

Representative Woman: The Greatness of Mary Moody Emerson

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I wonder how you can ever have linked a hope to the wayward destinies of a thing like me, to my dream-like anticipations of greatness.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson to Mary Moody Emerson, c. December 1821

Margaret Fuller talking of Women, said, “Who would be a goody that could be a genius?”

—Emerson in his journal, October 20, 1837

I pass over my own list of thinkers & friends [. . .] and only add, that I believe our soil yields as good women, too, as England or France, though we have not a book from them to compare with [Madame de Staël’s] “Allemagne.” Yet M[ary]. M[oody]. E[merson].’s journals shine with genius, & Margaret Fuller’s Conversation did.

—Emerson in his journal, 1871

What would happen if Ralph Waldo Emerson's late portrait of his aunt Mary Moody Emerson were silently added to the gallery of great individuals in *Representative Men* (1850)? The suggestion is not as odd as it might seem, and I would like to treat it here as a useful thought-experiment. I shall propose the portrait presented to the New England Women's Club in 1869, "Mary Moody Emerson"—or "Amita," as her nephew Waldo called the lecture (Cole 1998, 3–7)—as the missing seventh portrait of the book published nearly twenty years earlier. Mary Emerson was arguably the original, living pattern of Emersonian greatness, the figure who made *Representative Men* possible in the first place but who was impossible to include in it.

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There can be little doubt that the author of *Representative Men* saw in Mary Moody Emerson an embodiment of "true greatness" (Emerson 1990–94, 1:252).¹ His mature conception of this quality would not have been possible—nor would it have assumed the precise form it did—without her example. She enabled her nephew Waldo to experience human greatness intimately, in all its concrete complexity, long before it would emerge in his mature thinking as an autonomous, fully developed philosophical idea.

In his portrait of her, unveiled on March 1, 1869 to the Women's Club in Boston, Waldo declared Mary's life to be "representative." He meant by this, of course, *representative of a specific time and place*, "of an age now past, and of which I think no types survive." Mary's life, he added, "is a fruit of Calvinism and New England, and marks the precise time when the power of the old creed yielded to the influence of modern science and humanity" (Emerson 1903–4, 10:399).² But Waldo also gave the keyword its highest possible meaning, the one he had stamped upon it two decades earlier in his studies of human greatness, *Representative Men*. Mary may have been a "goody," as she liked to call herself, but she was also, quite clearly, a "genius" (W 10:399).

In his late notebook and journal writings from late the 1850s to the early 1870s, Waldo urged Mary's rightful claim to greatness, thereby quietly adding, as it were, an additional figure to a new, expanded—Americanized, feminized—edition of *Representative Men*. To the gallery of famous European men, let us then add "Amita" as the missing seventh portrait. Alongside Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Napoleon, and Goethe—that is, respectively, "the Philosopher," "the Mystic," "the Skeptic," "the Poet," "the Man of the World," and "the Writer"—let us include Mary Emerson, "the

Saint” or “Nun,” as Waldo called her elsewhere.³ In “Amita,” she is the pious visionary, the oracle or “Delphian” (*W* 10:408; Cole 1998, 4). Her biography made *Representative Men* possible yet could only have been composed two decades after the fact. Though missing from the original group, Mary’s portrait, functioning as a sort of retroactive cause, seems to have lent something of its qualities and powers to the others: her philosophy of cause and effect and her relation to the ordinary reappear in the portrait of Montaigne; her penetrating eye in Plato, Swedenborg, and Shakespeare; her “stern realism” and impatience with cant and convention in Napoleon and Goethe.⁴ If ever a great life was useful to Waldo’s own, and not only to this one book, it was hers. The very idea of including Mary (had it ever crossed his mind) would surely have appeared incongruous—a piece of special pleading for an obscure and eccentric family member whose written achievement, though undeniably powerful, had something of the evanescent value of “fairy gold” (*JMN* 16:15).⁵ Mary’s absolute originality made her impossible to include, in life as in literature. Her cultural moment had not yet arrived. Waldo may be forgiven, then. His heart was in the right place. His late tribute to her, which “partially paid a very old debt” (Cole 1998, 9), may be read as his belated and inevitably unsatisfactory attempt to right the wrong.

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Waldo’s Notebook XO, which he began in the late 1850s, resumes the reflections on causality and human greatness begun in *Representative Men* and contains a number of crucial references to Mary. Under the heading “Greatness,” he singles out her correspondence as an example of individual excellence perpetually outdoing itself, of “those high steps in character by which a true greatness is dwarfed in the presence of a higher strain, & this again by another” (*TN* 1:252). The journal entries of the 1860s continue to press Mary’s claim. She was, Waldo wrote five years after her death and the year before “Amita,” a great American worthy of placement alongside Jonathan Edwards, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and William Ellery Channing (*JMN* 16:90). And as shown in my third epigraph, from 1871 (*JMN* 16:259), he classed her among the great women too.

Waldo sees Mary’s claim to greatness in terms of both gender and genre. She is a representative *woman*—a “goody,” but one who embodies a form of female genius proper to the American soil. Her claim is also *literary*, but of a nature that defies comparison; her greatness is substantiated in her

lifewriting, but as a highly specific historical and cultural form. Mary's "Almanack" is "possibly New England's last great Puritan diary" (Cole 1998, 7). And Puritanism itself, as Waldo insists in his own journal, was essentially "biographical." It was "the religion of the diary"; and for Waldo, Mary's diary reveals "the power of the religion of the Puritans in full energy" (*JMN* 16:16, 15). The Puritan diary enacted the high drama of selfhood and salvation. Puritan diarists "personally believed themselves dignified, inspired, judged, & dealt with, in the present & in the future." Mary's "Almanack" is, accordingly, the record of a lifelong struggle to define "her relation to the Divine Being." And for Waldo it is the "earnestness" of her lifewriting that throws it into sharp historical relief, setting it apart from the "frivolous" productions of his own generation (*JMN* 16:16). At the same time, in its openness to modernity, Mary's writing marks a watershed in American history. Her late Puritan autobiography—which, broadly understood, must include her letters—also turns out to be "an early and groundbreaking woman's text of American Romanticism" (Cole 1998, 8).

