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Author(s): David Lyttle

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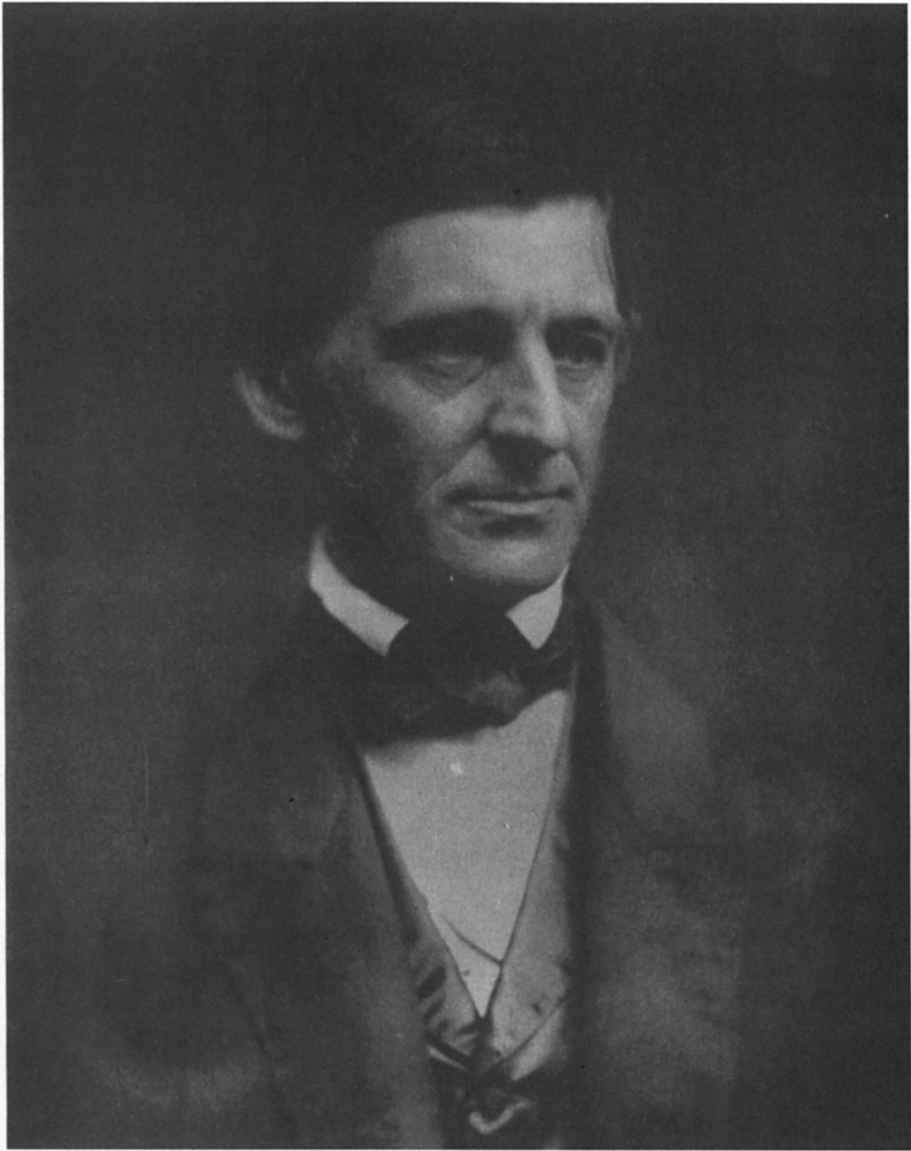
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**Ralph Waldo Emerson**

# *Emerson's Transcendental Individualism*

**David Lyttle**

Ralph Waldo Emerson triumphed over what he saw as the degradation of the individual by Calvinism and modern science in his denial of the existence of a personal God and the reality of the external world. Doubting all but himself, he affirmed that the “self is the sole subject we study & learn.” However, he meant by the “self” far more than the ego; he added: “Myself is much more than I know, & yet I know nothing else”<sup>1</sup> This “much more than I know” was for him the “infinitude” of the individual; and this infinitude was the Universal or “God.” He believed, therefore, that there is an ineffable identity of the individual and the Universal. Since he internalized God and held, in his subjective idealism, that the external world of appearance is made by God through the individual, the individual plays a dominant role in his thinking. This essay discusses the themes in Emerson’s philosophy of (1) the uniqueness of the individual, (2) the universality of the individual, (3) the individual as a miracle, and (4) non-relational Being and discrete entities.

## **Uniqueness of the Individual**

Emerson believed that uniqueness is the hallmark of an individual’s divinity.<sup>2</sup> One could say that for him each individual belongs to the category of one-of-a-kind, the category given by orthodox Christian theologians to God. The principle of uniqueness of the Universal is, therefore, the principle of each individual incarnation of the Universal.

