BRANKA ARSIĆ


Reviewed by Patrick Fessenbecker.

Ralph Waldo Emerson has been the touchstone for some of the most interesting philosophical literary criticism of the last generation. Here, Branka Arsić joins figures like Stanley Cavell, George Kateb, and Sharon Cameron in treating Emerson as a powerful, groundbreaking thinker. Indeed, Arsić salutes Cameron in particular by thanking her in the “Acknowledgments,” and highlighting her essay “The Way of Life by Abandonment: Emerson’s Impersonal.” “In a fundamental way,” Arsić writes, “[this] essay revised the inherited understanding of the Emersonian person as a self-asserting individual addicted to power” (92). Following Cameron, Arsić contests the understanding of Emersonian selfhood as something self-contained and autonomous. Instead, she favors a view where—to use one of her key terms—the self is “relational.”

Besides reflecting the influence of Cameron, this new book also sustains the trajectory of Arsić’s own work. Trained as a philosopher at the University of Belgrade, she first made her name with The Passive Eye: Gaze and Subjectivity in Berkeley (2003), which interpreted George Berkeley’s theory of vision within the context of both his contemporaries in modern philosophy and figures in twentieth-century continental philosophy. Turning to literary texts in Passive Constitutions, or 7½ times Bartleby (2007), Arsić again invoked continental philosophers, particularly Gilles Deleuze, in a reading of Melville’s short story “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” In On Leaving, the seminal contemporary thinkers mostly recede to the background, but their influence is nevertheless clear. When Arsić says that for Emerson, “the ‘I’—in its innermost
identity—is already relational and unstable,” we recognize the echo of the critique of the stable, Cartesian self that has been at the center of post-existentialist continental thought (52).

Formally, the book progresses through three sections, broken down into a total of seven chapters, and a short appendix. The sections—“Leave-Takings,” “Journeying,” and “Dwelling”—organize different aspects of Arsić’s analysis of the Emersonian self. “Leave-Takings” sets up the dominant notion of the book—the importance of “leaving” oneself—through a discussion of the various ways in which Emerson conceived of one’s care for oneself as a process of disrupting or violating everyday habits and customs, and as an effort to avoid settling back into these habits once disrupted. “Journeying,” in Arsić’s description, “answers the question: if certain perceptive structures and existential shifters help us move, how then does motion itself work?” (13). She works through this idea in three practices of the self—“dreaming,” “thinking,” and “loving.” The final major section, “Dwelling,” turns to Emerson’s analysis of ordinary life, initially at the level of the home and the domestic setting, and subsequently at the level of national politics, which Arsić provocatively addresses through a reading of Emerson’s thoughts on the traumatic removal of the Cherokee nation. The appendix, which Arsić somewhat playfully compares to the tracts on logic that medieval philosophers published with their works, turns to Emerson’s style and its contribution to his project (293).

Arsić’s interpretation is undeniably powerful. She is admirably attentive to Emerson’s philosophical predecessors, especially Jakob Boehme, a seventeenth-century religious mystic whom Emerson read extensively. Arsić draws on Boehme to explain the famous paragraph about the roses under Emerson’s window in “Self-Reliance,” which
“make no reference to former roses…[but] are for what they are” (Emerson, *Essays: First Series* [Library of American 1983] 270). In Arsić’s account, Emerson’s roses recall Boehme’s “garden of roses,” which ultimately “stands for nonrepresentational, nonobjectifying thinking—since objectification requires representation and referentiality” (206).

Moreover, Arsić’s invocations of contemporary philosophical figures are minimal but fruitful. In *What is Called Thinking?* (1968), she notes, Heidegger argues that post-Cartesian philosophy works essentially through the notion of “thinking as an act of sheer will” (323). In contrast, she says, “Heidegger proposes a thinking whose main features—scattered through the pages of *What is Called Thinking?*—would be purely relational: gentleness, patience, reception as thanking, will-lessness, the impersonal” (324). “Without knowing it,” she infers, “one may say, Heidegger is waiting for Emerson” (324). Thus she not only places Emerson within the Heideggerian tradition, but also shows how Heidegger’s critique of the Western tradition can facilitate our understanding of Emerson.

