

30 CRITICS DISCUSS

Ralph Waldo Emerson

(1803-1882)

"This grand Oration was our intellectual Declaration of Independence. Nothing like it had been heard in the halls of Harvard since Samuel Adams supported the affirmative of the question, 'Whether it be lawful to resist the chief magistrate, if the commonwealth cannot otherwise be preserved.' It was easy to find fault with an expression here and there. The dignity, not to say the formality of an Academic assembly was startled by the realism that looked for the infinite in 'the meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan.' They could understand the deep thoughts suggested by 'the meanest flower that blows,' but these domestic illustrations had a kind of nursery homeliness about them which the grave professors and sedate clergymen were unused to expect on so stately an occasion. But the young men went out from it as if a prophet had been proclaiming to them 'Thus saith the Lord.' No listener ever forgot that Address, and among all the noble utterances of the speaker it may be questioned if one ever contained more truth in language more like that of immediate inspiration."

Oliver Wendell Holmes
on Phi Beta Kappa Society Oration by Emerson (1837):
"The American Scholar"

"*My friend!* You know not what you have done for me there. It was long decades of years that I heard nothing but the infinite jangling and jabbering, and inarticulate twittering and screeching, and my soul had sunk down sorrowful, and said there is no articulate speaking then anymore, and thou art solitary among stranger-creatures? and lo, out of the West comes a clear utterance, clearly recognizable as a *man's* voice, and I *have* a kinsman and brother: God be thanked for it! I could have *wept* to read that speech; the clear high melody of it went tingling through my heart; I said to my wife, 'There, woman!' She read; and returned, and charges me to return for answer, 'that there has been nothing met with like it since Schiller went silent.' My brave Emerson!... Miss Martineau tells me, 'Some say it is inspired, some say it is mad.' Exactly so; no *say* could be suitable. But for you, my dear friend, I say and pray heartily: may God grant you strength; for you have a *fearful* work to do! Fearful I call it; and yet it is great, and the greatest."

Thomas Carlyle
Letter to Emerson (1837)

"Rev. Ralph Waldo Emerson gave an oration, of 1 1/4 hour, on The American Scholar. It was to me in the misty, dreamy, unintelligible style of Swedenborg, Coleridge, and Carlyle. He professed to have method; but I could not trace it, except in his own annunciation. It was well spoken, and all seemed to attend, but how many were in my own predicament of making little of it I have no means of ascertaining. Toward the close, and indeed in many parts of his discourse, he spoke severely of our dependence on British literature. Notwithstanding, I much question whether he himself would have written such an apparently incoherent and unintelligible address, had he not been familiar with the writings of the authors above named."

Dr. John Pierce, Harvard (1793)
on Phi Beta Kappa Society Oration by Emerson (1837):
"The American Scholar"

"We know not whether Aylmer possessed this degree of faith in man's ultimate control over Nature... He handled physical details as if there were nothing beyond them; yet spiritualized them all, and redeemed himself from materialism by his strong and eager aspiration towards the infinite. In his grasp the veriest clod of earth assumed a soul."

Nathaniel Hawthorne
"The Birthmark" (1844)

"This is admirable, as many other thoughts of Mr. Emerson's are. His gross and astonishing errors & illusions spring from a self-conceit so intensely intellectual and calm that at first one hesitates to call it by its right name. Another species of Mr. Emerson's errors, or rather blindness, proceeds from a defect in the region of the heart....A perfectly good being [according to Emerson] would see no evil--But what did Christ see?--He saw what made him weep. [Marking Emerson's statement, "Trust men and they will be true to you."] God help the poor fellow who squares his life according to this. [Marking Emerson's statement, "The evils of the world are such only to the evil eye."] What does this mean? If Mr. Emerson travelling in Egypt should find a plague-spot come out on him--would he consider that an evil sight or not? And if evil, would his eye be evil because it seemed evil to his eye...? Still, these essays are noble."

Herman Melville
notes in copy of Emerson's "The Poet" (1844)

"These hobgoblins of flesh and blood were attracted thither by the widespreading influence of a great original thinker, who had his abode at the opposite extremity of our village. His mind acted upon other minds of a certain constitution with wonderful magnetism, and drew many men upon long pilgrimages to speak with him face to face. Young visionaries...People that had lighted on a new thought, or a thought that they fancied new, came to Emerson, as the finder of a glittering gem hastens to a lapidary, to ascertain its quality and value. Uncertain, troubled, earnest wanderers through the midnight of the moral world beheld his intellectual fire as a beacon burning on a hill-top, and, climbing the difficult ascent, looked forth into the surrounding obscurity more hopefully than hitherto....For myself...being happy, I felt as if there were no questions to put, and therefore admired Emerson as a poet of deep beauty and austere tenderness, but sought nothing from him as a philosopher. It was good, nevertheless, to meet him in the wood-paths, or sometimes in our avenue, with that pure intellectual gleam diffused about his presence like the garment of a shining one; and he so quiet, so simple, so without pretension, encountering each man alive as if expecting to receive more than he could impart."

Hawthorne
"The Old Manse" (1846)

"Then there is electricity...the all-pervading intelligence!' exclaimed Clifford....'Is it a fact...that, by means of electricity, the world of matter has become a great nerve, vibrating thousands of miles in a breathless point of time? Rather, the round globe is a vast head, a brain, instinct with intelligence! Or, shall we say, it is itself a thought, nothing but thought, and no longer the substance which we deemed it?...The bank-robbers--who, after all, are about as honest as nine people in ten, except that they disregard certain formalities, and prefer to transact business at midnight...and for these murderers, as you phrase it, who are often excusable in the motives of their deed, and deserve to be ranked among public benefactors...'

'You are a strange man, Sir!' said the old gentleman, bringing his gimlet-eye to a point on Clifford, as if determined to bore right into him.--'I can't see through you!'

No, I'll be bound you can't!' cried Clifford laughing. 'And yet, my dear Sir, I am as transparent as the water of Maule's Well!'" [An allusion to Emerson's calling himself a "transparent eyeball" in *Nature*; Maule's Well in the Pyncheon garden is polluted.]

Hawthorne
"The Flight of Two Owls"
The House of the Seven Gables (1851)

"At last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature... In this enchanted mood, thy spirit ebbs away to whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space; like Cranmer's sprinkled Pantheistic ashes, forming at last a part of every shore the round globe over....But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Cartesian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at midday, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists!"

Melville
"The Mast-Head," *Moby-Dick* (1851)

"The Puritan revolt had made us ecclesiastically and the Revolution politically independent, but we were socially and intellectually moored to English thought, till Emerson cut the cable and gave us a chance at the

dangers and glories of blue water. No man young enough to have felt it can forget or cease to be grateful for the mental and moral *nudge* which he received from the writings of his high-minded and brave-spirited countryman....His oration before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge...was an event without any former parallel in our literary annals, a scene to be always treasured in the memory for its picturesqueness and its inspiration. What crowded and breathless aisles, what windows clustering with eager heads, what enthusiasm of approval, what grim silence of foregone dissent! It was our Yankee version of a lecture by Abelard, our Harvard parallel to the last public appearance of Schelling..."

