

458th Convocation Address: "Experiments in Solitude,"

May 25, 2000

**"Experiments in Solitude"
by W. Clark Gilpin**

It is with a particular pleasure that I address graduates of the University of Chicago this afternoon, since it was twenty-five years ago today that I received my own Chicago degree from President Edward H. Levi. To tell the truth, the convocation address that I assume was delivered at my convocation is not entirely vivid in my mind. Nevertheless, the anniversary invites me to consider the character of the intellectual's vocation, as I have been prompted to think about that vocation through affiliation with this great university.

In a brief but incisive book called *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), the cultural critic Edward W. Said remarks that James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is the first novel in the English language in which "a passion for thinking is fully presented." Unlike the protagonists of Dickens or Austen, Hardy or George Eliot, Stephen Daedalus pursues the intellectual vocation. Moreover, the "passion for thinking" embodied in Stephen Daedalus takes a distinctive form, and Said proposes that "in part because Stephen is a young provincial, the product of a colonial environment, he must develop a resistant intellectual consciousness before he can become an artist."

It is the "resistant intellectual consciousness" that interests me. It interests me in part because I think it is one of the characteristic features of the intellectual vocation in all settings, whether or not the thinker is "the product of a colonial environment." And, it interests me in part because this resistance is so thoroughly characteristic of the mid-nineteenth-century American intellectuals who have preoccupied most of my own recent thinking. It is, for example, scarcely possible to open an essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson that is not propelled by an initial burst of intellectual resistance. The opening paragraph of his slim first volume, *Nature*, written in 1836 when he was thirty-three, is a classic of the type.

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? . . . Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.

Notes of resistance sound throughout Emerson's most famous early speeches, such as "The American Scholar" or "The Divinity School Address," declaring that American thinkers must renounce subservience to "the mind of the past," in order to "invent" their own distinctive stance toward the world. At the opening of *Walden*, Emerson's younger friend, Henry David Thoreau, presses intellectual resistance still further, renouncing not merely our misguided veneration of prior generations but the generations themselves.

Practically, the old have no very important advice to give the young, their own experience has been so partial, and their lives have been such miserable failures, for private reasons as they must believe. . . . I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me anything to the purpose. Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me; but it does not avail me that they have tried it.

In this case, "resistant intellectual consciousness" is recast as an experiment, tried as if for the first time, by a thinker whose own life is the experiment. Intellectual resistance, which must precede becoming an artist, here presumes that the form of the intellectual life is not known in advance and must be sought, by daring to live experimentally toward it.

This characterization of the "experimenter" could suggest the unsettled, even incoherent, eccentricity of "trying something new" simply for the joy of difference. But, if eccentricity were the principal fruit of the resistant intellectual consciousness I am seeking to describe, it would have limited cultural significance. By contrast, Emerson thought that the resistant cultivation of a distinctive and disciplined point of view on human nature and democratic citizenship constituted precisely the thinker's contribution to the commonweal. The intellectual experiment, according to a typically grand Emersonian analogy, was like the wave that washed farther up the beach than any preceding and thereby prefigured the advance of the whole sea to that point and beyond. In this sense, the experimental life was lived prospectively, as an experiment in behalf of the society in which "the American scholar" participated, anticipating the possibilities of democratic citizenship for the nation. To borrow a phrase from Thoreau, Emerson acted on the principle that "the philosopher is in advance of his age even in the outward form of his life."

To achieve this social vocation required resistance against three principal dangers: the pressure of social convention, the dispersal of a person's distinctive character brought about by the contending demands of multiple social and professional responsibilities, and the misapprehension that by sheer exertion of will we

can shape the world to our own purposes. Everyday life in commerce and the professions exerted a constant pressure of social custom that squelched individuality. In Emerson's case, the life experiment of resistance against social convention took the specific form of a resistance against his own continuance in the ministry, and he had concluded by 1832 that it was "the best part of a man" that "revolts" against the ministerial vocation, because "his good revolts against official goodness." This resistance to social norms held critical importance, he believed, because claims made by the various institutions of society constantly threatened to disperse the distinctive self beyond recognition.

The objection to conforming to usages that have become dead to you is that it scatters your force. It loses your time and blurs the impression of your character. If you maintain a dead church, contribute to a dead Bible-society, vote with a great party either for the government or against it . . . under all these screens I have difficulty to detect the precise man you are.

But, this appeal for a distinctive focus of the individual life-experiment was not simply confidence about individual power in and of itself. Emerson early saw that "we are very apt to over-rate the importance of our actions. . . . If you think you came into being for the purpose of taking an important part in the administration of events, to guard a province of the moral creation from ruin, and that its salvation hangs on the success of your single arm, you have wholly mistaken your business."

Resistant intellectual consciousness sufficient to overcome these dangers is hard won, and never won fully. In order that resistance might have space to mature into intellectual artistry, Emerson practiced a series of intellectual disciplines intended to create an imagined domain of critical independence. He thought of these as disciplines of solitude, especially solitude in nature. Among them, perhaps the most characteristic was what he called "my strong propensity for strolling. I deliberately shut up my books in a cloudy July noon, put on my old clothes and old hat and slink away to the whortleberry bushes and slip with the greatest satisfaction into a little cowpath where I am sure I can defy observation." The purpose of his daily walks was, however, far less casual than the term "strolling" would suggest. Its aim was attentiveness to nature. The impact of the discipline of strolling was not always directly evident in Emerson's finished writing, because of the abstracted, epigrammatic sentences that characterized his published works. Consider, for example, his published declaration that the American scholar "shall see, that nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. . . . So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess." These sentences would, however, be misunderstood if we read them simply as a thinly metaphysical commonplace. Rather, Emerson has here generalized the reflective awareness of environment

cultivated during his "strolling." So much is made clear by a journal entry from 1840, in which lack of such attentiveness to nature indicated a corresponding loss of the self.

I went into the woods. I found myself not wholly present there. If I looked at a pine-tree or aster, that did not seem to be Nature. Nature was still elsewhere: this, or this was but outskirts and far-off reflection and echo of the triumph that had passed by and was now at its glancing splendor and heyday, -perchance in the neighboring fields, or, if I stood in the field, then in the adjacent woods. Always the present object gave me this sense of the stillness that follows a pageant that has just gone by.

Somewhat surprisingly, then, solitary resistance had as its purpose the creation of newly attentive, reciprocal relations with the life world. In this sense, Emerson's philosophy of the unity of nature was a guarantor that emboldened the experimenter. "Self-reliance" was, in fact, reliance on the currents of nature, "whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature." The work of the writer, the artist, the intellectual was the honest record of a life-experiment, which communicated itself as possibility to fellow citizens and humans who must enact their own experiments. Through disciplined inwardness, Emerson was performing the imaginative labor of conceiving a new vocation for himself and, perhaps, a new society in which this vocation might have meaning. Whatever contribution the intellectual might make to the common good was a contribution that dared to begin, though not to end, with independent thought. In solitude, the American scholar "learns, that in going down into the secrets of his own mind, he has descended into the secrets of all minds. . . . 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."

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