



Theses and Dissertations

---

2014-05-21

## Discovering the "God Within": The Experience and Manifestation of Emerson's Evolving Philosophy of Intuition

Anne Tiffany Turner  
*Brigham Young University - Provo*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Turner, Anne Tiffany, "Discovering the "God Within": The Experience and Manifestation of Emerson's Evolving Philosophy of Intuition" (2014). *Theses and Dissertations*. 4099.  
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/4099>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

Discovering the “God Within”: The Experience and Manifestation of  
Emerson’s Evolving Philosophy of Intuition

Anne Turner

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Edward Cutler, Chair  
Jesse Crisler  
Emron Esplin

Department of English  
Brigham Young University

April 2014

Copyright © 2014 Anne Turner

All Rights Reserved

## ABSTRACT

### Discovering the “God Within”: The Experience and Manifestation of Emerson’s Evolving Philosophy of Intuition

Anne Turner  
Department of English, BYU  
Master of Art

Investigating individual subjectivity, Ralph Waldo Emerson traveled to Europe following the death of his first wife, Ellen Tucker Emerson, and his resignation from the Unitarian ministry. His experience before and during the voyage contributed to the evolution of a self-intuitive philosophy, termed *selbstgefühl* by the German Romantics and altered his careful style of composition and delivery to promote the integrity of individual subjectivity as the highest authority in the deduction of truth. He would use this philosophy throughout the remainder of his life to encourage his audience to experience the same process he did.

Keywords: Emerson, Intuition, *selbstgefühl*, Romanticism, Self-Reliance.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would be ungrateful if I did not acknowledge those whose support has aided me most in completing this work. I feel indebted to Dr. Edward Cutler, whose immediate and continued desire to promote this work always offered inspiration and relief. Hours of patient, philosophical conversations with Dr. Cutler influenced innumerable aspects of this text. Thanks to Dr. Jesse Crisler for his meticulous proofreading in the early drafting stages and again in the final days that refined this work beyond my expectations. To Dr. Emron Esplin: for his willingness to dive into this work without hesitation. And particular thanks to Dr. Carl Sederholm, for teaching with expertise, opening to me a world of Emerson's that laid the groundwork for this paper.

And to those closest to me I owe more than gratitude for the emotional and physical support through the grueling days of drafting. To Deb Thornton for everything. For wings. And teaching me how to listen to the "God within." To my mother and sister, for their sacrifice of time as they provided a listening ear and child support during my busiest moments. And gratitude beyond measure to my husband, Adam Turner, for his kindness, unfailing support, constant interest, and dedication. Without him, I would be lost. Thank you, Adam, for letting me fly my kite.

Discovering the “God Within”: The Experience and Manifestation of  
Emerson’s Evolving Philosophy of Intuition

*And am I yet to learn that the God dwells within?* (Ralph Waldo Emerson, July 26, 1837)

Emerson’s emphasis on the immediate primacy of mind over what he viewed as the secondary structure of organized religion has led some scholars, such as David Robinson, to classify his philosophy as a “natural religion” which transcends the historical and the institutional, offering an “ethically oriented code of first principles” (5). The term “religion” is misleading, as Emerson’s evolving philosophy was not intended as a master religion, but, rather was the consequence of his life-long search for resonating truths amidst what Stanley Cavell has termed “institutionalized culture” (48). Originally investigating the authority of the individual, Emerson’s study, influenced by his experiences, would eventually bring him to a belief in intuitive self-awareness, what German Romantic philosophers termed as *selbstgefühl*, literally a form of “self-feeling,” a self-awareness that would cause him to seek confirmation of intuition’s authority in the very systems he rejected. Emerson’s voyage to Europe following his first wife’s death in 1831 contributed to his study of individual intuition and altered his careful style of composition and delivery to promote the integrity of individual subjectivity as the highest authority in the deduction of truth, a philosophy that he would use to encourage his audience to experience the same process he did.

The evolution of Emerson’s philosophy regarding the supremacy of the mind began with experience. From the time that he first questioned the doctrines of Unitarianism, and especially after he resigned his pastorate, Emerson continued to struggle with systematic structures in religion and philosophy—a struggle that would be paramount to his evolving belief. This time period, between leaving the ministry and the publication of his first collection of essays, would prove critical to the development of his relationship with systematic beliefs and the development

of his initial belief in individual subjectivity as the highest authority through the use of intuition—an indwelling phenomenon not explainable by science. Emerson's experiences during this defining era, the death of his first wife Ellen and his retreat to Europe after resigning his pastorate, would induce a philosophical focus to confirm resonating truth that would eventually result in the production of his first publications and stimulate his pursuit to confirm intuition through resonate classical and religious texts.

