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—Arthur S. Lothstein

I am grateful for my family's encouragement and for the constant support of John Lachs.

—Michael Brodrick

God had infinite time to give to us; but how did He give it? In one immense tract of a lazy millennium? No, but He cut it up into neat succession of new mornings, and, with each, therefore, a new idea, new inventions, and new applications.

—R. W. E.

# Dancing with Emerson

*Deborah Digges*

The wide pavilions of the old Post Road  
from western Massachusetts toward Concord  
one night past three, as I drove slowly in,  
just freshly plowed, were empty.  
The fields flapped out on either side,  
climbing the blue hills like eternity.  
There at the prison rotary  
I could go only round  
at last to dance with Mr. Emerson.  
Oh waltz with me to guardhouse radios  
playing night music for the stalled,  
the jailors and the jailed locked in their crimes  
like songs you live by.  
Mr. Emerson, hello.  
Do me the honor here outside the wall  
strung with barbed wire where once was meadow.  
My hand in his and his about my waist  
outside the gates we whirled the circle.  
And so I told him, shy, with due respect,  
you were my first love, Mr. Emerson.  
And this was early March,  
Northeast the worst of months,  
the snow piled high, like a rotunda.  
I blizzard-fated, blind and scared,  
and for the first time in my life  
my dance card was empty.  
Without a word, he such a gentleman  
held my hand, and I so lightly his  
as searchlights scanned the prison yards,  
and dance we did, my Mr. Emerson.  
I drive that road so many seasons, drive hours  
toward home or coming into Boston.  
It was enough that only once we danced,  
less time it takes to slip the wire,  
or dip the quill, or kiss a man.

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## Chapter 1

# Emerson

## An Introduction

*Mary Oliver*

The distinction and particular value of anything, or any person, inevitably must alter according to the time and place from which we take our view. In any new discussion of Emerson, these two weights are upon us. By time, of course, I mean our entrance into the twenty-first century; it is more than two hundred years since Emerson's birth in Boston. By place, I mean his delivery from the town of Concord, and his corporeal existence anywhere. Now he is only within the wider, immeasurable world of our thoughts. He lives nowhere but on the page, and in the attentive mind that leans above that page.

This has some advantage for us, for he is now the Emerson of our choice: he is the man of his own time—his own history—or he is one of the mentors of ours. Each of these possibilities has its attractions, for the man alive was unbelievably sweet and, for all his devotion to reason, wondrously spontaneous. Yet as time's passage has broken him free of all mortal events, we begin to know him more clearly for the labors of his life: the life of his mind. Surely he was looking for something that would abide beyond the Tuesday or the Saturday, beyond even his first powerful or cautionary or lovely effect. "The office of the scholar," he wrote in "The American Scholar," "is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances." The lofty fun of it is that his "appearances" were all merely material and temporal—brick walls, garden walls, ripening pears—while his facts were all of a shifty vapor and an unauthored goodwill: the luminosity of the pears, the musics of birds and the wind, the affirmative staring-out light of the night stars. And his belief that a man's inclination, once awakened to it, would be to turn all the heavy sails of his life to a moral purpose.

The story of his life, as we can best follow it from its appearances, is as follows. Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in 1803; his father, William Emerson, died in 1811. The family—his mother, two sisters, and five brothers—were poor, devout, and intellectually ambitious. Death's fast or slow lightning was a too-frequent presence. Both girls and one boy died in childhood; Emerson's brothers William, Edward, and Charles survived only into early manhood. The only remaining brother was Robert, who was a man of childish mind. As the poet Walt Whitman for most of his life took responsibility for his child-minded brother, Eddie, so did Emerson keep watch over this truculent survivor.

Emerson graduated from Harvard College, then divinity school, and in 1829 he began preaching at the Second Church (Unitarian) in Boston. In that year he married the beautiful but frail Ellen Tucker. Her health never improved, and in 1832 she died. Emerson was then twenty-nine years old.

I think it is fair to say that from this point on, the greater energies of his life found their sustenance in the richness and steadfastness of his inner life. Soon after his wife's death he left the pulpit. He had come to believe that the taking of the sacrament was no more, nor was meant to be more, than an act of spiritual remembrance. This disclosure he made to his congregation, who perhaps were grateful for his forthrightness but in all honesty did not wish to keep such a preacher. Soon after, Emerson booked passage to Europe. He traveled slowly across the Continent and, finally, to England. He was deeply touched by the magnificence of the past, so apparent in the cities, in their art and architecture. He also made it his business to explore the present. The list of those he met and talked with is amazing: Coleridge, Wordsworth, Walter Savage Landor, John Stuart Mill among them. His meeting with Thomas Carlyle began a life-long friendship, their letters going back and forth across the Atlantic until Emerson's death.

