Approaches to Teaching the Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson

Edited by

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	1X
PART ONE: MATERIALS	
Editions and Texts	3
Critical Reception	7
Critical Studies	8
Intellectual and Critical Contexts	9
Digital Resources	11
PART TWO: APPROACHES	
Introduction: Learning from Emerson	15
Approaching Emerson as a Public Intellectual	
Emerson the Orator: Teaching the Narratives of "The Divinity School Address" David M. Robinson	24
Emerson the Essayist in the American Essay Canon Ned Stuckey-French	31
Politically Ethical Aesthetics: Teaching Emerson's Poetry in the Context of Diversity in the United States Saundra Morris	37
Teaching Emerson's Philosophical Inheritance Susan L. Dunston	46
Emerson and the Reform Culture of the Second Great Awakening Todd H. Richardson	53
The Turbulent Embrace of Thinking: Teaching Emerson the Educator <i>Martin Bickman</i>	59
Emerson the Author: Introducing <i>The Collected Works of</i> Ralph Waldo Emerson into the Classroom Ronald A. Bosco	65
Teaching Emerson's Essays	
Once More into the Breach: Teaching Emerson's <i>Nature Michael P. Branch</i>	75

"The American Scholar" as Commencement Address Andrew Kopec	82
The Divine Sublime: Educating Spiritual Teachers in "The Divinity School Address" Corinne E. Blackmer	87
Experimenting with "Circles" Nels Anchor Christensen	93
Beyond "Mendicant and Sycophantic" Reading: Teaching the Seminar Studies in American Self-Reliance Wesley T. Mott	98
The Ideals of "Friendship" Jennifer Gurley	104
In Praise of Affirmation: On Emerson's "Experience" Branka Arsić	110
Teaching Emerson's Other Works	
Teaching Emerson in the Nineteenth-Century Poetry Course Christoph Irmscher	119
Teaching Emerson's Antislavery Writings Len Gougeon	125
Teaching the Practical Emerson through the Sermons and the Early Lectures *Carolyn R. Maibor**	131
Emerson, Gender, and the Journals Jean Ferguson Carr	136
A Natural History of Intellect? Emerson's Scientific Methods in the Later Lectures <i>Meredith Farmer</i>	142
Emerson across the Curriculum	
"These Flames and Generosities of the Heart": Emerson in the Poetry Workshop Dan Beachy-Quick	148
Between the Disciplines and beyond the Institution: Emerson's Environmental Relevance T. S. McMillin	153
Emerson in Media Studies and Journalism David O. Dowling	159

CONTENTS	vii
Emerson and the Digital Humanities Amy Earhart	164
Emerson around the World	
Emerson's Transatlantic Networks Leslie Elizabeth Eckel	169
Teaching the Latin American Emerson Anne Fountain	175
Emerson and Nietzsche Herwig Friedl	181
Emerson in the East: Perennial Philosophy as Humanistic Inquiry John Michael Corrigan	187
Notes on Contributors	193
Survey Participants	197
Works Cited	199
Index	215

Editions and Texts

With the recent completion of the definitive, ten-volume scholarly edition of all of Emerson's works published in his lifetime and under his supervision, The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson marks the culmination of a half century of vigorous textual editing that has conveyed the full range of Emerson's writing and thinking with unprecedented accuracy and authority. The publication of this textual scholarship—along with The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the sixteen volumes of The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks, extending to The Complete Sermons, The Poetry Notebooks, The Topical Notebooks, the four-volume supplement to The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson and The Selected Letters, Emerson's Antislavery Writings, The Later Lectures, and The Selected Lectures—has reintroduced to Emerson's readers, particularly students without access to these previously unpublished materials, the ways that Emerson worked and thought through his ideas in the medium of his writing. The Emerson scholar and biographer Lawrence Buell refers to Emerson as "a kind of performance artist" to characterize a fundamental paradox of his work, the ways he pursued a core idea by "forever reopening and reformulating it, looping away and back again, convinced that the spirit of the idea dictated that no final statement was possible" (Emerson 2). The scholarship represented in these definitive editions of Emerson's works brings the artistry of Emerson's performance center stage for the twenty-first-century study of this important author.

