RALPH WALDO EMERSON IN MINNESOTA

Early in the last week of January, 1867, a heavy snowstorm swept over southeastern Minnesota, the snow piling into deep drifts in valleys and cuts and blockading the scenic river road between La Crosse and Winona. Railroads between these points there were as yet none; so communication between Minnesota and the East was at a standstill until the wagon road should be cleared. On Saturday noon, January 26, a huge snowplow, pulled by fourteen horses and cutting a swath sixteen feet wide, set out from Winona, and by Sunday evening it had reached Trempealeau. The dispatch with which the work had been done met with great praise. "Give us Western enterprise for surmounting difficulties," exclaimed a local enthusiast. On Monday night, January 28, the temperature dropped sharply. According to a local newspaper, "Things snapped with frost as though there was a grand effort of nature at contraction. Mercury stood at twenty degrees below zero this morning at seven o'clock." ¹

Such were the conditions in southern Minnesota when Ralph Waldo Emerson, driving in an open sleigh from La Crosse to Winona, entered the state for the first time. His five lectures in this state were part of an extensive tour which took him north to Minneapolis and west and south to Kansas. After 1852, when he spoke in St. Louis, Emerson went west to lecture almost every year. Doubtless he was in part prompted to make these visits by a spontaneous personal interest in the remarkably rapid development of the new country, as the entries in his journals and his own purchase of land in Wisconsin in 1856 attest; but it is likely that he was more definitely influenced by the extent of the field for lecturing in the West, and that, like other men whose business it was to

¹Winona Daily Republican, January 29, 1869.
lecture, he was drawn by the relatively large fees paid by western lecture associations. He had not visited Minnesota before because of difficulties of travel. Indeed as late as 1865 the St. Paul Library Association despaired of obtaining eastern lecturers as long as the state had no railroad connections with the East.

The story of Emerson's experiences in Minnesota, because of the paucity of the available records, is soon told. On Wednesday evening, January 30, at half-past seven o'clock, Emerson lectured in Winona on "The Man of the World." The lecture was delivered in the court house hall, the attendance being "quite large." It was the first of a series of six lectures sponsored by the Young Men's Library Association, of which Charles Benson was president; William Mitchell, father of Attorney-general Mitchell, secretary; and D. W. Keyes, chairman of the lecture committee. Emerson's transportation from La Crosse, the scene of his last previous lecture, had been arranged by this association.

Since the existence of a railroad from Winona westward and northward to St. Paul made travel fairly easy, it was with no great inconvenience that Emerson was able to lecture the following evening, January 31, in Faribault. Here, at the instance of the Faribault Lecture and Library Association, he spoke in Fleckenstein's Hall on "American Culture." The local newspaper observed that people as far distant as North-
field had come to hear the "profound scholar and essayist." In the _Central Republican_ of February 6, 1867, there is every evidence of an intelligent and appreciative reception of the lecture, which was reviewed in considerable detail.

From Faribault Emerson went to St. Paul to lecture on February 1, once more on "The Man of the World." His arrival was heralded generously in two local papers. One presented a biographical sketch of the visitor, the other a "pen and ink portrait"; both wrote of him in high praise. Ingersoll's Hall, where the lecture was given, occupied the third floor of a building erected in 1860 and 1861 on the corner of Third and Wabasha streets. The St. Paul Library Association, which invited Emerson to speak, was organized in 1857 to "promote the intellectual improvement of its members." It was reported that the lecture was attended by one of the largest audiences "ever packed into" Ingersoll's Hall. On the morning following the lecture Emerson, accompanied by Governor Marshall, "visited the Senate, House, Supreme Court and other departments at the Capitol." ⁵ That evening Emerson lectured in Minneapolis at the request of the Athenaeum Library Association, and on Sunday evening, February 3, he spoke in the Universalist Church at Fifth Street and Fourth Avenue South, of which the Reverend James H. Tuttle was pastor. Concerning the first of these appearances, a local paper reported with a brevity that can hardly be surpassed: "Ralph Waldo Emerson lectured in Harrison Hall on Saturday evening, to a very large and attentive audience. Lack of space forbids comment." But this laconic gem was matched, nevertheless, by the same paper's account of the address in the Universalist Church: "Religious.—Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke in the Universalist church last Sabbath evening. So

⁵ _Saint Paul Daily Press_, January 30, February 3, 1867; _Pioneer_, February 1, 2, 1867; Edward D. Neill, _History of Ramsey County and the City of St. Paul_, 446 (Minneapolis, 1881); Minnesota, _Laws_, 1857, p. 10–13.
great was the rush of people that scores were unable to obtain admission — among whom was the writer."