Emerson’s celebration of uniqueness has been voluminously documented. For example, he wrote in 1830 that “every man has his own voice, manner, eloquence, & just as much his own sort of love & grief & imagination & action. Let him scorn to imitate any being, let him scorn to be a secondary man, let him fully trust his own share of God’s goodness, that correctly used it will lead him on to a perfection which has no type yet in the Universe save only in the Divine Mind” (*JMN*, 3:198-99). The individual’s true uniqueness is what Emerson called

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his “genius,” and his calling in life is to realize his genius. His genius is not his ego, which, if inflated, is the false individual. For the false individual is divorced from God or the Universal, and propagandizes himself above others. But the true individual of genius incarnates the unique Universal, and celebrates himself among others. Furthermore, genius does not originate in biology or in the environment. It is, for Emerson, given at birth; it is spiritual or transcendental. Since genius is innate, and since each individual, in his genius, is different from any other individual, only the individual (as Emerson himself found in his struggle for “Fame”) can discover what his genius is; society cannot inform him.

Emerson’s affirmation of the uniqueness of the individual is clarified when he is played off against his early mentor, the great Unitarian divine William Ellery Channing. Channing gave priority to what individuals have in common, and believed that persons fulfill themselves less by realizing their unique potentialities than by conforming to universal social laws. Elizabeth Peabody reported that Channing believed that the “development of the divine attributes in ourselves is the realization not of what is peculiar to any individual, but what is common to all men.” It is true that she reported also that Channing said in 1825 that “perfection does not imply but excludes uniformity. If every one obeyed the will of God revealed to himself, no two would be alike. . . . The variety of the universe of matter is a faint symbol of the variety of heaven”<sup>3</sup> But this statement does not express the tendency of Channing’s later thought. In the twenties, he inspired Emerson to do “his thing,” but then, like Alcott and others, he dropped the theme. As the Transcendental movement developed, he concluded that its explosion of unique individuals was in fact a chaos of egotheisms, of oddity, of rebelliousness against universal social values, and did not express God-given variety.

Channing’s dominant concern was the integrity of a person as an agent of free-will, who is responsible for embodying universal social values. “Our nature is social,” he said. “This is especially true in religion, the most social of all our sentiments,” a statement with which Emerson would not have agreed.<sup>4</sup> Channing was not concerned with the uniqueness of a person as a divine manifestation of the absolute. For him, all persons, distinct and separate entities, should be fundamentally the one color of Good.

When Channing does praise the individual, his position may be likened to what Lovejoy describes as “rationalistic individualism,” that belief of the Enlightenment “that—precisely because all individuals, *qua* rational, are fundamentally alike, and because this uniform element in them is the only important element—truth is to be attained by every individual for himself, by the exercise of his private judgment uninfluenced by tradition or external authority.” Channing, the moralist, contrasts with Emerson, the artist, who tended toward “romantic individualism,” which is the belief, Lovejoy says, that “the value of individuals [lies] . . . chiefly, not in what is uniform, but in what is diverse or unique in them.”<sup>5</sup>

But Lovejoy's definition of "romantic individualism" does not quite apply to Emerson, for Emerson was not interested in uniqueness simply for the sake of uniqueness. He assumed that all individuals are at once unique and fundamentally alike, and sought to give equal value to both characteristics. He noted in his journal "that the more exclusively idiosyncratic a man is, the more general & infinite he is, which though it may not be a very intelligible expression means I hope something intelligible. In listening more intently to our own reason, we are not becoming in the ordinary sense more selfish, but are departing more from what is small, & falling back on truth itself & God" (*JMN*, 3:199; 1830).<sup>6</sup> This is a memorable statement of his theory of the ineffable identity of man and God, or the individual/Universal.

The Emerson paradox is that when an individual realizes his uniqueness, he realizes his universality. A great man or a genius, accordingly, is neither an egocentric individualist who has little or nothing in common with others, nor a talented individual who embodies normative values of society, but an individual whose innate uniqueness possesses universal characteristics. Emerson's individualism may be designated as transcendental, in distinction to Romantic and Rationalistic individualisms.

His celebration of uniqueness is vital to a society that is alive and progressive. It validates individuals who are confident of the integrity of their uniqueness, but who can find little or no acceptance by society. His position is particularly applicable to artists who struggle against prejudice and fashion to express their unique visions of universal truths in new styles, who attempt to bring to unlistening societies messages of new values or new perspectives on old values. And appropriately, an empirical verification of Emerson's identity theory is art. His transcendental thesis speaks to the fact that an artist must find his own voice, or unique presentation of material, to be a great artist. That is, an artist must realize his unique style to receive enduring, universal acclaim; he must express themes of universal import by a unique and, therefore, memorable method. He thereby validates at once universal values and his own uniqueness. For Emerson, uniqueness in itself is trivial and odd, but uniqueness grounded on universal values is genius.

