

Review Essay.

"A Timely Reminder of Emerson's Perennial Value."

Lawrence Buell, *Emerson*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2003. 397 pages. Ralph Waldo Emerson. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Volume Six: *The Conduct of Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2004. 455 pages

Emerson continues to fascinate, and these volumes help explain why. Moreover, they should stimulate those who have spent a great deal of time reading Emerson as well as those just discovering his depth. I heartily recommend both.

Buell's study has many virtues. It balances nicely thematic and rhetorical concerns. It also avoids undue fascination with Emerson's psyche, as if reading Emerson were an exercise in psychological profiling. I think Buell succeeds because he is aware of how Emerson the cultural figure can overshadow the Emerson we have in the form of essays, lectures, journals, and letters. I think he also succeeds because he heeds his own warning. "When the prophet is famous and, worse still, an inescapable part of one's immediate cultural inheritance, it's exceedingly hard to feel his full vitality in all its original strangeness." (240) Luckily, Buell keeps us in commerce with Emerson's vitality, particularly if we take "original" to name less the ways in which Emerson's texts played back in the day, than in the thoughts they provoke and the tasks they set.

When I survey the shelf, I find Buell's *Emerson* the best book-length reckoning. Those with a deep historicist bent might prefer Richardson's *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (UCAL, 1996), but if you want to think along with or even against Emerson, if you want to witness the Emerson who models active thinking, Buell's discussions are richer, and they will rattle about your brain for a good deal longer than Richardson's source-critical observations. In fact, if paired with the essays collected in Cavell's *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford, 2003), which inject into Buell's synoptic grace some virtuoso inventiveness, both texts could accompany a suitably rich selection of Emerson's writings in a seminar.

Buell's work has other charms. He is an effortless writer, and thus his text is hospitable. It is also

remarkably learned, though its ease might lead you to miss the deep research and reflection that each discussion manifests. Anyone who knows their Emerson, however (and I should stress *their*, given the range of Emerson's available), and anyone who reads Emerson scholarship, will be struck by Buell's breadth and depth, particularly with well trodden essay's like "Self-Reliance" and "Experience."

For those readers aligned with SAAP, a few themes merit special mention. Chapter Five explores Emerson qua philosopher. Whereas Cavell persistently seeks to demonstrate that Emerson works philosophically by way of non-conformist translations of key philosophical terms and phrases, Buell, a literary critic, seems more interested in exploring how Emerson has been philosophically inherited, and he identifies two trajectories to that end, one Pragmatist, the other Nietzschean. The former, according to Buell, ". . . opts for the more citizenly and egalitarian side that honored the capacities of ordinary people and believed intellectuals should constructively engage the issues of the times . . ." (223) The latter prefers ". . . Emerson's schismatic, trouble-making side: his distrust of the social self, his preference of contemplation over civic engagement, his penchant for the obscure and the vatic . . ." (223) Particularly since Buell is clear that one needn't take exclusive sides, his discussion is provocative, raising the question of what Emerson we find ourselves affirming/rejecting and pursuing/ignoring, and why. And he intensifies the issue by reminding both camps that in either case, one has to grapple with Emerson's embrace of some notion of universality, although Buell doesn't do much (or enough, I should say) to unpack what it means when Emerson announces that genius entails taking that which compels one's heart to be true for all. Regardless, the discussion, judicious in tone, should occasion non-polemical reflections on what it means to be Emersonian.

That Buell's text should occasion such a question is perhaps unsurprising given he takes Emerson to be ". . . one of the most unusual authority figures in the history of western culture, the sage as anti-mentor." (292) The question, developed in Chapter Seven, "Emerson as Anti-Mentor," is how should a writer instruct. One could say that Buell helps us ask how Emerson convenes the community that has gathered around and through his texts, and he does so in part by exploring the work of various members, from Thoreau and Whitman to Ralph Waldo Ellison. Moreover, he

does so while reminding us that those who wax emphatically Socratic about their own ignorance or lack of doctrine are at points unbelievable, thus calling us to struggle with our own, perhaps inevitable paternalism, even as we praise those, like Emerson, who opt for provocation over indoctrination.

A third theme concerns Emerson's conception of and participation in reform. Again, Buell is judicious, neither moralizing, i.e. reading to render praise or blame instead of reading to learn something, nor excising Emerson's shortcomings. Of particular interest is Buell's discussion of the ways in which Emerson was not an organic intellectual (language Cornel West draws from Gramsci), but one who found himself compelled to address the crises of the day in ways that seemed to betray his own sense of intellectual piety. This interests because it marks another way in which one can read Emerson in order to come to a pressing question. As Buell puts it: ". . . it was precisely one's dual accountability to independent integrity and to addressing social wrongs that Emerson believed the scholar or intellectual needed to confront and work through somehow." (286) Not that Emerson has a theory about how to square both accounts. How could he? Rather, the struggle itself instructs, and in a provocative manner, which is to say, it both stirs thought and directs us to points where we might resolve the matter for ourselves, for example, before a class of first-year students, in a community council meeting, or while co-writing advocacy statements for a voter pamphlet.

Published in the thick of Emerson's activist efforts, *The Conduct of Life* (1860) seems distant from questions of slavery and civil war. Now, some have suggested that this distance is only apparent. Perhaps, but on the whole, I find *Conduct of Life* mostly continuing to reflect upon the selfsame issues that orient the earlier essays and Emerson's lyceum lectures, and I find nothing remarkable about this given that Emerson never thought reflection should limit itself to the issues of the day.

Surveyed as a series, the collection concerns how we can convert our condition into lives of power, wealth, self-cultivation, worship, and/or beauty, and it suggests that a consummated life must partake in all of the above, though some ends clearly should trump, even direct the pursuit of others. More than its predecessors, however, it

stresses, particularly in its initial and concluding chapters, "Fate" and "Illusion," as well as the unjustly neglected "Considerations by the Way," that our condition is inextricably bound to non-self forces, and mostly beyond our control and knowledge. For some, this marks the emergence of a more pragmatic (as opposed to idealistic) Emerson, whereas others see here the death of an earlier optimism. Both claims are overstated, I think, particularly the latter, which is probably just wrong. But I do think *The Conduct of Life* concludes, more strongly than before, that the key to the up building of humanity lies with learning how to conduct life as various metals, with varying success, conduct electricity, and that merits emphasis given the number of folk who still think that Emerson exemplifies liberalism's fascination with the illusion of willful self-legislation.

Because this edition of *The Conduct of Life* belongs to Harvard's *Collected Works* series, it comes with extensive scholarly apparatuses, including a historical introduction by Barbara Packer and a textual introduction by Douglass Wilson, both of which will make all but the most thorough of scholars feel amateurish. I also appreciate the decision to number paragraph's given that Emerson is the kind of writer for whom placement within a whole can prove significant. I note these details because, along with the first-rate binding, they help explain the text's stiff price tag, \$85, something that can't be said about all scholarly reissues.

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Book reviews.

Animal Pragmatism: Rethinking Human-Nonhuman Relationships, edited by Erin McKeena and Andrew Light, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 256pp ISBN: 0253344220 (hardcover), ISBN: 0253216931 (pbk)

In keeping with the tradition of extending pragmatist philosophy into areas of life that pragmatist philosophers had hitherto neglected in their scholarship, a trend marked by the broadening of pragmatism's philosophical horizons to