

draining out of the 30-foot lock,
 and there's quiet, a chill,
 as of something suddenly recalled
 but not named,
 as we drift downward
 and the steep rock walls rise
 damp and implacable above us
 to resume their old contemplation of each other.
 "In the bright ignorant air . . ."
 We have dropped below the sun, the fierce May wind
 cannot touch us as the great locks slide open
 and the waterway beyond is revealed
 unpeopled as a Dutch landscape, or
 Death's kingdom. We stare as if knowing
 what it is we see.

"In all, we will drop sixty feet. There is no
 going back . . ." And in the distance
 the next set of locks, locked tight as jaws.
 And the little boat shudders, and moves forward.
 Our brief journey begins.

Douglas Crase

HOW EMERSON AVAILS

HE WAS READY TO ENCOURAGE US WHEREVER IT MIGHT count, and even a partial record will suggest his success—and stamina. "With the Kingdom of Heaven on his knee," observed Emily Dickinson, "could Mr. Emerson hesitate?" Yet for much of the present century it was possible to ask if his own works weren't fatally dated. It was possible, that is, until the moment in 1984 when John Updike made the question itself securely obsolete by asking it in *The New Yorker*, a forum to demonstrate how timely Emerson had again become. By now you may have seen his name brightening the book reviews, like Barthes or Foucault or Virginia Woolf. I have even seen, in a college alumni magazine, remarks by a sophomore who referred in passing to his "Emersonian self" as if that needed no explanation, as if he had used a world-class signifier to disclose one of his more desirable attributes.

It is not the first time Emerson has been used this way. His *Essays* were once in everybody's hands and in everybody's thoughts. (My own second-hand copy first belonged, according to its inscription, to a high school senior of 1902 in Galesburg, Illinois.) Given the impact of that earlier wide distribution, its impact on art and society, I think our renewed use of Emerson could hardly be more significant. It means from now on that the scholar, not just the American Scholar, will be less easily disinherited. It means we have the luxury to worry that the inheritance might become an embarrassment of riches, that we could actually make an authority of this writer who in his first published sentences equated biographies, histories and criticism with sepulchres, and who asked, "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?"

Exactly, why shouldn't we also? If the textual Emerson, too, now stands with the great apparition, the nature that "shines so peacefully around us," then the recourse is to inquire, to what end is Emerson? The inquiry is being put by some awfully smart critics and philosophers. What I'm proposing is that you and I inquire, as poets, how Emerson avails.

"Avail" was one of Emerson's favorite words, a good word to use on him because it implies that he is not just a theme park to wander around in, but a transitive, updatable input for poetry. He would have liked that, or that's one way to read his hope in that last sentence of "Experience":

and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power.

His genius, our power: not really a far-fetched romance, because there's a whole procession to testify how his genius has availed. There was Whitman, who said he was simmering until Emerson brought him to a boil. There was Frost, who said never to forget Emerson. And there was Gertrude Stein, who said, "and I said there was Emerson, and there was Hawthorne and there was Edgar Poe and there was Walt Whitman and there was, well, in a funny way there was Mark Twain and then there was Henry James and then there was—well, there is—well, I am."

We could cite the evidence at length; although trails of influence, like money trails, seem often to leave the impression that writers are exchanging something on the sly. I think it's more honest than that. In his book *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins suggested a word for ideas and phrases that are replicators in cultural evolution the way genes are replicators biologically. By analogy, and with a root as in mimesis, he came up with "memes." From what I know about poets and writers, memes make at least as much sense as saying that "mature poets steal." Steal implies intent, but when you end up hosting powerful phrases isn't it because you can't get them out of your head? There are countless memes, replicating in poetry this way, that we can track to Emerson.

My own prejudice is that when so many poets host memes from an identical source, it raises the presumption that the source is another poet. The problem is, most of the influences traceable to

Emerson aren't from his verse but from his essays. Or maybe it isn't a problem, but a clue. Because I think all you have to do is ask whether the essays are really poems, or contain hidden poems, to take possession of the Emerson actually there.

Emerson has a reputation for memorable images and analogies, partly because that's what he said good writing consisted of. "Wise men pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things," is just one way he put it. Yet the power of an Emerson essay is finally conveyed by a diction that doesn't fasten words to things so much as it lets ideas loose in sounds. This is not to say you won't find in the *Essays* plenty of things: "swine, spiders, snakes, pests, madhouses, prisons, enemies"—though even this list is trying to vaporize into abstractions. Which pests or enemies? These are less things than enabling images. They permit you the liberty of moving on to visible things of your own, and liberty, yours and his, is something Emerson is scrupulous about. In the essay "Nominalist and Realist" he writes that the world is so full of things it's good you can't see them all. If you could you would be immobilized.

As soon as the soul sees any object, it stops in front of that object.

He doesn't mean just paused, he means transfixed, taken prisoner. This is the ex-minister who wrote elsewhere that every thought, even every heaven is a prison. Translate into poetic practices and you see why he so seldom beats you over the head with a bare X-is-like-Y analogy. Powerfully good or bad, an image can bring you to a stop.

The analogies Emerson prefers are the kind that emphasize how you can get free of one heavenly prison and enter the next—how something moves, becomes, how it avails.

Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose. It resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim. This one fact the world hates, that the soul *becomes*. . . .

And if in the face of the world's hostility the idea is to keep your soul becoming, to keep it on the move, then we have a clue to why Emerson's real poetry is in the essays and not so much in his verse.

Because if the soul stops in front of an object, it may also stop in front of a rhyme.

In an early lecture on English literature, Emerson came close to saying he admired George Herbert, for example, in spite of his rhymes. (After conceding that Herbert's poetry was initially "apt to repel the reader," Emerson went on to argue that its thought nonetheless had "so much heart as actually to fuse the words . . . and his rhyme never stops the progress of the sense.") In a later lecture he claimed the finest rhythms of poetry were yet unfound, "compared with which the happiest measures of English poetry are psalm-tunes." It was March 5th, 1842, in the Library of the New-York Society on the corner of Leonard Street and Broadway. Here is what else he said.

I think even now, that the very finest and sweetest closes and falls are not in our metres, but in the measures of prose eloquence which have greater variety and richness than verse.

Then he added, "In the history of civilization, Rhyme may pass away." If that sounds familiar I don't have to tell you who was in the audience in Mannahatta that day.

What's significant, of course, is not whether traditional or non-traditional form is better. That's not an argument poets should want to settle. What's significant is that Emerson's distrust of rhyme points, like a shadow to the sun, to what he thought poetry was for. It was liberty, liberty of perception: "The senses imprison us, and we help them with metres as liminary, — with a pair of scales and a foot-rule and a clock."

The paradox was that while meters might infringe on your perception they offered one liberty that prose withheld, the freedom to tell the truth. For the rest of what was said to the twenty-two-year-old Walt Whitman and the others in New York that March day was that rhyme might pass away, but it would always be remembered as a "privileged invention possessing . . . *certain rights of sanctuary*." It seems inevitable in hindsight. But if your problem is to invent a form that permits you that liberty to perceive which belongs to prose, together with that privilege to speak which belongs to rhyme, you do what Waldo Emerson did. You invent the prose-hidden poem.

What is the truth a lapsed minister, an aspiring poet, cannot put

into ordinary prose? You can't tell father, mother, wife and brother flat out in prose that the tropes, the metaphors of their society are a prison. You might say it, but you can't tell them, because logic is powerless against their metaphors. "I fear," wrote Emerson when he was only twenty, "the progress of Metaphysical philosophy may be found to consist in nothing else than the progressive introduction of apposite metaphors."

Today we have whole literatures and philosophies to point to our imprisonment by trope and language and media prime-time, so much pointing you have to wonder how far this fascination has become our apposite metaphor of the hour. But Emerson did more than point, and it would be interesting to know how he would proceed against the tropes of today. We know his pleasure was to subvert trope with trope. Of society, even more a male club than now, he focused back on it the anxiety that male bonding is supposed to alleviate in the first place. "Society everywhere is in conspiracy," he wrote (and we have learned to supply the italics), "against the *manhood* of every one of its members." Of getting rich, too often called the American Dream, he labelled it a "bribe." Of gender vanity, he wrote (and here the emphasis is his own) that there is "in both men and women, a deeper and more important *sex of mind*." Of divine absolution, he simply referred us to a divinity closer at hand: "Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world."

I would like to say these examples amount to recombinant memes. I can certainly say along with Charles Ives that Emerson, in his essays, was "lighting a fuse that is laid toward men" — and I could hardly say it better, except to add how it was laid toward women to the same impolite effect.

So where as poets does that leave you and me? If the old metaphors are blown away it leaves us right where Emerson wanted us, in the position of having to choose metaphors, turn tropes, that express our original relation to the universe. It's a heresy that may seem too much to ask, and there were times in Concord he must have thought so too. "Despair is no muse," he once wrote in his *Journals*, a formulation that makes you aware of the extent to which Emerson's so-called optimism is a strategy for writing: self-help for poets.

In life, he had plenty of practice. When his five-year-old son died in 1842 Emerson lost his first and, as far as he knew then, his only son. "I am and I have: but I do not get," is what he would write in "Experience" two years later, "and when I have fancied I had gotten anything, I found I did not." He had not even be-gotten a biological future for the name Emerson. "Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat," he writes bravely, "there is victory yet for all justice." But what kind of victory can compensate for the failure of heirs to carry your name in the world? You can still beget memes named Emerson.

and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power.

Considering that he left us face-to-face with the universe, we could use some of that practical power. Because no matter how good you are with words, it's hard to turn new tropes until you newly perceive, and the redemptive power of the trope will be proportional to the redemptive power of the perception. This is bedrock poetics, and it is this ratio that is behind Emerson's consistent emphasis on the eyeball, on vision: "We are never tired, so long as we can see far enough." The implication is that how you manage your perception will determine how much energy there is in what you write, which does sound like the start of a self-help course for poets.

