14
Creative Translation in Emerson's Idealism

Kenneth P. Winkler

In *Emerson and the Art of the Diary*, Lawrence Rosenwald describes the literary form of Emerson's journals as a 'creative translation' of earlier traditions of diary-writing or journal-keeping:[1]

> Two of Emerson's diaristic traditions, the Lockean commonplace book and the Moodyan diary, we have already considered in describing the process by which Emerson found his form; and in that description, as in most descriptions of the relation between and innovative artist and his or her tradition, we proceeded as if the traditions were originals and Emerson's response to them a creative translation.

The Lockean commonplace book, about which I will say no more, is an indexed record of one's readings and observations. The Moodyan diary, or what I will call the Puritan diary, which is more intensely personal, is best represented by Mary Moody Emerson, Ralph Waldo Emerson's aunt, who was the most potent personal influence on Waldo's early intellectual development. In the remark I have quoted, Rosenwald uses the word 'translation' very broadly, and in this chapter I will follow him. I will apply the word not only to Emerson's creative appropriation of a literary form, but to his creative appropriation of a philosophical doctrine – one that helps to make sense of an attitude towards life, its gifts and its burdens, that Puritan diaries often express. The doctrine, now known as the Doctrine of Continuous Creation, holds that, in conserving the world, God re-creates it at every moment, making the same creative effort at each ever-advancing now that he made at the very beginning. Continuous creation was explicitly endorsed by at least one Puritan diarist, Jonathan Edwards. It was an important ingredient in his idealism

and, once translated, it became an important ingredient in the idealism of Emerson. My aim in this chapter is to describe Emerson's creative translation of the doctrine as Edwards understood it. I will close by suggesting that for us, the doctrine can perhaps be a source of optimism and an incentive to action, as I believe it was for Emerson. I will also briefly consider Emerson's bearing on the themes of this volume.

I will begin in section one with Edwards' statement of the doctrine. In section two, I will document Emerson's esteem for the diaries of his Puritan forebears, Mary Moody Emerson among them. I will suggest that continuous creation makes her valiant response to life more comprehensible. I will then turn, in the third and final section, to Emerson's creative translation of the doctrine and its contribution to his idealism.

There is one preliminary: I must explain how I will understand idealism. The founding text of the idealist tradition is a passage from Plato's *Sophist*, where a 'stranger' or visitor to Athens speaks of a 'quarrel about reality' that he compares to a 'battle of gods and giants'.[2] 'How so?', young Theaetetus asks. F.M. Cornford, whose translation of the Stranger's answer I now quote, calls it a battle between 'idealists' (the party of the gods) and 'materialists' (the party of the giants):

STRANGER: One party is trying to drag everything down to earth out of heaven and the unseen, literally grasping rocks and trees in their hands, for they lay hold upon every stock and stone and strenuously affirm that real existence belongs only to that which can be handled and offers resistance to the touch. They define reality as the same thing as body, and as soon as one of the opposite party asserts that anything without a body is real, they are utterly contemptuous and will not listen to another word.

THEAETETUS: The people you describe are certainly a formidable crew. I have met quite a number of them before now.

STRANGER: Yes, and accordingly their adversaries are very wary in defending their position somewhere in the heights of the unseen, maintaining with all their force that true reality consists in certain intelligible and bodiless forms. In the clash of argument they shatter and pulverize those bodies which their opponents wield, and what those others alleged to be true reality they call, not real being, but a sort of moving process of becoming. On this issue an interminable battle is always going on between the two camps.

The Stranger's sympathies – and Plato's – are with the gods. As the entry on idealism in James Mark Baldwin's *Dictionary of Philosophy and*

Psychology reports, 'the first historical system to which the name of idealism is applied by common consent is that of Plato'.[3] The idealist thesis most emphasized by Plato in the passage quoted is metaphysical: bodies possess a diminished reality, a reality less 'true' – less real – than that of the impalpable unseen. In this chapter, I will take idealism to be the view that the mind is more truly real or more fundamental than body. To affirm the diminished reality of body is not to say that bodies are altogether unreal, or that they do not exist. This more extreme idealist thesis is a limiting case of idealism as I will understand it. The extreme thesis holds that the reality of body is so radically diminished that, in the end, it amounts to nothing at all.

