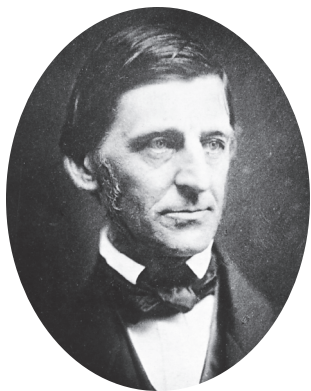




Rev.

Volume 33, Number 1

Spring 2022

## EMERSON SOCIETY PAPERS

### Announcing Undiscovered Regions of Thought: Emersonian Transcendentalism in Benjamin Peirce

OWEN POLLEY

If we consider Emerson as importantly within the Neoplatonic tradition, profoundly influenced by the earliest of the Neoplatonists, Plotinus, and by later conduits such as Wordsworth and F. W. J. Schelling, it becomes only natural to question the legacy of Emerson's unique contribution to this tradition. Where did Emerson's lasting ideas tend in the 19th century? One such avenue that has been explored is in the more metaphysical writings of Charles S. Peirce. Yet, in the literature, no representation is given to a figure just preceding the "metaphysical Peirce," namely, Benjamin Peirce, Charles's father. In this synoptic essay, I examine the prospects of a new line of research that sees Emerson as "feeding" the scientific-minded Benjamin Peirce, who naturally sowed these Emersonian transcendentalist seeds in his son, Charles.

We need not look "forward far" to glimpse the personal connections between Emerson and Benjamin Peirce. As Tiffany Wayne accentuates, they were both original members of the "Boston-based social and literary club founded in 1854," the Saturday Club. Benjamin Peirce, the famed Harvard mathematician, primarily published works on mathematics and science, but just as Emerson was a double-tasking genius (a poet-philosopher), so too Benjamin Peirce was a scientist-philosopher. The Lowell Lectures of 1879, published posthumously in 1881 as *Ideality in the Physical Sciences*, serve as evidence, as they synthesize New England transcendentalism and Benjamin Peirce's own mathematical and scientific background. His son Charles, then teaching at Johns Hopkins, attended the lectures when Benjamin delivered them in Baltimore; his own Cambridge Lectures delivered at Harvard in 1898 may well be thought to resemble, as well as upgrade, his father's precedent in articulating a worldview of

cosmogonic idealism. Presented in elegantly devised, metaphysically vertiginous lectures is a Christian cosmogony under the principles of objective idealism or ideal realism. Nicholas Guardiano, in his paper on C. S. Peirce's "intellectual neighbors", does nicely to bring out not only the physical but intellectual contiguity of New England transcendentalism, speaking to the disseminating ideas bouncing from one genius to the next. Here focusing on the fundamentals of Emerson's metaphysics, we can readily observe some familiar Emersonian themes in Benjamin Peirce's *Ideality*.

In Chapter I, "Ideality in Science," Peirce offers a theme familiar to many of Emerson's essays: "To translate a great poem demands months and years of earnest devotion, coupled with poetic inspiration. But to read the book of Nature is the province and privilege of consummate genius." Peirce distinguishes between mere talent—as a poem's translator—and true genius, whom we might call "Nature's translator." This is not far off from arguably Emerson's greatest theoretical work, "The Poet" (1844): "[N]ature by worthier impulses, has ensured the poet's fidelity to his office of announcement and affirming, namely, by the beauty of things, which becomes a new, and higher beauty, when expressed." While Peirce designates the mathematician-scientist to read the idealistic book of *Nature*, Emerson entrusts the role to the poet-metaphysician. The poet-metaphysician and mathematician-scientist are both keen observers of Nature, indeed the keenest of observers, their acts of synthesizing the metamorphoses of Nature coalescing. One inclines towards the discovery of physical laws, the other towards underlying metaphysical principles. Yet, they both uniquely contribute affirmative voices to Nature's ecstatic and prolific creation.

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The newsletter of the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society  
Published at The University of South Carolina

[www.emersonsociety.org](http://www.emersonsociety.org)

Editor: Michael Weisenburg  
Book Review Editor: Prentiss Clark  
Design and Production: Peggy Isaacson

*Emerson Society Papers* is published twice a year. Subscriptions, which include membership in the Society, are \$20 a year. You may subscribe using PayPal by visiting us at [emersonsociety.org/membership](http://emersonsociety.org/membership). Send checks for membership (calendar year) and back issues (\$5 each) to Peter Balaam, Carleton College, 1 N. College St., Northfield, MN 55057

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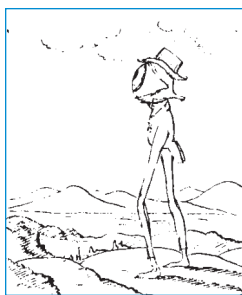
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# PROSPECTS



## Annual Conference of the American Literature Association

The Emerson Society will sponsor a panel at the 33rd Annual American Literature Association, held at the Palmer House Hilton in Chicago, May 26–29, 2022.

More information: <https://tinyurl.com/y5kwr8eb>

### Emersonian Economies

Organized by the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society  
Chair: Prentiss Clark, University of South Dakota

1. “‘If laborers are digging in the field nearby’: Emerson’s Economies of Work,” *Peter Balaam, Carleton College*

Contributing to recent work by Andrew Kopec and Len Gudgeon on Emerson’s conceptions of manual, scholarly, and poetic labor in the wider 19th-century cultural turns of the market revolution, this talk inquires into what counts in Emerson’s changing conceptions of labor and its social value. The quoted comment in my title, from the end of “Spirit,” Ch. VII of *Nature*, conjuring significant problems in Emerson’s evident social detachment or elitism, has rightly led to accounts of Emerson’s early defense of scholarly labor and of the products and, indeed, works of idealism too valuable to be spared in a world in need of novelty and vision. Against this early, possibly anxious statement from 1836, my talk investigates a moment seven years on, specifically, an 1843 *Journal* entry that would end up as the final paragraph and peroration of “The Poet,” in which Emerson ventriloquizes the demanding voice of a god calling a poet to higher labor through devotion to the Muse, alone. To a degree insufficiently understood, I will argue, this passage offers hints not of a defense of Transcendentalist idealism, but the setting to it of practical limits. The passage is a crucial text of Emerson’s hardly visionary, indeed, laborious reconstruction of his early philosophy in the 1840s and maps the signature qualities of the later phase of his published work.

2. “The Triumph of Intellect: Emerson’s Transcendental Abolitionism and Anti-Capitalism in ‘Address on the Anniversary of Emancipation in the British West Indies,’” *Yafang Luo, Pennsylvania State University*

On 1 August 1844, Emerson delivered his first public abolitionist address before the Concord Women’s Antislavery

Society as part of its annual celebration of the anniversary of emancipation in the British West Indies. While the address, well received by the contemporary abolitionists, has been lauded by critics as Emerson the detached individualist’s decisive move towards society as a political activist, its contradictory framings of the abolitionist argument pose an exegetic challenge and invite closer examination of the conversion’s nature as well as its compatibility with his transcendental philosophy. For one moment, Emerson adheres to his fundamental reason/understanding dichotomy and insists that the emancipation is and will always be victory of “intellect” over “love of sugar,” “sense of justice” over “taste for strong drink.” For another, he reconciles the moral with the material, appealing to “the hardest selfishness” with prophetic composure and tolerance and asserting cheerfully how the British abolition substantiates the existence of “a blessed necessity by which the interest of men is always driving them to the right.” Seizing on the latter vision of an inherently moral and progressive order of economy, critics foreground the affinities between Emerson’s abolitionist message and liberal ideas like free labor and civil society to show how Emerson’s moral message is compatible with and even containable within a liberal rhetoric. Yet to label Emerson as one of the liberal abolitionists is to ignore his most searching and persistent criticism of the liberal-capitalist “shopkeeping” civility as well as his fervent preaching of a metaphysically grounded moral perfectionist vision. By reading these moments against contemporary liberal arguments for abolition and along with Emerson’s earlier transcendental criticism of capitalism, I intend to show how his abolitionist argument constitutes a radical divergence from the former and a substantial development of the latter. If Emerson’s transcendental project, as Neal Dolan claims when exploring Emerson’s thinking on capitalism, works in harmony with his liberal agenda and serves well to “charge the [liberal] ethos with inspired moral feeling” (21), his effort to reconcile the material with the spiritual, I argue, is greatly frustrated the moment slavery is introduced, and Emerson’s loyalty, as the speech shows, lies always with the transcendental pursuit of Truth whose metaphysical intensities exceed the liberal understanding of virtue.

