
A Sympathetic Reading of Emerson's Politics

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I. A Sketch of a Political Emersonian

Ralph Waldo Emerson has a complicated political legacy owing at least in part to his own intermittent and hesitant political activism, crass racism, and fierce individualism. Despite this, a steady stream of political philosophers have attended to Emerson's work, with the likes of John Dewey proclaiming him "the philosopher of democracy" (1903). But as his writings continually direct readers inwards—away from social and political life—recovering an Emersonian politics is not a straightforward task. A basic difficulty lies in the fact that Emerson "did not consider himself a political thinker and focused his energies on issues that seem, at first glance far removed from politics. . . . From first to last Emerson regarded politics as one of the practical applications of ethics or moral philosophy, and he insisted that all political questions were, at bottom, moral" (Robinson, 2004: 1). But politics is not just morality scaled up. It raises distinct collective concerns to which individuated moral philosophy cannot speak. As such, imputing a political theory to Emerson is not a simple matter. Jennifer Gurley may best summarize the difficulty of recovering a political Emerson, noting: "of all the nineteenth century American writers we might describe as political, he is perhaps the one who most despised politics, proclaiming they are 'odious and hurt-

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ful' . . ." (Gurley, 2007: 323).

Given the resistance of Emerson's texts to being read politically, Gurley admonishes us to encounter his writings by asking "what for Emerson . . . constitutes political activity?" (ibid.) I shall argue that in doing so we learn how, for Emerson, individuals can forge social and political bonds through their affective capacities. This line of thinking is especially resonant with the sentimental turn in contemporary political theory. Martha Nussbaum (2003), Sharon Krause (2008), and Danielle Allen (2006) have all identified the need for the theory of politics to better regard how our emotions and attitudes affect our relationship to one another. Love, fellow-feeling, and friendship are not just personal considerations, but, as theorists as far back as Aristotle have known, play a critical role in politics too.

Words like "sentimental," "sympathy," "emotions," "love," "fellow-feeling," and "friendship" can have many different and even sharply opposed meanings. These can range from the teary-eyed sympathy and "brotherhood of man" of a Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Aristotelian character-based partnership in the good life to a Kantian-Hegelian recognition that human beings have a kind of common self. Sorting out these different meanings and arriving at sharp definitions would require a separate study. For the present purpose, "sympathy" and similar terms will refer to human beings' recognizing a social bond that comes from "within" and is a part of their nature, rather than the product of an externally imposed order based, for example, on a rationally designed agreement or contract.

What are the implications for politics of the kind of seemingly apolitical "affective" bond that Emerson discerns in human beings? I think J.D. Salinger provides an illustration of such an existence.

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It isn't surprising that Emerson was a touchstone for J.D. Salinger (Ross, 2010). In the popular imagination, Salinger is the archetype of a creative recluse, shunning the attention of his readers by escaping to the wilderness of Cornish, N.H. Yet Salinger's escape was for creative as well as temperamental reasons. The city's humanity felt distant, inhibiting his work. Lillian Ross quotes Salinger reflecting on his sense of alienation: "I started writing and making up characters in the first place because nothing or not much away from the typewriter was reaching my heart at all" (Ross, 2010). The characters of Salinger's typewriter felt more authentic to him than those he could encounter elsewhere, and so

the city became a distraction to his creative process. This comfort of the imagined over the solitude of the real resonates perfectly with the sentiment of Emerson's corpus.

Salinger was not, however, the misanthrope of the public's fascination. Thus, his daughter Margaret wrote that, on the one hand, her father "dreamt beautiful dreams, but did not have the skill to wrest them from the air and bring them to fruition in daily life" while, on the other, "when he chooses to make himself available, he can be funny, intensely loving, and the person you most want to be with" (Salinger, 2013: x-xi). Yes, the author's life was intensely internal and imaginative, but that didn't mean that he was coarse or anti-social.

In light of Salinger's widely reported introversion, it might come as a surprise that he was actually quite civically active. Amongst the Salinger revelry following his death, *The New York Times* ran an article, "J. D. Salinger a Recluse? Well, Not to His Neighbors." Indeed, the author regularly attended town meetings and church dinners, and frequently tutored students from the local high school. He was cordial—even friendly!—with his neighbors. The neighbors, in turn, did what good neighbors would do for a community member with a legion of stalkers: they protected his privacy, often dissimulating his whereabouts to tourists. "Despite his reputation, Mr. Salinger 'was not a recluse,' said Nancy Norwalk, a librarian at the Philip Read Memorial Library in Plainfield, which Mr. Salinger would frequent. 'He was a towns-person,'" the article notes (Zezima, 2010). Within his community, he wasn't reclusive at all; he was decidedly civic.

