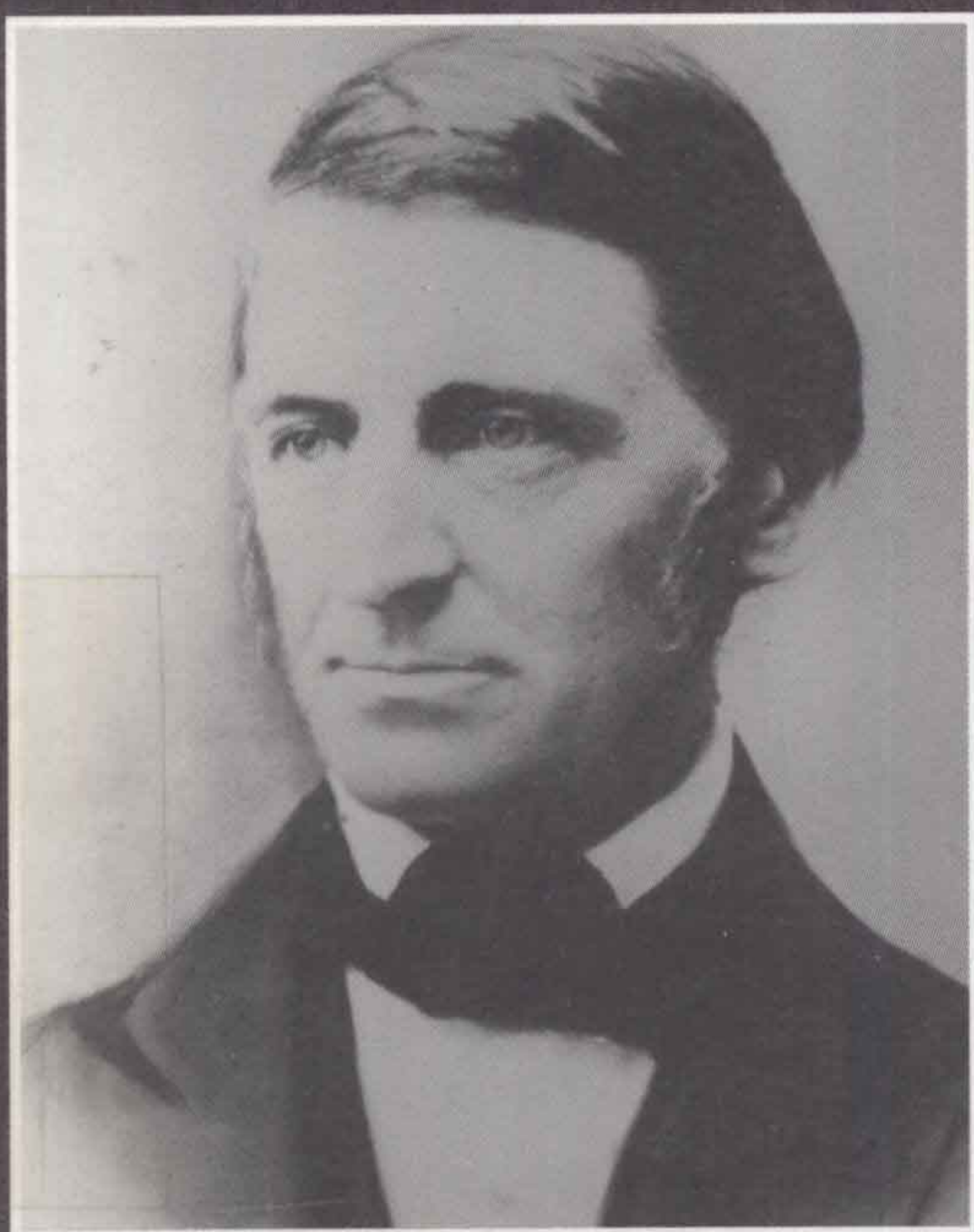


REPRESENTATIVE MEN

Seven Lectures



*Ralph
Waldo
Emerson*

With a New Introduction by Andrew Delbanco

Representative Men *Seven Lectures*

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Text Established by Douglas Emory Wilson

Introduction by Andrew Delbanco

*The Belknap Press of
Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England
1996*

The texts of Emerson's lectures are reproduced here from volume IV of *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, an authoritative edition being prepared under the general editorship of Joseph Slater. For detailed historical and textual information on the lectures as well as full notes on Emerson's quotations and allusions, readers are referred to that volume. The present volume comprises the entire text of *Representative Men*.

