

# THE AMERICAN MYSTERY

*American Literature from Emerson to DeLillo*

TONY TANNER

Foreword by Edward Said

Introduction by Ian F. A. Bell



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*Lustres and condiments:  
Ralph Waldo Emerson in his Essays*

It is said that Nietzsche never travelled without carrying a volume of Emerson's essays with him. When I started reading American literature – some thirty years ago – the conjunction of those two names would have seemed not just incongruous but ludicrous. As the stereotypes of the time had it, on the one hand there was Emerson the Boston Brahmin, bland even to fatuity, contentedly ripening with the New England melons, benignly meditating on such vaporous notions as the Over-soul, serenely disengaged not only from politics and society but from all human relations, ideally winnowing himself down to a transparent eyeball. On the other hand, there was the European Nietzsche, savage even to madness, ferociously dismantling the belief systems and the hypocritically espoused values of the declining bourgeois Western world. What was *he* doing with Emerson in his pocket?

Born in 1803, Ralph Waldo Emerson, like his father before him, became a minister in the Unitarian Church, being ordained minister of Boston's Second Church in 1829. Unitarianism represented an extreme dilution of the rigidly Calvinistic Puritanism which had originally dominated New England. But it still retained a minimum of – comfortably unexacting – orthodoxy and ritual, for instance the communion service. The young Emerson soon found himself uneasy with this residue of formal religion which he saw as a symptom of rigidification and petrification. He had come to suspect all institutionalised prescriptions, anything enshrined and repeatedly imposed, all the drilled and regulated mediations of authority already in place. All this he saw as the tyranny of the past – as embodied in the father, the Church, Europe, or any tradition which seemed to claim the right both to guide and constrain the individual. 'Nature abhors the old . . . We call it by many names . . . rest, conservatism, appropriation, inertia; not newness, not the way onward. We grizzle every day. I see no need of it' ('Circles'). He did not want to install himself in, and subserviently

administer, any church, indeed any system, whatsoever. ‘Up, down, around, the kingdom of thought has no enclosures, but the Muse makes us free of her city’ (‘Intellect’).

In 1838 Emerson wrote that it seemed that ‘the distinction of the new age’ would be ‘the refusal of authority’. In 1834 there had been riots at Harvard which started when a student said to a teacher, ‘I do not recognise your authority.’ In 1838 Emerson gave the famous, or infamous, ‘Divinity School Address’ at Harvard, in which he directly confronted and challenged established authorities. The address gave great offence and aroused fierce opposition – and no wonder. Emerson – *in* the Divinity School – speaks out against all formalisms and constituted mediations – ‘we shrink as soon as the prayers begin’. He refers to ‘the famine of our churches’; deplures ‘the stationariness of religion’; and argues the need for an entirely new mode of revelation. Given the time and place, it was an explosively anarchistic performance. He was not invited back to Harvard for thirty years. In 1838 Emerson made his final break with the Church. He had resigned his ministry in 1832, but had continued preaching in Concord. Now he felt he had to disassociate himself from even the vestigial officialdom of the pulpit.

But if he was no longer a minister, what – up, down, and around – was he? This has been called Emerson’s ‘problem of vocation’. Over the ensuing years, he deployed a wide range of names or terms to designate what he was, or felt himself to be, or aspired to be – or, more generally, the kind of figure he felt America needed. The very proliferation of these names is an index to Emerson’s uncertainty about the role – if any – he was playing, or could play, in society: he was variously Scholar, Seer, Reformer, Man of Genius, Contemplative Man, Hero, Poet, Transcendentalist, Student, Saint, Dissenter, Torch-bearer, Idealist, Aspirant, Radical. One might wonder why he could not simply have announced himself as a Writer, and have done with it. But things were not so simple in mid-nineteenth-century America. The idea that ‘writing’ could be a respectable full-time (male) occupation was regarded with particular suspicion. Fully explaining, or suggesting, the reasons for this would take us too far afield. Partly it was due to a Puritan deprecation of all fiction-making, all art, as potentially impious if not blasphemous. God was the only Maker. Then again, the whole ethos of America served to stress the importance of actual *doing* – pioneering, clearing, settling, building, inventing, mastering. The vast

and growing new nation required men of action. Writers themselves often felt a deep ambivalence, if not actual guilt, about writing. Hawthorne's long introductory chapter to *The Scarlet Letter* is, among other things, a tortuous and often anxious justification of his embarking on the novel. A quotation from an earlier work, *Letters from an American Farmer*, by J. Hector St John de Crèvecoeur, exemplifies this American ambivalence about writing. In his introduction, the author records his wife as saying to him –