Early in his ministry, Emerson began to question the weekly tradition of celebrating the Lord's Supper. In Emerson's mind, the Unitarian purpose of the Lord's Supper was not in keeping with the original purpose for which the Lord's Supper was given; and the current use of the Lord's Supper as ritual elevated the rite as a supernatural event and thus did little to confirm an individual's faith. In his final sermon, given on September 9, 1832, he explained to his congregation what he had been pondering over the last year: "Having recently given particular attention to this subject, I was led to the conclusion that Jesus did not intend to establish an institution for perpetual observance when he ate the Passover with his disciples; and, further, to the opinion, that it is not expedient to celebrate it as we do" ("Lord's Supper" par. 3). The summer before, Emerson spent time in the Green Mountains, indicating through letters to his aunt on the subject that he spent a great deal of time pondering and studying the matter. He had petitioned the church to allow him to dispense with commemorating the Lord's Supper in his own congregation, which he was denied. This petition clearly reveals Emerson's growing suspicion toward systems, a suspicion that prompted him to exercise his free will, placing integrity of mind above doctrine, which in turn led him to place an ultimate trust in the supremacy of the mind.

His journal from the summer previous reveals that discussions with church authorities regarding the petitioned change had been unsuccessful. At stake was the freedom of interpretation, which Emerson believed did not exist within the “unthinking corporations” of religions, a belief that was validated when the church denied his request (Journals 2: 386).<sup>1</sup> The ability for individuals to think and interpret for themselves was essential to the life of faith. “Freedom,” he said in his final sermon, “is the essence of this faith. It has for its object simply to make men good and wise. Its institutions should be as flexible as the wants of men. That form out of which the life and suitableness have departed should be as worthless in its eyes as dead leaves that are falling around us” (“Lord’s Supper” par. 31).

Communication with church officials, as he reveals the sermon, suggests that his decision to resign his pastorate was personal—not a request or suggestion from those in positions above him. He explained to his congregation that the choice to relinquish his ministry was personal: “It is my own objection. This mode of commemorating Christ is not suitable to me. That is reason enough why I should abandon it” (“Lord’s Supper” par. 30). Emerson, in his final sermon as an ordained minister, reveals that despite his requests to alter the occurrence of the ritual in his own congregation, responses from church authority were unsatisfactory, ignoring his feelings and the evidence he presented. His decision to resign is rooted in the authority of self: Emerson resigned because he subjectively believed something that the church did not recognize and would not validate, despite the scriptural evidence he presented.

He left his congregation, communicating to them with an understanding of what Christianity had to offer and not with a reason to leave Unitarianism: “If I understand the distinction of Christianity, the reason why it is to be preferred over all other systems and is divine is this, that it is a moral system; that it presents men with truths which are their own

---

<sup>1</sup> June 20, 1831

reason, and enjoins practices that are their own justification” (“Lord’s Supper” par. 30). For Emerson, systems, like sects of Christianity (including Unitarianism), were inevitable—human nature would always seek to compile truth into a recognizable form. Because of this, Emerson did not believe that these systems were not inherently restrictive. While such a system could contain and confirm truth, they only became problematic when the form itself becomes the authority, interfering with the primal relationship between mind and truth: a relationship that is its own authority and needs no external confirmation.

Some years later, and half a world away in Paris Emerson wrote decisively in his journal that while Christianity offered truths, its traditions and systems restricted its members from fully seeing and comprehending the aesthetics or “beauty” of such truths: “The errors of traditional Christianity as it now exists, the popular faith of many millions, need to be removed to let men see the divine beauty of moral truth...that Christianity is wrongly received by all such as take it for a system of doctrines, — its stress being upon moral truth; it is a rule of life, not a rule of faith” (3: 159-160).<sup>2</sup> Emerson’s focus on the aesthetics of truth demonstrates his interest in Romantic ideals, particularly British and especially German. The Romantics, whom Emerson studied and with whom he associated during his European journey, focused on the subjective qualities of truth. “Truth is beauty,” John Keats wrote, “beauty truth” (238). When truth is united with the aesthetic, an authentic deduction of that truth, according to Emerson and the Romantics, is possible. Keats’s “negative capability” is a prime example explaining the Romantic aesthetic influence.

An elaborate discussion between friends, held on an evening stroll, continued in the famous letter John Keats penned from his flat in the bustle of London. The letter, intended for his young brothers in the country, extended the ideas of an aesthetic, subjective method of deduction

---

<sup>2</sup> July 11, 1833



which he termed “Negative Capability.” Inspired by portions of a late night “disquisition,” Keats pondered the intuitive nature of the soul. “[A]t once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (492).

This penultimate passage communicates the foundation of Romantic thought: that the sufficiency and authority of an individual’s mind was ample enough to deduce truth. The great man, the Man of Achievement, would discard facts to follow his or her instinct. “With a great poet,” Keats continued, “the sense of Beauty overcomes every consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration” (492).

The intimate relationship of Emerson’s ideology to that of Romantics such as Keats, Wordsworth, Blake, among others, is evidenced through his regular correspondence with one of Romanticism’s own: Thomas Carlyle. Emerson’s first meeting with Carlyle in 1833 initiated a friendship that nurtured the aesthetic in Emerson’s evolving philosophy. But it wasn’t just a friendship. Carlyle’s critiques of German literature interested Emerson, whose previous reading of this literature affirmed Emerson’s “intuitive insight into divine truth,” an insight that evolved into a philosophy of its own (Hurth 193). Carlyle’s published critiques secured his spot among the many who sought to “Germanize” the British public.<sup>3</sup> His criticism of German Romantic authors appeared in the United States, instilling within Emerson a desire to meet the man who interpreted German authors in a way that Emerson connected to.

