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Knowledge with ‘Practical Cash-Value’: Emerson’s Lectures and the Cultural Market of Nineteenth-Century America

Abstract

One of the founding fathers of American literature, the essayist and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson was, arguably, the most influential public intellectual of nineteenth-century America. This article explores Emerson’s ideological struggle in participating in a project that, despite its educational mission, was also a profit-driven initiative which exemplified the materialism he so frequently and vehemently denounced. I argue that Emerson’s participation in the capitalist commodification of culture for financial gain and, more generally, his engagement with the capitalist practices of what Jürgen Habermas calls “the public sphere” was a strategic effort to balance materialism with the cultivation of a vibrant cultural environment. Approaching the lyceum as the privileged site where to engage on both the rhetorical and pedagogical level with what he called a “convertible audience” (Emerson 1960-82, 7:265), Emerson used the public lecture to give a “practical ‘cash-value’” to his ideas and to exhort his fellow Americans to put theory into work.

1. Introduction

The enduring popularity of talks and public lectures illustrates the persistent appeal of consuming knowledge through performances that rely on the charisma and eloquence of a speaker. Long before such performances became digitally mediated global spectacles, nineteenth-century America embraced the public lecture as an especially powerful medium through which intellectuals, scientists, and reformers could make culture both accessible and compelling. Scholars in American Studies have long examined the mechanisms and impact of this phenomenon, which, as James Perrin

Warren (1999, 11) notes, became the most important force shaping what he defines as a “culture of eloquence.” Emerging from the lyceum movement – the most popular form of organized adult education in nineteenth-century America which combined lectures with debates, experiments, and performances – public lectures were regarded, as early as the 1860s, as a quintessentially American medium that offered orators an opportunity to share their knowledge in a democratic, engaging and accessible format. Delivered across the nation, these lectures played a crucial role in shaping national culture, while they also provided ordinary Americans with opportunities to encounter and learn about other cultures. Crucially, this tension between nationalism and cosmopolitanism was not the only paradox that defined both the lyceum as an institution and the public lecture as its most enduring expression. Part of an educational project and yet a lucrative economic enterprise, the public lectures held on the lecture circuit – though ostensibly dedicated to intellectual and moral uplift – became an integral component of a highly profitable industry, as lecture tours and ticketed events transformed oratory into a career for some of the era’s most celebrated public intellectuals.

This essay examines the dual nature of the lyceum movement – both as a powerful cultural phenomenon and as a commercial enterprise – to explore Ralph Waldo Emerson’s ideological tensions in participating in a system that, while promoting education, was also deeply embedded in the materialism he so often criticized. Between 1833 and 1881, Emerson delivered approximately 1,500 lectures in 283 cities across the nation, establishing himself as one of the first Americans to build a career through public speaking and becoming the most influential public intellectual of his time. While he undoubtedly capitalized on the new economic opportunities that the expanding national (and global) market provided to intellectuals, this essay argues that his engagement with the capitalist commodification of culture was a pragmatic compromise. Far from being merely an embrace of market logic, it represented a strategic adaptation that he deemed necessary to put forth his transformative oratory and thus engage in the broader conversation about America’s evolving cultural identity.

2. Discourse and Debate: The Lyceum's "National Music"

I please myself with the thought that this may yet be an organ of unparalleled power for the elevation of sentiment and enlargement of knowledge [...] as other nations have each their favorite instrument, as Spain her guitar, and Scotland her pibroch, and Italy a viol, and as we go eastward, cymbals and song, let the reasoning, fact loving, and moral American, not by nature a musician, yet with a hunger for eloquence, find his national music in halls opened for discourse and debate, the one leading to the other. (Emerson 2001, 1:48)