I. Edwards on continuous creation

As a student at Yale College, Jonathan Edwards would have encountered the doctrine of continuous creation in the *Medulla Theologica*, a handbook of Puritan theology by William Ames.[4] God's conservation of the world, Ames writes 'is nothing else than as it were a continued *Creation*' – 'as it were' because conservation and creation do differ 'in reason' (but not 'in very deed'), since '*Creation* includes a certaine newnes which conservation excludes, & *Creation* excludes a precedent existence which conservation includes'.[5] Present-day students of philosophy first encounter the doctrine in the *Meditations* of Descartes. In the Third Meditation, Descartes explains:

> A lifespan can be divided into countless parts, each completely independent of the others, so that it does not follow from the fact that I existed a little while ago that I must exist now, unless there is some cause which as it were creates me afresh at this moment – that is, which preserves me. Hence the distinction between conservation and creation is only a conceptual one [a distinction of reason, as Ames had called it] and this is one of the things that are evident by the natural light.[6]

In the following passage, Jonathan Edwards states the Doctrine of Continuous Creation and argues for it. His argument begins with a disjunction: the present existence of any created thing, he says, can be caused in only one of two ways, either by the past existence of the thing itself or by God:[7]

> That God does, continually, by his immediate power, *uphold* every created substance in being, will be manifest, if we consider, that

> their present existence is a *dependent* existence, and therefore is an *effect*, and must have some *cause*: and the cause must be one of these two: either the *antecedent existence* of the same substance, or else the *power of the Creator*.

Edwards then denies the first disjunct: 'But it can't be the antecedent existence of the same substance. For instance, the existence of the body of the moon at this present moment, can't be the effect of its existence at the last foregoing moment.' Why not? Because a thing cannot operate where and when it does not exist:

> 'Tis plain, nothing can exert itself, or operate, when and where it is not existing. But the moon's past existence was neither *where* nor *when* its present existence *is*. In point of time, what is *past* entirely ceases, when *present* existence begins; otherwise it would not be *past*. The past moment is ceased and gone, when the present moment takes place; and does no more coexist with it, than does any other moment that had ceased twenty years ago. Nor could the past existence of the particles of this moving body produce effects in any other place, than where it then was. But its existence at the present moment, in every point of it, is in a different place, from where its existence was at the last preceding moment. From these things, I suppose, it will certainly follow, that the present existence, either of this, or any other created substance, cannot be an effect of its past existence.

The same reasoning rules out the possibility that the present existence of one creature is caused by the past existence of another (a relevant possibility that Edwards' initial disjunction had ignored):

> The existences (so to speak) of an effect, or thing dependent, in different parts of space or duration, though every so *near* one to another, don't at all coexist one with the other; and therefore are as truly different effects, as if those parts of space and duration were every so far asunder: and the prior existence can no more be the proper cause of the new existence, in the next moment, or next part of space, than if it had been in an age before, or at a thousand miles distance, without any existence to fill up the intermediate time or space.

So the present existence of a thing can be caused neither by the thing itself nor by any other thing. It must therefore be brought about by God,

who causes it by creating it at every instant it occupies: 'Therefore the existence of created substances, in each successive moment, must be the effect of the *immediate* agency, will, and power of God'.

What Edwards calls 'the body of the moon' stands in for any body whatsoever. If we concentrate on the moon, and on the other bodies it represents, the idealist consequences of Edwards' argumentation seem clear. Bodies have no causal power. Every effect that we might impute to a body is the immediate effect of God's will. Consider a billiard ball that collides with a second ball at rest. Does it cause the motion of the second ball? No, because the motion of the second ball is nothing but its successive reappearance in adjacent parts of space, and each reappearance is the work of God and God alone. Nor do bodies have an inherent self-identity – or so Edwards contends in passages elsewhere in *Original Sin* and whose argument I will summarize. Consider the moon. We take it to be identical over time. But its continued existence over time is nothing but the successive creation of remarkably similar – yet distinct – *phases* or *stages* in what we think of as a single lunar career. What is it that unites those stages into the enduringly self-identical thing we call the moon? What makes them all stages in a single career or lifetime, as opposed to fleeting and disconnected bursts of being? It is surely nothing in the stages themselves. Taken by themselves, any two stages, however similar or closely packed in time, are two things rather than one. According to Edwards, only the arbitrary will of God can meet the need. Only the power of God can unite intrinsically distinct things into a whole that is genuinely one. The reality of bodies is thereby diminished: they have been drained of causal power, now wholly invested in God, and even their self-identity has been rendered dependent on Mind.

