
Progressive Change in Emerson's 'The Conservative'

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Emerson scholars have long noted the ubiquity of change in his perspective on the natural and social worlds. They have also called attention to the dialectical process that Emerson credits with driving such change. They have not, however, paid much attention to the fact that the standard Emerson applies to the *pace of change* in the social world is the same aesthetic standard that he derives from the world of nature, and applied to the world of art. Emerson refers to the aesthetically pleasing nature of flowing or graceful change (as opposed to abrupt) found in nature and art as "beauty." When applied to the political, social, and religious worlds this pace of change results in what we call gradualism. Although Emerson frequently favored political, social, and religious reforms that were considered radical at the time, he believed that the proper pace of progress toward these goals was evolutionary rather than revolutionary. It is my contention that Emerson's preference for gradualism was based on his application of a natural aesthetic standard to the political, social, and religious spheres.

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In true Heraclitian fashion Emerson saw a world that was in a state of continuous change or flux.¹ He understood such change

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¹ "Nature itself, as Heraclitus said, was change." Robert D. Richardson, Jr., in his *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 342, describes the importance of change in Emerson's entire body of work. "The method of advance in nature is perpetual transformation," he now wrote, and the same per-

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to be not only an essential aspect of existence, but evidence of a healthy level of energy and vitality. Change is simply “The Method of Nature”: “If anything could stand still, it would be crushed and dissipated by the torrent it resisted, and if it were a mind, would be crazed.”² Emerson believed that political, social and religious institutions, being parts of the natural world, are just as subject to the ubiquity of change as any other aspect of existence. Whereas change in the world of physical nature, however, occurs according to the working of unconscious laws, change in the sphere of human activity can be affected by the choices humans make. The power of the will can be used to manipulate the pace and direction of change in human societies, and in human psyches as well.

In the natural world, according to Emerson, change takes on an aesthetic quality, and thus can be evaluated according to a natural aesthetic standard. He characterized any experience in which change is absent, for example, as “deformed.” In fact, Emerson found beauty to exist in the *process* of change itself—in the actual movement of phenomena from one form into another. “Beauty is the moment of transition, as if the form were just ready to flow into other forms. Any fixedness . . . or concentration on one feature . . . is the reverse of the flowing, and therefore deformed.”³ The deformity of fixedness is particularly apparent in human activity. In a social environment the power of the will can be utilized either to promote or to hinder change.

That Emerson considered this natural standard regarding change to be as applicable to human activity as to purely physical phenomena, there can be no doubt:

We are to revise the whole of our social structure, the state, the

ception is repeated over and over in phrases he would work into the essays he kept retouching and revising. ‘Life only avails, not the having lived,’ he concluded in a passage that went into ‘Self Reliance.’ ‘Happiness is only in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, the shooting of the gulf, the darting onward.’” Cornel West, in *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 15, describes Emerson’s perspective this way: “[T]he basic nature of things, the fundamental way the world is, is itself incomplete and in flux, always the result of and a beckon to the experimental makings, workings, and doings of human beings. Language, traditions, society, nature, and the self are shot through with contingency, change, and challenge.”

² Emerson, “The Method of Nature,” *Nature; Adresses and Lectures* (Boston: Thurston, Torrey and Company, 1849), 191.

³ “Conduct of Life: Beauty,” *Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Garden City Publishing Company, 1941), 466.

school, religion, marriage, trade, science, and explore their foundations in our own nature; we are to see that the world not only fitted the former men, but fits us, and to clear ourselves of every usage which has not its roots in our own mind. What is a man born for but to be a reformer, a Re-maker 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?⁴

Hence Emerson believed that political, social, and religious vocabularies and institutions were not only subject to, but benefited from, continuous change.

Change within the cultural sphere, as any reader of Emerson knows, will owe a lot to the contributions of "a few imaginative individuals." Imagination, like all other natural phenomena, "is to flow, and not to freeze."⁵ Although previous scholars have pointed out that Emerson traces change to a dialectical process, his dialectic differs from the Hegelian version in being driven, not toward a rational telos, but toward an aesthetic one. "Therefore," Emerson writes, "we value the poet. . . ."

