

THE PALIMPSEST

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Emerson at Davenport

Almost as soon as there were enough settlers in early Iowa communities to make a public gathering possible, lyceums were organized and lecture courses became a regular feature of social life. An old fashioned lyceum existed in Davenport in 1841 and not two years after the first log cabin had been built in Johnson County, a meeting was called for the purpose of forming a lyceum in Iowa City. Professional lecturing began as soon as means of communication and transportation permitted.

“A spirit for instruction is abroad in the land,” according to the Davenport *Gazette* of January 27, 1842, “before which bows the demoralizing pagantry of theatres and corrupting influence of grog shops. It shows itself in the gathering of the people to learn wisdom as it falls from the lips of the lecturer. Every city paper that we receive applauds the talents of gifted men, who are endeavoring by

means of public lectures to reform and instruct their fellow creatures. There is no better manner of improving our minds and morals than by attending the drawing room of the lecturer." Within a decade after the admission of Iowa into the Union, the lecture system had become a well established institution in the State, and many prominent speakers appeared upon the rostra of the various cities during a winter season. Among the most notable lecturers who came to Iowa was Ralph Waldo Emerson, the profound New England essayist and poet.

It was mid-June in 1850 when Emerson first looked over the sweeping, boundless prairies of Iowa. After a visit to the Mammoth Cave, which inspired the famous essay on "Illusions", he had gone down the Ohio River to St. Louis and then up the Mississippi as far north as Galena, Illinois, whence he had resumed his homeward journey.

Like most travellers of his day, he was impressed, not by the thriving cities which had already firmly established themselves in the new country, but by the novelty of the scenery, "the raw bullion of nature." "In the Upper Mississippi", he wrote to his friend Thomas Carlyle, "you are always in a lake with many islands. 'The Far West' is the right name for these verdant deserts. On all the shores, interminable silent forest. If you land, prairie behind prairie, forest behind forest, sites of nations, no nations." The cities which he passed and at which he stepped ashore escaped his comment.

Not until December, 1855, did Emerson come to Iowa as a lecturer, one of twelve in the Davenport course of that season. Although the almost inconceivable extent of the new land still stirred his fancy, he now travelled more leisurely, and took occasion to look about him more closely. At the Le Claire House in Davenport he copied two rules of the hotel in his journal on December 31st: "No gentleman permitted to sit at the table without his coat", and "No gambling permitted in the house." He also made a note of the fact that he had "crossed the Mississippi on foot three times", the previous crossings having been made at St. Louis in January, 1853.

The entry is characteristically Emersonian. Even in the Far West gentlemen must not sit at table without their coats. Emerson noted the rule for his own guidance, said his son, humorously. And perhaps his Puritanic morality was gratified though he considered it remarkable that gambling was prohibited.

Crossing the Mississippi on foot, and that was about the only way in the winter of 1855, was an exciting experience. Any one who has walked over the ice at Davenport will agree that the undertaking has its thrills. But Emerson crossed in comparative safety. "Our river", said a Davenport paper a few days before his arrival, "is pretty substantially bridged and hundreds of people are crossing on the ice; teams are also beginning to cross over and the old Father is considered as brought into subjection

to the ice king until the warm weather shall set him loose. Before the river closed entirely several persons managed to fall through the ice, but all were rescued without further damage than getting thoroughly wet." Evidently Emerson was not among those who managed to fall through.

"Soft coal, which comes to Rock Island from about twelve miles, sells for sixteen cents a bushel; wood at six dollars per cord", continued the journal of the Concord householder; and the student of language could not refrain from noting peculiarities of speech. "They talk 'quarter-sections.' 'I will take a quarter-section of that pie.'"

The founder of Davenport seems to have interested the New England scholar. "Le Claire being a halfbreed of the Sacs and Foxes (and of French-Canadian)", he wrote, "had a right to a location of a square mile of land, and with a more than Indian sagacity of choosing his warpath, he chose his lot, one [part] above the rapids, and the other below the rapids, at Rock Island. He chose his lot thirty years ago, and now the *railroad to the Pacific runs directly through his log house*, which is occupied by the company for wood and other purposes. His property has risen to the value of five or six hundred thousand dollars. He is fifty-seven years old and weighs three hundred and eight pounds."

