

PROLOGUE

Give all to love;
Open thy heart;
Friends, kindred, days,
Estate, good-fame,
Plans, credit and the Muse,—
Nothing refuse.

—R. W. Emerson, *Give All to Love*



This study began many years ago as an effort to answer a question. That question, however, must first be prefaced by a few observations. For the first thirty years of his life, Ralph Waldo Emerson was the epitome of upper-middle-class American gentility and conformity. Considered undistinguished as an undergraduate at Harvard (his younger brothers Charles and Edward were seen as the bright lights of the family), he graduated in the middle of his class and elected to attend the Divinity School at his alma mater, thus following in the footsteps of a long line of Emerson divines, including his father and grandfather.¹ His career in the Divinity School was as unremarkable as his undergraduate performance. Eventually, he completed his studies, married a young woman with the right social credentials and family background, and assumed a comfortable position in one of Boston's more prestigious Unitarian congregations, the Second Church. Nothing could possibly be more conventional and predictable. Indeed, as Lawrence Buell recently observed, in the first thirty years of his life, "Emerson did little to distinguish himself from respectable mediocrity."² Remarkably, however, before the third decade of his life was complete, he would suffer the death of his young wife, abandon the ministry, travel to Europe, and eventually, through an extraordinary series of publications and lectures, emerge as one of America's most gifted writers, speakers, philosophers, and social

reformers, a thoroughgoing revolutionary prophet who sought to “unsettle all things” in an effort to redeem and reform his world. An extremely creative and highly unorthodox thinker, his dynamic, idealistic, and supremely optimistic Transcendental philosophy would scandalize some but delight and enthrall many, especially the youth of America whose imaginations he captured. By the end of his long life, he would be revered as a veritable oracle, an American icon, a thinker and prophet of immense importance. He was recognized as a person whose vision helped to shape the destiny of his nation and the course of Western thought. The one hundredth anniversary of Emerson’s birth in 1903 was celebrated in one form or another in virtually every major American city. He was memorialized by Charles W. Eliot, the President of Harvard, and Theodore Roosevelt, the President of the United States. By the end of the decade, his works had been translated into all major Western European languages, Swedish, Russian, and Japanese.³

Now, more than two hundred years after his birth, Emerson’s reputation endures. In the decade of the nineties alone, nearly one thousand articles and books were published discussing his life, ideas, and his continuing influence.⁴ His incisive aphorisms as well as quotes from his various poems, essays, and addresses routinely appear on insurance company calendars and in presidential addresses. The question, then, simply put is this; how did all this happen? How did a conventional preacher of modest ability, leading an utterly predictable and comfortable middle-class life, eventually emerge as his nation’s foremost prophet, seer, and social reformer? And further, what was the source of the dynamic, mystical, and transcendent power that Emerson claimed to have discovered within himself that enabled such a dramatic transformation? In an effort to find an answer to these questions, I initially planned to examine Emerson’s personal psychological, spiritual, and intellectual development. I soon found that it would also be necessary to relate that development to the special needs of the time and place in which he lived if I was to comprehend the enormous impact that he had on his society. Emerson’s life experience, I discovered, involved a complex and, at times traumatic, inward journey that ultimately led to the source of his philosophy of personal transcendence, the discovery of what he called “the God within.” Emerson’s personal discovery provided the basis for his Transcendental philosophy which, in turn, offered vital answers to his society’s most pressing moral and social problems. Emersonian Transcendentalism soon became an essential ingredient in the ferment of social change that would serve to characterize the period 1830–1860 as “the era of reform” in America.⁵

The middle decades of the nineteenth century, like those of the twentieth century, were a time of great tension and social alienation in America. For Emerson, the period was characterized by a constant and distressing emphasis on material progress at the cost of human dignity,

meaning, and self-worth. The early stages of the Industrial Revolution and the rapid development of commercial enterprise were accelerating the pace of life and creating enormous wealth for some. In New England, much of this wealth was generated by the cotton-based textile industry, the raw materials for which were produced almost exclusively by southern slave labor.

The persistent pursuit of material gain during this period brought about the subordination of more humane values and created an alienating environment where, as Henry David Thoreau complains in *Walden* (1854), “men have become the tools of their tools.” This inversion of values, where material worth outweighed human worth, is captured succinctly in Thoreau’s observation that, “We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us.”⁶ Worse yet, in an environment characterized by endless commercial competition and the pursuit of the “almighty dollar,” presumably free citizens had, in Thoreau’s view, become “the slave drivers” of themselves. It is not surprising that in such a dismal and frantic environment, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”⁷ Additionally, the subordination of women, the mistreatment of Native Americans, and the ugly fact of slavery, provided a searing indictment of America’s growing materialism and corresponding disregard for basic human dignity.

Emerson saw this problem arising in the 1830s, at the beginning of his public career as lecturer and essayist. In his “American Scholar” address (1837), he describes a society rife with alienation where almost every person has been “metamorphosed into a thing.” In such a world, spiritual life is virtually nonexistent, and “The planter, who is Man sent out into the field to gather food, is seldom cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry. He sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm. The tradesman,” says Emerson, “is no better off because he “scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars.” Even the clergy have been compromised and literally de-humanized, just as most others have been. “The priest becomes a form; the attorney a statute-book; the mechanic a machine; the sailor, a rope of a ship.”⁸ A decade later, the problem had only grown worse, and in his “Ode: Inscribed to W. H. Channing” (1847), he proclaims,

’Tis the day of the chattel,
Web to weave, and corn to grind;
Things are in the saddle,
And ride mankind.

In this context, the value of humanity itself had been greatly discounted in the ledger book of life. “Men are become of no account,” Emerson observes. “Men in history, men in the world of to-day are bugs, spawn, and

are called 'the mass' and 'the herd.'"⁹ In such a world, people blithely accept the fact of slavery because of the usefulness of its products. As Emerson notes, "What if it cost a few unpleasant scenes off the coast of Africa? That was a great way off. . . . If any mention was made of homicide, madness, adultery, and intolerable tortures, we would let the church bells ring louder, the church organ swell its peal, and drown the hideous sound. The sugar they raised was excellent: nobody tasted blood in it."¹⁰ Everywhere, institutions of all types that had once provided a source of meaning, self-worth, and human dignity were fast becoming enervated and generally dysfunctional, at least in a moral sense. At its worst, "the establishment," as Emerson would call it, now tyrannize over the hapless masses, and demanded a dull conformity and acquiescence to a torpid and immoral status quo. As he observes in "Self-Reliance" (1841), society itself has become a "joint stock company," where "the virtue in most request is conformity." As a result, individualism is discouraged. There is little opportunity for personal growth and development (Emerson called it "self-culture"), because "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members."¹¹ There was scant concern for authentic spiritual values and religious vitality in a world that did not look beyond the material reality of the senses. The churches themselves were not immune from this general malaise. In his controversial "Divinity School Address" (1838), Emerson describes in painful detail "the causes of that calamity of a decaying church and a wasting unbelief."¹² The primary deficiency of the age, he eventually discovered, was its inability to connect with the primal, erotic, instinctive, and intuitional element within, the affective side of humanity that connects us with divinity itself and also binds us to one another. In short, the age was becoming increasingly heartless and, therefore, spiritually enervated. Emerson came to believe that without feeling, there could be no faith, love, or harmony and no perception of "higher law" or divinity in human experience. Without dreams, there could be no vision of a better world. Under such circumstances, society ceases to progress and becomes an arid graveyard of repetitious sameness. In place of a life-sustaining divinity, society worships at the "sepulchers of the fathers."¹³ Where emotional and imaginative vitality are present, however, life and faith abound. The intuition of immortality and divinity brings redemption and renewal. As Emerson notes in his "Divinity School Address": "A more secret, sweet, and overpowering beauty appears to man when his heart and mind open to the sentiment of virtue. Then instantly he is instructed in what is above him. He learns that his being is without bound; that, to the good, to the perfect, he is born, low as he now lies in evil and weakness."¹⁴ This personal insight, however, came to Emerson only after he completed a sometimes painful inward journey. Before he could heal his society, he had to heal himself.

Emerson experienced the dramatic collapse of his own world following the death of his young and beautiful first wife, Ellen Tucker, in 1831.

The young minister was cast back upon himself to find the meaning of his life. His formal Unitarian faith, he discovered, failed utterly to satisfy his acute emotional and spiritual needs. Suddenly deprived of the traditional supports of church and family, Emerson set out upon what would become a heroic, inward journey. Through a remarkable process of self-discovery, he eventually penetrated the very essence of his being. In the depth of his own inner sphere, Emerson eventually found what he believed to be the center and source of all life: an overarching, mystical and all-encompassing divinity which, like Augustine's God, possessed a center that was everywhere and a circumference that was nowhere. Eventually, he named this dynamic and transcendent force the "Over-Soul," but he also used other names such as Eros, the eternal One, the Reason, Love, or more traditionally, God. Unbeknownst to himself, he had actually been prepared for this discovery, in part, by his extensive readings in European Romanticism and the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Goethe, and others, as well as his own Puritan heritage (represented to him directly by his oracular Aunt Mary Moody Emerson) with its emphasis on interior religious experience and the mystery of conversion. The death of his wife Ellen served as the catalyst that set these diverse influences into a dynamic and creative flux. The outcome of this dramatic inward journey was uniquely Emersonian. Eventually, it touched every part of his life and informed his deepest thoughts on the nature of divinity, art, time, history, language, culture, and the human social condition. Eventually this "new thing," as he once called it, became known to the world as Transcendentalism. He preached it throughout the rest of his life in lectures, addresses, essays, and poems.

Emerson's Transcendental philosophy, as it turned out, was exactly what his age required. It eventually provided a dynamic impetus to social reform that helped to fuel a veritable "second Revolution" of American culture. With its emphasis on the dignity and divinity of all people, the supreme importance of the individual, and the obligation of all to work for the greater good, Transcendentalism helped to bring about an end to slavery and also promoted the rights of women, Native Americans, the poor and oppressed, immigrants, and all other marginalized people. It insisted on the sacred right of all Americans to share in the promise of freedom, equality, and justice, regardless of race, class, or gender. Emersonian Transcendentalism countered the distressing dehumanization of society by re-centering the world around humankind, both individually and collectively. The major thrust of this movement stressed the importance of activating and utilizing humankind's natural instinctive, affective, and intuitional resources, which are themselves a manifestation of the power of divinity. Emerson insisted that this divinity is within every person. It is precisely this affective quality that Perry Miller identifies as the very heart of the Transcendental movement. "The real drive in the souls of the

participants,” he maintains, “was a hunger of the spirit for values which Unitarianism had concluded were no longer estimable.” For Miller, Transcendentalism is essentially “a protest of the human heart against emotional starvation.”¹⁵ By emphasizing both the validity and the authority of divine intuitions, Transcendentalists embraced the spiritual and emotional energy that they believed united all of humanity and, ultimately, imparted dignity and meaning to life. By yoking the power of the affections and an intuitive perception of divinity with the conscious power of reason, Transcendentalism offered an effective and dynamic antidote to the sense of alienation and spiritual enervation that pervaded American society at the time. As Emerson observes in *Nature* (1836), “The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is, because man is disunited with himself.”¹⁶ To look within and access the divinity that is part of every person’s being, “the eternal One,” is the first and most important step in personal redemption, as Emerson learned from his own experience. This, in turn, leads to the redemption of society through the recognition of basic and universal human rights and the obligation of all to promote social justice. The end result is a more noble life and a just society. Emerson offered his contemporaries a Transcendental vision of personal harmony and social coherence based upon mutual respect and brotherhood. He describes the concept in mythic terms in the “American Scholar.” “It is one of those fables, which out of an unknown antiquity, convey an unlooked-for wisdom,” observes Emerson, “that the gods, in the beginning, divided Man into men, that he might be more helpful to himself; just as the hand was divided into fingers, the better to answer its end.” For Emerson, the source of this original unity is still with us. It is the power of Eros, the Over-Soul, the “divine Reason.” “The old fable covers a doctrine ever new and sublime”; he asserts, “that there is One Man,—present to all particular men only partially, or through one faculty; and that you must take the whole society to find the whole man. Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all.” It became an article of absolute faith to Emerson “that man is one.”¹⁷ It is this essential concept that imbues even the oppressed slave with divine dignity. As Emerson observed in an early journal entry, “Democracy/Freedom has its root in the Sacred truth that every man hath in him the divine Reason. . . . That is the equality & the only equality of all men.” He goes on to note that, because of the presence of this element of divinity in all people, slavery is an “unpardonable outrage.”¹⁸ By virtue of his Transcendental faith in the divinity of man, Emerson sought to effectively reverse the de-humanizing values equation of his time. He insisted boldly and confidently that “The world is nothing, the man is all.”¹⁹

As noted earlier, Emerson represented this divinity within, the life-giving and life-sustaining force in nature and mankind, variously as the Over-Soul, the eternal One, the Reason, Love, or “Eros.” He used this

latter term in its most original, mythological sense, and this is the sense in which it is used in this study. According to Hesiod, Eros was the most ancient of all the Gods. Many held that he was the son of Erebus and the Night. His function was to coordinate the elements that constitute the universe. As such, he can be seen as a personification of the elemental force that “brings harmony to chaos,” the first and most essential formative dynamic in the development of life.²⁰ Only in his later manifestations does Eros appear in a less cosmic context as the god of human love, passion, and feeling, but even in the diminutive form the cohesive and progenerative element is conspicuous. For Emerson, Eros represents the essential cosmic force, the glue that holds the universe and humanity together. His writings are infused with this dynamic spirit. Because this divine energy is the source of all harmony, it is Eros who shapes the vision of the Muse. These two provide the keys to all understanding and they are the source of all meaning. This connection is made explicit in Emerson’s poem “Love and Thought.”

Two well-assorted travelers use
 The highway, Eros and the Muse.
 From the twins is nothing hidden,
 To the pair is nought forbidden;
 Hand in hand the comrades go
 Every nook of nature through.²¹

This unifying power of Eros, of Love, is also made explicit in the poem “Beauty.” In an obvious reflection on his own prophetic role, Emerson here describes the creative experience wherein the poet is able to discern the essential harmony of a seemingly fragmented and painful world. Amid images of incipient chaos, “errant spheres,” “quaking earth,” “dens of passion, and pits of wo,” the poet perceives “strong Eros struggling through” bringing order and thus “solving the curse.”

He heard a voice none else could hear
 From centered and from errant sphere.
 The quaking earth did quake in rhyme,
 Seas ebbed and flowed in epic chime.
 In dens of passion, and pits of wo,
 He saw strong Eros struggling through,
 To sun the dark and solve the curse,
 And beam to the bounds of the universe.²²

Because they are the special conduits of this divine power, for Emerson the poet and the scholar (his dual vocation) displace the enervated priest. The ideal scholar is a person of insight, but also feeling; “He is the

world's eye. He is the world's heart." Because of this, "He is to resist the vulgar prosperity that retrogrades ever to barbarism, by preserving and communicating heroic sentiments, noble biographies, melodious verse, and the conclusions of history."²³ Emerson described himself in describing his ideal scholar. He is one who must be open to all knowledge. He is an eclectic thinker who can entertain a wide diversity of thought and feeling through the medium of the heart as well as the eye. He is a visionary who can penetrate the surface and reveal, like "strong Eros," the one among the many, the *unus mundus*, the divine harmony of all things.

It is in the role of the poet, however, that Emerson most clearly serves as the harbinger of divinity. The poet will perform much the same function as the scholar, but with greater passion, and hence, much greater authority. "The poet," Emerson says, "is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and stands on the centre. . . . Therefore the poet is not any permissive potentate, but is emperor in his own right." The power this "emperor" personifies and projects is that of the divinity that dwells within all humankind. This power transcends the staid limitations of the "joint-stock" world. Because poets facilitate a dramatic process of transformation by appealing to humanity's divine nature, and because for Emerson man in his current social state is "a god in ruins," poets function as "liberating gods" who, in effect, liberate gods, or demigods at least.²⁴ In this ideal form, both poet and scholar are avatars of the divinity within. They are representations of Emerson himself in the role he eventually assumed as Transcendental prophet and redeemer.

