

Context Mediated: Ralph Waldo Emerson's Political Economy of Plagiarism

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So write on, & by & by will come a reader and an age that will justify all your context. Do not even look behind. Leave that bone for them to pick & welcome.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Journal D, 1838

BECAUSE of its neglect of immanent critique in favor of identification with a transcendent Over-Soul, Ralph Waldo Emerson's brand of philosophical Transcendentalism is by definition decontextualist. In the very first lines of his first book, *Nature* (1836), and its complaint that "our age is retrospective. . . . Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?," Emerson rejects his obligation to the historical, cultural, and intellectual situatedness that we encompass under the shorthand *context*, establishing a theme that is thereafter never completely absent from his work.¹

Nineteenth-Century Literature, Vol. 72, No. 1, pp. 35–63, ISSN: 0891–9356, online ISSN: 1067–8352, © 2017 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2017.72.1.35>.

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature" (1836), in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson, Joseph Slater, et al., 10 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard

Given the utterly dominant role that the concept of context has played in determining how literary studies accord value since the 1980s, and especially under certain politically engaged forms of New Historicism, this theme has made Emerson a contested figure and his canonicity a political problem.² In this essay, I propose to reconsider Emerson's relation to context. By this term I do not mean any specific historical context, but rather his relation to the concept of context as such, and especially with respect to the general paradigm of capitalism in its early global phase. Some might call this a context; I will emphasize throughout that this is a false appellation, because the logic of capital operates on the basis of a rejection of contextualization in general. My contention will be that the use of historical context as a methodological rubric in literary studies was anticipatively queried by Emerson on the basis that literature itself is characterized by a decontextualizing or deterritorializing impulse that it shares with capital.³ My object is to propose Emerson as a significant but neglected thinker of literature's civic function in a capitalist society and as a theorist of the extent of literature's agency to intervene in or direct economic matters.

In its most basic definition, historical context is the imposed codification that delimits temporal and situational horizons to periodize and localize historical events. As New Historicists determined such codes and put them to use, they invoked what can be defined as a form of political economy. The assumption was that literary texts are productions of the

Univ. Press, 1971–2013), I, 7. Further references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text as *Collected Works*.

² The New Americanist movement, which identified itself through an aggressive if inconsistent commitment to a politically engaged scholarship, saw Emerson's propensity for abstraction as a moral failing in the context of contemporary efforts toward reform. See especially John Carlos Rowe, *At Emerson's Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997); and Jay Grossman, *Reconstituting the American Renaissance: Emerson, Whitman, and the Politics of Representation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2003).

³ In this respect, I seek to provide explanatory detail to Meredith McGill's comment that "it is the extemporaneous, dispossessing aspects of Emerson's and Thoreau's writing that a historicist criticism has been least able to account for: the complex pleasures of discontinuity and anachrony, and the power of decontextualization" (McGill, "Common Places: Poetry, Illocality, and Temporal Dislocation in Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*," *American Literary History*, 19 [2007], 367).

political discourse of their eras and should be read as such in the first instance. The critic's role comes to be that of intermediary between text and context, granting these texts a historical relevance that in itself constitutes a currency value that thereafter renders the text versatile and applicable to analogous concerns in other contexts of the historical past as well as of the present. Of course, this form of mediation has ideological and ethical bearing on critique's self-conception. As two contributors note in *Context?*, a 2011 special issue of *New Literary History* devoted to the concept's use in literary studies, criticism and pedagogy have both internalized the assumption that "*responsible reading puts a text in its context*," while "a commitment to historical context on the part of critic and novelist alike is tantamount to political commitment."⁴ Context not only gives literary scholars the tools to engage in political critique, but it also grants them political justification for the existence of their profession. Yet this apparent empowerment calls to mind old problems, notably the questionable status of the literary scholar as vanguard. As Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have emphasized, this notion "presented professional literary criticism as a strenuous and heroic endeavor, one more akin to activism and labor than to leisure, and therefore fully deserving of remuneration."⁵ Even as the more politically vocal forms of New Historicism have faded in recent years, the circuit of accountability suggested by Best and Marcus's comment still structures scholarship and pedagogy in literary studies, meaning that the imperative to historicize—to contextualize—has become fundamental to the political economic relations between government, society, academe, and the individual scholar.⁶

⁴ Herbert F. Tucker, "Introduction," *New Literary History*, 42 (2011), ix; and Bruce Holsinger, "'Historical Context' in Historical Context: Surface, Depth, and the Making of the Text," *New Literary History*, 42 (2011), 594.

⁵ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations*, 108 (2009), 5–6. Rita Felski's contribution to the above-mentioned special issue of *NLH* offers a similar critique in a lively polemic against the self-importance of this "ethos of the vanguard" (see Felski, "'Context Stinks!,'" *New Literary History*, 42 [2011], 574, 579).

⁶ The extension of this model of accountability is visible in the recent spatial turn in American literary studies, which leaves behind the focused contextualism that I reference here in an effort to expand context's geographical and temporal axes toward the articulation of a global or planetary context. Such studies—which are often not

My argument here illustrates how Emerson articulates an anticipatory counterargument to these conditions in the form of an alternative political economy of context that involves literature's self-recognition of its contextual manipulation in the process of production. The core of Emerson's method is plagiarism, something that might be defined as an infraction of the sovereignty of context. Since the introduction of copyright, plagiarism has been proscribed in accordance with the legal recognition of intellectual property, but even in Emerson's pre-copyright era it was ethically taboo.⁷ Plagiarism is especially interesting for its concentration of problems of literary agency. Like all forms of legal transgression, in the case of purloined text the adjudged degree of intent determines the severity of an individual or societal response. Fully unconscious appropriations of text make authors seem no more than the dumb conduit of their milieu. If the infraction is conscious, it may have been committed with a view to exploit the cultural or economic capital of the original context of the plagiarized text. In a contemporary context, this practice usually meets with reprimand; significantly, it was also a practice that a number of scholars have recently suggested was common in nineteenth-century America.⁸ But

coincidentally the work of former advocates of conventional forms of New Historicism—do not, however, depart from the logic of contextualism, but merely stretch its horizons to the extent that the concept of context is rendered ironically redundant even as the term itself retains its currency. Noted examples of such work include Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006); and Paul Giles, *The Global Remapping of American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2011).

⁷ For a study of the concept of copyright in the historical context of Emerson's era, see Martin T. Buinicki, *Negotiating Copyright: Authorship and the Discourse of Literary Property Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁸ Historicist recognition of such practice has been informed by Meredith McGill's *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2003). More recently, other studies have extended McGill's remit to consider whether the broader habit of literary dependence in Emerson's era show the innate duplicity and fraudulence of antebellum American literature, or whether it reveals a culture of dependence that reflected the actual nature of nation-building in the early republic as opposed to its ideologies of self-reliance and independence. See respectively Lara Langer Cohen, *The Fabrication of American Literature: Fraudulence and Antebellum Print Culture* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); and William Hunting Howell, *Against Self-Reliance: The Arts of Dependence in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2015). It is perhaps worth noting that Emerson appears in both studies only as an unreconstructed advocate of the ideology

there are also alternative forms of textual recycling involving intentional aestheticized uses of appropriated text that are not usually called plagiarism—modernist intertextuality, cut-ups, the citational habits of postcolonial writing, and the “uncreative writing” of the information age that has been theorized and/or practiced by Kenneth Goldsmith, David Shields, and others.

