Listening to Emerson's 'England' at Clinton Hall, 22 January 1850

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On the corner of Nassau and Beekman streets, the lecture room of Manhattan's Clinton Hall was filling up for the evening performance. After struggling to secure high-quality speakers during 1849, the Mercantile Library Association had scheduled an impressive cast of orators for the winter 1850 season, and such was the opening performer's popularity, organizers had been "strongly urged to choose another hall".[1] Complaints about the state of the city's lecturing facilities had been escalating of late, and Clinton Hall in particular was dismissed as "out of the way, too small and too uncomfortable".[2] Nonetheless, on the evening of Tuesday, 22 January 1850, a significant audience had begun to assemble, including several correspondents from the chief newspapers of the city. One recalled that the auditorium was "crowded to its utmost capacity"; another observed that "a large number were obliged to go from the door without obtaining admission"; a third wrote that even among those who gained entry, "many had to shift for accommodation".[3] The magazine writer Nathaniel Parker Willis was fortunate enough to get inside, but having arrived late,

> found the place crowded, and no chance of a near view of the speaker. The only foothold to be had was up against the farthest wall; and a row of unsheltered gas-lights blazed between us and the pulpit, with one at either ear-tip of the occupant, drowning the expression of his face completely in the intense light a little behind it.[4]

With this ecclesiastical tableau, Willis captured an atmosphere of almost messianic anticipation. The evening's performance was the first time many had seen this well-known, out-of-town

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[1]Mercantile Library Association of New York, *Annual Report*, 1850.

[2]"City Items – Lecture Rooms and Ventilation", *New York Daily Tribune*, 12 Dec. 1849; Mercantile Library Association of New York, *Annual Report*, 1851.

[3] "Lecture on England at the Mercantile Library", *New York Herald*, 23 Jan. 1850; "Mercantile Library Lecture", *New York Daily Tribune*, 23 Jan. 1850; "Mr. Emerson on England", *Literary World*, 2 Feb. 1850.

[4] Nathaniel Parker Willis, "Emerson", *Home Journal*, 2 Feb. 1850.

orator, and expectation for intellectual, aural, and visual stimulation from the "pulpit" was intense.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's appearance at Clinton Hall was clearly a media event, yet to many in the audience the material he was to present was already familiar. He had agreed to deliver a piece performed several times in New England during the previous winter entitled 'England', reports of which had appeared in both the American and British press.[5] Though it was to prove one of his most popular lectures, its tone had surprised early audiences: for one thing, it engaged with less abstract subject matter; moreover, many heard it as a startlingly positive appraisal of British society. Reporting on an early performance, a Boston journalist informed readers that Emerson had "lain it on quite thick, I assure you", and his commentary was widely censured as a provocatively reverent account.[6]

By contrast, a number of the reporters gathered in Clinton Hall on 22 January found much to commend in such provocation. The *New York Herald* commented on its "surprising epithets", "singular conjunctions", and "striking contraries of ideas".[7] In the *Home Journal*, Willis praised Emerson's mastery of "surprise" and his "very bold and fearless comment".[8] The *Albion* thought it possessed an admirably "bold, uncompromising love of truth, and a carelessness of consequences".[9] Such divergence of response was not unfamiliar for Emerson; nor was such disparity uncommon in coverage of the popular lecture circuit. However, the reception history of this performance provides instructive insights into the construction of Emerson's persona, into antebellum debates over Anglo-American identity, and into the dynamic interplay of oratory with the print media.

Since the operative meanings of lectures such as 'England' were fashioned by the interpretive gestures of the print media, Emerson's full impact can be understood only by

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[5] Uncovered New England reports include "Newport R.I. Correspondence", *Boston Evening Transcript*, 11 Dec. 1848; "England: Mercantile Library Lectures", *Boston Post*, 29 Dec. 1848; and "The English and American Character", *Hartford Courant*, 20 Jan. 1849. The lecture was reprinted in New York as "Mr. Emerson on England", *New York Tribune*, 6 Jan. 1849, and subsequently discussed extensively in several articles, including "England From Two Points of View", *Literary World*, 20 Jan. 1849; "The Durability of England and Englishmen", *Holden's Dollar Magazine*, Feb. 1849 and March 1849; and "The Other Side of the Picture", *Saturday Evening Post*, 18 Aug. 1849. It was discussed in the London media in "Emerson on England", *London Examiner,* 10 March 1849; "An American's Opinion of England", *The Times*, 14 March 1849.
[6] "Newport R.I. Correspondence", *Boston Evening Transcript*, 11 Dec. 1848.
[7] "Lecture on England", *New York Herald*, 23 Jan. 1850.
[8] Willis, "Emerson", *Home Journal*.
[9] "Mr. Emerson's Lecture on England", *Albion, A Journal of News, Politics and Literature*, 26 Jan. 1850.

attempting to recapture the figure he struck both on the lyceum platforms and in the newspaper lecture columns of antebellum America.[10] The recent publication of his later lectures has generated renewed interest in Emerson the speaker, focusing on how these neglected pieces mark his intellectual growth.[11] However, this essay adopts a different approach, by attempting a detailed account of the context, delivery and conflicting readings of a single Emerson appearance. In doing so, it aims to reveal how the lecture circuit, so often omitted from discussions of broader performance culture, needs to be reconnected to wider debates within the antebellum media concerning Anglo-American show practices, physicality and manners.[12] Such reconstruction allows us to recapture a sense of how the press seized on both the 'England' talk itself, and aspects of Emerson's performance style, as a means of shoring up of civic order and Anglo-American kinship.[13] Moreover, building on work of scholars such as Sandra Gustafson on early American orality, this essay argues for a re-examination of the textual interchanges of nineteenth-century oratorical culture. [14] It demonstrates how the re-animation of lecture reports

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[10] Recent discussions of Emerson's platform career include Mary Kupiec Cayton, "The Making of an American Prophet: Emerson, His Audiences, and the Rise of the Culture Industry in Nineteenth-Century America", *American Historical Review*, 92.3 (1987), 597–620; Cayton, *Emerson's Emergence: Self and Society in the Transformation of New England 1800–1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Sallee Fox Engstrom, *The Infinitude of Private Man: Emerson's Presence in Western New York 1851–1861* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997); Thomas Augst, *The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p114-157; and Bonnie Carr O"Neill, '"The Best of Me Is There": Emerson as Lecturer and Celebrity,' *American Literature*, 80.4 (2008), 739–67.

