

Emerson: No Rest for the Individual

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In 1840, Ralph Waldo Emerson—former minister of Boston, current Sage of Concord—wears very creaky boots. He’s been lecturing for weeks, months on end. In cramped venues with local townspeople. In airy ones with former presidents. He’s travelled by train, boat and carriage, walking with purpose to those lecterns. All through this time he’s worn his thick leather boots, preparing for the worst weather he’d encounter.

Meanwhile, they squeak and groan through his journeys.

There are just over seventeen million people in the United States now. The country has just laid claim to Antarctica and President Van Buren grapples with a sour economy. In New York City, a game derived from stickball and cricket is becoming more organized and soon the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club will soon be born on a field at 4th Avenue and 27th street.¹ The games are watched by few people and played by a handful of volunteers. New York City has about three hundred thousand people, any of them still nervous from the panic of 1839. Times are tough. For those in retail, manufacturing and especially academia. Despite this, Emerson has established himself as one of the premier speakers in America.² But unlike many professional lecturers of his time, The Sage attracts uneducated people and scholars alike. He’s speaking to farmers and scholars. Lumber jacks and bankers. Anyone with a set of good ears, an open mind

¹ Goldstein, Warren (2009). *Playing for Keeps: A History of Early Baseball*. Cornell University Press. Pg. 11-12.

² W. J. Rorabaugh, Donald T. Critchlow, Paula C. Baker (2004). "*America's promise: a concise history of the United States*". Rowman & Littlefield. p.210.

and the ability to pay admission price. If one of his lectures doesn't strike the necessary chords, he blames *his* words, rather than the aptitude of an audience.³ While each attendee is willing to pay a fee to see him, to hear about his experiences, Emerson articulates spirituality devoid of the dogma inherent in conventional religions. He claims everyone has the potential to reach greatness. It is a rare perspective rich in optimism yet shrouded in a stark realism eminently palatable to this diverse audience.

His features were certainly not attractive for the addressees—at least not in the traditional sense. Tall but gawky, Emerson had a large beak nose and dim grey eyes. He spoke with a steady voice, enunciating during the most unexpected moments, often startling any sleepy or distracted audience member to attention. Even if his boots creaked or his appearance spooked people, he had faith his words would resonate. They did—but it didn't come easy.

In February of 1840 Emerson toiled on his book of essays (to be published in 1841 as *Essays*). The dilemma he faced was a familiar one to all writers—finding the time and energy to write while balancing the expectations and obligations life demands. He sometimes took time allotted for writing and “squandered” it for reading. This gave him opportunities to indulge his intellectual curiosity, albeit also serving as a distraction for any block he experienced during the writing process. After all, Emerson once said writers who read too much exercise a “pusillanimous desertion of our work...gazing after our neighbors.”⁴ He believed a writer who reads more than she writes is in danger of becoming a fragmented and unproductive mess.

³ Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1990). *Selected Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Bantam Classics.

⁴ Emerson, Ralph Waldo (2007). *Spiritual Laws*. Rockville, MD: Arc Manor Publishing.

Although a voracious reader, Emerson had breadth but not depth. A review of his choices shows a smattering of philosophy, religion and education. Because he was a tireless note-keeper, we know his thoughts on many seminal authors, and how he often skimmed texts, owing to the fact he did not want to invest too much time in a writer who bored him because it robbed other interesting authors of his time.⁵ This wasn't a negative trait—it was just a habit that kept him immersed in so many books at so many times. Thus, Emerson was a creative reader and perpetually curious. Even as he lectured through New England, into the Midwest and beyond, Emerson kept his journal close at hand, recording thoughts on books, lectures, events and miscellanea. At one point he read everything he could on Napoleon. He became fascinated—even obsessed—with the ruler. Later, Emerson would laud the famous Frenchman, admiring his ambition and adoring his tendency to thumb his nose at the aristocracy. At one point while reading about him the love-sick Emerson irrationally testifies “...every line Napoleon ever wrote deserves reading.”⁶

While he sometimes worried his reading habits would jeopardize his written output, the copious notes, essays and correspondences of Ralph Waldo Emerson waylay any concern. His lectures in particular display an ability to distill bulky philosophy texts into condensed words and phrases.

