

BOOK REVIEWS

The Code of Concord: Emerson's Search for Universal Laws by Anders Hallengren. Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, *Stockholm Studies in History of Literature* 34 published by Almqvist & Wiksell International, Stockholm, Sweden, 1994. © Anders Hallengren. 413 pp. (ISBN 91-22-01620-1; ISSN 0491-0869).

As one concludes a reading of Anders Hallengren's lengthy and absorbing study of Ralph Waldo Emerson,¹ the book's subtitle would appear to be somewhat misleading. For the evidence that the author amasses throughout the work suggests that what Emerson searched for was not so much universal laws. Beneath many of his more radical or unorthodox pronouncements, Emerson was too much the traditionalist to be seduced by a solipsistic or an antinomian approach to the conduct of life. What Emerson seemed to be searching for was some understanding of the *ways* that mortals apprehended that universal laws existed. What sanctions did those laws impose upon us?

Even the main title gives one pause. Emerson once said of himself: "I am too young yet by several ages to compile a code." How, then, does one go about detecting a "code" at Concord or at any other place associated with the man?

These observations are not meant as quibbles. They do, however, underline what Hallengren—and every other serious student of Emerson—demonstrates voluminously: the paradoxes and apparent inconsistencies in Emerson's life and works make him a fascinating, yet most difficult, quarry to try to track down, let alone bring to heel. The paradoxes within his prose and poetry reflect the life. When Emerson resigned his pastorate of the Second Unitarian Church of Boston in 1832, he observed that it was "necessary to leave the ministry" if he were to be a good minister. He was

¹ Anders Hallengren, *The Code of Concord Emerson's Search for Universal Laws*, (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1994).

a man who made a name for himself and gained a following and a living as an itinerant lecturer. Yet he was clearly uncomfortable with the idea of a "following" and was certainly never a "joiner" himself. As Hallengren points out, one can readily detect elements of both the Jeffersonian and the Federalist in Emerson's comments and reactions (244), and he notes later that Emerson "never got tired attacking 'the Conservative', the Man of the Past. In doing so, however, his thinking was profoundly traditional" (361). One cannot reduce him to a "mere subjectivist or idealist," writes Hallengren, and in another place he says: "Emerson synthesizes opposites in one person, at the same time" (246). As for Emerson the preacher of individualism, Hallengren insists that Emerson repeatedly stresses that the "individuality is secondary to the universal" (182).

However, in a book that attempts to trace throughout Emerson's mature life his search for those "moral absolutes" that the author believes suggest "a constancy beyond the constant change" (9, n. 3), one runs into one of the most difficult paradoxes that surround Emerson the Moralist. After all, Emerson once stated bluntly: "I could never give much reality to evil." Nor is this an isolated comment. One can find numerous examples in which Emerson insists that an absorption with evil implies a fatal clogging of the passageways that lead to a perception of the divine in everyman. But if evil was a far more insignificant and tractable entity than Emerson's Puritan forebears and New England countrymen believed, whence arises the concern for moral absolutes?

The answer to this enigma—if one can be hardy enough to use the term "answer" in regard to anything relating to Emerson's thought—would seem to lie in the realm of psychology rather than logic. Once Emerson had finished his thorough discarding of dogmas, creeds, canons, and statutes, he was left to account for his inner convictions regarding the conduct of life. As was the case with his good friend, Thomas Carlyle, antinomianism had no appeal for him at all. Whether it was the pair's Puritan heritage or the spirit of the age, the moral imperatives were decidedly strong with them, and both men were left to find suitable replacements for the religious underpinnings that had traditionally provided the impetus toward a moral life. Hallengren puts it succinctly: "Emerson's religious struggle was primarily a fight to preserve threatened moral values" (30). Like physical laws, ethical laws were not invented nor

were they "'communicated' from heaven to earth" but 'inferred, discovered' (53). It was intuition and instinct that would reveal the pathway for mortal feet.

These intuitions and instincts were a reflection of the divine presence in man. As early as 1834, Hallengren points out, Emerson had concluded that "God is in Jesus, but Jesus is in man, and God is in every man" (185). And what of the counter-tendencies that blocked or frustrated those intuitions? Since Emerson held that evil things "were not from the beginning," they were "not eternal, but perishable" and would "disappear with the rise of human dignity" (85). Or, as Hallengren puts Emerson's concept in a later passage: "...evil is not symbolic, but metaphoric, since it corresponds to something in the corrupt soul which has no universal or eternal foundation..." (307).

One should hasten to point out, nonetheless, that for Emerson a substitution of the intuitive perception of the law for a reflexive obedience to external dogma and law never suggested any lighter task for mankind. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson had noted that we could "neglect this reflex standard" and "discharge its debts" by a more direct route; but he added this cautionary note: "If anyone imagines that this law is lax, let him keep its commandments one day."

