

Emerson the Individualist

Benjamin De Casseres

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The individual is God differentiated. Mankind is One reduced to fractions. Each soul is a segment of the primal circle—an arc curved over the deeps of Being. The roots of the soul, like the roots of islands, meet and conjoin in the depths where individual differences cease. The individual mind is a gaunt, isolated peak that rises sheer and stark from the unplumbed abysses of the divine. And, like mountains that crumble to the sea, they lay the foundations of future ranges that shall and shall not be the same, so does the individual return atom by atom to its source. Those emotions, desires, thoughts, that make us what we are shall drift back silently and inevitably to the great spiritual reservoir, and the many-tongued soul is at last resumed in God, whence it sprung. Difference is shrouded in like, and like undulates to difference in perpetual circles. Such, in brief, is the metaphysics of individualism as expounded by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The greatest thing in the world is self-love. Love yourself, reverence yourself, and it must inexorably follow that you can then hate no man. He loves himself best who hates himself most. You must learn to detest the petty that battens on your soul like maggots on rotten fish, and the gnawing envies that dart through your veins like hungry rats in a wall, and the furtive-eyed insincerities that shape the soul to obscene curves and amble after place and power like a crétin begging alms. Self-love is not selfishness, but self-ishness. He who loves another loves the best in himself. He who hates another loves the worst in himself.

We hear much of altruism. Altruism is Envy turned saint. It is the creed of soggy souls and sultry moralists. Altruism is a subtle form of egotism. It aims at self-expansion by denying self. Altruists are moral smugglers, and they have the contraband in their cellars. They do good that they may receive good in return. The absurdest thing in the world is the story of how Adam named the animals; almost as absurd is the doctrine of disinterested motives. It is easier to balance Sirius on a hair than to conceive of an action that is not motivated in self-love. The tops and bottoms of being cannot reach beyond the Self, in which we are shrouded like the sun in its fires. Except a thing tend to glorify you it is worthless.

The sublimest sacrifice that the world has ever seen was but the immolation of the lower on the higher, of the mortal individual on the cosmic individual. On the pyres of aspiration, Christ burned his lower nature. Hence we call Him the perfect man.

It was Emerson who first gave us leave to worship ourselves. In his high northing he skirted the open polar seas of the spirit; and his eye at least beheld the spot where all lines meet. The forked lightnings of his soul struck steeple and capitol, and the thunders that reverberated from

Self-Reliance rumbled around the world. The prim properties that feed on shredded wheat, and the mediocrity that lives by oatmeal alone were set a-crooning, and the “home virtues”—parlour magic for children—were scared into a death-chatter. The sham gods that dwell in their tinselled social padogas were rocked from their embossed pedestals, and the shrivelled souls of a manikin mankind—all neatly wrapped in the tinfoil virtues—were set a-squeaking and a-gibbering with horror. All the essays and poems are, in the last analysis, a celebration of Emerson. His own soul was the most important fact in his life. He knew nobody worthier than himself. Revolutionist, transcendentalist, sage, stoic, bond-servant to the Spirit that dwells in the unlimned spaces of the Oversoul, he flung the age-long cadavers that had staled in his doorway over the parapets of his castle, and sounded a clarion-blast of defiance to the worm-eaten faiths of the world.

It is the hardest thing in the world to preserve your individuality. All things tend to absorb you. The world is avid of your soul. The very stars are wolves upon your trail. Society is an unkennelled bloodhound that roams our cities seeking whom it may devour. Time is shod in rubber, and its ferret eyes leer with delight as it watches your soul crumble to the common level. Threatening missives are borne to you upon the winds, and the hint of penalties falls on your ear like rain-patter on a tin roof. Fear—that “obscene bird,” Emerson calls it—circles over your soul like a kite amorous of carrion. The cabals of Doubt are always in session, and your tiny spirit flutters and flickers like a candle set near a wind-swept chimney. The whispering negations play over your soul like lambent flames on troubled waters. All things conspire against you. The thongs of habit rib your soul. You are striated with elemental slime. The life of man from bib to coffin is a vicarious atonement; he does daily penance for the sins of his ancestors. The insinuating imps of temptation swarm in and out of your clay like worms in a corpse. If you rise to the level of your instincts, you will be pelted by pebbled epithets, and senile old women, of both sexes, will run into the highway and fling at you the “Nay!” “Nay!” from the slungshots of their hatred. And there are those who will crouch behind the hedges of humility and fling their dirt at the traveller along the Open Road. The man who dares to be himself is a wild hair blown into the eye of his generation.

“Let us have done with conformity!” cries Emerson. Were the mighty currents of Being set in motion merely to float the bloated bladders? He who can walk the waters of life is truly a saviour—at least, of himself. We amble and shamle through life. Walking is a lost art. We pay court here, we doff our hat there; we crook the knee to that senescent lie and fawn upon this pimpled villainy; and our backs grow round, and, like pigs with snout to the ground, are our senses riveted to smut. Conformity is cowardice, and all concessions are made to the devil. It is better to die on the Horeb of isolation, knowing that you have been true to yourself, than to rot away inch by inch in the mephitic alleys of the commonplace. It is better to go *your* way among men, defiant of their scorn, than to go men’s ways and scorn yourself. The cerebral activity of the average man consists of a series of apologetic molecular movements that discharge shrimp-like impressions which he dignifies by the name of thought.