One is struck here by the sharp contrast with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose kind of sentimental love for others tended to isolate him from actual human beings and made him progressively disgusted with them. His deepening alienation from others and from existing society with which his professed love for man coexisted is especially prominent in his *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*.

Salinger might be seen as a paragon of an Emersonian political agent, embodying the aspirations of sentimental political theorists. Though Salinger was personally aloof, he was nonetheless an active community member, party to the same kind of New England civic culture that Emerson might well have had in mind. Salinger's biography identifies many of the frailties and dispositions of an Emersonian political actor, surmounting a fiercely interior disposition through genuine, proximate, personal interactions. For the purposes of this essay, sympathy may be conceived as the critical epistemic mechanism which bridges

interpersonal chasms for Emerson, placing him generally speaking in a sentimental political tradition marked by contemporary scholars like Nussbaum, Krause, and Allen. And though Emerson does not offer a robust account of politics, his work is a seminal meditation on the role of affect in political life.

The next section offers a treatment of Emerson's essays in order to articulate the interiority that his texts frequently elicit. Focusing on his essays, I note how attention to the external world regularly folds in on itself, pointing the reader towards a seemingly atomistic and internal reality. This onto-epistemological reality prompts us to ask what resources might move us outside ourselves, facilitating responsibility to others.¹ After identifying the text's tendency to direct the reader inward, I then show how Emerson moves the reader to look outward. The following section explains how the mechanism of Humean sympathy comes to facilitate fellow-feeling for Emerson, making it possible for agents authentically to engage with one another. Reflecting on passages from "Self-Reliance" as well as moments in other essays and letters, I demonstrate how personal, proximate contact allows people to break out of their internal realities. Though Emersonian politics is not comprehensive, it does identify the radical, and deeply American, impulse to ground politics in our interpersonal lives.

II. Emerson's Skepticism

Emerson's bearing on politics has always been fraught. So, although, as Peter Field notes, "few intellectuals seem more engaged in the life of the nation than did Emerson," he "was never a politician and for the most part disavowed direct participation in political and reform movements" (Field, 2003: 211, 210). There does, however, seem to be an enduring impulse to identify Emerson with the democratic project as exemplified by such thinkers as F.O. Matthiessen (1941), George Kateb (1995), Judith Shklar (1990), and Stanley Cavell (1994), in addition to Dewey. Yet, when scholars like Field refer to him as a "democratic intellectual" the designation seems invoked by construction—whatever is meant by "democracy" it is just a descriptor of whatever Emerson's project is taken to be. Political and democratic commitments are run together here as a matter of course.

¹ The concepts of ontology and epistemology seem to overlap in Emerson's thought. He argues that the world is constructed in a way that necessarily shapes and limits our perception of it. While these are philosophically distinct concepts, I elide them for much of this essay.

But were Emerson a democratic theorist, or a political theorist of any sort really, his work would need to provide a means by which people respond to one another, a tie that wraps them into a larger whole. For the most part, however, Emerson appears to articulate a view of subjectivity wherein individuals are atomistic worlds unto themselves, without need or want of authentic human companionship. Even scholarly projects which attempt to recover a political Emerson acknowledge the inherent tension with an individualistic ethic (e.g. Rowe, 1997; Garvey, 2001; Gurley, 2007).

Yet it is Emerson's individualism that makes him such a rich source for political theorizing. The impulse to mark his work as democratic results from its deep resonance with our commitments to autonomy and individualism, although the terms "autonomy" and "individualism" have many different meanings, suggesting the possibility of different, even contrasting forms of democracy. In much the same way as Emerson's thought privileges the interior world of the agent herself, the sentimental turn of political theory looks at people's affective elements as resources for the construction of a meaningful politics. Although Emerson is not a democrat per se, he offers critical resources for constructing our concepts of democratic citizenship and agency through sympathy, raising questions about what might be a proper form of popular rule.

In order to show how Emerson directs us outward—and otherward—it is necessary to demonstrate how systematically he moves us inward. Emerson's essays consistently appear to extol our shared creative heritage and aspirations, only to reveal a deeply solitary project upon closer examination.

The beginning of *Nature* moves in just this way, at first sculpting a domain outside the self only to reveal its subjective construction. "Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under the name Nature" (*Nature*, 8).² While this feints at a nature which is independent of the self, the distinction is then quickly blurred. "In the woods," a synecdoche for nature, "we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life . . . all egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (*Nature*, 10). Rather than nature being

² All quotes from Emerson's essays are from Emerson (2000) and letters are from Emerson (1983).

a domain separate from the self, Emerson conceives of consciousness as subsuming the natural. When we meditate on our place in the world, we come to occupy that totalizing and universal perspective of God, and the self and the world collapse into one.

