



# EXPERIENCE and EXPERIMENTAL WRITING

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LITERARY PRAGMATISM  
from EMERSON to the JAMESES

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PAUL GRIMSTAD

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*Literary Pragmatism from  
Emerson to the Jameses*

Paul Grimstad

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of my father, Paul Hayden Grimstad.*

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## Experience and Experimental Writing

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# Introduction

In the last of the prefaces he added to the New York edition of his fiction, Henry James poses an ambitious thought experiment. What “would be really interesting, and I dare say admirably difficult to go into,” James writes

would be the history of [an] effect of experience; the history, in other words, of the growth of the immense array of terms, perceptual and expressional that . . . in sentence, passage and page, simply looked over the heads of the standing terms . . . or perhaps rather like alert winged creatures, perched on those diminished summits and aspired to clearer air. What [such an interest would] come back to is the how and the whence and the why these intenser lights of experience come into being and insist on shining.<sup>1</sup>

What does James mean by experience here? Is he referring to events undergone between the 1892 notebook sketches for the plot of *The Golden Bowl* and the final revisions to it in 1908? Or does he rather refer directly to the “growth of an immense array of terms,” as if experience named an impersonal fecundity latent in the very doing of composition? Would the “history of an effect of experience” then be a story about how the new terms—those “alert winged creatures”—had appeared from out of the accidents and surprises of rewriting, and the “admirable difficulty” that of giving an account of how and whence and why such experience had come into being at all? What would you have to take experience to be to think you could arrive at an “intenser” version of it through the process of revision?

In what follows I take James up on his invitation to go into these questions, finding in what he calls a “history of an effect of experience,” not only a way of thinking about composition, but the prehistory of the pragmatist insight that experience is not a matter of correspondence but of process and experiment. When the classical pragmatists talk about experience they do not mean getting inner representations to correspond with outer phenomena, nor of securing conditions of possibility for rationally justified knowledge, but an experimental loop of perception, action, consequences, further perception of consequences, further action, further consequences, and so forth. Richard Poirier, for one, links this understanding of

experience to composition, such that for “poet-pragmatists” like Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Jameses, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and Gertrude Stein, experience is not so much a matter of securing correspondence between mind and world as it is modeled on “writing itself as an activity . . . as a dramatization of how life may be created out of words.”<sup>2</sup> If the preface to *The Golden Bowl* invites us to imagine an “effect of experience” that is one with the process of composition, I follow Poirier in finding a version of that idea beginning in Emerson, and in his description of the writers he discusses as Emersonian pragmatists.<sup>3</sup> But rather than moving to writers more typically thought of as “modernist” (Stevens and Stein), I turn here to two of Emerson’s contemporaries, Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville.<sup>4</sup> In treating all three of them—along with James—as exemplifying in their poetry and prose an experimentation typically associated with modernism, I want not only to identify an arc of influence in American literary history—roughly from Emerson’s leaving the Unitarian ministry to Henry James’s late style—but to offer an account of the relation of literature to pragmatism as a function of the relation of experience to experiment.<sup>5</sup>

To make concrete the transition from thinking of experience as the squaring of inner and outer matters to thinking of experience as a process continued in composition, each chapter is organized around a particular scene or encounter: Emerson, in the middle of a crisis of vocation, arrives at a method for treating his journal entries as material for building up lectures and essays after seeing George Cuvier’s cabinets of comparative anatomy in Paris; Poe, precariously launched on a career as a work-a-day magazinist, invents the analytic detective story after witnessing and devoting an editorial to Bavarian inventor Johann Maelzel’s traveling exhibition of a mechanical chess-player; the impacted style of Melville’s *Pierre* emerges out of his agon with the literary-critical dogmas of New York literati, specifically some less than favorable reviews of *Moby-Dick*. These three different ways of dramatizing in prose the replacement of experience as correspondence with experience as composition is made most explicit in the relation between Henry and William James. Despite William’s complaint that his brother’s late style was “all perfume and simulacrum,” Henry’s 1903 novel *The Ambassadors* takes as its formal organizing principle precisely the central claim of his brother’s radical empiricism: that relations are external to, and as real as, their terms. In building a novel around the multiple ambassadorial relations between New England and Paris, Henry enacts at the level of style William’s most ambitious and encompassing account of experience, despite William’s professed impatience with the indirection of that style. The “encounter” described in the final chapter is then between the Jameses themselves.