Replacing the Riverside Edition of *Emerson's Complete Works* (1883–93), edited by James Elliot Cabot, Emerson's literary executor, and the Centenary Edition of *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Emerson's son Edward, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* will guide the study of Emerson in its comprehensive attention to the authorship of Emerson's published work and to the contexts of its composition. This standard edition of Emerson's works provides in its first eight volumes the books of prose brought to press by Emerson: *Nature*, *Addresses*, and *Lectures* (1849), *Essays: First Series* (1841), *Essays: Second Series* (1844), *Representative Men* (1850), *English Traits* (1856), *The Conduct of Life* (1860), *Society and Solitude* (1870), and *Letters and Social Aims* (1875). A ninth volume offers a variorum edition of Emerson's poems, including the poetry originally published in *Poems* (1847) and "*May-Day" and Other Pieces* (1867). The tenth and final volume gathers all of Emerson's previously published prose writing left uncollected at the time of his death in 1882.

While students will certainly benefit, much as researchers continue to benefit, from consulting the extensive historical and textual introductions and the editorial apparatus provided in this edition, the significant cost of each volume limits its adoption as a classroom text. However, the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press published in 2015 two single volumes containing selections from these

editions that will be valuable and feasible for classroom study, particularly in upper-level courses that seek to read Emerson at greater length: *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Major Poetry* and *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Major Prose.*

The selection of Emerson's major prose provides a particular example of how the significant textual scholarship pursued in Emerson studies over the past fifty years will shape and indeed change the ways Emerson will be read and taught in the classroom over the next fifty years. While selecting Emerson's most recognizable prose the editors, Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson, also broaden our understanding of Emerson's authorship in offering "the only anthology of his writings that draws from the three predominant sources of his prose: the pulpit, the lecture hall, and print" (Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Major Prose xxix). Furthermore, this volume reedits texts drawn from the first three volumes of the Collected Works to correct inconsistencies that resulted from an "editorial policy of producing eclectic texts drawn from many sources over many decades" (xxxvii). These reedited texts include Nature, "The Divinity School Address," "Self-Reliance," "Circles," and "Experience." Ronald A. Bosco, who also serves as the general editor of The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, will explore further lessons for teaching derived from the editing of Emerson in his contribution to this volume in part 2.1 Bosco advances the concern that the Emerson canon has been shaped primarily by textbook anthology editors rather than teachers. He argues persuasively that introducing the scholarly, edited archive of Emerson's volumes into the classroom enlivens and broadens the Emerson canon in ways that would have made sense to Emerson and his "authorial mind at work." This archive, moreover, will guide our students toward the central question we continue to pose to them: where do we find Emerson? As a start, we recommend that teachers consult the bibliography of authoritative editions of Emerson's writings provided by the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society ("Writings by Emerson").

Our survey of scholars indicates a wide range in the texts teachers use to assign Emerson in the classroom, particularly in the case of books ordered for student purchase. For courses and seminars dedicating significant time to the study of Emerson, the Norton Critical Edition by Joel Porte and Saundra Morris, Emerson's Prose and Poetry, provides an attractive combination of primary and secondary texts, including as it does in one volume a broad selection of Emerson's major writing as well as a range of critical perspectives. Porte's Library of America edition, Emerson: Essays and Lectures, remains an option for assigning extensive reading of Emerson's prose beyond a selection of essays. This volume includes all the prose works published by Emerson through The Conduct of Life. The Library of America also offers a volume of Emerson's Collected Poems and Translations (edited by Harold Bloom and Paul Kane) and two volumes of extensive selections from his journals, Selected Journals: 1820-1842 and Selected Journals: 1841-1877 (both edited by Lawrence Rosenwald). A handy "College Edition" paperback of Emerson: Essays and Poems is no longer available from Library of America, though a paperback edition Essays:

First and Second Series (Porte) remains in print. Richard Poirier's 1990 edition Ralph Waldo Emerson for the Oxford Authors series is also now out of print. A new Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, edited by Robert D. Habich, offers students a generous selection of Emerson's poetry and prose published in his lifetime, drawing from the more familiar earlier works but also, significantly, the work of the 1850s and beyond.

