

NO LONGER A DULL BOOK:
REVISIONING EMERSON AS A THEORIST OF READING

by

MICHAEL DAVID BOATRIGHT

(Under the Direction of Mark Faust)

ABSTRACT

Ralph Waldo Emerson has received scant attention as a philosopher of reading. One reason for his absence as a philosopher in the literature on reading theory could be connected to the challenges his writings pose, as Zwarg (1993) puts it, because he didn't write like a traditional philosopher. He believed his writings should inspire his readers, that his work should provoke thinking and questioning rather than provide explicit arguments on the topics he addresses. This project takes up the challenge posed by Emerson's style of writing through examining the corpus of his essays – extending from his earliest publication in 1836 to his posthumous publications in the 1880s – and argues that Emerson merits consideration as a theorist of reading in educational circles. The project begins by examining extant documentation on how Emerson learned to read and his own reading practices. The second chapter continues setting the foundation for this project by exploring the contentious galaxy of literary critics and philosophers who have responded to his work over the last two centuries. The third chapter builds a case for the productive uses of experience from an Emersonian perspective and sets the stage for the next trio of chapters that delve into the principle argument of this experiment: Emerson's ideas on reading. Chapter four picks up where chapter three leaves off and explores the transformative

power of aesthetic experiences when reading from an Emersonian perspective. Chapter five looks at reading as a form of engaged democratic citizenship and how Emerson viewed acts of reading and thinking as forms of action, critical questioning, and avenues for reform. Chapter six argues that Emersonian reading practices serve as a means for developing an ethical stance toward self and other by looking at Emerson's emphasis on the importance of relational connections among and across selves, others, texts, and society. The last chapter in this project speculates on how an Emersonian perspective on reading subverts the dominant discourse in US schools because it construes reading as a continual process of exploration, transformation, and learning rather than a linear, lockstep process aimed at pre-approved responses and right answers.

INDEX WORDS: Emerson, Reading, Experience, Events, Transactions, Dewey, Gadamer, Derrida, Foucault, Aesthetics, Democracy, Ethics, Education

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MICHAEL DAVID BOATRIGHT
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MICHAEL DAVID BOATRIGHT

Major Professor: Mark Faust
Committee: James Marshall
Donna Alvermann

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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DEDICATION

To Sarah.

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CHAPTER 1

EMERSON, THE READER

One must be an inventor to read well. There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world.

(Emerson, 1983, p. 59)

Creative Readings

Envision an English literature course on the first day of class at the start of a new semester. A deathly silence layered with fear of the unknown penetrates the air, with pens resting in hands or fingers hovering above laptop keyboards as students ready themselves to capture the professor's first words. Perhaps the key to success in the course will serve as the professor's opening statements. After the rustling and faint conversation fades throughout the room, the professor eyes the clock, stands up in front of the room, poised to speak, and offers the following suggestion to students:

Do not attempt to be a great reader... learn to divine books, to *feel* those that you want without wasting much time over them...often a chapter is enough. The glance reveals what the gaze obscures...skip the paragraphs that do not talk to you. (Emerson, as quoted in Woodbury, 1890, pp. 27-28, emphasis in original)

Imagine the reactions as they form from face to face after the professor delivers this nugget of perplexing advice. Would any students agree with this mantra advocating what may be perceived

as anti-reading? Would others secretly whisper to themselves – *blasphemer!* – and proceed to take notes as if nothing had happened and even consider dropping the course? Would other students scratch their heads, question the weight of the professor’s introductory remarks, and think about the nature of reading, what it means to read, and what they could expect from the semester ahead?

Such responses to reading advice would not be surprising given that many of us have been taught since our school years to regard books as untouchable objects (Bayard, 2007). Books exist in our culture as sacrosanct material entities that must be revered, read in a linear fashion from front to back, and put away after use. However, Emerson’s advice about skimming books, gleaning what readers find intriguing, and having a feeling for books speaks to a different approach to reading. Rather than championing anti-reading, Emerson invites readers into a process of decentering books, authors, and self that instead promotes the relationships made possible through reading. He felt that writers and readers existed as paradoxical partners in the act of making meaning from texts who switched roles and exchanged clothes to perform their non-exclusive, overlapping roles. In *Letters and Socials Aims*, the last book of essays published during his lifetime, Emerson (1875) writes, “Observe, also, that a writer appears to more advantage in the pages of another book than in his own. In his own, he waits as a candidate for your approbation; in another’s, he is a lawgiver” (p. 156). In other words, books were meant to be interpreted, debated, challenged, and were points of departure for thinking and rethinking. For Emerson, books weren’t relics of the past; books were springboards for thinking/acting, being/becoming in the world.

Emerson made a career of reading. But not reading as an isolated, cognitive activity for the purpose of mastering fractured and fossilized strands of knowledge and information

published in the yellowed books of antiquity. For Emerson, reading marked an opportunity to engage in the unceasing process of making sense of himself, his relations, his world, and of course, books. In *Nature*, his earliest publication, Emerson (1983) comments, “I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me” (p. 9), an early instantiation of his belief that reading/writing never occurs as an isolated practice. One is always reading with experiences, orientations, habits of mind, and ways of knowing that play inexorable roles in how one makes sense of texts, selves, others, and society. Reading was a perpetual act of sense making for Emerson, which meant teasing out ideas, having disagreements, seeing tensions in thinking/action, playing with language, and coming to newer understandings of situations, texts, and ideas.

However, a strong sense of irony courses through this chapter entitled *Emerson, the Reader*. Emerson had difficulties learning to read (Cabot, 1888; Richardson, 1995; Rusk; 1949), and he received remediation because of the challenges he encountered in becoming a reader. Which begs the question: How did Emerson become the questioning, creative, productive reader later in life? What documentation exists to represent his trajectory from an inability to read to becoming a reader who embraced reading as a central activity in his life? Emerson told his mentee and Harvard student Charles Woodbury (1890) that an author should leave readers something to puzzle, some room to think, and not provide all the answers, which leaves the process of assembling a profile of Emerson to his readers. Fortunately, Emerson did just that with his own writings. He addressed his reading/writing practices throughout his published essays and journals, even meditating on the importance of writings oneself into a piece of work in order to make sense of one’s thoughts. Emerson (1884) writes:

This necessity of resting on the real, of speaking *your* private thought and experience, few young men apprehend. Set ten men to write their journal for one day, and nine of them will leave out their thought, or proper result, - that is, their net experience,- and lose themselves in misreporting the supposed experience of other people. Indeed, I think it an essential caution to young writers, that they shall not in their discourse leave out the one thing which the discourse was written to say. Let that belief which you hold alone have free course. (pp. 250-251, emphasis in original)

Not only does this passage offer pedagogical advice for approaching the writing process by asserting one's own experiences in the text, it sheds light into how Emerson himself left clues, reflections, ideas, and dreams peppered throughout his work as signposts for understanding his reading/writing practices. With Emerson's own writings and various biographical accounts in tow, I will assemble the puzzle pieces and produce a portrait of Emerson as a reader. Before undertaking this endeavor, however, I first address how I arrived at the current project of revisioning Emerson as a theorist of reading.

Seeing Emerson Anew

Now that we are here, we will put our own interpretation on things, and our own things for interpretation.

(Emerson, 1983, p. 97)

My affinity toward reading the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) stems from two pivotal, concurrent social events. As I prepared to transition from being a full-time high school teacher to becoming a full-time graduate student working toward a doctorate in English education, a former colleague and current friend of mine, who proceeded me in commencing

full-time doctoral course work, suggested we read two books together: Menand's (2001) *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* and West's (1989) *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*. As we convened at my apartment over the summer to pore over and discuss these two texts, we could not escape the fact that the ideas of Emerson were central to each of these authors' arguments. Although Menand (2001) did not devote a section specifically to Emerson, the four historical figures he analyzed – Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, and John Dewey – were profiled as owing a sizeable debt in their thinking to their predecessor, Emerson. By contrast, West (1989) generated an explicit analysis of Emerson's work that situated him as the foundational, preeminent American philosopher and the progenitor of American pragmatism. After reading these texts, I felt that I had stumbled upon a mysterious American philosophical heritage heretofore unavailable to me. By the end of this social reading experience, I felt compelled to explore the writings of Emerson on a more intense, focused level.

One other event further encouraged and nourished my exploration of Emerson's prose. As I read Menand's (2001) and West's (1989) works that summer, I also met with my graduate advisor to discuss potential courses of interest, the prospects of earning an assistantship, and my theoretical understandings at an early stage in my doctoral program. During these advisement meetings, I shared my newfound inclination to read Emerson's work, and he was astounded to learn of my interest in Emerson – no previous doctoral student had espoused an interest in Emerson, a literary figure who never left his orbit of intrigue during his years as a student, a reader, and a researcher. He immediately and enthusiastically suggested we read Emerson's (1982) *Nature and Selected Essays* together, an edited volume of fifteen commonly studied essays by Emerson, as an introduction to Emerson's key works, and I procured a copy of this

edition of Emerson's essays based on this recommendation. As a consequence of these two social events, I launched into my current practices of reading and rereading Emerson.

In the process of reading Emerson's prose, I soon came to realize that the Emerson I had darted around during my own experiences as a student in high school English language arts classes and American literature courses in college, which celebrated him as a New England aesthete who lived an aloof existence based on esoteric mysticism and self-indulgent transcendentalism, bore faint resemblance to the Emerson I was now revisiting. For instance, Emerson (1982) troubles the humanist idea that objective facts exist as static, stable entities in the essay *Experience*; he questions the concept of isolated learning in the essay *Montaigne; or the Skeptic*; and he challenges his readers to envision themselves as actively engaged forces in the world and as works in progress in the essay *Circles*. Such philosophical offerings were not addressed during my experiences with Emerson in high school and college, and I began to question why Emerson's philosophical ideas held little to no currency in secondary and tertiary schools. On a larger scale, I began to conceptualize an understanding of Emerson as a philosopher who might play a role in shaping how we think about reading from a pedagogical perspective.

Based on the provocations I identified from reading Emerson's (1982) edited book of essays, I undertook a more thorough examination of his published works by obtaining a copy of Emerson's (1983) *Essays and Lectures*, a compendium of six complete books of essays spanning the trajectory of his publishing career, beginning with *Nature*, published in 1836, through *The Conduct of Life*, published in 1860. By pursuing a close reading of this volume of Emerson's books of essays, I began to question why I had not seen Emerson referenced in texts I had encountered during my graduate studies that addressed the teaching of reading in educational

circles. Furthermore, as I encountered Emerson scholarship and expanded my readings of Emerson to include his later essays and posthumously published works, the idea formed for the present project, and I venture now into the territory of Emerson's reading life as inroads to articulating Emerson's theory of reading in future chapters.

A Portrait of a Young Reader

Do not spare to put novels into the hands of young people as an occasional holiday and experiment.

(Emerson, 1884, p. 141)

In sketching a portrait of Emerson as a reader, one has to delve past the endlessly reproduced, iconic images of the ageing, avuncular Sage of Concord (McMillin, 2000), the erudite and stalwart father of the American Renaissance and Transcendentalism (Matthiessen, 1941), and even his centrality as the fountainhead of American pragmatism (West, 1989). Each of these manifestations serves to produce an image of Emerson larger than life, disproportionately more demigod and human, and palpably untouchable as a towering literary genius, poet, and philosopher. All the laurels hoisted upon such representations of Emerson serve to undermine his own admonitions against hero worship as in the essay *The American Scholar* when Emerson (1983), in one fell swoop, disabuses his readers of practicing idolatry of the thinkers of antiquity by writing, "Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries, when they wrote these books" (p. 57). Aside from Emerson's call that no literary figure should escape the reader's attention unscathed by critique, it also spawns a question by directing Emerson's statement back on himself. Before Emerson became the apotheosized Emerson extant in the study of American literature, what was

he like as a meek young man in the library? What were his reading practices and how did he advise others to read? And, what can be gathered from Emerson's own writings as well as biographies, memoirs, and conversations with and about him to construct an account of Emerson as a reader?

Ralph Waldo Emerson was the fourth child born to William Emerson and Ruth Haskins in 1803. William Emerson, a dedicated journalist, writer, and Unitarian minister who came across to his children as laconic at times, had every expectation that all his children would grow up to become intelligent and productive citizens (Rusk, 1949). Perhaps such high expectations caused William to lamentably proclaim in December of 1805 that his son, Ralph, slightly only two and a half years of age at the time, was "a rather dull scholar" (p. 19). Although it is quite feasible that Ralph was already attending school by this age, by his third birthday he had returned to the dame school after a serious childhood illness, and he was "naturally still unable to read well" (p. 19). Interestingly but not surprisingly, most biographers of Emerson over the past hundred years have latched onto William's dismissive comment toward his son that he documented in his journal on May 17, 1806, "Ralph does not read very well yet" (Cabot, 1888, p. 41; cf. Richardson, 1995; Rusk, 1949).

One possible rationale for William Emerson's preoccupation with his children's education, and their reading abilities, stems from the fact that both he and his wife Ruth lived bookish lives (Richardson, 1995). In fact, William, in early adulthood, founded his town's first social library, and he amassed a small personal library of his own (Rusk, 1949). With a home surrounded by books, and with their parents' own rigorous reading lives – William's personal agenda for any given day demanded approximately six hours a day to reading scripture, Greek authors, Latin authors, new publications, and philosophy – it is no small wonder that the

Emerson children felt pressure to excel at school and with reading. At one point, the Emersons debated which child required more remediation, Ralph or his brother William. In the end, “Ralph was selected as the one to be drilled in his studies” (p. 20).

However this drilling method of education panned out for young Ralph, no documentation exists, nor have various biographers expanded upon the nature of his studies. Nevertheless, Emerson felt a certain fondness for his early teachers, even a certain male instructor who practiced draconian styles of discipline in order to get his pupils to learn the required material (Rusk, 1949). Emerson’s affinity for his schoolteachers notwithstanding, the most powerful influence during Emerson’s early years can be ascribed to his Aunt Mary Moody Emerson (Richardson, 1995; Rusk, 1949), who lived with the Emersons throughout Ralph’s childhood and later in his adult life. Mary Moody Emerson, along with Ralph’s parents, proved a powerful role model in her manner of entertaining ideas, reading and rereading books, prolific letter writing, and assiduous dedication to the art of argumentation. For all the education Ralph received at school, he received practical lessons in his home environment, especially when it came to reading. In order to learn their hymns more perfectly, the Emerson boys learned and recited their hymns by heart, and by the age of six, Ralph’s experiences in learning to read consisted of a steady diet of recitation and memorization of primarily religious texts such as scripture and hymns.

Ralph attended the local public grammar school by age eight, and soon after his ninth birthday, he entered the Boston Public Latin School (Holmes, 1884; Rusk, 1949). During these years, a former fellow classmate noted, Ralph had a proclivity toward history, Latin, and Greek, and he generally kept a set of books under the bench of his writing desk that he would read during intermissions of the school day (Holmes, 1884). Not only did Ralph’s appetite for reading

increase during this time, he began to attempt his hand at writing poetry. In fact, Ralph utilized extra time at school in order to sculpt new, original verses, and William Furness, Ralph's seatmate in class, "never forgot how Ralph labored over his copybook, his tongue, half out of his mouth, working up and down in cadence with the strokes of his pen" (Rusk, 1949, p. 32; cf. Cabot, 1888).

It was also during these years that Ralph's father, William Emerson, passed away, leaving the care and instruction of the Emerson children to William's widow, Ruth Emerson, and his sister, Mary Moody Emerson (Richardson, 1995). As a means of sustaining the family, over 200 of the books located in William's library were sold at auction, books by poets, playwrights, and philosophers such as Ovid, Cicero, Shakespeare, Swift, Pope, and Goldsmith (Rusk, 1949). With Ralph's father deceased, his adult role models of reading practices shifted toward his mother and his aunt, two intellectually and spiritually powerful women who never desisted in nurturing Ralph's increasing thirst for books and encouraging him to continue reading and rereading books he found lucrative (Richardson, 1995).

Judging by these biographical accounts on Emerson's journey of learning to read, I raise more questions than can be answered. For example, what were his early difficulties in learning how to read? On what basis did his father assume that he was intellectually inferior to his other siblings while barely out of infancy himself and merely a toddler? How did reading – once a challenge for Emerson – become inexorably manifest in his devouring appetite for reading and writing? In light of the introduction to *Nature*, his first publication, in which Emerson (1983) states, "Undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable" (p. 7), it would not be beyond the realm of possibility for questions to be answered by more questions, questions that lead readers on a trajectory of learning as well as future inquiry. Although the documentation of

Emerson's acquiring the ability to read constitutes a somewhat sparse account, it sheds a modicum of light on his childhood education and perhaps anticipates Emerson's own ideas on the reading process and the centrality reading would play throughout his adult life.

A Portrait of a Continuing Reader

But the novel will find the way to our interiors one day, and will not always be the novel of costume merely. I do not think it inoperative now. So much novel-reading cannot leave the young men and maidens untouched; and doubtless it gives some ideal dignity to the day.

(Emerson, 1870, p. 172)

During his formative years, Ralph Emerson began a healthy epistolary correspondence with his aunt Mary Moody Emerson that would endure until her death in 1863 (Richardson, 1995). It is from this correspondence that the earliest known document of Emerson's writing about his reading practices emerges by way of a letter written to his aunt a month before his eleventh birthday. In this letter, Emerson offered a snapshot of a typical day in his life, which involved reading hymns and chapters from books aloud as a family, and he spoke of reading Virgil that day at the Latin school (Cabot, 1888; Rusk, 1949). Holmes (1884) writes that during this time, Emerson "loved the study of Greek" and that he "was fond of reading history" as well (pp. 43-44).

Emerson earned commendable marks while attending the Latin School, and Rusk (1949) asserts that he found the reading of self-selected, leisure books more profitable than the books required by the curriculum. Even though Rusk does not further expand upon this claim, such a commentary on the use of books may have provoked Emerson (1983) to offer the following

argument about school practices and what schools validate, and conversely invalidate, as appropriate knowledge:

The regular course of studies, the years of academical and professional education, have not yielded me better facts than some idle books under the bench at the Latin School. What we do not call education is more precious than that which we call so. We form no guess, at the time of receiving a thought, of its comparative value. And education often wastes its effort in attempts to thwart and balk this natural magnetism, which is sure to select what belongs to it. (p. 306)

School, in Emerson's estimate, rightfully ignores the natural proclivities that may spark learning in students' imaginations if they stray from the prescribed curriculum. Such remarks precede Dewey's (1902/1976) identification of the rift extant between a child's interest and the official knowledge of schools when he writes, "The source of whatever is dead, mechanical, and formal in schools is found precisely in the subordination of the life and experience of the child to the curriculum" (p. 277.) Whether Emerson (1983) had his own Latin School days in mind when he composed the above passage, or if he intended to stake a general grievance with education, remains conjecture. At any rate, this glimpse into Emerson's ideas about learning and education provides provocative evidence of how Emerson viewed reading as a vehicle for experiences not sanctioned in schools.

Emerson entered Harvard in August of 1817 at the age of fourteen (Cabot, 1888), and Richardson (1995) pinpoints Emerson's Cambridge years as the time period when he first launched into his rigorously disciplined practice of journaling, which would become a lifelong engagement. During his early years at Harvard, "[Emerson] wrote constantly, he wrote about everything, he covered hundreds of pages. When he had nothing to say, he wrote about having

nothing to say. He read and indexed and reread what he had written” (p. 42). He also expended great amounts of energy maintaining correspondences with family members such as his brother William, his mother, and his aunt Mary Moody, and some of these letters had their geneses in his notebooks and journals.

Aside from Emerson’s expanding journals and the documentation of the reading he assiduously pursued, he found his college courses lacking in substance. Many of his college lessons consisted of memorization and recitation practices, and for the most part, these lessons held little intrinsic interest for Emerson (Cabot, 1888; Rusk, 1949). Even though he industriously accomplished the duties of his studies, he acknowledged the guilt he felt in his journal by obliging his desire to explore books other than those required. “The boy at college apologizes for not learning the tutor’s task, and tries to learn them; but stronger nature gives him Otway and Massinger to read, or betrays him into a stroll to Mount Auburn, in study hours” (Cabot, 1888, p. 57). Here is yet another instance of Emerson’s fancy for leisure reading, a practice that would find articulation in his published works.

By the age of eighteen, Emerson had graduated from Harvard, having earned few academic accolades along the way like many of classmates vied for (Rusk, 1949). For a brief stint he worked as a schoolteacher in his brother William’s school before matriculating at Harvard Divinity School. Richardson (1995) suggests that Emerson’s reasoning for preparing for a religious life was familial: four generations of Emerson men had earned their living as pastors, and his Aunt Mary Moody seldom desisted in reminding him of this pedigree. Even before leaving for Divinity School and the avalanche of texts he had to read in preparation, Emerson still made time for Gibbon, Rousseau, Plato, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Pope, and Goldsmith – all central writers for Emerson that he read and reread. Although Emerson would earn a license to

practice divinity and had the security of giving weekly sermons at a Congregational church in Boston, a series of tragic events, such as the death of his first wife, Ellen Tucker, coupled with an encroaching doubt of his calling led him to resign his post at the church and launch into his lifelong career of lecturing and writing.

What resonates resoundingly through the multiple biographies that trace the educational path of Emerson, from his early challenges of learning how to read to the committed passion he developed for chronicling and journaling about the numerous books he encountered, is a reader who, as in his advice to Charles Woodbury suggests, divined what he needed from books. He was not, as Richardson (1995) iterates, a systematic reader; he read to placate his curiosities about science and history, to stoke his emerging philosophical contemplations, and to languish in the process of revisiting the books that spoke to him. Although these offerings provide a skeletal framework upon which to think about Emerson's reading practices, his own ideas about himself as reader constituted themes that he struggled with throughout his publishing career and provide more layers toward thinking about how Emerson approached reading.

A Reader's Portrait of a Reader

It seemed to me as if I had myself written the book, in some former life, so sincerely it spoke to my thought and experience.

(Emerson, 1983, p. 697)

Scattered throughout the journals he wrote, notebooks he maintained, letters he sent, and the conversations he enjoyed with friends, family, and colleagues are various accounts of how Emerson engaged in the process of reading (Emerson, 1970; Richardson, 1995; 2009; Woodbury, 1890). He shared advice when pressed to speak on the interrelated topics of reading and writing, and he wrote about his reading experiences in a select few of his essays. "Reading is

closely related to writing,” Emerson confessed to his friend Woodbury (1890). “While the mind is plastic there should be care as to its impressions. The new facts should come from nature, fresh, buoyant, inspiring, exact” (p. 24), which attests to the fluidity and playfulness of thought Emerson enjoyed when reading.

Reading, for Emerson, constituted an integral component of his day, and he felt a sense of inadequacy on days when reading was absent from activities. “I do not feel as if my day had substance in it, if I have read nothing,” Emerson writes in a letter to a friend (Richardson, 2009, p. 9). In light of this personal thirst for reading, Emerson raced through many books in any given month, and he frequently checked out more books from the library than he could possibly read before they were due (Richardson, 1995). Based on the lending records and borrowing ledgers from the Boston Athenæum, Harvard College Library, and Harvard Divinity School documenting the over one thousand volumes Emerson checked out over the course of half a century:

It is possible to note at a glance those books which he used again and again, others that were withdrawn from more than one library, those which he chose for his concentrated summer reading, as well as the many from which he drank less deeply. (Cameron, 1966, pp. 11-12)

Emerson (1870) writes of the intensely personal, even sensual relationship he felt with the books that he held in high regard: “Indeed a man’s library is a sort of harem, and I observe that tender readers have a great pudency in showing their books to a stranger” (p. 168). Such an intimacy with books harkens to Emerson’s college years when he confessed to relishing the consoling effects of books more so than the raucous shenanigans of his classmates, even though

Emerson certainly enjoyed his fair share of mirthful moments when socializing with friends on campus (Cabot, 1888; Rusk, 1949).

Along with Emerson's incessant urge for reading, he forged powerful relationships with many of the books he encountered, even going so far as to admit that he recommended the philosophical works of Bacon and Berkeley because, "They have been friends to me" (Woodbury, 1890, p. 26). This relational connection with books comes out in the essay *Friendship* in which Emerson (1983) draws the following analogy, "I do then with my friends as I do with my books. I would have them where I can find them, but I seldom use them" (p. 353), and he elaborates to explain that books, like friends, performed an integral role for inspiring him to greater heights of thinking but never enough from him to lose track of his own visions. Emerson even unites the concepts of friends and books by conceding that when his friends have gone away with their own lives and routines, he "shall regret the lost literature of your mind, and wish you were by my side again" (p. 354). Thus, books functioned in Emerson's sphere not merely as foreign, inanimate objects, but as living entities inviting the possibility of connecting with his own thoughts, selves, and others when reading.

A further manifestation of Emerson's connection to books comes to light when considering his use of body metaphors when writing about his connection to books. Similar to Bakhtin's (1981) assertion that words detached from their connective tissue in language use produce an empty language or "the naked corpse of a word" (p. 292), Emerson (1983) writes of the embodied nature of books. In his essay *Montaigne; or, the Skeptic*, he writes of his deep engagement with Montaigne's essayistic style of writing, noting that, "It is the language of conversation transferred to a book. Cut these words, and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive" (p. 700). For Emerson, books represented not merely a conglomeration of words placed in

a strategic order on each page for effect; they had a life of their own. Moreover, the power of books sometimes proved overwhelming for Emerson (1970), and they behaved as unsettling, intoxicating agents, as he discloses in a rather provocative journal entry, “Each of the books I read invades me, displaces me” (p. 254).

On a less serious note, Emerson writes of the playful experiences he engaged in with books. For example, in the essay *Montaigne; or, the Skeptic*, Emerson (1983) claims that Montaigne’s essays so explicitly mirrored his own train of thought that, “I remembered the delight and wonder in which I lived with it. It seemed to me as if I had written the book, in some former life, so sincerely it spoke to my thought and experience” (p. 697). In another vein, Emerson speaks to the challenges he preferred to experience as a reader in a conversation with Woodbury (1890):

The most interesting writing is that which does not quite satisfy the reader. Try and leave a little thinking for him; that will be better for both. The trouble with most writers is, they spread too thin. The reader is as quick as they; has got there before, and is ready and waiting. A little guessing does him no harm, so I would assist him with no connections. (p. 22)

Even in this snapshot of advice, Emerson proclaims that the most satisfying reading experiences occur when a writer does not provide answers and truth claims. Emerson’s role, as a reader, consisted of working through, weighing the arguments, and joining in the puzzlement of making sense from a particular text.

Emerson privileged reading experiences that overjoyed, befuddled, and challenged him, but he also advocated that readers should assume a questioning stance when engaging with books. Even though colleague and friend Amos Bronson Alcott (2003) notes in an 1837 journal

entry that “*Emerson*, true to his genius, favors written works” (p. 1, emphasis in original), he resisted authorial claims about absolute facts and figures. In the lecture *The American Scholar*, Emerson (1983) asks the rhetorical question, “What is the right use [of books]?” (p. 57), to which he responds that books, when rightly used, serve as sources of inspiration and a call to arms to actively thinking about self, other, language, society, and beyond. Revisiting Emerson’s (1983) rhetorical question, “What is the hardest task in the world?” to which he responds, “To think” (p. 420), McMillin (2000) provides a corollary to Emerson’s question: “Reading must always involve thinking about what, how, and why we read. Reading, then, is probably the second hardest task, after thinking” (p. 146). The books to which Emerson allocated the most time consisted of works that forced him to work through meanings and understandings, inspire ideas of his own, and he in turn imbibed the experience of challenge, intrigue, and mystery made available from reading.