[11] Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson, eds. *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson 1843–1871*, 2 vols (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001)

[12] The lyceum is notably absent from Rosemarie K. Bank, *Theatre Culture in America, 1825–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). This article's treatment of antebellum manners and performance culture has been informed by John F. Kasson, *Rudeness & Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1991); and Thomas Augst, *The Clerk's Tale*.

[13]My analysis of this has been influenced by the discussion of mid-century attitudes to Britain in Leonard Tennenhouse, *The Importance of Feeling English: American Literature and the British Diaspora, 1750–1850* (Princeton University Press, 2007) and Elisa Tamarkin, *Anglophilia: Deference, Devotion, and Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

[14] Examples of this "new orality" in American literary studies include Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Christopher Looby, *Voicing America: Language, Literary Form, and the Origins of the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Sandra Gustafson, *Eloquence Is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Peter Gibian, *Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Culture of Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For a critical survey of such work, see Gustafson, "American Literature and the Public Sphere", *American Literary History*, 20.3 (2008).

reconnects us to forgotten means of listening through texts, and to discursive contests over thoughts voiced in spaces such as Clinton Hall.[15]

Deciphering Emerson's Performances

This endeavour is particularly rewarding in the case of as copiously documented a performer as Emerson. As his most recent editors argue, the Emerson of the platform is a figure whose cultural place "we are just now beginning to appreciate".[16] Newspaper lecture coverage was instrumental in establishing this significance, since, as Mary Kupiec Cayton maintains, the "impact" of his lecturing "may have depended less on what he intended than on what key communities of interpreters made of him".[17] The ways in which the listeners in the media articulated what they heard was often a consciously partial ideological process.

Emerson developed an adversarial relationship to such reporting, for its erratic entanglement of oral and print values, and what he saw as its financially injurious theft of intellectual property.[18] Such opposition may have contributed to his cultivation of an unrecordable idiom; both his notoriously elliptical style and habit of rearranging pieces at the lectern presented formidable obstacles for transcription.[19] Consequently, accounts often involved conscious "misconstrual" and were a means by which reporters could annex their own version of his positions: on reform, the market, nationality and modernity. Following his Clinton Hall lectures, one publication observed that "Mr. Emerson seems to be used in a good many places, as the wagon full of chain cables is used on board our steamboats, to trim ship. If the orthodoxy of a

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[15] The most comprehensive treatment of the popular lecture circuit is Angela Ray, *The Lyceum and Public Culture in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005), 2. In addition, pioneering work was undertaken in a series of articles by Donald Scott:"The Popular Lecture and the Creation of a Public", 791–809; Scott, "Print and the Public Lecture System 1840–1860", in *Printing and Society in Early America*, ed. by William L. Joyce and others (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1983); and Scott, "The Profession that Vanished: Public Lecturing in mid-Nineteenth-Century America", in *Professions and Professional Ideologies in America*, ed. by Gerald Grierson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983). Earlier valuable studies include Carl Bode, *The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind*, 2nd edn, (London: Feffer & Simmons, 1968); David Mead, *Yankee Eloquence in the Middle-West: The Ohio Lyceum 1850–1870* (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1951).

[16]"Emerson the Lecturer", *Later Lectures,* I, xviii.

[17] Cayton, "Making of an American Prophet", 599.

[18] See Ralph L. Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Scribner, 1949), 382–83.

[19] See *Later Lectures*, I, xxiv–xxv; James Russell Lowell, "Emerson the Lecturer" in *My Study Windows* (Boston: Osgood, 1874), 379.

man is suspected, let him abuse Mr. Emerson; if his liberality is doubted, let him praise him".[20] These interpretive strategies were a recognized contemporary phenomenon.

Newspaper consumption allowed the republic to conceive of itself, in Benedict Anderson's terms, as "a deep, horizontal comradeship", and lecture reporting allowed citizens to become part of an abstract community of listeners.[21] Yet, crucially, these columns captured more than words alone. The lyceum was a discursive space that married intellectual stimulation with a structure of display, a conflation of intellectual and physical performance. As his first biographer maintained, "his voice and manner become a fine commentary on his written thought, giving to it new and unexpected meaning".[22] Accounts of Emerson's lectures bear this interplay out, since more than for almost any other speaker, reporters attempted to capture the man in full: costume, gesture and voice.

Emerson was a gadfly of the lyceum: he offered contradictory messages; he took aim at majority beliefs; he refused to obey traditional structures. His performances, by contrast, were entirely free of such drama. His act involved a disjunction between text and body, with his words imparting vigorous ideas, whilst his demeanour projected benign indifference. One curious exception was his "customary gesture", captured in various visual sources, of clenching the right fist, "knuckles upward, arm bent at the elbow ... to deliver a downward blow of the forearm, full of power bridled".[23] (See **Fig. 1** and **Fig. 2**). Combined with his peculiarly resonant vocal style, such enigmatic physicality was often a focal emphasis of contemporary interpretations. Emerson's body was presented as a beguiling social text, suggestive of an almost inscrutable moral identity. As reports of his Clinton Hall performance reveal, the interpretive stances involved in rendering these non-textual properties were richly ideological.

Such scrutiny took on a new significance at Clinton Hall. 1850 was a pivotal year for Emerson, representing his final transition from secular preacher to professional lecturer of national stature. **S**horn of much of his troubling early radicalism, his cultural symbolism was in

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[20] "Mr. Emerson's Lectures", *Christian Inquirer*, 13 April 1850.

[21] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 7

[22] George Willis Cooke, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: His Life, Writings and Philosophy* (Boston: Osgood, 1881), 256.

[23] Robert D. Richardson Jr, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 195.

Figure 1: Ralph Waldo Emerson, carte de visite, *c.* 1850
(Courtesy of Harvard Houghton Library)

Figure 2: David Scott, "Ralph Waldo Emerson", oil on panel, 1848
(Courtesy of Concord Free Public Library)

flux, available for audience manipulation. To attend a talk by the Sage of Concord afforded the opportunity to scrutinize the character of one of the nation's most prominent moral critics. Moreover, now a transatlantic celebrity, freshly returned from the seat of world power, his verdict on the moral character of Britain was highly anticipated. Having followed his trip to Europe and his troublingly pro-British lecture in Boston with interest, New York newspapers were eager to assess first-hand the extent to which this symbol of Yankee intellectual independence had been tainted - physically or mentally - by his global exposure.[24]

'England' as Affirmation?