As we will soon see, though, things are not quite so tidy as they seem.

II. Emerson and the Puritan diary

Riding one September day near his home in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1748, Jonathan Edwards ran into a young minister, Joseph Emerson, from the eastern part of the state. Emerson, who was twenty-four, was returning home from the commencement of Yale College.[8] Jonathan invited Joseph to spend the night at his home. There Joseph fell deeply in love with Esther, Jonathan's sixteen-year-old daughter. He returned to Northampton two months later to court her, but he was disappointed. 'I could not obtain from the young Lady the least Encouragement to come again. … I hope the disappointment will be sanctified to me, and that the

Lord will by his Providence order it so that this shall be my companion for Life', he wrote in his diary.[9] I tell this touching story – touching in part because of young Joseph's determination that his rejection should teach a lasting religious lesson – to indicate how close, in one way, the New England transcendentalists of the nineteenth century were to the New England Puritans of the eighteenth. The Joseph of my story was Ralph Waldo Emerson's great uncle.

More important than such external marks of closeness were the internal ones. Colm Tóibín, in his novel of the life of Henry James, brings out what these inward marks were like for some. Henry's Aunt Kate is describing the struggles of her brother, Henry's father. Henry Sr was the idealist author of *Substance and Shadow* and a member, with his friend Emerson, of Boston's Saturday Club.

> There was a battle going on, Aunt Kate used the same words each time, between his own sweetness and the heavy Puritan hand which his father, old William James of Albany, had placed on his shoulder. Everywhere he went, she said, Henry James Senior saw love and the beauty of God's plan, but the old Puritan teaching would not let him believe his eyes. Daily, within him, the battle went on. He was restless and impossible, but he was also, in his searching, innocent and easily enraptured.[10]

Jonathan Edwards, as Robert Richardson notes, was 'one of the few religious writers' of whom Henry Sr specifically approved.[11]

Standing over Ralph Waldo Emerson's own shoulder was his aunt Mary Moody Emerson. The following passage is from an entry, composed three years after her death, in Emerson's journal for 1866:[12]

> Read M.M.E'.s mss yesterday – many pages. They keep for me the old attraction … They make the best example I have known of the power of the religion of the Puritans in full energy, until fifty years ago in New England. The central theme of these endless diaries, is, her relation to the Divine Being; the absolute submission of her will, with the sole proviso, that she may know it is the direct agency of God, (& not of cold laws of contingency &c) which bereaves and humiliates her. But the religion of the diary, as of the class it represented, is biographical: it is the culture, the poetry, the mythology, in which they personally believed themselves dignified, inspired, judged, & dealt with, in the present & in the future. And certainly

> gives to life an earnestness, & to nature a sentiment, which lacking, our later generation appears frivolous.

Among the many resolutions made by the young Jonathan Edwards, there is an all-encompassing one that I find especially stirring: 'Resolved, to live with all my might, while I do live.'[13] Emerson's great uncle Joseph also lived by resolution, as we have seen, and even if he never put Edwards' particular resolution into words, he certainly seemed to live by it. Here is the conclusion of his diary for 1748, in which he urges himself to live even more intensely than he had in the year then closing:[14]

> read some & studied some. the year is now concluded and I may well finish my Journal as *Ames* does his Almanack [.] Another year now is gone, but ah! how little have we done. alas! how little have I done for God, for my own soul, for the souls of my people. committed I find a great deal Amiss, I would fly to the grace of Christ to pardon my defects and to his strength to enable me to do more for him this year if he should please to spare my Life.

