American Romanticism
and the Depression of 1837

The great land boom which followed the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 and lasted for twelve golden years coincided with America’s first great literary boom. While money poured into the coffers of speculators and infant industries prospered, romantic literature and philosophy were being born or incubated. Poe turned out three volumes of aesthetically revolutionary poetry and learned to write short stories. Hawthorne hibernated in Salem throughout the whole period and wrote many of his best tales. Irving traveled through the West gathering material for eulogies of Astor’s single-handed imperialism. Longfellow, in his library or in Europe, absorbed great quantities of romantic legend which he was to transmute shortly into incredibly popular rhymes. Still more important, American Transcendentalism was given an impetus as American editions of Wordsworth and Coleridge appeared and echoes of German philosophy reached New England. Alcott evolved exhilarating theories of education and practiced them on well-to-do Boston youngsters, and Thoreau began to be Thoreau while still at Harvard. In 1832 Emerson made his fruitful decision to leave the arid Unitarian Church, and four years later came the first meeting of the Transcendental Club and the first coherent statement of the new philosophy in Emerson’s Nature.

Suddenly the land boom collapsed. The panic began in May, 1837, when the banks suspended specie payment. By September, nine-tenths of the nation’s factories had closed. Banks failed every day, and New York City alone had two hundred and fifty
bankruptcies in two months. As in all economic depressions, the rank and file of the population suffered most. During the bitter winter of 1838 families suffered from starvation and exposure, and the almshouses and poorhouses were full to overflowing. In the cities riots raged in the streets, food stores were raided, soup kitchens were set up, and labor groups clamored so loudly at their Locofoco meetings for relief and remediary laws that the editors of the New York Knickerbocker nervously suggested a campaign against agitators, and several states revised their debtor laws.

The depression lasted five years. The literary boom, on the other hand, not only continued but flourished. In the year of the panic Hawthorne published his Twice-Told Tales, and Prescott his first history, which was quickly sold out at $7.50 a set. During the depression Poe, Whittier, Longfellow, and Lowell, all published volumes of verse or prose. Longfellow was particularly fortunate. During the depression his first volume of verse went through five editions, and it was during this period that he wrote “A Psalm of Life,” “The Village Blacksmith,” and “Excelsior.” As for Transcendentalism, economic distress seemed to nourish it. In 1837 Thoreau began his Journal, and at the height of the panic, in August, Emerson published his “American Scholar,” our “declaration of intellectual independence.” In the dreary years that followed, his group published the Dial and established their experimental Brook Farm. Optimistic philosophy flourished at Concord, fifteen miles south of the cotton-manufacturing towns of Lowell and Lawrence, where operatives practiced the transcendental doctrine of plain living, if not of high thinking.

It was not that the New England romanticists and intellectuals were ignorant of the forces that were building factories and creating a new and unpicturesque destitution, unrelated to the scenes of genial rustic poverty they had learned to love in the poetry of Gray and Wordsworth and of contemporary German sentimentalists. They still thought of the American workman as
a farmer and artisan, and starvation was to them a European rather than an American reality; but some of them had been through the panic of 1819, and all of them must have been aware of Unitarian concern with the problem of pauperism, for at least three-quarters of the literary men in New England belonged to that prosperous sect.

It was in 1819 that urban pauperism became conspicuous for the first time in American history. As John Q. Adams wrote in 1820, “multitudes [are in] deep distress and [are] looking out anywhere for a leader.” In Philadelphia an investigating committee found that in thirty industries employment had dropped from 9,672 to 2,137. In New York twelve to thirteen thousand persons received relief, and a newly organized Society for the Prevention of Pauperism estimated the number of paupers in the city at 8,000. In Boston the Unitarians began the humanitarian activity for which they became famous. In 1822 they established the Ministry at Large, the purpose of which was the administration of charity and religion—not Unitarianism, they explained significantly, but religion. Under Joseph Tuckerman they established missions among the poor who were without religious affiliations, studied the slums and the causes of poverty, and worked out a technique for charity. In Principles and Results of the Ministry at Large in Boston (1838) Tuckerman drew such a useful distinction between pauperism and poverty that the French “sociologist” De Gerando published a translation of it. More practically, his work led to the establishment of a legislative Commission on Poverty in 1832. Tuckerman’s paternalism was indicative of a new attitude in the twenties which received the moral and financial support of the Unitarian businessmen. Unitarian leaders stressed the duties of the upper class toward the lower, and charity provided a means of performing them. The Unitarians established most of the prominent institutions for the poor at the time, including the Massachusetts General Hospital, the McLean and Perkins Asylums for the Blind, and a number
of institutions for the orphaned and the insane. Of course, the Unitarians were not alone in their concern about a depressed class uninstructed in the principles of Christianity, for in New Haven the Trinitarians noted with joy that the concentration of workers in factory towns made somewhat easier the labors of their evangelists.\(^4\)

