

RALPH WALDO EMERSON'S TRANSCENDENTALIST REACTION
TO THE ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT

THESIS

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PREFACE

The existence of a considerable amount of conflicting opinion about Ralph Waldo Emerson's influence on the whole question of social reform in the United States, and specifically on the question of abolition, may be the result of an improper understanding of his transcendental philosophy. Emerson's efforts as a reformer were tempered by his philosophy. Thus the lack of unanimity among those critics who accuse Emerson of lacking a sufficient compassion for men may spring from a confused idea of what New England transcendentalism, and Emerson's transcendentalism in particular, signified. It seems advisable, therefore, to arrive at some definite statement of the fundamental principles of the movement which may serve as a point of reference for the remainder of the study. I shall turn to this task in Chapter I. Thereafter, I will show that as the question of slavery generated increasing friction in the political affairs of this young nation, Emerson was led to a correspondingly greater role as an abolitionist. I will follow Emerson through his early years of lofty, misty idealism, lasting, say, to 1845. I will try to show how that idealism began to assume a slightly different appearance during the transition years between 1845 and 1850. During these years, as the anti-slavery movement gathered momentum and the pro-slavery forces became more aggressive, Emerson re-assessed his basic philosophical precepts and recognized that social

involvement is necessary.

This change in Emerson's position was epitomized in his strong reaction to the passage in 1850 of the Fugitive Slave Law; it was a reaction heightened by the fact that the Law was passed with the support of Daniel Webster, Emerson's personal champion of freedom. From that point on, Emerson's lofty idealism gave way to practical activism. To understand and explain this change, as far as possible, constitutes the primary subject of this study. In other words, I want to follow the aloofness of the Emerson who wrote, "this stirring in the philanthropic mud gives me no peace. I will let this republic alone until the republic comes to me . . . ,"¹ to the active involvement of the Emerson who said upon inspecting the Charlestown Navy Yard, "Ah! sometimes gunpowder smells good."² I will try to determine what effect, if any, Emerson had on the abolitionist movement and whether he may justifiably be counted among the abolitionists.

¹James Elliot Cabot, A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson, II, 434.

²Ibid., p. 601.

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CHAPTER I

THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW ENGLAND TRANSCENDENTALISM

To understand what is meant by New England transcendentalism and its significance in the growth of American thought, it should be remembered that the movement in New England was only a single part of the wave of humanitarian idealism which swept over the Western World at the end of the eighteenth century. That century had seen man's reason upheld as the only true basis of knowledge. The thinkers of the age applied reason to support the institutions of the church and state and to dictate the methods of literary expression. It was only natural, therefore, that the revolt against eighteenth century rationalism should have its roots in the areas of philosophy, religion, politics, and literature.

Recognizing that transcendentalism is a particular form of idealism drawing on Platonic and other sources and that there is some danger of over-simplification, I will limit the review of the philosophical backgrounds of New England transcendentalism to that period immediately prior to its rise.

Important among the philosophical sources of New England transcendentalism is the philosophy of John Locke. His philosophy is expressed in his Essay on Human Understanding published in 1690.

In this essay, Locke maintains that man acquires all his knowledge through the senses and that he can know only that

which he has experienced. At birth, man's mind is a blank slate upon which the various experiences record certain impressions of facts. From this notion, Locke concludes that man has a positive knowledge of nothing but the physical world which he perceives through his senses and can only by faith believe in the existence of a spiritual world. To have any validity, the ideas of infinity must be based on sensual experience. Since such experience is lacking, Locke considers infinity as a negative quality which has significance only with respect to space, duration, and number. The human conscience, to Locke, is nothing but man's opinions of his own actions, and the question of morals depends upon the fact that the good experiences of life bring man pleasant sensations while evil experiences bring him pain. This being granted, Locke maintains that man will naturally search for good and shun evil. Because the immortality of the human soul has no logical basis and cannot be confirmed by the senses, Locke holds that a higher life only probably exists. According to Locke, probability is the guide to similar problems which cannot be proved by the senses.

At this point in the eighteenth century debate upon the nature of man's ideas and his acquisition of knowledge, the voice of a German, Immanuel Kant, was heard through his Critique of Pure Reason, published in 1781. The substance of Kant's observations upon these questions is expressed thus in Harold C. Goddard's words:

Kant . . . taught that time and space are not external realities or even concepts derived from external experience, but ways in which the mind constitutes its world of senses. . . . The idea of God . . . of freedom and of immortality are inevitable intuitions of the practical nature of man. . . . Innate, original, universal, a priori, intuitive--these are words all of which convey . . . the thought.¹

Notable contributions to the philosophical bases of the movement were made by several other thinkers, who were for the most part Germans. Among them was Frederick Henry Jacobi (1743-1819), who expounded an intuitive faith which allowed him certain moments of mystical visions of truths "respecting God, Providence, Immortality, Freedom, and Moral Law."² Another German, Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), expressed a heroic belief that human will is free, that man exists within his own mind, and that God is a creation of the soul.³ A disciple of Fichte was Friedrich von Schelling (1775-1854), but Schelling freed man from the subjective limitations placed upon his thinking by Fichte's philosophy and re-established the reciprocity between man's soul and the spirit of nature. From nature man may progress to intelligence, and from intelligence man may work out to nature again.⁴

Standing out in even a brief study of the new thought

¹Harold C. Goddard, Studies in New England Transcendentalism, p. 3.

²Octavius B. Frothingham, Transcendentalism in New England, p. 24.

³Ibid., p. 27.

⁴Ibid., p. 41.

which was bringing a revolution against sensationalism and pure reason in the late eighteenth century is the increased significance applied to the individual. If one man is born, as Kant said, with certain innate ideas of the immortality of his soul and the existence of a higher soul, then it must follow that all men possess these ideas at birth. If the mystical union of Jacobi with the external truths arise from an intuition of these truths, all men are capable of such experiences. Likewise, if Fichte can hold that man's mind creates the world, and his soul creates God, each man must be allowed to claim an abiding presence of God within himself. Such were the thoughts abroad in the closing years of the eighteenth century, the thoughts which were to strengthen the emphasis placed upon the value of the individual in the liberalism of the nineteenth century.

As might be expected, this new insistence on the dignity of man, the sanctity of his individual personality, and the equality of one man with another soon led to attacks upon the established authority of the social institutions. The first cry of alarm against the traditions which bound the individual to the regulations of political and religious authority came from Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) of France.⁵ Rousseau's arguments rest upon the general principles that God is the

⁵Even though Rousseau's writings appeared before those of the German philosophers mentioned above, he is introduced at this point because his influence was most manifest in the overt revolution against social institutions.

symbol of the supreme good, that nature reflects His goodness, and that man shares goodness with God and nature. Rousseau calls the existence of evil in the world the result of a perversion of the natural goodness from its intended result of righteousness and virtue in man. Rousseau finds the primary source of these perversions in the institutions which society has imposed upon man. His essay, The Social Contract (1762), contains his cry for freedom and individuality. He contends that governments are derived from a covenant between man and the state--a covenant which guarantees to each man his rights of liberty, equality, and property. The individuals taken together are the sovereign, Rousseau says, and the government is only a device for maintaining order.⁶

The direct relation of these thoughts espoused by Rousseau to the stirring battle cry of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity!" which spurred the French citizens to rise in revolt may readily be seen.⁷ Even though the zealous French rebels carried their revolution to an extreme which largely defeated their original purpose, one of its positive results was that man was able to see that he no longer need accept the authority of social and political institutions which spring from tradition alone. This spirit of subjecting tradition to a new

⁶Louis R. Gottschalk, The Era of the French Revolution, pp. 77-78.

⁷Rousseau was not, of course, the only thinker who contributed to the French Revolution in 1792. The purpose here is to indicate the revolution's relation to the expression of individualism found in transcendentalism.

investigation is the major link by which Goddard binds the French Revolution to New England transcendentalism:

. . . the transcendental spirit partook to an extraordinary degree of that distrust of the past, that optimistic faith in the future, the confidence in the efficacy of a formula for solving the problems of mankind, which inspired the most sanguine mind of 1789. . . .

Because political independence had long been an accomplished fact in the United States by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the new emotional atmosphere among Americans aroused their enthusiasm to effect changes in institutions other than the state. At that time, no American stronghold of authority exerted stricter controls upon society than did the Calvinist Church of New England. Thus the American phase of the worldwide movement of individualism centered itself in New England and became essentially a religious revolution.

The religious fervor which drew the Puritan fathers to seek refuge in the new world could not have endured forever. The same soil which offered itself as a haven for the religiously austere had within it the vast resources of wealth and ultimate self-indulgence. It was inevitable that the succeeding generations were bound less and less to the doctrine of the total depravity of man.

Early in the eighteenth century, according to Frothingham, the fathers of the Calvinist Church were pained to witness a

⁸Goddard, Studies in New England Transcendentalism, pp. 185-186.

steady weakening of their authority by a number of liberal religious movements. The Antinomians were teaching that the gospel dispensation promises that faith alone is necessary to salvation and that, with respect to his eternal soul, man has no use for moral law nor obligations to uphold it. Other Americans were following the concepts of the Dutchman, James Arminius (1560-1609), by maintaining that the election for salvation is conditional upon the individual's state of grace, that there is universal atonement for man's sins, and that the individual may be regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

The man who rose to lead the offense against the undermining forces of these radicals was Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). Under his inspiration from 1727 to 1750, the Calvinist Church in America experienced the revival of evangelical enthusiasm generally known as the Great Awakening. Much of the spirit of Edwards' religious enthusiasm, his idealism, and his inclination to mysticism was to be recaptured by the transcendentalists a hundred years later.

To the religious liberals of Edwards' own day, however, religious enthusiasm and spiritual revival were exceedingly distasteful. By the time the liberal group of Unitarian ministers had made their formal break with the Calvinist Church in 1785,⁹ all displays of emotions and sentiments of mysticism were due to be suppressed in deference to John

⁹In this year the King's Church in Boston eliminated the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, an act crystalizing the Unitarian movement in the United States.

Locke's sensationalist philosophy and the conventions observed in the Neo-Classical literary movement of the day. The importance of Locke's philosophy and of these literary conventions to the thought of practicing Unitarians is noted by Frothingham in his assertion that Unitarians "discarded the doctrine of innate ideas, and its kindred beliefs. . . . Unitarianism . . . has rarely, if ever, been taught or held by any man of eminence in the church who was a Platonist."¹⁰ Unitarians, as a group, denied the whole proposition of innate knowledge and relied on their senses to bring them the knowledge they sought. Generally, the New England Unitarians had keen, orderly minds. They were careful reasoners, good scholars, and clear thinkers. They were characteristically conservative in politics, literature, art, and social ethics. For something to be popular among them, it had to be reasonable, that is, to make "common sense." They were distressed by mysticism and metaphysics. Dreamers and visionaries were repugnant to them, as was anyone who disturbed their intellectual peace. "Unitarian leaders were distinguished by practical wisdom, sober judgements, and balanced thoughtfulness, that weighed opinions on the scale of evidence and argument."¹¹ The feature of Unitarianism which was eventually incorporated into the transcendental philosophy was their free thought in religion. "They disavowed sympathy with dogmatism . . . and avowed the

¹⁰Frothingham, Transcendentalism in New England, p. 109.

¹¹Ibid., p. 110.

absolute freedom of the human mind as their characteristic faith."¹² Thus, from the strange mixture of their insistence upon the positive value of free inquiry by the individual and their denial of the individual's ability to experience a mystical union with a higher spiritual power, the Unitarians opened the challenge to carry their religious free-thinking to even more liberal conclusions.

Among the first to accept the challenge of liberal Unitarianism was Dr. William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), who was a Unitarian in such a special sense that he formed the link between his church and the transcendental movement. Dr. Channing was aroused by the cold and logical atmosphere which pervaded the Unitarian Church in his day. Because he was a man of deep spiritual sentiments and strong religious enthusiasm, he began to sense the dangers in a religion which excluded such expressions of enthusiasm. In his sermons and articles for the Christian Examiner, Dr. Channing upheld the divinity of human nature, maintaining "the possibility of man's gaining some insight of Universal Order," and he "respected the lofty aspirations which prompt men to seek a perfect knowledge of the Divine Laws."¹³

The challenge to his church to close the gap between its extreme rationalism and the current step toward instinctive thinking was made in part by his words spoken in 1824:

¹²Ibid., p. 114.

¹³Ibid., pp. 111-112.

Now, religion ought to be dispensed in accommodation to the spirit and character of our age. Men desire excitement, and religion must be communicated in a more exciting form. . . . They want a religion which will take a strong hold upon them. . . . Much as the age requires intellectual culture in a minister, it requires still more, that his acquisitions of truth should be instinct with life and feeling.¹⁴

In 1832 the transcendental movement broke away from the sphere of influence of the Unitarian Church. This fact was manifested by the resignation of Ralph Waldo Emerson from his pulpit in the Second Church in Boston. Emerson had long been concerned about the adherence to traditional ritual by the church, and in 1832 he decided, after much serious reflection, that he could no longer in good conscience administer the sacrament of communion. In Emerson's opinion, man was not dependent upon such formal rites for his most climactic religious experiences, because these came from the inner recesses of man's spirit and not from the outward forms of sacramental rites.