Thus Emerson differs from Channing by championing individual uniqueness over social uniformity. He argues for a society of artists, each with a unique style of Being, not for a society of moralists conforming to what they believe to be ethical absolutes. In 1849, he noted that "I figure to myself the world as a hollow temple, & every individual mind as an exponent of some sacred part therein, as if each man were a jet of flame affixed to some capital, or nod, or angle, or triglyph, or rosette, or spandyl, bringing out its beauty & symmetry to the eye by his shining" (*JMN*, 11:161). In "Plato," he speaks about the principle of beauty, distinguishing it from that of logic: "Art expresses the one or the same by the different. Thought seeks to know unity in unity; poetry to show it by variety."

"The mind," he says, "returns from the one, to that which is not one, but other or many; from cause to effect; and affirms the necessary existence of variety; the selfexistence [sic] of both, as each is involved in the other."<sup>7</sup>

"We call the Beautiful the highest," he states in "The Transcendentalist," "because it appears to us the golden mean, escaping the dowdiness of the good, and the heartlessness of the true" (*CW*, 1:214). In sum, his ideal society, at least in theory, is a work of art, a harmonious congregation of unique individuals. When social unity is lacking, an uneasy conglomeration of egotists exists; when individual variety is lacking, a didactic commune in blank monotone exists. His position illustrates that the most distinctive good for Romantic and Democratic thought is not simple unity or chaotic diversity, but "the most inclusive integration" of unique individuals, "multeity in unity," as he must have known Coleridge called it.<sup>8</sup>

### Universality of the Individual

In his journal for 1836, Emerson spoke of "this stupendous fact of the identity, radical identity of all men; the one mind which makes each the measure of all, which makes each intelligible to all" (*JMN*, 5:265). In contrast to his emphasis on the uniqueness of the individual, he stressed the "infinite" or universality of the individual. This feature of his thought has been neglected by tradition because of his emphasis on the individual, but the two features should be balanced in a just evaluation of his philosophy.

Emerson believed that the individual in his infinitude is an identity of all individuals. He thought it "strange that any body who ever met another person's eyes, should doubt that all men have one soul" (*JMN*, 5:364;1837). What he saw in another person's eyes symbolized the Over Soul or the transcendental oneness of all persons. Seeking verification of this theory, he looked for evidence in experience about how persons, defined (from the low perspective of the Understanding) as separate entities, can also be in reality each other, how one person can be, at the same time, all persons, how one can be many. In so doing, he supported his fundamental theory of monism, and based his ethics on transcendental identity, not on sentiments of social relationships.

Particularly during the thirties and early forties, when he was clarifying his few major premises, Emerson developed a theory of identity under the term "sympathy."<sup>9</sup> By sympathy he meant, as did Hume, and other theorists of the seventeen and early eighteen hundreds, the ability of a person to become imaginatively another person, except that he used the term to refer to ontology as well as to epistemology.<sup>10</sup> He wrote: "Dec. 10, 1830. God is the substratum of all souls. Is not that the solution of the riddle of sympathy? It is one of the oldest principles of philosophy that like must beget like, & that only like can know like. It is worms & flesh in us that fear or sympathize with worms & flesh and God only within that

worships God of the Universe. Is it not remarked by us that always we endeavour to find ourselves in other men?" (*JMN*, 3:213).

Thus Emerson's "riddle of sympathy" was about how a person shares his identity with, in fact, at once remains himself and becomes, other persons. A person vicariously suffers when he sees another person suffering, and loves when he sees another person loving. How can this be when persons are conceived to be discrete entities, isolated minds? Were persons such entities, each would be, in himself, a black box of virtual reality, a solitary law, a universe unto himself, in which all actions are permissible. Each would surely be "a solitary law, a several universe" unto himself—a universe, moreover, in which all actions are permissible. For example, Emerson would say that if real identity does not exist among individuals, an individual has no obligation to help those in need. In fact, if individuals were in truth solipsistic entities, they could not understand each other, except by chance; they could not communicate; they could not love; they would have no language.

But Emerson believed that real identity does exist, asking, in an early sermon, "What is the principle on which our duty to serve our fellow men depends?" and answering that he believed "Self-interest never prompted a sincere service of others. From a polluted source a pure act cannot flow. . . . Nor . . . will it do to say that the manifest wants of our nature make the obligation to serve our fellowmen." For example, "very few men love all their fellowbeings. . . . Some men hate the poor. . . . The love of our neighbor is a principle of wonderful force where it really acts, . . . but it will not serve as a principle whereon to found the whole system of social duty." Rather, "The love of God is the principle on which the love of our neighbor stands," because "a man is not so much an individual as a manifestation of the Eternal and Universal One. . . . Every man you meet seems to repeat yourself, to be another and the same." "We . . . find ourselves in each other." "Must not all my intercourse with my brother, poor or rich, be governed by this tender reverence for our mutual nature, divine in its origin, however disguised by selfishness in both of us?" "I would love him as myself."<sup>11</sup> The motivation for social concern and action, for Emerson, was neither self-interest nor humanitarian sentiments, but the reality that we are each other.

