EMERSON TELLS US that truth is “such a fly-way, such a slyboots, so untransportable and unbarrelable a commodity, that it is as bad to catch as light.” However things may be with truth, it is so with Emerson’s thought. What he says is often wise or inspiring, but he has no coherent theory, and his commitment to what he writes is uncertain. He tells us what currently appears true to him, in penetrating, compressed, and sometimes shocking language, but his indifference to consistency makes his writings imply everything and nothing. What do we make of him, and why has he been so important to the life of the mind in America?

He believed in inspiration and followed every glimmering, accepting eternal goals in concept but never feeling bound by them in practice. He dreamed of a great public power, on which [the intellectual man] can draw, by unlocking, at all risks, his human doors, and suffering the ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him: then he is caught up into the life of the Universe, his speech is thunder, his thought is law, and his words are universally intelligible as the plants and animals.

A prophet’s constancy was not his, however. He suspected that all is illusion, or at least that “[n]o sentence will hold the whole truth, and the only way in which we can be just, is by giving ourselves the lie....” In the end, he took as his authority not a “great public power” but the here-and-now self, and his efforts to connect the two failed. The unity of Emerson’s writings came more from his setting and who he was than from doctrine or vision. He was a contemplative, a moralist, and a citizen of a busy commercial democracy, a mystic and a practically-minded Yankee. He was less a thinker than an observer of his own thoughts, whose writings make visible the difficult relation between American life and man’s need for the transcendent.

The American individualism that suppressed objective spiritual order and drove him into mysticism also made him unable to surrender to anything greater than himself. The result was spiritual aspiration that led nowhere; in that he was representative of many of his countrymen.

Emerson came to maturity as the novus ordo seclorum established by the Founding Fathers was itself maturing, and became its most characteristic spiritual voice. Sprung from a line of clergymen, he felt called to restore soul to a world he saw as godless. The new society had freedom, equality, and progress, but no fit place for the divine. Public life had be-

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come a Lockean world in which knowledge was sensual and social order a matter of property and contract. Religion was losing public recognition as true and becoming legally, socially, and intellectually disestablished, a matter of private feeling and preference. Its continuing influence on law and public life was justified by secular benefit and popular sentiment rather than intrinsic obligation.

In both America and Europe, "[t]he age of arithmetic and of criticism had set in.... The young men were born with knives in their brain...." Industrialism, democracy, and modern natural science were destroying coherence between religion and other departments of life and thought. Tradition and authority were weakening, and the public concerns to which they relate were growing more purely secular and material. The consequence was a disordered relation among individual, society, and spirit.

It was an age of public crassness and private dreams, of religion at odds with intellect, of romantics, utopians, and social dropouts. The increasing absence of the transcendent from public life made society a contract for material ends—"a joint-stock company, in which the members agree for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater." The inability of public life to support the life of the spirit drove sensitive souls into internal exile. Only in privacy or opposition could man attain his true stature.

Responses to such conditions diverged radically in Europe; without an accepted principle of unity it was difficult to find a solid alternative. Reactionaries rejected modernity root and branch, socialists hoped to remake it with new principles of cooperation, and utilitarians accepted it on its own terms, welcoming material advances as well as the end of public recognition for goods with no cash value. Americans found such responses unsatisfying. Among us, tradition was too thin for reaction, individualism too strong for socialism, and religiosity too intense for utilitarianism. Many took refuge in business and avoidance of thought. Others withdrew their allegiance from the existing order, without having another object of adherence, and joined the "intelligent and religious persons [who] withdraw themselves from the common labors and competitions of the market and the caucus, and betake themselves to a certain solitary and critical way of living...."

Emerson spoke for what was best in the latter tendency. He understood the arguments for reaction, appreciated the force of utilitarianism, and admired the socialists, but his joint commitment to progress, the spirit, and the independent individual led him to reject each of them. Nor was he a man who could stop thinking, at least in any simple sense. Because his commitments are typically American, and because we have not gotten past either the public rejection of the transcendent that defines modernity or the unwillingness to forego it that set him his task, he remains near the center of much of our intellectual life.

