

# An Eye for an “I” -- An Insight into Emerson’s Thought of Self-reliance

Haijing Liang

School of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, China

**Abstract**—Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Self-reliance* is one of the major writings that helped carve the ethnic American individualism and form the intellectual basis of today’s writers. The thought of self-reliance inspires people not to conform to social conventions but to rely on themselves. This theory can be considered as his perspectives about life. This thesis analyzes the active and mental self-reliance and furthermore, explores this thought through the following theories: circle and compensation. A deeper understanding of self-reliance is therefore deduced through the analysis. Besides, self-reliant individuals are so closely associated with the relationship with it.

**Index Terms**—self-reliance, individualism, active self-reliance, mental self-reliance

“Self-reliance”, which Emerson began to use in 1830, is perhaps a term closer to the idea of individual identity that Emerson was trying to describe. In the following part of this chapter, I am going to analyze Emerson’s essay *Self-reliance* and the thought of being self-reliance from the division of active self-reliance and mental self-reliance.

## I. THE ESSAY OF SELF-RELIANCE

Emerson’s master principle *Self-reliance*, which was also the main theme of the American Transcendentalist movement that he helped inspire, is now considered one of the classic formulations of American individualism. This essay provides us saying as well as builds up new concepts through which the author paves the path for the readers to follow, and furthermore, he tries to force the readers to be self-reliant in order to obtain their self-realization successfully.

In this essay, the author proposes an idea for living that defies all previous convictions. He encourages the readers to free themselves from the constraints of conformity and give themselves back to their nature. His theory is that everything in nature operates in harmony with divine Providence, and that by conforming oneself to social conventions, man cuts himself off from those conventions, which dictate all life. The text then proceeds to encourage man to get back to that state. He insists that man should step out of the routine thoughts associated with the rigidity of society, and live with the guidance of the spirit. Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string” (Emerson, 1841, p.25), this topic sentence could easily serve as Emerson’s thesis statement.

He emphasizes that in order to gain one’s own independence, one must first abandon all things that have been learned and seek to accumulate only the knowledge which one attains firsthand and makes it into one’s own truth.

It seems that the energy he saves by not concerning himself with form is reused in his employment of analogies. This may be another reason why he is such a favored writer. He is skilled in providing everyday examples for his often obscure and abstract ideas, which have the effect of making his long descriptions easy to be understood by even the common readers. These analogies also help his writings to be a certain visual element, which serves to keep the readers inspired by the work.

While Emerson’s language may not always reflect a humble tone, his overall message of universality is an assumption, which places the individuals above the masses, regardless of their identity as long as they act out of their own personal decisions. While at first this may not reflect the common idea of modesty, the assumption is that everyone has the potential to reach the highest esteem; therefore no person is innately superior to any other one. This view also shows the optimism, which permeates the speaker’s views. Everyone can achieve happiness, for it is possible upon anything inherent, rather, it requires a simple shift in one’s mental pattern, a shift any given person can make at any time in their life. Though Emerson may show a little pride at times, he does come from an equal point. His character has no prejudices rather he bases his judgments on independence of thought and strength of conviction. Emerson’s character exhibits a sense of duality that virtually counteracts any extremes of his character.

## II. ACTIVE SELF-RELIANCE AND MENTAL SELF-RELIANCE

Emerson’s thought of being self-reliant can be categorized into active reliance, namely, acting self-reliantly or self-reliant activity, and mental self-reliance, which is thinking self-reliantly. Active self-reliance is an independent activity, but it is less important than mental self-reliance for three main reasons: first, self-reliant thinking is an impersonal embrace of contrast and contradiction, while action must choose and exclude; second, self-reliant activity is dependent on free and retrospective thinking to draw its worth and meaning; and third, the nature of things seems to

obstruct people's effort by acting, no matter how self-reliantly, to achieve a feeling that one has experienced. Emerson's work lowers hope for self-reliant thinking. However, he does not abandon self-reliant activity. It may show some kind of independence, some daring or initiative effort. It can be inventive. And though self-reliant activity, still bound by the requirements of practical purpose, is guided by thinking, which can still be one's own. Activity can be the activity of individuals, of people who act as individuals: "What does it mean to act as an individual? It means a truly individual person will be act one with himself or herself, self-sufficient and self-contained; that its being will be indistinguishable from its being; that its being will naturally achieve its perfection; and that its being is an unintentional blessing on whatever is around it or happens to come its way." (Kateb, 1995, p. 135)

Here we are free to explore Emerson's theory of what it means to act as an individual. The theory contains several contrast ideas. I think that he resolves their contrast not by eliminating them, but by ranking them. These various ideas, however, have a common element; all self-reliant activity is a service or a contribution to others.