Reading into Emerson’s Reading Practices

These facts are, to be sure, harder to read. It is easier to count the census, or compute the square extent of a territory, to criticise its polity, books, art, than to come to the persons and dwellings of men and read their character and hope in their way of life.

(Emerson, 1870, p. 105)

The scholarly Emerson biographers James Cabot and Oliver Wendell Holmes in the nineteenth century, and Ralph Rusk and Robert Richardson in the twentieth century, contribute pieces of an incomplete portrait of Emerson’s life and works, and a portion from each of these informative accounts flirt with Emerson’s reading practices to varying degrees. Richardson (1995) allocates merely a few paragraphs on Emerson as a young reader, whereas Cabot (1888),

Holmes (1884), and Rusk (1949) draw a portrait of Emerson's youthful engagements with reading over multiple chapters, each producing a slightly different effect. Combine these sketches with Woodbury's (1890) conversations with Emerson and Emerson's own firsthand accounts (Emerson, 1970; 1973; 1982; 1983; 2010a; 2010b), and a distilled image of Emerson as reader, however piecemeal, comes into being.

Based on the documentation concerning Emerson's earliest experiences with reading, he did not learn to read quickly, which induced his father to remark that Ralph was the least intellectually inclined among his children despite the fact that Ralph himself had not quite reached three years of age at the time of his father's journal entry. In Nila Banton Smith's (1965/2002) *American Reading Instruction*, an extensive research document on the history of reading instruction in the United States, early nineteenth century pedagogies of reading centered on politics and accuracy of spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Embedded within this precision of learning to read was a preponderance of moralistic messages that reading helped form good citizens. Therefore, some of the tracts students read in schools focused on the fear of illiteracy and danger of straying from early nineteenth century American propriety.

Furthermore, learning to read during the post-Revolutionary years focused on discrete letter learning and eloquence in oral delivery of lessons, with alacrity, accuracy, poise earning students passing marks. If Emerson's lessons in learning to read contained such nationalistic-moralistic ideologies, and students only successfully mastered lessons through rote memorization of decontextualized texts, such lessons may not have appealed to the young Emerson's curiosity, which may account for Rusk's (1949) claim that Emerson gained more education from the intellectual forces residing in his home (i.e., mother Ruth and aunt Mary Moody) than from formal school lessons.

Because memorization played an intensely central role in learning to read in Colonial America (Smith, 1965/2002), Emerson's home routines of reading Biblical verses aloud as a family and committing hymns to memory may account for any acceleration and progress he made as a reader. One can surmise that the copious number of books lining the bookshelves of the Emerson home, along with a mother, father, and aunt who deeply valued literacy and literature (Richardson, 1995), influenced Emerson (1983) to read books irrelevant to the school curriculum and store a cache of "idle books" underneath his writing desk during his grammar and Latin school years (p. 306).

By the time Emerson entered Harvard at age fourteen, reading constituted an indispensable part of his day, and he journaled vigorously about the books that came under his scrutiny (Richardson, 1995). Although he "pored over Montaigne, and knew Shakespeare by heart" (Cabot, 1888, p. 59), Emerson finely honed his skill of sifting and skimming through books he read that did not attract his interest as a reader, even commenting that "The glance reveals what the gaze obscures" (As quoted in Woodbury, 1890, p. 27). As Richardson (1995) points out, "Reading was not an end in itself for Emerson" (p. 173); reading served to jostle ideas and evoke curiosities. Allegiance to any one text proved noxious (Emerson, 1983), and Emerson's ties to books during his college and seminary years evolved into a palpable relationship that endured throughout his life, and he embraced some books as formidable allies and companions who comforted him in days of grandeur and times of sorrow.

By forging relationships with books, even speaking of them as embodied entities that live and breathe, Emerson used books as a cornerstone for extending his own conceptualization of the world in which he lived. He concerned himself little with what books actually meant (Richardson, 1995) and focused on the travels of thought made possible through reading, using

reading “to nourish and stimulate his own thought” (p. 173). Books became valuable for Emerson not as artifacts for admiration, but as a series of imbricated texts that spoke to one another and to him as a reader. As Emerson (1973) writes in his journal in the late 1840s, “No book has worth by itself, but by the relation to what you have from many other books, it weighs” (pp. 34-35), and Emerson did just that with books – he weighed them, skimmed them, journaled about them, pored through them, pondered over them, and talked about them, with each serving a productive duty in how Emerson approached, thought about, and practiced the act and art of reading.

CHAPTER 2

READINGS OF EMERSON

Blame is safer than praise. I hate to be defended in a newspaper. As long as all that is said is said against me, I feel a certain assurance of success. But as soon as honeyed words of praise are spoken for me, I feel as one that lies unprotected before his enemies.

(Emerson, 1983, p. 298)

Atmospheric Relations

Emerson found himself drawn to the metaphor of atmospheres as living, thriving entities that connect selves/others through dialogue. He felt that atmospheres, or the ineffable energy that surrounds people in relations with themselves and others, were of paramount concern with how people lived in the world. Emerson (1884) writes, “The astronomers are very eager to know whether the moon has an atmosphere; I am only concerned that every man have one. I observe however that it takes two to make an atmosphere” (p. 57). In other words, an atmosphere becomes plausible when selves/others find themselves in relational situations and only arrives into existence when people become conjoined in the art of conversation, debate, and dialogue. Atmospheres exist at the nexus of relationships due to their potential to nurture an understanding of selves, others, texts, lives, and living. In light of Emerson’s ideas, Gadamer (1986) claims that we “place our aspirations and knowledge into a broader and richer horizon through dialogue with the other” (p. 106). Furthermore, Emerson admirer and critic Walt Whitman (1982) writes of relational atmospheres when considering reading:

The reader will always have his or her part to do, just as much as I have had mine. I seek less to state or display any theme or thought, and more to bring you, the reader, into the atmosphere of the theme or thought – there to pursue your own flight. (p. 667)

Whitman uses the provocative concept of atmospheres to speak of reading as an invitation to a meaning making process between and across authors, texts, and readers and acknowledges the active, complicit role readers play in these processes. He encourages the reader to forge ahead toward ideas, proclivities, and urgings within this co-generated atmosphere, and critics as well as supporters have achieved just this reading challenge by staking their claims in the ruptured, turbulent atmosphere of criticism and debate over the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Over the past 170 years, the atmosphere surrounding Emerson's work has consisted of authors, literary critics, philosophers, and poets who have vilified his publications and dismissed his prose as egotistical meanderings, his poetry as puerile, and his philosophy as undisciplined and unsustainable (Arnold, 1885; Eliot, 1919). At the same time, Cavell (1995), McMillin (2000), and Richardson (2009) have argued for an atmosphere that encapsulates Emerson's ideas of promoting a philosophy anchored in active thinking, vigilant questioning, and reading/writing as empowering reciprocal processes. In light of the extensive and complex history of critiques of Emerson's prose and ideas (Wider, 2000), Emerson (1983) evinces his own ideas about those who critique his work:

Blame is safer than praise. I hate to be defended in a newspaper. As long as all that is said is said against me, I feel a certain assurance of success. But as soon as honeyed words of praise are spoken for me, I feel as one that lies unprotected before his enemies. (p. 298)

Emerson finds comfort, even derives a feeling of success, from those who take an oppositional stance toward his work, and critics routinely took up the gauntlet in their charges against Emerson's writings during his publishing and lecturing career. Emersonian critiques, and the atmospheres they instantiated, have served moreover as a foundation for the criticism that would track Emerson's work throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Given the disparate critiques of Emerson's work and the atmospheres they occasioned, as well as those who have advocated that Emerson's work has philosophical import for thinking about the interrelatedness of language, writing, and reading, this chapter is divided as follows: the first section examines criticisms of Emerson's work, and the second looks at ideas about Emerson and reading.

Section I: Criticisms of Emerson's Work

The age of arithmetic and of criticism has set in.

(Emerson, 1884, p. 309)

The culmination of Emerson's thinking throughout his Harvard years and Divinity School days, of the years of grieving the loss of his first spouse, Ellen Tucker, and of the reflections on his first trip to England materialized in 1836 in the 40-page, humble treatise entitled *Nature*. Within this slender volume of ideas, Emerson emerged from the umbrage of classical idealism and Stoicism to articulate human beings' symbiotic connection to nature, self, and other, to found a philosophy not moored to the past but buoyed on present exigencies, and to exhort the phenomena of the actively engaged mind. "Build, therefore, your own world," Emerson (1983) encourages in the closing passages of *Nature*, which acknowledges the nexus of nature and human affairs in realizing one's potential in the world (p. 48).

This first publication of Emerson's ideas brought him mild success, and the book received a welcome and warm response (Richardson, 1995). Emerson's lecture circuit continued to draw crowds, and new influences in his life such as Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller served to magnify and increase the depth of his thinking (Zwarg, 1993), with Fuller playing a substantial role of inspiring him to finish 'Prospects', the last section of *Nature* (Richardson, 1995; Zwarg, 1993). After the publication of *Nature*, Emerson maintained a full work schedule of avidly reading the mountainous number of books he charged out of libraries (Cameron, 1966), writing in, revising, reorganizing, and re-cataloguing his journals, and delivering lectures. It was during this productive period that the earliest criticisms were lobbed at Emerson. Surprisingly, these criticisms came not from his sole publication at the time, *Nature*, but from an address he delivered to the graduating class of the Harvard Divinity School in July of 1838, an address that resulted in Emerson's banishment from Harvard for almost 30 years (Kelley, 2010).

Within the course of the *Divinity School Address*, Emerson (1983) derides what he labels historical Christianity primarily due to its heavy focus on Jesus as a person and the materiality of Jesus rather than the religious, ethical spirit that Christ emotes. By stating that "The soul knows no persons" (p. 81), Emerson found himself awash in a swirl of attacks, with one launched by his former mentor, Andrews Norton, who referred to Emerson as an atheist (Cabot, 1888; cf. Rusk, 1949), a most certainly derogatory and pejorative term at the time (Richardson, 1995). On top of accusations of blasphemy, Emerson's prose style came under sharp scrutiny. At the end of August, approximately six weeks after the *Divinity School Address*, *Boston Morning Post* reviewer G. T. Davis (1838) highlighted the idea that Emerson catered to a young, doe-eyed audience whose interest in romantic lyricism spur them onward during their youthful days, but

that his work will have little reverberations after such youth enter the maturity of adulthood.

Davis writes,

We cannot, however, believe that the peculiar views set forth with so much confidence and fascination by Mr. Emerson are likely to take a very deep root in the American heart. They are too dreamy, too misty, too vague to have much effect except on young misses just from boarding school or young lads, who begin to fancy themselves in love. (p. 1)

By limiting the scope of Emerson's audience to quixotic, puerile youth, Davis joined the queue of condemning criticism that echoed after the *Divinity School Address*. In fact, Emerson's address received some 36 published commentaries that stamped his writing as vague, unprincipled, inconsistent, or illogical (Richardson, 1995).

Although reviews of Emerson's later publications received favorable reviews, with one anonymous reviewer crowning Emerson as a "Yankee Mystic" and a "platonic philosopher" ("Review of Essays," 1850, p. 254-255), not all of Emerson's latter day publications garnered glowing laurels of praise. For example, English educationist, poet, and critic Matthew Arnold published one of the more influential pieces of criticism on Emerson's work (Wider, 2000). In his book, *Discourses in America*, Arnold (1885) specifically attends to the poetic as well as the philosophical argument of Emerson's work, and he writes in the chapter entitled *Emerson*, "Emerson cannot, I think, be called with justice a philosophical writer. He cannot build; his argument of philosophical ideas has no progress in it, no evolution; he does not construct a philosophy" (p. 169). Although later in the chapter Arnold praises the inspirational aspects of Emerson's literary genius, Arnold nevertheless established the argument that Emerson did not contribute to the philosophical undertakings of his time. Even though Arnold's position on

Emerson caused waves in literary circles, many felt his rebuffing of Emerson as a great thinker in poor form, considering Emerson had just passed away two years before the publication of Arnold's influential book (Wider, 2000).

Along the same lines as Arnold's critique of Emerson as ersatz philosopher, Paul Elmer More (1904) had little patience with Emerson's writings and even less faith that Emerson belonged among the celebrated lineage of great Western philosophers. According to More's critiques, the less influence Emerson had the better, and in Wider's (2000) interpretation of More's work, "Emerson, the unsystematic thinker, seemingly licensed an intellectual free-for-all in which one idea was as good as another" (p. 88). If one adheres to the proclamations by Emerson's prose, anyone can be a genius according to More. Influential literary critic, playwright, and poet T. S. Eliot shared a similar sentiment when constructing an argument against Emerson as a legitimate writer of literature. From the standpoint of the New Critics of the first half of the twentieth century, Emerson's "writing [was] intractable, flawed in terms of genre and subject" (quoted in Wider, 2000, p. 91). Thus both philosophers and literary critics alike found Emerson's writing style a meandering nuisance rather than a provocative wellspring of ideas, and neither school of thought claimed him as a member of its prestigious pedigree.

In terms of how Emerson's prose affected people in different life stages, and as possible corroboration of Davis's (1838) assertion that Emerson appealed primarily to a whimsical, younger audience, Walt Whitman offered the frequently quoted testimony to the visceral power of Emerson's prose, "I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil" (Trowbridge, 1902, n.p.). In fact, Whitman, while in his thirties, credited Emerson's essay *The Poet* for inspiring his most celebrated work, *Leaves of Grass*. Years later, however, Whitman (1880) shared a colder, yet perhaps more calculated and poignant, commentary on the influence

of Emerson in contemporary American society in a review entitled *Emerson's Books, (The Shadows of Them)*. In this review, Whitman professes that Emerson's work offers no panacea for the downtrodden and forlorn in America and that his greatest accomplishment is that of a critic or a diagnoser. Whitman also contends that the greatest justice that can be done to Emerson's work "is to try his own rules, his own heroic treatment, on the greatest themes, even his own works" (p. 178). Because Emerson (1983) entices his readers to think for themselves and despise the authorial power of texts, Whitman's (1880) challenge of performing Emerson's rules on Emerson's work itself resonates with twentieth and twenty-first century scholars who acknowledge the intense challenge of writing about Emerson's philosophical ideas (e.g., Cavell, 1995; Richardson, 1995, 2009; Wider, 2000).

At the close of the nineteenth century, and in the nascent years of the twentieth, Emerson's prose experienced the gamut of scrutiny, and the atmospheric engineers of literary critics and philosophers busied themselves in fortifying their defamation or exaltation of his work. Emerson's writings confounded his allies, baffled his successors, and sounded a clarion call to action that would, in the decades that followed, canonize him as the ancestral fountainhead of American literature (McMillin, 2000) and the unequivocal philosopher of his age (Hill, 1919). In the late interwar years, Matthiessen (1941) managed to elevate Emerson's work, as well as the work of his contemporaries, to what amounts to a veritable apotheosis by labeling their epoch as the *American Renaissance*, which further enshrined Emerson as the venerable forefather of American literature and established his place at the head of the table of American literature anthologies used in high school and college English courses across the United States.

To be sure, not all post nineteenth century scholars accepted *carte blanche* a celebration of Emerson's work, and detractors of Emerson's output still animate the literary landscape. Winters (1937/1987), for one, claims that Emerson lacked any originality and that he advocates for a universe populated by unthinking yet "amiable" and "perfectly unconscious imbeciles" (p. 164). More recently, Major and Sinche (2010) argue that the cult surrounding Emerson is antiquated; that college students futilely struggle with attempts at making sense of his work; and that American literature scholars and English professors should expunge him from his anthologized status. Regardless of these attacks, or perhaps resultant from them, infrequent irruptions rattled throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century of scholars willing to take the reins of the volumes of Emerson's work and articulate the philosophies in his densely complex prose. Given these combative atmospheres of critique and praise, the task ahead is to utilize scholars of Emerson in order to explore his ideas about literature, philosophy, and his theories about reading.

Section II: Ideas on Emerson and Reading

The statue is then beautiful when it begins to be incomprehensible, when it is passing out of criticism, and can no longer be defined by compass and measuring-wand, but demands an active imagination to go with it, and to say what it is in the act of doing.

(Emerson, 1983, pp. 332-333)

Schirmeister (1999), a student of Jacques Derrida, reminds us that, when undertaking an examination of Emerson's writings, "we may have much to gain from making Emerson strange again" (p. 32) despite how much experience we have with reading Emerson's work, or how knowledgeable we may be with his personal biography. In other words, it's time to confiscate the

excerpted textbooks that contain piecemeal extracts of his work, forget ironclad assumptions about his themes, and see with new eyes the textual terrain of his writings. When rethinking conventional ideas about knowledge,

The statue is then beautiful when it begins to be incomprehensible, when it is passing out of criticism, and can no longer be defined by compass and measuring-wand, but demands an active imagination to go with it, and to say what it is in the act of doing. (Emerson, 1983, pp. 332-333)

And this act of making the known strange again, an inevitable act of doing, to use Emerson's words, establishes a starting point for how scholars from various eras have written about Emerson's ideas about reading.

Reading Actively

Emerson allocated an exorbitant amount of energy laboring over his favorite books, such as Bacon, Milton, and Shakespeare, often to the point of memorizing sweeping passages from their work (Cabot, 1888). Such dedication to the reading act underscores the concept of active reading. As Bickman (2003) advocates, active reading is a continuous process of investigation, that knowledge – in essence – is produced through consciously engaging a world saturated in texts, and “to know has to be a set of active processes – perceiving, creating, inventing, formulating, and articulating, and not necessarily in this or any other linear order” (p. 164). In Emerson's (1983) words, “One must be an inventor to read well” (p. 59), with the phrase “to read well” suggesting that reading in an engaged fashion means paying attention to the enlightenments, confusion, disagreements, and questions one may encounter when reading a particular text.

Kateb (1995) also argues that active reading promotes opportunities for inspiring thought, which may exist at odds with the author of a given text. Kateb believes that Emerson's goal was "not to get us to agree with his judgments but to persuade us to take a chance and think for ourselves" (p. xxviii). Such acts begin in reflection, and in order for readers to engage in active and reflective readings, Emerson (1983) writes,

At last comes the era of reflection, when we not only observe, but take pains to observe; when we of set purpose sit down to consider an abstract truth; when we keep the mind's eye open, whilst we converse, whilst we read, whilst we act; intent to learn the secret law of some class of facts. (p. 420)

Emerson claims we arrive at places of reflection not by passively reading the texts we encounter but by taking pains to read these texts, pondering personal stances, and negotiating which aspects of a text to accept and which to resist. If Emerson was right when he says in the essay *Circles*, "The use of literature is to afford us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it" (p. 408), he offers a perspective on reading that favors readers who commandeer texts by engaging in their own meaning making processes, seeing how texts both may and may not resonate with their worlds, and relying on their abilities to generate creative and meaningful experiences with texts.

In another strand of reading advice Emerson shared with Woodbury (1890), he advocates for an active reading that involved exploration of other perspectives: "Read those who wrote about facts from a new point of view," Emerson says, "The atmosphere of such authors helps you, even if the reasoning has been a mistake" (p. 26). In other words, and as Kateb (1995) corroborates, Emerson argues for readers to maintain a malleable mindset when encountering texts, and he encourages readers not to agree with writers, but to make use of their critical,

creative abilities when evaluating texts. Tension constitutes a crucial component to active reading, and recognizing such tension allows the reader entrée into a multifaceted atmosphere of various and conflicting perspectives.

Reading Beyond Comprehension

Concomitant with Emerson's practices and processes of active reading – or the belief that engagements with texts engender an awareness that encompasses author, reader, language, and world – is the counterintuitive theory that the act of comprehending a text becomes de-emphasized in Emersonian reading. In Western culture, there lurks an obsession with the concept of mastery over things such as artistry, education, learning, and reading. When reading books in order to gain control over them, one treads on precarious grounds, especially considering Bayard's (2007) assertion that "all reading is a squandering of energy in the difficult and time-consuming attempt to master the whole" (Bayard, 2007, p. 8), a statement that attests to the impossibility of mastering a book, regardless of the time one has indulged in dutifully reading it. Although sidestepping comprehension all together may prove impossible inasmuch as it constitutes a culturally ingrained thought process in Western society, not to mention the lifeblood of literary critics and English professors alike (Iser, 1978), comprehension, especially when contemplating Emerson's essays, cannot and should not be the endpoint of reading.

The act of comprehending a text situates itself upon the epistemological assumption that isolated information can be held in abeyance until a future need requires it. This knowledge can be possessed and held captive. Indeed, at the etymological root of the word "comprehend," as Schirmeister (1999) notes, lies the notion of grasping or seizing. One clutches onto the meanings derived from texts, and claims that comprehension of meaning as an object. However, Emerson rejected this style of thinking, Cavell (1990) observes, when he addressed the tensions of

grasping in the essay *The American Scholar* by using the metaphor of the grasping hand. As Emerson (1983) writes, “the natural philosophy that now is, is only the first gropings of its gigantic hand, he shall look forward to an ever expanding knowledge as to a becoming creator” (p. 55). Further, Schirmeister (1999) writes of this grasping concept by claiming, “It is a mode of thinking that implies a strict opposition between subject and object, that actively seeks to master its “materials” by seizing them” (p. 45; cf. Zwarg, 1993). Grasping knowledge in this vein becomes corruptive because it delimits encounters with texts to self-contained, private exhibitions of consumption.

To disturb the delimitations set up by a controlling comprehending metaphor, Emerson (1983) disparages books used to such ends. When books are used in an unquestioning search for answers, readers are not active readers and thinkers, but rather bookworms. According to Emerson, they become “the book-learned class, who value books, as such; not as related to nature and the human constitution” (p. 57). At the heart of Emerson’s aspersions lies the importance of the relational nature of books. McMillin (2000) refers to this relational approach to reading as makeshift reading. Using Emerson’s metaphor of circles, McMillin writes, “Makeshift reading – thinking between texts – requires becoming mindful of the circles from which one’s reading proceeds, the circle in which the text resides, and the methods one employs to traverse the interval between those circles” (p. 132). A makeshift reading extends beyond the false endpoint of comprehension into the realm of thinking that requires making connections across texts, meanings, situations, and human experiences. In Emerson’s (1983) estimate, reading becomes valuable not as a commodity but as a touchstone for bridging relationships among and across people, knowledge, objects, nature, language, and society.

Reading as Transitory Act

When reading, one must be willing to break with the materialist concepts of consistency and the humanist belief in the infallibility of scientific systems of thought. In an analysis of Emerson's essay, *The Transcendentalist*, Carafiol (1986) argues:

Emerson's words do not *have* meaning. His statements do not offer fixed truths.

They can only be transitional, and even then, not between established points, but between other equally transitional statements. (p. 444, emphasis in original)

Carafiol claims that, for Emerson, meaning resides not in the statements upon the page but in the provisional experiences of readers, which resonates with Willinsky's (1990) argument against locatable, permanent meanings of texts. Readers from different epochs will make sense of texts contingent upon their temporal realities, and the meaning derived from reading Emerson's essays at the turn of the twentieth century would be different from reading Emerson's essays in the twenty-first century. In other words, transitory reading acts provide opportunities for experiencing the presence of life with an eye toward future developments and existential possibilities.

In line with Carafiol's argument, McMillin (2000) writes that transitory reading is "reading that occurs in transit, in moments of transition or transfer between the reader's textual means of knowing and the textual nature of what is being read" (p. 142). A transitory reading act involves the idea of movement, but not necessarily movement in a linear direction. Readers move throughout texts at various moments in their lives; they return to books months later only to reread what they have already read; and they have past experiences that influence reading and their meaning making endeavors. McMillin refers to transition as the "possibility of reading" (p. 142). By abandoning the search for monolithic shackles of certified, verifiable knowledge,

transitory reading ceases to be an act of rendering one true meaning from a given text, of discovering unalterable, irrefutable facts, and instead allows access to the experiential spaces governed by contemplation, exploration, and risk.

Reading as Transformative Act

Implicit in Schirmeister's (1999) suggestion of making Emerson strange again is the invitation to think differently about how one approaches the reading of Emerson's philosophy. Emerson avoided yielding to the didactic tropes immanent in the philosophies of his predecessors and his contemporaries and chose instead to illustrate the possibilities of thinking his prose may incite in his readers. Fittingly, Emerson (1983) rethinks the purpose of instruction in the now infamous *Divinity School Address* when he claims,

Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul. What he announces, I must find true in me, or wholly reject; and on his word, or as his second, be he who he may, I can accept nothing. (p. 79)

To be sure, scholars such as West (1989) and Schirmeister (1999) have long acknowledged the power of provocation embedded in Emerson's work. If readers intend to take up Emerson's advice about how to internalize the teachings of others, they must first reconfigure their stance toward reading Emerson's writing, which might also influence how they contemplate Emerson's ideas about reading.

Emerson seeks not to issue edicts of bedrock knowledge (e.g., Cavell, 2003; Richardson, 1995; Schirmeister, 1999). Instead, he cajoles his readers into having experiences that leave the reader not with information to grasp but rather in a process of reading that leaves the reader in a different place after the reading act has come to a close. In this vein, Schirmeister (1999) evinces, "Emerson, unlike many philosophers, does not seek to present a universal, immutable

truth, but rather to lead the reader into a process of change that occurs only within the ongoing vicissitudes of reading and interpretation” (p. 15). Reading, then, becomes not a quest for facts or trivia, but an opportunity for investing in the transformative process of engagements with reading.

Schirmeister (1999) pursues the theme of the transformative experience of reading when linking Emerson’s reading theory to Freud’s concept of transference as developed in his theories of psychoanalysis. From a Freudian perspective, transference is the redirecting of one’s personal feelings to another person or an object. For instance, if a person undergoing a form of transference therapy were asked to pinpoint a haranguing, problematic feeling, the person would be asked to transfer that feeling elsewhere in order to gain a level of distance from it and in turn see themselves differently. The end goal would be “the reclaiming of energies bound to the past for the service of the present” (p. 91). A catharsis occurs for and in the person, and the person becomes transformed as a result.

To adapt the idea of transference to Emersonian concepts of reading, the reader enters into the interpretative act of reading and is less focused on the content of the actual text than going through the process of making meaning from the text. The reader enters the reading act from an experiential space, and the emotions and ideas elicited during reading are of paramount importance. In this way, “the activity of interpretation, rather than the content of that interpretation” holds therapeutic power, and the reader is changed by engaging in this process, which becomes meaningful in and of itself (Schirmeister, 1999, p. 87).

Cavell (2003) observes that reading becomes a transformative act when readers are willing to unclench their stranglehold on meaning and welcome the process of experiential journeys made possible through reading. Cavell claims,

Emerson's theory of reading and writing is designed not to answer the question "What does a text mean?"... but rather "How is it that a text we care about in a certain way...invariably says more than its writer knows, so that writers and readers write and read beyond themselves?" (p. 95)

To apply Cavell's interpretation of Emerson's theory of reading, the focus of reading is not to extract a specific meaning to the narrative, but to focus on one's experiences brought to the surface because of this particular reading act as it occurs in a temporal and spatial moment of one's life. The reader reads *beyond* the text by permitting the evocative potential of the text to release and expose itself to the reader, which speaks again to Walt Whitman's (1982) claim that

The reader will always have his or her part to do, just as much as I have had mine.

