The Tragedy of Henry Reed: A Note on Power, Rhetoric, and Virtue in Nineteenth Century America

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Henry Reed, Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature at the University of Pennsylvania, 1835-1854, did not share the view of those mid-nineteenth century Americans who looked to present and future day America for the New Athens. As George Herbert wrote some two-hundred years before, Americans "have their period also and set times/Both for their virtuous actions and their crimes." For Reed that virtuous time had come and passed. While many Americans, as Perry Miller has put it, panted for "the technological future," Reed expressed deep concern about America. For Reed, American culture reflected a setting rather than a rising sun. Reed saw evidence of this decline in the debasement of language. Reed's ideas regarding the decay of language and the correspondent decay of culture were part of the nineteenth century debate regarding vulgar language. Many Americans interpreted conservative notions about language as a means to perpetuate class division and to undermine democracy. As Olivia Smith has written, the division between proper speech and vulgar speech "condemns the language of all but the extensively educated."

Who was fit to participate in the public life of a democracy? Kenneth Cmiel has written that "by the mid-nineteenth century . . . the very decorum that 'gentlemen of the old school' saw as essential to principled behavior was viewed by large segments of the democratic public as 'aristocratic.'" Reed was a "gentlemen of the old school." One of the most interesting aspects of his thought is that it echoes and recapitulates Federalists' beliefs. According to Robert E. Shalhope, Federalists identified with "the hierarchial attitudes of an earlier era" and "they found a stable, structured society to be a source of real security and identity in a rapidly changing, chaotic world." Such were the nostalgic views held by Henry Reed.

Federalists, Shalhope has said, thought that Republicans promoted "selfish interests at the expense of the whole community," "Unrestrained competition," Federalists believed, "not only threatened the social harmony of a republican commonwealth but set into motion a dangerous proclivity on the part of Americans to disdain rank, status, and order—the foundations of a true republic." As we shall see, these are exactly the beliefs of Henry Reed, though Reed lived a generation
after Federalism ceased to matter. Whereas Federalists bemoaned that "instead of the ordered, Augustan society the Revolution was supposed to usher in, America seemed to be in danger of becoming a scrambling, commercial society dominated by the pecuniary needs and desires of ordinary citizens rather than the austere and rational guidance of its natural aristocrats," Reed thought that such things no longer seemed to be occurring but had already regrettably come to pass.
Roland Barthes has suggested that “it was at the very moment when treatises on rhetoric aroused no more interest, towards the middle of the nineteenth century, that classical writing ceased to be universal and that modern modes of writing came into being.” One University of Pennsylvania student scribbled in the back of his copy of Alexander Jamieson’s *A Grammar of Rhetoric, and Polite Literature*: “Ended this book March 7th 1831 after nearly six months dry study.” John White Munro left his “Book of Troubles” behind after quitting Penn to become a stockbroker in New York. Not all students, though, had given up rhetoric and its promise that to speak well was to be a man of great distinction. Cmiel has said that “the nineteenth century debate over language pitted those trying to accommodate the new styles of popular rhetoric against those who resisted.”

At the University of Pennsylvania there were many students and professors who resisted, who maintained an interest in classical writing. When in 1848 the members of the Zelosophic Society of the University of Pennsylvania (a literary society founded twenty years earlier) invited Henry Reed to deliver an oration to the Society, he proposed to address the students on “the prospects and responsibilities that are before you on entering into active life, and the kind of preparation that you will need for them.” Unlike William Smith’s charge to his students nearly a century earlier, Reed’s expressed less certainty about the great future destinies of his students. Indeed, instead of telling them about high rank—how to attain and maintain it—Reed congratulated himself that out of the 346 students he had taught at Pennsylvania he did not know of one who had “been lost by abandoning himself to the self-destruction of low and vicious habits.” Reed warned his audience to avoid the moral perils of the present and to harken back to “the heroic age of American history” in order to find “political wisdom” and “the union of public and private virtues.”

Power thrived in Reed’s America as it had in Smith’s, but now, Reed believed, it was neither virtuous nor sublime. In his lectures Reed explicitly connected a decline in language with selfish business practices which he blamed on industrialization. The tragedy of Henry Reed lay not only in his death at sea by shipwreck, but also in his desire to return to an earlier time, a time when, according to his beliefs, language mattered more than commerce, virtue more than wealth. Like others who held this view, Reed was an anachronism in the America of his day. Reed was an eloquent, though hardly modern in Barthes’ sense, Pennsylvania spokesman for an imagined altruistic American past; for a kind of republicanism that was, according to Joseph J. Ellis, “a nostalgic, backward-looking ideol-
ogy resting on assumptions that were fundamentally antithetical to the market conditions and liberal mentality emerging in postrevolutionary America.”17 The social function of language, according to Reed, offered a remedy to the betrayed promise of America and the evils posed by an unrestricted market.

