EMANCIPATING PRAGMATISM
Modern and Contemporary Poetics

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EMANCIPATING
PRAGMATISM

Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental Writing

Michael Magee

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“No teacher ever taught, that has so provided for his pupil’s setting up independently.” Whitman said this of Emerson; I say it of Lisa New. This project began one day in a graduate seminar when, after I had delivered a short presentation on Emerson, Lisa casually suggested that I “save those pages” for my dissertation. I had no intention of writing any more about Emerson, but the seed was planted. When Emerson finally took center stage, Lisa alternately indulged and guided me as I prodded the unlikeliest of characters into dialogue with the Concord sage and, for good measure, moved his scenes from the study to the streets.

Bob Perelman and Herman Beavers were just as influential to the casting. Bob is almost wholly responsible for introducing me to the world of experimental poetry. His stunning range as a scholar was a vital model as I crossed centuries and genres under the sign of pragmatism; his insistence that a certain amount of historicist rigor was necessary if such crossings were to be more than whimsical had a pervasive effect on the writing. In Herman Beavers I had a prominent Ellison scholar and poet to both encourage me and guide me around the pitfalls of my integrationist approach. Al Filreis and Farah Griffin have also been there from the beginning, reading work at various stages, making timely suggestions, and otherwise providing help and advice too numerous to mention. Last among my mentors I count Jean-Michel Rabate, without whose help I would not have had the privilege of studying at Penn, and Robert Cording, without whose inspiration I never would have applied.

The fingerprints of some dear friends are all over these chapters. John

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My family has been a constant source of emotional and intellectual support. My parents’ affection has always been a buoy, but I am struck too by how their thoughts permeate the work: my dad’s utopian vision of service to communities, my mom’s speech that revealed to me that malapropism is a condescending word for the American vernacular in action. My younger siblings have always been my counselors. Mitch introduced me to jazz in the form of a Charlie Parker record when I was sixteen. Marc has spent many a late night rehashing the trials of our democracy with me. Meredith reminds me again and again by her actions
that true intellectuals read, as Emerson once put it, “in the faces of the people.”

My embarrassment of riches is increased tenfold by my wife, Susanna. I dedicate this work to her and to our two children. Anything I might say about myself would necessarily include her, and to describe the effect she has had on my identity would be to describe a life—impossible. I can only mention the small mercies. The opportunity to watch her care for America’s sick and underserved has been my most valuable education. However, when I myself was diagnosed with a difficult illness during the writing of this book, she knew that what I needed most from her was not treatment but love, which she continues to give selflessly, daily. This is the blessing of my life.
Abbreviations

DE  Nathaniel Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Cultu-
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ality, and Experimental Writing (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).


EMANCIPATING PRAGMATISM
There is Emerson and then there is Emerson. The pattern that repeats itself—inevitably, endlessly—involves the critic arguing for a “true” Emerson against one or the other past representation, sometimes to Emerson’s benefit, sometimes to his detriment. But the details tell the story. One might create a laudatory version of Emerson that would inspire as much disdain for him as a deeply critical one, and in fact the two might be related. “Emerson attended church on Sundays all his life with uncommon regularity.” This statement is a bald-faced lie, though no doubt a few critics over the years have taken it as gospel truth. Why did Charles W. Eliot write it, as he must have known it to be false? “We are always coming up with the emphatic facts of history in our private experience,” Emerson wrote. “All history becomes subjective.” History is a series of written texts whose words might be moved this way and that or, if all else fails, forged. The critic comes late to the game, and thus what John Dewey has said of philosophy is even more true of literary criticism: it is not “in any sense whatever a form of knowledge” but rather “a form of desire, of effort at action.” This is not to say that history isn’t true—only that it becomes true, unfolding in time as a result of discovery,
re-interpretation, and negotiation of meaning between readers. It is true whenever “we” agree on and believe the record.

