

ANALYSIS

THE STYLE OF RAPLH WALDO EMERSON

(1803-1888)

“Each paragraph, each essay, has the structure of the circle containing smaller circles within it and itself contained in larger circles. ‘The eye is the first circle,’ wrote Emerson in the shortest of his essays; ‘the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end.’ His method is organic, a reflection of the structure of the universe as he sees it.

But if the movement of logical sequence is lacking, that of direct communication to faculties beyond the reason is not. The units of his style are built upon one another into a rising structure of thought and feeling. Always there is the sense of a man speaking to his audience, catching their attention, focusing it on a central meaning, expanding it to furthest limits of experience, raising it to highest levels of recognition, bringing it back to the center. Each essay opens with a challenge, either by quiet reference to ordinary experience or by sudden shock of overstatement. With text thus supplied, homiletic rather than logical principles elaborate, illustrate, and slowly unfold the theme as writer and reader are borne onward together. In most of the essays, there is a sense of rising intensity in both meaning and form, which suggests Emerson's own images of the spiral, the ladder, the swift flight upward. The conclusion brings a quiet sense of completion, of exhausted possibilities, of whole vision which has the dramatic finality of the curtain of a play.”

Robert E. Spiller

Literary History of the United States 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 376

“In Emerson’s prose the unit is the sentence and seldom the paragraph. Each sentence is a thought clearly and epigrammatically put, but there is often a doubtful relationship with the sentences that follow or precede it. The fact is that Emerson had an unsystematic habit of mind. He would sink into a receptive mood, let the thoughts come, jot them down without much method. He had many flashes of genuine inspiration but no logical, systematic development of ideas. The drift of his paragraphs is often obscure. His sentences are short and incisive, giving a staccato effect, but at times his brilliance palls. His diction is racy, of the soil, as witness his ‘Hitch your wagon to a star,’ a concrete expression of an abstract idea.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff

The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

“The new form which Emerson developed is neither wholly essay nor wholly lecture. Its unit is the carefully wrought sentence, ‘pure, genuine Saxon’; as Carlyle immediately recognized, ‘strong and simple; of a clearness, of a beauty.’ Each contains in crystalline suspension the whole meaning of the essay, of the book, an art learned perhaps in part from the gnomic sentence of Bacon or the *pensees* of Pascal, as simple and direct as the familiar style of Montaigne. ‘Nature will not have us fret and fume.’ ‘All things are double, one against another.’ ‘Life only avails, not the having lived.’ Sometimes they are but a single image: ‘Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus.’ Longer sentences are broken and rugged, retaining their staccato quality... Even less closely are the paragraphs knit to their foregoers and followers, the essays to one another to make a book. But it would be a mistake to conclude that form is lacking...”

It has often been made a reproach to him that, brilliant as his sentences may be, Emerson had little feeling for the larger units of structure, and that his essays are perhaps glittering heaps of *sententiae* but not artistically ordered wholes. This criticism has been reinforced by the knowledge that both the lectures and the essays were ‘pieced together,’ like quilt-covers of variegated prose, from the journals--as though the sense of composition, if strong enough, could not produce an effect of beautiful coherence even by this

process. Emerson himself, at any rate, certainly intended that his essays should have a structural firmness of their own, though not perhaps an easily obvious or rigidly logical one. Rhetoric for him, indeed, was a 'species of architecture': he called it 'the Building of Discourse,' and was convinced that 'Profoundest thoughts, sublime images, dazzling figures are squandered and lost in an immethodical harangue.' Of the dangers of the 'aphoristic style' he was fully conscious: he did not wish to frustrate his readers, as he felt that his friend Alcott sometimes did, with 'a cord of chips for a cord of wood.' Nor does he--with some exceptions--do this.

His feeling for compositional wholeness was in fact much stronger than it has usually been said to be, but if the impression remains, even in the minds of some intelligent readers, that he is a writer of aphorisms rather than of sustained discourse, the reasons are understandable. It is true that he is one of the most *quotable* of modern writers: again and again his sentences, and even his phrases, can be detached from their context, like jewels from a disregarded setting, and quoted with a delight that seems to set at naught their relation to other sentences. It is true, too, that the transition from one sentence, or even one paragraph, to another is not always explicitly made, and this produces an effect of apparent discontinuity. 'It is not the masters,' he said, however, 'who spin the ostentatious continuity'--and if he habitually omitted the familiar connectives of logical discourse it was partly because he wished to leave some of the work of thinking to his readers, and partly because what he meant by continuity was not a logical but a superlogical principle.

It remains true that Emerson was a skilled and studious rhetorician, and that his sense of the architecture of an essay normally, and beautifully, triumphed over the tendency to dispersion or looseness. He had begun, after all, as a preacher in the tradition, however relaxed, of the Puritan homily, and his own early sermons are sometimes models of orderly discourse. The habit survived at least in his earliest publications: in *Nature*, in 'The American Scholar,' in 'Self-Reliance,' he is still, in certain sections, numbering his topics, though he later abandoned the 'building' principle it was based on. A careful scrutiny of almost any one of his characteristic essays will reveal, beneath the undulating surface, the actual firmness of the design."

Newton Arvin
Major Writers of American I
(Harcourt 1962) 484-85

"Our efforts to come to terms with Emerson's essays in an analytic way tend to flounder in a morass of 'linear logic' that Emerson was at such pains to have us avoid. We frequently seek in his essays the very qualities they do not contain, and we evaluate them in stylistic terms that are not always illuminating. This mis-perception is especially injurious in regard to Emerson's first major written essay [*Nature*]."

Richard Lee Francis
"The Architectronics of Emerson's *Nature*"
American Quarterly XIX (Spring 1967) 39-53

"Emerson envisions an ideal for himself as a thinker and a writer wherein he can approximate in his essays the fluidity he ascribes to Nature. He seeks to make the movement of thought in each of his sentences and paragraphs analogous to the flow of the natural world--to the point where the mind 'insures an order of expression which is the order of Nature itself.' Thinking and writing are organic for Emerson; his essays characteristically proceed by association rather than by logic. They reflect the way his mind actually works: moving from impression to impression, from association to association, always enlarging the context and broadening the range of experience. Ideas often spiral out in many directions, usually without being drawn together in some sort of unifying statement or conclusion. As Emerson's mind moves in a tangled web of observation, discovery, allusion, aphorism, and quotation, his essays become aggregates of sentences and paragraphs--a collection of insights. In this respect, a sentence in Emerson's essays generally carries the weight of what in other writers would be a paragraph. Often he seems to leap from one sentence to the next with little regard for transitions."

Justin Kaplan
The Harper American Literature I
(Harper & Row 1987) 978]

READING EMERSON

Emerson was a charismatic lecturer, perhaps the most effective in the history of American literature. Much is lost in merely reading his work. His poems express a radical philosophy yet are conventional in form--unlike Whitman. They are direct statements of his thought. His essays have been far more influential--full of inspirational generalizations--yet they are difficult for some readers today because his prose often seems not linear, except in the general form of the composition. As a rule his prose style is inspired and intuitive rather than logical. Hence his statements often seem not to connect in a sequence, but to rise up from his subconscious--or, as he would say, from his transcendental "Genius"--as divine revelations of Truth, like oracular bubbles from below. His sentences tend to isolate as aphorisms, turning his paragraphs into clusters of assertions related by topic and theme--a form of prose poetry.

Michael Hollister (2015)