

EMERSON

I spoke in the Introduction of moments of humiliation or humbling in remarriage comedy, as a prelude to overcoming the vice of snobbery. It happens that Emerson's "Self-Reliance," at the close of its opening paragraph, describes, and I would say recalls and enacts, a scene of a certain humbling, or chastening, or shaming, in particular of being humbled by the words of someone else, a scene that takes many forms in both the comedies and the melodramas we will consider.

In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else tomorrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another.

In my saying Emerson is here enacting as well as describing a scene of humbling or shaming, I mean that he is to be taken as presenting an instance of a work of genius (but what this means is a matter he will go on to examine, has already, if invisibly, begun examining in his speaking of "abiding by our impression"), in the face of which we are free to test our capacity for shame (or perhaps for congenial company, in case we know ourselves to be clear of his charge). Why has he begun with a little lesson in reading (the opening words of the essay are "I read the other day")? In particular, the idea of words presenting themselves to us with majesty is virtually a definition of the emotion of the sublime, a mode much in favor in the Romanticism which is one source of Emerson's writing, and the theory of which in recent memory was at the forefront of literary theory. (Emerson's insight that this feeling of majesty is alienated and—or because—projected out of being rejected by us,

is the kind of insight I have learned to expect of Emerson.) And why does he, or where does he get the confidence to, ask us to let his work teach us, or warn us, to change our ways?

Without trying to answer at once a question that the whole of Emerson's essay is about, I can already ask you to have in mind the question whether the sound of this writing is a sound you would expect from philosophy. Serious theology, or psychoanalysis, would seem more to the point. Here again I shall not try to answer at once—but I can at least say this much by way of anticipation. I myself experienced, especially after writing a little book on Thoreau's *Walden*, a sort of cringe in trying to get back into Emerson, a recoil from what struck me as his perpetual and irritating intertwining of lyricism and cajoling. Yet I was convinced, from my experience with *Walden*, that some such mode of writing may lend itself to a systematic thoughtfulness in a way only the name of philosophy suits. And, since it is obvious that *Walden* is in conversation with Emerson's writing in every page, and since nothing before Emerson in America is philosophically ambitious and original on this scale, it is reasonable to conclude that what we have in these two writers is nothing less than the origins of the American difference in philosophical thought, as this enters into a new well of American literary ambition on these shores. I will make a perhaps smaller, if no clearer, claim for Emerson's "Self-Reliance" than that it is philosophy. I will say it calls for philosophy, intermittently by quoting or parodying undoubted and familiar philosophy. Nothing has nourished my conviction in this matter more than the number and fervor of people who have gone out of their way to deny that Emerson is capable of challenging philosophy.

The question of Emerson's powers as a philosopher has been raised about his work from early in his career and fame, from 1848 when James Russell Lowell in his recounting of American letters to his time referred to Emerson's prose as a "mist" (and because Lowell admired Emerson, he qualified his epithet by describing it as a "golden" mist). And throughout most of the century and a half since, it has continued repeatedly to be called, by admirers and detractors, something like a fog—rather discouraging attempts to read it with trust in its intellectual originality and accuracy. Why should we still be concerned with this question—of philosophicality, let's say? In today's environment, or in some regions of it, it would be acceptable to identify our age as one of post-philosophy and indeed to praise Emerson for his avoidance or transcendence of the question. I think he is to be praised—

though less for avoiding the issue than for facing it in his own way. But again, if we can say that Emerson is a useful, interesting, moving, provocative writer, whose powers increase with increased attention to them, why bother about whether he is called a philosopher or something else, or nothing but a writer?

There are several reasons why it matters. First, it matters to me because I do not want a text to be denied the title of philosophy on the ground that it does not exactly take the form you might expect of philosophy. The denial of the title tends to excuse the tendency to refrain from putting much intellectual pressure on Emerson's words, to refrain from accepting the invitation of those words to get past their appearance, if I can put it so.

Second, it matters to Emerson's idea of himself, of his task, or fate, as a writer. The question whether he speaks with philosophical authority—and if not, with what authority—is an undertone, I find, of his prose throughout, connected, I cannot doubt, with the crisis in his life as a result of giving up the questionable, for him, authority of the pulpit. To give up on the question would be to give up following the way Emerson's prose questions itself. (As when, in the opening of "Self-Reliance," he describes the impressions he inscribes as merely those already rejected by the reader—leaving it open how far his own work of genius is to undo the alienation of the majesty that is the cost of the reception of other such works. The self-questioning is hence simultaneously a questioning of his audience, of those he writes for, taking the form of asking what reading is.) Third, it matters to the idea of moral perfectionism, which is somehow bound up with an idea of a philosophical way or imagination of life. Fourth, I think the ambiguity in whether or not Emerson is to be received as a philosopher may be key in working on another pervasive puzzle in the reception of Emerson, namely that he has endeared himself both to politically radical and to politically conservative temperaments.

These standing issues form a good place from which to approach the text of "Self-Reliance" more intensively, if not more consecutively. It is as familiar an American text as exists, and because for some the text, or its sound, will seem so familiar that it can seem we do not know whether we understand it at all—that it is indeed as unresistant or unsupportive as mist—I have adopted the strategy of isolating a few sentences, in pairs, torn from their contexts in that essay, in order to force us to stop over them. I adopt the strategy also because everyone knows that, but no one finds it easy to say

how, the Emersonian sentence is a remarkable achievement, bearing somehow the brunt of what Emerson has to say, or to do, and often making it difficult to see how his paragraphs, let alone what he calls his Essays, hang together. I'm suggesting we don't even know what makes the sentences themselves hang together, what produces that perpetual air of understanding and not understanding, insight and obscurity.

As an introduction to the exemplary yoking of sentences I shall cite in a moment, I repeat ones I have in the past often been glad to invoke. I have in mind Emerson's saying: "The virtue most in request in society is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion."

Immediately, as with Emerson's allusion to his own writing in speaking of returning rejected thoughts, thoughts we all have had, however bathed in mist (which we might project upon Emerson), here, in saying "Self-reliance is its aversion," he is pretty explicitly naming his own writing, as represented in his essay "Self-Reliance," as saying of itself that it is written in aversion, aversion to conformity. And since the work of the word "conformity" in its sentence is to name a virtue, a contribution to a way of life, the implication is that his writing in self-reliance exhibits or enacts a contribution to a counter way of life. "Aversion" is a striking word, not to be taken lightly as a description of his writing as such. It invokes the preacher's word once familiar to his life, that of conversion, and accordingly should raise the question whether the turning implied in conversion and aversion is to be understood as a turning away from the society that demands conformity more than as a turning toward it, as in a gesture of confrontation.

And which comes first, conformity or its aversion? Is the idea that we experience the demands of conformity, and either obey them or else find that reliance upon oneself demands, and provides in return, ways to confront those who guard and impose conformity? The demand of conformity would accordingly demand that I justify my wayward life (not at this stage criminal, but, say, critical, discomfiting), and the provision of justification, as exemplified by the self-reliance of Emerson's writing, takes the form of making myself intelligible to those concerned. (This is precisely what Thoreau stages himself as attempting to do, as he simultaneously suggests the magnitude of the task, on the opening page of *Walden*: "I . . . require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives; some such account as he would send to his kindred from a distant land, for if he has lived sincerely, it

must have been in a distant land to me.") Or is it the other way around—that I find myself outside, sensing a lack of justification for my existence, and interpret this as a call for conformity, showing that a rapprochement with others is something I also, other things equal, desire?

