Emerson's Audiences: American and British

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I

FATHER Walter J. Ong's thesis that "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction" (*PMLA,* January 1975) sounds like a flat contradiction of this essay on Emerson's relations with his audiences, but Father Ong is concerned with a writer alone at his desk trying to imagine his audience; I with a speaker standing before a congregation in a church or on the rostrum of a public lecture hall. Though Emerson wrote out his sermons and lectures and then read them, he was aware of his audience during the reading and then for future readings revised to improve his communication.

Of course Ralph Waldo Emerson's reputation today rests upon his published essays and poems—and, perhaps increasingly, upon his *Journals,* which are now being edited for the second time. The audience of these published works is a multitude of readers in the English speaking world, past and present. Emerson's relations with this audience can only be deduced by surveying the reviews and critical evaluations his books have received; and to a limited extent by letters his readers wrote him, many of which have survived. To estimate Emerson's relations with his reading audience from these sources would be largely to trace the rise and fall of his reputation. But he had more intimate and visible audiences for his lectures, for which he made adjustments which profoundly affected his literary style and his intellectual development. It is well known that his essays grew out of his earlier sermons and lectures.

Emerson's biographers stress the fact that his father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and many other ancestors were all ministers, from the seventeenth-century Puritan Peter Bulkeley to William Emerson, the poet's father. Waldo Emerson grew up with the assumption that he would study theology and become a Unitarian minister. As a result of this assumption, in his youth he hero-worshipped the famous orators and preachers of New England, such as Edward Everett, Daniel Webster, Dr. William Ellery Channing, and the Rev. Henry Ware, Jr. An audience meant to him an assembly of listeners to a sermon or oration, and he trained himself for these living audiences by exercises in public speaking in the Boston Latin School and Harvard College. Furthermore, this preparation, and his early experiences as pastor of the Second Church in Boston, and after that as lay preacher (i.e., public lecturer), were the paths to his literary fame, though in the beginning he was unaware of this destination.

Emerson was "approbated to preach" by the Middlesex Ministerial Association on October 10, 1826. Five days later he preached his first sermon in his Uncle Samuel Ripley's church at Waltham, Mass., on a text from First Thessalonians (v. 17), "Pray without ceasing." The subject of this sermon had been suggested to young Emerson the previous summer while working for his health on his Uncle William Ladd's farm in Newton. An uneducated Methodist hired-man named Tarbox had impressed him by the assertion that men were always praying, even while they worked at pitching hay, and that their prayers were always answered. By this statement Tarbox meant that a *wish* was a prayer, and that men's lives were shaped by their wishes. To this idea Emerson added the obvious homiletic conclusion: "We must beware, then, what we ask." Next day a farmer who had heard the sermon said to him: "Young man, you'll never preacher a better sermon than that." Apparently others thought well of it, too, for Emerson felt encouraged to repeat this sermon eleven times in the following months.

Yet in spite of this successful beginning with a sermon suggested by a common day-laborer and its appeal to an ordinary farmer, Emerson continued to think of the Christian minister as "a man who is separated from men in all the rough courses where defilement can hardly be escaped," aloof from stormy passion, political hatred, jealousy, and greed; a man "set apart to the office of walking between God & man . . . ." This holy dream owed more than Emerson realized to the earlier Puritan ministry in New England, when the pastor was the unquestioned moral and spiritual authority for his congregation.

However, though he continued to "count it the great object of my life to explore the nature of God," and to share this exploration with his congregation, Emerson very early also developed a theory which diminished priestly authority. As McGifford, editor of Emerson's selected sermons, says, "His theory that the relation of God to the individual has priority over the relation of God to the institution eliminates the possibility of social control over the individualism of the mystic."

Emerson was ordained pastor of the Second Church in Boston on March 11, 1829. This church was more affectionately known as Old North, where Cotton and Increase Mather had preached. It was now Unitarian, though vestiges of Puritan theology remained in the minds of some of Emerson's parishioners. On March 15th he preached two sermons, morning and afternoon, on his conception of "The Christian Minister." Prayer and preaching, he said, were his main public duties. "In Prayer he is only the voice of the congregation, he merely utters the petitions which all feel." (Within a few months he would alter this view.) "In preaching he undertakes to instruct the congregation, himself an erring man . . . ."

