"Self-Reliance," Plagiarism, and the Suicide of Imitation
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Abstract: Incorporating Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance" into any class for which student writing is an important element can serve a purpose not immediately apparent in the essay itself. In addition to being a part of the American literary tradition, it can be used as a discouragement of plagiarism. This is somewhat contradictory, since plagiarism usually involves a student making inordinate references to writings that are believed to be traditional and authoritative. I argue that plagiarism is best considered not as an ethical offense along the lines of theft, or as a moralistic transgression along the lines of cheating oneself out of an education. The use of these explanations is understandable, but the explanations are either disingenuous or inconsequential. For Emerson, one must be confident enough to risk presenting one's own ideas, and if one does not, one is not doing the kind of work required for a course in writing. In short, a plagiarized paper from a student--particularly a high school or undergraduate college student--is best understood not as a matter of ethics, but more importantly, as a matter of simply writing a very bad paper.

Taught in grade schools and colleges, Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" is part of the canon of American intellectual history. This is something of a problem, since, as an established part of American intellectual history, there is a tendency to give the essay traditional authority. "Self-Reliance," however, flouts such authority. So teaching "Self-Reliance" requires one to confront the idea of conforming to nonconformity. Students will instinctively regard Emerson as one of the names and customs on whom Emerson himself wants you not to rely. What follows is an explanation of the inconsistency that results if we establish the anti-establishment Emerson as a luminary in the American philosophical establishment. This problem is exemplified, I believe, in a charming but misguided 1951 educational short called "Developing Self-Reliance" that serves as a good foil for teaching some of the problems that come when one tries to teach people non-conformity in a conformist world.

This problem--that of establishing the anti-establishment Emerson as a luminary in the American philosophical establishment--is small compared with a more difficult, more practical problem that comes with teaching. This problem of conformity is, I believe, a significant part of the pervasive habit of plagiarism among students.
Teaching Emerson's "Self Reliance," with a stress on the idea of what I call character plagiarism can help change this habit of writing plagiarism. I argue that plagiarism is not so much an ethical issue as matter of simple evaluation of student essays. Plagiarism is not bad because it is stealing the work of some more established scholar; it is bad because it is bad writing. I suggest we understand plagiarism not so much as a legalistic or moral offense, but rather as a deficit of writing skill, thinking skill, and, above all, bravery. Emerson' "Self-Reliance" demonstrates that what is important in writing is not the development of research and citation habits, but rather the development of a willingness to write in a way that will stand and fall on the merits of the writer alone.

What Self-Reliance is Not

I have found it useful to approach the topic of self-reliance negatively. To explain what self-reliance is not, I use a 1951 educational film called "Developing Self-Reliance." This film, part of a corny Cornet Film series worthy of parody (see also the unintentionally hilarious "Dating Do's and Don'ts" video) exemplifies a common misunderstanding of the essay. It promotes self-reliance as a phony individualism serving to make one a dutiful employee who follows the rules of the institution, and a relatively thoughtless citizen unable to critically evaluate larger cultural problems.

The short film's campiness and bland moralism make it as charming as it is offensive to contemporary sensibilities. It begins with a narrator explaining the problem of self-reliance in terms of childhood development. A toddler is shown being dressed by his mother, and then an older boy neglects to feed the family dog, expecting someone else to do it. The narrator concludes that parents taking care of things for children leads them to like being dependent. If, for example, they do not learn to struggle with their math homework on their own, they risk being berated later in life by a boss for needing help on an assigned project. "Why do you bother me with something simple like this?" barks the boss to the sulking employee, "Something I'm paying you to decide. You'll never ahead around here or anywhere else unless you can make some decisions of your own!"
This leads the main story, which involves a teenaged boy, Alan, getting a life lesson from his teacher, Mr. Carson. Mr. Carson asks Alan what he thinks self-reliance is, and the boy provides a standard response, saying it is about "taking the blame for things that are my fault." Alan is given an index card with four steps toward self-reliance: (1). Assume responsibility; (2). Be informed; (3). Know where you're going; (4). Make your own decisions. He is then set off into the world in order to develop the requisite skills.

