

CRITICAL ESSAYS ON
Ralph Waldo Emerson

MYERSON
BURKHOLDER

*Critical Essays on
Ralph Waldo Emerson*

*Robert E. Burkholder
and
Joel Myerson*

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*Critical Essays on
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CRITICAL ESSAYS ON AMERICAN LITERATURE

This series seeks to collect the most important previously published criticism on writers and topics in American literature along with, in various volumes, original essays, interviews, bibliographies, letters, manuscript sections, and other materials brought to public attention for the first time. This volume on Ralph Waldo Emerson, edited by Joel Myerson and Robert E. Burkholder, is the most extensive collection of comment on this writer ever assembled. It includes, in addition to an introduction that provides an historical overview of reaction to Emerson's life and work, selections from important writers of the period, including Thomas Carlyle, Edgar Allan Poe, Margaret Fuller, Henry James, and Walt Whitman, and reprinted articles by many of the leading modern scholars, among them Perry Miller, Tony Tanner, Merton M. Sealts, Jr., Lawrence Buell, and Gay Wilson Allen. We are confident that this collection will make an important contribution to American literary study.

JAMES NAGEL, GENERAL EDITOR

Northeastern University

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INTRODUCTION

In choosing the contents for *Critical Essays on Ralph Waldo Emerson*, we have tried to select a series of works that would accurately reflect criticism on Emerson from his beginnings as a publishing author to the present. Because nearly every book-length study of Emerson is in print or readily available in libraries, we have decided not to reprint sections from these books. We have also avoided the “standard” works—such as studies by James Elliot Cabot, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Ralph L. Rusk, Perry Miller, Stephen E. Whicher, Newton Arvin, Henry Nash Smith, and Joel Porte—because they are easily found and because they have already been quoted at length in other books on Emerson. This volume, then, complements the book-length publications on Emerson already available.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in Boston on 25 May 1803, the fourth child of the Reverend William and Ruth Haskins Emerson. The death of young Waldo’s father in 1811, just two weeks short of his eighth birthday, left the family in financial straits. Even so, Waldo attended the Boston Latin School from 1812 to 1817, when he entered Harvard College on a scholarship. His academic progress at Harvard was, as his biographer Ralph L. Rusk phrased it, “no blaze of glory,”¹ but inwardly he began to expand, for it was during this period that Emerson started to keep his journals, which came to form a “savings bank” upon which he later drew for his writings.² After graduation, Emerson taught a young ladies’ school until 1825, when he began studying divinity at Harvard. In 1826 Emerson was licensed to preach, but a tubercular condition forced him to travel to Charleston, South Carolina, and St. Augustine, Florida, for a rest. After returning, Emerson supplied various pulpits until 1829, when he was ordained.

Emerson’s ordination on 11 March at the prestigious Second Church of Boston, where he was also to serve as associate pastor, began his career with a flourish. His good luck continued when he married Ellen Louisa Tucker in September, but their happiness was short-lived, for she died of tuberculosis in February 1831. Emerson, torn by doubts over the church and still grieving for his lost wife, resigned his pulpit in October and sailed for Europe in December. His trip in Europe, during which he visited France, Italy, and England, was a great personal success, for he

met most of the literary lions of the day, including Thomas Carlyle, with whom he formed a lifelong friendship.

Although following his return to Boston in October 1833 Emerson occasionally preached, his real energies went into establishing himself as a successful lecturer. This he did, and in September 1835 he married Lydia Jackson. They moved to Concord, where they lived in the house that Emerson had occupied the previous year.

