

1

The Essential Self (?)

Ralph Waldo Emerson is part of our Romantic heritage and is therefore seen as one of the early celebrators of the autonomous self to which we have been committed for such a long time. His Kantian antecedents contribute to this view, but even without them such essays as "Self-Reliance" would make the case that Emerson believed in the independence of thought we have now more or less abandoned. Without revising Emerson into the first deconstructionist, though, we can quickly discern that the received views of his sense of the individual self are not what we might have thought, particularly when grafted onto later essays like "Fate." Emerson's relation to the self is more complex than we give him credit for, and the sense of autonomy he grants to the individual is also not quite as pure as we are likely to think. Emerson does believe that an individual should stand up for what she thinks is true, but this doesn't necessarily condemn him to the dustbin of history, even if we today would be far less likely to uphold the virtues of our own intuitions. That is our

loss much more than it is Emerson's weakness.

"Self-Reliance" is well known for establishing the parameters for greatness of self that Emerson thought were available to all humans. His egalitarian sensibility, his willingness to assume that everyone could stand up for what he believed, was certainly called into question by the time the essay was written, as Emerson repeatedly makes clear within it. But in spite of Emerson's own hard lessons at the hands of social opprobrium, he remained adamant about the virtue of and the necessity for everyone to declare and depend upon his or her own sense of what the world was. One of the most effusive expressions of this view puts the matter this way: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,—that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost, and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment."¹ Emerson's conviction that we all know what we need to know, that our own thought is capable of revealing the truth to us, is one of the premises of American culture, and one that was held in high regard for a long time. In Emerson's mind, that which distinguishes "genius" from the ordinary run of things is precisely this willingness to "Speak [one's] latent conviction" without concern for what others might think.

Equally important is Emerson's belief that such assertions sooner or later become "the universal sense." It is not simply that our own deep intuitions about the nature of the world are true for us; they are fundamental probings of the nature of what is. Even if these intuitions seem strange or untrue to those in our midst, sooner or later people will come around to the view that is expressed from the genius who is willing to speak up for that which she believes to be the case. The definition of "genius" that is embodied in this declaration is not based on special knowledge, a more acute sensibility, or even on special dispensations of one kind or another. It is founded on courage: the willingness to believe in the veracity of one's own assessments. And although

genius by definition is rare, Emerson is still convinced that every one of us can accomplish this if only we set our mind to it. This view is perhaps most in evidence these days in the bromides of education, those attempts at behavior modification that are based on the notion that a better "self-image" is achieved by declaiming "I am a genius" every morning before class begins.

What is curious, though, is that for the most part lip service to the kind of genius that evolves from learning how to listen to oneself is stressed more insistently these days through such bromides than through the arms of higher education. The self-help community works to convince people of the worth of their sense of the world, and lower education is predicated on the notion that we are all blank slates who only need the right reinforcement to develop a positive self-image that will in turn lead to an Emersonian kind of human. But in the universities there is less emphasis on seeing the world through one's own eyes, and perhaps there always was. Emerson is clear about this too, telling us that "For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure. And therefore a man must know how to estimate a sour face" (182). The American education system in particular has been publicly committed to the notion that private revelation is not based on class or breeding and is thus potentially available to everyone, yet the response to Emerson in his own day makes it clear that society isn't terribly interested in the really new idea. This system may stress the need to establish one's own view, but it will also be more than willing to deny the value of one's assertions if they stray too far from the norm.

One of the striking things about the work that has evolved from Emerson is that Nietzsche was the only one who saw this problem of originality as at least as serious as what happens to the mad or the imprisoned. For all of Foucault's talk about how the power dynamics of a society work to exclude that which stands out, he didn't spend much time articulating the ways in which academic and intellectual communities do the same thing when it comes to the expression of new ideas. This notion is off limits, is

