



2002

An Intellectual Comradeship: The Friendship of Emerson and Thoreau

Lindsay Fitzharris '04

Illinois Wesleyan University

Recommended Citation

Fitzharris '04, Lindsay (2002) "An Intellectual Comradeship: The Friendship of Emerson and Thoreau," *Undergraduate Review*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev/vol14/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Ames Library, the Andrew W. Mellon Center for Curricular and Faculty Development, the Office of the Provost and the Office of the President. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Commons @ IWU by the faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

An Intellectual Comradeship:

The Friendship of Emerson and Thoreau

Lindsay Fitzharris

The relationship between Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne often goes unnoticed in the scholarly world. While both men seemingly contradict each other in their beliefs and values, a closer look at the two writers' correspondence between September 1842 and January 1844 reveals otherwise. In fact, this intellectual influence is evident in Emerson's lecture, "The Young American" and in Hawthorne's "The Intelligence Office." This influence also lingers on in other works, such as Hawthorne's piece, "The Hall of Fantasy." When examining both men's journals, it becomes apparent that this neighborly contact had a substantial impact on both writers. On the other hand, this claim rests on certain assumptions about the essence of the conversations between Hawthorne and Emerson during those years. Furthermore, previous claims about the two men's influence on each other sometimes are exaggerated and embellished. This paper explores the relationship between Emerson and Hawthorne during the years of 1842 to 1844 and the effect that friendship had on their works. Furthermore, it questions the validity of historical evidence surrounding this claim and deconstructs other historians' assertions about the strength of Emerson and Hawthorne's friendship.

Starting in 1842, when Hawthorne moved to Concord, Massachusetts, the two men began to record their meetings in journals. A large amount of testimony reveals the often-hostile opinions each had of the other, even before the two had become neighbors. After reading Hawthorne's "Footprints on the Seashore," Emerson writes, "I complained that there was no inside to it. Alcott & he together would make a man." (Porte 188) Even long after the two became friends, insults continued. In 1842, Emerson comments, "N. Hawthorn's [sic] reputation as a writer is a very pleasing fact, because his writing is not good for anything, and this is a tribute to the man." (*Ibid* 288) Although the insults persisted throughout their friendship, they began to dwindle as time went on. Eventually, the two learned to appreciate each other. In a letter to Hawthorne's wife, Emerson writes, "he [Hawthorne] always appeared to me superior to his own performances." (Myerson 418) This letter, however, was written after Hawthorne's death in May, 1864. His death may have

prompted Emerson to regard Hawthorne in a better light than he really thought of him during his lifetime. Also, Emerson may have been trying to console Hawthorne's widow, who often praised Emerson as "the greatest man that ever lived." (Elder 9)

While Hawthorne's notebooks are often less intimate than Emerson's journals, they still reveal that there was substantial contact between the two writers during the years of 1842 to 1844. On April 8th, 1843, Hawthorne records a particularly important conversation between the two men that most likely had a lasting impact on the two, as evident in their writing. Hawthorne writes that he and Emerson "had as good a talk as I ever remember to have had with him," discussing various things, such as Margaret Fuller, Ellery Channing, and not in the very least, Brook Farm (Hawthorne 334). Utopian communities, such as Brook Farm, became a special interest to Emerson during this period, and most likely Hawthorne, who was a former member of Brook Farm, heightened Emerson's intellectual curiosity. Hawthorne comments, "We talked of Brook Farm, and the singular moral aspects which it presents, and the great desirability that its progress and developments should be observed and its history written." (*Ibid*) Unfortunately, unlike this particular example, very few other entries describe the conversation the two men had. Interestingly enough, an important joint visit to Shaker Village in September 1842 was recorded in length by Emerson but not even mentioned by Hawthorne. Again, although it is irrefutable that the two men did have lengthy conversations and spent much time together, the impact this correspondence had is questionable.

The ideas that Emerson and Hawthorne discussed during their visit to Shaker Village appear in Emerson's lecture, "The Young American." Although aspects laid out in his speech may have come from other people, some ideas clearly mirror those talked about with Hawthorne. On September 27th, 1842, Hawthorne and Emerson went for a walk around Shaker Village. Emerson observed, "We scarcely encountered man or boy in our road nor saw any in the fields. This depopulation of the landscape lasted all day." (Lathrop 272) This led Emerson to conclude that "when any large brain is born in these towns, it is sent, at sixteen or twenty years, to Boston or New York, and the country is tilled only by the inferior class of the people, by the second crop or *rowan* of the men." (*Ibid*) This whole idea, that the countryside has been raped of America's promising youth, does not appear in any previous journal entries by Emerson. Thus, it would not be an implausible

claim to speculate that this idea was formulated while walking with Hawthorne and that the two most likely discussed the matter at length. Emerson remarks that they “had much conversation” during their stroll. (*Miscellaneous*, 8 273) Emerson also utilizes this idea in his lecture, “The Young American,” making it the key focus of his speech. In the beginning, he says, “The cities drain the country of the best part of its population: the flower of the youth, of both sexes, goes into the towns, and the country is cultivated by a so much inferior class.” (Ferguson 228) He continues to draw upon this idea, pleading for America’s youth to work the country’s soil. Later, he even associates the farmer’s occupation with the European aristocracy and the growth of patriotism. Although it is not clear whether this observation belonged to Emerson alone, there is a possibility that Hawthorne gave some thoughtful input about this topic during their long walk. The fact that Emerson incorporated this idea into his speech suggests that there was most likely some degree of intellectual influence between the two men.