The year 1836, called the “annus mirabilis” of American Transcendentalism, began a decade of hard work and wide-spread recognition for Emerson.³ The Transcendentalists, mainly a group of Harvard-educated Unitarian ministers, expressed their disagreement with the current state of affairs on three fronts: in literature, they championed English and continental writers, such as Carlyle and Goethe; in philosophy, they followed Kant in believing that man had an innate ability to perceive that his existence transcended mere sensory experience, as opposed to the prevailing Lockean sensationalism; and in religion, they denied the existence of miracles, preferring Christianity to rest upon the spirit of Christ rather than on His supposed deeds, as was the belief of the conservative Unitarians. Emerson’s first book, *Nature*, published on 9 September 1836, was a rallying cry for the Transcendentalists, espousing as it did organicism in art and viewing Nature as a divine teacher of man. Also in September, Emerson helped form the Transcendental Club, which served as a forum for the Transcendentalists over the next four years, as they met some thirty times. Emerson was also instrumental in establishing the semi-official journal of the Transcendentalists, the *Dial*, in July 1840, and edited it from July 1842 until its demise in April 1844. During this period Emerson formed friendships with the major figures of the Transcendental movement—Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker, Henry David Thoreau—and the lesser ones—Ellery Channing, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Jones Very—as well as with some of those who opposed it, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, his neighbor in Concord for a while. Emerson rounded out his activities by delivering addresses on the “American Scholar” before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard in 1837 and on the present dangers facing the church before the Harvard Divinity School in 1838, publishing numerous articles and poems in the *Dial*, continuing his successful lecturing career, and publishing *Essays* (1841) and *Essays: Second Series* (1844).

By 1844, whatever unity that had existed among the Transcendentalists was gone, and they pursued separate careers, still tied loosely together by a belief in reform, yet differing widely on how much was needed and what means were necessary to achieve it. Emerson’s own career blossomed and he was now a literary man of renown. The publication of his *Poems* (1847), *Nature; Addresses, and Lectures* (1849), and *Representative Men* (1850) helped to establish him as “the Sage of Con-

cord.” *English Traits* (1856) compared—too favorably for some—English life with American, and in *The Conduct of Life* (1860), he demonstrated a growing conservatism, balancing his earlier belief in complete Freedom with the “Beautiful Necessity” of Fate. Other successful lectures and books followed, and Emerson died, a famous and honored man, at Concord on 27 April 1882. He was buried at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, close to the graves of Alcott, Hawthorne, and Thoreau.

During his life, Emerson had exerted great influence on his contemporaries, both by his financial support of them, as in the cases of Alcott and Ellery Channing, or by his intellectual companionship, as in the case of his Concord neighbor, Thoreau. His discussions of organic form (everything proceeds from a natural order, followed by but not imposed upon man), self-reliance, optimism (evil does not exist as an actual force, merely being the absence of good), compensation, universal unity (or the Over-Soul), and the importance of individual moral insight were all influential in forming the literature and philosophy of nineteenth-century America. In poetry too, Emerson was an important force, and his organic theory of poetry (“it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem”) and his view of poets as “liberating gods” or prophets, did much to counteract the poetic conservatism of his day, and helped lead to the experimental verse of Walt Whitman, who once hailed Emerson as his master.

As the swings in Emerson’s life indicate, he was different things to different people at different times. From a beginning as a youthful divinity student and promising minister, he became, successively, an intellectually radical reformer (at the same time anathema to the religious and philosophical conservatives and an inspiration to those seeking new paths to truth), a successful lecturer, a best-selling author, and, at the end of his life, “the Sage of Concord,” now beloved by all and firmly enshrined in the American pantheon. As the *Boston Transcript* put it during the many celebrations in 1903 of the centenary of his birth, “The widespread public interest in the various memorial meetings, and the expressions of gratitude and admiration made by men of varying creeds and beliefs, have shown the deep hold which Emerson’s philosophy has taken on the generations succeeding him.”⁴ The essays reprinted in this volume also reflect these swings in Emerson’s reputation.

We selected nineteenth-century reviews and criticism with the intention of providing a greater sense of the texture of Emerson’s reception by contemporaries than has previously been available. For that reason, we attempted to achieve a blend of well-known, pivotal essays and reviews on Emerson and more obscure, perhaps unknown, essays and reviews that help to define how the public in general received Emerson’s writings. What emerges is the impression that instead of being the beneficiary of unrestrained puffing by friends or the victim of merciless hatchet-jobs by enemies, for surely there was plenty of both, Emerson’s work was often

met with judicious and perceptive criticism, quite an accomplishment in a nation that supposedly lacked both a literary identity and a critical tradition at the time Emerson published his most important writings.

