There are very few "unique" ideas existing in the canon of literature. As William Strunk remarked, "A writer who aims at freshness or originality had better discard it entirely." No writer stands by himself or herself in the realm of original thought. Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the greatest writers throughout the history of American thought in religion, and philosophy, is no exception to this postulate. Emerson scholar Robert D. Richardson, in his biography *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, points to four individual writers as having major influence on Emerson's philosophy. The writings of Mary Moody Emerson, Germaine de Staël, Dugal Stewart, and Michel de Montaigne have all served as strong motivating forces for Emerson throughout his lifetime.

Perhaps the most influential individual and writer in Emerson's life was his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson. Richardson states, "It was she and not the Boston Ministers of Harvard professors who set the real intellectual standards for the young Emerson." [1] In his diary, Emerson noted that he believed in her prime his aunt was "the best writer in Massachusetts" and set "an immeasurably high standard." [2] She fulfilled a function "which nothing else in his education could supply."[3] . According to historian Phyllis Cole:

> Ms. Emerson was widely read and formidably articulate. She could be surprisingly candid. She possessed a force of enormous force of character and limitless energy, and she had a gift of attracting young people. She was a tireless controversialist; she was a vigorous theologian. Above all, she was an original religious thinker, almost a prophet. . . . The obituary writer for the *Boston Commonwealth* said, "She was thought to have the power of saying more disagreeable things in half an hour than any living person." [4]

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[1] Richardson 23.

[2] Emerson Diary

[3] Emerson Diary

[4] Phyllis Cole

Through the surviving correspondence between Emerson and his beloved aunt, the world has received a fascinating picture of this peculiar relationship. Ms. Emerson believed in traditional Christianity. Richardson notes, "The cardinal points of her intellectual compass were New England's old Puritan religion."[5] The intellectual tension that this created between nephew and aunt as Emerson's philosophy developed throughout his thirties eventually caused Ms. Emerson to withdraw from her position of unofficial spiritual adviser. Although these philosophical differences existed, her effect on Emerson's life was permanent. [6] Although the two fundamentally disagreed on many spiritual issues, Emerson greatly respected this great thinker and her ideas.

One of Mary Moody Emerson's favorite books was *Corinne*, written by French writer Germaine de Staël. Ms. Emerson stated that she "admired *Corrine*, with its sympathetic portrait of the gifted, doomed heroine of intellect, imagination, and feeling."[7] Through his beloved Aunt's suggestion, Emerson read Mme. De Staël's fictional novels and then began to read her other writings. Mme de Staël was truly eclectic in her interests. Liberal and fiercely anti-Napoleon in politics, preferential in philosophy, mixing rationalism and spiritualism, and determinedly internationalist in her feeling for literature, she moved easily in a self-created world of ideas. She was influential enough to surround herself with the salon of intellectuals she founded at Coppet, Switzerland. Her two novels, *Delphine* (1802) and *Corinne* (1807), focus on the woman of talent persecuted by society. Her two most influential works*, De la Littérature* (1800) and *De l'Allemagne* (1810) expanded conceptions of literature, claiming that post-

[5] Richardson 25.

[6] Emerson 10:379

[7] MME

revolutionary French society required a new literature. [8] She explored the contrast between Classical and Romantic Literatures. She showed interest in foreign writers like Shakespeare, Ossian, and the German Romantics. Many of these ideas emerged from discussions with Wilhelm von Schlegel, and from meetings with and readings of the German philosophers Goethe and Schiller. This cosmopolitan cultural relativism lead to an inflammatory attitude amongst the prevailing conservative members of the neoclassical climate of her time. [9] This rebellion and self-reliance attracted young Emerson. Perhaps de Staël's *De l'Allemagne* became her most influential book to Emerson and to many of his peers. Richardson states that the ideas contained in de Staël's publication "had a huge effect on intellectual life in America."[10] Many Americans were inspired to learn about new philosophies coming from Germany during that time. However, Emerson was compelled by de Staël's comments on religion. From her ideas, Emerson conceived a primitive form of transcendentalism that he would bring to its philosophical heights in his later years.

Richardson rightly claims that religion for de Staël centers in "the feeling of the infinite, which she carefully separates from the infinite itself. The infinite", she explains, "consists in the absence of limits; but the feeling of the infinite, such as the imagination and the heart experience, is positive and creative."[11] She is interested in religious *experience*, not in dogma, theology, history or ritual. Religious enthusiasm is vital to an individual because it is "excited by the sentiment of the infinite," and she gave this example:

> When we contemplate the starry heavens, where the sparks of light are universes like our own, where the brilliant dust of the milky way traces with its worlds a

[8] EB

[9] EB

[10] Richardson 53

[11] Ibid 53

> circle in the firmament, our thoughts are lost in the infinite, our hearts beat for the unbeknown, for the universe, and we feel that it is only on the other side of earthly experience that our real life will commence."[12]

Importantly, de Staël believed that religion was to "important to be restricted to Sunday morning."[13] She writes, "Religion is nothing if it is not everything, if existence is not filled with it, if we do not incessantly maintain in the soul this belief in the invisible, this self-devotion, this elevation of desire."[14] Her ideal was that the whole of life should be "naturally and without effort, an act of worship at every moment."[15] Richardson stated that these ideas gave birth to Emerson's transcendental philosophy. He remarks:

> Emerson came back to de Staël repeatedly. She is one of his early constant reference points, one of the people he read and reread, turning the books a little each time like a kaleidoscope, so that a new pattern could emerge form the familiar elements. In time perhaps American life and literature could catch the sacred fire of enthusiasm. There was no reason for it to remain a German phenomenon. Enthusiasm was more strongly linked to its etymology than it was to any particular place. As de Staël pointed out, it means "God in us."[16]

Another influence upon Emerson's philosophy was Scottish Common Sense philosopher Dugald Stewart. This philosophy was the prevailing mode of thought at Emerson's education at Harvard. It was, states Richardson, "a broad and generous way of thinking, centered in moral issues and problems."[17] Common sense philosophy is itself a series of answers to the work of David Hume, who advocated a distrust of the self and to establish a distrust in all human facilities. The ground shared by the people who affirm this sensibility, is a belief, as Stewart puts

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[12] de Staël, Germany, 288.

