The Transcendental Self

What is the self upon which this written world is to be built? What is the status of the individual such that all that is known can be based upon it? This question, which is at the heart of Emerson’s homocentric Romanticism, is phrased in his 1841 essay ‘Self-Reliance’ as follows: ‘What is the aboriginal Self on which a universal reliance may be grounded?’ (CW2, 37). Emerson’s formulation of the problem may be interpreted as a lack of self evidence for the ‘self’, which in turn demands an inquiry into the self’s origin and ground. He is seeking a point d’appui for reliance, and the first restriction, contained in the epigraph to the essay and taken from Persius’s Satires, is ‘Ne te quæsiveris extra’: Do not seek yourself outside yourself (CW2, 25).1 Though these are not Emerson’s words (just what would it mean for words to be Emerson’s is at stake in this chapter), and they lie ironically and teasingly beyond the body of the essay, the quotation still suggests an obvious clue to the location of the self and one that might be expected in an essay bearing the title ‘Self-Reliance’. Yet some now familiar questions haunt and thus undercut this apparent obviousness. How are we to distinguish inside from outside? What are the self’s limits when the initial question is posed by a man renowned for preaching ‘the infinitude of the private man’ (JMN7, 342)? How, to paraphrase the Delphic imperative that Emerson inherited from Coleridge (‘the heaven-descended KNOW THYSELF!’ (Biographia, 291)), do we know ourselves? There are, of course, a number of familiar assertive answers given in the essay, associated with genuine action, or character, or work, or the kind of rugged self-belief that is weaned from ‘the she-wolf’s teat’ (CW2, 28). These, however, seem to be ways of bypassing or postponing the question to which the essay is addressed. Emerson’s words, which can be taken for homilies and which correspond to the nascent American self-perception of

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rugged individualism, do not provide the self with its own evidence. As the last few chapters have demonstrated, Emerson, under the influence of his aunt Mary, Coleridge, Carlyle and other contemporary Romantic thinkers, has begun to develop a very complex idea of the self and its relationship with the world based on man, God, language and nature. In this chapter, building on hints in the work of Stanley Cavell regarding Emerson and Immanuel Kant’s Transcendental Deduction, I shall consider the transcendental nature of Emerson’s Transcendentalism, and in particular the way that language, as writing, grounds Emerson’s *a priori* conception of the self over against that which opposes it: which is not nature, or God, but society.

I. ‘The star without parallax’

In ‘Self-Reliance’, aboriginality, literally the ‘origin from which’ reliance may be derived, is affirmed by Emerson in typically Romantic terms of loss. The self is said to ‘first share the life by which things exist’ only to ‘forget that we have shared their cause’ (CW2, 37). That on one level this stands as Emerson’s Romantic conception of the Fall is clear from *Nature*, where ‘A man is a god in ruins’ (CW1, 42), and the 1844 essay ‘Experience’, where the fall is not from grace but into forgetting, into *lethe*, and thus, ‘It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made, that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man’ (CW3, 43). Even though too late, the recollection of loss, which does not recover that loss, still stands for Emerson’s hope for redemption. For it is important to remember, according to Emerson, that we belong to the world first, that we receive it before we lose it; that we must have received it in order to have lost it. This initial reception is ‘spontaneous’ (or at least, involuntary); our ability to rely on it is what is at stake. The existential corollary is that we may only respond to our loss from within it, and therefore we struggle to know if we are recuperating the self or merely living out the Fall. Nevertheless, in order to be self-reliant we must *already* be able to be so, and as such self-reliance must be possible *a priori*.

It is, arguably, the question of the *a priori* that links Emerson most clearly with his age and the generation of philosophers who preceded him. Working out a ground of spontaneity which can refute the scepticism of Hume is, arguably, the fundamental problem of Romantic philosophy and of its literature, the disciplines that Emerson’s epistemology of form spans. For Stanley Cavell what is at stake in the question of a transatlantic Romantic conception of the *a priori* is the ‘ordinary’, and