But his lectures weren't just platitudes. To his audience—dwelling in a deep political divide of the United States in the 1840s—Emerson's lectures shone a light of unique hope to his listeners. In some talks he expounded philosophical concepts many were unfamiliar with.

⁵ A.W. and Hayford, Harrison Plumstead (1969). *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson Volume VII 1838-1842*. Belknap Press; First American edition.

⁶ Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1947). *Napoleon: Man of the World*. Periodicals Service Co; 1st Edition.

Through his classic schooling he read and quoted ancient Greeks like Thales and Heraclitus while becoming enthralled with the writings of the Lao Tzu. In particular, Emerson appreciated the Taoist cyclical perspective on life, death, reincarnation and the insurmountable power of nature.⁷ He also took the time to break the concepts down to palatable chunks for his listeners, without compromising the core of the message. Moreover, even while he admired and quoted other authors and philosophers, the end of Emerson's lectures were often lists of imperfections of the same men he lauded at the start of the talk, initiating more thought as he closed his discourse.

Ends of Beginnings

By 1840 Ralph Waldo Emerson was an established—though reluctant—celebrity. The widower was now married to Lydia Jackson. He owned a modest house in Concord, Massachusetts on ample land while his *Nature* garnered solid reviews and strong sales. Emerson had a built-in publicity machine, constant book tours, with his regular lecturing—about eighty per year— and as a bonus he thoroughly enjoyed them. Promoting his work mixed business with pleasure. Clearly, he had personal and professional satisfaction, yet by some accounts he was not in the least bit content to rest. In January of 1840 he decided to plunge himself into new creative outputs. One example is the journal *The Dial*, published with some of his transcendentalist friends, including Henry David Thoreau.

The masthead of the nascent journal reads like a who's-who of the intellectual circles of Emerson's day. It includes Margaret Fuller, Thoreau, George Ripley, Bronson Alcott, and

⁷ Emerson, Ralph Waldo and Grossman, Richard, ed. (2007). *The Tao of Emerson: The Wisdom of the Tao Te Ching as Found in the Words of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Modern Library; 1st edition

Theodore Parker, among others.⁸ But Emerson hoped to include not just distinguished writers or scholars. He wanted “good fanatics” whom would expound on the “art of living.”⁹ As Harvard alum, Emerson was well acquainted with the favoritism inherent among elite academic circles. These tendencies towards partiality and prejudice were repugnant to him, against the power of the individual he championed. Just because someone went to a prestigious college didn’t mean he could place himself on a pedestal and ensconce oneself in the safety of an ivory tower. If anything, pure rationalism—steeped in years of professional scholarship—lead to “...narrow-minded, careerist intellectuals, who fail to bridge the gap between themselves and the popular culture of their nation.”¹⁰ Emerson’s friends knew just how adamant he was about this.

During his undergraduate years at Harvard, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. once wrote a fifteen page critical essay on Plato. The essay attempted to carefully dissect various elements of Platonic idealism (some aspects the Transcendentalist would later integrate into their own philosophy) and analyze them one by one. The brash Ivy League undergrad dismissed most of the philosopher’s ideas as “unscientific”. He then passed a copy of the essay on to Emerson—eagerly awaiting the poets’ comments. Emerson merely wrote on the cover page “when you strike at a king, you must kill him.”¹¹ Giants—be them seminal thinkers, artists, politicians or institutions—can be crossed. Often, they should be. But only through the temperance of honest scholarship and the wonder of experience.

⁸ Sullivan, Wilson (1972). *New England Men of Letters*. New York: The Macmillan Company.

⁹ Emerson, Ralph Waldo (2010). *Selected Journals: 1820–1842*. New York: Library of America.

¹⁰ The Political Emerson SG Affeldt - *The Review of Politics*, 2003

¹¹ Larry Martin Roth. “Touched with Fire, Forged in Flame: Holmes and a Different Perspective: Symposium—Mr. Justice Holmes: The Man and His Legacy.” *University of Florida Law Review*, 28 (Winter 1976), 365.

