BETWEEN INSANITY AND FAT DULLNESS

How I became an Emersonian

By Phillip Lopate

Discussed in this essay:

Emerson: Selected Journals 1820–1842, edited by Lawrence Rosenwald. Library of America. 910 pages. $40.
Emerson: Selected Journals 1841–1877, edited by Lawrence Rosenwald. Library of America. 1,021 pages. $40.

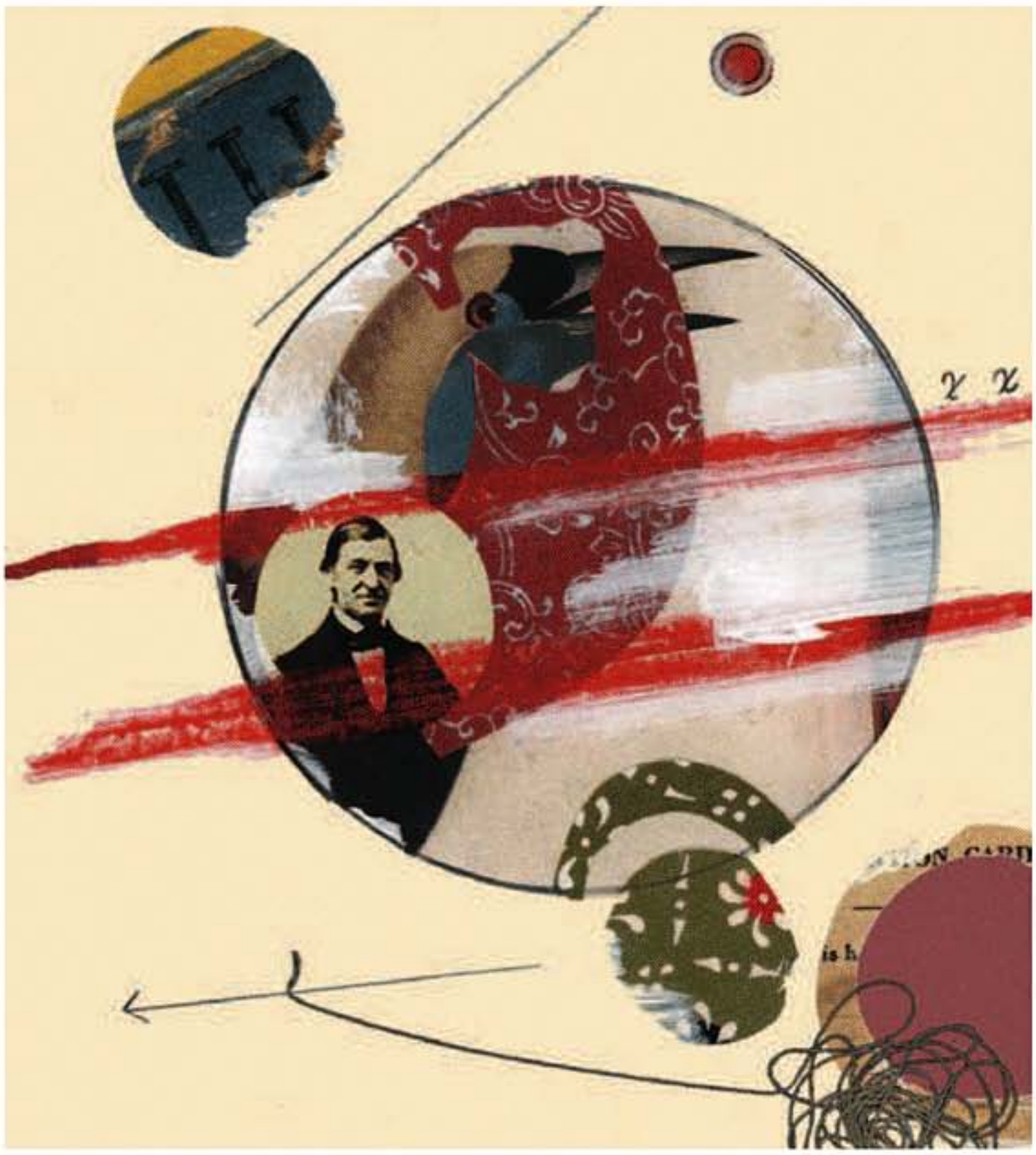

Illustration by Steven Dana

For several months I have been camping out in the mind of Ralph Waldo Emerson. It is a companionable, familiar, and yet endlessly stimulating place, and, since his mind is stronger than mine, I keep deferring to his wisdom, even his doubts, and quite shamelessly identifying with him. All this started when I came across in a local bookstore the new, two-volume edition of his *Selected Journals*, published by the Library of America, and decided to give it a whirl. Some 1,900 pages later, I am in thrall to, in love with, Mr. Emerson. If this sounds homoerotic, so be it. I think of a peculiar passage about love in his journals. In embracing the worth of someone he admires, Emerson writes, "I become his wife & he again aspires to a higher worth which dwells in another spirit & so is wife or receiver of that spirit's influence." In that respect, I have become Emerson's "wife," much to my surprise.

I never felt that close to Emerson in the past. I admired his prose style, but his essays seemed too impersonal. They sounded oracular, abstract, dizzyingly inspired, like visionary sermons: the thinking and language spectacular, the man somehow missing. It took reading his journals to find him.

The clichéd rap on Emerson is that he was a sententious "Plato who talks thro' his nose," in Melville's phrase; and that he was overly cheerful, a promoter of American exceptionalism and individualism, therefore the friend of businessmen, not progressives. H. L. Mencken, who, along with his idol Nietzsche, respected Emerson, wrote an essay about him titled "An Unheeded Law-Giver" that gets at some of the difficulty of assessing him: "Despite the vast mass of writing about him, he remains to be worked out critically: practically all the existing criticism of him is marked by his own mellifluous obscurity. Perhaps a good deal of this obscurity is due to contradictions inherent in the man's character. He was dualism ambulant." Mencken concluded that his influence on our culture was nil: "There is, in the true sense, no Emersonian school of American writers." Such an assessment would have pleased Emerson, who said, "This is my boast that I have no school & no follower. I should account it a measure of the impurity of insight, if it did not create independence."

It would be foolhardy for me to pretend that Emerson has been neglected. He has long been championed by some of our leading critics, such as Richard Poirier, Harold Bloom, and Stanley Cavell; there is also a robust tradition of Emerson scholarship, culminating in Robert D. Richardson Jr.'s indispensable biography, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* and its engaging sequel, *First We Read, Then We Write*. Still, I sense a resistance

