

## EMERSON IN THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

Ralph Waldo Emerson

(1803-1882)

“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