My guess though is that the course will seem compromised in its first lesson, *Nature*. You are probably not convinced by Emerson's analogy that the poet who turns nature into tropes is like the savior who rides in triumph into the holy city, an analogy that taken to its conclusion can only mean that salvation itself depends on the tropes you mount. We don't make big claims like that for poetry. There are a lot of bat-boy ideologues and vigilante divines in public life, and they make claims. But among poets and scholars there still flourishes the notion that poetry makes nothing happen, and can be written accordingly. I have a hunch that if Emerson were around he would see that as a metaphor for *our* imprisonment.

Chances are, the tropes you turn on nature do support salvation. When Emerson was reading astronomy, in 1833, he noted in his *Journals* that "God has opened this knowledge to us to correct our

theology & educate the mind." Yet more than 150 years later, when the space shuttle had exploded and slapped into the Atlantic Ocean, the best the President could do was to paraphrase a bad sonnet: the astronauts, he said, had "slipped the surly bonds of earth and touched the face of God."

Forget the God part, and it is still unbearably dissonant. What can it mean to refer to the surly bonds of earth? — bonds not slipped at all, since gravity brought the astronauts and their cabin into contact with the surface at 200 miles per hour. And what is surly about the bonds that hold the atmosphere, that make this planet the only breathing, protected paradise we know of and keep it from being, for instance, Mars?

You're wondering if I'm really serious, if it matters that an ill-managed president broadcasts a piece of mimetic vandalism grabbed up by a speechwriter. But tropes that make the earth unlovely make humans who do not love the earth. If theirs is the species that also has the bombs, or just the subdevelopment rights, then I think poetry has quite a lot to do with salvation. You don't have to be so impersonal about it, though. "For the value of a trope," or so Emerson left the issue, "is that the hearer is one: and indeed Nature itself is a vast trope, and all particular natures are tropes."

Cleverly put, except it still leaves for us the problem of nature, which as a source of poetry can seem like one painful anachronism. Walking in the Walden woods, the woods he owned, Emerson thought nature was "sanative," a remedy for everything false in human culture. It was a standard by which inconstant culture could be measured, re-trope. Yet who can study nature now, except with a broken heart? There's a hole in the ozone, isotopes in the reindeer, and a mile to the west of Emerson's woods are the waters of the Sudbury River which flow into the Concord River, go under the rude bridge that arched the flood, join the Merrimack and pass Plum Island into the Atlantic—all this after having first taken the outflow from a little tributary called (of all things) Chemical Brook, in Ashland, Massachusetts. There is where the river picks up the mercury, lead, chromium, cadmium, arsenic, trichloroethylene, nitrobenzene, and chlorinated benzenes that have made its contamination, according to the E.P.A., permanent.

Emerson thought there was nothing, except losing his sight, no

calamity that nature could not repair. A mile from where he stood, nature cannot even repair itself.

It's no wonder, considering what has been done to North America, if the American Scholar would rather contemplate frescoes in Italy than benzenes in Massachusetts. And yet what were American scholars up to in 1837 except Italian frescoes?—or Emerson would have had no subject for his famous talk. The difference is that they complained the continent was too empty, too untouched for art, and here I am complaining it's too full and too messed up. But since they felt despair because nature was too empty, and we feel despair because it's too full, is it possible the fault is not in nature but in despair?

The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque.

He never said it was easy to perceive what nature was about. "It is easier to read Sanscrit," is what he did say. But you and I have this advantage: somebody tried the axis of vision before and left records, essays on how to proceed.

A peculiar thing about the *Essays* (and another way they are like poems) is their titles, titles that don't reveal the subject so much as protect it. Of these, none has been less forthcoming than the most famous one, "Self-Reliance." Partly as a consequence, there is no masterpiece in our literature that has been more capriciously maligned. Emerson does insist on liberty, it's true, while the world seems to offer endless illustrations that humans can't always live up to liberty. Why this should make anyone feel smug is beyond me, but it does. More than one person of letters has felt compelled to note how irrelevant "Self-Reliance" is to a wiser culture that now recognizes the errancy of the individual as opposed to the steadfast guidance of—. But that's just it. No two agree on what the alternative authority is, though each must have one in mind even if, too bad for the other, it's not the same in both cases.

Of course there is creative reading as well as creative writing, since despite its title the famous essay is not really about the selfish self at all. On the contrary: if we are to have our original relation to the universe, then the self, the one with the instilled appetites and

the learned desires, this self must stand aside—which makes sense when you remember what the problem was.

The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye.

So if not the self, who do we rely on? Like any poet, Emerson suggests his answer in a writerly way, by qualifying his terms. Not halfway through, and he has renamed self-reliance to be self-trust, in order (while reminding his reader that trust has a fiduciary meaning) to ask: "Who is the Trustee?" It is, he writes, "that science-baffling star, without parallax."

No parallax, so it never appears to change position, even though he also described it at the outset as flashing from within. You can see Emerson liked riddles, since the light that never changes position yet is carried hither, thither and elsewhere within you is—our "common origin." Instructed, as we are supposed to be, in the dimensions of our inheritance, in the starbursts that deliver the elements that twist themselves up into things that replicate, we can better appreciate the justice of this answer, our common origin. It's a meme he elaborates at length.

We first share the life by which things exist, and afterwards see them as appearances in nature, and forget that we have shared their cause.

Nice, but. Taken to its logical conclusion what does it mean? That you put your trust as a poet in the Big Bang?