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to Emerson on the part of the young, a falling out of fashion. One reason, perhaps, is that he was primarily an essayist, and nonfiction has never enjoyed the same cachet as fiction and poetry. Another reason Emerson may have become an afterthought in the American literary canon is that he lacks that outsider romance of our other mid-nineteenth-century giants. We tend to revere renegades like Thoreau, doomed alcoholics like Poe, recluses like Dickinson, misunderstood visionaries like Melville, expansive gay bards like Whitman. Redskins not palefaces (to use Philip Rahv's famous distinction).

Though Emerson began keeping his journals as a dreamy would-be poet, he came to speak more and more in what Max Apple has called "the style of middle age." It is not as sexy as the style of youth, but it has its adherents, myself among them. According to Apple: "The style of middle age is a style of reappraisal, a style characterized by hesitation, by uncertainty, by the objects of the world rather than the passions that transport us from this world."

Ex-schoolmaster, ex-preacher, family man, Emerson was quite aware of his problematic temperateness: "In my strait & decorous way of living, native to my family & to my country, & more strictly proper to me," he writes, "is nothing extravagant or flowing. I content myself with moderate languid actions, & never transgress the staidness of village manners. Herein I confess the poorness of my powers." Though phrased as an inadequacy, it is really stubbornness: he refuses to go to extremes. What needs to be understood is that, for Emerson, moderation was a tense, heroic agon.

In his review of the journals in *The New York Review of Books*, Robert Pogue Harrison raises an interesting point: "One difference between Emerson's journals and his essays is that the former contain a much fuller record of both worlds [his speculations as well as empirical evidence drawn from city and farm], in their uneasy interaction, while the essays for the most part reflect only the world of Emerson's thought. Those of us who are more taken by Emerson's thinking than by his life prefer his essays to his journals for precisely that reason." The journals give us in full Emerson's thinking *about* his life. Harrison goes on to say: "What is missing in the essays, by contrast, is a record of the heroic efforts it cost Emerson to maintain that unconditional trust he had in himself, and to avoid its opposite, which is despair." In that respect, I do seem to be siding with those who are more taken by his life: through the journals, Emerson has become a model for me of how to overcome anxiety and despair, and make resilience eloquent.

