EMERSON
POLITICAL WRITINGS

CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE
HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

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EMERSON

Political Writings

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Introduction

Biography

It is difficult to imagine the United States without Ralph Waldo Emerson. Matthew Arnold judged his essays "the most important work done in prose" in the nineteenth century, and Emerson's influence is fully evident throughout American literature.[1] In philosophy, he can be read as lending support to or anticipating – despite the obvious contradictions – Kantian idealism, pragmatism, ordinary language philosophy, and post-modernism. He had a powerful effect on early political theorists as well as on many current ones, and in practical politics he became a leading voice for the abolition of slavery. His environmental interests inspired the school of Pre-Raphaelite painters and the landscape architects who made nature central to urban planning. Emerson, Harold Bloom suggests, is responsible for the one true American religion – that of self-reliance.

Raised in a family deeply rooted in Massachusetts, Emerson followed a time-honored path to Harvard College and the ministry. He was installed in 1829 at Second Church when Boston's Trinitarian Congregationalism was making the transition to a liberal faith that had just received the name of Unitarianism. But, declaring that he could not administer rites that portrayed Jesus as divine, Emerson soon surrendered his pulpit. After a trip to Europe in which he met Thomas Carlyle (with whom he would subsequently be closely linked), he settled into his ancestral home of nearby Concord and began developing into America's first public intellectual.

[1] Matthew Arnold, "Emerson," *Macmillan's Magazine* 295 (May, 1884).

Emerson could sustain himself as an independent thinker because of the newly formed lyceum movement. Lyceums had the declared intention of offering utilitarian knowledge to the upwardly mobile, but Emerson saw it as an opportunity to promote his inchoate philosophical ideas. Yet even as he began making a good living through public speaking, he despaired over the lack of spiritual reward. Beholden largely to the "sensible" middle class that paid to hear him, he often felt the need, which he noted with disgust in his private journals, to temper his message. As a consequence of his skill and his ability to compromise, his success was unrivaled. In 1871, as he was nearing the twilight of his life, he was praised by Mark Twain as "the most widely known, the greatest, and the most attractive of all present lecturers."[2]

From his earliest professional days, Emerson joined other talented thinkers who were moving from a Lockean and Trinitarian worldview to one shaped by Kant, Romanticism, and religious beliefs that ranged from Unitarianism to pantheism and atheism. Starting in 1836, some two dozen young idealists – mainly Harvard-trained ministers – began meeting regularly (often in Emerson's home) in what posterity would call the Transcendental Club. Almost immediately, Transcendentalists began arguing publicly with their former instructors at Harvard over the general intellectual temperament that distinguished European, especially German, Romanticism from British empiricism.

As part of that debate, Emerson delivered at his alma mater "The American Scholar" and the Divinity School Address – and, as a result, was not invited to talk again at Harvard for nearly three decades. These orations, along with his lyceum lectures and collections of essays, expressed a revolutionary rhetoric that would redirect the course of American literature and thought. Inspired by the vernacular voices of Goethe, de Staël, and Carlyle and opposing the decorous British style adopted by most American writers, Emerson claimed that "everything is admissible, philosophy, ethics, divinity, criticism, poetry, humor, fun, mimicry, anecdotes, jokes, ventriloquism" (*JMN* VII:265).[3] Ignoring academic formalism, he considered intuition, an essential ingredient of

[2] David S. Reynolds, *John Brown: Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 364–5.

[3] *JMN* = *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman, Ralph H. Orth, *et al.* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960–82), 16 vols.

the Romantic vision, to be his guiding principle: "If the thought ... come not spontaneously, it comes not rightly at all."[4] The purpose of thinking lay not in creating a systematic structure, but in the energy emanating from the clash of ideas. To "unsettle all things" was, he declared in "Circles," his primary goal.

That is why it is futile to hold Emerson accountable for logical incoherence. As he defiantly announced in "Self-Reliance": "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds ... With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do" (p. 59).[5] Post-modernists appreciate that Emerson was frustrated by the inadequacy of language and how it falsified the world: "We die of words. We are hanged, drawn & quartered by dictionaries," he lamented (*JMN* VII:240).

Despite his suspicion of the written word, his literary legacy is substantial. While the traditional collection of his prose and poetry amounts to a dozen volumes, over the past several decades more than three times that number have appeared (and more are forthcoming), containing his letters (about a million words of which survive), additional lectures and sermons, and his brilliantly insightful journal (containing some two and a half million words). In every mode of expression, Emerson continued to reinvent and subvert, often overturning what he had thought and written earlier.

By the early 1840s, many friends and relatives supported the abolition of slavery. Emerson, who had always been strongly opposed to slavery but hesitated to join any group for fear of subordinating independence of mind to a common cause, eventually became an active abolitionist (he and his protégé, "My brave Henry" David Thoreau, came to it almost simultaneously). Although he was subjected to taunts and threats, few Americans spoke with greater conviction for social change.

