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Carlson, Emerson's Literary Criticism

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Eric W. Carlson. ed. *Emerson's Literary Criticism*. (Regents Critics Series). Lincoln [Nebraska] and London: U. of Nebraska Press, 1979. L + 251pp. Cloth. \$21.50

Eric Carlson's anthology of Emerson's literary criticism is the latest volume in the Regents Critics Series established at the University of Nebraska "to provide reading texts of significant literary critics in the Western tradition." Although one may argue the merits of Ralph Waldo Emerson as a "significant literary critic," Professor Carlson assembles in logical fashion an impressive body of Emersonian commentary upon literary theory and practice. Some of the materials, for example, Emerson's essays on "Art," "The Poet," and "Intellect," are well known and easily available; other selections, particularly those dealing with specific authors and individual works, are not so readily accessible to the student.

Professor Carlson prefaces the selections in his anthology with a lengthy introduction in which he analyzes Emerson's literary theories in the context of his basic transcendental philosophical premises. Since Carlson relies very heavily upon the conclusions of other scholars, the introduction offers little that is new to Emerson's admirers. To be fair to Carlson, however, one should say that the introduction appears primarily aimed at the undergraduate student and not intended as a contribution to Emerson scholarship. In the headnotes to the individual selections, Carlson evidently feels much more at liberty to advance his own commentary.

Emerson's Literary Criticism is effectively organized. Selections are grouped under five major headings: "Art as Experience," "The Creative Process," "The Art of Rhetoric," "Toward a Modern Critical Perspective," and "Writers and Books." The first three sections contain material familiar to many students of American literature. The last two topics will doubtless prove the most interesting to anyone seeking to observe Emerson applying his literary theories to individual writers. On the whole, they suggest that Emerson was more at ease in the explication of his intuitive philosophical speculations than he was in dealing with specific writers and individual books. He seems particularly inept in evaluating novels and novelists. Without bestowing prizes to literary critics, one can say that Emerson's literary criticism does not rank with that of Poe, or Lowell, or Howells.

Professor Carlson includes a very helpful bibliography, as well as

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informative notes following each group of selections. The volume should prove useful to students who seek to understand Emerson's basic literary theories and their possible application to specific works and authors.

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