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Emerson's Epistemology: The Argument of the Essays. by David van Leer

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The claim that there is a new Melville renaissance may be challenged, but the timing of this mustering of forces is appropriate. The Northwestern-Newberry Edition is grinding on toward completion, and Jay Leyda is persevering with his third edition of *The Melville Log*. Two biographies have been announced. In the broader field of American literature there are also signs that forces are being mustered. *American Literature* is full of news about two projected multi-contributor literary histories, Lawrence Buell has a big new literary history of New England, and Kermit Vanderbilt has a marvelous account of *American Literature and the Academy* (1987), the climax of which is the politics of creating *The Literary History of the United States*. We can see in work on Melville and in the field of American literature some genuine consolidated gains in sophistication about history, literary history, biography, the history of scholarship, and the history and interrelationships of various branches of criticism and theory. In the *Companion* even the overlapping from chapter to chapter strikes me not as redundancy but as welcome corroboration that people are working together, whether they work jointly or apart. Repeatedly, the contributors infuse their chapters with a strong sense of how learning reached the present stage and what work needs to be done. Repeatedly, they call for "methodological self-consciousness" (Bickman's term, p. 531) even as they embody it in their own words. And if you are troubled by uncompanionable skepticism at the thought of yet another collection of essays on Melville, remember that even the best of these essays might not have been written if Bryant's blandishments had not summoned them forth.

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DAVID VAN LEER, *Emerson's Epistemology: The Argument of the Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Pp. xviii + 282. \$29.95.

David Van Leer finds a place from which he might send Emerson criticism off in a new direction. He declines to consider Emerson's corpus as spiritual biography, as an allegory of dialectical self-making, as part of a broader cultural history, or as "one more version" of the wane and "apocalyptic return of power" (pp. 135-36). He has reasons for his lack of interest in "the psychological situation that led Emerson to think" a particular thought, for to assume that psychology

explains “thought” amounts to “what we might call the ‘life of the mind’ fallacy” (p. 12). He ignores empirical psychology in order to consider psychology’s preconditions, and finds Emerson’s major literary contribution in his analysis of the permanent grounds of experience rather than in his account of experience itself. As Van Leer examines Emersonian categories such as “self,” “spirit,” “power,” and “fate” within the “genre” of epistemology, he illuminates their logical snarls, family relations, and unexpected inventions. But to move from this new clarity to a significant revision of Emerson’s categories proves to be a more difficult matter.

Van Leer argues that Emerson’s work rests first on a Kantian subtext and later on a “proto-pragmatist” theory of meaning. Following an explanation of his method, his chapters center on the established major essays—*Nature*, the Divinity School “Address,” “Self-Reliance,” “Experience,” and “Montaigne”—in order to liberate the epistemological argument couched in the deceptively spiritualistic language of the sage. Thus for Van Leer *Nature* does not describe a quasi-Platonic faith in the identity of eternal Spirit and “Man Thinking,” but a far more analytical, Kantian proof of “the extent to which the very possibility of experience is predicated on the unity of apperception or the ‘I think’ and on the existence of an objective realm apart from the apperceptive unity” (p. 185). “Spirit” is an unnecessarily supernatural way of referring simply to the preconditions of human consciousness.

Moving through the “Address” and “Self-Reliance,” Van Leer makes the case that Emerson does not wish to fold the self into spirit so much as to *distinguish* between the phenomenal self and the logical self. Emerson criticism often mistakes the logical self for Reason or soul, but Emerson’s *epistemological* argument shows that this irreducible “self” cannot be the freely willing, spontaneously moral, empirical person but only a formal “I think,” a determinate but empty category: “consciousness is simply a law, a prerequisite for empiricism” (p. 140). Van Leer sees in the ostensible skepticism of “Experience” not the ordinary fear that our subjectivity cannot know “things-in-themselves” but the more astringent truth that subjectivity cannot know the purely logical self that grounds it. Ordinary skepticism is not only impossible but, epistemologically understood, actually backfires by confirming that the self acquires stability precisely from the unknowability of its constitutive parts.

