University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

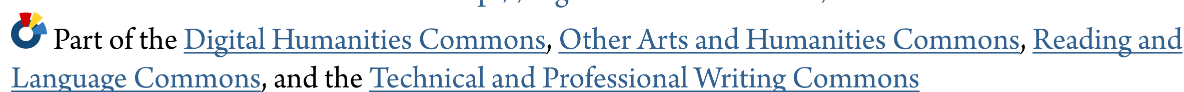
Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011) | Documentary Editing, Association for

2011

The Lion in Winter : Review of *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume VIII: Letters and Social Aims* Edited by Ronald A. Bosco, Glen M. Johnson, and Joel Myerson.

Richard Deming
Yale University, richard.deming@yale.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit


Part of the Digital Humanities Commons, Other Arts and Humanities Commons, Reading and Language Commons, and the Technical and Professional Writing Commons

Deming, Richard, "The Lion in Winter : Review of *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume VIII: Letters and Social Aims* Edited by Ronald A. Bosco, Glen M. Johnson, and Joel Myerson." (2011). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. Paper 15.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit/15

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Documentary Editing, Association for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The Lion in Winter

Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume VIII: Letters and Social Aims. Edited by Ronald A. Bosco, Glen M. Johnson, and Joel Myerson. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010. cclxxiv + 397 pp. ISBN 0674035607. $95.00.

Richard Deming

The recent publication by Harvard University Press of Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Letters and Social Aims*, Volume VIII of the *Collected Works*, is in many ways the most important contribution of this ongoing project, which presents scholarly editions of one of America's most central literary and philosophical figures. Among all of Emerson's books, *Letters and Social Aims* is without a doubt the most vexed in terms of textual questions, coming as it did so late in his life and at the dimming of his powers. However, the volume also represents some of the finest, most necessary thinking of this shaper of American ideas and ideals, reminding us just how crucial it is to have authoritative editions of his entire output in print. To read Emerson closely is to trace the grain of American thought and so it is crucial to have texts that represent those ideas and ideals as authentically as possible.

Letters and Social Aims originally appeared in December of 1875, six years before Emerson's death. Emerson, as one of America's most important, most enduring thinkers and writers, has become a major force in intellectual history—influencing not only nineteenth-century figures from Walt Whitman to Thomas Carlyle and Friedrich Nietzsche, but also twentieth-century thinkers such as John Dewey, Harold Bloom, and Stanley Cavell. During the last decade of his life, however, Emerson had already begun what his daughter Ellen Tucker Emerson would refer to as his "descent." While his reputation was as strong as it would ever be, beginning in the early 1870s, Emerson's energy, his memory, and especially his vaunted concentration and intensity became increasingly diffuse, so much so that as the great master's resources and output dwindled apace, Ellen took more and more of a role in facilitating her father's writing and editing process.

The assembling of *Parnassus* (1875), an anthology of poems that Emerson began in the 1850s and in the early 1870s negotiated a contract to edit, seemed to be a task that left the poet and cultural critic intellectually drained; his recovery was so slow that his daughter Edith Emerson Forbes largely took over the obligation, though her father's name remained on the title page. But evidence of Emerson's problems to create at the level he had once maintained started earlier than that. Beginning in 1870, upon the invitation of Harvard's president, Charles W. Norton, Emerson began delivering a course of lectures entitled "Natural History of the Intellect" at the university. These talks profoundly exhausted the

master lecturer at every level of his being, as he came again and again to confront the newfound limitations age placed on his abilities to articulate his thinking. His stamina failed, his memory faltered, and he was plagued at every turn by an almost debilitating self-doubt. Yet, no event was as catastrophic and traumatic as the virtually complete destruction by fire of his home in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1872. Soon after this horrendous event, occurring when he was 69 and already showing signs of failing health and mental impairment, Emerson collapsed physically and emotionally. Arguably, he never really recovered.

There would have been no *Letters and Social Aims* if Emerson had not been more or less forced into action by an English publisher, John Camden Hotten, who in 1870 began to plan the production of a British edition collecting some of Emerson's then as yet fugitive essays. Emerson was only able to block Hotten's efforts by promising to undertake the assembling of such a collection himself, though it would be Chatto and Windus that, because of Hotten's death in the intervening years, would actually publish the book when it was completed. Although when the time came to undertake the work, Emerson became too disheartened to face the project himself and so the editing all but halted for years. Whereas previously he had held an active, involved relationship to the appearance of his work, Emerson adopted an abstracted attitude to this collection of essays. Ellen, her brother, Edward Waldo Emerson, and James Elliot Cabot, Emerson's literary executor, all stepped forward to undertake the completion of the volume in order to fulfill Emerson's contractual obligation. Collaboratively, these three assembled the eleven essays that make up *Letters and Social Aims*. The diminishment of Emerson's faculties certainly contributed to his sense of emotional distance from the volume of essays, but since the others were called in to shape the various pieces as well as the book as a whole, it is very likely that his proprietary sense of authorship of these texts withdrew all the more because of his attenuated participation. Ralph L. Rusk, an important mid-twentieth-century biographer of Emerson, went as far as to argue Emerson was so removed from the process of readying the pieces for the collection that "*Letters and Social Aims* was almost posthumous," and for that reason there arose ethical questions about attributing the essays wholly to Emerson, with Rusk comparing the textual negotiations to the task Hegel's editors faced of bringing some sort of order to Hegel's confused manuscript notes on the history of philosophy.[1]

