



A LIBERAL EDUCATION IN LATE EMERSON

Readings in the Rhetoric of Mind

Sean Ross Meehan

A Liberal Education in Late Emerson

Mind and American Literature

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(*Skidmore College*)

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*For John Turnbull and Ed Folsom
scholars, teachers, mentors*

All things are contiguous to the mind.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Rhetoric”

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Acknowledgments

AT THE CENTER of Emerson's deep interest in metonymy, as I understand it, is the recognition that a broader context informs our thinking and writing, each of it and all of it. This is what makes rhetoric, for Emerson, pedagogical; and this is what makes education, and more specifically liberal education, rhetorical. This is another way of saying that this inevitably partial study of Emerson's rhetoric of mind would not and could not exist apart from the pedagogical relationships that have supported and informed my scholarship and teaching over a number of years.

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Introduction: Late Emerson and the Recomposition of Liberal Education

His works are studies. And any youth of free senses and fresh affections shall be spared years of tedious toil,—in which wisdom and fair learning are, for the most part, held at arm's length, planet's width from his grasp,—by graduating from this college.

—Amos Bronson Alcott, *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1865)

“Nothing Is Old but the Mind”

IN JULY 1867, an aging Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82) returned to Harvard College, his alma mater, to deliver the Phi Beta Kappa oration during commencement exercises. This was exactly thirty years after his more famous Phi Beta Kappa address known as “The American Scholar.” As Robert D. Richardson observes in his biography, this later address, which Emerson published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1868 as “Aspects of Culture” and then included in his final volume of essays, *Letters and Social Aims* (1875), under the title “Progress of Culture,” marks a complex turning point in Emerson’s career. The moment was in part triumphant since Emerson was also appointed to Harvard’s board of overseers, having been brought back into the fold the previous year—a prodigal son ever since his provocative address at the Divinity School in 1838—with the awarding of an honorary Doctor of Laws. But the moment was also partly tragic, a public marking of what Richardson calls “Emerson’s decline,” since as an oratorical performance the “occasion was a notable failure.” Richardson describes the failure in this way: “Emerson suddenly found that he could not see his papers clearly. He had not until that moment needed glasses to read his lectures. He became flustered, his papers slipped away under his hands on the poorly conceived table he was using as a lectern. Finally one of his auditors got up and put a cushion under Emerson’s papers for him. The audience was uneasy.”¹ Emerson was getting old, a fact he acknowledged in the opening of “Terminus,” the poem published in the *Atlantic Monthly* at the beginning of 1867: “It is time to be old.”²

To make matters worse, the sixty-four-year-old orator found himself in a country apparently inhospitable to old men. Earlier in the decade, in the 1861 lecture “Old Age,” published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1862,

Emerson articulates this circumstance in asserting, “America is the country of young men” (*CW* 7: 168). In “Progress of Culture,” perhaps to turn his eyes away from his own fate, Emerson distinguishes the “wonderful prosperity” of the restored “Federal Union” from the decaying old world and to the “mediaeval and primeval remains in Europe and Asia.” He boldly proclaims that, “in America everything looks new and recent” (*CW* 8: 111). This claim echoes with earlier exhortations from “The American Scholar,” where the “mind of this country” is urged away from the “courtly muses of Europe” and toward “the study of letters” pursued in “work[ing] with our own hands” and “speak[ing] our own minds” (*CW* 1: 69, 70). Thirty years later, Emerson quotes Ovid to make a similar point: “Prisca juvent alios, ego me nunc denique natum Gratulor.” In other words, translating from the Latin: “Let ancient times delight other folk: I congratulate myself that I was not born till now” (*CW* 8: 108, 258). Several paragraphs later, Emerson declares to his audience the conditions for their birth, their commencement: “Nothing is old but the mind” (*CW* 8: 111).

What was born in the “now” and borne by the “new” that Emerson celebrated at Harvard in 1867? Just two years beyond the Civil War, Emerson had much to remind his audience of the “whirl of life” that awaited “the country [that] has withstood the rude trial which threatened its existence.” Looking forward, Emerson believed that “a new and healthful air regenerates the human mind” (*CW* 8: 108, 110). Here we sense the irony, if not yet the tragedy, that Richardson observes in the traces of Emerson’s decline. Three decades beyond “The American Scholar,” Emerson could still see the prospects for vitality in American intellectual life and continued to call for “the transcendent powers of the mind” (*CW* 8: 121). Such invocations had made this author the guiding spirit of what Irving Howe calls *The American Newness*. But now in his sixties, Emerson’s own ability to call upon such powers, it seemed, had diminished.

Or so goes the familiar story of Emerson’s late years told by his biographers and reinforced by critics and anthologists. Observing signs of Emerson’s declining memory and mental acuity in his performance at Harvard in 1867, Robert Richardson, for example, locates the origins of such decline even earlier, arguing that “the general course of his life changed in the late 1850s, and a series of endings punctuated his last twenty-five years.”³ As Ronald A. Bosco has shown, however, Richardson and most Emerson biographers, in the swift, concluding treatment of those endings across Emerson’s final decades, impose a self-fulfilling prophecy upon the work produced in those years; their limited regard renders the late work and thought of Emerson insignificant to warrant our greater attention. The same is true of many anthologies, which frequently end with a selection from *The Conduct of Life* (1860), if they dare

even to venture beyond the more familiar work of the 1840s. As a result, late Emerson is perceived to suffer “a steady falling-off in terms of his personal involvement in the great social and intellectual issues of the 1860s and early 1870s” (*CW* 7: xxiv).