Thus ended Emerson's lecture tour in Minnesota. A few days later, from Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, he wrote to a friend in Chicago:

Such a citizen of the world as you are should look once at these northern towns, which I have seen under the perhaps too smiling face of the mildest, best winter weather, which may be exceptional, though the people almost to a man extol their climate. Minneapolis would strongly attract me if I were a young man,— more than St. Paul."

Although Emerson did not speak in Minnesota again, his presence was requested a second time, as the following letter to J. Fletcher Williams, secretary of the Minnesota Historical Society, indicates:

CONCORD, MASS^es June 5, 1870.

DEAR SIR;

Your letter containing the invitation of the Minnesota Historical Society to read a discourse before them during the summer, was received some days ago, but at a time when I was so closely engaged by some duties which had been put on me by the University at Cambridge, that I was forced to leave all my correspondence in arrears. The invitation is honoring, & is very attractive to me; but, on serious consideration of the tasks already before me for the summer, I do not find it quite prudent to accept it. Please to offer my respects & my thanks to the Society for this token of their goodwill, & my regret that I should lose the pleasure of meeting them.

Respectfully,

R. W. EMERSON.

J. F. WILLIAMS, Secretary.

^State Atlas (Minneapolis and St. Anthony), February 6, 1867. The Reverend Marion D. Shutter, present pastor of the Universalist Church, told the writer that Tuttle spoke of Emerson's lecture long afterward, but that the church records contain no mention of it.

Edward W. Emerson, *Emerson in Concord*, 181 (Boston, 1890). Emerson was engaged to speak in Fond du Lac on February 6. *Commonwealth* (Fond du Lac), January 23, 1867.

This letter, in Emerson's own handwriting, is in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.
Not without precedence does one of Emerson's latest biographers call him "the wisest American," for such was the reputation that preceded the lecturer upon his first appearance in the Middle West, and such was it when he last spoke there in 1871.9 “Mr. Emerson,” according to the St. Louis Intelligencer of December 30, 1852, “has read, studied and swept through the whole range of literature”; and, a little later, in the not distant city of Springfield, Illinois, a writer in the Daily Journal for January 7, 1853, asserted that “the profound genius and world wide renown of the lecturer, render all commendation superfluous.” Seven years later in Wisconsin, the State Journal of Madison for February 7, 1860, published the opinion that “Mr. Emerson, without doubt, is the most original and subtle thinker which America has yet produced,” and a writer for the Daily Wisconsin of Milwaukee for January 19, 1863, was certain that “there is no more profound and practical thinker.” Still a little later a reporter for the Milwaukee Daily Sentinel of January 31, 1865, wrote, “If any man has penetrated to the very heart of American life, it is Emerson.” Hence when Emerson spoke in Minnesota during the most extensive of his American lecture tours, the Minnesota papers added to the general acclaim. His lecture on “American Culture,” according to the Central Republican of Faribault for February 6, 1867, “was fully in keeping with the high reputation of Mr. Emerson as a profound scholar” and revealed “the lecturer’s extensive range of reading, his keen analytic powers, and philosophic knowledge of mankind and the world.” A writer for the St. Paul Pioneer of February 1, 1867, saw in Emerson “one of the foremost of American scholars of the present day — one of the profoundest thinkers and ablest writers. . . . A life time of severe study and wide observation has enabled him to penetrate every domain of knowledge.” The St. Paul Daily Press of January

9 Phillips Russell, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Wisest American (New York, 1929).
30, 1867, published a compliment less flattering now than in the heyday of the \textit{New York Tribune}: "Probably, in the amount of intellectual labor performed he surpasses even Horace Greeley, who has the reputation of being one of the most laborious of men." It is apparent that the \textit{Chicago Evening Post} for November 28, 1871, upon the occasion of Emerson's last western lecture tour, summarized western sentiment when it published the following comment: "If we have a philosopher and sage in the sense those words bore in their application to Plato, Emerson is that man."

