



## “ATOM BY ATOM, ALL THE WORLD INTO A NEW FORM”

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Theory of Reform

Dissent, from the Latin verb *dissentire*, to differ in sentiment, or, put more simply, to feel differently about something, is at the core of the American project. Religious and political dissent, for example, were driving factors of, respectively, the earliest migrations to North America and the War of Independence. As historian Ralph Young points out in his *Dissent: The History of an American Idea*, dissent not only “created this nation, [but it also] played, indeed still plays, a fundamental role in fomenting change and pushing the nation in sometimes unexpected directions” (2015: 2). As the First Amendment makes clear, dissent should not only be tolerated on American soil, but it also deserves to be protected. To use David Skover’s and Ronald K. L. Collins’ words, dissent is necessary for American society to thrive, and “it is what legitimates democratic governance; it is the seal affixed to the social contract” (2013: 132). In its etymological sense of “feeling differently” about something, though, the concept of dissent seems to be particularly close to some of the basic tenets of Transcendentalism. This literary and philosophical movement, with its constant emphasis on “intuition” and “individualism,” indeed revolved around the idea of “feeling differently.” According to the transcendentalists, intuition legitimized independent and personal endeavors, and they urged their contemporaries to live their lives with self-reliance,

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to rebel against custom and established models, to speak out and express their dissent when necessary.

This relationship between dissent and Transcendentalism has long been at the center of scholarly debate, but while Young rightly identifies Transcendentalism as “the wellspring of American dissent” (2015: 137) others have been more resistant to attribute such a revolutionary—and political—feature to the movement. Specifically, when it comes to the writings of the leading voice of Transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson, many have been skeptical about labelling his works as expressions of “dissent.” His image in popular culture has often been that of the “idealist Emerson,” a supposedly aloof and detached intellectual who chose to separate himself from the political and social reality of his time. Although there has been an effort in contemporary criticism to bypass this limiting interpretation of Emerson’s writings (see for example Gougeon’s *Virtue’s Hero: Emerson, Anti-slavery, and Reform*, Levine and Malachuk’s *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, or Garvey’s *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform*), what is still to be fully explored is the *productive* dissent that one can find in his essays. This connotation of “dissent” here is crucial because as Young notes, dissent can be expressed in a variety of forms. Some dissenters “are *reactionaries* who seek to address the problems by returning to the policies that existed before the problems arose. Some are *radicals* or even *revolutionaries* who propose to solve the problems by smashing the system and starting over,” and some, like Emerson, are “*reformers* who wish to fix the problems through a process of reform” (2015: 5). Drawing on Steven H. Shiffrin’s point that dissent is “a practice of vital importance to the self-realization of many individuals, and even more important, a crucial institution for challenging unjust hierarchies and for promoting progressive change” (1999: XII), this article aims to demonstrate that a strong reformist energy was inherent in Transcendentalism as a social and cultural phenomenon, and argues that Emerson’s idea of reform, though primarily directed towards the individual, was also intended to have an effect on society at large. Indeed, Emerson can be said to aim at social change through the reform of the individual.

What makes this topic relevant today is the openness of Emerson's work. Though he saw himself as a scholar, a poet and a lecturer, he wanted his audience to learn how to "listen to their interior conviction," (*Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* 3: 374) and never intended to communicate ultimate lessons. As Donald E. Pease points out, critics have identified in his writings both a "depoliticizing transcendentalism and a politicizing social reformism" (2010: 131). To analyze his theory of reform both tendencies need to be acknowledged since they are, as Pease observes, in "a relationship of antagonistic cooperation" (2010: 132).

#### EMERSONIAN INDIVIDUALISM AND SOCIETY

The starting point of an analysis for Emerson's theory of reform, as expressed in four different essays—"Reforms," "Man the Reformer," "New England Reformers," and "Reform"—is necessarily his individualism. Since his doctrine of reform revolves around both the individual and the society in which he or she moves, it is crucial to examine his concept of individualism, as well as at its implications for society. As is often the case with Emerson, individualism, just as Transcendentalism—which he loosely defined as "Idealism as it appears in 1842" (*Complete Works* 1: 311)—is a term that notoriously defies a simple and concise characterization. Emersonian individualism, or self-reliance, has been and still is a contested concept. Emerson's appeals to "trust thyself," his emphasis on self-trust and self-sufficiency have been interpreted in a number of ways. John Holzwarth claims that Emerson's concept of self-reliance has been often "dismissed as merely a rugged individualist's sneer to 'do it yourself'" and contemporary liberals sometimes "worry that Emerson's emphasis on self-reliance undermines empathy for the needy and feeds conservative attacks on the welfare state" (2011: 331). Over the course of the years, many scholars have attempted to define the essence of Emersonian self-reliance. Among them is Lawrence Buell who, while listing the heterogeneous interpretations of this concept in his 2004 landmark work *Emerson*, makes a point of exposing the apparently paradoxical foundation of self-reliance. Although "self-reliance seemingly sets the highest value on egocentricity, [it] also strives mightily to guard itself against the egotism it seems to license"