But the finest moments of Arsić’s analysis occur in her creative close readings. To mention one example, she quotes an entry in Emerson’s journal from October 28, 1837:

> The event of death is always astounding; our philosophy never reaches, never possesses it…I see nothing to help beyond observing what mind’s habit is in regard to this crisis. Simply, I have nothing to do with it. It is nothing to me. After I have my will & set my house in order, I shall do in the immediate expectation of death the same things I should do without it. But more difficult is it to know the death of another. (qtd. 228)

Here is Arsić’s analysis:

> What is truly incomprehensible in dying is not the fact of my own death, because what is called “my death” is, as the passage suggests, in fact only my death for the other. My death is never for me, since in it my own “I” is discontinued: in losing
myself I lose the sense of loss. It is therefore through the death of another that I experience the loss of what constituted my world. In interrupting my own identity—hollowing out the space of death within my own life—the death of another escapes my own thinking and so disables philosophy. (228)

In explaining how essentially elliptical remarks from a journal represent a clear and sophisticated philosophical position, Arsić is striking. Emerson, after all, doesn’t explain that the reason one’s own death doesn’t matter is because one is dead; he remarks instead rather cryptically, “I have nothing to do with it. It is nothing to me,” which seems to contradict the claim made only a few sentences before: that “death is always astounding.” Moreover, in contending that for Emerson the death of another “interrupts our own identity” and hollows “out the space of death within [one’s] own life,” Arsić clearly explains why Emerson called death astounding and not reachable by our philosophy: the death of another makes us experience a loss of identity that we cannot immediately comprehend.

Despite its virtues, however, Arsić’s analysis has some significant flaws. Too often, her readings become distanced from the passages they interpret, and the connection to her overall argument appears forced. Consider, for instance, how she treats Emerson’s critique of national identity and the Cherokee removal. She quotes from his “Letter to Martin Van Buren,” which he published in a Washington D.C. newspaper in 1838:

We only state the fact, that a crime is projected that confounds our understandings by its magnitude—a crime that really deprives us as well as the Cherokees of a country; for how could we call the conspiracy that should crush those poor Indians our government, or the land that was cursed by their parting and dying imprecations our country, any more? You sir, will bring down that renowned chair in which you sit into infamy if your seal is set to this instrument of perfidy; and the name of this nation, hitherto the sweet omen of religion and liberty, will stink to the world (286).
Here is Arsić’s gloss:

The political gesture Emerson here implies and even calls for is embedded in a complex dialectics of leaving and becoming mobilized in order to resist the removals. It suggests that one should stop being American as a result of such an American politics; that one should experience such politics as if one were a victim of it, and in that role resist it. For what happens to the victim must also victimize those who resist: “a crime that really deprives us as well as the Cherokees” (286).

Though Arsić goes on to defend Emerson from the charge that he is too simplistically identifying himself with the Cherokees, it not clear that he is doing any such thing. Emerson is claiming that if the United States were to expel the Cherokee, it would be not living up to its stated principles and would therefore be no longer recognizable as the country he thought it was. It is in this sense that Americans would be deprived of a country along with the Cherokee if the Removal were to be carried out.

Nevertheless, having inferred that Emerson shifts his identification from the United States to the Cherokee, Arsić links this would-be shift to her larger analysis. “Thanks to his multilayered thinking of leaving,” she writes, “…Emerson can propose a gesture of political disidentification of the citizens not only with respect to the government and Congress, but to the American nation and its claims to a land in general” (286). In her reading, then, Emerson argues that citizens must “leave” their national identity to stand with the victims of the national policy. But this is an unjustified connection. Beyond simply recognizing that the government’s treatment of the Cherokee violates both statutory and moral laws, Emerson is not demanding that one identify with the Cherokee; rather, he is demanding that American citizens live up to their espoused principles and preserve the “sweet omen of religion and liberty.” Thus, far from asking his countrymen to “disidentify” with their country, Emerson is reminding Americans of what their political principles are.
Other claims in the book could be likewise challenged, and a full treatment of Arsić’s analysis would need to address them all, but a larger critique seems prompted by the way Arsić’s Emerson emerges. In part, though the point is debatable, philosophical analysis should explain how various positions fit together in the larger view of a given thinker. In a sense, Arsić attempts this: under a single conceptual heading, “leaving,” she synthesizes a number of different ideas in Emerson’s writings. But too often, she achieves her synthesis by accumulating ideas that she takes to be similar rather than by truly integrating ideas that she perceives to be formulated differently.

