"'A New World': Philosophical Idealism in America, 1700 to 1950"
Lecture IV

1. *Emerson on Thoreau's at-homeness in the material world*

He could pace sixteen rods more accurately than another man could measure them with rod and chain. He could find his path at night, he said, better by his feet than his eyes. He could estimate the measure of a tree very well by his eye; he could estimate the weight of a calf or a pig, like a dealer. From a box containing a bushel or more of loose pencils, he could take up with his hands fast enough just a dozen pencils at every grasp. He was a good swimmer, runner, skater, boatman, and would probably outwalk most countrymen in a day's journey.

2. *Thoreau on the path from his cabin to the pond*

It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pond-side; and though it is five or six years since I trod it, it is still quite distinct. It is true, I fear, that others may have fallen into it, and so helped to keep it open. The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity! I did not wish to take a cabin passage, but rather to go before the mast and on the deck of the world, for there I could best see the moonlight amid the mountains. I do not wish to go below now.

3. *Ethical idealism*

Richard Falckenberg (one of Royce's German sources): "In ethics," idealism is exemplified "by all those views that locate the end of human beings in something higher than the satisfaction of sensual desire and selfish needs."

Hugo Münsterberg's definition of idealism in *Science and Idealism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906): Emerson was no "technical scholar, but not one stood more warmly, more luminously, more wholeheartedly for the deepest convictions of idealistic philosophy: he believed in the freedom of man and in the absolute value of man's ideals."

4. *On trial and experiment*

No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof. (I, 10)

I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me anything to the purpose. Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me. (I, 10)

But man's capacities have never been measured: nor are we to judge of what he can do by any precedents, so little has been tried. (I, 12)

We might try our lives by a thousand simple tests. (I, 13)

I sometimes try my acquaintances by such tests as this. (I, 35)

How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living. (I, 72)

All things considered, that is, considering the importance of a man's soul and of today, notwithstanding the short time occupied by my experiment, nay, partly even because of its transient character, I believe that that was doing better than any farmer in Concord did that year. (I, 76)

Once I went so far as to slaughter a woodchuck which ravaged by bean-filed . . . and devour him, partly for experiment's sake. (I, 79)

I learned from my two years' experience that it would cost incredibly little trouble to obtain one's necessary food, even in this latitude; that a man may use as simple a diet as the animals, and yet retain health and strength. (I, 82)

I found by experiment that I could make a very good molasses either of pumpkins or beets. (I, 85)

I short, I am convinced, both by faith and experience, that to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely. (I, 98)

The present was my next experiment of this kind. (II, 7)

We are the subjects of an experiment which is not a little interesting to me. (V, 10)

I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have build castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them. (XVIII, 5)

5. *On mythologizing*

On reading the book, the Arabians exclaimed, "O, that Robinson Crusoe must have been a great prophet!"

To some extent, mythology is only the most ancient history and biography. So far from being false or fabulous in the common sense, it contains only enduring and essential truth, the I and you, and here and there, the now and then, being omitted. (*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*)

6. *Foundations*

The walls must be stripped, our lives must be stripped, and beautiful housekeeping and beautiful living be laid for a foundation. (I, 56)

It would be worth the while to build still more deliberately than I did, considering, for instance, what foundation a door, a window, a cellar, a garret, have in the nature of man, and perchance never raising any superstructure until we found a better reason for it than our temporal necessities even. (I, 66)

A sentimental reformer in architecture, he began at the cornice, not at the foundation. (I, 67)

It would be *better* . . . for the students . . . even to lay the foundation themselves. (1.72)

By closing the eyes and slumbering, and consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit everywhere, which is still build on illusory foundations. (II, 21)

It affords me no satisfaction to commence a spring arch before I have got a solid foundation. Let us not play at kittly-benders. There is a solid bottom everywhere. (XVIII, 14)

7. *The higher hypothesis*

When [a man] has obtained those things which are necessary to life, there is another alternative than to obtain the superfluities; and that is, to adventure on life now, his vacation from humbler toil having commenced. (I, 20).

Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. Their fingers, from excessive toil, are too clumsy and tremble too much for that. (I, 6)

8. *Three paraphrasable lessons*

> *(i) Universal innocence*
>
> Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. (II, 14)
>
> There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of nature and has his senses still. There was never yet such a storm but it was Aeolian music to a healthy and innocent ear. Nothing can rightly compel a simple and brave man to a vulgar sadness. While I enjoy the friendship of the seasons I trust that nothing can make life a burden to me. (V, 4)
>
> The indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature—of sun and wind and rain, or summer and winter—such health, such cheer, they afford forever! (V, 17)
>
> The impression made on a wise man [by nature] is that of universal innocence. Poison is not poisonous after all, nor are any wounds fatal. (XVII, 23)
>
> A single gentle rain makes the grass many shades greener. So our prospects brighten on the influx of better thoughts. We should be blessed if we lived in the present always and took advantage of every accident that befell us, like the grass which confesses the slightest influence of the slightest dew that falls upon us; and did not spend our time in atoning for the neglect of past opportunities, which we call doing our duty. We loiter in winter while it is already spring. In a pleasant spring morning all men's sins are forgiven. Such a day is a truth to vice. While such a sun holds out to burn, the vilest sinner may return. Through our own recovered innocence we discern the innocence of our neighbors. You may have known your neighbor yesterday for a thief, a drunkard, or a sensualist, and merely pitied

