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AMERICAN LITERATURE

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14. Self-Reliance

Type	:	Essay
1 st Published	:	1841 (Essays, First Series)
Source	:	Transcendentalism, Emerson's Journals
Tone	:	Philosophical,
Theme	:	The need for everyone to avoid conformity and follow his own instincts and ideas.

Transcendentalism – “A core belief is in the inherent goodness of people and nature, and while society and its institutions have corrupted the purity of the individual, people are at their best when truly "self-reliant" and independent.”

Emerson's Self Reliance

Published first in 1841 in *Essays* and then in the 1847 revised edition of **Essays**, "Self-Reliance" took shape over a long period of time. "Self-Reliance" includes materials from **journal entries** dating as far back as 1832. In addition to his journals, Emerson drew on various lectures he delivered between 1836 and 1839.

The first edition of 'Self Reliance' bore three epigraphs: a Latin line "*Ne te quaesiveris extra*" meaning "**Do not seek outside yourself**"; a six-line stanza from **Beaumont and Fletcher's Honest Man's Fortune**; and a **four-line stanza** that Emerson himself wrote. Emerson dropped his stanza from the revised edition of it, but modern editors have since restored it. All three epigraphs stress the necessity of **relying on oneself** for knowledge and guidance.

The essay has three major divisions: the **importance of self-reliance** (paragraphs 1-17), **self-reliance and the individual** (paragraphs 18-32), and **self-reliance and society** (paragraphs 33-50). As a whole, it promotes self-reliance as an **ideal**, even a **virtue**, and contrasts it with various modes of **dependence** or **conformity**.

Paragraph 1 to 17

Emerson begins the essay by asserting the importance of thinking for **oneself** rather than meekly accepting **other people's ideas**.

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"To believe that what is true in your private heart is true for all men — that is genius."

The person who scorns personal intuition and, instead, chooses to rely on others' opinions lacks the **creative power** necessary for robust, bold individualism. This absence of **conviction** results not in different ideas, as this person expects, but in the acceptance of the same ideas — now **secondhand thoughts**

Emerson wants the readers to "**Trust thyself**". To rely on others' judgments is cowardly, without inspiration or hope. A person with **self-esteem** exhibits originality and is **childlike** — unspoiled by selfish needs — yet mature. Emerson invites the readers to be guides and adventurers, destined to participate in an act of **creation** modeled on the classical myth of bringing **order out of chaos**.

Emerson maintains that children provide models of self-reliant behavior because they are too young to be cynical, hesitant, or hypocritical. He draws an analogy between **boys and the idealized individual**: Both are masters of **self-reliance** because they apply their own standards to all they see, and because their loyalties cannot be coerced. This rebellious individualism contrasts with the attitude of cautious adults, who, because they are overly concerned with reputation, approval, and the opinion of others, are always **hesitant** or **unsure**; consequently, adults have great difficulty acting **spontaneously** or **genuinely**.

Emerson now focuses his attention on the importance of an individual's resisting pressure to **conform to external norms**, including those of society, which conspires to **defeat self-reliance** in its members. The process of so-called "**maturing**" becomes a process of conforming that Emerson challenges.

"Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist,"

Responding to the objection that devotedly following one's inner voice is wrong because the intuition may be evil, he writes,

"No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature . . . the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it."

In other words, it is better to be true to an evil nature than to behave "correctly" because of society's demands or conventions.

The non-conformist in Emerson rejects many of society's moral sentiments. For example, he claims that an **abolitionist** should worry more about his or her own family and community at home than about *"black folk a thousand miles off,"* and he chides people who give money to the poor. *"Are they my poor?"* he asks. He refuses to support morality through donations to

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organizations rather than **directly to individuals**. The concrete act of **charity** is real and superior to abstract or **theoretical morality**.

Emerson states that it is better to live truly and obscurely than to have one's goodness extolled in public. It makes no difference to him whether his actions are praised or ignored. The important thing is to act independently:

"What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think . . . the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude."

Emerson asserts that acquiescing to public opinion wastes a person's life. Those around you never get to know your **real personality**. Even worse, the time spent maintaining allegiances to "communities of opinion" saps the energy needed in the vital act of **creation** — the most important activity in our lives — and distracts us from making any unique contribution to society. Conformity corrupts with a **falsehood** that pervades our lives and our every action: ". . . **every truth is not quite true.**" Finally, followers of public opinion are recognized as hypocrites.

Emerson notes that there are two enemies of the independent thinker: **society's disapproval** or scorn, and the individual's **own sense of consistency**. Consistency becomes a major theme in the discussion as he shows how it restrains **independence and growth**.

Although the scorn of "the cultivated classes" is unpleasant, it is, according to Emerson, relatively easy to ignore because it tends to be polite. However, the outrage of the masses is another matter; only the unusually independent person can stand firmly against the rancor of the whole of society.

The urge to remain **consistent** with past actions and beliefs inhibits the full expression of an individual's nature. The metaphor of a corpse as the receptacle of memory is a shocking — but apt — image of the individual who is afraid of contradiction. In this vivid image of the **corpse of memory**,

"Why drag about this corpse of your memory, lest you contradict somewhat you have stated in this or that public place? Suppose you should contradict yourself; what then?"