Usually, Emerson used the term "sympathy" to denote affirmative identity, and believed that love is the highest form of this affirmation. There is "no love without sympathy. Minds must be alike. All love a seeking in another what is like self" (*JMN*, 3:260). But the term pointed to a wider definition, to the general ability of an individual to identify himself with other individuals. Thus he believed that sympathy does not necessarily lead to love and friendship. For example, he noted that "courage consists in the conviction that they with whom you contend, are no more than you. If we believed in the existence of strict *individuals*, natures, that is, not radically identical but unknown immeasurable, we should never dare to fight" (*JMN*, 5:344-45). In "Self-Reliance," he speaks of philanthropy, and sternly

asks, "Are they *my* poor? . . . I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong" (*CW*, 2:30-31). Emerson held that the sympathetic ability of individuals to identify with each other is the method by which they judge each other, for good or bad. He sympathized with others, loving some, but censoring others for characteristics that he found in both them and him.

Emerson, the champion of self-reliance, enjoyed his ability to become other persons. Moving up the sliding scale of consciousness, he increasingly identified with all individuals; moving down, he increasingly perceived himself as a "strict" individual among other strict individuals. His focus of consciousness was constantly shifting, transforming and retransforming his perception; he was now one among many, now the universal one. From the high perspective, he observed: "I suppose my friends have some relation to my mind. Perhaps they are its thoughts, taking form & outness though in a region above my will & that in that fact, my (dynamic) plastic nature, I have a pledge of their restoration: that is again, hereafter, I shall be able to give my thoughts Outness & enjoy (them) myself in persons again" (*JMN*, 5:223).

From a perspective less divine, he found "sympathizing" an adventure of vicariousness, the heart of culture:

When I read a problem, I would be a geometer; poetry a poet; history, a historian; sermons, a preacher; when I see paintings I would paint; sculpture, carve; & so with all things, the manifold soul in me indicates its acquaintance with all these things. Similar delight we have in the admirable artist's, soldier's or sailor's life. We individuate ourselves with him, & judge of his work. What is this but our first ride round our estate to take possession, promising ourselves withal, after a few visits more, to have an insight & give a personal direction to all the affairs that go on within our domain, which is the All? (*JMN*, 5:9;1835)

A year later he observed: "I go to Shakspear [sic], Goethe, Swift, even to Tennyson, submit myself to them, become merely an organ of hearing, & yield to the law of their being. I am paid for thus being nothing by an entire new mind & thus a Proteus I enjoy the Universe through the powers & organs of a hundred different men" (*JMN*, 5:178).

The principal reasons he thought Jones Very's essay on Shakespeare "a noble production" are that Very praised Shakespeare's ability to "enter . . . into the lives of others," and that Very believed that the first principle of ethics is that "by becoming more universal we at the same time become most individual."<sup>12</sup> In 1846 Emerson promised himself that

we shall one day talk with the central man, and see again in the varying play of his features all the features which have characterized our darlings, & stamped



themselves in fire on the heart: we then, as the discourse rises out of the domestic & personal, & his countenance waxes grave & great, we shall fancy that we talk with Socrates, & behold his countenance: then the discourse changes, & the man, and we see the face & hear the tones of Shakspeare [sic],—the body & the soul of Shakspeare living & speaking with us, only that Shakspeare seems below us. A change again, and the countenance of our companion is youthful & beardless, he talks of form & colour & the boundless riches of design; it is the face of the painter Raffaele that confronts us with the visage of a girl, & the easy audacity of a creator. In a moment it was Michel Angelo; then Dante; afterwards it was the Saint Jesus, and the immensities of moral truth & power embosomed us. And so it appears that these great secular personalities were only expressions of his face chasing each other like the rack of clouds. Then all will subside, & I find myself alone. I dreamed & did not know my dreams. (*JMN*, 9:395)

In this passage Emerson claims that he shall see again in the features of “the central man,” those of Ellen, Charles, Waldo (all dead by 1846). From the high perspective, he is “the central man” who looks down upon the apparent world of multiplicity, and sees “Shakspeare living . . . below us.”

In the following journal entry for 1840, Emerson, on his sliding scale of consciousness, envisions himself as Ralph Waldo being born from the Universal, and then as God, becoming all individuals. This is a “grand” vision of his monism of the one and the many.

