

Resurrecting Emerson:
An Investigation of Self-Reliance's Presence in *Society and Solitude*
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Abstract

Though many people believe that Ralph Waldo Emerson was a brilliant thinker, lecturer, and writer, there is a widespread notion among scholars that he abandoned his early philosophy during the latter stages of his life, casting a negative light on his legacy. Gertrude Reif Hughes summarizes this prevalent view as follows: “A commonplace of Emerson scholarship holds that the early voice of rhapsodic affirmation and challenge gave way, after the death of little Waldo in 1842 or the Mexican war of 1846, to a voice that is more skeptical, or resigned, or just plain tired” (ix). This belief that Emerson’s later work lacks his youth’s forcefulness serves as the impetus for this thesis, and I spend the bulk of the ensuing chapters evaluating the more specific argument among these critics that the older Emerson renounced the idealistic tenets of his early thought because of their impracticability.

It is impossible to assess this consensus if I treat Emerson’s early philosophy as merely transcendental, a label that most scholars use to characterize his work. To avoid this problem, I approach my critique of Stephen E. Whicher and other scholars’ denunciations of Emerson’s later thought by focusing on one vital element of Emerson’s early philosophy: self-reliance. It is an idea that has received a lot attention in both mainstream and academic circles, and, more importantly, it is “the best single key to [Emerson’s] thought and influence” (Buell 59). In its most simple terms, self-reliance is an individual’s ability to think his or her own thoughts. An investigation of this idea’s presence, or lack thereof, in Emerson’s later work provides us with a means to evaluate the scholarly consensus’s assertion that Emerson deserts his early philosophy in the concluding phase of his life.

For the purposes of this thesis, Emerson’s later philosophy is defined by the views that he sets forth in *Society and Solitude*, his last major work. By comparing *Society and Solitude* to Emerson’s early philosophy, I am able to ascertain the consistency of Emerson’s portrayal of self-reliance over the course of his life. However, before examining whether or not self-reliance pervades *Society and Solitude*, I define the term in the first chapter of my thesis. Essentially, I combine George Kateb’s conception of self-reliance, which asserts that it is a form of democratic individuality, with Randy L. Friedman’s and Whicher’s claims that the idea involves an inner religiousness. After defining self-reliance, the remainder of my thesis works closely with the essays in *Society and Solitude* and utilizes comparisons between these texts and Emerson’s early works in order to illustrate self-reliance’s presence in the book.

In the second chapter, I focus on self-reliance’s permeation of the most concrete essays in *Society and Solitude*. Throughout this chapter, I demonstrate that these essays’ practical topics do not signal a desertion of self-reliance and instead show that self-reliance is a practicable idea. Subsequently, the third chapter explores Emerson’s infusion of self-reliance into *Society and Solitude* through abstractions and establishes that Emerson never renounced his “idealistic rhetoric” (Rowe 24). Finally, the conclusion contends that Emerson’s unwavering belief in self-reliance represents a commitment to idealism that counters George Fredrickson’s theory about the Civil War’s dimming effect on American thinkers and Emerson in particular. Overall, this examination of self-reliance’s presence in *Society and Solitude* reveals that Emerson’s later work does not abandon this idea, and, consequently, does not completely deviate from his early thought.

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Short Titles

Essays: Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays: First and Second Series*. Avenel, NJ: Gramercy Books, 1993. Print.

Nature: ---. *Nature*. Nashville, TN: American Renaissance Books, 2009. Print.

S-R: ---. *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1993. Print.

SS: ---. *Society and Solitude*. Boston, MA: James R. Osgood and Co., 1876. Print.

INTRODUCTION

How do we judge a writer's career? Different answers to this question guide our varying perceptions of authors, particularly for those who have produced controversial work. Ralph Waldo Emerson certainly qualifies as one such divisive writer. For many people, Emerson's legacy is tied to his powerful declarations about nonconformity in "Self-Reliance" (1841). At one point in this famous essay, he affirms, "Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another you have only an extemporaneous half possession" (*S-R* 35). Emerson's supporters appreciate his espousal of independence and admire the writer's own "gift," which was his dogged attempt to think originally about all facets of life. Essentially, Emerson perpetually sought to "speak the truth that emerge[d] from within" (Sacks 4). Through this individuality, Emerson was able to draw profound conclusions from the ordinary, or, in his own words, "to see the miraculous in the common" (*Nature* 70). This sentiment played a critical role in all of his major works of writing: *Nature* (1836), *Essays* (1841), *Essays: Second Series* (1844), *Representative Men* (1850), *English Traits* (1856), *The Conduct of Life* (1860), and *Society and Solitude* (1870). Throughout these books, Emerson's devotion to his own ideas earns him the respect of readers across many generations.

Conversely, many individuals do not think that Emerson's career should be viewed in such a positive light. Despite Emerson supporters' emphasis on the transcendent and enduring quality of his work, there is also a widespread notion among critics that Emerson abandoned his early philosophy during the latter stages of his life. Gertrude Reif Hughes summarizes this prevalent stance as follows: "A commonplace of Emerson scholarship holds that the early voice of rhapsodic affirmation and challenge gave way, after the death of little Waldo in 1842 or the

Mexican war of 1846, to a voice that is more skeptical, or resigned, or just plain tired” (ix). Stephen E. Whicher, a ring leader of sorts for this strand of thought, calls this Emerson’s “acquiescence” to fate (124); similarly, Harold Bloom contends that Emerson’s early “joy” succumbed to “later, darker broodings” (55; 61). The death of Emerson’s son, Waldo, is an event that many scholars pinpoint as a turning point in Emerson’s work. It followed the publication of *Essays* and preceded the printing of *Essays: Second Series*. This tragic moment in Emerson’s life forced him to confront the “problem of evil,” a challenge to his philosophy that many scholars feel he naively addresses in “Compensation” from *Essays* (Whicher 36). Even prior to this incident, Whicher claims that Emerson’s “transcendentalism” was “steadily giving way to a basic empiricism—one which, though it includes and stresses man’s peculiar experience of the Soul, nevertheless pragmatically recognizes the priority of experience over ‘Reality’” (97). This quotation exemplifies Whicher’s influential view of Emerson’s career; he is the forerunner for a group of scholars who believe that the transcendental attitude in *Nature* and Emerson’s other early works ultimately yields to a more practical position in his later writings.

This scholarly consensus serves as the impetus for this thesis, and the bulk of the subsequent chapters are spent evaluating this argument. In one crucial way, this is an impossible endeavor. To this point, I have spoken generally about Emerson’s philosophy and scholars’ interpretations of it as if there is a viable method for assessing all of his thoughts. Emerson’s ideas do fall under an umbrella of sorts; Emerson is known as a founding figure of transcendentalism, a school of philosophical thought that emphasized the power of nature and individuality. However, there is not a clear line between what is considered transcendental and what is not. Consequently, it is impossible to evaluate the scholarly consensus if I treat Emerson’s early philosophy as merely transcendental.

To avoid this problem, I approach my critique of Whicher and other scholars' denunciations of Emerson's later thought by focusing on one vital element of Emerson's early philosophy: self-reliance. It is an idea that has received a lot attention in both mainstream and academic circles, and, more importantly, it is "the best single key to [Emerson's] thought and influence" (Buell 59). In its most simple terms, self-reliance is an individual's ability to think his or her own thoughts. Emerson expresses this notion when he declares in "Self-Reliance," "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind" (*S-R* 21). An investigation of this idea's presence, or lack thereof, in Emerson's later work provides us with a means to evaluate the scholarly consensus's assertion that Emerson deserted his early philosophy in the concluding phase of his life.

Up until now, I have referred to Emerson's "early philosophy" without explicitly defining this term. By Emerson's "early philosophy," I mean the views that he promotes in *Nature*, *The American Scholar* (1837), the *Divinity School Address* (1838), *Essays*, and *Essays: Second Series*. While many scholars regard Waldo's death as the crossroads in Emerson's thought and, as a result, include *Essays: Second Series* as part of his later philosophy, this book was published in such close succession to *Essays* that it seems imprudent to exclude it from his early work. A more apt event to divide Emerson's early thought from his later writing was his second journey to England and France in 1847. The trip allowed him to reflect on recent events in his life, and he knew that "Europe would challenge him, would displace his central man and make him feel peripheral, provincial, and derivative" (Richardson, Jr. 446). After his exposure to the revolutions that emerged throughout Europe in 1848, Emerson was pushed to continue his examination of the individual's place in society (Richardson, Jr. 455-456).

For the purposes of this thesis, the ideas that Emerson sets forth in *Society and Solitude*, his last major work, represent his later philosophy. Although *Letters and Social Aims* was published five years after *Society and Solitude* in 1875, Emerson's health significantly deteriorated in the months and years preceding the publication of *Letters and Social Aims*, raising doubts about Emerson's intentions for the book. His nearly nonexistent memory was particularly damaging to *Letters and Social Aims*; on a trip to England in 1872, Emerson could not remember the name of his wife at a dinner (Richardson, Jr. 569). This was not an isolated occurrence and typified his weakening physical state. More specifically, "he suffered from...aphasia; unable to call up a given word, he would resort to circumlocutions that sometimes came out like riddles" (569). Therefore, *Society and Solitude*, a work comprised of essays that Emerson refined throughout the 1860s, serves as the final book that we can analyze with an expectation that Emerson coherently pieced it together.

Society and Solitude contains 12 essays that touch on a wide variety of topics, including "Courage," "Eloquence," "Books," "Farming," and "Success." Yet, despite its lucid and compelling prose, the book is seldom addressed in scholarly circles. On the rare occasion when scholars mention *Society and Solitude*, they either quickly dismiss the book as a manifestation of Emerson's diminishing mental and physical strength or use the work to support the notion that Emerson abandoned self-reliance because of its impracticability. The former approach merely demonstrates these scholars' ignorance and thus says little about the book's content, but the latter approach undermines Emerson's early and late work by insinuating that he has not remained true to his philosophy. The impression that Emerson discarded his early thought suggests that he fell victim to the "foolish consistency" that he calls the "hobgoblin of little minds" in "Self-Reliance" (*S-R* 24). Since it is universally recognized that Emerson "consisten[tly]" espoused

self-reliance throughout the late 1830s and early 1840s, the scholarly consensus that Emerson ditched self-reliance in his later years implies that he recognized the “foolish[ness]” and impracticability of his idea. This perception of the contrast between Emerson’s early and late philosophy shines a negative light on his entire career because it leads people to view Emerson’s early writing as naive and his later work as submissive.

By comparing *Society and Solitude* to Emerson’s early philosophy, this thesis is able to evaluate the consistency of Emerson’s portrayal of self-reliance over the course of his life. To accomplish this contrast, I borrow a method that Hughes employs to illustrate connections between Emerson’s early work and *The Conduct of Life*, his second-to-last major work. Her technique is based on the relationship between affirmation and confirmation. She explains, “Confirmation not only validates existing thought or belief, it also constitutes a revelation of what the original thought or belief entailed” (xi). Basically, the repetition of an idea can shed further light on its origins. Relating this concept to Emerson’s texts, parallels between *Society and Solitude* and his early work’s description of self-reliance can show consistency in his thought and provide us with a more nuanced understanding of self-reliance.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge that, with the exception of *The American Scholar* and the *Divinity School Address*, my thesis’s scope is limited to Emerson’s major philosophical writings. Emerson was a prolific lecturer, kept an impressively detailed journal, and dabbled in poetry, but none of these mediums conveyed his philosophy with the same clarity as his books of essays. Though much of the material that is found in these works stems from Emerson’s lectures, “[r]arely were lectures turned into essays without much revision” (Buell 28). Essentially, Emerson’s essays are a more polished form of his thinking and therefore more worthy of our attention. I include the *Divinity School Address* and *The American Scholar* in my

examination because Emerson spent a significant amount of time preparing these lectures for momentous occasions, so they also achieve the developed quality that characterizes his essays. Moreover, they speak directly to the idea of self-reliance.

