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Kenneth S. Sacks: Understanding Emerson

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Introduction



WHEN, IN 1932, THE GOVERNING BODY OF PHI BETA KAPPA established a journal, there was little doubt what it would be called. The society named it after the most celebrated academic talk in American history—Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Phi Beta Kappa oration, delivered at Harvard ninety-five years earlier. And when that journal, *The American Scholar*, recently adopted a motto, it came just as inevitably from the same Emersonian speech. But readers who enthusiastically endorse the assertion “Life is our dictionary” might be surprised to learn that, only a few months earlier and in a quieter state of mind, Emerson had proposed in his diary, “My garden is my dictionary.”¹

Nature was long Emerson’s preoccupation: he had even published an essay of that title the previous year. Yet as the summer of 1837 progressed and as he faced the prospect of delivering his address on the last day of August, Emerson’s gaze reluctantly turned from nature to humanity. His closest friends felt under attack by the institution where he was to talk, and he knew they expected him to defend their common beliefs. But despite having high-minded principles, Emerson agonized when putting them into practice. Struggling to maintain his self-reliance while rebuking himself for remaining unengaged, in the end he chose to speak boldly. Life, at that moment, had to be his dictionary.

Misunderstanding and hostility, far more than applause, greeted the talk. After “The American Scholar” and the Divinity School address the following year, it was nearly three decades before Emerson was again invited to speak at Harvard. In the interim, Emerson went from being castigated as a dangerous thinker to being acclaimed as the central figure in American literature and thought. At Harvard, he was to be honored with a Doctorate of Letters, a second invitation to address Phi Beta Kappa, and an appointment as overseer. The university’s greatest presi-

dent, Charles William Eliot, called Emerson the inspiration for his curricular reforms, and its first building devoted to philosophy was named for him and dedicated on the centenary of his birth. “He had not grown more orthodox,” explained a close friend, “but opinion had been advancing in his direction.” Although both sides of that judgment are only partly true, “The American Scholar” was to become this country’s most revered expression of intellectual integrity. In our own time, Harold Bloom has called Emerson “Mr. America,” while Alfred Kazin considered him “the father of us all” and wondered, “Where would Emerson find his scholar now?” That has remained, since 1837, a worthy question.²

Just as worthy a question, however, is how Emerson came to create his scholar. Among the fine intellectual biographies of Emerson, none examines what turned out to be his difficult and risky decision to deliver the oration. Proclaiming to the world his own journey toward self-reliance, Emerson’s essays and speeches convey emotional certainty and lofty ideals. That apparent confidence makes it all too easy to consider these public statements also representative of his innermost thoughts. His private writings, however, suggest something more complex. Along with some four thousand pages of correspondence, the eight thousand pages of his journals, only recently published in full, provide essential insight into the development of his public voice. These personal expressions show Emerson in turmoil at the time of “The American Scholar.” They reveal the hesitation and ultimate courage of an insecure intellectual trying to become simultaneously self-reliant and famous.³

Emerson is, of course, universally portrayed as the central figure of Transcendentalism—this country’s most romanticized religious, philosophical, and literary movement. But in assessing his true place among his peers, their opinions ought to count, too. In recent decades, a trove of letters and diaries has been brought to light. Considered here, along with much that remains unpublished, this testimony indicates that in 1837 Emerson, hardly their leader, was still struggling for his place among Transcendentalists.

The public text that frames Emerson’s struggle is “The American Scholar” (the speech is reprinted in the appendix). Despite its extraordinary idealism, the oration speaks directly to humanity. Emerson’s audience that day consisted of some two hundred of Boston’s elite and therefore, in early-nineteenth-century America, the nation’s elite. Most he had known all his life, and he wrote the talk specifically with them in mind. David Robinson has observed of Emerson that “no writer ever needed an audience more, nor assumed an audience more completely.” Yet here, in front of lifelong friends, he chastised and intentionally shocked the assembly. The passion the usually soft-spoken Emerson brought to his oration suggests it was precisely that audience at that time that drove him on. The

summer following “The American Scholar,” at Dartmouth and far away from his Cambridge community, he delivered a similar address. Who has since heard of it?⁴

Beyond an expression of individual idealism, Emerson’s remarkable oration represents perhaps the first instance in America of academic debate intended also for public consideration. Founded in support of confessional faith, colleges played the role of churches when they used formal ritual to confirm community values. Emerson held Harvard, the nation’s oldest and richest college, not to the standard of confirming values, but to that of investigating them. He was uncompromising in treating the university—despite the strict social conventions of the moment—as an institution that must reject pretense and easy conformity. He demanded that Harvard live up to itself, and he made that demand in front of everyone who counted.

