

The Psychology of Being Traditional: An Enquiry into R. W. Emerson's *Self-Reliance*

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Abstract:

R. W. Emerson, the transcendentalist, has been one of the most celebrated American essayists. One of the central aspirations in his philosophical writing is his constant preoccupation with the theme of individualism and scathing criticism of the tradition. While discussing the importance of individualism, Emerson has to address the notion of tradition. In fact, the whole of the essay is a sort of antithesis between the traditional and the individual. This paper theoretically investigates the theme of tradition that figures in his essay 'Self-Reliance'. It finds out various psychological factors that make human beings traditional. He also enumerates consequences of being traditional and justifies his criticism scientifically.

Key Words: transcendentalist, individualism, tradition, psychological

The issue of tradition has been a matter of immense critical attention both in literature and critical thought as well. It has cultural, philosophical, religious, social, psychological connotations. *The Oxford Learner's Dictionary* defines traditional as "being part of the beliefs, customs or way of life of a particular group of people that have not changed for a long time". (Hornby: 1620) In every country and in all ages, due reverence has been paid to traditions. In certain regions, traditions have been a part and parcel of the aspirations of the common people. T. S. Eliot, in his 1921 essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* distinguished and also integrated the two terms philosophically. He projects tradition on a broad canvass saying that the force of tradition always conditions both the individuals and the institutions. However, the individual is important, too. It is the individual talent that modifies the tradition continuously. Thus, Eliot acknowledges its utility in the progress of human civilization. He says: "Whereas if we approach a poet without his prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously." (Eliot: 43) Eliot has been instrumental in revolutionizing the whole connotation of the word tradition. We must note that Eliot being a critic, his aim is rather speculative.

Self-Reliance is one of the most popular and early written essays by Emerson, the spokesman of the creed of individualism. Almost all of his transcendental essays are replete with the spirit of individualism. This aspiration of individualism was at work right from his childhood. In his personal religious life the spiritual master never made any compromise when it comes to advocate individualism. At times, he openly rebelled against certain ecclesiastical practices and declared himself a staunch non-conformist. In this respect this love for the cult of individualism was not just propaganda but a conviction. In 1832 he resigned from his pastoral appointment because of personal doubts about certain traditional practices. He had strong disagreements with

church officials over the administration of the Communion Services. “Emerson approached religion with the attitude of a philosopher.” (Gray: 25) Secondly, Emerson visited Europe in 1832 and met Wordsworth, Coleridge and Carlyle, the Champions of individualism. This must have stood in good stead with him when he wrote *Self-Reliance*.

Emerson, being a transcendentalist philosopher, offers a fresh perspective on tradition. Unlike Eliot, Emerson’s approach to the element of tradition is philosophical, spiritual and psychological. His main concern is to correct the collective error of humanity going excessively traditional at the cost of individuality. He is of the view that what we call tradition is nothing but our rejected thoughts and therefore it is foolish of us if we are coaxed into buying those discarded thoughts. Human mind has a natural tendency of embracing to some tradition or other; it feels itself rather safe and secure when surrendered to some tradition. What does this tradition consist of? It consists of achievements of great heroes of the past. But we must note that they are considered great simply because they were never traditional but highly individual. The crux of their uniqueness lies in their strength of being individual: “...they set at naught books and traditions...”. (P.38) The psychology of society is that it avers self-reliance and tends to love names and customs. The main concern of Emerson is self-reliance. He is the founder of a new creed of individuality.

