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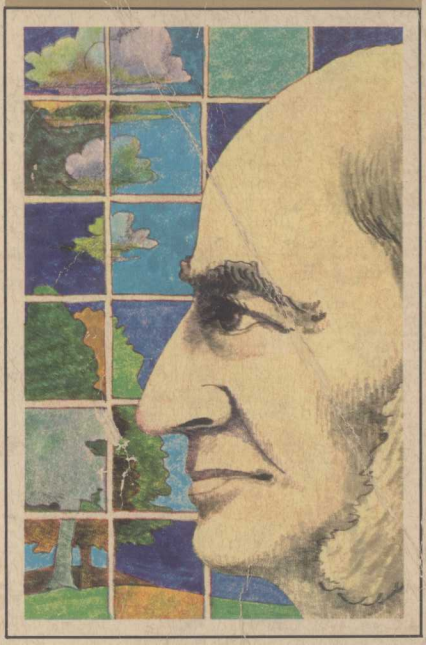

PUBLISHED BY POCKET

Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems of

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Edited and with an Introduction by R.E. Spiller

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A QUOKKA BOOK/PUBLISHED BY POCKET BOOKS

POCKET BOOKS, a Simon & Schuster division of
GULF & WESTERN CORPORATION
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020

ISBN: 0-671-48841-4

First Pocket Books printing April, 1965

6 printings

First Quokka printing August, 1978

Printed in the U.S.A.

Acknowledgment

Grateful acknowledgment is accorded Harvard University Press for permission to reprint "Human Culture: Introductory" from *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* Vol. II, edited by Stephen E. Whicher, Robert E. Spiller, and Wallace E. Williams (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963).

All other selections included in this volume were taken from the Centenary Edition of *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* edited by Edward Waldo Emerson, in 12 volumes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1903–04). The volume number and title are indicated for each selection.

EMERSON'S ART

As the second surviving son of a clergyman, Ralph Waldo Emerson felt the call to the ministry early in life. His first prose, therefore, was the sermon, and he learned the art of public speaking in church and at the Harvard Divinity School. It was an art of persuasion rather than of logic, an art of direct communication with an audience, in which the structure of meaning was built up from the simple text through expansion, emphasis, repetition, and illustration to a fuller revelation. This was the pattern that Emerson followed through all the variations he developed from the basic homilitic form. All of Emerson's writings, whether planned originally as sermons, lectures, or essays, bear witness to his power over the spoken word. They all share, to some degree, that living quality and immediateness that is the main strength of his art.

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Introduction

1.

In recent years there has been an effort on the part of the students and critics of Emerson to prove that he was something other than we had thought—that he was, after all, a very human and very modern writer, rather than the cool and somewhat remote spiritual leader that he had seemed to his contemporaries. The real Emerson, it has been argued, can be discovered only in the *Journals*, where we find "Man Thinking"—where we can struggle with him through his own hopes and fears from one personal crisis to another and finally achieve with him a somewhat precarious equilibrium between tensions rather than a static calm. This is an Emerson who can say something to modern man, caught as he is in a world he never made and to which he must constantly readjust in order to survive. This is also the romantic Emerson who, like Carlyle and Wordsworth, Poe and Melville, suffered through storm and stress to emotional resolution in art.

There is so much truth and health in this point of view that it cannot be dismissed lightly. The earlier image of Emerson was caught up, together with those of Bryant and Longfellow, Tennyson and Browning, in the smug certainties of Victorian idealism. Like Pippa, these prophets had only to pass in order to set the world to rights. What insights they had into the deeper strata of human experience were obscured by the glitter of a surface optimism. What artistic mastery they achieved was blurred by an insistence on their "message." All of them had to be "debunked" and reappraised by modern skepticism, and some did not survive the ordeal too well.

Emerson came late to his trial by Van Wyck Brooks, John Jay Chapman, Norman Foerster, Ralph L. Rusk, F. O. Matthiessen, Stephen E. Whicher, and others; and he has gained rather than lost in every re-evaluation; but the new image is still fluent in outline. A satisfactory "modern" Emerson has not yet been discovered; it will never be found in the

Journals alone or in any collection of paragraphs from his writings. For Emerson was both an intensely reserved man and a careful and deliberate artist; he kept his public and his private lives apart. If he was one of the major artists of his time, those writings to which he devoted his best effort and which he himself gave to the public in spoken or written form must stand on their merits, and they must be studied in the forms in which he presented them.