He viewed many of his friends and colleagues as monomaniacs. Attracted as he was to their ardor, critical of himself for a lack of "animal spirits," he also saw it as his particular mission to adhere to moderation. "Very hard it is to keep the middle point. It is a very narrow line," he wrote. And "Between narrow walls we walk—insanity on one side, & fat dullness on the other."

In Emerson's journals you see how gradually, hesitantly, incrementally his belief system accrued over decades, as he tested hunches and questioned himself. You also see the extent to which he took from other writers (his Big Ideas were syntheses, his throwaway perceptions truly original), and how much he was at the mercy of the disturbances of daily life. To oversimplify: The journals show his vulnerable side.

Unlike earlier abridgements of the journals, which reduced Emerson to the Sage of Concord, these superlatively assembled Library of America selections, culled from the sixteen-volume Harvard complete edition by editor Lawrence Rosenwald, give us a high-resolution picture of his mind at work. And since Emerson was interested in practically everything, ancient and modern, we are treated to a remarkable range of thoughts, impulses, fears, enthusiasms, doubts, sorrows, analyses of friends, encounters with historical upheavals. Emerson began keeping the journals as a sixteen-year-old college student, and over the next fifty-seven years filled more than 182 individual volumes. He never published them, but he consulted them extensively, taking months at a time to catalogue their contents, partly to make self-pillaging easier. Critics have often viewed the journals as merely a quarry for his essays and poems, but editor Rosenwald, who previously wrote *Emerson and the Art of the Diary*, argues that they were an intentional artwork—"his most successful experiment in creating a literary form."

I, too, am tempted to make enormous claims for them: that Emerson's journals are the Lost Ark of nineteenth-century American literature, the equivalent for literary nonfiction of *Moby-Dick* in fiction or *Leaves of Grass* in poetry. But while they contain innumerable excitements, they also have plenty of dry patches; they are an archive of reflections, not a shaped work of art. Still, what inspires is their faith in the dream to which essayists, from Montaigne to the present, have been especially drawn: that you can start off writing about anything, however insignificant, and eventually all thoughts and digressions—"the threads that spin from a thought to a fact, & from one fact to another fact"—are somehow connected to one another by an invisible web. Emerson's journals were this web, a grand attempt to test his intuition that a correspondence existed between nature's undulating patterns and the mind's ebb and flow.

At these journals' core is Emerson's sense that it is crucial to record one's fugitive ideas—to note "the meteorology of thought." He was indeed the weatherman of his own consciousness, charting his moods just as he observed on walks the changing aspects of nature and sky. What I respond to most in Emerson is his even-keeled preoccupation with daily life, the daily mental round, and with that his resistance to the bullying closures of the apocalyptic imagination.

Not that the mind was always a comforting place to hang out: "There is something fearful in coming up against the walls of a mind on every side & learning to describe their invisible circumference," he noted. Following in the footsteps of Plato and Montaigne, Emerson asserted that "the purpose of life seems to be to acquaint a man with himself," and he chose writing as the means to achieve self-knowledge. Since my literary patron saint is Montaigne as well, I was particularly happy to see how often Emerson professed in these journals his debt to the French author: "In Roxbury, in 1825, I read Cotton's translation of Montaigne. It seemed to me as if I had written the book myself in some

former life, so sincerely it spoke to my thought & experience. No book before or since was ever so much to me as that." He kept going back to Montaigne, whom he found "full of fun, poetry, business, divinity, philosophy, anecdote, smut." Though there's precious little smut in Emerson, he did take from Montaigne permission to enrich the staid Unitarianism of his upbringing with an earthier, more playful skepticism.

