

# In the Company of Books

James Mustich | No. 56 | 03.26.21



## Dear Reader,

In **NEWS** this time, a report on our spectacular March 18 Battle of the Books with Cuyahoga County Public Library and a stellar panel of presenters. But first, a walk with Emerson around the neighborhood to consider the divinity of days, how to read and write, and the cultivation of fruit trees and time—with a digression to ponder Books of Hours and the painting of Ellen Wiener, whose *Three Logics* (used by permission of the artist; all rights reserved) graces our header.



**DIVINE DAYS** :: The turn of the season is startling: a string of pellucid days, the sunlight like some beautiful antiseptic burning off the film of anxiety that has dulled the luster of the past twelve months. I've been immersed the past few weeks in the inspirations of Ralph Waldo Emerson, courtesy of Robert D. Richardson's exhilarating biography, **Emerson: The Mind on Fire**, so the bright blue sky that lit my way as I walked around the neighborhood this morning seemed to ring with Emersonian echoes.

"Heaven walks among us ordinarily muffled in such triple or tenfold disguises," the sage of Concord wrote to Margaret Fuller in October 1840, "that the wisest are deceived and no one suspects the days to be gods." Today, stunned as I was by the Spring sun, I saw what I'd always taken as a figurative flight in a new clarity. Whatever Emerson's transcendental intent, it struck me—as I walked out of the grayness of private months of illness and grief, embedded in a year of communal quarantine and distress, of political disorder and dread unfolding beneath a cloud of unknowing as murky as any my lifetime has known—that his assertion about the divinity of days was more than metaphorical. It even occurred to me that, taken literally, it might focus, rather than obscure, questions of fate and faith, and even those of science and experience. To acknowledge days as gods, arrayed in ephemeral, inscrutable beauty, is to admit our reverence is never strong enough to fix them or hold them fast—which I'd say puts us in the right relation to what exceeds our grasp.

More than a decade ago, in a small volume called **The Still Small Hours**, a celebration of the paintings of my friend Ellen Wiener, I engaged similar themes, so when I got home from my stroll I unearthed a copy. On its cover is the painting reproduced in the header to this issue; two dozen more of Ellen's intricate images—combinatoria, to use Italo Calvino's word, of astrolabes and compasses, books, globes, and branches—brighten and converse with my sentences through the forty-odd pages of the monograph. (You can view Ellen's catalogue of invention at her [website](#) or on her [Instagram feed](#).)

Turning pages to the beginning of my essay, this is what I find:

*The years we make, through breath and memory, but what we are given is the day. And, as the minister who narrates Marilynne Robinson's lovely novel **Gilead** sees, our days are not as various as the years make them appear: "it has all been one day, that first day. Light is constant, we just turn over in it. So every day is in fact the selfsame evening and morning."*

Spurred by Ellen's fascination with medieval Books of Hours, and exploring the depths of the visual pondering which that fascination layered into her work back then, I continued:

*The medieval monastics who created the Divine Office celebrated this gift, dividing the day into the canonical hours, defining each hour by prayer. Through their devotions, it was light that led them, and not time. Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, Compline—each hour encompassed a band of light, mirroring the perceptible changes of the day's illumination. In the silence of a cloister, the noise of time was quiet too, its metaphorical ticking washed in the chants that, from Matins through Compline, praised the light and marked our turning in it.*

And a little later:

*Time is like nature without the tangible trappings; it's an element we inhabit but can only imagine. By ordering the day, monastic rules made "landscapes" in time. Alert to light as they are, might we call the liturgical Hours a cycle of "paintings" composed in time's plain air, frames to concentrate and hold for contemplation time's boundlessness? Clockmarked hours provide a purchase on time, but only a purchase in passing; the monastic Hours order the day so that time can be abided rather than just marked. Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, Compline—day after day, the Hours parsed the light into parcels of perception, shaping it into dwelling places for work and prayer. And, in the books that helped the faithful remember them, into pieces of art as well.*

All of which illustrates, if nothing else, that Emerson's vivid expression, so elegantly displayed in Richardson's deft narrative, encapsulates themes I've lived with long enough to have almost forgotten. (What a colloquy this biography conveys: nearly every page prompts a note in the margin, if not a spark in the consciousness; my copy is festooned with enough small Post-it notes to supply confetti for a parade.)

In his essay, "The Poet," composed in the early 1840s, Emerson says, "The universe is the externalization of the soul." But could it be that it's the other way round, and the soul is the internalization of the day, an ephemeral incarnation of eternal moods? "The days come and go like muffled and veiled figures sent from a distant friendly party," Emerson wrote a few years later, when his natural enthusiasm had been curtailed by a temporary bout of despondency, "but they say nothing, and if we do not use the gifts they bring, they carry them silently away." Like luck, its worldly impersonator, providence meets us where we are, so that, walking out of the cul-de-sac of mourning and isolation into the sunlight of the new season, I was happy to have one more line of Emerson to hand: "Spring still makes spring in the mind."



