
CLASSICS

OF DEMOCRACY

Sloven Continent: Emerson and an American Idea

LARZER ZIFF

In the same month that Herman Melville boarded the *Acushnet* in New Bedford, Ralph Waldo Emerson, fifty miles to the north, delivered a new lecture. "I will not inquire into the oppression of the sailors," he said. "I will not pry into the usages of our retail trade." Instead he concentrated on the larger proposition that the system of trade on which the prosperity of his country was based was so general a system of selfishness that "we eat and drink and wear perjury and fraud in a hundred commodities."¹

Emerson was then thirty-seven years old and in the full swing of those powers that had gathered in him after the collapse of his first, singularly mediocre career. The heir of a clerical lineage, he had dutifully and undistinguishedly attended and graduated from Harvard, prepared for the Unitarian ordination he received in 1829, and with his first pulpit took also a wife whom he buried less than two years later. He then resigned his pulpit and, with the help of gifts from family and friends, set out to travel in Europe in order to discover his true relation to the world. Once back in America, he was able to realize about \$1,200 per annum from his wife's legacy; this he used to remain apart from the mainstream of life in his commercial community. He remarried, but his reluctance to return to the ministry came, he knew, not just from a hesitation to share in a body of religious beliefs but from a positive refusal to become part of business. The church, he felt, was but a branch of commerce. "If you do not value the Sabbath, or other religious institutions," he remarked, "give yourself no concern

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Man the Reformer," *Complete Works* (London: Riverside Press, n.d.), vol. 1, pp. 221-22.

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about maintaining them. They have already acquired a market value as conservators of property."²

Emerson sat in Concord; he thought, observed, read, wrote in his notebooks, and then wrote from his notes for publication. He began to give lectures, occasional lectures, and series of lectures, which were soon after to find printed form and to convince readers. By 1841, the year in which his *Essays, First Series* was published, he had acquired a piercing if restricted fame. First young Easterners and then other Americans became aware that apart from the magnetic field lying between the polarized interests of State Street Boston and the capital at Washington—between the positive force of trade fighting free of restrictions and the negative force of the people's government seeking to control rather than to yield to business—there existed another pasture, commonly called Concord, in which character was attempting a separation from the minutiae of American reality in order to discover whether the ultimate meaning of such petty details indeed necessitated that they should exist precisely as they did. It was not a pasture with fit fodder for many, and those who browsed in the actual, geographical Concord showed misshape rather than symmetry to the dispassionate observer.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, too, resided there, but in the physical rather than the spiritual township, as he insisted with such vehemence that at times he appeared to be convincing no one of this fact more strongly than he was trying to convince himself. Looking about him, Hawthorne wrote:

Never was poor little country village invested with such a variety of queer, strangely dressed, oddly behaved mortals, most of whom took upon themselves to be important agents of the world's destiny, yet were simply bores of a very intense water. Such, I imagine, is the invariable character of persons who crowd so closely about an original thinker, as to draw in his unuttered breath, and thus become imbued with a false originality. This triteness of novelty is enough to make any man, of common sense, blaspheme at all ideas of less than a century's standing; and pray that the world may be petrified and rendered immovable, in precisely the worst moral and physical state that it ever yet arrived at, rather than be benefitted by such schemes of such philosophers.³

But Hawthorne's skeptical glance at the glassy-eyed and bearded who came to the actual village of Concord to be near Emerson does not diminish the sym-

² Ibid., p. 303.

³ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Mosses from an Old Manse*, in *Works* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974), vol. 10, pp. 31-32.

bolic power the word "Concord" exerted on the many who never visited it. To them "Concord" meant that within America there could be a place in which man established his identity with those truths that hid behind appearance and so worked upon his destiny rather than remaining its mute and willing victim. Emerson's modest rentier's income had been invested to give his country a native equivalent of what magnificent fortunes had supplied in other lands in more splendid institutions such as court and monastery: a place where thought and imagination could be exercised in relative freedom from immediate consequence; a center of intent both culturally revolutionary and politically powerless. Once this Concord entered into the consciousnesses of young Americans in fenceless Illinois and in paved Brooklyn, it did not much matter what grotesque spectacles and fuzzy proclamations assailed the eyes and ears in the lanes of Concord, Massachusetts. Trade and politics were not the inevitable shapers of America's career; thought and imagination also existed and could be made to count.

