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EMERSON: AMERICA'S FIRST PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL?

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Lawrence Buell, *Emerson* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2003)

Peter S. Field, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Making of a Democratic Intellectual* (Lanham, MD, and Oxford: Rowan and Littlefield, 2003)

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Conduct of Life*, intro. by Barbara L. Packer, notes by Joseph Slater, text established by Douglas Emory Wilson, vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2003)

As most readers of this journal will already know, 2003 marked the bicentennial of Ralph Waldo Emerson's birth in Boston on May 25, 1803. The occasion did not generate quite the hoopla that characterized the celebration of the centennial of his birth; then, as Lawrence Buell notes in his own generous tribute to Emerson, children in Concord were let out of school for the day, and there were major celebrations both there and in Boston. To the chagrin of some of Emerson's admirers, the bicentennial passed without official recognition: as one complained on a website, "It's Emerson's 200th Birthday—and there's no postage stamp," an important indicator of cultural currency in the United States. In 1967, for example, the Post Office issued a stamp to commemorate the mere 150th anniversary of the other most famous Transcendentalist, Henry Thoreau. Nonetheless, like Thoreau, Emerson retains a tenacious foothold in American popular culture, though he is probably known there primarily for the inspirational aphorisms—usually collected under headings such as "action," "confidence," and "conformity"—on websites with names like Brainy Quote and Wisdom Quotes. Despite challenges from both the left and the right, Emerson also remains a central figure in American literary and cultural history; and he has been the focus of sustained scholarly attention, especially since the so-called "Emerson Renaissance," the resurgence of interest in his life and writings beginning around 1980.

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That sweeping reassessment has resulted in an image of Emerson far different from the one that emerged at the time of the centennial of his birth and became increasingly fixed during much of the twentieth century. In 1900, the philosopher George Santayana asserted that Emerson "fled to the woods or to his 'pleachèd garden,' to be the creator of his own worlds in solitude and freedom."[1] Not surprisingly, as that view gained wider currency Emerson's reputation suffered, especially in comparison to that of seemingly more socially engaged writers like Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman. In fact, Emerson's reputation sometimes seemed to rest primarily on his influence upon such writers, even in studies where his central place in the literary tradition was affirmed, for example in F. O. Matthiessen's *The American Renaissance* (1941). Matthiessen argued that what united the five authors covered in his study, including Emerson, was "their devotion to the possibilities of democracy".[2] A few years later, however, Arthur Schlesinger sharply questioned that devotion in *The Age of Jackson* (1945), where he offered a harsh critique of Emerson's failure either to recognize the significance of or to give his support to the Jacksonian Revolution.[3] The image of an aloof, apolitical Emerson was further developed in other influential books, notably Stanley Elkins's *Slavery* (1959), where the Transcendentalists were treated in a chapter tellingly entitled "Intellectuals without Responsibility;" as well as in more specialized studies like Taylor Stoehr's *Nay-Saying in Concord* (1979).[4]

During the last twenty-five years the pendulum has swung back in the other direction, bringing us a far more engaged and political Emerson. The figures and forces behind that shift are too varied and complex to be discussed in brief, but a few things stand out. Ralph L. Rusk's 1949 biography of Emerson, in which he was depicted primarily as a literary figure, has been displaced by Gay Wilson Allen's *Waldo Emerson* (1981), in which he emerges as a man and thinker deeply involved in the intellectual, political, and social issues of his time.[5] Emerson's reputation has also clearly benefited from the sudden and ongoing revival of interest in American Pragmatism, in which he was a significant force and in terms of which his work has been read by Richard Poirier in *Poetry and Pragmatism* (1992).[6] At the same time, George Kateb has made a case for the political viability and

1 George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900; rpt New York, 1922), 220.

2 F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York, 1941), ix.

3 Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Age of Jackson* (Boston, MA, 1945), 384–6.

4 Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (1959; rpt Chicago, IL, 1976), 147–57; Taylor Stoehr, *Nay-Saying in Concord: Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott* (Hamden, CT, 1979).

5 Ralph L. Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York, 1949); Gay Wilson Allen, *Waldo Emerson* (New York, 1981).

6 Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA, 1992).

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vitality of Emerson's views in *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (1992) and *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (1995).[7] Finally, Emerson's role in the antislavery movement—obviously a crucial litmus test for any convincing claim of his engagement in antebellum politics and society—has been fully documented in Len Gougeon's *Virtue's Hero* (1990).[8] Compelling evidence of his direct involvement in the antislavery agitation has been presented in *Emerson's Antislavery Writings* (1995), edited by Gougeon and Joel Myerson; while Albert J. von Frank has emphasized Emerson's more general "influence on the culture of antislavery" in *The Trials of Anthony Burns* (1998).[9]