When less extensive selections of Emerson's most familiar works are needed, given a shorter time frame in the course, paperback editions that select from his essays, poetry, and some lectures include *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Atkinson), which leads off with an engaging introduction by the poet Mary Oliver, and more recently an update of *The Portable Emerson*, edited by Jeffrey S. Cramer. David Mikics's *The Annotated Emerson* provides extensive and vivid annotations for a selection of Emerson's most well-known essays and poems. For the purpose of teaching Emerson within the constraints of an American literature survey course, literature anthologies remain a popular if also problematic option; the two most often used anthologies are *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (Baym et al.) and *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* (Lauter et al.), both of which continue to reprint a familiar selection of texts, from *Nature* to "Experience."

For teachers wanting to cultivate Emerson's significant example in the legacy of nature writing in a course in environmental studies or environmental literature, the Beacon Press edition *Nature/Walking* provides an inviting option, pairing Emerson's Nature with Thoreau's essay "Walking" and offering an introduction by John Elder. A more extensive offering of Emerson's environmental writing that includes his early natural history lectures is available in "The Best Read Naturalist": Nature Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, edited by Michael P. Branch and Clinton Mohs. (Branch discusses these writings and their uses in teaching Nature in part 2.) Though many acknowledge Emerson's importance in the tradition of the essay genre, his presence in anthologies of the type that teachers might assign in courses on creative nonfiction and the essay is surprisingly limited. The Oxford Book of Essays (Gross) offers "The Conservative," Emerson's lecture from 1841, for its one selection. For those wanting to bring into a course on the essay something more representative of Emerson's rhetorical poetics, Patrick Madden's Quotidiana, a digital resource and compendium of classical essays, provides digital versions of four essays by Emerson, including "Experience" and "Illusions."

General Reference

As a general reference for further reading and study, both for instructors developing an Emerson curriculum and for students in reading Emerson, Tiffany K. Wayne's *Critical Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work* offers a useful starting point. Along with a bibliography of

primary and secondary sources and a chronology of Emerson's life and times, Wayne offers a brief summary and critical commentary on nearly 140 sermons, lectures, and poems, as well as individual discussion of all the essays published in Emerson's books. Additional entries also provide reference to significant figures and topics associated with Emerson and transcendentalism. To guide course development and critical reading for students beyond summary of Emerson's texts, teachers should consult Wesley T. Mott's *Ralph Waldo Emerson in Context* (2013), which offers thirty-two accessible readings into core concepts and contexts for understanding Emerson's work and thought, produced by leading Emerson scholars. The topics covered include "Europe," "Democracy," "Race," "Publishers," and "Fame," among many others.

Biographical Resources

Emerson: The Mind on Fire (1995), by Robert D. Richardson, Jr., is arguably the most authoritative and engaging intellectual history of Emerson's reading and thinking. Richardson's work is a particularly effective companion for the study of Emerson's texts, an Emersonian reading into Emerson's life of the mind. It remains an invaluable starting point for conceiving of the study of Emerson and also, given Richardson's other biographies (on Thoreau and William James), for thinking through Emerson's intellectual relations and friendships. Ralph L. Rusk's The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1949), Gay Wilson Allen's Waldo Emerson: A Biography (1981), and John McAleer's Ralph Waldo Emerson: Days of Encounter (1984) each provides readers extensive biographical details and are worthy of consultation. For classroom use, however, Lawrence Buell's *Emerson* (2003) is particularly effective in organizing its biographical focus around key elements and critical problems of Emerson's thought and writing (for example, "Emerson as a Philosopher?" and "Emerson as Anti-Mentor"). Buell makes a compelling case for understanding Emerson as a national icon, America's first public intellectual, as well as an author of world literature. Buell's study is useful for the teacher thinking through issues that an upper-level course might engage while also providing a critical discussion of Emerson that is accessible to students at both introductory and advanced levels.