My exclusion of Emerson's journals is motivated by a larger issue that I have found in my study of self-reliance. Emerson's notion of a self-reliant individual is clearly an idealistic construct. As Lawrence Buell states, "Self-Reliance was not a plateau on which Emerson supposed anyone could securely live. It was a goal, a model, a call—to himself as well as others" (78-79). Despite Emerson's depiction of self-reliance as an ideal to be striven for and not necessarily attained, many scholars conflate Emerson's espousal of self-reliance with his own attempt to be self-reliant. Kenneth Sacks makes this error when he asserts that Emerson thought of himself as a "self-reliant scholar" (48). Sacks considers Emerson's own failure to live up to his ideal—Emerson was constantly "beset with anxiety and self-doubt" (3)—to be an indication that Emerson realized self-reliance's incompatibility with life in society, but Sacks' deduction relies on Emerson's life experiences, which do not necessarily dictate his writing and philosophy. In other words, it is possible for a person to possess a belief and simultaneously be unable to practice it. Similarly, scholars have pored through Emerson's journals and have often treated his entries as inspirations for his lectures and essays, but this is a dangerous tactic because it puts a scholar in the position of a psychologist. It is impossible to truly ascertain the impact of Emerson's life events on his writing. Emerson's journal entries are similar to his lectures because they lack the refined quality of his essays and, consequently, are inadequate sources of his philosophy.

Another pitfall that I avoid in my investigation of self-reliance is the tendency of scholars to treat Emerson's writing as an argument. One of the defining characteristics of Emerson's

writing is his penchant for presenting both sides of an issue. He “want[s] merely to be tasted, not swallowed and comprehended” (Porte 6). Emerson is concerned with entertaining his readers; he “constructs each [essay] to invigorate rather than convince his audience” (Hughes xiii). His style does not appear to lend itself to drawing conclusions about his convictions, but a thorough investigation of his work over the course of his career reveals that recurring themes and ideas do exist in his writing. This notion of persisting beliefs forms the basis of my method for assessing self-reliance’s presence in Emerson’s early work and *Society and Solitude*.

Before examining whether or not self-reliance pervades *Society and Solitude*, I define the term in the first chapter of my thesis. As I previously mentioned, self-reliance refers to an individual’s ability to think his or her own thoughts. Though most scholars would unquestionably agree that this is a part of self-reliance’s definition, this description does not fully consider self-reliance’s numerous dimensions that ultimately inform our evaluation of its practicability, which is at the core of Whicher’s and others’ dismissal of its presence in Emerson’s later thought. As a result, my definition addresses self-reliance’s many components by merging scholars’ arguments about its democratic and religious nature. Essentially, I combine George Kateb’s conception that self-reliance is a form of democratic individuality with Randy L. Friedman’s and Whicher’s contentions that self-reliance involves an inner religiousness. While Kateb’s argument motivates most of my conclusions about self-reliance, the incorporation of Friedman’s and Whicher’s views about self-reliance’s spiritual quality allows me to distinguish Kateb’s definition from my own.

After I propose my own definition of self-reliance, the remainder of my thesis works closely with the essays in *Society and Solitude* and utilizes comparisons between these texts and Emerson’s early works in order to illustrate self-reliance’s presence in the book. In the second

chapter, I focus on self-reliance's permeation of the most concrete subject matter in *Society and Solitude*. The chapter's first section investigates the relationship between labor and democratic individuality in "Civilization" and "Farming." More specifically, I show how labor is a fulfillment of democratic individuality and not, as Christopher Newfield suggests, a "submission" to corporate individualism by pointing to moments when Emerson alludes to the Universal Mind, another dimension of self-reliance (5). The second section explores self-trust in innovation and historical reading in "Works and Days" and "Books." This part includes an elucidation of Emerson's thoughts about conformity and counters Sacvan Bercovitch's belief that Emerson's later work illuminates his struggle with social change. Throughout this chapter, I stress that these essays' material topics do not signal a departure from self-reliance and instead show that self-reliance is a practicable idea.

Subsequently, the final chapter examines Emerson's infusion of self-reliance into *Society and Solitude* through abstractions. The inspiration for this chapter stems from John Carlos Rowe's assertion that Emerson's later works are devoid of his youth's "idealistic," or abstract, "rhetoric" (24). In the chapter's first section, I scrutinize abstraction in "Courage" and "Success," two intangible traits that Emerson connects to self-trust, and the second section illustrates how abstraction reveals the presence of democratic individuality in "Clubs" and religiousness in "Art." By demonstrating that these essays are filled with abstractions, I establish that Emerson has not renounced his "idealistic rhetoric," which includes self-reliance.

This examination of self-reliance's presence in *Society and Solitude* shows that Emerson's later work does not abandon this idea, the most significant principle in his early philosophy. The thesis's conclusion contends that Emerson's unwavering belief in self-reliance represents a commitment to idealism that counters George Fredrickson's theory about the Civil

War's dimming effect on American thinkers and Emerson in particular. Furthermore, this part confirms that Emerson's consistent promotion of self-reliance during his youth cannot be considered "foolish" because he never deserted the idea (Emerson, *S-R* 24). Thus, my argument resurrects the legacy of Emerson's early work by illustrating that he still clung to his idea of self-reliance nearly four decades after first advancing it.

CHAPTER ONE
DEFINING SELF-RELIANCE

There is perhaps no greater affirmation of Emerson's most famous idea than near the beginning of his essay "Self-Reliance" when he asserts, "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" (*S-R* 19). This is self-reliance at its core: a steadfast trust in one's own thoughts that effects a certain universality, a connection to the rest of humanity.¹ The first part of this definition—self-trust in one's own "thought[s]"—is the least controversial aspect of self-reliance because it is generally included in every scholar's portrayal of the concept. For example, George Kateb describes self-trust as follows; "[I]t is the steady effort of thinking one's thoughts and thinking them through" (31). However, as Kateb acknowledges, defining self-reliance as merely self-trust is reductive; there are other dimensions of self-reliance, such as its ability to unite humanity through the Universal Mind, that allow us to evaluate its practicability and, consequently, to possess a more nuanced understanding of its complexity. For this argument's purposes, practicability refers to an idea's compatibility with societal norms. It is essential to assess self-reliance's practicability because many scholars treat Emerson's focus on more concrete subjects in his later work as a sign that he abandoned self-reliance (Bercovitch 342; Bloom 62; Rowe 1; Whicher 52). Self-reliance's practicability primarily hinges on two questions: Is it possible for a self-reliant individual to participate in society, and can a self-reliant person remain an independent thinker while observing a religion? Scholars have debated these issues because Emerson's ideal requires "nonconformity" (Emerson, *S-R* 24). His use of nonconformity is unconventional because it is not particularly concerned with an individual's arrival at a completely original end; instead,

¹ See Deneen 171.

Emerson focuses on the “method of intellect” that one employs to reach a certain opinion or action (Kateb 3). If people utilize thought processes that are inherently unique to them, they are not conforming to the masses even if their conclusions mirror those of other individuals.

Emerson alludes to this notion in his essay “History” (1841) when he discusses the aforementioned “Universal Mind” (*Essays* 2). He declares that “[t]here is one mind common to all individual men” (1). In other words, there is one “common” characteristic of all “individual,” or nonconformist, people, which is that they submit to their own modes of thinking. Basically, the “Mind” represents the method of thinking that Kateb regards as the key to Emerson’s thought; “each individual man is one more incarnation” of the Universal Mind, and these additions are recorded by history (Emerson, *Essays* 2). Emerson offers the example of a revolution to further illustrate this concept, saying, “Every revolution was first a thought in one man’s mind, and when the same thought occurs to another man, it is the key to that era” (2). At its outset, a revolution is nonconformist in nature because it involves a revolt against certain societal norms, and its leader is certainly nonconformist since his or her ideas provide the impetus for this insurrection. Yet, by most definitions of nonconformity, the leader’s followers are conformists, adopting a mass viewpoint. This passage demonstrates where Emerson differs in his characterization of nonconformity because he depicts two men individually arriving at the same “thought.” In this hypothetical revolution, there is no distinction between leaders and followers; there is merely the chronological order in which they have attained a shared belief, or to put it in Emersonian terms, in which they have submitted to the Universal Mind. Despite reaching the same conclusion, both men have practiced self-reliant thinking by adhering to the sanctity of their own minds.

While the Universal Mind supports my contention that Emerson's conception of nonconformity is practicable because the Mind explains how independent thinking can plausibly lead to conformist behavior, most contemporary Emersonian academics have echoed Stephen E. Whicher's prominent position that "Emerson's whole dream of practical power through Self-reliance is just that—a dream" (Whicher 69).² John Carlos Rowe classifies Emerson as the leader of this "aesthetic dissent," a form of romantic idealism that is "naive" and overlooks "social convention" (1). On the other hand, there are some scholars, such as Kateb and Randy L. Friedman, who disagree with the claims of Whicher's followers and propose their own ideas about self-reliance. As a result, before examining whether Emerson's self-reliance pervades *Society and Solitude*, I need to define this controversial term so that I can adequately evaluate its presence in Emerson's final major work.

Social participation and religiousness lie at the core of my assessment because they are both frequently cited as reasons that self-reliance is impracticable (Gelpi 149; Whicher 64). Social participation involves an individual's voluntary contribution to a group of people by supporting certain causes and norms that benefit the collective whole. Similarly, religiousness generally entails an association with a group of people that share common creeds and submit to divine authority. In essence, both social participation and religiousness appear to clash with nonconformity by requiring acceptance of others' beliefs. Conversely, the Universal Mind, which I have just briefly explored, helps us understand how each is not conformist. In this chapter, by extensively investigating the Universal Mind and combining Kateb's characterization of self-reliance as a form of "democratic individuality" with Friedman's assertion that the idea

² See also Newfield 157; Robinson 6; Rowe x.

implies an “inner” spirituality, I illustrate that self-reliance is compatible with both social participation and religiousness (Kateb 1; Friedman 165).

I. Democratic Individuality and the Universal Mind’s Forces

For a man who took such pleasure in examining nature, Emerson spent a considerable amount of his life writing about society and its norms. More specifically, he developed a philosophy that evaluated individuals’ psychological motivations for participating in society. In his view, an individual’s involvement in society stems from an adherence to the Universal Mind, a representation of independent thinking that possesses two forces. The first is a sense of character, which he describes as “a reserved force [acting] directly by presence and without means” (*Essays* 242). All people possess this quality, but only a few actually realize it. These individuals “do not need society [and] can entertain themselves very well alone,” but this sense of contentment does not prevent them from ultimately entering a community (242). Instead, character is, in itself, an ascertainment of some higher truth that leads these individuals to seek justice in society. Emerson explains the relationship between truth and justice as follows: “Truth is the summit of being; justice is the application of it to affairs. All individual natures stand in a scale, according to the purity of this element in them. The will of the pure runs down from them into other natures, as water runs down from a higher into a lower vessel” (245). Essentially, individuals who possess character contribute to society by spreading their inherent righteousness to others in various “affairs” (245). It is only through this distribution of morality that a sense of justice and order can truly be achieved, so people with character will always choose to join society even though they can subsist outside of this realm.