I was born & came into the world to deliver the self of myself to the Universe from the Universe [the Universal] . . . & then immerge [sic] again into the holy silence & eternity, out of which as a man I arose. God is rich & many more men than I, he harbors in his bosom. . . . When I wish, it is permitted me to say, these hands, this body, this history of Waldo Emerson are profane & wearisome, but I, I descend not to mix myself with that or with any man. Above his life, above all creatures I flow down forever a sea of benefit into races of individuals. Nor can the stream ever roll backward or the sin or death of a man taint the immutable energy which distributes itself into men as the sun into rays or the sea into drops. (*JMN*, 7:435)

“The Deity in me”, Emerson wrote in “Friendship,” “and in them derides and cancels the thick walls of individual character, relation, age, sex, circumstance . . . and now makes many one” (*CW*, 2:115). “Look at those who have less faculty,” he urged in “Compensation,” doubtless thinking of his feeble-minded brother, Bulkeley, “and one feels sad, and knows not well what to make of it. He almost shuns their eye; he fears they will upbraid God. What should they do? It seems a great injustice. But see the facts nearly, and these mountainous inequali-

ties vanish. Love [the core of sympathy] reduces them, as the sun melts the iceberg in the sea. The heart and soul of all men being one, this bitterness of *His* and *Mine* ceases. His is mine. I am my brother, and my brother is me" (*CW*, 2:71-72). Because all individuals are in essence one, Emerson shared with Bulkeley Bulkeley's misfortune (and helped to support him financially). Alone, as the central self, he was everyone. "I who suffer from excess of sympathy," he said, "proclaim always the merits of selfreliance [sic]" (*JMN*, 7:372).

### The Individual as a Miracle

In an early sermon, Emerson observed that "a man might say that, to himself, his own existence in the world was more amazing than any other fact."<sup>13</sup> He admitted in 1837: "Hard as it is to describe God, it is harder to describe the Individual" (*JMN*, 5:337). And on May 14 of that same year, he recorded: "F. H. Hedge was here day before yesterday. We walked in the wood & sat down there to discuss why I was I" (*JMN*, 5:327). We do not know the exact form the problem of identity took when he and Hedge discussed it, or why Emerson thought it easier to define God than the individual, but we may speculate. They probably did not analyze Emerson's personality or review the influence of his family heritage—topics, respectively, too private and too well known to consider.

The problem "why I was I" was indigenous to all the Transcendentalists, whether or not they were theists and objective idealists, because of their stress on the individual. Margaret Fuller, for example, wrote in her journal: "I remember how, a little child, I had stopped myself on the stairs and asked, how came I here? How is it that I seem to be this Margaret Fuller? What does it mean? what shall I do about it?"<sup>14</sup> But Emerson of all the group—in fact, of all American writers—implicitly addresses and answers (as well as one can) this problem. For it is a question which can be answered only by a philosophy like his, of non-relational Being, never by a philosophy of persons and relationships, never by a philosophy that posits the Many as reality. On the answer to this question, he staked his belief that Being is orderly, and that the soul cannot be explained by self-contained physical laws.

First, Emerson accepted science as authoritative in its domain. He assumed that the causal laws of nature, corresponding to spiritual laws, are trustworthy and never broken, that there is a material cause for every effect. He makes this very clear in *Nature*, in "Idealism": "a law determines all phenomena, which being known, the phenomenon can be predicted" (*CW*, 1:33-34). In "Experience" he refers to "the perfect calculation of the kingdom of known cause and effect" (*CW*, 3:39); and in the journal, meditating on free will, he jotted down: "We should kill ourselves if we thought men were free, & could derange the Order of Nature. But the inference from Nature A Beautiful Necessity" (*JMN*, 11:95). In

the world of the Understanding, the laws of nature, although deterministic, are absolutely predictable and beautifully disciplinary. But, second, he asked: Why am I, I, and not someone else? And when he and Hedge discussed this question, they may have formulated it in the following way, thus helping to support Emerson's belief that "man is not order of nature, . . . link in a chain nor any ignominious baggage"<sup>15</sup>:

*Why are you who you are, and not someone else? Why is an individual born when and where he is born, and not somewhere else, in some other country, at some other time? In life, there is continuity of biology, but no continuity of consciousness. We can explain the make-up of our bodies and our personalities by genetics and environment,<sup>16</sup> but we can find no material cause for our place and time of birth, no logical reason that I am a conscious being right here, and not you, another conscious being, over there. What other fact is there that we cannot even in theory assume that we will be eventually able to explain in material terms? That no material cause can be found for why we are we and not another suggests that the soul or subject is outside the laws of nature.<sup>17</sup>*

These remarks on identity and the "soul" are not as unorthodox as one might think. Perry Miller reminds us that according to Christian doctrine a soul is "not engendered by physical transmission, but is specially and individually created by God Himself"; it is an integral, "spiritual, incorporeal," immortal entity.<sup>18</sup> Walter Ong, in contemporary terms, points out:

What is most distinctive of human beings, male and female, is human self-consciousness. Human self-consciousness is biologically unprocessable because it is genetically free-floating. The "I" that I utter is distinct from and totally cut off from all else, directly accessible only to itself and from its own inside; no one else can know the taste of self (to use Gerard Manly Hopkins' expression) which I experience when I say "I" or when I am simply aware of my own presence to myself. My body resembles the bodies of my parents and earlier ancestors. But my own self, what I refer to when I say "I," is no more related to my parents than to anyone else. It has no genetic constitution. And even though it is embedded in a particular culture, which provides it with its characteristic ways of relating to others, to the world, and even to itself, it still floats free of its culture. The "I" that I say is as completely different from any other self in my own culture as it is from any other self in any other culture, real or imaginable. I am simply not you, no matter who or how close you are.<sup>19</sup>

The "I," the "soul," the subject, is "biologically unprocessable"; it just "appears" in the causal sequence of time, at a particular point in space. But whether the "I" is merely a random effect of matter or part of an order of coherence other than matter, reason cannot determine. In this case, Emerson sided with Christian

theologians, believing that the soul is not a part of nature.

Thus he agreed with the theologians that Being is orderly, and that, therefore, he was who he was not by “Chance.” He recorded a conversation he had in 1848 with Ellery Channing:

I had much discourse concerning the birth, death, & fate of man. E thought he should make a prayer to the Chance that brought him into the world. I, that when the child had escaped out of the womb, he cries: I thank the bridge that brought me safe over. I would not for ten worlds take the next one’s chance. Will they, one of these days, at Fourierville, make boys & girls to order & pattern? I want, Mr. Christmas office, a boy, between No. 17 & No. 134, half & half of both; or you might add a trace of 113. I want another girl like the one I took yesterday only you can put in a leetle more of the devil. . . . Beware of taking any one thing out of its connexions, for that way folly lies. (*JMN*, 10:359)

In this passage, Emerson addressed explicitly the problem of why he was he and not someone else, and assumed that there was a transcendental cause for his identity. He dismissed, of course, the idea that this cause was a personal God, distinct and separate from himself. He might even have observed that such a God would be just another person among many, and that therefore there would be no reason or justice, only chance, that he was not God and God not he (Nietzsche would have agreed).<sup>20</sup> He had to posit a ground higher than a (supernatural) person to account for his identity. And the ground he posited was the infinitude of the individual, the unique Universal, which is, ineffably, at once each unique individual and all unique individuals, and the source, he would say, of the intuitive knowledge each individual possesses that he is self-existent and can be no other.

Emerson would have concurred eagerly, we surmise, with our formulation of the argument that the individual is not a part of nature. He would have summed up his position that (in his doctrine of “the double consciousness”) from the objective perspective of the Understanding, the soul or subject interrupts the inviolate sequence of nature for no apparent causal reason, and hence may be called a miracle—in fact, the only miracle there is (the miracles of the Bible, alleged as true by Andrews Norton and other orthodox Unitarians, he denied). On the other hand, he would have observed that from the transcendental subjective perspective, the soul is known as the creator of nature, at the center of apparent, radiating space.

He would have gone on to remind us that, from the high perspective, there are no others; there is only you, the only one who is. For were there others in reality, the universe would not be a universe, but a multiverse, a pluralistic world (as William James insisted). And were it pluralistic, there would be no reason why you are you, and not another; you would be a chance identity in a world of discrete, random identities. The sane position, Emerson would have reiterated, is

to hold both perspectives: on the surface, you are one among many, but on a deeper level, you are God, the transcendental identity of all individuals.

### Non-Relational Being and Discrete Entities

“It is very unhappy,” Emerson stated in “Experience,” “but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made, that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man” (*CW*, 3:43). He did not mean that the “Fall” is man’s individual existences (the various many are necessary), but that it is an individual’s self-conscious “discovery” that he exists as a discrete entity, “a person,” an object alone, who will inevitably die—hence the peculiar anxiety that underlies the routine of his affairs. But Emerson thought that this “discovery” is a deception concealing the reality that the primordial identity of every individual transcends objects and persons, a deception intensified by vast space revealed by modern science. He believed that once this deception is removed, the individual will hear the inner voice of Being, assuring him of eternal life (but not necessarily of personal immortality)

Further, Emerson thought that the individual who assumes that only objective knowledge is true is dependent for “salvation” upon “otherness.” Sick unto death with the idea of death, alone as an object in a world of objects, the individual nevertheless clings to objects, because objective entities are all that he knows, and becomes at last a theist or a humanitarian. But this desire in times of spiritual peril to rely upon objects, animate and inanimate, supernatural and natural, Emerson held to be idolatrous and materialistic, the sentimental result of being duped by objects to believe that reality is pluralistic, consisting in essences with substantial relations. But “there is no doctrine of forms in our philosophy,” he stated firmly in “The Poet” (*CW*, 3:3).