(2004: 59). While acknowledging that the Emersonian “I” rests upon the “subjectivity of vision,” Buell also stresses that self-reliance is “exemplary of any person’s capabilities and [thus] sink[s] egotism into precept” (2004: 77). In her *Critical Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Tiffany K. Wayne points out that “Emerson rejected the idea that an inward focus on the self, or ‘egotism,’ as critics charged, was undesirable and even harmful to society” (2010: X). The kind of self-reliant individuals who Emerson was envisioning were an asset to society, which, as Wayne puts it, being made up of individuals, is “only ever as good as those individuals make it” (2010: X-XI).

The relationship between self-reliant individuals and society is arguably one of the most interesting aspects of the concept of self-reliance. Emerson uses the opposition between the individualism at the core of the idea self-reliance and a well-functioning society where individuals are in some way dependent on one another to create a productive dialectic tool which empowers them and strengthens the society in which each self-reliant individual moves. In other words, in Emerson’s mind, being self-reliant did not require a definite rupture with society. Those who lived with self-reliance were able to act freely in accordance with the truth of their mind—rather than according to what was expected of them—and yet their defiance of public opinion never presupposed isolation and solitude. To use Buell’s words, self-reliant behavior “prescribe[d] not insular withdrawal but more robust coexistence” (2004: 78). Indeed, the kind of self envisioned by the Transcendentalists was not conceived to be a self-contained unit that existed separate from the world around him or her and though Emerson was, without any doubt, mainly interested in the development of the individual, he also believed that self-reliance had the potential to work “a revolution in all the offices and relations of men” (*Complete Works* 2: 76).

This intermingling of the individual and society is precisely what Wayne defines as “the paradox of Transcendentalism.” She asks:

How did a belief in the power of the *individual* translate into a *social* movement? The fundamental belief in the right to self-development, in the integrity of the individual mind, had application to questions of equality and justice that dominated 19th-century political culture,

from the right to vote to the right to an education, from labor reform to women's rights, from Indian removal to the atrocities of American slavery. (Wayne 2010: X)

It might be surprising to see how often a transcendentalist approach was indeed used to tackle many of the most pressing social issues of the time. And yet this philosophical movement, often remembered for its emphasis on abstract concepts such as the "Soul" and for its sustained focus on the individual, truly seemed to have had extremely practical and social applications, as it was often used to "reform the day-to-day world, to improve society—and make good on the American promise—for all" (Petruionis et al. 2010: XXIV). In this sense, Transcendentalism has a powerful reformist core. What to some commentators is the rather abstract idealism of Emerson's philosophy, for others constitutes a "mood of resistance to established conventions and expectations, and [a] desire for rethinking and remaking" (Robinson 1999: 14). As the number of different interpretations on the matter demonstrates, this quality of Transcendentalism is not entirely apparent at first sight, but there seems to be growing consensus among scholars on the shortsightedness of considering the Transcendentalists as only concerned with the development of individuals.

It seems that Emerson was convinced that the achievements of the mind were also supposed to have an impact on the world in which the individual moved and, as Kerry Larson affirms, in his essays he was aware that "getting people to change their opinion about themselves is often bound up with getting them to change their views on what it means to interpret the world around them" (2001: 994). Emerson appears sure that a maturation of the individual mind had to go hand-in-hand with the general improvement of society, the latter being the stage in which the self-reliant man<sup>1</sup> should perform his action. This application of Transcendentalism to society is the underlying assumption of this study. The comprehensive theory of reform that Emerson developed through the years, though clearly focused on the emancipation of the individual, was also meant to alter the world around them.

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1 I am here, and elsewhere in the article, using "man" as a non-gender-specific term.

