



Essays and Lectures: (Nature: Addresses and Lectures, Essays: First and Second Series, Representative Men, English Traits, and The Conduct of Life)

Ralph Waldo Emerson

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American essayist, philosopher and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson was a leading figure in the 19th century Transcendentalism movement. A champion of individualism and persistent critic of social pressures, Emerson was an influential American figure whose philosophy is embodied in the numerous essays he wrote and lectures he gave. This volume brings together an extensive selection of those essays and lectures. "Essays and Lectures" is a robust representation of Emerson's writings in which you will find the following individual works: "Nature: Addresses and Lectures"; "Essays: First and Second Series"; "Representative Men"; "English Traits"; and "The Conduct of Life".

Essays and Lectures: (Nature: Addresses and Lectures, Essays: First and Second Series, Representative Men, English Traits, and The Conduct of Life) Details

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Jeremy Egerer says

I try not to make a habit of rating things before reading their entirety, but some authors have such a total disregard for logic and truth in general that you can't finish their essays. He's the kind of guy who says that Jesus and Socrates and Zoroaster were divine, and that Shakespeare and I both have Shakespeare's wit because we're part of the same world soul. You know who disagrees about the first? Jesus and Socrates and Zoroaster. You know who disagrees about the second? Absolutely everyone other than Emerson. The essay On Self-reliance had some gems.

Amal Shoeib says

Emerson is one of the humblest and the most down to earth philosophers since the dawn of time, for he claimed " Let me remind the reader that I am only an experimenter. Do not set the least value on what I do, or the least discredit on what I do not, as if I pretended to settle any thing as true or false. I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker". He defended the premise that Aristotle once stated, "Theonly constant thing in this life is change."

Bruce says

The first essay contained herein is the eight part essay, "Nature." Emerson writes aphoristically and compellingly, each paragraph contained a line I feel drawn to underline. His writing is not always easy to understand without close reading, since he often uses common terms in idiosyncratic ways, but once one decodes his terminology, the way become easier; nonetheless, sometimes it seems more profitable to read him for general impressions than in meticulous detail. And if "Nature" at times seemed turgid, "The American Scholar" glows and delights, exploring Man Thinking, the influences upon which a thinker expands his awareness, creativity, and understanding; I enjoyed reading and pondering it greatly, and I cannot help but feel its influence on my own thinking.

Essays - "The American Scholar", "The Divinity School Address", "Literary Ethics" - all chock-a-block with aphorisms, all teeming with wisdom. Some essays, like "The Transcendentalist," seem to glow with erudition and inspiration, whereas a few, such as "The Young American," seem less interesting.

It was interesting to me to note how my understanding of and delight in Emerson's writings grew as I read essay after essay, each serving to deepen and expand my awareness of his thinking as I became more accustomed to his terminology and to the scope of his ideas. Rarely have I underlined so copiously in any book, his sentences glowing with images and metaphors memorable and incisive. In fact, he is best read a sentence at a time. True, he does construct general arguments in the course of his essays, but his thinking is divergent and rambling rather than cumulative and consistent, and it is in his sentences that his charm and wisdom lies.

His essay entitled, "Plato; or the Philosopher," is exquisite and makes me want to reread all of Plato's

writings immediately.

Day after day I found myself eagerly returning to these essays, and I enjoyed and profited from most of them. Even collections that commentaries I had previously read described as being of lesser quality and somewhat turgid, such as “English Traits,” were interesting and well written.

The final collection of essays are those contained in “The Conduct of Life.” His essay, “Culture,” is especially fine. And in “Worship,” Emerson describes with great prescience the spirituality, the religion of the 21st century, that faith necessary to and characteristic of the modern age.

The greatest benefit of having read this collection of lectures and essays lies not in the wisdom they provide, not in the acuity of Emerson’s thought, not in his convictions and admonitions, valuable as all these are, as it is in its stimulation of one’s thinking, in the impetus it provides to thinking through these very issues oneself, in the stimulus to considering and formulating one’s own convictions based on one’s own experience and understanding. Emerson could have wished for nothing better.

Kathryn says

I'm reading Emerson's Essays, Series 1 & Series 2 from the American Library Edition, so while the collection is a little different, I am left with a series of questions which I would love to discuss with someone.

Perhaps I am perverse, but I can't figure out where to stand in relation to Emerson. I suppose I want to be a believer, to follow him, to take his essays as personally instructive and applicable to my life. And yet at the same time, for the most part, I can't find how they are of use in these times. So that seems to make them interesting mostly from a literary point of view, the peculiar choice and use of words takes a while to get used to. I'm still working on that.

