EMERSON *and* THE DREAM *of* AMERICA

I feel a new heart beating
with the love of the new beauty.
I am ready to die
out of nature, and be born
again into this new yet
unapproachable America . . .

Ralph Waldo Emerson
"Experience"

EMERSON AND THE DREAM OF AMERICA

Finding Our Way to a New and Exceptional Age

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Preface

When Ralph Waldo Emerson set out to write a book entitled *Representative Men,* he chose as topics the philosopher, the mystic, the skeptic, the poet, the man of the world, and the writer. Oddly, he chose the great German scholar Johann Wolfgang von Goethe as his representative writer. With all the great writers of the world to choose from, his selection of Goethe broke the pattern of expectation. The others—Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakespeare, and Napoleon—suited their categories easily enough, but not Goethe, until we read in the essay this sentence about the writer: *"In his eyes, a man is the faculty of reporting, and the universe is the possibility of being reported."* This was certainly Goethe, just as it became Emerson.

The seer of Concord was foremost a writer. He was also a philosopher, a poet, a mystic, something of a skeptic, at least of his own culture, and he has become a man of the world. As the sentence attests, he was indeed "the faculty of reporting" and as a well-traveled lecturer for over thirty years he saw his growing America as "the possibility of being reported."

The American composer Charles Ives, whose *Concord* sonata celebrates the central figures of New England Transcendentalism, made this assessment of Emerson's importance:

> Though a great poet and prophet, he is greater, possibly, as an invader of the unknown—America's deepest explorer of the spiritual immensities, —a seer painting his discoveries in masses and with any color that may lie at hand—cosmic, religious, human, even sensuous; a recorder, freely describing the inevitable struggle in the soul's uprise—perceiving from this inward source alone, that every "ultimate fact is only the first of a new series.

Ideally, this is what a writer does. He or she represents the faculty of reporting as a fundamental way of being in the world and also must see the universe as available to the curious attention and investigation so crucial to important writing. The word "possibility" also attests to the limitless openness offered to the writer's mind by observation and experience. Nothing escapes.

Emerson began his writing career in *Nature* with this conviction: *"Undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable. We must trust the perfection of the creation so far, as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy."*

No modest commentary such as this on Emerson's writing can substitute for personal reading of his own words. This endeavor contains many of those words, some perhaps unfamiliar to even those who consider themselves Emersonians. Hopefully, you the reader will be inspired to settle down in solitude with Emerson the writer, the reporter of what he was to name *"this new yet unapproachable America."*

As an admiring student of their work, I dedicate this book to a great American couple, Robert Richardson and Annie Dillard, both of whom represent the best of American writing. They are the faculty both of reporting the universe as possibility and of revealing an America worthy of our own best thoughts.

Introduction

EMERSON and the Dream of America connects the life and work of Ralph Waldo Emerson to the informing ideas of America's founding. It hopes to show that Emerson was one of our most important founding thinkers and that in contrast to the American Dream, the Dream of America suggests something deeper, more fundamental to both individuals and the nation. It means a founding in which the principles of life, liberty, and human dignity were to be enshrined in law and carried out in practice, where fundamental human rights for all, regardless of race or gender, would finally prevail. It means living in dignity and freedom from oppression. And like our notion of the American Dream it means opportunity, which for most people means open doors, a path to fulfillment of hopes and dreams, and, simply, being given a chance to succeed.

We know, of course, that the Dream of America had to overcome its most severe challenge in the fact of slavery, our national nightmare, which still troubles our sleep as well as our waking lives. That the tragedy of an enslaved people on our shores still lives with us cannot be denied, and that is why Emerson's words still have relevance and credibility. Here, for example, is a passage from his 1862 speech "American Civilization," delivered in Washington, D.C., at the Smithsonian Institution:

> The times put this question: Why cannot the best civilization be extended over the whole country, since the disorder of the less-civilized portion menaces the existence of the country? Is this secular progress we have described, this evolution of man to the highest powers, only to give him sensibility, and not to bring duties with it? Is he not to make his knowledge practical? to stand and to withstand? Is not civilization heroic also? Is it not for action? has it not a will? "There are periods," said Niebuhr, "when something much better than happiness and security of life is attainable." We live in a new and exceptionable age. America is another word for Opportunity. Our whole history appears like a last effort of the Divine Providence in behalf of the human race.