The reviews of *Nature* by O. A. Brownson and E. P. Peabody, and W. H. Channing's review of "The American Scholar" address are positive commentaries on Emerson's early work which suggest that not only were Emerson's friends instrumental in promoting his ideas and writing to the public, but also that his initial reception was not as negative as the many reprintings of Francis Bowen's biting criticisms would suggest.⁵

The ten considerations of Emerson's Divinity School Address represent both the diversity of the response to that controversial event and the staunch defense of Emerson's position in the face of strident and often personal attacks upon him and his views. Of course, Andrews Norton's "The New School in Literature and Religion," the opening volley in this war of words, is notable for introducing what was essentially a religious controversy into the commercial newspapers.⁶ Norton's belligerent rebuke of Emerson and all the religious and literary implications of his stand was soon answered by Theophilus Parsons, who had reservations about Emerson's thought, but who protests more to the offensive manner of Norton's response;⁷ G. T. Davis, who questions the tone of Norton's attack because he saw it as ultimately contributing to Emerson's growing popularity;⁸ "Z.," who writes from the perspective of the small band of Boston free-thinkers headed by Abner Kneeland;⁹ and Chandler Robbins, who as Emerson's friend and successor in the pulpit of Boston's Second Church as well as editor of the Unitarian weekly, the *Christian Register*, demonstrates the need to protect both Emerson and the Church's official position.¹⁰ Emerson and Boston Unitarianism not only received censure from the orthodox theologians at Princeton¹¹ but also from the religious conservatives at Yale, here represented by the anonymous review of Emerson's address from the *Quarterly Christian Spectator*;¹² from Southern Unitarians, notably Samuel Gilman in the *Southern Rose*, published in Charleston, South Carolina;¹³ and the Boston Congregationalists who published the *Boston Recorder*, and who seem a bit incredulous in their review of the address, since they apparently assumed all along that the liberalism of Unitarianism would eventually lead to infidelity.¹⁴ Of course, James Freeman Clarke's "R. W. Emerson and the New School" and "The New School in Literature and Religion" represent the definitive defense of Emerson's views and the definitive refutation of Norton's.¹⁵

The anonymous review of *Essays* from the *New York Review* continued a critical theme introduced in reviews of the Divinity School Address—that Emerson is an unsystematic fanatic preaching a godless philosophy—a far cry from Thomas Carlyle's reserved praise in his introduction to the English edition of the same work, Brownson's defense of *Essays*, or William Alfred Jones's careful consideration of Emerson's imagination, style, and voice.¹⁶ These essays also make it apparent that the 1840s were

important years for defining Emerson and the worth of his work in the minds of critics. During this decade, responses ranged from the glibly negative consideration of Emerson by Poe in his "An Appendix of Autographs," to the confusion over Emerson's value expressed by an anonymous reviewer of *The Method of Nature* in the *Monthly Miscellany of Religion and Letters*, to a strong defense of Emerson's philosophy in general and *Essays: Second Series* in particular by "A Disciple" in the pages of the *Democratic Review*, and Margaret Fuller's important but measured consideration of the same work for the *New-York Tribune*.¹⁷ Add to this range of comment James Russell Lowell's influential portrayal of Emerson as a "Plotinus-Montaigne" in his *A Fable for Critics*, and it becomes apparent that criticism of the 1840s substantially contributed to defining Emerson for future reviewers and commentators.¹⁸ Certainly the most elaborate praise Emerson received during this period was from an anonymous reviewer for the *Boston Post* who, in describing Emerson as a lecturer, is embarrassingly bombastic in his choice of metaphors.¹⁹ The reviews of *Poems* by Cyrus Bartol and an anonymous critic for the *Democratic Review* represent reasonable considerations of a work not taken seriously by some reviewers, and should be compared with David Wasson's praise of Emerson's *May-Day*, a less daring and original volume than *Poems*.²⁰ The anonymous review of *Nature; Addresses, and Lectures* suggests that even if the Unitarians were unwilling to forgive Emerson his supposed infidelity more than a decade after his address at Divinity Hall, they were at least susceptible to being exhilarated by his work.²¹ As Frederic Dan Huntington's review of *English Traits* shows, this tendency to praise Emerson's writing while at the same time lamenting his want of Christian orthodoxy was continued for many years, especially in publications representing the views of conservative denominations.²²