Born in 1808, Henry Reed entered the University of Pennsylvania in 1822 and graduated in 1825. He began his professional life as a lawyer, but, as a fellow member of the American Philosophical Society noted shortly after Reed’s death, “the excitement and bustle of the life of an active lawyer were little suited to his retiring and reflective habits.”18 In 1831 he returned to the university as Assistant Professor English Literature. That same year he became Assistant Professor of Moral Philosophy, and in 1835 the Trustees elected him Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature. In 1854 the Professorship of Moral Philosophy opened; Reed applied. However, despite having once been Assistant Professor in this field and despite more than twenty years of service to Pennsylvania, Reed was not chosen. According to his brother, “His friends and family never saw him more depressed.”19 He took a leave of absence from the University, and in May of 1854, sailed for Europe. “In England,” William Reed wrote, “he was at home in every sense.”20 He visited the Wordsworths, Southeys, Coleridges, and many others. “The last words he ever wrote were in a letter of the 20th September to his venerable friend, Mrs. Wordsworth. . . .” On that day he boarded the steamship Arctic. In the words of his brother, “Seven days afterward, at noon, on the 27th, when almost in sight of his native land, a fatal collision occurred, and before sun-down, every human being left upon the ship had sunk under the waves of the ocean.”21

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Reed may have been devastated when rejected for the position of Professor of Moral Philosophy because that position usually came with an administrative title of rank, such as Provost. For example, William Smith, the first Provost at Penn, at first taught both ethics and rhetoric. With Francis Alison as a colleague the two men divided these important disciplines, Alison teaching moral philosophy and Smith, rhetoric. In the latter part of the eighteenth century, however, John Andrews taught both moral philosophy and rhetoric. According to the trustees’ 1792 plan of instruction, the two courses were to be taught by one professor. This position became increasingly prestigious. After Andrews’ death, for example, Dr. Frederick Beasley became Professor of Moral Philosophy and Provost.

The moral philosophy professorship would have been important to Reed for two other, more complex reasons. During the first half of the nineteenth century,
studies of rhetoric focused more on poetry and less on politics.\textsuperscript{22} Virtue became associated with a private poetry of the heart; not a public and persuasive politics, as it had been during the age of the American Revolution. Once rhetoric became accepted in elite circles within mid-eighteenth century Philadelphia it became a form of cultural persuasion employed by elites for purposes of representation, power, and authority. Rhetoric was not to be studied by all, but only by a few elite young men. These best and brightest were to lead in commercial, political, and religious life. The best men were the best orators, so the reasoning went, and the mass of men willingly submitted to these wise and virtuous orators. After the Revolution rhetoric remained primarily the bailiwick of a few select male students. It remained a necessary tool for authority and desired ornament for gentility. As William Hedges has written, “it was in part by the control of language, written and
spoken, that lawyers, planters, and merchants sought to maintain the leadership which, in their views, rightly belonged in a republic to people like themselves.”23 Paradoxically, Reed, who taught literary rather than civic rhetorical studies, believed that language had declined in his day and that when language declines, civilization decays. Reed believed that to have been promoted to Professor of Moral Philosophy and Provost would have enabled him to reconnect language and morals to a public purpose and to influence directly the overall curriculum of the university. Reed was in this way similar to Noah Webster after he became, as Cmiel has written, “thoroughly disenchanted with the political drift of the nation” and “longed for the rule of gentlemen.”24 Reed shared nothing with the younger Webster, or anyone else, who defended vulgar speech for the sake of an open democracy.

Had Reed been able to connect language and morals he would have won a small victory for “embattled generalists in an increasingly specialized age,” to borrow a phrase that Robert A. Ferguson has used to describe the condition of lawyer-writers in mid-nineteenth century America.25 “Modern lawyers,” Ferguson has written, “would enfold themselves and their subjects in expertise. The price of their intellectual precision would be a deliberate rejection of comprehensive ideas and a corresponding loss in communicative power.”26 Reed, whose essays were usually descriptive appreciations rather than analytical interpretations, sought the comprehensive in his teaching, writing, and editing. He favored surveys over seminars, broad synthesis over minute analysis.

