

Emerson as Rhetorician and Communal Author

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Roger Thompson, *Emerson and the History of Rhetoric* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2017), xii + 158 pp., \$35.00 paper.

Christopher Hanlon, *Emerson's Memory Loss: Originality, Communitality and the Late Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), xi + 164 pp., \$65.00 cloth.

Roger Thompson's *Emerson and the History of Rhetoric* and Christopher Hanlon's *Emerson's Memory Loss* present some challenging questions to the Emerson community. Though very different, both books are interested in Emerson's style, genres, and creative process, and they make intriguing and often persuasive claims about Emerson's relationship to his contexts and audiences. Thompson's purpose is dual. He wants Emerson scholars to take account of rhetoric and scholars of rhetoric to take account of Emerson. Hanlon's monograph is a provocation to reconsider Emerson's authorship by examining the roles of others in the creation of certain texts.

Across five closely argued and carefully researched chapters, Thompson's book makes a successful case for its dual purposes. He abstracts from Emerson's works—journals, lectures, and essays—a theory of rhetoric, while also locating Emerson the lecturer within a rhetorical tradition that ranges from the classical to the *belles-lettres* that dominated the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As Thompson reminds us, critics typically understand Emerson's lectures as “essays-in-the-making” (8). He counters this by inviting us to read the lectures as a vital part of mid-nineteenth-century New England

lyceum culture. As such, rather than considering them as way stations, Thompson reads them as ends in themselves and as the expression of Emerson's underlying theory of rhetoric. This theory is not explicit; rather it is Thompson's task to abstract it from a range of Emerson's journal and notebook comments and from his practice. The theory that Thompson derives can be summarized as follows: 1) the rejection of established forms; 2) the utilization of a romantic imagination that recognizes unity in variety; 3) the articulation of democratic and civic values; 4) the surrender to a greater power; and 5) the movement toward a transcendental truth that "moves beyond the individual to a representation of shared concerns between diverse constituents of a community" (30). While this may seem idiosyncratic, Thompson successfully relates each aspect to the history of rhetoric. This is where Thompson's work will be useful not only to Emerson scholars but also to scholars of rhetoric.

The influence of Plato on Emerson, for example, is familiar enough, but Thompson takes it in a different direction. It is not Plato the idealist who matters, but Plato the rhetorician. What Emerson gains from Plato, Thompson argues, is a way of articulating the relationship between the mind, the civic body, and language in a democratic context. So, for Thompson, Emerson mines Plato to begin to construct a form of rhetoric that is appropriate for an emerging U.S. democracy. Thompson also locates Emerson within Cicero's three rhetorical styles: the plain, the middle, and the grand styles. Early nineteenth-century United States rhetoric had broadly adopted the middle style, but Emerson's romantic rhetoric merged the high and the low: an attunement of the humble language of the street and the lofty style of the philosopher. His was a mode of discourse that elevated without alienating. For Emerson, one model was Edmund Burke (one of very few political figures admired by Emerson). Burke, in his highest moments, represents "philosophic eloquence" (47), a rhetoric that directly involves the audience in meaning making. This is an inspiring form that uses facts to make connections between various particulars, and persuasion is not solely to the speaker's gain, rather it is to a mutual end. One other classical figure that matters for Emerson's rhetoric, Thompson explains, is Augustine. What Emerson learns from Augustine is a resignation to higher forces. For Augustine this was an abandonment to scripture. For Emerson the range of texts

and influences is wider, but the principle is the same. Rhetoric is revelation through submission in which the self becomes a mouthpiece. Together these influences give Emerson's rhetoric a strong connection to a past to which he is not beholden, but rather allows his original voice to emerge.

Thompson clearly evidences Emerson's originality when he comes to the context of his practice. Emerson was educated in the *belles-lettrism* codified in Hugh Blair's 1783 *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* that remained the standard text at Harvard into the early nineteenth century. For this tradition, the imagination, which provided connections and figurative color, was the servant of reason. Edward T. Channing, who taught rhetoric to Emerson, stressed the subservient role of the imagination and that rhetoric was a craft that contained the flights of eloquence. Emerson's rejection of these "mechanical means" (79) was in line with the Romantic revolution of the time, where it is the imagination that provides the insights for reason. Indeed, the imagination is Reason in the sense that Emerson gains from Coleridge's romantic idealism. The imagination is transcendent and Emerson's rhetoric follows in its wake, taking his hearers with him, removing the veil of appearance and bringing them face to face with transcendent fact. This eloquence is, in the Augustinian sense outlined above, something the speaker obeys rather than controls. Here, Thompson maintains, the "heat" of the speaker matters. This is not just a figure Emerson uses to describe successful romantic rhetoric, but also a further rejection of the cold and mechanical forms of the *belles-lettristic* tradition. Crucially, though, for Thompson, this rhetoric of the heated imagination is not solipsistic, but engaged. In line with what Emerson has learned from Plato and Burke, it is concerned with changing individual and social relationships within the world.