These times, too, put the same questions. It does not take much imagination to translate the Emerson of 1862 to the present circumstances of the nation. In fact, it was in 1985, a generation ago in America, that philosopher Stanley Cavell began a speech in New York with an observation clearly relevant to the America of today:

> This is a most happy occasion for me and I do not wish to mar it by speaking of unhappy things. But I will not belittle it by using it to speak of anything less than what matters most to me as a teacher and a writer and a citizen. One of these matters I share in common with every thinking person on earth, the imagination, or the refusal of imagination, of nuclear war, the most famous issue now before the world. Another matter is, in comparison, one of the most obscure issues in the world, and I share it, at most, with a few other obscure persons, the inability of our American culture to listen to the words, to possess them in common, of one of the founding thinkers of our culture, Ralph Waldo Emerson, an inability which presents itself to me as our refusal to listen to ourselves, to our own best thoughts.

Then a professor at Harvard, Cavell already had done more than anyone to position Emerson as the founder of American philosophy. Now, more than two decades later, as the nation and world watch the

first months and years of a new political era, we are witnessing a sea-change in the collective American mind. Although the election of Barack Obama can be seen as the singular event in this change, it can also be said that his election was the result of a fundamental change already in the wind. Whether or not this shift will truly catch the sails of real change is yet to be seen.

The plea to listen to Emerson comes at another crucial moment in the Dream of America. In the coming months and years, the issue of climate change and environmental reform will present our new leadership with its greatest challenge. Health care reform aside, it will be the issues of alternate energies and climate change, with America as the leader in preventing global catastrophe, that will spell success or failure for America and the planet.

It was Emerson in 1836, when he published *Nature,* who truly signaled a unique perspective for a new nation. Although Emerson's little book influenced very few people when it was first published in that year, it was the germ of an idea that began a process of changing the way Americans thought about the wilderness. Rather than thinking of untamed nature as "the Devil's playground," as the Puritans did, Emerson told us we could find God in His creation and that time spent alone in unspoiled nature could restore our spirits and bring us closer to the source of our being.

When Emerson's friend and disciple, Henry David Thoreau, moved into his cabin at Walden Pond, on a piece of Emerson's land, he began the process of putting into practice what Emerson was teaching. The movement grew, and it was in 1862—in the middle of the Civil War, and the same year that Thoreau died—that President Lincoln signed a bill that for the first time in all the world set aside a large tract of land to preserve it for all the people of America as wilderness forever. It was Yosemite Valley in California.

Less than a decade later, in 1871, Emerson and a group of friends traveled by train to San Francisco just two years after the final spike was driven in the newly completed tracks of the Continental Railroad. He

went by coach and then horseback into Yosemite Valley. When he arrived there, the young John Muir, age thirty-three, heard that the great man was there and hastened to present himself, but he was so intimidated at the prospect of meeting the man who had so inspired him in his devotion to the natural world, that he could not bring himself to approach Emerson. Eventually, the next day, they met and a great friendship was established between the two naturalists.

Here is Muir's account of the occasion:

> When he came into the Valley I heard the hotel people saying with solemn emphasis, "Emerson is here." I was excited as I had never been excited before, and my heart throbbed as if an angel direct from heaven had alighted on the Sierran rocks. But so great was my awe and reverence, I did not dare to go to him or speak to him. I hovered on the outside of the crowd of people that were pressing forward to be introduced to him and shaking hands with him. Then I heard that in three or four days he was going away, and in the course of sheer desperation I wrote him a note and carried it to his hotel telling him that El Capitan and Tissiack demanded him to stay longer.

