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978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

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The American Critical Archives is a series of reference books that provide representative selections of contemporary reviews of the main works of major American authors. Specifically each volume contains both full reviews and excerpts from reviews that appeared in newspapers and weekly and monthly periodicals generally within a few months of the publication of the work concerned. There is an introductory historical overview by the volume editor, as well as checklists of additional reviews located but not quoted.

This book represents the first comprehensive collection of contemporary reviews of the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Many of the reviews are reprinted from hard-to-locate contemporary newspapers and periodicals.

Cambridge University Press

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

AMERICAN CRITICAL ARCHIVES 1

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Emerson and Thoreau

The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by
Joel Myerson

University of South Carolina, Columbia



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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

Series Editor's Preface page vii

Introduction ix

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

<i>Nature</i> (1836)	3
"The American Scholar" (1837)	25
"Divinity School Address" (1838)	33
"Literary Ethics" (1838)	55
<i>Essays [First Series]</i> (1841)	77
"The Method of Nature" (1841)	109
<i>Essays: Second Series</i> (1844)	111
<i>Poems</i> (1847)	148
<i>Essays, Lectures, and Orations</i> (1847)	190
<i>Nature; Addresses, and Lectures</i> (1849)	194
<i>Representative Men</i> (1850)	210
<i>English Traits</i> (1856)	256
<i>The Conduct of Life</i> (1860)	284
<i>May-Day and Other Pieces</i> (1867)	308
<i>Society and Solitude</i> (1870)	319
<i>Letters and Social Aims</i> (1876)	329

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

<i>A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers</i> (1849)	341
<i>Walden</i> (1854)	371

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

RETROSPECTIVE ESSAYS BY CONTEMPORARIES

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Thoreau"	419
"A Parish Priest," "Henry D. Thoreau"	431
[James Russell Lowell], "Thoreau's Letters"	437
Index	447

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Series Editor's Preface

The American Critical Archives series documents a part of a writer's career that is usually difficult to examine, that is, the immediate response to each work as it was made public on the part of reviewers in contemporary newspapers and journals. Although it would not be feasible to reprint every review, each volume in the series reprints a selection of reviews designed to provide the reader with a proportionate sense of the critical response, whether it was positive, negative, or mixed. Checklists of other known reviews are also included to complete the documentary record and allow access for those who wish to do further reading and research.

The editor of each volume has provided an introduction that surveys the career of the author in the context of the contemporary critical response. Ideally, the introduction will inform the reader in brief of what is to be learned by a reading of the full volume. The reader then can go as deeply as necessary in terms of the kind of information desired—be it about a single work, a period in the author's life, or the author's entire career. The intent is to provide quick and easy access to the material for students, scholars, librarians, and general readers.

When completed, the American Critical Archives should constitute a comprehensive history of critical practice in America, and in some cases England, as the writers' careers were in progress. The volumes open a window on the patterns and forces that have shaped the history of American writing and the reputations of the writers. These are primary documents in the literary and cultural life of the nation.

M. THOMAS INGE
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978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

A book that reprints contemporary reviews of the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau must be weighted in favor of the former. Emerson published an address celebrating Concord's centennial in 1835 and followed it with his first major work, *Nature*, the next year. Before his death in 1882, he published eight books of essays, two original volumes of poetry, and five major addresses. His books were published and widely reviewed in England, where a number of original collections of his essays and addresses were put together. In addition, by the mid-1840s, he had become known as the leading spokesman for the Transcendentalist movement in America. On the other hand, Thoreau published two books during his lifetime, neither of which had an English edition until two decades after his death in 1862. The beginnings of his reputation as a major American writer did not come until nearly half a century after Emerson had been firmly established in his role as a writer of importance.

The present volume, therefore, devotes nearly four times as much space to reviews of Emerson's writings as it does to reviews of Thoreau's works. This disparity in the number of words allotted to each writer reflects both their relative importance as seen by their contemporaries and the length of their careers. Reviews of sixteen Emerson titles are represented in this book, as compared to only two by Thoreau (*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden*, both published while he was alive). Because of this, I have approached my discussion of the reviews of each man's works differently in this introduction. The reviews of Emerson's works, spanning a forty-year period, are discussed separately in sections dealing with each work. In Thoreau's case, I have focused my discussions of the reviews around general themes that reviewers, usually writing only six years apart, saw in them.

The reviews of *Nature* (1836), published anonymously but widely known as written by Emerson, set the basic tenor of the discussions of nearly all of Emerson's works. Reviewers found *Nature's* style lacking in both originality and clarity, and its ideas dangerous, but its author was praised personally. Ironically, one theme that runs through nearly all reviews of Emerson's works—both positive and negative ones—is a sense of disappointment in what he has produced because he gives scattered evidence of knowing how to write well

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

but does not. As Francis Bowen put it: “The author knows better than to offend so openly against good taste, and, in many passages of great force and beauty of expression, has shown that he can do better.”¹

