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**Readings in the (Un) Divided Self: Edwards,
Emerson, Frost and Cummings**

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**Thesis in partial fulfillment of the Master of Arts
The University of Ottawa, Department of English,**

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Abstract:

In this thesis I have tried to evaluate the literary affiliation shared by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Jonathan Edwards, Robert Frost and E.E. Cummings. In his ethics of mental self-reliance Emerson recapitulates some of Edwards's Puritan ideas on the relation of self to reality. The tension that emerges as the self-relying/ self-denying dialectic in Emerson's writing is an extension of Edwards's prescriptions to try to attain contact with the immanent presence of divinity in the individual soul. This dualism of nature and consciousness and the self's attempts to overcome it become the fissure in the foundations of American individualism laid by Emerson and his principle New England forbear. The intellectual inheritance received by Frost and Cummings is thus ambiguous between transcendental idealism and a tough-minded realism: their struggle with the question of causality gives way to existential concerns. In Frost, idealism is born of a will to power or tendency towards creative expression that is commensurate with Emerson's endeavour to express spiritual power in material form. Many Frost figures cultivate a strong sense of idealism about existence and the natural world as they embark on their all-consuming journeys through interior regions. Their poetic dematerialisation of the landscape is a conglomeration of phenomena that are shaped and ordered by their minds. The naturalistic orientation some of them develop is the result of having suffered the consequences of fear and isolation brought on by circumscribing their realities according to the dictates of their minds' consciousness.

Cummings offers another aesthetically imbued philosophical interpretation of these two ways of perceiving. In *The Enormous Room*, his incarceration functions as a metaphor for those imprisoned in themselves. On his autobiographical quest, he discovers that self-authored truths, singularly perceived through the mind's eye, prove insufficient to those soul-sick in their search for transcendent ministrations. To claim ontological independence as the self-caused source and totality of one's being is to betray an extreme egocentrism. From the solipsism inherent in living the wholly self-reliant life, Cummings can emerge only on the condition that he passes beyond the limits of the ego. In his epiphany with the Wooden Man, the symbol of his soulful "I-Thou" exchange, he enters into a genuine encounter with the sublime presence of divinity that is not psychologically appropriated. The cubist methods with which he illustrates the marriage of Emerson's immanent "buzz and din" and "infinite and paradise" reveals that cosmic reconciliation is the reward gained by those willing to deny that they are the centre of their own being.

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Preface

This account of American transcendentalism attempts to describe and interpret one of its signal tensions in relation to three New England writers who, in their literary connection with Emerson, find themselves in a quandary that implicates his theories of self-transcendence and mental self-reliance. To the extent that the aspiring self abnegates an unyielding self-centeredness through an assimilation of transcendental modes of consciousness, to the extent that "all mean egotism vanishes," according to Emerson in his essay *Nature* (1836), it becomes "part and particle with God" and so fulfils its own potential.¹ But Emerson's desire for self-transcendence leads to the solipsized ordeal wherein his struggle to deny himself evinces his undeniable self-reliance, and his self-abnegating labours, an assertion of the self he would transcend. In this thesis I have set out to examine how this self-denying/ self-relying tension qualifies the spiritual promotion of self and to suggest its relevance to our understanding of works by Jonathan Edwards, Robert Frost and E.E. Cummings. My choice of these writers has been determined by the ways in which their work has helped establish American transcendentalism as a distinct conception of the self's spiritual relation to the world. This constitutes then the justification for the eclectic nature of this study: these writers, effacing themselves in laboriously presenting their sentiments of the higher realm, thus engage in the incessant battle waged by the soul in Emerson's essays. In an introductory chapter, I elaborate his connection with Jonathan

¹ *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays* ed. Larzer Ziff (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1982), p. 39. All citations of Emerson are taken from this edition.

Edwards and discuss Puritanism as the point of origin for this tension in New England transcendentalist writing. In Chapter Two I have tried to determine the extent to which Emerson's conception of the idealist poet can enhance our reading of Robert Frost's poetry. Chapter Three is a study of the cubist method that E.E. Cummings employs in *The Enormous Room* (1922) to represent a more viable mode of self-transcendence and facilitate the self's ascension into a higher form, without displaying the solipsistic repercussions of Emerson's idealism.

In striving toward the realisation of his immaterial identity, Emerson tries to stay intimately in touch with a world beyond the boundaries of narrow experience. Yet he insists that the "inward analysis must be corrected by rough experience," and metaphysics, reinforced by life (112). His principal insight is "the perfection of the laws of the soul," but its absence is "the presence of degradation," in the "sty of sensualism" in which "one soon comes to suicide." Of the clangour and jangle of these contrary states of being, Emerson insists that we "must have antagonism in the tough world for all the variety of our spiritual faculties, or they will not be born." Now addressing himself to actual life, now allowing the abstractions of his mind's consciousness to direct his perspective beyond the flux of experience, the individual striving for perfection does so with an unresolved antithesis in his soul. Stephen Whicher has remarked that this is due to the fact that Emerson, "like all Puritans was an extremist" (44).² With an "infirm faith" and a "will not strenuous," he could well lament the vast ebb and flow of spiritual power within him and feel the contrast between being "a weed by the wall" and "a God in nature."

Although Emerson's life-long obligation to the dual realms of unbiased

² Steven Whicher, "Emerson's Tragic Sense" in *A Collection of Critical Essays* eds. Milton R. Konitz and Stephen E. Whicher (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1962), P. 42.

experience and pure spirit remained irreconcilable, it is from precisely this constructive tension that his principal theories derive. From self-denial and renunciation to an undivided affirmation of the will, Emerson sought the fullness of human life in his ethics of self-reliance. Establishing its mission as a mystical union of what he called the spheral and ethereal realms, his theory of the sovereign individual flourished as the most pervasive literary expression of American identity struggling to form itself. As a genre of introspection this struggle for direct self-reliance has been a formidable strain in American literature from its inception in the early New England culture. In our study of mental self-reliance as it developed in Emerson's writing, we can observe the Protestant projection of a continuously perfectible identity gradually being stripped of its veneer of professed religious idealism, to reveal the philosophy of transcendentalism. In its manifest tensions and ambiguities, transcendentalism demands of its followers a synthesis of two contrastive systems of perception. Materialism and idealism are "the two sects," writes Emerson in "The Transcendentalist" (1842), into which "mankind has ever divided," with "the first class founding upon experience," the second upholding consciousness as "the higher nature" (239). As the nation's paramount visionary, Emerson always favoured the ideal image to which he would adapt the living reality. In pursuit of the hypervisual ideal of the search for a consciousness of perfection, he believed that the spheral self could ascend into a higher form by merit of the spiritual force dwelling "within the form of every creature." Instinct, intuition or primary wisdom, these then are the sources of the "aboriginal Self," the creature standing on the boundary between heaven and earth, upon which he grounded "an universal reliance" (191).

Since it is imagination which makes possible the passage of spiritual

meaning into immanent forms, Emerson developed his understanding of the self's relation to true reality by defining the poet's role rather than further reexamining, as he intended in his essay *Nature* (1836), the duality of nature and the self. As the final realisation of his vocational quest, the poet sees with his transparent eye-ball into the dual spheres of actual and transcendent life. But his imagination or spiritual insight "is a very high sort of seeing," and it comes "by the intellect being where and what it sees" (26). Hence with nothing existing objectively in itself outside the confines of his mind's consciousness, he effects a separation of self from the natural world by trying to educe the spiritual expressions of material reality, and the dualism breaks down as a result of his perceiving these appearances wholly with his mind's eye. Some critics have overlooked this fact by encouraging the notion that the poet's mind, "in its struggle with the world [and]. . . in its compulsion to strengthen and realise itself," gives birth "to the world of the 'Not Me', so as to have a field of resistance. . . against which it could. . . ultimately perfect itself."³ The ego, positing "itself to itself as the non-ego," M.H. Abrams remarks, enacts "an infinite striving against a resisting non-self."⁴ The inward analysis must indeed be corrected by rough experience. But if, as Emerson claims, "the nature of sun and moon, plant and animal" is "only a means to arousing his interior activity," if, that is, the "last fact behind which analysis cannot go" is "that it is the eye which makes the horizon," then Emerson's world of "buzz and din" is not at all the *agon* of the resisting "non-self." To the extent that he seems to support his faith in the ontology of the poet's mind-consciousness, his psychology of self-perfection becomes a metaphysic, and his world, merely the

³ Richard Lee Francis, "The Poet and Experience: Essays: Second Series" in *Emerson Centenary Essays* (New York: Double Day Press) p. 127.

⁴ M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: Norton Co., 1971) p. 173.

realisation of his own will. To create this new invisible order, as Nietzsche has said, is to experience "the world in the very form he sees it." It is also to perceive with "an eye that lied," he adds, the poet using his transparent eyeball for the creation of "beatifying lies" protectively to be-cloud his mind.⁵

In defining the poet's process of ceaselessly transforming the actual into the ideal, one critic describes the experience of self-effacement in Emerson's writing as the destruction of self that necessarily precedes its re-formation "in the image of perfection."⁶ Self-renunciation is the way of finding oneself, but the self he comes to believe in is an *isolato* moving deeper into himself. On this side of his artistic surrender, the poet's metaphysic effectively renounces the world of rough experience. There is then neither an effacement of identity nor even a "non-self" posited as a by-product of the ideal. In defending the value of the poet's isolation, Nietzsche protests in *The Genealogy of Morals* that what people call "a flight from reality" is really "his absorption, immersion, penetration into reality."⁷ Yet here the poet, while operating under the veil of self-transcendence, seeks to gain heights of consciousness by exploring the hidden recesses of self which he calls reality on a new plane. Displaying himself to himself in all his glory, his is a vision, as Emerson began to suspect, circumscribed only by the limitations of his mind. In the months following the writing of "The Poet" (*Essays, Second Series*, vol 1, 1844), Emerson realised that he had become blind to the world of living realities. Still struggling with this worst feature of the transcendentalist's double consciousness, he acknowledged that he had yet failed to achieve, "in his own ivory tower of illusion," a "degree

⁵ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Vintage Press, 1980), p. 56.

⁶ Stephen Donadio, "Emerson, Christian Identity, and the Dissolution of Social Order," in *Art, Politics, and Will: Essays in Honour of Lionel Trilling* eds. Quentin Anderson, Stephen Donadio, Steven Marcus (New York: Basic Books, 1977), pp. 120-121.

⁷ Nietzsche, p. 47.

of withdrawal similar to that of the art for art's sake artist."⁸

Emerson's disagreement with a totalising idealism becomes more pronounced when his awareness of having sacrificed his actual life to his life of the mind greatly increases. His realisation is that a wholesale dedication to intellectual rather than personal matters has come to exclude him from the very life his writing proclaimed. His aspirations for the poet as mediator thus required further, more subdued considerations than those offered with such extravagance in "The Poet." In search of the secure restrictions of experience, his attempt to order the substance of human life resulted in a point of view on that substance, and this is the perspective of "Experience" (*Essays, Second Series*, vol 1, 1844). Taking as its subject his former illusions of hope and certainty, this essay recounts his progress from self-assurance, which is the obvious subtext to "The Poet," to the attitudes of self-effacement that underwrite the difference between the integration and the extreme fragmentation of his ideal vision. The uncertainty he betrays was a function of his looming sense of defeat and incompleteness in his evolving sense of the self. It was a natural consequence of having devoted so much of his intellectual energy to immaterial hopes. Here he wants with increasing intensity to remove himself from the abstractions of his mind's eye, as if the gravity of his loss was actually dragging him earthward. Emerson never lost his belief that there was a "double meaning" to "every sensuous fact," but as he continued in his attempts to reconcile his insistence on the "eternality of art and its fluxional manifestation which is human creativity," he felt less obliged to the ideals he could never grasp.⁹ Since "Beauty" is the visual manifestation of the infinite realm only the poet can see, then its qualities are necessarily lost or at best

⁸ Donadio, p. 122.

⁹ Donadio, p. 98.

fabricated in his expression of it in the finite realm. Inhabitants of the "world of approximations, of similitudes only," in another critic's words, find that there can be no "balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant elements in a world constituted of and ruled by the logic of contradiction and separation." The idealist's aim, as Emerson implies in his later essays, "is consequently impracticable, and his vision of a beatific unity on earth a chimera."¹⁰

Throughout what follows, then, the stress is on what I take to be milestones or points of development in Emerson's explanation of the self-reliant subject as they relate to the New England authors in this study, three writers involved in their own version of the self's struggle to work out its relation to the dual realms of matter and spirit. They too seek to form an idealised sense of self that is yet nuclear and cohesive, but their desire to change the existing realities of the self's antagonism is expressed by virtue of an inward focused subjectivity. Hence one critic calls Jonathan Edwards "a man uncannily and instinctually aware of the narcissistic line of personality development," and argues that "The colonial Calvinist community not only encouraged such a fragmentation of self, but indeed demanded it in order to be considered a fully franchised member of society."¹¹ Another critic writes that his method "is one of progressive self-effacement" that aims to resolve "the contradictions between self and society." It is indeed "a model of selfhood grounded in Christian exegesis and homiletics."¹² Yet Edwards rewrites the tenets of rationalist ontology by insisting that "this world has a being. . . only in the divine consciousness." If individuals were "deprived of their consciousness," he says,

¹⁰ Camille La Bossière, *The Victorian 'Fol Sage'* (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, Inc., 1987), pp. 45, 55.

¹¹ Rachel Harris, "Object Relations as a Determinant in the Conversion Process" in *Psychology* ed. Stephen Everson (Cambridge: The University of Cambridge Press, 1991), p. 175.

¹² Sacvan Bercovitch, *Puritanism and the Self, The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 141, 148.

“and God’s consciousness at the same time [was] intermitted . . .the universe for that time would cease to be. There would be no difference in this respect between the world and the infinite void.”¹³

When Emerson wrote in a journal entry in 1867 that “What one thinks” does not constitute “what one perceives, anymore than the eye creates the rose,” he shows just how far he has come.¹⁴ After years of defending and applying Lockean rationalism to his sermons and yet emphasizing consciousness as the principle agency of all being, Edwards also arrives at the same conclusion (53). Thus what is most intriguing about his work concerns neither his tendency to empiricism nor the mysticism arising from his notions of the inner light, but his compulsion towards both as necessary components of the genuine spiritual life. “Whatever pretences persons may make to great discoveries,” Edwards writes in *Religious Affections* (1746), their claims are “no further to be regarded than they have influence on their practice.”¹⁵ This, he insists, provides the only sure evidence, “even to ourselves.” Hence the polarity of the pietist and the rationalist wings in the early Puritan’s implacable objections to the rituals of high church Anglicanism. In the Puritan revolution in England and in the Puritan migration to America, antinomianism and legalism equally prevailed in order to restrain an opposite excess in the spirituality of members within the community. Edwards expresses in “A Divine and Supernatural Light” (1734) and “A Personal Narrative” (1753) precisely how this cultural tension perpetuates the cycle whereby one’s outward self-abnegating labours are necessary to sustain one’s personal belief in the vital

¹³ Jonathan Edwards, *Selections*, eds. Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1935), p. 21. All citations from Edwards are taken from this edition.

¹⁴ *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds. Ralph Horth and Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 53. I use this edition for all citations from Emerson’s journals .

¹⁵ See *Selections*, p. 203.

presence of the Holy Spirit.

Edwards's struggle to justify or put into practice the lofty claims of his notion of the individual becomes Emerson's training in divinity at Harvard, and their concerns about the perfection of the inner self and the inviolability of its soul pose useful questions for our understanding of Robert Frost and E.E. Cummings. The transcendentalist's vocabulary changes when his self-denying/self-relying patterns are transposed to modernist literary contexts. Emerson's "moody child" who with his cosmic vision was rending "the dark with private ray," and his "Olympian Bards" who sing "divine ideas below," are here embodied by the conflict of the modernist artist, whose mind is now the legitimate creator of supreme fictions. To act as artificer of one's own world and reshape it according to one's own desire is indeed to create beauty out of *rudem massam*. It is also to perpetuate the contradictions of the transcendentalist's double consciousness. Emerson's realm of "buzz and din," like Edwards's sinful imminent world, represents the necessary aspect of true experience in the everyday world that serves as an anchor to the aspiring self in its search for authenticity. As Emerson knew, the "dream-power" that the idealist values as "transcending all limit and privacy," also shrinks the world "into a mere illustration and fable of this mind" (108). If divinity comes "only in silent shadows and in dreams," in Wallace Stevens's words, if we still "feel/ The need of some imperishable bliss," then from death alone "shall come fulfilment to all our dreams/ And our desires."¹⁶

I examine the protagonists in Frost's poetry who test in this way the reality of what exists as products of their minds' consciousness. As their descriptions of the landscape turn inward, they enter that atmosphere between

¹⁶ Wallace Stevens, "Sunday Morning." Taken from *The Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), p. 68.

illusion and reality and become increasingly less secure in their grasp of the external world which they have distorted through dreaming and idealising. In their search for lost experience they too confront the impasse of their existence and decide that the ground of their being is nothingness. The pressure of their inner atmosphere drives them onward down the lonely roads of interior landscapes, as if they are simply continuing on their own way toward death. Indeed many of Frost's figures seem to operate with Emerson's dialectical soul, but I disagree with those critics who feel that in Frost's poetry "we find ourselves in a diminished version of an Emersonian world."¹⁷ For such a reading misrepresents in some important ways the self's relation to external nature as it is illustrated by Frost's dramas of the divided self. I have tried to explain both the strengths and limitations of a comparative reading of their work.