Action is thought tempered by illusion. Most of our actions are cowardly. They aim at something the world prizes—fame, honour, riches. No man dares to act from himself. He borrows his light. If he has an original thought he conceals it. It is his; hence it is unworthy. His humility is cowardice. His apologies are the dry cough of a consumptive soul. He yawns and gapes when the world is not by. His life is as artificial and as useless as civilisation. His body is but the inflated bladder of a dead ego. “Don’t be a mush of concessions,” Emerson admonishes us. Dare to affirm—or to deny. There *is* a negative bravery. A pygmy may do and dare. It takes a Hercules to

achieve inaction. Dare not to do, and you will find it harder than daring to do. The man who aims at nothing, whose heart is set upon nothing, whose eye lusteth not, whose soul floats with the endless currents of being in a joyful, willing willessness, has achieved that calm and repose that are the basic motives of the strenuous act—the act that confuses means with ends and subsists *en passant*. Emerson's soul stood poised in a measureless calm—like a shaft of alabaster towering to the multitudinous stars. His mind was an Alhambra of beauties, and his head wore the turban of dreams. God stole on tiptoe to his soul and messaged to the world the great Saga of Self.

“Trust thyself.” Why should I make believe that I like the world-famed book I am reading if it run counter to my deepest convictions? Why am I bound to believe what is said in any book, though it come with the imprint of Mount Sinai? Why should I hold to any law, church, institution, if there is that within me that spurns it? Each man is unique. He may live again, but under other masks. My thoughts are best because they are my own. Each of us is a relative absolute—relative in his qualities, absolute in his unique potentialities. The man firmly mortised in the granite of Self must spurn gifts merely because they are gifts. What can I muse?—not What can I get?—is the question the egoist asks himself. Each thought, however humble, that is rightfully ours, is of use. The despised trivial is often the crumbling fragment of ancient buried sublimities. The carrion hours gorged with the filth of decayed cycles spit their bribes at our feet. But your great man will have none of them. Time is a rhymed undulation. The things he needs will flow to his feet. Let the social hucksters peddle their wares. The man who drinks his own spirit will no longer harpoon sardines; he baits for Eternity.

In so far as a man concedes and takes is he weak. In so far as he resists and refuses is he strong. Shall we be affronting reefs in this wild, unsounded sea of lawless law, or corks swirling anywhither? That flowering differentiation which is called individuation was begun in the affirmation of a denial—the affirmation of the rights of the single over the many and the denial of the power of environment. Things develop in inverse ratio to their likenesses. Life is conditioned on contention. At bottom there is war. Whether the battle for the preservation of self is carried on in the open or in the midnight silences of the soul—it is one and the same. It is the soul's demand for breathing space. It is the battle for the redemption of the self from the slavery of limitation. The law of self-preservation is the law of salvation. To preserve yourself at the expense of your neighbour is Nature's first ordinance. Attraction is secondary—an afterthought. Love is an efflorescence. Resistance is the primal law. Your molecules are surrounded by an impenetrable sphere of force. Your soul was made to withstand impact. Emerson never tires of emphasising this truth. In “Self-Reliance” he says: “I must be myself. I will not hide my tastes or aversions.” He will not sell his liberty and power to save other men's sensibilities. It is better to wound than play the hypocrite. “I do not wish to expiate, but to live. My life is not an apology, but a life.” It is the weak man who smilingly weaves his silken threads of craft around the strong man. But the strong man has need for neither craft nor apology. He slashes his way to liberty.

“Behold! I teach you the Overman,” might have been enunciated by Emerson. The Overman of the Nietzsche aimed at a beyond-man. The Overman of Emerson is to be evolved in man. Nietzsche sought to manufacture a God; Emerson sought to fabricate a man. Nietzsche conceived power as something that primarily flowed out of man; Emerson conceived it as something flowing into man from the Oversoul—the shoreless sunken seas of the potential.

There is a conspiracy among the underfed to palm off the emaciated for the ethereal. We cringe to words; we fawn before proverbs; we are the paid sycophants of Mumbo-Jumbo. We are ruled by the senescent and the obsolescent. Men are afraid to violate. Virtue is a papier-maché

monument that Impotence has erected over the grave of Hope. At most there is a thin, piping "No," and a scamper to cover. Men seek to do the "proper thing"—which is generally the improper thing. Most laws are obeyed through fear—and presto! we have the "virtue" styled obedience. The Ideal is the Cockayne of the lost. The weak man dreams his darling sin, and calls it "Heaven." The strong man enacts his darling sin, and the world cries "Bravo!"—sometimes—and another "virtue" comes to being. "Do the thing you are afraid to do," Emerson tells us. Shock the decorous. Defy the customary, and let us raise altars to the rebels! It is inability that wears the mask of patience, and we are ruled but he unfittest. Conscience?—the tribute that weakness pays to capacity. Strong men and their consciences must part. Each original act smashes a scruple. The highest Man is not a moral being, but an æsthete. Life for him is a spectacle, not an aspiration. What we call progress is but the primitive love of the novel. We are dying of an overdose of "moralic acid."

At bottom we reverence power. We have an instinctive love for the heroic. And we twist moral values to suit our desires. We love might more than right. The bandit Bonaparte has dazzled the world; we love him for his strength. He was a good animal. We secretly admire the great law-breakers and build private fanes to the great Anarchs,—witness Musolino.

The Greek Prometheus is the soul of man in eternal rebellion. We like to linger over the image of Ajax defying the lightning. The Byron legend will fascinate the world when *Childe Harold* shall no longer be extant. And America shall one day count Ralph Waldo Emerson her chiefest rebel and her greatest glory.

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