

## INTRODUCTION



Ralph Waldo Emerson

(1803-1882)

Ralph Waldo Emerson is (1) the most inspirational American philosopher; (2) the most quoted author on the facades of schools and other buildings in America; (3) the most influential moral teacher in America in the 19th century; and (4) the author of *Nature* (1836), considered the most seminal work in American literature. (5) Emerson became the intellectual leader of American culture after his famous address “The American Scholar” in 1837. (6) He was the first major American writer significantly influenced by Asian philosophy, as in “Brahma” (1855); (7) the leader of the New England Transcendentalist movement (1836-1860); (8) the philosophical model of Idealism for Thoreau and Whitman; (9) appreciated by the more conservative Holmes, Lowell and Longfellow even though they disagreed with his philosophy; (10) the literary adversary of Poe--his opposite--who satirizes him in “Never Bet the Devil Your Head”; (11) the main philosophical foil of Hawthorne and Melville, who criticized and satirized him, most obviously in “The Birthmark,” “The Old Manse,” *The House of the Seven Gables*, *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man*; and (12) a fertile source of ideas, metaphors and themes for other writers, including Thoreau, Whitman, Melville, Dickinson, Frost, and Henry James.

In his journal Emerson told himself, “Make your own Bible.” *Nature*, *Moby-Dick*, *Walden* and *Leaves of Grass* aspire to be new holy books. Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne and Melville were the best educated and most intellectually engaged major American writers of the 19th century before the Civil War. Emerson led the way--inspiring, challenging, and provoking. He embodies Idealism in the extreme, serving as a useful permanent reference point in our intellectual history. Always accused of minimizing or ignoring evil, he did not deny it, so powerful was his faith. Whatever you may think of his Idealism, his *archetypal* thinking--as in his essay “Circles”--is rare, profound and eternal. In this respect Emerson, genteel though he was, thinks like an Indian such as Black Elk and like Thoreau the pretend Indian. He and Thoreau state directly what fiction writers express indirectly in archetypal symbolism.

In 18th-century America the Enlightenment liberated many people from the constraints of organized religion epitomized in Calvinistic Puritanism--into the constraints of pure rationalism. Emerson led the 19th-century movement that liberated Romantics from the constraints of rationalism and vertical consciousness. His Idealism is holistic from the start, taking up where Jonathan Edwards left off, minus the Calvinism. Calvinists saw humans as depraved, whereas Emerson sees them as gods. As has often been

said, Emerson turned Calvinism on its head. The contradictions in Emerson are due to the fact that he is both (1) a moral teacher in the vertical mode of ordinary rational consciousness--a puritan speaking in practical terms, down to earth with his homely metaphors; and (2) a mystic in "cloudland"--as Hawthorne put it--in the holistic mode of reconciled opposites, often speaking in the transcendent paradoxes of an Idealist. Emerson noted another such duality: "A remarkable trait in the American character is the union...of Yankee cleverness with spiritualism." That is why, as with the *Bible*, people on both sides of an issue often can find quotations from Emerson to support their conflicting positions.

## BIOGRAPHY

Emerson's optimism was hard won: When he was only 8 years old, his father died; only 2 years after he married the love of his life, she died; 3 years later his brother Edward died; 2 years after that his brother Charles died; and 5 years later his little boy died at the age of 5 when Emerson was 38, just at the outset of his career. He descended from 8 or 9 generations of Massachusetts clergymen, the first of whom arrived in 1635. The second one settled in Concord after being driven out of his parish by Indians. The grandfather of Emerson was the minister in Concord and built the Old Manse. At the outbreak of the American Revolution, he encouraged the embattled farmers at the bridge nearby (celebrated in "Concord Hymn"), then he joined the army as a chaplain. Emerson was born in 1803 during the first administration of Thomas Jefferson. His conservative father was minister of the First Church, Unitarian, in Boston, when he died in 1811, leaving a widow and four sons close to poverty. "My recollections of early life are not very pleasant," he said. His upright character was formed in part by the discipline of his parents, his Puritan heritage and his early hardships.