Thoreau—who looked at nature as the ideal teacher—shared Emerson’s convictions. Reminiscing on his days at Harvard, Emerson remarked that the college “...taught all the branches of the important philosophies.” Thoreau—also a distinguished student at the same college— shook his head and stated “...it may teach the branches, but it neglects the roots.”

Unfortunately *The Dial*—eviscerated at the start by many critics and on financial life support—never became popular. It died a slow death. Within the first year of publication the journal had difficulty covering its overhead. None of the editors could help out much in this department. Though Emerson was not wealthy he was comfortable. But he had a family to support. Meanwhile, Alcott had his own financial problems with a school to bankroll. Fuller did the lion’s share of the editorial work, but received little monetary recognition for her efforts. She relied on her savings from teaching to survive on, and her promised annual salary of \$200 was never paid.¹² Other staff members put in hours of work yet didn’t have much in the way of discretionary funds to donate. Years later, the journal would survive in a series of various incarnations, publishing some influential writers during this time, until it finally died in 1929.

Emerson was not deterred by the small readership and negative reception. As a matter of fact, the lukewarm reviews of the journal likely served to embolden his convictions. He continued to write his lectures out by hand and enjoyed working on anything literary. Although the creative aspects of *The Dials*’ editorship were left at some points to Thoreau, Emerson always had a hand in the publication.¹³ During this time, he polished his essays and lectures.

¹² Von Mehren, Joan (1994). *Minerva and the Muse: A Life of Margaret Fuller*. Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts

¹³ Packer, Barbara L. (2007). *The Transcendentalists*. Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press.

Notes from his journals reflect a creator who was never satisfied with his finished product, realizing that all of writing is an evolving—if not frustrating— process.

June and July of 1840 brought a searing drought to the Northeast United States. The 37 year-old Emerson persevered, watching his crops wilt under the oppressive “red hot noon”¹⁴ but also taking the time to read and write in the shade. He honed the essay that would later be published as *Self Reliance*, launching him into international fame with such famous quotes as “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.”

Summer deaths increased throughout the summer of 1840 but Emerson knew that the heat—like everything else in the world—would dissipate and break. He continued to stay productive, writing in his journal, layering the notebook with passages that would become other important essays in his canon. During this point in time he also completed “Circles.” The title might have been inspired by his interest in the Vedas,¹⁵ an ancient Indian philosophy distilled from the Bhagavad Gita—emphasizing the illusory nature of existence and the cyclical nature of our spiritual lives. The work served to express just how endlessly open and unfixed things—important things—are in this world. Emerson notes “...there is no end in nature...every end is a

¹⁴ Emerson, Ralph W. (2006) *The Laws of Nature: Excerpts from the Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. VT: Heron Dance Art Studio

¹⁵ Johnson, GM. (1980). “Emerson's Craft of Revision: The Composition of Essays (1841).” *Studies in the American Renaissance*. Emerson’s journals suggest as he polished his essays he remained rooted in a unique type of mysticism. He was profoundly influenced by the nondualism stressed by the Vedic tradition. Indeed, in his 1841 essay “Over-soul” he says, “We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the animal, the tree, but the whole—of which these are shining parts—is the soul.”

beginning...under every deep a lower deep opens.”¹⁶ There is no permanence in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s world; the only constant is change. But this is not something to fret about. Because unjust laws can—should—be overturned. Wars eventually come to a close with treaties or armistices. Hot weather subsides with a new season. Sleep ends with awakening, and a long day ends with a restful night. The circle of our eye takes in life and eventually closes when we die. And death is merely “pouring the finite into the infinite.”¹⁷

This is the perpetual movement of nature, of the world all of us live in. It surrounds us every day of our lives, yet most of us are oblivious to it. If and only if a person embraces this reality will they start the journey towards happiness. Alas, even happiness can be—usually is—temporary. Pain, both emotional and physical, is a necessary human experience. Denying, avoiding this fact only puts a person “into the power of the evil.” Unfortunately, authentic happiness, earned by hard work, responsibility and service can be mimicked by an easy quick fix. To this end, Emerson notes “...drunkenness, the use of opium and alcohol are the semblance and counterfeit of the oracular genius.”¹⁸

On the topic of recreational drug use, Emerson was both firm and consistent. They riled him inordinately, because people under the influence “ask the aid of wild passions, to ape in some manner these flames and generousities of the heart.”¹⁹ What drink, drugs, and easy living took from people was something they needed: the resolve to work hard and develop individuality.

