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A

Representing Revolution: Emerson and the Language of Higher Law

By:

Jean Darcy

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2001

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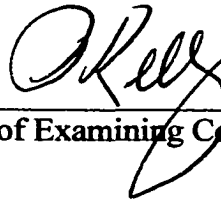
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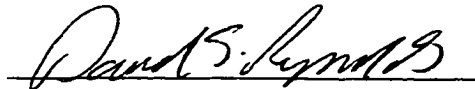
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Abstract

Representing Revolution: Emerson and the Language of Higher Law

By

Jean Darcy

Advisor: Professor William P. Kelly

Recent critics have contributed to the scholarship on Emerson by situating him within the historic circumstances in which he lived and wrote. I expand on this scholarship by situating Emerson's lyric voice within the communal space, on the bare common. Emerson uses transcendental language as a public language that bears witness to personal experience of the present moment. He calls this idealism in 1842. The public language used by ministers and politicians of the period to understand the crisis that brought the nation to the brink of war relies on an apocalyptic and gnostic understanding of providential history. This rhetoric seeks to both predict the future and provide the authority on which social compacts are based. Emerson's transcendental rhetoric opposes such a view of national vision and authority. Emerson claims that only the voice of the individual who bears witness to his experience in social spaces can recognize the relation between personal identity and higher laws, power and form. For Emerson this claim to personal voice is the beginning of social dialogue and circles of exchange that provide the basis for social cohesion.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation is dedicated to my children: Kathleen, Kristy, Devon, Michael and Jim.

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Molly Vaux read drafts of this dissertation and reconfigured it like a puzzle. Her brilliant reading and steadfast emotional support helped me get over a real fear of writing. To Molly I will always be grateful.

In courses with Angus Fletcher the idea for this dissertation took shape. His seminal work on allegory provided the intellectual frame for my own work on transcendental language. In addition, he gave me the advice I needed to give this dissertation its final form.

My teachers have inspired my interest in Emerson. Lee Schlesinger and Myra Jehlen let me be a part of their fascinating conversation, while Joan Richardson's unique personal relation to Emerson helped me develop my own voice. David Reynolds and Neil Tolchin have offered me the scholarly perspective I needed to develop my ideas. Most of all, Bill Kelly has been the brilliant listener who always asked the hard question that forced me to deepen my thinking.

Finally, this dissertation could not have been written without my partner, Jay Mullin. He gave me the language of hope out of which this work emerged. While wandering around the city, during morning coffee at Tal's, rides on the crosstown bus, walks in Central Park and dinners at Wo Hop, Jay and I talked about idealism. This dissertation is a record of those conversations.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- CHAL The Cambridge History of American Literature. Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- CLHUS Columbia Literary History of the United States. Ed. Emory Elliott. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- CW The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ed. Robert Spiller, Alfred Ferguson, et al. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1971-.
- EJ Emerson in His Journals. Ed. Joel Porte. Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1982.
- JMN The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ed. William Gillman et al. 16 vols. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1960-82.
- SW Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson Ed. Stephen E. Whicher. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960.
- W The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ed. Edward Waldo Emerson. 12 vols. Centenary Edition. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1903-4.

REPRESENTING REVOLUTION: Emerson and the Language of Higher Law

Introduction: Transcendental Language as Public Language

If there is any period one would desire to be born in, is it not the age of Revolution: when the old and the new stand side by side and admit of being compared; when the energies of all men are searched by fear and hope; when the historic glories of the old can be compensated by the rich possibilities of the new era?
(The American Scholar 1837 CW I 67)

Emerson was fascinated by revolution and by the times in which he lived. Within that historic moment the past with its “glories” and the future with its “rich possibilities” stood “side by side,” not quite connected but rather “compared.” In eliminating the necessary connection between the past and the future in his understanding of history, Emerson created a gap he called “the present hour,” a time in which hope and fear were conjoined. During the antebellum period, between 1832-1851, Emerson devoted his time to developing a language of hope; at the same time, he refused to debate within the confines of the prevailing language of fear. Transcendental language emphasizes the transitional relations that exist within the energy of possibility. In this sense it is a discourse of change. At the same time other discourses of change existed that attempted to assuage fears by grounding their claims in divine authority, apocalyptic and gnostic. Each of these discourses made special claims to knowledge and authority that transcendental discourse did not make. More democratic in its appeal, transcendental language claims only that ideas are lived in the present and depend on circles of exchange in culture. Man thinking attaches the imagination, Reason,

to perceptions in daily life. Ideas are lived. The self-reliant individual becomes conscious of his ability to imagine a cultural framework. The circles of exchange generated by these ideas in a public space can, in turn, influence the forms of social relation and social change:

But along with the civil and metaphysical history of man, another history goes daily forward.... He is the compend of time; he is also the correlative of nature. His power so consists in the multitude of his affinities, in the fact that his life is intertwined with the whole chain of organic and inorganic being. In old Rome the public roads beginning at the Forum proceeded north, south, east, west to the center of every province...so out of the human heart go...highways... A man is a bundle of relations, a knot of roots.... He shall collect into focus the rays of nature. (CW II 20 History 1841)

Emerson imagines “order” or “form” in culture emerging out of man’s engagement with the “knot of relations” of which he is a part. Like the nineteenth-century artists who painted themselves into the landscape, Emerson, in “Nature,” imagines each individual as an “artist” entering into a “theory of creation” and, thereby, generating out of himself new “forms” of relation in language.

In contrast, apocalyptic and gnostic claims to authority are grounded in an omniscient perspective that is not “part and particle” of nature. An apocalyptic discourse relies on the redemptive power of divine intervention in history. Gnostic discourses derive their power from a scrupulous withdrawal from history. Yet, in “The Poet” Emerson claims that each American is a poet, generating a new language of “attachment” to ideals from his local space. This local space within history, within the material world, is the source of renewal. It is from this local, limited personal “center” that consciousness emerges and from which a language of social change can develop.

In this dissertation I examine Emerson's transcendental language as a form of allegory that attempts to emphasize the various ways in which language connects local experience to universals, parts to wholes. Like allegory, transcendental language acknowledges the network of relations that exist within symbolic structures. Angus Fletcher, in Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode, has shown how an understanding of the allegorical play of language within such structures can be very effective at times of social paralysis because ideals can be retained while art plays with the relations within which those values are affirmed.¹ Emersonian transcendental language retains this sense of play. In "Experience" he claims that nature will not give a "berry" of evidence to support any of our philosophical claims, yet it will give us a "sphere for our cricket ball." Transcendental language insists on the transitive, slippery nature of any attempt to refer to universal ideals. In "The Poet" he claims that all symbols are "fluxional; all language is vehicular, and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead. Mysticism consists in the mistake of an accidental and individual symbol for an universal one." Man thinking can connect to virtue in Emerson's model, yet man thinking is embedded in circles of exchange and virtue itself is found only in the particular life, in lived experience. By emphasizing the embedded nature of the part-whole relation that

¹ In his introduction, Fletcher refers to Coleridge's famous distinction between symbolic and allegorical references. While the symbol is identified with synecdoche, allegory sets up a whole series of correspondences. The allegory is useful during times of oppression because it is veiled in

exists between lived experience and our ideals, Emerson insisted on personal agency by appealing to the lyric voice. For Emerson this voice was engaged in cultural dialogue in that he used this voice as a call that required the reader's response. He did not use his essays as a form of persuasion. Instead, the literary nature of his essays and his aphoristic sentences required a strong reading that Emerson called invention. At a time of cultural paralysis when northern and southern views on slavery divided the nation into a binary opposition that stifled expressions of difference and variety, Emerson opened up a space in language for the personal voice. He claimed that only thinking men could connect an understanding of personal rights to higher law. In so doing, Emerson makes institutions dependent on the individual. The individual is not granted his identity by institutions and the traditions on which they depend. By creating a self-reliant definition of identity at a time when the gag rule prohibited any discussion of slavery issues on the floors of Congress, Emerson popularized a language of identity that could argue in a context that prohibited argument. By examining the journals, essays, letters and one sermon of Emerson during the crisis years between 1832 and 1851 I attempt to document the way Emerson was vitally engaged in the critical historical issues of his day.

Moreover, in this dissertation I attempt to clarify Emerson's relation to idealism. This is an important issue today since contemporary theories of social change tend to disparage all forms of idealism. Thus attempts to connect institutional goals to ideals are characterized as utopian at best and imperialist at

a secret or riddle that enables people to discuss power relations in the "*agora*." The "*allos*" or other can be discussed (Fletcher 18).

worst. Instead, models are used that yield data and other material that demonstrate that the institution has gained access to the real world. Such models are ultimately grounded in a Kantian understanding of the separation between the noumenal and the phenomenal world. The scientific view is that we can connect to the phenomenal world but the noumenal world is beyond our reach. Therefore, to be responsible, the scientist only relates to the phenomenal world that becomes for him the only possible object of knowledge.

Emerson's idealism does not accept this separation. Emerson claims that our work as speakers in language can reflect ideals that we bring into lived experience. There can be no scientific separation from the material world that would allow language to render our view of that world objective. Our evidence is always flawed. Every scientist is an artist who sees the way light falls on an object and what he sees changes as he lives in the world. Repudiating the subject-object dichotomy, Emerson claims that it is the mind of man that casts the light. A Platonic idealist, Emerson claims that we can use language to enter into a dialogue with each other in order to see how each mind reflects the light of imagination. This is idealism in 1842 ("The Transcendentalist" CW I 329). Therefore, ideals are interrogated in language and man is more responsible for those ideals.

Critics have claimed that Emerson's slippery relation to the universal is indicative of his ahistorical relation to language and his narcissistic relation to the self.² I argue the opposite. Emerson's transcendental rhetoric, by privileging the

² For a comprehensive summary of this criticism from Quentin Anderson through A. Bartlett Giamatti, see Introduction, The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1999.

private lyric voice, posed a direct challenge to the dominant national discourse of American exceptionalism which defined the individual in terms that silenced those who did not fit into its definition of identity. By inserting a transcendental rhetoric that privileged the private lyric voice, Emerson challenged national claims to authority and insisted that all relations to ideals depend on dialogue. In his study of the relation between allegory and violence, Gordon Teskey argues that when the individual gives up his own voice in exchange for the protection offered to his body by the body politic, he is at great risk because he has given up the one part of himself, his interiority, that expresses his own relation to his body.

³ The part-whole relation Teskey calls allegorical is one in which, for example, society claims for itself the power to define individual identity while the individual, as part of the whole, submits to those definitions and universal claims. Indeed, when subjects are then required to observe and silently approve of torture, their abdication of genuine subjectivity is complete (Teskey 128-30).

But in surrendering the voice the subject loses the very body, as a private interior, the act of surrender was supposed to preserve. ... They cannot even scream, if the scream is understood, as it is in Picasso's *Guernica*, as the final political act of the voice.... The freedom to withhold or to proffer the voice is the basis of the concept of liberty. (Teskey 129)

During the pre-Civil war years, 1838-65, Americans lived within scenes of torture as Indians were dislocated from their ancestral lands and slaves were sold within marketplaces. While reform movements of every kind dominated the political and social landscape in these years, and the slave debate divided north and south, Emerson retreated from these reforms and debates to generate his own position. He has been criticized for remaining above history and social

³ See *Allegory and Violence*, Gordon Teskey, 128-31.

engagement. In this dissertation I argue that, although Emerson refused to assume a position of leadership in movements for reform, he did not retreat from the community or from the social problems. Instead, he popularized a language form that reversed the power vectors in the nation. Universal claims to authority and higher law could be made only by the individual lyric voice. Emerson imagined a new relation to the discourse of social change. Emersonian transcendental language provided a way for Americans to question the very ground of authority on which the nation's laws were based. Instead of entering the slave debate about the Constitution or supporting a particular social reform, Emerson shifted the foundations on which the laws that governed change were grounded. By examining his journals, letters, essays, and lectures from 1832-1851 in relation to the way those works engage higher law, it is possible to see how deeply Emerson was influenced by and engaged in the politics of his day. While Emerson made a decision not to argue in his essays, the discourse he constructs in them is, as we shall see, sharply critical of the discourse of American exceptionalism.

The public debate in antebellum America justified social and economic change by claiming that those changes were part of a providential design for American history. America was seen as free from the sins of Europe, free, that is, to become the biblical city upon a hill and serve as a democratic beacon of light for the whole world. Such beliefs in the American exception, in America's unique destiny, were grounded in both apocalyptic and gnostic interpretations of the divine will. Emerson rejected a providential view of history and claimed that redemption was possible only through self-reliant perceptual capacities freed from

national imperatives. Emerson's reflections on history were thoroughly eschatological, not apocalyptic. The two terms are quite distinct, yet often confused. While apocalyptic rhetoric claims that divine intervention is requisite for the redemption of history, eschatological rhetoric claims that history has already been redeemed; it is man who fails to understand the limits of his place in history. Through aligning his vision with the creative ecological relations of nature, of which he is a part, man is able to achieve a degree of perspective on the horizon of experience. While this view of history relies on the subjective perspective, it is not relativistic. Emerson is an idealist, but he is cautious about any individual's capacity to understand ideals from his limited perspective. He believes man must be committed to ethical ideals yet recognize at the same time the limits of his capacity to enact or even fully understand them. Thus Emerson is, paradoxically, claiming that man must orient to possibilities that are in a sense impossible for the self. Dialogue is necessary. Nonetheless, he is responsible for his own degree on the horizon of thought. Man is defined by his affinities, the energy that attracted him to become intertwined in a "chain of organic and inorganic being." Whereas fables and typological patterns of history enabled rhetoricians to persuade others to adopt apocalyptic views, Emerson's formulation demanded that the individual be radically present in his daily life.

...we lack the affirmative principle....the only ballast I know is a respect for the present hour....do broad justice where we are....We must set up the strong present tense against all the rumors of wrath, past or to come. So many things are unsettled which it is of the first importance to settle; - and, pending their settlement, we will do as we do. Whilst the debate goes forward on the equity of commerce, and will not be closed for a century or two.... - Thou God's darling! Heed thy private dream; thou wilt not be missed...stay

there in they closet and toil until the rest are agreed what to do about it. But ah! Presently come a day, or is it only a half-hour, with its angel- whispering, which discomfits the conclusions of nations and of years! ... God delights to isolate us every day, and hide from us the past and the future. "You will not remember," he seems to say, "and you will not expect".... All good conversation, manners and action come from a spontaneity which forgets usages and makes the moment great. (Experience CW III 45-64)

An individual is present if he is constantly aware of the language organizing his position on the horizon of consciousness. For Emerson, man is constantly thinking in language, and this activity makes language forms organic, changing in relation to the context in which they are cultivated. He does not believe that nature provides man with a model to be mirrored. Man's consciousness grows by interrogating the ideals on which arguments are based. A dialogue develops, on a bare common, the open space of social interaction owned jointly by the community. Only by stepping back from the social and political terms of an argument, can we examine the ideals that undergird it. Only an open, communal dialogue about those ideals will generate social cohesion.

Emerson was especially concerned with the debate about the national compact. He claimed that arguments grounded on the authority of biblical and constitutional texts disabled the imagination. Transcendental language offered an alternative mode of discussion. Emersonian transcendental language is defined by its resistance to prediction through patterns of tradition, logic, or expectation. It opens up a space in language Emerson calls transitive in which we can play:

Nature does not like to be observed, and likes that we should be her fools and playmates. We may have the sphere for our cricket-ball, but not a berry for our philosophy. Direct strokes she never gave us

power to make; all our blows glance, all our hits are accidents. (CW III 49 Experience 1844-5)

The Emersonian subject never gains power over the object. Instead, the artist achieves an oblique perspective through activity. Without foundations of authority to validate claims, it is still possible to find one's place in a web of relations by using language as an orienteering tool. By using transitive language, a language that recognizes perspective on a shifting horizon of thought, Emerson's goal is to create as much surface for meditation, speculation, and dialogue as possible. Transitive language does not strive for objective closure. Instead, it seeks to spiral through levels of consideration. Emerson calls his language vehicular, in that it actually stimulates change and movement. In "Nature" Emerson describes the levels of thought that spiral upward as individuals consider the varying relations established each time the mind engages the world differently: as commodity, as language, as idealism, as spirit, and finally, as prospect. Each time the position of the horizon of thought changes, relations change. Individuals generate the terms of their own lives. "Every spirit makes its house; but afterwards the house confines the spirit." (CW VI 9 "Fate" 1846-52).

Emerson's transcendental language makes room within the language of idealism for personal perspective. Although Emerson's aphoristic style has been called "discombobulated afflatus" by his critics, it effectively challenged the prevailing apocalyptic and gnostic discourses of its day. Specifically it showed how it was possible to appeal to higher law in arguing against slavery when

fugitive slaves sought freedom in Massachusetts in 1850.⁴ Instead of absorbing individuals into a national narrative, Emerson's language attracts the reader-listener to an on-going conversation and solicits a response. Emerson's aphorisms, like those of Ben Franklin, stimulate thought, and can be carried easily in memory. Both Franklin and Emerson use the aphorism to educate people about public language. Aphorisms take on different meanings in relation to experience. That meaning may not be transferable to another listener. Within language, meaning is constantly re-negotiated as power relations shift. Recognition is vital to this process:

Conversation is a game of circles. When each new speaker strikes a new light, emancipates us from the oppression of the last speaker to oppress us with the greatness and exclusiveness of his own thought, then yields us to another redeemer, we seem to recover our rights, to become men. (CW II 310 "Circles" 1839-40)

Emersonian transcendental language is unquestionably anti-gnostic. It is here in this world, in history, in nature that virtue is enacted. Vested in the relation between the material world and spiritual power, Emerson's understanding of revolution is eschatological. An eschatological understanding of change is one that believes in the fullness of time, that change occurs constantly as circles of new relations radiate, merge, and bounce off in new directions. An eschatological view of history is one in which the active agent is "man thinking." In an apocalyptic view, it is God who acts in a redemptive sanctification through violence. The apocalyptic language of the 1840's tended to be moral in that it

⁴ An extensive discussion of Albert Von Frank's argument concerning the use of transcendental language in the trial of Anthony Burns can be found in chapter one of The Trials of Anthony Burns.

validated a struggle between northern and southern views on slavery. In contrast, Emerson's consideration of virtue asks, "how shall we live?" "What is the good?" Emerson's language is interrogatory, questioning the grounds of argument itself. His understanding of virtue is rooted in the Greek definition. To have virtue means to be upright in a geometric sense. To stand true means to stand perfectly upright at a 90 degree angle to the horizon of thought. If angles are trued, upright, they form supports that can be trusted to hold firm when constructing an idea or a building. For Emerson, evil marks a lack of engagement in primary questions. Many of Emerson's critics considered this interrogatory approach to be vague, more concerned with moonshine than the real world. But Emerson is less interested in proving a point than he is in urging the individual into engagement. His essays are lyric calls, seeking a response. The good will come from the dialogue.

Emerson was part of a larger transcendental movement that hoped to make the human heart the center of power, a bundle of relations in a democratic nation. Beginning in a belief in moral suasion, the young liberals who broke away from the Unitarian Church stressed that individuals were nurtured by the rigors of imaginative exchange. Transcendentalism's most fundamental tenet was that human nature was improved by nurture, by paying attention to the social forms promoting or frustrating growth, not by complete reliance on an external act of divine grace (CLHUS 367). Most radically, the transcendentalists relied on the scholarship of German high criticism, which approached revelation as a "culture-specific human construct rather than as a divine given" (CLHUS 367). Human

nature was compatible with the divine; the divine did not break through into the human through revelation and miracle. Transcendentalists did not necessarily deny the divinity of Jesus. To that there was no scholarly access. What was available was the profound nature of the humanity of Jesus. Institutional claims to authority based on interpretations of divine revelation were sites of cultural power creating cultural constructs. Ideals could not emerge from sites of institutional power because institutions are abstract, and as such, lack the eyes and ears of human sensibility.

German Idealism was brought to America through the work of cultural mediators like Madame de Stael and Coleridge, through courageous publishers, and through conscientious translators. Barbara Packer describes the excitement felt by the students at Cambridge who learned of German scholarship outside the Harvard classrooms:

The young men and women around Cambridge who read these works delighted in a portrait of the individual mind and its relationship to nature that made ordinary perception seem revelatory and ordinary maturation Odyssean. It bothered no one that the Romanticism intoxicating Cambridge was decades old, and the Kantianism even older, or that the ideas being hailed as revolutionary were a jumble of bits and pieces torn from their contexts and served up by a haphazard collection of editors, translators, and book reviewers. If anything, this blurring of historical distinctions contributed to the sense of excitement. The fruits of a half-century of European progress in literature, philosophy, natural science, and sacred criticism all arrived on American shores more or less at once—Swedenborg and Schleiermacher, Herder and Strauss, Kant and Schelling, Goethe, and Wordsworth, de Stael and Coleridge. Such opulence could hardly fail to suggest that the world was on the verge of a remarkable synthesis.
(CHAL 357)

Emerson's transcendental rhetoric was shaped by the historic concerns of his culture. Poised before a major civil war, an industrial revolution, and the unification of communication, transportation, education, banking systems under federal authority, Emerson retreated into his closet to consider how the material world was becoming part of a larger design and a larger system of power. Packer quotes from the Scottish philosopher, Sampson Reed, who also chronicles this moment.

The world is deriving vigor, not from that which is gone by, but from that which is coming... We appear to be approaching an age which will be the silent pause of merely physical force before the powers of the mind; the timid, subdued awed condition of the brute, gazing on the erect and godlike form of man.
(qt., in CHAL 357 Growth of the Mind)

Transcendentalists actively resisted forming a church or even a clearly defined movement. In an era of romantic social reform, transcendentalism became associated with anything new, strange, and unaccountable (CLHUS 364). It shared the romantic affinity for all forms of personal connection to the spiritual world: spirit rapping, phrenology, seances, automatic writing. Emerson imposed on this larger romantic movement a scientific rigor that I call piety. At the same time, he resisted the scientific distinction between subject and object and made all scientists artists. Ideals for Emerson could only emerge out of the private, ordinary life of thought. But this does not mean that for Emerson all products of the imagination were of equal value. As the mind of man advances tentatively on

the “chaos and the dark,” it becomes necessary to distinguish genuine ideals from mere illusions, fables, and dreams.⁵

Along with Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker, George Ripley, and Henry Thoreau, Emerson was one of the American cultural mediators who introduced German idealism to the nation. Bronson Alcott in education, Margaret Fuller in gender relations, Theodore Parker in publishing and social reform, George Ripley in communitarian living, and Thoreau in civil disobedience, each added to the complexity of transcendental thought and the contemplation of unity amidst vast social change. Emerson’s contribution was to provide a handbook for the imagination.

In “Nature,” Emerson strips his language of almost all references to religion, and creates a geometric understanding of what it means to be erect, or in the old language of his Puritan forbears, justified. Yet, within this language of idealism, Emerson remains the protestant minister. He keeps this part of himself private, in his journals:

Jesus Christ was a minister of the pure Reason. The beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount are all utterances of the mind contemning the phenomenal world. “Blessed are the righteous poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye when men revile you,” etc. The Understanding can make nothing of it. “Tis all nonsense. The Reason affirms its absolute verity. (Journal undated Bliss 81).

Using Reason to consider the moral implications of the material laws of nature, Emerson defines language as a transitive orienteering device, a compass that helps the individual inscribe his own thought in spirals on the looming

⁵ See Barbara Packer’s Emerson’s Fall .

horizon of consciousness. Unlike Carlyle, Emerson does not seek to persuade his readers to his point of view. He discouraged hero worship and avoided leadership roles in reform movements until 1850 and the passage of The Fugitive Slave Law. What he hoped to persuade his reader toward was thinking.

My primary goal is to examine “transcendental” thought, not as a meta-mode striving to provide an ideal, timeless referent for a community in crisis, but as “idealism in 1842,” an idealism intricately bound up in its time, in history, and in the material world. In each essay I am concerned with a site of spacial authority, whether it be a particular institution, like the Unitarian Church or Harvard, or the government surveys that organized the landscape. In each case I try to show how Emerson recognizes the laws of language that determine authority and then re-imagines those laws in relation to the individual in personal time and space.

Emerson deployed a uniquely American version of Kantian idealism to urge individuals to consider the relation between the laws of the material world and the higher laws of the imagination, the vision of virtue, to which those laws are subordinated. He argued that sites of economic and governmental powers spoke in terms of a rhetoric of national purpose that was abstract and dislocated from the lives of ordinary men. When governmental policy forbade discussion of the slave problem on the floors of Congress by invoking the gag rule and sought to stifle inter-state dissemination of pamphlets discussing the constitutional debate over slavery, Emerson promoted discussions of moral issues by lecturing about the imagination and piety on the lyceum circuit. Accompanying lecturers in the

practical sciences, Emerson stressed the need to imagine how we use nature's laws. Rather than mirroring nature and the material world, Emerson argued, the mind of man imagines nature, through his own private subject lenses. Insisting that we cannot rely on an external design sanctioned by providence and articulated by national policy, Emerson inverted the power vectors in the nation and located the power of moral vision in the private individual consciousness.

The work of Myra Jehlen, Sacvan Bercovitch, Barbara Packer, and David Reynolds has helped me to provide the historical context for this discussion. In addition, the studies of Len Gougeon, Joel Meyerson, and Larry Reynolds have aided me in situating Emerson more directly in relation to the slavery issue. Each of these scholars has deepened our understanding of Emerson's relation to his life and political involvement. However, I treat Emerson's transcendental language as more polemical than these scholars do. Emerson's language challenges apocalyptic and gnostic rhetoric of national destiny and exceptionalism. More particularly, he challenges the government's power to define selfhood even while it censors national discussion of that definition. In "Experience" Emerson claims that the only "ballast" we have against "wars and rumors of war" is respect for the present hour. "Broad justice" can only be done by "the intellect being where and what it sees; by sharing the path or circuit of things through forms...." Emerson urged all members of the community to engage the problem of slavery by entering into a discussion of self-reliance. Each individual lyric voice was needed in the

national discussion. By making all people poets, Emerson understands American as a poem. Each individual in a democracy re-attaches his process of living in the material world to idealism. Being present within one's time and place contributes to the public power of creating community.⁶

To create a poetic language of justice, open to lyric expression and the individual voice, Emerson relied on spatial imagery. In his early work he created a communal image of the bare common, but the more he engaged the language of higher law the more abstract, universal, and scientific the image became. He called the lack of closure in language "the abyss," the "blessed nothingness," or "molecular interspaces." Through this spatial imagery Emerson created a place for poetic, visionary, self-extension, a place in which all could be equal in their ability to voice a new relation in community. "The people fancy they hate poetry, and they are all poets and mystics!" (CW III 16-17). Unlike Whitman, Emerson does not populate his language with images of the other. Instead, in focusing on the architecture of public power, or the relation between power and form, he protects a space for self-extension within community. It is the work of Elaine Scarry in The Body in Pain that has helped me understand the enormous importance of preserving that space of self-extension for the other who may be temporarily unable to speak. Emerson does not speak for others, but he does preserve that space of possibility. It is from these circles of exchange within public space that an understanding of the transitive nature of any unity can emerge. Stability in community is found in the process of exchange, not in the

⁶ It is Richard Poirier who has consistently demonstrated the impact of Emerson's insistence on lyric voice in American poetry.

authority of the omniscient perspective. By focusing on the essays, journal entries, letters, and lectures written between 1832-1851 that educate the public about their relation to higher law, it is possible to understand Emerson's perspective when he finally enters into the political arena after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law.

