Emerson’s poem “Boston” was begun in the mid 1850s and abandoned because Emerson could not reconcile his desire to write a tribute to his native city with his need to be honest about its sins during the Fugitive Slave crisis. Nearly twenty years later he finished the poem and read it at the Centennial Anniversary of the Tea Party, 16 December 1873, having suppressed a sequence of angry (and no longer very timely) stanzas on the slavery theme. Among the excluded stanzas was this one:

But there was chaff within the flour
And one was false in ten,
And reckless clerks in lust of power
Forgot the rights of men;
Cruel and blind did file their mind.
And sell the blood of human kind.

The phrase “file their mind” turns out to have a very specific source which illuminates the meaning of the stanza and clarifies the animus behind the suppressed critical portions of the poem.

In May of 1854, at the very beginning of the Anthony Burns case, Richard Henry Dana, Jr. had gotten himself appointed to represent the fugitive slave. He was immediately approached by Amos A. Lawrence, who offered to cover Dana’s expenses if he would hire as co-counsel a prominent Whig attorney. Dana urged Rufus Choate to undertake this task. In his journal, Dana records the “amusing interview” that ensued with Choate:

I asked him to make one effort in favor of freedom, & told him that the 1850 delusion was dispelled, & all men were coming round. . . . He sd. he shd. be glad to make an effort on our side, but that he had given written opinions ag. us, in the Sims case, on every point, & that he could not go ag. them.

“You corrupted your mind in 1850?”
“Yes. 'Filed my mind.”
“I wish you would file it in Court, for our benefit.”

Choate was certainly among the most prominent Whig lawyers of the age, but was bound to refuse the assignment: his support of the Fugitive Slave Act was grounded in loyalty to Webster, and he was indeed on record as preferring to placate the Slave Power rather than run the risk of disunion, which he felt was the alternative.

In making his remark to Dana, the learned Choate, a notable reader of Shakespeare, was almost certainly recalling Macbeth, III, i, 65 (“For Banquo’s issue have I fil’d my mind”). Apparently Choate’s remark circulated in the aftermath of the crisis, and Emerson remembered it, perhaps as an instance of the triumph of consistency over morality. Interestingly, Emerson may not have associated the phrase with Shakespeare at all, but perhaps more directly with Byron, and with a stanza from “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage” (III, cxii) which had influenced a much earlier poem of his entitled “Good-Bye.” Byron wrote:

I have not loved the World, nor the World me;
I have not flattered its rank breath, nor bowed
To its idolatries a patient knee.
Nor coined my cheek to smiles,—nor cried aloud
In worship of an echo: in the crowd
They could not deem me one of such—I stood
Among them, but not of them—in a shroud
Of thoughts which were not their thoughts; and still could,
Had I not filed my mind, which thus itself subdued.

The Byron source comes closer than the Shakespearean to expressing the contempt felt by anti-slavery men for Choate’s lack of independence and for the temporizing of Hunker Whigs in general. But surely it was the fact that the phrase issued from Choate himself that made for its aptness in the context of Emerson’s “Boston.”

Notes

1 See Ralph H. Orth et al., eds., The Poetry Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1986), 745-47.
The Rev. John Pierce Hears the "American Scholar"

The Massachusetts Historical Society Miscellany calls the attention of its readers to the valuable manuscript memoirs of the Rev. John Pierce (1773-1849), Unitarian minister in Brookline from 1797 until his death and a long-time member of the M.H.S. The Miscellany notes, however, that "Pierce's report of Ralph Waldo Emerson's 'American Scholar' Phi Beta Kappa address, delivered in the meetinghouse of the First Parish in Cambridge on Aug. 31, 1837, gives a taste of both the virtues and the liabilities of his 'Memoirs':"

Rev. Ralph Waldo Emerson gave an Oration of 1 1/4 hour on the American scholar. It was to me in the misty, dreamy, unintelligible style of Swedenborg, Coleridge, and Carlyle. He pretended to have method; but I could not trace it, except in his own announcement. It was well spoken; and all seemed to attend; but how many were in my own predicament of making little of it, I have no means of ascertaining.

