The Onward Way
Sherman Paul

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The Onward Way

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In a very real sense what I am going to say is the cry of its occasion. The cry, or outcry, of course, is not limited to poetry, which is one of the kinds of speech, the kind that issues from the dark silences of existence. The occasion that prompts much of our poetry and speech and that they, in turn, address, is seldom occasional, as, say, in the verse of Oliver Wendell Holmes; that is, it is seldom ceremonial or, to account for such occasions, communal. Our occasion is communal, evidence of our common life, and so I recognize its ceremonial aspect and am honored by it only as one can be when honored at home. Yet even this, for me, belongs to the occasion, the real occasion. For in being asked to speak I find myself asked—to answer. I find myself asked two inseparable questions: What am I thus privileged to say? What have you come here to hear?

When President Freedman established these lectures he provided a mandate for a convocation. He called us together in order that we might have our vocations together. The mandate instructs the speaker to “present significant aspects of his or her scholarly work to the entire University community and thereby stimulate intellectual communication among the many disciplines that comprise the University.” No one will deny the pertinence of this mandate nor remain unmoved by the words community and communication. They are kindred words belonging to the commune cluster, having communis in common. We have our communion, we truly do, when we communicate, when by speaking to each other in a common language we create a common world and constitute a public realm. We join hands by speaking and enter the round dance.

Kenneth Burke recently remarked that “love is the personalized word for communication.” This is a version of his motto Toward the Purification of War. I read it now in St. Augustine’s sense—love is concern for the being of another—and apply it to the public realm by indicating its plurality: concern for the being of others. We enter the public realm not only in order to make the self appear and have it confirmed but in solicitude for others. I forget now whether Heidegger said that language dwells in being or being dwells in language, but in any case language is the means by which we have our being together. It is the great chain of being. The cry of the occasion is always a cri de coeur. It is impossible to speak without love because eros gives us voice, and when I mentioned Buber I had in mind the fact that the intimate dialogue of I-Thou belongs as well to public speech.
No one will deny the pertinence of the mandate for another reason: it clearly puts our predicament, the scandal, so to speak, of a community of scholars no longer able to communicate with each other. We attribute this to specialization. We manufacture languages right and left, and there is some truth to the claim that we award our highest degree when students become as adept as their teachers in using the language of the specialty. Burke calls this “trained incapacity.” Less kind, Paul Goodman calls it “craft idiocy.” Is there any longer a common language among the many languages that comprise the University? Even now, as I speak, am I being heard? Not so long ago, you remember, Sir Charles Snow saw the matter in terms of two cultures, the humanistic-literary and the scientific. But surely this is no longer accurate. Many disciplines in the mandate is more to the point. Even within a single discipline, that, for example, of literary study, to cite my own, there are now many languages, some borrowed from science—languages that have opened a discipline that needed to be opened but that nevertheless widen the gulf of communication.

What we have in common is this predicament, and in being asked to speak I was troubled by it for several reasons. Wouldn’t a specialist speaking about his specialty to other specialists find himself justifying it, explaining its usefulness and significance much in the show-and-tell way he is asked to in writing grant proposals? Wouldn’t this be a form of self-advertisement, desperate, to be sure, especially so to the degree that others do not see its usefulness and significance? And that others no longer see this? Isn’t this the terror of our predicament as well as the terror of the twentieth-century world, evidence of the fact that we no longer share a common world but live in a cultural no-man’s-land, dismembered from our common past, without belief in the traditions that validated it, maintained it, gave it vital continuity? Doesn’t having to explain oneself, having no longer the salutary confirmation of colleagues and neighbors—and culture, after all, is just such confidence—doesn’t this put one in the terrible position of questioning the grounds of his work, the deepest and therefore most reluctantly examined assumptions of his vocation? And doesn’t it put the terrible question of whether one’s specialty is interesting at all—undermine the faith necessary to the work, hold one, mind you, to a grotesque accountability in the practice of thought, which hitherto has been—and still is the image of—the freest human activity?
The mandate proposes that I talk about my scholarly work, but who among you know my recent texts, since few among those in my own discipline know them, at best know only about them? Isn’t this generally the case? Isn’t this what much of our culture amounts to and the reason why literary criticism must first explain or make known the very texts it goes on to discuss? How wonderful it would be to talk about a text all of us know, to use this occasion to meditate once more, say, on Walden. But, then, Stanley Cavell, who meditated so well on this primary text, this classic of our literature, did so with a scepticism greater than mine, aware of the fact that even those of us gathered here probably have no more than three texts in common. What these were he never said. Finding out would make a lively and valuable game, not, I think, that we would find out but would have the scholarly pleasure that compensates for our predicament: we would exchange bibliographical information. Who doesn’t read his colleagues’ reading lists, not for the common but the uncommon books? When scholars meet, even before they talk about academic politics, they invariably talk about the books they have read and are reading. In fact, bibliography, which some poets have adopted as a literary form, makes for a community of scholars. At least we have that community. So I thought I might give this lecture bibliographical form, begin by listing the titles of books and then explain how, by fierce and loving and long encounter with them, they made and remade my mind and became my texts. But I haven’t done this, or not quite in this way. It isn’t exigent: it begs the question, doesn’t answer sufficiently to the occasion.

