

Emerson: The Mind on Fire. Robert D. Richardson, Jr. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. Pp. xiii + 671. \$35.00, hardcover; \$16.95 paperback.

The Emerson who was deeply compelled to look into the coffin of his first wife, Ellen, fourteen months after her death, an act repeated when he looked into the coffin of little Waldo fourteen years after his death, refuses to stay buried in the backlands of American philosophy. While his place within American letters has never been more secure, his standing in the philosophical community remains ambiguous. Cornel West quite rightly locates Emerson as one of the founding mythmakers of the North Atlantic theodicy, even if he profoundly misreads Emerson's political perspective by calling him a "petit bourgeois libertarian" (1989, 40). One of the many virtues of this new intellectual biography by Richardson is that it puts to rest once and for all many of West's rather unfounded charges, especially concerning Emerson's alleged failure to act vigorously for the emancipation of the entire community. Emerson was anything but a simple-minded (or even high-minded) libertarian, and he certainly was an unwavering abolitionist and supporter of John Brown, even when his public position cost him dearly in terms of his standing within the local and larger communities.

In addition to this lingering misapprehension of Emerson's social and political perspectives and public activities is the recurring view that there is little in Emerson's categorial scheme (assuming we can even use this language) that would be of value to a naturalistic age that has little use for Neoplatonic rhapsodies on the oversoul and the power of the imagination against the iron grip of fate. Our naturalism is a chastened one in which nature's regularities, even where punctuated by novelty and chance (assuming that Peirce is right), sweep across and through the human process with frightening regularity. From our genetic encoding to our early childhood experiences, which can become embedded in the hardwiring of the brain, we see little scope for a spirit that can link us directly to a liberating divinity that emerges out of the bosom of nature. And, even though Emerson is relentlessly antipatriarchal (and succeeds better in this than almost all monotheists in our world today), he still seems to the philosopher to be a curious throwback to a kind of prenatalistic optimism that cannot withstand the withering fires of the postmodern and naturalistic horizons.

Richardson brilliantly puts to rest the absurd idea that Emerson was anticomunal and unable to enter into the most agonizing debates of his time. Emerson's defense of the Cherokees against the forced march ordered by President Van Buren in 1838 has long been noted.¹ His personal anguish over the results of this march, which included many deaths, is well documented by Richardson through a thorough study of letters and notes written by Emerson during that period. Emerson's later alliance with the abolitionist movement (when none of the so-

called liberal Unitarian churches would even allow him to speak in their fellowship halls) shows the depth of his social feeling, which compelled him to give an endless stream of public lectures all over New England and beyond.

Emerson's support for President Lincoln was lukewarm until Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862. Until that point, Emerson was even ambivalent about the war, as he insisted that the preservation of the Union was of far less concern than the emancipation of the slaves. In fact, he and his second wife, Lidian, forbade their son to enter the Union army until the Emancipation Proclamation was signed. After that historic turning point, Emerson became a staunch supporter of the war effort and gave his son permission to enlist.

The political controversies that embroiled Emerson from the late 1830s on were foreshadowed by his heretical theological moves away from the then-orthodox Unitarianism of his day. Richardson does an excellent job in reconstructing the theological climate of the time and avoids the common mistake of painting Unitarianism in purely negative terms. It must be remembered that the Unitarian movement produced some of the most articulate abolitionists and advocates for woman's rights in the nineteenth century, and that twentieth-century liberalism would be unthinkable without acknowledging the continuing contributions of this vital social and religious movement. Many of the Unitarian ministers of Emerson's generation, such as George Ripley and Theodore Parker, were deeply congenial to the rise of Transcendentalism and fully entered into the fierce public debate that took place both from pulpits and in newspapers.² Parker deepened his commitment to Emerson's ideals by working with Margaret Fuller on the Transcendentalist journal the *Dial* during its 1840–44 run. Conservative Unitarians such as Andrews Norton, who was outraged by the liberalizing tendencies of the Unitarian Harvard Divinity School, tried to bring back a new orthodoxy to Unitarianism, in part, by ignoring the higher criticism of the Bible that was coming out of Germany. This higher criticism, which Emerson understood all too well, undermined the idea that the Bible was some kind of inspired and ahistorical document that expressed a unilinear divine revelation. When Emerson turned to the book of nature, he did so in the full recognition that all written texts are secondary reflections on the spirit that courses through the woods and streams around Concord.

Emerson was a voracious reader, returning to favorite texts again and again. Yet his reading was always done in the service of his primary view that nature had its own language and that all human attempts to render it must in the end bow before the signs and metaphors that lie embedded in local natural settings. Emerson had the kind of mind that could somehow see a metaphor emerge from almost any vivid scene. The metaphor, such as the undulating rhythms of the sea (an image that grew stronger in Emerson's mind as he aged), would point to a truth in nature that had its analogues in human ethical systems. If Kant could bring the Bible before the bar of practical reason, Emerson could bring this or

any other text before the bar of nature. It is small wonder that Emerson became estranged from the preaching found in the more conservative Unitarian churches of his day, for they still clung to a kind of supernaturalism.

