TWO IDEALISTS

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882)

Shortly before the poet Walt Whitman died (see page 326), 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. Better than anyone before him, Emerson expressed the advantages of a young land—its freedom from the old, corrupt, and moribund thought and 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. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson called for a philosopher "who shall reveal the resources of man, and tell men . . . that with the exercise of self-trust, new powers shall appear; that man is the word made flesh . . . and that the moment he acts from himself, tossing the laws, the books, idolatries, and customs out the window—we pity him no more, but thank and revere him." Emerson himself fit that description of the new philosopher very well.

Emerson was one of those rare writers who appealed both to intellectuals and to the general public. He helped open the door between the commonplace and "uncivilized" world of nineteenth-century America and the realm of philosophical and religious truth. In this way, he influenced contemporaries such as Thoreau, Melville, Whitman, and Dickinson, each of whom claimed a slightly different aspect of the crude and rich American experience for subject matter. His influence has continued into the twentieth century and can be seen, among other places, in Robert Frost's simple nature lyrics (see page 670) and in Wallace Stevens's philosophical poems (see page 768). Both these poets, in their ways, emphasize the connections between humans, nature, and a higher order.

Emerson's influence on the popular mind—spread through the thousands of lectures he gave throughout the United States during a long career—was equally strong. He had something of a reputation for being difficult to understand and, partly as a result of this, was considered "good for you" in a cultural sense. In fact, though, Emerson's lectures were usually quite understandable.

"I had heard of him as full of transcendentalisms, myths, & oracular gibberish," Melville wrote a friend after hearing Emerson lecture for the first time. "To my surprise, I found him quite intelligible." Then Melville added wryly, "To say truth, they told me that that night he was unusually plain."

Emerson's work is often "plain" in the sense that he offers a perfectly understandable surface, though there is much substance beneath it. His essays sometimes appear to be collections of memorable sentences rather than organized expositions of thought. Such a style betrays Emerson's habit of piecing together his lectures and essays from his journals.

But in some ways, this style was appropriate to a lecture. If one sentence was unclear, the listener need only wait for the next one, which might contain thought enough to consider for the entire evening.

Moreover, one of Emerson's stirring sentences might satisfy the intellectual and emotional needs of many different people. "Trust thyself; every heart vibrates to that iron string." No one had to delve deeply into Emerson's philosophy to respond to such confident optimism. Whether or not Emerson intended it, that sentence served equally well as a motto for businessmen and as an encouragement to a young man to go off and live alone in the woods.

Oddly, despite his great influence, it is difficult even to classify what kind of writer Emerson was. *Essayist* is too limited; *philosopher* is

too broad. The best term, perhaps, is *poet,* not in the sense of *versifier,* but in the sense Melville intended when he wrote that Benjamin Franklin was "everything but a poet." (See page 73.)

"I am a poet," Emerson wrote to his fiancée, Lydia Jackson, in 1835, "of a low class without doubt but yet a poet. That is my nature & vocation. My singing be sure is very 'husky,' & is for the most part in prose. Still am I a poet in the sense of a perceiver & dear lover of the harmonies that are in the soul & in matter. . . ."

This poet was born in Boston in 1803 to a family that was cultured, but poor. When he was only eight years old, his father, a Unitarian minister, died of tuberculosis. His mother was left with four growing boys to care for. A fifth son was mentally retarded and raised by relatives. Mrs. Emerson opened a boardinghouse and depended on the generosity of the Church.

The father's place in the lives of the Emerson children was taken by their aunt. Mary Moody Emerson was a strict Calvinist whose rigid piety 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."

Despite Aunt Mary's example of self-reliance in the family, every step of Emerson's own life had been laid out for him from an early age. He was to go to Harvard and become a minister like his father and the seven generations of Emersons before him. Emerson uncomfortably obeyed. His life consisted of a series of attempts to establish his own identity against this background of expectation.

When he was fourteen, Emerson entered Harvard. He was an indifferent student, especially weak at science and mathematics, but he read widely in philosophy and theology. The most significant events of his college career occurred during his junior year. He dropped the name Ralph, a gesture toward establishing his identity, and he began keeping a journal. Eventually reaching monumental proportions (the published version consists of fourteen volumes), that journal would be the source of Emerson's lectures and essays for the rest of his life.

Emerson's academic record at Harvard was so weak that upon graduation he failed to get a teaching post in the prestigious Boston Public Latin School. Instead, he took a teaching job at a school run by his uncle, and he prepared himself, with many doubts, for the Unitarian ministry. In 1826, he was licensed to preach. Three years later, at the age of twenty-six, he accepted a post at Boston's Second Church, which had been Cotton Mather's church a century before. That year, he married Ellen Tucker, a beautiful but fragile seventeen-year-old already in the early stages of tuberculosis, that curse of nineteenth-century life. Sixteen months later Ellen died.

