

EMERSON, YOUNG AMERICA, AND THE IMAGINATION OF EMPIRE

Talk prepared for conference "Art and Empires," CES, Harvard, April 23, 2007

Arthur Goldhammer

Our subject today is "art and empires," but I shall be speaking of empire in a special sense. My concern is with America in the 1830s and 1840s. I shall argue, first, that America, though not yet a fully integrated nation-state, developed a self-conscious imperial vocation in the early 1840s. I will explore the complex nature of this vocation by contrasting two addresses of Ralph Waldo Emerson's, "The American Scholar" of 1837 and "The Young American" of 1844. Finally, I note a confluence of similar currents in a rather different part of the political-cultural landscape, occupied by the editor John L. O'Sullivan and the literary cum political movement known as Young America. Along the way I suggest parallels with the roughly contemporaneous cultural shift in Europe from the political romanticism of Young Italy and Young England, the philosophical romanticism of Young Hegelianism, and what Paul Bénichou has dubbed *le sacre de l'écrivain*¹ to the disenchanted materialism of the later 19th century.

America's Imperial Vocation

What do I mean by an imperial vocation? If an empire is, as Charles Maier suggests, a cartel of transnational elites paying deference to a common center, then America was not yet an empire.² Nor was it yet even altogether a nation, for what the Constitution had wrought was a federal union in which, as Henry Adams put it, "each group of states lived a life apart."³ For Tocqueville, newly arrived on these shores in 1831 and struggling to understand how, *pace* Montesquieu, a republic could subsist in such a vast

inchoate wilderness, the initial answer seemed to be that the “country consists of small nations [*viz.*, the states] that remain almost entirely separate within the larger nation.” The interlocutor to whom he put this observation, identified in his travel notebooks only as “Mr. Clay, an ardent [Boston] Presbyterian,” replied that Tocqueville’s remark was “truer than you know. Not only does each state constitute a nation, but each city within each state is a small nation, [and] each ward within each city is again a small nation, with its own special interests, its own government, its own representation—in a word, its own political existence.”⁴

Now, the “ardent Presbyterian” surely exaggerated, for it would be too much to insist that the national spirit in America was as feeble as Mr. Clay implied. There was undoubtedly *something* in America that transcended the small “nations” encompassing still smaller ones in this Russian-doll Republic. Clearly, the “small nations” were not as Tocqueville initially believed, “entirely separate.” There was a national economy, built on what another Mr. Clay, Henry, the Great Compromiser, had optimistically dubbed the American System, but this had attained a peak from which it was about to tumble in the Panic of 1837. Furthermore, Jackson’s successful attack on the Second Bank of the United States signaled a widely held conviction that management of the nation’s economic growth was better decentralized than concentrated at the national level.

Security, whether against foreign powers or native Americans, was no longer the unifying element it once had been. Still, one might argue that there *was* a common center, symbolized by the Constitution, whose fiftieth anniversary was celebrated in 1837. The sanctified instrument that was supposed to have infused soul into the national body politic is today enshrined in the National Archives in a reliquary filled with noble gas and subjected to beatific veneration by busloads of bored schoolchildren, but in

antebellum America it remained a hotly contested document.⁵ Just seven years earlier, Webster had defended his reading of the National Scripture against South Carolina's Hayne, according to whom the federal government is a creature of the several and still sovereign states. But who was contending over the Constitution? Was there a national elite claiming deference from regional elites? Or were there rather regional elites vying for advantage over their competitors? Were Webster, Clay, and Calhoun of the center or the periphery? Even Jackson, whose forceful rejection of nullification had made him the very incarnation of central authority, was at the same time an emanation of Van Buren's Albany Regency and Overton's turbulent frontier Tennessee, as well as a staunch opponent of the American System.⁶ Whether there was anything like deference to that common center by subnational elites, and thus a sort of domestic empire, to bend Maier's definition a little, is therefore open to question. The periphery did not so much defer to the center as inhabit it. Indeed, the aspiring nation was rather like Pascal's universe, a circle with its divinized but abstract center everywhere and its periphery nowhere.⁷ What was America really, centrally, about? Was it to be a struggle over which of several forms of acquisitiveness, each concentrated in a different region of the country, was to prevail? Or did the country wish to define its unity in other than material terms? From New England came an answer. America was an incipient empire, bent on conquest—cultural conquest—of its own constituent parts.