Emerson's audiences shared the common curiosity to see a great man in person. There is reason to suspect, indeed, that the lecturer's person was, sometimes, as great an attraction as the substance of his lectures, for, like Greeley, though of course not so generally, he had a reputation for possessing certain personal peculiarities that made him a marked man. That they were exaggerated may be assumed, for such exaggeration is a natural expression of the popular delight in the oddities of genius. Perhaps more people today know about Greeley's white coat than about the editorial policies of his \textit{Tribune}. But Emerson has been remembered as a thinker rather than as a man; consequently one may be surprised, if not shocked, to find him the object of a vulgar scrutiny. Emerson's nose, according to a facetious writer in the \textit{Chicago Times} of December 3, 1871, "is a certain capital in Mr. Emerson's business. It is one of the features that draw. More than half the people who go to see Mr. Emerson, go to see that nose. When Mr. Emerson's Greek paragraphs are rolled off in that peculiar mumble which renders their incomprehensibility more incomprehensible than ever, it is no wonder that the audience naturally falls back on the nose as something tangible, something which comes within the province of the senses, something that compensates for the investment at the door."

Nevertheless, even more serious and respectful observers, influenced by notions formed by seeing such prepossessing plat-
form heroes as Charles Sumner, Wendell Phillips, Theodore Tilton, and others, found difficulty in reconciling the subtlety of the essayist with the plainness of the lecturer. "The general feeling," wrote a correspondent from Springfield, Illinois, "seemed to be wonder that such things could be said in such a way by so unpretending a looking man." This feeling was shared by a writer in the *Daily Wisconsin* of Milwaukee for February 10, 1860: "The unassuming and retiring manner, the unpolished and careless exterior, the apparent verdancy of Emerson, are great difficulties above which few men have risen." "Emerson in aspect reminds one of a plain country parson of advancing years," read a comment in the *Cedar Falls* [Iowa] *Gazette* for February 22, 1867. The first impressions of the man, it is obvious, were disappointing; but the lecturer had to speak but a short while and his audience became aware that, though he was "a plain, unaffected gentleman . . . and looked like an educated well-to-do farmer," he was no common character. "He has a rich, deep voice, and a bearing that begets respect — almost reverence. . . . Mr. Emerson has a slight frame, a noble cast of features, and a terribly keen eye," according to the *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* of January 24, 1865. "He is not what the ladies would call a handsome man," ran a description in the *St. Paul Pioneer* for February 1, 1867, "but at the same time he would anywhere attract attention as a superior person, by the character manifested in his face. He has a peculiarly pleasant smile, and a fine, sonorous, flexible, sympathetic voice." At a later day, when he was nearing seventy years, the *Chicago Tribune* of November 29, 1871, pictured him as follows: "His hair was long, white, thin, and combed closely to his head, as in early colonial days. His manner was slightly stiff and awkward, but that of a true gentleman."

10 Missouri Republican (St. Louis), January 13, 1853.
11 Chicago Tribune, January 27, 1865.
On the whole, however, the consensus of opinion, marked by notable exceptions, was that Emerson did not excel as a popular lecturer. As early as 1853 an Ohio newspaper said of Emerson’s lecture on “Wealth” that “the whole lecture was full of sparkling thought, but the elocution was not of a pleasing character; the diamonds fell unpolished from the lip.” But faulty execution did not necessarily presage failure. “Without art, or any of the graces of the orator, with remarkable power he held the attention of all, by a style of thought and expression peculiarly his own, and altogether new to us here.” So wrote an officer of the organization which sponsored Emerson’s first lectures in St. Louis in 1852 and 1853. Very sympathetic also was the criticism of the *State Journal* of Madison for February 9, 1860: “But no one can read Emerson, and bring out the subtle thoughts which are so wonderfully crystalized in his compact and perfect sentences as Mr. Emerson himself. With no grace of gesture, there is nevertheless a charm in his manner, in the shifting expression of that New England visage of his, with the keen, seer-like eyes, and the fine, deep, musical voice, which renders him one of the most effective of lecturers.” That, certainly, is a well-stated, significant expression of opinion, though no nearer the core of the truth than is the criticism quoted below, a criticism which contains a suggestion revelatory as no other statement that has come to the writer’s attention.

