6. Perfectionist Counterpoint: Time and Place in Thinking of Emerson

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> When a thought of Plato becomes a thought to me—when a truth that fired the soul of Pindar fires mine, time is no more.
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> RALPH WALDO EMERSON, "History"

> I would write upon the lintels of the doorpost, Whim. I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation.
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> RALPH WALDO EMERSON, "Self-Reliance"

> Thus inevitably does the universe wear our color.
>
> RALPH WALDO EMERSON, "Experience"

In Cavell's thinking, moral perfectionism is dynamic. It happens as an event. In conversations whose outcome is not foreseeable, in dialogue on stage and screen, in sentence-by-sentence turns of Emerson's essays, the soul *becomes* despite pressures of conformity. Teleology is where such perfectionism goes to die. It is not where we find ourselves but where our souls expire. Every event does not require the blessing of a concept to become intelligible. Quite the opposite. It may become the prisoner of premature definition as we too may become captive to fixed ideas and lose touch with immediate contexts where insight occurs and motivates us to advance, to take the

next step forward, up or down, as we move along. We do not know answers in advance. "[M]y forgone conclusions," Cavell admits, "were never conclusions *I* had arrived at, but were merely imbibed by me, merely conventional."[1] The dynamism of Cavell's perfectionist thinking challenges distinctions between subject and object, whim and clarification, past and present, as my epigraphs from Emerson suggest. It prompts crossings of such gaps. Likewise, in its summoning of philosophical conviviality and personal epiphanies, this essay seeks to represent contradictions and divisions of American culture and potential ways of inhabiting and even overcoming them that perfectionist thinking can encourage.

Table talk aptly inspires my essay though it takes me a long way back. For Socrates was an ancient Athenian, and he serves as an emblematic figure of philosophy at the end of the *Symposium* when he remains awake while others have fallen asleep.[2] Still, when a thought of Plato becomes a thought to me, as Emerson puts it, time is no more. So, it seems that nowadays Emersonian perfectionism may enable us to experience the same presence of mind that Socrates eternally represents in Plato's dialogue about that drinking party so long ago. The Italian Renaissance author, Baldesar Castiglione, clearly agrees with Emerson's sense of such a vanishing point in time even though he lived and wrote over three centuries before the American sage. At the court in Urbino in 1507, Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* stages an after-dinner dialogue on love, which is the same topic those classical Greek banqueters entertain. Moreover, Castiglione brings his whole book and that conversation both to a close when the interlocutors realize that they have talked through the night until dawn and lost all track of time in the process.[3] Like the Renaissance itself, the Transcendentalist movement in the United States is *not* an historical period, it is a cultural phenomenon and an event discernible in changes of heart and mind represented by such artists as Castiglione and Emerson. When a thought of Plato becomes a thought to both Castiglione and Emerson, time slips a cog and merges past and present. It disappears. On such occasions, we don't need historians as much as we need poets and philosophers and the competition between them for the human soul.

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1. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. New edition (Oxford University Press, 1999), 125.
2. Plato, *Symposium*, trans. and ed. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Hackett Publishing Co., 1989), 77.
3. Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Doubleday, 1959), 359.

Emerson is writing about history when he makes that radical claim about time, and table talk can take me a long way back in a chronological sense as well. It seems quite a while between now and when I was thirteen years old in 1957. In those days dinner conversation at home frequently focused on my older brother. To say the least, he was "a handful," and my parents were considering drastic measures to address that family dilemma. Sending him away to school seemed their only option, so night after night over dinner, my mother spoke eloquently about the benefits and attractions of such an education while she tried to avoid harping on my brother's troubling behavior both in and out of school. Around our imaginary table in conversation now about Emersonian perfectionism, I am confident that Cavell would appeal to his own supplement of Austin's categories of speech acts to identify my mother's tone and describe her speech as "passionate utterance."[4] But, while my older brother remained tone-deaf and unresponsive to such appeals, her passion caught my attention and moved me simply to ask, "What about me?" Ironically, that query put us all in an unforeseen quandary, for I was in no evident need of such an extreme course correction. Yet, the very next year I began travelling 2,500 miles from Tucson, Arizona, to Concord, Massachusetts, to attend an independent school that none of us had ever heard of until we began to address the sudden question I blurted out over that fateful dinner.

During the following summer in 1958, I began to enjoy occasional meals with another family, and my appetite for their conversation surprised me and grew keen. My mother had learned of a family with a son my age that was moving to Tucson, and she had urged me to meet this new arrival who just might need a friend. In so doing, I not only made a friend. I also found myself in the company of scholars—professors, not professionals such as my father's medical practice brought into our home. Moreover, my new friend's family were Southerners, and they were convivial experts in the lore of regional differences that I would soon encounter firsthand up north. Both his father and his uncle were historians of the South, as was their father. He had written a book on the Southern plantation and served as President of Washington and Lee University for three decades. According to his 1964 obituary in the *New York Times*,

4. Cavell, "Performative and Passionate Utterance," in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Harvard University Press), 155–191.

