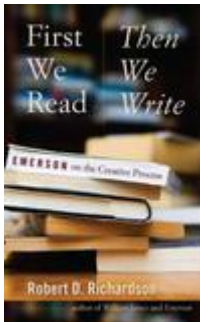


“Whence Is Your Power?” What Psychologists Can Learn From Ralph Waldo Emerson

A review of



First We Read, Then We Write: Emerson on the Creative Process

by Robert D. Richardson

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Reviewed by

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My friends and colleagues in psychology tend to think of themselves as scientists and/or clinicians, not as writers, and certainly not as creative writers. Yet we must write, and we must think creatively in order to generate and share ideas, and to maintain job security. Many psychologists are in fact fine writers, but that contingency between writing and job security (not to mention between writing and completion of graduate school) leads to considerable anxiety and, hence, avoidance of the writing desk, the keyboard, and that cursed blinking cursor. This anxiety spans our discipline and is not an issue only for those seeking tenure; for example, I am not on a tenure track, but I must write grants to obtain the funding for my salary.

Fortunately, there are books that provide strategies for better and more productive writing. A current favorite of mine is Paul Silvia's *How to Write A Lot* (2007; see also Dearing, 2007), which is helping me to conquer my long-ingrained procrastinating and deadline-pushing ways and to develop better writing habits. But right next to Silvia's book on my office bookshelf I am now placing Robert Richardson's new book *First We Read, Then We Write: Emerson on the Creative Process*.

This brief, entertaining book distills advice on writing and creative work from Ralph Waldo Emerson's (1803–1882) journals and essays, and, as Emerson was a master of epigram, the result is highly entertaining. But how can the great American transcendentalist help and inspire you, a 21st-century psychologist searching for a grant opportunity or putting off a difficult manuscript?

We can look to founding psychologist William James for an initial clue; Richardson is biographer to both Emerson (Richardson, 1995) and James (Richardson, 2006; see Noel, 2007). Preparing a talk to commemorate the centennial of Emerson's birth, James reread the works of his father's friend and intellectual mentor and marked passages such as this one, from the essay "Self-Reliance": "Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose: it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf" (Emerson, 1841; quoted in Richardson, 2006, p. 433). These lines had resonance for James, whose psychological theories of emotion and self emphasized the primacy of action in human thought and experience, and who in his daily life tended more toward "shooting the gulf" than toward repose.

We also find in these lines Emerson's fundamental emphasis on personal power as underlying effective action. In *First We Read*, Richardson gives us this from Emerson's journals: "My heart's inquiry . . . is, whence is your power?" (p. 43). Power for Emerson is available to all, and among its sources are nonconformity in thought and self-reliance in work. By the time he prepared his remarks for Emerson's centennial, William James had overcome years of indecision and episodes of depression in his youth to write masterpieces (*Principles of Psychology* and *Varieties of Religious Experience*), and so could attest to the substance beneath Emerson's lofty-sounding notions.

But let us return our attention to you, our weary grant-seeking, manuscript-delaying psychologist of the present, who will probably not write masterpieces—at the very least, you're unlikely to write two masterpieces. Whence is *your* power, and what does it mean to find it and translate it into your work? There is in fact real guidance in Richardson's little compendium of Emerson's advice. I focus here on points that seem to me especially helpful for psychologists.

Nature as Our Source

The creative process has been described as an interplay of deliberative, effortful work and insight arising from nonconscious or automatic processes (Simonton, 2008), and it is a more straightforward matter to provide advice on effective, effortful steps to productivity (e.g., scheduling work time) than on the mysteries of inspiration. In psychology, we are asked to generate “original” research ideas as we sit awash in the flood tide of e-mail alerts bringing news of new journal issues and papers that may be of interest. Some help for our predicament can be found in a chapter Richardson titled “Nature,” also the title of one of Emerson’s greatest essays. The opening of Emerson’s essay reads as follows:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?
(Emerson, 1836–1860/1982, p. 35)

Richardson comments that Emerson “has here hit upon a fundamental, evergreen view of the world, a way of looking at life available equally to me and to Marcus Aurelius” (p. 29). Try applying Richardson’s statement to your own work and interests in psychology; imagine an evergreen view of the world, a way of looking at human social behavior equally available to you and to Kurt Lewin (fill in the behavioral phenomena and seminal figure of your choice). Does this feel presumptuous or just plain silly, given the extent of literature we must all follow?

Psychologists I’ve talked to about the origin of their attraction to the field tend to recall either a fascination with some aspect of (usually human) behavior—the amazing leaps and bounds of infant development, perhaps, or the subtle but powerful force of conformity pressure within groups—or with a problem or social issue such as addiction, mental illness, or prejudice. They then recount a particular course or courses in psychology that focused this interest in a new way, introducing them to the discipline’s approaches and tools for thinking about and investigating their original questions. A few years of anxious scholarship in graduate school can be enough to obscure the power of those original experiences. The situation often gets only worse after graduate school; I can personally testify that years of postdoctoral pursuit of grant funds can all but wither anything “evergreen” in one’s view of the world.

Nevertheless, fresh observation is always possible, and the automatic, insightful process of inspiration can be nudged along by simply turning one’s attention outward toward phenomena. One chapter in *First We Read* relates how Emerson urged all his writing friends to keep a journal, and this practice had a profound impact on the work of Henry David Thoreau.