Emerson asks why people hold onto old beliefs or positions merely because they have taken these positions in the past. Being obsessed with whether or not you remain constant in your beliefs needlessly drains energy — as does conformity — from the act of living. After all, becoming mature involves the evolution of ideas, which is the wellspring of creativity. It is most important to review constantly and to reevaluate past decisions and opinions, and, if necessary,

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to escape from old ideas by admitting that they are faulty, just as the biblical Joseph fled from a seducer by leaving his coat in her hands, *“Leave your theory, as Joseph his coat in the hand of the harlot, and flee,”* an image particularly potent in characterizing the pressure to conform as both seductive and degrading.

Noteworthy in this discussion on consistency is the famous phrase

“A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.”

The term **“hobgoblin,”** which symbolizes fear of the **unknown**, furthers the effect produced by the “corpse” of memory and reinforces Emerson's condemnation of a society that demands conformity. Citing cultures that traditionally frown on inconsistency, Emerson points out that history's greatest thinkers were branded as outcasts for their original ideas — and scorned as such by their peers. Notable among these figures is **Jesus Christ**.

What appears to be inconsistency is often a misunderstanding based on distortion or perspective. Emerson develops this idea by comparing the progress of a **person's thoughts** to a ship sailing against the wind: In order to make headway, the ship must tack, or move in a zigzag line that eventually leads to an identifiable end.

“The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks. See the line from a sufficient distance, and it straightens itself to the average tendency. Your genuine action will explain itself, and will explain your other genuine actions.”

In the same way, an individual's apparently contradictory acts or decisions show consistency when that person's life is examined in its entirety and not in haphazard segments. We must **“scorn appearances”** and do what is right or necessary, regardless of others' opinions or criticisms.

Society is not the measure of all things; the individual is.

“A true man, belongs to no other time or place, but is the centre of all things. Where he is, there is nature.”

Nature is not only those objects around us, but also our individual natures. And these individual natures allow the great thinker — the ideal individual — to battle conformity and consistency.

Paragraphs 18 to 32

The second section of “Self-Reliance” offers more suggestions for the individual who wants to achieve the **desirable quality** of self-reliance. Emerson begins with a directive:

“Let a man then know his worth, and keep things under his feet.”

Material objects, especially those that are imposing — Emerson cites magnificent buildings and heroic works of art, including costly books — often intimidate people by making them feel of

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lesser worth. This **feeling of inferiority** is a mistake: Humans determine an object's worth, not vice versa. Emerson illustrates this point by relating a fable of a drunkard who is brought in off the street and treated like a royal personage; the **unthinking individual** is like the **drunkard**, living only half awake, until he comes to his senses by exercising reason and discovers that he is actually a **prince**.

One cause for our not exercising reason is the **uncritical manner** in which we read. Complaining that we often enjoy reading about the **exploits of famous** people while ignoring or devaluing books about **ordinary righteousness and virtue**, Emerson asks why people view the acts of well-known individuals as more important than the behavior of **ordinary citizens**, even though the good or bad behavior of ordinary people can have effects as noble or as dire as the actions of the powerful. Condemning European monarchies, he considers why royalty is accorded exaggerated respect despite the equal importance of common people; he can reason only that ordinary people respect royalty in recognition that a king or a queen represents the "**royal**" nature of every person, an argument he rejects outright.

Given the inferiority that an individual can feel when confronted by conformity and consistency, and now **commonality**, Emerson wonders how people remain confident in their abilities. The answer is provided by "that **source**, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call **Spontaneity or Instinct**." The wisdom that springs from spontaneous instinct is **Intuition**, or **inner knowledge** from directly apprehending an object. All other knowledge is mere tuition, **secondhand beliefs** received from others instead of a uniquely individual response that was sparked by the source itself. This notion of Intuition is closely related to a main idea of **transcendentalism**: An all-encompassing "soul" animates the universe and is the source of all wisdom and inspiration. Direct knowledge, or intuition, is gained as a gift from this overwhelming source.

Emerson now introduces a contrasting idea of the "**thoughtless man**," who cannot see the depth of truth being used by the **self-reliant, intuitive person**. Thoughtless people cannot understand self-reliant individuals' seeming **inconsistencies** because thoughtless people are too worried about being consistent — as society oppressively wants them to be.

Transcendence is gained only through intuitive knowledge. Describing this transcendent quality is difficult, Emerson says, because we have **no concrete words** for such an abstract state of mind. It is beyond language and can be conveyed only in negatives, by telling what it is not:

"And now at last the highest truth of this subject remains unsaid; probably cannot be said; for all that we say is the far-off remembering of the intuition."

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This type of understanding does not come from any **teacher or intermediary**; moreover, it reaches deeper than any kind of emotion, such as hope, gratitude, or even joy.