less important than what is happening to the more obvious manifestations of exclusion. Yet Emerson is quite insistent that the world will whip one with its displeasure if it doesn't like the thought that one asserts with conviction. Was Emerson simply embittered over his own reception, wary of displaying too much of his own vulnerability? Was he in error? Or have we mended our ways as a result of his courageous declaration of individual independence? It is impossible to say with certainty, for we don't have records that display the proportional tendencies of our society to decry new ideas that it finds unpleasant even when they are true any more than we have evidence of the relative tolerance of the academic community when it comes to new ideas. In spite of our acute historical awareness, we still have virtually no conception of how new ideas come into play and dominate a scene while others fall away. What makes some ideas worthy of obsession and others worthless? Why has Foucault become more important to our way of thinking than Derrida? It could be because Foucault has more merit, but it is more likely that he addresses the world in ways that are more congenial to our current sense of that which troubles us. The hostility or enthusiasm with which ideas are greeted in a community—and of course the hostility very often precedes the enthusiasm for many, as the case of Foucault demonstrates—is a function of processes far too complex for us to chart. But we do know that the world is as capable today of whipping one for having independent ideas as it ever was, and maybe even more so.

At the very least it is true that the standards for correct thought are more clearly asserted today than they have been for a long time. One is no longer quietly told that one doesn't say this or that in a particular academic context; one is simply excluded from the debate if one refuses the conditions about what can and cannot be said. Again, this is nothing new. Likewise, the problems that arise from this situation are complex and need to be discussed at length, but for the moment we need only to acknowledge that our current world does as much to articulate what can and

cannot be said as any other recent era. This is not exactly "political correctness," at least not in any way that would go against the notion that there is always a political correctness to the ideas one can express in a community. It is rather an explicitness about that which is thought to be correct that is often not so readily on display. Anyone working in the academy today knows that certain words have more value than others—*difference*, *community*, *gender*, *race*, *power*—and understands that the use of those words will have some value in paving the way for the reception of one's work. Similarly, one ought to know well enough that any contestation of the value of such words is likely to have a contrary effect: one will be whipped for denying their value. So one goes along with the codes or one contests them depending on one's disposition, and this is typical of the way other eras have confronted their problems.

What is different about our time is the demise of the individual and the consequent disregard for precisely what Emerson is asserting. When one declares that there is no truth, that all utterances are framed by the perspective through which they are established, one isn't necessarily dispensing with Emerson's belief that we all must speak our own thought, but that is what we have made of this insight. We have quickly moved from Nietzsche's assertions about the constructed nature of the self to the conclusion that we all think what the power relations about us impel us to think. We are our community, and therefore truth itself—such as it exists—is a function of a committee rather than an individual. True, other civilizations have been based on such a notion of community and truth: the Japanese way of consensus doesn't have much place for the individual expression of difference, and it seems to work well enough for the people who employ it. The Western cult of the individual, though, has prompted us to take a different path until recently, for better and worse, and it is clearly that path that is now at stake. Whether or not it ought to be abandoned is a collective question that is made by the way we continue to address the issue of the individual and his or her sense of the truth. But I don't think it

would be wrong to say that right now we are committed to the notion that truth comes from a committee and not an individual.

There are at least two permutations of the truth-by-committee that currently holds sway, one that is perceived negatively, and one that purports to be a positive assertion of the same idea. Cultural criticism is devoted to establishing the ways in which various power groups have determined the truth for us and have asserted its unequivocal nature when quite clearly their truths are only constructions that benefit those who express them. The strength of our current criticism is found in the ingenious strategies it employs to ferret out the ways in which we accede too easily to power structures whose truths are suspect at best. This is the negative version of truth by committee: those who have power wish unilaterally to impose a sense of the world upon us, and we are supposed to do what we can to resist it, even if much of the literature that emanates from this camp despairs over our ability ever to do so.

Certain other strains of our thought, though, make a more positive case for communal establishment of the truth. Some feminisms, for example, laud the fact that women tend to collaborate when solving their problems rather than working by themselves, as men often seem to. In this respect, Emerson's emphasis on the need to express one's own thought would reflect a male-oriented ethos that denied the links between the individual and the community. In place of Emerson's view is the collective expression of a group's needs. This may or may not be phrased as a communal expression of truth—it may simply be declared a function of group need—but the effect is to strip the individual of the ability to assert the truth on his own terms. Truth is a function of consensus, of group will, and any attempt to oppose the group's sense of the true past a certain limit calls either for self-repression (silence) or for exclusion from the group, at least when it comes to participating in the fundamental decisions of the majority.