James Russell Lowell
"Moral Mutiny in New England" (1871)

"He draws inspiration from the poetic thought of Plato, from the German idealists, from the mystical seer Swedenborg, from the Eastern religions, from Coleridge and the nature poetry of Wordsworth; yet with it all he retains every native peculiarity, and his words have the unmistakable local flavor of New England....*Nature*...contains much of the essence of his teaching. There is probably very little strictly original thought in this famous book; its originality lies rather in the freshness and vigor of the form in which old ideas were embodied. There is this indescribably quickening quality in most of Emerson's work, so that an old thought seems vitalized by his touch, and acts on us as a spiritual tonic. The book deals, in a rapt and poetic fashion, with the relations of nature, or the so-called physical universe, to the life of man. From the consideration of Nature as the minister to man's temporal and bodily needs we rise to a view of Nature as the teacher and inspirer of his spirit. The book is permeated with the ideal philosophy of the Germans, with the nature-poetry of Wordsworth and the nature-teachings of Carlyle....

In both poetry and prose he is emphatically the philosophic and religious teacher, the lover of nature; but dwelling in clear, bracing, rarefied atmosphere, remote from human passion and human sorrow. In both his prose and poetry, too, we find that lack of a rounded and even excellence, that absence of the power to construct a work which should be great not in detached passages, but as a whole, which is admittedly one of his most serious defects. Emerson's verse has undoubtedly an individuality and distinction rarely found in our poets. It has admirable qualities, but radical shortcomings, which show, it is to be feared, the inborn limitations of Emerson himself. It is the creation of the brain rather than the utterance of the heart; it fails in a warm, living, generous humanity; above all, the lines do not flow and sing themselves, as those of a true poet do, but the music seems half-frozen in the instrument. When Emerson was a boy at singing-school, a single exhibition of his vocal powers induced the teacher to tell him that he need not return. He lacked the musical faculty, and we can hardly read one of his longer poems to the end without being irritated by some harsh or limping line.

Emerson, in his prose, if an inconsequent, is an immensely stimulating writer....His short, terse, epigrammatic sentences pierce us like so many separate sword-thrusts. The intense, nervous vitality of the New Englander snaps and sparkles in his abrupt and oracular utterance. Brilliant, with a tiring, unrelieved brilliancy, his light, like that of the electric spark, may prick but cannot warm. He writes with a conscientious minuteness of homely things, 'the meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan'; nevertheless, his sympathy with the every-day problems and experiences of men and women is theoretical rather than real and spontaneous. In reality he has that abstraction and equable serenity possible for those who survey life from the mountain-peaks of philosophy....He remains coldly intellectual; absolutely unimpassioned, as though man were but a superior thinking-machine, the tension of his thought renders his work singularly lacking in the quality of repose....and while his work abounds in wise maxims, and in memorable and noble passages, we may agree with Matthew Arnold in refusing to place him with the greatest masters of style.

Yet Emerson stands squarely among the great men of our century. His voice reaches us from the heights, unworldly, clear, and pure. It is a great thing that our rich and commercial America, in the abundance of its material successes, should have brought forth a teacher of such unsullied life and lofty purposes, who bore unswerving witness to the worth of the things which are not seen. This was his work and mission, a great and beautiful one, to quicken our spirit, to increase our hold on the spiritual and eternal."

Henry S. Pancoast
An Introduction to American Literature
(Holt 1898, 1902) 166, 175-77

"I read and reread Emerson because he is that almost extinct species, the reflective man of letters, the meditative essayist, the thoughtful writer of a prose which has, without any of the more patent devices of verse, the magical effects of poetry....there is an Emersonian melody, a spiritual signature, a quality of personality that remains after the subject of the essay is forgotten and even after the theme remains only vaguely in one's head.... In Emerson it is the bright flash of eternity, the vista of the timeless caught in a sunburst of words. It is in the sentence that reads like the mystic avowal of an oracle or an inspired sage. It is, indeed, in the single sentence or in the single paragraph that Emerson is at his best....

Emerson is an arch Platonist. To him the world about us is the visible appearance of what is invisible; things in time are symbols of essences in eternity; the life, the vitality, the soul in us is the life, the soul of the universe.... Emerson saw the expanding commercialism, the rampant materialism of an America already given over to things; his words ring with a celebration of the living person, the unquenchable free spirit.... To open Emerson anywhere is to open a window admitting a fresh reviving air.... In his pages young people in young America found a voice that spoke to them of how much remained to be done, how much of freshness and morning there still was in the world....

It is not always easy on reflection to accept without reservation Emerson's romantic faith that every day is the beginning of a fresh era, that every soul has Godlike potential in it, that every act is the free act of a spirit untrammelled by necessity or convention, by the past....He makes one feel the possibility of escape from the rigidities of habits in action, from dogmas in religion, from academic imitation in art, from colonialism in culture, from idolatry to the past. He makes contagious a sense of freedom and creativeness. He breathes into the reader, in the literal sense inspires the reader, with a belief in himself, in the future. He makes the reader aware of fresh potentialities in the self and of fresh new fields for achievement. All this he accomplishes not by argument, but by eloquence and by art.

Perhaps as we grow older we find it harder to believe with Emerson that every day is a new experience, unique in wonder and creation. But to read him is to retrieve that youthful sense of being ever in sight of a new continent, the vision of a beckoning dream."

Irwin Edman
Introduction
Emerson's Essays
(Crowell 1926) v-x

"Emerson naturally felt Hawthorne's aloofness most keenly, for he could not understand how his neighbor could be so cold toward his ideas, when all the world was paying homage to them. And it is more or less directly to Emerson that we owe the conventional picture of Hawthorne--secluded, solitary, skeptic. To an enthusiastic, self-reliant idealist Hawthorne would, of course, appear thus, but now that others besides Hawthorne have become skeptical of Emerson's philosophy, it is time to lay off the transcendentalist spectacles and look at Hawthorne through uncolored lenses."

Herbert W. Schneider
The Puritan Mind
(Holt, 1930; U Michigan 1957) 257-58

"As a seer and a mystic, Emerson, the chief proponent of the transcendental philosophy, is in the line of mysticism which stretches from the original Puritan settlers of Massachusetts through Jonathan Edwards and Walt Whitman to our own day. Even when, as is frequently the case, the terms of the transcendental philosophy are not understood, most readers secure from Emerson flashes of sudden insight into spiritual meanings. The vocabulary of transcendentalism is a difficult one, and one not always consistent with itself; and, moreover, Emerson's habit of composition, whereby he sometimes sacrificed logical structure to pithy and brilliant statement, has further muddied the waters for the usual student....What he omits is the transition elements which would smooth the path of the reader from one aspect of his subject to another...