II

The cry of its occasion tells us that utterance belongs to and finds its substance in the occasion. So I decided to do what I have so far done: interrogate the occasion, enter it to discover why it is my occasion, why I am here. The nature of this occasion gives me my theme and enables me to enact it. This is my occasion because it raises, as we have seen, the issue of learning and public life or, as I sometimes think of it, poetry and the common world; poetry and the common world, I suppose, because the poets who interest me are the legislators, as George Oppen reminds us, of the unacknowledged world.

This occasion is a matter of private and public, of self and society, and it matters to me because the vita contemplativa of the scholar, happy as that solitude is, is incomplete, and I have always wanted
a public life. The *vita contemplativa* demands the *vita activa*, as Emerson more than a century ago admonished the American Scholar when he spoke to his occasion and addressed the already conspicuous ills of specialization. It demands it, he said, for the profoundest reason, that in the economy of the soul, influx requires efflux, thought fulfills its circuit in expression, where expression is act, the needful act of thought. Publish or perish, we cynically say, forgetting its truth, forgetting that *publish* and *public* have the same root and that thought is stillborn until it is delivered, made public. Consider American thought, isn’t it notable for its pragmatism, for uniting the disparate realms of thinking and acting? It doesn’t privilege contemplation, the withdrawal inward of the life of the mind. “Thinking is a partial act,” Emerson says; “Life is not dialectics.” This is a remarkable admission for a thinker who glorifies the mind. It was made under duress of experience and enrolls Emerson with the life philosophers who give precedence to existence, not to our ideas but to our occasions. The cry we utter belongs to life, is the outcry of existence, sometimes of isolated existence, which is why the preeminent art for Emerson and Whitman is oratory, a public performative art, *public speaking*. And this is why poetry now, in the poetry reading, has again become an oral, performative art.

No one understands this so well—or perhaps I should say acts on such understanding—as David Antin, who assimilates poetry to speech and talks his poems extemporaneously in public. “Man is; He acts,” Charles Olson says, where the root act, conferring existence, one with existence, is speech; talking to live, as he veritably did. And as Antin does by making the occasion a condition of his art, finding his speech there in addressing it. To speak extemporaneously makes speech an act of the instant. What is said is not premeditated but improvised. This puts the self in the open—recent poetry speaks of it as a field. It puts one in jeopardy and thereby quickens the sense of the present, which is the nick of time, the time of existence, and wonderfully so because ever new and creative, always a beginning.

