



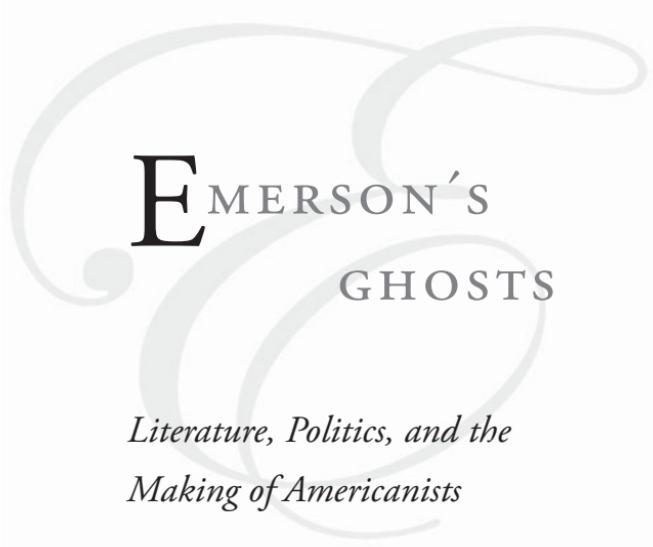
# EMERSON'S GHOSTS

*Literature, Politics, and the Making of Americanists*

RANDALL FULLER

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## PREFACE

My subject is the construction of Ralph Waldo Emerson by some of the most influential American literary critics of the twentieth century. Van Wyck Brooks, F. O. Matthiessen, Perry Miller, and Sacvan Bercovitch have each relied on Emerson to further their critical projects—projects which in turn have reflected their wider social and political engagements with “America.” More broadly considered, this book attempts to provide an institutional history of American literary studies—and its disciplinary cousin, American Studies—throughout the twentieth century and occurring against the sweeping backdrop of national and cultural history.

As a result, I am less concerned with a teleological account of Emerson studies than with the changing models of doing American literary and cultural studies during its brief history. My contention is that Emerson’s vision of the nature and significance of intellectual work, especially as set forth in “The American Scholar,” has provided a fertile challenge to would-be (re)mappers of American literary and cultural history. My study accordingly demonstrates the rich heterogeneity of our critical heritage through a focus on what I take to be its central aspect, the complex involvement and identification with Emerson. It emphasizes certain critical “paradigm-makers” in the belief that close attention to their practice can deepen our understanding of the persistent aspirations and difficulties attending any effort to think through and express American literary history; and its analysis centers on the interaction of personal urgencies,

professional requirements, and cultural politics in an attempt to trace the subterranean and often hidden sources for our obsessive concern with Emerson as a tutelary spirit who promises to connect the literary with the world, poesis with praxis—the long foreground to our beguilingly hopeful and yet deeply vexed efforts to become public intellectuals in the United States.

The first chapter explores the enormous imaginative influence Emerson has exerted over readers, and the second examines Emerson's early cultural construction by critics at the end of the nineteenth century. The next four chapters comprise individual treatments of critics of central importance to American literary history. These four critics had unparalleled influence on the emerging and intersecting fields of American literary scholarship and American Studies; it is not too much to say that without their work both fields would be strikingly different, unrecognizably so. Ranging from Brooks at the beginning of the twentieth century to Bercovitch at its conclusion, each critic's work is situated within personal circumstances, local institutional politics, and finally a broader twentieth-century intellectual and cultural history.

In limiting my focus to those figures who may be said to constitute the very origins and emergence of American literary scholarship and American Studies, I have revealed much of that history to be white, male, and Harvard-connected. My final chapter seeks to acknowledge the most important development in both fields during the past three decades or so: the fact that what was once known as a national literature and its critical reception have become extraordinarily diverse, contested, plural. This means, among other things, that any question involving Emerson for now and for the immediate future must ask to what extent he can be reshaped or even reenergized for a transfigured social and academic context. In the final chapter I treat this question and touch on the extraordinarily rich and diverse work on Emerson that has followed in the wake of the New Americanists before attempting to answer some of the questions raised by that work.

