



Emerson's Telescope: Jones Very and Romantic Individualism

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The character sheds not its characteristic on its surroundings, whereas, the original character, essentially such, is like a revolving Drummond light, raying away from itself all round it—everything is lit by it, everything starts up to it (mark how it is with Hamlet), so that, in certain minds, there follows upon the adequate conception of such a character, an effect, in its way, akin to that which in Genesis attends upon the beginning of things.

—Melville, *The Confidence-Man*

In dismissing him I seem to have discharged an arrow into the heart of society.

—Emerson, *Journals*

IN his 1938 essay “Jones Very and R.W. Emerson: Aspects of New England Mysticism” the poet and critic Yvor Winters offered a reappraisal and rehabilitation of the nineteenth century American poet, Jones Very. *Maule’s Curse*, the study that contained the essay, mounted an unrestrained attack on Winters’s menagerie of bêtes noires: emotion, romanticism, Ralph Waldo Emerson, ambiguity (obscurantism), and art that served what Winters considered to be undigested experience. Very was offered as antidote to Emerson, that “limb of the Devil,” and elevated as a “saintly man” who embodied the sort of mystic power his slippery Concord elder only affected.¹

¹Yvor Winters, *Maule’s Curse: Seven Studies in the History of American Obscurantism* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1938), 131, 126. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text.

Winters was an intense but idiosyncratic critic. As Denis Donoghue has shrewdly explained, Winters's creative and critical oeuvre was "propelled, driven" by "a sense of implacable wilderness, and a corresponding sense of the mind's exposure. The only answer [was] an order commensurate in force and scope."² Though in the mid-1920s Winters was not alone in opposing what he considered to be nineteenth-century fogginess, the specific energy of his turn against nature and emotion seems to correlate strongly to personal experience. Diagnosed with tuberculosis when he was eighteen, he spent the better part of three years at a sanatorium in New Mexico before taking a teaching job in a remote town in the northern part of the state. His poetry and fiction rooted in this period describe confrontations with a hostile, unfeeling natural world, an encroaching darkness and terror sometimes imagined as an invasive demon. By the later 1920s Winters had abandoned his early interest in imagism for more explicit strategies of resistance to an inchoate emotionalism. As Dick Davis explains, "[i]magism, as Winters had practiced it, had attempted to break down the barriers between the self and the external universe in order to assert and experience a state of numinous absorption in nature. For whatever personal reasons, he experienced this absorption as terror, an intimation of the dissolution of death."³ A later statement in Winters's *The Function of Criticism* declares that a poem is "a rational statement about a human experience," one that communicates the emotion of that experience but passes judgment on it. The poem, preferably the short lyric, is thus "a method for perfecting the understanding and moral discrimination; it is not an obscurely isolated end in itself."⁴ Perhaps more than a momentary stay against confusion, poetry in Winters's eyes was a way to hold back and rationalize

²"The Black Ox," *The New York Review of Books*, February 29, 1968, 22–24.

³*Wisdom and Wilderness: The Achievement of Yvor Winters* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983), 59.

⁴Quoted in Jan Schreiber, "The Absolutist: The Poetry and Criticism of Yvor Winters," *Contemporary Poetry Review*, July 2010.

unsettling or overwhelming experiences. He sought certainty above all, a crystalline perfection of form and concept untroubled by ambiguity.

The essay devoted to Very in *Maule's Curse* bears out this Manichean opposition between chaos and order. Emerson—and his embrace of continental romanticism—is Winters's primary target; Very is his weapon. Though pronouncing himself “at every turn unsympathetic” with Very's project, Winters praises the way the poet, thought by some to be mad, relates his mystical experience in a language that is calm, clear, and formally bound. His poems “render exactly that which he has to say” (143), and “the substance is the substance of personal experience” (142) seen from a distance that allows for the judgment and choice that Winters considered essential to any depiction of modern life. For Winters, language was not a tool for exploration or discovery; it was a means to consolidate and measure. Ambiguity was the sign of an entanglement with emotion and experience that he considered misleading and dangerous. “Emerson at the core is a fraud and sentimentalist” (143), Winters claims, because he merely surrenders to passing feeling and has no conception of absolute truth. He is not a mystic, just a promoter of quasi-mystical notions; if followed, his ideas would lead to madness and animalistic anarchy, crowds of automatons “guided by instinct,” unable to make conscious, rational choices (133).

Not surprisingly, Winters's classicist conception of poetic language yields oddly nearsighted interpretations of romantic writers. Winters disdains “irresolution,” arguing that “it is possible to solve any problem of insoluble experience by retreating a step and defining the boundary at which comprehension ceases, and by then making the necessary moral adjustments to that boundary” (156). Truth—or the perception of truth—cannot be ambiguous, uncertain, or, it is tempting to add, particularly complex. The poet can only walk up to the abyss; she can never look in. From this vantage, Emerson's image-rich, exploratory sentences would necessarily be discounted by Winters's standards. The rhetorical complexity of the essayist trying on

images and micro-styles, exaggerating, exhorting, letting metaphor carry meaning beyond the edges of the rational, amounted for him to little more than romantic blur. Clarity of understanding must precede its realization in language, and in its ideal form the perfect poem must not disguise its rhetorical intentions.

Winters is happiest in *Maule's Curse* when he detects "perfection of structure, perfection and power of phrase" (144) in the service of a strong conviction derived from personal experience. This was the essence of Very's achievement, as Winters saw it, and he cites a number of Very's sonnets that do in fact channel his mystical experiences into utterances of almost eerie calm. But was it the achievement of a "major" poet, the third after Melville and Dickinson in the American nineteenth century (Whitman is of course banished from this ranking because of his debt to Emerson)? The critical judgment here seems faulty, a wish rather than an insight, based more on Winters's own psychological requirements than on sound critical argument. A fuller view of Very—and, to be fair, Winters had access to a limited set of the poems, excluding for the most part the large number of sonnets set in the voice of Jesus—suggests that the Salem poet's classicism was less controlled than it might otherwise seem based on Winters's examples.⁵ But Winters is decidedly not interested in messiness, much less in the psychological complications of a poet who claimed his sonnets were *literally* dictated by the Holy Spirit. Very's "conscientious effort to render exactly that which he has to say," he argues, demonstrates that he ("or the Power that directed him") had the "conscience, the seriousness, of the artist" (143–44). And this seriousness was enough for Winters to make Very the perfect example of everything his Emerson had failed to be.

