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The Radical of The American Scholar

The Radical of *The American Scholar*

Arido Laksono

Abstract

Esai, sebagai sebuah genre sastra, mengungkapkan fakta menurut sudut pandang pribadi terhadap sang pengarang sebagai hasil dari proses berpikir. *The American Scholar* merupakan salah satu esai Emerson yang terkenal, yang dianggap radikal. Karya tersebut mengkritik rakyat Amerika di paruh pertama abad ke-19. Emerson menjelaskan kuatnya intelektualitas manusia untuk bertindak dan menciptakan hidupnya sendiri tanpa bergantung pada orang lain. Manusia seharusnya menjadi "Man Thinking (Makhluk Berpikir)" supaya dapat memahami semua fenomena di dunia ini. Karenanya, terdapat tiga poin penting dalam pandangan Emerson sebagai pengaruh terbesar terhadap perkembangan intelektual manusia—alam dan pengaruhnya, buku sebagai unsur masa silam yang berpengaruh, dan tindakan sebagai hasil proses berpikir.

Keyword: "Man Thinking", process of thinking, intellectual movement

1. Introduction

The American intellectual movement in the first half of the 19th century can not be separated from the great influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson. His thoughts are inclined to be radical. He called for a national literature and the independence upon the domination of European literature and art. Emerson emphasized the importance of personal integrity through which every individual has the inner power to act and work. Even with his power and ability, a man must have something different to others to distinguish himself.

Everyone must be a non-conformist as it is the reflection of the personal integrity. This idea was considered radical and was in defiance of the Puritan supremacy. Thus, discussing Emerson's thought is quite challenging since it build

The American character of today. *The American Scholar* asks for the majesty and divinity of the individual soul that leads to the American idea of individualism.

In order to have a more comprehensive understanding on the issues discussed, the paper applies the theory and approaches proposed by the scholars

of American Studies. It embraces the interdisciplinary approach and that of the sequence of *past*, *present* and *future* which sees a phenomenon as a continuity and integration, not separated (McDowell, 1948:4). It involves sociology to know and observe the characteristics of the American people in time when Emerson wrote his essays. The discussion also reveals the life of Emerson since an essay needs to be viewed from the perspectives of the writer himself. Here, the external elements (including the background and the experiences of the writer) influence internal elements (including theme) through the feeling, thought and perception of the writer (Abrams, 1976:22).

2. A Brief history of New England by the Mid-19th Century

Historically, New England played an important role in the development of modern America. Its citizen were mostly European immigrants who came in large numbers between 1630–1830. Many of them were English Protestants of firm and settled doctrine of Puritanism who searched for religious freedom. The Puritan believes that the heart of man is fundamentally corrupt by inheritance from the fallen Adam (Gabriel, 1974:34). Therefore, the duty of every Puritan is to fight evil on the basis of God's fundamental law of discipline for men and society.

In the first half of the 19th century, New England became the centre of America's Industrial revolution. New factories appeared all across Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island (Nickerson, 1986:2). During this period, the social life of New Englanders was colored by the firm and settled doctrine of Puritanism. The dreams of a city of God lingered in the minds of the New Englanders. With the growth of industry and the development of cities in New England, it seemed, as if the appointed hour had come (Brooks, 1944:5). The people of New England were quite sure that the coming of industrial era would give a lot of benefits toward their lives comparing to their condition in their mother countries.

Despite the rise of industries and the firm doctrine of Puritanism, people behaved as if they were European. They greatly admired the European culture,

“all of them lived and moved, walked and spoke as if their little town were a holy city and Rome, Paris and London were their suburbs” (Brooks, 1944:6). The domination of European culture existed in every aspects of the New Englanders. The way people wore their clothes, the architecture of their houses, and even the place where they went for holidays mostly referred to Europe. Europe was considered as the center of civilization and Americans in the nineteenth century looked to Europe for learning, for standards of taste, for inspiration (Gabriel, 1974:18)

3. The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson

In *The Living Thoughts of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Edgar Lee Master (1958:17) explains,

Emerson was not a philosopher in the formal, the Kantian sense. He did not have the kind of intellectual concentration and system. He was a mind of spiritual discernment in reference to man and society, moral, social and political wisdom.

