Joseph Eugene Mullin
Universidade do Minho

Emerson and the Gist of *The Conduct of Life*

Emerson seeks in "Fate", the opening chapter of ***The Conduct of Life*** (1860), to reconcile two realities, our freedom and that fatality, that "irresistible dictation", which haunts our character, our power, and our action. So, if we are to consider how to conduct our lives, it must be in personal terms, by the "method of taking up in turn each of the leading topics which belong to our scheme of human life, and, by firmly stating all that is agreeable to experience on one, and doing the same justice to the opposing facts in the others, [so that] the true limitations will appear" (Emerson, 1983: 943-4).[1] This "method" is a hint to the topics of the chapters and to the maddeningly discursive organization of the book, for the book shifts from one acute observation to another and leaves us puzzled, though engrossed, by its various argumentative impulses and, at last, by its general drift. My intention here, then, is to edit these arguments, fill in the elisions and lapses, and bring forward the essential purport of ***The Conduct of Life***, for I find it the most satisfyingly condensed of all Emerson's volumes. Thomas Carlyle thought it the best of Emerson's books (Richardson, 1995: 490). It evinces not so much the pessimistic Emerson, as had been argued by Newton Arvin and Stephen Whicher in an earlier generation, nor even a revised and refocused Emerson, as has been the burden of Robert D. Richardson and David M. Robinson, among others, in the present generation; but rather a mature Emerson, secure in his philosophical and ethical experience, having learned "to skate well" on the surfaces of life (as he ironically recommends in "Experience").

Emerson makes a clear, pragmatic choice at the beginning of ***The Conduct of Life***: since "we are incompetent to solve the times", since we cannot crack the riddle of the "theory of the Age", he would have us spend our energy more profitably, by deciding how best to lead the lives we have. At the outset he insists we allow no sentimental, no glib view of our lives, for "Providence has a wild, rough, incalculable road to its end, and it is of no use to try to whitewash its huge, mixed instrumentalities, or to dress

[1] Hereafter, citations from ***The Conduct of Life***, in the Library of America edition of ***Essays and Lectures*** (1983), will be identified by page only in the text, and to simplify the flow, several quotations from the same page will be identified only after the last citation from that page.

up that terrific benefactor in a clean shirt and white neckcloth of a student in divinity" (946). Emerson refuses to deny the brutal facts of fate or to intellectualize them or, indeed, to spiritualize them. And he reminds us that the very structures of climate, race, ancestry, sex, temperament, in forming us, confine us further. "When each comes forth from his mother's womb, the gate of gifts closes behind him" (947). In our birth is our fate. And, what is more, we know ourselves somehow "to be party to [our] present estate" (948).

We would choose to cultivate our own gardens and, so, defend ourselves from the large material forces of life; that is, we would prefer simple choices that fend off fate. However, we know "we cannot trifle with this reality, this cropping-out in our planted gardens of the core of the world". A person is, as it were, blind and enclosed in a great cask, "hooped in by a necessity, which, by many experiments, he touches on every side, until he learns its arc" (952).

Our growth or maturity consists in refining these material and spiritual limitations on our actions, which limitations we call our fate. "As we refine, our checks become finer" (952), though checks there remain. Yet, considering all these fatalities in matter, mind, and morals, still we have power to balance fate, "If Fate follows and limits power, power attends and antagonizes Fate" (953). "If you please to plant yourself on the side of Fate, and say, Fate is all; then we say, a part of Fate is the freedom of man" (953). However merely paradoxical this may sound, we may work deep – May, so to speak, confront Fate with our own fatality.

We are relieved when the limitation and pain in our lives draw, in turn, divinity to us as recompense. Emerson finds beauty in a Necessity "which rudely or softly educates" a person "to the perception that there are no contingencies; that Law rules throughout existence, a Law which is not intelligent but intelligence" which "solicits the pure of heart to draw on all its omnipotence" (968).

