

The American Scholar and Public Issues: The Case of Emerson

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IN 1847, during the first year of war between the United States and Mexico, Ralph Waldo Emerson made a series of barbed remarks about the conflict and the spirit in which it was being fought—remarks that surprise readers who think of him primarily in the light of “Self-Reliance” or “Spiritual Laws” or “The Over-Soul,” all of which had appeared in his first volume of *Essays* in 1841. Observing the national scene only six years later, he seems more tough-minded and down to earth, even disillusioned and cynical, as this sampling of comments will suggest:

We devour Mexico as the stomach arsenic, but it brings us down at last. (*JMN*, X, 36)¹

Nationality is babyish for the most part. (*JMN*, X, 76)

Patriotism is balderdash. (*JMN*, X, 161)

The name of Washington City in the newspapers is every day of blacker shade. . . . It seems to be settled that no act of honor or benevolence or justice is to be expected from the American Government, but only this, that they will be as wicked as they dare. No man now can have any sort of success in politics without a streak of infamy crossing his name.

Things have another order in these men's eyes. Heavy is hollow & good is evil. A western man in Congress the other day spoke of the opponents of the Texan & Mexican plunder as “Every light character in the house,” and [a Boston banker] speaks of “the solid portion of the community” meeting, of course, the sharpers. I feel, meantime, that those who succeed in life, in civilized society, are beasts of prey. (*JMN*, X, 29)

If England, France, America are forbidden war with each other, they spend their ferocity on Sikhs, Algerines, & Mexicans & so find a vent for their piratical population. You shall not as feudal lords kill the serfs, but now as capitalists you shall in all love & peace eat them up as before. (*JMN*, X, 36)

With a very few changes, such as "Vietnamese" for "Mexicans," the words just quoted might have been written with equal appropriateness by some anti-war activist of the late 1960's with a dim view of twentieth-century capitalism and imperialism, ready to whip up his listeners for another march on Mr. Nixon's Washington. Yet Emerson himself was no activist in 1847, no matter how strongly he felt about what was being done in Mexico and condoned in Boston; what he wrote about the war was intended for his own eyes alone. Rather than take a public stand against it, he was tempted to do what certain young male Americans would be doing in the 1960's: quietly leave the United States and withdraw "for a time" across the border to Canada (*JMN*, X, 29). The more dramatic gestures some of his own contemporaries were making against the war struck him as wasted effort; for all his idealism he was shrewd enough to realize that President Polk and a war-minded Congress would pay little attention to a few Northern protestors lacking the power of either numbers or the purse. And Southerners in and out of Washington could afford to be "cool & insolent" to the North, as he had observed when the war broke out, knowing just as the Southerners did "why Massachusetts & New York are so tame"—apart from a few angry voices. The reason was sheer economic self-interest. "Cotten thread holds the union together," he wrote in 1846, and "unites John C. Calhoun & Abbott Lawrence. Patriotism for holidays & summer evenings with music & rockets, but cotten thread is the union" (*JMN*, IX, 431, 425).

Even Henry Thoreau's now-celebrated decision to go to jail rather than pay his Massachusetts tax failed to "reach the evil" it opposed. Emerson thought at the time, since support of the war was actually coming from federal levies on articles of ordinary commerce—meaning Northern-sponsored tariffs on imported goods—rather than state taxes. As for the Abolitionists, who opposed

the war primarily because it would lead to the creation of more slaveholding states and so increase the pro-slavery vote in Congress, they should indeed resist, Emerson thought, simply "because they are literalists; they know exactly what they object to, & there is a government possible which will content them. Remove a few specified grievances, & this present commonwealth will suit them. They are the new Puritans, & as easily satisfied." But "nothing will content" a man like Thoreau, as Emerson well knew. "No government short of a monarchy consisting of one king & one subject, will appease you," he wrote in 1846 with Thoreau in mind. "Your objection then to the state of Massachusetts is deceptive" (he had first written "is then absurd"). "Your true quarrel is with the state of Man" (*JMN*, IX, 447).