Emerson is unconcerned with the patina of an external world. "For, seen in the light of thought, the world always is phenomenal; and virtue subordinates it to the mind" (*Nature*, 39). So when in the paragraph prior he divulged that "the object of human life" is "man's connection to nature" (*Nature*, 38), he does not direct the reader to consider the magnificent New England landscape, but to assume a particular state of mind. The phenomena of the external world can't provide access to substantive truths, as indeed "a dream may let us deeper into the secret of nature than a hundred concerted experiments" (*Nature*, 43). He is adamant that "the ancient precept, 'Know thyself,' and the modern precept, 'Study nature,' become at last one maxim" ("The American Scholar," 56) again folding the external world inward.

History too is a radically personal endeavor, not external to the self, but is a "private experience" which reveals internal truths. "Our age is bewailed as the age of Introversion," he opines. "Must that needs be evil?" ("The American Scholar," 67-68). In this project, others lose their personhood, "converted in the mind into solid and sweet wisdom" (*Nature*, 31). Emerson's project assimilates the external world with our perception of it, offering an epistemology that is in a sense deeply subjective. Friends are not foremost companions, but concepts of "sweet wisdom" that further the individualistic project of self-discovery. For, according to Emerson, only "ideal affinities" are "real" (*Nature*, 36). We are the authors of our realities, "coming up with the emphatic facts of history in our private experience, and verifying them here. *All history becomes subjective; in other words, there is properly no history; only biography*" ("History," 240, emphasis added).

Emerson does not so much weigh-in on the rationalist-empiricist debate, as brush the controversy aside completely. If there exists external knowledge, it cannot contribute to one's self, which is wholly ideal and self-contained. "Books," he writes, "are for the scholar's idle times" ("The American Scholar," 58). Ideas come from within, from introspection, rather than careful examination of the external world. Thus, "Not he is great who can alter matter, but he who can alter my state of mind" ("The American Scholar," 65). Ultimately, "The world is nothing, the man is all; in yourself is the law of all nature" ("The American Scholar," 70). In effect, one internally possesses the means fully to self-actualize

independent of the external world.

The onto-epistemology at work here is definitively internal and of the self. Political and ethical demands conform to this reality, thereby providing an “importance given to the single person. Everything that tends to insulate the individual,—to surround him with barriers of natural respect, so that each man shall feel the world is his, and man shall treat with man as a sovereign state with a sovereign state” (*Nature*, 70). No simple bonds hold us accountable to a common law, since the ontology of the world partitions us as individuals, politically and ethically, divorcing us of duties to one another. When we come to understand how the universe is constituted, it becomes incumbent on us to direct our actions accordingly, thereby running together ontology and ethics. Reading Emerson as straightforwardly political in this context fails to reckon with the text’s most basic commitments.

The payoff, however, is undoubtedly a terrifically empowering brand of American philosophy. Through introspection and contemplation, individuals can discover all the truths of the universe. Distance does not hinder our acumen as, “The near explains the far. The drop is a small ocean. A man is related to all nature” (“The American Scholar,” 69). Similarly, “Each particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world” (*Nature*, 30). In Emerson’s philosophy, where the part is commensurate with the whole, even the divine is just another manifestation of the self as he contends that “I am part or particle of God” (*Nature*, 10). Robert Richardson understands this feature of Emerson’s thought, “not as anthropomorphism, but its antithesis, theomorphism” (1995:152).

The confluence of Emerson’s normative and onto-epistemological projects is no more clear, however, than in “Self-Reliance.” Beyond self-sufficiency, the piece articulates a duty to be wholly atomistic and independent. When we imitate or reproduce the ideas of others, we lose what is unique about ourselves and commit no less than an act of suicide (“Self-Reliance,” 259). Great sculpture and painting are not produced by mimicry, but are “something original and not conventional” (“Self-Reliance,” 259), expressing a “preestablished harmony” (“Self-Reliance,” 260) with the world. Individual pursuits are granted moral primacy as only the individual is capable of obtaining truth and greatness. This notion “that society is a means for the ends of individuals, who are themselves ends,” leads George Kateb to remark that, “Emerson’s work is soaked in democratic spirit” (Kateb [1995]: 179). But like “sentiment,” the word “democracy” has many meanings. Emerson vivifies an American individualism, arguing that we are all distinct, unconstrained by the

whims of others.

But this contention undermines the very terms of a society. According to Emerson, membership in a wider community requires sacrificing liberty, obliging “conformity,” and forgoing the sovereignty that one is naturally due (“Self-Reliance,” 261). As such, political association appears to be not only a distraction, but entirely at odds with the pursuit of self-reliance.

