
RALPH WALDO EMERSON

1803–1882

Ralph Waldo Emerson is arguably the most influential American writer of the nineteenth century—the writer with whom numerous other significant writers of the time sought to come to terms. Without Emerson’s inspirational essays on nonconformity, self-reliance, and anti-institutionalism, Henry David Thoreau’s and Margaret Fuller’s careers may have followed different paths; and without Emerson’s call for an American bard whose poetry “speaks somewhat wildly” in addressing the nation’s “ample geography,” Whitman’s great poetry might never have been written. Though Melville rejected Emerson’s optimism, satirizing him in *The Confidence-Man* (1857) as a philosophical con man, he termed him a “deep diver” as well; Emerson’s conception of nature as a sign of spirit permeates Melville’s dynamic representations of the whale and the natural world in *Moby-Dick* (1851). Emerson’s persisting influence on late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century American writers is evident in astonishing permutations, on figures as diverse as Emily Dickinson, Louisa May Alcott, William James, Theodore Dreiser, Robert Frost, John Dewey, and his namesake Ralph Waldo Ellison.

Emerson was born in Boston on May 25, 1803, the son of a Unitarian minister and the second of five surviving boys. He was eight years old when his father died. Determined to send as many sons as she could to Harvard—the traditional route for ministers-in-training—Emerson’s mother kept a succession of boardinghouses. Around this time, Emerson’s brilliant, eccentric aunt, Mary Moody Emerson (1774–1863), stepped in to become his principal educator and inspiration, guiding his reading and challenging his thinking over the next several decades. In the more conventional setting of Boston Public Latin School, where he was sent at age nine, and Harvard College, which he attended from 1817 to 1821, Emerson showed no particular promise. Graduating from Harvard thirtieth in a class of fifty-nine, Emerson served, as he put it, as “a hopeless Schoolmaster” in several Boston-area schools. Turning to the study of theology in 1825 at Harvard’s Divinity School, he began preaching as a Unitarian in October 1826, and early in 1829 he was ordained by the Unitarians as a junior pastor at Boston’s Second Church. In July of that year, he was promoted to pastor.

Led in the 1820s by William Ellery Channing (1780–1842), Boston Unitarianism accepted the Bible as the revelation of God’s intentions but no longer held that human beings were innately depraved. In his 1828 sermon “Likeness to God,” Channing came close to suggesting that Jesus was not a god but rather the highest expression of humanity. Emerson was deeply influenced by Channing, and his skepticism toward historical Christianity was strengthened by his exposure to the German “higher criticism,” which regarded the Judeo-Christian Bible as a document produced in a specific historical time, rather than as the direct word of God, and interpreted biblical miracles as stories comparable to the myths of other cultures. Emerson was gradually developing a greater faith in individual moral sentiment and intuition than in revealed religion.

In 1831 Emerson faced a personal crisis: his wife, Ellen Tucker Emerson, whom he had married in 1829, died of tuberculosis on February 8, at the age of nineteen. Grief-stricken, Emerson wrote his aunt Mary: “My angel is gone to heaven this morning & I am alone in the world.” Emerson also faced a spiritual crisis, perhaps precipitated by the death of Ellen, as his thinking developed into a full-fledged

disillusionment with his position as pastor and with Unitarianism itself. Early in 1832 Emerson notified his church that he had become so skeptical of the validity of the Lord's Supper that he could no longer administer the sacrament, regarding it, as he remarked in his journal, as "worship in the dead forms of our forefathers." He resigned his pastorate on December 22, 1832, and on Christmas Day sailed for Europe, where he would remain until October 1833. During his European tour, he called on a number of well-known writers, in Italy meeting Walter Savage Landor, in England Samuel Coleridge and William Wordsworth, and in Scotland Thomas Carlyle, with whom he began a lifelong intellectual friendship.

Shortly after his return from Europe in late 1833, Emerson settled a legal dispute with the Tucker family and received the first installment of his wife's legacy. Soon he was assured of more than a thousand dollars annually, a considerable sum for that time. Without the need to produce a constant income, he began a new career as a lecturer, speaking around New England in the lyceums—public halls that brought a variety of speakers and performers to cities and smaller towns. In 1835, after a ten-month courtship, he married Lydia Jackson of Plymouth, and they moved to rural Concord, Massachusetts, where the Emerson family had property. There, Emerson completed his first book, *Nature*, which was published anonymously and at Emerson's own expense in 1836.

As the reviewers understood, *Nature* was not a Christian book but one influenced by a range of idealistic philosophies, ancient and modern, going back to Plato and more recently refashioned by a number of European Romantics. Although the favorable reception of *Nature* in England encouraged some American journalists to take Emerson seriously as an intellectual force, Emerson's immediate reward was having the book become the unofficial manifesto for a number of his philosophically inclined friends, who, over the next eight years, would meet irregularly and informally in Emerson's study and elsewhere. Termed "Transcendentalists" by mocking outsiders, the group was composed mainly of ministers who rejected the view of the philosopher John Locke (1643–1704) that the mind was a merely passive receptor of sense impressions, endorsing Samuel Coleridge's and other Romantics' alternative conception of the mind as actively intuitive and creative. Participants included the educators Bronson Alcott (1799–1888) and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (1804–1894), the abolitionist and Unitarian minister Theodore Parker (1810–1860), the Unitarian minister (later an influential American Catholic) Orestes A. Brownson (1803–1876), Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau. The group began its own journal, *The Dial* (1840–44), edited for the most part by Emerson, Fuller, and Thoreau.

