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Ralph Waldo Emerson

Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems

Edited with a Foreword by
Robert D. Richardson, Jr.

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Foreword

BY ROBERT D. RICHARDSON JR.

Emerson persuades by lightning strikes. He teaches courage, self-rule, the reality of ideas, and the accusing sufficiency of every day. Through the coiled aphoristic energy of his language, with its whip-cracks of metaphor, he unsettles and incites, shaming us out of the cant of premature defeat.

—"Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim."

—"An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man."

—"It is not what we believe concerning the immortality of the soul or the like, but the universal impulse to believe, that is the material circumstance and is the principal fact in the history of the globe."

—"Believe in magnetism, not in needles."

—"Heaven walks among us ordinarily muffled in such triple or tenfold disguises that the wisest are deceived and no one suspects the days to be gods."

—"Never strike sail to any. Come into port greatly or sail with God the seas."

—"Meek young men grow up in libraries believing it their duty to accept the views which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke and Bacon were young men in libraries when they wrote those books."

—"The way to write is to throw your body at the mark when your arrows are shot."

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Emerson understands that creation is perpetual, that "a portion of truth lies in every moment to every mind," and he goes out of his way to warn us that "no man has learned anything until he knows that every day is the judgment day."

Emerson was born in 1803 into a Boston that was not a city but a town of 25,000 inhabitants. As a boy of ten during the war of 1812, he watched from the rooftops as the British frigate *Shannon* defeated the American frigate *Chesapeake* in a cloud of gunsmoke in the outer harbor. The Emersons were so poor that Ralph and his younger brother Edward had only one coat between them to wear to school. The father, a respected Boston minister, had died in 1811, leaving his wife, Ruth, and six children, the oldest of whom was ten, without any means of support. Brought up by his mother and his father's brilliant and original sister Mary Moody Emerson, Ralph and his brothers supported each other. They all started teaching at thirteen or fourteen, and they took turns teaching to bring in money and going to school. Sister Caroline died in 1814; brother Bulkeley was retarded. The other four all went to college. Ralph, or Waldo, as he soon decided to be called, was the least promising of these four. When he graduated, he was in the middle of his class, he was class poet only because six others had turned it down, and he was not elected to Phi Beta Kappa.

After drifting for some years after college, Emerson settled on the ministry as a career. He also fell in love with, and married, Ellen Tucker, a young and beautiful New Hampshire woman who wanted to become a poet. A year and a half after the wedding Ellen died of advanced tuberculosis. Emerson was shattered. He had ceased to believe in the sacrament of communion and had left his church over the issue. He was not yet thirty; his beloved wife was dead; his career was over. He moved his mother, auctioned his furniture, sold his house, and fled abroad. Returning home nine months later, he completely reorganized his life, abandoning Boston and theology, moving to Concord, Massachusetts, and doing free-lance lecturing on science, literature, and modern times. He married Lydia Jackson of Plymouth, bought a home, and raised a family of two boys and two girls. His second life,

like his first, was death-marked. His brilliant younger brothers Edward and Charles died in 1834 and 1836, and his first son, Waldo, died at five in 1842.

Emerson was himself bookish, even as a child. Adults adored him. He wrote heroic poems at ten. Friends remembered his slaving over a copybook with his tongue hanging out. As a young man, he sneered at the heartlessness of the age with Byron's sneer; "They grieved for those who perished in the cutter, / And likewise for the biscuit casks and butter." As an adult, Emerson seemed reserved, at least to outsiders, but it was a strongly emotional nature that he held in reserve. His eyes flashed fire unforgettably when he lectured. He had a large circle of warmly admiring friends, mostly women, and he habitually sat forward on his chair, with his legs all braided up beneath him. He was tall and gangly, with marked family features, strong eyes and a large Roman nose. Acquaintances were always saying to him, "Seems to me you are a bit thinner than when I saw you last." He was formal on formal occasions, and he was capable of repose. He took long daily walks. He liked to arrange his tools and nails in the barn workshop. One day Longfellow found Emerson waiting for him on the Boston-to-Portland steamer, "sitting inside a coil of rope, with his hat pulled over his eyes."