Despite the protest of John Dewey and George Kateb, it is hard to construe Emerson as an obvious proponent of any political project. Emerson explicitly critiques institutional politics, writing that “any laws but those which men make for themselves, are laughable” (“Politics,” 567). To conform to an external law would be to regard the wrong reasons. “Good and bad,” he writes, “are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong that which is against it” (“Self-Reliance,” 262). Consequently, Emerson believes that “[t]he wise skeptic is a bad citizen” (“Montaigne or, the Skeptic,” 702); which is why ultimately, “[g]ood men must not obey the law too well” (“Politics,” 563). This is not to say that no moral duties exist. In fact, he believes that we are obliged to conform to an internal law (“Self-Reliance,” 274). What he argues is that others cannot make demands of us on merely “external” grounds.

As Emerson directs the reader to be concerned with an internal life, external domains such as nature, history, and even other people come to be construed as projections of our internal selves. Though there are scattered passages where Emerson articulates the independent existence of an external reality, these instances are in the clear minority.³ To consider the natural world or the human past for Emerson is ultimately to wind

³ Possibly the most vivid instance of this affirmation of an external reality might be cited. While I argued that Emerson’s history is an imagined narrative of past events, he appears to contradict this interpretation at the end of “History,” writing, “But along with the civil and metaphysical history of man, another history goes daily forward,—that of the external world,—in which he is not less strictly implicated. . . . A man is a bundle of relations, a knot of roots, whose flower and fruitage is the world. His faculties refer to natures out of him, and predict the world he is to inhabit, as the fins of the fish foreshadow that water exists, or the wings of an eagle in the egg presuppose air. He cannot live without a world. Put Napoleon in an island prison, let his faculties find no men to act on, no Alps to climb, no stake to play for, and he would beat the air and appear stupid” (“History,” 253-54). Here, however, Emerson demonstrably breaks the text (there is actually a bar preceding the paragraph, separating it from the one before) and explicitly acknowledges that an “external world” does indeed exist. What is most significant about this passage is his contention that others, even great individuals such as Napoleon, need embodied others to interact with and terra firma on which to roam. An imagined existence is not sufficient to satisfy one’s spiritual needs.

up back in one's own mind. Given that politics, and democracy in particular, requires the construction of a collective whole, it is difficult to cast Emerson as offering a political theory. However, the next section argues that Emerson does provide resources for constructing elements of citizenship and other-regardingness through a Humean form of sympathy.

III. The Politics of Sympathy

Emerson certainly appears confident of his claims, but why should we accept them? What evidence does he offer to persuade us that the world is indeed radically internal? Though nowhere in his *Essays and Lectures* does he provide a clear standard by which to judge the validity of his project, there is a reference point that goes some way to providing an answer.

Near the beginning of "Self-Reliance," Emerson argues that one must produce works of true originality, never imitating others. "Trust thyself," he admonishes. But what reason do I have to trust myself? Well, he claims that, "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" ("Self-Reliance," 260). I could just accept, as a matter of fact, that "great men have always done so," but this still does not provide a good reason to trust myself. Emerson has not established that great people are great because they have trusted themselves. Furthermore, given his metaethics, what reason could great men give me to act in a certain way, particularly after being implored to be original and not imitate others?

Even were we to accept divine provenance, how might we know what it is? He tells us that "every heart vibrates to that iron string," every soul responds to the dictum of self-reliance. The fact that we have an internal resonance with this truth provides such evidence. This language of vibration and resonance recalls David Hume's discussion of sympathy in *A Treatise on Human Nature*. There, in 3.3.1.7 Hume states,

We may begin with considering anew the nature and force of *sympathy*. . . . As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest; so all the affections readily pass from one person to another, and beget correspondent movements in every human creature. When I see the *effects* of passion in the voice and gesture of any person, my mind immediately passes from these effects to their causes, and forms such a lively idea of passion, as is presently converted into the passion itself (Hume, 2000: 368).

While Emerson does not provide a detailed account of the resonance he has in mind, Hume might help us here. Hume's account of sympathy specifies a response to the pain or pleasure of another. Like the tendency of a string to vibrate at the same frequency as another, simply due to some inherent, resonant property, people too naturally respond in kind to the pleasure or pain of others. Given the proper context, this response produces an internal moral duty on the part of the sympathizer to alleviate the pain of the object of his sympathy.

Much of Hume's account of sympathy accords well with Emerson's premise "that every heart vibrates to that iron string" of self-reliance. Emerson's account of persuasion runs something like this: The charge "trust thyself" triggers a person's sympathetic response to assess the subjective truth-value of the charge to be self-reliant. There need not be a sophisticated appeal to an external standard of goodness. Rather, Emersonian agents just possess an internal mechanism which responds affirmatively to the text's claim.⁴ Before facilitating other-directed responsibility, Emerson believes sympathy can move us to acknowledge the validity of external claims, like the ones we encounter in his writings. This capacity for sympathy is particularly suited to Emerson's thought, because its effects, according to Hume, are internal and unmediated, naturally directing us outwards.

Emerson had studied Enlightenment writings and those of the Scottish Enlightenment, Hume and Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in particular. As Richardson writes, Emerson was distinctly affected by the "teaching of Scottish Common Sense that we all possess something called the moral sense or the moral sentiment, which is anchored in the emotional, feeling, sympathetic part of human nature" (Richardson, 1995: 32). Yet, Emerson was deeply troubled by much of Hume's epistemology and, according to Richardson, "To a great extent Emerson's life and work—indeed, transcendentalism itself—constitutes a refutation of Hume" (ibid.: 31). Given Emerson's profound struggle with Hume's ideas, it is not surprising that Humean concerns found their way into the deepest regions of Emerson's thought. Ironically, though Emerson preferred the writings of Smith to those of Hume, Smith's formulation of sympathy is incompatible with Emerson's epistemology. Smith maintained that sympathy involves simulating another's world *from her perspective*. Insofar as individuals are wholly distinct and independent

⁴ Since Hume's mechanism of sympathy only comes to evaluate the pain and pleasure of others, we might cast this as a proto-sympathy. My claim is that Emerson borrows and extends the Humean concept.

for Emerson, such empathic simulation, if it assumes something like copying, simply is not possible. Humean sympathetic contagion, which does not violate the distinctiveness of one's internal consciousness, is a more apt mechanism for bridging internal and external worlds. So while Emerson may have sought to push back against Hume, Emerson's familiarity with his writings appears to have left an indelible mark on his philosophy.

This mechanism of sympathetic response recurs in his writings. When Emerson explains how people can obtain truth by "read[ing] God directly" he employs an Arab proverb, "A fig tree, looking on a fig tree, becometh fruitful" ("American Scholar," 58). This verse asserts that we come to understand others merely by observing them, which is again similar to Hume's notion of emotional contagion. In "American Scholar," he claims that our knowledge of nature's order is given by sympathy, that we and nature "proceed from one root; one is leaf and the other is flower; relation, sympathy, stirring in every vein" ("American Scholar," 55). He claims that, "We learn of our contemporaries what they know, without effort, and almost through the pores of our skin. We catch it by sympathy" ("The Uses of Great Men," 627). In "Literary Ethics," Emerson writes that when one "sees how much thought he owes to the disagreeable antagonism of various persons who pass and cross him, he can easily think that in a society of perfect sympathy, no word, no act, no record would be" ("Literary Ethics," 110). Sympathy is the means of overlooking our crass resentment of others in the pursuit of true social bonds. Echoing the process of sympathy, he describes the connection between friends as a "match[ing of] my mood with thine" ("Friendship," 345). The efficacy of sympathy explains why, for Emerson, society would need to be premised on love and friendship rather than constituted by impersonal monetary obligations ("Politics," 567). Large abstract associations cannot generate inter-personal obligations. The only legitimate bonds would be those forged through personal and direct contact.⁵ One detects here a sensibility difficult also to reconcile with centralized, collectivistic mass democracy.

Emerson thus subscribes to a theory of Humean sympathy, a social bond spreading resonantly through emotional contagion. This mechanism allows one to acknowledge both the veracity of claims and responsibilities towards others. And though it is true that in some of his writing, such as in the essays "Love" and "Friendship," the text ultimately turns inwards, the role of sympathy comes to catalyze the initial move

⁵ A point echoed by Gurley (2007) on page 330, for instance.

towards being other-regarding. The power of sympathy may posit the kind of “political friendship” that a thinker like Danielle Allen would advocate, predicated on the “recognition about what we share with the people who live around us and in the same polity” (Allen, 2006: xxii). Emerson’s political commitments are wholly invested in particular people and their ability to internalize shared emotional and epistemic realities.

The role that proximate sympathetic contact plays in Emerson’s thought can be seen most vividly in a troubling passage from “Self-Reliance,” in which he dismisses his duties to both family and the indigent, a moment at which he appears not very sympathetic. Emerson embraces nonconformity because he feels so strongly that we ought to remain predominantly solitary. But the language of “Self-Reliance” is more than solitary—it sounds harsh and cruel. He writes,

I shun father and mother and wife and brother, when my genius calls me. I would write on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim*. . . . Then, again, do not tell me, as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they *my* poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong. There is a class of persons to whom by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold; for them I will go to prison, if need be; but your miscellaneous popular charities; the education at college of fools; the building of meeting-houses to the vain end to which many now stand; alms to sots; and the thousandfold Relief Societies;—though I confess with shame I sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is a wicked dollar which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold (“Self-Reliance,” 262-63).