Despite enjoying broad acclaim during his lifetime, Emerson's reputation waned towards the end of the nineteenth century, as academic knowledge became more professionalized. Santayana appreciated the "plasticity" of Emerson's thought, but judged his philosophy weak, as did Henry Adams and William James. John Dewey, on the other hand,

[4] James Elliot Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1887), 1:294–5.

[5] Unattributed page numbers in brackets in the Introduction refer to the texts reproduced in this book.

pronounced Emerson alone of American intellectuals "fit to have his name uttered in the same breath with that of Plato." By labeling him "the Philosopher of Democracy," Dewey hoped to create for Emerson a special category of thinker that might resist attacks by formalists.[6] But the full restoration of Emerson's reputation perhaps began when, in *American Renaissance* (1941), F. O. Matthiessen, generally no great admirer of Emerson, juxtaposed the journals and essays to reveal Emerson's struggle to live simultaneously both an ideal and a material life.

By the 1980s, Emerson's high place in American thought was secure. Rather than being viewed as an undisciplined mystic, Emerson was now appreciated as a thinker who acknowledged the transience as well as the permanence of truth and developed the revolutionary notion of democratic individuality. Len Gougeon's pioneering work forced a reevaluation of Emerson's commitment to social advocacy, and Harold Bloom's championing, not only of Emerson, but of Romanticism generally, helped to reposition Transcendentalism at the center of the American intellectual tradition.

Background to the texts

The Boston and Cambridge elite were, in Emerson's day, predominantly Unitarian and Whig in outlook. More merchants than manufacturers, they traded predominantly with England and were strongly Anglophile in their taste for literature and philosophy. John Locke was required reading at Harvard, but the college most completely embraced Scottish Common Sense. Locke had argued that all knowledge derives from the impressions the outside world makes on the human senses and that these impressions multiply to create reflections that in turn form complex ideas, such as moral and political principles. Scottish thinkers sought a middle ground between Locke's sensualist origin of ideas and the tendency since Plato to believe that moral thoughts and categories of understanding are innate. They agreed that sensations cause reflections, but asserted that the mind develops ways of ordering and interpreting perceived knowledge that are independent of knowledge itself. Although not innate, these principles are obvious to the mind: because God would not

[6] John Dewey, "Emerson – the Philosopher of Democracy," *International Journal of Ethics* 13 (1903), 405–13.

deceive humanity, He imbued individuals with the necessary common sense to understand the world. Boston Unitarians believed in a benevolent, if somewhat distant, God, something of an innate human capacity to understand moral principles, and a positive sense of gradual moral and social improvement – all supported and demonstrated by ever-increasing material prosperity.

That was Emerson's immediate background, but it was not his inclination nor his future. "The Emersonian message," Sydney Ahlstrom observed, "was first of all a Hellenic revival."[7] Although Emerson was hardly dogmatic, his beliefs were largely framed by his classical training. As an undergraduate taught by followers of Common Sense, he wrote a prize-winning essay in praise of the Cambridge Neoplatonist Ralph Cudworth. Plotinus, the ancient philosopher most closely associated with Neoplatonism, proposed multi-tiered *hypostases* or forms of existence. The cosmic and fully perfect moral good (the One) emanates (or overflows) toward and thus forms the Intelligence, which in turn does the same to the World Soul (Emerson's Over-Soul), which embraces individual souls. This vision allowed Plotinus (and Emerson) to answer the disturbing question of how a divine force that is perfectly good could create a world in which there also exists evil: as emanations flow away from the One, they become weaker and therefore capable of admitting to evil (which Plato had defined as the absence of good).

Especially important for Emersonian thought is the Neoplatonic belief that when individual souls, inevitably debased by association with the material world, seek to reunify with the World Soul, they do so through the embrace of Divine Virtue. Political thinkers might understand virtue as anything from civic duty to the culture of social politeness. Emerson, however, usually diverted its force from public behavior to personal enlightenment. Drawing on Stoicism, Emerson saw virtue as one's ability to appreciate the power of fate and natural law while maintaining the capacity for freedom, or, as he put it in "Spiritual Laws," an "adherence in action to the nature of things." Combining that insight with the Neoplatonic notion that Divine Virtue was the individual soul's conduit to the World Soul, Emerson emphasized that acting virtuously was largely a private, highly spiritualized enterprise, an attempt to

[7] Sydney E. Ahlstrom and Jonathan S. Carey, eds., *An American Reformation: A Documentary History of Unitarian Christianity* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1995), 28.

understand and conform to the underlying principles governing the universe.

Because Neoplatonism claimed that, in striving for moral purity, the mind (or soul) helps shape the material objects of its perception, in broadest epistemological strokes it was compatible with Kantian metaphysics. It was just after Emerson had graduated from Harvard that Kant's revolutionary ideas were gaining a foothold in America. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in *Aids to Reflection* (1825), was primarily responsible for conveying to American Transcendentalists the spiritual side of Kant's system. In contradiction to Locke's sensualist theory of human cognition, Kant considered reason, understanding, and intuition as innate mental apparatuses. Coleridge reduced Kant's system to a dichotomy between Reason, which contains intuition and the innate moral faculties, and Understanding, which interprets and navigates the material world. Because what we are born knowing is inherently true while perceptions of external phenomena can be misleading, Reason *transcends* Understanding (hence Transcendentalism). This highly reductive interpretation of Kant was employed – usually as metaphor – by Emerson and many other Transcendentalists.