Either way, this perplexity seems particularly to mark that fateful moment of each human existence at which, given at least a minimum sense of political freedom and justice in your society, you recognize that you participate in your society's work and profit from it, you understand that you are—as liberal political theory puts the matter—asked to show your *consent* to that society, to recognize the legitimacy of its governing you. We shall see this centrally in Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* and reinterpreted in John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. A standing problem with this idea is that it remains unclear what it is that shows or expresses your consent. (This is a burning question for Thoreau, in *Walden* as well as in his deeply influential essay "Civil Disobedience," known to be an inspiration for both Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.)

Let's put this demand as the expectation of your "taking your place" in society. And let's suppose that you do not see the place, or do not like the places you see. You may of course take on the appearance of accepting the choices, and this may present itself to you as your having adopted a state of fraudulence, a perpetual sense of some false position you have assumed, without anyone's exactly having placed you there. A mark of this stage is a sense of obscurity, to yourself as well as to others, one expression of which is a sense of compromise, of being asked to settle too soon for the world as it is, a perplexity in relating yourself to what you find unacceptable in your world, without knowing what you can be held responsible for. Do I, for example, consent to the degree of injustice we all live with? Do I know how to define my position with respect to it? Since it probably doesn't make sense for me either to assume direct responsibility for it or to deny all indirect responsibility for it, where do I stand?

I am assuming that we can all recognize such moments in our lives. They are not confined to the period between adolescence and the claims of adulthood, though they may be first encountered, and be concentrated, there. I have identified the moment as located and inhabited by the remarriage comedies as one in which moral cynicism threatens, the temptation to give up on a life more coherent and admirable than seems affordable after the compromises of adulthood come to obscure the promise and dreams of

youth. The fact that the principal pair in these comedies is somewhat older than the young pairs of classical comedy provides a context in which certain ways of fulfilling earlier dreams have collapsed and a new regime must be formed to which consent can now, on reflection, be won, or wagered.

I have characterized Emerson as perceiving this state as one of my wanting (that is, lacking and desiring) justification, and understood him as perceiving our lacking the means of making ourselves intelligible (to others, to ourselves). And the depth of this crisis (if I do not miss the fact that it is a crisis) is expressed in, and by, Emerson's writing as responding to a time in which I sense as it were a lack in language itself, as if to explain myself I would have to reinvent my words. (Writing, as an allegory of aversion to conformity, to going along, getting along, inevitably raises the question of the direction of aversive turning as turning toward or away, since I crave the words I cringe from—all the words I have.)

I mean this to capture the experience of Emerson's saying, as we shall see in a moment, that conformity makes "most men," meaning most to whom he feels he is responding, "not false in a few particulars, authors of a few lies, but false in all particulars . . . So that every word they say chagrins us and we know not where to begin to set them right." I relate this to Aristotle's famous claim, at the opening of his *Politics*, that it is the gift of language that makes human beings fit for, and fated for, political association, the association that places and measures all the others. Emerson's claim of finding the language of most others depressing, let us say uncommunicative, made against the background of Aristotle's idea, which seems to me its most plausible inspiration, in effect declares that a genuine political association does not exist between him and those others; that, said otherwise, America has not yet been discovered. Then his task as a writer is to discover the terms in which it can be discovered. Then what will constitute its discovery?

I make the following fundamental assumption: What I characterized as making oneself intelligible is the interpretation moral perfectionism gives to the idea of moral reasoning, the demand for providing reasons for one's conduct, for the justification of one's life. Utilitarianism proposes a means of calculation to determine the good of an action. Kantianism proposes a principle of judgment to determine the rightness of an action. Perfectionism proposes confrontation and conversation as the means of determining whether we can live together, accept one another into the aspirations of our lives. This does not mean that perfectionism is an alternative to these other

famous positions. Left to itself it may seem to make the ability to converse do too much work—what prevents us from coming to unjust agreements, or intimately talking ourselves into misdeeds? Perfectionism is the province not of those who oppose justice and benevolent calculation, but of those who feel left out of their sway, who feel indeed that most people have been left, or leave themselves out, of their sway. It is a perception, or an intuition, that Emerson articulates as most men living in "secret melancholy" and that Thoreau a few years later transcribes as "the mass of men liv[ing] lives of quiet desperation."

I put matters by contrasting utilitarianism, Kantianism, and perfectionism in terms of providing means of coming to agreement, or establishing conditions of understanding, to align them with Socrates' question to *Euthyphro* that I cited in the Introduction: "What kind of disagreement, my friend, causes hatred and anger?" Some philosophers have taken the fact of moral disagreement to show the inherent irrationality of moral argument—show it to be essentially a matter of which side has the greater power, political, rhetorical, psychological, economic. Heaven knows there are mortal conflicts of such kinds, and they often give themselves out as moral conflicts. Whereas my suggestion is that moral reasoning of the standard sorts—calculation of consequences, interpretation of motives and principles—is to be understood as obeying the moral demand for intelligibility. It is in its meeting of that demand that perfectionism counts as a moral theory (or as a dimension of any moral theory). Everything else is still open. For example, whether there are limits to the obligation to be intelligible, whether everyone isn't entitled to a certain obscurity or sense of confusion, and at some times more than others. Maybe there isn't always something to say; and there is the question of what one is to do about persisting disagreement, how far you must go in trying to resolve it—as Adam Bonner (Spencer Tracy) will put the matter to Amanda Bonner (Katharine Hepburn) in *Adam's Rib*, "I've always tried to see your point of view. But this time you've got me stumped."

Socrates' mode is important. He is clearly in disagreement with *Euthyphro*, as he is discussing disagreement, and I like the notation of his credibly affirming, in that circumstance, friendship with *Euthyphro* ("What kind of disagreement, my friend, causes hatred and anger?"). The implication is that there the context for moral argument or reasoning, one in which there is a willingness to understand and to be understood, may be difficult to maintain. A further implication I draw is that hatred and anger are not

essentially irrational, but may clearly be called for. To live a moral life should not require that we become Socrateses or Buddhas or Christs, all but unprovokable. But we are asked to make even justified anger and hatred intelligible, and to be responsible for their expression in our lives, and sometimes, not always and everywhere, to put them aside.

One reason for my placing Emerson first, as a figure of the perfectionist, is the clarity and passion with which his writing tests its aspiration to honesty, to expressing all and only what it means. "Self-reliance is [conformity's] aversion" is one of Emerson's many efforts at the self-description of his writing, of the point of every word he writes. Take it this way: "Self-reliance" characterizes the manner in which his writing relates to itself, stands by itself, accounts for itself. "Conformity" characterizes the audience of this writing, the one it seeks to attract; an audience, I said earlier, from which and to which it turns, incessantly (so it is as attracted to that audience, or what it may become, as it is chagrined by it). If he believed that the audience *could not* turn to him, it would be folly for him to write as he does. As it would be folly if he believed that he was not subject to the same failings as they. (Thoreau says it this way: "I never knew . . . a worse man than myself." And "I would not [waste myself in?] preaching to a stone.") This turning is Emerson's picture of thinking, explicit in *The American Scholar*. It is manifest in the way Emerson turns words and sentences—as if you are to read them forward and backward, inside out and outside in.

