

SARAH TRYPHENA PHILLIPS LECTURE IN  
AMERICAN LITERATURE AND HISTORY

THE SOUND OF AMERICAN LITERATURE  
A CENTURY AGO

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ALMOST at once after the new American nation was established a few voices were heard crying for an American literature. They demanded a poetry and prose unmarred, they said, by imitation of British models. As time went on, more voices joined in the cry. By the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century the call had in a way been answered but not to anyone's complete satisfaction. We were grateful for Washington Irving but he was an international rather than a national figure; he had become a citizen of the world rather than of the American Republic of Letters. Among the novelists James Fenimore Cooper showed the most promise; among the poets William Cullen Bryant was outstanding. Nevertheless, this was still not enough for an American literature and the American critics of the time, such as they were, knew it. A chance remark in the *Edinburgh Review* by the Reverend Sydney Smith so perfectly expressed their feelings of inadequacy that it became embedded in the national consciousness. 'Who reads an American book?' he had asked in derision. The answer was loud but hollow.

Yet something was happening by the 1830's which would give Sydney Smith answer enough. Another clergyman had appeared, an American this time, who would not only himself swell the chorus for an American literature but would also help notably to provide it. This was the Reverend Ralph Waldo Emerson of Boston and Concord, Massachusetts. By May 1836 he was planning a 'sermon to literary men'; a little over a year later he delivered it as the Phi Beta Kappa address at the Harvard commencement. Its fame spread promptly and has continued to spread. Today it is known throughout the Western world as the essay on 'The American Scholar'. In it Emerson put all his exciting hopes. 'Our day of dependence, our long

apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close', he announced. He urged the needs of the new democratic culture: 'The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests.' These needs must be met by independent American talent. The way to meet them was to take the common, even the vulgar, and raise it into literature by revealing its universal relations. The resulting literature would be blood-warm, Emerson assured us, for it would comprehend and then transcend our common humanity. But we must look to ourselves; 'We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe.' He concluded with ringing optimism: 'We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds.'

It was no false dawn that Emerson heralded in 'The American Scholar'. Within ten years a truly American literature emerged. Emerson's own first books of essays were perhaps the most brilliant accomplishment. But Poe reached the height of his powers, as did Cooper; Longfellow published some of his most appealing poems; Melville's first novels came out; Hawthorne issued his fine short stories; and Lowell, Holmes, and Whittier each appeared in print. All this in ten years. A decade after 'The American Scholar' Sydney Smith's remark was unthinkable. And by the time of the Civil War, American literature had won a place, if a modest one, in Western culture as a whole.

Out of the many elements which nourished this antebellum literature, from Emerson's exhortations to the spread of free schooling, I should like to concentrate on one. This one has, I believe, been unusually influential but largely unrecognized. I want to concentrate on the relation between the American public and the American writer in terms of the spoken word. I repeat: in terms of the spoken word. I want to do it on two levels. Like Emerson I want to combine the practical with the Transcendental, the mundane with the aesthetic.

To explain, I must begin with a description of the American Lyceum. Like American literature its antecedents were English. In London during the 1820's George Birkbeck and Lord Brougham had pioneered in establishing what came to be called mechanics' institutions. These were associations of workmen who wanted to have some technical training. Their volunteer teachers and organizers were educated men who passed on something of their own special knowledge. The

principal aim was to teach the workmen to do a better job. At the London institution which Birkbeck helped to found, courses of lectures were offered on chemistry, geometry, and hydrostatics (taught by Birkbeck himself), among other subjects. Almost from the beginning a lecture room, books, and simple scientific apparatus were provided. The London Mechanics' Institution flourished from the day it opened. Others followed and prospered in other parts of Britain. By 1826 the mechanics' institute movement had spread to France and then across the Atlantic to America.

In America the movement was fortunate enough to find another Birkbeck. This time it was a Yale graduate with an interest both in teaching and science. His name was Josiah Holbrook and he was in his late thirties when somehow or other—we do not know exactly how—he came across the mechanics' institute idea. It had already attracted a little attention in the United States. Holbrook prepared a manifesto for the movement which he succeeded in placing in a magazine for teachers.