Emerson emphasizes the important process of eternally evolving for the better. The self-reliant individual is not **beholden** to society: Although society may remain stagnant, the individual constantly changes, growing more virtuous and noble. This person gains something that others in society do not: namely, the knowledge — and, by extension, the power — of the permeating spirit that animates all things, be they natural objects — plants, animals, or trees — or social activities — for example, commerce or war.

In the paragraphs leading up to this section's conclusion, Emerson moves from analysis to **exhortation**, offering suggestions on how we should act. Although everyone can become a model of self-reliance for the improvement of society, he asserts that "**we**" — the lazy, non-self-reliant individuals — are a "**mob.**" Too many people, he says, are led by **suggestions**, by **desires**, and by **feelings of responsibility**. Instead of practicing independent self-reliance, we give in to others' demands. He urges us to place truth before politeness, value **integrity** more than comfort, and abandon hypocrisy in favor of honesty. Acknowledging that the self-reliant individual risks being misunderstood as merely selfish or self-indulgent, he vows that individuals who rigorously follow their consciences will be more "**godlike**" than individuals who follow **society's laws**.

Paragraph 33 to 50

Emerson in the final section considers the benefits to society of the kind of self-reliance he has been describing. He then criticizes his contemporary Americans for being **followers** rather than **original thinkers**. Condemning the **timidity** of most young people, whose greatest fear is **failure**, he levels his complaint especially at **urban, educated youths**, unfavorably comparing them with a hypothetical **farm lad**, who engages himself in many occupations largely **self-taught** and **entrepreneurial**. The comparison between the city youths and the country fellow highlights the importance of being self-reliant

Emerson now focuses on four social arenas in which self-reliant individuals are needed:

1. **Religion**, which fears **creativity**
2. **Culture**, which devalues **individualism**
3. **The arts**, which teach us only to **imitate**; and
4. **Society**, which falsely values so-called **progress**.

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Religion, Emerson says, could benefit from a good dose of self-reliance because self-reliance turns a person's mind from **petty**, self-centered desires to a **benevolent** wish for the common good. Religion's main problem is its fear of **individual creativity**. As a consequence, it opts for the art of mimicry:

"Everywhere I am hindered of meeting God in my brother, because he has shut his own temple doors, and recites fables merely of his brother's, or his brother's brother's God."

Any religion can introduce new ideas and systems of thought to an individual, but religious **creeds** are dangerous because they substitute a set of ready answers for the **independent thought** required of the self-reliant person.

Emerson then relates over ambitious travel to religion, both substitute an external source of wisdom for an individual's inner wisdom. The person who travels

"with the hope of finding [something] greater than he knows . . . travels away from himself, and grows old even in youth among old things."

The reference to youth reminds us that the self-reliant individual is childlike and original, whereas a person who travels for the wrong reasons creates nothing new and chooses instead to be surrounded by "**old things**."

The urge to travel is a symptom, according to Emerson, of our **educational system's failure**: Because schools teach us only to **imitate**, too often we travel to experience others' works of art rather than create them ourselves.

In "The American Scholar," Emerson advises young scholars to break with European literary traditions. Likewise, in "Self-Reliance," he addresses American artists with many of the same arguments: *"Beauty, convenience, grandeur of thought, and quaint expression are as near to us as to any,"* if only American artisans would consider *"the climate, the soil, the length of the day, the wants of the people, the habit and form of the government."*

Emerson argues that society does not necessarily improve from **material changes**. For example, advances in **technology** result in the loss of certain kinds of **wisdom**: The person who has a **watch** loses the ability to tell time by the **sun's position** in the sky, and improvements in transportation and war machinery are not accompanied by corresponding improvements in either the physical or mental stature of human beings. The most effective image for this static nature of society is the **wave**. A wave moves in and out from the shoreline, but the water that composes it does not; changes occur in society, but *"society never advances."*

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The last two paragraphs of "Self-Reliance" are a critique of **property and fortune**. Emerson castigates reliance on property, as he earlier attacked reliance on the thinking of others, as a means to a full life. Rather than admiring property, the **cultivated man is ashamed of it**, especially of property that is not acquired by honest work. Respect for property leads to a **distortion of political life**: Society is corrupted by people who regard government as primarily a **protector of property** rather than of **persons**.

Finally, Emerson urges the individual to be a **risk taker**. No external event, he says, whether good or bad, will change the individual's basic self-regard.

"Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles."

Self-reliance, then, is the triumph of a principle.

Quotes

- ❖ "Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense...."
- ❖ "We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents."
- ❖ "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members."
- ❖ "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind."
- ❖ "What I must do, is all that concerns me, not what the people think."
- ❖ "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do."
- ❖ "The centuries are conspirators against the sanity and authority of the soul."
- ❖ "Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose."
- ❖ "Just as men's prayers are a disease of the will, so are their creeds a disease of the intellect."
- ❖ "Travelling is a fool's paradise."
- ❖ "In the Will work and acquire, and thou hast chained the wheel of Chance, and shalt sit thereafter out of fear from her rotations....Nothing can bring you peace but yourself."
- ❖ "Envy is ignorance, imitation is suicide."
- ❖ "Insist on yourself; never imitate."