CONSCIOUSNESS AND CULTURE

Emerson & Thoreau Reviewed

JOEL PORTE

CONSCIOUSNESS AND CULTURE

EMERSON AND THOREAU RE-VIEWED

JOEL PORTE

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS / NEW HAVEN & LONDON

Designed by Mary Valencia.
Set in Caslon type by Achorn Graphic Services.
Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Porte, Joel.
Consciousness and culture : Emerson and Thoreau reviewed / Joel Porte.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0-300-10446-4 (alk. paper)
1. Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 1803-1882—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Thoreau, Henry David, 1817–1862—Criticism and interpretation. 3. National characteristics, American, in literature. 4. New England—Intellectual life—19th century. 5. Consciousness in literature. 6. Culture in literature. I. Title.
PS1638.P665 2004
810.9'003—dc22
2004043842

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PREFACE

Some years ago, Perry Miller, publishing a volume of Thoreau's "lost" journal, entitled his book *Consciousness in Concord*, suggesting that Thoreau confronted his townsmen with a "rustic caricature of the Byronic egotist." Thoreau's exquisite nurturing of his "consciousness," in the high Romantic mode, led Miller to believe that Thoreau's exploitation of the natural resources of his native village was as "self-centered, as profit-seeking, as that of any railroad-builder or lumber-baron, as that of any John Jacob Astor."[1]

Miller's use of an aggressively mercantile figure here is an example of a hyperbolic rhetoric that brought down imprecations on his head from the pens of less flamboyant scholars. Miller's point—that Thoreau believed "that pure consciousness solved all riddles"—is probably over the mark in its insistence that Thoreau was interested only in himself, that he was engaged in a perpetual process of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual pulse-taking that tended to put nature underfoot: "This lover of Nature was not a lover of nature itself" but rather of the "raw materials of tropes and figures" that he could draw from the natural world. I argue that such a gimlet-eyed view of Thoreau as a naturalist scants a crucial aspect of his work. Thoreau conceived of himself as "a mystic—a transcendentalist—& a natural philosopher to boot." It is accordingly a mistake, I believe, to privilege one of these terms over the other two. If "transcendentalist" means a sublime egotist, that may indeed be one Thoreau mood—but only one. Thoreau in fact tells us on the first page of *Walden* that he will indulge himself, in his narrative, by using the "I" throughout though it is usually supressed "in most books." That, he insists, employing a very Thoreauvian pun, is "the main difference" between his book and others—at least "with respect to egotism." A form of address that appears to be self-regarding does indeed represent a kind of "egotism"; but it is always, he goes on to say, "the first person that is speaking." We are the inevitable center of our perceptions and discourse; but the "eye," as Emerson tells us, is only the "first circle": from there we move out.[2]

The "I"—consciousness—as Emerson also tells us, is "double," living in two worlds at the same time: the mundane world of the "understanding" and the more exalted world of "the soul." (W. E. B. DuBois would give his own twist to Emerson's "double consciousness" later in *The Souls of Black Folk.*) So the term "consciousness" itself contains both a "high" and a "low" component. From one point of view, the nurturing of "consciousness" is a sacred duty enjoined on all of us by the requirement of developing what we now call "self-esteem." In the transcendentalist period this duty was frequently referred to under

the rubric of "self-culture" and associated with the name of William Ellery Channing (though as I point out later, Frederic Henry Hedge also wrote on the subject in a *Dial* essay that Emerson and Thoreau both read). In a lecture delivered in September 1838, Channing insisted that "he who possesses the divine powers of the soul is a great being." Self-culture, defined as "the care which every man owes to himself, to the unfolding and perfecting of his nature," is egotistical in only a very narrow sense. It represents consciousness—a "self-searching" and "self-comprehending power"—employed to the end of developing a "self-forming power." If the locus of this work is initially personal, its use is finally social: the nurturing and elevating of the individual soul for the purpose of improving the condition of all humanity. There can be little doubt that both Emerson and Thoreau thought of the nurturing of "consciousness" in this context. If Emerson, for example, has been viewed by some as a reluctant participant in reform movements it is probably owing to his constant return to the question of self-reform or self-culture; as we shall note, his tendency to critique and even lampoon the foibles of actual reform movements can be seen as a necessary prolegomenon to all future efforts at reform. Both Emerson and Thoreau were critical by nature; but their critical impulses were constructive by intent. They were both concerned to represent the best aspects of the American spirit (to "brag for humanity," as Thoreau puts it in *Walden*).[3]