He became a close friend of Henry Thoreau, of Margaret Fuller, of Thomas Carlyle. He had a profound effect on <Walt Whitman>He was the central figure of the so-called Transcendental Club, which included Frederic Hedge, George Ripley (founder of Brook Farm), James Freeman Clarke, Bronson Alcott, Theodore Parker, and Elizabeth Peabody. Books of his essays appeared in 1841 and 1844. As his fame grew, he traveled farther and longer on the annual lecture circuit by which he made his living. In a typical year he gave seventy-five lectures all over the country during a continuous five-month period in which he either traveled or lectured almost every day. He was his own booking agent, advertiser, and arranger. He helped edit *The Dial*—the brave, short-lived periodical of the new Transcendental ideas. He traveled to England again in 1847, to California in 1871, and to Egypt in 1872. As an old man, his memory faded before his wit. Searching for the word "umbrella," when it refused to come, he finally said,

"you know, the thing guests leave behind." By the time he died in 1882, he had become his own lengthened shadow, and was already an American institution.

Emerson the man was deeply and permanently affected by the deaths of his wife Ellen, his brother Charles, and his son Waldo. He prized his living family all the more. He kept himself close to his other children. He had a strong playful streak, and had pet names for everybody, calling Ellen Ellinelli, Aunt Mary Tnamurya, and Lidian Asia. It even got into his reading. Xenophones is Zenny in Emerson's notes. His spelling was shaky for words with *e* and *i* together. He disliked letters about sickness and he hated sickness itself as "a pale screaming wailing distracted phantom, absolutely selfish." As a lecturer he loved the exhilaration of having an audience respond to his voice. He loved the noise and energy of huge crowds. He was fascinated by volcanoes. He once said he was never on a coach that went fast enough for him.

More than anyone else Emerson made Concord a major precinct in the American imagination, a sort of Yankee Weimar, a New World Athens of high thinking and plain living, albeit with high humidity and difficult, gloomy winters. Concord is one of the symbolic centers of American culture, and Emerson is its epicenter, the immediate source of what is perhaps the strongest antimaterialistic current in the modern American tradition. His appeal, however, is concrete and practical. Emily Dickinson said of one of Emerson's books *(Representative Men)*, that it was "a little granite book you can lean on." Henry Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Walt Whitman, William James, John Dewey, Robert Frost, Friedrich Nietzsche, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and many others have built on the granite foundation of Emersonian idealism, also known as Transcendentalism.

American Transcendentalism takes its name from Kant's Transcendental Idealism. It can also be thought of as American Idealism, but neither label satisfactorily suggests the strength of thought or the practical accessibility of the movement that is personified and centered in Emerson. Emersonian individualism is a protest against social conformity, but not against society. It is a protest on behalf of the autonomous, unalienated human being. There

comes a time in everyone's education, he says, when one "arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion." Emerson's self-reliant individual is a person who understands that his own consciousness is his only window on the world, a person who is interested in self-rule—in autarchy not anarchy, a person who acknowledges his equality, and his necessary connection, with others.

Emersonian individualism is not a blueprint for selfishness, self-aggrandizement, or social Darwinism, nor is it a coded manifesto for the subjection of other persons or viewpoints. A person interested solely in personal liberation can find a useful text in Emerson's "nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind." But Emerson says more than this. "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,—that," says Emerson, "is genius." At the deepest, most important level, we must believe that what is good for us individually is good for us all. If we require freedom, love, and meaningful work for ourselves, then we can deny these things to none.

This is the social and ethical imperative of American Transcendentalism. Individual liberation is important—crucial even—but it is only a starting point. Emersonian thought is a form of popular Kantianism, embracing the famous categorical imperative or moral law, which says we should act only upon those rules of conduct which we can will to rule everyone. Emersonian thought also has strong parallels with, and sources in, Hindu thought. Emerson's idea of compensation, for example, is very close to the Hindu concept of Dharma, meaning "law in the widest sense, the presiding order, . . . the moral law and religious merit." Emersonian Transcendentalism is more than a set of beliefs. It is a way of life with social as well as personal implications.

The social logic of American Transcendentalism led Henry Thoreau to support John Brown and the abolition movement. It led Margaret Fuller into the fight for women's rights, and later into the struggle for Italian independence. It led Sophia Peabody into education reform (the Kindergarten movement) and the defense of the Ameri-

can Indians. Emerson himself at various times actively supported the effort to stop the Cherokee relocation, the antislavery movement, and the women's movement. "Outside the doors of study," as Joanne Greenberg says, "an angel waits."

