Chapter 1

The American Scholar vs. American Schools

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Horace Mann

> It is well, when the wise and the learned discover new truths; but how much better to diffuse the truths already discovered, amongst the multitude! . . . Diffusion, then, rather than discovery, is the duty of our government.
>
> —Horace Mann

> Colleges, in like manner, have their indispensable office,—to teach elements. But they can only highly serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and, by the concentrated fires, set the hearts of their youth on flame.
>
> —Ralph Waldo Emerson

While there is such an urgency to bring the act of thinking more fully into our schools, it may seem pedantic or superfluous to detour through the 19th century. Yet American education was given its basic form at this time and the petrified hold of the past will keep us in its grasp as long as its assumptions remain unexamined and unchallenged. Until we see the specific historical conditions under which our system arose, we will accept it as natural and inevitable, as what school essentially is. But if its rigidity, anti-intellectualism, and authoritarianism are heritages of the mid 19th century, so too are our best tools for challenging this system and creating alternatives.

Of course, any historical narrative is necessarily a fiction. Not quite a lie, it is more accurately a construction, shaped by choosing out of a vast set of persons and incidents a few to weave together with links of chronology and causality. The story I am about to construct is not the one exclusive truth about American educational history but it does reveal previously unnoticed patterns. On another level, the narrative can be taken as an allegory for understanding any given moment in the act of teaching as one in which we can respond either openly and reflectively to the immediate situation or unthinkingly lapse into the habitual. We begin with one of these crucial moments when American education could have taken either of these paths.

On the afternoon of August 31, 1837, a young, relatively unknown alumnus delivered the annual Phi Beta Kappa address, "The American Scholar," to the graduating class of Harvard College. Ralph Waldo Emerson had not been elected to Phi Beta Kappa when he was a senior at the college sixteen years earlier and even now was only second choice. Having resigned from his post as minister in the Second Church of Boston, he preached only occasionally as an itinerant and up to this time had written only one thin book, *Nature,* published the previous year. Just as there was no reason to expect anything extraordinary from the speaker, the occasion itself hardly augured a break from the past. Commencement speeches are more likely to be moments when traditions are affirmed rather than questioned, where the young are exhorted to follow in paths society has already worn. So when the 215 members of the Phi Beta Kappa Society marched at noon from Harvard Yard to the First Parish Church, they were not expecting a speech that would challenge the very foundations of their own education. Perhaps only the location

itself, the site of the log meetinghouse where two hundred years earlier Ann Hutchinson was tried for antinomianism, hinted at any radical possibilities.

Late in his life Emerson wrote: "There are always two parties, the party of the Past and the party of the Future; the Establishment and the Movement" (1883, p. 325), and certainly the Establishment dominated the audience. Present as Harvard faculty were Edward Tyrrel Channing, who taught rhetoric to both Emerson and Thoreau, and Edward Everett, himself a former Phi Beta Kappa orator, as well as Eliot Professor of Greek Literature. But the Movement was also present in a group of upstarts becoming known even then as Transcendentalists, most of whom had the same Unitarian backgrounds as their Establishment elders, but were flirting with an idealism exported from Germany that had begun to undermine the prevailing materialism of Boston-Cambridge culture. Several of these young people, including Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, and Elizabeth Peabody, also were to congregate at Emerson's house the next day for one of their irregular discussion meetings. Henry David Thoreau was a member of this Harvard graduating class of 1837, but there is no evidence for either his presence or absence; he may have even returned to his native Concord while Emerson was journeying in the opposite direction. Later Thoreau was to read the address and embody its central ideas in his own living more fully than any of his Transcendentalist friends including Emerson himself.