Intelligent people like to think intelligent thoughts, not wacko ones, so those people will be happy to hear the word "cause" in Emerson's sentence. "Cause" will remind them of nineteenth-century Idealism and its has-been philosophers, and if Emerson is like those philosophers then his sentence is a has-been too. No wonder Emerson believed a thought was a prison, when what his words really add up to is a sentence that wants to release us where it will, just like poetry. So what if we forget philosophy, and read "Self-Reliance" as natural history?

We apparently do share, in DNA for instance, the life by which things exist. We apparently do share in the maintenance of the biosphere, but for centuries thought earthly things were natural

appearances instead of dependents in a common cause. Here is Emerson's sentence in its place.

In that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, all things find their common origin. For, the sense of being which in calm hours rises, we know not how, in the soul, is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them, and proceeds obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceed. We first share the life by which things exist, and afterwards see them as appearances in nature, and forget that we have shared their cause. . . . We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity.

What fascinates me in those lines is the assumption, in slow and equal iambs, of equal status among the five relies in the one consortium. Being human doesn't separate you, not from things, from space, from light, from time, from man. With a list like that, the mind reaches farther back than DNA. Far enough to raise the question again: What do we do, rely on the Big Bang?

We *were* looking for an original relation to the universe. And the Big Bang does promise a new twist on the axis of vision, especially if we could perceive our rights to be but co-equal in evolution with those of space, of time, of light, of things.

Emerson let self-reliance in for a lot of trouble when he wrote on the lintels of that doorpost, *Whim*. People have come out of the woodwork on account of *Whim* to condemn him for everything from bran flakes to poets who lust after the Big Bang. What they are really condemning in the process is your liberty as a poet to perceive. "Thoughtless people . . . fancy that I choose to see this or that thing," he writes, beginning one of those qualifications you learn to keep reading for. "But perception is not *whimsical*, but fatal." I added the emphasis, because the secret of "Self-Reliance" is that it proposes no whim, but a release of objectivity, the objectivity to honor facts as perceived from the axis of our common origin. In that case your perception itself is a fact, "as much a fact," says Emerson, "as the sun."

The catch is what happens when the soul sees a fact. It stops in front of that fact. The soul stops and, to adopt the figure of "Circles," it is encircled. Lucky for us if our Virgil knows an escape. "The way of life is wonderful," he explains, "it is by abandon-

ment." Brilliant as your perception was, the thing to do is to abandon it.

Maybe this won't sound so frivolous if you consider what we've learned from quantum physics about the uncertainty of measurements. Heisenberg's uncertainty relation is taken in popular terms to mean you can't measure simultaneously the momentum and the position of any particle, though this is apparently not quite right. What you can't know simultaneously are the average of many momenta and the average of many positions for any particle. To know one completely you would have to abandon completely your measurement of the other.

Heisenberg argued that you could not draw moral or practical analogies from quantum nature. Niels Bohr argued that you could. To an Emersonian self like mine, it seems inevitable. For example, if as a poet I measure for pollution at Chemical Brook, then I will perceive either more or less pollution. If less, I will be gratified by the better fit with our fashionable metaphor, ecology. If I perceive more pollution, I will be in pain, my axis of vision out of whack with the axis of things.

But what if I were to abandon ecology and measure instead by that lesson from our common origin—evolution? From the first contamination of protons after the Big Bang to the chlorinated benzenes in Chemical Brook, the project of the universe seems to have been to make big molecules and to mix things up. Given the record, you might wonder if humans aren't specifically here to mix things up, if we shouldn't as poets write that Chemical Brook, for degree of evolution, was never so beautiful as when it ran with a trichloroethylene sheen.

Maybe that's what he means in *Nature*, about how sordid and filth will no longer be seen.

I agree it's a perverse perception, and I am duly embarrassed. Embarrassed enough to be the example for Emerson's second remedy for encirclement. In order to write, you not only abandon your first perception, you must abandon yourself to love of the new one.

People don't often regard Emerson as a lover, but he was at least once or he couldn't use love as the standard for how far you have to go in order to write. Think of love as the time

when we forgive ourselves all embarrassment, and later never remember that we were ridiculous but only that we were in love. If in the act of writing you turn Chemical Brook into a freshet of the new Eden, you could stop in embarrassment or keep writing and go all the way. After all, "Life is a series of surprises" — or so begins in delight that passage from "Circles" that is one of Emerson's most beautiful and that ends, after its writer has cast away his "hoard" of knowledge, in a relief of wisdom.

The simplest words,—we do not know what they mean, except when we love and aspire.

Turn that inversion around and it says, to love is to know what words mean. To perceive is to know what words to write.

Today you may be justly suspicious of any presumption in favor of new perceptions, as if anybody needed more of them, as if they didn't crowd in on us already from film, TV, from printed things and things unprintable — so many of them, there are days the world seems nothing but rumors, everything less and less for real. Yet it's largely due to this present experience of data overload that Emerson's complaint in "Experience" can sound, not fatally flawed, but as modern and postmodern as our own.

All things swim and glitter. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception. Ghostlike we glide through nature, and should not know our place again.