or despised him, and despaired of the world; but the sun shines bright and warm this first spring morning, re-creating the world and you meet him at some serene work, and see how his exhausted and debauched veins expand with still joy and bless the new day, feel the spring influence with the innocence of infancy, and all his faults are forgotten. There is not only an atmosphere of good will about him, but even a savor of holiness groping for expression, blindly and ineffectually perhaps, like a new-born instinct, and for a short hour the south hillside echoed to no vulgar jest. You see some innocent fair shoots preparing to burst from his gnarled rind and try another year's life, tender and fresh as the youngest plant. Even he has entered into the joy of his Lord. Why the jailer does not leave open his prison doors—why the judge does not dismiss his case—why the preacher does not dismiss his congregation! It is because they do not obey the hint which God gives them, nor accept the pardon which he freely offers to all. (XVII, 18)

Innocence as perfectibility

The life in us is like the water in the river. It may rise this year higher than man has ever known it, and flood the parched uplands; even this may be the eventful year, which will drown out all the muskrats. . . . Every one has heard the story which has gone the rounds of New England, of a strong and beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood, which had stood in a farmer's kitchen for sixty year, first in Connecticut, afterward in Massachusetts—from an egg deposited in the living tree many years earlier still, as appeared by counting the annual layers beyond it; which was heard gnawing out for several weeks, hatched perchance by the heat of an urn. Who does not feel his faith in a resurrection and immortality strengthened by the hearing of this? Who knows what beautiful and winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages under many concentric layers of woodenness in the dead dry life of society, deposited at first in the alburnum of the green and living tree, which has been gradually converted into the semblance of its well-seasoned tomb—heard perchance gnawing out for years by the astonished family of man, as they sat round the festive board—may unexpectedly come forth from midst society's most trivial and handseled furniture, to enjoy its perfect summer life at last.

I do not say that John or Jonathan will realize all this; but such is the character of that morrow which mere lapse of time can never make to dawn. The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star. (XVIII, 18, 19)

Thoreau's problem of induction

We believe that the possibility of the future far exceeds the accomplishment of the past. We review the past with common sense, but we anticipate the future with transcendental senses. In our sanest moments we find ourselves naturally expecting or prepared for far greater changes than any which we have experienced within the period of distinct memory (*from the journals*).

(ii) *The search for higher ends as a higher end*

Be . . . the Mungo Park, the Lewis and Clark and Frobisher, of your own streams and oceans; explore your own higher latitudes. (XVIII, 2)

Explore the private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one's being alone. (XVIII, 2)

> If you would learn to speak all tongues and conform to the customs of all nations, if you would travel farther than all travellers, be naturalized in all climes, and cause the Sphinx to dash her head against a stone, even obey the precept of the old philosopher, and Explore thyself. (XVIII, 2)
>
> (iii) *Our whole life is startlingly moral ("Higher Laws," XI, 10)*

9. Caroline Merchant on the project of Walden

Walden, the result of an experiment in living that took places between 1845 and 1848 south of Concord, Massachusetts, was an inquiry into the question: How can a human being obtain the physical and spiritual necessities for survival with as little impact on nature as possible? To begin living at Walden Pond, one did not need to drain a marsh or clear-cut the land. In the communal spirit of the subsistence culture, Thoreau borrowed a few tools, cut down only those pines essential for timber, recycled the siding and windows of an old shanty, and reused bricks, shingles, and windows to construct a dwelling oriented toward the sun. Rather than a property owner, he considered himself a visitor passing through nature, availing himself of squatter's rights. (*Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Science, and Gender in New England* [University of North Carolina Press, 1989])

10. *The first collision*

We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled; like the worms which, even in life and health, occupy our bodies. Possibly we may withdraw from it, but never change its nature. I fear that it may enjoy a certain health of its own; that we may be well, yet not pure. (XI, 11)

The generative energy, which, when we are loose, dissipates and makes us unclean, when we are continent invigorates and inspires us. Chastity is the flowering of man; and what are called Genius, Heroism, Holiness, and the like, are but various fruits which succeed it. Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open. By turns our purity inspires and our impurity casts us down. He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established. Perhaps there is none but has cause for shame on account of the inferior and brutish nature to which he is allied. I fear that we are such gods or demigods only as fauns or satyrs, the divine allied to beasts, the creatures of appetite, and that, to some extent, our very life is our disgrace. (XI, 11)

From John Donne: "How happy's he who hath due place assigned / To his beasts and disafforested his mind!"

