

JULIE K. ELLISON

# Emerson's Romantic Style



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EMERSON'S  
ROMANTIC  
STYLE



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ROMANTIC  
STYLE

*By Julie Ellison*

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TO MY MOTHER

*Miriam Train Ellison*

AND

IN MEMORY OF MY FATHER

*E. Jerome Ellison*



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## A NOTE ON ABBREVIATIONS AND EDITIONS CITED

References to Emerson's works, journals, and letters are indicated by abbreviated title, volume number, and page number following the quotation. For material that has not yet appeared in the new Harvard editions of the *Journals* and the *Collected Works*, I have used the Centenary Editions. For ease of reading, in citations from the *Journals* and *Miscellaneous Notebooks*, I have omitted Emerson's deletions as indicated by the editors.

- CEC *The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle*. Edited by Joseph Slater. New York: Columbia University Press, 1964.
- CW *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Edited by Robert Spiller, Alfred Ferguson, et al. Cambridge: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1971- .
- EL *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Edited by Stephen Whicher, Robert Spiller, et al. 3 vols. Cambridge: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1960-1972.
- Hale *Ralph Waldo Emerson, together with Two Early Essays of Emerson*. Edward Everett Hale. Boston: Brown & Company, 1899.
- IS *Indian Superstition . . . with A Dissertation on Emerson's Orientalism at Harvard*. Edited by Kenneth Walter Cameron. Hanover, N.H.: Friends of the Dartmouth Library, 1954.
- J *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Edited by Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes. 10 vols. Centenary Edition. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1910-1914.
- JMN *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Edited by William Gillman et al. Cambridge: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1960- .
- L *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Edited by Ralph L. Rusk. 6 vols. New York: Columbia University Press, 1964.
- W *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Edited by Edward

#### NOTE ON ABBREVIATIONS

Waldo Emerson. 12 vols. Centenary Edition. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1903–1904.

YES *Young Emerson Speaks: Unpublished Discourses on Many Subjects*. Edited by Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Jr. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1938.

EMERSON'S  
ROMANTIC  
STYLE



INTRODUCTION

“THE MIND  
GOES ANTAGONIZING ON”

“Literature is now critical. Well analysis may be poetic,” Emerson wrote in an 1838 journal entry. “Is not the sublime felt in an analysis as well as in a creation?” (JMN.VII.303). The purpose of this book is to trace how Emerson came to answer “yes” to this question. His ambivalent affirmative sounds clearly in his pronouncements on the subject of criticism. A more intriguing and ultimately more persuasive answer, however, is the way Emerson’s prose style develops into a poetry of analysis, the way his rhetoric uses criticism in the interests of “the sublime.” Like so many of his Romantic predecessors and contemporaries, Emerson’s fascination with philosophies of perception, interpretation, and language had formal as well as thematic consequences.

Nevertheless, though theory partly generates style, both aspects of Emerson’s prose seem to be the vehicles of more fundamental motives or structures of thought and feeling. “A man’s *style* is his intellectual Voice only in part under his countrol [sic],” Emerson observed. “It has its own proper tone & manner which when he is not thinking of it, it will always assume. He can mimic the voices of others, he can modulate it with the occasion & the passion, but it has its own individual nature” (JMN.III.26). If style is an “intellectual Voice,” its analysis requires a reading of consciousness. Since its “proper tone & manner” persist even when the author “is not thinking of it,” it requires us to interpret the significant absence of self-consciousness. Because that voice perpetually “mimics the voices of others,” a study of style necessarily involves a writer’s response to his tradition. Prose is certainly no less subject to literary influence than poetry, and it is time to develop ways of talking



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about these dynamics concretely, that is, on the level of the sentence and paragraph.<sup>1</sup> And insofar as style modulates "with the occasion," we must take into account generic and historical contexts. For the real importance of understanding the psychological dynamics of Emerson's "intellectual Voice" is that, in them, we discover patterns common to most Romantic philosopher-poets. While a study of his development must to some extent treat Emerson as a unique case, the imaginative configurations eventually produced by that biography are genuinely representative of Romantic nonfiction prose.

