

MONTESINOS, TONI. *OJOS LLENOS DE ALEGRÍA. ESTAR VIVO CON R. W. EMERSON*. BARCELONA: ARIEL, 2023. 572 PP. 978-84-344-3624-4.

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In less than a last decade, Spanish writer and literary critic Toni Montesinos has unquestionably established himself nationwide as a leading expert on the complex and fascinating subject of Transcendentalism. His recent critical study on Emerson, entitled *Ojos llenos de alegría. Estar vivo con R. W. Emerson*, closes a trilogy which was started in 2017 with *El triunfo de los principios. Cómo vivir con Thoreau*, and then continued two years later with the publication of *El dios más poderoso. Vida de Walt Whitman*.

Like its two predecessors, this new volume runs over five hundred pages, thus revealing the depth and the comprehensive nature of Montesinos's approach to each of these three major authors of the U.S. literary canon, who are here hailed both as "espíritus libres y de luz poderosa" (23), and as an "inmortal trío" (214). As it was already the case when studying Thoreau and Whitman, the life and the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) are neatly intertwined, in order to better assess the biographic sources of his thinking. The crucial significance of his family background, the early death of his first wife, or his legendary conflict with the Harvard Divinity School is recurrently explored. In these sixteen chapters, Montesinos has chosen to portray Emerson as a human being without personal flaws.

Since he is a professional book critic and reviewer who frequently collaborates in leading Spanish media, Montesinos exhibits an appealing jargon-free prose which makes *Ojos llenos de alegría* an

ideal text for what Virginia Woolf famously termed “the common reader.” Such a commendable style already characterized the volume *El fruto de la vida diversa. Artículos sobre literatura norteamericana* (2020), which the author published in the landmark book series on U.S. Studies in Spain, the Biblioteca Javier Coy, expertly supervised by Carme Manuel Cuenca at the University of Valencia.

Ojos llenos de alegría might rightly be regarded as the most thorough critical analysis of Ralph Waldo Emerson ever published in Spain. Previous efforts worth mentioning are three volumes in the Taller de Estudios Norteamericanos bilingual collection published for years at the Universidad de León (*El intelectual americano* [1993], *Discurso a la Facultad de Teología* [1994], and *El poeta* [1998]); two books included in the prestigious academic series Letras Universales published by editorial Cátedra (*Hombres representativos* [2008], and *Ensayos* [2014]); last but not least, *Escritos de estética y poética* (2000), published at the Universidad de Málaga by Ricardo Miguel Alfonso, a respected Spanish expert in Emerson whom Toni Montesinos quotes in his new volume. While critical works published in the United States usually ignore the work of foreign scholars, in *Ojos llenos de alegría* one can find the names of Spanish critics who have done extensive research on Emerson, such as Juan José Lanero, Javier Alcoriza, Antonio Lastra, Paul S. Derrick, or Juan López Gavilán.

The main goals of this new critical study are to demonstrate, on the one hand, that Emerson should be regarded as the most influential figure in U.S. literary history, and, on the other, that his intellectual insights are still quite relevant today. Montesinos repeatedly insists on the idea that Emerson’s essays provide contemporary readers with an illuminating philosophy of life, unhesitatingly concluding on the last page of this book that the author of “Self-Reliance” “bien pudiera ser el pensador que más necesitamos en la actualidad” (474). Needless to say, the complexity of ideas in essays like “Nature” or “The Oversoul” sets Emerson apart from the self-help manuals that have so proliferated in recent times. In his constant efforts to prove that Emerson’s views should not be just restricted to the New England of his time, Montesinos makes some bold decisions which might surprise professors and students alike: he suggests that the traces of Emersonian thinking can be found in expressions of twentieth-century

U.S. popular culture such as a highly popular Frank Capra film like *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) or in the late basketball coach Jim Valvano's speeches to his college players.

