From thought to style: Emerson's interplay of ideas and language

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FROM THOUGHT TO STYLE:
EMERSON'S INTERPLAY OF IDEAS AND LANGUAGE

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
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San Bernardino

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ABSTRACT

The essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson have been widely read, respected, and highly influential for their timeliness over the past two hundred years, and have provided students and writers with the benefits of his rhetoric and style. This research focuses on the central questions: What are the special qualities in Emerson's style which have contributed to his lasting influence? How does Emerson use language to move his audience? Through philosophical, critical, and historical modes of inquiry, Emerson's writing is first considered in relation to his audience; his primary concern as a writer. Secondly, to establish Emerson’s writing foundation, his thought, journaling, and works are examined using classical rhetoric. The study then analyzes two essays, "Self-Reliance" and "Experience," on rhetorical, stylistic, and interpretive levels. Finally, Emerson's influence on students and writers, along with the implementation of "Self-Reliance" in the classroom, reveals the valuable application of some of his most useful ideas and techniques.
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The relationship between writer and audience, for Emerson, involves an intricate interplay of ideas and language. Robert Frost described this relationship in the works of Emerson as "The speaking tone of voice somehow tangled in words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination." Since Emerson was concerned with this relationship, he dedicated himself to formulating a rhetorical approach that would enable his audience to better understand his ideas. Emerson defined "true eloquence" as depending "upon the evidence of the listeners' reception." Therefore, audience was an important part of the composing process to Emerson. He used the art of rhetoric, especially the techniques of a central hieroglyph, tension through tone, and human imagery, to move and vitalize his audience. Emerson was committed to the formulation of a rhetoric which would bring his audience around to him; every element of his style focuses on how he might best use language to better affect his audience.

Chapter One focuses on the significance of Emerson's audience and technique, as well as aspects of Emersonian thought, including a study of the way in which thought works within the essay form. For Emerson, new thought is an expansion, the transition of one idea from the unconscious to the conscious, then the implementation of that idea into form. He believed that the new thought was not only an expansion, but that it was also a step towards a greater concentration. For example, in the essay "Self-Reliance," the idea of self-trust is expanded to consider independence as the power behind originality, and
that it is self-trust which makes great actions possible. It is through expansion that his work gains power. It is through concentration that his principle idea becomes well-developed, because he avoided limiting the significance of a thought.

Chapter Two looks into Emerson's foundations in classical rhetoric, contributing to the development of his essays, and presents a rhetorical analysis of "Self-Reliance." The text is utilized here to illustrate the structuring of Emerson's ideas around a central picture of a problem critical to American culture, for instance, a belief in self-reliant individualism. This illustration is created through the use of many related motifs: metaphor, pun, allusion, and Biblical and theological imagery. In the essay, Emerson highlights "the limitless authority and transformative power of the intuitive self." To support this belief, Emerson writes, "It must be that when God speaketh he should communicate, not one thing, but all things, should fill the world with his voice... and new create the world." His faith in the individual's access to speech is the foundation of this doctrine of self-reliance, with the goal of working out the theory of personality.

Chapter Three juxtaposes the ideas presented in "Self-Reliance" with a stylistic analysis of "Experience," the latter judged by many to be Emerson's greatest essay. The text is used to show how self-identity is worked out through the steps of experience. "Experience" reveals Emerson's recognition that a limited view or way of speech restricts us into possessing a narrow outlook on our world. Therefore, the essay highlights the fact that it is through shifting points of view that new vistas will be opened to us. In "Experience," Emerson writes that life should be regarded as "a train of moods like a
string of beads" by considering various aspects of life: illusion, temperament, succession, surface, surprise, reality, and subjectiveness. Emerson shows the reader that it is through experience that we can look beyond the specific to universal truths.

Chapter Four, the final chapter, discusses the reasoning behind the teaching of Emerson in the college classroom, based on his influences on students and writers throughout time. Emerson's writing is valued for the emphasis he placed upon self-reliance, an urging of the writer to produce his or her best work. The student of Emerson is encouraged to be a creative thinker, to construct essays which have a central idea surrounding some aspect of individual life. For Emerson, it was critical to utilize various techniques and devices for greater expression, and to avoid limitations of thought. Finally, this study applies Emerson's ideas and techniques to a college composition lesson, highlighting the benefits of his style, with the goal of developing student writing through personal insight, growth, and self-reliant individualism.
CHAPTER ONE
RALPH WALDO EMERSON:
HIS AUDIENCE AND TECHNIQUE

While preparing notes and materials for a future speech, "The Power and Terror of
Thought," Emerson wanted to make the point to his audience that "ideas, not vested
interests, were the great force in human history." Emerson strived to: "redeem the word
idea, which had been devalued . . . to mean only the faint shadow of a sense of
impression." For Emerson now as for Plato before, ideas became perceptions, realities of
which sense and impressions are the shadows. At the center of Emerson's life and work
is a core of these perceptions, bound together. Emerson admitted that he and his
audience might think different thoughts, but he was compelled to try to subvert the
difference . . . . The Emersonian style was to use words themselves as the means of
bridging that distance. He said that "The audience is a constant meter of the orator."

For this reason, Emerson shared a vision with his audience. That vision,
embodied in the eloquence of his carefully chosen language, enabled him to reach his
listeners on a more profound level. One of Emerson's most widely used rhetorical
techniques was to structure his essays "in an ascending and widening spiral around a
fixed center [hieroglyph], which is the major idea." For example, in "Experience," the
hieroglyph of a traveling geologist, a popular image in Emerson's writing, is used to
convey a personal insight within the reader, to describe the great man: "[The great man
is] like a traveling geologist who passes through our estate and shows us good slate, or
limestone, or anthracite, in our brush pasture. He is a geologist in the sense that, as a
student of the earth, he sees in the terrain landscape an image of the inner self." The
geological imagery in "Experience" reveals a double human implication, that of one's
land and one's condition as related to the earth. Much of the imagery which Emerson
used in his poetry and his essays is derived from natural images of the earth. "Like the
image of One Man, the images of the earth and of man as a traveling geologist appear
time and time again in Emerson's writings," most notably in what many critics have
determined to be his greatest essay, "Experience."

However, before studying Emerson's imagery, it is important to understand
something of his foundations in classical rhetoric. Like Quintilian, Emerson believed that
to reach his listeners on a higher level, meant to stir their emotions. But before this could
be accomplished, the speaker must first feel those emotions himself. Emerson said, "[we]
must, assimilate ourselves to the emotions of those who are genuinely so affected, for
then our eloquence will really derive from the feeling we want to produce in the mind [of
our listener]." This meant to choose language which every man can understand; language
which will both persuade and move the audience to some insight.

Always, Emerson tried to convert his audience into "one mind." Emerson saw
man as one mind, the mind as one, nature as one, and the world as one. His writing
reflects this oneness. For Emerson it was important to not only be a "seer" of nature, but
also a "sayer." To become a "sayer," he depended upon his audience. The audience
became a vital component in the relaying of his ideas, whether his ideas were to fail or to
move one. He was unable to separate the seer and the sayer. For this reason, Emerson was committed to finding a rhetorical approach which would endear his audience to him.

Emerson often asked the question in his work: "What is he?--What is man?"

Always at the heart of his writing, the answer became a biblical one for him. "Thou hast made him little less than God and dost crown him with glory and honor." This is one of the biggest reasons for Emerson's inclusion of his audience as a part of his writing; he was ever concerned with mankind's role and significance. Emerson spoke to his audience directly in saying that "each man's world is his own confession. He seeks to broaden and deepen life by helping each individual, through his rhetoric, to discover and disencumber his/her own powers." In so doing, Emerson engages the soul of his audience; Emerson speaks through rhetorical techniques to move his audience.

One such rhetorical technique with which Emerson has been very successful is the use of metaphor. For Emerson, metaphor becomes a vehicle of displaying the mind's rhetorical power, and figuration becomes the effect of interpretation. Differences in words are pointed out by the use of metaphor. The "metaphor is no longer a static equation, but perpetual transition . . . . Emerson distinguishes the word's charm from the motivating subject, the 'life of thought,' behind it." It is precisely this charm and life which allows Emerson's poems and essays to touch and appeal to individuals on a number of levels. The significance of the metaphoric style for Emerson is that when it "stands for a thought or the name of an object [it] becomes the name of an intangible quality, it is given over to a higher 'use'; it serves the soul . . . . Emerson's serial metaphors mark his acceptance of the mind's power to derive pleasure from language.
itself." The image derived from the use of metaphor calls up the mind's rhetorical power. This power is emanated through Emerson's most effective use of rhetorical devices, for example, his hieroglyph which conveys an expansion of context "always ascending a little farther beyond the reader's grasp." This enables the reader—Emerson's audience—to form a pictorial display and to integrate and react to that picture.