Of course, Mary's writing might not meet—any more than Margaret Fuller's—the formal literary standard set by Madame de Staël's *De l'Allemagne*, but the genius of both was indisputable. Establishing their rightful claims—and America's too—meant in effect pleading for a broader conception of literary greatness, extending beyond the recognized form of the "great book" and proving inclusive enough to embrace unconventional performances such as Mary's "Almanack" and Fuller's "Conversation" (*JMN* 16:259). In arguing the case of these two "friends," Waldo was also filing a brief on behalf of the future. Mary Emerson and Margaret Fuller also appeared together in Waldo's journal four years earlier, in 1867, in a list of friends who had conferred "benefits," many of these beyond mere words: "Great are the Silences & the Influences." Mary heads the list, immediately followed by Bronson Alcott and, a bit farther down, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and William Ellery Channing (*JMN* 16:66).

Great was Mary's influence. She was the original pattern of Emersonian greatness, in that, like all great persons, she encouraged Waldo and his brothers to develop the potential greatness in themselves: "She gave high counsels. It was the privilege of certain boys to have this immeasurably high standard indicated to their childhood; a blessing which nothing else in education could supply" (*W* 10:432). Great individuals drive us ever "upward" (*CW* 4:151). "Amelioration," one of the laws of the universe for Waldo, is one of the key assumptions of *Representative Men*: "all things continually ascend" (*CW* 4:7). Thus "great men exist that there may be

greater men.” *Representative Men* gives us heroes but not hero-worship—an attitude repugnant to the spirit of democracy and self-reliance. Great individuals have a “social and delegated quality” (CW 4:20). They are, in other words, ministerial to a principle higher than themselves: “The power which they communicate is not theirs. When we are exalted by ideas, we do not owe this to Plato, but to the idea, to which also Plato was debtor” (CW 4:12). As examples of genius, great individuals exist not to overwhelm or overawe but to serve, to inspire, to empower. They are recognized and admired not only as the best of a certain class or type, or as perfect embodiments of an age or country, but also as representative of certain exceptional qualities *in us*. Their greatness speaks to our condition and potentialities: “All that Shakspeare [*sic*] says of the king, yonder slip of a boy that reads in the corner, feels to be true of himself.” Exemplary others serve as mirrors reflecting the “unattained but attainable self” (CW 2:5). They are nothing if not useful—useful, that is, to our own enlargement. Hence the resolutely pragmatic spirit of Waldo’s introductory essay in *Representative Men*, “Uses of Great Men,” with its definition of genius as “use,” “service,” “benefit,” “advantage,” and “profit” (CW 4:16, 4, 5, 7, 9). Mary’s “high counsels” were, in precisely this sense, “higher benefits” (CW 4:10): “Scorn trifles, lift your aims: do what you are afraid to do: sublimity of character must come from sublimity of motive: these were the lessons which were urged with vivacity, in ever new language” (W 10:406). For Waldo, Mary’s language exhibited the “attractive,” magnetic power proper to greatness and authentic being (CW 4:16). As he noted in his journal in 1866: “Read M. M. E.’s mss. yesterday—many pages. They keep for me the old attraction [. . .]” (JMN 16:15). This power of her personality and her prose was something Waldo had often experienced, and it receives special emphasis in the late portrait: “None but was attracted or piqued by her interest and wit and wide acquaintance with books and with eminent names”; “[s]he surprised, attracted, chided and denounced her companion by turns, and pretty rapid turns. But no intelligent youth or maiden could have once met her without remembering her with interest, and learning something of value” (W 10:405, 406).

Nor was this all. In Waldo’s mind Mary was associated with greatness for another reason—one that brings us to the conceptual core of *Representative Men*. The philosophy of cause and effect that informs Waldo’s vision of human greatness is perhaps one of Mary’s finest legacies. It is asserted boldly in his response to Montaigne, the “representative skeptic”: “We are natural believers. Truth or the connection of cause and

effect alone interests us” (CW 4:96). Significantly, this same passage of *Representative Men* gives us the first occurrence in Waldo’s published writings of the word “causationist”—a word he apparently invented.⁶ Causationism is what underpins Waldo’s conception of greatness. As he later emphasizes in “Power”: “All successful men have agreed in one thing;—they were *causationists*.”⁷ A firm belief in the causal relation, or in the “strict connexion between every pulse-beat and the principle of being,” he adds, “characterizes all valuable minds” (CW 6:29). “Power” cites Napoleon, but the lines apply equally well to Mary. She was surely the most committed causationist thinker her nephew would ever know intimately.⁸ In the 1820s, his formative years as a philosopher, she helped him through his struggle with David Hume’s skeptical views on the causal relation.⁹ Among the critiques of Hume that she recommended in those years figure Thomas Brown’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (1820) and *Inquiry into the Relation of Cause and Effect* (1818), which Waldo dutifully read.¹⁰ In the early 1830s Mary feared that her nephew’s doubts about his ministerial vocation might be due to the lingering influence of empirical philosophers (“the ‘senses’ writers”); she counseled, by way of antidote, Descartes, Malebranche, and Samuel Clarke, who “studied the *Cause*” (MME-SL 315). Where Waldo’s deepest metaphysical convictions were concerned, however, Mary had nothing to fear. In large part thanks to her, he emerged from his encounters with skepticism galvanized by a firm faith in cause and effect. His metaphysical motto may be found in his exclamation to Margaret Fuller in 1838: “Cause & effect, cause & effect forever!” (L 2:164).¹ Waldo’s trust in these “chancellors of God,” as he styled them in “Self-Reliance” (CW 2:50), would remain unshaken for the rest of his life. For him causation was the true and only power game in the universe, the one with the highest stakes imaginable, the only one he thought worth playing. As he declared in his journal in 1842, “Some play at Chess, some at cards, some at the stock exchange. I prefer to play at Cause & Effect” (JMN 8:194).