Emerson's writing, in demonstrating our lack of given means of making ourselves intelligible (to ourselves, to others), details the difficulties in the way of possessing those means, and demonstrates that they are at hand. This thought, implying our need of invention and of transformation, expresses two dominating themes of perfectionism.

The first theme is that the human self—confined by itself, aspiring toward itself—is always becoming, as on a journey, always partially in a further state. This journey is described as education or cultivation. (Thoreau characteristically names his audience the student, and Emerson names it the scholar, but neither of them has in mind simply, or even primarily, people enrolled in what we call a school, but rather an aspect of their conception of the human, of any age.) Since an emphasis on cultivation is an essential feature of perfectionism, the ease with which perfectionism can be debased into a form of aestheticism or preciosity or religiosity is a measure of the ease with which perfectionism can be debased, as philosophy can be, or religion.

The second dominating theme is that the other to whom I can use the words I discover in which to express myself is the Friend—a figure that may occur as the goal of the journey but also as its instigation and accompaniment. Any moral outlook—systematically assessing the value of human existence—will accord weight to the value of friendship. But only perfectionism, as I understand it, places so absolute a value on this relationship. The presence of friendship in the films we will consider (including the sometimes drastic lack of this relation in the melodramas) is of the most specific importance in establishing them as perfectionist narratives.

We come, then, to the four pairs of excerpts from "Self-Reliance." I have arranged them as follows: The first two passages indicate how the *question of philosophy* shows itself as a determining matter of Emerson's writing. The second two suggest the role of *moral paradox* in Emerson. The next two name two narrative figures or characters whom Emerson invokes to measure his claim to authority or authorship (his disdaining of any standing authority is a measure of his claim to philosophy)—said otherwise, these figures occupy *the role of the Friend*. And the final two passages are meant as specimens of how *reading that writing* is to be accomplished.

THE QUESTION OF PHILOSOPHY

Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say "I think," "I am," but quotes some saint or sage.

Most men have bound their eyes with one or another handkerchief, and attached themselves to some one of these communities of opinion. This conformity makes them not false in a few particulars, authors of a few lies, but false in all particulars. Their every truth is not quite true . . . so that every word they say chagrins us and we know not where to begin to set them right.

In the first extract, Emerson is invoking Descartes's fateful idea "Cogito ergo sum," "I think, therefore I am." (Don't be put off by the lack of "therefore" in Emerson's version. Descartes also leaves out the therefore in the most likely place one may encounter his idea, in the second of his six Meditations, where he writes: "I am, I exist is necessarily true every time that I pronounce it or conceive it in my mind.") I say Emerson is playful and serious in his repetition of Descartes because what Emerson does, in a passage that identifies

quoting with a *fear of saying* (“I dare not say”), is to quote (a sage) and therefore not exactly, or exactly not, to say the thing for himself. (I do not here invoke the technical philosophical distinction between mentioning and using a signifying phrase. One reason not to do so is that there is an ordinary use of a quotation, irrelevant to logic, in which you introduce it by saying “As so-and-so aptly remarks,” thus claiming your acknowledgment of the truth or aptness of the remark without taking responsibility for forming the thought. Another reason is that I take Emerson here to be questioning the flat distinction between saying and quoting. A favorite idea of Emerson’s is precisely that, except in those moments when self-reliance, or coming to oneself, has overcome the necessities of conformity, one is incessantly quoting, using what Proust calls “public words.”)

The implications of Emerson’s strategy are various: (1) He shows himself not to have announced his own cogito (not here anyway); accordingly he shows himself to be unable or unwilling to claim and prove his own existence in that moment, hence then and there to be haunting it (“we glide ghost-like”). (2) His inability to assert the most basic facts of existence, for example the inability to name Descartes, to claim the authority of a founder of modern European philosophy, implies that America is unable to inherit and claim philosophy for itself, hence remains haunted by it. (3) If we Americans are to claim philosophy for ourselves, we will have to invent a language for it in which our existence without philosophy, or haunted by philosophy, is itself expressible philosophically. It will require a look and a sound so far unheard of, an originality not expressed in new words, as if we had to speak in tongues; we want the old words, but transfigured by our unprecedented experience of discovery, displacement, and inhabitation, of mad conflicts between the desire for freedom and the immediacy of heaven, and unending disappointment with our failings to become a new world. It will be a language, or a mode of speech, in which what we say is neither just quoted nor just said, perhaps because it is denied as well as said or because more than one thing is said.

On the second page of his essay “The Poet,” Emerson says: “The highest minds of the world have never ceased to explore the double meaning, or, shall I say, the quadruple, or the centuple, or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact.” There is some suggestion here, no doubt, that the daring philosopher whom Emerson calls for, taking on directly the assertion of his (and our) existence, will have also to be something of a poet—the ideal

of Coleridge and Wordsworth as well as of their contemporary German Romantics such as Schlegel and Tieck (the influential translators of Shakespeare into German). The process of discovering and announcing a fact is something Emerson (in “The American Scholar”) calls thinking and describes in a way philosophers of our time will have difficulty recognizing as part of the work they are obliged to do: Emerson writes of a process “by which experience is converted into thought,” which is a way of making the meaning of a fact public. A little later he says there is “no fact, no event, in our private history, which shall not, sooner or later, lose its adhesive, inert form, and astonish us by soaring from our body into the empyrean.”

This sense of being able to speak philosophically and openly about anything and everything that happens to you is an ideal of thinking that first seemed to me possible in contemporary professional philosophy in the work of the later Wittgenstein and in that of J. L. Austin. It is what their redemption of what they call the ordinary from its rejection in much of philosophy has perhaps most importantly meant to me. Without the sense of liberation that afforded me, I do not know that I would have persisted in attempting to find a place in academic philosophy.

In the second of the two passages quoted a moment ago, Emerson specifies further characteristics of a speech that can incorporate the fatedness to quotation (to America’s having come late into the world) and to the absence of a philosophical voice of America’s own. (Not that America’s relation to philosophy is in all respects unique. Nietzsche had his own conditions for experiencing the loss of a credible language of philosophy.) To be chagrined by every word that most men say is going to put you at odds with those men and make your common sense sound paradoxical. This is the crisis out of which moral perfectionism’s aspiration takes its rise, the sense that either you or the world is wrong. For example, Emerson somewhere refers to a *casual* remark or action as a *casualty*. This may be taken as idle, cute, or perverse of him. But consider first that remarks worth calling casual (especially as an excuse) are expressions of thoughtlessness and conformity; and second that what is said is permanent, it can rarely be neutralized by a simple “Pardon me.” We understand that the bustling and bumping that the human body is subject to in its daily rounds will cause some unintentional bruises, but purely unintentional words are harder to find or ignore or explain or excuse; and consider further that, unlike your unintentional actions, your as it were unintentional words may endlessly have already been taken up and

repeated as they made their way amid the varied interests and accidents of others, the most ordinary perhaps affording, as in Emerson's case, a certain melancholy.