The plain fact is that Emerson's concept of individuals—his philosophy of self-reliance—is always suitable for the individual of all persons. and just as the higher self-reliance, which is mental, is finally vindicated by the appreciation of the world, so the less import self-reliance, which is active, is praiseworthy to the extent that it serves or contributor. Emerson's self-reliance is a democratic individuality.

A society of individuals is a society made up of individuals serving or contributing to other individuals. "Each person is one self; each person gives and receives as oneself" (Cavell. 1988. P.58). To give or to receive because one's role requires it; to give anything that strengthens people in their sense as members or parts of a community—all these ideas are ruled by Emerson's theory of self-reliant activity.

Although Emerson's emphasis is on service or contribution, his idea of active self-reliance has a complex relation to morality. More precisely, self-reliant activity will be framed by moral limits, and moral purpose should be achieved indirectly for the most part. Emerson praise moral conduct insistently, and he also points out that indirect service is the best service. The following passages in the essay *Uses of Great Men* reveal Emerson's strategy: "Gift is contrary to the law of the universe. Serving others is serving us. I must absolve me to myself. 'Mind thy affair,' says the spirit: 'would you meddle with the skies, or with other people?' indirect service is left" (Emerson, 1850, p. 3).

He then gives a general characterization of indirect service: "Men are helpful through the intellect and the affections. Other help, I find a false appearance, if you affected to give me bread and fire, I perceive that I pay for it the full price, and at last it leaves me as it found me, neither better nor worse: but all mental and moral force is a positive good. It goes out from you, whether you will or not, and profits me whom you never thought of. I cannot even hear of personal vigor of any kind, great power of performance, without fresh resolution." (Emerson, 1850, p. 5-6).

Emerson's idea of self-help as a primitive self-reliance is illustrated not only by war of survival but also by economic endeavor. In order that a more important kind of active self-reliance ensure, primitive self-reliance in the form of economic self-help must first exist and then remain established. It means making one's way in the world, making it on one's own by an expenditure of one's effort.

The key point is that because self-reliance in every one of its active forms is conceptualized by Emerson as necessarily making a contribution to others, or serving them, the self-reliant individual cannot be dependent on the contributions or service of others to such an extent as to be unable to reciprocate there must be moral equality. Otherwise there would not be democratic individuality—there would not be the active self-reliance appropriate for a democratic society.

The search for wealth is not only a search for power; it is an impulse of power. That means it is also a display, even though those who display it are not interested necessarily in offering themselves or convert themselves into the raw material of their own contemplation or retrospection. But Emerson observes and encourages all of us to do so. His writings throughout his life contain tributes to the entrepreneurial energies of the Americans and the English. It is fitting that one of his tributes is found in the chapter, "Success" in *Society and Solitude*: "Our American people cannot be found taxed with slowness in performance or in praising their performance. The earth is shaken by our energy. We are feeling our youth and nerve and bone. We have the power of territory and of se-coast, and know the use of these" (Emerson, 1850, p. 289).

That he says that Americans are not slow in praising their own performance is a sly word of satire. "What I think he admires above all, is the sense of indefinite yearning and reaching that is conveyed by a wealth —seeking society so extravagant and wasteful in its worldly motions". Hence Emerson finds that recklessness, not prudence, is often at the root of the search for wealth, and that self-expenditure is not for the sake of future economic expenditure but for the sake of self-testing and self-discovery, or more likely, self-forgetting: "An individual's pursuit of wealth is a kind of indefinite outward reaching. Emerson admires the trait and praises it as part of what is best in the human race. He praises it even when it seems driven by obscure purposes or by unmastered currents of thought" (Bishop, 1964, p.203).