The existentialist's scepticism about the crucial differences between thinking and acting is embodied by E. E. Cummings, who embarks on a journey toward the sorts of conclusions that Frost's wayfaring figures reach. At once autobiographical and allegorical of the transcendentalist's quest, *The Enormous Room* is ambiguous between pure consciousness and actual experience. Like Frost's poetry, Cummings's progress toward prison represents the idealist's quest into the interior of his mind's consciousness. While enduring his incarceration at La Ferté Macé, he acquires the humility requisite to seeing the patterns of similarity between the sordid prison and his claustrophobic inner reality. To accept his actual predicament, so he realises, is to acknowledge that the idealism he cultivates is uniform with his irreverent self-will. Reconciliation of Emerson's dual spheres occurs at a cubist sort of Calvary when

¹⁷ Hyatt Waggoner, *American Poets From the Puritans to the Present* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), p. 300.

Cummings decides that art is not his own means of conversion, nor his mind an altar of atonement where personal failure is converted into expressive force. The elevation of spirit that attends his self-denial is the result of being willing to "die out of nature and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America."¹⁸ The "two realms elsewhere innately hostile, here cordially existed—each (by its very own distinctness) intensifying the other," to achieve, as he describes it in *i: six non-lectures*, "a homogeneous duality."¹⁹

Using cubist techniques to describe the beautiful union of actual and transcendent worlds, Cummings follows Emerson's injunction to cast "all things behind," in the "insatiable thirst for divine communications" (147). The complexity of his soul-searching achieved by his poetry and painting is revealed the moment he turns, as it were, his outlook on the lacklustre quality of life within the prison walls, to the particular angle Emerson turns his "Labrador spar." With the vertical ascending motif, Cummings crystallises Emerson's hope that one day "every calamity will be dissolved in the universal sunshine," as he celebrates his "new heart beating with the love of the new beauty." But, like Whitman, who looks "at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of [his] head" in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Cummings now finds his "inspiration in real objects."²⁰ The principal folly Cummings has cast behind is the pretence that he has been following his transcendental impulse, when really his former celestial moods were self-derived. He offers, then, a positive example of achieved self-transcendence to "the gangs of cosmos and prophets" that have become, through the ritual of America's hagiography, the failed

¹⁸ E.E. Cummings, *i: six non-lectures* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 42.

¹⁹ E.E. Cummings, *The Enormous Room*. ed. Richard S. Kennedy (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1978), p. 302.

²⁰ Walt Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." Cited from *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* ed. M.H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1986), p. 639.

idealists and apostles of its transcendentalism.

The writers in this study seek intercourse with the world seen only by their minds' eye, the realm wherein human consciousness provides answers to the question of what is real. But beyond their fleeting glimpses of it, none of them depicts the self's successful promotion from its position in the real world to its rightful place in the paradisaal realm. Their utopias of infinite possibilities can exist with the integrity of their mind's ideal because establishing it in the everyday world has proved unachievable. Yet the failure of their ideal vision is that which prevents an exile of self as perceiver within the chambers of its mind. Their work suggests that the individual, whose division into these mutually exclusive spheres of being occasions his discontent, will endure in his efforts to conceive the potential for himself while perceiving the myriad impediments to the fulfilment of his dreams in the everyday world. For to rid himself of his discontent is to augment the hopes of those whose dreams exist merely to preserve themselves. It is to extol his imagination without honouring the stock and trade of his actual situation. Since the transcendentalist represents the American individual trying to marry the tenets of his Puritan heritage with the terms of his material situation, his discontent is necessary to a literary tradition born of the endeavour to form an independent national identity. The dissatisfaction he betrays, then, is precisely the reason that the tension between the real and the ideal vision of it has been so important for the self-seekers of American literature, whose transcendental failures have served to motivate their self-reliant hopes.

Chapter I

Edwards, Emerson, and the Incongruities of Ascent

This chapter offers a comparative reading of Jonathan Edwards's "A Divine and Supernatural Light" and "A Personal Narrative." My subtext is Emerson's "Self-Reliance" (*Essays, First Series*, vol 1, 1841) and "The Transcendentalist," and more generally the tensions within American transcendentalism that can assist our understanding of Edwards's conceptions of the religious life. The self-denying/self-relying dialectic emerges as an idealist subjectivism in the writings of Edwards and Emerson, whose insistent return to the sources of the self—what Edwards calls "an indwelling vital principle" and what both call "intuition"—later became known as American transcendentalism. Among the central tenets of Emerson's philosophy, the self-emptying mode of consciousness, leading him beyond the material to the higher realm of pure spirit, becomes incongruous if both worlds reside within the regions of his own soul. With similar longings, Edwards in "A Personal Narrative" realises his aspiration to obtain the "mind of Christ" by emptying himself to the point of nothingness, so that "God might be all." Qualifying these expansive notions of both writers, however, is a more realistic perception of human nature, a fuller recognition of the inevitability of immanence that hinders the aspiring self from fulfilling its own potential.

In charting the development of the tensions in American Protestantism,

from its sources in the early Puritan culture to its expression in the work of William James, Larzer Ziff describes what he calls the great junction point, the writings of Emerson, at which "Puritanism and revolutionary republicanism, their force all but spent," arrive, "to be transformed and flow out again, with vigour, as idealism and individualism. . . [and] as spirit rather than matter."²¹ Always preoccupied with our everlasting human aspirations, Emerson echoes Edwards when he writes in "Man The Reformer" (1841) that the daily walk of every person should be "elevated by intercourse with the spiritual world" (128), and should reflect, as he says earlier in the essay *Nature*, his consciousness of "a universal soul within or behind his individual life" (38). Edwards would agree with Emerson's view of this tension, namely, that "spirit is above law." But unlike Edwards, Emerson abjured the Puritan mandate which insisted on an individual's accountability to the public mind for his inner spiritual life. Since one's life is for oneself "and not for a spectacle," Emerson sharply distinguished the individual from his virtues. Primary evidence of a person's allegiances to the Spirit requires no "appeal from the man to his actions" (180). In another assertion that sets him apart from Edwards, Emerson protests that "Few and mean as my gifts may be, I actually am, and do not need for my own assurance or of my fellows any secondary testimony. What I do is all that concerns me, not what people think." The antagonism inherent in the relation of the private spirit to any system's code constitutes Emerson's two confessionals: "You may fulfil your round of duties by clearing yourself in the *direct*, or in the *reflex* way. Consider whether you have satisfied your relations to father, mother, cousin, neighbour, cat and dog—whether any of these can

²¹ Cited from the introduction to *Emerson: Selected Essays* Larzer Ziff ed. (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1982), p. 9.

upbraid you. But I may also neglect this reflex standard and absolve me to myself. I have my own stern claims" (193). It is the difference between the personal and the popular code that preoccupies Emerson here in "Self-Reliance" (*Essays, First Series*, vol 1, 1841), for when an individual performs a work he is actually making a penance of his virtues. "I do not wish to expatiate," he summarises, "but to live" (180).

An informed sense of Emerson's distinction between self and society requires that one begin by approaching it from the perspective of "The Transcendentalist," the essay in which he most clearly adduces the worth of his Puritan heritage by noting the recurrence of the incongruity in Edwards's union of sensory perception and mystical consciousness. Like Edwards, Emerson conceives of the mutually exclusive constructions of reality as idealism and materialism, but Emerson is more consistent in upholding consciousness as the higher agency of all being. In 1838 he invited the senior class at Divinity College, Cambridge, to "behold these out-running laws" which "traverse the universe . . .[and] make things what they are" (108). And again: the "world is not the product of manifold power, but of one will, of one mind" (110). With no respect to the obligations of the material realm, Emerson's idealist observes the world as self-generated, as flowing perpetually outward from an invisible, "unsounded centre in himself" (239). In "Of Being," Edwards also concedes that "nothing has any existence any where else but in Consciousness" (23); but his appeal to the world of real experience is an attempt to militate against the solipsistic extensions of transcendental idealism that would concern Emerson a century later.

In "The Transcendentalist," Emerson invites the comparison between Edwards and himself by wondering, "Where are the old idealists? Where are

they who represented to the last generation that extravagant hope which a few happy aspirants suggest to ours? Where are they who represented . . .the invisible and heavenly world?" (249); and of course his major essays in *Second Series* are the locus classicus in American writing for these inquiries. Yet he reminds us that transcendental idealism, "as it appears in 1842," is not intrinsic to his own latent convictions, but developed out of an earlier American culture in which earthly reality was governed by heavenly abstractions and in which umpire conscience functioned as the inward working of Puritan piety. Emerson clarifies in this essay exactly why Edwards reacted against an autonomy of self and elaborates the solipsistic implications of transcendental idealism that threaten to diminish the objective integrity of an empirical approach to the genuine spiritual life. Emerson equates what "is popularly called Transcendentalism" with "Idealism . . .as it appears in 1842" (239), and, again, he asserts that people have "ever divided" into these two sects, with each emphasising their respective allegiance to experience or consciousness. Each of these ways of perceiving is intrinsic to the human condition, Emerson always maintains, but "the idealist contends that his way of thinking is in the higher nature."

Of course Emerson derives his equation of transcendentalism with idealism from Kant, who argued for the primacy of "a very important class of ideas or imperative forms which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired." Kant denominated as "transcendental forms" these intuitions of the mind (247). As a moral philosopher enlisted in the cause of the individual, Emerson found the tenets of Kantian philosophy useful to the development of his own theories of the individual. In "Self-Reliance," he urges the reader to "believe your own thought; to believe that what is true for you in

your private heart is true for all men" (175), without seeking support in external commitments. "Speak your latent conviction," he insists, and "it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost, and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the last Judgment" (175). For Emerson a person fulfils his identity by adhering to the devout motions of his own soul as an emanation of divinity. Thus his constitutive acts of consciousness permit the idealist to refuse "all measure of right and wrong except the determinations of his own private spirit" (244). While placing a premium on a radical subjectivity, the idealist incurs "the charge of antinomianism" and avows that he "may contravene every written ten commandment" (243). These views stress the antinomian continuities and the tradition of American dissent that comprise Emerson's whole ethic. And they recall from "prelatical times," as he notes in "The Transcendentalist," "this way of thinking which made Puritans and Quakers, and the peculiar shade of idealism which we now know" (246).

Emerson's inquiries in this essay take us back a century across the "sea of human thought" to Jonathan Edwards, whose own transcendental optimism went hand in hand with some of the problems attending this belief in things unseen. Edwards knew that Puritan aspirants were not always happy, because an individual's insight into ethereal abstractions proved inaccessible without the integrity of his personal testimony being subjected to an extreme public scrutiny, to the empirical standards that he held as correlatives that were requisite to the private claims of "heart religion." As arbiter of spiritual affairs in his Northampton community, Edwards struggled against this enmeshment of the Protestant ethos in issues of the self. Between the late 1670s and 1740s, when contrary winds of doctrine were sweeping across New England, queries

concerning the extent to which a person should involve himself in the conversion experience led to wide divergences in New World Protestant allegiances. Subjectivism, in Edwards's time, signalled an individual's recourse to himself as the fount of spiritual experience, and was definitive of a religion supposedly grounded in the emotions. Initiated by Anne Hutchinson a century earlier and by other sects that denied the need for outward evidence to substantiate their claims to salvation, the antinomian fervour violently moved against the rationalist theology that denied a place for the emotions in the conversion experience altogether. Some empirical Puritans who preferred a more cognitive, more reliable form of religion, challenged these private claims to heart religion and regarded the revival movement with a profound skepticism. Owing to the passionate outcries, faintings and bodily shakings of its participants, the self-reflexive character of revivalism compelled some Puritans to associate the movement with Quakerism, with its definitive notion of the inner light, and to seek more substantial evidence of true conversion that was not so obviously self-generated.

It is against this background of religious instability in the wake of the Great Revival that Edwards felt it imperative to separate the tares of high emotionalism and the rationalist religion from the fruitful harvest at his Northampton congregation. The union of cognitive and emotive tendencies in Edwards's writing points to the symmetry he tried to maintain in his understanding of the conversion experience. From one perspective, he was diligent in his defence of the emotional intensity of revivalism. When waves of emotional fervour flowed through New England, Edwards did little to stem the tide, nor did he hesitate to terrify his parishoners with the rhetoric of imminent hell-fire. As it is made evident by the memorable images of shrivelled spiders

and toilworn carpets in his famous sermon, the reality of hell compelled him to elicit emotional reactions from his congregation that were commensurate with his own heart-felt responses. When Edwards preached, he deployed words as an "engine against the brain" in order to "let light into the soul by describing vividly the selfless love of Christ . . .and thereby to entice the imagination away from its usual focus on worldly glitter" (62).²² That is, the skepticism concerning one's mental comprehension of spiritual matters caused him to stress the importance of true feeling as the principal element in the conversion experience. Yet, from another viewpoint, Edwards tried to balance the potentially self-indulgent emotionalism by placing a counter emphasis on the rational component of the religious life. In order to distinguish a true from a spurious piety, he employed a variety of empirical strategies by which detractors of the revival might question its authenticity. The objective models that Edwards proposed to use as guidelines for true conversion reveal his predilection for materiality and sensory perception. And although his empirical models seem at variance with his frequent injunctions to introspection, his support for the inner processes of heart religion necessitated the material assurance afforded by outward sign.

The cultural consequences of the tension between the public and the private claims to the genuine spiritual life reveal the theological and rationalist underpinnings of Edwards's understanding of the spiritual self's relation to the visible world. He further confirms his candidacy as one of Emerson's old idealists in "Of Being" where he intimates his view of the physical world as "the Divine Idea" eternally sustained within the "All-comprehending Mind" (29). In his estimation, the human body and "even the brain itself" would fall to

²² Andrew Delbanco and Thomas Delbanco, "A.A. At the Crossroads," *The New Yorker* June 5, (New York: The New Yorker Magazine, 1995), p. 42-49.

oblivion without the constant exertion of the Divine power. Our "knowledge and consciousness," the "only . . . real and substantial beings," also construct bodies by conceiving of mental existences, such as colour and geometry; but it is the "gross mistake" committed by the materialists to claim that objects of sense have true substance and that spirits are mere shadows. Not so for Edwards, for whom "spirits only are properly substance." In "The Soul" he mocks the materialist by extending the empiricist premises of the latter to ludicrous extremes: "First I would know whether this material Soul keeps . . . in ye Coffin," he asks rhetorically, "and if so whether it might not be convenient to build a repository for it [;] I would know what Shape it is[,] of round triangular or fore square" (11). He further elaborates on these idealist premises in "Notes on the Mind," where he inquires: "if we only had the sense of seeing we should not be as ready to conclude the visible world to have been an existence independent of perception, as we do" (27). All "the mind views by seeing, are merely mental existences," he summarizes, in the same way that "colours are not really in the things no more than pain is in a needle" (28).

Edwards's idealist ontology liberates the self to create the world wholly according to its perceptions. Consequently, various antinomian conclusions within his Puritan environment easily arose from premises supporting the autonomy of self, in ways that threatened to confirm the arguments of those impatient with Puritan excesses. Edwards does not pursue the antinomian implications in his philosophical writings, but the tension existing within his idealism and his concerns about the authenticity of spiritual experience do characterise many of his sermons. In "A Divine and Supernatural Light," for example, this peculiar duality underscores his eagerness to observe in one's practice the integrity of one's heavenly preoccupations. By setting inner

spirituality against empirical signs—in effect, by attempting to materialise the subjectivity of those who assert themselves as true converts—he aimed to distinguish the natural from the regenerate self. As a minister in the Northampton community, it was his responsibility to assist members in his congregation by providing them with a better understanding of their spiritual condition. “For many are deceived,” he quotes from Matthew’s gospel, “many will call on that final Day, ‘Lord, Lord’, but will hear in return, ‘Depart from me, ye workers of iniquity, for I never knew you’.” Matthew 7:23 is a text he often used to drive home the point that people have been deceiving not only each other with false claims to salvation but themselves as well. Both the natural and the regenerate person may have convictions of guilt and misery, yet only the latter has the “spiritual and divine light” that derives, in an almost mystical sense, from the light or sensibleness of truth. “That some sinners have a greater conviction than others, is because some have more light, or more of an apprehension of truth than others” (103), he says. But this distinction between common and special grace is very slight: there is grace that distils in the natural person a moral apprehension of right and wrong, and grace that renews and sanctifies him through the work of the Holy Ghost. Edwards stresses that the Spirit’s actions in such a manner depend on the qualifications of the candidate: “He may indeed act upon the mind of the natural man, but he acts in the saint as an indwelling vital principle.”

Edwards is describing not only the various degrees of intensity with which the Spirit speaks to the spiritual as opposed to the natural person. For him the actual faculty that registers the still, small voice differs according to the spiritual state of the person. The mind of natural persons proves susceptible to the “lively impressions of their imaginations” (105). But there is nothing

saving about a purely cognitive responsiveness. The fact that the gospel made mental sense to someone was not necessarily a sign of any saving activity on God's part. "Our people," Edwards wrote in a later journal entry of 1755, "do not so much need to have their heads stored as to have their hearts touched" (405), because it is precisely this sort of emotive response to the promptings of the Spirit that signified a veritable conversion. In the spirit of Edward Taylor's sweet depictions of the Christian experience, Edwards's regenerate man obtains a new faculty, the "sense of the gloriousness of God in his heart," that is required to gain a "saving conviction of the truth" (106). With his doctrine of the new sense he expresses then his conviction that one's perception of spiritual affairs, whether the vivid torments of hell or the beatific loveliness of God's holiness, distinguishes the elect member by the lively sensory impression he receives.