In their new books, Buell and Peter S. Field seek to extend and fortify the position scholars have gained for Emerson since 1980. Indeed, their books should be viewed as continuations of recent efforts to reassess and rehabilitate Emerson, rather than as part of a special outpouring of scholarly grace occasioned by the bicentennial of his birth. Nonetheless, that bicentennial as well as its close coincidence with the beginning of a new millennium evidently shaped both *Emerson* and *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Making of a Democratic Intellectual*. Both are primarily celebratory studies, in which Buell and Field are clearly eager to cast Emerson as a figure whose life and legacy are especially relevant to the twenty-first century. Emerson most often defined himself as a "scholar"—which he variously used in the archaic sense of a student or in the now equally dated sense of a man of letters, as in "The American Scholar." Buell and Field describe him as a "public intellectual," a recently coined term that implicitly brings Emerson to bear on contemporary questions about the social and political role of intellectuals, questions most vigorously explored in Richard Posner's *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (2001). Posner includes Emerson in a list of nineteenth-century public intellectuals, along with Bentham, Tocqueville, Marx, Thoreau, Dickens, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Matthew Arnold, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Henry Adams. But I think that grab-bag of disparate writers makes the term "public intellectual" so vague and amorphous that it loses most of its potential descriptive power. Posner, however, does offer a workable definition of the term as it is now most commonly used, observing that "a public intellectual expresses himself in a way that is accessible to the public, and the focus of his expression is on matters of general public concern of (or inflected by) a political or ideological cast."[10]

7 George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca, NY, 1992); *idem*, *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (Thousand Oaks, CA, 1995).

8 Len Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform* (Athens, GA, 1990).

9 *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, ed. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Haven, CT, 1995); Albert J. von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), xvii.

10 Richard Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 29, 35.

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Conceived in those terms, Emerson's "scholar" takes on a very different look; certainly he little resembles Santayana's portrait of him as a cloistered philosopher absorbed in abstract meditations on man and nature. Together with the new edition of *The Conduct of Life* (1860), the product of the decade in which he was most fully engaged in social and political issues, the books by Buell and Field consequently raise some central and related questions about Emerson's career. First, how did he conceive of his "public" role and the "public" he addressed in his lectures and writings? Second—given the very different approaches and responses to the first question in the books by Buell and Field—what kinds of historical contextualization and scholarly evidence are necessary for an adequate understanding of the relations between Emerson's writings and his role as a "public intellectual"? Finally, how well does that term actually fit him?

Those questions take on particular interest in Buell's ambitious book, partly because he casts himself as a kind of public intellectual, at least insofar as he seeks to address a subject that he believes is (or should be) of general concern in a way that makes it accessible to a wide audience. "This book is about the life, career, thought, and writing of the first public intellectual in the history of the United States," Buell immediately states. "It is written both for scholars and for nonspecialist readers seeking a first book on Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882). The research is as up-to-date and the language as direct as I can make it" (p. 1). Buell has obviously taken on a daunting task, not only by attempting to cover such extensive terrain, but also by seeking to tailor his study for such different audiences. The strains of the latter effort are sometimes all too apparent—certainly Buell's effort to avoid the language of academic discourse sometimes has unfortunate consequences. For example, discussing moments "when Emerson gets on his universal-mind roll," Buell cites "a mind-bogglingly extravagant passage" from "Nominalist and Realist," a passage that "seems calculated both to provoke wonder and to give you the creeps" (p. 75). To my ear, such language seems less direct than awkward and studied, rather like a professor seeking to convince dubious undergraduates that both he and Emerson truly are with it. Elsewhere, Buell seems rather insensitive to the needs of the general reader, as at the end of a paragraph on self-culture where he casually adds (without footnote or further explanation) that Emerson's approach "anticipates Michel Foucault's critically distanced fascination with the regimes of self-care in classical philosophy" (p. 62). At such points, it appears as if Buell's model of the public intellectual is Emerson himself, who quite blithely made extraordinary demands on his auditors and readers. For the most part, however, Buell seems to recognize the challenges nonspecialist readers will encounter in his complex and demanding study. Before launching into a nuanced reading of "Experience," Buell suggests that readers unfamiliar with the essay "might find it helpful to take a(nother) look beforehand." Those who are uncertain about whether they should do so will

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almost certainly be sent scurrying back to the essay by the opening sentence of Buell's discussion, where he describes "Experience" as "a series of interconnected mini-reflections on seven facets or phases of mental life that struggle to fight free from the unprecendentedly bleak mood with which the essay begins" (pp. 124–5).

As such passages suggest, Buell's book is finally directed at scholars; and even they will encounter significant challenges in *Emerson*. Given the critical sophistication and broad learning displayed in Buell's previous scholarship, that is hardly surprising. But his approach to Emerson will surprise those familiar with some of that earlier work, especially his influential studies *Literary Transcendentalism* (1973) and *New England Literary Culture* (1986).[11] In the former, Buell opened out the study of Transcendentalism, which had previously focused primarily on the major works of Emerson and Thoreau, to take in a wide range of other texts and writers. In his second book, Buell placed Transcendentalism within the larger context of the New England Renaissance, studying Emerson and Thoreau along with other major figures like Dickinson, Hawthorne, and Stowe, while discussing all of them in relation to a host of less well-known writers of the period 1830–60. Although his knowledge of the period strongly informs his new book, Buell now seems anxious to liberate Emerson from the confines of that cultural context. In sharp contrast to his own early work and to most recent studies, Buell portrays Emerson as "a national icon who at the same time anticipates the globalizing age in which we increasingly live," insisting that we need to think of him "not in terms of a single cultural context or scale but four: the regional-ethnic, the national, the transatlantic, and the global" (pp. 3, 4).