Perhaps the best single key to his meaning is the sensible and simple comment of the little girl on 'Brahma'--it just means, she said, God everywhere. It is the nearness of the divine to all the business of men that Emerson teaches. Emerson found support for this doctrine in many places--in Christian theology as understood by Unitarians, in Neo-Platonism, in German thought, in Carlyle... But the American seer was

incarnated in the American Yankee. Emerson's mysticism is not vague and cloudy, but applied to the practical issues of life as these presented themselves to a New Englander. He made many shrewd and sensible comments on the conditions of American civilization--its mediocrity, its mammon-worship, its tendency to mob psychology, its politics."

Howard Mumford Jones, Ernest E. Leisy, Richard M. Ludwig, eds.
Major American Writers I
(Harcourt 1935-52) 374

"Emerson paid his way by lecturing. For the rest, he abandoned himself to his own caprices. The writer, like the priest, had to be exempted from secular labour...To Emerson nothing seemed incredible, nothing, neither miracles nor magic, when he had experienced an insight. He longed for the consecutive, not the single glimpse but the panorama. A fuller inspiration, as it seemed to him, would cause the point to flow and become a line; it would bend the line and complete the circle. To experience this genius and communicate it, to detect and watch the gleam of light that flashed across his mind from within, was Emerson's dream and hope; and this alone governed his method of living.... It was in search of this power,--call it the poet's madness,--that Emerson set out for the woods and pastures. He was an abandoned lotus-eater. All he asked was that the days should be, for him, as full as centuries, loaded, fragrant....Emerson thought of the poet as Adam in the garden again, calling aloud to the children of morning that all creation was recommencing."

Van Wyck Brooks
The Flowering of New England
(Dutton 1936, 1952) 264-65, 267, 271

"Emerson was a pantheist and a moral relativist, so that Emerson's guiding Spirit was, in effect, instinct and personal whim, which, in his terms, became identical with the Divine Imperative, but which, in practice, amounted to a kind of benevolent if not invariably beneficent sentimentalism. The religious experience for Emerson was a kind of good-natured self-indulgence.... His moral judgments are frequently made with force and with accuracy; but his central doctrine is that of submission to emotion, which for the pantheist is a kind of divine instigation... Emerson...believed that flesh and spirit were one, that the universe was divine, and that all impulses were of divine origin....Emerson was the most influential preacher to appear in America after Edwards, for the lecture platform was merely the ultimate step in the secularization of the pulpit, a step that was inevitable after Unitarianism had displaced Calvinism....Emerson at the core is a fraud and a sentimentalist, and his fraudulence impinges at least slightly on everything he wrote."

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow 1937, 1947) 263, 267-68, 279

"Emerson, whose thought is often considered the core of Transcendentalism, stood apart from much of the activity of the movement, and, though he summed up the major development of romanticism in America, his philosophy is rooted in the Puritan background and tempered by the many systems of thought that converged in him. He had no complete philosophical system, but with a style now vibrant, now flinty, preached the great doctrine of a higher individualism, the spiritual nature of reality, the importance of self-reliance, the obedience to instinct, the obligation of optimism and hope, and the existence of a unifying Over-Soul which explains the many diverse phenomena of life."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-1983)

"He hoped to learn from the skeptics, the rationalists, and the scientists a common-sense basis for moral truth; and he hoped to meet in the mystics and romantics a validation immediate, instinctive, and final. The one brought him closer to experience, the other to God. He was feeding his moral imagination rather than disciplining his mind. The two-pronged nature of his quest was a reflection of his two-sided temperament and led to a suspended dualism, the necessary creative tension for literary expression. Always Emerson strove to make one of two; but in his own early thinking he did not clearly distinguish between the logical

and the intuitive roads to truth....Three points emerge...his faith in the moral imagination rather than the intellect, his lack of self-confidence, and his choice of eloquence as his natural medium of expression.... His rebellion, when it finally came, was twofold: against the last vestiges of ecclesiastical authority over the spiritual life of the individual, and against the eighteenth-century rationalism, which had killed spirituality, he thought, when it denied revelation. The first pointed to a schism in which each man becomes his own church; the second sought to provide the rules for a new and personal orthodoxy....

Many volumes have been written to prove that Emerson's final position was based on Neo-Platonism, German idealism, or Oriental mysticism; but a study of these sermons and of his early reading indicates that he never departed from his loyalty to the faith of his fathers, the Christian tradition as developed by Christ, Paul, Thomas Aquinas, and Calvin. Essentially romantic by disposition, he took his place with the rebels and seekers and, like Coleridge and Goethe, sought both confirmation and refreshment from all ages and quarters."

Robert E. Spiller
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 362-63, 365

"This is the courageous minister who, impelled by conscience, gives up his Unitarian pulpit without any assurance that he will ever be employed again. This is the man who proceeds to make himself a poet-prophet and, through his efforts during four decades, surely does more than anyone else to raise the spiritual level of his countrymen....To begin with we have a New England prophet whose New England neighbors gave him a mixed reception; at the end a seer whose goodness and purity, along with a mellowing of his doctrines, brought him worldwide homage....

Taking a long view of Emerson's journals we find that the cosmic optimism of the lectures and essays dominates. The optimism was not a pose....In the crucial years after the death of his first wife and his resignation from the ministry, what Emerson did, perhaps half-consciously, was to formulate a new religion... He rejected Judaism as austere, Buddhism as esoteric, Christianity as fossilized. Gradually he clarified what he did want. The essentials were simple: a kindly God, a kindly universe, and a few universal laws. For inspiration he turned inevitably to his reading and...to observation of the life going on around him. In the reading his guides ranged from Plato to the Scandinavian mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, from Goethe to Darwin....Though there were at least two bars to belief in Emerson's religion, neither was as forbidding as we might expect. One was the oddity of some of the tenets. For instance, the idea--a favorite of his from a favorite field, unscientific science--that the great globe we live on is reproduced in miniature, down to the tiniest detail, in a drop of dew. However, this was no more curious than, say, the Hindu idea that the world rests on the back of a tortoise....

He preached a religion radiant with hope. *Nature* opened and closed with the assurance that we had no questions to ask which could not be answered, presumably with Emerson's assistance.... In the course of the book he foreshadowed most of the principles he would contribute to Transcendentalism. Among them were the split of the cosmos into nature and the individual soul; the material world as an inferior copy of the spiritual; alternation as a basic fact of existence; and Reason as the proper label for intuition....The prime fact in the structure of Emerson's starry universe was that everything was double although he yearned to have it single....supporting Polarity and Correspondence stood the two-tiered universe, for a reconciled Emerson the ultimate doubleness.