Emerson’s is a form of appropriation in the latter vein. But I insist on calling it plagiarism, because, as I will illustrate, it turns on the considerations of displacement, kidnap, exploitation, and normatively improper methods of personal enrichment that are associated with this term. For all of these reasons, it reveals how the manipulation of context is always a political and economic issue. In what follows, I reveal that Emerson’s 1844 collection *Essays: Second Series* evinces an acute self-consciousness of literature’s obligations to the contextual conditions of its production. Critically, and in explicit opposition to a number of recent readings of Emerson that are symptomatic of a broad desire to read literature as a space of resistance to the negative effects of capitalism, I reveal how *Essays: Second Series* proposes that literature is ill-fitted to such a critique. On the contrary, Emerson’s text is cognizant that the literary partakes of a logic of capital that was evident even in its pre-Marxian era. I argue that literature under such conditions retains a minimal capacity for economic intervention, but to comprehend it we need to be more attentive to the terms by which Emerson conceptualized literary agency.



My focus will be two neglected essays that constitute the middle of *Essays: Second Series*—pieces 4 and 5, “Manners” and “Gifts.” These essays consciously register the necessity of dependence on potentially irrecoverable contexts as a core economic principle that binds the epistemologies of the capitalist market, cultural progress, and the formation of subjectivity, and that thereafter seeks to modulate that

of genius, an outdated appraisal that I show in this essay to be false. See Cohen, *The Fabrication of American Literature*, pp. 37–38; and Howell, *Against Self-Reliance*, p. 7.

recognition for those who would later read the work. The ethical dilemma that arises in this model consists in the degree of revelation of that dependence. If it is too visible, the determinations of history oppress the present; too hidden, and the reading subject is liable to be lulled into a delusion called modernity.

The structure of *Second Series* is critical to this modulation. Through the volume's structure, Emerson invites his readers to question their cognitive practice as they proceed sequentially through its essays, or alternatively read and reread them piecemeal dependent on their level of investment in the text. The effect of reading Emerson's essay series *as series* is a blind spot throughout Emerson criticism, which consistently prefers either close readings of individual essays or a freewheeling liberty to cite indifferently from texts that span the forty years of his career. It is worth remarking that the habit of quoting Emerson out of the contexts of his original publications is absolutely consonant with the theory of literature's necessary decontextualization that I will elaborate here; suffice it to say for now that Emerson's readers most likely adopt his practice unconsciously, since criticism's failure to recognize what Emerson is doing with plagiarism in *Second Series* is partly down to the author's calculated manipulation of literary revelation by using the form of the essay collection to reverse sequential logic in correlation with the form and structure of individual essays.

I begin with "Manners," for here Emerson's concentration on the derivative character of cultural progress and its necessary alignment with the logic of capital is most acute. In "Manners," Emerson plagiarizes—no alternate term will encompass the effects of his practice. As Eduardo Cadava has written in a piece on Emerson's politics that will counterpoint my argument, exploitation and the mourning that constitutes the normative ethical response to it begins with "the very first kidnap."⁹ Etymologically, plagiarism is kidnap, and Emerson's plagiarism in "Manners" simultaneously amplifies and conceals a form of complicity in the exploitative logic of capital that cannot be easily negotiated.

⁹ The line is originally a quotation from George Jackson's *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994), on which Cadava elaborates (see Eduardo Cadava, "The Guano of History," in *The Other Emerson*, ed. Branka Arsić and Cary Wolfe [Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010], p. 101).

Two observations attend the essay's first line: "Half the world, it is said, knows not how the other half live" (Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Manners," in *Collected Works*, III, 71). First, we might remark, as the editors of Emerson's *Collected Works* do, that this line alludes to Rabelais and reproduces Sir Thomas Urquhart's translation of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.¹⁰ Second, a world thus divisible into two is epitomized by text, which depends on two participants—the author, who grants it existence; and the reader, whose willingness to receive it is necessary that it survive as a viable cultural artifact. Needless to say, however, these two parties never meet save through the displaced contact that the text constitutes; it is a world of two in which, at any given time, only one party is tangibly present. The point is that texts demand trust in order that their transactions might be carried through, yet this necessity that readers place their confidence in the text and its author is liable to exploitation.

The first paragraph of the essay reveals how and why this is the case not only by the volume of its plagiarisms, but also by their subject. The first paragraph below is Emerson in "Manners," the second comes from Giovanni Battista Belzoni's *Narrative of the Operations and Recent Discoveries within the Pyramids, Temples, Tombs, and Excavations, in Egypt and Nubia* (1820). Belzoni's subjects are the inhabitants of Gournou, in Nubia, who live in the tombs of ancient Egyptians:

The husbandry of the modern inhabitants of Gournou (west of old Thebes) is philosophical to a fault. To set up their house-keeping, nothing is requisite but two or three earthen pots, a stone to grind meal, and a mat which is the bed. The house, namely, a tomb, is ready without rent or taxes. No rain can pass through the roof, and there is no door, for there is no want of one, as there is nothing to lose. If the house do not please them,

¹⁰ See Joseph Slater, "Notes," in Emerson, *Collected Works*, III, 199–201. "There I began to think that, it is very true which is commonly said, that the one half of the world knoweth not how the other half liveth" (Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, in *The Works of Rabelais* [trans. Sir Thomas Urquhart] [London: Chatto and Windus, 1871], p. 215). Joseph Slater's notes to *Second Series* pick up on this textual parallel, as well as all of those I will discuss here. Despite being highlighted by Slater more than forty years ago, however, the nature of Emerson's textual borrowings in "Manners" have never been the subject of scholarly discussion.

they walk out and enter another, as there are several hundreds at their command. ("Manners," p. 71)

When a young man wants to marry, he goes to the father of the intended bride, and agrees with him what he is to pay for her. This being settled, so much money is to be spent on the wedding-day feast. To set up house-keeping nothing is requisite but two or three earthen pots, a stone to grind meal, and a mat, which is the bed. . . . The house is ready, without rent or taxes. No rain can pass through the roof; and there is no door, for there is no want of one, as there is nothing to lose. . . . If the house do not please them, they walk out and enter another, as there are several hundreds at their command.¹¹

The elisions in the Belzoni text all tie the discussion back into the context of marital ritual in this necropolitan society with which the passage begins. Essentially, Emerson makes two major additions that I will have cause to return to later: he labels the Gournians' behavior "philosophical to a fault," and he reminds his reader that the house is "namely, a tomb"—while deleting Belzoni's contextualization. Otherwise, he recycles the prose he inherits to the letter, finding it perfectly suited to his own needs, just as the tombs suit the domestic requirements of their new residents—an act that pointedly owes more to the property laws of Gournou than to nineteenth-century America.

