

Emerson's Relevance Today

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It is now a commonplace to question the relevance of much of what we have called American ideals and values. A vocal if not representative segment of the younger generation has had enough impact upon social and political theorists to stir them to a reevaluation of policies which affect the welfare of us all. American literature has not been immune to the charge of irrelevance, as James E. Miller, Jr., Professor of English at the University of Chicago and current President of the National Council of Teachers of English, has pointed out. Every sensitive teacher, he comments, must recognize that there are issues today which are not merely pressing but "pursuing and demanding," "ambushing and assaulting." Teachers might differ about the significant issues, he adds, but "we might all well agree that we are living in a time of crisis in which we must lay aside the old ways that have not worked and find new ways that do work, the new visions that speak to our anguish."¹

And what are the issues? Miller lists white racism, problems stemming from urban and suburban sprawl, the population explosion and general dehumanization of life, the problems of human relations created by technology, and the daily violence which one way or another touches us all.² It wouldn't be difficult for a teacher of English to make a list of issues from the examination textbooks he receives for possible use in writing courses. The titles indicate the content, the significant issues: *The Radical Vision; The Rebel: His Moment and His Motives; Alienation; Relevants; Controversy*—the list could be extended, it seems, indefinitely. But the point is clear enough. Students are interested in current problems and a growing number of them simply do not identify with or accept without questioning "traditional values," and if the teacher wishes to communicate with them, he must recognize this fact.

Leslie A. Fiedler has called extremists among these students "The New Mutants." We may say, he notes, "that the 'mutants' in our midst are non-participants in the past (though our wisdom assures us this is impossible), drop-outs from history," who are protesting "the very notion of man which the universities sought to impose upon them: That bourgeois-Protestant version of Humanism, with its view of man as justified by rationality, work, duty, vocation, maturity, success; and its concomitant understanding of childhood and adolescence as a temporarily privileged time of preparation for assuming those burdens."³ Impulse, emotion, and nonrestriction are

preferred to self-discipline, order, and a rational approach to the solution of problems. And the widespread use of drugs among this group “is not merely a matter of changing taste in stimulants,” but a “programmatically espousal of an antipuritanical mode of existence—hedonistic and detached—one more strategy in the war on time and work.”⁴

Nor is it puritanical notions of work and duty alone that are being challenged, Marcia Cavell points out. Traditional belief in the superintending providence of God and standards (at least in theory) of morality, specifically those relating to sex and the family, she says, can no longer be assumed to be viable, and an ideal society as it is conceived by some students would be guilt-free.⁵

So what is the teacher of American literature to do? If we take these realities to heart, Miller believes, “there is much that we have taught that we might now cease to teach, and there is much that we have not taught that we should now teach.” Modern stuff can fend for itself—writers like Jean Toomer and Ralph Ellison and works such as *Catch-22* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. But which of the established writers do we leave out? Apparently no curriculum would satisfy those who reject, totally, the past; but for those who demand that the curriculum be relevant, there are, Miller thinks, classic writers who speak to current issues. These are the eight listed in the Modern Languages Association’s publication *Eight American Authors*: Poe, Emerson, Hawthorne, Whitman, Thoreau, Melville, Twain, and James, to which Miller would add Emily Dickinson.

This is not to say that these nine are without fault, for a case can be made out against all, who are “in some measure, in some crucial spot, critically, even grossly, defective.” Furthermore, the teacher would revise his emphasis in teaching any one author, shying away from “their classic faces—their safe and innocuous works.” Thus Poe can be made relevant to “the civilization of nightmare.” Hawthorne says much about “dream terrors” and “utopia and man’s longing for the perfect society.” Melville is almost too rich, but he can be mined for ideas of “male chauvinism” and stories of “existential despair,” while Emerson would appeal to the militants who believe that “Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.” The relevance of Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” is obvious, and Walt Whitman can be shown to relate to all of the students’ “psychedelic experiences” and their interest in the “so-called sexual revolution.” There is much “black humor” in Twain and “relevant questions about existential being and nothingness” in the writings of James. Emily Dickinson would contribute “to the modern ‘God Is Dead’ movement.”⁶

I confess a certain uneasiness as I consider this proposed program of relevant literature. Not that I am unaware that we often must make an

effort to help students appreciate some of the standard authors. As Donald Hall has pointed out, in identifying one problem, “to read Whittier requires an effort of the historical imagination; we must learn to cope with goodness and optimism” for “negativism is the weather of our time.”⁷ Longfellow is, admittedly, too gentle, Cooper and Irving are too much concerned with the past and resistance to change, at least radical change, and Howells wrote about too many of the smiling aspects of life for modern tastes. And so the criticism goes.

But even if the instructor should decide to restrict his curriculum to only eight or nine authors (which I think would be a mistake), their “classic faces” have a great deal to say about contemporary issues. Hawthorne’s main thesis, the evil consequences of isolation from the sympathy achieved through brotherhood with mankind, is certainly relevant to the problem of dehumanization today, and even more relevant, perhaps, is his intuitive awareness that the problems of the spirit will admit of spiritual cures only (I am thinking of “Rappaccini’s Daughter”). In a society dominated by technology, as valuable as technology may be, we will ignore Hawthorne’s insight at our own peril. Twain’s classic work, *Huckleberry Finn*, can certainly be shown to be a rebuke to white racism, and James’s emphasis on the failure to perceive the intentions of people, to accurately determine their motives, cannot be considered irrelevant in any consideration of the problems of human relations.

