Revisiting "The American Scholar": Emerson on Higher Education and Democracy

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Abstract

Ralph Waldo Emerson's deeply individualistic doctrine of "self-reliance" is generally viewed as antagonistic to most of the moral and political reform movements of 19th century America. But this account ignores the connection between the ethos of self-reliance and Emerson's vision of reformed higher education as developed in his influential lecture "The American Scholar." Emerson's presentation of the ideal of scholarship supports a conception of the university as a venue of contested academic space capable of providing a model for robust critique of the prevailing materialist and conformist tendencies of American mass democracy. In this respect, Emerson arguably provides a very early and homegrown American argument for academic freedom that may repay further consideration today.

Keywords: Ralph Waldo Emerson, higher education, democracy, individualism

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Introduction

Ralph Waldo Emerson is probably best known today as the chief American proponent of the philosophical school of Transcendentalism and as a harsh critic of the conformist tendencies of Jacksonian mass democracy. Practically all commentators recognize Emerson's concept of self-reliance as the core of his moral philosophy (e.g., Buell 2003, p. 254; Dolan 2009, p. 12; Kateb 2002, p. 1; Levine and Malachuk 2011, p. 3; Newfield 1996, pp. 2-11; , Sacks, p. 50; Wolf 2021, p. 248). However, the complex relations embedded within Emerson's notion of self-reliance are manifold, especially the conflict between individual genius and the weight of collective culture, and the tension between the personal God-in-me and the impersonality of the divine "Oversoul." Nonetheless, self-reliance broadly conceived remains the presumed peak of psychic possibilities available to the Emersonian individual.

However, there has been surprisingly little attention paid to the way in which Emerson's thoughts on education, and higher education in particular, reflect and connect with his teaching on self-reliance. This omission is remarkable for several reasons. First, there is the difficulty of harmonizing the fixation on individual autonomy central to the concept of self-reliance with the seemingly inescapable vulnerability and openness to the influence—even reliance on—the guidance of others without which education is mere injunction. But more importantly, arguably one of Emerson's most famous addresses "The American Scholar" delivered at Harvard University in 1837 focused directly on the unique role of the scholar in American democracy. "The American Scholar" has historically been interpreted as a critique of the stultifying cultural conformity of the Boston social and political elites (the "Brahmins"), an analog to Emerson's Harvard Divinity School Address the following year in which he excoriated the leaders of New England Unitarianism for what he took to be their smug conventionalism (Foster 1943, pp. 95-6, 99). This image of Emerson as the scourge of institutionalized education and religion is no doubt partly true. Emerson practically invented the role of public intellectual and delighted in contrasting the egalitarian medium, liberating use of vernacular and iconoclasm of the Lyceum speaking circuit to the staid formalism of the university lecture hall (Field 2002, pp. 136-37). But on a more fundamental level, Emerson's "American Scholar" reveals not an outright rejection of the institutions of higher education, but rather his efforts to apply the ideal of self-reliance to the university in service of an alternative vision of democracy to the mass conformism of his day.

By presenting the American academy as contested space, Emerson

offers universities and colleges as potential models for robust democratic society. My purpose is to illuminate Emerson's understanding of the political significance of higher education, which he believed deeply influenced (at his time negatively) the development of broader democratic culture in America. My analysis involves both explication of Emerson's texts and to some extent a theoretical reconstruction of his account of democracy that draws from the principles of his treatment of higher education an argument that extends into areas Emerson may have only partially anticipated, but which fulfill his larger goals for improving American democracy. Emerson offered an alternative vision for democracy, one that replaced the materialist model of self-interest as the basis of social union with a new conception of the active life grounded on a philosophy of education directed toward encouraging sentiments conducive to developing the virtues of what he calls "self-trust." Emerson thus connected the promise of democratic freedom and equality with the mission to produce an intellectually charged culture of debate made possible by educational reform.

My focus on the "American Scholar" is by no means altogether unique. The present study benefits significantly from Sacks' discussions of the biographical elements and historical context of the "American Scholar," but Sacks is generally not concerned with the political significance of scholarship in Emerson's account of democracy (2003, p. 93). The groundbreaking work in both Kateb's illumination of non-subject centered individualism and Cavell's idea of the ordinary as a way to reconcile individual genius and democratic equality offer an account of Emerson that has important implications for education (Kateb 2002; Cavell 1988). However, neither Kateb nor Cavell extend their analysis into a detailed treatment of the "American Scholar." Similarly, Rautenfeld's insightful analysis of Emerson's contribution to our understanding of the deliberative public sphere sheds light on Emerson's belief that "representative" individuals make public the opinions and values present among what Rautenfeld calls their "constituencies" (2005, p. 184). But while Rautenfeld discusses in a general sense Emerson's belief in the value of intellectual freedom (2005, pp. 192-93), he largely ignores Emerson's "American Scholar" as a source for understanding the important role the university plays in Emerson's account of the conditions that contribute to a participatory public sphere.