But having moved Emerson from a religion to an epistemology of the self—to a self which is that which knows—has Van Leer also shown that the epistemological self *differs* from the more familiar self of sublimated religion? It would seem not: in Van Leer’s telling, the narrative of the “preconditions” of experience leads to the same place as did the

rhetoric of the “God within.” Van Leer objects to those predecessors who take Emerson’s spiritualistic rhetoric at face value, but he comes close to repeating their conclusions. Emerson confirms “the naturalness of belief,” the “unknowable faith” that “there can be nothing to be done that is not nature” (pp. 199, 205). Epistemology’s essential trajectory is to lead *beyond* itself into the kind of belief in the world as an integrated totality that Stephen Whicher meant by “naturalism” and that Van Leer honors with the term “proto-pragmatism.” This pragmatic self distinctly resembles the divine self in its faith in a “self-evident” reality that “simply hangs together on its own terms” (p. 16). It is not clear that we needed speculative philosophy to speed the strikingly short journey from Swedenborg’s correspondence and Kant’s preconditions to the natural revelation of Emerson’s “Blessed Unity,” which, in Van Leer’s more “epistemological” mood, he would have treated as an eloquent spiritualist idiom veiling Emerson’s more sophisticated claims (p. 205).

Still, does Van Leer’s unexpected agreement with his predecessors show that he is mistaken? Is he not in fact correct to see Emerson ultimately preaching not merely “negative limits” but the holistic assurance that we can never be outside our constitutive system? I mention two reasons for thinking that Van Leer’s explicit conclusions are wrong. First, he achieves his somewhat occult pragmatism by contradicting rather than developing his earlier reading of Kant. His reassertion of nature’s totality and the self’s unity rests on the illegitimate translation of the purely “formal” “unknowable” self into a phenomenal, experienced self, a translation that recapitulates Coleridge’s woefully influential disregard for Kant’s qualifications of the “transcendental,” and that Van Leer deplors in theory. Kant obsessively repeats and refines his claim that the transcendental law is *not* a “psychological property,” and that it cannot be experienced as an “object of intuition.” Van Leer allows harmony between self and world only by forgetting that Emerson’s Kantian insight about the self regards it as *divided* between its “logic,” which entails the “unity of apperception,” and its experience, which involves unity’s perpetual disappearance.

Secondly, Van Leer intermittently deviates from his own holism and hints at making division into Emerson’s greatest insight. At these times he offers indispensable hints about the presently unknown destination of Emerson’s “Cartesian schizophrenia” (p. 184). This more exacting Van Leer stresses the “‘exclusion’ that the living feel from the absolute [of formal preconditions, which] . . . results in the total fragmentation of experience” (p. 171). Fragmentation does not suggest the self’s “fictionality” or the return of unity on a different level so much as it suggests the self’s dependence on “a tension between experience and its presuppositions

that logically requires a simultaneous unity and duality" (p. 184). The forgetful Van Leer, who wishes to fit Emerson to a residually spiritualist idealism, claims that "transcendent privacy" is the felt condition of existence; the analytical Van Leer, who wishes to fit idealism to Emerson himself, suggests that this privacy is "logically unexperienceable" (p. 177). Subjectivity, in the second case, does not rest on the priority of thought to things but on the way things "rush out of [thought] to be incarnated as people" (p. 192). This subjectivity does not depend on the self's unity and substance but on some entities that Van Leer alternately invokes and abandons—"webs of relations," "rotation or mere change" (p. 192), and "other persons" as "incarnations" of things.

These more dispersed and uninternalized "lords of life" lie at the center of what future readers of Emerson will show to be his most enduring contribution: a complex psychology of *non*-autonomy. It is a tribute to the difficult promise of Van Leer's material that he will require the help of future critics to explain his more unprecedented findings.

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MERRYN WILLIAMS, *Margaret Oliphant: A Critical Biography*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986. Pp. xvi + 217. \$25.

If the name of Margaret Oliphant is missing from the index of *Silences*, Tillie Olsen's study of writers thwarted by circumstance, we can perhaps attribute this to her 125 books and countless articles. From the age of twenty, when she wrote her first published novel, to her death at sixty-nine, she was *driven* by circumstance, not having (as she put it) "the luxury of keeping quiet" (p. 27). Even in her sixties she worked on two three-decker novels at once, producing on average, according to Merryn Williams, "a volume every sixteen days" (p. 171). Like her productivity, her range was legendary. Her fiction embraces every genre popular with her Victorian readership: historical tales, sensational romances, novels of social realism, consolation books, religious meditations, rural fiction, ghost stories, and children's books. Her twenty-five non-fiction books include biographies, history, literary history, theology, travel accounts, and an autobiography. Despite her mediocre French, she translated the seven volumes of Montalembert's *Les Moines d'Occident* for John Blackwood. (When the author groused about the translation in vol-