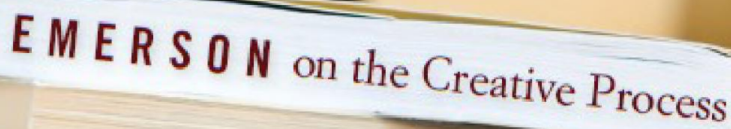
First We Read Then We Write



Robert D. Richardson

author of *William James* and *Emerson*

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EMERSON ON THE CREATIVE PROCESS

By Robert D. Richardson

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FIRST WE READ, THEN WE WRITE

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Introduction

The first sentence of Ralph Waldo Emerson's that reached me still jolts me every time I run into it. "Meek young men," he wrote in "The American Scholar," "grow up in libraries believing it their duty to accept the views which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote those books."

Writing was the central passion of Emerson's life. He considered himself a poet; he wrote what is arguably the best piece ever written on expressionism in literature—an essay called "The Poet"; he wrote about writers—Goethe, Shakespeare, Montaigne and he talked and wrote, especially in his journals, about the art and the craft of writing. But he never wrote an essay on writing.

One reason he never did may have been that he had impossible, unreachable ambitions as a writer himself. At age twenty-one he turned uncertainly to graduate study in divinity. He found himself longing for the open horizons and welcoming fields of endeavor enjoyed by earlier generations, and longing for a time when entering contestants

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"were never troubled with libraries of names and dates." Like many a beginning grad student, he felt "life is wasted in the necessary preparation of finding what is the true way, and we die just as we enter it." Graduate study in divinity in 1824, even for a Unitarian, meant almost entirely Bible study; by July, Emerson was reading Nathaniel Lardner's *History of the Apostles and Evangelists* and studying the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament. Proverbs is not a gospel, and it is not a great narrative like Genesis. It is a very minor book, though it does have a prophetic voice and it sits near Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, and Isaiah in the canon. Emerson's heart rose at the prospect of the passive study of scripture. It was his ambition not to annotate but to *write* one of "those books which collect and embody the wisdom of their times." Emerson looked on Solomon as a fellow writer, someone to be imitated, not just venerated. The young Emerson singled out in his journal the proverbs of Solomon, and Bacon's and Montaigne's essays, and declared, "I should like to add another volume to this valuable work." Preposterous as this must appear to the orthodox Christian, it made plain sense to Emerson. But, we say incredulously, what if it was God who was speaking through Solomon? Well, perhaps he would speak through Emerson also.

It was an aspiration he would claim at age twenty-one only in his private journal, but which he would reclaim, albeit collectively, in the last paragraph of the final essay in his 1850 book *Representative Men* almost thirty years later. "We too must write Bibles," he writes at the end of his essay on Goethe. His ambition then, from the start, was as phenomenal as it was unwavering.

We may debate his success, but as his young friend Henry Thoreau noted, "in the long run men hit only what they aim

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at." Emerson also knew, as Epictetus knew, that "all things have two handles. Beware of the wrong one." And the Proverbs of Solomon are themselves darkly eloquent about taking the wrong path:

I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding:
And, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down.
Then I saw, and considered it well: I looked upon it, and received instruction.
Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep:
So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man. (PROVERBS 24:30–34)

Emerson's immodest—almost indecent—ambition seems both too high and too abstract to be real, or to be believed; but there was always another side to the man, a side where both his feet are planted in everyday reality, a side of him that often sounds overwhelmed, sometimes desperate, but always determined. A person, he wrote, "must do the work with that faculty he has now. But that faculty is the accumulation of past days. No rival can rival backwards. What you have learned and done is safe and fruitful. Work and learn in evil days, in insulted days, in days of debt and depression and calamity. Fight best in the shade of the cloud of arrows."

It is encouraging to learn that writing was often a desperate struggle for Emerson. He came early to the knowledge that every day is the Day of Creation as well as the Day of Judgment. At day's end he never felt he had done his best,

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never felt he had achieved adequate expression. His best poem, "Days," expresses his sense of the accusing sufficiency of every single day and his chagrined feeling that he was not making the best use of his time, that he was claiming the wrong gifts, working the wrong side of the street, and that every day shut down for him on a night of failure.