But perhaps I am most perplexed because I, like Mr. Miller, am “concerned for the fate of mankind” and am at a loss to understand how his proposed program of studies would alleviate our distress. I propose to show that by ignoring Emerson’s “classic face,” we would emasculate the large body of his works and deprive ourselves of some of the clearest insights available to us to improve the fate of mankind. I would begin with his belief that “The whole secret of a teacher’s force lies in the conviction that men are convertible. . . . They want awakening” (J. IV, 278.)⁸ And I would certainly point out to my students that the notion that Emerson would “remedy the evil of the world by ignoring it”⁹ is inaccurate and misrepresentative of his thinking. The following is more typical:

Each must be armed—not necessarily with musket and pike. Happy, if, seeing these, he can feel that he has better muskets and pikes in his energy and constancy. Let him accuse none, let him injure none. The way to mend the bad world, is to create the fight world. (“Worship.”)

Further, Emerson knew that values are often perverted, thus losing any redemptive value they may have:

The consolation and happy moment of life, atoning for all short-comings, is sentiment; a flame of affection or delight in the heart, burning up suddenly for its object; . . . no matter what the object is, so it be good, this flame of

desire makes life sweet and tolerable. It reinforces the heart that feels it, makes all its Acts and words gracious and interesting. Now society and towns is [*sic*] infested by persons who, seeing that the sentiments please, counterfeit the expression of them. These we call sentimentalists,—talkers who mistake the description for the thing, saying for having. . . . Yes, they adopt whatever merit is in good repute, and almost make it hateful with their praise. . . . A little experience acquaints us with the unconvertibility of the sentimentalist, the soul that is lost by mimicking the soul. . . . Was ever one converted? The innocence and ignorance of the patient is the first difficulty; he believes his disease is blooming health. (“Social Aims.”)

In short, the mark of an educated man is his ability to recognize a good man.

Emerson’s radicalism, his doctrine of self-reliance, has immediate appeal to students who believe institutions are oppressive, as Miller observed. But it is easy to misread Emerson if his statements are taken out of context, a risk, it seems to me, inherent in the haste to make him relevant. It is true that Emerson often commented about the stultifying effect of conformity on the development of individual potential, especially in the earlier essays. But the reason conformity is deadly is always clear. In order for men to lead satisfying and productive lives, they must be receptive to the intuitions of the soul, a point which is clearly established in the widely acclaimed essay “Self-Reliance.” Whether he could prove his theory of intuition (inspiration) or not, “this theory of ‘ultimate perception’ of right or wrong,” as Bliss Perry has noted, “became Emerson’s lifelong creed.”¹⁰ But, Perry continues, “How many young persons who have been thrilled by the pages of ‘Self-Reliance’ have been able to perceive, simply by the evidence offered in that essay, that Emerson always had the higher self in mind, and that, in his son’s words,—he really meant ‘God-Reliance’ when he said ‘Self-Reliance’?”¹¹ Society wars against the individual because society—at least in a direct way—cannot offer the individual what Emerson believed was crucial to his welfare.

But that is not to say that society should be destroyed. Emerson didn’t go so far as Lowell in his criticism of Thoreau’s isolationism, but it is clear that he disapproved of it. Instead of “engineering for all America,” Emerson commented, Thoreau became “captain of a huckleberry party.” And Emerson’s whole theory of the uses of great men, the idea he developed as an introduction to the work, *Representative Men*, was just that they could be useful. Men become great by obeying their own intuition, but by so doing, show to others their own potential. “Our chief want in life, is, somebody who shall make us do what we can. This is the service of a friend. There is a sublime attraction in him to whatever virtue is in us.” (“Considerations by the Way.”)

Emerson further qualified his doctrine of self-reliance by emphasizing the need to be of service:

The secret of culture is to learn, that a few great points steadily reappear, alike in the poverty of the obscurest farm, and in the miscellany of metropolitan life, and that these few alone are to be regarded,—the escape from all false ties; courage to be what we are; and the love of what is simple and beautiful; independence, and cheerful relation, these are the essentials,—these, and the wish to serve,—to add somewhat to the well-being of men. (“Considerations by the Way.” See also the volume *Society and Solitude*, in which the relationship of the individual to society is explored at length.)