Causationism was thus the basis of Waldo’s metaphysics and his conception of human action, and Mary had been instrumental in converting him to that faith—the faith that sees “every trifle bristling with the polarity that ranges it instantly on an eternal law,” as “The American Scholar” put it (1837; CW 1:68). Small wonder, then, that Waldo should see fit to include, among the longer quotations in “Amita,” one of Mary’s poetic meditations on the presence of the Cause in nature (W 10:414–15).

It is Mary's value as a thinker and writer—the real, positive ground of her attraction—that Waldo's portrait of her seeks to establish. No easy task. In the absence of objective criteria, the portrait itself would lose all justification other than personal—the value of her life “to me,” as Waldo puts it in the first paragraph (*W* 10:399). Though undeniably “great” and “representative,” Mary was by no means easy to accommodate within existing norms, whether in literature or in life. She was, Waldo suggests in a fine closing metaphor, a “troublesome boarder” (*W* 10:432).

The opening of “Amita” is a fascinating variation on the sorts of tensions that may also be observed in the Montaigne lecture. Mary, too, is a “friend,” an object of love and admiration. In her case, however, the difficulties of the rhetorical exercise are compounded by her proximity, influence, and obscurity. If Waldo feared that his “personal regard” for Montaigne might be “unduly great” (*CW* 4:92), he ran a far greater risk in choosing as his subject the life of a woman related to him but completely unknown to the wider public: “Perhaps I deceive myself and overestimate its interest.” As in “Montaigne” at the same critical moment, the tone is tentative, apologetic: “I have found that I could only bring you this portrait by selections from the diary of my heroine, premising a sketch of her time and place. I report some of the thoughts and soliloquies of a country girl, poor, solitary, — a ‘goody’ as she called herself,—growing from youth to age amid slender opportunities and usually very humble company” (*W* 10:399).

Hardly a promising subject for a portrait, it would seem. But this is to forget the Romantic rehabilitation of the lowly that Waldo had himself championed over three decades earlier in “The American Scholar.” The time had now come to take that doctrine to heart, to apply it *at home*. That is the deep meaning of “Amita.” In a striking instance of doubling—as if his literary fate and hers would always be secretly intertwined, from his early appropriations of her writing in a student prize essay at Harvard¹² all the way up to this lecture nearly five decades later—it seems that Waldo cannot do justice to Mary's memory and genius without at the same time exhibiting the deep unity of his own life and thought. If Mary is to be brought before the public, then the spirit of high Transcendentalism must be revived to produce this belated final installment of *Representative Men*. The challenge of 1869 is to demonstrate “the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause” (*CW* 1:67) in the thoughts and surroundings of a poor anonymous country girl,¹³ to show power and wealth lurking amidst “Destitution,” “the Muse of her genius.” Mary illustrates in every written page the presence of the high in the low, “the grandeur of humility and privation” (*W* 10:404).

Consistent with these qualities, “Amita” obeys its own implacable logic of self-effacement that not even Waldo can escape entirely, despite his current celebrity standing—perhaps even because of it. His stated role is reduced to that of mere reporter, and it is the nature of his subject that has imposed this constraint: “I have found that I could only bring you this portrait by selections from the diary of my heroine” (*W* 10:399). In this specific instance, Waldo is not—and cannot be—the one who creates or imagines. He can “only” present this “real life” (as he calls it in the opening line of the lecture) through the words of her who lived it. In “Montaigne,” *he* told the personal story of how his love for the essayist grew; here Waldo must step aside and let Mary tell her own. Montaigne’s fame and egotism enabled an answering self-affirmation in the portraitist; with Mary, the logic is precisely the reverse. Rarity of quotation in the one contrasts with overabundance in the other. Waldo protests his inability to give Mary’s true likeness in any words but her own (over two-thirds of the whole text), as if his literary genius were compelled to yield—once again—to the peculiar nature, power, and presence of hers. Nor is Waldo’s overall discretion to be measured only by the inversely proportional number of quotations of Mary’s diary. There are other examples of self-effacement—or, to reverse the relation, of opportunities for self-assertion deliberately ignored. Particularly striking in this regard is the end of the lecture, where the impersonal stance remains *de rigueur*. Waldo refuses to emerge *in propria persona*, from behind the mask of neutral references to “certain boys” (himself and his brothers) or to “friends.” Evoking Mary’s death, for example, Waldo writes: “Her friends used to say to her, ‘I wish you the joy of the worm’” (*W* 10:432). A careful examination of Waldo’s early correspondence with Mary shows that this reference to friends is, among others, to himself.¹⁴

It might be objected that Waldo does not have to be explicit, that the references would probably be clear even to listeners outside the Emerson family circle,¹⁵ and that in any case the portrait does have a few personal touches and anecdotes. All of which is true; but such objections leave unexplained the prevailing logic of self-effacement which even the moments of intimacy seem to respect, with their consistent subordination to the imperatives of realistic portraiture. When, after the two opening paragraphs, Waldo refers occasionally to himself, it is always in order to illustrate some specific quality in his subject, such as the depth and sophistication of her thought or her obsession with death: “When I read Dante, the other day [. . .], whom do you think I was reminded of? Whom but Mary Emerson

and her eloquent theology?”; “I used to propose that her epitaph should be: ‘Here lies the angel of Death’” (*W* 10:402–3, 404). (I might note incidentally that the effect of Waldo’s proposed epitaph, which would have given *him* the last word on her life, is undone by the overwhelming presence of Mary’s own writing in rest of the portrait, as if the ambition he “used to” cherish had now given way to a recognition of her sovereign right to self-description.) On both sides of the relation, in form as in content, for portraitist as for subject, the lecture’s keynote is, to defer to Mary’s own practice, “self-denial” (*W* 10:419).

