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David Vallins

# Self-Reliance: Individualism in Emerson and Coleridge

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David Vallins

## Self-Reliance: Individualism in Emerson and Coleridge

What is a great man but one of great affinities, who takes up into himself all arts, sciences, and knowables, as his food? Hence his contemporaries tax him with plagiarism. But the inventor only knows how to borrow; and society is glad to forget the innumerable laborers who ministered to this architect, and reserves all its gratitude to him.

—R. W. Emerson, 'Plato; or, The Philosopher'<sup>1</sup>

On meeting Coleridge, Wordsworth, and other British luminaries in 1833, Emerson claimed to be unimpressed. God, he wrote in his journal, 'has shown me the men I wished to see [—] Landor, Coleridge, Carlyle, Wordsworth [—] he has thereby comforted & confirmed me in my convictions.... I shall judge more justly, less timidly, of wise men forevermore. To be sure not one of them is a mind of the very first class.... Especially are they all deficient ... in insight into religious truth. They have no idea of that species of moral truth which I call the first philosophy.'<sup>2</sup> That an author who in 1829 had celebrated Coleridge's 'living soul' and 'universal knowledge,' and more recently had written a poem with so Coleridgean a title as 'Gnothi seauton' (or 'know thyself'), in which he echoes Coleridge's view that 'We begin with the I KNOW MYSELF, in order to end with the absolute I AM,' should now describe both him and Wordsworth as mediocre and lacking in religious insight may well seem surprising.<sup>3</sup> The 'first' or 'primal' philosophy of which he says they

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<sup>1</sup> *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. E. W. Emerson, 12 vols (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903–4), 4:41–2.

<sup>2</sup> *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Oilman and Alfred R. Ferguson, 14 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1960–78), 4:78–9 (hereafter *JMN*).

<sup>3</sup> See *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, 10 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909–14), 2:277 (the passage derives from a letter to his aunt), 'Gnothi seauton,' esp. 11. 29–40 (*JMN*, 3:291), and S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983), 1:283 (hereafter *BE*); also Coleridge's poem 'Gnothi seauton' in *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. H. N. Coleridge, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912), 1:487. On Emerson's Neo-

"Self-Reliance" by Ralph Waldo Emerson is an 1841 essay about the importance of pursuing one's own thoughts and intuitions, rather than adhering to public norms. Emerson urges his readers to follow their individual will instead of conforming to social expectations. Emerson draws on examples of historical geniuses—such as Plato and Milton—in arguing for the importance of individualism. Emerson posits the effects of self-reliance: altering religious practices, encouraging Americans to stay at home and develop their own culture, and focusing on individual rather than societal progress. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. What is the aboriginal Self on which a universal reliance may be grounded? What is the nature and power of that science-baffling star, without parallax, without calculable elements, which shoots a ray of beauty even into trivial and impure actions, if the least mark of independence appear? The inquiry leads us to that source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct.