



NEH Summer Seminar 2005

Ralph Waldo Emerson: Reading Emerson's Essays

Dear Colleague,

I'm very pleased to learn of your interest in the NEH Summer Seminar on Ralph Waldo Emerson.

We expect a lively and innovative group of scholars and teachers as participants in the seminar, and we have a distinguished set of visitors in Stanley Cavell, Barbara Packer, and Sharon Cameron. We have secured affordable housing on the University of New Mexico campus, adjacent to an area of restaurants and shops. Albuquerque offers many recreational and cultural opportunities including hiking in the nearby mountains, the June Music Festival, and Old Town. The historic city of Santa Fe and the pueblos of Acoma, Santo Domingo, and Jemez are nearby.

In the rest of this letter I'd like to give you as much information about the program and setting as I can. Please don't hesitate to contact me via e mail (emerson@unm.edu) or telephone (505-277-4024) with any questions about the seminar that are not covered in what follows.

We look forward to considering your application.

Yours sincerely,

Russell B. Goodman
Director, NEH Emerson Seminar

READING EMERSON'S ESSAYS
A Summer Seminar for College and University Teachers
Supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities

Directed by Russell B. Goodman, University of New Mexico

June 6—July 2, 2005

Intellectual Rationale

If “each age must write its own books,” as Emerson said in “The American Scholar,” this age has certainly produced its own extraordinary books and essays about Emerson. Such writers as Stanley Cavell, Barbara Packer, Richard Poirier, Sharon Cameron and others have given us a new Emerson: a theorist of democracy with a tragic sense; an inheritor of Kant with affinities to Nietzsche and Heidegger; a “pragmatist” whose work influenced the writings of William James, Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens. Several of these writers—Packer, West, Cavell—spoke at the Emerson Institute that I directed in 2003 (“Ralph Waldo Emerson at 200: Literature, Philosophy, Democracy”). During the course of the institute many of us felt the need for more detailed study of Emerson’s essays, and we held a special discussion session on “Intellect” that proved to be one of the most successful of the institute. That session is the model for this seminar, which will focus on particular Emersonian texts. We are fortunate to have Cavell (Philosophy, Harvard) and Packer (English, UCLA) as visitors again, and in the seminar’s last week, Sharon Cameron (English, Johns Hopkins).

The unifying question of the seminar concerns the coherence or consistency of Emerson’s views, a question famously raised by Emerson himself when he wrote: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen, philosophers and divines.” We will spend the first week looking at the way Emerson’s consistencies—as well as his commitments to “whim” or “spontaneity”—play out in a single work with twelve parts, his *Essays, First Series*. In the second week we consider Emerson’s various idealisms, as expressed in the “Idealism” chapter of *Nature* (1836), the great, troubled essay “Experience” from the *Essays, Second Series* (1844), and “Illusions,” from the late book, *The Conduct of Life* (1860). In the third week, we study Emerson’s moral philosophy, with emphasis on his “moral perfectionism” and his development of an ethic of virtues, and in the seminar’s fourth week we consider Emerson’s complicated portrayal of the self in the “Divinity School Address,” “Circles,” “Montaigne,” and “Fate.”

The seminar will be collaborative, and will take some of its specific directions from the participants, who will be drawn from departments of philosophy, literature, American studies, politics, history, and religious studies.

Schedule

The seminar will meet three mornings a week, from 9 to 11: 30, for each of its four weeks (June 6th — July 2nd, 2005). Other meetings, for presentation of participants’ work—whether in initial or advanced stages—will be arranged by the members of the seminar with my assistance. The three main sessions will take place in the Philosophy Department seminar room at the University of New Mexico. The emphasis throughout will be on discussion and exchange, and on opening up multiple ways of thinking about the material. I will schedule individual meetings with participants in the seminar’s first and last weeks.

Participants in the seminar will be able to take advantage of the many recreational and cultural opportunities the Albuquerque and Santa Fe areas offer, and I will get us started by leading a day hike, in the first week of the seminar, to the ridge of the nearby Sandia Mountains (10,000 feet).

Week 1 (June 6- 10)

In the first week, we will consider Emerson’s *Essays, First Series* (1841). For all his aversion to a “foolish consistency,” Emerson practices a kind of consistency in his own writing, for the essays reflect each other, each as it were from its own point of view. The first session will be devoted to the development of this idea, by considering some thoughts to which Emerson consistently gives expression in the *Essays*, for example that the world is fundamentally a process, that the present deserves our attention more than the past or future, that the glance is more insightful than the steady gaze, and that persons are self-definers who, motivated by fear, find ways to dodge their

freedom. We will consider some touchstone passages in Emerson's greatest essays: "History" "Self-Reliance," "Circles," " and "The Over-Soul, and use these essays to introduce the subjects of idealism, ethics, and the self, that will occupy us in subsequent weeks. In the second and third sessions of the week we will look at two powerful but not frequently read essays in the *First Series*, "Intellect" and "Spiritual Laws. Reading each closely, we will work out to the larger consistencies of the *Essays*, considering ways in which "Intellect," like "Circles," is a metaphysical essay, and "Spiritual Laws" a statement of Emerson's moral ideal of a "high," "generous" and "commanding" life. These two concerns—metaphysics and morality—provide the main lines of inquiry for the next two weeks' sessions.

