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The “romance” of Susan Field’s title is her way of characterising Emerson’s representation of the relationship between self and other, where that “other” is variously nature, other people, himself or even his contemporary readers. Scholars have written persuasively about the importance of the romance as a literary genre and style of discourse to writers of the American Renaissance. But Field is using the term differently, to describe a kind of relation rather than a style of articulation. This is the “original relation with the Universe” of which Emerson writes; Field explains: “I call this relation the romance of desire, because desire inspires romance fraught with risk and mystery and passion” (p.8). Emerson’s work, then, is the writing of a romance that is the romance of the self-other dialectic in which his life engages. This dialectic provides the other key term in Field’s title – “incompletion”. The confirmation or recognition of self that comes from engagement with the “other” of nature, community or reader is ephemeral and needs constant renewal. It is, therefore, as a relation necessarily incomplete. The lack of closure characteristic of Emerson’s “life romance” gives rise, in Field’s view, to an epistemology of caring and individual responsibility. The engagement with difference and refusal of closure promotes in Emerson’s writing a heightened appreciation of instability and a corresponding ethic of caring. It is in this context that Susan Field reads Emerson’s work in relation first, to Idealism, then to key contemporary feminist theorists (Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray), and finally in relation to key antifoundationalists like Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish and Jacques Derrida. In Field’s reading, it is the systemic nature of feminism and antifoundationalism, rather than the ideas of individual thinkers, that separates Emerson’s achievement and keeps his work from being subsumed within contemporary critical thought. The presence of Stanley Cavell does hover over this book. Field often invokes Cavell’s work on Emerson and Thoreau as a touchstone to orient her own readings. Her book is very readable, approaching a kind of personal testimony in some passages. At a time when students find Emerson’s writing important but difficult to read, Field’s book makes a useful contribution to the effort to make Emerson both appealing and relevant.

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