By eliding the functions of the head and heart, Edwards establishes an emotional basis for perceiving spiritual realities, but he is compelled to buttress this doctrine of the sense of the heart with a more cognitive argument. Hence his objection that it is impossible "to obtain this knowledge and light by the mere strength of natural reason" occurs in sentences beginning with the phrase, "t'is rational to suppose." Given in his defense of heart religion, these statements yet serve to confirm the strong empirical tendencies that he developed during his immersion at Yale College in the work of Descartes, Newton and Locke, those writers who instilled this concern with a direct, sensory experience of reality. And as the sermon develops, the semantic field in which this elision of the head and the heart occurs becomes noticeably Lockean. Edwards's use of "sense of" denotes of course a sensory encounter with the Holy Spirit that closely accords with Locke's "sensational philosophy," since it was

from him that Edwards derived this conception of learning and knowing as having actual ideas of things. What governs the mind's potential for having actual ideas is the stimulus of the physical world. The degree to which an impression becomes an actual idea, not a notional understanding merely, serves to measure the intensity of the stimulus. Edwards moved Locke's system beyond the physical into the spiritual realm by adding to his analysis some significant factors, namely, the implications of depravity, that a person's perceiving cognitive faculties are insufficient as a final means of acquiring knowledge. By appropriating something of Locke's categories to distinguish the natural from the regenerate person, Edwards in "A Divine and Supernatural Light" provides the latter with a new sense that allows him to perceive divine realities as a kind of knowledge felt along the pulses. By equating ideas with emotions and feelings, Edwards enables the believer to surmount cognitive objections to a doctrine, once the "heart feels pleasure in [its] apprehension." As the prejudices in the heart against the truth of divine things are removed, so the "mind becomes susceptible of the due force of rational arguments for their truth" (107).

It is significant that Edwards's analysis of a saving conversion applies only if the person's spiritual condition has been predetermined. The basis for a disinterested judgment of one's own claims to genuine conversion, to which he refers at the end of the sermon, is the "discovery of this beauty and excellency" that he describes as a "kind of intuitive and immediate evidence [that] the spiritually enlightened have of the truth of the things of religion" (109). At the moment they see a "transcendent glory in them, such a conviction . . . is that true spiritual [*sic*] that there is in saving faith. And this original of it, is that by which it is most essentially distinguished from that common assent, which

unregenerate men are capable of." Like Emerson, who draws on Kant's notion of the intuitional forms a century later, Edwards uses Locke to set up foundations of scepticism on which idealism is raised, and he does so by grounding the discovery of God's transcendent glory wholly within the arbitrations of the self. In this sermon he has merely provided some empirical correlatives with which a person can change his vague conceptions of self into plausible assumptions about his spiritual condition. Indeed, as Edwards concludes, this doctrine "may well put us on examining ourselves, whether we have ever had this divine light . . . into our souls" (110). According to these guidelines, a feeling of pleasure in divine grace should perpetuate a sensory, and hence, saving knowledge of God. And yet, as the biblical verse with which Edwards concludes makes clear, this kind of self-examination is motivated by an undeniable anxiety. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him; and He will show them his covenant" (Psalms 25:14). Fearful is the disposition then in which the self is motivated to feel delight in giving itself over to Christ (112).

In "A Personal Narrative," Edwards records that, for much of his life, it was precisely this disposal to self-abnegation that he sought to obtain with such "inward ardour of soul." And inward is the direction of his search. Although he objects in "A Divine and Supernatural Light" that "God's excellency is not an human work," since it is ascertained by "a kind of intuitive evidence," in effect, God's holy light remains a human discovery. Hence his frequent injunctions to parishoners to scrutinise the determinations of their own private spirit, by exploring their consciousness for this divine light. In his case, as the "chief among sinners," Edwards uncovers the transgressions of his soul by looking inwardly in an attempt to fathom the very depths of his sinful nature.

Out of his inwardness the need for transcendent elevation originates, but his downward movement transforms into an obdurate self-consciousness all aspirations to partake of God's high and holy presence. This incongruity in "A Divine and Supernatural Light" generates the urgency in "A Personal Narrative" and prevents a seamless transposition into spiritual praxis of the fine discriminations in Edwards's theory of conversion.

The natural and regenerate human conditions in the sermon are construed as adolescence and maturity in his autobiography. The persistence of the "I" in the six self-references that occur in the meandering course of his first sentence underscores the lack of narrative linearity, the absence of structural principle—and these testify to the precarious nature of the adolescent self's struggle to become a mature soul. Edwards is clear that there was nothing saving about the devout motions of his youthful experience, yet his early efforts to obtain salvation are recorded here as a child's momentous labours to channel his longings towards an end, a "saving close with Christ," which he cannot possibly obtain under the ruling dictum of Calvinism. The stridency of the young Edwards's religious exercises is revealed in his need to pontificate with his friends, to withdraw to his closet frequently to pray, and in his construction of the fort of prayer deep in a secluded wood. By subjecting himself to repeated resolutions, vows and bonds, after a period of more intensely inward struggles, conflicts and self-reflections, his interest in Christ escalates to an ineffable pitch, compelling him to break off all former wicked ways and to make seeking salvation the main business of his life.

In accordance with his postulates in "A Divine and Supernatural Light," he discerns the enlightening ray of the Holy Spirit shine into his mind and enact the self-abnegation that was previously so difficult for him. "From my

childhood up," he reflects, "my mind had been full of objections against the doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty." And then, unexplainable even to himself, his rational objections gradually dissipate altogether: "I could never give an account how or by what means I was thus convinced." With the Holy Spirit slowly working upon his mind, Edwards inclines emotionally towards this doctrine, because until this occurs, there is, according to his sermon, nothing "of a saving or extraordinary" influence of God's Spirit in his mental ascent only. Not until later years, well after he has acquired "heart knowledge," can he become sensible of the beauty and amiableness of God's omnipotence, when his mere acceptance of the divine excellency of this harshest of Calvinist Christian doctrines is transformed into a sweet and pleasant conviction.

Yet just as Edwards's cognitive obstacles are being removed and he is acquiring a "new sort of affections" (59), he still fears that there is "nothing of a saving nature in this," a fear directing him further into himself, in search of those intuitive signs of God's transcendent light that he discusses in "A Divine and Supernatural Light." The persistence of his self-involvement offsets the saving work of the Spirit of God; and he reiterates his former complaint of remaining far too involved in his own spiritual condition. As this realisation grows increasingly stronger within him, the narrative becomes more and more self-reflexive, and he continues to chronicle his efforts to dissolve himself into God by merit of his awareness that these self-asserting labours are compromising his desire to annihilate himself. In effect, Edwards cannot be taken up in God while looking within himself for intuitive evidence, this observation being expressed by the fervour of the dialogue that follows: "I thought with myself" becomes a process of shifting self-conceptions that effect the movement of a pendulum, now shifting towards self, now towards God:

"How excellent a Being *God* is; and how happy *I* should be, if *I* might enjoy that *God*' (59). In retrospect these "great and violent inward struggles" cannot alleviate his "many conflicts and wicked inclinations," and he distinguishes these self-relying times as efforts that failed in bringing him to salvation (57).

Admittedly, Edwards cannot become "swallowed up in Him forever" until he thoroughly dies to himself. Denying himself means relying on God for deliverance, but relying on God for deliverance requires a self-willed passivity. This in turn incites a great deal of anxiety that must be denied in order to confirm a delightful sense of God's glory. Longing for nothingness, Edwards forces himself into a divided state of being, in which he is either lost in an abyss of self or "rapt up to [God] in heaven forever." Eventually this double disposition spirals into a visionary elevation of consciousness when, during one of his fervent ruminations on the divine qualities of Christ, he is caught up in a momentary transfiguration of self that allows his abstraction into the sublimity of God. In his attempt to describe the changing "appearance of everything," Edwards registers "a new way of seeing" in phrases beginning with "there seemed to be." When he finally voices his epiphanic statement his style all but explodes with boundless entropy in an endeavour to describe the elevation of his soul: "there came into my soul . . . a sense of the glory of the divine being; a new sense, quite different from anything I ever experienced before" (60).

Edwards now embodies the doctrine of the new sense of the heart that has finally come into his soul, yet his embodiment is merely the outcome of his enduring sweet inwardness, whereby his epiphany transpires less like the instance when God directly makes himself known than like the fulfilment of his prolonged struggle to impose transcendent meaning on his divided existence. His rapture is only momentary, since designated as a "sweet inwardness" in the

self which is the aspiring agent of his assent. If man, as he claims in "A Divine and Supernatural Light," is "absolutely dependent on the operations of God's Holy Spirit" (61) and not on himself, the brevity of transcendent union must be seen as a divine withdrawal that makes him crave what transcendence he has barely tasted before falling again into an immanent reality. Yet with more eager and violent pursuits after holiness, he continues to strive for an effectual submission to God's sovereignty. Expressed in a series of repetitive, almost incantatory phrases, Edwards's desire to be "swallowed up in Christ" perpetuates his ongoing involvement in the office of the Holy Spirit. But the lingering frustration that characterised his adolescent years can hardly define his present spiritual condition now that he is aware of his state of regeneration, notwithstanding his new sense of the heart. Anticipating this important objection, Edwards pauses to indicate the ontological difference between his adolescent religious life and that of his mature years. Compared to the experiences of his earlier days, these, he says, "were of a totally different kind . . . of a more inward, pure, and soul-animating nature" (61). If the grounds for true conversion in "A Divine and Supernatural Light" are intuition, emotional responsiveness, and a sustained delight in the sweetness of Christ, then despite Edwards's confident claims, the experience of his adolescent and mature years is different neither in degree nor in kind. And though he insists those former delights never reached the heart, that they did not arise from a sight and taste of the divine excellency, the signs of his adolescent spiritual condition are voiced, with the exception of a few added "infinite upon infinites," in exactly the same vocabulary he uses to describe his adult experience. Not only does Edwards's discontent with his spiritual state generate the same level of anxiety he experienced in his former days of unregeneration, but, following

his season of conversion, he struggles with even "a vastly greater sense" of his wickedness "since [his] conversion, than ever before" (61).

Edwards's anxiety intensifies because his standards of holiness escalate in direct proportion to his ongoing failure to fulfil them. His youthful habit of making promises and solemn vows to God revives in his maturer years with his inability to fulfill these self-imposed obligations. Reiterating *verbatim* a line from an earlier paragraph, he again shares his "burning desire to be in everything a complete Christian . . . [,] conformed to the blessed image of Christ" (61). By complaining of his "own lack of strength," his "extreme feebleness and impotence," he again registers his involvement in his salvation. "[L]onging," "pursuing," "pressing," "studying," "contriving," the participles in this paragraph articulate his ongoing self-examination, as he continues to meditate on abstract "holiness and the contemplations of heaven," which define the ideal realm he would inhabit were it not for the burden of sin that anchors him to a sinful reality. Still he feels compelled with "eager and violent pursuits after holiness," with "longings to lie low before God, in the dust; that I might be nothing, and that God might be all," and with myriad other self-abnegating efforts to submit effectually to God's divine sovereignty. The evanescence of Edwards's experiences with God derives, as he maintains throughout his autobiography, from his persistent involvement in his spiritual experience. In illustration of the self-reliant individual's struggle for his spiritual promotion, he desires, then, to "be emptied and annihilated" so that "God in Christ" can be "all in all." But he must do so by turning his "eye in upon [him]self" (62).

The incongruities arising from an application of the precepts of "A Divine and Supernatural Light" to "A Personal Narrative" warrant some further comparison of Edwards's practical theology with his theoretical constructions of

reality. If the line dividing the natural and the redeemed person seems to dissolve within Edwards's own account of his conversion experience, the incongruity derives from a tension inherent in his idealism and his religious practices. His idealist epistemology disallows an engagement with the material world as a veritable reality, but he anchors himself to that world by means of an unrelenting self-denial that he expresses with a negating language of self. His transcendental urge bespeaks his yearning to get beyond an inhibiting immanence, beyond the material realm to the divine realm. But for Edwards, an "abyss infinitely deeper than hell" constitutes selfhood or "what I am in myself," and it is fathomed by looking inward and downward, through a relentless interiority that affords a view of his exceeding wickedness. In "Of Being" he defines nothingness as "a state of absolute contradiction" (35). Only the idealist "perceives being," he contends, and by that act, he "consents to being"; in contrast to the materialist who shows his "Disagreement or contrariety to being" by reverting to the material world in an entropic immanence (36). This latter ontology, he writes, "is evidently an approach to nothing" also. By equating the materialist with the state of "nothingness," Edwards locates the idealist in a state of "somethingness." A parallel equation would associate his conception of "dissent from being" with the unregenerate self, and his idea of "consent to being" with the converted. Yet in "A Personal Narrative" Edwards longs for nothingness regardless of his adolescent or mature spiritual condition. Situated within the discourse of his spiritual praxis, then, his adherence to a self-negating model appears equally contradictory the moment he tries to determine his own spiritual ontology. That is, whether saved or lost, he aligns intuitive resources for his spiritual life with empirical standards existing externally to the perceiving self.

In "The Transcendentalist," Emerson sets out to expend these finer energies that characterise Edwards's practical theology. Emerson shows his intellectual affiliation with Edwards by defining the incongruity in terms of the transcendentalist's "double consciousness," with which the self now exists in the immanent realm of "buzz and din," and is now momentarily caught up into the realm of "infinitude and paradise" (254). These two states of thought generate his utopian vision of the self aspiring beyond the limitations of his will and mind and becoming part and particle with the deific energy. But because that state of being is self-generated, the self has no potential for transcendence. Like Edwards, who tries passively to feel the Spirit of God enter his soul, Emerson in "The Over-Soul" (*Essays, First Series*, vol 1, 1841) looks up to the infinite realm and attempts to put himself in the attitude of divine reception, while "from some alien energy the visions come" (205). "When I watch that flowing river, which, out of regions I see not, pour for a season its streams into me," writes Emerson, "I see that I am a pensioner, not a cause but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water" (206). But if the idealism implicit in his version of transcendentalism refers to the constitution of reality as the mere intimations of his interior self, "I—this thought which is called I" becomes the sole means of sustaining this vision.

"By no means happy is our condition," he confesses and thus moves us a little closer to an understanding of his doubts and objections that are not so easily disposed of, however easy it may be "to answer the objections of the man of the world" (252). In his portrait of one individual's inner struggle, Emerson implies that in their practical lives there is little difference between the individuals of immanence and transcendence. Examining the devout motions of the transcendentalist's soul, Emerson relates a story of the prototypical

aspiring self:

It is not to be denied that there must be some wide difference between my faith and other faiths; and mine is a certain brief experience, which surprised me in the highway or in the marketplace, or in some place, at some time,—whether in the body or out of the body, God knoweth,—and made me aware that I had played the fool with fools all this time, but that law existed for me and for all; that to me belonged trust, a child's trust and obedience, and the worship of ideas, and I should never be fool more. Well, in the space of an hour, I was let down from this height; I was at my old tricks, the selfish member of a selfish society (253).

“You will see by this sketch,” Emerson continues, “that there is no pure Transcendentalist; that all who by strong bias of nature have leaned to the spiritual side in doctrine, have stopped short of their goal” (254). Identifying Edwards as one of Emerson's old idealists depends on whether he stands with the many “harbingers and forerunners” who also failed in their aspirations to live a purely spiritual life. The vision Edwards and Emerson share in their perspectives on the intractability of the self reveals their singular affinities, both in their conceptions of the transcendental consciousness and in their sense of the impediments to self-transcendence. Ascribing more reality to these brief moments of illumination than to all other experiences, each devoted his principal energies towards a notion of true being existing within an order of reality beyond the world of buzz and din, where the soul may assume its colourful ideal in the infinite realm of paradise. But so “little do we mix with

the divine life," Emerson with Edwards would lament, "that it really signifies little what we do, to pass, when presently we shall, into some new infinitude" (255).

Chapter II

Frost, Emerson, and the Drama of the Divided Self

To the lyricist in groves and pastures, Emerson, with characteristic eloquence in "The Poet," holds out the great reward. "The ideal shall be real to thee," he promises, "and the impressions of the actual world shall fall like summer-rain, copious, but not troublesome to thy invulnerable essence" (284). While musing on the poet's otherworldliness some months later in "Experience," he compensates for his earlier composure by embodying with the same image his inveterate misgivings about the poet's approximations of the real: "The dearest events are summer-rain, and we, the Para coat that sheds every drop" (288). Expressing in the spirit of Ecclesiastes his period of disillusionment, of diminished hope for the poet, Emerson now confronts the double meaning of his reward. The extent that the idealist's paradise fades with the evanescence of a self-enclosed dream serves to measure his conviction that he who animates what he sees and sees only what he animates, proves incapable of addressing himself to actual life. Grieving this most unhandsome qualifying of his earlier exuberance, Emerson now looks to death, with grim certitude, "saying, there at least is reality that will not escape us," in telling illustration of the cost that comes hand in hand with the reward to which he incites aspiring poets of the coming age, the solipsism that attends nineteenth-century idealism, the burden of the postromantic self.

