



Introduction

Spending my childhood in a musical household—seeming to remember reading notes on a staff before I could read words of my speech—I learned early that one can turn pages for another playing the piano without being able oneself to match the playing. Because Liszt and Chopin were the composers my mother loved most to play, I would sometimes, left to myself, take volumes of their music from the piles at the sides of the piano's music stand, turn the pages looking for sheets dappled with the densest flights and swoops of notes, and wonder when I would be able to play them. My desire to think of Emerson's essays as transcendental musically as well as philosophically marks my inability for a long time to hear the sense of Emerson's sentences within, rather than despite, what seemed to me their detachable ornaments. And it registers, I know, my recurrent astonishment that two such differently creative creatures as Franz Liszt and Ralph Waldo Emerson should have inhabited the parlors and auditoriums of the Western world over essentially the same expanse of years, resulting in the thought that, when Emerson was writing the most famous of his essays from the late 1830s through the early 1840s, there was perhaps no one born and brought up on his shores who could play, let alone dream of writing, music such as Liszt's. It also matters to me that only in recent generations are pianists—on both, or other, shores—expected to play the Liszt *Transcendental Etudes* for the sake of their music more than for the sake of their virtuosity.¹ Something I wish my title to suggest, or recall, is that

there is a beauty that is realized only in granting an alarming difficulty. But I do not assume that the difficulty is everywhere of the same kind.

I recognize that this is said somewhat defensively, an attempt to re-draw the image of Emerson in response to having been told so often that Emerson cannot be as hard to fathom as I make out or, not to put too fine a point on it, cannot be as philosophical. I have, for example, taken, in "Self-Reliance," Emerson to be directly alluding to Descartes ("Man is timid, he is afraid to say 'I think,' 'I am' but instead quotes some saint or sage") as well as to Kant, hearing Emerson's aversion to "conformity," which he calls the virtue most in demand, to continue the essential insight of Kant's discovery of what he calls "the reality of duty," namely, that we are called upon to act not merely in conformity with the moral law but for the sake of the law. But readers of Emerson whose expertise I respect have simply denied that such allusions are, even if in some way intended, to be taken as serious philosophical observations on Emerson's part. And the ground of denial has mainly been, I think it is fair to say, that it simply makes no sense to suppose that Emerson, famously intimidated by formal argument, *could*, in principle, mean to be taking on and questioning, or modifying, even perhaps significantly parodying, signature thoughts of Descartes and of Kant. Something of this same sheer vision of, or unrelenting insistence upon, Emerson's inability to think and write rigorously has meant that, for all Nietzsche's explicit praise of Emerson, and for all the practically uncountable allusions to (I often call them rewritings of) Emerson in Nietzsche's writing, this relationship is forgotten as often as it is discovered. Until Emerson's own philosophicality is established for oneself, one is *bound* to find it inexplicable, hence bound to forget, that Nietzsche, in his rampage against the uses of Western knowledge and morality and religion, was inspired by, was characteristically incorporating, genteel Emerson.

Still, it is obvious that Emerson does not sound like what, especially in the Anglo-American tradition, we are accustomed to think of as philosophy. Why be so insistent? Why not, for example, distinguish (as Heidegger does) between philosophy and thinking, and grant thinking but not philosophy to Emerson? In some sense, indeed, I think this is right; but it is right only if the thinking in question is seen to be a criticism of philosophy (as it is in Nietzsche and in the Heidegger he, in turn, inspired). In the meantime, my insistence on Emerson's philosophicality is meant to account for Emerson's writing, most immediately for its tireless recurrence to descriptions of itself, or figures for itself. For example, in "Self-Reliance" he

shows himself writing *Whim* on the lintels of his door post (a complex image that is taken up more than once in my essays); in "The Poet" words are declared to be horses on which we ride, suggesting both that they obey our intentions and that they work beyond our prowess; in "Fate," as in "Intellect," intellect is said to "dissolve" what it touches, something I take as meant in opposition to the use of the conventional, parliamentary term "resolve," which in the American Constitution heralds the legitimizing of slavery; in "Experience" an Emersonian essay as a whole is allegorized as an embryo, said (according to "Experience") by a celebrated biologist of the period to form itself simultaneously from three points, which for Emerson describes such an essay as a circle, namely, one in search of like-minded readers; in "Circles" it is asserted that around every circle another can be drawn, which suggests further that Emerson's essays are related by encircling each other. And so on.