Other figures play a role in the span of time I am calling “Emerson to the Jameses.” Most immediately, there are the three representatives of classical pragmatism: Besides William James and John Dewey (whose naturalist account of experience I take up in detail in the remainder of this introduction), there is Charles Peirce, often considered to be the founder of pragmatism. Usually remembered for his magazine articles of the 1870s on truth and verification, and for his work on

semeiotic, Peirce enters the picture here as the author of some little-known essays on reasoning machines and for a specific innovation in the theory of inference. Also discussed are Georges Cuvier, whose work on taxonomy and comparative anatomy were not only a decisive influence on Emerson at a crucial moment in his search for a vocation, but factors centrally in the dénouement of Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"; Evert Duyckinck, whose role as publisher and critic in New York City in the 1840s and 1850s in part made careers (however precarious) like Poe's and Melville's possible; Friedrich Nietzsche, who turned to making some of his most experimental books just after re-reading and re-annotating German translations of all of Emerson's *Essays* in 1881 and 1882; Henri Bergson, whose ongoing friendship and correspondence with William James was decisive for the development of James's radical empiricism; and George Santayana, who said that the James brothers were unique for their way of breaking with what he called the "Genteel Tradition"; a claim that could be made for all the writers to whom I have devoted chapters here (even if Santayana himself believed Emerson and Poe were still in that tradition's grip).<sup>6</sup>

No treatment of Emerson as anticipating pragmatism's account of experience can ignore Stanley Cavell's formidable challenge to the idea that Emerson is any kind of pragmatist. Asking whether the phrase "Emersonian pragmatism" is "intended [as] the idea that there was a particular brand of pragmatism called Emersonian, or rather that Emersonianism was always a kind of pragmatism," Cavell finds in this identification "one more form in which the distinctiveness of Emerson's prose is repressed."<sup>7</sup> This worry over the repression of Emerson's distinctiveness as a writer continues a conversation—conducted mostly in remarks made *en passant* and in footnotes—begun in Poirier's *Poetry and Pragmatism*. There Poirier acknowledges at the outset an affinity with Cavell, saying that he feels some "exasperation" at the way Emerson's achievement as a prose stylist has been overlooked in the literary culture he helped to found.<sup>8</sup> And while Poirier is concerned to treat pragmatism as a "form of linguistic skepticism" (a claim that places him squarely in dialogue with Cavell's specific concerns), he also says that part of the distinctiveness of Emerson's writing is the way it is "to be experienced as it is written, and not in any clarifying translation into some other syntax."<sup>9</sup> The description is echoed later in *Poetry and Pragmatism* in a footnote addressed explicitly to Cavell, in which Poirier says that in Emerson's sentences experience is to be found in "the actual accomplishments *in* the writing, word by word."<sup>10</sup> Cavell's reservations about seeing Emerson as any kind of pragmatist are also voiced in relation to prose style; what Cavell calls Emerson's "difficulty."

The simultaneous convergence and conflict between Poirier and Cavell around the distinctiveness of Emerson's style might be considered in light of questions Cavell raises in his *Senses of Walden*: "Why has America never expressed itself philosophically? Or has it, in the metaphysical riot of its greatest literature?"<sup>11</sup> The questions seem both to signal Cavell's attraction to great nineteenth-century American

prose—not only Emerson’s, but Thoreau’s, Poe’s, and Henry James’s—and to profess a commitment to working through aspects of the metaphysics pragmatism set out to reject. The tension between metaphysics and pragmatism, though, conceals a deeper one, between skepticism and naturalism; a difference that depends on differing construals of the meaning of experience. That Poirier finds in Emerson the beginnings of pragmatism and that Cavell distrusts this idea—conflicting convictions held for the same reason: the *way* Emerson writes—invites us to unpack the distinction between skepticism and naturalism in relation both to Emerson’s style and to different understandings of experience.