MORAL PARADOXES

I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me. I would write on the lintels of the door-post *Whim*. I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation.

Do not tell me, as a good man did today, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they *my* poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong.

These two instances of paradoxes are both allusions to, some might say parodies of, words reported in the Gospels as said or heard by Jesus. In the first quotation Emerson is following the injunction not to delay, for example by appealing to the obligation to bury the dead, when the King of Heaven is at hand. Yet where others will claim that this is a private appeal to faith, Emerson suggests writing "Whim" for all to see. One might feel that this shows Emerson's distrust or chagrin in response to so many ready mouthfuls of faith. But then consider that it also shows a dedication of his writing to the work of faith, to transfigured, redemptive words, which means that he cannot, in his finitude, and his distrust of the exchanges of words as they now stand in society, claim more than the existence of his own call to write otherwise. Whether it is more, whether it speaks for the world and to others, is not for him to say.

The second quotation, containing the disturbing question "Are they *my* poor?" has, you may imagine, caused hard looks and words to be sent Emerson's way. But consider that Emerson is alluding, so I claim, to Jesus' famous dismissal, or acceptance, of the poor: "The poor you have always with you." The occasion was, similarly, one in which "a good man" (a good instance of what a man is) had said to Jesus something about helping the poor. It was, namely, the occasion on which Jesus allowed Mary, the sister of Lazarus, to anoint his feet with expensive oil, and the man objecting to this gesture, instructing Jesus in the moral impropriety of this extravagance, was Judas. Does this extravagant allusion on Emerson's part alleviate his apparent harshness, or does it magnify it? Since he claims to have his own poor,

and since these must be his way of referring to those for whom he spends his life writing, we will want to know on what basis he places this degree of confidence in the good of his writing, for which he claims no more than whim, betting his life that its good may prove "better than whim at last."

TWO FIGURES OF THE FRIEND

[The true man] measures you and all men and all events. You are constrained to accept his standard.*

The nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature. A boy is in the parlor what the pit is in the playhouse; independent, irresponsible, looking out from his corner on such people and facts as pass by, he tries and sentences them on their merits, in the swift, summary way of boys, as good, bad, interesting, silly, eloquent, troublesome . . . But the man is as it were clapped into jail by his consciousness. As soon as he has once acted or spoken with *éclat* he is a committed person, watched by the sympathy or the hatred of hundreds, whose affections must now enter into his account . . . Ah, that he could pass again into his neutrality! . . . He would utter opinions on all passing affairs, which being seen to be not private but necessary, would sink like darts into the ear of men and put them in fear.

I take both figures, the true man and the boy, to represent what Emerson calls "speaking with necessity," something I relate to Kant's demand that I speak with a "universal voice." Kant introduces the idea in accounting for the aesthetic judgment, but it seems to me to be understood, in his moral philosophy, as alluding to moral judgment, namely the application to one's conduct of the categorical imperative, which may be pictured as the universal voice speaking to me. The boy still in his neutrality is the model of an aspiration of philosophical writing, not on the ground that his judgment is always sound, but on the ground that it is always *his*, and because it concerns the basis for eventually judging usefully, fruitfully, anything and everything that passes through his world. The image of the true man is, I believe, a further development of Kantian ideas, which I will dwell on with more care in Chapter 7. But before leaving this initial sketch of Emerson's

* The second sentence here appears in the first edition of Emerson's *Essays* but not in most of the later editions that I have consulted. I regret Emerson's whim in excising this sentence.

ways and means, I want at least to indicate how I see this connection with Kant.

Emerson's true man, whose "standard you are constrained to accept" is a recasting of Kant's idea, mentioned in my Introduction, of the human as having two "standpoints" on his existence, which Kant also pictures as our living in two worlds—the sensuous world in which we are governed by the laws of material things, and the intelligible world in which we are free. The true man's standard is, in short, ours so far as we live adopting the standpoint of the intelligible world. (The justification for linking standard and standpoint involves my claim that "Self-Reliance" as a whole can be taken as an essay on human understanding and being misunderstood. If you take these recurrences of the idea of "standing" to be merely puns, I point to another claim of "Self-Reliance" in which Emerson declares, "I stand here for humanity," where the meaning of "standing for" as both representing something and bearing up under something is, I trust, too plain to deny. But this will come back.)

I note as a companion gesture Emerson's idea of being "constrained" by a standard as a recasting of Kant's idea of the human as "constrained" by a feeling of "ought," expressed as our recognizing and obeying the moral law, the categorical imperative. Kant pictures the origin, or what he would call the "possibility," of this feeling as a function of the human as being neither beast nor angel. This is clearly a relative of the picture of our living in two worlds, neither wholly in the sensuous world nor wholly in the intelligible world. If we lived wholly in the sensuous world, as beasts do, we would not recognize the demand of the moral law; if we lived wholly in the intelligible world, as only angels could, we would have no need of the law. Kant's constraint is that of duty, obligation, as I recognize the power of reason to overcome inclination. Emerson's constraint is that of attraction, recognizing myself as drawn, as it were, beyond my present repertory of inclination, to my unattained but attainable self. Moral reasoning is not to take me from irrational to rational choice (in the distribution of satisfactions, as in the case of moral theories that take the good as fundamental, such as that of John Stuart Mill); nor from a will corrupted by sensuous concerns to one measured and chastened by the demands of the moral law (represented by Kant and in an important sense by John Rawls, who defines an idea of right or justice in independence of a definition of the good); but to take me from confusion to (relative) clarity in seeking a world I can want.

Moral perfectionism challenges ideas of moral motivation, showing (against Kant's law that counters inclination, and against utilitarianism's calculation of benefits) the possibility of my access to experience which gives to my desire for the attaining of a self that is mine to become, the power to act on behalf of an attainable world I can actually desire.

THE NATURE OF READING

Character teaches above our wills.

In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.

The idea of "character" in Emerson always (so far as I recall) refers simultaneously to something about the worth and stamp of an individual's (or human group's) difference from others and to physical traces of writing (or expression more generally). So "Character teaches above our wills" means simultaneously that writing conveys meaning beyond our intention, and quite generally that we express in every gesture more than our will accomplishes or recognizes. "In every work of genius we recognize our rejected thoughts . . . with a certain alienated majesty," as a description of the ambition Emerson harbors for his own writing, links up with Wittgenstein's saying of philosophy that what it seeks is not (as in the case of science) to teach something new and to hunt out new facts to support its claims, but rather to understand what is already before us, too obvious and pervasive to be ordinarily remarked. Wittgenstein uses as the epigraph for *Philosophical Investigations* the following, from Nestroy: "Progress generally looks much greater than it really is." This seems to me to capture (beyond the suggestion that a decisive advance may be produced by a small move) the sense of philosophy as revealing the rejected or undervalued, in which the uncovering of something obvious can create astonishment, like the relation of something casual as yielding casualties, or in Wittgenstein's *Investigations* such a remark as "I am not of the *opinion* that another has a soul." (One might equally say of such cases that progress seems smaller than it really is; in neither case are we assured of its permanence.) Philosophers like to follow Aristotle in saying that philosophy begins in wonder. My impression is that philosophers nowadays tend to associate the experience of wonder with the explanations of science rather than, as in Wittgenstein and Austin, with the recognition of our relation to things as they are, the perception of the

extraordinariness of what we find ordinary (for example, beauty), and the ordinariness of what we find extraordinary (for example, violence).