"Friendship," writes Emerson, "like the immortality of the soul, is too good to be believed." This book could not have been written without the warm friendship and generous collegiality of many, many people. In trying to recapture the historical and intellectual contexts of Emerson's most insightful twentieth-century critics, I have benefited especially from discussions with and comments by Henry Abelove, Jonathan Arac, John Ashbery, Sacvan Bercovitch, Peter Carafiol, Stanley Cavell, Wai Chee Dimock, Lyndall Gordon, Sam B. Girgus, Bruce Greenfield, J. C. Levenson, Leo Marx, Edmund S. Morgan, Lawrence Rosenberg, Cushing Strout,

Shira Wolosky, and Rafia Zafar. Donald E. Pease and Daniel T. O'Hara read portions of the manuscript in its early stages, offering invaluable suggestions and comments that not only helped in revising the manuscript but contributed to my thinking in ways that continue to reward. Both exemplify generosity of spirit coupled with intellectual rigor. And the group of colleagues at the 2005 Dartmouth Summer Institute on the Futures of American Studies who responded to an early draft of chapter 6 not only improved that portion, but made this a better book overall. Lawrence Buell offered timely and searching comments that greatly improved the final chapter. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Ken Egan, Chair of the Department of English, colleague and friend, who not only found ways for me to write and present my work, but who has read the manuscript in its various permutations more than once, always improving it with his insights. I am grateful to Charles Taylor, Dean of the College and Vice President of Academic Affairs at Drury University, for financial support that enabled me to conduct research. I wish to thank the staffs at Harvard's Houghton Library, Yale's Beinecke Library, and the Van Pelt Library at the University of Pennsylvania for their unfailing patience and help. My greatest intellectual debt goes to Robert Milder, interlocutor and friend, whose seemingly inexhaustible fund of learned and intelligent suggestions recalled for me, time and again, why Emerson might continue to matter. I wish to thank my parents for their boundless support and encouragement; I am most fortunate to have in-laws who offered the same. Above all, I am grateful to my wife, Julie, for her sympathy and discernment, her infallible sense of what matters most, her incandescent self.

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A slightly different version of chapter 6 appears in “Aesthetics, Politics, Homosexuality: F. O. Matthiessen and the Tragedy of the American Scholar,” *American Literature* (June 2007). Reprinted with permission.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- EL*     *Ralph Waldo Emerson, Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983).
- JMN*   *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman et al. (Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 1960–1982). Cited as *JMN* with volume and page numbers.

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## EMERSON'S GHOSTS

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# CHAPTER I

## The Haunting of American Literature

*Enter GHOST . . .*

*Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio.*

—Hamlet

*The ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life.*

—Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters:  
Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*

### *Emerson and the Critical Imagination*

This book calls attention to the ability of one author, Ralph Waldo Emerson, to exert tremendous imaginative influence over certain readers and critics—to *haunt* them, as it were. I use the term “haunt” advisedly, not only to conjure up Harold Bloom’s description of Emerson as “our ghostly father” and that sense of belatedness Geoffrey H. Hartman evokes as “a haunting, ambiguous sense of living in the aftermath”<sup>1</sup> but also to suggest the always illusionary *literary* experience by which Emerson’s writing has demonstrably effected psychological transformations upon individuals in ways that remain to some extent mysterious and unpredictable.

Emersonian hauntings are the result of energies that cannot be entirely explained by context—although history’s impress etches itself indelibly upon the conditions of his authorial production and reception. Nor can such hauntings be explained entirely by the dense specificity of the text—though, again, Emerson’s richly contrastive language plays a far greater role in the critical engagement it produces than has typically been

acknowledged. Emersonian hauntings are generated, rather, within the volatile transaction between readers and an aesthetic mode that encourages perceptual transformation while remaining multivalent enough to suggest numerous, and often conflicting, transformations. These hauntings achieve their most salient effects by suggesting ways of opposing or critiquing the often disappointing actuality of American modernity—a modernity that sometimes seems relentless in its efforts to colonize or limit thought and action.