What commits Emerson to such self-registration? (And does it require virtuosity? At the end of Emerson's magnificent "Experience," he calls for patience, and again patience.²) I understand him to be responding to his sense that "Every word they say chagrins us"—not chagrins him alone, which would make him a crank, but those he calls "all and sundry" (Nietzsche will say, everyone and no one), who seek to say what they have it at heart to say. Now this struggle for a language which, let us say, promises honesty (expresses, hence scrutinizes, our desires, so far as we are able to read our desires) is relentless and endless for one who aspires to write philosophy. If Socrates (along with a line of others extending at least to Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*) is right, and philosophy knows only what anyone knows or could know by bethinking themselves of what they say and do, then it manifests itself in writing—or thinking—that can be said either to be without authority (that shuns authorization) or, put otherwise, that authorizes only itself by continuing to question itself, to bethink itself, after all the others who claim philosophy's attention (in Plato's image at the close of his *Symposium*) have fallen asleep.

For an American, the discovery of such a language, one allowing the continuous registration of the self's motion, presents a double task, since America, as Emerson was beginning to write, had as yet to inherit effectively a patrimony in European philosophy; no one had proven that the encounter of America with philosophy (beyond its occurrence in certain political doctrines) was feasible, hence had shown what it might sound like. To express America's difference (one could say, to justify its existence,

its independence) was for Emerson's generation most pressing in its call for a mode of literature that expressed the American experience. Emerson, in effect, established both modes of expression, suggesting that, for America, philosophy and literature would bear a relation to each other not envisioned in the given, outstanding traditions of philosophy in England and in Germany. Or, if it were said that this relation was in fact precisely envisioned in the movement called romanticism, both in England (in Coleridge and Wordsworth), and, more fervently and permanently, in Germany (in the Schlegels and Tieck, and in Novalis and in Hölderlin, affecting the future direction of German philosophy, in Hegel and his aftermath), it would have to be added that in both standing traditions the development of literary practice unfolded in the presence of, in a process of withstanding, established philosophy.

It is not for me to say whether the present book, collecting all the writing I have published that is mainly and explicitly devoted to Emerson, satisfies any reasonable image others may have of a book about Emerson. What I wish to say is that if I were to write a book about Emerson, who for a quarter of a century has affected my thoughts—I might say, my aspirations for thinking—as decisively as any other writer, then this (or some further version of it) is that book, the only one, or kind, it is given to me to write about Emerson's work. I cannot justify the selection of topics out of Emerson's work that have seemed to me to warrant a response out of mine. I would feel justified if, in each case, I have shown sufficiently why I have been stopped by a passage in Emerson and continued its thought far enough to convey my impression that he proposes in his essays a genre of writing that shows a finite prose text to contemplate an infinite response. The virtue I claim for my procedure is that it leaves open the possibility that one may plausibly and profitably be stopped for thought at almost any word in Emerson's work. His prose is not poetry (he could be said to write poetry in order to demonstrate this fact of his prose), but his sentences aspire to, let's say, the self-containment of poetry. I have elsewhere expressed something of this sense by saying that any sentence of an Emerson paragraph, or essay, may be taken to be the topic sentence. There are, of course, other ways to respond to an Emerson text. I cannot say why those ways are not mine, but I would hate to believe that they are generally incompatible with mine.

This unpredictable relation to Emerson, in which a response from me rarely even seems to take on a complete (so to speak) essay of Emerson,

is expressed, it seems to me, in the fact that more often than not, in the essays that follow, I place Emerson's writing in conjunction with the writing of other writers. I imagine such conjunctions express my relation to an Emerson text less as an object of interpretation than as a means of interpretation, as I have sometimes put the matter, and the one because of the other. I suppose this is one way of taking a serious writer seriously.

I have sometimes been told, by prominent readers of Emerson whom I respect and have learned from, that the Emerson portrayed in the way I write about him cannot be the drastically famous man who is read and treasured, or deplored, so variously, by generations of Americans. In no case that I am aware of has this charge been accompanied by claiming to find that something I have said is false to Emerson's words. The matter is worse than that. The idea is, rather (as was at least once, in public discussion, made explicit to me), that if what I say about Emerson is true of him, almost no one could, or could seem to, understand him—at least without doing little else in any given day except read him.