Thus Waldo’s comparative discretion should not be seen as mere posturing. It is on the contrary an act of piety at once familial and metaphysical (Mary made sure, in her correspondence with him, that the two realms were consistently linked). It is both a sincere homage to a great kinswoman and an acknowledgment of the irreducible singularity of her being. In point of fact, everything in the two opening paragraphs emphasizes Mary’s ontological priority and Waldo’s comparative powerlessness. What Waldo is offering in “Amita,” as he insists at the outset, is “a portrait of real life,” and this is a reality that cannot be subsumed under a higher-order discourse. It can only be experienced directly. Hence Waldo’s marginal function, the rarity of his intrusions. What he gives us, as he is compelled to admit, is far less *his* portrait than *her* diary. Strictly speaking, Mary can be presented but not represented. Struggle as he might for apt comparisons among European women renowned for their accomplishments in writing or conversation, for their extraordinary self-instruction, intelligence, or religious enthusiasm (Madame Guyon, Rahel, Eugénie de Guérin), Waldo must confess that she is “purely original and hardly admits of a duplicate.” Her language is “inimitable” and “ever new” (*W* 10:399, 404, 406). Mary is beyond compare, one of a kind, *sui generis*, neither susceptible of comparison nor depictable in materials foreign to herself. Nor can Waldo’s wide reading, whatever rough approximations it might supply from elsewhere, diminish the originality of her own genius. If anything, it accentuates it, always making *her* the primary point of reference. Mary becomes the center, the writer to whom others—even the greatest—are compared. Dante reminds Waldo of Mary, not the reverse (*JMN* 14:273).

The listener’s or reader’s relation to “Amita” is, by virtue of its built-in metaphysics, a direct encounter of “the real with the real,”¹⁶ in which Waldo’s discursive mediation is kept to the barest functional minimum (introduction, transitions, occasional explicative detail or illustrative

anecdote). “Mary Moody Emerson” is a fine piece of self-reflexive, applied philosophy. The question that the portrait raises—*Who or what was Mary Moody Emerson?*—is a question of *things*, to borrow a distinction from “The Over-Soul” (*CW* 2:168), a question that Waldo answers, appropriately, in the “only” way he can—by presenting “the thing itself,” by opening her diary to us, by revealing her written self, her writerly being. Mary is a “realist” philosopher, as Waldo rightly insisted (*JMN* 16:274). In “The Nun’s Aspiration,” a poetic monologue Waldo adapted from her “Almanack,” she is the soul who “rush[es] to be” (*W* 9:254). The “central theme” of her diary is ontological (“her relation to the Divine Being”), and the diary is itself, in our present and immediate encounter with it, a powerful figure of the Real (*JMN* 16:15–16).

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There is, however, a twist to the logic of self-effacement that we have been examining.

Waldo, world-famous philosopher and man of letters invited to speak before the Boston Women’s Club, presents not himself but Mary Emerson, her real life, her voice, her diary, her being. Mary, for her part, abandons herself to her God: “Constantly offer myself to continue the obscurest and loneliest thing ever heard of, with one proviso,—His agency” (*W* 10:428). Waldo called this three years earlier, in an 1866 journal entry which comments on this same passage of her diary, “the absolute submission of her will” (*JMN* 16:16).

These interlocking self-abandonments serve a higher purpose, however—a purpose that Mary’s “proviso” makes clear. Though the self may be loathsome (*haïssable*, in Pascal’s famous word), its abandonment serves a higher end, which is empowerment: Waldo steps aside in order for Mary to assert, even in anonymity, her power as a writer and thinker in her own right; Mary renounces self in return for a direct experience—even as its victim—of “the Being who makes the powers of life” (*W* 10:426).

Power is, in other words, the other key theme of Mary’s life, as an 1817 entry in her “Almanack” also attests: “I want influence—agency.”¹⁷ Waldo insists upon this theme as well at the opening of the lecture. Mary’s life is the product of a watershed in modern American thought, as I noted at the outset: “it is a fruit of Calvinism and New England, and marks the precise time when the power of the old creed yielded to the influence of modern science and humanity” (*W* 10:399). Her representativeness, her singularity,

the unique character of her life and thought reflect a major historical shift in the balance of cultural and intellectual power. Waldo had in fact already conceptualized Mary's life in precisely these terms two years earlier in "The Rule of Life" (1867), a late lecture that examines the devastating impact of science—with its "view from nowhere," its relentlessly universalizing, impersonalizing outlook—on theology and traditional conceptions of selfhood: "Science corrects theology line after line, until not one is left. Its irresistible generalizations destroy the importance of persons and anecdotes"; "[s]cience has made it impossible to introduce persons, or places, or the schemes of theologians into the mind" (*LL* 2:378). "The Rule of Life" is, along with a number of related journal entries from 1866 to 1868, a preparation for "Amita." Mary's diary is a massive yet still anonymous presence in this earlier lecture. We might even say that Mary's worldview provides one of its principal reference points, its essential term of historical comparison with the present. Mary is representative of the "Calvinistic age" (*LL* 2:379). She is the "new Saint" of a doctrine that emphasized "lowliness" and "gloried in infirmities"; yet at the same time she is the "fiery soul" who allows Waldo to present, after the 1866 journal entry and before "Amita," yet another version of the "proviso" passage of her "Almanack": "The fiery soul said, 'Let me be a blot on this fair world—the obscurest, the loneliest sufferer, with one proviso,—that I know it is *his Agency*,—I will love him, though he sheds frost and darkness on every way of mine'" (*LL* 2:382).