Emerson went beyond this commonly-accepted definition of the preacher's function, however, when he criticized contemporary practices as too narrow, harping on "a few and ancient strings . . .:"

> Men imagine that the end and use of preaching is to expound a text and to unfold the . . . meaning of *Grace,* of *Justification,* of *Atonement,* of *Sanctification,* and are permitted to forget that Christianity is an infinite and universal law which touches all action, all passion, all rational being; that it is the revelation of a Deity whose being the soul cannot reject without denying itself . . . ."

Emerson regarded the Christian Scriptures as "the reason of God [i.e., the mind of God] speaking to the reason of man." But this reason, or Divine Wisdom, spoke also in the laws of nature and cosmic phenomena. These would become Emerson's special subjects, instead of the usual taboos in morality or dogmas of the Church. In these views he would be in the vanguard of the revolution which would shake the foundations of the Protestant Church in the United States.

In Part II of "The Christian Ministry" (the afternoon sermon), Emerson attempted to define his personal relations with his congregation. He intended to sit by their firesides, learn the stories of their lives, and "establish relations of friendship and confidence." Thus when as the complete minister he "comes into the pulpit he comes into the midst of his friends; he knows their goodwill has prepared a welcome for his message . . . . He is sure of being understood . . . ." These were the Reverend Emerson's sincerest intentions. But at the end of his first year at the Second Church, in a sermon on "The Ministry: A Year's Retrospect," he frankly admitted the conflict he had experienced between the preparation of his sermons and visiting his parishioners:

> . . . The services of the church are periodical, but the development of truth within the mind is not. Obviously then the minister who makes it an important aim to convey instruction must often stay at home in the search of it when his parishioners may think he would be more usefully employed in cultivating an acquaintance with them. You will therefore have the charity to think when

> you do not see your pastor as often or at the times when you could wish it and desire it, that he may be employed with earnest endeavours to speak to you usefully in this place.

Here was the chief "rub": Emerson the scholar, the thinker, the prophetic-conscience, was painfully frustrated by the personal demands of his parish on his time. His successor told a story of Emerson's visiting a hero of the American Revolution on his deathbed and showing so much hesitation and embarrassment that the old man finally repremanded him: "Young man, if you don't know your business, you had better go home." Another colleague reported that he did not "make his best impression at a funeral."

In the spring and summer of 1832 a difference of opinion between Emerson and his congregation over the administration of the Lord's Supper led to his resignation. He had come to believe that Christ did not intend his Last Supper to become a ritual, with supernatural benefits, to be perpetuated by his followers. Though this was a shocking view to some of the members of Emerson's parish, friends agreed that a compromise might have been reached if Emerson had wished. The truth of the matter was that he wanted to be free of the ministerial harness, free to pursue his own intellectual and moral development without the distractions of pastoral cares.

The death of Emerson's young wife on February 8, 1831, may have had something to do with his dissatisfaction with the ministry, but was probably only another disturbing event in his growing rebellion. On January 10, 1832, he wrote in his *Journal*: "It is the best part of the man, I sometimes think, that revolts most against his being the minister." Twenty days later he returned to his unfitness for the ministry:

> Every man hath his use no doubt and every one makes ever the effort according to the energy of his character to suit his external condition to his inward constitution. If his external condition does not admit of such accommodation he breaks the form of his life, and enters a new one which does. If it will admit of such accom-

> modation he gradually bends it to his mind. Thus Finney can preach, & so his prayers are short. Parkman can pray, & so his prayers are long. Lowell can visit, & so his church service is less. But what shall poor I do who can neither visit nor pray nor preach to my mind? . . .

The phrase "to my mind" can be taken in two senses, such as *in my own estimation,* or more literally, he could not *satisfy himself* in doing these things. Probably the former meaning was consciously intended and the latter subliminally, for on the margin of one of his sermons he had written (and enclosed in parentheses, as if not to be included in the sermon): "I would like to write as a man who writes for his own eye only." McGiffert remarks that, "If ever a preacher preached to himself, Emerson was doing so when he preached on 'Do Thyself No Harm' . . . , 'Find Your Calling' . . . , 'Judging Right for Ourselves' . . . , and 'The Genuine Man' . . . ." In fact, in these sermons Emerson was groping for the doctrine of "Self-Reliance" which would become the trademark of his mature philosophy and the subject of numerous lectures and essays.