Responses to Emerson’s style in *Nature* generally reflected the philosophical outlooks of the reviewers. Emerson was proposing a Transcendental or intuitive form of knowledge to replace the Lockean concept of sensory experience then favored by the establishment. The conservative Bowen complained of the “darkness of language” that forced readers to “busy themselves in hunting after meaning, and investigating the significancy of terms,” instead of “comparing truths and testing propositions.” The resulting effect was “injured by occasional vagueness of expression, and by a vein of mysticism, that pervades the writer’s whole course of thought.”² An approving Orestes Brownson could not “analyze” the book (“whoever would form an idea of it must read it”), reflecting the experiential basis of the book itself.³ An even more favorable Elizabeth Peabody decided that the failure to understand *Nature* was a result of the inadequacies of readers, not of the author’s incomplete expression: “In other words, *to people with open eyes there are colors; to people with shut eyes, at least, to those born blind, there are no colors,*” she wrote.⁴ And Samuel Osgood saw *Nature* as having the potential to open up the lives of those who approached it with an open mind: “No one, we are sure, can read it, without feeling himself more wide awake to the beauty and meaning of Creation.”⁵

The debate over Emerson’s ideas and philosophy was from the start both religiously and nationalistically based. Because Emerson’s Transcendentalist philosophy was at least partially rooted in the works of German writers, an attack on him—and them—was seen by some as a defense of America and Americans. Brownson, who wanted Continental philosophy to be introduced to America, defended *Nature* in this fashion: “We prophesy that it is the forerunner of a new class of books, the harbinger of a new Literature as much superior to whatever has been, as our political institutions are superior to those of the Old World.”⁶ But Bowen, attempting to stave off the invasion, complained about the foreigners to whom Emerson was indebted:

The writers of whom we speak, openly avow their preference of such indistinct modes of reflection, and justify loose and rambling speculations, mystical forms of expression, and the utterance of truths that are but half perceived, on the same principle, it would seem, that influences the gambler, who expects by a number of random casts, to obtain at last the desired combination.⁷

In a similar fashion, the reviews of the addresses on “The American Scholar” (1837) and “The Method of Nature” (1841) followed these lines. An approving William Henry Channing, while regretting “thoughts which may not be

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Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

simply expressed,” nevertheless decided to “tolerate” the “quaint trappings,” and pitied the “purists, who cannot see a manly spirit through a mantle not wholly courtly.” And concerning Emerson’s style, Channing noted, “His conclusions are hinted, without the progressive reasonings through which he was led to them. Perhaps he does not come at them by any consecutive processes.”⁸ But the *Knickerbocker*, in reviewing the later address, was frightened that other writers would copy Emerson’s style: “We beg him to pause and reflect how much crude third-rate American transcendentalism he will be compelled to stand sponsor for, should he continue to perpetuate his peculiar style.”⁹

The “Divinity School Address” (1838) created a stir unlike the response to any other of Emerson’s works. It came at a crucial time in the controversy between the conservative Unitarians and the Transcendentalist Unitarians over the character of Christ and the miracles of the Bible,¹⁰ and, therefore, it was reviewed not so much for itself as for its representative position as what some saw as a statement of Transcendentalism. Andrews Norton, often characterized as the “Unitarian Pope” in recognition of his importance among the conservative Unitarians, fired the opening salvo in the Boston *Daily Advertiser*. By writing to a daily newspaper rather than waiting for the religious quarterlies to appear, Norton underscored the seriousness with which he took Emerson’s work. But his review, which scarcely mentioned Emerson by name, was really an attack on what he termed Emerson’s “school,” whose origin was owed “in part to ill-understood notions, obtained by blundering through the crabbed and disgusting obscurity of some of the worst German speculators, which notions, however, have been received by most of its disciples at second-hand, through an interpreter,” and its “characteristics” were “the most extraordinary assumption, united with great ignorance, and incapacity for reasoning.” Norton continued:

The rejection of reasoning is accompanied with an equal contempt for good taste. All modesty is laid aside. The writer of an article for an obscure periodical, or a religious newspaper, assumes a tone as if he were one of the chosen enlighteners of a dark age.—He continually obtrudes himself upon his reader, and announces his own convictions, as if from their having that character, they were necessarily indisputable.—He floats about magnificently on bladders, which he would have it believed are swelling with ideas.

But even after all this, Norton dismisses Emerson (“What *his* opinions may be is a matter of minor concern”) to concentrate on the “main question”: “how it has happened, that religion has been insulted by the delivery of these opinions in the Chapel of the Divinity College at Cambridge.”¹¹ Samuel Gilman chose to dismiss Emerson in a similar fashion in the *Southern Rose*:

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

On the whole, we cannot help concluding, that a writer, who seems to entertain no clear and definite principles,—who bewilders his hearers amidst labyrinths of beautiful contradictions; who floats about among vague and impalpable abstractions, and who is but the second or third hand receiver of ideas and visions, that have already been more than once exploded in the course of human progress, and could never get a foothold in this matter-of-fact world—is destined to make no very deep or permanent impression on the minds of his generation.¹²