The Emersonian Transformation

The increasingly insistent doubts about what democracy in America had and would yet become under the pressure of material success and territorial expansion were forcefully expressed on August 31, 1837, in an address to the Phi Beta Kappa Society, just a few steps from where we meet today, by the heterodox Unitarian preacher, orator, and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Emerson entitled his talk “The American Scholar,” and his ostensible subject was not empire but the state of scholarship and letters in the American Republic. Yet his central trope was a version of the traditional *translatio studii*, the classical proclamation of imperial coming of age: “Our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands draws to a close,” he said. “Who can doubt that poetry will revive and lead to a new age ...?”⁸ After the Ages of Rome, Florence, Paris, and London, it went without saying, this was to be the Age of New York, America *urbi et orbi*, tutored, to be sure, by Boston, the American Athens, or was it the New Jerusalem?

The conceit that literature and learning would follow mercantile and military might had been applied to America before, of course, but chiefly in anticipation, while the nascent nation still gleamed with Edenic radiance.⁹ But Emerson refurbished the old imperial trope, or rather he refurbished it as a weapon which, with mordant irony, he turned at once on the civilization he wished to moralize. America’s destiny he had no doubt would be nonpareil but only, he affirmed with residual Calvinist self-loathing, after it conquered itself: “Men, such as they are, very naturally seek money or power, and power because it is as good as money – the ‘spoils,’ so called, ‘of office.’” This was where America stood in Emerson’s estimation as Jackson left office and Van Buren succeeded him. It was full of men “sleep-walking.” “Wake them,” he said, “and they shall quit the false good and leap to the true and leave governments to clerks and desks. This revolution is to be wrought by the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture.”¹⁰

Far from believing that America would acquire learning and art because it had acquired wealth and with it the leisure to study, the *otium studiosum* said to sanctify the palaces of the ancient rich, Emerson blasted the appetites that had corrupted the American spirit without civilizing it: the annual gathering of scholars in Cambridge had thus far, he said, “been simply a

friendly sign of the survival of the love of letters amongst a people too busy to give to letters any more." *Too busy* to save themselves, in other words, and in case the point was missed, Emerson varied the image in order to pierce the defenses of a people that prided itself on its industriousness: this was a land, he charged, not of *studious idleness* but rather of *sluggard intellect*. The clever inversion of the Latin, so characteristic of Emerson's style, may have lightened the burden of his cumbrous learning, but it was a pun with real sting, amplified by the remainder of the sentence in which it was embedded: perhaps the time had come, Emerson hoped, "when the *sluggard intellect* of this continent will look from under its *iron lids*, and fill the *postponed expectation* of the world with *something better* than the exertions of *mechanical skill*."¹¹ Sluggard intellect, iron lids, postponed expectation, something better than mechanical skill: the disappointment is palpable, rising in Emerson's gorge almost as disgust.

Such condemnation of worldly pride in the name of spurned spirit had of course been the staple of New England preaching for two centuries. Here was yet another American jeremiad, to borrow Sacvan Bercovitch's evocative phrase, to scathe complacency and sow the soulful anxiety that had proved such an effective goad to fruitful labor.¹² Tocqueville had a few years earlier remarked America's characteristic restlessness in the midst of plenty. He called it *inquiétude* and attributed it to the fact that nothing in American life was fixed. Restlessness, he thought, was a source of both energy and misery. One could in America become anything by work, yet success seemed only to aggravate the ache of want. Restlessness yielded riches, but riches rankled souls raised in suspicion of all desire, and most especially gratified desire.

