

Ralph Waldo Emerson

(1803–1882)

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Burden of Expectation

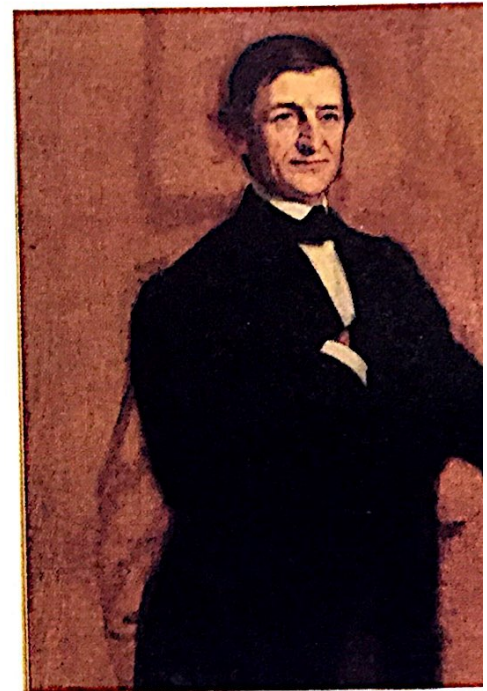
Emerson was born in Boston in 1803 to a family that was cultured but poor. When he was not quite eight years old, his father, a Unitarian minister, died of tuberculosis. His mother, left with six growing children to care for, opened a boardinghouse.

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

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

Young Rebel

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



Ralph Waldo Emerson (c. 1867) by William Henry Furness, Jr. Oil on canvas (45³/₄ × 36¹/₁₆”).

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