Society binds and tends to hinder individualization because it is least concerned with the reality; rather it loves names and customs. Emerson regrets that the endeavor of Nature of carving out the ideal human being has suffered a major blow in all ages due to this collective human infatuation with the past traditions. He gives the formula: “whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist.” (P.40) He holds that there is a force in every human being that provides inspiration for his self-expression in the world. This dynamic force functions well when the subject acts individuality. Conformity scatters our force. Emerson calls conformity “a blind-man’s-buff” (P.42). It is the enemy of individuality. Self-reliance is its aversion. “It loses your time and blurs the impression of your character.” (P.42)

Emerson wants us to innovate and work individually. Our sects determine our arguments. Originality is diminishing because people show a sort of aversion to their free expression. This is the reason why creeds have proliferated in the world. We know the beforehand that the preacher is not going to say anything new. “Our housekeeping is mediant, our arts, our occupations, our marriages, our religions we have not chosen, but society has chosen for us. We are parlour soldiers.” (P.51) This stereotyping has entered in every human institution including human thought. We relish our rejected thoughts. We unconsciously pay less respect to our own thought simply because they are ours and whatever is ours has always been suspected. We have so much subjected to the thoughts of others that we hate to pay attention to our thoughts. Emerson defines genius as being the capacity of the individual to realize that his private thought is potentially universal.

What we call out most original and novel thought is actually an imitation. We either peep or steal. Consequently, we are losing our individuality. Under these circumstances, it is very difficult for an intelligent man to find out what precisely we are. “Our houses are built with foreign taste; our shelves are garnished; our opinions, our tastes, our faculties, lean, and follow the Past and the Distant.” (P.54)

Emerson disdains conformity and consistency as well. Consistency, according to him is the enemy of self-trust. People form a particular opinion about us from our past acts. You love to "...drag about this corpse of your memory" (P.43) Human beings should enjoy the present moment "...without prospect and retrospect." (P.45)

The individual is the source of the collective. As a matter of fact, the individual has been relegated throughout the history and the collective has been glorified. In fact, the reigning collective aspirations that guide the mainstream life were once the ideas in the individual minds. There are two ends to the evolution of thesis: the inmost becomes the outmost in due course. Emerson remarks that "an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man." (P.54) The individual Caesar built the Roman Empire, the Christ founded Christianity. In short, Emerson insists on us to "act singly, and what you have already done singly will justify you now." (P.45) Moses, Plato and Milton said not what people thought but what they thought. He advises us to value our own thoughts than the "...lustre of firmament of bards and sages." (P.38)

"Let us affront and reprimand the smooth mediocrity and squalid contentment of the times, and hurl in the face of custom and trade and office, the great fact which is the upshot of all history, that there is a great responsible Thinker and Actor working wherever a man works; that a true man belongs to no other time or place, but is the centre of things" (P.45)

Emerson provides us with a host of solutions to throw off the slavery to traditions. Living from within is the need of the hour. Those who are traditionalists look with suspicion at human autonomy. They hold that the impulses that drive our actions operate from above. Emerson rejects this thesis and reiterates that they rise from within. "Abide in the simple and noble regions of thy life, obey thy heart, and thou shalt reproduce the Foreworld again." (P.55)

According to Emerson every man is unique. The soul is not a static entity; it is in the becoming. When we rely on our inner being we help the mission of the Divine. The mission of the Divine is to try variety possibilities in Nature. Being traditional we thwart the Nature's scheme of innovation.

In the realms of art imitation is in vogue. Our artists copy models from other masters. Where has their contemplation gone? The real source of models is the individual mind. We need to search the models in our own mind. We need not copy the Doric or the Gothic model. Imitating others lead us to half possessions because it is not our experience or invention. We have this defect embedded in our educational system, too. In schools we teach young minds imitation of great men. We insist on the pupils to be like them. This deprives them of their individual potentials. Who taught Shakespeare, Washington, Bacon, or Newton? They were individuals thoroughly. Emerson says, "Insist on yourself; never imitate" (P. 54) Love and reverence to our individual acts must be valued. In schools we teach our children Newton's theory of gravitation in minutes because whole of the Newton's experience of the falling apple has been theorized in books which have come down to us as a tradition. Tradition has been bedrock of the pedagogy down the ages. Conviction is on the back burner. Resultantly words have become hollow and there is no conviction in them.