It is useful, up to a point, to think of Emerson as the American Montaigne. Both were pioneering experimental scientists of consciousness, combing their mental lives for raw data; both believed that life was at bottom flux, transition, undulation; both openly borrowed from older writers yet insisted on trusting their own idiosyncratic inspirations; both championed tolerance, moderation, and balance. Their differences were more temperamental than methodological: Montaigne arrived at an amused equanimity about his contradictions, whereas Emerson, descended from Puritan stock, worried his flaws and limitations more. Also, Emerson continued to hunger for a larger philosophical truth (his Transcendentalist notion of the Over-soul) beneath the concrete material experiences that sufficed for Montaigne. Stylistically, Montaigne's essays meander conversationally, whereas Emerson's are chiseled, taut. It's in his journals, more so than his essays, that Emerson reprises Montaigne's organic, improvisational approach.

Emerson's essays are dense with thought, requiring full attention every second; like a steep cliff face, they make purchase difficult. The journals are, by comparison, appealingly relaxed. There is less strain for every word to count. Emerson conveyed his aesthetic in advice to his verbose friend Bronson Alcott: "He should write that which cannot be omitted, every sentence a cube, standing on its bottom like a die, essential & immortal." Emerson's basic unit of composition *was* the sentence; and he crafted one amazing sentence after another. The result is an aphoristic compression in the essays that gives some readers the impression of entering a fog and not remembering afterward what exactly was said. I doubt that anyone who reads the journals could dismiss Emerson as "foggy." He is too clear and exposed in them.

Consider, for example, the opening of one of his best essays, "Circles":

> The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world. St. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere, and its circumference nowhere. We are all our lifetime reading the copious sense of this first of forms. One moral we have already deduced, in considering the circular or compensatory character of every human action. Another analogy we shall now trace; that every action admits to being outdone. Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on midnoon, and under every deep a lower deep opens.

Dazzling stuff, if opaque. In a single paragraph you get impressions of the Deity's shape, of the law of compensation or karma, of something like Nietzsche's Eternal Return, and of an alarming incompleteness. This news of the universe's frightening uncertainty, circles under circles, is delivered in the confident, epigrammatic, impersonal "we" of Emerson the lawgiver—like a set of mathematical formulas with intransitive verbs as equation signs. It would be hard to predict where such an essay is headed from this opening. A philosophical meditation on circularity? Possibly, though often attempts to negotiate Emerson's essays remind me of a journal comment: "I found when I had finished my new lecture that it was a very good house, only the architect had unfortunately omitted the stairs." In that one sentence we hear the humorous, self-deprecating, and private voice of the journals.

His essays (many delivered orally, since he made his living largely as a public speaker) show Emerson trying to win over an audience with persuasive rhetoric. Not so the journals. Take the direct aggression of this passage: "Another vice of manners which I do not easily forgive is the dullness of perception which talks to every man alike. As soon as I perceive that my man does not know me, but is making his speech to the man that happens to be here, I wish to gag him." One thing Emerson did not like about many reformers, he says in these journals, is that they speak to everyone alike. They lack interiority, and for Emerson, conversation was ideally a space where interiorities could be exchanged. But he had mixed feelings about how much he *could* rely on other people, or they on him, and always wondered whether he would be better off alone. This conflict between the gregarious and the solitary pulls of his nature never ceased to perplex him.

Happily domesticated one moment, fiercely resistant to family life the next: I confess that here I most identify with him. My wife says to me: "In your head you're still a bachelor." I am tempted to counter with Elizabeth Hardwick's statement: "All writing is profoundly unmarried." Emerson expressed ambivalence about "the vitriolic acid of marriage," while elsewhere saying, "marriage is the perfection which love aimed at, ignorant of what it sought."

Sometimes Emerson reminds me of Pierre at the end of *War and Peace*, wandering off from the nursery and the dinner party to gaze inquisitively at the stars. The demands of intimacy make him uneasy, and he worries he might not be able to meet them, either because he is protecting his inner life and writing space or else because he fears he lacks the necessary warmth. Unstintingly courteous to neighbors and importuning strangers—"Politeness was invented by wise men to keep fools at a distance"—it pained him when his reserve kept him from honoring a loved one's or friend's neediness. One such crisis occurred when Margaret Fuller, the feminist and Transcendentalist, taxed him "with inhospitality of soul" for keeping her at a distance with "literary gossip"—for holding back. "I thought of my experience with several persons which resembled this: and confessed that I would not converse with the divinest person more than one week."