3. “‘You must make the best apology for me both to yourself & to the towns in the association which I hoped to visit’: Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Limits of the Lyceum Circuit,” *Michael C. Weisenburg, University of South Carolina*

In the nineteenth century, the lyceum circuit was one of the prime ways that intellectual and cultural information circulated through the United States. Regional communities, large and small, would publicly gather to listen to people orate about their ideas of practical science, art, religion, or politics, or perhaps recount their travels abroad and the customs of peoples far and wide. The lyceum was an economical means

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for audience members to gain knowledge through the experience of their fellow citizens, and as Angela G. Ray has argued, “the lyceum contributed to the creation of the idea of a U.S. public.” But what happened when the evening’s lecturer failed to show up? This paper will discuss Ralph Waldo Emerson’s missed lyceum engagements and will explore the economic, social, and political implications of the letters that Emerson sent explaining his predicaments and asking forgiveness. Additionally, when Emerson was capable of making his lectures, he often felt compelled to write letters to the local newspapers requesting that they not write up reports or summaries of his lectures, a signal of the anxiety he felt regarding the periodical press and its culture of reprinting’s ability to circulate faster than he himself could, and thereby rob him of potential future earnings. As one of the most active members of the lyceum movement, Emerson offers us a rich case study of the limits of nineteenth century circulation. The lyceum emerged at a moment of rapid advancements in the railway, post office, periodical press, and other methods of communication and transport. Yet, these advancements in technology and their corollary effects on American culture were by no means consistent across regions, and Emerson’s reactions to the myriad of impediments he often faced as he tried to move about the nation illustrate how competing modes of circulation could interfere with and infringe upon another, less fungible object, the lecturer himself. In considering Emerson as a commodity within the broader lyceum circuit, we gain added insight into not only his own finances but also how Emerson’s contemporaries considered his cultural value in relation to his physical, nonfungible, presence.

## Thoreau Annual Gathering

The Emerson Society will sponsor a panel at the Thoreau Annual Gathering, to be held in Concord, Mass., July 6–10, 2022. More information: <https://tinyurl.com/yx9z8fy8>

## Global Emerson

Panel sponsored by the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society  
Chair: Austin Bailey (CUNY Graduate Center)

Daphne Orlandi (Sapienza University of Rome / Technische Universität Dortmund), “‘Show me thy relations to me to all’: Ralph Waldo Emerson’s World Literature”

As the world saw one of its last physical borders fall in Berlin in 1989, philosopher Cornel West was trying to demolish the abstract wall confining Ralph Waldo Emerson to the American terrain. West saw Emerson

as one of those intellectuals who “set the agenda and the terms for understanding the modern world” (*The American Evasion of Philosophy*) and many were the scholars who, in recent years, have been redefining Emerson’s role within the global sphere. Drawing on West’s remark, this paper investigates Emerson’s conception of world literature and his attitude towards the international literary scene. In the 1840s, Emerson noted the constitution of world literature as a result of new technologies of printing and distribution and made explicit references to what he defined as the “great mass of the permanent literature of the human race” (“Literature,” *EL*). By adopting Emerson’s transatlantic and thereby global perspective, this paper aims at grounding his understanding of world literature in his desire for unity and wholeness and in his search for an antidote to the ever-increasing, and by him much deplored, fragmentation of the modern world. Emerson’s insistence on relatedness and his organic understanding of the world lead to a redefinition of literature as a transnational instrument of knowledge which explores and embodies the universal nature of mankind. This allowed him to creatively draw from the most diverse sources, to claim the thought of such diverse figures including Moses, Confucius, Montaigne or Voltaire not only as his own, but also as part of a universal canon. Although Emerson is traditionally remembered for his emphasis on American originality, this paper focuses on all those instances where he chose to look beyond the national context, on all those writings where Emerson’s mind, “tyrannized over by its own unifying instinct” (“The American Scholar”), goes on to find relatedness and unity in diversity.

Keegan O’Connor (Queen Mary University of London), “Emerson and the Sexually Creative Language of Seventeenth-Century England”

This paper reconsiders common perceptions about Emerson’s theorizing of a “language of nature.” I propose that such a language for Emerson speaks to a physical intimacy which literature, like all acts of worldly creativity, engages. Language is, I suggest, persistently reproductive and carnal for Emerson—it is invested in the fertilizing “juices” and the generative fluids (the “ejaculations”) that engender and sustain the physical world. And it is this kind of life-making language that, I argue, he finds particularly available in the writing of seventeenth-century England. “In the 17th century,” writes Emerson, “the language of nature ... appeared in every book.” Emerson’s equations of seventeenth-century literature with “nature” have, how-

ever, often been understood to be part of his (disembodying) intellectual, Neoplatonic, or Swedenborgian program. They have been read as symbolic, as emblematic of a correspondence between the physical and the “higher” spiritual forms, and, accordingly, as representing a philosophical, metaphysical “kinship” that the earlier authors share with their later American audience. This is epitomised by F. O. Matthiessen’s classic reading of the “Metaphysical Strain,” with its emphasis on the “Christian” and “Neo-Platonic” inheritance from the seventeenth-century English poets. Such a reading of the “language of nature” that their writing offers to Emerson, though, tends to treat their language (and language more generally) as representational and reflective (“prismatic”) rather than—as Emerson admires—physically generative and creative (“spermatic”). With examples from Emerson’s readings of Jonson, Herrick, and Herbert, I propose that his emphases on the “spermatic, prophesying, man-making words” of seventeenth-century England demand renewed formal attention—an attention that is sensitive to the sexually creative energies imbued in the poets’ productions. Beyond the “Metaphysical,” I suggest that we might also think of a Pragmatic, or Procreative, or Spermatic Strain as part of the early-modern English influence on Emerson and on American literature more widely.

Thomas W. Howard (Washington University in St. Louis/  
Freie Universität Berlin), “Aphoristic Emerson and the  
German *Aphorismus*: Reevaluating a Popular Form”

My paper reconsiders the “aphoristic Emerson,” to borrow Richard Poirier’s phrasing, in light of the German aphoristic tradition, specifically the difference between *Aphorismus* and *Sentenz*. The latter refers to maxims or “sentences,” made popular by the French moralists, on which the English-language understanding of the aphorism is based. These are short, pithy lines that appear to share some universal truth in a creative, stylistic, memorable way. By contrast, the German *Aphorismus* refers to a more open-ended, evasive statement of ideas that tends toward paradox or ambiguity. Rather than supply nuggets of truth, the *Aphorismus* forces readers to take up a process of interpretation, ruminating on the words to discover new, ever-changing truths. Richard T. Gray describes the forms as “centripetal” versus “centrifugal,” where the *Sentenz* pulls readers into the social circle, or salon, from which the maxim originated, while the *Aphorismus* pushes readers out into new, unexplored ideas. Similarly, in

“Circles” Emerson calls on readers to draw new circles of knowledge, and his later writing in “Fate” and “Power” becomes more enigmatic and evasive in tone. While Emerson clearly wrote many maxims in the French moralist tradition, he also wrote more open, evasive, and suggestive prose aligned with the German aphoristic authors, many of whom he had read. I argue that emphasizing this tradition makes manifest new perspectives on Emerson’s relation to emerging science, drawing on the origins of the aphorism with Francis Bacon’s “initiative” empirical method, where a hypothesis encourages deeper investigation. At the same time, these various global aphoristic streams are bi-directional, as Emerson influences the German aphorism, primarily through Nietzsche. The “aphoristic Emerson,” therefore, is hardly a mere popular figure looking to sell more books, as some scholars claim, but rather an important node in the network of transatlantic aphoristic thought that later manifests in a stream of uniquely American aphoristic thinking throughout the nineteenth century.

Julie Edewaard (State University of New York at Albany), “Confucianism in Transcendentalism: Ralph Waldo Emerson’s ‘Reform’ as ‘Yielding’ in Speech, ‘Not-Saying’”

This paper focuses on Ralph Waldo Emerson’s concept of “reform” as being a religious practice that involves yielding in speech and is ultimately derivative of Confucian thought. Because scholarship on (and even the definition of) “Transcendentalism” often prioritizes the German Idealist, Romanticist, and Christian influences on Transcendentalist writers, this paper aims to resituate Emerson’s texts from a more global perspective, particularly from the Confucian texts the Transcendentalists read, curated quotes from, and sometimes translated. While recent scholarship has helped to reposition Transcendentalism within religious studies as the movement and its writers had largely been examined as secular, when examined from a religious lens, the Christian religious influences (mainly Unitarian and Puritan) are emphasized, and even when Asian religious influences are mentioned, scholars often prioritize the Indic, as opposed to Chinese, influences on the Transcendentalists. This paper aims, therefore, to prioritize Emerson’s engagement with Chinese texts and to also examine the ways in which his selections, omissions, and framings of Chinese texts influenced his concept of “reform” as one of being “yielding” in speech. Emerson’s engagement with Confucian texts can tell us more about his concept of “silence” (or what

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we might term “not-saying” in order to prioritize the *absence* of language and the *absence* of the act of speaking) as a form of “yielding” in speech so that the impersonal (or what Emerson also refers to as “the wise silence,” “the eternal ONE,” “Divine mind,” and “God”) can act through us. As this paper argues, “reform,” for Emerson, is about “not-saying” to allow for one to take action; however, this “action” is also one that yields in reforming things external to oneself and instead, as from Confucian thought, first acts in taking care of one’s own “field” before “dress[ing] that of others” as outlined in David Collie’s 1828 translation of *The Chinese Four Books* and *The Dial*’s “Ethnical scriptures: Chinese Four Books.” Both societal “reform” and self “reform,” then, for Emerson, are Confucian practices of yielding in both speech and action to allow for “the wise silence” to speak and act through us.

### Undergraduate Essay Prize: Owen Polley

Owen Polley’s enthusiastic and well-researched essay argues that more scholarly attention ought to be paid to the genealogical relationship, and philosophical overlaps, between Emerson’s transcendentalist philosophy and Benjamin Peirce’s mathematical philosophy, a forerunner of C. S. Peirce’s pragmatism/“pragmaticism.” This essay suggests a potentially fruitful connection between science,

mathematics, and romanticism/poetics inspired by Emerson and carried forward by Peirce. Thus, Owen’s work/suggested area of research could foster an appreciation of Emerson in a more interdisciplinary context. We congratulate Owen on his promising and engaging submission.