However, as is often the case with Emerson, there are passages in his essays on this theme that seem to put individuals and society at odds with each other. In “The Individual,” an 1837 essay, he writes “All philosophy, all theory, all hope are defeated when applied to society. There is in it an inconvertible brute force and it is not for the society of any actual present moment that is now or ever shall be, that we can hope or augur well. Progress is not for society. Progress belongs to the Individual” (*Early Lectures* 2: 176). Although these words certainly exemplify some of Emerson’s thoughts on this theme, there are other occasions in which, when writing about the reform efforts of his time, he seems to put individualism and society in a fruitful relationship with each other.

#### EMERSON’S THEORY OF REFORM

The 1830s in the United States are known as the “Era of Reform.” As Len Gougeon writes, at that time “a number of reform movements took shape in America. Some prompted religious freedom, women’s rights, penal and prison reform, and peace, but none became as strong or as successful as the abolition movement” (*Virtue’s Hero* 1990: XIII). Much has been written on Emerson’s antislavery writings (see for instance Gougeon’s *Virtue’s Hero* and the volume he co-edited with Joel Myerson *Emerson’s Anti-slavery Writings*), which have been used as tangible examples of his interest in civic matters and of his commitment to certain political positions. He also famously argued for religious reform and commented (albeit somewhat superficially) on women’s rights. Even though his friend Henry David Thoreau is perhaps the most famous example of a nineteenth-century intellectual also engaged in practices of political dissent, Emerson was evidently no stranger to it either. For that matter, he did not limit himself to writing about reforming society—he even developed what he called a “doctrine of reform” which envisioned a systematic theory of reform founded on the concept of self-reliance.

The four essays Emerson devoted to this topic, “Reforms” (January 1840), “Man the Reformer” (January 1841), “New England Reformers” (March 1844), and “Reform” (November 1860), show that the idea of reform was a longstanding interest of his, one

which he revisited multiple times. In the late 1830s, as Gougeon states, Emerson believed that “comprehensive reform of American society could only come about as the result of the reform of individuals” (*Emerson, Poetry, and Reform* 1989: 39) and therefore he developed a theory of reform centered on self-reliance and on individual improvement. However, an analysis of these essays shows that this theorization was simply the necessary first step towards a reformation of society as a whole. In what he envisioned as a process of circular influence, individual improvement was not meant to be the end goal. Self-reliant individuals were supposed to help in reforming society at large, and a reformed society would have, in turn, fostered self-reliance.

This interdependency is already evident at the beginning of his 1840 essay “Reforms,” the sixth lecture in his series at the Masonic Temple in Boston. He opens it by noting that a distinctive trait of his age is a “great harvest of projects” of reform aimed at reforming the domestic, social, and civil sphere as well as the literary and ecclesiastical institutions. Emerson applauded these because, as Gougeon writes, he was persuaded that “universal regeneration could never be wrought by emphasizing a singular moral cause like abolition” (*Emerson, Poetry, and Reform* 1989: 39). According to him, these changes were the result of what he called the “education of the public mind” (*Early Lectures* 3: 256), a remark that hints at the connection between a self-reliant man and a self-reliant society. Emerson praised the existence of these attempts at reform, which he calls “efforts for the Better,” and he welcomed the fact that his epoch “did not sleep on the errors it inherited, but put every usage on trial, and exploded every abuse” (*Early Lectures* 3: 257). Emerson welcomed these movements, which to him were the proof of the soul that resided in every human being. In a comment reminiscent of Skover’s and Collins’ description of dissent as the loyal and faithful concept that works to preserve the democratic system in its ideal form (2013: 134), Emerson—in his much more abstract style—wrote that what “agitates society every day with the offer of some new amendment” was the “eternal testimony of the soul in man to a fairer possibility of life and manners than he has attained” (*Early Lectures* 3: 259).

However, although he was not blind to the positive sides of these “efforts for the Better,” he was also well aware of their faults and lamented their organization in a “low inadequate form [that] mix[es] the fire of the moral sentiment with personal and party heats, with measureless exaggerations, and the blindness that prefers some darling measure to justice and truth” (*Early Lectures* 3: 259). As Prentiss Clark remarks, Emerson was “particularly attentive to how associations and collective reform efforts could stray from their guiding principles and variously lead to unthinking conformity, misplaced sentiments, or hypocrisy” (209) and he often complained about the narrow-mindedness and dogmatism of many reformers of his time. Considering the many faults that one could find in these reformist projects and in their most famous proponents, Emerson believed that one had the right to be wary of those who “personify” change and be skeptical when change is forcibly imposed on individuals. About this he writes:

What then is our true part in relation to these philanthropies? Let us be true to our principle that the soul dwells with us and so accept them [...] Accept the reforms but accept not the person of the reformer nor his law. Accept the reform but be thou thyself sacred, intact, inviolable, one whom leaders, one whom multitudes cannot drag from thy central seat. If you take the reform as the reformer brings it to you he transforms you into an instrument [...] Let the Age be a showman demonstrating in picture the needs and wishes of the soul: take them into your private mind; eat the book and make it your flesh. Let each of these causes take in you a new form, the form of your character and genius. Then the Age has spoken to you, and you have answered it: you have prevailed over it (*Early Lectures* 3: 260).