The member of the audience who was to have the widest influence on American education fits comfortably into neither group but was on the margins of both. On the Transcendentalist side, Horace Mann had befriended Elizabeth Peabody and was later to marry her sister Mary. On the Establishment side, he was an influential member of the

Massachusetts state senate, although his humble birth on a farm and his own involvement in idealistic reform made him an outsider to the most prominent social circles. Mann had just resigned his senate seat two months earlier to become the first Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, an office that he as a legislator was instrumental in creating. Many of his friends felt he had foolishly interrupted a promising political career for a dead-end assignment. Before this appointment he had little experience in the schools, but he threw himself into the position with the same kind of committed energy he had shown previously in other causes such as temperance and abolitionism. The previous night he had just returned to Boston from Worcester, where he delivered his first two speeches as education secretary.

In what turned out to be a twelve-year tenure in this position Mann, proved an effective reformer in many ways, reflecting liberal and humane impulses. He advocated better school buildings and less use of corporal punishment. He widened the reach of public schooling and elevated the status of the teaching profession through training institutions. But without fully realizing it, Mann set in motion forces that would lead to increasing bureaucratization and social control. In confronting an anarchic stew of various kinds of school organizations and disorganizations, he began a tendency towards homogeneity and standardization that would develop as a force in its own right, far beyond his intentions or even perhaps his imagination. As David Tyack (1967) has put it: “The school reformers of Horace Mann’s generation hoped to create system where they saw chaos. . . . The quest for educational uniformity began as individual agitation, gained momentum as others joined the cause, and finally became fixed by law or institutional custom—thus becoming a self-perpetuating pattern of institutional behavior” (p. 31).

When Mann's successor, Barnas Sears, said in 1880, "I think we may fairly regard the year 1837. . . as the commencement of the modern epoch of education in this country" (Katz, 1968/2001, p. xl), he did not realize how prophetically ominous his words were.

Mann helped to establish what Tyack in a later book written with Larry Cuban (1995) terms the "grammar of schooling," which has established itself in the minds of generations of Americans as synonymous with school itself. As these historians point out, any school reform that challenges this grammar meets resistance: "Most Americans have been to school and know what a 'real school' is like. Congruence with that cultural template has helped maintain the legitimacy of the institution in the minds of the public" (p. 9). The central irony here is that the institution in our society most explicitly charged with encouraging thought has become the most impervious to reflective, unbiased thinking about its own workings; it has been running on automatic pilot for the last two centuries.

The elements of this grammar of schooling have structured our experiences so thoroughly that we have trouble thinking of them as having been created at a certain point in history. In brief these elements are: grouping students by age in self-contained classrooms with a single teacher, dividing knowledge into "subjects," the use of textbooks to teach these subjects, the exclusive reliance on paper and pencil tests to measure knowledge, and regular report cards to disseminate these measurements. Tampering with more than any one of these at will meet with opposition on the part of teachers, students, parents, administrators or all of the above.

Most of this grammar was constructed by the changes, which Mann set in motion and have been detailed by his biographer, Joseph Messerli (1972). Despite his

admiration for his subject, Messerli sees the confining effect of Mann's reforms as well as their advantages: "To create an educational ecology of formalism was to risk sacrificing many of the imaginative, spontaneous, poetic, and aesthetic indigenous lessons to be experienced in the emerging American culture" (p. 346). In other words, Mann never analyzed some of the ways order and uniformity by their very nature discourage genuinely educative possibilities. For example, the separation of students into "grades" of one-year units with corresponding egg-carton physical plants to house them creates several further separations, most of them invidious, as Messerli points out:

> Mann never envisioned that graded instruction could also mean a mind-numbing regimentation as repressive as anything accomplished by the Boston masters, nor did he expect that children would spend one-sixth of their lives, and some of their most formative years, in an environment of cells and bells. Although he would laud the new Hancock and Quincy schools in Boston with their monotonous individual classrooms and long corridors as his "idea of a perfect school edifice," he did not recognize that these secure, prison-like structures would become prototypes for a thousand others. Neither did he understand that such buildings could isolate children and wall them off from direct and vital relationships with their physical and cultural environment, surrounding them instead with two-dimensional symbols and abstractions carefully and tastefully packaged to ensure a growing consumership, even if this meant a competence of mediocrity. (p. 347)