Democratic societies are labeled as such because of their egalitarianism and representative systems of government, but Kateb’s use of “democratic” primarily refers to the

intrinsic morality of democracy that Emerson alludes to with his concept of character. In Kateb's estimation, democracy is the "only moral political system" because it "pays homage to the idea that all human beings, just by the fact that they are human beings, are morally equal" (181). This argument posits that all people are born with an equal opportunity to think and act morally when living in a democratic society. Not everyone will fully realize or exercise this moral fiber within them, but those who do will often feel compelled to contribute to the collective whole.

A similar notion underlies self-reliance. In an ideal democratic environment, people are afforded an equal opportunity to think and work independently, and individuals who practice self-reliance comprehend that their combined efforts ultimately result in collective improvement. David M. Robinson calls this phenomenon the "moral sense or moral sentiment," a quality that is "measured not by its contribution to the individual but by the individual's contribution to the larger whole that transcend[s] the particular self" (21). Even if he never explicitly links morality to self-reliance, Emerson implies that the idea encompasses integrity because he depicts self-reliance in an analogous fashion to character. When Emerson discusses the nature of valiant behavior in "Heroism" (1841), he asserts, "Heroism is an obedience to a secret impulse of an individual's character...[and] [s]elf-trust is the essence of heroism" (*Essays* 132). Equating self-reliance, or "self-trust," to a "secret impulse" is quite similar to when Emerson portrays character as "a certain undemonstrable force, a familiar or genius, by whose impulses the man is guided but whose counsels he cannot impart" (242). It is critical to notice that people take a passive role in Emerson's descriptions of self-reliance and character; in both cases, an inner "force" or "impulse" affects the individual's thoughts and actions, but the person is unaware of this instinctual authority within him or her. Thus, character functions as an element of the Universal

Mind, a representation of independent thinking that explains how self-reliance is congruous with social participation.

Whicher's argument entirely ignores the democratic aspect of self-reliance. He claims that Emerson's "wish for independence clashed also with his sense of obligation to be useful to the society he repudiated" (64). This contention errs because it presupposes that an individual cannot independently arrive at the idea that social participation is important. Emerson does not reject the notion of "be[ing] useful," or contributing, to a society. He only bemoans this behavior when an individual's participation is solely motivated by others' thinking and actions. As I have previously expressed, Emerson deems that self-reliant individuals often autonomously arrive at the conclusion that their independently motivated actions can "add" to communities, so Whicher's implication that social responsibility detracts from self-reliance is invalid (Emerson, *Essays* 65).

The weakness of Whicher's position primarily stems from a couple of false assumptions, both of which are evident when he declares that Emerson's "rebellion against the dominion of society encountered two main obstacles: his fear of solitude, and his sense of responsibility" (62). Whicher's belief that Emerson had a "fear of solitude," an idea that he bases on Emerson's unease following his resignation from the Unitarian ministry in 1832, is flawed in two respects (62). First, he conflates Emerson's life experiences with his philosophy. Emerson was constantly "depending on others and concerned with what they thought of him," but this personal anxiety about his public perception does not necessarily apply to his concept of a self-reliant individual (Sacks 3). In other words, Emerson's inability to live outside of society does not signify that all individuals possess the same incapacity; it is highly unlikely that Emerson would completely discard self-reliance because of his failure to fulfill his own philosophical ideal. Second,

Whicher treats Emerson's employment of solitude far too literally. When Emerson uses this term, he refers to the inner serenity of a self-reliant individual's mind, not social isolation. Emerson emphasizes that solitude is ideally found within the confines and structure of society, affirming that "the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" (*S-R* 23). If we consider "crowd" to be an allusion to public life, Emerson's idea of a self-reliant person is not an aloof individual who lives alone in the woods; rather, it is an individual who remains true to his or her inner convictions while "add[ing] to the world" (*Essays* 65). Emerson describes this contribution to society as "virtuous," further indicating that democratic conduct is ideal and part of self-reliance (65).

I have demonstrated that self-reliance is compatible with social participation, but the precise nature of self-reliant individuals' role in society has, up until now, not been explored. To investigate this matter, we must first comprehend Kateb's distinction between two types of self-reliance: "mental" and "active" (xlii). Mental self-reliance is "the steady effort of thinking one's thoughts and thinking them through," and active self-reliance is "independent activity" (31; 135). Active self-reliance always requires mental self-reliance because all activity is "incomplete or inadequate unless one makes the effort to disclose it and make it signify, and such an effort of contemplation and interpretation is of course a mental one" (29); a person always considers, even if it is just for an instant, the motivations and implications of their behavior before and after a particular action. The "independent" quality that Kateb ascribes to active self-reliance therefore stems from the autonomous thinking, or mental self-reliance, that individuals used to contextualize such actions (135).

Through their own methods of thinking, self-reliant individuals can fulfill the "highest form of active self-reliance," their "vocation" (Kateb 151; Emerson, *Essays* 74). This calling is at

the core of a person's existence; "[o]ne's active vocation is the expression and completion of one's being, but it is also the reason for being" (Kateb 24). Emerson says that "[e]ach man has his own vocation...[that is] silently inviting him...to endless exertion" (*Essays* 74). In this statement, Emerson employs "silently" to stress that vocation is not motivated by external influences; people must grasp this force on their own. Since Emerson portrays this calling as an internal force that affects an individual's thoughts and actions, we can treat vocation as the second element of the Universal Mind. Vocation mirrors character, the Mind's other force, in the sense that one must contribute to society in order to fully realize the concept. As Emerson notes, "Until [a man] can manage to communicate himself to others in his full stature and proportion, he does not yet find his vocation" (*Essays* 75). Consequently, the parallels between character and vocation suggest that vocation also functions as a dimension of self-reliance and helps to explain self-reliance's democratic nature. Basically, for democratic societies to improve, they need people with a variety of different skills to voluntarily coalesce. Self-reliant individuals' vocations reveal their "unique" talents, so the collaboration amongst people with different vocations allows a society to reach its full democratic potential (Kateb 167).

Even though self-reliance can involve social contribution, Emerson does not try to claim that self-reliant individuals must aim to enrich society. Rather, he contends that society's improvement will happen naturally if people think independently and carry out their own vocations, or "do [their] work" (*S-R* 23). Robert D. Richardson, Jr. addresses this notion, saying, "When a better society evolves, it will not, in Emerson's view, come about through a suppression of the process of individuation but through a voluntary association of fulfilled individuals" (322). Essentially, a society improves when self-reliant individuals freely choose to enter its community, a decision that is dictated by a submission to the Universal Mind. While interaction

and cooperation do not conflict with self-reliance, “the self-reliant individual cannot be dependent on the contributions or service of others to such an extent as to be unable to reciprocate” (Kateb 145). This statement illustrates that self-reliant people must always retain a sense of self-trust and independence. After this examination of the Universal Mind’s two forces, character and vocation, it is evident that Emerson’s self-reliance involves democratic individuality, a mental and active manifestation of independence that promotes self-reliant individuals’ participation in society and thus demonstrates self-reliance’s practicability (Kateb 17).

II. Self-Reliance’s Religiousness: The Over-Soul as a Transcendental God

Before I assess the compatibility of religiousness and self-reliance, it is important to scrutinize Emerson’s stance on religion. While my investigation of self-reliance and *Society and Solitude* seeks to avoid conflating Emerson’s life experiences with his philosophy, his writing is “ravenously religious,” so his personal creed is relevant to our analysis in this section (Kateb 65). In 1832, Emerson left the Unitarian ministry, and he eventually rejected all forms of institutionalized religion. Emerson’s *Divinity School Address* (1838) articulated many of his reasons for renouncing the church. For instance, he urged his audience to stop following religious customs in order to achieve a true spiritual enlightenment: “Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those most sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil” (*S-R* 114). This advice calls for people to practice their own religion without churches, clergymen, and biblical texts. He felt that Christian preaching bore little resemblance to its historical practice and that the Bible’s true messages had been lost over time. Emerson expresses this opinion after describing Jesus’s original ideas about man. He laments, “But what a distortion did [Jesus’s] doctrine and memory suffer in the same, in

the next, and the following ages!” (107). Despite Emerson’s criticism of the Christian church, it is crucial to note that he conveys a sense of devotion to God and Jesus, signaling that he still believed in traditional biblical figures at this point in his life.

Emerson’s allusions to God and Jesus in his work underscore a larger point, which is that Emerson never fully abandoned Unitarianism even though he left the pulpit. Unitarianism stresses the importance of Jesus’s “moral teachings” and the presence of one God, so Emerson’s references to these two figures and his emphasis on their virtuous nature in the *Divinity School Address* indicates that his Unitarian roots still had a discernible impact on his essays and lectures (Richardson, Jr. 47). Moreover, Emerson’s rejection of the church exemplifies Unitarianism’s resistance to institutional affiliation. In William Ellery Channing’s “Unitarian Christianity,” the famous Boston minister espouses this idea when he affirms, “Our earnest prayer to God is, that he will overturn, and overturn, and overturn the strong-holds of spiritual usurpation” (qtd. in Richardson, Jr. 47). For Emerson, the “distortion” of Jesus’s “doctrine and memory” is a form of “spiritual usurpation,” a gross abuse of Unitarian tenets (*S-R* 107; Richardson, Jr. 47). As a result, Emerson’s departure from the church can actually be viewed as a necessary action to uphold his Unitarianism.

While Emerson never relinquished some of his Unitarian beliefs, he certainly strayed from a biblical understanding of religion by establishing his own transcendental creed. In *Nature* (1836), Emerson frequently uses the outdoors as a medium through which the divine is ascertained. For example, he says, “In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me by my eyes) which nature cannot repair” (8). Since Emerson’s employment of “return” suggests that we have deserted “reason and faith” by leaving nature, this reflection implies that society is a place where true

piety is forsaken. In nature, we can restore our piety because “[e]very natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact” (26). This tenet is not attributable to the Bible or Unitarianism; it is a transcendental principle, one that laid the foundation for a philosophical movement in the 19th century. In addition to his transcendentalism, Emerson extends the scope of his work to the experience of human existence. He says, “Man is conscious of a universal soul within or behind his individual life, wherein, as in a firmament, the natures of Justice, Truth, Love, Freedom, arise and shine. This universal soul, he calls Reason” (27). “Reason” is another term for the Universal Mind or the Over-Soul, a concept that pervades one prominent work in *Essays*.³

“The Over-Soul” (1841) is Emerson’s most authoritative advancement of his ideas about religion and elucidates how religiousness is compatible with self-reliance. In the five years that elapsed between the publication of *Nature* and *Essays*, Emerson maintained his steadfast belief in the notion of one soul that was inherent to all humans. In this essay, he refers to that spirit as the “Over-Soul,” an essence “within which every man’s particular being is contained and made one with all other” (*Essays* 141). By noting that this universal soul is found “within” every individual, Emerson indicates that people can identify this spirit without mediation. Though there are “other[s]” that submit to the Over-Soul, an individual can grasp this essence without conforming because the Over-Soul is an “inner source” of divinity (*Essays* 141; Friedman 165). A person’s acceptance of the Over-Soul involves an adherence to “divine impulse[s],” which lead him or her into the “region of all virtues” (*Essays* 141). At first, this process seems to conflict with self-reliance since the “divine impulse” appears to dictate the individual’s actions. However, as I stressed in my discussion of character and vocation, the decision to act on a force

³ Emerson uses Reason, the Universal Mind, the Over-Soul, and the universal soul interchangeably throughout the course of his career. I adopt the scholarly consensus that these terms all refer to the same notion because there is no compelling evidence to suggest otherwise.

of the Universal Mind (or Over-Soul, in this case) can only result from a look inward, so a person's recognition of the Over-Soul is therefore a product of self-reliant thinking.