Emerson also saw his audience as an entity, that which had authority over him. That audience was so much a part of his work that he often addressed his readers, "You," granting them an independent existence, indicating how real his audience was to him, and how much their response became a part of his writing. The true eloquence of Emerson's writing, for him, always depended upon how his audience reacted; this became the measure of his ability as a writer and a speaker.

FROM THOUGHT TO STYLE

For Emerson, imagination and thought most often followed a broken path. Emerson was notorious for his broken style of writing. However, this style grew out of the results of his own set purpose to create a tension, through his language, between himself and his reader. For example, in "Experience," this tension is achieved through the many shifts in tone from section to section. Along with tonal changes, the richness of his epigrams, and the interplay between the greatness and homeliness of his metaphors are also representative of his philosophy of style. He wrote, "Style not matter gives
immortality.” The message comes in the form of the mastery of the creation and echoes in the mind long after the reading.

Emerson is able to echo ideas and images for us, through specially chosen rhythms and tones of speech, long after the telling. For example, to communicate an idea to the audience, for Emerson, meant to live it. “If I could persuade men to listen to their interior convictions, that were indeed life,” he wrote in his journal. This meant that through the transformation of his ideas into language—his art of rhetoric—he was able to create immortality, by moving his audience to consider their inner strengths. However, Emerson tackled a number of problems in bringing an idea from the unconscious mind to the conscious mind: "To embody an idea in a form one must vigilantly bring the whole intellect to bear on a problem at every moment." Emerson tackled this problem most successfully through his journal writing, whereby he recorded his perceptions as they immediately came to him.

Emerson’s journals are extensions of his experiences and thoughts, recordings of conversations, citations, anecdotes, metaphors, sentences, and paragraphs to be used in future writings. His journal entries attest that he thought about questions of style, questions of other writers, and questions of goals and expression. He thought of the successes and failures of other writers and his own. The journal provided a road for him—a road by which he could move his spiritual thought to a higher level, and draw upon his inspiration for poems, essays, and speeches. The practice of keeping a journal allowed Emerson the freedom to later pursue effective ways of having an impact on his audience.

Ever beneath the surface of Emerson’s writing is a volcano (a popularly used
metaphor in his writing) ready to spew out the fires of his mind, to charge the emotions of his audience with pertinent, timely issues. Behind the fire of Emerson's ideas are not abstractions, but perceptions, patterns, laws, blueprints, and plans.

[Emerson] associated the human mind and its capacity for thought with activity and energy. He concentrated... on the individual's sources of power, on access to the central fires that ignite the mind. Ideas were more important than phenomena because they (the ideas) lay behind them (the phenomena), creating and explaining the visible world. Ideas for Emerson were tangible and had force.

For Emerson, these ideas of activity and energy came through best, perhaps in his imagery. Many of his images are ones of movement--man's movement--from experience to experience, an interaction with nature, and an interaction with others.

Many of Emerson's tangible ideas conformed with the ideals which have helped to shape writing since Aristotle. His writing was influenced greatly by two more recent rhetoricians: Bacon and Montaigne. He tried to imitate Bacon in style, and emulate Montaigne's example of individualism. Furthermore, through the study of other writers, especially Swedenborg, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Plato, Emerson formed his sense of dualism, and his affiliation with symbolism. It is through this study of the works of other writers that Emerson gained his foundation for thought.

For example, in Representative Men: Montaigne, Emerson learned that "every fact is related on one side to sensation, and on the other to morals. The game of thought is, on the appearance of one of those two sides... Life is a pitching of this penny--heads or tails." For Emerson, the two sides of the penny symbolized nature and spirit. Constantly, Emerson wrote from a dualistic perspective, concerned with choosing the
proper symbol to represent his thoughts. He was equally concerned with both man’s and God’s language which originated in nature. "The man who lives close to Nature . . . clothes his thoughts in figures which, by their trailing clouds of glory, attest their spiritual origin." For Emerson, this spiritual origin was at the heart of much of his writing. He utilized natural images and metaphors to move his audience through his essays as a physical participant, like a “prospector,” for example in “Experience,” in which the reader becomes the prospector, moving through the essay, taking valuable insight beyond art, nature, and the self.

Emerson believed in the expansion of the mind as an expansion of self, through natural images and the conversion of those images through language. [He wrote that it is] the mind's generation of form through the marriage of thought to nature . . . [which is] the intellect constructive . . . [While] thought is spontaneous, or intuitive . . . expression is deliberate, implying a mixture of will, a strenuous exercise of choice. The intellect receptive tends to unity, while the intellect constructive tends to diversity; these are tendencies of the mind and of nature.

The passage supports Emerson’s belief that an individual develops when the mind develops. The development of the mind is achieved through an interaction between nature and language (communication). Emerson recognized that both thought and expression demand choice, and that both unity and diversity are important to the individual’s growth.

He also believed that there is always a relationship between language and reality. Emerson used symbols in his writing for many reasons, but the most distinct reason is linked to his religious beliefs. Because he was a religious writer, concerned with man's reaction to God, he placed art in a symbolic perspective, for example in "Self-Reliance".
If we live truly, we shall see truly. It is as easy for the strong man to be strong, as it is for the weak to be weak. When we have new perception, we shall gladly disburden the memory of its hoarded treasures as old rubbish. When a man lives with God, his voice shall be as sweet as the murmur of the brook and the rustle of the corn.

The passage typifies Emerson’s respect for and sense of unity between man and God, man and nature. The connection between man, perception, and nature were very important to Emerson. “Self-Reliance” is an essay rich in all three elements. The challenge Emerson set before himself was to bring the three together in such a way as to appeal to his audience on all three levels; to move them in a suggestive way. Through Emerson’s devotion to setting up a tension between his language and his audience, he hoped to be able to reach the inner self.
CHAPTER TWO
FOUNDATIONS IN CLASSICAL RHETORIC

Many critics consider "Self-Reliance" to be Emerson's best known essay. The essay has been most noted for its expansive rhetorical power: for its use of metaphor, central hieroglyph, human imagery, and political terminology. The very language of "Self-Reliance," in its oracular tone, requires a personal involvement from the reader. The essay works successfully rhetorically in illustrating Emerson's ability to inspire and communicate, while moving his audience, with a foundation of language in the rhetoric of Aristotle. Emerson followed the sovereign mission of Aristotle's rhetoric. To illustrate this foundation in classical rhetoric, Emerson utilized Aristotle's three methods of rhetorical "artistic" persuasion: 1) showing character through speech; 2) stirring the listener's emotions; and 3) proving a truth, real or perceived, by argument. Aristotle believed that to master the art of persuasion one must: 1) engage in logical reasoning; 2) hold a knowledge of character; and 3) uphold a knowledge of emotions. Emerson utilized each of these arts of persuasion in his writing.

Aristotle believed that everyone uses both rhetoric and dialectic in discourse, and emphasized that rhetoric is an art; the efforts of successful speakers can be studied, and the principles of their success methodized. The nature of persuasion lies in the arguments or "proofs." These arts of persuasion, or "proofs" are both artistic or nonartistic, or "scientific" and "unscientific." Art falls within the scientific category. Along with the three categories of artistic persuasion, a distinction is made that rhetoric is applied to recognized subjects of deliberation, and the subjects are those in which the issue seems to be uncertain.
Echoing Aristotle, rhetorician Quintilian, noted that "everything which art has brought to perfection originated in nature." Furthermore, Quintilian asserted that an "appeal to the emotions is necessary in all three kinds of oratory (ethos, pathos, and logical proof), including the deliberative, for the audience must be worked on in political no less than in legal debates. Emotional appeal should be used in every part of the speech."

Emerson, as seen in "Self-Reliance," shared this vision of appeals with Quintilian. "Quintilian believe[d] that the orator must appeal 'to the visual sense,' for his orator should 'generate' the emotions he wishes to prevail . . . by using 'visions.'" Another noted rhetorician, Hugh Blair, asserted:

No kind of language is so generally understood, and so powerfully felt, as the native language of worthy and virtuous feelings. He only, therefore, who possesses these full and strong, can speak properly, and in its own language, to the heart. On all great subjects and occasions, there is a dignity, there is an energy in noble sentiments, which is overcoming and irresistible. They give an ardor and a flame to one's discourse, which seldom fails to kindle a like flame in those who hear.