The work of art should, in the end, be able to stand up to criticism for what it is and what it says without recourse to the author's intentions for excuse. Modern biographers and students of the sage of Concord have done him an immense service in destroying the earlier image and thereby setting his work in a new and more accurate perspective, but there is another ordeal ahead for the poetry, the lectures, and the essays upon which Emerson rested his own bid for immortality. Criticism has not yet done for Emerson's literary work what it has done for *Moby Dick*, the lyrics and tales of Poe, or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

This volume is therefore a selection from those writings of Emerson that have best stood the test of time and that represent the various forms of oral and written expression to which he devoted his most careful thought and workmanship. It does not present him primarily as a philosopher, a social critic, or a religious leader, although he was in some sense all of these. It keeps separate his public and his private writings; they should, however, be supplemented by a judicious reading from the *Journals* and *Letters*, no passages from which are here included. The text is that prepared by Emerson himself, as edited in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* by his son Edward Waldo Emerson, with the assistance of his friend James Eliot Cabot.[1] Except for the lecture, "Human Culture: Introductory," which is here printed from *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. II,[2] with the permission of Harvard University Press, there is little novelty in the selections. Here the reader should find not all the best that Emerson wrote but at least some of the best in each kind of writing that he attempted.

[1] Edward Waldo Emerson (ed.), *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Centenary Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1903–04).

[2] Stephen E. Whicher, Robert E. Spiller, and Wallace E. Williams (eds.), *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. II (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963).

2.

From earliest youth, Emerson thought of himself as a poet, and it is to his poetry that we must first turn if we are to discover the roots of his art. "I am a born poet," he confessed in 1835, "of a low class no doubt, but a poet." When the library of his literary father was sold at auction in 1811, it was found to contain the works of Ovid, Pope, Johnson, and Goldsmith. Ralph, then eight years old, was already studying these classical models and practicing the art. It was he who celebrated, often humorously, minor family events in formal verse, and he early wrote verse epistles to his Aunt Mary. His college journals are sprinkled with rhymed couplets, and there is extant at least one formal essay on the beauties of poetry and a long original poem first read before the undergraduate Pythologian Club in April, 1820. An imperfect sympathy with the English romantics, especially Wordsworth, is offset in these journals by a lament for the decline of classical culture and a charge that "the Monks in their cloisters in the dark ages invented Rhyme by which they endeavoured to shackle poetry or the soarings of the mind." [3] The young poet felt this bondage acutely; he had confessedly no ear for music yet he was to struggle throughout his life to confine his soaring thoughts to measured lines despite his early realization that the images of poetry "are nothing but the striking occurrences selected from Nature and Art and [that] it depends a great deal upon the assistance of words to give definiteness and very much resembles algebra in the principle whereon it is founded." [4] The result is that the reader who is accustomed to think of poetry in terms of melody has often turned from his Byron or his Swinburne to find in Emerson's verses an awkwardness and a twisting of phrase or image to make it fit the uncongenial rigidity of English meter and rhyme. But he who starts where Emerson started in his theory of poetry—with the idea that the poet senses the moral law in Nature and gives it expression in exalted word and image—will find in that very awkwardness a vigor and surprise that open fresh vistas of understanding. For Emerson was the first modern American poet to take his

[3] William H. Gilman et al. (gen. eds.), *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. I (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 242.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 64.

primary inspiration from the seventeenth-century English metaphysical poets, and through them to view poetry as a kind of thinking, having as its chief instrument of expression the symbol rather than the metrical foot. For, like algebra, poetry conveyed its abstractions to him through the use of visible symbols and depended upon the eye even more than upon the ear for its reconciliation of nature and mind. When we learn, therefore, that Emerson was an admirer of George Herbert and Sir Thomas Browne, and that Emily Dickinson knew his poetry well and went to the same sources for her own, we do not find it difficult to trace an American heritage for the metaphysical poetry of such modernists as T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens.

Students of Emerson's poetry have been somewhat misled by the emphasis he seems to place on sound in his essay on *The Poet*. "For poetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings and attempt to write them down." But it is in this same essay that he calls the poet "the sayer, the namer" and declares that "it is not metres but a metre-making argument that makes a poem." "The poet is the Namer or Language-maker, naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence." "Nature offers all her creatures to to him as a picture language. . . . Things admit of being used as symbols because nature is a symbol, in the whole, and in every part." Thus, in his poem "Each and All," Emerson starts with "the heifer that lows in the upland farm" and concludes, "I yielded myself to the perfect whole"; similarly, in "The Snow-Storm," into what seems at first to be mere description of a winter landscape he unleashes the North Wind, a "fierce artificer" who can mock ages of architecture with his mad "night-work." Emerson's poet,

> The kingly bard
> Must smite the chords rudely and hard
> As with hammer or with mace.
> . . . . . .
> Great is the art,
> Great be the manners of the bard.
> He shall not his brain encumber
> With the coil of rhythm and number;
> . . . . . .