Often, while disagreeing about the quality of Emerson's style, reviewers did agree about the dangers of his ideas. Writing as "S.X.," Theophilus Parsons praised Emerson's "extraordinary brilliance of language, his frequent beauty of imagery, and the originality of his style," but he objected that he "preaches a doctrine which leads man to worship his own nature and himself."¹³ Brownson praised the address for "its life and freshness, its freedom and independence, its richness and beauty," but he did not like "its mistiness, its vagueness, and its perpetual use of old words in new senses." He regarded its "tone as somewhat arrogant, its philosophy as undigested, and its reasoning as inconclusive." And consistently with Parsons's objection, Brownson asked, "How shall we determine which are our higher instincts and which are our lower instincts?"—a comment echoed by Richard Monckton Milnes in the *Westminster Review* ("What a battle field for enthusiasms, would the world become, did men once believe that they are not speaking, but spoken from!").¹⁴

The favorable responses to the "Divinity School Address" praised Emerson's noble picture of humanity and its potential. G. T. Davis gave this reason for Emerson's success: "The state of mind here described, and which we may term a craving after freedom, exists in our own community to a very great extent. To this craving Mr. Emerson has spoken; this craving he has done something to satisfy; therefore, his popularity."¹⁵ And James Freeman Clarke somewhat sarcastically commented, "As critics, we confess our fault. We should have been more on the watch, more ready to suspect our author when he left the broad road-way of common-place, and instantly snap him up when he stated any idea new to us, and differing from our pre-conceived opinions."¹⁶

Milnes's long review of Emerson's works in 1840 helped set the tone for the debate over the latter's next book, the first series of *Essays* (1841). Paralleling Norton's arguments about literary influences, Milnes felt that "we would say that there is little in such of his works as have reached us . . . which would be new to the competent student of European philosophy." Specifically, Emerson's is a mind "cognate" to Thomas Carlyle's, "however inferior in energies and influences."¹⁷ The comparison to Carlyle was hard for reviewers to avoid, not just because of similar stylistic elements but also because Carlyle wrote the preface to the English edition of *Essays*. A comment by the *Literary Gazette* was typical: "Mr. Carlyle approves of this book; and no wonder, for it out-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Carlyles Carlyle himself, exaggerates all his peculiarities and faults, and possesses very slight glimpses of his excellences.”¹⁸ Other reviewers complained of Emerson’s style without invoking Carlyle’s name. C. C. Felton warned against “the super-sublimated transcendentalism of the Neo-Platonistic style”; the *Monthly Review* found “in Emerson’s quaint and strange modes of speech, in his queer phrases, and aphoristic enigmas, old and common-place ideas, feebly or only half-conceived”; and the *Athenæum* barked that never was “diction so rough, so distorted, so inharmonious; never was expression so opaque, so ponderous, so laboured.”¹⁹

Brownson asked people to keep an open mind in reading the essays: To “do them justice, they should be read with reverence, with a yielding spirit, an open heart, ready to receive with thankfulness whatever meets its wants or can be appropriated to its use.”²⁰ Others continued to see Emerson’s ideas as dangerous. Felton warned that “the new opinions, if such they may be called, are ancient errors and sophistries, mistaken for new truths, and disguised in the drapery of a misty rhetoric, which sorely puzzles the eye of the judgment,” and the *New York Review* dismissed it as a “godless book.”²¹ To the *Athenæum*, “Mr. Emerson seems to have ‘gone to a feast’ of Philosophy, and ‘brought away the scraps.’”²² The fact that most of the British reviewers (like the *Athenæum*’s) were so negative was discussed by John Heraud, an early friend of the Transcendentalists’ in England, who gave this as the reason:

The English are with difficulty induced to sympathize with the struggles of a man, to reach the height of contemplation and wisdom; the result of his toil, pictured in some system or logical dissertation, is their sole care. Emerson just gives us the materials of thought, and then leaves us to work out a further road by ourselves; but an English reader takes up a book to avoid the trouble of thinking.²³

Essays: Second Series (1844) evoked similar responses. The *Southern Quarterly Review* called Emerson “the copyist of a copyist of a bad model.”²⁴ Even otherwise favorable reviews found fault with Emerson’s style. “A Disciple” complained in the *United States Magazine, and Democratic Review* that while Emerson’s “mind betrays a quick apprehension of logical sequence, yet he renders no account of the actual process by which he arrives at results,” and Margaret Fuller wrote that the essays “tire like a string of mosaics or a house built of medals.”²⁵ Some reviewers found this volume of essays better than the first: To the *Spectator*, the subjects were “better chosen” and “come more home to the experience of the mass of mankind, and are consequently more interesting,” and to the *Athenæum*, “the flag of conciliation is displayed; much account is made of all manner of conventions.”²⁶ And there were again complaints about Emerson’s religious ideas—such as that of Frederic Henry Hedge, who warned that Emerson “regards Christ as a mere teacher of moral

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

and religious truths” and the Christian Church as “a school or sect, founded by Jesus, in the same sense in which any other school is founded by any other philosopher.”²⁷