Emerson's very familiarity to Americans makes him in some way the easiest and in some way the hardest to assess of the writers discussed in this book. Because I use Emerson as both a means or touchstone of interpretation and an object of interpretation, there will be many opportunities in later chapters to refine our assessment.

The Philadelphia Story

1 The film opens upon a country scene containing a luxurious dwelling where, on a cut to its entrance, we observe C. K. Dexter Haven (Cary Grant) storming, in a silent rage, out of its front door, hat on for travel, carrying a suitcase and a bag of golf clubs to a car waiting under the porte cochère. He turns around to glare back at the entrance, in which Tracy Lord (Katharine Hepburn), in a negligee, is standing, in silent contempt, holding a putter, evidently left out of the bag Grant is holding. She snaps the putter in two over her upraised knee (in those graceful years putters had wooden shafts) and throws the fragments on the ground between her and Grant. He drops his baggage, storms back toward Hepburn, raises his arm to punch her, and instead shoves her back into the house and onto the floor.

2 A title card fills the screen with the line "Two Years Later." Inside the same house, the three Lord women—the mother, Tracy, and her pre-adolescent sister Dinah—are discussing Tracy's impending wedding. Tracy does not expect her father to attend the wedding because of his involvement with an entertainer called Tina Mara. Dinah, out of Tracy's hearing, tells her mother she thinks that stinks. Her mother asks Dinah not to say "stinks," but, if absolutely necessary, "smells"; but she admits that she agrees with Dinah's view of the matter.

3 At the family's stables, Tracy, Dinah, and their neighbor Uncle Willie (Roland Young) await Tracy's fiancé George (John Howard), a rising, wooden man of the people, who upon his arrival displays with his new-bought outfit and his (lack of) horsemanship just how far out of his element he is.

4 In the headquarters of *Spy* magazine, its publisher, Sidney Kidd (Henry Daniell), assigns Macauley Connor, Mike to his friends (James Stewart), and Liz Imbrie (Ruth Hussey) to cover, respectively with words and photos, the wedding of Tracy Lord. Dexter is to get them into the Lord household, which is essentially closed to reporters, as friends of Tracy's absent brother.

5 Dexter introduces Mike and Liz into the house, where they are shown to the south parlor. Mike shows his disapproval of the existence and the taste of the monstrously rich.

6 Mrs. Lord and daughters are in a sunroom in some other latitude of the house when a whistle from outside indicates that Dexter has returned. They remind him that there is a wedding at hand which calls for his absence, and he gets Tracy alone to tell her that he has arranged to have her wedding covered in *Spy* magazine in exchange for Sidney Kidd's agreement not to print a scandalous story about her father and Tina Mara.

7 Tracy puts on a show of welcoming the intruders and learns more about them than they about her.

8 Uncle Willie shows up, and Tracy introduces him to Mike and Liz as her father; then when her father himself unexpectedly arrives, she introduces him as Uncle Willie, blaming him (her father), surreptitiously, for the necessary deceptions.

9 At the town library (which we have learned Dexter's grandfather built), Mike discovers Tracy reading his book of short stories. She tells him she too knows quite a lot about hiding a poetic soul under a tough exterior.

10a Tracy and Mike walk through a large park (the Lord property) to the Lords' swimming pool, where, in adjoining dressing rooms, Tracy offers to let Mike use her summer house as a place to write and Mike refuses.

10b Dexter enters, sets a wrapped object on a table, and engages Tracy in a conversation whose intimacy Mike shrinks from. Asked by Tracy to stay, Mike hears Dexter dress down Tracy for her cold intactness and her intolerance of human frailty, as, for example, of his drinking ("my gorgeous thirst"). She says it made him unattractive; he replies she was no helpmeet there, but a scold.

10c Mike has left; Dexter leaves just before George arrives, as Tracy dives into the pool alone. George says they are late for the party, comes to the edge of the pool, sets down contemptuously the now unwrapped object Dexter brought, and is informed by Tracy that it is a model of the boat he designed and built for Tracy and Dexter's honeymoon. This seems to precipitate Tracy's crying out, in anguish, "Oh, to be useful in the world." George responds by saying he's going to build a castle for her and worship her from afar. "Like fun you are." George knows he's made a misstep, and he departs.

11 The family is gathering for drinks on the terrace. Tracy comes upon her father and mother together and openly accuses her father's philandering of letting them in for the intrusions of the world. Her father dresses her down,

saying that she lacks an understanding heart, that she might as well be made of bronze, and, moreover, that she sounds like a jealous woman. She hurriedly tosses down a defensive sequence of martinis.

12 At the party, a glum George disapproves of a Tracy whose giddy behavior, earlier praised by Dexter, is new to him; Mike, also well on his way to giddiness, wants to dance with her; George disapproves further.

13 Mike grabs a bottle of champagne and asks a chauffeur waiting among the limousines to drive him to C. K. Dexter Haven's house, where he awakens Dexter, tells him he (Dexter) doesn't understand Tracy, says "either I'm going to sock you or you're going to sock me," reveals that he knows a story that would ruin Kidd, and agrees to let Dexter use the story as counter-blackmail.

14 Tracy shows up with Liz, who is pressed into service typing up the new story; Tracy drives off with Mike.

15 Beyond the terrace, Tracy and Mike dance around the edge of a fountain, discuss the difference between champagne and whiskey, and run off to the pool.

16 Dexter and Liz return to the Lord house after finishing the counter-blackmail letter.

17a At the pool, Tracy and Mike contest the difference between heart and mind, between lower and upper classes, and fall into an embrace that they will each have to interpret for themselves.

17b At the terrace Dexter is looking for Mike when George appears, still glum; Dexter sees evidence that Tracy and Mike are swimming and advises George to leave, but George declines.

17c Mike arrives singing "Over the Rainbow" and carrying Tracy in his arms like a child. Dexter assures himself that Tracy is not hurt.

17d After Mike returns from depositing Tracy in her bedroom, George demands an explanation, but Dexter pushes him out of the way and socks Mike (fulfilling Mike's prophecy). George marches away; Dexter and Mike have a friendly exchange; the camera moves up the ivy-covered column of the terrace to show that Dinah has witnessed the whole scene.

18 Tracy, hung over, has, as Dexter has predicted on the basis of a past experience, "drawn a tidy blank" about the events before she fell asleep. Dexter asks her about last night, which starts "getting those eyes open"; Mike fairly completes the task by saying he's lost his watch and identifying as his the watch she found on her bedroom floor.

19 She confesses to Dexter what she concludes must have been her transgression; he asks where he comes into it any longer and tells her to remember

George. She remembers George and phones to ask him to come over right away, before the wedding ceremony.