Emerson's message of divine liberation was, indeed, radical and revolutionary. By imbuing individuals with divine authority, he sought to emancipate them from the repressive strictures of America's corrupt obsession with "things." Not surprisingly, this soon led him into conflict with the conservative "fathers" of his society, who condemned his philosophy and his message as "the latest form of infidelity." Despite such harsh criticisms, Emerson persisted in his role as prophet and oracle throughout his lifetime, following his initial transformation. It is a role that he grew into gradually, sometimes with great reluctance, resistance, and even self-doubt. At times, especially in his antislavery crusade, like a wearied Christ, he wished that this cup might pass from him. In the end, however, he persevered through public ridicule and opprobrium to see his vision triumph.

In considering the overall trajectory of Emerson's life, it occurred to me early on that understanding the dramatic transformation that made his exceptional career possible would require both spiritual and psychological, as well as literary, insight. Fortunately, around the time of my first serious engagement with Emerson's writings, I came upon the works of a gifted group of eclectic thinkers who seemed capable of answering this need. These writers, Joseph Campbell, Erich Neumann, Mircea Eliade,

and Norman O. Brown, appeared in many ways to replicate Emerson's own example in their quest for unity, meaning, and human understanding in an increasingly chaotic and threatening world. It is also significant that, writing in the mid-twentieth century, these "psychomythic humanists" (as they shall be designated here) confronted a major crisis similar to that faced by Emerson in the mid-nineteenth century, namely, a potentially catastrophic collapse of the prevailing cultural paradigm.

The middle of the twentieth century in America, as well as the Western world generally, like the mid-nineteenth century, was a time of rapid change. This was wrought through dramatic industrial and technological development, social and political conflict, and global warfare. The result was often fear, anxiety, and a feeling of alienation. Despite the decade of prosperity that followed it, for many, the First World War appeared to signal the general collapse of Western civilization, which, according to Ezra Pound in his poem, "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly," amounted to "two gross of broken statues," and "a few thousand battered books." A "lost generation" of American writers, including Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos, and others attempted to find its way through bewilderment, disappointment, and depression. T. S. Eliot pronounced this failed and faltering world a "Waste Land" in his famous poem by that name. Following a decade of economic depression and hardship in the 1930s, the United States found itself involved in yet another devastating global war. This conflict included the unique horrors of the Holocaust and thermonuclear devastation. The Second World War demonstrated with stunning cruelty humankind's seemingly unlimited capacity for inhumanity. The euphoria that followed the successful conclusion of that war soon gave way with the advent of yet another war in June 1950, this one on the Korean peninsula. The Korean conflict, in turn, was followed by the growing and persistent paranoia of the Cold War. The very technology that brought the Second World War to a successful conclusion for the United States now seemed to threaten the annihilation of all humankind. The growing tensions over Civil Rights added yet another dimension to the generalized anxiety and sense of alienation of the 1950s and 1960s in America. Humanity's place in the scheme of things seemed uncertain at best. The notion of human dignity and self-worth was assaulted on many fronts. Conventional religious beliefs, as in the mid-nineteenth century, seemed inadequate to answer the needs of the time. It was difficult to maintain notions of brotherly love while constructing a family fallout shelter. It now appeared to many that all values were purely subjective at best and at worst a mere excuse for oppression. The seeds of postmodernism had been planted.

It was during this time of fragmentation, tension, and growing disbelief, that the psychomythic humanists considered here published some of their most significant works. Strongly influenced by the theories of Carl

Jung and, to a lesser degree Sigmund Freud, these thinkers attracted significant attention in academic circles and elsewhere. Joseph Campbell, Erich Neumann, Mircea Eliade, and Norman O. Brown all shared a deep interest in human psychology, as well as other disciplines. In significant ways, their collective thought bears a strong resemblance to Emerson's, as well as other nineteenth-century Romantics and Transcendentalists. One of the reasons for this is that they shared many common sources. Additionally, Emerson was himself an influence on all of these writers, both directly and indirectly.²⁵ Like Emerson, these writers are highly eclectic and draw upon a vast range of sources, from the mythic to the strictly scientific. The results are often provocative. Despite my fascination with these similarities and the possible guidance that they might provide in exploring Emerson's transformation, I put the matter aside for many years. I was instead drawn into a study of Emerson's public career as a reformer, especially his antislavery crusade about which so little of substance was then known. At least one of the reasons for my attraction to this topic was the fact that I grew up watching the Civil Rights Movement unfold on the black and white Sylvania TV in my parents' living room, and I was deeply moved by it. As a result, like many in my generation, I became interested in matters of social justice and race from an early age. It was, therefore, natural that I should be curious about Emerson's relationship to the greatest reform movement of his time. And so I began researching and eventually writing about the evolution of Emerson's increasingly active social role, and the long and difficult path he followed in emerging from the relative quietism of the 1840s to the turbulence of the 1850s and beyond. Throughout, I was impressed by the passion of his campaign for social justice. However, I was also curious about the source of his inspiration and the depth of his commitment to such a controversial but important cause as antislavery. There was also the question of the relationship of this very public crusade to his Transcendental philosophy, a philosophy which, in the eyes of many scholars, appeared to encourage an aloofness from public affairs. The pursuit of answers to these questions eventually brought me back to the psychomythic humanists. In my renewed desire to explore Emerson's inner life, I considered various current theories of personality offered by modern psychology, from Personal Construct Theory, to Existential Phenomenology, to Psychodynamic Social Learning Theory.²⁶ While all were interesting, and undoubtedly worthwhile in their own right, the purely psychological approach proved to be too restrictive to account for Emerson's many facets. Ultimately, I found that none spoke so well to him as the psychomythic critics that had made such an impression on me earlier. No doubt, one reason for this is the fact that they were responding to a similar cultural crisis. Also, of course, they had been touched by Emerson themselves.