Of those contexts, Buell focuses most of his attention on the latter two; and the effort to relocate Emerson from the regional or national to the transnational and world stage accounts for the substantial strengths as well as some of the limitations of *Emerson*. Buell indicates that his book is in part about Emerson's life, but it is hardly a biography. In the opening chapter, "The Making of a Public Intellectual"—which he suggests those familiar with the biography may wish to skip over—Buell offers an overview of Emerson's career. But the focus is less on the life lived, which inevitably roots the individual in the quotidian details of a specific time and place, than on Emerson's intellectual life, which tends to free him from both. Buell consequently seeks to demonstrate the "cross-cultural applicability" even of texts that are most often cited as expressions of Emerson's cultural nationalism and distinctly American concerns. In his discussion of "The American Scholar," for example, Buell emphasizes the ways in which Emerson spoke as a *man*, not as an American. Similarly, he reads Emerson's famous poem

11 Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY, 1973); *idem*, *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution through Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA, 1986).

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"Concord Hymn," not as an expression of local pride or patriotism, but as an example of Emerson's concern "with the values that stand the test of time and unite the world" (p. 58). In "Transnational Implications of Self-Reliance," part of a larger chapter on that crucial concept, Buell compares Emerson with two of his English contemporaries, John Stuart Mill and Matthew Arnold. Although he acknowledges some of the distinctive national features of "Self-Reliance," Buell once again represses the local in order to underscore the more universal elements of Emerson's experience and writing. What is lost, at least for those seeking a first book on Emerson, is an understanding of the ways in which the essay was shaped by both the bitter controversy over his 1838 Divinity School Address and the challenge to self-reliance posed by the reformers at Brook Farm, to say nothing about the more general anxiety about the mass or mob shared by many Whig intellectuals in Jacksonian America. What is gained by reading "Self-Reliance" alongside Mill and Arnold is, as Buell puts it, an understanding that "the concern for individuality at the heart of Emerson's thought was no more a *uniquely* American project than it was a complexly transatlantic one" (p. 104).

By privileging less well-known lines of descent, Buell seeks to secure a new place for Emerson in American culture and world literature, philosophy, and religion. Buell thus challenges the dominant narratives of American literary history constructed by critics from F. O. Matthiessen to Richard Poirier, all of whom assign Emerson a central role in the development of a distinctive literature in the United States. Such narratives have come under increasing scrutiny during the last twenty years, but Buell's approach differs from those of both traditional and revisionist critics. In contrast to the former, who have tended to trace Emerson's influence through a line of white and primarily male authors, Buell emphasizes his appeal to women writers and the complex response to Emerson by African Americans from Frederick Douglass and Charlotte Forten through W. E. B. DuBois to Ralph Waldo Ellison. In contrast to revisionist critics, whose work has been "limited by a tendency to define that which is significant in terms of some theory of the American" (p. 146), Buell is finally more interested in what he describes as "Emerson's will to thrust beyond local, provincial, national contexts toward a mode of expression that could speak across the borders of place and time" (p. 156). In "Emersonian Poetics," Buell emphasizes Emerson's interest in Persian poetry and the interest in Emerson displayed by writers as diverse and surprising as D. H. Lawrence, Marcel Proust, and Jorge Luis Borges, among others. Similarly, in his excellent chapter "Emerson as a Philosopher?," Buell effectively explores some of the key sources of his thought, especially Plato (or Plato's Socrates) and Montaigne, offering an illuminating analysis of the kinds of provocation such disparate figures as Friedrich Nietzsche, William James, and John Dewey discovered in Emerson. That chapter is more balanced and convincing than "Religious Radicalisms," in which Buell devotes most of his

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attention to Emerson's interest in and encounters with Indian scriptures. He acknowledges that Emerson "never learned Sanskrit, never visited a temple, perhaps never met a practicing Hindu or Buddhist, and repeatedly confused the two religions" (p. 172); nonetheless, Buell suggests that the interest he stimulated in such religions among younger Transcendentalists might be viewed "as an augury of the late-twentieth-century burgeoning of nonwestern religions in the United States with the rise of immigration from east and south Asia" (p. 187).