Our exploration of the motives of Emerson's development starts with his youthful journals, roughly from 1820 to 1824. These documents exhibit a severe case of literary overinfluence. Emerson would later say, quite accurately, "I have served my apprenticeship of bows & blushes, of fears & references, of excessive admiration" (JMN.IV.278). Awed by the glory of classical and English literature, he expressed his own literary ambitions mimetically. "What we ardently love we learn to imitate," he writes in the well-known "robe of eloquence" passage (JMN.II.239; April 18, 1824). At the same time, he treats his imitations as proof of his inability to match his models. The intensity of his fantasies of identification with great authors of the past is directly proportionate to his contempt for himself as their critic. His gloomy meditations on history and historical awareness express the Romantic sense that self-consciousness is a belated, sentimental condition. His judgments about history, religion, and literature are manifestations of his first vocational crisis, precipitated by the conflict between the dream of an inaccessible eloquence and the habit of criticism. In his late teens and early twenties, he is plagued with uneasiness that leads eventually to the discovery of self-delighting powers.

Stephen Whicher's *Freedom and Fate* was the first coherent account of this transformation, and it remains the most influential. Whicher argues that it was the discovery of "the god within" that decisively turned Emerson from anxious vacillation to exuberant self-confidence. Whicher describes the change in Emerson's stance as tantamount to religious conversion:

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The rock on which he thereafter based his life was the knowledge that the soul of man does not merely, as had long been taught, contain a spark or drop or breath or voice of God; it is God. . . . Before its revelation of the extent of his own proper nature, of the unfailing reservoir of needed strength that lay unsuspected in his own soul, his previously seemingly crushing disabilities evaporated into insignificance. The astonishing surge of pride and confidence that followed . . . is a genuine rebirth.<sup>2</sup>

Conversion is an appropriate figure for the advent of Emerson's powers. But it is a metaphor that leads Whicher into difficulties. By describing Emerson's change of mind as a radical break with earlier doubts, Whicher is left with the problem of explaining why fate, necessity, and skepticism surface in Emerson's works later on. In fact, these anxieties never leave his consciousness for more than a few pages at a time, even in his earliest literary experiments. If we understand the breakthrough of the 1820s as the consequence of—for Emerson—a new way of *interpreting* threats to his imaginative well-being, we can make better sense of the persistence of negativity and the way it forces him continually to rediscover self-reliance. Close readings of Emerson's prose will, I hope, bear out the hypothesis that, while the tone and arrangement of moods of "freedom" and "fate" change somewhat over the course of Emerson's career, the conflict between them is there from the start.

What is it, then, that enables Emerson to stop berating himself for his critical temper and to begin taking pleasure in it? To answer this question, we have to take Emerson's reading and theories of reading seriously. He moves from early frustrations to a liberating conjunction of imagination and analysis by using tendencies in his intellectual culture that enhance the critic's authority over the text he interprets and the scholar's power to shape myth and history retroactively. Emerson interprets his learning, using hermeneutics that release him from the double bind of idolatry and self-deprecation. It begins to occur to him that there are advantages to being born in "an age so late" (JMN.III.20). The models for his "sublime analysis" are the modes of criticism practiced in his day. They

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include Biblical scholarship, particularly the higher criticism, and the related disciplines of comparative religion and mythology; notions of the sublime; and the aesthetics and psychology of irony. As soon as he deploys Romantic criticisms, in a rhetoric directed against sources, the latter cease to be sources and become analogues of his own strategy and, within his works, analogues of each other.