Another Emersonian metaphor that Thompson draws upon to describe Emerson's rhetoric is the "panharmonicon," a bizarre early nineteenth-century instrument that could mimic a huge range of sounds, from the "cannon to the tinkle of a guitar" (*JMN* 7 265)¹ as Emerson puts it. It became a figure that Emerson used to think through the lecture form. As he writes in his journal in 1839: "A lecture is a new literature, which leaves aside all tradition, time, place, circumstance, & addresses an assembly as mere human beings,—no more—it has never been done well. It is an organ of sublime power, a panharmonicon for

variety of note" (JMN7 224). As Thompson tells us, it is in this burst of positivity about the liberating potential of rhetoric that Emerson began his 1839-40 lecture series on "The Present Age." However, Thompson does not go on to include Emerson's dissatisfaction at the end of the lecture series in February 1840: "Alas! Alas! I have not the recollection of one strong moment. A cold mechanical preparation for a delivery as decorous" (JMN7 339). Perhaps because of this disenchantment, for the first time in six years Emerson did not deliver a lecture series the following winter. In the context of the more familiar version of Emerson (the lectures as way stations to the essays), it is worth noting that 1840 is the year when Emerson the lecturer becomes Emerson the essayist and begins to draft *Essays: First Series*. That said, it is also worth remembering that as he constructs the essays, the same metaphors of failure are used: "My genius seems to quit me in such a mechanical work [...]—a cold exhibition of dead thoughts" (JMN7 404-5). Neither the lecture nor the essay is quite able to deliver Emerson from the chilling mechanical structures of rhetorical forms—at least not to his own gratification. In failing to acknowledge Emerson's dissatisfaction, I think Thompson overstates Emerson's successes. Perhaps one way to make a different and more persuasive case, though probably beyond the scope of the short monograph, would have been by way of comparison. When we want to consider Emerson's originality as a poet we compare him to Whittier and Bryant; as an essayist, we compare him to Channing and Brownson. I would very much like to know who else was on the lyceum scene in the 1830s as Emerson developed his voice, and what marks his differences from them. That said, in highlighting the importance of the lecture in its own right, in constructing Emerson's theory of rhetoric, and in locating Emerson against the history of rhetoric, Thompson's book is a remarkable and valuable intervention in Emerson studies.

Underlying Hanlon's premise is an invocation of that American staple, the individual versus society, where Emerson, the *locus classicus* of individualism, is reconstructed as a corporate "social" author. Of course, Hanlon is selective about where his case applies, but even so, the strength of his book is that it encourages Emerson scholars to reconsider the dominant view of Emerson as a self-reliant author. That the scholarship views Emerson as self-reliant is not just

because of his own self-definition: it is also because we have access to so much of his writing—journals, letters, lectures, essays, etc.—which hang together as an oeuvre, mutually quoting and re quoting each other, creating the weave of text that has come down to us as “Emerson.” While influence studies have long shown that Emerson has intellectual and cultural debts, the guiding myth is still that he transcends these influences and retains the independent identity summed up by his collected works. Now, just what is included or excluded in those collected works is very much at stake for Hanlon. The general editors of the recently completed Harvard critical edition of *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1971-2013) have made some notable omissions from the tenth and final volume, *Uncollected Prose Writings*, as they have only included works that they are convinced were solely authored by Emerson. *The Natural History of Intellect*, for example, has not been included, though it was first published in 1893 and was part of the 1903 Centenary edition edited by Emerson’s son, Edward. Numerous editions have been published over the last hundred years (it can also be found digitized on RWE.org). This is because, according to the editors of the final volume of the *Collected Works*, works like *Natural History* were put together by Emerson’s literary executor James Eliot Cabot and Emerson’s daughter Ellen Tucker Emerson from lecture drafts and other material. It is well known that by the 1870s Emerson’s ill-health—a form of dementia marked by aphasia—had resulted in significant memory loss and he was no longer able to construct his publications by himself.

This, of course, becomes the very issue for Hanlon, who argues that curation of the late work obscures how we should view Emerson’s “late style.” “Late style” is a phrase that Hanlon borrows from Edward Said, who used it to discuss the vigor of the final works of figures like Beethoven and Thomas Mann. As such, it is a provocative irony that Hanlon deploys it to label works now most often understood as the diminishing returns of Emerson’s later years. Hanlon’s provocation, though, is to look again at the late work in the context not of Emerson the self-reliant individual, but of “Emerson” the communal author. Hanlon’s focus in the first part of his book is *The Natural History of Intellect*. The interest here is threefold. First, Hanlon’s reading of these lectures and essays (he looks at them in both their extant forms) asks us to reflect on a