> Dr. [Francis Pendleton] Gaines, always confident and poised, was one of the South's most respected orators, known for precision and felicity of expression. In the nineteen forties he received about 400 invitations a year to speak at functions throughout the country. In a normal year he made about 40 major addresses in 20 states. He spoke in a richly toned, resonant voice that he allowed at times to become heavily Southern. The accent was his by birth. He was born at Due West, S. C., and reared in Virginia.[5]

As a Westerner in a New England school, I was treated kindly, and during Thanksgiving and winter breaks, schoolmates invited me to stay with them in their homes. But a significant part of me could not easily feel at home on vacation or at school. Moreover, in conversations with the Gaines family, I had begun to encounter ways of talking and thinking about aspects of American experience that often register in counterpoint with the opinions of thoughtful New Englanders. By junior year, when we studied the era of the Civil War, my sympathies were not as readily resolved as those of my classmates from up north. When I first read Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* (1961), which takes place in New Orleans, Binx Bolling's philosophical concerns and sense of irony resonated more deeply with me than those of any other protagonist I had yet encountered in an American novel. Later, Robert Coles was my teacher at Harvard, when he was writing about school desegregation in New Orleans. He befriended me at a critical moment during student protests against the Vietnam War and soon invited me to drive down to Yale with him so we could talk along the way. He was going to visit the historian C. Vann Woodward, whose sense of the burden and irony of Southern history informs Coles's *Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear* (1967). In that book's penultimate paragraph, Coles invokes Woodward and ironically questions the sense of history that he advocates: "Yet, why bother about information like that? Why not worry about our poor, ailing semitropical neighbors? If we label them 'sick,' we may respond with 'help,' with 'guidance.'"[6]

In my ear these queries sound like Emerson's defiant address to the "foolish philanthropist" in "Self-Reliance," a passage that has stirred negative reactions from

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5. "Francis P. Gaines, Educator, was 71: Chancellor and Ex-President of Washington and Lee Dies," *The New York Times*, January 1, 1964, 25.
6. Robert Coles, *Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear* (Little Brown & Co., 1967), 381.

estimable critics who have prompted Cavell to explain Emerson's controversial sentiments. Of course, Coles is writing specifically as a psychiatrist and making fun of his profession's habit of confidently offering its specialized kind of therapy as a panacea while willfully turning a blind eye to the world beyond the psyche and its past. In fact, Coles's challenge to his medical colleagues could readily apply to the smugness and self-righteousness that attends anyone's misplaced confidence in the unquestioned virtue and efficacy of their calling. Ironically, a year later at the New School for Social Research in New York City, where the publication of William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* occasioned a panel about violence in literature and Coles himself was a participant, the moderator introduced him with such fulsome praise of his "humanity" that Robert Penn Warren, who was also on the panel, could not resist making a quip. When the moderator asked Warren to start the proceedings with his presentation, he nodded toward Coles and remarked, "If he is so humane, why doesn't he go first?" He didn't exactly call Coles a foolish philanthropist. Rather, he humorously suggested his sense of a certain excess in the "moderator's" introductory remarks about Coles, and he sought to put such hyperbole into perspective.[7]

In "Hope against Hope," Cavell's defense of Emerson relies on the pertinence of a New Testament episode to this controversial moment in "Self-Reliance": "Then, again, do not tell me, as a good man did today, of my obligation to put all poor men in a good situation. Are they *my* poor?"[8] In John 12:8, Mary anoints the feet of Jesus with precious ointment, and Judas criticizes her for wasting this valuable substance which otherwise could have been sold to raise money for the poor. But Jesus defends Mary by saying, "The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me." This memorable episode is familiar to me because more than once I heard my grandfather preach a sermon based upon it called "Why the waste?" He was not a formally educated man because poverty had forced him to leave school after the eighth grade and get a job, but he appreciated the distinctions being made by both the Concordian and the Galilean in the passages above. He also took a keen interest in me and in my education. For example, just before I went off to Harvard, he and I grouted a small bathroom together. With a twinkle in his eye, he seized on the moment we finished

7. "Violence in Literature," *The American Scholar* 37, no. 3 (Summer 1968): 484.
8. Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, ed. David Justin Hodge (Stanford University Press, 2003), 178.

that job to reassure me that now he *really* knew I'd be okay in the Ivy League. But I can also trace back to him the eloquent emotion in my mother's "passionate utterances" at our dining table some years before about the value of education. He had not wanted her to go to college because the family could not afford it and she was a girl. In their mill town no one had heard of "gap years," nor did anyone speak of "first-gen" students, I'm sure. But after high school, she worked full-time as a secretary at the local bank and deposited enough of her earnings in a savings account to persuade her father to change his mind, just as she inadvertently prompted me to ask, "Why not me?" over two decades later. Her speech conveyed the conviction of her feelings beyond argument and rationalization.

In thinking of Emerson, we might fairly wonder who was speaking when I asked that question in 1957. Whenever I complained about school thereafter, my father would say, "You wanted to go. It was your choice." He made it sound as if there were no adults in the dining room that evening whose consent would eventually be required. Perhaps he was right. My mother was speaking with her eighteen-year-old voice at the latest, the voice which had finally changed her father's mind. When I heard her, I was thirteen. Perhaps my "genius" was calling, or hers was calling to me, or both of us were a little out of our minds, not yet clapped into jail by consciousness, as Emerson puts it. Perhaps tones of spontaneity and candor in each of our voices at that moment bespoke "the healthy attitude of nature" that Emerson discerns in "[t]he nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say ought to conciliate one." Dinner indeed had been served; our voices were heard like those of such boys as yet unencumbered by "consequences."[9]

"The Religious Feast" is Erasmus's version of Plato's *Symposium*. Though it takes place in an elegant villa with an enclosed garden, in some ways it reminds me of church basements where alcoholics assemble for AA meetings. Everywhere one looks in Eusebius's country place, it seems there is some scriptural quote or image or edifying artworks, like frescoes and statues, to interpret. Of course, such exegesis is familiar to Cavell, who, as he is well on his way toward writing about Emerson, writes his "little book" about Thoreau, *The Senses of* Walden. As its title indicates and his text

9. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," *Emerson: Essays and Poems*, ed. Joel Porte (Library of America, 1996), 261–262.

affirms, Cavell reads *Walden* as though it aspires to, and deserves, the status that sacred Scripture traditionally holds in the eyes of faithful Christians and Jews. Christian readers, traditionally, speak not only of the letter and the spirit but also of the four senses of Holy Writ, and Cavell reads Thoreau with an eye for such polysemy: the multiple meanings faithful exegetes may discern in the Bible and in Thoreau, as an inheritor of protestant poetics derived from biblical exegesis, which he deploys in his writing.[10]

The walls talk in Erasmus's colloquy, and they speak in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Where one might encounter slogans like "Keep it simple," "Live and let live," and "Easy does it" at an AA meeting, one reads, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" or "I am the Alpha and the Omega" or "Come ye children, hearken unto me; I will teach ye the fear of the Lord."[11] And just as alcoholics may pore over, and converse about, a passage in the "Big Book" or one of the twelve steps, in the country house of Eusebius, he and his guests examine and discuss in detail three verses from Proverbs and other passages from the Bible. Because there is a lot at stake in conversations that take place in such settings, each place, thus inhabited, amounts to "a serious house on serious earth," as Philip Larkin describes a country church he strays into even though he is anything but a believer.[12] The gravity of such occasions also rhymes with Emerson's sense of the transcendental present. Slogans such as "One day with the Lord is like a thousand years" (2 Pet. 3:8) and "One day at a time" require no great interpretive effort to construe as spiritually akin to "Time is no more." Moreover, unlike Plato's symposiasts, Erasmus's cast of characters encounter not only walls that talk, but also a cup that does the same to edify the guests about wine: "Nobody is harmed except by himself." "In wine there is truth."[13]

At the end of Erasmus's Christian symposium, Eusebius, the host, urges his guest to stay on a couple more days, but he puts the pleasures of their midrashic intercourse in perspective by excusing himself from their company. He must leave to visit a friend on his deathbed and to mediate a dispute between two of his friends that

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10. Lawrence Rhu, "Thoreau and Cavell: Unauthorized Versions," in *Thoreau at 200: Essays and Reassessments*, eds. Kristen Case and K. P. Van Anglen (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 220–221.
11. Desiderius Erasmus, "The Religious Feast," in *The Praise of Folly and Other Writings*, ed. Robert M. Adams, (W. W. Norton & Co., 1989), 184.
12. Philip Larkin, "Church Going," in *The Less Deceived* (St. Martin's Press, 1960), 28–29.
13. Erasmus, "The Religious Feast," 196.

otherwise may get out of hand. For him, such charitable works take precedence over the dialogue he has otherwise been fully enjoying with his companions.

Years ago, when I was teaching a summer course at Harvard on the Bible and its interpreters, I regularly had lunch with Stanley Cavell at a Chinese restaurant on Beacon Street in Boston. In conversation, Cavell once summoned a phrase from Erasmus's great antagonist, Martin Luther, to characterize the attitude toward humanities texts that Cavell dared to expect from students and other readers: "unless you believe, you will not understand."[14] That phrase (and many another, whole treatises as a matter of fact) sounds the keynote of Luther's argument over faith and works with the church of Rome, which he left while Erasmus remained in the fold. In contemporary secular terms, such a conviction about the relation between belief and understanding as Luther expresses above may be translated serviceably into the language of psychoanalysis as transference, which Adam Phillips prompts me to render back into clerical terms as *temporary* idolatry.[15] Hopefully at some stage, if only in passing, the reader or analysand invests complete conviction in the authority of a text or a psychoanalyst, and that investment enables the text to work effectively upon such a fully engaged reader or a psychoanalyst to work effectively with such a fully engaged patient. And vice versa, of course. One party in such pairs is not entirely passive while the other exercises agency. Rather, there is a conversation, a dialogue that redistributes such qualities as patience and agency into more viable and dynamic proportion and balance.

"Thinking of Emerson," Cavell's ambivalent title of his first essay on Emerson, performs this very process in an Erasmian spirit. For in Erasmus's most famous work, *The Praise of Folly* (Lat. *Moriae Encomium*), Folly is a fool who is singing the praises of folly, i.e., herself. So, she is both the subject and the object of her encomi-

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14. Rhu, "An American Philosopher at the Movies," *Double-Take* 7.1 (Spring 2001): 116.
15. See "Psychoanalysis and Idolatry," in *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored*, (Harvard University Press, 1993), 121: "With the discovery of transference Freud evolved what could be called a cure by idolatry; in fact, potentially, a cure of idolatry, through idolatry." Since the cure is "evolved" and comes "through" idolatry, transference sounds like a dynamic process—a "moment of transition" or "shooting of the gulf" in Emerson's terms in "Self-Reliance." In such a case, idolatry may be a *means* to an end, not necessarily *the* end itself. I lean into the idea of transference as a step toward recovery via *temporary* idolatry rather than toward what Phillips calls "belief in psychoanalysis" as a new form of idolatry and thus a problem (though I agree *that* is a problem). So does Cavell in his way as a philosopher when he writes, "Reason seems to be able to overthrow the deification of everything except itself" in his essay on *King Lear*. See Lawrence F. Rhu, "Temporary Idolatry" in *Stanley Cavell's American Dream: Shakespeare, Philosophy, Hollywood Movies* (Fordham University Press, 2006), 38-41.

um, just as "Thinking of Emerson" admits of reading "Emerson" as either the thinker or his thinking or both. Moreover, as with Castiglione only more so, if we read Cavell as embracing and inhabiting the same grammatical ploy as Erasmus, may we not say: In that moment, "Time is no more"? By identical means both Cavell and Erasmus subvert the stability of a grammatical distinction between subject and object, and Cavell does so in the present tense, which makes that subversion an ongoing process, a current event.