Most significant is the way the manifesto quietly reshapes the mechanics' institute to suit American culture. We no longer see an association where uneducated workers are taught by educated members of the middle class. Instead the keynote is mutual education. Every village or neighbourhood will have a club in which the members teach one another. The doctor will discourse on medical science, the minister on moral philosophy, the lawyer on the rudiments of common law, and so forth. Still, there will be some stress on applied science and the bulk of the students will be young apprentices, mechanics, or clerks.

By the end of November 1826 Holbrook had organized the first society, in a town called Millbury in Massachusetts. Then he went about organizing others elsewhere. Soon he began calling his new societies lyceums rather than mechanics' institutes. *Lyceum* had a fine academic sound and was a large enough term to embrace more than mechanics and clerks.

Throughout the next decade Holbrook spread the gospel of the lyceum. He proved himself a genius at persuasion. Lecturing had always been a means of spreading knowledge, but through Holbrook's powers the system of voluntary education by lectures became an American institution. The American Lyceum became a notable part of antebellum culture. Holbrook appeared in villages, towns, and cities to tell his story. He was even allowed to address several state legislatures. He travelled

as far from Massachusetts as Tennessee and South Carolina. He organized lyceums at local, state, and national levels, and before he was done he had projected a world lyceum. In addition to spreading his gospel by word of mouth, he put into print the most popular pamphlet on the advantages of the lyceum; it was the full-blown successor to his first brief manifesto in the teachers' magazine. Emerson once said that an institution was the lengthened shadow of a man; he was right for the lyceum and Josiah Holbrook.

As America developed and changed, so did the lyceum. The mechanics' institute with its lectures and demonstrations, with its books and apparatus, became a vogue. The clerks and mechanics gradually found themselves surrounded by a wide variety of fellow Americans; all sorts of people were sitting next to them in the lecture hall. More and more housewives appeared, often bringing with them their husbands and older children. For many an elderly person the lyceum was a boon. Farm families drove in to swell the attendance. Ultimately the audience contained almost a cross-section of the population. With this broadening of the audience came a broadening of the local lyceum policies, which showed itself both in the altered nature of the lecturers and in their lectures.

The ideal of mutual education began to tarnish. The change did not occur overnight but it was striking none the less. The first lecturers were often the local minister and doctor. What they had to say—or read—to their neighbours and young men was soon exhausted, however. When the next season of lectures came around, the programme committee began to look longingly at the minister from the neighbouring town or the lively lawyer from thirty miles away. Distance always lends attraction to a lecturer, and the villagers, bored now by their local lights, listened readily to the message of a stranger. As the lecture seasons began to pass, some men acquired a reputation for being especially able. They received more than their share of invitations and, as time went on, even the occasional offer of a fee. As the 1820's became the 'thirties and 'forties, lecturing for a fee developed and spread throughout the land with an inevitable logic. After a while some of the most popular lecturers realized that here was one way to make a living. Or if not that, then to augment one. Lyceum lecturing could be depended on to pay its share of debts and bills.

The lecturer began to turn professional or, more often, semi-professional. As he turned, so did his subject. With the

early emphasis on science and neighbourly instruction now lost, a wide variety of new topics emerged. The most popular proved to be history, travel, and—to use a term of Emerson's—the conduct of life. 'The Story of Mohammed', 'Glaciers', 'The Discovery of America by the Northmen', 'Instinct', 'The Practical Man', 'Genius': these were among the new lecture titles. And as the subjects changed, so did their treatment. More lectures were read from manuscripts or else delivered with actor-like precision. The stress on learning grew less, the stress on entertainment grew more. Though the lyceum always kept a gloss of education on its proceedings, the truth is that the general tone of the lectures grew lighter. The entertainer began to edge out the teacher. Yet there were always exceptions, not the least among them several literary men. Though Emerson was the greatest, his company included Henry David Thoreau as well as a number of lesser authors. They kept the highest standards they knew how. They made it their principle to speak their truest thought, whether they were lecturing or writing. They raised their lyceum audience to the same plane as the readers of their books.

And now I come to my central point, which is that the American Lyceum did yeoman service for American literature. Its contributions ranged from the solidly tangible to the extremely tenuous but in sum total they were impressive. At the one extreme they were as tangible as a ten-dollar bill; at the other, as tenuous as the relation between a writer's turn of phrase and an audience's approving nod.

