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JOEL PORTE

Introduction: Representing America – the Emerson Legacy

My purpose here is to say something about Ralph Waldo Emerson as a figure in American culture. It was Emerson who, in literary terms at least, really put America on the map; who created for himself the practically nonexistent role of man of letters, and for about a half century – from the golden age of Jackson to the gilded age of Grant – criticized, cajoled, sometimes confused, but mainly inspired audiences in America and abroad. When Emerson died in 1882 he was indisputably a *figure* – for some a figure of fun, but for most one to be spoken of with reverence approaching awe. Matthew Arnold declared that Emerson's was the most important work done in prose in the nineteenth century. Nietzsche called him a "brother soul." One of his disciples, Moncure Conway, likened him to Buddha, and twenty years later William James would pronounce him divine.

Somewhat more equivocal homage was also paid to Emerson in the fiction of the period. In the novels of William Dean Howells he is seen both as the prophet of pie in the sky and the proponent of pie in the morning. In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, he helps both to raise and to extinguish the consciousness of the restive heroine as she falls asleep over the *Essays* while plotting her escape from a stifling bourgeois marriage. Most notably, in Henry James's *The Bostonians* the master's spirit appears incarnated in the irrepressible though aged Miss Birdseye, the "frumpy little missionary" who represents a last link with the "heroic age of New England life – the age of plain living and high thinking, of pure ideals and earnest effort, of moral passion and noble experiment." She still burns with the "unquenched flame" of Transcendentalism, and in the "simplicity of her vision," looks to a higher if slightly faded reality: "the only thing that was still actual for her," James avers, "was the elevation of the species by the reading of Emerson and the frequentation of Tremont Temple." He declares her to be "sublime," but gives us reason to wonder about that heroic reading of Emerson through what are memorably described as "displaced spectacles."

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Somehow, the Transcendental vision had gone askew; the "transparent eyeball" of Emerson's *Nature* seemed to be clouding over. Soon Henry Adams would call Emerson "naif," and T. S. Eliot would dismiss him as "an encumbrance."

If Emerson seemed old hat to disconsolate intellectuals in the '20s owing to his presumed cosmic optimism, that did not keep ordinary readers from enjoying his aphorisms and apothegms. Bliss Perry's *The Heart of Emerson's Journals* was a best-seller in 1926. But even Perry had to admit by 1931 that Transcendentalism had long since gone out of fashion and that its epitaph was being written in doctoral dissertations. Though Emerson himself was still holding his own among a readership as yet unbesieged by diet books and sex manuals, he was nevertheless steadily receding into a historical past that would soon be virtually nonexistent except to the specialist. Now, too, Emerson has mainly been relegated to the college curriculum and the scholarly monograph (though Melville and Hawthorne are hardly household words). America's "classical" literary figures and their books appear to be largely invisible to the distracted and impatient eyes of what, in some quarters, is described as a "post-literate" society.

I intend to argue, nevertheless, that Emerson continues to nag the American conscience even when its ears are filled with other voices. Emerson did not simply produce stirring lectures, addresses, essays, and poems; he was passionately concerned with cultural analysis and devoted to cultural growth – twin imperatives that informed his total career. Emerson sits at the crossroads in a crucial moment of American history and like his own Sphinx asks the unanswered questions of our collective life – questions about the relative claims of conservatism and radicalism, the establishment and the movement, private property and communism; questions about slavery and freedom, the rights of women, the viability of institutions, the possibility of reform, the efficacy of protest, the exercise of power; indeed he asks perpetually about the meaning of America itself and its prospects among the nations. I offer this very abbreviated catalogue of topics only by way of suggesting that Emerson has strong claims to being considered not merely a Transcendental meditator on the infinitude of the private self but rather an *American* thinker deeply concerned with public issues. No other writer of America's so-called literary renaissance was more immersed in the country's civic culture. "Emerson's roots lay deep in the common soil," Bliss Perry notes; "he represented a significant generation of American endeavor, and . . . was a factor in the social and political as well as the intellectual history of his era."

Why should it be necessary to rehearse what was a commonplace of Emerson criticism more than half a century ago? Because the most persist-

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ent critical position taken in the 1960s and 1970s viewed Emerson as all but totally abstracted from his place and time – from what certain much-discussed commentators call "history" and "culture" and "the associated life." "The idea of community was dying in him and his fellows," wrote Quentin Anderson in *The Imperial Self*. "He would not be involved in time, he was not a member of a generation." Along the same lines, Ann Douglas argued in *The Feminization of American Culture* that Emerson, as opposed to Margaret Fuller, led a life of metaphor, substituted eloquence for experience, lived in literature and not in history. Somehow these critics, in Larzer Ziff's phrase, became convinced of Emerson's "turn away from history" – of his having conceived of himself as transcending time and circumstance so that he might, like Marie Antoinette, play at being a shepherd in some primitive Arcadia of the spirit.

But Emerson believed no such thing – except perhaps in his youth when he allowed himself to parrot Fourth of July rhetoric about the "uncontaminated innocence" of America versus the corruptions of the Old World. Even on this occasion – I am citing an 1821 journal entry written when Emerson was 18 – he complains that "it is the misfortune of America that her sudden maturity of national condition was accompanied with the knowledge of good and *evil* which would better belong to an older country." He was *hoping* for "reform and improvement," not making a unilateral declaration of independence from the collective experience of humankind. Boston thought of itself more as the Athens of the West than as the Garden of Eden. When Emerson did cast himself in the role of primal man before the Fall, it was for the purpose of introducing a particular tone of feeling – a momentary sense of release from the malady of the quotidian – into his discourse, not for the purpose of deluding himself and others as to where they actually stood. "Adam in the garden," he wrote in 1839, "I am to new name all the beasts in the field & all the gods in the Sky. I am to invite men drenched in time to recover themselves & come out of time, & taste their native immortal air." Emerson was not thinking of casting off his clothes along with his intellectual baggage and fleeing into the virgin forest to start life over but rather of planning a winter lecture series that would give his audience a sense of refreshment and renewal. A few days after setting down his Adamic entry, Emerson admonished himself to trust his own time, and the lecture series he produced was entitled "The Present Age."

Emerson in fact believed that the best use of history "is to enhance our estimate of the present hour." If he *was* coming out of history it was for the purpose of entering his own era more fully. What Emerson disliked was the notion of some Hegelian dialectic or logic of events that reduces individ-

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ual experience to a mere moment in an unfolding drama. That was not his definition of freedom. He rejected the notion of history as an iron rule of cause and effect that necessarily determines present conduct – the notion, for example, that we are all totally controlled and circumscribed by descent or inheritance. Men and women *are,* Emerson might say, indubitably because their parents have been; but *what* they are is yet to be seen. Time will devour us unless we master it. Emerson internalized or subjectified history so as to be able to use it, to make it part of his own fiber. He did not step out of history but into it, deciding to make it rather than be made by it. "Every mind must know the whole lesson for itself," he writes, "must go over the whole ground. What it does not see, what it does not live, it will not know." Observing that all history was acted by human spirits and written by human minds like his own, Emerson declared himself competent to interpret the texts that time had transmitted. The way to solve the riddle of the Sphinx is to set yourself up on her pedestal. Thus Emerson insisted that "an autobiography should be a book of answers from one individual to the main questions of the time." Why should we pay attention to what does not concern us? "Shall he be a scholar?" he continues, "the infirmities & ridiculousness of the scholar being clearly seen. Shall he fight? Shall he seek to be rich? Shall he go for the ascetic or the conventional life? . . . Shall he value mathematics? Read Dante? or not? Aristophanes? Plato? Cosmogonies . . . What shall he say of Poetry? What of Astronomy? What of religion? Then let us hear his conclusions respecting government & politics. Does he pay taxes and record his title deeds? Does Goethe's Autobiography answer these questions?" The inference is that it does not, at least not for an American living in the 1840s.