Emerson’s attraction to German philosophy intensified as he found resonance in the writings of philosophers who debated and defined the aesthetic, intuitive deduction of truth as a

---

<sup>3</sup> Ashton identifies several key individuals, such as R. P. Gillies, J. G. Lockhart, De Quincey, William Taylor and Henry Crabb Robinson, who pioneered the introduction of German Philosophy to Great Britain.

more satisfactory method of discovering truth than debating facts and reasons. In a journal entry dated September 23, 1836, Emerson praises the collective and individual wisdom of the Romantics as he traces wisdom throughout the ages: from Aristotle to Milton, and from Dante to Carlyle:

This came deepest and loudest out of Germany, where it is not the word of few, but of all the wise. The professors of Germany, a secluded race, free to think, but not invited to action, and crowded, went back into the recesses of consciousness with Kant, and whilst his philosophy was popular, and by its striking nomenclature had imprinted itself on the memory, as that of phrenology does now, they analysed [sic] in its light the history of past and present times which their encyclopaedical [sic] study had explored. All geography, all statistics, all philology was read with Reason and Understanding in view, and hence the reflective and penetrating sight of their research. Niebuhr, Humboldt, Muller, Heeren, Herder, Schiller, Fichte, Schlegel. (4: 94)

For several decades, the German Idealist and Romantic philosophers deliberated the source of authority, exploring objective reasoning and subjective understanding. Subjectivism, or the supremacy of the individual in determining truth, described as a literal self-feeling, incited debate between the differing philosophical groups. While these distinct, opposing differences between the German Idealist and Romantic movements often inhibited agreement, both movements offer a more thorough definition of Emerson's resonant philosophy regarding the supreme authority of the individual in recognizing truth. German philosophic literature explores more explicitly the depth, definition, and principles of intuition, the subtle quality of German thought, what Manfred Frank terms *Selbstgefühl*.<sup>4</sup> In order to explore Emerson's writings in this

---

<sup>4</sup> The definition of *Selbstgefühl* is more complex than we are able to analyze here. See Frank for a more in depth analysis.

context, we must first lay out the main philosophical debate that influenced it, and the definition and role of *Selbstgefühl* in that debate.

The German philosophers who most influenced Emerson were the Idealists—such as Kant and Fichte—who concerned their philosophical debate with what Elizabeth Millan-Zaibert has called “philosophy’s starting point”; to identify a foundation for philosophy would, in other words, create an absolute system for identifying truth (1). The pull for philosophers to find (capital “T”) truth, was alluring and when viewed through an absolute system, the “Truth” would supply a one-size-fits-all approach: truth that is true for everyone, everywhere. The literary descendants of the Idealists, the Romantics, continued the deliberation to discover the source of truth. Frederich von Hardenberg, a Romantic critic of Fichte under the pseudonym “Novalis,” said “I am searching for a foundation. [...] All philosophizing must terminate in an absolute foundation” (qtd. in Frank 39). This foundation placed an emphasis on an objective system, not on a subjective system that uses intuition.

Finding the absolute system posed challenges that Frederich Schlegel, a Romantic critic, argued could only exist through building off of the philosophies of others, and not being based upon subjectivity. In a critique of Kant, Schlegel identifies Kant’s philosophy as being somewhat systematic, though not systematic enough: “[A] critique of philosophizing reason cannot succeed without a history of philosophy. [This] is proved to us by Kant himself. His work as a critique of philosophizing reason is not at all historical enough even though it is filled with historical relations and he attempts to construct various systems” (qtd. in Millan-Zaibert 14). Philosophers, like Schlegel considered the systematic approach to prove an absolute system, but their work still reflected fragments of their philosophical findings and was presented in a less than systematic

way—most often presenting “fragments” that offered no “traditional system” of philosophy, and no absolute foundation (Millan-Zaibert 1).

These fragmented systems emerging from German philosophy did so because philosophers relied upon their own subjectivity in order to discern what should or should not belong to an absolute foundation. And as subjectivity and aesthetics have historically dominated German philosophical debate, it is no wonder that subjectivity, the individual interpretation of the world, often lost out. But Karl Ameriks, a Kantian scholar, explains that as German philosophy evolved it once again developed an interest in “consciousness and subjectivity,” which he considers as irreplaceable to both the world of science and philosophy (296). This romantic, historical turn, was more self-referential, not an attempt to secure an argument that completes a system; rather it was an attempt to locate resonate truths through consciousness of mind and emotion.

