

ESTIMATING EMERSON: AN ANTHOLOGY OF CRITICISM FROM CARLYLE TO CAVELL

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The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence —Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (in Simon and Parsons 1966: 13).

Resembling the stars he “awakened a certain reverence”, and like “all natural objects” he made “a kindred impression” upon the minds of those who were open to his influence. The American essayist, poet and admirable lecturer, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), helped shape and define American identity and is often considered to be “America’s Plato”.¹ As his contemporary and fellow Transcendentalist Orestes Brownson² once wrote, it was “as the advocate of the rights of the mind” and “as the defender of personal independence in the spiritual world”, that Emerson caught the attention of “many young, ardent, and yet noble minds” (in Gura 2007: 95). Emerson not only blazed a significant path for his contemporaries, but also left a legacy which —almost two centuries later— is still being studied, questioned, evaluated, criticized and analyzed. An internationally acclaimed author and thinker, he still excites influence and provokes admiration among intellectuals, writers and scholars. The widespread interest in Emerson’s work and persona persists, possibly because, as Walt Whitman states in his essay “The Superiority of Emerson’s Writing”, “he has what none else has; he does what none else does. He pierces the crusts that envelope the secrets of life. He joins on

equal terms the few great sages and original seers. He represents the freeman, America, the individual” (LaRocca 2013: 177).

Estimating Emerson: an Anthology of Criticism from Carlyle to Cavell edited by David LaRocca, brings together classic and contemporary critical miscellaneous texts on Emerson, written by a range of renowned critics and observers of literary history. *Estimating Emerson* is the first anthology of criticism which, on the one hand, compiles so many articles written over a period of 174 years, and on the other hand, gathers the various comments, interpretations and analyses written on Emerson by 67 of the world’s most celebrated authors. From Thomas Carlyle to Stanley Cavell, and including Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, Herman Melville, Charles Baudelaire, Walt Whitman, Henry James, Friedrich Nietzsche, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, Jorge Luis Borges, Harold Bloom and Charles Bernstein, to mention only a few of the authors who come together across time in *Estimating Emerson*. Although the texts and authors that make up this critical anthology are brought together as a result of having Emerson as the focus of attention, the book not only proves interesting and necessary for scholars interested in Emerson, but is also of interest to scholars and readers of the literary periods covered in general, due to the outstanding quality of its articles.

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Given that so many memorable classic and contemporary authors have paid attention to Emerson, LaRocca is led to wonder in his introduction to the book: “Why have so many notable writers taken their interest in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s work beyond private admiration –or irritation– and chosen to write essays, critical remarks, and other forms of prose as well as poetry that name, engage, correct and clarify, and often celebrate his writing?” (1). *Estimating Emerson* may perhaps not fully answer this question. Nonetheless, this volume does shed light upon Emerson’s long-lasting significance and helps illuminate and simplify the pathway to a better understanding of Emerson’s heritage and the reasons why he has been so widely celebrated. As LaRocca explains:

The present volume may form a partial reply, or by the sheer extent and diversity of comments on Emerson it may create a deeper mystery, a more pressing desire to understand how Emerson’s writing provoked and persuaded so many exceptional writers to single out his work for approbation and critique, to fathom the pleasure and difficulty of inheriting his work, and more generally to estimate Emerson’s singular contribution. (1)

The editing and formatting of an anthology as large and complex as *Estimating Emerson* is beset with decision-making and LaRocca broadly explains in the introduction his criterion for selecting authors and texts: “a criterion that blends an author’s prominence-at-the-time-of-composition with the impression his criticism made on the forms and features of criticism that followed his work” (3).

The volume is divided thus into eight periods that cover 174 years altogether, starting with the year 1834 —the date of the text which opens the anthology, Thomas Carlyle’s “Preface by the Editor to *Essays, First Series*”— and ending in the year 2008. LaRocca’s short biography for each of the authors that make up the anthology performs a useful service for readers by contextualizing the range of texts on display.

The three periods that cover the nineteenth century —1834-1860; 1861-1880 and 1881-1900— are inaugurated by Thomas Carlyle’s texts “Preface by the Editor to *Essays, First Series*” and “Letters to Emerson” and conclude with three texts by Friedrich Nietzsche taken from “Schopenhauer as Educator in *Untimely Meditations*”, from *The Gay Science* and from “Raids of an Untimely Man in *Twilight of the Idols*”, respectively. In these different periods belonging to the nineteenth century one finds texts by some of Emerson’s contemporaries: Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), Charles Dickens (1812-1870), Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), Herman Melville (1819-1891), Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), Walt Whitman (1819-1892), Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) and Henry James senior (1843-1916), among others. One can find texts as diverse as these short examples: in Hawthorne’s “Letter to Emerson” one reads, “My dear Emerson, I thank you for your book, which reached me a week or two ago [...]. Undoubtedly, these are the truest pages that have yet been written, about this country” (44). In Melville’s “Letter to Lemuel Shaw”, one reads: “Nay, I do not oscillate in Emerson’s rainbow, but prefer rather to hang myself in my own halter that swing in any other man’s swing” (103).

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The twentieth century is divided into five different periods and the last period includes the first eight years of the twenty-first century, starting in 1901 and ending in 2008 with three texts by Stanley Cavell. The twentieth century combines texts from John Dewey (1859-1952), George Santayana (1863-1952), Marcel Proust (1871-1922), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930), F.O. Matthiessen (1902-1950), Robert Frost (1874-1963), Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), Harold Bloom (1930-) and Cornel West (1953-), to name a few. Among the miscellaneous texts —both prose and poetry— included in this period, one can find the poem ‘Emerson’, dedicated to Emerson by the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges (478):

Closing the heavy volume of Montaigne,
The tall New Englander goes out
Into an evening which exalts the fields.
It is a pleasure worth no less than reading.
He walks towards the final sloping of the sun,
Towards the landscape’s gilded edge;

He moves through darkening fields as he moves now
Through the memory of the one who writes this down.
[...]

Estimating Emerson is to be highly recommended for all scholars from different fields of the Humanities. A close look at the book's content list will show that the volume is not just useful as a tool for studying Emerson, but that it may well serve to illuminate American society and identities throughout this period. While the table of contents is well organized considering the book's extension, the incorporation of an index—organized by names and subjects—would have proven useful for readers. Ralph Waldo Emerson may stand in the center of the kaleidoscope in *Estimating Emerson*, but the many and varied authors included in the book bestow on it a much wider relevance and interest than the title indicates.

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¹. Matthiessen affirms, "The representative man whom he most revered was Plato. For Plato had been able to bridge the gap between the two poles of thought, to reconcile fact and abstraction, the many and the One, society and solitude. Emerson wanted a like method for himself [...]". (1962: 3)

². Although Orestes Brownson was part of the Transcendentalist movement, he renounced both Transcendentalism and Liberalism when he converted to Catholicism around 1840.

Works cited

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