For instructors interested in earlier biographies of Emerson, as well as the construction of the author by his earliest biographers, Robert D. Habich's Building Their Own Waldos: Emerson's First Biographers and the Politics of Life-Writing in the Gilded Age (2011) provides generative insights. Bosco and Myerson's The Emerson Brothers: A Fraternal Biography in Letters (2005) brings a unique approach to biography by way of Emerson's relationship with his brothers. For guidance in placing Emerson's life and work in the larger context of the nineteenth century, and most particularly the extensive lecturing that Emerson pursued across four decades, Albert J. von Frank's An Emerson Chronology is remarkably detailed and useful; a revised and enlarged second edition

of the book (2016; originally published in 1994) is now available. James Elliot Cabot's two-volume A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson also places Emerson's work in chronological context, while providing summaries of many of the lectures that Emerson gave throughout his career. Finally, Joel Myerson and Leslie Perrin Wilson's Picturing Emerson: An Iconography further illuminates Emerson's biography by reproducing all known images of the author created from life.

Critical Reception

Studying the critical reception of Ralph Waldo Emerson is an invaluable aid to instructors preparing a course. The ongoing critical dialogue about one of the most generative writers in literary and cultural history is enormously helpful to students as well.

The bibliography in the first edition of George Willis Cooke's *Ralph Waldo Emerson: His Life*, *Writings*, *and Philosophy* (1881) indicates both the historical and cultural interest in Emerson's reception. Just over one hundred years later, an astonishing volume of critical commentary on Emerson's writing is noted by Robert E. Burkholder and Joel Myerson in *Emerson: An Annotated Secondary Bibliography* (1985) and by Kenneth Walter Cameron in *The Emerson Tertiary Bibliography with Researcher's Index* (1986). The chapter "Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, and Transcendentalism," in *American Literary Scholarship: An Annual* (Habich), provides insights for the continuing Emerson bibliography. The most current and comprehensive bibliography of writings about Emerson (more than 1,500 entries) is available on the Web site of the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society.

Sarah Ann Wider's excellent interpretive overview of the critical reception of Emerson across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *The Critical Reception of Emerson: Unsettling All Things*, begins with an acknowledgment that any account of the critical reception of Emerson (indeed any well-known author) will be "a study in exclusion" (2). Her introductory essay, "Emerson and His Audiences," surveys the early accounts of the critical reception of Emerson, including Bliss Perry's *Emerson Today* (1931), Frederic Ives Carpenter's *Emerson Handbook* (1953), and Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen E. Whicher's *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1978). Instructors and students interested in a more narrowly focused account of the critical reception of Emerson in the nineteenth century will find useful *Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews* (1992), edited by Joel Myerson. In addition, a fascinating compendium of critical perspectives from Emerson's contemporaries is Bosco and Myerson's *Emerson in His Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of His Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Family, Friends, and Associates* (2003).

A useful survey of the critical conversation about Emerson, from his time to the present, can be found in David LaRocca's *Estimating Emerson: An*

Anthology of Criticism from Carlyle to Cavell (2013). For critical assessments of Emerson at the end of the twentieth century, Joel Porte and Saundra Morris's The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson (1999) chronicles the renewed critical appreciation of Emerson since the 1970s. Teachers looking for representative critical approaches may also find useful Joel Myerson's Emerson Centenary Essays (1982), Lawrence Buell's Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays (1993), Wesley T. Mott and Robert E. Burkholder's Emersonian Circles: Essays in Honor of Joel Myerson (1997), and Harold Bloom's Ralph Waldo Emerson (2006). Finally, those interested in Emerson's early reception in the anglophone world beyond the United States may consult William Sowder, Emerson's Impact on the British Isles and Canada (1966) and Emerson's Reviewers and Commentators (1968).