Alan is not given completely bad advice. It is difficult to argue against the value of personal responsibility, knowledge, goal-directed activities, and autonomy. The problem is that the advice given becomes unrelated to the essay upon which it is supposedly inspired. For example, Alan is readying himself for a date, and asks his mother what to wear, but then realizes that he needs to think about it himself. He decides that, because he might meet the girl's parents, he should wear a tie. Whereas Emerson says that "imitation is suicide" and that "what I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think," Alan is shown learning that being informed means simply knowing how to meet the expectations of others. He is also shown expressing ambivalence about what classes he is taking next year, and his father admonishes him while sauntering toward the family bookcase, where his knitting spouse, the epitome of a 1950s middle-class housewife, informs him of the shelf on which the family copy of "Self-Reliance" is found. The father claims that he learned a lot from the essay, which he calls the "foundation of our way of life." He seems to assume that the 4-step plan Mr. Carson gave Alan is derived from Emerson's essay, when of course, Emerson provides no such plan, or any formulaic guidance on self-reliance. It is clear that Emerson's attempt at inspiration was ultimately lost on Alan's father and Mr. Carson, who see the essay as a reflection of what 1950s America valued, namely a conformity to ideals of individual responsibility to follow the rules.

Mr. Carson explains how Alan learned to "make self-reliance a habit" by concentrating on his studies, learning from his friends, and "making decisions for himself based on the best information he could get." There is no consideration,
however, of whether Alan is critically evaluating any assumptions behind the information. Rather, Alan is praised simply for making a choice within the cultural parameters. He follows reliable information more than provocative inspiration. Emerson says that we must "abide by our spontaneous impressions" (132); Alan is taught to forsake spontaneity for predictability.

The culmination of Alan's education comes at a student meeting, when, in the midst of various complaining students, Alan stands up to offer a solution to the parking problem. After he proposes that the old tennis courts be made into extra lots, the students quickly and happily conclude the meeting. What Alan does not consider, and what the film cannot conceive of him considering, is that the parking problem could be an early symptom of the suburban car culture that was developing in America in the 1950s, and which encouraged environmental degradation and physical laziness. It is certainly too much to ask of a teenager that he solve the cultural problems of America, and it would have been extraordinary if this 1951 educational short could have had such prophetic skill. Yet Emerson is trying to induce just this kind of thinking. Alan was using his mind to solve a problem within the system; a self-reliant thinker would look at whether the system itself is the problem.

Plagiarism: A Character Issue

The type of thinking exemplified in the film "Developing Self Reliance" is evident in classrooms as well as traditional family and work settings. Students are often conditioned to think that writing about a topic involves solving a task presented by a boss/instructor, and using tools to which the boss/instructor has access but no time to use themselves. They are workers putting something together with reliable, quality parts. Writing becomes a compiling of authorities rather than an exercise in creative thinking. "Self-Reliance" demands that one "learn to detect and watch that gleam that flashes" across one's own mind "more than the lustre of the firmament of the bards and sages." Classes of quiet and timid students should hear the warning to "abide by one's spontaneous impression then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side" or
Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice
Spring 2015 (8:1)

else someone else will have to "say with masterly good sense what we had thought all along" (132-133). Novel ideas lie waiting to be owned by the student willing to risk investing in them. If students are encouraged to follow their own thoughts, rather than immediately looking to outside authorities to make their writing credible, the value of the writing is improved--even if the ideas themselves turn out not to be brilliant. The student grows, because writing becomes the expression of a developing self rather than a tool who just fulfills a boss's need to complete company objectives.