My argument proceeds in the following manner. In section one I will illuminate the main theoretical elements of Emerson's concept of self-reliance. This will require situating Emerson's philosophical orientation in the context of German Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy that supplied the theoretical materials out of which Emerson con-

structed his transcendental philosophy. The following two sections will analyze Emerson's treatment of the impact the universities and colleges have on America's broader democratic culture. This involves both examining his critique of American higher education in the "American Scholar," but also considering Emerson's projection of a positive image of the scholar and the virtue of "self-trust" required to inspire democratic discourse. I will conclude with a brief discussion of Emerson's role as an early American champion of the principle of academic freedom and of the modern research university dedicated to discovery of new knowledge, both of which contribute to healthy democratic society.

The Self and Self-Reliance

The philosophical foundations of Emerson's self-reliance concept lay in the Kantian and post-Kantian German idealist philosophy of consciousness. The roots of American Transcendentalism draw from the famous "transcendental deduction" outlined in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.[1] Kant posed the question: what is the self in its most primary, or as Emerson would term, its "aboriginal" form (2000, p. 141)?[2] Kant found a priori unity of the self in a cognitive structure that is prior to experience such that experience itself is possible. He thus proposed that the self must be deduced a priori because it is impossible to find the structure that allows for experience purely within experience. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, arguably the most important post-Kantian German philosopher, subjected Kant's account of consciousness to a dialectical process. Fichte's celebrated *Wissenschaftslehre* discovered the basis of consciousness in the distinction between the "I" and "not I" (Fichte 1994, pp. 42-44). Fichte conceived the notion that the self originates in an act—the dialectical process by which the "unconditioned I" asserts its existence in response to all that is "not I." In the German idealist tradition of transcendental philosophy, the ancient injunction to "know thyself" requires beginning with the subject (I) and works toward understanding the object (not I), in contrast to the methodology of modern natural philosophy, which begins with knowledge of the object and works back towards the subject.

In his first book *Nature* (1836), Emerson adopted the Fichtean premise that the subjective self can only come into existence through the positing of an object—that object being the self itself. Emerson proposes that "philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and Soul" (3). But he defines "Nature" in a capacious sense as a radicalized version of Fichte's "not I": "All which Philosophy distinguishes as NOT ME, that is both nature and art, all other men and my

own body, must be ranked under this name NATURE" (4). A number of observations arise from Emerson's articulation of the "Me, not Me" basis of consciousness.

First, in his account of the dialectical relation of nature and soul, Emerson locates his own physical body in the "Not Me" category. Second, the anti-materialist thrust of Emerson's treatment of consciousness absorbs the self into soul. In the process, Emerson adopts Friedrich Schelling's amendment to Fichte's account of the self, which proposed that the subject and object can only exist on the basis of a prior unity—an "Absolute" ground for all knowledge (Schelling 2021, pp. 24-5, 47). Emerson describes this prior unity of nature and soul in terms of "spirit" (31-33). In agreement with Schelling, Emerson characterized spirit as freedom such that any structural limitation on the self must be freely willed (Schelling 2021, p. 294). Emerson interprets this spiritual freedom to mean that it is essential to a "true theory of nature and of man" that it be "somewhat progressive" (31). But by "progress" Emerson did not simply mean the continual expansion of the impact of Enlightenment rationalism. Reason, in Emerson's view, provides access to intuitive, non-reductive ways of knowing such as "the traditions of miracles," "the history of Jesus Christ," as well as "prayer; eloquence; self-healing; and the wisdom of children" (37-38). As Cavell observes, Emerson's estimation of the excellence of Jesus as a teacher signifies his understanding of the connection between intuition and tuition (Cavell 1988, p. 115). For Emerson, the authority of reason derived from its resonance with the inner light of individual conscience.

Emerson's fullest account of the German idealist concept of absolute unity is contained in his essay "The Over-Soul" (1841). Emerson describes the Over-soul as that being "with which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other" (237). The Over-soul is both pantheistic and radically solipsistic inasmuch as within each individual "is the soul of the whole" (237). The Over-soul encapsulates the rich paradox at the heart of Emerson's democratic metaphysic according to which the ultimate truth is in all human beings universally and in each particularly. The resolution of this paradox lies in the divine: "the Highest dwells with him, that the sources of nature are in his own mind" (249). The self signifies the unity of nature and soul insofar as soul is the "perceiver and revealer of truth," the fundamental truth being that "every part and particle" of nature is "equally related" (242, 237). The divine is present in both nature and revelation which Emerson interprets broadly to mean "an influx of the Divine Mind into our Mind" (243). Philosophy is, thus, transcendental in form precisely

because "soul is superior to its knowledge" and wiser than any of its works (247).