The boundary being crossed in these instances stands between subject and object, whereas the boundary crossed by the courtly symposiasts in Urbino stands between chronology and timelessness. But Cavell's use of "thinking," whether it is a gerund or a present participle, also brings Emerson into the moment at hand, as Folly does on her own behalf. For she is always already there as the speaker of her own praise, which she regularly tells us herself. Perhaps either crossing could be called ecstasy, but why all the hype? The philosophy Cavell hears Emerson calling for is just a more accurate description of our condition and experience as conscious persons if, like Socrates, we stay awake. "Thus inevitably does the universe wear our color." In such coincidences of the self with the self or the self with the world as we find it, "Emerson is out to destroy the ground on which such a problem [as sharply distinguishing subject and object] takes itself seriously, I mean interprets itself as a metaphysical fixture."[16]

But the more controversial way that Erasmus suggests we can erase historical differences comes through in his "Religious Feast" when he mentions virtuous pagans like Cato and prays for intercession from Socrates. Admiration of Cato's spirit in anticipating death almost turns him into a model for Christian conduct until his "excessive assurance, amounting almost to arrogance" disqualifies him in comparison with Socrates. His "really marvelous state of mind in one who never knew Christ and/or the sacred scriptures … can hardly keep [one interlocutor, the 'cloudy' Nephilius] from crying out, 'Pray for us, Saint Socrates.'"[17] This unofficial sanctification of a pagan philosopher stirs another interlocutor, Chrysoglottus, to acknowledge his hope that the souls of Horace and Virgil also both rest in that blessed condition. In this re-

16. Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, 13.
17. Erasmus, "The Religious Feast," 201.

gard it is worth remembering that Cato, who is both a pagan and a suicide, greets Dante and Virgil when they arrive in Purgatory. For he is the guardian of that mountain in the afterworld, and he will join the blessed in heaven after the last judgment.[18] But Virgil, who travels all the way to the top of the mountain with Dante, instantly disappears from his side in the earthly paradise when Beatrice takes over his role as guide for the rest of the journey.[19] Virgil will return to Limbo, but we can sense in Erasmus that the revival of classical culture during the Renaissance will, to say the least, problematize some of the sharp distinctions between Christian and pagan in medieval culture.

Such a counterpoint between distinctive phases of European civilization, as well as their dynamic mutability over time, can remind us of the interplay of diverse American cultures in the reception of Emerson. Even in "cities of words" that all of us ostensibly may share, the perfectionist assertion that "time is no more" may not decisively override the tenacious hold that the historical experience of defeat continued to exert on subsequent generations in the South after the American Civil War. When *The Moviegoer* was awarded the National Book Award in 1962, Walker Percy was asked why there were so many great southern writers. He briefly explained, "Because we lost the War." Soon thereafter Flannery O'Connor wrote him a letter affirming her agreement with Percy's blunt explanation.[20] Given such deep-seated sentiments, we may not yet inhabit what Emerson calls "this new yet unapproachable America" because residence in such a utopia requires a change of heart rather than a change of location.[21] In fact, some of us may not even entertain that prospect because our skeptical sense of human possibilities here on planet earth precludes such high hopes. We may have to wonder if we would even be very good company at the sort of symposium we are imagining since such skepticism can quickly devolve into cynicism. Yet, Robert Penn Warren's quip about Coles was absorbed in good humor during the 1968 panel, so there could be some hope for Warren in this castle that I'm building in air as the venue of our imaginary gathering. Moreover, in 1987, Walker Percy dedicated his

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18. Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, ed. C. H. Grandgent (D. C. Heath & Co., 1933), "Purgatorio," I.31–108.
19 Ibid., "Purgatorio," XXX.49–54.
20. Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 470.
21. "Experience," *Emerson: Essays and Poems*, 485.

sixth and final novel, *The Thanatos Syndome*, to Robert Coles, a Boston native who had been residing with his family in Concord, Massachusetts, since he returned from the South in the early 1960s. They had become friends after Percy favorably reviewed Coles first book, *Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear* in June 1967.

But let's not get our hopes up too high. For no one lets the air out of transcendental balloons better than Robert Penn Warren in "Homage to Emerson, On a Night Flight to New York."[22] Though other Southern writers may be prone to give it a try, Warren's crusty sardonic takedown on reading Emerson at 38,000 feet frequently hits favorite sore spots and deepens familiar wounds inflicted by other skeptics who, to say the least, regard Emersonianism with a jaundiced eye. Transcendental insight, it seems, only dawns at such altitudes in Warren's view:

> A finger
> Of light, in our pressurized gloom, strikes down,
> Like God, to poke the page; the page glows. There is
> No sin. Not even error.