What "The Rule of Life" cannot yet make explicit is that Mary was not limited by her Calvinist heritage. It is her openness to modernity—as the list of her later readings attests (*W* 10:402)—that makes her exceptional. Her thought and being span the watershed between old and new, embodying it as a dialectical whole (and thereby making her, in one respect, a broader and more complex figure than either Napoleon or Goethe, each of whom represented, in Waldo's eyes, only half of the nineteenth century: its "popular external life and aims" on the one hand, its "soul" or "interior truth" on the other, *CW* 4:156, 157, 161). In this historical dialectic—in this "conflict of the new & the old ideas in New England"—lies the origin of her "genius" and "the key to her life" (*JMN* 7:446). Mary's embodiment of both orders is in fact what secretly enables Waldo to formulate the central thesis of "The Rule of Life," a thesis that marks the writings of his maturity—namely, that it is not a specific doctrine or creed that drives historical change but something far deeper: the moral sentiment.¹⁸ The "moral element" rules life and history. Mary, as it turns out, is not only a figure of Being, but also of History, and her example makes the relation between the

two clear. The source of her “fire,” the origin of her religious rapture, was not doctrinal: “The iron belt of the New England Calvinist yielded a religious rapture and self-abandonment which I must revere and thank, however impossible it is to accept his creed. He thinks the rapture sprang from that: I see that it sprang from the Divine Presence which rushes through all his pragmatic straws.” In this key segment of “The Rule of Life,” the “fiery soul”—already a pivotal figure rhetorically and conceptually—provides Waldo with a transition from the lines just quoted on Calvinism to his assertion that the true force of historical change is the moral sentiment: “Wonderful the way in which the world is saved by the unfailing supply of the moral element” (*LL* 2:382). For Waldo, “[t]his virtue is never extinct. And we have seen our John Browns and other martyrs set the country on fire with the flames of their spirit.” The moral sentiment, which Waldo consistently identified with causality in its highest and deepest forms,¹⁹ is the force driving revolutionary change, whether nominally “religious,” “political,” or “scientific.” This fire—in Jesus, in Giordano Bruno, in Mary Emerson, in John Brown—“never goes out” (*LL* 2:383). It is what changes the world. Again, what matters to a “fiery soul” like Mary Emerson is not, Waldo insists, doctrinal—it is not even belief in the existence of Heaven! (*LL* 2:382)²⁰—but always her relation to the Cause.

Thus what we see in the journal entries, in “The Rule of Life,” and in “Amita” is just how useful Mary Emerson was to Waldo’s mature theorization of the moral sentiment as the ultimate power behind historical change. She embodies the old and the new, lowliness and greatness, the “trifle” and the “eternal law.” She serves, as she always has for Waldo, as a living demonstration of the existence of a Higher Cause. As he put it the year after the Women’s Club lecture, Mary was his “moral Muse” (*JMN* 16:194).

Historically and spiritually, in her representativeness as in her personal relation to God, Mary is an illustration of extremes that meet. She is, to borrow a line from “Fate,” “a stupendous antagonism, a dragging together of the poles of the Universe.”²¹ Waldo insists on the private, spiritual dimension of this opposition in the journals and gives it a striking form in the portrait. Waldo’s self-effacement in “Amita” enables him to figure forth the profoundly contradictory nature of Mary’s psychology and spiritual being. If on the one hand he rightly insists on her humility, he gives us, on the other, in the very form of this lecture largely made up of quotations from her diary, “a striking specimen of egotism,” to quote her sister’s apt description of one of Mary’s letters (*W* 10:407). The paradox of this study in self-renunciation is indeed its spectacular display of ego: for Mary, some 170

occurrences of the first-person pronoun crowded into 35 pages of the Centenary Edition; for Waldo, a mere 17. “Amita,” as a listening or reading experience, is marked by long stretches—up to 9 pages—where we hear little or nothing but Mary’s own voice. Strangely, self-renunciation would appear to serve the ends of a higher form of self-aggrandizement—or, at the very least, to enable a form of empowerment from which the individual personality, though still in principle subordinate to the Cause, is by no means absent.

It is this meeting of extremes in Mary’s psychology that Waldo found endlessly fascinating. She exemplifies “the haughtiness of humility,” “the self-respect of the saint” with which “[n]o aristocrat, no porphyroget, can begin to compare” (*JMN* 16:89; cf. also “Greatness,” *W* 8:313). It is essential to note once again, however, that Waldo’s insight into the contradictory nature of his aunt’s faith and personality is inseparable from his understanding of the Puritan diary as a specific, “biographical” genre:

But the religion of the diary, as of the class it represented, is biographical; it is the culture, the poetry, the mythology, in which they personally believed themselves dignified, inspired, judged, & dealt with, in the present & in the future. And certainly gives to life an earnestness, & to nature a sentiment, which lacking, our later generation appears frivolous.

(*JMN* 16:16)

Earlier in this same 1866 journal entry, we recall, Waldo interprets Mary’s diary as an instance of “the power of the religion of the Puritans in full energy” (*JMN* 16:15). The “Almanack” gives us, on the one hand, human power, personality, and provisos; on the other, “absolute submission” to God. It is the stage where the high drama of substantial selfhood unfolds. It is writing as the record of a fateful quest for a direct, individual encounter with Being, with the Cause of all causes. No wonder, then, that Waldo should feel duty-bound to step aside and let Mary’s diary speak for itself!

Waldo admired this genuinely heroic dimension of Mary’s personality as elaborated in her writing. In the dialectic of grandeur and humiliation he discerns there, it would often seem to be the first term that emerges—chastened and revitalized—from the second. In her “religious exaltation,” Mary does not “hold herself cheap,” any more than the Transcendentalist poet Jones Very, who, “in his constant sense of the divine presence, thought it an honor to wash his own face” (*JMN* 16:89, *CW* 7:90). Mary has a

consciousness of “resting on Deity, that destroys all other dignities, or so called divinities, & can well afford to be disgraced & degraded in their presence.” In her direct relation to her Maker, she seems a power in her own right: “M. M. E. in her vision of her place in heaven looks very coolly at her ‘Divine Master.’” Nor will she accept the relation on any terms: “To have less than an angel [. . .], I cannot” (*JMN* 16:89). She poses conditions. For the most part, these appear to aim at preserving the *personal* nature of the relation—and that *on both sides*. This is the meaning of her “proviso,” namely that her relation with the Cause remain personal despite “the absolute submission of her will,” “that she may know it is the direct agency of God, (& not of cold laws of contingency &c) which bereaves & humiliates her” (*JMN* 16:16).

Selfhood for her, personality for her Deity—those are the non-negotiable terms of the relation. Hence the following, crucial condition tacked on to her definition of an ideal existence: “the desire of being absorbed in God, retaining consciousness” (*W* 10:426).