On that same day, during their stroll around Shaker Village, Emerson and Hawthorne engage in a discussion about European aristocracy, instigated by their observations regarding the farmer. Emerson records the substance of that conversation:

In Europe, where society has an aristocratic structure, the land is full of men of the best stock, and the best culture, whose interest and pride it is to remain half of the year at least on their estates and to fill these with every convenience and ornament. (*Miscellaneous*, 8 272-273)

This same idea can be detected in Emerson’s lecture. As B. Bernard Cohen explains, “Predicting that talent applied to the farms of this country would create a system far better than that of Europe, he lauded the land as ‘a sanative and Americanizing influence.’” (Cohen 37) Again, this evidence that Emerson used ideas in his lecture that he discussed with Hawthorne hints that there was some degree of intellectual inspiration occurring. Unfortunately, because Hawthorne did not record this event in his own journals, it is not clear how much of these ideas were shaped by Hawthorne himself.

Another idea ventured by Emerson in his lecture, “The Young American,” is the role of communistic societies and their importance to America’s future. Here, particularly, we can speculate that Hawthorne influenced Emerson

and his views on these utopian experiments. Hawthorne, once a former member of Brook Farm, had many opportunities to detail his experiences to Emerson. In one specific instance, Emerson records his discussion with Hawthorne on Brook Farm: "We talked of Brook Farm...The Brook Farm Community is an expression in plain prose and actuality of the theory of impulse." (Hawthorne 334) Their discussions on this topic were numerous. On a later date, Emerson writes, "Hawthorne boasts that he lived at Brook Farm during its heroic age: then all were intimate and each knew the other's works...." (*Journals*, 6 441-442) These ideas make their way into Emerson's lecture, "The Young American." In his speech, Emerson venerates these societies, saying, "Witness, too, the spectacle of three Communities which have within a very short time sprung up within this Commonwealth, besides several others undertaken by citizens of Massachusetts within the territory of other States." (Ferguson 235) Although he does not specifically name Brook Farm as one of these communities, it is generally accepted that Emerson is talking about Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and Hopedale. (Cohen 37) He continues to discuss these communities, pointing out their strengths and weaknesses. Emerson glorifies these societies because they "aimed at a higher success in securing to all their members an equal and thorough education." (Ferguson 237) Emerson latches on to this idea that Government should educate the poor man. Although Emerson admits, "abundant mistakes will be made by these first adventurers," he praises the communities for the "revolution which they indicate" is underway. (*Ibid*) Because Hawthorne was a member of one of these communities, and because the two men recorded lengthy conversations about Brook Farm, there can be little doubt that Emerson's curiosity about these utopian experiments was sparked by the intellectual rapport between him and Hawthorne.

Although Hawthorne had many conversations about Brook Farm with Emerson, there are many other places where Emerson could have picked up these ideas. On November 10th, 1842, Charles Lane, Henry Wright, and Alcott met at Emerson's house to "present their plans for an ideal community." (*Miscellaneous*, 8 310) Hawthorne, George Ripley, and several other people interested in these communities were also there. Emerson writes four days later in his journal, "I begged A[lcott]. to paint out his project and he proceeded to say that there should be found a farm of a hundred acres in excellent condition with good buildings...." (*Ibid*) In this particular example, Alcott, not Hawthorne, is communi-

cating ideas about communist societies to Emerson. Furthermore, Emerson clearly shows that these ideas belong to Alcott alone, whereas there is no evidence whether any of Hawthorne's own original ideas ever reached Emerson during their discussions. Additionally, Emerson most likely formulated his own opinions and ideas about these societies first hand, when he visited Shaker Village in 1842. Admittedly, Hawthorne accompanied Emerson on this trip; however, it is not certain how many of the ideas recorded in Emerson's journal came from Hawthorne or from his own observations while staying in the village. Again, the degree of intellectual influence Hawthorne had on Emerson is questionable.

