

Revisiting Emerson's 'Declaration of Independence'

Phi Beta Kappa Society Address

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With enormous pleasure, actually a deep satisfaction, I address you today. I regard this as a singular honor, so I thank the faculty committee for selecting me. My brief comments are inspired by an earlier Phi Beta Kappa Address, the most notable in the Society's history. I am referring to Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous "American Scholar" lecture, delivered as the Phi Beta Kappa oration at Harvard on August 31, 1837. Emerson was the second choice of the organizing committee, after Reverend Jonathan Mayhew Wainwright, an author of a book of hymns had declined. The audience, assembled at the Brattle Street Church, consisted of an illustrious group, including a U.S. Supreme Court Justice, Joseph Story, James Russell Lowell, Richard Henry Dana, and Wendell Phillips, as well as some Unitarian heavyweights and the usual assortment of Harvard faculty. Henry David Thoreau, who had graduated the day before, was probably absent, already heading back to Concord, his home.

Emerson, like ourselves, lived in turbulent political times. The American Scholar address was given just as a new populism was asserting itself following the triumph of Andrew Jackson's Presidency. With the demise of the Federalists, an elite had been demoted and Emerson was well-aware that intellectuals, closely associated with that political elite, were mistrusted, and more, they were increasingly marginalized. The Great American Enlightenment led by towering political thinkers had long since expired. A different intellectual aura arose.

"The American Scholar" attempts to define the distinctive characteristics of the American intellectual and designate his responsibilities. Although an impropriety, I use the masculine pronoun, because properly speaking those were the human beings Emerson addressed. He lived in a world obviously different from our own in some ways, yet not so different in regards to the fundamental problems its citizens faced. Verging on an economic depression, the economy felt the uncertainties of an emerging industrialization; we are facing the challenge of a new global economy with our own economic functions shifting more and more to money management and service. The depression of 1837 was followed with a fitful recovery, but the 1840s were marked by controversy over slavery and the status of Texas as a member of the United States; we are in the throes of a disastrous war that has no obvious resolution. The 1850s were marked by growing conflict over differing views of American democracy, which culminated in the Civil War; we are facing growing economic and social disparities between the rich and poor, and the nation seems to have lost its moral compass in the process. How we will regain a liberal and generous democracy is hardly apparent. I believe Emerson's cardinal message was that the intellectual has an abiding responsibility to help maintain a vibrant democracy, and that is the theme I wish to again explore.

Emerson's talk has justly been regarded as one of the key proclamations in American history. Indeed, Oliver Wendell Holmes called it "our Intellectual Declaration of Independence." In many ways, it remains a suitable guide for those committed to a life of the intellect. I will not critique this work, but I do wish to build on Emerson's key theme, the notion of action as the guiding ethos of the intellectual's life work. Pushing

aside any stereotypic portrait of the scholar, let us focus instead on the general responsibilities for those of us committed to an intellectual life. I include here not only your professors, but all those who believe that the world of ideas, the history of those ideas, and the promise of those ideas deserve continued careful scrutiny. In short, I want to briefly examine what it means to be committed to a liberal intellectualism, or what I would call humanism. I will outline how and why in the next few minutes.

Emerson's lecture is divided between descriptive and prescriptive parts: He begins by describing the American scholar's three principle characteristics: First, the scholar is attuned to Nature, and more specifically the study of nature, for as he said, "the ancient precept, 'Know thyself' and the modern precept, 'Study nature,' become at last one maxim." Science therefore holds an especially august standing, because Emerson believed scientific inquiry offered a conduit to the mind and self-knowledge. More, he regarded scientific criteria to represent the surest means of discerning facts from appearances. This was a crucial and recurrent theme of the essay, because for Emerson, the scholar's top priority is the search for truth.

Second, the scholar is acutely cognizant of the past, in the broadest sense of the heritage of intellectual work. The exchange of ideas through history is critical for Emerson, but when he advocates study he does so in a particular manner, namely the inspiration that past books and ideas offer for creative *advancement*. So he would not be focused on the past per se, but rather on the prospects upon which new ideas and industry might be created from understanding the past and its ideas. Always peering into the future, Emerson admonishes us to be like Janus, simultaneously looking at the past and the future as we live in the fleeting present.

This then brings us to Emerson's third characteristic of the American Scholar, namely the commitment to *action*. Intellectualism alone is hardly sufficient, for the gifts of the scholar must be turned into activities, which are productive and germane to human flourishing. He writes that "thinking is a partial act" and without action "thought can never ripen into truth." Indeed, he proclaims that "inaction is cowardice."

Emerson devotes the rest of the essay to the scholar's duties, which basically focus on discerning facts from appearances in order to arrive at the best approximation of truth. He breaks the shackles to any further European indenture and ends the address with the famous anthem of American individualism:

We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds. The study of letters shall be no longer a name for pity, for doubt, and for sensual indulgence...A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men.

Emerson thus draws upon the Declaration of Independence and points to notions of self-responsibility, which will have their own later complex history.