American life had inhibited the American writer. Its lack of social density and its high geographical mobility deprived him of a sure location inside or outside the world of his fellows, and without such a growing place his art was stunted. His countrymen lacked a common history and were thus a people without a lore. Characteristic native scenes were of so recent a beginning they stood forth in jagged two-dimension. Time must pass, it seemed clear, before such raw outlines could deepen and in the mellowing lend resonating value to the house, the shop, the street. Many lives would have to be lived in these locations before the landscape had a lore. The so-called nature poets of England, who apparently turned away from the existence of historical associations in their land, in actuality relied enormously upon them. Their woodland scenes were punctuated by the smoke ascending from the thatched roof of the peasant; their wild flowers grew in the clefts of ruins.

Emerson's awareness of this threadbare native condition affected the first formulations he drew from sources such as Greek philosophy, Oriental scriptures, and post-Kantian thought, and gave them their American coherence. He felt the force of idealism because it explained to him that those phenomena that seemed America's very shortcomings were, in fact, its most powerful enablers. With a natural environment that was as yet largely unhistoricized, America could think beyond appearance and see that the afflatus that moved in each man was identical with that which flowed in nature. The selfsame divinity thrust forth its features in both. What appeared to be an objective nature was in reality merely mediate, an assemblage of commodities and symbols for the sustenance of human life and the conveyance of human thought. Each day brought with it this perpetual revelation so that history, when set in the scale against man's diurnal opportunity to reclaim his relationship to the universe, was negligible.

Those older cultures, proud in the possession of time's accumulations, were, in truth, encumbered. Within them social tradition and artifact had been transmitted for so long so unthinkingly that they had attained the fatal status of objective realities. They were coercing men, whereas all the value they had ever possessed they had acquired from men who had so imbued them as an expression of the divine flux within the human soul. History was the cursed arresting of such divinity in forms, and the adherence to the forms as if they were the force itself. America was blessed in its native poverty of such forms, freed from the idols that were worshipped in place of the dynamic god.

But America had at least one idol—money—and those who knew its potency, not just bankers and planters but writers and theorists also, were unmoved by the early Emerson manifesto, *Nature*, published in 1836. The actual, they felt, had its own rules of conduct and one had to attune one's self to them to succeed. On the level of petty trade, Emerson's belief that truth did not reside in appearance was wickedly parodied by everyday experience. A man who worked in a barter store near Danbury, Connecticut, for example, recalled:

The hatters mixed their inferior furs with a little of their best, and sold us hats for "otter." We in return mixed our sugars, teas and liquors, and gave them the most valuable names. . . . Our cottons were sold for wool, our wool and cotton for silk and linen. . . . The customers cheated us in their fabrics; we cheated the customers in our goods. Each party expected to be cheated, if it was possible. Our eyes and not our ears, had to be our masters. We must believe little that we saw, and less that we heard.⁴

Tocqueville saw beyond such crooked penny-catching to the larger matter and did not hesitate to declare that trade was the romance of the moderns and America was the modern nation of nations, so that there heroism was to be located in trade, not in artistry or war. In their bold and zestful commercial dealings, he said, Americans were not following calculation but an impulse of their natures. This, however, was not what Emerson meant by the heroism of nature, and his idealistic message was, it seemed, apart from the realities.

Then, in 1837, the sway of the actual broke down. Its rules were exposed as blind superstitions; the reality built up from the tiny maxims of Benjamin Franklin, the confident speculations of the China merchants, the style of the great plantation owners, and the daring of the dealers in western lands was fractured, and through the cracks there opened the space through which Emerson's light could shine. The Panic of 1837 silenced the shouts of national confidence,

⁴ P. T. Barnum, *The Life of P. T. Barnum, Written by Himself* (London: Redfield, 1855), p. 75.

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and in the hush Emerson's voice was heard. In the 1840s the economy recovered and growth became the dominant feature of American life. The tonnage engaged in foreign trade soared within twenty years to the highest point reached before World War I; the 2,818 miles of railroad in 1840 were so rapidly increased that by 1853 Chicago, St. Louis, and the northwest branch of the Missouri had been reached.⁵ But 1837 was remembered, and ever thereafter there were listeners for Emerson's message. Indeed they turned up in what seemed at first the oddest places, but which were on reflection very fitting.