Cabot and the younger Emersons did not simply select the essays to be included in the 1875 collection; they also worked at crafting many of the essays themselves—striking out repetitions, forging links and transitions between

[1] *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Scribner's, 1949), p. 487.

paragraphs and across various sections, making choices among the various possible versions that Emerson's drafts in journal and lecture manuscripts offered. In the books Emerson had published prior to *Letters and Social Aims*, such editorial input even from his publishers was less than necessary. In general, Emerson was an extremely careful, thoughtful writer and so editorial intrusions and insertions (beyond copyediting and correction) had been minimal in the essays he had produced in the past. Emerson's care is evident even in his drafting process, which, in a sense, occurred very much in the public eye. Often, Emerson, who made most of his income by working the lecture circuits, would hone and revise his essays through the course of his public talks. The audience reactions would signal to him sections that seemed too abstruse or simply lacking the necessary intensity that he sought to achieve in all his work. "Poetry and Imagination" is an example of a piece that had been evolving since the 1850s as he gave versions and variations of this essay in several lecture series as late as 1870, each time winnowing or expanding based on his sense of how the material worked before the audiences that gathered to hear what we would now refer to as America's first important public intellectual. It was Emerson's usual practice to compile his notes from these various versions of his lectures in order to fashion the essay that he would then see into print. Moreover, he would draw from journals and notebooks that he kept over the years, making use of sentences and passages that sounded apt or fitting within the new context of an essay. This explains the verbatim or near-verbatim passages that appear in multiple essays. Clearly, Emerson thought in terms of musicality and conceptual effect when he was composing his essays, rather than simply trying to present a discursive, argumentative structure.

When outside editors are called upon to fashion a viable, cohesive text for a dead—or even a living—writer, the question of authorship becomes quite knotted, of course. A contemporary reader might read with a skeptical eye, wary lest he or she be "tricked" by an inauthentic thought or bowdlerized claim, concerned about putting weight on a line or passage that cannot be ascribed with certainty to the author rather than the editor or amanuensis. There even arise certain ethical concerns about assigning an author's name to that which may not be entirely the author's work. As Emerson himself once stated in "The Poet," an essay from the 1840s, "Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words."[2] Because words are deeds and these have implications, it is crucial, imperative even, to get the words right. The more closely people read these late essays of

[2] "The Poet," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol III: Essays: Second Series,* edited by Joseph Slater, Alfred R. Ferguson, and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 6.

Emerson's and construct concepts from what is found there, the more necessary it is to be sure of the veracity of the texts themselves.

Given the questions around the "purity" of the text's composition, and because the book represents such late work by Emerson, it might be tempting to see *Letters and Social Aims* as simply a coda to such an important body of work, as a postscript that is merely historically relevant rather than conceptually or philosophically significant. If it were not for the fact that two of Emerson's most powerful essays—"Poetry and Imagination" and "Quotation and Originality"—appear in the collection, *Letters and Social Aims* might be well overlooked. These two pieces, though perhaps not as well known or as foundational as, say, "Self-Reliance" or "Experience," are as complex and compelling as anything Emerson wrote in his career. Moreover, these two essays seem only to be increasing in their importance as more and more critics, scholars, philosophers, and theorists—from Sharon Cameron, Joan Richardson, and P. Adams Sitney to younger scholars such as John Lysaker, Maurice Lee, and myself—plumb these texts for what they can tell us about Emerson's arguments tying together language and the construction of our sense of daily reality. "In proportion as a man's life comes into union with truth," Emerson writes, "his thoughts approach to a parallelism with the currents of natural laws, so that he easily expresses his meaning by natural symbols, or uses the ecstatic or poetic speech. By successive states of mind all the facts of nature are for the first time interpreted."[3] This passage shows Emerson's thought in all its representative nuance and complexity. It is Emerson's ongoing contention that the book of life—and it is a book insofar as it must be read and interpreted—is revealed by and within the details of the mind's search for meaning among particulars. This might be Emerson in decline, but let us not forget that, even so, Emerson's insights into how human beings discover that Nature and human nature are intertwined, not only spiritually but epistemologically, are unparalleled.