Even the harsh legacy of old Adam, the fallible father of us all, disappears on high when our hearts are, in Warren's phrase, "as abstract as an empty / Coca-Cola bottle."[23]

It is also noteworthy that Cavell draws a line at *Nature*,[24] which features Emerson's "transparent eyeball," just as Warren seems to be doing in his poem's second section, which begins,

> The spider has more eyes than I have money.
> I used to dream God was a spider
>
> Or vice versa.[25]

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22. Robert Penn Warren, "Homage to Emerson, On a Night Flight to New York," *New Yorker*, July 16, 1966, reprinted in *Estimating Emerson: An Anthology of Criticism from Carlyle*, ed. David LaRocca (Bloomsbury, 2013), 473–477.
23. Ibid., 473–474.
24. Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, 111–112.
25. Warren, "Homage to Emerson," 474.

Thus, we promptly find ourselves at an interesting crossroads of anti-Emersonian satire: Christopher Pearse Cranch's 1839 caricature of Emerson's metamorphosis into a transparent eyeball in *Nature* (1836).[26] It easily qualifies as the most memorable cartoon of the author ever after, an iconic capture of the sage of Concord "high on his own supply," though he has decades to go before that label of "sage" will stick. Moreover, Cranch's subsequent imitators have not hesitated to give Emerson more than one such all-seeing goggle eye. Then, Warren's afterthought, "Or vice versa" —that is, imagining himself as a spider rather than God—returns us to the crux of the matter in his opening section because it reminds us of perhaps the most notorious of all Puritan sermons, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." There, Jonathan Edwards imagines the consequences of human sin in the afterlife via the Dantesque image of a spider thrown into infernal flames, though Edwards was no reader of Dante.[27] We can be sure of that.

But Warren was a reader of Dante, as was Robert Lowell, his student in the Master's program in English at LSU in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, from 1940–1942. During that period, he and Warren met "several days a week at twelve o'clock and had a sandwich and a quick Coke, and then [they] read Dante for two hours."[28] In that setting, one has to wonder if Lowell was already speaking in "his peculiar accent, sort of quasi-Southern, a unique personal invention," a "fabricated drawl," which some construed as a "way to disavow Boston by resisting its manner of speaking."[29] In "Mr. Edwards and the Spider," Lowell the New Englander found words and images that enabled him to sound like an heir to Puritan homiletics who could imagine a pilgrimage through the *Inferno*:

> A very little thing, a little worm,
> Or hourglass-blazoned spider, it is said,
> Can kill a tiger. Will the dead
> Hold up his mirror and affirm
> To the four winds the smell

26. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson's "Nature": Origin, Growth, Meaning*, ed. Merton M. Selts, Jr., and Alfred R. Ferguson (Dodds, Mead and Company, 1969), 9.
27. Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Nina Baym (W. W. Norton and Company, 2013) 209–220, 215.
28. Joseph Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography* (Random House, 1997), 192.
29. Robert Pinsky, *Jersey Breaks: Becoming an American Poet* (W. W. Norton, 2023), 123.

> And flash of his authority? It's well
> If God who holds you to the pit of hell,
> Much as one holds a spider, will destroy,
> Baffle and dissipate your soul. As a small boy
>
> On Windsor Marsh, I saw the spider die
> When thrown into the bowels of fierce fire:
> There's no long struggle, no desire
> To get up on its feet and fly—
> It stretches out its feet
> And dies. This is the sinner's last retreat;
> Yes, and no strength exerted on the heat
> Then sinews the abolished will, when sick
> And full of burning, it will whistle on a brick.[30]

Critics often see Lowell's conversion to Catholicism in 1941 as a revolt against his Calvinist roots, which makes a certain sense if we recall the Reformation antipathy to the Church of Rome (and vice versa), even when they both seem to be singing from the same hymnal. But long after Lowell has lapsed from Catholicism, when he returns to Edwards and his spiders in "Jonathan Edwards in Western Massachusetts," he still sounds like a grateful heir of Dante's *Commedia*, though now he imagines meeting Edwards in one of its happier realms:

> Ah paradise! Edwards,
> I would be afraid
> To meet you there as a shade.
> We move in different circles.[31]

Lowell's ecumenical pairing of Edwards and Dante may seem to mend the Reformation schism, locally at least; and even more so, Lowell's easy-going conversational

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30. Robert Lowell, "Mr. Edwards and the Spider," in *Lord Weary's Castle and The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (Meridian Books, 1961), 58–59.
31. Lowell, "Jonathan Edwards in Western Massachusetts," in *Life Studies and For the Union Dead*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964), 41.

style in the later poem has calmed the tempests of his earlier rhetoric, which smacks of a convert's passionate intensity. But widespread acceptance and celebration of Dante in historically Protestant communities of readers have other literary roots. Thanks to Henry Francis Cary's early translation of the *Commedia* (1805–14) and many other Englishings thereafter, by the middle of the twentieth century, the recuperation of Dante for English readers had long been under way; the same goes for American readers, thanks to Longfellow's translation (1867). Openness to the Italian poet's visionary epic may lie in these developments, just as T. S. Eliot's influence as an exponent of Dante and the Christian tradition registered powerfully on other American poets, like Robert Penn Warren and Allen Tate, two Southerners whose instruction Lowell sought out as a young man. But Eliot's brief preliminary disavowal of historical background and biographical context in his 1929 essay on Dante bespeaks a critical trend that Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Poetry* further advances and New Criticism consolidates.[32] The autonomy of poems in their own terms becomes the byword of such interpretive practices. The adequacy of what is there on the *Commedia*'s pages, their alleged self-sufficiency, becomes a foundational premise for introductory courses in literature that seek to transform undergraduates into close readers and confident interpreters of primary texts.

