

JAMES MARCUS. *GLAD TO THE BRINK OF FEAR: A PORTRAIT OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON*. PRINCETON UP, 2024.

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Glad to the Brink of Fear: A Portrait of Ralph Waldo Emerson, written by James Marcus and published by Princeton University Press in March 2024, does not tell a linear story. Linearity is hardly the direction our human lives tend to follow. Marcus's book proceeds, instead, in Emersonian circles, showing us how moments of growth, learning, failure, and loss all contributed to shaping the man's life and his writings. Marcus's biography is an important read, which will appeal to scholars of Transcendentalism and general readers alike.

The book, though far from idealizing Emerson, serves as a powerful statement on the importance that his writings and teachings still hold for us today. Marcus writes about Emerson in ways that feel profoundly inspiring to modern-day readers. He describes, in compelling detail, the most courageous moments in Emerson's life, recounting how he fought for justice and exposed the moral, political, and intellectual corruption of his time. It is hard not to find a certain resonance between the mercantile greed that Emerson condemned and the inequalities that plague today's world. In the face of injustice, Emerson's denunciation of "infamy" was loud and clear:

We do not breathe well. There is infamy in the air. I have a new experience. I wake in the morning with a painful sensation, which I carry about all day, and which, traced home, is the odious remembrance of that ignominy which has fallen on Massachusetts, which robs the landscape of beauty, and takes the sunshine out of every hour (p. 218).

The strongest feature of Marcus's work is that, alongside the grandiose moments in Emerson's life and his intellectual genius, readers are concurrently presented with Emerson "the man" — a mere mortal who made many right decisions but also numerous mistakes.

Marcus's biography offers an organic view of Emerson's long life (1803–1882), an authentic and honest narration in which the private and the public intermingle and provides a 360-degree account of the evolution of his thinking. It is in many ways an emotional read, a beautifully written story about how Emerson navigated change in his life: from the loss of his first love and wife, Ellen Louisa Tucker, the trip to Paris that changed his life, his second marriage to Lydia Jackson, the devastating loss of his five-year-old son Waldo, to the end of his career and life, during which he embarked on one last transatlantic trip to Egypt with his daughter Ellen. In the final part of the book, Marcus is less intent on writing about Emerson's mental decline in terms of the "Platonic wonderland" (p. 247) he seemed to inhabit and more in humanizing the man. Throughout the biography, Marcus intentionally does not shy away from the "ugly," a word he frequently uses to call Emerson's cowardice out. He is critical and intellectually honest about the flaws in Emerson's thinking and about his slow — too slow — support for the abolitionist cause. Commenting on Emerson's early "attack(s) on philanthropy," Marcus states, unequivocally, "this is ugly" (p. 115). Overall, the book provides an excellent exegesis of how "a man so thoroughly opposed to crusades bec[a]me a reluctant crusader" (p. 209).

Unfortunately, Marcus does not pay the same amount of attention to the cause of women's rights, a cause for which Emerson was a very timid supporter throughout his life. What's more, the wording that the biographer chooses when mentioning Margaret Fuller does not do justice to the major intellectual and personal influence she had on Emerson. In the "Introduction," while commenting on the importance of biographical writing, Marcus indicates that Emerson encouraged "his dear friend [Fuller] to work on her abandoned life of the German polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe" and then abruptly concludes: "Despite this call to arms, Fuller never wrote her life of Goethe" (p. 17). Marcus does not acknowledge the forms of physical and economic hardship that Fuller, like all other women intellectuals at the time, had to endure because of gender discrimination. The fact that "Fuller never wrote her life of Goethe" is all that is said about her before her name reappears a hundred pages later. In Chapter Seven, referring to her for the second time in the biography, Marcus calls "the author and pioneering feminist Margaret Fuller . . . one of Waldo's biggest fans" (p. 113), which, though true, feels once again reductive. Fuller scholars have fought long and hard for her not to be relegated to the status of one of "Emerson's friends," as she was for far too long. Similarly, Marcus's comment about the young women he saw walking down the street

