

review essays

new studies of emerson

EMERSON CENTENARY ESSAYS. Edited by Joel Myerson. Carbondale. Southern Illinois University Press. 1982. \$19.95. EMERSON AS PRIEST OF PAN: A Study in the Metaphysics of Sex. By Erik Ingvar Thurin. Lawrence, Kansas. Regents Press of Kansas. 1981. \$21.00. EMERSON: Prospect and Retrospect. Edited by Joel Porte. Cambridge. Harvard University Press. 1982. \$16.50. THE TRANS-PARENT: Sexual Politics in the Language of Emerson. By Eric Cheyfitz. Baltimore. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981. \$13.50. WALDO EMERSON: A Biography. By Gay Wilson Allen. New York. Viking Press. 1981. \$25.00. EMERSON, WHITMAN, AND THE AMERICAN MUSE. By Jerome Loving. Chapel Hill. University of North Carolina Press. 1982. \$22.00. EMERSON IN HIS JOURNALS. Selected and edited by Joel Porte. Cambridge. Harvard University Press. 1982. \$25.00. THE JOURNALS AND MISCELLANEOUS NOTEBOOKS OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON, Volume 15 (1860-1866). Edited by Linda Allardt, David W. Hill and Ruth H. Bennett. Cambridge. Harvard University Press. 1982. \$40.00. RALPH WALDO EMERSON: A Descriptive Bibliography. Edited by Joel Myerson. Pittsburgh. University of Pittsburgh Press. 1982. \$70.00.

This rich outpouring of new titles during the Emerson centennial of 1982 will be of special interest to sociologist and to historians of art and culture, as well as to literary critics and Emerson specialists. The product of hard-earned research into Emerson's life and texts, these studies point to the need for a new understanding of Emersonianism—to, for example, a grasp of "self-reliance" in terms of its personal, experiential roots, its "psychic" and "spiritual" power (out of the unconscious and disciplined by the creative process) and its central place and function within the American value system. Intellectual historians will also find much to ponder in the revealing essays on Emerson's "modern" view of culture as holistic and as interactive with character, and in two book-length studies of Emerson's emergent feminism as his Platonic gender ideology gradually gave way to a sexual politics anticipative of the feminine revolution of our time.

Emerson Centenary Essays includes several studies showing Emerson's develop-

ment through *Essays: First Series* (1841): Evelyn Barish's intensive research into Emerson's crisis of health, 1825-27; Wesley T. Mott's analysis of "Christ Crucified," an unpublished sermon, as one step in the evolution of Emerson's stoic self-reliance; Jerome Loving's tracing of Emerson's "foreground" as it developed through six early sermons and three early lecture series; Glen Johnson's inquiry into the years 1836-41 as the period when Emerson defined his vocational-cultural role and his sense of creative process. David Robinson's close reading of "The Method of Nature" also belongs to this period as it was intended for *First Series*, though not published until *Second Series*. Two studies of "Experience" follow: Richard Lee Francis's fine analysis within the larger contexts of the visionary and the tropological function of the creative poet and David W. Hill's more detailed examination of the "lords of life" as steps toward a usable self. In a third group Sanford E. Marovitz traces the "Subtle modulations" of Emerson's view of Shakespeare over a fifty-year span; Robert E. Burkholder describes the contemporary reception of *English Traits*, especially the significant qualities appreciated by unprejudiced British readers; and Ronald A. Sudol interprets "The Adirondacs," a twelve-page poem on technology and a wilderness experience. The volume concludes with a lucid, interesting account of Emerson as lecturer-teacher by Merton M. Sealts, Jr.