Critical Studies

Emerson helped to define a canon of literature in the United States and the field of American literary and cultural studies, and his writings continue to preoccupy and provoke critics, as well as critical theorists and philosophers, in the ongoing assessment of our literary and cultural heritage.

In this section we have chosen critical studies that will be most useful for teachers and that have proven to be most productive in the ongoing conversation between Emerson and his readers. There is no question that F. O. Matthiessen's American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (1941) was a singular influence in the study of Emerson as a progenitor of the American literary tradition. Subsequent assessments of Emerson's place in the emergence of a distinctive literary tradition in the United States include Stephen E. Whicher's Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1953), Charles Malloy's A Study of Emerson's Major Poems (1973), David T. Porter's Emerson and Literary Change (1978), Barbara L. Packer's Emerson's Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays (1982), and Julie K. Ellison's Emerson's Romantic Style (1984). Each book-length study offers distinct and incisive commentaries on Emerson's writing. Emerson's literary and rhetorical practices are elaborated in David M. Robinson's Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer (1982), Lawrence Rosenwald's Emerson and the Art of the Diary (1988), Wesley T. Mott's "The Strains of Eloquence": Emerson and His Sermons (1989), Susan L. Roberson's Emerson in His Sermons: A Man-Made Self (1995), and Roger Thompson's Emerson and the History of Rhetoric (2017). Other critical studies have considered Emerson's use of language, including David LaRocca's Emerson's English Traits and the Natural History of Metaphor (2013), as well as more broadly Emerson's contribution to the development of

literary language and culture in the United States, notably Richard Poirier's *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (1987).

The critical conversation about Emerson has, at least since Matthiessen, been concerned with Emerson's social, cultural, political, and philosophical significance. The essays in Branka Arsić and Cary Wolfe's The Other Emerson (2010) provide an illuminating introduction to reading Emerson on subjectivity, politics, and philosophy. Instructors interested in the literary and political resonances of Emerson's approach to the self should consider Quentin Anderson's assessment in The Imperial Self: An Essay in American Literary and Cultural History (1971), as well as the later critiques of Emerson's individualism. These critiques include David Marr's American Worlds since Emerson (1988) and Christopher Newfield's The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America (1996). In contrast, a generative elaboration of the cultural resource of democratic individualism—and of Emerson's contribution to the development of American political philosophy—is available in two studies by the political theorist George Kateb: The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture (1992) and Emerson and Self-Reliance (1995; reprinted with new preface and introduction 2002). The history of the critical debate over Emersonian individualism is the subject of Charles E. Mitchell's book-length study, Individualism and Its Discontents: Appropriations of Emerson, 1880–1950 (1997), and a detailed study of the theory and practice of liberal culture in Emerson's thinking is Neal Dolan's Emerson's Liberalism (2009).

Emerson's political and ethical orientation is explored in Len Gougeon's Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform (1990). Gougeon offers a corrective to earlier readings by turning to the materials that have become available in the new editions of Emerson's journals, notebooks, and early lectures. Readers interested in Emerson the social reformer will also find useful Eduardo Cadava's Emerson and the Climates of History (1997), Albert J. von Frank's The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston (1998), and The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform (2001), edited by T. Gregory Garvey. Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk's A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson (2011) usefully gathers into one volume critical discussion of Emerson's politics.