This philosophical tug-of-war between the belief in an absolute system and the belief in subjectivity would never really be resolved by the Idealists, by the Romantics, or even by Emerson. Schlegel in his “Literary Aphorisms” postulated that philosophy must strike some kind of balance between the two: “It is equally deadly for a mind to have a system or to have none. Therefore, it will have to decide to combine both” (Schlegel 137). Whether Schlegel or Emerson ever found that balance is debatable; suffice it to say that both Emerson and German philosophers were interested in the same question.

The term *selbstgefühl* is best defined by Ameriks in *Kant and the Historical Turn*. Ameriks explains that *selbstgefühl* is a “self-awareness” or an “intuitive feeling” that guided German Romantics. What interested the Romantics is the idea that while reality itself cannot have an absolute meaning, it can derive meaning only through the limits and filters of individual

perception. With the objective world reduced, this individual subjectivity is the only way in which the world can be analyzed. The subjective manifested itself in different ways and, as Ameriks explains, it was those manifestations that gave the Romantics a way to structure *selbstgefühl*:

Despite the deep pull of ‘subjective’ experiences of both morality and religion, the fact of the matter is that it was instead the specific complexes of the new forms of what we would call basically *aesthetic* creation, appreciation, and life [...] that provided the Romantic’s with the main manifestations of the general structure of *selbstgefühl*.” (272)

The idea that one could extract truth from experience implied that there was something inherent within an individual’s mind that could not be reduced to experience alone. This is, of course, Emerson’s “transparent eyeball”—the ability of a mind to deduce truth through experience, without a system, without scientific truth.

Emerson’s religious critics found fault with the amount of power he gave to subjective deduction. Following his delivery of the “Divinity School Address” in 1838, Emerson’s ideology, that intuition could reach what Packer defines “the most abstruse and elevated proposition respecting the being and destiny of man,” was criticized by Francis Bowen, a conservative reviewer for the *Christian Examiner* (62). Bowen’s review centered around proving the existence of God without factual reasoning: “the argument for the existence of a God, or the immateriality of the soul, is tested by the same power of the mind that that discovered and proved any proposition in Euclid” (Packer 62). Bowen’s comparison to Euclid’s methods of mathematical discovery is valid since the foundation Emerson used was based on true but non-provable axioms. Proving the existence of God solely through intuition, Barbara Packer argues, indicates that such a distinction “split[s] the mind into two faculties incapable of communicating

with one another,” the two sides being factual reasoning and intuition (62). Such a division within the mind, favoring the individual over authority, “destroys the hope of a rational Christianity and leaves society open to all the horrors of religious bigotry,” leaving no defense against dogmatism and intolerance (62).

It should be noted that this intuition was not simply reliance upon an individual’s passing thoughts but on a universal resonance. In an essay titled “Ethics,” Emerson explains the difference between following random, uneducated thoughts, and real intuition. It is not “faith in man’s own whim or conceit” where a man could act alone and independent of others, with only his own interests at heart, but rather it is a “perception that the mind common to the Universe is disclosed to the individual through his nature” (qtd. in Packer 63). An individual’s nature is the only key he or she possesses that can offer this connection, this intuition, to the universal mind, the Oversoul.

In fact, Emerson addresses this debate in the introduction to “Nature,” coming to the conclusion that while “all science has one aim, namely to find a theory of nature,” there are also “abstract truths” that must be extracted through subjectivity in order to explain the workings of Nature (9). “Whenever a true theory appears,” he wrote, “it will be its own evidence. The test is, that it will explain all phenomena” (9). Philosophy, and religion, may attempt to find an provable absolute answer, an absolute system, but truth exists independent of reasoning—in the abstract waiting to be tested in order to prove its legitimacy. Emerson’s final sermon, given on the topic of the Lord’s Supper, is clearly a defining moment where he takes a step to publicly follow his own intuition.

Written and delivered shortly after the tragic death of Emerson’s young bride, Ellen Tucker Emerson, his questions surrounding the aesthetics of truth, which led Emerson to resign

his pulpit, aren't surprising; in fact, the origin of truth and the role of intuition in determining truth preoccupied his thoughts and writing for the next decade (2: 356).<sup>5</sup> Ellen's failing health prompted the couple to make a pact that would prove the existence of the soul after death, proof beyond any aesthetic or subjective quality. Before Ellen's passing, the young couple promised each other that whoever died first would return to visit the other and objectively confirm the existence of an after-life in which their love and life together would continue. After her death, and despite their lover's promise, Emerson never received his objective confirmation, making Ellen's death a catalyst for his reliance upon intuition as the highest authority.

The young, grieving Emerson made time to think. And away from scrutiny, in an insignificant journal on pages destined to fade and crumble, he processed his thoughts about truth in the light of his loss. Truth, he had once believed, originated with God and came to men through scripture. But what the young Emerson began to contemplate was that God didn't write scripture. Rather, prophets wrote the words of God, truth filtered through their understanding, as scripture. The doctrines were seldom received in written word. The Old and New Testaments contain stories of ministering angels, visions witnessed by many and visions that only the dreamer could remember and record. What intrigued Emerson were not the visions, but the men, the individuals, first receiving those revelations and then giving them secondary form in writing.