In dealing with Emerson, criticism is always in danger of neglecting the actual record in its density and richness in favor of its own theses – viewing Emerson, for example, as an endless seeker with no past at his back, a sort of Transcendental rocket racing into trackless space and attempting to drag American literature with it. To speak honestly, however, though we are all inextricably wedded to time and the "associated life," we nevertheless have moments, perhaps neither quite in time nor quite out of it, when another sort of experience seems possible. A fit of religious exaltation might be one example, sexual ecstasy another. In such moods, if we were Emerson, we might write *Nature* or "The Over-Soul" or "Bacchus" or "Merlin"; but such an expression could only be partial, never the whole of what we want to say. "I am always insincere," Emerson notes, "as always knowing there are other moods." We may wish to sell all we have and join this crusade against time and change, but Emerson will not allow us to hold him to it. We discover that he is not always the moonshiny man we took him for.

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James Joyce was no Transcendentalist but even he allowed Stephen Dedalus to exclaim that history was a nightmare from which he was trying to awaken. With a name like Dedalus it was easy to feel burdened by the past, and the same was true for Ralph Waldo Emerson. The Protestant Reformation was in his blood, even antedating the settlement of America, as was implied by a middle name derived from the Waldensian sect. (The site of Thoreau's hut on Emerson's property was thus an appropriate place for the man Emerson called "a protestant *à l'outrance*" – to the *n*th degree.) Far from refusing to be "a member of a generation," as Anderson claimed, Emerson knew precisely which generation he belonged to – the seventh in a line directly descending from the settlers of the Bay Colony.

American history was family history for him. Peter Bulkeley, "one of Emerson's sixty-four grandfathers at the seventh remove," according to Oliver Wendell Holmes's calculation, was moderator, along with Thomas Hooker, at the famous Cambridge Synod of 1637, and resolved that "an assemblage of females, consisting of sixty or more, as is now every week formed, in which one of them, in the character of principal and prophetess, undertakes to expound the scriptures, resolve casuistical cases, and establish doctrines, is determined to be irregular and disorderly." That resolution was passed in order to deal with antinomian Anne Hutchinson, but Margaret Fuller's "conversations," which Emerson attended with so much pleasure, might also have been labeled disorderly conduct if the authority of the theocrats had not been broken in the continuing Protestant Reformation in America.

Emerson's other forebears had much to do with it. His father William noted with chagrin in his dutiful *Historical Sketch of the First Church in Boston* that his own great-grandfather and grandfathers were zealous supporters of the evangelist George Whitefield, of whom Boston's First Church did not approve. It was therefore natural for Emerson to continue the struggle when his own time came. He characterized his father's generation as belonging to an "early ignorant & transitional *Month-of-March*, in our New England culture," thereby clearly implying that his own Transcendental springtime was the inevitable next step. Although that almost insolent way of describing his father's historical moment scarcely did justice to William Emerson's accomplishments as a liberal Congregationalist – he helped to advance the cause of the arts by joining in the founding of the *Monthly Anthology* and the Massachusetts Historical Society – it does suggest that the young Emerson's own identity consciously emerged from generational conflict. Like his father he had graduated from Harvard College and become pastor of an important Boston church (the Second, not the First); and again like his father he was elected to the Boston School Committee and

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named chaplain to the state senate. It was all easy, fatally easy, but the identity thus procured was false. It was precisely by stepping into his father's shoes that Emerson had avoided the responsibility of defining and being a member of his own generation, and it was only when he cast himself loose from the church and became a Transcendentalist that he was enabled to think of a generation – in the words of sociologist Karl Mannheim – as a "culture-renewing moment" and not as an "age-group movement."