To avoid the impression that the transcendentalists effected an abrupt break with the Unitarian Church, several facts may be pointed out. First, although Emerson resigned from his first ministerial appointment and never again accepted a permanent church position, he did fill the pulpit of Unitarian churches on several occasions thereafter. And second, such an ardent transcendentalist as Theodore Parker, along with others, continued to preach regularly in Unitarian churches after

¹⁴ Madeleine Hooke Rice, Federal Street Pastor, The Life of William Ellery Channing, p. 96.

embracing the transcendentalist philosophy. In fact, so close were the transcendentalists to the Unitarians that it was exceedingly difficult to be a transcendentalist without first having been a Unitarian. As Goddard states it, "though not impossible--it was hard for others than Unitarians to become transcendentalists."¹⁵ More explicitly, Perry Miller asserts:

Although the members fancied that there were great differences among themselves, which they took with an ostentatious and often exaggerated seriousness, still from our point of view they can be seen as pretty much of a single stripe: they were all young Unitarians who between 1830 and 1840 revolted against Unitarianism.¹⁶

Thus, Miller concludes that New England transcendentalism may be most accurately understood as a religious demonstration of "radicalism in revolt against a rational conservatism; . . . a protest of the human spirit against emotional starvation."¹⁷

In 1819, when Edward Everett, George Bancroft, and George Ticknor returned to New England from their studies at Göttingen in Germany, a great impetus was given toward the study of the German language and reading German literature in New England. This interest was aided by the appointment of Charles T. Follen as instructor in German at Harvard in 1825.¹⁸ Soon the literary works of Goethe, Richter, and Novalis and the philosophies of

¹⁵Goddard, Studies in New England Transcendentalism, p. 32.

¹⁶Perry Miller, The Transcendentalists, p. 7.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁸Goddard, Studies in New England Transcendentalism, pp. 30-31.

Kant, Jacobi, Fichte, Herder, Schelling, and others were being read and assimilated in their original German by the Americans.

The growing group of New England transcendentalists were not, however, entirely dependent upon a knowledge of German and the reading of German literature for their inspiration. In England, Thomas Carlyle assumed the task of bringing German philosophy and literature to the English-speaking world through numerous translations and penetrating criticisms of the German authors. Furthermore, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth were producing original works of philosophy and poetry which stirred the imagination of their New England readers. From France, also, came the works of Cousin, Jouffrey, and Mme. de Stael to help satisfy the desires for new thoughts in new forms of expression.

It does not seem necessary to recount the individual achievements or contributions of these German, English, and French writers. The point to be emphasized here is that, as leaders in the Romantic movement, they broke from the classic rules of literary convention in the attempt to formulate a more natural style of self-expression. Both Carlyle and Coleridge were transcendentalist writers who strongly emphasized the role of intuition in knowledge. Ascribing to a philosophy which upheld the dignity of the individual because of the divinity of human nature, they strove to reveal the individual dignity in the common man and to emphasize the unlimited potential of every life. In addition, the intense emotionalism of their literary products reflected their emphasis upon the

spiritual capacities of man which placed him in direct relation to the higher order of the universe.

Inspired by the philosophy and literature of Europe and England, the New England transcendentalists began to write essays, poems, and criticisms, which reached the public primarily through periodicals. In his study, The Periodicals of American Transcendentalism, Clarence Gohdes gives an account of the purposes and achievements of eleven publications¹⁹ which were active from 1835 to 1886 as vehicles for transcendental literature. Of these publications, The Dial is the best known. Conceived as a quarterly "Magazine for Literature, Philosophy, and Religion," The Dial appeared in four volumes from July, 1840, until April, 1844. The editorship of the transcendental periodical was shared by Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. The first volume of The Dial was prefaced by the editor's note to the readers, which was written by Emerson, stating the objectives of the publication:

We invite the attention of our countrymen to new design. . . . We do not wish to say pretty or curious things, or to reiterate a few propositions in varied forms, but, if we can, to give expression to that spirit which lifts men to a higher platform, restores to them the religious sentiment, brings them worthy aims and pure pleasures, purges the inward eye, makes life less desultory, and through raising men to the level of nature, takes away its melancholy from the landscape, and reconciles the practical with the speculative powers.²⁰

¹⁹Included are The Western Messenger; The Boston Quarterly Review; The Dial; The Present; The Harbinger; The Spirit of the Age; Aesthetic Papers; The Massachusetts Quarterly Review; The Dial, Cincinnati; The Radical; and The Index.

²⁰George Willis Cooke, An Historical and Bibliographical Introduction to Accompany "The Dial," I, 1-4.

Virtually all of the pieces contributed to The Dial were illustrative of the guiding principles set forth by the editors. And virtually all of the men and women who were interested in the thoughts and sentiments of transcendentalism made contributions to the four volumes of The Dial. Making no pretensions to literary artistry, the transcendentalists were, through The Dial, giving voice to "that spirit which lifts men to a higher platform." The men and women who contributed their thoughts to The Dial were all young. Ripley was thirty-eight, Emerson thirty-seven, Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker, and W.H. Channing were thirty. Thoreau was but twenty-three. In light of the youthfulness and idealism of these leaders, it is not hard to understand that The Dial was filled with the high hopes and dreams of those who had not tested themselves by long experience or severe trial.

The Dial was the product of that group of young men and women who composed what was called the Transcendental Club. This association was a natural outgrowth of the temper of the times. The club was sustained by the conviction of its members that something must be done about the state of prevailing opinion in theology. Dr. Henry Hedge, a prominent educator and transcendentalist reflected, "What precisely we wanted, it would have been difficult for us to state. What we strongly felt was dissatisfaction with the reigning sensuous philosophy, dating from Locke, on which our Unitarian theology was based."²¹

²¹Ibid., p. 49.

The binding force of the club was simply "sympathy of studies and of aspiration."²² The exact beginnings of the club are rather hard to pin down. No announcements were made, no invitations were sent. In 1836, four young Unitarian ministers--R.W. Emerson, F.H. Hedge, George Ripley, and George Putnam--came together for conversation and agreed to meet again to discuss the problems within the church. Meeting at Ripley's house, September 19, 1836, were Emerson, Hedge, Amos B. Alcott, James Freeman Clarke, and Convers Francis. Among those to join the group later were Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker, Orestes Brownson, William H. Channing, C.A. Bartol, Elizabeth P. Peabody, Caleb Stetson, John S. Dwight, Jones Very, Rev. Thomas T. Stone, and Henry David Thoreau. Among the typical subjects discussed at these meetings were Law, Truth, Individuality, Theology, Revelation, Inspiration, Providence, and the Personality of God. Emerson once remarked that the conversations were beyond the comprehension of some in the group. One of these declared that the meetings were "like going to heaven in a swing."²³

The friendships that resulted from the Transcendental Club were of great importance to the movement. No doubt Emerson, Parker, and Alcott would have come to the same conclusions that they finally reached, but to many of the other members, the club provided encouragement and a stimulus for their expression of those truths which they sought. Thus it

²²Ibid., p. 48.

²³Ibid., p. 54.

was in its effects upon our literature that the Transcendental Club had its chief value:

There was too much in the club of enthusiasm, too much of romantic anticipation, too much of froth and folly; but there was also much of bold initiative, daring innovation, and courage to look at life as it is. The result was that the old ways were forsaken, and fresh life and truthfulness came into our literature.²⁴

From this review of the origins of the transcendental movement in New England, certain facts stand out. Paramount is the conclusion that New England transcendentalism was basically the American phase of the new sense of individualism which stirred the Western World during the latter eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Within the area of philosophy there was the reaction of idealism to materialism and sensationalism; in politics, the individual asserted his independence from submission to excessive government. The churches experienced a revival of emotional and spiritual enthusiasm which threatened to cast off the restraining bonds of sobriety and decorum; and through the new poetry and fiction, the aroused emotions found a more natural form of self-expression than had been allowed by previous literary conventions. As those changes in the individual's thoughts and conduct were assimilated by the New Englanders who yet retained the sincerity, nobility, purity, and morality of their Puritan ancestors, transcendentalism came to full flower.

A second important consideration is the fact that since

²⁴Ibid., p. 55.

New England transcendentalism was shaped by the simultaneous influences of new ideas in religion, literature, and philosophy, it cannot finally be placed as an exclusive feature of any one of the three. The conclusion that the movement was essentially religious is correct because the majority of the transcendentalists were closely associated with the Unitarian Church. The transcendentalists were, nevertheless, active in the field of literature. And while their literary achievements may have been secondary to their philosophical purpose, their transcendental writings exerted an extremely strong force upon American culture in the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER II
EMERSONIAN TRANSCENDENTALISM:
PHILOSOPHY OF INDIVIDUALISM

As the "new thought" of transcendentalism developed in New England, Emerson, the Unitarian minister, recognized that it contained a close affinity with his own pre-established convictions. He was primarily interested in the moral nature of things, not in passion or action as such, not in science nor in letters, not in divinity, but in morals. Emerson had collected truisms and these became his law; they showed the moral nature of man, they declared God. Transcendentalist thought conformed to his temperament and the natural motions of his mind. It made him sovereign in his own right; it delivered into his hands the entire universe for his own. In proportion as he formulated his ideas of transcendentalism, Emerson came to his intellectual maturity. This process was completed by his thirtieth year. He left those "corpse cold" ideas of the church and ceased to put his thoughts forth in a Christian dress. They now wore the raiment of transcendental expression. Actually there was less change in Emerson than appeared from around 1832, when he quit the ministry, and 1836, when he published Nature. His thoughts were the same as they had always been; he was the same man; he had never changed his faith, for he had only one. But he had cast off the old skin of traditional Christianity. His book, Nature, was the

manifestation of that fact.

There are three main ideas in the book. First, with regard to the soul: the soul is divine and identical in all men, a spark of eternity, a portion of God. Thus it possesses the means of all knowledge, whether of self, of nature, or of God. Secondly, with regard to nature: nature is the visible, tangible manifestation of God, or, metaphysically, the realization of God in the unconscious. Its sole function is to unlock the capacities of the soul, whether as energy or as knowledge, "to supplement it as the material supplements the tool, to distribute its unconscious as the prism distributes the ray."¹ Nature is the agency by which the soul becomes apparent in power and knowledge. Thirdly, with regard to God: deity has unobstructed access to all of every soul, and, conversely, every soul has access to all of deity, the process in either case being a divine inflowing that comes not in a steady stream, but only in moments of mystically expanded being. These three ideas--the primacy of the soul, the sufficiency of nature, and the immediacy of God--are the triple root from which grows Emerson's entire thought on the universe, in a philosophical sense. In Nature the emphasis is given to the second of the three main ideas.

In Nature, Emerson says that currently "man applies to nature but half his force. He works on the world with his understanding alone. . . . Whilst his arms are strong, and

¹George Edward Woodberry, Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 48.

his digestion good, his mind is imbruted, and he is a selfish savage."² This need not be true according to Emerson. Man is disunited with himself because he looks at nature only from a selfish viewpoint. "But," says Emerson,

when a faithful thinker, resolute to detach every object from personal relations and see it in the light of a thought, shall at the same time, kindle science with a fire of the holiest affections, then will God go forth anew into the creation.³

Emerson says that we must see the everyday commonplace facts of nature as miracles, for that is the "invariable mark of wisdom." To the rhetorical questions, What is a day? What is summer? What is a child? What is sleep? he answers, "To our blindness these things seem unaffecting. . . . But when the fact is seen under the light of an idea . . . we behold the real higher law."⁴ He says that to receive the ultimate truths as revealed by nature, we must, as the Bible says, "become as a little child." Emerson says the "sun illuminates only the eye of man, but shines into the eye and the heart of a child."⁵ He goes on to develop the idea by saying that the true lover of nature is one who has "retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood."⁶ And again,

²R.W. Emerson, Nature, in Selections From Ralph Waldo Emerson, An Organic Anthology, ed. Stephen E. Whicher, p. 54. This anthology will henceforth be identified by the following short title: Selections (ed. Whicher).

³Ibid., p. 55.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., pp. 23-24.

⁶Ibid., p. 24.

"Infancy is the perpetual Messiah, which comes into the arms of fallen men and pleads with them to return to paradise."⁷

When we view nature, then, with the proper blending of both inward and outward senses, we can go into the woods and return to reason and faith. It is of the process of receiving this reason and faith that Emerson makes his first of several statements concerning the transcendental mystical experience:

Standing on the bare ground--my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifting into infinite space--all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God.⁸

Emerson speaks of nature as the medium between God and man--the three (God, nature, man) being akin because of the spiritual element or divinity in nature and man. The main purpose of the book is to present the theory that the secret of nature will be unraveled by no man who divorces nature and man, but only by him who perceives their spiritual harmony, or unity--through the Over-soul, as developed in his essay by that name. The function of nature is to unfold the soul. It does this by virtue of the perfect correspondence of nature and the soul. At the contact of the two, the functions of the soul--the images, ideas, and concepts pre-existing in the soul--arise into consciousness and become knowledge.⁹ By contact with nature, every function of the soul is perfected

⁷ Ibid., p. 53.