> Daughters of Time, the hypocritic Days,
> Muffled and dumb like barefoot dervishes,
> And marching single in an endless file,
> Bring diadems and fagots in their hands.
> To each they offer gifts after his will,
> Bread, kingdoms, stars, and sky that holds them all.
> I, in my pleached garden, watched the pomp,
> Forgot my morning wishes, hastily
> Took a few herbs and apples, and the Day
> Turned and departed silent. I, too late,
> Under her solemn fillet saw the scorn.

Out of his own repeated failures—from which, however, he arose each morning ready to try again—Emerson carved sentences of useful, practical advice, mostly for himself, one gathers, but fit for anyone to put up over a writing desk or write on the flyleaf of a new notebook. Emerson's preferred unit of composition is the sentence, not the paragraph and certainly not the essay. He wrote some of the best sentences in English; a surprising number are about writing good sentences.

The first rule of writing is not to omit the thing you meant to say.

Good writing and brilliant conversation are perpetual allegories.

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All writing should be selection in order to drop every dead word.
The thing set down in words is not therefore affirmed. It must affirm itself or no forms of grammar and no verisimilitude can give evidence; and no array of arguments.
Contagion, yeast, "emptins" [yeasty lees of beer or cider], anything to convey fermentation, import fermentation, induce fermentation into a quiescent mass, inspiration, by virtue or vice, by friend or fiend, angels or "gin."
All that can be thought can be written.

Perhaps this last was true in a general way, but how well could the actual Emerson write what he thought? Always he held up his doings—his writing and his life—to the great standard, that is, to nature. "When I look at the sweeping sleet amid the pinewoods, my sentences look very contemptible." But if his writing always had one foot planted in nature, the other foot rested, if somewhat lightly, on his wide and eager reading.

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Reading

"There is then creative reading as well as creative writing," Emerson says in "The American Scholar." "First we eat, then we beget; first we read, then we write." Reading is creative for Emerson; it is also active. In "History" he insists that "the student is to read history actively and not passively; to esteem his own life the text, and books the commentary." All Emerson's comments about reading aim to strengthen the authority of readers (and writers) of books, and to weaken or lighten the authority of books themselves. In an unpublished late essay called "Subjectiveness," he put it with compressed simplicity. While you are reading, he said, "you are the book's book."

His best comments on reading are about its limits and dangers. He was as suspicious of reading as he was of traveling. Escapist reading was, he thought, a fool's paradise. He liked Hobbes for saying, "if I had read as much as other men I should be as ignorant." He especially admired Montaigne, who had learned not to overvalue books. "If I am a man of some reading, I am a man of no retention," Montaigne wrote cheerfully. "I do not bite my nails about the difficulties I meet with in my reading. . . . I do nothing without gaiety. . . . My sight is confounded and dissipated by poring."

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Emerson's critique of reading makes sense, however, only if we understand that he himself was a prodigious and inveterate reader, a man in love with and addicted to books. He seems to have read everything. He habitually read all the British magazines, all the American ones, and all the new books as they came out. Besides the predictable reading in the Greek and Roman classics, in the history and literature of England, France, and Germany, and in the Judeo-Christian tradition, he read the literature and scriptures of India, China, and Persia. He studied Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, and Islam. He read books on Russia, on the South Seas, on agriculture and fruit trees, on painting and music. He read novels, poems, plays, and biographies. He read newspapers, travel books, and government reports.

He generally took more books out of the library than he was able to read before they were due back. His charging records at the Boston Athenaeum, the Harvard College Library, and the Boston Society Library are not so much a measure of his intake as of his appetite. He glanced at thousands of books. He read carefully many hundreds that caught his attention. He returned over and over to a favorite few, including Montaigne, Plutarch, Plato, Plotinus, Goethe, de Stael, and Wordsworth.

Emerson once noted that Coleridge had identified four classes of readers: the hourglass, the sponge, the jelly-bag, and the Golconda. The hourglass gives back everything it takes in, unchanged. The sponge gives back everything it takes in, only a little dirtier. The jelly-bag squeezes out the valuable and keeps the worthless, while the Golconda runs everything through a sieve, keeping only the nuggets. Emerson was the Golconda reader par excellence, or what American miners

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call a "high-grader"—a person who goes through a mine and pockets only the richest lumps of ore.