My contention in this chapter is that, by simulating in his poetry this Emersonian condition, of the self struggling to reconcile its dual allegiance to actual and ideal realms, Robert Frost shows a probity similar to Emerson's, and explores in his poetry many of the tensions that define American transcendentalism: the polarity of inner and outer weather, the contact between mind and natural world, the way in which Emerson vacillates in "The Transcendentalist" between his realms of "buzz and din" and "infinite and paradise" (248). In light of Frank Lentricchia's comprehensive study of Frost's idealism in *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self* (1975) and Richard Poirier's in *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (1977), the general critical approach to a comparative reading of these New England writers has focused primarily on the impact that the early Emerson had on Frost. Frost's narrators' power of expression and whimsical lyricism have thus been frequently seen as their way of realising, in the spirit of Wallace Stevens's supreme fiction, their imaginative sense of self by spawning fictional identities.

The implication that very few commentators have yet explored is that Frost's personae, in their efforts to recreate their world in their own image by validating their idealised self-conceptions, are hereby following Emerson's solipsized prescriptions for the idealist poet that are inherrent in his ethic of mental self-reliance. I want, however, to contest this implication by arguing for a more complex relation between Emerson and the poet who speaks of him as one of only three great Americans. For Frost elucidates and ultimately escapes this corollary to Emerson's philosophy of self-reliance by adhering to a *via media* engagement with post-Kantian idealism that expresses his commitment to both Emerson's early and later views. "We do not see directly,

but mediately . . . [and] we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are" (258). Thus Emerson proposes a view comparable to the critical notion prevailing among Frost's critics, such as Frank Lentricchia, who tend to see self-consciousness as so heavily mediated by the average person's use of conventional language, that the deepest levels of consciousness are finally inaccessible to all but the idealist poet, whose verbal giftedness allows him to transpose his mental projections into his consciousness, in ways that allow him "to keep in touch with himself," by capturing with words the essence of his subjectivity.²³ But while Frost reveals some of the idealist tendencies that formed Emerson's intellectual habits as adumbrated in "Self-Reliance" and "The Poet," he does not merely recapitulate the early Emerson's prescriptions for the poet, and goes on to show the ontological problems commensurate with a totalising idealism which Emerson himself addresses in his later essays, wherein he develops his commitment to a tough-minded form of realism.

In what follows I intend to clarify then what the general critical consensus regards as Frost's inexplicit depiction of the self's relation to worlds of fact and fiction by countenancing his poetry more generally as an allegory of Emerson's transcendentalism at various stages in his comprehension of mental self-reliance. Frost's *via media* idealism underwrites the drama of his more imaginative and verbally-gifted personae, whose relation to objective phenomena typifies the transcendentalist's early stage at which his mental self-reliance effects an Emersonian reduction of the physical realm. Insofar as the gross sense of actual experience continues to become the mere realisation of his own thought, the transcendentalist goes on transfiguring the

²³ Frank Lentricchia, *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975), p. 119.

material realm into the sanctuary of his mind's consciousness, until his self-sphered haven suffuses with the claustrophobia of the solipsist's asylum. His misgivings about the question of what is real begin to threaten his esteemed self-reliant life of the mind in ways that make his radiating acts of consciousness less constitutive of the world around him. The plight of Frost's personae offers a similar drama, in that some seek to change the illusion-filled nature of their reality when they experience the implications of viewing the world and the self in this way. While gaining a closer acquaintance with the dark timbre of the landscape they escape the confines of their consciousness; with the less subjective valuation of the natural world that ensues, a naturalistic orientation is occasioned by their attitudes of sobriety and disillusion concerning the temptation to alleviate, through an illusory use of language and imagination, the tedium and labour of their lives. Cultivating their respect, even their fearful sense of objects existing in themselves "out there" in the world of material form, these figures come to represent the phenomenal or practical self. No longer enacting a poetic dematerialization of the environment, this self embodies the instinctively human urge that compels the mature Emerson, for whom an emphasis on actual experience is the summation of his thought, to obliterate all self-generated fantasies by means of synthesising the disjunction between an idealising consciousness and the everyday world.

Theoretically, excursions into the natural world, for both the early and the later Emerson, become quests for personal wholeness, as the 1844 essay *Nature* exclaims of the moment the individual transcends his debilitating self-consciousness by escaping the isolating moods that enforce his solipsistic retreat. Yet with his efforts to efface himself serving to evince his undeniable

self-reliance, Emerson presents his transcendental experiences as self-enclosed dramas that express the all-sufficiency of the individual's mind and will in the service of his own ascent. Keeping wholly within the asylum of its consciousness, the aspiring self fabricates an infinite paradise under pretence of having denied itself by means of responding passively to the impulse of the Over-soul, and thus achieves its reward of an "alien detachment" from the experiential world as it takes on "a pictorial air." It is on the basis of these convictions that Emerson praises the self-reliant individual who trusts in his spirited adherence to the divine life of the mind, while he is really rewarding the one trusting in himself, to advance on "Chaos and the Dark," all the travail and suffering in the realm of buzz and din, by ascending to his region of infinitude and paradise, "where the passionate clouds of sorrow cannot rise" (268).

Notwithstanding the wilful extravagance with which he denied the transcendentalist's dependence on himself, even at the zenith of his doctrine of self-reliance Emerson's nascent confidence was precarious. Thus, in subsequent writings, with such essays as "Experience" and "Fate," he sets his glaring optimism against the cold truth of experience. Musing with persistent incertitude on the self-reliant individual's ability to form the whole "picture of life" that has veracity insofar as it portrays "the odious facts" that "cannot be trifled with" (53), he now regards everything as elegant and inspiring when seen from the intellectual perspective, now suspects the solidity of his self-reliant life of the mind precisely because it offers dubious sanctuary from all that seems "sour if seen as experience." From the time of his earliest doubts about the viability of his philosophy, we see him thus equivocating between these idealist and realist modes of thought. He describes this in the opening of

"Experience": "Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremesWe wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight" (285). On these escalating levels of self-knowledge, Emerson steps down to the materialism of the senses by wondering what might be gained "by manipular attempts to realise the world of thought," if indeed what "I think" captures less of essential reality than "the world I converse with in the city and the farms." The passage on the death of his son Waldo in "Experience" invites further speculation on the extent to which he convinces himself and his readers of his preternatural ability to abjure the reality of human loss and sorrow; to determine this is to understand how far "into real nature" his convictions have carried him. Here he claims we "court suffering"

in the hope that here at least we shall find reality. . . . But it turns out to be scene-painting and counterfeit. The only thing grief has taught me is how shallow it is. That, like all the rest, plays about the surface, and never introduces me into the reality. . . . An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at or 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. I cannot get it nearer to me. . . . It was caducous. I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature (288).

This is perhaps Emerson's most intimate embrace of unreality, in

illustration of "idealism's highest refinement of the art of metaphysical healing," of "the opacity that comes of solipsism,"²⁴ and his adopting the vagaries of dream delivering unto dream as the province of a ghastly reality. And "there is no end to illusion," he laments: "Life wears to me a visionary face." The counterfeited reality offers but "a choice between soft and turbulent dreams" for those unable to shake the drowsiness from the strong solution, the "unmitigated elixir" (328) of enthusiasm with which he conveys his once certain faith in what the self-reliant individual could ideally achieve. Now addressing the actual man, man as he is—"hoping," "never touching," "aiming at," "having lost"—what he previously regards as manipular attempts to realise the mind's semblances have now become the necessity: thoughts, the office of fancy; ideal power, once residing in the soul of every soaring saint, now his unclaimed reward hovering over the metaphysical division of the promise and the shabby reality; faith, the evidence of things hoped for but still unseen, now an "infirm faith" and a "will not strenuous" (231), inciting an intensity of hope for a sign of promise, a manifestation or embodiment of desire that evinces his moribund despair on the brink of the waters of life and truth. Emerson gradually tempered his optimism toward the self-reliant life of the mind since his efforts to channel the sublimity of his faith into the narrow limits of his experience finally proved impossible. "People disparage knowing, and the intellectual life, and urge doing. I am content with knowing; if only I could know" (292), he remarks, in a common sense resignation that the vigour of his flowing faith never was proactive, but reactive to what he later saw as the inevitable ebbing of it.

The transcendental self in Frost's poetry is a mental traveler who

²⁴ La Bossière, p.46.

oscillates with Emerson's dialectical soul between the natural landscape and that of his mind. Consider, for example, the protagonist of "The Road Not Taken," who muses with a divided consciousness: "I-/ I took the one less travelled by" (105; 18, 19).²⁵ In effect, he travels on one road, but as two travellers who would "travel both and be one traveller," by reconciling the opposing claims of the ideal and actual realms. "The Road Not Taken" can be regarded as the beginning of the quest along which the self seeks to resolve the antagonism inherent in its constitution, since it capitulates this tension in ways confirming neither Frost's endorsement of the aesthetics of escape, nor his entrenched resistance to it, as an evident subtext to his poetics. Written in the spirit of his work that conceives of this internal division of self as dialogical, the poem offers a fortifying example of how the *dédoublement* of personality against which the self struggles is a site of internal dialogue, of contrastive voices, neither one of which can disclose an authentic and unified consciousness. The vacillating quality of the poem expresses the dualism with which the speaker allows the diverging roads to make some claims upon him, internalising as he does the setting of the cross-roads and putting himself at analogous cross-purposes, with one side pondering the experience of taking one road, the other desiring to travel at once on both, by exchanging the external landscape for the private inscape of his consciousness.

Since the narrator immediately forms his perspective by reflection rather than observation (exploring possibilities in an "as if" as opposed to an "as is" manner), he gives greater consideration to the road he finally decides not to take, the one indicated as the title of the poem, than to the road he eventually chooses. Hence one line only describes the phenomenon of the roads, while the

²⁵ All citations are taken from *The Poetry of Robert Frost* ed. Edwards Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969). Page numbers precede line numbers in my references.

rest of the poem records the intensity of his response which continues to obscure what is observable: does one road actually have a better claim because its leaves are not "trodden black" (12)? Or again: "Then took the other" (6), the clause that opens the second stanza does not record his actual steps, but rather his mental strides down the internal path on which his private musings gain a greater degree of reality than the actual roads. By the end of the third stanza, we have added to our loss of orientation in the yellow wood an ambiguity of sequential time, a timeless aspect of this moment being told again "ages and ages hence" (17). Carrying within him on his travels these persistent misgivings about his direction and his purpose in journeying, he indulges, Ancient Mariner-like, his ongoing propensity to muse about his own peculiar relation to the real environment. And when he announces, by the end of the poem, that having chosen "the one less travelled by/ . . .has made all the difference" (19-20), the criteria for deciding which road he indicates are purposely ambiguous, with the result that the important difference becomes, like the road not taken, the private property of the speaker. In effect, by discussing the significance of the roads in this enigmatic manner, the narrator sets up a closed sign to everyone but himself. Not the roads but his intimations of them have become the poem, and these serve more generally to introduce the theme of inwardness, the proclivity of many Frost speakers to diminish the objective properties intrinsic to phenomena in the natural world by reducing them to the inscape of their consciousness.

By giving primacy to the mind's consciousness over experience, to his speakers' mental processes over the phenomena that occasion it, Frost compares with Emerson and the tradition of American transcendentalism in some notable ways. As one critic has said concerning the early Emerson's

philosophy, by "unfixing the world," situations such as those depicted by "The Road Not Taken" "authorise the assumption of subjectivity and recommend the certitude of idealism."²⁶ With this certitude of the mind's consciousness representing the destination toward which some of Frost's figures move on their metaphysical travels, what Emerson calls "the journey's end in every step of the road" (295), their quest ends where it begins, and they find themselves arrested in exactly the stage at which Emerson formulated his radical views on the function of the idealist poet. The internal schism characterising the traveler's conflicting allegiance to his myopic inner subjectification and his basis in real experience serves to differentiate the personae in "Mending Wall," with each figure embodying what Emerson sees as the two main functions of language, of words "new-created by the poet for his own ends," and of words applied "primarily to the common necessities of man" (43). The wall or point of discontinuity in the poem illustrates the line dividing those with special mental and linguistic agility from others who remain uninspired and hence unliberated by an artistic consciousness that lies dormant within. From the popular critical perspective, both figures in the poem share the common purpose of maintaining the wall, with the principal difference that the importunate speaker fulfils with a greater consciousness his hope of bringing into the spirit of his colloquy the imperturbable old-stone savage, who moves in darkness and naively insists on strengthening the partition that separates him from the other.

But from another perspective, this privileging of imagination as a sign of penetrating self-awareness in the narrator obscures the deeper significance of

²⁶ La Bossière, p. 46.

the poem, since his alleged heightened consciousness merely amounts to the playful spirit in which he casts a spell on the boulders he regards as loaves, describes nature's duress as the work of elves, embodies their attitudes in apples and cones, and generally allows spring's mischief to transform the tedium of their laborious project into "another kind of outdoor game" (33; 21) with one participant only. More important, what each is "walling in or walling out" (34; 33) is the subtext to which the darker neighbour is privy but the whimsical narrator cannot fathom. Despite his verbal skills, the gregarious speaker cannot find the proper noun that expresses precisely why he "doesn't love a wall" (35), and differs, in this respect, only a little from his neighbour who obviously loves a wall but does not care to reason why. The speaker remarks, for example, that his quiescent neighbour twice repeats in the manner of an automaton his father's saying, "good fences make good neighbours" (27). In a similarly persistent frame of mind he also twice repeats by rote, "something there is that doesn't love a wall" (1). Whereas he initiates rebuilding the wall, clearly he has no intention of keeping it between them, but wants rather to destroy the barriers that prevent him and his refractory neighbour from becoming comrades, from walking two abreast. Essentially he wants to do "the work of hunters" (5) and have his neighbour out of hiding, to handle the old-stone savage as he handles the boulders, and to have him share in his own gregarious spirit by putting some of his own notions into his neighbor's head that might vivify whatever creative impulses are ensconced therein.

Operating solely according to the promptings of his spirited imagination the speaker fails, however, at his attempts to fathom why he acts the way he does, and comes closer to comprehending what is essential to the identity of his

nameless neighbour, who acts more consistently with his attitude, whose actions are his creed, unlike the speaker whose actions, as James Dawes has noted, belie his very words.²⁷ The speaker's tendency to voice every sentiment contrasts with his neighbour's silent complicity in the darkness more inscrutable than that of woods and the shade of trees, for the latter has little use for language and knows that wall mending does indeed mean a great deal more than his own talkative neighbour can realise. It is not the work of elves, nor of cows or hungry apples that brings down barriers but the propensity of the narrator to weaken the savage's stone walls of self. Though the speaker wants the neighbour to think and talk as he does, wants him to live according to the terms he defines for himself, in the words of "The Fear of God," the unassuming savage wears the uniform of who he is, remains wary "of coming too much to the surface/ And using for apparel what was meant/ To be the curtain of the inmost soul" (385; 11-13). What makes their relationship oblique and casual, then, is neither the stone fence nor the hill that separates their homesteads, but more obviously the subtext of their contending wills, the "something" in both that constitutes their barrier for which the whole project of wall mending is an allegory on the surface of the verse.

Supposedly betraying a demise of full consciousness and genuine self-awareness, more accurately the old-stone savage possesses a different kind of consciousness that governs his personality. He is not among the majority, those whom Emerson calls "mutes who cannot report the conversation they have had with nature" (289), and subtly proves himself less duplicitous because more closely acquainted with himself than the other who, imaginative and communicative though he may be, cannot marry the truth of experience with his

²⁷ James Dawes, "Masculinity and Transgression in Robert Frost," in *American Literature*, vol. 65, no. 2 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 300-301.

intentions. The narrator's projection of his desired reality through verbal self-expression occludes a true-to-life knowledge of himself, the alleged claim to his greater consciousness notwithstanding, making him incapable of ascribing meaning to his deeds and making irony his principle tactic.²⁸ His predicament mirrors the later Emerson who muses on his incapacity to square life to self-spun fables, precisely because he has supplanted with his eloquent semblances the underlying reality of what is uniquely himself and uniquely real. His every attempt to capture the essences of things, as Emerson counsels in "Experience," amounts to nothing besides vanity and grasping of the wind. His grieving that grief can teach him nothing is a lament for the shallowness of language, for words anchorless and adrift in the innavigable sea that washes with silent waves between him and the far-off feelings he cannot explore. In both Frost and Emerson, then, we see a sort of optical metamorphosis, whereby the creating-self is confined to a life of illusion, the progress of which is all about learning to skate proficiently on verbal surfaces, about the "mind skating circles around itself," as Frost paraphrases Emerson in a letter to Louis Untermeyer in 1924.²⁹

Emerson's personal account of his intellectual development reveals that it is the poet "who suffers most in the transposition . . . to a world of objective

²⁸ In this regard, the narrator of "Mending Wall" invites comparison with the speaker of "A Time To Talk," who shows both his wit and his unwillingness to question his intentions when he responds to a cordial call from the road, by saying, "I go up to the stone wall/ For a friendly visit" (124; 9-10). Both speakers convey an attitude contrary to what their actions imply. The speaker of "Trespass" also has "a strangely restless day" until his property rights are acknowledged by a trespasser, though he has "no prohibiting sign" and no definitive property, and cannot say why he feels "trespassed on and against" and compelled to insist "the land was mine" (364; 8, 1, 4). "Ignoring what was mine" (15) obviously designates an attitude contrary to that of the speaker of "Mending Wall." Notably, however, both value the differences of attitude and behaviour that distinguish them from others in ways that reveal their own unself-conscious complicity in why they require boundaries for themselves. These poems suggest that in Frost's writing the need to have property lines respected by others expresses an appeal for acknowledgement of the boundaries or deeper claims of self existing at the level of consciousness, of which they seem so unaware.