Even if our writers had not kept in touch with institutional activity, some of them had ample reason to be aware of such realities as dividends from the manufacturing corporations and railroads which were laying off workers. Indeed, Longfellow, Prescott, and Lowell were related or married to manufacturing and banking families, and had learned to keep an eye on business conditions. Transcendentalists transcended this narrow interest, for with the exception of Emerson they were practically free of investment worries; but if the latter's *Journals* may be considered a guide, they must have discussed frequently the new phenomena of railroads and factories. As early as 1835 he had taken note of the number of spindles at Waltham and Lowell, and when the panic came, he watched the figures on bankruptcy, wholesale prices, and discount rates. Even the impractical founders of Brook Farm had to face the unpleasant reality of a mortgage administered by the bourgeois officer of a railroad, when in the midst of the depression they made their heroic effort to escape the evils of life under a capitalistic economy; and they must have felt badly let down when Hawthorne untranscendentally sued to recover the thousand dollars he had invested in their enterprise.

Certainly all New England writers at the time must have been familiar with the thinking of William Ellery Channing on the subject of industrial poverty, for as the leading Unitarian minister of the day and as the forerunner of the Transcendentalists, he enjoyed the audience of both the radicals and conservatives. He had been active in the organization of the Ministry at Large after the panic of 1819, and even at the height of prosperity in the middle thirties, he had been fully aware of the degrading
living conditions of the mill operatives and had even rejected intemperance as the basic cause. Nevertheless, he believed with his generation that “the chief evils of poverty are moral in their origin and character,” and that “moral and religious culture is the great blessing to be bestowed upon the poor.” This was anything but the pious complacency of a comfortable clergyman. Rather, it was the product of a background of hard work, frugality, and asceticism; of a belief that there was little real difference between the lot of the laborer and his own; and of a pardonable misunderstanding of the nature of economic forces in a transition period. When the panic came, he was sincerely distressed at the suffering of the poor and at the spectacle of class animosity. His answer was the familiar specific offered in that day for social and economic ills: education. He would teach the working class to rise above the physical and the sensual, and to use the resources of mind and soul, which he himself had in abundance. He would show them how to educate themselves morally and spiritually, a plan which would have the double advantage of saving other people’s money and preserving the workers’ independence. Throughout the thirties and forties he lectured to workingmen’s societies on self-culture, showing them how to use their “spare” time to the greatest moral and spiritual advantage.

Such was the temper of the time that the workers not only listened but rejoiced, and Channing told with pride how his lectures were reprinted in England and “widely circulated among the overtasked operatives,” and that he received letters of thanks from English Mechanics’ Institutes. In that period the fallacies of his system went unchallenged. The question of how the operative who worked twelve hours a day was to find the time, energy, or money for “self-culture” seemed to present no great problem. Only a little time each day was needed; the will would supply the energy and books were unnecessary, for intellectual improvement was not to be confused with book-learning. As an honest thinker, Channing acknowledged the imperious force of the facts
and admitted that often the worker "can live for but one end, which is to keep himself alive"; but he left the answer to the future. "I wait for the judgment of profound thinkers on this point, a judgment formed after patient study of political economy, and human nature and human history; nor even on such authority shall I readily despair of the multitude of my race." ¹

In the midst of the depression, shocked by statistics he had found in Marshall's *Statistics* of the British Empire, he wrote Harriet Martineau asking her to "recommend any books which treat of the distribution of wealth, and which particularly consider the question, how the most equable distribution may be effected in consistency with private rights and industry. The subject has always been to me beset with difficulties. The tending of all societies is to the depression of the multitude of men, and freedom promises no remedy." ⁸