When we add intelligence to matter, to Fate, we discover power. And, "If thought makes free, so does the moral sentiment" (956). With all comes a profound trust, which is the force of will, that truth may survive fate, master it, and flower. "Fate, then, is a name for facts not yet passed under the fire of thought; – for causes which are unpenetrated" (958). Robinson makes this positive suggestion, that fate is provocation, a "challenge to an expanding perception" (Robinson, 1993: 137). Our minds open, "the omnipresence of law" is revealed, and "we suddenly expand to its dimensions" (955). We experience the Unity in things and we find of this unity that, "It is not in us so much as we are in it" (955). Why this should be the way things are is not a question Emerson can answer. He is not proposing a theory to us but relaying observation and experience.

Emerson confidently assures us that since "all power is of one kind, a sharing of the nature of the world", then "the mind that is parallel with the laws of nature will be in the current of events, and strong with their strength" (972). "Power", the second chapter of ***The Conduct of Life***, offers, therefore, an inventory of our material resources and of those "muscular" capacities which a transformation of Fate makes active.

Success, Emerson finds, is a constitutional trait. It flows from "a strong pulse", from "stoutness or stomach", what he also calls "health", a soundness allied to the source of things. Many difficulties vanish before this power. About democratic government he

observes, "the evils of popular government appear greater than they are; there is compensation for them in the energy and spirit it awakens" (975). Power "brings its own antidote" – "all kinds of power usually emerge at the same time; good energy, and bad; power of mind, with physical health; the ecstasies of devotion, with the exasperations of debauchery. The same elements are always present, only sometimes these conspicuous, and sometimes those; what was yesterday foreground, being today background" (976). In politics or in trade there is a mixture of power: "as there is use in medicine for poisons, so the world cannot move without rogues" (978). The rule in all cases for employing energies is, "all ***plus*** is good; only put it in the right place" (979).

In summary Emerson says, "We say that success is constitutional; depends on a ***plus*** condition of mind and body, on power of work, on courage; that it is of main efficiency in carrying on the world, and, though rarely found in the right state for an article of commerce, but oftener in the supersaturate or excess, which makes it dangerous or destructive, yet it cannot be spared, and must be had in that form, and absorbents provided to take off its edge" (980-81). Again, "Success goes thus invariably with a certain ***plus*** or positive power: an ounce of power must balance an ounce of weight. And, though a man cannot return into his mother's womb [from whence coming forth "the gate of gifts close behind him" ("Fate", 947)], and be born with new amounts of vivacity, yet there are two economies, which are the best ***succedanea*** which the case admits" (981). The first economy is concentration, "as the gardener, by severe pruning, forces the sap of the tree into one or two vigorous limbs, instead of suffering it to spindle into a sheaf of twigs" (981). "The one prudence in life is concentration; the one evil is dissipation: and it makes no difference whether our dissipations are coarse or fine" (982). In ***Walden*** Thoreau puts it more severely: "All sensuality is one, though it takes many forms. All purity is one" (Thoreau, 1985: 498). What we require is applied, faithful work.

And the second economy with which the paucity of vivacity in men may somewhat be meliorated is "drill". What Emerson calls "the power of use and routine" (983). "Practice is nine tenths" (984), he says.

Emerson admits over-praising mere power. "But this force or spirit, being the means relied on by Nature for bringing the work of the day about, – as far as we attach importance to household life, and the prizes of the world, we must respect that" (985). And, "If these forces and this husbandry are within reach of our will, and the laws of them can be read, we infer that all success, and all conceivable benefit for man, is also, first or last, within his reach, and has its own sublime economies by which it may be attained" (985).