Collectively, these psychomythic humanists provide a unique and revealing perspective on Emerson's life and thought. Although diverse in their thinking, their works reveal four common Emersonian characteristics, each contributing to a unifying vision of reality and humanity's central place in it. First, all found through their studies of psychology (as well as religion, myth, history, art, and anthropology) that certain patterns or "archetypes" of experience and behavior appear to be universal. These archetypes were discovered in various myths, stories, tales, histories, sagas, religious accounts, songs, and rituals, as well as iconography, among widely diverse populations and civilizations over vast periods of time. Second, each of these thinkers ultimately explained the ubiquity of these archetypes by suggesting that their common source was, in one form or another, a "collective unconscious" that resides in the psyches of all people everywhere. Their studies of such archetypes revealed a great deal about human nature as expressed in philosophy, art, history, anthropology, theology, and various other disciplines. For some, these mythic archetypes and the collective unconscious, which is their ultimate source, appear as a manifestation of, and a point of contact with, a universal and divine force that resembles what Emerson called the "Over-Soul," "Reason," "Eros," "Love," and "God."

The third characteristic these thinkers have in common is that they are all, like Emerson, extremely eclectic in their thinking and frequently cross several disciplines in developing their individual studies. Despite this eclecticism, however, like Emerson's ideal scholar, they tend to center their studies on an examination of human nature itself, albeit from a variety of perspectives. By placing humankind in this central position, as both perceiver and perceived, all experience is seen as originating from and intimately related to humanity, both individually and collectively. The result is that, like Emerson and other American Transcendentalists and Romantics, they find in the apparently chaotic nature of human experience an ultimately unified and meaningful reality. Humankind's universal participation in a collective unconscious suggests the essential unity of the human family itself. Clearly, psychomythic humanism responded in many ways to the critical needs of the time, just as Emerson's Transcendentalism had a century before. The need itself was similar: to therapeutically address the strong sense of fragmentation and alienation that resulted from an acute dissatisfaction with the present failed paradigm of meaning through the rediscovery of an ultimate source of harmony deep within the collective unconscious, the universal "soul" of humanity.

The fourth and final characteristic these thinkers share with Emerson is this; they all maintain that the general malaise of the civilized world derives from an overemphasis on consciousness (Emerson called it "the Understanding"). This situation is largely the result of a pervasive

rationalism associated with the relentless march of science, technology, and material culture. In turn, the emphasis on consciousness results in neglect, or even repression, of the unconscious dimension of the psyche, the side that unites us with ourselves, with the divine, and with the rest of the human family. The result is a pervasive sense of alienation. Because of the remarkable similarities in their understanding of the psychological structure and essential needs of human nature, and because they were responding to a cultural crisis similar in its effect to that experienced by Emerson, I found that the writings of these psychomythic humanists provide a unique prism through which it is possible to view the interior landscape of Emerson's mind. Their insights also allow us to trace the path that Emerson followed in reaching the spiritual source of transcendence that became the mainstay of his intellectual life as well as his public role as prophet, seer, and reformer.

It is curious that, despite the many provocative archetypal and psychological insights that appear in Emerson's writings, a comprehensive study of this psychological/archetypal/spiritual aspect of Emerson, as reflected in both his life and his works, has never been attempted. Additionally, despite the strong presence of the affective, emotional element in Emerson's writings, as witnessed especially in such essays and poems as "Love," "Friendship," and "Give All to Love," as well as his numerous and often passionate antislavery addresses, this important element of Emerson's work and life has been largely ignored, or even denied. A brief overview of Emerson criticism to date suggests a possible explanation for this anomaly.

Sarah Wider's far-ranging and indispensable study, *The Critical Reception of Emerson: Unsettling All Things* (2000), reveals that, for the most part, studies of Emerson over the years have focused almost exclusively on his intellect and his intellectual contributions. This is certainly ironic, given the emphasis throughout his writings, both early and late, on intuition and sentiment.²⁷ Indeed, many critics seem to preclude the possibility that Emerson was even capable of psychological behavior, and by that is meant behavior stimulated by anything other than intellectual sources.²⁸ Consequently, a vital element so necessary to any truly humanistic study (and the sine qua non of the psychomythic approach) is missing; namely, a sense of the erotic, mystical, and intuitive Emerson, the passionate poet, philosopher, and visionary who feels as well as thinks. In fact, as we shall see, it is this very quality that is the source of his most creative and striking thought. Indeed, Emerson himself maintained that, "it is a law of our nature that great thoughts come from the heart."²⁹ An exclusively intellectual attitude, of course, is antithetical to the very impulse of psychological criticism. As Carl Jung points out, "one could pursue any science with the intellect alone except psychology, whose subject—the psyche—has more than the two aspects mediated by sense perception and thinking. The function of