In my daily work I incline to repeat my old steps, and do not believe in remedial force, in the power of change and reform. But some Petrarch or Ariosto, filled with the new wine of his imagination, writes me an ode or a brisk romance, full of daring thought and action. He smites and arouses me with his shrill tones, breaks up my whole chain of habits, and I open my eyes on my own possibilities.⁶

Our, as yet unrealized, possibilities are not rationally necessary goals, but aesthetically pleasing ones. "There is no attractiveness," Emerson emphasized, "like that of a new man."⁷

Vocabularies and institutions ought to change to reflect the change in individuals because vocabularies and institutions are only authentic to the extent that they reflect the forms and needs of the individuals of whom they are a product.⁸ Emerson conse-

⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Man the Reformer," *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 146 (emphasis added).

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," *Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Garden City Publishing Company, 1941), 137.

⁶ Emerson, "Circles," 108.

⁷ Emerson, "The Method of Nature," 198.

⁸ Jonathan Levin was referring to Emerson's theory of individual growth when he wrote, "What matters is onwardness, a perpetual development designed to resist the 'mischievous tendency' to settle into a definitive form. Emerson would always

quently saw cultural vocabularies and institutions, as he saw all of existence, as in a state of continuous movement. “[A]ll symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead.”⁹ There would accordingly seem to be little doubt that Emerson was sympathetic to the spirit of reform and innovation.

To abide by nature's aesthetic standard, change must maintain continuity with old forms.

Emerson's advocacy of the principles of reform and innovation were, however, bounded by a natural aesthetic standard regarding the pace of change. In his essay “The Conservative” (1841) he insists that innovation is only ever properly enjoyed when tempered by the opposing principle of conservatism. Thus, when Emerson speaks of beauty as a “flowing,” he is not speaking merely of the necessity of change, but of the *pace* of change. Change, in order to abide by nature's aesthetic standard, must maintain continuity with old forms. In other words, it must be gradual and contextual.

*Nature does not give the crown of its approbation, namely, beauty, to any action or emblem or actor, but to one which combines both these elements; not to the rock which resists the waves from age to age, nor to the wave which lashes incessantly the rock, but the superior beauty is with the oak which stands with its hundred arms against the storms of a century, and grows every year like a sapling; or the river which ever flowing, yet is found in the same bed from age to age; or, greatest of all, the man who has subsisted for years amid the changes of nature, yet has distanced himself, so that when you remember what he was, and see what he is, you say, what strides! what a disparity is here!*¹⁰

Thus the label “beauty” is reserved for change that occurs according to a natural aesthetic standard. In other words, change that is a consequence of—rather than a radical break with—the past.

In “The Conservative,” therefore, Emerson argued that gradual change is the result of a natural tension between the opposing forces of conservatism and innovation. “Throughout nature,” he points out, “the past combines in every creature with the present. . . . In nature, each of these elements being always present,

favor the dynamic unfolding over any particular instance or phase of that unfolding.” *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, and American Literary Modernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999) 27.

⁹ Emerson, “The Poet,” 137.

¹⁰ Emerson, “The Conservative,” *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, 175 (emphasis added).

each theory has a natural support.”¹¹ Conservative and innovative tendencies are, as Emerson understood them, as generic as the process of evolutionary change that they govern. Emerson saw the consequences of this natural tension between conservative and innovative forces everywhere in our physical and social environments. In the physical world, for example, mountain ranges are gradually created by the clash of continental plates, each simultaneously forcing change and fighting to maintain their old forms. Riverbeds are formed by the gradual, but steady and irresistible, erosion of resisting rock and soil. The transformations undergone by living species, resulting from the process of natural selection, display the same conservative and innovative principles at work.¹²

In human activity the principles of conservatism and innovation, sometimes called tradition and progress, represent the “same primal antagonism, the appearance in trifles of the two poles of nature. . . .”¹³ Circumstances and settings change, but the two principles are always present, working against each other. The tension between these two poles explains political and cultural reforms, as well as the psychological growth that can occur within the individual human psyche, or soul. In human environments, however, because of the role played by the will, one of the opposing principles, by becoming too powerful, can upset the delicate balance that produces gradual transformations, and result in either stagnation or discontinuity.

In politics and culture the conservative principle represents the perspective of tradition, the will of a people to maintain its cultural identity—the notion that what we are today is the acme of all of our prior growth. The innovative principle, on the contrary, represents the idealist perspective of the “ought,” the will of a people to become better than it is according to its own cultural aspirations. The idealist perspective is a product of the imaginative and creative impulse, and finds fault with the “actual” for falling so far short of the world that can be imagined. So while the conservative element represents our link with the past, and memory, the innovative element represents our aspirations for the future, and hope. Conservatism, as Emerson puts it, is the “pause on the last

For Emerson, conservatism and innovation represent “the two poles of nature.”