Early nineteenth-century political theory generally divided into Liberalism and Republicanism. Liberalism denied the notion of the common good and believed that diversity of interest makes for the best government. The most important duty of government, therefore, is the protection of individual rights. Republicanism held that there is, in fact, an identifiable common good and that government works best when citizens are educated in the virtue of civic responsibility.

Because Emerson was neither doctrinaire nor consistent, there is little to be gained by forcing him into either camp. "The end of all political struggle, is, to establish morality as the basis of all legislation. 'Tis not free institutions, 'tis not a republic, 'tis not a democracy, that is the end, – no, but only the means: morality is the object of government."[8] Although that is somewhat akin to a Republican sentiment of common virtue, Emerson believed above all in personal freedom and the right to individual development. "The Union is only perfect when all the Uniters are absolutely isolated," Emerson wrote in 1842. "Each man being the Universe, if he attempts to

[8] Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson, eds., *Emerson's Antislavery Writings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 153.

join himself to others, he instantly is jostled, crowded, cramped, halved, quartered, or on all sides diminished of his proportion" (*JMN* VIII:251).

To some degree, he was reacting against the contemporary notion of perfectionism: the belief that collective social reform could change society and save individual souls. But Emerson's intellectual development was also colored by the ascendancy of the Democratic Party under Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren (1829–41). Largely an assault on Northern property and privilege, the party embraced a wide variety of elements, including Southern plantation owners, Western freeholders, and the Northern underclass. To Emerson, the blatant contradictions among its constituencies and its reliance on political patronage and raucous campaigning suggested mere practical opportunism. Believing that government ought ideally be composed of autonomous individuals acting morally, it is hardly surprising that Emerson was terrified by what Tocqueville had recently identified as the tyranny of the majority.

Underpinning his fear of majoritarianism was Emerson's belief that the individual soul was a microcosm of the universal One. "In all my lectures," Emerson observed, "I have taught one doctrine, namely the infinitude of the private man" (*JMN* VII:342). Infinitude was for Emerson just another way of saying self-reliance, the cornerstone of his philosophy. Self-reliance derives from the Platonic notion that the individual soul mirrors the infinite plenitude of the Supreme power and must draw exclusively on its own resources in making all moral decisions. Majoritarian rule, although perhaps more politically equitable, would crush spiritual equality.

Emerson's spiritually autonomous individual has often been considered incompatible with democracy. But in recent years there has been an effort to understand self-reliance not as mere detachment from public life, but rather as an approach to enhancing personal humanity and the self-esteem of others. For, only when individuals are fully realized and candid in conversation can rights be protected – that is, as Emerson put it, when "[w]rath and love came up to town-meeting in company."[9]

The tension between autonomy and civic conformity, however, was never resolved. His daughter Ellen claimed that during the Civil War Emerson lectured more pragmatically in support of the Union, changing his style into something plainer and more appealing to the average

[9] "Kansas Relief Meeting," in *ibid.*, 113; discussed by George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1995), 182–8.

listener. This does not necessarily indicate that Emerson abandoned his search for self-reliance. Some situations are so overwhelmingly disharmonious that the least troublesome response is to face them squarely, a course of action Emerson may well have learned from his Stoic readings (Marcus Aurelius being the most famous practitioner). And, just as the French Revolution was for many European Romantics an event of essential transformation, to Emerson the American Civil War produced necessary cataclysmic change: "War shatters porcelain dolls, – breaks up a nation of Chinese conservatism. War always ennobles an age," he exalted in 1863.[10] If we bracket abolition and the resultant conflict as an extraordinary moment that demanded a significant tilt away from individual fulfillment and toward collective action, it seems clear that, throughout his life, Emerson articulated the innermost struggle between these two polarities of the citizen's duty.

Introduction to the texts

The texts are presented in approximate chronological order. Although it is not possible – despite recurrent attempts – to demonstrate a precise arc in Emerson's thinking, organizing his writings into four groups helps illuminate different aspects of his political views. In the earliest cluster of writings, Emerson grounds his philosophy in nature and natural law and voices a suspicion of institutions that claim legitimacy based solely on custom.

Emerson's first major work was an extended essay entitled *Nature* (1836), published anonymously. The identity of its author, however, was hardly a secret, and the Unitarian establishment judged it a poor example of Romantic and Platonic philosophy. But there was also much to cause worry among contemporaries, for Emerson begins by announcing in revolutionary fashion: "Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers ... Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" And so, "Let us demand our own works and laws and worship." Turning his back on tradition, Emerson insists that current truth must derive, not from convention, but from something permanent: "Let us inquire, to what end is nature?" (p. 1). This appreciation of nature as a revealer of natural law and a conduit to the

[10] Gougeon and Myerson, eds., *Antislavery Writings*, 147.

divine created a direct link to Thoreau's subsequent *Walden* and helped to shape the naturalist and environmentalist movements. It also laid the foundation for Emerson's claim that humanity should give greater authority to the inner voice than to social convention or existing institutions.