Henry Varnum Poor, for example, believed that man's mind was stronger than institutions and that it could be made to control the chaos of the investment market. First as editor of the *American Railroad Journal* and then as agent for the investor, he standardized the speculative wilderness. Poor knew Emerson and was stirred to his undertaking by Emerson's ideas.⁶

Freeman Hunt of Quincy was formed by the Panic of 1837 and the voice of Emerson that sounded then in his native region. In 1839 he founded his *Merchant's Magazine and Commercial Review* in New York, a journal that served Karl Marx, among others, as the best source of information on the American economy, and in it printed echoes of the self-reliant doctrine he had heard:

Sit not with folded hands, calling on Hercules. Thine own arms is the demi-god. It was given thee to help thyself. . . . There is an equality in all, and the resolute will and pure heart may ennoble either [the study, office, counting-room, workshop, or furrowed field].

But no duty requires thee to shut out beauty, or to neglect the influences that may unite thee with heaven.⁷

Emerson's address on "The American Scholar" was his melodramatic entry onto the stage of American life. More than sixty years after the United States had declared political independence, here, observers felt, was at long last the declaration of intellectual independence. That address was delivered to a highly specialized audience, the members and guests of the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard. But it was delivered in August of the panic year of 1837, the worst year the United States of America had ever experienced, and both the au-

⁵ See Ernest L. Bogart and Donald L. Kemmerer, *Economic History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, Green, 1947), and George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860* (New York: Rinehart, 1951).

⁶ Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., "Henry Varnum Poor," in *Men in Business*, ed. William Miller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), p. 255.

⁷ Freeman Hunt, *Lives of American Merchants*, 1856, 1858 (reprint ed.; New York: A. M. Kelley, 1969), vol. 1, p. xlvi.

dience that heard it and that which read it were opened to its meanings. Before Emerson reached the platform in August the price of cotton had fallen by almost one-half; mobs had demonstrated repeatedly in the streets of New York and in response to the inflated prices of food and fuel had looted the city's flour warehouses; the major banks had suspended specie payments; and the sale of public lands in the West had fallen by some 82 percent. The panic not only affected the subsistence of hundreds of thousands; it broke the merger of political and economic interests that had slowly but promisingly been developed in the earlier years of the decade. Then George Bancroft, Jacksonianism's optimistic theorist, had made strong anticapital pronouncements, and craft-centered trade societies had been engaged in political action as well as the strike to gain both economic ends and such social benefits as the extension of free education. The panic pulverized cooperative enterprise as well as individuals, and Emerson spoke from amidst the ruins of American morale.

He spoke, however, as founder-member of the only party that had won ground in the panic—the idealists. While both Democrat and Whig, both worker and entrepreneur, both farmer and industrialist, both Southerner and Northerner had suffered a common defeat that swallowed the smaller skirmishes they had gained or lost against one another, Emerson noted with some grim satisfaction that this, in sum, meant that the American commitment to the actual existence of a practical world, one which ruled affairs by discernible laws, was now exposed for the fiction that it was. Assertions of the primacy of inborn values and affirmations of the individual's ability to control his destiny rather than submit to it could, in the breakdown of the economy, no longer be dismissed as crackpot. Emerson told his notebook in May 1837:

Prudence itself is at her wit's end. Pride and Thrift & Expediency, who jeered and chirped and were so well pleased with themselves and made merry with the dream as they termed it of philosophy & love: Behold they are all flat and here is the Soul erect and unconquered still.⁸

An audience was now prepared to listen to such declarations as "Let there be worse cotton and better men,"⁹ because the seemingly inescapable laws that compelled better cotton and worse men had proved to be mere superstitions that had destroyed both cotton and men. With his Harvard address in the offing, Emerson told himself: "Let me begin anew. Let me teach the finite to know its

8 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1961-), vol. 5, p. 332. Since this is a diplomatic edition I have not reproduced the full punctuation in quotations from it.

9 Emerson, "The Method of Nature," *Works*, vol. 1, p. 184.

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Master. Let me ascend above my fate and work down upon my world.”¹⁰ The party of the idealist was now possible, a party that must always be the party of one, because by definition it had to be the emergence of one plus one plus one rather than of a group responding to external circumstances or submitting to a collective will. The head was not made to serve the feet.