Such grandiose claims border on—and, in my view, occasionally cross the border into—special pleading for Emerson's ongoing relevance in and comfortable embrace of multicultural America. Although he disclaims any effort to idealize Emerson, Buell certainly gives him the benefit of the doubt, especially when it comes to the charged issues of ethnicity, race, and slavery he takes up in the chapter "Social Thought and Reform." His brief assessment of Emerson's contributions to abolitionism is nicely balanced; in his cursory discussion of what he delicately describes as Emerson's "racialist doubts," however, Buell is eager to offer explanation and extenuation. In fact, where he elsewhere is at pains to liberate Emerson from the local, parochial, and provincial, Buell blandly suggests that his "racism was certainly no greater than that of most northern white abolitionists, and far less than the average northern white" (p. 259). Nonetheless, Buell's extensive knowledge of the antebellum period serves him especially well in the final sections of the chapter, where he convincingly explores the evolution of Emerson's complex and frequently conflicting views of race and nationality, both in terms of his New England heritage and in relation to the pressures of the years before, during, and after the Civil War. Buell also emphasizes Emerson's "extreme distaste" for speaking out on social issues—not, I would add, an attitude one usually associates with a public intellectual—forcefully suggesting that questions about his responses to specific social issues are finally less compelling than the questions he constantly confronted about when and how an intellectual *should* engage in public controversy. "As an anticipator of a thoroughgoing democratic cultural pluralism, he is a more fitful harbinger than his most progressive white acquaintances," Buell concludes. "As a diagnostician of the challenges of doing socially significant intellectual work in the face of social pressure and attendant self-division, Emerson had few equals, then or ever" (p. 287).

Our understanding of Emerson's social role is at once complicated and enriched by reading Buell's *Emerson* alongside Peter S. Field's *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Making of a Democratic Intellectual.* As its title indicates, Field's book might be read as a radically revised and expanded version of Buell's opening chapter, "The Making of a Public Intellectual." In effect, the difference between Buell's *public* intellectual and Field's *democratic* intellectual is the difference between a transnational and a firmly national Emerson. As Field observes, he has situated Emerson "squarely in the political and social environment that

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impinged on a Harvard-educated, Unitarian-trained New England minister in the early American republic, with the central concerns of his life stemming from his unique attempt to right himself with his times and with a growing nation beyond the parochial confines of Boston and Cambridge" (pp. 5–6). Where Buell consistently seeks to demonstrate the ways in which Emerson's writings have crossed borders and transcended time, Field focuses on the ways in which they were shaped by Emerson's deep involvement in antebellum American society and culture. The contrasting approaches are nowhere more clearly displayed than in their approaches to Emerson's religious views. Buell passes fairly quickly over Emerson's Unitarian background and only briefly touches upon the Divinity School Address and the controversy it generated; Field devotes four of seven chapters—well over half of his book—to a detailed discussion of the long foreground to the Address. Recalling Perry Miller's famous 1940 essay, "Jonathan Edwards to Emerson"—better known as "From Edwards to Emerson," the title of the revised version published in *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956)—Field's first chapter is called "From Emerson to Emerson." That is not, as the title might initially suggest, an account of Emerson finding himself, though that is essentially the story Field attempts to tell; rather, it describes Emerson's descent from and later revolt against the values of his father, the minister William Emerson. Indeed, Field describes the Divinity School Address as "nothing less than an American intellectual parricide" (p. 11).

Despite the Freudian overtones of that description, Field treats Emerson's revolt in religious and social rather than in psychological terms. Field, a historian whose earlier work includes *The Crisis of the Standing Order* (1998),[12] begins with an excellent discussion of the ways in which wealthy mercantile families in turn-of-the-century Boston "fostered the evolution of an exclusive clique of Brahmin ministers" (p. 17). The values of that ministerial elite were fully embodied by William Emerson, who in 1799 was lured from his rural parish in Harvard to the First Congregational Church in Boston. In discussing the later conflicts between latitudinarian and orthodox elements of the Congregational Church, Field emphasizes the powerful role of class in the Brahmin appeal, suggesting that Emerson's own critique of the Unitarian ministry in the Divinity School Address "was less about dogma or doctrinal issues than it was a denunciation of intellectual and social elitism" (p. 29). In the following chapters, where he traces Emerson's path toward the Address, Field argues that his democratic critique of the Unitarian ministry had its roots deep in the past, well before Emerson seemed to follow in his father's footsteps by becoming the pastor of Boston's Second Congregational Church in 1829. In fact, Field suggests that his father's premature death in

12 Peter S. Field, *The Crisis of the Standing Order: Clerical Intellectuals and Cultural Authority in Massachusetts, 1780–1833* (Amherst, MA, 1998).