Emerson returned from Europe and established a manner of living that he would scarcely alter for the rest of his life. He married again, a young woman named Lydia Jackson. In his journals, which he had begun in college and never abandoned, he tore down wall after wall in his search for a style and for ideas that would reach forth and touch both poles: his certainty and his fluidity. He bought a house in the town of Concord, an easy distance from Boston yet a place with its own extraordinary style and whose citizens were farmers, tradesmen, teachers, and the liveliest of utopians. Here, as husband and father, as writer and lecturer, Emerson would live for years his seemingly quiet, seemingly peaceful life.

The best use of literature bends not toward the narrow and the absolute but to the extravagant and the possible. Answers are no part of it; rather it is the opinions, the rhapsodic persuasions, the ingrafted logics, the clues that are to the mind of the reader the possible keys to his own self-

quarrels, his own predicament. This is the crux of Emerson, who does not advance straight ahead but wanders to all sides of an issue; who delivers suggestions with a kindly gesture; who opens doors and tells us to look at things for ourselves. The one thing he is adamant about is that we *should* look—we *must* look—for that is the liquor of life, that brooding upon issues, that attention to thought even as we weed the garden or milk the cow.

This policy, if such it might be called, he established at the start. The first book he published was called *Nature*; in it he refers, with equal serenity, to “Nature” and to “nature.” We understand clearly that by the first he means “this web of God”—everything that is not the mind uttering such words—yet he sets our lives down among the small-lettered noun as well, as though to burden us equally with the sublime and the common. It is as if the combination, and the understanding of the combination—the necessary honoring of both—were the issue of utmost importance. *Nature* is a text that is entirely about divinity, and first purposes, a book of manners, almost, but for the inner man. It does not demean by diction or implication the life that we are most apt to call “real,” but it presupposes the heart’s spiritual awakening as the true work of our lives. That this might take place in as many ways as there are persons alive did not at all disturb Emerson, and that its occurrence was the beginning of paradise here among the temporal fields was one of his few unassailable certainties.

In 1836, at the issue of this initial volume, and in the first years following, he was a man scarcely known to the world. Descended from seven generations of preachers, in conventional terms a failed churchman himself, he held no more important post than his membership in the Concord volunteer Fire Association. If he tried to be at home among the stars, so too he strove to be comfortable in his own living room. Mentor to Thoreau and neighbor to Hawthorne, the idiosyncratic Bronson Alcott, the passionate Margaret Fuller, the talkative Ellery Channing, and the excitable Jones Very, he adorned his society with friendliness and participation. His house was often full of friends, and talk. Julian Hawthorne, then a young boy, remembers him sitting in the parlor, “legs crossed and—such was their flexibility—with one foot hitched behind the other ankle. Leaning forward, elbow on one knee, he faced his guests and held converse.” There was an evening when his daughter Ellen called him away to talk to the butcher about mutton. It is reported that he rose mildly to do as he was bid. And there is another story, as he reports it himself in his journal, on a June day: “Now for near five years I have been indulged by the gracious Heaven in my long holiday in this goodly house of mine, entertaining and entertained by so many worthy and gifted friends, and all this time poor Nancy Barron, the mad-woman, has been screaming herself hoarse at the Poorhouse across the brook and I still hear her whenever I open my window.”

Emerson was the leading member of the group we know as the New England transcendentalists. It is hardly a proper philosophy; certainly it is not a school of thought in which all members were in agreement. Impossible such a finding would have been with the various sensibilities of Concord! For each member, therefore, it must be reported somewhat differently. For Emerson, it devolved from Coleridge and German philosophy, from Swedenborg, no doubt from half a hundred other voices as from his religious beliefs and his own appreciation of the world's more-than-utilitarian beauty. For Emerson, the value and distinction of transcendentalism was very much akin to this swerving and rolling away from acute definition. All the world is taken in through the eye, to reach the soul, where it becomes *more*, representative of a realm deeper than appearances: a realm ideal and sublime, the deep stillness *that is*, whose whole proclamation is the silence and the lack of material instance in which, patiently and radiantly, the universe exists. Emerson would not turn from the world, which was domestic, and social, and collective, and required action. Neither would he swerve from that unperturbable inner radiance, mystical, forming no rational word but drenched with passionate and untranslatable song. A man should want to be domestic, steady, moral, politic, reasonable. He should want also to be subsumed, whirled, to know himself as dust in the fingers of the wind. This was his supple, unbreakable faith.

