

# “He had *his* poor”: Emerson’s Self-Reliance and the Question of Charity

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## Abstract

*Ralph Waldo Emerson’s often anthologized essay “Self-Reliance” has been presented as a clear example of Emerson’s endorsement of the wider nineteenth-century’s laissez faire ideology. This is, however, an ultimately inaccurate characterization and a consequence of various kinds of misreading. This paper examines these misreadings and attempts to place “Self-Reliance” in its intellectual, chronological, and textual context. It is one essay in a carefully ordered presentation that is published as an embedded and local work. The essay’s tangential critique of “miscellaneous charities” is a communitarian and local critique of the burgeoning institutionalization and especially internationalization of American benevolence. When read in context, “Self-Reliance” demonstrates that Emerson’s poor are immediate, proximate, and fraternal, those to whom the whim of the moment can mandate a local response.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson's son Edward published *Emerson in Concord* in 1889, presenting the book as the kind of intimate portrait of Emerson only a son could write—Edward purports to show the private Emerson in the context of his social circle. Emerson had decided not to make Edward the executor of his literary estate, and had instead chosen James Elliot Cabot to write his official biography, one that presented Emerson the national figure and focused on his public life and work. Edward's biography, published two years after Cabot's, poses as a humbler compliment to Cabot's longer work and depicts Emerson "the citizen and villager and householder, the friend and neighbor" (Emerson 1). The pose is significantly embedded in the functions and scenes of a particular place, and Edward sees himself as "writing for the chronicle of his village club the story of my father" (1). Edward's book depicts a localized context outside of which Emerson's work is easily and, it seems, consistently misread.

Perhaps appropriately, the village of Concord plays, in Edward's book, the pivotal role in Emerson's life. In Robert Habich's recent reading, "not until his father settled in Concord did he experience the therapeutic joys of 'householding,' the love of gardening, and the sustaining interest in his town's affairs that stabilized his life and set him on his true path" (114). An Emerson undistinguished in work, frail in health, and mourning the death of his first wife finds, in Concord, solace and a community in which he can participate. Habich's examination of the tenuous nature of biography in general looks especially at the six biographies of Emerson published in the late nineteenth-century. While these tensions, motivations, and misrepresentations need to be kept in clear view, Edward's localized depiction provides a necessary counterpoint to the disembodied and ideological tenor that has overrun both the popular and the scholarly imagination and is, I think, nowhere more visible than in the misreading of Emerson's infamous "Are they my poor?" tangent in his most anthologized essay "Self-Reliance." While often read as a rhetorically abrasive denial of any obligation toward the poor, a contextualized reading allows for a more sympathetic, more generous, and ultimately more accurate assessment.

There is a surprising and seemingly ubiquitous naïveté when it comes to the particular reception and interpretation of themes in Emerson's individual works. Habich's discussion of the earliest biographies suggests this has always been the

case. No biography presents a complete picture: Cabot's "official" biography highlights the public life, while Edward's navigates the private. In the same way, Emersonian scholarship in the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first has focused on particular themes and works to the occlusion of others. Concomitantly, interest in an additional or novel concern—Abolitionism, race, political action, radical individualism, Jacksonian democracy—creates an additional Emerson. What feels an irreconcilable and inevitable confusion is attributable to two identifiable tendencies. The first tendency attempts to identify the sum of Emerson's thought on a particular issue, and so jettisons issues of chronology and textuality. The second reads Emerson as an exemplary representative of his wider milieu.

Laurence Buell's more recent (2003) biography of Emerson presents him as a public intellectual and is perhaps the most notable example of the tendency to exclude issues of textuality. While Buell helpfully corrects oversimplifications of both Emerson's ideology and Emerson's biography, and draws together the seemingly illimitable strands of Emersonian scholarship to date, he consistently occludes significant contextual details. To take one example, Buell presents Emerson's lecture "The American Scholar," as "Emerson's first concerted attempt to express this ambivalence [toward the relationship between belief and action] publicly" (243-4). Buell's presentation privileges the presently canonical essay "The American Scholar," over the contextually significant essays that chronologically preceded it. Emerson's 1837 Phi Beta Kappa address, "The American Scholar," draws extensively on the various public lectures and sermons that serve as its basis. After discussing "The American Scholar," Buell continues by suggesting that the ambivalent sentiments expressed in the later essay "Self-Reliance" are equally indicative of Emerson's initial thoughts regarding public action (245). Buell uses these two well-known essays to illustrate the public development of Emerson's thought. But this kind of discussion unhelpfully elides the local and private trends of Emerson's intellectual development. The pattern, moreover, remains a typical consequence of topically arranged or ideology-centered representations.