In order to understand the connection Reed made between the decline in language and a corresponding decline in civilization it is necessary to understand something of his specific beliefs regarding language. According to Reed language works—when it works—because it exists between spirituality and materiality. Thus, used correctly, it can “correspond to something within us.” Books which call “forth the good elements in our being” and chasten “the evil ones,” Reed said, “give spiritual health, and innocence, and moral power.”27

Although “the books which are Literature . . . speak to a people—to a whole nation—to scattered nations over the earth linked together by community of speech,” individual words may be misused, entire books may be pernicious, or language as a whole may decline.28 For example, Reed referred to the word “belles-lettres”: “not only well known what power of mischief there may be in a word.” When we hear this word we think of “no more than amusement, confectioneries (as it were) of the mind . . . .” True literature, according to Reed, demands “dutiful and studious and strenuous energy.”29
were) of the mind. . . .” True literature, according to Reed, demands “dutiful and studious and strenuous energy.”

In addition to the misuse of words, entire books may be ill-inspired and may in turn inspire in the reader only ill thoughts. Reed asserted as one unchanging, universal truth of all his thoughts on language and literature “that one inseparable attribute of all the highest poetry is alliance with virtue; that its tendency . . . is to make the wise and the good still wiser, still better, still happier.” One can discern echoes here of the eighteenth century neo-classical conviction that none but a virtuous man can be an orator, but here the virtuous man is no longer an orator, that is, a public man or a politician. He is, rather, a poet. Reed offered as proof of his fundamental belief the fact that Lord Byron, a bad man according to Reed’s view, was beginning to be regarded as a bad poet while Wordsworth, an eminently good man in Reed’s view, was more and more regarded as a great poet.

Reed believed that occasionally an entire language may degenerate and when that occurs the civilization of the nation also degenerates. Reed wrote that “after the domestic war in the seventeenth century . . . came debauchery, licentiousness, riot, and blasphemy.” This era produced little poetry, though “the old age of Milton” must be “seen with heightened sublimity” for he continued despite this national decline. A degeneration of political culture is always accompanied with a degeneration of literary culture.

For the wicked and debased, who are banded together in the fellowship of crime, disown the common language of their fellow-men, and delight in a strange vocabulary of their own; for when they break bond with the moral elements that link them to society, they cast off the language as one of the links. Words which serve the wise and good become for the silly and the sensual a burden. . . .

Such may have been the case, Reed believed, in his own time. The English language had spread far and wide, and while “we may conceive the vast power which is coupled with it,” Reed said, “we should remember that, commensurate with the power is the responsibility, the duty of cultivating and guarding it as a possession and inheritance, and a trust.” Whereas in his public lectures Reed demanded his audience be on its linguistic guard, in his private letters he was more specific regarding whom one should guard against—Emerson and Carlyle. “I know that the dialect they employ,” Reed wrote to Wordsworth, “is an intolerable corruption of our mighty language, and I fear there is desperate unsoundness in their philosophical and theological views.”
Reed, in one respect was like Emerson; he was an accomplished lecturer. When shipwreck cut short his life at forty-six each of his memorializers noted his ability to deliver a cogent lecture. In “A Lecture on the Literacy Opportunities of Men of Business, delivered before the Athenian Institute and Mercantile Library of Philadelphia,” April 3, 1838 and “Plea for Culture: Mental, Moral, and Physical, a Lecture Delivered before the Pottsville, Pennsylvania Lyceum,” April 9, 1839, Reed explicitly connected a decline in language with selfish business practices.35

In the first lecture Reed argued, somewhat nostalgically, that there should be no division between men of letters and men of business: “between a well regulated habit of reading and the most active habits of business there is no incompatibility.”36 This alone indicates that a great change had taken place since, as Reed called it, “the heroic age of American history.” Reed tried to convince businessmen not that knowledge and virtue were indelibly linked but that the pursuit of knowledge was the best way to pass one’s hours of leisure. Leisure was a new and an increasingly important concept at this time, and Reed informed his audience that “exactly in proportion as habits of reading are cultivated will the dangers of idleness and the pains of listlessness be diminished.”37

Whereas Benjamin Franklin’s professed view was that one worked to avoid “the dangers of idleness,” though ultimately everyone wanted time for the higher pursuits of knowledge, Reed’s maintained that one should pursue knowledge to avoid “the danger of idleness” while one was at rest from the pursuit of private riches. Yet, Reed pined for Franklin’s “heroic age,” a time when one studied moral philosophy in part as a way to success in business. In Reed’s America, by contrast, one strove for success in order to be called good. The chronology had been reversed. “The tendency of active life,” he observed, “is not only to conceal some of the purest elements of human nature, but to bring into undue prominence many of the worst.”38

Reed argued with some of his contemporaries that one of the worst elements in contemporary society was the emerging factory system. And so, in “a tone of high moral feeling,” as the Pottsville reporter put it, Reed addressed this subject in his “Plea for Culture: Mental, Moral, and Physical.” Whereas Franklin believed, or at least professed to believe, that technology could create an earthly paradise, Reed regretted that it had become a malevolent force.