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1811, when Emerson was eight years old, purged him and his brothers of "the reflexive conservatism of Brahmin Boston," adding: "The intimacy engendered by financial hardships combined with social ostracism seemed to foster at least in Ralph an elemental distrust of the Brahmin elite as well as an affinity with the millions of women and men who toiled mightily to eke out a living" (p. 40). The financial hardships were real, as was the family's decline in social status; but "social ostracism" strikes me as too strong a term for what they faced, and I am unconvinced by the assertion that Emerson consequently developed deep sympathies with the laboring classes. In his effort to efface Schlesinger's portrait of the detached sage of Concord in *The Age of Jackson*, I think Field offers an equally one-dimensional portrait of Emerson, not only as democratic intellectual but seemingly also as a committed Democrat. Emerson, however, was no Orestes Brownson, whom Field mentions only in passing as one of the members of the Transcendental Club. He does not note that when Brownson, who had earlier championed the Divinity School Address, published *The Laboring Classes* in 1840, neither Emerson nor any of the other Transcendentalists defended him from the ferocious attacks the work generated, especially from Whig opponents of the radical Democrat. Insofar as he was political, Emerson himself remained what is probably best described as a half-hearted moderate Whig with some theoretical "Democratic" principles, at least through the mid-1840s, after which he followed a fairly conventional path through Free Soil to the Republican Party.

In his eagerness to display Emerson's early embrace of democratic ideals, Field perhaps underestimates the degree to which he absorbed and internalized the values of the Brahmin elite, including its class-consciousness. Yes, Emerson's relative poverty distanced him from wealthier classmates at Harvard; but he and three of his brothers attended the college, and Emerson finally decided to enter the Divinity School dominated by the Brahmin elite and to become a Unitarian minister. Moreover, he and other members of his family understood that the ministry offered an opportunity to regain some financial security and reclaim their lost social status; and Emerson rejected several lesser offers before accepting the position along with a generous salary at the elite Second Church. Field is more effective in his subsequent discussion of Emerson's ambitions as a minister. Through preaching, which for him was the primary duty of the minister, Emerson sought to bring about the "reformation" of the denomination, convinced that anything less "signaled failure" (p. 85). His lofty goals made failure virtually inevitable, and Field persuasively argues that Emerson's conflict with his congregation over the Lord's Supper was "a pretext to leave Second Church" (p. 87). But he then somewhat contradictorily suggests that "Emerson could not sanction the type of social discrimination that sacraments like the Lord's Supper perpetuated," adding that the "Unitarians' social conservatism and exclusiveness always repulsed Emerson" (p. 89). In contrast to Buell, who

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emphasizes Emerson's interest in nonwestern religions, Field dwells upon his growing attraction to Quakers, who in contrast to the Unitarians "had come to terms with the social implications of Christianity," and who "espoused a far more inclusive and democratic American society" (p. 112). For Field, Emerson's path during the years between his resignation from the Second Church in 1831 and his 1838 address at the Divinity School was thus a movement away from "the effete Unitarianism of eastern Massachusetts" toward a more vital relationship with that larger society, a direction dictated by "his consuming desire for relevance in America" (p. 125).

At the very point at which he suggests that Emerson's career gains direction and momentum, Field's account of it loses much of its initial force and coherence. Although it strikes me as rather thesis-driven, I think his analysis of Emerson's early evolution is interesting and provocative. His emphasis on the social and political dimensions of Emerson's thought offers a corrective to those who have tended to focus more exclusively on religious divisions and theological issues. Field also offers a bracing challenge to those, including myself, who tend to emphasize the early influence and residual elements of Emerson's involvement with the Brahmin elite of Boston. Indeed, Field's detailed mapping of the social, religious, and cultural landscape of the city genuinely enhances our understanding of the long and complex foreground to Emerson's emergence onto the national scene. But the following chapters of his book are significantly less effective, partly because he abandons the narrative structure of the first four chapters of what initially promises to be an innovative biography of the public Emerson. Instead, Field then devotes a chapter to Emerson's career as a lecturer and another to his racial views and involvement in antislavery, concluding by "Assessing Emerson as a Public Intellectual." The consequences of that shift are almost immediately startling: chapter 4 ends with the Divinity School Address; chapter 5 begins four years later, with a journal entry in which Emerson reviewed what Field describes as "the singularly undistinguished record that comprised his career until the spring of 1842" (p. 131). Even if we put aside *Nature* (1836), to which Field devotes scant attention, by 1842 Emerson had also published *Essays* (1841), which by almost any standard might be viewed as a significant landmark in his career. It of course contains some of Emerson's most celebrated and familiar works, notably "Self-Reliance" and several other essays he had first delivered as lectures during the 1830s. For the most part, however, those lectures were delivered in Boston, so they apparently do not conform to Field's narrative of Emerson's movement away from that provincial city into the sprawling nation that beckoned him. Field suggests that his career as a lecturer gained significance only when his extended tours began to bring him "into vital contact with his compatriots," allowing him "to observe at close hand the life not only of the

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self-selective audiences of his lectures but of the average American-in-motion whom he so earnestly sought to incorporate into his work" (p. 133).

