Refreshing Self-Reliance

by Samuel Hamilton

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Abstract: This article explores Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and its challenging style in which pithy aphorisms are strung together. A historical overview of the essay then leads to a digital humanities project in which Emerson is remixed, allowing for hyperlinked self-examination and self-complication.

Keywords: Self Reliance, Ralph Waldo Emerson, quotations, aphorisms, digital humanities

"Ne te Google-quaesiveris extra."

"Digital Man is his own star; and the SNS that can

Render an honest and a perfect digital man,

Commands all likes, all reposts, all pokes;

Nothing to him posts too early or late for folks.

Our posts our angels are, or good or ill,

Our digital footprints that walk by us still."

Post pictures of your child on Facebook

Nurture him within a rich digital village

He is never alone will he to look:

Vast networks of folk his stillage.

ESSAY 2.0 *Refreshing Self-Reliance*

Like most of my good ideas, I stole the idea for "Refreshing Self-Reliance" from my students. We read and reread, several semesters ago, some prose written by an eminent lecturer which were original and not conventional. This was a first-year writing class, the theme of which was "Writing Education and Miseducation." We considered Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Mary Louise Pratt's "The Arts of the Contact Zone," a filmic representation of David Foster Wallace's "This is Water" (created by a production and design studio called The Glossary), and Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance." As we considered the various

educational worldviews of each author, as well as the ways in which each author did or did not successfully represent that worldview both *through* and *with* their writing, we developed our own assignment prompts that sought to analyze, evaluate, synthesize, and otherwise respond to our readings, their connections and interanimations, the ways they complemented and challenged each other and us. We tried on Freirean dialectic, imagining a conversation among Freire, the peasants whom he taught, and their former banker-teacher. This dialectic became agonistic as we tried to write like a contact zone, turning our co-authored essays into "social spaces" where our ideas met, clashed, and grappled with one another. We then remixed one of our previous alphabetic essays to incorporate audio and visual components much like The Glossary did with Wallace's original commencement address at Kenyon College. In short, we confronted the ideas *and* the writing of these pieces, and we attempted to respond to each through our assignments.

When we arrived at Emerson, though, we got stuck. "What's his worldview," we wondered. "What's he doing with his writing," we asked. "How is he representing his worldview through and with his writing." While both Freire's dialectic polemic and Pratt's and Wallace's deliberative addresses were fairly straightforward in terms of both genre and objective, Emerson's lecture-turned-essay was much harder to pin down, and so much harder to respond to, at least in the ways we had been responding to the course's previous readings. One of the aspects of Emerson's style my students did quickly pick up on is how he tends to string together pithy aphorisms. We noticed long stretches of "Self-Reliance" that are difficult to parse because Emerson seems to bounce from one aphorism to another, and these stretches challenged us as we tried to figure how the ideas of one sentence hook up with the ideas of the sentence that immediately follow it, let alone the other sentences in the same paragraph. This led to the class developing a prompt for responding to "Self-Reliance" in which they selected their favorite Emersonian aphorism from the essay and used it as a sort of key to unlock the meaning of the entire essay.

One case in point: several students were attracted to Emerson's oft-quoted statement "To be great is to be misunderstood." One student snarkily pointed out maybe Emerson's aphoristic writing style was an attempt to flip this universal claim: to be misunderstood is to be great. Har har. Another, Emily Harten, connected Emerson's championing of "individualistic thinking" and "sticking to your guns despite possible repercussions" with Wallace's idea that we tend to possess an in-born default setting, an "automatic, unconscious way" of experiencing things. Harten argued that

> Breaking one's default setting could result in internal misunderstanding. A person thinks in one way for so long that changing opinions or accepting other points of view as valid becomes a nearly insurmountable task. However, this internal misunderstanding generates a greater external understanding. Seeing situations from different perspectives allows one to accept—as Wallace advises—that one is not the only person in the world and that other people's lives are just as complex and important as one's own, making one a greater, more compassionate individual.

While I tend to think of Emerson's original aphorism as suggesting that prominent people attract naysayers, Harten revealed to me the oversimplification of my original interpretation. She reminded me that whatever Emerson meant by "to be great is to be misunderstood," it somehow circled back to the larger issue of self-reliance; that if we hope to be individually "great" we must be misunderstood, not just by others, but by ourselves. Harten goes on in the essay to argue that all who hope to be great must exercise a will to misunderstand themselves, which she describes as a sort of impulse to constantly complicate and challenge our personal "default settings."

In a way similar to how this student's essay described it, all of these students' analyses of "Self-Reliance" unsettled much of what we thought we knew and what we learned about Writing Education and Miseducation. Our struggle to make sense of a single aphoristic saying within "Self-Reliance" moved us from the meaning of the saying itself to its meaning within the context of its paragraph, to its meaning within the context of the lecture/essay itself, and beyond to its meaning within the context of our course's selected readings and our course's theme. Just as we thought we had a foothold on one layer/context, another appeared, and as our understanding of additional layers stabilized, our understanding of the previously settled layers was disrupted. Moreover, when my students and I read one another's essays, we noticed how many of us had selected different aphorisms and used them in different ways to make sense of vastly different meanings of "Self-Reliance." This is all to say: we came to the frustratingly excited conclusion that the reading strategy promoted by our assignment description was limited and limiting.

Yet, we were also struck by the fact that, for the most part, we had all made compelling inroads into not just analyzing Emerson's challenging essay, but also applying it to our own understanding of self-reliance as both a universal concept and as something that we can and should apply to ourselves. That is: the method was broken, but personally productive; it couldn't get at *the* meaning (which doesn't exist anyway), but it did propel us toward *different* and compelling meanings, as well as toward forming a richer historical and personal contextualization of the essay, and ourselves as readers of that essay. In this way, our analysis of Emerson was in line with what John Lysaker names in *Emerson and Self-Culture* as "taking Emerson personally." "A proper reception of Emerson's texts," Lysaker writes, "not only requires an acknowledgement of the challenges they pose—challenges to our beliefs, habits, and character—but also a willingness to assume the tasks they set, conclude them as we will." Lysaker describes Emerson's essays and lectures as "agitating in the broad sense" (15). It's not just that they, as William Gass suggests, "ruminate," but they also chip away at the reader's previously held beliefs and opinions (as Freire's work does), in addition to compelling us to follow some action (as Pratt's and Wallace's work does).

More than that, though, Lysaker describes Emerson's works as performances which are as provocative in their presentation as they are in the content they present. He points to Emerson's strategic use of overstatement and hyperbole when making a claim that "dangles more like bait, a hook that might drag us to determine the matter for ourselves" (13). In a sense, Lysaker's claim is that Emerson wrote—both in "Self-Reliance" and elsewhere—in a style that insisted that

his readers do some work. He wasn't laying out an argument in the way Pratt and Wallace did, nor was he engaged in a dialectic takedown of antiquated ideas in the way Freire was. Rather, he was presenting to us, his readers, an occasion for self-examination. His writing was prompting us, in a sense, to not rely upon the logical constructions or descriptions of others, but to create our own logical constructions and descriptions. "It is easy to see that a greater self-reliance must work a revolution in all the offices and relations of men," Emerson writes in "Self-Reliance," "in their religion; in their education; in their pursuits; their modes of living; their association; in their property; in their *speculative views*" (emphasis added). He was willing us, Harten puts it, to misunderstand ourselves.

That "Self-Reliance" should describe and prompt thoughts related to its title makes sense given its historical context. The essay was one of Emerson's earliest and most significant contributions to the popular pedagogy of self-culture, a particular mode or brand of self-education that emerged and gained traction in the nineteenth-century United States. Broadly speaking, self-culture was envisioned throughout the nineteenth century by myriad educational theorists such as John Stuart Blackie, publishers such as C.W. Bardeen, and even phrenologists such as O.S. Fowler, as a process by which an individual trained, educated, and otherwise cultivated herself by her own efforts toward her own ends. Yet, when practiced, self-culture often instantiated as a process by which an individual trained, educated, and otherwise cultivated herself by recruiting others for assistance toward the end of harmonizing or joining those folks in a larger sociocultural construct. *That is, self-culture is both a process of standing out and fitting in, a process of teaching yourself and learning with others, a process liberated from the confines of educating institutions, and a process dictated by the goals promoted and advanced by those institutions. It is a process for you for others and for others for you.*

