

THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR

Perhaps the time has already come when the sluggish intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill. Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests. In this hope I accept the topic which not only usage but the nature of our association seem to prescribe to this day — the *American Scholar*. Let us inquire what light new days and events have thrown on his character and his hopes.

The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk and strut about so many walking monsters — a good finer, a neck, a sto-

mach, an elbow, but never a man. In this distribution of functions the scholar is the delegated intellect. In the right state he is Man Thinking. In the degenerate state, when the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or still worse, the parrot of other men's thinking. In life, too often, the scholar errs with mankind and forfeits his privilege. Let us see him in his school, and consider him in reference to the main influences he receives.

The first in time and importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature. The scholar is he of all men whom this spectacle most engages. He must settle its value in his mind. What is nature to him? There is never a beginning, there is never an end to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning to itself. Therein it resembles

his own spirit, whose beginning, whose ending, he can never find — so entire, so boundless. He shall see that nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal, and one is print. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind. Nature then becomes to him the measure of his own attainments. So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess. And in fine, the ancient precept, "Know thyself" and the modern precept, "Study nature" become at last one maxim.

The next great influence of the scholar is the mind of the Past — in whatever form, whether of literature, of art, of institutions, that mind is inscribed. The theory of books is noble. The scholar of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again. It came into him life; it went out from him truth. Yet hence arises a grave mischief. The sacredness which attaches to

the act of creation, the act of thought, is transferred to the record. The writer was a just and wise spirit; henceforward it is settled the book is perfect. Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views which Cicero, Locke, Bacon have given. Hence, instead of Man-Thinking, we have the book-worm. Man Thinking must not be subdued by his instruments. One must be an inventor to read well. There is creative reading as well as creative writing.

There goes in the world a notion that the scholar should be a recluse, a valetudinarian. As far as this is true of the studious classes, it is not just and wise. Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it he is not yet man. Without it thought can never ripen into truth. Inaction is cowardice, but there can be no scholar without the heroic mind. Only so much do I know, as I have lived. I do not see how any man can afford to spare any action in which he can partake. He who has put forth his total strength into

fit actions has the richest return of wisdom. The mind now thinks, now acts, and each fit reproduces the other. Thinking is the function. Living is the functionary. The stream retreats to its source.

It remains to say something of his (the scholar's) duties. The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amid appearances. Free should the scholar be — free and brave. Free even to the definition of freedom, "without any hindrance that does not arise out of his own constitution." Brave; for fear is a thing which a scholar by his very function puts behind him. Fear always springs from ignorance. It is a shame to him if his tranquility, amid dangerous times, arise from the presumption that, like children and women, his is a protected class; or if he seek a temporary peace by the diversion of his thoughts from politics or vexed questions, hiding his head like an ostrich in the flowering bushes, peeping into microscopes and turning rhymes, as a boy whistles to keep

his courage up. Yes, we are cowed — we the trustless.

But I have dwelt perhaps tediously upon this abstraction of the Scholar. I ought not to delay longer to add what I have to say of nearer reference to the time and to this country. I read with some joy of the auspicious signs of the coming days, as they glimmer already through poetry and art, through philosophy and science, through church and state. One of these signs is the fact that the same movement which effected the elevation of what was called the lowest class in the state, assumed in literature a very marked and as benign an aspect. That which had, been negligently trodden under foot by those who were harnessing and provisioning themselves for long journeys into far countries, is suddenly found to be richer than all foreign parts. The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of the household life, are timely topics.

Another sign of the times, also marked by an analogous

political movement, is the new importance given to the single person. Every thing that tends to insulate the individual — to surround him with barriers of natural respect, so that each man shall feel the world is him, and man shall treat with men as greatness. This confidence in the unsearched might of man belongs, by all motives, by all prophecy, by all preparation, to the American Scholar. We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. Is it not the

chief disgrace in the world, not to be a unit; not to be reckoned one character? Not so, brothers and friends — please God, ours shall not be so. We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds. — *This Phi Beta Kappa Oration was delivered by Ralph Waldo Emerson before the Alpha Chapter of Massachusetts at Harvard University, August 31, 1837; abridged by Frank P. Graves.*

MEMORY AND JUDGMENT

Everyone complains of his memory, and no one complains of his judgment. — *La Rochefoucauld*