The higher criticism weakened the past and strengthened the reader. Its practitioners, rejecting revelation, changed a few prophetic authors into many anonymous scribes and editors. As distinguished recent studies have shown, comparative methods revealed discrepancies within the Bible while disclosing analogical relationships between the Bible and other epics, myths, and histories.<sup>3</sup> In conjunction with comparative studies of religions, it enabled scholars to view Christianity as one myth among many. This organized cultural history into a system of analogies that only the modern comparatist was in a position to apprehend. Most studies of the literary manifestations of Romantic mythopoetic thought overlook the fact that it proved to be destructive as well as synthetic.<sup>4</sup> Comparisons that broke down the distinctions between the Bible and other works left the critic master of a vast field of interchangeable mythologies. The import of the Bible ceased to be identified with its depictive accuracy, and began to be located in the experience of mediation among mythologies, that is, in the act of reading. Through complex identifications with and displacements of the Bible's human authors, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century interpreters took apart the Bible in order to repossess it. As a rule, their appropriations depended on the reader recognizing an aspect of himself (though usually of transpersonal origin) in the book he was reading.<sup>5</sup> It is not far from this to Emerson's claim that what draws us in others' works is our own alienated majesty. The higher criticism lent itself to being treated by Emerson as a theory of influence. By depriving the world's most influential text of the unitary meaning that proved God's authorship, it demonstrated the power of interpretation to diminish the intimidating aspect of writers and traditions—a power that, of course, brought with it new anxieties.

The Romantic sublime, like the higher criticism, enacts a scene

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of reversal, an antithetical conversion that turns the mind from God or nature to the self—a scene found in virtually every Romantic human science. Emerson appropriates elements of the sublime, as he does of the higher criticism, because of this structure or plot.<sup>6</sup> Romantic theories of the sublime convey a great variety of experiences—the wanderer's emotions in nature or before a ruin, the viewer's reactions to a painting, the reader's feeling for a poem. In every case, the subject feels that he is overwhelmed by the literal force or mass or by the imaginative power of the object. This is followed by an excited feeling of being enlarged and inspired by whatever it is he confronts. The sublime, therefore, is not an attribute of the art work but a psychological phenomenon in the witness who recovers from a debilitating percept. When one has been overwhelmed by a book or a literary tradition, this form of sublimity becomes a crisis of literary influence; the "mathematical sublime" becomes the "hermeneutical sublime."<sup>7</sup> The exhilaration associated with the sublime comes about as we convert disorientation and meaninglessness into evidence of our power over the things that cause these sensations. This brings about a sudden pleasure in self-consciousness that further strengthens the perceiving subject. If it is a reader or critic who discovers his ability to create the meanings of the texts that threaten him, criticism becomes the occasion for sublime emotions and for the disjunctive style that accompanies them. In 1826, Emerson described this moment in a letter to Mary Moody Emerson, whom he always associated with the sublime. He begins modestly, referring to life's "little coincidences," but then his heart leaps up. These events "touch all the springs of wonder." Then "the Mind [stands] forth in alarm with all her faculties, suspicious of a Presence which it behoves her deeply to respect" (L.I.170). The movement from wonder to alarm and suspicion betrays the defensive function of the sublime; the confrontation with authority is suggested by the persistent obligation to "respect" it (though Emerson goes on to remark that he is "touched not more with awe than with curiosity"). The structure of the sublime moment and the rhetoric of "sublime analysis" duplicate the less overt anxiety and recuperation we can trace in the work of a century of Biblical criticism.

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The Romantic sublime and Romantic irony are not usually treated as related phenomena. I think it can be shown that they are structurally, though not affectively, similar, however, and that they form related sequences in many Romantic works.<sup>8</sup> Irony often involves the overcoming or demystification of cultural and social authority. Like the hermeneutical sublime, on these occasions it marks the pleasure of the ego's victory over influence. The mood of irony is quite different from that of sublimity, however. Friedrich Schlegel's "Socratic irony" rescues the ego from external authority but resists the unidirectional resolution of the Kantian sublime, which rises above confusion toward Reason.<sup>9</sup> Schlegel finds pleasure, not in the mind's ascent, but in its appreciation of the "*indissoluble antagonism* between the absolute and the relative" (emphasis added). In both ironic and sublime configurations, the critical reader is suddenly flooded with a sense of his own power. "The will of the poet can tolerate no law above itself," Schlegel declares. But for the ironist, enforcing this law brings self-enjoyment so great that it overflows in "transcendental buffoonery."<sup>10</sup>