20 She receives a note from George, written earlier, and reads it aloud to her friends; in it George expresses his dismay at her conduct and suggests that if she has no explanation they had better call off the marriage. George arrives as she is finishing the letter. She confirms that she has no answer; Mike gives the answer, namely that two kisses had happened, and Tracy is moved to say, "I think men are wonderful." Whereupon it is announced that Sidney Kidd has arrived, saying he's licked, and George, appreciating the national importance Kidd lends the occasion, expands himself and proposes to go on with the wedding. Tracy bids him a fond farewell; again he departs.

21 We reach the climactic moment at which Mike asks Tracy to marry him. Tracy sees that that is not where her future lies, and accepts Dexter's suggestion to announce that the assembled guests will now be treated to the wedding ceremony they were deprived of two years earlier when the pair eloped. Except that Liz, asked by Tracy to be the maid of honor, corrects the title to matron of honor, and Dexter is not dressed properly for his role, as if nothing special is going on, or nothing whose importance others are, in his eyes, in a position to judge.

I said of moral perfectionism—in the version I portray of it, and defend, which I call Emersonian perfectionism—that the issues it assesses are typically not front-page news, not, for example, issues like abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, whistle-blowing, plagiarism, informing, bribery, greed, scapegoating, torture, treason, rape, spousal abuse, child neglect, genital mutilation, and so on. But not every fateful moral choice, every judgment of good and bad or right and wrong, is a matter for public debate. This may already seem contentious. Morality is what applies to all equally, to humans as humans. If abortion and euthanasia and capital punishment are wrong, they are wrong for everybody, for reasons everybody should recognize and accept. Some of these headline issues leave room, for some people, for crises of conscience, but this means that someone feels that he or she has reason, with fear and trembling, to go against a moral consensus of right and wrong, reason to feel that in *this* case, abortion or euthanasia or informing, say, is justified. Some issues do not leave this room, as rape, spousal abuse, and child neglect do not.

But the issues in moral perfectionism are not crises of conscience of this kind. The crises portrayed in the films we will consider are not caused by the temptation or demand to go against a standing moral consensus, but, on something like the contrary, are ones in which it is a question whether a moral issue is to be raised. Their central case is one in which a pair are deciding on divorce, on whether they wish to (continue to) be married. They are deciding on what kinds of lives they wish to live and whether they wish to live them together, to consent to each other, to say yes to their lives and their life together; nothing has happened between them that requires more than their mutual forgiveness. Of course one will feel that in each case of moral conflict, certainly in the moral crises that make the newspapers, persons are deciding what kind of life they wish to lead, what kind of person they mean to be. But that is the point. One might say that in our remarriage comedies and their derived melodramas, this is all that is being decided, that our interest in these relatively privileged couples is their pure enactment of the fact that in each moral decision our lives, our senses of ourselves, and of what, and whom, we are prepared to consent to, are at stake. Emerson will put such an idea variously, for example, in "Self-Reliance," in a remark recorded to different effect (a characteristic potentiality of Emerson's remarks) in the previous chapter, he says: "Character teaches above our wills. Men imagine that they communicate their virtue or vice only by overt actions, and do not see that virtue and vice emit a breath every moment."

The couples of our films all take for granted, accordingly, that divorce is a moral option for them—however careful its moral justification must be. And, I should add, now in the early years of the twenty-first century, they assume that marriage is itself a moral option, I mean a relationship to be ratified by state and, perhaps, by church, something that would have been questioned in an earlier period only by fairly unusual moral and political sensibilities. In my Introduction I said that marriage in these films may, to some arguable degree, be taken to stand for the idea of friendship. This is a matter more important in some moral theories of life than in others; in Plato's *Republic* it is mostly implicit; in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* it is climactic. But the question of sealing or weaving together the life of romance and of friendship, while clearly taken in the films, almost without exception, as ideal, is rarely made explicit in the pair's conversations to which we are made privy, though it should be seen as pervading them.

Obviously contesting the simple conclusion that the issues dealt with in the films are private is the plain fact that the antics of the pair typically make the newspapers. The very title of *The Philadelphia Story* is, within the film, the proposed title of the coverage of the pair's wedding in a news magazine, called—in a sense to its credit—*Spy*. Whether and why such a medium should have the right to make this material public is a point of argument within the plot of the film. The proposed bridegroom for Tracy Lord's new marriage is delighted with the idea of that publicity; he observes that it means their marriage is of "national importance." "Importance" is an important word for Tracy's former (and future) husband C. K. Dexter Haven, who applies it, to Tracy's chagrin, to the night she got drunk and danced naked on the roof of the house—it is her saying impatiently to him that he attached too much importance to that silly escapade that prompts him to say to her, "It was immensely important."

I pause to note that importance is also an important word in Wittgenstein's description of his own philosophizing in *Philosophical Investigations*, as when one of his interlocutors, real or imagined, causes him to ask: "Where does our investigation get its importance from, since it seems to destroy everything great and interesting?" (§118) His answer in effect is that it is precisely philosophy's business to question our interests as they stand (as philosophers from Plato to Montaigne and Rousseau and Thoreau have explicitly insisted); it is our distorted sense of what is important—call this our values—that is distorting our lives. That this questioning at first leaves us divested, or devastated, is accordingly inevitable. This is the background against which, in *The Philadelphia Story*, I see the Dexter character as playing the role of a kind of sage. (This role will in turn no doubt cause suspicion of itself.) Speaking of importance, I identify Philadelphia as the site of two of the biggest stories enacted on this continent, the site of the creation of the founding documents of the United States.

The topic of what is essentially public and what is essentially private is established at the beginning of the film as an issue within it. First, at the stables, Tracy picks up Uncle Willie's copy of *Spy* magazine and gives a recitation of its "disgusting" story, written in "that corkscrew English" (a clear enough reference to the prose of *Time* magazine of that period) about a day in the life of a congressman's wife. In the next sequence, which takes place in the offices of *Spy* magazine, Mike and Liz identify Dexter as having broken the cameras of photographers attempting to cover his and Tracy's

honeymoon. Nothing short of blackmail would force Tracy to open her house to the invasion of newshounds; and these sympathetic hounds are shown to be kept from following their vocations as writer and painter by the corkscrew demands of bringing back their bones of news. Are we, then, to ask what the relation is of journalism to serious art—for example, ask whether serious art does not itself make public matters private?

Does this film have anything worth saying about such a topic? If nothing, why does virtually every remarriage comedy have moments, and why do some have an entire setting, that features the newspaper? At some point we are bound to consider that these films are asking us to compare our enjoyment of them with our enjoyment of gossip and spying on the particularly lucky or unlucky. Mike says that taking the assignment of getting the story is degrading. How is our getting the results of the story, in the form of a film, less degrading? Liz says they do it "to keep a roof over our heads." Where is the profit for us? And if it is perhaps a degrading pastime, why do we not take the time to think about it?