Travel lectures such as 'England' were interpretive performances, or dramas of appraisal, through which cultural and civic values were articulated. Whether delivered by men of letters such as Wendell Phillips or Herman Melville, or by those noted for their explorations such as Bayard Taylor, travel testimonies transcended mere entertainment, possessing the potential to galvanize political opinion.[25] Lectures on transatlantic themes were a particular case in point. In the antebellum party-political climate, positions on a range of pressing contemporary issues became inflected by one's attitude to Britain; the content, tone, and spirit of appraisals of British culture and society were therefore richly significant gestures.[26] Just like his more celebrated 'Fugitive Slave Law' address of the following year, 'England' seems designed to be read as an expressive speech act that, unlike many of his earlier more elusive gestures, conveyed affiliation with particular social positions. To many, it sounded like a surprisingly affirmative gesture towards British society.

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[24] Margaret Fuller, "Review of Emerson's Essays: Second Series", *New York Tribune*, 7 Dec. 1844.

[25] For Melville's lecture career see Merton M. Sealts Jr, *Melville as Lecturer*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957); for Taylor's platform career, and further exploration of the travel lecture genre, see Tom F. Wright, "The Results of Locomotion: Bayard Taylor and the Travel Lecture in Mid Nineteenth-Century America", *Studies in Travel Writing*, Vol. 14.2 (June 2010).

[26] Throughout this essay, slippage will be noted in sources between the nomenclature of 'British' and 'English'. Though an internationally recognized concept of 'Englishness', independent of the more abstract political signification of 'Britishness' had emerged by 1850 the great majority of foreign commentators, and a number of English writers, continued to use the two as synonyms. Paul Langford locates one origin of this slippage in the reluctance of Romance languages "to coin a precise translation for 'British' or at least to use it once coined", noting that "even Americans, with no linguistic barrier to surmount, did not necessarily show more discrimination". Langford, *English Identified* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 12. Whilst allowing for this discursive slippage in my sources, I have attempted throughout to employ 'England' as a geographic designator, and 'Britain' and 'British' to denote political and imperial institutions.

One of his most popular performances, 'England' was delivered under varying titles dozens of times throughout the north-east and Midwest during 1848–51.[27] It represented an early version of the influential transatlantic vision of *English Traits* (1856), a work which has enjoyed a divided recent scholarly reputation, seen variously as a maturation of global perspective, as a disingenuous "double-cross", or as an evasion of domestic sectional tensions.[28] The book is also an important moment for those who read Emerson's later career as a drift from enraptured idealism to the accommodation of the market.[29] Such attention has enriched our understanding of his evolving responses to transatlantic relations and Anglo-Saxon culture, but neglects the light that can be shed by their gestation on the lecture circuit.

Though characteristically resistant to linear summary, 'England' contained some key strands.[30] It purported to be an account of experiences gained on his recent lecture tour; like *English Traits,* it began with an impressionistic passage describing the visceral experience of British modernity, before interrogating the paradox of the nation's "success" through the question of "Why England Is England". Emerson's idiosyncratic theories pointed to the temperate British climate, the strong diet, the presence of an aristocratic class, the history of

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[27] Statistics drawn from William Charvat, *Emerson's American Lecture Engagements: A Chronological List* (New York: New York Public Library, 1961); and Albert J. von Frank, *An Emerson Chronology* (New York: Hall, 1994), 224–310. The lecture was also performed during 1848–51 under titles such as "Why England Is English" (e.g. Concord, Dec. 1848), and "England and the English (e.g. Cleveland, May 1850). Later performances under the titles such as "English Influence in Modern Civilization" (e.g. Philadelphia, Jan. 1854) and "Characteristics of English Civilization" (e.g. East Boston, March 1854) represent separate texts from the lecture as performed during the earlier period.

[28] Responses that emphasise its disparaging assessment of Britain include Robert Weisbuch, *Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 21–25; Richard Bridgman, "From Greenough to "Nowhere": Emerson's *English Traits*", *New England Quarterly*, 9.4 (1986), 469–85. Studies that treat the work as an evasion of the sectional crisis include Philip L. Nicoloff, *Emerson on Race and History: An Examination of English Traits* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961); and William Stowe, *American Abroad: European Travel in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 74–101. Recent work that synthesises these readings includes Susan Castillo, ""The Best of Nations": Race and Imperial Destinies in Emerson's *English Traits*", *Yearbook of English Studies* (2004), 100–11; and Christopher Hanlon, ""The Old Race Are All Gone": Transatlantic Bloodlines and English Traits", *American Literary History*, 19.4, (2007), 800–23

[29] See for example Sacvan Bercovitch, "Emerson, Individualism, and the Ambiguities of Dissent", in Lawrence Buell, ed., *Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1992), 101–34; Christopher Newfield, *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[30] The Houghton Library manuscript of 'England' is reprinted in *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson 1843–1871*, ed. by Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson, 2 vols (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), I; and in *The Selected Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. by Bosco and Myerson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

racial mixing, and other intangible qualities such as English "pluck". Various anecdotal illustrations were introduced to support these arguments, and he concluded by denouncing prophesies of the nation's imminent decline. On the surface, at least, it was an affirmation of English modernity and supremacy, conveyed through a series of bold, counter-intuitive moments.

The lecture began with the first such striking set-piece that commenced the experience of English travel *in medias res*:

> The traveller, on arriving in England, is struck at once with the cultivation. On every side, he sees the triumph of labor. Man has subdued and made everything. The country is a garden. Under that ash-colored sky, the fields are so combed and rolled, that it seems as if they had been finished with a pencil instead of a plough. The structures that compose the towns have been piled by the wealth and skill of ages. Nothing is left as it was made. Rivers, hills, valleys, the sea all feel the hand of a master. (p.151-152)

In classical rhetorical terms, this is no standard *exordium* but rather an establishment of tone: admiring, fervent, and seemingly deferential. It unfolds a provocative catalogue, its sequence of superlatives almost amounting to a panegyric to the accomplishments of British modernity. The resonances of "cultivation" and "finish" suggest twinned admiration for both social and technical refinements. Such approval seems rich in domestic party political signification, its esteem for the "hand of a master" presented in a Whig-inflected register of internal improvements.[31] Above all, the passage's ebullient present-tense constructions framed an unmistakable rhetorical argument: that the nation required confrontation as a contemporary fact not, as in his own famous early formulation in *Nature* as the mere "dry bones of the past".[32]

Two other crucial moments affirmed British supremacy against claims of imminent expenditure. In a second key passage, Emerson treated audiences to another fulsome celebration of British progress:

> In America, we fancy that we live in a new and forming country, but that England was finished long ago. But we find London and England in full growth. [...] Trafalgar Square was only new finished in April 1848 [...] The London University opens like our mushroom colleges at the West [...] Everything in England bespeaks an immense and energetic population. (p.157-158)

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[31]For Whig leader Henry Clay's "American System" see Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979), 20–21.

