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A Critique Of Oliver Wendell Holmes Analysis Of R.W.Emerson's "The American Scholar"

Dr.Somalika Sahoo

Lecturer in English

Christ College, Cuttack

ABSTRACT

Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. called R.W. Emerson's 1837 "The American Scholar" as "our intellectual Declaration of Independence"(Holmes, 115) and since its first publication in 1884 on the biography of Emerson, it has become a sort of objective correlative for the oration itself, used by every critics, theorists, editors and historians, as a way, somehow, to suggest the connotation and implication of the oration. But it is exorbitant to say that the phrase "our intellectual Declaration of Independence" has achieved the rank of critical euphemism, a phrase that has been overused to the point of being futile, pointless and unimportant". The American scholar", much like the oration itself, has come to occupy a kind of acontextual limboland where meaning is compromised if not lost altogether" (*ESQ* 37). What Holmes said to equip his depiction was this, "Nothing like it had been heard in the halls of Harvard since Samuel Adams supported the affirmative of the question, 'Whether it be lawful to trust the chief magistrate, if the commonwealth cannot otherwise be preserved.'"(Beach 24)

KEYWORDS

radical, declaration, oration, crisis, hopelessness

INTRODUCTION

His reference is to the 1743 Harvard commencement in which Adams who was awarded his Master's degree at the ceremony defended the inciting theory that Holmes states before an aristocratic group who were loyal subjects to the English King. Oliver Holmes implied argument was that Emerson's Phi Beta Kappa oration was of the same sort of revolutionary attack on the authoritative status quo as that of Samuel Adams, nearly a century before, with a similar impact on the aristocratic class who attended it. The revolutionary character of "The American Scholar" is remarkable because it upset the "grave professors and sedate clergymen" (*Works*,I, 416) because it breached the "formality of an Academic assembly" (415). For this reason, Holmes concludes, " No listener ever forgot that Address, and among all the noble utterances of the speaker it may be questioned if one ever contained more truth in language more like that of immediate inspiration"(416). Holmes description is distinctly both imaginative and exaggerated. It is the finest bit of historical fiction that one can find in all of the venerable history of Emerson studies and "it is singular in its resilience"*(ESQ* 38). Despite the many new approached to

Emerson, we can still be sure of the undefeated fact that Emerson wrote "Our intellectual Declaration of Independence".

Holmes explanation of the formality of the event is exalted so as to create a more appropriate ground for Emerson's supposed radical assault. This, for example, is a description by President Josiah Quincy's daughter Maria Sophia Quincy, of the enthusiasm with which women sought out seats for the 1829 Phi Beta Kappa exercises:

> The moment the bolt was pushed,… we all rushed in. There was more strife than yesterday, but pale and trembling, we all found ourselves in our accustomed pew. It was really surprising to see the ladies leap over the tops of the pews. A number of female forms were seen rushing through our pew, and leaping over the highest side of it to those adjoining. They were headed by Mrs. Abbott Lawrence, who certainly deserved to have a degree given her for her powers of jumping. *(ESQ* 38-39)

The high jumps of Mrs. Lawrence and company seem barely the sort of introduction one would anticipate in the stately academic assembly suggests Holmes. Yet with the increasing admiration of such commencement exercises during the period, the audience of Emerson's lectures was not composed of "grave professors and sedate clergymen", but it was also composed of women who wanted strategic seats and also of others who were only interested in social and joyful aspect of the event. We might think that after a momentous lecture of Emerson, those gathered who divide themselves into small groups to discuss its importance, but the truth was that the celebration and partying almost began immediately after the speech.

Charles H. Warren in the celebatory dinner after Emerson address following toast: "Mr. President, I suppose all know where the orator comes from; and I suppose all know what he has said. *I give you The Spirit of concord. It makes us all of one Mind*," a sentiment that Emerson later said gave "the happiest turn to my old thrum" (Gilman 376). Warren's toast and Emeron's involuntary embracing of its sentiments gives another ground why Holmes characterization of "The American Scholar" is unacceptable. Despite the efforts of Holmes and Gay Wilson Allen, there is no reason behind Emerson's speech as an attack on the established order, even though it was used as a political tool by W.H. Channing in the *Boston Quarterly Review* to hammer the "retrograde conservatives with evidence of growing reform-mindedness, but these are instances of Emerson's cohorts politicizing his message into very small caliber ammunition for use in the ongoing Unitarian war"(*ESQ* 39). The members who heard Emerson's lecture took it the same way as John Pierce who said:

> It was to me in the misty, dreamy, unintelligible style of Swedenborg, Coleridge, and Carlyle.[Emerson] professed to have method; but I could not trace it, except in his own annunciation. It was well spoken, and all seemed to attend, but how many were in my own predicament of making little of it I have no means of ascertaining. (*Catalogue of the Harvard Chapter* 159)

It was "the misty, dreamy, unintelligible style" of "The American scholar" that distressed the Jacksonian democrats at the weekly, the *Boston Investigator* because they were the only group to condemn and criticize Emerson's speech publicly for its political insinuations. Abner Kneeland, the leader of Boston democrats, did not find his speech to be politically radical. Instead, he said, "it is altogether too bombastical, metaphysical, caballistical, allegorical, rhetorical, figurative- yea, too full of everything but plain common sense, to be useful to the common reader"(*Philosophy and Common Sense* 2-3).