Emerson would have found the same commitment to courageous self-inspection and self-improvement in the literary remains of his maternal ancestors. The following resolution, committed to paper a year before her marriage, is from the diary of Emerson's mother, Ruth Haskins:[15]

> I desire now in a better strength than my own to resolve that from this date – April 20, 1795, – I will, as God shall enable me, from time to time carefully notice all his providences towards my friends or myself, whether prosperous or adverse, – and conscientiously note down whatever appears to be for the glory of God, or the good of my own soul.

I think it is fair to assume that between the glory of God and her own good (or the good of others), nothing could defensibly fall beneath her notice.

In lectures he gave in Boston in 1839–40, Emerson asked his audience, 'Who can read the pious diaries of the Englishmen in the time of the Commonwealth and later without a sigh that we write no diaries today?' 'How richly this old stream of antique faith descended into New England', Emerson says later in the lecture, 'the remembrances of the elder portion of my audience I am sure will bear witness'.[16] He continued:

> The depth of the religious sentiment as it may still be remembered in individuals imbuing all their genius and derived to them from hoarded family traditions, from so many godly lives and godly deaths of sainted kindred, was itself an Education. It raised every trivial incident to a celestial and religious dignity.[17]

I cannot of course say that these diarists had continuous creation explicitly in mind when they dignified every incident. But the doctrine makes very good sense of their thinking, lending it a force and urgency it may not otherwise have. The doctrine assures us that we are, at every moment, in immediate contact with God. At any instant, we are on the receiving end of a creative effort as mighty and miraculous as the effort chronicled in Genesis. Each of us is as much an Eve or Adam as Eve and Adam were.

Emerson brings out these implications of continuous creation in a letter to his aunt.[18]

> It is one of the *feelings* of modern philosophy, that it is wrong to regard ourselves so much in a *historical* light as we do, putting Time between God & us; and that it were fitter to account every moment of the existence of the Universe as a new Creation, and *all* as a revelation proceeding each moment from the Divinity to the mind of the observer.

He makes fuller remarks along the same lines in an early sermon.[19]

> Men are ever disposed to view God from afar, to look back to a distant period, put back his agency at the Creation 6000 years ago, a notion which all sound philosophy combats. It is imagined that at that time God established the laws of Nature and left it to itself as an Artist winds up a machine and leaves it to perform its work. But this is very unsound analogy. If God leaves his work it will fall asunder. For consider the difference of the two cases. The artist who constructs a watch avails himself of powers perpetually afforded him by nature, that is, by God – as the force of gravity or the elasticity of steel. If these powers should be withdrawn his machine would stop. But God has no such powers out of himself.
>
> The same power is needed this moment as was needed the first moment to produce the same effect. To him it is the same to uphold as to establish. It is a creation of each instant. I look then at my present being as now received, as now sustained by the Omnipresent

> Father. Therefore, when I look abroad I receive directly from him these impressions of earth and sea and sun and stars and man and beast. All that we behold is not an ancient primeval work, covered with the moss of many an age but fresh with life, God's immediate act upon each of our minds, at this instant of time. And thus in a most emphatic sense, 'In him we live and move and have our being'.

If every instant is a revelation, as Emerson says in his letter to his aunt, then we are, at every moment, being addressed. Our experience is not a brute effect of the cold laws of contingency, but a carefully considered message from a cause that is warm with life. Hence in dignifying the present moment, continuous creation seems to dignify *us*. But there is a difficulty – one we can make apparent by returning to the passage from Edwards. Edwards illustrates continuous creation with a body: 'the body of the moon'. And with that illustration in mind, we are primed to appreciate the doctrine's potential to diminish the reality of body. Yet as the passage begins, Edwards speaks not of body, but of 'every created substance'. So his reader – my own self, for example – would be as fit an illustration of the doctrine as the moon. The same reasoning that diminished the reality of body would then apply no less relentlessly to me. It would deprive me of any remnant of causal power and rob me of inherent self-identity. How, then, could I in fact be addressed? Address, so far as we are able to understand it, always involves two parties, and the party doing the receiving, no less than the party doing the transmitting, pre-exists the advice or information that is being imparted. If our own existence is as fugitive as that of body, we seem to lose our privileged place as addressee.