Within it two realities existed, spirit and matter; and naturally spirit transcended matter. Two ways of knowing likewise existed, intuition and tuition; and intuition naturally transcended tuition. Tuition taught us about the material world through our senses, while intuition illuminated the spiritual world for us in flashes of lightning. Borrowing from Coleridge...Emerson dubbed the instrument of intuition Reason and that of tuition the Understanding. Reason assured us that the Over-Soul existed; the Understanding reported that our barn was red....The Over-Soul was the Eternal One, which held each individual's being; it was the common heart; it was the overpowering reality; the universal presence; the divine mind; the holy spirit.... The key word in the Over-Soul essay was unity, yet Emerson privately considered it unattainable. By their nature all things were antagonistic as well as divided. Nothing could ever unite for long, not even the individual soul with the Over-Soul, certainly not husband and wife. So Emerson thought in his darkest

hours, as the journals show. A few times he admitted it in public, most notably in his essay 'Experience.' There he confessed that we could not even see one another clearly, let alone keep hold on one another to unite....

No matter whether the doubleness was physical or conceptual, he tried to wish it away....Emerson envisioned a smiling universe in which evil played a trivial part.... Emerson could happily create a God for his cosmos, but he declined to create an Anti-God....Considering the masses a calamity, and calling them just that, he pined for a universe peopled with individuals. For them he created his God, which he christened the Over-Soul and whose relation to the individual was one to one. And he insisted that this sacred relationship would be profaned by the interposition of such supposed aids as ministers or churches."

Carl Bode, ed.
The Portable Emerson
(Penguin 1946-81) ix, xvii, xx-xxi, xxiii, xxvi

"His thinking never achieved clarity of system; each utterance came as an authentic revelation of Spirit and could be used by him and other preachers as a text, almost Biblical, for numberless sermons. These two basic traits of his thought account for much of Emerson's power as an American institution: (1) he invented a secular pulpit, a secular technique of sermonic commentary, and a secular 'wisdom literature' which gave his sentences an oracular quality; (2) he spoke as man to man, appealing from experience to experience. Thus, both his manner and his message were peculiarly welcome to a public bred and bored by pulpits and brought to other American thinkers (if not scholars) the same confidence, self-cultivation, and individuality which he had achieved.

Emerson's idealism was neither Platonic nor Berkeleyan, though he knew a little of both. Things interested him neither in terms of their universal patterns nor in terms of their natural existence, but in terms of their ability to stimulate the poetic imagination, which he and his fellow transcendentalists called reason or spirit. Such 'spirit' was doubly subjective: it was imagination rather than knowledge--poetry not science--and it had self-knowledge as its avowed object. It was a synthesis of introspection and reflection, and it created a self-esteem, now heroic, now pathetic...Shifting the focus of the mind from nature as existence to nature as food for spirit, was Emerson's primary aim and his chief argument for idealism....

The transcendentalists shared and abetted the fashion of their day in extending an uncritical sympathy toward almost anything that was unscientific, in their effort to emancipate the spirit from the habits of natural understanding. In this trait, and in general, Emerson represents the golden mean of New England transcendentalism. Though he patronized and sympathized with the reformers and mystics surrounding him, he himself yielded in neither direction; he kept himself aloof, using these ideas and enthusiasms as themes for critical self-cultivation. Not only as a person, but also as an institution, Emerson was both the genial critic and the constructive idealist, combining Yankee humor and sobriety with poetic imagination and freedom. His ability to keep on friendly terms with his intellectual and social environment and tradition made him a great American mediator; his public accepted from him as gospel what in other tones and idioms it repudiated as heresy or humbug."

Herbert W. Schneider
A History of American Philosophy
(Columbia U 1946, 1963) 246-48

"Emerson should be judged and appreciated...not primarily as a metaphysical philosopher, but as a moral teacher. If his moral teachings seem to have lost some of their early force, if Emerson for almost a generation has been 'unfashionable' (T. S. Eliot could speak of the essays in 1919 as 'already an encumbrance'), it is by no means certain that with a change of intellectual and moral 'climate' Emerson may not regain much of his old authority and influence."

Randall Stewart
The Literature of the United States
(Scott, Foresman 1953, 1966) 1039

"The more we know him, the less we know him. He can be summed up in a formula only by those who know their own minds better than his....He is, finally, impenetrable, for all his forty-odd volumes.... Emerson is teaching his tested secret of insulation from calamity: Live in the Soul. His famous assertion in 'Experience' of the unreality of his devastating grief for his son is an impressive illustration of the necessity he was under to protect, at whatever human cost, his hard-won security. Yeats has said somewhere that we begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy. The opposite was true of Emerson. Only as he refused to conceive life as tragedy could he find the courage to live. By denying man's fate, however, Emerson did not escape it. His urgent need to deny it shows that his confidence was more precarious than he would admit....The free and easy assurance of Franklin is just what is missing in Emerson....

This chasm is the Emersonian tragedy, a tragedy of incapacity. Man's reach must exceed his grasp, of course; that is not tragic. Emerson's chasm cuts deeper: between a vision that claims all power now, and an experience that finds none. Emerson's thought of the self was split between a total Yes and a total No, which could not coexist, could not be reconciled, and yet were both true....There is an Emersonian skepticism as well as an Emersonian faith....Nor do I mean to suggest that he did not find the secret of a serene and affirmative life. The evidence is overwhelming that he did. My point is that his serenity was a not unconscious *answer* to his experience of life, rather than an inference from it... It was an act of faith, forced on him by what he once called 'the ghastly reality of things.'... He *had* to ascribe more reality to his brief moments of 'religious sentiment' than to the rest of life, or he could not live....A gentle resignation came to settle over his thought of human nature, an elegiac recognition that life perpetually promises us a glory we can never realize.... If we are ever to have a great literature again, one would conclude, it will not be until we can break decisively with the whole extremist Emersonian pattern and find some means to face this world without either transcendence or despair."

Stephen E. Whicher
"Emerson's Tragic Sense"

The American Scholar XXII (Summer 1953) 285-92

"The importance of the organic metaphor in Emerson's thinking and writing has been increasingly recognized in recent years....Let me begin by making some distinctions between the organic and the two most important other ways of looking at the universe which were available to Emerson in the 1820's. The first of these was formism, which has descended from Platonic idealism and which is mainly to be found in the humanistic tradition. Younger, but vastly more popular, was mechanism, characteristic of the 'new philosophy' of science which had disturbed and then defeated the humanists in the seventeenth century and which has pretty much dominated mass thinking ever since. Because Emerson hated mechanism from the start, his problem was to find some more effective means of fighting it than those used unsuccessfully by the humanists. Like most romantics, he adopted the organic rather than the formistic theory, although he did not emphasize the differences between the two, perhaps because he felt that the common antipathy to mechanism was more important....