### Subvention Award: Cecily Brem

There is no doubt that Michael Jonik’s new Cambridge Companion will be a vital piece of work in Emerson studies, and Cecily’s role on this team as editorial assistant is a vital one. She will be editing each of the eighteen essays, liaising with contributors, constructing the bibliography and chronology, and preparing the final typescript for publication. The Awards team felt that Cecily’s application for funding was well worthy of this year’s subvention award.

### Pedagogy/Community Award: Joan Wry

Joan Wry’s project brings Emerson to athletes with no prior exposure to his works through an “Emerson-themed” training camp retreat for a varsity men’s and women’s cross-country team in northern Vermont. Joan believes that Emerson’s focus on self-reliance and individual power—as well as his assertion of the importance of flow and transition—will be natural complements to a training program for young women and men hoping to improve their mental and physical performance as runners and teammates on a collegiate varsity athletic team. The RWES felt that Joan’s outstanding submission was an innovative and worthy winner of the pedagogy/community award.



The Emerson Society sponsored a panel on “Reconstructing Emerson” at the C19 conference in Coral Gables, Florida. From left, Chris Hanlon, Michael Stancliff, Christina Katopodis, Sandra M. Gustafson, Jeffrey Insko, and Brigitte Fielder.

## EMERSONIAN TRANSCENDENTALISM

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This astounding quote from the Harvard mathematician, producing his own synthesis, should strike anyone as resoundingly Emersonian:

There is everywhere in Nature a voice audible to human ears, and a speech intelligible to human understanding. It is the truth of science, the beauty of poetry, the logic of philosophy, and the faith of religion. Ignorance cannot hide it, nor deformity degrade it, nor superstition corrupt it, nor scepticism conceal it.

We are offered here a synoptic glimpse of Emerson's career-text: as articulated, for example, in the early work of *Nature* (1836), together with the theoretically consequential essay, "The Poet" (1844), and two chapters out of *Representative Men* (1850), "Swedenborg; or, the Mystic" and "Montaigne; or, the Skeptic." For Emerson, nature's intelligibility pours in on the individual mind free from deformity (e.g., attachment to the sensuous; Nature), superstition (e.g., *a priori* commitment or belief; "Swedenborg"), and all modes of skepticism (Humean, Pyrrhonian, or otherwise; "Montaigne"). Here Benjamin's words quite literally exude Emersonian psychology and metaphysics. Both aver that nature's intelligibility, its ideality, is something conspicuously clear to those attuned to its incessantly communicated message.

Further to this metaphysical affinity, Benjamin Peirce avers several other Emersonian themes of substantial correspondence:

But let us consider where the proposition lands us, that all science can be reduced to one fact. Among the facts to be embodied [in the perfection of theology], are the facts of omnipresent ideality, the intelligible cosmos, and the all-comprehending intellect.... All the laws of the material world must be included, and they will constitute its least part. The mind of man must be in it, with its philosophy, its emotions, and its infinite capacity of development. It must contain the law of love, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Lord's Prayer. What can this mighty fact be but God himself? Where is the man who will not accept this fact, as the one fact which comprehends all others?

Among so many representative passages in Emerson's writings, turning here solely to his "Natural History of Intellect" (a composite work published in 1893), we find numerous points of thematic similarity to Peirce's brilliant passage: "Who has found the boundaries of human intelligence? Who has made a chart of its channel or approached the fountain of this wonderful Nile?"; "I believe the mind is the creator of the world, and is ever creating;— that at last Matter is dead Mind ... that the genius of man is a con-

tinuation of the power that made him and that has not done making him"; "This reduction to a few laws, to one law, is not a choice of the individual, it is the tyrannical instinct of the mind"; "We must embrace the affirmative. But the affirmative of affirmatives is love.... Strength enters as the moral element enters. Lovers of men are as safe as the sun." These strong themes from "Natural History of Intellect" abound in resonances with Benjamin Peirce's *Ideality*.

Thus, we have exciting new ground to cover in Emerson scholarship. The truly philosophical work of Benjamin Peirce stands as another formidable product of New England transcendentalism. It bolsters Emersonian transcendental themes of objective idealism, the infinite capacity and ascendancy of intellect, the affirmation of positive growth-inducing love, connaturality, and an evolutionary metaphysics. Emerson wisely urged, early in his career, to inquire about untilled grounds of thought through what Charles Peirce, following his father Benjamin's footsteps, later came to feature as the uberous logic of abduction: "A wise writer will feel that the ends of study and composition are best answered by announcing undiscovered regions of thought, and so communicating, through hope, new activity to the torpid spirit" (*Essays and Lectures* 45).

So much more can be added! Here I simply announce this suggestion of a new path of appreciation of New England's legacy of transcendentalism—with promise of abundantly more grist for the mill—for future generations to pursue and to make and express anew.

—Owen Polley earned his BA  
from Stony Brook University in spring 2022



## “The Morning Hope of the Teacher” Ralph Waldo Emerson as Schoolmaster

DANIEL KOCH

Emerson is known to history as a writer and lecturer, an abolitionist, philosopher, and one-time Unitarian minister. But before he earned notoriety for any of those things, he was a teacher. Emerson's biographers have given relatively little attention to this aspect of his life. Where they have, they have focused on passages in Emerson's letters which show that he took little pleasure in school-teaching. He brooded gloomily about it occasionally and disparaged his own ability as an educator. But Emerson's years as a teacher had an important impact on his outlook. The importance of Emerson's experience in schools bears reappraisal.

Emerson earned his living teaching in schools between graduating from Harvard at the age of 18 in the Spring of 1821 and joining the ministry in 1826. He was following a family tradition. His own father, William Emerson, similarly taught school between finishing Harvard and becoming a minister. The eldest of Emerson's brothers, William, named for his father (who died when the boys were young), taught school in Kennebunk, Maine, after his own graduation in 1818, using his earnings to help bankroll his brothers' education. Emerson's uncle, Samuel Ripley, ran a boarding school in Waltham and Emerson occasionally taught lessons there while he was studying at Harvard, as early as age 14.

William Emerson had returned from Kennebunk by 1821 and established a School for Young Ladies in the Emerson family home at 26 Federal Street, Boston. Ralph Waldo Emerson taught there, first as William's assistant. After William's departure to study theology in Göttingen, Germany in 1823, Emerson was in full charge of the school, which had about 24 female pupils. Emerson moved with his mother to Roxbury in 1823 but continued to run the school in rented rooms behind Trinity Church on the corner of Summer and Hawley Street in central Boston. Meanwhile his cousin, George B. Emerson, had moved to Boston to become the principal of the city's English High School for boys in 1821. He opened his own girls' school two years later. George went on to become one of the most prominent educators in the United States and a major player in the growth of the public school system in Boston as the city's population exploded with immigrants from the 1820s onward (Schultz).

Emerson shut down his young ladies' school early in 1825 and enrolled as a divinity student at Harvard in preparation for the ministry. Financially, the school had been a success. He had accumulated more than two thousand dollars, enough money to enable him to pay his debts and move back to Cambridge without the same burdens of poverty that had hung heavily on him during his earlier studies at

Harvard. While recovering from an illness that nearly rendered him blind, he taught in a boys' school for several months in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, in the autumn of 1825 and then moved to Roxbury and carried on teaching there in January 1826. When he went back to Cambridge later in that year, he taught there too. Now an experienced teacher, he was seen by one of his pupils—the brother of Oliver Wendell Holmes—as a “king in his dominion” (Rusk 108, 116).

Thus, by the age of 23, Ralph Waldo Emerson had spent the better part of five years as a schoolmaster. Adding to this his own years of schooling first at Boston Latin School and then at Harvard, he spent more than a quarter of his life in schools. There is much to show that he did not enjoy the life of a teacher. In 1821 he called himself a “dull mortal,” whom “the fates have condemned to school-keeping” (L 1:103). In a letter from 1822 to his former classmate, John Boynton Hill, he wrote, “I am (I wish it were otherwise) keeping a school & assisting my venerable brother lift the truncheon against the fair-haired daughters of this raw city” (L 1:106). In another he wrote that the “duties [of a teacher] were never congenial with my disposition” (Rusk 108). But much of the frustration was not with the work itself, but rather with anxieties about his future. He was reading voraciously when not teaching, preparing for the life of a writer, orator, and minister to which he aspired. His disparaging comments about keeping school stopped featuring his letters once he had made his mind up to study divinity. Later, as a minister, he took up a position on the Boston Schools Committee (Richardson 41-5, 54-5).

Many of his most famous essays and speeches such as “The American Scholar,” (1837) are preoccupied with the concept of education, which he viewed in an idealised form. But the contrast between the ideal and the real (a philosophical touchstone in Emerson's writing) was something he felt keenly regarding the practice of school teaching. He seldom referred directly to his long experience of keeping school in his writings. But he did return to the topic late in his life. In 1876, at the age of 73, he delivered a short address at the centenary celebration of the Boston Latin School reminiscing on his own days as a schoolboy (New York Times, November 11, 1876). It may be this that prompted him to write a longer essay, “Education,” which he delivered at Concord and Phillips Exeter Academy in 1879. His mental faculties were in decline at the time, but perhaps this indicates that Emerson felt he stood on firm ground on this topic at least.



