

The Emerson Nobody Wants to Buy

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There are times when I feel that the greatest Emersonian line ever written has got to be, “Excuse me, while I kiss the sky.”¹ It combines ironic insolence with ecstasy, Emerson’s “taking the way *from* man,” with his “hour of vision.”² How disenchanting, then, to see Jimi Hendrix’s fire become truly *all consuming*: everybody identifying with sexy rebels replicated on billboards and buses, beatific about their choice of gin or jeans. If this is Emersonian individualism — the Commodity personified — then surely it is a naiveté that we can no longer afford.

Well, is it? Although her paper does not directly address this question, Naoko Saito offers us, among other riches, insightful reason to reject our individualist, consumerist spectacle in the name of Emerson. The Emersonian individualist, Saito suggests, is better understood as someone who possesses nothing that could be sold, and desires only what a learning friendship has to share. Indeed, this reading backs up her claim that Emerson, far from having sicced modern narcissism and the will to power on us, can help minister to this state today, and so is anything but an irrelevant dinosaur. To develop my interpretation, I shall sharpen a distinction latent in her text, that between individualism as self-assertion, on the one hand, and individualism as self-recovery, on the other.

Most everybody has felt the force of the ideal of the self-assertive individualist. A staple of Romantic impatience with the compromises of modern democracies, this figure rises to meet the danger that conformity-inducing conventions are crippling our capacity for self-reliance, for being true to each of our own original intuitions, and so for genuine self-government. Against such normalizing coercions, preying on insecurity about our self-worth, Emerson and others assert the freedom to express authentic “Whim” as if nothing were more urgent. In this spirit, Saito seconds the complaint of a fourteen year-old Japanese boy as follows,

Though being a thoroughly personal and private voice, this is the cry of a suppressed gleam of light that cannot find an entrance into his culture, a negative manifestation of his prophetic whim trapped in an icy cave....In its negative, dark picture, this young boy reminds us of Emerson’s voice: “the heart refuses to be imprisoned; in its first and narrowest pulses, it already tends outward with a vast force, and to immense and innumerable expansions”...He suggests that there should be a route of education that can help us revive the gleam of light once being killed...that can inwardly empower the young to battle outwardly against social conspiracy.

Is it too fanciful to hear behind these lines, as if in accompaniment, Hendrix’s fierce guitar, declaring war on cowed euphemism, and testifying to the wild joy of being alive? Determined iconoclast, sure about his “gleam of light” within, and so inspired to flaunt the proprieties without: is this not the kind of self his amplifier asserts? There are moments when Saito too appears to champion such a figure. “The foremost task of Emersonian education,” she declares, “is to acquire a strong self-centeredness to awaken the lost gleam of light, to be a ‘hero who is immovably centered.’” The

picture here is of individual creativity in chains, but morally resolved to break loose and push back the night.

Yet as I have suggested, I worry that this picture is finally too ill-defined to emulate in good conscience. Viewing the enemy as conformity *per se* is too broad: such an attitude casts a mistrustful cloud over all relationships, and fails to distinguish the edifying and encouraging from the stifling. Paranoid about influence, I am then, ironically, all-too vulnerable to the allure of false friends, who promise to help make my flickering light shine more star-like in the latest mass productions. Moreover, believing that I already possess a mind illuminated, believing that I already know that “I think, I am,” is a recipe for a self that never unsettles itself, that asserts and asserts given, indeed planted, desires, without growing into responsibility for them. Eventually, the hollowness of such wayward demands, their inability to convince me myself that they represent anything as substantial as a self with a claim to dignity, are bound to silence me as surely as any intimidating convention.

However, Saito also gives us another way of characterizing Emerson’s individualism. This is intimated in the very next sentences of hers after the one on Emersonian education I quoted above. “This self-centeredness is not a form of hedonism; instead, it aims for a thorough confrontation with one’s self to reclaim his or her natural proclivity. The fundamental ethical and philosophical question to be addressed is, ‘Where do we find ourselves?’” Let me explain why I find a disjunction between these sentences and their predecessor, one that broaches a distinction between two types of individualism. The earlier sentence speaks of a figure who has a grip on his threatened inner self, and who is ready to engage the enemy outside; it invokes a poised, centered warrior. The succeeding sentences paint a darker predicament. Here, the figure has precisely lost her “natural proclivity” or sense of direction; to borrow a term of Charles Taylor’s, she has become morally disoriented.³ Perhaps she found herself responding, or failing to respond, to the world in ways that violated her self-understanding; perhaps she awoke one day a stranger to herself. After some such fall, the very sense that there *is* a self guiding her actions toward the good, a self to assert, is apt to become questionable. “Where do I find myself?” indeed, and how can I right myself in the abyss? This picture is of someone humbled to her roots, who has been dispossessed of all strength. A character, needless to say, that nobody would want to buy.