Reading was a physical necessity for Emerson. "I do not feel as if my day had substance in it, if I have read nothing," he once wrote a friend. "I expect a man to be a great reader," he wrote on another occasion, "or in proportion to the spontaneous power, should be the assimilating power." He knew at first hand the power a book can have. "Many times the reading of a book has made the fortune of the reader,—has decided his way of life. The reading of voyages and travels has waked a boy's ambition and curiosity and made him a sailor and an explorer of new countries all his life, a powerful merchant, a good soldier, a pure patriot, or a successful student of science." Of the books which had moved him personally he could write with open gratitude and a clear sense of feeling transported. Of Montaigne's *Essays* he said: "It seemed to me as if I had written the book myself in some former life. . . . No book before or since was ever so much to me as that." When he sent his friend Sam Ward a copy of Augustine's *Confessions*, he wrote:

> I push the little antiquity toward you merely out of gratitude to some golden words I read in it last summer. What better oblation could I offer to the Saint than the opportunity of a new proselyte? But do not read. Why read this or any book? It is a foolish conformity and does well for dead people. It happens to us once or twice in a lifetime to be drunk with some book which probably has some extraordinary relative power to intoxicate *us* and none other; and having exhausted that cup of enchantment we go groping in libraries all our years afterwards in the hope of being in Paradise again.

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Considering that Emerson was a confirmed and habitual reader, he sometimes seems to protest too much. "It is taking a great liberty with a man to offer to lend him a book," he once noted. "Each of the books I read invades me, displaces me." Often there is a comic note to his self-admonitions. After reading a book about German literature by Wolfgang Menzel, he wrote: "I surprised you, O Waldo Emerson, yesterday eve, hurrying up one page and down another of a little book of some Menzel, panting and straining after the sense of some mob better or worse of German authors. I thought you had known better. Adhere, sit fast, lie low." But only those who are swamped in books—and thus dealing continually with the views of others—have to worry much about guarding their personal integrity. It is precisely the reader of many books who is in danger of losing sight of his own views, and of becoming, as Emerson says, "drugged with books for want of wisdom."

Emerson liked to give the impression that he was an uncommitted and indiscriminate reader. "If a man reads a book because it interests him and reads in all directions for the same reason, his reading is pure and interests me," he once said. "No matter where you begin, read anything for five hours a day and you will soon be knowing." Yet however much he read, there were whole categories of books the mature Emerson would not read. He would not read theology or academic controversy. He wanted original accounts, first-hand experience, personal witness. He would read your poem or your novel, but not your opinion of someone else's poem or novel, let alone your opinion of someone else's opinion. An early lecture records his characteristic and disquieting bluntness on this subject: "A vast number of books are written in quiet imitation of the old civil, ecclesiastical and

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literary history; of these we need take no account. They are written by the dead to be read by the dead."

Many books acquired only a temporary hold on him. "How many centers have we fondly found, which proved soon to be circumferential points! How many conversations on books seemed epochs, at the moment, which we have now actually forgotten." He never used his reading as an anodyne. He fretted if he wasn't getting something all the time. "We are too civil to books," he complained. "For a few golden sentences we will turn over and actually read a volume of 4 or 5 hundred pages."

The most persistent problem Emerson had with books was that they exerted too great, not too little, an influence on him. Books were a major part of the baggage he carried in what he once called "the knapsack of custom." "The public necessarily picks out for the emulation of the young the Oberlins, the Wesleys, Dr. Lowell and Dr. Ware. But with worst effect. All this excellence beforehand kills their own. They ought to come out to their work ignorant that ever another had wrought. Imitation cannot go above its model."

As much as Emerson recognized the claims of the classics ("It is always an economy of time to read old books"), he opposed the passive ingestion and approval of canonical texts just because they were famous. "If Homer is that man he is taken for, he has not yet done his office when he has educated the learned of Europe for a thousand years. He is now to approve himself a master of delight to me also. If he cannot do that, all his fame shall avail him nothing."

Emerson did not read in order to pick up the common coin of his culture or class. He did not even read with the Arnoldian hope of learning the best that had been thought and said. Emerson read for personal gain, for personal use.

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"A man must teach himself," he observed, "because he can only read according to his state." Like Stephen Dedalus, Emerson retained "nothing of all he read save that which seemed to him an echo or a prophecy of his own state." He put it in other ways: "For only that book can we read which relates to me something that is already in my mind." He had a full awareness of this in his earliest lectures. "What can we see, read, acquire but what we are?" he asked in "Ethics" in 1835. "You have seen a skilful man reading Plutarch. Well, that author is a thousand things to a thousand persons. Take that book into your own two hands and read your eyes out. You will never find there what the other finds. . . . Or do you think you can possibly hear and bring away from any conversation more than is already in your mind born or ready to be born?" Emerson read explicitly the way we all read implicitly. "Insist that the Schelling, Schleiermacher, Ackerman or whoever propounds to you a mythology, is only a more or less awkward translation of entities in your own consciousness. . . . If Spinoza cannot [render back to you your own consciousness], perhaps Kant will." This is not, of course, to deny new thoughts or the original contributions of others. It is just an assertion that we can follow an argument and recognize its strength only by its congruence with our own mental processes.

When we read actively, we can profit from anything. "A good head cannot read amiss," said Emerson. "In every book he finds passages which seem confidences or asides, hidden from all else, and unmistakeably meant for his ear. No book has worth by itself, but by the relation to what you have from many other books, it weighs." It was in this frame of mind that Emerson could claim: "It makes no difference what I read. If it is irrelevant I read it deeper. I read it until it is pertinent to

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me and mine, to nature and to the hour that now passes. A good scholar will find Aristophanes and Hafiz and Rabelais full of American History."

What Emerson claimed for himself, he was ready to extend to others. He was reluctant to speak of *the* meaning of a book, and eager to affirm the idea that there would be as many meanings of a book as it had readers. "Every word we speak is million-faced or convertible to an indefinite number of applications. If it were not so, we could read no book. Your remark would fit only your own case not mine. And Dante who described his circumstance would be unintelligible now. But a thousand readers in a thousand different years shall read his story and find it a picture of their story by making of course a new application of every word." It is precisely this convertibility of words that, far from separating us, makes reading and writing possible in the first place.

Emerson himself read almost entirely in order to feed his writing. "Everything a man knows and does enters into and modifies his expression of himself," he wrote in an early journal. A few years later he commented: "Philosophers must not write history for me. They know too much. I read some Plutarch or even dull Belknap or Williamson and in their dry dead annals I get thoughts which they never put there. . . . Do not they say that the highest joy is the creator's not the receiver's?" He responded enthusiastically to Goethe's frank recognition of the importance of assimilation to the writer. "What is genius," Goethe had said, "but the faculty of seizing and turning to account everything that strikes us?" Goethe insisted that "the greatest genius will never be worth much if he pretends to draw exclusively from his own resources," and that "every one of my writings has been furnished to me by a thousand different persons, a thousand different things."

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Reading and writing were favorite topics for Emerson. In essays, letters, and journals he returns again and again to both subjects. He liked to talk about them, too, as we can see in a series of remarkably unguarded conversations he had between 1865 and 1870 with a young Williams College student named Charles Woodbury. Woodbury listened carefully, took notes, and wrote down much of what Emerson talked about, eventually publishing it as *Talks with Ralph Waldo Emerson* in 1890. Woodbury went on from Williams to become a successful oil merchant in San Francisco. He lived in Oakland and was active in Unitarian circles, even writing the occasional original hymn. That Woodbury was not a writer gives his account a special interest; he seems to have made little effort to clean up Emerson's talk, in which ideas and images just tumble out, and we hear the man himself, sitting in Woodbury's college room, talking books.

> "Reading is closely related to writing. While the mind is plastic there should be care as to its impressions. The new facts should come from nature, fresh, buoyant, inspiring, exact. Later in life, when there is less danger of imitating those traits of expression through which information has been received, facts may be gleaned from a wider field. But now you shall not read these books"—pointing—"Prescott or Bancroft or Motley. Prescott is a thorough man. Bancroft reads enormously, always understands his subject. Motley is painstaking, but too mechanical. So are they all. Their style slays. Neither of them lifts himself off his feet. They have no lilt in them. You noticed the marble we have just seen? You remember that marble is nothing but crystallized limestone? Well, some writers never get out of that limestone condition."