It isn't fair. You follow all his self-help counsel, and he informs you at last that experience will undo your perceptions, once by denying them outright and again by not being true enough to have ever made them real.

A measure of how this troubled Emerson himself is that "Experience" is the most overtly organized of his famous essays. Eight parts, though if you subtitle them according to his own summary it's more like seven, plus a coda (which puts part four at the essay's center, even more clearly its focus than before). In the first three parts, Emerson names those sensations, all too real, that seem to deny his best begotten perceptions. In the last three, preceding the coda, he counters with generalizations to mend or embrace the denials. Nowhere does he suggest the generalizations are real

enough to make up, say, for losing his son: "The amends," he writes elsewhere, "are of a different kind than the mischief." But the essay's structure does suggest how hard he was trying, and how compelling this makes the resolution he has balanced there in its fourth section, on "the equator of life, of thought . . . of poetry." There, in a kind of purgatory between the inferno of sensation and the paradise of generalization, his solution is: "add a line every hour, and between whiles add a line." His solution is to write.

To say inferno, and so on, is close to accusing Emerson himself of hosting some famous memes. (He once noted that if he taught writing he would use Dante as his textbook, so the speculation I'm about to make isn't really wild.) Of those three beasts Dante confronts after he wakes, lost in mid-life, it is the wolf of envy that finally destroys his hopes. Predictably, or so Virgil tells him, because envy lets no one pass and you must take another way. In the first sentence of "Experience" Emerson likewise wakes ("Where do we find ourselves?"), is likewise lost in mid-life, and having suffered the death of his son he too has an envy to confront. His martyrdom has been insufficient, the griefs of others more romantic than his own.

Not martyred enough. On one level this sounds like some vestigial Puritan envy of those who have suffered more than we have. On the level you and I are talking about it is envy of those persons, those systems even, that we fear have perceived more than we have, that have seen all the data in the world or, worse, seen through it all. It is even envy of data itself. And it's to counter this romance of envy that Emerson offers what he calls the true romance: turn the genius of your own perceptions into practical power. "Thou art sick," he writes, not mincing the word, "but shalt not be worse, and the universe, which holds thee dear, shall be the better."

I'm not sure how the universe will be better if everybody sits down tomorrow and writes a poem. It's possible, if the project of the expanding universe is to evolve, to become something else, then the more memes, the more poetry, the better. What I want to know, especially since I thought the anthropic cosmos was a conceit peculiar to a new cosmology, is whether Emerson really believed the actual physical universe would be better.

Eight years after "Experience" was published, Waldo Emerson, 49, laments in his *Journals* that just when you get to be a good writer you get old. Your physical energy has begun to fail. Then he reminds himself that whatever he has already perceived and written was thanks to the universe, and thanks to the universe he, and any of us after, writes again.

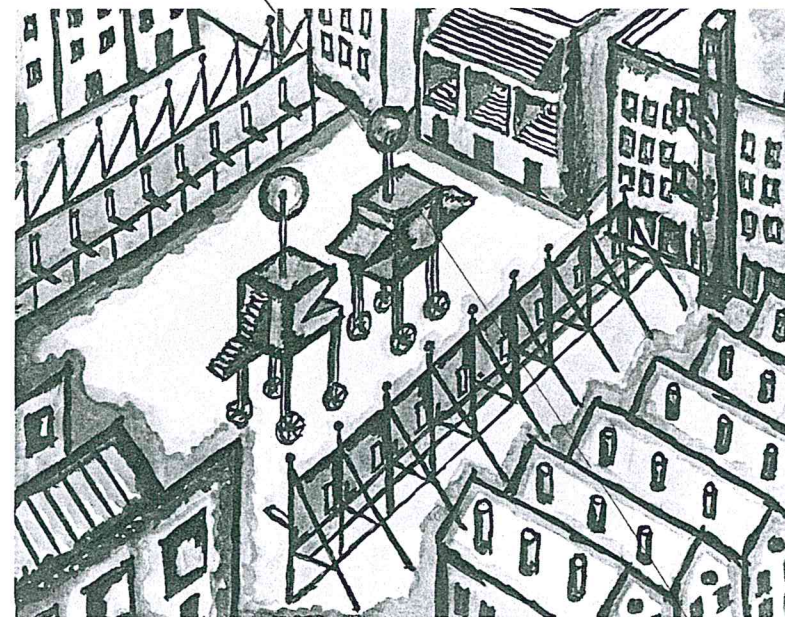
In you, this rich soul has peeped, despite your horny muddy eyes, at books & poetry. Well, it took you up, & showed you something to the purpose; that there was something there. Look, look, old mole! there, straight up before you, is the magnificent Sun. If only for the instant, you see it. Well, in this way it educates the youth of the Universe; in this way, warms, suns, refines every particle; then it drops the little channel or canal, through which the Life rolled beatifically—like a fossil to the ground—thus touched & educated by a moment of sunshine, to be a fairer material for future channels & canals, through which the old Glory shall dart again, in new directions, until the Universe shall have been shot through & through, *tilled* with light.