In effect, the lyceum paid American writers, and paid them rather well, to read the preliminary drafts of their writing to it. That was the most basic service. Again and again writers found that they could earn more money in fees from the lyceum than in royalties from their books. It was not till Emerson, for instance, was past seventy that he could count on a decent income from his writing. Before that if he had depended on his royalties he would have starved. Next, the lyceum augmented a writer's usual public by adding the people who had heard him speak. More persons recognized his name on the spine of his new book. Finally, it gave him a testing ground for his new work. With an audience before him, he could see what went smoothly and well, what limped or failed. Emerson remarked in his journal that he often tried out a new lecture on an audience of villagers and that, through repeated readings, it was much improved

when he delivered it in the city. 'Poor men', he said, 'they little know how different that lecture will be when it is given in New York, or is printed.'

For one or two categories of writers it should be said at once that the lyceum meant little; for others it meant much. I have rarely seen records of American novelists reading their fiction. Melville, it is true, took his South Sea novels to the platform but audiences found his manner distasteful and his content dull. Then too, he made the mistake of reading from already published works, unlike the successful lyceum lecturers, who read first and published afterward. Not the least of his difficulties was the fact that the genre itself remained disreputable. The novel was still suspected of being mere entertainment. Poetry, particularly when it had a moral or satirical point, was more highly regarded. Though many Americans failed to take poetry seriously, there are grounds for believing that it enjoyed a wider popularity a century ago than it does today. Or, to put it the other way around, the poet was less unpopular then than now. However, for the essayist the lyceum was the promised land and the essay flourished in America as it never has before or since. The informal personal essay was welcome, of course, but the informative or inspirational essay was even more in demand. When that was the evening's fare the audience could go home feeling that it was the better for having listened. Then it could realize gratefully what Emerson meant in maintaining that the lyceum was his pulpit. For the travel writer and the historian, along with the essayist, the lyceum offered an ample field. The restless, curious Americans were eager to hear about foreign lands as well as about the far reaches of their own. They were equally fascinated by the past. With the intense patriotism of a new nation they heard with particular interest about American history. But they also came to hear about the rich past of Europe, from the time of Pericles down to the time of Napoleon.

Some writers within each category fared better than the rest of course. Most of the best-known figures of those days are now forgotten. Who today remembers the essayists E. P. Whipple or G. W. Curtis, the moralists Orville Dewey or Starr King, the travellers Isaac Hayes or Elisha Kent Kane? Who recalls the historians John Lord or Joel Headley, the poets Park Benjamin or J. G. Saxe? There are others, however, such as Bayard Taylor who still receive a paragraph in histories of American literature and a few at any rate such as Thoreau who have found world-wide fame.

Because much of what we have been saying has been in general terms, it might be well to look briefly at the relation of the lyceum to one specific writer, in this case Emerson himself. To a marked degree, he will illustrate for us the effects of the lyceum.

Emerson made a unique personal contribution to American belles-lettres, a contribution which continues to be esteemed. Right now the Harvard Press is issuing full scholarly editions of his lectures and journals. The lyceum's role in his life was surprisingly important. It began early and ended late. He read his first lecture in November 1833, when he was thirty. In harmony with the times it was on science but, as always for Emerson, science from a Transcendental point of view. His next two lectures were also on science. Then, however, travel made its appearance as a subject, and after it the sort of lecture which became one of Emerson's staples: the study of a great man with an inspirational inquiry about what made him great. Michelangelo was the first of many to be anatomized and apostrophized. By 1835, when he lectured on Michelangelo, Emerson was becoming established as a popular lecturer. He soon showed himself strong and independent enough to appear before lyceum audiences on his own terms, and they were glad to have him. In 1833 he had lectured only once; by 1836 he could lecture two dozen times a year, and more.

He wrote out his lectures and saved them carefully. As time went on and they accumulated, he rifled them with increasing freedom, drawing pages from them for new lectures—and for books. The two books of essays which made Emerson's reputation as a writer were published in 1841 and 1844 respectively. The material for those striking works came chiefly from four series of lectures, the first of which was given in 1836-7 and the last in 1841-2. Paragraph after stirring paragraph, phrase after splendid phrase came from the lectures. First Emerson selected, then he assembled, and then he revised. The major flaw in the resulting essays was a certain lack of structure; this was a lack chargeable in part, though only in part, to his eclectic method. But otherwise the gains were great. The tone was heightened, the thought fortified.