¹¹ Emerson, “The Conservative,” 175-176.

¹² Emerson accepted the theory of biological evolution.

¹³ Emerson, “The Conservative,” 173.

movement," while innovation is the "salient energy" that moves us on to another climax.

Overemphasis on either of the two opposing principles results in an extreme that is damaging to the health of a community and a violation of the aesthetic standard. Overemphasis on the conservative principle, on the one hand, acts as an obstacle to reform. Norms, laws and institutions stand in danger of stagnating or remaining unchanged even though they no longer reflect social attitudes, or produce the social, political, and economic consequences that were the reason for their creation in the first place. This is what follows when the conservative principle transforms norms, laws, and institutions into ends-in-themselves, as opposed to allowing them to remain what they originated as, i.e., means to achieve our political, social, and religious values.

A community's roots the source of its meanings.

An overemphasis on the innovative principle, on the other hand, can produce radical and destabilizing change. When change breaks too radically with existing norms, laws, and institutions, it is not only likely to result in social dissonance, but may cause a fatal break with a community's past, and hence with its cultural identity. Thus, for example, reforms based on abstract ideas, or on ideas imported from other cultures, need somehow to be adapted smoothly to the existing cultural context. A community's roots are the source of its meanings. To be severed from them is to pose a threat, not only to cultural identity, but also to the very ideals upon which the change is supposedly based. Thus the aesthetic standard Emerson observed in nature was one he found appropriate for all forms of change.

"The new in art is always formed out of the old."

[T]he new in art is always formed out of the old. . . . No man can quite emancipate himself from his age and country, or produce a model in which the education, the religion, the politics, usages and arts of his times shall have no share.¹⁴

Ideals, no matter how radical, have their genesis in the existing culture or else they lack meaning. Thus while continual change is necessary in order for a culture to remain healthy, the change ought to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary.¹⁵

¹⁴ Emerson, "Art," *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, 432.

¹⁵ In *The Conduct of Life*, in the chapter titled "Wealth," Emerson argues that the wisest path is always that based on the context provided by the past. "Of the two eminent engineers in the recent construction of railways in England, Mr. Brunel went straight from terminus to terminus, through mountains, over streams, crossing highways, cutting ducal estates in two, and shooting through this man's cellar, and

The upshot of all this is a dialectical process where the struggle between conservative and innovative forces results in an aesthetically pleasing form of graceful, but progressive, movement.¹⁶ Robert Richardson detects a similar “oppositional tension” in Emerson’s later essay “Fate” from *The Conduct of Life* (1860):

Emerson draws up two columns. In the one there are fate, nature, determinism, and circumstance. In the second column stand power, thought, freedom, and will. The two columns relate in a process Emerson is now willing to call ‘history.’ ‘History,’ he says, ‘is the action and reaction of these two, Nature and Thought.’ It is, he says, like ‘two boys pushing each other on the curbstone of the pavement.’ But there is not only action and reaction, stroke and recoil. There is unity and there is advance. The unity lies in the fact that the entire second column—power, thought, freedom and will—is just as necessary, as *fated*, as the first column. . . . The possibility of progress, amelioration, reform, and struggle arises from the fact that this unity is not static but in some rough Hegelian way dialectical, that is to say, *oppositional and advancing at the same time.*¹⁷

*History “the
action and
reaction of . . .
Nature and
Thought.”*

Richardson and others, however, have not called our attention to how Emerson would determine whether change or reform is proceeding at the proper pace. The proper standard, according to Emerson, is aesthetic, and Emerson’s faith in this aesthetic standard can also be found in his later writings. Note that it is in one of his later writings—*The Conduct of Life*—in a chapter titled “Beauty,” that Emerson defines beauty as “the moment of transition” and “fixedness” as “deformed.”

In “Beauty,” Emerson is simply reiterating the aesthetic stan-

that man’s attic window, and so arriving at his end, at great pleasure to geometers [because of its non-contextual abstractness], but with cost to his company. Mr. Stephenson, on the contrary, believing that the river knows the way, followed his valley as implicitly as our Western Railroad follows the Westfield River, and turned out to be the safest and cheapest engineer. We say the cows laid out Boston. Well, there are worse surveyors. Every pedestrian in our pastures has frequent occasion to thank the cows for cutting the best path through the thicket, and over the hills: and travellers (sic) and Indians know the value of a buffalo-trail, which is sure to be the easiest possible pass through the ridge.” *Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 406-407.