To understand why a philosopher like Emerson was so deeply invested in the lyceum – and the tensions this engagement created – it is essential to consider the broader cultural significance of a practice he once called America's "favorite instrument." Within the mid-nineteenth century literary context, lectures emerged as a unique mode of learning that not only democratized knowledge but also transformed culture into a public spectacle. The immense popularity of public lectures, which by the 1850s drew approximately 400,000 attendees each week (Scott 1980, 800), gave rise to a "mature cultural economy" (Wright 2017, 12) that attracted figures such as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henry Ward Beecher, Horace Greeley, Anna Dickinson, Wendell Phillips, and Herman Melville to name a few. While many of the prominent intellectuals of the time embarked on lecture tours across the nation, only some managed to capitalize on this endeavor, both financially and in terms of cultural influence. But how, then, did this phenomenon come to occupy such a central place in the cultural landscape of nineteenth-century America?

As Kent P. Ljungquist (2010, 330) notes, both the lecture format and the term *lyceum* have a "long history that antedated the advent of [that] coherent network of public speaking" now associated with the American lyceum movement. Taking its name from the gymnasium in ancient Athens where Aristotle founded his philosophical school, the lyceum model was also influenced by the mechanics' institutes that played a pivotal role in early nineteenth-century England. The American lyceum movement began in 1826 when Josiah Holbrook, a Yale-educated farmer and teacher, established the first community-based lyceum in Millbury, Massachusetts. Founded to enrich the local communities that sustained them through annual membership fees, early lyceums initially spread across the Northeast and Midwest, emerging as the preferred mode of cultural expression for white, Protestant, middle-class men, who provided their communities with evening lectures on scientific subjects, seeking

to promote both education and moral uplift. As the format gained popularity, however, local speakers were gradually replaced by invited lecturers, and by the early 1850s, facilitated by the expanding railroad network, a national lecture circuit had taken shape.

The relevance of these events was also amplified by advances in print communication. As Meredith McGill (2003, 107) argues, the extensive newspaper coverage of lectures allowed Americans across geographical divides to perceive themselves as participants in a shared national discourse. This media amplification not only contributed to the creation of a mass culture but also played a crucial role in transforming prominent lecturers into nationally recognized public intellectuals and, in some cases, public celebrities (O'Neill 2008, 747). Yet lecturers were not the only ones affected by the growing social and cultural significance of the lyceum. As Angela G. Ray (2005, 177) observes, “the broad-scale transformation from mutual education to a system of popular lecturing was accompanied by a corresponding change in the nature of the audience. From participants and learners, the audience became spectators and judges of performance.”

Although education and entertainment were central objectives of the lyceum from its beginning and remained crucial to its mission throughout its history, scholars generally agree that by the late 1860s, the movement had undergone a notable shift from a primarily educational endeavor to a form of commercialized entertainment. Operating within a system embedded in a “marketplace increasingly crowded with diverse forms of amusement” (Augst 2013, 230), lecturers were expected to tailor their scope, style, and content to meet audience expectations, while organizers selected speakers not only for their intellectual merit or oratorical skill, but also for their ability to attract large crowds. As Johannes Voelz (2010, 70) notes, what had once been driven by the “republican, Enlightenment goal of instilling virtue in the community’s members through education and self-culture developed into a commercialized enterprise increasingly reliant on the celebrity of the lecturer.”

Positioned at the crossroads of “academy, church, and theatre,” the lyceum came to function “at once as a formative class practice, a market transaction, an instrument of reform, and a marker of civic identity” (Wright 2013, 3). Unsurprisingly, this dual function – as both a forum for intellectual and civic engagement and a commercial enterprise shaped by market forces – generated an inherent tension. While public lectures provided a crucial space for important discussions on self-cultivation and national cultural development, they were

also governed by the imperatives of the marketplace. Organizers needed to book speakers whose reputations could drive ticket sales and secure subscriptions for full lecture seasons, while lecturers, in turn, had to satisfy what Thomas Augst (2003, 118) describes as “a secular appetite for ‘rational amusement’ and ‘useful knowledge’” common among nineteenth-century lyceum-goers.

