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David Vallins

# Self-Reliance: Individualism in Emerson and Coleridge

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David Vallins

## Self-Reliance: Individualism in Emerson and Coleridge

What is a great man but one of great affinities, who takes up into himself all arts, sciences, and knowables, as his food? Hence his contemporaries tax him with plagiarism. But the inventor only knows how to borrow; and society is glad to forget the innumerable laborers who ministered to this architect, and reserves all its gratitude to him.

—R. W. Emerson, 'Plato; or, The Philosopher'<sup>1</sup>

On meeting Coleridge, Wordsworth, and other British luminaries in 1833, Emerson claimed to be unimpressed. God, he wrote in his journal, 'has shown me the men I wished to see [—] Landor, Coleridge, Carlyle, Wordsworth [—] he has thereby comforted & confirmed me in my convictions.... I shall judge more justly, less timidly, of wise men forevermore. To be sure not one of them is a mind of the very first class.... Especially are they all deficient ... in insight into religious truth. They have no idea of that species of moral truth which I call the first philosophy.'<sup>2</sup> That an author who in 1829 had celebrated Coleridge's 'living soul' and 'universal knowledge,' and more recently had written a poem with so Coleridgean a title as 'Gnothi seauton' (or 'know thyself'), in which he echoes Coleridge's view that 'We begin with the I KNOW MYSELF, in order to end with the absolute I AM,' should now describe both him and Wordsworth as mediocre and lacking in religious insight may well seem surprising.<sup>3</sup> The 'first' or 'primal' philosophy of which he says they

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<sup>1</sup> *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. E. W. Emerson, 12 vols (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903–4), 4:41–2.

<sup>2</sup> *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Oilman and Alfred R. Ferguson, 14 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1960–78), 4:78–9 (hereafter *JMN*).

<sup>3</sup> See *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, 10 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909–14), 2:277 (the passage derives from a letter to his aunt), 'Gnothi seauton,' esp. 11. 29–40 (*JMN*, 3:291), and S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983), 1:283 (hereafter *BE*); also Coleridge's poem 'Gnothi seauton' in *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. H. N. Coleridge, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912), 1:487. On Emerson's Neo-