⁵Winters notes that he has compared the 1839, 1883, and 1886 editions of Very's poems. None of these included the manuscript poems in the voice of Christ, most of which were printed for the first time in William Bartlett's, *Jones Very: Emerson's "Brave Saint,"* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1942). For a full history of Very's manuscripts and published collections, see Helen R. Deese, *Jones Very: The Complete Poems* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), lix–lxxi.

Whatever the faults of Winters's reading, however, elements of his attack on Emerson retain their potency, particularly when he analyzes the effect of the "brave saint" on Emerson and the Transcendentalist circle in Concord. Winters may have willfully misunderstood Emerson's poems and essays, but he is right to say that Very troubled the seemingly smooth surface of Emerson's subjectivism. Whether "mad" or not, Very brought an intensity to bear on Emerson's ideas that forced a revelation of possible weaknesses. In examining his brief but strange career as the poet-mystic of the Concord circle, it can be difficult to decide whether Very was Emerson's new Christ (the "One man" who "was true to what is in you and me") or a darker avatar of post-romantic modernism.⁶ The "brave saint" seems poised at the crux where romantic individualism was forced to come to terms with the costs of isolation in a modernizing world. In many respects—and especially when seen through Emerson's eyes—Very prophetically anticipates Melville's *Bartleby*, pressing his worldly employer toward a troubling recognition of modern isolation. In this respect he may have been more than a New England eccentric: he may have catalyzed the crisis in individualism that eventually produced Winters's savage response to romanticism.

As Solitary as Jesus

Very's notoriety in Boston and Salem intellectual circles can be dated specifically to September 1838. A few months earlier, Emerson had delivered the customary speech to the graduating class of the Harvard Divinity School. This now infamous lecture, with its radical claim that Jesus's divinity was present in all men, put a match to the parched landscape of conservative Unitarianism. Outrage followed. The Unitarian defenders of traditional Christology and supernatural miracles charged Emerson with atheism; his allies countered that individual experience, not ancient magic tricks, was central to a living

⁶Ralph Waldo Emerson, "An Address to the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, July 15, 1838," in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 80.

spirituality. Emerson remained silent, but his provocation had done its work: the controversy simmered for months, influencing, among others, the slim, severe young student he had met earlier that year.

Jones Very was already a well-known local poet when Elizabeth Peabody heard his lecture “Why There Cannot Be Another Epic Poem” at the Salem Lyceum near the end of December 1837. The talk, written when Very was still an undergraduate at Harvard, was an impressive display of historical literary criticism and a robust defense of romantic poetry’s attention to the inner life, a focus made inevitable by the emergence of Christianity: “The effect of Christianity was to make the individual mind the great object of regard, the centre of eternal interest, . . . ; so the soul of the modern poet, feeling itself contending with motives of godlike power *within*, must express that conflict in the dramatic form, the poetry of sentiment.”⁷ Taken with the “uncertain, shy, and embarrassed” young man, Peabody invited him to walk home to Charter Street with her and her father.⁸ Along the way Very confessed that he was “an enthusiastic listener to Mr. Emerson” and explained that he was working on an essay to address Shakespeare’s lack of Christianity in light of his greatness as a writer.⁹ As soon as Very left that evening, Peabody wrote to Emerson and suggested that he invite Very to repeat his lecture in Concord. On April 4, Very did in fact present “Epic Poetry” at the Concord Lyceum, impressing the thirty-four-year-old author of *Nature*, who penciled the following inside his younger friend’s copy of the famous manifesto of Transcendentalism: “Harmony Of Man With Nature Must Be Reconciled With God.”¹⁰ A second visit followed a few days later when

⁷“Epic Poetry,” in Jones Very, *Poems and Essays* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1886), 14–15. Emphasis in original.

⁸Elizabeth Peabody to William P. Andrews, November 12, 1880, in *Letters of Elizabeth Peabody: American Renaissance Woman*, ed. Bruce A. Ronda (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), 404–5.

⁹Peabody, *Letters*, 405.

¹⁰Edwin Gittleman, *Jones Very: The Effective Years, 1833–1840* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 164.

Very and several friends from Harvard appeared at Emerson's house after a long walk, prompting an improvised dinner party that included Thoreau and the local minister, Barzillai Frost. This festive gathering cheered and encouraged Emerson, who had been generally pessimistic about the future of the ministry. The natural radicalism of the students—and Very's impressive intensity—may have confirmed his distaste for what he considered Frost's plodding, lifeless preaching and set his mind toward the changes he thought were crucial to the training of new ministers.¹¹ In his insightful biography of Very, Edwin Gittleman argues persuasively that these first meetings between Emerson and Very significantly influenced the divinity school speech Emerson was then writing:

That he had begun to “conceive hopes” for America at this time (less than two weeks after he had agreed to speak to the graduating class), was in part, Emerson admitted, due to the dramatic impact Very twice had made upon him. To hear a Harvard divinity student sounding so unlike a student of Harvard divinity was reassuring. It was a hopeful sign, finding the moral sentiments of this enthusiastic nonconformist thriving in that center of higher conformity. Very's ability to live in “society” without being infected by what was worst and most characteristic of that “society” confirmed Emerson's decision to further stimulate the culture of such uncommon growths.¹²

Very's “enthusiastic” non-conformity issued from his increasing conviction that he was slowly conquering his personal will and coming ever closer to embodying the pure, unfiltered commands of the Holy Spirit. Three years earlier he had responded to what in retrospect seem like normal sexual feelings with a desire to rid himself of all selfish or carnal impulses. As he became a tutor in Greek and an unofficial student in the Divinity School, he gradually intensified his asceticism, channeling all of his energies into scholarship, teaching, and the writing of meditative sonnets. An early description of his spiritual and sexual

¹¹Barbara L. Packer gives a penetrating account of Emerson's fatigue with local preaching and Very's disruptive but encouraging presence in Concord in *The Transcendentalists* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 72.