Antoine Le Claire's log house, which Emerson passed in his walks about Davenport, still stands, although it no longer occupies its original site and is

not to be seen in its original condition. After having been moved twice, it now stands at the intersection of Fifth and Pershing streets. The railroad which in 1855 ran directly through it did not, however, extend to the Pacific. That was only a popular dream. As a matter of fact it had hardly reached the capital of the State at Iowa City, and ten years elapsed before it was completed to Des Moines whither the capital had meanwhile been removed.

Emerson's journal records that he was announced as "the Celebrated Metaphysician" in Rock Island, while in Davenport he was described as "the Essayist and Poet." No existing Davenport or Rock Island papers advertised "the Essayist and Poet" or "the Celebrated Metaphysician." Emerson must have referred to handbills or placards, none of which have been preserved. The newspaper notice which proclaimed his coming, hidden in small type on an inside page, was not pretentious:

YOUNG MEN'S LITERARY ASSOCIATION

ANNUAL COURSE OF LECTURES

The Seventh lecture of the course will be delivered at the Congregational Church on Monday evening, December 31, by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Lecture will commence at 7½ o'clock.

Single Tickets 50 cents; for sale at the Book Stores and LeClaire House; Season Tickets \$2.

WM. HALL	} Committee
C. DELANO	
A. MORTON	

Although the New Year's eve lecture appears to have been well attended Emerson's auditors were not much impressed by his discourse if the newspaper review may be accepted as a basis for judging.

"RALPH WALDO EMERSON.— We were one of the many who had the pleasure of listening to this man of celebrity on Monday evening. Those who assert that Mr. Emerson is an orator are simply mistaken. That he writes and reasons well no one can doubt, but he is *no* orator. In that respect we were disappointed, but in others we found him much as we had anticipated.

"The first part of his lecture was by no means flattering to his reputation, but the latter portion redeemed it. That the audience appreciated the many good things that fell from his lips, was apparent in the silence with which they listened to his remarks.

"It would have been difficult to have given his address a name; indeed, we doubt if the author himself was not at a loss to give it an appropriate title. He treated laconically upon many subjects, and all of them he handled skilfully, leaving in his wake a train for thought which will come upon the mind at unexpected moments like a forgotten dream. His lecture, like Laocoön, should have been ascribed 'to those who think'."

Perhaps, after all, the lecture had no title. If the address went over the reporter's head, he nevertheless was sufficiently acute to comprehend the miscel-

laneous and mosaic character of Emerson's thought, and his opinion of Emerson's oratorical ability struck the keynote of the criticism which was to prevail in Iowa as long as Emerson lectured. At no time was Emerson highly regarded for his delivery. Although his Iowa engagements were comparatively numerous, he was not in demand because of his oratory; for he lacked the fire and dramatic ability of Wendell Phillips or John Gough, the great popular platform heroes of the fifties and sixties. His appeal was of an entirely different character. He did, in truth, address those who think, and thinking is neither a dramatic nor a spectacular process.

The small space devoted to a review of Emerson's 1855 Davenport lecture is not conclusive evidence that his audience did not enjoy and appreciate what he said. Judging by the newspapers of that day, one would imagine that the whole duty of man was then politics, the whole duty of woman — silence. And the interest in front page advertisements, set in minute type, must have been exceedingly lively. Mere lectures were of little significance compared with politics.

The lecture in Davenport was Emerson's only appearance in Iowa in 1855. Although as early as 1853 there had been some discussion of an effort to secure him as a lecturer in Dubuque, it was apparently not until August, 1856, that he was definitely asked to speak there. But the Concord essayist came no

farther west than Illinois that season and it was not until after the Civil War that he again lectured in Iowa.

Despite the fact that in Davenport he had been regarded as "*no orator*", it was to Davenport that Emerson came first upon the occasion of his second Iowa visit. He had been engaged by the Associated Congress, the group of men sponsoring the lecture courses, to speak on "*Resources*" at Metropolitan Hall, Friday evening, January 19, 1866. "Considering that Mr. Emerson is quite as well and favorably known throughout this section as Bayard Taylor," said one Davenport newspaper, "and recollecting the crowded state of the Hall at the latter gentleman's lecture, some time ago, it seems really useless for us to say a word in his favor."

The paper which ten years before had announced his coming only in a formal advertisement this time said: "There will be an opportunity tonight to hear a lecture of the first order of merit . . . As a thorough scholar and pronounced thinker, Ralph Waldo Emerson occupies an eminent position in this country. His published lectures are among the most valued contributions to American literature." This announcement, too, predicted that the lecture on "*Resources*" would be well patronized.