Integral with these alterations was a certain shift in the point of view. The lecture had the audience full in front of it. There Emerson's syntax is informal, his examples are familiar, his address is direct. And his images are often homely. This is Emerson as nearly local as he can be. The printed essay,

however, has a wider audience. It is addressed to man everywhere and, appropriately, to the individual man, to the man within, not the man without. The difference between lecture and essay is substantial. At the same time, the lecturing remains the basis for the printed prose.

After 1844 the lecturer and the essayist came closer and closer together. The new lectures gained steadily in stature. Emerson's need to revise them before publication lessened, once they had been tested on the lyceum. Consequently, for the next fifteen years he published his books with little revision. *Representative Men*, dated 1850, actually bears the subtitle *Seven Lectures*. If these books were not as consistently notable as the *Essays*, first and second series, they still contained some very fine things. And one volume, his *English Traits*, was as good over all as anybody could wish.

In three books, each printed before the Civil War, the essay and the perfected lecture are nearly one. They are the *Representative Men* and *English Traits* just mentioned and *The Conduct of Life*. *English Traits*, in its brilliant combination of candour and wit, its decent shrewdness and sympathy, is probably the best book written by an American on Victorian England. About the people Emerson says, for instance, 'They have a wonderful heat in the pursuit of a public aim'. About the land he says, 'England is a garden', which is cliché enough, but he takes the curse off by adding in the next sentence 'under an ash-colored sky'. The chapters of *English Traits* were all proved first on the lecture platform.

Emerson began presenting *The Conduct of Life* to the public in 1851, first in the form of several single lectures and then as a course. As the 1850's went along, the struggle over slavery intensified; the whole weather of American life grew dark. Emerson's response was neither to restate the unworldly Transcendentalism of his earlier years nor to preach a political sermon. Instead he took his first principles and applied them to a time of crisis. To his troubled hearers he showed an unexpected awareness of the power of evil, of the strong gods of force. But he maintained that by taking them calmly into account one could emerge with an idealism all the better for having been tempered by experience. By 1860, when he finally published *The Conduct of Life* in book form, his attitude was still firm and confident even though the Civil War was less than six months off. Carlyle, going through the book, could see no faltering; to him Emerson was now 'more pungent, piercing',



than ever. He was right: this was Emerson at his sagest both as a writer and lecturer.

After the Civil War Emerson lost his mental vigour. His gift for selecting the best from his accumulated work slowly faded. Now when faced with the need to give a new lecture he could only leaf aimlessly through his piles of papers. Even when they reached print the post-war essays were structureless, or if they had any structure it was imposed by Emerson's assistants. Even in his prime Emerson's structure had been weak; now in his old age it was gone entirely. In other respects, too, the last lectures, like the last volumes, show a sad falling off. By the end of the 1870's Emerson was done. For forty years before that, however, the poet-prophet had stood out as the noblest figure on the lyceum and the greatest American essayist. Literary critics have often commented on his felicities but he could also impress the ordinary listener. Here is what an average young woman in his audience one night in 1857 had to say about his performance: 'One of the most beautiful and eloquent lectures I ever heard.'

On the whole Emerson gave more to the lyceum than did any other writer. And the lyceum reciprocated, not only by letting him test his essays but also in a more material way: it paid him. During his best period he averaged fifty lecture dates a year. His fee varied from place to place, not surprisingly, but even as early as 1837 he was receiving ten or twenty dollars for a single appearance. And for a series of ten lectures in Boston in that year he netted \$571. Boston and New York returned him the greatest profit but otherwise the farther he ranged the more he earned. As soon as rail transportation was established he travelled to the Midwest. He went reluctantly, mindful of cold, dirty inns, and tedious journeys; but he went and the result of each tour was a profit of \$500 or so. Even when he was past sixty he still could produce a best-selling lecture such as 'Social Aims'. He delivered this one more than seventy times in five years and his fees for giving it exceeded \$4,000.