Emerson: Prospect and Retrospect contains nine academic studies, two of which more or less duplicate articles in the Myerson collection: Joseph Jones on "The Adirondacs" and Kenneth Marc Harris on "The Method of Nature." Beyond those, Michael T. Gilmore examines Emerson's views, early and late, of trade and capitalist economy; and Ronald Bush explores T. S. Eliot's agonizing response to the Eliot family's New England ideal of confident selfhood and achievement, on the one hand, and "Boston doubt" (unsparing self-criticism), on the other, with Emersonianism as a strong, inherited standard of self-esteem. Jeffrey Steele treats Emerson's interpretation of the self in terms of the shift from egotism to the unconscious as the source of genius, mythic power and self-reliance. Closely related is Michael Lopez's essay on Emerson's philosophy of "spiritual power" and the conversion process by which resistance to or absorption of, failure, evil and suffering may be transformed into realized reality and power. Another fine article, "Emerson on History" by Robert D. Richardson, Jr., develops Emerson's view of the mind as the driving force of history, and his theory of reading history from individual experience (i.e., by the power of experiential realization), thus giving meaning to the past. The significance of Emerson's view is pointed up by contrasting it to the typological Christian view of history and the determinism of the past felt as a burden. Similarly, Stuart Levine makes a strong case for Emerson's holistic anthropological approach to popular culture and the problems of "modernization," especially specialization. Levine finds Emerson to be "very modern" in his sophisticated grasp of not only technology, science and other social forces for change but also the meliorism of the American experience, the poetic nature of creativity, and the deeper "occult" powers within man and nature. Phyllis Cole's "The Advantage of Loneliness: Mary Moody Emerson's Almanacks, 1802-1855" is a fascinating account of a secret, still unpublished, diary. Although it anticipates Emerson's self-reliance in its nonconformity and visionary power, it is, in its own right, significantly female. "Mary was herself before she was Waldo's aunt." Despite her poverty, orphanship, exile and loneliness, she achieved a powerful spiritual individualism through Puritan introspection, "a dance of the inner self in direct contact with divinity."

Like his aunt Mary, Emerson struggled to define and live by his gender

ideology as manifested in his idealized conceptions of love and friendship, and the complex nature of male-female relationships. In mythic terms, attempts at bipolaric "marriage" of the feminine (Earth) and the masculine (Heaven), or of "Europe" and "Asia," typically resulted in a monistic assimilation by the Platonic Ideal or by Pan as the spirit of nature, the *natura naturans*. Yet, according to Thurin, Emerson found himself "slowly, much too slowly. . . . bending the real in the direction of what he thought of as the ideal. . . . there are cases in which his personal experience colors his view of the ideal." In "Fate" (1860), his final statement on the conflict between East (fate, circumstance) and West (freedom, mind) Emerson came down on the side of intellect and the laws of the universe ("the Beautiful Necessity") held in precarious balance, in "double consciousness."

In *The Trans-Parent* Eric Cheyfitz also has attempted an analysis of the "sexual politics in the language of Emerson," especially the "figures" revealing his ambivalent sexuality. In addition, Cheyfitz makes extensive use of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* as a frame of reference for illuminating Emerson's ideas of "father," "mother," and so forth, often by contrast. The ending to this study, as to Emerson's *Nature* on which it is mainly based, "may be the siren song of a savage, hermaphroditic figure that, aligning itself with a growing feminine power. . . . is forecasting the revolutions of actual life" (167). In such terms, Cheyfitz's argument tends to restate rather than interpret and is weakened by certain assumed identities not convincingly demonstrated.

On the face of it Jerome Loving's account of the Emerson-Whitman relationship in terms of the discovery, celebration and loss of the American Muse may seem of little relevance to the social historian. But the story of how two men of greatly diverse origins and experience—one a Boston Brahmin, the other a New York newspaperman—discovered each other testifies to the power of shared cultural and artistic values. It is the story of the "foreground" of American experience that enabled these men to join hands and minds. As Loving details the impact of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* on Emerson, their subsequent first meeting, Whitman's "reply" to Emerson's letter in the 1856 edition, and Emerson's silent approval, the common ground is defined as the shared theme of Character, identity or self-reliance. In Part II Loving adds three chapters interpreting Emerson's *Nature* and *Essays* and Whitman's major poems in an effort to document Emerson's growing pessimism and Whitman's realization that, according to Loving, self-reliance is a "paradox" and a "hoax": it denies the possibility of love. A final chapter develops further this view that after 1860 the grand, inspiring vision of the early works was reduced to a mere mosaic of "wisdom" institutionalized as "culture." That dated view was put forth by Stephen Whicher in 1957. Since then, and some time earlier, more perceptive students of Emerson have recognized a persistent *interaction* of Character and Culture as distinctive of both Emerson and the American value system.