“The invention of the self,” Antin says, “is the outcome of talking to discover.” We talk to ourselves when we think, for thinking is dialogic. Socrates’ great achievement was to make this public and to remain loyal to its consequences. This strikes me now as the point of Antin’s challenging remark: “if Robert Lowell is a poet I don’t want to be a poet if Robert Frost was a poet I don’t want to be a poet if Socrates was a poet I’ll consider it”. We cannot think alone, and when we are alone
we converse with ourselves, with the other within us, the me myself, as Whitman calls it. In one of his meditations Antin says:

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\text{. . . occasionally he speaks to possess his soul}
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But he might have said, “he speaks occasionally,” because, as I said, he purposely seeks an occasion in order to do this. Writing, he found, is a closet affair, a private dialogue with the self. “i wanted,” he says in explaining his talk poems, these language or lecture events, “i wanted to talk not to myself and thats why i came out.” He wanted a public place because he wanted the self to appear in public: “im here in this public place with my private thing so to speak and i tell you im here to define myself and im telling you who i am and what im doing it for.” No mistaking the urgency of his need, the common need to make the self appear. We know what we are, not who we are. Antin doesn’t tell us who he is, he shows us; by talking he makes the self appear. Like Whitman, who named and demonstrated the project in “Song of Myself,” Antin speaks himself only because he prefers speech to song. And this self, we should remember, is not the ego. Whitman follows “I celebrate myself and sing myself” with “And what I assume you shall assume.” Emerson, speaking of himself—this orator who comes forward to speak his private thoughts—Emerson says that the most private is the most public. Whatever the manner of speech or mode of address the self inevitably appears. This is the reason Thoreau prefaced Walden with the reminder that it is always the first person who is speaking and held himself to the requirement of accounting for his own life. If we hew to experience, which is the best we can do, we can only speak of ourselves but not only for ourselves. Interior truthfulness of this kind is a notable insistence of our literature.

III

The scholarly work designated by the mandate is my life, a vocation, we used to say. It is “work that releases deep energy and . . . gives happiness in the activity itself,” and I understand it now in terms of the generative necessity of those endless poems that are coextensive with a poet’s life. I have come here to talk about such a life’s work, to account for it.

On interrogating myself as well as others, I find that a scholar’s life, like any other, has, as Roland Barthes says, its secret mythology,
though the secret is probably more patent than Gary Snyder believes in saying that “in scholarship we often don’t understand ourselves well enough to know why we really do something.” I will speak of this secret in terms of essential autobiography, spiritual or interior autobiography, the story of the me myself, the self, according to Whitman, that is “apart from the pulling and hauling” yet “in and out of the game.” The most interesting feature of essential autobiography is the fact that we acquire the story before we unfold it in our lives: it is a scenario accepted early on because it speaks to us, is felt to be truly ours, and thereafter we enact it, follow its script throughout a lifetime, to the end. We might say that the scenario is inscribed in us when we are called to our vocations; for a vocation is a calling, a destiny. It is the providential crisis of our lives.

I take the term essential autobiography from Robert Duncan, who found the scenario of his life in myth, in the story of Psyche and Eros. I can think of no mythic scenario of my life, though surely there must be one, for even now, in our unheroic time, the hero has a thousand faces. Instead I find the scenario composed by my texts, a scholar’s scenario, if you will, my texts being those, as I said, that, by teaching and writing, I have made my own and that, in consequence, have made me. I say texts, I might say books, but I should say authors, because the authors speak to me and authorize my being. I cherish them as beloved predecessors. They are familiar to me—you see how much I think of them by how much I think with them.

I will begin with Emerson because, in actual fact, I began with him—and am not yet done. I have spoken elsewhere of my initial engagement with Emerson, but I did not ask then what I am moved to ask now: What does it mean to begin with Emerson? I mentioned the fact that I had returned from the war and had turned from the New Criticism to the historical study of our own culture; in Emerson I had found an example of the kind of scholar I wanted to be and the starting point of an intellectual tradition I wanted to foster. But I didn’t mention what I find more important now: that I would have been intent neither on a beginning nor on a tradition if there hadn’t been a war, and that everything I reported as a personal matter was profoundly public and, without knowing it, I was in step with my generation.

My generation is one of the several war generations of this century. This may be why George Oppen says that a new generation declares itself not by the dew on them but by taking their place at the head
of the moving column. A global war, the use of the atom bomb, totalitarianism furnished our rites of passage and, willy-nilly, made us *Begründer*, from *begründen*, to found. Charles Olson begins *The Maximus Poems* by planting the oar and ends by announcing what still needs doing, “the initiation of another kind of nation.” But the most eloquent testimony for me is one of his earliest poems, its French title insisting that we register its significance. It is called “La Préface,” and I will read it now because it situates my beginning, gives the context of my texts, and speaks to its occasion.