²⁹ *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrence Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 478.

objects."³⁰ Since "the seer and the seen are no longer the same there, the poet finds himself not near enough to his object." In Frost, the fact that all "Souls never touch their objects" (288) is illustrated by the "aeon-limit" separating all souls that are "too widely met" (52), according to the speaker of "A Missive Missile" (327; 50), for whom it proves impossible to reach all objects existing in themselves outside the haven of his all-encompassing mind. A million year-old stone painted with the sender's blood constitutes a message from someone intending its reception as an icon of his "sacrificial-votive" death. The narrator's reconstruction of the "obscure petitioner" dissatisfies, not because he is modern and the other ancient, but because the carver of the "ocher-written flint" and the significance the speaker ascribes to its message, he realises, are the off-spring of his fiction making consciousness (29-41).

"The meaning of it is unknown," he finally admits, "Or else I fear entirely mine" (43-44). On the basis of a similar kind of resignation the figure described in "The Most of It" also holds the world well within the boundaries of his self-sphered soul. "He thought he kept the universe alone," the narrator begins, "For all the voice in answer he could wake/ Was but the mocking echo of his own" (338; 1-3). Aspiring for something other than his voice given "back in copy speech," the man needs "counter-love, original response," but "nothing ever came of what he cried" (6-8). Making the most of it—his assumption of a causal relation of his voice with the crumbling rocks—bespeaks the futility inherent in his attempt to cross the "soul-from-soul abyss" (49), in the words of "A Missive Missile." This abyss distances those immured in consciousness from the objects at which they aim through their efforts to relate one with another. With one beholding an ocher-flint, the other a far-off cliff, the figures of "A

³⁰ This and the following quotation are taken from *The Victorian Fol Sage* pp. 57, 58.

Missive Missile" and "The Most of It" dramatise the ordeal of one trying to reach "someone else additional to him" when the object of his interest is indubitably the subject of his own mind. In Emerson's words, these figures, look[ing] from the mountain and see[ing] only the mountain" (248), whose view of "the sunset or the fine poem" depends solely upon their frame of mind, for all their artful dexterity cannot get beyond their fabrications of the real.

On such a search, Frost's Census-Taker has some similar concerns. Standing at the cliff's edge, calling out across the great gulf of his animating consciousness, he anticipates the solace offered by authentic human presences existing externally to himself. But the cliffs opposite him are "too far for echo" (175; 65); the perimeters of his subjectivity extend farther than his own voice can carry to something of objective integrity that could answer back to him. "After hours' overlooking from the cliffs," he arrives at the "slab-built, black-paper-covered house . . . with some hope, but not much" (9-13). His premonitions of hospitality, of a glowing lamp and a warm hearth, comprise the waning hopes shared by troubled purveyors of interior wastelands, by those seeking fraternity through "dreamy unofficial counting" with others occupying settlements empty and "flayed to the very stone" (32, 14). Thus the Census-Taker's task consists of "having to count souls/ Where they grow fewer and fewer every year" (14, 60-61). Observing the barrenness of human presence in the desert areas from which he journeys with these misplaced expectations for genuine society, he defines the borough with negative remarks only. "None in the hundred miles, none in the house," he says upon first arriving, and once inside: "They were not on the table with their elbows./ They were not sleeping in the shelves of bunks," and so on, leading him to the forlorn deduction that, "Nothing was left to do that I could see/ Unless to find that there was no one

there" (40, 55).

By this reductive process, not undesigningly he reduces to absolute nothingness all the drab phenomena of the external realm as an expression of his bleak interior vista. "So what is this I make sorrow of?" (8), he ponders, in another moment of clouded self-reflexivity. Hardly assuaging his perturbation, his imaginative activity—finding no one, making sorrow and doing nothing—feign his identification through familiar "as if" speculations with those who are no more, those associated in his mind with images of his own impoverishment of spirit. The manner in which the wind shuts the door encourages him, "the tenth" person, to cross the threshold as the "next one" (30-33). Once inside the house, he now fully obscures with his dreamy and dreary demeanour all actualities of time and place. "The time was autumn," he notes, "but how anyone/ Could tell the time of year" (17-18) eludes him, as he further detaches from the temporal world by indulging what has become his moribund self-absorption. And toward the end, when he describes as the source of his sorrow the places fallen to ruin over the course of "ten thousand years,/ "Where Asia wedges Africa from Europe" (53), he proceeds to confirm his peculiar kind of exile known to those living within the sole dimension of their consciousness.

The disjunction of the actual homestead from his mind's metaphor of it, has, as its obvious corollary, the total disjunction of authentic experience from self-consciousness. Allowing him to transmute into mere realisations of his own thoughts all that exists objectively in itself in the experiential world, his projections have become precisely the means by which he journeys into the silence of his self-absorbing preoccupations (58-60). It is not his fear that an assimilating energy within the muted environs will include him unaware, a literal force which he must for his survival hold in abeyance by journeying

onwards or turning to fresh tasks. It is rather an atmosphere possessed of the claustrophobia of an unremitting self-consciousness that instils his fear of being stifled along with those dwelling within the realities he sustains within his mind. Proclaiming "This place is desert" (57), by way of a directive to others suffering his bewilderment, he thus confirms his decision "to go on living" (64) by ceasing his dismal identification with the dead.

The speaker of "Desert Places" is also threatened by the darkness and heavy snow that smothers him along with the woods and animals in their lairs. But this poem is less a survey of the cheerless hinterland than a subjective evaluation of his own inner weather, with an aridity of spirit evaporating his will to survive that is commensurate with the lifelessness of the forlorn desert place. Looking into the field, he obviously looks within. Witness the narrative shift in emphasis from external to internal states of being, when he describes the nameless something that intensifies within him: "The woods around it have it—it is theirsAnd lonely as it is, that loneliness/ Will be more lonely ere it will be lessI have it in me so much nearer home" (296; 5-6, 9, 15). The benighted speaker bears comparison with Emily Dickinson's "freezing persons" who, just before the "letting go," experience the chill and stupor of winter, but cannot "choose the adjective/ For this blank cold, this sadness without a cause."³¹ The oppositions of colour introduced in the opening line, "Snow falling and night falling fast, oh fast" (1), and continued throughout by images of "benighted snow" and bright stars set against the black expanse (11, 14), eventually come to cancel themselves out, with telling effect on the speaker's combination of opposing impulses, either to go on living or resign himself to the season-ending forces that drive him deathward. Whereas the speaker of

³¹ Emily Dickinson, "341." Cited from *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* ed. M.H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1986), p. 1103.

"Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening," while observing the "woods fill up with snow" on the "darkest evening of the year" (8), finds the scenery "lovely, dark and deep" (13), the narrator of "Desert Places" is much "nearer home" (15), without promises to keep or more miles to travel. When "the desert snow lets down as white/ As may be in dark woods" (226; 3) the narrator of "The Onset" is also tempted to "give up his errand" and let "death descend/ Upon him where he is" (6). But the speaker of "Desert Places" watches emanate from within the darkness encroaching ominously upon his temperament, and he sees, "In the thick of teeming snowfall" (303; 1) to borrow from "Afterflakes," the shade of himself that shows "in form/ Against the shapeless shadow of storm" (9). Each of these speakers, with Emerson, are learning of the horizon—the far cliffs, the desolate house, the dark winter field or forest—the "art of perpetual reference and retreat" (286): reference to the objects in nature that mirror the sources of anxiety in themselves, from which they invariably seek retreat.³²

Out of such winter things, these wayfarers fashion, in their search for vestigial traces of the world they have renounced, an awareness of their predilection to confine themselves to the realm of mental similitudes. With no strong basis in the realm of objective experience by which to measure the value of their animating designs upon it, they observe the solipsistic repercussions of mental self-reliance the moment their recreation of the material world reflects their actual desolation: a fearful "universe alone," a world "entirely mine," an "emptiness flayed to the very stone," the loneliness of one's "own desert

³² The situation of these figures complies with that of the "autumn-tired" Leaf-Treader, another "fugitive" who is "too fierce from fear." Having put "forth too much strength" while running rather from what he fears than to what he hopes to find, he acknowledges the necessity of his approaching demise. The leaves that threaten "under their breath" to carry him to his death (297;3-8), that once were "overhead, more lifted up than I" (5), but have now fallen "to their final place in earth" (6) could serve to image his own demise. But he too fears the result of nurturing the pathetic fallacy in his mind that nature is speaking to him "as if it were leaf to leaf." Whether the leaves tap and touch at his eyes and lips, he says, "it was no reason I had to go because they had to go" (11-12)

places." From one perspective, these poems convey the trepidation imparted by those for whom the forces of their natural surroundings impel their sympathetic responses, to the extent that they present themselves less as fully realised persons than mere reactions to the natural conditions that imbue them with fear. But it is not so much the potential violence of the winter elements, nor the threat of nature's ritualism bringing all things to an end that they find so threatening, as the alienating forces that operate within these self-willed exiles and constrain their loss of vitality. The level of anxiety welling up within them helps make them aware that their usual way of escaping into their rich fantasy life leaves them blindly surveying the boundaries of a private desert. "If art, like life, is a self-enclosed dream," as one critic says of the plight of the depleted idealist, "the artist going in search of food for the mind does no more than travel in circles."³³ As figures condemned to an unreality of total self-consciousness, their situation is that of Emerson's cat chasing or snake ingesting its own tail, in illustration of the endless circularity by which the idealist's circle of absolute self-sufficiency sends him spinning around his own universe.

The idealist's knowledge of his self-deceptions exhausts his will in ways that serve to undermine the volitional aspect of projecting his private realities into the mere forms of his quotidian life. As Emerson elaborates in "Experience," respite from the transcendentalist's unyielding self-centeredness is the culmination of the dialectical struggle that expresses his maturing knowledge of his inability to imbue with spiritual meaning his less than satisfying immanent existence. The extent to which he struggles to sustain his illusory moments, those in which his mind rather than his sense impression

³³ La Bossière, p.56.

governs, becomes a measure of his need to engage with the realm of finite experience. With his vision of himself as he might be intensifying the plight of what he really is, he struggles to reconcile a consciousness that is divided by his allegiance to ideal and actual states of being, a fruitless undertaking insofar as these contrastive sides of self are sustained by opposing hopes. For the speaker of "Birches," this tension inheres in his efforts equally to fulfil the claims of his present reality and what he dreams of himself as a "swinger of birches" (121; 41). The birches that "bend to left and right/ Across the lines of straighter darker trees" (1-2) function as the metaphor by which he alternates between his unsatisfactory life and the transcendent version of himself as the young boy, who goes "out and in to fetch the cows" (23), and thus feels the tension between needing to fulfil his adolescent responsibilities and desiring to alleviate the tedium of his afternoon by swinging on birches. When the narrator is "weary of considerations" (26), he too escapes to his youthful paradise, by way of balancing the affairs of his life with the creative efforts he makes when wanting to "play alone."

The back and forth pattern of the narrator's musings on actual and mental realities creates the oscillating focus of the narrative, as suggested in the opening line by the shift from seeing "birches bend" to thinking that "some boy's been swinging on them" (1). Half-perceiving and half-creating the phenomena of swaying birches, he unexpectedly abstains from elaborating his mental intimations, by means of the conjunction with which the emphasis swings over the narrative curvature to the "matter of fact" considerations on what "Truth" would posit about the ways in which seasonal forces bend birches: "But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay/ As ice storm do" (5-6). Yet when ice "cracks and crazes their enamel," when the sun's warmth sends the ice

"shattering and avalanching" into "heaps of broken glass," he wants to capture his observations poetically as the falling of "the inner dome of heaven" (9, 12, 13, 22). Continuing his commentary on the natural processes of decay that send birches to the "withered bracken by the load," he again interrupts Truth by pondering the ways in which trunks that trail "their leaves on the ground" are "Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair/ before them over their heads" (17-20). His rational queries finally proving insufficient to elucidate the profound significance of the trees, he ceases, by the middle of the poem, to vacillate from facts to creative illusion by opting for a purely fictive presentation. "I should prefer to have some boy bend them," he says, returning again to his opening remarks, "By riding them down over and over again" (23).

Having shifted the weight of his considerations to his artistic comprehensions from the facts unimaginatively seen, he recalls the "straighter darker trees" and the significance he neglects to ascribe to them in the opening line, in contemplating the forest, wherein cobwebs burn and tickle the boy's face and twigs make him weep by lashing across his "open eye" (45-47). The dreariness of living within the "pathless wood" defines the immanent reality from which the narrator envisions his own desired transcendence, as the boy who rises beyond the drudgery of his daily afternoon and learns all about "not launching out too soon," when swinging through the air and landing safely on the ground (27, 40). The narrator also keeps his poise through the illusory acts of climbing "black branches up a snow-white trunk/ *Toward* heaven" (56) and then of swinging back again to earth (48-49). Since the good life inheres in both "going and coming back" (58), he fears that fate will "half-grant" his wishes by snatching him away into the realm of his mind, in which he begins his life over as the young birch-climber, never to return and realise his vision of

himself in the everyday world. As a swinger of birches, he can thus exclaim that, "Earth's the right place for love:/ I don't know where it's likely to go better" (52-53), only because he escapes the disappointments of his immanent life, by moving inwardly to his recreation of it, and returns again with an intensified hope of becoming the person he dreams of being.

Now indulging these playful illusions of his reconstructed youth, now failing to fulfil his idealised self-conceptions, the narrator altercates these contrastive identities in ways that evoke what Emerson calls in "The Transcendentalist" the "worst feature" of an irreconcilable "double consciousness" (268). "There is no tree that reaches upwards to the sky," Emerson also laments his unresolved dualities in a journal entry of 1834.³⁴ Like the narrator of "Birches," the self-reliant individual sustains, with his "irregular and interrupted impulses," his moments of elevation by way of concentrating his momentary ecstasies into reactions in view of his actual predicament. By merit of the hidden life within his mind, the narrator is also not without transcendent hope, though he still proves helpless to support his faith in what he could potentially become. His failure to realise the substance of what he envisions of himself proves the unfortunate habit of a life patterned after this endless cycle, whereby he tempers his idealistic extremes with responses to the implausibility of his vision once the world comes revolving back to him.

Nor could he act otherwise, since he has not taken what the girl in "Wild Grapes" calls "the first step in knowledge" (196; 95), while musing upon her experiences as a young birch-climber. She too meditates on the effects of being "translated," when clinging with all her strength to the branches of a birch tree (45). Once "wholly self-supporting," she recalls that her stubborn insistence to

³⁴ See Steven Whicher, "Emerson's Tragic Sense," in *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen E. Whicher (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 45.

uphold herself diminishes in proportion to her growing need for the assistance of another. At the instant she describes her refusal to "let go with her hands" as an expression of her wishing "in vain to let go with the mind" (45), her account becomes a drama of herself as a type of transcendentalist, whose precarious situation calls into doubt the viability of her mental self-reliance. Whereas the narrator of "Birches" tries to reassure himself with his visionary alternatives of the real, she quickly acquires the knowledge that draws her "safely from the upper regions" (59). "I don't know much about the letting down" (84), she recalls of the moment her brother bends the tree and lets her down by it (83). In effect, she discovers that there is an unsatisfactory, even a frightening corollary to her incipient refusal to let go with her mind. To paraphrase "The Lost Follower," she comes to see that it proves dangerous, even in a playful moment of her youth, to contend that she has the godlike in herself that empowers her with the illusory ability to move at will to the spiritual realm (359; 34-6).

Both for her and the speaker of "Birches," then, it is as if being "run off with by birch trees into space" (90) perpetuates the restive tensions that co-exist within them. Modelling themselves after their adolescent experiences as birch climbers, they seek to confirm what they are by trying to realise what they envision of themselves as playful youths. Inasmuch as they persist in countenancing their idealised self-conceptions, by means of climbing mentally, as it were, "Back up a stream of radiance to the sky" (300; 2-3), their claim to identity proves a matter of divisive effort. More aware than the speaker of "Birches" of this feature of their double consciousness, the narrator of "Wild Grapes" can attest to having "an extra life" (13), while celebrating "two different ages" on "two birthdays" (16). Her remarks echo Emerson's observation

in "The Poet" that, once the individual has converted his material harvest into spiritual seed, nature detaches from him "a new self," one which is "not exposed to the accidents of the weary kingdom of time" (385). Before he can be "caught up into the life of the Universe," he must have acceded to nature's higher end, "namely ascension, or the passage of the soul into higher forms," through which he becomes the "fearless, vivacious offspring, clad with wings" (272). But both Emerson's spiritual kingdom and his standards for those seeking citizenship through self-induced acts of transfiguration belong, as Stephen Whicher has remarked, to "what he later came to call it, a romance."³⁵ The individual's efforts to perfect his immaterial identity merely produce a quandary: the conflict, that is, between his inevitable adherence to the claims of the old self in the material world, the claims that vie with the principles that define him in an ideal sense only as the new, by order of the division that obtains in his spiritual inception.