Even if a belief in the Over-Soul arises from independent reflection, self-reliant individuals' dependence on the Over-Soul could potentially signify "God-reliance" instead of self-reliance (Hughes 107). In order to investigate whether or not self-reliance is actually "God-reliance," it is first vital to determine if Emerson regards the Over-Soul as the God of his particular creed (107). There is an undeniable evocation of God in Emerson's depictions of the Over-Soul, which he calls a "prophet," "supreme," "eternal," "perfect," and, most importantly, a "deity" (*Essays* 141). Conversely, Emerson mentions God throughout "The Over-Soul," so some readers might contend that Emerson still regards the Unitarian God as his creed's supreme being and that the Over-Soul is subordinate to God's omnipotence. I disagree with this interpretation. In fact, the moments when Emerson invokes God's name signal that God is contained in every individual; basically, the Over-Soul is God. For instance, Emerson declares, "Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul. The simplest person who in his integrity worships God, becomes God" (154). Unlike the Unitarian God, the Over-Soul is a collective being because it absorbs its believers, who "becom[e]" God. Clearly, Emerson considers the Over-Soul to be the God of his transcendental dogma.

The Over-Soul is Emerson's God figure, so a reliance on this spirit technically qualifies as "God-reliance," but not in the way that Gertrude Reif Hughes intends it (107). In Emerson's depiction of the Over-Soul, each individual is a "part" of this God (*Essays* 141). Accordingly, a reliance on the Over-Soul is, at least partially, a reliance on oneself and the independent thinking that allows this God to be discerned. As Whicher asserts, "[T]he soul of man does not merely, as had long been taught, contain a spark or drop of breath or voice of God; it *is* God" (21). In order

to realize one's own divinity, an individual must break away from the "god of tradition" and the "god of rhetoric" who Christianity worships (Emerson, *Essays* 154). Emerson addresses this idea by mentioning that Jesus "speaks always from within" (151). Though Jesus has seemingly lost power in Emerson's new view of religion, Emerson uses Jesus's name as a rhetorical device to lend authority to his thoughts. Through his employment of the Over-Soul, Emerson establishes religion as a self-reliant ascertainment of the God within oneself.

III. Conclusions

In this chapter, I have argued that Emerson's religiousness and Kateb's concept of democratic individuality are compatible and form two critical dimensions of self-reliance. Democratic individuality stems from self-reliant individuals' realizations of their character and vocations, the two forces that compose the Universal Mind. The Mind is also known as the Over-Soul, the God of Emerson's transcendental religion. Consequently, even if I have portrayed democratic individuality and religiousness as two different dimensions of self-reliance, they are certainly related elements because they both involve an intense level of introspection. Donald L. Gelpi illustrates this link when he says, "The decision to follow one's creative genius despite any sacrifice or social intimidation disposes the soul to the creative influx of divine life. The moment of creativity reveals the divine. Creativity not only heightens self-awareness; it yields ultimate self-understanding" (44). If Gelpi's idea of "creativity" is comparable to Emerson's notion of vocation, it is apparent that this adherence to one's inner calling "reveals" a sense of divinity that transcends the self. In other words, since practicing one's vocation is part of democratic individuality, social participation can actually lead to religiousness. Ultimately, both democratic individuality and religiousness contribute to "self-awareness" and "self-understanding," which are both fundamental to self-reliance.

CHAPTER TWO

SELF-RELIANCE IN THE CONCRETE

It is undeniable that *Society and Solitude* contains a more practical subject matter than Emerson's early work. One only needs to glance at the titles of the book's 12 essays, including "Works and Days," "Books," and "Farming," to see that the collection primarily focuses on societal activities and institutions. Many critics have viewed this shift to material topics as a sign that Emerson abandoned self-reliance, which they deem an abstract and impracticable idea (Bercovitch 342; Bloom 62; Rowe 1; Whicher 52). The following examination of *Society and Solitude*'s most concrete essays dispels the notion that the societal content in Emerson's later work signals a departure from self-reliance by highlighting the different dimensions of self-reliance that these works reference. This chapter instead shows that these essays function as a means to further illustrate self-reliance's compatibility with daily social life. The first section investigates Emerson's thoughts about labor in "Civilization" and "Farming," revealing his connection of the material—work—to the abstract—democratic individuality. Subsequently, the second section demonstrates a similar association by linking self-trust to innovation and historical reading, the topics of "Works and Days" and "Books."

I. "Civilization" and "Farming": Labor as a Fulfillment of Democratic Individuality

Labor is at the heart of any culture. Even though they do not receive as much attention as political leaders or celebrities, assembly line workers, farmers, craftsmen, and other individuals with arduous occupations provide the foundation for any society. Emerson was quite aware of these laborers' importance, and *Society and Solitude* frequently stresses their significance, particularly in "Civilization" and "Farming." For Christopher Newfield, Emerson's examination of laborers in his later work represents his shift to "corporate individualism," an idea that

involves “individual submission” to a preexisting set of circumstances, or “system of forces” (5). On the surface, this notion might seem to support my contention that the Universal Mind’s forces guide a person’s participation in society, but the “forces” that Newfield refers to are external or, more specifically, economic. His argument primarily focuses on the distribution of power among the citizens of a capitalist society. By solely concentrating on the economic implications of Emerson’s later essays, Newfield overlooks a significant element of Emerson’s work: Emerson’s subtle emphasis on the Universal Mind amid precise reflections on society. Throughout “Civilization” and “Farming,” Emerson alludes to the Universal Mind’s forces, vocation and character, in order to illustrate that labor is a fulfillment of democratic individuality.

In both essays, Emerson’s references to vocation quickly emerge as integral parts of his discussions about labor in society. “Civilization” initially describes various societies’ progression throughout history before it promptly moves into an investigation of the reasons for their development. Emerson asserts that a common feature of a successful, growing society is a productive and content labor force who provides the community with a continuous supply of goods to meet its demands. He says, “The division of labor, the multiplication of the arts of peace, which is nothing but a large allowance to each man to choose his work according to his faculty, —to live by his better hand, —fills the State with useful and happy laborers” (SS 24). Through his employment of “faculty” (24), Emerson evokes his early depiction of vocation in “Spiritual Laws” (1841), which affirms that vocation is a “call” to one’s “faculties,” a “silent” summoning of a person to the “pinnacle” of his or her abilities (*Essays* 74). Essentially, people must realize and be able to choose and practice their individual vocations if civilization is to have “useful and happy laborers” (SS 24). Thus, in order for individuals to perform their vocations, a society must offer access to a wide assortment of professions, an “allowance” that is necessary

for people to “choose their work.” This “allowance” is nonexistent in nations where governments impose bans on certain occupations and force people to work in specific industries, so self-reliant individuals, who inherently only aspire to join societies that grant them the liberty to pursue their vocations, would not freely enter and improve such states. Emerson’s allusion to vocation in “Civilization” therefore serves as a means to illustrate that democracy, a political system that, at the very least, does not dictate citizens’ occupations, is superior to other forms of government because it appeals to self-reliant individuals and, as a result, produces an effective labor system.

While “Civilization” refers to laborers in a general sense, “Farming” specifically looks at those who till the land. The essay reads as an ode to farmers because of Emerson’s appreciation for these individuals’ contributions to various communities. For example, the work begins with the following description of the farmer’s importance to society:

The glory of the farmer is that, in the division of labors, it is his part to create. All trade rests at last on his primitive activity. He stands close to nature; he obtains from the earth the bread and the meat... . The first farmer was the first man, and all historic nobility rests on possession and use of land. Men do not like hard work, but every man has an exceptional respect for tillage, and a feeling that this is the original calling of his race... . (113)

From the outset of this passage, Emerson positions the farmer as a self-reliant individual. His assertion that the farmer “create[s]” echoes his characterization of self-reliant people as “creators” in “Self-Reliance” (SS 113; S-R 21). Moreover, in “Spiritual Laws,” Emerson declares that “vocation” is a type of “call,” so his portrayal of farming as the “original calling” in the above passage suggests that this occupation was humanity’s first vocation and that a farmer was the world’s first self-reliant individual (*Essays* 74; SS 113). A biblical allusion helps us

understand how this “calling” is internal. When Emerson says that the “first farmer was the first man,” Emerson is referring to Adam, who God places “into the Garden of Eden to till it and to keep it” (SS 113; *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, Gen. 2.15). Even though God puts Adam in the Garden, he does not instruct Adam to till the earth; Adam intuits this duty on his own. Like Adam’s natural grasp of his role as a farmer, a self-reliant individual’s realization of his or her vocation requires a look inward. Consequently, vocation’s “call” is not dictated by external circumstances but by one’s own introspection (*Essays* 74). By associating farming with a prominent biblical figure, Emerson ascribes a divine quality to this form of labor and illustrates that it is a product of vocation and the Universal Mind.

Similar to his depiction of vocation, Emerson stresses that character, the second force of the Universal Mind, is an impetus for a successful labor force. “Civilization” addresses this idea when Emerson mentions that climate has a significant impact on a society’s progress. Despite the oppressive effects of frigid winters and arid summers on certain areas, Emerson claims that these places can overcome their environmental limitations and reach “high civility,” a term that Emerson frequently uses to describe a flourishing society, if their inhabitants possess “deep morality” (SS 26). Emerson’s employment of this word is somewhat unconventional. By “moral,” Emerson means the “respecting in action catholic or universal ends” (27). This definition mirrors my description of character as an internal force that compels self-reliant individuals to seek justice in society and spread their inherent righteousness to others. In other words, individuals who possess character qualify as “moral” because their voluntary participation in society is motivated by a “catholic or universal” aim, which is to better society through the distribution of morality to their peers. Labor results from character because the desire to achieve collective improvement necessitates involvement in some form of work that

“secur[es] the greatest good of the greatest number” of people (33). By contributing to the labor force, self-reliant individuals exercise character and hence raise these societies to “high civility” (26).

For Emerson, farmers’ lives are tributes to character because they can easily toil solely for their own benefit, but they instead choose to provide services and set an example for “society at large” (116). Essentially, they are “continuous benefactor[s],” or constant implementers of character (116). As Emerson reflects in “Farming,” “This crust of soil which ages have refined he refines again for the feeding of a civil and instructed people” (125). Not only do farmers improve society by offering the fruit of their harvests, but they also present a model of self-reliant behavior for others to emulate. More specifically, their dedication to their vocation—tilling the land—has already resulted in the “moral and intellectual” improvement of “cities” throughout the world (116). Basically, Emerson believes that farmers have applied character in society by spreading their innate morality to those around them and have therefore advanced the development of numerous societies. It is certainly possible that some farmers may not realize and exercise this character within them. Conversely, Emerson feels that most farmers are able to recognize and apply this force because their distance from cities’ depravity leaves them with “uncorrupted behavior” and a “constitutional excellence” that is necessary to practice character and self-reliance in general (126). Through his endorsement of farming as an ideal occupation that influences the behavior of civilized areas, Emerson demonstrates that labor is not only an effect of character’s application to society but also a means to inspire moral behavior in other individuals.