As a woman, I find that Emerson takes the patriarchal attitude of Western thought absolutely for granted, this and what feels like his embrace of the status quo, are really stultifying for me as a reader. I'm perplexed because, naturally, I am reading as a person living in the 21st century and he was writing in the middle of the 19th century. So how do I make sense of where he is in relation to the other writers and thinkers of his time? I can't seem to parse these differences clearly.

Afterall, isn't Emerson supposed to be rather timeless, and to have considered himself able to engage with the thought of Plato and Shakespeare as easily as with Carlyle or others of his own generation? His assertion that all mind is one, all from the one source suggests that if his thinking is correct then I should be able to find the merit in his thinking if his thinking is sound.

However, what do we do with the plurality of understanding which has come to consciousness since his time? He easily ascribes terms like idiot and imbecile but in this era, we reach out and connect with the feeling and thought of those who were not taught to reason using classical logic, but whose stories and life experience are now recognized as worthy of consideration. Consciousness has grown far beyond the strictures of the academy, but Emerson's work seems to be all in response to that limited point of view.

On the other hand, I find that he has remarkably catholic views, acknowledging that all mind is one, and that we are all part of each other. I am left wondering if he is one of the last of the enlightenment classicists or if he is one of the earliest modernists?

I suppose American thought has always perplexed me. I see it all in relation to issues of economy and history, perhaps because I understand the progression and impact of those matters, but American thinking stands apart.

Megan Rich says

Emerson was one of the most influential writers of my adolescence. I read his entire collected works, even the journals, and felt a deep communion with him always.

Martin Bihl says

08.08.18 - Nature; Addresses & Lectures

Morning says

A wealth of information. I feel my relative had incredible spiritual teachings that the world didn't accept until this age. It proves to me that although his thoughts weren't as acceptable then, they give us great awareness of the spirituality of life and the struggles of the human, while living on earth. He is very deep and each time I read this book, I learn more. Again this is proof as to how we learn as humans. We each have the understanding according to our level of consciousness and so when we grow in consciousness and we read again, we learn more. This is why a teaching given from the spiritual realm continues to transcend. This is the greatest hope of tomorrow, that we will always transcend everything and come up higher.

Ben says

In alluding just now to our system of education, I spoke of the deadness of its details. But it is open to graver criticism than the palsy of its members: it is a system of despair. The disease with which the human mind now labors, is want of faith. Men do not believe in a power of education. We do not think we can speak to divine sentiments in man, and we do not try. We renounce all high aims. We believe that the defects of so many perverse and so many frivolous people, who make up society, are organic, and society is a hospital of incurables. A man of good sense but of little faith, whose compassion seemed to lead him to church as often as he went there, said to me; "that he liked to have concerts, and fairs, and churches, and other public amusements go on." I am afraid the remark is too honest, and comes from the same origin as the maxim of the tyrant, "If you would rule the world quietly, you must keep it amused." I noticed too, that the ground on which eminent public servants urge the claims of popular education is fear: "This country is filling up with thousands and millions of voters, and you must educate them to keep them from our throats." We do not believe that any education, any system of philosophy, any influence of genius, will ever give depth of insight to a superficial mind. Having settled ourselves into this infidelity, our skill is expended to procure alleviations, diversion, opiates. We adorn the victim with manual skill, his tongue with languages, his body with inoffensive and comely manners. So have we cunningly hid the tragedy of limitation and inner death we cannot avert. Is it strange that society should be devoured by a secret melancholy, which breaks through all its smiles, and all its gayety and games?

But even one step farther out our infidelity has gone. It appears that some doubt is felt by good and wise men, whether really the happiness and probity of men is increased by the culture of the mind in those disciplines to which we give the name of education. Unhappily, too, the doubt comes from scholars, from persons who have tried these methods. In their experience, the scholar was not raised by the sacred thoughts amongst which he dwelt, but used them to selfish ends. He was a profane person, and became a showman, turning his gifts to a marketable use, and not to his own sustenance and growth. It was found that the intellect could be independently developed, that is, in separation from the man, as any single organ can be invigorated, and the result was monstrous. A canine appetite for knowledge was generated, which must still be fed, but was never satisfied, and this knowledge not being directed on action, never took the character of substantial, humane truth, blessing those whom it entered. It gave the scholar certain powers of expression, the power of speech, the power of poetry, of literary art, but it did not bring him to peace, or to beneficence.