Nothing was more crucial to Emerson's development than his realization that his generation, his "culture-renewing moment," constituted a new and distinct age. If it in some ways bound him, time also had presented him with an opportunity. He became virtually obsessed with defining his age. As early as 1827 he set down in his journal under the heading "Peculiarities of the present Age" almost a program for his own historical context: "It is said to be the age of the first person singular. . . . The reform of the Reformation . . . Transcendentalism. Metaphysics & ethics look inwards." By the following year at least he had read William Hazlitt's *The Spirit of the Age* and found out more about his destiny. He learned there, for example, that Wordsworth and Coleridge, though members of his father's "age-group movement," were closer to him in their own impulses and aims. They – and especially Wordsworth – were for Hazlitt pure emanations of the "spirit of the age," the *modern* spirit, ushered in and exemplified by the French Revolution. The specter of what Hazlitt called "legitimacy" and the spirit of liberty were locked in a life-and-death-struggle. As early as 1801 the writer and reformer Hannah More suggested presciently that the revolutionary impulse had not only unlocked a force fomenting generational conflict but also raised an awareness about gender that would inform the Zeitgeist for years to come: "Not only sons but daughters," she wrote, "have adopted something of that spirit of independence and disdain of control, which characterizes the time." It was a time for protest and original action, as Emerson knew well enough; but the grip of tradition was strong and this young Jacob found it difficult to wring a blessing from the patriarchal specter with whom he wrestled.

Waldo had been educated to prize his pedigree, though it was his own humor to despise it. And there, close by his side, was his father's sister and surrogate, Aunt Mary Moody Emerson, who frequently spoke of the virtues of Waldo's clergymen ancestors, renowned for their piety and eloquence. He acknowledged all that but chafed under the weighty inheritance, insisting, bravely: "The dead sleep in their moonless night; my business is with the living." His father's spirit, however, both introjected and externalized in Aunt Mary, still walked restlessly abroad and asked to be remembered.

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On the title-page of *The Spirit of the Age* Hazlitt had invoked Hamlet – a figure with whom Emerson strongly identified. (Later Emerson would insist that "it was not until the 19th century, whose speculative genius is a sort of living Hamlet, that the tragedy of Hamlet could find such wondering readers.") Hazlitt had begun his chapter on Coleridge by lamenting that "the present is an age of talkers, and not of doers; and the reason is, that the world is growing old. We are so far advanced in the Arts and Sciences, that we live in retrospect, and doat on past achievements." Troubled by such an allegation, Emerson would both echo it and strike out at it on the opening page of his first book, *Nature*: "Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. . . ." The burden of the past – America's religious history as personal imperative – was strong and debilitating for Emerson.

The following year, 1837, in "The American Scholar," he whistled a brave tune as he walked past the old sepulchers, but the bones rattled again and his inner debate revived: "Our age is bewailed as the age of Introversion. Must that needs be evil? We, it seems, are critical; we are embarrassed with second thoughts; we cannot enjoy anything for hankering to know whereof the pleasure consists; we are lined with eyes; we see with our feet; the time is infected with Hamlet's unhappiness – 'Sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought.' " He did not think that his own visionary gleam was a thing to be pitied. Should he, like Oedipus, put out his eyes because he had offended his father? One year later Emerson delivered his decisive blow against his father's church and profession in the Divinity School "Address" and then, indeed, the bones rattled more strongly than ever. Even friends of his own age were troubled, complaining that though they approved intellectually of his doctrine, their feelings were still bound to the old ways. Emerson replied to one such that he, Waldo, "would write for his epitaph, 'Pity 'tis, 'tis true.' " What could this brave New World Hamlet do when surrounded by so many youthful Poloniuses? He would have to continue striking out even at the risk of wounding them. Emerson's fundamental criticism was that America – or New England at least – had devoted far too much energy to arid theological and ecclesiastical dispute. His patriotism consisted in saying simply this: that the American mind and spirit had better ways to occupy itself.