While other critics have helped me situate Emerson's thought within its historic context, I hope to extend their work by locating his writing within the communal space. At a time when scenes of torture dominated the landscape as slaves were sold in local markets and Amer-Indians were dislocated from their ancestral lands, Emerson cleared another space in community: a bare common. Here he insisted self-reliant identity bear witness to its own time and place. An identity founded on personal witness and recognition used human sensibilities, eyes and ears, to interrogate the ideals of the community. Formulating an understanding of "idealism in 1842" Emerson provided a way of creating a new communal dialogue concerning identity from this site of recognition and witness. Emerson re-attached language to the human voice. Abstracted from the human subject, language can be used as a weapon to publicly display its own power. Attached to the human voice, it must speak from human interiority acknowledging the pain of the body. Emerson hoped to reverse the power vectors in society and allow the individual to reclaim his capacity to define himself. Both Elaine Scarry and Emerson are concerned with keeping the human voice the power source in language.

In chapter one of my dissertation I consider the influence that biblical modes of interpretation had on American conceptions of political identity.

German high criticism challenged the apocalyptic and gnostic modes of thinking that grounded American exceptionalism. Emerson's training in theology at Harvard and his exposure to the German school of high criticism influenced his move from the pulpit to the lectern from which he popularized a new kind of idealistic thinking. I do not suggest that Emerson originated a new rhetoric of idealism. Rather, I argue that Emerson is a part of a circle of conversation in his community. Each transcendentalist chose to emphasize a different approach to culture. What interests me is the way Emerson created a language that could challenge contemporary religious conceptions of authority. In Emerson's farewell sermon in 1832, in "Nature" in 1836, and in his journal entries until 1840 we are able to trace the evolution of Emerson's relation to prevailing forms of persuasion. By comparing Emerson's work in the 30's to the work of Fredrick Douglass in 1851 and David Einhorn in 1864, it is possible to see the way in which this newer language gained an audience and, finally, became a dominant discourse able to challenge government authority. While he remained a deeply religious man, Emerson could not reconcile his understanding of the gospel with church dogma. An ordained minister for only three years, Emerson resigned from Second Church, Boston in 1832. Deeply influenced by his brother William's study of German theology in Gottingen in 1824-5, Ralph and William shared a steady correspondence concerning the work of Eichorn and Herder. The rigorous philologists of Gottingen and Halle sought to understand the ancient biblical documents and their translations within the context of their cultural production and transmission. In particular, the German scholars were interested in

distinguishing between the language of Jesus and the language of the gospels interested in creating a church.

While Ralph Waldo Emerson was not interested in the kind of biblical criticism that demanded rigorous attention to translation, he was profoundly moved by higher criticism's attention to the total history of the text and its transmission through the work of ordinary men. He thus came to understand the Bible's authority not in terms of revelation or miracle but of witness: the Bible records the experience of those who were inspired by their recognition of Jesus as a "presence" in his historical moment (Ellison 44). A shaken William Emerson found he could no longer become a minister if he could not regard the bible as evidence of faith supported by the rituals of the church. In contrast, Ralph Waldo Emerson was inspired by the new criticism that focussed on the human imagination of Jesus and the new demand placed on consciousness.

I will examine in this chapter the text of Emerson's 1832 farewell sermon at Second Church, noting its relation to "Nature." In both early works Emerson demonstrates his unique use of German criticism and its influence on his concept of self-reliance. By bringing German criticism into the American context, Emerson influenced the terms of the debate over slavery. I compare the language of Fredrick Douglass' "What is a Slave on the 4th of July?" with Emerson's language of "original relation." In addition, I consider the language of interpretation used by the most prominent Jewish abolitionist of his day, David Einhorn. In a sermon delivered on March 19, 1864 in the Temple of the Congregation Keneseth Israel Philadelphia, Einhorn critiques the pro-slavery

rhetoric that claims biblical authority for the enslavement of other races. By coming to understand the language of the gospels in relation to the lived experience of Jesus within his historical circumstances, Emerson created a new way of appealing to authority. At the same time, he continued the work of human imaginative engagement with higher laws not yet embodied in communal institutions.

Chapter two considers the differences between transcendental rhetoric and the rhetoric of “manifest destiny” in the search for evidence and information. Challenged by the impact of German criticism, apocalyptic and gnostic rhetoricians began to use the methods of German criticism to prove their own claims to the biblical promise in Matthew applied to America’s destiny as a city upon a hill. Promotional pamphlets urging settlers to go west, as well as government documents describing terrain reflected the view that American settlers would improve the land and raise the standard of culture in the communities they developed. The way in which land was surveyed and defined influenced an American understanding of property and identity. The literatures of expansion reflect a conception of manifest destiny that defined the spatial boundaries and reinforced an elite sense of American identity. This national narrative of expansion existed in opposition to a more transcendental understanding of the landscape as a vast set of relations or ecological balances that could only be perceived by being a part of the landscape. This more artistic-scientific understanding of the American’s relation to the land is expressed in Emerson’s 1844 essay “The Young American.” In this chapter I compare the

spatial imagery Emerson uses in 1836 in “Nature” with the political outrage Emerson expresses in his 1838 letter to Martin Van Buren protesting the removal of the Cherokee from their ancestral lands. In this letter Emerson speaks for his neighbors who have not been given information justifying the government’s right to affect this removal. By 1844, in “The Young American” essay, Emerson has disciplined his rage and in calmer voice exhorts the young people of his country to define property in a new way.

Against this language of expansion and national purpose, Emerson proposed in “The Young American” that science worked in relation to the human imagination and creative drive, not in relation to divine authority. In proposing a “theory of race” in this chapter he claims that it is incumbent on all people to develop a system of taking care of the weak. For Emerson, nature already had a way of caring for “races” of men. Survival was assured to the race itself; it was the individual who was at risk in nature. In “Circles” Emerson insists that the personal voice, the speaker and the listener, engaged in dialogues about ideals creates the surfaces of exchange that become communal foundations. By examining Emerson’s 1838 letter to Martin Van Buren and his speeches concerning the slave debate, I trace the way Emerson used newspapers and town meetings to create new centers of exchange over ideals in community.

In chapter three I argue that Emerson’s ostracism from Harvard and the Unitarian Church actually enriched his understanding of German criticism. From this position he joined with other thinkers who felt comfortable with the challenges this criticism posed to religious foundations. Paradoxically, so many

felt a similar alienation during the pre-Civil War years that Emerson's "bare common" became well populated.⁷ Emerson was able to imagine the position of the young American isolated from national definitions of identity. In 1838 after delivering "The Divinity School" Address Emerson found himself bereft of further support from Harvard. In his journals he records how he came to understand the state of mind that produces facts that isolate those who oppose the dominant power structure. This ostracism and his personal experience with the way that ideas become fashionable and dominant shaped the process of exchange he advocates in his 1840 essay "Circles." Instead of proposing that such alienation situates the individual outside culture, he claims that the ostracized individual is still in its center, part of a newly emerging center of a circle. The liberal Unitarian clergy who conducted the debate against him conserved its positions in the institution, and won the debate by counting how many people supported their positions. The mind interested in conserving positions of power produced facts that supported their state of mind. Emerson imagined a new space, what might be called "the alienated agora," from which individuals might engage in a new discourse. In this way transcendental language is similar to allegorical language in that it provided a way of speaking in the *agora*.⁸ While his journals at the time record his yearning for relationship, Emerson develops a self-reliant state of mind that values exchange, more than it values dominance. To understand the context in which Emerson positions his discourse, I rely on the work of Philip

⁷ For an extensive discussion of this alienation within the body politic, see Priscilla Wald, Constituting Americans 1-13.

Fisher and Priscilla Wald. They trace governmental attempts to impose an ideology unconnected to the lived experience of the citizenry. Both demonstrate the way that the lack of a national ideology connected to the ordinary lives of people stimulates the expression of diverse discourses and narratives.⁹

As government surveyors were intent on drawing new national boundaries, state borders, and property lines, Emerson became more and more itinerant, wandering outside of culturally defined spaces and roles. As Barbara Packer observes, “It was difficult to be a Unitarian heretic, but Emerson discovered he had managed that feat” (CLHUS 387). In alienating himself from Harvard after “The Divinity School Address” (1838), Emerson was without support from the one institution on which he depended after leaving the church. Indeed, from his association with Harvard he was able to secure for himself many positions on the lecture and essay circuit. Harvard would no longer be a source of support for Emerson. He was deeply shocked by the reaction in this community, yet refused to launch his own defense since it would require a new opposition, a defensive use of language.

At a time when the geography of the United States was organized by the Jeffersonian grid that packaged the landscape into easily mapped and easily negotiated parcels of exchange, Emerson focused on imagining America from a private perspective within a public space. Antebellum land surveys were fundamental to the organization needed to develop highways, inter-state

⁸ I am indebted to the work of Angus Fletcher which inspired this dissertation. In particular, his careful argument about the relation of allegorical language to the public space during times of social change is fundamental to my argument.

⁹ See New American Studies and Constituting Americans.

commerce, communication systems, and railway networks connecting the Atlantic to the Pacific. These identical self-sufficient units defined the landscape on the surveyor's grid of the United States.¹⁰ As delineated by Philip Fisher in his discussion of these surveys, the problem is that the grid-like landscape was an abstraction on a blank piece of paper and provided no sense of relation for a *volk* who would inhabit the land.

On this grid Emerson imagines a process of mutual recognition, or correspondence, or genius, the spirit of local place. Spirit is not created by an omniscient perspective but through original relations. Lecturing on the lyceum circuit, using lessons in science as the metaphorical tenors for moral vehicles, Emerson taught the new inhabitants of the land to become artist-creators, intricately connected to their homes by understanding the vital need for perspective in everything they did. From a position of ostracism, Emerson was able to develop a deep relation to those isolated on the frontiers, outside of normal institutional imperatives. In contemplating the higher laws and the practical laws that organize every aspect of life in the new communities, an understanding of a relation to a spirit of place emerges.

In chapter four I examine more closely the discourse of original relation. Emerson used the new theories of probability proposed by Adolph Quetelet, a pioneer in statistical analysis, to support his discourse of hope and possibility. Governmental agencies were using the same patterns of probability to determine the fate of the community. The higher laws that allow for error and from that error produce possibility, become the foundation of Emerson's opposition to the

Philip Fisher discusses these surveys in his work [New Studies in American Literature](#).

language of scientific authority and class hierarchy. Possibility and hope emerge out of error, out of the wild, out of the “Druids and Berserkers” (CW I 100 “The American Scholar” 1837-8). His furious “Fugitive Slave Law” speech delivered in 1851 in Concord employs the rhetoric of science and disease that he had been using for years to characterize the spread of ideas dependent on a host ideology. When Emerson entered into the political debate over law in America, he did so from an extremely strong position. He did not oppose or debate. Instead, he imagined new possibilities in human relations in language. In “Farming,” “Plato,” “Montaigne,” “Swedenborg,” and “Self-Reliance” Emerson educated the public about transcendental language. By 1851 this language is very recognizable through his work and that of the other transcendentalists. He uses that language to oppose slavery in Massachusetts. In this chapter I rely on the work of Albert J. Von Frank. It is Von Frank’s argument that the lawyers who defended Anthony Burns and the citizens of Massachusetts who blockaded the courthouse, argued against the federal position using Emersonian language. When Emerson finally became a fiery leader in the abolitionist movement, he used a language of revolution that claimed to preserve a deeply conservative relation to law. Resisting both the temptation to omniscience offered by the newly emerging science of social physics that hoped to survey cultures, and the interpretive power of religious dogma, Emerson managed to create a language of hope and possibility. Using the humility of receptivity characteristic of religious hope and the rigor of perceptive awareness required of scientific method, Emerson manages to keep the individual rooted in virtue even as he situated man in the

“astronomical interstices” he calls the “abyss.” Surprisingly, this conception of open space in language creates a new basis for agency in that communal relations are seen on the model of free exchange within a scientific community.

Inspired by the new laws of probability advanced by Quetelet, Emerson posits laws of hope by re-imagining the possibilities offered to genius. Genius can change statistically determined fate in a moment of perception in the present hour. Combining an understanding of math and music, and their transitive relation to one another, Emerson calls for a new Euclid who can determine a new harmony, a golden mean within a statistical awareness of numbers.

In chapter five I explore Emerson’s position of leadership in relation to the gnostic movements spreading conversion experiences in makeshift tent meetings across the land. Knowing that laws of relation can be changed by probability, standing firmly on his own axis of relation, Emerson provides the leadership needed to recognize that the appeal to personal authority is simply another form of exceptionalist thinking, and so does not represent an adequate alternative to theories of national exceptionalism. At times of revolutionary crisis when the community no longer believes in the institutions of government, a temptation to withdraw to a center of personal authority threatens to make language a secretive, privileged communication system. Emerson insists that language is intensely communal even as it works through personal engagement. In his Anti-Slavery Address, Emerson cites his research on civil law and finds just such a claim within the founding documents of democracy. It is in the essay “Experience,” however, that Emerson provides a description of the balance of power possible in

lived experience. Situating the individual on the “slippery surface” of language Emerson urges the reader to venture out into “the chaos and the dark,” achieving a sense of balance only from an understanding of what it means to be upright. It is this upright position that enables the individual to see in his present hour, even within a “paltry empiricism,” and bear witness to a harmony within mathematical relations beyond statistics.

“Experience” is an essay that strips away at one’s foundations instead of creating a gnostic base of personal exceptionalism. All the supports of family, lovers, church, nation, are experienced as loss as Emerson catalogues the fables and illusions through which we live our lives. Then Emerson takes away our place in nature. Man has no nest, no place of rest. Instead, astronomical interstices separate us from all we long to touch. The images of loss in the essay “Experience” create a “space” an “abyss” into which Emerson invites identity. Here is developed the “capital virtue” of “self-trust.” This gap in language is the space of self-extension that Emerson preserves as an act of sympathy for those oppressed who cannot find a space within culture for their voice. It is out of this poetic image of a bare common that justice will emerge, not from gnostic or apocalyptic rhetoric.

Chapter One: Interpretation and Freedom

There is the greatest difference between presuming an opinion to be true because, with every opportunity for contesting it, it has not been refuted, and assuming its truth for the purpose of not permitting its refutation. Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action; and on no other terms can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right. (Mill, On Liberty)

Mill's understanding of liberty is predicated on the ability to argue with presumed truths for "purposes of action." If, however, to be granted the right to argue, one has to agree in advance to a particular conception of discursive competence, one is not really allowed to argue. The right to argue must be derived from sources not threatened by "argument." In the slave debate religious rhetoric was used to make identity contingent upon an interpretive framework, a framework dominated by a particular conception of divine justice. Both apocalyptic and gnostic interpretations of the American "manifest destiny" presume that American national identity is innocent of the sins of old world civilization. Pre-ordained assumptions about divine justice and American "innocence" provided the framework within which alone argument over slavery issues could be conducted.

How is it possible to argue from a position outside the communal system of interpretation that provides the criteria for assessing the rationality of argument? How is it possible to seriously reject those constraints which define what seriousness is? The nineteenth century debate over definitions of selfhood in the constitution was argued by those who fit within the definition of selfhood validated by the argument. Those who did not fit into the definition were not included in the debate. Is it possible to argue for a definition of selfhood that is not recognized by those who are allowed to argue the question? Any position that presupposes a definition of the “fully human” prevents a real questioning of the meaning of democracy from taking place.

It is easy to see that a greater self-reliance must work a revolution in all the offices and relations of men; in their religion; in their education; in their pursuits; their modes of living; their association; in their property; in their speculative views. (CW II 77 “Self-Reliance” 1839-40)

Emersonian transcendental rhetoric concentrates on providing a description of self-reliant human agency not defined by conservative cultural traditions. By situating man “at the center of things,” he claims that man “measures you and all men and all events....An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man” (CW II 60-1). Emerson attaches man to transcendent principles of “being” that are a “given” not necessarily recognized by culture. Emerson proposes this definition at a time when human agency was at risk.

In the pre-Civil War years lawmakers were confronted with the difficult task of legislating slavery into the land while at the same time claiming that America was free of the sins of European civilization. In this “Promised Land” a new

freedom would be born. A rational framework built around the defensive need to construct an innocent identity necessarily dissociates itself from the evidence provided by actual experience. Habits of mind must be developed that keep that dissociation from entering into sensory awareness. In "Benito Cereno" Herman Melville provides an example of this self-alienation: he parodies the inability of Amasa Delano to trust the evidence of his senses because what he sees and hears does not fit into the abstract national narrative that dominates his identity. He is completely alienated from an integrated relationship between ideas and the evidence of his senses. Even after the horror of the slave revolt is evident, he is still unable to take responsibility for his part in the institution of slavery. Amasa Delano is unable to "see" the situation aboard the "ship of state" because of a gnostic innocence that dominates his self-conception. While Cereno, the Spanish captain, is able to grasp the horror when the dynamic of domination and submission is reversed, Delano still believes that "America" will replace the dying civilization of Spain, even as it perpetuates the same domination and submission.

Scholars of nineteenth-century religious thought have contributed significantly to an understanding of the pervasive, almost hysterical atmosphere of divine judgement that threatened an American understanding of its innocence. In Errand into the Wilderness Perry Miller examines the power of the idea of a covenant imposed on a "vacant" landscape. Emerson's understanding of the relation between ideas and sensory awareness critiques this kind of imposition. He suggests that there are constant transitive readjustments of the relation between the power of ideas and the forms of sensory awareness that emerge as a

result of those ideas. Ideas are not imposed on vacant sensory landscapes but on forms of life and patterns of growth. Thus Sacvan Bercovitch has related the American jeremiad to the need, during the antebellum period, for a return to a covenant to maintain social innocence in the face of divine justice. Edmund Wilson in Patriotic Gore relates the need for unity in the nation to the pervasive use of apocalyptic thinking during the pre-Civil War years. As the distance between the covenant and actual experience becomes more apparent, apocalyptic solutions are invoked. Wilson is interested in the deep biological and even zoological instincts at the basis of such apocalyptic thought. Primitive organisms create organizational behavior in “armies” through demonstrations of domination. “Now, the wars fought by human beings are stimulated as a rule primarily by the same instincts as the voracity of the sea slug.... There are perhaps only the army ants which have mastered a comparable technique” (xi). Having lived through two world wars Wilson is interested in the instinct to create unity by the dynamic of domination and submission. Wilson suspects that beneath our rhetorics of “glory” and “virtue” and need for the advance of civilization, is a deeper instinct to devour other forms of identity:

The difference in this respect between man and the other forms of life is that man has succeeded in cultivating enough of what he calls “morality” and “reason” to justify what he is doing in terms of what he calls “virtue” and “civilization.” Hence the self-assertive sounds which he utters when he is fighting and swallowing others: the songs about glory and God, the speeches about national ideals, the demonstrations of logical ideologies. These assertions rarely have any meaning—that is, they will soon lose any meaning they have had once a war has been got under way. (xii)

Wilson illustrates his argument by a thorough analysis of the speeches, hymns, anthems, and political oratory of the crisis years. He demonstrates the way that both northern and southern politicians used the same rhetoric of biblical authority to validate their claims. I would argue that the language of biblical authority that validated claims to a providential ideology of national redemption was drained of all “meaning” long before the war itself. Rather, as soon as language could be attached to two diametrically opposed meanings and had the power to create a binary opposition of identity, it no longer functioned to represent national identity. Instead, language became attached to an instinctual need to create unity through domination and submission. Institutions reflected this instinctual need.

Emerson’s appeal to a transcendent space outside institutional constraints, determinations of history, and tradition was a claim to both a space for and a definition of identity not dependent on apocalyptic and gnostic interpretive modes. In making this move Emerson is pointing to a “transcendent” language in which spiritual questioning- a questioning into the ideals on which the argument is based- is still able to guide a nation. Emerson attempted to reattach spiritual interrogation to lived experience not interpretive authority. In his 1832 sermon before the Second Church Boston, Emerson claimed that he could no longer be a Unitarian minister because the celebration of communion was “disagreeable to my own feelings” (CW 11 19). The structure of the sermon relies on the German historical criticism of biblical texts that reshaped biblical interpretation in the nineteenth century. This method separates the text according to its parts: legends,

miracle stories, histories and myths. Instead of grounding belief in the existence of miracle, or interpretation of text according to the needs of the early church, German theology found “mystery” in the literary construction of history:

Distinguished from Lower Criticism whose work it carries forward, by its concern to understand documents in relation to their original historical setting; sometimes understood as virtually equivalent to historical criticism. Higher criticism relies more on internal than external evidence. In determining whether Peter wrote the epistles, it assesses the intrinsic probability in light of their contents rather than relying on the epistles own claim to authorship or on external attestation in other texts. The higher critic concludes that Peter is not the author then proceeds to infer the probable time, place, and occasion of the epistles. The nineteenth and twentieth century controversies over biblical criticism have concentrated on the legitimacy of higher criticism because it appeared to threaten the authority of the Bible. (L. E. Keck, *Interpreter’s Bible*, 411)

Emerson was fully conversant with the American scholars who were examining the impact of higher criticism.¹ Theodore Parker published a journal called *The Scriptural Interpreter*, which was devoted to propagating the higher criticism. In addition Parker translated De Wette’s *Introduction to the New Testament*. Elizabeth Palmer Peabody translated Herder’s *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*. Emerson read German biblical criticism and Mme De Stael’s *De L’Allemagne*. His brother William studied theology in Gottingen in 1824-5 and exchanged a rich correspondence with Emerson over his studies (Ellison 42).

Beginning in the Reformation, scholars began to study the origins of the canonical New Testament books particularly in the context of Catholic dogmatic

¹ On the biblical studies of the Harvard-Gottingen students, see Orié William Long, Literary Pioneers: American Explorers of European Culture (Cambridge, Mass., 1935).

and polemical interests. Richard Simon was the first scholar to write an introduction to the New Testament that attempted to account for the manuscript tradition and the origin of the individual writings. The first great introduction that consciously handled the historical development of the manuscripts was done by J. D. Michaelis in 1788 with an English translation done in 1802. However, the first “free investigation” of the origin of the canonical Scriptures was provided by J. G. Eichhorn’s five-volume *Einleitung in das NT* (1804-27). The Tubingen School conceived of the development and transmission of New Testament texts in terms of Hegelian logic: thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.

The apostolic age was thought to be dominated by the opposition between the narrow-minded Jewish-Christianity of the original apostles and the law-free, universalistic gospel of Paul. In the post-apostolic period the opposition was eased: though concessions and compromises the two parties came closer together and united on a middle way over against the Gnosticism and Montanism of the second century. (Kummel 31)

Dealing with probabilities and intuitions about human agency rather than miracles, higher criticism is interested in the way that myths, miracle stories, legends, and oral traditions were transmitted and shaped by individual writers. It was assumed, for example, that Luke used Matthew as his source and that Mark used both Matthew and Luke. Using his intuition about human agency, one critic questioned how Mark could possibly have read both Luke and Matthew and eliminated the beautiful narratives therein from his own text. Higher criticism does not attack a reverence for the life of Jesus. Instead, especially under the influence of neo-Hegelians like David Strauss, the mythic, rather than miraculous, nature of that life provides testimony to the working out of an understanding of

ideals. Strauss in his Life of Jesus (1835-6) claimed that in the gospel of John a more developed form of myth defined the style, and this gospel could not be considered a historical source.² Emerson never accedes to this “mythic” understanding of the life of Jesus.

The Enlightenment and the rise of the natural and historical sciences created a grave problem for understanding the New Testament, for the New Testament narratives are full of references to things that are difficult for people living in the post-Enlightenment world to accept literally: angels, demons, miracles.... To understand the impact of Strauss, it is important to recognize that Strauss’ work contrasted myth and factual history, and that he had a particular understanding of myth. For Strauss, myths were not abstract ideas or concepts, but the vivid, dramatic, and pictorial religious images with which primitive peoples expressed themselves.... Strauss believed there was an historical event in the background...[but] the impact of his work was to cast doubt on the historical reliability of the gospel narratives. (Perrin and Duling 48)

For Emerson the mythic understanding of the lives recorded in the Bible does not capture the lived experience of being present to the age in which one lives. Idealism for Emerson required a connection between “presence” in local experience and an intuition of being part of a whole. That intuition of wholeness governs how the individual organizes his sense impressions in his local experience. Living in the local, Reason organizes that experience according to an impossible imperative: imagining the whole. Conceptually, Emerson proposes that “virtue” is the organizing principle of the world. Perceptually in local experience it is necessary to enact or incarnate that ideal. It is a requirement of

² For an extended discussion of German criticism see Werner Georg Kummel Introduction to the New Testament.

“self-culture” to develop the capacity to be capable of “virtue.” Defying the orthodox understanding of human nature as depraved, Emerson interprets one part of the identity of Jesus as fully human; an example of the fully human unmarred by depravity and sin. This part of Jesus’ nature was different from the rest of mankind not in kind but in degree. His virtue was completely continuous with the moral nature of the world and of God. Therefore, apocalyptic and gnostic versions of divine agency – that agency is pure and other- is no longer needed to redeem the world. The soul of man will redeem the world as it realizes its vital connection to an ethical imperative. Redemption will not come from without but from within.

The problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty is solved by the redemption of the soul. The ruin or the blank that we see when we look at nature is in our own eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque. (C W I ,73)

A profound change in the understanding of the private soul had been made by higher criticism. No longer would the great man be the “prophet” of his age receiving revelation from god. Julie Ellison characterizes the impact of higher criticism on “revelation.”

What distinguished the higher criticism from other approaches to the Bible was its concern with the total history of the biblical text: historical milieu, generic conventions, authorial intent, interpretive tradition. It was defined methodologically by the premise that all texts are the productions of ordinary mortals written without divine inspiration. This could be proved by comparison. Scholars compared conflicting accounts (the Synoptic Gospels) with each other, compared Biblical narratives with other mythologies (any mythology-Greek, Roman, Hindu, German, Egyptian, Icelandic), and finally,

compared Christian versions of history with other surviving historical evidence, physical or written. The effect, though rarely the intent, of the higher critics' enterprise was to deprive the Bible of its traditional status by calling into question its historical validity and by challenging the unitary canon. Biblical scholars "deconstructed" the revelations of prophets. (Ellison 44)

It is my argument that Emerson normalizes the concept of "revelation."

Instead of thinking about revelation as a kind of knowledge from a "divine" plane that breaks through to the material world, Emerson places man's consciousness on an edge between his position as part and his striving to understand the whole. In submitting to that impossible position, man's consciousness changes.

Consciousness is constantly negotiating between the chaos and the dark and the buzzing confusion of the material world. The act of mind that connects "conception" with "perception" is radically creative and therefore in need of communal interrogation. Emerson deploys the higher criticism to explore the position each individual occupies within this communal language of spiritual interrogation. Emerson claims that the rite of communion as practiced by the institutional church was "disagreeable to my own feelings" (CW XI, 19). Before Emerson claims an "original relation" to his own feelings, he first demonstrates his mastery of the history of biblical interpretation related to the communion ritual. Displaying his ability to read a biblical text according to a variety of fashionable interpretive modes, he then claims his right to use German higher criticism in order to understand the text in human terms. If the prophets of the Bible were men, not vessels of divine revelation, Emerson could read carefully,

listen to them and then respond as a man to their conversation.³ Reading was conversational but not casual. He had to give a strong reading to the text that demanded of him a strong response. It is this final reading that he values.

Textual interpretation informed by German high criticism imagines into the human agency that produced the text; it must, in other words, be willing to establish and sustain a real dialogue concerning the ethical and ideal assumptions on which a vision of life is based. The individual is responsible for those assumptions. Five years after his farewell sermon, in “The American Scholar,” Emerson formally instructs his audience in this method of active interpretation: “One must be an inventor to read well” (CW I 92). At a time when the Bible and the institutions and forms of social practice upheld by it were at the center of arguments supporting slavery, Emerson uses an approach to interpretation that dismantles any authoritative interpretive mode.

In his farewell sermon delivered September 9, 1832 Emerson selects Romans 14:17 as his scriptural reference: “The kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.” To expound on this text he first examines a variety of interpretations of the communion ritual. He dismisses the questions regarding postures of the body, mixed or unmixed wines, leavened or unleavened bread, even though these issues had been “lately debated” (CW 11 3). Instead he addresses the controversies over the nature of the rite itself. The “first great question” was that of the “Real Presence” in the Eucharist. He provides a list of interpretive differences. Luther and Calvin differed over the doctrine of consubstantiation. Within the Church of England Laud and Wake

^{2 3} Hodder in *Emerson’s Language of Revelation* argues the opposite.

maintained that it was a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God, Cudworth and Warburton that it was not a sacrifice but a feast after a sacrifice, and Bishop Hoadly that it was a simple commemoration (CW XI 4).