With the publication of *Poems* (1847), Emerson changed genres but not the general nature of reviewers’ responses. The New York *Daily Tribune* was alone in proclaiming “Ralph Waldo Emerson . . . one of America’s greatest Poets if not absolutely her greatest Poet.”²⁸ More typical was the comment in the *Critic* that the poems contained “a repetition of the vagueness mistaken for grandeur, and mysticism for profundity,” and the comparison in the *Athenæum* of Emerson’s poems to Keats’s “Endymion,” a “production full of fine poetic material, but wanting the decision of outline and form necessary to a finished work.”²⁹ To Francis Bowen, the poems had “some mystical nonsense, some silly pedantry, an intolerable hitch in rhythm or grammar, or an incredible flatness and meanness of expression.”³⁰ Still, the *Critic* did say that if Emerson is “obscure, it is because he soars so high that he loses sight of his landmarks; but how can there be discovery without daring—how explore without sometimes erring?”—a thought put more pithily by C. A. Bartol’s “He has, we think, more height than breadth.”³¹ And there were the old complaints about Emerson’s religious ideas, with Bartol questioning how they could be those of the true poet (“Yet we hardly know how he could have the kind of human sympathy which we most value for the inspiration of such an undertaking, with his present views of religion”) and Brownson calling the verses “hymns to the devil.”³²

One reason Emerson’s poetry was never highly appreciated by his contemporaries lay in its departure from the more traditional forms of a Longfellow or a Holmes. Bowen complained about Emerson’s “fragments in verse—if *verse* it can be called, which puts at defiance all the laws of rhythm, metre, grammar, and common sense.”³³ The *Critic* felt that perhaps Emerson had “a meaning in many of these lyrics, but certainly it is unintelligible to his readers,” an unforgivable trait, since a “poet has no right so to tax his reader’s brain.”³⁴ In a similar statement of contemporary poetic theory, the *American Review* chided Emerson because we “require that a certain propriety and regularity shall inspire the form and the measure of verses; that the line be full, sounding, and of a free construction, not feeble, harsh, or cramped. The accents and pauses must fall agreeably, and the sense follow easily along the line, rather helped than impeded by it.”³⁵ In an indirect answer to such a statement, the *Literary World* commented that to “be free of faults has been a safer passport to the welcome of reviews and drawing rooms rather than to be fertile of excellences,” and to this “we attribute in a great degree the comparatively cold reception of Mr. Emerson among his countrymen.”³⁶ Ironically, Bowen felt that “it is only in his prose that Mr. Emerson is a poet,” since

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

quaint and pithy apothegms, dry and humorous satire, studied oddities of expression, which made an old thought appear almost as good as a new one, and frequent felicities of poetical and picturesque diction, were the redeeming qualities that compensated the reader for toiling through many pages filled with a mere hubbub and jumble of words.³⁷

The reviews of *Nature; Addresses, and Lectures* (1849), a collection of *Nature* and earlier addresses, was met with “mingled delight and disgust” by the *Literary World* and other reviewers.³⁸ The former quality is best characterized by George E. Ellis:

We apprehend that the highest, the most enduring, and the most just encomium which Emerson will receive will not be from the coterie who regard him as an inspired seer, but from the larger, the more discriminating, and the really more intelligent body of his readers, who find on every page of his proofs of a most pure spirit and a loving heart, without one breathing of an unholy or rancorous feeling.³⁹

The latter quality was exemplified by the *Knickerbocker*, which attacked Emerson’s “philosophy which would reduce all outward appearances to the mind’s mode of conceiving them” as “a cold and unsympathizing philosophy”; as a result, Emerson would “make each human being an isolated, independent demi-god, instead of a weeping, laughing man, with a heart clinging in countless sympathies to every heart around him.”⁴⁰

When *Representative Men* (1850) was published, the jury was still out on the question, as the *Athenæum* phrased it, “Is this inspiration or folly?”⁴¹ The *Spectator* felt that it was the latter (“Paradox, which formerly was confined to particular ideas, now extends to whole sections of the book; the views, if not the arguments, are often vague and unsatisfactory”), as did the *Critic*, which believed that Emerson was still “indulging in the strange sort of mysticism that he probably imagines to be philosophy, but which, to others, appears very much like nonsense—words substituted for thoughts, and the unintelligible mistaken for the profound.”⁴² Bartol felt that in “the midst of his discussions, masterly and original in their single points, we look back, at a loss, like a man with a vague clew in the centre of a labyrinth.”⁴³ But the *Literary World* thought this Emerson’s “best work . . . because in it he is most objective,” and the *Yale Literary Magazine* praised the “grace and fitness of his metaphors, the freshness of his expressions, the poetic and truthful originality of his descriptions.”⁴⁴ Old objections resurfaced: C. C. Felton warned of Emerson’s “apparent indifference to positive religious belief, as shown by his

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

manner of classing all beliefs together,” and *Graham’s Magazine* simply stated, “In matters of religious faith it may be confidently asserted that mankind is right and Mr. Emerson wrong.”⁴⁵

Representative Men was one of the works featured in a long review of Emerson’s writings by Theodore Parker, who, although he often differed with Emerson, had earlier been caught up with him in attacks by conservative Unitarian writers. His review is arguably the most incisive one written about Emerson while the latter was still alive. Parker is from the start a supporter: “Mr. Emerson has won by his writings a more desirable reputation, than any other man of letters in America has yet attained.” His put-down of critics who fail to appreciate Emerson is scathing:

“What of this new book?” said Mr. Public to the reviewer, who was not “seized up and tied down to judge,” but of his own free will stood up and answered: “Oh! ’t is out of all plumb, my lord—quite an irregular thing! not one of the angles at the four corners is a right angle. I had my rule and compasses, my Lord, in my pocket. And for the poem, your lordship bid me look at it—upon taking the length, breadth, height, and depth of it, and trying them at home, upon an exact scale of Bossu’s—they are out, my lord, in every one of their dimensions.”