Nor does Emerson stop at this point. Although he provides us with Belzoni's name in a short piece of direct quotation in the next line, this time enclosed within proprietary quotation marks, this reference evinces less a sense of indebtedness than an indication that Emerson is totally confident in his liberty to manipulate source material. Immediately, he flouts the convention of accreditation again, for the following section is also cribbed, this time from A.H.L. Heeren's *Historical Researches into the Politics, Intercourse, and Trade of the Carthaginians, Ethiopians, and Egyptians* (1832). Emerson's version begins: "In the deserts of Borgoo, the rock-Tibboos still dwell in caves, like cliff-swallows, and the language of these negroes is compared by their

¹¹ [Giovanni Battista] Belzoni, *Narrative of the Operations and Recent Discoveries within the Pyramids, Temples, Tombs, and Excavations, in Egypt and Nubia*. . . (London: John Murray, 1820), p. 183.

neighbors to the shrieking of bats, and to the whistling of birds” (“Manners,” p. 71). Compared to Heeren’s original, Emerson’s deletions are again significant:

The Tibboo Raschadé, or Rock Tibboos, still dwell in caves. . . .
 . . . Beside this, a trifling circumstance mentioned by Herodotus, respecting the language of these people, is confirmed in a manner we could hardly have expected. “They have no language like other men, says he, but shriek like bats.”—“When the Augilians speak of these tribes,” says Hornemann, “they say their language is similar to the whistling of birds.”¹²

Stripping the details of their accreditation, Emerson reiterates Heeren’s respectful scholarly citations in the form of anecdotal wisdom. Decontextualized, general, and circulatable, the description enters through the prism of Emerson’s reiteration into common currency. He repeats the process in the next sentence, once again cribbing from Heeren while excluding the quotation marks and accreditation linking back to sources in Herodotus and Leo Africanus (*Historical Researches*, I, 232–33).

This construction of parroted text reaches an ironic conclusion when Emerson finally switches back into a legitimate personal voice in order to summarize: “But the salt, the dates, the ivory, and the gold, for which these horrible regions are visited, find their way into countries, where the purchaser and consumer can hardly be ranked in one race with these cannibals and man-stealers” (“Manners,” p. 71). The irony, of course, is that Emerson’s plagiarism precisely replicates such “man-stealing.” It exploits the cited writers as well as the contexts that were so carefully delimited through citation toward a mode of writing that emphatically rejects an obligation to contextualize. The implication seems to be that the emergent global market that Emerson nods to in these lines depends on the perpetuation of certain practices we might consider barbaric, but that we assent to them in not interrogating those displaced contexts, much as we assent to his plagiarism by allowing it to pass.

¹² A.H.L. Heeren, *Historical Researches into the Politics, Intercourse, and Trade of the Carthaginians, Ethiopians, and Egyptians* [trans. D. A. Talboys], 2 vols. (Oxford: D. A. Talboys, 1832), I, 223–24.

Two points for consideration emerge from this discussion. First, there is the simple issue of appreciation. Emerson's stated reliance on the "extreme economy" of literary dependence in the late essay "Quotation and Originality" (1876) has been discussed by a few scholars, notably Julie Ellison and Joseph Kronick, while a recent article by Nikhil Bilwakesh reveals the extent of Emerson's logic of literary appropriation in his 1875 poetry compilation *Parnassus*.¹³ Yet, to my knowledge, no critic has even remarked on the astonishing extent of Emerson's plagiarism in the much earlier "Manners," with the exception of Joseph Slater's extraordinarily well-researched (but merely illustrative) notes in the Belknap *Collected Works* edition of *Second Series*. Indeed, the essay, which was described alongside "Gifts" as "light, short pieces" by Emerson biographer Robert Richardson, one of the weaker chapters in "an uneven volume," is seldom read by critics at all.¹⁴ The consequence is that Emerson's plagiarism has passed his readers' scrutiny so well that any critique inhering in his practice must become meaningless. So what is Emerson's project?

The task of interpreting it becomes more curious in light of the second point, which is that "Manners" was not the only work to deal with the complicity between culture and economic or colonial exploitation that Emerson published in 1844. In August 1844, two months before publishing *Second Series*, Emerson gave an address "On Emancipation in the British West Indies" in

¹³ See Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Quotation and Originality," in *Collected Works*, VIII, 94. Bilwakesh finds *Parnassus* to be the site of a form of authorship in which proprietary provisions in literature are dissolved among the curated fragments of other writers' poems. Bilwakesh notes that it echoes the loss of literary agency Emerson experienced as he succumbed to dementia in the 1870s (Nikhil Bilwakesh, "Emerson's Decomposition: *Parnassus*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 67 [2013], 520–45). Both Kronick and Ellison argue that "Quotation and Originality" should be understood as a core text in Emerson's poetic theory (see Julie Ellison, *Emerson's Romantic Style* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984], pp. 141–53; and Joseph G. Kronick, *American Poetics of History: From Emerson to the Moderns* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1984], pp. 9–36).

¹⁴ Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire: A Biography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1995), p. 400. A notable exception to this critical indifference is Branka Arsić's reading of the essay in her *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2010), to which I will have cause to return.

Concord, in which he implores that the full history of the exploitation of African slaves be brought into the open.¹⁵ In lines that are much more widely known than those of “Manners,” Emerson states that the “earliest monuments” of human culture tell us that “one race was victim, and served the other races” (Emancipation Address, p. 302). The connection between “Manners” and this address is then confirmed in intertextual resonance: Emerson supports his claim by describing how “in the oldest temples of Egypt, negro captives are painted on the tombs of kings, in such attitudes as to show that they are on the point of being executed” (Emancipation Address, pp. 302–3), a passage that follows the method of “Manners” insofar as it is directly lifted from Heeren.¹⁶ But there the similarity between the urbane, suggestive “Manners” and the intense, engaged Emancipation Address ends, for in the latter work Emerson makes a pointed political comment: “Language must be raked, the secrets of slaughter-houses and infamous holes that cannot front the day, must be ransacked, to tell what negro-slavery has been” (Emancipation Address, p. 303).