Neo-Jansenist irony and withdrawal could not satisfy Emerson, however. Concord was not Port-Royal. If Emerson built, it would be not a refuge from the inevitable hypocrisies of power but a new Jerusalem out of a bustling

Babylon. Hence he aimed at a transvaluation of the old Protestant pieties. Anticipating Nietzsche, who would become his admiring reader, Emerson counseled his young American scholars to throw open the temple doors and study nature; to set aside the old sacred texts and re-enchant a disenchanted age, not with borrowed images of the Old World but rather by “transmuting life into truth”;¹³ and above all to make the standard of that truth action rather than contemplation: “The preamble of thought ... is action. Only so much do I know, as I have lived.”¹⁴

The paradox, of course, was that the only world in which one could live and act was the contemptible one of money and power and spoils. These were the ink in which the “preamble of thought” must be written. Emerson grasped the dilemma by the horns. Having “dwelt perhaps tediously upon this abstraction of the Scholar ... I ought not to delay longer to add what I have to say of nearer reference to the time and to the country.”¹⁵ This turned out to be a plea for a more democratic literature: “The same movement which effected the elevation of what was called the lowest class in the state assumed in literature a very marked and as benign an aspect. Instead of the sublime and beautiful, the low, the common, was explored and poetized. ... Man is surprised to find that things near are not less beautiful and wondrous than things remote.”¹⁶

Thus, in 1837, Emerson had recommended that the American scholar “embrace the common.” He had commended an expansion of the horizon beyond the study, the library, the precincts of elite learning: “I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low.” Yet he still felt it necessary to keep the familiar and low at arm’s length by employing a strenuously poetic diction, paradoxically straining for linguistic loftiness in order to attain the demotic low: “What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin, the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat.”¹⁷ By 1844,

when he delivered the address entitled “The Young American” to the Mercantile Library Association, he was no longer so fastidious. Young merchants not taking their meals in firkins or lapping their milk from pans, he drew his examples now from the more prosaic world of commerce. “Who has not been stimulated to reflection by the facilities now in progress of construction for travel and the transportation of goods in the United States?” he asked. His lapidary judgment followed: “This rage for road building is beneficent for America.” The “iron lids” that had previously hooded the nation’s “sluggard intellect” had given way to images of iron horses hauling people and goods about the enlarged American *Lebensraum*, with the result that “America is beginning to assert itself to the senses and to the imagination of her children, and Europe is receding in the same degree.”¹⁸

What is striking is that this new presence of America to the imagination of her own children is here portrayed as a consequence of eminently material changes, whereas in 1837 it was through the advent of a genius, culture hero, or Oversoul—a Napoleon of letters—that the miraculous redemption had been expected to occur. To be sure, a role remained for the American scholar. But now it appeared that his vocation was not to preach a New Word to the New World but rather, altogether more prosaically, to teach correct “values” to the American doer: “The task of surveying, planting, and building upon this immense tract requires an education and a sentiment commensurate thereto. A consciousness of this fact is beginning to take the place of the purely trading spirit ... and even on the coast prudent men have begun to see that every American should be educated with a view to the values of land.”¹⁹ Instead of the spirit of poetry answering the world’s “postponed expectation” with “something better” than the “exertions of mechanical skill,” now “the land is the appointed remedy for whatever is false and fantastic in our culture. The continent we inhabit is to be physic and food for our mind.”²⁰

The “continent we inhabit”: that phrase, uttered in 1844, gives pause, since precisely what part of the continent “we” would inhabit was still very much an issue, and Emerson, although he was capable of misleadingly summarizing his politics with an apothegm such as “Whigs have the best men, Democrats the best cause,”²¹ was no supporter of either the Whig Tyler’s or the Democrat Polk’s designs on the Republic of Texas. Yet however staunchly he opposed imperial policies of forceful annexation, with their implication of an extension of the Slave Power’s dominion, the change in tone from “The American Scholar” of 1837 to “The Young American” of 1844 makes it clear that the original dream of American spiritual empire arising out of the democratizing intellect’s embrace of the “familiar and low” had been subtly reconfigured. Now it was “the uprising and culmination of the new and anti-feudal power of Commerce” that defined the “sublime and friendly Destiny by which the human race is guided.”²² Even American institutions were to be remade not by a renewal of republican political thought or a rationalization of Protestant theology but by the majesty and gravity of nature: “... [H]ere shall laws and institutions exist on some scale of proportion to the majesty of nature. To men legislating for the area betwixt the two oceans, betwixt the snows and the tropics, some of the gravity of nature will infuse itself into the code.”²³ In Emerson’s 1844 vision, in other words, America’s vocation was no longer merely to translate the culture of sclerotic old civilizations into the vital demotic idiom of a juvenescent continent; now it was to make a work of art of majestic nature itself, literally to sculpt a civilization in a landscape that spanned the area “betwixt two oceans.”