The style of the speaker is that which is frequently observed in great thinkers—a certain nervousness of expression, now rapid in motion, now impressively—almost painfully—slow; paying little or no regard to customary punctuation, grammatical or rhetorical; now carrying out a word with great care before he lets it fall, and now splintering them off with much greater rapidity; and in this being governed not at all by the importance of the words, but rather by the motions of his own thoughts. The

12 *Cincinnati Sun*, quoted in *Pioneer*, January 6, 1853.
interruptions to his lecture, caused by omissions which he saw fit to make, were by no means pleasant, or conducive to the effect of the whole. He seemed to disobey the maxim of Confucius which he announced in the early part of his discourse, “Whatever you do, let it be thoroughly prepared beforehand.”

That criticism points at once to the weakness and to the strength of Emerson’s lecturing. By ignoring the customary art of the elocutionist, Emerson created a gulf between himself and the conventional listener; by reading from manuscript, as implied in the foregoing quotation, he widened it; and it became almost impassible when he obviously and irritatingly skipped page after page of the essay before him. In part, his “keen, seer-like eyes” and “fine, deep, musical voice” saved him, though the heart of his success lay farther beneath the surface than that. Much of Emerson’s charm as a speaker lay in his ability to create the illusion that his ideas were occurring to him for the first time, that he was revealing the very “motions of his thoughts.” “His lectures,” according to another writer, “have ... the qualities of protracted meditation.” When Emerson stood on the platform properly keyed, he was the personification of “man thinking.” The angular gestures, the awkward poses, the shuffling pages—all these were forgotten the moment the audience felt that it was in the presence of ideas in process of creation. Here, fresh from the depths of a great mind, was thought taking form before one’s very eyes.

Perhaps similar sentiments were felt by the man who reported Emerson’s address in Winona; at least such outcroppings seem to be evident beneath the loose upper soils of workaday composition:

Mr. Emerson is not a popular lecturer, as that term is generally understood. He says nothing for effect. He makes use of none of the tricks or the graces of oratory for the purpose of dressing out his literary wares to advantage. On the contrary, his manner

14 Milwaukee Sentinel, January 24, 1865.
15 St. Louis Intelligencer, December 30, 1852.
is characterized rather by restraint and stiffness. He speaks—or reads from his manuscript—in a conversational tone, and with great deliberation. Yet he is as attentively listened to as if he were in the habit of "enchaining" the thoughts of his audience, or of carrying them away, by passionate bursts of eloquence.\textsuperscript{16}

Whether or not Emerson himself was conscious that novelty was one of the secrets of his success as a lecturer, it is certain that he preferred to deliver an address with which his audience was wholly unacquainted. For this reason he objected to the publication of detailed reports of his lectures; indeed, his addresses were sometimes prefaced by a request that the reporters present give only a brief review.\textsuperscript{17} Not always were his wishes heeded, however, and, of course, not always was such a desire expressed; frequently the lectures were reviewed in considerable detail, much to the delight of the student, who is thereby enabled to discover some of the devices by means of which, through a series of experiments, the lecturer satisfied himself that his material was suitable to a finished and publishable essay.

Practically everything said in the lecture on "American Culture" delivered in Faribault in 1867 appears in the published essay entitled "Social Aims." But it is interesting to note that probably the major contents of the address had been used as early as 1866, in a lecture bearing the longer title of "Social Aims in America." Some of the features of this earlier address which do not appear in the published essay were employed in still another lecture that Emerson called "Table-Talk," although other portions of "Table-Talk" which are not to be found in "Social Aims in America" are evident in the published essay. It appears, then, that the published "Social Aims," whatever its other possible ingredients,

\textsuperscript{16} *Winona Republican*, January 31, 1867.