This division of students into age-segregated sequential grades encouraged the division of knowledge into a systematic and uniform curriculum, dictating what should be taught at

each level. The system has an undeniable convenience, but it also straightjackets processes of discovery, as Messerli notes:

> It was necessary for subjects to be subdivided into lessons of bits and pieces of information, then reorganized, classified, labeled, and given some hierarchy of values. In this way, the chasm between ignorance and learning would not be negotiated only by the insightful leaps of a talented few. It would be filled in with hundreds of textbooks, thousands of assignments, and an infinitude of words, numbers, and facts, so that the multitudes could cross over in lockstep fashion with less intellectual effort, albeit with far more drudgery and boredom. (p. 341)

Knowledge, then, was predigested and structured by someone other than the learner, whose mastery of the material was often measured only by the ability to repeat the words of the textbook instead of by any operational knowledge. Any productive encounter with uncertainty and difficulty, with that shifting but instructive edge between the known and the unknown, was foreclosed. This attitude towards knowledge is as persistent a feature of the grammar of schooling as any institutional structure.

Of course, the imposition of order on chaos is a crucial feature of any cultural endeavor. But the stance of American education since Horace Mann is to impose order prematurely, too neatly and complacently, so that it becomes a confining box rather than a door or window. We then mistake the shape of this box for the shape of the universe. A mother once told me about a conference with her daughter's kindergarten teacher, who was concerned that the child did not color within the lines on her handouts. The mother was a little puzzled since she knew her daughter to be a good artist for her age, so she queried the child at home. The daughter said, "But a bear doesn't stay inside the lines—

it's shaggy." Schools have acquired a knack for smoothing out the shagginess of reality and arresting its flux with nice clean lines that have more to do with our rage for order for than our actual experience of the world.

Herbert Kliebard (1992) has conceptualized the problem well. He notes that teachers are asked to do two functions, to keep order and to instruct, both of which seem to be compatible in theory. But in practice the first almost always trumps the second: "the injunction to keep order has become so supreme that it simply swamps the teaching function" (pp. 103-104). Kliebard generalizes that "educational reforms involving changes in teaching practice fail with such monotonous regularity because enlightened reform rhetoric and the generosity of spirit that impels people to attempt to change things for the better come into direct conflict with institutional realities" (p. 104).

With all this separating students into grades, knowledge into lessons and textbooks, the day into fixed periods, the school system stands as a monument to rigid stability in a world of variety and novelty. But Mann did not so much introduce a new epistemology into American education as disseminate the view of knowledge already implicit in thousands of classrooms across the country. As Barbara Finkelstein (1989) notes in a study that includes schools from the beginning of the nineteenth century:

> Teachers proceeded as though they believed that all knowledge, from reading to arithmetic, comprised collections of fact—absolute, unchanging, true. They did not seem to regard knowledge as provisionally held and progressively realized, as constantly changing and as subject to creative manipulation. The task of the student was to learn the material. The task of the teacher—essentially moral, rather than intellectual—was to make students learn. For these teachers, the

> cultivation of intellect and the development of character proceeded in the same mechanical, orderly and controlled manner. (p. 137)

What Mann did was to reinforce these attitudes and create for them a habitation—a set of school systems and training institutes—that particularly resists constructive scrutiny or imaginative revision. Paradoxically, in Mann's drive to create a more encompassingly democratic system of schooling he helped build one of our most stratifying and hierarchical institutions. We want to ask, then, what was Horace Mann thinking on that sunny Wednesday afternoon of August 31, 1837, when he heard Emerson delineate a conception of American education diametrically opposed to the one he helped foster?