The second and most common tendency is to read Emerson as definitively representative of the era's wider thought. Such representations appear in the work of Robert Milder, William Charvat, Clemens Spahr, and Susan Ryan, who each

in their own way present an Emerson participating noticeably in the stereotypical trends of his time. Charvat, in an often-overlooked essay interrogating the relationship between the New England Romanticism of the 1830s and 40s and the 1837 financial crisis, sees Emerson's thought as participating in the financially insulated elitism of New England. Charvat describes the essay "Self-Reliance" as "a protest against the tyranny of public opinion in a society in which numbers were beginning to be more powerful than the prestige which Emerson's class had always enjoyed" (66). Taking an opposite position, Milder investigates what he calls "Emerson's radical period," between the financial crisis so pivotal in Charvat's reading and Emerson's 1842 "endorsement of what can only be called free enterprise ideology" (51). The discrepancies between Charvat's indictment and Milder's defense further illustrate the prevalent elision: Emerson's private and Emerson's public self.

In a recent article on Orestes Brownson, Clemens Spahr builds on Milder's portrayal. Spahr attempts to demonstrate a causal progression from Transcendentalism to social action, and uses, among others, Emerson's essays on "Art" (1841) and "Nature" (1844). Spahr shows how what is often seen as Brownson's break with Transcendentalist thought arises instead inevitably out of Transcendentalism's implicit but substantive ethical thrust. Spahr argues that scholars, since Matthiessen (32), have ignored the "social thought" of Emerson. Spahr's argument is a helpful corrective, but seems also to rely on broader generalizations of Emerson as primarily representative of wider movements of his day. Using Emerson instrumentally as a representative—whether indicative of the elitism or the radicalism of New England Romantics—usually results from a larger necessity, a wider argument helped along if Emerson can perform the role of representative foil. Susan Ryan's work and its influence most clearly illustrates the consequence of such instrumental inaccuracies.

Ryan examines the discourse of charity in the antebellum period, and her argument builds on the dissertation of Cassandra Cleghorn. Cleghorn contends that there is a lively, operative discourse surrounding charitable giving in the periodical literature of antebellum America. This literature revolves around the issues of duplicity—whether of the philanthropist or the recipient (140)—and spectacle (157). Any invocation or discussion of philanthropy, according to Cleghorn, draws from, alludes to, and participates in this larger discourse. Cleghorn mentions Em-

erson in her discussion of the duplicitous recipient, stating "nothing could serve a proponent of self-reliance more efficiently than an imagined charity gone bad" (152). In Cleghorn's argument, the demonstrable duplicity of the unknown beggar encourages Emerson's refusal to be charitable. Ryan, taking up Cleghorn's argument, makes this suggestion more explicit. She attributes Emerson's opposition as part of "the era's pervasive suspicion of direct charitable aid" (79) and connects the period's "ethos of suspicion" (58) directly to Emerson's infamous tangent. "Emersonian self-reliance," writes Ryan, ". . . is one of many antebellum attempts to represent and evaluate dependence and its opposites" (78). Ryan attempts to ameliorate Emerson's explicit rejection of direct charitable aid by commenting, "though his phrasing is extreme, Emerson is expressing widely held views" (79). These views involve the refusal to give charitably on account of the potential giver's assumption of the beggar's duplicity. Ryan and Cleghorn are right to contextualize Emerson's seeming ambivalence, and they lay the groundwork to read Emerson accurately, but ultimately fail to do so. Instead, Ryan uses Emerson's "Self-Reliance" to create an adequate context for what she sees as Melville and Douglass's critiques of Emersonian "selfishness."