during his own trip to Concord feels — to say the least — unnecessary: “On the main street, young girls carried melting ice-cream cones in their hands, wearing skimpy outfits that probably would have made Waldo turn in his grave” (p. 229). More generally, some of the language Marcus uses to try to sound more engaging to a modern, potentially multi-generational, readership is not very convincing: while comparing Emerson’s lectures to “something halfway between a TED talk and a sermon” (p. 6) might help some of us to picture how these sorts of performances took shape, the reference to “emojis” when explaining Emerson’s childhood pictograms (p. 7), as well as the comparison of Emerson to an “irritating uncle” we all “are desperate to avoid” (p. 1), do not necessarily land well. Similarly, when Marcus describes Henry David Thoreau as “a youth . . . gallivanting through the woods with Waldo, very much a sidekick or puppy in human form” (p. 131), his word choice (and by that, I mean calling Thoreau a “puppy”) is a little awkward. One might also add that, by stating in the “Introduction” that Emerson “speaks to us as Americans, and as individuals” (p. 14), Marcus is not the most welcoming host to his non-American readers.

At other times, Marcus’s style carries readers forth with an engaging enthusiasm, which is extremely helpful in understanding Emerson’s notoriously complex writings. The biographer somewhat takes on the role of a guide, holding readers by the hand and leading them *gently* into the world of Emersonian thought — a strategy about which he describes quite openly, “I will not try to unpack the entire essay. That would require a chapter many times longer than this one, even if I simply copied out the best bits — which is actually my ideal prescription for reading Waldo’s essays . . . He strings together far-flung sentences from his journals, and we take them apart again” (p. 120). Marcus empathetically understands the difficulty of reading Emerson and his attempts at explaining the philosopher’s writings, even by simplifying, are effective and generous: commenting on the many words “Waldo” uses to refer to “freedom,” Marcus admits to a certain “terminological fog [which] can be hard to navigate” (p. 229). In his reading of Emerson’s essay on “Friendship,” in which the latter’s vision is complex and at times may even seem contradictory, Marcus’s summary is useful, efficient, and helpful: “Waldo does have some shrewd things to say about actual friendship. He argues that true friendship requires a mixture of affinity and antagonism. We are drawn to people like ourselves, but not too much like ourselves . . . What we cannot tolerate, Waldo says, is a ‘mush of concession’ from the other party. This makes sense. No friction, no sparks” (p. 127). Marcus’s writing style and tone, which is relatively informal, makes Emerson’s

writings feel accessible; *Glad to the Brink of Fear* is in my opinion a great point of entrance for people who have never read Emerson's work, or who are afraid of reading Emerson's work because they fear it might be too hard to navigate. Marcus's enthusiastic guidance (expressed through phrases such as "here is where things get really interesting" or exclamations, "blooming, buzzing, impossibly fecund — he now dematerializes it!") helps demystify Emerson a little, making sense of his writings by exposing the "magic trick [that] is language" (p. 67).

Where Marcus's narration really shines is in its honest calling out of Emerson's initial lack of support for abolitionism, which he defines for what it is — a disappointing failure. He writes: "Reader, I wish it were otherwise. I wish Waldo hadn't found the activists of his age so comical that he devoted much of 'New England Reformers' to mocking them" (p. 115). Marcus has a straight-to-the-point approach to this subject and firmly denounces Emerson's ethical and moral failure: "where he really went wrong, in the remarks above and in 'Self-Reliance,' is his disdain for the abolitionists" (p. 116). That said, Marcus also shows how Emerson's thinking did come around quite radically and in ways that might have surprised his younger self: "'It is so delicious to act with great masses to great aims,' he declared — an assertion that probably would have made him snort just a decade earlier." (p. 221). The biographer draws a very complete and thorough picture of how Emerson's thinking evolved through the years, of how he went from "pour[ing] his scorn upon every form of charitable relief" and "presenting himself as a Transcendentalist Scrooge" (p. 115) to eventually "push[ing] back against his own reputation as an evangelist of individualism by exalting the power of communal action" (p. 221). Building upon Emerson's metaphor of "circles," Marcus also points out that, with old age, and unable to work autonomously, Emerson gave new meaning to the word "community": collaborating with James Elliot Cabot and his daughter Ellen, at a late age, Emerson looked at them as "fellow creatures, participating in a giant and unending conversation, with no gold stars awarded for individual genius (p. 248). And yet, Marcus steadily — and rightly so — reiterates the point that, though Emerson changed, "The good and the bad — the exalted and excruciating — coexisted in Waldo's mind until the very end" (p. 223).

