

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) From *The American Scholar*, *The Poet*, and *History*

On the surface, Emerson was the least revolutionary of men. One of eight children of a Unitarian minister, who died when Emerson was still a boy, he was raised by his mother and his father's sister, went to Harvard, and became a Unitarian minister, too. In September, 1832, however, he announced to his congregation that he could no longer in good conscience serve communion, or the "Lord's Supper." He had decided that it was a form which Christ did not intend should be continued for century after century, and resigning from his post, left in December for Europe.

Such "independent judgment," as Alexis de Tocqueville might have called it, was highly characteristic of Emerson and can be seen in most of his early writing. He was impatient with tradition, formalism, and orthodoxy; and he sought inspiration and individual freedom. The "duties" of the American scholar, he told the students at Harvard in 1837, consciously turning the words of John Calvin and his own Puritan ancestor's downside up "may all be comprised in self-trust."

A faith in "self-trust" and "self-reliance," as he later called it made Emerson a predestined journal-keeper. The first edition of his own Journal, published 1909-14, filled ten volumes, and the modern, scholarly edition fills over twice as many. Equally important, from the perspective of American autobiography, was his role as a sort of propagandist for all kinds of personal writing. It was he who urged Thoreau to keep a journal, which he started in 1837 and kept till 1861 (1st ed. 1906, 14 volumes). And Emerson's enthusiastic endorsements of transcendental individualism and autobiographical poetry (see below) helped inspire the young Walt Whitman.

The paradox of Emersonian individualism is that he and his fellow Transcendentalists expected the fully developed individual to be universal. The individual would become a part and an expression of a transcendent mind or soul or spirit that ran through all individuals, present and past. "There is one mind common to all individual men," he said in "History." How one can be one's self and also be like all others is a problem. Nevertheless, the underlying self-confidence and optimism are very clear.

There are many biographies of Emerson. For a searching discussion of Emerson and other Transcendentalists' relation to the autobiographical tradition, see Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1973).

Reading

Essays and Poems Online
<http://www.emersoncentral.com/texts.htm>