The sad speaker of "To A Moth Seen In Winter" aptly summarises the basis of what Emerson took to be the individual's signal complexities at this stage in his experience of living the self-reliant life of the mind. The fact that he never attains with any consistency to what he spiritually aspires obviates the loneliness of those spending themselves, like the moth, "too much in self-support" (356; 12). The speaker also equates the acts of making "the venture of eternity" (13) with seeking "the love of kind in wintertime" (14). His sentiments recall the futility of trying to cross the "icy barrier" in "A Missive Missile," and the same resignation underscores his refusal to believe that the hand he stretches "Across the gulf of well-nigh everything" (16) could reach his own obscure petitioner. But the narrator is not lured by false hopes, not even

³⁵ Stephen E. Whicher, p. 70.

in wintertime, he insists, when one seeks the "love of kind" for reasons of mere survival. Contrary to the Birch-Climber's sentiment, that the earth is "the right place for love," this speaker admits the implausibility of meaningful exchanges, even for those who, like the narrator of "Wild Grapes," supplant an unfounded faith in themselves with their recognition of needing another's strength. This, he says, would require being "made more simply wise" (19), though he refrains from taking that first step in knowledge. Definitive of something human, the old and incurable "begetter of all ills that are" (16), the moth's need of another's support for his well-being contrasts with the speaker's insistence "to save [his] own a little while" (24). "I cannot touch your fate" (25), he exclaims to the forlorn moth, whom he thus advises to continue on its laborious flight, as he does, until its "pinions are quenched" (18).

"There is a limit to our time extension," the speaker of "The Lesson For Today" could immediately respond, in his dialogue with an imaginary ancient persona that also recasts the situation in "A Missive Missile." "Doomed to broken-off careers" (34), we and the world we live in, he laments, are equally "liable to the fate/ Of meaninglessly being broken off" (35). Admitting his fictional intent, he says: "I'm telling you. You haven't said a thing . . . / Unless I put it in your mouth to say," that the "earth is a hard place in which to save the soul" (38). Hence his prognosis that one should just "take the curse" bespeaks his surrender to the dictates of fate and echoes Emerson's proclamation of his self-reliant freedom that eventuates in his submission to the ways of providence. Insofar as the speaker acknowledges the futility of setting his hopes against the power of universal determinism, he compares with the Birch-Climber whose wishes might be "half-granted," and with the youth in "The Wind and the Rain," who is equally inclined to let "the half of life alone"

by playing "the good without the ill" (336; 15). Most of all he stands with those who, like the narrator of "The Wind," sing "of death" while realising, with the perspicuity of the disenchanted, that indeed "many deaths one must have died/ Before he came to meet his own!" (336; 10-11).

The attitude that each of these speakers share is one of survival, an attitude that reveals their feelings of helplessness and enforces their resignation to the inevitability of their retirement. Aware of their present situation as an exigency beyond their own control, they suggest the transcendentalist at the moment his mental paradise entirely loses its glamour. This happens in conjunction with his waning confidence in his "invulnerable essence," the powers of will and mind that served as his prior means of living the purely spiritual life. Like Emerson's miller who stands "on the lower levels of a stream, when the factories above [him have] exhausted the water" (285), he has relinquished his once certain competence at drawing into himself the alien energies flowing in streams of ethereal water from paradisaal regions (206). Once the well-spring of his creative inspiration, his mind shows the attrition of spiritual power conveyed by Frost's suggestion of "a blanker whiteness of benighted snow . . . / With no expression, nothing to express" (7), an image related to the *tabula rasa* quality of the solitary mind falling headlong into the vacuity of its non-existence. Underlying the confusion that inheres at this stage of his predicament, his anxiety of having his "lostness overwhelm" him (296; 12) culminates in precisely this form of nihilism. Respite from the unyielding torment of the self-divided will, as Emerson knew, is gained by silencing it with a total resignation of the impulse to live, by grimly anticipating the untroubled security of non-being. That is what Wylie Sypher calls the "drag toward inertia" which is constantly eroding "the self-assertion

which we call living."³⁶ The current of disillusionment running through the book of Ecclesiastes and underwriting much of Frost's poetry, hereby evinces a deromanticising of man's view of himself. If earthly dust affirms the source and the summation of our being, Frost with the mature Emerson would avow, a responsible consciousness possesses a heightened intuition of our nominal worth, a negative or negating view of purpose and an abrogation of our will to live.

Well acquainted with these nihilising resignations, Frost's Apple-Picker thus courts the autumnal mood. Evening and winter barrenness are here made more vacuous by his more extreme weariness and loss of ambition. The sterile nature of his wasteland is occasioned by his intractable refusal to escape the ache and tedium of his everyday world by bringing any visionary possibilities into being. Although "Magnified apples appear and disappear" (68), more compelling to him by far is the acclimatising "essence of winter sleep" that inheres in the scent of apples and the winter mood. This mood is commesurate with the sepulchral timbre of the orchard, and finds expression in the ominous ladder, empty barrels and frozen troughs, all the spectral embodiments of his consciousness strewn about the farm, rather than in his transcendent fantasy of apples. He knows that the attempt to realise this vision is as insubstantial as the frosted breath on which his dying words are carried away. Whereas mending walls, wood piles and well-curbs are sources of visionary engagement for other Frost figures, the Apple-Picker sees, while trying to "rub this strangeness from [his] sight" (9), no creative potential in the melting sheet of ice that images the foreboding sense of his all but immediate return to dust. Held up against the dying "world of hoary grass" (12), the

³⁶ Wylie Sypher, *Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art* (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 274.

evaporating mirror is a revealing depiction of his congruence with such ephemeral objects, of his unquestioned resignation to the laws obeyed by all things in the temporal world. Whereas in "An Encounter," the speaker's fear of being lost in the cedar swamp is allayed by his gazing up to heaven, "since there was no other way to look," and his finding "there against the blue" a "resurrected tree" (125; 10, 12), the hopeless Apple-Picker observes nothing that might encourage his receding spirit to look upwards in the direction that his ladder points, "Toward heaven still" (2).

"Sleep lingers all our lifetime about our eyes, as night hovers all day in the boughs of the fir-tree" (285), so Emerson remarks of the same prevailing lassitude that governs the Apple-Picker's yearning for an eternal repose. This is not just a yearning for the restorative slumber of the woodchuck's seasonal hibernation, but the enduring weight of lethargy and disillusionment incumbent upon a life-time of harvesting, the value of which he now takes into account. In the spirit of the writer of endless and worthless labour under the sun, he recounts all that has been done and left undone: "there's a barrel that I didn't fill/ . . .there may be two or three/ Apples I didn't pick upon some bough," and there have already been some "ten thousand thousand fruit to touch/ Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall" (3-5, 29-30; 68-69). All apples that have "struck the earth" (33), the Apple-Picker, stultified by the labour of his days regards as emblems of what will trouble his interminable sleep, of his failure to fulfil the great harvest he once desired. Here Frost refuses to separate the farmer from his trade or the sower from the seed. With the rotting results of his labour imaging his own realisation that he, like them, is going "surely to the cider-apple heap/ As of no worth" (35-36), the over-tired Apple-Picker virtually lies down at the foot of his ladder, near his own rag-and-bone shop,

his cellar bin, while thus contemplating his somnolent demise.

If "After Apple-Picking" represents the spiritual nadir towards which Frost's mental travellers incline as the consequent end of their inward journeys, "Directive" can be read as the response warranted by those soul-sick in their search of transcendent ministration. Intimations of various messenger-figures in "A Missive Missile" and "The Lesson For Today," of authentic presences standing outside the mind's consciousness of the figures in "The Most of It" and "The Census-Taker," are here realised in the speaker's counsel to his disciple concerning the anarchic potential of nurturing the illusions of self as sole governor of his innermost world and originator of his visionary realms of being. By inciting his disciple's desire for a better nature than that afforded by his imagination, the speaker imparts the transforming knowledge whereby self-reliance becomes reliance on a higher power. As Steven Whicher has said of Emerson, once his entrenched hope for the ideal power of the self-reliant mind was set against the obdurate realm of fact and experience, "he responded the only way he could—a resignation to the Power that created him."³⁷ The destitute self solicits the presence of an agent of unitary reality to resolve the duality of his consciousness. What serves to affirm his faith in something existing objectively in itself in a Platonic sense are the doubts and objections as to his inbred capabilities to facilitate his ascension into a higher form and prohibit his regression to the lower "brute and dark" immanence—"so base a state" (291), as Emerson puts it—wherein he remains unenlightened by his spiritual aspirations.

The speaker ministers to his disciple by way of the parables with which he dissociates childhood's imaginative reconstructions of reality from the

³⁷ Stephen Whicher, p. 43.

adult's sober vision, the two ways of perceiving reality in the poem: the "children's house of make-believe" (43) from the "house in earnest" (44), with one image evincing the illusory curative power of the self-reliant artificer's practice, the other encouraging the solemn perspective that reckons with the spiritual privation of those willing to confront the darker attributes of their inner life. Other Frost figures look to their childhood as the model for an ideal way of being. But this speaker offers an exemplum of youthful idealism rather as something from which to learn and get beyond, than something to emulate by cultivating the kind of illusory versions of reality that are one with the ontological perplexity induced by the unreality of dreams. Never far from the surface of Emerson's thought when at his most self-aware, the fear of self-deception that Frost isolates here bespeaks the candour of his assessment regarding his own citizenship in the heavenly realm, and underscores the necessity of getting beyond such confusion. Indeed "the kingdom of heaven is likened unto a child" (10: 15),³⁸ but St. Mark's account of Christ's injunction to his disciples and the religious leaders of the time are here invoked to separate those believing themselves privileged with the kingdom of heaven within them, from others humbly in search of spiritual rebirth, those who have abandoned the pharisaic attitudes of self-sufficiency by opting for procedures of self-abnegation.

The New Testament subtext to this procedure of self-transformation in "Directive" recalls the uncommon messenger in "A Missive Missile," the make-believe sender who "must have had to die" a "sacrificial-votive" death (327; 13-18). Deconstructing the complexities brought upon him by way of his irreverent self-will, the disciple loses himself when he descends through layers of

³⁸ *The New Jerusalem Bible: The Reader's Edition* (New York: Doubleday Press, 1985).

unreality to the same level of nothingness to which the Census-Taker brings himself. While he looks back to "a time made simple by the loss/ Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off/ Like graveyard marble sculpture" (30-31), the laminations of mental realities are stripped away from his forged sense of identity. The path on which he travels "may seem" to be "someone's road home from work" (31), the speaker says, in imitation of his disciple's fictional inclinations, but he goes on to recount that these inward adventures have taken his disciple deep within the country of his mind. This journey has taken him down a road leading to an interior sort of catacomb, where the houses and farms, the towns and cultures of villages he has known have faded to the evanescence of all subjectively-perceived elements of unreal worlds.

Unburdened of his illusions, the disciple progresses in his conversion to the world of *existentia essentia* in which he has no need of his "ladder road," his mental path or stream of radiance leading inward to the enclaves of his mind's consciousness under the guise of leading upward to the sky. Whereas the house divided against itself could not stand, as St. Matthew tells us (12: 25), the "house that is no more a house" (54) is an apter depiction of what must ensue before this disciple arrives "at home" (45). The "belilaced cellar hole" (56) suggests the otherwise lonely quarters of the disciple's soul, but the speaker's presence with him behind the "CLOSED sign" serves to nullify the omnivorous solipsism implied by the Apple-Picker's cellar bin. The tacit communion of souls the speaker's presence implies issues forth in the tropological procedure by which he adduces, in a consubstantial moment that drives him to the use of symbols, the inwardness and mystery of his disciple's transformation. With the "Grail" he offers as his disciple's cup of atonement the waters of life and truth drawn from the source he sanctifies with his mystical spell. By stealing "the

goblet from the children's playhouse" (61), he further ensures that what belongs as an emblem in the substantial realm of adult spirituality does not fall among "the wrong ones," those who could profane its sacred qualities with their inordinate and frivolous ceremonies while fabricating its value as just another plaything "in the playhouse of the children" (60).

The reformed disciple was once the "divinely self-sphered artificer giving birth to himself out of the womb of his own fertile imagination,"³⁹ whose system of perception wholly supports the "being of seeing." Now he can acknowledge the hubris of such high-minded devisings of incorporeal versions of reality, and make the "seeing of being" the system whereby the complexities of perceiving reality are understood within the experience of living as a dynamic involvement with the not-self. The disciple fulfils his destiny of genuine self-renewal because he acknowledges the incongruity of trying to save himself and enters into communion with something existing beyond the limitations of his powers of mind and volition. While penetrating in this way the illusion of the purely intellectual functions of his soul, he extends the horizon of his consciousness further than the secret places in his mind and succeeds in making real for himself the profundities of his experience. The disciple's destination is not, then, what some critics have called, speaking more generally of Frost's wayfaring mental travellers, the "redemptive consciousness" at "the culmination of imagination's journey."⁴⁰ This disjunction between the creating self's practice and its solipsistic repercussions is really a finely drawn differentiation. By this way of reckoning, Frost seeks to distinguish between the "projection of the imagination's shapes [that is] accompanied by a sober self-consciousness" and the "projection of fantasy worlds that . . . spur [him]

³⁹ La Bossière, P. 44.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Lentriccia, P. 119.

into anarchic solipsism (255). It is a view that sets adrift the notion of transformation from its etymological mooring in the zone where nothing exists but what thinking makes it so, the zone, in Sypher's phrase, waning on both sides to the personal darkness of those locked in total self-consciousness (48).

For Frost, like the later Emerson, was not a poet too convinced that he had to believe things into existence by constructing "a private world (a 'better nature')," in Frank Lentricchia's words, "in order to redeem, by replacing, his existential situation" (183). Lentricchia's conclusion seems justified by the sometimes inexplicit emphasis in Frost's poetics on self-belief, "which is also a means to creating the self believed in," as Hyatt Waggoner has remarked.⁴¹ There is also Frost's proclaimed indifference to "whether the world goes to hell,"⁴² the world that otherwise "needs to be transformed" by the mind's consciousness. These statements would seem to reinforce the active role of the private ego in its transcendence and reiterate, moreover, the romantic kind of self-assertion in Wordsworth's claim of having no need of a redeemer. From another perspective, however, Frost's avowals suggest a poetics more like Wallace Stevens's. Whereas Stevens's emphasis on sublimity and the supreme fiction recalls the early Emerson's considerations of the idealist poet, Frost follows the Emersonian tradition that is weighted more toward the actualities of life than the non realities of imagined experience. Stevens describes the supreme fiction as the mind's resemblance of the real: it is "keen enough to be in excess of the normal sense of reality" which it evokes only to defy.⁴³ Frost's claim would be more proscriptive of his poetics if he did not depict in his poetry the solipsistic repercussions of a totalising imagination, and thereby constrain

⁴¹ Hyatt Waggoner, p. 175.

⁴² *SL*, 43.

⁴³ Cited with no reference by Poirier, p. 43.

the transcendental self in its yearning to withdraw from the unremarkable realm of experience by escaping into the exceptional realm of pure mind.

The equivocation of the contrastive systems of perception apparent in Frost's poetry intimates, then, his affinity with Emerson, for whom these separate categories exist in his writing as the tension between his nascent idealism and his subsequent emphasis on the hardness and darkness of actual life. Under the rubric of American individualism, Emerson views the natural landscape as the externalisation of the soul situated in the self. He intends a partial reunion with nature by resolving the dualities of his own "ineffectual struggles." But the authenticity of experience is here made indeterminate by virtue of his self-reflexiveness and consequent conflation of true reality and consciousness: the alienness of nature—"The woods around it have it—it is theirs," as Frost puts it—must be ascertained as the alienness of the self exiled in his own consciousness—"I have it in me so much nearer home." Emerson's theoretical outlook on the culture that views "matter as a reality foreign to his soul" collides inevitably with the fact that the self-relying individual observes less of actual nature, the "scene before one's eyes," in Larzer Ziff's words,⁴⁴ than the peculiar landscape native to his mind. The Emerson of the later essays thus recognises his earlier metaphysical decisions to overcome the dualism of nature and consciousness as failing attempts to fortify the inviolability of the "great and crecive self, rooted in absolute nature" (305), whose reward is the discovery of the "hidden truth . . . that the fountains whence all this river of Time and its creatures floweth are intrinsically ideal and beautiful" (284). Since nature's spirit does not operate

⁴⁴ Larzar Ziff, in his introduction to *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays*, ed. Larzar Ziff (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1982), p. 4.

upon the self from without but from within, the early Emerson, for whom many poets of his day had lost the perception of the "dependence of form upon soul" (284), in bestowing his reward, thus bestows the "heavy price Narcissus exacts from those tak[ing] him for a patron."⁴⁵

In "The Gift Outright," Frost issues another deed of gift, the reconciliation of nature and the self. He exclaims that nature can reassume alienated individuals to itself insofar as they relinquish an unfounded belief in their limitless traits of soul and mind. "Something we were withholding made us weak," he reflects, "it was ourselves/ We were withholding from the land" (348; 8-9). The "limits and bounds" in which the individual stays confined, what Emerson calls the "obstruction or excess of phlegm" (289) in his constitution, are the result of his unyielding self-will, that which prevents his communion with nature and diminishes with his growing conviction that there is "salvation in surrender" (10), in the giving of himself outright. Frost assumes in his poetics this struggle of the lone individual working out his own relation to nature beyond him while looking inward to the nature of his desires. In his dramas he reveals the utter ambiguity within his figures' systems of perceiving that causes the tension under which they conduct themselves, all that is alien and threatening within their own nature, in images depicting the illusory value of objects held within their notional interest. Emerson had defined the reward of poetry as the vital quality of ideal vision that is essential therefore to the soul's growth as the principal means of giving "man the perpetual presence of the sublime" (28). Frost shows that these unspecified promises of the mind's consciousness can become deceptive conjurations which lure the individual from the darker aspects of their reality wherein lies the ultimate attraction of death;

⁴⁵ La Bossière, p. 51.

for beyond these illusory obstacles still prevail the reasons for his moribund compulsions. He can grasp these reasons only by acknowledging the link between his obdurate belief in the ideal perceptions of the mind's eye and his lost hopes in himself as the one who aims to see them realised. Conceiving within the grandeur of his mind's cosmos a reality he cannot himself obtain serves to kindle his nihilistic determinations as to the pointlessness of vaguely realising something never to be attained, since his means to finding it proves uniform with the means by which it is lost.