II

The shifting of Emerson's audience from a Unitarian congregation to himself was the turning point in his development as a thinker and writer. Perhaps it is a necessary stage in almost any writer's development, for so long as he deliberately writes for an audience of other minds, he is likely to be superficial, to contrive, to compromise, to manipulate, hoping to satisfy an editor or desired readers. William Faulkner once confessed that he had published several books before he could really take in the fact that strangers were actually going to read them. A writer may not always be his own best audience, but it is in the attempt to satisfy himself that he explores the depths of his own mind. In this sense, Father Ong is surely right: his audience is a fiction—or a pretence.

But after Emerson had come to terms with himself, he was able again to speak, and more effectively, to an audience of other minds. The great crisis of his life came when he was trying to decide whether to resign as pastor of the Second Church. Friends worried about his health, and enemies said he was insane. And he was a physical wreck after his resignation. In the nineteenth century nearly all educated people on the eastern seaboard seemed to think that a trip to Europe was the best therapy for shattered health; so Ralph Waldo Emerson went to Europe, sailing on Christmas Day, 1832, in a brig bound for Malta. The trip over, in spite of the stormy, wintery Atlantic, healed him physically; his experiences on the continent and in England healed him mentally. During his ten months abroad he met Landor in Florence, and Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Carlyle in England. He was least disappointed in Carlyle, but the others left him with the realization that no one could solve his problems except himself.

While still at sea on his way home, Emerson wrote in his *Journal*: "A man contains all that is needful to his government within himself . . . . He only can do himself any good or any harm." But these reflections rested on a more profound conviction: "The highest revelation is that God is in every man." This was not an original idea, but Emerson would spend the remainder of his life making personal and public applications of it.

After his return to Boston Emerson was invited to be guest minister in many churches, including his former Second Church, and for four years he continued to preach frequently in New England. But he was also finding a new occupation in secular lecturing. In the 1830 decade both in England and the United States, courses of lectures were being organized for working men, and some also for middle-class audiences. There were Mechanics' Institutes, Natural History Societies, Societies for the Diffusion of Knowledge, and the more broadly-based town Lyceum. The Lyceum was basically an adult education movement, with emphasis on self-improvement, though it also became a form of entertainment in its decline. Even in the middle class societies and associations of Boston the emphasis was on popularizing knowledge.

Emerson's first professional lecture was given on November 5, 1833, to the Natural History Society in Boston on "The Uses of Natural History." This might seem like a strange topic for the recent Unitarian minister, but in Europe he had found his greatest satisfaction in meeting scientists and visiting laboratories and natural history museums. In the Garden of Plants in Paris he had been mystically "moved by strange sympathies," which gave him an intuition of "an occult relation between the very worm, the crawling scorpions, and man." He had before this felt the presence of God in nature; now he preached that the fall of man had taken place not in the Garden of Eden but long after when man became alienated from nature.

In "The Uses of Natural History" Emerson declared: "Man is the broken giant, and in all his weakness he is invigorated by touching his mother earth, that is, by habits of conversation with nature." If harmony could be restored between man and nature, he could recover his lost strength and become a *whole man* again. This was now to be Emerson's lay text, which he would preach from the public rostrum for the next forty years. And it would also be the subject of his first book, called simply *Nature* (1836), and the tenor of subsequent publications.

From the relations of man and nature Emerson proceeded to biography, manners, education, and similar topics, but they all carried the teaching that moral and social perfection could be attained by listening to the Divine Reason speaking through the Moral Sentiment (the individual conscience) and living in harmony with the cosmic laws of Reason. This message had great appeal to American audiences in the 1830s and 40s, and Emerson became one of the more popular lecturers of the period.

But of course it was not the message alone which made

Emerson so successful. His personality, his pleasant baritone voice, and the integrity which he radiated established rapport with his audiences of almost every variety, from college students to textile workers, from professional men to housewives, farmers, and small-town storekeepers. There were, to be sure, exceptions, such as the Divinity School faculty at Harvard in 1838, when in his address he advocated complete self-reliance in religion, and created a scandal.