If jotting ideas and observations in a journal or notebook is not your cup of tea, informal conversation with colleagues can also shake loose new ideas. Not long ago, a friend and I were discussing our dissatisfaction with outcome measures and decision-making models of risk behavior in prevention research, and we began to recount our own memories of how we and our peers had first used alcohol in high school, with no sense of group pressure and little to no premeditation. This discussion led us to look back into the literature with fresh purpose, with an eye to social–cognitive and developmental studies outside the substance use/prevention field, and we’re now beginning data collection for a line of research that we both find more interesting than any work we’ve done since graduate school.

But you need not put stock in the experience of an obscure book reviewer. In a 2006 *New Yorker* profile and interview (Talbot, 2006), Harvard developmental psychologist Elizabeth Spelke, who has published some of the most interesting recent work on infant cognitive development, made this comment about her mentor, Eleanor Gibson:

She was the best experimental psychologist I ever met. . . . She combined hard-nosed experimental rigor with an insistence that the work you do be directly connected to real-world phenomena. Never do a study the motivation of which is to understand the result of a previous study. Do a study the motivation of which is to understand how people are functioning in the real world. (p. 97)

Using the Literature (Without Losing Yourself)

The foregoing is not a suggestion that one should observe the world while ignoring the literature. The title of Richardson’s book, *First We Read, Then We Write*, is taken from one of Emerson’s journal entries and demonstrates the importance to Emerson of reading in order to form the background for one’s own creative work and writing. Richardson describes the extent of Emerson’s reading, covering history and world religions, fiction and nonfiction, classic works and contemporary periodicals.

Yet Emerson loved to display irreverence toward books. A line from his essay “The American Scholar” that is clearly a favorite of Richardson (he states, “It still jolts me every time I run into it,” p. 1) provides an interesting and crucial counterpoint to Emerson’s voracity: “Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the view which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given; forgetful that Cicero, Locke and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote those books” (Emerson, 1836–1860/1982, p. 88).

Or consider Emerson’s reading list in light of this, also from “American Scholar”: “I only would say that it needs a strong head to bear that diet. One must be an inventor to read well” (Emerson, 1836–1860/1982, p. 90). Emerson advocated for active reading, for

extracting what one needs on the basis of one's own interests and ideas, and warns against becoming overawed by, and imitative of, published work.

This is a well-balanced message for psychologists. Immerse yourself in the classic and current literature of the field and become familiar with published theories and findings because scientific work must build on what has gone before. But read actively and critically, always keeping your own data and experience in mind. Grant applications often ask that you provide a background to your proposed study based in relevant literature and then that you identify gap(s) in that literature that your work will fill. The Discussion sections we read tend to outline "next steps" for research, but your own experience and unanswered questions about behavior will help you locate the most interesting gaps.

"...Then We Write"

As we consider these calls for originality and intellectual nonconformity, it is important to note that Emerson was a prolific and successful working writer. Emerson's thoughts about the struggles and the craft of writing are credible because he worked at it daily and produced exceedingly powerful prose while facing the same frustrations experienced by any writer in any field. In Emerson's journals, more than in his essays, Richardson finds the bold nonconformist speaking more quietly, commiserating with writers and creative scholars over the difficulty of this work: "I lose days . . . determining how hours should be spent"; "Always that work is more pleasant to the imagination which is not now required" (p. 39). Richardson comments, "One reason Emerson still speaks to the modern writer is just this awareness of the failures, doubts, inadequacies, evasions, of the many times and reasons when the work grows cold" (p. 39).

Emerson was fully aware that independent thought and personal power avail nothing if not put to use, especially when one is facing failures, doubts, and inadequacies. Of the many memorable lines from Emerson's essays and journals that Richardson shares in *First We Read*, the one that I may tape up next to my computer is "The only path of escape known in all the worlds of God is performance. You must do your work before you shall be released" (quoted in Richardson, p. 24). Richardson, himself an excellent and productive writer, sums up Emerson's practical advice in his own words:

We need the power to write, but that is only the beginning. We also need the resilience to rebound from our setbacks, the willingness to finish what we start, and the strength to hold out for performance over intention . . . The qualities required are all forms of power, talismans for the pragmatist who evaluates things by their fruits, not their roots. (p. 43)

This brings us full circle, from renewal of the motives and interests that drew us into psychology in the first place to Paul Silvia's present-day counsel that we "stick to a writing schedule, mental rain or mental shine" (Silvia, 2007, p. 99) and that we "want less and do more" (Silvia, 2007, p. 130). Following what interests you and maintaining independence of thought as you learn the literature increase the likelihood that good ideas—meaning ideas that please you and that share commonalities with, but do not duplicate, those of others—will arise, and on good days this can feel effortless. In this independence and ensuing creativity lies what Emerson would call your power. "But the real question," says Richardson, "is what you can *do* with the powers you do in fact have" (p. 43).

First We Read is a genuinely motivating book. When you finish it, you will feel braver than when you started. But both Emerson and Richardson remind us that such emboldened determination, like all emotion, is short-lived. You will get stuck in a piece of writing, your manuscript or grant will get rejected, you will become tired and feel overwhelmed. What is finally beginning to sink in for me, after several postdoctoral years filled with all manner of advances and setbacks, is that insistence on the value of your ideas in the midst of the greatest self-doubt and simply sitting down to work, even when the going is slow, will allow you to maintain traction. And when traction is maintained, you move forward, albeit sometimes only by inches.

Emerson, more gifted than I in use of metaphor, expressed this sense of persistence beautifully, so I close with one more thought from his journal that Richardson shares with us (p. 3): "No rival can rival backwards. What you have learned and done is safe and fruitful. Work and learn in evil days, in insulted days, in days of debt and depression and calamity. Fight best in the shade of the cloud of arrows."

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