

François Brunet et Anne Wicke éd. *L'œuvre en prose de Ralph Waldo Emerson.*

Paris : Armand Colin. 2003. Pp. xviii, 171.

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- 1 Appearing in the bicentennial year of Emerson's birth, in connection with the inclusion of Emerson's work as one of the set texts in the Agrégation, the volume of critical essays edited by François Brunet and Anne Wicke would seem to give official recognition to Emerson's stature as a founding figure in American literature and culture, though the special number of *RFEA* devoted to Emerson in 2002 had already signaled a wide-spread interest in Emerson among French academics. Nevertheless, as noted by Brunet and Wicke in the introduction to their volume, "despite multiple efforts, at different times [to introduce Emerson to French readers], he still remains today an author curiously little-known in France." Some of Emerson's texts were presented in French translation by Émile Montégut as early as 1851, and by 1895 the *Essays* were "bedside reading" for Marcel Proust. Between 1900 and 1930 much of Emerson's work became available in French, but this effort, as the editors inform us, underwent a kind of eclipse until the publication of Maurice Gonnaud's magisterial doctor's thesis in 1964 (*Individu et société dans l'œuvre de Ralph Waldo Emerson: essai de biographie spirituelle*). Still, as the editors note, despite the devoted efforts of many French Americanists, "the work of the 'sage of Concord' remains, in French universities, a body of canonical citations rather than a true field of study." *Emerson's Work in Prose* announces at the outset that while threading one's way through the "impressive labyrinth of Emersonian studies," with all the "complications and contradictions therein revealed," it is important to keep in mind that the central issue to which one constantly returns is "that of the invention of a specifically American language, or simply a language of one's own." Accordingly, Brunet and Wicke insist that their main concern in assembling "this work designed to serve as an introduction to Emerson's oeuvre was to foreground the verbal dimension—textually and

rhetorically—of that oeuvre so as to provoke the French public to read Emerson and not become narrowly circumscribed by his ideas.” I think this is an admirable goal, though it is realized only fitfully in the volume, which actually offers a number of discussions (often quite rich) of concepts and movements—intellectual continuities and discontinuities, philosophical affiliations and problems.

Thus, in the first essay in the collection Yves Carlet traces what he calls the “Transcendental religion” (semantic quotes) from its origins in seventeenth-century Puritanism through the deformations caused by the religious disputes characteristic of Emerson’s own time: “continuities and ruptures” is thus the subtitle of Carlet’s chapter. Carlet notes that modern readings of Emerson have been largely controlled by a “new *doxa*,” founded essentially on the work of Stanley Cavell, “whose gaze is directed more downstream than upstream, toward philosophy rather than religion, toward Wittgenstein and Heidegger more than toward Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards.” For those who follow this line, Carlet argues, Emerson tolled the knell of the oldtime religion and functioned as the mid-wife of a new secular national culture, “or at least one based on the discovery of alternative religious models.” Carlet’s chapter, however, tends to recapitulate the argument of Sacvan Bercovitch’s *Puritan Origins of the American Self*, seeing Emerson as being haunted by the ghost of John Winthrop. My own view is that neither the Cavellian approach nor that of Bercovitch is adequate to the complexities of Emerson’s role in American culture. We must read him in his own terms.

In the second chapter in the collection, “Emerson and the Transcendental Movement,” François Specq rehearses the checkered history of this cultural event in its social, political, and intellectual aspects, and reasonably concludes that Emersonian Transcendentalism had a significant effect on American culture in its own time and retains a certain vitality even in current intellectual debate. Mark Niemeyer (in English) takes us back to “The American Scholar” in an essay entitled “Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Intellectual Declaration of Independence,” then goes back further to place Emerson’s address in the context of Jefferson’s “Declaration.” Anne Wicke (“The America to Come and the Burden of Europe”) weighs the balance of past and future in Emerson’s thinking about his young nation, also invoking John Winthrop’s “City upon a Hill” (loosely) as a model for Emerson’s “optative” view of America and its promise. In an essay usefully adding to current debate among American academics as to Emerson’s role as a public intellectual (“The ‘Sage of Concord’: An Engaged Intellectual?”) Aïssatou Sy-Wonyu argues, convincingly enough, that “it is hazardous to reduce Emerson to the role of a moralistic voice behind which lurks the terrible and bloody intentions of American imperialists”—a position taken recently by John Carlos Rowe. On the contrary she insists that Emerson was “never deaf to the voice of his conscience.” He was the “philosopher of a democracy on the march”—essentially a libertarian and a true idealist.

Other essays in the collection deal with such questions as Emerson and modern capitalist America (“Idealism Tested by Materialism”—Marc Bellot) and Emerson in the heritage of American philosophy that leads (according to Sandra Laugier and Mathias Girel) from Williams James to—of course!—Stanley Cavell: “The invention of the ordinary by Emerson represents the discovery, or the foundation [to appropriate the

play on words of Cavell, ‘finding as founding’], of American thought.” Another essay, Mathieu Duplay’s “Emerson, the Art, the Poet,” moves through Emerson and the Romantic movement (with the help of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean Luc-Nancy) and on to Emerson’s poetry of “utopian America.” Duplay argues, eloquently, that, following the example of The *Eumenides* of Aeschylus, Emerson as the poet of democracy will not allow his fellow Americans to turn away from the only “question that matters, that of the eternal and the beautiful”—which is to say “they will be the citizens of a New World yet to be discovered, an America of the mind that differs from the nation called the United States, as a True [book] is distinguished from a bad book of philosophy, or the Beautiful from a failed poem.”

Finally in a chapter by Michel Imbert devoted to “Self-Reliance” (“Individualism or the Infinitude of the Self”), we do get some close reading (though Emerson’s texts are occasionally imperfectly reproduced) that, however, in the end subscribes to Layla Raïd’s untenable notion, in the *RFEA* volume edited by Sandra Laugier in 2002, that Emerson resorts to grammatical “non-sens” to achieve his rhetorical goals. What is one to do with an essay that concludes by glossing *relying on oneself* as “*self relying relaying lying on/to oneself*”? The jeu de mot in this case strikes me as a long way off from *le mot juste*.

But the last word must be that despite differing anglophone and francophone habits of mind that sometimes seem to result in meanings getting lost in translation, the Brunet/Wicke collection attests to a serious interest in Emerson in France and represents a valuable contribution to Emerson studies that should be noticed on both sides of the Atlantic.

INDEX

Thèmes : Recensions

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