It is some distance from Emerson to that thorny individualist Henry Thoreau. Yet he found the lyceum useful too. The important part it played in his literary process paralleled the part it played for Emerson. Thoreau summed up his own method of literary composition one day in the middle 1840's. 'From all points of the compass', he explained, 'from the earth beneath and the heavens above, have come these inspirations and been entered duly in the order of their arrival in the

journal. Thereafter, when the time arrived, they were winnowed into lectures, and again, in due time, from lectures into essays.' Some of the essays best known to us today made their first public appearance as lectures. One of them is his outspoken 'Life without Principle', which commences, in fact, with a reference to lyceum lecturing. There Thoreau asserts that the lecturer should have perfect freedom to say what he thinks—and is under obligation to say it to the members of his audience. 'They have sent for me, and engaged to pay for me, and I am determined that they shall have me, though I bore them beyond all precedent.' His classic essay on 'Walking' is much more genial but the marks of the lecture are equally plain. Thoreau opens this essay exactly like a lecture. 'I wish to speak a word for Nature', he says, and then continues in a firm, conversational tone. When the piece is printed the concessions he makes to the reader as opposed to the hearer are negligible. The most influential essay of them all, 'Civil Disobedience', is another that started as a lecture. Gandhi, struggling in South Africa, read it with eagerness ('It left a deep impression upon me', he said) and today its advice is still being followed.

Much of Thoreau's travel writing also passed through the stage of the lecture. Wherever he travelled he journalized and out of his journal he composed delightful accounts of visits to the Maine woods, to Cape Cod, and to Canada. Then he read parts of these accounts to the lyceum and subsequently turned them into essays which were collected into books published after his death. Of the two books published during his life, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden, Walden* is, of course, much the more important. The *Week* is a unique American pastoral, deserving of greater attention than critics have given it. But it has its defects and it is possible that if Thoreau had read more of it to audiences it would have developed into a better book. Its turgid passages might have been fewer, its narrative smoother. Yet it may well be that he lacked the opportunity to read it aloud. At any rate, we have only one record of his drawing on the *Week* for a lecture. On *Walden*, however, he drew ten times or more. Under such titles as 'Life in the Woods', 'White Beans and Walden Pond', and 'History of Myself' he tested his thesis and polished his chapters. *Walden* still begins with its first, deceptively simple address to his neighbours about why he went away, and throughout the book he talks as directly to the reader as he ever talked to his hearers. There is little doubt that the lyceum

affected Thoreau's writing in general, from the world-renowned *Walden* down to so obscure an essay as his 'Sir Walter Raleigh'. Thoreau's best biographer, H. S. Canby, was not exaggerating much when he asserted that 'Nearly everything Thoreau wrote was originally conceived as a lecture'.

It would be gratifying to report that Thoreau was enabled to make a living by the lyceum. The truth is otherwise. Though he lectured off and on for a fee and though he served his local lyceum in Concord faithfully, he never managed to earn as much as did a hundred mediocrities who are today forgotten. An occasional ten or twenty dollars would come to him but there were seldom enough engagements to be of much help. During fifteen years or so of reading his manuscripts on the lyceum, Thoreau lectured about sixty times in all. His luck varied but he was seldom adequately paid or much appreciated. A few times he fared well. For instance, at the request of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Thoreau read part of the first chapter of *Walden* to the Salem Lyceum for \$20. He repeated the lecture in Portland and earned another \$20. On the other hand, when he lectured in Danvers on his excursions to Cape Cod, he required only that his expenses be paid. He lectured about *Walden* before various other groups for nothing. More often than not he lectured with a certain heaviness. 'I judge the audience was stupid and did not appreciate him', someone wrote from Philadelphia; when Thoreau lectured in New Bedford, someone else observed judiciously, 'I have heard several sensible people speak well of [his] lecture . . . but conclude it was not generally understood'. Yet every now and then there was *rapport*. After Thoreau lectured to a Nantucket group in 1854, he said with satisfaction, 'I found them to be just the audience for me'. Money was far from everything to him and that was fortunate. It would be rash to guess at the amount of his income from the lyceum but safe to suppose it small. Nevertheless, income is relative, not absolute, and the lyceum was the only regular source of money for Thoreau the writer. He did make some profit from his lecturing whereas he barely broke even on his writing. Regardless of how well he fared, he supported the lyceum gladly. 'The one hundred and twenty-five dollars', he noted in his journal, 'which is subscribed in [Concord] every winter for a Lyceum is better spent than any other equal sum.'

The hey-day of the lyceum was before the Civil War and so

we have been focusing on antebellum literature. Yet we should remember that lecturing as such continued after the war. It still attracted some authors—and paid them variously. For one of America's greatest post-war writers it afforded a happy home. This was Mark Twain. His deft wit and raucous humour enchanted a generation of his countrymen. He played the clown but added the satirist whenever he could. In the rather gross culture of post-war America he appeared, for years, perfectly at ease.