The dead in via

in vita nuova

in the way

You shall lament who know they are as tender as the horse is.

You, do not you speak who know not.

“I will die about April 1st . . .” going off

“I weigh, I think, 80 lbs . . .” scratch

“My name is NO RACE” address

Buchenwald new Altamira cave

With a nail they drew the object of the hunt.

Put war away with time, come into space.

It was May, precise date, 1940. I had air my lungs could breathe.

He talked, via stones a stick sea rock a hand of earth.

It is now, precise, repeat. I talk of Bigmans organs

he, look, the lines! are polytopes.

And among the DPS—deathhead

at the apex

of the pyramid.

Birth in the house is the One of Sticks, cunnus in the crotch.

Draw it thus: ( ) 1910 ( 

It is not obscure. We are the new born, and there are no flowers.

Document means there are no flowers

and no parenthesis.

It is the radical, the root, he and I, two bodies

We put our hands to these dead.

The closed parenthesis reads: the dead bury the dead,

and it is not very interesting.

Open, the figure stands at the door, horror his

and gone, possessed, o new Osiris, Odysseus ship.

He put the body there as well as they did whom he killed.
Mark that arm. It is no longer gun.
We are born not of the buried but these unburied dead
crossed stick, wire-led, Blake Underground

The Babe

the Howling Babe

Many voices speak here—Homer, Dante, Blake, Lincoln, Yeats, Pound—for our speech is common and belongs to history. But the voice that speaks to me belongs to my generation and utters the cry of its occasion. "La Préface" tells us, as Olson says elsewhere, that "Der Weg stirbt," the way is dying, but that by means of new life we may begin a new way. *Vita nuova* is *via nuova* — and *nuova*, a wonderful word, carries the egg of this fertile possibility! The poem declares the emergence of a new generation; it is the emergence, the great fact of natality—"The Babe/ the Howling Babe." Reading it now I recall the celebration of new life in Snyder’s *Myths & Texts*: "Baby, baby, noble baby/Noble-hearted baby." *Noble-hearted* and *Howling* because the beginning, the new possibility, is a leaping into life, and the risk, the need for courage, is enough to make one cry.

I use the word *natality* to remind you of Hannah Arendt, whose first great book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, was written at this time in order to explain how it was that the world as she had known it, and as it had been known for centuries, had come to an end. As it does in Olson’s poem, where the human enterprise from Paleolithic times ends in Buchenwald, in *l’univers concentrationnaire*. And I use *natality* to remind you that all that Hannah Arendt can counterpose to the prospect of continuing terror is the "beginning . . . guaranteed by each new birth." In our time, when the common sense is one of endings, I find it heartening and challenging to be told that "beginning . . . is the supreme capacity of man." But even more heartening and challenging is the fact that Hannah Arendt held to this faith throughout a lifetime and tells it again at the close of her last book, *The Life of the Mind*, which names her exemplary way, the freedom to think, and with it the possibilities of thought, granted by beginning again.

Most of us do not find our occasions, as directly as Hannah Arendt found hers, in *the* occasion of our time, in an historical impasse of thought where the free work of mind is needed to undo the ideological work of mind that ends in disaster. This is a measure of greatness. Her way, Olson’s way, Emerson’s way have *exemplary validity*, to cite Kant’s term for particulars—Achilles’ courage, for example—that
have the force of universal truth. My heroes have Achilles’ courage but all of them are heroes and heroines of thought. All are beginners and advance under the banner America has claimed for itself: *Make New*, which we sometimes forget does not exclude *renew*. As Emerson said of himself, all are “endless seekers.” This is not to say, as he did, that they have no past at their back, but rather that they refuse endings, refuse to be circumscribed by the mind’s tyrannous desire for unity. They simply “experiment,” or improvise, begin again by trying things in terms of their experience. Their terminus a quo is William Carlos Williams’s “to begin to begin again”; their terminus ad quem is Jerome Rothenberg’s “thwarting of ends.” Like Antin, you find all of them talking at the boundaries, which, incidentally, is a good place for scholars to begin to talk to each other.