Emerson allied himself with the Romantics in seeing nature and language as mutually dependent. In humanity's original primitive state, the material world invited a spiritually energized or metaphorical meaning for language. Reciprocally, language served to name and give meaning to the material world. The ultimate gift of language is that it allows us to appreciate that nature is a direct reflection of the divine spirit, and that, by using thoughts and words in a pure way, we associate our soul with the divine, receive revelation, and so "That which was unconscious truth, becomes, when interpreted and defined in an object, a part of the domain of knowledge, – a new weapon in the magazine of power" (p. 8).

Nature was Emerson's only attempt at anything approaching formal philosophy, and the effect is jarring: a mixture of object and subject, logic and metaphor. He henceforth threw off the final constraints of formalism, writing essays and lectures that danced around like moonbeams. But if his style became increasingly elusive, the intention became more pointed. Just as he proposed in *Nature*, Emerson believed that, if he understood a higher truth, he could use language as a weapon in its service.

It took Emerson some effort to get to that point. Fundamental to understanding Emerson's innermost thoughts and his struggle for a public voice are his journals. Emerson called them his "savings bank" – ideas were deposited there, to be withdrawn and used in his public lectures and essays. The journals bear witness to Emerson's insistence on intuitive thinking: what begins as spontaneous private reflection metamorphoses into polished performance. Included in the present volume are entries that illuminate his impatience with his disengaged self-reliance. This was to be resolved, at least temporarily, in two speeches at his alma mater and a letter to the President of the United States.

Harvard's Phi Beta Kappa oration was at the time the country's most honorific academic event, and the speaker would usually begin by lavishing praise on the host institution. In 1837, Emerson, selected more because of social connections than achievement, broke with tradition by denouncing what he saw as rote education grounded on outdated British thought. "The American Scholar" is probably the most famous academic address ever given in the United States, and eyewitness Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., observed, "This grand Oration was our intellectual Declaration of

Independence ... [T]he young men went out from it as if a prophet had been proclaiming to them, 'Thus saith the Lord.'"[11]

Political philosophers often base their understanding of rights on their interpretations of the initial state of humanity. Emerson, notably, does not describe an original society but only the original individual. "One Man, – present to all particular men only partially, or through one faculty" is the Platonic archetype. But humanity has since become only shadows of that ideal as social and economic complexity forces individuals to become divisible entities. Emerson demands reintegration: "Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all" (p. 12).

Of three "influences" or sources of knowledge for the reborn scholar and fully formed individual – nature, books, and personal experience – it is the last of these that Emerson dwells on here. Just as for many other Romantics, action is for Emerson the centerpiece of his philosophy. In hectoring his audience, Emerson shows himself the true scholar – not only drawing on nature and books, but now also a willing participant. Here is the first clear glimpse of Emerson's self-reliance, not as passive observation in Nature, but as active involvement in the vicissitudes of life. "It is a shame ... if he seek a temporary peace by the diversion of his thoughts from politics or vexed questions ... Manlike let him turn and face it" (pp. 21–2).

A year later, Emerson was back at his alma mater, this time at the invitation of a few divinity students. The Divinity School Address identifies two related defects of Christianity: the misapplication of Jesus' teachings as a loyalty test for the "Cultus" and the failure to see religion as living thought. Starting with a somewhat abstract play on virtue, which is both intuitive ("These laws ... will not be written out on paper, or spoken by the tongue") and reified ("not virtuous, but virtue"), Emerson suggests that this Neoplatonic quality connects an individual with the cosmic mind, and then – astonishingly – "in so far is he God" (p. 30). This is what Jesus did through his own identity with the godhead, for "Alone in all history, he estimated the greatness of man" (p. 33). Every human can do the same, if they, like Jesus, are able to understand the spiritual pathway to divinity. Emerson then establishes the theological basis for his political philosophy by following Plato in asserting that evil is simply the absence of the good: "Good is positive. Evil is merely privative, not absolute" (p. 31). This monist vision of

[11] Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1885), 115.

cosmic force eliminates the external influence of evil, placing the entire burden of making moral decisions on the individual.

The authenticity of Biblical miracles had long come under attack (Hume called them a "superstitious delusion"). But Unitarians had emerged out of Calvinism with its strong reliance on religious authority and were still trying to work out, in an age of science, to what extent the Testaments would remain a guide, not only to moral behavior, but even to physical phenomena. Drawing on his theory of language in *Nature* and claiming that the church, by parsing his words, debased Jesus' ministry, Emerson ignites a theological firestorm: "[Jesus] spoke of miracles; for he felt that man's life was a miracle ... But the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain" (p. 34). That God beckons us to associate with divine power through our understanding of natural law is the miracle Jesus preached.