Richardson details the evolution of Emerson's reading habits and shows the continuing influence of the German tradition, from Kant to the post-Kantians. Schleiermacher, the father of modern theological liberalism, was very much in the air at the time, and Emerson found a congenial niche in the early writings of this Reformed theologian, especially the 1799 *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, which was written by the young aesthete to his fellow Romantics in Berlin. Schelling came to assume an important place for Emerson after 1845, and this influence is one that deserves further study (especially in the larger context of American philosophy, and Peirce in particular).

Like the Unitarians then and now (remembering that Emerson formally left the church in 1832), Emerson placed a great deal of hope in human reason to take on the role that previously had been accorded to revelation. Of course, this reason is not identical to the reason that emerged out of the Enlightenment and is more akin to the inner light of the Quakers. Emerson retained a fascination with Quaker thought throughout his life and was inclined to identify with this movement more than with any other. Reason, in his reconstructed sense, worked with the spirit of/in nature to bring about a communion between the self and those forces that could transform our fate into a state of partial freedom. As his thought matured, especially after the death of his son Waldo (age 4), Emerson began to wrestle with the forces of fate and built-in character as they work to limit the scope of freedom and reason. But as Richardson traces so well, Emerson never capitulated to fate and always saw its presence in the form of an ongoing dialectic with freedom, sometimes stressing one side over the other, but never giving up hope in amelioration.

Philosophically, Emerson remained fairly consistent in his evolving perspective, although there emerged different emphases that sometimes mirrored the tragic events in his personal life. He witnessed death in many forms and guises (e.g., tuberculosis, lock jaw, shipwreck, and cholera) and lived in a world far more vulnerable to disease than our (industrial) world. His brilliant 1844 essay "Experience" is a testament to the power of negation in the world. But this essay should be placed in tension with his most Plotinian piece, "The Method of Nature," originally delivered in Waterville, Maine, in the summer of 1841. Here we see a strong articulation of an almost raging emanation that sweeps all particulars before it, eventually manifesting a powerful pulsating spirit that can transform any life open to constant change. Richardson refers to this 1841 perspective as a "dynamic pantheism" (346), that has its conceptual roots in Schelling, Carlyle, and Coleridge, as well as in the Pythagorean, Neoplatonic, and Zoroastrian traditions (346). By 1841, Emerson was already fully at home in Persian, East Asian, and South Asian thinking and felt that there were strong family resemblances (he would say identities) between them and the best of Western thought.

Richardson probes into Emerson's psyche, although he does not make use of psychoanalytic analyses. Many critics have noted an almost Napoleonic stream in Emerson, manifest in what a medieval Christian would call "concupiscence," namely, the desire to eat the world. There is some hint that a kind of gentle narcissism animated Emerson's drive to render everything into his mother tongue (in fact, he hated to read any book in the original if a translation was available). In addition to the famous dream in which an angel has Emerson eat the world that has suddenly turned into an apple, there is this 1849 dream (age 46) in which

a certain instructive race-horse was quite deliberately shown off, which seemed marvelously constructed for violent running, and so mighty to go, that he stood up continually on his hind feet in impatience and triumphant power. But my admiration was checked by some one else's remarking behind me, that "in New York, they could not get up the smallest plate for him." Then I noticed, for the first time, that he was a show horse, and had not run forward at all. (469)

The dream ego sees the magnificent embodiment of sheer power and will that serves as an ideal self-image. It is as if the dream ego (Emerson) is saying, "Would that I could be that race-horse and burst out of the gate." Yet another voice informs him that the horse is for show only and could never win a purse (plate) in a legitimate race.

Leaving aside a Freudian reading of sexual dynamism and displaced wish-fulfillment, we can see that Emerson's continual obsession with power, both in the self and in nature, becomes beautifully condensed in this image of the dual reality of the horse. With his desire to outrun all poets in the land, there is also the gnawing sense that he really doesn't belong in the race and that there is something of the charlatan in his nature. Regardless of the merit of this interpretation, it is clear that Emerson had a much more complex psyche than is often recognized and that many tensions appear to the astute reader of the poems and essays.

The last years of Emerson's life are treated in a condensed manner on the grounds that his writing and his earlier near-volcanic ideation were rapidly cooling. We see a still-unbowed Emerson, but one who can only rake over the coals of earlier moments of glory. Richardson could have done more with the last two decades of Emerson's life, but he succeeds in showing the arch of this profoundly gifted soul as it made its way from "corpse cold Unitarianism" to the Neoplatonic and Romantic realm of undulating nature, a nature that could destroy its offspring, but that always provided more power than fate for the one who could solve the riddle of the Sphinx.

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NOTES

1. This highly public struggle against President Van Buren is well detailed in another excellent biography of Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Days of Encounter* (McAleeer 1984). See my review of McAleeer's book in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* (1986).
2. On this issue, see *A Stream of Light* (Wright 1989), especially "At Morning Blest and Golden-Browed" (Howe 1989).

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