



Emerson's 'New England capitalist'

Citation

Strauch, Carl F. 1956. Emerson's 'New England capitalist'. Harvard Library Bulletin X (2), Spring 1956: 245-253.

Link

<https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37363489>

Terms of use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material (LAA), as set forth at

<https://harvardwiki.atlassian.net/wiki/external/NGY5NDE4ZjgzNTc5NDQzMGIzZWZhMGFIOWI2M2EwYTg>

Accessibility

<https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/digital-accessibility-policy>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#)

Emerson's 'New England Capitalist'

EMERSON'S 'New England Capitalist,' apparently written about 1843, and here printed for the first time, from manuscripts in the Harvard College Library, neatly suggests in twenty-one lines all that its author had to say in numerous lectures and essays on the subject of capitalism.¹

New England Capitalist.

What are his machines
Of steel, brass, leather, oak, & ivory,
But manikins & miniatures,
Dwarfs of one faculty, measured from him,
As nimbly he applies his bending self 5
Unto the changing world, thus making that
Another weapon of his conquering will?
He built his mills, &, by his politics, made
The arms of millions turn them.
Stalwart New Hampshire, mother of men, 10
Sea-dented Maine, reluctant Carolina,
Must drag his coach, & by the arts of peace
He, in the plenitude of love & honor,
Eats up the poor, — poor citizen poor state.
Much has he done, 15
Has made his telegraph,
Propeller, car, post office, phototype,
His coast-survey, vote by majority,
His life assurance, & star registry,
Preludes & hints of what he ventures next; — 20
Now let him make a harp!

Emerson's comments on trade have struck some critics and interpreters of his thought as naïve and materialistic. The late Professor Matthiessen remarked that the 'sentiments of such essays as those on "Wealth" and "Power," working on temperaments less unworldly than their author's, have provided a vicious reinforcement to the most ruthless elements in our economic life.'² 'In a free and just common-

¹I wish to thank the Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association, through Mr Edward Waldo Forbes, for permission to print the poem.

²F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (London, 1941), p. 4.

wealth,' said Emerson in his notoriously facile way, 'property rushes from the idle and imbecile to the industrious, brave and persevering,' and again, 'Money, which represents the prose of life, and which is hardly spoken of in parlors without an apology, is, in its effects and laws, as beautiful as roses.'³ Whatever the partial truth in such statements, it is possible to discover directly opposite views in the Emersonian canon; and it should be perfectly clear to today's scholar, if it was not to yesterday's capitalist, that Emerson always made his uncompromisingly vigorous assertions within the implied context of his total philosophic position.

Emerson saw the universe in Neo-Platonic fashion, as a monism expressing itself, under the stringent necessity of the dualism of matter and spirit, in a multiplicity of degrees ranging up and down the scale of existence from brute creation to man viewed as the incarnation of Intellect. What Emerson frankly admired in the Anglo-Saxon capitalist, whether in England or in New England, was the manifestation of universal power at the physical level as man harnessed and exploited nature for his own advantage and gain. 'The laws of nature,' he observed from this comprehensive philosophical standpoint, 'play through trade, as a toy-battery exhibits the effects of electricity.'⁴ In their essence these laws of nature are spiritual, and though the capitalist may perform selfishly, he is nevertheless 'conspiring with a beneficence which in its working for coming generations, sacrifices the passing one.' This 'sublime and friendly Destiny' engages in an 'unceasing effort throughout nature at somewhat better than the actual creatures: *amelioration in nature*, which alone permits and authorizes *amelioration in mankind*.'⁵ The Industrial Revolution was, in spite of abuses, a part of this amelioration. As Professor Gerber has pointed out, Emerson rejected both the narrow utilitarianism of Bentham and the pessimism of Malthus and held to an optimistic view of economics based squarely upon his own metaphysics.⁶

If at one level man will ingeniously exploit nature, he must himself,

³ *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Centenary Edition, Boston, 1903), VI, 106; III, 231.

⁴ *Complete Works*, VI, 106.