¹⁶ Emerson, “The Conservative,” 174. George Willis Cooke pointed out Emerson’s use of a dialectical tension in his *Ralph Waldo Emerson: His Life, Writings and Philosophy* (Los Angeles: University Press of the Pacific, 2003 [Reprint of 1881 version]), 298-99. “In his essay on Circles, and elsewhere, Emerson illustrates the perpetual law of development through the law of contraries, or through the mutual conflicts of the various forces of the world. He finds that there are no fixtures in nature, that permanence is but a word of degrees, and that every ultimate fact is but the first of a new series.”

¹⁷ Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, 503.

dard of change that he had first proposed almost twenty years earlier in "The Conservative": "This is the charm of running water, sea-waves, the flight of birds, and the locomotion of animals. This is the theory of dancing, to recover continually in changes the lost equilibrium, not by abrupt and angular, but by gradual and curving movements."¹⁸ As in his earlier writing, the pace of movement Emerson is praising is decidedly gradual and adaptive rather than abrupt and dissonant.

The innovative principle censured when not tempered by conservatism.

Thus, while beauty is clearly found in movement, rebuking a conservative principle that would hinder change, it is also clear that movement ought to be graceful and flowing in order to avoid any radical and discordant break with the past. The innovative principle then, when not tempered by conservatism, is also censured. "It is necessary in music, when you strike a discord, to let down the ear by an intermediate note or two to the accord again: and many a good experiment, born of good sense, and destined to succeed, fails, only because it is offensively sudden."¹⁹ Clearly Emerson is here applying an aesthetic standard to social reform.

Emerson's observation, that sensible experiments sometimes fail because they are "offensively sudden," is borne out by the history of reform movements in the United States.²⁰ "All that is a little harshly claimed by progressive parties may easily come to be conceded without question, if this rule be observed. Thus the circumstances may be easily imagined," Emerson wrote in 1851, "in which women may speak, vote, argue causes, legislate, and drive a coach, and all the most naturally in the world, if only it come by degrees."²¹ Emerson thus seems to be arguing that a natural rule governs social reform requiring that it should proceed at a deliberate, but evolutionary, pace.²² There seems to be no question

¹⁸ Emerson, "Beauty," *Conduct of Life*, 466.

¹⁹ Emerson, "Beauty," 466-67.

²⁰ Many reforms proposed by the late nineteenth century Populist Movement, for example, seemingly rejected by Americans in the lopsided election of 1896, were eventually adopted in the Progressive and New Deal eras that followed. The historical lesson seems to be that many of the changes demanded by the Populists, though eventually considered "sensible," were, at the time the Populists first proposed them, too radical, at least according to the aesthetic sensibilities of the majority.

²¹ Emerson, "Beauty," 466-67.

²² Thus, while some of Emerson's feminist ideals may have been radical, as pointed out by Gregory Garvey (xxiv) and in Armida Gilbert's "Pierced with the Thorns of Reform: Emerson on Womanhood" (93-114) in *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2001),

here that the reforms regarding the rights of women that Emerson favors are somewhat radical for 1851, yet he applies the same aesthetic standard to this type of reform that he does to art—it is the aesthetic standard that he observes in nature.

The gut reaction of the innovative party to Emerson's admonition is surely that necessary and just reforms are frequently postponed way past reasonable definitions of the term "gradual," or that some practices, such as slavery, are so unjust that no patience in their abolition can be justified. It was, of course, in response to a call for patience by cautious southern clergymen that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote in his famous "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" that for "years now I have heard the word 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.' We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that 'justice too long delayed is justice denied.'"²³ Many reformers, therefore, may see a call for gradual rather than sudden change as an excuse for inaction or timidity.

From an Emersonian perspective, however, the stagnant history of civil rights reform that King complains of in his "Letter" would be more accurately laid at the doorstep of an overemphasis on the conservative principle, not on the call for gradual reform. Surely if reform had proceeded in a gradual, but deliberate, pace during the century from the end of the Civil War to 1964, King would not have had to complain that the word gradual almost always means "never." The same was true in Emerson's own era in regard to the question of slavery. In all probability, the times in which we experience the most revolutionary and destabilizing changes are as much the consequence of a previous overemphasis on the conservative principle as a current overemphasis on the innovative principle. If change is postponed beyond all reasonable expectation, then when it finally does occur it is more likely to be radical and unsettling.