What Emerson gives us through these two linked texts is his anticipative response to the politics of reading nineteenth-century American texts in the twenty-first century. The contemporary scholarly preference for the Emancipation Address, with its advocacy of something that looks very much like discourse analysis, exists because this text answers affirmatively to the questions that critics prefer to put to it. Take, for instance, Eduardo Cadava’s emphatic response to its imperative to “rake . . . language,” in which Emerson is lauded and amplified for the potency of his realization about politics and linguistics. For Cadava, Emerson’s Emancipation Address inculcates the approach to make language “bear the traces of what it undergoes . . . its inscription within an exploitative economic system of

¹⁵ See Ralph Waldo Emerson, “An Address Delivered in the Court-House in Concord, Massachusetts, on 1st August, 1844, on the Anniversary of the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies,” in *Collected Works*, X, 301–27 (hereafter referred to as “Emancipation Address”). The Address would be published in the United States in early September 1844, and was quickly followed by a London edition (see Len Gougeon, *Virtue’s Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform* [Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1990], p. 90).

¹⁶ Compare Heeren, *Historical Researches*, II, 283.

international dimensions." It is the sign of a hermeneutics structured by an ethical imperative: we must read always "to engage an inheritance"; Emerson suggests that we learn "to read historically," to expose "ourselves to the vicissitudes of . . . history . . . to which we remain urgently and dangerously responsible." In short, and unambiguously, Cadava insists that we should read "in relation to the context" ("The Guano of History," pp. 106, 107, 116).

I suggest that this contrast serves as evidence of why "Manners" is probably the more significant piece. "Manners" constitutes the conscious violation of the hermeneutical imperatives just set out in the Emancipation Address, and thereby it serves also as a violation of the methodology valorized above all others in studies of antebellum America in our critical epoch. After the performances of its plagiaristic opening, "Manners" relentlessly endorses a logic of reading indifferently to the contexts concealed in the text based on a tacit recognition that civilization is built on the same principle. Emerson praises urbanity over all other qualities. The "gentleman" is extolled as the epitome of Western culture, and there are no cracks in Emerson's uncompromising praise of civility in Europe and America in an essay that can be difficult to read precisely because it is so extraordinarily benign. There is no requirement, for instance, that the gentleman's "personal force" be checked by moral rectitude. Instead, "bruisers and pirates are of better promise than talkers and clerks. . . . [The gentleman] is good company for pirates, and good with academicians" ("Manners," pp. 73-74). Establishing a parallel between concealed and taboo practices in the cultural and mercantile worlds, the gentleman's adaptability is valued because his influence eases the mechanisms of civility and removes obstacles to comfort. Such is Emerson's definition of the term "manners": "Manners aim to facilitate life, to get rid of impediments, and bring the man pure to energize. They aid our dealing and conversation . . . by getting rid of all avoidable obstructions of the road, and leaving nothing to be conquered but pure space" ("Manners," p. 75).

It should barely need remarking that the last phrase in this excerpt connotes the ideology of westward expansion just as readily as the wider colonial aspirations of imperial nations in

the nineteenth century. In the specific context of “Manners,” the phrase applies to the “impediments” to reading that recognition of its plagiarism would be. So, in yet another appropriated piece of text, Emerson offers a suggestion of how nondisclosure might be used in writing to maintain a façade of civility: “I am far from believing the timid maxim of Lord Falkland (‘that for ceremony there must go two to it; since a bold fellow will go through the cunningest forms,’) and am of opinion that the gentleman is the bold fellow whose forms are not to be broken through” (“Manners,” p. 74). As Slater’s notes reveal, Emerson lifts this quote from a contemporary novel, which itself lifted it from an older history.¹⁷ The phrase “cunningest forms” does not appear in either source, however, and so Emerson’s adaptation indicates his refusal to offer witness to his exploitative practices—the “cunning forms” are both literally and metaphorically his own. Indeed, based on a point that “Manners” emphasizes time and again, the limits of author/reader contiguity are the concern whenever the nature of the gentleman’s relationships is the subject: “Let us not be too much acquainted. . . . In all things I would have the island of a man inviolate. . . . Lovers should guard their strangeness. . . . Not less I dislike a low sympathy of each with his neighbor’s needs. Must we have a good understanding with one another’s palates?” (“Manners,” pp. 80–81).

Suffice it to say that the essay does not acquit well a writer who had supposedly just announced himself “perhaps one of America’s greatest mourners” for the victims of the march of capitalism (Cadava, “The Guano of History,” p. 107). On the contrary, Emerson seems to want to commit us—his readers—to terms that would dismiss our interest in raking his language. What “Manners” would convey is not philosophical fellowship, not a collaborative effort to uncover the barbarity of Western culture, capital, and ethics, but an unquestioning acceptance of its benevolence insofar as it grants its beneficiaries ontological and epistemological liberty from the burden of history. The

¹⁷ Slater writes that Emerson found this quotation in a footnote in Robert Plumer Ward’s *Tremaine; or the Man of Refinement*, 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1825), II, 70. The footnote itself refers to Edward Earl of Clarendon’s *History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Sheldonian Theatre, 1707), I, 81. See Slater, “Notes,” in *Collected Works*, III, 201, n. 74.11.

forms of suasion that Branka Arsić has rightly noted in her acute and rare reading of “Manners” are part of this tendency, because the impression of personal force Emerson valorizes in his essay aligns with the ideology of autogenesis that is a core component of post-Enlightenment philosophy, aesthetics, and the logic of capital.¹⁸ As Werner Hamacher has written, the ideological constant in Western cultural idealizations since the eighteenth century has been:

a history of self-production and self-idealization. But insofar as it is a history of self-domestication, it must be a history not only of subjectification, but also of the subjugation, colonization, and enslavement of the other. As a history of the domination of the self, it must also be that of the sacrifice of the other. . . . The *prescription* of its ideal operates, implicitly or explicitly, by delicate or brutal means, the *proscription* of whatever does not conform to it.¹⁹

As Hamacher goes on to illustrate, the delusion of autogenesis that underpins cultural emancipation is categorically identical with that which provides the ethical blind spot that sustains capitalist exploitation for the benefit of the civilized.

So “Manners” is a curious paradox. The only mitigating factor of its unapologetic acceptance of and perpetuated complicity in the exploitations native both to culture and to capital is its ironic self-consciousness. But both possible critical readings of “Manners”—that it is ironic, and that it is insidious—have been neglected in favor of a general sense that it is merely of no

¹⁸ Arsić argues that Emerson’s definition of “manners” is counterintuitive given that the term conventionally refers to accustomed and ritualized social practices. By seeking to disaggregate all conventional ethical or cultural positions under the singular influence of the gentleman, Emerson’s redefinition means that “manners disturb what is fixed” to place such fixtures under a new and exclusive condition of stability (Arsić, *On Leaving*, p. 304). As Arsić notes, such a definition strips manners of precisely those ethical or cultural positions that conventionally determine personality, and so manners become “a purely external relation between two ‘energies’ or two nonpersonalized lives; they are gestures without persons” (p. 305). But such depersonalization also corroborates the removal of obstacles that might “bring the pure man to energize” in Emerson’s thought. As such, they facilitate the delusion that the individual can achieve his “original relation” and assign to himself the source of genius in cultural, aesthetic, and entrepreneurial contexts.