I am grateful for discussions of such a response with two colleagues of mine celebrated for their work on the high tradition of American intellectuality and literary ambition. In a graduate seminar I offered jointly with Sacvan Bercovitch on Emerson some years ago, issues of the tension between the historical and the philosophical Emerson kept arising, mostly at our invitation but sometimes to our dismay. Illuminating as these issues promised to be, and much as we sought resolutions, we kept discovering the historical and the philosophical registers to outstrip each other, to assert one interest at the expense of the other. Then, recently, an extended exchange with Lawrence Buell about the chapter on Emerson's philosophizing in Buell's important recent book *Emerson*, which situates Emerson in the many roles he plays in American cultural life and in the wider contexts in which he places that life, has forcibly reminded me of how little unequivocal progress I have made in finding my way in the various conflicting contexts in which Emerson functioned. I have not given up on myself here, although it may be that I am hampered by too unyielding, or too small, a circle of ideas here, taking it that Emerson's lasting historical importance, even the waxing and waning of his fame, would not exist without the power of his thinking; and at the same time that that fame, in his own country (where alone he has achieved lasting fame, something beyond the testimony of individual great admirers elsewhere), is granted at the expense of stinting the acknowledgment of that power. Something unnerv-

ing to me about the condescension characteristically shown Emerson, understood as the expression of a doubt of America (voiced not alone by Emerson) about the promised originality of its culture, is the sense that this disappointment is in league with America's terrible arrogance, as though it senses its aspirations to democracy are fated to be less appreciated than its failures of it.

It may be that what incites the exasperated response to my reading of Emerson's texts is a certain idea or picture of what kind of difficulty Emerson causes, perhaps an idea that something complicated should be figured out and made plain. I myself do not find that such a task is more frequently posed in Emerson than in the prose of any other serious writer. What seems to me signature in Emerson is the weight he puts on the obvious, where the difficulty is taking him at his word. A favorite instance of mine is his liking for the connection between something happening casually and something creating a casualty. He is, in effect, calling attention to a point that language is making for us on its surface, namely, that what we do casually, every day, unthinkingly, distractedly—the hierarchies we assume, the slights we deliver and suffer, our adaptations (Emerson calls it our conformity) to the unconscionable—are as permanent in their effects, as much matters of life and death, as are catastrophes.

The matter is not how much time you spend with an Emerson text but—given for some reason, some odd day, a stunning encounter with a moment of such a text—what it is you expect of it. It is true that Emerson, in expecting to be understood, and misunderstood, gives plenty of satisfactions for unsublime, even routine expectations. But this is an obligation of any writer who takes on, perhaps beyond her or his will, certain, let's call them scriptural tasks. I might describe writing of this kind as struggling to keep its moral urgency, in principle evident in every word, fit for polite company, say tactful, recognizing that the urgencies of life, of sanity and derangement, are shared by all but are not open to discussion at announced or predictable times, that philosophy is not for every mood, that our separateness, our lack of synchrony in our concerns, is to be accepted, not just accepted but honored. This is as true, however different in appearance and knack, of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* as it is of Emerson's most inexhaustible essays. A tendency (if that is what it is) of my writing on Emerson's texts—about which I remain unapologetic—is that of judging the reach of a difficult reading, resisting the flow of the writing, by testing it against what I make of what Thoreau and Nietzsche have

made of Emerson's achievement, oftener, I guess, than I show. One effect, or intention, of this tendency is to underscore the mysteriousness of Emerson's knack in making his manner available to public occasion.

A fixed picture of Emerson's difficulty helps settle for, I would say, a more settled Emerson (who claims for himself that he would unsettle all things, meaning first, all settlers) than I perceive to be necessary. My sense, further, is that this fixed view is sustained by framing Emerson as essentially a forerunner of pragmatism. No one can sensibly deny that Emerson was a muse of pragmatism. But to my mind the assimilation of Emerson to pragmatism unfailingly blunts the particularity, the achievement, of Emerson's language, in this sense precisely shuns the struggle for philosophy—for, I might say, the right to philosophize, to reconceive reason—that Emerson sought to bequeath. Old and new friends have recently been urging upon me that their interest in the relation between Emerson and, say, Dewey, is not to assert Emerson as a "proto"-pragmatist but in effect to rediscover Dewey's textual debt to Emerson's, let's say, transcendentalism. This strikes me as an unequivocally interesting and promising turn of events.

