

Ralph Waldo Emerson

(1803–1882)

Shortly before the poet Walt Whitman died, he honored a man whose ideas had influenced him profoundly throughout his own long and controversial career. “America in the future,” he wrote, “in her long train of poets and writers, while knowing more vehement and luxurious ones, will, I think, acknowledge nothing nearer [than] this man, the actual beginner of the whole procession.”

“This man” was Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson expressed, better than anyone before him, the advantages of a young land—its freedom from the old, corrupt, and dying thought and the customs of Europe; its access to higher laws directly through nature rather than indirectly, through books and the teachings of the past; its energy; and its opportunity to reform the world.

Emerson was one of those rare writers who appealed both to intellectuals and to the general public. His influence on the popular mind—thanks to the thousands of lectures he gave throughout the United States—was strong. Although Emerson had something of a reputation for being hard to understand, his lectures were usually quite accessible. “I had heard of him as full of transcendentalisms, myths, and oracular gibberish,” Herman Melville wrote a friend after hearing Emerson lecture. “To my surprise, I found him quite intelligible.” Melville added wryly, “To say truth, they told me that that night he was unusually plain.”

Despite Emerson’s great influence, it is difficult even to classify what kind of writer he was. *Essayist* is too limited a term, and *philosopher* is too broad. The best term, perhaps, is *poet*—a poet whose best work was not always in verse.

“I am born a poet,” Emerson wrote to his fiancée, Lydia Jackson, in 1835, “of a low class without doubt, yet a poet. That is my nature

and vocation. My singing, be sure, is very ‘husky,’ and is for the most part in prose. Still am I a poet in the sense of a perceiver and dear lover of the harmonies that are in the soul and in matter. . . .”

The Burden of Expectation

Emerson was born in Boston in 1803 to a family that was cultured but poor. When he was not

quite eight years old, his father, a Unitarian minister, died of tuberculosis. His mother, left with six growing children to care for, opened a boardinghouse.

In the lives of the Emerson children, their father’s place was taken by an aunt, Mary Moody Emerson. She was a strict Calvinist who emphasized self-sacrifice and whose enormous energy drove the Emerson boys to achievement. “She had the misfortune,” Emerson later wrote, “of spinning with a greater velocity than any of the other tops.”

Every step of Emerson’s life had been laid out for him from an early age. He was to go to Harvard and become a minister, like the eight generations of Emersons before him. Emerson uncomfortably obeyed. His life was a series of attempts to establish his own identity against this background of expectation.

Young Rebel

Emerson entered Harvard at fourteen. He was an indifferent student, although he read widely in philosophy and theology. Upon graduation,



Ralph Waldo Emerson (c. 1867) by William Henry Furness, Jr. Oil on canvas (45³/₄" × 36³/₁₆"). Acc. no.: 1899.8

Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Gift of Horace Howard Furness.

Emerson took a job at a school run by his brother and prepared himself, with many doubts, for the Unitarian ministry. In 1829, at the age of twenty-five, he accepted a post at Boston's Second Church; that same year he married Ellen Tucker, a beautiful but fragile seventeen-year-old already in the early stages of tuberculosis. Seventeen months later Ellen died.

Emerson's grief coincided with a growing disbelief in some of the central doctrines of his religion. In June 1832, he shocked his congregation by resigning from the ministry and setting off on an extended tour of Europe. There he met and conversed with the Romantic poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, as well as other influential writers.

Emerson's "New Pulpit"

Returning to the United States in late 1833, Emerson settled in Concord, Massachusetts, and soon married Lydia Jackson. He began to supplement his meager income by giving lectures and found in that occupation "a new pulpit," as he once wrote. Emerson's view was distinctively American in that he denied the importance of the past: "Let us unfetter ourselves of our historical associations and find a pure standard in the idea of man."

The last phrase points to Emerson's focus on humanity. Individual men and women were part of this "idea of man" in the same way that individual souls were part of a larger entity, which Emerson later called the Over-Soul. The idea of nature also corresponded to the "idea of man"—both were part of a universal whole in which people could see their souls reflected.

Over the years, Emerson's influence grew. In 1837, he excited students at Harvard with the lecture now known as "The American Scholar." In the speech, Emerson demanded that American scholars free themselves from the shackles of the past. "Our day of dependence," he declared, "our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close."

A year later Emerson was invited back to

Harvard to speak to a group of divinity students. His speech, "Divinity-School Address," called for a rejection of institutional religion in favor of a personal relation with God. Religious truth, Emerson said, is "an intuition. It cannot be received at secondhand." The lecture so outraged Harvard authorities (who heard in it a denial of the divinity of Jesus) that three decades passed before Emerson was allowed to speak there again.

Twilight of an Idol

With the author's growing fame, Concord increasingly became a destination for truth-seeking young people who looked to Emerson as their guru. The young responded to Emerson's predictions that they were on the verge of a new age; intellectuals responded to his philosophical ideas about the relations among humanity, nature, and God; and society as a whole responded to his optimism.

That optimism was dealt a severe blow in 1842, when Emerson's son Waldo died of scarlet fever at the age of five. By nature a rather reserved man, Emerson had found in Waldo someone to whom he could show his love spontaneously. At the child's death he shrank into an emotional shell from which he never emerged. "How can I hope for a friend," he wrote in his journal, "who have never been one?"

In later years, Emerson suffered from a severe loss of memory and had difficulty recalling the most ordinary words. This affliction resulted in his increasing public silence, and when he did appear in public, he read from notes.

In the autumn of 1881, Walt Whitman paid Emerson a visit of respect and was asked to dinner. Whitman wrote that Emerson, "though a listener and apparently an alert one, remained silent through the whole talk and discussion. A lady friend [Louisa May Alcott] quietly took a seat next to him, to give special attention. A good color in his face, eyes clear, with the well-known expression of sweetness, and the old clear-peering aspect quite the same." Six months later Emerson was dead.