In Emerson's formulation of some of his ideas, his reading of Swedenborg onward from the 1830s played a major role. Anyone even marginally aware of Emerson's writing knows that Swedenborg's name is one that Emerson persistently invokes in his essays and journals. Yet, true to Emerson's nature, when he came to enroll him among his *Representative Men*, he did so in such a way as to leave the reader in doubt as to whether he came to praise or bury the seer. He would record in his journal in 1854 that "'the Age is Swedenborg's'" (164), but, like Blake and the elder Henry James, Emerson was not one to confuse strong influence with adherence to anything that resembled religious orthodoxy or ecclesiastical polity. If there was one thing that remained a constant with Emerson it was his refusal to acknowledge any subordination of his own mind to the pronouncements or experience of others—even of saints and prophets. A belief in everyman's transcendent access to the higher laws implied no less.

But by the time that Emerson came to write his long essay, "Nature," in the mid-1830s, his own reading of Swedenborg and the influence of the Bostonian Swedenborgian, Sampson Reed, had left enough of an imprint on him that one of the first reviewers of that essay had judged its anonymous author to be a Swedenborgian. Emerson would not have denied the influence, but he surely would have cringed at being thought a follower or, even worse, a convert. Perhaps it was the memory of this earlier identification that accounts for the tone of the piece in *Representative Men*. Hallengren's observation suggests this: "He always attacked those to whom he owed much" (28).

We know that Emerson was particularly attracted by Swedenborg's description of the correspondences between the world of nature and of the spirit, but Hallengren also asserts that the *ethical* influence of Swedenborg on the young Emerson, though "far from obvious," was significant even though Emerson scholars have, in the main, ignored it (58). "It was the primacy of morals which appealed to him above all in Swedenborg," writes Hallengren (172). A bit later he adds: "...the doctrine of use was perhaps the only one of Swedenborg's doctrines to be accepted at its face value, and where he took 'the mystic' at his word" (174). Hallengren indicates that this attitude with regard to "works" appears early in Emerson, for he cites as evidence Wesley T. Mott's study of Emerson's sermons, one of which included Emerson's pronouncement that "good works" form the sole "index by which it is possible to determine your progress in goodness" (220). This attitude, Hallengren concludes, "was to remain and become fundamental" with Emerson (220).

Hallengren's aim in this study, however, goes considerably beyond a simple investigation of Emerson's concern with the moral and ethical code by itself. He wishes to find "a concordance of Ethics and Aesthetics, Poetics and Politics" in Emerson, or, more precisely, he wishes to demonstrate that this "concordance" is provided by the "moral thread" that "Emerson the moralist" spins between these disciplines (9). This is an ambitious undertaking. To this reader's eyes, the book succeeds only partially in this larger scheme.

Perhaps it is the very abundance of material on and by Emerson that accounts for this. When one adds to Emerson's published works the

contents of the Journals, now largely accessible to all, and when one tops this with more than a century of various sorts of assessment of the man's life and work—a good bit of it tendentious or contradictory—the difficulty of Hallengren's task becomes evident.

Particularly as one moves to its latter chapters and segments, the book seems to lack the kind of organization that is needed if one is to find some clear chronological or thematic development. It is almost as if a long absorption with the master's works had begun to have its effect on the writer's own style, the very diffusiveness—albeit brilliance—of Emerson's prose, his easy movement from idea to idea, image to image, *aperçu* to *aperçu*, leading the writer unconsciously to imitate the inimitable.

Nonetheless, the great merit of the book is the breadth of the author's reading and his insightful analysis of what he uses. Very little scholarship on Emerson seems to have escaped him. One could probably produce another solid volume simply from gleanings from Hallengren's footnotes. More important, one senses at every point the depth of the author's absorption of the spirit of Emerson's time and the nature of the American soil out of which Emerson sprang. He is on intimate terms with the literature of this country and of the European and classical authors who influenced Emerson. His own description of his book as "a few marginal notes made by a foreigner relating to a tradition" (11) is misleadingly modest, both with regard to the book's scope and to his own qualifications for the task he sets himself. He writes clearly and well, with only some occasional locutions that strike the ear as unidiomatic—productions of a writer whose mother tongue is not English. It is particularly gratifying that the writing is blessedly free of the jargon and posturing that infect so much of what passes for literary scholarship these days.

The "Emersonian enigma," as Hallengren terms it, is probably best summed up when he notes that, although Emerson's ideas put him in the "liberal forefront" of his day, his "philosophy appears to be a last attempt, within the framework of modern secularization, to save a traditional world-view with Christian as well as Classicist tenets" (371). This is a suggestive comment that helps define the "enigma" and some of the paradoxes one finds in Emerson. But the direct appeal of Emerson's writing to generations of readers around the world has more to do with his

THE NEW PHILOSOPHY, January-June 1995

talent for relating the universal details of daily human experience to those intimations of the inner life that give meaning to those experiences.

It is to Hallengren's credit that he offers insights into both the enigma and the gratification that a reading of Emerson still brings to many of us.

Robert W. Gladish
Huntingdon Valley, PA 19009