Yet, except for his resonant voice and clear articulation, Emerson had almost none of the personal assets one might expect in a professional speaker. All contemporary witnesses agree on this point. He read his speeches and secured attention more by his language (striking imagery, idiomatic diction, natural speech rhythms) than by oratory or showmanship. The following description is corroborated by other observers:

> Precisely at four o'clock the lecturer glided in, and suddenly appeared at the reading-desk. Tall, thin, his features acquiline, his eye piercing and fixed; the effect, as he stood quietly before his audience, was at first somewhat startling, and then nobly impressive. Having placed his manuscript on the desk with nervous rapidity, and paused, the lecturer then quickly, and, as it were, with a flash of action, turned over the first leaf, whispering at the same time, "Gentlemen and *ladies*." The initial sentences were next pronounced in a low tone, a few words at a time, hesitatingly, as if then extemporaneously meditated, and not, as they really were, premeditated and forewritten. Time was thus given for the audience to meditate them too. Meanwhile the meaning, as it were, was dragged under the veil and covering of the expression, and ever and anon a particular phrase was so emphatically italicized as to command attention. There was, however, nothing like acquired elocution, no regular intonation, in fact, none of the usual oratorical artifices, but for the most part a shapeless delivery (only varied by certain nervous twitches and angular movements of the hand and arms, curious to see and even smile at), and calling for such cooperation on the part of the auditor to help out its shortcomings. Along with all this, there was an eminent *bonhomie,* earnestness, and sincerity, which bespoke sympathy and respect, —nay, more, secured veneration. (Quoted by Cooke from *Jerrold's Newspaper.*)

One might understand the tolerance of Boston audiences for the reading of a lecture in this manner, for they were accustomed to hearing sermons read in the pulpit. But Emerson could not have become one of the most sought-after lecturers of his time if he had not succeeded with other audiences. He spoke in churches, school houses, town halls, court houses, concert halls, and rented rooms over stores from Massachusetts to Maine; in New York, Baltimore, Washington, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, and intervening towns and cities. The unwritten law on the Lyceum circuit was that highly controversial subjects must be avoided. Emerson observed this restriction before Lyceum audiences, but spoke out on political issues to other groups, as we shall see.

On his lecture tours Emerson carried manuscripts of two or three lectures and gave the lecture committees a choice. But he varied and experimented with his manuscripts, as he confided to his friends:

> When I tell a country Lyceum committee that I will read a new lecture, they are pleased—poor men! They do not know that 'the barber learns his trade on the orphan's chin.' By the time that lecture, after long trying on, is given in New York or Philadelphia, it will be a very different affair.

The improvements consisted mainly in juggling paragraphs, inserting sentences, omitting passages that were dull or repetitious, and polishing the style: finding more pungent diction, sharpening the imagery, and improving rhythm. In this process Emerson also learned to write his essays, giving them the compactness, fresh metaphors, and witty epigrams for which they became famous. Thus the sentences which would later shine like polished gems in his books acquired their lustre from friction with numerous lecture audiences.

Emerson's essays, in fact, not only grew out of his lectures, they were for the most part refined versions of the lectures. Such a method of literary composition did not produce simple order and easy comprehension.

This may sound paradoxical, but the most common criticism of Emerson was that both his lectures and essays were deficient in transitions, and often implied rather than clearly stated their essential meaning. To judge by newspaper reviews of his lectures, not all audiences were responsive to his methods, and some complained of incoherence. That he succeeded with enough people to give him his reputation was, James Russell Lowell believed, as much the result of his personal charm as of anything he said: "If ever there was a standing testimonial to the cumulative power and value of Character . . . we have it in this gracious and dignified presence." After listening to a lecture that seemed "more disjointed even than common," Lowell exclaimed: "It was as if, after vainly trying to get his paragraphs into sequence and order, he had at last tried the desperate expedient of *shuffling* them. It was chaos come again, but it was a chaos full of shooting-stars, a jumble of creative forces."

Of course Lowell was both a sympathetic and a sophisticated listener—though if he had attended closely more to the sequence of details and metaphor, he might have found more order than he professed to see. And his criticism may have been more witty than literally truthful. Yet it was certainly true that some of Emerson's unliterary auditors got little more than a vague impression of noble thoughts and vivid language (like "meal in the firkin" or "a trout in the milk"), and were either too polite or too embarrassed to say outright they didn't know what he was talking about. This would have been more likely in the western states (or territories), where he lectured in the 1850s after railroads made them accessible. In 1856 Emerson read a lecture nearly every night during January in Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin. On January 3 he wrote in his *Journal*:

> A cold, raw country this, and plenty of night traveling and arriving at four in the morning to take the last and worst bed in the tavern. Advancing day brings mercy and favor to me, but not the sleep . . . . Mercury 15° below zero . . . . I find well-disposed, kindly people

> among the sinewy farmers of the North, but in all that is called cultivation they are only ten years old; so that there is plenty of non-adaptation and yawning gulfs never bridged in this ambitious lyceum system they are trying to import.