For over four decades, Cavell taught introductory humanities courses at Harvard. Though they were not strictly literature courses, they featured such authors as Shakespeare and Beckett, as well as Thoreau and Emerson. Cavell's lectures also exemplified close reading, and he expected it of his students though he did not shy away from intellectual history and comprehensive narratives of the emergence of modernity. His friendship with Thomas Kuhn at Berkeley perhaps underlaid and supported the accounts of skepticism and modernity featured in his first essay on Shakespeare, "The Avoidance of Love," which derives from his lectures in Humanities 5: "Ideas of Man and the World in Western Thought," though Harry Berger aptly identifies it as "an essay from outer space."[33] But Cavell's writing often succeeds in enlisting diverse

32. Cavell specifically addresses some premises of such criticism in "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays,* updated ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 74–82.
33. Harry Berger, Jr., *Making Trifles of Terrors: Redistributing Complicities in Shakespeare*, (Stanford University Press, 1997), xii. On Kuhn's friendship with Cavell, see Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford University Press, 2010), 352–357.

approaches without evaporating into "meta-theory," the wild blue yonder beyond the beyond that Cavell does not believe exists. His writing is "literary," even "poetic," simply because he takes an interest in it as a means of appeal and connection. When he singles out Dante's *Commedia* as a perfectionist text, I am confident he could profitably read it as such. Even Eliot could be something of a model for Cavell's approach, or at least he could be helpful, but Erich Auerbach's treatment of Dante as a poet for a secular world would better serve a reader who seeks to demonstrate the value of such an interpretation.

Both Walker Percy and Flannery O'Connor are drawn to Dante, but except for O'Connor's story "The Artificial Nigger," neither of them managed any extended imitation or interpretation of Dante's poem. Clearly Lowell has discovered the usefulness of a more colloquial idiom by the time he returns to Edwards's Dantesque visions, but he has left the Church of Rome in the meantime. Even Lowell's teacher, Allen Tate, appears to have foundered in his ambition to write extensively in terza rima, which is perhaps no surprise, given the difficulty of sustaining such a form in English for long.[34] According to Robert Pinsky, who translated the entire *Inferno* in terza rima, Dante's rhyme scheme poses technical challenges that are hard to meet without padding lines and adopting Latinate diction.[35] Still, all of these artists, except Pinsky, were drawn to Dante because he is a Christian poet, so Auerbach's secular approach might not appeal to them. Yet, each would acknowledge that modern society understands itself mainly in secular terms, and literary realists are thus obliged to reflect contemporary experience in such terms if they seek a current audience beyond their co-religionists. Unitarianism itself was a step away from Augustinian theology and Calvinism, and it struck traditional Christian believers as a move toward, if not an arrival at, secular humanism. Moreover, Emerson's career followed the increasingly secular path of leaving his Unitarian pulpit in Boston and then affronting the Unitarian establishment at Harvard with his Divinity School Address in 1838.

It may thus seem inevitable that a Southern Catholic novelist like Walker Percy would find in Emerson and his heirs just the sort of secular drifter who would

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34. See Marian Janssen, *Not at All What One Is Used To: The Life and Times of Isabella Gardner* (Missouri University Press, 2010), 195–237; and Dennis Looney, "Allen Tate's Flight from Racism: Dante and 'The Swimmers'," in *Dante Beyond Borders: Contexts and Reception*, eds. Nick Havely, Jonathan Katz, and Richard Cooper (Legenda, 2021), 299–310.
35. Pinsky, *Jersey Breaks*, 166–169.

constitute an apposite antagonist of Will Barret, the protagonist of Percy's second novel, *The Last Gentleman*. Will's telling moniker reveals the legacy of Cavalier stoicism he is liable to inherit as the default philosophical setting for aristocratic Southerners like Percy's "Uncle" Will (William Alexander Percy) in real life and Binx Bolling's Aunt Emily in *The Moviegoer*, Percy's first work of fiction. Moreover, in *The Last Gentleman* Percy creates an Emersonian target of mockery named Forney Aiken, but Jay Tolson overlooks this clear though minor instance of anti-Emersonian satire in *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy*. Instead, he makes a much larger claim about Percy's anti-Emersonian convictions to distinguish his work from modern biographies in general, which lack "a tragic sense" and tend to see their "subject's failings against some implied perfectibilist ideal rather than the limitations of human fate."[36] Tolson's argument relies mainly upon Percy's refusal of an invitation to give what Tolson calls "the Emerson lecture" during Harvard's graduation ceremonies in 1987, but he exaggerates Percy's hostility to Emerson in the service of larger cultural dichotomies—secular and religious, northern and southern—whose inevitability is not guaranteed when viewed close-up or even from certain distances or heights, such as where we found Robert Penn Warren on a night flight to New York.[37]

Richard Tillinghast warrants consideration in an essay about how Southern writers respond to Emersonian perfectionism because he evokes Warren's "Homage to Emerson" in his long poem, *Sewanee in Ruins*, which tells the story of his shattered post-Civil War alma mater during Reconstruction. Tillinghast grew up in Memphis and graduated from the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, before he came to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he studied with Robert Lowell at Harvard during the 1960s. Though Lowell himself sought out Southern poets like Tate and Warren as teachers and guides in developing his craft (and he even cultivated a vaguely Southern drawl in speaking), Tillinghast stood out as the only Southerner among Lowell's most gifted students like Alan Williamson from Chicago, Frank Bidart from Bakersfield, California, and Lloyd Schwartz from Brooklyn.