Without a doubt, Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson are the two most important, most exacting textual scholars Emerson's oeuvre has had. Because of their dazzling meticulousness, it is unlikely that there will ever be any serious need for future scholars to revisit and revise the work they have done thus far, which ultimately is a level of achievement that most textual scholars aim to accomplish. This is what some might call *trust*. In this volume, Glen M. Johnson joins Bosco and Myerson and provides the extensive notes appended to the book. In their desire to present the text as closely to Emerson's authorial intents as possible, Bosco, Myerson, and Johnson keep their apparatus at the edges, with

[3] "Poetry and Imagination," in *Letters and Social Aims*, p. 39.

the notes and editorial efforts appearing before and after the main body of essays. A reader is allowed, therefore, to trace the variations and emendations if he or she so desires, but the text also is allowed to stand forth on its own so that a reader can grapple with Emerson's prose directly, without having to glimpse it through scholarly scaffolding, a feature that has been consistent throughout the various volumes of the *Collected Works*. In this, the editors and publisher (and Bosco has been serving as the project's general editor for almost ten years) make clear that their dedication is to facilitating a more or less direct experience of reading one of America's finest minds, even if in these essays that mind is in decline.

Both Bosco and Myerson contribute lengthy and detailed essays that serve to establish the context and conditions within which the volume was written and assembled. In the historical introduction—a more than two-hundred-page, comprehensive, illuminating biographical piece focused upon Emerson's final decade—Bosco describes the years surrounding the compilation of *Letters and Social Aims*, recounting the twilight of Emerson's life and its impact on various projects. He presents a persuasive, provocative argument that Emerson's abilities begin to decline in the late 1860s rather than in 1872 as a response to the crisis of losing his house, which traditionally is where scholars and biographers signal the beginning of the end. Bosco cites the death of certain members of Emerson's family and the fact that he was professionally overtaxing himself as being not the causes but at least factors that hastened a form of senility that might today be diagnosed as Alzheimer's. Bosco's extensive research in primary and secondary materials, correspondence, and journals fashion a full and provocative portrait of the ways that Emerson's offspring and his literary executor all helped keep the Emerson intellectual industry in place even as the master's gifts failed him.

Since four of the essays had appeared previously in journals such as *The Dial* and *North American Review*, not everything included in *Letters and Social Aims* has a fraught and somewhat unstable history. Versions of "Persian Poetry," "Quotation and Originality," "The Comic," and "The Progress of Culture," all were available before being collected in this collection, Emerson's last major book. The rest had not only never been in print, they were composed from manuscript sources that covered an expanse of, in some cases, decades. That there was so much general sculpting of the essays of *Letters and Social Aims*—since what Cabot and the Emersons undertook was something more than mere editing—means that Bosco, Myerson, and Johnson have had to be extremely comprehensive in their research in order to discern as much as possible where hands other than Emerson's were shaping the texts of the essays both in the editing of the first edition and in subsequent reprintings. The result of their endeavors is that this new scholarly version published by Harvard/Belknap represents an edition not only authoritative; we might even call it *authorial*.

Although *Letters and Social Aims* first reappeared after Emerson's death as part of the Riverside edition of Emerson's collected works, edited by Cabot, and then once again as the Centenary edition, edited by Edward Emerson, this new scholarly version will be the definitive one. Both of the earlier series of Emerson's collected works amended accidentals and attempted to make Emerson's coherent but idiosyncratic choices of diction, spelling, and punctuation much more contemporary through certain forms of editorial modernizing and regularizing of the source texts. Edward depended largely on the versions of the essays Cabot had settled upon to make his own emendations and corrections, thereby compounding the drift from Emerson's intentions. While the Centenary edition includes crucial notes and commentary by Edward himself, his textual scholarship was neither as complete nor as rigorous as what Bosco, Myerson, and Johnson have supplied in this new edition. For instance, this new edition of *Letters and Social Aims* includes an appendix cataloguing the instances of parallel passages that appear elsewhere in Emerson's oeuvre. That way, the editors have made it possible for a reader to trace the weave of Emerson's thinking not only within this volume but across his body of work.

Emerson's own insistence on reading as a means for contemplating the world and the self becomes the impetus for textual scholarship of the kind Bosco, Myerson, and Johnson have undertaken. Indeed, their dedication and attention to details both historical and textual testify to how seriously the editors have taken Emerson's sense of responsibility to language and these legible acts of choice and interpretation inherent in words and meanings. "In the highest civilization, the book is still the highest delight. He who has once known its satisfactions, is provided with a resource against calamity."[4] Whether we agree or disagree with Emerson's theories and philosophies, editing of this caliber and acumen is itself a resource against calamity, insuring that when the conversations begin, the ground for thought is surefooted.

[4] "Quotation and Originality," in *Letters and Social Aims*, p. 93.