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**A NEW LITERARY HISTORY  
OF AMERICA**

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way of life. He spends a summer sleeping in a hut on the beach, learning how to prepare hides, smoke pipes, and swear in Hawaiian. One of the "Kanakas," Hope, becomes his Friday, his proto-Queequeg: "I really felt a strong affection for him, and preferred him to any of my own countrymen there; and I believe there was nothing which he would not have done for me." As one of his shipmates chided him after the book's publication, Dana has excised from this scene the Indian women who used to visit the "Oahu Coffee-house"; when Dana later sneaks medicines from the ship to treat Hope's syphilis, we get the strong whiff of a story incompletely told.

But ellipses are, after all, one of the generic requirements of memoir. Nowhere is Dana's ambivalence about self-transformation more evident than in the homecoming scene, where instead of joy he experiences "a state of very nearly entire apathy." When an old schoolmate comes aboard at Boston's Long Wharf, Dana describes himself from the other man's perspective: "There came down from aloft a 'rough alley' looking fellow, with duck trowsers and red shirt, long hair, and face burnt as black as an Indian's." However, he quickly returns to a recognizable self again—so much so that he does not sit down to reconstruct his narrative for another two years, after finishing his degree and beginning his legal studies.

Dana put nose to the grindstone, building a practice in admiralty law and serving in the Massachusetts legislature, where his nickname, "the Duke of Cambridge," suggests how fully he had returned to the role of patrician. The only hint of lingering attraction to life's "low places" are the episodes in Dana's early married life, described in *The Journal of Richard Henry Dana, Jr.*, when he ventures into prostitutes' apartments, "knowing it was a vain curiosity & tending to no good," ducking out before temptation can seize him.

On the bad advice of his father, Dana had turned down his publisher's offer of a 10 percent royalty and took a flat fee of \$250 for the manuscript of *Two Years before the Mast*; the book earned tens of thousands for the Harpers and spawned many pirated editions. Finally retrieving the copyright in 1869, he prepared a new edition even more mediated than the one he had reconstructed in 1840. For the original didactic postscript he substituted an account of his return journey to California in 1859, "Twenty-Four Years After." The prose is weighted down by adjectives extolling the "glorious climate," the "golden sunlight," the "gleaming white Mission." In unrecognizable, prosperous San Francisco, he is welcomed reverentially as "the veteran pioneer of all." But the steamships are ugly and lack the grace of sail. No one remembers how to prepare a hide. The Kanakas are gone. The Mexican *rancheros* no longer strike him as shady characters but as noble "pillars of the past." He sings the praises of Juan Bandini, the very man he had once mocked as a broken-down, "dissolute," "extravagant" *caballero*. It is as if he forgot to reread his own book.

"Twenty-Four Years After" would feed into a common representation of California as both defined and ruined by constant change. It transforms "California fever" into the *tristesse* of nostalgia: "The past was real. The present, all about me, was unreal, unnatural, repellent." Carey McWilliams would later diagnose this refuge-seeking in the past as a "Spanish fantasy heritage" that dissolved the social tensions of frontier California in the rosy glow of red-tile roofs, noble horsemen,

and gentle padres, most influentially articulated in Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* (1884). Joan Didion writes of her Sacramento pioneer family's mythmaking: "That I should have continued, deep into adult life, to think of California as I was told as a child it had been in 1868 suggests a confusion of some magnitude, but there it was." The histories written by Californios—including several generations of Bandinis—generally tell a different tale, as do novels like Maria Amparo Ruíz de Burton's *The Squatter and the Don* (1885).

In his unfogged original, Dana repeatedly represented California as the "ends of the earth." Such a description could have arisen only in a context of Manifest Destiny that saw the continental extension of the United States as an inevitable yet implicitly melancholy fact. *Two Years before the Mast* may stand as the foundational assertion of California eschatology: the place of the last chance and the end times, populated with "smart, unprincipled fellows" and "loafers." Dana cites the example of an industrious tailor who disappeared one day and returned in a cart, barefoot, half-clothed, and "cleaned out": "This is a specimen of the life of half of the Americans and English who are adrift over the whole of California." From here it is not far to the stream of drifters, losers, and lowlifes who animate the works of Nathanael West, Raymond Chandler, John Steinbeck.