⁸ Ibid., p. 24.

⁹ George E. Woodberry, Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 133.

in action. When the latent consciousness is entirely drawn out and exposed as knowledge, then will nature be completely comprehended, and correspondence will be perfect. This same theme was expanded in Emerson's essay "Plato; Or, The Philosopher" in his Representative Men, published in 1850.

There is perhaps no important idea in Emerson's later writings which was not first contained in Nature, either fully developed or in embryo. If we think of Nature as a preview of Emerson's later ideas, we might well think of his essay "The Over-soul" as the cornerstone of his whole doctrine. In this essay, Emerson tried to formulate the basis on which his theories were to stand. Not content with the "God-as-Father" and "Man-as-Brother" idea of the Unitarians, Emerson tried to establish an even closer relationship. He wanted to bring all men into a monistic relationship which could only be achieved through some unitizing master scheme. This was accomplished by the employment of what Emerson called the Over-soul.

According to his thesis, the Over-soul is universal, it pervades all things, it is the Absolute Mind, it is God. The Over-soul is shared commonly by all men yet possessed by none. Every person is to the Over-soul as an inlet is to an ocean. We are filled with its flood, but are nothing but dry and dusty banks without it. The Over-soul is the source of all power and knowledge. Man's perception of the absolute truth as revealed by the Over-soul does not come in a steady stream, but comes only when the individual is prepared to receive it. As Emerson says, "Our faith comes in moments. . . . [T]here is a depth in

those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences."¹⁰ In those moments of submission to the Universal Mind, or the Over-soul, the moral law of the universe is received into us, so that we learn what is right and true, not by experience, but because there is in us the fountain of all wisdom and authority. This theory, as can be seen, places the individual man, with his capacity for direct communication with the Over-soul, far above any human institution. When man is obedient to the workings of the Over-soul, then man becomes inseparable from God; indeed, man becomes God. "As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so there is no bar or wall in the soul where man, the effect, ceases, and God, the cause, begins."¹¹ And again, Emerson says, "The simplest person who in his integrity worships God, becomes God."¹²

The Over-soul, with its direct communication with man, accomplishes more than any church, with its traditions and forms, is able to do. Emerson said that only when we have broken our god of tradition "may God fire the heart with his presence."¹³ On another occasion, Emerson expressed the same

¹⁰R.W. Emerson, "The Over-soul," The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson (Current Opinion Edition), II, 267. This edition will henceforth be identified by the following short title: Complete Works (Current Opinion Ed.).

¹¹Ibid., p. 280.

¹²Ibid., p. 292.

¹³Ibid.

idea by saying:

The faith that stands on authority is not faith. The reliance on authority measures the decline of religion, the withdrawal of the soul. The position men have given to Jesus, now for many centuries, is a position of authority.¹⁴

It would logically follow then, that any authority such as the church, or even Jesus, is an obstruction to the attainment of pure religious truth, and not an aid. Only from the Over-soul, which is the Universal Mind, or Emerson's concept of God, can pure truth be revealed. Emerson accepted the example of Jesus' life, but not his divinity. "That Jesus lived purely was his strong argument,"¹⁵ he declared. So, what need have we of the church, or any human institution? inquires Emerson. The individual man is all-sufficient.

The question surely arises, how could Emerson be certain when he was receiving the truth? He never doubted or dared to question that, because it was not Emerson per se who received the truth, but the soul which was in Emerson and is in us all. "The soul is the perceiver and revealer of truth. We know truth when we see it . . . from opinion, as we know when we are awake that we are awake."¹⁶ The individual, left to his own devices, could never be sure of recognizing truth. "From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things

¹⁴Ibid., p. 295.

¹⁵Charles J. Woodbury, Talks With Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 107.

¹⁶R.W. Emerson, "The Over-soul," Complete Works (Current Opinion Ed.), II, 279.

and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all."¹⁷ A man is nothing more than a façade of the soul. An individual can command no respect on his own merit. As Emerson stated it,

What we commonly call man, the eating, drinking, planting, counting man, does not as we know him, represent himself. Him we do not respect, but the soul, whose organ he is, would he let it appear through his action, would make our knees bend. When it breathes through his intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through his will, it is virtue; when it flows through his affection, it is love.¹⁸

All human knowledge, then, is a pious reception of God's truth, which we, as individuals, have done nothing to create. For we cannot even determine what we think. All we can do is to clear our senses of all obstructions and let the light shine in. Emerson described a moment of truth as a dazzling experience enrapturing our senses, an ecstasy. But when we cease to report exactly what the moment revealed to us and begin to correct or contrive, then it ceases to be truth. Man can know and understand God's truth because man has God's divine element within him. He is like God; therefore, man can communicate with Him. Yet these moments of ecstatic communication cannot be induced by man, but are given from God, and the knowledge comes as "insight; it comes as serenity and grandeur,"¹⁹ and it is an intuition.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 270.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 271.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 289.

The supremacy of the individual man was the very heart of Emerson's philosophy. All human institutions, whether spiritual, social, or fraternal, could not render a fraction of the truth and justice found in one individual soul. This was true in Emerson's view, because to be a member of any group was to mortgage and obligate a portion of the soul to the group. This message, in some form, was always at the heart of Emerson's essays, speeches, and sermons.²⁰

Emerson's essay, "Spiritual Laws," is a very strong statement of his view of individual self-sufficiency. The thesis here is that man should not choose his profession, friends, modes of action, or anything else, but should simply cut all social ties and set himself adrift in the "stream of power and wisdom which animates all whom it floats, and [impels him] without effort . . . to truth, to right and a perfect contentment."²¹ For, asserts Emerson, "What your heart thinks great, is great. The soul's emphasis is always right."²²

On August 31, 1837, Emerson delivered perhaps what was his strongest appeal for pure individuality. This appeal came in the form of his address "The American Scholar," at

²⁰In his one-hundred-twenty-third sermon at the Second Church in Boston, he said, "A trust in yourself is the height not of pride but of piety, an unwillingness to learn of any but God himself." See Ralph L. Rusk, The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 158.

²¹R.W. Emerson, "Spiritual Laws," Complete Works (Current Opinion Ed.), II, 139.

²²Ibid., p. 145.

Harvard. Emerson's message on this occasion was that the young scholar must be free of any limitation on his intellectual inquiry and that the scholar could not be a leader of men unless he were entirely self-sufficient. "In self-trust all the virtues are comprehended. Free should the scholar be, free and brave. Free even to the definition of freedom, without any hindrance that does not arise out of his own constitution."²³

Emerson says:

The world is nothing, the man is all; in yourself is the law of all nature, and you know not yet how a globule of sap ascends; in yourself slumbers the whole of Reason; it is for you to know all; it is for you to dare all.²⁴

Emerson assures his young audience that "if a single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts and there abide, the huge world will come round to him."²⁵

Emerson delivered another strong appeal for individualism in his essay, "Self-Reliance." The term "Self-Reliance" actually is the same as "God-Reliance" for Emerson, since man contains the divine elements of God. "Trust thyself," urged Emerson, "every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you . . . , [for] imitation is suicide."²⁶ "Nothing," says Emerson, "can

²³R.W. Emerson, "The American Scholar," Selections (ed. Whicher), p. 74.

²⁴Ibid., p. 79.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶R.W. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," Selections (ed. Whicher), p. 148.

bring you peace but yourself."²⁷

Later in his life, while traveling in the West, Emerson was asked to sum up his transcendental thought. He replied to his questioner:

The Puritans came here in a revolt against forms. Why should they have kept any then? Why accept baptism and the bread and the wine of the Supper, and refuse the foot washing, which was at least as strongly emphasized? They were right, nobly; but they stopped short. Is any form necessary? Do we need any gift of foreign force? Can we not be self-sustaining?²⁸

The impression of Emerson's talk is that he esteemed transcendentalism less a gospel than a rebuke of the temper which accepts mediators, intercessors, or go-betweens. It is a protest against any outside word which encroaches on the individual's direct relation to God. The Bible is a record of a religion, whereas the book of nature (meaning all those things which have retained simplicity) is the word of God. "Literally, a passing beyond all media in the approach to the Deity, transcendentalism"--as Charles Woodbury gathered from his talks with Emerson--"contained an effort to establish, mainly by a discipline of the intuitive faculty, direct intercourse between the soul and God."²⁹

Emersonian transcendentalism was not a systematic philosophy, nor was it ever intended to be. It was nothing more than

²⁷Ibid., p. 168.

²⁸Charles J. Woodbury, Talks With Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 108.

²⁹Ibid., p. 110.

a reflection of Emerson's opinions regarding the individual soul and its relationship to nature and to God. No effort was made by Emerson to be consistent in his philosophy, as he was not preparing a case to be argued or to be urged upon anyone else. To the contrary, Emerson said, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines."³⁰ Emerson always expressed his transcendentalism as his own view to be accepted or rejected by anyone who pleased.

In summary, some basic concepts of transcendentalism as espoused by Emerson can be stated thus: (1) Every man (as well as Christ) has, in his nature, something of the divine--is himself part of the Over-soul. As a result he has, within himself, and himself is, the measure of all things. (2) Man is capable of establishing a direct relationship with the universal spirit by means of his spiritual intuition. Every man is capable of attaining a receptive harmony with the Over-soul and of spontaneously perceiving the highest truth. (3) Nature is another part of the same manifestation of the world, or universal soul. Through nature, man communicates with the Over-soul and receives true knowledge. (4) The Over-soul is all powerful and is a beneficent force; evil, therefore, does not exist as a force, but is merely the absence of good.³¹ (5) The human individual

³⁰R.W. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," Selections (ed. Whicher), p. 153.

³¹For a full discussion of this idea of the absence of evil as a force in the world, see Emerson's essay "Compensation."

has a boundless potential for good since he is the instrument of the Over-soul. (6) There is an eternally living God, an everpresent God, rather than a mystical or absentee God. Eternity, Emerson believed, is here and now.

The only sanction of morality, to Emerson, lay in his philosophy of the supreme worth of the individual man. To him, the only right is that which corresponds to the individual constitution; the only wrong is that which is against it. Emerson uses individuality, or "self-reliance," then, to insulate the soul against external influences. It is from the point of view of individuality that he attacks tradition, authority, and institutions.

That all souls are equal one with another is a declaration that Emerson meant literally. The relation of men virtually is not with other men, but with God, who is the source of all truth and power and who is in all men. A man does not derive truth from Plato but from the Over-soul, where Plato himself received it. Truth is immanent in the mind; it does not come from without, it is latent. Authority, therefore, is given only by inward and private dictates and can not possibly belong to anything external, whether man, creed, or institution. Emerson maintained that if the individual man was made kind and faithful in his heart, "then the whole sequel would flow easily out and instruct us in what should be the new world."³²

³²George E. Woodberry, Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 142.

CHAPTER III
EMERSON ON REFORM

During the decade of the 1840's, especially in the first half of it, when the influence of transcendentalist thought was strongest in New England, there was an intense movement for the general removal of all of the social injustices, whether real or imagined. Emerson's sympathies were, of course, with the renovators. In a letter to Carlyle, Emerson wrote:

We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform. Not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waist coat pocket. I am gently mad, and am resolved to live cleanly. One man renounces the use of animal food; and another of coin; and another of domestic hired service; and another of the State; and on the whole we have a commendable share of reason and hope.¹

But these external reform movements, whatever their relative importance, could not move Emerson to abandon his philosophical position resting in the idea of sufficiency of internal, individual reform. Emerson shunned the demands for action by the reformers with a "brave and cold neglect,"² which came from his unwillingness to violate his character:

I must consent to inaction. . . . Whilst therefore I desire to express the respect and joy I feel before this sublime connection of reformers now in their infancy around us, I urge the more earnestly the paramount duties

¹Emerson's Correspondence With Carlyle, p. 184.

²R.W. Emerson, "Lecture on the Times," Complete Works (Current Opinion Ed.), I, 278.

of self-reliance. I cannot find language of sufficient energy to convey my senses of the sacredness of private integrity.³

The question in Emerson's mind, then, was not about the need for reform, but about the best means to accomplish true reform. "The Reform of reforms must be accomplished without means . . . ,"⁴ insisted Emerson. Obviously, the need for reform was real, but reform must be accomplished in the hearts of men, because it could never be accomplished by the institutions of men. To Emerson, all particular remedies for reform were a "buzz in the ear."⁵ As he wrote in his Journal, October, 1840:⁶

I approve every wild action of the experimenters; I say what they say, and my only apology for not doing their work is preoccupation of mind. I have a work of my own. . . . [I]t would leave that [work] undone if I should undertake with them, and I do not see in myself any vigor equal to such an enterprise.