Nature reached a smaller audience than did many of Emerson's lectures, which were often written up in newspapers; his formal Harvard addresses to the Phi Beta Kappa Society in 1837 on the American scholar and to the Divinity School graduates in 1838 on the state of Christianity were both printed as pamphlets. Conservative ministers attacked "The Divinity School Address" for its rejection of historical Christianity and its bold questioning of the claims made for Christ as a divine savior. But with the publication of *Essays* (1841), Emerson's lasting reputation began to take shape. Far more than *Nature*, this book was directed to a popular audience. The twelve essays in the volume had been tried out, in whole or in part, in his lectures, so that their final form was shaped by the responses of his many audiences.

Early in 1842 Emerson's first son, Waldo, died at the age of five, a loss from which Emerson never fully recovered. Writing in his journal the day after Waldo's death, he expressed his grief and confusion: "Sorrow makes us all children again[,] destroys all differences of intellect[.] The wisest know nothing[.]" For the philosopher of idealism who had argued that the world can be apprehended mainly through intuition, the death of a beloved son pushed him toward the skepticism expressed most powerfully in "Experience" (1844), an essay presenting individuals as perpetually

skating on surfaces. At the conclusion of the essay, however, Emerson, in an anticipation of the American school of pragmatism that he would profoundly influence, insisted on the importance of continuing to act in the world, however elusive and tragic that world might be.

Emerson continued to work steadily on essays derived from his extensive journals and his lecturing. In 1844 he brought out a second series of essays, including his influential “The Poet,” which grappled with aesthetic issues of form and meter and foretold—indeed provided the blueprints for—the style and subject matter of some of the great national poets to come. Meter does not make the argument, he wrote, in striking contrast to his contemporary Edgar Allan Poe, but the argument (or poetic idea or vision) makes its own meter; thus he inspired Whitman to break with poetic tradition by introducing the idea of “open form” poetry. Emerson lectured in Boston, across the Northeast, in the South, and even (after the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869) in California, giving more than fifteen hundred lectures over the course of his career. These as much as his essays helped develop his reputation.

As Emerson’s reputation continued to grow, he gained modest recognition for his own poems, which he collected at the end of 1846. In 1847–48 he took a second trip to Europe, delivering approximately seventy lectures in England and Scotland. One eventual result of that tour was the publication in 1856 of *English Traits*, an inquiry into the supposed racial, historical, and cultural characteristics of Anglo-Saxonism. (Like many thinkers of the time, Emerson accepted the idea of racial differences and hierarchies.) Two other books emerged from his lectures: *Representative Men* (1850), which examined exemplary intellectual and cultural figures, such as Shakespeare and Napoleon; and *The Conduct of Life* (1860), which examined tensions between thought and delimiting worldly forces, even as Emerson reaffirmed the power of self-culture and the individual mind.

Precisely because he so valued individual self-culture, Emerson was skeptical of social reforms that required group participation. In the early 1840s he refused to participate in the reformist, socialistic community Brook Farm in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, which drew a number of the Transcendentalists associated with *The Dial*. Abolitionism did engage his attention, however, and in 1844 he delivered a passionate antislavery address, “Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies,” at the Concord Court House on August 1, 1844. Appalled by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Emerson became more fervent in his views during the 1850s, offering scathing attacks on Northern supporters of what he termed “this filthy law.” In his 1855 “Lecture on Slavery,” presented before the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society at the Tremont Temple in Boston, Emerson declaimed against the “outrage of giving back a stolen and plundered man to his thieves.” Valuing individual rights and believing in the individual mind (or soul) as divine, Emerson regarded slavery as abhorrent. He also argued in favor of women’s rights. In 1855, the same year he attacked slavery at Boston’s Tremont Temple, he spoke before a women’s rights convention to support women’s right to vote, to “hold their property as men do theirs,” and to “enter a school as freely as a church.” Although Emerson never achieved national prominence as a social reformer, his lectures and essays motivated many of his admirers to become political and social activists.

Emerson’s contemporary reputation rested on his lectures and essays, but all along he had been producing another major body of writings, his journals, which he called his “savings bank.” The journals were not published in full until the late twentieth century, under the title *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*. A historical record of responses to people and events, the journals, as critics are increasingly recognizing, are among the best accounts of the intellectual and spiritual life of a nineteenth-century American writer. Following the Civil War, Emerson cut back on his writing, partly for health reasons (as he aged he began to display the symptoms

of memory loss). But he had his vigorous moments. In 1871 he traveled to California, and in late 1872 and into 1873, following a fire that severely damaged his house, he traveled to Europe and Egypt with his daughter Ellen and met with Carlyle one last time. Upon his return to Concord, he lectured occasionally there and in Boston. He died on April 27, 1882, and was buried in Concord's Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.