The two reviews of *Representative Men* from the *Amherst Indicator* and the *Yale Literary Magazine* suggest the important influence Emerson exerted on college campuses by 1850.²³ This influence is further demonstrated in the anonymous consideration of Emerson's "shady side" in the April 1858 *Rutger's College Quarterly*.²⁴ Theodore Parker's definitive commentary on Emerson and his work attempts to evaluate him through a detailed examination of his writing and thought. The final section of Parker's essay, reprinted here, coalesces all of Parker's praise and blame into a final judgment that Emerson's importance lies in his goodness and humanity.²⁵ Two other general appraisals of Emerson from roughly the same period are George Henry Calvert's appreciative essay, which seeks to show how Emerson's originality caused him to be misunderstood, and John Custis Darby's essay, published in a religious periodical in Richmond, Virginia, which argues that Emerson would return us all to the paganism of ancient Greece.²⁶ The resentment of Southern critics toward Emerson, whose name was often linked with radical abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison in the Southern press, is even more effectively illustrated in the anonymous

review of *The Conduct of Life* from the *Southern Literary Messenger*, published on the eve of the attack on Fort Sumter.²⁷ James Russell Lowell's consideration of the same work in the *Atlantic Monthly* emphasizes the distinctly Yankee quality of Emerson's work and continues the theme of treating Emerson as a blend of practicality and mysticism that Lowell had introduced in *A Fable for Critics*. This review was later abbreviated and tacked on to a shortened version of Lowell's "Mr. Emerson's New Course of Lectures" from the *Nation* and reprinted as "Emerson, the Lecturer" in Lowell's *My Study Windows*.²⁸

Two controversies that swirled around Emerson in the late 1850s are also represented by reprinted selections. The first of these involved the publication of Emerson's poem, "Brahma," in the November 1857 *Atlantic Monthly*. For the wits of 1857, the poem provided seemingly endless opportunities for parody. "Phasma," an anonymous effort published in the *New York Sun*, is only one of literally dozens of lampoons which found their way into print, and these parodies, in turn, occasioned a number of defenses of Emerson's poem, like that by Charles Godfrey Leland in *Graham's*.²⁹ The second controversy blossomed out of Emerson's famous congratulatory letter to Whitman following the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855.³⁰ When Whitman reproduced that letter in the 1856 second edition, he managed to link publicly Emerson's by-now-respected name with his own work, leaving dismayed critics, like the one in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, to wonder at Emerson's motives and to denounce him along with Whitman as a pornographer.³¹

Following the Civil War, Emerson's position as the acknowledged master of American writers, even at a time when his considerable powers were on the decline, meant that he was less the focal point of attack and more the object of eulogy than ever before. For this reason, Bret Harte's appraisal of Emerson's *Society and Solitude* is all the more interesting, since it is a westerner's evaluation of the work of a man who significantly contributed to formulating America's perceptions of the West. To Harte, Emerson's notions about life on the frontier were unrealistic because they were evolved "from his moral consciousness" and not from any solid knowledge of frontier life.³² Henry James's most famous commentary on Emerson is his review of Cabot's biography in the December 1887 *Macmillan's Magazine*, but his brief consideration of Emerson in his biography of Hawthorne is most effective in communicating to the reader the power Emerson's words held over a nation on the verge of losing its innocence.³³ As such, James's assessment of Emerson's central position in the intellectual life of his age serves as a balance to his father's curmudgeonly essay, which suggests that Emerson was completely without conscience, lacking in knowledge, and may not in fact have been real at all!