William Ellery Channing was perhaps the most influential Unitarian minister of the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Emerson called him 'our Bishop'. Channing was an avowed opponent of the Calvinism that Edwards represented. I do not know whether Channing was aware of the selfhood-undermining reasoning I have just reviewed, but he saw the same general tendency in what he called Calvinism, and he lamented it. Channing was an idealist. He acknowledged the diminished reality of body. It was, he told his friend Elizabeth Peabody, Richard Price's *Dissertations on Matter and Spirit* that had 'saved [him] from Locke's philosophy':[20]

> He gave me the Platonic doctrine of ideas, and like him I always write the words Right, Love, Idea, etc. with a capital letter. His book, probably, moulded my philosophy into the form it has always retained, and opened my mind into the *transcendental depth*. And

> I have always found in the accounts I have read of the German philosophy in Madame de Stael, and in these later times, that it was cognate to my own.

Channing was repelled by what he saw as Calvinism's diminishment of human beings – more particularly, by its denial that human beings share in causal power. This denial, Channing argued, draws one inevitably to pantheism:[21]

> Calvinism will complain of being spoken of as an approach to Pantheism. It will say that it recognizes distinct minds from the Divine. But what avails this, if it robs these minds of self-determining force, of original activity; if it makes them passive recipients of the Universal Force; if it sees in human action only the necessary issues of a foreign impulse. The doctrine that God is the only Substance, which is Pantheism, differs little from the doctrine that God is the only active power of the universe. For what is substance without power? It is a striking fact that the philosophy which teaches that matter is an inert substance, and that God is the force which pervades it, has led me to question whether any such thing as matter exists: whether the powers of attraction and repulsion which are regarded as the indwelling Deity, be not its whole essence. Take away force, and substance is a shadow, and might as well vanish from the universe. Without a free power in man, he is nothing. The divine agent within him is every thing. Man acts only in show. He is a phenomenal existence, under which the One Infinite Power is manifested: and is this much better than Pantheism?
>
> One of the greatest of all errors is the attempt to exalt God, by making him the sole cause, the sole agent in the universe, by denying to the creature freedom of the will and moral power, by making man a mere recipient and transmitter of foreign impulse.

This is a verdict that Emerson shared. But Emerson was unwilling to abandon continuous creation. It is invoked, or so I think, in the opening paragraph of *Nature*, Emerson's first book and the fullest statement of his idealism. Here Emerson is doing what he often went on to do: joyfully anticipating new worlds and the people who would occupy them. I do not agree with Barbara L. Packer, for whom the paragraph brims with 'satire and scorn'.[22] To my ear, the paragraph's tone, though reproving, is earnest and hopeful.[23]

> Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to actions proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship. (Introduction 1)

I turn now to Emerson's creative translation, in *Nature*, of the Doctrine of Continuous Creation that Edwards and other modern philosophers had handed down to him.

III. Continuous creation in Emerson's idealism

The first edition of *Nature* begins with a motto attributed to Plotinus but actually borrowed from Plotinus' seventeenth-century heir, Ralph Cudworth. The motto adumbrates the idealism to come: 'Nature is but an image or imitation of wisdom, the last thing of the soul; nature being a thing which doth only do, but not know.' *Nature's* later statement of idealism, more official and less cryptic, is adapted to continuous creation:

> Idealism sees the world in God. It beholds the whole circle of persons and things, of actions and events, of country and religion, not as painfully accumulated, atom after atom, act after act, in an aged creeping Past, but as one vast picture, which God paints on the instant eternity for the contemplation of the soul. (VI 19)

But idealism so defined is not *Nature*'s stopping point: 'Let [the ideal theory] stand …, in the present state of our knowledge, merely as a useful introductory hypothesis, serving to apprize us of the eternal distinction between the soul and the world' (VII 6). Idealism is only introductory because there are urgent questions it does not settle:

> Three problems are put by nature to the mind; What is matter? Whence is it? and Whereto? The first of these questions only, the ideal theory answers. Idealism saith: matter is a phenomenon, not a substance. Idealism acquaints us with the total disparity between the evidence of our own being, and the evidence of the world's being. The one is perfect; the other, incapable of any assurance; the mind is a part of the nature of things; the world is a divine dream, from which we may presently awake to the glories and certainties of day. Idealism is a hypothesis to account for nature by other principles than those of carpentry and chemistry. Yet, if it only deny the existence of matter, it does not satisfy the demands of the spirit. It leaves God out of me. It leaves me in the splendid labyrinth of my perceptions, to wander without end. Then the heart resists it, because it balks the affections in denying substantive being to men and women. Nature is so pervaded with human life, that there is something of humanity in all, and in every particular. But this theory makes nature foreign to me, and does not account for that consanguinity which we acknowledge to it. (VII 5)

That 'matter is phenomenon, not a substance' was precisely Channing's view of matter or nature. And that idealism so defined denies 'substantive being to men and women' was Channing's complaint against Calvinism. But Emerson's complaint against idealism taken as a final view, as opposed to a hypothesis meant for eventual incorporation into a larger whole, is more specific than Channing's – and more daring. 'It leaves God out of me', Emerson objects. A mature idealism, by implication, puts God into me. And when continuous creation is translated into this new setting, the finite self becomes the creator. ('In all my lectures, I have taught one doctrine, namely the infinitude of the private man.'[24]) The truths of a mature idealism – an idealism that answers the questions that a merely introductory idealism fails to address – are offered as self-evident insights, rather than as conclusions reached by the kind of taut, linear argument we saw in Edwards:

> But when, following the invisible steps of thought, we come to inquire, Whence is matter? and Whereto? many truths arise in us out of the recesses of consciousness. We learn that the highest is present to the soul of man, that the dread universal essence, which is not wisdom, or love, or beauty, or power, but all in one, and each entirely, is that for which all things exist, and that by which they are; that spirit creates; that behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is

present; that spirit is one and not compound; that spirit does not act on us from without, that is, in space and time, but spiritually, or through ourselves. Therefore, that spirit, that is the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old. As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests on the bosom of God; he is nourished by unfailing fountains, and draws, at his need, inexhaustible power. Who can set bounds to the possibilities of man? Once inhale the upper air, being admitted to behold the absolute natures of justice and truth, and we learn that man has access to the entire mind of the Creator, is himself the creator in the finite. This view, which admonishes me where the sources of wisdom and power lie, and points to virtue as to

'The golden key

Which opens the palace of eternity',

carries upon its face the highest certificate of truth, because it animates me to create my own world through the purification of my soul. (VI 7)

What can we make of these confident promises, and of the idealism that underlies them? To mention just one difficulty, how can nature be put forth through us when we are late arrivals in the world? *Nature* was written almost twenty-five years before Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), but Emerson did not need Darwin to convince him that ages had to pass before the world would be prepared for us. He had learned that much from his study of geology, and he emphasized the point repeatedly in his natural history lectures of the 1830s. 'Man', Emerson explains in one lecture, was 'prophesized in nature for a thousand ages before he appeared; … from times incalculably remote there has been a progressive preparation for him; an effort, … to produce him'. 'He was not made sooner', Emerson says in summary, 'because his house was not ready'.[25] Yet the furnishing of the house, and the larger effort to *produce* humankind, could not in any straightforward way be the *work* of humankind. In what way, then, can we be the creator in the finite?

I can offer only a sketch in Emerson's defence. For Emerson, God or spirit is primary. But God exists at first, or before our arrival, only as impersonal law. That law is moral as well as physical (V 13). This means, in part, that a common verbal formula serves for both. 'Every action has an equal and opposite reaction' formulates a law of nature, a law that

allows for no exceptions. Every portion of matter must conform to it. Were it not for law, every body would be a dead, inactive lump. Hence law is more real than the bodies it animates. But the sentence also formulates a moral law, a law of compensation, from which we, as conscious, willing beings, can depart. We are alone in being able to depart from it, but we are also alone in being able deliberately to follow it. Law, then, is rendered personal only in us. And when 'personalized', it assumes its most fully realized form: first when we come to understand it and, second, and finally, when we come to act in thorough accordance with it.