¹²Gittleman, *Jones Very*, 165.

crisis, likely composed in September of 1837, suggests both the dilemma at hand and his ability to constrain its emotion in a fixed form:

I gazed upon thy face—and beating life,
Once stilled its sleepless pulse in my breast,
And every thought whose being was a strife
Each in its silent chamber sank to rest;
I was not, save it were a thought of thee,
The world was but a spot where thou hadst trod,
From every star thy glance seemed fixed on me,
Almost I loved thee better than my God.¹³

At the time he first met Emerson, Very had not yet mastered this internal struggle between body and soul, but he had absorbed the lessons of *Nature* and may have been bold enough to consider its author an intellectual partner, less a guide from whom to seek advice than a fraternal spirit. It does seem clear that Very was primed, both emotionally and intellectually, to hear the anti-establishment message Emerson delivered at the Divinity School in July of 1838: by the start of the autumn term that year Very had come to believe that his “identification with Christ” was complete.¹⁴

The sequence of events that followed that strange day in September when he raised his voice and exhorted his class to “Flee to the mountains, for the end of all things is at hand!” was entirely predictable, and yet its significance as a moment of collision between the heretical fringes of old Calvinism and the new individualism has been underestimated. After his dismissal from Harvard, return to Salem, and subsequent confinement at McLean Hospital (hustled there by angry Salem ministers he had tried to “baptize”), Very again returned to Concord, this time for a week’s visit with Emerson. The biographical traces of this encounter are few but well documented. Despite

¹³“Beauty,” in Deese, *Jones Very*, 58.

¹⁴See Peabody, *Letters*, 406: “[Shakespeare] did not realize personally that he saw with Him who sends his rain on just and unjust—But *we* were *called* to do this!—to do it would be to be hidden in Christ—This identification with Christ seemed to be his aim—It was a spiritual act which would enable us to see what was in man as Christ did.”

efforts by Gittleman to use Very's contemporaneous letters to flesh out their conversations, we actually have only fragments from Emerson's journals and letters to gauge what passed between them. Nevertheless, these sparse entries are fascinating, not only for what they reveal about Very's state of mind but for what they record of Emerson's complex reactions to his ever more demanding visitor.¹⁵

On October 26, Emerson noted Very's arrival "two days since" and admitted that his presence "gave occasion to many thoughts on his peculiar state of mind and his relation to society."¹⁶ He classified his visitor as a "monotone," someone obsessed by a single idea or conviction, and recognized that the critical value of this "telescope's" focus was his ability to isolate and highlight a single "evil" or correctable human failing from the "sphere" of thought and experience. Only in this way can we see "the immense extent of that revolution that must be wrought" toward our apprehension of the "all in all" (7:117). Even though this was their third meeting, it was Emerson's first real opportunity to listen at length to Very's "mission." He was impressed and perhaps even a little flattered by this almost familiar embodiment of his own ideas grafted onto the wild vine of Calvinist and Quaker enthusiasm. Only a few weeks later, despite differences that had emerged in the meantime, Emerson thought enough of Very's new essay on Shakespeare to list him in his journal as one of the dramatist's greatest critics (along with "Coleridge, Lamb, Schlegel, Goethe" and Herder) and later, to pair him with Bronson Alcott, as one of the spirits of the "Revolutionary age" (7:147, 207). The Shakespeare essay in particular, with its argument that the playwright and poet was "not to be esteemed so much a man as a natural phenomenon. . . . To be natural . . . is indeed alone to be truly great; for that which is so is God's," seems to have convinced Emerson that Very's so-called madness had been

¹⁵Gittleman, *Jones Very*, 240–52.

¹⁶Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume VII of *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. A.W. Plumstead and Harrison Hayford (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 116. Subsequent reference to the journals will appear parenthetically.

exaggerated.¹⁷ To Elizabeth Peabody, he declared the young writer “profoundly sane,”¹⁸ and he recorded his unalloyed delight when his odd visitor routed the local “preacher” (again Barzillai Frost) leading a meeting of Sunday school teachers in Emerson’s parlor:

I ought not to omit recording the astonishment which seized all the company when our brave saint, the other day, fronted the presiding preacher. The preacher began to tower and dogmatize with many words. Instantly I foresaw that his doom was fixed; and as quick as he ceased speaking, the saint set right and blew away all his words in an instant,—unhorsed him, I may say, and tumbled him along the ground in utter dismay, like my angel of Heliodorus. Never was discomfiture more complete. In tones of genuine pathos he “bid him wonder at the Love which suffered him to speak there in his chair, of things he knew nothing of . . . —and yet he was allowed to sit and talk, whilst every word he spoke was a step of departure from the truth, and of this he commanded himself to bear witness!” (7:127–28)

Very’s ability to usher in social anarchy confirmed the power of his unselfconscious egotism. His performance was just the sort of revolutionary rudeness Emerson would celebrate three years later in “Self-Reliance.” He marveled at how Very could utter apparently egotistical absurdities without a trace of affectation: “He felt it an honor, he said, to wash his face, being, as it was, the temple of the spirit” (7:123). And he recognized that such disarming candor forced others into “true relations” with Very because his words were “no more disputable than the shining of yonder sun or the blowing of this sound wind” (7:491, 522).