By examining the references to vocation and character in “Civilization” and “Farming,” I have illustrated that Emerson’s focus on labor in *Society and Solitude* does not signify his

comprehension of man's "submission" to economic forces, as Newfield would suggest (5). On the contrary, Emerson depicts self-reliant individuals' labor as a product of vocation and character, two critical aspects of democratic individuality and self-reliance. Moreover, the exuberant manner in which he discusses labor counters the idea that he has abandoned his conviction in humanity's ability to practice democratic individuality. For instance, he proclaims in "Civilization" that man is "unbound, and full of joyful action. With this unswaddling he receives the absolute illumination we call Reason, and thereby true liberty" (SS 26). Once again, it is important to note that Emerson uses "Reason," among other terms, interchangeably with the Universal Mind. Consequently, this statement indicates that Emerson still believes in self-reliant individuals' ability to realize, or "receiv[e]," the Universal Mind's forces within themselves. This "liberty" of the mind and spirit leads self-reliant people to fulfill democratic individuality, which manifests itself as labor in society.

II. "Works and Days" and "Books": Self-Trust in Innovation and Historical Reading

While the inextricable link between democratic individuality and labor is vital to our understanding of self-reliance's presence in *Society and Solitude's* most concrete essays, it could be argued that I have adopted a rather broad definition of self-reliance in order to cater to the book's content. After all, Kateb's notion of democratic individuality is a controversial interpretation of self-reliance, yet I heavily rely on it (1). In order to quash the critique that I have conveniently accepted democratic individuality as a means to justify the largely practical subject matter in *Society and Solitude*, this section highlights the prevalence of self-reliance's most fundamental and indisputable element, self-trust, in the book (Kateb 19). This term refers to a certain conviction in one's own thinking and actions. Emerson describes self-trust in "Self-Reliance" when he says, "What I must do is all that concerns me, not what people think...in

actual and in intellectual life” (*S-R* 21). This idea is common throughout *Society and Solitude*, but this section focuses on just two essays—“Works and Days” and “Books”—and the activities—innovating and reading history—that they scrutinize. In these essays, Emerson illustrates that these norms can lead to conformity in some individuals. By conformity, I mean the externally motivated acceptance or imitation of others’ views and behavior. It is the antithesis of self-trust; conformists ignore their own intuitions and solely seek the approval of others. However, Emerson also claims that a person can partake in these activities yet refrain from conforming. From his standpoint, if an individual’s own thinking is the inspiration for a certain end, then that end is not considered conformist. By demonstrating that Emerson merely rejects the conformity that results from innovating and reading history and not the activities themselves, this section shows that self-trust is compatible with these norms and that Emerson’s exploration of them encourages people to practice self-trust.

In “Works and Days,” Emerson investigates the impact of innovations on inventors, or “mechanic[s],” and adopters, or the collective “we” (*SS* 129; 134). He opens the essay by expressing his amazement about technological advancements over the past century, but he quickly asserts that adopters can become too dependent on machinery and that they must continue to rely on their own minds. He says, “Many facts concur to show that we must look deeper for our salvation than to steam, photographs, balloons, or astronomy” (134). The significant differences in these four innovations suggest that Emerson regards innovation as a widespread, all-encompassing aspect of society. Furthermore, Emerson’s use of “salvation” underscores his belief that people possess a nearly religious devotion to inventions. This dependence on innovation concerns Emerson; the instant gratification that people receive from these innovations can be alluring, and adopters increasingly utilize these creations before

contemplating their “questionable properties” (134). The intellectually shallow employment of these inventions is the primary source of Emerson’s fear of innovation. People often accept and use innovations without first considering their actions or engaging in “deeper” thought (134). They ignore “gleams of a better light,” or the use of “reason as well as understanding” (*Nature* 68). As a result, they become indistinguishable from the inventions themselves: “The weaver becomes a web, the machinist a machine” (SS 134). These conforming individuals increasingly replace moments of internal reflection, which Emerson views as a crucial part of practicing self-trust, with hours of amusement that are dependent on various innovations’ functionality. For Emerson, self-trust “begins when a man cuts loose from dependence on any foreign force and lives wholly from within,” so there is a renunciation of self-trust when people habitually rely on inanimate objects or concepts—“foreign force[s]”—without first assessing the motivations for this reliance (Whicher 50).

Emerson believes that a similar desertion of self-trust is evident when examining inventors. Self-trust is the guiding force behind many inventions since they are often conceived in the mind of a single individual, but inventors frequently allow the process of innovation to govern their lives. As Emerson laments, “Works and days were offered us, and we took works” (SS 136). The notion here is that inventors should have many passions guiding their lives, not just a subservience to their own innovations; they should not solely live for the “works” but for the whole of the “da[y].” Moreover, inventors must be wary of their own successes: “[T]he machine is so perfect, the engineer is nobody” (135). If they create “perfect” machines, they make *themselves* obsolete. In other words, inventors must continue to innovate in order to preserve their roles, or identities, in society, but their inventions’ increasing flawlessness makes any future improvements unattainable, so they are forced to either choose a different career or

continue to flounder in their current one. In both situations, they lose their individual identities as innovators, countering the sense of independence that underpins self-trust. Additionally, some inventors are successful but still stray from self-trust because of the fame or money that results from their ingenuity. Emerson acknowledges that innovators frequently succumb to “material power” and become “lamed by [their] excellence” (136). Basically, they cease creating because they have achieved a degree of affluence that leads them to abandon their original method of thinking that inspired their innovations. By illustrating that adopters can become reliant on certain innovations and that inventors can lose their identities because of their own inventions, fame, or wealth, Emerson conveys that innovation erodes certain individuals’ self-trust.

For Sacvan Bercovitch and other descendents of Stephen E. Whicher, Emerson’s negative portrayal of innovation’s impact on self-trust in “Works and Days” is indicative of his later work’s increasing awareness of the powerful “agencies of change” in his society and self-reliance’s clash with this “volatility” (Bercovitch 342). However, Bercovitch errs because he believes that “self-reliance [is] working against the ubiquitous conspiracies of society” in Emerson’s early work (313). In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that society figures quite prominently in self-reliance, a pillar of Emerson’s early thought. Because of his misconception, Bercovitch views Emerson’s attempt to mesh self-reliance and society in his later work as a departure from his original representation of the idea. Furthermore, he thinks that this supposed change stems from Emerson’s growing interest in “the theory and practice of socialism” and the “utopian dimensions not only of his own society but of modern liberal culture at large” (318; 342). Bercovitch’s misinterpretation of Emerson’s early depiction of self-reliance renders his observations about Emerson’s “shift” in his later thought, including his belief that Emerson was increasingly infatuated with socialism, futile (318).

In addition to his inaccurate construal of Emerson's early work, Bercovitch underestimates Emerson's ability to show how self-reliance is compatible with various cultural developments. For an example, we can return to Emerson's ideas about the relationship between innovation and self-trust. While people who create or rely too heavily on innovations can certainly lose the ability to trust their own thinking, adopters and inventors can still possess self-trust. In order to survive in an increasingly innovative climate, Emerson contends that one must "remember the power of science" (SS 136). It is not a betrayal of self-trust to employ the "excellent" "mechanical aids we have applied to the human body, as in dentistry, in vaccination" (131). The adoption of certain innovations as remedies for illness are not acts of conformity if people possess their own individual reasons and motivations for using them. Moreover, the invention of such mechanisms are acts that exemplify self-trust and its "love" for "realities and creators" (S-R 21). As long as inventors remember to value their "days" instead of just their "works," they will maintain a well-balanced life that allows them to sustain their identities as innovators (SS 136). Thus, innovation's threat to self-trust as a vehicle of conformity is not grounded in its prevalence in society; it is instead based on the people that are adopting or creating the inventions.

In the same manner that he illuminates the potential pitfalls of innovation, Emerson cautions that historical reading can effect a reliance on past generations' accomplishments and traditions, which leads us away from a sense of trust in our own thinking. "Books" most comprehensively addresses this idea, but Emerson first raises this notion in "Works and Days" when he says the following: "The reverence for the deeds of our ancestors is a treacherous sentiment. Their merit was not to reverence the old, but to honor the present moment" (144). Emerson's claim is paradoxical because he simultaneously admires our ancestors' ability to live

in the present moment and suggests that the current generation should mirror their appreciation for the “present moment,” yet he criticizes others for “treacherous[ly]” reflecting on past generations. Nonetheless, the contradiction does not obscure Emerson’s belief that the present generation spends too much time celebrating past achievements and customs instead of moving forward and creating its own rituals. Emerson’s position in “Works and Days” clearly echoes his stance in the opening lines of *Nature*: “Our age is retrospective... . The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes” (1). Once again, we see Emerson praising past generations’ ability to live with a certain immediacy and condemning his own generation’s tendency to be “retrospective.” Although *Nature* and *Society and Solitude* were published 34 years apart, these passages demonstrate that, in both books, Emerson holds the same feeling of disappointment about society’s tendency to become intellectually insecure. Instead of forming new traditions and challenging intellectual assumptions, Emerson’s culture often settled for conformity by merely revering the past.

While “Books” is predominantly a listing of Emerson’s favorite texts in various genres, the essay continues his rebuke of society’s admiration for past generations by strongly asserting that historical reading can lead to conformity and an abandonment of self-trust. For instance, Emerson maintains that America and Europe often use books about the “old pedantries of the world, [which are] our times, places, professions, customs, opinions, [and] histories” to determine current social practices (SS 171). This emphasis on conforming to the past leads individuals to stray from the “right reason” that guides their individual “duties” (172). In this context, “duties” refers to people’s roles in society. Instead of allowing their own thoughts—their “right reason”—to direct their actions, people rely on past generations’ conduct to dictate

their own behavior. As a result, people lose trust in their beliefs, culminating in a desertion of their “dreams” and leading to a society that is filled with conformists.

The fatalistic tone of this moment in the essay epitomizes Harold Bloom’s belief that Emerson “sacrifice[s] the joy of his authority” in his later work (55). Conversely, this notion fails to consider Emerson’s equally robust espousal of history’s beneficial impact on society when it is treated as a supplement to our own convictions and actions. Essentially, Emerson’s criticism of historical reading that results in a veneration for past generations is not a reproach of the custom itself. On the contrary, Emerson feels that an appreciation for our ancestors’ actions can enrich our thinking as long as people approach history with a skeptical eye that exemplifies self-trust. He explains that every student of history must read with “a pursuit of his native aim, instead of a desultory miscellany. Let him read what is proper to him” (SS 157). Emerson wants people to digest material that benefits them intellectually and is relevant to their individual existences; a thoughtless adherence to what society considers historically impressive does not benefit any individual. Emerson’s portrayal of historical reading as a mechanism through which individuals can learn more about their own lives is also seen in his essay, “History” (1841): “The student is to read history actively and not passively; to esteem his own life the text, and books the commentary” (*Essays* 3). The reader takes center stage in this depiction because history is solely meant to inform his or her own aims. In *The American Scholar* (1837), Emerson calls this method of reading “Man Thinking,” which is “comprised in self-trust” (“The American Scholar”). Thus, just as the creation and use of innovations can stem from self-trust if they are invented and adopted with individual scrutiny, society’s admiration for historical traditions and accomplishments can arise from original thinking if people independently consider past events’ and books’ relation to their own experiences.

