

About This Volume

Jericho Williams

The principal goal of *Critical Insights: Ralph Waldo Emerson* is to introduce a perennial figure in studies of American literature, philosophy, and religion to a new generation of readers and to encourage further interest and inquiry. As in the cases of other highly influential nineteenth-century American figures such as Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, much of Emerson's writing is obscured in the shadow of the persona that precedes it. And like Douglass and Lincoln, Emerson can be a towering and intimidating figure for first-time readers. Yet, as all contributors to this volume might attest, Emerson is still a vibrant force within literary studies.

Emerson has not vanished from the realms of American and global thought. Many of the famous orator and writer's ideas still circulate within intellectual discussions today within a variety of academic disciplines. His ideas comprise what might be described as a common bedrock of American experience, and they remain inextricable from American identity today. This volume aims to celebrate that reality by discussing Emerson's contributions during his lifetime through the present day.

The book originated with the idea of exploring Emerson's writings beyond the essay "Self-Reliance." Chances are that if students encounter Emerson's work in high school or college, they read this essay, which first appeared in *Essays* (1841). A meditation on the self as it relates to American identity, "Self-Reliance" remains thought-provoking today. Some readers proclaim that certain passages are so strongly resonant that they merit excerpting, whereas others decry this approach and insist that the essay must be read in its entirety. This to-excerpt-or-not dilemma also applies to much of Emerson's other work, which also remains eminently quotable. Outside of academic settings, the general public is likely to encounter Emerson via snippets that appear in the public sphere as parts of greeting cards, inspirational speeches, online thoughts of the

Biography of Ralph Waldo Emerson_____

LuElla D'Amico

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82) was a prominent American philosopher, essayist, and poet who lived and wrote during the nineteenth century. Emerson is best known for his transcendentalist beliefs, which emphasize the importance of individuality, nature, spiritualism, and intuition. His writings have left a profound impact on American literature and philosophical thought. In other words, they are still often referenced today in academic circles and in the wider culture writ large.

In *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*, contemporary philosopher Cornel West writes that Emerson is:

The indisputable godfather of the deep democratic tradition . . . , a literary artist of dramatic and visionary eloquence and the first full-blown democratic intellectual in the United States. Emerson was an intellectual who hungered most of all to communicate to broad publics. He reveled in the burning social issues of his day (the annihilation of Native Americans, slavery), highlighting the need for democratic individuals to be nonconformist, courageous, and true to themselves. (4)

Emerson, therefore, harbors a unique legacy as being both activist and philosopher. Throughout his works, Emerson inspires others to take up his charge of trusting their intuitions to make change. Imminently quotable, he relays in his 1841 treatise “Self-Reliance” that “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines” (265). For Emerson what matters most is that the public be attentive to their inner selves and conscience—that they rail against thoughtlessly agreeing with the masses, and each other, for the mere satisfaction of approval. Rather, the public must listen to and trust themselves, regardless of social consequences. In this way they can become

The Critical Reception of Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Longstanding American Commitment to Individuality and Freedom

Amy Leshinsky

Despite his place on numerous required reading lists for secondary schools in the United States, Ralph Waldo Emerson did not excel in school. Although he was privileged in the education he received, entering Boston Latin School in 1812 and enrolling at Harvard College five years later, he was “a slow learner and made no mark at Harvard as an undergraduate” (Franklin Park Coalition 3). In 1820, a year before graduating from Harvard, he received the Bowdoin Prize for an essay on “The Character of Socrates” and the Boylston Prize for public speaking. However, his performance at Harvard was stagnant; he did not gain admission into Phi Beta Kappa; and he did not graduate at the top of his class of fifty-nine. While his future seemed uncertain, in 1826 Emerson began to preach, and by 1827, he had preached forty-eight sermons. He would go on to preach more than one hundred sermons a year in subsequent years.

Sermons appealed to Emerson, in part, due to their ability to target a broader audience than the book industry. During the 1830s and 1840s when Emerson’s seminal works appeared, the book industry saw a surge in interest due to increased literacy rates; however, there was a lack of centralization to provide writers with widespread exposure (Dowling 221–22). The lecture circuit, in contrast, had a longer reach due to daily and weekly published notices that were circulated throughout geographic regions. The press would advertise his speaking engagements prior to his lectures and publish reviews afterwards, which ensured his name was frequently in the press. Emerson wisely discerned that “the spread of his own reputation through lecturing was accountable not to the hundreds he had addressed at his orations, but to the tens of thousands who would read excerpts from those lectures in newspapers and magazines such

Emerson's Polarity of Loneliness and Friendship

Susan L. Dunston

There must be very two, before there can be very one.

(Emerson, *CW* 2:123)

It takes two to know one.

(Gregory Bateson, qtd. in Nachmanovitch 21)

Emerson was a sought-after companion, and he loved and cared for his family and relatives. He was a generous neighbor and an engaged citizen who advocated social justice and reform. He had numerous friends on both sides of the Atlantic with whom he had lively conversations, long walks, and voluminous correspondence. He mentored many younger writers. Even in his old age, he began mentoring the young Emma Lazarus who was to write “The New Colossus,” the poem featured on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. After his death, mourning friends such as James Elliot Cabot elaborated his reputation as a serene, kindly sage whose lifelong friendships and sweet smiles evidenced his equanimity. Social bonds were important to him. But as a youth, struggling with grief and self-doubt and trying desperately to formulate his identity and purpose in life, Emerson took refuge in solitude even as he suffered from loneliness. Throughout his life, he valued his solitude and protected it from the press of friends and society. He did not join reformist groups even though he actively and publicly protested injustices, including the Cherokee removal of the late 1830s, slavery, and the oppression of women. Nor did Emerson accede to the urgings of close friends to join their experimental utopian communes such as Brook Farm. Though he wrote that he “wished to be convinced, to be thawed” to join their venture, he wrote with wry humor “I do not wish to remove from my present prison to a prison a little larger,” determined that his “solitude” was more “beneficent than the concert of crowds” (*JMN* 7:407–08). As his choice of “thawed” suggests, he