Years later, Emerson would come to the conclusion that truth, or the "doctrine" of God as he would have referred to it in this stage of his life, need not be appealed to a book. But for now, he began his study using the tools and vocabulary that he already possessed, exploring how truth filtered through the individual. And during this period of reflection after Ellen's death, Emerson penned these words regarding the relationship between truth and the individual: "Every word of

---

<sup>5</sup> February 1831

truth that is spoken by man's lips is from God. Every thought that is true is from God" (2: 358).<sup>6</sup> Truth, pure undiluted, necessary to life, came directly from God through an individual.

The summer following Ellen's death was one of contemplation and mourning for Emerson. He retreated to the Green Mountains seeking, as one can only guess, solace, but following his retreat he again gives words to his feelings about religion: "I suppose it is not wise, not being natural, to belong to any religious party. In the Bible you are not directed to be a Unitarian, or a Calvinist or an Episcopalian" (2: 385). These thoughts ultimately led him to the decision to relinquish his congregation and career as a Unitarian minister. This long summer of contemplation gave Emerson time to formulate his new relationship with systematic religion and redefine his beliefs about truth. At the close of the summer, the day before he resigned his pastorate, he literally and figuratively wrote a new chapter of his life. Emerson had altered his view of the origin of truth, evolving into a much more personal definition. He wrote, "The purpose of life seems to be to acquaint a man with himself. The highest revelation is that God is in every man" (3: 201).<sup>7</sup> On the eve of relinquishing the career he had spent his young life preparing for, he utters the sublime yet religiously controversial truth that carried him through years of questions; the implications of which would be far reaching.

"God is in every man" was his assertion, penned in ink, which would develop a host of questions about authority that he would spend the rest of his life asking, answering, and asking again. As a religious man he credited ultimate authority to God. But now, as a man who saw religions as being very un-Biblical, he developed the idea that the individual indeed could be the authority for truth. As if to process this idea, a month after he spoke his last words over a pulpit

---

<sup>6</sup> March 13, 1831

<sup>7</sup> Sept 8, 1831



of his ministry, Emerson would compose a poem that would more fully explore the supremacy of the individual in deciding truth. He titled it “The God Within.”

Who says the heart's a blind guide? It is not.  
 My heart did never counsel me to sin.  
 I wonder where it got its wisdom,  
 For in the darkest maze, amid the sweetest baits  
 Or amid horrid dangers, never once  
 Did that gentle angel fail of his oracle.  
 The little needle always knows the north,  
 The little bird remembereth his note (2: 599).<sup>8</sup>

Somehow, Emerson postulated in this poem, the individual could be led by an internal influence that was as imperceptible as magnetic energy and as indiscernible as the memory of a bird. The soul’s ability to know truth was as equally visible as these. Here, in a seemingly inconsequential poem, Emerson establishes that the heart, epitomizing the center of emotion—with its subjective and aesthetic understanding—can be a direct authority in matters of truth. This belief, the individual’s subjective authority in matters of truth, prompted an internal investigation for Emerson: to define the means by which an individual can be the ultimate authority, the “God within.” Emerson pondered extensively the self as ultimate authority, especially during the next year as his personal interests took him on a journey abroad.

What Emerson eventually believed is contained within in his essay, “Self-Reliance,” where he reveals his final conclusion on the relationship between an individual’s subjectivity and the absolute system emphasis that Emerson places on it: “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true in your heart is true for all men—that is genius” (113). The ability to

---

<sup>8</sup> October 9, 1832

intuit truth from the world around one, be it nature, philosophy, or science, is emphasized as the only way that truth can be known.

Frequent storms, wind-less days, and transporting waves were Emerson's companions as he sailed towards Europe, a metaphorical and literal wealth of knowledge and experience that would redefine and sustain his philosophical focus over the coming years. Perhaps Europe offered a new intellectual landscape for Emerson: conversations with living, breathing poets; ivy covered tombs of the ancients; relics and monuments of the past thousand years. Regardless of the surrounding intellectual stimulation, Emerson's writing was altered—his philosophical ponderings silenced, replaced by the record of events.

From December 1832 to October 1833, the day-to-day travels of Ralph Waldo Emerson took a front seat to the internal contemplations he had produced before, a fact that he readily acknowledges on his return voyage: "No sailing to-day," he wrote, "so you may know what I have seen and heard in the four days I have been here. Really nothing external, so I must spin my thread from my own bowels" (3: 188).<sup>9</sup> He gives no reason for the absence of philosophy, leaving speculation in its wake. But what Emerson did write during those months, during the rare moments in which he returns to his pondering, reveals that he had been meditating deeply on the authority of the individual, formulating thoughts on the self as center to that authority.