Reed told his audience that “the improvements in machinery by multiplying the powers of production, stimulate the passion for accumulating wealth to an intensity that blinds its victim to the havoc he may make in the happiness of his fel-
low-beings.” “There are few more melancholy records,” he said, “than the simple
statements of the evils of the factory system.” He added that “it has been reserved
for modern ingenuity to join Moloch and Mammon together by erecting an idol
with the attributes of both.”

Charles Willson Peale’s painting “Exhuming the Mastodon” (1860) may pro-
vide a useful insight on Reed. As far as we can know, Reed seems never to have
made any comments on this painting. Yet, a consideration of this painting can illu-
minate Reed’s views on technology. In Peale’s painting technology did not hold
forth a benevolent solution to social inequities as Franklin thought. Rather, the
machine here is the monster that Reed described in his lecture. The machine in
this painting represents a hierarchical structure of society, but a hierarchical structure
devoid of any notion of the common good. Technology in the painting serves to
separate and alienate; it provides the few with power over the many, with no evidence that this power exists for the benefit of the entire community. Indeed, the community depicted here is a dystopian nightmare. This painting presents a crowded scene. As workers remove dirt and water from the pit, other people watch. A huge machine dominates the center of the composition. The machine dominates the center of the composition and it dominates the workers. They are dwarfed by it; many toil beneath it. The workers furthest down in the pit have on the least clothing. Off to the side, away from the machine but in ultimate control of it, is Peale and his family. They are richly attired and peacefully reposed. As Rowland Berthoff and John M. Murrin have noted, post-Revolutionary reforms that were meant to lead to greater freedom for average citizens made average citizens “free to become unequal and on a far grander scale” than was possible before the Revolutionary. Indeed, in “Exhuming the Mastodon” average citizens are unequal on a grand scale. The machine fosters and perpetuates this inequality. The owners of the machine, the Peales, seem indifferent to the worker’s plight. Here there is no eighteenth century benevolence, but only the self-interest of the self-made man who is set against his neighbors in unending competition.

Why did the promise of industrialization threaten to become a curse? Because America’s earliest captains of industry suffered from a faulty education. “The chief aim of education” Reed stated, “has been to facilitate the acquisition of mere knowledge—to store the mind with facts—forgetting that intellectual instruction is not moral discipline. Just as certain as knowledge is power, if it is increased without a correspondent cultivation of the moral and religious feelings, it is only arming the native depravity of man with a new weapon to do wrong.” Reed had forsaken here the Hutchesonian innate moral sense school of thought taught by all his predecessors at the University of Pennsylvania and its parent institution the College of Philadelphia. He had instead adopted a bleak Hobbesian view. Reed’s solution was exceedingly simple: cultivate the moral imagination with literary studies. Would such cultivation have been sufficient to solve the problems of America? If so, would Reed have prized the chair in Moral Philosophy?

Before his demise in the nineteenth century, the virtuous orator battled the selfish commercial man. Shalhope has written that Federalists “adhered to a paternalistic world of hierarchy and social order that prompted them to view the emergence of the self-made man with a mixture of fear and disdain.” Reed, too, adhered to such beliefs. He regretted that the pursuit of wealth by the many had replaced the pursuit of virtue by the few. The professed beliefs of the eighteenth
century male elite indicate that those who held power did so because it was wise and good that they should do so. For a man like Henry Reed in the mid-nineteenth century, it was no longer either wise nor good. The commerical man rather than the virtuous now held power. Sometime near the turn of the century, according to University of Pennsylvania graduate Alexander Graydon, "The substance of justice was exchanged for its shadow, and the principle established, that virtue is a certain bar to the attainment of power, an encumbrance which the candidate cannot too soon shake off; and, that corruption and wrong mark the route to the pursued." Because he shared the perception, Reed wanted to return to "the heroic age of American history." By doing so corruption could be checked and the promise of America fulfilled through a language revivified.

In his well-known essay "The Declaration of Independence and Eighteenth Century Logic" Wilbur Samuel Howell has observed that rhetoric "is not fixed and changeless," but rather it "changes as the culture around it does." Changes in language reveal changes in culture, and though Reed was keenly aware of this, he may not have diagnosed them well. As Perry Miller has written, those who offered a cautionary view of America's technological, materialistic, individualistic future "were at best minor voices and . . . they were sadly ineffectual." Reed lived in an age of considerable vigor and imagination. Indeed, he will always be remembered most of all for having established Wordsworth's reputation in America. Yet, Reed never accepted the values of the era in which he lived. Robert Ferguson has said that the lawyer-writers of Reed's time had lost their "grasp of what American was becoming." So it was with Henry Reed.