Wealth, of course, is a product of power. It "has its source in applications of the mind to nature" (989). Nature throws up obstacles and resistances, to be sure, but a wise design and direction of energy produces wealth: it is not "industry" so much that secures wealth as a "better order" in our procedures, a "timeliness" in our performance, and the gift of "being in the right spot" (989). For the usual person "every thought of every hour, opens a new want to him, which it concerns his power and dignity to gratify". As if in direct reply to ***Walden,*** Emerson continues, "It is of no use to argue the wants down; the philosophers have laid the greatness of man in making his wants few; but will a man content himself with a hut and a handful of dried pease?" Or even a

bushel of fresh beans? No, for man "is born to be rich" (990-1). So, ***be*** is the rich man who "can avail himself of all men's faculties", not he who makes his wants the fewest. "The world is his tool-chest, and he is successful, or his education is carried on just so far, as is the marriage of his faculties with nature, or, the degree in which he takes up things into himself" (991).

The lazy and unimaginative see only toys in wealth, see only play and luxury. (Or the radically critical, like Thoreau, see only distraction and corruption.) But sensible people see in wealth the opportunity "to execute their design, power to give legs and feet, form and actuality to their thought, which, to a clear-sighted man, appears the end for which the Universe exists, and all its resources might be well applied" (993). In fact, Emerson often says the universe exists for one purpose or another, for "the education of each man" ("History"), for "the transformation of genius into practical power" ("Experience"), or for teaching "the science of liberty" ("The Fugitive Slave Law"). These ends, as we may discern, are all variations or perspectives on developing character, however. It would be an advantage for the person to be rich, to "pluck his living, his instruments, his power, from the sun, moon, and stars" (994); yet, paradoxically, "Whilst it is each man's interest, that, not only ease and convenience of living, but also wealth or surplus product should exist somewhere, it need not be in his hands. Often it is very undesirable to him" (995). The test for this wealth or ownership is the capacity to administer, to carve out work for more people. For the rest, only the use of books, pictures, instruments is called for. To sum up, "Man was born to be rich", to use his full capacity, "or, inevitably grows rich by the use of his faculties", that is, by concentration and drill, "by the union of thought with nature" (996). So, we see that being "wealthy" really means having developed personal capacities and resources.

In work Emerson values application and attention to detail. "Success consists in close appliance to the laws of the world, and, since those laws are intellectual and moral, an intellectual and moral obedience. Political Economy is as good a book wherein to read the life of man, and the ascendency of laws over all private and hostile influences, as any Bible which has come down to us" (997). I doubt we really believe this, and we are probably embarrassed or scandalized by Emerson's insistence on these "moral" facts. Further, we do not believe that the successful merchant or man of commerce believes any of this himself. It is a perspective from far above the daily level of getting and spending. Nevertheless, Emerson speaks of the sensitivity of dollars to probity in the men who count, stack, lend, borrow, and use them. The value of the dollar will reflect trust in these men. Determined to give the Devil his due, Emerson expresses a ***laissez-faire*** confidence which is remarkable: "The basis of political economy is non-interference. The only safe rule is found in the self-adjusting meter of demand and supply. Do not legislate. Meddle and you snap the sinews with your sumptuary laws. Give no bounties; make equal laws; secure life and property, and you need not give alms". His advice is concise: "Open the doors of opportunity to talent and virtue, and they will do themselves justice, and property will not be in bad hands" (1000). That it were so! Or, that the moral laws here applauded where allowed to operate unhindered by human vice! Emerson, let us remember, uses political economy to clarify principles of compensation as they function across the globe. His point is that prices and salaries always turn out just. If the master pays the servant less, he gets less value in the work

the servant performs. And so a moral ***compensation*** works out its inevitable laws, in non-intercourse, tariffs, and immigration – in social benefits, even, and in crime!