We thereby gain the substantive being that Edwards' reasoning had denied us. But continuous creation has not been left behind. Here I cannot even try to make sense of Emerson's suggestion that all of nature is put forth through us. But with respect to our own acts, continuous creation now presents itself as a perpetual task – a task assigned not to a God who stands outside of us, but to our own selves. We are now called upon either to renew our acts at every moment – all the wise agree, Emerson later writes, 'that as much life is needed for conservation, as for creation'[26] – or to change them. In one way this is daunting. Inertia cannot carry us forward from one moment to the next. But, in another way, it is encouraging. At any moment our slate is clean. Anything is possible. In the limited domain of acts indisputably our own, continuous creation can perhaps be a source of the optimism needed to endure the strains of commitment to 'actions proportioned to nature'. In our own perilous time, this may serve us as well as I believe it served Emerson in his.

I conclude with some remarks about the themes of this volume. My topic has been the translation of an idea from one thought environment to another, rather than the translation of text to text. Emerson never thought of texts as authoritative – at least not if their authority was supposed to derive from the person of their author, the might of their culture of origin, the persistence of a tradition or the sheer passage of time. What authority they had, he thought, came from the insights they translated into words. Emerson read text-to-text translations gratefully. He preferred reading English translations even when the original was written in a language he knew:[27]

> I thank the translators & it is never my practice to read any Latin, Greek, German, Italian, scarcely any French book, in the original which I can procure in an English translation. I like to be beholden to the great metropolitan English speech, the sea which receives tributaries from every region under heaven, the Rome of nations, and I should think it in me as much folly to read all my books in

> originals when I have them rendered for me in my mother's speech by men who have given years to that labor, as I should to swim across Charles River when ever I wished to go to Charlestown.

Emerson read widely, and in diverse traditions, as his recommended readings among the 'class of books' he deemed 'the best' – namely 'the Bibles of the world, or the sacred books of each nation' – attest:[28]

> After the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, which constitute the sacred books of Christendom, these are, the Desatir of the Persians, and the Zoroastrian Oracles; the Vedas and Laws of Manu; the Upanishads, the Vishnu Purana, the Bhagvat Geeta, of the Hindoos; the books of the Buddhists; the 'Chinese Classic', of four books, containing the wisdom of Confucius and Mencius.

Emerson listened carefully to all these sacred texts, and what he heard in them was not dissent but agreement. These texts agreed in teaching him 'the immensity of every moment, the indifference of magnitude, the present is all, the soul is God'.[29] These thoughts are corollaries of Emerson's version of continuous creation, or thoughts that continuous creation can explain. The past is dead and gone and the future is yet to come. Hence the present moment is immense; so immense that it contains all that is real, or, at least, all that is actual.

Notes

1. Rosenwald, *Emerson and the Art of the Diary,* 83.
2. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, 230 in Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*.
3. For more on Plato as the standard-bearer of idealism see Holmes, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 391: 'Emerson was an idealist in the Platonic sense of the word, a spiritualist as opposed to a materialist.'
4. A copy of *Medulla Theologica* now in Yale's Beinecke Library, is signed by Edwards and dated 1721.
5. I quote from an English translation of the *Medulla*, *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity*, 42.
6. Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes,* vol. 2, 33.
7. Holbrook, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 3, 400–1.
8. 'Joseph Emerson's Diary, 1748–1749', 266 in *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 262–82.
9. 'Joseph Emerson's Diary', 271. Phyllis Cole also tells this story, in *Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism*, 18.
10. Tóibín, *The Master,* 133.
11. Richardson, *William James,* 52.
12. Rosenwald, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, *Selected Journals 1841–1877,* 846.
13. Claghorn, *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 16, 753. There are many echoes of this resolution in later American writing. They are probably clearest in Thoreau, but they can also be heard in William James: 'Live energetically; and whatever you have to do, do it with your might' (quoted in Richardson, *William James*, 327). James' resolution more directly echoes Ecclesiastes

ix:10: 'Whatsoever thy findeth to do, do it with thy might'. A 1829 sermon by Emerson is on this text; see von Frank, *Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1, 250–4.