It was within this charged intersection of education and capitalist enterprise that Emerson built his career as a lecturer. By highlighting the lyceum’s role as both a powerful cultural force that shaped American thought and a profit-driven enterprise that commodified intellectual labor, this essay argues that Emerson’s involvement in this capitalist framework was not merely opportunistic, but rather a necessary compromise: by engaging with the financial and institutional aspects of the lyceum movement, he was able to disseminate his ideas on a national scale and contribute to the evolving discourse on American cultural identity.

3. *Knowledge with “Practical Cash-Value”*

When considering the relationship between literature and economics, the groundbreaking work of Marc Shell immediately comes to mind. In *The Economy of Literature* (1978) and in *Money, Language, and Thought* (1982), Shell presents economics and literature as formally similar: both function as systems that translate abstract concepts into concrete forms. Just as language materializes thought, money materializes value. Describing both as “systems of tropes” (1982, 3), Shell – alongside other post-structuralist critics such as Jean-Joseph Goux and Walter Benn Michaels – has worked to uncover the historical and philosophical parallels, or “homologies,” between economic and linguistic systems (Woodmansee and Osteen 1999, 14). Through this semiotic approach, Shell examines literary texts that encode “economic knowledge in metaphorical – and more broadly figurative or tropological – uses of economic vocabulary, and via styles and forms that stand in a “homological” relation to monetary and financial systems” (Crosthwaite, Knight, and Marsh 2022, 3).

Building on these insights, scholars working on Emerson, such as Ian F. A. Bell (1985), have analyzed his economic metaphors, particularly the one at the center of the “Language” chapter in “Nature” – the same metaphor Shell also references in *Money, Language, and Thought* (1982, 3). In *American Romanti-*

cism and the Marketplace, Michael Gilmore (1985, 8) highlights Emerson's "life-long fascination with [...] the moral economy of capitalism, regularly discovering lessons for the spirit in the procedures of the countinghouse" and emphasizes how frequently this tendency surfaces in Emerson's language – for instance, in his well-known description of his journal as a "Savings Bank" (Emerson 1960-82, 4:250). More recently, Andrew Kopec (2024, 288) has explored Emerson's financial vocabulary, offering a provocative reframing of "self-trust as insurance."

Although approaches such as these are all compelling, a sustained figurative and textual analysis of Emerson's lectures lies beyond the scope of this study. Rather than focusing on Emerson's metaphors, I examine the material dimensions of his lecturing career – how it intersected with the social, cultural, and economic conditions of his time. Specifically, I explore the ideological tension at play in Emerson's involvement with the lyceum movement, placing his career within a system of literary production oriented toward wide audiences and shaped by market pressures – what Pierre Bourdieu theorized as the subfield of "large-scale production" (1996, 121). In doing so, my work aligns with the contextualist branch of economic criticism, which emphasizes literary production, circulation, and consumption, and frames texts within broader extratextual economies (Woodmansee and Osteen 1999, 36). Rather than viewing Emerson as abstracted from the market, I argue that his lecture career placed him squarely within it – both as a critic of and participant in America's expanding cultural economy.

Emerson scholars, many of whom are cited here, have long been invested in analyzing his remarkable career as a lecturer, for, as David Robinson (1982, 4) notes, "however eloquent the private Emerson could be in his journals, no writer ever needed an audience more." Since the 1940s, critics have also examined his economic thought and his stance toward the market economy and capitalism (among the earliest and latest works, see Alexander C. Kern's "Emerson and Economics," 1940 and Benjamin Pickford's "Emerson and Capitalism," 2024). At the same time, scholars have attended to Emerson's rhetorical strategies and oratorical style, often grounding his eloquence in his relationship with his audience (Thompson 2017).