"Self-Reliance" (1841) is arguably Emerson's clearest statement of the transcendental premises of his individualistic moral philosophy. Emerson's response to the question whether the soul can be superior to its own knowledge and works relates to the idea of genius. Emerson presents "genius" as a concept signifying insight beyond knowledge and actions conventionally understood. Genius represents the psychic link between the self and the universal: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius" (132). Genius is profoundly self-reflective inasmuch as "we recognize our own neglected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty" (132). Emerson's ideal of self-reliance redefines moral virtue in terms of courageous autonomy: "Trust thyself" (133). But this conception of virtue presupposes the idea of natural goodness almost invariably corrupted by the institutions of organized social life. Emerson insists: "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members" (134). The chief virtue advocated by society is conformity with its rules and attitudes. Self-reliance can, then, be defined negatively as the "aversion" to conformity (134). In this case, the "I" wills its freedom affirmatively in the negation of the "not I" represented by society.

Self-reliance requires virtue because conformity is in some sense very natural given that it is enforced by both external social pressure and by internal psychological forces. Emerson highlights the conformist pressure of raw public opinion as individuals typically fear the "indignation of the people" (137). This condition is exacerbated in mass democracy because of the prevailing anti-elitist prejudice that resents any claim to superiority: "Now we are a mob. Man does not stand in awe of man" (137, 145). Insofar as modern democracy celebrates the physical power of undifferentiated, numerical majorities, it will inevitably be hostile to distinctive genius. But for Emerson the most important reinforcement for the conformist tendencies of society is the misunderstanding of "character" in terms of habitual thought and behavior: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds" (138). The socially inculcated distrust of spontaneity and intuition is perhaps the greatest tool of conformism because it plants the seeds of self-doubt. Emerson describes the pernicious effect of conformism as the way in which it "scatters your force" (136). By this, Emerson appears to mean that conformity undermines psychic unity by interposing what he calls in his essay "The Transcendentalist," a debilitating "double consciousness" (93) through which the individual sees oneself both as a subject and

as an object perceived through the judgment of other people. The soul cannot "know thyself" mediated by the consciousness of others.

Emerson acknowledges several implications that flow from his doctrine of self-reliance. Perhaps most famous is his jarring transvaluation of the principle of philanthropy according to which he excoriated every discernible trace of moral self-satisfaction among habitual do-gooders. Strikingly, one of the objects of his disdain in "Self-Reliance" is the cause of anti-slavery:

> If an angry bigot assumes this bountiful cause of Abolition, and comes to me with his latest news from Barbados, why should I not say to him, 'Go love thy infant; love thy wood-chopper; be good natured and modest; have that grace and never varnish your hard, uncharitable ambition with this incredible tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off. Thy love afar is spite at home.' (135)

The example of abolition is troubling.[3] Emerson could simply be exposing the insufferable hypocrisy of a facile and self-serving form of moral idealism that requires no real sacrifice or virtue on the part of the benefactor, but allows for a feeling of moral superiority over one's less cosmopolitan neighbors. But in the context of antebellum American history, abolition was an issue that absolutely required a kind of moral projection by concerned people outside the South who typically did not experience enslaved people as part of their daily lives. That is to say, in the moral horizons of Emerson's self-reliance doctrine South Carolina and Barbados are closer to each other than either of them is to Boston.

Another implication Emerson adduces in the context of articulating the doctrine of self-reliance has to do with education. While education is the more direct theme of "The American Scholar," it is also an underlying presence in "Self-Reliance." Emerson declares in "Self-Reliance": "There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide" (133). Emerson bemoans the situation in his time when it is considered a tragedy if the "finest genius" at one of our colleges is not installed within a year of graduation in "the cities or suburbs of Boston or New York" (147). Greater openness to developing self-reliance through education would seem, then, to necessitate resistance to the reduction of higher education to professional training and a reaffirmation of the German neo-humanist ideal of seeking knowledge for its own sake. Emerson cautions, if Americans are going to cease viewing learned institutions as essentially socio-economic ballasts— "guards of property" (152)—it will require employing self-reliance as a new way to interpret any and every form of human association.