It was Emerson's own standing quarrel "with the state of Man" that for most of his life kept him from enrolling in more limited crusades, whether against the government, the Mexican War, or even American slavery, much as he deplored its existence. Despite his low opinion of official Washington he habitually regarded Daniel Webster as one figure of honor in Congress until even Webster disappointed him grievously in 1850. Before passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in that year Emerson remained clear of organized reform movements and political partisanship, though he inclined toward the principles of what he called "the movement party" rather than those of "the establishment"—the terminology here is Emerson's own, though again it is close to the rhetoric of the 1960's.² But he was repeatedly put off during the 1840's by the caliber of those candidates whom the movement party proposed. "The spirit of our American radicalism is destructive and aimless," he charged in 1844: "it is not loving; it has no ulterior and divine ends, but is destructive only out of hatred and selfishness. On the other side, the conservative party, composed of the most moderate, able and cultivated part of the population, is timid, and merely

defensive of property. . . . From neither party, when in power, has the world any benefit to expect in science, art, or humanity, at all commensurate with the resources of the nation" (*W*, III, 210). For a changed society Emerson had little hope; for changed *men and women* he had the requisite faith in individual human capacity that any teacher must have to keep on going about his business. Whether that business should include taking an active stand on political issues was a question that troubled him only when a political issue became a moral issue, as it did finally and most conspicuously for him in the case of slavery.

I have called Emerson "teacher" quite deliberately. By the 1840's, as a public lecturer, he was already becoming one of the most influential teachers the American people have ever had, but he never attained the "professorship" he privately wished for (*JMN*, X, 28). Like many other men of the nineteenth century who later became college and university professors and presidents, he had been formally trained for the ministry, but he left his first and only pastorate in 1832 to develop a vocation of his own as speaker and writer. Appearing first in and around Boston, he continued traveling ever more widely on the lecture circuits of the day—through New England and the northeastern states, across the Atlantic in 1847 and 1848 to England and Scotland, then north to Montreal and west on the new railroads in the 1850's and 1860's to Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, and beyond the Mississippi. He was engaged in something we are now seeking to revive in the United States under such names as "open education" and "outreach," something which the lyceum movement did a good deal to develop more than a century ago. These were the days of "informal mutual education," as Carl Bode has called it;³ the lyceum filled a popular need long before the establishment of public high schools and the founding of land-grant colleges.

In his "new pulpit," as Emerson wrote of his lecturing to Thomas Carlyle in London, he felt freer and much more himself than he had ever been as a settled parish minister.⁴ He was "variously Priest, Poet, and Philosopher," as Robert E. Spiller has remarked, "but, when he chose his own role, he defined himself as the 'American Scholar'."⁵ Spiller's reference, of course, is to Emerson's well-known Phi Beta Kappa address of 1837 at Harvard. Ever since his boyhood, as he once told a student audience at Dartmouth College, he had believed that "a scholar is the favorite of Heaven and earth, the excellency of his country, the happiest of men" (*W*, I, 155). This characteristic idea, or "prejudice," as he called it, Emerson never abandoned, though his conception of the scholar's duties in a democracy underwent considerable testing and revision between the 1830's and the Civil War.

As scholar and teacher Emerson made a clear distinction between education and indoctrination. Education, he held, was a process of drawing out the latent potential of a student so as to foster self-realization and self-reliance. He liked to remind himself of "the cardinal virtue of a teacher" exemplified by Socrates: "to protect the pupil from his own influence" (*JMN*, X, 471). Toward the close of his active career he remarked that he had been writing and speaking "for twenty-five or thirty years, and have not now one disciple. Why? Not that what I said was not true; not that it has not found intelligent receivers; but because it did not go from any wish . . . to bring men to me, but to themselves. I delight in driving them from me. . . . This is my boast that I have no school follower. I should account it a measure of the impurity of insight, if it did not create independence" (*J*, IX, 188-189).

Feeling in this way about the scholar's proper function as a teacher, Emerson long sought to maintain a further distinction between what he said and did as a private individual and his words and acts as a public figure.

The differentiation was relatively easy to make during the early years of his career but grew increasingly more difficult as he became nationally and internationally known through his writing and lecturing. While he was still an active minister it was his expressed conviction that a preacher who proclaims or even insinuates from the pulpit his views on public men and public issues would be violating "the plainest decorum," as he said in a sermon of 1830,⁶ and for a long time he followed the same principle in his lecturing. This did not mean that he divorced himself from public service, or even from public controversy; his intention was to keep his various activities separate and distinct. Even during his ministry in Boston, for example, he stood for election as a member of the Boston School Committee, but the strong stand he took at its meetings on issues of local educational policy cost him re-election in 1830.