Of unknown date, "Uriel" celebrates and mocks the Divinity School Address. Emerson was writing poetry by thirteen and never stopped shaping his ideas metrically. As part of the Romantic tradition, he believed that poetry produced insights unattainable by formal philosophy. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton had described the angel Uriel as unwittingly helping Satan find earth. Emerson identifies members of the Transcendental Club with the young deities who do battle with the older ones (the Harvard establishment) and himself with Uriel. Both angel and instrument of Satan, Emerson delights in his own paradoxical identity and ridicules himself for refraining from public debate after giving the Divinity School Address. For its compressed attacks on institutions, absolutes, and life after death, Robert Frost called it "the greatest Western poem yet."[12]

In sharp contrast to the mockery and literary obscurity of "Uriel," "Concord Hymn," composed two years before the Divinity School Address, has become a treasure of American patriotic expression. The town of Concord laid claim (in competition with neighboring Lexington) to being the cradle of the Revolution, and asked Emerson to compose a poem to celebrate a monument marking the fiftieth anniversary of the

[12] Robert Frost, "On Emerson," excerpted in *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, ed. Joel Porte and Saundra Morris (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 652. For the interpretation: Kevin P. Van Anglen, "Emerson, Milton, and the Fall of Uriel," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 30.3 (1984): 139–53.

conflict. Emerson was not just one of Concord's favorite sons: his grandfather had died in the Revolutionary War. Other Transcendentalists also had grandfathers who had fought the British, and they believed they were struggling to add spiritual freedom to the civic liberties gained in 1776.

Soon after becoming President, Andrew Jackson, long a fighter of the Indian, pushed through the Indian Removal Act, giving him the power to relocate America's native population west of the Mississippi River (thereby freeing up some 5 million acres of cotton land). When the majority of the Cherokee Nation refused to give up their territory, Federal troops moved them at bayonet point. Just before the forced evacuation, Emerson publicly spoke against Federal policy. So eloquent were his words that friends urged him to send an open "Letter to Martin Van Buren, President of the United States" (who had recently taken office and inherited the situation from Jackson). Especially important is an argument that immorality toward any member of the community is immorality toward all: "a crime that really deprives us as well as the Cherokees of a country" (p. 51). The claim would later play an essential role in his abolitionist stand.

Bracketed by his public attacks on education and religion in "The American Scholar" in August, 1837, and the Divinity School Address in July, 1838, Emerson's social activism occurred in a period when he was trying out a particular type of public voice, laced with anger and social criticism. But a mere three days after publishing the letter (which received high public praise), Emerson recorded bitterly in his journals that his self-reliance was threatened, because he was too much in harmony with surrounding sentiment: "I will let the republic alone until the republic comes to me. I fully sympathise, be sure, with the sentiment I write, but I accept it rather from my friends than dictate it. It is not my impulse to say it & therefore my genius deserts me, no muse befriends, no music of thought or of word accompanies. Bah!" (*JMN* V:479).

After initial public defiance, Emerson seemed to turn more toward promoting his philosophy in the quieter venue of the lyceum. The next group of readings focuses around Emerson's struggle between the inner and outer life, in which he sets out how the individual is to function within a society very much demanding of change.

"Self-Reliance" contains passages of such soaring idealism that it may be the most quoted essay in American literature. But mixed with dazzling insights are arguments that appear to go nowhere. Emerson, Joel Porte observed, "was less interested in exhibiting his thoughts than he was in

presenting *himself* in the act of thinking."[13] "Self-Reliance" is a demonstration that the process of thinking, and not its result, defines the individual.

Emerson describes the self-reliant individual as someone "who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" (p. 57). This is achieved by trusting completely in one's instincts: "What is the aboriginal Self, on which a universal reliance may be grounded? ... We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition" (p. 62). In Coleridgean terms, it is believing that innate Reason is truth and acquired Understanding society's deflection of truth. Yet, significantly, Emerson defines self-reliance by how an individual acts within society. It is, in fact, impossible to think of Emerson – the consummate social animal – as living apart from others. Even when he claims to turn his back on humanity, he softens his bravado with irony: despite believing it a sign of conformity, he admits that he continues to give charity to the poor.

Because it is not done in solitude, living self-reliantly results in the exercise of power. Described variously, power usually emerges out of moral unity with "the ever-blessed ONE ... the Supreme Cause ... Power is in nature the essential measure of right" (p. 65). But because no individual (except perhaps Jesus) has ever remained in unity with the One, power is ephemeral and "resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state" (p. 64). Power destroys stasis, and this is why Emerson, to the dismay of modern critics, lauds war (or at least certain wars) as a creative act. Power is transformative. That is the point of the fable about the poor sot who, in a drunken stupor, is dressed by others in royal finery. He awakens and "exercises his reason, and finds himself a true prince" (p. 61).