Emerson's view of the truth of individual intuition is thus at stake in our new directions, and it would be fair to

say that the present failure of his idea about our need to be nonconformists is a function of Nietzsche's declaration of the fictive nature of the self. If our self is only a construct to begin with, how could it possibly be a repository for truth? On what basis—on what *grounds*—could it declare the irrevocability of its ideas? Emerson writes before the self became a construction, so he is not aware of this problem, except when it comes to the assertions of that self in a community that would prefer to disregard the individual truths. He understands the constructed self in a more homely fashion and relates it to us via a tale that contrasts our public and private selves. On the one hand, we get the repeated emphasis on the need to go our own way: "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being" (177). We must learn how to trust our own sense of what is fitting, what is proper. Great humans have always done so, even as they have also thereby "confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age." That is what we too must do.

On the other hand, Emerson also knows that "These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs" (178). If many of us are capable of working through our sense of things in the privacy of our own homes, still when we enter the lists with others, our conviction dissolves, the voices fade, and we begin to think that we must have been wrong. Emerson is pointing here to the same kind of power dynamics that

Foucault was enamored of, only he is less interested in dissecting them because he is convinced that all of us could readily enough see through the "names and customs" that conformists take for reality and truth if only we had the courage of our convictions.

Emerson's approach to the social conventions that govern our lives is to assert that the voices we hear in private fade when we enter the public arena, and the reasons for this are not hard to find. Most obviously, our voice becomes one among many in a group: the larger number of voices opposed to our sense of things drowns our own out. How could we be correct when a hundred people think otherwise? How could our voice be the right one when tradition and the "power structures" declare the opposite to be the case? Any well-meaning individual will face these uncertainties as she allows private conviction to enter a larger debate, and all of us know very well how easily we can convince ourselves that our private voice must have been in error. Emerson suggests that we are unlikely to stand up for our own belief chiefly because "Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater." We want a consistent supply of food, so will give up our individual sense of things in order to obtain it. We willingly conform in exchange for daily bread, recognizing that "The virtue in most request is conformity." Nevertheless, we still have a private voice that occasionally tells us we have made the wrong choice.

Emerson is doubtless right that the social joint-stock company requires certain trade-offs, one of which can be the need to give up one's own private revelations in exchange for a position that allows one creature comforts and stability. Any honest survey of college students would reveal that many of them agree with Emerson that conformity is what is most virtuous in society regardless of the fealty we pay to going one's own way, just as many would admit that they have traded their personal voice for the hope of a snug berth. The willingness of many students to assert these thoughts may be a function of the uncertainty

of our times, but for more than 20 years now I have regularly observed individuals respond this way to Emerson's question, so I don't think that the willingness to compromise one's vision for economic security is new. Surveys often ask college students how important money is to their sense of future and how significant their commitment to social change is, and these numbers go up and down proportionately. What is often ignored, though, is that those who publicly placed a higher value on social change a generation ago tended to assume that they would have little trouble establishing a comfortable way of life as well. Money didn't appear as important to them in part because they didn't recognize the possibility of poverty in their own case. Today one can no longer make the same assumption. What has been consistent—at least in my classes—has been the ready willingness of the majority of students to admit that they had already made their own pact with the devil: they were fully aware of the social pressure to be something less than they were, and they were willing to accede to that pressure in order to find a haven within the larger community. In this respect what seems to change between the college years and those that come later is not a new stance toward the community but rather a growing dishonesty, an unwillingness to admit as one ages that one gave up those private thoughts for a mess of pottage.

Even if we assume that many people agree to exchange their personal view of the world for a secure financial future, though, Emerson has skipped over the more fundamental problem, most pertinently expressed simply as the law of numbers. The psychology of the individual competes with the fact that a community by definition always has larger numbers of individuals asserting beliefs that might run contrary to one's own. The pressure to conform to the beliefs of the community doesn't begin as a function of the need for a snug berth; it is rather the result of the more than understandable questioning decent people put themselves through. If one's elders and many others see the world differently, one is inclined to doubt the value of one's own assessment of things. The frangibility of the indi-

vidual—regardless of whether one sees the self as an essence or a construction—is such that it is hard to muster sufficient conviction to be willing to doubt the community rather than oneself. It is for the most part more “natural” to question oneself.