It is the individual, Emerson believed, who possesses these emotions, and utilizes these visions, who will be able to evoke desired feelings in another. Emerson always claimed to be at home with his audience. His discourse indicated that, even though he and his audience had different thoughts, he was able to bridge the distance between the speaker and the hearers through his rhetorical style, a style which used words themselves as the means of bridging that distance. For Emerson, rhetoric meant to influence his audience in such a way as to change their way of seeing the world and to move his audience to look within themselves and to discover new insights.
A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF "SELF-RELIANCE"

"Self-Reliance," uses an effective rhetoric which speaks to the heart, divided into three theoretical sections, beginning with the hieroglyph (image) of the "Logos," or "inner self," and closing with four practical (advisory) applications of self-reliance. The essay includes a hieroglyph based on the sun, including a traditional Christian pun, for example, "the genesis and maturation of a planet, its poise and orbit . . . are demonstrations of the self-sufficing poise and orbit . . . and therefore self-relying soul." The sun is associated with the Logos. "The Logos or Word is the sun/Son of God; he is the ever-dynamic divine agent who spoke and continues to speak all things into being." This view of the inner Logos is expanded throughout the course of the essay as, for example, in Emerson's statement: "to believe in your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,—that is genius." By utilizing this Logos image, Emerson creates a rhetorical effect for his audience which places them directly at the center of the essay, by appealing to the heart of his reader. Emerson used "whatever rhetorical device . . . necessary to get the public emphatically involved in [his] affirmation": eloquence, illustration, comparison, symbol, imagery, and especially in "Self-Reliance," hieroglyph.

Emerson expanded this image of the Logos—self-relying soul—in observing that man must be a nonconformist. Through Emerson’s rhetoric—his language—the inner self is spoken to directly. The essay relays Emerson's idea that in every independent act of speech man fulfills his Logos function. "'Speak what you think now in hard words and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again,'" Emerson wrote. "Like the traditional Logos, the self should continue at every present moment to speak truth into
being." Emerson draws comparisons between genius and virtue, and spontaneity and instinct in relation to the Logos-like self in this passage:

The essence of genius [the Logos-like potentiality of genesis], of virtue [that which most fundamentally pertains to man] and of life [being which exists because of genius and virtue]... we call Spontaneity or Instinct... We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition.

The effect of this passage is to make the audience aware of the possibility of genius and virtue in each of us, and the counterparts of spontaneity and instinct. It is an effective comparison because it includes both the unexpected and the inbred traits in man. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson accentuated the point that perception or intuition originates in the Logos-like self. Thus, the circular structure of the essay is demonstrated through the Logos hieroglyph. Emerson alluded to planetary orbit/revolutions as well; expanding his hieroglyph through the American War of Independence imagery. This war signifies an expression which re-creates revolution spoken forth by the Logos-like self of the Americans, revealing a new center of illumination around which other nations develop.

The essay is full of references to the independent and rebellious mind, alluding to Jesus and the American Revolution. By using political language, an appeal is made to both the government and the private citizen on a rational level, for example in this passage: "Let us enter into a state of war, the only right is what is after [our own] constitution." The word "constitution" has been punned to mean the U.S. Constitution as well as the individual’s inner constitution. The effect of this pun is to appeal to the individual’s belief system--to reach the individual on a personal level.

Another effect of Emerson’s use of political language is that it helps set up a tension between his subject and the reader. Emerson manipulated vocabulary to cause a
reaction in his audience, through the pun of the political “constitution” and man’s inner "constitution," which is most important. Emerson is also appealing to the audience on an emotional level. The political terminology and imagery is offset by the author’s insistence that man must be “original” and rise up within himself, signifying an internal revolution. In other words, the region of self is infinite, as are its yet undiscovered riches. Emerson wrote, "[There is] a united light on the advancing actor," casting shadows from other great men. He makes the assertion that "a foolish consistency is the hobglobin of little minds." Like the constitution, consistency, means to stand; Emerson places great significance on standing, but to stand foolishly is an undesirable stance. Emerson asserts that man must stand on his own, by his own actions, firmly, rising above institutions and conformity.

Furthermore, the central hieroglyph of the sun, to which Emerson continues to allude, revolves around the church, the most frequently mentioned institution in "Self-Reliance." The church is personified; its windows become human eyes; its doorway becomes a human mouth. For the church lies within the human self—within this self man. Another type of institution will have a very different effect. For example, “[The walls of these very institutions] will crack, will lean, will rot and vanish and the immortal light, all young and joyful, million-orbed, million-colored will beam over the universe as on the first morning.” This passage draws a contrast between the inner church (institution) of self and the outer institutions which are harmful to the self. Despite the significance of the church, as the primary institution of man, however, Emerson argues that man must see beyond the church’s confining structure as well, in order to "perceive that light, unsystematic, indomitable, will break into any cabin." He is stating here that man must be aware of the strength of institutions and not give into them.

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Emerson continually supported that man maintain his own stability: "In the Will work and acquire, and thou hast chained the wheel of Chance, and shall sit thereafter out of [free of] fear from her rotations." Sitting becomes another Logos image in the essay, whereby man sits fearlessly, while the world rotates. The rhetorical effect of this is that it causes the reader to acknowledge that even while the world may change, he/she can still remain firm in will.

A third primary Logos image presented in the essay is that of kneeling. Along with kneeling, sitting becomes an image of the will, as man's potential active power, "uniting instinct [feet] and consciousness [standing]--hand imagery dramatizing action of the will also abounds in the essay." Emerson illustrates the point of inner power, by stating that the person who realizes his human destiny, "throws himself unhesitatingly on his thought, instantly works miracles." This says to Emerson's reader that to believe in your own thought is to have the ability to do great things.

The revolutionary images of "Self-Reliance" are seemingly limitless. Institutions give way to revolutionary impulses, which lead to new institutions, which lead to other "sunlike forces" or "Sons of God," leading to even greater miracles than before. Emerson argued for the actor, the "ever-creating Logos," and his ever-increasing light in support of self-reliant individualism.

This individualism, this doctrine of Self-Reliance, first originated in Journal IV, page 100. In his journal, Emerson wrote that personal experience, when made a subject of thought and shown in its universal relations, "admonishes us instantly if that hour and object can be so valuable, why not every hour and event in our life, if passed through the same process?" The dicta of Self-Reliance reveals the trivialities of childhood and youth as well as art--the joys and the sorrows--holding conflicting ideas in a delicate balance.
In addition, Emerson attempted to strike a balance between self-trust and duty. "Self-trust has, since the days of the oration, been the scholar's first duty, and it rhetorically serves the function here [in 'Self-Reliance']." Emerson argued that man must trust himself "safely":

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine Providence has found for you; the society of your contemporaries, the conjunction of events. Great men have always done so and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, nor cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort, and advancing on Chaos and the Dark.20

He says to "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron heartstring." This becomes a remembered slogan—echoing a former rhetoric, to which hearts vibrate, but no longer hear. Independence, for Emerson, then, becomes an acceptance of circumstances, society, and fate. The "guides, redeemers, and benefactors," do not speak truth or see it, but merely "obey."21 In saying this, Emerson has presented a problem to the audience, one which is not social or biological, but one which is epistemological, that man's consciousness, a straying from self-trust, will clap him into jail. He puns the word "commitment" in the following passage when he speaks of self-trust:

But the man is, as it were, clapped into jail by his consciousness. As soon as he has once acted or spoken with eclat, he is a committed person, watched by the sympathy or the hatred of hundreds, whose affection must now enter into his account. There is no Lethe for this. Ah, that he could pass again into his neutrality!22

"Commitment" is an eventual condition of personality, just as some imitation is the ultimate result of using common language. Emerson expands his idea of commitment to
include conformity and consistency: "Whoso would a man must be a nonconformist . . . . Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world." His objection to consistency is a logical one, and is similar to his objection of conformity. Consistency is conformity internalized. This concept of consistency is necessary to self-identity in such a way as conformity is not. In short, some consistency is necessary so that the self can be identified as an individual.

The individual's self-reliant nonconformity is compared to virtue's autonomy.

I do not wish to expiate, but to live. My life is for itself and not for a spectacle. . . . I ask primacy evidence that you are a man, and refuse this appeal from the man to his actions. I know for myself it makes no difference whether I do or forbear those actions which are reckoned excellent.