The American Scholar

Emerson was ambivalent toward academic life. He resented many learned institutions for their complicity in the banality of politics in America inasmuch as "from the courtesies of the academy and the college," there is a "spirit of cowardly compromise and seeming which intimates frightful skepticism, a life without love, and an activity without an aim" (91).[4] But Emerson also offered more positive assessments of the scholarly vocation. For example, he claimed it is only when the official political doctrine of the state becomes near total falsehood that "the scholar flies for refuge to the world of ideas and aims to replenish nature from the source" (Emerson 2008, p. 102). Scholars, then, represent a potential counterweight to the conformist pressures for political compromise. That is to say, if the political order is just, "scholars will gladly be lovers, citizens and philanthropists" (Emerson 2008, p. 102).

Emerson nevertheless identified the educated classes in America as a major source of corruption and purveyors of materialism. Emerson insists that Americans rely almost entirely on the "power of the dollar; they are deaf to sentiment," and he concludes "no class is more faithless than the scholar or intellectual man" (Emerson 2008, p. 111). American education is a "system of despair" that suffocates human creativity with the "deadness of its detail" (410). In a faithless and unimaginative age, it is hardly surprising "men do not believe in education" (410). The broader cultural impact of a literary class in particular destitute of faith is that "society should be disheartened and sensualized by unbelief" (411). Emerson, thus, offers his vision as an alternative to the skepticism characterizing American education by pointing toward the possibility for a model of scholarship that exalts the sacred and celebrates individual genius.

"The American Scholar" is crucial for understanding Emerson's complicated portrait of academic life. This lecture was originally the Phi Betta Kappa Address delivered at Harvard in August 1837. It was received with considerable enthusiasm at the time and is arguably, as one commentator observes, the "most celebrated academic talk in American history" (Sacks 2003, p. 1). The immediate context of the speech is perhaps significant. The audience of more than two hundred included many of the great and the good of elite Boston society, especially commercial leaders and the pillars of the establishment Unitarian Church. As the scion of an old New England family, who counted no less than thirty-one relatives as Harvard alums (Greenham 2012, p. viii), Emerson was familiar with the internal conflicts within his alma mater over the direction of higher education in America.

This was a turbulent period in Harvard's history.[5] During Emerson's time as a student at Harvard in the early 1820's, the teachers he most admired were the German educated literature professors George Ticknor and Edward Everett. They were inspired by the Humboldt model of the modern university characterized by faculty governance, academic freedom, and the focus on original research and knowledge acquisition.[6] In the 1830s more conservative elements in the college led by sitting Supreme Court Justice and Harvard Fellow of Law Joseph Story established policies that ensured control of Harvard by its wealthy Board rather than faculty. In 1834 Ticknor was effectively driven out of Harvard by non-academic University President Josiah Quincy. That same year German literature professor Karl Follen was dismissed by the administration in an act seen by many as a repudiation of the principle of academic freedom given that Follen was an outspoken abolitionist (not a popular position in New England at the time) and an advocate for student and faculty self-governance. Emerson and many fellow travelers in Transcendentalist circles were upset that with Follen's departure German literature was no longer taught at Harvard.

"The American Scholar" was remarkable for a variety of reasons. It disappointed some of those who expected Emerson either to praise Harvard or to engage in direct criticism of its recent policies. Likewise, Emerson surprised some of his admirers who believed Emerson's exemplary scholar would be a kind of democratic everyman (Sacks 2003, p. 30). But it is perhaps most profitable to view this address in terms of its emancipatory potential as stimulus for the kind of reforms Emerson believed were needed to revivify the "system of despair" American higher education had become. One commentator astutely identifies "The American Scholar" as the "fountainhead" of Emerson's "engagement with humanity" (Sacks 2003, p. 3). The text of the address was intended to provoke and challenge the complacent assumptions of America's educated classes. Famously, one of its auditors, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. would pronounce of "The American Scholar": "This grand Oration was our intellectual Declaration of Independence" (Sacks 2003, p. 18).

Indeed, Emerson practically began the address with an assurance about the developing American self-confidence in arts and letters: "Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close" (43). Hitherto Americans have focused their minds primarily on the hard work of building a nation and had little time to worry about the arts. Americans could enjoy the intellectual and spiritual benefits of European culture and its derivatives in the New World as free riders, as it were. But Emerson identifies this as a

pivotal moment when events will arise that touch the newly forming American soul with such force and verve "that it must be sung" in a distinctive poetic voice that "will revive and lead in a new age" (43). One precondition for the birth of this American poetry is the transformation of the university from a glorified finishing school for future Brahmins to a place that cultivates creative and unified souls (Frost 2005, p. 287). Emerson is not naïve about the obstacles facing this move toward American intellectual and artistic independence. He recognizes that the American educated classes "have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe," and will find it difficult to craft a poetic vision suited to a democratic people (59). Emerson acknowledged that the "spirit of the American free-man" is accurately suspected to be "timid, imitative, [and] tame," precisely because "the mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself" (59). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the only real examples of genius he actually adduced in "The American Scholar" are Europeans including Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Robert Burns, William Wordsworth, Thomas Carlyle and Emanuel Swedenborg.