Emerson believed that true answers to real questions come in non-relational terms, from fulfilling the being one is; his subjective idealism, his monism of Being, is the framework for this belief. Raising himself to the highest perspective, he held that there was an ineffable identity of him, an individual, and the Universal, the self-existent ground of Being, and that, therefore, he had no problem about knowing intuitively why he was he. He said to himself (as he said all persons can say to themselves) that there are not many, but only one, the existence of whom is self-authenticating, simply given. He was at once the individual, Ralph Waldo, living at a certain time, in Concord, among others, and the central soul of all people who were, are, and will be. He wrote about 1849: “Culture, the height of Culture, highest behavior consists in the identification of the Ego [the individual] with the universe [the Universal], so that when a man says, I think, I hope, I find,—he might properly say, the human race thinks, hopes, & finds, . . . and yet, at the same time, he shall be able continually to keep sight of his biographical *ego*” (*JMN*, 11:203). And he said in “Self-Reliance”: “These

roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day. There is no time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence" (CW, 2:38-39).

Consequently, Emerson remarked that it was less hard to describe God than the individual, because he believed that he knew by intuition why he was he, but could not (we have theorized) find a conceptual answer to the problem of why he was one and not another. He believed that when he intuited (his) infinitude, self-conscious questions ceased to exist; he had "health and a day" (CW, 1:13) and knew why he was he in the same way the rose and the rhodora know why they are they; he was, like the rhodora, his "own excuse for being."

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"In all my lectures," Emerson noted, "I have taught one doctrine, namely, the infinitude of the private man" (JMN, 7:342). This is his theory of identity, of the individual/Universal. In the thirties, he championed the self-reliant individual, but even then he did not celebrate the individual as ego, distinct and separate from, and set off against, the rest of the world; he celebrated the true individual, the individual/Universal. And the true individual is the "self" which is "the sole subject we study & learn," but which includes "much more than I know." But this "much more than I know," in truth, is known, or at least, can be known; it can be known intuitively—but never conceptually, because it is not an entity. It is that "immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed" (CW, 2:161); "that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, [in which] all things find their common origin" (CW, 2:37).

The individual, therefore, is the metaphysical ground of the universe, the only door to the inner world of subjectivity on which the external world of objectivity depends for its creation and existence. As object, the individual is insignificant, but as subject, he looks out upon a world of which he is the creator and the center. But the world, although being the created, cannot be dominated by any one among many. The world is the creation not merely of the individual; it is the creation of the individual/Universal. Hence, its universal aspects necessitate respect from the individual. The individual, to have a sane and enduring world, must abide by universal laws of Being, of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. He must rank and integrate the various aspects of his universe; he must, above all, live in sympathy with other people. It is true, Emerson says in "The Over-Soul," that as subject, the individual is more real than other people; other people "are supplementary to the primary teachings of the soul" (CW, 2:164). But other people, although possessing no essential otherness, are necessary symbols that certify that the soul and nature, the Me and the Not Me, are not alien to each other, but correspond, and make one universe.

In the late thirties, Emerson began to modify his idea of the character of God, conceiving the universal pole of the monism to be impersonal and unconscious, and the individual pole to be its consciousness. Or, to go back even further in his career, he tended at first to conceive of God and man as two distinct entities of consciousness, as did Channing and other theists of his heritage; then he conceived of these two consciousnesses as one, as epitomized by the mystical transparent eyeball metaphor in *Nature*. And in the late years, he tended to speak of the Universal, as was fashionable in his liberal circles (and as he had to a lesser extent in his early sermons) not in terms of mystical salvation but in terms of moral principles that underlie social progress.

But from *Nature* on, above and beyond these modifications in his ideas of the character of the three aspects of his monism, God, man, and nature, Emerson held that the individual is necessary to the creation and sustenance of nature. The individual, he says, is where “Being passes into Appearance, and Unity into Variety” (*CW*, 3:9), where freedom exists: “Every man sees that he is that middle point whereof every thing may be affirmed and denied with equal reason” (*CW*, 2:81). His message, challenging those ideologies which denigrate man, is that the individual, no matter how grotesque his experience or how meaningless it seems, is far more than a fugitive creature or a phantasm of matter. The individual, he assures us, contains “that depth where society itself originates and disappears, . . . where the individual is lost in his source.”<sup>21</sup>

## Notes

- 1 *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman et al, 16 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960-82), 4:68. (Hereafter designated in the text as *JMN*.)
- 2 Quentin Anderson writes that “the guarantee of their [the Transcendentalists’] connection with the universal was their existential uniqueness,” *The Imperial Self* (New York: Knopf, 1971), 46.
- 3 Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, *Reminiscences of Rev. Channing, D. D.* (Boston: Robert Brothers, 1880), 365, 103-04.
- 4 *The Works of William Ellery Channing, D. D.* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1886), 431.
- 5 Arthur O. Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York: Putnam, 1948), 82. Thoreau, like Channing, championed rationalistic individualism. His message is essentially social, not artistic. He said that he was “a majority of one” because he thought he was the only one on the side of absolute justice. In his ideal society his kind of individualism would be unnecessary. Emerson, on the other hand, was wary of political absolutes and thought difference among individuals necessary for a healthy society.
- 6 Richard P. Adams thinks that this is a “risky assertion,” as it certainly is. “Emerson and the Organic Metaphor,” *PMLA* 69 (1954): 117.

