The New American Scholar

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IN HIS ESSAY "Literary Vocation as Occupational Idealism: The Example of Emerson's 'American Scholar,'" Rob Wilson compares Ralph Waldo Emerson's scholar with the present literary intellectual in American society. According to Wilson, rather than becoming the intellectual beacon of hope Emerson envisioned, the American (literary) scholar has become trapped in a kind of intellectual bondage by the very act of writing. That is, Wilson believes that the American scholar, because of the effect of Emersonian idealism, has been subjected to repeating Emersonian moral symbols and aesthetic tropes, which has resulted in the alienation of the critic from American society (Wilson 84). However, as will be seen, Wilson's theory of "occupational idealism" is an invalid rhetorical device used to support his belief in dialectical materialism and determinism, whereby the scholar is trapped in a cycle of history and nature causing him to vainly attempt to demystify Emerson's idealistic writings by simply producing more of them.

According to Emerson, one of the duties of the American scholar is to look to his inner light and through his rhetorical skills bring a conversion of the world whereby men would be taught the virtue of self-reliance: "We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak with our own minds" (Emerson 71). One of the purposes of Wilson's essay is to elucidate the terms of Emersonian idealism that have been repeatedly used by the literary world ever since Emerson made his address at Cambridge:

> According to the energizing image of *power/knowledge* from the Phi Beta Kappa address of 1837, the scholar's word would be a regenerative deed for the sleepwalking populace. Literary criticism merges into social prophecy. Each trope would link the sublime energies of God and Capital to the sublime influx of emancipatory energies in the self, *any self*. (Wilson 91)

Thus, Wilson believes that the current state of American literary criticism has morphed into one in which the scholar is compelled to participate in a writing system that is based upon Emersonian symbolicity of speech and imagery with the scholar as a "troping genius" (92). Although Wilson thinks that Emersonian idealism has become a central role model for the literary vocation in America, ironically, the net effect of Emerson's "conversion" of the literary world had been to subject the American scholar to an occupational idealism where he is bound into a recurring fate of rhetorical representations: "trying to demystify habitual illusions in the act of writing more of them, as if this above all constitutes a counterstrategy of rhetorical liberation" (Wilson 91).

In order to show how the current state of American literature is wrought with Emersonian idealism and its social irrelevance, Wilson gives the example of Frederick Exley—a high school teacher of English who yearns to become a transcendentalist author in the mold of Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Exley's dream is to become a great American novelist and live a life of fame and fortune (87). According to Wilson, Exley's vocational call serves as a paradigm of the literary intellectual who would interiorize the work ethos of capitalism as empowering Emerson's god-believing self to accrue moral sublimity within labor (88). However, while Exley is summoned to an Emersonian career of letters that would set him apart from the masses, he becomes distraught about writing and never seeing his calling materialize. For Wilson, Exley's vision of self-sublimity is founded in compensatory narcissism—with the same self-brooding in bars and libraries—and "repeats the marketplace disdain, suicidal introversion, and 'discontent of the literary class' . . . as portrayed in Emerson's 'American Scholar'" (89). Exley's alienation from American society is only curable by looking to the inner self and converting to Emersonian transcendence. This type of conversion is not only typical for the scholar but *inevitable* given the "commodification" of nature that Wilson believes Emerson's essay assumes (Wilson 89–90).

Wilson's use of the term "commodification" as it relates to Emersonian idealism is somewhat obscure. In one part of his essay, Wilson suggests the term "commodity" refers to the material world—nature as being material real estate (101); in another variable, the term refers to the economy, a "commodity-driven marketplace" (90n9). In yet another instance, reference is made to "commodities" as being man-made conditions and not facts of nature. Borrowing from Adorno, Wilson posits that the fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness, but merely has a dialectical nature in the sense that it produces consciousness (105). Therefore, Wilson argues that

the fetish character of the commodity helps produce the fetish of strong selfhood in Emerson's idealism (105). From an analytical standpoint, Wilson's reliance on the terms "fetish character of commodity" necessarily assumes reference to a *physical* object that *produces* consciousness. Clearly, Wilson is making an effort to convince his audience that Emerson's idealism is controlled by and subjected to the material world. That is, the same Emersonian idealism that has trapped the American scholar in a state of social inertia (by repeating Emersonian symbols and aesthetic tropes) is likewise irreconcilable with the real world order of things (Wilson 103–05). In particular, Wilson's essay assumes that because of the pre-existence of the "real" material world, Emerson's idealistic symbolism must actually "compensate" for its illusory character by recalculating the real world:

> Emerson nonetheless, by an act of ideological compensation that *refigures the real*, proposes to heal this split self not by acts of social transformation but by a private act of vision. (Wilson 103; emphasis added)

Thus, Wilson is clearly suggesting that by producing symbolism and "compensatory" tropes, Emerson's idealism is in reality (of the material world) nothing but a rhetorical illusion.