## EDUCATION

He was sent to Boston Latin School, where a classmate described him as "a spiritual looking boy in blue nankeen, whose image more than any other is still deeply stamped upon my mind, as I then saw him and loved him, I knew not why, and thought him so angelic and remarkable." At the age of 14 he was able to enter Harvard after receiving an appointment as the President's freshman and by working as a waiter in the Commons. His mother somehow got all four of her sons through Harvard. Emerson disliked formalism and braindead professors. As a result he was a mediocre student, excelled by two of his brothers, graduating 30th in a class of 59. What first distinguished him from his classmates was his independent mind and the courage to use it. Upon graduation, he became a schoolteacher for awhile. "I was already writing every night in my chamber, my first thoughts on morals and the beautiful laws of Compensation and of individual genius, which to observe and illustrate have given sweetness to many hours of my life." He went back to Harvard and attended the Divinity School: "Had they examined me, they would never have passed me." After that he spent a winter in Florida for his health, then became pastor of the Second Church of Boston in 1829, where Increase and Cotton Mather had preached more than a century before.

## RESIGNS FROM MINISTRY

Young Pastor Emerson married an aspiring poet, a delicate young New England girl in frail health, Ellen Tucker—"a woman of remarkable beauty, grace, and buoyancy of spirit." After only two years, however, she died in 1831. The following year, bereaved and in failing health himself, Emerson unburdened himself of his obligations as a Unitarian clergyman by resigning his pastorate. He explained that he could no longer administer the sacrament of the Lord's Supper: "I have sometimes thought that in order to be a good minister it was necessary to leave the ministry. The profession is antiquated. In an altered age, we worship the dead forms of our forefathers."

## RELIGION

Unitarianism was too confining and rationalistic for Emerson. He outgrew it while reading Plato, Montaigne, Plutarch, Shakespeare, Carlyle, Scott, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Mill, Newman, Goethe and Hegel. As he developed his philosophy, he came to resemble the Idealist Plotinus more than he did Plato, in his tone of spiritual elevation and his belief that "all life is a kind of spiritual vision." Critics dispute his exact religious beliefs. He has been called a "primitive Christian," but some of his beliefs—especially in absolute individualism—are contrary to Christianity. At the same time, he declared that "Jesus speaks always from within, and in a degree that transcends all others." And "I believe in the still small

voice, and that voice is Christ within us.” If God had prompted Emerson, as he believed, it must have been as a prophet to rationalists and materialists throughout American history thereafter, to preach the primacy of the spirit--to awaken souls. Secular liberals like being flattered that they are actually gods and they can avoid thinking of themselves as religious by calling God the “Over-Soul.”

## EUROPE

Hoping to restore his health, he took a trip to Europe, where he met his nearest European counterpart Thomas Carlyle, who became a lifelong friend, in the wilds of Scotland--in “Solitude almost Druidical.” He also met Wordsworth, Coleridge, Mill and others. Upon his return to America he wrote in his journal in September 1833: “I thank God who has led me through this European scene--the last schoolroom in which He has pleased to instruct me--in safety and pleasure; and has brought me to the shore, and to the ship that steers westward. He has shown me the men I wished to see...He has thereby comforted and confirmed me in my convictions. Many things I owe to the sight of these men.”

## MARRIAGE & LECTURING

When he returned to America, his credentials and talent as an orator enabled him to make a living with the lecture platform as his pulpit. Inspired and writing in earnest now, he moved into the Old Manse in Concord for awhile, the home of his Puritan ancestors and later of Hawthorne. Then he bought a house on two acres, married Lydia Jackson and published his first volume, *Nature* (1836). The slim treatise inspired and became the bible of the Transcendentalist movement in New England and eventually, according to scholars, the most seminal of all American books.