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Emerson told Woodbury to read writers "who are not lazy; who put themselves into contact with the realities. So you learn to look with your eyes too. And do not forget the Persian, Parsee, and Hindoo religious books—the Avesta, Vendidad, and the rest; books of travel too." Emerson gave Woodbury lots of names of authors and titles. He recommended Bacon and Berkeley, Sharon Turner and Plutarch. "And there is Darwin! I am glad to see him here." But where Emerson really came alive was when he talked bluntly and forcefully about what *not* to read. "Avoid all second-hand borrowing books—'Collections of———,' 'Beauties of———,' etc. I see you have some on your shelves. I would burn them. No one can select the beautiful passages of another for you. It is beautiful for him—well! Another thought, wedding your aspirations, will be the thing of beauty for you. Do your own quarrying."

"Did you ever think about the logic of stimulus?" Emerson asked Woodbury. "There is a great secret in knowing what to keep out of the mind as well as what to put in." Emerson used newspapers as an example. He thought no one should neglect them. "But have little to do with them. Learn to get *their* best too, without their getting yours. Do not read when the mind is creative. And do not read thoroughly, column by column. Remember they are made for everybody, and don't try to get what isn't meant for you." Emerson's advice to Woodbury is not empty exhortation. He is describing his own reading habits. "Reading long at one time anything, no matter how it fascinates, destroys thought as completely as the inflections forced by external causes. Do not permit this. Stop if you find yourself becoming absorbed, at even the first paragraph."

The logic behind Emerson's apparent disparaging of reading is the logic of a person who expects his reading to

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be useful above all. "Do not attempt to be a great reader," Emerson tells Woodbury. "And read for facts and not by the bookful. You must know about ownership in facts. What another sees and tells you is not yours, but his." The reader is to take only what really suits him. Emerson tells Woodbury he ought to "learn to divine books, to *feel* those that you want without wasting much time over them. Remember you must know only the excellent of all that has been presented. But often a chapter is enough. The glance reveals what the gaze obscures." When pressed for details on exactly how to do this, Emerson hesitated a moment, Woodbury says, and then went on: "Well, learn how to tell from the beginning of the chapters and from glimpses of the sentences whether you need to read them entirely through. So turn page after page, keeping your writer's thought before you, but not tarrying with him, until he has brought you the thing you are in search of; then dwell with him, if so be he has what you want. But recollect you only read to start your own team."

Most writers eventually disappear into their texts; many aim to do so. Emerson aimed at the opposite. His faith in texts is a faith only in their carrying capacity. His theory of reading and his theory of writing are both biographical; the text should carry the reader to the writer, and should carry the writer to the reader. Conventional argumentation frowns on ad hominem arguments. For Emerson it is just the other way. All arguments are ad hominem or ad feminam; nothing else matters. When the connection is made between writer and reader, the text dissolves into the connection. The best texts do this over and over.

The awestruck but perceptive young Woodbury observed that it was symbolic that Henry Ward Beecher, the famous orator and preacher, had a huge wheel-shaped desk, at the center

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of which sat Beecher himself. Emerson, by contrast, worked in a rocking chair that he pulled up to the edge of a round writing table. What Emerson knew was that while things are circular ("unit and universe are round") and while every person is his or her own center, no one is the center of the whole world. "Every spirit builds itself a house, and beyond its house a world, and beyond its world a heaven," he says at the end of *Nature*. "Know then, that the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect. What we are, that only can we see." Then he goes on to say, "Build, therefore, your own world." He might just as well have said: "Read and write, therefore, your own world," since creative reading was at last inseparable for him from creative writing. But reading was just the means. The end—the purpose—was writing.

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Keeping a Journal

The mature Emerson would look back on his voluminous journals as his savings bank. The phrase from the world of money seems feeble; it lacks the disastrous felicity—as Kenneth Burke called it—of, say, William James's insistence on the "cash value of an idea," but Emerson's journals served a more vital purpose when he was just starting out. "Keep a journal . . . for the habit of rendering account to yourself of yourself in some rigorous manner and at more certain intervals than mere conversation." What Emerson kept, and what he recommended enthusiastically to others, were what used to be called commonplace books, blank bound volumes in which one writes down vivid images, great descriptions, striking turns of phrase, ideas, high points from one's life and reading—things one wants to remember and hold on to. A commonplace book is not a diary, an appointment calendar, or a record of one's feelings. If your journal consists of the best moments of your life and reading, then rereading it will be like walking a high mountain trail that goes from peak to peak without the intervening descent into the trough of routine. Just reading in such a journal of high points will tighten your strings and raise your pitch.

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