Like nature as he hoped nature could be, it is Emerson's motive that is revealed as sanative, a remedy for what is false in our culture. As an incitement to write and a guide for doing so, it is unfading and unbeatable. It indicates now, and will indicate deep in the twenty-first century, how Emerson avails.

John Hejduk



• RIGA •



Kim Shkapich

OBJECT/SUBJECT

EDITOR'S NOTE: John Hejduk has been creating the most ominous and poignant architectural projects of our day, and, in so doing, he revises our sense both of architecture and of narrative. His smallest autotelic drawings, his models of cut steel, his vast imaginary cities, have all the revitalizing force that one might expect from a man who derives his surrealism from Mondrian and his anti-functionalism from what he has called the "resurrection"

LOCALE

The sound of it is always there,
The fumbling of pigeons in the old barn:
You'd think first of the wind
But it's too specific of origin for that,
At the same section of unused pulley track
High in the peak where an open window was.
It is like that, interrupted now and then
By the flap of exits and entrances,
Settling down sometimes in the burr
Of a plump snooze, but never stilled,
Though when I try to make it out
It's dim as the pigeons in the mow and gray.
It follows me and I suppose I've encouraged
The attention—when it goes faint
I try to listen harder, when it is loud
I stare up at the bright dust to see
Where it is coming from. For something
Which is part of life it's attached
In a funny way and yet there's no danger
Of it ever flying off to someplace else.
If it wasn't for the racket the elevator
Makes, the thump of wet bales falling
In the haymow, you'd hear what I mean.
At night when the barn is vacant as the moon
It will be unmistakable in the loft,
Its ruffling outskirts tentative,
A tentative nest at an immanent remove.

THE HOUSE AT SAGG

The way the physical things add up,
The plain practical shapes of them derive
A mounting architecture in which the minutes
Reach for footing, solid enough
To hold them down. Our bodies, of course, but also
The space they agitate in a just right bed,
The doorways that make you stoop and the ones that don't,
The advantages of a sunken living room:
These things push the living in or out of shape
And, like the climber rose on the trellis,
It longs to contend with them. The simple things
(The heat of the water in the tap) exist,
And in their measurements is a way for the living
To emulate their still extent. Properly put together,
The things we touch are announced in the ones we do:
The driveway, built of pebbles, rattles accordance
With how and how often it's disturbed. Beautiful,
Our actions depend on finding their objects
And growing around them
Until one or the other is forced to bloom.

THE LAKE EFFECT

So many versions at any time are all exemplary
(In fog, suspended drops of rain; in a blizzard,
Each driven crystal the authentic apotheosis of the snow)
It is impossible to choose, to even want to choose
From millions of improbably accurate identities,
Things as they are. Selection magnifies, but concurrently
It excludes and how can that be satisfactory
When present estates, so-called, include all recollections
Of what they were as well as the motives for remembering them?
This being true, which past is agreeably the one
For bringing the looks of the world up to date?
Even though there's nothing new to say about it,
The weather isn't suspected of offering a clue
And this despite the attention paid to minutest variations
On the compact barometric scale. Slowly, popular wisdom
Seems to have lost its weather-canny sense
(When the geese are arguing it means unseasonable storms)
In favor of a new vocabulary in which a stationary low
Sets up its unmistakable loitering fronts of gloom.
Big words like "spring" are hardly useful for telling
What's about. When the wind comes over the warmer lake
The troubled surfaces don't stand a chance: an incident
Of water can be gigantically transformed and brought to land
In altitudes that seem to belie its origin. In trillions
And trillions the universe of surpluses descends
So that in comparison even the very air is remembered
As once being seen in form, though what that was
Now no one is able to say. No wonder in such a country
The soul goes mad, keen to the rappings underfoot
In wooden towns, the tablets of gold that are known to glow

On the dreary hills outside. Energies of terrible belief
Have to appear: temperance, drunkenness hold camp meetings
Close at hand. These are ways to combat velleity
But still the level weather shifts and comes
And, without leaving the earth, no one sees clearly
Through its cover to the sun. It's not that visibility
Is poor but that so much so visible must be perceived
Vastly obscure. The underinflated days weigh indistinct
As the lidded atmosphere, and only the untenable instant
Is separate from the muffled expanse it anxiously regards
And into which it once again subsides.

*LIFE IN A
SMALL NEIGHBORHOOD*

It has to be an act, almost a European thing
Tricked out of its boundaries to appreciate
What is sufficient if not just enough.
And it probably must be the cat of behavior
Trained, that will slip and step through
Yet still accumulate rather than leave behind,
Accumulate content out of the cracks
Got through, imperial, empire on the sly.
It will need to accumulate to persuade,
By persuasion making a place for itself,
Survived. Its rules are brief and it knows
When it is tired, how far the border is
And the distance it can cover in 24 hours.
Knows, too, where neutral country may be found.
In action it is the review of what it knows,
A review of process and due possibility,
Preceding its palace of results. A palace
Where life had been possible, as it turns out.

*TORONTO
MEANS THE MEETING PLACE*

This is an age where limits are required.
Douane: The first twenty dollars are duty free,
After that it depends how long you stay
And certain things are better undeclared.
In a meeting place people understand the terms
Though it's acceptable if they want to pretend
They don't, as in: "Why are you holding me?"
Do you want to put a Canadian out of work?