What is all history but the work of ideas, a record of the incomputable energy, which his infinite aspirations infuse into man? Has anything grand and lasting been done? Who did it? Plainly not any man, but all men: it was the prevalence and inundation of an idea. What brought the pilgrims here? One man says civil liberty; another, the desire of founding a church; and a third, discovers that the motive force was plantation and trade. But if the puritans could rise from the dust, they could not answer.

So far we find in Emerson's thought about active self-reliance a defense of primitive self-reliance primarily as

economic self-help and a qualified admiration of the self-reliance that shows itself in the pursuit of wealth—a pursuit he traces to various passions, all of them commendable to a certain degree, but none wholly admirable in itself, his general implications is that the pursuit of any main power, position of fame can be a form of active self-reliance, even though in a commercial democracy, the overt pursuit is the pursuit of wealth. Yet Emerson has a keen sense of the inadequacy of worldliness. The self-reliance shown is not reliance on the best self, the aspects of the acting self that most deserve display. Worldliness, to Emerson, is too entwined with selfishness or egotism to be wholly commendable. “The deeper trouble is that the ego in display when worldly prizes are pursued is often not really the ego, but an imitation of egotism” (Kateb, 1995, p. 142). To be worldly is to want what others want because they want it and to obtain success because others have succeeded or failed. Or it is to take unconscious satisfaction in playing one’s part in a game or drama; keeping the whole thing going becomes one’s interest. One is owned by the world and as it were selflessly obeys its commands by accepting and acting on its definition of what is worthwhile.

To be worldly, one does not break away from the society; one does not break one’s neck by turning around; one does not think oneself into a position where once can ask oneself why one is pursuing the things; one looks at one’s life at all. One does not try to live from point zero. One knows how to play the games, but not why they exist or why one should play them. Being worldly is conformity, but conformity is the main antithesis to self-reliance.

But even if not a deceived selflessness but a pure egotism motivates worldly pursuits. Emerson suggests that after a certain near point, an inverse relation exists between egotism and self-reliance, and hence between the self-assertion and self-expression of worldly pursuit and true active self-reliance” (Kateb, 1995, p. 143).

Nevertheless, Emerson adores expressiveness and he is willing to admire self-assertiveness. He is not merely prepared to make concessions to inevitable active egotism. He favors it.” But he wants the search for power and the desire to display energy to find better channels than those already established in the world, established by and for the world, established as an unself-examining organization of power” (Kateb, 1995, p. 145). Emerson wants individuals to look at their lives from the perspective power and energy, but to cut their own channels.

### III. FURTHER EXPLORATION OF THE THOUGHT OF SELF-RELIANCE WITH THE CONCEPT OF CIRCLE

Two principle conceptions can explain it when we try to think about Emerson’s idea of active self-reliance as a whole. They can both be seen as conceptions of personal identity, of being in the world. One is the idea that a person’s movement through life should be unfixed, an unceasing creation and abandonment of channels. One’s identity should be constantly changeable, not easily defined by others or by himself. The other idea is that one should do his work “in a certain unegotistical way” (Anderson, 1971, p.344). After finding one’s position, one should do the work that one does best, that is, the work that one was born to do. Obviously, there is dissonance between two ideas. A life of restless movement is a life of constant self-finding and self-loss. “a life of vocation is willing one thing, a life of perfect, adherence to one commitment, even if such adherence is not static, but rather something more like a process of what is called unfolding” (Kateb, 1995, p. 165). I believe that he prefers vocation above movement. Before turning to the thought of vocation, I will explore his views on a life, which is spent in movement, that is, in restless searching and finding, losing and searching. This, too, is a kind of unfolding. The good life is the life of growth or change.

Unless we overtake ourselves, circumstances will overtake us. The implication is that only conformists try to be fixed, and that in a democratic society, where change is allowed as a matter of principle. Only conformists crave fixity. Thinking that they can conform to democracy, they betray it. Thus the self-reliant personal identity is not really an identity but something more like an unlimited repetition.

