

Jerome Loving. *Emerson, Whitman, and the American Muse*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982. 220 pp. \$22.00.

Loving's excellent book treats a major subject in a fresh and thoroughgoing way and produces new emphases and conclusions. His topic is the interrelations between Emerson as the central man in nineteenth-century American literature and Whitman as the greatest poet. The connections between the careers of Emerson and Whitman are more frequent and intricate than many have known. Emerson's 1855 letter of praise and its publication and republication by Whitman are not the whole story. As a historian of literature Loving shows Emerson's influence in their parallel but overlapping careers, each rising to a peak of five years or so, Emerson's from 1836 to 1842 and Whitman's from 1855 to 1860, and then their decline into less impressive respectability. Both escaped being stultified by their cultures and produced a literature that was at once representative of American character and uniquely their own. And both subsided in relative conservatism.

Loving achieves this end because of his superior judgment and learning, which is based upon going back to the primary sources—especially the sermons and early and late lectures of Emerson and the journalism and poems of Whitman—some long known and some only recently published. From these come fine insights. In addition, he uses a thorough knowledge of the best and most recent scholarship to substantiate his points. His technique is more to compare than to contrast the two, in alternating chapters. Though this organization seems simple, the book is complex in structure because of controlled cuttings back and forth in subsections—some containing cultural material, some analyses of their attitudes and thought. The richness of the volume is difficult to represent because it is so packed with judgments, ideas, and facts. Though obviously not writing for the beginner, Loving rewards close attention and careful rereading. Even more important, he makes us wish to reread Emerson and Whitman.

Loving finds Whitman and Emerson alike in the shapes of their careers and in their temperaments and talents, despite their differences in social milieu. Both had long foregrounds leading up to their periods of greatness. Emerson's was in the ministry but he found doctrinal doubts and was too much a poet to remain a preacher. Whitman found his verse too intellectual and Emerson's best results were in the prose poetry of his lectures. Whitman for his part was too much the poet to remain in his earlier field of journalism. In their proper calling both expressed views of a Neoplatonic idealism—views they could not permanently uphold. While Emerson moved from self-reliance to acceptance of his limitations and of adherence to the standards of social custom, Whitman lost faith in himself and preached what he could no longer practice. After five years their periods of greatness had passed.

As Emerson abandoned Unitarian Christianity and developed his own direct relation with Spirit or the Oversoul, he called for a new American poet—one who could combine nature and man through the poetic imagination. New Englanders had failed him: Very, Alcott, Margaret Fuller, Newsome, Ellery Channing, and even Thoreau as he thought. So when Emerson read his lecture on "Nature and the Powers of the Poet" in New York on 5 March 1855 he was beginning to despair. But Walter Whitman reported the speech in the *Aurora* on 7 March. It is ironic that at the end of his major phase Emerson should have sowed the seed that grew into *Leaves of Grass*.

Noting the call for a native poet, Whitman for his part read Emerson's *Essays*, 1st Series, moved from political journalism, and produced a song of himself as the divine average American.

When *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1855, Emerson had accepted the validity of the physical senses as part of experience. He recognized the greatness of the book at once and wrote his letter, "I greet you at the beginning of a great career." Whitman had this encomium published in the *New York Tribune* on 10 October. Though irritated by this tasteless act, Emerson nevertheless called on Whitman in Brooklyn and took him to the Astor House for dinner. Loving properly undercuts Rusk's second-hand rumor and myth of Whitman's sensational conduct there. At any rate, Emerson praised the new book to his friends and even the 1856 edition with the blurb on its spine and a reprinting of Emerson's note. And in 1859 he sent Whitman a complimentary copy of *The Conduct of Life*. The meeting and talk on Boston Commons about the 3rd edition is too well-known to recount. Whitman would not remove the offending material. But Emerson provided the "wound-dresser" with letters of introduction to the Secretaries of State and the Treasury in 1863 and later helped place "Proud Music of the Storm" in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1869. When, however, Whitman turned from sexual to religious imagery and themes, Emerson thought he had not improved in his later poems.