Finally, as provincial and even parochial as the transcendentalist movement appeared in its time, its main thrust was always "cultural" in the fullest sense of that term. *The Dial* may have published its share of self-indulgent maunderings—an example often given is Bronson Alcott's "Orphic Sayings"—but it also attempted to move at least New England into a wider range of reference. It reported at length on European and other foreign thought, art, and music; it was also catholic and comparative in its treatment of religious questions. Its range of reference was broad. Thoreau's work as a translator was especially notable in the journal. But the "translation" in a larger sense of other cultural languages was a deep purpose of *The Dial.*

I have been working on Emerson, Thoreau, and Transcendentalism since my graduate school days, which is to say for more than forty years. Naturally, notoriously, over this long stretch of time modes of critical discourse have changed and I have adjusted my own focus and critical vocabulary not so much to keep up with the times as to reflect my immersion, willy-nilly, in the mutating intellectual fields of force that have had an impact on how literary study is done. In 1960, for example, few scholars were talking about "cultural work" or the status of the "text" as a made object shaped not just by authors but also by the material conditions—social, economic—under which books get written (an exception: the still indispensible work of William Charvat). "Literary Theory," mainly relegated to departments of comparative literature, was not the subject of anxious concern generally (though we did have Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature,* and such influential work as Renato Poggioli's *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* and Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*). Apart from the myth and symbol school that was fashionable for a while in American studies—and I wondered why Perry Miller used to fulminate ungenerously about R. W. B. Lewis's *The American Adam;* I loved it!—the reigning methodology that shaped my thinking was that of "intellectual history," as practiced by such figures as Arthur Lovejoy and Miller himself. Miller's commanding obsession was "the mind of America" (which often appeared to mean just the mind of New England)—a sweeping hypostatization that had a strong appeal, although like Emerson's "Oversoul" it seemed to exist in a realm apart that floated over the less exalted and frequently messy particulars that struck me as an important part of the cultural mix.

My doctoral dissertation, begun in 1960 under the direction of Perry Miller, became my first book, *Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict.* In it I tried to document an intellectual debate that seemed to me central to "transcendentalism" in its various strains; but the book suffered, under Miller's influence, from an exaggerated polemical stance that led me, essentially, to

take Thoreau's part and underestimate the subtleties of Emerson's writing. I would try to make up for that failing by writing *Representative Man: Ralph Waldo Emerson in His Time* (1979). The second part of that title was intended to register not only an essentially historical point of view but also my desire to take the measure of Emerson's "time" in a different sense—charting the rhythms and seasons of his life story. But I actually began to modify my polemical approach to these linked figures in an essay published in 1968, "Emerson, Thoreau, and the Double Consciousness," which viewed them as working more cooperatively on a question that joined them as much as separated them. Perhaps without entirely realizing it, I was moving away from the static definitions of transcendentalism I had inherited from the previous work of others and toward a more fluid approach to this troubling rubric that could accommodate shifting positions and fruitful deconstructions (as accomplished later in the "detranscendentalizing" of Emerson by such critics as Lawrence Buell, Michael Lopez, and Richard Poirier). As we know, the word "transcendental"—especially in the phrase "transcendental signified"—would come into bad odor as a result of the relentless demystifying process to which Derrida and his followers were subjecting the Western "logocentric" tradition. But we remember that Kant wanted nothing to do with the "transcendent," which he took to be little more than linguistic hocus-pocus. And even Emerson himself could be a little wry on his signature term, as when he reported that "the view taken of Transcendentalism in State Street is that it threatens to invalidate contracts," or that it was reported it had something to do with teeth. Still, the belief that there is a higher law than "contracts," or that there exists a kind of meta-dentistry that might enable us to digest the divine, is hard to put down entirely. And certainly Emerson continued to experience moods in which the transcendental—"the pledge & the herald of all that is dear to the human heart, grand and inspiring to human faith"—lifted his spirit and drove his pen.[4] The same is true of Thoreau, though he might sometimes arrive at his higher