Thus, irony turns not only against overpowering external percepts, but against the temptations of the sublime itself. It challenges the aspirations to unity and closure that are often part of the high seriousness of properly sublime moments and exposes the sublime illusion of originality. Conversely, the sublime can save the ironist from the sterility of excessive self-consciousness. Thus irony is an analogue of the sublime, but irony and sublimity are also criticisms of, or reactions to, each other. Irony diminishes anxieties about tradition and authority through the subject's enjoyment of his power to fragment and play with his culture from within, as it were; the sublime similarly gratifies him by allowing him to behold it from above. At times, in Emerson's prose, irony and sublimity accomplish the same end and appear interchangeable. Frequently, however, irony follows sublimity, deflating its pretensions without relinquishing its pleasures. In Emerson's "poetics of prose,"<sup>11</sup> Schlegel's "Witz" appears as "Whim" and as "the Comic," or that double consciousness which exposes "the radical joke of life, and then of literature" (W.VIII.159-61). Emerson intermittently becomes a transcendental buffoon, recommending "humor, fun, mim-

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icry, anecdotes, jokes, ventriloquism" (JMN.VII.265). Just as frequently, though, playful passages intensify into the resonant hyperboles of the sublime. Emerson's irony alternates with his yearning for transcendence and teleology, a tonal emblem of his fluctuation between self-consciousness and surprise.

The long and complex eighteenth-century debate about the origin of language and the related explorations of the properties of poetic language are the basis of Emerson's frequently ironic conceptions of figurative language.<sup>12</sup> From post-Lockean theories of language, he appropriates the fable of an early man who instinctively turned sensible ideas into metaphors for abstract ones. This linguistic primal scene sanctions his own craving for metaphoric proliferation, even though such proliferation invalidates all primal scenes. Words, he writes in "The Poet," are "fossil poetry," preserved pieces of ancient history, and Emerson handles them as irreverently as he does all other forms of history. Words have long since been carried away from their original sites. Our present use of them is quotation out of context—as quotation always is for Emerson. His clusters of metaphor and multiple fables create an image of the past as debris tumbled together in our curricula and in our minds. His figures of speech are motivated by his joy in conversions of meaning rather than by a belief in the intrinsic affinity between a symbol and its referent (despite the almost universal tendency on the part of his commentators to take literally his statements of the latter view). Metaphor, as the trace of the modern mind at play in ancient languages, becomes another version of the anti-authoritarian reader/writer's triumph over the past.

The perspective gained by study of comparative literature and comparative religion begins to organize Emerson's prose. Comparative strategies allow him to perceive the history of civilization as a system of mythologies analogous to each other by virtue of their structural and thematic similarities. When he defines them all as reflections of himself, their equivalence is reinforced. All of Emerson's sources—literature, science, nature, preaching—become similarly interchangeable. Repetition governs the relationship of his essays to each other, as anyone familiar with their predictable way of unfolding knows. One essay may treat history,

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another love, another America, but these subjects are figurative; they are fables that permit the repeated enactment of a single drama. Subject matters are as interchangeable as the languages of different disciplines and traditions. Within each essay, he composes by restating an idea in the metaphors and diction of many idioms. Because repetitive sentences create parallel rather than linear arrangements, the paragraph strikes us as disjunctive. There is no flow of argument or exposition, but rather a series of discrete acts of substitution. Paradoxically, Emerson's mature prose is closer to the discontinuity of the journals than to his early public performances. His first sermons prove him capable of limpid clarity and smooth progressions. Only when he possesses a justification for fragments and surprise do his published works begin to feel like his miscellaneous notebooks. More important than the justification itself is the fact that Emerson now uses theory and style for aggressive purposes. Disjunction enters his works once they are organized by antagonism. From 1832 on, writing is always resistance.