Like the Reverend William Ellery Channing, Emerson “offended the sectarian and party spirit, the personal prejudices of the men about him; his life was a reproach to them, his words an offence, or his doctrines alarmed their sectarian, their party, or their personal pride, and they accordingly condemned the man.” Parker recognized Emerson’s strength in small units of literary construction (“He never fires by companies, not even by platoons, only man by man”); his “idea of personal freedom, of the dignity and value of human nature”; and the “profoundly religious” effect of his writings (“They stimulate to piety, the love of God, to goodness as the love of man”). At the same time, Parker lamented “the want of logic in his method” and a good bit of his poetry, saying, “Good Homer sometimes nodded, they say; but when he went fast asleep he did not write lines or print them.”⁴⁶

The reviews of *English Traits* (1856) naturally fell out along nationalistic lines. Most of the American press liked the book. Its “solid realities” were praised in *Harper’s*, and *Putnam’s* called it “exquisitely rich.”⁴⁷ Andrew Peabody felt that it “revives our early pride in our mother-land, and makes us feel anew the unparalleled queenliness of her position and belongings.”⁴⁸ Putnam’s commented that whether “you begin at the last chapter or the first—at the bottom of the page or the top, it is almost equally intelligible and equally interesting.”⁴⁹

The response from England was not as positive. The *Critic* warned that *English Traits* was unfortunately typical of books by American travelers:

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Ignorance is partly concealed behind prejudice; presumption takes the place of a well-grounded confidence; everything is dwarfed to suit a pre-conceived and not very lofty standard; and the general result tends only to inspire us with contempt for the author, and wonder at the laudatory notices of his production that come to us from the American press.⁵⁰

The *Athenæum* wrote that “the book, as a book, will be remembered—if remembered at all—as a work wanting in substance and genuineness,” and the *New Quarterly Review* described it as consisting of “a series of diatribes upon England and Englishmen, seasoned and served up so as to pique national self-complacency, and swell local conceit in Boston.”⁵¹ The *Spectator* noted that the “volume is a cheap edition, published by Messrs. Routledge ‘by arrangement with the author’; though what he can get out of it seems difficult to imagine.”⁵² And the *New Quarterly Review* “tersely” conveyed “the national English feeling—‘If you don’t like the country—d——n you—you can leave it!’”⁵³

By the publication of *The Conduct of Life* (1860), reviewers realized that Emerson was not going to change, and their comments about his good and bad points settled into a familiar litany. The *Westminster Review* called the book a collection of “desultory musings” that have “been called suggestive, but this is only true in the sense that all incompleteness is suggestive.”⁵⁴ The *Knickerbocker* warned its author, “THOU HAST NO CHRISTIANITY!”; and Noah Porter, Jr., decided that “Mr. Emerson is incompetent to judge of what the world thinks, by the utter shallowness and flippancy of the judgments which he expresses concerning Christianity itself.”⁵⁵ William Maccall found the philosophy “far too vague,” and the New York *Daily Tribune* said that “the reader who expects any fresh accessions of knowledge, or more intelligent perceptions of truth, or a clearer insight into the ‘conduct of life’ from its oracular ‘utterances’ will doubtless rise from its perusal with a sense of disappointment.”⁵⁶ The *Athenæum*’s reviewer felt he knew the reason for the latter response, saying that Emerson had “come to the end of all he has to say, and is repeating himself, but with a colder and more feeble utterance.”⁵⁷ James Russell Lowell gave the book its most favorable review, but even he would “only say that we have found grandeur and consolation in a starlit night without caring to ask what it meant, save grandeur and consolation.”⁵⁸

Emerson’s second volume of original verse, *May-Day and Other Pieces* (1867), was treated more seriously than his first one had been. Charles Eliot Norton praised the inspirational qualities of the poems (“more fitted to invigorate the moral sense, than to delight the artistic”) but said that Emerson was “still careless about the shape in which his thought embodies itself, and fails to guard his poetry against the attacks of time by casting his poems in perfect and imperishable forms.”⁵⁹ William Dean Howells, too, praised the poems for giving “the notion of inspiration.”⁶⁰ And David Wasson made an

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

interesting comparison of the poems with Emerson's prose: "In prose we find of late years less color, and a more determinate form, less imagination and more reason, less of gleaming suggestion, more of steady light. . . . [O]n the contrary, [we see in the poetry] a richness of color and a fine flow of movement which he has never elsewhere attained."⁶¹

The last two volumes Emerson published in his lifetime were collections of previously published works and later lectures, often compiled and edited by family and friends as Emerson's memory and creative powers declined. The reviewers, for the most part, lamented the loss of the Emerson that had been as much as they reviewed the works before them.

