

The importance of oratory in ralph waldo emerson's works



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Ralph Waldo Emerson is generally remembered as one of the most influential writers of the American Renaissance. He is the father of the philosophical movement Transcendentalism, that is, the American equivalent of the European movement Romanticism. During his career, Emerson wrote several essays and delivered more than 1500 lectures all around the United States. Even if his written outputs had a significant impact on the American authors of the following generations, Emerson earned his living and obtained his popularity as a public lecturer. Oratory is, indeed, Emerson main strength, as well as the subject he analyzed more in his works.

In both his essays and journal, Emerson acknowledges that oratory was not merely an exhibition of one-person opinion; rather, successful speech produces a synthesis between speaker and hearer that reveals a mutual identity. According to the literature professor Granville Ganter, “ Emerson’s sense of successful oratory is closely tied to the concept of abandonment, a word he associates with the oracular genius” (270). Ganter affirms that Emerson believed that everyone has the quality to be a successful orator, but that not everyone goes through enough hardship to develop their skills. Both in his essay “ Self-Reliance” and in his speech “ The American Scholars,” Emerson asserts that scholars and orators need to undergo poverty, tedium, adversity and solitude in order to progress. In his speech “ The American Scholar,” Emerson says, But he, in his private observatory, cataloging obscure and nebulous stars of the human mind, which as yet no man has thought of as such, — watching days and months sometimes for a few facts; correcting still his old records, — must relinquish display and immediate fame. In the long period of his preparation he must betray often

an ignorance and shiftlessness in popular arts, incurring the disdain of the able who shoulder him aside. Long he must stammer in his speech; often forego the living for the dead. Worse yet, he must accept — how often! — poverty and solitude. (540) Emerson highlights the difficulties that scholars could encounter during their paths, and he emphasizes the importance of succumbing to ignorance and laziness to understand one person's potential and limitation. It is not possible, in fact, to evolve without knowing until what extend we are able to learn. Moreover, Emerson insists that scholars and orators should be wary of immediate success because it does not necessarily denote knowledge and mastery. On the contrary, after a life of privation and misfortune, intellectuals achieve awareness of their competences.

For Emerson, however, knowledge is not something that men can acquire just from the outside world and from experience, but it is a characteristic that is innate. According to the philosopher Philip Kitcher, Emerson has been influenced by Kant's idea of "a priori knowledge" (4). Actually, Emerson incorporated Kant's philosophy in his own connecting the idea of a priori knowledge to the idea that "words by themselves refer to material object, but ideas transcend the physical word. Still, until ideas are expressed in concrete language, they are meaningless abstraction. [...] Metaphor fuses the material and ideal, unifying and giving meaning to the experience" (Berlin 526). Therefore, if words express concrete object and metaphors combine the physical and the metaphysical, the orator's task increase its value. The orator should use metaphors to express what cannot be known in other way simplifying people's understanding of reality. Emerson, however, claims that the orator's job is so specific, that the public speaker should

welcome other works to not loose contact with reality. In the American Scholar speech, Emerson explains this concept using an extensive metaphor saying, “ 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.” (537). Ideas are innate, but they can be developed only after getting in contact with the outside world, so the speaker has the task to let this idea flourish. In order to let ideas prosper, the orator has to do physical work. Yet Emerson claims that orators instead of focusing on discovering of new concepts are just repeating and reformulating other people thoughts.

Even if Emerson over-criticized his contemporary lack of originality, he is really fascinated by the figure of Edward Taylor. Taylor was an English pastor, poet and physician who migrates from England to the United States in 1668; he was famous for his sermons that Emerson defined as the perfect example of almost perfect speech (Stanford). Emerson had the opportunity to listen to a Taylor’s speech on Temperance March 13, 1837, the same year in which Emerson himself made his greatest public address (Oliver). In this occasion, Emerson wrote on his journal that Taylor brought the dynamic of his personality and creativity into “ harmonious relationship” with his audience (22). He was amazed by Taylor ability to extemporize his speech and to construct a perfect oration without using a defined method. Taylor talent lay, in fact, in the connection he created with the audience. He engaged the audience to such an extent that Emerson described him as a “ creature of instinct whose illustration keeps us broad awake” (25). Emerson

also acknowledge to Taylor the ability to observe analogies between nature and spirit. In his journal, he wrote that Taylor used the material world to seek an understanding to the spiritual world making the spiritual world more understandable to the faithful (27). For Emerson, man could only be free when he is guided in his action by his consciousness reached to the understanding of the spiritual world, and “ the business of the preacher-orator is to bring his audience to a state of consciousness” (Ray).

Nevertheless, the main quality that Taylor had, and that Emerson recognized as the fundamental characteristic the perfect orator should have, was the ability to use the knowledge inherited by the “ man thinking” of the past and integrate it with his own understanding.

Emerson often criticized his contemporary because they emulated other works without contributing to the creation of new ideas. In the American Scholar speech, in fact, he warned the Harvard students of the danger that books represented to them and to their imagination. He argued that books should be an inspiration, and that scholars and orators should never consider them as an absolute truth. In his speech, Emerson said, The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although, in almost all men, obstructed, and as yet unborn. 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. [...] On the other part, instead of being its own seer, let it receive from another mind its truth, though it were in torrents of light, without periods of solitude, inquest, and self-recovery, and a fatal disservice is done. Genius is always sufficiently the enemy of genius by over influence. The literature of every nation bear me witness. The English dramatic poets have Shakspearized now for two hundred years. (540) Emerson used Shakespeare as a concrete example to validate his point. He affirmed that Shakespeare was a genius because he succeeded in creating something new, but that all the English authors that came after him tried to emulate his works failing the main task of a scholar: generate new ideas. He also stressed the fact that American authors had a greater need to create new ideas because they needed to detach themselves from the European cultural tradition. The orator represents the essence of Emerson desire of an American cultural identity: he is the person whose main task is to transmit culture and ideas, to make people discover new interests and expands their knowledge, and he can be defined as the connection between intellectual and physical men. The orator should use his personal experience to expand his knowledge as well as to develop his audience comprehension of both the natural and the spiritual world. He has not only the opportunity but also the duty to create an American identity and be part of what Emerson defines as “ Man thinking”

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