## GENERAL PRINCIPLES IN *Nature* (1836)

(1) Nature is like a “divine dream” of God (or the “Over-Soul”); (2) Nature is the artwork of God—“one vast picture”; (3) matter is illusion, everything is spirit (monism, Idealism); (4) “Nature is the symbol of spirit”; (5) “Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts”; (6) Nature is fluid and changeable; (7) Nature mirrors the divine mind of God and the soul of man: “Man is conscious of a universal soul within or behind his individual life [which] he calls Reason” [not 18th-century reason, but transcendent intuition]; “the sky with its eternal calm...is the type [archetypal space] of Reason”; the whole of Nature is a metaphor of the human mind; (8) Nature belongs to every person; (9) Nature is meant to be impressed with the culture of the human race; (10) humans are part of Nature, part of God--immortal spirit. (11) You are in reality a god on earth; (12) you have an infinite capacity; (13) you are perfectible and can prevail over evil; (14) but at present you are a fallen god because you are “disunited” (dissociation of sensibility), alienated from Nature, your soul dwarfed by materialism and traditional dogmas. (15) You can know the mind of God and regenerate yourself by studying Nature; (16) consider your life an ongoing process of growth and renewal (individuation); (17) build your own world and live in the ideal; (18) retain the imaginative “spirit of infancy”--of Adam and Eve; (19) trust your instincts, intuitions and “heart”; (20) live according to your highest thoughts; (21) seek the miraculous in the common; (22) notice the microcosm of the whole in every part; (23) recognize differences but emphasize unity; (24) live simply and love truth; (25) live in the country if you can.

## “The American Scholar” (1837)

*Nature* boldly proposes that Americans substitute Nature for what was generally considered to be their lack of a distinctive cultural heritage--in short, replace England with Nature. Given the opportunity to deliver the annual Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard in 1837, Emerson burst into national prominence all at once with the most inspirational speech of his life, at the perfect moment in American literary history: In “The American Scholar” he set the highest standards for scholarship and called upon Americans to look inward--not to Europe. Oliver Wendell Holmes called it “our intellectual Declaration of Independence.” The address was greatly admired also by many others, including James Russell Lowell, whose accounts of its effects upon the audience convey its power and the excitement it generated. The most extensive account was given by Bliss Perry almost a century later in “Emerson’s Most Famous Speech” (1923). Just a year

after that sensation he became provocative and controversial with his "Divinity School Address" (1838) in which he challenged orthodoxy, committed heresy and offended Christians.

#### Essays (1841,1844)

Emerson became what Christians called a false prophet, though he did declare that "Jesus speaks always from within, and in a degree that transcends all others." He further defined his philosophy in "The Over-Soul" and in "The Transcendentalist": "What is properly called Transcendentalism among us is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842. As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects--Materialists and Idealists." His "Self-Reliance" may be the most reprinted essay in American literature. Emerson inspired the founding of the Transcendental Club, collaborated with Margaret Fuller, edited *The Dial* from 1842 to 1844, began opposing slavery in an address in Concord in 1844 and, returning to Europe, delivered many popular lectures in England and Scotland.

#### INDIVIDUATION

Emerson does not dramatize an individuation process that culminates in transcendent consciousness, as do Thoreau in *Walden*, Hawthorne in "The Artist of the Beautiful" and Melville in *Moby-Dick*. His first major work *Nature* (1836) exhibited from the start most characteristics of literature in the transcendental mode. His Idealism made him seem aloof to his neighbors in both philosophy and personality. Modern readers who find him naive should bear in mind that in his early life, Emerson endured hardship, multiple griefs, alienation, condemnation and ridicule that amounted to a prolonged ordeal in the "Wilderness." His life and his Idealism were both triumphs over the pain of tragedies.