When I suggest that Emerson was an organicist, I mean that he did not habitually think of the universe as a copy of ideal reality or form, in the Platonic manner, or as a vast self-regulating machine, in the manner of eighteenth-century scientific rationalists, but that he thought of it as if it were like a living plant or animal. Two crucial differences may be seen between this way of thinking and the others: first, that change, in the tradition of romantic organicism, is a good thing because it implies growth, or the quality of life, which is not inherent in the assumptions of either scientific mechanism or Platonic idealism; second, that organicism is more strongly synthetic than either of the others.

A mechanist is inclined to feel that things can be best understood if they are separated into their component parts, and if each observed effect is assigned its proper cause. A formalist also is likely to insist on the importance of distinctions, because each prototypical idea, being eternally itself, is different from every other idea. An organicist, however, tends to concentrate, often with a rather mystical air, on the wholeness of the whole, reluctant to analyze at all, maintaining with Wordsworth that 'We murder to dissect'... Organicism...is not concerned with ideal forms or categorical distinctions, like formism, or with analysis of causes and effects, like mechanism. Its aim is to realize the ultimate organization of all things in a unity which includes them as they are, a harmonious relationship of human experience with all the processes of nature, or the universe....The important thing to discover is not causes or archetypal ideas but

relatedness...[Emerson] derives his formula from the basic metaphor of the living plant. This metaphor embodies the concept of progressive relatedness and ultimate unity in which a great many romantic writers...appear to believe....

He may be tempted to suppose that the timeless unity is the real aspect and that experience seems fragmentary only because of his inability to comprehend the final unity; but he is really neither a dualistic nor a monistic idealist. He believes in the seamless continuity of all things, and he feels that material and temporal appearances are not false, or different from the ultimate reality, but parts of it. This reality, of course, does not consist of norms or patterns but is the single principle of organization that makes creation a universe instead of a multiverse. Stated crudely, the difficulty lies in believing that the universe really changes, but that it really does not change, a paradox which disappears in the image of the living tree but which is hard to resolve in any discursive treatment of the metaphor and its implications....

We are too often asked to take his optimism straight, without the sense of its having been earned, and at such times we are likely to sympathize with objections made by Melville and Hawthorne, among others, to his enthusiastic, if not reckless, celebrations of the perfection of the universe. Cosmic optimism can be logically grounded on the premise that all things and events are ultimately organized in perfect unity, but it is a unity that we cannot see, and that Emerson cannot show us."

Richard P. Adams
"Emerson and the Organic Metaphor"
PMLA LXIX (1954) 117-30

"Anyone in the nineteenth century waging war against optimistic philosophy must of course sooner or later single out for particular attack its great American champion, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Accordingly, Melville brings Emerson aboard the *Fidele*, perhaps in the herb-doctor, certainly in the mystic Mark Winsome and his practical disciple Egbert, whom the cosmopolitan next encounters. Using Winsome and Egbert as his targets, Melville fires a few derisive volleys at the Emersonian metaphysics; and against the Emersonian ethics, especially Emersonian individualism, he empties the arsenal of his scorn.

In splitting Emerson's philosophy between Winsome and Egbert, whom I take to be its metaphysics and its ethics respectively, or perhaps better the abstract philosophy and its practical effect, Melville was dramatizing a dualism in Emerson that has been generally commented on from Lowell's *A Fable for Critics* (1848) to the present...Melville's overt splitting of the Emersonian philosopher into the working and speculative reformer enabled him to say very earnestly that, though the metaphysics might be dismissed as moonshine, the practical ethics were operative and were charged with moral danger to mankind. Melville is sweeping in his criticism of Emerson, and he is as severe as it is possible for one to be...

What Melville had called non-benevolence in describing Plinlimmon in *Pierre* is the concomitant of Emerson's intense individualism...It is clear that he does not intend, by making the Emersonian individualist seem worse than the Confidence Man, to whitewash the latter, but rather to underline the inhumanity of the former. That the philosophy of Mark Winsome, the practice of the Mississippi swindler, and the machinations of our 'metaphysical scamps' the Confidence Men, all tend to the same end, an 'atomistic' world of trustless, loveless misanthropes, should not be obscured by the cosmopolitan's bland, benevolent mask."

Elizabeth S. Foster
Introduction: "Emerson in *The Confidence-Man*"
The Confidence-Man (Hendricks House 1954) xxiii-xxxii

"Emerson saw no dialogue at all, but only a 'schism,' a split in culture between two polarized parties: 'the party of the Past and the party of the Future'...of the Understanding and the Reason.' The schism began, according to Emerson's retrospective meditation of 1867, in about 1820. But Emerson subscribed too readily perhaps to a two-party system in intellectual affairs; and he was always puzzled by the attitude of a man like Hawthorne, who seemed skeptically sympathetic toward both parties and managed to be confined by neither....

Thoreau...learned a good deal from Emerson, whose early energy was largely directed toward constructing 'an original relation with the universe' and who reverted time and again to the same theme:

'beware of tradition'; 'forget historical Christianity'; 'lop off all superfluity and tradition, and fall back on the nature of things.'...Irony too--the doubleness of things--Thoreau could learn from Emerson, as each of them had learned from Coleridge and Plato....The old double, the ideal and the actual, the higher law and the fried rat....

This was the tactic of writers like Emerson and Thoreau, and occasionally even of Herman Melville: they manipulated the concrete and transient to the point where, in the climaxes of paragraphs, they could set off metaphysical skyrockets."

R. W. B. Lewis
The American Adam
(U Chicago 1955) 7, 23-4, 119

"Beyond doubt, an anthology of the basic texts of Transcendentalism would perforce include Ralph Waldo Emerson's little book of 1836, *Nature*, his two seminal orations--'The American Scholar' of 1837 and 'The Divinity School Address' of 1838--and several of his classic *Essays*--'Self-Reliance,' 'The Over-Soul,' 'Fate,' 'Experience.'... No modern historian can compose, nor should any student require, a better or more subtle account of the phenomenon that got itself called 'Transcendentalism' than the lecture Emerson gave in 1880 to the Concord Lyceum--his hundredth before that body. His mind was then dissolving into benign vagueness, but the address was pieced together, with the help of a secretary and his daughter, out of older jottings (mostly from the year 1867); hence it still exudes that sense of freshness and excitement, combined with a cool, ironic appreciation of the fugitive character of the outburst, which from the beginning was Emerson's peculiar qualification for becoming and remaining its foremost spokesman....