Dana is the very type of the Easterner who can never apprehend the West as anything but radically other. "Head work" to him meant stiff, folded hides and escape from the demands of thinking. Didion stands in a long line of articulate Californians who have made Dana's pilgrimage in reverse—among them Frank Norris, Josiah Royce, and Gertrude Stein—yet the phrase "California intellectual" still invites puzzlement or worse, despite ample evidence of their accomplishments and those of writers who, embracing their edgy perspective, remained. This is not all Dana's doing, but it may be his unintended legacy.

*Bibliography:* Richard Henry Dana, Jr., *Two Years before the Mast*, ed. Thomas Philbrick (New York, 2001); *The Journal of Richard Henry Dana, Jr.*, vol. 1, ed. Robert F. Lucid (Cambridge, MA, 1968). Joan Didion, *Where I Was From* (New York, 2003).

KIRSTEN SILVA GRUESZ

1837, August 15

Ralph Waldo Emerson warns,

"The American eagle is very well . . . But beware of the American peacock"

THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR

If you ask your average intellectually inclined French citizen if he has ever read any Descartes or Pascal or Rousseau, he will almost certainly tell you that he has (and in most cases he will be telling you the truth). To be a French intellectual and to be simply unacquainted with the classics of French thought and to be happy to admit that one is thus unacquainted is to be a very unusual person indeed. There is no American philosopher ignorance of whose work could strike a

measure of fear or embarrassment in the soul of an American of letters at all comparable to what it would mean for a French intellectual to have never read a word of Descartes. If you attempt to hit upon the name of an American philosopher that almost every educated American has read, you will seek in vain. Insofar as you can find a philosopher that most educated Americans have read, it will not be an American—most likely, it will be Plato or Descartes or Hume or Kant. There is nothing you could call American philosophy which plays a role in the formation of an American intellectual identity that parallels the role that French philosophy plays in French culture, or German philosophy in German culture. To be an intellectual in the United States still means, above all, to have a certain literacy in certain landmark moments in the history of *European* thought. The intellectual in America is haunted not by the fear that he might be failing to be an *American* intellectual; more often he is haunted by the fear that he might be succeeding in being just that—and hence perhaps someone a European might look upon as a philistine. Even if someone were somehow to come into the grip of the idea that becoming an intellectual in America meant, above all, learning how to become an American intellectual, there would be few American landmarks by means of which he or she could confidently navigate the way toward such an identity.

These facts are no less true today than they were when Emerson gave his famous address to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard in 1837. This means that the call that he issued on that day has still largely gone unanswered. The call was indeed an ambitious one. It asked not only for a rethinking of the three concepts that figure most centrally in the preceding paragraph—philosophy, America, and Europe—but also for a rethinking of each of the three in the light of the other two. On Emerson's ambitious conception, the establishment of a genuinely American tradition of philosophy would have to evince a significant internal relation between the concepts *philosophy* and *America*. But Emerson did not have only philosophy in mind. He was calling, more generally, for a transformation of American letters and public discourse, for the forging of a significant internal relation between yet further concepts, ones such as *thinking*, *culture*, and *scholarship*, on the one hand, and *independence*, *representative*, and *democracy*, on the other.

In his eyes, America had not yet declared its independence. Among the opening remarks in his address, Emerson declares the following hope: "Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests . . . In this hope I accept the topic which not only usage but the nature of our association seem to prescribe to this day,—the AMERICAN SCHOLAR." The American scholar will come into existence only when America herself comes into existence by learning to think for herself, where this requires first throwing off all that is no longer living in the ossified edifice of European scholarship. But for Emerson that task starts with each of his listeners: an American is something each of us must first *become* in order for there to be anything that is America.