**HOW TO READ** :: Emerson's ideas take you to new places, and sometimes turn you around, and around, and around again to bring you back. ("A foolish consistency," he famously wrote, "is the hobgoblin of little minds.") As Richardson ingeniously puts it, his subject's wisdom is "transitive and vehicular." What's wondrous about Emerson's essays, however, is that it is not the argument nor the train of thought that is the conveyance, but the sentence. What moves our minds farthest in reading Emerson is the oracular confidence and concentration of perception packed into units of prose (or lines of verse); even removed from their context, the phrases become instruments of inquiry and scrutiny at the same time. They start fizzing in our head as soon as we sound them, little tablets of inspiration releasing the elixir of eloquence.

*Perception makes. Common sense is genius dressed in its working clothes. Earth laughs in flowers. Language is fossil poetry. In skating over thin ice, our safety is in our speed. . . . we bury in an undefined procrastination all our obligations. So much of our time is preparation, so much is routine, and so much retrospect, that the pith of each man's genius contracts itself to a few hours. . . . the frolic architecture of the snow. Believe in magnetism, not in needles.*

"I am a rocket manufacturer," he said. Exactly.

One of the most intriguing discoveries of reading Richardson's biography is how much labor Emerson put into his journals. Not only did he document his wide-ranging reading and his reactions to it, but he tagged his quotations and annotations by topic, so that he could go back and index it all into new compendiums that he would then mine to nourish his lectures and essays. He let nothing slip, capturing as well as he could each tremor of intellect or flutter of emotion, no matter how uncomposed, as soon as it appeared: "For the best part . . . of every mind," he believed, "is not that which [a person] knows, but that which hovers in gleams, suggestions, tantalizing unpossessed before him."

Richardson's close attention to Emerson's reading life is especially interesting. In the biography, Richardson explains that Emerson "read, as he wrote, rapidly. Like Montaigne, he did not pore. He read actively, as a writer does, looking for what he could use. . . . He was alert to the curious way in which our reading seems always to refer to whatever project we have in hand at the moment."

The biographer warms to this thematic strand, returning to it again and again (he would go on to devote a separate slim book to the subject: **First We Read, Then We Write: Emerson on the Creative Process**). Indeed, Richardson sees Emerson's foraging as emblematic of his creative character, a mark of his distinction:

*We all read hundreds of books, but the reading does not make us great writers, nor does it very often change our lives. When we have canvassed Emerson's vast reading, it will by itself have told us little or nothing about the creative process or the growth of character. Sometimes the books of a month of Emerson's life are merely an inventory of a month's distractions. Anyone can amass an impressive amount of reading. But the active filtration and the tight focus of constant intention which convert that reading into real life experience and then into adequate expression, these are the exclusive properties of the great writer.*

Emerson said this more succinctly, in another example of his rocket manufacture: "There is then creative reading as well as creative writing."

There's a lesson for us in this as well, or at least for those of us distracted by the plethora of list regimens promising a 5 or 7 or 10 book path to happiness, productivity, riches, or liberty of one stripe or another. (Let's agree among friends to think of **1,000 Books to Read Before You Die**, built as it is on Emersonian principles of free-range reading, as a sheep in wolf's clothing.) "Reading was not an end in itself for Emerson," Richardson tells us. "He read like a hawk sliding on the wind over a marsh, alert for what he could use."

"The glance reveals what the gaze obscures," Emerson once said in conversation. "Somewhere the author has hidden his message. Find it, and skip the paragraphs that do not talk to you." In this way, reading itself becomes "transitive and vehicular," an encouragement rather than a mere assignment. "There is a process in the mind very analogous to crystallization in the mineral kingdom," he wrote in a notebook; reading precipitates it.



**CULTIVATION** :: I can't recommend *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* too highly. It's a volume I will be returning to for both solace and inspiration. The story it tells—of one learner's ceaseless cultivation of self and spirit—constitutes a version of a book its subject intended to write but never really got around to: a natural history of the intellect. I could quote from it forever, but let me leave you with my favorite passage, which is about cultivation of a different sort:

*Emerson soon had more than a hundred fruit trees whose names had their own poetry. There were plums, such as Damson, Green Gage, Plymouth, and Coe's Golden Drop. There were peaches, including Early Rose, Early York, Cross Mignon, and President. He had over thirty apple trees, among them Golden Russet, Gravenstein, Spitzenberg, Baldwin, Wine-apple, Jonathan, Hightop, Bellflower, Tallman Sweet, Dutch Coddling, and Sopsavine. One apple in the orchard list is named Thoreau and in all probability was developed by his young friend. Of the four hundred varieties of pear grown at the time in eastern Massachusetts, Emerson had Duchesse d'Angoulême, St. Ghislaine, Glout Morceau, Iron, Seckel, Fulton, Bloodgood, Bartlett, Dunmore, and Dix. He also put in a dozen quince trees. The quince is a close relative of the pear and is often used for root stock in the grafting of pears. Emerson's quinces included Long Green, Beurte Diel, Catilac, and Pound. Tart and austere as it comes from the tree but wonderful when cooked and mixed with apples, the nearly forgotten quince was another native of Persia that came to flourish in Concord.*

Stand in a supermarket today and survey the fruit piled high, and you'll realize—through the lens of this private orchard in mid-nineteenth-century Concord—the poverty of the twenty-first century's profligate abundance.