Emerson's criticism of American educational elites is trenchant. Their superficial posturing over the works of America's European intellectual inheritance only serves to mask the palpable cultural degradation among a people naturally drawn to material aspirations. Emerson characterizes the most obvious problem in American higher education as one of specialization. Americans see education as training or professionalization because they reduce education into functionalist terms. Emerson describes this tendency in terms of a social "fable" analogous in its effects to the division of labor in the industrial revolution. This fable tells us that there is one essence of the human being, but "that you must take the whole society to find the whole man" (44). In the fable each individual assumes a role, for example, "Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer," but social duty requires each individual at some point to "return from his own labor to embrace all the other laborers" (44). The great problem in American education is that the original unity of purpose portrayed in the fable "has been so distributed to multitudes, has been so minutely subdivided and peddled out" that the soul of the individual is amputated from the trunk of society (44). In reducing knowledge habitually to function, American educators always only see "a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man" (44). The psychological effects of this functionalized existence are brutal: "The priest becomes a form; the attorney a statute-book; the mechanic a machine; the sailor a rope of the ship" (44). In American education, the person becomes a thing.

How specifically does this dystopian fable about the intellectual division of labor apply to education? Emerson rejects books, cultures, or traditions that do not support the development of the student's and scholar's inner voice or intuition. Self-reliance applied to education is a call for experimentation, encouraging multi-tasking and stoking creative passions and instincts. In the distribution of functions, the scholar is "the delegated intellect," but this process of delegation can be either negative or affirmative. In its most common form in America, the scholar is a victim of social pressure to conform and thus becomes either "a mere thinker, or still worse, the parrot of other men's thinking" (44). This is the human type exemplifying what Emerson dismisses so thoroughly as what is wrong with American education. But, for our purposes, what is most significant about "The American Scholar" is Emerson's projection of a positive ideal for scholarship, the antithesis of a "mere thinker." In its proper state, the function of a scholar is to exemplify what Emerson calls "Man Thinking" (44).

Self-Trust and the Scholar

Emerson identifies three main influences on the development of the American scholar, or "Man Thinking" in the American context: nature, history, and the active life. Given the explicit metaphysical underpinnings of Emerson's philosophy, it is perhaps not surprising that nature is the influence on scholarship both first in time and primary in importance. Nature is the non-institutional, divine essence of the scholar's personal identity and intuition embedding the individual in the "web of God" (45). The "man Thinking" is not overwhelmed by the pantheistic vision of cosmic unity. In fact, Emerson declares that one of the defining characteristics of the scholar is possessing an engaged mind that classifies and orders natural phenomena in direct opposition to the "tyranny of unifying instinct" (45). The scholar in the Emersonian hue has an intuitive understanding of the divine mystery of human consciousness contained in the "I, not I" distinction: "Nature is the opposite of soul" (45). The transcendent link between nature and soul is, of course, the individual mind of the truly thinking human being for the real beauty of nature lies in "the beauty of his own mind" (45). The scholar intuits the cosmic unity among separate perceivable beings and classes of things in nature.

The second great influence on the "spirit of the scholar" is history, or "the mind of the past" (46). Emerson displays ambivalence toward books of which he claims: "Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst" (47). The problem of books in Emerson's

view is not so much the individual taking direction from an exogenous source, so much as it is the predicament that arises when the sacredness attached, perhaps justifiably, to the act of creation is transferred to the recording of it. Books stifle thought and creativity when the writings themselves assume an authority that "the sluggish mind of the multitude" clings onto and appeals to in order to resist any criticism or challenge to that authority (46). However, Emerson hastens to add that it is not only, or even especially, the common people who sacralize books. Rather it is among the educated classes, the arbiters of taste and culture, that this problem is most acute: "colleges are built on it" (47). Emerson hereby offers his Harvard audience an implicit endorsement of the German research university model championed by his teachers such as Ticknor and Everett. For Emerson, higher education is not simply the transmission of cultural knowledge and traditions from one generation to another. Universities must be places that inspire critical and original thought, but today:

> Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given; forgetful that Cicero, Locke and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote books. (47)

Emerson herein suggests that there is arguably even less original scholarship in the growing institutionalized system of universities in 19th century America than there was in the much less democratic past.

