

COMMENTARY

“Self-Reliance” (1841)

Ralph Waldo Emerson

(1803-1882)

“‘Trust thyself,’ a central doctrine in the author’s ethical thought, is the theme developed here. ‘Envy is ignorance...Imitation is suicide’; a man ‘must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion.’ ‘Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members...Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist.’ The two terrors that discourage originality and creative living are fear of public opinion and undue reverence for one’s own consistency. The great figures of history have not cared for the opinions of their contemporaries; ‘to be great is to be misunderstood’; and if a man honestly expresses his nature he will be largely consistent. Deference to authority, to institutions, or to tradition is disobedience to the inner law that each of us must follow in order to do justice to himself and to society. We must speak the truth, and truth, revealed intuitively, cannot be achieved except through the development and expression of one’s individual nature. ‘Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind’.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“‘Self-Reliance’ has been in the past, and perhaps is still, the best-known and most often quoted essay in American literature. ‘Trust thyself; every heart vibrates to that iron string,’ and ‘Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles’ are only two among many examples of Emerson’s gift for expressing spiritual truth in quotable form. ‘These lofty sentences of Emerson,’ Matthew Arnold wrote in 1884, ‘and a hundred others of like strain, I never have lost out of my memory; I never can lose them.’

Emerson’s belief in self-reliance follows as the logical result of his doctrine of the ‘over-soul.’ According to this doctrine, every man has something of the divine in his nature and is capable of establishing a direct relationship with the universal spirit. By means of what Emerson liked to call ‘the intuition of the moral sentiment,’ every man is capable of perceiving the highest truth. To quote from the essay: ‘We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity.’ Every man, therefore, ought to rely upon his own spiritual perceptions, ought to be self-reliant.

Emerson was an individualist, and his ‘Self-Reliance’ is an extreme statement of the individualistic point of view. To the modern reader, the author may appear unmindful of social obligations when he says: ‘What must I do is all that concerns me, not what the people think’; and again, ‘Are they my poor?’ But Emerson was not indifferent to society. He thought of society as composed of individuals. A good society would be a society composed of good individuals. The primary obligation of the individual, therefore, is to perfect his own life. Like his Puritan forbears, Emerson believed that social salvation could be achieved only through the salvation of the individuals who compose society [Hawthorne agrees in his satire of the socialist Utopians in *The Blithedale Romance*].

A superficial reading may leave one with the impression that Emerson’s doctrine is fatally easy. He appears to say, simply, ‘Do as you like.’ It should be remembered, however, that Emerson, again like his Puritan forbears, is holding himself to an almost intolerably high standard of thinking and living. The individual must obey his own *highest* instinct, must ‘absolve’ himself to himself. Self-imposed requirements, in the case of a conscientious person, may be rigorous to the last degree. ‘If anyone imagines that this law is lax,’ says Emerson, a little defiantly, ‘let him keep its commandment one day’.”

Randall Stewart

The Literature of the United States I, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953,1966) 1094-95

“‘Self-Reliance’ is generally regarded as indispensable for the clear understanding of Emerson’s matured philosophy of individualism. This individualism functions through the relations of the ‘self’ with God, or the ‘Over-Soul’--which is another name for the moral law inherent in Nature. But these relations are not automatic; the individual is accorded the responsibility of freedom of choice, guided by intuition and experience. Apart from its ideas, ‘Self-Reliance’ is regarded by many as the high tide of Emerson’s prose; it is compact and cogent in its logic, and its style is a perfect instrument for its emotional intensity and its wit. The ideas of this essay took shape over a long period. It contains a passage from a journal entry of 1832, and others from various lectures delivered between 1836 and 1839.”

Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long
The American Tradition in Literature I, 3rd edition
(Norton 1956-1967) 1129

“The theme of moral independence, of resistance to external pressures, of nonconformity had been a favorite one with Emerson for many years before this essay was written: it was the subject, for example, of one of his best sermons, ‘Trust Yourself,’ which he had preached as early as 1830, and it is of course one of the major strains in ‘The American Scholar.’ Emerson’s journals for the thirties abound in admonitions to himself to preserve his status as a free individual at all costs, and in the lectures he delivered in Boston and elsewhere he returned to the subject again and again. An interesting summary of the sources of ‘Self-Reliance’ in Emerson’s own journals and lectures may be found in Stephen E. Whicher, *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1957), pp. 481-82.”

Newton Arvin
Major Writers of America I
(Harcourt 1962) 510

“‘Self-Reliance’ is perhaps the most brilliant display of Emerson’s literary strategy in all his essays. This was the essay that would be most often quoted in future years--and often misinterpreted as simply *believe in yourself and you can overcome any obstacle*, overlooking the context of Emerson’s self-reliance in ‘God-reliance.’ However, ‘Self-Reliance’ is so strongly assertive that this caution is easily ignored. The essay is a twenty-one gun salute to self-reliance. The compact sentences, with almost no connective words or phrases, march always straight ahead with vigor and emphasis. The reader can almost hear the sentences being shouted. The style, fully as much as the subject matter, has made this one of Emerson’s most popular essays.

Everyone knows such sentences as: ‘To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your own private heart is true for all men,--that is genius.’ (This is one of the more complicated sentences, but it ends with the crack of a whip.) ‘Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string’; ‘Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist’; ‘I would write on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim*. I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation’; ‘a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines’; ‘An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man’; ‘Our reading is mendicant and sycophantic’; ‘As prayers are a disease of the will, so are their creeds a disease of the intellect’; ‘Travelling is a fool’s paradise.’

Critics continue to accuse Emerson of incoherence, but here, characteristically, in ‘Self-Reliance’ every statement emphasizes the exhortation to be true to one’s own God-given conscience...The main thought in each of Emerson’s essays, as previously in his sermons and lectures, is simple and explicit, but he illustrates with such an abundance of examples that an inattentive reader may lose the key to the thought...

It is no wonder that Nietzsche adored these essays, carried them with him when he traveled, and annotated his copy. In ‘Self-Reliance’ Emerson quotes Zoroaster, and Nietzsche’s Zarathustra is a variant spelling. In fact, Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* was probably derived from Emerson’s ‘Over-Soul’; and ‘Self-Reliance’ was the Over-Man’s creed. ‘Circles’ also is in the spirit of the prophet Zarathustra preaching his message of transcending the ordinary human life and discovering one’s divine potentialities. The circle is a metaphor for the expanding life of man radiating from the soul at the center.”

Gay Wilson Allen
Waldo Emerson

(Penguin 1981) 373-74, 378

Michael Hollister (2015)