* * *

In Mary’s theology, union with a personal God cannot be a complete annihilation of consciousness, for the simple reason that in her view consciousness *is* God’s agency or causal power. Which explains why, in a letter to Waldo, Mary expressed her disappointment that he did not have “strong convictions of the only true phi[losophy].—the divine personal agency as of your own consciousness.”²² In a letter to Waldo’s brother Charles later the same year (1832), Mary was even more explicit about this crucial equation, which she was overjoyed to find echoed in Book 4 of William Wordsworth’s *Excursion*:

For the first time I seem to apprehend that by the lines of
Wordsworth

For adoration Thou endurest; endure,
For *consciousness the motions of thy will*
For apprehension These transcendant truths &c

indicate those motions to constitute our consciousness. Glorious beam of light—but I fear I’m not intelligible—but ’tis to you—or if you get at my feeling—perhaps I mistake my poets mysticism for the real high romance of our existence! This *consciousness* w’h is our all & all—the

agency—the seed of immortality to be but the *motions* of
His will—!

(MME-SL 320)

It is essential to note that these lines spoken by Wordsworth's Wanderer—lines with which Waldo was also thoroughly familiar—are part of a prayer devoted to the theme of permanence (“things eternal”) and addressed to a God identified not only as “Father” but also as

—Thou, dread source,
Prime, self-existing cause and end of all.

(Wordsworth 1981, 123)²³

For Mary Emerson as for the Wanderer, human consciousness is the direct effect of God's causal power and inconceivable apart from it.

In her conceptualization of her relation to God, Mary is even willing to entertain the hypothesis of a *deus absconditus*—provided, once again, that the relation remain personal, one of mutual recognition:

Were it possible that the Creator was not virtually present with the spirits and bodies which He has made:—if it were in the nature of things possible He could withdraw himself,—I would hold on to the faith that, at some moment of His existence, I was present: that, though cast from Him, my sorrows, my ignorance and meanness were a part of His plan; my death, too, however long and tediously delayed to prayer,—was decreed, was fixed.

(W 10:427)

Though her desire for a direct encounter with God were frustrated, Mary would still not settle for any form of mediation. She has her pride, as she admits herself: “I approached no nearer the person of my Divine Master—but the Infinite must forever & ever surround me. I had too proud a spirit, too elate, too complacent from constitution, may be, ever to have that affinity to Jesus which his better holier ones have” (*JMN* 16:89). One of the most interesting—and, for Waldo, the most delicate—moments of the Women's Club lecture is when he evokes the curious and excessive formalism that characterizes, in his view, Mary's attitude towards Jesus:

I sometimes fancy I detect in her writings a certain—shall I say—polite and courtly homage to the name and dignity of Jesus, not at all spontaneous, but growing out of her respect

to the Revelation, and really veiling and betraying her organic dislike to any interference, any mediation between her and the Author of her being, assurance of whose direct dealing with her she incessantly invokes [. . .].

(W 10:427)

Such deference to protocol is surprising in one such as herself, “in whom lived a higher aspiration, who felt there might be a secret union & derivation from the Infinite, without external forms or performances” (*JMN* 16:46). Waldo was right to see this as meaningful, as both “veiling and betraying.” The personal note he strikes here, as I have suggested above, serves the deeper objectives of revelation of character, in a contrasting moment of intense and uncharacteristic impersonality in his subject.

Anyone who reads through Mary’s selected correspondence can only be struck by her dogged attachment to the idea of a personal God. In her letters to Waldo and his brothers, especially, it is a topic to which she constantly reverts.²⁴ The influence of Mary’s conception of personality on Waldo’s thinking would be difficult to overestimate, as witness his continuing fascination with this aspect of her thought. His own conception of the Absolute Cause as Impersonality was elaborated in frank opposition to her sternly filioipietistic causationism. Mary felt so strongly about this issue that it appears to have been one of the reasons for declaring the she had “lost” Waldo after his departure for Europe in the early 1830s. As she confided to his brother Charles: “I do believe he has no fixed faith in a personal God! His letters have been confused & dark—a mixture of heathen greatness—of worse than antient good heathenism — pantheism — Swedenborgianism [*sic*]— hypotheses of nature & german rationalism.”²⁵

* * *

If Mary was the original pattern of Emersonian greatness, of empowerment through “absolute submission,” then clearly it was a pattern Waldo altered to suit his own philosophical ends. Mary was *useful*, among other things, as the model against which Waldo could define his own philosophy of human action derived from an increasingly impersonal Cause of all causes. Mary forced him to think long and hard about what she called, in an 1842 “Almanack” passage, “the line between human & divine agency” (qtd. in Cole 1998, 301).

In Mary’s thought, as we have seen, self-abandonment becomes an exalted form of self-respect, of self-aggrandizement in God, of “voluntary

union to the infinite Personality” in which the “holy consciousness” of the individual is preserved.²⁶ The relation with the Deity which is the ground of her faith must remain personal, and this presupposes the perpetuation of selfhood. The agency Mary seeks must derive from a Supreme Agent. Which explains her consistent denunciation of the “new laws,” “impersonal principles,” and “hollow abstractions” of the “young speculatist”—by whom she meant above all, of course, Waldo (*MME-SL* 394, 334, 366). In a post-scriptum to an 1835 letter to Frederic Henry Hedge, Mary presented what we might call her official position on this issue, using the emphatic third person: “M. M. E.’s liberty never extends to repeating the speculations of the young philosophers. She rejoices to believe they will return from their comet like wanderings to the center of a *Personal* Divinity—leaving that which has caused their unnatural eclipse and eccentricity.” Although “[n]ovel & stretchy [*sic*] speculation dazzles,” as she wrote to Charles two years earlier, it would not dazzle her out of her commitment to a personal Deity (*MME-SL* 359, 334).