Emerson describes a seemingly irreducible tension between learned writings and the spirit of scholarship. The findings and arguments of books must be approached with a certain acceptance of their provisional status, but they cannot apparently be dispensed with entirely in education. Books and intellectual traditions are fundamentally conservative: "That is good, they say—let us hold by this" (47). Indeed, Emerson argues genius can be its own worst enemy as witnessed by the suffocating cultural impact of Shakespeare on English literature for over two centuries. To this end, he makes special mention of writers such as Wordsworth, Carlyle and especially Goethe, who challenge prevailing literary fashions and usages, and by comparison to whom the highly stylized writings of the previous generation look "cold and pedantic" (58). At times Emerson even seems more radically to anticipate later critical hermeneutics that challenge the very idea of "great books" as he describes the idealized "Man Thinking" as one who "can read God directly" without the mediation of authoritative texts (48). Even as American universities expand materially, and construct new infrastructure financed by massive "pecuniary foundations," they risk

losing touch with the experiential core of higher education inspired by wonder: "Forget this, and our American colleges will recede in their public importance, whilst they grow richer every year" (49).

The third important influence on the development of the American scholar is the deliberate embrace of the active life. Emerson deplores the ivory tower and calls upon Harvard elites to celebrate the rich artistic potential of popular culture, or what Emerson calls the literature of the "near, the low, the common" (57). Emerson's scholar is not the contemplative book worm: "Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential" (49). The scholar is not only a person of action because he or she is creative—critical thinking is fundamentally active—but also due to the need for scholars to exhibit great courage and possess a "heroic mind" (49). What kind of heroism does Emerson associate with the American scholar? It is not the form of courage we would generally identify with political or social activism. To the contrary, the scholar-hero displays the courage required to confront a certain realization about human consciousness, that is to recognize that "the world" is nothing more or less than "a shadow of the soul, or other me" (49). Popular culture is the scholar's chief access to the world or "other me." For Emerson, it is the menial and mundane that speaks most to the needs of the rational soul: "Life is our dictionary" (50). Emerson's Romantic-inspired celebration of the stirrings of the heart confirms the anti-institutional bias throughout "The American Scholar" as he insists "colleges and books only copy the language which the field and the work-yard made" (51). There is also, however, a sharp anti-elitist element in Emerson's Thoureauian (even proto-Maoist) rustification of moral virtue: "There is virtue yet in the hoe and spade, for learned as well as unlearned hands" (52). For Emerson, what is perhaps lost in terms of civility and erudition with this labor-oriented ideal of professors working the fields is more than regained in vitality and spiritual toughness.

The peak of the virtues for the American scholar is the distinctive characteristic "self-trust." The wisdom contained in nature, books and the active life are "all comprised in self-trust" (52). Trusting in one's own judgment and intuitions will be perhaps especially trying for the scholar because to democratic peoples, the visible features of "Man Thinking" will often appear professionally incompetent and socially maladjusted. Perhaps the most dissonant chord the scholar will strike in American life results from his or her anti-materialism. The scholar in democracy must see it as a crucial task "to resist the vulgar prosperity that retrogrades ever to barbarism" (53). But once again the non-conformist academic is no strident or starry-eyed activist for "some fetish in government" is beneath concern, indeed "not worth

the poorest thought, which the scholar has lost in listening to the controversy" (53). Self-trust is not reducible to introspection, although it clearly is part of it. The scholar must possess a certain confidence that in going down to the secrets of his own mind he has "descended into the secrets of all minds" (53). Self-trust is in this sense a normative conclusion drawn from the premise of the Over-Soul, in which each and all participate.

Self-trust requires courage, and Emerson displays an Enlightenment confidence in the power of education to overcome ignorance and fear. But the truly democratic potentiality contained in Emerson's notion of self-trust lies in the exemplary effect of inspiring pedagogy insofar as the creative poet, for instance, only does for me "what one day I can do for myself" (56). Much as self-reliance requires one to see in works of genius one's own discarded thoughts, so too does self-trust call forth a kind of spiritual grandeur that runs contrary to the sign of the times. Today, Emerson declares, human beings have become "bugs," "the mass," the "herd" (55). Despite this violent brutalizing imagery, Emerson also exudes a curious optimism that the herd-like *demos* are educable inasmuch as they look to the "hero or the poet" to validate society's ideals of greatness. Emerson's heroes are not political founders in the traditional sense insofar as they tend to "leave government to clerks and desks" (55). But the unmistakable discontent among the American literary class presents an opportunity to transvalue the aesthetic sense in a democratic direction. Instead of focusing the artistic and academic mind on the aristocratic concepts of the beautiful and the sublime, now in the present age "the near, the low, the common is being explored and poeticized" (57). Self-trust is, thus, conducive to cultural subversion in the most positive and creative sense.