Everyone around Emerson seemed to seek his approval: he had become a benign father figure from his late thirties. Compounding the problem were Emerson's acute loneliness and his paradoxical need for solitude. Only in solitude could he attempt to free himself from public opinion and discern his own mind. "Alone is wisdom. Alone is

happiness. Society nowadays makes us lowspirited, hopeless. Alone is heaven." At the same time he felt the failure of most attempts at empathy: "Man is insular, and cannot be touched. Every man is an infinitely repellent orb." This melancholy conviction of universal solipsism was the reverse side of Emerson's advocacy of self-reliance.

When Hawthorne died, Emerson regretted that they had never become friends: "It would have been a happiness, doubtless to both of us, to have come into habits of unreserved intercourse. It was easy to talk with him,—there were no barriers;—only, he said so little, that I talked too much.... Now it appears that I waited too long."

Talking too little was not Henry David Thoreau's problem. He and Emerson sustained a close friendship for decades. This in spite of the fact that Thoreau was, according to Emerson, relentlessly combative and self-absorbed. "It is curious that Thoreau goes to a house to say with little preface what he has just read or observed, delivers it in a lump, is quite inattentive to any comment or thought which any of the company offer on the matter, is merely interrupted by it, &, when he has finished his report, departs with precipitation." Emerson oscillated between being enchanted and annoyed by his friend's eccentricities. Privately he worried that Thoreau's going to jail was "one step to suicide" and that his retreat to the woods might end in "want & madness." ("My dear Henry," he wrote in his journals, "a frog was made to live in a swamp, but a man was not made to live in a swamp.") But it was Emerson who urged Thoreau to keep a journal, and he copied down many of Thoreau's sayings, paying him the compliment that the "oaken strength" of Thoreau's writing went "a step beyond" anything he himself was capable of doing. True enough, Thoreau got more gristle and loam into his prose than did Emerson, who was always tilting his sentences toward abstraction. Thoreau was the quintessential bachelor, Emerson the fatherly householder who took Thoreau into his home when the woodsman got tired of camping outdoors. When they quarreled, they reconciled with a conversation about "the Eternal loneliness" of everyone they knew, themselves included.

What most impresses me about Emerson is that he still tried to stretch himself to accommodate others and to become larger souled, more responsive. "Better be a nettle in the side of your friend than be his echo," he wrote, and some of his friends were indeed nettles. He put up with the quirks of the mad poet Jones Very. He invited Fuller, as he had Thoreau, to live with his family. He even forced himself to abandon his cherished spectator's role and become a political activist.

The transition to political activism took a while. He felt his task in life was to write, not agitate: "my way to help the gov[ernmen]t is to write sonnets." He sent an open letter to President van Buren deploring the government's ill treatment of the Cherokees but disliked doing it. Privately he recorded in journals his liberal views on every issue of the day: for abolition of slavery, for women's suffrage and property rights, against the removal of the American Indians from their land, for the new immigrants, against the cannibalistic aspects of capitalism and the selfishness of the wealthy class, and unequivocally against U.S. imperialism. Stating that "Nationality is babyishness for the most part," he opposed the Mexican-American War, the annexation of Texas, the expropriation of Hawaii. But still, he insisted on clinging to "inaction, this wise passiveness, until my hour comes when I can see how to act with truth."

His hour finally arrived around 1851, when he became outraged at the Fugitive Slave Act, which mandated that runaway slaves be returned to their owners in the South. He filled dozens of pages with fulmination against the traitorous statesman Daniel Webster, who supported the bill to placate the South; he was horrified that "this filthy enactment was made in the 19th Century, by people who could read & write. I will not obey it, by God." Emerson now began speaking out widely for abolition, on occasion even getting booed.

His ardent defense of African Americans may seem a change of heart in light of his condescending remarks about "the Negro race" years earlier. But that was Emerson's way: not to deny himself entering any stray thought in the journals, however lopsided, and

then to come around to the most reasonable position. Just as he made it a point to listen to both sides of every question, so he attended to the split voices in his own thinking. A walking dualism, Mencken said, Emerson was always on the lookout for wisdom, which, he wrote, "consists in keeping the soul liquid, or, in resisting the tendency to too rapid putrefaction."

One of the ways Emerson staved off putrefaction was by reading. Having swallowed the English classics, he taught himself German, French, and Italian, translated Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, and immersed himself in translations of the Bhagavad Gita, the Koran, Buddhist texts, and Persian poets. He wished he could satisfy his curiosity about Egyptian history, Sanskrit literature, and the Chaldean Oracles. He admired his idol Goethe as much for the German polymath's studies of optics and plants as for *Faust*. That nineteenth-century bug of believing one could synthesize all knowledge and spirit had bitten Emerson. In Eastern thought he found, at times, a model for that integration.