Toward the end of “The Young American” Emerson succinctly encapsulated the new imperial vocation: “In every age of the world,” he said, “there has been a leading nation, one of a more generous sentiment, whose eminent citizens were willing to stand for the interests of general justice and

humanity, at the risk of being called ... chimerical and fantastic.”²⁴ The reversal here is striking. Now the representative American is not the sluggish intellect fatigued by mechanical exertion but the eminent champion of general justice and humanity. Why this reversal of figure and ground? Emerson gives no sign that he thinks the redemption of the culture for which he called earlier has occurred. He sees the spiritual elite of the nation still confined to a single region: “Which should lead that movement, if not New England?” He deplores the tone of national conversation: “I find no expression in our state papers or legislative debate, in our lyceums or churches, specially in our newspapers, of a high national feeling ...” Nor does he find ground for hope in a culture of political opposition, a spirit of party: “The ‘opposition’ papers, so called, are on the same side. They attack the great capitalist, but with the aim to make a capitalist of the poor man. The opposition is against those who have money, from those who wish to have money.” Only in one place does he find a brightening on the horizon, where youth shines through the gloom. “Who should lead the leaders, but the Young American.”²⁵ The last two words are capitalized, as though Emerson were naming a movement, and there was indeed a movement so named in literary New York. Two men prominent in this milieu, John L. O’Sullivan and Evert Duyckinck, Emerson had met. They weren’t altogether to his taste, nor he to theirs. Yet he seems to have sensed a hopeful energy in them. He would not be the last middle-aged American teacher to credit his not altogether subservient tutees with greater transformative power than they possessed.

Young America

Youth was of course in the air. Mazzini had founded Young Italy in 1831. Disraeli’s Young England had been launched in 1835 with *The Vindication of the English Constitution*. In 1837 Karl Marx, aged nineteen, counted himself among the Young Hegelians and wrote his father a letter that Edward

Widmer, the historian of Young America, remarks could almost have been written by Emerson, calling for a “great new poem”: “There are moments in life which mark the close of a period like boundary posts and at the same time definitely point in a new direction.”²⁶

Across the Western world, youth was thus claiming a new voice in both politics and the arts and, more striking still, asserting that the political and the artistic were intimately entwined, not least because old structures of authority were inhibiting the birth of the new in both. This thought was put succinctly in October 1837, just two months after Emerson’s “American Scholar” address in Cambridge, by a twenty-three-year old New Yorker named John L. O’Sullivan, who published in the first issue of *The Democratic Review*, of which he was the founding editor, a manifesto in which he anticipated Emerson’s 1844 depiction of America as a “leading nation”: “Why,” O’Sullivan asked, “cannot our literati comprehend the matchless sublimity of our position amongst the nations of the world?”²⁷

Now, the birth of *The Democratic Review* is a swashbuckling yarn, to which I cannot do justice here. O’Sullivan’s concept of sublimity had nothing whatever to do with a translation of studies from the sacred to the secular register. His father John Thomas O’Sullivan had been not a Protestant divine, like Emerson’s, but a picaresque pirate. Or at any rate he had been accused of piracy while captain of a merchant brig named *Dick*, which American authorities in Buenos Aires had seized in 1823 “on suspicion of her being engaged in piratical pursuits.”²⁸ The unlucky freebooter, who also styled himself the count of Bearhaven, a scion of the Irish nobility, subsequently went down in a shipwreck, but litigation over the confiscation of the *Dick* lingered until 1836, when the U. S. government agreed to compensate the widow. According to Widmer, it was no coincidence that the pirate’s son, John Louis O’Sullivan, had in the interim become a protégé of Martin Van