In the end, Wilson's theory of "occupational idealism" is in reality a rhetorical device used to support his belief in dialectical materialism and determinism. In a telltale footnote in this essay, Wilson summarizes his position on Emerson's effect upon American literature: "The Emersonian influence is at first 'inevitable' and only later, through social critique, becomes 'dialectical'" (92n14). Thus, because Emerson's influence is "inevitable" (trapping the intellectual into accepting idealistic symbolism), Wilson is espousing the idea that the American literary scholar is the direct result of Emersonian idealism. But if it is "inevitable" that the scholar will become an idealist (in producing literature), then it also follows that this idealistic character necessarily determines the fate of all literary intellectuals. Then, being part of a determined fate, Wilson posits that—through the process of criticism—the intellectual becomes dialectical in how he processes the literature (92). Therefore, the literary critic starts as an Emersonian idealist and *becomes* a dialectical materialist in a vain attempt to demystify the habitual illusions wrought by the transcendentalism of Emerson "by writing more of them" (92). Later in his essay, Wilson attempts to show his audience a way of escape from the trap of Emersonian idealism: by becoming more pragmatic and writing in clear metaphors concerning the human condition (113). If nothing else, such clear-speaking pragmatism would appease the American populace, who Wilson believes has a contempt

for Emersonian idealism (89). Interestingly, since Wilson is himself a literary intellectual, the very act of his critical writing seems to belie his argument that the American scholar has been unduly and "inevitably" influenced by Emersonian symbolism.

As stated above, there is a systemic flaw in Wilson's analysis. He argues that the literary intellectual is trapped into accepting Emersonian idealism simply because the writer may use Emersonian symbols or tropes in expressing a particular thought. For Wilson, the "pathos of ego" of the intellectual derives from the normalization of Emersonian idealism upon society—presumably by institutions of higher learning (91). In either case, Emerson's transcendentalism is the objective fate (determinism) of the American literary scholar. Thus, Wilson's view produces the contradictory result of the literary scholar being controlled by the elements that pervade society ("commodification"), even for those who exercise their free will and articulate idealistic writings. It may have made more sense for Wilson to simply identify the Emersonian "problem" as it relates to the modern scholar as being the convergence and tension between idealism and determinism. As correctly stated by Wilson, Emerson's scholar would seek to use symbolic language as a vehicle to reach a "God-relying self-hood" where "trust is dematerialized and etherialized into the free flow of signs" (92). This is the essence of Emersonian transcendentalism—that the ultimate truth is founded in the very act of writing from within (Emerson 61). However, Wilson's theory leads the scholar always back to where he presumably started: in the material world where one's writing skills are predetermined (98). Therefore, Wilson's analysis is correct that Emerson has probably been the most influential single source of American literature. However, to characterize the result of the scholar's occupation as being his "determined" fate is theoretically invalid.[1]

In explaining how the scholar has been compelled into Emersonian idealism, Wilson categorizes the literary intellectual as being the "novelist, poet, critic, and scholar" (91). Wilson also adheres to Frank Lentricchia's definition of the literary scholar as being "people who read, analyze and produce what advanced criticism calls 'representations' and 'interpretations'" (Lentricchia, qtd. in Wilson 91). Thus, Wilson has grouped the literary author who *creates* the text with the critic who *analyzes* the writing—both are considered scholars who have been subjected to Emersonian idealism as an occupational fate. One of the problems with Wilson's argument of the American Scholar being unduly influenced by Emerson's idealism is that it ignores one of the primary purposes of Emerson's scholar to rely on his intuition in order to enable the writer to act with creativity in expressing his thoughts:

> The soul active sees absolute truth; and utters truth, or creates. In this action, it is genius; not the privilege of here and there a favorite, but the sound estate of every man. In its essence, it is progressive. The book, the college, the school of art, the institution of any kind, stop with some past utterance of genius. This is good, say they, let us hold by this. They pin me down. They look backward and not forward. But genius looks forward: the eyes of man are set in his forehead, not in his hindhead: man hopes: genius creates. Whatever talents may be, if the man create not, the pure efflux of his Deity is not his; cinders and smoke there may be, but not yet flame. (Emerson 57–58)

Thus, the active soul looking ahead to create is Emerson's path to literary genius leading to transcendent life. He clearly wanted the American college to focus on the creative aspect:

> Colleges, in like manner, have their indispensable office—to teach elements. But they can only highly serve us when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and, by the concentrated fires, set the hearts of their youth on flame. (Emerson 59)