The essay was finally published posthumously in *Lectures and Biographical Sketches*. In it, he wrote that the main object of education “should be a moral one” (W 10:135). It should “teach self-trust” and inspire an appreciation for the life of the mind which connects the individual to a transcendent whole (W 10:135). Emerson believed that “the secret of Education lies in respecting the pupil” and advises those who seek to educate that by “tampering and thwarting and too much governing” a student will be held down, and their development stunted. He believed in treating students “as the high-born candidates of truth and virtue.” (W 10:143, 151).

Emerson admits that converting this ideal into actual application in a school is extremely difficult. The numbers of pupils and mix of attributes, motivations, and behaviours makes the life of the idealistic teacher impossible: “Each [student] requires so much consideration, that the morning hope of the teacher, of a day of love and progress, is often closed at evening by despair” (W 10:152). Faced with the realities of managing sometimes unruly pupils, even the wisest must resort to means of control and punishment “in lieu of that wise genial providential influence they had hoped ... to adopt” (W 10:152). He admits that he is “utterly at a loss in suggesting particular reforms in our ways of teaching” (W 10:156). But he tries to offer some advice to educators. He tells them to enforce the rules and ensure that there is an ordered environment in the classroom, but at the same time to “smuggle in a little contraband wit, fancy, imagination, thought” (W 10:157). In other words, keep order but allow some fruitful chaos. With this, a potentially

stifling environment can become a positive and uplifting one. A teacher can maintain good standards, but can also illuminate, educate, and inspire.

“Education” is a fitting bookend to Emerson’s career as a public intellectual, bringing his mind back to where his career started, in schools. Education and teaching were perhaps a bigger part of the making of Emerson than we have hitherto understood. There are interesting prospects for future research into how Emerson and his schools fit in the wider history of education in Boston, New England, and America more widely. In a life that has been studied in minute detail over the last century and a half, there is still much to learn about Emerson the educator.

#### Illustration

Detail from John Gales and Thomas Wightman, *Map of Boston*, 1814 showing Federal Street, where William and Ralph Waldo Emerson ran a school from their family home, and the intersection of Summer and Hawley Streets, site of Trinity Church, behind which Emerson directed his school in 1823-4. Library of Congress: [www.loc.gov/item/2011589322](http://www.loc.gov/item/2011589322)

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# Emerson and Earth's Natural Benevolence

CHRISTOPHER A. ULLOA CHAVES, ED.D.

Our re-emergence into the world continues but with cautious optimism since variants of COVID-19 still rule the day in places where it encounters humans' skepticism, lack of economic resources, or disregard for scientific expertise. And yet, the other issue of grave importance, global ecological degradation, remains in the background, increasingly reminding us to intervene to reverse man-made harms which continue to threaten our delicate ecological systems.

Interestingly, one nineteenth century literary luminary's work reminds us about the special role that nature represents for our contemporary and future wellbeing on the planet. Ralph Waldo Emerson, during the early stages of the American Industrial Revolution, encouraged understanding and empathy toward our ecological systems by giving particular recognition to the "acorn, the grape, the pine-cone, the wheat ear, the egg, ... the butterfly, sea shells ... clouds, buds, leaves, and the forms of many trees" (*W* 1:16). While a major objective for writing *Nature* (1836) seemed to be to initiate confidence for a new American intellectual tradition, the book's chapter on Beauty appears to highlight nature's aesthetic, spiritual, and intellectual contributions which serve to nurture a planetary wellbeing we cannot do without. Indeed, understanding each of these contributions can help us fulfill our reciprocal role in this crucial partnership as we commit anew to nurture and protect earth's important ecological systems; and, this includes renewing our commitment to improving human relations in our diverse communities. Therefore, exploring key sections of *Nature's* chapter on "Beauty" can serve to explain how humans can co-create global well-being through engagement with nature's aesthetic, spiritual, and intellectual contributions to life on earth. We begin with a brief contextual background on *Nature*.

## Background

While there were few known early nineteenth century American writers such as novelists William Hill Brown and Washington Irving, it would fall upon Ralph Waldo Emerson to initiate greater impetus for North America's literary independence as a consequence of publishing *Nature*. Indeed, there was a need for a uniquely American literary culture as contemporary observers like Alexis De Tocqueville had earlier acknowledged in 1832 that "in few have great artists, distinguished poets, or famous writers been more rarely found" than in the United States (Tocqueville 524). During this time, the young American republic lacked philosophic, scientific, and artistic pedigree, as it had relied on British and European intellectual traditions to inform its New England culture, a fact Emerson lamented; he writes in his introduction to *Nature*, "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" (*W* 1:3). Emerson scholar Robert D. Richardson

writes, "Nature for Emerson was a theory of the nature of things —how things are: it was ... a foundation for philosophy, art, language, education, and everyday living" (3).

When writing *Nature*, Emerson focused on what there was an abundance of in the young United States, namely the natural ecology that had largely been the exclusive domain of numerous indigenous tribes. From nature's endowments was where much of every civilization's material and cultural pedigree came from and Emerson would acknowledge this at the outset of his literary career. Also informing much of his early literary work was the Romantic Age, an era during which a new emphasis on man's unity with nature was made more explicit in literature, art, music, or the maritime profession. For instance, the everyday life of a ship crew involves navigating through treacherous oceans while factoring the data inputs that come from the sun, moon, stars, or birds that signal the nearness of imminent land; Emerson cites Gibbon to make a deeper point about nature's support for human expertise in this maritime environment: "The winds and waves are always on the side of the ablest navigators" (*W* 1:20). In Emerson's mind, humanity and nature demonstrate their unity by coexisting as competent and reliable partners; he writes further that a "virtuous man is in union with her works ..." (*W* 1:22).

In *Nature's* chapter on Beauty, Emerson introduces us to a transcendentalist view of our ecological systems by describing some of its intangible influences which seem to correspond with the human dimensions of body, spirit, and mind; this means that, nature's aesthetical, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions influence our daily lives in very concrete and beautiful ways if we're aware of these benevolent influences; experienced in combination, therefore, fulfills the transcendent desire for beauty in the human experience.

Indeed, Emerson asserts that a "nobler want of man is served by nature, namely, the love of Beauty" (*W* 1:15); the perennial concept of beauty often communes with the two other essential human desires namely the necessity also for both truth and goodness. He affirms the autonomous value that nature represents when he writes "the primary forms, as the sky, the mountain, the tree, the animal, give us a delight *in and for themselves*; a pleasure arising from outline, color, motion, and grouping" (*W* 1:15). But Emerson also recognizes our symbiotic relationship with ecological environments, asserting that "To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone." He employs language that relates to the quadrivium section of the seven liberal arts; for instance, he uses terms such as "laws of light," "...well-colored and shaded globe," and "round and symmetrical" to begin his description on how the human eye informs the mind in its quest to understand the transcendent beauty the earth represents (*W* 1:15). These seeming scientific

terms inform a basic understanding of what artists call *aesthetics*, which, generally speaking, deals with the principles of beauty and artistic taste.

### The Aesthetical

Fully grasping the idea of aesthetics can sometimes be complicated given a particular group experience underway and its context but beauty is also, as the saying goes, *in the eye of the beholder*. Aesthetical concepts are rooted in philosophical traditions, and they usually involve the intersection of the human senses and emotions. Emerson writes, “Nature never wears a mean appearance. Neither does the wisest man extort her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection” (W 1:7-8). One might interpret Emerson’s foregoing words in a romantic sense; namely that in spite of her kind allure, to know nature’s essential wonders, force or deception should not be employed in the discovery process. In spite of subsequently discovering her most powerful wonders, nature never loses her lasting appeal to the most interested and astute of souls; indeed, a genuine and lasting relationship is possible with her, not simply a brief romantic encounter. Thus, a symbiotic relationship based on love, not simply human self-interest, sustains ecological wellbeing on into the future; this idea certainly also applies to human relationships as we reenter our world to encounter new opportunities for rediscovering our own tribe and members of the *other* as respectful equals as Emerson seems to encourage.

Emerson, begins his description about nature’s aesthetic dimension with what seems a declaration to egalitarian values, namely nature’s equal benefit to all regardless of occupational endeavor. He writes “The tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street, and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again. In their eternal calm, he finds himself” (W 1:16). Simply reentering ecological environments affords the conscious individual the opportunity to restore her essence in the moment. Emerson affirms the experience that vision provides, but even a blind person who senses “eternal calm” in nature can also find himself as a man, which is more important than the precarious identities of attorney or tradesman (W 1:16). Indeed, as the Great Resignation proceeds in the world of work (Pazzanese, October 20, 2021), for many nature assists us in shedding fleeting and unsatisfying identities and reminds us about our inherent human qualities that, collectively, comprise our essential human identity.

Emerson fulfills the two main criteria required in aesthetic response, namely the appeal to the senses and emotions, by describing an interaction involving both his own eyesight and feelings. He uses literary juxtaposition in the following two quotations to achieve this; he writes “I see the spectacle of morning from the hill-top over against my house, from day-break to sun-rise, with emotions which an angel might share” (W 1:17). Emerson asserts that after witnessing the morning spectacle among the tangible artifacts surrounding his home-stand, an experience involving the pure emotions of an invisible angel arises within him. This visual and emotional

experience begins in the east where the sun rises but it also concludes with the clouds prominent in the west where the sun sets. He writes, “The western clouds divided and subdivided themselves into pink flakes modulated with tints of unspeakable softness; and the air had so much life and sweetness, that it was a pain to come within doors” (W 1:17). We can discern a sort of paradox here that, while Emerson experiences an abundance of visual pleasure in the external environment, the emotional impact at the end of this day is akin to the internal pain of separating from a beloved friend or lover. His ability to juxtapose observation and emotion continues when he writes:

“I please myself with the graces of the winter scenery, and believe that we are as much touched by it as by the genial influences of summer. To the attentive eye, each moment of the year has its own beauty, and in the same field, it beholds, every hour, a picture which was never seen before, and which shall never be seen again” (W 1:18).