¹⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), 168

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 170

¹⁸ Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1983). *Essays and Lectures*. New York: Library of America

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 48

Once someone entered a soporific stupor; the mind is not focused on the “here and now” but is fragmented and far-away. This topic had personal significance for Emerson. He knew many influential artists who were under its spell, including one he looked up to, Samuel Taylor Coleridge.²⁰ At one point he takes the habit of the famous Romantic to task, paraphrasing Milton, who said “The lyric poet may drink wine and live generously, but the epic poet, he who shall sing of the gods, and their descent unto men, must drink water out of the wooden bowl.”

²¹Moreover, he was aware of the First Opium War the United Kingdom had embroiled itself in with China.

History, current events, domestic and foreign affairs of the United States was not something that Emerson just wanted to read about. He longed to travel and experience cultures and events. Throughout his necessary travels for those lectures he witnessed the dire conditions many impoverished people languished in, the growing disparity between the haves and have nots and the Dickensian impact of industry on American cities. Emerson believed that "History no longer shall be a dull book. It shall walk incarnate in every just and wise man. You shall not tell me by language and titles a catalogue of the volumes you have read. You shall make me feel what periods you have lived."²²

²⁰ MH Abrams. *The milk of paradise: the effect of opium visions on the works of DeQuincey, Crabbe, Francis Thompson, and Coleridge*. Octagon Press, Limited, 1971.

²¹ Emerson, Ralph Waldo. (2009) *Essays and Lectures: Nature: Addresses and Lectures, Essays: First and Second Series, Representative Men, English Traits, and the Conduct of Life*. New York: Library of America.

²² Allen, Gay Wilson. *Waldo Emerson*. New York: Penguin Books, 1982: 512–514

The Seminole War was an example of just how much an event can impact an individual, even if the person lives many miles away and doesn't share common ancestry. Unfortunately, Emerson lost the opportunity to voice the injustices of this war in his lectures.

The Second Seminole War (Part I)

The Second Seminole War, also known as the Florida War, was—at the time—one of the most expensive engagements ever for the United States, and the U.S. Army was employing new tactics to quell the Native Americans in Florida. Lieutenant William Tecumseh Sherman bribed some of the leaders of the tribes; forged names on treaties and bloodhounds were even used (unsuccessfully) to track the Seminole, who had a strong lay of the land.²³ Saw grass provided great cover for the Indian troops and a sharp, dangerous terrain for U.S. troops to infiltrate.

Deliberately infecting Native Americans with diseases via smallpox infected blankets and handkerchiefs was one strategy entertained by Britain's Commander and Chief of North American during the French and Indian War,²⁴ and it would not have been surprising if it was considered as a potential option by the U.S. military—albeit a last resort—if the Indian Removal Act did not go according to plan. Frequently, however, Native Americans were captured and killed and put on display in efforts to mitigate the morale of the tribes. These gruesome displays seemed to break the resolve of the fighters, even after their victories earned via difficult and daring guerilla warfare tactics.²⁵ The Seminole tribe was dealt a significant blow when tribe

²³ Covington, James W. (1993) *The Seminoles of Florida*. Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida.

²⁴ Ewald, Paul W. *Plague Time: How Stealth Infections Cause Cancer, Heart Disease, and Other Deadly Ailments*. New York: Free, 2000. Print.

²⁵ Mahon, John K. (1967) *History of the Second Seminole War*. Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Press

leader Osceola arrived to a presumed truce negotiation and was captured and arrested by U.S. officials. He later died in prison.

