

The Midterm Week Bridge: Emerson, Pound, and the Modernist Individual

Introduction

As indicated on the syllabus, the week of the midterm I have assigned you two readings that we will not have time to discuss as a class. These works, however, will be beneficial to your understanding of where we are headed in the coming weeks. Instead of posting questions, as I usually do, I'll instead post a short reading guide to both readings, to help you see where they fit and to point out a few relevant sections.

[Recommendation: Read the notes on Emerson, then read Emerson and Pound. Then read the notes on Pound and the rest. To ensure this, I'll include Pound's poem in the lecture.]

Emerson and the “Old” Individual

Emerson, a prominent philosopher, thinker, and [Transcendentalist](#) of his time, was one of the first Americans to lay out a detailed philosophy of nature and life. True to his argument in this essay, however, his philosophy is not a coherent whole, but spans a number of essays and periods of his life. Contradictory ideas and ideals clash from essay to essay, as Emerson seeks after what truth he can find. Before we begin the essay itself, I want to note that Emerson's methods as a philosopher and thinker are seen as American, jumbled together from different cultures and viewpoints. The 'unsystematic' system runs through American thought for centuries (possibly even into today).

“Self-Reliance” is important to our course for a number of reasons. In much the same way that Crèvecoeur's view of America set the stage for our first semester half, Emerson will set the stage for the second. One of the most pervasive and influential concepts of the American Experiment and American culture is the **individual**. Thinking about ourselves, we are raised as individuals, attend schools (and accrue debt) as individuals, live (ideally) in homes we own as

families (of individuals). The concept of the 'self' is rarely questioned in depth; we generally accept the individual self as fact. (Clearly, I'm headed somewhere with this idealized portrait. In fact, I'm headed in two directions.)

First, the notion of the radical Individual, **the genius**, is laid out clearly in Emerson's essay. Through an in-depth look at the ideals of individualism, Emerson spells out the best life an American can lead: "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string." While I won't pretend to summarize his whole essay or argument, here are a few points of focus. As he explains it, "[t]he virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs" (577). The enemy in this essay is **conformity**, along with its twin, **complacency**. Emerson attacks all institutions, traditions, persons, and customs that stand between an individual and his attainment of greatness. On 579, he discusses the "gentlest asinine expression" that settles on the face of one who constantly forces a smile for the benefit of another. On 580, he argues that "to be great is to be misunderstood."

Where is Emerson heading with this argument? Part of it is the Romantic notion of **Intuition** (even if for Emerson we are all connected to some Divine Spirit, not just responding to Nature but with the soul to see its majesty). He basically argues that anything that keeps each individual from living his own nature and doing his own work is a flaw or weakness. We get separated from ourselves by acts of kindness, or weakness, or distraction. As the essay continues, Emerson discusses religion, travel ("My giant goes with me wherever I go" (589)), and other institutions that weaken us (including government). Published in 1841, this document will influence generations who seek an **authentic** life in America. Emerson, here, lays out the most extreme example of what true self-reliance looks like and the ideal for each individual.

Second, to return to my two points, his vision of the individual is very ideal and will be challenged by future writers and thinkers (including Emerson himself, who in later essays questions the power of “Fate,” for example. “Self-reliance” is young Emerson. His essay, “Fate,” is written after the death of his son). In other words, the ideas of this essay will work as a counterpoint and contrast to what we will see in the weeks after the midterm. Emerson’s confidence in the power of the individual will meet the challenges and uncertainties of the 20th Century, as we have already experienced with Hemingway. Without this Emersonian background, the newer works may be harder to understand. For this reason, please take the time to read and digest “Self-Reliance.”

Pound and the Challenge

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough. (1923)

At first glance, you will probably wonder where the poem is. I hope that you wonder why I assigned these three lines. Here is your answer. If there was an individual who fit Emerson’s notion of genius from “Self-Reliance,” it was Ezra Pound. If you glance at his biography, you will see that he lived a long time (through $\frac{3}{4}$ of the 20th Century). Pound broke with poetic tradition to help create Modernist poetry, with an emphasis on **Imagist poetry**. Pound’s goal was to become the greatest poet in the world (no small soul here), and his method was to learn and adapt Chinese poetry into Western ideas. (That Pound eventually “cracks up” and supports Mussolini and the Fascist party in Italy can only add proof to his genius, right? As Emerson argues, a genius is rarely understood in his own time).

Two hallmarks of Pound’s poetry are his political motivation and his technique. In our course we will avoid his politics, except to say that literature gets increasingly politicized in the

20th Century (as we will soon find out). Our short poem, “In a Station of the Metro,” is a haiku, with the title acting as the first line. This poem serves two purposes. First, it shows a new method of poetry, capturing things in the most concise, clear language possible (which will partly influence Hemingway). The vision of this poem (and those like it) is to bring a new way of seeing to the world, an appreciation for subjects usually neglected. Second (if you trust me), this poem in some ways shows the disappearance of the individual into the crowd. The defined character of the world seems to fade out here, and the people become almost ghosts. Thus, while Pound might carry the mantle of Emersonian genius (along with other famous literary figures of the time), the people he sees in the world seem to have less and less substance. It is hard to promote the radical individual when people live packed into cities. The space that Emerson’s individual seems to need may be disappearing.

What Emerges

These two readings/notes are meant to get you thinking about where we are headed. The next few weeks will see many definitions of the individual emerge. Having these two as a place to start will help you to tackle coming readings. Please take the time to read Emerson and Pound while working on your papers.

Questions to consider:

- 1) What is your opinion of the role of the individual? Why do you hold that view?
- 2) What do you make of Emerson’s style? Does his individual seem “real” or “ideal”?
- 3) In Pound, how important is setting? What does the word “apparition” evoke? What is a “wet, black bough”?