In listing these differences, Emerson emphasizes the point that interpretations change according to the historic concerns of the culture. Each culture brings to its interpretive mode a concern for ideals that are threatened within their own time and place. Emerson demonstrated his own concern with the “present hour” in the sermon. By demonstrating the transitive nature of the engagement with ideals, he emphasizes how active the imagination must be to be present to the concerns of the age. Using the techniques of German higher criticism, he compares the accounts of the Last Supper in the four gospels, speculates about their sources and the transmission of text, and situates an understanding of the ritual in the history of the Jewish nation and in the Jewish tradition of ritual performance. He acknowledges the different uses Jesus makes of genre, especially his use of parables. He concludes that the Evangelists, in transcribing the oral accounts of the Last Supper, provided a text that more fully reflected the Evangelists’ need, after the fall of the Temple in 70 C. E., for a church fellowship than it reflected Jesus’ own concern with “presence” and “fellowship.”

Similarly, Emerson observes that Paul’s references to the communion rite in I Corinthians reflects the behavior of pagan converts who are familiar with the form of the ritual more than they reflect Paul’s authorization of the rite as a church doctrine. The error in interpretation, Emerson concludes, consists in the

ecclesiastical assumption that a local form can be applied to “all mankind...nation after nation ...” (CW XI 6). Even so, Emerson admits, perhaps forms are more easily “transmitted than virtues.” Yet he argues that “forms should be animated by our feelings; that our religion through all its acts should be living and operative” (580).

In this interpretation Emerson is, ironically, echoing Jesus’ celebration of the Passover ritual. The hymn sung during the Passover ritual is from Psalms 115 in which the Hebrews acknowledge that their god is not an idol but a living presence. Idols have ears but do not hear; they have eyes but do not see. In establishing a ritual through which the disciples can remember him, Jesus insists that he be remembered as a living presence in a time and a place. He is an embodied presence that threatens the power relations within the Roman Empire. Soon his tortured body will hang among the others that line the streets in a display of imperial force to which the public must bear silent witness.

What is significant about this sermon topic is that in leaving the church, Emerson justifies his actions in terms of a “living presence” on which the church as an institution is founded. While the church during the nineteenth century fragmented over interpretations of text, Emerson used the German higher criticism to create a personal relation to the lived experience of the character of Jesus in his historical circumstances. Identity and “presence” precede institutions, interpretation, and argument. Identity is self-reliant, generative, and not dependent on institutional validation. Emerson leaves the church citing the very scriptural references and rituals that were used to defy Roman power, bear

witness to torture, and foster the development of the church in opposition to such power. The question he implicitly raises is this: How does an individual remain a “living presence” during a time when abstract forms of power relations reduce communal spaces to scenes of domination and submission and the torture of slavery?

Perhaps a more difficult audience for Emerson than that of the Second Church congregation was a beloved audience of one, Aunt Mary Moody. In expressing his “feelings” to her regarding his vocation, he alienated the family as an institution as well as the church. With the death of Emerson’s father, Aunt Mary Moody became a great source of support to the family. Emerson valued their correspondence deeply. In her letters to Emerson, Aunt Mary claims that his decision to leave the ministry is “parrisidical,” a strong accusation from a loving Aunt to a son who suffered the early death of his father. The males in Emerson’s family had been prominent protestant ministers since the Puritan founding of the Massachusetts Bay community. At the heart of Aunt Mary’s attack is a disagreement with her nephew over the authority religion commands “to the multitude.” She asks, if the miracles and revelations of the Bible are not true in the teachings of the church, what authority commands the multitude?³ She asks, how do we create “unity” in community? In their correspondence Emerson had asked whether “the heart were not the Creator.” Aunt Mary called this a “Lucifer doctrine of pantheism.” Her questions to Emerson strike at the center of the issue: “What morai truth can you preach or by what authority should you feel it?”

Without the support of theories of interpretation that grant moral authority to truth claims, “feelings” could be pantheistic, uncontained, and “parrisidical.”

Having left the church, Emerson resituated the claims to moral authority outside a religious model of selfhood. The Emersonian self relies upon feelings and sensibilities that emerge in relation to intuitions of universal principles that apply to all human beings. While Emerson was criticized by abolitionists for not actively entering the slave debate, he engaged the argument on a deeper level by refusing the assumptions concerning selfhood at the basis of the debate. To make claims for this “self,” Emerson finds a place outside the two institutions in American culture that asserts moral authority: the family and the church. He dissociates himself from these institutions in dramatic forms of public display and address, even while remaining a “minister,” father, and husband. In both “Nature” and “Experience,” early and late essays, Emerson distances himself from claims of identity demanded by the family and church as institutions. Instead, he insists in both essays, identity depends not on institutions but on one’s capacity to understand the creative process in producing consciousness itself: the ability to “align” perceptual sensibility to conceptual possibility. As a result, he is able to develop an understanding of self-reliance. In the essay “Nature” he attempts to align an intuition of “real presence” with actual lived experience. The “eye” bears witness to the relation between ideas of mind and scenes in the landscape.

The interpretive context within which transcendentalism emerged as a uniquely American movement is vitally important to an understanding of idealism in the pre-Civil War years. As Liberalism became associated with middle class

interests and the need to maintain existing social institutions, Unitarians saw those very institutions as the source of human oppression. William Ellery Channing, a Unitarian leader and great influence on Emerson, proposed that social change might occur as individuals engaged each other as moral witnesses to principle. Slaveholders would be engaged in personal conversations that would change their views.

I have also felt and continually insisted that a new reverence for man was essential to the cause of social reform. As long as men regard one another as they do now, that is as little better than brutes, they will continue to treat one another brutally. Each will strive by craft or skill to make others his tools. There can be no spirit of brotherhood, no true peace, any farther than men come to understand their affinity with and relation to God and the infinite purpose for which he gave them life. As yet these ideas are treated as a kind of spiritual romance; and the teacher who really expects men to see in themselves and one another the children of God is smiled at as a visionary. The reception of this plainest truth of Christianity would revolutionize society and create relations among men not dreamed of at the present day. (Channing, Works, 7)

Expanding economically and militarily, America lacked an understanding of how only a network of human relations, not economic relations, can provide a sense of cultural cohesion. Emerson goes a step further than Channing and emphasizes that individuals need to understand how definitions of selfhood are created before they can engage others in moral arguments that form networks of relation. “This revolution is to be wrought by the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture. The main enterprise of the world for splendor, for extent, is the upbuilding of a man....One soul animates all men.” (CW I 107). For Emerson,

unity in culture is derived not through mythic thinking, which provides meta-narratives of national identity and external models of self-hood, or from evangelical group experiences of conversion, but from an ability to calibrate one's position in relation to thinking. Rather than claim that thinking is derived from foundations of authority, Emerson claims that thinking depends on a "circulation of being" or spiraling levels of consideration. Emerson is making a claim not to perception but apperception. All men must have this ability. The idea of culture must be "domesticated" to allow all men to become "man thinking." At a time when the ability to constitute identity was being debated in relation to slavery, to say "all" men must take on the responsibility of generating a relation between ideas and forms of life was revolutionary.

Emerson distinguished his work from the German school of higher criticism that embraced "mythic" thinking as an alternative to both supernatural dependence on miracles and a rational dependence on scholarship. While Emerson used German higher criticism to develop a mode of interpretation that stresses the lived experience of humanity, he dismisses both "mythic" interpretations of miracles and rational explanations of supernatural events. If human nature is continuous with the spiritual interrogations of the Bible, history does not need a divine agency to break through to the fallen world. In addition, he does not believe nations are held together through mythologies about themselves. All these modes of moral thought externalize the source of authority in a way that relieves the individual of responsibility. Emerson insists that thinking be impelled to engage the impossible ideals that actually energize all thought.

So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes. It shall answer the endless inquiry of the intellect, -What is truth? And of the affections, -What is good? By yielding itself passive to the educated Will. Then shall come to pass what my poet said: "Nature is not fixed but fluid. Spirit alters, moulds, makes it. The immobility or bruteness of nature is the absence of spirit; to pure spirit it its fluid, it is volatile.... (CW I 76).

Idealism is impossible because it is always fluid not fixed. The material world perceived through the eyes of idealism is "parts" that "enter into results" (CW I 13 " Nature" 1836). Since ideals are lived, it is impossible to "know" in traditional ways. There is no closure. Transcendentalists were more interested in Reason and the imagination than in typological relations between texts because they believed in the "transitive" or "vehicular" nature of moral engagement. They relied less on tradition and prediction and more on attention and awareness and how language changed to communicate that attention and awareness. They were concerned with how the text might give the reader access to the lived experience of "the action of a man upon nature with his entire force, -with reason as well as understanding. Such examples are, ...the history of Jesus Christ; the achievements of a principle as in religious and political revolutions and in the abolition of the slave-trade..." (Nature 54). We tend to see life through the eyes of these individuals instead of seeing our own lives with our own "entire force." Instead of reading the Bible as a source of authority, transcendentalists would read actively and wonder into the lonely life of the young David tending his goats in the barren landscape near the Dead Sea. How did such a life produce the depth and range of spiritual reference in Psalms? What were the essential features of the personality of Jesus? ⁷ Emerson finds the contemporary debate over biblical explication too

overheated to be worth entering on its terms. Instead, he focuses on the thinking process that is able to contemplate the basic questions of consciousness without reference to the interpretation of texts. If this could be done in relation to the Bible, it could be done in relation to nature, God's other book. On May 27, 1832 Emerson argued in his sermon that astronomy illustrates beautifully "the irresistible effect" of science in "modifying and enlarging the doctrines of theology" (CS 4:156). How are original relations possible? "The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" (CW 1 3). At a time of ideological breakdown, when arguments were polarized into northern and southern perspectives on how to interpret a national narrative, Emerson proposes that we move outside of the narrative completely. He looked to a space on a "bare common" open to all forms of identity. Where anyone could enter into a consideration of how ideals are to be lived in the present (CHAL 337).

Emerson's theory of "natural theology" was an interesting innovation. Pre-Darwinian conceptions of adaptation to natural landscapes and environments assumed that the environment had been designed to support the organism, not that the organism was significantly altered by adapting to the environment. In Emerson's reading of nature the moral sense in man has a corresponding moral end in nature. The national landscape was being radically transformed both culturally and physically; Emerson proposed that individuals participate actively in that transformation. As the government claims the power to dislocate the Amer-Indian, enslave the African, disenfranchise women, and deny rights to

laborers and children, Emerson proposes in “Nature” that culture be re-made from personal spaces on bare commons not through national narratives of redemption.

Connected but distinct from an understanding of ideality is Emerson’s understanding of unity. At a time when binary thinking dominated religious thought Emerson attempted to introduce an Eastern understanding of non-categorical thinking into American spirituality. Beginning in the 1820s, Bertram Wyatt-Brown contends, moral reform in the North was the focus of a politically minded clergy: “Their approach was far from being sophisticated but instead divided the world between Good and Evil in the starkest terms imaginable. They did so perhaps because of a hidden uncertainty” (Miller ed. 97). Emerson claimed that each thinker must position himself in relation to his own self-reliant integrated thought process. The opposition between good and evil as abstractions would thereby be eliminated. The essay “Nature” is a handbook on how to create an “original relation”:

The problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty is solved by the redemption of the soul. The ruin or the blank that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque. The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps is because man is disunited with himself.... But when a faithful thinker, resolute to detach every object from personal relations and see it in the light of thought, shall, at the same time kindle science with the fire of the holiest affections, then will God go forth anew into the creation. (CW I 73)

In The Body in Pain Elaine Scarry traces the way that the redemption of the soul of man and building of a world, a culture, are central to biblical concerns.

Her formulation of the creative process is Emersonian. She describes how the Hebrew people are given detailed instructions on building a tabernacle, an ark of gopher wood, an altar, a nation. Scarry contends that how one relates to objects, how they are made, reflects a devotional, objectifying attitude toward the world that externalizes the on-going development of human consciousness. The creation of objects of devotion reflects the interiority of the people more than it describes their god. What is being created is human consciousness itself.⁴

Imitating the voice of the Old Testament creator god Emerson writes, “Let us demand our own works and laws and worship” (CW I 3). “Let us interrogate.... Let us inquire...”⁽⁴⁾. Emerson’s communal inquiry takes place outside the church, outside structures of authority that dominate textual interpretation. Echoing the “primal witness” to the first acts by Yahweh in Genesis, Emerson begins his essay calling for an understanding of a “theory of creation” using the language of an “interior dialogue.” Karl Barth in Church Dogmatics claims that the divine “let us” refers to Yahweh’s being as “interior dialogue.”⁵ Being made in God’s image means being made a part of that relation established by interior dialogue. Of vital importance, language becomes the vehicle of that exchange between the part and the whole. The essay “Nature” posits an understanding of the creative character of man’s position in nature. Opposing a reading of the Genesis text by the pro-slavery faction that interprets man’s “domination” over nature to include the right to own slaves, Emerson proposes that to be made in God’s image is not a question of racial superiority

⁴ For an extended discussion of Emerson’s Biblical references in this essay see Joel Porte, Representative Men.

based on physical characteristics that makes one person an “animal” and another person a “man”; instead, to be made in God’s image means to participate in an activity, to be part of the internal dialogue of language itself. This is Emerson’s “theory of creation” in “Nature.” Any silencing of the other through domination and submission excludes the other from the vital dialogue essential to the process of “creation.” The Oxford Bible translates the word “image” in Genesis to mean “activity” not physical type. Emerson stresses that the emphasis on racial characteristics in the proslavery use of this text is a nineteenth-century concern that is of no importance to the editor who is compiling this Biblical text in 5thc. B. C. E. The self-sufficiency of the God is of vital importance here. The creative process begins in “internal dialogue,” or self communion that draws man into the conversation. The “Let us...” can be translated as an internal dialogue that anticipates the trinity, or as a conversation with an unseen “court.” While the animals and plants will be involved in procreation, man is asked to understand creation “in God’s image.” In the Genesis narrative this is not a procreative act. Instead, creation is a “fabrication” out of “nothing” and chaos. In case a misunderstanding develops and man misinterprets creativity to mean enslavement of others, the book of Exodus is meant to be a corrective. In the covenant on Sinai the Law is established that affirms how man will conduct his interior dialogue with Yahweh. Just as Yahweh has freed the Hebrews from slavery the Ten Commandments are put in place to ensure that the Hebrew will never enslave themselves or others. The creative process involves self-dialogue and self-sufficiency, not enslavement. While Emerson does not refer to Exodus directly in

⁵ Book 3,I.

“Nature” he does indirectly at the conclusion of the essay. In “Prospects” he cites the abolition of the slave trade as an example of man reclaiming his rightful relation to nature (CW 1 72). Following this model of the creation experience set up in the Old Testament, Emerson proposes that while unity is vital to the creative process, it is achieved not through domination and submission but through integrations made by the eye. Emerson is clear in this essay that he is proposing this mode in opposition to an economic model. The highest category defining our vision of the nation and progress should not be economic but poetic, subjective:

Everything should be treated poetically, -law, politics, housekeeping, money. A judge and a banker must drive their craft poetically as well as a dancer or a scribe. That is, they must exert that higher vision which causes the object to become fluid and plastic. Then they are inventive, they detect its capabilities. If they do not this, they have nothing that can be called success, but the work and the workman become blockish and near the point of everlasting congelation. All human affairs need the perpetual intervention of this elastic principle to preserve them supple and alive.... (Journal, December 323, 1839).

To live in a “cosmos” rather than an economic system, it is necessary to own the landscape, not twenty or thirty farms (CW 1 8). The “poetical sense” can integrate impression made by “manifold natural objects.” In his description of the process of integration, Emerson compares the eye to the “composer” and light to the painter and the result is “mute music” (CW 1 18). The “beauty” created by adjusting the inner senses to their outer correspondences sees the world not as a fixed painting but as music which continually flows requiring “perpetual

intervention” on the part of the individual to produce the play. The “perpetual intervention” is acted as life; “I dilate and conspire.”

Rather than propose that the self is separated from the object-world, the Emersonian being stands in a fluid participatory relation to a “circulation” that constantly remakes the lenses through which perception is achieved. The self is not in control but is participating in a spiraling transitive process he trusts is moral. The beauty he sees is in living gestures. Emerson cites Columbus, Sir Harry Vane, Arnold Winkelried, and Lord Russell as able navigators, able to follow the flow when their times demanded that the standard of beauty “re-form” itself on the mind (21).

It is interesting that Emerson describes “spirit,” in his next level on the spiral of engagement, not in the heroic, artistic terms he used to describe beauty but as thoroughly “devout.” The highest form on his spiral of adjustments, excluding “prospects,” the spiritual aspect of nature is described as a “she.” “Like the figure of Jesus, she stands with bended head, and hands folded upon the breast” (61). The elaborate description of spiraling awareness recounted in “Nature” culminates in a redefining of submission.

What the soul perceives is “virtue.” Borrowing from both the Cambridge Platonists, who believed in the objective reality of moral truths, and from Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746) who believed in the innate moral sense of the heart, Emerson creates a synthesis of mind and heart based on a belief in human virtue exercised by Reason.

Since Emerson is concerned with the interpretive freedom that arises from a knowledge of assumptions and original relations, he is very concerned with the instruments through which ideas are formulated. He argues that cultures are not economic systems organized by domination and submission but imaginative enterprises organized by Reason. The “work” of culture demands not economic progress but submission to the demands of the impossible ideals, the concerns of Reason. Mastery and domination are not possible in dealing with ideals. Instead, the mind is confronted with the “chaos and the dark.”

...we lack the affirmative principle....We are as much strangers in nature as we are aliens from God. We do not understand the notes of birds. The fox and the deer run away from us; the bear and tiger rend us. We do not know the uses of more than a few plants, as corn and the apple, the potato and the vine. (CW III 45).

In the 1992 Oxford Amnesty Lectures sponsored by Amnesty International, Barbara Johnson claims that “it is always against humans that human rights need to be defended” (9). Johnson contends that it is through definitions of selfhood that we can protect human rights. Emerson was one of several nineteenth-century thinkers who questioned the conception of selfhood in relation to the preservation of human rights. He began a critique of selfhood by opening up a space of definition that was outside of institutions concerned with preserving rights of ownership. He also moved considerations of definitions outside of rational argument and into a consideration of ethical ideals. Using his training as a minister, Emerson devised a critique of selfhood that would bridge eighteenth-century conceptions of liberty and freedom with democratic openness

to interrogation of principles, even principles that threatened to destroy traditional forms of stability. The right to property and the right to rationality were not enough to constitute identity. Identity was self-reliant, grounded in the ability to be present in one's place in time, in "original relation."

Using many of the same rhetorical techniques employed by Emerson in 1832, Fredrick Douglass addressed an audience of mainly white anti-slave reformers on July 5, 1851. Along with the other transcendentalist Emerson's mode of analyzing and interrogating ideals and principles from a self-reliant perspective enabled them to hear and value Douglass's rhetoric. In this address entitled "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" Douglass creates the same "bridges" to the past by understanding how lived experience can create a "presence" in power relations that alters those relations. By using this rhetoric of "presence" Douglass could enter into the slave debate from a space cleared in the interpretive community. He could extend into that space a new conception of selfhood.

Douglass begins his address by "quailing" and "shrinking" before his audience because of his "limited powers of speech." With "little experience" and "less learning," Douglass, nevertheless, deftly moves into a position from which he critiques the system of cultural knowledge that does not recognize his rights as a human being. From a position that Orlando Patterson calls "social death," Douglass demonstrates the power contained in that liminal space occupied by the "undead," those who physically lived within society without any social existence (Patterson). First he summarizes the ideals of the colonial struggle for liberty

against England and its “fashionable idea of the day, of infallibility of government, and the absolute character of its acts” (Lauter 1818). While rendering the history of the colonies’s struggle for freedom, Douglass addresses his audience as “Fellow Citizens,” “Friends and Citizens,” and “We.” He builds bridges to his audience by displaying an understanding of their cultural heritage and representing it to them from a position of recognition (Bizzell 208). He then proceeds to accuse “America” of being unable to perform a reciprocal act of recognition. He can “see” them, but they cannot see him.

Douglass’ mastery of the cultural tradition, its ideals and its documents as testaments to those ideals, enables him to understand the spiritual inquiry of the past and utilize that inquiry in the present. Since he understands how meaning is generated he can actively generate meaning in the present. He does not have to rely on tradition. It is Douglass’s consciousness of being excluded from the system of knowledge that enables him to raise and re-interpret the question of the applicability of ideals to the present. As a person excluded from a definition of personhood, he can critique that definition. “In the name of humanity which is outraged, in the name of liberty which is fettered, in the name of the constitution and the Bible which are disregarded and trampled upon dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery--the great sin and shame of America!” (Bizzell 208).

As Emerson reinterprets the communion experience through an understanding of the lived experience of the historical Jesus and redefines the meaning of the church by returning to that experience, so Douglass goes back to

his understanding of the lived experience of the founding fathers to redefine his experience in his own time and place. Both Emerson and Douglass use texts to understand the human situation and the struggle to achieve ideals, not to claim abstract authority.

Excluded from participation in the network of relations set up by a cultural system of knowledge, the slave develops a stoical relation to the institutions that deny his reality. The slave becomes “conscious” of his relation to himself and is thereby conscious in ways that the owner cannot be. Douglass is able to assume an interpretive ground that is at once transcendental and marginal. He claims that the founding fathers did their work in their moment in history: “They seized upon eternal principles, and set a glorious example in their defense. Mark them!” (Lauter 1822). The difficulty with eternal principles is, however, according to Douglass, that we experience them only in their “embodied” form. Unless they are lived, they have no existence. Ideals and examples exist in a living relationship. Ideals do not exist in a protected pure eternal realm ready to break into the human drams and redeem the moment:

But now is the time, the important time. Your fathers have lived, died, and have done their work, and have done much of it well. You live and must die, and you must do your work. You have no right to enjoy a child’s share in the labor of your fathers, unless your children are to be blest by your labors. You have no right to wear out and waste the hard-earned fame of you fathers to cover your indolence (1823).

What follows in the address is an indictment of every American cultural institution that has excluded the presence of the African as a human being: the family, the church, the economy, and the schoolroom. Even an American

conception of itself as “a city upon a hill” is seen through the eyes of the “undead,” those denied a “living presence” in culture.

Go where you may, search where you will, roam through all the monarchies and despotisms of the old world, travel through South America, search out every abuse, and when you have found the last, lay your facts by the side of the everyday practices of this nation, and you will say with me, that, for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival.
(1827)

Douglass’ strategy is to understand the system of knowledge that excludes him, to occupy that space of recognition, and to articulate his mastery of the terms through which that institution operates. Douglass can see, and in so doing he creates for himself a space of self-extension: a position on the horizon of thought that is expressive of his own “axis of vision.” From this “axis” he then claims his right to interpret American social documents:

...interpreted as it ought to be interpreted, the Constitution is a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT.... While I do not intend to argue this question on the present occasion, let me ask, if it be not somewhat singular that, if the Constitution were intended to be, by its framers and adopters, a slave-holding instrument, why neither slavery, slaveholding, nor slave can anywhere be found in it. What would be thought of an instrument, drawn up, legally drawn up, for the purpose of entitling the city of Rochester to a track of land, in which no mention of land was made? The very act of forcibly keeping the African out of an institution becomes an acknowledgement that he could be within its terms.
(1834)

Even within the Constitution, the slave occupies a liminal space. The category of slave is never named. From the margins of that document, Douglass performs the task of interpretation. He argues for the principle of liberty that

demands that the slave be recognized socially by citing examples of Africans who exist before our eyes, within our sensory awareness. He lists the roles and professions fulfilled by the free Africans that defy the boundary created by such classifications as doctor, lawyer, minister, craftsman, poet, and editor. It is only when laws forbid the slave from functioning in an institution, he argues, that the category of “slave” is constructed: “What is this but the acknowledgement that the slave is a moral, intellectual and responsible being? The manhood of the slave is conceded. It is admitted in the fact that Southern statute books are covered with enactments forbidding, under severe fines and penalties, the teaching of the slave to read or to write. When you can point to any such laws, in reference to the beasts of the field, then I may consent to argue the manhood of the slave” (1825).

Using a metaphor derived from nature, Douglass interprets the mission of the founding fathers. He describes the nation as a young river that has not yet “worn deep channels through the course of ages.” Variegated possibilities are open to such a river that is not available to great streams that have worn deep channels. Such streams might overflow in great disruptions but gradually recede back into old paths and old ways. Revolutions can likewise become repetition compulsions that accomplish nothing. Like Emerson Douglass claims that unless the revolution is based on an interrogation into principles the revolution will accomplish nothing. While in England Emerson makes that same observation in his journals. Revolutions can become a repetition compulsion if the object of revolution is fetishized.

People here expect a revolution. There will be no revolution,
none that deserves to be called so. There may be a scramble for

money. But as all the people we see want the things we now have, and not better things, it is very certain that they will, under whatever change of forms, keep the old system. When I see changed men, I shall look for a changed world. Whoever is skilful in heaping money now will be skilful in heaping money again. (Journal London April, undated 1848 Bliss Perry)

The work of the fathers is the work of “embodied” ideals, creating a “living presence” that defies abstracted conceptions of power. Perpetual work is necessary if the nation is to maintain a lived relation to the ideals that keep the nation young, open to possibility. Liberty is constantly reinterpreted by lived experience.

Douglass claims that the founding fathers performed their own acts of interpretation from a position of liminality similar to that of the slave. This space is psychological as well as physical: “Oppression makes a wise man mad. Your fathers were wise men, and if they did not go mad, they became restive under this treatment” (1820). Douglass’ empathy with the founding fathers reaches a high point in his characterization of the “landscape” of liberty: “The country was poor in the munitions of war. The population was weak and scattered, and the country a wilderness unsubdued. There were then no means of concert and combination, such as exist now. Neither steam nor lightning had then been reduced to order and discipline....Under these, and innumerable other disadvantages, your fathers declared for liberty and independence and triumphed” (1821).

It is interesting that Douglass describes the landscape and cultural organization in a primitive stage of development. The cultural forebears had produced the most progressive documents of social organization in circumstances that demanded that they be “brave” as well as wise. It is from this space outside of

cultural institutions that Douglass claims that social change can take place.

Separation itself is the first step toward re-interpreting categories.

Just here, the idea of a total separation of the colonies from the crown was born! It was a startling idea, much more so, than we, at this distance of time, regard it. The timid and the prudent (as has been intimated) of the day, are, of course, shocked and alarmed by it. Such people lived then, had lived before, and will, probably, ever have a place on this planet; and their course, in respect to any great change, no matter how great the good to be attained, (or the wrong to be redressed by it), may be calculated with as much precision as can the course of the stars. They hate all changes, but silver, gold and copper change! (1820)

Clearly at issue for Douglass in his speech on the fourth of July is the relation between freedom and interpretive authority. Simply stated, Douglass asserts that it is not the truth claims of traditions that preserve liberty but rather the effort to establish one's position within that space where liberty is threatened. Only a perspective grounded in an awareness of the vulnerability of freedom can speak convincingly of the need for social change. Douglass compares the slaves to Samson in the temple who, denied his liberty, pulls the temple down. Mastering cultural documents, interpretations, perspectives, and freeing himself from the constraints of institutional definitions of selfhood, Douglass moves from the position of the "quaking" orator to the outraged revolutionary prepared to pull down the entire structure of the "temple" (Bizzell 208).