value—feeling—is an integral part of our conscious orientation and ought not to be missing in a psychological judgment of any scope.”³⁰ Certainly one might say the same for the study of literature and art and those who produce such. Freud issues the same warning as Jung regarding studies that focus exclusively on intellect when he observes: “We remain on the surface so long as we treat only of memories and ideas. The only valuable things in psychic life are, rather, the emotions. All psychic forces are significant only through their aptitude to arouse emotions.”³¹ The opportunity for a fuller understanding of Emerson, therefore, has been subverted in most critical approaches by an emphasis on intellectual argumentation and interpretations that are exclusively grounded in analytical reasoning. Ironically, it is precisely the unreasonable, spontaneous, mystical, and emotional element in romantic art that constitutes an essential aspect of its gift to humankind. As Whitman asserts unabashedly in “Song of Myself,” “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes).” And Melville says of Shakespeare, “. . . it is those deep far-away things in him; those occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive truth in him, those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality:—these are the things that make Shakespeare, Shakespeare.”³² Not surprisingly, Melville “instinctively” sensed this mystical depth in Emerson, as he notes in a letter to his cousin. “Now, there is something about every man elevated above mediocrity, which is, for the most part, instinctively perceptible. This I see,” he says, “in Mr. Emerson. And, frankly, for the sake of argument, let us call him a fool:—then I had rather be a fool than a wise man.—I love all men who *dive*.”³³ Norman O. Brown sees this element of the mystical and unreasonable in art as essential, and he paraphrases Freud in his statement that “art provides relief from the pressures of reason.”³⁴ Wallace Stevens, who was himself influenced by Emerson, appears to make the same point when he represents poetic beauty as, “the imagination pressing back against the pressures of reality.”³⁵

A psychomythic approach to Emerson that takes into account his emotional, affective, mystical, and intuitional side provides unique insights. For Emerson, emotion, sentiment, and instincts are all directly related to the divine. They are integral to our understanding of ourselves and our world. He always recognized the necessary relationship between thought and passion in human experience and understanding. As he tells us in “The Poet” (1844), “it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing.”³⁶ For Emerson, thought without passion is arid and lifeless. It is passion that informs, more than anything else, his career as poet, philosopher, and reformer. Ironically, this element has seldom been recognized in his life and works.

Emerson's monumental reputation in his lifetime had more than a little to do with his enshrinement as an intellectual idol, and his literal disembodiment as a living being. The early biographies consistently depict him as a man of "elevation, purity" and "nobility of stature;" a creature whose spirit "had missed its way on the shining path to some greater and better sphere of being."³⁷ One asserts that even as a child he was "a spiritual looking boy,"³⁸ and yet another concludes that as an adult he "certainly seemed . . . hedged about with something of saintship" and perhaps due to this he "was a self-isolated thinker, and intellectually the creature of his religious moods."³⁹ Indeed, Wider observes that, following the publication of Oliver Wendell Holmes' influential biography in 1884, the "subordination of life to writing and writing to idealized life continued for the next two decades, and it arguably persisted so far into the twentieth century that its influence on Emerson studies remains palpably present today." She also observes: "For all the biographies of Emerson, there is a persistently static figure in their midst."⁴⁰ Generally, the emphasis throughout these biographies is upon the thinker and not the man. Even his private journals, when first published by his son, Edward Waldo, were expurgated of personal comments not in keeping with this established intellectual image.⁴¹

By the mid-twentieth century things had improved but little. F. O. Matthiessen, in his classic study, *American Renaissance* (1941), found the intellectual side of Emerson appealing while discounting the mystical element almost completely. Thus, he states, that "To-day [Emerson] has been overtaken by the paradox that 'The Over-Soul' proves generally unreadable; whereas, on the level of the Understanding, which he regarded as mere appearance, his tenacious perception has left us the best intellectual history that we have of his age."⁴² Similarly, one of the most detailed and reliable Emerson biographies, Ralph Rusk's *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1949), was received by critics, with some justification, as a load of learned lumber, wherein the man Emerson is lost somewhere amongst the five hundred or so pages of "facts" with which the reader is confronted. It tends to be, as various commentators have noted, "a useful tool of scholarship" rather than a life.⁴³ Occasionally there have been attempts to establish the existence of a real person behind the icon. Stuart P. Sherman in his *Americans* (1922), made a gallant effort in his chapter on Emerson, titled significantly, "The Emersonian Liberation," to reacquaint the reading public with the vitality and dynamism of the young New England rebel who did so much to set American minds and hearts afire. For Sherman, Emerson is something more than a disembodied idealist and "saint." As he says, "To know him is not merely knowledge. It is an experience; for he is a dynamic personality, addressing the will, the emotions, the imagination, no less than the intellect. His value escapes the merely intellectual appraiser."⁴⁴

More recently, Gay Wilson Allen's *Waldo Emerson* (1982) is a deliberate effort to present something of "the intimate, personal life" of the subject.⁴⁵ Robert Richardson's *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (1995), the best biography to date, began as an effort to present an intellectual history of the man, but the author soon found that "Emerson's intellectual odyssey turned out to be incomprehensible apart from his personal and social life."⁴⁶ Indeed, John McAleer's *Days of Encounter* (1984), and Carlos Baker's *Emerson Among the Eccentrics* (published posthumously in 1996), both make an effort to render Emerson's life largely through those personal relationships. However, the influence of such relationships, especially their emotional content, on Emerson's works and thoughts is largely undeveloped.

Lastly, there are many critics who find in Emerson a distressing "dualism" or "double-consciousness," that is seen as indicative of a schism between thought and feeling, the inner and outer worlds, the ideal and the real, the proponent of self-reliance and the social reformer. Stephen Whicher's *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1953), perhaps the most influential study of Emerson in the twentieth century, was among the first of these. As Wider notes: "Whicher divides Emerson's life in two, sharply distinguishing between the affirming vision of the 1830s . . . and the cynicism bordering skepticism emerging in the 1840s. . . . As drawn by Whicher, the intellectual life shows an unbalanced dualism."⁴⁷ According to Whicher, it was the apparent failure of idealism that resulted in a withdrawal on the part of Emerson after 1838 as the "image of the hero scholar, leading mankind to the promised land, steadily gave way to the solitary observer, unregarded and unregarding of the multitude."⁴⁸ The ideal and the real, it seems, were simply not compatible, at least according to this construct of Emerson's life.