Emerson found himself reacting to just such a hindrance to the proper pace of reform when, in the early 1850s, he expressed his outrage at Daniel Webster in the "The Fugitive Slave Law." Yet

he favored a progressive rather than a radical *pace* of change. See also "The Radical Emerson?" by Robert Milder in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 49-75.

²³ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991) 292.

No genuine political, social, or religious change can occur that does not reflect change in cultural attitudes.

even when he was most outraged by the obstacles that conservatism erected in the path of what he saw as a clearly justified reform (the elimination of slavery) he did not change his perspective on the proper pace of change.²⁴ It is not that Emerson opposed a quick end to slavery; it was rather that he was resigned to what he saw as the fact that no genuine political, social, or religious change could occur that did not reflect a change in cultural attitudes, and cultural attitudes always change gradually.

Yes, that is the stern edict of Providence, that liberty shall be no hasty fruit, but that event on event, population on population, age on age, shall cast itself into the opposite scale, and not until liberty has slowly accumulated weight enough to countervail and preponderate against all this, can the sufficient recoil come. . . . Liberty is never cheap.²⁵

The problem that abolitionists faced was the same that King, and the Civil Rights Movement, faced over one hundred years later: an overemphasis on the conservative principle which prevented a gradual reform of norms, laws, and institutions. Ingrained habits are a hard thing to alter, and the habits created by norms, laws, and institutions are no exception.

Thus almost all advances in human liberty are won at the cost of a long struggle against conservative tendencies. "Slavery is disheartening; . . . But the spasms of Nature are centuries and ages, and will tax the faith of short-lived men. Slowly, slowly the Avenger comes, but comes surely. . . ."²⁶

It taxes the faith of earnest reformers when reform is long in coming. Emerson noted that his own faith was taxed in regard to the abolition of slavery: "I own that the patience it requires is almost too sublime for mortals. . . ."²⁷ Those of little faith, therefore, may conclude that the struggle is in vain. Emerson is insisting, however, that lasting change comes at such a glacial pace that we cannot measure its movement by focusing on the success or failure of historically local movements. Only when we stand back and look

²⁴ In vulgar politics the Whig goes for what has been, for the old necessities—the Musts. The reformer goes for the Better, for the ideal good, for the Mays. But each of these parties *must of necessity* take in, in some measure, the principles of the other. Each wishes to cover the whole ground; to hold fast *and* to advance. Only, one lays the emphasis on keeping, and the other on advancing. Emerson, "The Fugitive Slave Law," 872. (Emphasis mine.)

²⁵ Emerson, "The Fugitive Slave Law," 872.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 873.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 874.

at centuries can we see lasting growth in liberty.

Emerson's endorsement of the process of evolutionary change suggests that he rejected both strictly conservative and radical ideologies in the realm of politics, society, and religion. While he finds something to value in both the conservative and innovative impulses, he rejects each as a stand-alone principle. "Each is a good half," he insists, "but an impossible whole."²⁸ Each exposes the abuses and weaknesses of the other.

So what is the value of conservatism, then, if it acts as an obstacle to change? Conservatism's value, according to Emerson, is that it holds to facts. While the innovative party deals "only with possibilities, perhaps impossibilities," the actual is an "insurmountable fact." It is the ground, and cultural context, within which all men, including innovators, have their root. Innovation is thus always and everywhere merely an effect of the actual—the past. Innovators must live in and use the actual in their very attempt to transcend it. The values of the innovators are a product of the existing culture and if, or when, the innovative party does succeed in surpassing the actual, the innovator will have simply set up a new conservatism — a new "is." Thus innovation can never start in a vacuum. The actual is the necessary context within which all innovation originates and proceeds.²⁹

The values of the innovators are a product of the existing culture.

Nevertheless conservatism, according to Emerson, although it is as necessary as its innovative opposite, has the worse of the argument, because it must always be apologizing for the status quo. "It builds a fortress around the actual state of things—good or bad," and, of course, the actual state of things will always be inferior to the aesthetically pleasing future that can be imagined by the more poetically minded.