Had he pursued further the question of freedom—of "laissez-faire"—he might have found a way out, for his confusion was clearly rooted in his agrarian sympathies. The forces of commerce and industrialism he understood superficially, but like most liberals of that day, he fancied that they were subject to moral control. Instinctively he hated the new industrial world. Everybody was overworked. "My own constitution," he says, "was broken by early toils." The division of labor in the factories—the "monotonous, stupefying round of unthinking toil" which "dwarfs the intellectual powers"—appalled him.⁵ Realizing that "at the present time a momentous change is taking place," he asked whether "the mass of the people will be permanently advanced in the comforts of life and in the culture of their highest powers and affections." ¹⁰ Could the American workman "stand his ground against the half-famished, ignorant workmen of Europe, who will toil for any wages, and who never think of redeeming an hour for personal improvement"? His reply was typical of liberal agrarian thought in America. "If this end should require us to desert from the race of commercial and manu-
facturing competition with Europe; if it should require that our
great cities should cease to grow, and that a large portion of our
trading population should return to labor, these requisitions
ought to be obeyed."

Whatever his confusion about the problem of poverty, Chan­
nning was one of the few literary men of the day who were deeply
disturbed by it, and except for Orestes Brownson, he was the only
one of them who gave much thought to the distress of the workers
during the depression. As an active social worker, Channing made
it his business to see the slums which most of the other writers
avoided. Perhaps also it was physical contact with poverty that
made Brownson speak plainly and to the point during the
depression. As early as 1829, he had been active in the Working­
men's Party, and had adopted Channing's theories on the educa­
tion of the worker. When the panic came, he dropped these
theories. After a series of blasts against the banks as the chief
offenders, and a controversy over the health and morals of the
women operatives at Lowell (whose average working life, he said,
was three years), he published in 1840 his famous article on "The
Laboring Classes." He told an incredulous world that in the
United States death by starvation was not uncommon, and the
only remedy was to "emancipate the proletaries." How? Not by
inner reform: that theory had been condemned by six thousand
years' experience. Channing's "self-culture" could not abolish
inequality nor restore men to their rights. The system must be
changed, not its managers. The priesthood must be destroyed,
the Christianity of Christ must be revived, control of the govern­
ment must be taken away from the banks and given to the
workers, and privilege must be wiped out by prohibiting the
inheritance of property. He even hinted that the change must
come through force, though the time was not yet ripe.

To his liberal contemporaries such talk occasioned raised eye­
brows, and their skepticism concerning his sincerity turned out
to be justified. By 1844 Brownson had been converted to Cath­
olicism and had run through four religions and perhaps as many economic creeds. Whether or not his championship of the labor movement did more damage than good, his factual articles on labor conditions in his own magazines stimulated Theodore Parker to do much sounder thinking on the problem. Decidedly, Brownson and Channing were forerunners of the group who were to investigate industrial poverty in the middle and late forties.

Meanwhile, what of the major writers? To all of them the depression must have been a fact, whether personal or social, and their reactions to it are an interesting commentary on the relationship between the writer and his milieu. One thing is immediately apparent: few of them published anything which reveals any particular consciousness of the distress of the worker. Melville, eighteen years old in 1837, saw poverty in New York and Liverpool which must have contributed to the cosmic bitterness of his mature works, and young Russell Lowell printed some juvenilia concerning “hunger and cold”—a subject to which he did not return. The rest of them, though they all showed signs of being aware of the panic, made no mention of human suffering. If they worried at all, it was about the damages that hungry mobs might do to private property. Thus Emerson’s first reaction to the panic was that the sixty thousand laborers “to be presently thrown out of work make a formidable mob to break open banks, rob the rich, and brave the domestic government.” If they felt any pity, it was for the solid merchant who had been damaged through no fault of his own. As Emerson said, “The merchant fails. He has put more than labor, he has put character and ambition into his fortune, and cannot lose it without bitter mortification. It seems that he could and should have been content with safe wealth, and not ventured and so fallen.” The honest merchant sees that “a great fortune has not an evil, a dishonorable influence. Its influence is very far from being built on the weakness and sycophancy of men, but it is a certificate of great faculty, of virtues of a certain
sort. Moral considerations give currency every day to notes of hand. Success and credit depend on enterprise, on accurate perceptions, on honesty, on steadiness of mind. This man in the land-fever bought no acre in Maine or Michigan." 15