I seek less to state or display any theme or thought, and more to bring you, the reader, into the atmosphere of the theme or thought – there to pursue your own flight. (p. 667)

Hence the reader experiences a transformation by not searching for the truth of textual meaning, but by engaging in the productive process of imagining realities differently because of the experience of reading.

Converging Atmospheres

These books should be used with caution. It is dangerous to sculpture these evanescent images of thought. True in transition, they become false if fixed.

(Emerson, 1983, p. 682)

From Davis's (1838) reactionary review of the *Divinity School Address*, which argues that Emerson's airy language and dreamy tropes could only appeal to lovesick adolescents desperate for a Byronic lyric upon which to latch their undiscerning emotions, to Major and

Sinche (2010), who suggest toppling the pedestals upon which the Sage of Concord so comfortably rests, desisting from claiming that all American literature flows directly back to Emerson's front door, and accepting the fact that students are incapable of making sense of Emerson's frustratingly indecipherable prose, criticism of Emerson's work has now spanned the diameter of three centuries. If one were to hold a tribunal with Emerson's literary output as the defendant and its attendant influence on American culture, literature, and politics, Yale president A. Bartlett Giamatti's (1981) baccalaureate address to Yale's graduating class might serve as appropriate closing arguments to garner a guilty verdict:

With extraordinary literary skills at a crucial moment in our nation's life, it is Emerson who freed our politics and our politicians from any sense of restraint by extolling self-generated, unaffiliated power as the best foot to place in the small of the back of the man in front of you, and who promoted shoving as the highest calling that abolitionist, moral New England could conceive. (p. 174)

In Giamatti's estimate, Emerson endorsed a self-reliance that promoted personal and private gain above all else, and overreliance on this reading of Emerson has instantiated America's cavalier position as a world power over the past two hundred years that can best be described as sadly glutinous and recklessly rapacious. Along with critics who faulted Emerson's writings as geared toward jejune audiences (e.g., Davis, 1838) and those who saw his abstract tropes as unsystematic and decidedly unphilosophical (e.g., Arnold, 1885; Eliot, 1919), Emerson's work has witnessed a legacy of scrutiny that, in the end, aptly corresponds to his once-stated desire for blame rather than praise.

Although Emerson's detractors continue to wedge their dismissive arguments into the crevices of scholarly and popular publications, proponents of Emerson's work have pursued a

reevaluation of Emerson as a major American author and philosopher with serious implications for rethinking approaches to the act of reading. In the heuristic appropriated from Emerson scholars, active reading, reading beyond comprehension, reading as transitory act, and reading as transformative act, should not, in the final analysis, be viewed as isolated theories, but rather as simpatico ideas that relate to, expand upon, and complement one another in a multi-tiered Emersonian theory of reading.

As Bickman (2003) notes, the backbone of an Emersonian theory of reading predicates itself on an active approach to reading, which detests wholesale acceptance of textual messages and encourages readers to challenge textual authority, welcome a plurality of perspectives on the world, and allow sway to the creative impulses of the imagination. In dialogue with active reading is the Emersonian theory that reading should transcend such parlor games of mining texts for comprehension and to engage rather in the process of reading itself and to contemplate the atmospheres of thinking made possible from reading (Schirmeister, 1999). If readers envision reading as a transitory act (Carafiol, 1986; McMillin, 2000), they drift away from deciphering concrete information from texts and gravitate toward a process that has meaning because of its migratory capabilities. Readers move in and out of texts, making connections with other texts, other people, and past experiences. The experience of reading itself becomes foregrounded in Emerson's theory of reading as a transformative venture. As Cavell (2003) and Schirmeister (1999) contend, engaging in the act of reading from an Emersonian standpoint invites readers to attend to thoughts, emotions, and ideas in which readers leave the reading act differently than they started it. Put differently, readers are transformed precisely because they pay heed to a cathartic process that challenges them to think differently about themselves, their relationships, and their present cultural and social contingencies.

A Reading of Emerson

The imagination is the reader of these forms.

(Emerson, 1875, p. 20)

In the essay *Experience*, Emerson (1983) claims that human existence is primarily constituted by the elements of power and form. When either one of these elements presents itself in excess or in deficit, it becomes deleterious to human progress. Because of the complex nature of keeping these elements in concert and at play with one another, Emerson states, “A man is a golden impossibility” (p. 482), intimating not only that beauty exists in the attempts to reach an unattainable level of stasis in an imperfect universe, but that therein lies value and reward in making such attempts. One could easily recruit this phrase when addressing the literary heritage that Emerson produced in the course of his career as well as the task of ferreting out his philosophies about reading. In a sense, sketching out theories from Emerson’s prose becomes valuable due to the challenge it presents, on one hand, and to the process of the quest for understanding itself on the other.

Emerson attempted through his writings to join the concepts of theory and practice (Schirmeister, 1999), and one particular instantiation would be when he informed his mentee Woodbury (1890) that the author should never make her or his work predictable, that an author should never give away the ending too early as an insult to the integrity of the reader, and that the author should “try and leave a little thinking” for the reader (p. 22). Such is the case with Emerson’s philosophical writings, which, as Zwarg (1993) notes, refuse to be read in the fashion one has grown accustomed to when reading philosophical texts because Emerson chose not to write within the confines of philosophical discourse. Instead, Emerson left behind several books of essays, his letters to colleagues and family, and his multi-volume journals to convey a style of

thinking indicative of the golden impossibility of teasing out absolutisms, formalized truths, and retrievable, naked facts from his prose.

For some readers of Emerson's work, this perceived obstacle has resulted in criticisms that claim readers ultimately have nothing to gain from reading Emerson's convoluted essays, there is no benefit in the attempt, and readers would be better off without the headache of dealing with his writing. For others, however, the golden impossibility of working through Emerson's texts, of navigating the philosophical language within in his poetic writings, and of generating meaning and situating oneself in the experience of reading his texts, serve as the reward for entering the process of reading Emerson, and in turn, of producing theories of Emersonian reading acts. And an Emersonian reading act is an event, a temporal and powerful transaction between and across reader and text in which each becomes transformed in the process

If, as Carafiol (1986) suggests, readers find Emerson troubling because "he won't sit still for his portrait" (p. 431), it is because the snapshot will not suffice in capturing the nuanced, relational nature of his ideas about literature, philosophy, and reading. In light of the researchers and scholars who have taken pains to contemplate and outline Emerson's reading theories, I argue that Emersonian reading is a stuttering, contentious, and fascinating process of making sense, of realizing that reading occasions events of arresting contemplation and startling confusion. When I read Emerson's essay, I find opportunities to go beyond myself, as Cavell, (2003) suggests, to go beyond Emerson, beyond comprehension, beyond logic, and situate myself in the experience of reading his essays. Given the etymology of the word *essay*, which means an attempt, I attempt to read Emerson's essays with no expectations of a linear argument, no misgivings that anything will be stated as absolutely true or absolutely false, that the beginnings and endings of his essays should not be taken as starting points and ending points but

rather as blurred parameters for an open space to think differently. I attempt to read his essays as works in progress in which I construct and reconstruct meaning, and with each reading, I see my day as somehow enhanced and enlivened, as an experiment and experience that leaves me with imperfect ideas, tentative ways of knowing, and a rejuvenated perspective on life and living. I leave the experience of reading Emerson's essays knowing that I've never really left reading at all, that I'm always already reading, and that I'm always already reading for the first time again.

On that note, I will explore Emerson's ideas about experience in the next chapter as groundwork for developing my arguments about Emersonian engagements with reading.

CHAPTER 3

THE USES OF EXPERIENCE

Scorn trifles, lift your aims: do what you are afraid to do: sublimity of character must come from sublimity of motive: these were the lessons which were urged with vivacity, in ever new language.

(Emerson, 1884, p. 380)

Emersonian Experience

In Emerson's (1884) tribute to Mary Moody Emerson, his beloved aunt, he reminds his readers of one of her often uttered sayings: "do what you are afraid to do" (p. 380). These words from her meticulously kept journals, which Emerson claims "were intensely true when first spoken" (p. 377), speaks to the ideas about experience that Emerson emotes throughout his writings (cf. Richardson, 1995). Experience, for Emerson, suggests not only the temporal and spatial occurrences that infiltrate and illuminate life; rather, it is rife with the potentiality of a life lived differently, which finds later iteration in Dewey's (1920/1982) idea that experience means "making a life that is worth living" (p. 201). In conjunction with Mary Moody Emerson's advice about overcoming fear and with Emerson's own ideas about experience as articulated in his prose, I will explain how multi-tiered, complex experiences how are produced and are productive, and in homage to the title of Richardson's (1995) biography on Emerson, how they serve to set the mind on fire.

I chose not to limit my readings and rereadings of Emerson's published writings to a select few essays precisely because to do so would constitute an inadequate analysis of his work,

but also because Emerson's ideas about experience and reading is evident throughout his career. For instance, I contend that the optimism that pervades and is shot through his first published work, *Nature* from 1836, still resonates with to the hopefulness and challenge to living which appears throughout the book of essays, *The Conduct of Life* published in 1860. Both of these books, along with the publications that came between them, and a few scattered publications that proceeded them, namely *Society and Solitude* (1870), *Letters and Social Aims* (1876), and *Lectures and Biographical Sketches* (1884) – the last in this series being published posthumously – represent an Emerson who, in accord with Carafiol's (1986) estimate, would not sit still for his portrait. What follows is my reading of Emerson's take on experience through the prism of this composite, imperfect image of Emerson's writings. In this chapter, I will focus on Emerson's ideas on experience; that experience is experimental. The first section will address Emerson's ideas of experience as engaged transaction; the second, his idea of experience as vehicle for overcoming limitations; and thirdly, the transformational potential of experience. Although I acknowledge that these themes exist as fluid, flowing, and in flux, with each informing the other to varying degrees at different times, such categorical division will assist in carving out this reading of experience and setting the stage for the chapters ahead.

To develop my reading of Emersonian experiences, I will draw upon the work of philosophers Jacques Derrida, John Dewey, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Derrida's (1967/1974) concept of deconstruction, a productive theory that critiques reified, delimiting notions of history and knowledge to open gateways for new forms of thinking to occur, sits well with Emerson's questioning of how the power of history and knowledge gridlocks and precludes the emergence of new ideas, theories, and historical understandings. In line with Derrida's productive concept is Dewey's (1920/1982) idea of a reconstruction in philosophy away from the worship of

knowledge and the quest for certainty and toward a thinking/acting engagement in which knowledge is impermanent and continually made and remade. Dewey advocates for a praxis that combines theory and action in order to advance Western thought beyond what he perceives as an impasse. Just as Emerson believes that words are also actions, Dewey argues that for thinking to extend beyond its current limitations, philosophy must be embraced as something alive and vital. Lastly, Gadamer's (1960/1975) theory of historically effected consciousness, or the idea that people are always located within a context and thus all experiences are unfinished, unpredictable events, speaks to Emerson's idea that experience has the transformational potential to change readers and texts because each reading produces a different experience each time that it occurs.

Section I: Experience as Engaged Transaction

A strange process too, this, by which experience is converted into thought, as a mulberry leaf is converted into satin. The manufacture goes forward at all hours.

(Emerson, 1983, p. 60)

Sixteenth century French essayist and thinker Michel de Montaigne, a figure who influenced the philosophy and writing of Emerson, asks the following question of himself: "*Que sais je?* What do I know?" (Emerson, 1983, p. 701). By posing this self-directed question, he not only interrogates the information or raw facts he may have held captive in his mind, he also casts into relief an inquiry that examines the value of knowledge itself. If I were to turn Montaigne's rather stifling question on myself, I might hold canyons of information, trivia, and facts in my head on any one given topic, yet what purpose does having that information serve? And is such learned knowledge worth hoarding or even possible? Such inquiries, I contend, are helpful in foregrounding a theory of experience informed by a reading of Emerson in which experience is a productive concept rather than being reflective of reality.

Experience and Authority

Emerson (1983) dismisses Western philosophy's habit of knowledge worship when he says, "I hold our actual knowledge very cheap" (p. 256), a statement that not only returns to sand and water the concrete pedestals upon which knowledge has been historically placed, but also advocates for an active engagement with knowledge to produce experiences and further learning. Following Emerson, Dewey (1920/1982) goes to great lengths to outline a point of view of the Western philosophic tradition that has treated knowledge as an isolated commodity available only to a select community of privileged, educated individuals; whereas any application of that knowledge proceeded on a plain beneath the educated class, and the twain seldom should meet. Dewey proceeds to offer what he hopes might be the direction of future thinking, which he labels reconstruction, and one element of this reconstruction in thinking holds in great contempt the engrained idea that knowledge should exist as a spectator sport (cf. Dewey 1929/1984). Knowledge is not something out there, the sole property of intellectuals or something placed upon the highest shelf of the library accessible only by an intimidating, unsteady ladder. For a professed reader of Emerson such as Dewey, "knowledge is active" (p. 147) and must be experienced to become meaningful.

Emerson (1983) also speaks of the lifeless condition of knowledge for the sake of knowledge when he writes about experiences with reading. Emerson argues that the mere act of reading, or the mechanical activity of decoding the contents of a page into letters, words, and sentences, does not constitute a reading that actively engages the knowledge derived from reading. As Emerson writes, "Much of our reading, much of our labor, seems mere waiting: it was not that we were born for. Any other could do it as well, or better" (p. 205), meaning that reading is not merely decoding; reading is sense making and making sense of the world and life.

By calling reading ‘mere waiting,’ Emerson denounces reading as a passive act. Reading for Emerson is a productive, active process that requires engagements with texts, selves/others, life, and living. Bystanders wait for something to happen, from an Emersonian perspective on experience, and readers make that something happen. It produces reality rather than being reflective of it. As a foil to such approaches to reading in which the mind sits in a state of inertia waiting to the stimulus of reading, Emerson contests that the reading material itself is insignificant, “that it is not much matter what he reads, [but] what he does” that produces experiences with reading (p. 110). By actively engaging reading, similar to the active engagement of knowledge, Emerson carves out an argument that acknowledges the power of books and facts when they serve as provocations of thinking and experience. As Emerson (1884) succinctly articulates, “We live day by day under the illusion that it is the fact or event that imports, whilst really it is not that which signifies, but the use we put it to, or what we think of it” (p. 239).

Reading as Experience, Experience as Reading

Just as facts are flightless, in the spirit of Emersonian prose, and become meaningful only when engaged, applied, and contested with, the same could also be argued of books with facts and narratives, those characters who fascinate and the plot shifts that beguile. Books that line library shelves, gathering dust and slowly yellowing after years of inattention, in and of themselves, hold little interest to Emerson, who finds himself far more engaged with what books afford him as a thinker than books as artifacts and art objects. Emerson (1983) famously inquires into a right use of books, and I underscore his appropriation of the term *use* in this matter. Emerson uses books, or rather, he transacts with them, and Cameron’s (1966) documentation of the hundreds of books Emerson charged out of libraries during his lifetime – often armfuls at a

time and more than he could possibly read before their respective due dates – provides another insight into Emerson’s orientation toward books. It is an appropriation of books that constitutes experiences that Emerson values as a meaningful endeavor.

I find it Rosenblatt’s (1938/1995) term *transaction* useful. As Rosenblatt writes, transaction “permits emphasis on the to-and-fro, spiraling, non-linear, continuously reciprocal influence of reader and text in the making of meaning” (p. xvi), a statement that I interpret as an acknowledgement of the roles that readers and texts perform in order to make sense from a reading experience. Such transactions require a “living through” (p. 38) of the experience of reading that pays attention to what readers and texts may become together as they work in concert. At times, Emerson (1983) privileges the active engagement of the reader during transactions with texts, such as his challenge to fellow readers who claim to read the same book as he when he bluntly claims that the “author is a thousand books to a thousand persons. Take the book into your own hands, and read your eyes out; you will never find what I find” (p. 314). However, in accord with the unstable, shifting portrait of Emerson (1870) from which I am borrowing, he also argues that texts perform a role during reading transactions when he writes that “it is the law of [books’] limbo that they must not speak until spoken to” (p. 155), a statement recognizing that books that find their voice during reading transactions.

Because books also have a voice, or rather, become voiced during and as a result of reading transactions, and just as the reader’s perspective has the potential to shift over time with each visitation to a book, the book, too, adjusts and reshapes in this process. One of the characters in a novel by Italian writer Italo Calvino (1979/1981) speaks of this component to reading transactions as a type of a never-ending process of exploring for meaning and understanding, and states, “This is why my reading has no end: I read and reread, each time

seeking the confirmation of a new discovery among the folds of the sentences” (p. 255). In thinking about the altering tenor of a book over time, Calvino’s character taps into the curiosity that attends to each transaction with a book, even with the same book, and each new transaction derives from a different perspective and produces new, nuanced experiences.

Emerson (1875) not only recognizes books as having voices because of reading transactions, he writes of being called back to books that he has already read because of their forceful impact. For instance, when pondering a book he had once read, he states that “later, the thought, the happy image which expressed it, and which was a true experience of the poet, recurs to mind, and sends me back in search of the book” (p. 31). The memory of the transaction with a book spurred Emerson onward to return to it, to recover it, to see if perhaps reading the book again would bring him to the boiling point as it did the first time. The siren-like qualities of Emerson’s experiences produced by transactions with books are a cajoling, a soliciting, and a tempting back to the book that once enflamed his imagination.

The unpredictable, unfinalizable nature of transactions addressed in this section constitutes a key element of experiences that occur during reading acts, and Gadamer (1960/1975) pursues a curious trajectory of thought when he writes of the disappearance not only of the reader in the text, but also of the text in the reader when the two are immersed in reading transactions:

We have seen, I think more correctly, what is involved in reading a text. Of course the reader before whose eyes the great book of world history simply lies open does not exist. But neither does the reader exist who, when he has his text before him, simply reads what is there. Rather all reading involves application, so that a person reading a text is himself part of the meaning he apprehends. He

belongs to the text that he is reading. The line of meaning that the text manifests to him as he reads it always and necessarily breaks off in an open indeterminacy.

(p. 335)

Like Emerson, Gadamer recognizes the powerful experiences produced by reading transactions. In his estimate, neither reader nor text become privileged entities in the process of reading. By claiming that all reading involves what he refers to as application, a reader affixes herself/himself to a text akin to a type of chemical bonding. Like Alice in Lewis Carroll's (1865) famous nineteenth century novel, the text leads the reader down unbeknownst rabbit holes of speculation as the reader attempts to make sense of what is happening. From this engaged transaction do reading experiences and reading events occur, and Gadamer wrests both reader and text from their traditional vaunted status of primacy to articulate the idea of the instability of readers and the uncertainty of texts during reading transactions.

Emerson (1983) holds to the idea that thinking is a form of doing. He writes, "A philosopher must be more than a philosopher" (p. 635), a statement that I argue refers to the necessity that one need be more than a thinker and that knowledge and books have little merit as inanimate objects. This line of thinking anticipates Dewey's (1920/1982) hopeful prognostication for a reconstruction in philosophy in which theory and action are reciprocally performative concepts as well as his belief that knowledge is serviceable to human living as a form of action. Both Emerson and Dewey believe that knowledge has weight, substance, and import when they are put to use. As Emerson (1870) claims, "It is not new facts that avail, but the heat to dissolve everybody's facts. Heat puts you in the right relation with the magazine of facts" (p. 16). Whether it is referred to as heat or transaction, it is a transactional engagement with knowledge and books that produces powerful, meaningful experiences. And in this assertion

about igniting facts until they spring to life, I side with Emerson who is far more concerned with where knowledge and reading take thinking, and what experiences they invite, than in treating books as still water reservoirs of dispassionate facts and detached, impersonal information.

Section II: Experience as a Vehicle for Overcoming Limitations

I agree with their heart and motive; my discontent is with their limitations.....

(Emerson, 1884, p. 219)

The first part of this chapter sought to explore experience as an engaged transaction. Here I seek to pull the carpet out from under the idea of limitation and do so by remembering Mary Moody Emerson's advice, "do what you are afraid to do" (Emerson, 1884, p. 380; Richardson, 1995). A powerful component to the idea of experience as articulated throughout Emerson's writing is the notion of working through fear and trepidation. Worthwhile experiences often require pushing through barriers and overcoming conventional ways of being in the world. In other words, experience necessitates a sense of courage, and "Courage," as Nietzsche (1883/1995) writes, "also slays dizziness at the edge of abysses: and where does man not stand at the edge of abysses? Is not seeing always – seeing abysses?" (p. 157). Exceeding limitations and struggling through what arrests and paralyzes make available certain types of experiences and ways of thinking worth inquiring into further in order to see beyond Nietzsche's abysses of the unknown.

Inkpots and Wellsprings

Emerson (1983) argues that particularly powerful experiences are produced through a process of overcoming limitations. For instance, Emerson (1983) stares down the creative barriers he may have encountered as a writer when he claims, "I dip my pen in the blackest ink, because I am not afraid of falling into my inkpot" (p. 1055). This particular thought resonates

with me when I ponder the struggle of not only the creative process of producing a piece of writing in a literal sense, but also in reference to Nietzsche's ubiquitous abysses in life. In this case, the pitch blackness of the pool of ink swimming in Emerson's inkwell encapsulates the ever-approaching tides of the unknown and the unknowable. It intimidates and forebodes certain doom if trespassed upon, and the easy way out would be avoiding its depths and leaving it alone all together. However, Emerson opts not to give sway to the potential danger of thinking something differently, and he would rather fall inside this unknown territory than be paralyzed and stunned by it. Instead, he complements Dewey (1920/1982) when Dewey writes, "Conditions and events are neither to be fled from nor passively acquiesced in; they are to be utilized and directed" (p. 146). Rather than allowing fear to dictate Emerson's (1983) writing and impede his creativity, he cleaves onto the creative potential of ink as a resource to navigate and produce his ideas, and he relishes the experience of creative challenges.

Regarding the unknown, Dewey (1920/1982) argues that travel, once limited to areas mapped out in relief and labeled by cartographers, now permits a form of thinking and other, stranger plateaus of experience to become produced. As he puts it, "The actual adventure of travel and exploration purged the mind of fear of the strange and unknown: as new territories geographically and commercially speaking were opened up, the mind was opened up" (p. 101). Consonant with Dewey's advocacy of a reconstruction in philosophy, physical landscapes that were once uncharted now provide welcome avenues for opening up new ideas and newer ways of considering situations. Dewey's disposition in this instance is simpatico with Emerson's (1983) clarion call to, "Explore, and explore. Be neither chided nor flattered out of your position of perpetual inquiry. Neither dogmatize, nor accept another's dogmatism" (p. 111). Here, Emerson presses his readers to follow through with ideas that may appear, at first blush,

impossible or painful, and he advises readers to hold fast to the idea of perpetual inquiry. For it is through perpetual inquiry, I argue, that experience becomes enlivened and that an understanding of ourselves, others, and our surroundings becomes more nuanced, more palpable, and more productive. As Emerson boldly declares, “Passions, resistance, and danger, are educators” (p. 1084), and experiences that involve taking risks, both on a personal and social plane, engender and produce certain, unpredictable ways of being in the world otherwise not possible if the path of least resistance is taken.

Beyond Commonsense

Emerson (1983) dislodges former, fallible modes of thinking from their authoritative reign and identifies the pitfalls of an overreliance on commonsense when he writes, “Presently, a new experience gives a new turn to our thoughts: common sense resumes its tyranny” (p. 704). In this statement, Emerson notes the possibilities of experience working against the persuasive forces of commonsense. Commonsense provides another barrier to experiences, and commonsense notions of science, knowledge, and reading serve to keep thinking grounded and limited instead of buoyant and explorative. Moreover, Emerson argues that facts evolve and devolve over time, some come into favor while others become disproven or ineffectual. There is no constancy when it comes to factual knowledge. However, Emerson acknowledges the wild attraction that commonsensical notions can have on a person’s or society’s modes of thinking, and he argues that such approaches to learning stalled ideas and kept thinking locked in a dimension that never sees beyond its borders. Emerson writes, “Facts encumber [people], tyrannize over them, and make the men of routine the men of sense, in whom a literal obedience to facts has extinguished every spark of that light by which man is truly man” (p. 252). Emerson laments what he observes to be the domination of facts over human living rather than the two

coexisting as mutually productive entities. Obedience to the law of knowledge or facts forces thought into a holding pattern, and in a vibrantly colorful Emerson statement, he claims, “I distrust the facts and the inferences” (p. 475), which suggests not only a critique of factual knowing that Derrida (1967/1974) would work against in the twentieth century, but also a warning against the river of influence made possible by such unchallenged factual discourses and carved in stone epistemologies.

Echoing Emerson, Dewey’s (1920/1982) reconstruction in philosophy focuses on an urgency to rethink knowledge as a form of action and how that affects the potential for new experiences and learning. Similarly, Derrida (1967/1974) takes on an enterprise that would become his signature idea, deconstruction. Deconstruction works as an analysis that serves to uncover conventional notions or ideas in order to discover their underlying histories, discourses, and oppositions. But, more importantly, Derrida’s deconstruction, rather than razing structures of thought and destroying previous ways of knowing, encourages thinking that opens up possibilities for different experiences to be produced. Deconstruction means, as one of Derrida’s translators, Spivak (1974), writes, “To locate the promising marginal text, to disclose the undecidable moment, to pry it loose with the positive lever of the signifier, to reverse the resident hierarchy, only to displace it; to dismantle in order to reconstitute what is always already inscribed” (p. lxxvii). Just as Dewey (1920/1982) advocates for producing newer ways of thinking by going beyond how knowledge has been appropriated in hierarchical divisions that has limited growth of society and culture, Derrida (1967/1974) uses deconstruction to locate the source and history of ideas only to dislocate them, highlight the illusion of elusive conventional concepts in order to produce thinking and experiences that challenge and offset one’s balance in

the universe. And both philosophers address commonsensical approaches to living as sites for analysis and change.

Never one to avoid criticism of his own work, and even welcoming it from others, Emerson (1983) argues that, “Blame is safer than praise. I hate to be defended in a newspaper. As long as all that is said is said against me, I feel a certain assurance of success. But as soon as honeyed words of praise are spoken for me, I feel as one that lies unprotected before his enemies.” (p. 298). Furthermore, Emerson feels obliged to remove himself from the center of attention in case his own ideas be taken at face value and not interrogated. In order to decenter himself as the final verdict on ideas, thinking, or philosophy, he warns his readers:

But lest I should mislead any when I have my own head and obey my whims, let me remind the reader that I am only an experimenter. Do not set the least value on what I do, or the least discredit on what I do not, as if I pretended to settle any thing as true or false. I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past at my back. (p. 412)

By self-assigning the label of experimenter, Emerson dissolved any mythical notions his readers may harbor of him as a definitive thinker and authoritative philosopher. As an experimenter he wished to push ahead toward new ideas, new options of knowing, new ways of living by perpetually delving into the way things were. Further, the idea that Emerson had no past at his back suggests, I argue, his acknowledgement of the prejudice of the past while at the same time desiring to forge ahead with a fresh start and with a willingness to make himself vulnerable rather than being anchored by the manacles of past thinking, or Nietzsche’s abysses, because he understood that commonsense ideas suffocated future thought and exploration. To put it alternately, Emerson acknowledged his complicity as a public figure and wished his readers to

also deconstruct, in a Derridian sense, the ideas that he set forth, to question their stance toward such ideas, and to arrive at conclusions in ways he surely had never envisioned.