In 1851 Douglass was ready to pull the temple down. In 1844 Emerson was already recording in his journal that Douglass was one of the people responsible for freeing the slave. The "Negro has saved himself, and the white

man very patronizingly says I have saved you.” In this journal entry Emerson records his complicated argument concerning emancipation. He records his belief that when the slave gained the power of self-description, he gained liberty. Liberty is not given to the slave by the white. The journal entry sounds racist yet Emerson risks that in order to make the greater claim, in terms that are not patronizing, that the slave has freed himself. Stripping his language of all Christian charity Emerson “recognizes” the slave as a man. It is this recognition, this ability to “behold” and not “charity” that brings community together.⁶

If the black man is feeble and not important to the existing races, not on a par with the best race, the black man must serve and be sold and exterminated. But if the black man carries in his bosom an indispensable element of a new and coming civilization, for the sake of that element no wrong nor strength nor circumstance can hurt him, he will survive and play his part. So now it seems to me that the arrival of such men as Toussaint and of Douglass outweighs all the English and American humanity. The Anti slavery of the whole world is but dust in the balance, a poor squeamishness and nervousness; the might and the right is here. Here is the Anti-Slave. Here is Man; and if you have a man, black or white is an insignificance. Why at night all men are black. The intellect, that is miraculous who has it has the talisman, his skin and bones are transparent, his is a statue of the living God, him I must love and serve and perpetually seek and desire and dream on.... The black man carries in his bosom an indispensable element of a new and coming civilization” (JMN 9:125,126).

Freed of the need to represent himself as a man of Christian charity, Emerson is able to recognize others in the community that do not fit the description of selfhood defined by political documents. From the alienated position on the bare common liberty would be defended by acts of mutual recognition.

⁶ For an extended discussion of Emerson’s thinking at this time see Richardson, 398-403.

The Jewish community in the nineteenth-century actively critiqued the concept of Christian charity that patronized the slave. While protestant ministers and politicians consistently use their own interpretations of Jewish texts to make truth claims, those truth claims marginalized the Jewish scholars of the day. While higher criticism examines a text within the complete historic context of its production, typological interpretation does not imagine into the lived experience of a people. It sees experience as evidence of an abstraction, a type. Typological analysis of text has moved the power of the text out of the historical realm into that of abstraction in the service of truth claims for Christian institutions. Nonetheless, the voice of the Jewish community can be heard, most notably in the work of David Einhorn. Einhorn was forced to flee Baltimore following an anti-slave riot in 1861 where he was a prominent anti-slave orator.

In a sermon titled “War with Amalek!” delivered on March 19th 1864 in the Temple of the Congregation Keneseth Israel, Philadelphia Einhorn distinguishes between modes of interpretation used by “angels” and ordinary human beings. He claims that Hebrew text was used as a means to liberate the human conscience, not to establish truth claims.

There is an ancient maxim in Judaism: “the law is not made for Angels;” the law of God was intended for human beings and is, therefore, a law of education affording to the human mind the most powerful impulse for development, and, in this spirit, expanding itself more widely and beautifully from its very innermost nature. It is only the slaves of the letter that deny this capability of development, it is only they that convert the letter of the Bible into a slave-whip....(LA 668)

Einhorn uses the Christian claim that the gospels spell liberation (from the law of the Jews) against Christianity itself (against the dominant mode of biblical interpretation in institutionalized Christianity). First he claims that Angels are always free of the law. Human beings, however, must remain within the law if they are to achieve the self-discipline necessary to develop the mind and conscience. The freedom of the Christian from law has only enabled Christians to be slave to the “letter,” interpretations of text, out of which they have created the slave whip (668). Becoming free of the law, no longer subject to the discipline that demands a devout mind and submission, makes possible the enslavement of others.

They desire, as they tell us, to improve the Constitution, but in reality to destroy its very inmost spirit, by an amendment recognizing the American nation as a Christian nation, the founder of the Christian Religion as the ruler of all, and his will as the highest law of the land; and that this principle should be the test for oaths of office and in all other matters! America would become not merely a Christian State, but a real Church State, and Washington, a second Rome; the President of the United States would be converted into Pope, and the Congress, into an Ecclesiastical Tribunal! (668)

Einhorn claims that Jesus never made any distinction between the church and the temple that would allow for freedom from the law. Seconding Einhorn’s argument, Henry Ward Beecher struck at the heart of the pro-slavery attempt to dominate the interpretation of social documents:

It would have seemed almost a theatric arrangement, had these oppugnant elements, Puritan liberty and Roman servitude- for, whatever men may say, American slavery is not Hebrew slavery; it is Roman slavery. We borrowed every single one of the elemental principles of our system of slavery from the Roman law, and not from the old Hebrew. The fundamental feature of

the Hebrew system was that the slave was a man, and not a chattel, while the fundamental feature of the Roman system was that he was chattel, and not a man. (654)

Transcendentalism claims that the way we interpret objects in the external world reflects not truths but the state of interior life within the imagination. Power relations within the imagination are imposed on objects in the material world. Therefore, the redemption of the soul does not really rely on the power to interpret external objects of belief. Instead, it relies on the ability to be intimate with our own interior life. Becoming familiar with the structures of our own beliefs and the forms they generate is the focus of concern. Rather than impose belief systems on others, the preoccupation is with understanding one's own will to form. But the creative process of "making a world" is not engaged, the process of "unmaking a world" occurs due to the inability of the self to identify with its own displaced power. Power and authority are abstracted from human sentience (Scarry). On the brink of Civil War, transcendentalism was concerned with the creative process of building a world, generating new principles and higher laws through a struggle in consciousness. Emerson claims in "Nature" that we have abstract "theories of races but not an idea of creation" (CW 1 4). "Religious leaders dispute and hate each other, and speculative men are esteemed unsound and frivolous"(4). "But when the fact is seen under the light of an idea, the gaudy fable fades and shrivels. We behold the real higher law" (75).

Meantime, in the thick darkness, there are not wanting gleams of a better light,-occasional examples of the action of man upon nature with his entire force, -with reason as well as understanding. Such examples are, the traditions of miracles in the earliest antiquity of all

nations; the history of Jesus Christ; the achievements of a principle, as in religious and political revolutions, and in the abolition of the slave-trade...(CW 1 73)

In the Emersonian tradition of tracking the way cultures create “world images” Elaine Scarry describes the process through which the power of language is erased in the master-slave relationship. “Through his ability to project words and sounds out into his environment, a human being inhabits, humanizes, and makes his own space much larger than that occupied by his body alone. This space, always contracted under repressive regimes is in torture almost wholly eliminated” (Scarry 49). The structure of the master-slave relationship depends upon torture, emotional and physical. Human needs are denied to such an extent that the result is “world-destroying” (Scarry). The self in pain loses all sense of itself, its world, and its voice. The power of agency exerted over the self overwhelms and destroys the space of interiority, replacing it with an enthrallment to power. The scene of torture was domesticated and normalized in nineteenth-century America. Spaces of civilization designed as enclosures meant for protection become scenes of uncanny horror in which the slave is not only silenced by the power of his felt pain, but is also isolated by that pain. His pain is demonstrated in a public square or in a “family.” His pain isolates him because witnesses feel no physical pain themselves (Scarry 50). Both the pain and the isolation contract the space available for self, for extension into the world. The tortured self becomes voiceless and invisible. In addition, the slave’s situation is redescribed in terms that he cannot recognize as himself: he becomes unfamiliar to himself in domestic space (66). The act of sympathy, the ability to feel what

another is feeling even while isolated from the actual pain provides a possibility of recognition just as the selfhood of the other is dissolving. Through recognizing the other, humans can restore a sense of self-extension in the world; an accurate mirroring of the other can prevent the dissolution process through which the oppressed person's power of self-description is erased (Scarry 279).

While on a trip to St. Louis in 1834 Emerson witnessed his first slave auction (Journal). From a vantage point on the margins of a large square he could see both the church at the far end, out of which poured Protestant hymns, and the auction block spreading in the open area outside the church, where the ringing of the auctioneer's voice mixed with the voices of jubilee from the church. Emerson notes in his journal that the institutions of American culture are juxtaposed in a way that does not cultivate the ability of the people to respond to one another: "Such a dereliction of all faith and virtue, such a denial of justice, and such deafness to screams for mercy were never heard of in times of peace and in the dealing of a nation with its own allies and wards, since the earth was made" (Letter to Martin Van Buren CW XI 92).

By legitimizing a notion of selfhood not acknowledged by religious, familial, educational, or political institutions, by creating a space for "self-extension," Emerson opened up in language a space from which social change could originate because a new power of perception, mutual recognition, was possible. From the marginalized private lyric voice emerged a new category of mind that enabled new habits of collective understanding through which to extend recognition and sympathy: "And.... [there is] no limits to their works except the

limits of their lifetime, and resemble a mirror carried through the street, ready to render an image of every created thing”(The Poet CW III 41).

Chapter Two: Interpretation, National Identity and Expansion

The patriarchal form of government readily becomes despotic, as each person may see in his own family. Fathers wish to be the fathers of the minds of their children, and behold with impatience a new character and way of thinking presuming to show itself in their own son or daughter. This feeling, which all their love and pride in the powers of their children cannot subdue, becomes petulance and tyranny when the head of the clan, the emperor of an empire, deals with the same difference of opinion in his subjects. Difference of opinion is the one crime which kings never forgive. An empire is an immense egotism. "The Young Americans" (CW, I, 232 1844)

Instruction in the new German methods of biblical study began at Harvard in 1811. However, Joseph Stephens Buckminster, the first Dexter Lecturer, never allowed these methods to undermine the value of supernatural revelation or the historical reliability of the Bible. Instead he used German historical methods to advance the "scientific" study of the revelations and miracles. By using the process of German historical criticism to reinforce support for the interpretive authority of theologians, Buckminster was able to avert a real threat to Unitarian belief. It was not the criticism itself but the methods used that compromised the authority of church dogma. Based on historical research rather than interpretations of text, the German school threatened an American understanding of the protestant "church" and Jesus' role in creating that "Model of Christian Charity." If the gospels were not written until 70 CE. when Jerusalem was destroyed and when the Messiah did not return, that means that the idea of a "church" occurred after the life of Christ. It is possible that Jesus did not himself conceive of the "church" or depart from his role as a devout Jew. Nonetheless, both William

Ellery Channing and Andrews Norton continued to use the methods of historical criticism to ensure the authority of church dogma and biblical revelation. Henry Ware joined in this effort since any criticism that provoked doubt in church dogma would cast doubt on the history of Christ.¹ Andrews Norton observed in Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels that “There is no other theory in which propositions ready to weaken man’s faith in the genuineness of the Gospels, ... [in which such theories] are so elaborately and plausibly introduced” (I:115).² William Ellery Channing and Andrews Norton continually used the critical methods of the Gottingen exegetes to support a “scientific” understanding of miracles.

This approach contrasts sharply with that of German High Criticism. The latter approach was primarily philological. It attempted to determine which portions of the gospels were actually derived from oral tradition and, therefore, likely represented the sayings of Jesus. This portion of the text consisted largely of parables. What fascinated the philologists was how human beings preserved in memory through oral transmission a revolutionary understanding of value. If the life of Jesus created a “revolution,” that revolution was preserved in memory and oral exchange before it was preserved in text. What was preserved was parable not “evidence.” C. H. Dodd defines the oral parable in relation to the more literary allegory.³ Allegory became a primary tool of interpretive logic for the early patristic fathers of the church. In allegory, two parts of language are in direct

¹ Norton 1:96

² See also Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy 1805-1861* and Lilian Handlin, “Babylon est delenda- The Young Andrews Norton” in American Unitarianism, 1805-1865 ed. Conrad Edick Wright

correspondence with one another. A concrete reference has an abstract correspondent. The abstraction is the important element in the interpretation. In the parable, the abstract correspondent is not quite known. A parable uses concrete language from everyday life to force the mind to consider how meaning is being generated in that life. There are no direct abstract correspondences in the parable as there are in allegory. Instead, a narrative illustration from everyday life is presented in such a way that it teases the mind to reconsider its assumptions concerning how relations are made. A new way of thinking about action in everyday life, cause and effect, is offered. In making comparisons, new qualities of association and distinction are considered. Why did the father love the “lost boy” more than the loyal son? What exactly is a “pearl of great price”? How is the kingdom of God like a mustard seed? The only way to understand the “ideal world” is to reconsider the terms found in every day life experience. Parables force the mind down new paths. In the parables and lists in “The Sermon on the Mount,” all the normal hierarchical considerations that define power are inverted. A demand is made that the dynamics organizing power relations among people be reconsidered. In the “city upon a hill” created by this language of blessing, it is the meek, those who mourn, the hungry, and the merciful who generate “relation.” Ironically, the scholars who preserved authoritative interpretive control over the puritan mission “civilizing” the west to make America a “city upon a hill” do just the opposite to those power relations.

While almost all of the Harvard students were particularly critical of the new style of German criticism, rejection of these critical procedures and their

³ For an extensive discussion of Dodd’s distinctions see Parables of the Kingdom.

outcomes was not unanimous. George Ticknor and Edward Everett moved away from biblical studies but George Bancroft and the Emerson brothers, Ralph and William, showed a deep appreciation for historicocritical exegesis.⁴ It is this appreciation for the methods through which to study cultural “myths,” that Emerson brought to the myths of American culture. Instead of validating the authority of a myth, Emerson was interested in how value was being transmitted through oral narratives. With the eye of a Gottingen exegete he tracked the rhetoric of manifest destiny and expansionism that continually justified the expansion of American democracy as part of a providential design. Emerson created a distinction between what he considered to be oral transmission of value in culture and “fate,” a “ferocity” at the center of nature that allowed the strongest to survive. Emerson’s understanding of “fate” and nature is a direct criticism of divine providence and manifest destiny.

But nature is no sentimentalist.... The way of Providence is a little rude.... The cholera, the small-pox, have proved as mortal to some tribes as a frost to the crickets, which having filled the summer with noise, are silenced by a fall of the temperature of one night. Without uncovering what does not concern us, or counting how many species of parasites hang on a bombyx, or groping after intestinal parasites or infusory biters, ...the forms of the shark, the *labrus*, the jaw of the sea-wolf paved with crushing teeth, the weapons of the grampus, and other warriors hidden in the sea, are hints of ferocity in the interiors of nature. Let us not deny it up and down. Providence has a wild, rough, incalculable road to its end, and it is of no use to try to whitewash its huge, mixed instrumentalities, or to dress up that terrific benefactor in a clean shirt and white neckcloth of a student in divinity. (CW VI 6 “Fate” 1846-52)

Instead of divine providence guiding history towards its purposes, Emerson proposes that man’s “fate” is a result of his character. “Personality” or “character”

⁴ Hurth, “William and Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Problem of the Lord’s Supper”, 193.

moves history as individuals engage the interaction between “power and necessity.” Transcendental thought posits that it is only possible to see “what you are.” Character is definitive. We see through “subject lenses.” Directly opposed to any belief in national destiny, Emerson proposes that it is vital to all efforts to remake culture that human creativity remain at the center of all interactions between “power and form.” What is created in that engagement is human consciousness itself. For Emerson it is vital that every individual in a democracy be conscious, thereby “attaching” human sensibility to ideals. The necessary limits and catastrophes of life can be engaged imaginatively by human beings who project into public spaces “forms” of awareness that remember the human presence itself, the body and the feelings. Emerson cites Watt and Fulton as men who were able to see into destructive forces and arrive at a principle or law of relation that made life easier and physically comfortable for the human presence. “Fate is unpenetrated cause” (CW VI 6 “Fate”). In engaging causes, man remakes his culture, “makes a house; but afterwards the house confines the spirit” and the imagination will engage a new form, a new limit and through that engagement re-imagine the structure of his life. In this way every race forms its own “habitat” (16). In making consciousness and “habitats” conform to one another, what is of importance to Emerson is not the maps of prediction and tradition, but the ability to circulate exchanges among people to facilitate the working of the cultural imagination. “Certain ideas are in the air.... He [man] feels the infinitesimal attractions” (48-9). While Emerson was considering how ideas circulate and become part of a cultural “myth” dependent on the character of

thinkers, rhetoricians were using the language of typology and providence to promote expansionist adventures of every kind across the national landscape. While the national imagination relies on a belief in “myth,” Emerson’s transcendental imagination relies on the private imagination canny about the power of such myths and the way the private imagination is sacrificed to the need for passive submission to imposed conceptions of identity.

In recent years scholars have become more interested in studying the impact that the concept of American exceptionalism had on an understanding of American identity. Eric J. Sundquist documents the impact of the nineteenth-century rhetoric of national destiny in “The Literature of Expansion and Race.”⁵ In this extensively researched article Sundquist provides a rich account of the way that the use of a language of “providential design” relied on a belief in the relationship between science and revelation. Explorers, settlers, speculators, politicians, and military leaders provided “evidence” of the need for American institutions in the west at the same time that they fit that evidence into a vision of a millennial future. Sundquist quotes from promotional tracts urging settlers west, from government surveys describing resources, from political officials arguing for special considerations in congress, from Lippard’s gothic novels describing the need for “civilizing” influences.

It is Sundquist’s thesis that a literary mapping of the national landscape occurred as the country was swept by the promise that individuals would fulfill themselves as they fulfilled the national destiny (Bercovitch ed. CHAL 127-74).

⁵ Bercovitch, (ed.). The Cambridge History of American Literature, vol. 2, 127-328.

America's first literature was a literary mapping of the landscape using scientific evidence and description to support a millennial vision of America's destiny.

While the patterns in the literary forms were the same, that pattern seemed suitable to an endless variety of genres.

Written in the form of diaries, journals, formal reports, travel narratives, and fiction, and composed by trappers, adventurers, scientists, common pioneers, soldiers, and professional writers, the literature detailing the exploration of the territories opened to conquest by the American Revolution and the Louisiana Purchase, and later by treaty and war with Great Britain and Mexico, may claim to be the new republic's first national literature. The writing about actual exploration often borrowed the imperial rhetoric of expansionism.... The prevailing idea of America's "manifest destiny" – its mission to conquer and regenerate the North American continent, the Western Hemisphere, or even the entire world- picked up strains of perfectionism from Puritan discourse and, guided by the imagined fulfillment of America's democratic promise unleashed by the Age of Revolution, made the mapping of the United States coincident with an eschatological idealism. The extension of American boundaries, it was argued, would mean the extension of democracy.... (129)

Using the rhetoric of Andrew Jackson to describe the acquisition of American territory between 1818-53, Sundquist describes the "area of freedom" attained by "absorbing and subjugating" Mexicans and Indians (128). Jackson summed up his views on progress in America in his 1830 Second Annual Message:

To follow to the tomb the last of his race and to read on the graves of extinct nations excite melancholy reflections. But true philanthropy reconciles the mind to these vicissitudes as it does to the extinction of one generation to make room for another.... Philanthropy could not wish to see this continent restored to the condition in which it was found by our forefathers. What good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms, embellished with all the improvements which art can devise or industry execute... (177)

Through treaties with Britain and battles at the Canadian and Mexican borders, the United States territory was enlarged from the Pacific Northwest and the Upper Great Plains to the Rio Grande and California. This language that claimed “freedom” by “civilizing” others extended into accounts for a domestic vision of the America home as well. Citing Catharine Beecher in Treatise on Domestic Economy (1841) Sundquist claims that Beecher was “renovating degraded man” within the home. In Catharine Beecher’s own words women were “agents in accomplishing the greatest work that was ever committed to human responsibility. It is the building of a glorious temple whose base shall be co-extensive with the bounds of the earth, whose summit shall pierce the skies, whose splendor shall beam on all lands” (130). Women absorbed the male rhetoric of subjugation and absorption and adopted it to domestic politics creating their own sphere of moral influence. Journalist Nathaniel Parker Willis (1806-67) wrote in American Scenery (1840) that all “external objects” to Americans are exponents of their “own future” (131). Conflating the language of “promise” inherited from the puritans, Americans were unable to use language to form “relations” in Emerson’s communal sense. For Sundquist the fullest expression of the western promise appeared in Edward Everett’s 1824 Phi Beta Kappa oration, “The Circumstances Favorable to the Progress of Literature in America.”

Everett argued that Providence had provided America as a “last refuge” to men “flying westward from civil and religious thralldom.” Quoting with admiration Bishop Berkeley’s famous stanza beginning “Westward the course of Empire takes its way,” Everett called upon patriots and scholars alike to realize the ancient prophecies of a “land of equal laws and happy men. (133)

Edward Everett was one of the Harvard scholars who could not embrace German High Criticism and its implications for an understanding of cultural “myths.” Instead he chose to retain a belief in the “fulfillment” of ancient prophecies. He would use language in a way that constantly reinforced his own interpretive power over ancient texts.

One of the many examples of the literary mapping of the nation provided by Sundquist is James Fenimore Cooper’s conception of the landscape in The Prairie (1827). This conception of the landscape coincided with the widely held notion that the land in the west was uninhabitable and influenced Monroe’s plan to remove the Indians (137). Washington Irving’s novels about the west recounted the adventures of rugged individuals who exemplified the civilizing influence of American identity on the landscape (139). George Ruxton, who wrote Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains (1847), made claims for scientific information to be available in an otherwise “terra incognita” (141). Explorers and surveyors provided an ethnographic map that created a taxonomy of the natural phenomena and Indian tribes (137). Sundquist claims that maps like Albert Gallatin’s *Map of the Indian Tribes of North America* (1836) were informed by evidence gathered from explorers like Jedediah Smith, William Sublette, James Clyman and James Beckwourth. These ethnographic maps “codified an inherently imperialistic scientific paradigm” on the landscape (137). Samuel Morton’s study of racial traits based on skull measurements in *Crania Americana* (1836) was modeled on Alexander Wilson’s American Ornithology (1808-14). Scientific maps, literary maps, and religious methods of interpreting

texts existed in a homologous relation to each other. The west was full of ample “evidence” of the need for American technology to improve conditions in a primitive land (149).

In 1860 William Gilpin, a future governor of the Colorado Territory, quoted Alexander von Humboldt’s theory of the “isothermal zodiac” to support evangelical notions of expansion. According to this theory the Great Plains and California lie in a hemispheric band similar to the one that produced all the great empires of the past (173). Seeking to provide an evangelical context for emigration into the unpopulated West, Gilpin claims that people will come with a “moral grandeur,” a “universal instinct for peace,” and enough gold to accomplish an industrial revolution. Continuing the goals of the American Revolution, pioneer heroes will dispel tyranny and bring charity to not just the uninhabited western land but the world. A new age will be born that will “absolve the curse that weighs down humanity, and ...shed blessing around the world” (173). Ten years before Gilpin made these claims, Senator William Seward had contemplated the promise of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the settlement of the Pacific Coast in a similar providential rhetoric.

If, then, the American people shall remain an undivided nation, the ripening civilization of the West, after a separation growing wider and wider for four thousand years, will in its circuit of the world, meet again, and mingle with the declining civilization of the East on our own free soil, and a new and more perfect civilization will arise to bless the earth, under the sway of our own cherished and beneficent democratic institutions. (174)

Catholic institutions of the West, with their feudal belief system, Mexican culture, which remained in a “degraded” state, and primitive Amer-Indian culture would be swallowed by the wave of progress. This “redemptive pattern” characterized descriptions of America’s aggressive war against Mexico in 1848. The acquisition of Texas, New Mexico and California expanded the American continent until it faced nothing but China, thereby opening up a new horizon of commercial markets. While land was the prime goal of expansion, the acquisition of slaves and expansion through trade were its secondary goals. To the south, America was now in a position to exert its influence in South America and the Caribbean. Pro-slavery southerners saw the potential to trade slaves within America’s own borders. Internally, the policy of manifest destiny justified the Indian Removal policy and furthered dependency upon African slave labor (Bercovitch CHAL 129-74).

The American journalist and diplomat John Louis O’Sullivan in an editorial supporting the annexation of Texas first used the term “manifest destiny” in 1845. However, Sundquist quotes an earlier essay “The Great Nation of Futurity” published in 1838 to show that the idea was very much in the air long before the annexation. Indeed, the annexation was a consequence of the power of the idea.

In its magnificent domain of space and time, that nation of many nations is destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High-the Sacred and the True. Its floor shall be a hemisphere – its roof the firmament of the star-studded heavens, and its congregation an Union of many

**Republics, comprising hundreds of happy millions,
calling no man master but governed by God's natural and
moral law of equality. (133)**

The language of exploration did not explore the unknown. Instead, evidence was found that supported a vision of “ancient prophecy,” the already known. This language of exploration is neither interrogatory nor dialogic. Taxonomies are established that support existing assumptions. In the context Sundquist describes, the word “explore” means to find “evidence.” The literature of exploration, therefore, combines a use of religious language and scientific study with the goal of supporting the interpretations of authoritative texts that provide a “vision” of America’s destiny. To be fully human in this context meant to participate in the nation’s destiny. Through the superiority of American institutional networks of power, the American Revolution would continue in the nineteenth-century to bring freedom and liberty to the entire continent. It is within this context that identity is achieved. Identities that question progress are denied full access to networks of power. As a result, the Indian leaders and the Mexican representatives of government who questioned the grounds on which Americans asserted their authority did not enter into the conversation. In 1879 Chief Joseph delivered an oration in Washington, D. C. tracing the process of betrayal felt by the Indian at the hands of the American leaders.

**I have asked some of the great white chiefs where they get
their authority to say to the Indian that he shall stay in one place,
while he sees the white men going where they please. They cannot
tell me... Whenever the white man treats an Indian as they treat each
other, then we will have no more wars... Then the great Spirit Chief
who rules above will smile upon this land, and send rain to wash out**

the bloody spots made by brothers hands across the face of the earth.
For this time the Indian race are waiting and praying. (175)

After the conquest of the territories of northern Mexico in 1848, a Mexican military leader Mariano Vallejo concluded his history of California with a description of the American aggression.

The Americans have treated the Californian as a conquered people and not as citizens who willingly became part of that great family. (127)

Sundquist has made a valuable contribution to historical research by documenting the rhetoric of American exceptionalism. It is possible to track within the same period the forces that seek to oppose such a description. Many discourses of self-description existed side by side during the nineteenth-century. Philip Fisher and Priscilla Caldwell have contributed to an understanding of the period by seeking out these diverse challenges to national self-description at a time of ideological breakdown and paralysis. Emerson's 1844 essay "The Young American" is a direct challenge to the discourse of exceptionalism. While Sundquist quotes from this essay selectively to support his own thesis, he fails to provide a reading of the whole essay which actually argues against the myth of national destiny.

It was just this "civilizing" influence of American culture that Emerson rejected as he moved closer and closer to Goethe's understanding of organic evolution. Emerson rejected the "rigid reliance on scriptural authority, on the dead forms and external evidences of a effete, superannuated Christianity" (Journal 2:491-492). "The Young American" is only one example of the Emersonian challenge to hierarchical thinking that claims that the power vectors in nature flow

from the top down. Emerson claims the opposite. We exist like artists as part of a vast ecological net of relations, “each and all” growing according to a diverse criteria.

The least leaf must ope and grow after the fashion of its own lobes and veins and not after that of the oak or the rose, and I can only do my work well by abjuring the opinions and customs of all others and adhering strictly to the divine plan a few dim inches of whose outlines I faintly discern in my breast. Is that not German enough? Letters 1:354

For Emerson an “apocalypse” or redemption of the world would occur when man, using his Reason, began to integrate his sense impressions in a new way within his lived experience. “Man is an analogist, and studies relation in all objects. He is placed in the center of beings, and a ray of relation passes from every other being to him” (CW I 26-39 “Nature”). The ability to see relations depends on the character of man .

The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language. When simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas is broke up by the prevalence of secondary desires- the desire of riches, of pleasure, of power, and of praise, -and the duplicity of falsehood take place of simplicity and truth, the power over nature as an interpreter of the will is in a degree lost, new imagery ceases to be created, and old words are perverted to stand for things which are not; a paper currency is employed, when there is not bullion in the vault. (Nature CW I 29)

The language of transcendentalism dismantles the evangelical rhetoric of “manifest destiny.” Instead of using scientific “evidence” to support “revelation” and “vision,” Emerson uses the transcendental language of Kantian idealism and interrogates how the mind is organizing its sense impressions. Borrowing from Locke, Emerson emphasizes the way that language itself becomes a part of the

sensory world, influencing our perceptions of the world. Borrowing from German criticism, he focuses on how values are transmitted in oral exchanges.