This attitude was typical of the times. When Dion Boucicault later wrote his play *The Poor of New York*, based on the panics of 1837 and 1857, he wasted no words on the workers. “The poor! Whom do you call poor! They are more frequently found under a black coat than a red shirt.” All of them are, like his hero, once prosperous people, cheated by Wall Street. “These needy wretches are poorer than the poor, for they are obliged to conceal their poverty, with the false mask of content—smoking a cigar to disguise their hunger—they drag from their pockets their last quarter to throw it with studied carelessness to the beggar, whose mattress at home is lined with gold.”

Aside from the traditional acceptance of a poor class as a law of nature, there were several specific reasons for the indifference of the romantic writers. It is not unfair, perhaps, to inquire into the personal financial condition of these authors, since a real relationship frequently exists between a writer’s comfort and his sensitivity to social catastrophe. Well-to-do authors like Prescott were interested in the mechanics of the decline. Prescott’s securities were damaged a little, but his history of Ferdinand and Isabella had a big sale. Longfellow was safely established on the Harvard faculty and probably received help from Judge Longfellow which enabled him to travel. Irving was comfortable, having hired out to Astor for sums unknown but reputed large. 16

The sale of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* was probably hurt by the panic, but in 1839 his friends in politics obtained a lucrative job for him in the Boston Customs House which protected him from the financial bad weather of the next two years. Brownson likewise enjoyed a political job as steward of the U.S. Marine Hospital throughout the depression. Poe, of course, was rarely out of financial difficulties, be the times good or bad. Ministers
like Theodore Parker received small but steady salaries in stable farming communities whose respectable citizens had not caught the gambling fever. Thoreau lived from hand to mouth and liked it. Emerson wrote in 1838 that he owned a house, $22,000 worth of stocks earning 6 per cent, and an income from lectures varying from $400 to $800 a year.  

These facts may mean little or nothing, but they are significant in this respect: the New Englanders' incomes, whether from work or investments, suffered very little in the panic of 1837. The circumstance that their books had fair sales, that their lectures were well attended, and that their holdings were not wiped out, throws light on the situation, and suggests that romanticism and optimistic philosophy grew and prospered during very trying years in our economic history. The fact is that New England, especially Massachusetts, was in remarkably good condition from 1837 to 1843, while other sections of the country were prostrated. For although many of the textile factories were closed by the fall of 1837, and the operatives lost their jobs, New England railroads and banks suffered hardly at all. "Boston securities," say the economic historians of the period, "passed through the relatively troubled times of 1816-1819 with hardly a tremor, and they coursed through the even more active forties with much less movement than the index of New York bank stocks reveals. One is forced to conclude that Boston securities were strikingly insulated from forces which were active in other parts of the country."  

New England railroad stocks were so divergent from main movements that Messrs. Smith and Cole charted them separately in their statistical records for the period. In 1843, with Central Atlantic roads at an index of 35, New England roads were at 90, not 20 points below the great peak of 1835. Nor was the construction of new roads checked by the depression. The Boston & Worcester, even in the difficult early years, earned an average 7 per cent, and the Western Railroad, chartered in 1833, and begun in
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1837 with the aid of a grant from the state, obtained the rest of its funds by a canvass of Boston and main-line towns. By 1847 it was paying 8 per cent. Professor Cole explains this in part by the attitude of Massachusetts toward railroads. "While the roads were permitted to fix their own rates (and these rates were the lowest in the United States), the legislature reserved the right to lower such charges if the net income of the company exceeded ten per cent of the cost of the property. The legislature also reserved the right to purchase the railroads for the state at the end of twenty years from the date of their completion. Such a threatening attitude might well curb speculative enthusiasm for the shares of railroads incorporated in Massachusetts."

Of course, Massachusetts was a region already well settled, whose potentialities were easily gauged, but the conservatism of New England stock purchasers was well known. "Moreover, the securities of the New England railroads may have been closely held. Possibly their acquisition had been dictated as much by the desire for an income-yielding investment as by an itching for marked appreciation in values."