When the Huron brought furs the Iroquois
Gave them flint. Economies briefly stabilized
But eventually they had to come to terms:
They slaughtered the Huron
And drove the Ojibway farther north.

The frontier moves. We were nostalgic
Because it disappeared but the frontier moves.
It cuts inland, it darts behind a lake, it lies
In wait for us in places where we've been.
We will turn someday and we will deal with it.
There are frontiers everywhere. I never
Expected, for instance, to find you here.
It's a nickel on your dollar, sir. Important,
Important to agree on the medium of exchange.

In a meeting place people decide on the exchange:
The Iroquois needed the furs to give to the Dutch

Could anyone foresee the lot so plentiful
Now Stuff on the one hand and Guff on the other
Lean perpetually forward and never quite strike
The bell. Why isn't it possible all the ensembles,
These impossible getups, are somehow designer
Commemoratives of you, the lovelier for being
The less real and seldom difficult to desire.
Afternoons, they come on as billboards until
Who covets them can hardly know his state, can feel
His stately heart cut loose and lose its balance
As item hard after item spreads
Provocation to those preceding and forward
To these beyond: it's how temptation heats up
By increment to make the last also the least
Resistible—and here it is, securely indifferent
While surely aimed to please. Check it out; the tags
Are snapping and the offer is made in style.

SUMMER

Everywhere things have been taking place
Visibly, filling vacancies as if these
Were where they accurately belonged.
Likewise with us, it is no isolated longing
We are called on to endure, encouraged
By the loose joints of each expanding afternoon,
This season we never could have made
Save for the hours that buckle and gully
Beside us with desire. Headlong as it seems,
Our momentum is still an adjunct
Of the year and the territory we cover
Is legitimately ours, as when yellow rocket
Retakes an empty field. What's to decide?
The invisible volume of richness within our grasp
Is unfathomable unless we retrieve it
In peculiar experience: a day at the beach,
A trip to the country, a morning that starts
With the loudest cardinal we ever heard.
And though these moments will ripen by themselves
We are not likely to be surprised
If they turn up heaped together one day
Like a pail of raspberries ready to be cleaned,
In total no fuller and no less than the space
That was exactly available at the time.
It's enough to occupy dimensions
As we come to them, the handsome couple
Just now appearing in the door,
And how we measure their eventual reach
We can wait for time to tell. Today though,
Today crowds the branches in busy readiness,

The abundant minutes are plentiful all around,
And immediately as the afternoon begins
The wind arrives
With the flutter of something really happening.

GREAT FENNVILLE SWAMP

The thing about the Great Fennville Swamp is your father
Going through it in his canoe, not what that signifies
But what it does, the limp algae wake that would be made,
The sluggish disturbance in the pointillistic skin he'd
Paddle through. The thing about the Great Fennville Swamp
Is approaching it on your own in your own canoe, young
With discovery, enough peanut butter provisions close
At hand, and the river's touching momentum as if it were
A stand-in for your guide. The thing about the Fennville
Swamp is, when you enter it, its bleaching humidities
Have begun: minerals, sleek as minks, slip through the
Surface to dissolve in accumulating beds of peat and muck.
The thing about this factor of the swamp is it's a factory,
Thick with feedstocks, to reduce raw cat-tails and the
Separating pulp of dead jack pines—a refinery to crack
The uncouth molecules in its patient soak. The thing is,
With a swamp you're between a dying lake and still-emerging
Land, the end product sinks to the bottom and there's no
Place for certain where the original processing leaves off
Just as the latest technologies began. The thing about a
Swamp in this state is the place it occupies in time: the
First settlers passed the whole territory for fear of fever
And water moccasins, and, despite the irreversible success
Of immigration when it came, those who remember still warn
You of the worst: all Michigan to be a swamp someday.
The thing about a swamp is where it is, and if it takes
A lot of getting to. The thing is, what does it provide—
Cat-tails, pussy willows, bright with poison sumac at its
Side? The thing is, if you take the Fennville Swamp, muskrats
Are possible, bones of a mastodon, mud herons standing on

REPLEVIN

If the beginning of love
Is loss, possessing it
In places where you know
It can be seen, then
The reason for love is
Retrieval, arranging it
To fit the space where
It always might have been.
If the manner of love
Is displaying it, faithful
As if belonging were,
Then the assumption of love
Is correcting it, rightful
Proportions rightfully
To restore. If the effect
Of love is regaining it,
In greetings as over
Distances overcome,
Then the source of love
Is remembering it, the
Illusion of love is
Reshaping it, and the life
Of love is embracing
Its perpetual
Unattainable selves.

COVENANT

To live with me and be
My love, proposing it
As if all the pleasures
Came to the same test,
Invites the love from living
In for life, deposing it
With an innocent lively
Tension of intent. And
To live with me *or* be
My love, selecting it
As if without the other's
Commerce the one could live,
Secures the life from loving
In live death, protecting it
With a deadly living
Waste of discontent. But
To love with me and live
My love, engaging it
One from the other neither
Leaving off, is to love
In the life of division
And live in loving it,
Where if loving only lives
It dies
But if living only will love
Then loving will live.

