

Studies in English, New Series

Volume 4

Article 28

1983

Loving, Emerson, Whitman, and the American Muse

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Recommended Citation

Spiller, Robert E. (1983) "Loving, Emerson, Whitman, and the American Muse," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 4 , Article 28.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol4/iss1/28

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JEROME LOVING. EMERSON, WHITMAN, AND THE AMERICAN MUSE. CHAPEL HILL: THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA PRESS, 1982, x, 220 pp. \$22.00.

The story of Walt Whitman's sudden conversion in 1855 from an unknown Brooklyn hack journalist into the inspired American bard of *Leaves of Grass* has been told many times—and never quite the same twice. Always central, however, is Emerson's enthusiastic letter—"I greet you at the beginning of a great career," but that "long background" that Emerson intuitively suspected and the stormy consequences of the later relationship of many years have never been explored in such a way as to leave the greatness of both men unsullied by the false bombast of the one and the glum silence of the other. It is one of the great moments in American literary history that everybody apparently knows all about and nobody quite fully approves.

Loving has exactly the right temperament to tell the story for the first time in full and without emotion or prejudice. He is not a documentary research scholar and he actually reveals nothing new. But his careful study of all the new source material and all the storm of interpretive and conflicting criticism that the past half-century has accumulated, allows him to produce a full, even-tempered, and well documented account. Consequently, he has produced an excellent introductory essay for both the elementary and the advanced student of the poetry and poetic theory of both Emerson and Whitman—and of American poetry in general. It will serve as required reading for both the college freshman and the textual and research scholar in the field.

There are three stages in the story: (1) the development of Emerson from Victorian preacher to Transcendental poet (1831-36) and of Whitman from journalist to prophet-bard (1850-60); (2) the actual relationship between the two in the crisis year (1855); and (3) the aftermath period when their joint focus on "character" and self-reliance tapered off in Emerson to the "wisdom" of experience and in Whitman to the merger of flesh and spirit into a cosmic whole. All three are treated with equal skill by Loving, but the first is of special interest to this reviewer because of personal involvement.

This first and, in many ways, most important stage relies heavily on the three volumes of *Early Lectures* and on the completely reedited *Journals and Miscellaneous Note-books* of Emerson. As I follow Loving's subtle analysis of Emerson's development through his lectures on Science, Nature, Biography, Literature and finally Human Culture, I recall the days when Steve Whicher and I met in the Houghton Library at Harvard to rescue the manuscript fragments of these

unpublished lectures that Emerson himself so mercilessly cut, altered, and pirated for his later work. Only because his literary heirs, Cabot and son Edward, had appreciated their importance and arranged them in neat and well-marked folders could we piece them together into these three volumes. Steve has gone his way, but I can still take comfort in the sense that our labors in the editorial vineyard have brought their reward into the wine of insight in this revealing study.

From Emerson's first lecture on poetry in New York which Whitman reported in 1831, to the meeting on Boston Common in 1860, when Emerson so earnestly and fruitlessly pleaded with his friend and one-time near-disciple to omit explicit passages from his third edition of the *Leaves*, the details of the relationship were all there, but it took a real teacher-critic to put the whole story together and to write a book that makes everything so clear and simple that it almost gives the impression that it really did not need to be written after all. But it did.

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