It’s certainly true that throughout the year nature offers us generosity and warmth, and often in the forms of emotional and visual experiences that are guaranteed to be new every moment. But sadly, these associations in time will never be experienced again; much like a beloved friend or family member whose time on earth has passed, we’ll likely never see them again while others hope to someday. And yet, Emerson writes, “this beauty of Nature which is seen and felt as beauty, is the least part” (W 1:19). Most of us are initially attracted to nature’s aesthetic qualities but, as our relationship with it matures, we can begin discerning its spiritual influences and its propensity to partner with our efforts to do, or sustain, good in the world; but this requires our willingness to respect its preeminent role, awesome powers, and natural cycles as we cautiously reenter the emerging post-pandemic world.

### The Spiritual

For Emerson, nature’s spiritual dimension informs human activities and, at best, our willingness to partner with these intangible influences will largely determine the level and scope of positive impact in the world; not understanding this spiritual partnership makes mankind vulnerable to the tragic consequences of egocentricity or social hubris. He writes, “The presence of a higher, namely, of the spiritual element is essential to its perfection. The high and divine beauty which can be loved without effeminacy, is that which is found in combination with the human will” (W 1:19). Nature not only has physical attraction, but experiencing its spiritual qualities make its beauty more complete. Moreover, Emerson believed that to experience the sacred aspect of nature’s beauty, our human volition should be consonant with its preeminent role in the world. For instance, many can appreciate that when a farmer cooperates with the universe’s seasonal cycles including earth’s rain seasons, the photosynthesis process involving plants, and oxygenated soil, her seedling efforts in the soil will tend to produce an abundant harvest to, in turn, feed the community at large; and this

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benefit may include helping to feed those in the developing world whose crops have evaporated due to global climate change. He writes "The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable" (W 1:10). Emerson posits that nature's occult influences also inform and affirm the human ideals which promote greater wellbeing among human relationships, especially within political domains.

It seems that nature also honors the normative social and political commitments humans socially construct amongst themselves. There is no doubt that democratic forms of human organization are currently under attack globally; indeed the case can be made in this moment in time that democratic societies are too unwieldy during political or public health crises, and so, authoritarian personalities seek the opportunity to also reverse progress in political, gender-based, and social freedoms and their accompanying obligations. According to Emerson, the universe sides with and affirms the individual who is *willing to act* on higher principle, or when an important ideal is at risk of being seriously undermined (emphasis mine); citing an example from history he writes:

Charles II., to intimidate the citizens of London, caused the patriot Lord Russel to be drawn in an open coach, through the principal streets of the city, on his way to the scaffold. "But," his biographer says, "the multitude imagined they saw liberty and virtue sitting by his side" (W 1:21).

The return of a non-democratic English monarchy led by Charles II alarmed many like Lord Russell, who was unfairly charged and executed for supposedly plotting to murder Charles's brother James. However, what seems to be at stake here is not Lord Russell's imperfect legacy, but a key democratic principle, namely that the state ought not be an instrument of political revenge, but of social justice. Moreover, Charles's abuse of political power in order to intimidate a free population, citizens or subjects, by also openly humiliating a prominent member of the people's House of Commons confirmed in the minds of many about the dangers of monarchical prerogatives. In spite of Russell's misfortune, Emerson asserts that "among sordid objects, an act of truth or heroism seems at once to draw to itself the sky as its temple, the sun as its candle" (W 1:21). A sordid political system which allows capricious and arbitrary forms of injustice can, in response, trigger a human willingness towards heroism, or sacrifice, which serves to expose to the light of day the true character of particular political systems and their representatives.

However, a transcendent human sense, what Emerson called our moral sense, can recognize virtue accompanying anyone's courageous action. Stephen E. Whicher characterizes Emerson's idea of the moral sense as "an innate, instinctive admiration for moral excellence at sight" (14); he writes further that for Emerson, "conscience was not to be explained

naturalistically. It was, as religion taught, the voice of God in the soul, teaching us an unquestionable law of conduct, testifying to that reality of a divine authority..." (14). However, our current willingness to renew our moral sense should be informed by progressive faith and science to create new and expanded notions of social justice for all sentient beings, including animals.

Often, civilizations or nations erect monuments, statues, or create works of art that celebrate cultural or natural artifacts worthy of duplication for display in a museum, private dwellings, or through the internet. In *Nature's* chapter on Beauty, Emerson asserts as well that ecological allure informs our imagination to such an emotional level that we strongly desire to replicate through art, for instance, a placid sunset, an inspiring meadow, or a raging ocean; often times we undertake creations of art to recall, if not attempt to recapture, those moments in nature that we may never see again.

### The Intellectual

Emerson completes the book's chapter on *Beauty* by describing how nature's aesthetic and spiritual dimensions make impressions upon our intellectual faculties which inform our imagination as we attempt to replicate or understand its beauty through concrete works of art. Emerson writes, "The production of a work of art throws a light upon the mystery of humanity. A work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world" (W 1:23). A work of art serves as an imperfect concrete reflection of a perfect ecological reality in our planet. For instance, native New Englander Georgia O'Keefe introduced the beauty of northern New Mexico's sandy mesas to the rest of the country, if not the world; indeed, her heart and mind were genuinely transformed by the surrounding ecological character and its beckoning spirit to become one of the world's greatest 20th century painters of the American Southwest. Emerson writes "The poet, the painter, the sculptor, the musician, the architect, seek each to concentrate this radiance of the world on one point ... in art does Nature work through the will of a man filled with the beauty of her first works" (W 1:24).

Other influences from nature seem to inform hypothetical questions and later scientific research. He writes, "The intellect searches out the absolute order of things as they stand in the mind of God, and without the colors of affection" (W 1:22). As we grapple with the current anti-science sentiments expressed mainly within Western societies, Emerson reminds us that the attempt to understand the laws of nature requires objective analysis and evaluation that is free of personal biases. Understanding the true works of nature, be it about bee pollination, a pandemic, a Tsunami, an earthquake, or how an ant colony organizes its community, requires scientific epistemological methods that yield insights which can be confirmed by independent investigators; it is then possible to more accurately reproduce nature's genuine occult attributes and tangible features through diverse forms of art or environmental education.

Human wellbeing is often manifested in the confidence to be creative across an array of artistic or technical disciplines

and in the fruits of creativity. Emerson writes, “All good is eternally reproductive. The beauty of nature reforms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation” (W 1:23). Interacting with nature is not intended solely for simple viewing and appreciation but, sometimes, for personal inspiration to develop new creations or innovations that facilitate, for instance, faster and more accessible world travel. Wagenknecht wrote about Emerson’s respect for applied sciences, asserting that in spite of his interest in “the spiritual aspects of science, there are times when he seems to relish technological power as much as it can be relished ...” (63).

Early in my professional life, I had the privilege of working in the aviation field which involved fixed winged aircraft and helicopters; oddly, I have always been fascinated by the spiritual energy present in most airports. Through the years, I’ve noticed that, in contrast to previous bi-plane designs, new innovations in contemporary aircraft designs increasingly have been informed by “the wings and forms of most birds,” (W 1:16) and particularly by the natural flying capabilities they exhibit; The largest whale on earth, the blue whale, has recently inspired aeronautical engineers to engage in biomimicry research to conceptualize a three-story aircraft which can be assembled and flown using environmentally friendly material resources; for instance, the aircraft’s form and technical capabilities reduces drag and fuel consumption during flight. It goes without mention that the animal kingdom’s influences continue to inform our abilities for social wellbeing, including travel to new places. Interestingly, shortly after losing his young wife Helen to the ravages of tuberculosis, Emerson would embark upon a boat trip abroad to encounter various cultural sites and literary personalities in Europe and the United Kingdom; concluding his travel, and still mourning from his familial losses, he returned to New England with a new vision to write and publish, among other works, *Nature* in 1836.

## Conclusion

In *Nature*, Emerson initiates human empathy for our often misunderstood relationship with earth’s ecological systems; the literary content is characteristically transcendentalist, philosophic, and not very “scientific” but it conveys a deeply human narrative about the meaning of life in our interdependent universe. Nature, its ecological systems, continue to inform our efforts to do good within our delicate planet in spite of our response rooted in self-interest. In contrast to ancient characterizations of a deity who vindictively demands that unworthy populations be dealt with through drought, pestilence, or war, Emerson instead describes a benevolent and reliable partner in the universe; our delicate but resilient ecological systems nourish our desire for beauty, encourages our willingness to partner with its work on bio-sustainability on earth, and informs our creative imagination to understand and replicate its dynamic beauty. Unfortunately, our uses of much of the world’s natural resources have not matched nature’s cycles and influences and, instead, we have taken its aesthetic, spiritual, or intellectual forms for granted. Emerson, however, provides us hope but, un-naively, as well reminds us of our obligation to nature; he writes that nature continually stretches out “her arms to embrace man, only let his thoughts be of equal greatness” (W 1:21).