There must be some fundamental defect in the psychological constitution of the human being that he is more prone traditions. "Man is apologetic; he no longer upright; he dares not say

‘I think,’ ‘I am,’ but quotes some saint or sage.” (P.47) In his opinion the ideal human being is one who frees him from the yoke of the dead past with all its burden of memory, intellectual maneuvers etc. Human being is time-bound creature in that he has a natural tendency to belittle the present and revere the former things. Obsession with the past has been a psychological disorder that confronts a number of patients in our times. To emphasize this, Emerson picks an example from the natural world. He says a rose lives without a reference to time; it is timeless. This makes the whole difference. “These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day.” (P.47) At every stage of its life, it remains satisfied, not the forced satisfaction, but highly natural. On the contrary, a human being is excessively time-bound. This over-consciousness to time has disastrous effect and has taken its toll as well. Human mind always postpones pleasure: “but man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with revered eye laments the past or, heedless of the riches that surround him”. (P.47) Living in the present moments also means living with the nature. Emerson calls upon us to ground this universal reliance on the “Divine Spirit” that he says permeates this universe. This means living with God. This is the new perception that we need to cultivate. “When we have new perception, we shall gladly disburden the memory of its hoarded treasures as old rubbish.” (P.48) We have celebrated the achievements of the heroes of the past and now it is time for us to extoll the individual. We need to change the set phraseology. Emerson designates this collective madness as “worship of the past”.

“Yet see what strong intellects dare not yet hear God himself unless he speak the phraseology of I know not what David, or Jeremiah, or Paul. We shall not always set so great a price on a few lives. We are like children who repeat by rote the sentences of granddames and tutors, and, as they grow older, of the men of talents and character they chance to see-painfully recollecting the exact words they spoke...” (P.48)

This love for the old and dead past is contradictory to our real life experience. We in our real everyday life accept the evolutionary principle in Nature. Our preference is fullness and completion. What has evolved for the present is more wholesome, perfect and complete. Emerson asks “is the parent better than the child into whom he has cast his ripened being? Whence then this worship of the past? (P.47) Gradually, this trend has set in and as a result a human being is no more an individual; he has become a mob intrinsically. We are accustomed to mob behavior. We have acquired this new psychological adaptation. This is very harmful because we are all set to annihilate the individual which is very fundamental in existence. He is no more “...in communication with the internal ocean, but it goes abroad to beg a cup of water of the urns of other men.” (P.49)

The chief concern that Emerson shares in this crucial essay is need for self-reliance. He communicates the vital importance of self-reliance, self-trust, and love for individuality out of that passion. He criticizes human beings for their reluctance towards self-reliance. The main intention of the writer here is not to attack tradition; but the human approach to the dead past. He contributes a meaningful perspective on the issue incidentally for he thinks that self-reliance is not possible without settling the matter of tradition. Emerson appears well versed in human psychology and hence his arguments are pretty balanced and logically convincing and hence acceptable. He appears to be a sociologist per se. He is concerned with the intellectual stagnation that is occurring in society as the populace is going traditional day by day. Being a spiritual

master, he has his unique vision to the menace of tradition. He could see the upcoming disaster more clearly like the man at high altitude sees the sunrise. He speaks out of that passion and zest. "His spirit and his teachings have worked to free man, the private man, from the shackles of mere convention, mere custom, mere tradition" (Egbert: 8) According to him there were agitations worldwide in the last thousand years for the liberty, for physical liberty to be precise. After having won it, we must embark on a new expedition of psychological and spiritual liberty which is more genuine and long lasting. The first pre requisite for this mission is better understanding of our nature, psychic energy, instincts, impulses etc. Against this backdrop, *Self-Reliance* is the manifesto of a new man. Here is an opportunity for us to rectify our fundamental historical error. "We have made the individual of no account. We have made him less than a man. Now we must restore him to his manhood." (P.5) Individuality is the catalytic force for the evolutionary progression of humanity from man to superman. On the contrary, being traditional we take a backward look at the dead past. This is the crux of Emerson's objection to our being traditional.

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