I believe that, contrary to appearances, the passage is not meant to express disdain. Rather, it evinces Emerson’s contrarian impulses, simultaneously refusing to patronize the poor and implicitly contesting John 12:8, “The poor you shall always have with you,” thereby critiquing self-satisfied philanthropists who care more about causes than people (Dauber, 1994: 225). But surely the reader is expected to cringe here. Why, then, must he present himself as begrudging the poor and slighting his family in such an apparently distasteful manner?

Judith Shklar writes that “Self-Reliance” is an essay “in which the boundaries of democracy would appear to be crossed by the call to each of us to create our own world and to acknowledge our isolation. Here, Emerson seems quite prepared to flout the democratic creed in his enthusiasm for the self-reliant individual, but, in fact, he avoids a full assault and backs off from it” (Shklar, 1990: 602). Shklar claims that Emerson generally believes society to be a conspiracy against its members and

that a person must sometimes cut even close familial ties to maintain integrity. But his dismissal of the poor requires unpacking. Addressing this concern she continues,

Dissociation could hardly go further. He certainly means to shock his readers. He also does so in order to demonstrate his indifference to any obligation that is not self-made. The impact is, however, softened at once by irony. He confesses with shame and regret that, in fact, he is too weak to refuse a dollar to the poor. The principle remains intact, the joke is on him, and he has not withdrawn himself from fellowship after all (Shklar, 1990: 602).

Emerson's passage is meant to be encountered ironically. An 1850 dollar, after all, is a considerable amount of money.⁶ As Shklar explains, Emerson's self-proclaimed weakness is really evidence of the project's strength. Emerson's cold-hearted insistence on self-reliance belies that even he cannot (and likely never will) ignore others' pleas. Though he claims that one day it will be possible, it is hard to take him seriously. Indeed, we are never meant to take him at his word. But why does he succumb? It is because he was asked, because someone directly confronted him with a need and he was impelled to respond. True, it is not his duty, "to put *all* poor men in good situations," only those that appeal to him directly. The need of *all* the poor is just too vague to stir the necessary sentiment to generate a moral obligation. The idea of "the poor" cannot elicit sympathy, only the embodied poor can.

The lack of proximity also accounts for why he was famously disengaged from abolitionism until later in his career. In "The Fugitive Slave Law," he explains that before the law was passed, the blight of slavery did not affect him as a citizen of Massachusetts. "I never in my life up to this time suffered from the Slave Institution. Slavery in Virginia or Carolina was like Slavery in Africa or the Feejees, for me. There was an old fugitive law, but it had become, or was fast becoming, a dead letter, and, by the genius and laws of Massachusetts, inoperative. The new Bill made it operative, required me to hunt slaves, and it found citizens in Massachusetts willing to act as judges and captors" (Emerson [2000]: 784). Emerson's claim is not that slavery is tolerable, but that the distance between him and the harmed prevented him from being implicated, from being responsible (Gurley, 2007: 330). Donald Pease finds something similar noting that, "in addition to their geographical distance, the black folk of Barbados also represented barriers to sympathetic identification"

⁶ Pegged to the Consumer Price Index, an 1850 dollar has a present value of \$28. It is worth \$420, however, if inflation is pegged to GDP per capita. Either way it is not an insignificant amount.

(Pease, 2007: 92). Once the law threatened to involve him by perverting his community, he was impelled to protest. This aspect of Emerson's thought draws attention to both strengths and weaknesses of his politics. On the one hand, he is unfeeling for those he cannot see, in whose suffering he does not consider himself directly implicated. On the other, his response to local injustice is adamant and deeply personal.

Contrast this with Emerson at his most detached and isolated, at the beginning of "Experience" when writing of the loss of his son. Reflecting on his grief, he writes that, "souls never touch their objects. An innavigable sea washes with the silent waves between us and the things we aim to converse with. Grief too will make us idealists. In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate,—no more" ("Experience," 473). But it is the absence of his son that provokes him to "idealize" the world, prompting an internal loneliness. Though his grieved state deprives him of the capacity for love, there is no reason for us to be similarly skeptical, outside of such a state of mourning.

In contrast to Emerson's essays, his correspondence and autobiographical writings abjure grand and aloof rhetoric. His speech on behalf of the abolitionist John Brown illustrates the point. In addition to lauding Brown's cause, Emerson praises him for "cherish[ing] a great respect for his father, as a man of strong character" (Emerson [2000]: 795). It is for such a person, of "courage and integrity" who "interfered on behalf of the despised poor," that Emerson shares "sympathy and sorrow" (ibid.). Others are implicated in Brown's suffering because, "Nothing can resist the sympathy which all elevated minds must feel with [him]" (ibid.: 796). Sympathy unites people "of elevated minds," affecting those who share similar moral concerns, prompting action. It moves us both to acknowledge the validity of the cause as well as feel for those who have been violated. Emerson's praise for Brown is not a case of whimsy or introversion, but of practical dedication to abolitionism and to his family. Emerson bookends his remarks by drawing upon the sympathy of his listeners, calling "all who are in sympathy with him" to fight for his cause (ibid.: 798).

