

The main contention of Rohler's critical analysis is that Emerson's sermons and lectures share a continuity due to his use of the sermonic form and techniques throughout his career as a lecturer. Rohler first provides a brief overview of Emerson's life. Here he focuses on the importance of Emerson's religious background in his rhetorical development, highlighting specifically his experience as a minister's son and a student at Harvard University's Theological School. Also, Rohler sketches his travels in Europe during which he became friends with Thomas Carlyle, a proponent of German Idealism and influential character in Emerson's life. Later, his association with the New England intellectual community, according to Rohler, marked Emerson's rise as a public figure.

Aside from the initial historical exposition, the remainder of Rohler's critique consists of a rich mixture of technical analysis and historical perspective of Emerson's speaking career. Specifically, he focuses on Emerson's early lectures when he was "at the height of his powers(7)." The post-Civil War years were marked for Emerson by physical and mental decline.

In his second chapter, entitled "Preacher," Rohler effectively captures for his reader the tremendous significance of the sermon form in the years prior to, and during, Emerson's speaking career. At that time "the sermon represented an art form that many educated Americans regarded as the best literature American culture produced"(9). Emerson first emerged as a thinker from this deeply religious setting. Hence, "his sermons are the record of a man struggling to free himself from the conventional pieties of society and to find his own voice" (ibid.).

As well, Rohler emphasizes how the sermon evolved in the hands of Unitarian ministers at that time. Due to their defining Christianity in ethical terms rather than doctrinal propositions, sermons became persuasive calls to moral living. They were
intended to contribute to character formation in the hearer. Unitarian ministers sought to elevate "the soul toward the ideal of moral perfection(13)." Also in this chapter Rohler explicates Emerson's sermons included in this collection. Ultimately, he claims, they are pertinent because "they are at least the root and stalk of his ideas."

Chapter three provides a evolutionary perspective of Emerson's lecturing. Rohler focuses on how his preaching affected his early lecturing, and how he developed the lecture-essay. His style made him a "poet-priest"-- a secular preacher calling his listeners to realize and develop their better selves (29). His presentation of secular themes in sermon form was highly effective in an age greatly saturated by traditional religion.

The fourth chapter contains a brief explication of "The American Scholar" and "The Young American" addresses. Rohler asserts that these mark his move from critical idealism to "a resigned acceptance of life" (46). They represent some of his most successful lectures. Rohler attributes this success to Emerson incorporation the sermonic form into his lecturing. This enabled him to deliver "inspirational orations," rather than dry soliloquies (53).

Chapter five examines Emerson's ceremonial and political speaking. The political address was influential in his career, according to Rohler. Although, Emerson never was entirely comfortable making such speeches. In his mind it "compromised moral integrity"(58). "His belief in the sanctity of the individual conscience and the importance of the self lead him to view organized effort by the mass of men as a futile and self defeating" (ibid.). Finally, Rohler asserts that Emerson lacked interest and success in the political speech "because they require sustained argument than assertion of truth" (61).

Rohler concludes that Emerson was as effective as one person could be at the object he pursued: Whereas "Lincoln wanted to save the Union; Emerson wanted to save its soul"(69). Indeed, Rohler asserts, Emerson exemplified the ideals of critical intelligence and moral development that he prescribed for America.

This critical analysis effectively ties together the mechanical and historical aspects of Emerson's career as a lecturer. Rohler provides a rare perspective of Emerson by succinctly blending his ministerial career and his career as a lecturer and thinker in the secular realm, two spheres of Emerson that are usually bifurcated. This book, however, is geared more toward the study of rhetoric than philosophy. As such it is a useful text, though overpriced. Not a must read, but I find it an accessible resource, perhaps for research or particular interest in the oratorical dimension of Emerson's life and time.

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