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Abstracts of Washington ALA Papers

Inventing a Life: The Example of the Sermons

SARAH WIDER
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Whether reading biography, writing it, or redefining it, Emerson devoted a considerable amount of prose to exploring what it meant to write a life. Frequently his subjects were the expected ones—the so-called "great men" admired by his audience. But another individual occupied even more of Emerson's attention. His biography was first written in the sermons, and it is here that Emerson worked out his version of the genre. Adopting the Unitarian emphasis on "character," Emerson radically revised the exemplary figure, the mainstay of Unitarian sermons. Where his colleagues emphasized the singular perfection of Christ and the unquestionable importance of circumstance, Emerson freed his listeners from both constraints. In his sermons, he presented the life of the "genuine man," a new exemplary figure who replaced Christ and came to represent Emerson's ideal biographical subject. Defined by his attributes, divorced from particular settings or specific actions, this figure lived in the mind. He was a composite of abstractions in a world that was purely prospective. As his biographer, Emerson wrote a life that could not strictly be imitated. To follow the pattern set out by Emerson's sermons was essentially to invent a life for oneself.

"Build Therefore Your Own World": Emerson's Constructions of the "Intimate Sphere"

ALBERT J. VON FRANK
Washington State University

Literary biography, still a relatively popular form, clings to its roots in old-fashioned narrative history, but shows signs of renovation as it opens itself to theoretical concerns. In this regard the ideas of Jürgen Habermas about the modern emergence of a bourgeois public sphere and its shifting relation to the intimate sphere of private individuals may prove especially enriching because it offers new ways to explore the historically contextualized self. In the 1830s Emerson's "problem of vocation" (or his relation to the public sphere) was yoked, in ways that have not as yet been fully sorted out, to the "problem of home," a problem that had simultaneously its personal and cultural dimensions. As America's great nineteenth-century theorist of the self, and as a crusader for self-culture and "the intimate of the private man," Emerson found himself at odds with his father's generation in locating power in the private rather than in the public sphere. Emerson's choice in 1835 of what appears to be a conventional and stable household in Concord is shown to have been in fact a highly deliberate and experimental shaping of the conditions of the intimate sphere, seen against the backdrop of a widespread suspicion among Emerson's contemporaries about the ethical and social implications of bourgeois householding.

Young Emerson and the Mantle of Biography

SUSAN L. ROBERTSON
Auburn University

Fascinated always with the heroes of history, particularly the figure of Jesus of Nazareth, young Reverend Mr. Emerson, at a time when he was making up his mind who and what he wanted to be, found the great men to be more than inspiring, for by putting on the mantle of biography he could borrow at times others' strength and remold himself in the image of his own projected, heroic self by partaking in and assimilating for himself the qualities of greatness, heroism, and power.

The Misuses of Great Men: Emerson, Antislavery, and Biography

LEN GOUGEN
University of Scranton

In Representative Men Emerson articulates his belief that the world relies heavily on the positive influence of great men. In his introductory essay, "Use of Great Men," he observes, "It is natural to believe in them... Name seems to exist for the excellent... They make the world wholesome" (CW 4:3). Additionally, as the title of Emerson's volume suggests, the great man is representative of the whole society, "Their quality makes his career, and he can variously publish their virtues, because they compose him" (CW 4:7).

At the very time Emerson was penning these words, however, his faith in the positive influence of great men in American society was waning. From the mid-1840s onward Emerson's involvement in the antislavery movement accelerated exponentially. In the antislavery speeches he made during this time he expressed his hope that great men would arise to move this all-important reform along. Curiously, however, the abolition movement produced no such major figures but instead seemed to be a grass roots movement of undistinguished but morally sensitive social reformers. Adding to Emerson's reconsideration of the role of great men in providing the collective biography of the times was the recognition that the great national personalities of America, like Daniel Webster, were, in fact, opposed to the major reforms of the time.

