⁶ While truth is not exactly prior to human activity, it is not yet, as in Dewey, merely a contingent effect or product of it; it is instead only manifested in the evolving dialogue of human communities. Hence, the communitarian aspects of Emerson that so appealed to Dewey in the quotation with which this chapter opened.

Yet it was not immediately clear just how each such cultural bonds were to be articulated. American political leadership had remained tied to the same conception of representation as in the Constitutional era. Great political leaders attempted to represent a general will in their persons that could not appear at any specific place in the constituency. In order to form new bonds of cultural stability, Emerson saw that he would have to rethink the problem of leadership. Such was the central issue of *Representative Men*.