Emerson began his address with the old fable of the beginning in which the gods divided man into men so that he might be more helpful to himself, “just as the hand was divided into fingers, the better to answer its end.”¹¹ That, he asserted, should serve as a reminder that there is “One Man,” not doctors, professors, farmers, and shopkeepers, but one man. Each was an original unit, “a fountain of power.” Unfortunately, American society in its geographical, social, and economic divisions had amputated man from his trunk, severed him from his instincts, and in the streets one saw walking monsters, “a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man.”

He set out to teach original man how to reclaim himself. First, he must learn from the nature so abundant around him that at times its very plenitude hid what it was: “the opposite of his soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal and one is print. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind.” Therefore, the maxim “Know thyself” and the maxim “Study nature” are one and the same.

Next the American must gain a right sense of the influence of the past. Emerson praised noble books, the past’s chief means of access to the American present, but praised them for their capacity to transmit the living voice of their authors—the manifestations of the same flux that moved through the reader—rather than for any aesthetic stasis they achieved. Books worked when they worked just as nature did, answering the spirit within man with the corresponding spirit within creation. When authorial stamina broke down or when the authorial pen was deflected from the line of force, books, and even the greatest were not exempt, were valueless. The sacredness of great writing stems from the act of thought kinetically present in it, not from the text itself. The poet chanting is divine, the chant is not. When men come to read the writings themselves rather than to respond to the spirit moving in them they have fallen into the same corruption as occurs when love of a saint’s life is debased into worship of his statue.

“I had better never see a book,” said Emerson, “than be warped by its attraction clean out of my orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system.” He saw this to the bottom:

The discerning will read, in his Plato or Shakespeare, only that least part,—only the authentic utterances of the oracle,—all the rest he re-

¹⁰ Emerson, *Journals*, vol. 5, p. 332.

¹¹ Emerson, “The American Scholar,” *Works*, vol. 1, p. 82. Subsequent quotations are from this text.

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jects, were it never so many times Plato's and Shakespeare's. Every thing that tends to insulate the individual,—to surround him with barriers of natural respect, so that each man shall feel the world is his, and man shall treat with man as sovereign state with a sovereign state,—tends to true union as well as greatness.

The union of selfish interests in America had proved false; the American Union itself was so unless men could base it on individual identities.

The past had protested, and today we might well protest again, that utterance is not separable from its manner; that its authenticity stems not from inherent content but from the realization achieved by form. Emerson was not immune to such effects. But to yield to them was for him to exchange original potency for borrowed aids. It showed a modesty that was ultimately cowardice as respect for inherited wisdom facilely became avoidance of self-awareness. Unless a man had firmly fixed in him the prime truth that he was in his wholeness as original as any other man who is or has been—not as good or as smart or as handsome, but as integrally original—he was condemned to a reduction of the divine intent. History did not make men except insofar as men lost sight of themselves; men made themselves; and the sunrise each morning brought news to the corresponding soul that this was so. *repostitious*

Emerson was advocating the mythic nature of our existence, the constant possibility for man to be in touch with his creation and in living along that channel to determine his daily reality. Man is not the creature of history, and a year in which history went all wrong, 1837, served to underline the proposition that it was not history that was at fault but those who lived history rather than their own lives.

Approaching the great American brag—that the country produces men to match its geographical sublimity—Emerson put the emphases where he knew that they belonged: *cf. Fitzgerald*

Public and private avarice make the air we breathe thick and fat. The scholar is decent, indolent, complaisant. See already the tragic consequences. The mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself. There is no work for any but the decorous and complaisant. Young men of the fairest promise who began life upon our shores, inflated by the mountain winds, shined upon by all the stars of God, find the earth below not in unison with these, but are hindered from action by the disgust which the principles on which business is managed inspire, and turn drudges, or die of disgust, some of them suicides.

The remedy was clear: plant yourself on your instincts and the world will come round.

His message was in conflict with the way in which American democracy had imagined itself, specifically opposed, it seemed, to Jacksonianism's assertion of the people against property. Emerson's sympathies were against property, but the weapon with which he opposed it was not the people; it was the person. He was thereby caught in a tangle from which he persistently sought to extricate himself without snapping the strands of truth.