He thought schemes of reform futile. Modernity had been gathering strength for centuries and seemingly become invincible. Since it had decisively prevailed, and become fundamental to the social world to which he owed allegiance, he felt he must accept it. Like most Americans, he idealized the independence and freedom it seemed to offer. He was nonetheless sharply aware of the deficiencies of modern life and could not give up the spiritual things it seemed to exclude. He thought to resolve the conflict through poetic reinterpretation, and with dazzling literary skill set forth what he intended as a new and redemptive vision. It was his great virtue to present with equal force and vividness both the strengths of that vision and its obscurities and contradictions.

His views grew naturally out of his
situation. In the absence of substantive common goods, the new and redemptive understanding had to be purely individual and inward. What was not a man's own could do nothing for him. "Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul." His new outlook would be a religion of "the infinitude of the private man" that combined subjectivism and moralism in a sort of mysticism of personal integrity. "I must absolve me to myself," he wrote; by doing so he would achieve oneness with what he truly was and unity with all things.

The key to reconciling the radically separate individual with God and the world was suppression of the distinction between God and unconditioned individual subjectivity. The latter is the aspect of our consciousness that stays the same while sense impressions, desires, and concepts change. Our consciousness is initially of specific things. If we let go of particulars, what remains is an impersonal background of which we are only obliquely aware, described by Emerson as "the background of our being...an immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed." This background of consciousness embraces things that remain below the limits of awareness, and so becomes a source of intuitions and inspirations we cannot explain. When perception and understanding harmonize with it they seem touched with something more than personal. Our own human consciousness thus appears an opening to the divine.

For Emerson, consciousness was "that in us which changes not, and which ranks all sensations and states of mind...a sliding scale, which identifies [each man] now with the First Cause, and now with the flesh of his body...." Such a view is reminiscent of Kant: it is our consciousness itself that unifies experience in all its aspects, establishes relative valuations, and so presents the world as an ordered whole. The way we present the world to ourselves, the world as we experience it, is our own doing.

Emerson thus softened the dualism of man and nature by erasing the distinction between the cosmos and the world we construct for ourselves by our manner of grasping experience. "Let man then learn...that the sources of nature are in his own mind...." Since our ordering of the world was not distinguishable from God's creation of it, the distinction between man and God became hard to draw: "there [is] no bar or wall in the soul, where man, the effect, ceases, and God, the cause, begins." All being thus became one; with God within us and permeating all things, division and evil were illusory. The consequence was the deification of individual man, before whose "immense possibilities...all mere experience, all past biography, however spotless and sainted, shrinks away."

Or so it seemed, at least in the moods Emerson valued most highly. This outlook promised to accept modernity and redeem it. Rather than struggle hopelessly for public recognition of the transcendent, it attended to aspects of private experience that transcend other aspects and therefore come to seem divine if absolute transcendence is denied. The result was a new religious understanding fully consistent with a purely human and contractual order of things. If public order is constructed by contract, it is natural to recognize individual consciousness as supremely authoritative, because the highest law is the concurrence of subjective desires. The view that individual consciousness is divine made that recognition theological.

Emerson thus re-established the connection among man, God, and the world in very difficult circumstances, and in a way that in retrospect seems inevitable. His views were both rooted and cosmopolitan. They combined Yankee individualism and moralism with European transcendental idealism, John Locke with
oriental wisdom, and provide the classic reconciliation of American life with permanent universal concerns. The difficulty of finding another solution that is equally satisfying has made him enduringly central to American culture.

Nonetheless, his views led to serious problems of their own, because they suppressed essential distinctions among the things they united. A basic problem was that they treated something within the world as the *ens realissimum*, which can not be done without radical distortion. To make one aspect of life uniquely authoritative is to make others incomprehensible. If unconditioned subjectivity becomes the standard, then specific experience is left in the lurch. Particular men and events are very different from the elusive abstractions under which we conceive the unconditioned, and on the view Emerson proposed they became a mystery and a disappointment.

