

CRITICAL STATURE OF EMERSON

“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

"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

“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

“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)