This can be understood since his educational background was not in philosophy but in ministry at the Harvard Divinity School. His father's influence, William Emerson, pastor of the first Unitarian Church, directed him to follow his brothers to become pastor of the Second Church in Boston in 1829. Unitarian belief here was the result of the disparities between the adherents to orthodox Calvinism and the New England's Congregationalists. The adherents to orthodox Calvinism believed in the concept of predestination, the depravity of mankind and the triple nature God exemplified in the Trinity. These stiff religious principles were difficult to accept for the more liberal precepts of New England's Congregationalists. Therefore, in 1785 King's Chapel in Boston removed the concept of the Trinity from its liturgy and became the first Unitarian church. Unitarianism rejected the authority of the clergy and asserted the right of the individual to think and believe what he pleased (Crawford, 1954:86)

Even though Unitarianism was more moderate than its founder, Puritanism, Emerson felt that the Unitarian theology seemed too limited, particularly in the existence of man to deal with God. Based on this reason, Emerson resigned from his congregation in 1833. He believed God could be found through intuition which transcended the power of the senses or of reason..."God could be found in the depths of his own heart, that with attentive ear he could hear the voice of God speak from his heart" (Blau, 1952:122). With this concept, Emerson had discovered the transcendental method and it was with this method that he and his friends came to be called *Transcendentalists*.

In the *Literary Criticism in America*, Demile (1967:124) stated that it was difficult to determine who had been the biggest influence in Emerson's mind. Emerson had an extraordinarily wide range of liking, although, there were certain authors who became his prime favourites; like Montaigne, Beaumont and Fletcher, Goethe, Plutarch, Shakespeare, and Swedenborg. Emerson chose his heroes not merely because they were great but because each represented one attribute of divinity which he saw as the basic right of every man.

In Plato, Emerson found a mind that comprehended the cardinal facts, the mind that saw oneness in the multiversity of the world of things. Plato asserted the coincidence of science and virtue, "for vice can never know itself and virtues, but virtue knows both itself and vice" (Masters, 1958:33). While Swedenborg gave Emerson the idea of mysticism

It was natural for his mind to turn to Swedenborg who was a compound of science and philosophy, of logic and spirituality, of that subtle penetration which leaves science and enters into mysticism (Masters, 1958:34)

After Swedenborg was Montaigne who gave him the idea of skepticism. Emerson considered Montaigne as the frankest and most honest of all writers. He learned from Montaigne that "the right ground of the skeptic is consideration, self-containing, not at all of unbelief, of universal doubting, least of all of scoffing and profligate jeering at all that is stable and good" (Masters, 1958:34). Emerson admired Shakespeare as the poet. He saw him as something higher than a dramatist. Shakespeare's interpretations were beyond the abilities of the human eye. Emerson said of Shakespeare that he was "inconceivably wise, articulate without limitation and everything to everyone" (Masters, 1958:35).

Even though Emerson admitted the representation of the attributes of divinity in his heroes, he could not be generalized to have the same ideas as them. It was true that Emerson read their works and admired their intellectual capacity, but Emerson himself was basically an individualist. He has his own experience, and in all of his discoveries, Emerson meditates on it, analyzes it, and explores the unexpected analogies with other facts from his experience (Elliot, 1988:383).

4. Emerson's thoughts in *The American Scholar*

The American Scholar is Emerson's oration which was delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society in Cambridge on 31st August 1837. The essay invites men, particularly scholars in America, to reconsider every potential inside the self without any dependence on the European domination. American scholars should not have focused their intellectual achievement only on the development of science. It is also important not to imitate the ancient Greeks or Troubadours who repeated the same knowledge without any effort to expand their inner power. For Emerson, the intellectual must be able to go beyond senses and look for something better than just the exertions of mechanical skill or the same knowledge which deadens man's intellect.

We do not meet for games of strength or skill, for the recitation of histories, tragedies, and odes, like the ancient Greeks; for parliaments of love and poesy, like the Troubadours; nor for the advancement of science, like our contemporaries in the British and European capitals... Perhaps the time is already come when it ought to be, and will be, something else; 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 (Emerson in Lindeman, 1954:103).