This was not the case, for instance, for Lydia Jackson, Emerson's second wife. In a chapter entirely devoted to their relationship, entitled "A Conjunction of Two Planets" (which is apparently how a "Plymouth resident had . . . call(ed) their impending marriage" [p. 100]), Marcus shows that Lydia was the one who made her entrance in the world of

politics first: while “Waldo shrank from the contact sport of politics,” which Marcus calls “an out, a dodge, a failure,” “Lidian got there first” (p. 102). She “helped to found the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1837,” she “invited such prominent abolitionists as Wendell Phillips and George Luther Stearns to the Emerson home,” she hosted “Sarah and Angelina Grimké, a pair of crusading sisters who broke with their slave-owning family in South Carolina to become ardent activists” (p. 102). In short, Lydia was “devoted to the great causes of the age,” while her husband’s “initial attitude toward these reform movements was one of gentle ridicule” (p. 111). While Marcus’s rendering of Lydia’s life, both before and after her marriage, is fascinating, and does real justice to the importance she had for her husband’s life and career — “her influence,” he states, “was enormous” (p. 111) — it is surprising to note that he most often refers to her as Lidian, and that, despite acknowledging that Waldo’s decision to change “his fiancée’s name” from Lydia to Lidian was “strange” (p. 99). Critics are now more and more often opting for what feels like a more respectful choice, which is to use Lydia’s *real* name instead. In a chapter simply entitled “Lydia Jackson Emerson,” in the new *Oxford Handbook of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (2024), Randall Fuller expressly calls her Lydia, remarking that “she has been almost entirely overshadowed by her famous husband.” Apart from that, Marcus’s analysis of Lydia’s life is thorough and lengthy: in the book’s sixth chapter, a complete switching of perspectives allows readers to enter Lydia’s world, leaving Emerson aside for a minute. And she is not the only woman from the Emerson circle that we learn a lot about: Marcus’s account of Emerson’s aunt Mary Moody is also very important in helping readers understand the influence that these women, and of course, Fuller, had on the philosopher. That also applies to Emerson’s daughter Ellen, who played a fundamental role in her father’s later years and after his death. We learn a lot about Emerson’s male contemporaries as well — among whom, Thoreau, Herman Melville, as well as Abraham Lincoln — and all of this allows for a compellingly exhaustive vision of the literary, social, and political world that Emerson was immersed in.

To conclude, Marcus’s biography is an engaging book, which provides what feels like an intellectually honest and three-dimensional account of the most complex and most famous thinker of the nineteenth-century United States. A lot less successful, I believe, is Marcus’s treatment of Margaret Fuller. The biographer’s remarks, which lean too often toward the physical (see, for instance, his remark on page 139: “Waldo is probably the least erotic of all the great American writers. Which doesn’t mean that his friendships were devoid of the mosquito buzz and delicious distortions of sexual curiosity. Case in

point: Margaret Fuller”), dangerously reiterate an insistence on the body, and an objectifying kind of perspective, which feminists — including Fuller — have been fighting against for a long time.

REFERENCES

Marcus, James. (2024). *Glad to the Brink of Fear: A Portrait of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.