Here is the innumerable multitude of those who accept the state and the church from the last generation, and stand on no argument but possession. They have reason also, and, as I think, better reason than is commonly stated. No Burke, no Metternich has yet done full justice to the side of conservatism. But this class . . . *have no attraction for us*. It is the dissenter, the theorist, the aspirant, who is quitting this ancient domain to embark upon seas of adventure, who engages our interest.³⁰

²⁸ Emerson, "The Conservative," 175.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 176-177.

³⁰ Emerson, "The Young American," *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, 221 (emphasis added).

The innovators are always free to plead the best state of things—to argue perfection. To counter the movement forward the conservative must plead the necessity of the “is,” to deny the possibility of a better world, or to argue that all change is decline. As a result, conservatism hinders the human capacity to hope for, or imagine, a better future: “Conservatism makes no poetry, breathes no prayer, has no invention; it is all memory.” Conservatism must always, as Thoreau said, be “stoning the prophet.” And conservatism is prevented from objecting to such a characterization of itself by Emerson’s definition of the term. An argument, for example, that conservatism can also invent and innovate is cut short by Emerson when he points out that the “moment conservatism puts a foot forward it is no longer conservative.”³¹

Burke, unlike Emerson, locates the impulse for improvement within conservatism.

The conservative party will surely object to the limitations Emerson places upon its principle. Emerson’s characterization of conservatism is at odds, for example, with the account given of conservatism by Edmund Burke, who not only preceded Emerson in insisting that reform must be gradual and contextual, i.e., continuous with existing traditions and customs, but also likened tradition itself to a living plant whose growth must be carefully tended. Thus, when Emerson complains that “Government has been a fossil,” and insists that “it should be a plant,”³² he could be accused of simply reiterating Burke’s notion of conservatism. In fact, the following prescription for gradual change, penned by Burke, comes close to the argument Emerson seems to be making in “The Conservative.”

Our political system is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world, and with the mode of existence decreed to a permanent body composed of transitory parts; wherein, by the disposition of a stupendous wisdom, moulding together the great mysterious incorporation of the human race, the whole, at one time, is never old, or middle-aged, or young, but, in a condition of unchangeable constancy, moves on through the varied tenor of perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and progression. Thus, *by preserving the method of nature in the conduct of the state, in what we improve, we are never wholly new; in what we retain, we are never wholly obsolete.*³³

³¹ Emerson, “The Conservative,” 173.

³² Emerson, “Politics,” *Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 197.

³³ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1986), 120 (emphasis added). “Upon that body and stock of inheritance we have taken care not to inoculate any scion alien to the nature of the original plant. All the reformations we have hitherto made have proceeded upon the principle of reverence to antiquity; and I hope, nay I am persuaded, that all those which possibly may be made hereafter, will be carefully formed upon analogical precedent,

Thus Burke, like Emerson, also finds a standard of gradual change in nature. Emerson, however, allows conservatism no forward movement because, for him, the analogy of the plant can only apply to *a synthesis of the conservative and innovative principles*—gradualism must be the result of a synthesis of the two opposing forces.

If Emerson's natural aesthetic standard in regard to the pace of change is similar to Burke's, does this mean that Emerson was a conservative? There are at least two reasons why it does not. First, the reforms that Emerson favored in a variety of political, social, and religious areas were at least progressive, if not radical. It was merely the pace of reform that he held to be necessarily gradual, not the ultimate goals of reform. Thus when Robert Milder reports that Emerson's "persistent disparagement of socialism in the 1840s was not directed against its ends of economic and social justice but against its intrusive effort to hasten the evolutionary process,"³⁴ this is simply another example of Emerson's aesthetic standard of change being applied to economic and social reform. The second reason why Emerson cannot be considered conservative is that, as we shall examine more closely below, he was clearly one of what he referred to as the experimenters. It was precisely because he saw his innovative ideas as experiments, however, that he did not see them as authoritative prescriptions for the culture as a whole. Individual imagination results in cultural transformation only when its products are intersubjectively verified through the experience of others, and this takes time.

Emerson not a conservative.

Emerson reserves his harshest criticism of the conservative principle for those instances when it finds its basis in property, for while he traces a lack of ideas and forward looking ideals to the possession of a conservative perspective, he traces the *cause* of many a conservative perspective to a timidity induced by too high a regard for the security of property. The result, Emerson finds, is timidity in regard to social experimentation and reform. Through-

authority, and example. . . . This policy appears to me to be the result of profound reflection; or rather the happy effect of *following nature*, which is wisdom without reflection, and above it. A spirit of innovation is generally the result of a selfish temper, and confined views. People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors. Besides, the people of England well know, that the idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservation, and a sure principle of transmission; *without at all excluding a principle of improvement.* . . ." Burke, *Reflections*, 117-120 (emphases added).