On one hand, America's redemption resided in man's individual spiritual enterprise, but the only visible correlative of this was the economic enterprise of the entrepreneur. As much as he despised the belly-serving of the capitalist, Emerson could not back down from the logic that provided the enterprising moneymaker as a symbol of self-realization. "The harvest," he was compelled to admit from his philosophy, "will be better preserved & go farther laid up in private bins, in each farmer's corn barn, & each woman's basket, than if it were kept in national granaries." Planting one's self on one's instincts meant individual not collective effort:

Take away from me the feeling that I must depend upon myself, give me the least hint that I have good friends & backers there in reserve who will gladly help me, & instantly I relax my diligence & obey the first impulse of generosity that is to cost me nothing and a certain slackness will creep over my conduct of affairs.¹²

On the other hand, the materialism of private economic enterprise was also the very reverse of the idealism that alone gave the key to life:

The Rich & the Poor. Alas the poor are the poor of these rich. . . they also sought to be rich & their grief now is not that the rich are rich, but that themselves are not. They load these last with every name of opprobrium; they tell all their selfishness & grieve that they themselves are not able to be as selfish & worthless. The rich also are no better; they are the rich of these poor.¹³

How to break into this herding of avarice and restore the constituent particles to their true identities? Democracy as demagoguery kept them in their massed condition through appeals to interest rather than to reason. "The Best are never demoniacal or magnetic but all brutes are,"¹⁴ he insisted. And what the politicians did was to assert unreasoning attraction on the sheer magnetic force of the mob. If he was to liberate them into the custody of their reason he must believe that reason did exist, and, counter to the mode of public harangues adapted to

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¹³ Ibid., p. 264.

¹⁴ Ibid., vol. 7, p. 376.

an assumed popular ignorance, he had to proceed from the proposition that "The people know as much & reason as well as we can do."¹⁵

A contradictory mood told him that the mob was "the emblem of unreason; mere muscular & nervous motion, no thought, no spark of spiritual life in it."¹⁶ But was that, after all, contradictory? The point was that there was in reality no mob, only thinking beings, and that the apparent mob was mere symbol of a falsehood fostered in malice or in ignorance by the politicians and the press.

One day in 1838 George Bancroft sought to impress Emerson with the power that resided in the press, and talked of the *Boston Globe*. It had, Bancroft said, a circulation of 30,000, and since each copy was read by ten people its editorial articles were read by 300,000 persons. He pronounced this awesome fact, Emerson recalled, with "deepmouthed elocution." But Emerson felt that he replied badly to Bancroft when he muttered that he wished that if they wrote for so many they could write better, and thus let the matter lapse. What he should have told Bancroft but told his notebook instead was: "What utter nonsense to name in my ear this *number*, as if that were anything. 3,000,000 such people as can read the *Globe* with interest are as yet in too crude a state of nonage to deserve any regard."¹⁷ To deserve any regard, that is, because of their sheer number. As individuals each should be brought rapidly to outgrow his nonage.

His wrestlings with the monster, mob, the phantom of unreason conjured up from the body of reasoning Americans, arrived finally at this conclusion:

Concert, men think, is more powerful than isolated effort & think to prove it arithmetically with slate & pencil: but concert is neither better nor worse neither more nor less potent than individual force.... Let there be one man, let there be truth & virtue in one man, in two men, in ten men, then can there be concert; then is concert for the first time possible; now nothing is gained by adding zeroes, but when there is love & truth, these do naturally & necessarily cohabit, cooperate, & bless.¹⁸

Ten years after the great panic Emerson traveled to England to lecture at the invitation of the Mechanics' Institutes of Lancashire and Yorkshire. With the American economy now booming along he had come to adjust his timetable but not his message, come to see that his ideas would have to accompany and temper American life, starting independent moral revolutions within individuals rather than directly shaping the course of public life. But this, he could reflect without rationalization, was in the very nature of the doctrine. "Wherever a

¹⁵ Ibid., vol. 3, p. 136.

¹⁶ Ibid., vol. 5, p. 100.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 462.

¹⁸ Ibid., vol. 7, pp. 437-38.

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man comes," he had written, "there comes revolution,"¹⁹ and he was committed to walking this path. He could, therefore, accept that such outrageous pieces of public behavior as the annexation of Texas were to be resisted because they were immoral and yet were inevitable because they proceeded from irresistible feelings. More and more he received signs that individuals—Margaret Fuller, Henry Varnum Poor, Henry David Thoreau—were taking his message and that from such, eventually, America would take its most consequential shape.

While at home Emerson was a sage committed to cutting across the national current; abroad he was an American voice. In inviting him, the Mechanics' Institutes were inviting an American who would speak to their condition from the perspective of a more liberal society in which the dignity of the worker was more sacred than in England and the opportunity for his advance far less restricted.