Negativism is the last thing anyone would associate with Emerson, although he gave doubt its due in the essay “Experience” and heartily admired Montaigne, whom he called “The Skeptic.” On the contrary, he was so optimistic his idealism becomes a liability. The problem is whether he was aware enough of the human condition, which is to say, the evil inherent in man’s nature so obviously manifested in human behavior. Emerson himself did little to allay suspicion. He once admitted, “My heart did never counsel me to sin.” (J. IV, 48.) Robert M. Gay believed that “in all his family unbridled passion and the coarser vices hardly existed. He lived in an ascetic atmosphere, where being good was merely natural.”¹² But if Emerson was immune to the “coarser vices,” he was not blind to them in others, nor unaware of the limitations that hinder human achievement. He once noted in his journal that “it takes a great deal of elevation of thought to produce a very little elevation of life,” and that “only gradually can we break through the trivial forms of habit,” to “bend our living towards our idea.” (J. V, 489.) The following comment from “The Conservative” suggests anything but a facile optimism:

. . . yet men are not philosophers, but are rather very foolish children, who by reason of their partiality, see everything in the most absurd manner, and are victims at all times of the nearest object .Our experience, our perception is conditioned by the need to acquire in parts and succession, that is, with every truth a certain falsehood. . . .

Unfortunately, people learn slowly. Their own temperaments, their hereditary dispositions and unfavorable environments, perhaps most of all their illusions, get in the way. All of this Emerson admitted in the essays “Experience,” “Fate,” and “Illusions.”

So what is man to do? The answer Emerson invariably gave entitles him, at least, to a hearing, for he refused to confirm man in his desperation. “A low, hopeless spirit puts out the eyes; skepticism is slow suicide.” (“Resources.”) All betterment lies in a positive attitude, an affirmative: “A steady mind, a believing mind wins the world,” he wrote in his journal (V, 325), and noted in the essay “Courage” that “he has not learned the lesson of life who does not every day surmount a fear.” Hence Emerson’s great admiration for activity, for getting things done. There are several references to Napoleon in his journals and essays, but they all make the same point:

“He belonged to a class, fast growing in the world, who think that what a man can do is his greatest ornament, and that he always consults his dignity by doing it.” (“Literary Ethics.”) He further noted that Napoleon “went to the edge of his possibility,” and that “he felt, with every wise man, that as much life is needed for conservation, as for creation.” If the truth were known, Emerson quipped, “We are always in peril, always in a bad plight, just on the edge of destruction, and only to be saved by invention and courage.” (“Napoleon.”)

Thus his works are full of praise for idealism and hope. “The joy of the spirit indicates its strength. All healthy things are sweet tempered. . . . power dwells with cheerfulness; hope puts us in a working mood whilst despair . . . untunes the active powers.” (“Considerations by the Way.”)

Alienation and estrangement were as foreign to Emerson as anguish. Nowhere was he able to sustain either mood very long for he was convinced that the Universe what he liked to call the nature of things—was structured to confirm man’s desire to believe that his life has meaning. “Spontaneous action is always the best,” he reiterated countless times, because it is an act of reception, of receiving impressions from the Oversoul, an act which all may participate in and whose laws of influx all may study. “A healthy soul stands united with the Just and True, as the magnet arranges itself with the pole” he wrote in “Intellect.” That a Benevolent Spiritual Power might not exist seems never to have concerned Emerson:

O my brothers, God exists. There is a soul at the center of nature and over the will of every man, so that none of us can wrong the universe. (“Spiritual Laws.”)

But man can wrong himself. The “Evolution of a highly destined society must be moral,” he noted, “it must run in the grooves of the celestial wheels.” In order to accomplish anything excellent, man must have catholic aims. All action must lean on principle. “Let us not lie and steal. No god will help. . . . Work rather for those interests which the divinities honor and promote,—justice, love, freedom, knowledge, utility.” The true test of a civilization, Emerson concluded, “is not the census, nor the size of the cities, nor the crops,—no, but the kind of man the country turns out.” (Civilization.”)

I have attempted to show solely on the grounds of his ideas that Emerson is relevant today. He may also be defended on artistic and aesthetic grounds, as Miller admits.¹³ Thus while I disagree with those who would radically revise the curriculum of American Literature, I believe there is merit in asking ourselves, as critics of the curriculum have asked, whether our emphasis is where it should be. Surely there is much to be gained by asking ourselves what accounts for Emerson’s optimism, for amid the wail of so much negativism his strong, positive voice is needed to remind us

despair is only one mood man is capable of and need not be final. To quote him once more, "I count no man much because he crows or silences me. Any fool can do that. But if his conversation enriches or rejoices me, I must reckon him wise." (J. IV, 268.)

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1. The 'Classic' American Writers and the Radicalized Curriculum," *College English*, Vol. 31, No. 6 (March, 1970), pp. 565–66.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 566.

3. "The New Mutants," in *The Radical Vision: Essays for the Seventies*, ed. Leo Hamalian and F. R. Karl (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1970), pp. 487–89.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 501.

5. "Visions of a New Religion," *Saturday Review of Literature*, December 19, 1970, pp. 12–14, 43–44.

6. Miller, pp. 567–69.

7. Whittier, *The Laurel Poetry Series* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1960), p. 18.

8. Citations from Emerson's journals in my paper are to *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman et. al. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1960–).

9. Miller admits this is a general criticism of Emerson.

10. *Emerson Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1931), p. 20.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

12. *Emerson: A Study of the Poet as Seer* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1928), p. 31.

13. Miller, p. 569.