The New England banks acquired a like reputation for sound policy. Controlled by a banking aristocracy made up of the Amorys, the Perkinses, the Appletons, and the Lawrences (the group that supported Daniel Webster in politics with a fund of $100,000), Boston institutions not only sustained the values of their stock (Massachusetts scrip, issued in 1838, commanded the highest price of loans placed by any American state in London) but did their best to restore credit by importing British gold.

It is worth noting that Massachusetts banks offered the only bank statistics available for the period from 1790 to 1820. New England investors had every reason to feel confident in local enterprises, and indeed, there was no great gap socially and intellectually between the old mercantile group, who were now going into railroads and manufacturies, and the literary men. Prescott and Longfellow married into capitalist families through
the Lawrences and the Appletons; John Murray Forbes was an intimate of Emerson's and a member of the Saturday Club; Francis G. Shaw and Lucy Cabot took a second mortgage on Brook Farm; and the Peabodys have been called the patrons of the Transcendental movement. It was only natural, then, that bank, railroad, and industrial stocks provided a substantial part of the income of those New England authors who had money to invest. Specifically, Emerson and Prescott had such holdings, and though they complained of a slight depreciation and an occasional passed dividend, there is no indication in their letters and journals that they were seriously affected at any time during the depression. What is more important, it was probably this same group of investors in Boston and "the main-line towns" who were able to attend Emerson's lectures (his audiences averaged four hundred between 1837 and 1841) and to buy Prescott's $7.50 history when times were hardest. And it was Massachusetts economic soundness generally which made possible the progress of New England idealism through such specific circumstances as Emerson's gift of $500 to Alcott for a trip to England in 1842, and his financing of Carlyle's books in America; the "kind friend's" gift of $600 to Parker for his trip abroad in 1843; the ease with which the Brook Farmers mortgaged their property for $500 more than it cost them, through the generosity of such local aristocrats as Francis G. Shaw and the co-operation of the Commissioners of the Sinking Fund of the Western Railroad Corporation. It also helps to explain how prominent Unitarian laymen—the Lowells, the Appletons, the Lawrences, and other members of the banking, railroad, and manufacturing aristocracy—were able to establish such paternalistic humanitarian institutions as the Perkins Institute for the Blind in 1837 and the Lowell Institute in 1839, and contribute heavily to various reform movements. New England was "sound," and it is not surprising that the writers refused to be disturbed by talk of bread-lines in other regions. Even the distress of the working class in the manufactur-
ing towns was not particularly conspicuous. Boston had its slums, it is true, but they were full of unassimilated Irish. The native factory workers in Lowell, Bedford, and Lynn fared better, since for the most part they came from neighboring farms to which they could return when the mills closed down. What was more, most of the writers themselves lived simply and frugally according to our standards, and were not conscious of a great gap between their standards of living and that of the worker. The real difference, they thought, was in the mind, not in material comforts.

What really disturbed the writers of the day was not the poor, whom we have always with us, but the new commercial middle class, whose feverish expansion had brought about the crash. Channing, for instance, not only held the speculators responsible for the panic but accused them of endangering the whole social structure through their efforts to become prosperous without labor. "Thus prosperity is in more danger from those who live by the sweat of their brow." 22 It was the pushing middle class, he felt, which made the masses dissatisfied, put a deplorable stigma upon physical work, and contaminated American culture with its cheap penny papers, its vulgarity, and its false standards. Poe's only literary reaction to the depression was a satire on "The Business Man," attacking his lack of taste, his spineless submission to the banks, and his pretensions to genius. Hawthorne, in "Peter Goldthwaite's Treasure," mocked the speculators and Colonel Sellerses of his time.

Emerson's entries in his Journal through the depression years contain the essence of the rebellion of his class against Jacksonian democracy. Even before the panic he had expressed his dislike of the new regime. "In a former age," he wrote in 1834, "men of might were men of will; now they are men of wealth." 23 He might have added that that age was not far past and that he had lived in it, for up to Jackson's time the men of might had been men of his own class. Now all that was changed. It was "rather melancholy to find no more receivers of your doctrine than your
own three or four, and sit down to wait until it shall please God
to create some more men before your schools can expect to
increase.” Moreover, the new class in power seemed not to be
hardworking members of a profession. “The virtue of the intellect
consists in preferring work to trade.”