The distance between the human and divine cannot be abolished. To treat aspects of our consciousness as divine is to reproduce that gap within experience and so make experience incoherent. One-sided identification with such aspects removes a man infinitely from his own specific experiences. Daily life comes to seem unreal: “The idealist...does not respect government...nor the church, nor charities, nor arts, for themselves; but hears, as at a vast distance, what they say, as if his consciousness would speak to him through a pantomimic scene.”

It is unnatural to live in such a way, and difficult to sustain the attempt. It makes the world around us unreal in a way that at times pushed the Emersonian idealist to desperation: “There are moods in which we court suffering, in the hope that here, at least, we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth. But it turns out to be scene-painting and counterfeit.”

The impossible distance between the divine self and the world carried over to human relations: “The great and crescent

self, rooted in absolute nature, supplants all relative existence, and ruins the kingdom of mortal friendship and love.” If I am divine, and you a figment, what proportion can there be between us? The gap between self and others, together with difficulty dealing with finitude and imperfection, could lead to a rejection of actual men that Emerson sometimes expressed in shocking terms, commenting that “enormous populations, if they be beggars, are disgusting, like moving cheese, like hills of ants or of fleas,” and speaking of “quantities of poor lives, of distressing invalids, of cases for a gun.”

Denial of realities beyond experience made it impossible to accept the in-between nature of human life and led to obsession with extremes within experience. Emerson could neither accept his dependence on things that forever exceeded him nor identify fully with the unconditioned subjectivity that remains at the fringes of awareness. Failure to achieve full unity with the unconditioned led him to feel imprisoned by the concrete aspects of experience. He often experienced the self not as infinitely removed from particulars but as hopelessly enmeshed in them. In such moods the impossibility of attaining the absolute made existence itself seem oppressive: “On the brink of the waters of life and truth, we are miserably dying. The inaccessibleness of every thought but that we are in, is wonderful.... Every thought is also a prison; every heaven is also a prison.”

Nor in the end was the human world enough without reference to something that exceeds it. The blurred line between man and cosmos transferred to the world our insufficiency. If it was only our construction, it was too insubstantial to provide a place to live. “Gladly we would anchor, but the anchorage is quicksand.”

The private man turned out to be incurably finite after all, and so consequently did the world of his experience.
“[C]ulture...ends in headache. Unspeakingly sad and barren does life look to those, who a few months ago were dazzled with the splendor of the promise of the times.”

Theodicy became altogether unmanageable. Sin, the separation of man from God, becomes nonsensical if God is an attribute of man and man of God. Emerson attempted to dodge the question of evil in uninteresting ways. He asserted improbable compensations: “no evil is pure, nor hell itself without its extreme satisfactions,” and suggested that evil may in time evolve into good: “Evil, according to old philosophy, is good in the making.”

Repeatedly he claimed that there is less to it than meets the eye, and at times fell into heartless denial of suffering: “Tragedy is in the eye of the observer, and not in the heart of the sufferer.... [I]t is not I, it is not you, it is always another person who is tormented.... That which would rend you, falls on tougher textures.”

He needed to see evil as confusion that would be dissolved through insight. Especially in his early writings, he envisioned that the mindless weight or downright evil of the world would simply vanish:

The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque.... A...revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit. So fast will disagreeable appearances, swine, spiders, snakes, pests, mad-houses, prisons, enemies, vanish; they are temporary and shall be no more seen.

The weight of experience put an end to the fantasy that thought could do away with the opposition between the good and the necessary. By his second series of Essays, Emerson had become far more deeply conscious of the difficulty of realizing his vision. The world had come to appear strangely mixed and difficult to rationalize. “Providence has a wild, rough, incalculable road to its end, and it is of no use to try to whitewash its huge, mixed instrumentalties.”

That recognition did not deepen Emerson’s thought, but simply coexisted with his earlier views. In his Divinity School Address he had insisted on a religion of experience and human growth rather than absolute transcendence. He had proposed that religion be “alive and warm, part of human life, and of the landscape, and of the cheerful day,” and foretold a teacher who would see “the identity of the law of gravitation with purity of heart.”