- 7 *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson et al, 5 vols. to date. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1971- ), 4:32, 4:28. (Hereafter designated in the text as CW.)
- 8 M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: Norton, 1971), 186.
- 9 Carl F. Strauch writes: “Emersonian sympathy was in large part, if not exclusively, metaphysical and thus escaped the sentimentalism of the ethical social principle as found in eighteenth century works.” “Emerson and the Doctrine of Sympathy,” *Critical Essays on Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert E. Burkholder and Joel Myerson (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1983), 345. In *Emerson’s Angle of Vision* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1952) Sherman Paul observes that Emerson used the term “sympathy” in the broad sense of identification with all “external” reality. Paul speaks of Emerson’s idea of “the sympathetic correspondence with nature, which alone prepared the mind to see nature as the expositor of the divine mind” (131); he quotes Emerson on sympathy: “Our health is our sound relation to external objects; our sympathy with external being” (158); and he writes that Emerson’s coldness and self-reliance should be balanced against his idea that Love—affection, instinct, sympathy—was the central idea and condition of transcendental insight” (179).
- 10 See Walter Jackson Bate, *From Classic to Romantic: Premises of Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1949), Chapter Five, for a discussion of “sympathy” in the Neoclassic and Romantic periods. Coleridge, Hazlitt, and Keats, among others, thought Shakespeare preeminently the poet of sympathy. Hume held that sympathy is the fundamental principle of morality. He wrote: “It is needless to push our researches so far as to ask, why we have humanity or a fellow-feeling with others. It is sufficient, that this is experienced to be a principle in human nature” (*An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Section IV, “Why Utility Pleases”).
- 11 *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Albert J. von Frank et al, 4 vols. (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1989-92), 3:85-89.
- 12 Perry Miller, *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), 346, 349-50.
- 13 *The Complete Sermons*, 4:229.
- 14 Joseph Jay Deiss, *The Roman Years of Margaret Fuller* (New York: Crowell, 1969), 313. Of course, Emerson and his friends are not the only ones to ask this question, Why am I, I? It has been asked, and its possible answers pondered over, probably since people began to think. Wislawa Szymborska asks, in her poem “Wonderment”:

Why to excess then in one single person?  
 This one not that? And why am I here?  
 On a day that’s a Tuesday? In a house not a nest?  
 In skin not in scales? With a face not a leaf?  
 Why only once in my very own person?  
 Precisely on earth? Under this little star?  
 After so many eras of not being here?

And John Updike tells us that “the mystery that most puzzled me as a child was the incarnation of my ego—that omnivorous and somehow preexistent ‘I’—in aspeck so specifically situated amid the billions of history. Why was I I? The arbitrariness of it



- astounded me; in comparison, nothing was too marvelous.” (In “The Dogwood Tree,” section “Religion”).
- 15 In “Fate,” *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson, Centenary Edition, 12 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903-4), 6:22.
  - 16 For instance, Emerson wrote in “Poetry and Imagination” that “the poet contemplates the central identity. . . . His own body is a fleeting apparition,—his personality as fugitive as the trope he employs” (*The Complete Works*, 8:21). The soul, Emerson believed, is distinct from the personality; it is the metaphysical ground of the personality.
  - 17 Jonathan Glover, reviewing Thomas Nagel’s book, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986) comments that Nagel “thinks the self shows an important limitation of objectivity, conceived of as the impersonal view from nowhere. A complete impersonal description of the world would omit one important fact: that out of all the people in the world, this particular one is me.” Glover retorts that “statements made in the first person . . . seem irreducible to impersonal statements. But perhaps this is a semantic peculiarity rather than a deep metaphysical fact about perspectives. An objective description of the universe would not mention that this particular place is here, or that this particular moment is now.” *The New York Review* (April 9, 1987), 31-34. Are the poets talking nonsense? Emerson, the subjective idealist, would side with Nagel, and say that “an objective description of the universe” which omitted “the view from nowhere,” that is, which omitted the fact that some one (who is a one among many) had to make that description, would be an incomplete description of reality. In other words, he would say that reality is a subject experiencing, and that a comprehensive definition of reality is incomplete when it ignores the subject that experiences. He would go further and say that the subject is neither a function of biology nor something added to biology (neither a “link in a chain nor any ignominious baggage”), that it cannot be objectified because it is not an object, that it is that which creates personal and impersonal texts—creates worlds, with many others, to experience.
  - 18 Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939; Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), 240.
  - 19 Walter Ong, *Fight for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), 10-11.
  - 20 Nietzsche wrote, “If there were Gods, how could I endure it to be no God! Therefore there are no Gods.” *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, “In the Happy Isles.”
  - 21 *The Complete Works*, 7:10.