Like his favorite authors, Plutarch and Montaigne, Emerson is a Stoic; he prizes autonomy and self-sufficiency. The austere notion which in Marcus Aurelius seems defensive ("the human body is not asked to endure anything it has not been prepared to endure"), Emerson reshapes into an enabling affirmation that provides essentially the same protection. "The powers of the soul are commensurate with its needs, all experience to the contrary notwithstanding." Emerson also follows the Stoic lead in his belief that nature, rather than the state, the gods, or history, is the proper place to turn for answers to the question, How should I lead my life?

Emerson loves the red-brown of fall, the gray New England winter, the gold and green of spring. He takes daily walks to Walden Pond long before Thoreau gets the idea of going there to live. Emerson has both visual acuity and the ability to reflect on that acuity. He notices both how "night hovers all day in the branches of the fir tree," and how "it is the eye that makes the horizon." His strongest experiences are out of doors. "Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have been glad to the brink of fear."

At the heart of Emerson's thought is his broad inclusive conception of nature. His first book, called simply *Nature,* is a bold Lucretian attempt to work out, for himself, in under a hundred pages, *De Rerum Natura,* the way things are. Nature, says Emerson, provides us not only with the material goods of life (the chapter on Commodity), but also with a theory of beauty ("The standard of beauty is the entire circuit of natural forms."), and a theory of language that amounts to a virtual metaphysic ("It is not words only that are emblematic: it is things which are emblematic.") Nature further teaches us to accept that there is a world outside our perception of it (his chapter on Discipline), and to acknowledge the role our own mind plays in the construction and deconstruction of everyday

reality. "The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is, because man is disunited with himself." Nature teaches the necessity of both cultivation and self-cultivation. Finally, and most importantly, by calling our attention repeatedly to the processes and patterns and laws that everywhere underlie and explain appearances, nature teaches us to look beyond nature to Nature, and persuades us to call that apparent which we used to call real, and that real, which we used to call visionary.

From his student days through his life as a teacher, as a minister, and finally, after he was twenty-eight, as a freelance intellectual, Emerson always thought of himself as a poet. And while most of his best work is in prose, it is a prose which Emerson tried to keep to at least as high a standard as the usual language of poetry. Like Coleridge, he wrote only a few great poems ("Days," "The Snow-Storm," "Hamatreya"), and also like Coleridge, he is often a better writer about poetry than a poet. The essay "The Poet" is, for example, arguably the best piece ever written on literature as literary process. Emerson is the spokesperson for the idea that the poet is a sayer more than a maker. He asserts that the poet is not different from or better than us but *representative* of us, of the capacity that exists, as Jorge Luis Borges notes, during a few occasions in the life of every person. Emerson stands for the idea that the highest art shapes its own form, unique and organic, from within, as a pear grows. He insists that language is not fixed or final, that on the contrary it is vehicular and transitive—the means, and not the end, of art. Above all, Emerson contends that "art is the path of the creator to his work," not the finished work itself. "For it is not metres but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem, a thought so passionate and alive, that like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing."

Emerson is our strongest defender of expressionism in the arts, of the idea that self-expression is a basic human drive, one of the things all creatures live for. "It is a necessity of the human nature," Emerson writes, "that it should express itself outwardly and embody its thought. As all creatures are allured to reproduce themselves so must the thought be imparted in speech. The more profound the

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thought, the more burdensome. What is in will out." "The man is only half himself," he says in "The Poet," "the other half is his expression."

If the great poet is representative, "apprising us not of his wealth but of the common wealth," so too are the other great figures in world history. In *Representative Men,* Emerson interprets afresh the great-persons theory of history. It was Thomas Carlyle's view, in *Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History,* that some individuals are simply born great, and that the rest of us should find fulfillment and happiness in our willing submission to them. Emerson consistently rejects this leader worship and the aristocratic point of view that supports it. Instead, he argues, each of the great persons of the past merely represents one aspect of our common humanity developed to a high level. So Plato comes to stand for the philosophical inquirer in each of us, Montaigne for the skeptic, Shakespeare for the poet, and so on. As he draws each portrait, Emerson is at great pains to praise what is general and imitable. What Plato has thought anyone can think. Pitting his belief in self-reliance against Carlyle's reliance on the hero, Emerson is careful to end each sketch with a cold-eyed account of the subject's imperfections.