Self-Reliance and the University

Emerson's account of the transvaluation of artistic and intellectual virtues in "The American Scholar" is not directly political. But it is institutional insofar as reformed American universities can provide a platform for original, creative scholarship that speaks to the development of the student's inner sentiments and intuitions. Emerson's scholar is not a poet-founder who will draft majestic legal or religious codes. But given that the academy has already played a pivotal role in nourishing and exporting the moral cynicism and cultural pessimism that marks what Emerson calls "want of faith" (410), the discovery of a distinctively American kind of scholarship cannot help but have a positive political impact. The institutions of higher education are in

a unique position to help enact a cultural founding of world historical significance with the prospect that "a nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul" (59). Needless to say, Emerson leaves the portrait of this libertarian theocracy in only the broadest, most suggestive brush strokes. But the implicit premise of Emerson's American scholar is that the human being in the complete sense—the good person—has yet to appear on Earth as the good citizen.

Nearly thirty years after delivering the "American Scholar," Emerson finally received an honorary LLD from Harvard University. This restoration of positive relations between arguably at the time America's premier intellectual and his alma mater culminated in his election by Harvard's alumni to its Board of Overseers in which role he would serve on a university committee established to examine methods of teaching foreign languages, evaluating the grading system and debate ways to modernize the curriculum (Allen 1981, p. 640). In 1869 Emerson supported the appointment as Harvard President of an educational progressive Charles Eliot, who instituted the German practice of elective courses and an innovative lecture series of distinguished figures from outside the faculty. Unsurprisingly, Emerson himself would deliver a series of lectures on philosophy.

While Emerson arguably channels the spirit of Humboldt's transformation of the 19th century German universities, he is not the American Humboldt. Emerson's essays marked by their unapologetic mixture of abstract metaphysics, convention confounding vernacular, and paradoxical tropes would no doubt have puzzled even the most talented reform-minded university or college administrator. But Emerson's reformist sympathies were apparent, and it is possible to theoretically reconstruct Emerson's argument about higher education in such a manner that does speak to institutional reform. We know Emerson was critical of the idea of classical education in his day: "Some thousands of young men are graduated at our colleges in this country every year, and the persons who, at forty years, still read Greek, can all be counted on your hand" (406). In this respect, American schools are simply imitating the elite universities in Britain, but only providing a second-rate version of the Oxford or Cambridge classical education (568). Emerson insists it is beyond mistaken, it is "warfare against common sense" that the educated class, "the whole liberal talent of this country should be directed in its best years on studies which lead to nothing" (406). But institutions can never really change unless and until the individual as scholar, citizen and most importantly as human being is reformed upon the basis of self-trust.

It is the non-institutional, even agonistic, nature of Emerson's ideal of scholarship that offered the possibility for transformational influence in America as modelled by his projection of contested academic space exemplified in a provocative live address censuring Harvard's Brahmin's to their faces. This ideal of the university as a venue for robust critique and controversy would in later years permeate Emerson's rhetoric about American politics. For instance, he described Northern public agitation against the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act as being "like a university to the entire people. It has turned every dinner table into a debating club, and made every citizen a student of natural law" (Turner 2011, p. 138). This metaphorical presentation of the university as a kind of "standing insurrection" certainly accords with the more iconoclastic, even antinomian, features of Emerson's self-reliance philosophy (Gougeon 2011, p. 191).

The academic variant of self-reliance would prove to be central to Emerson's prescription for elevating American democracy. Even as Emerson insisted that "man is endogenous, and education is his unfolding," he also allowed for expertise among those who inhabit "a higher sphere of thought" and can help the individual discover truth within oneself (Allen 1981, p. 453). For Emerson, his goal of popularizing the doctrine of "the infinitude of the private man" required promoting original, creative research inasmuch as in the colleges and universities "it is indispensable to resist the consolidation of all men into a few men" (397). The scholar's great service to society in stimulating and provoking debate presupposed academic freedom for the individual scholar housed in an institution of higher education.

By this account, "The American Scholar" represents a home-grown American expression of the principle of academic freedom—the scholar's right to teach and conduct research without undue interference from political or religious authorities—decades before its generally accepted arrival from Germany in the latter part of the nineteenth-century. In the "American Scholar" Emerson provides perhaps his quintessential definition of freedom as "without any hinderance that does not arise out of his constitution" (54). The celebration of self-reliance obviously exposes a distinctive tension within American democratic society between the belief in natural goodness and individual moral sense, on one hand, and the claim of institutional wisdom and authority of the sovereign people, on the other. But Emerson's heroic vision of the American scholar as champion of human freedom may hold more than merely historical significance.