Whicher is not the first critic to be perplexed by this combination of the "Yankee" and the "mystic" in Emerson. Frederic Carpenter, in his *Emerson Handbook* (1953), outlines clearly the history of this attitude beginning with James Russell Lowell's *A Fable for Critics* (1848), which famously describes Emerson as "A Greek head on right Yankee shoulders, whose range / Has Olympus for one pole, for t'other the Exchange." The problem here, however, resides more with the critics than with Emerson. If one allows that Emerson could both think and feel at the same time, and that feeling is actually an essential element in the Emersonian thought process, the problem vanishes. Emerson's idealism, by his own admission, is "intuitive," and thus God-connected; he speaks for what he feels is right and suggests that other people should do the same.⁴⁹ His concern with reforming his society, which persisted throughout his lifetime, was simply an attempt to implement this idealism in the "real world," to put his "creed into his deed." Whicher, however, attempts to force feeling and thought into separate categories and, hence, insists that

Emerson did too. He claims that Emerson was an inexperienced idealist when he wrote *Nature* in 1836, and a realistic empiricist when he published the essay "Experience" in 1844. He also suggests that the period 1838–1844 was a crisis period for Emerson, a time when he "turns against himself" as his naive idealism came face-to-face with the hard facts of his life experience.⁵⁰ Ironically, the record of Emerson's life shows that at the very time Whicher claims that he was in the process of withdrawing from society and forgoing his ideal of reforming America, Emerson was actually publicly protesting the removal of the Cherokees from their homeland in the south to the trans-Mississippi (1838), and undertaking what would prove to be a major commitment to the antislavery movement. Indeed, Emerson's dedication to active social reform would endure through the Civil War in keeping with his emergence as a major moral force in American society.

The concept of "dualism" persists today in critics such as John Carlos Rowe and George Kateb, as well as others, who see in Emerson's idealistic efforts at social reform a deviation from his Transcendental idealism. Rowe claims that, "Emersonian transcendentalism and Emerson's political commitments from 1844 to 1863 are fundamentally at odds with each other."⁵¹ Which is to say, that Emerson is at odds with himself. Similarly, George Kateb sees Emerson's participation in reform movements as a "deviation" from his own doctrine of self-reliance.⁵² Again, if one allows for the unity of thought and feeling in Emerson such "dualism" vanishes.⁵³ Emerson's social reform activities, like those of other Transcendentalists, were stimulated by his intuitive grasp of "higher laws" that reside within the unconscious of every person. His efforts to implement these ideals in his society were very much in keeping with his role as hero, redeemer, and reformer.⁵⁴

Finally, at the other end of the spectrum, Emerson has been criticized, at least occasionally, for being overly emotional. Perhaps the harshest of these critics is Yvor Winters who believed that Emerson's idealism was based on frivolous emotional impulse and, therefore, "Emerson at the core is a fraud and sentimentalist."⁵⁵ More commonly, however, Emerson was accused of the opposite sin. In the inappropriately titled *Emerson the Mythmaker* (1954), J. Russell Reaver asserts that in his poetry Emerson, "reveals his most complete reliance on intellectual appeals; his poems in image and structure stimulate the mind primarily, not the emotions."⁵⁶

The following chapters argue that Emerson was a passionate and dynamic artist, thinker, and reformer who was able, through accessing the content of his own unconscious, to shape from his personal experience, insights, and revelations of archetypal proportions and universal social import.⁵⁷ Because of this strong, archetypal strain, Emerson anticipates, to a surprising extent, many of the insights and beliefs of the psy-

chomythic humanists who followed a century later. Using the theories provided by this school, it is possible to come to a much deeper understanding of Emerson's works and also to explore an aspect of the man long ignored by traditional criticism, namely, his affective, intuitive, and mythic side. The genesis of this study, as noted earlier, lies in an effort to reach some understanding as to how Emerson became Emerson, and to "get at" what lies at the core of his most essential writings. It all begins with his early transformation, which was something of a mystical experience. Not surprisingly, the works of his early maturity, 1836–1844, as David Robinson points out, are characterized by a certain "visionary ecstasy" that reflects that transformation.⁵⁸ Emerson experienced these visions, not merely as the result of a sustained intellectual endeavor, but through periods of extreme emotional crisis that preceded and made possible these early major works. They are the result of a discernable process of psychological and spiritual growth and maturation through which Emerson eventually came to know and to trust what Lawrence Buell calls, "the divinity of the self, the cornerstone of Transcendentalism."⁵⁹ The dynamic personality that evolved from this experience was fortified with both the insight and the passion that allowed this once obscure figure to fulfill the role of redeemer and reformer in an alienated and generally corrupt American society. This development enabled him to bring to that society the healing forces necessary to address the essential needs of his day, that is, to fire the "artillery of sympathy and emotion," and to "celebrate the spiritual powers in their infinite contrast to the mechanical powers & the mechanical philosophy of this time."⁶⁰

In the study that follows, chapter 1 presents a brief and general discussion of the recurring need felt by individuals and societies to "re-center" reality in order to maintain vital and responsive patterns of human experience and thought that address the particular needs of the day. Looking back to the collapse of the Renaissance worldview under the weight of the New Science in the seventeenth century, and forward to the psychomythic humanism of the twentieth century, Emerson's Transcendental philosophy is viewed in a continuum that connects Neoplatonism and the modern world.