Society and Solitude (1870) seemed "like stray sheets caught up at random" to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and lacking in "purpose" to *Putnam's Magazine's* reviewer.⁶² To Bret Harte, Emerson's "results no longer astonish us, although we are always entertained with his processes," but the *Academy* decried Emerson as "the hierophant" of the "mischievous school of American makebelieve."⁶³ Even a supportive John Burroughs noted: "No one knows better than Emerson himself that he has long ago had his say, and that he has nothing essentially new to add." He also complained that the lectures had been poorly revised for book publication, having "too much point, and not enough drift. . . . An audience must be pleased every moment, but a good reader can afford to wait, and holds by the general result."⁶⁴

In a review of *Letters and Social Aims* (1876), the *Athenæum* dismissed Emerson by noting that he "begins to stand, accordingly, among the men of today, a figure of the past, not yet remote enough to be venerable, but unserviceable for present needs."⁶⁵ *Scribner's* felt that "there is still enough left of the old method, or non-method, to bring back something of the old exasperation—both at the excess of choice quotation, confusing the main thread,—if thread there be,—and also in the fact that in re-arranging the loose sheets, some of the best things may have fallen out and disappeared."⁶⁶ And George Parsons Lathrop found the book "extremely fatigued reading, especially to those who wish for the elixir of Emerson's earlier volumes."⁶⁷

Contemporary reviews of Thoreau's books, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) and *Walden* (1854), concentrated on a number of major points: physical versus spiritual values, philosophy versus practicality, individualism versus social responsibility, physical isolation versus social involvement, and the religious or personal hypocrisy of the author.

In general, the response of reviewers to both books was very positive. Although most of the reviews were short, general, or both, they did contain a number of effusions. *A Week* was called "a fresh, original, thoughtful work," a match for Emerson and Carlyle "in felicitous conceits and amusing quaintnesses," and "as cool and pure as the fall of dew in summer nights."⁶⁸ About

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Walden, reviewers commented that it was full of “many and rich suggestions”; “a prose poem [with] classical elegance, and New England homeliness with a sprinkle of Oriental magnificence in it”; “Sometimes strikingly original, sometimes merely eccentric and odd, it is always racy and stimulating”; and that “we do not get such a book every day, or often in a century.”⁶⁹

The argument over physical versus spiritual values in *A Week* was perhaps best recognized by Horace Greeley, who said it seemed the “main purpose” in Thoreau’s life “to demonstrate how slender an impediment is poverty to a man who pampers no superfluous wants, and how truly independent and self-sufficing is he who is in no manner the slave of his own appetites.”⁷⁰ In a similar fashion, the Oneida community’s *Circular* called *Walden* “a picturesque and unique continuation of the old battle between the flesh and the spirit.”⁷¹ In “Higher Laws,” Thoreau himself explicitly stated that this subject was of interest to him: “I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both.”⁷² But the Boston *Atlas* found that Thoreau’s pursuit of higher laws had resulted in a loss of humanity on his part: Although it praised the “strong, vigorous, nervous truth” of the spiritual passages in *Walden*, the *Atlas* complained that “there is not a page, a paragraph giving one sign of liberality, charitableness, kind feeling, generosity, in a word—HEART.” In *Walden*, body had been subordinated to spirit, and there was a “total absence of human affection.”⁷³ In comparing the two books, the *National Anti-slavery Standard* wrote that

life exhibited in them teaches us, much more impressively than any number of sermons could, that this Western activity of which we are so proud, these material improvements, this commercial enterprise, this rapid accumulation of wealth, even our external, associated philanthropic action, are very easily overrated.⁷⁴

Another dichotomy present in both books—that of philosophy versus practicality—was discussed by reviewers. A number of them attacked Thoreau’s Transcendentalism, as did W. R. Alger in his review of *A Week*, which he found

interspersed with inexcusable crudities, with proofs of carelessness and lack of healthy moral discrimination, with contempt for things commonly esteemed holy, with reflections that must shock every pious Christian, with the transcendental doctrines of the new-light school, with obscurities of incomprehensible mysticism, with ridiculous speculations, moon-struck reveries and flat nonsense,—without moral purpose in the writing, and without practical results in the reading.⁷⁵

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The New York *Morning Express* believed that the “tendencies of his mind are at times too speculative,” and the New York *Churchman* did not “expect many people to follow his example; comically, his experience is published as a curiosity, a piece of quaintness, an affectation for the simple amusement of a wicked world.”⁷⁶ And the New York *Times*, referring obliquely to “The Bean-Field” chapter, noted: “Ascetics who have a taste for beans will find comfort in this volume.”⁷⁷ Although Thoreau gave plenty of evidence in *Walden* that good ideas must be built upon solid bases (“If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them” [p. 324]), not all reviewers noticed this. Some, like that of the Boston *Daily Evening Traveller*, simply pointed out the combination of “many shrewd and sensible suggestions” and “a fair share of nonsense” in the book.⁷⁸ The *National Anti-slavery Standard* was more positive about the philosophical parts of *Walden*: “The striking peculiarity of Mr. Thoreau’s attitude is . . . that the loftiest dreams of the imagination are the solidest realities, and so the only foundation for us to build upon, while the affairs in which men are everywhere busying themselves so intensely are comparatively the merest froth and foam.”⁷⁹ In its odd comparison of *Walden* and P. T. Barnum’s *Autobiography*, the *Knickerbocker* argued that the only similarity between the two authors was their rejection of practicality (both would not labor “very hard with their hands for a living”) for a type of philosophy (both were “determined to support themselves principally by their wits”).⁸⁰ In the *Westminster Review*, George Eliot called attention to “that practical as well as theoretical independence of formulae, which is peculiar to some of the finer American minds.”⁸¹ A few readers saw in *Walden*’s philosophical passages vestiges of Transcendentalism. Elizabeth Stoddard, writing in the *Daily Alta California*, called *Walden* “the latest effervescence of the peculiar school, at the head of which stands Ralph Waldo Emerson,” and the *Yankee Blade* thought the “Conclusion,” in which Thoreau “tries to Emersonize,” the “poorest” chapter of the book.⁸² But John Sullivan Dwight, himself previously aligned with the Transcendentalists, defended Thoreau as “one of those men who has put such a determined trust in the simple dictates of common sense, as to earn the vulgar title of ‘Transcendentalist’ from his sophisticated neighbors.”⁸³ In a later review of *A Week*, the *Saturday Review* compared it to *Walden* by claiming that in “none of his later volumes did Henry Thoreau express his peculiar philosophy with so much geniality and so little straining after exaggerated effect” as he did in his first book.⁸⁴