Another reason to doubt Holmes characterization of Emerson's speech in his inferred statement that politics was not suited to such a formal academic event; that Emerson's lectures like Adams in 1743 was unusual in its political character. Such a presumption is convenient while trying to "create a mythos of American radicalism" (*ESQ* 40) keeping Emerson as a pivotal figure, which is far from the truth. Marta Wagner shows in her recent studies that "Phi Beta Kappa orators did take partisan stands on controversial issues"(Wagner 21). The case which Wagner uses to prove her point is of Abraham Bishop. Bishop in 1800 who was a Yale graduate was asked to draft an oration for the Connecticut Phi Beta Kappa's anniversary celebration. Because of his strong Jeffersonian ties and his politics were suspect , the Kappa society asked him to submit his oration for a preliminary review. Three days before the ceremony. A meeting of the Connecticut Chapter was held which was attended by conservative members who rejected Bishop's oration and rebuked him "for involving the members in that political turmoil which disgraces our country" (Wagner 2). The Connecticut ceremony was therefore held without an oration. In Wagner's study of many Phi Beta Kappa speeches delivered from their formation at Harvard in 1782 up to Emerson's oration in 1837, Wagner shows that the political objective of Bishop's rejected speech was not unusual and that it is also unusual to find a speech that abandons politics altogether and seeks a nonpolitical high ground. It is only sensible to understand that a learned and intelligent man would find it difficult to keep his views on political partisanship out of his speech, especially when delivered in an extremely volatile political time.

The political essence of Phi Beta Kappa address in Harvard in the 1830s is made evident when we examine the three orations delivered at the annual celebrations before Emerson's. Such an analysis provides a preliminary step towards seeing "The American Scholar" as different from the standard Phi Beta Kappa speeches. In 1834, William Howard Gardiner, a Boston lawyer delivered "Classical Learning and Eloquence". His opening acknowledgement of his desire to make his speech a political one:

> Every speaker who addresses any assembly for whatever purpose in the present state of affairs, is strongly tempted to find his theme in that all-absorbing subject, national politics. But the occasion of a literary festival (may I not say the chief literary festival of New England?) held in this seat of learning, by an association of lettered men, demands that something should be done or attempted for the cause of letters. (Gardiner 1)

Indeed Gardiner comes up with an empty argument for the need of studying classical writers to improve American expressiveness that hardly hides his anti- Jacksonian message that he wants to deliver. One disgraceful example would serve to show the superficiality of Gardiner's speech. He gives the example of the impact of eloquence of Cicero upon Caesar to prove that eloquence has the power to dominate oppression:

> Cicero, the adherent and intimate of Pompey, with whose overthrow and slaughter Caesar was yet flushed, addressed this man under these circumstances upon that which he had premeditated and resolved. Yet Caesar trembled with emotion, and Cicero prevailed. (40)

None in the audience missed the comparison between Daniel Webster, Harvard's favorite son and Andrew Jackson, the 7th President of US.

A similar anti- Jacksonian speech was delivered by Theophilus Parson in 1835 on "The Duties of Educated Man in a Republic". Like Gardiner, Parsons was also a lawyer whose father served as Chief Justice at the Massachusetts Judicial Court and was involved in Boston's political and social circle. Parson's speech was a straightforward attack on Jacksonianism. It stated how education can be a weapon to prevent class war. Parson's fear was that mass would rise against aristocratic people who owned property and to forestall such an action was to make people aware of the sovereignty of Truth, a theory that Parsons never elucidates other than stating that the scholar at Harvard had exclusive access to it. He

states "that, in a republic, the will of the people makes the right" (Parsons 20). In the gravity of his fear, Parsons expresses his plea in the imagery of war:

Do I not see around me, a host, whom our fathers, by the institutions which they founded with wise forecast, have armed for this warfare? Have they not bound you to this service, by an obligation co-extensive with the good that education has wrought for you, and with the blessings that the truth would preserve for the remotest future? Have we not the right to call on you to come to the labor and to the conflict;- to come, on your allegiance(25).