The doubts that come upon us as our voice is drowned out in public are first and foremost a function of human psychology: most of us are likely to doubt our own conviction before we question the voices of the many. We may or may not change our minds. We may or may not finally decide that our own view is superior, but the initial impetus is to doubt ourselves. Consequent to this doubt we will come upon the large and small economic questions that emanate from the possibility of being excluded from the community, but even these are by no means related primarily to the need to secure our bread. A more fundamental concern is the need to belong: we don't want to be excluded because our basic economy of life depends on the exchanges with others that are part and parcel of everyday life in a group. We are reluctant to give that up regardless of whether or not our way of life is secure. So the voice fades, and we become an expression of the community rather than an assertion of the way things are from our own particular place within the relations of the world.

We are now at a point in our society where we believe that the essential self was a fiction we created in order to imagine a ground for our belief that we could have an understanding of the way things are. It provided a defensible position in the face of opposition from the group precisely because there was no contesting the essential self from which that assessment came. One thing Emerson has over us in this respect is his conviction that all humans possess the ability to know the world and to express that knowledge in spite of its difference from the community's view of things. We who live with constructed selves are not as comfortable in declaring the truth value of our notions of the world. Without an essential self to ground our sense of things, we are perhaps even more likely to lose the private voice and to accede to the public vision.

The dissolution of the essential self, though, is even more problematic than that, for today we would be inclined to contest the very notion of a private self. Emerson's work depends on the assumption that we who read him will agree that by ourselves we often have great conviction about the nature of things, yet we lose that sense of certainty once the voices of others drown our own out. Today it would seem that there is no such thing as a private voice: the private voice is just a public voice that we have become convinced belongs to us alone. If selves are constructions—and if they are the fictions of language—then a private voice is inconceivable, the argument runs, because we are first and foremost in a language that is not our own, that rather owns us. We may *think* that it is our voice, but it has really come down to us through the language and the power relations that flow through its structures. Where, then, would there be a place for the conviction that one was right, particularly inasmuch as the dissolution of the self and the death of the truth are one and the same gesture?

One might counter that if all selves were as public as many today believe, there would be no place for change in the world. If we were all simply a function of the power relations in our area, how could those relations change in any significant way? Invasions from another community? Perhaps. After all, we recognize that there is no one community in play throughout a society but rather a series of them, so we could assert that change is a function of the clash between communities of ideas rather than the contestation of private visions of the truth. University professors regularly run into students who begin college life with a sense of the truth and value of the world that is almost identical to that of their parents, and one can see how those values change once they are contested in the academic arena, where values are often in opposition to the ones shared by the larger community. So the students grow and change, and if they are fortunate they arrive at a richer sense of things. But how do they do this? Do they merely exchange the values of their parents—their early “public” voices—for those of their teachers, the voices that drown

out the earlier ones when they are placed in a setting that reinforces a different set of values? Do they make some kind of compromise between the values they were brought up with and those their new community seeks to instill in them? Do they do this in an ad hoc fashion, or is there an underlying method to the way they establish a new sense of things?

Part of the problem with today's overly constructed self is that these questions cannot be answered in any but the most cynical way: we have to assume either that individuals change their values on the basis of power relations of which they remain oblivious, or that they do so in ad hoc ways that have nothing to do with who they themselves are but are rather a function of chance or circumstance, again of which the individual remains largely oblivious. If the private voice is merely a fiction that disguises the very public nature of even that voice we think we hear in the solitude of our own room, then there is no way to establish an ethos that escapes arbitrariness or the imposition of external power relations upon the individual site within those relations. We would consequently have to argue that there could finally be no place for conviction either. It would have to be based on something of which one could be convinced, yet there would be only one possible route to that certitude: agreeing to accept the ethos of the community because its voice was stronger.