Conclusion: Emerson Today

The modern American research university is confronted by serious challenges that would not, we suspect, surprise Emerson. Emerson's appeal to the scholar to philosophize about "the near, the low, the common" (57) clearly foreshadowed the contemporary turn toward understanding philosophy as practice. This approach, perhaps exemplified by Michel Foucault and James Tully, demonstrates how moral and ethical knowledge is socially constructed by particular practices within specific historical contexts. This practical bent did not mean, however, as Augst (1999: 103) claims that Emerson rejected the idea of specialized university research. Rather the division of the branches of study into discrete disciplines pursuing truth largely free from the interference of those outside of the professorial community is consistent with Emerson's educational philosophy.

Threats to academic freedom and complaints from some quarters about the pernicious effects of academic specialization are more prominent today than for many years. In the 1957 case *Sweezy v New Hampshire*, at the height of the Cold War "Red Scare," the United States Supreme Court would condemn "the grave harm resulting from governmental intrusion into the intellectual life of a university," even as it asserted "the essentiality of freedom in the community of American universities is almost self-evident."[7] A decade later in the case *Keyishian v Board of Regents* (1967), in the midst of widespread anti-war protests on university campuses, the Supreme Court would reaffirm: "Our Nation is deeply committed to safeguarding academic freedom, which is of transcendent value to all of us and not merely to the teachers concerned."[8] However, many scholars see more recent decisions (especially *Garcetti v. Ceballos* in 2006) as opening legal doors to seriously curtailing academic freedom in public colleges and universities.[9] Given this erosion of the commitment to academic freedom in the courts, it is perhaps not surprising that in the past few years state lawmakers in 35 states from Florida to Texas, and from Ohio to Utah have introduced bills that seek to curb academic freedom through gag orders on discussion of so-called "divisive concepts" such as critical race theory, measures to weaken the protections of tenure, and even legislative mandates shifting curricular decision-making away from faculty toward government oversight.[10] A broad cultural reaffirmation of robust Emersonian intellectual individualism could help refocus debates about academic freedom away from partisan battles and towards ideals of freedom and equality embedded in the tradition of American political thought.

Changes in the structural dynamics of American university life also present deep challenges to academic freedom. It has become ever more difficult to sustain Emersonian scholarly self-reliance when the norms of collegial self-governance and tenure are threatened by the vast unequal chasm between increasingly imperious administrative elites on top and the growing legions of adjuncts and temporary lecturers forming the academic precariat on the ground. Emerson likely would also caution today's American scholar to be wary that the peer-review process, especially in culturally contentious social sciences and humanities, not simply become another mechanism to entrench and perpetuate existing paradigms. In the face of increasing calls by powerful public and private forces for the academy to justify its continued existence by more fully integrating the scholarly mission into broader economic, political, or religious systems, reflecting upon Emerson's inspiring, but also perhaps unsettling, vision of the American scholar may help produce a salutary counterbalance.

Notes

[1] Kant 1996: A 84-87, B 116-119, pp. 141-146. Whereas Allen (1981, pp. 391-92) and Berger (2020, p. 53) argue Emerson's relation to Kant was superficial, I agree with Cavell (1979, pp. 168-70), Greenham (2012, pp. 145-49), Woodward-Burns (2016, p. 40, 52) and Wellek (1943, pp. 44-48) that it is fundamental.

[2] Hereafter all references to Emerson 2000 in notes and text will simply be page number in parenthesis.

[3] Arguably it was not until the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act—nine years after publication of "Self-Reliance"—that Emerson became truly committed to the cause of abolition.

[4] Emerson was especially irked by the fact that his friend and kindred spirit Henry David Thoreau was never honored by a university or college. As Emerson put it: "perhaps these learned bodies feared the satire of his presence" (Allen 1981, p. 616).

[5] The following discussion about Harvard's internal battles draw from Sacks' excellent account (2003, pp. 33-40).

[6] For a first-rate treatment of the Humboldt model of modern research model exemplified by the establishment of the University of Berlin in 1810, see McClelland 1980, pp. 101-149.

[7] *Sweezy v New Hampshire*, 1957.

[8] *Keyishian v Board of Regents*, 1967.

[9] In *Garcetti v Ceballos* a split court ruled that an assistant district attorney did not have a constitutional right to criticize his own office. For the potential, disastrous application of this decision to the academy, see Hudson 2022 and Goldberg 2022.

[10] See https://ohiocapitaljournal.com/2024/05/31/state-laws-threaten-to-erode-academic-freedom-in-us-higher-education/

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