⁵ *Complete Works*, I, 374, 371-372.

⁶ John C. Gerber, 'Emerson and the Political Economists,' *New England Quarterly*, XXII (September 1949), 336-357 (but especially 346-350). See also Alexander C. Kern's 'Emerson and Economics,' *New England Quarterly*, XIII (December 1940), 678-696.

What are the machines

~~Plants with~~ Plants with
Red - little green

W. H. C. Smith

Contributions of the donors

Amesbury, Oct. 14. 1833

Shirley

For her advice - her kindness

Expenditures for

[illegible]

1887

100-100000

110 was the Peak

111 West 4th

112 Cherry by camp side

113 - Kaituma Road

114. *Grasshopper*

115-116 pilae 47 Reddish

Perdit^{er} King's meadows

Assembly has empty potatoes made

The amount of milk sold. Turnover

Robert Gordon

Wm. Lloyd Garrison

Stimulus and response

Mr. J. L. G. G. G. G. G.

وفاقیہ

Perlin, made his telegraph

James J. [illegible]

Chap

W. G. L. G.

Post Office
Votely, Maryland

محمد بن عبد الله

Handing to Santa Rosa

re. 10. 10. 10.

Wears that brown velvet thing

118 Faintberg

PLATE I

New England Capitalist.

[What are his machines
Of steel, brass, leather, oak, & ivory,
But manikins & miniatures,
Dwarfs of one faculty, measured from him,
As nimbly he applies his bending self
Unto the changing world, thus making that
Another weapon of his conquering will?
He built - his mills, & by his politics, made
The arms of millions turn them.

He built New Hampshire, Mother of men,
Sea-dented Maine, reluctant Carolina,
Must drag his ~~back~~, & by the arts of peace
He, in the plenitude of love & honor
Eats up the poor, - ~~poor~~ ^{poor} citizen & state.
Much has he done,
Has made his telegraph,
Propeller, car, post office, phototype,

His const. survey, vote by majority,
His life assurance, & star registry,
Preludes & hints of what he meditates;
Now let him make a leap!

at a higher level, serve the ends of intellect and the moral sentiment; hence, in Emerson's judgment, 'Trade is also but for a time, and must give way to somewhat broader and better.' In *English Traits* Emerson brought criticism to bear upon a particular moment in history when he questioned the immense wealth established by the foremost industrial and mercantile nation of the age: 'Such a wealth has England earned, ever new, bounteous and augmenting. But the question recurs, does she take the step beyond, namely to the wise use, in view of the supreme wealth of nations?'⁷ No perceptive reader will fail to note in Emerson's adaptation of the title of Adam Smith's classic work a blunt challenge to the conception that wealth lies in coal, iron, and a favorable trade balance rather than in a morally and intellectually superior people.

In the poem before us there is a three-fold development. In lines 1-7 Emerson asks whether machines are not 'dwarfs of one faculty' in man, who with these 'manikins & miniatures' subdues 'the changing world' to 'his conquering will.' There is an implied censure of the neglect of man's full powers for the exaggerated development of only one faculty; and a reader is reminded of the fundamental view in 'The American Scholar' that in 'the *divided* or social state' the functions of the mythical One Man 'are parcelled out to individuals.' The original unit has been divided and subdivided and distributed at large in such minute portions among the multitudes that men 'strut about so many walking monsters.' The farmer, the priest, the mechanic, the sailor, the scholar are all such monsters, and so is the tradesman, who 'scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars.'⁸ The dominant humanistic note throughout Emerson's writing is that insofar as the divided state of existence will permit, man must continually strive to recapture the harmonious development of the fabled One Man.

In lines 8-14 Emerson briefly sketches the social and political consequences of the tradesman's selfishness — 'poor citizen poor state.' The whole nation 'must drag his coach,' and while he 'cats up the poor' he is himself honored. In line 12, in the midst of this vigorous censure, Emerson links the development of trade with the maintenance of peace; and this connection is one of the basic propositions in the amateur economics of this amateur philosopher. In 'The Young American'

⁷ *Complete Works*, I, 379; V, 169.