Emerson sees America's relation to Europe to be largely one of cultural ventriloquism combined with the cultivation of a form of dishonesty that allows its

citizens to pretend otherwise: "This mendicant America, this curious, peering, itinerant, imitative America, studious of Greece and Rome, of England and Germany." Yet the last thing he wants is for us to endorse the European view of America. (Though he thinks Americans should be interested in the degree to which they have acquired a certain reputation abroad: "Let us honestly state the facts. Our America has a bad name for superficialness.") Indeed, countless remarks in his *Journals* make it clear that he thinks America has a long way to go: "The mark of American merit in painting, in sculpture, in poetry, in fiction, in eloquence, seems to be a certain grace without grandeur, in itself not new but derivative, a vase of fair outline, but empty."

Ever since Emerson's 1837 address, and often directly inspired by its words, it has been a central ambition of much American thinking and writing and art (though seldom of American philosophy) to call forth a form of culture in which American thinkers or authors or artists can eschew European models—of philosophy or authorship or art—in a manner that will enable them finally to be able to feel at home in their homeland as thinkers or authors or artists (as they imagine their European counterparts are able to feel at home in their respective cultures). The realization of such an ambition is supposed by Emerson to require a reciprocal change on the part of American thinking and writing and art and on the part of the homeland itself; and the accomplished fact of such reciprocal change is an integral part of what it means for the American scholar finally to have come into existence. But to say that American thinking and writing and art have been fueled by such an ambition is not to say that such a vision of America has ever been realized—that the American philosopher or author or artist has ever yet been able to feel himself or herself permanently or comfortably at home in America.

"We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our own incomparable materials." A common way to understand a remark of Emerson's such as this is to construe it as a plea for cultural chauvinism. No greater misunderstanding is possible. Emerson has no wish to retain the central assumption of the conception that he opposes: namely, the assumption that Europe and America between them have only one form of culture worthy of respect and admiration. The conception he opposes takes European culture to be the real article and American culture, insofar as there is something worthy of the title, necessarily to be a pale imitation thereof. The aforementioned misunderstanding of Emerson attributes to him the intention simply to turn this way of thinking inside out: to regard European culture as sick and dying and American culture as healthy and vibrant. These two views are mirror images—each feeds on and sustains the other. There was never a more penetrating critic of American triumphalism than Emerson. The following quip, for example, remains as apt a caution for our flag-waving patriots as it was for the Jacksonians at whom it was originally directed: "Your American eagle is very well. Protect it here and abroad. But beware of the American peacock." Emerson was able to sympathize with the triumphalist's thought that one of the reasons that patriotism comes less naturally to American intellectuals has to do with their tendency to identify culture

and cosmopolitanism with Europe, without sympathizing in the least with their further thought that the way for America to cure itself of this unhealthy self-conception is simply through a sheer act of will, to learn to view itself as the paradigm of a healthy nation and to look upon the glories of European culture as symptoms of illness.

Emerson's rejection of any brand of American cultural chauvinism goes hand in hand with his impatience with the correlative posture of blind patriotism. It is no accident that it is a student of Emerson's, Henry David Thoreau, who comes to be the author of that famous tract *Civil Disobedience*. For it is precisely out of a fidelity to his understanding of America's pledges to itself that Emerson enjoins his readers to see that they, too, out of a sense of their devotion to America, ought to take themselves to stand honor-bound, *hic et nunc*, to resist this or that federal law—such as the Fugitive Slave Act. To be complicit in returning a runaway slave to his or her slaveholder was to participate in a form of activity that itself contravened the very foundations of our national covenant: "I think we must get rid of slavery or we must get rid of freedom . . . If you put a chain around the neck of a slave, the other end fastens itself around your own." In the two decades following his Phi Beta Kappa address, as the Northern states' willingness to accommodate Southern demands with regard to a supposed right to retain—and, if it be fugitive, reclaim—human property seemed at first to know ever fewer bounds, so too did Emerson's scorn for what passed for politics in Washington: "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." It would be a mistake to suppose that just because Emerson harbored a dream of what she might be, his heart was never broken by the reality of what America was.