Let me emphasize at the outset that I am persuaded by Bosco’s significant counterargument to the critical convention that disregards Emerson’s late work and in the process denies that work its social and intellectual relevance. While duly recognizing evidence of Emerson’s “rapid decline of both his physical and mental conditions from the mid-1870s on,” conditions that included aphasia and possibly the onset of dementia, Bosco demonstrates that in Emerson’s work of the 1850s through the 1860s and into the early 1870s, there is considerable evidence of “intellectual” and “literary vitality,” (*CW* 7: xxxvi, xxiv). This vitality is evident across Emerson’s *Later Lectures* (1843–71), which Bosco edits with Joel Myerson, and in the final two volumes of prose Emerson published in his lifetime, *Society and Solitude* (1870) and *Letters and Social Aims*, essays that Emerson developed from his primary work as a lecturer, a career that continued into the 1870s.

Like Bosco, David M. Robinson challenges what he calls “the narrative of Emerson’s declension” infecting the critical reception of late Emerson. Reclaiming Emerson’s “Progress of Culture” from that narrative, for example, Robinson argues that the address “belies any sense of intellectual decline or disengagement from central questions of both public policy and the conduct of intellectual life.”⁴ As Robinson well demonstrates in *Emerson and the Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and Ethical Purpose in the Later Work*, the persistent view of an aging Emerson, increasingly distant from public matters and limited by declining intellectual powers is, as a critical convention, weakened by its own distance from the real engagements of Emerson’s ongoing work as a lecturer, writer, and public intellectual across the last twenty-five years of his career. In *Emerson’s Memory Loss*, Christopher Hanlon insightfully redresses the critical avoidance of what he calls “Emerson’s late style” and its problematic associations with Emerson’s aging and dementia. Indeed, rather than avoiding the creative limitations Emerson faced in his later years, Hanlon addresses them head on. Hanlon locates in Emerson’s significant editorial collaboration in the 1870s with James Elliot Cabot, his literary executor, and Ellen Tucker Emerson, his daughter, a version of creativity that is problematic with regard to individual authorship, to be sure; the prominent role both editors played in bringing *Letters and Social Aims* to press reached beyond editing. However, Hanlon also recovers in this extensive collaboration a late Emersonian philosophy of composition, a theory of “communal mind” that counters Emerson’s earlier vision of self-reliant individuality and that offers “a way of reading Emerson anew.”⁵ In their critical and archival attention to Emerson’s late work, Hanlon, Robinson,

and Bosco invite readers to return to the work and thought of the older Emerson anew.⁶

In taking up that invitation, this book extends the reconsideration of the intellectual vitality of Emerson's work through the 1860s by focusing greater attention on its educational contexts. These educational contexts or "aspects," to use Emerson's word, are often marked by the rhetorical situation in which Emerson delivered an address or lecture: for example, "Progress of Culture" at Harvard, or earlier in the decade, the "Celebration of Intellect" commencement address delivered at Tufts College in 1861; or the July 1863 address delivered at Dartmouth College and repeated in August at Waterville (now Colby) College in the immediate aftermath of Gettysburg, where Emerson, despite the urgencies of war, implored the graduating scholars to "stand" by their "order" in hopes of "a revival of the human mind"; or "Education," the November 1864 lecture delivered to the Parker Fraternity in Boston; or finally, the philosophy course Emerson agreed in 1869 to teach for a new graduate program and president at Harvard, delivering these "University Lectures" in 1870 and 1871, a culmination (of sorts) to his decades-long and never-completed project on the "Natural History of the Intellect."⁷

In celebrating intellect as he did in numerous addresses on college campuses and in other lectures throughout his later years, Emerson argues not just upon the familiar grounds of higher learning, he argues for higher learning's traditional foundation. Emerson invokes the "idea of a College" (as he put it at Tufts) as a necessary place and pedagogical power for the cultivation of mind (*LL* 2: 248). He did so, it must be noted, in the 1860s, the beginning of the transformational period in American higher education in which the modern university emerged from the traditional college. And yet, at Tufts College, at Harvard, and elsewhere throughout this period of new educational and intellectual ideas, Emerson aligned his conception of mind with older forms, with the rhetorical and educational ideas associated with the classical college. Emerson thus proposed a familiar argument in these works, the "transcendent powers of the human mind," but he did so in terms that, although they would have been known to his audience, have been for too long unrecognized in Emerson criticism. Emerson conceives of the mind in "common" or in "correlation"—terms circulating through these late works—with the educational culture of a rhetoric, a way of thinking and learning, he associates with the liberal arts college.