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36. Jay Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy* (University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 12–13.
37. In "The Birth of Love," for example, Warren describes a smitten husband's view of his wife in strikingly Emersonian terms, the very terms that Cranach's cartoon had so memorably mocked: "The man // Some ten strokes out, but now hanging / Motionless in gunmetal water, feet / Cold with the coldness of depth, all / History dissolving from him, is / Nothing but an eye. Is only eye." *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. John Burt (Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 319.

In 1980, almost two decades after he had graduated from Sewanee, Tillinghast found himself there again as a visiting professor, and, in a passage where he laments his current students' obliviousness to their predecessors' harsh sufferings and deprivations, he summons memories of his alma mater's struggles immediately after the Civil War in terms reminiscent of Warren's satirical disdain for Emerson:

> The Armies of Emancipation
> having *loosed the fateful lightning*
> *of His terrible swift sword*
> would be free to go West and kill Indians.
> The machines tooled in that war economy
> eased the North on plush velvet and iron rails
> into its Gilded Age
> and reconstructed the South
> with share-cropping and hunger—
> and a deeper thirst,
> not satisfied by the Coke you drink,
> flying Delta over kudzu fields out of Atlanta,
> reading *The Last Gentleman* by Walker Percy.[38]

Tillinghast is echoing the satirical spirit of Warren's high-flying anti-Emersonian Coca-Cola imagery; but ironically, he supplements those allusions with a skeptical reference to *The Last Gentleman*, a novel that engages in explicit satire of transcendental high-mindedness as it is embodied in Forney Aiken, the alcoholic "pseudo-Negro," whose firkin business links him to the romanticism of "the meal in the firkin, the milk in the pail" in "The American Scholar."[39] Indeed, the broadest generalization that Walker Percy's biographer, Jay Tolson, makes about his subject asserts that he is pervasively anti-Emersonian. That claim derives mainly from this sentence about the New England transcendentalists in Lewis Simpson's "Home by Way of California," which Percy calls "the real savage eye-opener": "On the path to the realm of the Over-

38. Richard Tillinghast, *Sewanee in Ruins* (University Press of Sewanee, 1983), 10.
39. Emerson, *Emerson: Essays and Poems*, 69.

soul, they had made a choice and effected a kill: they had murdered the self that is the creature of history and society."[40] But the more pertinent influence on *The Last Gentleman* is Søren Kierkegaard, not only because of that Danish philosopher's Augustinian sense of human fallibility, but because of the way he characterizes Christian faith and "the teleological suspension of the ethical" via the figure of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*. Percy puts this latter concept to work in his novel when he creates a fictional version of the 1962 protest at Ole Miss against the admission of James Meredith, an African American, to its law school. Amid a violent mob who ultimately knock him out with a pole holding a Confederate flag, Will Barrett single-mindedly seeks his beloved Kitty Vaught. Even when he awakens, his conscious mind hardly registers the political concerns that sparked the riot, and he resumes his search for Kitty all the way to Santa Fe. Thus, to borrow a word from Cavell, Will seems more a "pre-moral" person than an ethical individual who knows his priorities, considers his options, and makes a deliberate choice. Or perhaps that is how Christian allegory sounds to an ear accustomed to secular realism or how true love-at-first-sight sounds to the disenchanted.

When Percy offered his memorably succinct explanation of why the South has produced so many good writers— "Because we lost the War"—he was suggesting a familiar theme about the region's tragic historical experience and its bone-deep lessons thus learned about human limitation and evil. That experience distinguishes the South not merely historically but temperamentally from the North. As Warren puts it in prose, bloody sectional conflict produces a triumphalist North with its Treasury of Virtue as opposed to a chastened South with its Great Alibi, which the tragic sense of life and the Christian doctrine of original sin both can too readily become.[41] Tillinghast is echoing Warren's poem mainly to expose the lack of a sense of history and an understanding of tragedy, neither of which his students at Sewanee have yet acquired, if only because of their youth and good fortune as privileged Americans like the twenty-five-year-old Will Barrett, a Princeton dropout. In this regard he is also echoing claims that C. Vann Woodward made about the lessons that all Americans *can* learn from the study of Southern history though, in the light of the *national*

40. Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins*, 455, 466.
41. Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (Harvard University Press, 1961), 54–66.

tragedy we suffered due to our involvement in the Vietnam war, he later retracted them. During that ordeal, you might say, the South lost its regional monopoly on the sense of tragedy.

As we have seen, Jay Tolson also echoes a version of such claims when he seeks to distinguish his approach as a biographer from that of others who tend to see their "subject's failings against some implied perfectibilist ideal rather than the limitations of human fate."[42] This ideal, which Tolson links to Emerson, smacks of the idea of perfectibility that inheres in the misappropriation of Emerson that Cavell exposes in John Rawls's chapter on "Perfectionism" in his *Theory of Justice*. Cavell's layered argument works its way through various texts to discern Emerson's presence in Rawls on Nietzsche on Schopenhauer, as he is seeks to liberate our ideals from becoming "metaphysical fixtures" that stymie us, via "maximization" and "teleology," rather than prompting us to advance. Such fixed ideas stand apart from us as objects do from subjects, and so conceived, they are structurally "unattainable" rather than simply "unattained but attainable."[43] But when Emerson remarks, "Thus inevitably does the universe wear our color,"[44] he is acknowledging our presence at our own experiences and our consciousness as an integral part of our perceptions, however essentially transient they may be. This quality of Emerson's thinking leads Cavell to identify it as "an epistemology of moods."[45]