Instead of participating in the conflation of religious and scientific rhetoric in his age, Emerson's experience at Harvard and his training in German criticism made it possible for him to understand the "national narrative" as an interpretive product produced by the culture and transmitted through cultural means of communication.

At the same time that mythic language was being used to provide for national narratives of identity, German theologians began to differentiate between the language of oral tradition and the language of biblical text. Oral traditions required that ideals and principles be easily remembered and transmitted in short parables and list-like sayings and aphorisms. Such oral transmissions were "open" to interrogation, teasing the mind into considering new forms of relation. Official texts were not needed for peoples to discuss the higher laws that governed their relations. At times of cultural repression, oral traditions and the informal transmission of information becomes very important. Increasingly Emerson relied on informal networks of communication outside of the church and Harvard for much of his information concerning dissemination of cultural information and "evidence." It was not the authoritative texts studied in the libraries of Harvard that were providing the nation with "vision" but newspapers whose reports were not subordinated to national policy. In writing to Martin Van Buren concerning the removal of the Cherokee, Emerson refers to information made available through newspapers that was not available through government documents. He

creates a “dialogue” with Van Buren and the community of readers through the newspaper by having his letter printed.

In the name of God, sir, we ask you if this is so? Do the newspapers rightly inform us?We have inquired if this be a gross misrepresentation from the party opposed to the Government and anxious to blacken it with the People. We have looked into newspapers of different parties, and find a horrid confirmation of the tale....Such a dereliction of all faith and virtue, such a denial of justice, and such deafness to the screams for mercy, were never heard of in times of peace, and in the dealing of a nation with its own allies and wards since the earth was made. Sir, does the Government think that the People of the United States are become savage and mad? From their minds are the sentiments of love and of a good nature wiped clean out? The soul of man, the justice, the mercy, that is the hearts' heart in all men, from Maine to Georgia, does abhor this business. (Gougeon 3)

More and more Emerson began to depend on newspapers for valuable information and scientific “evidence.”

The immense amount of valuable knowledge now afloat in society enriches the newspapers, so that one cannot snatch an old newspaper to wrap his shoes in, without his eye being caught by some paragraph of precious science out of London or Paris which he hesitates to lose forever. My wife grows nervous when I give her waste paper lest she is burning holy writ, and wishes to read it before she puts it under her pies. (Journal 1848, 353)

The prestigious work of the German scholars, who recognized the influence of the historical and cultural forces on the production of written texts opened a door for Emerson to see the value of oral, private, and informal language. Newspapers provided “evidence” for a strong critique of the narrative of American national identity. This critique would be made, according to Emerson, by individuals who speak from the “heart’s heart” about justice and mercy. Oral interrogation by individuals of the national “vision” was of utmost

importance to him. Like Ben Franklin, Emerson knew that the public needed a language that was open to interrogation, which could be used to promote a democratic conversation about ideals in the nation. Parables and aphorisms are peculiarly suited to such a discourse because they tease the mind into new considerations of relation. Few authors are as quotable as Emerson. While the meaning of the essay can be lost, a sentence, “like a repellent particle” will not fit the logic of a paragraph but it will be remembered in the way that Franklin’s aphorisms are remembered. Even in the sixties, Emerson’s “Do your own thing” became a call to the age. Freed from the national narratives and institutional imperatives that preserve an understanding of individual “destiny,” Emerson envisions building a world where there are “no warranty-deeds” and no “titles” (CW I 8 Nature).

It is necessary to read “Nature” in relation to the essay “Circles” to understand Emerson’s cultural transmission of private ideals. Emerson sets up a series of positions and a shifting horizon of thought that changes with angles of vision and methods of transmission. Instead of proposing that ideals are fixed and that identity is derived from them, Emerson proposes that from our personal position we change the way ideals are perceived. We see one place on a horizon of thought. The perfect circle is, therefore, never seen. We only see one degree of the circle and imagine the other 359.

There are degrees in idealism....In conversation we pluck up the *termini* which bound the common of silence on every side....When each new speaker strikes a new light, emancipates us from the oppression of the last speaker to oppress us with the greatness of an exclusiveness of his own thought, then yields us to another redeemer, we seem to recover our rights, to become men.

....All that we reckoned settled shakes and rattles; and literatures, cities, climates, religions, leave their foundations and dance before our eyes....And yet here again see the swift circumscription! (CW II 311 "Circles" 1839-40)

Emersonian transcendentalism is not relativism any more than Kant's critical idealism is relativism. There are objects of knowledge because of the application of the mind's categories to those things. We could not understand perspective as limitation unless we knew that there was a whole of which we are a part. The Kantian categories trace the limits of knowledge. These very limits give an awareness of the whole (Copleston 61-5). While individuals have different perspectives on the idea, from knowledge of those perspectives they posit the possibility of "noumena" beyond the phenomena. Things conform to the categories of mind yet the mind grants that there may also be a side we do not see, that does not correspond to the categories of mind. The "noumena" is the thing that exists apart from its appearing, a thing in itself apart from the categories of mind. For example, God can not be thought of apart from causality, substance, and quantity: a correlate of spacio-temporal appearances. Yet, the human mind conceives of the possibility of His existence apart from its own mind.

Emersonian transcendentalism posits just such a limit at a time when the national narrative claims to be able to use scientific "evidence" to conform to a spiritual imperative. At a time of national expansion, Emerson claims we can intuit the existence of the "noumena," only by acknowledging limit. Knowing the supernatural through revelation and miracle does not form consciousness.

Consciousness is possible by recognizing the edge beyond which the self cannot

go, that limit beyond which the self has no access. “I am very content with knowing, if only I could know. That is an august entertainment...”(CW III 48 “Experience”). It is the awareness that the mind is full of fables and illusions that brings awareness of possibility in the unknown that makes real interrogation possible (CW III 45). This is an “open” possibility, an impossible possibility. Metaphysics cannot yield objective knowledge. Metaphysics can only place the individual into the “open space,” the unknown where real creative thinking is possible. Without that limit expansion becomes repetition, a repetition that gets larger and larger.

Critics with surprising frequency conflate Emerson’s idealism with ideas of progress associated with manifest destiny. In an essay on the nation’s policy towards the American Indians, Eric Sundquist claims that Emerson’s location of idealistic abstraction within the realm of everyday life and commerce, “philosophically broke down distinctions between mind and nature” (CHAL Bercovitch 144). He cites Emerson’s 1844 essay “The Young American” as a representation of Emerson’s expansionist mysticism. I argue that Emerson broke down the scientific distinction between mind and nature, but replaced that distinction with a deeper understanding of cultural transmission and man’s position within that exchange. The mind does not produce objects of scientific evidence, but all objects are “pictures that were never seen before.” “The eye is the best of artists” (Nature CW 1 15). Obliterating the distinction between the mind and the object even further, Emerson claims that actually there are no objects, there is only process. Individuals are actually participating in every scene

they create and can never step aside to view it as an object in a museum. "Virtue" is not fixed. It requires a radically creative mind to understand the way virtue is operating in lived experience to nurture living relations. "All those who plough, build, or sail, obey virtue" (16). The mind can never know objects through "ownership" "titles" and "warranty deeds." Only by coming to understand the "lubricity" of all objects can the imagination begin to "obey virtue" because the subject object relation is so deeply understood. Perception is an "apocalypse" of the private mind not transferable to a national destiny. Unless Emerson's transcendental language is considered within the context of transmission through "moral suasion," Kantian idealism and the biblical scholarship that concerned ministers in general and Emerson in particular critics will continue to confuse transcendental language with national apocalyptic and gnostic language. Sundquist assumes a mode of interpretation and applies it to Emerson's essay on "The Young Americans." Yet, in this essay Emerson argues against the language of national expansion and the definition of selfhood derived from "feudal use of physical force." Emerson is careful to limit all claims in language to an inner human perspective.

For Emerson, apocalyptic modes of interpretation cannot be used to justify claims to ownership. Only the poet, the creative artist, can see the landscape. Yet, Sundquist claims that in Emerson's formulation of progress the nation's railway systems are a "magician's rod" giving the nation power and energy (CHAL 144). In addition, Emerson's call to engage the "higher laws" of "spirit" is, in Sundquist's analysis, associated with the expansionist policy of manifest destiny.

While Emerson uses the word “destiny” in the essay “Young Americans,” he does not use it to endorse a natural design that justifies possession; instead, he uses the word in the way he uses the word “fate,” as a warning against a process that furthered possession without engaging individual men in the creative work of seeing what is there and exploring it as an “unknown.” The point for Emerson is that “seeing” in nature is a deeply creative act that can only be accomplished if the vast array of ecological relations is posited as possibility. Providence and nature take care of the race, individuals do the work of re-creating their habitat, making culture in a way that supports human life. “Gentlemen, there is a sublime and friendly Destiny by which the human race is guided, the race never dying, the individual never spared-to results affecting masses and ages” (CW 1 230).

This statement about “destiny” introduces a long discussion of “amelioration in nature, which alone permits and authorizes amelioration in mankind” (218). The distinction between amelioration in nature and amelioration in mankind is vital to an understanding of Emerson’s conception of virtue and the way it provides for possibility within the constraints of fate. It is not the “race” or the nation that is at risk, but the private imagination. If ideals can only be imagined through the limits of the private imagination, when the “small particular” is lost our access to “virtue” is lost. Emerson claims that nature improves the race, but ignores the pain of the individual, especially the weak. Nature is the “noblest engineer, yet uses a grinding economy.” Nature labors for the general, the race, but the “poor particulars are so crushed and straitened, and find it so hard to live.... Our condition is like that of the poor wolves: if one of the

flock wound himself, or so much as limp, the rest eat him up incontinently” (CW 1 231). Since Nature does not take care of “poor particulars,” mankind must use its “genius,” its ability to spiritually inhabit time and space, to “build a world,” venture on its own project of amelioration.

While the “race may have the instinct to devour the individual,” it is the work of culture to nurture the private mind so that if the community is educated to respect the private mind of each person, we can create community with limited but shared perspectives. Governments cannot impose a vision on the nation but interactions between agents on the local level can provide for imaginative exchanges in culture. Emerson sees trade as a vehicle for local exchanges that strengthen the poor particulars. Through trade a social revolution occurred in Europe that aided in ameliorating the plight of the poor. Citing the communist movements in Europe, the Trades’ Unions and the English League against the Corn Laws, the reform communities in America, and Fourierism, Emerson argues that a new conception of community is emerging in which “differences of men must be acknowledged, and met with love and wisdom” (CW 1 237). The differences between men cannot be acknowledged until self-reliance and apperception are accepted in the thinking process. When the rights of the private mind are respected, a community can be built:

The private mind has access to the totality of goodness and truth, that it may be a balance to a corrupt society; and to stand for the private verdict against the popular clamor, it’s the office of the noble. If a humane measure is propounded in behalf of the slave, or of the Irishman, or the Catholic, or for the succor of the poor, that sentiment, that project, will have the homage of the hero....to succor the helpless and oppressed; always to

throw himself on the side of weakness, of youth, of hope, on the liberal, on the expansive side, never on the defensive, the conserving, the timorous, the lock and bolt system.... More than our good will we might not be able to give.....We cannot give our life to the cause of the debtor, of the slave, or the pauper, as another is doing; but to one thing we are bound, not to blaspheme the sentiment and the work of that man, not to throw stumbling blocks in the way of the abolitionist, the philanthropist, as the organs of influence and opinion are swift to do. It is for us to confide in the Supreme Power, and not to rely on our money, and on the state because it is the guard of money. (CW I 240)

Any offer of “charity” and protection in the social system, Emerson proposes, weakens the individual. They should be offered complete agency, full participation in self-reliance. A paternalistic system that supports the weak is not acceptable. For Emerson the community must organize its institutions in such a way as to ensure that every individual has the capacity to envision his own relation to the whole. Emerson is proposing that a different kind of system be established that engages the poor by granting them all the rights of the private imagination on the basis of equality, not charity. The problem in communal relations emerges when individuals are not a part of the imaginative work of creating projects of amelioration in the community. A commercial age requires the ingenuity of all citizens (CW I 238). When the government, or the state, takes over the planning of a project without considering the lives of the people in the habitat that forms the community like a living organism, the project becomes a “fossil, ” a dead thing, because it is imposed on the imagination. The national mind of man can only act in the role of “banker and executioner” (CW I 235). In this way, America has a “feudal” government, imposing its systems on a passive people who perform their fixed roles (CW I 238). In contrast, Emerson joins the

“swelling cry of voices” of the common people expressing themselves through socialism and communism in Europe. Their demands for work, equal rights and education are a demand for full participation in community. Education encourages everyone in the community to become a part of the “joint-stock companies,” groups of individuals engaged in “feeble experiments” employing scientific lessons to solve the practical problems of survival unique to their environment. In his vision for the nation Emerson considers the “prospect” of science and art coming together, not science and religion. Using the skills of both disciplines, communities of people will create “gardens” across the nation that will transform the landscape, as the gardens of Europe have transformed the Old World. In contrast to this garden-technology, in a “patriarchal” system only one voice is heard: “Feudalism is not yet ended. Our governments still partake largely of that element.” Any power is feudal to Emerson that uses military might and physical force instead of imaginative power. But trade will “abolish slavery” because it requires that men leave their own ways of doing things to confront “foreign parts.” New orders of things take place. Men become their own agents and displace the use of physical force as a means of power and replace it with “computation, information, and science.” “New commands take place, new servants and new masters” (CW I 234). Emerson envisions a future for the nation not through physical force but by enlisting the imaginative faculties of the small particulars so they can become agents of change. While he acknowledges that trade brings “evil” also, Emerson claims that the historian will see that it was

trade that broke the power of class, the aristocracy that needs to preserve “feudalism” in America (CW I 234).

As communities of individuals take over the task of governing, the government will no longer embody the power of a military, physical force. A new “executive” power will convert the need for physical force into a need for an “Intelligence Office.” The task of government will be to draw upon the faculties of all individuals for administration, production, and manufacture. “Art, skill, morals, and virtue” will add “new works to new days” (234). Destroying the artificial barrier that separates the farmer and the scientist, for instance, Emerson claims, would “save the farmer.” For want of scientific information, the farmer faces bankruptcy (236). In taking scientific information out of an institutional framework and disseminating it on the lyceum circuit, Emerson views scientific information more like art. In folding scientific information into their lives and re-making their environment using that information for their own vision, farmers begin to “paint” a new landscape by becoming creators within their own life process.

“The Young Americans” was an address delivered before the Mercantile Library Association on February 7, 1844. Like Franklin who began the public library system to educate everyone in the community, Emerson is proposing that the mercantile library is just such a “joint stock company.” Young tradesman join together to create their own libraries. Through the lyceum circuit and the private subscriptions that support the circuit they are able to attain the information that enables them to problem solve. This kind of information is very different from

the “evidence” obtained by the government as they explore the “unknown” west in order to attain support for a national millennial vision.

Emerson is not interested in “evidence.” He is deeply committed to spreading information in the nation that allows individuals to think about their perspective in relation to the nation and, thereby, begin to imagine their own creative relation to work. It is through the kind of education on the lyceum circuit that new information will be found. Emerson asks that this group of young tradesmen see themselves as the “nobles” of our country. This new “aristocracy” will not protect their possessions but through learning the physical laws governing their environment, they will become the “nobles” who translate an understanding of “commodity” into an understanding of “spirit.” By obeying their “hearts” and standing for “the general justice of humanity,” they will be the legislators of communal law (239). In doing so they would become the “lofty counsels.” At present, he asserts, there is no expression in “our state papers or legislative debate, in our lyceums or churches, specially in our newspapers, of a high national feeling.” He claims that the government is composed of capitalists, concerned only with preserving property, and the property of the capitalist is “the school, the church, the hospital, the theatre, the hotel, the road, the ship.” In making this claim Emerson argues that the desire for money and possession has corrupted the institutional structure of the nation. The capitalist knows how “to secure, adorn and enlarge.” The only force of opposition Emerson sees in the country is one exerted by those who want to make the capitalist poor so that they can obtain his wealth (239).

Emerson calls on the young American working class to reject a new class structure that thrives on feudal oppression and preserves hierarchical relations. He asks workers to envision a network of relations through “transparent borders” that would allow for a fluid exchange. Class boundaries and the boundaries separating technology, science, art, and crafts will be redefined. He “calls” to the young working men to add their “art” to nature and enlarge the nation through a communal sharing of skills, talents, arts, and genius that dissolve the boundaries separating people. In short, Emerson calls for a “social revolution” that acknowledges the distinctions within the human faculties, making each individual a contributor to solving the problems of the nation from dispersed perspectives on the national horizon. In each private mind the imagination must be engaged. Instead of locating power in government, Emerson locates power within “man thinking.”

In the present commercial age, Emerson argues, feudal governments rule because they use physical force to conserve the hold of the “aristocracy” on the institutional framework. Feudal revolutions only result in further oppression because those who oppose the existing power only hope to attain that power. No alternatives to the system are offered and further oppression occurs.

We devise sumptuary and relief laws, but the principle of population is always reducing wages to the lowest pittance on which human life can be sustained. We legislate against forestalling and monopoly; we would have a common granary for the poor; but the selfishness, which hoards the corn for high prices, is the preventive of any famine; and the law of self-preservation is surer policy than any legislation can be. We concoct eleemosynary systems, and it turns out that our charity

increases pauperism. We inflate credit, and are presently visited with unlimited bankruptcy. (CW 1 232)

The breaking down of artificial boundaries that separate individuals into an oppressive “feudal” class structure begins with the common man using the power of his private imagination to conceive of alternative relations in the power structure. “Power and form” are always in a very tentative relation in cultures. Values can be changed dramatically as individuals exchange information and imagine together. A new integration can be achieved that creates a new perspective on the horizon of thought, a new understanding of “higher laws.” A class system that educates the elite and keeps the worker uneducated stunts the mind of the nation. But, through an understanding of science workers will adapt higher laws to the work of the land and, thereby, break down not only a class boundary but also a boundary between art and science. It is this “commerce” in skills within community that will “disclose new virtues for the ages to come” (217). Emerson contrasts the “public virtue” of legislators who ignore the “sentiments” of the people with this new “nobility” of common Americans who break down barriers of class by sharing knowledge.

Emerson envisions a new young American who displaces “physical strength, and installs computation, combination, information, science, in its room. It calls out all force of a certain kind that slumbered in the former dynasties” (221). Emerson proposes that the young American workers form a social revolution by creating a new group of thinkers who combine a wide variety of

perspectives using a variety of human faculties. This group of thinkers will cross institutional boundaries making more fluid exchanges of ideas. Emerson is describing a new American conception of art.

In "Nature" Emerson had philosophically classified all works of art under the same category as nature, instead of placing them in opposing categories. Birds build nests; people build cultures. Art is, therefore, what people do when they add their will to nature. It consists of "a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing that in an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result" (CW 1 4-5). Only the soul is separate from nature. This separation is not a withdrawal into an elite position; rather, individuals use their soul and ingenuity to take care of "small particulars," innovating on nature's design that nurtures the race alone, not the individual soul. In "Young America" Emerson demonstrates how transcendentalism works: he embodies his philosophical ideals, as expressed in "Nature," in a practical application that revolutionizes forms of life. In "The Young Americans" Emerson is suggesting that an art can be created that is not "feudal." New forms of life are not imposed on habitats because they are "superior networks of institutions." Superior institutions imposed on landscapes offering "charity" and "protection" only disable the private imagination.

In an only slightly veiled reference to the government's policy of Indian Removal, Emerson states his belief in the power of evil. When self-reliance is lost, the public mind begins to think in abstractions about progress.

Stealing is a suicidal business you cannot repudiate but once. But the bold face and tardy repentance permitted to this local mischief reveal a public mind so preoccupied with the love of gain that the common sentiment of indignation at fraud does not act with its natural force. The more need of a withdrawal from the crowd, and a resort to the fountain of right, by the brave. The timidity of our public opinion is our disease, or, shall I say, the publicness of opinion, the absence of private opinion. Good nature is plentiful, but we want justice, with heart of steel, to fight down the proud. The private mind has the access to the totality of goodness and truth, that it may be a balance to a corrupt society; and to stand for the private verdict against popular clamor, is the office of the noble. (CW I 240)

Governments and institutions are capable of evil because they lack a “private conscience.” Only the private heart is able to recognize evil. Emerson claims that great evil is committed when policies are put in place that lack a sense of human feeling. If the relation between “power and form” in culture is one in which power is exercised by adherence to abstractions, predictive formulas, patterns of success, then the policies will have an inhuman character. The direction of the power vectors in culture must be reversed. “This is the good and this the evil of trade, that it would put everything into market, talent, beauty, virtue, and man himself” (CW I 234). Any policy that is imposed on culture for the purpose of conserving the power of institutions will become evil, even the trade. His hope is that the young American workers will come to understand the creative self-reliance necessary in work and through that self-reliance come to understand the deep evil of slavery and the “selling of human beings to the will of profit” (CW I 234). The workers will bear witness to the way power operates in their time and place and become active participants in building their world.

Security is not in the Union of the States but the union of the states relies upon the ability of the people to impart their strength to the state (CW I 240).

Emerson worked hard to keep the image of those human beings who were being oppressed in the mind's eye: the image of the American Indian dislocated to a barren landscape, the enslaved African, the subjugated peoples of the war with Mexico. America is defining itself in terms of its ability to incorporate or "swallow up" other peoples whose interiority is not acknowledged. Elaine Scarry describes this process of destroying personhood as a prelude to the creation of a belief system capable of producing a sense of "identity." A person achieves a sense of self by giving one's interiority over to something wholly outside oneself, to someone who has power. In Emerson's formulation identity is an on going process. The spirit producing a "house" learns from that altering of the environment and then begins to build a new "house." Both Emerson and Scarry are concerned with the problem of consciousness. For Scarry, if the individual replaces consciousness with power, identity is lost. People who are wholly identified with power, actually lack identity. In her definition they are without a creative interiority; they are solipsistic.

It is when the object created is in fact described as though it instead created you. It ceases to be the "offspring" of the human being and becomes the thing from which the human being himself sprung forth. It is in this act that Isaac yields against all phenomenal assessment to Abraham, that Abraham yields to God, and the reader yields to the narrative: it is not simply the willingness to give one's interior to something outside oneself but the willingness to become the created offspring of the thing in whose presence one now stands. (205)

In the democratic institutions that dominated culture in the nineteenth-century, individuals were subordinated to national projects that assured that the republic would “progress.” Public spaces became scenes of torture where Americans bore witnesses to the power of economic imperatives. Witnessing scenes of torture can have an intense effect upon the witness as well as the victim. Without a coherent sense of self, the witness can be so threatened that the ability to respond is lost. Sympathy would mean identifying with the victim. The need to overcome one’s own impotence could cause the witness to identify with the torturer. A language is needed that enables those threatened to feel empathy: the bonds of connection that keep the self intact yet allow the other to be recognized. Vital to the process of ending such scenes of torture is for the witness to verbalize an alternative reality not only for the victim but for the other witnesses who are silenced by their traumatized inability to feel. It is from this space that the victim himself can recognize an alternative to his own position as victim. A space of self-extension is generated for the other who temporarily lacks a coherent sense of self (Scarry 326).

Scenes of torture confuse boundaries of identity. It becomes vital in scenes of public torture, if they are to be an effective means of social constraint and control, that there exist fundamental anxieties about the stability of the witness’ own identity vis-à-vis society. If the observer is extremely secure in his own identity and able to acknowledge that the other in pain is wronged, that an injustice is being committed by an inhuman claim to power, then one can feel empathy. If, however, there is confusion about the source of identity, or if

definitions of selfhood are imposed from without, anxiety results about one's own position in the hierarchy of power relations. Self-reliance trains individuals to be clear about the survival of the race and the survival of the "small particular." If we begin to identify with abstract conceptions of identity generated by race or nation, we begin to adhere to a survival pattern that assures the survival of the race, not the private mind. This is what it means to be "racist" for Emerson.

For Emerson it was therefore of utmost importance that a space of recognition and witness be opened in the public awareness. An image of the interiority of selfhood had to be kept alive in culture until those who were being deprived of that selfhood could claim it for themselves. Emerson bore witness to both self-reliance and the scenes of torture thereby preserving an alternate space for the "particular" identity.

Emerson urged individuals to identify with the artistic, creative work that ensured the survival of the poor particular out of which consciousness emerges. In the essay "Farming," originally a speech called "Man with a Hoe," delivered in 1858 at the Middlesex "Cattleshaw," Emerson argues that the farmer-artisan is the "private" man who can retain his own sense of identity and, thereby, see the evil of slavery.

The man that works at home helps society at large with somewhat more of certainty than he who devotes himself to charities. If it be true that, not by votes of political parties but by the eternal laws of political economy, slaves are driven out of a slave state as fast as it is surrounded by free states, then the true abolitionist is the farmer, who, heedless of laws and constitutions, stands all day in the field, investing his labor in the land,

and making a product with which no forced labor can compete.... Who are the farmer's servants? Not the Irish, nor the coolies, but Geology and Chemistry, the quarry of the air, the water of the brook, the lightning of the cloud, the castings of the worm, the plough of the frost.... These activities are incessant. Nature works on a method of all for each and each for all. (W VII 141-3)

Like the artisan in "The Young American," the farmer can further social change. Emerson respected the farmer because in placing himself within the creative process itself, he not only altered the landscape but in learning the lessons of chemistry, gravity, geology, botany, biology, and hydraulics, he engages his intellect in that process of alteration. Yet, he functions more like an artist than a scientist. He is projecting his work out of a creative engagement through which he creates himself. He is a painter who has painted himself into the scene. He cannot view the world from a scientific perspective. There can be no subject capable of producing objective "evidence" of supernatural power. He has become "part and parcel" of the circulation of forces around him and submitted to the process. His sense of identity is not separated from the object world. This engagement is governed by a logic of self-reliance not one of domination and submission. There is no subject who retains control over objects of knowledge. By becoming a part of the ecological relations in nature, man cultivates an understanding of the ecological relations in culture that require "circles" of awareness.

Before elaborating a communal vision of the developing nation in addressing young Americans, Emerson addressed the government directly in his own voice and bore witness to the torture inherent in this dislocation. Providing for the public the voice of outrage that must be expressed so that witnesses to

such scenes can preserve their own emotional responsiveness, Emerson used the newspaper to clear a space for public recognition of this event. It is this public witness that Elaine Scarry claims is vital to the preservation of human consciousness (367). In 1838 Emerson addressed the government directly in a letter to President Martin Van Buren. In this letter Emerson labels the government the oppressor and the Cherokee the victims. He provides a space for an alternative consciousness. He asserts that the government “does not see and it does not hear”:

Will the American Government steal? Will it lie? Will it kill?...And now the steps of this crime follow each other so fast, at such fatally quick time, that the millions of virtuous citizens whose agents the Government are, have no space to interpose, and must shut their eyes until the last howl and wailing of these poor tormented villages and tribes shall afflict the ear of the world. (Gougeon 4)

Emerson’s letter to Van Buren was published in a newspaper for the general public to read. It functioned as a public expression of outrage, but it also functioned to give language to the pain of the Indians. It was an expression of human recognition and sympathy at a time when the government lost its capacity to feel. In the opening to his letter to Van Buren, he addresses the president in purposively intimate terms. “By right and natural position, every citizen is your friend.” In doing so, Emerson does not treat the office as an expression of abstract power. He characterizes his own voice as representative of his friends and neighbors. He calls on his right to address issues that “repel the affections of any man.” He closes by calling the president a “fellow citizen,” leveling the ground that separates them (5).