Five points of economic advice follow. 1) Spend for your strengths and cut to the bone expense for other purposes. 2) "Spend after your genius", yes, "***and by system***" (1005). All expenses, indeed, all inheritances bear watching, require constant applied attention. (One is reminded of Parkinson's Second Law, that "expenses rise to meet income") 3) "***Impera parendo***" (1007), that is, command by obeying. The secret is to trust to "the custom of the country". 4) "Look for seed of the same kind as you sow" (1009). We draw to ourselves what we are, and we should not expect our improvidence to yield plenty or our sour face joyful companions. 5) All pecuniary advice admits of a higher sense or application. "The merchant's economy is a coarse symbol of the soul's economy. It is, to spend for power, and not for pleasure". Robinson observes, "Insofar as [these points] urge prudent attention to the elements that make life whole, they are in the best tradition of wisdom literature and ethical philosophy. Insofar as they recommend that which is beyond the control of the will, they ironically establish the tragic dimensions of life" (Robinson, 1993: 154). Emerson's five rules make more or less the same point: "The true thrift is always to spend on the higher plane; to invest and invest, with keener avarice, that [the person] may spend in spiritual creation, and not in augmenting animal existence" (1010). Here Emerson seems to have rejoined Thoreau.

Trying to balance these worldly meditations, Emerson asserts, "Whilst all the world is in pursuit of power, and of wealth as a means of power, culture corrects the theory of success" (1015). Since a person is a captive of his skills, of his dominant capacity, "Culture reduces these ***inflammations*** [italics mine] by invoking the aid of other powers against the dominant talent, and by appealing to the rank of powers" (1015). "Culture is the suggestion from certain best thoughts, that a man has a range of affinities, through which he can modulate the violence of any master-tones which have a droning preponderance in his scale, and succor him against himself" (1018). Culture, thus, can achieve a new balance in character, rekindle human sympathy, and acquaint a person "with men of merit, with classes of society, with travel, with eminent persons, and with the high resources of philosophy, art, and religion" (1019).

What is required for our culture or balance or temper is proper education in books, travel, society, and solitude. "Books, as containing the finest records of human wit, must always enter into our notion of culture" (1020). Travel, though Emerson hesitated to praise it overmuch, acquaints us with languages, other customs, and widens our view of life. It even gives new meaning to our lives at home: "we go to Europe to be Americanized" (1023). Social relations "give us collision" and "take the nonsense out of a man" (1024). And solitude gives Nature a chance to speak to our unencumbered imaginations. "Solitude takes off the pressure of present importunities that more catholic and humane relations may appear" (1029).

"But, over all, culture must reinforce from higher influx the empirical skills", since there is "a certain loftiness of thought and power to marshal and adjust particulars, which can only come from an insight of their whole connection" (1030). For example, "a wise man who knows not only what Plato, but what Saint John can show him, can easily raise the affair he deals with, to a certain majesty" (1031). The entire race is in need of such elevation. The culture of human kind can spare nothing to achieve that

miracle, "until at last culture shall absorb the chaos and gehenna", And human beings then will "convert the Furies into Muses, and the hells into benefit" (1033-4).

"Behavior", the fifth essay in ***The Conduct of Life***, is Emerson' s reflection on "manners", those "happy ways of doing things; each one a stroke of genius or of love, – now repeated and hardened into usage" (1037). And, in fact, "manners are always under examination, and by committees little suspected, … awarding or denying you very high prizes when you least think of it" (1038). Manners' first stage, of course, is "very low", to get people washed, clothed and out of their animal state. Then come the social customs which control the contradictors, the long-winded talkers, the monologists, the self--pitiers, in short, the social bores, who try every social gathering. Ultimately, manners rest on self-possession and, thus, on self-reliance itself. They require leisure, patience, a wide margin in living. And so manners impress us "as they indicate real power" (1047). People in fact take the measure of one another from their first meeting and at every subsequent meeting as well. People judge others "by their personality, by who they are, and what they said and did heretofore" (1048). Finally, manners yield a candor, a magnanimity, a personal grace – yet, it is so difficult to lay down any rules for such delicacy of bearing and conduct, for such "graces and felicities [are] not only unteachable, but undescribable" (1052).