The theory of virtue, is a necessary stage in individualism. Emerson is rationalizing with the reader in this passage. He denounces "spectacle." His statement, "my life is for itself" says that both virtue and the self are autonomous. Emerson's logical appeal is that man not be made into a spectacle by his expiated actions, those actions which are expected of him, but that he may live his life for itself, not how others may wish it to be lived.

The more positive, hopeful tone of the first section of "Self-Reliance" gives way to an abrupt change in tone in the second section, which examines nature and character. Emerson's intended rhetorical effect is, again, one of creating a tension between himself and his audience to cause them to take notice and to react. At this point, Emerson begins to doubt his previous analysis of the self.

I suppose no man can violate his nature. All the sallies of his will are rounded in by the law of his being . . . . Nor does it matter how
you gauge and try him. A character is like an acrostic or Alexandrian stanza: read it forward, backward, or across, it still spells the same thing. Emerson uses the simile of an acrostic to describe man's character, because the character is always itself. He alludes that man cannot change his character/nature, that his "being" is a "law" which cannot be broken. No matter how man tries to "read" or interpret character, it always remains the same from all perspectives or "sides."

As Emerson turns his discussion of character to genuine action, he is less concerned, with self-explanation than with the notion of explanation itself. "Your genuine action will explain itself and will explain your other genuine actions. Your conformity explains nothing," Emerson writes. He circles back to a previous theme of self-trust in asking a series of unanswered questions:

The magnetism which all original action exerts is explained when we inquire the reason of self-trust. Who is the Trustee? What is the aboriginal Self on which a universal reliance may be grounded? What is the nature and power of that science-baffling star, without parallax, without calculable elements, which shoots a ray of beauty even into trivial and impure actions, if the least mark of independence appear?

Here, Emerson's appeal to the emotions of the audience is a strong one. His language works on levels of uncertainty and self-doubt, asking questions many of us have asked before. The tone is initially very negative, but it ends hopefully with the star metaphor as a representation of reliance, suggesting that to break out of universal reliance and to take even the smallest of actions is to achieve an element of independence. From that independence, Emerson moves on to a depersonalization of perception. He finally abandons one of his favored puns: the "I/eye" which has thus far symbolized the self and perception, and he suggests that they are really not the same.
Sometimes I find, that I cannot avoid the having those ideas [of the existence of things] produced in my Mind. . . . If I turn my Eyes at noon towards the Sun, I cannot avoid the Ideas, which the Light, or Sun, then produces in me. . . . And therefore it must needs be some exterior cause, and the brisk acting of some Objects without me, whose efficacy I cannot resist, that produces those Ideas in my Mind, whether I will, or no.30

Emerson's point here is not the annihilation of self, but, rather, to distinguish a separation between "two incompatible levels of discourse." He suggests that perception is not, as is Nature, a road to salvation, instead it is just a part of the problem. The true proof of self, for Emerson, depends on a completely different type of experience—a new form of language itself.31 Although man has fallen, he is not, as Emerson previously believed, "the God" in ruins.

Emerson's rhetoric attacks referentialism, much as it earlier attacked commitment, conformity, and consistency—each preventing the individual's complete reliance upon him/herself:

When private men shall act with original views, the lustre will be transferred from the actions of kings to those of gentlemen . . . . The world has been instructed by its kings, who have so magnetized the eyes of nations. It has been taught by this colossal symbol the mutual reverence that is due from man to man.32

Emerson believed that men are equal, and therefore do not, or should not, express a profound state of awe for each other; he shows his audience that individuals are as equally important as "kings."

This second section of the essay, then, works to clear up the ambiguities of the first section, by drawing the distinction between perception and existence—"to reaffirm the fatality of referentiality for the self while establishing personality apart from perception in purely existential terms."33 For Emerson, it is important that he
acknowledge personality apart from the existential. He says that perception is of the highest importance.

In the third section of "Self-Reliance," Emerson goes beyond his theoretical clarification of perception to consider the consequences of the doctrine of self-reliance and man's existence in the world. Emerson writes: "Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim. This one fact the world hates, that the soul becomes." Self-reliance moves from no longer a dualistic perspective, but to a function of working and existing. He questions: "Why then do we prate of self-reliance? . . . To talk of reliance, is a poor external way of speaking. Speak rather of that which relies, because it works and is." Self-reliance becomes a term merely to define existence—the self-existence of the self. He then circles back to his earlier theme of virtue: "... All things real are so by so much virtue as they contain." He is saying that to the individual things are only as real as the virtue (the truth) that they contain, that by possessing virtue, we are acknowledging truth.

In Emerson's conclusion his tone changes once again in the return to the theme of autonomy, a logical independence from all standards: "If we cannot at once rise to the sanctities of obedience and faith, let us at least resist our temptations; let us enter into the state of war, and wake Thor and Woden, courage and constancy, in our Saxon breasts." From this aggressive perspective, the essay concludes in a final tonal change to one of a more positive outcome with "practical" applications to self-reliance: prayer, self-culture, traveling, and society. Emerson completes "Self-Reliance" by providing the reader with the appearance of hope:

A political victory, a rise of rents, the recovery of your sick, or
the return of your absent friend, or some other favorable event, 
raises your spirits, and you think good days are preparing for you. 
Do not believe it. Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. 
Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles. 

He urges his audience to see beyond momentary "victory," the appearances of goodness, 
and instead to depend upon the one truth--a belief in self.

The rhetorical techniques of "Self-Reliance," including the use of political 
terminology, the creation of tension between speaker and audience, and an emotional 
appeal to the individual, help to bring about an effect upon Emerson’s audience. 
Emerson's continuous return to earlier mentioned themes unifies the concepts presented. 
True to human nature, he constantly questions, changing in tone from negative to hopeful, 
expanding this tension between him and his audience, his tone changing from uncertain to 
firm. He constantly reevaluates his beliefs, accepting new ones, shaping and reshaping 
his thoughts, evoking emotional and logical appeals, and building upon man's self-
reliance, through his choice of rhetorical technique. The discourse presented is both 
troubling and thought-provoking; it speaks truths which are true even today--to which we 
do not listen, but to which, as a skillful rhetorician and writer, Emerson causes us to 
listen. Through that cause, he strengthens his relationship between himself and his 
audience, revitalizing the impact which he has upon them. The power behind the essay 
still remains; its message of the importance of self-reliant individualism is a lasting one.
CHAPTER THREE

STYLISTIC BEGINNINGS

Less than two years after declaring that the chapter on “Self-Reliance” was unfinished, Emerson began making notes in his journal for what would later become “Experience.” In “Experience” Emerson worked out the problem of structure which existed in “Self-Reliance,” and turned to a non sermon-like format, utilizing the rhetorical technique of metaphor, “the Seven Lords of Life.” He finds a new, more flowing, confessional tone in this latest essay, and strikes a more modern chord of understanding with the readers, through his desire to both inform and move his audience by creating tensions within the sections of the essay. While the seven sections of the essay intermix from time to time, and each has a distinctly unique tone, they are still well-defined. Through similarities and overlapping themes, “the Seven Lords of Life” function to form a more unified, clear style than many of Emerson’s previous essays.

Style is so closely linked to Emerson’s thoughts in “Experience” that it is often difficult to distinguish between the two. Clearly, Emerson’s stylistic techniques fall under the categories of what rhetorician Hugh Blair calls “Directions for Forming a Style.” Blair asserts that “the foundation of all good style, is good sense, accompanied by a lively imagination.” Most important in matters of style are to: 1) think closely of the subject until we become interested in it; 2) frequently practice the composing process slowly and carefully; 3) become well acquainted with the style of the best authors; 4)
avoid a “servile” imitation of any author; 5) adapt style to subject and audience; and 6) do not allow an over attention to style detract from an attention to thoughts. Emerson is successful in juggling these directions of style in his present work, without moving away from his initial thoughts about his subject. “Experience,” in effect, takes on a conversational tone and as a result is able to directly impact the audience: one of Emerson’s greatest talents as a persuasive writer.

Emerson often intended a definite, natural pattern in his writing. He considered every idea both from the point of view of God (eternity) and of man (time), the idealist usually dominating and the realist speaking up for the opposition. “In its most complex form, ‘Emerson’s Literary Method’ has been analyzed and illustrated by Walter Blair and Clarence Faust, and based upon Plato and his theory of ‘the twice bisected line.” Plato clearly distinguished between the ideal and the real. For example, in his parable of the cave: “men see only the shadows or appearances of objects, and often mistake the shadows for realities.” Plato, however, distinguished between men’s thinking (opinions) about these shadows of things, and their thoughts about the realities (truths) behind these shadows. Thus, Plato’s theory was that “the invisible, or physical world is divided into shadows and realities; the invisible, or intelligible, world is . . . ‘bisected’ into opinions and truths.” In Emerson’s study of Plato, he acknowledged this theory.” He later adopted Plato’s theory and used it as a part of his own organizing method and style.