Despite the acquisition of power, living self-reliantly is not an entirely free act. When he urges the reader to "Accept the place the divine providence has found for you" (p. 54), Emerson replaces controls characteristic of Western anthropomorphic monotheism with some vaguely defined, but equally intrusive, divine force. In a passage quoted above, he grounds self-reliance on reclaiming the aboriginal self, and in "The American Scholar" he appeals to humanity to rediscover the long-lost archetype of integrated man. But, as Lionel Trilling asked of a similar sentiment in Schiller, while this archetype may be the best fulfillment of

[13] Joel Porte, ed., *Emerson in his Journals* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 213.

humanity, is it, in fact, the best fulfillment of me?[14] Emerson's (intentionally) outrageous insistence that, "if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil" (p. 56), acknowledges the question. Although he never resolves the conflict between freedom and accountability, Emerson does explore it more fully in "Fate" and "Power," both of which are discussed below.

If "Self-Reliance" attempts to assert the power of the individual, "Compensation," its companion piece, is designed to identify an underlying moral order. At a time when majoritarian politics struck fear into the hearts of the established classes, Emerson could never fully accept that collective decisions adequately protect individuality or prove sufficient for progress. A select few, it seems, especially draw on nature's gifts and, by punctuating prevailing equilibrium, advance civilization. Emerson eventually argued for a compensatory balance between singular achievement and social welfare. Unique accomplishments will eventually flow toward the improvement of all, while the individual genius who may for a time profit personally ultimately suffers from isolation. "He must hate father and mother, wife and child ... [H]e must cast behind him their admiration, and afflict them by faithfulness to his truth, and become a byword and a hissing" (p. 79).

Compensation also produces a subtle kind of democratic justice: "as soon as there is any departure from simplicity, and attempt at halfness, or good for me that is not good for him, my neighbour feels the wrong; he shrinks from me as far as I have shrunk from him; his eyes no longer seek mine; there is war between us; there is hate in him and fear in me" (p. 84). To meet another as equal, without fear of judgment or condescension, is the essence of self-reliance and of democratic individualism. Performing an injurious deed, and thereby losing the respect of others, weakens one's capacity to participate fully in society. That is compensation enough.

As Emerson was expressing his views on autonomy and its limits, several of his closest intellectual allies, believing that society needed to be transformed, created Brook Farm, a joint-stock utopian farming community. The organizers, George and Sophia Ripley, and other Transcendentalists approached the Emersons about joining. In his journals Emerson chastises

[14] Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 5. See also Christopher Newfield, *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America* (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

himself for his lack of candor toward his friends and then justifies his refusal to participate by the belief that one (self-reliant) individual is stronger than an entire city. George Ripley followed up the visit with a letter of November 7, and five weeks later Emerson responded. That reply does not survive, and what is included here is the more polished of two surviving rough drafts. Emerson's delay in responding and the multiple drafts suggest his struggle. Perhaps that is why in a letter to his brother he angrily refers to Ripley's proposal as "this madness of G. R.'s Socialism" (*Letters* II:372).

At the same time as he was declining to join his friends in a working community, Emerson argued in "Man the Reformer" that private property is morally and therefore publicly corrupting. Reflecting the labor theory of value, Emerson expresses concern for the underlying exploitation of those who work for others. The aim of self-sufficiency is to avoid extracting unfair value for one's production: "How can the man who has learned but one art, procure all the conveniences of life honestly?" (p. 109). Enlarging on this idea, "Politics" (1844) attacks the influence of unequal property and justifies civil disobedience. Claiming that governmental institutions are not aboriginal ("they all are imitable, all alterable," p. 116) and that "The wise man is the State" (p. 123), Emerson anticipates his "Address to the Citizens of Concord" and Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government." Government merely protects people and property, and, although citizens may enjoy equal protection in a democracy, "their rights in property are very unequal" (p. 117). Because property inevitably corrupts, regardless of the form of government, "Every actual State is corrupt." And therefore: "Good men must not obey the laws too well" (p. 119). Although Emerson wishes to support the party that is "for free-trade, for wide suffrage, for the abolition of legal cruelties in the penal code, and for facilitating in every manner the access of the young and the poor to the sources of wealth and power" (p. 120), he believes that even such a party lacks transcendent principles: "The spirit of our American radicalism is destructive and aimless: it is not loving; it has no ulterior and divine ends" (p. 121).

Under the shadow of slavery's contagion, however, Emerson would soon come to believe that the state represented far greater potential for repression of the individual than did the reformers. The next cluster of writings illuminates Emerson's transition from agonized observer of social activism to enthusiastic participant. This dramatic turn has created

problems in the historiographical tradition. Emerson's two earliest biographers and close friends, James Elliot Cabot and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. – both, especially Holmes, socially conservative – depicted him as remaining distant from abolition. Accepting their interpretation uncritically, later historians complained that Emerson's self-reliance made him aloof from essential moral issues. The recent publication of his lesser known writings, however, reveals a much stronger commitment to social activism than Cabot and Holmes indicated. Indeed, over the past two decades a complete reexamination of Emerson's statements and actions has shown that, after initial hesitation, Emerson became a leading voice in the abolitionist movement.