14. 'Joseph Emerson's Diary, 1748–1749', 275. Joseph quotes from Nathanael Ames, *An Astronomical Diary, or, an Almanack for the Year of our Lord Christ, 1748*, fourteenth unnumbered page. On the importance of an end-of-year audit, in which the soul 'summon[s] her faculties before them', to 'ask them rigorously what they have done', and to determine 'how performance tallies with the promise', see Emerson's 1829 sermon 'The night is far spent …', in *Complete Sermons*, vol. 2, 112.
15. Haskins, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: his maternal ancestors,* 44–5.
16. Spiller and Williams, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 3, 193.
17. Spiller and Williams, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 3, 194.
18. *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1, 174. His aunt does not take up these points in her reply; see Simmons, *Selected Letters of Mary Moody Emerson*, 222–3.
19. Toulouse and Delbanco, *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 2, 21–2.
20. Peabody, *Reminiscences of Rev. Wm. Ellery Channing*, 368.
21. Channing, *The Works of William E. Channing*, vol. 1, xii–xiii.
22. Packer, *The Transcendentalists*, 47.
23. Porte, *Emerson. Essays and Lectures*. References to *Nature* will be by chapter and paragraph number and will follow the quoted passages.
24. Rosenwald, *Emerson, Selected Journals 1820–1842*, 735.
25. Spiller and Williams, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 3, 29.
26. Porte, *Emerson. Essays and Lectures*, 734.
27. Rosenwald, *Emerson, Selected Journals 1841–1877*, 159. A revised version of this 1843 journal entry appears in *Society and Solitude*, 182.
28. Emerson, *Society and Solitude*, 194–5.
29. Here I quote Emerson's statement of the 'great and greatest' lessons of 'the religious sentiment' in his preface to *Parnassus*, edited by Ralph Waldo Emerson, v.

Bibliography

Ames, Nathanael. *An Astronomical Diary, or, an Almanack for the Year of our Lord Christ, 1748*. J. Draper, 1747.

Ames, William. *Medulla Theologica*. Johannes Janssonius, 1634.

Ames, William. *Medulla*, *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity*. Edward Griffin for Henry Overton, 1642.

Baldwin, James Mark. 'Idealism'. *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, vol. 1. Oxford University Press, 1901.

Channing, George E. *The Works of William E. Channing*, vol. 1. Crosby, Nichols and Company, 1849.

Claghorn, George S, editor. *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 16. Yale University Press, 1998.

Cole, Phyllis. *Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism*. Oxford University Press, 1998.

Cornford, Francis MacDonald. *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1935.

Cottingham, John, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, editors. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 2. Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Emerson, Joseph. *Joseph Emerson's Diary, 1748–1749*. *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 44. 1911.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Society and Solitude.* Fields, Osgood and Company, 1870.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo, editor. *Parnassus.* James R. Osgood and Company, 1875.

Haskins, David Greene. *Ralph Waldo Emerson: his maternal ancestors* [,] *with some reminiscences of him*. Cupples, Upham and Company, 1887.

Holbrook, Clyde, editor. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 3, *Original Sin*. Yale University Press, 1970.

Holmes, Oliver Wendell, Sr. *Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Houghton Mifflin, 1912.

Packer, Barbara L. *The Transcendentalists*. University of Georgia Press, 2007.

Peabody, Elizabeth. *Reminiscences of Rev. Wm. Ellery Channing*. Roberts, 1880.

Porte, Joel, editor. *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, *Essays and Lectures*. Library of America, 1983.

Richardson, Robert D. *William James: In the maelstrom of American modernism*. Houghton Mifflin, 2006.

Rosenwald, Lawrence A. *Emerson and the Art of the Diary*. Oxford University Press, 1988.

Rosenwald, Lawrence A., editor. *Ralph Waldo Emerson, Selected Journals 1820–1842.* Library of America, 2010.

Rosenwald, Lawrence A., editor. *Ralph Waldo Emerson, Selected Journals 1841–1877.* Library of America, 2010.

Simmons, Nancy Craig (ed.). *The Selected letters of Mary Moody Emerson*. University of Georgia Press, 1993.

Spiller, Robert E. and Wallace E. Williams, editors. *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 3. Harvard University Press, 1972.

Tóibín, Colm. *The Master: a novel*. Scribner, 2004.

Toulouse, Teresa and Andrew Delbanco, editors. *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 2. University of Missouri Press, 1990.

Von Frank, Albert J., editor. *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1. University of Missouri Press, 1989.