Four times an hour the B, the R, the K—*brake*
Break—how, with neither claim nor clarity, would trail
Along to sound first “Halt” and then “Escape”
While he led his progress nevertheless to—what?—
What we were waiting for. No opening:
Ramp, bridge or lane will hug him in, *Phragmites*
Tight to his fenders and wide in the wake of him
When, over the rickety skyway, down the road
Is revealed in front of night this bright conditional,
Our rise and fall,
The breath of blue movies, the bounce and toss
Of the chemical mattress for which—precisely when was it?—
We traded in the sky. Deeper than fossils,
Fuller than coal is formed, I tell you we’ve done it again
And he is ours. Time enough to strike the medal.
For now let’s have him up and get acquainted
(Hello, injured and curious) over that overdue meal.

IN DEFENSE OF ELLIS HOLLOW CREEK

Rather than innocence, I recognize
The claim of knowledge abandoned at its source,
Learned fresh with happening and fit to the universe
Though small, and exclusive as things are where they grow
Exact. In their surroundings one gets to know
The lively specificity of things (the arrowhead
Half out of the water and a third in bloom) as naturally
Arranged to habitat as the succession of boneset,
Snakeroot and Joe-Pye weed that proceeds from the creek
Straight to the back porch door. After learning the
First one, they each seem silent with uses in a way,
Coiled like the seed of touch-me-nots to be released
In season according to the experience at hand:
Some Indian remedy known three hundred years ago
For afflictions that never required *Mayflower* transport
After all. Yes, growing up is like being a colonist
And it’s nice to know about new worlds when young,
That arrowhead is duck potato and you could live
Through winter stealing it from the muskrat storage
Bins, but taxonomies of wonder dry at an early age,
One stops walking barefoot in the creek and learns
To drive, and the starch of childhood gets buried
Life by life not when it’s useless but only when
It is no longer used. Like legal age or the Revolution,
Lifelike experience has come to be acquired as
A function of cutoff points in time, a disposition
Toward divorce that has made short work of yesterday.
Some of the farms around have been next to deserted
Since the Civil War. Their news arrives in the evening:

Information about the world that wasn't gathered from
The world. Far from innocence, what's left untended
Is what took years of living in one spot to learn
(The map turtle on his rock, the kingfisher
Buzzing the creek along his altitude): a marginal joy
Proceeding as common sense, age to commemorate
Its attentive childhood the way the life of a creek
Is measured in distance not in time,
As the place I grew up could be the one I live.

PART FIVE

The pays d'en haut Sublime

for Brian Walker

The fables were always upcountry, but
The sublime
Understood in its practical sense as
This map of vista and refuge that slides into mind
Whenever you simply are looking
Has to be here: its precincts
So free of protection, freely desired,
And reached by that hard-driving warpath
Where each vote was personal, something you feel,
Cut time. The fashions
Are always downriver, not the sublime.
It lingers the unlicensed wealth
Due to any inhabitant, some,
Who could hurry its data into an ardent shape
As if life were a sensate
Cartography. So it would seem
In this land where the maps all lie flat
Until, trying one on,
You proceed via graphic new molt as your whole country
Walking—in whose indefensible habits
Let me come too, though the facts
Turn to fables themselves, strike back and run.

Astropastoral

As much as the image of you, I have seen
You again, live, as in live indecision you brighten
The limbs of an earth that so earnestly turns
To reflect you, the sky's brightest body
And last best beacon for those who are everywhere
Coded in spirals and want to unbend,
Who bear in the dark turned toward you
This message they have to deliver even to live,
To linger in real time before you, to meet or to
Blow you away—and yes I have seen you receive them
But you are not there. Though I've tried to ignore you,
Go solo, light out beyond you,
I have seen you on every horizon, how you are stored
And encouraged and brought to the brim
Until the round bounds of one planet could not hold you in
But were ready to set near space ringing
As if from the ranking capacitor outside the sun.
I have seen you discharged, and then how you swell
Toward heaven and how you return, transmitting the fun
Of the firmament, all of it yours. And these things
Have happened, only you are not there.
At night in the opposite high-rise I'd see how you glow,
And in the adjacent one too, the same would-be blue,
And I've looked on the glow in the waters
Around the reactor, that also blue, how
Whatever would match your expression you
Wouldn't be there. I have seen the impressions you leave
At the margin of error in exit polls, monitored polls
That you never entered—I can tell what I see:

Refuge

The mitigation remembers the mischief,
And nothing's repaired except to engender it
Different. All things are wild
In the service of objects toward which they verge
—Each amendment is wild, and the touch
On the refuse truck wheel tears up Valley Brook
Road. We were here for the view, and in that
We are a success because this is our scene:
Tracks, turnpike, a pipeline, the landfill,
Amenities meant for the wildlife in
The error-prone acreage between. No habitat
Scans like a wasteland, but by what unmistakable
Eye? The truck stirs the mice, the hawk
Heart stirs, and rodents in motion resolve
In fast-focus foveae. Life lifts from, it
Harries the ground, and the study a species
Must turn to is that earth
Where the dump and the refuge are relations under the sun.