Emerson’s essay on “Experience” utilizes a reversal of Plato’s method, considering the “commodity” of “nature” and the “illusions” of human experience first,
then describing the "ideal aspects of Nature and human spirit." The style of writing leaves two conflicting states in the audience's mind, and it is left up to the reader to determine, according to the facts, the balance of truth. Like his method, Emerson's style is highly personal, and informal. His style is an extension of his own theory--"an integral part of the universal theory of the personal essay." Because the prose essay as a literary form has always remained essentially personal, this is the style Emerson used.

Through this personal essay, one of Emerson's aims was to present familiar images to his audience. For example, one such image is that of a highway. A part of his argument in "Experience" deals with this highway image: "Everything good," he twice proclaimed, "is on the highway." This image reflects Emerson's overall theme, that of "steps," or "Lords of Life"--the highway is one more step, one more turn we must take in life to arrive at our destination or future.

A great virtue of Emerson's style, as the above example reveals, is that it is very personal and also "colloquial." Because of his experience, for example, as a preacher and a lecturer, he was able to write with the vitality of the spoken word. His style became an extension of this "word." "Just as his literary method reproduced the dynamic tension of the speaker, so did his style. There are many passages of pure unadulterated rhetoric. And even his most eloquent sentences often follow the patterns of conventional oratory." Preaching, lecturing, rhetoric, oratory, each contributed to the formation of Emerson's style. His style celebrates the natural meaning of single words. For Emerson this meant that his style included two qualities: the intense and the organic. His goal was to use
language which would embody the quality of things. He strived to make his language as powerful and touching to his audience as possible, as we will see in the analysis of “Experience.”

Emerson experimented with different styles and tones of writing in *Journal R*, for what he tentatively titled “Life” (later known as “Experience”), and planned to title the sections of the essay “The Capital Lessons in Life” instead of “The Seven Lords of Life.” The most stylistically synthetic sections are: “illusion” and “temperament,” for their closely drawn materials from nearly all of Emerson’s journals from 1838 to 1844. “Surprise,” “reality,” and “subjectiveness” were drawn from journal materials written the year after his son’s death, in which the tone of the essay takes a recognizable shift. Thus, the tonal changes in “Experience,” and Emerson’s recognition of the impact of his own experiences had a direct impact on the topics within each section, moving through an evolving “reality” as the essay develops from “lord” to “lord,” experience to experience.

Emerson wrote in his journal in 1844:

I have found my ideas very refractory to the usual byelawsofassociation.... But wilt places are alike to me I make great distinction between states of mind. My days are made up of the irregular succession of a very few different tones of feeling... Among these are favorites, and some are to me the Eumenides.

These “states of mind,” “succession,” “tones of feeling,” and “Eumenides” are just a few hints of the voices of the essay in which Emerson constructed a source of help from a self of helplessness. But a historical study of the essay reveals that Emerson’s modification, choice, and organization of journal entries established instead an outline of self-
construction. The voices of “illusion,” “temperament,” and “succession” become like the “Eumenides” for Emerson. The voices which accept “surprise,” “reality,” and “subjectiveness” do not, however, become the goal of Emerson’s style in “Experience,” because “no single voice could look at and say ‘experience’ to Ralph Waldo Emerson.” Only the succession of voices can add up to experience. Emerson appeals to the individual in “Experience,” through varied points of view, and tonal changes—to reflect the changing experiences in life.

A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF “EXPERIENCE”

Perhaps the best unifying elements of “Experience” are the references made to power and form, best described in this passage which works as a kind of blueprint for the essay, which helps to maintain a balance between the excesses of the human self and nature:

Life itself is a mixture of power and form and will not bear the least excess of either . . . . Human life is made up of the two elements . . . and the proportion must be invariably kept. If we would have it sweet and sound. Each of these elements in excess makes a mischief as hurtful as its defect. Emerson uses power and form to influence his audience on an emotional level. Many see power as good, but Emerson, through the course of the essay, expresses that too much power can be dangerous. He asserts that too much form—too much structure—for the human self can also be dangerous. Experience is continuously being contrasted to the
nature of man as well as worldly nature. Both experience and nature are viewed as having physical and metaphysical value. From nature and experience, Emerson finds his subject and language. Through a specially chosen language, the thematic focus of the essay—that balance—becomes evident to the audience. Emerson’s delineation of the extremities of both nature and man includes this function of “power and form.” These elements are associated, like much of those in “Self-Reliance,” with earthly imagery.

In addition, he includes heat imagery to symbolize the force of religion. Fire is associated with man’s feet—the Torrid Zone of the earth—water with the Temperate Zone, and air with the Frigid Zone. These three elements are revealed through the rhetorical images of nature’s motion and flux. “All things swim,” Emerson states in the opening paragraph. The symbolic individual will realize that he is “a swimmer among drowning men.” Most people are unable to initiate “direct strokes,” because he/she does not possess what Emerson calls a “superfluity of spirit.”

Emerson elaborates this point by metaphorically using a ship to represent an individual life in this passage:

Every ship is a romantic object, except that we sail
in . . . . Our life looks trivial . . . . [We are frustrated
by] a tempest of fancies [by an] inevitable sea [which]
washes with silent waves between us and the things we
aim at . . . . [The] only ballast is a respect to the present
hour."

Thus Emerson’s aesthetic form is clearly a philosophical as well as a metaphoric one.

Many of his questions in “Experience,” unlike those in “Self-Reliance” which were often left unanswered, offer reasonable answers to previous problems. “The ambivalence of ‘Experience’ may seem far from the exhortation of ‘Self-Reliance.’ Yet the doctrine of
world and other minds it proposes is the natural counterpart to, even the consequences of, the earlier theory of self. Emerson is successful in achieving a more uniform acceptance of reality. Whereas in “Self-Reliance,” the individual seeks to go beyond institutions, conformity, and consistency, to celebrate (for instance) spontaneity, in “Experience,” the self must come to realize and respect the “ballast” (balance) in life. That balance, he asserts, can only be found in the “present.” Each section of the essay presents a progression of the present to Emerson’s audience.

Therefore, each “lord” is logically presented for two purposes: 1) to explain the illusoriness of nature and 2) as a possible means of controlling the excesses of the previous lord. As each section builds, it is tested by its effect on the individual’s relation to others. The argument and movement of the lords of “temperament,” “succession,” “surface,” and “surprise” ends with the introduction of the more absolute condition of “lord” of “reality,” in which Emerson illustrates that the individual’s experiences are ultimately moved by reality, that the upward movement, and remaining in balance while “stepping,” leads us to a more realistic view of the world. Further, in his argument of “Experience,” Emerson explains the experience of the empirical self as one of moments: not only that we see “what” we animate, but also that we see “when” we animate. The problem of existence, experience within a system, focuses “on the question of experience of experience—the special problem of what it ‘feels like’ to have a mind.” Emerson’s project in this essay is to determine the felt experience of knowledge, “and his proof of the mind’s existence emphasizes not its transcendent necessity but its epistemic
incorrigibility." In terms of Emerson’s audience, this means that man is not only driven by necessity, but that he/she is more often driven by outside influences.

In the first section of “Experience,” “illusion,” Emerson asks the question of why knowledge never works to evaluate our experience. The next two sections, “surface” and “surprise,” attempt to answer his opening question of “less where do we find ourselves than why do we find ourselves as such: what is it about the nature of our existence that makes us experience things in the way we do?” Emerson seeks an attachment to the world in the first section, an attachment which another person would sacrifice so that he may secure an “invulnerable essence.” A part of being vulnerable, Emerson asserts is that man sees through “many-colored lenses,” noted in this passage:

> each [lense] show only what lies in its focus . . .  
> Nature and books belong to the eyes that see them. It depends on the mood of the man  
> Whether he will see the sunset or the fine poem.  
> There are always sunsets, and there is always genius; but only a few hours so serene that we can relish nature or criticism. The more or less depends on structure or temperament.

Emerson’s quotation effectively establishes the eye metaphor as a focus and the colored-lenses as man’s means of seeing the world differently. But it is up to man whether he/she sees life as structure, and his/her perceptions and feelings about life—nature, books, etc.—will change as a result of temperament.