But to appreciate Very’s sincerity was not to accept Veryism. Emerson’s understanding and acceptance of the subjective perception of truth divided him from Very’s pre-modern unity of self and spirit. In the entry most important to Winters’s reading, Emerson describes his attempts to explain the conditional limits on individual knowledge:

¹⁷Very, *Essays*, 49, 50.

¹⁸Quoted in Gittleman, *Jones Very*, 250.

When Jones Very was in Concord, he said to me, "I always felt when I heard you speak or read your writings that you saw the truth better than others, yet I felt that your spirit was not quite right. It was as if a vein of colder air blew across me." He seemed to expect from me a full acknowledgement of his mission and a participation of the same. Seeing this, I asked him if he did not see that my thoughts and my position were constitutional, that it would be false and impossible for me to say his things or try to occupy his ground as for him to usurp mine?⁹ (8:148)

For Winters this account demonstrates Emerson's fraudulence: he pretends to mystical experience but cannot believe in its absolute truth. "Emerson tried to explain to Very that truth is relative, and Very tried to point out to Emerson that truth is absolute" (134). The distinction is correct but clumsy to the point of willful misrepresentation. A better reading would note that Emerson makes little claim about truth itself; instead he describes the limits on perception. Our "thoughts" and our "position" are "constitutional" of how we see the world, not of how the world exists. (There is ample evidence in Emerson's writing to demonstrate that he relied on the assumption of a general truth in nature and spirit to tame the anarchy of individual vision.)¹⁹ As a consequence, and as he explained to Very, "sincerity is the highest compliment you can pay" (7:124) because it indicates a oneness between the self and experience that very likely, if not certainly, gives us a glimpse of truth. A world framed by such skepticism was, of course, unacceptable to his younger visitor, who seemed to yearn for a kind of communion and warmth that Emerson could not supply.²⁰

¹⁹See Packer, *The Transcendentalists*, 63; Emerson "reminded his audience [in 1837] that the self-trust he has been recommending to them as the fountainhead of all virtue is 'not a faith in man's own whim or conceit, as if he were quite severed from all other beings and acted on his private account, but a perception that the mind common to the Universe is disclosed to the individual through his own nature.'"

²⁰In describing Very's two visions of nature, one pre- and one post-conversion, David Robinson has suggested that Very understood conversion as an "epistemological change": "the sleepers" and those who are awake see nature differently. It remains clear, however, that the converted see the truth, not just another version of the truth, while the unconverted fail to see the spiritual force that dwells within the material world. "Jones Very, the Transcendentalists, and the Unitarian Tradition," *Harvard Theological Review* 68 (1975): 103-24, 118.

Winters's simplifications notwithstanding, what remains vital about this encounter in Concord woods is Very's recognition of the "vein of colder air" moving through Emerson's spirit. Though we might imagine that this metaphor simply records Very's disappointment at Emerson's reticence, its emotional truth is confirmed by the most remarkable passage of all in Emerson's notes on Very:

I told Jones Very that I had never suffered, that I could scarcely bring myself to feel a concern for the safety and life of my nearest friends that would satisfy them; that I saw clearly that if my wife, my child, my mother, should be taken from me, I should still remain whole, with the same capacity of cheap enjoyment from all things. I should not grieve enough, although I love them. But could I make them feel what I feel,—the boundless resources of the soul,—remaining entire when particular threads of relation are snapped,—I should then dismiss forever the little remains of uneasiness I have in regard to them. (7:132)

Commentators have often cited this passage as foreshadowing Emerson's similar confession in 1844's "Experience": "In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate,—no more. I cannot get it nearer to me."²¹ The earlier entry suggests that this coldness or sense of distance from feelings had been with Emerson for some time, a thread in his inner life that he pulled at from time to time.²² But it is nevertheless striking that Very, with his unguarded and insistent evangelism, should elicit this moment from someone as personally elusive as Emerson. Very's ability to evoke "true relations" with all he encountered seems to have included Emerson, who was apparently surprised by his own candor.

In "Experience" the confession of emotional constraint appears in the essay's great and brooding overture, that groping search for clarity governed by the question, "Where do we find

²¹Emerson, "Experience," in *Essays and Lectures*, 473. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

²²In fact, he had made a similar entry in 1831 after his first wife's death: "I loved Ellen, & love her with an affection that would ask nothing but its indulgence to make me blessed. Yet when she was taken from me, the air was still sweet, the sun was not taken down from my firmament," *Journals*, 5:19–20.

ourselves?" (471). After a general declaration that all desire leads to illusory ends, Emerson wonders at the "opium . . . instilled into all disaster," the inability to feel or mourn because trauma presents only "slippery sliding surfaces" (472). Grief seems impossible, not only due to lack of feeling but because of a distance that somehow cannot be crossed. "I cannot get it nearer to me," he notes, perhaps because nothing seems quite real or reality seems roped off by an invisible border. Perhaps death will give us the contact we miss. Nothing is clear, and nature, once a comfort, is elusive and strange:

I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition. Nature does not like to be observed, and likes that we should be her fools and playmates. . . . Direct strokes she never gave us power to make; all our blows glance, all our hits are accidents. (473)

Stanley Cavell has commented brilliantly on this famous passage as an anticipation of Heidegger (and a complex response to Kant's conditional imperative), but it takes on a slightly different aspect when read as an elaboration of Emerson's response to Very.²³ In addition to a confession of haunting personal loneliness (the often noted pun on "unhandsome" suggests the failure of both *logos* and *eros*), the passage establishes its mourning as the loss of precisely what Jones Very—legitimately or not, admirably or not—possessed. In a form less brutal than Winters insists upon, it also admits to a kind of fraudulence, a failure to be and act that Emerson recognizes all too clearly. In fact, it is the consciousness of his false grief that drives his sense of alienation and loss: "I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature" (473). His skepticism, which he later equates to a post-Lockean "Fall of Man," was of course antithetical to Very, who brought with him not only a pre-modern monism but the fateful ghost of Jonathan Edwards's predestination. From at least the time of

²³See *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 38–39.