When this new configuration emerges, however, Emerson does not abandon his old attitudes. He does not renounce or forget his daydreams of glory, his paralysis before excessive knowledge, his sense that he lives in an impoverished age. Instead, he now locates these despairing moods in a sequence of emotions that dramatizes both crisis and resolution. Readers of his journals know that statements of anxiety and self-enjoyment, doubt and pride alternate with each other for decades. His essays come to be organized by the repetition of these movements from deprivation to power. Once the strategy of egocentric interpretation is established, it is Emerson's pleasure to reenter the state of crisis that made it necessary. He celebrates his theory of criticism with narcissistic impudence because it has always just rescued him from a regressive susceptibility to great men.

His progression from weakness to strength turns into a recurring cycle. He reexperiences the power of books and teachers over him, and perpetually turns against them as he again enters their fields of force. Even as he dramatizes the antagonistic relationships among influence, analysis, and invention, he shows, by repeatedly moving through them, that these states are contemporaneous. He takes

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more pleasure in the motion that makes them almost simultaneously possible than in the possession of authority:

[we] renew as oft as we can the pleasure the eternal surprize of coming at the last fact as children run up steps to jump down or up a hill to coast down on sleds or run far for one slide or as we . . . go many miles to a . . . place to catch fish and having caught one & learned the whole mystery we still repeat the process for the same result though perhaps the fish are thrown overboard at the last. The merchant plays the same game on Change, the card lover at whist, and what else does the scholar? He knows how the poetry he knows how the novel or the demonstration will affect him no new result but the oldest of all, yet he still craves a new book & bathes himself anew with the plunge at the last. (JMN.VIII. 12-13)

There is an unsolved "mystery" in the most predictable experience. The mystery is that repetition yields the pleasure of "eternal surprize"; the result is known, but not the reason for it. Why does the scholar keep reading? It must be to understand his own compulsion. It is precisely because Emerson feels that his "craving" for books, "the oldest of all" desires, is mysterious that he illuminates for us the cyclical dynamics of criticism. By making our susceptibility to books and our resentment of them phases of a repeated series of gestures, Emerson keeps himself as reader—as well as his readers—in a perpetual state of crisis. This is why "the sublime" is "felt in an analysis as well as in a creation."

Since I have stressed the importance of "antagonism" in the cycle of attitudes that links criticism and power in Emerson's writing, it is worth looking at the passage where we find his assertion that "the mind goes antagonizing on." As his phrasing suggests, aggression is desirable because it keeps the mind "going on." Emerson's will to power takes the form of substitution and repetition, processes that are his theme in "Experience":

How easily, if fate would suffer it, we might keep forever these beautiful limits, and adjust ourselves, once for all, to the per-



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fect calculation of the kingdom of known cause and effect. In the street and in the newspapers, life appears so plain a business that manly resolution and adherence to the multiplication-table through all weathers will insure success. But ah! presently comes a day, or is it only a half-hour, with its angel-whispering,—which discomfits the conclusions of nations and of years! To-morrow again every thing looks real and angular, the habitual standards are reinstated, common sense is as rare as genius,—is the basis of genius, and experience is hands and feet to every enterprise;—and yet, he who should do his business on this understanding would be quickly bankrupt. Power keeps quite another road than the turnpikes of choice and will; namely the subterranean and invisible tunnels and channels of life. It is ridiculous that we are diplomatists, and doctors, and considerate people; there are no dupes like these. Life is a series of surprises, and would not be worth taking or keeping if it were not. God delights to isolate us every day, and hide from us the past and the future. We would look about us, but with grand politeness he draws down before us an impenetrable screen of purest sky, and another behind us of purest sky. “You will not remember,” he seems to say, “and you will not expect.” All good conversation, manners, and action, come from a spontaneity which forgets usages and makes the moment great. Nature hates calculators; her methods are salutory and impulsive. Man lives by pulses; our organic movements are such; and the chemical and ethereal agents are undulatory and alternate; and the mind goes antagonizing on, and never prospers but by fits. We thrive by casualties. Our chief experiences have been casual. The most attractive class of people are those who are powerful obliquely and not by the direct stroke; men of genius, but not yet accredited; one gets the cheer of their light without paying too great a tax. Theirs is the beauty of the bird or the morning light, and not of art. In the thought of genius there is always a surprise; and the moral sentiment is well called “the newness,” for it is never other; as new to the oldest intelligence as to the young child;—“the kingdom that cometh without observation.” In like man-