The notebook in which Emerson recorded the vast majority of his thoughts on slavery and abolition, his “WO Liberty” notebook, was lost between 1903 and 1966. During this period no one apparently had any knowledge that it had ever existed. The antislavery writings of Emerson’s that were extant were collected in a volume harmlessly entitled Miscellanies—and Emerson’s interest in the cause of abolition, if it existed in the minds of scholars at all, was believed to be, at best, quite miscellaneous. Among those who believed otherwise were some prominent American pragmatists: William James, whose father was arranging lectures in New York for Emerson at a time when Emerson was delivering extremely controversial, vitriolic speeches on the Fugitive Slave Law; John Dewey, who was interested in fleshing out the implications of Emerson’s role as the “philosopher of democracy”; and Ralph Ellison, who as an African American named after Emerson had obvious reasons for seeking out his namesake’s opinions on slavery. The Emerson I plan to describe is largely their Emerson. If this Emerson seems unfamiliar, that is to some degree the point.

The fight over the meaning of Emerson’s texts would certainly not have surprised him. Indeed, the Emerson I will describe was involved in such a fight. In chapter 2, I will suggest that Emerson’s involvement in the struggle for abolition, or more generally emancipation, was a long time in the making, but for now I will simply leap into it. In the two decades following the publication of his first series of essays (1841), Emerson would spend a great deal of time arguing that cultural texts such as the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence must be read as contingent rather than codified texts and that this model of reading was the predicate by which the “rhetoric and rituals” of the republic could remain operative in practice as tools for the expansion of democracy. Otherwise, they were merely paper or, worse, impediments to the very ethic they supposedly promoted. “No forms,” he would write, “neither constitutions, nor laws, nor covenants, nor churches nor bibles, are of any use in themselves. The devil nestles comfortably into them all” (CW 11:234). Far from being simply an abstract possibility, Emerson be-
lieved that the devil was already well into his work. The devil, so Emerson’s story goes, is a free-wheeling interpreter of language living among passive literalists. Of course, as a freewheeling interpreter himself—and an advocate for that style of reading—Emerson’s observations on the activity of the devil’s minions are thick with irony; to read Emerson’s characterization of Christianity as “a religion of dead dogs” is to recognize just how severe he considered the crisis of slavery to be. “Of course they quote the bible, & Christ & Paul, to defend slavery,” he mused in his “WO Liberty” journal, as if exasperated with all the passive literalists, “these are dead forms that will cover anything” (JMN 11:413). Texts such as the Bible and the Constitution, Emerson realized, were sites of social contestation, at once revered by the collective for their meaning and totally indeterminate in their meaning. Given this situation, he determined that “a literal, slavish following of precedents, as by a justice of the peace, is not for those who at this hour lead the destinies of this people” (CW 11:299–300).