Since Emerson's lecturing has not received the attention it deserves, Field's emphasis on that aspect of his work is especially welcome. But he does not convincingly establish the connections between Emerson's lectures and his role as a public or democratic intellectual. As Field observes, in 1871 James Russell Lowell called Emerson "The Lecturer," and that vocation was his primary source of both income and material for his published works. Between his first lecture in 1833 and his final address in 1881, "Emerson read one or another of his resplendent lectures an astonishing fifteen hundred times," traveling from Maine to Michigan and as far west as California (p. 137). Field is particularly interested in the ways in which lecturing at once shaped and illustrated Emerson's growing commitment to democracy. "Even as he fell far short of a rough streetwise eloquence, his respect for a common style represented the very heart of Emerson's intuitive democratic sense," Field affirms. "Nowhere else did he proclaim so unambiguously his faith in the American workingman's latent talents than in his conscious attempt to grasp the rhetorical power of everyday language" (pp. 147–8). Field, however, offers few illustrations of the ways in which Emerson displayed that power in his lectures. Instead of language and style—surely key issues in any consideration of the effectiveness of a public intellectual—Field focuses on what he views as another source of Emerson's success as a lecturer, "his unfeigned admiration for the achievements and progress he saw all around him" (p. 150). In Field's version of Emerson, he emerges as a remarkably upbeat celebrant of life in the United States, viewing "his message of self-culture as the intellectual complement of Americans' headlong pursuit of material prosperity" and celebrating "the potential of commerce to produce good" (pp. 151, 155). There is evidence to support that view of Emerson's easy accommodation to American materialism, but it is highly selective. Among other texts, Field cites "The Young American," an 1844 lecture Emerson included in *Nature, Addresses and Lectures* (1849). Well before that, however, and certainly after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, Emerson frequently whistled a different tune. "The way in which the country was dragged to consent to this . . . shows that our prosperity had hurt us," Emerson proclaimed in "The Fugitive Slave Law," delivered in 1854; "that, whilst we reckoned ourselves a highly cultivated nation, our bellies had run away with our brains, and the principles of culture and progress did not exist."[13]

Field is well aware that the struggle over slavery powerfully shaped Emerson's vision of the country. Nonetheless, Field treats his involvement in abolition in a separate chapter rather than relating it to his career as a lecturer. The result,

13 *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, ed. Gougeon and Myerson, 80.

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I think, is to distort both aspects of Emerson's public work. Field is notably tougher than Buell on the issue of what he firmly describes as Emerson's "racist assumptions" (p. 173). Indeed, the quotations Field cites from his early journals will make Emerson's admirers cringe, however much his racist views mirrored those of many of his white contemporaries. To his credit, however, Field is not interested in finger pointing; rather, he emphasizes the ways in which Emerson's view of black inferiority blunted his ability to refute proslavery arguments and consequently impeded his involvement in antislavery until 1844, when he delivered "Emancipation in the British West Indies." From that point, Field traces Emerson's involvement in antislavery to and through 1850, after which he became "a tireless agent of antislavery," to which "he dedicated an awesome amount of energy for over a decade in the prime of his life" (pp. 190, 198). That assessment conforms to the argument advanced in the fullest discussion of the subject, Gougeon's *Virtue's Hero*. But the emphasis on his antislavery activities during the 1850s does not fully jibe with Field's own earlier and more convincing argument about the centrality of Emerson's other lectures during the decade, when he spent much of his time touring the United States. By that standard, his involvement in abolitionism might just as easily be described as limited and sporadic. In 1851, Emerson spoke out strongly against the Fugitive Slave Law; but he did not deliver another antislavery address until 1854. The following year he offered his fullest statement of his views in his "Lecture on Slavery." From then until the outbreak of the Civil War, however, he confined himself to scattered and relatively brief remarks on topics like the "Assault on Charles Sumner," the civil war in Kansas, and John Brown, amounting to roughly twenty pages of text in *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*.

In fact, despite his increasingly militant opposition to slavery, Emerson during the 1850s continued to dedicate most of his energies to lectures on other subjects. The results of those efforts are now available to scholars in the *Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (2001),[14] and in new editions of the books Emerson cast from two of his lecture series during the 1850s, *English Traits* (1856), published in 1994, and *The Conduct of Life* (1860), published in 2003. The latter, under review here, is volume 6 of *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, so I should acknowledge that I am a member of its Editorial Board. Nonetheless, I have no hesitation in saying that every aspect of the volume is superb; and it should further spur the interest critics have recently begun to display in *The Conduct of Life*. The text has been established and expertly edited by Douglas Emory Wilson, who has also contributed the full textual apparatus. Remarkably, two-thirds of the text is based on holograph manuscripts, bringing us far closer to Emerson's

14 *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1843–1871*, ed. Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson, 2 vols. (Athens, GA, 2001).

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intentions, especially his idiosyncratic punctuation. Like the earlier volumes in the *Collected Works*, this one also includes a list of parallel passages in Emerson's journals, topical notebooks, and other writings, which will allow scholars to trace the evolution of his thinking and his process of composition. Emerson and his text are also brilliantly illuminated by the explanatory notes, the final work of Joseph L. Slater, General Editor of the *Collected Works* from 1976 to 1996, and until his death in 2001 one of my closest friends and colleagues at Colgate University. As Wilson observes in a graceful tribute to Slater at the opening of *Conduct of Life*, "His historical introductions and notes to *Essays, First Series* (1979) and *Essays, Second Series* (1983) established a standard of excellence for the rest of the edition;" and that standard of excellence has been fully met in *The Conduct of Life*.