In returning both Emerson and his readers to what Alcott in 1865 suggestively calls "this college," this book argues that Emerson's continuing, vital interest in the mind's cultivation is best illuminated when read in the context of this transformative period of American educational reform. Situating Emerson in that context, this book addresses three related and critically neglected facets of Emerson's late work that

I identify collectively as his “rhetoric of mind”: first, a reconsideration of Emerson’s interest in rhetoric not merely as a matter of oratorical skill or literary style, but as a broader, organizing principle of mind, a crucial but still under-read component of the author’s intellectual project; second, a reconsideration of Emerson’s engagement with the ideas and pedagogy of the classical liberal arts college and curriculum, a traditional place for rhetoric’s cultivation; and third, by extension of these first two aspects of culture, a reconsideration of Emerson’s influence on other writers and thinkers in this same period of transformation, figures also engaged with questions concerning the revival of the human mind, but with more familiar notions of Emersonian influence here rethought as a matter of pedagogical relation. To use a term that factors greatly in this study, given its significance in Emerson’s rhetoric of mind, I would say that in referring to Emerson figuratively as a “college” and his works as “studies,” Bronson Alcott advances a *metonymy* that appropriately characterizes the ethos of Emerson’s works.

Rhetorical Liberal Arts

If readers long after Alcott have forgotten or disregarded relations between Emerson’s late works and the intellectual work of the college, what do we fail to learn or grasp? “Progress of Culture” suggests an answer in Emerson’s complicated exploration of the newness of the mind’s powers and its educational culture. Speaking at Harvard in 1867, Emerson did not turn the mind of his audience entirely, nor for very long, toward “everything [that] looks new and recent.” Instead, in the space of the same paragraph where he invokes the *appearance* of newness, Emerson counters the very perspective, reminding his audience that the new aspects of culture in America are, in fact, radically retrospective. For Emerson, the “oldest empires,—what we called venerable antiquity,” can also be perceived now “like creations of yesterday.” Emerson then analogizes this dynamic relation of new and old by referring to recent lessons from geology that “efface” the solidity of the known world, “disclos[ing] that the world is a crystal, and the soil of the valleys and plains a continual decomposition and recomposition” (CW8: 111).

The lessons of a science such as geology, for Emerson, return recent formations to the older foundations from which all science, or “knowledge” in the root sense of the Latin *scientia*, emerges. As an aspect of “continual decomposition and recomposition,” the “new and healthful air [that] regenerates the human mind” is powerful precisely in its relation to, not rejection of, the past. Emerson then proceeds through the bulk of the address to enlarge this geological lesson of “recomposition” by analogizing it with broader cultural lessons found in the study of rhetoric, literature, philosophy, history, and politics, no less than in the sciences.

In this sort of natural history as liberal arts curriculum, Emerson finds a “certain equivalence of the ages of history” and the “equality between new and old countries,” qualifying his initial claim of newness. Emerson argues, instead, that “we have not on the instant better men to show than Plutarch’s heroes” and that the “Dark Ages” are “the feet on which we walk, the eyes with which we see. ‘Tis one of our triumphs to have reinstated them.” According to Emerson’s way of thinking, the newness of the American mind and its culture reinstates “primeval remains” (*CW* 8: 111–12).

With this language, Emerson recomposes the argument from “The American Scholar,” but “recomposition” now should be understood not as mere repetition, but rather as a process of continual reconsideration that takes its lessons from nature. “Every law in nature as gravity, centripetence, repulsion, polarity, undulation,” Emerson argues, “has a counterpart in the intellect” (*CW* 8: 116–17). The hands with which scholars will work and minds with which they will speak, we understand, are never entirely their own. As he puts the matter in the essay “Quotation and Originality,” first published in 1868 by Charles Eliot Norton in the *North American Review* and later included in *Letters and Social Aims*: “The originals are not original” (*CW* 8: 94). “Quotation and Originality” concludes with another reiteration of the insight that intellect’s culture and history are, as “memory,” only the “raw material” by which “Nature decomposes all her harvest for recomposition” (*CW* 8: 107), phrasing that can also be found earlier in the decade in Emerson’s address at Dartmouth College (*LL* 2: 309).

With this understanding of a dynamic and even resistant relation between originality and its quotation or recomposition, between mind, memory, and its decomposing material history, Emerson characterizes these “equivalences” of the old in the new as “the problem of culture” (*CW* 8: 113). Culture’s potential to educate the mind anew derives from the mind’s older foundation, and from the relation between the individual mind and a multitude he calls “public mind” (*CW* 8: 118). “I find the single mind equipollent to a multitude of minds, say to a nation of minds, as a drop of water balances the sea,” Emerson explains, “and, under this view, the problem of culture assumes wonderful interest.” Thinking of this counterbalancing or “equipollent” relation as a “co-presence of the revolutionary force in intellect,” Emerson adds this problematic, contradictory definition for good measure: “Culture is all that which gives the mind possession of its own powers” (*CW* 8: 113). Education unfolds as the tuition of intuition, the teaching of an intelligence already learned. This statement enlarges the assertion Emerson makes a few paragraphs earlier regarding the effect of “continual decomposition and recomposition”: “Nothing is old but the mind” (*CW* 8: 111). If for Emerson everything is new except the mind, then nothing is new when the mind,