Emerson's call for the American scholar is sometimes criticized for presupposing an overly romantic conception of the cultural aspirations of the common run of his fellow citizens and an overly utopian conception of the transformative power of democratic public opinion as an engine of cultural change. One does not need to read very far into Emerson, however, to discover that there is neither anything romantic nor utopian about his view of contemporaneous American public opinion: "It is said public opinion will not bear it. *Really?* Public opinion, I am sorry to say, will bear a great deal of nonsense. There is scarce any absurdity so gross whether in religion, politics, science, or manners, which it will not bear . . . It will bear Andrew Jackson for President." (I know just how he feels.) There is certainly nothing triumphalist about Emerson's attitude toward what passes in his day for the accomplished fact of America: "This country has not fulfilled what seemed the reasonable expectation of mankind."

The following quotation, in combination with the previous ones, gives us a glimpse of the picture that Emerson has of the American landscape he is seeking to redeem: "The Jacksonianism of the country, heedless of English and of all literature—a stone cut out of the ground without hands—it may root out the hollow dilettantism of our cultivation in the coarsest way and the new-born may begin

again to frame their own world with greater advantage." The landscape is therefore populated equally by those who are animated by a false sense of their own culture ("the hollow dilettantism of our cultivation") and by those who are possessed by a no less false conception of how America may become "new-born" (through the triumph of a party of "rabble-rousers"). Thus, now at the other end of the spectrum of misplaced responses to the dilemma of the absence of the American scholar, Emerson is no less wary of a tendency among even some of his thinking countrymen to attempt to overcome their inferiority complex vis-à-vis the splendor of European modes of cultivation by attempting simply to do without the higher forms of *Bildung* altogether: "It seems to me as if the high idea of Culture as the end of existence does not pervade the mind of the thinking people of our Community . . . Could this be properly taught, I think it must provoke and overmaster the young and ambitious."

A central obstacle to the emergence of such a genuinely American form of high culture is traced by Emerson—and then even more loudly diagnosed and then denounced by Thoreau—to an attachment to forms of literary and political speech emptied of their substance. Emerson writes: "Sometimes the life seems to be dying out of all literature and this enormous paper currency of Words is accepted instead." Stanley Cavell, paraphrasing the authors whose views he here helps to articulate, gives forceful expression to why, for both Emerson and Thoreau, the American reader and the American word must be awakened together:

Everyone is saying, and anyone can hear, that this is the new world; that we are the new men; that the earth is to be born again; that the past is to be cast off like a skin; that we must learn from children to see again; that everyday is the first day of the world, that America is Eden. So how can a word get through whose burden is that we do not understand a word of all this? Or rather, that the way we understand it is insane, and we are trying again to buy and bully our way into heaven, that we have failed, that the present is a task and a discovery, not a period of America's privileged history; that we are not free, not whole, and not new, and we know this and are on a downward path of despair because of it.

Certain forms of speech seem not to require recovery because, to so many Americans, they seem to have always been present and are everywhere still present. And, indeed, Americans often still hear their fellow citizens echoing the currently fashionable—often secularized—equivalents of sentences such as these: "This is the new world"; "We are the new men"; "The earth is to be born again"; "The past is to be cast off like a skin"; "America is Eden." (The rhetoric has been modernized but the sentiment remains much the same.) Verbal formulae such as these, in Emerson's time, after several decades of repetition (and in our time, after now several centuries of repetition), are asked not to lose any of their original expressive capacity. Yet those who make confident use of them persist in living in ways that must deprive them of meaning: as the call for Americans to be new gives way to a fantasy of freezing time—to a call to disregard any needs or hopes deemed not to accord with the supposed "intentions of the founders"; as the new world, having pledged to cast off its past like an old skin, seems now, much like

the old world, weighed down by layers of history. In the face of such failures on America's part to be able to mean its descriptions of itself, the task of a properly American philosophical and literary and political discourse became, already over a century and a half ago, for Emerson, that of finding a way, first, to tell Americans, such that they *are* able to hear it, that they no longer understand the forms of words they call upon to articulate the promise of America, and, second, to demonstrate that these very words, their present apparent expressive impotence notwithstanding, can still be called upon, in speaking of America, to say something we are still able to understand and believe.