laws through the modalities of ordinary experience. Yet Stanley Cavell was in the process of teaching us that the "quest of the ordinary" was also crucial to Emerson's work. The truth is that both Emerson and Thoreau could feel transcendental or descendental by turns and write accordingly.

Attempting to track their varying moods, I would over the years find myself working both sides of the street as I explored this endless dialectic of "high" and "low," the "prudential" and the "heroic," the common and the uncommon, the canny and the uncanny, in the work of Emerson, Thoreau, and their fellow travelers. Thus another piece I undertook after completing my dissertation, "Transcendental Antics," first delivered at a University of Houston symposium in 1967 and then published in *Veins of Humor* (edited by Harry Levin, 1972), played with the comic aspects of a movement that could at times seem insufferably high-minded.

"The Problem of Emerson," published in *Uses of Literature* (edited by Monroe Engel, 1973), has a special place in this series of essays, for it proposed a reading of Emerson favoring the actual texture of his writing more than his transcendental "ideas." Some students and friends have suggested that this is one of my better efforts and that it helped to initiate the Emerson "revival" that has been so conspicuous a feature of American literary studies over the past thirty years. If that is true, the virtue of the essay is mainly its injunction that no author, no matter how important his or her place in the ongoing "cultural work" of a nation, can continue to live without the detailed attention to texts that forms the basis of literary study.

The next three pieces are linked to specific occasions. "Representing America" was read at the Boston Public Library in April 1982 as one of a series of events to commemorate the centennial of Emerson's death. It was composed as a response to Quentin Anderson's notion (to me wrong-headed) that Emerson represented little more than an "imperial self" refusing to engage in the common life of his time. (And, indeed, the most recent turn in Emerson studies has concerned itself with the extent and nature of Emerson's involvement in

the movement for social justice and reform—especially as regards slavery.) The seed to the talk was actually sown the previous year, when I participated, along with Conrad Wright, in a symposium at the Unitarian Church in Harvard Square, Cambridge, organized to discuss A. Bartlett Giamatti's attack on Emerson in his address at the Yale commencement in 1981. "Emerson as Journalist" was read at an MLA panel in 1984 put together by J. A. Leo Lemay to celebrate the publication of Emerson's *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*. That symposium underlined how important for the new Emerson scholarship has been the recovery of Emerson's texts in their fullest and most accurate form. And finally, I read "Emerson at Harvard" in September 1986 as part of a panel I organized to help commemorate the 350th anniversary of the founding of Harvard College. The panel was called "American Literature: The View from Harvard," and also included talks by Alan Heimert, Daniel Aaron, and Warner Berthoff. "Holmes's Emerson" was written to introduce a new edition of Oliver Wendell Holmes's spirited and quirky *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1885) and gave me a chance to explore the relations of these two near-contemporary Boston Brahmins whose careers and literary universes appear, on the face of things, to have had little in common. Thus I have continued to participate in the strong current interest in rehistoricizing and recontextualizing an Emerson who, for a long time, was viewed largely as a "wisdom" writer not linked to specific historic circumstance.