The transformation of the individual into the instrument that Emerson describes might make the modern reader think about the Marxist concept of reification (from the German: *Verdinglichung*, “turning something into a thing”), however the focal point of this essay is Emerson’s insistence on what Gougeon calls “the central ethical responsibility of the individual soul” (*Virtue’s Hero* 1990: XXI). Time and again, throughout the essay, Emerson insists on the sacredness of the individual, who has to stay put on their “central seat,” a concept that he will explore in “Self-Reliance,” published a year after this essay. Interestingly, in “Reforms” he writes that he “cannot find language of sufficient energy to convey my



sense of the sacredness of private Integrity,” (*Early Lectures* 3: 266) and yet the following year he will find both language and energy to write his most celebrated essay on self-sufficiency.

The 1841 collection *Essays: First Series* also contains what is probably Emerson’s most famous essay on reform, “Man the Reformer,” a lecture that he delivered to the Mechanics’ Apprentices’ Library Association in Boston on January 25th, 1841. In this piece, Emerson begins to reflect on what he calls “the wider scope” of individual reform efforts. He states that:

We are to revise the whole of our social structure, the State, the school, religion, marriage, trade, science, and explore their foundations in our own nature; we are to see that the world not only fitted the former men, but fits us, and to clear ourselves of every usage which has not its roots in our own mind. What is a man born for but to be a Reformer, a Remaker of what man has made; a renouncer of lies; a restorer of truth and good, imitating that great Nature which embosoms us all, and which sleeps no moment on an old past, but every hour repairs herself, yielding us every morning a new day, and with every pulsation a new life? Let him renounce everything which is not true to him, and put all his practices back on their first thoughts, and do nothing for which he has not the whole world for his reason (*Complete Works* 1: 236).

In this famous passage Emerson puts a clear emphasis on the individual, whom he believes is supposed to attempt to improve society at large, to reform “the whole of social structure.” Men are born to be reformers and, as Emerson famously writes in “Self-Reliance,” he wishes to see them questioning old habits and avoiding conformity more often. This “upright and vital” (*Complete Works* 2: 52) attitude, however, has to be applied to the community in which the individual lives, and is thus not meant to be limited to individual experiences. As he writes at the very beginning of “Man the Reformer,” Emerson hopes that every person in the audience has:

Felt his own call to cast aside all evil customs, timidities, and limitations, and to be in his place a free and helpful man, a reformer, a benefactor [...] a brave and upright man, who must find or cut a straight road to everything excellent in the earth, and not only go honorably himself, but *make it easier for all who follow him* to go in honor and with benefit (*Complete Works* 1: 218) [author’s emphasis].

Despite his constant emphasis on the importance of the individual, Emerson does not wish to see them detached from the rest of their community and urges them to help others in their journey towards self-reliance and reform. His reformist energy cannot be more explicitly evident than in this passage in which, with a tone that is reminiscent of “Emerson the preacher,” he asks his audience “whether we have earned our bread today by the hearty contribution of our energies to the common benefit” and urges them not to “cease to *tend* to the correction of flagrant wrongs, by laying one stone aright every day” (*Complete Works* 1: 235–6).

Self-reliance and the reformist efforts are also at the center of another important lecture of the 1840s, “New England Reformers,” an address he delivered at Amory Hall in Boston on March 3rd, 1844. Here, Emerson notes that, in those years, there was a “keener scrutiny of institutions and domestic life than any we had known, there was sincere protesting against existing evils, and there were changes of employment dictated by conscience” (*Complete Works* 3: 241) and points out that the “good result” of these movements was the “assertion of the sufficiency of the private man” (*Complete Works* 3: 241). Slowly, he argues, mankind was realizing the power of the individual and was learning to cast off material aids, in favor of a “growing trust in the private, self-supplied powers of the individual” (*Complete Works* 3: 247). While this text certainly puts emphasis on solitary agents of change, it also theorizes a way for people to act communally that does not take a toll on their individual development.