It is internal to what Emerson is and remarkably remains for American culture that someone, unknown to me, has undertaken to distribute each day by e-mail, to anyone asking to be kept on his/her list, a citation from Emerson's *Journals*. I find it an agreeable way to relate to that monumental achievement. (I may be affected here by how much I enjoy being read to, or played music for, which is a reason I like listening to music on a decent concert or jazz radio station rather than, except as it were for business, choosing and playing recordings to myself.) The other day the citation was the following, from the journal entry for August 18, 1831 (still early in the game): "The sun shines and warms and lights us and we have no curiosity to know why this is so; but we ask the reason of all evil, of pain, and hunger, and mosquitoes and silly people." I do not imagine that this observation will ever become a favorite touchstone of mine, but, though early, it is recognizably Emerson, and seeing it I at once had the thought: "Does this sound like pragmatism? It negates pragmatism." On second thought, it might be pragmatist to consider that what philosophy and theology have hitherto called "the problem of evil" and taken to be a metaphysical question concerning the nature of God should be put aside in favor of taking measures to discern the causes of human misery and putting this exercise of intelligence into the service of eradicating or mitigating

them. Is there a third thought, something like the question "What problem does the shining and warming and lighting of the sun pose that intelligence should solve?" The suggestion that this is a serious question again would negate pragmatism. Or are these words of Emerson's merely a fancy way of saying that our capacities for complaint outstrip our talent for praise—a certain indication of the justice in the familiar charge against Emerson that he lacks a tragic sense of life?

But suppose that Emerson's phrase "curiosity to know," in this context, is an ironic dig at philosophy's idea of knowledge, in the line of romanticism's questioning of the idea, though now questioning it from within philosophy. In the many times I have heard cited the tag "Philosophy begins in wonder," the wonder in question, it is implied, is a state to be satisfied by an explanation, one necessarily subject to confirmation by the agreement of others, as if wonder were inherently (what we call) scientific, as it seems to be in Bacon's speaking of wonder as "the seed of knowledge." But Emerson's proposal to know why the sun shines and warms and lights takes wonder, of the kind that will call for philosophy, precisely not as curiosity but as, let's say, admiration—perhaps you could think of it as a meta-curiosity. Wittgenstein registers this in one of the famous late lines from his *Tractatus*: "Not *how* the world is, but *that* it is, is the mystical." Why the sun rises has a scientific answer; part of the answer might be that it does not rise. Why it rises (or the earth turns) every day is not a further scientific question. But that for us the sun rises every day has been a source not only of philosophical myth (as in Plato) or of epistemological puzzle (as in Hume) but of something we might call philosophical wonder.

Thoreau was interested that dawn does not, or should not, wake us just as it wakes birds; that what is early and what is late, what is appropriate for night and what for day, origins and ends, are for us to measure; that, perhaps one could say, the natural history of the human essentially contains the unnatural, contests itself. Emerson records this one way in saying that "The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion." Since Emerson also speaks of our living always with an unattained but attainable self, I understand him to mean that to have a self is always to be averse to one's attained self (in one's so far attained society); put otherwise, to conform to the self is to relinquish it. Here, as is not unusual with me, an old and continuing respect for John Dewey prompts me to ask how Emerson's "intellect," an essential predicate of which is that it "dissolves," compares with Dewey's "intelligence," which is said to solve

problems arising in situations of decision, where a characteristically Deweyan criterion of intelligence is to demand an Aristotelian/Hegelian moment of choosing between extremes, say between hesitancy and precipitancy, between becoming an aesthete and becoming unfeeling, between whim and over-intellectuality, between conformity and eccentricity, between subservience and violence, an intellectual gesture that came to leave me feeling empty-handed, abstracted from thinking, however much I was being promised concreteness.

I can imagine that someone will suggest that Emerson's idea of dissolving also means capturing the need for a middle way. Emerson characterizes thinking as requiring (in a pair of his main predicates of human thinking in "The American Scholar"), conversion or transfiguration (the other main predicate is partialness). There is no middle way between, say, self-reliance and self- (or other-) conformity. What calls for thinking in Emerson occurs before—or as—our life of perplexities and aspirations and depressions and desperations and manifestations of destiny resolve themselves into practical problems. Singled out by a choice between subservience and violence (as, to take a high instance, in the face of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law), one finds Emerson proposing, or provoking us to, a task of tracing and transfiguring, reconceiving, the everyday threads that have unnoticeably wound together our present forms of subservience and of violence.

The new emphasis I mentioned manifested in recent efforts to trace Emerson's textual influence on Dewey should serve as a welcome corrective to my earlier impatient and repeated claim that although Dewey admired and praised Emerson, he could make no use of him textually, that is, in the actual detailed work of philosophizing. If I regret the still prevalent attempted assimilations of transcendentalism into pragmatism, and do what I can to maintain their differences, it is not with the aim of choosing between them. What good, or wisdom, would prompt me to choose between serving the unconscionable and serving the impractical and the unintelligent?