Emerson's grief coincided with a growing disbelief in some of the central doctrines of his religion. As a result, he distrusted his own vocation as a minister. In June of 1832, he shocked his congregation by resigning the ministry and setting off for an extended tour of Europe.

Long influenced by European thinkers, Emerson had read the work of German philosopher Immanuel Kant and admired the writings of British historian Thomas Carlyle, who was in Scotland thundering out calls for individual greatness and denouncing the evils of modern society. Emerson had also read the Romantic poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. From Kant he would adopt the term *transcendentalism;* from Coleridge he would take up the crucial distinction between logical thought and intuition, a poetic form of thought that enables us to see the correspondences between the physical world and spiritual reality. In Europe Emerson met and conversed with Coleridge and Wordsworth, and he visited Carlyle at his remote farmhouse.

When he returned to America in 1834, Emerson settled in Concord, Massachusetts, and soon married Lydia Jackson. He began to supplement his meager income by giving lectures. In fact, he found in the lectern "a second pulpit," as he wrote Carlyle. After a short time, the major works by which we have come to know Emerson's thought began to appear.

The announced subject of Emerson's first series of lectures was the philosophy of history. Emerson's view was distinctively American, in that he denied the importance of the past. "The ancients are dead," he said in one of these early lectures, "but for us the earth is new today and heaven is raining influences. Let us unfetter ourselves of our historical associations and find a pure standard in the idea of man."

The last phrase points to Emerson's focus on

Ralph Waldo Emerson and his family.

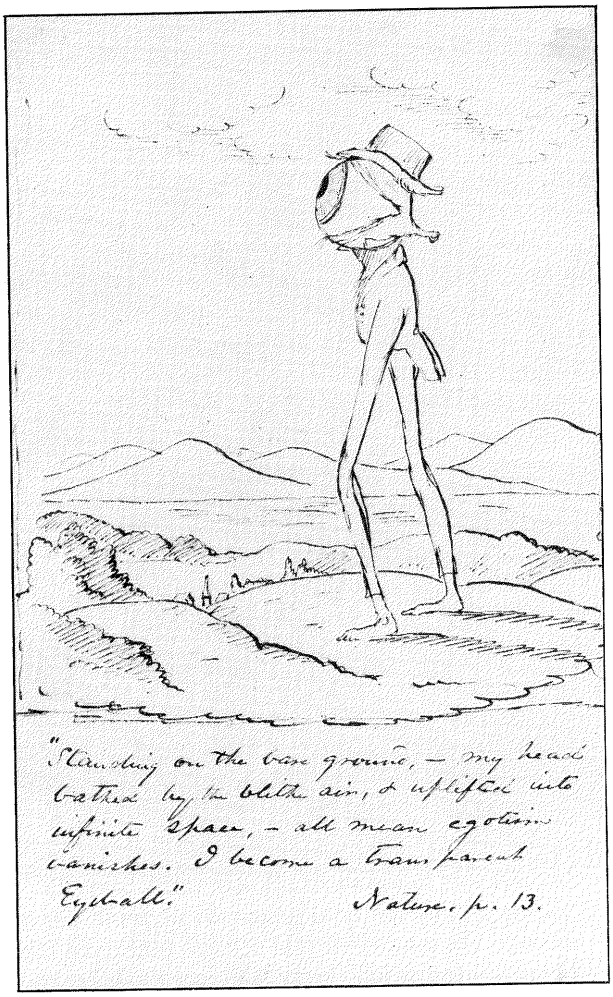
the nature of our humanity—a subject that really interested him more in these lectures than any philosophy of history. Individual men and women were part of this "idea of man" in the same way that individual souls were part of a larger entity, which Emerson would later call the "Over-Soul."

The idea of nature corresponded to the idea of man—both were part of a universal whole. "There is in nature," he wrote in the "Humanity of Science," "a parallel unity, which corresponds to this unity in the mind, and makes it available. . . . Not only man puts things in a row, but things belong in a row."

In 1836, there occurred three major events in Emerson's life: the publication of *Nature,* the most complete exposition of his philosophy; the birth of his son Waldo, who would become the center of Emerson's life; and the first meeting of a conversation group of like-minded thinkers in Emerson's drawing room, which would come to be called "The Transcendental Club."