Six day later in Beloit, Wisconsin, with the mercury at 30° below zero, Emerson confessed that both the climate and the people were "a new test for the wares of a man of letters."

> . . . At the lyceum, the stout Illinoian, after a short trial, walks out of the hall. The Committee tell you that the people want a hearty laugh, and Stark [Starr?], and Saxe, and Park Benjamin, who give them that, are heard with joy . . . . These are the new conditions to which I must conform . . . . I must give my wisdom a comic form, instead of tragics or elegiacs . . . .

Stark's name I do not find in any biographical dictionary, and Carl Bode does not mention him in his excellent history of *The American Lyceum.* But the spelling may have been a slip of the pen for Starr—Starr King, the young minister of the Hollis Street Church in Boston, whom Emerson knew well enough to use his first name. Bode says that Starr King "occupied one of the top places among the royalty of the lecture platform," from Bangor, Maine, to Chicago. He was an abolitionist and preached an "active social gospel." He was an idealist in philosophy like Emerson, but simplified his ideas for popular comprehension.

The other names mentioned by Emerson, Park Benjamin and John G. Saxe, were journalists who had achieved a reputation as comic poets. In heroic couplets they satirized what the general public regarded as the silly aspects of American life. Intellectually they were both vastly inferior to Emerson, and today their verse is too boring to have any audience at all.

Emerson's most spectacular competitor was the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, who won national fame—or notoriety—while pastor of the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, N.Y. Bode says that, "His love for theatrical effects, his humor, and his general flamboyance made the lyceum his appointed place." Beecher is said to have earned as much as $30,000 a year on his lectures. If Emerson earned $2,000 he thought he was doing well. This gives some idea of their relative popularity in terms of dollars. Thus it is pathetic that Emerson should have even thought of competing with Starr King, John G. Saxe, and Park Benjamin on their own terms. Fortunately, he never did make the attempt—and would have failed if he had. But he succeeded well enough as a lecturer to encourage him to continue, thereby gaining experience which enabled him to become the master of prose for which he is still remembered, while his competing Lyceum entertainers are not even mentioned in histories of literature.

III

The only time Emerson spoke in public during his 1832-33 trip to Europe was when he preached in the Unitarian Chapel at Edinburgh. Apparently he did not consider this experience worth recording in his *Journal.* But a young journalist named Alexander Ireland heard the sermon, and as Townsend Scudder says in the *Lonely Wayfaring Man,* "committed to his diary a page of enthusiasm which, when he scanned it again after the intensity of his experience had abated, read like the wildest exaggeration." Scudder explains that "Edinburgh was accustomed to the brutal explosiveness of Dr. Thomas Chalmers, who bullied his auditors into hypnotic attention: this discourse, which the inattentive failed even to catch, shone like cold fire compared to a furnace blast." Mr. Ireland may have been the only one who was impressed by Emerson's sermon, but he was so deeply affected that fourteen years later he began urging Emerson to come over for a lecture tour.

Alexander Ireland was now part-manager of the influential *Manchester Examiner* and a man of considerable importance in the industrial Midlands. He was a staunch supporter of the Mechanics' Institute and the Athenaeum in Manchester. Emerson finally agreed to go, and arrived in Liverpool on October 22, 1847. Meanwhile Mr. Ireland had started a vigorous publicity campaign and begun to line up speaking engagements in other cities. So vigorous was this campaign that Emerson, "the coming American," was known to most newspaper readers before he landed.

Emerson began lecturing on November 2 in the Manchester Athenaeum, and next day lectured to the Mechanics' Institution in Liverpool. For three weeks he alternated between these two industrial cities, using the lectures which he would later publish as *Representative Men* (1849), these men being Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Napoleon, and Goethe. What these men represented was "a vaster mind and will" operating through them. "The opaque self becomes transparent with the light of the First Cause," which some people called God and Emerson had called the Over Soul in his essay by this name. In simpler language, the great heroes of history are different from common men only in their greater ability to tap the sources of energy and intellect open to all men: "This is the key to the power of the greatest men,—their spirit diffuses itself. A new quality of mind travels by night and day, in concentric circles from its origin . . . ."

Of course many of the young men who heard Emerson found this doctrine vague and visionary, but others did not; and not only those who heard him speak but also those who read his essays, which were available in England in cheap pirated editions. The publicity given to Emerson's lectures helped to sell his essays—though without profit to him—, and now his influence in Great Britain was both through his printed and his spoken words, often simultaneously. In fact, even the lectures were being taken down by reporters and were printed in the newspapers. Emerson complained about this practice in a letter to his wife from Birmingham, December 16, 1847: "The newspapers here report my lectures and London papers reprint so fully, that they are no longer repeatable, & I must dive deeper into the bag & bring up older ones, or write new ones, or cease to read." What Emerson's sympathetic hearers got from him, says Scudder, was "an attitude toward life—a hopefulness and a trust in themselves which served many of them to the end of their days."

The fact that England was going through an economic depression in 1847-48 also gave Emerson's message increasing appeal. Because of the inflexibility of the British Establishment, social unrest was rising and radical reformers were becoming bolder. England was not yet ripe for the actual attempts at revolution already taking place in several European countries—thouugh without success. However, in March, 1848, mobs broke glass windows in London and looted the stores.

These social tensions and intellectual unrest were important factors in the reception—and rejection—of Emerson's lectures in England. Many conservatives both in religion and politics became alarmed, and such magazines as *The English Review* began to warn against a growing "Emerson cult." Sometimes the vehemence of Emerson's language inadvertently gave them ammunition for attacks. In his lecture on Swedenborg he angered the New Church followers by saying that Swedenborg was a mystic and an unreliable moral guide. In this lecture he had also used a sentence which offended not only the Swedenborgians but also many other conservative people of various denominations. The sentence was: ". . . Man on the gallows, or in the brothel, is always on his way upwards."

Emerson's reception in Great Britain was, therefore, a mixture of extreme praise and denunciation. As early as December 1, 1847, he wrote his wife from Manchester:

> . . . the most ridiculous panegyrics & exaggerated estimates of me may be found in print here, of which a book by Henry Sutton called "Evangel of Love," was shown me, where I figure with saints & mystics of many colours. Meantime my reception here is rather dubious & by no means so favorable as Henry [Thoreau] pleases to fancy. I am preached against every Sunday by the Church of England, & by the Church of Swedenborg,

> & the Athenaeum & the Examiner newspaper [are] denounced in the [other] newspapers for letitng in such a wolf into the English fold. Indeed I do not know but my friends Ireland & Dr. Hudson will find some difficulty in realizing for me those engagements they first promised.

By the spring of 1848 Emerson himself was weary of his lecturing, and took time out to travel, socialize, revisit London, and in May to make a trip to Paris to witness the "revolution" taking place there since the flight of Louis-Philippe. He had been debating with himself whether to attempt lectures in London. He needed the money for his return home, and considered giving more lectures in Liverpool, but in April a petition signed by Dickens, Carlyle, Bulwer Lytton, John Forster, and other notables settled the question for him. He agreed to give a course of six lectures in June at the Literary and Scientific Institution at Portman Square.

The price of admission was to be one guinea, and Emerson was led to expect £200 for the series. These lectures in the fashionable West End were attended by intellectuals and aristocrats: Thackery, Dickins, Crabb Robinson; Charles Lyell, the geologist, William Spence, the entomologist, Douglas Herrold, playwright and journalist; Lord Morpeth, the Duke of Argyle, Lord Lovelace, and many others of social prominence. Some, like Carlyle, attended out of loyalty, for by this time he and Emerson disagreed on almost every subject. The lectures became a social occasion, and people went to see or be seen, or to be amused by the strange American. Emerson wrote his wife that it was "a curious company that came to hear the Massachusetts Indian." Mrs. George Bancroft, wife of the American Minister to Great Britain, had been busy introducting Emerson to the aristocracy, and they dined and wined him. Such "relations" as Emerson had with his Portman Square audience were social and superficial.