In *Ojos llenos de alegría* there can be traced a major attempt to locate Emerson in the social and intellectual context of his time, when the United States was experiencing in the mid-nineteenth century what F. O. Matthiessen defined as an "American Renaissance," so that the young nation achieved literary and cultural independence from Europe, a goal which Emerson had explicitly stated in his groundbreaking essay "The American Scholar." Therefore, Montesinos constructs a thick web of both personal and intellectual connections with Emerson contemporaries such as Thoreau and Whitman (rather predictably), but also Nathaniel Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller, Harriet Beecher Stowe, or Louise May Alcott. In fact, one of the chapters is entirely devoted to Alcott, whose book *Moods* (recently translated in Spain as *Cambios de humor*) Montesinos discusses, as he does with the latest Hollywood adaptation of *Little Women*, directed in 2019 by Greta Gerwig, who updated the source novel by successfully emphasizing its feminist overtones for contemporary audiences. Since he has devoted almost a decade of his life to his trilogy on Thoreau, Whitman, and Emerson, Toni Montesinos does provide a magnificent portrait of a generation of New England artists and intellectuals that formed what Susan Cheever aptly defined as "American Bloomsbury," in her 2006 book of the same title.

As a matter of fact, one of the major achievements of this new analysis of Emerson's legacy is, undoubtedly, the impressive intertextual dialogue constantly established with dozens of authors and sources from distant cultural periods, ranging from the *Bible* and the classics to Latin American masters such as José Martí or Jorge Luis Borges. As a professional critic who, for decades, has reviewed hundreds of books and penned volumes of literary history, such as the recent *Muy al norte en el turbio mar. Una historia de la literatura inglesa* (2022), Toni Montesinos is able to display insightful critical dialogues with Emerson's views: Plato, Seneca, Arthur Schopenhauer, Thomas Carlyle, Leo Tolstoy, Emilia Pardo Bazán, Henry James, Virginia Woolf, or Lewis Mumford are some of the "representative men"—and women—who appear throughout *Ojos llenos de alegría*. Bearing in mind his Spanish-speaking readers, Montesinos even discusses a

sonnet by Borges, included in his 1964 book *El otro, el mismo*, in which the Argentinian author portrays Emerson as “un personaje al que podemos imaginar nítidamente en sus movimientos y pensamientos” (448).

Even though all sixteen chapters of *Ojos llenos de alegría* provide ample intellectual reward, two of them do merit special scrutiny. “Comunas imposibles en un país pragmático” (297-338) delves into Emerson’s views on some of the major political issues of his time, such as the constant government abuses against Native Americans, the Mexican war, and—rather inevitably—the most pressing issue of the period: slavery. Another outstanding chapter is “El alma afin de Whitman” (341-368), devoted to exploring the unique personal and literary relationship between Emerson and the author of *Leaves of Grass*. In order to highlight the close connection between both authors, Montesinos even asserts that “el ensayo ‘La confianza en uno mismo’ y el poemario ‘Canto de mí mismo’ podrían ser títulos intercambiables” (355).

The volume closes with a fifty-page chronology which provides an extremely detailed account of both Emerson’s life and his social and cultural milieu. In addition, there is a generous selection of colorful photographs of places related to Emerson’s life. All these images were taken by Montesinos himself, who hardly ever explores the possible personal or intellectual flaws of the man who penned texts like “Self-Reliance”, “The Poet” or “The American Scholar”.

In conclusion, with *Ojos llenos de alegría. Estar vivo con R. W. Emerson* Toni Montesinos brilliantly brings to an end his trilogy on Transcendentalist authors, providing Spanish-speaking readers with a readable and comprehensive critical assessment of the writer who can arguably be regarded as the most influential thinker in U.S. literary history. Montesinos fully succeeds in painstakingly demonstrating that Ralph Waldo Emerson’s values and intellectual insights remain truly relevant for readers of the twenty-first century.

Selected Bibliography

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