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REVIEW

John T. Lysaker, *Emerson and Self-Culture* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), ISBN: 978-0253219718

In *Self-Reliance* Emerson says of original writings that “The sentiment they instill is of more value than any thought they may contain”¹ and the same could be said for Lysaker’s book which conveys the sentiment of Emerson’s writings in a way that few academic books can. *Emerson and Self-Culture* contributes to a growing philosophical literature on Emerson that includes recent books by Lawrence Buell,² Stanley Cavell,³ and Naoko Saito.⁴ It is a welcome addition to the resurgence of Emerson scholarship and one that is distinct from the others in its highly personal style. It is less a formal exploration of Emerson’s thought than a meditation on self-culture that is taken up in the Emersonian spirit. Its focus is self-culture and Lysaker says that it is the concept that interests him most, Emerson being a particularly effective thinker through which to grasp it.⁵ Despite this admission, Lysaker does indeed deliver a great deal of insight on Emerson, insight that goes beyond simply using him as a means of exploring self-culture. Throughout the book Lysaker treats Emerson’s ideas with a sense that it is the ideas themselves that matter most and not Emerson’s particular formulation of them. This makes the book feel as though it is not simply a commentary on Emerson but also a continuation of his thought.

Not only does Lysaker wish to push Emerson’s project beyond its original formulation, he also gives the reader a sense of why Emerson is important, especially with regard to self-culture. In the first chapter, “Taking Emerson Personally,” the author shows how to read Emerson’s work as existentially relevant, not simply as a philosophical curiosity, through exploring what Emerson would think about Lysaker’s own musical tastes. Such personal commentary is normally out of place in a work of serious philosophy, but Lysaker’s

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson’s Essays*, edited by Irwin Edman (New York: Harper Collins, 1981), 31.

² Lawrence Buell. *Emerson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

³ Stanley Cavell. *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*. Edited by David Justin Hodge (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁴ Naoko Saito. *The Gleam of Light: Moral Perfectionism and Education in Dewey and Emerson* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005)

⁵ Lysaker, *Emerson and Self-Culture*, 6.

personal insights are among the book's most memorable passages because they challenge the reader to make similar investigations while reading the book.

Throughout *Emerson and Self-Culture* there is a tension between expressing Emerson's own ideas and building upon them to arrive at new insights. Conveniently, this is a problem that Emerson has already wrestled with so we can watch Emerson in the act of deciding how we should read him. As Lysaker points out in the second chapter, "The Genius of Nature," quotation is problematic, even when one evokes wise maxims, because they are not one's own words. No matter how useful the thoughts of others may be, they discourage us from putting our own genius to work. A person must strike a balance between imitation and originality by following the insights of predecessors without losing sight of one's own contributions. In the investigation of self-culture this is the only way one can proceed. Although Emerson gives many indications of what self-culture is, his explanation of it feels like a deliberately unfinished project. Like Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and philosophers taking a therapeutic approach, Emerson is not so much interested in espousing a doctrine as he is in inciting readers to conduct their own investigations. "The address of an Emersonian text is ever present, always asking to be taken to heart, to be taken personally, and in the fullness of its responsive provocations."⁶ Thus, Lysaker shows that his approach to reading Emerson in terms of our own lives is the one Emerson would recommend to us.

Most of Lysaker's book is concerned with showing what self-culture is and how it differs from other forms of individualism. Self-culture is a radical concept because it encourages us to question rules whenever they conflict with our own values. It confers upon us a nearly divine power to determine value – the power to judge the world and praise or condemn it according to our own standards. Neither the laws of man nor those of religion are laws that an authentic person is beholden to without question. Emerson recognizes the potential criticisms of this iconoclastic trust in the self and in *Self-Reliance* argues that, even so, trust in oneself should not be diminished though it may conflict with religious doctrines and social norms. We must trust our impulses, he argues, even when we are not sure whether their source is good or evil. From this line of reasoning we can see that it was only a short step to Nietzsche's position that our capacity to create our own values should not be restrained by "herd morality."

Lysaker chooses to refer to Emerson's notion of individuality as "self-culture," even though there are more common words that initially seem synonymous. Words like "individualism" and "private" have strong liberal connotations that mislead those trying to understand Emerson. They bring to mind an affirmation of the self at the expense of others, or at least separate from them, but Emerson's self-culture differs a great deal from liberal individualism. The self that Emerson deals with is one embedded in social relationships. Most important among these are friendships; however, looser connections with other members of society and even the government are also essential. Among the reasons why we must abandon atomistic individualism is that

⁶ Lysaker, *Emerson and Self-Culture*, 24.

the means by which we express ourselves are inherited from our predecessors. Our language, the tools we have to realize our potential, and even perceptions are shaped by what has come before and the context we are rooted in. As Lysaker puts it, "the self of self-culture neither stands nor proceeds alone, but only with the support of others."⁷ There is also a sense in which one loses oneself to one's own genius. We are not in complete control of our thoughts; they take on a life of their own. "We do not command our own best thoughts, but they us."