As evidence of Emerson's (1983) distrust of commonsensical ways of knowing, or unquestioned modes of thinking that prevent actively produced understandings of the world, Emerson takes within his purview the concept of fate. Emerson argues that the idea of fate, as it evolved from its Greek origins meaning that which is prearranged and portioned out ahead of time, has persisted to constrain possibility. The phrase 'resigning oneself to one's fate' comes to mind, which suggests wholesale abandon of opportunities with only one stark and narrow path to pursue. The idea of agency exists as already foreclosed and precluded. In Emerson's terms, "The element running through entire nature, which we popularly call Fate, is known to us as limitation. Whatever limits us, we call Fate" (p. 952). In resistance to this confining conceptualization of fate, Emerson claims we must *use* fate, that fate exists as a barometer of the limitations that entrap and prevent thinking beyond unquestioned and impotent ideas produced by commonsense. Moreover, fate exists as what one can work with and what one can do and is therefore proscriptive rather than prescriptive. As Schirmeister (1999) puts forth in an estimation of Emerson's deconstruction of fate, "[Fate] suggests all apparently external limitations are no more than one's unconscious obedience to constructions of one's own making" (p. 173). Put another way, such limitations are self-perceived barriers to thinking differently, and in order to use fate as a means of altering perspective, Emerson (1983) writes that, "Fate, then, is a name for facts not yet passed under the fire of thought; - for causes which are unpenetrated... Fate is unpenetrated causes" (p. 958). Hence Emerson challenges his readers not only to recognize the causes that produce fatalist discourses, but to grapple with those causes and to set alight the blue flame of ideas that illuminate what exists as a means of suggesting what could exist, what

possibilities may now be available, and what experiences lie within reach that were once unreachable mirages of a future to come.

By drawing reference to Greek thought, Dewey (1920/1982) reminds his readers of the history of the term experience. In Dewey's words, "To Plato, experience meant enslavement to the past, to custom" (p. 132). From this perspective, experience served to glorify tradition and to preclude the engendering of progress, and Dewey makes use of this archaic understanding of experience to redefine the power of experience as generative, forward moving, and productive. Emerson (1983) performs a similar activity with the concept of fate. Although Emerson acknowledges the historical influence on present day beliefs in and about fate, he argues it must be combated with power. "For, though Fate is immense, so is power, which is the other fact in the dual world, immense. If Fate follows and limits power, power attends and antagonizes Fate" (p. 953). Even though fate can overwhelmingly hold thinking and progress at bay, power sees fate for its stultifying denial of growth of thought and raises the bar in order to overcome limitation and stagnation. In this reinscription, fate must be reinterpreted as that which challenges and contests and which allows fear and anxiety unnecessary reign over circumstances and situations. In other words, and to appropriate Shakespeare for the sake of argument, if fate be rough with you, be rough with fate. For fate may yet serve a profitable purpose: that which measures the height of limitation so that it may be surpassed by aiming higher.

Section III: Transformational Potential of Experience

Is it not true that every landscape I behold, every friend I meet, every act I perform, every pain I suffer, leaves me a different being from that they found me?

(Emerson, 1884, p. 129)

One more key component to Emersonian experiences remains unsaid until this juncture in the project. It not only makes use of the sections that precede it, it exceeds beyond them. Moreover, and as a caveat, this section does not serve to provide closure to what has come before, nor to predict with stone cold accuracy what will follow, because the uses of experience, as I appropriate from reading Emerson's work, are to find oneself differently oriented to the world because of having had an experience. By adopting Emerson's (1983) desire for experimentation, something is produced in the process. In the twentieth century, Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) label this type of labor as sorcerer's work because:

That is how we sorcerers operate. Not following a logical order, but following allogical consistencies or compatibilities. The reason is simple. It is because no one, not even God, can say in advance whether two borderlines will string together or form a fiber, whether a given multiplicity will or will not cross over into another given multiplicity, or even if the given heterogeneous elements will enter symbiosis, will form a consistent, or cofunctioning, multiplicity susceptible to transformation. (p. 250)

The unpredictable power of experience can lead one to thinking along trails of thought never before imagined, or at the very least, never before entertained as possible paths. In a sense, then, one of the powerful components of experiences is the possibility for transformation, for a new lease on realizing the world. As such it invites further development of what it means, by again consulting Emerson's work, for experience to possess this transformative potential.

Unfinished Events

Emerson's (1983) metaphorical recruitment of circles illustrates what happens when limitations are transcended: "The one thing we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves,

to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle” (p. 414). Emerson taps into the idea that through the vehicle of experience, the mind opens itself up to be something that it isn’t, something better. It seethes with impulse, surprise, change – something to knock us out of our comfortable orbits and routine lifestyles and into an untraversed space. Gadamer’s (1960/1975) the concept of historically effected consciousness resonates well with Emerson’s desire to be knocked out of his cozy orbit of thinking and become transformed in the process. Gadamer claims that historically effected consciousness constitutes the manner in which understanding itself proceeds. For Gadamer, coming to understanding is realizing that we always find ourselves in situations, and that “The very idea of a situation means that we are not standing outside of it and hence are unable to have any objective knowledge of it” (p. 301). He claims that being historically “means that knowledge of oneself is never complete” (p. 301), and he opts for the metaphor of horizons to suggest this incapability of a completed knowledge of a concept, a fact, or a thing. Horizons are limits to situations, and through inquiry horizons become transcended to allow for different approaches to thinking to be produced. In tandem with Emerson’s (1983) drawing of new circles, of creating parameters of knowing, and his insatiable wish to go beyond present awareness, leave memory behind, and produce new opportunities, Gadamer (1960/1975) argues that knowledge of oneself means coming to terms with the understanding that self exists as an incomplete project.

In more explicit prose regarding his ideas, Dewey (1920/1982) writes of the desired outcome of reconstruction as an element that resists stagnation and strives for the possibility immanent in change. As he puts it, “Essential philosophic reconstruction...will regard intelligence not as the original shaper and final cause of things, but as the purposeful energetic

re-shaper of those phases of nature and life that obstruct social well-being” (p. 108). Here, Dewey employs the term purposeful in addressing how modes of thinking must change if newer modes of thought are to be conceived. Emerson (1983) articulates the necessity of the purposeful or intentional will if the shackles of ancient thinking are to be unhitched from commonsense approaches to day to day living, even referring to such forms of living as sinful, which I take here to mean monolithic epistemologies that no longer serve a purpose or serve to impede engaged, daring experiences. “I will that we keep terms with sin, and a sinful literature and society, no longer, but live a life of discovery and performance. Accept the intellect, and it will accept us” (p. 130). In other words, Emerson claims that life becomes a worthwhile enterprise when we shed the inhibition of tradition and aspire through acts of doing toward discovery, which leaves us differently oriented to ourselves, others, and our world. A sinful literature and a sinful society are debilitating structures of antiquity that intercept and puncture the embryo of new ideas, preclude the likelihood of change, and maintain a debilitating status quo. Further, according to Emerson’s design, transformation in thinking results through the mutual acceptance, or the transaction, of activity and intellect, leaving what was once a transgression behind to the fractured pillars of ossified tradition and carving a space for possibility, potentiality, and a climate of perpetually becoming.

Moments of Suggestion

Emerson (1983) perceives the experiencing of everyday life as shot through with provocations and suggestions. As he observes, “Our music, our poetry, our language itself are not satisfactions, but suggestions” (p. 552), which also resonates with his belief that experiences do not finalize thought and verify it as sacrosanct and untouchable. Rather, Emerson argues that art, literature, and language function to take the mind out of current strands of thinking and to

envision what can be created or realized as a result of having been allured by a captivating piece of music, or particularly lyrical poem, and the beauty of language in general. Music, literature, and language constitute ideas only on the verge of commencement, poised to be realized by future engagements with imagination. In concert with Emerson, Gadamer (1960/1975) argues that incompleteness of the self or ideas should not be perceived as deficiencies but rather opportunities to redirect the past in unforeseen ways, and Dewey (1920/1982) contends that suggestion performs a role in tempting thought away from assurances and toward that which produces new, enlivening experiences.

A suggestion differs from recollection in that no attempt is made to test its correctness. Its correctness is a matter of relative indifference. The cloud suggests a camel or a man's face. It could not suggest these things unless some time there had been an actual, literal experience of a camel and face. But the real likeness is of no account. The main thing is the emotional interest in tracing the camel or following the fortunes of the face as it forms and dissolves. (p. 81)

Dewey places great value on the power of experience to allow for an element of play and creativity. Whether the cloud image in the sky resembles one thing to someone, or an entity completely different to another person, has little worth in ideas spawned from suggestions. The main drive from these visions comes from the emotional sway triggered by suggestion. Suggestions do not require proof, nor do they possess verifiable concepts. Instead suggestions mark the point at which what is certifiable becomes negligent and forgettable. Instead following leads, provocations, hunches, and curiosities invite experiences into the unknown, or possibly the unknowable, into unborn realms of ideas.

Just as experiences with art, in Emerson's terms, serve as provocations for opportunity to re-envision the world, Emerson assumes the same stance toward learning, for in his estimate, knowledge cannot be transmitted from one person to another – it must incense the intellect to seek for itself. Or, as he phrases it,

We hear eagerly every thought and word quoted from an intellectual man. But, in this presence, our own mind is aroused to activity, and we forget very fast what he says, much more interested in the new play of our own thought, than in any thought of his. (p. 955)

In this telling example, Emerson writes of the experience of being in the presence of a profound thinker; however, what stimulates Emerson to a state of excitation are not the speaker's words, but by the evocation of those words. Even though initially Emerson attended to this person's ideas, his own ideas become engaged 'in the new play of thought' that form the epicenter for ways of thinking not previously possible. And these moments of suggestion produce for Emerson, I argue, experiences of renewal and becoming, of re-negotiating one's approach to living, and of traversing safe, well-trodden paths of sameness across to other, unimagined planes.

At the convergence of events and selves that remain unfinished and the alluring intoxicant known as suggestion exist the potential production of experiences that Emerson argues transform how one can be in the world. He witnesses opportunities for change in the vast arrays of experiences available to humans, from the quotidian events of one's daily routine to explorations into the value of enduring pain and suffering. As Emerson (1884) eloquently inquires, "Is it not true that every landscape I behold, every friend that I meet, every act I perform, every pain that I suffer, leaves me a different being from that they found me?" (p. 129). I extend Emerson's inquiry by arguing that the transformational nature of experiences are what,

in Dewey's (1920/1982) words, produce "a life that is worth living" (p. 201). And a life worth the process of living, in Emerson's estimate, involves the acknowledgement that experiences have the power to transform ideas, selves, and others from whatever confines, whatever impedes, or whatever disallows into that which invites, redefines, and reorients. Emerson (1983) envisions himself as a seeker, but a seeker without a goal in mind, as in the statement, "The persons who compose our company, converse, and come and go, and design and execute many things, and somewhat comes of it, but an unlooked for result" (p. 484). By living a life guided by the search for newer modes of thinking, being, and becoming, one arrives at Emerson's unlooked for results, those unsought outcomes that make life a surprise, an event, an enterprise, and an experiment worthy of the undertaking.

Anticipating Reading Experiences

That is not the question; but to what purpose did they read?

(Emerson, 1884, p. 245)

As if in response to Mary Moody Emerson's challenge to "do what you are afraid to do" (Emerson, 1884, p. 380; cf. Richardson, 1995), Emerson (1983) offers a counter-challenge, "I say this polemically, or in reply to the inquiry, why not realize your world?" (p. 492). To realize one's world from an Emersonian perspective, I argue, entails a use of experience that disbands with present theoretical paradigms, casts off the yoke of commonsense approaches to thinking and doing, and forges ahead through the steady undercurrent of dated systems of knowing and outmoded practices of understanding. In Dewey's (1920/1982) estimate, "We *use* our experiences to construct new and better ones in the future" (p. 134, emphasis in original), and realizing one's world constitutes, in Gadamer's (1960/1975) terms, "a living historical process,"

of unceasing inquiry into the order of things, exceeding beyond the comfortable and the settled, and seeking without a goal in mind to make space for unforeseeable possibilities (p. 217).

I have argued that Emersonian experiences encompasses three different yet overlapping themes. First, engaged transactions produce experiences that forego knowledge as static and stable. Knowledge shapes, shifts, and is produced by actively engaging with it, interrogating origins, and partaking in the process in which information changes as people transact with it. Secondly, limitation, from an Emersonian perspective on experience, provides merely a false barrier to dreams, hopes, and wishes. Limitation sets in granite a status quo for adequate subsistence in society. Emerson challenges the very nature of limitation, leaps willingly and wildly into the inkpot of Nietzsche's ineluctable abysses, and dares to take risks that lead to a more realized ideal of potentialities. Lastly, Emersonian experiences, when embraced without inhibition, possess the potential for changing perspectives, paradigms, and prescribed codes of existence. In short, a transformation of thinking, living, and believing are all up for reinscription because of the productive nature of experiences.

Given the present chapter's reading of Emersonian experiences and the two preceding chapters grounded in explorations of Emersonian theories of reading, the question begs itself at this point in the argument – what are the purposes to which reading can be put from the perspective of Emerson's ideas about experience? The following trio of chapters will tend to just this inquiry by making use of the various themes of Emersonian experiences. The first in the series will cope with the power of aesthetic experiences when transacting with reading; the second one will address reading as a form of active democratic citizenship; and the third in this triumvirate of chapters will examine how reading can nurture an ethical stance toward self and others. Similar to the current chapter, the next three will take Emerson's prose as providing the

focal point through which these sections on reading may be interrogated, fleshed out, and made sense of.

As a caveat, the upcoming chapters will not offer systems of dogmatism nor didacticism, nor should they be regarded as ingredients for specific ways of envisioning reading. Instead, they hope to open up, in Derridean fashion, byways, catacombs, and trapdoors for approaching reading differently with an eye toward its educational potential at the college and university level. On that note, it is time to “unsettle things,” become an “endless seeker,” and “simply experiment” with reading (Emerson, 1983, p. 412).

CHAPTER 4

READING AS AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

A true announcement of the law of creation, if a man were found worthy to declare it, would carry art up into the kingdom of nature, and destroy its separate and contrasted existence.

(Emerson, 1983, p. 438)

Enlivening the Aesthetic

Reading as experience, as articulated in the previous chapter, involves transactions in which both text and reader are transformed and affected through engagements with reading. It necessitates a being in the moment of reading, of being situated in the act of reading and making sense of the experience of reading. To extend that conversation, I argue that there is an aesthetic involved in reading as experience, but not an aesthetic as understood during Emerson's time. To be sure, Emerson would have been well versed in nineteenth century European understandings of the term *aesthetic*, especially given his admiration for the work of German philosopher Immanuel Kant (Richardson, 1995) who wrote extensively on the term. In fact, the word aesthetic was first incorporated in the English language via German by Alexander Baumgarten (1750/1961) whose use of the term placed a heavy stress on how beauty and art are perceived by the senses. Baumgarten's understanding, which emphasized the subjective nature of sensorial experiences and polarized the division between humans and art, came under fire by philosophers like Kant who attempted to bring aesthetics closer to its Greek origins (*aesthesis* – sense perception) by defining aesthetics as a science of sensuous perception (Williams, 1976/1983). By

the middle of the nineteenth century, aesthetics was generally associated with ideas about beauty with reference to art and maintained its distinctive subject/objective boundaries into the twentieth century when philosophers like Gadamer (1960/1975) critiqued Kant's aesthetics by troubling the boundaries between human and art object and observing how both are transformed in aesthetic experiences.

If the Emerson quote at the beginning of this chapter is any indicator, Emerson, too, found flaws in definitions of aesthetics during his own lifetime. Moreover, he would have appreciated the work of Siegesmund (1999) who by examining conjugations of the Greek verb *aisthanesthai* (to perceive) noted that aesthetic experiences originally emphasized the relational nature between subject and object. During aesthetic experiences, a certain back and forth is present, with subject and object acting upon the other as if at play in an open dialogue, and I contend that Emerson (1983) also envisioned the experiencing as art as an instantiation of relationships when he says above that art becomes a true creation when it is wrested away from separatist notions of subject and object and is embraced as something perpetually in dialogue with a subject. To employ Rosenblatt's (1938/1995) idea of transactions, as addressed in chapter three, I see Emersonian aesthetic experiences as transactions in which subject-object relationships work in concert to produce transformational experiences. In particular, I argue that a key component to aesthetic experiences when reading – based on my reading of Emerson – derives from such transactions with a focus on what happens during lived through experiences. In order to make sense of what happens during aesthetic reading experiences, I have elected to organize what follows into three major yet complementary categories. The first section explores reading as an engaged playfulness and a surprising enterprise; the second one looks at paying attention to and focusing on reading as an event and making space for those events to happen;

and the last major section carves out a space for reading as an inventive, creative performance. To begin this argument, however, it makes sense to look at reading as experience by exploring the transactional concept of reading experiences.

Section I: Reading as Play

*Can any biography shed light on the localities into which the Midsummer Night's
Dream admits me?*

(Emerson, 1983, p. 719)

The invitation to playing with reading that Shakespeare offers his audience found a welcome disciple in Emerson, who as one being admitted into a performance happily entered the space of the play and of reading. Shakespeare, for one, has a niche for allowing the ideas of playing and reading to cohabit, and in the case of *Hamlet*, to a dizzying effect. In one such example, with the subtle yet provocative stage direction of “Enter Hamlet reading on a book” in the middle of Act II, scene ii of *Hamlet* (Shakespeare, 1963, p. 75), the Bard captures a potent moment of reading engagement that speaks to what I refer to in this chapter as aesthetic reading experiences from an Emersonian perspective. During this fragment of the play, a melancholy and crestfallen Hamlet reads a book by a title unknown to the audience while simultaneously conversing with Polonius, Ophelia’s father. After a few lines of dialogue, Polonius’s curiosity stirs him to ask Hamlet what he is reading, and Hamlet remarks with the staccato, “Words, words, words.” Polonius, sensing something awry with the Prince of Denmark, inquires, “What is the matter, my lord?,” to which Hamlet snaps back with another inquiry, “Between who?” Polonius qualifies his question, “I mean the matter that you read, my lord” (p. 76), thus launching a comical dialogue in which Hamlet connects the events of the book occupying his time to the events of the play unfolding around him. Hamlet’s response of “Between who?”

when asked if something is the matter signals that the act of reading, and specifically Hamlet's transactions with his book, arguably constitutes another character in the room along side Hamlet and Polonius by opening up the possibility of the lived experience of reading. Furthermore, Hamlet's reading becomes relevant because he uses the text he reads not only to castigate Polonius in the present scene but also because, several lines later, he uses it to divine the play within a play that sows the seed of the tragic finale to come. In a sense, Hamlet's playing with reading and Shakespeare's playing with the character of Hamlet conjure up a hall of mirrors effect and a successive intermingling of reading, character, author, and text in order to advance the narrative and provoke the audience to make their own sense of what's happening during this given moment in the drama. Such a cajoling to thought and thinking, and an invitation to making sense of texts on multiple levels, resonates with Emerson's advice to his acolyte Charles Woodbury (1890) to play with reading, and that when the moment strikes to "shut the book when your own thought comes" (p. 147).

To extend further the Hamlet anecdote, Shakespeare (1963) makes an uncanny use of acts of reading and of playing within the forum of a play itself. Hamlet strategically plays with reading from within the text of the play, and Shakespeare ostensibly plays with the character of Hamlet as a character to be read, both suggesting two corollary connotations on the word play: that as something which occurs as an activity, and that which is assigned to the theatrical genre. Both forms of play, when merged in conjunction, suggest the idea that playing has elements of deliberation, that certain forms of play require a focused engagement for the play to function properly and convincingly. I argue that reading, when regarded under the purview of aesthetic experiences, works in a similar fashion. Reading aesthetically requires such an engagement with the text, for without which, as Emerson (1983) laments, "We have few readers, many spectators

and hearers” (p. 712), which anticipates Dewey’s (1929/1984) dismissal of the spectator’s approach to knowledge and learning. To open up yet another layer on the idea of play, Derrida (1972/1982), suggests that play can also refer to how gears cooperate in a machine, that there must exist some play, or level of looseness and lubricity in the intimately related network of cogs and wheels, for a machine to function properly. Playing with reading also has this component of mobility and levity in the sense that reading transactions can have a purposeful element while still allowing the imagination to roam unfettered while reading. It is in this multi-tiered sense of play and playfulness that readers become players at reading, just as Hamlet becomes a player within a play or the pivotal play of parts in a machine, and what follows looks to explore playing as an exploratory, intentional act when considering reading as an aesthetic experience.

Purposeful Playing

Gadamer (1960/1975) offers a productive definition of playing when addressing the concept of the aesthetic element in art. Although he claims that seriousness runs counter to a useful, pragmatic understanding of play, he qualifies that claim by stating that play is a purpose-driven activity. There are goals established, gauntlets raised in competition, and an ineffable spirit of rivalry and quest for accomplishment woven through the event of play to make it worth the endeavor. In Gadamer’s words,

Play fulfills its purpose only if the player loses himself in play. Seriousness is not merely something that calls us away from play; rather, seriousness in playing is necessary to make play wholly play. Someone who doesn’t take the game seriously is a spoilsport. (p. 103)

Such a trajectory of thinking helps inform how I think about playing with reading. Constitutive of play is a targeted ambition to accomplish the goals of playing. Without an ambition leveled at

a goal, however envisioned by the player, why expend the effort in the first place? In other words, what's the point of playing if there is no point to playing?

In a similar vein to Gadamer's assertion, I believe Emerson (1983) advocates for a level of serious playfulness when reading texts. A certain degree of focus and acumen is necessary to open up spaces for reading as a playful endeavor. As Emerson writes:

The thought of genius is spontaneous; but the power of picture or expression, in the most enriched and flowing nature, implies a mixture of will, a certain control over the spontaneous states, without which no production is possible. (p. 423)

Here, Emerson concedes that a certain permutation of guidance and control are crucial components to playing with reading. The spontaneity that accompanies reading, those epiphanies when the realization hits of being psychologically and emotionally submerged within the narrative of a book, have a basis in a desire to want to "get lost" in the reading act. Even if reading playfully teases readers to flip around through various sections of a book, perhaps launch into an achronological approach by reading the ending first, or read the first line and last line of every page to see what different connections are possible, such reading is filtered through a purpose of wanting those moments of discovery. Moreover, the playfulness of detaching oneself from the highly socialized protocol of reading from the beginning of a book to its ending places the reader precisely in the magic of Emerson's staircase that ignites his essay *Experience*,

Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight." (p. 471)

Play, as an aesthetic component to reading, functions as another facet of transactional experiences with texts (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995), and in a gracefully poignant, Emersonian twist, Calvino (1979/1981) gestured toward such engaged, purposeful experimentation with reading when he pens, “I expect readers to read in my books something I didn’t know, but I can expect it only from those who expect to read something they didn’t know” (p. 185).

Educational Potentiality of Play

When Emerson (1983) claims, “The plays of children are nonsense, but very educative nonsense” (p. 477), he is gesturing toward an understanding of play that encapsulates more than mindless goings-on between and among various selves and others. Although he refers to play, in this instance, as nonsense, he quickly qualifies the educational relevance of playing. In other words, children at play engage themselves in acts of learning, such as different maneuvers in a particular game, the necessary steps in solving puzzles, or any array of playing that requires the use of specialized information in order to achieve a desired goal. The educative component of play asks for a self-directed willingness to project oneself into a climate different than the quotidian one of everyday experiences. I argue that reading aesthetically asks for this intentional sleight of hand, but also that playing with reading does not invite a free for all or anything goes facet. Rather, playing with reading, as I believe Emerson argues, encourages readers to engage in the act of sense making informed by past experiences (cf. Dewey, 1934/1987) yet welcomes readers to lose themselves in the act of reading as they develop newer ways to understand what they read. Interestingly, Dewey shares Emerson’s (1983) as well as Gadamer’s (1960/1975) vision of play as a hybrid activity of levity intermixed with gravity when he writes, “No one has ever watched a child intent in his play without being made aware of the complete merging of playfulness with seriousness” (p. 284).

When considering the element of losing oneself in the act of reading, Gadamer (1986) offers the following description of what that can look like:

We know that we are able to read something when we cease to notice the letters as such and allow the sense of what is said to emerge. In every case, it is only the constitution of coherent meaning that lets us claim we have understood what is said. (p. 48)

The construction of sense making arises, according to Gadamer, when the mechanistic function of deciphering words disappears, and in its place a situation is assembled by the reader that allows entrée to meaning making relevant within a given social, temporal, spatial, and experiential milieu. Put another way, reading engagements, from an aesthetic perspective, offer a stimulus for thinking and invite the mind the wonder beyond the enclosures of the written words. Emerson (1983) speaks to this educative nature of playing with reading when he says:

We hear eagerly every thought and word quoted from an intellectual man. But, in his presence, our own mind is roused to activity, and we forget very fast what he says, much more interested in the new play of our own thought, than in any thought of his. (p. 955)

Transpose Emerson's idea of being in the presence of an articulate orator to the pages of a book, and the playfulness of enticing, wandering thoughts that occur while one reads ceases to be a mind disconnected from the reading material at hand and instead becomes a mind engaged in the transformative acts of contemplation, learning, and exploration. In more florid prose, Emerson claims that while reading,

We are as elastic as the gas of gunpowder, and a sentence in a book, or a word dropped in conversation, sets free our fancy, and instantly our heads are bathed with galaxies, and our feet tread the floor of the Pit. (p. 622)

Hence, aesthetic experiences with reading hold the potential to stir the mind to learning not only because readers approach reading transactions with previous experiences and depart from reading transactions differently than they once were. Perhaps readers feel a heightened awareness of the sensitivities of a current relationship, understand the travails of a family member sympathetically, or in general see themselves, others, and their worlds differently. Readers, when indulging in the diaphanous boundaries of playing with reading, in that state in which words dissolve and meaning making rears its provocative head, find themselves engaging in the educative nature of playing with reading and are transformed. As Emerson (1870) puts it in his essay entitled *Books*, which found its inspiration in an essay of the same name by French essayist Montaigne, and with whom Emerson chooses to disagree in this particular assertion, states, “Montaigne says, ‘books are a languid pleasure;’ but I find certain books vital and spermatic, not leaving the reader what he was: he shuts the book a richer man” (p. 159).

Surprise of Play

In tandem with the concepts of reading as intentional playfulness and reading in a playful manner as part and parcel of a potentially educational act is the idea that reading is rife with surprise, the unexpected, and mystery shrouded within reading transactions themselves. Emerson (1983) claims that surprise constituted an ineluctable element to life and living, that surprise keeps the senses honed, the mind sharpened, and the imagination welcome to change, difference, and growth. To employ words, “Life is a series of surprises, and would not be worth taking or keeping if it were not” (p. 482), and reading transactions should allow space for the

unknown to surface. Such mystery, as Woodbury (1890) quotes Emerson as saying, renders reading as aesthetically unique and curious adventures, for when too many clues are provided, reading becomes a numbing chore rather than an energized race requiring thought and meaning making. As Woodbury's quotation of Emerson goes, "The most interesting writing is that which does not quite satisfy the reader. Try and leave a little thinking for him . . . A little guessing does [the reader] no harm, so I would assist him with no connections" (p. 22). Phrased another way, inviting the surprise of playing with reading yields a reading experience that enflames a malleable imagination to challenge the unknown of what lay ahead in the reading journey and assists in making reading a satisfying enterprise of wonder and excitement.