Then, at the outset of "Worship" Emerson acknowledges that he had taken too low a view of Fate, Power, and Wealth, accepted too facilely the "evil spirit of the times", acted too effectively, perhaps, the devil's advocate. "In the last chapters, we treated some particulars of the question of culture. But the whole state of man is a state of culture; and its ***flowering and completion*** [italics mine] may be described as Religion, or Worship" (1057). Richardson calls "Fate" the "anchor of the series" of essays in ***The Conduct of Life*** (Richardson, 1995: 500). Why isn't "Worship" the anchor, as Emerson seems to have suggested himself? Indeed, "Worship" reaffirms Emerson's fundamental confidence that the truth will speak through him whatever his doubts. Though life rolls on in all its terrors and pains, he "will allow full swing to his skepticism", certain – for he trusts the evidence of his own experience – "the spirit will return, and fill us" (1055).

In the meantime religions crawl along and await "souls out of time, extraordinary, prophetic" to "announce absolute truths", though the sad fact is that these "with whatever reverence received, are speedily dragged down into a savage interpretation" (1057). People are untouched by what they profess to believe: "the population is godless, materialized, – no bond, no feeling, no enthusiasm. These are not men, but hungers, thirsts, fevers, and appetites walking" (1059). People do have faith in science, in industry, in productivity, but their faith does not extend to a moral universe. The "freak and extravagance" of religious expression, in fact, betrays the "levity" of their religious imagination: "witness the heathenisms in Christianity, the periodic 'revivals,' the Millennium mathematics, the peacock ritualism, the retrogression to Popery, the maundering of Mormons, the squalor of Mesmerism, the deliration of rappings, the rat and mouse revelation, thumps in table drawers, and black art". He concludes: "Not knowing what to do, we ape our ancestors" (1059). And all these religious follies undermine trust in human virtue, tolerate vice in society, and settle for compromises of routine and half-measures of reform.

Still, Emerson knows that to acknowledge vice and folly does not negate truth and light. "'Tis like saying in rainy weather, there is no sun" (1061). The sun does shine. "There is a principle which is the basis of things, which all speech aims to say, and all action to evolve, a simple, quiet, undescribed, undescribable presence, dwelling very peacefully in us, our rightful lord", Emerson avers. Then he continues, "We are not to do, but to let do; not to work but to be worked upon; and to this homage there is a consent of all thoughtful and just men in all ages and conditions" (1061) This central passage of "Worship" enlarges his description in "The Divinity School Address" and "The Over-Soul" of our spiritual power. And at this precise point it is worth repeating that self-reliance – which is self-respect or self-definition or self-fulfillment – is founded upon the "perception that the mind common to the universe is disclosed to the individual through his own nature", as Emerson observes in his 1836 essay on "Ethics" (***apud*** Richardson, 1995: 259). Thus does Emerson describe the "philosophy of insight" which he had early pleaded for in the opening of "Nature" (7).

Emerson awaits no revival of old creeds and disciplines, no modernization of forms spent. True faith will survive its formulas. "God builds his temple in the heart on the ruins of churches and religions" (1056). When we take true faith to our hearts we shall "prefer, as a better investment, being to doing; being to seeming; logic to rhythm and display; the year to the day; the life to the year; character to performance; – and [shall] have come to know, that justice will be done us" (1063). Emerson warned in "Self--reliance" it is not true that "good days are preparing for you" – unless those days reflect "the triumph of principles" (282).

Emerson suggests that worship is the fount of intellect: "if your eye is on the eternal, your intellect will grow, and your opinions and actions will have a beauty which no learning or combined advantages of other men can rival" (1064). Ours is an age of science, but we are shortsighted to conceive of laws limited to the visible plane, so that "look where we will … a perfect reaction, a perpetual judgment keeps watch and ward" (1065). "Strong men believe in cause and effect": that is to say, "As we are, so we do; and as we do, so is it done to us; we are the builders of our fortunes" (1065).