The weakness of the business class would seem to be their lack
of any working philosophy. Emerson talked with many of his
business neighbors in Concord and came to the conclusion that
“the most wonderful men in our community have no theory that
can stand scrutiny. They are devoid of remote aims.” Yet
he did not undervalue legitimate business as a calling, nor the
business man per se. John Murray Forbes, the railroad man, he
honestly admired, and he spoke no word against the financial
barons who seemed to conduct legitimate enterprises. It was the
lesser fry, the new middle class, who speculated in land, whom
he criticized. They were turning us into a money-mad nation
without value, without principles. As the depression wore on,
Emerson became more bitter about the materialism of which it
was a symbol and gradually came to identify it with democracy.
“Bancroft talked of the foolish Globe newspaper,” he wrote in
1838. (It had a circulation of thirty thousand and reached three
hundred thousand readers.) “I ought to have said what utter
nonsense to name in my ear this number, as if it were anything.
Three million such people as can read the Globe with interest are
as yet in too crude a state of nonage as to deserve any regard.”
The Van Buren-ism which gullied these millions disgusted him,
as did the “progress” which they admired. “The rapid wealth
which hundreds in the community acquire in trade enchants
the eyes of all the rest, the luck of one is the hope of thousands,
and the whole generation is discontented with the tardy rate of
growth which contents every European community.” “This
invasion of Nature by Trade with its Money, its Credit, its Steam,
its Railroads, threatens to upset the balance of man, and estab-
lish a new universal monarchy more tyrannical than Babylon or Rome."  

The total effect of these phenomena was to send Emerson deeper into his idealism and to make him preach more vigorously than ever. Seen against the background of the depression and of his thoughts concerning it, his "American Scholar," conceived and written while banks were collapsing, and the famous Essays published in 1841, gain a fresh significance. The crash supplied him with an object lesson, a factual point of reference, which gave his still-developing idealism a special cogency and a vindication. "I see good in such emphatic and universal calamity as the times bring that they dissatisfy me with society. Under common burdens we say there is much virtue in the world and what evil coexists is inevitable. When these full measures come, it then stands confessed—society has played out its last stake. Young men have no hope. Adults stand like day laborers idle in the streets. The present generation is bankrupt of principles and hope, as of property behavior the boasted world has come to nothing. Pride, Thrift, Expediency, who jeered and chirped and were so well pleased with themselves and made merry with the dream, as they termed it, of Philosophy and Love—behold they are all flat, and here is the soul erect and unconquered still."  

These words were written in private in May, 1837, but the essays published in the next few years were written in the same triumphant mood. To us it may seem that he was somewhat callous in raising this slightly vindictive paean of joy at a time when thousands of workers who had taken no part in the gambling were suffering acute privation. It is in the essay on "Self-Reliance" (1841) that we find the statement, "Do not tell me, as a good man did today, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent I give to
such men as do not belong to me.” It is in his attitude toward the lowest social strata that Emerson reveals the class basis of his thinking and the essential similarity between his social point of view and that of such complacent patricians as Longfellow and Prescott. Even his antipathy to slavery was lukewarm until his personal moral code was outraged. In 1846 he wrote in his Journal, “Does he not do more to abolish slavery who works all day steadily in his garden than he who goes to abolition meetings and makes a speech,” and in his “Ode to W. H. Channing” in 1847 he rebuked that zealot for trying to draw him into a cause which would “rend the Northland from the South.” But when the new Fugitive Slave Law was passed in 1850, and his moral independence was violated through the complicity of his own state in the slave system, he forgot his philosophic calm and stumped in Concord, Boston, and New York for John Brown and the Kansas settlers, as zealously as Mr. Channing. Emerson refused to get excited over human chattels, but he fought like a tiger when the state violated his own integrity.

In the thirties the real class animus was not between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” So far as the writers and intellectuals were concerned, the struggle was between their own homogeneous patrician society and a rising materialistic middle class without education and tradition, who were winning cultural and economic power and changing the tone of American life. The patrician group, molded by college education and Unitarian and Congregational churches into a traditional cultural pattern, had for a generation controlled the national culture through the professions of law, ministry, and politics; had written their own books and edited all the critical journals; had represented the people in their legislatures and garnered all the diplomatic appointments.