If one were going to make an argument that the Bible or the Constitution stood for liberty and emancipation, one would have to eschew literalism as a potential strategy and, instead, embody those characteristics of liberty and emancipation and make a strong reading: “to interpret Christ, it needs a Christ,” Emerson wrote, and “to make good the cause of freedom against slavery you must be . . . Declaration of Independence walking” (JMN 11:413). This state of affairs presented an opportunity for anyone willing to present an interpretation, but it was an opportunity being grasped, by and large, by proslavery advocates and Northern apologists. “It is curious that now liberty is grown passive and defensive,” Emerson lamented. “Slavery alone is inventive and aggressive, Slavery reads the constitution with a very shrewd & daring & innovating eye. Liberty is satisfied with the literal construction” (11:420). Of course the irony of this is that those representing slavery, while engaged in “wolﬁsh interpretation,” were loath to admit that their readings of cultural documents were anything but strictly literal. Emerson recognized this as a rhetorical game, a devious strategy. Of Daniel Webster, two months after Webster had helped to make the Fugitive Slave Act into law, Emerson would write, “He praises Adams and Jefferson, but it is a past
Adams and Jefferson that his mind can entertain. A present Adams and
Jefferson he would denounce. So with the eulogies of liberty in his writ-
ings—they are sentimentalism and youthful rhetoric” (CW 11:234, 204).
Webster’s paeans to liberty are precisely “eulogies” because they treat the
concept of liberty as dead fact rather than as evolving, context-depen-
dent principle. Likewise with Adams and Jefferson: Webster’s praise is
given under the conceit that the identities of those revolutionaries, what
they represent, are codified and immutable. Emerson now had a rather
horrifying practical example for his description, from “Self-Reliance,” of
the causal relationship between a reverence for “badges and names” on
the one hand and the perpetuation of “large societies and dead institu-
tions” on the other (2:51). Emerson himself was determined to disrupt
the presumptions on which that causal relationship was based. Often
such disruptions take the form of an edgy clearing of the air regarding
signification. The country’s most revered words, Emerson reminds in
these moments, are not what they seem. Thus such gems as “democracy
or other mumbo jumbo” appear in the journals (JMN 9:186), and, in the
speeches, Emerson is constantly setting the record straight for anyone
still invested in trusted American vocabularies. “Language has lost its
meaning in the universal cant, Representative Government is really mis-
representative; Union is a conspiracy against the Northern States which
the Northern States are to have the privilege of paying for; the adding
of Cuba and Central America to the slave marts is enlarging the area of
Freedom. Manifest Destiny, Democracy, Freedom, fine names for an
ugly thing. They call it otto of rose and lavender,—I call it bilge-water”
(11:259).

Emerson believed that convincing the nation that words such as democracy
and freedom had come to signify their opposites was the prerequisite
for the generation of new vocabularies—vocabularies that could better
serve the principles on which such words as freedom and democracy were
originally based. One can already see the change occurring here, as
Emerson insists that representative means misrepresentative, free means
slave, the word democracy is akin to bilgewater. He understood just how
deply reliant arguments for slavery and imperialistic government were
on such words. They were the smoke screen behind which attacks on
egalitarian activity were mounted—and they were incredibly persuasive. But Emerson’s own attacks must have made arguments such as Webster’s seem like those of the most inept confidence man. They are masterpieces of vitriol, and as such they betray the seriousness with which Emerson viewed his intervention. The following is an example from 1851:

Mr. Everett, a man supposed aware of his own meaning, advises pathetically a reverence for the union. Yes but hides the other horn under his velvet? Does he mean that we shall lay hands on a man who has escaped from slavery to the soil of Massachusetts & so has done more for freedom than ten thousand orations, & tie him up & call in the Marshall, and say,—I am an orator for freedom; a great many fine sentences have I turned,—none has turned finer, except Mr. Webster,—in favor of plebeian strength against aristocracy; and, as my last and finest sentence of all, to show the young men of the land who have bought my book & clapped my sentences & copied them in their memory, how much I mean by them,—Mr. Marshall, here is a black man of my own age, & who does not know a great deal of Demosthenes, but who means what he says, whom we will now handcuff and commit to the custody of this very worthy gentleman who has come on from Georgia in search of him; I have no doubt he has much to say to him that is interesting & as the way is long I don’t care if I give them a copy of my Concord & Lexington & Plymouth & Bunker Hill addresses to beguile their journey from Boston to the plantation whipping post? (JMN 11:359–60)

In this satire on the “orator for freedom” (a kind of miniature companion piece to “The American Scholar”), Emerson turns signification upside down. The final sentence—two hundred and twelve words long—is a rhetorical tour de force in which the “orator for freedom” betrays the bathetic and devious nature of his oration by the fact that his “finest sentence” is not a sentence at all—or, to be more precise, it is a sentence of a different sort. The final sentence of the orator for freedom is not a grammatical one but a penal one, a judicial decree, like those given out under the authority of the Fugitive Slave Law. This pun is not idle; it is