³⁴ Milder, "The Radical Emerson?" 70.

Emerson
identifies
conservatism
with
materialism.

out his writings he repeatedly associates the conservative principle with this kind of resistance to change.

In his discussion of the conservative and innovative principles in the essay "Politics," for example, Emerson points out that the conservative party, though "composed of the most moderate, able and cultivated part of the population, is timid, and merely defensive of property." He goes on to write in regard to this party that "it vindicates no right, it aspires to no real good, it brands no crime, it proposes no generous policy; it does not build, nor write, nor cherish the arts, nor foster religion, nor establish schools, nor encourage science, nor emancipate the slave, nor befriend the poor, or the Indian, or the immigrant."³⁵ Noble, ideal and heroic ends tend to be ignored, Emerson is suggesting, whenever the heart is captured by materialism.³⁶ Thus while the conservative principle, per se, is a necessary and valuable force, when conservatism is motivated solely by a defense of property, it is neither.

The value of the innovative principle, on the other hand, is that it is the source of all reform and progress. Absolute monarchs would still be on their thrones, slaves would never be loosed from their chains, and women would forever be barred from public life, if it were not for the fact that a few innovative individuals had the capacity to imagine a world that differed from the actual one. Thus Emerson reminds us that

In dealing with the State we ought to remember that its institutions are not aboriginal, though they existed before we were born; that they are not superior to the citizen; that every one of them was once the act of a single man; every law and usage was a man's expedient to meet a particular case; that they all are imitable, all alterable; we may make as good, we may make better.³⁷

³⁵ Emerson, "The Conservative," 173.

³⁶ Emerson, "Man the Reformer," 136. In 1863's "Fortune of the Republic" Emerson warns Americans to learn from what he sees as the decline of English civilization. In regard to England he claims that "never a lofty sentiment, never a duty to civilization, never a generosity," and never a "moral self-restraint is suffered to stand in the way of a commercial advantage. In sight of a commodity, her religion, her morals are forgotten." The reason for this is that "[m]eat, and drink, and pampering, at last, pulls the man down. It runs to softening of the brain, to corruption of principles. . . ." As a consequence the English are "in search of nothing grand and heroic. They have shown no trait of enlarged policy. A liberal measure has no chance; a just measure, very little chance, if there is no powerful party to extort it." *The Political Emerson: Essential Writings on Politics and Social Reform*, ed. David M. Robinson (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 191-192.

³⁷ Emerson, "Politics," 193.

And while the changes resulting from reforms may eventually become solidified into a new form of conservatism, the changes do, after all, occur. Movement, or growth, is possible only because some imaginative and self-reliant individuals are capable of escaping the "is" and imagining ideal "oughts."³⁸ These "oughts" then provide society with a telos with which it can guide the *direction* of political, social, and religious change.

But might not the ideal, the conservative party is sure to protest, be impractical? Yes, but this is not counted by Emerson as a defect. An individual trying to avoid traveling in circles in a deep forest is better served by an unreachable telos (a star, for example, or a far mountain) than by a reachable one (for example, the farthest observable tree which, once attained, has lost its use for providing direction for further progress).

Another reason Emerson was tolerant of radical ideals was that they were frequently the direct consequence of a period in which the conservative principle had become too dominant to allow even gradual change. Emerson replied to arguments that reformers' heads are too often in the clouds by exclaiming: "What if some of the objections and objectors whereby our institutions are assailed are extreme and speculative, and the reformers tend to idealism; that only shows the extravagance of the abuses which have driven the mind into the opposite extreme."³⁹ Emerson was thus not put off by idealized or radical aspirations on the part of innovators; it was only the radical *pace* of change that he found contrary to nature's aesthetic standard.

Yet Emerson was not unsympathetic to conservative skepticism, and the insistence, on the part of those who defend the conservative principle, that the burden of proof must lie with the innovator. In "The Conservative," Emerson has his conservative protagonist argue against the innovator that

Your schemes may be feasible, or may not be, but this [the actual] has the endorsement of nature and a long friendship and cohabitation with the powers of nature. This will stand until a better cast of the dice is made. . . . You are welcome to try your experiments, and,

³⁸ Even in his early writings Emerson defended the function of imaginative ideals. "The advantage of the ideal theory over the popular faith is this, that it presents the world in precisely that view which is most desirable to the mind. It is, in fact, the view which Reason, both speculative and practical, that is, philosophy and virtue, take." Emerson, "Nature," *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, 39.