Americans had always been edgy about the English view of them. They responded to English criticism at times with abject humility, at other times with defiant aggressiveness, revealing in either response a deep prerational attachment. England still stood as parent. What had the youthful nation to show as compensation for the rich cultural inheritance it had forsaken when it cut the family ties?

Travelers came to America from France and Germany and Russia to learn what this new society could tell them about the reorganization of their societies, a reorganization they felt was inevitable; the principal question was whether America could supply the vital clues to the forces of liberalization or whether when that reorganization came it would result in reinforced autocracies. But travelers who came from England were free of such concerns. Their identity was solid; their future was not revolutionary but, when change was called for, would be shaped by specific reforms in keeping with the national character; their curiosity was directed at the manners rather than the ideals of the Americans because life in Britain had taught them that ideals were vapor, while personal conduct was the essential mark of what a people is. They did not listen to what Americans claimed for themselves, but they listened to their tone and found it dreadful.

Hence the raw sensitivity of Americans to judgments offered in a British accent. The tone itself was all the validation the judgment required; Americans could not respond adequately because whatever principles they proclaimed, they had no certain tone as counterweight. Emerson had felt this inequality of force as a young man when he visited England and returned home to the realization that the British influence there was prejudicial, that Americans seeking their own voice had to be on guard against it. "Genius," he had concluded, "is the enemy of

¹⁹ Emerson, "The Divinity School Address," *Works*, vol. I, p. 144.

genius."²⁰ During that first visit to England he had been an avowed learner, grateful for the time and courtesies extended his unknown self by such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, for all the finger-wagging admonitions about America that they also extended without solicitation. Now in 1847 he would learn through listening to himself whether the American had developed a characteristic voice that in itself proclaimed the existence of a significant society. He had tried to prepare for the test. Even in the flush of his first recognition in America, he had seen his own potential limitations when he had looked at a young American admirer and commented, "He does not see any body who calls him to account or who in all respects overtops him & so he has contented himself with easy exertions. . . . The Americans are too easily pleased."²¹

Emerson's mature reflections on his English journey, *English Traits*, were not published until 1856, a larger lapse between occasion and reflection than was usual with him. The book's pages are dominated by images of solidity, of the concrete, immovable "thereness" of the Englishman's face and body and lands and houses and monuments, a coherent density that is so weighty it thickens customs, religious practices, and social rituals into corporeality. In a manner that must today strike us as anachronistic, he attempts in one chapter to get at the English character through a consideration of the races that contribute to it, but even here the dominating concern is that of physical manifestation. He is not so much asserting the real existence of racial traits as attempting to account for the ponderous import of the people and their culture. So sure and steady is this presence that mind must yield to tradition among the English: "They have difficulty in bringing their reason to act, and on occasions use their memory first."²² This is said as much in respectful awe as in criticism.

What Emerson arrives at as he probes this impressive presence is the factiousness of English life. The term today has immediate pejorative connotations and such are not, eventually, missing from Emerson's use. But in his first reach he is attempting to convey the long and man-made history of the English, the sense in which they carved their landscape from what it at first was not, blended their primitive races into a better mix that became the Englishman, and formed their society as a conscious product of political economy. *Artificial*, another pejorative word, meant "by art"; and in describing the artificiality of England Emerson was not condemning so much as he was marveling at the ability of these people to have moved against nature rather than in accord with it and to have converted brute races and a dreary island climate into the center of civilization as well as the most massive political force in the modern world. The result was a great society, and the

²⁰ Emerson, *Journals*, vol. 5, p. 197.

²¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 8, p. 122.

²² Emerson, *English Traits*, in *Works*, vol. 5, p. 110.

question arose as to whether American success as well must come from such a conscious human opposition to the primitive. Was political economy the necessary shaper? Was nature the stone for carving rather than the correspondent to the questing soul?