His certainty that a man must live also in this world, enjoined with the similar faith of the other transcendentalists, was no small force in the New England of the 1830s and 1840s, especially in speech and action in behalf of abolition. Slow as he often was to express outrage, Emerson burst forth in his journal thus: "This filthy enactment [of the Fugitive Slave Law] was made in the 19th century, by people who could read and write. I will not obey it, by God." And he did not.

Writing that loses its elegance loses its significance. Moreover, it is no simple matter to be both inspirational and moderate. Emerson's trick—I use the word in no belittling sense—was to fill his essays with "things" at the same time that his subject was conceptual, invisible, no more than a glimmer, but a glimmer of immeasurable sharpness inside the eye. So he attached the common word to the startling idea. "Hitch your wagon to a star," he advised. "The drop is a small ocean." "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." "We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them." "Sleep lingers all our lifetime about the eyes, as night hovers all day in the boughs of the fir tree." "The soul makes the body." "Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view," he says, and suddenly that elite mystical practice seems clearer than ever before and possible to each of us.

Of course his writing is made up of the nineteenth-century sentence, so nimble with commas. The sparks of his expression move forward softly



and reasonably, in their shapely phrases—then they leap. He rests upon the gnomic as a poet will rest upon meter and comes not to a conclusion but to a pause in which the reader's own impetus, given such a bright shove, takes over. And yet it is not ornamental eloquence, but natural, fecund, ripe, full of seed and possibility. Even, or especially (it is his specialty, after all), when talking about the utterly unprovable, he sends out good news, as good reports come all day from the mockingbird, or the soft tongues of the Merrimack. The writing is a pleasure to the ear, and thus a tonic to the heart, at the same time that it strikes the mind.

Thus he wrote and lectured, often in Boston and New York but also as far west as Missouri and beyond. He did not especially like travel, or being away from home, but he needed the money and trusted the lecturing process as a way for him to develop and polish his essays for eventual publication.

In 1847 Emerson, by then an established writer and widely honored on both sides of the Atlantic, returned to England. The audiences for his lectures were large and curious. Crabb Robinson, in his diary of those years, relates first his own response and then the reaction of the writer Harriet Martineau:

Tuesday, I heard Emerson's first lecture, "On the Laws of Thought;" one of those rhapsodical exercises of mind, like Coleridge's in his "Table Talk," and Carlyle's in his Lectures, which leave a dreamy sense of pleasure, not easy to analyze, or render an account of. . . . I can do no better than tell you what Harriet Martineau says about him, which, I think, admirably describes the character of his mind. "He is a man so *sui generis*, that I do not wonder at his not being apprehended till he is seen. His influence is of a curious sort. There is a vague nobleness and thorough sweetness about him, which move people to their very depths, without their being able to explain why. The logicians have an incessant triumph over him, but their triumph is of no avail. He conquers minds, as well as hearts, wherever he goes; and without convincing anybody's reason of any one thing, exalts their reason, and makes their minds worth more than they ever were before." 9th June, 1848.

That we are spirits that have descended into our bodies, of this Emerson was sure. That each man was utterly important and limitless, an "in-finitude," of this he was also sure. And it was a faith that leads, as he shows us again and again, not to stasis but to activity, to the creation of the moral person from the indecisive person. Attachment to the Ideal, without participation in the world of men and women, was the business of foxes and flowers, not of men, not of women. This was, for Emerson himself, difficult. Outwardly he was calm, reasonable, patient. All his wildness was in his head—such a good place for it! Yet his certainty that thought, though it might grow most robust in the mind's repose, was sent and meant for

participation in the world, never altered, never ebbed. There are, for myself, a hundred reasons why I would find my life—not only my literary, thoughtful life but my emotional, responsive life—impoverished by Emerson’s absence, but none is greater than this uncloseting of thought into the world’s brilliant, perilous present. I think of him whenever I set to work on something worthy. And there he is also, avuncular and sweet, but firm and corrective, when I am below the mark. What we bring forth, he has taught me as deeply as any writer could, is predictable.

But let him have the last word. In his journal he wrote: “I have confidence in the laws of morals as of botany. I have planted maize in my field every June for seventeen years and I never knew it come up strychnine. My parsley, beet, turnip, carrot, buck-thorn, chestnut, acorn, are as sure. I believe that justice produces justice, and injustice injustice.”