\textsuperscript{17} *Chicago Evening Journal*, January 28, 1865; *Chicago Republican*, March 5, 1867. The latter paper reports such a request made at the instance of Emerson by the Reverend Robert Collyer, who introduced the speaker.
is a mixture, the result of a boiling down of "American Culture," "Social Aims in America," and "Table-Talk." 18

"The Man of the World," never published as an essay, was apparently first delivered on December 11, 1866, before the Parker Fraternity of Boston. 19 Although this title had been used in an earlier lecture and published essay — "Napoleon, or the Man of the World" — there was, as a matter of fact, small similarity between the two, for in the later lecture Napoleon received only passing notice. Because it has been frequently pointed out that the parts of Emerson's essays sometimes follow no apparent logical order, one is not surprised to discover that Emerson not only omitted sections of his lectures from time to time, as has been noted, but that apparently he also altered the arrangement of the divisions of his lectures when it pleased him to do so. 20

Since "The Man of the World" was never published, the quotation of occasional sentences from reports of the lecture to show its general character may not be amiss. In some cases, at least, one can be sure that almost the exact words of the speaker have been quoted. Some scattered extracts from the report of the St. Paul lecture follow:

There is a best way of doing everything, and civilization is the having learned the sum of bests.

The so-called men of the world are commonly men of whips and horses, who strain their nerves at the pop of a champagne bottle, but those who study science, the laws of nature, who would find their fellows in persons of real elevation and culture are the true men of the world.

18 Dubuque [Iowa] Semi-Weekly Times, January 26, 1866; Chicago Tribune, February 3, 1865; Emerson, Letters and Social Aims (Boston, 1876). See the preface to this volume for evidence that in editing the essay for publication, James E. Cabot probably altered the original material.

19 Cabot, Memoir of Emerson, 2: 796.

20 Compare, for example, the reports of Emerson's lectures in the St. Paul Pioneer, February 2, 1867, and the Washington [Iowa] Weekly Press, February 20, 1867. The order of parts in "American Culture" is very different from that in "Social Aims."
We are in danger of forgetting that the basis of aristocracy is truth and honesty.

Common sense is always right, has the precedence of all wit, all learning. It milks the cow, chops the wood, plants, hoes, reaps, and ministers to the necessities of the race.

Newton said, "Never was a great discovery made without a great guess."

No man of learning listens without envy to the sprightly and telling converse of merchants and men of business, who are so conversant with the world that they talk without embarrassment or restraint.

Men of rare intelligence are naturally solitary.

But it is pleasant to see refinement penetrating into retired homes.

The more piano the less wolf, the less dirt.

There is no face or form so uncomely that it is not loved when associated with high goodness or power.\(^{21}\)

Another paper included these extracts in a review of "The Man of the World":

> It is not a question now whether we shall be a nation but whether we shall be a new nation. The humanity of all nations is in the American Union.

> Would that we could feel that this country is the last great charity of the war, the end of all struggles to establish morality as the object of government. . . . The work of America is to make the advance of ideas possible — to prove the principle that everything that is immoral is inhuman. In the condition of America at this hour, prayer has become right. It is relieved of its moral curse, it has no foreign complications; it proposes to do right to all classes of its people, and to make it possible that the American citizen shall be a true man of the world.\(^{22}\)

At St. Paul Emerson's lecture was a substantial success, his audience being the fourth largest in a course of ten speakers. But the audience that heard Theodore Tilton, later to startle the entire United States by his accusations against Henry Ward Beecher, exceeded that of Emerson by twenty-five per

\(^{21}\) Pioneer, February 2, 1867.