2

As we read Emerson, we should not only be asking what was Mann thinking but also what is "thinking" itself? Should our thinking be directed towards the immediacies of our own lives or something beyond it? Do the conditions of American life provide ways of rethinking the relations between present experience and previous cultural achievements? How should education function in a fluid, democratic culture? These are some of the questions Emerson addressed in his address but which Mann generally ignored. It is unfair, though, to single out Mann for blame here, since generations of American educators have used Emerson's speech as just another text on which to quiz students or to pigeonhole as "our American intellectual declaration of independence," to use the phrase coined by Oliver Wendell Holmes.

Emerson is less concerned with nationalism than with distinguishing between the true scholar and the false one in any country: "In the right state he is *Man Thinking*. In

the degenerate state, when the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or, still worse, the parrot of other men's thinking" (p. 54). "*Man Thinking,"* as the present participial construction suggests, is always in process. "Thinker," on the other hand, is a static noun, a label that can remain affixed after the actual act of thinking has past. But even worse than the thinker, Emerson goes on to say, is the parrot, the ersatz scholar who merely repeats unreflectively the remnants of other people's thinking. That traditional education produces such people is not its failure but the logical result of its methods and attitudes.

Emerson extends and develops these ideas on the influences on the scholar: 1, nature; 2, the mind of the past, especially in the form of books; and 3, action. It is tempting to oversimplify by saying that he argues for the first and the third at the expense of the second, but it is more accurate to view him as searching for a working dialectical relation among all three. Emerson considers "nature" to be "the first in time and the first in importance of the influences of the mind" (p. 55), yet it gets the shortest treatment. One reason is that his book, *Nature,* already took the relations between mind and nature as its main subject.

Another reason for the brevity of this first section is that as soon as one starts writing about nature, one is no longer in that realm but immediately enters that of culture. The very word "nature" is necessarily other than nature, is rather part of our universe of human symbols. A description of this process begins the next section on "the mind of the Past": "The scholar of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again. It came into him life; it went out from him, truth. It came to him, short-lived actions; it went from him, poetry.

It was dead fact; now, it is quick thought" (p. 56). The very shape of these sentences, with their balanced antitheses, their repeating rhythms, their aphoristic monosyllables suggest a complementary and dynamic balance between the mind and nature. Emerson's depiction of knowing departs from the Lockean model of the mind as a blank slate passively receiving and being shaped by sense impressions from outside. This Lockean or sensationalistic view of the mind, modified some through Scottish "Common Sense" philosophy, was hegemonic at Harvard College both when Emerson was a student and when he gave this address. It was taught explicitly in philosophy classes and was the basic assumption behind the actual practice of instruction, with its primary mode of the "recitation," where, as Emerson's sentence about "the thinker" implies, the students mechanically parrot back knowledge poured into them from passively reading their texts. Frederic Henry Hedge, who attended Harvard College along with Emerson, said the attitude of the Harvard faculty was: "Hold your subject fast with one hand, and pour knowledge into him with the other. The professors are task-masters and police officers, the President the Chief of the College Police" (Wells, 1943, p. 141).

By contrast, the new paradigm that Emerson introduced to his Harvard College audience can be characterized as constructive and transactive. The mind is not passively shaped by reading or the outside world but actively creates knowledge in an interactive process where the world is not only observed but shaped. To use his own terms, there is a kind of productive rhythm between "the world" and "the arrangement of his own mind," between "life" and "truth," between "actions" and "poetry," between "fact" and "thought." The scholar takes in each first term to give back to the world the second term as knowledge, as formulations, as words and images. But once this knowledge is

constructed, there is a danger in merely accepting and dwelling in it, instead of constantly refashioning and reconstructing it:

> Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this. Yet hence arises a grave mischief. The sacredness which attaches to the act of creation, —the act of thought, —is transferred to the record. The poet chanting, was felt to be a divine man: henceforth the chant is divine also. The writer was a just and wise spirit: henceforward it is settled, the book is perfect; as love of the hero corrupts into worship of his statue. Instantly the book becomes noxious: the guide is a tyrant. (1983, pp. 56-57)

The imagery and diction reinforce the meaning, as the "hero," a living actor in the world, becomes frozen as a "statue" of cold, inanimate stone—Emerson elsewhere refers contemptuously to statues as "stone dolls" (p. 438). Our "love," potentially a mutual relation between equals, degenerates into the self-abasing and one-way attitude of "worship." "The poet chanting," a participial phrase that emphasizes action in the present tense is turned into a static noun, just as "Man Thinking" turns into an inert book. What was in process now becomes settled, fixed, lifeless.