Slater's leisurely notes, which run to more than 125 pages of the new edition, are absolute delights to read, so graceful is his style and so wide-ranging is his learning. Indeed, they can be read with pleasure and profit even without reference to the text of *The Conduct of Life*. At the same time, Slater's identification of allusions, especially biblical references, as well as the sources of quotations and paraphrases underscores Emerson's own extensive reading. If we keep in mind that most of the essays in *The Conduct of Life* were first delivered as lectures, the notes also remind us of just how dense and elusive most of his auditors must have found those lectures, a recognition that further complicates questions about his role as a public intellectual. Even a scholarly audience today faces formidable challenges in reading the text, some of them as a result of Emerson's erudition and others as a result of his contemporary idioms and references. A few examples from the opening of "Fate," the first and most famous essay in *The Conduct of Life*, illustrate just how distant and difficult the text actually is. The fourteen-line poem used as the epigraph to the essay generates seven notes, all of them welcome, at least for those of us who would not immediately know that "as late as 1860 the word 'delicate' remained suggestive of delight—religious as well as secular delight;" or that Emerson's "Hints writ in vaster character" meant "mystic messages written in a super-human hand" (p. 175). Even at points where the meaning of the text seems deceptively clear, Slater often saves readers from misreading. Describing the obstacles confronting any effort "to reform men," even if undertaken when they are in school, Emerson observes: "But the boys and girls are not docile; we can make nothing of them" (p. 2). For the great champion of nonconformity, who in "Self-Reliance" had celebrated the independence and irresponsibility of schoolboys, that seems a rather odd and disconcerting complaint—a sign, perhaps, of what some scholars have characterized as Emerson's retreat from his earlier radicalism in *The Conduct of Life*. The passage, however, takes on a very different meaning when we learn in Slater's notes that "docile" meant "teachable," so Emerson "would not have been surprised or amused to find

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himself praised for his 'schoolboy docility' in J. E. Cabot's *Memoir* of 1887" (p. 176).

In a different though no less compelling way, Barbara L. Packer's Historical Introduction also illustrates how deeply *The Conduct of Life* was rooted in its own time. Her introduction is the best discussion I have read of the relations among Emerson's various writings of the period and of their connections to specific historical events from the Compromise of 1850 to the eve of the Civil War. As indicated above, Emerson was outraged by the Compromise of 1850, especially the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. Nonetheless, as Packer makes clear, Emerson in the winter of 1850–51 devoted himself to work on the lectures for a series called "The Conduct of Life," including "Wealth." That subject scandalized his aunt Mary Moody Emerson, who sternly wrote Emerson: "You who have steadily stood for the *rights* of the slave are riveting his chains & pursuing the fugitive with [*sic*] increasing the rage the mania for wealth" (quoted p. xxxi). The enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law in Massachusetts prompted Emerson to speak out against the law, even goading him into uncharacteristic political campaigning in the spring of 1851; Packer, however, rightly emphasizes that he "knew that his real work was lecturing, not political speechmaking" (p. xlv). Later that year he thus revised "The Conduct of Life," beginning it with a new lecture, "Fate." As Packer observes, the lecture concerned some of the deepest and most abiding riddles of human life; but she also relates it to more immediate concerns, strikingly suggesting that "'Fate' is a kind of debate: not a neat argument-and-rebuttal . . . but an endless, repetitive wrangle, like the congressional debates of 1846–51" (p. xlvii). As Packer also indicates, the themes developed in "Fate" also cropped up in Emerson's other lectures during the 1850s, including antislavery addresses like "The Fugitive Slave Law," where he explored the ongoing conflict between "*May* and *must*: the sense of right and duty, on the one hand; and the material necessities, on the other" (quoted p. li). "Fate" was not, of course, the whole of *Conduct of Life*; nor was slavery Emerson's only concern. Almost immediately after delivering "American Slavery" several times early in 1855, for example, Emerson delivered another new lecture on a radically different subject, "Beauty," later revised for *The Conduct of Life*. Such topics and the scarcity of topical allusions help explain what Packer describes as the central irony of its reception history, "that *The Conduct of Life*, born of Emerson's involvement in one of the most turbulent decades of the nation's history, should have acquired in our day a reputation for aloofness and unconcern with events" (p. lxvi).