This historical relocation of Emerson has, in turn, produced a new dilemma: namely, are his earlier statements on idealism and self-reliance vitiated by his subsequent activities? Just as historians previously attacked Emerson for failing to understand the compelling force of abolition, philosophers and political theorists now criticize him for being too involved in abolition and therefore becoming "de-transcendentalized."[15] They question how Emerson could remain self-reliant while being fully engaged politically. Even contemporary abolitionists observed that, "He is no more a philosopher, but a practical man."[16]

Emerson always opposed slavery on the grounds that all humans have Reason and therefore cannot be chattels. But he often criticized black slaves for a lack of culture and abolitionists as single-issue reformers who failed to understand that each person, through independence of spirit, must decide individually on the best course of action. Emerson's public position changed rapidly, however, after Congress approved the admission of Texas into the Union as a slave state. His 1844 speech at a meeting of the Women's Anti-Slavery Society of Concord was widely admired by abolitionists and reprinted at home and abroad. Some doubts persisted, as he occasionally gave voice, especially in his journals, to harsh criticisms of slaves and reformers. The 1846 poem, "Ode: Inscribed to W. H. Channing," dedicated to his close friend and a passionate abolitionist, expresses ironic detachment from the cause. And yet, over the next two

[15] *The Emerson Dilemma*, ed. T. Gregory Garvey (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), xxi and 210–11.
[16] Quoted by Gougeon and Myerson, eds., *Antislavery Writings*, xliv.

decades Emerson's most creative moments would be in the service of reform.

What provoked Emerson was a new political reality. With the admission of Texas and with possible American expansion into California and New Mexico (and even rumors about Cuba), the prospects of additional slave territories extinguished the hope that slavery would be contained and eventually die out. Ancient Stoics often argued that, when surrounding conditions threaten the harmony of the soul, rather than struggle to escape, it is better to address those conditions directly in order later to regain inner peace. Slavery surrounded Emerson: "I wake in the morning with a painful sensation, which I carry about all day ... the odious remembrance of that ignominy which has fallen on Massachusetts, which robs the landscape of beauty, and takes the sunshine out of every hour."[17] What finally made Emerson's inner peace fully untenable was the Compromise of 1850, which guaranteed the future expansion of slavery and included the Fugitive Slave Law. This measure deprived a runaway slave of virtually all civil rights and made it a Federal offence to harbor or protect the runaway. When Massachusetts enforced the law in 1851, Emerson lamented that the legislation curtailed his own freedom: "I said I had never in my life to this time suffered from the Slave Institution ... There was an old fugitive slave law, but it had become, or was fast becoming, a dead letter ... The new Bill made it operative, required me to hunt slaves."

First delivered in 1851, "Address to the Citizens of Concord" became Emerson's standard stump speech for the abolitionist Congressional candidate, John Gorham Palfrey (the first dean of Harvard Divinity School and an early critic of Transcendentalism). In his 1831 poem "Webster," Emerson portrayed Daniel Webster as the model of a principled public servant. But the Massachusetts senator surprisingly supported the Compromise of 1850, and in "Address to the Citizens of Concord," as one critic notes, Emerson was "savage, destructive, personal, bent on death."[18] His poem "1854" shows how he had by then put the issue of slavery above all else in judging an individual's worth. He

[17] *Ibid.*, 53; Albert J. von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 325–33.

[18] John Jay Chapman, quoted by Harold Bloom, "Emerson: Powers at the Crossing," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Collection of Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1993), ed. Lawrence Buell, 150.

observed that "The word *liberty* in the mouth of Mr. Webster sounds like the word *love* in the mouth of a courtezan" (*JMN* XI:346).

Although venom against his former hero infuses "Address to the Citizens of Concord," far more importantly the talk explores why constitutional law must be based on natural law and why it is necessary to violate constitutional laws that run counter to it. "An immoral law makes it a man's duty to break it, at every hazard. For virtue is the very self of every man" (p. 138). Virtue is the very self, because Virtue, the intermediary between an individual soul and the World Soul, is part of the great cosmic Good and transcends human law. Morality cannot abide even momentary association with immorality.

During the early 1840s, Emerson attacked the inequities of property and class. Starting in 1844, he openly fought for abolition, or the equality of race. And, in 1855, he turned publicly to support feminism, or gender equality. Many leading feminists were friends of Emerson, and he had frequently argued in his journals that women ought to have full and equal rights: "Man can never tell woman what her duties are" (*JMH* VIII:381). The Transcendental Club began including women in their discussions only after a meeting in Emerson's home to which female intellectuals were invited. Emerson's support for abolition and lifelong association with strong public women encouraged feminists to seek his support. But Emerson continued to take a dim view of political activism. Finally, he agreed to address the Second Annual New England Women's Rights Convention in Boston, delivering "Woman. A Lecture Read Before the Woman's Rights Convention, September 20, 1855."