III. Conclusions

In this chapter, I have contended that Emerson's numerous references to various dimensions of self-reliance during his investigations of labor, innovation, and historical reading in "Civilization," "Farming," "Works and Days," and "Books" signify that self-reliance pervades even the most concrete subjects in *Society and Solitude*. In the first section of this chapter, I established that labor is a manifestation of democratic individuality, a crucial dimension of self-reliance. More specifically, "Civilization" and "Farming" position labor as a fulfillment of the Universal Mind's two forces, character and vocation. In the second section, I demonstrated that Emerson rejects the potential conformist effects of innovation and historical reading but also explains how these norms are congruous with self-trust in "Works and Days" and "Books." Through this elucidation of self-reliance's compatibility with social norms and activities, I have shown that the practical focus of Emerson's later essays does not represent an abandonment of self-reliance. Furthermore, there is certainly not a shift in his writing "from the glorious potentialities of freedom to the chastening ties that bind" (Lydenberg 352). This chapter illustrates that *Society and Solitude* promotes a world in which people practice self-reliance without feeling burdened by social and economic influences.

CHAPTER THREE

SELF-RELIANCE THROUGH THE ABSTRACT

As one of the founders of transcendentalism, Emerson often allowed his writing to drift from the societal sphere and into the realm of the conceptual, particularly in his early works. Consequently, scholars often point to the lack of “abstraction” in Emerson’s later essays as a sign that he abandoned his early thought (Richardson, Jr. 4).⁴ John Carlos Rowe exemplifies this view when he says that Emerson’s later writing “tries valiantly to avoid the sort of idealistic rhetoric that characterizes his early and most often cited works, such as *Nature*, ‘Self-Reliance,’ and ‘The American Scholar’” (24). By “idealistic rhetoric,” Rowe means both Emerson’s early ideas, such as self-reliance, and his abstract presentation of them. Though Rowe’s stance is prevalent in Emersonian scholarship, his argument fails for two reasons. First, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, Emerson’s cogitations about societal activities and norms in his later work did not signify his renunciation of self-reliance, a notion that epitomizes his youth’s idealism. Second, some parts of *Society and Solitude*, a work that I have treated as representative of his later writing, contain “idealistic rhetoric” that evoke his youth’s speeches and essays.

The presence of the idealistic Emerson in *Society and Solitude* serves as this chapter’s central focus. At times, his abstraction—a term that I employ to describe moments when Emerson explores the immaterial—is immediately apparent to readers. For example, this chapter’s first section investigates “Success” and “Courage,” two essays that exclusively examine intangible human traits—success and courage—and could quite easily be mistaken for works in *Essays* or *Essays: Second Series* from three decades earlier. The mere fact that Emerson discusses these attributes in *Society and Solitude* refutes Rowe’s claim that Emerson relinquished

⁴ See also Lydenberg 356 and Rowe 24.

his “idealistic rhetoric” as he grew older, but my analysis also points to specific abstract moments within these conceptual essays as a means to counter the entirety of Rowe’s contention (24). More specifically, I look at the relationship between these human traits and self-trust, which is the most fundamental dimension of self-reliance. However, there are other instances in *Society and Solitude* when Emerson’s abstraction is less obvious because of the concrete context in which it appears. This chapter’s second section analyzes a couple of essays, “Clubs” and “Art,” that talk about societal activities but also possess moments of abstraction that reveal Emerson’s allusions to democratic individuality and religiousness. In both sections, the illustration of abstraction’s presence and promotion of self-reliance in *Society and Solitude* counters the scholarly consensus that Emerson deserted self-reliance, the pillar of his early work’s idealism.

I. Overt Abstraction: Self-Trust in “Courage” and “Success”

For Emerson, society has a tendency to mischaracterize human traits. It exaggerates or misinterprets people’s actions, heaping praise on unworthy figures and forgetting commendable individuals. More importantly, people rarely challenge these widely embraced definitions of certain human qualities. In *Society and Solitude*, Emerson focuses specifically on two abstract attributes, courage and success, and their connection to self-trust. When they are properly defined, courage and success can embody self-trust. Conversely, the masses’ false impression of these two traits typifies the thoughtless conformity that is rampant in society. Throughout “Courage” and “Success,” Emerson demonstrates how people can misunderstand, properly accept, and ultimately view courage and success as forms of self-trust by repeatedly utilizing abstractions to explain his beliefs.

In “Courage,” Emerson examines a trait that society frequently ascribes to some of history’s most prominent figures. He first illustrates that courage is often wrongly associated with military greatness, the “[a]nimal resistance” that people need to defeat violent foes (SS 205). He subsequently notes that courage is supposed to be a “rare” quality, yet “the instinct of the male animal when cornered...is no doubt common” (205). This statement’s abstract nature is undeniable because it involves a broad generalization about the “instinct[s]” of all “male animal[s].” Moreover, this sweeping assertion allows Emerson to depict society’s conception of courage as a trait that all individuals possess and can potentially act upon. To further convey this point, he lists a multitude of historical and mythological military figures, such as Hercules and Napoleon Bonaparte. It could be argued that this list does not establish valor’s pervasiveness because the seventeen individuals who Emerson names hail from eras that span numerous centuries, but Emerson demonstrates that courage applies to more than just these figures by elaborating on society’s idea of “animal resistance” in the same section of the essay. He says that society ascribes courage to “any man who puts his life in peril in a cause which is esteemed” (205). If we treat “cause” as a reference to war, a subject that is clearly the focus of this section of “Courage,” we see that society’s definition of courage could be applied to millions of individuals; it is no longer a “rare” attribute. Through an abstract affirmation about animals’ instincts, Emerson shows that courage’s connection to military involvement has diminished the word’s meaning. Consequently, the popular exaltation of military figures signals a thoughtless embracement of this notion of valor.

Although he believes that many people misunderstand courage, Emerson suggests that individuals’ acceptance of the attribute’s traditional definition can exemplify mental self-reliance, an aspect of self-trust, if this adoption stems from one’s own thinking (Kateb 31). In

another abstract moment that expands the scope of his investigation of courage, Emerson compares a person's ability to independently define courage to an individual's capacity to withhold judgment on a highly criticized book, saying, "In all applications [it] is the same power, —the habit of reference to one's own mind, as the home of all truth and counsel" (SS 215).

Emerson's employment of "counsel" signifies that people should use their own "mind[s]" to guide their opinions. Basically, people must practice, or "appl[y]," mental self-reliance in order to fully express the "truth." Furthermore, the statement's diction—"all," "power," and "truth"—conjures a sense of universality and profundity that characterizes Emerson's early abstraction (215), the kind of "idealistic rhetoric" that Rowe claims Emerson's later work lacks and makes it "impossible [for Emerson] to deal with the world of actualities" (Rowe 24; Lydenberg 356). As we see here, Emerson *does* ground his idealism in reality. He provides a plausible example of how mental self-reliance, an "idealistic" construct, can influence individuals' perception of books (Rowe 24). It is certainly not "impossible" to fathom an individual who refrains from critiquing a book before reading it, just as it is not "impossible" to imagine a person who develops his or her own definition of courage (Lydenberg 356). By tying these two situations together through an abstract assertion of mental self-reliance, Emerson suggests that the traditional understanding of courage is only inadequate if it is accepted without independent thinking.

Emerson certainly encourages people to arrive at their own conclusions about self-reliance, but he also believes that self-trust is indisputably a form of courage. To demonstrate this concept, Emerson once again turns to war imagery in a distinctly abstract depiction of courage: "[T]he pure article [of courage], courage with eyes, courage with conduct, self-possession at the cannon's mouth, cheerfulness in lonely adherence to the right, is the

endowment of elevated characters” (SS 205). Emerson’s use of “self-possession” certainly evokes the notion of self-trust, but it is the words preceding “self-possession” that truly illustrate this idea. In an Emersonian context, the word “pure” generally refers to the natural essence of someone or something, and self-trust is inherent to people. Self-trust also involves observation of the surrounding world—“eyes”—and independent “conduct.” This diction indicates that Emerson’s characterization of courage is indistinguishable from a description of self-trust. Additionally, the personification of the “cannon” and the employment of “elevated” give this passage a valiant and dramatic tone that illuminates Emerson’s intangible aim, which is to stress the sense of heroism in practicing self-trust. As Emerson proclaims in “Heroism” (1841), “Self-trust is the essence of heroism” (*Essays* 132). If we treat heroism as synonymous with courage, it is clear that Emerson views self-trust as inextricably linked to valor.

Perhaps the most abstract expression of self-trust as a form of a courage arrives near the end of the essay when he says the following:

Sacred courage indicates that a man loves an idea better than all things in the world; that he is aiming neither at pelf or comfort, but will venture all to put in act the invisible thought in his mind. He is everywhere a liberator, but of a freedom that is ideal; not seeking to have land or money or conveniences, but to have no other limitation than that which his own constitution imposes... . He wishes to break every yoke all over the world which hinders his brother from acting after his thought. (SS 219)

Initially, we are unsure about the nature of the “idea” that “man loves” more than anything else in the “world,” but we learn at the end of this passage that “[h]e”—“man”—“wishes” to uphold self-trust, or the “acting after [one’s] thought.” As a result, we now consider the “idea” to be

purposefully ambiguous; it is a symbol for any “invisible thought[s]” that people possess. The significance of this opening is merely to establish self-trust as a necessity for “courage.” An individual must be willing to “venture all” in order to enact their own beliefs. A moment in “Self-Reliance” helps us understand how the “yoke” that “hinders” humanity from possessing self-trust is conformity. “Self-Reliance” asserts that the “world whips you with displeasure” for refusing to conform to the masses (*S-R* 24). In both “Courage” and “Self-Reliance,” a sense of punishment, either through the burden of the “yoke” or via the pain of the “whips,” awaits those who attempt to think and act independently (*SS* 219; *S-R* 24). Thus, the maintenance of self-trust is an act of courage.

This passage’s elucidation of self-trust’s relationship to courage exemplifies Emerson’s abstraction in *Society and Solitude* because he refers to intangible concepts such as “freedom” and “thought” rather than social norms and activities (*SS* 219). His accentuation of the individual’s liberty invalidates Stephen E. Whicher’s claim that Emerson realizes, beginning with his second-to-last major work, *The Conduct of Life*, that “freedom lies only in obedience” (168). Essentially, Emerson recognizes that his vision of courage and, accordingly, self-trust is both nonconformist and “ideal,” a classification that he also makes earlier in the essay (*SS* 219). Through his theoretical association of courage and self-trust and his own awareness of this connection’s “ideal” nature, Emerson illustrates that his work still heavily relies on his youth’s abstraction.

Emerson believes that success, like courage, is misunderstood by society, particularly in the United States. In “Success,” he contends that Americans increasingly view the attribute as exclusively a result of competition amongst each other, and he reflects that the American emphasis “on wealth, victory, and coarse superiority of all kinds” is “of very recent origin”

(230). Emerson's employment of "coarse" conveys a disdain for this new American attitude, so this moment epitomizes Emerson's critique "of the shallow materialism entailed by the conventional American idea of success" (230; Robinson 140). Emerson's disapproval of America's notion of success also appears in an abstract form when he discusses this false characterization's roots. He says, "Cause and effect are a little tedious; how to leap to the result by short or by false means? We are not scrupulous. What we ask is victory, without regard to the cause" (SS 231). Within this passage alone, there are three references to intangible concepts: "cause," "effect," and "victory." Through these abstract terms, Emerson demonstrates that America's idea of success is a product of a desire to achieve fame and glory without a proper "regard" for the process, or "cause," that is necessary to achieve these ends. He feels that this outcome-focused view of success is a manifestation of "egotism" (231). While self-trust certainly involves a turn inward and therefore could be considered somewhat self-centered, it also benefits society by producing a culture that fosters unique perspectives. In contrast, egotism merely benefits one individual. Emerson provides an example of this selfishness: "Men see the reward which the inventor enjoys, and they think, 'How shall we win that?'" (231). There is no concern for the method of obtaining this "reward," just a desire for the end itself. Similar to the way in which military figures become associated with courage simply because of people's past misinterpretations of the word, competition and results become linked to success because of the thoughtless acceptance of a definition that neglects the process that is necessary to attain this attribute.