Likewise, Emerson records his alarm at the enslavement of Africans by celebrating the emancipation of slaves in the West Indies in an address in 1844: “The history of mankind interests us only as it exhibits a steady gain of truth and right, in the incessant conflict which it records, between the material and the moral nature” (8). Emerson claims in this address that a new language must be developed that acknowledges the horror of scenes of torture: “slaughter houses and infamous holes.” The desire for luxury and comfort in civilized nations who desire the production of cotton, of sugar, of rum, and brandy make one race their victim (8-9):

But if we saw the whip applied to old men, to tender women; and, undeniably, though I shrink to say so, pregnant women set in the treadmill for refusing to work, when, not they, but the eternal laws of animal nature refused to work; if we saw men’s backs flayed with cowhides, and “hot rum poured on, superinduced with brine or pickle, rubbed in with a cornhusk, in the scorching heat of the sun;” if we saw the runaways hunted with blood-hounds into swamps and hills; and, in cases of passion, planter throwing his Negro into a copper of boiling can-juice, if we saw these things with eyes, we too should wince. They are not pleasant sights. (10).

Emerson’s language is concretely descriptive. He wants his listener to see and hear. He projects out of himself the scene. He uses language to create a sensory phenomenon and then invites the listener to feel it. He invites the listener to wince. The surfaces of human exchange have been cauterized in the nineteenth-century. There was a need for a public language of concrete witness that could “reattach” consciousness to “higher laws” than the laws of national destiny. Emerson gives language “eyes and ears.” In this address he thanks the country-boy or girl, the neighbor, for supplying the small anecdotes that inform

the general public of oppression (9). This was the kind of “evidence” he valued: The language of the anecdote that bears witness to human presence.

Again Emerson’s opposition to expansionism is well known through his opposition to the war in Mexico. Perhaps his most emotional protest against the war was delivered in Dedham at a fundraiser for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society (July 4, 1846). The crowd attending the event “numbered several thousands of both sexes.” William Henry Channing, James Freeman Clarke, William Lloyd Garrison, and Wendell Phillips also spoke (Gougeon 210). In response to the recent annexation of Texas and the subsequent war on Mexico that would extend the political power of the slave interests, Emerson exhorts the citizens to form a “revolutionary committee.” Yet, he clearly knows that the audience has no idea what a revolution is. Damning an American instinct to create war for the sake of national progress, he says Americans have no understanding of how to create a change in social justice within their nation. He chides the inaction and apathy of the people of Massachusetts, calling them “sniveling nobodies” (42). Economic laws create a “thrift” of action that makes the body politic inhuman. Emerson is outraged that northern citizens tolerated Virginia Senator John Randolph’s challenge to the north: “Gentlemen of the free States, we shall drive you to the wall: we have done it, and we shall keep you there.” Emerson accounts for the north’s silence by claiming that it is the Yankee trader’s policy to avoid shooting their customers, at least until their bills are paid (42). Northern financial interests held the mortgages on southern plantations and were heavily

invested in southern economic interests. The financial community therefore remained silent and allowed the war with Mexico to proceed.

Emerson then addresses the portion of the population that thrives on the instinct for war. Even while England and America form elaborate peace treaties and documents of liberty that advance the cause of civilization, those same countries are declaring war on weaker countries who will be “devoured by these peace-loving states” (43). Finally, Emerson turns to the portion of the population dedicated to decorum of officialdom. He cites Governor Briggs as an example of a representative who goes along with policy instead of using his office to oppose the forces that devour people. The truly revolutionary force for change in American life for Emerson is abolitionism. For Emerson this is the new church, the revolutionary force in American culture (43).

Emerson is explicit in establishing the rules for transcendental discourse that differ markedly from gnostic and apocalyptic discourse: only the private mind, conscious of apperception, can generate the form of identity necessary to unite ideals and sensory awareness of the forms of life. The model of identity achieved by mirroring the national narrative is diametrically opposed to achieving an understanding of apperception. While Emerson sustains the tension between human self-reliance and impossible ethical ideals, he never claims access to anything other than the personal relation to transcendent laws operating on sense impressions. Emerson’s references to universal orders, principles and vast tendencies in nature are always in reference only to the individual’s private

imagination and its own limited horizon and therefore, its need for communal exchange.

Yet, the process of apocalyptic thinking in America was assumed in the national discourse, and Emerson's alternative way of thinking is difficult to recognize. It tends to be absorbed into basic assumptions. Not only was Emerson's understanding of destiny subordinated to expansionist rhetoric, but the concept of "The Young American" also came to be absorbed into and transformed by expansionist rhetoric.

Politicians absorbed the phrase and actually changed the paradigm completely. Instead of upholding principles of liberty that required social engagement, the Young Americans became associated with aggressive overturning of tradition. While the New York editors interested in providing an alternative to the traditions of Europe supported the artists associated with the movement, by the 1852 presidential campaign, the Young America movement became associated with an expansionist American foreign policy. Emerson's more cultural understanding of the "nobility" of the artisan was lost (Fox 758).

In the political appropriation of transcendent rhetoric the argument is "won" by moving the argument to a higher ground of "divine design" before a public discussion can begin. For Emerson, ideals must be felt on the personal level and ideals move through "circles" of discussion. Emerson's interest in the social state is vested in cultivating an environment that nurtures the growth of private virtue and thereby makes discussion possible. Progress is related to an

increasing moral exchange of ideas instead of exchanges based on material gain, oppression, and mastery. He claims at the end of the address at Dedham that designs of the spirit will lead the nation “to a more excellent social state” (Gougeon 230). The political rhetoric and the rhetoric of exploration that urges settlers to venture west, uses claims for progress in terms that refer to the glory of empire more than the artisan’s communal “feeble experiments.” In travel narrative full of important information for settlers, Charles Dana, a journalist, compares the vastness of space in the west to the possibility of order promised by empires, not by self-reliance.

The land of Promise, and the Canaan of our time, is the region which, commencing on the slope of the Alleghenies, broadens grandly over the vast prairies and mighty rivers, over queenly lakes and lofty mountains, until the ebb and flow of the Pacific tide kisses the golden shores of the El Dorado....O, the soul kindles at the thought of what a magnificent empire the West is but the germ, which, blessed with liberty and guaranteeing equal rights to all, shall go on conquering and to conquer, until the whole earth shall resound with its fame and glory.
(Bercovitch CHAL 145)

While Emerson’s use of the “vast affirmative” referred to private discipline in relating to principles of inter-relationship, the possibilities of extending into the west are related to imposing American culture on the globe. Complementing this idea of imposing American culture is the idea that other cultures are savage, degenerate, or primitive. While Emerson is inverting the class hierarchy in America, the dominant political discourse and exploration narratives posit the self in its relation to the degenerate other. Investigating the racist hypothesis that Indians, blacks, and simian animals were related species, Thomas

Say, author of American Entomology, found he could not place American Indians in a workable zoological context (Bercovitch CHAL 138). The effort to classify nature and its people supported the right to create a political conquest, based on scientific data. Creating classifications in public documents became part of government policy. Emerson's rhetoric attempted to provide Americans with an alternative space in which identity could be achieved through expressions of witness and recognition. Ironically, Emerson achieved the ability to occupy that space because of his own ostracism from positions of power in his culture.

Chapter Three: Ostracism: Itinerancy in Social Spaces

Journal St. Augustine, Florida, February 27, 1827

A fortnight since I attended a meeting of the Bible Society. The treasurer of this institution is Marshal of the district, and by a somewhat unfortunate arrangement had appointed a special meeting of the Society, and a slave-auction, at the same time and place, one being in the Government house, and the other in the adjoining yard. One ear therefore heard the glad tidings of great joy, whilst the other was regaled with "Going, gentlemen, going!" And almost without changing our position we might aid in sending the Scriptures into Africa, or bid for "four children without the mother" who had been kidnapped therefrom.

Emerson's journals record his ability to observe with detachment the sensory split in the American cultural imagination. He hears and sees the way the juxtaposition of institutions encourages dissociation within sense impressions. One ear hears the glad tidings of jubilee from the bible society, the other the voice of the slave auctioneer. How does the mind unify such sense impressions to create ideas on which one may act with integrity? Emerson's answer would be that the mind cannot. Sensory impressions do not of themselves imply principles of coherence. As an idealist Emerson posited that integration can be made only by Reason and that Reason is radically creative: "the eye is the best of artists" (CW I 15 "Nature" 1833-6). Only an artistic understanding of unity and authority could replace the master narratives used to articulate an American destiny.

In a monarchy, the king's body contains the bodies of the people, and the king's consciousness determines man's relation to divine authority. For Emerson, America had done away with the monarchy but had not done away with the

monolithic habit of mind that assumed that “master narratives” were a source of “revelation” and authority providing for the nation a sense of unity, destiny, and purpose. In contrast, Emerson proposed that the “surface” of exchange created within the “body politic” was much more vast and relational. The monolithic surface of the king’s body as container is replaced by a demand for the “poet’s bodily presence” in centers spread over the landscape. Each individual created a “body surface” that witnessed to the lived experience of everyday life. Jonathan Arac claims that Emerson tried to impose as much “surface” on the plane of human awareness as he possibly could. Only a thick surface of description could match the vast possibility of consciousness in relation to the “noumena.” While each consciousness is limited by the individual body, the “surfaces” of exchange become fluid, rich, and textured: language becomes “vehicular,” tracing the surface of the “circulation of being.” Circles of exchange develop with “centers everywhere and a circumference no where.” Instead of a divine revelation transmitting authority to the king, a thick surface of exchange is created by recognizing the differences in consciousness in varied times and places. In Emerson’s optimistic view these differences will nonetheless cohere in a unity. The desire of mind to realize itself is sufficient to the task of cultivating “wild virtue.”

Perhaps the first expression of Emerson’s own “wild virtue” is in his letter to Martin Van Buren in April of 1838. In an outraged voice he claims he had to learn about the government’s actions through village newspapers. Part of his outrage in this letter is derived from the way that governmental authority asserts

its will over the people. In July of the same year, Emerson, it seems, is still exercised over this misuse of power and in his “Divinity School Address” castigates Harvard’s Divinity School for a similar misuse of power. The ostracism he suffers as a result of his “wild virtue” tempers him until 1851 when, as a result of the passage of The Fugitive Slave Law, he again emerged on the cultural scene as an outraged abolitionist.

Between 1838 and 1850, as a result of his ostracism, Emerson became “self-reliant.” From this position he theorized that institutional power tended to “objectify” American identity. While Emerson was extremely optimistic about the capacity of consciousness to achieve unity in spite of vast differences on the surface of exchange in language, he was pessimistic about the mind’s capacity to resist the power of its own objectification. “Refinements” can dissociate men from their place in the creation experience.

The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet. He is supported on crutches, but lacks so much support of muscle. He has a fine Geneva watch, but he fails the skill to tell the hour by the sun. A Greenwich nautical almanac he has, and so being sure of the information when he wants it, the man in the street does not know a star in the sky. The solstice he does not observe; the equinox he knows as little; and the whole bright calendar of the year is without a dial in his mind. (CW II 85 “Self-Reliance” 1839-40)

Emerson claimed that objects of consciousness negotiate a position between the part and the whole, reminding man both of his own bodily limitations and his desire to extend his consciousness toward wholeness. When that relationship is consistently affirmed, the products of consciousness reflect man’s limits as well as his relationships on the horizon of consciousness. The watch

reminds him of his own small “axis” on the “horizon” of experience. The watch does work for man. It is a tool created by consciousness that frees the imagination for another kind of work. Objects of consciousness that function as “tools” freeing the imagination for new relations on the “dial” of experience allow men to become more sensitive to the world around them. One’s own bodily presence is related to a striving within other men, other degrees on the horizon of awareness. The Geneva watch enables all the members of the community to regulate their meetings with each other. Objects of consciousness that allow man to rest, free the imagination. Emerson represented an understanding of “revolution” and social change that emerged out of a meditative state that allowed the imagination to conceive of new terms of relation. However, the imagination can also produce objects of consciousness that are used as weapons.¹ But if the production of the watch becomes of utmost importance because it grants power to some people and takes power away from others, the watch itself is seen as a source of power. If the power to organize one’s relation to sensory experience resides in the products of consciousness instead of consciousness, a vital attachment to the self is lost because the communal “us” in language is disabled. Order in community is controlled by those in charge of production. “The horse is riding man” (“Self-Reliance”).

Elaine Scarry argues that “products” of consciousness can be used as either tools or weapons. When they are tools they mirror human sensibilities and the desire to extend that human sensitivity beyond the individual body. A chair

I am indebted to Elaine Scarry for the conceptual distinction between tool and weapon used in this paragraph.

does the work of the human spine, the phone of the human ear, spectacles of the human eye extending into “public space” the ability to communicate sensory awareness and conceptual activity. However, when products of human consciousness are used to create order in public space based on domination and submission, products of consciousness become weapons, objects that lack consciousness and human sensitivity. Weapons silence those who are forced to submit to their power. Every artifact exists as an unstable referent and can be used either as a tool or a weapon, depending on the power dynamic underlying its use. The instability of the relationship between the subject and the object is created by the direction of the power vectors. If the subject is seen to be the source of conscious power, the object is a tool of that consciousness. If the object is seen to be the source of power, it becomes a weapon disabling the human imagination. In his journals Emerson worries over the relationship between the “state of mind” and “facts,” the products of the mind. Emerson describes a battle over the power of description in which it was claimed that objective fact could be based on superior force, i. e., number. For Emerson “states of mind” produce facts, and he is much more interested in how states of mind are nurtured. Emerson describes “facts” produced by those who seek to preserve their power in culture.

In our vulgar politics the knowing men have a good deal to say about the “moral effect” of a victory and a defeat. The fact that the city of New York has gone for the Whigs, though only by a slender majority, is of the utmost importance to the Whig party about to vote in a distant state. Why? because it is a fact, a presentable fact. States of mind we care not for; we ignore them; but a mere fact though proving a less favorable state of mind than we have a right to infer, we overvalue. (Journal October 10 1838)

A believer, a mind whose faith is consciousness, is never disturbed because other persons do not yet see the fact that he sees. (October 19, 1838)

The occasion for Emerson's speculations about the relationship between objective "facts" and "states of mind" was his ostracism from Harvard after delivering "The Divinity School Address." In making his observations about social institutions public in his major addresses, Emerson slowly became alienated from the two institutions within American culture that he relied on to earn a living: the Unitarian church and Harvard. By the time he wrote "Self-Reliance" in 1838 he was a marginalized individual. The irony is that the more marginalized he became, the more he was sought after as a moral voice able to speak to issues of "higher law." The more he preserved a private conscious relation to language, the more he could speak to issues of human suffering. Nonetheless, his experience with American forms of debate and censorship forced him to refuse positions of leadership because those positions only perpetuated the oppositional "state of mind" which was unable to imagine real possibility and real human suffering. In spite of this isolation he kept a record in journals of his awareness of others and his need for friendship. His journals articulate surprise at the depth of rejection his ideas provoked. In the face of severe censure by Harvard authorities, Emerson refused to defend himself and his ideas. In the same way that he refused to enter the slavery debate, Emerson refused to defend his own "state of mind." Instead, he used German criticism to understand a new way of

preserving human presence in language.² After expressing these ideas in “The Divinity School Address,” he found that, indeed, his beliefs forced him to become completely self-reliant. The more he articulated the need for every person to become a “poet,” a “genius,” or a “spirit” inhabiting his own time and space, the more alienated he became from institutional support.³

In rejecting Emerson, authorities at Harvard displayed their own inability to come to terms with the implications of German theology in a democratic nation. The theological liberals who dominated Harvard at the time tended to be both wealthy and politically conservative. As a Harvard student Andrews Norton, the “Unitarian Pope” and future head of the Divinity School, wrote to his father that he would like to replace the assertion “All men are created equal” in the Declaration of Independence with “Most men are fit for nothing but to be governed” (CHAL 334). Andrews Norton would be Emerson’s most vehement critic since, in his address, Emerson claims that the ordinary individual must rely on his own spiritual imagination within which there existed “possibility.” Emerson’s spiritual possibility within the human mind challenged the authority of “miracle” in the gospel text.⁴ For Emerson the chief fault of institutional Christianity was that it turned reverence for the *person* of Jesus into a “cultus” or “mythus” that was seen as the source of miraculous truth. In emphasizing the human aspects of Jesus, German critics placed responsibility on human sensibility. What would it be like to see and hear through a state of the human

² The reading lists in RWE journals attest to his interest in German literary and historical exegesis.

³ After he left the ministry in 1832 Emerson still functioned as a substitute preacher. He also remained a lecturer at Harvard especially popular for “The American Scholar.” He is ostracized

mind that valued idealism? Emerson urges each individual in the audience to account himself a “newborn bard of the Holy Ghost.”

While Andrews Norton might be considered “the most pugnacious of the Unitarians” of his day, he was not ready for Emerson (336). Unitarians were liberals who fought against more orthodox Calvinist conceptions of Christianity. In place of a “servile” religion that stressed the punishment and the “torture of the son” for the sins of a few saved souls, the Unitarians stressed that salvation was possible through the rigorous assertions of “self-culture.” The assertions of “self-culture” relied on the authority of the gospels as a source of miraculous truth. Theologians at Harvard became interpreters of that truth. In spite of the liberal aspects of “self-culture,” Unitarians could not endorse the innovative methods of German Biblical scholarship, and Andrews Norton became so convinced of its destabilizing effects that he refused to let his son study the German language. While Andrews Norton studied German criticism, he assumed that historical “evidences” would support belief in divine revelation and supernatural rationalism. George Ticknor and Edward Everett solved the problem of the “German madness” by deliberately moving away from biblical studies.⁵ Edward Everett had been given the opportunity to study in Germany before assuming his position with the Harvard Divinity School. After years of avid study of German criticism, he admitted in a letter to his brother that he wished “public worship of God” could be separated from “all connection with arbitrary facts, supposed to

however when he applies the same cautions about over-influence to the religious imagination in “The Divinity School Address.”

⁴ For a brilliant discussion of the “Miracle Controversy” in 1833-40, see CLHUS p.210.

⁵ See Elisabeth Hurth 193

have happened in distant nations and ages” (Everett to Alexander Everett, January 5, 1816). While German scholars like David Strauss were able to reconcile the mythic imagery of the literary efforts of Christian writers with the existence of the historical Jesus, it became difficult for American scholars to reconcile their own national apocalyptic narrative with this literary “mythus.”

Emerson’s journals record his avid reading of German criticism. Elisabeth Hurth documents his sources. As a divinity student at Harvard, he used William Newcome’s edition of Johann Jakob Griesbach’s Harmony in Greek of the Gospels. Following William Ellery Channing’s advice, who recommended to Emerson in 1824 a list of biblical studies in high criticism, Emerson also repeatedly consulted Georg Rosenmuller’s Scholia, Christian Gottlieb Kuinoel’s Commentarius in Libros Novi Testamenti Historicos, and Johann Benjamin Koppe’s Novum Testamentum. Even Aunt Mary Moody Emerson was a reader of Eichhorn.⁶

While many scholars and people of faith were disillusioned by the findings of high criticism, Emerson found historical study inspiring. The human heart was not the locus of depravity but of possibility. The discrepancies, inaccuracies, and contradictions in the gospels only testified to a yearning to recover the character of Jesus and his impact. In the “Divinity School Address” Emerson confronts the problem of establishing an individual perspective in an age of radical democratic social change. He addresses the main source of American intellectual authority and dismantles the foundation upon which that authority

⁶ For this reference I am indebted to Hurth 195. JMN,3:340, 354-5. And Walter Harding Emerson’s Library

rests. In this address he uses religious language for the last time in his career. The language of the address is provocative, direct, and revolutionary. Yet, he speaks only for himself. Perhaps this is the most revolutionary aspect of his address; he does not claim any authority but his own, and he derives no power from a vocational association willing to back his ideas. In an age that is proclaiming that the nation is “a city upon a hill” guided by divine providence, Emerson counters that “providence” operates on a much smaller private scale that depends on sites of exchange. Symbol systems do not provide grand myths of identity; instead, they express a life, a single biography: “Let the breath of a new life be breathed by you....Whenever a man comes, there comes revolution...God is, not was” (CW I 144 “Divinity School Address” 1838). Emerson’s focus was not on dogma but on how Jesus was capable of creating an “original relation” to his time and place that changed the way his witnesses experienced their own lives.

In the “Divinity School Address” Emerson argues that the historic hour must be confronted by the soul not by memory preserved in texts governed by particular interpretive modes:

Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty he lived in it, and had his being there. Alone in all history he estimated the greatness of man. ... Through me God acts; through me, speaks. If you would see God, see me; or see thee. (128).

The claim here is that living primarily in relation to the soul, not text, realigns the senses (146). “Acquaint men at first hand with Deity. Look to it first and only, that fashion, custom, authority, pleasure, and money are nothing to you-

-are not bandages over your eyes, that you cannot see” (146). Emerson claims in the address that the biography of Christ has become a “mythus,” a “trope,” a miracle that is a “monster,” “a false impression” (128). In language that inspired rage in his audience, Emerson claims that the idioms of Jesus’ language and the figures of his rhetoric have usurped the place of his truth, and that churches are not built on his principles but on his tropes (128). As a result of this “falsification,” historical Christianity has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion. The falsification comes from an “expansion” that is not founded upon “sentiments.” Relation in community, for Emerson, is founded not on the authority of miraculous words or deeds, or rituals but on the cultivated ability of each person to receive sentiments (130). The ability to receive sentiments depends on the mind’s relation to ideals. Ideas grow and circulate in culture through their attachment to people, not to mythic, “monstrous” expansion (128).

Emerson is comparing and contrasting prophetic language with apocalyptic language in this essay. Apocalyptic language is dependent on inter-textual interpretation to provide a way to predict occurrences in the present. Prophetic meaning relies on an original relation to one’s time and place (Buber 174). The prophet is able to see the future because he is so fully present to his own place in the moment. History can be seen as a series of confrontations in time that are radically free, determined only by individual choice and bearing individual responsibility. Or it can be conceived of as a sequence of events that is predetermined in which apocalyptic corrections are made when that “destiny” is

violated. The “reader” gains insight into events through the text, but never takes responsibility for innovations in the typological dynamic through which the divine intersects the historic time line. Language is used as if all that mattered died a long time ago (134). “The prayers and even the dogmas of our church are like the zodiac of Denderah and the astronomical monuments of the Hindus, wholly insulated from anything now extant in the life and business of the people” (139).

The language of dogma comes, therefore, from memory, not the soul (141). Language is not used in a way that connects the soul of men to the lives they live. Man “skulks and sneaks through the world, to be tolerated to be pitied, and scarcely in a thousand years does any man dare to be wise and good and so draw after him the tears and blessings of his kind” (142). In contrast, transcendental language is similar to the prophetic use of language that develops out of an inner dialogue and is characterized by a “turning,” a turning of the being of man toward recognition in relationship. Language is not a source of prediction that enables man to adapt passively to a sequence of events, but a source of self-extension into public space that enables witness and recognition on the personal surfaces of human exchange. Mutual exchanges allow a participation in “being” through “seeing” real alternatives in action and decision making (Buber 177).

Relocating the emphasis on lived experience makes “perpetual revolution” possible: “The remedy is already declared in the ground of our complaint of the Church. We have contrasted the Church with the Soul. In the soul then let the redemption be sought. Wherever a man comes, there comes revolution. The old is for slaves....Let me admonish you, first of all, to go it alone; refuse the good

models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil” (145). Community grows out of this direct relation to sentiment unmediated by institutions: “Friends enough you shall find...By trusting your own heart you will gain more confidence in other men” (145). Once individuals are using language connected to their own lives, language can create possibility in cases of cultural conflict. What was a dead thing becomes and is present (115). Religions do not decay, only their formal institutions do. Emerson’s challenge in this essay, according to Barbara Packer, is in the fact that the “great truths are always adequate to us, whether or not we are adequate to them” (CLHUS 397). Michael J. Colacurcio characterizes Emerson’s “prophetic” use of language as an “original” use of the literary:

What Emerson seems to have sensed-rightly or wrongly-was that the only way to go on was not practically, in the available projects of social reform, or even in the still privileged domain of religion itself, but purely, in some original yet now entirely recognizable version of the “literary.” Except in Kant’s high “moral” sense, the practical meant the political, where Association demanded first compromise and then conformity. In the secular arena the result could be only one more party in religion but another cult...The necessary alternative was the way of ...”the newborn bard of the Holy Ghost” of the revolutionary “Address.” (CLHUS 217)

After he delivered “The Divinity School Address” Emerson found himself “reviewed” and “raised into the importance of being a heretic” (Journals Oct 8 1838). *The Boston Daily Advertiser* printed a “blast” by the Dexter Professor of Sacred Literature at Harvard, Andrews Norton. Perry Miller argues that this was an act so unprecedented that it could have been “inspired by nothing less than

pure rage.” The Hollis Professor of Theology, Henry Ware, Jr., in a gentler gesture, preached a subsequent sermon on “The Personality of the Deity” which was designed to clear the Divinity School of implication in Emerson’s opinions. A lively pamphlet war ensued for some years over the controversy (Whicher 98). Theodore Parker remembered an evening spent debating the question “Whether Ralph Waldo Emerson was a Christian.” It was concluded that he was not since Christianity required discipleship, and Emerson’s whole life was spent in passionate rejection of “over-influence” (CLHUS 387).

In contemplating the experience in his journals Emerson says that he considers the criticism against him a “victory” for the other side, for the arguments that proclaim that the church is founded on revelation proved by miracle. He calls this “victory” for the opposition “fact.” Yet he claims that these “facts” are produced by counting how many people vote one way or another. What he is interested in is the “state of mind” reflected in the production of such facts. “The courage of men is shown in resisting this fact and preferring the state of mind. The poet must set over against the lampoon his conviction of divine light, the patriot this deep devotion to the country against the mere hurrah of the boys in the street” (October 10, 1838 Whicher 118).

In his journals Emerson records his decision not to advance his arguments and engage in a polemic with the critics who censored him (Journals, October 1838). In defending his position, he would mimic the binary opposition already beginning to fracture the nation over the slavery issue. Counting how many people were for slavery, how many against, did not solve the problem of creating

a state of mind independent of the dynamic of domination and submission. Instead, the “moral sense” demanded that we see ourselves in human nature and in the other. Creating binary oppositions and claiming victory for one’s own side was engaging in power dynamics that reflect a mind ordered by domination and submission.

Emerson was interested in an “organic” state of mind. It is not the authority of the text or divine providence that makes the text sacred, but the ability of the text to remain alive, to come down to “our eyes and ears.” The text is transformed and develops meaning as different audiences receive it:

Goethe suggested the leading idea of modern botany, that a leaf or the eye of a leaf, is the unit of botany, and that every part of the plant is only a transformed leaf to meet a new condition, and by varying the conditions, a leaf may be converted into any other organ and any other organ into a leaf. (Richardson 172)

Emerson used Goethe’s metaphor in his reflections on being “reviewed for his address: “How soon the sunk spirits rise again, how quick the little wounds of fortune skin over and are forgotten. I am sensitive as a leaf to impressions from abroad, and under this night’s beautiful heaven forgotten that ever was reviewed” (October 8, 1838). Texts were a part of nature, produced like nests, or beaver dams. They also evolved over time as they meet new conditions and audiences. If the text like a leaf responds to varying conditions and can be “converted” to another “organ” how might the Bible, the primary text on which both pro- and anti-slavery arguments are based, be read in America in the nineteenth century? How did the Biblical language encourage a vital original

relation to its time and place? How might readers learn to use language to create their own vital “original relation”? Jesus was a man living in a time of Roman oppression, who lived as an itinerant teacher and called for the inversion of the power structure in his culture. How might that text be relevant to the master-slave relations that defined American culture?

After Emerson’s ostracism from Harvard, he developed an understanding of mathematics and probability theory that disparaged the kind of “counting” that lead to balances of power and binary oppositions. Instead, he became increasingly interested in the state of mind that could see “facts” that produced a sensory impression of the possible.