The biographer caps this catalogue of remarkable variety with a poignant reflection on his own attempt to harvest of the fruits of Emerson's voluminous legacy:

*Parts of Emerson's land were later sold off; much of what remains has run wild. Only a few steps from the house the land is densely overgrown, essentially abandoned and thoroughly impenetrable. Recent efforts have carved out a garden space behind the house. Emerson's own fruit trees are gone, though a few descendants remain. The real crop of the orchard is in his late writings. But simply to stand in his backyard and say "apple" or "quince" is to miss entirely the rich cornucopia of varietal names, the once valued separate qualities of each of Emerson's more than a hundred trees, the everyday connection between the cultivation of the soil and the life of the mind which has vanished. That lost orchard also haunts the biographer, since it stands for everything that was common and lively and is now unrecoverable in Emerson's life.*

A few pages later, we've followed Emerson to England, where a different kind of homogenization of experience is taking root: "It was symbolic of the new forces," Richardson writes, "that on December 1, 1847, while Emerson was in Liverpool, the time all over England was reduced and standardized to Greenwich Mean Time. Until that day the time for each village or town had been regulated by local solar observation, noon being the moment when the sun reached its highest point overhead."

Mean time indeed: the very day stripped of local character and identity, to say nothing of divinity, and reduced to a commodity. As with pears, so with time; it's a kind of sacrilege.



Thanks, as always, for your attention to this newsletter. I'd be grateful if you'd forward it to anyone who might be interested in it.

Happy reading,

Jim Mustich

P.S. If you missed my last newsletter, you can read it here: [Newsletter No. 55: Spring, Listening, Where I'm From, How To, Recipes](#).  
If by email was forwarded to you, you can [subscribe here](#). If you can't contact us by email at: [hello@1000books.com](mailto:hello@1000books.com), you can purchase a copy of my book [here](#).



**BATTLES OF THE BOOKS**  
**Cuyahoga County Public Library**  
On Thursday evening, March 18, five presenters joined us for a virtual trek to suburban Cleveland to visit our friends at Cuyahoga County Public Library. More than 650 people registered to join our audience, and attendees logged into the Zoom event from all over Ohio as well as farther-flung locales: Corte Madera, California and Palshear, Texas; New Mexico and Connecticut; Ontario, Canada and St. Croix in the Virgin Islands; Michigan, Pennsylvania, Nevada, Kentucky, and Arizona; Minneapolis and Milwaukee; Baton Rouge, Saint Louis, and Brooklyn.

Our battlers were Thrity Umrigar, author of the acclaimed novels *Bombay Time* and *The Secrets Between Us*, among many others; Donna Seaman, editor for adult books at *Booklist* and author of *Identity Unknown: Rediscovering Seven American Women Artists*; Andromeda Romano-Lax, author, most recently, of *Annie and the Wolves*, named by *Oprah Magazine* as one of 2021's best and most anticipated works of historical fiction; Anne Bogel, creator of the *Modern Mrs. Darcy* blog, host of the marvelous *What Should I Read Next?* podcast, and author of *Don't Overthink It*; and, finally, Mary Bly, professor of English at Fordham University, but better known as the wildly popular romance novelist Eloisa James, whose latest novel, *Wilde Child*, will be published next week.

The books they championed in a spirited exchange of enthusiasms were [Mama Day](#) by Gloria Naylor (Thrity); Leon Forrest's enormous, extraordinary, and unduly neglected novel [Divine Days](#) (Donna); Louise Erdrich's [Shadow Tag](#) (Andromeda); [Crossing to Safety](#), by Wallace Stegner (Anne); and Loretta Chase's [Lord of Scoundrels](#) (Mary/Eloisa).

While Anne took home the laurels, with Thrity a close second in the voting, it was, as always in these events, the assembled community of readers who won. You can watch a recording of the entire contest here: [Cuyahoga Virtual Battle of the Books](#).

All five books championed in this most recent battle have been added to our [website](#). I invite you to visit the site and add your own favorites to our growing list of The Next 1,000. Here's how: first, search for the book you think should be on the list. If it's not already on the site, click the ADD A BOOK button and post your book with a comment telling us why you think people should read it; if it is already on the site, please add your own endorsement to its page.

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