Emerson's usual avoidance of purely topical matters, political or otherwise, when he made public appearances as a lyceum lecturer was certainly not because of any lack of personal courage. He could and did speak out, there and elsewhere, when prompted by conscience or sufficiently aroused by some conspicuous violation of justice and decency. Although he had been unwilling as a minister to preach against slavery himself, he did permit a well-known anti-slavery crusader, Samuel May, to speak from his pulpit in 1831 on "Slavery in the United States," and the Boston press took appropriate notice. In 1832 his own dissatisfaction with the ministry led him as a matter of conscience to resign quietly from his pastorate; six years later, in a controversial public address delivered at the Harvard Divinity School, then the very citadel of Unitarian orthodoxy, he dared to point out plainly what he saw as the deficiencies of religion and the church. Earlier in 1838 he had shocked a Boston audience attending one of his lectures on Human Culture by including a tribute to Elijah Lovejoy, a Presbyterian minister of

Alton, Illinois, who had been shot and killed while defending his Abolitionist printing press against mob attack. A close friend who was present at the lecture, George P. Bradford, long remembered the "cold shudder" that ran through the audience at Emerson's "calm braving of public opinion twenty years before its ripening in the great war for freedom" (*W*, II, 426). Emerson himself was no Abolitionist in 1838, but he was very strongly affected by the murder of Lovejoy and spoke of him as a hero and a martyr to the causes of free men and free speech.

By the 1840's, as anti-slavery agitation increased through the North, Emerson was publicly advocating emancipation of American slaves after the model of what had been done in the British West Indies, though he was still refusing to turn Abolitionist or to violate his principles by using his scheduled lecture engagements as occasions for fulminating against slavery. But his current position was not decisive enough to satisfy "the new Puritans," as he called the Abolitionists in 1846, and he himself was gravely troubled by the conflicting demands of his self-dedication as an observant but detached scholar and his feelings as a concerned citizen who deplored the injustice and immorality of war and slaveholding: what were the duties of the scholar in society at such a time? A call to lecture abroad in 1847 took him away from what he called the "Lilliput" of contemporary American society (*JMN*, X, 30) long enough to give him perspective and restore his self-confidence, but a time of still greater troubles lay before him on his return from Europe late in 1848.

Emerson was always a man of thought more than a man of action, though for a person of his reflective temperament "Words are also actions," as he liked to say, "and actions are a kind of words" (*W*, III, 8). What finally "radicalized" him, to use our present-day term, was passage in 1850 of the Fugitive Slave Law, a "de-

testable" piece of legislation, as he rightly called it, that obliged Northerners to aid in returning run-away slaves instead of expediting their flight for freedom. Page after page of his journal for 1850 is filled with angry denunciation of the new law and of his old hero Daniel Webster, who in his eyes had now sacrificed principle to politics by appeasing Southern slaveholders out of a base regard for the economic interests of Northern businessmen. In the journal Emerson was vitriolic: "This filthy enactment was made in the 19th Century, by people who could read & write. I will not obey it, by God" (*JMN*, XI, 412).

Throughout the 1850's and into the Civil War years the formerly detached scholar took an increasingly active position against slavery, though not without persistent inner misgivings. On one August night in 1852, for example, he awoke and "bemoaned" himself

because I had not thrown myself into this deplorable question of Slavery, which seems to want nothing so much as a few assured voices. But then, in hours of sanity, I recover myself, and say, "God must govern his own world, and knows his way out of this pit, without my desertion of my post, which has none to guard it but me. I have quite other slaves to free than those negroes, to wit, imprisoned spirits, imprisoned thoughts, . . . which, important to the republic of Man, have no watchman, or lover, or defender, but I." (*J*, VIII, 316)