Copyright © 1987, 1996 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

First Harvard University Press paperback edition, 1996

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 1803–1882.

Representative men: seven lectures / Ralph Waldo Emerson;
text established by Douglas Emory Wilson; introduction by
Andrew Delbanco. — 1st Harvard University Press pbk. ed.

p. cm.

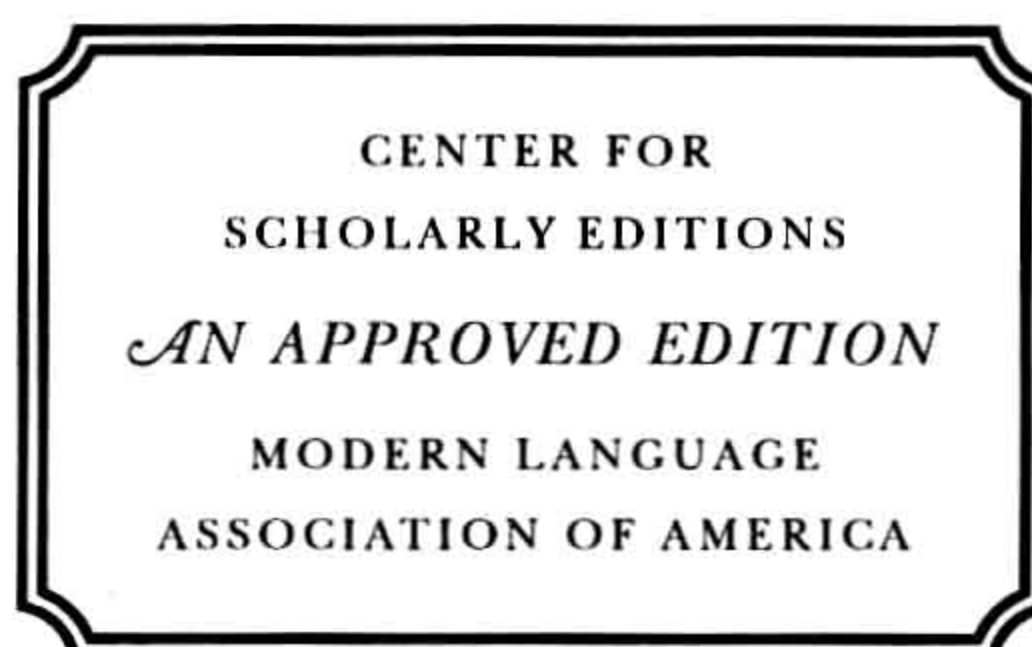
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-674-76105-7

1. Bibliography. I. Wilson, Douglas Emory. II. Title.

PS1621.A1 1996

814'.3—DC20 95-46287



Introduction

At first reading, *Representative Men* seems the most alien of Emerson's books. First published in 1850 (having taken form over the five preceding years as a series of lectures intended as "winter evening entertainments"), it was inspired by the romantic belief that there exists a "general mind" that expresses itself with special intensity through certain individual lives. It was an appreciation of genius as a quality distributed to the few for the benefit of the many. When, according to Longfellow, Emerson began to speak on these themes in Boston in 1845, the Odeon theater was jammed with "old men and young, bald heads and flowing transcendental locks, matrons and maidens, misanthropists and lovers." The crowds were rapt and grateful, as were their counterparts two years later in England, where the lecture series continued. One Manchester man reported that

no orator ever succeeded with so little exertion in entrancing his audience, stealing away each faculty, and leading the listeners captive to his will . . . dispensing his regal sentences in all mildness, goodness and truth, but stealthily and surely he grew upon you from the smallest proportions, as it were; steadily increasing, until he became a Titan . . . The moment he finished he took up his MS. and quietly glided away,—disappearing before his audience could give vent to their applause.