He rather casually surveys the communistic enterprise at Brook Farm (1840-1846), which he declined to join--to the immense grief of George Ripley, its leading spirit, and of those who with Ripley felt that Transcendental premises should lead toward some such social action....[Emerson preaches] a full reliance upon self by the atomic and self-sufficing individual....

The primary and most radical thrust, in terms of metaphysics, of the Transcendental religion of Nature was Emerson's volume of 1836....*Nature* arose out of what Emerson called a 'Saturnalia' of faith; in the last three chapters it becomes a hymn to the mighty 'Self' who may govern, actually give laws to, the objective universe. The same ecstasy informs the two seminal addresses, 'The American Scholar' of 1837 and 'The Divinity School Address' of 1837. Thereafter, Emerson's thinking, or rather feeling, about external reality can be described, as Stephen Whicher puts it, as an increasing 'ascendancy of experience over Reality.' Though never surrendering his basic conviction, Emerson executes a grand retreat from natural egotism to a reconciliation of himself with objective Nature. From the demonic Protestantism of 1836 he rapidly subsides into a more acquiescent optimism, into what William James called a 'soft determinism.'...

While Emerson and his associates hoped they might do something toward creating an American Literature, and that they might lend at least encouragement to the other arts, they were too much the children of a Puritan culture to be comfortable with a conception of their mission as merely literary or artistic. Unitarianism had done away with, for them, all vestiges of Calvinism as a system of belief, but it now seemed to starve their spiritual life. The new ideas they received from Wordsworth, Coleridge, Carlyle and the Germans were religious, metaphysical and ethical, and only incidentally literary. While the Transcendentalists tried not to waste precious energies haggling over the sterile issue of the miracles, still in the situation of their time they were obliged to make their assertion a new form of Puritanism rather than simply a literary fashion....

They revolted against the prosaic didacticism they associated with the name of Alexander Pope, but they were convinced that their poetic expression, if it were to achieve the desired 'sublime' and to eschew the commonplace, should convey, even in its most transient lyric moments, a message from the realms of Transcendental verity. All of them theorized about this difficult assignment, so extensively that we may be astonished that they ever left off talking about poetry in order to try composing some....They were all so entranced with great poets and great mystics that few of them dared venture to make themselves either poets or mystics. So they theorized....there is no more precise summation of the poetic program to which the group as a whole had dedicated themselves in the 1830's [than Emerson's "Poetry and the Imagination"

(1876)]: the crux of the position--the Transcendental doctrine of the 'symbol' and the basic distinction (derived by them from Coleridge) between the Fancy and the Imagination....

Emerson is the only one among the Transcendental versifiers whose works have a position in the world's literature. In general his contemporaries thought his poetry inferior to his prose; they were often apologetic about it, explaining that poor Mr. Emerson lacked 'ear.' Margaret Fuller put her loyalty to the test by saying of his verse in *The New York Tribune* that it took high rank for subtle beauty of thought and expression; however, she was candidly obliged to add, his poems are mostly philosophical, which is not the truest kind of poetry; they interest the mind, but fail to wake echoes in the heart, and 'the imagery wears a symbolical air.' In less respectful quarters the criticism was more bluntly put: Emerson could not keep metre. In these estimations Emerson was compared, to his disadvantage, with his melodious contemporaries, Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes. At the present writing, when, I take it, the stock of these three is fairly low, the rhymes of Emerson stand out as prognostications of a revolution, if not indeed the first victories of modernism....

For Emerson, the debate between 'society and solitude' went on inside his mind for all his life.... To the distress of his friends--those who developed Transcendental premises into an extreme anarchy of individualism, or those who proceeded from the same assumption toward socialism or authoritarianism--Emerson guarded his 'armed neutrality.' As he elsewhere said--and this may indeed summarize his ambiguous position--'The relation of men of thought to society is always the same; they refuse that necessity of mediocre men, to take sides.'...

Upon receiving the first copy of *Leaves of Grass* Emerson was capable of the shock of recognizing that this strange New Yorker did represent the future of what he and his colleagues had striven to realize in New England; Emerson had the courage and the grace thus to salute what he recognized as surpassing himself."

Perry Miller, ed.
The American Transcendentalists
(Doubleday Anchor 1957) x, 3, 48, 171, 195-96, 217, 286-87, 367

"Emerson belonged to what William James called the 'healthy-minded' mystics. Intuition was the only way to approach reality, he held. On the purely mystical side of his nature he owed more to Plotinus than to Plato. The tone of spiritual elevation in Plotinus mirrored his own spirit. From him Emerson perceived the truth that 'all life is a kind of spiritual vision.' He felt kinship with his stress upon intuition, upon the direct perception of mystical experience, upon the doctrine of the journey of the soul of man toward the Great Soul (which Emerson called the Over-Soul), upon the mysterious efficacy of lonely contemplation, and upon his faith that nothing that truly is can ever perish. Echoes of Plotinus's philosophy appear most clearly in his essay 'The Over-Soul' and in his ripest book, *The Conduct of Life*. One must not consider Emerson merely rapt in a cold meditation on the supremacy of the moral laws of the universe. He knew the writings of Boehme and Swedenborg. He was sympathetic with every genuine religious experience, though he thought theology uncertain. At forty he read eagerly in the *Vedas*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and the *Vishnu Purana*. 'I believe,' he wrote in his *Journal*, 'I am more of a Quaker than anything else. I believe in the still small voice, and that voice is Christ within us.'

We may easily discern three main points in Emerson's philosophy of Transcendentalism: (1) The soul is divine and identical in all men. We have the same instincts and desires; there is a spark of eternity in every man, and he possesses *within himself* the means of all knowledge. (2) Nature is only another side of God, 'the gigantic shadow of God cast on our senses.' Every law in nature has a counterpart in the intellect. There is a perfect parallel between the laws of nature and the laws of thought. Material elements have a close affinity with the moral elements; they simply represent action on an inferior plane: 'Whenever you enumerate a physical law, I hear in it a moral rule.' (3) God is the Over-Soul, and this has unobstructed access to each soul, and each soul has unobstructed access to the Over-Soul. Every man may commune with God if he wills: 'I am born into the great, the universal mind--of this universal mind each man is one more incarnation--all its properties consist in him. I am part and parcel of God,' he wrote....

Emerson's own estimate of his skill as a poet was modest: 'I am born a poet--of a low class without a doubt, yet a poet. That is my nature and vocation. My singing, to be sure, is very husky, and is for the most

part in prose. Still I am a poet in the sense of a perceiver and dear lover of the harmonies between these and those.' His poetry is didactic and fused with an ethical element. He was discriminating, however, in the choice of the right word. He had the vision of the poet but was unable to transmute it into song; he did not have a good ear for poetry. But his poems contain the very quintessence of his teaching."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"The immense value Emerson's teaching had for his own generation was due, on the level of ideas, partly to what he rejected and partly to what he affirmed. Earlier writers--Irving, Bryant, Cooper--had given expression in their work to one impulse or another of the romantic *sensibility*; Emerson, for the first time in this country, gave full and eloquent expression to the *philosophy* of romantic idealism--of what was soon known, though Emerson came to dislike the word, as 'Transcendentalism.'