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ner, for practical success, there must not be too much design. A man will not be observed in doing that which he can do best. There is a certain magic about his properest action which stupifies your powers of observation, so that though it is done before you, you wist not of it. The art of life has a pudency, and will not be exposed. Every man is an impossibility until he is born; everything impossible until we see a success. (W.III.67-69)

This passage shows us the precise function of "antagonism" in Emerson's prose. He celebrates the forces that sabotage existence contained within the "beautiful limits" of "perfect calculation": "Fate," "Power," "God," "Nature," "Life." This list is an example of the disconcerting metaphoric substitutions that are Emerson's response to the daemonic "angel-whispering . . . which discomfits the conclusions of nations and of years!" The mind liberated from "the kingdom of known cause and effect" can deploy serially and analogically all figures for power. The anti-authoritarian motive of Emerson's prose is heard in that rejection of time and "nations." When he puns on casualties later in the passage, the link between aggression and unconsciousness becomes clearer: "We thrive by casualties. Our chief experiences have been casual." Given the contiguity of "antagonizing," I take him to mean that we thrive by inflicting casualties, though in Emerson's writing, such violence is always a recovery from a prior debility. We can only "thrive by casualties," through a kind of deliberately "casual" forgetting that frees us from the inhibitions imposed by memory and "usage." "Power," he continues, keeps to "the subterranean and invisible tunnels and channels of life." Life can be "a series of surprises"—a significant conjunction of surprise and the phenomenon of serial repetition—only because "God" hides "the past and the future": " 'You will not remember,' he seems to say, 'and you will not expect.' "

Genius is only possible when, without self-knowledge or memory, we face "an impenetrable screen of purest sky." Only in this condition of half-willful forgetting can "spontaneity" transform "the moment." In Emerson's idiom, surprise is always aggressive,

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a rebellion against continuity, tradition, and authority. When we forget, we are freed into aggression. Experience breaks up into discrete moments of resistance; "the mind goes antagonizing on, and never prospers but by fits." If discontinuity is the weapon of genius, it is also the strategy that preserves the self-respect of the reader. Because the light of genius pulsates, the onlooker is spared "too much design" or "too great a tax." Emerson here wishes for authors who do not embody the temporal consciousness of tradition that "taxes" the patience of the competitive reader. The wish to evade his own self-consciousness and to avoid the "light" of others' leads to a desire to censor the story of his own development: "A man will not be observed in doing that which he can do best. There is a certain magic about his properest action which stupefies your powers of observation, so that though it is done before you, you wist not of it. The art of life has a pudency, and will not be exposed." The artist "stupefies" his reader in order not to be exposed and thus used by him. Fortunately, Emerson left us all the materials we need to "expose" him, including expressions of his desire to be exposed. His celebrations of ignorance, surprise, antagonism, and discontinuity are signs of his self-knowledge. He knowingly elects a style of apparent unconsciousness in order to free himself from his own respect for tradition. Emerson's literary development consists, therefore, of the movement of ongoing antagonism, the movement from memory to surprise, from causality to casualties, from guilt over the exercise of critical powers to delight in them.

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THE DEVELOPMENTAL  
NARRATIVE