While Ryan's use of Emerson as a foil for the more subversive figures of Melville and Douglass is understandable and effective, her book's reception illustrates the way that such use perpetuates misreadings of Emersonian thought. Lawrence Goodheart, in a sizable review of Ryan's work, notes Emerson's infamous rejection of benevolence and builds on Ryan's suggestions: "Such laissez faire ideology was a clear apology for the reigning class system and skewed distribution of wealth and power" (363). Emerson's "Are they *my* poor?" rejection recurs and illustrates the period's unfeeling response to the lazy and deceptive poor. Emerson is read as a proponent or at least defender of a kind of Social Darwinism.

More recent scholarship has largely attempted to correct these two tendencies—the tendency to assess the totality of Emerson's thought on a particular subject, and the other tendency to read Emerson's anti-benevolence as representative of wider trends. John Ronan argues, building explicitly on the scholarship of David Robinson, that there is a congruity between the homiletic work of Emerson and the Emerson of the *Essays* (1841), and, further, that the *Essays* are homiletic in

structure and style. Prentiss Clark, in what is foundationally related to this present work, reads the sermons, essays, and journals to de-center and re-present the locus of Emerson criticism from the self alone to the self in a web of relations to the whole. In Clark's reading, Emerson evokes and rejects a Cartesian alienation of the self and instead posits interaction, not thought, as the foundation of being: "a man engaged by and engaging the world, wondering at the very fact of this live relation and what it requires of him" (323). For Clark, this is "the singular position of humankind Emerson will investigate in all his writing" (324). Most recently, Robinson Woodward-Burns has argued that Emersonian solitude necessarily leads to action. Woodward-Burns investigates the whole of Emerson's thought, but is chronologically particular. He avoids conflating individually developed essays (a tendency illustrated above). These three scholars, their work taken together, suggest the path forward, but, in the vastness of their scope, continue to overestimate the ability of scholarship to accurately elucidate complex totalities—such as Emerson's various ideological progressions—by means of synchronically selected and unsystematically related particulars. The path forward begins with a re-estimation and careful consideration of particulars—the diachronic context of "Self-Reliance" in the life, work, and place of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Laurence Buell has written that "we must focus less on adjudicating what [Emerson] did when and more on what he thought and said about what he was doing or not doing" (280). As my critique of Buell demonstrates, we must go further. We must, additionally, not lose sight of where and when Emerson thinks about what he's thinking and saying. This begins with a more nuanced consideration of Emerson's compositional process. Many scholars have taken up the ideological content of "Self-Reliance" without considering its diachronic position. Emerson first includes "Self-Reliance" in his second published work, *Essays* (1841). The significance of this position, so rarely acknowledged, is first suggested by Joseph Slater in his historical and textual introductions to the *Essays*. For Slater, Emerson's operative contexts are the journals, the lectures, and the publication of the works of Thomas Carlyle (*CW*, II. xv-xvi). Slater further draws attention to the careful arrangement of the essays, where he asserts that "[Emerson's] conscious concern about shape and symmetry is evident in the alternative arrangements of 'chapters' in his journal entry

of June 1840" and "his worry that the essay 'Nature' might not be completed in time to function as a proper balance to its adjacent essays" (*CW*, II. xxx). Emerson carefully arranges these essays, and Slater highlights the intricate significance of this ordering: "twelve essays arranged in three quatrains, in an A-B-A order, general-particular-general: the table alone looks like a rhyme scheme" (xxx-xxxi). Given the notable care Emerson puts into the artful, point-counterpoint arrangement of this published work, there is tremendous irony in the fact that essays like "Self-Reliance," which, it seems, were not intended to function as a solitary unit, often function as singularly representative of Emerson's thought. In addition, the conflation of later work as a compliment to or elucidation of the concepts in *Essays* (1841) betrays an ungrounded or ill-considered representation. The published *Essays* (1841) is a mined apotheosis of the preceding eleven years of journals, sermons, and lectures, and it stands as a curated whole, helpfully elucidated by both the preceding work on which Emerson drew and the essays in the published volume.