Once again, it is critical to note that, as with courage, Emerson does not oppose the adoption of the trait's traditional definition even though he believes that it is inadequate. His denunciation of society's idea of success is solely related to the process that individuals utilize to

arrive at conclusions about success. In Emerson's model community—a group that is entirely composed of self-reliant individuals—people would define success in their own ways and resist the urge to unthinkingly embrace others' views of the attribute. Yet, in reality, “it is rare to find a man who believes his own thought” (233-234). In other words, it is unusual to discover a person that practices self-trust because most people doubt their own opinions if they do not mirror their peers' positions. This statement's theoretical nature—it advances the notion that individuals tend to question their own “thought[s]”—further idealizes self-trust. While a self-trusting person could certainly arrive at the mass attitude that success is tied to “victory” (231), Emerson abstractly asserts that the embellishment of personal achievement—an effect of his peers' mischaracterization of success—directly counters self-trust: “He only who comes into this central intelligence, in which no egotism or exaggeration can be, comes into self-possession” (236). As previously noted, “self-possession” is an abstract reference to self-trust, and the use of “central intelligence” alludes to the Universal Mind, an immaterial dimension of self-reliance. This intangible terminology supports the idea that individuals cannot embody the Universal Mind unless they have a steadfast dedication to the “Truth” (*Nature* 27). Since self-trusting individuals belong to the Universal Mind, it follows that these people cannot possibly hold a view of success that is based on a hyperbolic inflation of one's own accomplishments. Thus, even though a proper devotion to independent thinking could still result in an acceptance of courage's traditional definition and exemplify self-trust, Emerson abstractly contends that a person who possesses self-trust would never freely choose this characterization of the term.

Emerson emphasizes that people can define success in a variety of ways as long as they practice self-trust, but he also maintains that self-trust is itself a form of success. This declaration begins a paragraph that is initially forthright but becomes progressively more abstract:

Self-trust is the first secret of success... . It by no means consists in rushing prematurely to a showy feat that shall catch the eye and satisfy spectators. It is enough if you work in the right direction. So far from the performance being the real success, it is clear that the success was much earlier than that, namely, when all the feats that make our civility were the thoughts of good heads... . It is the dulness [sic] of the multitude that they cannot see the house, in the ground-plan; the working, in the model of the projector. (SS 234-235)

Emerson's use of "of" instead of "to" in his affirmation that self-trust "is the first secret of success" is significant because "of" implies that self-trust is a part of success rather than a characteristic that leads "to" success. Emerson further clarifies this distinction by conveying self-trust's superiority in relation to society's traditional conception of success. He says that self-trust "by no means consists in rushing prematurely to a showy feat," which is a reference to the "shallow materialism" and outcome-focused, or "performance"-focused, nature of society's notion of success (234; Robinson 140; SS 234). Essentially, self-trust values the process, or the "thoughts," that ultimately result in certain accomplishments, not the "feats" themselves (234).

This idea is reminiscent of a moment in "The Poet" (1844) when Emerson calls "paths" and "methods" "ideal and eternal" (*Essays* 215). In the above passage, Emerson suggests through abstract analogies that the masses, or the "multitude," do not appreciate that the process for attaining success is important (SS 235). He metaphorically illustrates that society is so intent on instant gratification that it cannot "see the house" or "the model of the projector" before they are actually physically built (235). More explicitly, society cannot comprehend the method or work that is necessary to assemble these structures. These metaphors involve physical structures, but the equation of these two separate comparisons powerfully portrays Emerson's extremely

theoretical idea that his culture does not value the method for achieving success. This example typifies Emerson's complex representations of his beliefs throughout "Success" that enhance his readers' understanding of his ideas about the trait; by abstractly depicting self-trust as a form of success that stresses the importance of independent thinking and action and hence challenges society's impression of the trait, Emerson generates "a standard less prone to entanglement in the webs of social conformity" (Robinson 161). Consequently, although Emerson emphasizes that an adherence to self-trust can create diverse opinions about the nature of courage and success, he ultimately asserts that self-trust is itself a form of both traits, which is an abstract notion in its own right.

II. Abstraction Amid the Concrete: Democratic Individuality and Religiousness in "Clubs" and "Art"

Unlike "Courage" and "Success," "Clubs" and "Art" explore concrete subjects, so Emerson's mere examination of these topics does not demonstrate a persistence of his youth's abstraction. These essays' practical nature is perhaps best conveyed by the precision of his advice for intellectual organizations' meetings in "Clubs": "[T]o a club met for conversation a supper is a good basis, as it disarms all parties, and puts pedantry and business to the door" (SS 198). This specific counsel exemplifies Emerson's predominantly pragmatic writing in both "Clubs" and "Art," but there are other moments in these essays when Emerson allows his writing to drift into the intangible. In "Clubs," Emerson's abstraction arrives in his investigation of social relations and reveals his promotion of democratic individuality, a dimension of self-reliance that is primarily expressed by the essay's frequent echoing of "Character" (1844) and "Friendship" (1841). In "Art," Emerson's abstraction emerges in his discussion of nature's effect on human creativity and underscores the Universal Mind's impact on self-reliant individuals' artwork by

mirroring his portrayal of this spiritual essence in “The Over-Soul.” By drawing parallels between these essays and Emerson’s early thought, this section illustrates that Emerson still abstractly advances democratic individuality and religiousness, two dimensions of self-reliance.

For a large portion of “Clubs,” Emerson contemplates the nature of people’s conversations and social interactions, straying from his essay’s practical focus on intellectual associations and abstractly reiterating his ideas about democratic individuality that he had set forth decades earlier in “Friendship” and “Character.” For example, when Emerson talks about the nature of arguments between two independent thinkers, he reflects, “[T]here may easily be obstacles in the way of finding the pure article we are in search of; but when we find it, it is worth the pursuit, for besides its comfort as medicine and cordial, once in the right company, new and vast values do not fail to appear” (SS 188). Basically, Emerson believes that people should endure their quarrels with certain individuals because they can potentially discover the “pure article” by maintaining a relationship with their adversaries. The “pure article” is quite abstract; Emerson never explicitly defines this concept, so we are initially unclear about its meaning. However, his use of “pure” ascribes a moral significance to this passage and evokes Emerson’s early descriptions of character, a force of the Universal Mind that involves the internal ascertainment of a higher truth. Emerson’s employment of “search” and “pursuit” further supports the notion that he alludes to character in this passage. A crucial component of Emerson’s construct of character is that people who grasp this moral fiber within themselves will seek justice in society. For Emerson, justice is the “application” of character’s higher “truth,” a “purity” that resides within people, to affairs in a community (*Essays* 245). Thus, the “pure article” that the quarrelers seek to find in one another is character’s higher truth, an abstract idea that readers can comprehend by closely scrutinizing its origins in “Character” (SS 188).

By depicting the discovery of someone else's "pure article" as desirable to independent thinkers, Emerson fundamentally suggests that this detection of another person's higher truth enriches one's understanding of the world. More specifically, once the disputants in Emerson's hypothetical argument realize that they can enhance each other's knowledge and perspective on certain matters, they will begin to think about "new and vast values" that enrich their minds and influence their behavior (188). In the simplest sense, they will both be improved by their current and future encounters. This notion—a belief that the voluntary social participation of self-reliant individuals will ultimately result in collective improvement—is the essence of democratic individuality. The aforementioned passage's emphasis on the beneficial nature of argumentation echoes a moment in "Character" that touches on the nature of friendship between two people who possess this moral strength: "I know nothing which life has to offer so satisfying as the profound good understanding which can subsist, after much exchange of good offices, between two virtuous men, each of whom is sure of himself and sure of his friend" (*Essays* 254). Like his reflection in "Clubs," Emerson's cogitation in "Character" highlights the enduring benefit of a proper relationship to another independent individual. The repetition of "sure" indicates that these "virtuous men" are confident in their own convictions and are therefore self-trusting people. Moreover, they discern this self-reliant quality in one another. The implication here is that, like the quarrelers in "Clubs," these men have arrived at a "good understanding" after many disagreements; they have found "truth" in one another (245). By expressing the beneficial effect of self-reliant individuals' search for higher truths in their peers through allusions to "Character," Emerson abstractly illustrates in "Clubs" that a tolerance for disputes can ultimately result in two individuals discovering each other's possession of character.

Though Emerson asserts that a self-reliant person's recognition of another individual's character can improve his or her own thinking and behavior, this enhancement does not occur through a mere adoption of the other person's beliefs; a thoughtless acceptance of another individual's ideas is an act of conformity, the antithesis of self-reliance. For Emerson, peers' enrichment of one another is instead a product of competition. By challenging one another to think deeply about certain subjects, self-reliant individuals expand each other's mental capacities. Emerson addresses this notion in "Clubs" when he says the following about discourse in society:

We consider those who are interested in thoughts, their own and other men's, and who delight in comparing them, who think it the highest compliment they can pay a man, to deal with him as an intellect, to expose to him the grand and cheerful secrets perhaps never opened to their daily companions, to share with him the sphere of freedom and the simplicity of truth. (SS 193)

Emerson's diction demonstrates that this passage is an example of his youth's abstraction; adjectives such as "highest" and "grand" connote a literal sense of enlargement that indicates his reflection's vast scope, and his use of "freedom" and "truth," two intangible concepts, illuminates his statement's theoretical aim. A closer look at his language also reveals a greater understanding of his thoughts about listening. At first, this passage appears to advise listeners to accept speakers' profound ideas, or "grand" "secrets," but the inclusion of "expose" suggests that listeners possess the power to resist speakers' views. Emerson could have utilized "teach" or "instill" instead of "expose," but these words would have implied that listeners should merely accept the speakers' words.

Through his employment of “expose,” Emerson ascribes a sense of independence to listeners that mirrors his belief about the appropriate relationship between two self-reliant individuals in a democratic society. Essentially, he feels that self-reliant people should always seek conversations that involve alternative viewpoints. As he asserts in “Friendship,” “[It is] [b]etter [to] be a nettle in the side of your friend than his echo. The condition which high friendship demands is ability to do without it” (*Essays* 111). In other words, self-reliant individuals should not aspire to have friends who willingly hold the same opinions as them. Instead, they should covet friendships in which both parties are willing to terminate, or “do without,” the relationship at any moment if they deem that it is necessary to retain their own convictions. Similar to his abstract promotion of listeners’ ability to hear but not necessarily embrace speakers’ ideas in the passage from “Clubs,” Emerson affirms in “Friendship” that self-reliant people should pursue friendships but preserve their own views.