The idea of collectivized reform, as opposed to individual reform, was the first social and politically-tinged question in the transcendental movement that became the basis for a split between Emerson and most of his fellow transcendentalists. In October, 1840, George Ripley invited Emerson and his family to join the Brook Farm experiment at West Roxbury. The group's

³Ibid., p. 279.

⁴Ibid., p. 277.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Henceforth, quotations taken directly from the Journals will not be footnoted for identification purposes if the quotation is dated in the text of the thesis by year and month.

objective, according to George Ripley, was to "insure a more natural union between the intellectual and manual labor than then existed; to combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual."⁷ In the political sense, Brook Farm was an attempt at socialistic government and reform on the community basis.

Emerson's reply to Ripley's invitation to join Brook Farm was an affirmation of his own belief that the only hope of a righteous and enlightened society lies in the growth of the individual. Emerson's stipulation was, of course, that the individual could best cultivate his own powers by trusting himself instead of trusting groups and organizations. Emerson noted in his Journal, October 17, 1840:

I do not wish to remove from my present prison to a prison a little larger. I wish to break all prisons. I have not yet conquered my own house. It irks and repents me. Shall I raise the siege of this hencoop, and march baffled away to a pretended siege of Babylon? It seems to me that so to do were to dodge the problem I am set to solve, and hide my impotency in the thick of a crowd.

The members of the Brook Farm experiment began publishing a magazine called The Harbinger with the purpose of furthering the interests of social reform. Emerson was asked to contribute articles, but again he refused to participate.⁸ Nor did Emerson see his way to joining the little community of Fruitlands, another experiment in socialistic living, established a year or

⁷Perry Miller, The Transcendentalists, p. 464.

⁸James Elliot Cabot, A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson, II, 438.

so after the Brook Farm community by his good friend Amos Bronson Alcott.

Although Emerson refused to join any social reform group, he did make some reform experiments on his own. He adopted vegetarianism, in some form, but he soon gave it up. He proposed that the servants should eat with his family at one table. This experiment did not work out as a practical innovation, as Emerson indicates in a letter to his brother William, March 30, 1841:

Well, Lidian [Emerson's wife] went out the other day and had an explanation on the subject with the two girls [Louisa and Lydia]. Louisa accepted the plan . . . but Lydia, the cook, firmly refused. A cook was never fit to come to the table, etc. The next morning, Waldo [Emerson's son] was sent to announce to Louisa that breakfast was ready; but she had eaten already with Lydia, and refused to leave her alone.⁹

Emerson resolved to do more of his own manual labor and, in that regard, invited Henry David Thoreau to come and live with him so that Emerson might learn the art of fruit-tree grafting. For that service and "any other labor he chooses to do"¹⁰ Thoreau received his room and board free. Emerson was not well-suited, either by temperament or by physical strength, for hard manual labor, however, and remarked in his Journal:

If I judge from my own experience, I should unsay all the fine things, I fear, concerning the manual labor of literary men. . . . The writer shall not dig. To be sure, he may work in the garden, but his stay there

⁹Ibid., p. 446.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 447.

must be measured, not by the needs of the garden, but of the study.¹¹

Here is a clear indication that Emerson, like all mortal men, tended, when something became difficult, to rationalize the problem to suit himself.

Emerson was a strong believer in personal charity, but for institutionalized charity he had no patience. Soon after the failure of the Fruitlands community, Emerson invited the destitute Alcott and his wife to come and live, free of charge, in his home.¹² But when Emerson was asked to support public charities, his reaction was quite different, as reflected in this statement from an earlier essay:

. . . 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 thousand fold 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.¹³

Emerson's repudiation of public charities was, again, his assertion of the sufficiency of the individual will. He insisted that if his own position was suddenly reduced to that of a slave, or in some way suffered adversity, he would have the will and insight to extricate himself from those circumstances. There was absolutely no reason why any man could not do the same, since all insight was received from the same source and available

¹¹Ibid., p. 450.

¹²Mrs. Alcott graciously, but wisely, refused.

¹³R.W. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," Selections (ed. Whicher), p. 150.

to all men. Popular charities, therefore, simply were not necessary. Charities, he said, could not accomplish in an eternity what love could accomplish in a day. Just let men love one another and at once the greatest of all revolutions was accomplished. "This is the one remedy for all ills, the panacea of nature. We must be lovers, and at once the impossible becomes possible."¹⁴

The nature of Emerson's objection to the reform movements lay not in the aims of the reformers, but in the means by which reforms were undertaken. "I have the same objection to dogmatism in Reform as to dogmatism in Conservatism. The impatience of discipline, the haste to rule before we have served,"¹⁵ He said the reformers did not rely on the strength of love to win their cause, but relied on multitudes, on money, on party, on fear, wrath, and pride:

I think that [the strength of love] the soul of reform; conviction that not sensualism, not slavery, not war, not imprisonment, not even government, are needed,--but in lieu of them all, reliance on the sentiment of man, which will work best the more it is trusted; not reliance on numbers, but contrariwise, distrust of numbers and the feeling that then are we strongest when we are private and alone.¹⁶

Reform in any case, and especially legislative reform, is nullified by the law of things above our will. It is better,

¹⁴R.W. Emerson, "Man the Reformer," Complete Works (Current Opinion Ed.), I, 252.

¹⁵Cabot, A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson, II, 427.

¹⁶R.W. Emerson, "Lecture on the Times," Complete Works (Current Opinion Ed.), I, 276.

said Emerson, to limit government to the least function. It does its best work in assuring an open career and equal opportunity for the poor and for guarding against whatever makes for inequality in the social condition. The wise, said Emerson, "know that foolish legislation is a rope of sand which perishes in the twisting."¹⁷ And, "Good men must not obey the laws too well."¹⁸

The main trouble with the two major political parties of the day, according to Emerson, was that "they [did] not plant themselves on the deep and necessary grounds to which they are respectively entitled, but lash[ed] themselves to fury in the carrying of some local and momentary measure, nowise useful to the commonwealth."¹⁹

Of the liberal party, Emerson said, "The spirit of our American radicalism is destructive and aimless; it is not loving, it has no ulterior and divine ends, but is destructive only out of hatred and selfishness."²⁰ The conservative party, on the other hand, he saw as "merely defensive of property."²¹

Early in 1841, Emerson delivered a lecture entitled "Man the Reformer" before the Mechanics' Apprentices' Library

¹⁷R.W. Emerson, "Politics," Complete Works (Current Opinion Ed.), III, 200.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 208.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 209.

²⁰Ibid., p. 210.

²¹Ibid.

Association, in Boston. Generally this lecture was a call for man to return to a simple form of life where each individual provided for his own needs. Emerson contended that prosperity was working contrary to nature because so many people now were content with being served by others. Emerson was calling for Americans to learn the great lesson of self-help. "It is more elegant to answer one's own needs than to be richly served."²²

Emerson recognized that the extreme of his position would result in the total isolation of individuals from society, and he assured his audience that he had no such intention. Certainly, Emerson agreed, it would be absurd to adopt the position of using only those products which were manufactured by moral means, or of dealing with only those people who were innocent. Such extremism would compel the individual to suicide. But, he said,

I think we must clear ourselves each one by the interrogation, whether we have earned our bread today by the hearty contribution of our energies to the common benefit; and we must not cease to tend to the correction of flagrant wrongs, by laying one stone aright every day.²³

Later in the same year, Emerson delivered his "Lecture on the Times," read at the Masonic Temple in Boston. In this speech Emerson points out that the conditions of the times were the strongest argument for general reform. All of society must be reformed, says Emerson, but it must be a general reawakening

²²R.W. Emerson, "Man the Reformer," Complete Works (Current Opinion Ed.), I, 247.

²³Ibid.

of the sentiment of love, and the particular reformers, with their special causes, he sees as no better than rabble-rousers and trouble-makers:

Those who are urging with most ardor what are called the greatest benefits of mankind, are narrow, self-pleasing, conceited men, and effect us as the insane do. They bite us, and we run mad also.²⁴

But, on the other hand, says Emerson, "I cannot choose but allow and honor them. The impulse is good, and the theory; the practice is less beautiful. The Reformers affirm the inward life, but they do not trust it, but use outward and vulgar means."²⁵

Emerson says that the majority of people cannot see an evil around them, such as slaveholders, intemperate men, and fraudulent persons, until the evil becomes gross and excessive. Then the reaction against the evil is clamorous, magnified, and excessive. This was Emerson's case against the reformers. "We say then that the reforming movement is sacred in its origin; in its management and details, timid and profane."²⁶

Apart from pointing out the reasons for his objections to the reformers, Emerson reveals the indecision which is becoming a torment to him. He can not decide which should be the stronger force, the philosophical transcendentalism which preached individual self-sufficiency and the futility of institutionalized reform, or the practical accomplishments of whatever reform

²⁴R.W. Emerson, "Lecture on the Times," Complete Works (Current Opinion Ed.), I, 277.

²⁵Ibid., p. 276.

²⁶Ibid., p. 281.

might be made through existing means. Emerson asked his audience and himself whether men should become involved with imperfect institutions even though their impulse was noble.

Coming back to his favorite argument that the individual mind has in it the seed of all knowledge, Emerson told his audience (and meant it literally) that the state of the nation could only be judged by the state of the individual mind. External conditions counted for nothing of themselves except to reflect the conditions of the individual mind. If the individual mind was selfish, then there was slavery in the country. If the individual mind was just, then there was no slavery, let the laws say what they will. The individual mind, to Emerson, was a microcosm of the national mind, indeed, of the universal mind. The reformer's war against the circumstances of the downtrodden, then, had no validity and was trivial. "Give the slave the least elevation of religious sentiment, and he is no slave . . . ,"²⁷ Emerson insisted.

Emerson expressed his concern for the practical institution of education in his essay "New England Reformers" in 1844. In this essay, he complains that we are shut up in our institutions for years and come out with little or no practical knowledge:

We do not know an edible root in the woods, we cannot tell our course by the stars, not the hour of the day by the sun. It is well if we can swim and skate. We

²⁷Ibid., p. 280.

are afraid of a horse, of a cow, of a dog, of a snake,
of a spider.²⁸

We study dead languages which no longer have any bearing on our lives, he says, adding that he has not met ten men in his life who continued reading Greek and Latin after leaving school. "But is not this absurd that the whole liberal talent of this country should be directed in its best years on studies which lead to nothing?" he inquires.²⁹ Genuine truth cannot be conveyed to a student through a book, says Emerson, but can come only from the one great source, the Over-soul.

Emerson says all wrongs will be righted "Whenever . . . a just and heroic soul finds itself."³⁰ Again, however, Emerson argues that the reformers' reliance on association is their greatest weakness:

[B]ut remember that no society can ever be so large as one man. He, in his friendship, in his natural and momentary associations, doubles or multiplies himself; but in the hour in which he mortgages himself to two or ten to twenty, he dwarfs himself below the stature of one.³¹

Emerson contends that the reformers exaggerate some special virtue at the expense of truth and justice. Of this partiality of virtue, he says: "When we see an eager assailant of one of these wrongs, a special reformer, we feel like asking him, What

²⁸R.W. Emerson, "New England Reformers," Complete Works (Current Opinion Ed.), I, 280.

²⁹Ibid., p. 258.

³⁰Ibid., p. 263.

³¹Ibid., p. 264.

right have you, sir, to your one virtue? Is virtue piecemeal?"³²
 Emerson says that it is not the vices of society that bother him, because he can envisage an end to them, but it is society's virtues that mortify him. He says our virtues are "so sour and narrow, so thin and blind, virtue so vice-like."³³

Emerson was by his own admission emotionally sympathetic to the aims of most of the reformers and was tolerant, if not sympathetic, to those others whose particular cause seemed ludicrous to him. Yet that other force, Emerson's devotion to the complete self-sufficiency of the human individual, was stronger, and it prevented Emerson from joining or wholeheartedly endorsing any associations. At this point in Emerson's development then, before his idealism was jolted by the extreme developments of the slavery question, he might best be described as a revolutionary without the quality of action. As the slavery conflict began to generate more heat throughout the nation and as it became apparent that the Union was in jeopardy, Emerson's idealism was dissipated or at least seriously modified until he assumed the hard countenance of an active abolitionist.

This process of change in Emerson was a process that saw him undecided and wavering in his devotion to pure transcendental philosophy. Emerson's essays and speeches between, say, 1845 and 1850 contain a definite manifestation of his inner conflict. Emerson's apparent simultaneous acceptance and

³²Ibid., p. 265.

³³Ibid.

rejection of American civilization illustrate the condition of divided intelligence strikingly. He was both the critic and the celebrator of his and subsequent generations, the yea-sayer and the nay-sayer. He was the most articulate exponent of democratic individualism whose philosophy of self-reliance, or self-sufficiency, harmonized with the disintegrative tendencies of American life, and yet at the same time he quite characteristically attacked the social consequences of his own philosophy.