Slater, Albert Von Frank, and David Richardson all read "Self-Reliance" in its published context, preceded by an essay entitled "History" and followed by another titled "Compensation." This context allows them to interpret the essay's primary theme in three important ways. Slater reads it as communicating "that what is true for you is true for all men and that to worship the past is to conspire against the sanity of the soul" (*CW*, II. xxxi). Von Frank sees it as an attempt to make the reader "more personally authentic by teaching him to inhabit himself" (Von Frank 108). Richardson argues Emerson is recommending "self-reliance as a starting point—indeed *the* starting point—not the goal" (Richardson 322). Acknowledging the thematic interrelation of the carefully arranged series of essays allows these three scholars to identify the essay's instrumental theme, and provides the appropriate initial context for investigating Emerson's intent in describing his benevolent dollar as "a wicked dollar" (*CW*, II. 31).

Yet, largely because the popular and scholarly mischaracterization of Emerson remains an entrenched and well-established counterpoint, it is beneficial to return first to Edward Emerson's localized characterization of his father in the neighborhood of Concord and from there to move to the various sermons and lectures Emerson gave as a member of these two in-placed communities: Boston and

Concord. First, Edward draws attention to the often-overlooked possessive pronoun adjective “my poor.” Writes Edward, “The property that came to [Emerson] . . . was impaired by various claims that he willingly recognized and responsibilities which he assumed to his kin by blood and marriage, and also by sympathy of idea,—he always had ‘*his poor*,’ of whom few or none else took heed” (Emerson 198). Edward’s conscious echo of “Self-Reliance” contextualizes the passage’s concern. Edward continues by emphasizing the shrewd frugality of his father, a frugality that allowed him “to give freely for what public or private end seemed desirable or commanding” (198). A Little later, Edward finds it necessary to defend his father from the charge of giving *too* generously to the philanthropic societies of Concord (201). These passages, problematic as their source might be, helpfully complicate the oversimplified depictions of Emerson explored above: Emerson as stably *laissez faire* and exclusively ungenerous. On the one hand, Edward feels it somehow necessary to defend his father from the charge of selfishness, while on the other against the charge of credulous generosity. If, as is sometimes suggested, “Self-Reliance” communicated a fiscal principle of strategic neglect, these passages object to that suggestion.

Emerson was also a Unitarian minister. One of Emerson’s sermons, entitled “Benevolence and Selfishness” and delivered many times, is demonstrably composed and delivered within the period Susan Roberson highlights as when “Emerson had been steadily working out issues of self-reliance, self-authority, and self-empowerment in his sermons” (3-4). It is imperative, as David Robinson has shown and Ronan has reasserted, to understand that Emerson continues to preach after his 1833 departure from the Second Unitarian Church of Boston. This “Benevolence” sermon, though composed during Emerson’s pastoral tenure, is last delivered in the immediate wake of the financial panic of 1837, the same panic Charvat examines. The sermon’s introduction highlights the existence and characteristics of true selfishness, the highest form of which is ungenerosity toward friends (*CS*, II. 135). A second section argues for the need to educate children in benevolence: “The aim of education . . . should be the rule of Christian benevolence . . . that it is base to forget the comforts of others in seeking his own” (135). Interestingly, Emerson emphasizes the work of the sympathetic imagination, contrasting the self-centered and profiteering gaze of the trader with “the man of benevolence,” who sees in



each member of a needy crowd an infinite soul existing in a web of mutuality: "each ... is a son, brother, husband, friend" (137). This emphasis on commonality, on the individual self recognizing, in the moment, her responsibility toward others, complements Clark's suggestion that Emerson considers the self to exist in mutuality (323). These two sections culminate with a concluding, ethical imperative worthy of quoting in full:

There is not one of us, I suppose, who might not find within a stone's cast of his own house, some child of pain and want who suffers severely from want of comforts which it is in our power to bestow, or to obtain. Let the Lord's maxim carry us to those cheerless rooms as messengers of consolation. As you would that men should do to you do ye unto them likewise. (*CS*, II. 137)

To suggest, on account of one sermon variously preached in Concord and Boston, that Emerson can no longer be read as a vocal proponent of *laissez faire* ideology would be irresponsible. Nevertheless, this sermon illustrates the increased level of nuance Emerson's position requires. Further, the central position of the individual observer and the proximity of local want personally ameliorated by a physically present individual may provide the necessary evidence for a more accurate interpretation, especially when read alongside a few key passages within lectures evidently mined by Emerson for his essay "Self-Reliance."