When the reptile is attacked at one mouth of his burrow, he shows himself at another. If you would be chaste, you must be temperate. What is chastity? How shall a man know if he is chaste? He shall not know it. We have heard of this virtue, but we know not what it is. We speak conformably to the rumor which we have heard. From exertion come wisdom and purity; from sloth ignorance and sensuality. (XI, 12)

From Thomas Carew, "Complemental Verses" quoted at the end of "Economy": "This low abject brood, / That fix their seats on mediocrity, / Become your servile minds, but we advance / Such virtues only as admit excess / . . . . /that heroic virtue / For which antiquity hath left no name, /

But patterns only, such as Hercules, / Achilles, Theseus. Back to thy loath'd cell; / And when thou seest the new enlightened sphere, / Study to know but what those worthies were."

Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome. (XI, 13)

Every man is the builder of a temple, called his body, to the god he worships, after a style purely his own, nor can he get off by hammering marble instead. We are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones. (XI, 14)

John Farmer sat at his door one September evening, after a hard day's work, his mind still running on his labor more or less. Having bathed, he sat down to re-create his intellectual man. . . . He had not attended to the train of his thoughts long when he heard some one playing a flute, and that sound harmonized with his mood. Still he thought of his work . . . . But the notes of the flute came home to his ears out of a different sphere from that he worked in, and suggested work for certain faculties which slumbered in him. They gently did away with the street, and the village, and the state in which he lived. A voice said to him—Why do you stay here and live this mean moiling life, when a glorious existence is possible for you? Those same stars twinkle over other fields that these.—But how to come out of this condition and actually migrate thither? All that he could think of was to practise some new austerity, to let him mind descend into his body and redeem it, and treat himself with ever increasing respect. (XI, 15)

11. *The second collision (from* "*Ktaadn,*" *in* The Maine Woods*)*

The mountain seemed a vast aggregation of loose rocks, as if some time it had rained rocks, and they lay as they fell on the mountain sides, nowhere fairly at rest, but leaning on each other, all rocking-stones, with cavities between, but scarcely any soil or smoother shelf. They were the raw materials of a planet dropped from an unseen quarry, which the vast chemistry of nature would anon work up, or work down, into the smiling and verdant plains and valleys of earth. This was an undone extremity of the globe; as in lignite, we see coal in the process of formation.

. . . Occasionally, when the windy columns broke in to me, I caught sight of a dark, damp crag to the right or left; the mist driving ceaselessly between it and me. It reminded me of the creations of the old epic and dramatic poets, of Atlas, Vulcan, the Cyclops, and Prometheus. Such was Caucasus and the rock where Prometheus was bound. Aeschylus had no doubt visited such scenery as this. It was vast, Titanic, and such as man never inhabits. Some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose grating of his ribs as he ascends. He is more lone than you can imagine. There is less of substantial thought and fair understanding in him than in the plains where men inhabit. His reason is dispersed and shadowy, more thin and subtile, like the air. Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty. She does not smile on him as in the plains. She seems to say sternly, Why came ye here before your time. This ground is not prepared for you. Is it not enough that I smile in the valleys? I have never made this soil for thy feet, this air for thy breathing, these rocks for thy neighbors. I cannot pity nor fondle thee here, but forever relentlessly drive thee hence to where I *am* kind. . . .

Perhaps I most fully realized that this was primeval, untamed, and forever untamable Nature, or whatever else men call it, while coming down this part of the mountain. We were passing over "Burnt Lands," burnt by lightning, perchance, though they showed no recent marks of fire, hardly so much as a charred stump, but looked rather like a natural pasture for the moose and deer, exceedingly wild and desolate, with occasional strips of timber crossing them, and low poplars springing up, and patches of blueberries here and there. I found myself traversing them familiarly,

like some pasture run to waste, or partially reclaimed by man; but when I reflected what man, what brother or sister or kinsman of our race made it and claimed it, I expected the proprietor to rise up and dispute my passage. It is difficult to conceive of a region uninhabited by man. We habitually presume his presence and influence everywhere. And yet we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast and drear and inhuman, though in the midst of cities. Nature was here something savage and awful though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work. This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man's garden, but the unhandseled globe. It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor waste land. It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth, as it was made forever and ever,—to be the dwelling of man, we say,—so Nature made it, and man may use it if he can. Man was not to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific,—not his Mother Earth that we have heard of, not for him to tread on, or be buried in,—no, it were being too familiar even to let his bones lie there,—the home, this, of Necessity and Fate. There was clearly felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. It was a place for heathenism and superstitious rites,—to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and to wild animals than we. We walked over it with a certain awe, stopping, from time to time, to pick the blueberries which grew there, and had a smart and spicy taste. Perchance where our wild pines stand, and leaves lie on their forest floor, in Concord, there were once reapers, and husbandmen planted grain; but here not even the surface had been scarred by man, but it was a specimen of what God saw fit to make this world. What is it to be admitted to a museum, to see a myriad of particular things, compared with being shown some star's surface, some hard matter in its home!

I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one,—*that* my body might,—but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense! Contact! Contact! Who* are we? *where* are we? (p. 646)

11. *Anthropocentrism and* Walden

Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wildness—to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground. At the same time are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature. We must be refreshed by the sign of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and decaying trees, the thunder-cloud, and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets. We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander. We are cheered when we observe the vulture feeding on the carrion which disgusts and disheartens us, and deriving health and strength from the repast. (XVII, 23)

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