"Self-Reliance" supports a non-criminalistic attitude toward plagiarism. The criminalistic approach makes plagiarism into a form of stealing. This is misguided and slightly disingenuous. Texts appropriated by students are often from the internet, often anonymously authored, and in many cases from sites that intend for people to use their material, sometimes for a fee. Further, in most cases the student papers are not promulgated, and no credit is given to the student other than that assigned by the professor. The principle harm that is done is to the sensitive professor who feels they have been duped by the student. Granted, plagiarism becomes more serious the farther you get into the academic process. Plagiarizing a dissertation is a graver matter, but is still not distinctly harmful. If you steal another person's ideas, another person's argument, or even another person's data, the ideas, arguments and data are no less useful because of it. To say "this argument was plagiarized, therefore we should reject it" would be to make what philosophers call the genetic fallacy: connecting the origins of an idea to the value of that idea. It has to be acknowledged that this stealing does an injustice to the person who labored to develop it. Further, inconsequential undergraduate plagiarism is perhaps a gateway to more significant plagiarism later, and thus should be dealt with. But it still seems disingenuous to think of this as a matter of honesty. Since the author of useful ideas is largely irrelevant to the ideas themselves, nothing much is at stake in us trusting that we know the correct author.

Some professors acknowledge that the criminalistic understanding does not work, and resort to thinking of plagiarism as cheating oneself. One does not get the benefits of the intellectual development resulting from a paper created with self-reliance.
This is of course true, but hardly a strong statement to the student. After all, if we follow this argument through, we get odd conclusions. For example, a student who studies only an hour for a test that requires two hours of study also would be cheating himself. After all, this idea of cheating yourself involves the idea of working less than you should, but not working less than you should is not an egregious offense. It is, rather, part of the rationale for grading itself, and we do not think the student who gets a B rather than an A because they chose to study less is cheating themselves in any way that requires a special reproach on our part. Giving the grade is enough of a reproach.

I take a different approach to plagiarism, and I see this approach suggested in "Self Reliance." Plagiarism is really a matter of writing a very bad paper. It reflects poorly on the writers who are either too afraid to take a chance with their own ideas or too lazy to come up with them. This idea is nothing new. Every teacher knows that students can be lazy and diffident. I am proposing, however, that we forego thinking of laziness and diffidence as explanations for some ethical offense, and deal with laziness and diffidence as problems in themselves. A plagiarized paper is merely a small step lower in quality from a meticulously referenced paper. The meticulously referenced paper is just a compilation of ideas serving as an exercise in recitation, perhaps a semi-valuable exercise in organization, but not a helpful new contribution to the world. It is simply the work of a dutiful version of the young man in "Developing Self-Reliance," who is able to conform to the boss's directives. It suggests a division of labor, with the bosses as bourgeoisie and the students as proletariat.

Bad writers' ideas, in short, should be preferable to the recitation of other writers' good ideas, since the bad ideas are at least novel. A professor might justifiably assign the meticulously referenced recitation a D or F, while the non-meticulously referenced exposition--i.e. the plagiarized paper-- is assigned a zero. The difference between these papers is a matter of quality more than morality. Emerson say that there is a time in every person's education when they begin to understand that "imitation is suicide," (133) and that they must accept their own ideas for better or worse. Giving a zero to the student, and not allowing that student any opportunity to rewrite the paper, seems an
appropriate natural consequence to the act of literary suicide committed by the plagiarizer.

"Self-Reliance" is about authentic self-creation. It is a strong criticism of what can be called character plagiarism, the attempt to appropriate the authority of others into your own, and forgetting the necessity for novel contributions on your part. Considering the idea of character plagiarism helps in the discouragement of academic plagiarism. If we consider this idea further, we see that it can help mitigate uncomfortable passages in Emerson's text. For example, Emerson takes up the topic of charitable donations, and appears to be inappropriately dismissive:

Do not tell me, as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong. There is a class of persons to whom by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold; for them I will go to prison, if need be; but your miscellaneous popular charities; the education at college of fools; the building of meeting-houses to the vain end to which many now stand; alms to sots; and the thousandfold Relief Societies; — though I confess with shame I sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is a wicked dollar which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold. (135-136)