Yet in spite of the social success of these lectures, Emerson netted only £80. As a consequence he agreed to give other lectures (using some of his "Representative Men"), in Exeter Hall near London University for the Metropolitan Early Closing Association. The total fee for the series was thirty-five guineas, and this made it possible for anyone to attend. Emerson wrote his wife, "Ah could you see the advertising Vans that go up & down the Strand [where he had rooms] announcing to all millions in huge red letters that R W E is to speak, you would pity me & believe that we must pay full price for all we get." But regardless of the embarrassment, he felt that his performance in Exeter Hall would "make amends for my aristocratic Lecturing in Edwards Street at prices which exclude all *my public* . . . ." Moncton Milnes, the radical politician and reformer, presided at these lectures, and at the end of the last—which was Emerson's last in England—he warmly praised the American democrat. The audience rose *en masse,* cheering and waving hats. It was, evidently, Emerson's public.

IV

Although conservatives in Great Britain thought Emerson a firebrand likely to ignite a revolution, in the lectures he read he supported social change only in his advocacy of each man's reliance on his own moral conscience, which received its impulse from the heart of the universe (Reason or God). This continued to be the gist of his message to American audiences after his return from England, and in the 1850-decade he traveled farther and lectured more often than in previous decades. During this time his reputation reached its highest point in New England, the Middle Atlantic States, and the Middle West. He was the same Emerson, only more experienced and professional on the lecture tour.

But there was another side of Emerson which found expression and eager ears in the 1850s. In spite of his hatred for slavery, he had never actively joined the abolition movement, and he did not in any formal way now—that would have been against his nature—; but the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 shook him out of his reserve and he began to speak out as emphatically and forcefully as any abolitionist. On March 7, 1854, the fourth anniversary of this odious legislation, he read a lecture in the huge auditorium called the Tabernacle in New York City. "I do not often speak to public questions," he began; "they are odious and hurtful, and it seems like meddling or leaving your work." (By "work" he meant his literary activities.) "I never felt the check on my free speech and action, until, the other day, when Mr. Webster, by his personal influence, brought the Fugitive Slave Law on the country." Now he not only felt his own freedom menaced, but believed that the freedom of the nation was not being protected by the Constitution, the Supreme Court, and the laws of the land. Worse yet:

> I fear there is no reliance to be put on any kind or form of covenant, no, not on sacred forms, none on churches, none on bibles. For one would have said that a Christian would not keep slaves;—but the Christians keep slaves. Of course they will not dare to read the Bible? Won't they? They quote the Bible, quote Paul, quote Christ to justify slavery. If slavery is good, then is lying, theft, arson, homicide, each and all good, and to be maintained by Union societies.

In the Town Hall of Concord, Mass., on May 25, 1856, Emerson castigated the South and its sympathizers for the recent physical assault in the U.S. Senate on Charles Sumner. "I do not see," he declared, "how a barbarous community and a civilized community can constitute one State." In a speech on Kansas given on September 10th of the same year, he accused the U.S. Government of having "led the ruffians against the poor farmers." He was so disillusioned with the federal government that he had become practically an anarchist:

> We stick at the technical difficulties. I think there never was a people so choked and stultified by forms. We adore the forms of law, instead of making them vehicles of wisdom and justice. I like the primary assembly. I own I have esteem for governments. I esteem them only good in the moment when they are established. I set the private man first. He only who is able to stand alone is qualified to be a citizen . . . .

Emerson befriended and supported John Brown when he came to Concord to raise money for arms to protect the anti-slavery citizens in Kansas. After Brown's tragic raid on Harper's Ferry in Virginia, many of his Massachusetts supporters turned against him, but Emerson made a plea in Boston for relief of Brown's family two weeks before his execution, and strongly praised Brown himself in a speech in 1860 given at Salem, Mass.

When the war began, Emerson started demanding that President Lincoln immediately issue an emancipation proclamation, and his impatience grew with the delay. However, when the President finally did issue the proclamation on September 22, 1862, Emerson was willing to "Forget all that we thought shortcomings, every mistake, every delay." He was not only reconciled to Lincoln, but to government and laws to protect liberty. This was the final turning point in Emerson's public life. He soon entered into a long period of euphoria, in which his natural optimism took over almost completely. Whether because of this benign state of mind (and he ultimately lost his memory), or because he was now a "grand old man" in the mind of the public, he was honored as a national treasure—except, of course, in the South. He could be loved because he was no longer a gadfly to the national conscience.