That most of us regularly work out of conviction to change the world and address its circumstances as best we can in spite of all these impossibilities attests yet again to the weakness of a view that refuses to accept anything other than a public conception of the truth, that denies the possibility of a private voice. We need to assess the relations between private and public in a new way rather than simply abandoning the private for the public, casting out the individual and condemning all to a collective vision of the truth in which they may well have no belief. There may be no grounds for a private voice, and there may be no essential self; the constructions of society may impose themselves on the individual from before the moment he is

born, and they may make forever problematic the conviction that one has one's own particular sense of the world; but there is just as clearly a place for private conviction in the world of constructed selves. The subject may be a function rather than an essence, but the individual who constructs his or her behavior through the fiction of that subject is also more than the construct itself.



The path to conviction is smoother for Emerson because the essential self is a given of his era. He must wrestle with the problem of the individual voice in his private life as his public lectures bring opprobrium rather than praise—and he is therefore pushed to the limit to contest his own private voice—but he possesses a public rhetoric that is quite congenial to his idea that we all know the truth when we see it. Emerson may occupy a place in our tradition that declares him to be the first serious American exponent of individualism, but this is more mythology than truth, for his own antecedents are from an individualist stock as much as ours are. The primary difference is that Emerson is able to declare the value of the independent soul at the same time that he seeks to ground our public culture in such a view, in contrast to the Europeans. He simply took the essential self and the political declarations of the United States and melded them into a consistent view of the importance of the individual. But again, this is not to say that Emerson's own private agonies didn't confront the same space that we take up today when we address the issue of the constructed self.

Emerson's conviction comes from a commitment to the value of individual intuition, as he tells us when he questions the origin of his own beliefs:

The magnetism which all original action exerts is explained when we inquire the reason of self-trust. Who is the Trustee? What is the aboriginal Self, on which a uni-

versal reliance may be grounded? What is the nature and power of that science-baffling star, without parallax, without calculable elements, which shoots a ray of beauty even into trivial and impure actions, if the least mark of independence appear? The inquiry leads us to that source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct. We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition, whilst all later teachings are tuitions. In that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, all things find their common origin. (187)

Spontaneity, *Instinct*, and *Intuition* are the words that cover the space of the "aboriginal Self" upon which Emerson's vision depends. For him these words require no further justification. He assumes that we know beforehand what intuition is, that its relations to spontaneity and instinct are evident to all. We are less confident of the force of these words and more suspicious of the value of spontaneity, so our distance from Emerson is considerable. This is a reflection of the lack of credibility that any vision based on an essential self has today, but our wariness in the face of these words shouldn't keep us from considering more carefully just what kind of essential self it is of which Emerson makes use.

An "aboriginal Self" certainly carries with it the odor of essentiality, yet many of Emerson's descriptions sound more material than essential, as "aboriginal" implies. Such a self may be primitive, antecedent to the sophistication that comes from socialization, and it may be original in the sense that it is the character with which we are born, but it isn't necessarily as essentialistic as we might think. Nor is the word *Instinct* inevitably essential, though its reference to universal codes built into the species is held to be suspicious by many, particularly by those whose commitment to the constructed self is the defining force of their work. The fact is that we are born with certain traits already present, even if these capabilities or "instincts" are amenable to training and manipulation. That is precisely Emerson's point: instincts can be tamed, can be trained, can be made

to dull the intuitions we receive in solitude. Nevertheless, the notion that we have immediate access to the truths of the world is an idea whose time seems to have come and gone, even if it isn't predicated on any unified, essential self.

If we consider the word *spontaneous* with our own suspicions in mind, we get an idea of some of the problems Emerson's view presents us with. We would probably all agree today that humans are capable of more or less spontaneous actions; we would simply argue that those actions are mediated in various ways. One form of spontaneity is a function of the dictates of that which Freud characterized as the unconscious, which is hardly free from the mediations of culture. Other manifestations of the spontaneous may have a kind of conviction to those who are swayed by them, but from the cold light of analysis we would insist that the feeling of immediateness that an intuitive action conveys is an illusion. Far from being connected to that which is, spontaneous actions are subjective responses to phenomena rather than expressions of original relations with the things of this world. Still, we know that in certain domains it is preferable to act spontaneously: the best athletic movements may be a function of great training, but the individual who puts them to use must do so without thought for their naturalness to seem genuine. The very fact that the motions are disciplined leads us to think that they have lost their spontaneity—how could something that has been assiduously prepared for be considered an original reaction to phenomena—and therefore don't qualify as intuitive responses to the world. The idea that people in emergency situations often act spontaneously to intervene in positive ways without regard for their own safety is yet another context in which we tend to grant credence to the idea of immediate reactions to the world about us that have the freshness of disinterest to them, but even here there would be skeptics who would doubt the originality of this action. The fact is that our culture is so thoroughly mediated that most conceptions of intuition or spontaneity have long ago lost their forcefulness.