Notes
8. Ibid., 151.
9. Ibid., 152.
15. Ibid., 27. In The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), Steven Watts argues that it was at the time of the War of 1812 that some Americans began to speak of a return to the heroic virtues of the founding fathers. See especially chapter four.
18. John F. Frazer, "Henry Reed," read February 16, 1855, Memoirs of Deceased Members. Manuscript Archives and Manuscript Collections of the American Philosophical Society, #18, 9. I draw my biographical information on Reed from this manuscript and from William B. Reed's "Introductory Notice" to the posthumous volume his brother's lectures, Lectures on English Literature, from Chaucer to Tennyson (Third edition; Philadelphia: Parry & McMillan, 1855). Little has been written on Reed, but more should be. It is my hope that this brief note will encourage future study of Reed by other scholars. In his lifetime Reed published several significant articles on the arts and literary figures, and edited such works as the first American edition of Wordsworth's poems, Thomas Arnold's Lectures on Modern History, Lord Mahon's History of England, and the Poetical Works of Thomas Gray. After his death, in addition to the above cited work, his brother supervised the publication of Lectures on English History and Tragic Poetry as Illustrated by Shakespeare (1855), Two Lectures on the History of the American Union (1856), and Lectures on the English Poets (2 volumes, 1857). Reed had extensive correspondence with Wordsworth. Many of these letters concern financial matters, not artistic ones. Of particular interest are a number of letters about investments in the United States made by the poet's friends and relatives. In his sonnet "To the Pennsylvanians" (1845) Wordsworth wrote that Penn's virtue had been "Renounced, abandoned by degenerate Men." Reed petitioned the poet in April, 1849 and again in December of that year to change the poem, write a sequel, or add an explanatory note. Reed pointed out that the failure of Pennsylvania to make payment on state bonds was but a temporary aberration and that payment to investors resu-
med after the legislature initiated a system of taxation. Wordsworth fulfilled Reed's wishes. Shortly before his death he added an "additional note" to the latest edition of his poems in which he observed that "the reproach addressed to the Pennsylvanians . . . is no longer applicable to them." Reed speculated that this "was probably . . . the last sentence, which he composed for the press." This correspondence is available in Wordsworth & Reed, edited by Leslie Nathan Broughton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1933). See Ferguson, Law and Letters for a thorough analysis of the relation between the professions of law and literature during the first half of the nineteenth century.

19. William B. Reed, "Introductory Notice" in Henry Reed, Lectures on English Literature, xix.
20. Ibid., xx.
21. Ibid., xxi.
25. Ferguson, Law and Letters, 281.
26. Ibid., 290.
27. Reed, Lectures on English Literature, 40 and 95.
28. Ibid., 32.
29. Ibid., 32.
31. Ibid., 2: 204.
32. Reed, Lectures on English Literature, 219-221.
33. Ibid., 92.
34. Reed to Wordsworth, November 29, 1841, Wordsworth and Reed, 60.
35. Newspaper account of Reed's lecture attached to manuscript, "Plea for Culture: Mental, Moral, and Physical" (Rare Book Room, University of Pennsylvania).
36. Henry Reed, "A Letter on the Literary Opportunities of Men of Business" (Manuscript, Rare Book Room, University of Pennsylvania), 12.
37. Ibid., 22. See Hugh Cunningham, Leisure in the Industrial Revolution c. 1780-c. 1880 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980) in which he argues that "the century 1780 to 1880 stands out as crucial in setting terms to the meaning and experience of leisure in advanced capitalist society" (14). Also see Richard Butsch, "Introduction: Leisure and Hegemony in America," in Butsch, ed. For Fun and Profit: The Transformation of Leisure into Consumption (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 3-27. In Walden (1854), Thoreau wrote: "When the illiterate and perhaps scomful trader has earned by enterprise and industry his coveted leisure and independence, and is admitted to the circles of wealth and fashion, he turns inevitably at last to those still higher but yet inaccessible circles of intellect and genius, and is sensible only of the imperfection of his culture and insufficiency of all his riches, and further proves his good sense by the pains which he takes to secure for his children that intellectual culture whose want he so keenly feels: and thus it is that he becomes the founder of a family" (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 82-83.
38. Ibid., 26.
42. For information on Hutchesonian moral philosophy at the College of Philadelphia/University

- Shalhope, The Roots of Democracy, 165.


- Ferguson, Law and Letters, 280.