But with the widening of the franchise and the advent of the new politicians of the Jackson and Van Buren regimes, their
power had begun to weaken: the lower middle class had begun to feel their political strength and to demand their share of patronage, and as their power grew, their own culture took shape and engulfed the old. As a class, they were aggressive, materialistic, and vulgar. Impatient of the slow returns from professional work, they were speculators and gamblers. Careless of traditional "taste," they were ostentatious in their preferences in dress, architecture, and interior decoration. Lacking college education, in literature they preferred novelty, brevity, sensationalism, and sentimentalism to the solid learning and stately prose of the *North American Review* and the serenity and authority of the classics. By 1840 they had established academies whose curricula had profound effects upon those of the colleges, and lurid newspapers which at a penny a copy drove out the solid but dull sheets which only gentlemen had read. They were building horrible Gothic residences whose elaborateness excited the public far more than the quiet classical Georgian houses of the aristocrats. They had established magazines like *Graham's* which had such big circulations and paid so well that patrician writers who depended upon their art had to succumb to them.

Emerson's speech "The American Scholar" (which, it must be remembered, was addressed to the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard) was essentially a plea to his own class to recapture cultural power and leadership by reforming its education and vitalizing its ideals. For Emerson had perceived the spiritual aridity of the colleges and of Unitarianism, and knew that they no longer had sufficient energy to cope with the needs of his class in a new age. For the new generation it was important to learn more from nature and less from books and tradition. It was necessary also, he pointed out, to act and assume leadership. Above all, the scholar must be independent and "defer never to the popular cry." "Self-Reliance," likewise, may be interpreted as a protest against the tyranny of public opinion in a society
in which numbers were beginning to be more powerful than the prestige which Emerson's class had always enjoyed. In the privacy of his *Journals*, protest became pugnacity:

Look danger in the eye—it vanishes:
Anatomize the roaring populace,
Big, dire, and overwhelming as they seem,
Piecemeal 'tis nothing. Some of them but scream
Fearing the others; some are lookers-on;
One of them hectic day by day consumes,
And one will die tomorrow of the flux.
One of them has already changed his mind
And falls out with the ringleaders, and one
Has seen his creditor amidst the crowd
And flies. And there are heavy eyes
That miss their sleep and meditate retreat.
A few malignant heads keep up the din,
The rest are idle boys.  

The whole romantic movement in America may be considered in part as a protest against the new bourgeoisie. Poe's natural bitterness was aggravated by the necessity to pander to it. Cooper, from 1834 to the end of his life, waged a bitter war against its newspapers. Holmes's essays and much of his poems as "Rhymed Lesson" are attacks upon their manners and speech. J. G. Holland's best-selling *Titcomb's Letters to Young People* were intended to improve their manners. When Edward Everett, lured by the offer of $10,000 for a series of articles, sold out to the most blatant of their journalists, Robert Bonner of the famous *New York Ledger*, he was attacked as a renegade, and Irving lost the respect of his class when John Jacob Astor bought up his talents for propaganda purposes. Here was intramural, class warfare which overshadowed completely the conflict between laborer and non-laborer, and it was the factor which chiefly determined the attitude of the romantic writers toward the Panic of 1837.
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7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 115.
10. Ibid., p. 64.
11. Henry F. Brownson, Orestes A. Brownson's Early Life.
13. See his Redburn, chaps. iv and xxxvii.
17. Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1834–1872 (Boston, 1883), I, 160.
21. Lindsay Swift, Brook Farm (New York, 1900), pp. 19 f.
22. Works, p. 28.
24. Ibid., p. 371.
25. Ibid., p. 458.
26. Ibid., IV, 440.
27. Ibid., V, 529.
29. Ibid., IV, 241.
30. Emerson's philosophic calm was also shaken by the panic of 1857, which New England did not escape. See the statistics for the period in Smith and Cole, op. cit.; note also Emerson's indignation when his railroad stocks depreciated seriously, in Journals, September 22, 1856, IX, 122.