And though he still kept a distinction between his occasional public pronouncements on current issues and his regular lecturing, his views on slavery, which by then were well known, made him unwelcome not only in the South but in some Northern cities as well. Even in Cambridge when he delivered a purely political speech in 1851 supporting a Free-Soil candidate for Congress, William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* reported that "students from Harvard College did what they could to disturb the audience and insult the speaker, by hisses and groans, interspersed with cheers for Webster, Clay, Fillmore, Everett, and 'Old Harvard.'"7

In 1851 at Concord and again in 1854 at New York Emerson strongly attacked the Fugitive Slave Law in

public addresses; on both occasions he expressed his sorrow over Webster's unhappy part in its passage. The legislation of 1850 "did much to unglue the eyes of men," he declared in New York, "and now the Nebraska Bill leaves us staring. The Anti-Slavery Society will add many members this year." The Abolitionists had been right from the beginning, he granted now, calling their Society "the Cassandra that has foretold all that has befallen, fact for fact, years ago; foretold all, and no man laid it to heart." The time had at last come for the true lovers of liberty—Emerson among them—to take the offensive: they "may with reason tax the coldness and indifferentism of scholars and literary men," he said, particularly those persons in the universities who "are lovers of liberty in Greece and Rome and in the English Commonwealth, but . . . lukewarm lovers of the liberties of America in 1854" (*W*, XI, 244, 242).

It was Emerson himself who had spoken in "The American Scholar" of "the state of virtual hostility" in which the scholar "seems to stand to society" (*W*, I, 101), and who wrote in "Self-Reliance" that "you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it." There he added something that every practicing scholar would probably grant: "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" (*W*, II, 53-54). In after years he obviously sacrificed something of his own independence, his scholarly objectivity, and even his sweetness as he diminished the distance he had once kept between himself and the world's affairs. Both detachment and commitment have their price, as Emerson well knew, and that price is likely to be high. Change he always regarded as salutary and necessary for individuals and for society, though mere change, as he said, is not necessarily amelioration, and for everything that is given there

is something taken away (*W*, II, 84). Venturing into the world, as he once remarked, is a perilous adventure "in a sea strewn with wrecks, where none indeed go undamaged. It is as bad as going to Congress; none comes back innocent" (*J*, VIII, 240).

Events of the mid-1850's continued to increase Emerson's emotional involvement in the crusade for American liberty that he had finally joined. He agreed wholeheartedly when Charles Sumner, the Free-Soil Senator from Massachusetts, spoke out during May of 1856 against pro-slavery outrages west of the Mississippi. Sumner's speech on "The Crime Against Kansas" was answered by a Southern Congressman with a brutal physical assault on the Senate floor, and when the news reached Concord Emerson responded, it has been said, "as if he personally had been attacked."⁸ Discussing "The Assault on Mr. Sumner" at a public meeting a few days later, he stated flatly that "every sane human being" was now "an abolitionist, or a believer that all men should be free." The entire slaveholding South he stigmatized as "a barbarous community" where "man is an animal"; and since barbarity and civilization cannot "constitute one state," as he argued, America was facing a momentous choice: either "we must get rid of slavery, or we must get rid of freedom" (*W*, XI, 250, 247).

Given the actions of Congress, the recent events in Kansas, and now the attack on Sumner, Emerson and many of his friends in Concord and Boston soon gravitated toward the new Republican party because of its announced opposition to slavery, though he was temperamentally unable to become an enthusiastic partisan. But in 1859, as the country drifted closer to civil war, he surprised his close associates by making an unexpected public defense of John Brown's armed attack on the government arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia. He had been much impressed with Brown when that self-appointed avenger made an earlier visit to Concord. Convinced of

the rightness of what Brown had already done against pro-slavery settlers in Kansas, Emerson was prepared to accept his latest resort to violence as equally justified. In a speech at Boston after the episode at Harper's Ferry the now-militant Emerson went so far as to say that should Brown be hanged for his deeds there, he would "make his gallows glorious like a cross."⁹ Later, after Brown had been tried and indeed been hanged, Emerson praised him publicly as "the rarest of heroes, a pure idealist, with no by-ends of his own" (*W*, XI, 268). These controversial words were widely reported. The implied comparison of Brown with Christ was especially offensive in some quarters, provoking immediate cancellation of a scheduled lecture engagement in Philadelphia, and there were angry protests against Emerson's appearances in Cincinnati and other western cities early in 1860.

