

Emerson, Thoreau, and Individuality

On the topic of solitude, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) has been largely overshadowed by his protégé Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), whose practical experiences in nature and outdoors gave Thoreau a rich hoard of material for self-reflection and writing. But while Emerson was strictly a writer and lecturer, his expertise of literature and observational skills make for a widespread treatment of the topic of solitude, especially in three works: *Society and Solitude*, *Self-Reliance*, and *Nature*. Both transcendentalist thinkers speak about being individual and what reforms and changes need to be made in our society. However, the two authors differ in their idea of what reforms must be made. While Emerson takes a much more general approach to what changes a person should make, Thoreau gets into much more detail as to what the individual needs to do to change society.

Considered two of the most influential and inspiring transcendentalist writers of their time, Ralph Waldo Emerson is generally considered the father of American transcendentalism, where "truth resides in the spiritual world" (Civil Disobedience). Henry David Thoreau, his student, was also a great essayist and critique. Both men extensively studied and embraced nature, and both men encouraged and practiced individualism and nonconformity. In Emerson's essay "Self Reliance" and Thoreau's essay "Resistance to Civil Government" ("Civil Disobedience"), both men speak of individualism and what reforms need to be made in society. They do so through criticizing the religious, political, and cultural values of American society, all in order to show people that they are more important than everything, including government and society.

According to Emerson, society is a barrier against the individuality of its members; and he continued: "Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity" (Self-Reliance). The solution, for Emerson, is self-reliance, meaning that man is only responsible for his own life and he shouldn't be too enveloped in society, which is one of the main principles of his Transcendentalism concept. The other principle is individualism, which was expressed in Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience": "I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right" (Civil Disobedience). And in *Self Reliance* by Emerson: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, -- *that is genius.*" Emerson's belief that people afraid of voicing their own ideas and speaking the truth is what led Thoreau to discover "everyone has an obligation to himself and himself, alone. Too many people in society conform to what the government says is right and moral, when the true meaning of right or moral comes from what each individual holds to be what is right. To become a true individual is to make every decision based upon your own personal belief of its morality, no matter what society says, and to act upon your belief accordingly" (Self-Reliance).

The common idea in Emerson's "Self reliance" and Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" is the fact that in order to be an individual one must be a non-conformist: "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist." says Emerson and

adds, "He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world." Emerson's insistence on being an individual and finding truth in through solitude is a millennial break-through. He opts "not [to] go where the path may lead, [but] instead where there is no path and leave a trail" (Self-Reliance).

Thoreau followed the same way, but chose the government as a target and used it as a hinder on becoming a man, as it dehumanizes people into working for the government. "The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies" (Civil Disobedience). Thoreau too tended to attack all government objectives promoting conformity and the use of people to alleviate their own moral debts. Emerson tended to promote individualism in thought and action, and promote the idea that individualism allowed sole survival in a shifting society. They gave philosophic definition to a diffuse cultural tendency, in need of new representation. What Emerson implied to the world was that individualism was the virtue that made Americans' achievement possible. He entails how much greater Americans' achievements would be if they were to preserve their vast individualism instead of minimizing it. Emerson believed all great works were spouts of liberty and individualism, solitude and self reliance, claiming that "In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else, to-

morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another" (Self-Reliance).

Similarly, Thoreau's core theme in "Resistance to Civil Government" was the importance of keeping our own ideas and conscience against unjust authority: "If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth--certainly the machine will wear out... Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong, which I condemn" (Civil Disobedience). The factor, which led Thoreau to be in favor of non-conformity, is Emerson, of course. He considered individuality as doing whatever he wanted and ignoring what the people think, which we can find in his words: "What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think" (Self-Reliance). According to Thoreau and Emerson, individuals are responsible for them and should not ask for protection from the state. In his *Self-Reliance*, Emerson advised men to trust themselves and accept the society of their equals, the connection of events that God found for them. For "it is only as a man puts off all foreign support, and stands alone, that I see him to be strong and to prevail" (Self-Reliance). In similar fashion, Thoreau expressed in his famous essay *Resistance to Civil Government* that when he conversed with the freest of his neighbors, he perceived that, whatever they might say about the extent and legitimacy of the question, that they could not spare the safety of their existing government. He said that: "For my own part, I should not like to think that I ever rely on the protection of the State." Adding that, "You must live within yourself, and

depend upon yourself always tucked up and ready for a start, and not have many affairs, in order to avoid of the reliance on the protection of the State, which indicates the necessity of living simply" (Walden).

In conclusion, Emerson and Thoreau defined how an individual must be, which can be summed up as trusting your own ideas, finding the truth within yourself as Emerson says, "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself" and not to let society suppress your private individuality (Self-Reliance). Thoreau, a strong believer that enlightenment stems from solitude, reinforced Emerson, in a sense, by preaching to stop following and take initiative to lead. He states that all men "must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny, and not be pinched in a corner." Like Thoreau, Emerson believes that a person can learn the most about themselves in solitude. "These are the voices [of enlightenment] which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is a conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members," says Emerson (Self-Reliance). According to these American writers—a man of principle cannot be constrained into any wrongdoing and will never compromise his freedom and integrity—thus peace is not for the cowardly and timid. It is certain that Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were quite influential in the development of the United States of America, taking into consideration the fact that they imparted self-confidence into society and freedom of thought to the minds of its citizens. However it is difficult to say the same thing today as US citizens are far less self-reliant today than they used to be. All in all, between these two men, their scriptures

left a historical footprint on America's earlier literature, whilst fueling an impact of the literary future to come.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Overview (Norton Anthology of American Literature, 7th Edition)
<http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/naal7/contents/B/welcome.asp>
- Aaron, Michelle, "Thoreau and Individualism"
<http://www.msu.edu/~aaronmic/aaronm03.html>
- Beck, Sanderson, "Emerson's Transcendentalism"
<http://www.san.beck.org/Emerson.html#1>
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo, "Self Reliance" Essays (Boston, 1841)
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo, "The Conduct of Life" 1860, Power
http://quotations.about.com/library/db/blauth_emerson.htm#answer
- Thoreau, Henry David, "Resistance to Civil Government" taken from The Norton Anthology of American Literature: Volume I (London: Norton & Co. 1993)
Transcendentalism
- "Transcendentalism-The Anti-Individualist Philosophy of Emerson and Thoreau"
<http://www.individualistvoice.com>