¹⁹ Werner Hamacher, “One 2 Many Multiculturalisms,” trans. Dana Hollander, in *Violence, Identity, and Self-Determination*, ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1997), p. 293.

consequence. In the essay's final pages, any ambiguity as to its purpose seems to evaporate. Emerson advocates the legitimacy of insincerity in cultural progress: "What if the false gentleman contrives so to address his companion, as civilly to exclude all others from his discourse, and also to make them feel excluded? Real service will not lose its nobleness" ("Manners," p. 85). Civility necessitates exclusion of these unwanted "others" for the benefit of the gentleman's favored "companion." To adapt Arsić's reading once more, "Manners" is not about personal qualities, but the impersonal energies that underscore civic progress and personal gain. If Emerson is seeking to identify himself in the performance of the gentleman, the reader is his present companion who is taken into trust. What Emerson offers us by persuading us to let the essay's formal practices pass—which is to say by making us complicit—is benevolence. His interest is given to be in our future, he is the "fanatic who plants shade-trees for the second and third generation, and orchards when he is grown old" ("Manners," p. 85). The only context that is proposed to matter is that of the reader; it is purely progressive, emphatically modern according to the definition offered by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Use and Abuse of History for Life* (1874). By amplifying the nondisclosure of the past, Emerson reveals how cultural figures possess a limited agency to generate the possibility of the present. This nondisclosure is limited insofar as the freedom of the present for the beneficiary is predicated solely on a guiltless conscience, and the serenity of such a conscience is thereafter permanently threatened so long as there remains the possibility of historicist revelation. In the next essay in the volume, the economic paradigm involved in this process emerges. Hence Emerson reveals his project against the grain of a sequential or serial reading, a formal decision that is critical to an accurate representation of literature's interventionary agency in the economic field.



If the conceptual purpose of context is to grant synchronicity and sovereignty to a spatial or temporal locality, and the purpose of "Manners" was consciously to

enforce complicity in infractions of contextual sovereignty for a presumed benefit to modernity, then the next essay, "Gifts," is significant because it theorizes an economics that only comes into effect once any sense of continuity between the sovereign contexts of past eras and an experience of modernity as pure present is rendered defunct. "Gifts" begins by alluding to the exact opposite of this economics as an alternative to capitalism, with its first line considering economic restitution through reparations to exploited parties toward restoring the world to solvency: "It is said that the world is in a state of bankruptcy, that the world owes the world more than the world can pay, and ought to go into chancery, and be sold" (Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Gifts," in *Collected Works*, III, 93). But Emerson immediately and flippantly gives it up—his interest is drawn instead to how such economic responsibility is comfortably ignored "at Christmas and New Year," when the expense of gift-giving goes on irrespective of personal or public debts.

There is, however, more at stake than is immediately apparent. Emerson acutely anticipates that gift theory offers a heterodox form of economics, yet for most of the early history of gift studies in anthropology its economic principle depended on exchange according to a familiar set of parties involved in transaction: a debtor and a creditor, a defined giving subject as well as a defined receiving subject. So it is worth noting that when gift theory's most celebrated initiator, Marcel Mauss, considered models that subvert this exchange function, Emerson was his example:

The unreciprocated gift still makes the person who has accepted it inferior, particularly when it has been accepted with no thought of returning it. We are still in the field of Germanic morality when we recall the curious essay by Emerson entitled "Gifts." Charity is still wounding for him who has accepted it, and the whole tendency of our morality is to strive to do away with the unconscious and injurious patronage of the rich almsgiver.²⁰

²⁰ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1925), trans. W. D. Halls (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1990), p. 65.

The true gift's indifference to the otherwise ineffaceable politics involved in transactions between active and passive parties is, as Mauss suggests, Emerson's main point in this essay. Against the impositions involved in conscious gift and receipt, Emerson valorizes impersonal circulation. With conscious gift-giving, "the impediment lies in the choosing," and so "one is glad when an imperative leaves him no option" ("Gifts," pp. 93, 94). In giving according to imperative, the giver avoids the necessity of prostrating himself before the recipient. Much the same applies for the receiver, on whom an obligation of restitution would be made by the conscious receipt of a gift. So a truly *given* gift does not invoke exchange: the receiver does not accept the gift sympathetically; in fact, he seems not to accept the gift at all. On the part of the giver "the expectation of gratitude is mean, and is continually punished by the total insensibility of the obliged person" ("Gifts," p. 95). If a gift is to be a gift, it must be received without the sense of receipt, without the recipient entering a cycle of exchange by being obliged to the benefactor—with indifference, in other words. For the same reason, an act of giving that is conscious of itself "is flat usurpation," a gift made only with sight of the recipient's obliging return ("Gifts," p. 95). If a gift can only be received with indifference, so must it be made—"Let him give kingdoms or flower-leaves indifferently" ("Gifts," p. 96). As gift, any given thing has no differential value, but is defined solely by the conditions of being given.

The closest analogue to Emerson's interest in transactional rupture in a contemporary philosophical lexicon is found in the work of Jacques Derrida, whose theory of the gift is elaborated in *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (1992).²¹ What Derrida claims as his departure "from the tradition" of gift theory is in essence Emerson's economic point—the true gift must be "an-economic": "For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, countergift, or debt. If the other *gives* me *back* or *owes* me or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift. . . . the gift is annulled. . . . each time

²¹ See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992). For another reading of Emerson's "Gifts" as proto-Derridean, see Gary Shapiro, "'Give Me a Break!' Emerson on Fruit and Flowers," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 13 (1999), 98–113.

there is restitution or countergift" (*Given Time*, p. 12). The gift achieves its objective of negating the terms of conventional transactionality by eroding recognition of the other party in that transaction—a condition that explains Emerson's rejection of readerly sympathy in "Manners," and that is described in "Gifts" as the purely circulatory nature of the giver or the receiver within the terms of the gift transaction: "The gift, to be true, must be the flowing of the giver unto me, correspondent to my flowing unto him" ("Gifts," p. 95).²²

This is why the gift is critical for grasping how something that is presumed to operate according to a principle of mutually beneficial exchange seems nothing more than exploitation and appropriation. Not to recognize the sovereign character of an appropriated context means to decline to acknowledge its status as a giver as well as the benefit we take from it as its gift. Emerson's calculatedly convoluted point is that we partake of the logic of the gift throughout our dealings in culture and capital whenever we unquestioningly inherit a given state of affairs. This means that any system that relies on the nondisclosure of its contextual precedents—among which the circulation of capital should be numbered—is not properly speaking an exchange and is aneconomic. Of course, the recognition that capital is aneconomic is no more than a rewording of Karl Marx's ironic comments that capital appears to be the goose that lays golden eggs, or, more recently, of Fredric Jameson's extension of the Marxian formula for capital that recasts the term's definition as the condition by which value is released from the "productive moment": "Capital itself becomes free-floating. It separates from the concrete context of its productive geography"—literally "float[ing] away" toward sites of greater profitability.²³ The

²² Derrida's late-twentieth-century phrasing adds little other than a more overt philosophical tone to this point: "if there is a gift, it cannot take place between two subjects exchanging objects, things, or symbols. The question of the gift should therefore seek its place before any relation to the subject, before any conscious or unconscious relation to self of the subject. . . . the subject and the object are arrested effects of the gift, arrests of the gift" (*Given Time*, p. 24).

²³ Fredric Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," *Critical Inquiry*, 24 (1997), 251. As Marx describes, capital's apparently "occult ability to add value to itself" is an illusion founded on the opacity that the role of the merchant originally introduced into the exchange between producer and consumer. Surplus value is thereby a "parasite" of

difference with Emerson is that restitution will not come through reestablishing contiguity between the disconnected parties of a transaction, a step incompatible with the gift. Rather, in adopting an approach that recognizes and immediately rejects all theses of value that tie it to the specific context of production, Emerson's political economy aligns with the logic of the gift, and therefore with the logic of capital.

This is precisely how "Manners" works. The benign reader of that essay accepts its tactics not with suspicion, but simply as given. Emerson's obscuration of the contexts of origin for the plagiarized passages means that his author-function is merely to ease the mechanism of giving; he renders the opacity that conceals giver from recipient. His own subject-position with respect to the act of giving is negated, because what he gives is counterfeit.²⁴ The question, therefore, is why Emerson does this. Why renege immediately on the political engagement of the Emancipation Address, for which he was lauded quite as much in 1844–45 as he would be by his few advocates in New Historicism a century and a half later, in order to acquiesce in the exploitations of capitalist world-systems?²⁵

To comprehend Emerson's project, we need to return to those two interjections made among the opening plagiarisms of "Manners." Emerson's decision to emphasize that the Gournian's house is "namely, a tomb" can be understood in light of the description of such domesticity as "philosophical to a fault." The point is that the conditions in which the Gournians live are not unique. All cultures live among the bones and relics of those whose history grants the basis for present civility—the

economic exchange: "in its pure form, the exchange of commodities... is not a method of increasing value" (Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes [London: Penguin, 1990], pp. 255, 261, 247–69). Jameson's focus is a "Marxian theory of modernism" appropriate to the rise of finance capital in the twentieth-century, but his invocation of Marx's own formula of capital renders it equally appropriate to that which Emerson recognizes in global capital in the 1840s (see Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," p. 255).

²⁴ Again, Emerson anticipates Derrida here. Charles Baudelaire's posthumously published short story "Counterfeit Money," which is the focus of the later part of *Given Time*, considers how the conscious use of a fraudulent coin could render practical the otherwise impossible gift. See Derrida, *Given Time*, pp. 108–72.

²⁵ For details of how the Emancipation Address was celebrated in abolitionist circles, see Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero*, p. 91.

only concern is as to how visible that history is, how consciously it is “used,” and the Gournians exemplify a mode of existence in which a culture’s historical relics persist in plain sight. As Emerson stressed in the one line from “Manners” that employs the accepted marks of quotation and attribution to Belzoni, “‘It is somewhat singular,’ . . . ‘to talk of happiness among people who live in sepulchres’” (“Manners,” p. 71).

Nietzsche famously later recognized what the existential consequences of an unfiltered and unrelenting consciousness of history might be “one who wished to feel everything historically would be like a man forcing himself to refrain from sleep,” but “in the smallest and greatest happiness there is always one thing that makes it happiness: the power of forgetting, or, in more learned phrase, the capacity of feeling ‘unhistorically’ throughout its duration.”²⁶ Hence to be “philosophical to a fault” is to be hyperalert to one’s dependence on and obligation to history, and Emerson’s project is to negotiate a path between these poles of oblivious happiness and historicist anxiety. “Manners” mobilizes Nietzsche’s preference for forgetfulness in its surfaces, but the hints it drops means that it also carries with it the possibility of a revelatory reading that “rakes” those surfaces, providing a critical balance that attenuates the significant problems with the happiness that comes without history. Nietzsche acknowledged these problems—“the unhistorical and the historical are equally necessary to the health of an individual, a community, and a system of culture” (*Use and Abuse of History*, p. 8)—but it was Paul de Man who elaborated on the blind spot in Nietzsche’s thinking. The question is not merely how this “necessity” is to be modulated, but also of “whether Nietzsche can free his own thought from historical prerogatives.” So “modernity invests its trust in the power of the present moment as an origin, but discovers that, in severing itself from the past, it has at the same time severed itself from the present.”²⁷ In other words, while an excess of history oppresses the liberty to simply “live” in the present, the forgetting of history

²⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History* (1874), trans. Adrian Collins (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1949, 1957), pp. 7, 6.

²⁷ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2d revised ed. (London: Methuen, 1983), pp. 148–49.

removes the historical prerogatives that formulate the present, meaning that a forgetful life in the present is unconscious, like that of the “beasts” Nietzsche uses as his example. As such, the form that is tasked to articulate the relation between multiple presents, between multiple contexts, cannot depend on a normative critical present as a basis for this articulation. This is why a form that slips the bonds of the present, and of the proprietary terms of contextual sovereignty, is to be valorized, and this is what is permitted by the aneconomic literary gift.



For Emerson, a critical and definitional function of literature is its capacity to displace the present.²⁸ In “Circles,” from *Essays: First Series* (1841), literature was given to be “a point outside of our hodiernal circle, through which a new one may be described.” Its use “is to afford us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it” (Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Circles,” in *Collected Works*, II, 185). A rupture with any particular present is also a rupture with any particular context, and the point of “purchase” that literature affords serves as an indication that Emerson sees this logic as a form of economic agency. Because literature’s power to unmoor from sovereign origins, to grant circulatory powers, means it is structurally identical to the power of capital in historical consciousness, the Emersonian model of literature’s economic intervention incorporates a distinctive form of critical historicism.

The basis of this model is the condition of dependence that Emerson recognized as the constitutional predicate of

²⁸ In my arguments that follow, Emerson’s proximity to the rejection of contextualism in deconstruction is a crucial reference point. On the relation between presentism, context, and writing, Derrida had this to say: “a written sign . . . is . . . a mark which remains, which is not exhausted in the present of its inscription, and which can give rise to an iteration both in the absence of and beyond the presence of the empirically determined subject who, in a given context, has emitted or produced it”; for this reason, “the value or effect of transcendentalism [that] is linked necessarily to the possibility of writing” must remain a perpetually reinforced rejoinder to imperatives to always historicize in literary studies (Jacques Derrida, “Signature/Event/Context” [1971], in his *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982], pp. 317, 316).

literature. In “The Poet,” the piece that opens *Essays: Second Series*, Emerson made the much-quoted remark that “language is fossil poetry” (Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet,” in *Collected Works*, III, 13). In a survey of Emerson’s oeuvre, this line is merely one of the more noted examples of a constantly expanding compendium of axioms and instances about quotation in literature and literature’s necessary dependence on its internal traditions.²⁹ Literature emerges from the parameters of an inherited language, a state of belatedness from which authors can never fully achieve freedom. Their language, their new text, is always another sepulcher, a charnel-house pieced together from “fossil poetry.” The appeal of Emerson for theses like Harold Bloom’s anxiety of influence is the consequence of a literary transaction that consists of a perpetuated recurrence of this formal principle. We have been committed to language before any recognition of the fact, before a decision on the matter can be made, in much the same way that we are always committed to capitalism before and in spite of any moral objections we might hold about its processes—it is, as we have already seen, a given.³⁰ Emerson explicitly expressed his sense of this process on numerous occasions in the early 1840s. In March 1842, he noted in his journal: “It is in vain you pretend that you are not responsible for the evil law because you are not a magistrate, or a party to a civil process, or do not vote. You eat the law in a crust of bread, you wear it in your hat & shoes.”³¹ In the previous year’s “Man the Reformer,” Emerson wrote: “We are all implicated, of course, in this charge; it is only necessary to ask a few questions . . . to become aware that we eat and drink and wear perjury and fraud in a hundred commodities” (Ralph

²⁹ The scope of Emerson’s interest in this area is attested by the number of appearances it makes in his numerous notebooks, indexes, and writing aids. See, for instance, Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Topical Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph H. Orth, Susan Sutton Smith, et al., 3 vols. (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1990–94), III, 137–39.

³⁰ For a discussion of this ontology of commitment and its difference from Theodor Adorno’s use of the term, see W.J.T. Mitchell, “The Commitment to Form; or, Still Crazy after All These Years,” *PMLA*, 118 (2003), 321–25.

³¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman, Ralph H. Orth, et al., 16 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1960–82), VIII, 207.

Waldo Emerson, “Man the Reformer,” in *Collected Works*, I, 147). If we elect to expose ourselves to this fact, there is no end to the labyrinth of realizations that we are party to historical exploitations for which restitution can never adequately be made, and, in its every phrase, literature duplicates this process. As it mediates contexts and reanimates tropes and usages, the literary text is necessarily always engaging in processes of disclosure and/or nondisclosure of what is at stake in the uses, abuses, losses, and attempted recoveries of those contexts. Hence the ethical imperative of authorship turns on the decisions made about the extent to which the text reveals its mechanisms of exploitation to its readers, on how the text apportions accountability for its implication in historical processes or in eroding the sovereignty of these contexts to permit their entry into general circulation.

In addition to the contested notion of “responsible reading,” therefore, there are also questions regarding the responsibilities of authorship and of the text itself to which *Second Series* offers provocative answers. According to the economy of the gift, the form of responsibility will not be contiguous for all parties involved in a literary transaction. For this reason, I find fault with Cadava’s claim in *Emerson and the Climates of History* (1997) that “the performativity at work within [Emerson’s] language calls for *the same responsibility in his readers*. It requires a work of reading that is *also a labor of invention*.”³² This invocation of communion and the sharing of the burden of history between author and reader refers, of course, to a Marxist form of literary engagement, but *Second Series* indicates that the clarity to which Cadava aspires is reductive. Emerson’s combined efforts in “Manners” and “Gifts” are first to render his reader part of the mechanism of the gift, and then subsequently to offer a highly guarded exposition of its conceptual structure. Not only does this calculated opacity dismiss any claim that Emerson is an author who personally invests in a form of communion with his reader, but it also inverts sequential logic. If we are reading *Second Series* serially, then practice precedes theory, instantiation precedes preliminary explanation. Even without the layers of

³² Eduardo Cadava, *Emerson and the Climates of History* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1997), p. 7, emphasis added.

opacity that have so successfully camouflaged the significance of both essays, the reader who proceeds linearly through the volume literally *cannot* apprehend what Emerson is revealing about their commitment to a history of exploitation. Only by rereading, only by reading against Emerson's warnings not to have sympathy with him, only by suspecting his benignity and seeking to find out what lies behind the persona he projects do readers come to an awareness of the practices I have disclosed in this essay. And by doing so, the only conclusion they can draw in coming back to "Manners" with a renewed awareness of the exploitation they had previously overlooked is that they too have already been complicit, and remain so.

Emerson therefore offers a compelling case study in the risks of insisting on literary responsibility, and more pertinently on the possibility of responsible risk. In *Second Series*, this risk is conveyed through a conditional form, a form that insists on contextual openness. Because it carefully mediates its contexts and because, in the end, it *does* disclose its theoretical parameters (even if that disclosure is complex), this text does not conceal these contexts according to the principle of modernity predicated on forgetfulness. But neither does it compel readers to recognize their nonnegotiable complicity in the human history of exploitation. Instead, Emerson leaves at risk the question of how we will make use of literature as a means of guiding judgments within political economy and as a lens into the impossibility of ethical finality where the logic of capital is concerned. Even after we have moved on from the reductive notion that responsible reading involves merely "putting a text in its context," alternate forms of responsibility nevertheless seem to demand some measure of recontextualization that is absolute and delimiting. In Derek Attridge's recent project to restage the concept of responsible reading, the critic is implored to take "into account not just the work being read but the context within which the new writing in response to it is undertaken and the context within which it will be received."³³ To this plea I would only append Peggy Kamuf's wry reflection that "it is precisely on the condition of a certain *unaccountability* that we

³³ Derek Attridge, *The Work of Literature* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), p. 192.

read a text called literary.”³⁴ In other words, all stages of the literary transaction involve the acceptance and even the valorization of risk. Within the formal system of *Second Series*, Emerson’s complete submission to its terms is revealed in the text’s speculative availability to the service of either interrupting or perpetuating literature’s nondisclosure of its exploitations of context.

Plagiarism epitomizes this transaction. At one level, it is merely a blunt instrument that can simultaneously disguise and reveal culture’s perpetual self-cannibalism to itself, and when revealed it usefully draws attention to the terms by which a culture renders infractions of sovereignty taboo. But the author who plagiarizes also submits to its demands, because the act of plagiarizing is a concession to the inevitability that one will in time be plagiarized in turn. If one gives on the condition that the gift will not be perceived or understood as such, then one submits to endless future manipulations, exploitations, and generally being read out of context. Emerson thereby comes to register that his form of responsibility to history consists of accepting that his subjectivity is conductive rather than directive, and this form of historical consciousness is distinctive for its renunciation of all aspiration to be excused from a capitalist cultural history that is determined to maintain the principle of exploitation.³⁵ *Second Series* permits its readers the minimal liberty to read the text at a myriad of points along the continuum

³⁴ Peggy Kamuf, “Melville’s Credit Card,” in her *The Division of Literature, or the University in Deconstruction* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997], p. 176. The sentence that precedes the cited line speaks to the same concerns that I have articulated throughout: “the literary signature’s credit structure is not one that can be simply avoided by a more meticulous historical accountability” (Kamuf, “Melville’s Credit Card,” p. 176). Claire Colebrook’s contribution to *Context?*, the above-cited special issue of *NLH*, reiterates this sentiment in a spirited defense of deconstruction’s arguments against contextual specificity in literary studies within the concept of responsible reading (see Colebrook, “The Context of Humanism,” *New Literary History*, 42 [2011], 701–18).

³⁵ Emerson’s theory of the conductive subject seems to me to offer a basis for the title of his 1860 collection *The Conduct of Life*, and particularly these lines from its opening essay, “Fate,” which share the sentiment indicated in *Second Series*: “To me, . . . the question of the times resolved itself into a practical question of the conduct of life. How shall I live? We are incompetent to solve the times” (Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Conduct of Life*, in *Collected Works*, VI, 1).

of literature's relative disclosure of its complicity in capitalism's world-system. We can accept Emerson's benevolence or seek revelation just as we will: both options are given in the text. However, Emerson indicates that literature's maximal interventionary economic agency is restricted to these polarities. Thus, on the one hand, it embodies and reveals the form of conductive consciousness that exists in belated relation to the given; on the other hand, it seeks to withhold revelation of this condition for the benefit of the existential levity of its reader. The principal benefit of Emerson's system is that it protects the openness of this admittedly minimal agency, and therefore it is—somewhat ironically—a defense of subjectivity. But perhaps realist defenses of minimal subjective agency are preferable to the utopianism of projects of emancipation through literature. Conventional forms of “responsible reading” in these projects of emancipation necessitate the determination of contextual bounds despite the fact that literature categorically will not be contained by them. By seeking to foreclose the consequent necessity that literature will contribute to the perpetuation of the forms of capitalist world-systems, such models are not only falsely called responsible, but are wont to dupe themselves that they are not culpable in the very processes they set out to critique.

My closing remarks should clarify why—in the case of Emerson, at least—this logic is ineluctable. In *Representative Men* (1850), Emerson's book of lectures on the relation of the individual to culture, history, and context, the lecture “Napoleon, or the Man of the World” focuses on Bonaparte's extraordinary circulation in nineteenth-century culture. Critically, Emerson attacks Bonapartism—not because of Napoleon's “truth of adaptation to the mind of the masses around him,” which is merely his power to circulate, but because Napoleon represented a threatening combination in which the transhistorical heroic subject maintained the power of personal influence after his entry into circulation. Napoleon is thus “not merely representative, but actually a monopolizer and usurper of other minds” (Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Napoleon, or the Man of the World,” in *Collected Works*, IV, 130). In consequence, as Elizabeth Duquette has recently indicated, the only way to diminish

Napoleon's influence was to remove him from circulation, a step best undertaken by a more committed contextualization:

In order to interrupt the circuits of exchange Napoleon enabled, Emerson restages the emperor in the hopes of making him unfamiliar and thus undesirable as a figure for mass identification. . . . he argues that understanding Bonaparte is a necessary precondition to grasping—and rejecting—the structures [of the world-systems of his era].³⁶

This reading tells us that Emerson both understood and employed what is still the standard method for revisionary interventions into the canon: the use of contextual readings to delimit and erode the circulatory liberty of cultural figures who are perceived to have overdetermined a specific era's cultural consciousness.

But from here Duquette's reading reiterates the assumptions exhibited by Cadava and others to argue that the contextualization and removal from circulation of Bonaparte is part of Emerson's broader "politicized, even radicalized" project to render visible the exploitative logic of capital (Duquette, "The Man of the World", pp. 641, 657). In other words, it is a "responsible reading" insofar as it seeks to impress on Emerson the status of collaborator in the nominally responsible project of advocating literature's ongoing effort of resistance, and an irresponsible reading insofar as it fails to acknowledge Emerson's consciousness of culpability that I have sought to elucidate throughout this essay, a consciousness that also finds expression in *Representative Men*. In that volume's "Shakspeare, or the Poet," Emerson discusses the ideal poetic representative in civic terms and with a singular emphasis. He mocks contemporary bardolatry and the inquiries of the Shakespeare Society then active in London, with their fixation on "whether the boy Shakspeare poached or not, whether he held horses at the theatre door," and so on (Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Shakspeare, or the Poet," in *Collected Works*, IV, 116). The point is precisely that almost nothing could be said of Shakespeare's personal life. As Emerson paraphrases,

³⁶ Elizabeth Duquette, "The Man of the World," *American Literary History*, 27 (2015), 641.

“he was a goodnatured sort of man, an actor and shareholder in the theatre, not in any striking manner distinguished from other actors and managers.” Which leads him to an ironical confession: “I admit the importance of this information. It was well worth the pains that have been taken to procure it” (“Shakspeare,” p. 118). The reason is that Shakespeare, unlike Napoleon, is an exemplary exponent of the gift: he disappears completely into his works, a virtue that renders these works unmatched in the language in terms of their extent of circulation, currency value, and versatility. Shakespeare’s power is his adaptability, his capacity to fulfill the requirement for a cultural form that can constitute a mode of equivalence into and out of which the comparative value of innumerable contexts might be mediated.³⁷ The necessity that Shakespeare’s personal idiosyncrasies disappear into the general abstraction his name represents is merely a necessary corollary. And in this respect, there should be no surprise about the other aspect of Shakespeare’s writing that Emerson chooses to venerate: he “esteemed the mass of old plays waste stock, in which any experiment could be freely tried” (“Shakspeare,” p. 111). It is practically essential that Shakespeare should have been a cultured and conscious plagiarist.

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ABSTRACT

Benjamin Pickford, “Context Mediated: Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Political Economy of Plagiarism” (pp. 35–63)

Context has long been a critical determiner of methodologies for literary studies, granting scholars the tools to make objective claims about a text’s political or economic relation to the situation of its genesis. This essay argues that Ralph Waldo Emerson anticipatively criticizes our commitment to such practices through his use of plagiarism—a literary mode that exemplifies the denial of the sovereignty of context. I focus on two core principles that underlie Emerson’s conception of literature’s civic role in *Essays: Second Series* (1844): first, that literature is driven by an impulse to decontextualize; second, that this means that it has a deep affinity with the deterritorializing logic of capital. Provocatively proposing Emerson as a theorist of the relation between literature and economics, I argue that *Essays: Second Series* shows how the literary text

³⁷ Compare Emerson’s essay “History” from 1841: “All that Shakspeare says of the king, yonder slip of a boy that reads in the corner, feels to be true of himself” (Ralph Waldo Emerson, “History,” in *Collected Works*, II, 5).

can negotiate its ineluctable culpability with capitalism, but this does not mean that it can presume to possess a privileged point of vantage that might deny such culpability. Given that this is precisely what much historicizing or contextualizing scholarship implies, I contend that Emerson gives us a case study in the limits of literature and criticism's economic agency.

Keywords: Ralph Waldo Emerson; plagiarism; context; historicism; economics