Among the pre-war writers, after we have cited Emerson and Thoreau, there was no one of Mark Twain's magnitude who found much in the lyceum. Melville bungled his lecture tours. Hawthorne felt too shy to lecture, consenting instead to serve as secretary of the Salem lyceum. Oliver Wendell Holmes was too casual. Widely known for his wit, he made many platform appearances but did not regard his lectures as a stage in his literature. Instead he called them his 'fireworks' and declined to put them in print. Lowell lectured a little, so did Poe; but the lyceum meant nothing to them as authors. Once we leave writers of the first rank, however, we find many who used the lyceum in their work. They provided the substructure of our new American literature. Bayard Taylor, the gaudy prince of travel writers, was their chief exemplar.

For Taylor the lecture still had much the same relation to the printed book that it did for Emerson and Thoreau, though he was younger than they and came to the lyceum later. When he got there he proved to be a phenomenal success. Taylor lectured on life in Japan, in India, in the icy North, in Russia. He often dressed up in native costume; the result was magnificent enough to cause any lady to swoon. Even when he ventured to make a social criticism of his fellow citizens, he remained popular. Lecturing let him live in state. At his best he could clear \$5,000 a season and pay for the luxuries he loved; yet he found the lyceum a bore. One rainy night as he sat in a dismal little room in Niles, Michigan, while waiting to lecture, he described his trials:

Comes a rapping, tapping  
At my chamber door,  
But, unlike Poe's raven  
Crying 'Evermore!'  
'Tis the new Committee  
Any one can tell,  
Come to see the lecturer:  
'Hope you're very well!' . . .

Finally they leave me,  
I'm alone, again, . . .  
When again a rapping—  
(Hope you will not laugh)—  
School-boy with an album  
Wants an autograph!  
Next a solemn gentleman,  
Unctuous of face:  
'What's your real opinion  
Of the human race?'

Thicker than the deluge  
Pouring out-of-doors,  
Comes a rain of questions  
From the crowd of bores;  
'Where's your lady staying?'  
'What's your baby's name?'  
'Do you find Society  
Everywhere the same?'  
'Where are you going to travel?'  
'What's your future plan?'  
'Do you think you'll ever  
Be a settled man?' . . .

Oh, I want to be  
Where, for information,  
No one comes to me.  
I'd be a bloody whaler  
Among the Kurile Isles,  
A tearing, swearing sailor  
Whom the Captain riles,  
Anything but Taylor  
Lecturing in Niles!

There is no need to labour the point that Bayard Taylor lectured because he was paid for it. The urge to share the very best of his thought, the urge which moved Emerson and Thoreau so much, signified little to him. He was the professional performer. He was also the most widely read of our travel writers, however, and to this day occupies a niche in American letters.

Of the writers on literature H. N. Hudson was representative. He read his essays on Shakespeare throughout the country and in their printed form still called them lectures. His critical principles were simple ones, obviously appealing to his audiences. He affirmed that literature was intended to

teach, that the moral lessons in Shakespeare's plays were manifold. 'The peculiar excellence of the poet's works is in their unequalled ability to instruct us in the things about us and to strengthen us for the duties that lie before us.' He couched his lectures in what his audiences no doubt believed to be literary language. They heard such sentences as, 'It was out of this dark, pestiferous, and lethiferous imbroglio of earth and heaven, of dirt and divinity, that the myriad-minded genius of England was to create the bright, breathing, blossoming world of a national drama'. To his impressible auditors Hudson was more than a handmaiden to literature; he was literature itself.

The few poets who read to the lyceum wrote usually in a debased imitation of neoclassical style. They ran to satire and heroic couplet. To teach by amusing was their most obvious aim. Before E. P. Whipple began writing essays he produced a poem which was a success from the first time he read it in public. Summing up the appeal not only of this poem but its whole school, the Boston *Transcript* said it was 'full of playful humour, lively sallies, and satirical hits in which [he] cut up and used up, with the skill of an old master, the numerous humbugs and abstractions which are emptying the pockets and turning the heads of so many people of the present generation'. Park Benjamin and J. G. Saxe were the leaders of this school. Benjamin's most popular satire is called 'The Age of Gold'. Here are four typical lines from it:

Few marvels now the busy mind engage  
In this gold-seeking, gold-discovering age,  
When Love himself forsakes his bowers for mines  
And all our firesides turn to Mammon's shrines.