Over the following years, Emerson's influence as a lecturer and an intellectual leader continued to grow. In 1837, he excited his student audience at Harvard with the lecture now known as "The American Scholar." Oliver Wendell Holmes (see page 161) called this speech "our intellectual Declaration of Independence." In the speech, Emerson demanded that American scholars free themselves from the shackles of the past. "Our day of dependence," Emerson declared, "our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close." He reminded scholars of the importance of the present and of things that were apparently insignificant. Since all things are part of a larger whole, even the commonest matters could open a door to the eternal.

A year later, in 1838, he was invited back to Harvard by a small group of divinity students to speak to them on the eve of their graduation. His speech—"The Divinity School Address"—called for a rejection of institutional religion in favor of a personal relation with God. Religious



A caricature by Christopher Pearce Cranch from *Illustrations of the New Philosophy.*

By permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge.

truth, Emerson said, was "an intuition. It cannot be received at second hand." Like the scholar's books, the pulpit was for inspiration, not indoctrination. Emerson called upon the young divinity students before him to "cast behind . . . all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with the Deity." This lecture so outraged Harvard authorities (who seized on what they thought was its denial of the divinity of Christ) that three decades passed before Emerson was allowed to speak there again.

By this time, Emerson's life had settled into a consistent pattern: an ever-widening series of lecture tours, punctuated by the publication of his lectures in essay form. *Essays* appeared in 1841; *Essays: Second Series* in 1844; *Representative Men* in 1850. There was something for everyone in his lectures and essays, but especially for the legions of people who were disappointed with the narrowing material or spiritual condition of their lives.

It was to these people, perhaps, that Emerson spoke most intensely. Concord became a kind of Mecca to a rising class of disaffected and truth-seeking young. They sought out Emerson as a kind of guru. But Emerson's genius was such that he appealed to a broad spectrum of American society. Intellectuals responded to his philosophy, his ideas about the relations between humanity, nature, and God; the young responded to his hope, his declarations that they were on the verge of a great new age; while society at large responded to his optimism, his claims that all was really for the best.

That optimism was dealt a severe blow in 1842 when Emerson's son Waldo died at the age of six from scarlet fever. Emerson was profoundly moved. By nature a rather cold, restrained man, he had found in Waldo someone to whom he could demonstrate his love directly and unaffectedly. At the child's death, Emerson shrank back into an emotional shell from which he never reemerged. "How can I hope for a friend," he wrote in his journal during his middle years, "who have never been one?"

In his later years, Emerson suffered from a severe loss of memory and had difficulty recalling the most ordinary words. This affliction resulted in his increasing public silence, and when he did appear in public, he read from notes. Near the end of his life, agreeing to such a performance, he remarked, "A queer occasion it will be—a lecturer who has no idea of what he is lecturing about, and an audience who don't know what he *can* mean."

In the autumn of 1881, Walt Whitman paid Emerson a visit of respect and was asked to dinner. In Whitman's report of this "blessed evening with Emerson," he wrote that Emerson "seated himself in his chair, a trifle pushed back, and, though a listener and apparently an alert one, remained silent through the whole talk and discussion. A lady friend [Louisa May Alcott] quietly took a seat next to him, to give special attention. A good color in his face, eyes clear, with the well-known expression of sweetness, and the old clear-peering aspect quite the same." Six months later, Emerson was dead.

FROM

Self-Reliance

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

GUIDE FOR READING

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better for worse as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. . . .

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. . . .

Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world. I remember an answer which when quite young I was prompted to make to a valued adviser who was wont to importune me with the dear old doctrines of the church. On my saying, "What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within?" my friend suggested—"But these impulses may be from below, not from above." I replied, "They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil." No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it. . . .

9 the divine providence: God.

12–13 betraying . . . trustworthy: revealing their awareness that God.

16 immortal palms: everlasting triumph and honor. In ancient times, people carried palm leaves as a symbol of victory, success, or joy.

19 suffrage: approval; support.