[32] Robert E. Burkholder, Alfred Riggs Ferguson and Philip Nicoloff, eds., *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 7 vols (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971-2007), *Vol.* I, 58.

In their striking assertion of growth, these lines reprise the tenor of his patriotic tribute to domestic energies in 'The Young American.'[33] Yet here, such spread-eagled boosterism is recast as mere "fancy". Similarly, at the lecture's close, a final *refutatio* rejects notions of British expenditure:

> It is common to augur evil of England's future and to forbode her sudden or gradual decline under the loads of debts, and pauperism, and the unequal competition with new nations where land is cheap (p.168)

Before leaving audiences with a vivid closing metaphor:

> But though she may yield to time and change, what a fate is hers! She has planted her banian roots in the ground, they have run under the sea, and the new shoots have sprung in America, in India, in Australia, and she sees the spread of her language and laws over the most part of the world made certain for as distant a future as the science of man can explore. (p.168)

The piece thus ended by invited audiences to resist Anglophobic sentiments, demanding that they be mindful of transatlantic inheritance and Anglo-American unity. Yet, in typically subtle fashion, the nuanced "Banyan" image resolved his analysis with the implicit argument that Anglo-Saxon greatness could only persist and continue in the nation's "offspring".

One of the talk's most notable formal features was, in fact, its emphasis on dispassionate balance and nuance. In an 1844 *Dial* review, Emerson had lamented "a certain disproportion in the picture" presented of English society in the Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present* (1843).[34] By contrast, evenness became a central principle of 'England', every superlative tempered by qualification and caveat. Such balance was a quality he commended in the natural character: "a certain balance of qualities in their nature, corresponding to what we call temper in steel [...] neither too cold, nor too hot; neither too swift, nor too slow" (p.162). Therefore, what appeared as pure affirmation was in fact a subtle broadside against hyperbole. It was an attempt to demystify British modernity, presenting it as neither cause for automatic alarm, nor cause for blind admiration.

There was also something more insinuating at work. The lecture represented an instance of the dialectical aesthetic employed in Emerson's wider portraiture in studies that - like his elegy to Thoreau and the sketches of *Representative Men* (1850) - first praised only to

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[33] 'The Young American', Emerson, *Collected Works,* I, 217-247.
[34] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Carlyle's "Past and Present"", *Dial,* 4.1 (1844), 99.

undercut.[35] Consider the dual effect of the opening passage above, which operated as both praise, but also a bravura performance of encapsulation and interpretation, *capturing* the nation in acts of summary interpretation, each aphorism subtly undermining through a process of reverse colonization. When Carlyle read reports in London of its 1849 Boston rendition, he wrote to Emerson in praise for the "*hidden* genius lodged in it", terming it "an excellent sly little word".[36] During the moment of oral rendition, however, much is lost to even dutiful ears, and this "sly", "hidden" nature seems to have been missed. In any case, the texture of reception was determined not by Emerson's text alone, but by recent events in New York performance culture.

'England' and Astor Place

In contrast to the furore surrounding its Boston performance, the New York media's response was generally positive.[37] As stated earlier, readings were characterised by a vocabulary of audacity and bravado: "bold, fearless comment", "honest bluntness" and "carelessness of consequences". We might well take pause at such language - why speak of a travel account in such terms, or consider a mere analysis of Britain as "defiant"? Part of the answer lay in the character of the Manhattan media's evolving management of urban class tensions.

Emerson was entering the city at a volatile time for civic and cultural life, and particularly for public performances that took as their theme the discussion of transatlantic affairs. In May 1849, the infamous "Shakespeare Riot" had taken place at the Astor Place Opera House, in which supporters of the American actor Edwin Forrest besieged the theatre where the illustrious English actor William Charles Macready's *Macbeth* was to open on May 7th.[38] After several days of escalating unrest, culminating in tens of thousands of protesters in the streets around Astor Place, the city's Whig authorities sent the National Guard to quell the disturbance, resulting in 25 dead and 120 injured. Though the idiosyncratic origins of the event have led to

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[35] For an assessment of this approach, see Buell, *Emerson,* 92. Weisbuch sees this at the heart of the "doublecross" of *English Traits*, Weisbuch, *Atlantic Double-Cross*, 275-76

[36] Thomas Carlyle to Ralph Waldo Emerson, 19 April 1849, in *Emerson and Carlyle*, 453

[37] "Mr. Emerson on England", *Literary World*, 2 Feb. 1850.

[38] The summary draws upon Richard Moody, *The Astor Place Riots* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958); and Nigel Cliff, *The Shakespeare Riots: Revenge, Drama, and Death in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Random House, 2007).

[38]See Samuel W. Haynes, "Anglophobia and the Annexation of Texas: The Quest for National Security", in *Manifest Destiny and Empire*, ed. by Haynes and Christopher Morris (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 115–45.

the event being cast as a vaudevillian historical curiosity, it was nonetheless the deadliest civic disturbance of the early republic, and the urban divisions it revealed were stark.

As notorious broadsides reveal, the ferment surrounding the riot was conducted rhetorically as much in terms of anti-British sentiment as more local socioeconomic tensions (**Fig. 3**). The fissures of Manhattan's class politics found expression through reference to perceived adherence or rejection of British manners or cultural practices, with putative battle lines established between the bearing and costume of demotic Democrats and effete Eurocentric Whigs. The Democrat-leaning *Herald* regularly fuelled such divisions, and during the build-up to the riot had chronicled developments in a language marked by vilification of the "coteries and cliques which make up our pseudo-aristocratic circles", castigating their anti-democratic, implicitly Whig, pro-British sentiments.[39] Inevitably, both tragedians" performances were read in terms of national synecdoche's: Forrest as the authentic everyman, overbearing and stridently demotic; Macready as haughty, introspective, and aristocratic.