There is, however, one strong case of intellectual influence between the two men. Between August 25th and September 3rd, 1843, Emerson records another conversation he and Hawthorne had about Brook Farm. After this reference, the term "intelligence office" makes its first appearance in Emerson's journals. Emerson remarks:

Families should be formed on a higher method than by the Intelligence Office. A man will come to think it as absurd to send thither for his nurse or farmer, as for his wife. Domestic pass in silence through the social rooms and recover their tongues at the kitchen door—to bless you? (*Journals*, 6 444-445)

As Cohen asserts in his essay, "Since the notation comes at a time when Emerson referred to at least one conversation with Hawthorne and when he was jotting down ideas later used in his lecture, one may assume that some mention may also have been made of this specific term." (Cohen 39) The validity of this assumption is supported by evidence from Emerson's lecture, "The Young American," and Hawthorne's story, "The Intelligence Office." Both men refer to the term as a place where anything can be bought or sold, including ideas and values. In his lecture, Emerson says, "Instead of a huge Army and Navy, and Executive Departments, it [trade] tends to convert Government into a bureau of intelligence, an Intelligence-Office, where every man may find what he wishes to buy...." (Ferguson 233-234) For Hawthorne, the Intelligence Office was a Central Office where a person who "has missed anything valuable, whether out of his heart, mind, or pocket..." could go to buy it back. (Lathrop 370) For Emerson, the Intelligence Office had almost an identical meaning: it was a place that "put everything into market, talent, beauty, virtue, and man himself." (Ferguson 234) Furthermore, Emer-

son's condemnation of trade and its evils are reflected in Hawthorne's story. Hawthorne writes, "There is more of good and more of evil in it [the Intelligence Office], and more errors of the virtuous...in short, a more perplexing amalgamation of vice and virtue, than we witness in the outward world." (Lathrop 337) Reading this passage recalls Emerson's words about the Intelligence Office, where he writes, "This is the good and this is the evil of trade...." (Ferguson 234) The fact that both men use the same exact term with very similar meanings in their works highly suggests that each influenced the other¹

Of course, not all claims accurately depict the intellectual influence between Hawthorne and Emerson. Some assertions are overemphasized and embellished to fit the historian's thesis. In his article, "Emerson's 'The Young American' and Hawthorne's 'The Intelligence Office,'" B. Bernard Cohen occasionally downplays evidence that is contradictory to his claims about the nature of Emerson and Hawthorne's intellectual friendship. Hidden amongst the footnotes are statements that destroy the validity of his thesis. For example, Cohen suggests that Hawthorne modeled one of his characters in "The Intelligence Office" on Emerson. Basing this claim off a previous work Hawthorne had written, "The Hall of Fantasy," where Emerson had, in fact, played the role of a seeker of truth, Cohen goes on to say, "Emerson himself entered Hawthorne's sketch in the guise of the seeker of truth." This is an incredulous claim and there is very little evidence that supports this assumption. Most literary critics, including Herman Melville, agree that the seeker of truth in "The Intelligence Office" is most likely Hawthorne, himself. (Cohen 42) Furthermore, Cohen admits in his footnote that Hawthorne had removed references to his contemporaries when "The Hall of Fantasy" was reprinted. It seems unlikely that Hawthorne would continue to include his friends in his sketches so soon after he had made his decision to eliminate them in a previous work.

¹ As Cohen notes in his article, there is no evidence that Hawthorne had actually read Emerson's lecture before writing his story. Also interesting to note, I found no mention of the term "Intelligence Office" in any journal entries by Hawthorne. This claim, therefore, rests on the assumption that Emerson had indeed discussed this term with Hawthorne on the day the phrase appeared in his journals. For more information, see "Emerson's 'The Young American,' 39-42."

When examining Emerson and Hawthorne's entire collection of works, there is little evidence that either man influenced the other; however, a closer look at Emerson's "The Young American" and Hawthorne's "The Intelligence Office" reveals otherwise. Between the years of 1842 to 1844, the two neighbors came into frequent contact. Both men recorded many of these visits in journals and several conversations suggest that the two engaged in deep, intellectual discussions. Even more, some of the ideas exchanged during these talks appear in Emerson and Hawthorne's works. Although the degree of influence is questionable, evidence shows that each sparked an intellectual rapport with the other. As Cohen logically points out, "Had he [Emerson] not sensed in Hawthorne some intellectual kinship, the relationship would have been a failure from the beginning." (Cohen 43) Admittedly, many of these claims rest on assumptions about the essence of Hawthorne and Emerson's conversations during those years; however, it is not implausible to assume that both men engaged in lengthy conversations concerning many different issues of the time. Many of those included discussions about Brook Farm. Furthermore, both men use the same terminology in their papers "The Young American" and "The Intelligence Office," written only months after one another. Although it is impossible to prove the extent to which Emerson and Hawthorne affected each other, evidence clearly shows that the two men had formed some type of intellectual bond during the years of 1842 to 1844.

Bibliography

- Cohen, Bernard B. "Emerson's "The Young American" and Hawthorne's "The Intelligence Office." *American Literature* 26 (March 1954): 32-43.
- Elder, Marjorie. *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Transcendental Symbolist*. Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1969.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Edited by William H. Gilman, Alfred R. Ferguson, et al. 10 vols. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Edited by Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes. 10 vols. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Press, 1914.
- Ferguson, Alfred R., ed. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Vol. 1, Na-

ture, Addresses, and Lectures, by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Passages from the American Notebooks*. Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1896.

Lathrop, George Parsons, ed. *The Complete Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Vol. 2, *Mosses from an Old Manse*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Press, 1882. Reprint, Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1884.

Myerson, Joel, ed. *The Selected Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

Porte, Joel, ed. *Emerson in His Journals*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982.