[13] Richardson 53

[14] De Staël 289.

[15] Ibid

[16]Richardson 54, De Staël 388.

[17] Richardson 29

it, "in the universality of moral perceptions as an essential part of the human constitution . . . As all our knowledge of the material world rests ultimately on facts ascertained by observation, so all our knowledge of the human mind rests ultimately on facts for which we have the evidence of our own consciousness . . . the capacities of the human mind have been in all ages the same, and that the diversity of phenomena exhibited buy our species is the result merely of the different circumstances in which all men are placed"[18] This intellectual universe of Dugal Stewart provided Emerson with a set of working ideas that he retained all of his life. In Stewart's widely read manifesto on this philosophy, entitled *Dissertation: Progress of Metaphysical, Ethical, and Political Philosophy*, one can easily find the roots of Emerson's self-reliance and the notion of reason. Stewart writes:

> What we commonly call sensibility, depends, in a great measure, on the power of imagination. Point out two men, any object of compassion; --a man, for example, reduced by misfortune from easy circumstances to indigence. The one feels merely in proportion to what he perceives by his senses. The other follows, in imagination, the unfortunate man to his dwelling, and partakes with him and his family in their domestic distresses.... As he proceeds in the painting, his sensibility increases, and he weeps, not for what he sees, but for what he imagines. It will be said, that it was his sensibility which originally aroused his imagination; and the observation is undoubtedly true; but it is equally evident, on the other hand, that the warmth of his imagination increases and prolongs his sensibility.[19]

This philosophy had limitations for Emerson. Richardson states that "As a system it left little place for imagination, art, or literature. It was too reliant on social morals. It left room for, but put no great emphasis on, original force or insight."[20] Historically, Emerson remains as one influenced by Scottish Common Sense, and not remembered as an advocate of the philosophy.

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[18] Stewart *Dissertation: Progress of Metaphysical, Ethical, and Political Philosophy,* 16-18

[19] Stewart 247

[20] Richardson 33

This body of ideas provided Emerson with a worldview that emphasized ethical thought, an outlook that was predisposed to affirmation of humanity that was open to all of society, and was open to both religion and science. It is interesting to note that although Stewart intended to protect an important role for theology through this philosophy, his work demonstrated to John Stuart Mill and others the way to make theism irrelevant to the scientific enterprise. In Stewart's *Elements of the Philosophy of the Mind* of 1792, he formulated a purely instrumental philosophy of science for theistic reasons. These theistic reasons were easily dismissed and only the science remained, which was intolerable to Emerson as demonstrated in *Nature*.

In 1826, Emerson found the writings of Michel de Montaigne during a reading assignment in seminary. The seminarian wrote that he immediately realized that this assignment was not one of the "studies that end in new studies and do not tend to lessen the price of bread but a window on life itself and a pattern for a kind of writing that is sharply different from the biblical commentary that dominates divinity school."[21] Emerson would remark of Montaigne that his writing was so realistic that Emerson noted that if one were to "cut these words [of Montaigne] and they [would] bleed."[22] From Montaigne, Emerson found another manner in which to look at some problems that confronted him. Montaigne was a skeptic, but not in the same category of Hume. Richardson states that Montaigne's essay, which was Emerson's most favorite, "Apology for Raimondew de Sebonde" is "a lively narrative essay that defends both Christianity and natural theology while taking pains to describe the human race a sonly one part of a vast natural order, all of which is entitled to our awe and wonder."[23] From is chapter in *Representative Men*, Emerson came to see Montaigne a position between the pure idealist and

[21] CW 9:71

[22] Richardson 68

the pure sensualist. He writes, “The abstractionist and the materialist, thus mutually exasperating each other, and the scoffer expressing the worst of materialism, there arises a third party to occupy the middle ground.”[24] Montaigne uses this middle ground in every sentence that appealed to Emerson who was searching for a balance in this period in his life between the cry of reason and the cry of normative Christianity. [25] He devoured the works of Montaigne and would later state that “It seemed to me as if I had written the book myself in some former life. No book before or since was ever so much to me as that.” [26] This high praise for Montaigne coalesces the search that drove Emerson to seek a balance between his struggle between the call of reason and the call of community.

Emerson understood the influence that the previous generations have on our philosophy. He wrote in his poem “Ode to Beauty,” that “Olympian bards who sung divine ideas below, which always find us young and always keep us so.”[27] The ideas of his Aunt Mary, of Mme. de Staël, of Stewart, and of Montaigne, inspired Emerson throughout his life and influenced his personal philosophy that served as his moral compass.

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[23] Ibid 68

[24] Representative Men ,154

[25] Richardson 69

[26] CW 9:72

[27] Emerson “Ode to Beauty” 939

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Emerson's Influences

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