To anyone who has imagined Emerson as the sedentary philosopher invariably upholding with transcendental logic the Ideal against the Material, his delight in the harmonies of the market-place might appear somewhat paradoxical. A closer survey of his writings, however, shows that his communications with the Over-soul did not always preclude a secular interest in vulgar appearances. His transcendentalism, in fact, provided an ideal explanation for the conduct and activities of the business classes and offered the necessary criteria by which he was able to justify or to criticize them. This leisure-loving beneficiary of a commercial economy, whose ancestors were ministerial rather than mercantile, outlined a rationale for the entrepreneur of an industrial age.

Emerson's fastidious tastes found little that was congenial in the vulgarity and crassness of workaday business. It is all the more remarkable that he was able to sublimate his instinctive distaste for hucksters in counting-houses and see them finally as exemplifying divine principles. His journals and essays are filled with disparaging references to the business

classes; their sordidness, their undeviating pursuit of wealth, their narrow self-interests, and their timidity are bluntly and scornfully arraigned. But he seems to have cherished a particular dislike only for the meaner of the species. Businessmen of larger appetites and bolder ambitions, notwithstanding their faults, often called forth his admiration, and he consistently identified business intrepidity with the exploits of warriors and heroes.³⁴

The portrait of Napoleon in Representative Men is perhaps the best illustration of Emerson's ambivalent attitude toward aggressiveness and self-seeking; it is not by accident that he saw "this deputy of the nineteenth century" as the "agent or attorney of the middle class of modern society; of the strong who fill the markets, shops, counting-houses, manufactories, ships, of the modern world, aiming to be rich."³⁵ The essay falls roughly into two parts. In the first section Emerson exalts Napoleon into a superman; in the concluding three of four paragraphs, he dwells upon his uglier defects--his coarseness and lack of idealism. But the deflation of the great man undertaken at the close of the essay cannot entirely obliterate the earlier impression of Emerson's enthusiastic admiration. In praising Napoleon's practicality, prudence, and directness,

³⁴Daniel Aaron, "Emerson and the Progressive Tradition," Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays, Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen E. Whicher, eds., p. 90.

³⁵R.W. Emerson, "Napoleon; Or The Man Of The World," Representative Men: Seven Lectures, A.L. Burt, Publishers, n.d., p. 208.

his powers of synthesis and cool audacity, Emerson is underscoring precisely those attributes that make up the American success code. Emerson's strictures against the blowhard, the strutting egotist, the low vulgarian are devastating, but the following encomium also represents his settled convictions:

We cannot, in the universal imbecility, indecision and indolence of men, sufficiently congratulate ourselves on this strong and ready actor [Napoleon], who took occasion by the beard, and showed us how much may be accomplished by the mere force of such virtues as all men possess in less degrees; namely by punctuality, by personal attention, by courage, and thoroughness. . . . The lesson he teaches is that which vigor always teaches,--that there is always room for it.³⁶

Yet in the same volume, Representative Men, in the chapter "Goethe; Or, The Writer," Emerson makes what would seem to be a completely contrary statement concerning action. He says:

If I were to compare action of a much higher strain with a life of contemplation, I should not venture to pronounce with much confidence on favor of the former. . . . A certain partiality, a headiness, and loss of balance, is the tax which all action must pay. Act, if you like,--but you do it at your own peril. Men's actions are too strong for them. Show me a man who has acted, and who has not been the victim and slave of his action. . . . The fiery reformer embodies his aspiration in some rite or covenant, and he and his friends cleave to the form, and lose the aspiration.³⁷

Emerson continued this line of thought a little further on in his essay by saying that "great action must draw on the spiritual nature. . . . The greatest action may easily be one of the most

³⁶Ibid., p. 227.

³⁷R.W. Emerson, "Goethe; Or The Writer," Representative Men: Seven Lectures, A.L. Burt, Publishers, n.d., pp. 244-245.

private circumstances."³⁸

This apparent contradiction in Emerson's essays of this time also reflects the ideas of the reformers who regarded themselves as his disciples or who unconsciously reflect his influence; and since Emerson was the real prophet of the progressive tradition, his polarized attitude toward the individual has a direct bearing on the history of progressivism in America. The progressives who followed Emerson felt his impatience with men in the mass. Like him, they held forth the possibility of human development while noting the appalling evidences of human mediocrity. Like him again, they fervently condemned the shortsightedness and selfishness of the middle class at the same time that they cherished its virtues and faith. Emerson was their perfect representative, and his ambivalent attitude toward man in the aggregate was shared by the progressives who followed him.³⁹

³⁸Ibid., p. 246.

³⁹Aaron, "Emerson and the Progressive Tradition," Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays, Konvitz and Whicher, eds., p. 89.

CHAPTER IV

EMERSON'S EARLY ABOLITIONISM

The question of slavery in America was a question that Emerson was never able to rationalize to his satisfaction. His natural sympathies were with those who advocated the abolition of slavery, but like other social reformers, the abolitionists, Emerson felt, were misguided. For that reason, Emerson never formally joined the abolitionist movement, yet it was not satisfactory for him to remain entirely separated from it.

On Sunday, May 29, 1831, Emerson, the Unitarian minister, admitted an abolitionist in his church to deliver a lecture on that subject. The following year, another abolitionist was invited to speak. These acts, of themselves, are important only when we realize that they occurred years before the abolitionist movement had generated any momentum or respectability. William Lloyd Garrison was, at this time, considered a vulgar street preacher, too radical to be taken seriously. To take a strong anti-slavery stand was to invite the reaction of a Boston mob. The respectable, conservative Boston merchant class did not want any talk which tended to unsettle or disturb the status quo. The institution of slavery, evil as it might be, was far removed from Boston and was not a Boston problem. Besides, respectable Bostonians reminded themselves, slavery was guaranteed by the United States Constitution and was

therefore beyond legal question. This wild abolition talk could only make trouble and was, after all, espoused by only a handful of rabble-rousers who deserved no credibility. Such was the atmosphere in which the abolitionists, in 1831, were trying to arouse the general public to organize themselves against slavery.

In 1835, when Harriet Martineau, a staunch abolitionist writer, was nearly mobbed in Boston and no prominent citizen ventured to her side, Emerson and his brother Charles hastened to her defense.¹

In November, 1837, Emerson was asked to deliver a speech on the subject of slavery at the Concord Lyceum. Since such a controversial subject, however, was not considered appropriate by the Lyceum's Speakers Committee, another platform, the vestry of the Second Church in Boston, was finally secured for Emerson's speech. In his speech Emerson dwelt especially on the duty of resisting all attempts to stifle discussion. He said that it is the eminent duty of New England to open her churches and halls for a free discussion of every question involving the

¹As Harriet Martineau testifies in her Autobiography: "Waldo invited me to be his guest in the midst of my unpopularity, and during my visit told me his course about this matter of slavery. He did not see that there was any particular thing for him to do in it then, but when, in coaches and steamboats, or anywhere else, he saw people of color ill-treated, or heard bad doctrine or sentiment propounded, he did what he could, and said what he thought. Since that day he has spoken more abundantly and boldly the more critical the times became; and he is now and has long been, identified with the Abolitionists in conviction and sentiment, though it is out of his way to join himself to their organization." From Emerson's Complete Works (Centenary Ed.), XI, 573.

rights of men. "If the motto on all palace gates is 'Hush,' the honorable ensign on our town halls should be 'Proclaim.'"²

Emerson continued:

I account this a matter of grave importance, because symptoms of an overprudence are showing themselves around us. I regret to hear that all the churches but one, and almost all the music halls in Boston, are closed against the discussion of this question.³

Emerson's stand, at this time, should not be mistaken for a pro-abolitionist stand, but should be taken simply as an assertion of his position that all questions have a right to be heard. Specifically, as far as the slavery question is concerned, Emerson said:

But when we have distinctly settled for ourselves the right and wrong of this question, and have covenanted with ourselves to keep the channels of opinion open, each man for himself, I think we have done all that is incumbent on us to do. Sorely as we may feel the wrongs of the poor slave in Carolina or Cuba, we have each of us our hands full of much nearer duties.⁴

This position, it can easily be seen, is consistent with Emerson's basic conviction of the sufficiency of the individual. This tone was offensive to the abolitionists as being insufficiently alive to the interests of humanity. The abolitionists contended that Emerson's disgust at the methods and the manners of the reform group blinded him to the moral importance of their work. Emerson was ready to admit that there was

²James Elliot Cabot, A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson, II, 425.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 426.

some truth to that charge. "I like best the strong and worthy persons . . . who support the social order without hesitation or misgiving. I like these; they never incommode us by exciting grief, pity, or perturbation of any sort." As for professed philanthropists, he declared that they are "an altogether odious set of people, whom one would shun as the worst of bores and canters."⁵

It was not fastidiousness nor a lack of interest that made Emerson such an unfavorable candidate for any philanthropic scheme, so much as it was the dictates of his nature. His sense of fair play demanded that all sides of a question should be freely and fairly heard. Emerson could not believe that one side could be totally right, while the other side was totally wrong.⁶ Surely, thought Emerson, the abolitionists exaggerated their rightness and the slaveholder's wrongness.

For New Englanders to keep slaves would be the height of wickedness, but for the Southerner to keep slaves might indicate only a degree of self-indulgence. Self-indulgence, contended Emerson, is not limited to the geographical South, but might be easily equaled in New England. How then, he asked, could the abolitionists demand a superiority of the planter that could not be found at home? The Southern slaveholder was no

⁵Ibid., p. 427.

⁶In his essay "Compensation," Emerson develops the idea that there are no absolutes in nature; that is, that every action has its reaction and that no action exists independent of a result.

more to blame for slavery than the Negro for allowing himself to be held as a slave, he contended. After all:

The degradation of that black race . . . did not come without sin. The condition is inevitable to the men they are, and nobody can redeem them but themselves. The exertions of all the abolitionists are nugatory except for themselves.⁷

The Negro, said Emerson, is created on a lower plane than the white. "The Negro is imitative, secondary; in short, reactionary merely in his successes, and there is no organization in him."⁸ This statement, however, surely does not bear the full weight of firm conviction by Emerson; it is the only instance in which such an idea is recorded, while on other occasions, as we shall see, Emerson made statements expressing his belief in the equality of the Negro race with the white.

On November 7, 1837, the Rev. E.P. Lovejoy, an abolitionist, was shot by a mob in Alton, Illinois, while attempting to defend his printing-press from destruction. The mob had been inflamed against Lovejoy by the temper of his abolitionist newspaper. This incident seems to be the first racial event for which Emerson's idealism could not offer a satisfactory rationalization; it made Emerson see the ugly realities of an impassioned mob. He was moved to record in his Journal, November, 1837, "Right minded men have recently been called to decide for Abolition." Later in the same month he confided to his Journal:

⁷James Elliot Cabot, A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson, II, 428.

⁸Ibid., pp. 429-430.

The brave Lovejoy has given his breast to the bullets of a mob for the right of free speech and opinion, and has died when it was better not to live. He is absolved. There are always men enough ready to die for the silliest punctilio; to die like dogs, who fall under each other's teeth, but I sternly rejoice that one was bound to die for humanity and the rights of free speech and opinion.

Yet when Emerson wrote his essay on "Self-Reliance," less than two years later, he included the following statement:

If an angry bigot assumes this beautiful cause of Abolition, and comes to me with the latest news of Barbardoes, why should I not say to him, "Go, love thy infant; love thy wood-chopper; be good natured and modest; have that grace, and never varnish your hard, uncharitable ambition with this incredible tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off. Thy love afar is spite at home!"⁹

It is clear from these conflicting statements that Emerson was, at this time, torn between his natural disapproval of the abolitionists and the persistent realization that they offered the only alternative to the odious institution of slavery.

Emerson's refusal to join in abolitionist reform during this time, was not, however, taken as an indication of cowardly timidity. At the same time that the militant abolitionists were critical of Emerson for not having sufficient compassion for the slave, it was generally recognized that he was a man of great personal courage. In April, 1838, when he learned of the impending removal of the Cherokee Indians from Georgia to a government reservation, he wrote a letter of protest to President Martin Van Buren. So incensed was Emerson that he wrote:

⁹R.W. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," Selections (ed. Whicher), p. 150.

You, sir, will bring down that renowned chair in which you sit into infamy if your seal is set to this instrument of perfidy; and the name of this nation, hitherto the sweet omen of religion and liberty, will stink to the world.¹⁰

Emerson, however, got little satisfaction from this letter as he recorded in his Journal, April 24, 1838:

Yesterday went the letter to Van Buren,--a letter hated of me; a deliverance that does not deliver the soul. I write my Journal, I read my lectures with joy; but this stirring in the philanthropic mud gives me no peace. I will let the republic alone until the republic comes to me.