When word came around of the atrocities to Concord, Emerson was appalled. The members Transcendentalism Club shared his outrage; however they did not have the political influence to make a difference in policy. In Nonetheless, Emerson wrote letters to President Harrison as well as Andrew Jackson. He received no response from either. Harrison—who was elected that November—ran as a war hero (following Andrew Jackson’s strategy)²⁶ against the wealthy snob he characterized his opponent, Martin Van Buren as.²⁷ But the President (who would die on April 4th 1841, one month after taking office) was not about to change the course of his domestic policy—regardless of the lack of popularity among writers and poets.

The ends of expanded land for the United States justified Van Buren’s needs for brutality and by 1842 nearly 4000 Seminoles were transported to Indian Territory. President John Tyler made it clear he wanted to expand America’s empire at any and all costs. He believed in “national destiny” and his administration was able to negotiate a treaty with Britain to agree on a Maine-Canada border.²⁸ This served the dual purpose of improving relations with Britain while fracturing neighboring Native American tribes. Tyler knew that application of the Monroe Doctrine depended on a strong fist. Thus, he increased the military budget, adding Navy warships and heavy artillery. He ordered American forts to be built from Iowa to the Pacific,

²⁶ Formisano, Ronald P. "The new political history and the election of 1840," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Spring 1993, Vol. 23 Issue 4, pp 661-82

²⁷ Chambers, William Nisbet. "The Election of 1840" in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., ed.) *History of American Presidential Elections, 1789–1968* (1971) vol 2

²⁸ Chitwood, Oliver Perry (1964) *John Tyler, Champion of the Old South*. Russell & Russell.

while setting his eyes on annexing Texas (events that would subsequently inspire Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*) and Hawaii.

Meanwhile, the war of attrition with the Seminoles brought results for the U.S. claim to Florida. By the end of 1842 only about 300 recalcitrant tribesmen remained in the Everglades.²⁹ The surviving members of the Seminole tribe living in the Everglades share the unique distinction of being the only federally recognized tribe which never relinquished sovereignty or signed a peace treaty with the United States.

After ten years of fighting in the Second Seminole War, the U.S. lost nearly 1600 troops and peace returned briefly to the region. That is, until the Third Seminole War in 1855 whereby the United States government thereby ordered all Indians removed from Florida.³⁰ Interestingly, while Emerson appeared dismayed at the atrocities impugned against the Native Americans and later fought for women rights, his lectures don't mention the Seminole War in the weight it warranted.

In his 1838 famed essay "War" Emerson even goes so far to inexplicably say that war "...is the great beneficiary of self-help..." One can only wonder what he meant by this. Even though he later determines war is "...an epidemic insanity..." this reads more of an afterthought, because there just isn't any excuse for his silence regarding the Second Seminole War. There's the letter he wrote to President Van Buren on April 23rd 1838, detailing the "denial of justice" against the Cherokees via the Indian Removal Act. In this letter he abandons some of his typical

²⁹ Bemrose, John. (2001) *Reminiscences of the Second Seminole War*. FL: University of Tampa Press.

³⁰ Missall, John and Mary Lou Missall. (2004) *The Seminole Wars: America's Longest Indian Conflict*. University Press of Florida.

rhetoric and adopts an angry, direct tone. But—at best—this had the impact of dropping a penny in a well. Because while Emerson wrote this, Cherokee were rounded up and placed in crowded and hastily constructed concentration camps. U.S. Army and state militia, headed by General Scott, removed men, women and children from their homes, usually by gunpoint.³¹ When these tactics became too costly for the U.S. Government, nearly all Indians in the region were transported east of the Mississippi and most died of thirst or sickness in transit.

Unlike many black slaves of the time, the Cherokee were a literate people; with an organized government and efficient education system. Although not many could speak or read English, over half could read and write using the Cherokee alphabet devised by the Cherokee scholar Sequouya in 1821³² (Emerson admired the “fine Indian eloquence”). And just like the Seminole, they valued the very thing Emerson and the Transcendentalists worshipped: nature.