Waldo, for his part, took Mary’s conception of self-abandonment farther than she was willing to go, treating the source of power and ground of all being in increasingly impersonal terms. Obedience for him is submission to a Higher Law; piety, the refusal of “a personality which is instantly imprisoned in human measures” (*TN* 1:85). Over the years, Waldo’s move away from a religion that by definition “includes the personality of God” (*Nature*, *CW* 1:35)—a move which culminates in his hymn to the “Beautiful Necessity” in the essay “Fate” (*CW* 6:26–27)—put him in opposition to thinkers as different as Mary, Bronson Alcott, Cyrus Bartol, and Henry Ware, Jr., as well as to the Paleyan teaching of his Harvard days. That Waldo should emphasize Mary’s refusal to submit to “cold laws” is his way of marking the difference in their conceptions of the true object of worship.

At the same time, these contrasting visions of the Cause should not obscure what is shared in their conception of human greatness. Mary passed down to Waldo her delight at “success,” her love of superiority in others, which she saw as a witness of “a Godlike principle of action and feeling.” And when she claims that “the greatest geniuses” are endowed with a “large perception [that] consumes[s] their egotism” (*W* 10:405, 430–31), she asserts, nearly a quarter of a century before *Representative Men*, one of its central ideas. In the great individual, the ego is a self-consuming artifact. Where Waldo and Mary differ is in the extent of this process and its *terminus ad quem*. For Waldo, the hero embodies an ideal of *total* self-

effacement in a principle of Impersonality that Mary adamantly refused.²⁷ Waldo's great man is greatest "when he can abolish himself and all heroes, by letting in this element of reason, irrespective of persons, this subtilizer, and irresistible upward force, into our thought, destroying individualism" ("Uses of Great Men," *CW* 4:14).

* * *

Before leaving "Amita," I would like to insist once again on its dialectic of high and low. The lecture is indeed an excellent illustration of the doctrine of "The American Scholar," which sees "the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking, as always it does lurk," in the humblest surroundings (*CW* 1:67–68). Mary Emerson may have been a poor and solitary country girl, but as Waldo exclaims—in a possible echo of Napoleon's well-known boast, *Quel roman que ma vie!*—"What a subject is her mind and life for the finest novel!" (*W* 10:402, *JMN* 14:273). "Amita" shows us the superlative in the ordinary, "the grandeur of humility and privation" (*W* 10:404). As befits his subject, Waldo closes the lecture on a bold synthesis of high and low. This, it would appear, is the only way to accommodate a "troublesome boarder" like Mary Emerson, the only way to arrive at a nontrivial definition of her place and of the true nature of her faith:

She gave high counsels [. . .]. It is frivolous to ask,—“And was she ever a Christian in practice?” Cassandra uttered, to a frivolous, skeptical time, the arcana of the Gods: but it is easy to believe that Cassandra domesticated in a lady's house would have proved a troublesome boarder. Is it the less desirable to have the lofty abstractions because the abstractionist is nervous and irritable? Shall we not keep Flamsteed and Herschel in the observatory, though it should even be proved that they neglected to rectify their own kitchen clock? It is essential to the safety of every mackerel fisher that latitudes and longitudes should be astronomically ascertained; and so every banker, shopkeeper and wood-sawer has a stake in the elevation of the moral code by saint and prophet. Very rightly, then, the Christian ages, proceeding on a grand instinct, have said: Faith alone, Faith alone.

(*W* 10:432–33)

The final note that Waldo strikes is, appropriately, one of “elevation,” of the “high,” the “lofty,” the “grand.” Defying conventional terms of classification, seemingly impossible to consider apart from the All, Mary’s humble life drags the two poles of the universe together, revealing the vital link between the everyday and the sublime, between the mackerel fisherman and the laws of astronomy, between the common tradesman and Holy Writ, between the “goody” and the “genius.” There is no existence so isolated and obscure but has its living link to the Cause, its rightful share of universal power in the moral sentiment. Waldo had already observed in his journals this peculiar power of Mary’s writing to reveal the deep meaning lurking in apparent trifles: “Yesterday I read an old file of Aunt Mary’s letters, & felt how she still gains by all comparison with later friends. Never any gave higher counsels, as E[lizabeth]. H[oar]. most truly said, nor played with all the household incidents with more wit & humour. My life and its early events never look trivial in her letters, but full of eyes, & acquire deepest expression” (*JMN* 8:391).

Mary gave sense, depth, and unity to Waldo’s life, and his homage to her can only render the same. With Mary, the high does not exclude the low but enhances it, heightens it, glorifies it through the extraordinary transfigurative power of her prose. “*How rich the world is!* I said [. . .] on reading a letter of M. M. E.” (*JMN* 7:220). Nothing is trivial, nothing merely anecdotal. Her life reveals the oneness of Being, the omnipresence of the Cause, the march of History.

Notes

1. This work cited hereafter as *TN* (*Topical Notebooks*).
2. This work cited hereafter as *W* (*Complete Works*).
3. For Mary as “Saint,” see Ralph Waldo Emerson 2001, 2:382; further references to the *Later Lectures* are to this edition and will be cited hereafter as *LL*. Waldo’s poem “The Nun’s Aspiration,” a versified passage of Mary’s “Almanack,” serves as the untitled epigraph to “Mary Moody Emerson” in the Centenary Edition titled *Complete Works* (cf. *W* 9:253–54 and 10:397–98).
4. The parallels mentioned may be found in Waldo’s *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* (1960–82; cited hereafter as *JMN*) and *Collected Works* (1971–; cited hereafter as *CW*). On cause and effect and the ordinary, see *W* 10:415, *CW* 4:96–97, *JMN* 8:391 and *CW* 4:94; for Mary’s penetrating eye (also in the prophetic or “Delphian” sense), *JMN* 7:446, 14:280, *CW* 4:11, and *W* 10:408, 432; for her realism and impatience with convention, *JMN* 16:274, *CW* 4:166, and *W* 10:404, 407. Mary had already played the role of Plato two decades before

Representative Men in a dialogue cowritten with Waldo in 1824. See Mary Moody Emerson 1993, 185–89 (cited hereafter as *MME-SL*) and *JMN* 2:246–49, 250–52.