⁸ *Complete Works*, I, 82-84.

he says, 'Meantime Trade has begun to appear: Trade, a plant which grows wherever there is peace, as soon as there is peace, and as long as there is peace.'⁹

An interesting reflection of the contemporary political situation lies in the implied contrast between the mercantile and the agrarian, the North and the South. 'Reluctant Carolina' must help to drag the coach of the acquisitive New England capitalist; and the history of that reluctance is written large in the debate over tariffs as revenue or as protection for industries. The agrarian South, led by South Carolina and Calhoun, objected vigorously to the 1828 'tariff of abominations'; in response to the tariff of 1832 Carolina invoked the doctrine of states' rights to nullify the law. Despite subsequent efforts at compromise, the mercantile interests of the North were so aggressively powerful that by 1842, with a Congress controlled by Protectionists, the new tariff act of that year was not much less extreme than that of 1832.

Emerson's appraisal of the human and sectional injustices inflicted, however incidentally, by the new era of manufacture, provides the basis for his statement in the essay 'Politics': 'The philosopher, the poet, or the religious man, will of course wish to cast his vote with the democrat, for free-trade, for wide suffrage, for the abolition of legal cruelties in the penal code, and for facilitating in every manner the access of the young and the poor to the sources of wealth and power.' But Emerson added that the persons proposed as the representatives of these better ideas were themselves aimless and destructive out of hatred and selfishness and had in mind 'no ulterior and divine ends.'¹⁰

In the third section of the poem, lines 15-21, Emerson changes the tone from censure of the capitalist to praise in a catalogue of the technical achievements of the modern era, but he most significantly links these products of scientific genius with political and social advances.

'Telegraph' and 'phototype' suggest the name of Samuel F. B. Morse, who, born in Charlestown, Massachusetts, had a long and illustrious career both as artist and as inventor. When Morse visited Paris in 1838 to introduce his system of telegraphy in France, he met Daguerre, who exhibited and explained to him his own invention of the daguerreotype. Morse's earlier interest in fixing camera obscura images by the action of light was thus revived; and when Morse returned to America in April

⁹ *Complete Works*, I, 377.

¹⁰ *Complete Works*, III, 209-210.

1839 he performed experiments with the process of daguerreotypy.¹¹ 'Coast-survey' and 'star registry' suggest the name of the famous navigator Nathaniel Bowditch, who published his *The New American Practical Navigator* in 1802, containing instructions for calculating lunars from the sun or certain fixed stars. Bowditch also surveyed and mapped the harbors of Salem, Marblehead, Beverly, and Manchester. It should be remembered that, apart from the practical value of astronomical calculations, there had been for long a popular amateur interest in the celestial world disclosed by the telescope. Perhaps the outstanding example is provided by William Cranch Bond, who had a model dome and telescope constructed in the parlor of his Dorchester house. 'During the day,' relates Professor Struik, 'Bond was occupied by his Boston business; his spare time he spent in constantly gathering data on chronometers, performing astronomical observations, and later also observing terrestrial magnetism for the United States Government.' In 1839 Harvard put into operation a plan, long contemplated, to have an observatory, and Bond was invited to move with his instruments into the Dana House on Quincy Street.¹²

Emerson's inclusion of life insurance in the same list with the telegraph, coast survey, and tables of stars is not so bizarre as might appear at first glance. It is a fact that the development of life insurance lagged behind that of fire and marine insurance, since it depended upon the formulation of actuarial tables; and it was only in Emerson's young manhood and middle age that life insurance companies did business on an expanding scale. Thus, in 1823 the Massachusetts Hospital Life Insurance Company of Boston invited Nathaniel Bowditch to direct its affairs. Certainly by the 1840's Emerson must have been aware of life insurance as an accomplishment of the enterprise he was to celebrate in his poem, for in the latter part of 1843 the New England Mutual Life Insurance Company, already organized in 1835, was beginning to do business.¹³

All the activities which we have passed in review admirably combined the commercial and scientific interests of the New England

¹¹ Josef Maria Eder, *History of Photography*, trans. Edward Epstean (New York, 1945), pp. 272-273.