As a matter of fact, both tribes shared a long tradition of respecting the Earth, employing novel farming techniques and minimal carbon footprints. But unlike the cause of abolitionism or the plight of the suffragist, the dilemma of the Seminole didn't seem worthy of Emerson's lecture series. While it doesn't seem likely a lecture from Ralph Waldo Emerson would have blocked a Jacksonian domestic policy rooted in the expansion of the country he lived in, it is perplexing, even inexcusable to notice the dearth of concern for the plight of the Native Americans expressed in his lectures during this time.

A Force of Nature

³¹ Foreman, 290; E. Raymond Evans. (1977) "Fort Marr Blockhouse: The Last Evidence Of America's First Concentration Camps," *Journal of Cherokee Studies* 2(2): 256-262.

³² Fuller, Louis. (1998) *The Removal of the Cherokee Nation: Manifest Destiny or National Dishonor?* FL: Krieger Pub Co

By 1840 the United States was moving full speed ahead with innovative technology. These innovations held promise to connect people, goods and ideas. Excitement spread through the nation as the population experienced the change. Steam proved to be equal parts danger, power and convenience. In Boston, ice was cut from Walden and other ponds, shipped to the American South and even Calcutta. But in the rush to utilize steam power, some people paid the price for lack of preparation. The Steamship *Lexington* used boilers powered by wood. They were converted to coal, without any consideration of safety. Because coal burns hotter and there were no safeguards for heat exchange, sparks ignited a large cargo of cotton and the ship caught afire. The crew panicked and attempted to turn back to shore, but the wooden rudder had burned through. In the chaos, one of the lifeboats full of people was sucked into the wheel of the large ship. The other two fell stern first into the water and sank immediately.

The vessel was still burning when it sank at 3:00 AM on January 14 1840 off the coast of Long Island. 139 passengers died in the frigid waters of the Atlantic.

However, other news brought hope to the horizon. In March the Wilmington and Raleigh Railroad was completed. At 161.5 miles, it was the world's longest railroad.³³ Emerson embraced the various aspects of technology, excited at the prospects for science and technology to bolster American independence and reduce an unhealthy reliance on Europe. He frequently used railroads to transport him from one lecture to another and loved the "scenic" mode of transportation. Yet he also recognized the price nature has to pay for man's arrogance whilst developing these technological marvels.

³³Usselman, Steven. (2002). *Regulating railroad innovation: business, technology, and politics in America, 1840-1920*. UK: Cambridge University Press

Emerson worried that the “clock and compass do us harm by hindering us from astronomy,” and noted “The Greek letters...are already passing under the same sentence and tumbling into the inevitable pit which the creation of new thought opens for all that is old. New arts destroy the old. See the investment of capital in aqueducts, made useless by hydraulics; fortifications, by gunpowder; roads and canals, by railways; sails, by steam; steam by electricity.”³⁴ The circle of change spins in the minds of engineers and conductors. At the same time, Thoreau eerily predicted technology would eventually “...master the user...with emphasis on means rather than ends.”

In later years—during his visit to Paris in 1847—Emerson travelled to the site of the French Revolution. He stood on the site where large barricades had been erected—now only peppered with stumps of old trees. During a mass celebration he questions in his journal if “...the revolution was worth the trees...” In his “Present Age” lecture series in May of 1840, he notes “success depends on the aim, not on the means.” Emerson knew time brought disappointment misfortune to people, good and bad people alike. But he also knew “nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.”³⁵ Unlike his acetic and rustic friend Thoreau, Emerson enjoyed the creature comforts society offered. These include comfortable furniture, softer clothes and efficient stoves to heat his house. But he did so wearily, eschewing materialism, and knew one cannot take these with him when he dies.

The Tracks of a Poet

³⁴ David M. Wyatt. Spelling Time: The Reader in Emerson's "Circles" *American Literature* Vol. 48, No. 2 (May, 1976), pp. 140-151

³⁵ Emerson, Ralph Waldo (2010). *Selected Journals: 1841–1877*. New York: Library of America

Just where did those boots take Ralph Waldo Emerson? Throughout the Northeast, Midwest and Western United States. Into towns transformed by technology. Regions uprooted by slavery. Across the South, into Florida. Into Europe. In, out and back in with his friend Henry David Thoreau. Amidst the tribulations of downtrodden people and through the death of his first wife, Ellen.