Yet if in taking a stand for friends and principles Emerson believed that he was moving toward greater self-reliance, he was wrong. Despite proclamations of personal freedom, Emerson was beset with anxiety and self-doubt, depending on others and concerned with what they thought of him. And in confronting his own college and community, he was in effect bowing to his own patrimony.

But the tension in those attachments provided much of the fire in the talk and propelled him to greater heights of social awareness. A few months later, and as a result of his oration, he began his long and erratic public struggle against slavery, following soon with a defense of Native American rights and his great attack on organized religion at the Harvard Divinity School. After that, Emerson had to wait twenty-seven years for another invitation to speak at his alma mater. Then, at commencement on July 21, 1865, he was asked to salute the conclusion of the Civil War and the victory of abolitionism, an issue with which he had become increasingly identified (despite the heckling of Harvard students in 1851 as he spoke against slavery in Cambridge). “The American Scholar” was the fountainhead of his engagement with humanity.⁵

The oration also gave him legitimacy of sorts among peers, not in proving that his views were right—for his ideals were too extreme even for most American Transcendentalists—but, much more, in demonstrating that he could finally stand up for his beliefs. It certainly strengthened the admiration of Thomas Carlyle, who rejoiced at reading the speech (Jane Carlyle said that she knew nothing like it “since Schiller went silent”). And that, in turn, led directly to Emerson’s great popularity in Europe.⁶

“The American Scholar,” then, accounts for much of how Emerson succeeded. The early chapters of this book explain the revolutionary intent of the oration, as Emerson turned his back on tradition and offered an entirely new understanding of what it meant to be an American scholar.

Breaking with the materialism in which he was raised, Emerson proposed an extreme vision of the intellectual who transcends all convention, including the institutions of one's own country, to speak the truth that emerges from within. Colleges, if they are to serve humanity faithfully, must nurture the individual voice. Appearing in one of the most controlled of all academic environments, Emerson challenged its constraints and anticipated by a half-century curricular and pedagogical reforms. The distinguished authority Lawrence A. Cremin believed that "no single figure was more influential in the education of nineteenth-century Americans" than Emerson. But "The American Scholar" ought not be tethered to its historical context. As today's reform becomes tomorrow's convention, we would all do well to ponder the spirit and courage of his eternal vision.⁷

In the end, however, because he labored to become the very scholar he proposed to his audience, the oration is mainly about Emerson himself. In summoning the courage to defy tradition, Emerson overcame, though he could not extinguish, his almost pedestrian feelings of inadequacy. For, having renounced his pulpit largely in pursuit of greater intellectual freedom, Emerson found that as lyceum speaker he continued to compromise his desire to express himself with complete candor. Then, aware that he was failing his friends, Emerson felt compelled to surrender something of his self-reliance and fight a battle others had begun. "The American Scholar," far more direct and forceful than his essays, succeeds so well because its idealism arose out of historical circumstances. And that is the part of the story that merits most attention.

Yet however one interprets "The American Scholar," the fact is, the oration does not make for easy reading. Exhibiting many of Emerson's most notorious quirks (or, to put it kindly, his rhetorical strategies), the talk rambles, rapidly shifts styles, and delights in obscurities. In fact, referred to today with reverence, "The American Scholar" is, I suspect, not well understood. In a world beset by ironic detachment, that is our loss. To approach the talk sympathetically, with a knowledge of Emerson's trials, is to feel his commitment to people and principles, to ideals that matter. What makes the oration great—what ultimately makes Emerson great—is the passion, intensity, and towering integrity. Moments such as that at Harvard in 1837 come rarely to anyone. Confronting so many forces in his life, Emerson triumphed over himself and in that instant set course to become America's scholar.