The ultimate outbreak of civil war in 1861 came almost as a relief to Emerson, who at fifty-eight was too old for military service but not for civilian activities in support of the Northern war effort. He had been glad of Lincoln's election in 1860 but chafed at his slowness in proclaiming black Emancipation; when the fighting was at last over in 1865 he still felt that Lincoln had been too lenient with the enemy and that Grant's terms for Lee's surrender were far too easy. The peace-loving Scholar of the 1830's had finally turned into a war-hawk and a hard-liner, and like his friend Sumner he became a radical reconstructionist. But his opinions were expressed only in the journal or to a few friends, not as a public crusader, for Emerson's role as active advocate had ended with the war.

"I never dared be radical when young," wrote Robert Frost in "Precaution," "For fear it would make me conservative when old"; as we have seen, Emerson's transformation between the 1830's and the Civil War took an opposite direction. Today, with the perspective afforded by time, it seems almost facilely easy for us to say that on balance he was probably right about the Mexican War

and that "filthy enactment" the Fugitive Slave Law, too generous in his early estimates of Webster, too hasty in taking his stand with Sumner and John Brown, too harsh in what he said of Lincoln and Grant, and too vindictive toward the later Webster and the conquered South. In our eyes he was even a little slow, perhaps, in turning Abolitionist, pushed as he was by events that brought out his own latent Puritanism. But given his characteristic temperament, few of us if we too had lived in the nineteenth century could have become a William Lloyd Garrison or even a Wendell Phillips. Should *he* as a scholar have moved faster and farther into the public arena before the 1850's? Should *we*, before or during the 1970's?

If one believes with Mr. Justice Holmes that "Life is action and passion," and that "it is required of a man that he should share the action and passion of his times on the peril of his being judged not to have lived," then perhaps scholars ought also to be activists and even militants; Holmes himself, after all, bore arms in the Civil War long before he ascended to the bench in Washington. But if one's own temperament responds more to something that Emerson himself said in the 1840's, that "Life consists in what a man is thinking of all day" (*JMN*, X, 146), then he may reply that action is indeed essential—but action taken only for action's sake is a poor expedient for a scholar, meaning a man or woman whose prime commitment is not to parties and causes but to the free play of the mind itself. Emerson's chief assessment of the American experience and his great contribution to it were not made in the political sphere, after all, nor do we value him primarily for his pronouncements on specific topical issues. Certainly we would not want to lose an Emerson from our literature only to gain another Garrison. Perhaps *one of each* is what the country needed in their day, and certainly there is room for both thinkers

and reformers of their power—in public life and in the Academy as well—in the United States during the 1970's.

NOTES

This essay was written while its author was a Senior Fellow of the National Endowment for the Humanities and a recipient of support from the Research Committee of the Graduate School, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

- ¹ Parenthetical references within the text are to the following publications: *J* = *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, 10 vols. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1909-19); *JMN* = *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman et al. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1960-); *W* = *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson, 12 vols. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1903-04).
- ² *W*, X, 325; cf. *W*, I, 307, 316, and *W*, III, 263. Henry Fairlie, "Onward and Upward with the Arts: Evolution of a Term," *New Yorker*, 19 October 1968, p. 187, credits Emerson with originating "the term 'the Establishment'" as it is now popularly used.
- ³ Carl Bode, *The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1956), p. xii.
- ⁴ *The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle*, ed. Joseph Slater (New York and London: Columbia Univ. Press, 1964) p. 171.
- ⁵ Robert E. Spiller, "From Lecture into Essay: Emerson's Method of Composition," *The Literary Criterion*, 5 (Winter 1962), 28.
- ⁶ *Young Emerson Speaks: Unpublished Discourses on Many Subjects*, ed. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1936), p. 76.
- ⁷ Quoted in Ralph L. Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), p. 367.
- ⁸ Leonard Neufeldt "Emerson and the Civil War," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 71 (1972), 506-507. The present essay is indebted to Neufeldt's analysis and also to Marjory M. Moody, "The Evolution of Emerson as an Abolitionist," *American Literature*, 17 (March 1945), 1-21.
- ⁹ Moncure D. Conway, *Emerson at Home and Abroad* (London: Trubner & Co., 1883), p. 251.