It is a poor-spirited age. The great army of cowards who bellow and bully from their bed-chamber windows have no confidence in truth or God. Truth will not maintain itself, they fancy, unless they bolster it up, and whip and stone the assailants; and the religion of God, they being of God, they seem to think dependent on what we say of it. The feminine vehemence with which Andrews Norton of the *Daily Advertiser* beseeches the dear people to whip that naughty heretic is the natural feeling in the mind whose religion is external.... A believer, a mind whose faith is consciousness, is never disturbed because other persons do not yet see the fact which he sees.... The aim of a true teacher now would be to bring men back to a trust in God and destroy before their eyes these idolatrous propositions: to teach the doctrine of perpetual revelation. (October 19, 1838)

Other journal entries during this period register Emerson’s attempt to ward off feelings of persecution. He chides himself for becoming distracted from his own awareness of his “dark spots” that keep him from focusing on “holy

obedience” (November 8, 1838). Both a religion that exerts power externally on the self and a social politics that ostracizes the private voice take the focus away from an inner dialogue about the moral sense.

Emerson eventually embraced his isolation and ostracism and began to formulate his own understanding of transcendental language separated from the community of religious rhetoric. Profound loss of human relation marked Emerson’s life. Over time he would lose his father, brothers, wife, son, vocation, religious community, and educational support. But those very losses gave him the alienated “prophetic” perspective through which to reconstruct a relation to existence. Unlike contemporary theologians for whom “Jerusalem” never fell, Emerson spoke like an Old Testament prophet. Rooted in the local, the transcendental man is “imagining the totality” without the stable frames of “glory,” textual authority, or classification. Loss creates a cast of mind that renders life itself transitive but does not necessitate an atheistic or a negative response: “Where now sounds the persuasion, that by its very melody imparadises my heart, and so affirms its own origin in heaven? Where shall I hear words such as in elder ages drew men to leave all and follow...?” (CW I 85) Loss of human relation made Emerson increasingly sensitive to the questions of the meaning of human relation.

Human sensitivity is related to morality: to seeing, hearing, and the act of recognition. As Emerson states in “The Divinity School Address,” “These laws [moral laws] refuse to be adequately stated. They will not be written down on paper or spoken by the tongue. They elude our persevering thought; yet we read

them hourly in each other's faces, in each other's actions, in our own remorse. The moral traits which are all globed into every virtuous act and thought, -- in speech we must sever, and describe or suggest by painful enumeration of many particulars" (CW I 112).

From a position of ostracism, Emerson developed a relation to an impossible ethical ideal of relation that expresses human need in geometric imagery. In his essay "Circles" (1839-40) Emerson articulates an image of social change that juxtaposes a conception of power he calls the "flying perfect" with the power of binary opposition represented by contest, battles, and war (CW II 301). Each power produces a different kind of energy. The energy of "gaming" and warring produces oppositions that are "addictive," like "opium" and "alcohol." Each side of the binary needs the other for its very being. The binary is "uncanny" because it depends on "mirroring" images of the other. This type of energy is addictive because it is a "semblance" of energy, not a real source of vitality. It produces dangerous "attractions," "dreams, drunkenness" but not "generosities of heart" (322). In contrast, the "flying perfect" with its "center everywhere and the circumference nowhere" continually engages the imagination in "granular speculations" that create transitive surfaces of exchange, or abandonment, but refuse to coalesce into totalizing myths. One kind of energy imagines tools that allow creativity a place of rest. From this position one can recognize the other. The other energy relies on weapons of attack and defense in a battle of warring oppositions.

In an expansion on his thesis concerning the relation between power and form in culture, Emerson proposes, as Marx would, that it is possible for identity to be produced by the system of which it is a part. "The horse is riding the man." If identity becomes fetishized, if man becomes a body part, "a finger, a stomach, an elbow" his capacity to think as a whole man is lost. He can no longer negotiate from a self-reliant position and develops an addictive relation to power which he perceives to be outside the self. Since wholeness is derived from a displaced source outside the self, identity is permanently dependent on its external structure, wants it to remain fixed and, yet, is never satisfied by the relation because our "affections do not circulate through it." Ideas become repetition compulsions because they are generated by power structures not creative centers.

Sites of authority are conservative in Emerson's theory of compensation. They need to provide foundations, classifications, traditions that affirm their own necessity. Instead, Emerson proposed in "Circles" that the eye connected to the "soul" generates a circle, an idea through which the world is seen. Because the whole man lines up his axis of vision with the axis of things the idea has integrity, a correspondence between Reason and sensory awareness. "Lo, on the other side rises also a man and draws a circle around the circle we had just pronounced the outline of the sphere. Then already is our first speaker not man, but only a first speaker" (305). Immense and innumerable expansions of the circles are possible because every man is generating ideas out of his life (322). That circle achieves a place on the horizon that another person can also then see. I look out on the horizon and see a boat. Another person sees what we call the same boat. Emerson

is not interested in whether the boat is “really” there or not or whether we are seeing the same boat. It could all be what he calls an “apocalypse of mind.” Yet, once that description of the boat is generated, the next person can describe that boat in a way that is different from the first description. A new circle is drawn on the horizon of thought. The first person then recognizes his own first idea with the new circle drawn around it and launches forth into a new way of using language to describe the boat, perhaps using the second person’s language to add to his own (304-6). This negotiation in language does not allow the individual to achieve a grandiose position in relation to universals. The Emersonian self continuously participates in generating circles, “wheels without wheels.” The thinking process is not devoted to oppositions, domination and submission, or totalizing myths. Instead, whole men, working on principles, axioms, and “higher laws” are in constant reciprocal transitive relation creating the “slippery surfaces” of experience. Man’s thought is constantly circumscribed, yet he is, nonetheless, constantly committed to the “Unattainable,” the impossible ideal, or the “flying perfect” (301).

Situated on a slippery surface of language, “the flying perfect” is both the “inspirer” and “condemner” of every success since constant change is required to remain organically and morally related to a common sensory environment. Every integration of principles of relation and sensory awareness between “head and heart” is constantly readjusted. Far from claiming authority, therefore, the Emerson uses language to create an “open space” in which to inscribe his own identity. From that space in language that contains the “blessed nothing,” since

there are neither foundations nor universal attainments, the poet inserts his “whole” identity in time and place. What is achieved is an “upright” position in relation to an horizon of thought. This is Emerson’s impossible ethical ideal. The very process is moral because, for Emerson, it is the “upright” stance, holding firmly to one’s axis, that generates the possibility of reciprocity of vision and communal relations. Only from this position can each individual recognize the other individual who is also creating circles on the horizon of thought. Since there is no meta-narrative, each narrative or discourse influences the other but remains connected to individual awareness:

The things which are dear to men at this hour are so on account of the ideas which have emerged on their mental horizon, and which cause the present order of things, as tree bears its apples. A new degree of culture would instantly revolutionize the entire system of human pursuits. Conversation is a game of circles....All that we reckoned settled shakes and rattles; and literatures, cities, climates, religions, leave their foundations and dance before our eyes. (CW II 310)

What is most striking about the essay “Circles” is its discipline and constraint. It is written one year after Emerson was ostracized from Harvard because of the “Divinity School Address.” Emerson’s most communal essay is written from a position of alienation. Emerson turned alienation into a “center” from which to communicate to other “whole men” who considered their identity to be the source of their imaginative power. Only by finding that open space in language that requires complete self-reliance could the fetishized identity of man as a “body part” be confronted. The geometric rigor of the language in “Circles”

suppresses the spiritual language that challenged the national narrative that placed power outside the soul of man.

By comparing closely Emerson's language in "The Divinity School Address," the subsequent journal entries, and "Circles," it is possible to witness Emerson's withdrawal into an "alienated agora" within social institutional space.

Do not accuse me of sloth. Do not ask me to your philanthropies, charities, and duties, as you term them; -I sit at home with the cause....(October 7, 1840)

Ostracized but speaking from within culture Emerson is not against institutions, only static institutions that require identity to be fixed in order to conserve its power.

As a result of his censure, Emerson never used religious language again. Instead, he develops a private dialogic language that preserves a space within the community for the lyric voice of everyman. The lyric voice of affirmation counters the discourse of binary oppositions. Entering into the cultural debate on its terms would destroy the ability to construct a life within the terms of one's own "vision of principle."

As Philip Fisher argues, the space of public discourse was severely "wounded" in the pre-Civil War years. In "Democratic Social Space" Fisher describes the quixotic elements of American identity that made it useful for the government to impose statistical and abstract definitions on the nation. First, Americans had no common origin or history that would enable them to become a "volk." Second, the land and the climate was so various that life styles within the nation were different. Third, before the nation was formed there did not exist a

common source of cultural achievement. Finally, Americans were not united in a common language. What did unite the nation was an economic enterprise, justified by a religious typology, that thrived on the same uniformity and interchangeability that would later create the factory system.

Fisher points to Jefferson's surveyor's maps, which divided the nation into identical self-sufficient units, as an example of the imaginative structure of government policy (Fisher 75). Land divided into abstract units could be easily sold and the Jeffersonian agrarian life could thus be reduplicated across the continent, defining American identity. The problem for Fisher is that this form of American mass-produced identity could put a person in a place that felt "like" home, yet the individual would not feel "at home." Since the unit was created and the individual inserted into it, there were no connections to place and identity itself becomes "uncanny," at once recognized as the self but uninhabited by one's own sensibility (75).

In spite of increased cultural efforts to define selfhood within social institutions in the pre-Civil War years, the population became restless because no ideology could unite them (Fisher x). The meta-narrative was economically expedient but personally empty. Voices began emerging within the nation that articulated the need to express alternate forms of association. In a study that parallels the work of Philip Fisher, Priscilla Wald notes in Constituting Americans that national narratives of identity are disrupted by the stories they leave out of account.

National narratives of identity seek to harness the anxiety surrounding questions of personhood, but what they leave out resurfaces when the

experiences of individuals conspicuously fail to conform to the definition of personhood offered in the narrative.... They must therefore be reabsorbed by the official stories they challenge. Yet the extra work required by that reabsorption threatens to expose the discontinuity it is supposed to obscure. Thus the uncanny continues to haunt the narrative, drawing attention to its obscured origin in the reformulation (hence to the conventionality) of personhood. Intrinsic to the narrative of identity is the ongoing possibility of a return to its own genesis in the uncanny (the unrecognized self).... (Wald 10).

Toni Morrison claims that American literature derives its very coherence from the identity of a people the national narrative would not acknowledge in its stories. By obscuring the identity of the slave, the attempt to “constitute” identity in the nineteenth century became primarily a convention of opposition. Identity was founded on what it was not. The American was not a slave. The slave was not an American. Allen Grossman observes that “the refounding of personhood, the historical function of the poet, was the deferred business both of the American Revolution and American literature.”⁷

Emerson’s understanding of the poet’s function in relation to finding one’s own lyric voice was strongly influenced during this period by his reading of Herder (Richardson 94). For Herder what is “real” is the individual living in direct sensory relation to the world, even while the individual interprets the world according to his “state of mind.” Thus, to engage a biblical text, for example, the reader must imagine into the “other,” into the experience of the primitive shepherds in the Judean hills or the peasant life of a Jewish carpenter under Roman rule. Cultures have their own unique “centers of gravity” that exert a myriad of influences on the individual life. From an alienated perspective within

⁷ For further discussion see “The Poetics of Union in Whitman and Lincoln” in Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease, ed., The American Renaissance Reconsidered, 192.

one's own culture, from a position in the "alienated agora" it is possible to imagine these forces operating on individual lives. The ability to be open for the other, requires that the self-reliant imagination first establish an inner dialogue concerning definitions of selfhood. From within this dialogue the individual is able to establish a non-institutional relation to moral principles lived in local experience.

This kind of individualized moral sensibility was frustrated in the United States. The attempt to forge compromises that would unite the nation during a time of ideological confusion was based on cultural repression of real debate over the way social compacts defined personhood. First, the political rhetoric conflated religious authority and political authority to force a discussion of slavery into the terms of "manifest destiny." By moving the debate to the higher ground of national mission, local issues were absorbed into an expansive rhetoric. Second, between 1835-1844, the United States House of Representatives battled over the "gag rule." William Lee Miller argues that the controversy over the "gag rule" and the need for open debate over moral issues has shaped our conceptions of "civil liberty." "If one doesn't believe that moral argument ever makes any difference, then one doesn't believe in republican government" (Faust 11). At issue was the method of forging compromise that had been in place since the adoption of the Constitution in 1789. In order to insure that the Constitution would be adopted, the delegates agreed that there would be no debate over the slavery issue in states where it already existed. This method of forging compromise could not be used in the pre-Civil War years. As the abolitionist

movement gained power in the North that silence over antislavery petitions was increasingly challenged. The gag rule raised the issue of the political freedom of expression that was at stake for every individual. The question of the right to argue for “higher law” and moral relation was real for every member of the nation: women, Catholics, workers, Indians (11). Third, the evangelical movements that produced experiences of mass conversion in “tent meetings” across the land, produced a mass experience of conversion that relied on the power of the group to replace institutional authority. Instead of adhering to institutional claims, mass experiences created group relations that became the foundation of communal relations:

Populists stressed the emotional trauma and ecstasy of the New Birth, an experience empowering and open to all regardless of intellectual or social attainments, race, or gender. Theirs was democratic, Arminianized gospel message in which the grace of conversion was always available, needing only to be stirred up or brought down by preaching, prayer, testimony or song. These groups popularized camp meeting and charismatic preachers. They also, as Curtis Johnson has pointed out, were deeply suspicious of elite attempts to Christianize society, to reform the nation or in any other way to improve America. They believed that the impact of revivals on the broader society would be indirect, the aggregate result of individuals being changed, one by one through conversion. (Long 6)

It is ironic that the revival movement claimed to reform the nation through the conversion of “individuals,” yet it relied on the emotional power of the masses. Emerson attempted to connect ecstasy and the moral sense only in the context of the need for the self to exert authority over itself. While this grounding in the moral center of the self brings the individual into a need for community, it

does not create a collective identity. By making revelation a matter of private experience, the work of “constituting identity” through the “stoical doctrine” of “Obey thyself,” Emerson demanded the rigor of an inner dialogue. This dialogue did not expand into control over others but was conducive to moral debate from an alienated perspective that, nonetheless, achieved the ability to see and hear another. Party politics, revivalism, and institutional intellectual positioning had become a numbers game that denied the rigor necessary for moral debate.

Smarting from the sting of ostracism, Emerson realized that he must be able to sustain himself if he were to live outside of social institutions. “It seems as if a man should learn to fish, to plant, or to hunt, that he might secure his subsistence if he were cast out from society and not be painful to his friends and fellow men” (Journal September 30 1838).

In his study of the relation between a symbolic mode and representations of the social body, Gordon Teskey claims that allegory and violence are related because of a distortion in the part-whole negotiation. He comments extensively on the illustration in the frontispiece to Hobbes’ Leviathan.

The latter reveals, in a visual pun, the ambiguous fate of bodies in the *agora* when voice is denied them. One at first sees many bodies contained in the body of the monarch; but the contained bodies are also represented as if standing in a clearing, an *agora*, where they listen to what is dictated to them. The image records, even as it distorts, the opposition of forces out of which the political space is composed: the gathering of bodies through mutual need onto one body and the separation of bodies by the voice. But the separation is a collective illusion. In the Hobbesian political order subjects have contractually surrendered the power of the voice as a political force in return for protection from the war of all against all. The one absolute right left to the subject is the defense of the body, since it was for the preservation of the body that the contract was entered into in the first place. But in surrendering the voice the subject loses the very body,

as a private interior, the act of surrender was supposed to preserve.
(Teskey 128-9)

In the mass conversion experience, individuals give themselves up to the sensory experience of the enthusiastic language of conversion that flows like a current through the mass. Instead of deriving a sense of identity from the king's body, a sense of identity emerges out of identifying with mass energy. In Emersonian thought the individual is separated from the social body and from representations of power. Rather than represent the private man as a microcosm reflecting the larger macrocosm of the social body, Emerson represents the private man as occupying an "open space" within social institutions, a bare common. He does not make national claims from this position, but he makes moral claims contained in the smallest units of coherence, such as the aphorism. He emphasizes the smallest unit of articulation against the largest myths of nationhood: "Here I sit and read and write, with very little system, and, as far as regards composition, with the most fragmentary result: paragraphs incompressible, each sentence an infinitely repellent particle" (May 10, 1838). From this position in his library he hears the other lone voice, ostracized from community.

and all this time poor Nancy Barron the mad-
woman, has been screaming herself hoarse at the
Poorhouse across the brook and I still hear her whenever I
open my window. (June 1840)

As he writes in his journal Emerson recognizes that it is not charity that will save Nancy Barron, but an entire reorganization of institutional life in America. It is from the journal entries of 1839-40 that "Self-Reliance" is developed. What would save Nancy Barron from the poorhouse is not charity but

an understanding that each “eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray” (CW II 46). Emerson argues for agency, not charity. “To live truly, we shall see truly....Inasmuch as the soul is present there will be power not confident but agent” (CW II 68). Order in a republican nation had become associated with meta-narratives that absorbed all rhetorics of exploration, classification, settlement, progress, and charity into a prophetic vision of manifest destiny. A technologically progressive nation would provide for people by organizing their lives into networks of unity like a factory system. By contrast, Emerson saw himself writing in a language that “builds out into Chaos and old night a splendid architecture to bridge the impassable, and call aloud on all the children of morning that the Creation is recommencing. I wish to write such rhymes as shall not suggest a restraint, but contrari-wise the wildest freedom” (Journal June 27 1839). With sentences that were “infinitely repellent particles” Emerson defied national myths. “A man, said Oliver Cromwell, never rises so high as when he knows not whither he is going” (CW II 322).

Emerson intended to build an architecture that nonetheless held society together because the moral integrity of the particles reattached individuals to a shared sensibility, circles of awareness. Without the ability to conceive of ideals, individuals could not feel. The faith he had in wildness, all those fragments unloosed on the national landscape, enabled him to envision the failure of American cultural institutions. The journals of 1839-40 are a summary of the “concatenation of errors called society” in which Emerson transforms gender, marriage, vocation, the church, education, and publishing (October 10, 1839). He

re-imagines marriage as a genderless, “communion of all souls” not a “pairing of two.”

It is only when you leave and lose me by casting yourself on a sentiment which is higher than both of us, that I draw near and find myself at your side; and I am repelled if you fix your eye on me and demand love. In fact, in the spiritual world we change sexes every moment. You love the worth in me; then I am your husband: but it is not me but the worth, that fixes the love; and the worth is a drop of the ocean of worth that is beyond me. Meantime I adore the greater worth in another, and so become his wife. He aspires to a higher worth in another spirit, and is wife or receiver of the influence. (Journal November 21, 1840)

Freed from interpretive models, outside of institutions, Emerson imagines himself as part of an ocean of identity, fluid because based on a deep recognition of worth, not social bonds. He detaches his identity from any need to be recognized in terms of his vocation or gender. He apologizes for his inheritance and takes a vow of poverty: “You think it is because I have an income which exempts me from your day-labor, that I waste my time in sun-gazing and star-gazing. You do not know me. If my debts, as they threaten, should consume what money I have, I should live just as I do now: I should eat worse food, and wear a coarser coat, and should wonder in a potato patch instead of in the wood, but it is I and not my twelve hundred dollars a year, that love God” (Journal October 7, 1840). It is only the moral sense that defines selfhood and creates an identity that is at once recognizable and full of one’s own sentiments.

Education in the country had become a matter of “recitation rooms for ten or fifteen years” (September 14, 1839). Rejecting the Lockean theory of mind that

produced the imitative models prevalent at Harvard, Emerson proposed that an education occurred when the present moment was engaged by the imagination not imitation: “ We hate editors, preachers and all manner of scholars, and fashionists. A blacksmith, a truckman, a farmer, we follow into the bar-room and watch with eagerness what they shall say, for such as they do not speak because they are expected to, but because they have somewhat to say.” The church fares no better for its inability to connect to actual persons. “I hate preaching whether in pulpits or in teachers’ meetings” (September 14, 1839):

At church today I felt how unequal is this match of words against things. Cease, O thou unauthorized talker, to prate of consolation, and resignation, and spiritual joys, in neat and balanced sentences. For I know these men who sit below, and on the hearing of these words look up. Hush, quickly: for care and calamity are things to them. There is Mr. Tolman, the shoemaker, whose daughter is gone mad, and he is looking up through his spectacles to hear what you can offer for his case. Here is my friend, whose scholars are leaving him, and he knows not what to turn his hand to next. Here is my wife, who has come to church in hope of being soothed and strengthened after being wounded by the sharp tongue of a slut in her house. Here is the stage-driver who has the jaundice, and cannot get well. (May 19, 1839)

Besides critiquing social institutions, the journals of 1839-40 record conversations with a circle of friends who re-imagine the terms of communal relations. Emerson’s tone when he records these conversations is quite different from that of the essays in which his voice achieves an unemotional, stark stoicism. In the journals he revels in the warmth of friends with whom he feels very shy. He records a “shudder of joy” on finding out about the “love my friends bear me.” Relieved that they do not feel the “disgust” he feels for himself for his

inarticulateness while he is admiring them, he claims that there must be “supersensuous channels of communication, and that spirits can meet in their pure upper sky without the help of organs” (September 1, 1840). In particular, Emerson reveres his friendship with the “itinerant” Bronson Alcott. Imagining alternatives to social institutions and new social relations in a community called “Fruitlands,” Alcott “is quite ready at any moment to abandon his present residence and employment, his country, nay, his wife and children, in very short notice, to put any new dream into practice which has bubbled up in the effervescence of discourse” (March 1842).

Yet, in spite of his admiration for Alcott, Emerson is critical in his journal of “spiritual” enterprises that always require land and money before they can be undertaken (November 19, 1842). What was manifest destiny but an outsized utopian scheme requiring money and land? For Emerson any real social undertaking would not be utopian because it required human recognition as the starting point. Human limits, not Calvinistic depravity, would make every undertaking a partial effort exerted from a local position where human faculties needed to be developed. Men needed to be granted “facility not beneficence.” Intensely communal, strongly influenced by conversations about utopian enterprises, Emerson argued that man must begin with a relation to himself that makes it possible to recognize the worth in another. If the slave existed outside of American social institutions, how would it be possible to recognize his worth if one could not imagine worth apart from money, land, vocation, gender, marriage, education, and religious institutions?

Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens.

This fact, as far as it symbolizes the moral fact of the Unattainable, the flying Perfect, around which the hands of man can never meet, at once the inspirer and the condemner of every success, may conveniently serve us to connect many illustrations of human power in every department. (Circles 1839-40, CW II 301)

Chapter Four: Piety on the Circuit

Taken in the mass, and in reference both to the physical and moral laws of his existence, the boasted freedom of man disappears; and hardly an action of his life can be named which usages, conventions, and the stern necessities of his being, do not appear to enjoin on him as inevitable, rather than to leave to the free determination of his choice. (Sir John Herschel 1850 Review of Quetelet)

From his position within the “alienated agora” of the major institutions of American culture, Emerson began to critique the methods employed by the new science of “social physics” which was developing a way of understanding communities through “numbers” and statistics. An understanding of statistical probabilities enabled the government to manage or organize the goals of its various agencies. Jonathan Arac in Commissioned Spirits reviews the nineteenth century novelists’ critique of urban life as organized by this “omniscient” statistical perspective. He sees this kind of omniscience is in marked contrast to the Emersonian self-reliant perspective on universals that functions to create a transitive energy of exchange in language on the horizon of thought. Arac describes the “optic skill” gained by this science that organizes individuals into standardized units according to an “architecture” of objective, scientific perspective:

From the late 1780’s Barkers’ “Panorama” allowed the curious for a small price to assume over the painted simulacrum of a city a position like that to which Milton’s Satan had led Jesus. At this time, too, a more serious version of this toy was projected in Bentham’s Panopticon (1791. This architectural machine also began from the pathological, for Bentham devised it as a prison,

but in his later plans, it became adaptable for factory design as well, or for any institution that had to organize large numbers of individuals. The principle involved a central watchtower around which were deployed in a circle the cells of individual criminals as opposed to the recently razed Bastille, which had hidden its inmates away from view, the inmates here would be constantly susceptible to observation, although they would never know whether they were actively being seen at any moment. This device created a secular version of the “specular mount” Satan offered, from which his “optic skill” served as an “airy microscope” to peer into dwellings. (Arac 18)

Even before being “reviewed” and ostracized, Emerson was extremely skeptical about the use of statistics to determine “facts” in American culture. Instead, he proposed that “genius” determined man’s fate. Yet, just as it is necessary to understand Emerson’s critique of the concept of “omniscience” in his culture, it is necessary to understand the ways in which his definition of “genius” is in marked contrast to the accepted definitions of his age. Richard Poirier in “The Question of Genius” argues that for Emerson our social and cultural fate resulted from the language we use and by which we learn to form relations.

Here as everywhere Emerson means to detextualize, to dehistoricize, to un-authorize “genius,” leaving in place only an activity, and a barely traceable one at that. It is this phenomenon- “genius” as an activity, an influx, a movement, “genius” as energy- that has always, with or without Emerson, posed a problem for humanistic criticism and the culture it looks to for support. As a phenomenon of energy, “genius” in Emerson lays waste to generally perceived humanistic images of authorial and therefore of individual human purpose and intent. (180)

Poirier stresses in his definition of Emersonian genius that in “performance,” in the activity of using language creatively in our lives, the act of

writing becomes adapted to individual purpose. By entering into the act of writing “we make our most effective inflections of dissent.... Through such acts as these, more than by directly political actions, consciousness might be altered and, if only on occasion, a truer self, or “genius,” might be discovered” (168). “Genius,” therefore, is related to a sense of self that is achieved as one participates in the energy of exchange that occurs between “degrees” of perspective on the “circle” of awareness that is always advancing on the “chaos and the dark.” The Emersonian self discovers identity more as a “site” a position achieved in a local place of habitation through using language as an orienteering tool that achieves relation by understanding the angles of awareness in ecological relation. Language is not a source of authority but of relation.

This understanding of the individual’s relation to language is in marked contrast to not only statistical authority constructed by empirical science but to the understanding of “genius” proposed by Matthew Arnold. For Arnold, “all human values, all human emotions, are of social growth if not of social origin... and that much of what man does for himself depends on what society allows him to do” (Lionel Trilling qt. in Poirier 180). In this definition, language is a container, in which we keep and preserve cultural treasures. These cultural treasures become authorities against which “genius” measures itself and derives its inspiration. Both humanistic and scientific versions of authority see human relation in abstraction from lived experience. For Emerson, language is like an “oversoul,” a source of power or energy to be actively engaged by individual speakers. In connecting to the “oversoul” individuals reattach to language a

relational energy of exchange, not corporate authority, knowledge, fate or statistical destiny. For Arnold culture is fixed, the best that is known and thought in the world; while for Emerson it is fluid, always the new degree on the horizon of thought. Language, like the soul, “becomes” through a capacity for receptivity, a capacity for ecological variety and exchange.. New relations leave their “trace” on the “transitional surface” of language as individuals participate in its energy (182).

...the experience of poetic creativeness...is not found in staying at home, nor yet in traveling, but in transitions from one to the other, which must therefore be adroitly managed to present as much transitional surface as possible. (CW VI 55 “Plato”)

This Emersonian creative energy that moves through language and creates “revolutions” is surprisingly ordinary. It is not the energy of Promethean overreaching or of Dionysian disruption. The “truth” of Emerson’s energy is “cold” but not the “slave of tears” or tragedy. Emersonian language is the language of optimism and hope. The ordinary man is adequate to the task of creative social change and revolutionary thought if he understands what it means to be a man and accepts that condition. He need not be more, and he is not less. In coming to understand the poet’s work in language, man comes to understand his own “practical power.” He “no longer waits for favoring gales, but by means of steam, he realizes the fable of “Aeolus’s bag,” and carries two and thirty winds in the boiler of his boat” (“Nature” *Commodity*). For Emerson revolutions were not the work of heroes, over-reachers, or Dionysian disrupters, but of the ordinary

man who stayed home and “loved his babe,” “loved his woodcutter” (“Self-Reliance” CW II 51).