The implication in Emerson’s account is that living a changeable life is not simply changing from one thing to another, accumulating various experiences and thereby putting a life together by means of unpurposive addition. Ideally, one desires to draw a circle around oneself, succeeds in drawing it, but then draws another circle around the previous one. Drawing circles symbolizes the effort to achieve completion – that is, perfection. One desires to a kind of fixedness of identity and one is also supposed to become bored with what seems to be fixed. But change is genuine only if it is not searched for itself but is accepted for the sake of an idea of completeness or perfection. New courage arises from new dissatisfaction with the things incomplete as well as imperfect, but it is a courage that dares to try to achieve satisfaction. The memory of failure must become a source of energy, hope for success must be sincere. One must try to acquire his own identity and stick to the effort, and although one may always fail, perhaps one will ascend into a higher state, which is changeable. The very energy that goes into the effort to achieve perfection is an indication that the results of the effort will eventually be found unsatisfactory. Emerson says, “That which is made instructs how to make better” (Emerson, 1841, p.412). A self-reliant individual is supposed to see around himself or herself, to seize a new possibility of experience, and to jump out of the self-enclosure. “Nature, a mountain walk, always gives us to suspect the poverty of life, and we believe that we have run along only one thread of experience out of millions of varied threads which we were competent to combine with that single-string of ours.” (Emerson, 1841, p.419)

The attributes that one is most proud of in oneself must be thrown away, because the “terror of reform is the discovery that we must cast away our virtues” (Emerson, 1841, p.421). The only fact that we are loved or admired means that we have made a mistake. One should try to be heaven if another one admires him, one cannot be heaven if he stops to be such a common person as the one who admires the others. In a cruel passage Emerson says: “The sweet of nature is love; yet if I have a friend I am tormented by my imperfection. The love of me accuses the other party. If he

were high enough to slight me, then could I love him, and rise by my affection to new heights.” (Emerson, 1841, p.406)

One must grow out of the love that has enabled him to grow. “A man’s growth is seen in the successive choirs of his friends” (Emerson, 1841, p.406). It seems that he was trying to say that one only love those who disdain him. One also helplessly disdains those who love him. “When much intercourse with a friend has supplied us with a standard of excellence, and has increased our respect for the resources of God who thus sends a real person to outgo our ideal; when he has, moreover, become an object of thought, and, whilst his character retains all its unconscious effect, is converted in the mind into solid and sweet wisdom, it is a high to us that his office is closing, and he is commonly withdrawn from our sight in a short time.” (Emerson, 1836, p.31)

Life is a process of abandoning and attaining. “The way of life is wonderful; it is by abandonment.” He says in one of his most famous sentences” (Emerson, 1841, p.414). We should grow by being loved, but perhaps even more by being rejected. “Dear to us are those who love us. They enlarge our life; but dearer are those who reject us as unworthy, for they add another life: they build a heaven before us whereof we had not dreamed, and thereby supply to us new powers out of the recesses of the spirit, and urge us to new and unattempted performances.” (Emerson, 1942, p.315)

I must convert my being rejected into mutual abandonment. The irony is that by the abandonments we initiate or exploit we more nearly approach ourselves. The more we change, the more coherent we become. In talking about the advantages of calamity, Emerson says, “The changes which break up at short intervals the prosperity of men are advertisements of a nature whose law is growth. In proportion to the vigor of the individual these revolutions are frequent, until in some happier mind they are incessant and all worldly relations hang very loosely about him, becoming as it were a transparent fluid membrane through which the living form is seen, and not, as in most men, an indurated heterogeneous fabric of many dates and no settled character, in which the man is imprisoned.” (Emerson, 1839, p.52-53)

Growth means deliberately throwing away the less voluntarily or involuntarily acquired crust of custom. What is left is perhaps nothing more than an ever-greater desire to be identified: “Man was made for conflict, not for rest. In action is his power; not in his goals but in his transitions man is great. Instantly he is dwarfed by self-indulgence. The trust state of mind rested in becomes false.” (Emerson, 1853, p.60)

According to Emerson, there is no end for our search and abandoning because our life is only a process of learning. It is “an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn” (Emerson, 1841, p.403). We have to search and abandon for all of our lives. For a self-reliant individual the only rest from apprenticeship is not in attaining the achievements but in death. Until then, life is learning and forgetting and learning again the truth of incessantly available possibility that is contained inside one’s power. “The only motive at all commensurate with his force is the ambition to discover by exercising his latent power. True culture is a discipline so universal as to demonstrate that no part of a man was made in vain” (Emerson, 1841, p.410).