\(^{22}\) Quoted in the Winona Republican, January 31, 1867, from an unnamed Chicago newspaper.
cent; and Frederick Douglass, the radical mulatto orator, was so much more of an attraction than Emerson that his St. Paul audience was larger by more than a hundred per cent. Anna Dickinson, a young feminine firebrand who was most popular in her scorching condemnation of President Johnson, likewise proved more popular than Emerson. The attendance at each of her two lectures was larger than that for Emerson's single appearance. The names of the lecturers with the amount of the gross receipts and the expenses incurred for each one's appearance in the St. Paul course follow: Edward Eggleston, gross receipts, $89.43, expenses, $51.80; General Sibley, $125.10, $46.80; R. W. Emerson, $289.08, $146.80; E. L. Youmans, $112.08, $146.80; Theodore Tilton, $361.33, $176.80; Frederick Douglass, $589.63, $188.60; W. H. Milburn, $94.50, $205; Bishop Simpson, $193, $167.75; Henry Nicholls, two lectures, $271.30, $242; Anna Dickinson, two lectures, $640.75, $446.75. In the case of the first four lectures, the hall rental seems to have been $46.80; later it was increased by $30.

Some evidence as to the popularity of Emerson may be obtained by comparing the figures of the St. Paul Library Association with those of the Young Men's Association of Chicago for a course of lectures also given during the winter of 1867–68. One of the most striking features revealed by the Chicago report is the fact that Emerson and the colored orator were the lowest paid lecturers on the course. This report is interesting, too, because it includes the names of such platform giants as John Gough, the temperance lecturer; Charles Sumner, the statesman; and Wendell Phillips, the political extremist. A complete list, in this case including the sum received by the lecturer, follows: Charles Sumner, gross receipts, $913.25, amount paid to the lecturer, $200; Isaac I. Hayes,

28 Pioneer, January 16, 1868. Except for St. Paul, the financial records of Emerson's lectures in Minnesota are incomplete.
$273.30, $150; P. B. du Chaillu, $233.50, $200; R. W. Emerson, $165.50, $100; Henry Vincent, $296.50, $150; John B. Gough, $1,072.60, $200; Petroleum V. Nasby, $407.10, $150; Frederick Douglass, $358.35, $100; Rev. G. H. Hepworth, $51.25, $110; Anna Dickinson, $457.10, $200; E. P. Whipple, $67, $110; John Gough, $719.40, $200; Wendell Phillips, $678.65, $200.24 This statement does not include the names of certain local speakers, such as the Reverend Robert Collyer, who gave their services without charge; but in terms of gross receipts at the lectures of paid speakers, Emerson's lecture, in a list of thirteen, ranks eleventh. In passing judgment on Emerson's popularity and fee, however, it should be remembered that his lecturing experience had extended over a much longer period than that of any of his contemporaries, and that, with John Gough a possible second, he had probably spoken more often than had any of the others.25 His was a lasting if moderate success.

All the evidence shows that Emerson's visit to Minnesota was pleasant to him and satisfying to those who heard him. There was much praise both before and after he spoke, and there is no record of a single harsh criticism. That he was invited by the Minnesota Historical Society to speak in St. Paul a second time makes it indubitably clear that he was held in esteem.

When Emerson died in 1882, an obituary in the Daily Pioneer Press of St. Paul described him as the "foremost thinker of the times," and his significance was summarized in the Minneapolis Tribune in words that still have validity:

Mr. Emerson leaves to the world no system of philosophy, no orderly presentation of new or great truths; but he has done a great and usually salutary work by stimulating the thought of two generations and by helping courageously to clear away the intellectual rubbish which the centuries had gathered. . . . He

25 He had lectured in Chicago eight months before his appearance with the Young Men's Association.
has done the needed work of the iconoclast in so kindly and decorous a way as to hurt as little as possible the enduring good.\textsuperscript{26}

But this criticism does not tell the whole story, for some there are who yet feel that Emerson's living influence not only has not ceased, but that time is still to reveal the day of greatest ascendency of "the waiting master." \textsuperscript{27}

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\textsuperscript{26} See the issues of these papers for April 28, 1882.

\textsuperscript{27} Oscar W. Firkins, \textit{Ralph Waldo Emerson}, 373 (Boston, 1915).