The excerpt above explicitly calls for American intellectuals to hold high the essence of man, and the intellectual, without being engaged by the achievements of science and mechanical skills in Europe. Here, it is obvious that Emerson rejects

science since it brings man to compartmentalize his physical functions and not their integrity as a man or an intellectual. Man is all. He must see himself not as a part of certain function, but as a whole—who has the power to understand all matters.

Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all. Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier' (Emerson in Lindeman, 1954:104).

Emerson's statement means that every man who is unable to see something objectively will not be able to find his existence. For example, a farmer who goes to the field every morning to cultivate the land will not be able to see further than his plough and his farm. He considers himself as a farmer, with all instruments to do his routine work, and not as a 'person in the field'. A 'person in the field' will see not only the farm and the plough but also the sky, the bird, the horizon and the surroundings. He must think far beyond his sight. The example above asks for man's attention to think of his existence in such a way as to be "Man Thinking".

Man is thus metamorphosed into many things. The planter, who is Man sent out into the field to gather food, is seldom cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry. He sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm...

In this distribution of functions the scholar is the delegated intellect. In the right state he is *Man Thinking* (Emerson in Lindeman, 1954:104).

The American Scholar affirms Emerson's three important thoughts which influenced the American scholars in 19 century America. Firstly, nature and its influences toward man. Emerson puts nature first since it is the media for man to contemplate and communicate with God, the Creator. Nature has a lot of elements which always turn around and relate to one another, and therefore, we never know either the beginning or the end. For Emerson, the circular power of nature represents the unlimited power of God, and man must have this kind of knowledge to understand nature.

The first time and the first in importance of the influence upon the mind is that of nature. Everyday, the sun; and, after sunset, Night and her stars. Ever the wind blows; ever the grass grows. Everyday, men and women, conversing, beholding and beholden. The scholar is he of all men whom this spectacle must engage. E 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 into itself (Emerson in Lindeman, 1954:105).

Nature is the picture of man's active soul which means that the soul also has something which is constantly revolving and is difficult to find out the beginning or the end. Nature has its beauty and so does the soul. Our appreciation of every element in nature is the evidence of the soul as the picture of Nature. All the complicated aspects in nature also exist in the soul.

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 attainments. So much of, nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess (Emerson in Lindeman, 1954:106)

The excerpt above describes nature as the measure of man's achievement. The progress which is achieved by man must be in harmony with nature. Hence, man must have a good relationship with nature in order to enrich his intellect.

Secondly, books are influential elements of the past. Emerson explains that books consist of great thoughts of the past which were gradually inherited from generation to generation with no attempt to explore man's own thoughts.

Books are the best type of the influence of the past, and perhaps we shall get at the truth—learn the amount of this influence more conveniently—by considering their value alone (Emerson in Lindeman, 1954:106).

Books do not make man become “Man Thinking” since they only inspire. Books are written by the authors, who received knowledge and information by reading other great authors’ works, so that they do not have their own principles. Emerson considers these kinds of people as “thinkers” since they do not have the power to create their own principles. They are wrapped by the attraction of books and are limited by certain knowledge.

Books are written on it by thinkers, not Man Thinking; by men of talent, that is, start wrong, who set out from accepted dogmas, not from their own sight of principles...

They are for nothing but to inspire. I had better never see a book than to be wrapped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system. 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 (Emerson in Lindeman, 1954:107)

Emerson’s basic idea on man, referring to books, is his rejection of European concepts which penetrated America and influenced the American way of thinking. The European concepts deaden American intellect since there are certain postulates which direct man to leave his active soul and forget his aim to be “Man Thinking”. Man reads other man’s works and forgets his boundless power. He, then, is only “thinker” and not “Man Thinking”.

Genius is always sufficiently the enemy of genius by over influence. The literature of every nation bears me witness. The English dramatic poets have Shakespearized now for two hundred years...

It is remarkable, the character of the pleasure we derive from the best books. They impress us with the conviction that one nature wrote and have the same reads. We read the verses of one of the great English poets, of Chaucer, of Marvell, of Dryden, with the most modern joy—with a pleasure, I mean, which is in great part caused by the abstraction of all *time* from their verses (Emerson in Lindeman, 1954:108)

Thirdly, action as the result of the process of thinking. Emerson calls for man's courage to act and show his character. Action is the evidence of man's attempts to explore the active soul in order to reach the real truth. With action, man no longer has obstacles which hinder his continual process of thinking. When he stops to think, he starts to act and this is the beginning of another process of thinking which he himself never knows the end. Hence, man never meets weariness since he always has the excitement of life and the resource to live.

Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it he is not yet man. Without it thought can never ripen to truth. Whilst the world hangs before the eye as the cloud of beauty, we can not even see its beauty. Inaction is cowardice, but there can be no scholar without the heroic mind (Emerson in Lindeman, 1954:109)

The mind now thinks, now acts; and each fit reproduces the other. When the artist has exhausted his materials, when the fancy no longer paints, when thoughts are no longer apprehended and books are a weariness—he has always the resource to *live* (Emerson in Lindeman, 1954:111)

Action is man's effort to open his mind so that he has a chance to fulfill his existence. Action encourages man to see beyond the accepted dogmas or knowledge. Man, who has integrity and the active soul within, should have the courage to be free of any limitation in life.

There is virtue yet in the hoe and the spade, for learned as well as for unlearned hands. And labor is everywhere welcome; always we are invited to work; only be this limitation observed, that a man shall not for the sake of wide activity sacrifice any opinion to the popular judgements and modes of action (Emerson in Lindeman, 1954:112)

The American Scholar ended with Emerson's conclusion on self-trust. "Man Thinking" will have a self-trust within so that he is able to reveal the facts of his surrounding. Moreover, he will be able to understand the secrets of nature which are the reflection of the soul.

They are such as become "Man Thinking". They may all be comprised in self-trust. The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide man by showing them facts amidst appearances (Emerson in Lindeman, 1954:112)

These being his functions, it becomes him to feel all confidence in himself, and to defer never to the popular cry. He and he only knows the world. The world of any moment is the merest appearance (Emerson in Lindeman, 1954:113)

Emerson underlined the importance of freedom and bravery as the realization of self-trust in revealing the facts in nature. Freedom and bravery will lead man to have the power of analyzing the elements of nature, not to conquer nature, but to be united with nature. Emerson considers man's ability to understand nature as the power which awakens man from every consistency. With this power the world and the laws of nature are in man's hand and it is right to know the reasons for every fact. Man is, then, the meter of all because he can face the world without doubt.

In self-trust all the virtues are comprehended. Free should the scholar be—free and brave. Free even to the definition of freedom...Brave; for fear is a thing which a scholar by his very function puts behind him (Emerson in Lindeman, 1954:113)

The world is nothing, the man is all; in yourself is the law of all nature, and you know not yet how a globule of sap ascends; in your self slumbers the whole of reason; it is for you to know all; it is for you to dare all (Emerson in Lindeman, 1954:118)

Those two excerpts above explain the power of self-trust within man which indicates the integrity of man. Emerson wrote "the world is nothing, the man is all" to show the ability of man to deal with every obstacle in the world. It does not mean that man has such an easy life, but, with this power, he can survive and overcome his problems. Therefore, it seems, the world is nothing since man has freedom and bravery as the realization of self-trust so that he can always think and express his boundless ideas in the capacity of a "Man Thinking".

5. Conclusion

Considering his background as the third son of the pastor of Boston's First Church, it is obvious that Emerson's thoughts are radical. *The American Scholar* stresses on man's existence in which man must not be influenced by the development of science and mechanics. Man's intellectual capacity must be stretched as widely as the universe. Therefore, man can be "Man Thinking"

who has the active soul to search for the ultimate truth. This idea surely struck the old doctrine of Puritanism in which man could only accept his destiny from God. The duty of man is to obey God's law and man does not have the right to use his own thought and will.

The American Scholar is radical since it protested against the domination of the ruling society, The Puritan. In the era when society was offered by modern technology and knowledge, and the traditional values of Puritanism together with the domination of European culture, Emerson came up with a more radical way of thinking which invited the Americans to reconsider their own culture and society.

The process of searching for the ultimate truth is in line with the American idea of individualism. Every American believes that people can determine their own lives and goals. They work hard to reach their dreams. This idea has been living in the mind of the American people for years and it has been thought through generations as the basic principle that build the nation. The dignity and importance of the individual person are the basis for the freedom of thought and action. Every individual has the equal opportunity to determine his life in accordance with his abilities.

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