characteristically accused himself of cool detachment and doubted his capacity for personal relationships. His self-assessment in his early twenties that “What is called a warm heart, I have not” (*JMN* 2:241) seemed accurate at times to him later in life as well. In 1839 and 1840, when he was seeing a great deal of Margaret Fuller and her friends, he still called himself “cold” and lamented his “icy barriers” (*JMN* 7:273, 509).

Emerson grew up chronically lonely and suffered the terrible losses of his father and siblings, and later the deaths of his first wife and first-born child. The tensions and nexus formed by loneliness, loss, and friendship marked his life through what he called his “unpleasing boyhood” and adolescence, his health crisis in the mid 1820s, his intense and brief first marriage, his second marriage and fatherhood, his friendships and professional life, and his old age (*JMN* 2:309). Coming into his own as an internationally known poet, philosopher, lecturer, essayist, and public intellectual entailed dealing with how to transform deep-seated loneliness into the productive solitude that makes creative and generative connections possible. That process of transforming became his life-long practice. It permeates his published work and is the essence of all that is useful in those texts for readers today: Emerson exemplifies a way of thinking and being toward “each and all” of us flourishing in the “fluid and volatile” universe that is our home (*CW* 9:14; 2:179).

Hardship, Self-Doubt, and Despondence

As Evelyn Barish details in her study of Emerson’s earliest years, *Emerson: The Roots of Prophecy*, Emerson’s childhood and adolescence were traumatically shaped by the death of his father shortly before Emerson’s eighth birthday and by the pressure of family tradition. Emerson’s father, William Emerson, was a Unitarian clergyman descended from generations of ministers. The weight of family precedent was considerable, and the Emerson boys were expected to become clergymen as well. By the time Emerson was born, William held a prestigious position as the pastor of Boston’s First Church, which had been established in 1630 under the leadership of John Winthrop. By Emerson’s account, his father was an

Master-Enchanter: Emerson's Extraordinary Influence on John Burroughs

Stephen M. Mercier

John Burroughs (1837–1921) had a lifelong obsession with the figure and writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. This is demonstrated by admissions from journals and his earliest and final essays. Writing explicitly on Emerson throughout his lifetime, he infused Emersonian perspectives found in the seminal essay “Nature” (1836), including the ability of Nature to heal, its beauty and sublimity, a critique of materialistic society, childlike wonder and curiosity, and spirituality. Thus, Emerson’s views on Nature played a particularly influential role in Burroughs’s intellectual development, writings, and philosophy.

In her Preface to Burroughs’s *The Last Harvest* (1922), published one year after his death, official biographer Clara Barrus attests to his “abiding interest in Emerson” and explains that at the end of his life, Burroughs “hungered for everything that concerned the Concord Sage, who had been one of the most potent influences in his life. . . . he knew well that Emerson would always rest secure on the pedestal where long ago he placed him” (vii).

For readers unfamiliar with the figure of John Burroughs, at the turn of the twentieth century, Burroughs was hailed as the most beloved author of the natural history essay, and his books sold more than one and a half million copies. He wrote twenty-seven books between 1867–1922, comprised of 450 essays. Known mainly for his peaceful woodland rambles and essays about farm life and birdsongs, fans adoringly referred to him as John O’ Birds. He was born in Roxbury, New York, and is largely identified as a Hudson River Valley regionalist.

In “An Egotistical Chapter” in *Indoor Studies*, Burroughs blatantly shares with his readers: “as a young man I was an Emersonian” (265) and reflects that when in his early twenties,

he started to realize “the power of letters” (266). During this developmental period, he began penning his own essays and first saw them appear in magazines and newspapers. At this especially informative time, Emerson is Burroughs’s penultimate influence:

[T]he master-enchanter of this period of my life and of many following years was Emerson. [I] opened one of his books in a Chicago bookstore, and was so taken with the first taste of it that I then and there purchased the three volumes, —the ‘Essays’ and the ‘Miscellanies.’ All that summer I fed upon them and steeped myself in them. (*Indoor Studies* 267–68)

Despite Burroughs forging out on his own as a writer, he acknowledges lifelong gratitude to Emerson: “But to this day I am aware that a suggestion of Emerson’s manner often crops out in my writings. . . . my debt to him is great. He helped me to better literary expression, he quickened my perception of the beautiful, he stimulated and fertilized my religious nature” (*Indoor Studies* 268). This last admission conveys three huge claims: Emerson’s writings were crucial to Burroughs’s development as a literary naturalist, to his ability to perceive beauty, and they also serve as a perpetual incentive to his spirituality. Due to these influences, Burroughs felt a deep affinity with Emerson and continued to view him as a master-enchanter. In addition to explicit considerations, Burroughs’s oeuvre contains particularly Emersonian moments that implicitly embed his most meaningful contentions and revelations.

Nature’s Ability to Heal and Its Beauty and Sublimity

In “Nature,” Emerson explains the healing powers available in Nature, as he contrasts those whose lives have been negatively impacted by their stifling careers and workplaces: “To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone. The tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street, and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again. In their eternal calm, he finds himself” (27). Quite similarly, Burroughs claims in *Riverby* that Nature