The second section of the essay, “Temperament,” which presents a rhetorical image of a music box represents for Emerson and his audience, compulsion--what Emerson says, “seems impulse . . . turns out to be a certain uniform tune which the
revolving barrel . . . must play.” But it is not until “subjectiveness,” however, that Emerson “gracefully leads the essay to a ‘balanced voice’ the ‘threads on the loom of time . . . the lords of life’ . . . . With its echoes of both the beginning of the essay and its end, the essay indicates Emerson’s realization that the moods of ‘Illusion,’ ‘Temperament,’ and the rest are not sequential lessons to be learned and overcome but are ‘lords’ to be named, acknowledged, and accepted.” The effect of this, for Emerson’s audience, is that we realize that not everything can be overcome or must be overcome; some things need to be accepted before we can move on.

“Experience,” suggests how Emerson has created his own sense of self from one of helplessness, after his son’s death (though Waldo’s death is denied in ‘illusions’), to one of acceptance and a source of help in subsequent sections of the essay. The “temperament” section, focuses on the failure of analogy: this “Temperament is a power,” Emerson writes, “which no man willingly hears any one praise but himself.” Emerson’s analogy technique challenges privacy and the notion of the will which supports it. Much later in the essay, he returns to analogy, as he presents how someone might believe in other minds without “analogically” doubting his own. For example, in “subjectiveness,” he asserts:

Use what language we will, we can never see anything but what we are; Hermes, Cadmus, Columbus, Newton, Bonaparte, are the mind’s ministers. Instead of feeling poverty when we encounter a great man, let us treat the new-comer like a traveling geologist, who passes through our estate, and shows us good slate, or limestone, or anthracite, in our brush pasture. The partial
action of each strong mind in one direction, is a telescope for the objects on which it is pointed. Other minds are “ministers,” or foundations to the individual’s mind. Like a “geologist” those minds come into our lives and help to shape the surface of our experiences, in many different forms. But while we are affected partially, by others, and we may use their language, we still cannot deny who we are. Who we are, Emerson asserts, remains a constant reality.

In section three, “succession,” Emerson stresses the importance of variation. “Our love of the real,” Emerson says, “draws us to permanence, but health of body consists in circulation, and sanity of mind in variety or facility of association. We need change of objects. Dedication to one thought is quickly odious.” He cautions against stagnation—limitation—stressing that through change, through a connection between thoughts, feelings, and ideas, and even the minds of others, we can grow. In isolation, Emerson’s study of Montaigne, Shakespeare, Putarch, Plotinus, Bacon, Goethe, and Bettine would not be enough. He seeks to go beyond one mind, one genius to another, considering collective thoughts—changing points of view—much as he does in the present essay.

Thought, limited to one belief, Emerson says, limits us—change brings knowledge. A succession of objects, thoughts, experiences, leads to a more rounded self-identity. He compares man to a labrador spar, in this passage, “which has no lustre as you turn it in your hand, until you come to a particular angle; then it shows deep and beautiful colors . . . . Each has his special talent.” Taken as a whole, we may miss special talents in man, but when looked carefully upon as an individual, uniqueness will
Following "succession," "surface," recognizes that in life there are many exteriors to reality. Emerson uses his rhetorical device of analogy again here: "I compared notes with one of my friends who expects everything of the universe, and is disappointed when anything is less than the best, and I found that I begin at the other extreme, expecting nothing and am always full of thanks for moderate goods." He asserts that many of us are not satisfied, and look to surface things (material or exterior things) for pleasure. He describes life as "a bubble and a skepticism." We seek our own private dreams, whether cloaked in non reality or not, often skeptical of others, and that it is power and form in life which will bring sweetness or soundness to us. But, he cautions, even power and form in excess can be a danger.

The true power and reality for Emerson resides in the Eternal and in evolution:

I have set my heart on honesty in this chapter, and I can see nothing at last, in success or failure, than more or less of vital force supplied from the Eternal . . . . The miracle of life which will not be expounded [from the Eternal], but will remain a miracle, introduces a new element. In the growth of the embryo, Sir Edward, I think, noticed that the evolution was not from one central point, but coactive from three or more points.

The "three or more points" of evolution can also be related to the evolution of experience from one aspect, "Lord of Life," to the next, constantly expanding and reshaping.

"Surprise" expands this image of evolution to include a new picture:

No man ever came to an experience which was satiating, but his good is tidings of a better. Onward and onward! In liberated moments, we know that a new picture of life
and duty is already possible; the elements already exist in many minds around you, of a doctrine of life which shall transcend any written record we have. 

Emerson believed that man can take an experience and improve it through his goodness. There are always more “pictures” and possibilities ahead. Emerson tells his audience that we can formulate a new “doctrine of life” better than the one which already exists. Through this doctrine, a “new statement” will help us to go beyond “unbeliefs” to a “new philosophy” which makes affirmations outside of limitation, while maintaining “the oldest beliefs” in life.

In the “reality” section of the essay, Emerson asserts to his reader, “Any invasion of its “life’s” unity would be chaos.” The “subjectiveness” section turns this chaos to despair. Subjectiveness examines two forms of skepticism: idealism and noble doubt. To examine our experiences is to assume a “unitary consciousness--between spirit and experience, Emerson asserts. To examine our experiences is also to assume a unitary consciousness underwriting that experience; and the same philosophical move that proves we necessarily exist forces us to look behind the existence, even behind that experiencing “we,” to the self-validating “I” of subjectiveness. The self-validating individual can look “directly and forthright,” Emerson asserted. If we are not able to do so, we will be swayed by frivolities—the needs and wants of other people—and not see our own needs. Attention to what we wish to see or experience will help us to avoid these frivolities of others. In effect, these last two sections of “Experience” move Emerson’s audience to a realistic level, beyond material, to the true nature of experience.

In short, it is the succession of voices present in each section of the essay which
calls up the meaning of experience for Emerson and his audience (it was intended), for
whom no single voice will justify the intricacies of experience. From his journals he
learned that we must speak to the limits of what we can say: "Up again, old heart!"
"Experience" examines and accepts a world in which:

[A] dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to
illusion . . . . Life is a train of moods like a string of
beads, and as we pass through them, they prove to be
many-colored lenses which paint the world their own
hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus . . . .
The secret of the illusoriness is in the necessity of a
succession of moods and objects . . . . We live amid
surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on
them.\(^9\)

The passage is a summary of Emerson’s intent in the essay. It says to the reader that life
is a combination of many things, seen through different lenses—varying views—as our
experiences in life change. For Emerson a succession of voices was very important. If he
were to accept no single vision, no single set of facts, he would propose an entirely new
order of fact. For example, Emerson writes: "it is not what we believe concerning the
immortality of the soul or the like, but the universal impulse to believe [his emphasis],
that is the material circumstance and is the principle fact in the history of the globe."\(^1\)

Emerson is referring to the acceptance of subjectivity as the “fall of man.” The often
repeated metaphor, colored lenses, represents man and his view of the world, revealing
that we cannot correct the “distortions” which we see.

To expand this image of lenses, Emerson writes: “[The world which gives us
authority also sentences us to] relative truth . . . . People forget that it is the eye which
makes the horizon." By the end of the essay, Emerson accepts subjectivity and uncertainty. This acceptance leads him to a revelation:

I know that the world I converse with in the city and in the farm is not the world I think. . . . The true romance, which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power. . . . To finish the moment, to find the journey's end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom.

In this passage, Emerson unites his images of truth, power, steps, the highway, and wisdom to make one final point: how we choose to spend our lives—if we spend most of our hours in goodness—leads us to wisdom. "Experience" is about the impossibilities, miscarriages, and mortgages of power [in life]. For Emerson that "practical power" is the self's ability to take ideas and bring them to form.

The "Lords of Life," then, are steps toward a usable self, contributions toward the artfully constructed voice which closes the essay. "At the beginning as at the end, there is a paradox: while spiritual illumination is not available to people in exhilarating and reassuring moments of vision, the fact is not of very much help to us most of the time. The 'seven lords of life' are tonal variations of the theme: they are seven ways of looking at a self." The self's ability "to finish the moment, to find the journey's end in every step of the road" leads the reader back to the beginning of the essay, indicating that life's progress is circular. While each step seems to lead to another, at times we fall back to a lower step along the journey. Through the course of the essay it is illustrated that we must constantly try to balance ourselves, while ascending to the next step. But, unlike
“Self-Reliance,” in which mankind rebels against conformity in striving to obtain his own self-reliance, in “Experience,” the individual comes to the realization that the different aspects of life’s experience are to be recognized, named, and accepted.