Chapter 2 develops many of the details of this general outline, and Emerson's role as a precursor of psychomythic humanism. This chapter also presents an overview of the relevant psychological and archetypal theories articulated by this group, as represented in their most seminal writings. Particular attention is paid to concepts such as time and history, economy and religion, and language and art.

Chapter 3 presents a detailed look at Emerson's inner and outer worlds for the period 1820–1844, a time of remarkable growth and development. It was during this period that Emerson experienced his greatest personal tragedies, including the deaths of his wife, Ellen, his brothers

Charles and Edward (who were also his closest friends) and, most painful of all, his firstborn son, Waldo. But it was also the period that witnessed his remarriage, the evolution of his Transcendental philosophy, and his initial emergence as a prophet and reformer. Additionally, some of his most seminal writings, such as *Nature* (1836), *Essays, First Series* (1841), and *Essays, Second Series* (1844), would be published during this period. Emerson's journals provide the venue where he first expressed his most important and profound insights. Here we see them in their raw form as the immediate intellectual and emotional products of his life experience. Through a detailed analysis of these journals, and other sources, it becomes apparent that Emerson's life came to reflect the patterned form of the hero archetype, which is the subject of Joseph Campbell's classic study. Through tragedy and defeat, Emerson emerges in his society as a prophet and revolutionary, a reformer and redeemer who confronts the opposition of America's "terrible fathers" in an effort to build a better world. His journals document the details of this experience and the elements of his thought that would ultimately find expression in his published works.

Chapter 4 demonstrates the final transformation of Emerson's life experience into his finished art as essays, lectures, addresses, and poems. Here the topics of time, history, art, the Hero, and the Hermaphrodite are examined from multiple perspectives that provide insights into some of Emerson's most complex and revealing concepts. These concepts would, in turn, provide the groundwork for his later social engagement with an alienated and corrupt society.

Finally, chapter 5 describes and examines Emerson's emergence as a major public figure in America. Fortified by the transcendent vision that his earlier personal experience provided, and assured by the clarification and articulation of that transcendence in his earlier writings, Emerson now fully assumes the role of public oracle, reformer, and redeemer. His message of humankind's essential divinity, dignity, and self-worth is brought to bear on the corruption of contemporary institutions of education, religion, business, and government that served to deny this divinity and to diminish individual self-worth. These same institutions also limited, or in some cases denied completely, the principles of freedom, equality, and justice that Emerson maintained are the birthright of all people. Nowhere was this corruption more apparent than in the heinous institution of slavery. Ultimately, Emerson would wage, for two decades of his public life, a hard-fought and finally successful crusade against this evil. This struggle would touch every facet of his existence and influence virtually all of his later writings and lectures. Several of the latter are examined here for the first time.

Overall, this study will present an answer to the question posed earlier as to how a middle-class preacher of modest ability transformed him-

self into the nineteenth century's greatest prophet and reformer, the acknowledged genius of his age.⁶¹ This journey will lead, ultimately, to the spiritual, mystical, and intellectual roots of Emersonian transcendence and the movement that he inspired, a movement that would have a profound effect on the transformation of American society in the nineteenth century. The reverberations of this movement continue to be felt today. While presenting an overview of Emerson's mature life and works, the style of this narrative will necessarily be circular as well as linear. (Emerson would call it a "spiral.") The reason for this is that Emerson's thought, while diverse, was also, ultimately, unified and harmonious. The experience of reality for him was holistic, with each element reflecting the other. As he says in his "American Scholar" address, "Nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal, and one is print."⁶² Because of this, the essential patterns or archetypes that inform his major writings appear again and again, throughout his journals first, and then in the works themselves. In speaking of them, therefore, we shall emulate this circularity ourselves. As a result, there will be an inevitable (but hopefully revealing) overlap between chapters 3 and 4.

I must also say something about terminology. One of the unique difficulties in a study such as this is that the terminology, as well as the psychological schema employed by Emerson and the psychomythic humanists, may appear to a contemporary reader to be overtly sexist. One example is Emerson's frequent use of the term "man" to represent all of humanity, a common practice in his day. There is also his tendency, shared by the psychomythic humanists who followed, to identify the conscious, the domain of reason and logic, as "masculine," while the unconscious, the domain of emotion and feeling, is identified as "feminine." Additionally, it may seem somewhat anomalous that, in an effort to establish psychological and cultural unity, all of these thinkers appear to bifurcate the psyche into masculine/feminine, conscious/unconscious polarities, thus seemingly contributing to the very oppositional thinking that they sought to defeat. Furthermore, in this division, masculine consciousness appears to be dominant and, therefore, preferred. In response to these legitimate concerns, I would first of all point out that whenever possible I have used gender neutral constructs. Nevertheless, it was often necessary for me to use the terminology employed by my sources for clarity and consistency. Furthermore, it should be noted that the terms "masculine" and "feminine" were used by the psychomythic humanists and Emerson primarily to represent specific psychological qualities that exist simultaneously in both sexes. Therefore, the terms should not be equated with the biological gender designations "male" and "female." Also, as we shall see in the chapters that follow, the "divided state" of the psyche was understood as a chronic and parlous condition by both Emerson and the

psychomythic humanists. Their goal was to establish a unified psyche that combined both feminine and masculine, unconscious and conscious elements in a dynamic and healthy balance.

Finally, I have attempted to allow the principals here to speak for themselves, as much as possible. My reason for doing so is simple. When Robert Frost was once asked to explain the meaning of “Mending Wall,” he replied, “What do you want me to do, say it again in different and less good words?”