Such receptivity to the celebration of genius is an experience lost to us. As Perry Miller remarked a century after *Representative Men*

Introduction

was first published, “we cannot possibly use the word [genius] with a like solemnity; half the time we use it as an insult. Too many of [Emerson’s] terms are altered; few of us can accept his metaphysics, and many of the geniuses we admire do not seem so clearly to contribute wealth to any commonwealth.”

Representative Men is in some respects an antiquated book. Its “metaphysics” seem preposterous now, since with all his contempt for what he called “the culinary use of the world,” Emerson still believed that man and nature were created as mutually fulfilling complements—that human intelligence was designed to refine the raw essences of nature into new forces that transform and improve the world. With a nineteenth-century confidence in the benignity of nature, he writes: “As plants convert the minerals into food for animals, so each man converts some raw material in nature to human use. Justice has already been done to steam, to iron, to wood, to coal . . . [but] the mass of creatures and of qualities are still hid and expectant. It would seem as if each waited, like the enchanted princess in fairy tales, for a destined human deliverer.”

Representative Men is concerned with six instances of this princely deliverer: Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Napoleon, and Goethe. None was an American, a fact that disappointed Thomas Carlyle, who had urged his Yankee friend to “take an American hero, one whom you really love, and give us a history of him.” Emerson declined, leaving it to others to create the American pantheon. In an era when every windy politician had a eulogy on some past statesman in his repertoire, Emerson preferred not to join the chorus.

Nor did he cater to the universal appetite for gossip. In a passage that should give pause to any biographer of an artist, or writer, or philosopher, he remarks that “great geniuses have the shortest biographies. Their cousins can tell you nothing about them. They lived in their writings, and so their house and street life was trivial and commonplace.” *Representative Men* tells us nothing about what great men eat for breakfast.

Emerson made no contribution to hagiography. He conducted no psychological investigations. Nor did he chronicle the private

Introduction

lives of public men. What kind of book, then, had he written? Why were his American audiences so engaged, his English audiences so fascinated?

For one thing, *Representative Men* was—Carlyle's disappointment notwithstanding—a self-consciously American book. It was composed at a time when American intellectuals found themselves compelled to formulate a new kind of relation with tradition: Old-World worthies were no longer fit objects for veneration, and yet the very activity of reading and writing implied some continuing relation between past and present. Emerson catches this paradox in one of his typically self-repudiating sentences: "Excellent is culture for a savage; but once let him read in the book, and he is no longer able not to think of Plutarch's heroes."

This conundrum—the simultaneous richness and sterility of second-hand culture—was a problem with which Emerson contended in all his writings. He was always looking for ways to reconcile the spirit of independence with the claims of tradition. In *Representative Men* he takes a step toward solving this problem by making all his exemplary figures, despite their geographical and historical remoteness, heroes of a distinctly American type. Plato, he writes in a characteristically paradoxical phrase, was "a great average man." The essay on Shakespeare is less about the playwright himself than it is about "the Shakespeare in us." There is a sense in which the entire book is an extended answer to Emerson's own complaint, delivered a decade earlier in his Phi Beta Kappa oration at Harvard, that "we have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe." The answer he proposes in *Representative Men* is not to turn away and close out the voices of the Old World, but rather to appropriate them, to absorb and transform them into energies of the new self. Great men are those in whom "men see . . . their own dreams." Of Shakespeare, Emerson says that "our ears are educated to music by his rhythm" until he becomes a provocation for our own song.

Emerson's representative men are, in other words, the very opposites of seigneurs commanding obeisance. They are not giants who make ordinary people feel small. On the contrary, they give voice to the mute: "I can say to you what I cannot first say to

Introduction

myself." They are "a collyrium to clear our eyes from egotism and enable us to see other people and their works." They answer everyman's yearning to experience the world more fully than the limitations of the self have hitherto allowed: "In one of those celestial days when heaven and earth meet and adorn each other, it seems a poverty that we can only spend it once: we wish for a thousand heads, a thousand bodies, that we might celebrate its immense beauty in many ways and places."