He never changed those demands, and never developed principles that let him accommodate divine law and evil, spirit and the machine, the infinite and the concrete, except by pronouncing them all incomprehensibly the same. He could neither reject the testimony of experience that such things were radically opposed nor take it into account in any coherent way, and ended by openly living with contradictions he could not discuss rationally.

Ignoring contradictions became central to his way of thinking. Nothing could satisfy him unless it was turning into something else. The appeal of his thought came to depend on its ability to draw support from contraries. He stands for fate and freedom, for self-assertion and mystic submission. “All the universe over, there is but one thing,” he wrote, “this old Two-Face, creator-creature, mind-matter, right-wrong, of which any proposition may be affirmed or denied.”

He attempted to bridge the gaps through rhetoric, images, and appeals to a mythic future in which all divisions would somehow disappear. Elastic and slippery words like “soul” helped glide over issues like the opposition of subjective and objective. When he approached coherence the gaps in his world became unbridgeable chasms, and he was left with the solipsism reflected in his chilling comments on the absolute
isolation of the individual. Ultimate issues are difficult and likely not soluble, but insisting that fundamental oppositions are both real and not real, with no serious proposal for mediating them, suggests that he had nothing constructive to say.

He could not, however, escape the contrast between inspiration and the everyday that dominated his own experience. "The astonishment of life, is, the absence of any appearance of reconciliation between the theory and practice of life." His response to the difficulty was to demand inconceivably high standards that he himself could not begin to meet. He envisioned what he called "poetry" or "scholarship," the realization of the ideal in daily life, as a task for all, and the poet or scholar as a combination of Christ and Uebermensch. No one and nothing was good enough to meet such demands. Milton and Homer fell short; "all literature is yet to be written." The absolute unattainability of his standards could not refute them for him because he could not do without them. Only unimaginable genius and heroism could transform, as he required, things actually present in a man's life into a substitute for the transcendent.

Emerson's peculiarity was that the unimaginable was enough for him. The rarity of that quality meant that he had very few followers. At the center of his invincible serenity was assurance of a necessary unity in all things that could be neither seen, understood, brought about nor referred to something truly transcendent. That faith, however incomprehensible, gave him the confidence he needed to live and work. Apparent intellectual vice thus increased his usefulness as an observer, and the world's contrariness made him rely all the more on his own mind and sensibility. Since he could simply presume unity, he could describe what he saw, without the need to impose rational coherence, and propound both sides of polarities he could not begin to explain.

Indifference to contradiction had a price, of course. Part of that price was vacuity. A man who accepts contradictions too readily can have nothing definite to say. Emerson's inability to make sense of the relation between the ideal and the concrete made him unable to assert anything practically useful.

However, no one goes to the trouble of propagating a philosophy without opposing it to something that has practical implications. As he said, "Your goodness must have some edge to it—else it is none." The poet of the "Concord Hymn" was a proponent of the new order initiated by the American Revolution, and his work helped secure and advance that order. Behind Emerson's position in American thought is the standing threat absolute transcendence poses to a new order of things built on human purposes. His "transcendentalism" provided a substitute object within experience for the religious impulse. By eliminating the distinction between God and man, it enhanced the practical sufficiency of the here-and-now and helped obviate a threat to a fully secular world.

Emerson's difficulty relating the concrete to the ideal inhibited active political participation. When he took sides in public disputes he fell below himself, as when he praised John Brown, who pulled five men from their beds and hacked them to death, for his "simple, artless goodness." He had "not found that much was gained by manipular attempts to realize the world of thought," and felt that "[y]ou cannot institute, without peril of charlatanism." He preferred "to remain in the establishment better than the establishment," not so much to change things as to transform their meaning. He was ready to propose what was in substance a new religion, but not a new church or even new forms of ceremony. Nonetheless, the shift from the abso-
lute transcendence of God to the transcendence of individual subjectivity with respect to particular objects of experience had important practical implications. One was rejection of historical Christianity in favor of something much harder to define. Emerson claimed that abandonment of church, dogma, and sacrament would make little difference; all true religion had a common essence, and in any case what was distinct in Christianity had already died. Mysticism and morality, for him the permanent parts of religion, were eternal and self-sufficient, and were independent of special revelation, orthodoxy, and indeed of persons other than oneself.