Tragically, the experience that initially prompts "Experience," the essay that contains Emerson's memorable claim about "the universe [inevitably wearing] our color," originates in the death of Waldo, Emerson's five-year-old son, and the searing grief that such a loss inflicts upon his father. The "attraction" and "inclination" that, "when our genius calls," gets us going or keeps us so, "may be whim at last," but the grief that unmoors Emerson is profound mourning. No glib pun or lame attempt at metaphorical transformation of "mourning" into "morning" can break the spell of Emerson's disorienting and protracted grief in weathering such an enduring loss and the suffering it entails. "We must hold hard to this poverty, however scandalous," he avers. "Patience and patience."[46] Yet, in "the power of passiveness" and "patience" as

42. Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins*, 12–13.
43. Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, 153–163.
44. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson: Essays and Poems*, 489.
45. Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, 11.
46. Emerson, *Emerson: Essays and Poems*, 490, 492.

suffering (such as Job undergoes though he complains mightily!), Cavell discerns the origins of Emersonian philosophy, which "begins in loss, in finding yourself at a loss."[47] Moreover, when Cavell inflects the verbal root of such words as "patience," "passive," and "passion," he sounds like an heir of an American tradition as much as a respondent to continental influences like Kant and Heidegger. He is coming to terms with our verbal resources by playing etymologically with the "fossil poetry" that Emerson discerns in language, and he is activating its potential. "Every word was once a poem," Emerson claims. "Language is fossil poetry."[48]

The writing that expresses Emerson's philosophy "[calls] for a transformation of things, and before all a transformation of the self," both as Cavell reads it and as he writes his own version of such philosophy in his responses to "Emerson's writing, with its enactment of transfigurations."[49] Thus, at some turns, it comes to sound as much like poetry as it sounds like philosophy, poetry which stirs and purges emotions in its competition for the human soul. As the author of an "essay from outer space," which, Cavell himself acknowledges, "bears scars of our period in Vietnam" and "contains love letters of nightmare,"[50] perhaps we should not be surprised by such literary affinities nor reluctant to bring poems into conversation with his work and Emerson's. "A Life in Poetry," the last essay in Tillinghast's *Poetry and What Is Real*, contains a section that covers the same period in Vietnam and its aftermath. It could fairly be called "Home by Way of California," inasmuch as Tillinghast sounds this keynote: "I was wild to go to California, where everything seemed to be happening."[51] Moreover, it tells of this poet's "hippie life" during his years on the tenure track at Berkeley and thereafter during the political turmoil and cultural revolution of the late sixties and seventies, which ultimately led to Tillinghast's becoming, among other things, a superb travel writer. Though Emerson avers, "Travelling is a fool's paradise,"[52] paradoxically, he also spent significant parts of his life on the road in some far-flung places, and he deplored "a foolish consistency." In reflecting on one of

47. Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, 132.
48. Emerson, *Emerson: Essays and Poems*, 455, 457.
49. Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, 155–156.
50. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*. Updated edition (Cambridge University Press, 2002), xii.
51. Richard Tillinghast, "A Life in Poetry," in *Poetry and What Is Real* (University of Michigan Press, 2004), 172.
52. Emerson, *Emerson: Essays and Poems*, 278.

his finest poems, "Eight Lines by Jalal-ud-din Rumi," Tillinghast entertains a similar paradox about "the sense of place that Southerners are supposed to have," which strikes him as akin to the Sufi practice of "attuning oneself to holy places like the shrine at Konya" where Rumi is buried.[53] The poem begins,

> Leaving here, I slip out the gates of the palace garden
> as autumn stuns the trees with remembrance
> and makes them come round again
>
> — a memory of dervish flutes —
>
> In my mind I hear the word *perfect*.
> My feet touch down into cool dust
> and my eyes look up
> to the mountains that ring the high plateau—
>
> *Perfect* the way air is,
> including everything there is
> that one can pass through.[54]

"Passing through" rhymes with the onwardness of Emersonian thinking, a quality that leads Cavell to an American conception of the philosopher "as taking the open road…as the hobo of thought," rather than, say, a pilgrim.[55] Perhaps the latter suggests a destination which may be known in advance rather than wherever we may stop for a meal and a visit—or even something fancier, like a symposium or a banquet—but then move along. "You're throwing a literary dinner party," the *New York Times* asks a different author each Sunday in "By the Book," an interview featured in its weekly *Book Review*. "What three writers, living or dead, do you invite?" Well, I would invite Odysseus, Dante, and Montaigne. If anyone "wrote" *The Odyssey*, they

53. Tillinghast, "A Life in Poetry," 176.
54. Richard Tillinghast, "Eight Lines by Jalal-ud-din Rumi," in *The Knife and Other Poems* (Wesleyan University Press, 1980), 19.
55. Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, 139.

would have to acknowledge that its hero deserves a share in its "literary" renown because he tells so many gripping tales and shrewd lying stories. It would also be a pleasure to hear Dante explain to Odysseus why he stuck him in Hell and then almost fell into the fiery ditch in his eagerness to speak with the Greek before Virgil relieved him of that role in the conversation.[56] And I would want to talk to Montaigne, "prince of egoists" and "admirable gossip," about Emerson and Cavell, who would probably be there anyway since this is a symposium and many are invited—any and all who may take an interest in such things as other contributors and I have sought to bring to the table.

56. Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, "Inferno," XXVI.43–75.