5. Cole observes for her part that the letters and diary are “powerful as language and idea, though daunting as a result of both intrinsic complexity and vagary of form” (1998, 7).

6. *CW* 4:97. The *OED*’s sole sources for the word “causationist” are Waldo’s essays “Montaigne” and “Power.”

7. *CW* 6:28. Waldo drives the point home in “Worship”: “Strong men believe in cause and effect” (*CW* 6:117).

8. Mary’s letters to Waldo in Nancy Craig Simmons’s selection contain nearly fifty references to causation as a metaphysical concept, a figure that climbs to well over a hundred if we include her letters to other members of the family circle with whom she shared her passion for metaphysics and speculative theology.

9. See Ralph Waldo Emerson 1939, 1:137–39, cited hereafter as *L*. On Waldo, Mary, and Hume, see *MME-SL* 127, 138–39, 176–80, 182–84, 208–9, 241–43; see also Barish 1989, 99–115 and Cole 1998, 176–77.

10. See *MME-SL* 160–61 and *JMN* 2:36n57, 37n60, 47n15.

11. A glance at the number of references to *cause* in the Centenary Edition alone will give some idea of the persistence of this theme. See the electronic concordance at <http://www.concordlibrary.org/scollect/EmersonConcordance/index.htm>.

12. See Barish 1989, 99–100, and Cole 1998, 164, 167–68. Nancy Craig Simmons also gives specific examples of Waldo’s borrowings; see *MME-SL* 140n3, 145n10.

13. Cole notes the peculiar status of a lecture whose subject remains anonymous—a peculiarity she attributes to “[g]enteel reticence”: “‘Amita’ was neither a traditional eulogy nor a personal reminiscence, for the speaker declined even to speak of his subject by name” (1998, 3). She claims furthermore that Waldo omits “the substance of Mary’s intellectual life” (11). I shall dissent from this position, arguing that the anonymity—which is not total, since Waldo does in fact name his subject in the third paragraph (*W* 10:399)—has a deeper cause as well, and that the lecture, in *form* as much as content, bespeaks the mind and personality of its subject. Its structure contains far more than a “minimal alloy of metaphysics” (Cole 1998, 307).

14. “I give you joy of the worm!” Waldo exclaimed, toward the end of the same letter quoted in my first epigraph, in which he evokes Mary’s faith in his own “dream-like anticipations of greatness” (*L* 1:105; Dec. [?] 1821[?]).

15. See Cole’s useful description of the audience of the lecture (1998, 5–7).

16. I quote Waldo’s definition of truth in “The Superlative” (*W* 10:176; see also “Aristocracy,” *W* 10:33). In “Greatness,” Waldo defines it as “resting on the real”; in “Worship,” as “deal[ing] with real being,—essences with essences” (*W* 8:308; *CW* 6:113–14).

17. Qtd. in Cole 1998, 8. “Mary’s desire for agency,” Cole adds later, “was writ large in all her life gestures” (132).

18. Doctrine might be considered at best a *proximate* cause, but by no means the ultimate one. This last is always, for Waldo, the moral sentiment.

19. The early lecture “Holiness” defines the moral sentiment as “all we know of the Cause of Causes” (Ralph Waldo Emerson 1964–72, 2:352); see also the introduction to the 1841 Lectures on the Times (*CW* 1:182).

20. At the end of the same paragraph of “The Rule of Life,” Waldo quotes Mary’s “Almanack”: “Nay, it came up to the point of saying, ‘To obey God is joy, though there were no hereafter’” (*LL* 2:382).

21. *CW* 6:12. For Mary’s influence on “Fate,” see Cole 1998, 284–85.

22. *MME-SL* 314. “We are as conscious of certain moral truths, and an intuitive belief of the Supreme, as we are of our own existence” (“Almanack” entry from the mid-1820s, qtd. in Cole 1998, 112).

23. In an 1846 letter to Waldo’s wife Lidian, Mary noted the “rousing” effect upon her of the opening pages of Book 4 of *The Excursion* (*MME-SL* 484). Waldo referred regularly to *The Excursion* in his journals and notebooks.

24. As she warned Waldo in the face of his impending decision to quit the ministry: “Without a personal God you are on an ocean mast unrigged for any port or object” (*MME-SL* 314).

25. *MME-SL* 330; January 8, 1833. Looking back on this quarrel three years later, she declared to Waldo that she had lost him “in the chaos of modern speculation” (*MME-SL* 368; March 31, 1836).

26. I am quoting Mary’s 30 September 1838 letter to her nephew William. In the same letter, Mary reacts to the impersonalizing drift of Waldo’s Divinity School Address, which reminded her of “many a gone bye year, when his young Muse was wont to wander into strange ‘universes’ and find idealised people and alas, ‘new laws’” (*MME-SL* 394).

27. Thus Mary in a December 17, 1837 letter to Elizabeth Hoar:

The only transition from finite to Infinite is the “limitations” w’h God condescends to set to Himself in nature & rev.s—in the very personality (if we dare so to speake) he, as it were, assumes? All we can grasp of infinite is something like losing self in transition? Yet we dont lose self subsistence—that immense gift of God’s image—that charter of our own free personality—& of our Maker’s!—that invincible sense of freedom—so opposed to Cousin’s theory of the absolute reason as impersonal [. . .].

(*MME-SL* 384)

For Mary, the problem with French philosopher Victor Cousin’s influential conception of absolute reason was indeed that it left no room for selfhood:

I love the *enthusiam* [sic] of Cousin and his refutation of dear old Locke—but can't believe his "absolute reason" to be applicable to the human consciousness & the general truths of philosophy—
And I return to the plain dealing Scotch school with respect—
however circuitous & inconclusive—there are the great facts of a personal Divinity & man's relations.

(MME-SL 382; letter to William Emerson, 11 May 1837)

Like Mary, Cyrus Bartol, a member in good standing of the Transcendental Club, would later regret that Waldo "followed Cousin" and his "doctrine of Divine Impersonality" (1872, 85).

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