To fully grasp the ideological tension underlying Emerson's involvement in the lyceum movement, and to understand the reasons behind my interpretation, it is essential to consider all the critical perspectives discussed above, but perhaps the most direct insight into Emerson's awareness of the lecture econo-

my comes from his own words. In an 1835 letter to Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle, Emerson offers a striking account of the economic dimensions of public lecturing in America. At the time, Emerson was still a newcomer to the lyceum circuit. Seeking to persuade Carlyle to tour the United States, he lays out in detail the mechanics of the lecture economy. He admits to Carlyle that while in New York City “anything literary has hitherto had no favor” (Emerson 1964, 56), Boston has “some genuine taste for literature” (*Ibid.*: 53). He notes that lecturers are typically paid “inconsiderable” fees – “usually \$20 for each lecture” – but adds that some have been “well paid” for a series of talks (*Ibid.*).

Throughout the letter, Emerson provides further details on the economic aspects of lecturing; however, despite the information that Emerson gave Carlyle, his friend never made it across the Atlantic. Emerson worked tirelessly to make Carlyle popular in the U.S. and yet, as Kaplan (1983, 233) notes in his biography of Carlyle, “the more money that Carlyle received through Emerson’s efforts, the less motivation he had to earn his livelihood in a foreign land.” Ironically, although Emerson famously dismissed travel as a “fool’s paradise” in “Self-Reliance” (Emerson 1971-2013, 2:46), he was far more willing than Carlyle to venture beyond home – particularly when it came to spreading his ideas across the United States.

When Emerson wrote this letter to Carlyle, he had only recently begun his lecturing career. Following the death of his first wife and his resignation from Boston Second Church, Emerson traveled to Europe for the first time in 1832-33, embarking on a trip that proved to be transformative both personally and intellectually. Upon returning to the United States, he started delivering lectures, thus quickly transitioning from the pulpit to the lyceum platform. Over time, Emerson spent more time addressing laymen in lecture halls than preaching to churchgoers from the pulpit, and, like so many other ministers who “found the lecture platform the easiest to stand on” (Bode 1956, 31), he recognized his true calling in lecturing.

His brother’s account of the “The Uses of Natural History,” the first lecture Emerson delivered just a month after his return from Europe, tells the story of an illuminating experience: for the first time “young and old [could open] their eyes and their ears” and the old, stump lecturers were forced to “see what was what and bow to the rising sun” (Emerson 1990-95, 1:397). Although Charles’ description of his brother’s lecture is surely somewhat excessive, Emerson was poised to make a lasting impact on the lyceum circuit.

According to Peter S. Field (2001, 493), the public lecture gave Emerson “money to make ends meet, an ideal means to observe the salubrious development of the nation, as well as an unmatched opportunity to commune with his fellow citizens.” Furthermore, as Whicher and Spiller note, lecturing was not only Emerson’s “main source of his earned income,” but it was also the “first form of public expression of his ideas” (Whicher and Spiller 1959, 1: XIII). Through this medium he transformed the dissemination of his knowledge into a professional enterprise and, as discussed above, the lyceum and its marketing opportunities were precisely what granted Emerson the status of public intellectual.

Between the 1830s and the 1860s, writers increasingly became “producer[s] of commodities for the literary marketplace” (Gilmore 1985, 4), as the “cult of oratory” transformed into a “means of employment” for many American writers who relied on “oral performance as a major source of income” (Buell 1986, 153). For Emerson, lecture earnings supported his family, helped him purchase his Concord home (Bush), and sustained a life of relative middle-class comfort (Field 2001, 475). In 1833, his first year travelling the lecture circuit, he earned \$10 for each lecture; by 1837, he was making around \$550 for a series of 28 speeches. Throughout the 1840s, his fees doubled and towards the end of his career – in the 1860s and early 1870s – he was regularly “commanding \$100 per address” (Ibid.). These numbers not only describe a successful career and quantify Emerson’s profit on the lecture circuit, but they also reflect his participation in the commodification of culture that happened on the public lecture circuit, where money transactions underpinned the exchange of ideas between the speaker and his audience.