My next chapter, on "Emerson's French Connection," was written at the invitation of Bertrand Rougé, editor of the journal *Q/W/E/R/T/Y*, published at the University of Pau. It appeared in the fall of 2002 in anticipation of the Agrégation (French national examination) administered in the spring of 2003 and including an oral question on Emerson. But I chose the subject not only because I thought it would appeal to a French audience. In line with the ongoing publication of Emerson's texts, Ronald Bosco and Joel Myerson brought out an edition of *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (2001) containing a piece, "France, or Urbanity" (January

1854), not known previously even to many Emerson scholars. The timing of the lecture—just two months before Emerson delivered his second speech on the Fugitive Slave Law and not long before he began drafting *English Traits*—suggests something I had not thought much about previously: following his return from a trip to England and France in 1848, Emerson understood that he was developing an international reputation with the obligations attendant on his role as a public intellectual both in America and abroad. Accordingly, in Ralph Rusk's phrase, he was definitively coming down "from his ivory tower" and becoming truly cosmopolitan. This, then, is the period of Emerson's greatest involvement in what I have called above the work of cultural "translation." I think it rather significant that in his address of 7 March 1854 Emerson universalizes the issue of slavery in distinctly transnational terms: "What is useful will last; whilst that which is hurtful to the world will sink beneath all the opposing forces which it must exasperate. The terror which the *Marseillaise* thunders against oppression, thunders today,—*Tout est soldat pour vous combattre:* 'Everything that can walk turns soldier to fight you down.'" As Perry Miller once suggested, European ideas were "catalytic" in Emerson's formation; and France was an important part of the equation.[5]

In the following three essays I turn back to Thoreau, an early favorite of mine (the first paperback edition of *Walden* I owned is dated 1949). "Henry Thoreau and the Reverend Poluphloisboios Thalassa" was written for Matthew Bruccoli's 1973 collection, *The Chief Glory of Every People,* and represents, I suppose, the most unpronounceable title I ever devised for an essay (a formidable stumbling-block for copy editors and typesetters). But the joke—based on Homer—was Thoreau's and still seems to me a good one. In the piece, which was written under the influence of Gaston Bachelard and focuses mainly on *Cape Cod,* I explored Thoreau's anxieties about fathoming things, with a particular look at his interest in bottoms, an issue later revisited by other critics. "Society and Solitude," originally read at the University of Houston in 1967,

was included in a special number of *ESQ* devoted to Thoreau and edited by Joseph McElroy (1973). In it I examine the claim that Thoreau's Walden experiment was prompted by antisocial tendencies—exemplified later on, perhaps, in Greta Garbo's famous remark, "I want to be alone." My conclusion is that wanting to be alone was not simply and totally the substance of Thoreau's desire (I think the same was true of Garbo), but that is the reputation that has stuck to him and one, I argue, that performs a certain kind of cultural work. The third Thoreau piece, "'God Himself Culminates in the Present Moment': Thoughts on Thoreau's Faith," was read at the Thoreau Society annual meeting in Concord in July 1978 and published later that year in the *Thoreau Society Bulletin.* When I delivered the talk I'm afraid I offended the religious sensibilities of some members of the audience by suggesting that their hero was not a Christian. I am sorry about that, but I still stand by what I said. Readers who want an author principally to buttress their religious beliefs should stay away from this dangerous heretic.

The next piece in this section, "'In Wildness is the Preservation of the World': The Natural History of Henry David Thoreau," delivered at the Cornell Plantations in September 1997 as the inaugural lecture in a new series, endowed by the Harder family, devoted to the conjoining of literary study and the vigorous current concern for the environment, participates in the recrudescence of interest in Thoreau as a naturalist that has attracted such leading Thoreauvians as Lawrence Buell and Laura Dassow Walls. "Writing and Reading New Englandly," published in *The New England Quarterly* in 1993 as an "essay-review," takes as its jumping-off point Richard Poirier's *Poetry and Pragmatism,* which links Emerson and William James as "pragmatists" motivated by a particular kind of linguistic skepticism. That view seems to me a distortion, itself motivated by a distinct ideological bent evident in certain pedagogical circles that began to be visible after World War II, and I used this occasion to set out the issues involved and put them in both

theoretical and historical context. The essay seems to me an apposite way to end a book devoted to these advocates of self-reliance and sublime egotism who have become commanding figures in a cultural debate that has carried us far beyond the confines of New England.