Buren, Jackson's vice president and political *éminence grise* and now president-elect. The Little Magician's antennae, ever sensitive to rumblings of disaffection in the electorate, had picked up signs of discontent in the New York literary world with the Whiggish *Knickerbocker*.²⁹ His own Democratic Party enjoyed the support of many newspapers around the country but had in its pocket no national literary or intellectual monthly of the quality of the *Knickerbocker* or *The North American Review*. Since young O'Sullivan had displayed precocious talent in literary and political journalism, a federal contribution to the family's fortune must have seemed a promising investment to the Democratic president-elect. And indeed, *The Democratic Review's* manifesto gave a decidedly populist twist to Emerson's assertion that it was time to end America's "long apprenticeship" to foreign masters. As Perry Miller paraphrases O'Sullivan: "Our 'better educated classes' imbibe anti-democratic habits from English literature, 'hence this tone of sentiment of our literary institutions and of our learned professions, poisoning at the very spring the young mind of our people.'"³⁰ Young America therefore took a new and *unsentimental* "tone," melding youthful resentment, brash self-confidence, and pervasive if vague mistrust of the established generation.

O'Sullivan is remembered by history – as distinct from literary history, in which he claims a larger place as midwife to Nathaniel Hawthorne's talent – chiefly as the coiner of the phrase "manifest destiny." As we have seen, however, the word "destiny" had already been uttered by Emerson before O'Sullivan published his piece in the *New York Morning News*. Still earlier, in 1833, the journalist William Leggett, though a radical democrat, had written in the *Knickerbocker* that "the horizon of society has been enlarged. Where we might a few years back have looked for a civic patronage with local objects and illustrations, we must now look for a national. Where the sphere was narrow before it has become vast. From a circumscribed we have arisen to a

grander destiny.”³¹ So the word, the idea, of America’s “destiny” were everywhere.

By the mid-1830s, then, the “horizon of society had been enlarged,” but the very expansion of space seemed to dilute whatever sense of common republican purpose remained from the founding generation. The political theorist Uday Mehta has written about liberal political theory’s difficulty with incorporating concepts of territoriality. The liberal citizen is an abstract bundle of rights, not the inhabitant of a territory which, as Mehta puts it, “is both a symbolic expression and a concrete condition for the possibility of ... a distinct way of life.”³² Interestingly, French liberals such as Montesquieu and Tocqueville have been more sensitive to the influence of geography than, say, Locke or Mill—but that is a subject for another occasion. As America expanded, despite the quickening of intersectional commerce, geography asserted itself with increasing force precisely as Mehta describes, as symbol and condition of distinct ways of life. If disparate sections were to remain a nation, a single polity capable of discussing distinctive differences within a common symbolic framework, cultural innovation was required. The need seems to have been felt in both Boston and New York. But the responses were highly abstract. The very vastness of America, the “majesty” and “gravity” of the landscape, became the token of a future greatness or destiny to which the country was now called to rededicate itself. The abstraction that moved from sections identified with modes of production to a continent defined by its “majesty,” from innumerable toilers seeking after riches to a hypothetical national literature eager to embrace the “familiar and low,” avoided the very real conflicts about which territories were to be included, how they were to be won, and who was to occupy them under what conditions and relations of power. Because these questions could not be permanently elided, Young America soon came to grief, as repressed divisions surfaced. But the abstraction, the imperial vocation, the imagination before the fact of a

cultural unity that could be embraced as distinctively American and uniquely worthy of the veneration and deference of inferior or outdated cultures, survived.