However, Emerson’s participation in the lyceum’s commercial business appears to be at odds with his frequent critiques of American materialism. Indeed, as Neal Dolan (2011, 353) shows, Emerson was “deeply troubled by the tendency of Jacksonian America to all-devouring materialism.” For Nolan, Emerson’s famous statement in his “Ode: Inscribed to W. H. Channing” (1847) where he proclaims that “things are in the saddle, and ride mankind,” is only [Emerson’s] most striking formulation of a genuine concern about pervasive market instrumentalism that surfaces frequently in his notebooks, lectures, and published writing” (Ibid.). Yet Emerson’s stance on the market is far from unequivocal. On one hand, some critics – most notably Sacvan Bercovitch – have seen in Emerson’s writings “unabashed endorsements [of] free

enterprise ideology" (Bercovitch 1993, 330). On the other, thinkers like George Kateb (2002, 18) insist that Emerson rejected an "exclusively materialistic life" as "not life, but a misdiagnosed dying."

Rather than attempting to resolve this contradiction, I suggest that Emerson's lectures embody it. He frequently noted how "the moral and intellectual effects" of American society were not "on the same scale with the trade and production," and lamented that "there is no speech heard but that of auctioneers, newsboys, and the caucus" (Emerson 1903-04, 9:385). In other words, he believed that material pursuits, while not inherently negative, illegitimately dominated the cultural discourse. People heard "too much of the results of machinery, commerce, and the useful arts," and he thought that, as a scholar, he was supposed to redress this wrong. However, he did so not by "look[ing] with sour aspect at the industrious manufacturing village, or the art of commerce." On the contrary, he considered "trade and every mechanical craft as education also," but he believed material progress was "precious" inasmuch as it was the expression of an "intellectual step" and a "spiritual act" (Emerson 1971-2013, 1:120-21).

This complex – and often contradictory – view of economic life necessarily informs his involvement in the lyceum circuit in which Emerson negotiated a space and form that allowed him to intellectually contribute to the country's material progress. As he writes in "American Civilization" (1862), "a man coins himself into his labor; turns his day, his strength, his thought, his affection into some product which remains as the visible sign of his power (Emerson 1903-04, 11:297). Undoubtedly, his lectures were the most tangible way he found to exercise his intellectual power.

4. Being Agitated to Agitate: Emerson's Transformative Rhetoric

However, intellectual engagement was not initially the reason that drove Emerson out of the comfort of his Concord home. As he candidly admits in an 1843 letter to Samuel Gray Ward, lecturing, at least early in his career, was nothing more than financial necessity: "Whenever I get into debt, which usually happens once a year, I must make the plunge into this great odious river of travelers, into these cold eddies of hotels & boarding houses – farther into these dangerous precincts of charlatanism, namely, Lectures" (Emerson

1990-95, 7:523). What he saw at first as a burdensome but unavoidable aspect of a man of letters' livelihood, however, quickly became a medium that he deemed necessary to foster a deeper kind of self-awareness in his fellow Americans. As Augst (2003, 129) argues, the lyceum circuit offered a chance for men of letters such as Emerson to "create a niche within the commercial marketplace for general, secular learning." Entrusted with the responsibility of disseminating knowledge to a mass audience, in the lecture hall Emerson put into practice what Stanley Cavell (1989, 10) considers to be the core of his whole philosophy: "attracting the human (in practice, his individual readers [and listeners]) to the project of becoming human."

In the lyceum, Emerson found what he called a "convertible audience" (Emerson 1960-82, 7:265) with which he could engage on both the rhetorical and pedagogical level. Crucially however, Emerson was not interested in a prescriptive use of rhetoric. He believed that Americans had to achieve progress by remaining open to change, and although he saw himself as an agent of this transformation, he approached lecturing without a normative agenda. Rather than offering definitive lessons, he sought to inspire his audience to embark on their own journey toward self-culture and self-reliance. Standing at the lectern, he learned to stimulate his audience by "suggesting to them connections between things entirely disparate, without ever spelling them out" (Voelz 2010, 74). Although, as Mary K. Cayton (1987, 612-613) has shown, this method sometimes led to misinterpretations, Emerson's intention was clear: he sought to provoke a personal, reflective journey rather than to dictate conclusions.