The trust or belief which Emerson expounds, the strength or character he recommends, is the fruit of his maturity. "Use what language you will, you can never say anything but what you are" (1067). "People seem not to see that their opinion of the world is also a confession of character" (1067). And that character commits itself to its work, for "men talk as if victory were something fortunate. Work is victory. Wherever work is done, victory is obtained" (1067).

Through acting and doing, we "refine" our limitations. We can turn back to "Fate" now, understanding, after these reflections or meditations, that "the faithful servant [can] reverse all the warnings of his early instinct, under the guidance of a deeper instinct" (1072), which is his very confidence in his work – let us call it his "worship". Such a worshiper seeks "sympathy with the invisible and real, finds support in labor, instead of praise, … does not shine and would rather not. With eyes open, he makes the choice of virtue, which outrages the virtuous; of religion, which churches stop their discord to burn and exterminate; for the highest virtue is always against the law" (1074), and not because antinomianism is to be prized but because prophecy is always progressive. The worshiper's "gentle trust" is the "whole revelation that is vouchsafed us" (1075).

Human kind is not granted anything more than this trust, but that trust is sufficient. Immortality will come to the worshiper who "is fit for it". This is a doctrine, says Emerson, paradoxically, "too great to rest on any legend, that is, on any man's experience ***but our own*** [italics mine]" (1075). Religious myths, even when they persuade us, can guarantee nothing more. And, further, it is curious to reflect that death will not help us slip our duty: "The only path of escape known in all the worlds of God is performance. You must do your work, before you shall be released" (1075).

This is the tremor of "a voluntary obedience, a necessitated freedom". We await that infrequent assurance, that occasional illumination, that we are doing our work. "Let us have nothing now which is not its own evidence" (1076). In this religion to come, the person of the future will stand independently, stoically. "He shall expect no coöperation, he shall walk with no companion. The nameless Thought, the nameless Power, the superpersonal Heart, – he shall repose alone on that". He shall find himself among the lawgivers, and "always feel himself in the presence of high causes" (1076). Or, as Emerson observes in "Circles": "We all stand waiting, empty, – knowing, possibly, that we can be full, surrounded by mighty symbols which are not symbols to us, but prose and trivial toys". That is our situation, as also is this condition: "Then cometh the god, and coverts the statues into fiery men, and by a flash of his eye burns up the veil which surrounded all things, and the meaning of the very furniture, of cup and saucer, of chair and clock and tester, is manifest" (408.)

"Worship" brings a climax which might conclude ***The Conduct of Life***. But a chapter most curiously and anticlimactically called "Considerations by the Way" follows. Emerson returns to the quotidian facts. What he has "to say of life, is rather description, or, if you please, celebration, than available rules" (1079). He offers a hymn to capacity. His enthusiasm is contagious. Our vigor is encouraged, our power increased, our capacity for action enlarged.

We persist in asking, nevertheless, can people reasonably aspire to his lordly human standard? Is Emerson serious that persons actually have an experience of the Spirit adequate to this level of independence? We see that Emerson is calling for a race of ***individuals***, and he is explicitly writing off the remainder of human creatures. "Masses! the calamity is the masses. I do not wish any mass at all, but honest men only, lovely, sweet, accomplished women only, and no shovel-handed, narrow-brained, gin-drinking million stockingers or lazzaroni at all". And, further, "I wish not to concede anything to [the masses], but to tame, drill, divide, and break them up, and ***draw individuals out of them*** [italics mine]" (1081). The ratio of individuals to mere persons is like that of good melons to bad, he says, one in fifty. Nature "scatters nations of naked Indians, and nations of clothed Christians, with two or three good heads among them" (1082), and we know that all revelations, progress, cities, communities are the work of these individual brains. The lesson for us is clear: "we are used as brute atoms, until we think: then, we use all the rest" (1082). And it is essential to insist that "no sane man [for this, read 'no adult,' 'no self-reliant individual'] at last distrusts himself. His existence is a perfect answer to all sentimental cavils" (1082).