Cavell says that in the essay “Experience” Emerson “explicitly challenges the . . . idea of experience to be found in Kant and in the classical empiricists.”<sup>12</sup> Both of these models of experience—on the one hand, the way the making of determinate judgments functions as the condition of possibility for objects to become intelligible at all; on the other, the mechanism by which sense impressions come to furnish the mind with ideas—are representationalist. That is, both descriptions of experience come down to giving an account of how “outer” phenomena can be made to square with “inner” representations.<sup>13</sup> Consider this, then, in relation to what Cavell takes to be Emerson’s challenge to such models of experience, particularly his line, “but far be it from me the despair which prejudices the law by a paltry empiricism.”<sup>14</sup> Cavell takes the line to say that what is wrong with empiricism is “not its reliance on experience but its paltry idea of experience”; a reading that leads him to consider a “little argument” he takes Emerson to be having with Kant about “the nature of experience in its relation to, or revelation of, the natural world.”<sup>15</sup> Cavell sees this argument at work in Emerson’s saying that “the secret of the illusoriness [of life] is in the necessity of a succession of moods or objects. Gladly we would anchor, but the anchorage is quicksand. This onward trick of nature is too strong for us. *Pero si muove.*”<sup>16</sup> Finding in these lines an engagement with Kant’s second Analogy of Experience, Cavell hears in the word “anchorage” an allusion to Kant’s well-known example of a boat moving down a river: if an anchorage in *outer* succession were to turn out to be quicksand, then our inner representations would be set adrift. Since the point of the boat analogy for Kant is to give a proof for the objectivity of outer succession (and thus avoid what he calls “dogmatic” idealism), the melting away of *this* anchorage would indeed lead to an extreme form of external world skepticism.<sup>17</sup>

But matters are not so simple as this. Cavell rather tells us that for Emerson “the succession of moods is *not tractable* by the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity Kant proposed for experience,” and that it is “*this* onward trick of nature that is too much for us; the given bases for the self are quicksand. The fact that we are given over by this succession . . . means that you can think of it as at once a succession of moods (inner matters) and a succession of objects (outer matters). This very evanescence of the world proves its existence to me; it is what vanishes from me.”<sup>18</sup> On Cavell’s account, Emerson is saying that the “secret of the illusoriness of life” is our inability to gauge the one order of succession by the other,

because you can think of succession as at once a series of moods or objects. And if neither is tractable by the other taken as fixed, then the “given bases of the self are quicksand,” since for Kant one of the conditions of the self’s unity—“unity of apperception” as the necessary ground for the synthesis of experience—requires and implies an isomorphism between inner and outer matters. Cavell’s recognition of Emerson’s “bringing to mind the characteristics of skepticism’s mood”<sup>19</sup> thus leads him to hear in these lines from “Experience” both an acknowledgment of one of the more sophisticated efforts at heading off at the pass the threat of the world’s becoming alien to us, and a resistance to the idea that the skeptical mood either arises out of or is properly addressed in relation to a problem of inner representation of outer objects. This wariness about the effort to provide an answer to the skeptic is an instance of what Cavell elsewhere calls the “truth of skepticism”; as if Emerson’s disappointment in the proof Kant offers as a way of dealing with skepticism were not a failure to be persuaded by Kant’s arguments but a part of skepticism’s mood.<sup>20</sup>

While Cavell finds in Emerson a skeptical mood not so much characterized by a doubt about knowledge of the external world, but by an inability to feel satisfied with Kant’s effort at “answering” the skeptic, he does so by pointing precisely to that feature of Kant’s empirical realism—the boat as an emblem for the objectivity of outer succession—that brings Emerson’s lines back to the epistemological problem of representation. If our moods succeed each other (even if, as Emerson has it elsewhere, they “do not believe in each other”<sup>21</sup>) then the “logic of moods” remains expressible in the kind of argument that would ground the fact of their succession in something outside us. And that last *Pero si mouve*—an allusion to Galileo’s tactful response to his persecutors that, while he did not mean to suggest that the Earth moves around the Sun, nevertheless added “and yet it does move”—while pointing to Copernican turns both astronomical and epistemological, might then be read as a sort of *sotto voce* reminder of the nagging pull on us of Kant’s understanding of experience as (in part) premised on the gauging of inner by outer succession. Changing course from riverboats to celestial bodies, we might say that Cavell’s effort to show Emerson both feeling the gravitational pull (or getting out of the orbit) of skepticism, nevertheless depends on the intelligibility of its threat for a finding in “Experience” a little argument with Kant.