Over time, Emerson grew aware of the "cash-value" of his ideas, of how words came loaded with a transformative potential, and of how theories, when put "at work," as William James (1968, 26) suggested, could change people and reality. With this in mind, Emerson made use of the lyceum's designated role for identity formation to teach the art of self-reliance, which he never saw as limited within the self. Rather, by encouraging his audience to embrace self-reliance, he envisioned them as agents of change within American society and culture at large, and although he openly criticized the materialism of his time, his engagement with the capitalist practices of what Jürgen Habermas calls "the public sphere" became a strategic effort to balance materialism with the cultivation of a vibrant cultural environment.

Augst (1999, 89) aptly notes that for many Americans, "attending lectures given by Emerson and others were crucial means of finding practical moral

guidance and developing philosophical capacities.” Yet, Emerson aimed to show his listeners that the answers they sought were already within them. His primary objective was therefore not to prescribe solutions, since in the deeply personal journey towards self-reliance no traditional teacher was necessary. He merely aimed to encourage his listeners to connect with their inner selves, proposing intellectual and spiritual growth as an essential complement to their material pursuits. To do so, Emerson believed that the orator had to “provoke men to see, feel, and live by that truth which [...] lies within them waiting to be animated” (R. Ray 1974, 224). He was convinced that individuals rarely act based on conscious reflection, and it was precisely in this realm that the orator could exert influence. As he observed in his journal, the lecture provided the orator with everything necessary to achieve this goal:

Here is all the true orator will ask, for here is a convertible audience, and here are no stiff conventions that prescribe a method, a style, a limited quotation of books and an exact respect to certain books, persons or opinions. No, here everything is admissible... Here [the speaker] may lay himself out utterly, large, enormous, prodigal, on the subject of the hour. (Emerson 1960-82, 7:265)

Emerson’s remark suggests that the lyceum granted the orator complete freedom to devise a rhetorical style that could inspire the audience toward a path of spiritual and cultural uplift. What Roberta Ray (1974, 223) defines as Emerson’s “rhetoric of provocation” was a necessary tool that the orator had to use to “rouse [...] into action” (Emerson 1960-82, 5:274) the minds of the audience. For Emerson, the orator was meant to be “a benefactor that lifts men above themselves and creates a higher appetite than he satisfies” (Emerson 1971-2013, 8:60). In contrast with the economic necessities that he quoted as primary motive behind his lecturing career, in a 1844 journal entry Emerson admits that what he saw in lecturing was a chance to “paint [...] in fire my thought, and being agitated to agitate” (Emerson 1960-82, 9:70).

As these quotations show, Emerson saw in his role as a public intellectual a social responsibility to contribute to the “awakening” of his audience (Emerson 1960-82, 4:278). Fully convinced of the pedagogical power of the spoken word, Emerson negotiated his role on the cultural marketplace of the lyceum in order to secure for himself a place from where to stir the discourse on America’s development. In nineteenth-century America, as Lawrence Buell (1986, 59) points out, full-time “serious” artists and full-time “commercial” artists

started to emerge and intellectuals such as Emerson had to find their own delicate balance between what Bourdieu calls the literary subfield of “restricted production” and that of commercial literature. Without compromising the integrity of his artistic vision to accommodate the demands of a wide, popular audience, Emerson entered the cultural marketplace and brought his genius in relation with “the common, the familiar, the low” that he mentions in “The American Scholar” (Emerson 1971-2013, 1:67). Although he sold his ideas for profit, he also made his thoughts accessible to the widest possible audience, which was in turn asked – as Roland Lee (1957, 242) argues – to “look *through*” them and use such ideas to “make other things visible.”