When the literary class betray a destitution of faith, it is not strange that society should be disheartened and sensualized by unbelief. What remedy? Life must be lived on a higher plane. We must go up to a higher platform, to which we are always invited to ascend; there, the whole aspect of things changes. I resist the skepticism of our education, and of our educated men. I do not believe that the differences of opinion and character in men are organic. I do not recognize, beside the class of the good and the wise, a permanent class of skeptics, or a class of conservatives, or of malignants, or of materialists. I do not believe in two classes. You remember the story of the poor woman who importuned King Philip of Macedon to grant her justice, which Philip refused: the woman exclaimed, "I appeal": the king, astonished, asked to whom she appealed: the woman replied, "from Philip drunk to Philip sober." The text will suit me very well. I believe not in two classes of men, but in man in two moods, in Philip drunk and Philip sober. I think, according to the good-hearted word of Plato, "Unwillingly the soul is deprived of truth." Iron conservative, miser, or thief, no man is, but by a supposed necessity, which he tolerates by shortness or torpidity of sight. The soul lets no man go without some visitations and holy-days of a diviner presence. It would be easy to show, by a narrow scanning of any man's biography, that we are not so wedded to our paltry performances of every kind, but that every man has at intervals the grace to scorn his performances, in comparing them with his belief of what he should do, that he puts himself on the side of his enemies, listening gladly to what they say of him, and accusing himself of the same things.

Troy Farlow says

Emerson was - in my mind - beyond brilliant. While I have always heard of him, he was brought to my attention after reading Thoreau's Walden for the first time in 2017. It was then, that I was seriously introduced to Ralph Waldo Emerson.

NOTE #1: I read his famous "Nature" in this book. Then I went on to read "The American Scholar" which is a famous speech he gave at Harvard (where he - and Henry David Thoreau - and Troy Farlow, ha! went to college - might as well have some fun here!). And then I read some - but not all - of his essays in this book as well: Self-Reliance, Nature (the essay), and one or two others. But I did not read this book in its entirety.

NOTE #2: While I have rated it 5 stars, I have done so simply because his brilliance is beyond me - Thoreau is more to my liking - and was MUCH easier for me to digest. But yes, Emerson is something to behold, that is for sure. Nothing but RESPECT for Ralph Waldo Emerson.

S. Chandler says

I'm adding this on 12-17-09:

I have been checking this in and out of the library since August, I think will just post as I go. It is just too dense to somehow, summarize with a simple "Thumbs up!" More recently I have been focusing on how Emerson represented and interpreted a certain climate that existed in New England during this time. Mormonism developed in the same climate and this is of interest to me. There are some important parallels in how Emerson views man and the doctrine of the Mormon Church. For example, LDS doctrine emphasizes eternal progression, and the divine parentage of every spirit. Emerson is obsessed with harnessing an inner divine power. In his *The American Scholar*, he says "[man:] shall look forward to an ever expanding knowledge as to a becoming creator." Still riot inciting today are his thoughts on the divinity of Jesus Christ as discussed in his address to the Harvard School of Divinity. He sees Jesus Christ as no more divine than all mankind, or perhaps, less offensively, we are no less divine. "One man [Jesus Christ:] was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, 'I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks.'" While LDS people are devoted to a divine Christ as a member of the Godhead, every soul has the seed of divine potential. This is a radical idea now but, it seems that, perhaps, at least among certain circles in New England in the early 1800s, this was an idea that was being explored.

Self-reliance drove me crazy. Am I foolishly consistent, and therefore, of little mind, or am I simply consistent in some respectable way?? One quote which I am endeared to at the moment is, "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 to-day." What if we allowed ourselves to grow, evolve, improve, and rather than treat this a betrayal of past ideas, simply embrace the new in a unselfconscious way?

Enough for now.

This was a rollercoaster for me because of my personal journey right now, but there is some very humbling wisdom here. It feels, to me, very timeless. We each, at some point, must own ourselves and trust ourselves. It isn't immoral if we believe we are divine by design. It is time to grasp our individual purpose releasing all external "duty."

globulon says

The thing I like the best about Emerson is that he provides a pattern of life that I can live with. He balances the spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical lives in a way that seems quite useful to me.

I probably won't give this five stars just because he can be long-winded and boring at times, but there is still plenty of excitement too.

I definitely am finding the second series of essays inferior to the first. I had high hopes for "Experience" for instance but found it unclear and bloated.

In his essay on *Intellect* Emerson talks about finding an author who can mirror back your own mind to you. I think this is the primary reason that I am grooving on him so much right now. I feel like as much as other authors have amazed or excited me, Emerson's is the closest I have come to meeting a really kindred mind.