To recur to Gadamer's (1960/1975) analysis of play as a means of complementing an endorsement of surprise when playing with reading, he iterates that the beauty of recognition is powerful when playing not because one learns something already known, but rather that recognition is a further enlightenment of what one already knows. As Gadamer puts it:

The joy of recognition is rather the joy of knowing *more* than is already familiar.

In recognition what we know emerges, as if illuminated, from all the contingent and variable circumstances that condition it; it is grasped in its essence. It is known as something. (p. 113, emphasis in original)

When contemplating the element of surprise when reading aesthetically, I argue that it works similarly to Gadamer's analysis of the role of recognition. In recognition, the known becomes known better, or perceived in a new light, or appreciated from a different angle, which makes it not what once constituted it. When something surprises a reader, a new awareness settles in, perhaps concerning a well guarded secret in the narrative of a novel or making sense of a philosopher's seemingly incongruent set of ideas after visiting the text on several occasions.

Hence surprises are seldom total shocks; rather, they imbue the already known with different shades of understanding. Commonsense, everyday expectations are jettisoned from their traditional, comfortable moorings and orbits, and the potential of newer ways of making meaning accompany the mystery of discovering the unpredictable.

To accentuate this use of Gadamer's work, Emerson (1983) also contests against an overreliance on understanding and argues that surprise enhances the already known into newer ways of knowing. In Emerson's articulation, "The vision of genius comes by renouncing the too officious activity of the understanding, and giving leave and amplest privilege to the spontaneous sentiment" (p. 100). By privileging spontaneity, mystery, and surprise, Emerson endorses a form of aesthetic reading that sees reading as an adventure with no foreclosed limitations, that the mind should have full sway of its proclivities to wander, and that the risk of the unknown, or the soon to be soon known differently, is a worthwhile endeavor when reading from an Emersonian perspective.

Playfully Reading, Reading Playfully

In light of the current analysis of playing with reading from an Emerson perspective, it makes sense at this juncture to draw a connection this time to Nietzsche's (1882/1974) work on play. Moreover, if "Emerson was one of Nietzsche's great loves ever since he read him as a schoolboy" (Kaufmann, 1974, p. 7), then Nietzsche's homage to Emerson's (1884) idea of the joyous science – or the idea that science should be played with, experimented with, and severed from its current status as grim, staunch, and aloof – it comes as no surprise that Nietzsche expounds upon this joyous science in his work. For instance, Nietzsche stakes the claim that playfulness has an integral role in our understanding, yet is dismissed by some as inconsequential to the cold, sterile realities of science. In Nietzsche's words:

The lovely human beast always seems to lose its good spirits when it thinks well; it becomes ‘serious.’ And ‘where laughter and gaiety are found, thinking does not amount to anything’: that is the prejudice of this serious beast against all ‘gay science.’ – Well then, let’s prove that this is a prejudice. (p. 257)

Using this brief excerpt, Nietzsche acknowledges play, experimentation, and laughter as pivotal components to learning, growth, and living, and I argue the same can be articulated of our relationship with reading as an aesthetic experience. Reading presents opportunities for a focused, intentional playfulness, carves a space for educational experiences, and opens up a receptiveness to surprise that can occur while reading and that in turn makes reading transactions powerful and transformative.

Furthermore, Emerson (1875) understood the value and necessity of laughter and playfulness as means for learning and the deleteriousness nature of taking matters too seriously when he says:

We must learn by laughter, as well as by tears and terrors; explore the whole of nature, - the farce and buffoonery in the yard below, as well as the lessons of poets and philosophers upstairs, in the hall, - and get the rest and refreshment of the shaking of the sides. (p. 139)

Emerson’s choice of images in this quotation argue for the refreshing attribute of laughter, how play relaxes priggish philosophers, and that levity can lighten grave occasions. In like spirit, reading aesthetically encompasses each of these elements. Reading invites the reader to playfully indulge in the act of reading, such as whimsically skipping around the text from page to page or paragraph to paragraph. What emerges is the surprise of finding out the ending first, details that

were overlooked or perhaps enhanced, and any number of possible imaginative approaches made available when reading is treated as a form of informative, educational play.

Section II: Reading as Event

It is the quality of the moment, not the number of days, of events, or of actors, that imports.

(Emerson, 1983, p. 204)

Sanguine with the idea that playing with reading constitutes an important element of aesthetic reading from an Emersonian perspective is the concept that reading aesthetically also takes into consideration a removal of concrete place and supplants it with an oxygenated, enlivened space of activity. Because playing suggests the active movements of thinking, imagining, and dreaming, I argue along with de Certeau's (1980/1984) concept of reading as poaching that reading cannot be perceived as a stationary enterprise and that the very act of reading, or transactions with reading, constitutes an in flux space that becomes meaningful because of its liquid, molten nature. Even the bodily component of reading and the belief that reading occurs when the body remains moored to a setting, cannot be envisioned as static any longer. As de Certeau articulates about reading and the body, "Emancipated from places, the reading body is freer in its movements. It thus transcribes in its attitudes every subject's ability to convert the text through reading and to 'run it' the way one runs traffic lights" (p. 176). I interpret de Certeau as advocating a form of reading in which mind/body, the text and the person, run away with themselves, as if they are transgressing some sacred law of reading, in order to free themselves from the pillars of reading as a mechanistic, routinized operation involving a monolithic text and an equally frozen-in-place reader.

From a similar angle, Emerson (1983) argues for the mobile nature of reading and embodiment when he claims that “The use of literature is to afford us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it” (p. 408), which suggests that reading’s fluid nature serves to transport the reader to a different location when they assume ownership of their reading experiences as valid and important. In both de Certeau’s (1980/1984) and Emerson’s (1983) estimates, reading and the reading body work in ways that move the reader and reading to spaces qualitatively different than before, and I contend that an aesthetic reading experience acknowledges and cultivates these reading movements and the nuanced moments along the way. Given this idea of movement, the following section takes an Emersonian perspective under consideration on the value of momentous events in reading transactions as another component of reading as an aesthetic experience.

Events Rather Than Objects

As referenced at the outset of this chapter, an aesthetic perspective, in its eighteenth century iteration, valued art for art’s sake, that the object of art constituted a completed entity after the artist fashioned it into existence (Dewey, 1934/1987; Gadamer, 1960/1975, 1986). Based on this perspective, art objects become celebrated icons of idolatry and the question of what the work of art meant to any one observer was deemed irrelevant. The same idea translates to books as art object in which the text (for example autographed, first editions of novels by famous writers) acquires a monetary value and is intended only as a show piece for admiration rather than as a book to be handled and read. Gadamer’s (1960/1975) counters such perspectives of revered art objects when outlining the idea of historically effected consciousness, which acknowledges that we are always experiencing situations differently contingent upon situated contexts. Being situated historically not only means that awareness of self is an incomplete

process, it also means that the experiencing of art is a constant process of renewal each time it is encountered.

Dewey (1934/1987) speaks in concert with Gadamer when he claims that the art object cannot exist without the transactions of human participants and that each experience with art has a power all its own. As Dewey proposes, “As a piece of parchment, of marble, of canvas, [a work of art] remains (subject to the ravages of time) self-identical throughout the ages,” and he continues by saying, “But as a work of art, it is recreated every time it is esthetically experienced” (p. 113). In this instance, Dewey announces that artifacts are produced into works of art as a result of the human experience with them and that meaning derives not from the work of art but from the engaged transaction with the work of art itself. In building his case, Dewey alludes to the museum conception, or rather misconception, of art in which the human experience is irrelevant in transactions with art objects kept at arm’s length in museums and art exhibitions. In light of these revisioned ideas about aesthetics, it is the *event* of experiencing art that irrups into meaning and meaning making rather than the isolated artwork functioning as a self-contained reservoir of beauty, knowledge, and meaning.

As a precursor to Dewey’s articulation of experiences with art, Emerson (1983) believed that regardless of the fawning laurels cast around works of art that art has a purpose only when it sets the mind alight with thought, or as he puts it, “Yet when we have said all our fine things about the arts, we must end with a frank confession, that the arts, as we know them, are but initial” (p. 437). If Emerson’s words are extrapolated to address aesthetic reading transactions as eventful spaces, the text functions as a provocateur and a resource; it serves as merely the beginning of a process that cannot even begin without the intentional actions of a reader willing to participate in the reading transaction. In concert with Nietzsche (1908/2005), one must

become what one is without the slightest notion of what that looks like or can look like. From this enticement to the event of reading, in which both text and reader are complicit, readers join in the quest of meaning making that invites an exploratory experience to depart from the text itself, to draw from rivers of past and current experiences, and to allow for the forgings of newer understandings to occur. In this regard, Emerson sees books – and the acts of reading them - as intertwined, overlapping links in a network that make the expansion of thinking possible and keep the knowledge of things and ideas constantly flowing. Based on this concept of books as inaugural provocateurs of the imagination, Nietzsche (1882/1974) slyly interrogates the purpose of books when he rhetorically inquires, “What good is a book that does not even carry us beyond all books” (p. 215).

Paying Attention to Moments

Emerson (1983) endeavored to problematize the concept of observation in his writing on the topic. He claims that observation functions not merely as a leisurely bystander’s fancy or as the wistful activity of a spectator upon a crowd. Rather, Emerson states that truly observant actions are only be possible if “one will but take pains to observe,” which suggests that lucrative, productive insight becomes a reality through an active engagement with one’s surroundings, context, and past experiences (pp. 243-244). Emerson believes that paying attention, and taking concerted efforts to observe, worked toward stimulating the mind to newer understandings. Dewey (1920/1982) elaborates on Emerson’s idea of the integration of observation and thinking when he acknowledges that both observing and thinking have reciprocal roles in carrying one onward to further opportunities for thought. As Dewey explains,

The first distinguishing characteristic of thinking then is facing the facts – inquiry, minute and extensive scrutinizing, observation. Nothing has done greater harm to

the successful conduct of the enterprise of thinking...than the habit of treating observation as something outside of and prior to thinking, and thinking as something which can go on in the head without *including* observation of new facts as part of itself. (p. 160, emphasis in original)

In this instance, Dewey laments an ends-in-view distinction between thought and observation as had been historically and scientifically understood and advocates for a rigorous form of observation, or a reflection in action, of an active, engaged mind to notice details and nuances, note differences and similarities between and across observed concepts and objects, and make connections to lived experiences and relationships with others.

Such an active sense of observation plays well into this conceptualization of aesthetic experiences with reading in that they are produced through engaging with the event of reading. As Emerson (1983) suggests, “Learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across your mind from within” (p. 259), which I interpret as an invitation to those epiphanies of reading, say during the reading of a novel, when a character shares such relatable aspects to the reader than the reader indulges these connections and perhaps makes sense of the world differently by taking time to pause on these synapses of insight and discovery. Taking these moments during reading into consideration, and going to further lengths to process them, speaks also to the fleeting nature of eventful moments during reading because such meteoric flashes across the imagination when reading can be ephemeral and not to be recaptured, because reading is a situated investment during a particular temporal and spatial moment across a reader’s set of experiences. As Emerson phrases it, “To the attentive eye, each moment of the year has its own beauty, and in the same field, it beholds, every hour, a picture which was never seen before, and which shall never be seen again” (p. 15). Again, Emerson emphasizes what he refers to as the

attentive eye, or that focused engagement with reading that makes capturing the fugacious a possibility and makes moments of reading arresting and powerful for readers.

Expounding upon the current argument that eventful readings from an aesthetic perspective rely on careful observation, and with an understanding to take pause and seize upon moments that may not pass by again, is the idea that these eventful moments are made by readers. As Derrida (1994/2005) teases out of Nietzsche's idea of the dangerous perhaps, an idea that explores what becomes elusive and what one misses out on when second guessing experience, experiences must be seized, wrestled, and grappled with, and from an Emersonian perspective the reader plays a significant role in making those events happen. In Emerson's (1983) essay *The Poet* – with poet considered from its Greek origins as someone who makes or does something – Emerson arrives at the fulcrum of this section of the chapter. In Emerson's words,

For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem, -- a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. (p. 450)

Emerson stresses the belief that a poem is lifeless without a reader and that the reader makes, forges, or renders an understanding of a text. Moreover this textual exchange between text and reader, or transaction, arouses a piece of literature from a catatonic state of stagnation and breathes life into something different, new, or previously unrevealed to the reader. Reading, then, from an aesthetic perspective, consists of moments made by the reader who willfully engages in the reading act with an openness to that which was previously obscured or veiled but has now become available in richer understandings of the text, self, and others because of such active involvement in the aesthetic experience of reading.

Remembering Dewey (1929/1984), knowing, learning, and ultimately reading can no longer be conceived as spectator sports, nor can objects such as texts exist as inanimate things with an inherent meaning in and of themselves (Gadamer, 1960/1975). In order “to make a life that is worth living” (Dewey, 1920/1982, p. 201), and to appropriate Dewey for the sake of argument, to make an aesthetic reading experience worth having, Emerson (1983) encourages a reading experience in which readers see reading as an event that involves a malleable text and an evolving reader. Furthermore, he proposes an aesthetic reading in which readers take pains to observe what they glimpse from the texts with which they transact, to pay attention to what is being read and the language used to represent it, and to allow for a space to produce readings of texts in which the reader takes an active role in bringing the text to a newer, richer level of sense making. From this in flux exploration of reading experiences that focus on the event of reading and the shifting, destabilized nature of making such moments possible, Emerson offers apropos words in envisioning an aesthetic reading experience that casts into relief the use of events, progress, and moments, “Thoughts walk and speak, and look with eyes at me, and transport me into new and magnificent scenes” (p. 154).

Section III: Reading as Performance

I will that we keep terms with sin, and a sinful literature and society, no longer, but live a life of discovery and performance. Accept the intellect, and it will accept us.

(Emerson, 1983, p. 130)

The previous major sections of this experiment touched upon the importance of reading as an engaged playfulness and carving out spaces for reading as a productive event between reader and text as two components of reading aesthetically in light of the ideas articulated in

Emerson's prose. The current section makes use of both play and eventfulness when considering the role of performative, creative reading as an aesthetic experience. Because meaning is rendered through reading transactions, and because the meaning making process occurs in an infinite permutation of context, past experiences, present exigencies, and social milieu, what may come from a reader's reading of a text is bounded only by what limits the reader sets on the experience and not by the text itself. Further, because texts lend themselves to the act of interpretation, or to paraphrase Emerson (1870), texts are silent until spoken to and come alive during acts of reading, a definitive reading of any given text becomes an impossible and futile endeavor. As French professor of literature and of psychoanalysis Bayard (2007) contends, "the content of a text is so fluid that it is difficult to assert with any certainty that something is not found in it" (p. 161). In like manner, Emerson (1983) explores the nature of multiple meanings from a text when he thunders, "Take the book into your two hands, and read your eyes out; you will never find what I find" (p. 314). In each instance, readers are not only invited to play with meaning or to scrutinize a text until the words themselves become a noxious eyesore, but also to assume the role of creative performer. As performers during reading acts, readers have the opportunity to tap into the imaginative component of reading and to engage in an aesthetic experience when making sense of texts.

Furthermore, performing reading, and all the creative elements infused in the act and art of performing, constitutes a journey along a path in which meaning making occurs in the process of the performance itself and along the pathway. Analogous to the performance of actors in a play in which no single performance is repeatable, performative reading happens and sense making occurs in the process of reading itself, and meaning is cobbled together through transaction. Cavell (2003) calls meaning making along the way *finding as founding*, which also

recurs to Emerson's (1983) advice that life be lived as a process of discovery and performance. By considering reading transactions in light of finding as founding, no structure antedates the experience of reading; instead structure and foundation happen during reading acts. As Saito (2005), expanding upon Cavell's concept, puts it, "This might be called Emerson's antifoundationalism, his way of living beyond the restrictive, fixed choice between no ground and absolute ground" (p. 134). By viewing reading as a performance in which finding is founding, reading transactions are spaces in which locating sense making changes and shifts through the transactional process and encourages a spontaneity and a daring to explore the unknown that becomes known through the creative act of reading. With these ideas on performance at play, the work ahead seeks to produce a reading of Emerson that speaks to the importance of performative reading as intimately bound up in aesthetic experience during reading.

Manifold Meanings

As Richardson (2009), one of Emerson's many biographers across the last two hundred years, articulates, "[Emerson] was reluctant to speak of *the* meaning of a book and eager to affirm the idea that there would be as many meanings of a book as it had readers (p. 13, emphasis in original). This analysis of Emerson as open to the possibilities of textual meaning swings back to Emerson's (1983) call for an active engagement with reading that speaks to the creative process of the reading act itself. As he phrases it, "One must be an inventor to read well" to which he later justifies that if in fact creative writing is a label assignable to composition, then creative reading must also be validated in the process of making sense from texts (p. 59). In Emerson's estimate:

There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world. (p. 59)

Based on this understanding of reading as an act peppered with creative possibility, reading from an aesthetic perspective not only invites the creative mind to make sense as it can, it requires the laborious task of putting that active imagination to use. In other words, for manifold meanings to fester, procreate, and percolate, creative reading ceases to be an act of passive consumption of a text and instead becomes a fruitful performance of focusing one's attention on what one reads in order to allow creative meanings to blossom.

Emerson lived during an epoch that privileged the text over the reader, which may account for his overemphasis on the role of readers in his writings (Bickman, 2003). However, "Emerson's vision is consonant with our best current thinking on reading, that meaning is created in a transaction between the reader and the text" (p. 14) because Emerson believed emphatically in the relational possibilities of reading. He viewed readers and texts as complicit culprits during creative readings that endorse multiple interpretations of texts. In one excerpt, Emerson (1983) flirts with metaphoric and even anthropomorphic language when addressing books as renewable resources that must be granted a space to perform their duties for each new reading transaction. Emerson writes,

the book remains ever so new and unexhausted, that we must even let it go its way and be willing to get what good from it we can, assured that it has only begun its office and has millions of readers yet to serve. (p. 755)

In this instance, Emerson not only acknowledges the complicity of texts in creative reading transactions, he suggests that readers must let go of books after they have made sense of them in order to preclude a definitive textual meaning from becoming calcified and glorified. Allowed such leeway, readers generate their creative understandings of texts and then relinquish the text from the obligation of providing codified, certifiable knowledge. Instead texts welcome anew each reading transaction as an opportunity for newer, nuanced ways for a text to mean something else to a different audience, even if that different audience consists of previous readers of the same text.

Awakening Creativity

To engage widely with a text, as Emerson (1983) suggests, an element of the creative constitutes a necessary part of transacting aesthetically when reading. Similar to Gadamer's (1960/1975) assertion that players must be willing participants in play, readers must be willing to maneuver through texts with an empathy that leads them to different understandings of texts. In line with American educator Wilhelm's (1997) encouragement that readers 'BE the book' by connecting themselves in and through a text, suspending their disbelief, and engaging with the characters of a novel on an interpersonal level, Emerson (1983) states that true reading begins with this creative adventure.

The fact narrated must correspond to something in me to be credible or intelligible. We as we read must become Greeks, Romans, Turks, priest and king, martyr and executioner, must fasten these images to some reality in our secret experience, or we shall learn nothing rightly. (p. 238)

Reading instantiates a valuable experience, in Emerson's estimate, when a reader allows the imagination to envision the events of the text as if they themselves had a sincere investment in

the narrative's outcome. Without such creative, performative engagements with reading, as Emerson suggests, what is gained from reading is a detached knowledge, or a vague awareness of what transpired during the course of a book, rather than a meaning that resonates with the reader's psyche, sings to past experience, or tempts the reader to revision the world outside the text differently than before. In this case, learning something rightly, as Emerson phrases it, means not accepting facts read in books as set in stone but using the imagination to question those facts and figures and to seek their own understanding of contexts, people, narratives, or histories.

Emerson (1983) continues along this trajectory of thinking as a performative creative venture when further elaborating on the role of books during creative reading transactions. Books, as Emerson views them, function as provocateurs. They are never endpoints in themselves as settled knowledge, verifiable fact, or incontrovertible science. Rather, according to Emerson, "Our books approach very slowly the things we most wish to know" (p. 1099), which I interpret as his alluding to books as tempting the reader to learn more than the contents upon the written page. In this spirit, the reader must perform as a creative seeker for an awareness not previously available, and not simply a seeker, but a willful actor who enters transactions with reading to plum the depths of imagination in finding out what one desires to know. Put differently, books, far from providing all the evidence and the keys to each locked and barricaded gate, leave a space for and welcome creative reading transactions, ones that awaken a malleable mind to newer hemispheres of understanding and that constitute an invaluable component in aesthetic experiences with reading.

In order to make space for performative reading engagements with texts, reading becomes an imaginative act; the reader takes the text and hazards a risk at understanding the

loopholes of narrative, draws connections across dilapidated bridges in which dense fog clouds the other side, and wrests a coveted, shadowed meaning that makes sense to the reader during reading transactions. As Emerson (1983) writes, “The best discovery the discoverer makes for himself” (p. 628), which speaks to reading as an experiment in meaning making in which the reader actively and creatively searches for something to be discovered as if there is something to be discovered. In addressing this uniquely inventive space that is produced during reading transactions, Rosenblatt (1966) attests, “No one else can read a literary work for us. The benefits of literature can emerge only from creative activity on the part of the reader himself” (p. 1000). In other words, reading is a creatively driven performance that becomes useful, insightful, and productive because the reader actively seeks out opportunities to recruit the imagination during reading transactions. Furthermore, it is this purposeful recruitment of creative, performative energies that makes aesthetic reading transactions enriching, enlivening, and invigorating experiences.

Engaging Aesthetic Reading

See how daring is the reading, the speculation, the experimenting of the time.

(Emerson, 1983, p. 161)

To eavesdrop once again on the Prince of Denmark, the morose yet calculating hero of Shakespeare’s (1963) tragedy, Hamlet uses reading in manners I contend align well with Emerson’s ideas about reading as an aesthetic experience. Hamlet plays with the book as a subterfuge in order to sound out his vituperations against the pandering Polonius, and the question begs itself – are those insults found in the pages Hamlet holds, or are they Hamlet’s own words of spiteful slander toward an interloper he regards as possessing “a plentiful lack of wit”? (p. 77). Is the “satirical rogue” that Hamlet mentions Shakespeare, Hamlet himself, some

composite of the two? Such a form of play has imbedded within it the aesthetic notion of eventful readings, with Hamlet wandering about as he reads the words on the page yet also reading the action presently unfolding on the stage. Hamlet seizes the opportunity to intermingle his book reading with the dialogue of the drama, which further instantiates de Certeau's (1980/1984) idea of the freely moving reading body that physically moves around while reading a text. Lastly, Hamlet captures the performative aspect of aesthetic reading experiences when he allows the pretext of the book to serve as the idea for the play within the play that will unveil the truth behind his father's murder and barrel the plot toward its tragic climax.

In each of these components of reading aesthetically, a willful action is required of the reader. A reader must be willing to indulge in the play of reading, whether it is a playful manipulation of the text itself or of using the text as an escape mechanism or suspension of reality to play within the world of the text itself. Aesthetic experiences also don't just happen – they happen because of an intentional engagement with a text that pays attention to the moments and the events of reading, of acknowledging questions, problems, and concerns a reader has with a text. Readers actively put their imaginations into motion during aesthetic reading transactions to allow for lucrative moments to be produced that rethink various narrative outcomes and character motives. Moreover, aesthetic reading experiences, in light of Cavell's (2003) work, offer readers spaces in which finding meaning indeed becomes a process of founding newer textual understandings and ways of knowing to be produced.

By indulging in this willfulness, Emerson (1870) argues, readers become affected by what they read. As he phrases it,

the novel will find the way to our interiors one day, and will not always be the novel of costume merely. I do not think it inoperative now. So much novel-

reading cannot leave the young men and maidens untouched; and doubtless it gives some ideal dignity to the day. (p. 172)

In light of Emerson's commentary on the reading of novels as touching the reader, Emerson approaches the idea that reading does something to the reader. Something happens during reading transactions. Something is different, or is differently thought, because of the reader's engagement with reading. And, by taking pains to observe, as Emerson (1983) encourages, readers to situate themselves as partakers and performers in reading as a form of aesthetic experience.

CHAPTER 5

READING AS ENGAGED DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

Nothing solid is secure; everything tilts and rocks. Even the scholar is not safe; he too is searched and revised. Is his learning dead? Is he living in his memory? The power of mind is not mortification but life.

(Emerson, 1983, p. 116)

Emersonian Pragmatism

Emerson embraced the power of the mind as that which exists in constant reformation in its understanding of the world, as a chrysalis poised at the outer hemisphere of becoming something different, something renewed, something powerful. Security of knowledge and complacency of thought were for Emerson pernicious concepts that sapped the life out of living and ceremoniously padlocked shut the gate on imaginary and intellectual thinking. He saw no mode of thinking as permanent and no scholar as above critique, and especially derided what William James (1907/1997) refers to as “truths grown petrified by antiquity” (p. 104).

Emerson’s beliefs in the potential of the active imagination along with his outright denouncing of knowledge as an unquestioned fixture directly contributed to America’s first indigenous mode of thinking known as pragmatism. Pragmatism, as James describes it, stood in opposition to rationalist modes of thinking in which logic and deductive reasoning channel thinking down a narrow, well-trodden path of expected outcomes and results in which one path to understanding is *the* way to understanding. James contends that pragmatism subverts such forms of knowing because it does not seek to provide the answers; rather, it asks how ideas come

to be known in certain ways; how things might be understood differently. In James' words, "Pragmatism unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets each one at work" (p. 98). The key word in James' statement is *work*, for pragmatism doesn't offer solutions; it is an instrument, a resource, and a "program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be *changed*" (p. 98, emphasis in original). With pragmatism enlisted as more of a plan of action than a stale philosophy, this mode of thinking dovetails nicely with the ethos that founded the United States: democracy.

Following Emerson, John Dewey (1888/1997) makes it quite clear that he believes democracy is more than simply a system of government. Dewey states that democracy also refers to a way of life or "a mode of associated living" (1916/1980, p. 93) in that we are organically connected together in experience through our actions in the pursuit of our goals. Living in a democracy, or rather a lived democracy, means that multiple perspectives on ideas should be validated and that it is our ethical responsibility to welcome and pay attention to polyvocal viewpoints. In other words, Dewey envisions a healthy democracy as rife with possibilities, tensions, and opportunities, and in order to have a working democracy, it must devise a theory of knowledge in which knowledge works as a method toward further knowing. Knowledge, for Dewey, is something that works, that is *at work*, in creating newer ways of understanding in a productive democratic society. As Emerson (1983) says, "Knowledge is the knowing that we can not know" (p. 703), which not only speaks to the aims of pragmatism but to the goals of democracy. The point is not to know with certainty, but to know approximately, contingently, and that knowledge constantly shifts and reshapes in a healthy democratic society.

Emerson (1983) claims that a democratic country's potential to thrive rests in the negotiation of complex, varying viewpoints as a way of bringing people closer to nuanced,

critical understandings of any number of issues when he says, “The centripetence augments the centrifugence. We balance one man with his opposite, and the health of the state depends on the see-saw” (p. 628). The see-saw effect of life in a democratic society, as Emerson sees it, sets the stage for newer ways of understanding and living to emerge because centripetence/centrifugence works in concert and must work in concert for America to last. However, Emerson acknowledges the struggles and tensions inherent in nurturing a Democratic society populated by people resistant to change, ideas, and progress, and he articulates his concerns for the ideological America as he experiences it – especially in his reference to the United States as “this new yet unapproachable America (p. 485) – which also articulates his hopes for a society committed to reformation, revision, and re-imagining in his writing.