Likewise, when he discusses his step-grandfather Ezra Ripley, he is not primarily concerned with the idea of the man, but with his person. "He was open-handed and generous. Ingratitude and meanness in his beneficiaries did not wear out his compassion; he bore the insult, and the next day his basket for the beggar, his horse and chaise for the cripple, were at their door" (Emerson (2000): 747). Ripley was a caring and sympathetic individual, and Emerson did not overlook his practical virtues.

These examples of interest in and appreciation for actual persons need not conflict with the more impersonal tone of his essays, but rather show how the sympathy travels across his work and life.

Sympathy allows an Emersonian agent to move beyond her internal self in two ways. Sympathy moves us to assess the validity of an external claim, like the admonishments of Emerson's own text, and also allows us to feel responsible to others, by internalizing the proximate claims they make on us. Sympathy is what brings these about, given that it is an internal feature of our person. The forums in which Emerson's essays were initially presented reflect the manner of sympathetic contagion that Emerson has in mind. He often presented his essays at small readings, such as at the Social Circle of Concord, a group of roughly twenty-five members that rotated through various homes, the chairs arranged in a circle to promote discussion. Emerson intended to bond with his listeners and readers, generating community by engaging an audience with shared epistemic commitments.

In this vein Stanley Cavell has a straightforward response to George Kateb's aptly put question: "What provision has Emerson made for a self-reliant individual to work with others, to cooperate and collaborate?" His answer is that the text itself draws the reader in, encircling her. Cavell claims that Emerson entitles his essay "Circles,"

[I]n effect proposing that an essay is a circle, [which] suggests that each Emerson essay draws a circle around each other. . . . Each of the countless identifications he makes of his relation to his readers takes them one by one, as a book does. In a sense he makes a circle with each reader; and in a sense he and the reader make two circles, each around the other, depending on whose turn it is; but in a sense there is no circle yet since there are only two points, a writer and a reader, which determines just a line (Cavell, 1994: 956).⁷

The written form that his project takes demonstrates that Emerson does believe that text can move people outside themselves. There are,

⁷ Cavell argues here that each person who reads Emerson is placed into a direct relationship with the text and with its other readers. The act of reading (and responding to) the text itself creates a kind of political community. This observation nicely explains an odd passage in "The American Scholar" mentioned above in which Emerson derides books as being "for the scholar's idle times" ("The American Scholar," 58). But, of course, we learn this while reading a book. Indeed, Emerson is not deriding all books here, only the practice of endowing the object with a sacredness which inhibits our ability to engage with the meaning therein. According to Cavell, the text succeeds at placing us in a direct relationship with the author's ideas, potentiating our reaction to it. Either our hearts vibrate or they do not, but our engagement with the text makes it possible to locate others with shared commitments.

however, few passages that feature real people. Emerson consistently writes in the impersonal abstract. Masculine indefinite pronoun passionately loves feminine indefinite pronoun; I would go to jail for an undisclosed friend. But when actual people are involved—a poor man this morning, Emerson’s late son, Brown, Ripley, the reader—he cannot help but acknowledge a sympathetic resonance he has to others. This resonance generates both shared understanding and shared responsibility. Given Shklar’s ironic reading of a long passage quoted from “Self-Reliance,” one is inclined to read his line “are they my poor?” in a similar vein: *yes, they are your poor*. By virtue of the fact that you come into direct contact with another person, you are responsible to him.

In responding to the text, a responsibility comes to be posited with the community of Emersonian readers, with whom I share a means of persuasion, a “spiritual affinity.” In this case, the set of items to which I am responsible—to which I respond—contains both myself and Emerson’s text. By acknowledging that as responsive readers we are persuaded by Emerson’s arguments, the text creates the possibility that we find ourselves responsible to one another as readers; others for whom we would go to jail. Cavell’s move here draws straight from the imagery of “Circles.” “The life of man is a self-evolving circle. . . . The extent to which this generation of circles, wheel without wheel, will go, depends on the force or truth of the individual soul” (“Circles,” 404). And it is through the resonance of the individual with the ideas of the text that this community grows, through the “truth of the individual soul.” It “self-evolves,” in that it grows by the same sympathetic process through which one comes to acknowledge all external truths. Emerson has successfully articulated a community through text that has the person at its center, while also moving them to be other-regarding. These modes of responsibility are motivated by direct engagement, whether in person or by way of the text. It would appear that this folding together of people and prose appeals to Emerson.