Due to self-reliant individuals’ constant desire to cling to their beliefs, friendships among these people necessitate “deal[ing] with” each other as “intellect[s]” (*SS* 193). Exactly how a person can treat another individual as an “intellect” is rather abstract and difficult for the reader to decipher, but this notion parallels another moment in “Friendship” when Emerson says that companionship “treats its object as a god, that it may deify both” (*Essays* 115). Basically, in order for a relationship between self-reliant individuals to be beneficial for both people, each individual must treat the other with high esteem, either as an “intellect” or a “god” (*SS* 193; *Essays* 115). If there is a lack of respect on either side of the relationship, there is at least one party that is no longer benefitting from the friendship; more importantly, the competition between them has ceased. Emerson references this idea earlier in “Clubs” by emphasizing that interactions among friends should expand, or “enlarg[e]” their mental capabilities (*SS* 184). This

intellectual growth can only occur through competition, refuting Christopher Newfield's contention that "[c]ompetition yields to kinship" in "Clubs" (147). Simply put, Emerson claims that true kinship *is* competition because it results in collective improvement, the essence of democratic individuality. Throughout "Clubs," Emerson promotes character and competition, two critical aspects of democratic individuality, through abstract diction that achieves the same intangible quality as his early depictions of the concepts in "Character" and "Friendship."

In "Art," Emerson's abstraction arrives within an examination of the differences between the "Useful" and "Fine" arts (SS 39). More specifically, through constant allusions to the Universal Mind via his repeated use of the immaterial "Nature," Emerson abstractly demonstrates that the creations of both art forms are spiritual endeavors and manifestations of self-reliant thinking (40). For Emerson, all art "aims at use or at beauty," which is the basis for his distinction between the "Useful" and "Fine" arts (39). The useful arts include "agriculture, building, ...and the construction of all the grand and delicate tools and instruments by which man serves himself" (39). These arts are vital to society; without them, humanity would lack the apparatus for innovation and survival. Emerson appears to stress that the useful arts are subservient to natural forces, asserting that "the omnipotent agent is Nature; all human acts are satellites to her orb" (40). This idea is buoyed by Emerson's later description of the climate's effect on the useful arts, including "wind, sun, [and] rain" (40). However, Emerson's use of "Nature" does not solely underscore the environment's impact on the useful arts; his characterization of "Nature" as "omnipotent," a word that people often associate with God, ascribes a sense of divinity to the term.

A reference to nature in the "Over-Soul" (1841) further illuminates the word's spiritual connotation for Emerson: "Let man then learn the revelation of all nature and all thought to his

heart; this, namely: that the Highest dwells with him; that the sources of nature are in his own mind” (*Essays* 155). In this passage, we can treat “Highest” as an allusion to the God-like essence—the Over-Soul or Universal Mind—that resides “with[in]” humanity because the word appears amid a larger examination of religion. The equation of “Highest” and the “sources of nature” in this passage not only reinforces the notion that “Nature” holds a religious meaning for Emerson, but it also indicates that “Nature” embodies the Universal Mind because it is “representative” of this spirit (155; *SS* 40). Accordingly, Emerson’s depiction of the relationship between the useful arts and “Nature” in “Art” exemplifies his abstraction because he employs an intangible term—“Nature”—to refer to the Universal Mind and to show that the useful arts require a submission to this spiritual essence.

Emerson’s use of “Nature” as an allusion to the Universal Mind in his analysis of the useful arts signifies that his portrayal of nature’s influence on the fine arts also possesses a religious connotation. At the outset of his discussion of the fine arts, which are “[m]usic, [e]loquence, [p]oetry, [p]ainting, [s]culpture, [and] [a]rchitecture” (41), Emerson asserts that “[n]ature paints the best part of the picture; carves the best part of the statue; builds the best part of the house; and speaks the best part of the oration” (44). In the context of this essay, this statement might suggest that our understanding of the natural world influences our works of fine art because it informs our perception of “beauty” (39). Conversely, if we treat nature as a reference to the Universal Mind, the passage suggests that a proper adherence to the Mind assists in the production of fine art. Donald L. Gelpi advances this idea when he describes the link between creation and the Universal Mind as follows: “The moment of creativity reveals the divine” (44). Due to our enhanced understanding of nature’s religious meaning for Emerson, we

can interpret this moment in “Art” as an abstract investigation of the relationship between people and this spiritual essence, the Universal Mind.

My characterization of nature has, up until now, ignored a primary assumption that my view necessitates. By asserting that “Nature” is representative of the Universal Mind and a guiding force of all artwork, I have implied that self-reliant individuals are the only artists because they are the sole members of the Universal Mind. In other words, only self-reliant people’s work can embody the Universal Mind because they are the only individuals who can intuit this spiritual essence. This stance might seem far-fetched, but Emerson affirms this position when he says, “The universal soul is the alone creator of the useful and the beautiful; therefore, to make anything useful or beautiful, the individual must be submitted to the universal mind” (SS 40). Basically, self-reliant individuals are the only people who can create artwork that is either “useful” or “beautiful.” Emerson’s declaration that one must be self-reliant in order to be an artist supports the idea that his use of the Universal Mind conveys the spiritual nature of self-reliant thinkers’ useful and fine artwork. Combined with his advancement of democratic individuality in “Clubs,” this reinforcement of self-reliance’s religious nature in “Art” through the intangible notion of nature illustrates that Emerson still abstractly promotes self-reliance’s dimensions in *Society and Solitude*.

III. Conclusions

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that *Society and Solitude* contains numerous moments of abstraction that allude to various elements of self-reliance. More specifically, I established that Emerson’s abstraction in “Courage” and “Success” allows us to grasp his contention that these traits can exemplify self-trust if they are properly understood. Subsequently, I showed that abstraction illuminates the presence of democratic individuality and

religiousness in “Clubs” and “Art.” The purpose of highlighting the intangible in these essays stemmed from the scholarly consensus that Emerson’s later thought abandoned his youth’s “idealistic rhetoric,” a claim that refers to both the stylistic presentation and content of his early ideas (Rowe 24). As I have exposed throughout the chapter, this argument is invalid; there was never a “[p]ost-transcendental Emerson” because he still advances self-reliance, his youth’s most idealistic tenet, in *Society and Solitude* (Gelpi 151). Thus, the Emerson who we encounter in the book is not, as many scholars would suggest, a darkened, cynical shell of his younger self. Rather, he is a man who believes in the “beauty, truth, and goodness” that “spring eternal in the breast of man,” a hopeful individual who still clings to his faith in the mind’s transcendent capabilities (SS 52).

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this thesis, I have examined self-reliance's presence in *Society and Solitude*, Emerson's last major work, as a means to refute the scholarly consensus that Emerson renounced his early philosophy in his later work. Though Stephen E. Whicher is the forerunner for this particular strain of scholarship, Harold Bloom provides perhaps the best summation of this group's assessment of Emerson's career when he says that Emerson "finds you simmering, brings you to a boil, but does not stay to make coffee" (61). Essentially, Bloom metaphorically asserts that the young Emerson was able to grab readers' attention and intrigue them with his espousal of idealistic concepts, but he abandoned his supporters by ultimately deserting his early ideas, or "not stay[ing] to make coffee." Many scholars have adopted this stance because of two primary misunderstandings about the true nature of self-reliance. First, Sacvan Bercovitch and others speculate that Emerson did not account for societal norms and activities in his early thought and that, as a result, his later focus on practical topics signals a departure from his early work (342). On the contrary, and as the first chapter of my work establishes, self-reliance entails democratic individuality, an idea that not only accounts for self-reliant individuals' social participation but also contends that these people *seek* to contribute to society (Kateb 1). The other misconception stems from scholars' belief that Emerson's later work does not contain his youth's abstraction, or "idealistic rhetoric" (Rowe 24). In the final chapter of this thesis, I illustrate that abstraction is quite prevalent in *Society and Solitude*, so the notion that Emerson does not incorporate his early writing's abstract content and style is also inaccurate. Thus, by showing that Whicher and his followers fail to properly define self-reliance, recognize its practicability, and notice its abstract promotion in *Society and Solitude*, this thesis demonstrates

that Emerson's later work does not abandon self-reliance and, consequently, does not completely deviate from his early thought.

This emphasis on the continuity between Emerson's early and late depictions of self-reliance resurrects his legacy because it underscores the compelling nature of his later work and indicates that he did not relinquish the concept. In other words, the scholarly consensus that Emerson deserted self-reliance implies that he realized the impracticability of the idea as he grew older, so these scholars regard his constant advancement of self-reliance in his early writings as a manifestation of the "foolish consistency" that Emerson labels the "hobgoblin of little minds" in "Self-Reliance" (*S-R* 24). This naive idealism is a major cause of his "present decline of reputation" (Whicher 36). Of course, this widespread view is erroneous because Emerson never deemed self-reliance impractical. My thesis therefore restores Emerson's status as a preeminent thinker for some scholars by stressing that his life's work represents an unwavering commitment to self-reliance.

Even more significantly, Emerson's consistent portrayal of self-reliance revives his exalted reputation by demonstrating that he did not belong to the group of northern intellectuals who radically changed their philosophies during and after the Civil War. George M. Fredrickson is one of the many scholars who include Emerson in this group of thinkers because he believes that Emerson's "emphasis on individualism and anarchism disappeared" during the war (177). He expresses this opinion in a more general assessment of Emerson's post-war demeanor:

Emerson thus seemed to accept the fact that many of his old ideals were ideals were without application in the new America foreshadowed by the war experience... . The new Emerson, like the Yankee lad he described in 'Self-Reliance,' fell on his feet like a cat and ended in harmony with the intellectuals

who denied his individualistic, anti-institutional philosophy. The change in American thinking which occurred during the Civil War was perfectly summed up by the changing views of Emerson himself. (180)

Fredrickson errs because he rarely cites Emerson's writing from this period and thus relies on Emerson's own life experiences, which do not dictate the content of his writing, to inform his claims. Emerson certainly became more involved in political and social affairs during this time, but his increasing activism did not necessarily impact his philosophy. Fredrickson also implies that Americans could no longer fathom Emerson's idealistic beliefs in a post-war environment that was characterized by the omnipresence of death and suffering. However, the notion that Emerson's mystical view of the world had no place in this society is purely speculative. Even if some post-war readers of the young Emerson felt that his writing was too optimistic, *Society and Solitude* illustrates that self-reliance, a bastion of the early Emerson, can manifest itself in the most practical elements of life. Furthermore, the mere espousal of self-reliance in *Society and Solitude*, which was published five years after the Civil War's conclusion, demonstrates that Emerson did not desert his "individualistic" constructs.

While it could be argued that *Society and Solitude* is not an adequate representation of Emerson's post-Civil War thinking because the essays were almost entirely written during his "creative burst in the 1850s," Emerson still decided to publish the collection after the war had ended, so he likely believed that these works contained ideas that were still relevant to society (Robinson 150). If Emerson had truly felt that his early concepts "were without application" in this post-war environment, he would not have published them (Fredrickson 180). It is apparent that Fredrickson and other scholars include Emerson in the group of radically altered northern intellectuals because they cannot separate his own life's events from his writing. This conflation

is a primary issue with Emersonian scholarship, and one that scholars need to avoid in the future if they want to accurately portray his career. A strict adherence to Emerson's writing could possibly alter the scholarly consensus regarding his life and lead to more research about *Society and Solitude* and his other late works. This examination of the elderly Emerson could prove to be particularly fruitful for scholars; after all, "[i]n a world so charged and sparkling with power, a man does not live long and actively without costly additions of experience, which, though not spoken, are recorded in his mind. What to the youth is only a guess or a hope, is in the veteran a digested statute" (SS 263).

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