Packer convincingly explodes such earlier readings of *The Conduct of Life* and, along with them, some persistent stereotypes of Emerson. The involvement in history revealed in that book would also seem to provide additional justification for defining him as a public intellectual. Despite the arguments advanced by Buell and Field, however, I think Emerson can be described as a public intellectual only

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in a limited and highly qualified sense of that term. Certainly it calls attention to important aspects of his career, especially his antislavery addresses, in which Emerson obviously addressed a political question of public concern in a way that was accessible to a wider public. Despite the attention those addresses have recently received, however, Emerson clearly did not view them as a central or vital part of his work. When he needed a final chapter to fill out *Essays: Second Series* (1844), for example, he had two possible choices: "New England Reformers," his witty critique of activists, including the abolitionists; and his first major antislavery address, "Emancipation in the British West Indies." He chose "New England Reformers," and he later also excluded the Emancipation address from a collection of his early writings, *Nature, Addresses and Lectures* (1849). Similarly, except for accounts in newspapers, none of his antislavery addresses during the 1850s was published during his lifetime, partly because Emerson held them in such low regard and partly because he viewed them as tangential to and interruptions of his primary work. "I awoke at night, & bemoaned myself, because I had not thrown myself into this deplorable question of Slavery, which seems to want nothing so much as a few assured voices," he recorded in his journal in the summer of 1852.

> But then, in hours of sanity, I recover myself, & say, God must govern his own world, & knows his way out of this pit, without any desertion of my post which has none to guard it but me. I have quite other slaves to free than those negroes, to wit, imprisoned spirits, imprisoned thoughts, far back in the brain of man,—far retired in the heaven of invention, & which, important to the republic of Man, have no watchman, or lover, or defender, but I.[15]

That passage, one of many that might be cited in the journals, reveals a good deal about Emerson's own conception of his public role, which I think was finally very different from the usual role of the public intellectual. Conscience and perhaps a bit of ego drew him into the debate over slavery, in which he believed his own assured voice might and probably did make some difference. At the same time, he was clearly determined not to allow issues of greatest public concern overwhelm his own convictions about what was ultimately of greatest importance to "the republic of Man." For the most part, Emerson tenaciously pursued his own agenda during the 1850s, notably in his "Conduct of Life" lectures, which he prepared for publication immediately after John Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry in November 1859. As Buell and especially Packer reveal, the convulsive political controversies of the period shaped Emerson's treatment of certain topics in the book, notably "Fate," which may well be read as an implicit commentary on

15 *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman *et al.*, 16 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1960–82), 13:80.

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slavery. But in chapters like "Culture," "Behavior," "Worship," and "Beauty," Emerson explored a terrain very different from that usually occupied by the "public intellectual;" and he rarely adjusted his steps to insure that most of his auditors and readers could follow his swift pace and circuitous route. As Field emphasizes, Emerson delivered his lectures to diverse audiences throughout the North; but the texts of those lectures and contemporary accounts of their reception contain few hints that he sought to make them accessible to a broad public. Indeed, many people evidently went simply to see and hear the famous lecturer, whose performances were probably more edifying than explicable to many of those in his audience. Recording his experiences in New York City, where he had delivered a series of lectures on "The Times"—a series in which he exposed the limitations of political figures like the conservative and the reformer by implicitly comparing them with the only fully representative figure of the age, the poet or expresser—Emerson in 1842 humorously observed: "My Lectures had about the same reception there as elsewhere: very fine & poetical but a little puzzling. One thought it 'as good as a kaleidoscope.' Another, a good Staten Islander, would go hear, for he heard I was a *rattler*."[16] Although he is far more attentive to the expressive and poetic elements of Emerson's work, Buell also begs some fundamental questions about his primary audience: for example, the fact that his work has appealed in diverse ways to a wide range of philosophers and writers does not mean that he was a "public intellectual," at least as that term is now usually employed.

Despite my reservations about their rather loose use of that term, I think Buell and Field illuminate a central aspect of Emerson's work, one that is also powerfully illustrated by the new edition of *The Conduct of Life*. Even as Buell invites us to consider the ways in which his writings have communicated far beyond the physical and temporal boundaries of antebellum America, he depicts Emerson as a deeply engaged writer and thinker who from crucial perspectives "starts to look less like a philosopher of mind . . . and more like an ethicist, for whom the core concern was negotiation of life in the world" (p. 210). Field and Packer, who place greater emphasis on the specific social and political terms of that negotiation, also portray Emerson as grappling with fundamental questions about what he as early as 1824 called "the conduct of life" (quoted by Packer, p. xv). Thirty-six years later, in the opening paragraph of the opening essay of the volume of that title, Emerson in "Fate" thus affirmed that "the question of the times resolved itself into a practical question of the conduct of life" (p. 1). I am not fully convinced by the claims for his relevance pressed by Buell and Field, both of whom conclude with eloquent affirmations of the ongoing importance of Emerson's writings to what the former calls "serious-minded people" (p. 314) and

16 Ibid., 8:203.

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the latter describes as "all educated Americans" (p. 227). But I am convinced, or at least hopeful, that his persistent and provocative explorations of that "practical question of the conduct of life" will continue to gain him an audience. That audience is probably no longer, if it ever was, the broader public implied by the term "public intellectual;" but I suspect that would not particularly trouble Emerson. In fact, he not only defined himself as a scholar, he also most often suggested that his primary audience consisted of other scholars, or students. Certainly all scholars interested in him will want to revisit *The Conduct of Life* in this exemplary edition and to study the distinctive portraits developed in Buell's *Emerson* and Field's *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Making of a Democratic Intellectual.*

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