To me he really provides a pattern of a spiritual and intellectual life, which is in many ways is what I am searching for in reading. I think he would approve of this. That's not to say that I think that's what people

should be searching for in reading, or even that I will continue with that later. Rather that has been one of my overriding motivations in reading for some time. Perhaps it will change now to a more general search for expression and variety.

"Circles" is in my opinion the center (pun intended) of his system.

I've also noticed that I much prefer Emerson to Nietzsche. Although they are after very similar things Emerson does so without the pretention pomposity and sheer ranting crazy that is Nietzsche's work. Emerson writes without the bitterness that seems to come from a childish feeling of not being appreciated.

I would like to offer a few comparison/contrast quotes although they will have to be seen as cherry-picked rather than scholarly chosen.

Transvaluation of all values

The uber-mensch

Metaphysics

Keith says

Emerson is America's great Transcendental philosopher of nature. I'm not a nature lover, however. I don't think more truths are to be had walking through a forest than walking down a city street. I don't think nature is an unambiguous good, extolling lessons of virtue and justice. Nature, to me, is more equivocal, more problematic. Let's be perfectly clear: It's trying to kill you. All the time. Everywhere. It is a remorseless battleground for survival.

It's through these jaded eyes I'm reviewing the key essays as I read them:

The American Scholar – Emerson would have his scholar divorced from an active social, political and commercial life. His views would certainly not jibe with the philosophy of a college education today, in which young adults are prepared for jobs and careers. Emerson, importantly, missed the revolution that was happening right before his nose – the industrial revolution. In light of those changes, Emerson's views seem rather quaint and, well, 19th century.

The Poet – Emerson prepared the soil, planted the seed and nurtured the blossom that was to become Walt Whitman (and, in some respects, Emily Dickinson). As many people have noted, Emerson's ideal poet, described here, is embodied in Whitman and his quasi-Eastern philosophy, his new voice/meter, his focus on the American experience. As he says:

“For 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 an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing.... For, the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet.” (pg. 450)

I read the Library of America edition. It is a beautiful book with authoritative text. Buy why, why, why, oh

why wouldn't you include an index? Why? How is a reader to look up information with this edition? I wanted to see Emerson's references to poetry. Not with this edition. I've grudgingly accepted that the Library of America editions are going to have no introduction and approximately half the notes you need to fully understand the text. But no index on a book of essays? That's outrageous. Yes, outrageous.

Cameron says

This compendious, rather unwieldy (yet still portable!) collection of R.W. Emerson's essays, poems, lectures, and other assorted literary marginalia is great—you can really see his development as the grand poobah of self-reliance and metaphysical Idealism. While the overly abstract and sometimes contradictory language can be a real bear to get through, it's worth it—it's a privilege to see such a great mind at work and I found myself coming across aphorisms that I didn't know were originally by Emerson.

Thomas says

I appreciate Emerson's passion, but his rhetoric is overblown and sophistical. He excuses his inconsistency with a pithy phrase that has become his trademark, but his careless thinking isn't so much a hobgoblin as a morass. He has a good heart, so it's hard to give the man a pitiful two-star review. Unfortunately, I think he's peddling snake oil. He provides the perfect argument against idealism while intending just the opposite. I admit that I didn't read all of these essays but like the fine people of Concord who crossed the street to avoid "Mad-dog Emerson," I feel compelled to do the same.

Aaron says

By all rights I should give this a 5. Emerson is the quintessential American and quite frankly probably the quintessential human being, by my lights. At his peak, which he hits here often (see especially: The Poet, The American Scholar, The Divinity School Address, and the final chapter of The Conduct of Life), his every sentence falls like a fiery brand imprinting itself forever on my mind. Stylistically, he is an absolutely incredible writer, and his content *burns*. Emerson speaks to you and only you—reading these essays is about as close as an atheist like myself can get to understanding what it is like, for religious people, to have a personal experience with God (do not misunderstand this as me simply praising Emerson as a divinity).

So why only a 4? Because, as good as this is, his journals (released, in abridged form, in two wonderful volumes by the Library of America) tower above his essays. In his essays, he is the ultimate in self-confidence, but he is also abstract. In his journals, you see the self-doubt, the foibles, etc. that he struggled with, that gives his work the deep meaning it has. That the essays abstract out his life is a good thing in a way—it makes room for your life to fill in that space—but it's also a substantial barrier to seeing just what it means to be self-reliant, in the Emersonian sense. No doubt about it, the essays, lectures, and books are genius, but they only tell half the story. They pull out ideas from his the journals that serve as the battleground for those ideas, but in his case, it's imperative to see the battle itself. The essays and lectures are a history written by the victors, and skewed exactly as you would expect as a result.