In composing "Self-Reliance," as has been shown, Emerson draws from various lectures. These have been catalogued and collated by Robert Spiller and Wallace Williams. In four, chronologically ordered early lectures, each given during the latter period of Emerson's homiletic use of "Benevolence and Selfishness," Emerson further elucidates the principles that inform his infamous tangent. Each of the following lectures is noted by Spiller and Williams as providing material for "Self-Reliance," and so can be accurately presented as operative, meaningful context. In "Ethics," first given in Boston in 1837, in a discussion of genius's role in ethical action, Emerson bemoans the difficulty of believing one's own thought in light of the inevitable appearance of "those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it yourself" (*EL*, II. 152). In "Duty," first given in Boston in 1839, virtuous action is explained as obedience to "the sovereign instinct," that in each

moment the self has a particular relation to the whole that generates imperatives not by custom or command, but by impulse (*EL*, III. 144). This same idea recurs in “Reforms,” given in Boston in 1840, where Emerson links whim explicitly to philanthropy, suggesting that one ought to conform each cause to one’s own “character and genius” (*EL*, III. 260) and so be, in the midst of philanthropic endeavor, an ultimately autonomous self. Finally, in “Tendencies,” delivered in Boston in 1840, Emerson again addresses the topic of philanthropy, suggesting that philanthropic societies “are right, inasmuch as they involve a return to simpler modes and a faithful trust of the soul that it has and can show its own royal road” (*EL*, III. 303-4). In context, “simpler modes” refers to fraternal as opposed to mercenary modes of exchange.

Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance,” is compiled from many of his previous lectures, and it is carefully arranged alongside eleven others in a collection published in and for the communities of Boston and Concord and, from there, distributed further. When read as embedded in these contexts, Emerson’s infamous tangential critique operates as a rhetorically striking reiteration of Emerson’s elsewhere evident concerns. In the essay’s relevant passage (*CW*, II. 30-31), an initial critique of malicious philanthropy connects ethical imperatives to immediate and local community. The malicious philanthropist “assumes this bountiful cause of Abolition,”—for which Emerson was himself an initially cautious but vociferous advocate—but in Barbados. The Philanthropist seeks to varnish his proximate cruelties with an ultimately wasted piety (*CW*, II. 30). Emerson’s discussion of philanthropic malevolence seems inexplicably followed by the elevation of “Whim,” but given the essay’s context this topic naturally follows. For, as we have seen in “Duty,” the ethical impulse is, for Emerson, always grounded in the impulses of the moment, in proximate vision of immediate need. Finally, the language of belonging and possession that follows in response to the suggestion Emerson has a responsibility “to put all poor men in good situations. Are they *my* poor?” (*CW*, II. 30) signifies the obligation that whim exhibits only in immediate localities wherein the more basic mode of fraternal exchange can exist. So the “wicked dollar” seems to be that dollar which, rather than used for the charitable relief of those individuals in want “within a stone’s cast” of one’s own house, is used for the impersonal and miscellaneous (31).

"Self-Reliance" is often read as something of a straightforward presentation of Emerson's typical *laissez faire* ideology. This is, however, an ultimately inaccurate characterization. "Self-Reliance" is instead but one part of a carefully ordered presentation and an embedded and local work. Emerson's tangential critique of "miscellaneous charities" is a communitarian, a local critique of the burgeoning institutionalization and especially internationalization of benevolence. Emerson does in fact, as Edward notes, have *his* poor. Emerson communicates, in "Self-Reliance," that *his* poor are immediate, proximate, and fraternal, those who the whim of the moment allows, even mandates him to operate benevolently toward—those embedded persons to whom he belongs: "thy infant... thy woodchopper" (30).

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