Whitman's "How I Still Get Around and Take Notes," Huntington's "Ralph Waldo Emerson," Moncure D. Conway's *Emerson and his Views of Nature*, and Christopher Pearse Cranch's "Ralph Waldo Emer-

son" are all pieces that appeared immediately before or after Emerson's death, but each selection offers a different perspective from which to view Emerson. As Whitman's title suggests, his essay is as much about himself as it is about Emerson; however, his accounts of visits with Emerson just six months before his death, his brief interpretation of the facts of Emerson's life, and his final tribute to Emerson's influence, make this reminiscence an important statement about the continuity of nineteenth-century American literature.³⁴ Conway's little-known address to the Royal Institution of Great Britain is a significant early statement of Emerson's relationship to and anticipation of the most important scientific thought of his age.³⁵ Huntington's assessment of Emerson caused a furor at the time of its publication because many felt it too negative a treatment of a man who deserved to be remembered in a better light.³⁶ It is typical of the public idolatry at the time of Emerson's death that any comment that even implied criticism of him was considered profane. Certainly, Cranch's eulogy, although wide-ranging, substantive, and valuable because it is a tribute from a personal friend, is much more typical of appraisals of Emerson immediately following his death than Huntington's.³⁷ Nevertheless, this reverence afforded Emerson by the public made most substantive criticism of Emerson's work nearly impossible, as Matthew Arnold so rudely discovered when he came to Boston in December 1883 to announce that Emerson's work did not entitle him to be ranked with the great poets or philosophers.³⁸ Arnold's apparent perplexity over the resulting denunciation of him and his views suggests that he failed to grasp the significance of the cult of worshippers who guarded Emerson's memory and reputation as though he were a national shrine.

Such devotion, however, did not completely preempt sound criticism that is still of value today. One need only read through William Torrey Harris's discussion of the organic structure of the essay "Experience" to be convinced that not all late nineteenth-century criticism of Emerson should be dismissed as so much sentimental claptrap.³⁹ And the same might be said about Henry Athanasius Brann's acerbic attack on German metaphysics and Emersonian philosophy;⁴⁰ John M. Robertson's thorough and even-handed evaluation of Emerson's life, work, and philosophy;⁴¹ Henry Demarest Lloyd's surprising argument for the importance Emerson placed upon wit and humor;⁴² and George Santayana's general assessment of Emerson's significance to American and world literature and philosophy.⁴³ It is fitting that Santayana's dispassionate evaluation of Emerson as a thinker and writer whose importance rests on his original expression of well-worn ideas should serve as a transition to the cooler light of twentieth-century criticism, where Emerson's work would continually be the subject of analyses that would aim at casting aside the myth of the "Sage of Concord" in order to discover the substance and nature of the ideas that created the myth.

In the twentieth century, we have chosen three classes of essays:

those which deal with specific periods in Emerson's life; those which deal with general topics of interest to Emerson throughout his life; and those which place Emerson in the broad context of American literature and thought. (We have purposely not reprinted any essay which deals with only one or two works by Emerson.)

The development of Emerson's early thought, prior to the publication of his first volume of essays in 1841, can be seen by reading the articles by A. M. Baumgartner on his early lectures, Ralph C. LaRosa on his early journals, David Robinson on his early ideas about nature, and Merton M. Sealts, Jr., on his concept of the scholar.⁴⁴ Phyllis Cole deals sensitively with "Emerson, England, and Fate," as does Leonard Neufeldt on "Emerson and the Civil War."⁴⁵

Other critics deal with specific concepts which attracted Emerson's attention: Gay Wilson Allen on Emerson and science, Robert Detweiler on the Over-Soul, Alexander Kern on Emerson and economics, Norman Miller on Emerson's each-and-all concept, Henry F. Pommer on Emerson and compensation, Robert D. Richardson, Jr., on Emerson and myth, Carl F. Strauch on Emerson's doctrine of sympathy, and Tony Tanner on Emerson's use of visionary imagery.⁴⁶ Essays by Lawrence Buell and R. A. Yoder perceptively analyze Emerson's literary method, and Joseph F. Doherty helps to explain why Emerson often appears to be standoffish in his writings.⁴⁷

Two general essays place Emerson in a larger context. William L. Hedges discusses American thought "From Franklin to Emerson," establishing a continuity and a complementary argument to Perry Miller's famous article, "From Edwards to Emerson."⁴⁸ Miller himself examines "Emersonian Genius and American Democracy," an essay which shows Emerson's central position in the development of American thought.⁴⁹

Because of the enormous amount of writings about Emerson (the most recent bibliography lists about 6,000 items, and it is selective), we have chosen to present in our Introduction those primary and bibliographical works with which the reader can begin a more complete study of Emerson's life, writings, and thought.