Even though – at first glance – Emerson’s participation in the commercial marketplace of the lyceum might seem counterintuitive, if not outright hypocritical, I see this as one of the many instances in his career in which his apparent contradictions are, in fact, strategic compromises. Emerson did note and lament the fact that, during the antebellum period, literature and knowledge were becoming a commodity, but unlike others such as Emily Dickinson (who abhorred publication), Henry David Thoreau (who resolved it was best to live in solitude), or even Walt Whitman (who, despite tirelessly working to disseminate his democratic vision, was less engaged in civic institutions), he actively carved his place in the public sphere and in the cultural discourse of his time by engaging with the capitalist infrastructure of the lyceum. Although his oratory was transformative, its reach and impact were contingent upon his willingness to operate within the commercialized lecture system.

The lecture hall – described by Scott (1980, 806) as a remarkably egalitarian space that, unlike the church or the university, “appeared to make knowledge readily accessible to the common man” – was the only venue where Emerson’s ambitious project of amelioration could be realized. As he himself wrote in his journal, “a lecture is a new literature, which leaves aside all tradition, time, place, circumstance, & addresses an assembly as mere human beings. It is an organ of sublime power” (Emerson 1960-82, 7:224). For Emerson, this power was instrumental in consolidating a national culture and, although he was deeply critical of the commercialism of his time, he saw his participation in this capitalist cultural practice as essential to counterbalance America’s economic expansion with the development of a meaningful intellectual and cultural environment.

In his “Editors’ Address to the Massachusetts Quarterly Review,” he lamented the absence of a truly inspiring national voice:

We hearken in vain for any profound voice speaking to the American heart, cheering timid good men, animating the youth, consoling the defeated, and intelligently announcing duties which clothe life with joy, and endear the face of land and sea to men. It is a poor consideration that the country wit is precocious, and, as we say, practical. (Emerson 1903-04, 9:385-86)

For all his life, Emerson eagerly sought to be that “profound voice speaking to the American heart,” and his participation in the lyceum movement became the principal means through which he made a lasting impact and reached the widest possible audience. As he declared in his 1878 lecture, “Fortune of the Republic,” “all advancement is by ideas, and not by brute force or mechanic force” (Emerson 1903-04, 9: 531). For Emerson, traveling the lecture circuit was not merely an economic necessity; it became his chosen medium for communicating to his fellow Americans that ideas – and not material wealth – would ultimately shape the destiny of their nation.

As it is often the case with Emerson, it was in moments of ambiguity, or even apparent contradiction, that he was at his most creative. Always attempting to “unsettle all things” as he wrote in “Circles” (Emerson 1971-2013, 2:188) he managed to profit from a capitalist infrastructure of culture while simultaneously offering its participants tools to question it. In “Wealth,” part of his 1860 collection *The Conduct of Life* and his most well-known essay where marketplace imagery and language abound, Emerson writes that men are “born to be rich” and “must be capitalist[s]” (Emerson 1903-04, 6:99, 126). Yet, he makes a crucial distinction: for Emerson, authentic capitalism lies in the recognition that “the true thrift is always to spend on the higher plane; to invest and invest, with keener avarice, that he may spend in spiritual creation, and not in augmenting animal existence” (Ibid.). What he suggests to his audience in this passage is also reflected in his own participation in the lyceum circuit. By selling his ideas in the cultural marketplace, Emerson did grow rich and profited from making his philosophy a marketable commodity. Yet, as Amos Bronson Alcott observed, Emerson served the country with “impulse and thought of an ideal cast” (qtd. in Matthiessen 1941, 23), and the wealth he derived from the lyceum was not merely material; it lay equally in the intellectual and spiritual capital he accrued by successfully bridging philosophical ideals and commercial culture, thereby inspiring his fellow Americans to pursue self-culture and effect social change.

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