Emerson's opinion of the abolitionists and their work seems, in these early years, to be more a product of his transient mood than a definite angle of vision. His anger and his anti-slavery resolve were prompted only by incidents of violence, such as the Lovejoy murder, but by and by he would again lapse into a lethargy in which the slavery problem was none of his concern. The incidents of this insistent problem were to Emerson temporary and bothersome interruptions in his idealistic euphoria. An example of his prevailing tendency to rationalize this nagging problem without becoming personally involved was recorded in his Journal in January, 1840:

Does he not do more to abolish slavery who works all day steadily in his own garden than he who goes to the abolition meeting and makes a speech? He who does his own work frees a slave. He who does not his own work is a slave holder.

The tenth anniversary of the emancipation by Act of Parliament of all the slaves in the insular possessions of Great Britain

¹⁰R.W. Emerson, "Letter to President Van Buren," Complete Works (Centenary Ed.), XI, 93.

in the West Indies was celebrated in Concord on August 1, 1844. Emerson was invited to make the address on this occasion. The public conscience was slowly becoming aroused, by this time, especially among the country people who did not have the mercantile and social relations with the Southerner which hampered the action of many people in the cities. Yet, even in Concord, all the churches closed their doors to the philanthropists who gathered to celebrate. Through the effort of Henry Thoreau, always a champion of freedom, the courthouse was made available for their purpose.

Emerson's speech, "West Indian Emancipation," given on this occasion marks one of the most important steps Emerson took in becoming an active, self-acknowledged abolitionist.

Earlier in the same year an incident occurred which took Emerson beyond the limits of his patience. In the port of Charleston, South Carolina, colored Massachusetts crewmen were taken off their ship and held in jail. In accordance with the laws of that state, the visiting shipmaster had to pay the cost of the arrest and incarceration. If he failed to do this, the prisoners would be sold as slaves. The state of Massachusetts had no legal recourse.

Emerson was enraged by this incident, as were all New Englanders, and used the occasion of his speech on the "West Indian Emancipation" to declare: "Brothers, I have come to enter with you into this holy war. My arm and my heart are yours, and here do I pledge myself henceforth to do battle in

your cause till you have gained the victory."¹¹ "The blood is moral," says Emerson, "the blood is anti-slavery; it runs cold in the veins; the stomach rises with disgust, and curses slavery."¹² Referring to the incident concerning the Massachusetts seamen and recalling to his audience the fourth article of the Constitution, i.e., "The citizens of each state shall be entitled to all privileges and immunities of citizens in the several States," Emerson says:

If such a damnable outrage can be committed upon the person of a citizen with impunity, let the Governor break the broad seal of the state; he bears the sword in vain. The Governor of Massachusetts is a trifler; the State-House in Boston is a play-house; the general court is a dishonored body if they make laws which they cannot execute.¹³

Such was Emerson's indignation at this outrage that he called on Congress to instruct the President to dispatch orders, and an armed force if necessary, to Charleston to secure the release of those incarcerated seamen. "As for the dangers to the Union, from such demands!--the Union is already at an end when the first citizen of Massachusetts is thus outraged."¹⁴

Emerson says that, while some would maintain that the planter held slaves for the love of luxuries (Emerson's own position a few years earlier) and would gladly release the

¹¹Moncure D. Conway, Emerson At Home And Abroad, p. 245. This quotation does not appear in Complete Works, but is recalled by Conway, who was in attendance.

¹²R.W. Emerson, "West Indian Emancipation," Complete Works (Centenary Ed.), XI, 104.

¹³Ibid., p. 131.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 132.

slaves if given money or machines that would yield him as much as his slaves, the history of slavery does not bear out such a motive. He says that the slaveholders have . . . a bitterer element, the love of power, the voluptuousness of holding a human being in his absolute control."¹⁵ As can be seen, this speech represents an entirely different view of the Southern planter from that Emerson held prior to 1844.

Emerson continues the speech by tracing the history of slavery in the West Indies, focusing on those events, decisions, and men that led to the emancipation. Of the emancipation, Emerson says, "This event was a moral revolution."¹⁶ Emerson continues:

I esteem the occasion of this jubilee to be the proud discovery that the black race can contend with the white. . . . [T]he quality of this race is to be honored for itself. For this they have been preserved in sandy deserts, in rice-swamps, in kitchens and shoe-shops so long; now let them emerge, clothed and in their own form.¹⁷

Emerson thus was among the first to call for some form of emancipation, a call he was to repeat many times before emancipation became an accomplished fact.

In summing up Emerson's changing attitude toward the slavery controversy in these early years, we must admit, I think, that his rage at the planters was sporadic and that he was not fired with the dedication of the anti-slavery crusade. Still, while he was, and always had been, opposed to the

¹⁵Ibid., p. 134.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 135.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 145.

institution of slavery as a moral matter, he was inconsistent in his attacks on slavery and in the intensity with which he deprecated that institution. On the one hand, he hated the timidity of the New Englanders for allowing slavery to continue to spread; on the other hand, he would himself turn his back on the abolitionists. Of the collective silence in New England, he protested:

Will you stick to your principle of non-resistance when your strong-box is broken open, when your wives and babes are insulted and slaughtered in your sight? If you say yes, you only invite the robber and assassin; and a few bloody-minded desperadoes would soon butcher the good.¹⁸

Yet Emerson had justified his own inconsistency years before, when he said, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,"¹⁹ and he justified his inconsistency in action by saying, "A wise man will never impawn his future being and action, and decide beforehand what he shall do in a given extreme event. Nature and God will instruct him in that hour."²⁰ Yet one of the qualities Emerson most admired in Napoleon in Representative Men, was his ability to anticipate all situations.

Emerson was, of course, a very well-known man, and his idealism was recognized and understood by the abolitionists.

¹⁸R.W. Emerson, "War," Complete Works (Centenary Ed.), XI, 168.

¹⁹R.W. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," Selections (ed. Whicher), p. 153.

²⁰R.W. Emerson, "War," Complete Works (Centenary Ed.), XI, 169.

It was never expected that Emerson would engage himself in mob violence. Such a course would have been contrary to everything he had ever said. What the abolitionists wanted from Emerson was inspiration. Seen from that angle, Emerson does not appear to be a failure as an abolitionist. He did furnish the abolitionist movement with thought and inspiration. According to Newell D. Hillis,

Little by little it came about that the fighters went to Emerson as to an arsenal for their intellectual weapons. . . . Hundreds of orators and reformers went up and down the land attacking slavery, but while the voices were many the argument was one, and Emerson for a time did the speaking for the abolitionists.²¹

²¹Newell Dwight Hillis, The Battle of Principles, p. 97.

CHAPTER V
EMERSON THE ABOLITIONIST

Throughout his public life, Daniel Webster had always been the outspoken critic of the slaveholding interests in the South. Ever since Webster's speech "Reply to Hayne," Webster's name had been revered throughout New England as the champion of freedom. To Emerson, Webster was nature's grandest man. Emerson had always taken great personal pride in Webster. In 1832, Emerson wrote a poem about Webster which indicated an inordinate adoration of the man, as the following quatrain shows:

Let Webster's lofty face
Ever on thousands shine,
A beacon set that freedom's race
Might gather omens from that radiant sign.¹

In 1843, after Webster was a guest in Emerson's home, Emerson recorded in his Journal, August 17: "He is a natural emperor of men . . . the one eminent American of our time whom we could produce as a finished work of nature."

Hero worship was not alien to Emerson's philosophy, but a natural conclusion to it. To Emerson, great men such as Webster are the products of their superior individual wills. They are men, as Emerson had preached earlier, who stand "indomitably upon their instincts until the huge world come round to them."

In 1845-46, Emerson gave his series of lectures,

¹R.W. Emerson, Poems, Complete Works (Centenary Ed.), IX, 398.

"Representative Men" (published in 1850). In his introductory lecture, "The Uses of Great Men," he might well have had Webster in mind when he said, "Nature seems to exist for the excellent. The world is upheld by the veracity of good men: they make the earth wholesome."² At any rate, Emerson was proud to give voice to the praises of Webster as the foremost defender of freedom in New England. Yet events which were taking shape through the 1840's would prove that Webster was primarily a compromising politician who would not stand "indomitably on his instinct. . . ."

The annexation of Texas, the Mexican War, and the acquisition of territory on our southern and western borders brought the slavery question into sharp focus. Webster had always, when the occasion required, denounced slavery as a great moral and political evil; and although affirming that under the Constitution it could not be touched by the action of the general government in the states in which it existed, he had declared himself against its extension. He had opposed the annexation of Texas, the war against Mexico, and the enlargement of the republic by conquest. But while he did not abandon his position concerning slavery, his tone in maintaining it grew gradually milder.

Webster could see, by virtue of his advancing age and

²R.W. Emerson, "The Uses of Great Men," Complete Works (Current Opinion Ed.), VI, 3.

failing health, that the convention of 1852 would be his last opportunity for the Whig nomination for the Presidency. He felt as though he would have to gain Southern support in the Senate if he was to secure the nomination. Therefore, when the Compromise of 1850, with its attached Fugitive Slave Law, was put before the Senate, he was faced with the decision of taking his traditional anti-slavery position and losing the needed Southern support, or of supporting the Fugitive Slave Law, thereby violating his convictions and the trust of his New England constituents.³

The anti-slavery men of the North, and all of his conservative friends, hoped and expected that he would, as before, stand defiantly for the Union in the face of the rebellious spirit and give voice to the moral sense of the North. But Webster chose otherwise. On March 7, 1850, he spoke in the Senate. While denouncing secession and pleading for unity, he upbraided the Northern abolitionists as mischievous trouble makers, earnestly advocated the compromise, and commended that feature of it that was most odious to the Northern sentiment--the Fugitive Slave Law. By the terms of this law, all citizens of the free states were obliged, under threat of a six-month prison term or one thousand dollars fine, to aid in the recapturing and returning of fugitive slaves.

To Emerson, Webster's "Seventh of March" speech was a crushing blow and an intolerable personal disappointment. He

³Carl Schurz, "Webster," The Library of Oratory, ed. Chauncey M. Depew, LL.D., XV, 173-189.

knew that the last hope of Northern resistance had crumbled before the Southern pressure and that the North was at the mercy of the planters. Webster not only endorsed the law, but continued to urge the citizens of Massachusetts to abide by its terms, as recorded by Harper's New Monthly Magazine:

Mr. Webster has written a letter to the citizens of Newburyport, Massachusetts, upon the wrong done to the South by refusing to surrender their fugitive slaves, urging the necessity for more stringent laws and expressing the opinion that there is nothing, either in the spirit or the letter of the Constitution requiring a jury trial to determine the question of slavery, when an alleged fugitive is seized.⁴

In another edition of Harper's, the bitter resentment with which the North accepted the Fugitive Slave Law is reflected by the following statements:

We recorded . . . the passage by Congress of the several measures generally known as the "peace measures" of the session--the last of which was the bill making more effectual provision for the recovery of fugitive slaves. Congress had no sooner adjourned than these measures, especially the last, became the theme of violent public controversy. In the northern states several attempts to regain possession of fugitives from slavery in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia were resisted with great clamor, and served to inflame public feeling to a very unhealthy extent.⁵

After several incidents occurring in New York in which abolitionists allegedly hid slaves and protected them from the authorities, Webster wrote a letter to a peace meeting in New York, October 30, 1850, in which he said:

⁴"Monthly Record of Current Events," Harper's New Monthly Magazine, I, 107.

⁵Ibid., II, 122.

I have heard no man, whose opinion is worth regarding deny its [The Fugitive Slave Law's] constitutionality, and those who counsel violent resistance to it, counsel . . . bloodshed, and the commission of capital offenses. . . . If we would continue as one people, we must acquiesce in the will of the majority, constitutionally expressed, and he that does not mean to do that, means to disturb the public peace, and to do what he can to overturn the government.⁶

Such was Emerson's shock and despondency over this betrayal by Webster that in April, 1850, Emerson wrote in his Journal, "The badness of the times is making death attractive." His dispirited condition is reflected by many journal entries in those early months after the adoption of the Fugitive Slave Law. Emerson's entry to his Journal, February, 1851, is a particularly good statement of his depression:

We wake up with a painful auguring, and after exploring a little to know the cause, find it is the odious news in each day's paper, the infamy that has fallen on Massachusetts, that clouds the daylight and takes away the comfort out of every hour. We shall never feel well again until this detestable law is nullified. . . . All I have and all I can do shall be given and done in opposition to the execution of this law.

Such was his discomfort over the "detestable law" that Emerson was no longer able to contain his personal bitterness. Here was an issue he could not ignore. Yet, what could he do? His course of action was not clear because he was a complete stranger to the involvements of political questions. He lamented in his Journal, May, 1850: "It is the scholar's misfortune that his virtues are all on paper, and when the time comes to use them, he rubs his eyes and tries to remember what it is that

⁶Ibid., II, 137.

he should do."