This way of understanding greatness—as a communicated spirit that multiplies the faculties of the self—was Emerson's effort to reconcile the two apparently contradictory virtues of democracy: individualism and equality. *Representative Men* demonstrates that reverence and self-reliance are not incompatible. Its great men "live in several bodies, and write, or paint or act, by many hands; and after some time it is not easy to say what is the authentic work of the master and what is only of his school." They aid the individual "in ascending out of his limits into a catholic existence."

This notion of greatness as a reciprocal relation has nothing to do with the characteristics usually attributed to great men—permanence, monumentality, grandeur. Emerson has no interest in fixed or meticulous portraits (one reads many pages into the Montaigne essay before Montaigne is mentioned), but only in free and fluent reactions. He obliterates the distinction between giver and receiver; he values the effects of greatness, not its sources. He does not traffic in proverbs or axioms, and in virtually every sentence he expresses nervous discontent with all received wisdom:

The philosophy we want is one of fluxions and mobility. The Spartan and Stoic schemes are too stark and stiff for our occasion. A theory of Saint John, and of non-resistance, seems, on the other hand, too thin and aerial. We want some coat woven of elastic steel, stout as the first and limber as the second. We want a ship in these billows we inhabit. An angular, dogmatic house would be rent to chips and splinters in this storm of many elements.

Introduction

Emerson is a writer who grows restless if he stays too long with any proposition. And so, as one of his most intelligent modern readers, Judith Shklar, has pointed out, he built *Representative Men* around the principle of “rotation,” which had become a political axiom in Jacksonian America—the idea that no man, no matter how imposing, should be accorded permanent authority. *Representative Men* honors the language of democracy in its very title, and it employs political metaphors throughout. “We are multiplied,” the opening chapter declares, “by our proxies.”

In keeping with this American discontent with yesterday’s truth and this morning’s hero, *Representative Men* continually undercuts itself. Swedenborg, with all his angelic insight into the correspondences between the physical and moral worlds, has the “vice of theologic determination.” Montaigne has too much “impatience and fastidiousness.” Goethe is “fragmentary; a writer of occasional poems and of an encyclopedia of sentences”; his works have a certain “looseness.” For Emerson, these limitations suit the antipathy to adulation he believes inherent in the human soul; “the soul is impatient of masters and eager for change We cloy of the honey of each peculiar greatness. Every hero becomes a bore at last.”

This fickleness disturbed Carlyle. “I generally dissented a little,” wrote the author of *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* to his American friend, “about the *end* of all these Essays; which was notable, and not without instructive interest to me, as I had so lustily shouted, ‘Hear, hear!’ all the way from the beginning up to that stage.”

Yet even with the endings that Carlyle found vitiating, Emerson remained uneasy that he had written too pious a book. After the much-revised lectures were finally published in 1850, he recorded in his journal a feeling that every author knows: dismay at seeing his book with all its errors and deficiencies set incorrigibly in print.

Many after thoughts, as usual, with my printing, come just a little too late; & my new book seems to lose all value from their omission. Plainly one is the justice that should have been done to the unexpressed greatness of the common farmer & labourer. A hundred times I

Introduction

have felt the superiority of George, & Edmund, & Barrows, & yet I continue the parrot echoes of the names of literary notabilities & mediocrities, which, bring them (if they dared) into presence of these Concord & Plymouth Norsemen, would be as uncomfortable & ridiculous as mice before cats.

A few years before Emerson embarked on the series of biographical lectures by which he was now discomfited, Alexis de Tocqueville, noticing the scarcity of public monuments in the young American republic, had identified a curious feature of democratic culture: "Democracy not only leads men to a vast number of inconsiderable productions; it also leads them to raise some monuments on the largest scale; but between these two extremes there is a blank." Tocqueville was fascinated by this asymmetry between the "cramped dwellings" in which most Americans dwelt and the "magnificent palace for Congress" they had erected in what had been a fetid swamp.

Tocqueville's explanation for this discrepancy of scale holds the secret to Emerson's meaning in *Representative Men*. "In democratic communities," Tocqueville writes, "the imagination is compressed when men consider themselves; it expands indefinitely when they think of the state." According to the theory of democracy, this kind of expansive worship of the state did not proceed at the expense of ordinary citizens, because "the state . . . represents them all and contains them all in its grasp." Americans, in other words, build monuments through which they can worship themselves.