If we start from another of Emerson's statements about the intuition that should be the focal point of our lives, we may be able to appreciate better the significance of what he is talking about:

Here is the fountain of action and of thought. Here are the lungs of that inspiration which giveth man wisdom and which cannot be denied without impiety and atheism. We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity. When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams. If we ask whence this comes, if we seek to pry into the soul that causes, all philosophy is at fault. Its presence or its absence is all we can affirm. Every man discriminates between the voluntary acts of his mind and his involuntary perceptions, and knows that to his involuntary perceptions a perfect faith is due. He may err in the expression of them, but he knows that these things are so, like day and night, not to be disputed. (187, 88)

Emerson may be referring here to an essential self that is autonomously occupying its own space, and he may be using the word *intuition* to cover up his ignorance of what drives him, but it is striking how much he is willing to concede remains beyond his ken. Whatever this "immense intelligence" may be to which we remain connected, it is difficult to see it as something that is a function of self or that is located in an autonomous creature. On the contrary, we are "receivers of its truth and organs of its activity," and whereas our reception is a function of our aboriginal selves, the intelligence itself clearly is not to be found within us but rather in our relation to the things of the world.

As for the idea that an essential self is a primary actor in the world, Emerson tells us that "When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams." This is hardly the expression of a self that intuits things on its own and then passes them back to the world outside. It is rather a description of

an individual who knows intuitively how to discern justice and truth precisely by bypassing the usual circuits of self-interest that cloud our original relation to the world. Emerson admits that he cannot get any closer to that aspect of humanity that is covered by the word *intuition*, but he assumes we all know what he is talking about because we too must have experienced similar moments of surety. Beyond that, he says, we cannot go: "Its presence or its absence is all we can affirm." Nevertheless, Emerson insists that "Every man discriminates between the voluntary acts of his mind and his involuntary perceptions, and knows that to his involuntary perceptions perfect faith is due." Again, we are less likely today to be so confident of our "involuntary perceptions" because we know the many ways that even our senses can be misled, even as we know that the senses themselves and the perceptions they generate are part of a vast structuring apparatus that is far from pure in itself.

Emerson's distinction between voluntary acts and involuntary perceptions does have value to the extent that it points to a difference between a mode of perception that is specifically devoted to effecting a particular change in the world and one that is involuntarily thrust upon us by the phenomena in our midst. If Emerson believes the involuntary perception to be free of self-interest, we are inclined to assume that all human acts and perceptions are self-interested, so that even our "involuntary perceptions" are structured by the perspectival vision that is a function of our particular spot on the planet. Even in a world that assumes that all human actions are driven by self-interest, though, it is surprising how casually any kind of intuitive response to the world is dismissed by this assumption. It is as though once the word *self-interest* appears, nothing more need be said: one is self-interested, therefore one can speak with no degree of universality or objectivity, and the matter comes to an end.

Even if we assume that humans are incapable of escaping from their own self-interests, though, it is worth considering the various kinds of self-concern to which they

are susceptible, for not all are of equal value. Emerson's "involuntary perceptions" may be self-interested in a way he was unaware of, but surely the kind of interest that is on display in our involuntary perceptions is different from that to be found when we are calculating how best to achieve the life we desire or how best to persuade this or that individual of the veracity of our thought. Our perceptions are a function of an "interested" body, one that measures the flows of the world from its own particular place within them in order to guarantee as much as possible the continuing ability to be a site that has perceptions, but even in this context there is doubt that the word *self-interest* covers the same phenomena. How are we to contrast the careful calibration of the threats of the world that our nervous system is always at work on with the unexpected perception of a beautiful bird in flight? The one form of self-interest is designed for preservation, the other is a manifestation of the organism's interest in pleasure. Certainly aesthetic perception is self-interested to the extent that it provides gratification, but it is hardly a calculating kind of interest that is seeking to maximize its power in the midst of the other relations of the world.

