

Return to Self-Reliance

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In “Self-Reliance” Emerson tells us that our alienation consists of living in a world that does not manifest our genius. We trust only in society and do not trust in fate. Society is built on a secondary selfhood that has its limits in the order of calculation. Its founding principles are conformity and consistency. Its relations are governed by envy, property, and debt. In society we are “ashamed before the blade of grass and the blowing rose.” We practice a false morality, as if in apology for our existence. Our original powers are sacrificed at the altar of a ghostly civilization.

A total revolution is announced in the concept of self-reliance, which is an automatic trust in fate. The fatal self is the aboriginal self, beyond the narrow personhood of name and custom. It is the unknowable self of instinct and spontaneity, the primordial self of god, daimon, and genius. The empowerment of this self is everywhere lost in society, its cosmic force projected into idolatrous symbols. A life sustained at the fountain of self-reliance is a life of absolute nobility and affirmation. To drink from this fountain is to trust innocently in the necessity of one’s path, without time for judgment or explanation.

The liberty of self-reliance is simple, wild, and immediate. It springs from the assurance that whatever one is, in one’s most original nature, is just. This is a justice inherent in the forces of nature itself. Opposed to it stands the moral order of civilization, which institutes an enslavement of these aboriginal forces. Morality is the discipline of the pale, reactive subject, who counts and is accounted. Its techniques are inseparable from the spectacular order of knowledge and mediation. The moral act is performed for the sake of being known, judged, surveyed; it establishes all life in relation to a universal scale of credit and debt, crime and punishment. The rudiments of the whole bloody machinery of mass society are contained in this subjection.

“Self-reliance” is Emerson’s name for an inalienable power native to the Earth’s creatures. Its fulfillment implies not only an inward spiritual orientation, but an outward revolt against the institutions of civilization. We inherit this power from our prehistoric ancestors as the essential ground of our constitution. And yet self-reliance remains a hidden potential in a world defined by its systematic denial.

In a global “information society” with its logic of total surveillance and technocratic control, this aboriginal condition is even more difficult to sustain. One is forced to live as a part-time savage, recuperating the powers of self-reliance through transitory religious or “transpersonal” experiences. Or else one strives for a merely inward realization, a primitive soul participating in the rituals of postmodern hyper-reality. This is a false refuge, and no more than a private memorial to the powers of the unknowable self. Self-reliance has always been rooted in the reawakening of a perennial exodus from the self-imposed tortures of civilization. Its return as an authentic way of life will be possible only when these tortures have been overcome.

The automatic trust of self-reliance exceeds all investment in word, number, and purposive activity. Its ultimate manifestation is a condition of effortless spontaneity—doing nothing, at least nothing knowable as action. This is not a state of passivity or inertia, but an experience so alive with energy as to overflow all attributions of order. In its extreme form, this automatic trust means trusting in wild nature for survival, without any need for exploitative or classificatory labor. Radical self-reliance stands in resistance to the division of labor; it evades the civilized obligation to appear. It is rooted in a refusal of the separation of consciousness into subject and object, an outliving of the transcendent violence of signification.

Emerson is explicit in bringing this radical vision to bear on the servile conventions of mass society. Indeed—and in contrast to the domesticated appropriations that have circulated for the past two centuries—his entire essay on self-reliance can be read as a fierce statement of contempt for modern civilization. The harm of “improved machinery,” Emerson warns, “may compensate its good.” The myth of this life in perfect innocence is to overstep the boundaries and taboos that govern the reified order of society. If one builds one’s own hearth, gathers one’s own grains, or bakes one’s own bread—or does all three in defiance of specialization—then one is closing in on the immediate powers of genius. And if one does all this innocently, then one may very well inflict violence on Law, Property, and Custom in the doing.

It is at this level that the positive force of self-reliance reveals an infinite capacity to disrupt the operations of the civilized mono-program. In living freely, in entrusting oneself to the unknown, one disobeys law and order simply by one’s very nature. Self-reliance, in the midst of civilized society, is a perpetual Progress he casually rejects. Technology and industrial labor are incisively diagnosed, exposing an inner logic of stultification and disempowerment. (“Society acquires new arts, and loses old instincts.”) Family relations, social norms, representative government, duties to God and Country, educational training, scientific and charitable organizations, specialized modes of livelihood—all are found wanting. Property is singled out as a particularly abominable enemy of self-reliance, a foundation of envy and attachment on which much of society’s impoverishment is based.

Underlying this critique is the positive vision of independence illuminated by Emerson’s metaphysics of the aboriginal self. The essence of this vision is both an injunction to drop out of the spectacle of modern society and a call to live from the depths of one’s trust in fate. A sudden, solitary reversion to pure wildness is neither possible nor desirable. As a harmonious resonance in nature, self-reliance is not a condition that can be achieved alone. On a planet thoroughly colonized by self-destructive forces, self-reliance is cultivated through the formation of small-scale autonomous communities. These are zones of intimate co-existence where basic potentialities of life and dignity can be sustained during the process of civilization’s dissolution.

To a large extent, these communities are able to survive on the wasted abundance of the crumbling order, without employing new techniques of organized labor and domestication. In this way, essential needs—which are potentially very few—can be satisfied directly, without sacrificing the godlike respect and equanimity inspired by the path of self-reliance. Undoubtedly, trusting in one’s aboriginal self means disengaging from the machinery of technocratic society, refusing to invest one’s faith in experts, specialists, and authorities, except where imminent needs are in question.

Trusting innocently in fate demands an acceptance of what is immediately in play. This is not a formula for reconciliation with the existing totality, but an invitation to open revolt. The established order does not manifest our destiny; it is not the outcome of innocent trust, but of denial, separation, and rational control. Innocence ends with the obligation to become a responsible member of society, to establish oneself as a rational, consenting adult. To trust in fate one must withdraw, as far as possible, from the ranks of the grown-up order and live childlike.

Emerson’s way of putting this is as follows: “I do not wish to expiate, but to live. My life is for itself and not for a spectacle.” To live spontaneously, directly, and not in the shadow of some mediating totality, is to make life from the powers nearest oneself, the powers of auto-trust. And to make trespass. Merely by walking naked one breaks the law. And there is no trust where nature hides from itself.

Let us not affirm these dreams only in our minds! By practicing intimate co-existence, we concentrate the sphere of our attractions to what we experience immediately, to what is most primordially our own. We gather our forces and relations closer and closer until the dream of original harmony again comes alive. We travel the path of the free spirit, who is ashamed of nothing and who makes himself at home everywhere—and who might say to his brothers and sisters, “You and I, we are like the rest, we own everything.”



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