Frost's is a method that moderates, then, the early Emerson's totalising idealism and ethics of mental self-reliance by incorporating the later Emerson's principles of self-abnegation, whereby meaningful realities are construed not as something human imagination creates as an alternative form of experience. As Frost's *fabula* of La Fontaine suggests, the "apogee of human blind conceit" (394; 4), the individual walking "sole alone" on the road to self-transcendence will inevitably plunge "head foremost in the trench" (9). His allegiance, divided as it is between ideal and actual worlds, widens further when his faith in the imminence of his vision threatens to become a chasm of the contrary pull of forces which prove too great for his efforts of mind and will. To seal the fissure between dreams and the everyday realities that occasion them, so Frost's writing suggests, is to see the value in things artless and unenhanced, not for what they could become but for what they are.

Chapter III

Squaring the Self: Versions of Transcendentalism in E.E. Cummings's *The Enormous Room*.

The worst feature of this double consciousness is, that the two lives which we lead really show very little relation to each otherOne prevails now, all buzz and din; the other prevails then, all infinitude and paradise; and with the progress of life, the two discover no greater disposition to reconcile themselves.

—Emerson, "The Transcendentalist"

A son of New England had observed those two realms bitterly struggling for dominion: then, as a guest of verticality, our impuritan had attended the overwhelming triumph of the temporal realm.

—E.E. Cummings, *i: six non-lectures*

It is generally accepted that E.E. Cummings is a modernist proponent of Emerson's moral humanism who shares his forbear's aspirations to elevate an immanent reality to paradisaal heights. Over the past two decades a resurgence of critical interest in their close affiliation has occasioned a strong consensus of their similarities. A number of critics have argued for a direct relationship between Cummings and his chief literary antecedent in their attempts to point out that the solipsism inherent in Emerson's views on the self is also a characteristic of Cummings's visionary experiences. By conventional reckoning the genre of spiritual autobiography which Cummings inherits from Emerson no

longer leads man ever onward to God but ever inward to himself.⁴⁶ While drawing on Cummings's comment in *i: six non-lectures*, "thanks to I dare say my art I am able to become myself" (23), these critics have defined his transcendentalism as the self-caused locus of individual identity and meaning. Indeed there is a direct and quite specific influence of Emerson's philosophical reflections on Cummings's thought. Yet very few commentators have assessed the important differences in their ethics of the self-reliant individual that another comparative evaluation of these writers can reveal. In this chapter I have set out to evaluate the methods by which Cummings presents in *The Enormous Room* a more viable mode of achieved self-transcendence. The cubist impulse to render things consubstantial prompted him to shoulder a two-dimensional reality upward into the hard sunlight of a three-dimensional vision. While adding greater dimension to his version of self-transcendence his cubist techniques function like a prism of sorts that exposes all solipsised shadows in the zenith of his bright noon and illustrates the reconciliation of Emerson's bleak worlds of buzz and din with his colourful worlds of paradise.

Cummings has indeed looked from under the iron lid of eighteenth century America's sluggish intellect. In many ways he fulfils Emerson's postponed expectations in "Self-Reliance" (*Essays, First Series*, 1841, vol 2). In much of his early writings Cummings exhibits an understanding of society's aversion to self-reliance, that it "loves not realities and creators, but names and customs," as Emerson puts it (178); moreover he knows that "nature is slow to equip us in the prison-uniform of the party to which we adhere" (182). But as a receiver of this inheritance, Cummings inclines more toward the prodigal than the older son. In Banyan fashion, laden with the ideas of his American fathers, he

⁴⁶ See Gary Boire, "An Inconceivable vastness': Rereading E.E. Cummings's *The Enormous Room*" in *English Studies in Canada*. IV, 3, Fall (1978), pp. 55, 331.

departed for the city of Modernism, where he both lost and found himself amidst foul rag-and-bone shops, cities hostile and towns unfriendly, until he was no longer at ease in an old Emersonian dispensation, voiced in the phraseology of an old mouldered American nation. While America is the unattained ideal in much of Emerson's writings, for Cummings the frequent equation of the American landscape or city with the self suggests that it is the latter which is still unattained. With Cummings's own transcendental paradigm a focus on national identity becomes a more personal concern with self-identity. The extent to which Emerson and Cummings agree in their perspectives on the intractability of the individual is evidently limited by the different postulates of individualism in their writings. Exemplified by his heroic conceptions of Shakespeare, Napoleon and Carlyle, Emerson's candidate for the great American man must be "a cause, a country and an age" (54). But such figures, with their unfounded dignity and inscrutable self-reliance, no longer spoke universal sense to Cummings in post-existential America. A great man for him is someone like Bathhouse John who, like many characters in *The Enormous Room*, has "no very clear conception of the meaning of existence" and "thinks of the usual Nothing," while sitting beneath apple trees, "ruminating thoroughly upon non-existence" (56).

The signal point of contrast between Emerson's and Cummings's views on the individual's spiritual potential concerns the capacity of their heroes to exist according to their own heroic or anti-heroic self-conceptions. "Ruminating on non-existence" would seem to be the self-abnegating act of consciousness revealed in Emerson's famous "eye" passage, wherein the hero's transcendental moment is occasioned by his attempts to efface himself in the process through which "all mean egotism vanishes," before the hero, a forerunner of Bathhouse

John, can claim, "I am nothing." But this vision is generated by the hero himself, the privileged agent of ascent. He is "uplifted into infinite space" and becomes a "part and particle with God" as the "currents of the Universal Being" flow through him. Emerson's confidence in the "divinity in man" plunges the hero to depths of his own self-conceptions. "Inward leads the mysterious way," in Novalis's words, "within us or nowhere is eternity with all its worlds, the past and the future."⁴⁷ His inability to achieve self-transcendence is the result of the indulgence of his introspective tendencies, leading to the solipsistic end to which the exploring of his interior consciousness is supposed to be the means. His failure to occupy the higher world of "infinite and paradise" derives from the romantic transcendentalist's double consciousness, his effort to get beyond himself by means of himself—his other side of self residing in the lower world of "buzz and din." While standing in the shadow that falls between the idea and the reality of Emerson's transcendentalism, these aspiring individuals who are anchored in an immanent world can discover, then, "no greater disposition to reconcile themselves" (254).

The shadow that rises at the evening of Emerson's life to darken his optimistic transcendentalism does not fall on Cummings, for whom there is no such disjunction beleaguering the individual whose method of ascent accords with the development of a modernist paradigm of selfhood. With the advent of modernism, as Carl Michalson writes, the romantic kind of self-confidence which had previously borne every predicament by means of an act of "impudent self-will" changed to a recognition of the situation the self endures exclusively through "the hope of rescue beyond oneself."⁴⁸ In the third chapter of *i: six*

⁴⁷ See J. Wilson, *The Romantic Heroic Ideal* (London: Louisiana State Press, 1982), p. 20.

⁴⁸ Carl Michalson, *Contemporary Existentialism and Christian Faith* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), p. 12.

non-lectures, Cummings celebrates the benefits gained by the individual who abandons his claims to self-reliance, along with a variety of salient principles that inform his synthetic version of individualism. Revitalising the equation of cityscape and self, he illustrates the reconciliation of all opposite and discordant elements that ensues with passively letting go:

Now I participated in an actual marriage of material with immaterial things; I celebrated an immediate reconciling of spirit and flesh, forever and now, heaven and earth; this accepting transcendence; this living and dying more than death or life. Whereas—by the very act of becoming its improbably gigantic self—New York had reduced mankind to a tribe of pygmies, Paris . . . was continuously expressing the humanness of humanity. Everywhere I sensed a miraculous presence . . . of living human beings; the fact that I could scarcely understand their language seemed irrelevant, since the truth of our momentarily mutual aliveness created an imperishable communion. While (at the hating touch of some madness called La Guerre) a once rising and striving world toppled into withering hideously smithereens, love rose in my heart like a sun and beauty blossomed in my life like a star. Now, finally and first, I was myself: a temporal citizen of eternity; one with all human beings born and unborn (53).

Regarded as a prefatory text to *The Enormous Room* this passage highlights the ways in which Cummings's linear style rearranges into cubist dimension his inner condition and environment. His transcendental moment is the sort of imperishable communion of spirit and flesh that proved unattainable for Emerson. In a moment of self-finding offered by "certain beautiful givers of

illimitable gladness" (54), as he writes earlier in *i: six non lectures*, "whose any mystery makes every man's/ flesh put space on and his mind take off time", Cummings is less the agent of his ascent than a passive receiver who "participates" and "accepts" his own peculiar regeneration. He is anything but imprisoned inside his own skin but is as existentially liberated as he could possibly be. In a vision born of an engagement with time as immanent *chronos* and as *chairos*, with a fully immanent, material realm—Emerson's "buzz and din"—and with one entirely transcendent, immaterial—his desirable paradise, Cummings is a citizen of one of two usually dissociated cities: the City of God and the City of Mammon, the Celestial City and the City of Destruction, are become Paris and New York, respectively. Cummings registers his personal alteration in cubist dimension while extending his consciousness upward and outward, and sounds harmoniously his soul's tonic note through the octaves of a parallel edge in a higher register, thus portraying the uniquely actual but still other-wordly quality of his transcendental experience.

In their pursuit of this kind of existential liberty prisoners of *The Enormous Room* yearn for an annihilation of the structures that hinder the union of immanent and transcendent realms. Cummings describes his incarceration locale as an "abominable and unyielding Symbol" that offers the potential for self-transcendence to prisoners who are contained within "the immutable vileness of our common life" (101). Alleviation of "the ineffable and terrific and to be perfectly avenged Wrong" suffered by the prisoners requires "a shaft of bright lightning" that could "wither the human and material structures which stood always between our filthy and pitiful selves and the unspeakable cleanness of Liberty." Yet beyond hoping for an actual bolt of lightning to destroy the prison walls and set free the captives, here Cummings

imagistically refers to the merging of two different spheres of reality. He attains to this reconciliation by filtering the memories of his incarceration experience in *The Enormous Room* through a cubist mode of consciousness. All sequential experience is here squared into "a vast grey box in which are laid helter skelter a great many toys" (82). Accordingly the evocation of various modes of nursery school iconography creates the childlike perspective from which life in novel is viewed. Each of the toys is "completely significant apart," he writes, "from the always unchanging temporal dimension which merely contains it along with the rest."

Dimension is the cubist watchword Cummings uses to lend depth and significance to the environment he describes as "the somewhat beautiful dimension of sorrow" (17). Experience in this sordid realm is an unchanging though temporal square which "contains" objects in the same manner a box contains toys. Irrespective of minutes and months, the penitentiary reality is not teleological, does not extend railroad-like on a two-dimensional time line, since any "time method" is merely another outmoded "technique that cannot do justice to timelessness," and is displaced by representative "units of time" which are "individualities" or artistic perspectives offered on a variety of cubist entries into his "diary of . . . alternative aliveness and non-existence at La Ferté Macé." What makes "death worth living and life worth dying" (107) at the prison is the dynamic or "kinetic aspect of the institution," the movement and change provided by the immigration and emigration of its prisoners. In a manner characteristic of all temporal citizens of eternity, the contours of these prisoners or "toys" are "part of the actual Present—without future and past" (82). Throughout the novel, then, Cummings's presents to the reader a variety of figures who must experience what he calls "an amputation of the world" (83),

the same process of self-transformation described in *i: six non-lectures*, to which individuals become subjected in their paradoxical life-in-death existence within the prison walls.

Self-transformation commences in the novel at the first stage of becoming a toy-doll while suffering an annihilation or "amputation" of self that precedes spiritual rebirth. The initial stage entails accepting the humbling conditions on which self-renewal must occur at La Ferté Macé. As a sort of Obstinate figure from *Pilgrim's Progress* who refuses to succumb to such debasement, the aristocrat Braggard finds it impossible to paint in a place "where the fellows drop their dung in the very room where they sleep . . . all this dirt and these filthy people—it stinks! Ugh!" (53). Braggard's title as Count, his "glib, faultless French" and his boundless arrogance recall Cummings's father and the Chef de Section Sanitaire, both of whom are accustomed to the decencies and luxuries of life and have their own determined notions of identity and artistry. While complaining that here he "is treated no better than pigs here," the Victorian Braggard also stands as a sort of elder Prodigal son. With nihilistic distemper he derides his gamy jail-mates and cries injustice at having to accompany his younger brother into the swine trough. In other words, he remains at ease in Emerson's dispensation and receives honors as that rarefied individual whose heroic self-conceptions incite him to inhabit an ideal realm which has nothing to do with the mundane world of ordinary affairs. But he resembles his role model in a more crucial way. Like Emerson, who failed to see the value of things outside of himself and found that the badness of the times gave death an uncanny attractiveness, so Braggard speaks with an increasingly sombre tone in his bereavement of "the time [he has] wasted here . . . A man might as well be dead." But to others in the herd, all the prevailing

"buzz and din" of their earthy environment evinces the celebration of life precisely within the degrading medium through which they can attain to a paradisaical state of being. Regarding themselves as a "fluent and numerous cluster of vital humanity," they anticipate with Yeatsian vision the shaft of lightning as the ladder or means to transcendence that is set in mounds of refuse leading upward to images of pure mind.

In "I Begin a Pilgrimage," Cummings begins his spiritual descent when he journeys towards the prison and announces to his "comrades, friends and gentlemen" that he would be guillotined shortly thereafter (6). Confident with the jovial anticipation of his own impending death, he embarks on a pilgrimage, saying, "They would ask me when I preferred to die. I should reply, 'Pardon me, you wish to ask me when I prefer to become immortal?'" (34). His composure soon diminishes, however, as he progresses toward La Ferté Macé and a noticeable heaviness of spirit descends upon him: in "the yellow flares of lamps, huge and formless in the night . . . Every figure was wrapped in its own individual ghostliness . . . [in] this unearthly patch of the world, this putrescent and uneasy gloom." Stumbling onwards, "blind and dumbly, in a disorderly state of my mind," Cummings presses on like Eliot's Magi, who also have a hard time on their long journey, through "villages dirty and charging high prices" (15) and "prefer to travel all night" (17) before discovering a stream of water near three trees on a low sky (24).⁴⁹

The similarities between Cummings's and Eliot's artistic comprehensions of the pilgrimage have greater significance, since these pilgrims involve themselves in archetypal Christian experiences through which an almost ineffable alteration occurs inside them. "I had seen birth and death," says the

⁴⁹ Citations of T.S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" are taken from *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* ed. M.H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1986), pp. 1846-47.

nondescript narrator of Eliot's poem, reflectively, "[b]ut had thought they were different; this Birth was/ Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death" (37-39). Cummings presents himself then as a type of wayfaring Christian pilgrim set within a familiar modernist elision of temporality and precise location: while bowing under his great sack he struggles to see the sort of Damascus-road on which he journeys, before resigning himself to the Dantean gloom. "My eyes were blind," he recounts, and further immerses himself in the visionary mode of consciousness through which he sees the Wooden Man moments later. In his stupor Cummings realises that the Wooden Man has already appeared to him "in the dream of some medieval saint." A typology now begins with the actual face to obliterated-face encounter with the first toy-like character to emerge in *The Enormous Room*. The Wooden Man is the prototypical Doll whose wooden, clumsy body has suffered a painful amputation like none other in the novel. Not standing on his fragile legs, absurdly large feet and funny writhing toes, the Wooden Man supports himself with "an unearthly ferocity of rectangular emotion," while his little stiff arms make "abrupt cruel angles with the road" (38). The syntax of Cummings's description suggests that the Wooden Man's body and the cross on which he seems to hang are one and the same. "Hanging all by itself," picture-like, the Wooden Man is reminiscent of Picasso's *Portrait of Wilhelm Uhde* or *Daniel Henry Kahnweiler* with his "terribly brittle shoulder [on which] the droll lump of its neckless head ridiculously lived" (39).