Given that he was cleverer and better read than most of his countrymen, his modesty came as a surprise to me. His journals frequently expressed admiration for farmers, workmen, voluble Italians. "My only secret was that all men were my masters. I never saw one who was not my superior ..." I take heart from Emerson's humility. For a while he longed for a spiritual guide, a superior being who could lead him upward. But he concluded in the end that one must seek the god within.

Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance, which has been misunderstood and oversimplified, did not deny that man was a social animal. He practiced building community and fulfilling civic and neighborly responsibilities; he edited magazines, got friends' books published, attended local meetings. But he urged Americans to stop taking all their cultural cues from Europe, and those seeking spiritual truth to put aside "a historical Christianity ... Christ preaches the greatness of Man but we hear only the greatness of Christ." In a sense it was easier for a man like Emerson, already so steeped in European and Christian traditions, to argue for going one's own way.

Just as we waste our inner sublime, so the outer world brings us a daily abundance we seem ill equipped to harvest. In an especially lovely sentence Emerson wrote that days "come & go like muffled & vague figures, sent from a distant friendly party; but they say nothing, & if we do not use the gifts they bring, they carry them as silently away." More pragmatic, I do not share this vision of man's unrealized divinity. But I am with him all the way when he expresses dissatisfaction with life, sounding like one of Chekhov's characters: "I find no good lives. I would live well. I seem to be free to do so, yet I think with very little respect of my way of living; it is weak, partial, not full & not progressive. But I do not see any other that suits me better." He later put it even more succinctly: "We are all dying of miscellany."

Emerson never exaggerated the nobility of his sentiments. He took careful note when indifference or coldness had crept into his soul, and so his sympathies sound more trustworthy. Though he believed we are made for ecstasy, and chastised himself for not feeling enough joy, a work-centered stoicism remained his default mode. This was not so much resignation as resilience, predicated on the understanding that human beings can take a lot. The one thing he resisted was embracing suffering in order to feel more deeply: "We court suffering in the hope that here at least we shall find reality, sharp angular peaks & edges of truth. But it is scene painting, a counterfeit, a goblin."

His secret (a goal disdained by youth but not middle age) was to achieve a gyroscopic equilibrium. He confessed: "I told J. V. [Jones Very] that I had never suffered, & that I could scarce bring myself to feel a concern for the safety & life of my nearest friends that would satisfy them: that I saw clearly that if my wife, my child, my mother, should be taken from me, I should still remain whole with the same capacity of cheap enjoyment from all things." This alarmingly candid, disturbing statement seems an admission of shallowness, or at least a lack of tragic consciousness.

But he spoke too soon; he would shortly come to know suffering. If it had eluded him after the death of his first wife, Ellen, whom he mythologized as an angel, he had no such protection when he lost his firstborn, Waldo. Emerson had delighted in recording the sayings and deeds of this charming son, and when the boy died of a sudden illness at age five, he wrote: "the wonderful Boy is gone"; "he most beautiful of children is not here. I comprehend nothing of this fact but its bitterness." In the passages mourning Waldo we get the rock-bottom Emerson, without disguises. He recovered his poise but never his optimism after Waldo's death. Decades later, he would recall Waldo at the circus watching the clown's antics and saying, "'It makes me want to go home,' and I am forced to quote my boy's speech often & often since. I can do so few things, I can see so few companies, that do not remind me of it." The distance between public and private man was never more starkly put. Those who regard Emerson as too cheerful would do well to ponder his statement that "after thirty a man wakes up sad every morning."

The journals help us to grasp the confessional nature of the essays. For instance, in his essay "Experience" there is this remarkable sentence, offered without elaboration: "The only thing grief has taught me, is to know how shallow it is." The journals contain numerous passages about grief, such as this one: "Presently the man is consoled, but not by the fine things; no, but perhaps by very foul things, namely, by the defects of the dead from which he shall no more suffer; or, what often happens, by being relieved from relations & a responsibility, to which he was unequal." This last bit about suspecting oneself unequal to the challenge of caring for the infirm is typical of Emerson's compulsive honesty, no matter under how bad a light it might place him. The journal's entry is not as spectacular as the essay's sentence, but it gives us a more shaded insight into the psychology of grief. Trying to juggle all his social ties in middle age, he threatened wryly to close up shop. "A man of 45 does not want to open new accounts of friendship. He has said Kitty kitty long enough."