Now in this darkness, Emerson and Saito point out, there is a gleam of light. But this gleam appears to me to be precisely not yet a self: it is a spontaneous sensation of life, new and untested, and not a coherent history; it is a “transcendental moment of [breaking] time above [continuous] time.” As such, it presents me with a direction to follow, and hopefully to orient myself morally to — but is it the right direction? Saito observes: “it is a mixture of potential good and bad. In Cavell’s words, the meaning of Whim is ‘to be proven only on the way, by the way’ and whim is ‘prophetic’.” But again, even if I am bound to follow one whim or another, is it not more prudent and less self-deceptive to simply resign myself to that fact? And so give up on anything but a cynical self? Having lost confidence in my judgment, how can I *trust* in any particular prophecy, let alone in my ability to follow through in the long run, virtuously, to some kind of good life?

I think the answer to this dilemma has to be that a necessary condition for my trusting in an inner gleam of light is some friend placing their trust in me. In despair, what I lack is precisely any self that is capable of believing in its judgments and actions. Before I can believe in a sign of life enough to regain a morally oriented self, I first need to regain enough of a self to be capable of such belief. How is this possible? The only way is by receiving another's faith from the outside, his confidence in my judgment. And why should I accept this confidence, why not distrust it as well? First of all, because it is sincere: because he *is* confident in my judgment, this friend scrupulously avoids telling me what I should do. And mainly because — and this is the hardest rock I can think of on which to turn my spade — that confidence is accompanied by an undeniably sympathetic understanding of my predicament, disarming doubt. Such an understanding is nurtured in conversation where we learn together about the human, all-too human failings that ground this trust. Only from someone who has experienced the same kind of disorientation as I have, who has evidently overcome it (if only for the moment), and who is wholeheartedly confident that I can too, can I borrow the courage to trust my — incipient — self. Only from such a person may I receive this radical moral education. And so recover myself.

Thus individualism as self-recovery is a very poor cousin to the bold hero asserting his gleam of light against a hostile world, let alone to the garden-variety egocentrist. But in the braggart's circus that has sprung up around us since Emerson's time, this poverty may sound more like prophecy than still more amplifications of whim. It speaks neither of the imperial self nor even of the self under threat, but rather of the self already lost. And not necessarily to some exceptional psychodrama: on another occasion, I would be ready to argue that our selves are mostly lost all the time to the normal run of capitalist fragmentation, beancounting, and theatricality. This idea of individualism in Emerson, then, first challenges us to acknowledge, and mourn, the full extremity of this empty darkness, this society in quiet desperation.

But even in our lostness, there is the gleam of light, the irrepressible spark of resurrection. And there are friends, like Emerson and Saito, who have devoted themselves to extending their trust in that spark to others. By demonstrating that they have an intimate understanding of our hopeless condition, yet by bearing witness to their faith in a grace given to all, in the present, they can help us begin to “mediate between grief in our irrecoverable past, a struggle for revival in the here and now, and a prophetic drive to become ourselves in the unknown [hence unhoped-for] future.” Individualism here means not the power to wall yourself off from others' influence, but the need to accept the trust of other individuals at a level of intimacy that must be won philosophically, that is to say, through honestly searching conversation. It means the communion of souls. Not wishful displays of insouciance. Indeed, in cultivating this community, will we not be committed to struggling against the exploitation of our hard-won celebrations of life, the way they are used to dress up programmed appetites?

Walter Benjamin once called for revolutionary thinkers who are convinced that “*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.”²⁴ Substitute for a clear

“enemy” a more shadowy, Camusian “plague,” and these become rallying words for the Emersonian individualist, trying to rescue ours, and Hendrix’s, gleams of light from both outer travesty and inner anguish. They capture one more reason we should be grateful to Naoko Saito for enlisting Emerson’s spirit so movingly in the struggle for moral education today.

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1. Jimi Hendrix, “Purple Haze,” *Experience Hendrix*, LLC, 2000.
 2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 271.
 3. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 3-107.
 4. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 255.