In his 1837 oration “The American Scholar,” Ralph Waldo Emerson famously proclaimed that “Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close.” For many scholars of American literature, Emerson became the first and foremost avatar of that cultural independence he declared here and elsewhere. His writings are infamously difficult and ambiguous—in “Self-Reliance,” for example, he celebrates his own contradictions and embraces the possibility of being misunderstood—and different interpretations of his philosophy and its significance for American literature and American culture abound. What is more certain is that his thought and his approach have had a profound impact on many Americans.

Emerson was born in 1803 to a family long connected to the pulpit. His father was the distinguished minister of the First Church, Boston, where he had moved the congregation away from its Calvinist roots and towards Unitarianism. Mary Moody Emerson, his paternal aunt, would become the greatest intellectual influence on young Emerson after his father died when he was eight. Despite the financial difficulties his family faced after his father’s death, Emerson was able to attend the Boston Latin School and then Harvard. After teaching for four years, Emerson returned to Harvard in 1825 to attend the Divinity School, following his father into the ministry. However, he was never certain of his calling, and in 1832, following the death of his first wife, he resigned his pulpit and began to shape his career as a public intellectual. Over the next few years, he traveled to Europe, where he met Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Thomas Carlyle and engaged more and more deeply with European Romanticism.

This thinking led to his first book, *Nature*, published in 1836. Over the next few years, Emerson became the leader of a new movement of American thought, Transcendentalism. Emerging out of a group first organized by Frederick Henry Hedge, the Transcendentalist Club would lend the movement its name, a name Emerson never fully embraced, although he occasionally used it. The term transcendentalism came from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Writing at the end of the eighteenth century, Kant had sought to reunify the subjective and the objective, the spiritual and the material, the ideal and the physical. The transcendentalists, though, were less directly influenced by Kant’s philosophy than through its recapitulation and reframing by romantic poets and essayists such as Coleridge and Carlyle and by their own roots in a New English religious tradition built on self-examination and exploration, reaching back through the Unitarians to the Puritans.

While *Nature* helped to establish Emerson’s reputation, it was through his orations that he first became famous and through which he would reach the largest American audiences. In addresses such as “The American Scholar,” “The Divinity School Address,” and “Self-Reliance,” Emerson signaled his desire to break from tradition, to create a distinctly American culture by turning to the individual and his or her own judgments and relations to the world, including
nature, God, and society. Most controversially, in his graduation address to the Harvard Divinity School in 1838, he rejected a religion based on scripture and faith in miracles in favor of one based on one's direct relationship to God and nature through intuition: "an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul." Rather than turning to the Bible or to religious traditions handed down for generations, which "speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead," Emerson told his auditors they should look both inward into their own consciences and outward to the beauty of the world around them. As such, the job of the minister—his audience consisted of newly minted clergymen—was not to teach or lecture or cajole a congregation into the correct faith but to help lead the congregation in its own exploration of spiritual connection to the world and its own realization of the universal laws underlying the spiritual and physical world through the congregation members' lives. The divine truth "cannot be received at second hand," and thus "it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul." Most of the ideas in "The Divinity School Address" had appeared in Nature, but presented as a lecture to new Christian ministers at Harvard Divinity School, the ideas scandalized many (even as it electrified others). Most prominently, Andrews Norton, a Harvard professor of theology, repeatedly attacked Emerson's thought in the press, calling it the "latest form of infidelity." As the controversy developed, Emerson's rejection of miracles became the center of the dispute. While Emerson never directly engaged in the debate, it helped to establish him as a prominent—and potentially radical and misunderstood—thinker in American culture.

From the late 1830s until the early 1870s, Emerson would be one of the most popular lecturers on the Lyceum circuit, traveling around the country and delivering different versions of what would become his most famous essays to local audiences. His finished essays most often developed first from his extensive notebooks, being worked up into orations before being published in the collections that continue to be at the center of his reputation. At the same time, he published a great deal of poetry, further exploring the connections between art and philosophical (or spiritual) truth at the core of much of his thought. While Emerson’s lectures, poems, and essays covered a wide range of ideas and topics, he returned to certain key ideas, most notably the inviolability of the individual conscience; the supreme importance of the individual standing on his own, making his own way, in material and spiritual matters; the direct relationship between the individual and the divine; the central role of nature in materializing the divine laws connecting the individual and the universal; and the ability of poetry (or art more broadly) to revitalize this connection between the individual and the divine.

Emerson has often been read as central not only to the American renaissance but to all of American literature. Even as he argued that Emerson produced no great masterpiece, F. O. Matthiessen organized his version of the American renaissance around Emerson’s influence, with Thoreau and Whitman developing Emerson’s ideas in slightly different veins and Hawthorne and Melville reacting against what they saw as his overly optimistic view of the world and human nature. Emerson directly influenced many of the most important
writers of his age. He was a mentor and friend of other leading transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau (it was on Emerson’s land that Thoreau built his cabin at Walden Pond) and Margaret Fuller, with whom he co-edited the transcendentalist journal *The Dial*. He shared his home with Nathaniel Hawthorne (the title of his short story collection *Mosses from an Old Manse* refers to Emerson’s house), and he provided critical support for Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (without Emerson’s permission, Whitman would use Emerson’s personal letter congratulating him on the first edition of the collection to promote the second edition). Other writers found it impossible not to respond to Emerson—Poe rejected him with disdain, Melville repeatedly parodies and struggles with Emerson and Emersonian philosophy, and Dickinson similarly explores the blind spots and potential of Emerson’s vision of the individual’s connection to the divine.

In recent years, critical interest in Emerson has focused less on his literary influence than on the implicit and explicit politics of his philosophy and the continuing significance of that philosophy. Emerson largely eschewed political questions per se, focusing instead on the individual as the basis for a self-reform that would then lead to social transformation. Taking this position, he rejected George Ripley’s invitation to participate in the transcendentalist utopian commune at Brook Farm and found himself at odds with more directly political transcendentalists such as Orestes Brownson. While Emerson rejected organized politics, he found himself drawn more and more into speaking out against slavery, especially after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. In recent decades, literary critics have interpreted Emerson’s relationship to the politics and society of the mid-nineteenth-century U.S. in opposing ways. On the one hand, some, such as John Carlos Rowe, have contended that Emerson helps to establish a long-standing attempt to withdraw American literature from important political issues, a failure to address the most important social causes of the time in favor of aesthetic contemplation, while others have emphasized the centrality of his philosophy to his anti-slavery thought and its resonance with a variety of political and social activists or have suggested how his aesthetic theory and practice provides a more profound engagement with the material and ethical underpinnings of socio-political questions. Similarly, his emphasis on the individual has been read as reproducing a capitalist logic of domination under the guise of equality (Newfield, for example) and as a radical philosophical critique of the kind of individualism that capitalism enshrines (Cameron, for example). Whether read positively or negatively, as political or philosophical, religious, or poetic, Emerson’s writings continue to hold a central place in the study of nineteenth-century American literature.
Suggested Recent Criticism