It should be clear, then, that I began with Emerson not simply for the expedient reason that my teacher had already claimed the Puritan beginning. I was moved, I see now, not by the need to find an historical origin but by the need to find a progenitor of beginners. I wanted a birthright.

**IV**

Where, you might ask, is the scenario in all this, a scenario for beginnings, for the onward way? If you know Emerson, you know that it is readily at hand in “Circles,” the essay in which he wrote out his own scenario for the endless seeker and the “new genesis.” He says a good deal about the duties and disciplines of the American Scholar in the famous address of that name, but here is the way. Emerson’s thought is circular—it doesn’t run in circles, though many have thought so because his meditative way, his poetry of thought, does not follow the accepted linear logic. To think in this curious fashion—his very style of thought—is itself an example of a new beginning, and his essays belong to what he called the “open genres,” not merely for formal reasons but because the work of open forms is to open the mind. Circularity of this kind is common among my heroes: organic form of this kind is form as proceeding; the form does not follow, it makes its own way. It *ambulates*, as William James would say, because ideas do not order the proceeding but feed into it as part of the on-going experience. So Emerson’s thought is not circular out of perversity. It answers, as all styles of thought, all representations of reality do, to his deepest sense of the world. It is a form of thought for one who appreciates the circulations of being.
The circle is Emerson's primary figure, in a geometry of imagination that manages superbly without triangles. This geometry is one of the great geometries of the nineteenth century, to be put with those of Riemann and Lobachevski, who, according to Charles Olson, "broke the whole thing open," gave us our modern sense of the world. The circle, Emerson says, is the "first of forms," "the highest emblem in the cipher of the world." It is, of course, associated with divinity, with whatever is whole, complete, perfect, self-contained; and being and well-being, as Bachelard claims, are round. I suspect that first is synonymous with highest, but is descriptive, reminding us that in the beginning there was nothing and that divinity is to be accorded those who make something of it. But Emerson does not insist on these meanings, and even when he speaks of divinity, which is necessary to his conception of the self as an "eternal generator," does so in terms of unimaginable openness: "St. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose center was everywhere, and its circumference nowhere." Emerson destabilizes the figure; he speaks of circles, the plural enfranchising all of us, in keeping with the Augustinian definition, and also suggesting the concentric widening that figures motion of a nonlinear, saltatory kind. Such motion, he believed, was natural, in the nature of things, since "Line in nature is not found; / Unit and universe are round."

The unit of which he speaks is the self, and every thing he says depends on the inseparable relation of self and cosmos, on the fact, which we recognize in the word environment, that we are surrounded by the world and that our well-being comes of being in touch with it, reliant on its "energizing spirit." This is the meaning of self-reliance. I have learned from Emerson that you cannot spin your own top. I have learned—am still trying to learn—to rely on the energy available in both soul and world. The last phrase is Paul Goodman's, and I cite him because he knew, with Emerson, that the way of life is by abandonment and that if our tops are ever to spin, and keep spinning, we must stand out of our own way.

Unit and universe are round because this is how we find ourselves. Sometimes we find ourselves, in the terrifying image of the endless stairway, "in a series of which we do not know the extremes." This is how Emerson situates us at the beginning of the essay "Experience," where we are truly lost. But in "Circles"—and this explains the exhilaration of the essay—we cannot be lost because unit and universe, as their common syllables indicate, have the same center. The essay begins: "The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the sec-
“We are always centered on ourselves, for the eye is also the I. Each of us has the world he or she makes, which is another reason, besides the presence of the “eternal generator,” that it corresponds to us. We have for our fields what falls within the compass of our powers. Our limits are our own, not otherwise, and to open the field, we must, as Whitman, for example, learned to do from Emerson, open the self, permit it to speak with “original energy.”