Emerson felt the world had had enough of Benjamin Franklin....The rationalistic mind seemed to him to have chilled and rigidified the whole of human existence, beginning with the life of the spirit on its profoundest levels....On the deepest level he was persuaded that the religious life had been impoverished and all but destroyed, partly by the dehydrated rationality of the Deists. He had ceased to believe, moreover, in that conception of knowledge and role of the mind formulated by Lockean empiricism, which was still the basis of philosophical teaching when he was an undergraduate and the underpinning of Unitarian doctrine when he studied at the Divinity School. The image of the world, of nature, that had been so dear to the imagination of the older materialists and mechanists--the image of a World Machine as beautifully, as delicately, constructed as a watch...had come to seem to Emerson, as to Goethe and Wordsworth, intolerable....Like the great European romantics, Emerson was ready to throw into the discard all those older views of beauty, of the arts, of poetry, of the role of the poet, that had been so congenial to the rationalistic mind and that have come to be known in literary history as the principles of neoclassicism....

The Emersonian faith is a faith that, without indeed repudiating the whole Judeo-Christian tradition, is no longer specifically either Judaic or Christian. It is purely idealistic belief in an ultimate spiritual reality, an impersonal and timeless Absolute, a transcendent One. In its true nature this One is not to be described or defined; it eludes all attempts to confine it in a net of language or system; it is simply essential Being--'that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other'--and in its presence all else is only relatively real, is transitional and somehow illusory. Yet this central Unity is not, as in some absolutist systems, destructive of all diversity or individuality: the reality of these may be only relative and in some ultimate sense illusory, but it is not a mere empty delusion. A mysterious contradiction is involved, but Emerson 'knows' that the individual soul exists and that, without its ceasing to exist, it and the divine Soul are one. Divinity, as he says, is within as well as above: 'God in us worships God.' It is this divine principle that is the true self, not 'the biographical Ego.'...

His great authority as a writer generally derives, ultimately, from the wonderful reach of his polarity, from the length of the leap he could take in spirit from the atom to the All, from details to Unity, from the minute and even mean to the sublime. This holds for his verse as well as for his prose; the author of his best poems can justly be said to have done what he tells us his archetypal bard, Merlin, did; can be said to have reconciled 'extremes of nature'; to have comprehended, and expressed, the most polar opposites. Only two or three of our other writers approach him in this achievement."

Newton Arvin
Major Writers of America
(Harcourt 1962) 480-81

"This dualistic theory of mind provides a firm base for romantic pastoralism. Although the prudent, sensible Understanding may be trained in schools and cities, the far-ranging, visionary Reason requires wild or rural scenes for its proper nurture.... Like Thomas Jefferson, Emerson is confident that under native conditions science and technology can be made to serve a rural ideal....The industrial revolution is a railway journey in the direction of nature....The nation is engaged in a pastoral retreat on a monumental

scale, and the result is to be a distinctive national culture. Moving west means casting off European attitudes and rigid social forms and urban ways. (The city is an obsolete, quasi-feudal institution.)."

Leo Marx
The Machine in the Garden
(Oxford 1964) 233, 236, 238

"The core of Transcendentalism was the belief that a correspondence or parallelism existed between the higher realm of spiritual truth and the lower one of material objects. For this reason natural objects assumed importance because, if rightly seen, they reflected universal spiritual truths. It was this belief that led Ralph Waldo Emerson to declare in his manifesto of 1836 that 'nature is the symbol of the spirit...the world is emblematic....' Transcendentalists had a definite conception of man's place in a universe divided between object and essence. His physical existence rooted him to the material portion, like all natural objects, but his soul gave him the potential to *transcend* this condition. Using intuition or imagination (as distinct from rational understanding), man might penetrate to spiritual truths....

While rejecting the deists' assumption of the power of reason, Transcendentalists agreed with them that nature was the proper source of religion. They were even more in accord with English Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth who believed in moral 'impulses' emanating from fields and woods. In theory, at least, Transcendentalists left little room for the earlier ideas about the amorality of wild country. Instead, the wilderness, in contrast with the city, was regarded as the environment where spiritual truths were least blunted.... Emerson wrote, 'in the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in the streets or villages...in the woods we return to reason and faith.'... Much of Thoreau's writing was only superficially about the natural world. Following Emerson's dictum that 'the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind,' he turned to it repeatedly as a figurative tool. Wilderness symbolized the unexplored qualities and untapped capacities of every individual."

Roderick Nash
Wilderness and the American Mind
(Yale 1967, 1974) 85-86, 89

"Emerson's biography is a story of continuous struggle, physical and intellectual (until middle age), and refinement of his ideas in successive lectures, essays, and poems. Even the key words of his vocabulary changed subtly in meaning from year to year, or book to book, so that his meaning must always be derived from the context. Emerson's first book, *Nature* (1836) is often regarded as difficult, but it is much easier to understand if the reader is familiar with the preceding lectures on natural sciences and passages in the Journals of the period on the Neoplatonists. It was no accident that Emerson chose natural science for his first public lectures. Contemporary geology, astronomy, and physiology were liberating him from the theological dogma he had been taught, and Neoplatonism suggested to him a theology for his own age.

In Emerson's fertile mind, the (seemingly) most unlikely sources fused in his own creations, such as Neoplatonism and the latest theories and discoveries in the sciences. The eighteenth-century Scottish 'Common Sense' philosophy might seem compatible with Plotinus and Plato, but Emerson's concept of the 'moral sentiment' came from Adam Smith (*Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1759), Richard Price, Thomas Reid, and Dugald Stewart, the very men whom Thomas Jefferson studied at William and Mary. Emerson's theory of the 'moral sentiment,' therefore, though derived from Scottish philosophers and Neoplatonism, is as American as the Declaration of Independence. But the Scottish school prepared the way for Unitarianism, which Emerson emphatically rejected, preferring the path of the Neoplatonists to 'natural' truths.... But in his Puritan inheritance, only partly rejected, Emerson bore witness to the survival of traces of Puritanism in American cultural history....In the sense that a finite mind can communicate with the Infinite Mind, Emerson was a mystic, for he believed that such communication was possible through prayer and meditation....

Emerson later rejected an anthropomorphic God and called his Deity Mind, Reason, or Over-Soul; but the traditional Christian belief in the subordination of matter to *soul* or *spirit* always remained the central assumption in his philosophy....Believing profoundly that the Christian conscience is an oracle, Emerson sought by introspection to find answers to moral problems. Through his close observation of his own mind

he came to feel that a greater Mind was in some mysterious way thinking through him, or prompting his finite mind. This introspection led him to anticipate William James's description of the 'stream-of-consciousness.' Like James, too, he strongly suspected that the hidden source of consciousness was an *unconscious* mind in which his thoughts originated. In these observations and deductions Emerson anticipated later psychologists of the unconscious (Freud) or the subconscious (Jung).

