The subject of personal renewal brings us once again to the Emersonian idea of “work.” While the orientation of this work becomes variously more reflexive when viewed from the perspective of selfhood, the basic self-world materials remain identical to those contributing to cultural renewal. Put most simply, this work now takes the form of a pragmatic-poetic approach to subjectivity as an ongoing work-in-progress. Using his popular figure of circles, Emerson perceives it this way: “The life of man 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.”

You will recall that Emerson’s circles are often configured as linguistic formations, and that the contents of these formations are necessarily contingent upon the meanings made available to us in our efforts to make sense of the world. They are, as a result, finally inseparable from the environment in which the self lives and works—personal renewal and cultural renewal are interdependent events. This means that the Emersonian self should not be thought of as a fixed Cartesian entity (subject), situated and constituted independent of its actions and ends, standing over and against the world (object). “Everything is medial,” we are again reminded. And “Permanence is a word of degrees” (“Circles” 297).

Still, chapter 5 showed us that observing such pragmatic principles is not as simple as these easy aphorisms might lead us to believe. The reifying tendencies of subject-object metaphysics are very deeply entrenched in our everyday forms of life, influencing in a fundamental way how we talk and think about ourselves and the world. Most importantly, this metaphysics can make the self or subject appear essentially fixed and autonomous. In critiquing this common phenomenon, Pirsig again summons his computer metaphor to underscore our (skeptical) tendency to be seduced by substantives into supposing some antecedently existing thing that corresponds to them:

Our language is so organized around pronouns such as “I” and they are so convenient to use it is impossible to get rid of them. . . . The language we’ve inherited confuses [us]. . . . This Cartesian little “Me,” this autonomous little homunculus who sits behind our eyeballs looking out through them in order to
pass judgment on the affairs of the world, is just completely ridiculous. This self-appointed little editor of reality is just an impossible fiction that collapses the moment one examines it. This Cartesian “Me” is a software reality, not a hardware reality. (Lila 154, 201)

Even Emerson and Pirsig’s “original unit,” it seems, is an emergent entity, a software reality. Nonetheless, they still hold that it can successfully rewrite itself and flourish through selected private practices of self-fashioning and carefully measured participation in social life.

In opposition to the reified subject of Cartesian convention, Emersonian pragmatists maintain that the self is best seen as an *activity* or constellation of behaviors, a means of organizing and making sense of experience rather than a mental substance *that* acts. It is an ongoing event that emerges and, one hopes, expands or grows through interaction with the natural and sociocultural world (it may also fragment or become encased in a shell of addled routine). Consequently, self-realization is no more a given than any of life’s other goods. With this general theme as our point of departure, we explore in this chapter the possibilities and problems of personal renewal, of reconstructing (or rewriting) this emergent self. After demonstrating that the poetics of personal renewal comprise multiple narrative dimensions, I offer a Deweyan corrective to Emerson and Pirsig’s distinctly inner-directed path to remaking the self. All of this serves by degrees to round out our investigation of focal question number 3: How might art as experience contribute to an everyday poetics of living?

**The Emergent Poetic Self**

Dewey’s take on the emergent self is a natural extension of his theory of habits, those readily acquired “working capacities” that lend structure and direction to experience. It is a theory based upon his recognition that we are thoroughly embodied, biological beings. Yet Dewey also clearly understands that we are very much the products of culture and various forms of social interaction. In braiding these different sources of the self together, we might then say that Deweyan habits are expressions of culture rooted in the lived body and mediated by social interaction. This means, *contra* Emerson, that the acquired meanings manifested by our working capacities are not situated solely, or even primarily, in language. Rather, they suffuse our embodied, spatial, temporal, culturally formed, and value-laden behaviors and understandings. What exactly this means for the processes of personal renewal will become evident shortly.

Dewey’s conception of the self suggests that we are more creatures of habit than of will or reason. Will or reason, he tells us, could constitute the self only in a world where we are not continually engaged in purposive interaction with our natural and sociocultural environments. What we commonly think of as will largely becomes, for Dewey, the habitual predisposition to respond in certain ways to different life situations. Reason, correspondingly, is a set of intellectual tools that assists us in developing intelligently functioning habits.