What Emerson did in *Representative Men* was to apply the same theory of greatness to the achievements of individuals whose renown would seem to have elevated them above the masses. His theme is the dependency of the great on the common. His heroes are partial and defective without the consent and participation of those who recognize them. They are democratic heroes.

It is not easy today to grasp the full contemporary force of this attempt to recoup the idea of individual greatness for an egalitarian culture. One obstacle to understanding is our loss of Emerson's

Introduction

faith that “the destiny of organized nature is amelioration,” and that great men are those who make large contributions to moving the world toward that destiny. Many people are no longer sure which way the world is moving; and most are unsure what part individuals play in building its momentum.

Another difficulty is that Emerson’s once-bold iconoclasm has lost its freshness for us. In its own day, *Representative Men* was a rebuke to those who thought the world acquired meaning from people who lived their lives on the grand scale. It was written, as Shklar says, in opposition to “the politically obtuse longing for hero-leaders.” It was a proud expression of American insolence, reflecting a time, as Emerson recalled late in his life, when “veneration [was] low,” and “people [grew] philosophical about native land and parents and relations [and] there [was] an universal resistance to ties and ligaments once supposed essential to civil society.”

These attitudes were novelties when Emerson expressed them; but they have become conventions. For some readers today, those aspects of Emerson’s book that troubled a conservative mind like Carlyle’s will doubtless seem tame and uncontroversial. We live, after all, in a time when the idea of the integral self—not to mention the idea of genius—has been debunked as a myth. How many pages about this or that “great man” can hold our attention when we believe, as one contemporary literary critic, Fredric Jameson, has put it, that “consciousness is a kind of construction rather than a stable substance . . . a locus of relationships rather than an ego in the older sense”?

Yet anyone who reads *Representative Men* with attention to its self-contradictions will see that, for all its outmoded earnestness, it is a book of considerable salience for the modern, and even the postmodern, sensibility. At the end of the magnificent chapter on Montaigne, Emerson articulates his real theme. He proposes that if the quest for permanence leads us to turn any man into a putatively durable monument, the effort will be worse than futile. Only in the fluidity of mind itself, which is never insulated from exchange with other consciousnesses, can human beings find hope:

Introduction

Let a man learn to look for the permanent in the mutable and fleeting; let him learn to bear the disappearance of things he was wont to reverence without losing his reverence; let him learn that he is here, not to work, but to be worked upon; and that, though abyss open under abyss, and opinion displace opinion, all are at last contained in the Eternal Cause:—

“If my bark sink, ’tis to another sea.”

This was Emerson’s democratic faith: that there are finally no giver and receiver, no major and minor, no leader and follower. There are always, and only, interchange and succession. *Representative Men* reminds us that if we lose touch with this essentially egalitarian vision of human experience, we shall have lost faith in democracy itself.

Andrew Delbanco
New York
September 1995

CONTENTS

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-----|
| Introduction by Andrew Delbanco | vii |
| I. Uses of Great Men | i |
| II. Plato, or the Philosopher | 21 |
| Plato: New Readings | 45 |
| III. Swedenborg, or the Mystic | 51 |
| IV. Montaigne, or the Skeptic | 83 |
| V. Shakspeare, or the Poet | 107 |
| VI. Napoleon, or the Man of the World | 127 |
| VII. Goethe, or the Writer | 149 |
| Index | 167 |

USES OF GREAT MEN

I

Uses of Great Men

It is natural to believe in great men. If the companions of our childhood should turn out to be heroes, and their condition regal, it would not surprise us. All mythology opens with demigods, and the circumstance is high and poetic, that is, their genius is paramount. In the legends of the Gautama, the first men ate the earth, and found it deliciously sweet.

Nature seems to exist for the excellent. The world is upheld by the veracity of good men. They make the earth wholesome. They who lived with them, found life glad and nutritious. Life is sweet and tolerable only in our belief in such society; and actually, or ideally, we manage to live with superiors. We call our children and our lands by their names, their names are wrought into the verbs of language, their works and effigies are in our houses, and every circumstance of the day recalls an anecdote of them.