Moved by the mellow decencies of the dinner hour, the embodiment in London of all social life could want, the existence in Oxford of a world in which fame could be had for study, he went also to Manchester to learn the lesson that it and all the industrial towns of England had to teach. What he saw was the degeneration of men, a cruelly actual reduction of them to the fragments he had personified in his Harvard address as walking monsters—a good finger, a neck, an elbow. Now the same phenomenon was encountered rather than imaginatively projected as he saw that England, and America also soon in following the same industrial path, came to its wealth and culture through the degradation of its workers. “The robust rural Saxon degenerates in the mills to the Leicester stockinger, to the imbecile Manchester spinner,—far on the way to spiders and needles.” Strength, wit, and versatility were stolen by the division of labor that put in their place “a pin-polisher, a buckle-maker.” The glories of a factitious society depending from the principles of political economy dictated that for that society’s well-being whole towns would have to be sacrificed “like ant-hills, when the fashion of shoe-strings supersedes buckles, when cotton takes the place of linen, or railways of turnpikes.” The free trade he had managed consistently to admire in America and in world history as the conveyor of ideas as well as commodities, the relentlessly beneficial destroyer of the walls of prejudice as well as the walls of nations, he now saw, also eventuated in the deceits compelled by a competitive market in which the lowest-priced goods were the goods bought in quantity. “England is aghast at the disclosure of her fraud in the adulteration of food, of drugs, and of almost every fabric in her mills and shops,” he wrote, “finding that milk will not nourish, nor pepper bite the tongue, nor glue stick.”

With this perception of the base of the splendid English edifice, Emerson’s admiration of the factitiousness of the world’s greatest culture, its magnificent, deliberate assertion in the face of and counter to nature, now took on a pejorative tone. “In true England,” he concluded, “all is false and forged.” The last word resounds its double meaning: forged because struck off from resisting materials and forged because fake.

Emerson looked at essentially the same conditions as Marx and Engels were observing in essentially the same regions, and his analysis is not innocent of their sharp sense of economic cause. And yet the counter he offers to such conditions is in value curiously detached from the observations that formed its occasion. “Society,” he says, “is admonished of the mischief of the division of labor, and

that the best political economy is care and culture of men."²³ Critic that he was of the ravages let loose in America as well as England by the doctrines of unrestricted capitalistic enterprise, he was, nevertheless, totally distrustful of collective action as the remedy. On the basis of his American experience, collective or class consciousness meant mob consciousness, and he could not but conceive of such as a meretricious extension of the manipulation of the American politicians and journalists who had created from men the fiction of a mob in order to gain power. His mind adhered to the necessity of remedying economic exploitation by confirming the laborer in his individuality rather than entrenching him more deeply in his nonentity through subjugating him to a collective will. History, he insists as he looks at history's greatest modern monument, England, must not be yielded to as real or all is lost. Ideals may not, as actualities must, yield tone; yet ideals are the reality.

One afternoon in England, Emerson and his British friends, Carlyle among them, found themselves trapped indoors by rain. They had planned a continuation of their tour and in the frustration of it conversation moved heavily, perhaps even a bit irritably. His friends began teasing Emerson, asking him "whether there were any Americans?—any with an American idea?" He recognized the question for the blunt but accurate challenge that it was. He could not respond by telling them of the theory of democracy, for, indeed, had that not come in good part from English thinkers? Nor of the Puritan notion of the sanctity of the soul and its unimpeded access to the divinity, for had that not also migrated to America from England? He could not cite American institutions—certainly there was an American practice but these men were teasing him to produce an American idea. Had there ever been, was there one?

"Thus challenged," Emerson recalled,

I bethought myself neither of caucuses nor congress, neither of presidents nor cabinet-ministers, nor of such as would make of America another Europe. I thought only of the simplest and purest minds; I said, "Certainly yes;—but those who hold it are fanatics of a dream which I could hardly care to relate to your English ears, to which it might be ridiculous—and yet it is the only true."²⁴

Then, taking the plunge and, as it turned out, gaining little understanding, he attempted to explain it. In 1848, that year of failed revolutions, America's leading thinker, compelled to produce an original American idea, talked not of religious freedom, universal suffrage, or common literacy. He mentioned, rather, what he called the "dogma of no-government and non resistance."

²³ His reaction to the industrial condition is in *ibid.*, pp. 163–64.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

This dogma is, centrally, that of the Garrisonian abolitionists. Derived by them from Christ's injunction to individuals not to resist evil, it was transformed by those who in Emerson's America were called nonresistants into an opposition to any pretension on the part of man to regulate his fellow man through legal coercion. Slavery, although the most flagrant, was not the only example of a widespread, blasphemous usurpation of the governing power that is God's alone. In an acceptable contemporary sense of the word these people were anarchists, although in their application of the term they were sincerely anti-anarchist, because the rule of Christ was for them the rule of order while that of human government was the rule of disorder.²⁵ In citing them Emerson was announcing that the original American idea is that it is the right, indeed the duty, of each person to resist any human authority—parent, institutionalized church, state, public opinion—that goes counter to his conscience. The only true majority, even in a democracy, is the majority of one man's sense of right.