But mount to paradise
By the stairway of surprise.

This is the Emerson who gave to modern poetry a debt of freedom even greater than that it owes to Whitman, a freedom to use sound as discord to startle the ear, and an understanding of the visual qualities of language which give to poetry the mathematician's mastery of the symbol. His poetry must be seen as well as heard before its meanings can be grasped.

Thus, even though his output was small—he published only two volumes of verse during his lifetime—it is to Emerson's poetry that we must first turn if we would read him aright. Some of his verses are mere epigraphs for his essays and these tend to rely too heavily on the simple restatement in meter of ideas better expressed in prose; but the independent poems that are built around images, such as "Days," with its single image of time, or "Uriel," with the challenge of the rebel angel, move directly from the poet's vision to its meaning as realized in symbolic form.

3.

If Emerson's poetry must be seen as well as heard, his prose should be heard before it is seen, for it was written first with an audience in mind and much of it was never committed to print during his lifetime. His sermons, addresses, lectures, and essays are all variants of the same basic form, the oral discourse—a form that had a much higher status as literature a century ago than it would seem to have today. Those were the days of such preachers as William Ellery Channing and Lyman Beecher, of orators such as Edward Everett and Daniel Webster. They were also the great days of the Lyceum Movement, when each city and town in the United States had its own public hall where everything from the lay sermon to the magician's bag of tricks occupied the long winter months with a continuous variety show.

As the second surviving son of a clergyman, Ralph Waldo Emerson felt the call to the ministry when his older brother William decided to go into law. His first prose form, therefore, was the sermon, and he learned the art of public speaking in church and at the Harvard Divinity School. It was an

art of persuasion rather than of logic, an art of direct communication with an audience, in which the structure of meaning was built up from a simple text through expansion, emphasis, repetition, and illustration to a fuller revelation. This was the pattern Emerson followed through all the variations that he developed from the basic homiletic form. The sentence is the first unit; the paragraph (which is normally an expansion of the sentence) is the second; and the sermon, lecture, or essay is built up from its slow start, in increasing tempo, as with building blocks, to a structure that takes form and balance as it rises from the level ground of common experience into the higher air of moral truth. For this reason, some students of Emerson's prose have made the mistake of thinking that his art consists merely in skillful use of the aphoristic sentence or paragraph, and that they as editors or anthologists are as free as he seemed to be to lift, shuffle, and re-form sentence and paragraph in any way that they please. In such fashion the rhetorical rhythm of his structure is totally lost, and all that is left is a jumble of parts. Emerson's apparent carelessness of method is wholly deceptive. His art is that of the composition of meaning by use of the *spoken word*, an art in which the audience and the occasion are as much a part of the act of composition as is the speaker.

First, then, the sermon. Emerson won his approbation or license to preach by delivering a sermon to the Middlesex Association on October 10, 1826, at the age of twenty-three, and he began assisting the Rev. Henry Ware at the Second (Unitarian) Church in Boston where, three years later, he became junior pastor. Through the happy few years of his marriage to Ellen Tucker, he preached regularly, but he had always questioned the doctrinal and sacramental phases of Christianity and, with the demands of regular church responsibility, his doubts increased. Of the many sermons that survive in manuscript only a few were published in his lifetime, the most memorable of which is the "Farewell Sermon" of October, 1832, which, like the others, is rather a declaration of independence of view than a call to religious belief and conformity. Throughout these sermons, the young minister seems to be debating with his audience and, with their help, finding his way through the jungle of formalism to a few essential truths. But he was already developing some of the chief characteristics of his later style: the abrupt statement of

a whole idea or opinion in a single aphoristic sentence, the mounding of illustration upon illustration drawn from both a wide and eclectic reading and a homely experience, the crisp choice of word and image, the rhythm of restrained but ascending emotion.

With his voluntary resignation from his church and the death of his wife, Emerson's whole life seemed to fall apart and, in 1832–33, he traveled in Europe. Upon his return he was greeted by friends with an invitation to deliver a lecture in Boston on natural history, or science, on November 5, 1833. With this lecture he began a new life. He married again and settled in Concord, Massachusetts, where he had spent so many of the summers of his youth; he bought the old Coolidge mansion on the Lexington Road; and he became a dominant figure in the life of the town, as his children grew up around him and the local farmers joined the intellectuals in seeking his friendship and guidance.