And here is where Emersonian pragmatism strays from James’ definitions. To distinguish, James (1907/1997) approaches pragmatism from an instrumental perspective in his argument against rationalist thinking. Emersonian pragmatism, however, is a less systematic mode of living predicated on experimentation and open-ended thinking. It is productive and focused on an art of living rather than means to an end. Emerson pragmatism views America as a constant work in progress and as something to be worked upon, with democratic thinking based on problem posing rather than problem solving. Put otherwise, Emersonian pragmatism sees America as an unfinalizable, unfinished project always with an optimistic eye toward possibility and hope and always ready to be remade, rethought, and refashioned.

One way that Emerson seeks to remake American society is through the power of language as a vehicle for producing new ways of thinking and being, and his ideas on Democracy contribute to my interpretation of Emersonian reading as a form of engaged democratic citizenship. In order to spotlight reading practices that speak to such engagements

with reading, I will attend to the following interrelated themes: the first section will focus on thinking as a form of action; the next section will speak to the notion that reading promotes a healthy questioning of authority; and the final section will seek to explore reading as a productive means of reforming and reconceptualizing society.

Section I: Reading as Pragmatic Acts

That which he has learned is that there is much more to be learned. The wiser he is, he feels only the more his incompetence.

(Emerson, 1875, pp. 276-277)

When Emerson (1983) rhetorically asks, “What is the hardest task in the world?” and immediately answers, “To think” (p. 420), he articulates a belief that thinking functions as an antifoundational enterprise associated with becoming an active, sentient person in a democratic society. McMillin (2000) endorses Emerson’s claims that thinking and reading are intimately and inseparably connected activities when he states,

Reading must always involve thinking about what, how, and why we read.

Reading, then, is probably the second hardest task in the world, after thinking.

Thinking is the hardest task in the world precisely because it is a way of making sense of the world while being inextricable from it. (p. 146)

In this passage, McMillin acknowledges a form of Emersonian reading that views reading as a means to thinking, or better yet, as a form of thinking. Reading, when approached from this angle, cannot be severed from critical contemplation the world. From a pragmatist perspective, thinking/acting works inseparably in how sense can be taken from the world. Thinking is something that is made through experience *and* initiates experience. Thinking, then, entails and erases the boundaries in Cartesian passive/active, mind/body constructions because it activates

and motivates that which is required for future ideas and learning. As Emerson (1875) suggests in the quote that begins this section, learning is a process of the engagement of thinking/acting, and reading involves the recruitment of thinking/acting as part of the process of realizing that much more is yet to be learned about the world.

Revisiting Dewey's (1920/1982) concept of reconstruction in philosophy in light of Emersonian pragmatism, it is easy to see how both advise against a spectator viewpoint on knowledge and believes stagnation in thought keeps ideas locked in a holding pattern that precludes philosophy from taking root as a productive part of living. Dewey writes of the "isolation of thinking" and the "exultation of theory" as deleterious to future growth and newer ways of knowing (p. 161), and he argues that the mutually informative concepts of thinking/acting usher in opportunities for a reconstruction in philosophy that view philosophy as an active engagement with the world. Furthermore, Dewey follows Emerson's (1983) claim that, "We know that the ancestor to every action is a thought" (p. 322), and this intimate genealogy of thinking and acting rests well with an Emersonian stance on reading as an active enterprise where ideas coagulate, repel, and bifurcate in order for newer understandings to be produced.

Considering Emerson's ideas about reading as fertile territory for thought and action, McMillin (2000) discusses the concept that engaged reading informs one's ability to transact with the universe of texts, ideas, and other individuals. "How we gather meaning from texts informs how well we will participate in the worlds of our words," which suggests that, in a world saturated with and situated in language, reading plays a palpable role in how one orients the self in a complex, diversified world (p. 126). McMillin further elaborates, "Reading, then, is nothing other than a method of thinking, of gathering the world" (p. 126), and I interpret McMillin's quite pragmatic claims as saying that the performance of gathering the world, of sifting through

the seemingly infinite amount of data and information available, coincides with sense making as an active component to reading in order to ponder judiciously one's views on issues of importance. Reading fosters a complicity within thought/action that is continually at work with reading that provides a platform for this relationship to flourish.

McMillin's analysis of the profound relationship between reading and thinking draws upon Emerson's (1983) ideas about the power of language and the influence it had on his work. For instance, words performed such a vital role in Emerson's thinking that he writes in reference to Montaigne's essays, "Cut these words, and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive" (p. 700). Not only do words possess circulatory, oxygenated nervous systems for Emerson, books themselves have a rejuvenating, life-giving function: "I find books vital and spermatic, not leaving the reader what he was: he shuts the book a richer man" (Emerson, 1870, p. 159). For Emerson, language serves a galvanizing function and enlivens how he articulates ideas, and reading transactions with and across texts brings Emerson to contemplate his own vital relationship to books, a relationship that he welcomed to abet his evolving thought processes and perspectives on the world.

To take Emerson's recognition of the power of language a step further as a living, breathing entity, language not only brings forth action, it is a form of action in itself. As Emerson (1983) phrases it, "Words and deeds are quite indifferent modes of the divine energy. Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words" (p. 450). That is, language has a performative role in making sense of the world. Given this perspective on words, reading transactions consist not merely of a leisurely and passively consumption of words on a page; words *do* something during reading transactions, and readers paying attention to these processes allow themselves not only to know more about themselves, others, and other worlds, they can tap into that knowledge in a

participatory fashion that leads them back and forth between the text and their worlds. Actions are realized in thought, and reading as a form of engaged democratic citizenship relies on the reciprocity that exists between thinking and acting as a mode of critically understanding and making sense of the massive array of information on offer in society and making informed choices in a democratic country.

As Emerson scholar Joel Porte (2004) claims, “Far from being inadequate to represent its world, language, for Emerson is an instrument of power – a sign of our command over nature and fate” (p. 194). Porte acknowledges that language fulfilled a fortifying need for Emerson by opening gateways to thinking/acting that Emerson (1983) embraces as elemental in developing notions of how the world works and how it might be conceived differently. Viewed in this light, pragmatism is a productive mode of inquiry, which complements James (1907/1997) when he writes that “pragmatism is fully armed and militant” in light of rationalist, narrow focused understandings of theories and facts precisely because it serves to disrupt and unsettle solidified ways of knowing. Pragmatism is a rogue philosophy in that it resists conventional philosophic theories; it is a working theory, a piece of armament, that assists in seeking different possible understandings. Reading also presents opportunities for being powerful in that working one’s way through the meaning making process of reading transactions constitutes a pragmatic act of searching, of finding not *the* way of understanding a text, but finding multiple ways of understanding it. The idea that language is at work, that language is recruited in reading transactions, marks what I call democratic reading experiences that empower readers toward a more nuanced awareness of their worlds.

Emerson (1983) believed firmly in experimentation, even labeling himself “an endless seeker” (p. 412), as a means for transacting with knowledge, and he envisioned this transaction

as random, messy, and disarrayed. When readers transact with texts, they come into contact with innumerable information about scientific innovations, historical causality, and literary characters. As Emerson conceives it, reading should allow for experimentation because it puts readers in a space to evaluate what they read and arrive at informed possibilities about texts. Rather than reading books for pre-given right answers, Emerson celebrates the idea that:

there are far more excellent qualities in the student than preciseness and infallibility; that a guess is often more fruitful than an indisputable affirmation, and that a dream may let us deeper into the secret of nature than a hundred concerted experiments. (p. 43)

In other words, reading becomes a powerful event when readers have a sense of agency of the knowledge they encounter and not when they read for pre-determined meanings, intentions, or purposes. Emerson personally felt the power of exploratory reading transactions when he writes, “It is a low benefit to give me something; it is a high benefit to enable me to do somewhat of myself” (p. 82). Certified knowledge held little interest for Emerson, and the empowering act of reading ensnared his own mind and lived experiences in order that they might be transformed or challenged by texts with which he engaged.

Preceding James’ concept of pragmatism as an armed, working philosophy, Emerson (1983) invokes a militaristic metaphor about power and learning when he claims that transactions with texts and information provide the grist for empowerment: “That which was unconscious truth, becomes, when interpreted and defined in an object, a part of the domain of knowledge, -- a new weapon in the magazine of power” (p. 25). In this example, truth possesses no innate value; it exists as a random variable in a galaxy of factual information. However, as Emerson offers, after that knowledge is harnessed through transactional experiences and made

sense of, that previously randomized assortment of information transforms into something useful, something powerful, as one preparing a weapon in the war against foundational thinking, uninterrogated decisions, and unquestioned systems of ideology and government. This sifting and mulling over ideas, bringing them under the blue flame of analysis, and considering multiple possibilities for understanding are hallmarks of an Emersonian perspective on reading for engaged democratic citizenship.

In order for reading to be productive of democracy, McMillin (2000) claims that thinking/acting should be viewed as a welcome component to a democratic way of life. Passively engaging with texts will not promote a deep critical awareness of worldly issues, nor will it increase a reader's arsenal of knowledge that can be used strategically for responsible participation in society. According to McMillin, "Reading is not something we do all the time but something we could (and should) do more often, if we would learn to see differently" (p. 127). In order to make space for envisioning differently, factual information can at best be considered seeds for initiating learning experiences. As Emerson (1983) admits,

Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul. What he announces, I must find true in me, or wholly reject; and on his word, or as his second, be he who he may, I can accept nothing. (p. 79).

Reading and thinking become powerful, active agents in gaining, producing, and using knowledge through a willful process of transacting with static information, taking into consideration various and conflicting perspectives, delving through avalanches of knowledge claims, and forging ahead with the formidable task of making sense of a world while at the same time, as McMillin (2000) offers, living within that world. Moreover, such thinking is in line with Emersonian pragmatism, which is about advancing toward a pluralistic society based on problem

posing rather than problem solving. If as Emerson (1983) puts it, “To think is to act” (p. 322) and reading transactions are intimately bound up in thinking/acting, reading in order to nurture engaged democratic practices also means viewing reading as an empowering event in which expanding ideas and replacing outmoded ones become possible. And becoming powerful is a pivotal antecedent in moving toward realizing a more fair and just democratic society.

Section II: Reading as Pluralistic Enterprise

All philosophy, of East and West, has the same centripetence. Urged by an opposite necessity, the mind returns from the one to that which is not one, but other or many; from cause to effect; and affirms the necessary existence of variety, the self-existence of both, as each is involved in the other.

(Emerson, 1983, p. 638)

James (1909/1997) argues that from a pragmatic perspective, we live in a diverse universe of knowledge, understanding, and thinking; that nothing can be all inclusive in how the world can be known. He writes,

Things are “with” one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything. The word “and” trails long after every sentence.

Something always escapes. “Ever not quite” has to be said of the best attempts made anywhere in the universe at attaining all-inclusiveness. (p. 132)

James’ line of thinking about a pluralistic universe is a well-stated echo of Emerson’s (1983) idea about the interconnectedness of ideas and that “all philosophy...affirms the necessary existence of variety” (p. 638). In thinking pluralistically, relations are those constituted moments of specific experiences that lead to one route for how things may happen, not how they must happen in every instance. As James (1909/1997) says, “each relation is one aspect,” one possible

outcome, one modicum of knowing in a dense vegetation, root works, and veins of understanding a particular concept. In Emerson's words, "A man is a bundle of relations, a knot of roots, whose flower and fruitage is the world" (p. 254). Employing pluralism as a means of understanding reading, then, means using reading as a means of questioning codified ways of knowing and absolutes. It welcomes an exploratory process that extends the olive branch of knowing the world differently and of questioning long ago accepted notions of how things are and begs the question: how else can they be? The current section of this project focuses on these multiple ways of knowing and argues that Emersonian reading is also a pluralistic enterprise toward knowledge expansion, development, and furthering.

Kuhn (1962) is being very Emersonian and pragmatic when he states that scientific advances have occurred throughout history when people have learned to see and think differently. Science changes slowly over time as a result of those thinkers putting to use what Emerson (1983) calls the "daring imagination" (p. 642), and by realizing that scientific theories are open to reinscription. As Dewey (1929/1984) states, "There is no knowledge self-guaranteed to be infallible, since all knowledge is the product of special acts of inquiry" (p. 154), an idea that resonates with James' (1907/1997) articulation of the meaning of pragmatic thinking:

Any idea upon which we can ride, so to speak; any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experiences to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labor; is true for just so much, true in so far forth, true *instrumentally*. (p. 100, emphasis in original)

By announcing a belief in temporary truths and that manifold routes exist in the creation of knowing, James pays homage to Emerson (1983) who lamented what he perceived as America's blind devotion to linear, systematized information. He expresses contempt for 'so called science'

– what Kuhn (1962) calls ‘normal science’ – when Emerson (1983) readily professes, “I distrust the facts and the inferences” (p. 475), which speaks not merely to the problem of accepting published facts as accurate without challenge, but also to the problem that unchallenged facts spawn ways of thinking that are also suspect. In step with Emersonian pragmatism, distrust of conventional knowledge is the hallmark of democratic thinking, and reading as a means of inculcating democratic citizenship predicates itself on just such inquiry.

Questioning Scientific Authority

To be sure, Emerson’s (1983) disdain for positivism’s supreme reign as the final word on scientific issues during his lifetime found articulations throughout his essays, and he makes his stance abundantly evident when he writes about the hypnotizing effect scientific publications have on consumers of such materials. He calls the celebrated scientists of his day “theoretic kidnapper and slave-drivers” who hijack thinking and transform it into absolutes, dead ends, and impermeable enclosures (p. 475). Further, Emerson believes the apotheosis of science marks the death knell for creative inquiry, and he laments as much when he says, “I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions” (p. 262). Dewey (1929/1984) also finds fault with scientific worship when he expounds upon how positivism has come to trump philosophical inquiry as a certified, reliable mode of knowledge production in modern times. As Dewey puts it, “Thus ‘science,’ meaning physical knowledge, became a kind of sanctuary. A religious atmosphere, not to say an idolatrous one, was created. ‘Science’ was set apart; its findings were supposed to have a privileged relation to the real” (p. 176). In order to decenter science as infallible and immutable, Emerson (1983) places value not in absolute knowledge but rather in the undeniable possibilities of the experience of living. Emerson writes, “I had fancied that value of life lay in its inscrutable possibilities; in the fact that

I never know, in addressing myself to a new individual, what may befall me” (p. 475), and I see Emerson here as talking about being open to reading as a transaction with possibility and potentiality. Rather than “the word of a poet [as] authoritative and final” (p. 125), as in a scientist endorsing a particular formula, reading privileges the multiple and nuanced meanings that take place during reading transactions, and reading democratically means a reading that welcomes multiple interpretations and questions pre-given conclusions as a healthy enterprise for intellectual growth and development.

Even though Emerson (1983) concedes that certain subjects could only be learned through what he called laborious reading, he further clarifies that the purpose of laborious reading is not to pour over facts, to memorize minutia, and commit past ideas, discoveries, and events to memory. Instead, laborious reading swings toward his ideas of paying attention to the words on the page, to realizing those words were produced and published in a localized context, and that those words reflect the ideology of a particular school of thinking. When a reader labors over a book, the reader transacts in a way that leads to ownership of the material, and the reader may start to inquire into the nature of an author’s argument, a verification of information, and a revaluing of textual knowledge. As Emerson’s writes:

History and exact science he must learn by laborious reading. Colleges, in like manner, have their indispensable office, --to teach elements. But they can only serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and, by the concentrated fires, set the hearts of their youth on flame. (p. 59)

When reading as a mode of inquiry is supported and nurtured, reading vacillates back and forth between acts of consumption/production, and questioning knowledge awakens a creativity to

uncover assumptions and, in line with the ethos of pragmatism, to seek for oneself alternative forms of explanation and experimentation.

Perhaps Emerson's weightiest complaint on scientific texts and institutions would be science as a distancing subject matter, with all problems offered and prescribed methods to follow in order to arrive at pre-ordained conclusion, leaving no room for the productive component of transacting with texts to inspire thought and learning. Emerson (1983) writes, "Empirical science is apt to cloud the sight, and, by the very knowledge of functions and processes, to bereave the student of the manly contemplation of the whole" (p. 43). In other words, for scientific inquiry to be a meaningful endeavor, it should welcome the hypothesis of the student and encourage future thought, not foreclose discussion. Scientific advances arise when experimenters have been allowed to experiment and have taken initiative to explore, play with ideas, and leave space for surprise, inexactitude, and guesswork. For science to be productive, "Every surmise and vaticination of the mind is entitled to a certain respect, and we learn to prefer imperfect theories, and sentences, which contain glimpses of truth, to digested systems which have no one valuable suggestion" (p. 45). Reading democratically from the perspective of pluralism means actively searching for the holes and fissures in scientific discoveries and theories, and formerly dead fact becomes enlivened again when cast under the fire of a questioning, "daring imagination" (p. 642).

To alleviate positivism's despotic rule over thinking, Emerson (1983) states that science needs to be humanized because "All our science lacks a human side" (p. 1099). Science does not constitute an exteriority or something 'out there' apart from human existences – it is an integral component to human learning and understanding. Emerson views science, facts, and knowledge as embodied outgrowths of a desire to know more than one already knows, and he considers

living as a perpetual series of transactions with facts that produce knowledge just as knowledge produces different experiential possibilities. In Emerson's words,

What is our life but an endless flight of winged facts or events! In splendid variety these changes come, all putting questions to the human spirit. Those men who cannot answer by a superior wisdom these facts or questions of time, serve them. Facts encumber them, tyrannize over them, and make the men of routine the men of sense, in whom a literal obedience to facts has extinguished every spark of that light by which man is truly man. (p. 252)

In light of Emerson's ideas about positive science and its counterproductive effect on thinking and creativity, reading as democratic citizenship means resisting the power of factual knowledge to control thinking. Reading democratically also means reading pluralistically and that asking questions that contradict current schools of thought is a productive enterprise toward seeing knowledge as evolving, malleable, and convertible. As Emerson says, "Every ultimate fact is only the first of a new series" (p. 405), and reading transactions from a pragmatic, pluralistic argument acknowledge the fleeting nature of facts as prerequisite springboards for future learning, chances, and discoveries.

Reading as Expanding Meanings

Pragmatist C. S. Peirce (1955) claims that each gain in science has involved a process of mucking through experimentation, and even a false sense of understanding, in working through experiments that became foundational.

every work of science great enough to be well remembered for a few generations affords some exemplification of the defective state of art of reasoning of the time

when it was written; and each chief step in science has been a lesson in logic. (p.

6)

Here, Peirce not only acknowledges that scientific progress may have origins in chaotic thinking, he also notes that science itself has been a long, deliberate process of stumbling empowered by a desire to learn something new or how something may be understood differently. Peirce's belief in imperfect science speaks to what his colleague William James (1907/1997) contends about pragmatism, that "no theory is absolutely a transcript of reality, but that any one of them may from some point of view be useful. Their great use is to summarize old facts and to lead to new ones" (p. 99). Not only do Peirce's and James' ideas resonate in their discrediting of positivism, their arguments connect to Kuhn's (1962) idea that science compels people to revise convention and to see the world differently.

Antedating each of these thinkers, Emerson (1983) says that narrow perceptions of knowledge and science prove debilitating to progressive thinking, and he claims that creative thinkers realize that knowledge has multiple possibilities for interpretation and reinterpretation. To explore a rather extended excerpt from Emerson,

Theologians think it a pretty air-castle to talk of the spiritual meaning of a ship or a cloud, of a city or a contract, but they prefer to come again to the solid ground of historical evidence; and even the poets are contented with a civil and conformed manner of living, and to write poems from the fancy, at a safe distance from their own experience. But the highest minds of the world have never ceased to explore the double meaning, or, shall I say, the quadruple, or the centuple, or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact. (p. 447)

I argue that Emerson purposely uses the phrase ‘sensuous fact’ to further drive home the point that science is produced through human transactions and that knowledge, along with works of art and literature, can be interpreted in multiple ways and manipulated in order to serve numerous ideological purposes. Moreover, Emerson’s pluralistic approach to coming to know finds ready articulation in James’ (1907/1997) idea that pragmatism rejects rationalistic thinking and instead endorses a reasoned debate from a variety of perspectives in the production of knowledge and in Dewey & Bentley’s (1949/1989) pragmatic concept of transactional knowledge. Reading democratically, when viewed through a questioning of positivistic, authoritative science, is realizing that science has mediated how knowledge has been constructed in the past. As a means of combating positivistic ways of knowing, reading transactions mark an opportunity for disputing, contesting, and remaking past knowledge as a productive process of transforming it sensuously – of humanizing it – into something else other than what it is and toward what it can become.

Section III: Reading for an Always Reformed and Reforming Society

What is a man born for but to be a Reformer, a Remaker of what man has made; a renouncer of lies; a restorer of truth and good, imitating that great Nature which embosoms us all, and which sleeps no moment on an old past, but every hour repairs herself, yielding us every morning a new day, and with every pulsation a new life?

(Emerson, 1983, p. 146)

American sociologist, philosopher, and pragmatist C. Wright Mills (1959/2000) poignantly argues the idea that although the founding principals of America were democratic in nature, America has yet to achieve the status of a completely democratic nation. According to

Mills, “The social structure of the United States is not an altogether democratic one...I do not know of any society which is altogether democratic – that remains an ideal” (p. 188). However, Mills also acknowledges that even though the social sciences may not be capable of saving the world, he states that trying to save it remains a sincere ethos, believing that the social sciences to be possibly the only disciplines capable of reforming America. In more optimistic terms, Emerson (1983) writes, “We think our civilization near its meridian, but we are yet only at the cock crowing and the morning star,” a statement that signifies Emerson’s hopes that society, and America in particular, holds the potential to reach its founding democratic ideals. I argue that one component to reading democratically means reading not only with a social awareness but also with the understanding that attendant with social awareness is a responsibility to developing healthy individuals and a healthy society. How this social responsibility can play out in reading democratically and the role reform will play constitute the exploration ahead.

In an early publication, Dewey (1888/1997) firmly adheres to the idea that democracy cannot be conceived only in terms of how a government operates. He argues that this distancing perspective eschews and obfuscates the idea that a democracy must be lived, that it must be a way of life. Concomitant with this idea is Dewey’s (1920/1982) urging that a reconstruction in philosophy must take place in order for America to progress as a society, and he laments the current status quo of many Americans who choose to treat their participation in society as nothing more than a spectator’s sport. Moreover, he takes jabs at a country overrun by bloated capitalism and “unadorned consumerism” (p. 184) in developing his polemic advocating change. Emerson (1983) acknowledges such fallacies with American society in his writings. As he sees it, “In America, the geography is sublime, but the men are not: the inventions are excellent, but the inventors one is sometimes ashamed of” (p. 1084), suggesting that America’s people were

often disillusioned by avaricious pursuits, and were too content with performing the role of ineffectual bystanders than affecting change.

Emerson (1983) further outlines what an America could look like if healthy forms of protest and dissent became punishable offenses and such oppressive systems were allowed to proliferate if left unchecked:

The patriarchal form of government readily becomes despotic, as each person may see in his own family. Fathers wish to be the fathers of the minds of their children, and behold with impatience a new character and way of thinking presuming to show itself in their own son or daughter. This feeling, which all their love and pride in the powers of their children cannot subdue, becomes petulance and tyranny when the head of the clan, the emperor of an empire, deals with the same difference of opinion in his subjects. Difference of opinion is the one crime which kings never forgive. An empire is an immense egotism. (p. 219)

When paths of thinking persist on narrow, myopic routes, and newer generations are disabused from thinking on their own, then progress of ideas becomes stifled, and America would share more similarities with dictatorships than with the democratic ideals undergirding its creation. Reading as a form of democratic, pragmatic involvement predicates itself on such different thinking in order for change to happen. Furthermore, reading democratically acknowledges the faults immanent in America's current political and social climate that Mills (1959/2000) argues and recognizes new approaches to thinking as essential to reforming a system already becoming like regimes in which the empowered remain powerful and all others are silent and voiceless.

Emerson (1983) emphasizes the necessity that American government should be derailed from its primary focus on personal acquisition, wealth, and power, and shift its interests toward a society fueled by education, social responsibility, and equality. In Emerson's terms,

The revolutions that impend over society are not now from ambition and rapacity, from impatience of one or another form of government, but from new modes of thinking, which shall recompense society after a new order, which shall animate labor by love and science, which shall destroy the value of many kinds of property, and replace all property within the dominion of reason and equity. (p. 167)

In this excerpt, Emerson writes of the type of revolution required to revise America's hedonistic, individualistic approaches to thinking about government toward one that embraces a lived science and "sensual facts" (p. 447) as progress toward a healthier, more equitable society. Following Emerson, James' (1907/1997) argues pragmatically that Americans' craving for wealth and power is the antithesis of life in a democratic society because of its focus on personal gain at the expense of the rest of society. Such pursuits are distancing and alienating from society rather than involving and implicating. Moreover and furthering Emerson's ideas about a healthy society, Dewey (1920/1982) argues that individuals need to conceive of a shared happiness and that healthy living is achieved by acknowledging one's interrelatedness to society. As he puts it,

Healthy living is not something to be attained by itself apart from other ways of living. A man needs to be healthy *in* his life, not apart from it, and what does life mean except the aggregate of his pursuits and activities?" (p. 175, emphasis in original).

Newer modes of thinking, such as seeing the individual as intimately tethered to society, are crucial aspects to reading democratically and pragmatically. Reading democratically means acknowledging that readers are situated in a climate and are surrounded by a political landscape in which they have the responsibility to participate. Moreover the health of a society also affects the health of individuals, and reading democratically also means understanding the reciprocal roles of self and society in order to move forward with reform.

Emerson (1983) places the responsibility of reforming American society squarely on America by asking his readers to rethink the United States as a text, and an unstable one at that, as something worthy of improving. In Emerson's words, "Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres" (p. 465). As with much of Emerson's meticulous wordsmithing (Richardson, 1995), I have little doubt that Emerson specifically elects to use the word poem because of its etymological lineage to acts of making and remaking. Reading America as a text, on one level, may be as simple as embracing the belief that all individuals have equal access to resources to achieve their own version of the American dream. On another level, America can be read as Emerson chooses to read it, which is a text sadly committed to a capitalistic ideology that precludes many of its citizens from actively engaging in the democratic process. The second reading speaks to Emerson's idea of "this new yet unapproachable America" (p. 485) in its expression of the challenges America faces if it is to achieve its promise of a fair and just society for all its members. To read America – and Emerson – with the idea in mind that America falls short of the democratic ideals upon which it was founded, America needs a vast overhaul of bold thinking and leadership if the grandeur of this country's potential is to be realized. Reading America differently means realigning one's focus toward reforming society, and America as text must be read democratically to carve a space for

new ways of thinking that are beneficial and hold society responsible and accountable to the individuals who constitute it, and conversely, for individuals to live and act responsibly as members of a shared society.

Responsibilities of Democratic Reading

By persisting to read or to think, this region gives further sign of itself, as it were in flashes of light, in sudden discoveries of its profound beauty...