Intellectual and Critical Contexts

There is no more reliable and rewarding resource for understanding Emerson's intellectual and critical contexts than the historical and textual introductions to each volume of *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1971–2013). The extended historical essays situate the primary documents included in each of

the volumes among the biographical, social, and political events of nineteenth-century America and as such provide instructors with indispensable intellectual and critical contexts for the classroom. The textual introductions familiarize readers with the textual histories and variations that have preoccupied editors and scholars and suggest the pedagogical significance of Emerson's writing process, and textual variations, in the classroom.

Instructors and students interested in the relationship between Emerson and transcendentalism will find an enormous range of useful critical commentary and analysis. The most indispensable resources include Joel Myerson, Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, and Laura Dassow Walls's *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism* (2010) and the extended discussion of the historical contexts that inform Emerson's work in Myerson's *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson* (2000).

Emerson is concerned with fundamental philosophical questions. It is therefore unsurprising that philosophers since William James and George Santayana have been engaged with Emerson's thinking. One of Emerson's most rigorous, sympathetic, and creative readers, Stanley Cavell, offers extended readings of Emerson's philosophical contributions in, among other writings, Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism (1990) and Emerson's Transcendental Etudes (2003). In addition, Branka Arsić discusses Emerson's emphasis on change and transformation in On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson (2010). Literary and cultural historians have also explored Emerson's philosophical orientation and influence in American intellectual history. These studies include Cornel West's *The American Evasion of Philosophy:* A Genealogy of Pragmatism (1989), Richard Poirier's Poetry and Pragmatism (1992), and Jonathan Levin's The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, and American Literary Modernism (1999). More specialized studies of Emerson and philosophy are useful as well, including David Van Leer, Emerson's Epistemology: The Argument of the Essays (1986); John Michael, Emerson and Skepticism: The Cipher of the World (1988); David Jacobson, Emerson's Pragmatic Vision: The Dance of the Eye (1993); David M. Robinson's Emerson and the Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and Ethical Purpose in the Later Work (1993), which is a particularly valuable guide to Emerson's neglected later work; and Gustaaf Van Cromphout's Emerson's Ethics (1999).

Instructors and students interested in learning more about Emerson and nature, natural history, and science should consult Laura Dassow Walls's *Emerson's Life in Science: The Culture of Truth* (2003). Additional study of Emerson's engagement with natural history, and the fascination with the aims and methods of natural science that Emerson cultivated during his visit to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, include Lee Rust Brown's *The Emerson Museum: Practical Romanticism and the Pursuit of the Whole* (1997). Earlier studies of Emerson's idea of nature include Sherman Paul's *Emerson's Angle of Vision: Man and Nature in American Experience* (1952) and the collection of essays *Emerson's Emerson's*

Nature: Origin, Growth, Meaning (1969), edited by Merton M. Sealts, Jr., and Alfred R. Ferguson.

A welcome context for the critical evaluation of Emerson has grown from a global perspective on his literary and cultural work. Teachers and students interested in Emerson's transatlantic exchanges will benefit from A Power to Translate the World: New Essays on Emerson and International Culture (2015), edited by David LaRocca and Ricardo Miguel-Alfonso—a compelling collection of readings, in a wide range of geographical and cultural contexts, that elaborates the trajectories of Emersonian thinking among non-American writers and intellectuals. Readers may also consult Emerson for the Twenty-First Century: Global Perspectives on an American Icon (2010), edited by Barry Tharaud; Emerson's Transatlantic Romanticism (2012), by David Greenham; and Transatlantic Transcendentalism: Coleridge, Emerson, and Nature (2013), by Samantha C. Harvey. Emerson's cultural affiliations and literary influences beyond the United States may be further explored in Daniel Koch's Ralph Waldo Emerson in Europe: Class, Race, and Revolution in the Making of an American Thinker (2012) and The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle (1964), edited by Joseph Slater.