The first separate primary bibliography of Emerson was George Willis Cooke's *A Bibliography of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1908).⁵⁰ Although excellent for its time, it is now outdated. The only comprehensive bibliography of Emerson's writings is Joel Myerson's *Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Descriptive Bibliography* (1982), which lists all editions and printings of Emerson's works in English, all foreign-language editions of his works through 1882, all collected editions and collections of Emerson's works, all first-appearance contributions to books, pamphlets, newspapers, and magazines, all books edited by Emerson, all reprinted material in books and pamphlets through 1882, and material attributed to Emerson.⁵¹

Cooke's book is also the first significant secondary bibliography of

Emerson. Its listing of nineteenth-century works is supplemented by William J. Sowder's list of British reviews of Emerson's works, "Emerson's Reviewers and Commentators: Nineteenth-Century Periodical Criticism" (1968).⁵² Jeanetta Boswell's *Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Critics* (1979) cumulates material for the period 1900–1977, and adds a few titles to those available in earlier bibliographies, while perpetuating their errors and introducing new ones.⁵³ Boswell clearly has not seen most of the items she lists, resulting in numerous errors, false leads, and even non-existent works. An excellent annotated bibliography of criticism published between 1951 and 1961 is Jackson R. Bryer and Robert A. Rees's "A Checklist of Emerson Criticism, 1951–1961" (1964), and through 1976 on Emerson's prose is Annette M. Woodlief's "Emerson's Prose: An Annotated Checklist of Literary Criticism Through 1976" (1978).⁵⁴ All of these have been superseded by Robert E. Burkholder and Myerson's *Ralph Waldo Emerson: An Annotated Secondary Bibliography*, a massive, fully-annotated listing of some 6,000 works from 1816 to 1979 (forthcoming).⁵⁵

There are a number of good bibliographical essays on Emerson. Burkholder's introduction to "Ralph Waldo Emerson's Reputation, 1831–1861: With a Secondary Bibliography" (1979) is an excellent—and the only—discussion of Emerson's contemporary reception in America during the years indicated.⁵⁶ William J. Sowder's *Emerson's Impact on the British Isles and Canada* (1966), which covers the nineteenth-century response to Emerson in those countries, focuses more on the poetry than on the prose works.⁵⁷ The bibliographical essays by Floyd Stovall in *Eight American Authors* (1956, 1971) are also useful overviews, as is the essay by Burkholder and Myerson in *The Transcendentalists: A Review of Research and Criticism*, ed. Myerson (forthcoming).⁵⁸

Four other bibliographical works deserve mention. George Shelton Hubbell's *A Concordance to the Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1932) is restricted to those poems published in volume nine of the Centenary Edition (see below).⁵⁹ Eugene F. Irely's *Concordance to Five Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1981) arbitrarily (and despite its title) chooses *Nature*, "The American Scholar," Divinity School Address, "Self-Reliance," and "Fate," and uses the now-superseded Centenary Edition texts.⁶⁰ Mary Alice Ihrig's *Emerson's Transcendental Vocabulary* (1982) lists all appearances of certain word clusters in the first seven volumes of the Centenary Edition.⁶¹ All three concordances list the words in context. Walter Harding's *Emerson's Library* (1967) lists all the books Emerson is known to have owned but not, as Harding acknowledges, all the ones he is known to have read or used.⁶²

The standard edition of Emerson's works is *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 12 vols. (1903–1904), referred to as the Centenary Edition.⁶³ While the notes by Emerson's son Edward are excellent, the texts have been mangled by editing them according to turn-of-the-century standards. This edition is slowly being superseded by *The Collected*