Self-culture existed and functioned as a sort of grab-bag of pedagogical methodology in and throughout 19th century. Because advocates for self-culture borrowed freely and inconsistently from religious and secular sources, natural and human sciences, established (at the time) pedagogical theories and wholly original insights, a singular functional existence of "self-culture," either in theory or in practice, is impossible to identify. This is because the fullest articulation of self-culture didn't come from just one source, but rather emerged in pieces, drawing equally from the writings of Enlightenment-era philosophers (John Locke, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Johann Pestalozzi, Jean-Jacques Rousseau), early American statesmen (Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Horace Mann, Noah Webster), newly-named "scholars" (William Ellery Channing), as well as from articles, essays, and lectures reprinted or advertised in popular press (penny papers, popular magazines such as *Godey's Lady's Book*) and various autobiographical accounts (slave narratives, worker's narratives) both serialized and published as single volumes. That is, it was a praxis that was fundamentally distributed between those that advocated for it in and practiced it through writing.

The promotion of self-education generally and self-culture specifically was, as scholars of the early US Republic argue, central goal of the developing US educational system in the late-18th and throughout the 19th centuries. In *Age of Reason* Thomas Paine articulated this goal thusly:

"every person of learning is finally his own teacher" (Part 1, Section 11, para. 7). This feedback loop between self-learning and self-teaching, in which the more you teach yourself, the more you learn, and the more you learn, the more you can teach yourself, was thought to be the best way to produce a self-sufficient and independent citizenry. Though one of the earliest—and certainly one of the most widely read -- American statesmen to express such a sentiment, Paine was not alone in his advocacy for self-teaching. The promotion of self-teaching coursed through early proposals for educational systems, from Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, and Noah Webster to Horace Mann, Samuel Read Hall, and Elizabeth Peabody. These educational theorists maintained that a key function of schools was to teach students how to teach themselves. In terms of self-culture: to culture individuals into a culture of self-culture. This is weirdly paradoxical. How can self-culture be both a deeply independent and individualized personal project as well as a widely promoted and collectively supported national project? Moreover, must someone learn from someone else that they should teach themselves, let alone how they should go about teaching themselves? What is the relationship between the individual culturing herself and the culture into which she is being enculturated? That is, how was the relationship between "self" and "culture" conceived of by those advocating for or engaged in the practice of self-culture? What are the aims or purposes of self-culture? What are the methods and materials required for self-culture?

Emerson's "Self-Reliance," which Robert Richardson argues developed from a series of lectures and sermons Emerson delivered throughout the 1830s (257), nuances what is otherwise an often erroneous conflation of "self-reliance" (or self-culture) with pure autodidacticism. This conflation overemphasizes the individual in the process of self-culture at the expense of overlooking the myriad people, places, and things that necessarily contribute to self-culture. Emerson is often understood as antagonistic toward these contributions, when in actuality he worried about their power to not just influence, but govern an individual's development. As Lysaker writes, "While Emerson has little interest in directing self-culture through state apparatuses, he conceives of self-culture as a practice of solitude and sociality, and in a marvelously complex way that the connotations surrounding "privacy" threaten to overwhelm" (8).

The tension between individual autonomy and the governing power of outside influences—between self and culture—continues to be a prominent feature of education, be it institutionalized or individualized, or (as it nearly always is) great bits of both. These are the threads that "Refreshing Self-Reliance" seeks to trace and untangle, yet also interweave and knot. Just as Emerson's contemporaries such as Horace Mann and Elizabeth Peabody promoted common schools as a necessary mass literacy/citizenship project, we are currently engaged (willingly or not) in myriad collective projects of mass *digital* literacy. Depending on how you look at it, these can be discipline-specific projects (Cynthia Selfe's urging for compositionists to "pay attention" in her 1999 chair's address at CCCC), a professional project (the implementation of ICT literacy standards in the Common Core), a national project (former President Bill Clinton's 2000 State of the Union in which he specifically addressed the "digital divide"), and/or a global project (Sugata Mitra's Hole-in-the-Wall initiative or Nicholas Negroponte's One Laptop Per Child association). All of these projects aim at making folks not

just digitally literate, but also equipped for twenty-first-century global citizenship. That is, while Mann and Peabody maintained that literacy was a necessary component of being a nineteenth-century US citizen, so too do Selfe, Clinton, Mitra, Negroponte, etc. maintain that *digital* literacy is a necessary component of being a twenty-first-century global citizen.