On March 29, 1832, they took him into the tomb of his young wife, who had been buried one year and two months earlier. It wasn't a gothic gesture—the young poet just needed to see her. He needed to *experience* the fact she was dead. The sight brought him closure. In 1842 his first and only son Waldo died of scarlet fever and a year after his death he would do the same thing.³⁶

Even then, Emerson had solidified his tenet of nonconformity. For Emerson knew that the person who makes a dent in the universe doesn't waste time looking over his shoulder to see if it pleases people. His calm demeanor persisted through some of the most difficult circumstances life can throw at a person. The slow, painful death of his father from stomach cancer when the young Emerson was just seven. The death of his first born son at age five. The death of his first wife from tuberculosis after less than eighteen months of marriage. A fire that destroyed most of his beloved home. During this last event, Emerson's neighbors gathered to help put out the blaze and salvage his belongings. His large collection of books lay in a soggy pile, hastily tossed out a window. Emerson walked past them, briefly surveyed the contents and

³⁶ Richardson, Robert D. Jr. (1995). *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.

said to Margaret Fuller, whom was attempting to organize the mess, “I see my library under a new aspect. Could you tell me where my good neighbors have flung my boots?”³⁷

So what would have Ralph Waldo Emerson thought of 21st century America?

It is 2012. The population of the world’s only superpower has swelled to over three hundred million people; her fifty states now stretch into the Pacific Ocean and the first African American president of the United States Barack Obama simultaneously grapples with a sour economy while overseeing two foreign conflicts. A hole in the Earth’s ozone layer covers the entire continent of Antarctica—now one of the fastest warming places on the planet.³⁸ Major League Baseball—America’s pastime—has the most attendance of any sports league in the country and incorporates thirty teams, with at least one player earning thirty million dollars annually. Emerson shakes his head and says “a man is usually more careful with his money than he is of his principals.” He reads the *Science Times* and thinks rationalism has become a pandemic. Those modern scientists miss the point with all this fuss on manipulating atoms. One pictures him in the midst of a muggy July afternoon, shuffling into a lectern nestled in a college town somewhere in New England, grateful of the air-conditioning but agitated by the clamor.

After the lecture, he bypasses any schmoozing and winds down in a nearby library. Emerson loves the concept of social media, but is weary of the execution. He still believes—now more than ever— individuals are “encumbered by ponderous machinery”. But at the same time

³⁷ Alcott, Louisa May (1882). *Reminiscences of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Boston: The Youth's Companion, 1882

³⁸ Schiermeier, Quirin (12 August 2009). "Atmospheric science: Fixing the sky". *Nature* (Nature Publishing Group) 460: 792–795.

he appreciates pop culture, particularly the trailblazers. He enjoys Elvis Presley but the Tea Party's antics make him wring his hands. Maybe he is a comic book fan, too, reading them for amusement and satisfaction. Perhaps his favorite is Batman—Emerson loves the stark and savage individualism expressed by the superhero and despises the decadence of the alter-ego Bruce Wayne. He's shaking his head in disbelief while he reads the grim commentary on a recent environmental disaster, those black leather boots still creaking as he adjusts his chair.

In Emerson's day—mid-19th century America—he lectured about the power of the individual, with a particular emphasis on resisting the urge to lose oneself in the power of suggestions of others, be it friends, family or the state. The only truth in the world is found in nature and the experience of the individual. Judging by the immense popularity of his talks across the country, his message was well received. Today—over a century later—his influential essays are considered to express the lynchpin of American philosophy. Emerson once said “we have built carriages but forget how to use our feet.” One can only imagine just how many miles he walked in those creaky boots of his, and if, during his later, golden years, he planned on retiring them—perhaps lecturing on the allure of a comfortable pair of loafers.

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