The outpouring of anti-British sentiment in Astor Place, however, had sounded a note of alarm for the city's cultural elite. Publications such as the *Herald* were conscious of their influence on street-level resentment and the potential for further disturbance, and there was a broad sense of the wisdom of enforced austerity.[40] Willis, himself chief among the tastemakers of the "aristocratic coteries", wrote a considered response to the riot, in which he rejected claims that it represented "the breaking out of a deep-seated hostility to England and Englishmen", but instead, a symptom of needlessly stoked class antagonisms.[41] Nonetheless, there is a sharpened degree of sensitivity over the treatment of British themes. Observing the affair with a mixture of concern and bemusement, the London *Times* warned that the violent indignation of the Bowery Boys, "supplied as it is with so much anti-British material, is too likely to be repeated, unless all the good sense of the Union is exercised to extinguish it".[42]

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[39] Anon., 'shakespeare Readings and Fashionable Vulgarity", *New York Herald*, 23 April 1849.
[40] See Moody, *Astor Place Riots*, 86–96; and Thomas N. Baker, *Sentiment and Celebrity: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Trials of Fame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 108–10.
[41] Willis, "After-Lesson of the Astor-Place Riot", *Home Journal*, 26 May 1849.
[42] Anon., "America", *The Times*, 29 May 1849, reprinted as, Anon., "The English View of the Riot", *New York Herald*, 16 June 1849.

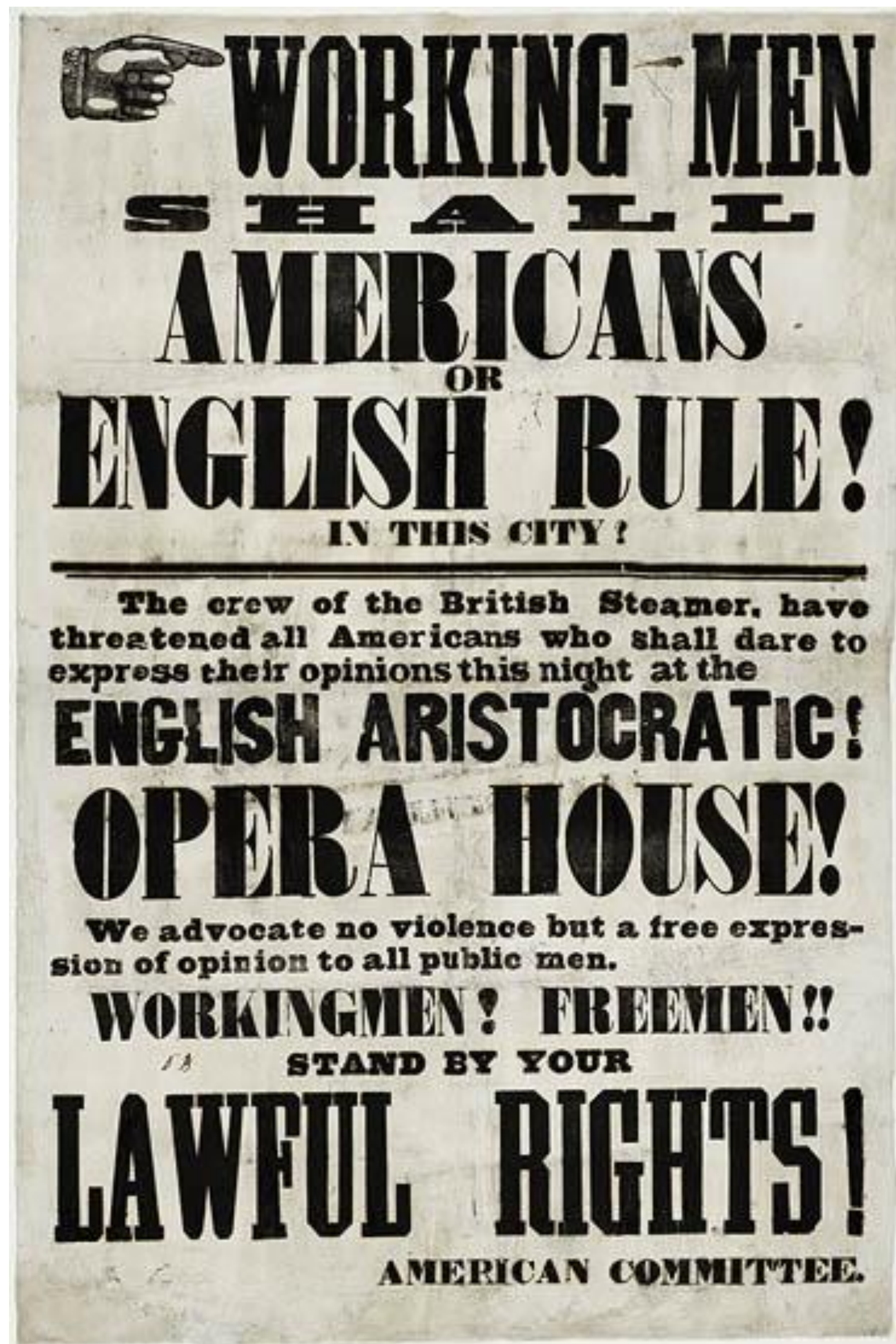

Figure 3: "American Committee", "Working Men: Shall Americans or English Rule This City?" Broadside, 1849 (Courtesy of Folger Shakespeare Library)

Emerson's invitation to speak came from the Mercantile Library Association, whose lectures attracted an audience of the rising professional class and, for speakers as prominent as Emerson, the cream of the city's cultural elite.[43] Of the crowd at Emerson's January 1850 engagements, the *Christian Inquirer* recalled "rarely having even seen so splendid a collection of cultivated people gathered by any public lectures".[44] However, its membership drew upon a demographic of clerks and tradesmen, the very clientele the city's cultural elders were hoping to reclaim from potentially anarchic Anglophobic influences.[45]

Issues of class tension and perceived exclusivity remained central to the atmosphere of the city's show culture. The riots were a sequence of events which enfolded all other public events into its orbit that invoked issues of Anglo-American identity, and whose performance values invited interpretation as articulations of attitudes to transatlantic relations. It was a continuum in which 'England' was embedded. We might conceive of interplay between three players - Forrest, Macready, and Emerson - each presenting competing answers to the questions of national styles and performance values. Those who termed Emerson's appearance "bold" and "fearless" spoke to the risk of presenting such an affirmative version of British culture amidst such a climate of agitation. As a result, discussions involved coded recognitions of his hazardous discussion of transatlantic themes, and attempts to fix the symbolism of his performance style and affirmative vision.