That interaction is best demonstrated in *Waldo Emerson* by Gay Wilson Allen, the first attempt at a definitive Emerson biography since Ralph Rusk's *Life* in 1949. It embodies much of the scholarship and all of the primary materials added in the past thirty-two years: the *Early Lectures*, the *JMN*, over 3,000 new letters, Aunt Mary's diary and the unpublished diaries of Emerson's brothers. It is more comprehensive and at times more detailed than Rusk's in its account of Emerson's personal, intellectual, social and professional development. It reveals Emerson's self-doubt and disillusionment as well as his feeling of "psychic power" and euphoria, and does so in a style that matches Rusk's for clarity and smoothness. The result is a well-balanced, readable portrayal of the man among family and

friends, and of the creative writer as an original genius, and of the public speaker as a representative American voice in the context of his times. Social and cultural history is reinforced by Allen's insights into the poems and the artistic essays, as in the distinctions drawn between self-reliance and God-reliance, mystical and creative experience, transcendentalism and pure Idealism. Also noteworthy are the pages on women's rights (equality of status with men), and chapters 25-27 on his deep involvement with the abolitionist movement from the mid-1850s, including his support for John Brown (though not for the Harper Ferry raid).

The ongoing discovery of the real Emerson is now more definitively pursued with the virtual completion of the *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* as the latest volumes, XV (1860-1866) and XVI (1866-1882) have arrived from the Harvard University Press, also the publisher of *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, with volumes 1-3 (lectures and essays) now in print. Joel Porte's one-volume edition of selections from the 16-volume *JMN* is handsomely printed and bound. With the omission of the textual apparatus in the *JMN*, the page is wholly clear and readable, a fact that will please the general reader as well as not a few specialists. As a further enhancement, the editor has supplied a general introduction and separate introductions to each of the nine sections, from "Prospects (1820-1824)" to "Taking in Sail (1866-1874)." Also included are an index, a chronology, some twenty illustrations, but no notes. Another invaluable aid to Emerson scholars is *Ralph Waldo Emerson: A New Descriptive Bibliography*, edited by Joel Myerson, in the Pittsburgh Series in Bibliography. Its contents are subdivided as follows: Separate Publications, Collected Editions, Miscellaneous Collections, First Book and Pamphlet Appearances, First-Appearance Contributions to Newspapers and Magazines; Books Edited by Emerson; Reprinted Material in Books and Pamphlets; Material Attributed to Emerson; Compiler's Notes, and an Appendix: Principal Works about Emerson.

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life, art, history, faulkner, method

FAULKNER: *The House Divided*. By Eric J. Sundquist. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1983. \$16.95. WILLIAM FAULKNER: *His Life and Work*. By David Minter. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1980. \$16.95.

American Studies is sometimes less in the method than in the training; the scholar or the reader will see the connections which spell "culture," "society," "interdisciplinary" or whatever if only he knows enough. Of course it helps if his thinking is appropriately broad, as it is in each of the Faulkner studies under consideration. Both books are about relationships between Faulkner's world and his works. Minter's is what used to be called a critical biography; Sundquist's is a "reading." In Minter, the analysis of novels is in the context of the life, while Sundquist moves from Faulkner's work to history.

Faulkner has been carefully studied, and by bright people; there is always the problem, in writing about him, of locating a fresh area in which to stake out a claim. As early reviewers noted, Minter's "biography" makes no special effort to add biographical information to that already available. Minter means rather to show both how the fiction reflects a life and how it also provides a private world which "distances" Faulkner from the life. He uses old-fashioned writer-in-his-art