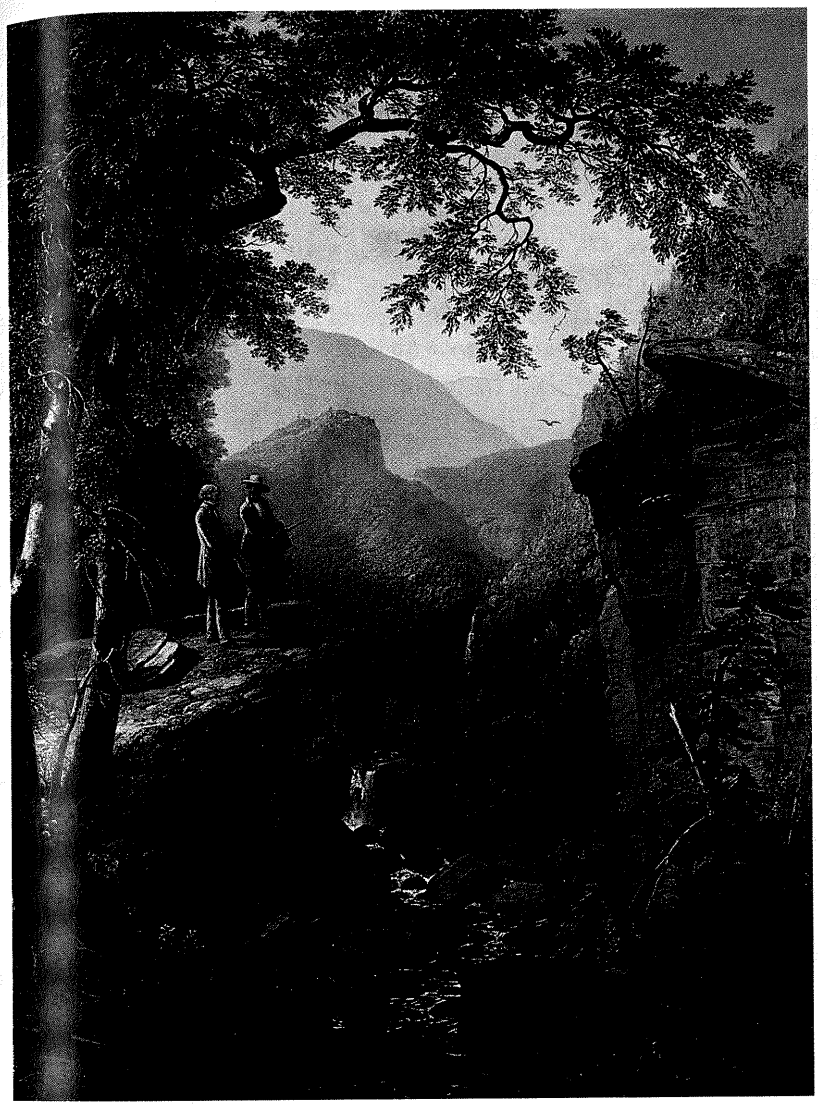
21 wont to importune me: accustomed to trouble me.

26–29 What is implied by Emerson's use of the word *sacred?* Why does he believe that one should follow his or her own nature?

29 after my constitution: consistent with my physical and mental nature.

WORDS TO KNOW

bestowed (bĭ-stōd') *adj.* applied; used **bestow** *v.*
predominate (prĭ-dŏm'ə-nāt') *v.* to have controlling power or influence
nonconformist (nŏn'kən-fôr'mĭst) *n.* one who does not follow generally accepted beliefs, customs, or practices
absolve (əb-zŏlv') *v.* to clear of guilt or blame



Kindred Spirits (1849), Asher B. Durand. Oil on canvas, collection of The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude. . . .

33 meanness: the state of being inferior in quality, character, or value.

35–38 What does Emerson say is easy to do? What does he say a great person is able to do?

For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure. And therefore a man must know how to estimate a sour face. The by-standers look askance on him in the public street or in the friend's parlor. If this aversion had its origin in contempt and resistance like his own he might well go home with a sad countenance; but the sour faces of the multitude, like their sweet faces, have no deep cause, but are put on and off as the wind blows and a newspaper directs. . . .

The other terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency; a reverence for our past act or word because the eyes of others have no other data for computing our orbit than our past acts, and we are loth to disappoint them. . . .

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

39–42 What does Emerson say is one consequence of being a nonconformist?

41 askance (ə-skăns′): with disapproval, suspicion, or distrust.

47–52 Why does consistency scare us from trusting ourselves?

50 loth (lōth): unwilling; reluctant.

51 hobgoblin: a source of fear or dread. Notice that Emerson does not criticize all consistency, only "foolish" consistency that does not allow for change or progress.

52 divines: religious leaders.

58–60 Pythagoras . . . Newton: great thinkers whose radical theories and viewpoints caused controversy.

LITERARY LINK

from Memoirs

MARGARET FULLER

In the chamber
of death, I prayed
in very early years,
"Give me truth;
cheat me by no illusion."
O, the granting of
this prayer is
sometimes terrible to me!
I walk over the
burning ploughshares,[1]
and they sear[2]
my feet. Yet nothing but
the truth will do.

1. **ploughshares** (plou′shârz′): the cutting blades of plows.
2. **sear:** scorch; burn.

WORDS TO KNOW **aversion** (ə-vûr′zhən) *n.* a strong dislike