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Distinguished Achievement Award

presented to

Herwig Friedl

Herwig Friedl, Professor Emeritus of American Studies and History of Ideas, Heinrich-Heine-University, Düsseldorf, Germany, received the Emerson Society Distinguished Achievement Award at its annual meeting via teleconference on May 4, 2021. Professor Friedl has published on American philosophy in an international context, pragmatism, and a variety of American authors ranging from Poe and Longfellow, Dickinson and Stein, Dewey and James, to Wharton and E. L. Doctorow. His work often puts authors and philosophers in conversation with one another in ways that illustrate not merely influence but how these figures articulate a deep engagement with experience. Friedl's scholarship on Ralph Waldo Emerson has mapped Emerson's reception in Germany and clarified Emerson's influence on pragmatism, Nietzsche, and later modern thinkers. As such, Friedl's contributions to the field have worked to situate Emerson as an influential philosopher whose work has a global reach.

Friedl's interests in comparative literature and philosophy began as a student. He studied American, English and German Literatures and Languages, and Philosophy at Heidelberg University from 1963-1967, where he attended Gadamer's weekly lectures and was introduced to the Pre-Socratics and their influence on Nietzsche by Karl Löwith. These early influences inspired an enduring interest in anti-foundationalist currents influence in modernism that can be seen across his body of work. As a Jacob Gould Shurman scholar at Cornell from 1967-1968, he began work on his dissertation on Henry James advised by M. H. Abrams and Arthur Mizener. The subsequent book, *Die Funktion der Bildlichkeit in*

den kritischen und theoretischen Schriften von Henry James (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 1972), finds a pluralism driven by open-ended experience in James' novels and stories while arguing for a "pragmatist aesthetics" implicit in James' literary theory.

Friedl's study of Emerson was sparked on Christmas of 1973, during a year of postdoctoral study at Yale, when his "wife presented [him] with the twelve-volume *Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*," a "cherished and to this very day indispensable 1888 Riverside Edition" (*Thinking in Search of a Language*, 5). Emerson's style, which is often paratactic, open-ended, and reminiscent of the natural phenomena of thought, afforded Friedl a precursor to the pragmatists and other anti-foundationalist thinkers. As he has recently characterized Emerson's writings: "Each essay, and sometimes each single paragraph or even one aphorism after another, may open a new world, a different perspective, an unprecedented vista or vision. Again and again, alternative points of view are proposed and then abandoned, the Protean consciousness dons mask after mask" (*Thinking in Search of a Language*, 6). Emerson's accretionary style signals a shift in modernist ontology, and Friedl, like his contemporary, Stanly Cavell, reads in Emerson an "onward thinking" that both glances back to the Pre-Socratics and looks forward to figures such as Nietzsche, Dewey, James, and others.

Such a comparativist approach has been central to his situating Emerson within a modern philosophic tradition. As David Robinson has recently argued, Friedl makes the "case for Emerson's innovative philosophical influence," which "provide[s] a fresh analysis of the American

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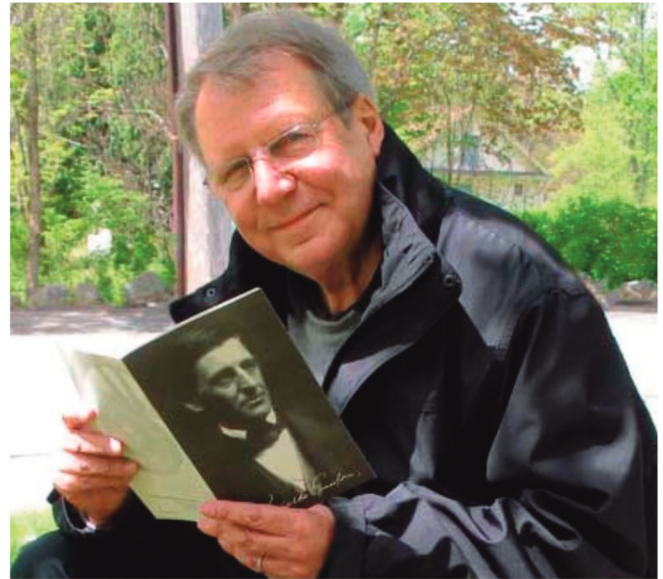
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pragmatists and their pre-linguistic turn in modern thinking” (134). The political implications of Emerson’s influence are further emphasized by Friedl’s assessment that “Democracy, in the way Dewey reads Emerson, is the mode or way or dispensation of Being that makes proliferating versions of democratic realization possible in their essentially unforeseeable variety and plenitude,” and reveal that Emerson was able to propel the liberal Unitarian thinking of his youth into a fluid system that was pliable enough to be of continued use to later thinkers and their needs (“Thinking America” 140).

Additionally, Friedl’s analysis of Emerson’s influence on Nietzsche makes the case for Emerson’s international philosophic stature. As he has argued, “Emerson and Nietzsche stand at the beginning of one of the most dramatic changes in the history of thinking;” and, though he is quick to admit that “Emerson is not Nietzsche,” he persuasively points out that “Nietzsche, as a thinker, responding to a new dispensation of Being, could only become who he was by appropriating the fated antecedent other, called Emerson” (“Fate, Power, and History” 269, 287). A stronger advocate for Emerson’s importance as a philosopher is hard to imagine.

In his most recent work, *Thinking in Search of a Language: Essays on American Intellect and Intuition* (Bloomsbury, 2018), Friedl argues that “Emerson’s imaginative cosmological hierarchy finds its culmination point and, at the same time, its all-encompassing and unifying container in the intellect” (*Thinking in Search of a Language*, 20). At the core of such philosophical inquiry is an admiration for thought beyond words, and words are certainly inadequate to the task of articulating Professor Friedl’s contributions to the field of Emerson studies. For this and so much more, he is most deserving of the Society’s Distinguished Achievement Award.



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