Arriving first in Malta, driven into the harbor on the winds of a gale, Emerson paused for a moment from his eventful journey to reflect, albeit with hesitation, on the extent of what an individual could know. "Perhaps it is a pernicious mistake, yet, rightly seen, I believe it is sound philosophy, that wherever we go, whatever we do, self is the sole subject we study and learn. Myself is much more than I know, and yet I know nothing else" (3: 28).<sup>10</sup> Here Emerson realized

---

<sup>9</sup> September 2, 1833

<sup>10</sup> February 10, 1833

that there is more to the individual as authority. The individual is the only authority because he knows nothing else. “Mean, sneakingly mean, would be this philosophy, a reptile unworthy of the name, if self be used in the low sense, but as self means Devil, so it means God” (2: 29). The focus on self allowed Emerson to embrace subjective humanity, elevating it at the same time.

Months passed with no “internal” reflections appearing in his journals. Emerson traveled across Italy, expressing disgust at art copyists: “No original art remains,” he complained. “I hear nothing of living painters, but perhaps there are” (3: 66).<sup>11</sup> When he arrived in Paris, he rejoiced in what appears to be a type of homecoming for him, a familial setting that may have set Emerson enough at ease to process his pent-up thoughts. What thoughts Emerson wrestled with during his journey are evident in the question that he asks after his arrival in Paris, a question that reveals how deeply personal this issue was to Emerson. His resignation the previous year had a definite impact on his belief in an individual’s authority. While Emerson provided evidence for his disagreement with the rite of the sacraments, perhaps he would not have voiced his difference if he had had only the subjective authority of feeling: “When shall we be able without a blush and without harm to utter to the world our inmost thought?” (3: 159).<sup>12</sup>

As Emerson’s European journey came to an end, he wrote at length in his journal—expressing gratitude to the heavens for the experience. He wrote, “I thank the Great God who has led me through this European scene, this last schoolroom in which he has pleased to instruct me...and has now brought me to the shore and the ship that steers westward,” he wrote (3: 185). The instruction that he referred to was not only the experience but the people he had learned from: “He [God] has shown me the men I wished to see, — Landor, Coleridge, Carlyle, Wordsworth; he has thereby comforted and confirmed me in my convictions. Many things I owe

---

<sup>11</sup> March 15, 1833

<sup>12</sup> July 11, 1833

to the sight of these men (3: 185).<sup>13</sup> Through the great Romantic poets, Emerson's convictions—his philosophies, beliefs, his reasons for leaving Unitarianism—were validated. The confirmation he experienced during the latter part of his voyage led him to seek additional confirmation in the coming years.

This Romantic struggle, between intuition and an authority external to self, was ultimately a catalyst for Emerson's resignation from Unitarian ministry and allowed him to redefine authority, placing the discernment of truth not in the hands of ritualists but in the hands of individuals. But if his theory of intuition was correct, it evidenced itself in resonant words; words that moved the spirit and stimulated the mind. For the rest of his writing career, he returned to literature, mainly the classics and religious texts, seeking to confirm individual authority from the sources whose dogmatic traditions he had wholly rejected. While confirmation from external sources appears contradictory to intuition, Emerson made it clear that nothing can supplant the individual consciousness, but the individual conscious can find confirmation in the genius of others. "Ideas are infinite," Schlegel wrote, "original, and lively divine thoughts" that enlightened the mind, rather than oppressed it with dogmatic traditions (150).

Emerson understood that the confirmation he was seeking was not going to come in the form of a model or guide; such a restrictive form would mean the end of his original work. After his journey to Europe, where he met with many notable authors and philosophers, he wrote: "It is not that I wish my companion to dictate to me the course I should take. Before God, No. It were to unman, to un-god myself. It is that he may stimulate me by his thoughts to unfold my own, so that I may become master of the facts still. My own bosom will supply, as surely as God liveth,

---

<sup>13</sup> Sept 1, 1833

the direction of my course” (3: 267).<sup>14</sup> The thoughts of others were less a guide for Emerson’s own thought and more a stimulation for the confirmation of truth.

When encountering truth, Emerson experienced within the center of his emotion a confirmation—a spiritual resonance. This resonance, which opposed more logical and scientific methods of deduction, explored a method of subjective deduction that would eventually be defined by Barbara Packer as “intuition” (69). This philosophy, an individual’s own thoughts, through their intuition, could be regarded as the ultimate authority to any question.

Transcendentalists, Packer explains, “placed absolute faith in the integrity of the soul’s intuitions” (69). In one attempt to describe it, Emerson compared objective deduction with the fictitious fable, whose curtain falls away to reveal the truth, and aesthetic value can be placed on fact. Emerson wrote, “Hence doubtless that secret value we attach to facts that interest us much beyond their seeming importance. We think it frivolous to record them, but a wise man records them, and they agree with the experience and feelings of others” (4: 70).<sup>15</sup> Universal truths—hidden at first—when discovered resonated with the feelings of the individual, revealing the subjective aesthetic that German philosophy explored.