Beginning with the powerful image of the stairs upon which we sit--stairs beneath us which we have overcome, stairs above us extending into infinity--”Experience” moves to and through the many aspects in our lives--all necessary steps to developing the self-identity. “Experience” works to blend one stair into the other, not uniformly, but leading us (Emerson’s audience) upwards, towards reality. And that which leads us on is the element of “power”--power in nature, power in God, power within, power in knowledge, power in thought.
CHAPTER FOUR
INFLUENCE ON STUDENTS AND WRITERS:
WHY TEACH THE WRITINGS OF EMERSON?

As we saw in the analysis of Emerson’s essays, his attention to audience
determined the rhetorical devices and language used. His unlimited treatment of the
timely issues we, as individuals and as a society, are still facing is one reason to study
Emerson’s writings. But what were Emerson’s theories on writing, and what was his
direct influence on his contemporaries and students? Why has his writing endured? How
might we, as teachers today, implement Emerson’s poems or essays into our lessons, so
that our students might gain insight or encouragement from their creative fabric? These
were just some of the questions I had when I began this study. I became increasingly
more interested in having these questions answered as my work progressed. What
impressed me the most about Emerson’s writing was that he wrote for “everyone.” His
subjects are ones to which we can all relate. His language is understandable and
extremely visual. This project, in effect, became a highly visual one as well as a great
learning journey.

More and more, along my journey, I was led back to Emerson’s relationship with
his audience. Emerson set audience as his first priority. In his journals of the 1830s,
especially, his most obsessive topic was that of a genuine concern with language—how
eloquence and oratory could move his listeners, and all individuals to agree. His goal
through eloquence was to embrace the problem of truth. This was a difficult task.

Emerson believed that we are connected to the world not through the objects seen, but through “the instructed eye [again a popular image in his writing].” For this reason, he used the eye as a symbol of inquiry, knowledge, and wisdom. “To the instructed eye the universe is transparent,” he wrote in his journal of 1833. The eye was always more than a metaphor.”¹ The eye became, for Emerson, the window to the soul, capable of both perceiving and revealing.

In order to stay organized and focused, Emerson indexed his journal ideas. This method gave him ready "access to the enormous mass of specific materials in his ever-increasing pile of notebooks. . . . (His) journals show that for years he fished along the edges of consciousness, eager to note down the smallest fresh suggestion or hint of suggestion." Emerson said about the process of composition, "In writing . . . the casting moment is of greatest importance . . ."² Many critics of today have "cited Emerson as authority in affirming that expression has little value unless it is suffused by the light of a strong idea." From that idea arises Emerson's concept of language, "the stuff and substance of literature. For Emerson language has the vitality of plants, animals, and men, and is conceived in all its complexity as a gradual growth. . . . As soon as man recovers (the) lost harmony with natural things, he will easily attain vivid expression."³ Above all, Emerson's theory of expression is an aesthetic one. Emerson incorporated real-life situations into his essay themes and theories. For us, as our society becomes increasingly more depersonalized, materialistic, and often amoral, it appears that we are
in need of Emerson's insightful theories even more today than were his contemporaries of the nineteenth century.

Emerson's stature as an artist and a thinker grew significantly following the publication of *Nature* in 1836. He remained the principal spokesman for Transcendentalism, which "helped breathe life into American thought in the late Jacksonian period; modern scholars seeking the meaning and import of this key intellectual movement must turn to Emerson's writings." It was Emerson's optimism and his faith in mankind and its future which formed a "current in our cultural legacy." He addressed issues and problems which are central to American culture, still significant to today.

Over the last thirty years, critics have begun to formulate a better understanding of Emerson's writing development of his approaches to texts and their meanings. Emerson was courageous enough to address the infringement of the rights of the individual, and his distress over the frightening power of institutions. Consequently, Emerson's vision was not limited to good times; in his lifetime, he witnessed hard times and disillusionment. As a result, his writing has the kind of authenticity and value that will endure to touch humankind for many years to come.

A very large part of Emerson's influence, whether intended or not, has reached us in the form of his teachings. He lectured and wrote, not for students in college classrooms, but "to a whole generation of general listeners and readers... inspiring and provoking an ever-widening audience as his reputation steadily grew." Emerson's
influence touched writers, Henry Thoreau, whom he encouraged to start a journal in Concord 1837, and Walt Whitman, at the time a Brooklyn newspaper editor, who said, "I was simmering, simmering, simmering... Emerson brought me to boil." Robert Frost named Emerson as one of the four greatest Americans, after George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln. For Frost, Emerson influenced audiences in such a way as to change insights within the inner self. Frost based much of his own poetics on an Emersonian style. However, his works did not only influence literary minds, but others as well who found that, in many respects, his works were diaries of their own lives which had never been written.

Young people of Emerson's time understood and enjoyed him, not so much for his messages, but for the spirit behind the man. Writer Lowell said, "We do not go to hear what Emerson says so much as to hear Emerson." Oliver Wendell Holmes said that Emerson's delivery was a simple one, as though he was "picking his way through his vocabulary, to get at the best expression of his thought.... Like all teachers, especially those who teach other teachers, Emerson... reached his students even at second or third hand. 'A teacher effects eternity,' said Henry James; '(A teacher) can never tell where his (/her) influence stops.'

"[Emerson believed that every human being stands] in need of expression, (students and teachers included): In love, in art, in avarice, in politics, in labor, in games, we study to utter our painful secret." For him there were two kinds of teachers: those who "speak from within," and therefore teach with firsthand knowledge and authority; and those who speak only "from without, as spectators merely," on the basis of second hand evidence...."
Emerson protested against dead knowledge. "That which we are, we shall teach," he wrote, "not voluntarily but involuntarily. Character teaches over our head. He (/she) teaches who gives, and he (/she) learns who receives."

It is this need to express ourselves and to make our message known and heard which helps us to appreciate Emerson's theories as a writer, a teacher, and experiencer of life. We can understand his belief that in order to teach, we must give something of ourselves: our own experience, techniques as writers, vulnerabilities as humans, understanding as compassionate beings of nature; and that in order to learn, we must also be willing to receive and accept the knowledge and the experience of others. For Emerson this began with his audience. He believed that in order to confirm the identity, which he attempted to do in "Self-Reliance," meant that we all live in the presence of an audience. He believed that this contributed to character development. Again, the main purpose in Emerson's writing was to move his audience, to find a rhetoric which would cause people to listen, and to both persuade and to have an impact on their lives at the same time.

Moreover, the novelties Emerson taught as a writer and a lecturer, whatever his subject, were: "independence, self-reliance, self-knowledge, self-expression, and self-fulfillment." The lessons have been heard and repeated by many since then, and are especially relevant today in a society where insecurity and a lack of self-confidence can destroy a good idea. Because American self-perception is still being shaped by the works of Emerson, like the lives and works of Jefferson and Lincoln, biographies of Emerson continue to appear. He never wrote for groups. His audience was always the
individual. Emerson addressed some very distinct opinions about teaching at an inaugural lecture at the Boston Society of Natural History: "Teaching is the perpetual end and office of all things. Teaching, instruction is the main design that shines through the sky and earth. . . . The end of being is to know; and if you say, the end of knowledge is action, why, yes, but the end of that action again, is knowledge." He saw self-knowledge and self-cultivation as, not a means to something, but as the ends and goals of life.

There are two main rules which Emerson held for his own writing and offers to other writers, and these are to, first, "Sit alone" and second, keep a journal "for the habit of rendering account to yourself in some more rigorous manner and at more certain intervals than mere conversation." Because Emerson's own ideas for writing often began in his journals, he became an important role model as a journal keeper to others.

An intricate blend of forces have helped Emerson's writing to remain vital and influential throughout the years: journal keeping, enjoying nature, life experiences, religious insight, the deaths of his wife and young son, lecturing, the writing of poetry and essays, or the encouragement he offered students, contemporaries, or friends. The combination of these influences has shaped Emerson's writing into what we know it to be today: a valuable source of thought, theory, experience, and spirit. For these reasons, I embarked upon this thesis project. I like that Emerson draws his audience into his confidence; his relationship with his audience becomes one of constant revelation on both ends. As he refines his images and hieroglyphs for his reader, and adjusts his tone to meet the circumstances of timely issues in our lives, he constantly impacts and influences
His essays are a constant movement from one experience to the next, providing insight in every step. Although, at times abstract, nevertheless his rhetoric is fresh and lively, and worthy of study by both students and writers.