“Nature,” Emerson had understood that the universe we perceive becomes a complex product of who we are, but in “Experience” the emotional costs of such subjectivity seem far higher. Locked inside “these colored and discoloring lenses,” we can see only the world we are determined to see and so are separated, isolated, alone:

Thus inevitably does the universe wear our color, and every object fall successively into the subject itself. The subject exists, the subject enlarges; all things sooner or later fall into place. As I am, so I see; use what language we will, we can never say anything but what we are; Hermes, Cadmus, Columbus, Newton, Buonaparte, are the mind’s ministers. Instead of feeling a poverty when we encounter a great man, let us treat the new comer like a travelling geologist, who passes through our estate, and shows us good slate, or limestone, or anthracite, in our brush pasture. The partial action of each strong mind in one direction, is a telescope for the objects on which it is pointed. (489)

It is striking, but perhaps not surprising, that this mournful description of the inevitability and loneliness of character is recorded in the words of Jones Very. Not long after his week’s visit to Concord, Very came to hear Emerson speak in Boston and spent some time with him afterward. He retracted his earlier acquiescence to Emerson’s explanation of subjectivity and insisted instead on the natural truth of his own spiritual insights: “When I was at Concord,” he explained, “‘I tried to say you were also right; but the spirit said, you were not right. It is just as if I should say, It is not morning; but the morning says, It is the morning. Use what language you will,’ he said, ‘you can never say anything but what you are’” (Emerson, *Journals*, 8:148). By 1844, at least in the remarkable first part of “Experience,” Emerson has transposed the tonal register of Very’s phrase into a comparatively bleak assessment of the modern condition; not even nature can save us from this house of mirrors. The ecstatic experience of the woods seems now, in the “mood” of loss, just another version of self-reflective perception. To be great (or useful) is possible only to the monotones and “telescopes,” those unaware of the prison house, who reveal nothing more than the singular objects of their obsessions.

Very's presence in "Experience" suggests that Emerson saw him as the kind of prophetic figure he called for, perhaps hoped to be, but believed on some level to be anachronistic in a contemporary context.²⁴ Emerson could speak of the god-like power of individuals, but he could never have the absolute faith of a Fox, Swedenborg, or Very, the sort of figure whose conviction (or madness) allowed him to "command and awe men" (*Journals*, 7:232). He considered such figures powerful but ultimately too narrowed by their convictions. At best, "Experience" argues, the individual who is not a "monotone" is limited to the grace (or "small mercies") of moving among surfaces—an enabling insight, perhaps, but still an adjunct to grief. Meanwhile, Very offered evidence of both conscious power and unconscious isolation, messianic certainty and modern loneliness: "And he is gone into the multitude," Emerson recorded at the end of the week's visit, "as solitary as Jesus. In dismissing him I seem to have discharged an arrow into the heart of society. Wherever that young enthusiast goes he will astonish and disconcert men by dividing for them the cloud that covers the profound gulf that is in man" (7:123). With its strange blend of the quizzical and mournful, this passage indicates that Very, despite his almost comical oddity, may have done precisely this to and for Emerson: struck him sharp and made clear the "profound gulf" between the self and the world that Emerson came to see more clearly as his own—and the era's—burden.

Very and Bartleby: "A corpse in the apartment"

Critics have often detected a reaction to Emerson and his ideas in Melville's 1853 story "Bartleby, the Scrivener."²⁵ In

²⁴Frank M. Meola suggests something similar in his meditation on Emerson's friendships with Achille Murat and Very: "This suspension [skepticism's openness] implies that Jones Very's sort of belief was no longer possible, even if it was vastly superior to the attenuated gestures of conventional religion, because it was still too rigid, too unchanging, and too ponderous." See "Emerson Between Faith and Doubt," *New England Review* 32 (2011): 111–23.

²⁵Christopher W. Sten, for instance, argues for Emerson's "The Transcendentalist" as the source of the story, claiming that the essay's idealist and materialist philosophies are represented in Bartleby and the lawyer, respectively. See "Bartleby the

Pierre (1852), *The Confidence-Man* (1857) and tales such as “Cock-A-Doodle-Do!” and “Poor Man’s Pudding,” both from the same period as “Bartleby,” Melville had demonstrated a willingness to satirize romantic or transcendentalist concepts, and it may well be that the “Tale of Wall-Street” issues from this same well of suspicion. Perhaps, for instance, the copyist could be understood as an avatar of self-reliance taken to a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*, his social isolation a reckoning with the cost of romantic heroism. Perhaps the self as Emerson constructs it has no great source of spiritual power. Perhaps in an environment like Wall Street, the unattached “I” is empty, the product rather than the antithesis of its relations to others.²⁶ Less common is the claim that Emerson or his style of thinking can be detected in the actions of the lawyer-narrator—and for good reason. The narrator who calls himself “an eminently *safe* man” is clearly a creature of social convention, concerned to remain respectable, “cozy” so that his business can flourish without disruption.²⁷ His reasoning and approach to dealing with his rebellious copyist often rely on precisely the sort of conventional thinking Emerson pitted himself against. And yet the relationship between the lawyer and Bartleby—one public and attendant to his public image; the other private, intense, ensnared by his own purity—often appears to mirror the structure of Emerson’s relationship with several of his quasi-disciples, including Jones Very. Has Bartleby come to the lawyer’s office to copy text for him in much the same way that Thoreau or

Transcendentalist: Melville’s Dead Letter to Emerson,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 35 (1974): 30–44.