Whitman's self-begotten American Sublime also lasted about five years. Encouraged by Emerson's example, disgusted with the politics of slavery, and soon sensing Lincoln as the average American, Whitman personally celebrated the equality of body with spirit and microcosmic man with the universe. With marvelous imagination he combined celebrations of love and death in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" but "Children of Adam" and the Calamus series, that dark slough of the soul, could not attach him to anything permanently. "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," an almost miraculous evocation of despair, closes his most creative period.

Whitman moved farther from his early spontaneity by consciously changing his emphasis from sex to religion—perhaps in imitation of his master. But as we have said, Emerson was not fooled. In the end both became preachers, having lost the faith that language could charm the understanding out of the fear of death. Emerson turned to the conduct of life while Whitman adopted an institutionalized personalism. So, for Loving, "Passage to India" was a forced and artificial creation as Whitman tried unsuccessfully to play God.

In emphasizing the life cycle, Loving charts the responses of both to the knowledge of death, which Emerson called the fall of man. Yet his optimism survived the death of his beloved wife because the memory of their first rapture remained. But ten years later at the demise of little Waldo euphoria was gone and death was the only remaining certainty. Emerson doubted the vision of self-reliance, saw it as a mean egotism, and fell back on the wisdom of culture which could limit the evils of self-regard. He had moved from Freedom to Fate, as Stephen Whicher put it in a dichotomy which Loving explores. Deciding complete heroes were no longer possible, Emerson wrote of less adequate representative men whose function it now was to transform genius into practical power as his friend John Forbes had done.

Loving's book is remarkably evenhanded and is fair to both figures with perhaps a slight bias in excusing Whitman. While Loving plays down Emerson's mysticism

and Whitman's homosexuality, Thoreau's total response to Whitman was friendlier than Loving's quotation displays.

The historical approach requires an account of the decline of each into age. This is hard on people, since they all get older as I unfortunately know. Even so determined a man as Wallace Stevens, who kept getting better with age, turned to religion at the end though unlike Emerson and Whitman he did not preach in his poems.

Somewhat different is the view of Stanley Cavell. As a philosopher himself he calls Emerson a philosopher. Loving does not because his interest is psychological rather than mental. He is more interested in responses than in mental activity, so he includes entire careers, while Cavell can select from the peak of their careers the ideals that appeal to him.

Conversely Loving emphasizes the personal relations of these poets, their biographers, and their attempts at the self-begetting of the American Sublime. So Harold Bloom, especially, and Erik Erikson both are quoted. While he makes value judgments, Loving is not primarily a critic who makes formal analysis or gives a detailed description of imagery. And, of course, considering his topic, Loving does not hold the bias against optimism, romanticism, and the common man of the Brooks and Warren school.

What Loving sets out to do he accomplishes exceptionally well. Despite a tendency to repeat its arguments, the book is not boring because the illustrative material keeps changing. So this is a major book on a major subject by a major scholar.

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Meena Alexander. *The Poetic Self: Towards a Phenomenology of Romanticism*. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, Inc., 1979. 280 pp. \$14.75.

In this study of five romantic poets—Coleridge, Wordsworth, Arnold, Whitman, and Baudelaire—Meena Alexander examines ways in which 19th century poetry attempted to construct a self; its ways of making a meaning independent of traditional beliefs. For the English poets, the great Romantic quest for selfhood was that of relating subjective consciousness to the outer time of the world and its shared space. For them the unifying force was memory, binding present perceptions to moments in the past and anticipations of the future, and locating past, present, and future firmly in spatial terms. The lyric meditation, like Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," was the typical form in which they achieved such selfhood. Wordsworth's "The Prelude" and Arnold's "Empedocles on Aetna" are other instances of this romantic quest for the self.

In contrast to their emphasis on the role of time and memory in this quest, Whitman, faced with the same problem, addresses it in terms preeminently spatial. In "Song of Myself," the problem of poetic identity is given in new, non-linear terms, directly related to the vastness of the America continent. The logic of the poem is given by a struggle between the "vatic" voice—"the expansionist desires of the embodied self" as Ms. Alexander puts it—expressing itself in the great catalogues in