In England, however, Emerson's influence was quite different. The publication of *English Traits* in 1856 angered a great many people in the British Isles, though he praised John Bull for his tenacity and courage as much as he condemned his crass materialism. The general middle class in England never became reconciled, but Emerson was a hero to associations of atheists ("rationalists" and "secularists" they called themselves), and to the Spiritualists and Theosophists. In America Emerson also in his late years spoke to the Free Religious Association, composed mostly of disaffected Unitarian ministers. But this organization was scarcely known out-side Boston, and its members were not as vocal and obnoxious as the British "rationalists." It was after Emerson's death, however, that Mrs. Annie Besant, the most formidable leader of Theosophy in England, made extensive use of his name and writings. Madame Blavatsky also claimed and quoted him. But Emerson's "Transendentalism" had never made much impression on the Victorians, and Theosophy failed to interest the middle class, its intended audience. As William Sowder says in *Emerson's Impact on the British Isles and Canada*:

> . . . Unlike those pile drivers .the Secularists], Emerson was, as [Oliver Wendell] Holmes observed with some truth, "an iconoclast without a hammer, who took down our idols from their pedstals so tenderly that it seemed like an act of worship." He was a philosopher who never turned dissenter; Secularists were dissenters who never became philosophers. Secondly, the lower and lower-middle classes welcomed ammunition with which to destroy the despised authority of the church, but they were sorry indeed that Emerson could replace it with nothing better than self-reliance . . . .

Meanwhile in America Emerson's ideas had been adapted by Mary Baker Eddy and other "mind cure" cults which flourished after his death. There was of course incipient faith-healing and mind-cure in Emerson's philosophy (our thoughts make us sick or healthy, make us failures or achievers), but his highest goal was the recovery of man's lost power (a myth to counteract Original Sin). His ideal was a complete man, a unit, not an integer. It is significant that his greatest disciple in Europe was Nietzsche, whose *Ubermensch* was also misinterpreted, so that "Super-man" (a bad translation) still has repulsive connotations today.

And in America the appropriators of Emerson's "Self Reliance" and so-called "optimism," have also inflicted a terrible toll on him. What H. L. Mencken said in 1924 is almost as true today: "What remains of Emerson . . . is . . . a debased Transcendentalism rolled into pills for fat women with vague pains and inattentive husbands —in brief, the New Thought—in brief, imbecility. This

New Thought, a decadent and product of American superficiality, now almost monopolizes him."—*Prejudices, First Series*. On February 16, 1976, *The New York Times* quoted the influential critic and social historian, Irving Howe, as saying: "Everything in this country comes out of Ralph Waldo Emerson, whether you like it or not. Often I don't like it. But we're Emerson to the gills—there's a God in every tree."

I do not know whether this is Howe's own view of Emerson, but it is a good summary of the popular conception of Emerson. Though there was something like pantheism in Emerson's theology, it was not as simple as "a God in every tree," which is as superficial a reading as Orison Marden's finding in his "self-reliance" doctrine the means of becoming wealthy and successful. Acquiring worldly property was not the kind of success Emerson tried to teach and achieve—though he was not an anchorite either. What man is, compared to what he could be, Emerson expressed in his much-misunderstood poem "The Sphinx":

"But man crouches and blushes,
  Absconds and conceals;
He creepeth and peepeth,
  He palters and steals;
Infirm, malancholy,
  Jealous glancing around,
An oaf, an accomplice,
  He poisons the ground."

Time and again Emerson said and wrote that man is "a broken giant" because he lives out of harmony with nature. (Never mind the metaphysical overtones; it is true on a material level also.) That is why he is an "oaf" and poisons the ground—in his own country as well as by the American military in Vietnam; and ecology involves moral as well as purely physical reforms. It would be tendentious, however, to claim that Emerson prophesized the tragic—or potentially tragic—consequences of man's oafishness in the twentieth century. He optimistically believed that "The fiend that man harries/ Is love of the Best . . . ." Today it is difficult to believe that, but certainly "To visions profounder,/ Man's spirit must dive . . . ."

The time is right for a revival of interest in Ralph Waldo Emerson, and there are some signs that he may yet find his understanding audience—the audience he deserves. Recently Hyatt Waggoner argued passionately in his lengthy history of *American Poets* that Emerson is the fountainhead of American poetry. And there are rumors of several forthcoming books on Emerson. Perhaps the completion of the new editing of his *Journals, Lectures, Sermons,* and *Works*—also Eleanor Tilton's huge addition to Rusk's *Letters*—, will make Emerson both more available and intelligible to *this* generation.

NOTES

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