In a passage that sounds like Whiteman before Whiteman got started, Emerson says: “I am not careful to justify myself. But lest I should mislead any when I have my own head and obey my whims, let me remind the reader that I am only an experimenter. I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane. I simply experiment, an endless seeker with no past at my back.” (Emerson, 1841, p.411-2)

Writing essays is combined with living a life Emerson breaks into the apparently sincere confessional mode because he anticipates that some readers will accuse him of Pyrrhonism –an equivalence and indifference of all actions, and will impute to him the unpleasant thought that even out of crimes “we shall construct the temple of the true God” (Emerson, 1841, p.412). Emerson answers the readers with the word “experimenter” (Emerson, 1841, p.412). It is not easy to say whether he hides from his implications or is underlining them but the passage is stirring, and its effect is not blunted when Emerson invokes a principle of “fixture or stability in the soul” (Emerson, 1841, p.412). For what is the soul? It is “the eternal generator; its central life is superior to all it generates and it contains all circles” (Emerson, 1841, p.413). The self is larger than anything it creates. No creation excels the power that created it or can satisfy the fixed soul in which the power of movement is lodged. But dissatisfied with not creating, the soul creates, and then it is also dissatisfied what it creates, and so it creates anew, again and again. What Emerson says about great works of art is also what he would have us feel about all works, all deeds, and all states of being: “They create a want they do not gratify. They instantly point us to somewhat better than themselves” (Emerson, 1841, p.414).

The great philosopher of affirmation is concurrently the great teacher of dissatisfaction, even disappointment. In each of us, the energies of hope should make room for the emotion of philosophical acceptance of the world, as it must be.

No doubt Emerson is keenly aware that the will to power, even in the most unexpressed person, can be limitless in its intentions or fantasies, which is why he hopes that all people will be encouraged in it: “For nature wishes everything to remain itself, and whilst every individual strives to grow and exclude, and to exclude and grow, to the extremities of the universe, and to impose the law of its being on every other creature, nature steadily aims to protect each against every other. Each is self-defended.” (Emerson, 1850, p. 15)

I do not find in Emerson theoretical praise for a person who acts out of character in a radical sense, who acts against his grain or take sides against himself, or who changes because of a strong conviction that he has been in serious error. These phenomena seem contrary to unfolding. To think self-reliantly is to think against oneself, but one cannot expect or be expected to act that way. Emerson did act against himself when he took up the abolitionist duties of citizenship in the 1850s. But interrupting the arc of one’s circle is not what Emerson praises. The life of movement is nevertheless a life of risk. “Experimentation is life as an adventure’s being the hero of one’s life means taking on the world, not merely

as something that needs resistance, but as something that needs definition as one's own, one's rightful place. And in the process, the contribution to others that experimenters make is the inspiration they give by their exemplary courageous self-reliance they invite the more timid to live more" (Kateb, 1995, p.171).

#### REFERENCES

- [1] George Kateb. (1995). *Emerson and Self-reliance*. Cambridge: the Riverside Press.
- [2] Jonathan Bishop. (1964). *Emerson on the Soul*. Cambridge: Oxford University Press.
- [3] Ralph Waldo Emerson. (1971). *Nature*. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume I*. Ed. Joseph Slater. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- [4] Ralph Waldo Emerson. (1971). *Uses of Great Men*. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume I*. Ed. Joseph Slater. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- [5] Ralph Waldo Emerson. (1979). *Circles*. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume II*. Ed. Joseph Slater. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- [6] Ralph Waldo Emerson. (1983). *New England Reformers*. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume III*. Ed. Joseph Slater. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- [7] Ralph Waldo Emerson. (1979). *Compensation*. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume II*. Ed. Joseph Slater. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- [8] Ralph Waldo Emerson. (1979). *Self-reliance*. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume II*. Ed. Joseph Slater. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

**Haijing Liang** was born in Suiling, Heilongjiang Province, China in 1979. She received her M.A. degree in British and American literature from Haerbin Engineering University, China, in 2005.

She is currently a lecturer in the School of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, China. Her research interests include British and American literature.