IMPLEMENTATION OF "SELF-RELIANCE" IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

After careful analysis of "Self-Reliance," I became interested in pursuing a study of the essay in the classroom, and began considering different ways in which the essay might be interpreted and treated. Keeping in mind the importance of the various underlying themes of the essay, the enhancement of the individual's own self-growth and self-reliance needs to be a primary objective in close consideration with learning skills development. Determining the needs of your audience and who your students are, where they are at this point in their lives, will make this a very valuable lesson. For the study of Emerson, a level of English 101 or English 1A may most likely be a good place to begin. The recommended text is Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson by William H. Gilman, New York: New American Library, 1965/1983.

After your students have completed their pre-assigned reading of the essay:

Day 1

Objective: to engage students in critical thinking with the goal of developing student writing, through personal insight, growth, and self-reliant individualism.
Learning Skills: interpretation, group discussion, evaluation, analysis, deductive reasoning, journaling, essay writing.

I. Class Discussion - Student Orientated.

A. **Interpret** the Following Quotation:

"Man is his own star; and the soul that can

Render an honest and a perfect man,

Commands all light, all influence, all fate;

Nothing to him falls early or too late.

Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,

Our fatal shadows that walk by us still" (257).

Possible questions:

1. In what way/s can/cannot this quote apply to you?
2. Do you agree or disagree, why/why not?
3. How might someone be considered perfect, when we live in an "imperfect" society?
4. What does the author mean by "fatal shadows that walk by us still"?

B. **Evaluate** "Self-Reliance" Part 1: Logos - "Inner Self"

(i.e. thought, trust, perception, conformity vs. consistency).

For the sake of time, perhaps explore two areas.

1. **Thought**

   Emerson stresses the importance of individual
thought in saying:
"Familiar as the voice of mind is to each, the highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato, and Milton is, that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men but what they thought" (258).

a. What does this mean to you as an individual?
b. What power might be found in thought?
c. Why do we so often dismiss our thoughts as unimportant?

2. **Self-Trust**

To Emerson, self-trust was the essence of self-reliance. Without it we fall victim to limitation, failure, and vulnerability.

a. What does Emerson mean when he says that "Man is clapped into jail by his consciousness"? (259).
b. How might self-trust help us as students?
c. How might self-trust help us in society?

C. **Analyze** "Self-Reliance" Part 2: Self-Nature

(i.e. character, action, self-trust, perception, existence).

1. **Nature**

In section 2 of Emerson's essay, the tone changes
dramatically. Look for shifts in language which suggest the change in tone.

a. When Emerson says, "I suppose no man can violate his nature" (264), what does this mean?
b. In what ways do we "violate" our nature?
c. Can this violation be seen as positive or only negative?

2. **Action**

Emerson makes a distinction in this section between the "genuine" and the "conforming" action.

a. Explain this distinction?
b. How might the two types of actions mix?
c. If we are constantly conforming, what happens to our self-trust?

D. **Reason** "Self-Reliance" Part 3: Reliance

(i.e. working, existing, Supreme Cause, autonomy).

Emerson defines self-reliance as self-existence in this section of his essay. He stresses the rejection of external standards, virtually all standards. For Emerson, the law of consciousness remains--earlier described as "a jailor" and as something which inhibits self-reliance.

a. What point does Emerson make here about autonomy?
b. What has been stripped away from the character at this point?
c. Why does Emerson bring "temptation" (271) into his discussion?

**Days 2-5**

II. Out of Class Assignment - **Journaling**

Begin a "Self-Reliance' Journal" in which you explore Emerson's four applications of self-reliance (273-277). Each day free write about one of the applications in any style of writing you prefer, focusing on your life, noting your perceptions and observations immediately as they come to you. Length can be from 1-2 pages on each of the following: prayer (/or meditation), self-culture, traveling, and society, in relation to your own self-growth and reliance.

**Day 6**

III. In Class Writing - "**Self-Reliance**" and the Individual / "**Self-Reliance**" and Society.

Choose one of the following and write a detailed narrative essay of 3-5 pages; journals may be used as sources of ideas or inspiration:

**Prompt A:**

"I never realized how important my own self-reliance and independence were until the day that I... This experience helped me to... My life has changed in these ways since then..." The experience should be a significant one which had an impact on you and caused you to think about the best course of action to take.
Before beginning, you might ask yourself: what does self-reliance mean to me? In what ways have I been reliant in my life? In what ways have I not been reliant? How has self-reliance influenced my life?

Prompt B:
Describe an experience in which you did something which profoundly affected another individual in a positive way. It should be something which helped that individual, changed them and you in some way, and provided a new opportunity/opportunities for one or both of you. Consider these questions before writing: were there hardships which you faced in helping this individual? Was this an intended action of yours or unintended? Did the individual resist your help in any way? How did this experience influence you or your perceptions of another individual?

Conclusion to the lesson: Through the application of Emerson’s essay, “Self-Reliance,” students may better understand how language influences a person’s actions and how he/she perceives the world. The student may also begin to think more critically about his/her place in the world. Through the consideration of new points of view, gaps in thought and knowledge will be better bridged. The student will have questions. What value will Emerson’s writing have for me? How may I apply his writing to my life? Once again, the point of audience emerges. How the student will be influenced or moved by the works of Emerson is a valuable consideration.
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

From Emerson’s individualistic expression, beginning in his journals, a rich tapestry of voices and experiences emerged. These voices and experiences helped to make his essays come alive to readers. No single voice could accurately capture the many thoughts Emerson incorporated into his writings. It was, instead, the collective voices which brought power and authenticity to his subjects. Through his journals, he learned to speak to the heights of what we, as individuals, can say to our audience. The huge role that the audience played in Emerson’s work was to him “the highest bribes of society . . . the feet of the successful orator . . . He has his audience at his devotion.” When preparing notes for what would become “Experience” in 1844, he wrote in his journal: “Up again, old heart!”

In many ways, this one line sums up the meaning behind much of his life’s work. It typifies the expansion of his ideas, his resolute optimism, and a devotion to ideals and goals. But even more so, the line calls up the spirit of determination in all of us so that we may succeed in life. Along with the succession of voices, tones, and experiences, this moving forward—upwards in time—is critical to our own self growth. Emerson provided his audience with an experience of continuous revelation. He based every aspect of his rhetoric on this goal of revelation. Through language, as a means of influencing his audience and moving them to action, Emerson became a successful persuasive writer.

A master of metaphor and style, capable of developing an intimate dialogue between himself and his readers beyond the constraints of time, his ideas evolve as
situations in life change. Emerson's timely themes are worthy of further thought and study, so that we may gain some valuable insight into our own character. Perhaps these self-reliant lessons and steps of experience, emerging from Emerson's mind, may very well be aspects present in each of us to be analyzed and accepted.
ENDNOTES

PREFACE


CHAPTER ONE


6. Donadio et. al., 65.


10. Gilman, xi.
12. Duncan, 58.
13. Richardson, xi, 4.
15. Sutcliffe, 12, 14.
16. Duncan, 57.
17. Gilman, 269.

CHAPTER TWO


2. Cooper, 8, 11.


6. Donadio, et. al., 54.

7. Gilman, xiii.

8. Scheick, 89.

9. Scheick, 90.

10. Scheick, 91.

11. Scheick, 93-94.


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13. Scheick, 95.
15. Scheick, 97.
17. Sutcliffe, 67-68.
22. Gilman, 259.
27. Van Leer, 134-135.
29. Van Leer, 133.
30. Van Leer, 134.
32. Gilman, 266.
33. Van Leer, 137.
34. Van Leer, 137.
36. Van Leer, 139.
37. Gilman, 280.

CHAPTER THREE

1. Golden, 84-86.


3. Carpenter, 78.

4. Carpenter, 78.


6. Myerson, 121.

7. Sutcliffe, 58.

8. Myerson, 121.

9. Scheick, 60.

10. Scheick, 61.


12. Van Leer, 175.


14. Myerson, 120.

15. Myerson, 120.

18. Myerson, 120.
19. Myerson, 120.
22. Gilman, 332.
27. Gilman, 344.
28. Van Leer, 182.
29. Myerson, 121.
30. Richardson, 402.
31. Richardson, 402.
32. Richardson, 402.
33. Richardson, 402.
34. Richardson, 403.
35. Scheick, 65.

CHAPTER FOUR

1. Richardson, 155.
2. Richardson, 201-202.


6. Myerson, 186.

7. Myerson, 190.

8. Myerson, 190.

9. Richardson, xi, 153.

10. Richardson, 200.

11. Donadio, et. al., 64.

12. Myerson, 121.
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