The opportunity for direct action soon came in the form of an invitation to address the citizens of Concord on the problems of the times. Emerson was not tardy in accepting this invitation, and on May 3, 1851, he delivered his speech, "The Fugitive Slave Law," because he said, "The last year has forced us all into politics. . . . I have lived all my life in this state, and never had any experience of personal inconvenience from the laws until now. They never came near me to my discomfort before."⁷ He said that he was ashamed that the North and, specifically, Boston had allowed this law to be foisted upon them. "Boston, spoiled by prosperity, must bow its ancient honor in the dust, and make us irretrievably ashamed. . . . The tameness is complete,"⁸ he lamented. One good thing had come from the law, he told his audience, for it

showed the slightness and unreliableness of our social fabric, it showed what stuff reputations are made of, what straws we dignify by office and title. . . . It showed the shallowness of leaders . . . that men would not stick by what they had said.⁹

His rage was not to be mollified. He continued, "I thought none, that was not ready to go on all fours, would back this law."¹⁰

⁷R.W. Emerson, "The Fugitive Slave Law," Complete Works (Centenary Ed.), XI, 179.

⁸Ibid., p. 182.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 186.

Emerson maintained that, since it had been passed, the Fugitive Slave Law had been proved impracticable in five different ways. First, he found the law contravened by the sentiment of duty. "An immoral law makes it a man's duty to break it at every hazard,"¹¹ he contended. An immoral law or statute is void, he said, because laws do not make rights, but are declaratory of rights which already existed. Second, he said, the law was contravened by all human sentiments. "How," he asked, "can a law be enforced that fines pity and imprisons charity? As long as men have bowels they will disobey."¹² Third, said Emerson, the law was contravened by other written laws:

By the law of Congress March 2, 1807, it is piracy and murder to enslave a man on the coast of Africa. By the law of Congress, September, 1850, it is a crime to resist the re-enslaving of a man on the coast of America. What kind of legislation is this? What kind of constitution which covers it?¹³

Fourth, Emerson pointed out, a bad law cannot be obeyed by good men, but could only be obeyed by men as bad as the law itself. Therefore, the Fugitive Slave Law was contravened by the mischief it bred. In this law, said Emerson, "You have a law which no man can obey or abet the obeying, without the loss of self-respect and forfeiture of the name of gentleman."¹⁴ Fifth,

¹¹Ibid., p. 192.

¹²Ibid., p. 196.

¹³Ibid., p. 198.

¹⁴Ibid.

the law was contravened because it stated no moral truths, but was simply an instrument of conciliation and compromise.

At this point in his speech, Emerson's whole public career found its lowest and most depressed condition. For the only time in his life, he publicly launched a vitriolic personal attack against an individual, and this against an individual who had formerly been a continual source of pride and respect to Emerson. Surely, this was Emerson's most unhappy moment. Of Webster, he said:

those to whom his name was once dear and honored, as the manly statesman to whom the choicest gifts of Nature had been accorded, disown him; that he who was their pride in the woods and mountains of New England is now their mortification,--they have torn down his picture from the wall, they have thrust his speeches into the chimney.¹⁵

Emerson continued the attack by saying that Webster, contrary to all his past sentiments, on March 7, 1850, became the head of the slavery party in this country. Webster, after all was only following the natural direction of his constitution, said Emerson, since, "He obeys his powerful animal nature. . . . All the drops of his blood have eyes that look downward."¹⁶ Emerson declared that the law which Webster forced upon the country

is suicidal, and cannot be obeyed. The Union is at an end as soon as an immoral law is enacted. And he who writes a crime into the statute books digs under the foundations of the Capitol to plant there a powder magazine, and lays a train.¹⁷

¹⁵Ibid., p. 201.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 204.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 206.

What then, was the answer to this intolerable calamity? "First," said Emerson, "abrogate this law; then, proceed to confine slavery to the slave states, and help them effectually to make an end of it."¹⁸ It was true, he admitted, that the slaveholding interests had never compromised, so there was no reason to expect that they would compromise then. The slave interests meant only to extend their territory and influence. "She [the slaveholding South] is very industrious, gives herself no holidays. No proclamations will put her down."¹⁹ Therefore, insisted Emerson, "Everything invites emancipation."²⁰ He did not intend a mere proclamation of emancipation by the North, but true emancipation through compensation to the planters. "Why not," he asked,

end this dangerous dispute on some ground of fair compensation on the one side, and satisfaction on the other of the free states? It is really the great task of this country to accomplish, to buy that property of the planters . . . because it is the only practicable course, and is innocent.²¹

The cost of such an action was estimated at two billion dollars, but said Emerson:

We will have a chimney tax. We will give up our coaches, and wine, and watches. The church will melt their plate. . . . The mechanics will give, the needle women will give, the children will have cent societies. Every man in the land will give a week's work to dig away this

¹⁸Ibid., p. 207.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., p. 208.

²¹Ibid., p. 209.

accursed mountain of sorrow once and forever out of the world.²²

Emerson continued, "Let them confront this mountain of poison, --bore, blast, excavate, pulverize, and shovel it once for all, down into the bottomless pit. A thousand millions were cheap."²³

Emerson concluded his speech by summing up his sentiment of unrelenting defiance. "This law must be made inoperative. It must be abrogated and wiped out of the statute-book; but whilst it stands there, it must be disobeyed."²⁴

This speech represents the new Emerson. For the first time the thinker was advocating and proposing a course of direct action. Although the course of action he proposed may not seem a practical one, it had many very prominent advocates.

It might be supposed that after the passion of the moment had subsided, Emerson would lapse back into a sort of detachment and unconcern about the slavery question. From this point on, however, he was never again to feel unconcern over the raging conflict. His private journal entries prove that, by the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law and especially by Webster's role in it, he had been pushed beyond his endurance and that, from that time forward, he took an uncompromising anti-slavery position. In his Journal, in March, 1851, he wrote: "Liberty! Liberty! Pho! Let Mr. Webster, for decency's sake, shut his

²²Ibid., p. 210.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., p. 212.

lips once and forever on this word. The word liberty in the mouth of Mr. Webster sounds like the word love in the mouth of a courtesan." In July, 1851, Emerson recorded a personal pledge to himself in his Journal: "This filthy enactment was made in the nineteenth century, by people who could read and write. I will not obey it, by God!"

Emerson never believed that his speeches would change the course of the conflict. He was moved to action on behalf of the abolitionists because he was enraged by the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law and because he was bitterly disappointed in Webster. He never imagined that he was at the head of a crusade. That was for people like Garrison and Parker. After 1850, however, he could not deny or suppress the dictates of his conscience which demanded that he resist slavery in the only way he was equipped to resist it--by speaking out against it. In a letter to Carlyle, Emerson said, "In the spring the abomination of our Fugitive Slave Law drove me to some writing and speech making, without the hope of effect, but to clear my own skirts."²⁵ The fact that he had not given the abolitionists his unqualified support and thrown himself into the thick of the controversy from the outset bothered Emerson, and it explains, at least in part, why when he did finally join the battle, his speeches were so furious. Emerson confided to his Journal, August, 1852: "I waked at night and bemoaned myself,

²⁵The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle, ed. Joseph Slater, p. 470.

because I had not thrown myself into this deplorable question of slavery, which seems to want nothing so much as a few assured voices."

Webster's compromise with the South by supporting the Fugitive Slave Law did not win the Southern adherents Webster had hoped for in the 1852 convention. His defeat at the convention could hardly have been more complete. As Emerson said in his Journal, November, 1852, "But alas! he was the victim of his ambition; to please the South, he betrayed the North, and was thrown out by both." Webster's health had been failing for some time, but the rebuke of 1852 seems to have hastened its decline. On the morning of October 24, 1852, Webster died, politically bankrupt.

Emerson was invited to deliver another speech on the Fugitive Slave Law on March 7, 1854, the fourth anniversary of Daniel Webster's famous speech. Emerson's passion had mellowed since his first speech on the subject, yet he still maintained that it was the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 that made an abolitionist out of him:

I have lived all my life without suffering any known inconvenience from American Slavery. I never saw it; I never heard the whip; I never felt the check on my free speech and action, until, the other day, when Mr. Webster, by his personal influence, brought the Fugitive Slave Law to the country.²⁶

The Fugitive Slave Law, said Emerson, brought slavery right to his front door. "Slavery in Virginia or Carolina was like

²⁶R.W. Emerson, "The Fugitive Slave Law," Complete Works (Centenary Ed.), XI, 219.

slavery in Africa or the Feejees, for me."²⁷ But the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law showed that slavery was no longer mendicant, but had become aggressive and dangerous:

It showed that our prosperity had hurt us, and that we could not be shocked by crime. It showed that the old religion and the sense of the right had faded and gone out, . . . [that] our bellies had run away with our brains, and that the principles of culture and progress did not exist.²⁸

The events of the four years since 1850, Emerson asserted, had proved correct all that he had been saying for years. He told his audience that their trust in forms was misplaced. They relied on the Constitution of the United States, which did not even contain the word slave; they relied on the Supreme Court, but the justices themselves came from among the wolves; they relied on state sovereignty; they relied on the Missouri Compromise; and more recently they had relied on the Fugitive Slave Law. None of these forms, he said, had proved an effective protection against the evils of slavery:

These things show that no forms, neither constitutions, nor laws, nor covenants, nor churches, nor bibles, are any use in themselves. The Devil nestles comfortably in them all. There is no help but in the head, and heart and hamstring of man. . . . He only who is able to stand alone is qualified for society, and that I understand to be the end for which a soul exists in the world,--to be himself a counterbalance against all falsehood and wrong.²⁹

If any good had come from slavery, Emerson said, it was that men had been made to see the insufficiency of forms and institutions.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 224.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 229.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 234.

Whenever a man has come to this mind, that there is no church for him but his believing prayer; no Constitution but his dealing well and justly with his neighbor; no liberty but his invincible will to do right,--then certain aids and allies will promptly appear: for the constitution of the Universe is on his side.³⁰

Thus, we see that Emerson had not changed his transcendental philosophy of the supremacy of the individual and the unreliability of institutions. On the contrary, he attempted to show that the advent of the Fugitive Slave Law proved the unreliability of institutions. Emerson's active association with the Anti-Slavery Society constituted an exception he was forced to make to his philosophy and did not represent a general change in his transcendentalism. Of the Anti-Slavery Society, Emerson said, "It is the Cassandra that has foretold all that has befallen, fact for fact, years ago."³¹ His was a forced alliance with the abolitionist for the duration of the controversy, and it did not mean that he now refuted all that he had said over the years regarding institutionalized action.

In May, 1856, the distinguished Senator from Massachusetts, Charles Sumner, a strong abolitionist who filled Daniel Webster's old seat, delivered a speech on the floor of the Senate on the affairs in Kansas. Sumner shocked his audience by saying that the crime against Kansas was, "the rape of a virgin territory, compelling it to the hateful embrace of slavery."³² Sumner

³⁰ Ibid., p. 236.

³¹ Ibid., p. 244.

³² T. Harry Williams, The Union Sundered, The Life History of the United States, V (1849-1856), 70.

struck hardest at Andrew P. Butler, Senator from South Carolina, who was absent:

The senator from South Carolina has read many books of chivalry, and believes himself a chivalrous knight, with sentiments of honor and courage. Of course he has chosen a mistress to whom he has made his vows and who, although ugly to others, is always lovely to him; although polluted in the sight of the world, is chaste in his sight--I mean the harlot Slavery.³³

So enraged were the Southerners over Sumner's speech that Preston Brooks, a member of the House of Representatives and a kinsman of Butler, attacked Sumner on the Senate floor with a walking stick, inflicting such damage on Sumner that it required four years for a full recovery. A protest meeting was held in the Town Hall of Concord on May 26, 1856, and Emerson addressed the crowd. He said:

The events of the last few years and months and days have taught us the lessons of the centuries. I do not see how a barbarous community and a civilized community can constitute one state. I think we must get rid of slavery, or we must get rid of freedom.³⁴

Emerson said that the whole slavery conflict debased the government by appealing to base men. Good men, such as Sumner, became targets of the bad. The better the man, the sooner he would come under attack. Under the rules of that game, Emerson said, if Massachusetts wanted her representatives to survive, she would have to send fools to Washington.

The only charge the Southerners made against Sumner was

³³Ibid.

³⁴R.W. Emerson, "The Assault Upon Mr. Sumner," Complete Works (Centenary Ed.), XI, 247.

that he was an abolitionist, said Emerson, "as if every sane human being were not an abolitionist, or a believer that all men should be free."³⁵

By an act of Congress, passed May, 1854, the territories of Kansas and Nebraska were organized, and in this case, the terms of the Missouri Compromise Act of 1820 were suspended. The Act of 1820 had limited slavery to areas south of 36°, 30' in the Louisiana Purchase territory. The result was that slavery was not forbidden in the new Kansas territory. Kansas Emigrant Aid Societies organized in New England assisted Northern emigrants in the settlement of this fertile region. Settlers from Missouri also streamed into Kansas, bringing their slaves with them. This situation resulted in a continuing fight between the two groups of settlers. Emerson always attended the meetings in aid of Kansas held in Concord and Boston, gave liberally to the cause, and spoke on behalf of "Kansas aid" wherever called upon. On September 10, 1856, he addressed such a meeting in Concord. In this speech, Emerson called on the governor of Massachusetts to raise arms to be sent to the Northern emigrants in Kansas. This was a moral matter, said Emerson, and the legal difficulties of such an act did not matter, for, he emphasized, "every immoral statute is void!" The government, he said, did not defend truth and freedom, but on the contrary, was "the chief obstruction to the common weal."³⁶

³⁵Ibid., p. 250.