(continued on page 7)
Emerson Society Papers

AN EMERSON BIBLIOGRAPHY, 1990

DAVID M. ROBINSON
Oregon State University

Editions


The Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume 2. Ed. Teresa Toullide and Andrew Delbanco. Missouri, 1990. [The second volume edition with newly discovered or collected letters, and corrected texts.]

An Emerson Bibliography, 1990

New editions and critical works from 1990, including late-appearing items from 1989.

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Fall 1991

Emerson Society Papers

The Emerson Society in Concord

"Emerson & Thoreau"—the Emerson Society's contribution to this summer's jubilee celebration of the Thoreau Society (see ESP, Spring 1991)—drew rave reviews in Concord on 14 July.

The panel, which had been hoped would attract an audience of 30, was held in the French Gallery of the Concord Museum, with seating capacity for 72. According to our host, Jayne Gordon, Director of Education at the Museum, when the audience swelled to over 150 (some estimates say 200), the doors were closed and an additional 30 disappointed persons were turned away, with complimentary passes to the Museum as consolation.

The Emerson Society congratulates the Thoreau Society and thanks the Concord Museum. We look forward to presenting more programs in Concord.

—WTM

Panelists, pictured, wore (seated, left to right) Marcia Moss, Harry Orth (reading the absent Linck Johnson's paper), Nancy Simmons, Joel Myerson (respondent); (standing) Wes Moss (moderator), Len Gougeon, Bob Sattelmeyer, and Brad Dean.

An Emerson Bibliography, 1990

Boudreau, Gordon V. The Roots of Walden and the Tree of Life. Vanderbilt, 1990. [Discusses Emerson's influence on Thoreau.]


straus, Cushing. Making American Tradition: Visions and Revisions from Ben Franklin to Alice Walker. Rutgers, 1990. [Contains a chapter on Emerson's influence on William James, pp. 72-87.]

(Continued on page 6)

**Essays.**


Burkholder, Kenneth W. "Emerson and the West: Concord, the Historical Discourse, and Beyond." NCS 4 (1990):93-103. (Discusses Emerson's move to Concord in terms of his sense of its frontier past.)

Carpenter, Kenneth W. "Ralph Waldo Emerson's Report on the Harvard College Library." HLB n.s. 1 (1990):6-12. (A report written while Emerson was a Harvard Overseer.)

Cavell, Stanley. "Emerson's Aims: Thinking." Romantic Revolutions, pp. 219-49. (See Cavell, Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome, above.)


Dean, Bradley P., and Gary Schamhorst. "The Contemporary Reception of Walden." SAP 18 (1990):595-99. (The authors conclude that Emerson's early sense of Walden's favorable reception was generally accurate.)


Carl Strauch died at his home in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, after teaching at Lehigh University for forty years and retiring in 1974 as Distinguished Professor Emeritus of English. In 1973 he had received from Muhlenberg College (his alma mater) the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters. As a scholar and teacher throughout his career, Carl loved Melville, Whitman, Carlyle, and especially Emerson. His doctoral dissertation, "A Critical and Variorum Edition of the Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson" (Yale, 1946), was the first close look at Emerson's manuscript and notebook poems since the "Centenary" edition of 1904; and his numerous articles on Emerson as a poet (out of which he had hoped to make a book that unfortunately he never published) sparked scholarly and critical interest that has been carried on by others. He contributed significantly to the development of The Emerson Society Quarterly into ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance, and was a member of the Editorial Board that founded and guided the early progress of The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. According to one of his colleagues, "Carl Strauch was one of the few who meet Thoreau's high criterion, who 'serve [the organizations of which they are part] with their consciences also,' not satisfied by serving with their bodies or even with their minds."

—Douglas Emory Wilson
(based on a Memorial Resolution by Rosemarie Arbur)