Most reviewers touched on the theme of individual versus social responsibility in both books. To the New York *Churchman*, *A Week*’s “excessive love of individuality and those constant Fourth-of-July declarations of independence, look very well on paper, but they will not bear the test of a practical examination.”⁸⁵ In their discussions of this topic, few reviewers understood the genuinely antisocial basis of Thoreau’s individualistic philosophy, which

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

warned that “public opinion is a weak tyrant compared with our own private opinion” (p. 7) and that “not until we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations” (p. 171). That this theme is a major one in *Walden* can be seen in the famous line “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer” (p. 326). Typical of the reactions to this theme is the comment in the *Albion* that readers can “admire [Thoreau], without wishing to imitate him.”⁸⁶ On the other hand, the Boston *Atlas* recognized that, unlike his “brother moralizers” who “think and speak of mankind as being themselves” units of it, Thoreau “fondly deems himself emancipated from this thralldom, and looks down upon them as an inferior tribe.”⁸⁷ *The National Anti-slavery Standard* presented succinctly recognition of Thoreau’s belief that individuals need to emancipate themselves before attempting to emancipate society:

In a deeper sense than we commonly think, charity begins at home. The man who, with any fidelity, obeys his own genius, serves men infinitely more by so doing, becoming an encouragement, a strengthener, a fountain of inspiration to them, than if he were to turn aside from his path and exhaust his energies in striving to meet their superficial needs.⁸⁸

Related to this theme is that of physical isolation versus social involvement. Most reviewers of *A Week* found that solitude did not improve the tone or attitude of the book’s narrator. The *Saturday Review* commented that “Thoreau’s intellectual self-absorption is apt to resemble, in its wearying capacity, the faculty of a bore”; the *Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer* found the book “at times repulsively selfish in its tone”; and James Russell Lowell asserted that “Mr. Thoreau, like most solitary men, exaggerates the importance of his own thoughts. The ‘I’ occasionally stretches up tall as Pompey’s pillar over a somewhat flat and sandy expanse.”⁸⁹ Thoreau had made it clear in *Walden* that he preferred physical isolation to social involvement: “I had this advantage, at least, in my mode of life, over those who were obliged to look abroad for amusement, to society and the theatre, that my life itself was become my amusement and never ceased to be novel” (p. 112). He made this point over and over in *Walden*, sometimes by using paradox (“We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers” [p. 135]) and sometimes by using humor (“I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself, than to be crowded on a velvet cushion” [p. 37]). Again, most reviewers missed the antisocial implications of the book, choosing instead to harp on what the Boston *Atlas* called “the one great, fatal error, which completely vitiates the experiment,” that Thoreau was “no true hermit. . . . He only played savage on the borders of civilization.”⁹⁰ In other words, while Thoreau denounced society in print, in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

life he crept back into town whenever he wanted meals and companionship.

Finally, many reviewers complained of Thoreau's hypocrisy. In *A Week*, the hypocrisy was seen in his professing to be religious while maintaining a negative attitude toward Christian religion. Sophia Collet found Thoreau's comments on Christianity "sometimes rather random, a defect unworthy of one who usually displays such keen justness of thought," and the Oneida community's *Circular* could not "sympathize with his glorification of Hindoo philosophy; we cannot agree with his estimate of Christ."⁹¹ The *Literary World* made this observation about Thoreau's comments on religion: "Yet, when this writer, so just, observant, and considerate, approaches what civilized men are accustomed to hold the most sacred of all, he can express himself in a flippant style which he would disdain to employ towards a muscle [i.e., mussel] or a tadpole."⁹² The perceived attitude of personal hypocrisy was probably the most complained-about aspect of *Walden*. As the *National Era* described *Walden*, it contained "many acute observations on the follies of mankind, but enough of such follies to show that its author has his full share of the infirmities of human nature, without being conscious of it."⁹³ A corollary to this was the argument made by Charles Frederick Briggs in his review of the book: "Although he paints his shanty-life in rose-colored tints, we do not believe he liked it, else why not stick to it?"⁹⁴ Obviously, these reviewers missed the many occasions in the book in which Thoreau said he was making a case for all people, not just himself ("If I seem to boast more than is becoming, my excuse is that I brag for humanity rather than for myself" [p. 49]); asserted that he wanted his readers to rethink their own lives and not merely imitate his ("I would not have any one adopt *my* mode of living on any account" [p. 71]); and explained that "I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one" (p. 323). Indeed, Thoreau clearly stated that his purpose in *Walden* was not to foster clones of himself but to free people to think; he proposed—in a line that appeared on the title page of the first edition—"to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up" (p. 84).