Without diminishing the importance of such massive undertakings, "Refreshing Self-Reliance" wonders at similar undertakings at a much smaller scale. Specifically, I am curious about the affordances of a notion of digital self-culture in today's mass-oriented educational culture. More specifically, I wonder how/even if digital self-culture happens. As, Lisa Spiro points out in "Getting Started in the Digital Humanities," a widely circulated and recirculated blog post offering practical how-to advice on "joining" the burgeoning field of Digital Humanities: "many in the DH community are to some extent self-taught and/or gained their knowledge through work on projects rather than through formal training" (para. 2). As Spiro phrases it, teaching (or, more appropriately perhaps, "training") is conflated with what we might call enculturation, but which might also be understood as self-culture. That is, for Spiro, upon acquiring informal, self-taught training or formal, institutional training in some skill or process or tool related to being a Digital Humanist, an individual student *becomes* a Digital Humanist, though this transmogrifying process remains as mysterious as it is significant. Yet, this transmogrification is not only present within the confines of an academic discipline. It is fair to wonder if, upon acquiring informal, self-taught training or formal, institutional training in some skill or process or tool related to being digitally literate (and so, a digital citizen), does that same individual *become* a digital citizen? The process Spiro identifies as "self teaching" is more appropriately the program or praxis of self-culture, a process that Lysaker describes as entailing "physiological formation and development; creation in the sense of establishing or founding; formal education and training, with connotations of cultural refinement; and so on" (2). An additional goal of my project, therefore, is to illuminate this praxis of "teaching oneself" to be not just a Digital Humanist, but indeed a twenty-first-century human/citizen.

Much like my students' readings of Emerson's original essay, the "remix" of "Self-Reliance" this short essay introduces attempts to read Emerson as Emerson seems to wants folks to read him. That is, "Refreshing Self-Reliance" takes some of Emerson's bold claims as occasions for self-examination and self-complication. As such, any illumination of the pedagogy of self-culture emerges not just through the details produced by my analysis of "Self-Reliance," but also via the process of producing/composing that analysis (not to mention the *details of the process* [i.e. reflections] I use to produce those details). In a simplified sense, "Refreshing Self-Reliance" examines how one can hope to teach one's self not only how to operate as a twenty-first-century (digital) citizen/human, but also whether operating in this way actually makes one a twenty-first-century (digital) citizen/human. In other words, is Emerson correct when he says, "Do your work, and I shall know you?" That is, is it also possible for someone to teach himself or herself how to *be* a digital citizen/human? And this is no given, for as Lysaker qua Emerson points out, the process of self-culture is "a pursuit that admits of failure and success...a pursuit that might come up short, a task whose completion is far from secure" (2).

If my notion of digital self-culture seems unsettled, that's because it most certainly is. As Lysaker suggests in his own project of self-culture (both in terms of analysis of the concept itself and enactment of the concept for himself), attempts to rigidly codify "self-culture" are quixotic. Codification, Lysaker argues, implies agreement in a group, an impulse antithetical to the staunchly individualistic impulse that undergirds the concept of self-culture. To be blunt: my notion of self-culture is my own, and at this stage, I do not yet firmly grasp it myself; this is, after all, an enactment that aims at analysis. But incipient in my notion of digital self-culture—as with Lysaker's and Emerson's respective notions of self-culture—is a desire to promote the process of self-culturing. It's an impossible task, this promotion, as it is fundamentally a promotion not just of something I know not what, but also a promotion of a thing that violently resists its own promotion. To (ironically) quote Emerson: "Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say 'I think,' 'I am,' but quotes some saint or sage."

These reflections consider both the concept of digital self-culture and my own project of digital self-culture, specifically the project of creating and hosting "Refreshing Self-Reliance." Prior to starting this project, I had no knowledge of how to code anything with JavaScript (I finished with only slightly more knowledge than that with which I started), and minimal knowledge of HTML. Through co-opting pre-made code, trial-and-error, questions to coder friends and on coding forums, numerous Google searches, and so on, I made "Refreshing Self-Reliance." And in the making of "Refreshing Self-Reliance," I engaged in what I would consider an example of digital self-culturing; in a sense, I refreshed "Self-Reliance." By continually reflecting on both Emerson's text, as well as the *process* of "refreshing" Emerson's text, I get as close as I can to my notion of digital self-culture, analyzing not the concept itself, but the consequences of the concept as I attempt to enact it. "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles."

[Also see: Works Cited, Consulted, and Considered: Refreshing Self-Reliance by Samuel Hamilton]

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