



RALPH WALDO EMERSON'S TRANSCENDENTALIST ETHOS AND ACTIVISM

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"I ought to go upright and vital and speak the rude truth in all ways."
– Emerson, *Self-Reliance*

It was two days ago, May 25th, that we celebrated Ralph Waldo Emerson's birth. Born in 1803 in Boston, Massachusetts, Emerson's lifelong career as a poet, essayist, professional lecturer, and man of letters was defined by his controversial and impassioned calls for radical social and cultural reform. Known for his transcendentalist ethos in works such as "Self-Reliance," "The American Scholar," and *Nature*, the nineteenth-century thinker's language called for intellectual development and an ethic of self-improvement. As scholar Evan Carton determines, Emerson "profoundly internalized the leading cognitive and affective challenges of the time and place and fashioned visionary responses that some combination of personal ambition, popular appeal, rhetorical genius, and historical happenstance render nationally consequential." (Carton 2012, 6). Here, Carton sees Emerson as an individual who deeply recognized the volatile collision between American rationale and Unitarian scriptural authority and thus used his platform to advocate against marginalization and other forms of social regression. Furthermore, he served as a central figure of the New England Transcendentalism movement through his publication of *Nature*, wherein Emerson privileges one's relationship to the universe outside of societal conformity. Ralph Waldo Emerson's chief contributions to nineteenth-century American society comprised a lifelong work based on ideas of self-reliance, criticism of conformity, and philosophies on religion and individualism.

Emerson argued that there were three areas of one's education – nature, books, and action – to which an individual must devote themselves in order to create real, political, social, and intellectual change. The first maxim, nature, was inspired by an 1833 visit to the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris; after which he reflected on the animated and



naturalistic elements of the Universe and its relation to life itself, let alone the principles of human beings. Emerson believed that because nature was everywhere, human pursuits should mimic the organizational principles of nature. Social behaviors could be explained through natural matter, and science was “nothing but the finding of analogy, identity, in the most remote parts.” (Emerson 1971, 87) The scholar Lee Rust Brown writes about Emerson’s 1833 visit to the *Jardin des Plantes*, noting that when Emerson viewed the outside of France’s Cabinet of Natural History, he “found these classifications demonstrated again on a larger scale in the menagerie and the botanical gardens, where living representatives of species were laid out to illustrate the systematic ranks of genus, family, order, and class.” (Brown 1992, 57). Indeed, Emerson recognized that consciousness and societal structures were not created, but naturally woven into the very fabric of our “divine design,” (Carton 1992, 17) and thereby, were meant to be discovered through the close observation of nature. To study nature, then, was to study oneself.

The second major area of one’s education, books, was highly necessary, but according to Emerson was subject to corruption. As mandated by his contentions in “The American Scholar,” one’s relationship to books must of course include the pursuit of knowledge but tempered with self-awareness and criticism. Without these two qualities, the danger was that people would invest books with a sacredness that they did not really possess, treating them as objects to be uncritically consumed rather than human objects ready to be critiqued, and thus invalidate the purpose of recorded text: the germination of new and original thought. Bookishness and bibliomania – loving books merely for their being books – were often deemed as familiar aphorisms for genius and used in lieu of creativity and true knowledge. Books would, if used to their fullest potential, “inspire the active soul,” (Emerson 1971, 56). But to this point, the notion of being educated had been wrongfully interpreted as a tokenization of books and text and had restricted the pursuit of critical analysis, creative thinking, and the evolution of intellectual processes.

But for Emerson, education was not all observation and thought – far from it. The third part of one’s education was action, which Emerson deemed essential to thought, stating directly that without action, thoughts could “never ripen into truth.” (Emerson 1971, 59). Similarly, he writes: “Only so much do I know, as I have lived. Instantly we know whose words are loaded with life, and whose [are] not.” (Emerson 1971, 59). Emerson underscores how truth would remain inert and meaningless if it did not materialize in the real world. There was a strong and necessary civic component to living a moral life. Emerson spoke fervently against the institution of slavery, even distancing himself from transcendentalists who did not actively work against the slave-trade. The process of action, constituted through public speaking, advocacy, and written publication allowed for the natural circuitry of thought and



action to take place. Ultimately, Emerson believed that action was necessary in the construction of a more egalitarian community, one in which its people evolved their nation by remaining critical of their world, and willing to work against what they believed was immoral.

There is an overlap between Emerson's transcendentalism and current trends related to political urgency. Like many famous activists who dissented unjust social powers, Emerson was considered a radical for his time. His theories of self-reliance and criticism coincide with his mental determination to understand our democratic responsibility to each other. That is to say that despite Emerson's contribution to American culture, a modern transcription of his philosophy would probably involve questioning the origins of American nationalism itself. True, Emerson believed that reflective work on the self would legitimize the strength of this country (Field 2001, 9). But now, since one must acknowledge the ways in which race, racism, and the Atlantic slave-trade have shaped the American identity, reconceptualizing Emersonian thought would involve preserving our duty to each other and becoming more aware of how history has shaped us. Thus, Emerson's emphasis on individual reflection can be recognized as a way of prioritizing our contribution to democratic progress, and ultimately, a better world.

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