All his life he preached individuation, though he thought of it in his own terms. He also anticipated Jung by thinking in archetypes--he even uses the term "archetype," as in his essay "History." The first step in the process of psychological development is (1) *attaining independence*: "He in whom the love of truth predominates will keep himself aloof from all moorings" ("Intellect"); "The virtues of society are the vices of the saint" ("Circles"); "The reliance on authority measures the decline of religion, the withdrawal of the soul" ("The Over-Soul"). The next step in the development of the soul is (2) *recognizing that "God exists"*. There is a soul at the centre of Nature and over the will of every man" ("Spiritual Laws"). The goal is *centering yourself*: (3) "If he have found his centre, the Deity will shine through him" (OS); "Is this too sudden a rushing from the centre to the verge of our orbit?" (Cir).

Emerson does not explain how to center yourself. That varies from one soul to another. He is an inspirational preacher of general principles: "I simply experiment, an endless seeker with no Past at my back" (Cir); "Whilst we converse with what is above us, we do not grow old, but grow young" (Cir); "I cast away in this new moment all my once hoarded knowledge, as vacant and vain" (Cir). Emerson's philosophy inspired other Romantics and anticipates Modernism in its Existential stress on free will and creating the self: "The soul looketh steadily forwards, creating a world always before her" (OS); "Know then that the world exists for you...Build therefore your own world" (*Nature*).

#### TRANSCENDENTAL CHARACTERISTICS

Emerson's early writing exhibits most of the usual characteristics of literature in the transcendental mode, with exceptions that define his philosophy: (1) the QUEST INTO THE WILDERNESS: The Wilderness is Nature all around us and in us; (2) above all Emerson preaches the need to SAVE ONE'S OWN SOUL OR SELF; hence there is no (3) CHRIST-EVOKING FIGURE AS EXEMPLAR, although "Jesus speaks always from within, and in a degree that transcends all others"; (4) there is no SPIRITUAL GUIDE but your own spirit: "The relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure that it is profane to seek to interpose helps" (SR); (5) SOLITUDE AND SELF-RELIANCE: "We must go alone" (SR); "It is only as a man puts off from himself all external support and stands alone that I see him to be strong and to prevail" (SR); "He must greatly listen to himself, withdrawing himself from all the accents of other men's devotion" (OS).

(6) SPIRITUAL DEATH AND REBIRTH: "The soul's advances are not made by gradation...but rather by ascension of state, such as can be represented by metamorphosis... The growths of genius are of a

certain total character” (OS). “True conquest is the causing the black event to fade and disappear as an early cloud of insignificant result in a history so large and advancing” (Cir). His phrase “true conquest” is the equivalent of slaying the dragon, overcoming the archetypal monster--the negative aspects of Nature--in particular death, which he experienced early in life with the successive losses of 5 people he loved. Grief was his (7) CONFRONTATION WITH ULTIMATE TRUTH. Idealism was his practical solution to despair. Idealism is simply better for your mental health than materialism: “The advantage of the ideal theory over the popular faith is this, that it presents the world in precisely that view which is most desirable to the mind” (*Nature*). (8) ATONEMENT WITH NATURE: “that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up Nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old” (*Nature*); “A life in harmony with Nature, the love of truth and of virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text” (*Nature*); I expand and live in the warm day like corn and melons” (*Nature*); “I am God in nature; I am a weed by the wall” (Cir); (9) THE RECONCILIATION OF OPPOSITES SYNTHESIZES HEAD AND HEART, PURITAN AND PASTORAL VALUES: practicality, usefulness, discipline, self-denial, living by highest principles, conquering nature and domesticating the wild--as well as spontaneity, originality, intuition over reason, heart over head, rejection of authority, anarchistic individualism, and living in the present.