Even more than individuals, institutions constantly commit this error through canonization and through organizing knowledge into static blocks of curricula and textbooks:

> The sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude, slow to open to the incursions of Reason, having once so opened, having once received this book, stands upon it, and makes an outcry, if it is disparaged. Colleges are built on it. Books are

> written on it by thinkers, not by Man Thinking; by men of talent, that is, who start wrong, who set out from accepted dogmas, not from their own sight of principles. Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries, when they wrote these books. (p. 57)

Later William Butler Yeats was to epitomize similar insights in a poem titled "The Scholars," perhaps with an allusion to the title of Emerson's address: "Bald heads, forgetful of their sins,/ Old, learned, respectable bald heads/ Edit and annotate the lines/That young men, tossing on their beds,/ Rhymed out in love's despair/ To flatter beauty's ignorant ear" (1933, p. 139). Emerson goes further in this vein:

> Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end which all means go to effect? They are for nothing but to inspire. I had better never see a book, than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system. The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul . . . . The book, the college, the school of art, the institution of any kind, stop with some past utterance of genius. This is good, say they, —let us hold by this. They pin me down. They look backward and not forward. (1983, pp. 57-58)

No one before Emerson had so clearly articulated this process by which once the act of writing is completed, its effects can be undone by dwelling in the result. As he said in an earlier lecture, troping an image from the bible: "Thought is like manna, that fell out of heaven, which cannot be stored. It will be sour if kept; and tomorrow must be gathered

anew" (1959-72, 2:93). These would be extraordinary words anywhere, but in the setting of a college graduation they are a particularly courageous indictment of how institutions of knowledge block knowing, how they turn thinking into having once thought, the act of writing into texts that have become fetishes rather than incitements. The paradox of school is that by not viewing the symbolic constructs of the past as only one point in a dynamic process, by isolating them from the experiences they distill and rearrange, we are in danger of inhibiting and stunting such efforts in the future. Emerson's solution, though, is not to abolish the institution of schooling but to widen its conception and activities. He concedes that one function of colleges is to transmit the accumulated learning of history, "but they can only highly serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and, by the concentrated fires, set the hearts of their youth on flame" (1983, p. 59). The college is not merely to pass along the rays of knowledge but stimulate their students to bring them all to bear on some Promethean act of fiery creation, as a lens converges sunbeams. In other words, colleges should not just be places where culture is transmitted but where it is created and transformed, personally inflected and negotiated.

Colleges should not ignore the record of the past, but approach it in a less overawed, more critical and active spirit: "There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion" (p. 59). Emerson's vision is consonant with our best current thinking on reading, that meaning is created in a transaction between the reader and the text. If Emerson seems to emphasize the role of the reader, it is because the kind of education to which he himself was subjected

overemphasized the importance of the text in a way that discouraged original thought: "Undoubtedly there is a right way of reading, so it be sternly subordinated. Man Thinking must not be subdued by his instruments. Books are for the scholar's idle times" (p. 58). Reading supplants and preempts the possibilities of new writing and reading, or as Emerson puts it: "Genius is always sufficiently the enemy of genius by over influence. The literature of every nation bear me witness. The English dramatic poets have Shakespearized now for two hundred years" (p. 58). Elsewhere Emerson says: "These books should be used with caution. It is dangerous to sculpture these evanescing images of thought. True in transition, they become false if fixed." (1959-72, 2:134).

The third resource of the scholar is "action," not so much a separate influence as a way of relating mind to world: "It is the raw material out of which the intellect moulds her splendid products. A strange process too, this, by which experience is converted into thought, as a mulberry leaf is converted into satin" (1983, p. 60). We are constantly thinking about and articulating what we have lived through, and, conversely, we can become aware of our subliminal, subconscious mental workings when we see them resulting in physical actions: "The preamble of thought, the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action." (p. 60). One way to keep the process of learning, the activity of the scholar, from hardening into narrowness is to make sure new symbolic structures are created from the experience of living and working in the world, not from other books; we should be less like the bookworm than the silkworm. In turn, these new structures have meaning only as they are turned back into the world of action for clarity and refinement. "So much only of life as I know by experience, so much of the wilderness have I vanquished and planted, or so far have I extended my

being" (p. 60). Or, as Zora Neale Hurston has one of her characters say in another vernacular: "Yuh got tuh *go* there tuh *know* there" (1937, p. 285).

On one level, Emerson may seem to be extolling a well-rounded life, balancing intellectual work with physical work. But at a deeper level he is deconstructing the fundamental oppositions between the abstract and the concrete, mind and body, thinking and labor by viewing them as complementary opposites that undulate into each other as rhythmically as "the inspiring and expiring of breath" (1983, p. 62). In envisioning a continuing dialectic between knowing and acting, Emerson initiates America's major contribution to philosophy, pragmatism. More fully and technically formulated later in the century by William James and John Dewey, one of its major contributions is to reverse the overemphasis on being and knowing at the expense of becoming and acting. Plato extolled the idea over the thing, putting it on a greater plane of reality. He used mathematics as a central metaphor—a perfect circle can exist in the mind as a concept but can never exist in the physical world—and preferred this fixity of concept over the fleeting and confusing chaos of immediate existence. Even Aristotle, who was less radically dualistic, exalted mental work over physical work by imagining his god as the Unmoved Mover, who leaves the dirty work of dealing with matter to lesser forces.

Dewey will later historicize this Greek separation of the theoretical from the practical as that of a slave society and Emerson attempts to heal these deleterious splits in an epistemology for a more democratic culture, where the majority participate in physical work. In making his formulations Emerson is perhaps not so much the inventor as one who makes explicit certain tendencies already present in American life. Several historians have noted a particularly American stance towards knowing that grew up with

the conditions of settling the country, living and working in a "new" world, unmapped and uncategorized. As Daniel Boorstin (1958) has described it:

> The haze which covered the New World in that age probably covers no part of the world today; America was one of the last places where European settlers would come in large numbers *before* the explorers, geographers, and professional naturalists. . . . We sometimes forget how gradual was the "discovery" of America; it was a by-product of the *occupation* of the continent. To act, to move on, to explore meant also to push back the frontiers of knowledge; this inevitably gave a practical and dynamic character to the very idea of knowledge. To learn and to act became one. (p. 159)

Related to this emphasis on immediate experience as the source and measure of knowledge, Emerson speaks later in the address of the value of applying intelligence and extracting wisdom from the minute particulars of our quotidian life: "What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and gait of the body" (p. 69). He moves from external objects to our very modalities of knowing and experiencing. To read "The Emerson's words as simply a plea for a distinctively American literature is to miss its vision of an education that at once radically departs from the entire Western tradition of schooling yet reunites the sundered aspects of that tradition in ways that ultimately affirm and complete it.

3

If Horace Mann had fully grasped the implications of what Emerson was saying, there would be no need to write this book. Some conventional histories of education see Emerson and Mann more aligned than opposed. It is true that Mann often shared ideas with his sister-in-law Elizabeth Peabody, an important Transcendentalist educator, and that there were other, less personal affinities among all these New England reformers. But from the beginning both sides recognized the deep divisions between them. For example, Bronson Alcott records in his journal that for a teacher's institute in 1847, Mann "deemed it unsafe to introduce me to the teachers, and, on pressing my desire to give them the benefit of my experience as an educator, I was informed that my political opinions were esteemed hostile to the existence of the State" (1938, 1:195). And on being asked to donate money for a commemorative monument to Mann, Thoreau, continuing in the same vein of Emerson's dislike of statues, said: "I declined, and said that I thought a man ought not any more to take up room in the world after he was dead. We shall lose advantage of a man's dying if we are to have a statue of him forwith" (1906, 12:335). But it was Emerson who saw earliest in 1839 the petrifying effects of Mann's work:

> Yesterday Mr Mann's Address on Education. . . Sad it was to see the death-cold convention yesterday morning as they sat shivering[,] a handful of pale men & women in a large church, for it seems the Law has touched the business of Education with the point of its pen & instantly it has frozen stiff in the universal congelation of society. (1969, pp. 237-238)

Emerson notes that the educational system being constructed is more concerned with

social control than with individual development: “I notice too, that the ground on which eminent public servants urge the claims of popular education is fear: ‘This country is filling up with thousands and millions of voters, and you must educate them to keep them from our throats’ ” (1983, p. 600). Underlying the rhetoric of liberal democracy Emerson perceptively detected anxieties over class struggles and mob rule. What the journal passage is most clear about is how Mann’s moves toward over-organization and bureaucratic structuring are a threat to the very play of mind Emerson wished to make the center of the educational process.

It is not quite accurate, though, to see the differences between Mann and the Transcendentalists as a simple difference in philosophy, since Mann seemed far less interested in theory than in institutional practice. His biographer writes:

> Theoretical discussions made him impatient. Such things he thought unnecessary. Thus when Elizabeth Peabody attempted to be the conduit between Emerson and Mann and raised some theoretical questions concerning the common school reform movement, Mann replied with a not too carefully concealed irritation:
>
> > Oh my dear lady! If a tough question were before a District Sch. Meeting about doing something for the school;—or before a Town Meeting about helping any side or limb of humanity forward, how think you, your oracle [Emerson] would lead or manage the minds of his people, which we call great by country! Oh these Reformers and Spiritualizers who can do everything well on paper! They can tell exactly how a road ought to be laid between here and New Orleans, but can they lay it? (Messerli, p. 336)

As with many school administrators, there was an anti-intellectual edge to Mann, an intuition that to conceptualize education might create divisive ideological positions, that some things are best left unexamined and unarticulated. Yet there was a kernel of insight in Mann's remark that helps explain why his version of American education won out over Emerson's.

For Emerson so valued the self-reliant individual and was so distrustful of any kind of institutional action that he shied away from offering an educational alternative, even in his mind. In a later essay, "Education," he says:

> I confess myself utterly at a loss in suggesting particular reforms proposed in our modes of teaching. No discretion that can be lodged with a school-committee, with the overseers of visitors of an academy, of a college, can at all avail to reach these difficulties and perplexities, but they solve themselves when we leave institutions and address individuals. (1883, pp. 156-157)

In this quotation we see an essential paradox: the institution of school must be changed by the engaged mind acting on it; in current jargon, reform can be only from the bottom up. Yet unless the institution is changed, individual thought within that framework can be increasingly stifled.

It seems that in the end Emerson can propose only retaining the traditional grammar of schooling but with an openness and spontaneity quite at odds with it. In the rest of the paragraph he goes on to say:

> I advise teachers to cherish mother-wit. I assume that you will keep the grammar, reading, writing and arithmetic in order: 't is easy and of course you will. But smuggle in a little contraband wit, fancy, imagination, thought. If you have a

> taste which you have suppressed because it is not shared by those about you, tell them that. Set this law up, whatever becomes of the rules of the school; they must not whisper, much less talk; but if one of the young people says a wise thing, greet it, and let all the children clap their hands. . . . Of course you will insist on modesty in the children, and respect to their teachers, but if the boy stops you in your speech, cries out that you are wrong and sets you right, hug him!
>
> (pp. 157-158)

Emerson's stance here is similar to that towards the institutions of religion, as when in "The Divinity School Address" the next year he advises the new ministers to avoid establishing yet another "Cultus," but "rather let the breath of new life be breathed by you through forms already existing" (1983, p. 81). Emerson may have been observant enough to see where education was going if it followed Mann's directions, but even he underestimated the pervasiveness and destructiveness of the forms that did evolve. He did not see that even small movements toward thinking, toward basic human decency and common sense, could be cut off before they begin in such an atmosphere. On one level, he was right to put the onus on the single individual in the classroom as opposed to institutional decree, but it is too often an uneven match. Mann's top down bureaucracy can perpetuate and replicate itself so well because that is its main goal.