Whitman once said of Emerson, "I think everyone was fascinated by his personality. His usual manner carried with it something penetrating and sweet beyond mere description. There is in some men an indefinable something which flows out and over you like a flood

of light—as if they possessed it illimitably—their whole being suffused with it. Being—in fact that is precisely the word. Emerson's whole attitude shed forth such an impression.... Never a face more gifted with power to express, fascinate, maintain."

Staring at his photographs, we can guess at the power "the gentle Emerson" had for his contemporaries. Or we can turn to the writing, especially the journals, where his wholeness of being is manifest. In later years he was introduced to President Lincoln and celebrated as the nation's foremost public intellectual. Self-mockingly, he said that if the people who were honoring his intellect had read the same books he had, they wouldn't think he was so smart.

Faced with aging, he had a mixed response. On the plus side, he no longer felt the need to prove himself: "It is long already fixed what I can & what I cannot do." On the minus side, he said,

> 'Tis strange, that it is not in vogue to commit hari-kari as the Japanese do at 60. Nature is *so* insulting in her hints & notices, does not pull you by the sleeve, but pulls out your teeth, tears off your hair in patches, steals your eyesight, twists your face into an ugly mask, in short, puts all contumelies upon you, without in the least abating your zeal to make a good appearance, and all this at the same time that she is moulding the new figures around you into wonderful beauty which, of course, is only making your plight worse.

I'm sure one could make the case for Emerson's relevance by casting him as a proto-postmodernist, a wild man with dark imagination, or a proponent of multiculturalism. My fondness for him rests on his intelligence and his truthfulness, his questing, non-dogmatic sanity. He wrote some of the best reflective prose we have, he was a hero of intellectual labor, a loyal friend, and, taking all flaws into account, a good egg. True, he was a bourgeois and wrote in the style of middle age. Can we ever forgive him? I can. More, I can identify with him, having at last entered both categories. In middle age, I find myself an unrepentant Emersonian. I simply like the man, which is saying something after having spent 1,900 pages in the innermost chamber of his mind. Of how many other American writers could one say the same? ■

AGE OF EXUBERANCE

The lost grandeur of the Gilded interior

By James Fenton

Discussed in this essay:

The Poetic Home: Designing the 19th-Century Domestic Interior, by Stefan Muthesius. Thames & Hudson. 352 pages. $80.

Artistic Circles: Design and Decoration in the Aesthetic Movement, by Charlotte Gere. V&A Publishing/Harry N. Abrams Inc. 240 pages. $60.

Searching recently for a home in Upper Manhattan, I was struck by two warring thoughts. The first: How much, behind battered facades, has survived of the late-nineteenth-century interiors—the stained-glass transoms, the pocket doors, the elegant distinction between front and back parlors, the chaste division between the master's and the mistress's bedrooms (with their discreet communicating bathrooms), the pot-bellied stoves and the deep laundry sinks abandoned in the basements, the dark paneling and the beamed or coffered ceilings.

Poverty and neglect are great preservers up to a point, and they have pickled in Harlem, in house after house, all the evidence of a genteel nineteenth century. The louvered shutters still function, and sprung catches still jump to attention—or would do here and there, if layers of paint were scraped away. To a foreigner it is all unfamiliar, but it hangs together with its own charming decorative logic.

The second thought is that nearly all of this frozen decor is doomed. It doesn't stand a chance against the sound finances and priorities of a "gut renovation." Oh, some of the fireplaces and pocket doors and transoms will survive as "original features." But the ensemble will not, cannot, survive. The proportions of the rooms will not survive air-conditioning with its ducts and false ceilings. The floors will be brutally sanded, and the window surrounds scraped, until they look flayed. The

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The ladies' room, from *Unser Heim im Schmucke der Kunst* (*Our Home as Beautified by Art*), 1879, by Oskar Mothes. Courtesy Thames & Hudson, from *The Poetic Home: Designing the 19th-Century Domestic Interior*