Unfortunately, the audience was not of the proportions predicted. The weather was very inclement. Said the Davenport *Gazette* on January 20, 1866: "A large number of our citizens who had

anticipated a rich treat last evening in listening to the lecture of the distinguished essayist, R. W. Emerson, were, thanks to the intense cold and furious gale which made outdoors venturers almost heroic, grievously disappointed. A few — about four score — braved the frost and blast, and with all the interest possible in a hall freezingly cold and amid the continual clatter and banging of windows and doors, heard and were amply repaid for the effort. Resources — in the abstract and concrete — formed the subject of the lecture, which was, of course, filled with the deepest thought and most happy illustration. We regret that the hall was not filled, as it would have been had the weather been at all favorable. That the hall was so miserably warmed was highly discreditable and deserving of severest censure.”

The Davenport *Democrat* agreed that “a more inauspicious night could not have been selected for Mr. Emerson’s lecture than the last one. In addition to the most intense cold, the wind was furious, and the air filled with snow. Yet, in spite of these obstacles, some sixty or seventy persons assembled at the hall, a third of whom were ladies, and the renowned lecturer began his discourse. The windows and doors rattled incessantly, but in spite of the noise Mr. Emerson’s voice was sufficiently powerful to be heard distinctly in all parts of the hall. It requires but little genius to interest an audience on a very interesting subject, but to interest it with

abstract facts, and theories, is quite another matter. In the latter, however, Mr. Emerson succeeded to perfection, and notwithstanding the cold, scarcely an eye was diverted from the speaker during the whole discourse." But with respect to the indifferent manner in which the hall was heated, the *Democrat* took issue with the *Gazette*. "The furnaces were kept in full blast to the close of the lecture. The fault was in the atmosphere, and not with the managers of the hall."

Only a handful of people ventured out to hear the lecture, yet the lecturer was there, and may have travelled many difficult miles to meet his engagement. Speaking under such circumstances was not easy, yet he was distinctly heard. In spite of distractions, a close interest was maintained, and this, too, in an abstract subject. It is a significant picture of the hardships which the scholar had to undergo, of the niche he filled as a lecturer — the speaker, not the orator, winning attention with intangible material. Even the little newspaper quarrel about the faulty heating is meaningful: generally the quarrel centered about the speaker, his political complexion deciding the editors' opinions of his worth. Emerson, by avoiding disputed questions of the hour, lost somewhat of the glamour of immediate popularity, but received a more unbiased and lasting approbation from those who had given their applause to the lecture heroes basking in the sunlight only for the day.

Not quite two years elapsed when Emerson's third lecture in Davenport was announced. "Ralph Waldo Emerson", said the Davenport *Democrat* of December 12, 1867, "occupies to-day the highest place in American literature; honored, admired, and studied by the master authors of England, Germany and France, and has consented to lecture here on the evening of Friday, December 20th, 1867."

The terrible cold and the inadequate heating of the hall upon the occasion of his former lecture were remembered, and the Young Men's Library Association thought it well to assure the public that this time Metropolitan Hall would be well warmed and comfortable. An additional furnace was to be installed, and a stove placed in the hall for use in case necessity should demand. This time Emerson's audience should be able to listen to him without physical distractions.

In spite of these extraordinary precautions to make the evening's entertainment and instruction a complete success, an uncontrollable element had not been taken into consideration — the lecturer himself. Emerson spoke from manuscript, which was not always in perfect order. Furthermore, the pages of his manuscript were merely distant signal fires to which he did not always directly proceed and which he sometimes entirely ignored. The result was occasionally irritating to those who sat near enough to watch his actions clearly and who unfortunately could not avoid seeing the details of his movements.

Emerson's lecture in Davenport, wrote one of these front-row people, "may have been about 'Success;' but the peculiar hop, skip, and jump style of the speaker, commencing a page and omitting half of it, or beginning in the middle, and, while reading the last part, turning over and laying aside two or three full pages, certainly failed to make clear either what success is or how to attain it."

The serene Amos B. Alcott, lecturing in Iowa in 1872, and viewing Emerson's literary efforts in retrospect, thought that his essays might be read either backward or forward. "Does it make any difference", he asked, "where one begins to look at the firmament? Are not the Heavens all, in each constellation, beautiful?" Doubtless every group of stars is in itself beautiful, yet if these groups were shifted hither and yon before our eyes with no accompanying explanation, a certain amount of amazement would certainly arise in the minds of all save the most philosophical.

The hall, however, was well warmed to the satisfaction of all present.

HUBERT H. HOELTJE