Like his sermons, his lectures were written for public presentation, and most of them have survived only in manuscript; but they were drawn upon heavily for the published essays, and much of what they contained is thus available in a revised and more polished form. Nevertheless, one must go back to the lectures themselves to hear the voice of Emerson and to appreciate his art. The earlier lectures are somewhat restricted in choice of subject by the fact that they were prepared on short notice on invitation of a lyceum group, but in 1836 he launched out on his own account with a succession of winter series in Boston on "Human Culture," "Human Life," "The Times," and other more congenial subjects.

Each series consisted of from five to twelve lectures on varying aspects of a central theme. They were usually delivered first in a place such as the Masonic Hall in Boston and were then repeated, in whole or in part, in other New England towns. Later Emerson extended his tours to New York and Philadelphia, and finally journeyed as far west as Ohio. On one occasion he accepted an invitation to make a lecture tour of England, where he read the series on "Representative Men." His subjects varied from pure moral abstraction, such as the introductory lecture to the series on "Human Culture," to topics more nearly of the times, such as "The Transcendentalist." Occasionally a specific invitation would elicit an address like "The American Scholar," which was given as the annual

oration before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard, or the controversial address to the Harvard Divinity School in 1838. In every case, however, the form of the lecture was determined by the audience and the occasion. One must know, for example, that "The American Scholar" was the assigned topic for an annual academic oration in order to appreciate the irony and the challenge in Emerson's attack on provincialism and pedantry. Sometimes we hear the thrust and parry of the fencing match in his imperfect sentences and logical *non sequiturs,* or feel the mounting force of persuasion as each idea is sharply or quietly presented and then built up by repetition, emphasis, and rising and falling rhythm to a completion that is not a conclusion. There is a circular or spiral structure in all of Emerson's prose, and to read it well is to hear it spoken.

4.

The final form of Emerson's prose is the reworked essay or book, and Emerson was not by nature a writer of books. Later volumes like *Representative Men* (1850), *English Traits* (1856), and *The Conduct of Life* (1860) were apparently little more than the texts of his lecture series, perhaps considerably edited but otherwise printed much as they had been presented on the platform. Other collections, starting with *Society and Solitude* (1870), were compilations of miscellanies from various periods assembled by either Emerson or his friend James E. Cabot for an importunate publisher. Only the two volumes of collected *Essays* (First Series, 1841; Second Series, 1844) were thought over and thoroughly rewritten with publication in mind, and only *Nature* (1836) was written as a book in the first instance. In these last three works the whole of Emerson's literary method can be traced, starting usually with the passage from the *Journals,* which was reworked for the lecture and then reworked a second time for the essay, each sentence and paragraph polished to clarify its meaning and to strengthen its rhetorical effect, and then the parts woven and rewoven into the texture of the finished lecture or essay. The portrait that has come down to us of the lecturer in his decline shuffling his manuscripts on the lectern with little apparent plan or purpose grossly mis-

represents the controlled artistry of his strong and mature years.

This artistry is most apparent in Emerson's first, which was also his last, book. As early as 1833, when he was still in Europe waiting to sail for home, he was planning a statement of what was to be for him the "first philosophy" of a new life. "I like my book about Nature," he wrote in his *Journal*, "and I wish I knew where and how I ought to live. God will show me." Notes on natural history in the same *Journal* list some of the "uses" of Nature that were to provide him with a springboard for both his book and his new way of life.

The book itself did not appear until 1836, after his career as a professional lecturer was well established. It was a slim volume, but in it he had distilled all his experience to date and all his plans for the future. A testament of beauty in poetic prose, it reflects the best of his thinking in the form he had developed in the pulpit and on the platform for its expression. Starting with a definition as text, it establishes at once the dualism of the inner and outer experience that he was hereafter to espouse. "Philosophically considered, the Universe is composed of Nature and the Soul." Man is to be the measure of all things, but he must learn to look two ways, and the first is outward into Nature. There follows a series of chapters which, starting on the lowest level of "Commodity," gradually ascend through "Beauty," "Language," and "Discipline" to the upper level of "Spirit," from which the future can be calmly met as a quest for truth. Here the inner vision is fully realized. The ascending thought is closely paralleled by the ascending structure in an almost perfect arc. Uriel's heresy has become the key to the new philosophy and to the form of a new art:

> Line in nature is not found;
> Unit and universe are round.