(Emerson, 1983, p. 484)

A key element in my argument for reading as a form of engaged democratic citizenship can be found in Emerson's (1983) statement that, "A man should know himself for a necessary actor" (p. 123). The idea of the necessary actor not only swings back to James' (1907/1997) and Dewey's (1888/1997) arguments that multiple perspectives have merit and must be articulated in a democratic society, readers must envision themselves as necessary actors in the process of reading transactions. Reading democratically necessarily recognizes thinking/acting as crucially invaluable acts that empower readers to contemplate their ideas about texts and to promote informed decision-making when participating in democratic processes. Reading democratically sees knowledge as produced and productive and factual texts or didactic manuals for how the world functions as worthy of questioning, contesting, and grounds for future experimentation. Reading to foster democratic involvement takes as one of its bases the idea that individuals are responsible for the societies in which they live and that they can reform systems they perceive as unjust, oppressive, and authoritarian. As necessary actors, readers need to understand that they are necessary, that their ideas matter, and that their concerted efforts to change America cannot begin without them. Emerson (1983) says, "we are not permitted to stand as spectators of the

pageant which the times exhibit: we are parties also, and have a responsibility which is not to be declined” (p. 157). In other words, reading democratically is necessary. It matters.

In conclusion, I return to Dewey’s (1920/1982) assertion that individuals cannot exist in society apart from others and that although individual differences are of quintessential importance in reshaping ideas, society cannot move forward without their active involvement. As Dewey claims, “Society...is many associations not a single organism. Society means association; coming together in joint intercourse and action for the better realization of any form of experience which is augmented and confirmed by being shared” (p. 197). Individuals must recognize the utmost necessity of coming together to partake in this America as it currently is in order to change it into an America that could be. Cavell (2003) furthers Dewey’s argument and contends that Emerson’s work serves not as a commentary on the democracy that then existed in the United States; rather, he speaks of the democracy to come, what America could be, that Emerson (1983) is hopeful when he writes about a “new yet unapproachable America” (p. 485). However, this democracy to come will never actually arrive; it is instead a project that will always be unfinished and unfinalizable, just as life in a living democracy, according to Dewey (1920/1982), is an incomplete experiment involving self/others as inexorably responsible for making and remaking society. Reading as engaged democratic citizenship and as pragmatism enterprise cannot occur without readers understanding the shared responsibility they have as participants in a flawed democracy and America as a project. For to read democratically is not only to understand the power of language as a vehicle for reform, it is also a means by which readers can envision themselves as necessary actors whose roles, voices, ideas, and dreams matter in the uphill struggle and process of remaking American society.

CHAPTER 6

READING FOR DEVELOPING AN ETHICAL STANCE TOWARD SELF AND OTHER

We want real relations of the mind and the heart; we want friendship; we want knowledge; we want virtue; a more inward existence to read the history of each other.

(Emerson, 1875, p. 74)

The Energy of Ethics

Emerson fiercely championed life as a living, pulsating experiment perpetually engaged and situated in relations. Beginning with Emerson's (1833) first publication, *Nature*, when he claims that "a ray of relations passes from every other being" (p. 21) and that man cannot be understood without other beings and other beings cannot be understood without man, Emerson argued that an interconnectedness of being and energy makes life a project of making sense of self, other, and society, with each playing indispensable, indistinguishable parts of the work of living. Swing forward to the late essay *Fate*, and Emerson writes, "relation and connection are not somewhere and sometimes, but everywhere and always (p. 958), which continues his proclamation of valuing the productive nature of relationships. By arguing that life is a continual process of being and becoming within relations, Emerson produces a reconceptualization of the subject as that which lives not diametrically opposite of an object – instead, he foregrounds the argument that subject and object work together in concert, as conjoined concepts better envisioned in a subject/object configuration because of their deeply embedded, networked, intertwined, and imbricated existence in relations. By reconceiving the subject/object

innerworkings in his writings, Emerson resists the humanist idea of a bifurcated subject and object relationship when he claims,

Urged by an opposite necessity, the mind returns from the one to that which is not one, but other or many; from cause to effect; and affirms the necessary existence of variety, the self-existence of both, as each is involved in the other. (p. 638)

Emerson disrupts Descartes' Enlightenment understanding of a differentiated subject and differentiated object by seeing subject/object as at play and in relation. In the case of ethics, Emerson's line of thinking represents not only a questioning of the Kantian division between the inherently, innately good or bad that proliferated during his lifetime (Richardson, 1995), it also foreshadows the poststructuralist idea that nothing exists in itself (cf. Derrida, 1994/2005). The world is far too messy for such strict delineations to hold sway with Emerson. In his writings, subject/object exists as entanglements and as ethical responsibilities toward creating, living in, and thriving in a world constituted by an endless series of overlapping relations. As Emerson (1983) writes, "There is no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us" (p. 405), which speaks to his claim that "the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one" (p. 386). This web of relations is vast and limitless, with each strand of the web as possibilities for newer relations to form and thrive, and I contend that ethics, from an Emersonian perspective, is concerned with how relations work together in maintaining healthy, productive selves/others in society.

The concept of ethics, in light of Emerson's ideas on self/other relations, can no longer be defined in terms of a self obligated to an other. It is instead the accumulating energies of a life's work toward improving relations, toward envisioning life differently. Therefore, self/other is nurtured in ethical relationships, and humanist beliefs about ethics as always directed toward

others become more complex and powerful when viewed as a complicit responsibility of subject/object. Literary critic Harpham (1990) brings the self back into connection with the other when he writes,

How to think of ethics? *Can* one think of ethics? As the locus of otherness, ethics seems to lack integrity “in itself,” and perhaps ought to be considered a matrix, a hub from which various discourses, concepts, terms, energies, fan out, and at which they meet, crossing out of themselves to encounter the other, all the others. Ethics is where thought itself experiences an obligation to form a relation with its other – not only other thoughts, but other-*than*-thoughts. Ethics is the *ought* in thought. (p. 404, emphasis in original)

According to this understanding, ethics ceases to be a protocol of obedience to otherness and an abnegation of the self. Instead, self/other is understood not only in perpetual dialogue with one another and as imbricated entities that branch out toward a hopeful philosophy of a future based on mutual obligation between and across selves/others. Moreover, self/other exists in a healthy, recursive relationship, and this relationship moves society forward in productive, generative, dialogic ways, and my understanding of nurturing an ethical stance from reading anchors heavily in the crossover concept of self/other as useful for cultivating not only, in Dewey’s (1920/1982) terms, a life worth living, but a society worth living in.

This chapter on Emersonian reading as a means of developing an ethical stance toward self and other seeks to explore three main themes. The first theme will explore the ethics of reading and writing as they relate to the creation of healthy selves; the next theme will look at how produced selves and others exist within intimate matrices of relations; the last theme will examine the concept of transcending limitation and treating life as a work of art.

Section I: Cultivating Selves

O my friends, there are resources in us on which we have not drawn.

(Emerson, 1983, p. 90)

A central component to Emersonian ethics is its emphasis on work¹. He understood work as something that one not only does, as an outward act to achieve a desired goal, but also as self-work, as that which is done in cultivating the self in and within relation to others. Emerson (1884) writes, “He is to know that in the last resort he is not here to work, but to be worked upon” (p. 272). For Emerson the nourishing of the self/other is, as he refers to it, a resource in forming healthy selves in society, and an untapped resource at that. He believes that progress of selves/others in society requires this self-work as a means of opening up new landscapes of thought and ideas. Moreover, Emerson (1870) articulates an imperative that the progress of civilization is only feasible through working on oneself, “[Progress] is learning the secret of cumulative power, of advancing on one’s self. It implies a facility of association, power to compare, the ceasing from fixed ideas” (p. 22). By advancing on one’s self, by doing this self-work, Emerson speaks to the responsibility one has to work on one’s self in its association with others. By performing this work on oneself, a person becomes not only available to the abundance of human knowledge of the past, a person become a questioner and a producer of it. Nurturing healthy selves puts one in a position to advance one’s life, to resist the shackles of fixed notions and concepts, and take part in life as a process and live progressively. In Dewey’s (1934/1987) estimate, life as process situates one in the flow of life’s energies in all its contingencies and relatedness.

¹ See chapter 5 for an analysis of pragmatism’s emphasis on work.

But what does this work look like, and what does life as a process look like? Michel Foucault's (1984/1986) writings speak to such forms of self-work in his ideas on the care of the self. Caring for one's self, Foucault notes, instantiates an ethical, philosophical practice that Socrates advocated in Greek society in that before one could tend to the needs of and care for others, that person must first focus on nurturing a healthy self. One practices a care of the self by understanding philosophy as a set of spiritual practices rather than a systematized prescription of the order of the cosmos. It means seeing the lived connections between selves/others, and living life as both experiment and process. It means seeing the self as work in progress and an artwork in progress. Foucault explains,

it was this theme of care of oneself, consecrated by Socrates, that later philosophy took up again and ultimately placed at the center of that "art of existence" which philosophy claimed to be. It was this theme, breaking out of its original setting and working loose from its first philosophical meanings, gradually acquired the dimensions and forms of a veritable "cultivation of the self." (p. 44)

An "art of existence" for the Greeks was a lived philosophy that precisely focused on taking care of oneself that also entailed treating one's life as a malleable, evolving work of art. To be sure, caring for oneself did not relinquish individuals from their obligations toward family, coworkers, and society. Instead, one was obligated to work on oneself in conjunction with their relations and as a part of an everyday, ethical practice.

The Greek concept of caring for oneself derives from the medical tradition with its emphasis on living a healthy life and nurturing healthy relations, which Foucault documents in his work. Preceding Foucault, Dewey (1920/1982) understood the necessity of a healthy existence as intimately connected to life and society. As Dewey claims,

Healthy living is not something to be attained by itself apart from other ways of living. A man needs to be healthy *in* his life, not apart from it, and what does life mean except the aggregate of his pursuits and activities (p. 175, emphasis in original)

Dewey's ideas of one being healthy in one's life as that life relates to others echoes Emerson's challenge of living life as a work and being worked upon within life's interconnected networks of relations, and one way to cultivate working and worked upon selves comes about and is produced through engagements with reading. To quote Emerson (1875), "Every book is good to read which sets the reader in a working mood. The deep book, no matter how remote the subject, helps us best" (pp. 239-240).

Reading as Nourishment

Richardson (2009), one of Emerson's late twentieth century biographers, notes that Emerson used books to the extent that they constituted an essential component to his everyday routine and served the same salubrious function as eating and drinking. "I do not feel as if my day had substance in it, if I have read nothing," Emerson wrote in a letter to a friend (p. 9), which referred to the necessary role that reading played in Emerson's life. Emerson carved out time in his daily ritual to pay attention to the nourishment that reading provided, and he felt his day impoverished when obligation kept him away this treasured, fulfilling activity. This devotion to reading as ethical sustaining works well with Foucault's (1984/1986) elaboration on the care of the self using letters written by Pliny the Elder, "reading and writing and finding time to take the exercise which keeps my mind fit," and "sharing my thoughts with no one but my own writings" (as cited in Foucault, p. 48). As with Emerson's epistle to a close friend, reading/writing kept Pliny the Elder fit and served as a means of keeping him limber and alert. In each case, reading

was an activity that not only provided a form of nourishment, it was an ethical practice because it pertained to working on a self in relation to others, to friends, to family, and to knowledge. Reading/writing viewed in this light is productive and produces a self within society. Moreover, Emerson (1983) would disagree with Pliny on writing for solely oneself when he says, “He that writes to himself writes to an eternal public” (p. 316), which furthers Emerson’s ideas on the connected nature of reading/writing, and reading/writing was to be cherished and relished in both Pliny’s and Emerson’s lives as welcome parts of their days that brought a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment.

As further extension of reading as an ethical and vitalizing endeavor, Foucault (1994/1997) looked at medical metaphors – from whence he claims Greek discourse on care of the self originated (1984/1986) – in addressing the productive uses of a nourishing reading/writing regime. In Foucault’s (1994/1997) words,

The role of writing is to constitute, along with all that reading has constituted, a ‘body’. And this body should be understood not as a body of doctrine but rather— following an often-evoked metaphor of digestion—as the very body of the one who, by transcribing his readings, has appropriated them and made their truth his own: writing transforms the thing seen or heard ‘into tissue and blood’. It becomes a principle of rational action in the writer himself. Yet conversely, the writer constitutes his own identity through this recollection of things said. (p. 215)

Reading/writing constituted a practice that was theorized into the very sinewy, svelte architecture of the body, but as Foucault clarifies, not a body of philosophy, or a mindset, or a form of conventional thinking; reading/writing formed a process of ingestion and consumption in the same way the body intakes and processes food. It coursed through the veins and performed the

active role of producing and reproducing selves. In the essay *Books*, Emerson (1870) theorizes not only how books invigorate his existence, but how they stimulate the mind to thoughts previously inexpressible and unknown. Emerson writes, “I find certain books vital and spermatic, not leaving the reader what he was: he shuts the book a richer man” (p. 159), which antedates Foucault’s (1994/1997) emphasis on the life-giving nature of reading/writings acts and enlivens the reader/writer with a richness of thought and the offering of different perspectives from which to envision one’s world. As referenced in chapter 3, selves and texts are transformed through reading transactions (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995), and in like manner, selves become transformed when they feast upon language as edible elements that satisfy and satiate the palette because words do work in the world just as food does work to transform bodies into healthy selves/others.

Reading as Ameliorative

Attendant with Emerson’s ethical work on reading for nourishing selves are his ideas on the regenerative nature of thinking/reading. Emerson (1870) viewed reading as a recuperative act in that the transactions one has with texts can lead one out of a debilitating, languishing sickness and toward renewed perspectives on static, stalemated patterns of thinking. In the following excerpt, Emerson begins by addressing the inadequacy of the imagination in itself to repair the damage of conventional methods of thinking and introduces the role reading plays in nursing selves back to health:

But what is the imagination? Only an arm or weapon of the interior energy; only the precursor of the reason. And books that treat the old pedantries of the world, our times, places, professions, customs, opinions, histories, with a certain freedom, and distribute things, not after the usages of America and Europe but

after the laws of right reason, and with as daring a freedom as we use in dreams, put us on our feet again, enable us to form an original judgment of our duties, and suggest new thoughts for tomorrow. (pp. 171-172)

For Emerson, reading has the potential to rejuvenate a dulled and deadened approach to thinking through the transaction of imagination and text, and ‘the laws of right reason’ speaks to his pragmatic beliefs that reasoned debate held a more productive and healthier approach to living than ascribing to any didactic, deadened mode of knowing the world in a singular, programmatic way. The imagination requires transacting with books in order to break the manacles of soporific customs, rituals, and habits to allow for revitalized outlooks on thinking/doing. In the above excerpt, Emerson states that reading is one component to a convalescent transformation that empowers readers out of the sickroom of unquestioned thought and on the road, or back on one’s feet in Emerson’s words, toward reclaiming a healthy status with and in relation to the self. But what does it mean to be healthy? Being healthy, from an Emersonian perspective, is a verb; it is about movement, flow, change, process, incompleteness, uncertainty, openness, multiplicity, and being able to let go. In sum, being healthy is the process of living a life in relation to selves/others that works toward staving off stagnation, resignation, ignorance, singularity of thought, and ultimately death.

Reading also has the potential to reach readers in the deepest conditions of grief when mourning the loss of life. As Richardson (1995) documents, Emerson composed his second series of essays in the wake of the death of his son, Waldo, and the first essay in that book of essays, *The Poet*, speaks directly to the power of reading as an invaluable component to the process of moving through the grief of loss. As a reminder, Emerson was no stranger to grief, given the loss of his first wife, Ellen, and later his brother, Edward, and his faith in life and living

was certainly hard earned. Emerson (1983) writes, “Genius is the activity which repairs the decay of things” (p. 457), and he comes closest to defining the word genius when he says, “The term ‘genius,’ when used with emphasis, implies imagination; use of symbols, figurative speech. (1875, p. 20). Given this understanding of genius, I interpret it as a process involving the actively engaged imagination that moves selves toward a place in which old thoughts are interrogated, broken dreams can be retrieved and realized, and a bruised heart can begin the arduous, painful journey toward reconciliation with its self.

Considering the insurmountable challenge of healing after the loss of a child, Emerson worked through his grief by engaging the genius to resuscitate himself from a stupor of despair, and he is able to move beyond a debilitating grief, as he offers in the essay *Experience*, “By persisting to read or to think, this region [of life] gives further sign of itself, as if it were in flashes of light, in sudden discoveries of its profound beauty and repose...” (p. 484). Amidst the turmoil of loss, Emerson advocates a turning toward reading as a palliative to assist him in the process of recovery, which finds reiteration in Foucault’s (1984/1986, 2001/2005) work on the care of the self. Reading/thinking is an intimately inseparable practice that not only serves as maintenance of healthy selves by providing nourishment to tired, enervated bodies, it also works in conjunction in reattaining healthy selves from a position of ailment, grief, and mourning caused by the death of a loved one. As Harpham (1990) refers to it, ethics is the ought in thought, and the ought in Emerson’s work is situated squarely in the living, even in its acceptance of and learning to face death.

Section II: Web of Relations

A man is a bundle of relations, a knot of roots, whose flower and fruitage is the world.

(Emerson, 1983, p. 254)

Emerson (1870) believed in the necessity of maintaining forms of social responsibility. He contended that the growth of a healthy society cannot derive from singular strengths and capabilities. Instead, the source of power in a society springs forth from the nurturing of relationships and from realizing that the source of progress comes from attending to the shared resources that exist in our selves and others. As Emerson writes, “We are not strong by our power to penetrate, but by our relatedness. The world is enlarged for us, not by new objects, but by finding more affinities and potencies in those we have” (p. 241). Here, Emerson claims that fixation on the materiality of objects encumbers human progress and dilutes the human connection essential for the nurturing of a healthy culture. He advocates instead that true empowerment of a civilization comes from an obligation to selves/others in a vital symbiotic relationship that sustains and promotes growth, knowledge, and progress.

Following Emerson, Foucault’s (1994/1997) elaboration on care of the self should not be conceived of as a selfish practice or a narcissistic endeavor. Care of the self, while requiring that one take care of one’s self through healthy practices, also has a component that emphasizes the necessity of extending self-care into the nurturing of relationships with others. Foucault illustrates in his work that care of the self becomes an ethical practice when taking into account the conjunction of self with the other or an other:

What makes it ethical for the Greeks is not that it is care for others. The care of the self is ethical in itself; but it implies complex relationships with others insofar

as this ethos of freedom is also a way of caring for others. This is why it is important for a free man who conducts himself as he should to be able to govern his wife, his children, his household; it is also the art of governing. *Ethos* also implies a relationship with others, insofar as the care of the self enables one to occupy a rightful position in the city, the community, or interpersonal relationships, whether as a magistrate or a friend. (p. 287, emphasis in original)

Because care of the self constituted a social code in Greek culture, it specified that one continue to work on not only on one's relationship with one's self but on how one worked on and in relationships with others. This social obligation unravels to include, as Foucault points out, how one nurtures familial bonds, friendships, and collegial and neighborly ties. More importantly, care of the self cannot exist as a social order or mode of living apart from the challenge of sustaining of healthy selves/others. Hence, care of the self revolves around the branches of relationships in one's life and tending to the needs of others while remaining responsive to one's own health, which further gels with Emerson's claim that humans exist, and must work to exist, as a bundle of relations.

Reading as Relatedness

Emerson (1875) speaks directly about his readers in the essay *Social Aims*. In it, Emerson explores the power of conversation as a means of forging relationships, producing and sharing knowledge, and learning as a shared responsibility. When Emerson writes, "I am sure that each one of my readers has a parallel experience" (p. 84), I interpret Emerson as referring to reading as a social practice, or a practice that has become socialized, ritualized mode and habit of thinking, in which reading experiences will arguably differ contingent upon the transactions of each reader with each text. Yet, he views these experiences as enwrapped in the social fabric of a

shared consciousness and mode of living. In other words, the experience of reading isn't a purely subjective event; how one reads, transacts with texts, makes sense of works of literature are immanently undergirded by one's social, cultural, and history surroundings. The reading of a novel, by way of example, has the potential to affect how one comports oneself around others, the level of empathy one can share with another, and the epiphanic moments that bring about more nuanced understandings of social situations are ethical hallmarks of the relatedness of reading. In Emerson's (1983) estimate, the empowered student of reading is composed of a developed sense of self/other, and "His excellence is facility of adaptation and of transition through many related points, to wide contrasts and extremes" (p. 1019).

Emerson (1983) also forewarns of an overly self-indulgent approach to reading. As he phrases it, "The man runs round a ring formed by his talent, falls into admiration of it, and loses relation to the world" (p. 1016), which I contend works along side Foucault's (1984/1986) concept of care of the self. Reading with an ethic stance emphasizes work on self/other as concomitant, mutual processes. The self must be worked upon but not at the expense of the other, and Emerson's (1870) essay *Society and Solitude* plays with just that dynamic of self/other without privileging either. Readers need to have a sense of self but must also realize how that self connects to the wider world of other selves, texts, and worlds. In a commentary on education, Emerson (1983) writes, "Let the youth study the uses of solitude and of society. Let him use both, not serve either" (p. 105) to which he later says, "Solitude is impracticable, and society fatal" (1870, p. 18). In each of these claims, Emerson writes of the interrelatedness and complexities of solitude/society that is necessary to live an ethical reading life that pays attention to self/other. Emerson warns of an overindulgence into the ego at the expense of social relations, and at the same time he sees society as fatal when selves are elided. Productive learning for

students occurs in the matrices of solitude/society relations, when reading/thinking is about paying attention to relations made possible from reading engagements and when those relations of selves/others are supported, nurtured, and worked on through dialogue and openness, a willingness for change and to be changed in return. Reading places one in a position to tend to such relationships by understanding the relational bonds produced through ethical engagements with reading.

Connectedness through Analogy

Another expansion of the web of relations emerges when considering Emerson's (1983) emphasis on the value of analogy. Emerson goes so far as to refer to people as active analogists when he states, "man is an analogist, and studies the relation in all objects" (p. 21). Emerson stakes this claim specifically in reference to the power of metaphor in language and the unique role that symbols play as in flux representations of how one makes sense of the world. Moreover, Emerson revisits the concept of analogy in various essays to stress the idea that most ethical human endeavors consist in drawing connections as a means of understanding selves/others differently. He even situates the study of science – a discipline that he critiqued as gridlocked by its archaic approaches to knowledge construction – as being primarily dominated by making connections to other concepts in order to produce knowledge. Emerson puts it this way, "The chemist finds proportions and intelligible method throughout matter; and science is nothing but the finding of analogy, identity, in the most remote parts" (p. 55). In this claim, he argues that the role of science lies not in necessarily finding new knowledge. Rather, knowledge becomes produced through the use of analogy. When a concept is framed in a particular light via analogy, it illuminates not only one's understanding of the concept under study, it changes the language associated with it, which works toward generating new labels and identifiers for the concept. I

contend here that the search for analogies when making meaning from texts, and the desire to make meaning in self/other relations, are exemplars of the interconnectedness of a shared language and demonstrate how self/other is constantly formed and reformed through locating newer associations, perspectives, and compassions when reading.

The connective tissue of analogy also situates comfortably in the reading of literature, as Emerson (1875) notes in the essay *Quotation and Originality*. Emerson not only pontificates quotation's embeddedness in all literature and the futility of having an original thought, he reroutes the argument to claim that originality is a myth and that power derives not from having original thoughts, but from using the thoughts of others in how selves/others makes sense of the world. Emerson writes, "Our debt to tradition through reading and conversation is so massive...one would say that there is no pure originality. All minds quote. By necessity, by proclivity, and by delight, we all quote" (p. 144). In other words, language constitutes a perpetual reciprocity of ideas, which further instantiates the concept that reading promotes a meta-awareness of selves/others and highlights language as the principle backdrop for sustaining relationships with self/other. When Emerson calls quotation the "inevitable fruit of our social nature" (p. 153), he recognizes the human reliance upon analogy in deepening and supporting life's intertwined web of relatedness. To further stretch this interconnected web, reading texts is not simply the written word. The analogy of reading extends to how one reads faces, people, and the world, and reading conceptualized as an ethical practice means that the self has as a duty to respond ethically to these social texts of the other in order to nurture a healthy, sympathetic, and progressive society.

Section III: Life as Art

True art is never fixed, but always flowing...A great man is a new statue in every attitude and action. A beautiful woman is a picture which drives all beholders nobly mad. Life may be lyric or epic, as well as a poem or a romance.

(Emerson, 1983, p. 438)

Emerson (1983) acknowledges the challenge of redefining and recreating one's life in the essay *Fate*. He articulates how Western culture has been characterized by an obedience to ways of living that fail to question the logic of dualistic, humanist thinking that prevents the self from being truly free. Emerson asks, "How shall I live? We are incompetent to solve the times. Our geometry cannot span the huge orbits of the prevailing ideas, behold their return, and reconcile their opposition. We can only obey our own polarity" (p. 943). Here, Emerson asks a key ethical question: How shall I live? Within the confines of Enlightenment, humanist thinking, of thinking of life merely in terms of polarity and opposition, he seeks a freedom of thought and a freedom for thought in order to actualize a life worth living. As Emerson (1884) claims about humanity, "He is to know that in the last resort he is not here to work, but to be worked upon," and that work must result in the production of selves/others not bound by limitation and fear. Instead, life must be unbounded with an openness to living life as an experiment and as a recreated and recreatable freer self/other. In sum, to live life as a work of art. This concept nestles well with Dewey's (1934/1987) critique of the museum concept of art in which art and life exist separately. He refers to a poem as an organization of energy, as that which teems with life, as that which is to be experienced, transacted with, and made alive, hence blurring the humanist delineation between life/art

Foucault (1984/1986), following Emerson and Dewey, expounds upon his analysis of the Greek social practice of care of the self by claiming that the self is never given: the self is produced within a social network and context, and because of the produced nature of the self, life should be lived as a work of art. In Foucault's estimate, the care of one's self means treating life as a project and an experiment, that as a continual work in progress one must always see one's self as malleable, pliable, and revisable. Foucault (1994/1997) interrogates the long extant humanist binary between life and art when he writes,

What strikes me is the fact that, in our society, art has become something that is related only to objects and not to individuals or to life. That art is something which is specialized or done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object but not our life? (p. 261)

When life is envisioned as a work of art, the aim of caring for one's self becomes self-creation and self-production. Life becomes an opportunity and an adventure; a means of defying that which obstructs and obfuscates and a process of transcending self-imposed limits to become something grander, something spectacular. Care of the self, then, is a jolting out of one's comfortable orbit, or as Foucault (2001/2005) puts it "The care of the self is a sort of thorn which must be stuck in men's flesh, driven into their existence, and which is a principle of restlessness and movement, of continuous concern throughout life" (p. 8) in order to begin the process of living a life as a construction of beauty and a work of art.

In order to live a life as a work of art, one must also redirect perspectives that encumber and paralyze a healthy existence, namely the socially ingrained concept of fate as an inescapable future destiny. Emerson (1983) allocates a great deal of energy in attempting to thwart how fate

is perceived and understood by placing it under reinscription. Emerson writes, “The element running through entire nature, which we popularly call Fate, is known to us as limitation. Whatever limits us, we call Fate” (p. 952). If the popular notion of fate was that of an unavoidable collision with a future occurrence, Emerson dismisses such preordained thoughts as not only counterproductive to one’s self-health, but as an ethos that proved septic to society and a leach on the lifeblood of progress. Emerson details how one can debunk the narrative of fate as a foreclosed future by redefining fate as limitation and that which must be overthrown to live a freer life. “Part of our fate is the freedom of man” and “So far as a man thinks he is free” (p. 953), Emerson espouses, at once providing a counternarrative to nineteenth century’s humanist understanding of a fatalist fate and propagating the idea that thinking differently, thinking in terms of self-overcoming, are essential constitutive components to reconstructing a life worth living and a life seen as a modifiable, incredible experiment and as a work of art. For Emerson claims, "Tis the best use of Fate to teach a fatal courage" (p. 954). In other words, fate as repurposed by Emerson is not what we cannot do; fate is about what we can do. Fate is anathema to limitation. It is opportunity and change, freedom and openness; fate is empowerment.