I would not have thee, James, pass for what the world calleth a writer; no, not for a peck of gold, as the saying is. Thy father before thee was a plain-dealing, honest man, punctual in all things; he was one of *yea and nay*, of few words; all he minded was his farm and work. I wonder from whence thee has got this love of the pen?<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, the *Letters* is a fiction, and there may be some comic exaggeration at work. But the wife expresses something both real and prevalent in pre-Civil War America: a feeling that writing was not, truly speaking, in and for itself, a proper, self-justifying activity.

Thus it is that we find Emerson often returning to the problematics of action. 'Besides, why should we be cowed by the name of Action? . . . We know that the ancestor of every action is a thought . . . The rich mind lies in the sun and sleeps, and is Nature. To think is to act . . . Action and inaction are alike to the true' ('Spiritual Laws'). Even more to the point, he writes: 'Words and deeds are quite indifferent modes of the divine energy. Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words.' When he came to write his volume entitled *Representative Men*, Emerson was initially going to conclude (and thus climax) with 'Napoleon; or, the Man of the World' – Napoleon being for Emerson, as for so many nineteenth-century writers, the exemplary man of action of their age. But then Emerson came to question what was finally achieved by all Napoleon's activity – 'this vast talent and power . . . It came to no result. All passed away, like the smoke of his artillery, and left no trace.' So Emerson concluded the volume, triumphally as one feels, with 'Goethe; or the Writer'. The 'vast talent and power' of the great writer *does* leave traces.

A key word there, and for Emerson everywhere, is 'power' (perhaps this was part of his appeal for Nietzsche). 'The law of nature is, Do the thing, and you shall have the power: but they who do not the thing have not the power' ('Compensation'). Emerson's 'thing' was writing (and speaking) and he felt, had to feel, that he 'had the power'. 'The good soul nourishes me, unlocks new magazines of power and

enjoyment to me every day' ('Spiritual Laws'). If, he says, you can really open the eyes of old and settled people to the truth, 'they are perfumed again with hope and power' ('Circles'). 'Perfumed with power' – the trope has an almost Shakespearean audacity. The 'real value' of great books 'is as signs of power' ('Art'). One can see why he should conclude his perhaps greatest essay, 'Experience', in this way: 'the true romance which the world exists to realise, will be the transformation of genius into practical power'. He refers easily to 'the direct splendor of intellectual power', and, rather remarkably, celebrates 'that *dream*-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy' ('The Poet'). On the role of power in society, he affirms, in 'Manners', 'Power first, or no leading class.' Nietzsche would surely have approved of that. He would also have approved the belief that 'Power is in nature the essential measure of right.' And 'power' was inseparable from movement. 'Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state; in the shooting of the gulf; in the darting to an aim' ('Self-Reliance'). 'Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energising spirit' ('Circles'). Writing, of course, fixes things – a written word is a word in repose. Emerson sought to find a mode of writing which, as it were, seemed to dissolve itself even as it began to settle, stiffen, and congeal – a writing seemingly in a state of permanent transition.

Thus crucial words for Emerson – in addition to 'power', 'force', 'energy' – are 'unfix', 'unsettle', 'upheave', 'antagonism'. He was against whatever was 'stationary'. Movement – transition – was what mattered. 'Every thing good is on the highway' ('Experience'). This is an apt enough aphorism for a literature which spends a good deal of its time 'on the road'. But it has more far-reaching implications for Emerson: 'all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead' ('The Poet'). All Emerson's negative terms are to do with 'fixity' and arrest: all evil, he says, has to do with 'limit' ('the only sin is limitation' – 'Circles'). Throughout his essays, the image of the 'wall' serves as the most extreme abuse. 'Suffice it for the joy of the universe, that we have not arrived at a wall, but at interminable oceans' ('Experience'). Whatever makes for fluidity is seen as a positive force – he even makes 'flux' into an active – transitive – verb. 'Every solid in the universe is ready to become fluid on the approach of mind, and the power to flux it is the measure of the mind. If the wall remain adamant, it accuses the want of thought. To a subtler

force, it will stream into new forms' ('Fate'). Life, for Emerson, was indeed 'a flux of moods', and for him it was a sign of health to go with the 'flux' and, since it is his verb, to keep on and on 'fluxing'. The risks and possible losses (even inhumanities) attendant on such a stance hardly need spelling out. But its potential for energising liberations is very great.