This was second-rate Dryden, it is true, but better than nothing at all. It may indeed have instructed audiences as well as amused them. After the lyceum disappeared so did the systematic public reading of verse. A poet or two still went bravely about, chanting lyrics to little groups, but the fairly substantial support which the lyceum had given was gone. Little poetry, even of a satirical and entertaining kind, would hereafter be heard from the lecture platform.

During the thirty years the lyceum existed, it was of course only one of many factors shaping American literature. But its effects were far-reaching. At its worst it persuaded an author

to simplify his subject and cheapen his approach. It pressed him to pander to its own likes and dislikes—even Emerson had to warn himself once or twice against doing that. At its best it provided a continuing dialogue between audience and author which was inspiring to both. As he read his first drafts to his audiences, he could see what was effective, what was not. Popular taste and the literary artist met and agreed. The rough essay, for example, developed into a work of accumulated, tested excellences. In the process an American literature developed which was not only American in the simple sense of being by Americans but also American in responding to American ideas and attitudes. This was explicitly native literature in which native audiences had played their part.

For a sidelight on the relation of author to audience, let me turn from literature to art and from America to England. In the 1960 Reith lectures Edgar Wind spoke about the relation of the artist to his patron. Professor Wind pointed out that today we think it is wrong for the patron to interfere in the creative process. He is expected to buy the result of the artist's labour but certainly not to take part in the process of composition. If he does manage to impose his ideas on the artist, the result is believed to be bad. That is our assumption and has been for some time. On that basis, we are apt to blame the headstrong client as well as the architect for yesterday's ugly villa or today's brick-box office building. But there is another side to this. Professor Wind maintains, with surprising warmth and conviction, that the patron was capable of being a very good influence. This is because the artist needs, not polite acquiescence, but something to work against. Professor Wind describes the wrangling between Michelangelo and his Medici pope, Clement VII, and argues that out of their clash of wills a masterpiece was generated. He points out too that the stormy relations between Renoir and his Parisian art dealer, Ambroise Vollard, ended with the painter's wry acknowledgement of his artistic debt. Of course, an intrusion can also have a bad effect. But Professor Wind's argument is that for the best patrons, from the Medici pope to the Parisian dealer, beauty was vital; they intruded because they wanted to see it fully realized. The artist knew this and responded. There was an interplay between him and his patron; there was a resonance in the result.

My own belief is that Professor Wind is right and that his thesis can be applied to the writer and the lyceum audience.

I do not mean that there was anything quite like the active participation of the patron of art. But I do suggest that the audience in front of the writer gave him a comparable stimulus. Purely as a man of letters he probably never saw a reader relish his book—or throw it aside. However, as a lecturer he saw the audience turn apathetic when he himself was dull or eager when he came to life. Psychologically the audience did for the lecturer what the active patron did for the artist.

I myself feel that there is almost a mystique about an audience, even more perhaps a century ago when we read less but listened longer. The author found, I am sure, that the effect of a hundred persons in front of him was tonic. Here was no Gentle Reader in the abstract but a solid group of his fellows. The very fact of the group had its significance, for an audience is more than a number of individuals; the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The situation demanded that the writer give his best, not his second best. Certainly there were exceptions, but as a rule the experience of the lecture proved to be effective. It gave the writer a chance to test his sensitivities, to try out his intuitions. The human voice itself, through its odd electricity, allowed a close communion with the audience. The voice too, through its extraordinary command of nuance and appeal, made for a more exact communication of meaning than the printed word.

Sound was indeed important. Thoreau among others knew it well: when he wrote *Walden* he devoted a whole chapter to it. Reading to an audience trained an author's ear. No writer worth his salt would keep a raucous phrase or ugly rhythm after a hundred auditors had heard it. As the lecture season progressed, as the writers read again and again, cadence and measure improved. The sound of American literature grew clear and at times melodious. And I am convinced that it was heard far more widely than it would have been without the American Lyceum.

Data come largely from my own studies, many of which are embodied in *The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind* (New York, 1956). Additional information is from William Charvat, 'A Chronological List of Emerson's American Lecture Engagements', *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, vol. lxiv (1960), nos. 9-12; from Robert E. Spiller, 'From Lecture into Essay: Emerson's Method of Composition', an unpublished paper; and from Walter Harding, 'A Check List of Thoreau's Lectures', *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, vol. lii (1948), no. 2.