²⁶See Sten, “Bartleby, the Transcendentalist,” 38, 39. Gabriel Alkon, after establishing self-reliance as a form of pure potentiality, claims that “Melville has prepared a message for Emerson: potentiality alone is powerless and hopeless.” “Freedom and Integral Will: The Abandonment of Sovereign Power in Emerson, Melville, and Agamben,” *Telos* 152 (2010): 127–44, 140. For a broader discussion of the story as it relates to Emerson’s quietist tendencies, see Clark Davis “Not Like Any Form of Activity”: Waiting in Emerson, Melville, and Weil,” *Common Knowledge* 15 (2009): 39–58.

²⁷Herman Melville, “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” in *Billy Budd and Other Stories*, (New York: Penguin, 1986), 4. Subsequent references will appear in the text. David Dowling notes that Emerson’s changing attitudes toward Very are similar to the fluctuations of the lawyer’s treatment of Bartleby. See *Emerson’s Protégés: Mentoring and Marketing Transcendentalism’s Future* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 315.

Very found their way to Emerson's house in Concord, not in a historical sense but as a test of his unrealized idealism? Can "Bartleby" be understood as a meditation on this kind of disruption, like the turbulence Very brought to Emerson's thinking in 1838–39, a challenge not only to his thought but to his inner life, his emotional center? And if so, what light can this story throw on the Emerson-Very relationship that connects it to Melville's larger investigation of isolation and failed human connection in the later stages of American romanticism?

Let me make clear first of all that I am not claiming Melville based the character of Bartleby on Jones Very. A tempting, though circumstantial, case could be made that the name or peculiar history of the Salem poet came up in Melville's conversations with Hawthorne in the early 1850s. Hawthorne's tolerant but quizzical relationship with Very is well documented, and in the 1843 version of his story "The Hall of Fantasy," he placed Very in that part of the hall that contains Emerson and other "disciples of the Newness"; standing alone, Very remains "within a circle which no other of mortal race could enter, nor himself escape from."²⁸ Similarly, in "A Virtuoso's Collection," included in *Mosses from an Old Manse*, the narrator discovers a "Wind flower and a Columbine" (poems imagined as pressed flowers) from Very in "Cornelius Agrippa's book of magic."²⁹ In his discussion of their relationship, Gittleman suggests that Hawthorne took an initial interest in Very precisely because he reminded him of an evangelistic character he had previously created for "The Storyteller," later published as "Passages from a Relinquished Work," also in *Mosses*: "It was almost as if Jones Very were an invention of Hawthorne's own Gothic imagination, a character whom he felt he understood completely, and for whom he was in a sense morally responsible."³⁰ And it was

²⁸Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Hall of Fantasy," in *Hawthorne: Tales and Sketches* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 1491.

²⁹See Hawthorne, *Tales and Sketches*, 709. Robert D. Arner has also found a satire of Very's self-centeredness in Hawthorne's "Egotism; Or, the Bosom Serpent." See "Hawthorne and Jones Very: Two Dimensions of Satire in 'Egotism; Or, the Bosom Serpent,'" *The New England Quarterly* 42 (1969): 267–75.

³⁰Gittleman, *Jones Very*, 284.

of course Melville's review of *Mosses* that launched his friendship with Hawthorne in 1850. The cumulative effect of these connections is certainly enough to make it plausible, though not at all necessary, that conversations between Hawthorne and Melville could have touched upon the strange case of Jones Very, if nothing else out of their shared interest in the kind of self-obsessed, isolated personalities that populate their fiction. When we consider the famous or eccentric characters of both authors—Wakefield, Ethan Brand, the Reverend Mr. Hooper; Ahab, Bartleby, Pierre, the man in cream colors aboard the *Fidèle*—we can easily spot, if nothing else, a strong family resemblance to the somewhat notorious Salem poet who, however briefly, presented himself as a new messiah.

Regardless of potential biographical connections that might prove influence, the resemblance between Very (as Emerson describes him) and the cadaverous scrivener is not difficult to discover. Both are quiet ascetics, socially strange or estranged, though of exemplary personal, even moral, deportment. Their behavior is unique and unyielding to social convention: the social scenes in which they appear form around rather than incorporate them. They stand, as it were, on stage, always apart, though to what extent each understands his effect on the social environment is uncertain. In their influence on others, they both appear remarkably representative—one historically, one imaginatively—of Melville's definition of character as formulated in *The Confidence-Man*, the "original" creation, like a "Drummond light" (a calcium or limelight, used in theaters): "everything is lit by it, everything starts up to it."³¹ In Emersonian terms, both Very and Bartleby are almost absurdly self-reliant, though hardly in a sense indicative of Emerson's buoyant praise of instinct and spontaneity. Instead they each suggest a mournful malformation of individualism, the silence and recalcitrance of the stubborn rather than the ecstatic. (It is true that Very began his manic period as a kind of evangelist, hoping for a time to pull close those to whom he bore witness,

³¹Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (New York: Norton, 2006), 238.

but his effect was primarily disruptive rather than constructive; he gathered very few actual disciples, more often, like Bartleby, only spectators and antagonists.)

More important still is the clear engagement of both figures with concepts of will. To a variety of critics, Very has seemed at times to gather certain radical Protestant strains—antinomianism, Quakerism, Edwardsian Calvinism—perhaps in an unconscious effort to approximate some form of quietism.³² His primary claim to a higher state rested on his conviction that he had erased his personal will: “I felt within me a new will. . . . It seemed like my old will only it was to do good—it was a feeling of my own but a sensible will that was not my own. Accompanying this was another feeling as it were, a consciousness which seemed to say—‘That which creates you creates also that which you see or him to whom you speak,’ as it might be.”³³ This new force extended even to small, seemingly unconscious acts, and to some it produced a kind of behavior that seemed both exalting and exalted.³⁴ To others, Very’s denial of personal intent merely allowed for a stronger and somewhat disguised assertion of self. Hawthorne, for instance, ever willing to let Very be Very, nevertheless found him “always vain,” though he considered this vanity “innocent” and “sanctified by real piety and goodness.”³⁵ Melville seems to have intuited precisely this combination of self-assertion and (unconscious) egotism in his construction of Bartleby’s famous rejoinder. As Gilles Deleuze unpacks the phrase, Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” is “not a will to nothingness, but the growth of a nothingness of the will.” Asserting but withdrawing, preferring but negating, “the formula is ravaging, devastating, and

³²For an overview of Very’s connections to these various traditions, as well as an argument linking him more firmly to contemporary Unitarianism, see Robinson, “Jones Very.”