Encroaching upon this modernist Calvary, Cummings further experiences the kind of self-transformation that determines his state of being hereafter in the novel, in terms both moral and aesthetic. His moment of "living and dying" in *i:six non-lectures* bears resemblance to this event which leaves him with the

option: "I must not lose, or lose all" (38). In effect, he must choose between two versions of transcendentalism: an Emersonian assertion of self, in an effort to achieve a transcendental ascent powered by "an impudent self-will"—"I must not lose"; or an absolute loss of self, a passive letting go of all claims to himself—"or lose all." Undergoing the metamorphosis that will conform his image to the Wooden Man's, Cummings discovers the relationship between being penitential and being mechanical: "it was only a step up or downI crawled on hands and knees Prone, weight on elbowsUphill now. Every muscle thoroughly aching, head spinning. I half-straightened my no longer obedient body"—until he comes "face to face with a little wooden man." In the manner of Eliot's speaker who ends his account with a series of questions, Cummings feels prompted by the cubist Christ to wonder: "[w]ho was this wooden man? Like a sharp black mechanical cry . . .stood the coarse and sudden sculpture of his torment." Yet he cannot fully understand the significance of his encounter since the Wooden man speaks solely through "the angular actual language of his martyred body." While lying prostrate before the Wooden Man, Cummings makes an important observation, that there is "in this complete silent doll a gruesome truth of instinct," a "success of uncanny poignancy" that parallels his non linguistic communion with the "living human beings" in *i: six-non-lectures*. He is compelled into soulful communion with the Wooden Man, who draws him out of himself in another moment of "mutual aliveness," of "accepting transcendence." These details add to the fact that when he departs his feet become "absurdly large" like the Wooden Man's, to confirm that his "face to face" encounter between the pilgrim-like artist and the Symbol leads to their ontological equanimity as toy dolls. He has begun, then, the process through which he too becomes a doll-like type of the Wooden Man,

the culmination of which occurs at the end of the novel, when he claims: "I felt myself to be, at last, a doll," an aesthetic recreation born out of an authentic response to this "Symbol" of what it means to die to himself in the silence of intolerable autumn.

"The moon's minute flower" that now pushes "between slabs of fractured cloud" is reminiscent of the situation described in *i:six non-lectures*, when love rises in his heart like the sun and beauty blossoms like a star. But it is an image of transcendence that leaves him more perplexed. Like the Magi who are no longer at ease in their place among "these kingdoms," Cummings is disoriented upon returning to the town that he now regards "as a unique unreality . . . These streets with their houses did not exist . . . This was a city of pretend" (39). Unlike the Magi, however, he cannot yet describe his moment here before the Wooden Man in overt terms of Christian paradox. Not until the end of the novel does Cummings express the meaning of his situation in ways that echo Eliot's speaker's question: "were we led all that way for/ Birth or Death?" The invocations of these Christian formulations of spiritual rebirth suggest that the significance of this event extends well beyond that of mere alterations in the artist's aesthetic orientation. That is, his process of self-becoming is not foremost an artistic transformation of self, and the existentialist significance of his conversion defines the role Cummings plays throughout the novel. Having undergone the initial stages of self-annihilation at this scene with the Wooden Man, Cummings now stands as a pilgrim wanderer of sorts. The importance of the Christ figure that Cummings sees en route to La Ferté Macé derives from this typology that extends throughout the novel: the "dolls" that are pulled from the vast grey box become emblems of his symbol-making consciousness. They now go forth to other imprisoned divine

figures who are types pointing back to this scene. Like the Divine Prisoner, with whom Cummings had earlier stood face to face in a way repeated here with the Wooden Man, the monkey man, the two Bears, Emile the Bum (to name a few), all become types of Divine Men transformed through the process of "amputation" into doll-like artistic re-creations of the Wooden Man.

A number of literary critics have called attention to this process of self-renewal in their commentaries on Cummings's close affiliation with Emerson. That Emerson's doctrine of mental self-reliance is a leading conception Cummings absorbed into his version of individualism in *The Enormous Room* is a view that infers that his ideas of selfhood involve purely artistic self-conceptions. Yet Cummings's method does not recapitulate Emerson's principles as clearly as some scholars suggest when they evaluate his moment of self-regeneration as the aesthetic self-construction of his mind's consciousness. In Cummings's estimation, authentic selfhood always precedes authentic art: the former is not achieved by merit of the latter. Cloaked in an apparently benign version of moral humanism, the aesthetic argument is really another way of privileging the self-as-creator that informs Emerson's transcendental idealism. Cummings, in his candid understanding of the limited role the self plays in the transcendental ascent, shows greater allegiance to the principles of theistic existentialism, than to the humanist existentialism that is, as one critic comments, an extension of Emerson's ethics of mental self-reliance.⁵⁰ Cummings recognises a redemptive force that elicits his instinctive response and this constitutes the principle difference between Emerson's account of self-renewal and his own. Divine reality, throughout Cummings's *oeuvre*, is not the spiritual *nisus* that acts through all phenomena, as Emerson claims it is. It is

⁵⁰ See George Stack, *Nietzsche and Emerson: An Elective Affinity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992), p. 9.

the real, *ab extra* presence of divinity that externally determines the individual's spiritual well-being. It is the distinction between a subjectively conceived presence, similar to what Nietzsche called "immaculate perception," and one wholly impersonal and transcendent. Cummings's well-known statement recorded in *six non-lectures*, "Thanks to I dare say my art I am able to become myself" (44), is often used by critics to ascribe Emersonian significance to Cummings's aesthetic initiatives. Yet another statement in *The Enormous Room*, "I am myself a painter" (53), proves more accurate in summarising what he takes to be the value gained by dissociating moral growth from creative ascension. At a later moment in the novel, he elaborates further:

Had I, at this moment and in the city of New York, the complete confidence of one twentieth as many human beings I should not be so inclined to consider The Great American Public as the most aesthetically incapable organisation ever created for the purpose of perpetuating defunct ideals and ideasLet no one sound his barbaric yawp at this. I refer to the fact that, for an educated gent or lady, to create is first of all to destroy—that there is and can be no such thing as authentic art until the *bon trucs* (whereby we are taught to see and imitate on canvas and in stone and by words this so-called world) are entirely and thoroughly and perfectly annihilated by that vast and painful process of Unthinking which may result in a minute bit of purely personal Feeling. Which minute bit is called Art (224).

Here Cummings acknowledges true art as the essential produce yielded by obliterating the cultural baggage acquired through an education in the ways of the world. Artistic representation is drawn from a vast crucible wherein all

that is authentic to one's identity is extrapolated from the worthless dross of bygone and lifeless ideals. Again, this makes Cummings sound much like Emerson, and critics have responded to such passages in ways that highlight the links. Here is a representative example: "Phoenix-like rising from the ashes of the modern world," Cummings's "veritable transformation [is] a traumatic, but nonetheless regenerative rebirth."⁵¹ Or again: Cummings's method entails a "debilitating negation" that is "inherent in the outworn values and assumptions of an arid tradition" (338). He acknowledges "his life-long antagonist—the ever-threatening possibility of negation" as the "tempting fiend" or "active, impersonal system that seeks to suppress and eventually negate all that is vitally human" (338).

This argument yet fails to account for the positive negation that Cummings addresses in this passage in *The Enormous Room*, in *i: six non-lectures*, and in many of his poems, from which comes some more fortifying statements: "Blow soon to never and never to twice/ (blow life to isn't; blow death to was)/—all nothing's only our hugest home;/ the most who die, the more we live" ("what if a much of a which of a wind"). "We (by a gift called undying born) must grow "All lose, whole find," he says in "one's not half two."⁵² The "non" in Cummings's official "non-existence" in *The Enormous Room* is a prefix as significant as the opening epigraph: "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (xxi), and many similar passages like: "I almost shouted in agony I turned into Edward E. Cummings, I turned into what was dead and is now alive, I turned into a city, I turned into a dream," that occur near the end of the novel (238). Cummings's aestheticist critics have argued that here prisoners undergo a "process of transformation"

⁵¹ Gary Boire, p. 336.

⁵² E.E Cummings: *Selected Poems* (London: C. Nicholls and Company, 1960), pp. 58, 57.

through which they reach either "vital liberation" or "spiritual inertia," through which they journey on stepping stones toward freedom or Précigné. And they extend this either-or paradigm to existentialist modes of difference "between being and nothingness," as imaged by the Delectable Mountains and Apollyon. Quintessential to the protagonist's spiritual progress are both the moments of "spiritual inertia" and "vital liberation" that are illustrated by the threatening reality of Apollyon or on the Delectable Mountains. These negative or negating circumstances are uniform with the positive experience which, for Cummings, is one with negation. Witness his emphasis on the consonance between dying and living in the passage from *i: six non-lectures*: the reconciliation of "spirit and flesh" is achieved by way of his "living and dying more than death or life." In the act of becoming "its improbably gigantic self," the city of New York, "a once rising and striving world," topples into "withering hideously smithereens." Cummings is equally dead and alive, "one with all human beings born and unborn" (53). A "spirit descends to ascend," Cummings's paraphrase of Christ's injunction, "he who would find himself must first lose himself," indicates the prototypical Christian view that being and nothingness are not oppositional, since being is contingent upon first experiencing what Cummings calls the "no of all nothing" (236). Or, to invoke modernist statements on the same: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and E.M. Forster's *Passage To India*, wherein the reader is asked to wander with dim illumination through the utter ambiguities of the human condition and arrive at the meaning of the sentiment that "nothing is something" in the Marabar caves and on the Congo river. The self-abnegation enacted by the soul-sick is, then, the physic necessary to dissolve the non-essentials of human nature, this confrontation with the nadir of self proving necessary to fulfill the means to which spiritual conversion is the end.

The correspondence between authenticity of selfhood and art is inherent in the grammar Cummings uses in depicting his toy dolls. His grammar fulfills the intention of cubist syntax to represent an object in a manner that accurately states its vital nature. For Cummings, true existence has no predicates: Jean Le Nègre is "A Verb; an IS" (168). Both Picasso and Matisse excised the formal modes of representation in their efforts to fathom what Gertrude Stein called "the bottom nature," in particular, colour, tonality, and a number of attributes superfluous to the substance of the object that is stretched across a two-dimensional surface, on which the definitive lines of a character's outward appearance could easily be traced. Instead the cubists used a mode of representation they felt was truer to the inner qualities of the art object. Note the visual tone and mood of Cummings's feeling response when Josef Demestre departs for le Précigné: "with him disappeared unspeakable sunlight, and the dark keen bright strength of the earth" (167). "Things of this sort," he writes, "are always inside us and in fact are us and which consequently will not be pushed off or away where we can begin thinking about them [which] are no longer things; they, and the us which they are, equals A Verb; an IS." Cummings's "toy dolls" are captured visually as an expression of the feelings he has upon contemplating them. The verb "to be," in what Carl Michalson has called "existential syntax," is not "a copula . . . one does not say of man, he *Is*, then go on to add a predicate object, such as he is 'a thinking thing.'"⁵³

What Gertrude Stein called "Bottom nature," or what Bergson described as "touching bottom," Cummings puts under the rubric "instinct," whereby he denotes the childlike propensity to perceive reality through an imaginative

⁵³ Michalson, p. 10.

engagement of an eternally present moment. Instinct, in its tendency to repeat previous conditions, may seem contrary to Cummings's insistence on annihilating the past and its defunct ideals. Yet it achieves the cubist perspective that enables the artist to restate, over and over again in a repetitious childlike manner, the salient characteristics of an object or item. Such was the desired method with which Picasso endeavoured to portray his object on canvas with the vibrancy and intimacy known only by direct experience with it. To capture the child-like eye which beholds a single object in all its momentary intensity—a child's instinctiveness constituting his prelinguistic, whimsical and fully immediate sense of reality—was to reach the highest level of artistic excellence. Jean le Nègre also delights in "the purely picturesque," is "only happy when he is exercising his imagination"; his "use of language was sometimes exalted fibbing; and he court[s] above all the sound of words," more or less disdaining their meaning "like the inconsolable child who weeps his heart out when no human comfort avails and wakes the next day without an apparent trace of grief—Jean Le Nègre, in the course of the next twenty-four hours, had completely recovered his normal buoyancy of spirit. The sees-tee francs were gone. A wrong had been done. But that was yesterday. Today—and he wandered up and down, joking, laughing, singingHe was never perfectly happy unless exercising his inexhaustible imagination" (205).

Even Jean's most unfortunate experiences in *The Enormous Room* remove any "debilitating inhibition [which] had held the child, which was Jean's soul and destiny, prisoner" (214). No layers of cultural lamination amount to Jean's personality; no shades of the prison house are cast. This is in part because he is not a growing boy who inherits the adult world of education, whereby things of this so-called world, as Cummings describes it, could threaten the

authenticity intrinsic to "a portion of purely personal Feeling." Cummings elaborates his ideas on feeling as opposed to reason and belief in his portrayal of Jean. In antithesis to Cummings's notions on feeling as a viable epistemology is a mere belief in the mimesis of character depiction; realism, in cubist artistry, is an obsolete faculty. The cubist painter distorts the contours of an object on the surface of the canvas, so that the viewer can penetrate its outward form while responding feelingly to its abstracted vitality. The cubist intends the viewer to feel the object's significance through an intuitive response. Cummings uses fairies as an example, in which "we no longer believe," since "there are certain things in which one is unable to believe for the simple reason that he never ceases to feel them" (168). Belief and thinking are two epistemologies that Cummings holds in distinction from all that is genuine about the self and its most candid portrayal. Recall Surplice, who "thinks America is out a particular window on your left as you enter the enormous room" (188), and Cummings's statement that he is "unwilling to know except as a last resort."

In its devaluation of cognitive responsiveness and evocation of various childlike reactions based on feeling, cubist representation provides a viable method of authenticating character depiction. Moreover, structurally, cubist representation is transcendental in its ability to give dimension to portraiture, to elevate, that is, the art object from a two-dimensional surface in a moment of immediate representation. Towards the end of the novel Cummings filters the ruined landscape outside and in and around his prison through the soundless country of his mind, in a manner serene and almost other-worldly. Under an "unhealthy almost-light" that leaks from a corpse-like meridian, "manshaped beings [are] huddled in the mud" (224). At the moment when

Cummings engages the scene artistically, reducing as he does so “la promenade to a recently invented mechanism; or to the demonstration of a collection of vivid and unlovely toys . . . the maimed and stupid dolls of my imagination,” he becomes aware of the “gradual complete unique experience of death” (225). Hours later, in the cold rotten darkness of his cell, he ruminates on “that brilliant and extraordinary and impossible something called: Life.” The reciprocity of death and life leads to a culminating epiphany: “In front of and on and within my eyes lived suddenly a violent and gentle and dark silence . . . I felt myself to be, at last, a doll—taken out occasionally and played with and put back into *a house*.” Shortly thereafter, when the “sharp cry sung through the enormous room, ‘Il tombe de la neige,’” he feels the snow’s gentle touch “falling perfectly and suddenly, through the thick soundless autumn of [his] imagination” (232), and playing upon his sensibility like “a child touch[ing] a toy it loves” (233).

By the end, not lightning but falling snow annihilates the boundaries between the protean world of becoming and the spiritual realm of pure being. With cubist proportion, his penitentiary “is filled with a new and beautiful darkness, the darkness of the snow outside, falling and falling and falling with [a] silent and actual gesture” (233). The existential freedom Cummings feels here—with Gabriel Conroy at the end of Joyce’s “The Dead”—follows from a life-through-death epiphany that leads to an sympathetic, universal response to all creatures everywhere. When Cummings crosses the Atlantic, at the moment he thinks he is “lost for good,” he observes the snow “falling into the sea; which quietly receives it: into which it utterly and peacefully disappears” (244). Gabriel also watches the snow falling into the Shannon sea on all the living and the dead. But the similarities between their conclusions are confined to

thematic patterns only, since Cummings goes on to open imagistically another dimension on his unique autumnal feeling of exquisite elevation.

The complete realisation of his spiritual freedom is occasioned hours later during his actual release from La Ferté Macé. In another all-encompassing ordeal like the one recorded in *i: six non-lectures*, he unites through his synthesising consciousness himself, "Paris. Life. Liberté. La Liberté" (237). Overwhelmed by the euphoria of his deliverance, he parses his feelings in existentialist syntax: "to live: infinitive. Present first singular I live. Thou livest," and registers his transformation in by now familiar terms: "I turned into E.E. Cummings. I turned into what was dead and is now alive, I turned into a city, I turned into a dream" (238). "It is not I who am saying goodbye," he then exclaims, "It is in fact somebody else, possibly, myself" (239). While aspiring beyond an Emersonian double consciousness, Cummings stands with arms lifted up and turns into Paris and into the dream of freedom (238). This process is fundamentally different from Emerson's elevating moments when he becomes an afflatus of everything he sees around him, indeed when everything becomes him. Cummings's passionate self-inwardness turns outward as he becomes everything else, like Keats's sparrow, in whose existence Keats himself partakes and picks about the gravel, though Cummings's self-efflux is more far-reaching. Riding "upon the soonness of the train," on a horizontal track of double-consciousness, once "into the now of Paris" and into the "firm hard snowy sunlight" of America, Cummings lifts up into cubist dimension with great undulous strides the mortal and rather ugly island which is America, full of the "hurrying dots which are men and which are women and which are things new and curious and hard and strange and vibrant and immense," firmly into immortal sunlight (242).

Here Cummings is bending the world of *The Enormous Room* to examine its indications of humanity in what he calls a "somewhat cubist wilderness" (244), a world "without contingency, without compromise, without contradiction, without limits," in Norman Friedmann's summation.⁵⁴ Indeed many of the terms often used by critics to describe Cummings's vision directly evoke Emerson's desired higher realm: "dream," "mystery," and "miracle." Cummings's approach to the queries invoked by modernist notions of identity and meaning allows him to reconcile Emerson's disjunction between the world of "buzz and din" and the realm of "infinitude and paradise," by means of an existential loss and affirmation of self within an expansive three-dimensional reality. He achieves this elevation, not through a mysterious inwardness that discovers the infinite realm within the finite self, but through a mystical outwardness that identifies this sense of timeless eternity in *The Enormous Room* as merely one of the myriad vistas residing within every individual whom he knows through an instinctive responsiveness.

⁵⁴ Norman Friedman, "E.E. Cummings and the Modernist Movement," in Guy Rotella, ed., *Critical Essays on E.E. Cummings* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1984), p. 165.

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