There can be little doubt that Emerson's personal sense of paralysis and uncertainty during the crucial period when he was forging his new identity colored his thoughts and utterances for many years to come. In Ann Douglas's formulation, "as chief apostle of the emerging cult of self-confidence, Emerson would spend his life in a complex effort to shut out the voices of self-contempt." That is not wrong, but I would shift the emphasis a bit.

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Emerson's Hamlet side, so to speak, made him perennially concerned with questions of manliness and potency. As he would come to phrase it in the 1850s, "life is a search after power"; but under his breath one can hear Emerson saying, "our experience in life, though, is too often one of powerlessness." The exercise of power, especially in an American context, troubled Emerson, and this internal debate found its most cogent public expression in his last great book, *The Conduct of Life.* As a compendium of what is usually considered Emerson's most mature and worldly wisdom the book is worth returning to, and one such reconsideration was included in the late A. Bartlett Giamatti's baccalaureate address to the Yale class of 1981.

Still uneasy, I think, about the student revolution of the late '60s and early '70s, President Giamatti characterized Emerson's views as "those of a brazen adolescent" and recommended that they be jettisoned. Echoing Anderson, and others, Giamatti pronounced himself disturbed at what he took to be Emerson's desire "to sever America from Europe, and American culture and scholarship and politics from whatever humankind had fashioned before." He argued that Emerson stood for "self-generated, unaffiliated power." Emerson, he claimed, was a prophet "of the secular religion that was the new America" of his time, and Giamatti's key text was the essay "Power" in *The Conduct of Life.* Here is part of his commentary:

> In the dark pages of that powerful meditation on power, on the eve of the [Civil] War, Emerson amply reflects a view of politics and politicians that is disdainful of the hurly-burly, the compromising and dirtiness of it all. But Emerson makes it clear that he does not share those fastidious views. Those views, he says, are only held by the "timid man"; by the "churchmen and men of refinement," implicitly effete and bookish. Emerson was not for them. He was for the man who is strong, healthy, unfettered, the man who knows that nothing is got for nothing and who will stop at nothing to put himself in touch with events and their force. . . . The "thinkers" Emerson really admires are those with "coarse energy, – the 'bruisers,' who have run the gauntlet of caucus and tavern through the county or the state," the politicians who despite their vices have "the good-nature of strength and courage."

Now *The Conduct of Life* is a manifestly and designedly dialectic exercise, chapter balancing and opposing chapter in the Emersonian mode ("Power," for example, is preceded by "Fate"), and should be read that way. But we may at least test the accuracy of Giamatti's paraphrase by listening to Emerson's words:

> Those who have most of this coarse energy – the "bruisers," who have run the gauntlet of caucus and tavern through the county or the state – have their own vices, but they have the good nature of strength and courage. Fierce and

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> unscrupulous, they are usually frank and direct and above falsehood. Our politics fall into bad hands, and churchmen and men of refinement, it seems agreed, are not fit persons to send to Congress. Politics is a deleterious profession, like some poisonous handicrafts. Men in power have no opinions, but may be had cheap for any opinion, for any purpose; and if it be only a question between the most civil and the most forcible, I lean to the last. These Hoosiers and Suckers are really better than the snivelling opposition. Their wrath is at least of a bold and manly cast.

We notice that Emerson is not really eulogizing the "bruisers"; indeed he says that "men in power have no opinions, but may be had cheap for any opinion." Though he admires their "strength and courage," he knows that they are "unscrupulous." What appeals to him is their candor and directness: whatever they are, they *are* that honestly. (Emerson would have hugged Harry Truman to his bosom while rejecting the smooth deceit of a Nixon.) Emerson understands that "politics is a deleterious profession," that none come back quite clean from bathing in those murky waters. All high principles are finally compromised in the Washington miasma. The best we can hope for, says Emerson, is men of rough honesty who have no stomach for lying or truckling and will stand boldly for what they want, be it good or bad. They will use what power they can and not dissemble, and we are therefore enabled to meet them on their own grounds. Emerson simply had come to the realization that the exercise of power is the name of the game in politics. "Our people," he writes in his journal in 1844, "are slow to learn the wisdom of sending character instead of talent to Congress. Again & again they have sent a man of great acuteness, a fine scholar, a fine forensic orator, and some master of the brawls has crunched him up in his hand like a bit of paper."