At the end of the visit with Muir, Emerson's party rode away from the Mariposa grove of great trees and Muir wrote of the moment: "Emerson lingered in the rear . . . and when he reached the top of the ridge, after all the rest of the party were over and out of sight, he turned his horse, took off his hat and waved me a last goodbye."

Emerson had the prescience to appreciate fully the unique character of the American enterprise as it hurtled westward, and to place himself in a position to speak directly to a wider and wider audience. For thirty years, roughly from 1835 to 1865, he lectured throughout America, except the deep South. Early on it was around the Eastern seaboard, but he ventured later in widening circles as the country expanded and small towns grew to cities.

Lecturing was the primary support for himself and his extended family. Despite all the inconveniences of travel in those years, he was

basically on the road every year for six months. He spent the warmer months back home in Concord, preparing for the new lecture season.

Throughout his lectures and teaching, Emerson's primary subject was "the infinitude of the private man," a vision that spoke to the unlimited potential of the human mind in its progress through time. But attached to that potential was always the awareness of limitation in dealing with "the times," of taking action in the world at large. Then as now the question came down to two aspects of daily life: How shall we live and how do we solve the times?

Emerson was intelligent enough to know that the times seem perennially bad, especially as seen through the light-infused prism of an irrepressible idealism. More pragmatic individuals may see the times as an opportunity for personal advancement or, even more negatively, as reason for their personal failures. Passionate reformers respond to the times by advancing causes, offering programs, founding societies, holding conventions, writing books and articles, and making fervent speeches. Their ambition is to effect permanent change for the better, perhaps even to reform human nature in the process. At a minimum, they hope to improve the lives of the less fortunate and promote economic and social justice.

But the change Emerson sought, at least early in his career, comes only sporadically through these interventions. The times may improve through collective action and enlightened policies; but changing the collective mind of a large, dynamic, and diverse culture such as America's does not happen solely through political or social action. Genuine change is more profoundly rooted and is led by unique individuals with unique gifts employing less obvious means.

The title of this book hopes to make the connection between Emerson's vision and what the founders envisioned for the new republic they established. As Americans we are taught to think of our blessed country as the hope of the world. Ours is the grand experiment, a new horizon for humanity. In our recent history, with credibility diminished, moral standing suspect, we find ourselves anxious to find a new, revitalized

place to stand among nations. With a new sense of possibility recently engendered, we dare to hope for genuine renewal. Ours is, given the magnitudes involved, a daunting task.

Emerson knew that being American meant living with a moral imperative. Living elsewhere, Switzerland, for example, where my wife was born, or Canada, say, there is no imperative to defend or fulfill a promise of some grand potential or sacred trust handed down to us by founders. In America, however, we have to live up to the Dream that promises to lead the world to equality, justice, and freedom. We are to be the gleaming city on the hill, destined to show what can take place when the restraints of ruling authority and oppression are thrown off to let the individual be free at last, free at last. America began to fulfill that promise (for a brief shining moment) from World War II through the social progress of the Sixties. But soon enough came Vietnam, Watergate, the glorification of greed, and now, since 9/11, the tragic adventurism in Iraq, and economic irresponsibility on a global scale.

America seemed to have lost its way and the great Dream was replaced by the Grim Reality of superpower geopolitical politics. The mood turned apocalyptic after 9/11 and the growing threat of nuclear proliferation. For a time, even a decade ago, the comments of Stanley Cavell in 1985, with his grave concern about the dangers of nuclear war, seemed overwrought and his wishful thinking that we might actually listen to the words of our Founding Thinker seemed, as he himself put it, too obscure. But now, Cavell's plea on both counts must be taken seriously.

In this book we listen to Emerson as he explains to us what he means by individual self-recovery and moral engagement with one's culture. We listen with the hope that hearing his inspired words will support the notion that fundamental change may indeed come now to America, and that his voice can be a powerful guide to personal and national self-recovery.