I call attention to a moment in *The Philadelphia Story* in which the film calls attention to, and questions, the condition of its existence as a film—namely in its two closing images. First, at the click of Sidney Kidd's camera, the image of Mike, Dexter, and Tracy standing together in front of the wedding's official celebrant freezes, as if the three are getting married (it is a kind of wedding photo). Second, that view is then replaced, as an album leaf is turned, by a still of just Dexter and Tracy embracing. The motion picture camera has declared its relation to still photography, hence to the work Liz and Sidney Kidd are doing, one reluctantly, one greedily—questioning what it is we have been doing as witnesses to this work, having passed an hour and a half of our life investing in it. It might suggest that film—as some kind of art, some site of the transmutation of public and private into and out of each other—is peculiarly fit to capture lives as they pass by, without time or space to examine themselves, to examine the magnitude of concepts and forces that are determining them: life passing itself by.

For the moment, let's consider the form the issue of questioning takes in the narrative of *The Philadelphia Story*, or questioning the right to question. Any moral theory will require of itself that it seek the ground of rationality in moral argument, the thing that makes conduct criticizable by reason. Utilitarianism seeks rationality in the maximization of value (it is irrational to achieve less pleasure for fewer persons if you have the choice to achieve

more for more). Kantianism seeks rationality in the universality of the principle on which one acts (it is against reason to exempt oneself from the judgment of one's principles). Kantianism focuses on the disruption of principle by the infection of inclination; for example, the value of charity is lessened if it is given out of either a feeling of pity or a swell of benevolence or for the acclaim it will command (in other words, if the left hand knows what the right hand is doing). Perfectionism also focuses on the one acting, but detects irrationality in failing to act on one's desire, or acting in the absence of sufficient desire, in the case where an act has value (positive or negative) essentially as a function of whether one desires it. Dexter says to Tracy about her proposed marriage to George that "it doesn't even make sense"; and when Mike tells her "You can't marry that guy," it turns out that he too means not that it is provably bad or wrong but that it just doesn't fit. Tracy accuses them both of snobbery. What they are both doing is appealing to her to recognize that she does not desire what she protests she desires. They are trying, as Dexter will put it, "to get those eyes open."

This is the aim of moral reasoning in perfectionism, not to assess pluses and minuses of advantage, nor to assess whether the act is recommendable universally, but yet to see to what those two standard theories wish to accomplish, namely that the one in question make himself intelligible, to others and to himself. Perfectionism concentrates on this moment. First, it recognizes difficulties in the moral life that arise not from an ignorance of your duties, or a conflict of duties, but from a confusion over your desires, your attractions and aversions, over whether, for example, you want the duties associated with marriage at all, whether you can bear the sense of failure in another divorce, whether your inability to act on your self-confessed longing to be useful in the world is based on anything more than fear or your vanity in wanting to be perfect, intact, without the need of human company. Second, it proposes that such muddles essentially stand in need of the perception of a friend. Third, it underscores that for one to confront another with her confusion, especially when she has not asked for advice, requires the justification of one's moral standing with her. To whom are reasons owed? Dexter asks Tracy, when she begins to confess to him that she doesn't know what happened between her and Mike, "Why [are you saying this] to me, Red? Where do I come into it any longer?"—not as rhetorical questions, but to get those eyes open to the fact that she continues to regard him as her helpmeet.

The moment of encounter, or challenge, does not exist in utilitarianism, in which, as Rawls remarkably observes, the individual does not exist. Nor does it exist essentially in Kant, where the challenge comes from the moral law alone. (We shall see in Chapter 7 that a condition of the appearance to you of the law, which Kant articulates in his categorical imperative, is that you are, in your life, and your present intention, "stopped," brought to take thought, to think whether you can, let us say, want a world characterized by an act such as you propose. What, among the nests and webs of actions and intentions and distractions in which your life is invested, has, in this instance, here and now, stopped you?)

The general cause of intervention in the films of remarriage comedy—given that the fact of these marriages means that the pair are in conversation—is to educate; to begin with, to respond to the woman's sense of her lack of education, her demand to know something that will change her dissatisfaction with the way things are, or reveal her role in it, or her, after all, greater satisfaction with this way than any other. In *Adam's Rib*, the Hepburn character will not place this demand explicitly until the next-to-last line of the film, in which, as the pair are about to get into bed together, she asks her husband, evidently in all comic seriousness (as it were, as a test of whether to get into bed with him again), what the difference is, or means, if anything much, between men and women. In *The Philadelphia Story*, the demand, to my ear, is placed in that outcry of Tracy's to George, "Oh, to be useful in the world!"

Tracy has, like Portia, three men to choose from; in her case the choice lies in determining who can help her answer that demand, which means, finding whom she can talk to, whom she believes. George on the spot rules himself out by failing to take her demand seriously; one question of the comic plot is to figure out how this news, of the foundering of an engagement to marry, is to break. To believe Dexter is to believe him when, for example, he says, an hour or so earlier, that Tracy was no helpmeet, she was a scold; their conversation had run aground; has it started again? Mike seems to have reached her, after a passionate exchange ending in a kiss, but the result of their reenacting a favorite scene from her earlier life with Dexter—having a midnight swim together after a party—is that she links up again with her desires, as Dexter keeps hoping for and holding up to her, but this time the immediate result is the scene with her and all three men, as Mike is carrying her from the swimming pool to her bedroom. Here she sings out in full giddiness that

she has feet of clay, meaning roughly that she is subject to desire. It is here that she describes her condition, in response to Dexter's expression of concern, as that of being "not wounded, Sire, but dead." (This provided a signal moment of confirmation for me in working out the characteristics of remarriage comedy against Northrop Frye's characterization of New and Old Comedy. Frye remarks of Old Comedy that in it the woman undergoes something like death and resurrection and holds the key to the plot.)

The playful dig in Tracy's in effect addressing Dexter as "Sire" is good enough in itself, but it is obvious that Tracy is quoting something. It is only within the past year that, after desultory spurts of unsuccessful rummaging in Kipling and Browning, I am able to report, with some pleasure and relief, that the source is Robert Browning's "Incident at the French Camp," as follows:

"You're wounded." "Nay," the soldier's pride
Touched to the quick, he said:
"I'm killed, Sire!" And his chief beside
Smiling the boy fell dead.

Of course Tracy Lord would know Robert (and Elizabeth Barrett) Browning. I note that, having re-found her playfulness in response to Dexter's concern, a quality in her he has told her he relished (I am remembering her having described Dexter, to George, as "my lord and master"), and, leaving aside the question of who is the chief who is present "beside" her (it could be George, but the idea that her pride in battle is touched rather suggests that it is Mike), I note further that what has died is specified in Tracy's allusion to herself, via Browning's poem, as a boy, hence she is in effect acknowledging that the "garçonne" quality associated with Katharine Hepburn (fully recognized on film in her playing a boy in *Sylvia Scarlett*, directed by George Cukor in the mid-1930s) is part of why she requires resurrection as a grown woman.

Or is this worth noting? Can this little radiation from Browning's poem have been intended? By whom? These are questions I know will, even should, arise often. My advice is not to ignore them, but also not to let them prevent your imagination from being released by an imaginative work. To deflect the question of intention you have to say something to yourself about how, for example, just this poem by just this poet is alluded to just here in this work. So if you tell yourself it is an accident, then take that idea seriously.