In the year before Emerson left for England, his friend Thoreau, in whose care he was to leave his home, refused to pay his poll tax to Massachusetts since the state, he felt, condoned slavery by remaining in union with slaveholding states and cooperating in the unjust Mexican War. When, as a result, he was imprisoned for a night, he shrugged the matter off with the comment that under a government that imprisons men unjustly the only place for a just man is prison. He likened the state to a timid old woman in fear of losing her spoons.

Emerson agreed with Thoreau's principles but he disagreed with the particular gesture of nonpayment of taxes. He was thus compelled to an explanation of why he would go on paying them:

The State is a poor good beast, who means the best: it means friendly. A poor cow who does well by you,—do not grudge it its hay. It cannot eat bread as you can, let it have without grudge a little grass for its four stomachs. It will not stint to yield you milk from its teat. You who are a man walking cleanly on two feet will not pick a quarrel with a poor cow. Take this handful of clover & welcome. But if you go to hook me when I walk in the fields, then poor cow, I will cut your throat.²⁶

The state figured in the European imagination as a leviathan, a labyrinth, a devouring machine, an impregnable fortress. These Americans saw it in images of a fearful old woman, a poor cow. Where puny man is contrasted with the might of authority in other cultures, Emerson's contrast is between an upright, cleanly creature and a dependent, lowing beast who should repay kindness but who, if she does not, can easily be dispatched. Nothing he imagined about America could exceed in stature and in power the simple, separate person. In Euro-

Central democratic idea

²⁵ See Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), for an excellent analysis of these ideas.

²⁶ Emerson, *Journals*, vol. 9, p. 446.

pean political philosophy individualism was synonymous with selfishness, social anarchy, and divisive, egocentric assertion. Its function at best was one of generating a transition to a higher level of social harmony than the level of class exploitation. So Giuseppe Mazzini, exiled in England, who went to hear Emerson lecture there because he knew him to be the friend of his own dear friend, Margaret Fuller, could only report to her, "His work, I think, is greatly needed in America, but in our own world we stand in need of one who will . . . appeal to collective influences and inspiring sources, more than to individual improvement."²⁷

In America, however, individualism was the goal itself, Emerson felt, because the freedom for which America stood, the new chance offered by that continent, was freedom from the fiction of the herd, the chance again to attune one's instincts to what nature echoed.

The rain finally abated and Emerson and his friends went on their way to Winchester. The conversation became more sprightly, and passing through the gentle, molded English countryside, the companions began to talk about American landscape, forest, houses. Emerson was asked questions about them he did not find it easy to answer. He says,

There, I thought, in America, lies nature sleeping, overgrowing, almost conscious, too much by half for man in the picture, and so giving a certain *tristesse*, like the rank vegetation of swamps and forests seen at night, steeped in dews and rains, which it loves; and on it man seems not able to make much impression.

This rankness, this resistance to man, was, in the bone, the source of the doctrine of nonresistance that he had elaborated as the American idea, and now in the sunshine following rain the cultivated beauty that was England and of which he felt himself quite too sensible—"Every one is on his good behavior and must be dressed for dinner at six"—overwhelmed him and he could not adequately explain the details of the rough, unfinished landscape whence he came or why he loved it.

He thought of his homeland, "that great sloven continent," with yearning and yet with a deep inability to express to his dear friends why this should be, why his heart went out to the slovenliness not in pity, as he contrasted it with the finished beauties through which they were passing, but in hope that it would never lose its uncraftiness, but would harbor it and visit its meaning on its native sons. "In high Alleghany pastures, in the sea-wide sky-skirted prairie, still sleeps and murmurs and hides the great mother, long since driven away from the trim hedge-rows and over-cultivated garden of England,"²⁸ he thought.

He thought; but he could not speak it to his friends. The common language no longer grew from common things.

²⁷ Joseph Jay Deiss, *The Roman Years of Margaret Fuller* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1969), p. 107.

²⁸ Emerson, *English Traits*, p. 288.