I have already mentioned the organizations that provided the occasions when some of these chapters were first delivered as talks and the journals that published revised versions of the talks or that accepted those chapters written as essays. All of the chapters, in any case, have been recast—some several times—to allow for corrections and, I hope, to remove infelicities. I am grateful to Dianne Ferriss, of the Cornell University Department of English, who over a period of some years worked as my editorial assistant and keyed most of the chapters onto computer disk. Her skills and advice were invaluable. John Kulka, of Yale University Press, was enthusiastic about this collection when I first told him about it and guided me at every step of the way. Joyce Ippolito expertly copy-edited the manuscript. Two anonymous readers for the Press deserve thanks for their positive reactions to my work and their suggestions for improvement. I also thank Elizabeth Hall Witherell, editor-in-chief of the Princeton Thoreau Edition, for copying a page of Thoreau's manuscript journal, and the Pierpont Morgan Library for permission to reproduce it in chapter 12. My wife, Helene, has provided companionship, encouragement, and a sharp critical judgment that has repeatedly rescued me from making blunders. Undoubtedly some faults remain, but there would be many more without her intervention.

Finally, I need to say something about the dedication of this book. When, in the early 1950s, I was an impecunious student in New York City, I was lucky enough to find part-time employment at Atlas Corporation, an investment trust located at 33 Pine Street (40 Wall Street). Eventually, the president of the company, Floyd Odlum (then well-known, now remembered if at all because he was

married to the celebrated aviator and entrepreneur Jacqueline Cochran), would become my direct benefactor; but as I moved from the mailroom on the 57th floor, where I was a "runner," to the 58th floor and a better job as "office-boy" to the executives, I encountered the woman who became, effectively, my surrogate mother and a benefactress in more profound ways.

Emilie Dixon, née McMillan, a graduate of Smith College circa 1920, was in charge of the executive offices—and especially of running the kitchen and private dining room where Floyd Odlum and his vice-presidents were elegantly fed, along with their rich and (mostly) famous guests. Under her tutelage I learned to copy pertinent quotes from the ticker-tape and grocery-shop at Gristede's; but that was the least of it. Emilie had a passionate love for English language and literature. Graduating from Smith, she moved to New York and became an editorial assistant at *The Freeman*—a fledgling journal founded by Francis Neilson, Albert Jay Nock, and Van Wyck Brooks.[6] Emilie worshipped Nock and Brooks—but especially Brooks. She collected everything he published, plus reviews, and was far more interested in teaching me about his work than in instructing me about stocks and bonds. (After her death in 1969 her whole Brooks collection, plus a bound set of *The Freeman,* were shipped to me at Harvard.)

Emilie also gave me expensive books that I could not afford to buy for myself: the Oxford *Companions* to English and American literature, the *Oxford Bible,* a deluxe edition of Francis James Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads,* works on English language by the Fowler brothers (another passion), Greenough and Kittredge, Jespersen, Ivor Brown, and Frederick Bodmer—and much, much more. But it was her faith in me and her firm belief that I *could* go to Harvard and become an English professor that sustained and inspired me. The dedication of this book to her represents only a slight measure of my gratitude. And, in a small way, it brings the name of this wonderful woman, without direct descendants of her own, into public view.

CONTENTS

ONE

EMERSON, THOREAU, AND THE DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

It was Thomas Carlyle who in 1834 advised his readers to close their Byron and open their Goethe, thereby suggesting that Goethe— "the keenest star in a new constellation," to use Margaret Fuller's phrase—was pre-eminently the man of his age. By 1850 Emerson was only summarizing cultivated opinion when he called Goethe, in *Representative Men,* "the soul of his century."[1]

But to many outraged critics that soul was irreparably corrupt. As early as 1817, somewhat distressed by much "which needs must be called stuff" in *Faust,* Edward Everett pronounced it a masterpiece