Readings: Emerson, *Essays, First Series*, relevant sections of O. W. Firkins, *Ralph Waldo Emerson* and Barbara Packer, *Emerson's Fall*, and "The Transcendentalists," in *The Cambridge History of American Literature*; Stanley Cavell, "Being Odd, Getting Even," in *In Quest of the Ordinary*, and "Aversive Thinking," in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*; Russell Goodman, "Emerson's Mystical Empiricism," in *Nature in American Philosophy, American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition*, Chapter 2, "Cavell and American Philosophy," in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, entries on Emerson in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Week 2 (June 13-17)

Emerson is often labeled an idealist. This is not wrong, but it may be misleading, for many things can be meant by the term "idealist." Is Emerson like George Berkeley, who posits a world of individual minds and their ideas, or more like Plotinus, who speaks of the "One," and of a central mind or intelligence from which the world emanates? Is he on the other hand a Kantian, who delineates the necessary structures of experience, or is he closer to Hegel, or even to Hinduism? There is evidence for all these claims. Emerson discusses Berkeley's idealism with approval in his first book, *Nature*, he acknowledges a debt to Kant (through Coleridge) in "The Transcendentalist," he is heavily indebted to Plotinus both in *Nature* and in "The Over-Soul," and his late work *The Conduct of Life* is imbued with his readings in Hinduism.. In the first session of the week, we will sort out these varieties of idealism as they appear in Emerson's texts. For the second and third sessions of the week, Barbara Packer will join us. Packer recently published the introduction to the new Harvard edition of Emerson's late work, *The Conduct of Life* (1859), and will lead the seminar in comparing Emerson's "Illusions," from that work, with earlier versions of idealist thinking in the "Idealism" chapter of *Nature*, and in "Experience." In outlining the approach she would like us to take in the seminar, she states that "people still don't know what to do with late Emerson, treating [the writing] either as a simple retraction or ignoring it altogether. Yet it seems to me that the development is organic, and that the late work tests and probes the earlier work to see where it still holds true, where it needs revision."

Readings:

Emerson, *Nature*, "Experience," "Illusions"; Packer, *Emerson's Fall*, chapters on *Nature* and "Experience"; Cavell, "Thinking of Emerson," "Emerson, Coleridge, Kant"; Goodman, "East-West Philosophy in Nineteenth Century America: Emerson and Hinduism, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1990).

Week 3 (June 20 —24)

The third week will focus on Emerson's moral philosophy. One way of thinking of that philosophy is as a contribution to the "virtue ethics" that runs through the Western tradition from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, through Aquinas, Montaigne, and Nietzsche. On Tuesday I will lead a session on Emersonian virtues, focusing on the essays "Manners," "The Uses of Great Men," and "Montaigne: or the Skeptic." A complementary but distinct approach to Emerson's moral philosophy is taken by Stanley Cavell, who will join us for sessions on Thursday and Friday. Cavell sees Emerson as part of a tradition of "moral perfectionism" in the West that is found as much in utilitarianism as in Kant, as much in Plato and Aristotle as in Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and William James. Perfectionism so understood is not a particular moral theory, then, but a dimension of many moral theories, in which ideas of conversation, education, and attraction to a "higher" or better life come to the fore. In his book *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: the Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago, 1988) Cavell finds exemplary expressions of moral perfectionism both in Plato's *Republic*, which charts a "journey of ascent," and in Emerson's "History" essay, which speaks of an "unattained but attainable self." In our two sessions with Cavell we will consider Emerson's moral perfectionism as expressed in "The American Scholar," "Self-Reliance," "Experience," "Politics," and "Culture."

Readings: Emerson, “The American Scholar,” “Self-Reliance,” “Experience,” “Politics,” “Culture”; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IV, Chapter 3; Michel de Montaigne, “On Educating Children,” “On Books,” “On Experience,” in *Essays*; Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, pp 1-32; *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes* (selections).