In the end, there is a fundamental difference between the Emersonian scholar whose calling is not the Exley metaphor of fame and fortune, or even the Wilsonian literary critic who engages in analyzing prose and poetry, but rather the person who aims to create an artful expression through his or her writing. Based upon the tone of Wilson's essay and his conclusions, it appears that most of his complaints are grounded on an analytic "dialectical" approach to literary criticism (Wilson 92). One of the main problems with Wilson's analytic approach is that it is contingent upon history and human experience as a basis for reviewing Emerson's transcendental imagery—which is clearly aimed at a spiritual existence (Emerson 70). One could argue that if Emerson's prose and poetry seeks to reach a spiritual realm through the inner self, then such is an art form, and should not be subjected to Wilson's literary analysis. That is, in Emerson's subjective world of transcendental spiritualism, technical analysis should be left to the literary critics (the bookworm); art should be left to those possessing and expressing their writing through a creative imagination (Emerson 57).

In his essay, Wilson argues that the occupational idealism that has been the result of the "Emerson effect" needs to be *resisted* by the literary scholar:

> The occupational idealism of this deep-rooted "Emerson effect" in American letters needs to be resisted lest we perpetuate a cultural

> transcendentalism that remains benignly impotent before the commodified real as *the* uncontested American Way and, subsequently, alienation becomes the normative affect of the literary profession. (Wilson 105)

In other words, it is Wilson's view that our "impotent" literary profession receives some cultural acceptance in a market-driven materialistic society (87). In order to do that, Wilson proposes—as a means of rhetorical "liberation"—that the literary scholar avoid Emerson's use of symbolic tropes and move toward the pragmatism of William James (91, 111). As an example, Wilson points to the career of Harvard poet Elizabeth Bishop who changed her approach from an "imagistic obsession" (Emersonian idealism) to one of "tenderly describing" human poverty in Brazil (Wilson 113). Bishop's career change is the paradigm of what Wilson believes would liberate the literary profession from occupational idealism:

> It is exactly this sense of a life of the mind well-integrated into a cultural community of work and of transpersonal commitment that is lacking for American intellectuals. . . . They must retreat, as the poet-critic Jarrell did, into tactics of satire, lament, self-mockery, criticism, and evasion, or invoke visions of other cultures or other American times. (Wilson 113)

Ironically, while lamenting the life of the occupational idealist having been alienated from American culture and desiring to move toward a vision of clear-speaking pragmatism, Wilson's idea of literary reform is closely aligned to what Emerson himself was urging the American scholar to describe:

> The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of the household life, are the topics of the time. It is a great stride. It is a sign—is it not? Of new vigor, when the extremities are made active, when currents of warm life run into the hands and the feet. I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia. . . . *I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low*. (Emerson 68–69; emphasis added)

Thus, in addressing the proper attributes of the American scholar, Emerson was clearly promoting a literature that sought to describe the condition of the ordinary man in our society. However, Emerson believed that the vehicle to draw the common man out of his pit was through the scholar's act of creative writing—which, for Emerson, was the spiritual mechanism to speak life into the void:

> The new deed is yet part of life—remains for a time immersed in our unconscious life. In some contemplative hour, it detaches itself from

> the life like a ripe fruit, to become a thought of the mind. Instantly, it is raised, transfigured; the corruptible has put on incorruption. (Emerson 61)

Therefore, Emerson was strictly an idealist who believed that the material world is simply an extension of the spiritual world (Emerson 70). It was Emerson's desire to have the American scholar rely on the inner self and the light that dwells within to transform the spirit of the American freeman:

> It becomes him to feel all confidence in himself and to defer never to the popular cry. He and he only knows the world. The world of any moment is the merest appearance. Some great decorum, some fetish of a government, some ephemeral trade, or war, or man, is cried up by half mankind and cried down by the other half, as if all depended on this particular up or down. . . . In silence, in steadiness, in severe abstraction, let him hold by himself. . . . The poet, in utter solitude remembering his spontaneous thoughts and recording them, is found to have recorded that, which men in crowded cities find true for them also. (Emerson 64)

NOTE

1. Regarding Wilson's view of economic idealism, and how it has affected the American scholar, he appears to have come to the same conclusion as the literary critic. That is, using Frederick Exley as his example, Wilson argues that the modern literary scholar is also trapped by Emersonian idealism in an economic sense. Wilson defines this phenomenon as "compensatory narcissism," whereby the scholar (Exley), in search of fame and fortune, finds that he cannot achieve his calling to literary greatness because he is compelled to repeatedly use Emersonian symbolism to transcend the marketplace—only to find that he is further alienated from economic success by virtue of his transcendental rhetoric (Wilson 89).

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