The cyclic rhythm of life provides the structure and rhythm of the *Essays* as well, although only a few of these adhere strictly to the pattern of the ascending arc. Quarrying the manuscripts of the forty or more lectures that by now had accumulated in his file, Emerson laid out a series of studies of the components of his philosophy of humanism, his view of culture as an organic, continuing, and ever self-renewing

experience. In the First Series "History" came first, because the past must first be conquered and made contributory to a living present. Then "Self-Reliance" places man in the center, and "Compensation" and "The Over-Soul" consider his relationship with the worlds of the relative and of the absolute. There is thus a loose plan to the book as a whole, which carries over into the more diverse topics of the Second Series in a descending scale from "The Poet" to "New England Reformers"; but its basic pattern is that of the inventory. Each essay focuses on an aspect of the central truth; taken together they constitute an elaboration and more judicious consideration of that First Philosophy he so passionately stated in *Nature*. No one essay is a doctrinal statement, although Emerson was by now in command of a growing doctrinal system of his own, composed of individualism, intuition, correspondence, compensation, and symbolism. To study the *Essays* as philosophy, one should of course sort out and consider each of these doctrines as well as their interrelationships, but to read and enjoy them as essays, no such effort is called for. Each is a flowing discourse, rising as the sun from a low horizon and shedding its light over a single day, setting a topic and then allowing the topic to develop and expand until it is completed. There are no consecutive arguments and no conclusions. Like experience itself, each essay is a unit only as a single vision of life that comes and goes in its cycle.

If the *Essays,* by their very care of composition, lack some of the fluidity of the spoken word, they compensate for it by their more gemlike perfection. They should first be read fast, and lived in the reading, rather than analyzed piece by piece. Analysis can come later and can be carried down to each single paragraph and sentence with rewarding discoveries. But for Emerson, in his writing as in his life, the way to truth is through living, and not, as Thoreau agreed, "through the having lived."

—Robert E. Spiller

Bibliographical Note

The standard text of Emerson's writings is still the Centenary Edition of *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* edited by Edward Waldo Emerson, in 12 volumes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1903–04). This contains everything that Emerson published in his lifetime plus a selection from manuscripts unpublished at his death. A selection and arrangement of *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson* was edited by Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, uniform with the Centenary Edition of the *Works,* in 10 volumes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1909–14). This text will be superseded for scholarly purposes by the more nearly complete edition, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* William H. Gilman et al., general editors, in 4 volumes with future volumes in preparation (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960–64). A definitive 6-volume edition of *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson* was edited by Ralph L. Rusk (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939); and an edition of the early unpublished lectures, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* was edited by Stephen E. Whicher and Robert E. Spiller: Vol. I, 1959; Vol. II, with Wallace E. Williams, 1963 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press). Most of the sermons are still unpublished, although a selection of them was offered by Arthur C. McGiffert, Jr., in *Young Emerson Speaks* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1938). The collected *Poems* are included as Volume IX of the Centenary Edition of the *Works.*

Selections from Emerson's writings are many, but three deserve mention for their special emphases. *Basic Selections from Emerson,* edited by Eduard C. Lindeman (New York: New American Library of World Literature, 1954; a Mentor paperback) stresses his pragmatic side; *Emerson: A Modern Anthology,* edited by Alfred Kazin and Daniel Aaron (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1958; a Laurel edition paperback)

attempts to order his philosophy by a systematic rearrangement of short passages from his works, letters, and journals; and *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson: An Organic Anthology* edited by Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957, Riverside edition) shows his evolving personality by means of chronological presentation of journal passages, closely paralleled by selections from the essays and poems.

The standard biography is *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* by Ralph L. Rusk (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949); but James E. Cabot's *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* in 2 volumes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1887), is still useful. Among the many critiques are *Emerson: A Statement of New England Transcendentalism as Expressed in the Philosophy of Its Chief Exponent,* by Henry D. Gray (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1917); *Emerson Handbook,* by Frederic Ives Carpenter (New York: Hendricks House, 1953); *Emerson's Angle of Vision,* by Sherman Paul (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952); *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* by Stephen E. Whicher (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953); and *Spires of Form: A Study of Emerson's Aesthetic Theory,* by Vivian C. Hopkins (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1951). Kenneth Walter Cameron has supplied much incidental detail in *Emerson the Essayist,* in 2 volumes (Raleigh, N.C.: Thistle Press, 1945), and in other compilations. See also the periodical *Emerson Society Quarterly,* which first appeared in 1955. For further titles, see *Literary History of the United States,* edited by Robert E. Spiller, et al., in 2 volumes (New York: Macmillan Co., 1963, Third edition, revised.