Frustration followed Emerson, just as it had the German philosophers. He struggled to replace his habitual dependence upon external authority with dependence on his own intuition. This resistance came directly from, as Schlegel described it, the necessity for a system and the need for no system. An apprehensive Emerson pursued confirmation of his belief—that truth would stand independent and resonant to all—in the literature he studied. Often he found the resonance he was looking for shouting at him from the page. In the summer of 1836, he presented his advice for retrieving resonance: “Make your own Bible. Select and collect all the

---

<sup>14</sup> March 22, 1834

<sup>15</sup> June 16, 1836

words and sentences that in all your reading have been to you like the blast of triumph out of Shakspear [sic], Seneca, Moses, John and Paul” (4: 78).<sup>16</sup> Collecting resonant citations, however intuitive, was only a partial solution to counteracting the systems of external authority.

While such a solution to find confirmation requires a contradictory reliance on the words, thoughts, and ideas of others, because Emerson placed emphasis on the individual’s deduction, not on the reliance upon authorial authority, it is not contradictory in the slightest. Too much emphasis on authorial authority would result in what Emerson later explained in “The American Scholar” as becoming a “satellite instead of a system” (54). Intuition would always be the primary source for truth—and books, as “secondary sources,” would, as Packer has explained, have a “tendency to warp the reader out of his own orbit” (68). In order to maintain an individual’s integrity, Emerson suggests a “creative reading” of the text (Packer 69). He wrote, “The best rule of reading will be a method from nature, and not a mechanical one of hours and pages. It holds each student to a pursuit of his native aim, instead of a desultory miscellany. Let him read what is proper to him, and not waste his memory on a crowd of mediocrities” (“Books” 173).

Instead of reading assigned texts page by page, Emerson encouraged individuals to pursue that which was of most interest to them, or that which resonated with their own subjective filters. Packer, drawing on Emerson’s idea of resonance, interprets this “creative reading,” or citation, as an ability to pick and choose from readings and “create something new,” building upon the words of others (68). Emerson describes his creative reading not as a search for new ideas but as a way to describe those ideas:

The office of reading is wholly subordinate. [...] By knowing the systems of Philosophy that have flourished under the names of Heraclitus, Zoroaster, Plato, Kant; by knowing

---

<sup>16</sup> July 21, 1836

the life and conversation of Jesus, of Napoleon, of Shakespear, and of Dante; by knowing chemistry and commerce, I get thereby a vocabulary for my ideas. I get no ideas.

(3:256)<sup>17</sup>

Despite Emerson's success in creating his own philosophy through citation, he still felt dissatisfied. His usual methods of confirmation, at first original and innovative, inadequately reflected his growing belief in the supremacy of the individual's mind. On one occasion, in 1837, Emerson vents his frustration at his reliance upon external authorities to get the confirmation he sought: "Yesterday I went to Athenaeum and looked through journals and books—for wit, for excitement, to wake in me the muse. In vain, and in vain. And am I yet to learn that the God dwells within? The books are but crutches, the resorts of the feeble and lame, which, if used by the strong, weaken the muscular power, and become necessary aids" (4: 258).<sup>18</sup> The God within. Emerson's chastisement demonstrates the depth of his belief in intuition and also the depth of his relationship with external authority. But this moment appears to be a turning point for him. Realizing (and vocalizing) that reliance upon external sources for identifying truth weakened his ability to intuit truth within anything. External sources could stimulate confirmation within an individual, but the external was not the confirmation itself.

Despite his resolute description of the consequences of continuing to rely upon external sources for confirmation, Emerson did not wholly discard those sources in his personal study but he would begin to replace them with an original source of truth that could not be disproved: Nature—original, unborrowed, unbuilt. Emerson's emphasis on the role of Nature illustrates the need not for the creation of a more natural or organic system, but rather for the need to of natural, organic experiences of listening to the God within. Choosing an organic setting,

---

<sup>17</sup> July 19, 1837

<sup>18</sup> July 26, 1837

Emerson claims, allows the individual to “return” to “reason and faith,” incorporating the subjective as a method of deduction (“Nature” 12).

In Nature, the ultimate aesthetic creation, and with the sun warming the New England air, Emerson experienced the ultimate in subjectivity: “I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all” (“Nature” 12). Truth, filtered through intuition, just as light and images filter through the eyeball, became evident to Emerson through his own subjectivity. This experience provided him with a new vantage point for deciphering resonant truths from a subjective experience with Nature. Sifting this truth, visible in its pure natural form, through his subjective experiences, gave Emerson the needed push to write and publish the beliefs about intuition that had transformed him over the previous few years.

Rather than relying solely on texts for resonance to confirm his beliefs in his writing, Emerson focused on truths, like Nature, that were not tied to an external system, ultimately turning away from an absolute system or an absolute authority to a reliance on *selbstgefuhl*. “Each philosopher,” Emerson explains, “each bard, each actor has done for me, as by delegate, what I can one day do for myself” (“The American Scholar” 63). That day had arrived. Emerson’s focus, as manifested through his published essays, reflected the intense deliberation he experienced between resonance and systems. Packer argues that an individual must “fight against the gravitational pull by becoming an inventor himself” (69). And Emerson did just that. Using writing as his outlet for invention, he fulfilled a promise written in 1833: “I feel myself pledged, if health and opportunity be granted me, to demonstrate that all necessary truth is its own evidence; that no doctrine of God need appeal to a book; that Christianity is wrongly received by all such as take it for a system of doctrines, — its stress being upon moral truth; it is



a rule of life, not a rule of faith” (3: 159-160).<sup>19</sup> This promise to “demonstrate” truth as its own “evidence” would expose truths otherwise hidden by systematic thoughts. While his pledge would lead the focus of his future writings, it was his experiences with religion that would prove invaluable to his philosophy.