shift in Emerson's thinking that directly relates to his own changing physical and mental condition where, for example, metaphors of the body and an interest in memory become much more central. Second, Hanlon invites us to drop our prejudice against the idea of the corporate author, and to think through the consequences of this. These late works are not, for Hanlon as they are for the Harvard editors, "corrupted," as though there was some original authorial intention we are no longer able to latch onto. Rather, the communal nature of the authorship of *The Natural History of Intellect* is consonant with its themes, which move away from isolation and become more interested in community. Finally, as Hanlon reminds us, *The Natural History of Intellect* is one of the key works in establishing Emerson's legacy. These lectures were given at a time when Pragmatism was emerging, and they were published during its first flush. As such they were attended and read by early Pragmatists, such as William James, as though they were Emerson's works. Hanlon even goes so far as to say that William James's famous "stream of consciousness" metaphor could be derived from a similar "stream of thought" metaphor that "Emerson" (if that's the right word here) uses in the *Natural History* lectures as a figure for the relationship between memory and the self. Hanlon reminds us that neglect of these lectures could lead us to misunderstand Emerson's place in U.S. intellectual history—and if, as Hanlon claims, that metaphoric connection has not been made before, that does indeed signal significant neglect.

It is a shame that Hanlon did not spend more time in *Emerson's Memory Loss* working through the consequences of his provocation and keeping to the subject raised by the main title. As it is, he gives over half of the book to less successfully realized matters that prevent him from fulfilling the promise of the topic he has raised. The subtitle of the book is "originality, communality and the late style." The middle phrase, "communality," takes up the middle chapter of the book, which re-explores Emerson's relationship with Margaret Fuller. While this is in part a discussion of Emerson's edited "communal" volume in response to Fuller's death, it has nothing to do with either memory loss or the late style. Rather, Hanlon takes a new line. He is now interested in how Fuller's tragic death marked a change in Emerson's views and, more significantly, in his desire to express them publicly. Famously, Emerson was known to be cold in his

relationships (Emerson's caloric value is of interest to Hanlon and Thompson). Fuller made a point of resenting this aspect of her friend. Hanlon argues that after her death Emerson warms to a more public role, and in particular to the abolitionist cause. The traditional understanding of Emerson's position on slavery is that once he gets past his early racist attitudes he becomes privately opposed to slavery from the 1830s, then he begins to take a public line against slavery in the 1840s and, after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, he becomes a powerful public voice for abolition. Hanlon maps this awakening onto a different background. Rather than the Fugitive Slave Act it is Fuller's death two months earlier in July 1850 that provokes Emerson's public voice. While this is an intriguing theory, and the excellent close reading of Emerson's before and after texts certainly points to a difference in tone and outlook, it is not more convincing than the theory that is usually put forward. Also, if Hanlon wants to make the case that Emerson's friends and family have a key role in his works and develop his corporate author idea, he could have looked at Emerson's brothers, particularly Charles, and his aunt Mary Moody Emerson. Of Charles, in May 1835 just after recording his early death, Emerson writes, "through what orbits of speculation have we not travelled together, so that it would not be possible for either of us to say, This is my thought, That is yours" (*JMN* 151). Frequently in his writings, Emerson quotes "friends." Some of these are inventions, some are Charles, but they always point beyond the self-reliant author.

Hanlon is also prone to the digression—which is not adequately purposeful in such a short book. And while his section on Matthew Fontaine Maury's mid-century works on sea currents probably taught me the most I didn't know, it remained an aside. As did his discussion of crowds in Melville, Fuller, and Whitman. The purpose of the digression was to enable a reconsideration of Emerson's metaphors in another late lecture and essay also now omitted from the canon, "Perpetual Forces," as they move away from the singular to the plural, from the individual force to larger currents; but this could have been achieved more efficiently. Additionally, I am not convinced that there is a significant shift in language in this late work, and I wish Hanlon had offered a better sense of the earlier work in order to make his case. That said, Hanlon's eclecticism does allow for a terrific few pages in which Melville's "The

Counterpane” chapter in *Moby-Dick* frames a discussion of intersubjectivity in William James and Emerson, considering where one person ends and another begins. The last part of the book, a “coda” on John Frederick Peto’s *trompe l’oeil* paintings of nineteenth-century letter racks, is rather too idiosyncratic. Yes, it allows for another take on memory, this time the Civil War and Lincoln’s death, but it is not integrated into the monograph’s argument.

While there is much to admire in Hanlon’s invitation to reconsider Emerson’s late work as a corporate enterprise and to re-attend to its significance in U.S. intellectual history, *Emerson’s Memory Loss* is a missed opportunity to engage with the problems it identifies in a sustained way and to make a radical difference to the community of Emerson scholars. The book is certainly provocative; it will be up to others to respond and make good on its claims. Thompson’s more sustained focus in *Emerson and the History of Rhetoric* avoids this problem, but both books still suffer from the current fashion for publishing smaller monographs in that they would have benefitted from the space to further contextualize and evidence their claims.

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Note

¹ The abbreviation *JMN* refers to *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, cited in parentheses with volume number.

Works Cited

- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. 10 Vols. Ed. Alfred R. Ferguson *et al.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971-2013.
- . *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. 16 Vols. Ed. William H. Gilman, *et al.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960-1982.