In a crucial passage of the essay, Emerson writes about the concept of “concert,” which he argues is

Neither better nor worse, neither more nor less potent than individual force. All the men in the world cannot make a statue walk and speak, cannot make a drop of blood, or blade of grass, any more than one man can. But let there be one man, let there be *truth* in two men, in ten men, then is concert for the first time possible (*Complete Works* 3: 252) [author’s emphasis].

As this quotation makes apparent, to him a union of intents is only possible as long as everyone in the community acts truthfully, and to act truthfully means to act with self-reliance. For this model

to work, though, each individual has to reach their full potential. In Emerson's own words:

There can be no concert in two, where there is no concert in one. When the individual is not *individual*, but is dual; when his thoughts look one way, and his actions another; when his faith is traversed by his habits; when his will, enlightened by reason, is warped by his sense; when with one hand he rows, and with the other backs water, what concert can be? (*Complete Works* 3: 253)

Even when he attempts to reconcile the individual with society, Emerson never abandons the idea of self-reliance, since the first step for him is always the development of each individual, who only then would be able to fully function and thrive within a larger society. Although the individual remains the main focus, Emerson perceives the world's interest in communal efforts, in the idea of union. He believes that when this union will finally be realized, "men will live and communicate, and plough, and reap, and govern, as by added ethereal power, when once they are united" (*Complete Works* 3: 253). However, Emerson warns that this union "must be inward, and not one of covenants," for "union is only perfect, when all the uniters are isolated. It is the union of friends who live in different streets or towns" (*Complete Works* 3: 253). Incidentally, these words are strikingly similar to Margaret Fuller's famous passage from *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), in which when discussing marriage, she points out that women had to develop their own individuality before entering a marriage—she affirms that "we must have units before we can have unions" (Fuller 1998: 60)—and are indicative of Emerson's plan to integrate self-reliant individuals within society.

In his later essay "Reform" (1860), which he delivered before the Twenty-Eight Congregation Society at the Music Hall in Boston, he stresses once again that reform is a vital function, that it is "an incessant impulse like that of gravitation" (*Later Lectures* 2: 151) and, playing with the etymology of the word, he maintains that "it is not Reform: It is form, and substance. It is primary truth, the clearing away all the delusions, so that you live to honor, justice, and use" (*Later Lectures* 2: 155). The reform efforts of his time are, to him, indicative of our aspiration to imagine fairer possibilities of life and to live truthfully, and therefore he wants self-reliant

individuals to “be an intellectual power” that, by seeing themselves, have to “make others see” (*Later Lectures 2*: 155). Twenty years after the first essay devoted to the theme of reform, Emerson is even more adamant in advocating for self-reliant individuals to fulfill certain obligations to society. He affirms that:

The part of man is to advance, to stand always for the Better, not himself, his property, his grandmother’s spoons, his corner lot, and shop-till, and the petty trick that he and his have done over and over again, till the patience of Nature is exhausted; but to stand for his neighbors and mankind; for the making others as good as he is, for largest liberty; for enriching, enlightening and enkindling others and making life great and happy to nations (*Later Lectures 2*: 157).

It is striking to see Emerson downplaying (to a certain extent) the centrality of the self. Furthermore, in this passage he powerfully asserts that self-reliance should not be an end in and of itself, but rather it should function as a tool to improve life for everyone, everywhere. Emerson even mentions the word “nations” which, though it could refer simply to a great number of individuals, points to the *idea* of “nation” in its more common meaning, that of an organized society in which a diverse group of people, made up of single individuals, work together for the common good.

As these essays demonstrate, whenever Emerson wrote on reform, though he might have seemed solely concerned with individual growth, he was in fact also advocating for tangible social changes, which, in his mind, were to be introduced by self-reliant individuals, by those whom we could call reformers or dissenters. The starting point of his theory of reform is clearly the formation of self-reliant individuals, for as he writes in “New England Reformers,” in 1844, “Society gains nothing whilst a man, not himself renovated, attempts to renovate things around him” (*Complete Works 3*: 225). Eminent critics have analyzed and described Emersonian individualism, and though they are right in noticing the importance of the individual project, Emerson seems to think that it is only one side of the matter. For him, individualism was never meant to end in itself. An excerpt from his *Journals*, in which he comments on the 1848 revolutions in Europe, explains this point even further:

People here expect a revolution. There will be no revolution, none that deserves to be called so. There may be a scramble for money. But as all the people we see want the things we now have, & not better things, it is very certain that they will, under whatever change of forms, keep the old system. When I see changed men, I shall look for a changed world (*Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* 10: 311).