Emerson's view of women would be, in modern terms, "essentialist," for he believed that differences between men and women are innate and transcend cultural conditioning. His close friend Margaret Fuller, in her path-breaking *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, had already suggested that women have a special type of intuition. But Emerson fully supports the right of women to shape their own destiny: "it is they and not we that are to determine it" (p. 166). And when he wonders why women would want suffrage and a role in government, he is only reflecting his long-standing distaste for activity within the public sphere.

The final group of selections comes from Emerson's last productive period. As Civil War approached, he began to suggest practical applications for his philosophy. The essays in *Representative Men* (1850) include studies of Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Napoleon, and Goethe. To some scholars, "*Representative Men* marks a key turning

point in the evolving ascendancy of the pragmatic over the idealist strains of Emerson's thought."[19] And, indeed, if in "The American Scholar" Emerson proposes a Platonic archetype of the complete and perfected individual, all of Emerson's representative men here reveal only partial qualities. Napoleon transformed France: "A market for all the powers and productions of man was opened; brilliant prizes glittered in the eyes of youth and talent" (p. 178). Yet, there is much that is harsh in the Emperor: "Bonaparte was singularly destitute of generous sentiments . . . [H]e has not the merit of common truth and honesty . . . He is a boundless liar" (p. 183). This recognition of good and evil mixed within a great individual may reflect Emerson's new pragmatic reality, brought on by contemporary political conditions.

But perhaps more subtly, *Representative Men* is part of Emerson's response to his inner struggle between celebrating the unique accomplishments of the exceptional individual and accepting democracy's claim that all its participants are inherently equal. Although *Representative Men* does not resolve the problem, its title points to the creative tension Emerson settled on. His subjects are not to be emulated nor judged better than the rest of us ("there are no common men"). These noted individuals are, instead, *representative* of certain qualities, which, if taken to the extreme, change society for better or worse. Democracy's great virtue is that its elected representatives work for their constituencies but eventually surrender their responsibilities. Similarly, as we have already seen in "Compensation," the great contain within themselves fatal flaws which eventually bring them back to the common level. As Emerson intones at the beginning of *Representative Men*, "all are teachers and pupils in turn."

Soon after, Emerson's world changed rapidly. In 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act enabled the spread of slavery north of the previously established boundary. Abolitionist and pro-slavery forces contested a territory whose unfortunate sobriquet, Bleeding Kansas, reflected the level of violence there. In the same year, the return of the escaped slave Anthony Burns from Massachusetts to a Virginia plantation set off a wave of indignation. In 1857 came the US Supreme Court's worst moment: the ruling in the case of *Dred Scott* that no manumitted slave or descendent of African slaves could ever become an American citizen

[19] Garvey, "Emerson's Political Spirit," in *The Emerson Dilemma*, 14–34, quotation on 28–9 with bibliography.

and that it was unlawful for the Federal Government to prohibit slavery in new territories.

"I think we must get rid of slavery, or we must get rid of freedom," pronounced Emerson.[20] At a rally a few months later, he urged listeners to donate money to help Kansas Free-Soilers buy guns. Transcendentalists, believing they were renewing the Revolutionary War zeal of their grandparents, began promoting the notion of righteous violence. In his "Kansas Relief Meeting" of 1856, Emerson warned: "A harder task will the new revolution of the nineteenth century be, than was the revolution of the eighteenth century ... Fellow Citizens, in these times full of the fate of the Republic, I think the towns should hold town meetings, and resolve themselves into Committees of Safety."

Against this backdrop, in 1857 the radical abolitionist and religious extremist John Brown came to Concord to raise money for his resistance to slavery in Kansas. He spent the night with the Emersons, returning to stay with them in 1859. The year before the first visit, Brown massacred unarmed pro-slavery families in Pottawatomie, Kansas, and, just months after his second visit, he raided Harper's Ferry, Virginia, attempting to take over the Federal arsenal and effect a slave uprising. Most of his party was killed or captured, and Brown himself was hanged two months later.

Emerson's first and most influential biographer, James Elliot Cabot, could not believe that Emerson was fully aware of Brown's violent intentions, and even today it is disturbing that Emerson might have supported someone most contemporaries considered a religious fanatic and murderer. And yet, while Brown was being tried, convicted, and executed, Emerson not only stood by him but helped glorify his legacy. In "Speech at a Meeting for the Relief of the Family of John Brown," delivered between Brown's death sentence and his execution, he quotes Brown approvingly: "Better that a whole generation of men, women and children should pass away by a violent death than that one word of either [the Golden Rule and the Declaration of Independence] should be violated in this country" (p. 188). Here, Emerson privileges the Declaration of Independence, grounded, like the Golden Rule, in natural law ("We hold these truths to be self-evident"), over the humanly constructed Constitution.

"Fate" and "Power" are essays in *Conduct of Life*, one of Emerson's richest works. Published in 1860, when Emerson was fully committed to

[20] Gougeon and Myerson, eds., *Antislavery Writings*, 107.