We are not lost but in terms of life have more or less. Our grief, like Emerson’s, is want of power. The briefest version of Emerson’s scenario is: “The life of a man [or woman] is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end.” Life—not merely its span, which indicates the temporality Emerson insists on, but the very quantum of being—evolves from the self. It is the insistent force by which this generator is defined. To be expansive is the nature of the self. Its imperative, its veritable life, like that of a seed, is growth. It rushes outward, refuses to be imprisoned—“the heart refuses to be imprisoned; in its first and narrowest pulse it already tends outward with a vast force, and to immense and innumerable expansions.” We know this to be true from our experience. Emerson is a phenomenologist of being who gives us the great truth of being to which we must be true because life not only evolves from the self but the self itself evolves. Ensouling is its work. This is why the way is endless and we cannot rest. But who would rest from life? “Death is the condition of being so tied up that one cannot proceed to the next step.” Paul Goodman says it as well as Emerson, who called the ills of spirit circumference. So valor—the heroism of life—“consists in the power of self-recovery,” not the recovery of an old but the discovery of a new self.

I have begun with this aspect of “Circles” because Emerson is preeminently a spokesman for the self, still very much the friend and aider, as Matthew Arnold said, of those who would live in the spirit. Emerson’s concern is with the self-and-world, with how we find ourselves in the world and by taking thought have our being there. The brilliance and truth of what he says belongs to his primary figure, the ever-expanding circles of the generative self. These circles, not successively but at the same time, also represent the ever-expanding circles of thought. So thought literally pulses with life. There is a life of the mind that is rooted elsewhere than in the mind. And life pulses with thought, and we may recover the self, which is to say our life, by taking new thought, risking this ever-generative beginning. Han-
nah Arendt corroborates this when she says, “To think and to be fully alive are the same, and this implies that thinking must always begin afresh.”

The universe of “Circles” isn’t closed, and nothing in it is fixed. In keeping with its pulsing dynamism, the circles that figure it are both spatial and temporal. It is our world, not that of the eighteenth century, even though Emerson still reads in it the consolation of compensation. It is a world in which to journey because the way of life is onward, the direction, as Whitman says of the open road, “forever forward” because “forever alive,” and to stop is death. It is an open universe because creation is not an accomplished fact of the past but ever present, awaiting the next step.

You will, I’m sure, have seen in these circles the figure of dialectical thought. Yet what is most Emersonian here is the combativeness it releases, his pleasure in destruction, in the fact that the new consigns the old to the pit. Thought is powerful; it can change the world—not only the worlds we construct by thinking but, as we are finding, the world. The Emerson who believes in the sovereignty of ideas is a philosophical idealist. This figures in “Circles” in his use of circles to represent the ascent of generalization, where the ever-expanding circle is an upward-widening spiral that encloses what it surpasses. This is a nineteenth-century version of Plato’s ladder and assumes that if we climb high enough—“the new prospect is power”—we will attain to the Idea, the all-enclosing generalization that totalizes the world. This, in turn, explains the extremity of Emerson’s sense of powerlessness, the distress he feels in the ebb of energy because he has set his heart on such perfection and this cannot be realized in the endless world of experience he has opened to us. Emerson himself gave me the phrase I used earlier—the tyrannous desire of the mind for unity—and this describes the entelechy of the mind. Yet Emerson believes that the world resists such totalization. “Circles” tells us this, with its paratactic, horizontal form, with its openness to endless talk. A poet, not a philosopher, wrote this essay, and in doing so he was true to his own conflicting senses of mind. Because he was, I found an opening there.

It may be that my own reading of Emerson is Emersonian, after the fashion of his account of the way literature gives us a purchase on our present life. “He smites and rouses me with his shrill tones,” he says of the writer, “breaks up my whole chain of habits, and I open my eye on my own possibilities.” I open my eye: I widen my circle, my horizon. It is significant that the only instrument he men-
tions is literature. Surely this suggests the limitations of New England culture, but it answers well enough to explain my own concern with literature, the collective consciousness of imaginations of possibility. Literature is always a good place to begin.