Changes in basic beliefs do matter, though. The indeterminacy of Emerson’s thought evidences a growing disconnection between life and ultimate meaning in America. Only by depriving his thought of concrete implications could he keep thinking about fundamental issues. A God who is everywhere equally and in oneself above all is nowhere that can make a difference. He may have intended to save faith by substitution of a faith that prescribed nothing for a faith that prescribed a great deal, but the effect was to help free his country to develop in good conscience in accordance with its pre-spiritual and thus social and material tendencies.

The concrete implications of Emerson’s startling views are hard to distinguish from boldly doing what one wants. The view that everything has its own integrity and justification suggests not struggle but a stance of perfect receptivity, the utter passivity of a “transparent eyeball.” On such an understanding not only circumstances but also one’s own thoughts, impulses, and actions become in the end something to contemplate and accept as part of the order of things. If by birth, breeding, and inclination one is a hard-headed Yankee, then the way of mystic acceptance and non-interference is to act accordingly. Although Emerson opposed hedonism and mere acceptance of the status quo, his rejection of concrete standards and tendency toward all-inclusiveness made it hard for that opposition, however vehement, to be more than pose and gesture.

Emerson’s heroic rhetoric was thus at odds with the actual effect of his thought. True heroism defies circumstance and one’s own weakness for the sake of something publicly valid. In contrast, “obedience to a secret impulse of an individual’s character,” Emerson’s version of heroism, made no objective demands. In the absence of the transcendent, compliance with the spirit of the times became the source of public validity. Heroism was part of his capital virtue of self-trust, and he defined the latter as acceptance of “the place the Divine providence has found for you” like those “[g]reat men [who] have always done so and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age....”

Emerson’s radicalism has remained on good terms with dominant social forces because its practical substance has been radical acceptance of fundamental existing tendencies. The young dissenter who shocked a dying religious establishment became a popular Gilded Age lecturer, a fixture of patriotic high school literary anthologies, and most recently a prophet of postmodernism. Believers in progress have used his arguments because they too have stood for dominant trends in American life. His elimination of the transcendent made communion with the infinite a this-worldly affair. He himself turned to the infinite within, but it was natural for the less contemplative to seek the unlimited in the more concrete form of endless motion and the social forces likely to provide it. His religious rhetoric—the divinity of man, the preference for living spirit over dead form, the abandonment of traditional in favor of larger and freer understandings—could be
readily given a this-worldly turn in favor of change as such, as could his appropriation of traditional authority to revisionist ends and occasional affectation of prophetic sternness.

Emerson’s views can fit all forms of liberalism, from rugged individualism to postmodern relativism. Liberal doctrines stand for the triumph of less ideal social forces than abstract freedom and equality. As society becomes rationalized, money and bureaucracy make all things interchangeable, and the Good becomes a subjective taste. Particular connections lose stability and importance and men become deeply non-social. Emerson accepted and spiritualized such trends. His radical subjectivism can harmonize with either the expanding and diversifying commercial economy of the nineteenth century or today’s multicultural consumer society. His views have an obvious connection to the nineteenth-century liberalism of civic freedom, minimal government, and economic expansion, but are not limited to it. Although not himself a libertine or welfare statist, he spoke of a radical critique of marriage and property, and can be cited in favor of inclusiveness, diversity and multiculturalism. His radical openness to novelty and scorn for consistency point the way to the postmodern rejection of settled standards and even the integrity of the individual. For better or worse, he has been a man for all seasons in the changes that have affected the American soul.

There are many reasons to read Emerson: his skill with words, his penetrating intuition, his wonderful gift for concrete images of spiritual states of affairs, and his acute observations, marked by generosity, broad culture, and common sense. He was ambitious to understand all life as a spiritual system comprehending everything from human civilization to “the lizard on the fence, the fungus under foot, the lichen on the log.” He had his prejudices and unreasoned commitments, but was more interested in developing and communicating his perception of how things were than advancing any cause. Because he said what he thought, he touched on important truths even when wrong.

