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EMERSON'S WILD CRAB:  
AMERICAN CONSERVATISM AND  
INDIGENOUS GROWTH

*A Nation announcing itself,  
I myself make the only growth by which I can be appreciated,  
I reject none, accept all, then reproduce all in my own forms.*

*A breed whose proof is in time and deeds,  
What we are we are, nativity is answer enough to objections. . . .*  
— Walt Whitman  
“By Blue Ontario’s Shore”

Conservatism as a principle is usually equated with a love of unchanging stasis. Yet ever since Edmund Burke defended the rootedness of traditional English society as a necessary stay against the confusion of the French Revolution, the term has been vivified by an organic metaphor of slow growth and steady accretion. As Yeats wrote in “Blood and the Moon,” Burke, “haughtier-headed” (and so perhaps more farsighted) than his eighteenth-century compeers, Swift and Goldsmith, “but proved the State a tree.”<sup>1</sup> Emerson, always a mediator, looked to the sources and conditions of this indigenous growth as well as to the archetypal arboreal image itself. His essay of 1841, “The Conservative,” posits that before you can have reform, you must have a material foundation for it, since “the existing world is not a dream, and cannot with impunity be treated as a dream; neither is it a disease; but it is the ground on which you stand, the mother of whom you were born.” Paradoxically, growth can only be measured as growth because it occurs in relation to this matrix of a fixed base that allows us to see just how much things have changed, or not changed. “Innovation is the salient energy;