Endorsing 'England'

It is useful to conceive of this process in terms of what Stuart Hall terms transparent, negotiated, and oppositional readings: secondary textual representations that, respectively, channel, mediate or recode elements of any given performance.[46] Responses to 'England' can be mapped onto this

[43] Speakers for the 1849–50 winter season had included six lectures by Henry Giles on "Don Quixote" and Horace Mann on "Advice to Young Mercantile Men". The association also specialized in narratives of travel and global culture: W. H. C. Hosmer had spoken on 'scottish Song" in Dec. 1849, and the performances that were to follow Emerson's 'England' and "London" in Jan. included Rev. W. Ware on "Florence" and Rev. George W. Bethune on "Holland and the Hollanders", in the Mercantile Library Association, *Annual Report*, 1850, 24–25.

[44] "Mr. Emerson's Lectures", *Christian Inquirer*, 13 April 1850.

[45] Of 2974 members in 1850, 2805 described themselves as "clerks", New York Mercantile Library Association, *Annual Report*, 1850, 24; see also Thomas Augst, *The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 118–21.

[46] Stuart Hall, "Encoding / Decoding", in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks*, ed. by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 174–76.

spectrum. A neutral report in Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, for example, was effectively transparent, merely providing a neutral account. The *Albion* and the *Home Journal,* however, offered more interpretive, negotiated readings, and the rhetoric of their accounts offered pointed commentaries on both message and performance style.

The *Albion* began with an extended commentary on Emerson's mode of presentation, observing how his impressions had

> undergone the scrutiny of a clear and singularly masculine intellect … he contrived for an hour to enchain the closest attention of his hearers, and to wring from them marks of their approbation. These testimonies to the power of his simple eloquence, and to the justness of his conclusions were *wrung*, we say, from the listeners, because Mr. Emerson made no appeals to their own national and patriotic feelings – the shortest and surest road to the applause of a public meeting. On the contrary, there was an honest bluntness, a directness of purpose, a defiance, so to speak, of the prejudices of those around him, that argued a bold, uncompromising love of truth, and a carelessness of consequences, worthy of a philosophic mind.

The violent register here ("enchain", "wrung") approvingly emphasises both Emerson's forceful counter-intuitive ideas and the agonistic process of quelling audience resistance. The means by which he "contrived" such "marks of approbation" is presented as a subtly dynamic process: a fusion of sincerity, insouciance and dispassionate objectivity. As the distinction between lyceum and "public meeting" suggests, this passage also represents a commentary on competing performance practices. His talk had been "masculine" both for its authoritative handling of ideas, and for avoidance of the crude xenophobic rhetoric of the city's Anglophobic orators such as "Ned Buntline" or Mike Walsh, or the physical more "native" performers such as Edwin Forrest.[47] Emerson's physicality, shorn of ostentation and bombast, is figured as a reclamation of the nature of noble civic vigour.

The report then closed with an overwhelmingly favourable account of the lecture's concluding remarks:

> In concluding, Mr. Emerson touched upon the croakers and detractors from England's glory, assuring them that he saw no signs of her approaching fall from the lofty vantage ground that she occupies. Forced she may be by circumstances to contract the limits of her immediate sway; but she is indelibly impressed upon countless regions of the earth the genius of her laws, her institutions and her language. Yes, Mr. Emerson is right. Trim, as men and Time may, the ample

[47] See Cliff, *Shakespeare Riots*, 196–210.

> skirts of her flowing garments, the great heart of England yet beats with undiminished vitality, and the generous blood of her sons yet courses with vigour through her veins.[48]

The passage adopts an analytical tone that overplays the linearity and prominence of Emerson's argument. His script, in fact, did even less than "touch upon" theories of decline, as dismiss them in a single phrase. Here, the nuanced "Banyan" image of cultural transfer is recast as a matter of indelible global "impress", presenting the lecture's finale as a simple gesture of confirmation of supremacy. Ending with the outspoken affirmation of lineage as organ for the "sons" of England, the passage cements its negotiated reading of Emerson's nuanced portrait as an act of Anglophilic affirmation.

Willis's sketch in the *Home Journal* was the most elaborate report, and through subsequent reappearances in the national media helped to secure the popularity and meanings of the lecture.[49] Having become a national tastemaker through his journalistic portraits, Willis was also a divisive symbol of urban class strife, and his representation can be read in the light of an attempt to dampen the tensions he had helped to generate.[50] After narrating Emerson's arrival at "crowded" Clinton Hall, he spent much of his sketch elaborating on the speaker's oddities of vocal expression and his use of "surprises". The report then largely skirts over the message of the lecture itself:

> We can only say of this Lecture on England, that it was, as all is which he does, a compact mass of the exponents of far-reaching thoughts – stars which are the pole-points of a universe beyond, and at the close of each sentence, one wanted to stop and wonder at that thought, before being hurried to the next. He is a suggestive, direction-giving, soul-fathoming mind, and we are glad there are not more such. A few Emersons would make the every-day work of one's mind intolerable.[51]

It is a document of respect for sheer force; the qualities ascribed are all coercive ("direction-giving, soulfathoming"), suggestive of aphoristic generalizations almost tyrannical in their force. As with the *Albion* account, we get not the sense of a pleasurable aural experience, but a bold intellectual encounter with uncomfortable ideas.

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[48] "Mr. Emerson's Lecture on England", *Albion*, 26 Jan. 1850.

[49] Printed first in the *Home Journal* of 2 Feb. 1850, the sketch was excerpted in the *Boston Evening Transcript,* 4 Feb. 1850; it was subsequently published in Willis, *Hurry-Graphs: Sketches of Scenery, Celebrities and Society* (New York: Scribner, 1851), 189–92.

[50] See Baker, *Sentiment and Celebrity*, 101–04.