(10) CIRCULAR, CYCLICAL AND SPIRAL IMAGERY: “St. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere and its circumference nowhere” (Cir); “The natural world may be conceived of as a system of concentric circles” (Cir); “The life of man is a self-evolving circle; which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end” (Cir); “Whilst the eternal generation of circles proceeds, the eternal generator abides. That central life is somewhat superior to creation, superior to knowledge and thought, and contains all its circles” (Cir); (11) INNER LIGHT: “All goes to show that the soul in man...is not a faculty, but a light” (OS); “A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within” (SR); “From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all” (OS); “By the same fire...which burns until it shall dissolve all things into the waves and surges of an ocean of light,--we see and know each other, and what spirit each is of” (OS); (12) NUMINOUS EVOCATION and (13) MYSTERY, INTENSITY, ECSTASY:

“In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,--no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,--my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,--all mean egotism vanishes. I become a *transparent eyeball*; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God” (*Nature*). [italics added]

Transparency is a common motif in literature expressing loss of ego and transcendent experience. (14) TRANSCENDENCE OF TIME AND SPACE: “When these waves of God flow into me I no longer reckon lost time...These moments confer a sort of omnipresence and omnipotence which asks nothing of duration, but sees that the energy of the mind is commensurate with the work to be done, without time” (OS); “We become immortal, for we learn that time and space are relations of matter; that with a perception of truth or a virtuous will they have no affinity” (*Nature*); “He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time” (“The American Scholar”); (15) SENSE OF PARADOX: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds” (SR); “Men are wiser than they know” (SR); “The thief steals from himself” (“Comp”); “Our strength grows out of our weakness” (Comp); (16) INEFFABILITY: “Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul” (OS); “Of that ineffable essence which we call Spirit, he that thinks most, will say least” (*Nature*); “The soul answers never by words, but by the thing itself that is inquired after” (OS).

(17) HOLISTIC PERCEPTION: “Existence, or God, is not a relation or a part, but the whole” (Comp); “Within man is the soul of the whole...the common heart” (OS); “the whole of history is in one man” (Hist); “Live with a divine unity” (OS); “The heart which abandons itself to the Supreme Mind finds itself related to all its works” (OS); “The integrity of the intellect...must have the same wholeness which Nature has” (Int); “A leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time, is related to the whole, and partakes of the

perfection of the whole" (*Nature*); (18) HARMONIOUS VISION OF LIFE: "That Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart." (OS); "So intimate is this Unity, that, it is easily seen, it lies under the undermost garment of Nature, and betrays its source in Universal Spirit. For it pervades thought also" (*Nature*): "The universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One" (OS); "If the Reason be stimulated to more earnest vision, outlines and surfaces become transparent, and are no longer seen; causes and spirits are seen through them" (*Nature*); "In the nature of the soul is the compensation for the inequalities of condition" (Comp).

#### EMERSON AND ANNE HUTCHINSON

Emerson is in the Antinomian tradition initiated by Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643), to whom Hawthorne compares Hester in *The Scarlet Letter*. Just as Hutchinson rebelled against Puritan orthodoxy, Emerson rebelled against the orthodoxies of his culture. Both gave their own intuitions sovereignty over society, giving moral authority to their "inner light" or conscience. Emerson says, "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament or bards and sages"; "Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist...Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind"; "What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think"; "The relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure that it is profane to seek to interpose helps."

#### ANARCHISM

However, Emerson is more radical than Hutchinson: "No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature...The only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it." He advocates "wild virtue" and advises us, "Trust your emotion." Even anger, hatred and lust? In his individualism, Emerson is an anarchist like Thoreau in "Civil Disobedience" (1849) and in *Walden* (1854) when we are advised to "Grow wild according to thy nature." This tradition is also expressed in 19th-century fiction in the characters of Natty Bumppo and Huckleberry Finn. During the 1960s this tradition of rebellious individualism—personal anarchism--inspired a countercultural revolution that transformed society and largely determined American history for the rest of the 20th century into the 21st. Few anarchists are as virtuous as Emerson. Anarchists have a history of blowing things up. Today we have millions of young people "growing wild according to their natures" in the drug culture, sex clubs, hooking up, street gangs, flash mobs, riots, and mass murder. "Trust your emotion" is bad advice.