In this connection, it is worth considering the impact on Emerson of the death of his young son, Waldo, in 1842. Prior to this event, his essays were marked by an almost anarchistic confidence. One reviewer of the volume containing 'Self-Reliance' said that its doctrines 'if acted upon, would overthrow society, and resolve the world into chaos'. Certainly, with its attack on 'the smooth mediocrity and squalid contentment of the times', its view of society as a 'conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members', its vigorous espousal of non-conformity ('whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist'), and what sounds like an unchecked, capricious arbitrariness ('I would write on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim*'), the essay does read as a licence for unhindered anti- or a-social individualism, overvaluing what he elsewhere calls 'the great and crescive self' (and thus, among other things, vulnerable to appropriation by supporters of a ruthless and unscrupulous self-aggrandising capitalism whom Emerson sought to excoriate).

Part of the problem is that, in a way, Emerson is writing against writing itself. He has to use sentences, and sentences, to the extent that they are semantically legible, look inexorably propositional. But Emerson purported not to believe in propositions ('essence refuses to be recorded in propositions'). He regarded language as potentially a trap which is liable to check us to the point of stagnation and even decay – indeed, 'stationariness'. That is why he had so little regard for 'foolish consistency'. Better to follow your own authentic impulses. *Whim*. 'Live ever in a new day.' 'The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks.' And so it is with the voyage of his own writing. This is why it can be at times so exhilarating – always surprisingly on the move; and at times so exhausting to follow – it never stops tacking. But for good or bad, good and bad perhaps, this was something both extraordinary and new in American writing.

But four years later, in 1844, at the beginning of 'Experience', Emerson seems lost, or at least disorientated. 'Where do we find ourselves?' He found himself – lost himself – having to apprehend and assimilate the

sudden death of his adored young son. How he did so has been responsible for much of his later reputation as almost inhumanly unfeeling. He only once wrote directly about this death:

The only thing grief has taught me, is to know how shallow it is . . . In the death of my son . . . I seem to have lost a beautiful estate, – no more. I cannot get it nearer to me. If to-morrow I should be informed of the bankruptcy of my principal debtors, the loss of my property would be a great inconvenience to me . . . but it would leave me as it found me, – neither better nor worse. So is it with this calamity: it does not touch me . . . It was caducous. I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature . . . I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition. Nature does not like to be observed, and likes that we should be her fools and playmates.

This ‘slippery, sliding’, lubricious, caducous nature is very different from the infinitely benign nature of Emerson’s first essay, ‘Nature’. And Emerson’s way of coping with grief seems preternaturally cool – a supreme example of what he himself referred to as ‘my old arctic habits’. Clearly, when it came to the basic creatural passions and feelings, he was, by any reckoning, very repressed. (Sex and sexuality scarcely figure in his copious writing, and John Jay Chapman once wrote that a visitor from another planet, wishing to find out about human life on this earth, would do better to go to the worst Italian opera than read Emerson – because at least from the opera he would learn that there are two sexes!) But ‘arctic’ males – and females – were, by all accounts, common enough in nineteenth-century England and America; and having initially found Emerson’s dismissive composure in regard to his son’s death rather repellent, I now think it can be seen as manifesting its own kind of bravery and strength. ‘Providence has a wild, rough, incalculable road to its end, and it is no use to try to whitewash its huge mixed instrumentalities’ (‘Fate’). Confronted by the terrible results of these ‘huge, mixed instrumentalities’ Emerson refused to be immobilised by grief. ‘Let us be poised, and wise, and our own, today.’