[51] Willis, "Emerson"

Willis ended his piece with a paraphrase of the "banyan tree" passage, preceded with praise for the "very bold and fearless comments" that he offered "on the croaking that predicts the speedy downfall of England".[52] Such was the strength of the closing metaphor, argued Willis, that "Queen Victoria should name one of her children 'Emerson'". The nature of Emerson's praise was therefore "fearless" in various senses: undaunted by the prospect of audience reproach, of the real danger of provoking violence in the immediate urban context, and of the risk that the grandeur of his generalizations be proved wrong and his prophecy thought ridiculous. In his summary, Willis deliberately seems to eschew Emerson's negative message, and instead the sense we take away from his negotiated reading is his exaltation of Emerson's benign cosmopolitan affirmation; and endorsement of his physical geniality as an exemplary, salutary cultural stance.

Recoding 'England'

The *Herald* report was in some ways the most intriguing. No regular supporter of the lecture circuit, the paper often prophesied its demise, which meant that its front-page coverage of Clinton Hall presented the event as a newsworthy act, rather than a routine cultural event.[53] The account opened with a concise introductory sketch subtly inflected with commentary on matters of exclusivity and elitism:

> Mr. Emerson delivered a lecture on the above subject last evening. The room was crowded to its utmost capacity from curiosity to hear this gentleman's lecture who has deservedly acquired a high reputation for the originality, boldness, and some have said, the transcendentalism of his style and ideas. On entering the room and taking his place at the reading desk, Mr. Emerson was greeted with some applause and marks of public admiration. His appearance is pleasingly prepossessing, being modest, simple, and unostentatious, having in his countenance the marks of intellect and benevolence, and in his manners of the evidence of quiet gentility and good breeding.[54]

The tone is carefully modulated. Whilst "deservedly" seems to convey a measure of respect, the wry reference to "transcendentalism" (still decidedly a pejorative in 1850), and the double-edged valences of "boldness" and "originality" betray muted scepticism. Similarly ambivalent is the emphasis on "curiosity" as the motive to "hear" him speak, a curiosity that resided as much in visual as aural stimulation.

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[52] Ibid.

[53] The penchant of the *Herald* for such jeremiads was mocked in Anon., "Lectures and Lecturers", *Putnam's Monthly*, March 1857, 317.

[54] *New York Herald*, 23 Jan. 1850.

Accordingly, the final sentence presents a full physical sketch, encompassing physiognomy, costume, and gesture. Placing such a nuanced pen portrait before an account of his words performed an implicit service for the reader. It suggested that the enigmatic nature of his potentially unruly utterances demanded comprehension through non-verbal signals. Only after such prior scrutiny were audiences thought equipped to assess the weight to attach to his "original, bold" discourse. Several of the terms here ("prepossessing", "ostentatious", "gentility", and "manners") operated in the 1849 New York media as freighted code words. Through such terms, the social text of the Emerson's lecturing body is scoured for its meanings, and ultimately found safe, sentient, and "benevolent", not the bearing of a supercilious aristocrat, nor a threatening reformist firebrand. "We do not shut our eyes", the paper had reported in June 1849, "to the fact that among the [Astor] rioters there were a large proportion of youth, persons at that age when the temperament is most excitable". Emerson's quietly forceful performance style furnished an example of positive "temperament", counteracting more inflammatory anti-British oratory.[55]

His message itself is then conveyed in relatively neutral terms, reducing his argument to a tabulation of factors. However, the report closes with another vivid commentary on both performer and audience:

> It would be an impossible task to follow Mr. E in his eloquent and descriptive lecture. It abounded with scintillations of striking and original genius, with rare and surprising epithets and occasioned singular conjunctions of ideas and analogies. Herein his *forte* seems to lie joined with a power of vivid description and striking contraries of ideas. Singularly enough, though Mr. Emerson was loudly cheered at several striking passages, we remarked that the loudest and most animated cheering occurred at the mention of the name of Oliver Cromwell, proof positive that he was before an audience who sprang from the people of whom Oliver was one – the people who settled New England, and the people who decapitated a king – a deed for which Oliver and his companions were called regicides and who afterwards for asserting their right to independence and liberty were called rebels.[56]

Once again, conventional compliments sit amidst other indicators of a more cautious tone. "singularly enough" reprises 'singular" in a way that suggests that Emerson was a victim of his own "singularity", a sense illustrated by the shift into audience response. Through the kinship of the forename "Oliver" the *Herald* seems to validate and claim affinity with the crowd's reaction. Since the reference to Cromwell in Emerson's script was minimal, and since no account of

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[55] For *Herlad* quote see Cliff, *Shakespeare Riots*, 237. For discussions of anti-British oratory, see Robert Ernst, "One and Only Mike Walsh", *New-York Historical Society Quarterly*, 36 (1952), 43–65.
[56] *New York Herald*, 23 Jan. 1850.

reaction occurs in any other report, the overemphasis here seems pointed.[57] What was at stake at this moment, and what does this record of equivocal vocal interaction achieve or make audible?

It implies first that audience reaction were therefore ultimately beyond Emerson's verbal control, that whilst his carefully calibrated "contrary" moments met with approval, it was to a passing historical allusion that his audience were most receptive. The *Herald* celebrates the means by which unpredictability of response overcame him; that the contingency of the lecture hall was just as "singular" as Emerson's own provocative message. Second, the energies that emerge through this moment offer a potential glimpse of the anti-aristocratic boisterousness of the city's performance culture. During the week leading up to the lecture, the *Herald* had been running coverage of the trial of the Astor Place rioters, and reported rumours of another impending riot at the Italian Opera House.[58] As Willis's sketch had described it, Clinton Hall was a primitive, overcrowded auditorium, significantly downtown from the gentility of Astor Place. Through the resonances of the *Herald* report, and the sudden lexical intensification ("decapitate", "regicide" and "rebel"), we get a sense of the genuine "fearlessness" it may have taken to speak so provocatively in praise of Victoria's realm in such an arena.

Impossible though it may have been to "follow Mr. E" and his lecture, the *Herald* passage achieved just that, subtly recoding the meaning of his performance. Such mediation foreclosed the meanings of his words, refracting his appraisal through the ambivalent centripetal force of audience vocality, wresting control of the oral discourse from the speaker. One of the duties of lecture reporting, the *Herald* suggests, was the gauging of public response; scouring newspaper columns was the chief means by which the urban public not only "read", but also "heard" the character and mood of their own civic life. The *Herald* leaves readers listening not to Emerson, but to the clamour of antimonarchical rowdiness.

