

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

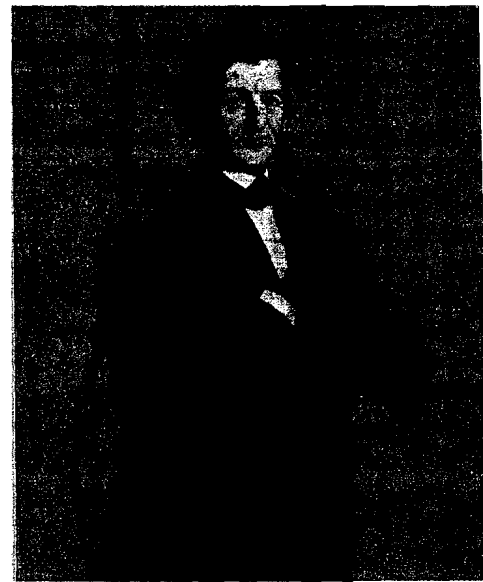
not quite eight years old, his father, a Unitarian minister, died of tuberculosis. His mother, left with six growing children to care for, opened a boardinghouse.

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 (45 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 36 $\frac{3}{16}$ ").

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Gift of Horace Howard Furness (1899.8).

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.



Long Island Farmer Husking Corn (1833–1834) by William Sidney Mount. Oil on canvas mounted on panel (20⁷/₈" × 16⁷/₈").

The Long Island Museum of American Art, History and Carriages. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ward Melville, 1975.

from **Self-Reliance**

Ralph Waldo Emerson

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried. Not for nothing one face, one character, one fact makes much impression on him, and another

none. This sculpture in the memory is not without preestablished harmony. **1** The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray. We but half express ourselves, and are

1 Emerson believes that each person has unique talents and passions that can be discovered only on one's own.

? What does he mean by "this sculpture in the memory"?

Vocabulary

conviction (kən·vik'shən) *n.*: fixed or strong belief.

ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents. It may be safely trusted as proportionate¹ and of good issues, so it be faithfully imparted, but God will not have his work made manifest by cowards. A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best; but what he has said or done otherwise, shall give him no peace. It is a deliverance which does not deliver. In the attempt his genius deserts him; no muse befriends; no invention, no hope. ②

② According to Emerson, when is a person relieved and happy?

Trust thyself: Every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine Providence has found for you; the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating² in all their being. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort, and advancing on Chaos and the Dark. . . . ③

③ Who or what should every person trust?

These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company in which the members agree for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion.³ It loves not realities

1. **proportionate** *adj.*: having a correct relationship between parts; balanced.
2. **predominating** *v.* used as *adj.*: having influence or power.
3. **aversion** *n.*: object of intense dislike or opposition.

and creators, but names and customs. ④

Whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist. He who would gather immortal palms⁴ must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve⁵ you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world. . . . ⑤

④ What is the opposite, or "aversion," of self-reliance?

⑤ According to Emerson, what must a person be?

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today—"Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood"—Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton,⁶ and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood. . . . ⑥ ■

⑥ What does Emerson say about "foolish consistency"?

4. **he who . . . immortal palms**: he who would win fame. In ancient times, palm leaves were carried as a symbol of victory or triumph.
5. **absolve** *v.*: pronounce free from guilt or blame.
6. **Pythagoras . . . Newton**: people whose contributions to scientific, philosophical, and religious thought were ignored or suppressed during their lifetimes.

Vocabulary

imparted (im·pärt'id) *v.*: revealed.
manifest (man'ə·fəst) *adj.*: plain; clear.
transcendent (tran·sen'dənt) *adj.*: excelling; surpassing.
integrity (in·teg'rə·tē) *n.*: sound moral principles; honesty.