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JAMES CONANT

### 1838, July 15

#### Emerson shakes the foundations of traditional philosophy and established Christian faith

##### THE DIVINITY SCHOOL ADDRESS

To this day, Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1837 lecture "The American Scholar" has intrigued readers as the quintessential statement of a courageously independent departure in American culture and in the history of thinking in general; at the time, Emerson's July 15, 1838, oration, commonly called the Divinity School Address, created quite a local and regional stir in Cambridge and the Boston area as "the latest form of infidelity," as the conservative minister Andrews Norton memorably denounced Emerson's address before the graduating class of Harvard Divinity School. The Divinity School Address has stood ever since as a momentous challenge to Western Christian belief and culture. Taken together, the two speeches may be said to have shaken the foundations of traditional philosophy and of established Christian faith.

More than Emerson's acclaimed first publication, *Nature* (1836), with its still relatively traditional philosophical structure and style, the two speeches inaugurated that radical turn in Western cultures that one may define as the still-ongoing project of modernism; the tremors caused by Emerson's philosophical and theological and cultural provocations continue to be felt undiminished in modes and moods of thinking and belief, whether they be called postmodern or poststructural or posthistorical or simply contemporary.

In "The American Scholar" and in the Divinity School Address, Emerson not

only begins to undermine traditional assumptions, axioms, and principles of Western cultures. For the first time and fully, he also perfects his characteristic aphoristic style—in the early German critic Paul Sakmann's apt characterization, as "the master of the single sentence"—but the aphorism, in Emerson, is not merely a stylistic device of concentration and provocation. It is an indispensable and essential aspect of the philosophical, the theological, the cultural subject matter itself.

In his *Twilight of the Idols* Friedrich Nietzsche, in so many ways Emerson's disciple and heir, spoke of the aphorism as a "form of eternity," as the single most powerful form of articulating prophetically and philosophically authoritative insights. In the *Will to Power* Nietzsche insisted that the deepest and truly inexhaustible books would always possess an "aphoristic and sudden character," would present and enact the unforeseen, the unexpectedly powerful and innovatively surprising truth, the earthshaking new departure in a single incisive statement.

"There is never a beginning, there is never an end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself." From "The American Scholar," this aphoristic condensation of Emerson's meditations on the meaning of nature is a unique and comprehensive, a destructively critical and at the same time reconstructively innovative statement, a program for a whole new philosophical, religious, and cultural world—in short, a powerful overture of modernism. The idea of a linear history in a Christian sense, extending from creation to a final judgment, is abandoned; the philosophical concepts of origin and ultimate goals are discarded as well; reality is an ambiguous web. The aphorism does not decide whether God weaves the web or whether God is the web weaving itself; that which *is*, Being itself, is a movement that, in creating powerfully, creates itself endlessly by returning into itself, into its own resources of creativity. In one single aphoristic stroke Emerson has jeopardized traditional visions of creation, time, and history, and he has articulated in one condensed phrase the philosophically defining twin ideas of Nietzsche's later interpretation of all existence: the will to power as a basic feature of existence, and the eternal return of the same as its mode of operation, "circular power returning into itself."

"If a man is at heart just"—reads possibly the most provocative aphorism in the Divinity School Address, which so shocked the elite audience at Harvard on that hot summer day in 1838—"then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice." The divine and the human are seen as not essentially separate but as transitional into each other: "Within and Above are synonymous" Emerson had already stated in his 1834 journal. The divine is—potentially—housed in the human, the human transcends, goes beyond itself into the totality of all meaning and dignity, into the divine. In this way, transcendence and immanence, the here and the beyond, cease to be opposites and that dualism, so constitutive for Christian religion and for metaphysical thought, collapses "if a man is at heart just." The aphorism speaks of the authentic core of human existence, of justice in a sense laboriously unfolded in many of Nietzsche's aphorisms: justice is no longer a legal or religious term; Emerson has revalued the meaning of justice to signify authentic existence,