In *The Forgotten Language*, Erich Fromm says: 'One of the most beautiful and concise statements on the superior rational character of our mental process in sleep is made by Emerson.' Fromm refers to the lecture on 'Demonology,' in which Emerson says, 'Dreams have a poetic integrity and truth...Wise and sometimes terrible hints shall in them be thrown to the man out of quite unknown intelligence.'...He was...interested in the relation of his subconscious to his waking mind, by which he experienced impulses and intuitions which he could not account for rationally. He came to feel that it was by this 'doorway' that God entered consciousness. This is quite different, of course, from Freud's theory of the id and the subconscious, perhaps nearer to Jung's collective unconscious. But the important point is that Emerson was pioneering in psychology.... His confidence in the healthy effect of the harmony between his conscious and unconscious minds was an early example of psychiatric therapy....

His philosophy of pain and evil has often been misunderstood. He did not say that they do not exist; rather, he said that they are not 'real,' meaning that they are finite and remediable. Tragedy is irremediable: it is predestined, inescapable, a permanent condition under which a fated person must live and die....He anticipated what has been called 'The Tao of Physics'...He was an ecologist before the word was used, though not quite to the extent that Thoreau was.... Though optimistic in the long run about the future of the human race, he was pessimistic about contemporary men, and was severely critical of their greed, ignorance, and dishonesty. He refused to join social reform movements because he believed individual action was better than collective enterprise. Unless the individual could be improved, there was no hope for society. His own reform began with himself...Emerson became so disillusioned about government, constitutions, and elected officials that he was for a time an anarchist...Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation restored Emerson's faith in the government. Unfortunately, when his anger cooled, so did his creativity."

Gay Wilson Allen
Waldo Emerson
(Penguin 1982) ix-xiii

"Emerson is more than a brilliant fellow. Be his stuff begged, borrowed, or stolen, or of his own domestic manufacture, he is an uncommon man. Swear he is a humbug--then he is no common humbug.... There is a something about every man elevated above mediocrity, which is, for the most part, instinctively perceptible. This I see in Mr. Emerson. And, frankly, for the sake of the argument, let us call him a fool;-- Then had I rather be a fool than a wise man--I love all men who *dive*."

Melville
quoted by Alfred Kazin
An American Procession
(Random House Vintage 1984) 31

"A young man named Ralph Waldo Emerson...after failing in the every day vocations of a Unitarian preacher and schoolmaster, starts a new doctrine of transcendentalism, declares all the old revelations superannuated and worn out, and announces the approach of new revelations and prophecies. Garrison and the non-resistant abolitionists, Brownson and the Marat democrats, phrenology and animal magnetism, all come in, furnishing each some plausible rascality as an ingredient for the bubbling cauldron of religion and politics."

John Quincy Adams (c.1837)
former President of the United States
quoted by Alfred Kazin, *An American Procession*
(Random House Vintage 1985) 33

"Emerson was an organic writer and instinctive stylist who even on the platform seemed to be waiting for his own voice to astonish him....we can still hear the man who dazzled so many brave minds in the

nineteenth century. Emerson was the contemporary who discovered them to themselves.... No American writer ever played more roles than Emerson the inspirer, the 'mystic,' the poet, and the inhuman perfectionist. On the lecture platform he was blandness itself, the sage on all subjects. Reporting his mind in his journal, he astonished and disconcerted himself....

Whitman's 'message' must have been glimpsed by Emerson as the farthest extension of his own, Whitman's ecstatic lines a startling complement to rhapsodic paragraphs of *Nature*.... Emerson was to have the greatest possible influence on his contemporaries, on other writers, on the myth of the American as being uniquely free. Whitman was eventually let down by Emerson's prudish objections to *Leaves of Grass*, but he would have been nothing without Emerson's presence in the American picture. He sized up Emerson's temperament as 'almost ideal.'...

His habitual benevolence and insistent optimism made him suspect, even in his own time, as a type of confidence man. But in his great beginning, when the minister of Second Church in Boston unfrocked himself and then offered himself as 'man thinking' to any lecture audience that would have him, he was that rarest of all modern intellectuals--an ecstatic, a primitive Christian....For nine successive generations in New England, Emersons had been ministers.... In the age-old way of Puritan America, Emerson regarded himself as one of the Elect because a divine message had come through him. It was not just as the founder of a new spiritual consciousness that Emerson recognized himself; it was as a link between man and God. The poet-prophet-clairvoyant-hero was more than a spokesman for the divine; he was the living proof that God could be realized in every man....

The Greeks may have discovered that the 'world' replicates the human mind; Emerson lived this fact without philosophy's sense that perception can be duplicitous. The 'soul' or 'mind' had for him such total access to reality that it virtually replaced it....The soul was not just the perfect knower but the real medium of existence. We live in disembodied consciousness as God does....The genius of primitive Christianity lent itself to Emerson's belief that his soul was the center of a cosmic drama....Emerson certainly felt himself to be of the greatest possible importance to the cosmos....In his intoxication with the religious sufficiency of his creative powers Emerson paraded before all men a doctrine sufficient only to great creative talent....

The contradiction between the soul and society, which helped to kill Thoreau during the Civil War, did not kill Emerson. It did not even change him significantly. It muted his enthusiasm and darkened his vocabulary....The years after the Civil War were to be one long anticlimax to rhapsodies from Emerson's genius for personal faith. Then Emerson himself became 'a god in ruins,' reduced to the elegance of style that never failed him. The apostle of perfect personal power--to be gained from the energy and imagination no longer sacrificed to formal religion--was to be misunderstood as a preacher of rugged individualism."

Alfred Kazin
An American Procession
(Random House Vintage 1985) 26-41, 51, 57

"Emerson articulated principles that have become central to defining traditional American values: self-reliance, individual authority and responsibility, a resolute optimism, moral idealism, the veneration of experience, and a worshipful return to nature. Emerson's expression of these fundamental principles in America's collective identity has been quoted, endorsed, and adapted by so many generations of writers and public figures that their familiarity may well reduce our appreciation of just how original these ideas were when Emerson expressed them. As the inheritors of a literary legacy nourished on a schoolroom diet of Emerson's most epigrammatic lines, contemporary readers must rediscover the range, freshness, complexity, and elasticity of his writing. The challenge in reading Emerson is to recover the originality of his now-familiar ideas."

Justin Kaplan
The Harper American Literature I
(Harper & Row 1987) 972

Michael Hollister (2015)