Most readers suppose that the originality of Emerson's message rests on the demands and possibilities of a distinctly American intellectual life, which would spawn some characteristic library of letters and practical philosophy. These developments did, indeed, occur, but only later. And, as important as this notion of a distinctly American corpus of scholarly ideas might have been, it was hardly original to Emerson. As the intellectual historian Bliss Perry observed in 1923, this notion of breaking the shackles of a Euro-centric intellectual heritage was a recurrent theme of previous oratories. So what accounts for Emerson's declaration, especially considering how deeply Emerson himself

was indebted to the European tradition and self-consciously so? We look elsewhere for the key to the enduring appeal of his address.

I think Robert Richardson is correct in observing, that Emerson “was not so much interested in separating America from its European past as he was in separating the individual from his incapacitating education, most of which happened to be European” (*Emerson, The Mind on Fire*, p. 264). Emerson complains “the book, the college, the school of art, the institution of any kind...pin me down. They look backward and not forward.” He would liberate the individual to his or her own pursuits, albeit on the foundations of the past, but always forward looking, and most importantly, guided by a personal muse. American excellence would be found in the liberated individual mind.

In summary, Emerson’s characterization of the American intellectual rested on the twin attributes of creativity built from older traditions and action based in critical *individualized* thought. The two, at least for Emerson, are inextricable. Creativity must be grounded in a firm understanding of the intellectual territories already traversed. Accordingly, education must be based in a broad agenda of ‘history’ (as he called the humanities) and an understanding of science, in order for citizens to situate themselves in their complex world, both social and natural. That means, in plain English, that the American intellectual must appreciate the world from several perspectives, and to do so, she requires a broad understanding of the natural world and a critical ability to read the past and decipher contemporary discourses. From that base, American scholars might venture forward to lead their fellow citizens facing open frontiers and limitless prospects.

This testament to an unbridled optimism fit that occasion, and I invoke it for our own. We celebrate with you the hopes seeded during your collegiate experience. Tufts has, since its origins, asserted a strong kinship with this Emersonian mission. The deep commitments to academic excellence, community involvement, and public service marks the esprit of Tufts. Reform marked the college’s earliest orientation. The Founders’ vision has developed into an outstanding institution for the enactment of their ideas. Very effectively, they instantiated Emerson’s message by establishing Tufts College. You, the best and the brightest, are the exemplars of those original commitments, and I congratulate you on your achievements, collectively and individually.

But beyond your specific grade point averages, term papers, research projects, sports triumphs, and artistic endeavors, I trust you have learned the deeper moral lesson Emerson propounded. Promoting a unique American religion, one that defined a political ethics that would serve as the foundation of a liberal society, he understood, perhaps better than we have, that the intellectual could not reside in some splendid isolation. Instead, those with the gifts to contribute are morally obliged to do so. I am referring to his basic thesis about individual responsibilities. The responsibility to think critically: Presumably you have developed that skill. The responsibility for community involvement: Presumably you appreciate that citizenship entails duties as well as benefits. The responsibility to creative action: Presumably you have learned that personal fulfillment is more than the accumulation of things, but also requires fulfilling the humanistic promise of your minds and hearts. So in celebrating your achievements, we reject any complacency and again call for you to fully exercise critical insight and moral excellence in every pursuit. Guided by good intuitions and intentions, we have every reason to expect that you, a new generation of gifted American Scholars, will follow the broad mandate offered you. We wish you every success and good fortune.

Thank you for your attention.

Omitted:

Risking an easily criticized generality, I think it fair to say that Emerson's address is poised between two vast cultural developments, each very characteristic of the 19th century. On the one hand, he was enunciating a new humanism, and on the other hand, he was embracing a new enthusiasm for science. For a moment, let us reflect on each.

'Humanism,' was coined in the 19th century to apply to the re-discovery of the classical tradition in the medieval period. Humanists were originally concerned with a general education, which spans the classics to modern science. But humanists accorded particular importance to the liberal agenda: freedom of thought, tolerance, revision and correction of opinion, open communication, and a self-critical attitude. From this platform, the liberal arts curriculum developed in the United States.

In this setting, the unique contribution of American philosophy, pragmatism, took hold. I do not have time to delve into how the roots of pragmatism lie in earlier intellectual movements, with the exception of drawing out its debts to Emerson.

Pragmatism followed Emerson's seed concepts: The pragmatists assumed no ideologies; they rejected formalisms; they withheld enthusiastic embrace of any intellectual movement other than open, action-based inquiry. They championed the idea that ideas were tools. Socially, pragmatists promoted liberal economic policies; politically they advocated liberalism; ethically, they embraced various forms of utilitarianism and consequentialism. But most importantly, they were action-based citizens, who identified with the communal project and the collective as an organ of growth and prosperous human industry. Emerson was in many ways a prophet of this American philosophy, and he spoke to his audience with an eye towards the world beyond academia. That larger context is the key to the text.