

Preface

When I was invited to write the preface to this year's edition of the TCNJ *Journal of Student Scholarship*, I immediately turned to the most celebrated essay about scholarship ever published in the United States: Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The American Scholar." Emerson's essay, which began as an address to Harvard's Phi Beta Kappa chapter in 1837, has been called America's intellectual Declaration of Independence. At the time, the United States suffered from what might be termed a cultural inferiority complex. Americans in every field – from literature to the sciences – looked to Europe for inspiration and example, and European intellectuals disdained American culture. One particularly haughty Englishman, Sydney Smith, wrote a famous dismissal that rankled Americans for decades. "In the four corners of the globe, who reads an American book?" Smith began, then continued in a paragraph filled with snide rhetorical questions.

However, Sydney Smith has long been silent, and Emerson's defense of American scholarship may seem dated in the current age of U.S. global hegemony, when American higher education is the envy of the world. Yet if the age of American provincialism is long past, other aspects of Emerson's era are remarkably relevant to our contemporary situation. Most notably, Emerson was living at the dawn of the age of mass communications, when new technologies of information were proliferating with dazzling speed and reach. During the 1830s, when "The American Scholar" was written, the first "penny papers" were established – inexpensive tabloids aimed not at a mercantile and political elite but at the average American citizen. Steam-driven cylindrical printing presses made it possible to produce thousands of copies an hour; railroads and steamships speeded distribution of newspapers and magazines; and the laying of the transatlantic cable enabled instantaneous communication between the U.S. and Europe.

The new technologies promoted a fascination among journalists and their readers with speed, novelty, and celebrity. Both Emerson and his acolyte Henry David Thoreau deplored the trend. "We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the Old World some weeks nearer to the New; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that the Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough," Thoreau wrote in *Walden*. Substitute the Internet for the telegraph and Lindsay Lohan for Princess Adelaide, and the remark could have been written yesterday. Emerson dismissed the national absorption with trivia in a witty aphorism: "Let [the scholar] not quit his belief that a popgun is a popgun, though [others] affirm it to be the crack of doom." The scholar should not become absorbed with journalistic ephemera, Emerson believed. More radically, he argued that the scholar's primary concern was not even with the advancement of knowledge in the various disciplines of the arts and sciences. Rather, he asserted, "The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men." The scholar only incidentally advances knowledge; his or her true aim is to nurture our souls.

Emerson's spiritually charged definition of the scholar's role remains as provocative now as it was in the 1830s. Emerson and his circle of transcendental radicals valued learning, but they believed that scholarship was not a purely intellectual exercise. "The true question to ask respecting a book," Walt Whitman wrote, "is, *has it help'd any human soul?*"

The essays collected in this volume of the *Journal of Student Scholarship* may, superficially, be divided into the fields of natural science, social science, history, literature, and art. But what unites them is a deeply human curiosity – curiosity about society, culture, history, and the workings of nature at every level, from the cosmos to the cell. Ralph Waldo Emerson would be proud of the intellectual brilliance and careful scholarship revealed in these essays, but he would be sure to point out to us, their readers, that we can find here nourishment not just for our minds, but for our souls.

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