He dealt with enduring aspects of human life, in particular as lived in America, and said penetrating things on all sides of them. His greatest importance lies in his presentation of the spiritual state of Americans. His writings bring out essential implications of the democratic ideal and the faith that attends it. They are immensely valuable as an articulation of that faith, even though the ultimate incoherence of his views makes satisfactory exposition difficult. To read him is an education in the aspirations and illusions of the life of the spirit among us.

Emerson’s faith, like that of American idealists generally, was a movement away from the half-dead forms and petty material concerns that pervade a national life too little rooted in the transcendent, and toward a shining but ill-defined and contradictory vision. In the end, his vision could not be given usable form; it could not replace what it attacked as insufficient, and led only to greater spiritual deadness. He failed in the task of the poet and scholar as he himself defined it: “Man...still watches for the arrival of a brother who can hold him steady to a truth, until he has made it his own.” He could not be that brother, because what he presented as truth could be made neither coherent or stable.

Nor did his thought advance. His best and most distinctive work was produced early on, and thereafter he repeated and contradicted himself while becoming more aware of problems his views raised but could not resolve. Self-accepting contradiction leads nowhere, and his views excluded the possibility of development. If a man idolizes “development,” and tries to make all future changes virtually present in his work by accepting them in
advance, then actual development becomes impossible because his existing views can never be shown wrong. His failure to develop was not due to declining powers. On concrete matters he continued to write brilliantly, as in his book on England (1856) and eulogy on Thoreau (1862).

Emerson's views are native to America, and so are his deficiencies. The ultimate sterility of the main tendencies in his thought correspond to fundamental problems in American life. Like many of his countrymen, he mistook the undefined for the great and settled standards for a prison. He viewed solid qualities as insufficient because they are not self-sufficient. Americans want to be infinite and self-contained wholes, and we cut ourselves off from every standard that could anchor us and make us something definite. The demand that literal reality conform to the unconditioned has caused us to lose real but limited goods. It has often seemed "not worth while to execute with too much pains some one intellectual, or aesthetical, or civil feat, when presently the dreams will scatter, and we shall burst into universal power."46

The result has been to put aspirations at odds with consequences. From the beginning America has been a country of dreams deferred or betrayed. Exaggerated principles have defeated their own purposes. Freedom from traditional hierarchies has meant oppressive conformity, because the majority becomes a mindless and irresponsible ruler; individualism has meant uniformity through the abolition of distinctions; and tolerance has meant closed minds, because it would be intolerant to take any idea seriously. The frustration of our dreams is incomprehensible to us, and our spiritual demands too vast for effective response, so we avert our eyes from our situation. Emerson himself put the matter best: "Whilst we are waiting [for universal power], we beguile the time with jokes, with sleep, with eating, and with crimes."47

He was nonetheless no prisoner of his general ideas. It was his strength as well as weakness that his final commitments were so few. His receptivity and honesty, and indifference to contradiction, helped him set forth the limitations as well as greatness of what he approved, and the virtue and reality of what he disliked. He gave us materials for thinking but left our thoughts free. This essay has emphasized the tendencies that mattered most to him and his readers—his subjectivism, his opposition to dogma, and his forceful pronouncements that seem strikingly perceptive but lack concrete implications. From other tendencies one could construct a very different Emerson with an acute appreciation for things he usually opposed. Few Americans have understood as well as he the limits of conscious intentions, the strength and dignity conferred by dogma, and the power of the accumulated experience summed up in tradition.

We should no more be prisoners of established ideas than he was. The debate among conflicting sides of Emerson's thought is the necessary debate between dreams and experience in America. Life among us has been more than grand proclamations of equality and democracy. Tradition, ordinary human ties, and loyalty to substantive goods that transcend us have been essential to what we have been. To get beyond a political, cultural, and spiritual situation that grows increasingly superficial, sterile and perverse we must deal with that situation directly and at its root. Which aspects of our life and ideals have had enduring value, and which have proven at odds with the good of our people? The rhetoric we have made habitual cannot provide an answer. Emerson, the greatest expositor, propopent, and critic of the spiritual side of the American polity, can be a special aid to us in our difficulties.