What is the accident? That it is this poem by this poet? That it is said just this way by just this actress playing just this role in the presence of just this set of characters at just this moment in this plot in just this notable posture (the unique time in the film a character says anything while being carried)? This is a conjunction of seven or eight accidents, to go no further. Is it more satisfying intellectually, or as a point of common sense, to attribute this conjunction of events to a set of accidents than to suppose that it was intended that Tracy Lord allude, with understanding, to Browning's line? Why resist it? (I am asking this in all seriousness. Is intention dismissed, or resisted, less in response to the traditional arts than in response to film? Of course the concept of intention is in need of analysis. There is hardly a concept more in philosophical need.)

It may help in the present case to recall that the play from which this screenplay was adapted was written by Philip Barry, a considerable playwright of the period; and that the screenplay was adapted by Donald Ogden Stewart; and that the two writers studied together in a legendary class in playwriting given by George Baker just after the First World War, first at Harvard, then moving with Baker to Yale. It is not as if I am asking you to recognize in-jokes in the film/play, such as that George Kittredge (the very George that Tracy is engaged to as our story opens), bears the same name as the most famous Shakespearean scholar at Harvard at the time Philip Barry and Donald Ogden Stewart would have been there; or such as that, among other allusions to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Uncle Willie, characterized by pinching bottoms, says of himself, the morning after the engagement festival, that his head just fell off, the fate more or less suffered by Shakespeare's Bottom as he awakens from his dream of festival; which in turn suggests that you may take Uncle Willie as sharing Shakespeare's given name, especially since it is explicitly and momentarily shifted from one person to another in the course of the film. Here it may perhaps help to note that the director of the film, George Cukor, had before coming to Hollywood directed a fair sample of the corpus of Shakespeare's plays in and around New York.

The period in American culture in which the sensibilities and education were formed of those responsible for such a film as *The Philadelphia Story*, specifically the confidence with which sophisticated exchange and allusion were expected to be understood by a considerable proportion of one's fellow citizens, was, I suppose, not matched before or since. Don't make me seem to say more than I mean. These people were not intellectuals in a European

mold; Philip Barry is not Bertolt Brecht; George Cukor is not Jean Cocteau. There are limitations on both sides. I am talking about a culture in which Broadway musical theater was thriving, and the *New Yorker* magazine was in stride, and jazz, still segregated, was meant for everyone who had ears to hear, and Hemingway and Fitzgerald and Dos Passos and Willa Cather were writing bestsellers.

But we were talking about Tracy Lord's education (Katharine Hepburn's education is explicitly referred to in *Adam's Rib*, where Spencer Tracy will poke admiring fun at her "Bryn Mawr accent"). And the genre of remarriage is talking about the woman's demand to be educated, and to educate, that is, to be listened to. Tracy receives lectures from all the men in her life, from Dexter and Mike and her father and George. George's idea is always to constrict her behavior, as when he responds to her wish to be useful by saying that instead he is going to build her an ivory tower; and as when at the party, in response to her tipsy gaiety, he disapprovingly insists that it's time for them to leave. He in effect takes himself out of the running; how the plot manages this is fun to see. (Whether in old or in new comedy, the renewed community at the end is formed at the price of ridding itself of a character of gloom, cursed with an intractable lack of sociability—think of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, or, as we shall see, Muggsy in *The Lady Eve*. If the character is unsociable not because of gloom but because of an ungovernable appetite for life, as in Falstaff's case, the society feels lessened that has to refuse him acknowledgment.)

The effect of each of the other three men is to humble or chasten this woman. Early, Dexter tells her she was no helpmeet and is chaste and virginal and will never be a "first-class human being" until she has some regard for human frailty. Before the party, her father accuses her of being as good as made of bronze and tells her she sounds like a jealous woman. After the party, Mike shows her she has feet of clay. What is the fruit of their instruction? It is summarized at almost the last moment, as they are to enter the replaced wedding ceremony which, Tracy announces to the awaiting guests, was denied them the first time around (there is no marriage without remarriage). Tracy's father says to her that she looks like a goddess; Tracy responds that she feels like a human being. She has come down to earth ("very down to earth" is how Dexter describes Mike's collection of short stories; Tracy regards them as poetry). But how does she arrive there?

Calling it off with George on the ground of his impoverished imagination, and seeing that he wouldn't be (and that she has no wish to try to make

him) happy, Tracy has also had to see that Mike is not for her. Not for her, partly because, as she says, "Liz wouldn't like it," but partly too because of Liz's knowledge of Mike, expressed by whatever exactly she means in saying that he's not ready for marriage, that "he still has things to learn and I don't want to get in his way." I think of this as Mike's version of being innocent, virginal. (Liz's insistence on being "matron" not "maid" of honor in the wedding ceremony is in contrast both with Tracy's perception of her and with Mike's difference from her, in a sense his ignorance of her.)

I have elsewhere described the thought of Mike's not being ready to put aside his intactness by recurring to the moment—the detour—in Genesis where, just before God creates woman as a helpmeet for the single man, he allows Adam to give names to the animals. (The passage in Genesis about creating a helpmeet will come up emphatically again for us, since it is the classical theological justification, for both Christians and Jews, of marriage, and is featured as such in John Milton's tract on divorce, central to my account of remarriage comedy. Not for nothing do two of the definitive comedies of remarriage feature the names Adam and Eve in their titles.) My midrash on this Adam's (Mike's) "detour" (Freud might call this moment in the development of the human being the period of latency) is that it accomplishes two things: (1) it creates time for the man, a sense of the reality of life as irreversible, consequential, time to come into his own words (Mike is said to be a writer), giving himself language, his names for things, making the shared world his; (2) it allows him to survey the world of living things and to learn that none but the woman will make him feel other than alone in the world, will be a companion, reciprocal. His "not being ready" accordingly means that he is not ready to recognize Liz as his other, not Liz as opposed to all others, but as another to his separateness, to what Emerson calls "the recognition that he exists," the fact Emerson identifies as the Fall of Man (in the wonderful essay "Experience," which will also come up again).

Hence Tracy learns, or has learned, that Dexter is ready, that he is her company, that they exist. It is what she expresses to her father by declaring her feeling that she is a human being. Has she thereupon become what Dexter calls "a first-class human being"? Dexter here is on dangerous moral ground. One way to describe this is to put the remark next to the several remarks in the film on upper and lower classes ("Mac the night watchman is a prince among men; Uncle Willie is a pincher. What has class got to do with it?"). If we are to take Dexter seriously, he cannot mean that being first class

means you deserve to command a greater share of the world's goods than others do. (Similarly, the film puts Tracy at risk when, in her first interview with Mike, she responds to his speaking of his early "lack of wherewithal" by saying "But that shouldn't be." Does she know whether she means that this shouldn't be because Mike is talented, or because no one should lack wherewithal?) We would like to take Dexter to mean by "a first class human being" something like being one who makes serious moral demands upon her/himself. (Tracy's mother has said that Tracy sets exceptionally high standards for herself. They evidently do not satisfy Dexter, as though they amount to making an exception of herself.) What counts as serious demands upon oneself, genuine caring for the self, is what perfectionism concerns itself with, after rational calculations have been made and standing obligations have been assessed and met, or found unworthy.