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## Yannella, Ralph Waldo Emerson

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DONALD YANNELLA. *RALPH WALDO EMERSON*. BOSTON:  
TWAYNE PUBLISHERS, 1982. 147 pp. \$10.95.

This latest book in Twayne's "United States Author Series" is an introduction to the anthologized Emerson, the "Sage of Concord" whose work from *Nature* to "Experience" and beyond is marked more by continuity than reversal—"certainly not repudiation." The new reader of Emerson will not find the Emerson that Stephen Whicher and Jonathan Bishop taught us to see—the Emerson whose nineteenth-century version of our mid-life crisis drove him to confess in "Experience" that the "mid-world is best." Here we have Emerson in the "middle region" of his being, with no beginning and certainly no end in the sense that self-reliance finally becomes God-reliance. The place to begin one's study of Emerson, Yannella advises at the outset of his book, is with the essays and poems. Recent scholarship, however, would argue that an earlier and better place for meeting the man whose thought is sometimes well-nigh inscrutable is the published early lectures and—for the very curious—the selection of published sermons. Study of these works makes it easier to understand the trajectory of Emerson's philosophy. We see that his optimism grew out of a sense of failure in the particular life—in the loss of his first wife and brothers (a thesis borne out when the journals are added to one's study of the early Emerson). We also come to see how his transcendental optimism eventually had to fail, as his faith in the general fell back into a hope for the particular life. Yannella indicates some understanding of this paradigm when he says (echoing Carl F. Strauch and others) that whatever pessimism is found in the later Emerson is merely muffled in the early work. His point is to put Emerson's career into a clearer context, one that allows the bard to hobble off stage with many of his illusions intact. It's a good portrait for all those who don't take Emerson personally.

It's also a good introduction in the sense that the works discussed are laid out for the reader clearly and concisely. Those in search of a quick context for *Nature*, "the American Scholar" Address, the "Divinity School Address"—indeed for most of Emerson's major works—will not be disappointed. Yannella's chapter on the poetry is particularly useful—as is his fresh discussions of such overlooked works as *English Traits*. The book, as I said, is even-handed. It is also informative and—in spite of its search for a more harmonious Emerson—not without its original observations.

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