It is part of Emerson's own usefulness that he offers us, in "History" and "Self-reliance," a way to turn the burden of the past into a survival kit for the present. By regarding all times and places as equal (the historiographical equivalent of the axioms in modern physics that the universe has no one center, and that the laws of nature are equally valid everywhere) and by accepting the idea that we share a common mind, of which history is the record, we are enabled to say that all history is explicable by each mind. Thus history exists only for our education, not as a load of information we must somehow shoulder, carry, augment, and finally shunt onto the backs of our children.

Emerson similarly provides us with a way to deal with the burden of human greatness. Instead of concluding, sadly, that the achievement of each great person before us leaves just that much less for us to do, Emerson persuades us that each great person and his or her achievement is merely one more testimonial to what we may legitimately expect of ourselves. Even Christ left room for improve-

ment, and Emerson once drew up a list of his defects: "no cheerfulness, no love of natural science, no kindness for art, nothing of Socrates, Laplace, Shakespeare." *Representative Men* is a major book for the American experiment in representative democracy, because it undertakes, seventy-five years after the American Revolution, to reconcile the patent inequities of human talent and training with the underlying egalitarian premise of modern democratic idealism.

Much of Emerson's power lies in his complete and unwavering allegiance to this intellectual and historical egalitarianism. He refuses to concede that greater eras, greater peoples, or greater individuals have ever existed than exist now. Thoreau and Whitman learned this basic article of trust from Emerson. Self-trust or self-acceptance is a liberation from the unrequested tyranny of the past, and from the injurious superiority of the great and famous. Emerson's lasting importance is as a liberator. In poetry, in politics, in personal ethics, he teaches the possibility of self-emancipation as the necessary first step toward an autonomous, free life.

Stanley Cavell has recently observed that America has already had its great philosophers in Emerson and Thoreau, but that America seems incapable of incorporating them into the general culture. George Kateb has also argued, a little more hopefully, that the democratic idealism of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman is our best defensive strategy in the postnuclear age (because it combines egalitarianism with a commitment to life as such). These large claims agree that Emersonian thought is more easily grasped than put into practice. For Emerson's thought is not so much a system of ideas as an angle of vision, not so much a theory of knowledge as an insistence that we act and take responsibility for our lives whether we have adequate information about everything or not. The habitual center of Emerson's personal energies—what William James calls the hot place in a given consciousness, "the group of ideas to which he devotes himself, and from which he works"—is unlimited respect for the individual, for *all* individuals. Thoreau, in "Civil Disobedience," puts it this way: "There will never be a really free and enlightened State, until the State comes to recognize the individ-

ual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly." Modern liberalism has been founded largely on respect for the secular individual's political, economic, and material interests. Critics accuse modern liberalism of bleakness and soullessness. Emerson supplies a spiritual center, a soul for modern liberalism. None of the material gifts of modern life is worth much unless it is compatible with a society composed entirely of self-respecting, autonomous, free persons. "The one thing of value in the universe," says Emerson, "is the active soul."

Emerson does not address curriculum committees, legislatures, or conventions. Significant change for him means individual change, and it is always and only to the individual that he speaks. Here, on his chosen ground, Emerson is incomparable, and forever within reach of the solitary reader. What Emerson himself sought through a lifetime of reading was original power, force, or energy. His eye was caught by whatever was striking, breathtaking, or moving; whatever startled, goaded, or enticed. (He would have loved the suggestion in a recent children's book that when you are tired of counting to ten the same old way, you can vary it, thus: ounce, dice, trice, quartz, quince, sago, serpent, oxygen, nitrogen, denim.) He was concerned all his life with the soul's access to the sources of power. His lifelong interest in the processes of nature, in the growth and emergence of individual selfhood, in the continuing fact and miracle of creation, and in the immanence of the divine in everything, are all efforts to locate and celebrate power. What drew him was not physical power or political or economic power. He expressly repudiates the exercise of power over others. What he cares about is moral and spiritual energy. One kind of power is the power to take over the running of our own lives. Another is that force in nature that "through the green fuse drives the flower."

At bottom, the power of the individual to seize his own life and the creative power of nature are the same power: this is Emerson's most important religious insight. It is not anthropomorphism, but theomorphism. If the mind common to the universe is revealed to each individual through his or her own mind, so, also, the forces that

shape us shape the stars as well. As Virginia Woolf so quickly saw, what Emerson did "was to assert that he could not be rejected because he held the universe within him. Each man, by finding out what he feels, discovers the laws of the universe; the essential thing, therefore, is to be as conscious of yourself as possible."

NATURE

(1836)

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