When Emerson speaks about the value of a spontaneous reaction to the world, when he claims primacy for the intuition, when he tells us that we do nothing of ourselves when we discern justice or truth, he is asserting that the fundamental values of human life are determined from an aesthetic perspective. In some respects, this is the core belief of all Romantic visions of things, but this by no means implies the kind of autonomous, essential self that we think it does. Even Emerson is more than willing to admit that the "self" is precisely not in control in such aesthetic contexts: "we do nothing of ourselves." If his own discourse gets trapped by another problem, the tendency to move from the language of action and manipulation to words of reception and passivity—words that are no more true than those upon which the conception of the autonomous self are based—still he makes no assertions here that would depend on our own silly notions of free

and pure individuals outside of the stream of life.

Emerson's vision is *aesthetic*. This does *not* mean that he has a simpleminded faith in essential selves any more than it suggests that his commitment to the emerging importance of the individual is naive in character. It may seem inconsistent to assert that our intuitions give each of us the ability to discern the truth for ourselves when in effect we can do no more than confirm the presence or absence of a state that would allow us to discern the truth and to believe that the individual's vision of things takes precedence over the collective assertions of truth, but there is no fundamental inconsistency at all. If Emerson celebrates the individual and grants to each of us the ability to perceive the world aesthetically, he by no means confers upon us the ability to see the world as a god might. No, our intuitions clearly depend on a way of seeing that places us within the relations of the world rather than removes us from them, eliminating the kind of autonomy we tend to associate erroneously with Western individualism and undercutting our facile visions of self that we equally erroneously associate with figures like Emerson. We may remain suspicious of Emerson's belief that humans have an aboriginal self that is capable of involuntarily perceiving the world outside of the constraints of social structures, but in the end this argument seems to be a matter of degree more than of state. Even there Emerson changed as he matured. If in an essay like "Nature" he exclaims the value of an "original relation to the universe," his language in "Self-Reliance" is less dependent on the kind of originality we are so suspicious of today. Emerson may still have great faith in our ability to assess the world outside of the interests of culture, but he is not foolish enough to conjure a self that discerns the truth of the world from a position outside of it.

To repeat: even if we agree with the argument that human actions are always self-interested—a position that I myself would not accept for anything other than the purposes of argument—we need to recognize that the kinds of self-interest that humans display are various in nature:

some manifestations of self-interest have more value than others. We may think that we experience the "immense intelligence" to which Emerson refers only through a perspectival form of interest, but there are still greater and lesser "intelligences" in the world, and discrimination among them is necessary. Emerson's belief in the sanctity of the individual is a function of our ability to discriminate between modes of human interest, and he was not wrong in thinking we are capable of doing so. The interests of our perceptions are different in kind as a rule from those that dominate our thought within the social world; they are to be distinguished from the calculation that is involved in planning a future even as they differ from those kinds of interest that are always in play in human relations, where power is perhaps to a greater or lesser degree always a determinant of our assessments of things. It is easy to ridicule those who have a simple faith in the goodness of their intuitions, but Emerson's faith isn't necessarily a simple one. We have become so overwrought with our self-conscious embrace of the mediations of the social world that we look askance at anything that smacks of pure intuition, yet we rely upon it all the same. Emerson's faith in the individual is based on something both simple and difficult: "If we live truly, we shall see truly" (189). This is a straightforward statement, but it nowhere presupposes that seeing truly is an easy thing. It may come naturally to us, with our ability to sense the world around us as our fundamental linkage to that which we need to know, but it is certainly not easy. To live truly requires great discipline, and Emerson well understood the need for that discipline: the world will whip one with its displeasure if one doesn't accede to its view of the truth, and it takes both discipline and courage to be willing to embrace that which one truly sees. Emerson was less effective when it came to delineating the discipline needed to keep oneself from succumbing to the delusions of desire, but his location in a pre-Freudian era explains his relative lack of interest in this collateral field. To live truly requires more than most of us are likely to want to give, "Self-Reliance" tells us; we are more than willing to trade the