³³Gittleman, *Jones Very*, 187.

³⁴After Very’s extensive interview with William Ellery Channing, the great Unitarian told Elizabeth Peabody that to “hear him talk was like looking into the purely spiritual world—into truth itself. He had nothing of self exaggeration [*sic.*]. He seemed rather to have attained self annihilation [*sic.*] and become an oracle of God.” Quoted in Gittleman, *Jones Very*, 269.

³⁵Gittleman, *Jones Very*, 284.

leaves nothing standing its wake” except, we might add, the scrivener’s power over the lawyer and the domestic space of his office.³⁶ Will is asserted, even when it has no content. In Very’s case, this same “preference” is clearly present, though denied (or renamed) in deference to a higher power.³⁷ Its disruptive force is almost identical to *Bartleby’s*: the “cadaverous” scrivener single-handedly brings the lawyer’s business to a halt; Very, who reminded Emerson of “a corpse in the apartment” (*Journals*, 7:213) brought chaos and silence to the parlors of Concord.

Disruption is the key: both figures, through a strange assertion and denial of will (individualism thrust forward, then denied), disturb the order of the environments they enter. Through a combination of passive resistance (or should we say passive aggression?) and linguistic absolutism, they assert political and personal power. For the lawyer/narrator of “*Bartleby*” the disturbance is obvious: his settled notions of charity, of business and its cozy relationship with moneyed power, even his fashionable Christianity are not only challenged and found wanting but eventually routed, sent packing in shameful retreat. He cannot reach or understand his fellow man, and he proves unable to comprehend his profound responsibility for others, no matter how strange they may be. For Emerson the case is admittedly more subtle. He was not, on the face of it, a man like Melville’s lawyer. Very’s initial appearance and behavior in Concord delighted him precisely because of its anarchic effect on conventional social order. But Very’s insistent and quiet antagonism, his refusal to accept Emerson’s more complex understanding of epistemology, and his extravagant but naïve claims to truth wearied even the great collector of eccentrics. After muddling through the awkward process

³⁶See Gilles Deleuze, “*Bartleby; Or, The Formula*,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 70.

³⁷Robinson argues that Very’s determinism, though it appears Calvinistic, requires an assertion of will in order to achieve the lack of will he claimed: “Very’s emphasis on the availability of salvation to all men is accompanied by an emphasis on the necessity for each man to seek that salvation. Just as there are no elect in Very’s theology, neither is grace irresistible.” “Jones Very,” 110.

of editing Very's poetry for publication—how do you edit the Holy Spirit, who admits of no correction?—Emerson was more than relieved to see the last of his uncompromising “saint.” He did, however, retain a measure of regret, not unlike the doubts expressed by the lawyer in his more reflective moments. In “Friendship” (1840) Emerson acknowledged that Very had been capable of evoking an honesty of relations with all those he met: “No man would think of speaking falsely with him, or of putting him off with any chat of markets or reading-rooms. But every man was constrained by so much sincerity to the like plain dealing, and what love of nature, what poetry, what symbol of truth he had, he did certainly show him.” Though he was apt to be critical of Very's limitations (particularly his demand for agreement), Emerson's later comments suggest that their relatively brief friendship remained a touchstone for him. Aware of his own tendency to “parry” those who approached, he made it clear that Very had broken through these defenses and without effort had forced a kind of reckoning with his own store of “poetry” and “truth.”³⁸

There is little doubt that Very posed a challenge similar to Bartleby's: first, as a potential avatar of Emerson's own most radical thinking (a copyist, of sorts); second, as a “telescope” of spiritual concern so focused and intense that it prompted the confession of emotional failure later explored in “Experience.” The similarly wrong-footed lawyer in “Bartleby” never admits to such a flaw, but like Emerson he fails to break through, to touch or hold the estranged world of others that Bartleby represents. Throughout the story, despite his repeated efforts at charity and Christian ethics, he physically touches Bartleby only once, when he tests to see if “the silent man” is still alive in the Tombs. “Something prompted me to touch him. I felt his hand, when a tingling shiver ran up my arm and down my spine to my feet” (Melville, 45). It bears repeating Emerson's formulation in “Experience”: “I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome

³⁸Emerson, *Essays*, 347.

part of our condition” (“Experience,” 473). Emerson fends off Very’s sincerity and unconscious demand for honesty—perhaps even for intimacy of feeling—in part because he is intent on preserving his own “constitutional” thinking. But his distance is also a product of his understanding of subjectivity. If it is impossible, as he told Very, for two people to “occupy the same ground” philosophically, then “community” (understood as agreement) is indeed out of the question, except as an appreciation of the other’s sincerity. (In a later entry he complained that Very wanted only “community” whereas he himself liked “sharp salts” [9:311]). That this isolationism constituted a paradoxical trap he seemed not to have fully reckoned with until “Experience,” where Very’s words re-appear in more emotionally acute formulation. Perhaps, like “Bartleby’s” lawyer, who continually rationalizes his distaste for conflict, Emerson sensed that he was merely confirming Very’s Calvinistic understanding of character: “Use what language you will, . . . you can never say anything but what you are” (8:148).