In spite of the emphasis on individuality, neither Emerson nor Lysaker wishes to present self-culture as something selfish. It affirms self-trust while at the same time affirming the value of relationships with others. In the second half of the book Lysaker explains how self-culture is developed by our relatedness to others in friendship. Lysaker finds two reasons that friendship is central to self-culture. First, it gives us a more accurate impression of the world by showing us that it is not empty. Second, and more importantly for self-culture, friendship challenges us to improve. A friend who is interested in music, for example, might open one to new genres that would otherwise go unexplored. In the first chapter Lysaker reflects upon his own musical preferences and sees how doing so propelled him into an investigation of himself. In concluding his analysis Lysaker shows how a friend might have the same effect. The reconciliation of individualism with the necessities of group life is thus affected in the same way as in Aristotle's in *Nicomachean Ethics*. For Aristotle the deepest form of friendship is found in unity between two virtuous individuals who associate for mutual benefit without either one losing independence. Yet although friends help us realize self-culture, they are insufficient in themselves. So too are other associational ties. Self-culture is thus a complex topic that ties together our own conscious strivings to understand ourselves, the innate genius which at times seems to overwhelm our consciousness, and our relations with others.

Lysaker shows that Emersonian self-culture concerns the entire being of the individual. It is not the improvement of certain faculties, nor is it superficial improvement through cultivating a better attitude. The transformation that Emerson recommends is a total metamorphosis in which the individual is constantly recreating himself to affirm youthful energy, resilience, and openness to new possibilities.⁸ It is the kind of radical self-creation that was picked up by Nietzsche and became a dominant theme of existentialism. Because it concerns a person's entire character self-culture is a constant concern; it is made through every action and inaction. Whether or not we are conscious of it, we are constantly engaged in creating ourselves. What Emerson offers us is a way of making this process conscious and an indication of what kinds of people we ought to become.

There are many interesting parallels between Emerson's thought and that of other philosophers and literary figures. Unfortunately, Lysaker does not speculate much about

⁷ Ibid., 38.

⁸ Ibid., 195.

Emerson's influence, nor does he say much about his influence on subsequent thinkers. He writes at length about contemporary interpretations of Emerson, especially Cavell's work, but does not have much to say about how other prominent philosophers understood Emerson's contribution. It may be outside the scope of the book to dwell on such relationships, but it would be a valuable aid to understanding self-culture if they received more explanation. This is especially true given Lysaker's desire to explore the concept of self-culture for its own sake. He admits that more is said about self-culture than appears in Emerson's writing and that it would improve the reader's understanding of Emerson to have some idea of what these other conceptions of self-culture are.

Despite Lysaker's claim to be writing a book about self-culture, which only takes up Emerson as a useful starting point, the book never moves far in a new direction. It remains a work of intellectual history, albeit one that does not approach the subject in a purely academic manner. Lysaker's enthusiasm for taking up self-culture in an Emersonian spirit and writing as though the idea mattered beyond the academic context is both a strength and a weakness of the book. It provides new insight into the philosopher's work and distinguishes this study from other recent works on Emerson. Yet Lysaker's approach also deprives the work of a critical edge. He does not call Emerson into question, nor does he have a basis on which to do so since the book opens with the assumption that the self-culture project is a good one, only needing some further explication.

Lysaker's inclusion of quotations from countless essays and notes reveals his knowledge of Emerson's work and gives the reader a large supply of profound ideas to reflect on. There is, however, one difficulty with the breadth of the study. By building the concept of self-culture from an array of Emerson's writings, including unpublished work, there is little sense of how Emerson's idea developed and changed over the course of his writings. The historical dimension is lacking, as are any biographical insights into what may have driven Emerson to revise his thoughts. Using all of Emerson's work to build a single view of self-culture also makes the concept somewhat vague.

Emerson and Self-Culture is, as the title suggests, a detailed examination of one aspect of Emerson's thought and not a general examination of his philosophy. Through that concept one gets a sense of the Emerson's work as a whole because it is a recurrent theme throughout his writings. Nevertheless, the book only approaches other areas of Emerson's thought tangentially and always through the lens of self-culture. Because of this focus *Emerson and Self-Culture* is best suited for readers who are already familiar with Emerson. The book is excellent for those who seek a deeper understanding of Emerson or readers interested in concepts of individuality and self-exploration. It is essential reading for philosophers interested in the renewed debate over Emerson's philosophy.

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