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# Emerson in the Internet's Shadow: Re-Wilding the Sage of Concord

BRIAN GEIGER, INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

Ralph Waldo Emerson once asked early Americans to gift themselves the luxury of direct experience—to feel God themselves rather than read of him, to think politically for themselves rather than ideologically, to experience nature themselves rather than veiled in utility. Otherwise, he feared, we might build our lives on secondary experience, worshiping half-things, reasoning with slogans, and remaining completely blind to the inexhaustible things in life that make it worth living

Books contain these things if we'd take the time to read them, but a tendency has emerged to approach them like pounds of useless rock containing only nuggets of gold. So prevalent is this tendency that a market has formed around it—the book summary service, not for homework-averse students, where it found its first foothold, but for adults. These services range from the bad faith utilitarianism of book summary apps to the much more sympathetic rise of the edutainment niche. At their heart, they promise the same thing: the literary gold of all ages with as little engagement with the surrounding stone as possible—all of Dostoyevsky without all of that Dostoyevsky getting in the way, all of Emerson without the vital digressions that make up the full climate of his thought.

Of course, art has already been boiled down to the bones. It survives nothing less than it is. And it's in this context, where we prize the quick secondhand account over the sincere first-hand text, that Ralph Waldo Emerson has suffered a fate worse than being forgotten: he's now prolifically misunderstood. The internet age and this new season of the secondhand account have given rise to an Emerson we can no longer recognize—the summarized Emerson, the self-help Emerson, the Etsy Emerson, but never Emerson himself.

In history, we can approximate the importance of individuals based on the intensity and prolificity with which others write about them. At this historical resolution, Emerson's significance, his bookshelf legacy, has never been doubted. But what about the online Emerson—the one future Americans are most likely to engage with? In this new digital dig site, there are few substantive engagements with America's first original thinker. This is especially the case on popular platforms like Youtube, where self-help gurus, quote compilers, and summary videos of questionable validity appear far before lectures, book analyses, or even the many informal book reviews that show a sincere engagement with Emerson's ideas.

Perhaps this is how the online Emerson has become a Rorschach test, abstracted into whatever we want him to be—even a Sage of Silicon Valley, as he's fashionably interpreted, ignoring his most prescient warnings about depersonalization through careerism and profit chasing. And perhaps this is how

Emerson was so easily co-opted by productivity gurus, hustle culture, and entrepreneurs. Among these groups, his philosophy has been reduced to its catchiest quotes, his work has been re-interpreted as cheerleading for careerism, and his anti-conformist writings are cherry-picked to exempt people from thinking seriously about their actions.

No longer bolstered to his own words, the online Emerson is stuck in a game of Telephone. *Nature* isn't about the private man encountering the divinity of the natural world—it's a reminder to get an indoor plant so you can bear heavier burdens at work. *Self-Reliance* isn't a celebration of the sacredness of individuality or a call to shield it from ideologies and institutions—it's a blanket justification to "move fast and break things," eschew any sense of shared morality, and instrumentalize oneself entirely for success.

These interpretations go unchallenged online, and they end predictably with a call-to-action for an entrepreneurship course, a self-help book, a summary service, or even merchandise printed with Emerson quotes of dubious origin.

Of course, this isn't Emerson. This isn't the man who was a second sun for early Americans trapped in Europe's shadow; the man who poetically prefigured naturalism, evolution, and the psychological unconscious; the man who insisted that the highest form of nature rests also in the individual—and built up from there his own morality which demanded unassailable equality among everyone with a beating heart.

More than that, Emerson was an early critic of the American specialist. "The state of society," he said in *The American Scholar*, "is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk and strut about so many walking monsters,—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man" (W 1:83). In such a "subdivided" society, the tradesman is "riddled by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars. The priest becomes a form, the attorney a statue-book; the mechanic a machine; the sailor a rope of the ship" (W 1:83). For all of our debts to the narrowing divisions of labor, Emerson believed it also split workers off from something essential.

This is one of the many ways that the individual deteriorates, that man becomes "the dwarf of himself" (W 1:71). So we might read Emerson anew as the troubling qualities of his time further deteriorate in ours. After all, Emerson's age of specialization has tapered off into an age of hyperspecialization. Today, work has been further atomized into smaller tasks demanding finer specialties or, in some cases, more grueling repetition. Professional fields have become further siloed. The rise of the gig economy has revealed the porous border between our personal and professional lives. Whatever depersonaliza-

tion Americans face at work can now continue even at home.

Emerson was also concerned that the colleges of his day were suppressing the creative instincts of their students by prioritizing profit over inspiration. So long as this was the case, he worried, “colleges will recede in their public importance, whilst they grow richer every year” (W 1:94). This is a striking statement in light of the mounting costs and diminishing returns of the current college pipeline, which throws financially average students into their adult lives with an average debt of \$37,000 (Hanson) and an undergraduate degree of dwindling distinction.

Of course, more than anything else, Emerson wanted to escape the “courtly muses of Europe” (W 1:114) and establish a distinctly American approach to art, literature, philosophy, and religion. For this reason, he asked early Americans to experience the world directly and think boldly for themselves. Surely, he would be concerned to see just how much of our current discourse amounts to exchanging slogans and talking points that were generated by a few thought leadership hubs that flourish in the conflict. Again, we see that the modern American mind prizes the quick secondhand account over the sincere firsthand text. No longer in the shadow of Europe, modern Americans find themselves once again compelled to outsource their thinking to others.

And then there’s the crisis of meaning. To a secularizing country, Emerson’s elegant answer to meaninglessness has only become more important. He places transcendence within reach of those who practice his own sort of pantheism but also of those naturalists on the wide spectrum of disbelief. It’s the “infinite of man” (W 1:144) and his encounters with the “ministry of nature” (W 1:62) where the richest of life occurs. For Emerson, nature doesn’t merely furnish the space between important locations — it’s a vital appendage of life and petrification of all the invisible hands that keep it going; it’s the source of our moral sentiment, our language, our inexhaustible creative impulse, and especially the transcendent qualities that made Emerson “glad to the brink of fear” (W 1:9).

As Emerson would have it, a meaningful life is one that recognizes the primacy of our mental life, our capacity to analogize the world around us, and nature’s state as “the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal and one is print. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind” (W 1:87). Nature, then, is a discipline, and it’s this discourse between the private person and the world that sustains them where life’s richest and most transcendent moments occur.

In this way, transcendence requires only introspection and a poetic eye. It’s as possible for the secular person as it is for the theist because, at their greatest depths, both of them were poured in the same archetypal mold. “In going down into the secrets of his own mind he has descended into the secrets of all minds ... [others] drink his words because he fulfils for them their own nature; the deeper he dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true” (W 1:103).

But nowhere in the online Emerson, except nestled in the corners where only Emersonians go, do we find these prescient

warnings about our current crises. It isn’t that we don’t talk about Emerson online; it’s that we don’t engage with him, with sincerity, where it matters most. His quotes have found new circulation on social media, often on Twitter profiles that use his name and picture. One scholar concluded that reading him in 140-character fragments “can offer to the initiate a pathway, rather than the entire, sometimes overwhelming, landscape” (West). This conclusion feels sensible, even after Twitter doubled its character count. However, interpreting Emerson from contextless glimpses warrants caution—especially when he’s so often misquoted. Saved from Emerson’s intimidating landscape, initiates might wander into a false and textureless one that isn’t Emerson at all.

As Chris Hanlon wrote of dubious Emerson quotes, “Even if occasionally these insipidities are ‘real,’ quoted out of context from an actual Emerson paragraph, I still consider them fake Emerson quotes” because they “muffle the Emerson who urges me to consider that the world I inhabit is not the world I think, that another is possible; and that my apprehensions of a different self, coming as it does to me in fits and flashes, should leave me glad, but glad to the brink of fear” (Hanlon).

Of course, a more generous interpretation of the tweeted Emerson isn’t that he’s being treated like an inefficient advice column, but that Emersonians are bringing his most vital sentences to new generations to inspire. So far as this is the intention and the result, tweeting Emerson may be a sunspot in the broader shadow of his online legacy.

Still, Emerson must be challenging and unsettling. He isn’t reducible to even his greatest sentences. His digressions frame, prepare, and texture his great aphorisms. While the tweeted Emerson might be a gateway to further reading, it remains undependable, incomplete, and uninspired. And that’s precisely what Emerson has been reduced to online. Unbolstered from his full context and hung up over the most popular avenues on the internet, Emerson once again loses his vigor and becomes a Rorschach test.

Perhaps in a time of remarkable alienation—from our world, ourselves, and others—we should re-wild Ralph Waldo Emerson where he has been most reduced and where Americans will most often find him: online. As Emerson once said while reading our divine world, “the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men’s transcripts of their readings” (W 1:91). Emerson shares our same heart and our same conditions—and the inviting sublimity we all feel in nature betrays in us, just as our ancestors, an enduring deficit that has still not been filled.

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## Reviews

**THE BEST READ NATURALIST: NATURE WRITINGS OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON.** ed. Michael P. Branch, Clinton Mohs. U of Virginia Press, 2017. 288pp, \$65 cloth and ebook, \$29.50 paper

My strong interest in Emerson's philosophy of nature started from my direct encounter with wilderness in Chile and Texas in America while I pursued my doctoral degree in the field of environmental ethics. It was the first time in my life that I gained access to large wilderness areas to think about the concept of nature and wilderness in the philosophical and cultural traditions of China and the world. *The Best Read Naturalist*, edited by Michael P. Branch and Clinton Mohs, really attracted my attention since, for a very long time, I have been researching the philosophical meaning of nature in Emerson and thinking about how Emerson's interpretation of nature constitute his pursuit of meaning in life.(13).