The search after the great is the dream of youth, and the most serious occupation of manhood. We travel into foreign parts to find his works — if possible, to get a glimpse of him. But we are put off with fortune instead. You say, the English are practical, the Germans are hospitable, in Valencia, the climate is delicious; and in the hills of the Sacramento, there is gold for the gathering. Yes, but I do not travel to find comfortable, rich, and hospitable people, or clear sky, or ingots that cost too much. But if there were any magnet that would point to the countries and houses where are the persons who are intrinsically rich and powerful, — I would sell all, and buy it, and put myself on the road today.

The race goes with us on their credit. The knowledge that in

Representative Men

the city is a man who invented the railroad, raises the credit of all the citizens. But enormous populations, if they be beggars, are disgusting, like moving cheese, like hills of ants, or of fleas, — the more, the worse.

Our religion is the love and cherishing of these patrons. The gods of fable are the shining moments of great men. We run all our vessels into one mould. Our colossal theologies of Judaism, Christism, Buddhism, Mahometism are the necessary and structural action of the human mind. The student of history is like a man going into a warehouse to buy cloths or carpets: he fancies he has a new article. If he go to the factory, he shall find that his new stuff still repeats the scrolls and rosettes which are found on the interior walls of the pyramids of Thebes. Our theism is the purification of the human mind. Man can paint or make or think nothing but man. He believes that the great material elements had their origin from his thought. And our philosophy finds one essence collected or distributed.

If now we proceed to enquire into the kinds of service we derive from others, let us be warned of the danger of modern studies and begin low enough. We must not contend against love, or deny the substantial existence of other people. I know not what would happen to us. We have social strengths. Our affection toward others creates a sort of vantage or purchase which nothing will supply. I can do that by another which I cannot do alone. I can say to you what I cannot first say to myself. Other men are lenses through which we read our own minds. Each man seeks those of different quality from his own, and such as are good of their kind; that is, he seeks other men, and *the otherest*. The stronger the nature, the more it is reactive. Let us have the quality pure. A little genius let us leave alone. A main difference betwixt men, is, whether they attend their own affair or not. Man is that noble endogenous plant, which grows, like the palm, from within outward. His own affair, though impossible to others, he can open with celerity and in sport. It is easy to sugar to be sweet, and to nitre to be salt. We take a great deal of pains to waylay and en-

Uses of Great Men

trap that which of itself will fall into our hand. I count him a great man who inhabits a higher sphere of thought, into which other men rise with labor and difficulty: he has but to open his eyes to see things in a true light and in large relations; whilst they must make painful corrections, and keep a vigilant eye on many sources of error. His service to us is of like sort. It costs a beautiful person no exertion to paint her image on our eyes: Yet how splendid is that benefit! It costs no more for a wise soul to convey his quality to other men. And every one can do his best thing easiest. "*Peu de moyens, beaucoup d'effet.*" He is great who is what he is from nature, and who never reminds us of others.

But he must be related to us, and our life receive from him some promise of explanation. I cannot tell what I would know, but I have observed that there are persons who in their characters and actions answer questions which I have not skill to put. One man answers some question which none of his contemporaries put, and is isolated. The past and passing religions and philosophies answer some other question. Certain men affect us as rich possibilities, but helpless to themselves and to their times, — the sport perhaps of some instinct that rules in the air; they do not speak to our want. But the great are near; we know them at sight. They satisfy expectation, and fall into place. What is good is effective, generative; makes for itself room, food, and allies. A sound apple produces seed, — a hybrid does not. Is a man in his place, he is constructive, fertile, magnetic, inundating armies with his purpose, which is thus executed. The river makes its own shores, and each legitimate idea makes its own channels and welcome; harvests for food, institutions for expression, weapons to fight with, and disciples to explain it. The true artist has the planet for his pedestal: the adventurer after years of strife has nothing broader than his own shoes.

Our common discourse respects two kinds of use or service from superior men. Direct giving is agreeable to the early belief of men; direct giving of material or metaphysical aid, as of health, eternal youth, fine senses, arts of healing, magical power and prophecy. The boy believes there is a teacher who can sell him wisdom. Churches believe in imputed merit. But, in strictness, we are not