In a journal entry of 1836, Emerson wrote: "There is creative reading as well as creative writing." As a creative writer, Emerson attempted to get his whole philosophy into every essay, and even into single sentences. At the same time, he was skeptical of the capacity of language to embody truths, so he presented his essays as epistemological quests of sorts that, in the twistings and turnings and circlings of his thought, made enormous demands on his readers. Emerson's language can be elliptical and sometimes maddeningly abstract, but there is no American writer who placed greater importance on the reader's active interpretive role in generating new meanings and new ways of seeing the world. Emerson's respect for the independent spirit of his readers, his prompting of readers to trust their ideas and take them in new and even different directions—the main point of "Self-Reliance," perhaps his most famous essay—may in fact be the key to his broad literary and cultural influence.

Nature¹

"Nature is but an image or imitation of wisdom, the last thing of the soul; nature being a thing which doth only do, but not know."
—PLOTINUS²

Introduction

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past,³ or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.

1. *Nature* was published anonymously in 1836 by James Monroe and Company of Boston, paid for by Emerson himself (the company published a thousand copies for Emerson's approximately one hundred-dollar payment). The text used here is that of the first 1836 edition. A few obvious typographical errors have been corrected; and the changes that Emerson himself made in presentation copies to the opening of Chapter 4 have been adopted. Otherwise, the occasional oddities of punctuation, spelling, and subject-

verb agreements that appeared in the 1836 text remain in this reprinting.

2. Emerson found the motto from the Roman philosopher Plotinus (205?–270?) in his copy of Ralph Cudworth's *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1820).

3. An echo of Ezekiel 37.1–14, especially 37.4, where God tells Ezekiel to "Prophecy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."

Undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable. We must trust the perfection of the creation so far, as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy. Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. He acts it as life, before he apprehends it as truth. In like manner, nature is already, in its forms and tendencies, describing its own design. Let us interrogate the great apparition, that shines so peacefully around us. Let us inquire, to what end is nature?

All science has one aim, namely, to find a theory of nature. We have theories of races and of functions, but scarcely yet a remote approximation to an idea of creation. We are now so far from the road to truth, that religious teachers dispute and hate each other, and speculative men are esteemed unsound and frivolous. But to a sound judgment, the most abstract truth is the most practical. Whenever a true theory appears, it will be its own evidence. Its test is, that it will explain all phenomena. Now many are thought not only unexplained but inexplicable; as language, sleep, dreams, beasts, sex.

Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME,⁴ that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE. In enumerating the values of nature and casting up their sum, I shall use the word in both senses;—in its common and in its philosophical import. In inquiries so general as our present one, the inaccuracy is not material; no confusion of thought will occur. *Nature*, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. *Art* is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture. But his operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result.

Chapter I. Nature

To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and vulgar things. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime. Seen in the streets of cities, how great they are! If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these preachers of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.

The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are always inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence. Nature never wears a mean

4. Emerson draws on Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34) for his idea of "NOT ME," which Carlyle presents as similar to the German philosophical concept of "everything but the self."

appearance. Neither does the wisest man extort all her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection. Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected all the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood.

When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects. It is this which distinguishes the stick of timber of the wood-cutter, from the tree of the poet. The charming landscape which I saw this morning, is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men's farms, yet to this their land-deeds give them no title.

To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood.⁵ His intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says,—he is my creature, and maugre⁶ all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me. Not the sun or the summer alone, but every hour and season yields its tribute of delight; for every hour and change corresponds to and authorizes a different state of the mind, from breathless noon to grimmest midnight. Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or a mourning piece. In good health, the air is a cordial of incredible virtue. Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. Almost I fear to think how glad I am. In the woods too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life, is always a child. In the woods, is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. 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 eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental. To be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate⁷

5. An echo of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817), ch. 4, in which Coleridge defines the character and privilege of genius as the ability to carry the feelings of childhood into

adulthood.

6. Despite (archaic).

7. Related.



Shortly after the publication of *Nature*, Emerson's friend, the artist and poet Christopher Cranch (1813–1893), depicted him as a “transparent eye-ball” in “Illustrations of the New Philosophy” (c. 1836).

than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.

The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm, is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right.

Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight, does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both. It is necessary to use these pleasures with great temperance. For, nature is not always tricked in holiday attire, but the same scene which yesterday breathed perfume and glittered as for the frolic of the nymphs, is overspread with melancholy today. Nature always wears the colors of the spirit. To a man laboring under calamity, the heat of his own fire hath sadness in it. Then, there is a kind of contempt of the landscape felt by him who has just lost by death a dear friend. The sky is less grand as it shuts down over less worth in the population.