Emerson goes some distance to clarify his hardness. He claims that the "majority" of people, whom, though he calls "wicked", are simply "unripe", "have not yet come to themselves, do not yet know their opinion" (1083). The beast-like side of people's

natures normally will prevail. What carries wise persons forward is their experience that malice and folly turn to good, whatever the feeble intentions of any wicked majority. In the larger sphere "wars, fires, plagues, break up immovable routine, clear the ground of rotten races and dens of distemper, and open a fair field to new men"; and in private life "passions, resistance, danger, are educators" (1084). Emerson does not shrink from this social Darwinism, though perhaps it is really a moral Darwinism. "In short, there is no man who is not at some time indebted to his vices, as no plant that is not fed from manures. We only insist that the man meliorate, and that the plant grow upward, and convert the base into the better nature" (1086). And so too "bad times have a scientific value. These are occasions a good learner would not miss" (1087).

A person's conduct is always founded on independence: "every man shall maintain himself" (1088). But Emerson would call too for health, confident disposition, good cheer, and, above all, purpose. And though conversation is fine, life is wasted when spent with unfit companions. "Ask what is best in our experience, and we shall say, a few pieces of plain-dealing with wise people". Rare, good conversation apprises us that "our chief want in life, is, somebody who shall make us do what we can" (1093). Yet, we live largely on other levels. The "secret" of our culture is to learn the few great, recurring points: "escape from all false ties; courage to be what we are; and love for what is simple and beautiful; independence, and cheerful relation, these are the essentials, – these, and the wish to serve, – to add somewhat to the well-being of men" (1096).

"All our science lacks a human side", Emerson complains (1099). Astrology and alchemy had their appeal in that they "tied us to the system", but the modern sciences leave us alone in the universe. "The motive of science was the extension of man, on all sides, into Nature, till his hands should touch the stars, his eyes see through the earth, his ears understand the language of beast and bird, and the sense of the wind; and, through his sympathy, heaven and earth should talk with him. But this is not our science", he complains again (1100). I take Emerson's central word here to be "sympathy": we lack the "sympathy" to hear, to be spoken to, to appreciate that we are even being addressed. David Robinson has noted that in Emerson, "Moral choice is … threatened less by the failure of the will or the limits of fate than by the distraction of true perception" (Robinson, 1993: 154). In this vein Emerson continues, "Beauty is the form under which the intellect prefers to study the world" (1102), for beauty "takes us out of the surfaces, to thinking of the foundations of things" (1103). Beauty lies in elegance of structure, in the streaming and flowing of form into newer form, in "perfect economy", in providing an ever-renewed interest. "Things are pretty, graceful, rich, elegant, handsome, but, until they speak to the imagination, not yet beautiful", until, that is, they match that "sympathy" in us to be touched or spoken to (1110).

"The new virtue", further, "which constitutes a thing beautiful, is a certain cosmical quality, or power to suggest relation to the whole world, and so lift the object out of pitiful individuality" (1110-11). So, too, we pull ourselves free from the "wicked" majority (by means of spiritual experience) and make ourselves individual persons. We strive to find, through beautiful objects or persons, our interrelation with the whole world, so as to lift ourselves, as well, out of our own "pitiful individuality". Is this paradox enough for us? "Facts which had never before left their stark common sense, sud-

denly figure as Eleusinian mysteries", Emerson maintains. We acknowledge that "into every beautiful object, there enters somewhat immeasurable and divine" (1111). Emerson affirms "a climbing scale of culture", rather echoing Castiglione, "from the first agreeable sensation . . . up to the perception of Plato, that globe and universe are rude and early expression of an all-dissolving Unity, – the first stair on the scale to the temple of the Mind" (1112). This temple, of course, we are granted a view of at the end of "Illusions", the final chapter of ***The Conduct of Life***.