Digital Resources

Instructors and students of Emerson will find a range of primary material and secondary works on the Web. However, the varying quality of Web-based materials and accuracy of digital editions necessitate cautious use. Although there is as yet no comprehensive electronic research and teaching resource dedicated to Emerson on the order of *The Walt Whitman Archive*, sites developed by the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society and digital portals at several libraries and educational institutions provide access to an electronic Emerson that can supplement the study of his texts and contexts. We include here a selection of available Web sites, digital portals, and digital editions that teachers should find to be both productive and appropriate for use with students.

The Centenary Edition of Emerson's Complete Works (1903–04) is available in digital format at The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson Web site, edited by Jim Manley, as well as at the University of Michigan Library (The Complete Works), where a variety of word searches can be conducted. Project Gutenberg provides access to digital editions of works by Emerson on its Emerson author page ("Books by Emerson"), and an edition of Representative Men has been digitized by the University of Virginia American Studies Program (Representative Men). Instructors and students interested in a searchable, digital version of Emerson's early poetry can consult the American Verse Project in the University of

Michigan Humanities Text Initiative (American Verse). Eugene F. Irey's concordance to the Centenary Edition of Emerson's Complete Works is available through the Concord Free Public Library Web site. And nine manuscript items are accessible through Lehigh University's I Remain: A Digital Archive of Letters, Manuscripts, and Ephemera.

The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society maintains a Web site that, in addition to providing extensive bibliographic references for the study of Emerson, curates a listing of digital resources available for the study of Emerson and his contemporaries ("Related Sites"); a series of drawings, engravings, and photographs of Emerson, following his development from a young man to old age ("Images of Emerson"); and access to *Emerson Society Papers* dating back to the first issue in 1990 ("Emerson Society Papers"). Other Web-based materials for instructors and students include the Emerson materials available at *The Web of American Transcendentalism* ("Ralph Waldo Emerson") and Paul P. Reuben's "Ralph Waldo Emerson" page on his Web site *Perspectives in American Literature*.

There is also an archive of video discussions about Emerson available in C-SPAN's *American Writers* series, including "Emerson and the Examined Life," featuring Robert Pinsky, Richard Geldard, and David M. Robinson. David A. Beardsley's video biography, *Emerson: The Ideal in America*, includes discussions with Robert D. Richardson, Jr., and Sarah Ann Wider, among other scholars. Finally, instructors and students will benefit from the comprehensive entry on Emerson as a philosopher by Russell Goodman in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessible on the Web.

NOTE

¹We would like to acknowledge the numerous editors who contributed to *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*: Alfred R. Ferguson, Robert E. Spiller, Joseph Slater, Douglas Emory Wilson, and Ronald A. Bosco (general editors); Robert E. Burkholder, Jean Ferguson Carr, Joel Myerson, Philip Nicoloff, Barbara L. Packer, Albert J. von Frank, Wallace E. Williams, and Thomas Wortham (editors).

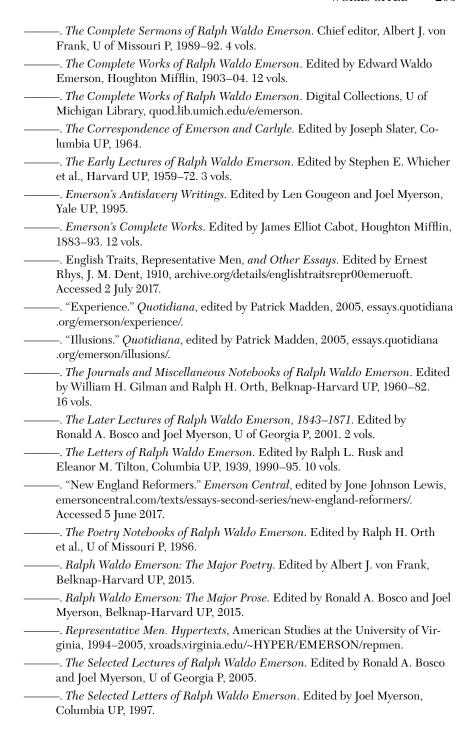
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