Taken together, however, Emerson’s (failed) grief at the death of his son and Bartleby’s death in the Tombs amount to more than the limitations of specific people or personality types. The entire micro-trajectory—from Very’s messianic “madness” to Emerson’s confession to Melville’s stark dramatization of social failure—suggests a slow, systemic collapse, not only of the typically cited targets of “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (fashionable Christianity, the culture of business, and the ethic of charity in antebellum America) but of romantic individualism itself. It is as though Very, by claiming the messianic role Emerson had evoked in “The Divinity School Address,” not only precipitated the crisis made clear by “Experience” but predicted his own historical double, the pale scrivener, “the silent man” who himself foreshadows the modern isolato.

The Dead Letter Office

Is the dead letter office evoked at the end of “Bartleby” the tomb of Emersonian self-reliance? On the face of it the idea seems absurd: the concept and its influence continued well past

1853 and is arguably as alive, though in distorted forms, today as it was in 1841. But the presence of its echoes and attenuations offers no proof that the romantic self ever escaped the conceptual trap that walled in *Bartleby*. What distinguishes the scrivener as a character may in fact be his awareness of his imprisonment from the moment he first refuses the lawyer's request to proofread his copies. He stares at the wall outside the office window just as he later stares at the walls of the Tombs while the story's narrator, like many of Melville's aging bachelors, fails to unravel the knot of his clerk's meaning. The lawyer's version of *Bartleby's* back story seems designed to let him escape his own guilt by constructing a sentimental etiology that blames a failed governmental system. But the lawyer has seen just how impossible it is in his Wall Street world to communicate, to send a message of help or hope or love. His own attempts to "touch" *Bartleby*—not merely to change his life but to register on his consciousness in a way that matters—have ended on the same pile of lost letters and misdirected intentions he summons to salve his conscience. Emerson too we might place in the office—a much more subtle, wary, and complex awareness but nevertheless, like the lawyer, failing to grasp the unhandsome world, his grief the pain of its absence. As he told Very, sincerity may be the highest compliment you can pay to any another individual, but he never explained whether or not such praise could overcome loneliness. In the second part of "Experience," he finds himself offering (half-heartedly?) a deflated pragmatism:

Do not craze yourself with thinking, but go about your business anywhere. Life is not intellectual or critical, but sturdy. Its chief good is for well-mixed people who can enjoy what they find, without question. Nature hates peeping, and our mothers speak her very sense when they say, "Children, eat your victuals, and say no more of it." To fill the hour,—that is happiness; to fill the hour, and leave no crevice for a repentance or an approval. We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them. (478)

To skate requires ice of course, and coldness was the failing to which Emerson confessed. The solitary mind has here

become a threat, even a disappointment: its seductions lead to dead ends rather than ego-dissolving liberations. Better to pare your hopes, accept a chilled heart, and learn to live on its altered rhythms. Even the essay's more optimistic conclusion, which retains subjectivity but argues for its limitations as evidence of the individual's unique position and expression—"an irreducible given that locates and defines us," in David Robinson's phrase—suggests a kind of inhabitation of the office rather than an escape. It is, certainly, a way to move forward intellectually and in that sense an expression of hope, but it is also a way to remain, to live within and around the evidence of loss.³⁹

Solutions such as this, it is safe to say, were not acceptable to Yvor Winters. Though it might appear that the limited goals of pragmatism would satisfy his desire for restrained clarity, his appreciation of Very suggests that all such compromises with truth would be equally insufficient; a functional subjectivism would still pale against Very's rapt intensity. In pitting Very against Emerson, Winters was attempting to find ground on which to stand against subjectivity and modernity, some foothold where the solitary could see and experience a transmissible human truth and set it down in a formally disciplined utterance. To do so the poet had to confine herself to experience that could be presented clearly, concisely, using language not to explore the limits of thought but to verify her small horizon. Winters's complaint against Emerson—that he was a fraud, an obscurer of truth, a subjectivist—could be boiled down to the more direct accusation that Emerson was simply a late romantic, a proto-modern—and insufficiently aware of the terror

³⁹Robinson, "Experience, Instinct, and Emerson's Philosophical Reorientation," in *Emerson Bicentennial Essays*, ed. Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2006), 391–404. My reading of the second part of "Experience" is temperamentally closer to Sharon Cameron's sense that the essay's "conversion . . . savages the idea of reconciliation" and "insists definitionally on the isolated, the alien, the rootless, the excluded." See "Representing Grief: Emerson's 'Experience,'" *Representations* 15 (1986): 15–41, 37. More recently, Branka Arsić has argued that in the second part of "Experience" "[s]ubjectiveness is therefore already transcended by the forces of life that are in us if not accessible to us, forces that will 'swallow' it in the same way that vast affirmative being swallows all such negations." See "Against Pessimism: On Emerson's 'Experience,'" *Arizona Quarterly* 72 (2016): 25–45, 43. This argument was anticipated, to a degree, by Robinson's "Experience."

laced into his condition. For Winters, neither romantic individualism, with its privileging of emotion, nor a chastened pragmatism could combat the evil inherent in modern isolation: "But in that illusion [a universe which does not conform to our definition] we live from day to day; and in that life of illusion we govern ourselves by judgment and by choice; and should we deny or lose control of these, the illusion would become a horror" (Winters, 142).

In other words, Winters the ex-imagist and anti-romantic should be understood as a part of this history rather than a commentator on it. His championing of Very offers an atavistic response to the same problem that challenged Emerson and Melville—or, for that matter, T.S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens. The irony of his celebration of the "brave saint" lies in the possibility that it was Very who helped catalyze the late romantic crisis of which *Bartleby* is the symbol and Winters himself the product. The apocalyptic warning Very delivered that September day at Harvard may have been truer than he knew. But if he was the romantic Christ, the union of self and Holy Spirit he took himself to be, he was equally the harbinger of the pallid copyist, the "man without properties, without qualities."⁴⁰

⁴⁰Deleuze, "Bartleby," 74.

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