#### 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.

#### "THE SAGE OF CONCORD"

Emerson's reputation grew with each book he published: *Poems* (1848), *Representative Men* (1850), *English Traits* (1856), *The Conduct of Life* (1860). His writing after the *Essays* became less poetic, more factual, empirical and skeptical, moderating his optimism. He was in ever-increasing demand as a lecturer on Lyceum platforms all around the country and he traveled extensively by train and by horse and buggy. He opposed the Fugitive Slave Law (1850) with a passion and in 1859 he took a public stand as a champion of the abolitionist John Brown for his attack on the government. From 1861 to 1865 he was caught up in the fever of the Civil War: "Emerson," Hawthorne said, "is breathing slaughter like the rest of us." In 1863 he read his "Boston Hymn" to a full house in the Boston Music Hall and Henry James described "the

momentousness of the occasion, the vast excited multitude, the crowded platform, the tall spare figure of Emerson” and “the immense effect with which his beautiful voice pronounced the lines.” Emerson lived so much in the ideal that actual society was to him a “perpetual disappointment.” The Civil War contradicted his philosophy and his optimism suffered a blow from which he never recovered.

#### DEATH

On his lecture tour in Great Britain, a letter published in a London newspaper requested that the admission price of Emerson’s lecture be reduced so that the poor could hear him speak: “Emerson is a phenomenon whose like is not in the world, and to miss him is to lose an important part of the nineteenth century.” When he died in April 1882, the church bells in Concord announced it by ringing 79 times. Walk up the hill into the woods to the town cemetery, past the plain headstone for Thoreau on one side of the path and the plain one for Hawthorne on the other side--the simplest of gray headstones. Near the top of the hill is a large granite boulder with a chain fence around it and a plaque memorializing Ralph Waldo Emerson. *The New York Times* gave three columns on its front page and more than two inside to his death and works, concluding: “His influence has in all likelihood been greater upon the American...mind than any other writer in the Nation.”

Michael Hollister (2015)

#### CRITICAL STATURE

“He brought us *life*, gave us ravishing glimpses of an ideal under the dry husk of our New England; made us conscious of the supreme and everlasting originality of whatever bit of soul might be in any of us.”

James Russell Lowell

“There came to us, in that old Oxford time...a clear and pure voice, which for my ear, at any rate, brought a strain as new and moving, and unforgettable, as the strain of Newman or Carlyle or Goethe....He was your Newman, your man of soul and genius visible to you in the flesh, speaking to your ears, a present object for your heart and imagination. That is surely the most potent of all influences! Nothing can come up to it. Emerson is the friend and aider of those who would live in the spirit....As Wordsworth’s poetry is, in my judgment, the most important work done in verse, in our language, during the present century, so Emerson’s *Essays* are, I think, the most important work done in prose....I figure him to my mind...with one hand stretched out towards the East, to our laden and laboring England; the other towards the ever-growing West, to his own dearly loved America--great, intellectual, sensual, avaricious America.”

Matthew Arnold

“Emerson had a genius for seeing character as a real and supreme thing...He serves, and will not wear out...Indeed, we cannot afford to drop him... He did something better than anyone else, he had a particular faculty, which has not been surpassed, for speaking to the soul in a voice of direction and authority.”

Henry James  
“Emerson” (1887)

“For all his influence in shaping the American mind, we now find it hard to accept his often uncompromising idealism or his absolute trust in the future, not to mention his notion that each of us can find the laws of the universe by searching his heart. The fact remains that his structure of thought was more complete and consistent than most of his critics have been willing to concede. In large part it derived from the Neoplatonists of the later Roman Empire, and theirs has proved to be a lasting tradition. Even when we reject Emerson’s metaphysics, we are likely to be swayed by the psychological force of his beliefs (which are, by the way, easy to rephrase in more recent terms; for example, his Over-Soul often seems close to the Jungian notion of a collective unconscious.)”

Malcolm Cowley  
*The Portable Emerson*  
Carl Bode, ed.