"Our conversation with Nature is not just what it seems", Emerson notes, for we add our own part to all we observe, even our "senses interfere everywhere, and mix their own structure with all they report of". In reality, "the same interference from our organization creates the most of our pleasure and pain". He lists, for example, as the first of our errors, "the belief that the circumstance gives the joy which we give to the circumstance" (1116). And more than these "deceptions" of the senses there are, as well, illusions of passion, feeling, and thought. And yet these experiences of "succession" are evidence of an "incessant flowing and ascension", so that "each thought [not to speak of perception or feeling] which yesterday was a finality, to-day is yielding to a larger generalization" (1121).

And we ***find*** ourselves when we understand where we are – despite illusions, succession, surface, etc. Emerson (and we) search out ***affirmation*** because the task is to know where we are and how to use capacities and resources (***i.e.***, wealth, success, power, behavior) in order to fulfill spiritual purpose and perform our role in the sublime order.

"Illusions", the final essay in ***The Conduct of Life***, begins in the darkness of Mammoth ***Cave***! and ends, where? in some celestial landscape (where the significance of the human person before the gods is indubitably affirmed). "Illusions" ends precisely where "Experience" begins, replying to the question "Experience" puts to us – "where do we find ourselves?" In a dark cave ***and*** alone before the gods is "where we find ourselves". Stanley Cavell observes that it is Emerson's way "endlessly asking us where we stand, what it is we face" (Cavell, 1992: 142). All of ***The Conduct of Life*** reflects upon that same matter, "where we find ourselves", suggesting, as ever in the pragmatic Emersonian style, just what our resources are in constructing a mode of living out of the facts we face, those facts of illusion, succession, surface, subjectivity, outlined too in "Experience". We are forced to acknowledge that "the capital facts of human life are hidden from our eyes" (1121). We find ourselves, it seems, "Like sick men in hospitals, we change only from bed to bed, from one folly to another; and it cannot signify much what becomes of such castaways, – wailing, stupid, comatose creatures, – lifted from bed to bed, from the nothing of life to the nothing of death" (1122).

And the best we can do is be who we are, speak our minds, acknowledge our debts. This seems but a counsel cheerful in its desperation. What is man, Emerson asks, that he should resist the way of the world and "think or act for himself", when there are "every moment, new changes, and new showers of deception, to baffle and distract him" (1123)? And, yet, of a sudden the mists which cover all that is about us, that is, those illusions in which we live and toil, which seem a ***system*** of illusion in our bleakest hour, do roll up and reveal other facts, just as "a sudden rise in the road shows us the system of the mountains, and all the summits, which have been just as near us all

the year, but quite out of mind" (1121-22). So, the beleaguered mortal "***fancies*** [italics mine] himself poor, orphaned, insignificant" (1123); "when, by and by, for an instant, the air clears, and the cloud lifts a little, there are the gods still sitting around him on their thrones, – they alone with him alone" (1124).

The Conduct of Life (1860) is a surprisingly social book. This fact may account for the academic tendency to detach Emerson's somewhat gloomy ruminations on "fate" from the rest of the book and to discuss "Fate" in relation to "Experience", "Montaigne", and other more cynical or skeptical Emersonian utterances. Preferring the "elder, wintry Emerson" (Porte, 1988: 288), the critics seldom read the rest of ***The Conduct of Life*** with the same enthusiasm they use to discuss "Fate". It is simply more satisfying for most learned readers, it seems, to appreciate that less idealistic Emerson who took the blows of life. But we have to ignore a lot to find a bleaker Emerson at the end of his career – we have to ignore the remarkable ending of ***The Conduct of Life.*** We have not simply to acknowledge that "once we thought freedom was all, but now we know it is half"; rather, we have to affirm again that when the clouds lift a little, the person finds himself among the gods, "they alone with him alone".

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