¹² Dirk J. Struik, *Yankee Science in the Making* (Boston, 1948), pp. 72-75, 80-81, 326. For the observatory see also Samuel Eliot Morison's *Three Centuries of Harvard 1636-1936* (Cambridge, 1936), pp. 264-265.

¹³ Joseph B. Maclean, *Life Insurance*, 7th ed. (New York, 1951), pp. 527, 530-531. See also Struik, p. 77.

capitalist, who in the poem doubtless represented for Emerson the type of the modern man — creative and revolutionary in his investigation of nature and in his transformation of trade and social institutions. Emerson believed that all kinds of power, good and bad, emerged simultaneously;¹⁴ in the first fourteen lines of the poem, for example, he acknowledged the evil results of capitalism, even though he felt that trade was a harbinger of peace, but in the catalogue of achievements that we have just examined he stressed the positive gains. Hence in the concluding two lines he challenged the New England capitalist, who had already accomplished so much, to aspire to 'ulterior and divine ends.' 'Now let him make a harp!' exclaimed Emerson, and with the symbolism of the harp he meant man's highest spiritual gifts and possibilities. In this manner we return to Emersonian metaphysics, to the conception of the whole man, to the emphasis on amelioration, to the belief that man, as the most richly endowed creature, must consciously contribute to the progressive tendency in nature. In familiar Emersonian style we have described a circle or, perhaps better, ascended spirally from the physical to the spiritual.

The poem provides, in small compass, a nice example of balanced antitheses, which may not, however, yield their full burden of meaning without the larger philosophic background which has been sketched in.

We must now consider the manuscripts and probable date of composition. The first draft occurs in a small limp-leather notebook (Houghton 125a) with the word 'TREES' printed in Emerson's hand on the front cover. In this slender notebook, the pages of which are unnumbered, Emerson kept a record of the trees he purchased and planted; there is, however, a scattering of verses: on the recto of the eighteenth leaf four lines of 'Ode to Beauty,' on the recto and verso of the twentieth some verses of 'Threnody,' and on the verso of the thirteenth and the recto of the fourteenth a pencil draft, without title, of 'New England Capitalist.' This first draft is reproduced herewith as Plate I (size of original 7 by 5 inches). The most interesting variant is 'crafty politics' for 'politics' in all later drafts; and the change makes the censure of the capitalist noticeably less harsh. In verse-book X (Houghton 132) there are two drafts. The first (X¹), chiefly in pencil but with a few corrections and additions in ink, occurs on MS page 60, with the first few lines superimposed upon the crased last stanza of 'The House.' X² occurs in ink on MS page 63, superimposed upon

¹⁴ *Complete Works*, VI, 63-64.

erased lines of 'Monadnoc.' On MS page 211 of verse-book *NP* (Houghton 92) there is another draft in ink superimposed upon two pencil drafts of the quatrain, 'Her planted eye to-day controls.' Only with the final copy on a sheet of blue paper (Houghton Em 349 P. 800 (15)), in ink but with an addition and a correction in pencil, does the poem receive its title. This final version is shown in Plate II (leaf size of original 10 by 7 7/8 inches).

An examination of lines 2-4 will clearly establish the evolution after *Trees* as being *X¹*, *NP*, *X²*, *Em* (pointed brackets indicate crossing out in the manuscript):

X¹

Of steel, brass, leather, oak & ivory
 But (little men), complements of his ^{perfected} limbs,
 Dwarfs of one fixed idea, applied to him

NP

 bullhide
 Of steel, brass, (leather), oak, & ivory,
 But complements of his perfected limbs,
 Dwarfs of one fixed idea applied to him,

X²

 bullhide
 Of steel brass (leather) oak & ivory
 But manikins & miniatures
 Dwarfs of one (fixed idea ^{measured from} applied to) him
 faculty ^

Em

Of steel, brass, leather, oak, & ivory,
 But manikins & miniatures,
 Dwarfs of one faculty, measured from him,

The dates of composition for the three poems accidentally involved in the manuscript evolution of 'New England Capitalist' are themselves at best conjectural and therefore do not help us in establishing a date

for the poem in question.¹⁵ We must accordingly seek the assistance of whatever external evidence may come to hand.