IV. What It Is to Be a Political Emersonian

Emerson’s work admits a theory of political actors, rather than a comprehensive political theory. Though he is not a good republican democrat, his essays do offer a means of moving outside ourselves to engage others who inhabit the space around us. This interpretation rebuffs criticisms leveled by scholars such as Cornel West (1987) or Sacvan Bercovitch (1993), who take aim at pragmatic or liberal readings of Emerson, like those that make him out to be an uncomplicated democrat. My

account, in contrast, construes Emerson as admitting the possibility of political actors bound by close sympathetic ties.

While his texts, particularly the essays, tend to interpret external phenomena and experiences as features of one's internal consciousness, sympathy can move us outwards to acknowledge external truths, our responsibility towards others, and even create a community of readers. As Krause notes, the politics of sympathy can create some of the most meaningful and powerful impulses of our political lives. Whether Krause's emotional leanings and political preference are or are not the same as Emerson's is an open question, but she views Emersonian sympathy as the vehicle for social bonding: "Women's suffrage, the end of Jim Crow laws, and the recent advances in freedom and equality for gay people in the United States are . . . products of the politics of passion. In the course of American history, the sympathetic communication of sentiments has extended the generalized standpoint of moral sentiment so as to include the feelings and the concerns of many previously excluded groups in new ways" (Krause, 2008: 200). The kind of politics that Emerson admits seems compatible with the kind of affective posture that Krause describes. They both see sympathy as a means to create substantive and meaningful social bonds which can bring about a humane brand of politics.

Attention to these political openings in Emerson's text yields a richer account of political experience and citizenship. Resisting a politics of rights and duties, he develops an epistemology and phenomenology of interiority and explores the circumstances under which one might move beyond one's self. Insofar as one affirmatively responds to the text, sympathy brings one to acknowledge the ontological and normative grounds of his project. The internal construction of sympathy makes it the right vehicle for bridging the onto-epistemic chasm that divides people. Only a feature internal to individuals could point them outward, bringing them to recognize external claims.

The sorts of communities to which such sympathetic affinities give rise may not be enough to sustain a robust political community, but this form of attachment is a key contribution to the construction of political life. Sentimental theorists of Emerson's type might well push us further, asking us to use the capacity for resonance to strengthen our moral muscle and expand the ambit of our sympathies. And while I do not mean to belittle supposedly pressing questions of systemic inequality and distributive justice, we might pay attention to modes of citizenship that are consonant with Emerson's account of subjectivity in order to

make politics responsive to persons as well as to the more diffuse collective “the people.”

Emerson allows for other-directed responsibility only through direct contact facilitated by sympathy. That contact might come because I share epistemic motivations with others, because I see another in need, or via a text that creates community through overlapping commitments. Sympathy acts by contagion to move people to share similar commitments. The account of Emerson here does not offer a political theory that can be “scaled up” to explain the construction of political bonds at the level of the state. That being said, taking note of Emerson’s sympathetic politics ought to motivate us to consider the special duties that these affective and proximate bonds of community engender.

The political life of an Emersonian actor need not be inconsequential, as the life of Salinger illustrates. I imagine that being J.D. Salinger is different from reflecting upon J.D. Salinger, much the same way that reading Shakespeare is different from writing Shakespeare—a point which Margaret Salinger was instructed by her father to keep in mind. And this is what I understand Emerson to mean when writing, “Shakespeare will never be made by the study of Shakespeare” (“Self-Reliance,” 279). Salinger felt alienated from the literary community of his readers as an author and reader do not confront the same text. Overwhelmed by requests to engage distant readers and publishers, he retired to Cornish to be surrounded by family and a close-knit New England community. Though he was fiercely self-reliant, he was not, as his daughter points out, rugged or self-sufficient. Being self-reliant is neither as grand nor as cold as one might think.

According to Ross, one of Salinger’s favorite lines was taken from Emerson’s journal of June the 8th, 1838. “A man must have aunts and cousins, must buy carrots and turnips, must have barn and woodshed, must go to market and to the blacksmith’s shop, must saunter and sleep and be inferior and silly” (Ross, 2010). Salinger understood Emerson well. The kind of deep fellow-feeling that Emerson writes of resonated with him as a member of the literati, but also with him as the member of a family.⁸ Though Emerson’s formal essays grapple with (un-turnip-like) transcendent objects, his personal commitments lay with, among other things, family, friends, and turnips. Both he and Salinger understood that responsibility obtained locally in New England. This was not despite their high-mindedness, but because of it.

⁸ Emerson is known to have had a very close relationship with his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, in particular (Richardson, 1995).

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