This book collects the full text of *Nature* (1836) along with sermons, addresses, lectures, and essays, that focus on nature and the natural world in Emerson's work. Ordered chronologically, it includes many lesser-known natural history writings which are integrated with his widely read canonical essays. The book's editors address the common misunderstanding of Emerson that he attached great importance to the natural history of the intellect while neglecting a direct encounter with the natural world. They argue that this view fails to account for the fact that Emerson's main career was as a public intellectual. Emerson tries to create his own philosophy of nature through many public lectures and addresses and also places emphasis on a direct encounter with nature. The editors revise the widely accepted view of Emerson as the "Sage of Concord" and regard him as "Green Emerson" (xxvii).

The Branch and Mohs point out that science is the deeper root for Emerson's philosophical theory of nature, which is made up of following theoretical elements:

(1) *The metaphysical foundation for his philosophy of nature is in God.*

In the second essay of this book, titled "God That Made the World," the authors stress the point that God is the author of all things and can be read by the light of nature rather than the traditional Christian approach of reading God through reading the Bible. In terms of nature, it has two dimensions of meaning. The first dimension of meaning can be found in the essay titled "The Method of Nature" (129). The authors point out that Emerson connected this concept of nature as a fluid system to a state of continuing creation. The other dimension of nature is the material fact of nature, which is also the object of scientific research.

(2) *Integration of science and humanity.*

The authors stress that although Emerson had high praise for science, he also reminds us of the evils of science since it might isolate the individual from the larger system of nature by focusing too much on the minute details of that system. The

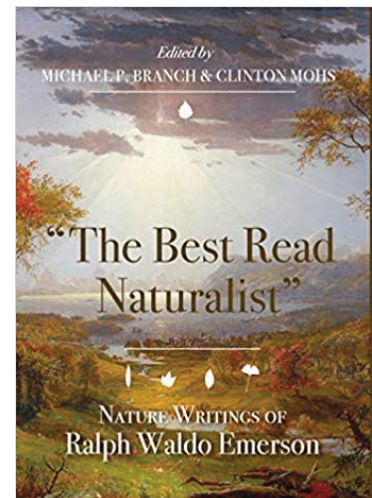
authors point out that Emerson held the correspondence theory which is deeply influenced by Emanuel Swedenborg, the Swedish scientist, philosopher, and mystic (xvii). According to this theory, the law of nature has the corresponding law in human mind. That is the deeper reason why people are easily attracted to nature and love it.

(3) *Direct encounter with nature.*

Emerson's philosophy of nature stresses the direct experience of nature. This aspect of Emerson is usually ignored by most Emerson scholars. The authors collect two lectures ("On the Relation of Man to the Globe" and "Country Life") given by Emerson to stress that Emerson encouraged people to have direct encounter with nature through walking and fully using the senses (watching and listening) to feel the material existence of nature. For Emerson, our perception of nature is not innate but acquired through sustained practice of attention to and engagement in nature.

Overall, the authors argue that science is the root for Emerson's philosophy of nature. The materials that they have compiled support this view. However, there is also another root for Emerson's philosophy of nature, which can be found in Plato and Plotinus' thought on the ultimate reality of the world and epistemology. Emerson also finds support from Asian philosophers such as Confucius and Mencius about the philosophical understanding of humanity. These, in addition to his scientific outlook, have been integrated into his philosophy of nature.

—Shan Gao, Soochow University, China

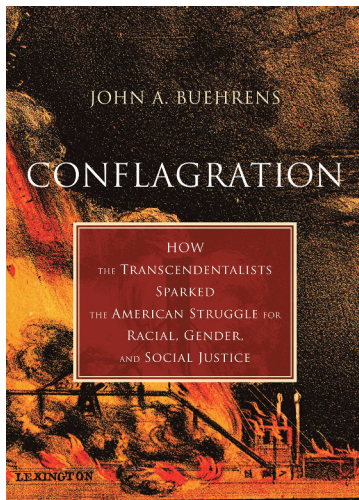


**CONFLAGRATION: HOW THE TRANSCENDENTALISTS SPARKED THE AMERICAN STRUGGLE FOR RACIAL, GENDER, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE.** B John Buehrens, Beacon Press Boston, 2020, 339 pp. \$20.00 paperback.

In *Conflagration*, Buehrens delineates the cultural and spiritual center Transcendentalists created—especially in Boston—to challenge racial, class, and gender inequality during the mid-nineteenth century. Buehrens' list of "leading dramatis personae," as he terms them, covers almost 35 Transcendentalists. Like a Shakespearean play full of drama and intrigue, Buehrens' work aims to unite the individual lives and spiritual friendships many Transcendentalists experienced to answer a modern-day and present struggle of our time: How do we be self-transcendent? What do we do with the privilege we have? It is in the pursuit of these questions that Buehrens pivots his transcendental protagonists and their influences in shaping social justice and democracy in the United States.

Dividing his book into four main sections—Fire, Water, Earth, and Spirit—and prefacing each chapter with corresponding verses from the Old and New Testament, Buehrens foregrounds both the humanity and divinity in the lives of prominent Transcendentalists. Honest depictions of the financial troubles Lydia Maria Child and Sophia Ripley endured to be part of Margaret Fuller’s *Conversation with Women*—a space tackling issues on socio-economic equality in the effort to realize the kingdom of God on earth—become ironic. To achieve a more egalitarian society, Buehrens avows that Transcendentalists often felt their vocation and affection could only materialize through “helping others realize their spiritual, moral, and creative potential” (91).

*Conflagration* not only emphasizes the experimental course of actions, echoing Ralph Waldo Emerson’s belief that “[a]ll life is an experiment, the more experiment you make the better” (294/5), but the failures of the Transcendentalist movement. Although Buehrens takes a more neutral approach (as opposed to his more pronounced title) in critiquing their shortcomings, his strength lies in drawing out the intimate thoughts that inspire major movements in history. By tracing the severe impact on society stemmed by the Fugitive Slave Act in the 1850s and the contrasting approaches to opposing slavery—from Garrison’s



anti-violence to Lewis Hayden’s vehement anti-slavery acts—Buehrens underlines how Boston became stage for debate and the creation of crucial racial laws.

Writing with the keen perception of a literary historian and the precision of a surgeon, Buehrens’ *Conflagration* pieces together intimate moments between nineteenth-century Transcendentalists and their inner circle to capture a vibrant portrait of the fight for freedom leading to the emancipation of slavery. Buehrens hearkens to William Ellery Channing’s core belief during Reformation that undergirds the Transcendentalists’ fervor: to focus not only on human sin, but that “deep within every soul there also lies an *imago dei*—the image and power of God, waiting for recognition, nurture, and create opportunities for use in the world in the service of others” (40).

In this vein, despite conflicting theological beliefs between the protagonists in “Emancipation” and “Organization,” Buehrens highlights the coming together of Unitarians and Transcendentalists in organizing humanitarian reliefs during the Civil War and the socio-economic implications on the soldiers’ families, especially the families of black soldiers’ who were often overlooked. For once, Buehrens argues, religion wasn’t about “creeds or scriptural proof-texting,” but a “shared spiri-

tual and moral insights about the imperatives of the time” (237).

Yet, even after Emancipation, the battle for equality continued in its fervor in the women’s rights movement. *Conflagration* reads like a biography to women activists, writers, and thinkers, emphasizing their disappointments and heartbreaks. One example is Buehrens’ intimate portrayal of Julia Ward Howe who, although she argued for equal educational opportunities for both genders, was lonely and isolated from her troubled marriage due to her stance. Glimpses into the spiritual friendship between James Freeman Clarke and Margaret Fuller not only contextualize some of Fuller’s writings but deepens our understanding of Fuller as a woman in her doubts and struggles fighting for women’s rights.

However, Buehrens’ comparison between the individual and the larger social context do not always work well. In “Unequal Union,” Buehrens tries to draw the perils of marriage in connection to the greater whole of nineteenth-century America on the brink of disunion. Although he frames the chapter through Elizabeth Peabody’s many hands-on pair-makings from the Hawthornes to the Parkers, the chapter’s central parallels of individual Transcendentalists’ marriages to the threat of disunion on a wider scale did not quite come through. Another missed opportunity came towards the end in the book’s brief chapter on the friendship between Emily Dickinson and Thomas Higginson: the chapter did not offer new insights into what we already knew about their correspondence. Buehrens’ main objective in this chapter seems to shoehorn in the Transcendentalists’ continual influence or “circumference” (a reference from one of Dickinson’s poems). I thought it was an opportunity to highlight Dickinson’s life, character, and her contribution to the social movement of her time, or her relationship with Buehrens’ definition of religion, where “[r]ight religion is not about right belief. It is about right feeling and action, sustained by good character” (52). However, it was less a chapter about Dickinson and more of a limelight to Higginson as a transcendental mentor.

All in all, Buehrens’ book serves as a love letter to the many Transcendentalists throughout the nineteenth century. Their ideas, “[w]ith their openness to religious pluralism ... helped to pave the way for greater interfaith dialogue and cooperation in matters of justice” (7). Their secret thoughts and desires are paired side by side to their larger influences in society. The book will serve as a great companion to any American literature and American history survey course to provide insights to the lives of significant Transcendentalists and the ways their ideas contend with heated social issues of their time; ideas that continue to shape the way forward and offer light to current social issues plaguing society today.