We first hear of Emerson's intention of delivering a series of lectures on New England in his letter to William Emerson of 25 November 1842. Writing to Margaret Fuller on 31 December 1842, Emerson mentioned that he had gathered material for three lectures and that the three might become five. The subjects included religion, agriculture, trade, manners, recent spiritual influences, climate, politics, and the like. This series of lectures Emerson delivered in Philadelphia from 23 January to 1 February 1843, and he repeated it in New York from 11 February to 22 February.¹⁶ Cabot's summary of the lecture on trade follows:

The other element conspicuous in the Anglo-Saxon mind is the determination of blood to the hand. The favorite employment is trade, and agriculture as the basis of trade. Farming in New England a cold, surly business. Hard work ill-rewarded makes the farmer a narrow and selfish drudge. The best part of the class drained off to the city. Behold the result in the cities that line the Atlantic coast, and the intellectual circulation they nourish. Trade flagellates that melancholy temperament into health and contentment. The good merchant is a very considerable person. He puts more than labor, he puts character and ambition into his business. This runs to excess and overpowers sentiment.¹⁷

It seems plausible that during a period when he was writing and delivering his lectures about New England trade, Emerson should write verses on the New England capitalist.¹⁸ If this general period, from late 1842 into 1843, is acceptable, it is possible to limit the date of composition to 1843 alone, for the inclusion of the telegraph in the list of accomplishments attributed to the New England capitalist makes it probable that Emerson did not write the poem before 11 January 1843. The first public message was not sent over the telegraph until 24 May

¹⁵ 'Monadnoc,' for example, may have been begun as early as 1839 and was certainly being composed, in part at least, as late as 1845. See *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk (New York, 1939), II, 220; also *Complete Works*, IX, 424.

¹⁶ *Letters*, III, 100, 107-108, 128, 145, 149, 232-233.

¹⁷ James E. Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Cambridge, 1887), II, Appendix F, 749.

¹⁸ See also *Complete Works*, I, for Emerson's other lectures on the economic, political, social, and cultural questions raised by the Industrial Revolution and reform — especially 'The Conservative' and 'The Young American.'

1844, but Emerson had seen the instrument on 11 January 1843, as the letter of the following day to his wife reveals.¹⁹

The full text of the poem, printed above from the *Em* draft in ink, reproduces Emerson's punctuation, the penciled addition of 'Stalwart' in line 10, and the penciled correction of 'ventures next' for 'meditates' in line 20 — except that the stronger original punctuation at the end of line 20 has been preferred to the comma following the substituted phrasing. In line 12 the article in the phrase 'the arts of peace' appears to be stricken out, but it has been retained for the cadence.

CARL F. STRAUCH

¹⁹ *Letters*, III, 110.

List of Contributors

HARRY LEVIN, Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Harvard University

C. F. MAIN, Instructor in English, Rutgers University

GEORGES EDELEN, Instructor in English and in General Education, Harvard University

PHILIP HOFER, Lecturer on Fine Arts, Curator of Printing and Graphic Arts in the Harvard College Library, and Secretary of the William Hayes Fogg Art Museum

ARTHUR SHERBO, Assistant Professor of English, University of Illinois

CARL R. WOODRING, Associate Professor of English, University of Wisconsin

EARLE E. COLEMAN, Cataloguer, Longwood Library, Kennett Square, Pennsylvania

CARL F. STRAUCH, Professor of English, Lehigh University

EDGAR F. SHANNON, JR., Assistant Professor of English, Harvard University

W. H. BOND, Curator of Manuscripts in the Houghton Library, Harvard University

DAVID C. WEBER, Senior Assistant in the Harvard College Library