(Penguin 1946-81) xxxiv

“Emerson’s appeal lies not only in his often splendid rhetoric and sometimes stirring ideas; it lies in something in between, which we might call his mode. He could take a perfectly straightforward sentence, with no embellishment to it, and curve it in such a way that it captured the attention. If we look closely, we can see that he thought not only in circles but in segments of circles....Just as he was given to curving his sentences, he was given to curving his paragraphs and...whole essays. Emerson always loved a crescent. He confessed in explaining Compensation that he was happy if he could ‘draw the smallest arc’ of its vast circle for us.”

Carl Bode, ed.  
*The Portable Emerson*  
(Penguin 1946-81) xxxi-xxxii

“His preeminence has caused our literary historians some embarrassment. America was ready for a Shakespeare, a Dante, or a Dostoyevski to give literary voice to her achieved majority. She was given an apologist--an Aristotle, a Paul, a Bacon. In the wise and temperate Emerson, the heat became radiant light. It was he who brought into its first sharp focus the full meaning of two centuries of life on the Atlantic seaboard of this continent; of the economic and spiritual revolutions which had unsettled the Old World and settled the New; of the experiment in democracy which was to make a Holy Commonwealth into a world power. He did this in two ways: by carrying to its ultimate statement the individual’s revolt from authority, which marked the transition from the medieval world to the modern; and by formulating the dichotomy between the vision of a Jonathan Edwards and the common sense of a Benjamin Franklin, a conflict and a balance which has always provided the creative tension in American life.”

Robert E. Spiller  
*Literary History of the United States* 3rd edition  
(Macmillan 1946-63) 358

“Historically, though he was by no means our greatest literary artist, he was perhaps the most important thinker and writer we have had, the first to make our declaration of cultural independence effective, and the chief pioneer of romanticism, (that is to say, of modern thought and art) in this country. We can well afford to forgive him his structural weaknesses and his excessive optimism, which was never merely sentimental, as some critics have assumed. And we owe it to ourselves, if not to Emerson, to remember that we are where we are in the world’s culture today partly because we have his high, stooping shoulders to stand upon.”

Richard P. Adams  
“Emerson and the Organic Metaphor”  
*PMLA* LXIX (1954) 151

“The durability of Emerson for the general reader is one measure of his genius. Now, a century and a half after his birth, the forum and the market place echo his words and ideas. As Ralph L. Rusk has suggested, this is partly because ‘he is a wise man, wit, and poet, all three,’ and partly because his speculations proved prophetic, having as firm a practical relationship with the conditions of our present age as with the history of mankind before him. ‘His insatiable passion for unity resembles Einstein’s’ as much as Plato’s; and this passion unites serenity and practicality, God and science, in a manner highly suggestive for those attempting to solve the twentieth-century dilemmas which have seemed most desperately urgent.”

Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, eds.  
*The American Tradition in Literature* 3rd edition  
(Norton 1956-67) 1061

“Thus far in the twentieth century the excitement of Emerson has remained mostly with philosophers and literary critics, with those in the pragmatic tradition (William James, O. W. Holmes, Jr., and John Dewey) and those in the school of organic criticism (F. O. Matthiessen, Charles Feidelson, and such Emerson scholars as F. I. Carpenter, Sherman Paul, and Stephen E. Whicher). Few poets and novelists have felt for Emerson the kind of kinship that they have had with Hawthorne or Melville or James. One notable exception is Robert Frost, who in his 1959 address put Emerson with ‘my four great Americans,’ called



'Uriel' the 'best western poem yet,' and thought that 'not even Thermopylae has been celebrated better' than the Battle of Concord in 'Concord Hymn.' Earlier, in an essay of 1954, Frost has described a recurrent fascination with 'Brahma' over a period of sixty years, and in his final knowledge of it concluded that he had become 'a confirmed symbolist.' Somewhat more typically, T. S. Eliot has viewed Emerson as one of the outmoded 'guardians of the faith.' Whether the critical reawakening to the strength of Emerson and the recognition of Robert Frost among poets will precede a more widespread sense of Emerson's usability remains as yet a question. No American, however, will understand his past without understanding the man who said, 'Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind'."