Francis Wayland published "The Elements of Moral science" which was the most important address of 1836. His address was less aggressive and was based on the idea that "the moral order must remain, above all, orderly" (Meyer 16). Wayland was a Baptist Minister who served as President in Brown University since 1827. His thoughts were a blend of Calvinism and Scottish common sense philosophy. John Pierce, who thought Wayland's to be "a sound and highly acceptable oration, of 1 hour & 15 minutes, on Veracity" (*Proceedings* 126) described it:

> In the course of his oration he alluded with deep feeling the dangers of our republic from the despotism of the *many*, in the language of passionate and unprincipled appeals to the prejudices of the vulgar, and in the form of mobs and other ways in which justice is anticipated or perverted by those not immediately authorized to dispense it. He paid a generous and earnest tribute to our University; and his best wishes for her prosperity, usefulness, and honor came from a heart too much expanded under the narrow influence of bigoted or sectarian partialities. At its termination the expression of unmingled applause was long, loud, and universal. (*Catalogue* 158)

The orations of Gardiner, Parsons and Wayland grant a context suggestive of the political nature of the orations of Phi Beta Kappa in general and in particular of the intense thrust on ideology during the dwindling years of Jackson's administration and the beginning of Van Buren's. Thus as distinct it is from the orations of Emerson's three predecessors, "The American Scholar", might possibly be viewed as having a political motive though it has other methods and ideologies. Hence, to come back to Holmes characterization of "The American Scholar", perhaps we should compliment him for recognizing that Emerson's speech was indeed political in nature while acknowledging that Holmes missed the mark in determining the political character of "The American Scholar".

Despite his writers' tendency to minimize Emerson's concentration with his personal finances in the spring and summer of 1837, the evidence indicates that Emerson, who was worried over dollar, was more troubled over nation's economic circumstances and its social and political aftermath. Emerson did not simply cease to consider the importance of the Panic of 1837 and return to his musings on the scholar but instead he was disturbed over the financial crisis, that his worry, resulted in his return of his old lung illness in June and he was too weak to write in his journal during the period. His letters to William, his brother suggests of his anxiety and his records in his journal were much darker. In mid-May, two days after the withdrawal of specie payments in Boston. He wrote in his journal, "Harder times," and this was followed by his thoughts on economy and politics that stop when the journal entries stop altogether with the onset of his illness. "Is the world sick?" he asks and cites "Bankruptcy in England &America" as one of the reason for this question(*JMN* V 331). His entry in his journal stops on May 31 and is resumed until the end of June, after Emerson received the invitation to deliver his Phi Beta Kappa oration on June 22.

Even after an interval of nearly a month, his journal entries was clearly directed towards the thoughts that would become "The American Scholar". His journal entries on May 21 dealt with the Panic of 1837. Addressing the "emphatic and universal calamity… the times bring", Emerson writes:

> Society has played out its last stake; it is checkmated. Young men have no hope. Adults stand like daylaborers idle in the streets. None calleth us to labor. The old wear no crown of warm light on their grey hairs. The present generation is bankruptcy of principles & hope, as of property. (*JMN* V 331-332).

Emerson tracks down this crisis to what he calls as "the casual bankruptcy"-"the cruel oppression that the ideal should serve the actual; that the head should serve the feet"- and he finally tells, "Let me begin anew. Let me teach the finite to know its Master. Let me ascend above my fate and work down upon the world"(*JMN* V 331-332).

"The American Scholar", thus becomes Emerson's was of teaching the "finite to know its Master", a means of resisting both the real bankruptcy and hopelessness of the financial crisis and, more salient, the "casual bankruptcy" of the spirit so that he could give the students at Harvard the hope. Emerson understood that economic, political and social turmoil of 1837 would be so catastrophic to society that they would actually give him the chance to impart the lesson that he prayed to be able to teach in late May. He states this when he writes:

> If there is any period one would desire to be born in,- is it not the age of Revolution; when the old and the new stand side by side, and admit of being compared; when the energies of all men are searched by fear and by hope; when the historic glories of the old, can be compensated by the rich possibilities of the new era? This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it (Depew113).

CONCLUSION

But the summer of 1837 was a finer time than most for remunerating the "historic glories of the old" with "the rich possibilities of the new era" that Emerson's oration envisages. Innate in that crisis of that summer, Emerson saw the possible effacing of accepted social, economic and political systems. For those displaced by the accompanying chaos of the "casual bankruptcy", Emerson offered the theory of "The Scholar" that in its revolutionary asocial and apolitical idealism- its thrust on absolute self-trust, its support for breaking off cultural and familial ties its re-evaluation of traditional notion of success and democracy- serves as a powerful political commentary. "It is a devastating critique of the status quo, embodies in a theory that assumes the near total demise of all that was then accepted, and as such it is the sort of declaration of independence that Holmes could not have imagined"(*ESQ* 53).

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