Winfried Fluck has persuasively argued that since at least the late eighteenth century, the shared project of the humanities throughout Europe and the United States has been a struggle to countermand the consuming instrumentalism of modernity.<sup>2</sup> I would add the observation that crucial and somewhat distinct aspects of that instrumentalism achieved particular force and a commensurate sense of urgency in the United States from the antebellum period to our present day. Those aspects include (but are by no means limited to) aggressive industrialization, the conflation of laissez-faire capitalism with democracy (with democracy *as* commodity), the shift from production to consumption, the emergence of ever-more encompassing and connective communications technologies, mass media, the Manichean division of the world (at least for a significant portion of the twentieth century) between the United States and the former Soviet Union, and, with the end of that division, a global dispensation that has produced new networks of multinational interests, sectarian conflict, and a more contested notion of the nation-state.

The critics of my study—and the Emerson upon whose example they grounded their work—are of interest in part for the ways in which they criticize and at times imagine opposition to the challenges of modernity manifested in history. I am aware that to invoke the word *opposition* (or its close relatives, *dissent* and *resistance*) is to risk the celebratory gesture—the revolutionary bravado—that passes increasingly for action in the professionalized humanities. To counter this, I hope to show how and why particular acts of cultural and literary criticism might have felt *urgent* at a given time—how this admixture of history and inclination have shaped, among other things, our dynamic understanding of Emerson, so that it often seems, in Stanley Cavell's words, “as if we do not yet know what this man is and what he wants.”<sup>3</sup>

Emerson's originary performance of cultural critique is so influential in part, I argue, because it is *literary*. Various extolled and derided throughout his historical reception as a philosopher, a poet, and a cultural descriptor, Emerson might better be understood as an aesthetic or literary intellectual whose accomplishment is the endless troping of these (and many other) discourses to create what Oliver Wendell Holmes described

as that "Emersonian atmosphere"<sup>4</sup> and what I am here calling a form of haunting.<sup>5</sup> That haunting might be critically situated somewhere between what traditional literary critics once referred to as "influence" and, more recently, subsequent theorists see as Derridean "spectrality,"<sup>6</sup> that sense of writing as capable of overwhelming the interpretations of literary-critical descendants through a forceful imaginative power unleashed in literary turns and conundra, in language that is often at odds with itself. Its effect, broadly speaking, is to excite perceptual habits within a space imagined to exist somewhere between raw, unmediated experience and those tendencies toward conceptualization designed and meant to order such experience. Emerson's particular and robust version of literary performance encourages eccentric reading and fosters sympathetic identification ("I contain multitudes," wrote one of the earliest haunted). It posits a speculative haven in which consciousness may enlarge itself through imaginative solidarity with the author or through adversarial overcoming of self and society. And it accomplishes these tasks in large part through aesthetic surplus: a surcharged dynamism created by the clangorous juxtaposition of words, images, and discourses—a *something else* that evades or extends beyond that which can be categorized. Like the Hamlet who mobilizes Derrida's spectrality with his lament that "time is out of joint," the haunting force of Emerson has centered upon the problem of how best, in times of rapid and disorienting historical change or crisis, to act.

American Scholars in the twentieth century have been keenly susceptible to Emerson's version of aesthetic surplus. Like Hamlet, they have been compelled to engage with a ghostly precursor whose illusionary presence challenges orthodox descriptions of reality while at the same time encouraging them to imagine themselves as potential actors on the stage of human affairs. More specifically, they have felt called upon to follow Emerson's project of realizing American politics and culture by resisting it through a disruptive linguistic movement juxtaposed with brief, shimmering narratives of wholeness and integrity. The good luck as well as the misfortune of these particular scholars has been their sensitivity to Emerson's appeals as well as their urgent sense that such appeals needed conversion into modes of action that would reshape or redirect culture.

I am aware that to speak of Emerson in such terms is to evoke claims on behalf of the aesthetic that until quite recently were suppressed by the past two decades of literary scholarship. It is to hint at the undertheorized significance of authorial intention, the powerful half-life of prior interpretations, and the readerly appeal of authorial biography (Van Wyck Brooks went to Harvard because it was close to Concord, for instance; F. O. Matthiessen regularly took students to Emerson's house). More important, it is to suggest that while the conjunction of idea and image