Conclusion: Clinton Hall, Urban Politics and Multimedia Texts

In mid-century oratorical culture even as authoritative a figure as Emerson was regularly a victim of decentring and appropriation. By 1850, he had developed from a threatening embodiment of

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[57] The reference in Emerson's script was as follows: "The fabulous St. George has never seemed to me the patron saint of England; but the scholar, monk, soldier, engineer, lawgiver, Alfred… he is the model Englishman. They have many such in their annals. Cromwell is one"., *Later Lectures,* I, 163.

[58] For example, Anon., "Trial of the Astor Place Rioters", *New York Herald*, 17 Jan. 1850; and Anon., "Interesting Opera News: Another Riot or *Emeute* Expected", *New York Herald*, 19 Jan. 1850.

reform to a potentially consensual voice: the late, conservative Emerson, whom interpreters as various as Willis and the *Herald* were instrumental in constructing. The shift in reaction between Boston and New York performances of 'England' – consternation at the former, qualified embrace of the latter – allows us to glimpse the ways in various ways in which a culture of Whig stewardship attempted to rein in Anglophobic sentiment. Emerson's 'England' was presented as a model of renovated nationalism, by which, as Elisa Tamarkin argues, "a renewed commitment to belonging could be learned from feelings for Britain".

The lyceum offered a realm in which temperament could be cultivated. Lawrence Levine famously located the emergence of American high/low cultural distinction at turn of the Twentieth Century, yet a plausible reading of the lyceum's rise might be that it represented a pragmatic middle-ground between realms already engaged, by mid-century, in vigorous, unruly dispute.[59] Civic tensions over bodily control, audience conduct and modes of attention coalesced to promote this self-consciously non-partisan institution. In the North, but to a lesser extent in the antebellum South, lecture halls represented a neutralising middle realm, a crucible in which collective habits of listening could be forged, and lyceum attendance duly became a performance of middle-class identity.

Clinton Hall provides an instructive closing vignette regarding this ascendancy. Following its damage in the riots (**Fig. 4**), the Astor Place Opera House declined and observers advised its conversion to other uses; the *Herald* swiftly recommend that "the proprietors of Massacre Place Opera House convert it into a church".[60] The Mercantile Library Association acquired the building in June 1850 and reopened it as the new "Clinton Hall" (**Fig. 5**), with a lecture hall at the centre.[61] The institution that rose out of the ashes of the Astor Place Opera House symbolized a reorganization of urban space, the ascendancy of middlebrow culture through a medium that embodied aspiration ostensibly divorced from the troubling associations of elitism. As the 1850s opened, this civic enthusiasm for the lecture circuit was reaching its zenith. Though Clinton Hall was to decline as a venue once more during the Civil War, while it

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[59] Lawrence Levine, *High Brow/Low Brow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1988).

[60] Anon., "The Public Amusements", *New York Herald*, 29 May 1849.

[61] See Anon., "The New York Mercantile Library", *Scribner's Monthly*, Feb. 1871; and Augst, *Clerk's Tale*, 261–64.

Figure 4: "Riot at the Astor-Place Opera-House", New York. wood engraving, 1849 (Folger Shakespeare Library)

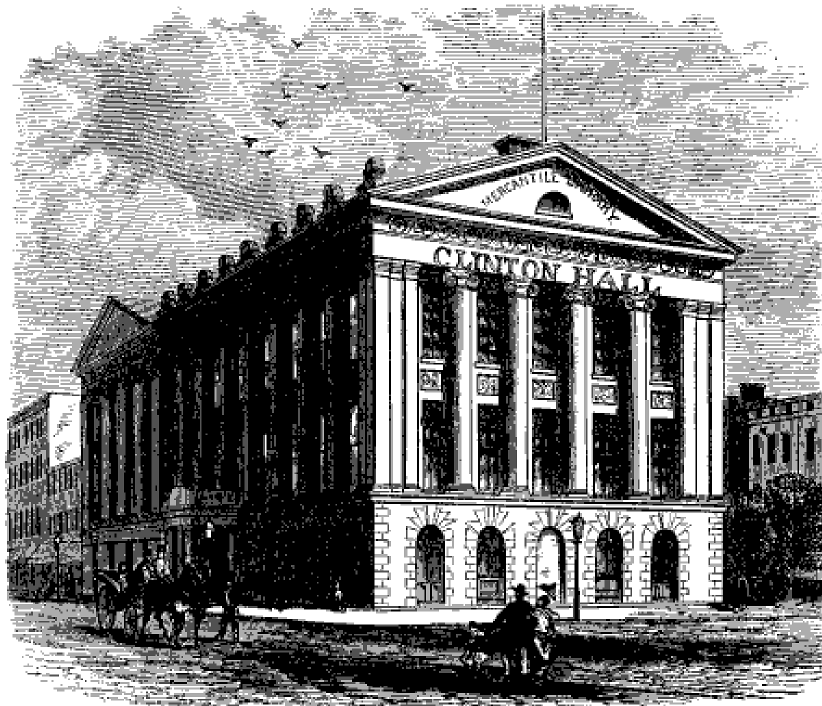

Figure 5: Fig. 13: Astor Place Opera House reborn as the new "Clinton Hall", "The New York Mercantile Library", *Scribner's Monthly*, February 1871

retained its status as a lecturing platform, it was a symbol of a certain strain of urban civic nationalism in the North, an arena of multileveled performances, whose complexity and agency we are only now beginning to comprehend.

Lecture reports immerse us in this oral culture. These artefacts were often deeply felt responses to communal verbal experience, multimedia texts that broadcast oratorical events throughout the print media. Their re-animation allows for a fuller account of nineteenth-century performance culture: they lay bare the collective-processes of meaning-creation; they remind us that show events were not isolated, but embedded in a web of textual representations. Above all, they help to break down what Gustafson laments as "the sharp divide between printed texts and oral performances".[62] Lecturing to a New York audience in 1854, Emerson spoke of "the silent revolution which the newspaper has wrought"; yet far from noiseless, the medium of print remained full of sound.[63] It is a world whose reverberations we perceive anew when attending to the methodical and instrumental words of spectators such as those listening to 'England' at Clinton Hall.

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[62] Sandra Gustafson, "American Literature and the Public Sphere" (2008)
[63] Emerson, "Fugitive Slave Law" (1854), Emerson, *Later Lectures,* I, 334