Three posthumous reviews of Thoreau's writings show markedly different attitudes toward his works. The review by an unknown "Parish Priest" is a surprisingly complimentary one, given the problems of earlier reviewers with Thoreau's religious ideas.⁹⁵ James Russell Lowell's review of *Letters to Various Persons* retarded Thoreau's public recognition for years with its portrayal of a dry and humorless man.⁹⁶ And Emerson's comments, ostensibly an expansion of his eulogy at Thoreau's funeral, did little to provide a picture of a man whose books the average American would wish to read. His portrait of a stoical and aloof idealist was probably more responsible for the delay of Thoreau's acceptance by the reading public than any other essay written on Thoreau during or after his life.⁹⁷

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

NOTE: Most nineteenth-century reviewers give copious extracts from the works under consideration to illustrate their points; in some cases, the extracted material exceeds in length the reviewer's own comments. For reasons of space, I have omitted these extracts from the selections for this volume, except in those instances where they are necessary to understand the comments made in the review itself. Because first editions of works by Emerson and Thoreau are not readily available, I have indicated the locations of material deleted by reference to standard editions of the authors' works. References to Emerson's *Nature*, "American Scholar Address," "Divinity School Address," "Literary Ethics," and "The Method of Nature" are to the Harvard University Press edition (in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*) of *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures* (ed. Alfred R. Ferguson, 1971); this edition is also used for references to *Essays [First Series]* (ed. Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr, 1979), *Essays: Second Series* (ed. Ferguson and Carr, 1983), and *Representative Men* (ed. Douglas Emory Wilson, 1987). References to "Michael Angelo" (in *Natural History of Intellect*), *Poems*, *English Traits*, *The Conduct of Life*, *May-Day and Other Pieces* (in the *Poems* volume), *Society and Solitude*, and *Letters and Social Aims* are to the Centenary Edition of *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Edward Waldo Emerson (Houghton, Mifflin, 1903–4). The Princeton University Press edition of *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau* is used for *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (ed. Carl F. Hovde et al., 1980), *Walden* (ed. J. Lyndon Shanley, 1971), and "Resistance to Civil Government" (the corrected title of "Civil Disobedience") in *Reform Papers* (ed. Wendell Glick, 1973). Citations of these texts in this volume give page and line ("11.25" would be page 11, line 25) and, where applicable, poem or chapter title for easy reference to other editions. Readers should be aware that the first-edition texts quoted in contemporary reviews often differ from the texts used for citation.

Readers interested in pursuing the contemporary reception of Emerson and Thoreau will find a number of works of value. A full list of contemporary comments on Emerson is in Robert E. Burkholder and Joel Myerson's *Emerson: An Annotated Secondary Bibliography*, and a number are reprinted in *Critical Essays on Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Burkholder and Myerson.⁹⁸ Myerson's *Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Descriptive Bibliography* lists all of Emerson's writings.⁹⁹ Raymond R. Borst's *Henry David Thoreau: A Reference Guide, 1835–1899* and *Henry David Thoreau: A Descriptive Bibliography* list writings by and about Thoreau.¹⁰⁰ All the known reviews of *Walden* are reprinted in *Critical Essays on Henry David Thoreau's "Walden,"* ed. Myerson, and Bradley P. Dean and Gary Scharnhorst, "The Contemporary Reception of *Walden*"; both of these also include selections from general critical commentaries on Thoreau and his works.¹⁰¹ At this writing, Scharnhorst was preparing a comprehensive bibliography of writings about Thoreau. For a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

good survey of scholarship on the Transcendentalist movement as a whole, see *The Transcendentalists: A Review of Research and Criticism*, ed. Myerson, and *Critical Essays on American Transcendentalism*, ed. Philip F. Gura and Myerson.¹⁰²

All scholarship builds on the work of other scholars. I am grateful to Robert E. Burkholder for allowing me to use freely the Emerson reviews he discovered, and to Bradley P. Dean and Gary Scharnhorst for sharing their Thoreau researches with me in a similar fashion. Kenneth Walter Cameron did groundbreaking work on both Emerson and Thoreau; Walter Harding and Thomas Blanding have extended our knowledge of Thoreau and his times in their scholarship. All three men have made my job easier. I thank M. Thomas Inge for establishing this series and for his work on this book as series editor. The University of South Carolina has supported my work, and I am especially grateful to Carol McGinnis Kay, Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, and Bert Dillon and Trevor Howard-Hill, who chair the English Department. Maxine James and Alfred G. Litton provided valuable assistance in preparing the texts for this book. And, of course, my gratitude goes to Greta for her love and especially for her patience.

JOEL MYERSON

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Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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