

## Reviews

### Ralph Waldo Emerson *L'Amérique à L'essai*.

THOMAS CONSTANTINESCO. Paris: Editions de la Rue d'Ulm, 2012. 267 pp. € 21.00 paper.

For French-speaking enthusiasts of American transcendental literature or for the innumerable other Emersonians who love the French language, as well as for the general reader, Thomas Constantinesco's new book is a Gallic *aperçu* of Emerson's thought and his art, his self-construction as a public figure, and also his reception, particularly, of course, in France. Constantinesco is a leading specialist in the literature of nineteenth-century New England, as well as a translator of Melville. In his preface, Mathieu Duplay notes that Emerson's reception in Europe received its impetus from Emerson's own cosmopolitan outlook. Constantinesco offers a useful chronology of writers and their influence and he notes in his prologue that while Emerson was a luminary in his own generation, he and others of his time went into "eclipse; only in the 1940s would the Sage of Concord be added to the new American canon. Eloquence is a new American religion, the orator is the new minister, and the lecture hall is the new cathedral. "Eloquence," and indeed the orator's own conversation, are a form of "contact with the divine," (21) inviting the audience into the extraordinary, an experience not unlike the *furor poeticus* of Plato's *Io*, or as espoused by Leon Hebraeus.

Constantinesco teases out the continuity between poetry, eloquence, and the essay as he demonstrates for the reader Emerson's own intellectual-affective trajectory from inchoate poetic ambitions to iconic essayist realizations. There is a discussion of the extent to which Emerson's writing and the man himself remain "fragmentary and incomplete." Emerson assessed himself as a fragment and his work as but a piece of that (26). Does he incarnate the American nation: is he the heretofore lacking American philosopher? And, as Constantinesco suggests, does he weave a *social contract*: a subliminal reference here to Rousseau, who, he allows, Emerson never read?

Constantinesco also discusses an ambient desire to see Emerson as representative of every man. Very interestingly, Montaigne's influence on Emerson's writing and his persona is analyzed at length (24-26). Emerson discovered Cotton's translation of Montaigne in his father's library as a child and found it delightful. The relationship was thus born early. Whether Emerson would become a type of the human to be found in everyone, the borrowing, and ultimate transformation of this concept and others from the author of the *Essais* is discussed. Similarly to those of Montaigne, Emerson's works are a process, a series of realized impulses, as the word *essay* suggests. They form a continuity where one cannot help but refer, when discussing one of his topics, to other pieces by him on the same theme. In this continuity, moreover, is to be found a host of instances where the author contradicts himself. Having thus mapped out these characteristics of Emerson's character and *oeuvre*, Constantinesco pursues his discussion.

What rapport can exist between creatures and nature? In the essay "Experience" one finds the stipulation that space exists to separate creatures (77). An appeal to the new "molecular philosophy," introduced in a time when the terms science and philosophy were still relatively interchangeable, serves Emerson to describe the separateness of the components (atoms) of reality, and this recognition of separateness is also made apparent by the essay, which by its nature is a provisional, experimental genre. Constantinesco opines that for Emerson, to write about nature or to understand it is to experience separateness. This conclusion is the fruit of his work over ten years, Constantinesco affirms. Emerson's articulations of nature appeared in 1836 and then again in 1844. Constantinesco notes that a comparison of the two editions reveals his journey from high optimism about the individual's potential for "independence from influences" to his crestfallen avowal that nature cannot be dominated, and that metamorphoses are everywhere apparent.

Thus, the author assesses, a sort of "symbiotic relationship" that he had thought possible between "consciousness and the world" (79) proved quite improbable. For Constantinesco, the works of Emerson can be seen to revolve around two opposing concepts, those of harmony and discontinuity. He follows the articulation of these principles throughout Emerson's essays. The anatomical image Emerson deploys as a prelude to his "American Scholar" address suggests that the parts always refer to the whole, as the fingers are to the hand, allowing for greater flexibility in performing the tasks of society.

While Emerson succeeds, through his work to establish a thesis of the universality of truth and to assert that this is readily seen in the diversity of events and the variations in reality, he also obviates the threat of fiction and masters the concept of myth by domesticating them, subsuming their functions in the service of truth. Constantinesco concludes that it is through fiction and myth that Emerson comes in his essays to articulate America: a domain of the separate, as inchoate as is the nation's growth towards the realization of its ideals. This fine volume wonderfully analyzes the progress of both Emerson's self-discovery and the evolution of his prose. These are studied as a microcosm, but also as a guiding incarnation of the American psychic self-construction since its beginnings.

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### Thoreau in His Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of His Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Family, Friends, and Associates.

Ed. SANDRA HARBERT PETRULIONIS. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012. lxx + 314 pp. \$27.50 paper.

"Time is but the stream I go a fishing in," Thoreau wrote in *Walden*. It would have pleased him to know that some one hundred and sixty years later a good many people still "go a fishing" in that same deep stream—for knowledge of him. But time's currents are swift enough that a mid-nineteenth-century fish can