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Thus we see two conceptions of education beginning at the same time and developing side by side. Mann projected a network of schools that would transmit existing knowledge efficiently and uniformly to passive recipients, while Emerson's

speech is the keynote for a tradition of active learning. In short, this tradition views knowledge as provisionally constructed by the mind in perpetual interaction with the world. The end results of this process are cultural artifacts such as ideas, classifications, and formulae, works of literature—basically a body of knowledge that has been organized and divided as the curriculum. The worst mistake of conventional education is to overvalue and fetishize only these end products, and merely hand them over ready made instead of involving students in the entire process of reconstructing the world for themselves, of engaging in dialectical movements between experiencing and conceptualizing, acting and thinking, practice and theory. It is a practice and a philosophy that we would now term more constructivist, more student-centered, more meta-cognitive, engaging students more as culture-creating agents than as simply conduits for the transmission of culture. It is wholistic, focusing not on developing the intellect solely but integrating knowledge with the body and the feelings.

This book is an alternative history of alternative ways of thinking about schooling, ways that focus on the mind continually creating a relationship with the world. It traces a coherent tradition of re-forming schooling itself to align it more with the ways we actually learn. This tradition always seems to be in a losing conflict with the forces of inertia, of systemization, of mindless self-replication. But we have to be careful, though, not to simply view the situation as the forces of good against the forces of evil. For school reform itself is not immune to the process Emerson describes of thinking becoming frozen in lifeless cultural artifacts. As Emerson writes elsewhere: "The first act, which was to be an experiment, becomes a sacrament. The fiery reformer embodies his aspiration in some rite or covenant, and he and his friends cleave to the form, and lose

the aspiration" (1983, p. 749). John Holt has said, "A conservative is someone who worships a dead radical" (Jervis & Montag, 1991, p. ix), and indeed Emerson himself like Horace Mann has become something of a statue. When I was a student at another of his alma maters, Boston Latin School, I used to occupy myself during boring assemblies by reading the names of famous alumni etched in gold on the frieze, Emerson's among them. I later took my Philosophy of Education course in Emerson Hall on the Harvard campus, a place from which Emerson was dis-invited for thirty years after he delivered his "Divinity School Address" in 1838. The building showcased a hefty bronze statue of Emerson as The Sage. I was not assigned to read anything by Emerson in either institution.

To give another example, we can look at what happened to Bronson Alcott's innovations. Unlike traditional schools where the main student utterances were recitations of textbook materials, Alcott had his young students actually giving their own ideas to the reading through journals and open discussions. Wishing to spread the word of his methods and to affirm the innate wisdom of children, he had transcripts and descriptions published in a series of books. Hiram Fuller, an entrepreneurial young man who opened The Greene Street School in Providence in 1837, was taken with Alcott's methods—so taken, in fact, that instead of trying to replicate the kinds of discussions Alcott reported, he simply read to his own students each day long passages from these books. Similarly, in teachers colleges, students have been asked to memorize large portions of John Dewey's book *How We Think* (1910), one of the main purposes of which was to argue against such recitations. By themselves these incidents are small in scope, but they are paradigmatic of what so often happens in school reform: the educational hero

becomes a statue, the spirit becomes the letter, the act of mind becomes a text. But I do not see a tragic inevitability to the story. Becoming aware of exactly how this process happens, of how vision turns into method and liberation into oppression, is the first step in breaking the cycle.