Ameriks explains that experience provides an assurance of self and existence, building an “authentic style” that is necessary for the extraction of truth:

One must consider the fertile and bipolar internal nature of the experience itself. At its base level, it offers an immediate revelation of both the self and existence (actuality, being) as such, and thus provides an intimate form of certainty found nowhere else. Furthermore, the base experience also naturally leads itself toward being elaborated in several higher-order forms, cumulating in the development of a personal and authentic style, as in the aphorisms, fancies, and novels of Novalis and Jean-Paul. This style takes one far beyond the holy pre-conceptual immediacy of the base level, and yet, in all its sophistication, it remains essentially connected to the ineliminable subjective particularity. (272)

This authentic style, as Ameriks argues, is what emerges from using experience, as evidenced through writing, as a vehicle for intuition. Emerson’s use of one-liners may be an indication that his belief in the principles of *Selbstgefühl* did influence his style of writing and his ultimate message, as it did the German philosophers that came before him.

The evolution of Emerson’s ideology surrounding subjective intuition was crucial to the method he chose to promote it. His belief in a “common spirituality” prompted him to write with caution, in fragments, leaving out transitions, and boiling down truth to its purest, resonant “essence” (Buell 188). His choice to remain indirect, however, has drawn criticism. Lawrence

---

<sup>19</sup> July 11, 1833

Buell evaluates what he believes is Emerson's inability to tell his audience how to disseminate their self-reliant thoughts and actions throughout the world: "what this [self-reliance] means is proclaimed rather than spelled out" (66). In Buell's eyes, Emerson's refusal to formalize his philosophy falls short of anticipating a key instructional move for his audience. But perhaps what Buell is missing is the brilliance of such a move. Emerson chose to remain indirect, because doing so promoted the individual's responsibility to rely not on his authority, through his words, but on their own intuitive authority. Emerson, whose concept of intuition was fully formed, no doubt anticipated that from the beginning—allowing for the subjective experiences of others by decisively excluding a formula to allow for the independent intuition of his readers.

Emerson's philosophical journey, stimulated by experience, led him from participation in the "institutionalized" culture of Unitarianism, to becoming a self-aware, conscious, creative thinker and writer. His value of individual subjectivity led him to cultivate a self-reliant intuition informed by resonance, guiding his study and writings for the rest of his life. His philosophy empowers the individual to think, analyze, and write from the center of subjective experiences; to revise current ideologies in favor of resonance; and to doubt those revisions, questioning and always searching for the answers to questions of the soul. His belief in filtering truth through individual, subjective experiences was never an arrival at an "absolute system" for determining truth, rather it was an evolving process that impacted his future career as one of America's greatest writers.

## Works Cited

- Ameriks, Karl. "The Key Role of Selbstgefühl in Philosophy's Aesthetic and Historical Turns." *Kant and the Historical Turn: Philosophy as Critical Interpretation*. New York: Oxford UP, 2006. Print.
- Ashton, Rosemary D. "Carlyle's Apprenticeship: His Early German Criticism and His Relationship with Goethe (1822-1832)." *The Modern Language Review*. 71.1 (1976): 1-18. *JSTOR*. Web. 8 Apr 2014.
- Buell, Lawrence. "Religious Radicalism." *Emerson*. Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2003. 158-198. Print.
- Cavell, Stanley. "Aversive Thinking." *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*. La Salle: Open Court, 1990. 33-63. Print.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The American Scholar." *The Essays and Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004. Print.
- . *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson 1820-1872*. Ed. Edward Waldo Emerson. 10 vols. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1910. Print.
- . "The Lord's Supper." *American Transcendental Web*. n.p, n.d. Web. 4 April 2014.
- . "Nature." *The Essays and Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004. Print.
- . "Self-Reliance." *The Essays and Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004. Print.
- Frank, Manfred. *Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2004. Print.

Hurth, Elisabeth. "William and Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Problem of the Lord's Supper: The Influence of German 'Historical Speculators.'" *Church History* 62: 2 (1993). 190-206. Print.

Keats, John. *Complete Poems and Selected Letters of John Keats*. New York: Random House, Inc. 2001. Print.

Millan-Zaibert, Elizabeth. Introduction. *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*. By Manfred Frank. New York: State University of New York Press, 2004. 1-22. Print.

Packer, Barbara L. *The Transcendentalists*. Athens: Georgia UP, 2007. Print.

Robinson, David. "'For Largest Liberty': Emerson, Natural Religion, and the Antislavery Crisis." *Religion and Literature* 41:1 (2009). 3-24. Print.

Schlegel, Frederich. *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*. University Park: University of Pennsylvania, 1968. Print.