³⁶R.W. Emerson, "Speech on Affairs in Kansas," Complete Works (Centenary Ed.), XI, 255.

Emerson warned his audience that the slavery controversy had such deep roots and entangling conflicts of interest that war was becoming unavoidable.

In 1857, John Brown came to Concord to direct a plea for aid and arms to the emigrants of Kansas and to tell some key abolitionists there of a plan he had. He confided the outlines, but not the details, of the plan to six abolitionist leaders. These men entered eagerly into the conspiracy, even to the point of assuming code names, and were known as the "Secret Six." Their principal service was to provide Brown with financial assistance. He intended to seize a strong point in the mountains of Virginia, set it up as a fortified base, and operate from there to free slaves. Eventually he meant to take his charges into the hills, organize them into a kind of Negro state within the South, and force a general emancipation. Of Brown's visit to Concord, it is recorded by F.B. Sanborn that

Brown's general purpose of attacking slavery by force in Missouri or elsewhere, was known in 1857-8-9 to R.W. Emerson, A. Bronson Alcott, Henry Thoreau, Wendell Phillips, . . . and others of the anti-slavery men of Massachusetts, none of whom discountenanced it, while most of them, in my hearing, distinctly approved it.³⁷

John Brown's raw courage and pure dedication to a cause completely captured Emerson's admiration and filled the vacuum left by Daniel Webster's defection to the slaveholding interests. After Brown's raid, failure, and capture at Harper's Ferry,

³⁷F.B. Sanborn, "Recollections of the John Brown Raid," The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine, XXVI (May, 1883 to October, 1883), 412.

Emerson addressed a meeting for the relief of Brown's family, at Tremont Temple, Boston, November 18, 1859. He described Brown as a simple, unaffected man who lived and acted solely on his basic belief in the Golden Rule and The Declaration of Independence. Brown, said Emerson, saw through the political forms to basic truths:

He saw how deceptive the forms are. We fancy, in Massachusetts, that we are free; yet it seems the government is quite unreliable. . . . [A]ll the forms [are] right . . . and yet, life and freedom are not safe. Why? Because the judges rely on forms, and do not, like John Brown, use their eyes to see the facts behind the form.³⁸

In his essay "Courage," delivered within the same month, at the Music Hall in Boston, Emerson, speaking of the cowardly politics of Massachusetts said:

Why we do not say, We are abolitionists of the most absolute abolition, as every man must be? Only the Hottentots, only the barbarous or semi-barbarous are not. We do not try to alter your laws in Alabama . . . nor shall we suffer you to carry your thuggism North. . . . We intend to set up and keep a cordon sanitaire, all around the infected district and by no means, suffer the pestilence to spread.³⁹

Then, turning his attention to John Brown, Emerson made a statement that found great favor among the most militant abolitionists and, conversely, caused great despair among those of a more conservative orientation. Emerson spoke of Brown as that new saint, than whom none purer or more brave was ever led by love of men into conflict and death,--the

³⁸R.W. Emerson, "John Brown: Boston Speech," Complete Works (Centenary Ed.), XI, 271.

³⁹R.W. Emerson, "Courage," Complete Works (Centenary Ed.), VII, 429.

new saint awaiting martyrdom, and who, if he shall suffer, will make the gallows glorious like the cross.⁴⁰

This speech spoiled Emerson's welcome in Philadelphia, as an invitation to lecture there was withdrawn. His speaking career also suffered in Boston as a result of his radical statement, and he was obliged to accept speaking engagements in the West.⁴¹ Yet, Emerson continued in his unrelenting attack on the institution of slavery. Having joined the fight, he was determined to continue it, despite the personal hardships it brought him. In his Journal, January, 1861, is an example of this resolve:

Do thy duty of the day. Just now the supreme public duty of all thinking men is to assert freedom. Go where it is threatened, and say, "I am for it, and do not wish to live in the world a moment longer than it exists."

The news of the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, found Emerson in the midst of a course of lectures called "Life and Literature." This news, which was not unexpected, came as a great relief to Emerson. He changed the announced lecture, "Doctrine of Leasts," to one entitled "Civilization in a Pinch." In this lecture he confessed relief that the war had finally come. He said:

We have been very homeless, some of us, for some past years,--say since 1850; but now we have a country again. Up to March 4, 1861, in the very place of law, we found instead of it, war. Now we have forced the conspiracy out of doors. Law is on this side and war on that. It

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 427.

⁴¹Cabot, A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson, II, 537.

was war then and it is war now, but declared war is vastly safer than war undeclared.⁴²

War on such an issue was to be welcomed, because it united the Union more solidly than political parties were able to do.

Emerson asked a friend to show him the Charlestown Navy Yard, and on seeing the warlike preparations said, "Ah! sometimes gunpowder smells good."⁴³ Emerson reflected his delight over the war in his Journal, May, 1861:

The country is cheerful and jocund in the belief that it has a government at last. The men in search of a party, parties in search of a principle, interests and dispositions that could not fuse for want of some base,--all joyfully unite in this great Northern party, on the basis of Freedom. What a healthy tone exists!

In Emerson's view there was just one great task left for the Union to accomplish, emancipation. Being in Washington as a guest of Senator Sumner, Emerson pleaded the cause of emancipation at the Smithsonian Institute, January 31, 1862.⁴⁴ In this speech, attended by part of President Lincoln's Cabinet, Emerson stated, "Emancipation is the demand of civilization. That is a principle; everything else is an intrigue."⁴⁵ In his view, compensation should be made for the emancipated slaves. Immediately, said Emerson, the Southern Army must run home to

⁴²Ibid., pp. 600-601.

⁴³Ibid., p. 601.

⁴⁴Although it is otherwise generally agreed that Lincoln was not present, Moncure D. Conway says the speech was read before the President and his Cabinet (Emerson at Home and Abroad, p. 313).

⁴⁵R. W. Emerson, "American Civilization," Complete Works (Centenary Ed.), XI, 304.

protect their estates when the slaves were freed. Also, being paid for the slaves, the Southern planter would be less bellicose and would come, quietly and peacefully, back into the fold.

Whilst slavery makes and keeps disunion, Emancipation removes the whole objection to union. Emancipation at one stroke elevates the poor white of the South, and identifies his interests with that of the Northern laborer.⁴⁶

Emerson concluded his appeal for emancipation by saying, "These ideas must work through the brains and arms of good and brave men, or they are no better than dreams."⁴⁷

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 307.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 310.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

It is now apparent that the events leading up to the outbreak of hostilities between the states had changed Emerson and his views. He had always maintained that "The one thing in the world of value is the active soul;"¹ yet the correct action for a thinking man such as himself, Emerson had held, is to think. "To think is to act,"² he had said. Also, he had said that the only obligation a man had in regard to the slavery question was to perform an act of mind only, deciding for himself the rightness or wrongness of the question. After the trials of the slavery fight had opened his eyes and dissipated the mist of his idealism, he told a group of distinguished men that unless ideas were acted upon, they were no better than dreams. Obviously, Emerson's opinion on what constituted proper action had changed with regard to the anti-slavery movement. This change, as I said earlier, was an exception to Emerson's transcendentalist view of action and did not represent a general rejection of his overall philosophy. Emerson was a transcendentalist thinker from 1830 to 1845. All of his essays during that period of time reflected the idealistic mysticism

¹R.W. Emerson, "The American Scholar," Selections (ed. Whicher), p. 69.

²R.W. Emerson, "Spiritual Laws," Complete Works (Current Opinion Ed.), II, 163.

of pure transcendentalism and were marked with a distinct aloofness from the secular affairs of men. Emerson firmly believed that life should be lived in simplicity and should involve a continual endeavor at spiritual elevation. For, Emerson insisted, this spiritual elevation could only come through a perfect understanding of the Over-soul and the truths which it revealed. Man's most important function, then, was the pursuit of truth. Truth was being, and truth, he held, suffocated and perished in the presence of society. Therefore, society and all its involvements should be avoided.

Beginning in 1845, however, Emerson's essays take on a slightly different tone. He appears to have come to the point of agreeing with Henry David Thoreau, who said:

To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically.³

He began to speak more favorably of those individuals who exerted power and force of will in order to attain pre-established goals. He had, of course, even in his youngest days, respected Daniel Webster as a great man of action, and he had always agreed with the actions that Webster took--up to 1850. But during the years between 1845 and 1850, Emerson began speaking very favorably of strong-willed men of action, even though he could not agree with their actions. In other words, Emerson

³H.D. Thoreau, Walden, in The Works of Henry David Thoreau, ed. Henry S. Canby, p. 253.

began to show that he respected force as a manifestation of will and character. In Representative Men, Emerson praised Napoleon for the results he attained, not his impulses. It is, I believe, accurate to say that Emerson's lofty, idealistic transcendentalism mellowed, during these years, to a transcendentalism that recognized the necessity for social involvement. Emerson came to realize that the spiritual elevation of mankind would be a difficult task to accomplish and that the only way it might ever be accomplished would involve the employment of forceful, mundane action.

Emerson was not, however, prepared for the action of Daniel Webster on March 7, 1850. The action Emerson took as a result of that speech was, in fact, a reaction against Daniel Webster. It was not thoughtful and creative practical action aimed at the elevation of mankind. On the contrary, it was reflexive, defensive, and blind action taken against the man who had recently disappointed Emerson. For that reason, it would be inaccurate to think of Emerson's involvement with the abolitionists as a general revision of his transcendental idealism. His actions on behalf of the anti-slavery movement were separate and apart from his then-mellowed transcendentalism.

All of the references Emerson made to his active participation in the anti-slavery effort date from the year 1850. The events of that year thrust the problem of slavery on Emerson and brought it into such clear focus that he could not ignore it. Webster's speech on March 7, 1850, backed Emerson into a corner. Emerson viewed the speech as a personal challenge.

His dedication to principle, which was stronger than his dedication to other men, left him no alternative but to enter the controversy.

It must be noted that as far as active participation in a public cause is concerned, the anti-slavery movement represents the only exception to Emerson's policy of non-involvement. Never again did he become enraged, except through his speeches, in any public philanthropic scheme.

On September 22, 1862, President Lincoln at last spoke the word so long desired by the abolitionists. By the terms of his Emancipation Proclamation, on the first day of the coming year slavery would be abolished in those states in rebellion against the United States.

At a meeting held in Boston in honor of the Emancipation Proclamation, Emerson spoke:

Liberty is a slow fruit. It comes, like religion, for short periods, and in rare conditions, as if awaiting a culture of the race which shall make it organic and permanent. . . . These measures provoke no noisy joy, but are received into a sympathy so deep as to apprise us that mankind are greater than we know.⁴

The war, he said, was unavoidable. It existed long before the bombardment of Fort Sumter. It was in the minds and bones of the combatants. A peaceable secession of the rebels would only have whetted their insatiable appetite for more territory and power. The war, he said, was a rallying force for the North, forced upon them as a matter of self-preservation.

⁴R.W. Emerson, "The Emancipation Proclamation," Complete Works (Centenary Ed.), XI, 315-316.

Likewise, I submit that it was a matter of personal self-preservation for Emerson to finally become engaged in the affairs of the abolitionists.

Emerson obviously considered himself an abolitionist, as he said in his Journal, February, 1858: "It is impossible to be a gentleman and not be an abolitionist." Emerson was considered to be an abolitionist by the people of New England and was among the group of men most despised in the South. He was counted among the abolitionists by the press. Cabot records that the Boston Daily Advertiser, remarking more in sorrow than in anger of Emerson's attendance of various abolitionist meetings, said that Emerson "might fairly be looked upon as a decided abolitionist."⁵ To claim that Emerson was not an abolitionist because he was never involved in mass demonstrations or civil disobedience is not satisfactory, because nothing is plainer than that it was Emerson's calling to supply impulses and not methods to the movement. He was not an organizer, but a power behind many organizers, inspiring them with lofty motive, giving breath to their views which were always tending to become narrow through concentration on their special objects. Newell D. Hillis established Emerson as an abolitionist by saying, "Every great movement must have its advocate and voice. Garrison was the pen of abolition, Emerson its philosopher, Greeley its editor, and Wendell Phillips its advocate."⁶

⁵James E. Cabot, A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson, II, 587.

⁶Newell D. Hillis, The Battle of Principles, p. 68.

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