V

A scenario for beginnings, but beginning what? The script is implicit but, as I make it out, it asks us to give over our inheritance, the world view and habits of thought of philosophical idealism. “Life is not dialectics.” Dialectics not dialects, as I first wrote it because I was about to remind you that before logos meant reason and logic, it meant speech, what is said. In the beginning was the word; life is dialects. (Have I come on the myth of my essential autobiography, the myth of the creative word?) This script, I said, was implicit. It was not to be made out all at once nor subscribed to without the help of many thinkers who, since Emerson’s time, have made the reconstruction of philosophy an essential scholarly task. So, by the time I read Olson, I understood “the dead in via/ . . . [the dead] in the way.” Olson provided one more instance of what the humanist enterprise of abstraction, power, and ego had come to. And I knew why he invoked Odysseus, the figure at the problematic center of modern literature: because humanism, he said, “is (homer) coming in, and (melville) going out.” We had to acknowledge this—find some other model than Captain Ahab—before we could begin again.

I was on the point of saying that every specialist here knows this, but I’m not so sure. Are we really free of dualistic, hierarchical, patriarchal, symbolical, closed, and totalizing ways of thought? Have we really accepted the new cosmology and epistemology, the theories of language and meaning, the politics and ethics that follow from a fundamental generative change? Are we still comfortable with the vita contemplativa and the attenuated life that comes of idealizing and aestheticizing experience? Do we really want our servants to live for us? Isn’t this very estrangement what we wish to overcome, the extremity of consciousness that Eliot describes in The Waste Land?

We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison.

To use Emerson’s figure, we are circumscribed by the ego-mind and must push beyond it to an eco-mind. Our anthropo- and homocentrism must yield to geo- or Gaia-centrism. And so on, and on, these circles of affirmation enclosing our skepticisms, all, to cite Hannah
Arendt once more, for the love of the world, the unacknowledged world.

Perhaps what I have said explains what I have tried to do. I have tried to recover and hand over a tradition, brief and local as it is, and tell its story lest it be forgotten. To maintain the past in readiness for use—to see it anew from the present of each generation—is one of the functions of scholarship. John Jay Chapman likened scholars to earthworms but forgot the importance of composting. I believe with Paul Goodman that we simply owe it to the great thinkers to teach them, and I would add that by returning to their texts we may find an eternal generator, a source of energy, that Emerson did not sufficiently appreciate. Scholarship, after all, is not only concerned with truth, the truth of facts; it is concerned with meaning, which is not a matter of cognition but of thinking, a matter of endless interpretation. So we may begin with the past as readily as with the present, for the past we know belongs to our present, is made present by scholarship, handed over vitally.

At the same time I have tried to forward the work of contemporary writers, especially those whose work seems to me to fully engage the crisis of thought in our time. And I have tried in my own style of thought to bring over some of the things I have learned from them. Of these writers perhaps the most Emersonian-Whitmanian is Robert Duncan, and I will cite him now, not his essays on the relation of an open universe to open form, which continue the argument of “Circles,” but a lyric that reminds us that an open universe is a cosmetized image of the well-being sought by the self.

Come, let me free myself from all that I love.  
Let me free what I love from me, let it go free.  
For I would obey without bound,  
serve only as I serve.

Come, let me be free of this master I set over me  
so that I must exact rectitude  
upon rectitude,  
right over right. Today

I am on the road, by the road,  
hitch-hiking. And how, from one side,  
how glad I am no one has come along.  
For I am at a station. I am at home  
in the sun. Not waiting, but standing here.
And, on the other, I am waiting, 
to be on the way, that it be my way.
I am impatient.

O let me be free now of my way, for all that I bind to me
— and I bind what I love to me,
  comforting chains and surroundings —
let these loved things go and let me go with them.
For I stand in the way, my destination stands in the way!

This poem belongs to a poet’s middle years. To complement it, here
is another poem by a poet in his later years. In this poem, George
Oppen recalls the liberating act of his youth, the scenario to which
he and Mary Oppen have been and will continue to be faithful. To
the fathers who tell them they are old and summon them to death,
he answers by entering again, in memory, the very open that gave
them life.

to the shining
of rails in the night
the shining way the way away
from home arrow in the air
hat-brim fluttered in the air as she ran
forward and it seemed so beautiful so beautiful
the sun-lit air it was no dream all’s wild
out there as we unlikely
image of love found the way
away from home

These poets are on the way, on the open road where all of us find
ourselves. Their poems are the cry of their occasions, part of what,
on this occasion, I have been privileged to say.
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