Emerson wants authentic charity rather than guilt-giving. The reference to "spiritual affinity" indicates some kind of transcendent connection among people, but this connection does not involve simply believing in some universal ethical principle. There should be some personal connection. Emerson refuses to give to the poor, one might say, because he would be refusing to abet their lack of self-reliance. "Self-Reliance" cannot be interpreted that narrowly, though. The disdain expressed toward the philanthropist is best understood as a disdain for external authority. It is, once again,
the problem of focusing on customs over realities. Self-reliance is not just about making a living on one's own; it is about foregoing creative dependence on others, and living with one's own ideals. This passage is about character plagiarism. One should not appropriate authoritative charities in place of one's own spontaneous charitable inspirations.

The passage about the Relief Societies, then, can be interpreted in light of the issue of writing plagiarism, which, in my view, is a subset of character plagiarism. A student does not have to feel obligated to use any source other than the one to which the student feels a strong connection. Plainly expressed, you quote only what has genuinely influenced you, that to which you have a kind of spiritual affinity. The belief that good writing involves merely finding the most authoritative sources gives way to the belief that good writing involves, at most, the inspiration of outside sources. In "The Over-Soul," Emerson says that humans are "a stream whose source is hidden" (237). In the case of plagiarism, that hiddenness involves quoting the authors without disclosing the source. For a good writer, however, sources are hidden in the author. They are not camouflaged like a wary animal, but integrated into the environment, like gravity in the rapids of a river. They are hidden because they are the unacknowledged position against which an author argues, or they are hidden in the way that early childhood memories are buried in our adult consciousness, but yet constitute the character of one's adulthood. The mature writer has hidden their sources deeply, in their expression of mind, rather than superficially, in their neglect at including an MLA-certified bibliography.

A later part of "Self-Reliance" gives us additional insight into plagiarism. The claim is that "reliance on Property, including the reliance on governments which protect it, is the want of self-reliance" (152) On this view of self-reliance, one should not worry about maintaining one's property, since doing so belies an insecurity about oneself. We are not our property. We are not even our thoughts, if we think of thought as owned by a mind. Emerson's Over-Soul encompasses all minds. The reference in "Self-Reliance" to being diffident about a new idea ends with saying that we will have to shamefully accept
hearing the idea we had being expressed by another. But it is that other person’s idea as much as ours. We don’t own ideas, we are just users of them, and though there is some value to being the first to present it, we do not thereby need to insist on branding it our own. We should not measure our value by what we have, but by what we are. What we want is "living property, which does not wait the beck of rulers, or mobs, or revolutions, or fire, or storm, or bankruptcies, but perpetually renews itself wherever the man breathes" (153).

Plagiarism, then, is not about protecting the intellectual property of writers. I suggest not framing the issue in terms of theft, and character issues related to illegal behavior, but in terms of bad writing, and the character issues related to diffidence and laziness. We should indeed, like Mr. Carson, be interested in developing self-reliance in our students. We should not, however, view self-reliance as a responsibility just to acknowledge sources, but as a responsibility to eschew sources when possible. Plagiarism is not about the student denying themselves a learning experience while fulfilling the requirements of the course, but it is about the student failing to complete the requirements of the course in the first place. These requirements are for creative self-development, not just familiarity with names and customs. The course should be rigorous, but rigor is associated with working to develop new ideas, rather than packing old ideas into a paper while also loading them onto bibliography. In sum, my suggestion is to teach self-reliance in all courses that require writing by finding a way to teach "Self-Reliance" in all courses that require writing.
Works (Reluctantly) Cited


**TADD RUETENIK** earned his Ph.D. from the Philosophy and Literature Program at Purdue University. He has published, among others, articles on Toni Morrison, vegetarianism, Sartre's *Nausea* and American philosophy, as well as a very unorthodox interpretation of the *Scarlet Letter*. An Associate Professor of Philosophy at St. Ambrose University, he has taught courses on the philosophy of literature, existentialism, and aesthetics.