William M. Gibson & George Arms  
*Twelve American Writers*  
(Macmillan 1962) 3-4

"Emerson has had a curious fate, though by no means a unique one. To the older generation, at the beginning of his career, he seemed a propagator of dangerous and probably subversive ideas—the latest form of infidelity,' as a famous attack had it. The old ex-President, John Quincy Adams, wagging his head sadly over the heresies preached by this son of an old friend, could only describe them as 'wild and visionary phantasies,' clearly destructive of 'the most important and solemn duties of the Christian faith.' To the younger generation, on the contrary, he spoke as a liberator and a spurrier-on—a liberator from the handcuffs of convention and timidity, a spurrier-on to a life of rebellion, experiment, discovery, and heroic action. For younger men and women—and this over a period of decades—he played the roles of both a Socrates and of a Taillefer; of an emancipator and a warrior-bard, a questioner and an instigator to valor. He did more than any other man, said John Jay Chapman, 'to rescue the youth of the next generation and fit them for the fierce times to follow. It will not be denied that he sent ten thousand sons to war.'

Time passed, however, and though this tonicity of Emerson's has probably never ceased to exercise, behind the scenes, its invigorating effect on responsive minds, a public process of dilution and vulgarization got under way: the inflammatory strains in his thought were conveniently banked over and damped down; his affirmations were translated into complacencies, his ardor into 'strenuousness,' and his philosophical optimism into Positive Thinking. The vulgarizers, to tell the truth, could always cite chapter and verse for their deformations of Emerson's teaching: their version is a caricature, but it is a caricature of something that is really there. In any case, his name gradually became synonymous with a shallow cheerfulness or a kind of Boy Scout gospel of essentially adolescent virility. The best minds of a later generation found less and less to make use of in Emerson, more and more to reject."

Newton Arvin  
*Major Writers of America*  
(Harcourt 1962) 477

"Aside from his own merits, he is important for his influence on Whitman and Dickinson, and Robert Frost gratefully confessed his indebtedness. Recently critics have also begun to see his influence on Wallace Stevens and other modern poets. This suggests vital differences between Emerson and his fading New England contemporaries."

Gay Wilson Allen  
*Waldo Emerson*  
(Penguin 1982) viii

"Ralph Waldo Emerson is often positioned as the 'father' of American literature. As a poet, preacher, orator, and essayist, he articulated the new nation's prospects and needs and became a weighty exemplum of the American artist. Throughout the 19th century, Emerson's portrait gazed down from schoolhouse and library walls, where he was enshrined as one of America's great poets...He was known for his critique of conventional values of property and ambition, yet his formulation of the self-reliant American was used to authorize the *laissez-faire* individualism of Horatio Alger and Andrew Carnegie...He was...read enthusiastically by Carlyle and Nietzsche....To Irving Howe, Emerson is the dominant spirit of his age... In F. O. Matthiessen's formulation of the 'American Renaissance,' Emerson is the initiating force 'on which Thoreau built, to which Whitman gave extension, and to which Hawthorne and Melville were indebted by being forced to react against its philosophical assumptions.'

As Joel Porte has argued, 'Emerson's fate, somewhat like Shakespeare's, was that he came to be treated as an almost purely allegorical personage whose real character and work got submerged in his function as a touchstone of critical opinion.' He becomes the founder of 'Transcendentalism' or the spokesman for 'Nature,' the 'optimist' who does not understand the world's evil or pain. He is thus removed from the march of time, idealized as a 'primordial' figure whose vision isolates him from the political and social struggles of his age."

Jean Ferguson Carr  
*The Heath Anthology of American Literature I*  
(Heath 1990) 1467

Michael Hollister (2020)