Consider the contrast between two examples drawn from different sections of the book. Early in her analysis, Arsić describes the injunction to avoid habit-formation in “Self-Reliance” as a kind of leaving:

Self-Reliance…so represents a crucial formulation of Emerson’s theory of self-culture. The gesture of departing from oneself is there famously called aversion. Aversion is said to be the love of reality rather than the customs to which conformism is attached…However, aversion is not only the act of detaching the self from the customs of community, but also, no less importantly, the act of turning the self against the ways of its own thinking, which are the habits of the mind. (31, emphasis mine)

Later, apropos the injunction to constantly seek out new interpersonal relationships, Arsić significantly quotes a famous passage from “Compensation”:

The changes which break up at short intervals the prosperity of men are advertisements of a nature whose law is growth. Every soul is by this intrinsic necessity quitting its whole system of things, its friends, and home, and laws, and faith, as the shell-fish crawls out of its beautiful but stony case, because it no longer admits of its growth, and slowly forms a new house (187).

She interprets this passage thus:

Change requires “vigor” because one sometimes has to move out from a house one loves (like a shellfish crawling out of its “beautiful case”), obviously not because one doesn’t feel good in it, but because staying in it doesn’t provoke the radical shifts that amount to growth. Leaving will thus be often about departing
So the central move here is to group the concept of “aversion” and the notion of “quitting a system of things” under the heading of “leaving,” and to see them as connected in this way. I don’t want to reject Arsić’s connection entirely, but we ought to keep in mind that the concept of “leaving”—as well as the term itself—is Arsić’s, not Emerson’s, and that she is imposing it as a conceptual framework.

More importantly, in the drive to see aversion and quitting as varieties of leaving, Arsić’s analysis fails to capture crucial differences between these actions. To note a few from Arsić’s own discussion, it seems significant that aversion is driven by “love of reality,” while “quitting [the soul’s] whole system of things” is driven by something like the impulse towards growth. Moreover, as Arsić is at pains to emphasize, the “aversion” in “Self-Reliance” entails questioning one’s habits of mind, whereas the “departing” in “Compensation” involves rejecting “what is dear.” While the leaving in “Self-Reliance” is intellectual, it becomes in “Compensation” affective. These different sorts of leaving seem to require possibly related but nevertheless significantly different forms of self-questioning: rejecting a belief surely requires a different sort of critique than rejecting a friend.

Arsić might also have said more about the differences between Emerson and the contemporary philosophers with which she associates him. While she usefully links Emerson to Heidegger on the question of thinking as volition, she cites Heidegger only to clarify her interpretation of Emerson, not to show how they philosophically differed. Yet they differed precisely on the topic of leaving, as Stanley Cavell observes in a passage Arsić quotes: “The substantive disagreement with Heidegger shared by Emerson
and Thoreau, is that the achievement of the human requires not inhabitation and settlement but abandonment, leaving” (qtd. 89).

Instead of picking up on this contrast between Emerson and Heidegger, Arsić draws from Cavell the concept of leaving. But how does she reconcile Cavell’s statement of contrast with her later claim that Heidegger was unknowingly “waiting for Emerson” (324)? In a footnote Arsić glances at the difference between the two: “a future study,” she writes, “should, perhaps, show the ways in which despite initial similarities Emerson’s understanding of the world differs profoundly from Heidegger’s” (340). But since this difference does not make it into the text, Arsić’s Emerson ends up as somehow less than a philosopher. He lacks the intellectual strength to challenge the figures Arsić uses to interpret him.

This, however, is a problem that almost none of the literary critics who draw on contemporary philosophy have solved, and in spite of my objections I find Arsić’s discussion of Emerson rich.