While analyzing passages that record Emerson's reaction to this historical event, Sacvan Bercovitch emphasizes that Emerson had a "firm belief that all hope for change, reformist or revolutionary, peaceful or violent, belonged to individualism" (1993: 338). However, this individualism was not the end goal for him, and indeed he states that he would only start looking for a changed world after individuals took it upon themselves to radically change, thus suggesting that the process of amelioration of each individual should not stop there, but should instead be the engine of a larger revolution. As Robert Milder points out, "the future, as Emerson imagined it, rested on a full-scale reorganization of consciousness, [one that] led individuals [...] to a terra incognita of spiritual being that promised to remold traditions and social institutions" (1999: 56). Milder calls this a "revolution-by-consciousness," and describes it as a process that rests on the idea that to transform the world, one has to first transform mankind (1999: 59). Furthermore, Jeffrey Stout believes that time and again, Emerson in his writings alludes to Romans 12:2 ("Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind") and posits that Emerson makes use of a "rhetoric of transformation [which] aims to draw readers into a process of ethical change" (2014: 20). These renewed individuals, humankind 2.0, are those who, as Emerson states in "Reform," should bring about (social) change: "Each man is a new power in nature; has an aptitude which none else has; is a new method and distributes things anew. If he could attain full size he would take up first or last, atom by atom, all the world into a new form" (*Later Lectures* 2: 159).

The only way to attain "full size," however, is to use the power of self-reliance to change and improve the lives of others, for as Emerson writes in "The Transcendentalist," "the good and wise must learn to act, and carry salvation to the combatants and demagogues in the dusty arena below" (*Collected Works* 1: 211). To truly be self-reliant, one needs to recognize that

self-reliance does not extinguish its power into the individual. On the contrary, as he writes in his lecture “The Individual” (part of *The Philosophy of History* series), individual progress is the necessary condition for the emergence of any meaningful social reform: “out of the strength and wisdom of the private heart shall go forth at another era the regeneration of society” (*Early Lectures* 2: 186). As is often the case in Emerson’s oeuvre, the apparent dichotomy of self/society is rethought and ultimately almost dissolved. Not only, as James M. Albrecht has noted, Emerson’s self is “inescapably social,” but in his works a “healthy community” is often described as one in which “active individuals inspire and antagonize one another through their diverse activities” (1999: 21–22). The constant progress of amelioration of the individual that Emerson argues for throughout his whole career places extreme value on the variety of human experience. Although Emerson firmly believes in a “universal mind” of which “each individual man is one more incarnation” (*Collected Works* 2: 4), he also appreciates the dynamism and diversity that could arise in a society whose members were able to learn the lesson of self-reliance. As Joseph Urbas notes, Emerson’s “self-reliant soul” is “fundamentally creative—morally, poetically, religiously, and politically creative” (2021: 235) and, as I have shown, this ultimately results in a radical rethinking or a rigorous reconstructing of society and its institutions. Urbas also rightly points out that, for Emerson, “self-reliance is not synonymous with indifference to social or political engagement” and that “obligations to self do not dispense us from those to others” (2021: 254). Although this is undoubtedly true, Emerson’s theory of reform goes even further. When he writes that “every reform was once a private opinion” (*Collected Works* 2: 4), he not only stresses that self-reliance does not oppose social engagement, but rather he envisions moral and ethical development as the necessary ground for—and hence the first step of—any meaningful project of social and political reform.

*Life Matters:  
The Human Condition  
in the Age of Pandemics*

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*Abstract* The idea of dissent has often been discussed in association with the works of the Transcendentalists, who greatly influenced the literary and philosophical landscape of the United States in the 19th century. This article aims to shed light on an often-ignored side of Ralph Waldo Emerson who, often described as an aloof thinker, was an adamant dissenter and, more specifically, a conscientious reformer. By focusing on his theory of reform as expressed in a selection of essays devoted to this theme, this paper argues that Emerson's concept of reform, though primarily directed towards the individual, was also intended to have repercussions in society at large. This dichotomy between individualism and communal effort is analyzed in texts which cover a twenty-year span in Emerson's life, to demonstrate that this dualism constitutes an opposition that must be reevaluated and ultimately resolved.

*Keywords:* Transcendentalism, reform, Ralph Waldo Emerson, individualism, dissent, American Literature

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