—Regina Yoong Yui Jien, University of Malaya

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(Continued on page 18)

## REVIEWS

(Continued from page 17)

**THE TRANSCENDENTALISTS AND THEIR WORLD.** Robert A. Gross. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021. 836 pp., \$40 cloth.

In 1976, Robert A. Gross published his first groundbreaking work on Concord, *The Minutemen and Their World*. In it, he brought to life the events leading up to April 19, 1775, and the men and women of Concord who experienced the first day of the American Revolution.

Over 40 years later, we now have Dr. Gross' companion piece to that first book; *The Transcendentalists and Their World* was published near the end of 2021, and it was very much worth the wait. As he did in his first book, Gross puts us inside the daily life of Concord, warts and all. Full of the sights and sounds of the first half of the 19th century, it's almost as if we are standing on Main Street in the 1830s and watching the hustle and bustle unfold around us. You can practically smell the Mill Dam and hear the blacksmith's forge.

Readers who are expecting yet another book about Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau will be in for a surprise. Yes, Concord's two most famous citizens are here, but they are minor characters in the first part, 'A Community in Change.' After all, in the 1820s (the decade in which the book opens), Thoreau was just a child and Emerson was still living in Boston. Instead, we are introduced to their neighbors, the men and women who were attempting to transform Concord from a sleepy shire town into a village of prominence and importance.

Dr. Gross's scholarly and highly readable book brings to life a whole host of Concord's citizens, men like John Keyes, Daniel Shattuck, and Samuel Hoar. They and their fellow townspeople were struggling to figure out where and how their village would fit into the burgeoning 19th century. The farming community of some 2000 people was very much in ferment in the 1820s and 1830s as it confronted the changing economic, political, social, and religious landscape of the young Republic.

The Reverend Ezra Ripley plays a prominent role in *The Transcendentalists and Their World*. Wanting to embrace "every soul in town," (44) Ripley considered himself Concord's "watchman and monitor." (45) He was, after all, the minister at Concord's First Parish for an astonishing 63 years. Spiritually, culturally, and even politically, Ripley had tremendous influence (for better and for worse) on not only Concord but on his step-grandson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, a soon to be ex-minister and budding philosopher.

A pivotal event in Ripley's life, indeed, in the history of the town itself, took place in 1826 when a small group of unhappy parishioners left Ripley's First Parish and started the Trinitarian Church. Situated just across the Mill Pond, then as now, the two houses of worship were only a few hundred yards apart from each other. This "secession" (as Gross calls it) wouldn't be the only spiritual crisis that would divide Concordians in the 19th century; a decade later, both churches would be up in arms over the newness that was being called Transcendentalism.

The big takeaway from Gross's book is just how chaotic life in Concord was. Today, the town takes pride in its bucolic, small-town, New England charm. It wasn't that way in the 19th century; political battles, the debate over slavery, the role of women in town, the Anti-Masonic hysteria, newspaper wars, class struggles, and a stagnating agrarian way of life all led to constant friction between civic minded conservatives and progressives. As Concord experienced growing pains, the culture wars going on in town were very real.

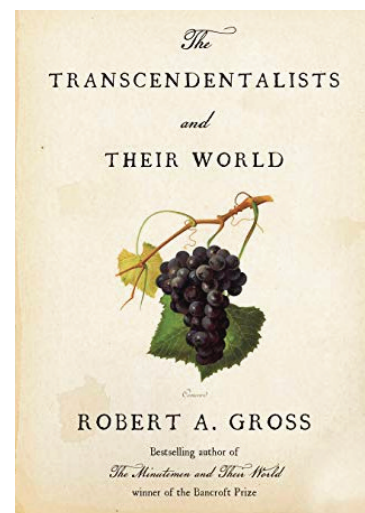
The stage was thus set for the arrival of the Transcendentalists, meaning, of course, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau. While Part One of the book deals with "the world" of Concord, Part Two begins with the arrival of Emerson at his ancestral home, the Old Manse, in 1834. And soon after, he would meet the recent Harvard graduate Henry Thoreau.

Both Emerson and Thoreau become the centerpieces of Part Two of the book, as they rise from relatively unknown entities to the writers we know and admire today. But Emerson wasn't always the Sage of Concord, and Thoreau wasn't the world-renowned Hermit, and Gross does a wonderful job telling the story of both men's transformation into philosophers and writers. Sometimes, neither of them is very admirable, and, along with their brilliance, Gross shows us their prejudices and foibles. On occasion, neither Emerson nor Thoreau are very likable. In other words, Dr. Gross has presented us with the real, living people that they were.

The best reading of American history is like hearing a good story, and that's one of the strong points of the book; Gross is a first-rate storyteller and he has made 19th century Concord a real place. The Concord we encounter is a living, breathing, loud, busy, smelly place. Take, for instance, his description of the area on Main Street known as the Milldam:

*"It filled in with mechanics shops and became an industrial park ... Heading toward the common was Stephen Wood's tannery, an extensive operation for turning hides into leather, with a long yard containing vats of lye, lime, urine, and dung ... where a workhorse, plodding in circles hour after hour, turned a stone wheel that crushed oak bark into tannin."* (85)

In Part Two of the book, we finally get a clearer picture of Henry Thoreau, the only native Concordian out of all the writers, poets, and oddballs who flocked to Emerson's home. Indeed, the last two chapters of the book focus almost solely on him. By 1840, Thoreau had "embraced the Transcen-



dentalist religious sentiment” (502) and was searching for the meaning of life: *his* life. His father and mother, John and Cynthia, are given a lot of time in the book, and we learn a great deal about their lives. John was a quiet man, civically involved but one who didn't make waves in town, while Cynthia was involved with not only the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, but also signed petitions against the forced removal of the Cherokees. She and her husband were proponents of Temperance and Cynthia was one of the small group that left the First Parish in 1826. Henry Thoreau came by his rebellious attitude honestly.

Epic in scale and scope, this book is filled with details great and small, and Gross has given us a snapshot that brings the mid-19th century into sharp focus. The changing town of Concord influenced and shaped the Transcendentalists, and they, in return, made Concord the literary center of America. As a result, one cannot think of Concord without thinking of the Transcendentalists, and vice versa. In his book, Robert Gross has lifted the veil that separates past from present and has taken us on a guided tour of the world of Emerson and Thoreau. As I finished the book, I came away with the sense that I had been time traveling.

—Richard Smith  
Concord, Massachusetts, Public Historian

## BRAHMA\*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

IF the red slayer think he slays,  
Or if the slain think he is slain,  
They know not well the subtle ways  
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

Far or forgot to me is near;  
Shadow and sunlight are the same;  
The vanished gods to me appear;  
And one to me are shame and fame.

They reckon ill who leave me out;  
When me they fly, I am the wings;  
I am the doubter and the doubt,  
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.

The strong gods pine for my abode,  
And pine in vain the sacred Seven;  
But thou, meek lover of the good!  
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven.

\*(first published in *May-Day and Other Pieces*, 1867)

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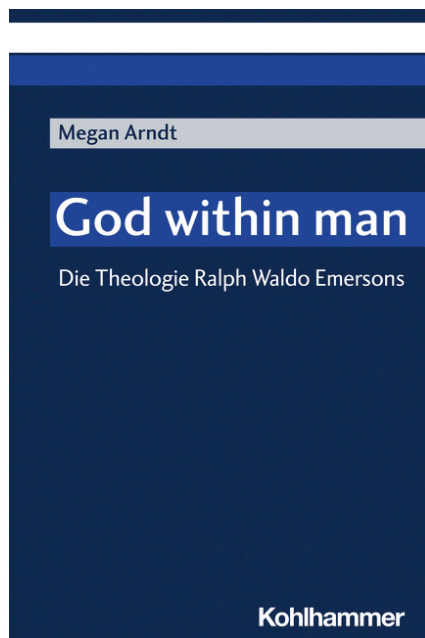
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Megan Arndt

## God within man

Die Theologie Ralph Waldo Emersons



Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) gehört zu den prägenden Figuren der nordamerikanischen Kulturgeschichte. Einer christlichen Familie entstammend und durch ein Theologiestudium in Harvard vorbereitet, nahm er zunächst eine Pfarrstelle in Boston an, bevor er als Schriftsteller und Redner berühmt wurde. Sein Verhältnis zu seiner christlichen Herkunft rekonstruiert die Autorin anhand seines Umgangs mit Kernthemen des Christentums in seinem Werk. Emersons Abwendung von traditionellen kirchlichen Formen und Sprachformeln wird begleitet von einer intensiven Suche nach neuen Ausdrücken und Bildern, um seinen religiösen Individualismus zur Sprache zu bringen. Eine besondere Rolle bei seinem Ringen um theologische Fragen in seinen Predigten, Reden und Essays spielt die Einbettung des Menschen in die Natur sowie die Hervorhebung des unmittelbaren Zugangs des Menschen zum Transzendenten. Damit bieten sowohl Emersons Werk als auch die Nachzeichnung seiner Theologie zahlreiche Anknüpfungspunkte an gegenwärtige theologische Diskurse.

### Bibliografie

ISBN 978-3-17-041048-0

300 Seiten, kartoniert

59,00 (D)/ CHF 70,80/ 60,70 (A)

### Die Autorin

Dr. theol. Megan Arndt wurde mit dieser Arbeit an der LMU München promoviert.

### Informationen

**Käuferkreise, Zielgruppen:**

TheologInnen.

### E-Book

52,99

PDF: 978-3-17-041049-7