Despite this rendering of the role of succession in Emerson, and despite Cavell’s own disappointment with the Kantian “settlement with skepticism”—for all the glory of transcendental idealism, it still requires that things in themselves drop out of the picture (to this gift from Kant Cavell has replied: “thanks for nothing”<sup>22</sup>)—Cavell’s reading of Emerson’s lines returns experience to the problem of aligning “inner [with] outer matters”; that is, to the problem of representation, or at any rate a successor of this problem.<sup>23</sup> We might push this further and say that to get off the ground as a genuine problem skepticism *must* understand experience as some form of (however failed) representation. If we are worried about our access to the external world, or to other minds, or whether we can have a firm grasp on what it means

to follow a rule, or whether we can have our selves reflected back to us in another's recognition; or if it is just that we have begun to wonder how a simultaneous respect for, and doubt about, efforts to answer the skeptic might stand for some deep truth about us: in each case, what we are worried or wondering about is the correspondence of some set of representations with a condition of life.

But consider some of the steps that led to the making of Emerson's essay "Experience." A journal entry of January 1841 says "the method of advance in nature is perpetual transformation," and on September 11, 1841, Emerson says: "It is much to write sentences; it is more to add method & write out the spirit of your life symmetrically . . . to arrange many reflections in their natural order so that I shall have one homogeneous piece . . . this continuity is for the great."<sup>24</sup> Here, the role of "succession" seems not to be bound up with the problem of representation, but of arriving at a practicable method of composition. The move from the "perpetual transformations" of nature to what Emerson calls "writing out the spirit of your life" is made more explicit in the lecture "The Method of Nature," given at Waterville College in Maine, also in 1841. In that lecture Emerson says to his audience that they (and he) will "celebrate this hour by exploring the method of nature. Let us see that, as nearly as we can, and try how far it is transferable to the literary life."<sup>25</sup> Some months later in his lecture called "The Poet," Emerson describes what the poet does as "vehicular," "fluxional," and "transitive," such that the poet's lines "flow with the flowing of nature."<sup>26</sup> Rather than think of outer succession as lost to us, because of a veil or an imbalance between inner and outer matters, Emerson wants to find a continuity running from nature to composition.

Given Cavell's assertion that Emerson's idea of experience is a challenge to both transcendental idealism and classical empiricism (a claim with which I agree), I want to treat that challenge as the way he replaces a worry over the vicissitudes of representation with what he simply calls "method." And given that Cavell is as concerned as Poirier with the distinctiveness of Emerson's way of writing (yet is reluctant to find in Emerson any form of pragmatism) we ought to consider how the method by which Emerson got his sentences to sound the way they do informed John Dewey's description of experience as the "continuity between natural events . . . and the origin and development of meanings [as a] naturalistic link which does away with the often alleged necessity of dividing the objects of experience into two worlds."<sup>27</sup> Dewey's naturalist rejection of correspondence epistemology, and the way it informs his aesthetics, encourages us to stop puzzling over how to connect the chasm between mind and world and imagine rather a course or continuum of experience moving from one to the other. In his 1925 Paul Carus lectures, *Experience and Nature*, Dewey offered a naturalist account of experience premised on what he called a "shift of emphasis from the experienced (the *what*) to the experiencing, the *how*, the method of its course." He later describes this move from the "what" to the "how" of experience as a desire to eliminate the "division of everything into nature *and* experience," encouraging us rather to think of experience as the "direction of natural events to meanings"; what John Murphy