

nomic Review, explains how ancient national rivalries, submerged during more than a century of colonialism and foreign intervention, resurfaced in fierce power politics, diplomatic maneuverings, and bloody clashes.

Even as the last U.S. personnel withdrew from Saigon in 1975, Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia began purging suspected Vietnam sympathizers; purges soon led to direct attacks on Vietnamese villages. To the Khmer Rouge, says Chanda, this was a "preventive war of survival" against a hereditary enemy. Vietnam viewed the attacks as a predatory ploy, backed by its millenary foe, China; it responded by invading Cambodia in 1977. China, for its part, saw its hegemony in Southeast Asia threatened by an old rival who, moreover, had close ties with the "barbarian" to the north, the Soviet Union.

Chanda believes that the United States could have fostered a balance of power in the region. But President Carter's concern about Soviet expansion made him avoid normal diplomatic ties with Hanoi and deal exclusively with Peking. Even today, Chanda contends, seven years after consolidating its hold in Cambodia, Hanoi would break off its marriage of convenience with Moscow if America would provide guarantees against Chinese aggression along Vietnam's northern border.

Arts & Letters

**THE AMERICAN
NEWNESS: Culture
and Politics in the
Age of Emerson**

by Irving Howe
Harvard, 1986
99 pp. \$12.50

Twentieth-century cynics tend to look down on Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82) as the pundit of unrealized possibility, a curious reminder of strangely optimistic times. But Howe's little volume, drawn from lectures delivered at Harvard, places Emerson on a broader plane.

During the period of "newness"—America in the 1830s and '40s—Emerson reigned as the main spokesman of transcendentalism. Having abandoned traditional Christianity (he had begun his career as a Unitarian minister), Emerson saw in the breakdown of New England Puritanism the first days of a "Central Man" who would base his life on "self-reliance." "What Washington and Jefferson had enabled institutionally," Howe writes, "Emerson would now bring into fruition in the

sphere of the spirit, and therefore in the life of the culture." Far from being the musings of a recluse, Emerson's lectures and essays, adjuring individuals to look to their own hearts for truth and guidance, reached a wide audience.

Walt Whitman took Emerson's line of thought and turned it into a celebration of individuality. Henry Thoreau took it to the extreme of literal isolation. Even in reacting against Emerson, other writers acknowledged their debts to him. Nathaniel Hawthorne described how self-reliance could lead to loneliness, mental breakdown, and even to sin. And as Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* learned, indulging the self could lead to exile from the community.

The Civil War and industrialization may have killed the Emersonian "moment," but writers still look for the fresh start that Emerson hoped for in the rosier days of antebellum America.

LESS THAN ONE:
Selected Essays
 by Joseph Brodsky
 Farrar, 1986
 501 pp. \$25

These 18 essays by Russian émigré poet Brodsky include autobiography, literary appreciation and criticism, personal recollections of great writers, and reflections on the state of Soviet society and culture. Born in 1940 in Leningrad, Brodsky grew up with the conviction that nothing that happened around him—whether the dull ideological monotony of school, deadening factory work, or even prison life—could change who he was inside. Belonging to what he calls a "bookish" generation (relationships were "broken up for good over a preference for Hemingway over Faulkner"), he and his peers sensed "a strange intensity in the air" during the early postwar years, only to see life soon "reduced to uniform rigidity by the centralized state."

In one of two essays about W. H. Auden, Brodsky sums up the healing genius of the poet he considers the 20th century's greatest writer: "[Auden] went among the world's grave, almost terminal cases not as a surgeon but as a nurse, and every patient knows that it's nurses and not incisions that put one back on one's feet." Brodsky's detailed reading of Auden's "September 1, 1939," is a masterful and reverent exegesis; his assessment of Caribbean poet Derek Walcott's work—"these poems represent a fusion of two versions of infinity: language and ocean"—