That is the obvious bearing of Emerson's remark in "Power" about "churchmen and men of refinement." Giamatti claims that Emerson is disdainful of them and "not for them." But I believe Emerson was simply articulating his *own* sense of powerlessness – and that of his class – when faced with raw and brutal force. He says, let us observe again, "our politics fall into bad hands, and churchmen and men of refinement, it seems agreed, are not fit persons to send to Congress." They may be fit for pulpits and lyceum halls and college classrooms, as Emerson himself was, but they are not fit for Congress, where the "strong, healthy, unfettered" are the ones who carry the day in the caucus room and senate chamber and must therefore be met by opponents who can deal with them on their own terms. But in the 1845 journal entry on which Emerson drew for this passage in "Power," he concludes by insisting: "Yet a bully cannot lead the age."

It is worth adding, in connection with Giamatti's allegation that Emerson

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rejected "churchmen and men of refinement," that Emerson had reason enough, by the time he published *The Conduct of Life* in 1860, to feel betrayed by the presumed men of principle of his own class and background. Following Daniel Webster's infamous speech of the seventh of March 1850 in favor of the Fugitive Slave Law, almost a thousand distinguished citizens of Boston, including Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., published a letter in support of Webster's position and Emerson was outraged. As the crisis over the Fugitive Slave Law sharpened, Emerson filled his journal with angry denunciations of men of refinement and churchmen who supported what he called the "filthy law." "The fame of Webster ends in this nasty law," he wrote, "and as for the Andover & Boston preachers, Dr Dewey & Dr Sharpe who deduce kidnapping from their Bible, tell the poor dear doctor if this be Christianity, it is a religion of dead dogs, let it never pollute the ears & hearts of noble children again."

After President Fillmore signed the Fugitive Slave Law, Sharpe preached a sermon in which he argued that "free citizens of the United States, living under the protection, and enjoying the benefits of our blessed laws, with all the advantages of the national compact, [cannot] be justified in encouraging poor fugitive slaves to acts of resistance." Such was the climate in which Emerson was writing. "I met an episcopal clergyman," he notes, "& allusion being made to Mr Webster's treachery, he replied, 'Why, do you know I think that the great action of his life?' I am told" – Emerson goes on – "they are all involved in one hot haste of terror, presidents of colleges & professors, saints & brokers, insurers, lawyers, importers, jobbers, there is not an unpleasing sentiment, a liberal recollection, not so much as a snatch of an old song for freedom dares intrude." (It was at this time that James Russell Lowell's vernacular mouthpiece, Hosea Biglow, lamented: "Massachusetts, – God forgive her, – / She's a kneelin' with the rest!") "We have seen the great party of property and education in the country," Emerson was to write, "drivelling and huckstering away, for views of party fear or advantage, every principle of humanity and the dearest hopes of mankind; the trustees of power only energetic when mischief could be done, imbecile as corpses when evil was to be prevented." Emerson was worried in the long run less about the southern Democrats and their doomed cause than he was about the propertied Whigs of the North with their material interests. They, and not the "bruisers," were the real "trustees of power." Can one actually believe, with Giamatti, that Emerson extolled "self-generated, unaffiliated power," when we hear him saying, "The American marches with a careless swagger to the height of power, very heedless of his own liberty or of other peoples', in his reckless confidence that he can have all he wants, risking all the prized charters of the human race, bought with

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