For me, the plastic embodiment of the imperial moment I've just described in letters is a painting by Thomas Cole, but not his "Course of Empire," about which you are going to hear next. It is rather his painting of Schroon Mountain, finished in 1838, and thus probably conceived at about the same time that Emerson was writing "The American Scholar" and O'Sullivan launching *The Democratic Review*. Cole's painting depicts America as an empty landscape, curiously abstract in its punctilious and repetitious realism. The middle distance glows with innumerable ruddy trees tranquil in autumnal dress, much as Jefferson imagined the vast territory he had purchased from France would one day be filled with countless tranquil farms neatly maintained by self-sufficient yeomen no more individuated than Cole's trees. But Cole goes Jefferson one better: instead of merely banishing conflict from a vastly extended agrarian republic, the painter ruthlessly eliminates all trace of human life. In the distance, rays of light from a hidden but transcendent source pour through a gap in the lifting storm clouds. Schroon Lake beckons, and one might dream of finding respite from contention in its cool waters, if only a path through the dense intervening forest can be found. Such was the dream, from which Young Americans were soon to be awakened by war with Mexico, the Compromise of 1850, Dred Scott, and Civil War. Only when that horror finally ended did it become possible to conceive of a still vaster American empire, no longer confined "betwixt two oceans." "Manifest destiny" would come to be the watchword of that empire as well, but at its inception it was a more cozily domestic affair, willfully irenic in its deliberate banishment of all that was divisive in American life but for two pugnacious refusals: youth's refusal to defer to the

taste of its elders, and the refusal of American letters to defer to the superiority of the Old World.

[end]

Notes

¹ Paul Bénichou, *Le Sacre de l'écrivain* (Paris : Gallimard, ???).

² Charles Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 33.

³ Quoted in Garry Wills, *Henry Adams and the Making of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), pp. 130-131.

⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Oeuvres I* (Paris : Gallimard, 1991), 2 October 1831, p. 80.

⁵ See, for example, Michael Kammen, *A Machine that Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1987).

⁶ See, for example, Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: Norton, 2005), p.

⁷ Tocqueville, incidentally, inadvertently inverted Pascal's image in an 1834 letter to Charles Stoffels, where he speaks of a circle with its center nowhere and its periphery everywhere—a rather Freudian slip for the author, who believed as ardently as the Presbyterian in God's Providence without quite convincing himself of His actual presence, and who much preferred power discretely parceled out along the periphery to concentration and its attendant risk of despotism. See Laurence Guellec, *Tocqueville et les langages de la démocratie* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004).

⁸ All quotations from Emerson are taken from Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983). "The American Scholar," p. 53.

⁹ And before the European imagination had been sobered by acquaintance with uncouth pioneers shorn of civilization by the encounter with savages who slipped disconcertingly out of the noble role to which the European dramaturgy of discovery had assigned them. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973). The classic expression of the *translatio studii* applied to America can be found in a poem by Bishop Berkeley, *Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America*: "Westward the course of empire takes its way; The first four Acts already past, A fifth shall close the Drama with the day; Time's noblest offspring is the last." This was published in 1752 but may have been written when Berkeley lived in Rhode Island between 1729 and 1731.

¹⁰ "The American Scholar," p. 66.

¹¹ "The American Scholar," p. 53. Emphasis added.

¹² Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

¹³ "The American Scholar," 56.

¹⁴ "The American Scholar," 60.

¹⁵ "The American Scholar," 67

¹⁶ "The American Scholar," 69

¹⁷ "The American Scholar," 68-9

¹⁸ "Young America," 213.

¹⁹ "Young America," 214.

²⁰ "Young America," 214.

²¹ Quoted in Edward L. Widmer, *Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 68; also in "Politics."

²² "The Young American," 217.

²³ "The Young American," 217.

²⁴ "The Young American," 226.

²⁵ "The Young American," 226.

²⁶ Widmer, *Young America*, p. 5.

²⁷ Quoted in Perry Miller, *The Raven and the Whale: Poe, Melville, and the New York Literary Scene* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), p. 110.

²⁸ Widmer, *Young America*, p. 27.

²⁹ See Miller, *The Raven*, pp.

³⁰ Miller, *The Raven*, p. 110.

³¹ Quoted in Widmer, *Young America*, p. 34.

³² Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 119.