Remembering Harpham’s (1990) work on ethics, an ethical approach to life consists of embracing a thirst for what is utterly unthinkable by claiming that, “Ethics is the *ought* in thought” (p. 404, emphasis in original). Emerson (1983) grapples with the idea of the unattainable in thinking when he writes, “The inaccessibleness of every thought but that we are in, is wonderful. What if you come near to it, --you are as remote, when you are nearest, as when you are farthest” (p. 463). Emerson challenges his readers to engage in a discourse of understanding the power of the ought, of the unfathomable what could be, in order to unmoor the self from defeatist, fatalist narratives and to dream about a life lived unconventionally. Life lived

with this mindset directs self/other on a course to composing itself as a work of art, and one in which the “moment of a man’s life is a fact so stupendous as to take the luster out of all fiction” (Emerson, 1884, p. 17).

In articulating a creation of the self as a work of art, Emerson (1983) offers a potent symbol that speaks to reading as a productive and artistic process: that of the inkwell. Because Emerson (1884) attempted to live his life according to the challenge his Aunt Mary Moody issued, that of always doing what one is afraid to do, he writes of the creative process of thinking fearlessly when he defiantly states, “I dip my pen in the blackest of ink, because I am not afraid of falling into my inkpot” (Emerson, 1983, p. 1055). The complexity of Emerson’s claim cannot be underscored sufficiently. With ink as a symbol for creativity, and by extension the lifeblood of the artistic endeavor of reading/writing, and the blackness of the ink itself as fear of the unknown or the frightening possibility of uncovering what was once thought buried and forever eviscerated from the subconscious, Emerson arrives at the challenge of reading/writing/thinking as a means of developing an ethical stance toward self/other. One must possess the courage to read and think, the strength to engage with others as fellow readers, thinkers, and doers, and the power to see the inkpot as merely an invitation to go beyond one’s self, to create one’s self as a creation and as a work of art.

This notion of challenging the self, of reclaiming the creative fire generated through and across selves/others, is transcendental indeed, is transcendentalism: a lived philosophy of courage, passion, resistance, empowerment, strength, and work. It is self-overcoming, transcending the humanist challenge of a bifurcated cosmos, and anticipates the empowering work of Nietzsche (1882/1974) whose vision of the over-man challenges readers to transcend their own limits and see fate as inroads to overcoming. To be sure, standing at the precipice of

creativity requires strength and owning the unknown, and I take comfort in Nietzsche's (1883/1995) commentary on courage: "Courage also slays dizziness at the edge of abysses: and where does man not stand at the edge of abysses? Is not seeing always – seeing abysses?" (p. 157).

If Nietzschean abysses permeate the landscape of life, then one must also live dangerously in a Nietzschean sense; that is, to take risks and meet head on the challenges encountered with each inkwell in one's path. Reading is an enlivening process with brilliant creative potential. If one must be creative to read well, as Emerson (1983) suggests, which I contend means that creativity is immanently bound up in reading transactions that produce powerful experiences, reading creatively finds simpatico energy in living life creatively as a work of art. The challenge of reading is to go beyond one's self, to let go, to test the waters of understanding, and to transcend one's limitations to afford a newer, nuanced sense of the unknown and the unknowable. The work of art, the work of reading, and the work of life meet at the epicenter of imagining differently and taking an Emersonian plunge into the inkwell of existence. If, as Emerson (1983) boldly states, "Passions, resistance, dangers, are educators" (p. 1084), reading in order to nurture an ethical stance toward self/other marks a productive excursion into cultivating life as a work of art, living as a provisional, perpetual learning experience, and dreaming as a prospective, unfinished, and unfinalizable event.

Conducting One's Life

[Thoreau] declined to give up his large ambition of knowledge and action for any narrow craft or profession, aiming at a much more comprehensive calling, the art of living well.

(Emerson, 1884, pp. 422-423)

Dewey (1920/1982) duly notes that the Greek theory of ethics derived from the concept that one should conduct one's life based on reason rather than custom, and upon further inspection of Greek ethical theory, Foucault (1984/1986, 2001/2005) elaborately argues the notion that how one conducts one's life did not, and should not, occur as deference toward authority. Conducting one's life means not only self-conduct and self-nurturing, it refers to transactions of selves/others in relation. Care of the self works between and across selves/others in that one's focus on self-health also connects to how one conducts one's self in relation to others. In Emerson's (1983) words,

The first wealth is health. Sickness is poor-spirited, and cannot serve any one: it must husband its resources to live. But health or fullness answers its own ends, and has to spare, runs over, and inundates the neighborhoods and creeks of other men's necessities. (p. 972)

As Emerson writes, taking care of selves/others is an insoluble, reciprocal process of living an ethical life that ultimately empowers one to construct a life worth living. He claims that healthiness or fullness permeates social relations and that one cannot occur without the other if one has an eye toward living an ethical life that pays attention to developing healthy selves/others.

As Foucault's (1984/1986) reminds us, caring for the self is the belief that selves/others are produced rather than given and that life should be conceived of as a work of art, an idea that resonates with Emerson (1870) in the essay *Art* when he says, "The conscious utterance of thought, by speech or action, to any end, is Art" (p. 38). Emerson acknowledges that art is lived through conversation/deed and constitutive of works of art. Given this understanding of art,

reading is an art and the reader an artist, forging ahead in a boundless meaning making process. Through reading, conversations are possible and actions become opportunities for learning, developing, and partaking in an economy of life that values the power of conducting selves/others as continual works in progress intimately caught up in fantastic and fascinating, enlivened and enlivening, powerful and empowering, webs of relations.

This chapter marks the conclusion of a trilogy of chapters that explore my reading of Emerson's work and how it speaks to different perspectives on reading. Chapter 4, reading as aesthetic experience, addressed the quintessential value of the eventfulness of reading transactions. The next chapter, reading as engaged democratic citizenship, focused on reading/thinking as actions and as incitement to involving oneself in democratic practices. And the current chapter, reading for developing an ethical stance toward self and other, explored how caring for one's self and others are crucial components to envisioning life as a work of art. With each of these three complementary reading practices in mind, the following and final chapter of this project will look at implications for how these ideas about reading might offer reimagined approaches to pedagogical practices in the teaching of literature.

CHAPTER 7

IMPLICATIONS OF EMERSONIAN READING EXPERIENCES FOR EDUCATION

In the sketches which I have to offer I shall not be surprised if my readers should fancy that I am giving them, under a gayer tide, a chapter on Education.

(Emerson, 1884, p. 36)

Emerson on Education

Emerson had sharp criticisms of the state of education during his lifetime. He deplored the tendency of formal schooling to focus on the perfunctory drilling of facts and figures and how it sapped inspiration and curiosity from the learning process. In 1841, the year his first full book of essays was published, Emerson (1983) writes in the essay *Intellect*,

Every man, in the degree in which he has wit and culture, finds his curiosity inflamed concerning the modes of living and thinking of other men, and especially of those classes whose minds have not been subdued by the drill of school education. (p. 420)

Even in this early work, Emerson stresses his belief in the power of knowledge as constructed in and through the reciprocity of relationships between and across selves/others and how meaningful learning experiences are quelled within the institution of school education. In the posthumously published book of essays *Lectures and Biographical Sketches*, Emerson (1884) reiterates not only his disdain for the system of public education but how conversations of educational reforms have little more than a soporific effect on stakeholders. Emerson claims,

It is ominous, a presumption of crime, that this word Education has so cold, so hopeless a sound. A treatise on education, a convention for education, a lecture, a system, affects us with slight paralysis and a certain yawning of the jaws. (p. 133)

This passage comes from the aptly entitled work, *Education*, an essay in which Emerson addresses how mechanical, routinized approaches to teaching serve not to educate but rather to anesthetize and stunt learning. Schools, in Emerson's estimate, did more harm than good in preparing students to think for themselves, and he celebrated those who harnessed inspiration and creativity in spite of education's deadening effect on the intellect, thinking, and ingenuity. As Emerson (1983) writes, "it was not that we were born for" (p. 205).

Aside from Emerson's (1983) assaults on the system of education, he still had hope for what schools could look like when he proclaims, "Let us make our education brave and preventative" (p. 1020). In spite of how education curtailed learning and stifled creativity, he envisioned an educational system that was brave, one in which teachers and students both took risks in the classroom, and one that prevented and resisted traditional methods of skilling and drilling to pave the way for an educational system founded upon openness of thought, critical thinking, and pluralistic approaches to teaching and learning. In the preceding chapters, I examined three approaches for what Emersonian reading experiences can look like. In this chapter, I explore what those approaches might look like from a pedagogical perspective in the teaching of literature. The first section summarizes those three approaches to reading experiences from an Emersonian perspective; the second looks at educational implications for these approaches; and the last one looks at an Emersonian reading experience followed by a coda that continues the teaching scenario that opened chapter one as a means of developing concluding thoughts on this experiment of revisioning Emerson as a theorist of reading.

Section I: Emersonian Reading Experiences

I confide that my reader knows these delicious secrets...

(Emerson, 1875, p. 271)

In chapter 4, I argue that Emerson (1870, 1875, 1884, 1983) troubles Kantian notions of aesthetics in which art and life are distinct, separate entities. Instead of praising artwork, Emerson (1983) claims, “Yet when we have said all our fine things about the arts, we must end with a frank confession, that the arts, as we know them, are but initial” (p. 437). In other words, there is no final analysis of art, or reading for that matter. The experiencing of art and of reading constitutes what Gadamer (1960/1975) refers to as unfinished events. They continue at all hours of the day, which echoes Emerson’s (1983) claim that, “A strange process too, this, by which experience is converted into thought, as a mulberry leaf is converted into satin. The manufacture goes forward at all hours” (p. 60). Each reading experience – or transaction to make use of Rosenblatt’s (1938/1995) term – is different with each new reading, and the meaning making process of reading transactions pays attention to those experiences, to the potential juggernaut of responses that rush through readers imaginations, and to the past experiences and current exigencies that influence how sense can be made from reading.

I used chapter 5 as a space to address the Emersonian idea that reading can be used as a way of encouraging engaged democratic citizenship, that reading is a form of doing, and I employ Dewey’s (1888/1997) concept of democracy as a lived experience in order to describe democratic reading experiences. Reading democratically means welcoming a plurality of ways of knowing and interpreting experiences from reading. Emerson (1983) writes of multiple modes of knowing in his essay *The Poet*: “But the highest minds of the world have never ceased to explore the double meaning, or, shall I say, the quadruple, or the centuple, or much more manifold

meaning, of every sensuous fact” (p. 447), and Emerson acknowledges the unending task of seeing sensual facts as up for reinscription in a democratic society. He sees the greatest work of a democracy as not only a living work in progress, but as a project worthy of the undertaking. To that end, Emersonian pragmatism marks the fusing together of thinking/acting into a central component of reading democratically. For Emerson (1875), the art of thinking, reading, and writing “is not to be distinguished from action. It is the electricity of action. It is action” (p. 94). This action of reading is what spurs Emerson (1983) onward when he hopefully writes about this “new yet unapproachable America” (p. 485), an America always on the horizon, always unfinalized and unfinalizable, and always requiring the work of thinking/acting and reading/writing as means of making progress toward a better, healthier society.

Regarding healthier living, I contend in chapter 6 that reading can nurture an ethical stance toward self and other. For Emerson, everything exists in relations, and Emersonian ethics is based upon how life and living is affected by the relationships between selves/others in society. Emerson (1870) writes, “You cannot detach an atom from its holdings, or strip off from it the electricity, gravitation, chemic affinity, or the relation to light and heat, and leave the atom bare. No, it brings with it its universal ties (p. 139), which connects on an ethical level when Emerson (1983) also claims that relations are “everywhere and always” (p. 957). Emersonian reading experiences speak to the nurturing of healthy relations because reading can be used to therapeutic, recuperative, and convalescent means. Moreover, Emersonian reading experiences mark a challenge for reading the word and world differently and transcending limitations. In light of Emersonian ethics, fate is not debilitating, delimiting, or detouring; fate is living a healthy life, is what one is capable of doing, and realizing that reading is a challenge to go beyond oneself in making sense of an interrelated, interconnected world of readers, selves,

others, and society. Emerson writes, “Fate is unpenetrated causes” (p. 958), in which he dismisses a life lived in the darkness of accepted causality. Healthy living challenges causality itself in order to go beyond limitations, and reading for developing an ethical stance toward self and other means seeing and reseeing life as web of relations, understanding that selves/others live in complex relations, and that reading is a productive event, and one that takes up Emerson’s (1983) challenge: “why not realize your world?” (p. 492).

Section II: Educational Implications

I advise teachers to cherish mother-wit. I assume that you will keep the grammar, reading, writing and arithmetic in order; 't is easy and of course you will. But smuggle in a little contraband wit, fancy, imagination, thought. If you have a taste which you have suppressed because it is not shared by those about you, tell them that.

(Emerson, 1884, p. 154)

Transitions and Relations

Emerson recognized the dulling effect education can have on students, and as in the quotation above, he saw teachers as empowering forces for rerouting education onto a different, less traveled path. He acknowledges the powerful prevalence of the teaching of discrete facts through the avenues of reading, writing, and arithmetic. However, he also advises teachers to smuggle in contraband thought, to be subversive in their pedagogies, to allow for creativity and daring to flourish in the classroom. If literature courses are treated as experiential spaces in which students’ and teachers’ transactions with texts are validated, reading isn’t seen as an outcome-based, linear activity in which one certified response to an inquiry trumps all other responses to a text. Instead, reading as approached from an Emersonian perspective, is “the

experience of poetic creativeness, which is not found in staying at home, nor yet in traveling, but in transitions from one to the other, which must therefore be adroitly managed to present as much transitional surface as possible” (Emerson, 1983, p. 641). When reading is not used to uncover facts, but to see that those facts exist in relation, just as readers exist in relations with and across selves/others, the primary reason for reading becomes the sense making process and social experiences it occasions. It becomes a way of playing with the experience of reading and seeing it as always in transition, that reading is always skating on the surface of transitions and that meaning is always becoming.

Emerson (1983) acknowledges the crucial element of playing with learning when he writes that, “The plays of children are nonsense, but very educative nonsense” (p. 477). Playing, according to Gadamer (1960/1975), always has an end goal in mind, as the play is directed toward a desired outcome. What then might it look like if students were encouraged and taught to play with reading and to see that reading isn’t only about decoding the words on a page or on a computer screen? Playing with reading means enjoying a looseness in reading transactions and being unrestricted by sanctioned interpretations of texts. It means allowing the play of one’s own thoughts and the thoughts of others a role in how sense is made from texts. Just as Emerson (1983) played with Michel Montaigne’s essays when he admits to seeing his own experiences written in the pages of those essays, when students are invited to play with reading, they are invited into a process of seeing relations with and across texts, selves, and others, to see that reading is about transitions throughout the meaning making process, and that reading is an exploratory, productive space for creatively thinking and rethinking connections, relations, and experiences.

Thinking and Questioning

Because Emerson (1883) believed in questioning as a healthy, productive endeavor, he derided an obedience to uninterrogated knowledge. As Emerson writes, “There is on every question, an appeal from the assertion of the parties, to the proof of what is asserted. They are impious in their skepticism of a theory, but kiss the dust before a fact” (p. 810). Factual worship runs counter to an Emersonian reading experience in that he believed in a healthy democratic society, the art of questioning and polyvocal perspectives were paramount, necessary practices to keep ideas and knowledge in flux. Emerson (1884) especially values students’ abilities to transact and question knowledge in a democratic reading experiences and even admonishes teachers and educators who fail to understand that students have the capability of reading and questioning facts that may be assumed as absolutes. Emerson claims:

They know truth from counterfeit as quick as the chemist does. They detect weakness in your eye and behavior a week before you open your mouth, and have given you the benefit of their opinion quick as a wink. They make no mistakes, have no pedantry, but entire belief on experience. (p. 138)

Although Emerson’s language borders on the hyperbolic, he argues that students need opportunities to question – along with teachers – cherished, credentialed information found in texts and reading is always an active process of an imagination at work, which is a key component to reading democratically. It means seeing life, literature, and selves, as works in progress and that pluralism of ideas and thinking is what makes living a challenge and a project.

Based on Emerson’s ideas on reading experiences, what does questioning look like in democratic readings. In my reading of Emersonian pragmatism, reading democratically is a questioning of the assumptions of authors and experts and looking for alternative, multiple ways

for reading texts. Emerson (1983) writes, “I distrust the facts and the inferences” (p. 475), which speaks to reading as a questioning, as an opening up of interpretations to look for how texts can be made sense of differently. Such a process begins by encouraging students to look for assumptions in given texts, to question those assumptions, and, as Derrida (1967/1974) writes, to deconstruct texts for newer understandings to happen. No text is above questioning, analyzing, and reseeing, and healthy questioning of motives, assumptions, and conventions is not only practicing democratic reading, it is partaking in democracy as a way of life and understanding that learning and becoming are perpetual, essential aspects of progress in a lived democratic society.

Possibilities and Becoming

Emerson (1983) writes, “I had fancied that the value of life lay in its inscrutable possibilities; in the fact that I never know, in addressing myself to a new individual, what may befall me” (p. 475). Emerson understood that within every experience the possibility of growth, change, and learning was immanent, and this possibility was tied up in “unlooked for results” as Emerson puts it (p. 484). I argue the same is true for reading experiences, that reading is a searching for the unknown and being open to the possibilities of what happens during reading transactions. How can educators make a space for the possibilities of reading in light of what Emerson says about reading and his valuing of life as rife with possibilities? When reading is viewed as an experimental process of assembling meanings and forging relationships with selves/others, reading becomes a productive and unfinished event, a process in which each new reading involves different experiences. Hence educators can make a space for reading by suggesting that students read not with eye toward a correct reading of text, but by asking students to pay attention to their own processes of meaning making and encouraging them to see reading

not as an act of accuracy and precision, but as an act of unknown, unforeseen outcomes. Asking students to read differently or with alternatives in mind might assist students in seeing reading not as linear or simplistic, but as a productive, interrelated, open-ended process and experiment of learning and understanding.

Emerson (1983) writes that fate can no longer refer to limitation and trepidation. One's fate, according to Emerson, isn't marked by what one cannot do; it is that which one can do. One must dismiss with the notion, as Emerson does, that "Whatever limits us, we call Fate" (p. 952). Fate is ability rather than impairment; action instead of atrophy; and power rather than disempowerment. Reading with this understanding of fate is reading fearlessly, knowing that life is a continuous process of becoming that which one isn't (Nietzsche, 1908/2005). Reading fearlessly is reading with the understanding that some texts will prove challenging, deal with subject matter foreboding and dark, and cause one to question belief systems, habits of knowing, and notions of how the world is. As Cavell (2003) offers,

Emerson's theory of reading and writing is designed not to answer the question "What does a text mean?"... but rather "How is it that a text we care about in a certain way...invariably says more than its writer knows, so that writers and readers write and read beyond themselves?" (p. 95)

Going beyond oneself removes the burden of having to find out what a text means and instead looks at the reading experience as a meaning making process valuable in and of itself (Schirmeister, 1999). If educators suggest that students read beyond themselves, they can help students see that reading isn't about being secure with an understanding of a text – it's about being caught up in the ebb and flow of a plurality of understandings, meanings, and perspectives. It's about a willingness to let go and not to be fearful of what one lets go but to embrace the

unknown as a productive process of learning and relearning about selves/others engaged in a continual process of being and becoming.

Section III: An Emerson Reading Experience

The great object of Education should be commensurate with the object of life.

(Emerson, 1884, p. 134)

In a college senior course for prospective English language arts teachers, I used Emerson's (1983) essay *Experience* for a class reading. This marked the first time I had used Emerson's writings in the three years that I taught this particular course, a course grounded in students' experiences as student teachers. To set the stage for the conversations that I hoped would ensue, I asked students to consider and respond to the following questions: 1) How do you make sense of what Emerson says about experience?, and 2) How are you thinking about experience after reading this essay? Students had several minutes to think of their responses to these questions, to discuss their responses in small groups of four or five, and write down talking points they wanted to share with the class during whole group discussion. But first, to put the conversation in motion, I asked them to share their initial responses to reading Emerson's *Experience*.

Students' responses varied wildly from disgust to bewilderment to enjoyment. One student responded that Emerson's language was intriguing but asked how a teacher would go about "testing" students on the essay. Another asked what the point was in reading Emerson's work and how it related to their experiences as prospective high school English language arts teachers. Still another group asked what the plotline line might be and tried to identify a linear, stable narrative to follow in the essay but were unable to do so. Lastly, a small cadre of students

resigned themselves to misunderstanding the essay all together and agreed that they could not penetrate or comprehend Emerson's prose.

As my students relayed their responses to Emerson's (1983) work, I was reminded of the opening lines of the essay itself: "Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none" (p. 471). My students found themselves frustrated and confused by Emerson's work, and they didn't quite know what sense to make of it. They were very concerned with finding themselves, having the stability of comprehending the text, and having a solid grasp what the essay is supposed to mean. Their responses echoed what Cavell (2003) and Schirmeister (1999) call Emerson's (1983) resistance to produce texts that have meanings in and of themselves that can be comprehended and grasped. Although these students had experience in college literature courses in reading challenging texts in order to enter their senior year of student teaching, the general consensus among students was that Emerson's essay was problematic, troublesome, and didn't sit comfortably in a course designed to apprentice high school English language arts teachers.

What was my rationale in asking students to read this particular essay? My goal was not for students to become admirers or followers of Emerson's work. My intent was for students to experience reading a text that may prove challenging, to question their assumptions about what it means to read a text, and acknowledge the openness to understanding that manifests in not having all the right answers to questions when reading. As Emerson says to his apprentice Charles Woodbury (1890), the author should leave a little work for the reader in making sense of a text, and in this particular teaching episode with college seniors on the cusp of graduation and beginning their careers as high school English language arts teachers, Emerson's essay left them with more questions than answers.

After students shared their initial responses to Emerson's (1983) essay, they worked toward answering the questions posed at the beginning of class about how they were able to make sense of experience in light of Emerson's essay. They revisited the text during the conversation that ensued, talked with each other about their responses and questions, and pulled quotes that spoke to their understandings of Emerson's essay. Aside from the commentaries that they anonymously wrote and submitted at the end of class, I admittedly cannot say what they took away from reading Emerson or that day's lesson, but I can comment on the conversations that transpired. Students spoke of how Emerson privileges being in the moment of experience when they referenced, "Since our office is with moments, let us husband them. Five minutes of today are worth as much to me, as five minutes in the next millennium" (p. 479). They also talked about how experience differs contingent upon perspective, as when Emerson writes about experience through the eyes of a kitten:

Do you see that kitten chasing so prettily her own tail? If you could look with her eyes, you might see her surrounded with hundreds of figures performing complex dramas, with tragic and comic issues, long conversations, many characters, many ups and downs of fate, -- and meantime it is only puss and her tail. (p. 489)

Students discussed this passage and how it spoke to their experiences as prospective high school English language arts teachers in a course that interrogates their ideas about experience. Students came to class each week with complex, lived experiences in their past, each with vastly different experiences when out in the field.

As my students struggled with these ideas, I too thought of an Emerson passage from this essay that spoke to the conversation that transpired that day, "I know better than to claim any completeness for my picture. I am a fragment, and this is a fragment of me" (p. 491), which not

only connected and validated the intellectual work my students undertook that morning in class, it also acknowledges that reading is not about coming to conclusions, to finalized portraits of comprehension. Reading, like an oil painting in which the paint never dries, is about moments, pockets of understanding and meaning making, of seeing and reseeing in the wake of experiences. Reading is about provocation and suggestion and valuing the transformation of thinking and becoming that happen during reading events. Just as Emerson (1983) asks “What is the hardest task in the world to do? To think” (p. 420), McMillin (2000) elaborates on Emerson and says that the hardest task in the world next to thinking is reading. I would take McMillin one step further and say that reading, from an Emersonian perspective, *is* thinking. It is an active process of making sense of the world through experience, of understanding that being/becoming exist as fragmentary and incomplete, and always an unfinished, productive, transitional, and transformative event.

No Longer a Dull Book

I rather wish you to experiment boldly and give play to your energies, but not, if I could prevail with you, in conventional ways.

(Emerson, 1884, p. 255)

So what might happen if on the first day of an American literature course a professor started class by echoing what Emerson said to his student, Charles Woodbury (1890):

Do not attempt to be a great reader... learn to divine books, to *feel* those that you want without wasting much time over them...often a chapter is enough. The glance reveals what the gaze obscures...skip the paragraphs that do not talk to you. (pp. 27-28, emphasis in original)

How would students react if the professor followed up by soliciting responses from students and asked them what reading means to them? Or what a great reader even looks like? Or what it means to have a feeling for books? Professors could carve a space out for Emersonian reading experiences by asking such questions and inviting inquiry as a component to their classrooms. In sum, literature professors could ask of reading as Emerson (1983) asks of history books:

History no longer shall be a dull book. It shall walk incarnate in every just and wise man. You shall not tell me by languages and titles a catalogue of the volumes you have read. You shall make me feel what periods you have lived. (p. 255)

Reading is not about lists of titles, authors, and summaries. Such information is readily available for students in the information age through any number of online resources. As in this passage, Emerson is not concerned with eloquence in recitation of memorized facts, lists, and figures. Instead Emerson is concerned with the profound nature of reading as a lived, relational experience. It is not what one reads, but how one reads, puts that reading to use, and pays attention to the experience of reading. Reading is about being in the moment of experience, of living experiences as productive, meaning making events that help one realize that relations are what sustain readers as interrelated, interconnected, active partakers in a democratic experiment and project of living.

Remembering Emerson's (1870, 1875, 1884, 1983) ideas about reading as explored throughout this experiment, I argue that Ralph Waldo Emerson is indeed a theorist of reading. He resists humanist views of the reader/book configuration and instead thinks about it as deeply connected, always at play, and tangled up in tension and paradox in the process and project of reading. For Emerson, reading is never solely about books as textual reservoirs; it is about living

life as an event, process, and experiment and making that life a life worth living (Dewey, 1920/1982). As Emerson (1983) writes, “You shall make me feel what periods you have lived” (p. 255), and I take this charge from Emerson as a raising of the gauntlet to see reading differently, to realize one’s world differently, and to see that reading is a perpetual process of sense making in a complex world populated by the texts of human existence. In light of Emersonian reading experiences, reading is an enlivening and transformative event of renewed understandings of the world, and through reading transactions, understanding, interpretation, and meaning making are unfinished, unfinalizable projects of becoming. After exploring reading from the perspective of Emersonian reading experiences, reading, language, and life are powerful and empowering experiences, and a book, once set afire in the cathartic energy of reading events, can no longer exist as an artifact. It can no longer rest listlessly on a shelf, no longer be separate from the experiment of living, and no longer be a dull book.

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