If life was ‘flux’ in constant ‘metamorphosis’ (another key word for Emerson), then so should the writing of it be. ‘Nature hates calculators; her methods are *saltatory and impulsive*. Man lives by *pulses*; our organic movements are such; and the chemical and ethereal agents are *undulatory and alternate*; and the mind goes *antagonising* on, and never prospers but by fits. We thrive by *casualties* . . . The most attractive

class of people are those who are *powerful obliquely* ('Experience'). The italics are mine, and while Emerson applies them to organic life, we can reapply them to his own prose – vehicular as opposed to stationary; more of a conveyance than a homestead; practising interminability in preference to giving a feeling of arrival; an ocean rather than a wall. Nature, he says, 'has set her heart on breaking up all styles and tricks' ('Nominalist and Realist'), so he tries himself to write in a style which gives the impression of constantly breaking *itself* up.

You do not read Emerson for information, nor – and this is where it sometimes becomes problematic – do you exactly read him for his sense. Two statements which reveal his own mode of reading – what he read *for* – may be helpful here. 'An imaginative book renders us much more service at first, by stimulating us through its *tropes*, than afterward, when we arrive at the *precise sense* of the author' ('The Poet' – my emphasis). Secondly, 'I find the most pleasure in reading a book in a manner least flattering to the author . . . I read for the *lustres*, as if one should use a fine picture in a chromatic experiment, for its rich colors' ('Nominalist and Realist' – my emphasis). Such a mode of reading of course risks promoting superficiality; and Emerson's own style at times courts the disaster of becoming almost meaningless. Emerson is neither a hard nor a deep thinker – nor does he aim to be. You read him for the tropes and the lustres, and allow their power, to adapt one of his own formulations, to 'slide into you as pleasure'. It is important to remember that he regarded himself as a serious poet, and it would be appropriate to say that many of his essays aspire to the condition of poetry.

It is also relevant to recall that Emerson's primary occupation was as a lecturer – in 1867, for example, he gave no fewer than eighty lectures. It is clear not only that he evolved his own highly original manner of speaking but also that that manner is behind his writing. Here is John Jay Chapman again, more admiringly: 'It was the platform which determined Emerson's style . . . The pauses and hesitation, the abstraction, the searching, the balancing, the turning forward and back of the leaves of his lecture, and then the discovery, the illumination, the gleam of lightning which you saw before your eyes descend into a man of genius, – all this was Emerson. He invented this style of speaking.'<sup>2</sup> As in the speaking, so in the writing. It is as if Emerson somehow seeks to escape from his own moments of utterance – as if speech, like writing, was a regrettable necessity. 'The waters of the great deep have ingress and egress to the soul. But if I speak, I define,

I confine, and am less' ('Intellect'). In much the same spirit he writes, 'The sentence must also contain its own apology for being spoken' ('Spiritual Laws'). The paradox of the great speaker and writer declaiming against the confining and diminishing effects of all forms of utterance and articulation is squarely faced by Emerson. 'No sentence will hold the whole truth, and the only way in which we can be just, is by giving ourselves the lie; speech is better than silence; silence is better than speech' ('Nominalist and Realist'). These perhaps rather too contented-seeming contiguous self-contradictions are of a piece with his belief that 'You are one thing, but nature is *one thing and the other thing*, in the same moment' ('Nominalist and Realist'). Emerson wanted to get some of that seamless doubleness of nature into his writing. He must then disappoint, if not infuriate, those whose expectations have been determined by more traditional modes of discourse – which seek to elicit clarifications and distinctions from the chaotic abundance of nature.

Nevertheless, the Emersonian voice is an important part of the affirmative strengths of that ongoing improvisation and experiment called America. It reminds us that 'society is fluid'; that institutions are not rooted in nature like trees; that all is 'alterable' ('Politics'). It is easy to fault or deride his optimism in the face of evil, suffering, and pain. Yet that power for persistence, that self-renewing energy and refusal of 'stationariness' for which he continually speaks, are essential things.

Like Nietzsche, he went 'antagonising on'; and society would stagnate without such bracing oppositional voices. But more than that, he knew that art was, and should be, not utilitarian and serviceable, but a supplement, an addition, an excess, something over and above; not our daily bread, but an added relish. 'We came this time for condiments, not for corn. We want the great genius only for joy' ('Nominalist and Realist').

#### NOTES

- 1 J. Hector St John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 48.
- 2 John Jay Chapman, *Emerson and Other Essays* (London: David Nutt, 1898), pp. 33–4.