Week 4 (June 27-July 2)

Emerson is known for propounding “self-reliance,” but the self on which one is to rely is mysterious. In the first paragraph of the essay “Self-Reliance” Emerson enjoins us to “learn to detect that gleam of light that flashes across his mind from within....” But how is such learning to be accomplished? The odds are not good if, as Emerson also says, scarcely one person in a generation fully exercises his or her “genius.” Even the notion of “self-reliance” comes under Emerson’s critique when, further along in the essay and in one of his characteristic shifts of mood, Emerson expostulates: “Why, then, do we prate of self-reliance?... To talk of reliance is a poor external way of speaking.” In the seminar’s final week we will consider Emerson’s complicated notion of the self with one of America’s most sensitive and provocative readers of Emerson’s shifting points of view—Sharon Cameron, Kenan Professor of English at Johns Hopkins. In the week’s first session I will lead a discussion of two of the four texts Cameron will be examining: the early “Divinity School Address” (1838) and the late essay “Fate” (1860). (The other texts, “Self-Reliance” and “Circles”) will have been discussed in week 1). Cameron will ask us to consider a “doubleness” in Emerson—for example in the “Divinity School Address,” where he exhorts us to find divinity in ourselves, but in a way that goes against our own complacency and comfort. Her first session will focus on a series of “double statements” in Emerson’s essay “Circles,” and on “the way in which such doubleness becomes structural in the dialectic of ‘Fate.’” In her second session, Cameron will lead an open-ended discussion or, if desired, propose a series of difficult passages related to the concerns of the first session, which the participants will join her in discussing.

There will be a final reception on the evening of July 1, and a summing up and assessment session on Saturday morning, July 2nd.

Readings:

Emerson, “Divinity School Address,” “Circles,” “Fate.” Cameron, “The Practice of Attention: Simone Weil’s Performance of Impersonality,” *Critical Inquiry*, (2003), “The Way of Life By Abandonment: Emerson’s Impersonal,” *Critical Inquiry* (1998).

Institutional Context

The seminar will take place in the Philosophy Department at the University of New Mexico, in Albuquerque. UNM is a major research university, with a student population of 25,000, a Medical and Law School, and graduate programs in the disciplines of the seminar. Zimmerman Library has extensive collections in these areas, and seminar participants will have the status of visiting scholars for purposes of borrowing books and using the library’s research resources. The library is open in summer Monday through Friday, 8 a. m. till 6 p. m., and on Saturdays from 10 a.m. till 6 p. m. It is closed on Sunday.

The University of New Mexico was founded in 1889 and is constructed in a unique southwestern style. The campus lies a mile above sea level and covers nearly 700 acres. It is situated in an urban environment, adjacent to an area of theatres, clubs, and restaurants, and not far from downtown Albuquerque, museums, art galleries, shops and larger malls. Visitors to Albuquerque can enjoy the Rio Grande Zoo, Botanical Gardens, Aquarium, Sandia Peak Tramway and hiking trails in the nearby Sandia Mountains, which rise to over 10,000 feet. New Mexico is home to Acoma Pueblo, Chaco Canyon National Monument, Bandelier National Monument, Taos, Abiquiu and the historic city of Santa Fe, which is 60 miles north of Albuquerque at the base of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The seminar overlaps with the Albuquerque June Music Festival (<http://www.cma-abq.org/>).

Housing

Participants will be housed in air-conditioned four-bedroom apartments in Redondo Village on the UNM campus. Each apartment has four private bedrooms, a bathroom, shower, and kitchen equipped with refrigerator, stove, sink, and microwave. Local phone calls are free and there are ethernet ports in each room. Rooms will cost \$25 per night. Meals are available in the dormitory cafeteria, at the UNM student union, and at nearby restaurants. Parking is available at \$12 per week. We will assist those who would rather live off campus in finding alternative housing.

Financial Support and Stipend Distribution

The NEH provides participants with a stipend of \$3000.00. This stipend is meant to help cover the costs of travel, housing, and meals. (Participants are encouraged to apply for travel funds from their home institutions.) Those who take advantage of the housing provided by UNM will (with written permission) have the sum of \$700 deducted and submitted to the University of New Mexico on the participant's behalf. One-half of the remaining stipend will be distributed to participants at the first meeting. The second half will be distributed at the beginning of the third week. Participants will need to make their own travel arrangements.

Application Procedures

NEH application information is included in this packet of materials or as an e-mail attachment. It is also available as a pdf file on our website at <http://www.unm/~emerson>. A complete application includes 3 copies of each of the following: a cover sheet, a detailed curriculum vitae, and an application essay. Two letters of reference should be mailed to the address below under separate cover. Perhaps the most important part of the application is the essay that must be submitted as part of the complete application. This essay should include any personal and academic information that is relevant; reasons for applying to this particular seminar; your interest, both intellectual and personal, in the topic; qualifications to do the work of the project and make a contribution to it; what you hope to accomplish by participation, including your individual project; and the relation of the study to your teaching. Your completed application should be postmarked no later than 1 March 2005 and addressed to Professor Russell B. Goodman, Department of Philosophy, MSC 03 2140, 1 University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131.