³⁹ Emerson, "The Conservative," 177.

if you can, to displace the actual order by that ideal republic you announce, for nothing but God will expel God. But plainly the burden of proof must lie with the projector. We hold to this, until you can demonstrate something better.⁴⁰

Experiment—or experience—thus supplies the nexus between the two opposing principles; between actual facts and imagined futures. Experience is where the ideals that we imagine are tested so that we can discern their actual, rather than their imagined, consequences.

The effects of existing norms, laws, and institutions evolve even when they themselves do not.

In this sense, however, even our existing norms, laws, and institutions have to be counted as ongoing experiments. The consequences of existing norms, laws and institutions continually evolve even when they themselves do not.⁴¹ In “Emancipation in the British West Indies” Emerson quotes Britain’s Lord Mansfield as saying, “Immemorial usage preserves the memory of positive law, long after all traces of the occasion, reason, authority, and time of its introduction, are lost.”⁴² Continual change is necessary for our norms, laws, and institutions, in other words, not only as a means of trying to attain ideal goals, but as a means of adapting to change in other aspects of the social or natural environment—changes in technology for example.

Because Emerson considered himself an experimenter, he warned his readers not to place too much value on what he “pretended to settle . . . as true or false.”

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 at 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.⁴³

Emerson insists that experimentation is only valid when participation is voluntary. In “Politics,” Emerson places limits on social

⁴⁰ Emerson, “The Conservative,” 174.

⁴¹ The consequences that followed from a laissez faire approach to the economy in the United States, for example, differed depending on whether the economy was dominated by family farms and independent craftsmen, as in the early 19th century, or by large manufacturing industries, as in the latter part of the 19th century.

⁴² Emerson, “Emancipation in the British West Indies,” *The Political Emerson: Essential Writings on Politics and Social Reform*, 97.

⁴³ Emerson, “Circles,” in *Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 108. Emerson thus appears to have understood the social role of the experimenter to be that of the imaginative individual reporting the results of his or her experiments to society. He saw such individuals as the source of change, but he did not see that role as justifying the use of society itself as an involuntary guinea pig.

and political engineering: "But whenever I find my dominion over myself not sufficient for me, and undertake the dominion of him also, I overstep the truth, and come into false relations to him."⁴⁴ Experiments, he seems to imply, when they are successful, will be gradually emulated, and need not be forced.

For Emerson, social experimentation only valid when participation is voluntary.

One is reminded of Richard Rorty's description, in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, of how one vocabulary gradually replaces another because, in the pragmatic sense, it works better.⁴⁵ Intersubjective verification of the appropriateness of a new vocabulary or institution occurs when a new perspective "fits us" better than the old one did.⁴⁶ In "New England Reformers" Emerson warns that "the moment we cease to report [the results of our experiments] and attempt to correct and contrive, it is not truth."⁴⁷ Emerson probably had utopian communities like Brook Farm in mind when he wrote this. If such experimental communities worked they would eventually proliferate despite conservative resistance.

In conclusion, in "The Conservative" and elsewhere, Emerson describes a natural aesthetic standard of evolutionary change that, while wholly inevitable and unconscious in the physical world, can be resisted, hurried, and directed in the sphere of human activity. Invariably, however, the opposing forces of conservatism and innovation both play their roles. Thus Emerson concludes "The Conservative" by proclaiming that "it is a happiness for mankind that innovation has got on so far, and has so free a field before it. The boldness of the hope men entertain transcends all former experience." But he just as quickly turns our attention to the context in which that hope originates. "And this hope flowered on what tree? It was not imported from the stock of some celestial plant, but grew here on the wild crab of conservatism. It is much that this old and vituperated system of things has borne so fair a child. It predicts that amidst a planet peopled with conservatives, one Reformer may yet be born."⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Emerson, "Politics," 199.

⁴⁵ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁴⁶ To repeat the quote from above, Emerson argued that "we are to see that the world not only fitted the former men, but *fits us*, and to clear ourselves of every usage which has not its roots in our own mind." (Emphasis mine.) Emerson, "Man the Reformer," *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, 146.

⁴⁷ Emerson, "Intellect," *Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 111.

⁴⁸ Emerson, "The Conservative," 189..

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