While national projects of unification were put on hold because of the slave debate, local reform movements sought to improve culture through utopian dreams of a better society. For Emerson, social change would not occur by creating abstract systems of relation, national or local. Only the individual could be a site of personal moral awareness and from that perspective all attempts to negotiate power must emerge. Emerson rejected both scientific as well as Calvinistic determinism. He proposed a definition of human agency beyond the dialectic of dogmatic Christian pessimism and utopian optimism. For Emerson, the private mind, able to imagine the laws of relation in nature, fashions the institutions of culture, which, in turn, expresses moral relations among men. At a time of repression, censorship and slavery, Emerson proposed that the scientific and moral imagination could cultivate an understanding of relation in community. The common man was equal to the task of using his own energy to imagine a new order, a new way of achieving bonds that held the community together based on personal relations. Laws were bonds or ligaments that held the social body together through an individual capacity to use energy to achieve order. In positing that the ordinary man was capable of this relation to energy and order, Emerson argued that a sense of American “exceptionalism,” a meta-narrative of national destiny, was not useful in establishing the goals of local experience. So too did he posit that order was achieved through ordinary capacities to bond, not through violent upheavals that released instinctual or repressed energies.

It was not within Harvard that the mind of man was evolving new “spirals of form” from which to “build a world” but within a loosely organized lyceum movement supported by barely emergent communities across the nation. On the lyceum circuit, Emerson promoted a sense of agency that connected the individual to the practical laws of nature and the “poetic quality” of those laws that allowed for personal adaptation and relation. As the schoolroom became the primary scene of instruction for the nation, Emerson found himself visiting improvised schoolrooms throughout the Northeast and West joining lecturers who spoke on “Improvements on the Common Lathe” and “George’s Clock Wakener and Lighter.”

The lyceum movement came to America from Scotland, where, in 1800, one of the first lyceums, or mechanics’ institutes was founded by Dr. George Birkbeck of the Andersonian University in Glasgow. Birkbeck developed a close relationship to the local craftsmen in the area who helped him to devise and construct the scientific apparatus used for demonstrations in class. He learned through his relations with artisans, mechanics, and tradesmen that they were hungry for the knowledge found only in the universities. What followed was the beginning of artisan associations and mechanic’s institutes throughout England and France.

A similar hunger for knowledge of chemistry, metallurgy, botany, and physics existed in the frontier towns of America. Farmers valued information about fertilizers and botany; mechanics needed to know physics to operate air pumps and simple machines; inventors and manufacturers needed new types of

small machines; housewives needed the knowledge necessary to operate small cottage industries within the home. At a time when the debate over slavery forestalled any national public educational system, communities were able to design their own lecture schedule depending on local needs. The lyceum movement depended on money raised by the subscribers themselves.

It was on this precarious circuit that Emerson established his career as a lecturer, speaking in towns and communities as far away as California. There was an interesting mutuality in Emerson's relation with his audience on the circuit. He claimed in his journals that he was uncertain about his lectures and "tried them out" like the barber who "learned on the orphan's chin." Seventy-five percent of his essays were "tried out" as lectures that were the literary accompaniment to other lectures that offered practical knowledge about the everyday problems of trade, manufacture, agriculture, and small domestic industries. Following the method outlined in his essay "Nature" Emerson's lectures considered the higher spiritual laws that might be derived from lessons on "The Common Lathe," electromagnetism, air pumps, and metallurgy.

On the lyceum circuit Emerson demonstrated the relation between the practical knowledge needed to harness power and the spiritual lessons that could be derived from understanding the "higher laws" governing practical knowledge. By creating rhetorical models that express a metaphoric relation between the laws of nature and the laws of spirit, Emerson was reattaching identity to work and survival in newly emerging communities. Neighbors were "building a world" not having a national narrative imposed on them. While federal policy attempted to

organize the nation through railway, banking, and highway systems, Emerson participated in a system of education that located the sources of power in ordinary lives: “Transcendentalism says, the Man is all.... Franklin says, the tools,.... A master and tools is the lesson I read in every shop and farm and library. There must be both” (Journal, VII, 268). By placing man in a dynamic relationship to the tools he creates, Emerson encourages self-reliance in place of the master-slave relationship. Individual effort is not dependent on a national economic system. Instead, the nation is dependent on individual effort. In his essay on “Farming” Emerson argues that it is the farmer who is evolving a revolutionary habit of mind. The network of ecological relations within which he solves his problems educates him about his relation to tools and work:

And in this great factory of our Copernican globe, shifting its slides, rotating its constellations, times and tides, bringing now the day of planting, then of watering.... -the farmer is the minder.... Who are the farmer’s servants? Not the Irish, nor the coolies, but Geology and Chemistry.... These activities are incessant. Nature works on a method of all for each and each for all.... If it be true that, not by votes of political parties but by the eternal laws of political economy, slaves are driven out of the slaves states as fast as it is surrounded by free states, the true abolitionist is the farmer (“Farming” CW VII 142).

Emerson’s connection to the lyceum movement is significant because the lyceum movement changed the orientation of American education. Rather than emphasizing the ideas of great men or traditions preserved in museums and libraries, the lyceum scholars conducted surveys in communities as a way of asking, as Emerson might have put it, “Where do we find ourselves?”

(“Experience” CW III 45). In the spirit of discovery characteristic of Lewis and Clark, but without the national concerns that defined that project, new communities used the geologists, botanists, and surveyors on the circuit to educate themselves about the local resources in their communal spaces. Through scientific and technical knowledge communities gained awareness about their natural environment. Speaking from an orientation that was not mythological, religious, ethnic, or patriotic, Emerson attempted to make self-conscious the “spirit of the place,” the genius of the people able to connect their physical world to moral law not “mythus,” “cultus,” or ideology.

In “Nature,” Emerson had posited that the laws of nature correspond to the laws of ethics, that man was “part and particle” of an evolving virtue. In “Circles” the “geometric” line or the individual axis of vision is connected to other self-reliant men to create circles of exchange on the horizon of thought. Emerson’s self-reliant perspective on the universal is expressed in one on one relationships between a first speaker and a second speaker until circles of exchange are developed in a granular fashion that fit his aphoristic style. There is no omniscient perspective managing the exchange. Hybrids may develop, patterns may repeat, parallels may be generated, and forms may collapse into one another in an organic growth process. Speech and language develop ecological relations grounded in the “virtue” of moral suasion between the first speaker and the second speaker or the writer and the strong reader. In sharp contrast, the barely emergent discipline of “social physics” developed methods of unseen observation that destroyed the reciprocity of seer and seen so important to Emerson’s

understanding of witness. Individuals were seen as cases and aggregates of cases that formed “statistical wholes” (18). Interventionist bureaucracies developed the “vision” needed to protect the population. However, this population was grouped into statistical wholes, cases, and aggregates that did not have the reciprocal power to “see” the bureaucracy. Arac claims, for instance, that if airborne disease threatened the public health of a city, the techniques of aerial observation were required to combat dangerous contagions by gathering and organizing the information concerning the ways that disease spread in populations. His argument is that novelists attempted to provide an understanding of the lived experience of persons in urban centers through an authorial perspective that “saw” the factory system, the law, the government agency at work. Those who were seen as statistics in government reports were portrayed by the novelists through the lived experience of the child, the poor, the women, the worker, and the insane (19). It is important to understand that Emerson’s self-reliant perspective on the universal is formulated to counter national narratives and the temptation to omniscience. As a Protestant minister, Emerson knew the biblical critique of power and Milton’s representation of omniscience in “Paradise Lost.” For Emerson it is not omniscience that is required but character, “Character makes an overpowering present” (CW II 321):

Every reform is only a mask under cover of which a more terrible reform, which dares not yet name itself, advances. Slavery and anti-slavery is the question of property and no property, rent and anti-rent; and anti-slavery dare not yet say that every man must do his own work, or, at least, receive no interest for money. Yet that is at last the upshot. (June 1846)

As the nation sought to industrialize, a more “terrible reform” was needed in the power relations of a nation ordered by domination and submission accomplished through compromise, and in which those with property could form networks of associations that disempowered the individual. Barbara Packer claims that Emerson’s relation to statistics is similar to his relation to associations, movements, and systems that generate abstractions to which individuals submit their identities. Clarifying Emerson’s relation to science and the use of scientific law in social physics, Packer argues that transcendental rhetorical strategies do not use science to create “joint stock companies” that deny the individuality of its members. Packer cites Emerson’s response to Fourier to make her assertion clear. Fourier attempted to use statistics to create communities based on “passional attraction,” the social equivalent of Newton’s law of gravity. These “phalanxed” communities would attract great people (Packer “Terrible Tabulations 3). In a letter to Lydian, Emerson claims: “Transcendental persons who are too great for your Concords and New Yorks will gravitate to that point for music and architecture and society such as wit cannot paint nowadays” (Letters 3:21). Once a utopian community was successful, the model would spread. The dynamic would work very much in the same way as “manifest destiny,” spreading a model at its expanding borders. In his private correspondence, Emerson makes it clear that it is the hope that these communities will achieve power through their force of numbers that dissuaded him from joining.

Yesterday I dined with Mr. Horace Greeley and Mr. Brisbane, the socialist, at a Graham Boarding House. Mr. Brisbane promised me a full exposition of the principles of Fourierism and Association, as soon as I am

once lodged at the Globe Hotel. *Il faut soumettre*: Yet I forsook in a moment when I encountered the two new friends here, that I cannot content them. They are bent on popular action: I am in all my theory, ethics, and politics a poet and of no more use in their New York than a rainbow or a firefly. (Letters 3:18)

For Emerson this attempt to enlist all the great and talented people into a “popular action” was “the old war” between the “Omnipotence of Arrangements versus Power of the Soul” (Letters 3:23). If the omnipotence of arrangements was preserving the race, it was the genius of the single soul that would preserve moral law. “Arrangements” were not the problem. “Character” was the problem. The effort at reform turned out to highlight the problem of human desire:

Charles Fourier announced that “the attractions of man are proportioned to his destinies in other words, that every desire predicts its own satisfaction. Yet all experience exhibits the reverse of this; the incompetency of power is the universal grief of young and ardent minds. They accuse the divine Providence of a certain parsimony. It has shown the heaven and earth to every child and filled him with a desire for the whole; a desire raging, infinite a hunger as of space to be filled with planets; a cry of famine as of devils for souls. Then for the satisfaction; --to each man is administered a single drop....He was an emperor deserted by his states....(“Montaigne” CW IV 183)

Packer argues that Emerson does not seek to solve the problems of character through associations and reform movements. Instead he turns to astronomy when he is looking for an alternative to the myths generated by religious dogma. The laws of celestial mechanics operate on every atom in an equal way, and they are not arbitrary (TTF 8).

The Scriptures were written by human hands.
God intends by giving us access to this original writing of

his hand to correct the human errors that have crept into them. Let us yield ourselves with a grateful heart to the instruction that comes from this source and not repine to find that God is a greater, wiser and more tender Parent than we were wont to worship. (Sermons 4:159)

For Packer Emerson was not leaving God behind as a guide to human character, but he was making the language of science available to the population for everyone to “see” on “the canvas as large as the sky” (9). Human beings would not be determined by the laws of physics; rather, they would determine how to use scientific laws by relating them to the sensibilities of lived experience. If parties and associations and scientists influenced by social physics were interested in designing societies statistically, Emerson was more interested in the circumstance that produced the anomalies: the Jenny Lind, the Bonaparte or the Bowditch (“Fate” CW VI 17). Each individual has the potential for genius that would change the “observation” by statistics. The question for Emerson was “How shall I live?” (Nature). This was a problem for the imagination not statistics. “If we live truly, we see truly”. Emerson does not assume the position of the objective scientist observing the world. He is part and particle of that world. Neither is the individual omniscient, managing the world. Instead, he manages his own transitive movements between being the seer and the seen, becomes witness to the possibility of transformation.

An Emersonian relation to “higher laws” is generated through the human subject surrounded not by Fourier’s “passional attractions” but by the “chaos and the dark.” There are no privileged positions from which to claim, for example, a sense of national exceptionalism. The religious language that relied on such an

understanding of national destiny and power was not used in transcendental language. Instead transcendental language poised the individual in the middle of the circulation of being in which he lives. Statistics could not provide a model for the moral sense able to achieve an “upright” position of virtue through which circulation is perceived. The power vectors are, therefore, reversed. The advancements of mankind rely on human agency alone, not human access to divine intervention and authority: “The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray.”

Since there is no divine or scientific access to authority, the expansion of transcendental language into the “chaos” is qualitatively different from expansionist models of civilization whether of the “manifest destiny” or Fourierist type. The expansion of national boundaries presumed that American culture would “save” the inferior cultures within and around its borders of consciousness, just as the reform communities believed that they would save those outside their utopian borders. Transcendental language does not posit a pure center of awareness. Instead individuals can testify only for their own locality. Centers of awareness are scattered. “If an angry bigot assumes this bountiful cause of Abolition, and comes to me with his last news from Barbadoes, why should I not say to him, ‘Go love thy infant; love thy wood-chopper; be good-natured and modest; have that grace....’”

In the face of the seemingly overwhelming tendency of both religious and scientific discourses to minimize the significance of agency in the ordinary life, Emersonian transcendental language places the power of revolutionary innovation

within the “innocent” life. It is “the child, the babe, the brute” Emerson claims in “Self-Reliance,” who can see with a whole mind and, thereby, cast a light on the fact that places it within a “real” perspective. All facts dissolve before the eyes that have the capacity to “behold” life in the present (“Self Reliance” CW II 77). It is the unique vision that will dissolve the fact, not the omnipotence of arrangements, national or utopian.

To understand the role of human agency in the production of representations of “higher laws,” it is necessary to understand Emerson’s training in Puritan piety. Once Emerson saw that the language of the church was entangled in the politics of slavery, he could no longer use the authority of the Bible and church sanctioned means of interpreting the Bible to negotiate ethical relations. For Emerson, the piety needed to enter into ethical relations during the pre-Civil war years became associated with the discipline of scientific inquiry. The same habits that were cultivated in relation to biblical text and church dogma were now cultivated in relation to scientific thought. Emerson used scientific thought to create a language of hope and possibility that defied the structures of power in the nation.

Religious means of producing representations of revolution differ from scientific or Emersonian means in the following way. In a religious community agreement is achieved regarding dogma. In a scientific community it is vital that each scientist is aware of perspective, retains a skeptical relation to knowledge, and shares in separate investigations out of which a paradigm is created (Merton

224-52). Only when “circles” of knowledge are shared in association can representation emerge.

In the religious community, a microcosm-macrocosm relation is maintained through which the individual retains a receptive relation to the universal. Since knowledge is located outside the self, the self does not bear responsibility for revelation only for the receptivity. The individual is remade by the outside source. One must interpret, believe, or understand the revelation. This projection of the source of truth outside the self is the source of humility (Scarry 197).

During the age of a Puritan alliance between reason and revelation, the church retained the ultimate authority over science’s scrutiny of the particulars of the universe, while respecting the discipline of rationality science represented; a faith that is not “rationally weighed” is but fancy or opinion. In turn, science founded its investigations on the religious assumption that the universe is an orderly place. What began as an alliance became, in time, a problematic relation. Science assumed a more and more assertive position in the social world as it devised ways to make the world a more comfortable place. In science, human agency, even human arrogance, could displace religious humility (Merton 224-53).

Emerson’s piety reverses his relation to the “paltry empiricism” of science. The imagination structures our experiences. We see what we live. The rigor of scientific thought causes the individual to “suspect his instruments,” the tools used to change experience. Is the imagination generating myths, illusions,

fables? The very attempt to preserve the imagination's relation to reality can produce illusions. But everyone can do the work of examining the "fables" of mind used as instruments to establish an imaginative relation to the physical world. The scientist, therefore, does not attain any special knowledge preserved in and limited to universities and professional societies.

The mind works within the "Chaos and the Dark" maintaining a relation to impossible moral ideals. It is the singularity and the loneliness of the work that characterizes Emersonian "experiment" but also cultivates the imagination, through which we perceive higher laws, "the subject lenses that color perception."

And yet is the God the native of these bleak rocks.
The life of the truth is cold and so far mournful; but is not
the slave of tears, contritions and perturbations. It does
not attempt another's work nor adopt another's facts. It is
a main lesson of wisdom to know your own from
another's. ("Experience" CW III 81)

Enlightenment science assumed that the universe was an orderly place. Emerson assumed that within the human mind, alongside illusions and fables, virtue could imagine a correspondence with nature. The world is not made to correspond with the human mind. In nature man will find no resting place. "Then the new molecular philosophy shows astronomical interspaces betwixt atom and atom, shows that the world is all outside; it has no inside ("Experience" CW III 64). The art of life is being able to skate well on "surfaces." The imagination can form a transitional relation to moments in time through which virtue is expressed. It is from this conception of "empiricism" and the human subject that Emerson realizes his scientific piety, his humility, whose goal is always to understand "higher law." Emerson poses questions for science that

seem to be philosophical not scientific. These questions are the starting point of experiment. He asks, “How shall I live?” “What is the good?” From a position of self-reliance and scientific piety the answers to these questions produce a sense of agency. “And we are now men...not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort and advancing on Chaos and the Dark” (“Self Reliance” CW II 47).

In the late eighteen-forties Emerson began reading the work of Adolph Quetelet, a pioneer in statistical analysis. A follower of Laplace, Quetelet derived his understanding of probability from Laplace’s attempt to predict the true position of a heavenly body from a mass of conflicting observations. Laplace developed the use of an “error curve” to reduce the results of observations to an arithmetical average, thereby, compensating for human error. Quetelet believed that the error curve did not measure human errors in observation, but a normal “probability” in statistics. This error curve, he proposed, could be used to analyze data in “social physics” since it was assumed that the laws of physics have their counterpart in the mental world. In “Swedenborg,” published in 1850, Emerson comments that “the terrible tabulation of the French statistics brings every piece of whim and humor to exact numerical ratios. If one man in twenty thousand eats shoes or marries his grandmother, then in twenty thousand is found one man who eats shoes or marries his grandmother” (CW IV 109). “Laws” in science came to rely on statistically determined perceptions.

By contrast Emerson argued that it was possible to calculate a more ideal “golden mean” in cultures. In succumbing to “fashion”

men become “dwellers in tents,” “outlines in chalk,” “jokes,” and “buffooneries” (Journal April 1846). The poet, he claims in the same passage, has the capacity to calculate human tendency according to a harmony he compares to music: “Where is the Euclid,” he asks, “who can sum up these million errors, and compute the beautiful mean?”

The Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Law that accompanied it prompted a series of events in Massachusetts that recreated social institutions according to a dynamic Emerson calls “fashion.” In these events Emerson saw the “law of numbers” silencing the population of the state. In May 1851, a month after state supreme court justice Lemuel Shaw ordered the escaped slave Thomas Sims returned to his owner, Emerson delivered his furious speech, “The Fugitive Slave Law” in Concord. In this speech Emerson examines the “social physics” involved in Judge Shaw’s action, making it clear that it was not only the slave who was chained in “adamantine bandages.” Instead, the “fashion” of action that lacked individual moral perception was spreading like a disease. For Emerson, the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law meant that communal forms of life were being re-created on the southern model. Human sentiment could restore to social institutions a sense of “rectitude” if citizens can still “see.”

Emerson begins his speech by claiming that he cannot breathe. He wakes up in the morning with a painful sensation that does not leave. His neighbors feel the same sensation. The air is full of infamy (Gougeon and Myerson 53). Though these neighbors are distant from politics they are actually more “impressionable” and feel the infamy, while those involved in politics do not. Emerson claims that

this ability to feel will eventually be experienced by the entire population. The implication is that this “sensibility” will correct the infamy of a system created by “numbers” and “parties.”

He goes on to describe the process of corruption in the community in scientific terms. The human organism that needs healthy air to breathe is surrounded by disease. Rather than use the moral rhetoric of religion to describe corruption, he uses the language of “life” and biography to describe this condition. As a result of the recent “prosperity,” he says, Boston, once the center of liberty is now corrupt. Emerson describes all the professionals who are caught up in obedience to the new law without an “unpleasing sentiment” amongst them. The newspapers, the “local good news,” he notes, have also become corrupt. Emerson concludes that “virtue” is no longer located in the individual and responsibility but is a matter of “fashion.” When the “public mind” is determined in this manner, the whole social fabric is weakened. The situation prompts Emerson to question the value of civilization (55):

The sense of injustice is blunted,- a sure sign of the shallowness of our intellect. I cannot accept the railroad and the telegraph in exchange for reason and charity. It is not skill in iron locomotives that marks so fine civility as the jealousy of liberty. I cannot think the most judicious tubing a compensation for metaphysical debility. What is the use of admirable law-forms and political forms, if a hurricane of party feeling and a combination of monied interests can beat them to the ground? What is the use of courts, if judges only quote authorities and no judge exerts original jurisdiction, or recurs to first principles? (56)

Emerson claims that immoral laws are void: “Cicero, Grotius, Coke, Blackstone, Burlamaqui, Montesquieu, Vattel, Burke, Mackintosh, Jefferson, do all affirm this” (59). Again using biological language to describe moral insights, Emerson claims that what makes a man different from an animal is his “rectitude,” his ability to stand upright. What he stands up for is not appearances and “fashion” but that which *is* independent of appearances. Without being more specific Emerson claims that this ability to know what is ties the community together and makes life substantial (58). This sensibility is grounded in “breathing” as an upright individual, not in abstraction.

What will begin the process of revolt against the Fugitive Slave Law is not divine intervention but physical laws. As long as men have “bowels,” Emerson says, they will disobey the law. Physical laws will enforce moral law:

Will you blame the ball for rebounding from the floor; blame the air for rushing in where a vacuum is made or the boiler for exploding under pressure of steam? These facts are after the laws of the world, and so it is law, that when justice is violated, anger begins. The very defense which the God of Nature has provided for the innocent against cruelty is the sentiment of indignation and pity in the bosom of the beholder (61).

Divine Providence intervenes, not as an apocalypse or sanctification through violence, but through human sentiment. If the innocent cannot speak for himself, as indeed the slave could not in a court of law, a language must be developed that enables “the beholder” to witness for those whose liberty is threatened. But first the beholder must be able to “see” through his imagination a new possibility in communal life forms. The purpose of rhetoric is not to persuade but to give a man to himself. Here Emerson enlists numbers and

statistics to make his case. He claims that the “thousands and millions of hairy babes formed not in the image of your statute, but in the image of the universe, too many to be bought off; too many than can be rich,” these “many” are “created in their sentiments” (61). Sentiments write statutes, and eventually democracy, with its numbers, will re-write the slavery laws.

Great men, not the “democracy of numbers” are responsible for “warping right into wrong” (63). Great men can use rhetoric to promote “fables of mind,” false dependencies, not the imagination. The newspapers, once Emerson’s hope for the actual spreading of news, became a vehicle for merchant advertisers who were dependent on Southern markets. These New York merchants advertised the names of abolitionist businessmen hoping to secure southern markets for themselves.

Boston, alarmed, entered into the same design. Philadelphia, more fortunate, had no conscience at all, and, in this auction of the rights of mankind, rescinded all its legislation against slavery. And the “Boston Advertiser” and the “Courier,” in these weeks, urge the same course on the people of Massachusetts. Nothing remains in this race of roguery, but to coax Connecticut or Maine to out-bid us all by adopting slavery into its constitution. Great is the mischief of a legal crime. (63)

In asking the “many” to “behold” this great “mischief,” Emerson again uses scientific imagery to make his point. He asserts that every citizen is now engaged in a single subject of conversation: slavery. “Mr. Webster can judge whether this sort of solar microscope brought to bear on his law is likely to make opposition less” (64). The solar microscope, like the dial that measures the sun’s movement, registers minute angles of perspective to illuminate the focus of concern. Repeated in the population at large this is the radiance of perspective

Emerson tracks in the “spirals” of the essay “Nature.” Emerson is not asking the population to act according to “fashion” but according to their own “angles of perspective.”

Albert J. Von Frank asserts that Emersonian language is used to appeal to “higher law” during the 1854 trials of Anthony Burns. Burns was a barely literate twenty-one year old Virginia slave who escaped to Boston. When the courts of Massachusetts were unable to defend him, Bronson Alcott led a mob against the court where he was held. Von Frank claims that while Emerson had not assumed a position of leadership early in the abolitionist campaign, he had done the work in language that allowed the community to express its revolutionary stand against federal law. Emerson argues that the private conscience must be involved in every aspect of daily action if apocalyptic eruptions are to be avoided. Every moment of revolutionary activity involves the collision of private perception with public form. Progress for Emerson, therefore, is not apocalyptic but constant. It is not material, evolutionary, technological, or economic. It is an ongoing preservation of moral piety (Von Frank 98).

Daniel Webster, a fervent supporter of The Fugitive Slave Act, felt directly targeted by transcendental thinking. In a public letter to the citizens of Newburyport, Webster identified those who opposed him as “borne away, by the puffs of a transcendental philosophy in an atmosphere flickering between light and darkness” (qtd. in Von Frank 99). In “Politics,” written in 1841-3, Emerson is clear that it is the citizen trying to “make good” that is the basis of community not “puffs” of transcendental philosophy:

In dealing with the State, we ought to remember that its institutions are not aboriginal, though they existed before we were born: that they are not superior to the citizen: that every one of them was once the act of a single man: every law and usage was a man's expedient to meet a particular case: that they are all imitable, all alterable; we may make as good; we may make better.that highest end of government is the culture of men; and that if man can be educated, the institutions will share their improvement and the moral sentiment will write the law of the land. ("Politics" CW III 199, 204)

Emerson joined the abolitionist platform and assumed a position of cultural leadership only after the passage of The Fugitive Slave Law. He emerged into leadership in the abolitionist movement to find that he could be listened to by audiences that would not be open to Garrison, Phillips and Parker whose speeches were often disrupted by public violence. In his address at Tremont Temple, Boston in 1855 he again uses the language of science and disease to condemn the slave powers.

This outrage of giving back a stolen and plundered man to his thieves was ordained and under circumstances the most painful. There was enough law of the State of Massachusetts to resist the dishonor and the crime, but no judge had the heart to invoke, no governor was found to execute it. The judges feared collision of the State and the Federal Courts....(101) Truth exists, though all men deny it. There is a sound and healthy universe whatever fires or plagues or desolation transpire in diseased corners. The sky has not lost its azure because your eyes are inflamed. Seas and waters, lime and oxygen, magnesia and iron, salts and metals, are not wasted, their virtues are safe, if an individual or a species sicken. And there's a healthy interior universe as well, and men are great and powerful as they conform to, or become recipient of, the great equal general laws....It is not to societies that the secrets of nature are revealed, but to private persons...in thoughts. (Gougeon 102)

Emerson's training as a minister, his training in German theology and historical criticism, prepared him to understand that any "original virtue," "revelation," or law could become an illusion, a fable, or a mythus if it became part of a discourse of coercion. Only a discourse that encouraged "man thinking," would attach language to hope and possibility in communal cultural exchange.

Chapter Five: The Transcendental Response to Gnostic Withdrawal

Although the antebellum period was a time of unprecedented material progress, an emotional and moral center was lost. The hope of democratic freedom and prosperity existed side by side with the hopelessness of slavery. The mood was one of paralysis: the paralysis of compromise preserving a binary understanding of freedom that was the only way of uniting the nation. All federal projects designed to unite the nation through railway, banking, communication, and educational systems were delayed as the states battled for power over slavery issues. Instead of becoming “a city upon a hill” within the global context, America was one of the few nations in the world that still allowed slavery within its borders. The failure of the church, the government, and the hopes for American democracy fostered despair in the nation. In addition, the inability of the government to control the spread of disease, tuberculosis in particular, exacerbated the sense of despair as the resultant grief over familial loss pervaded communities across America (Kessler-Eng).

In the wider, global context, the conflict over slavery put America in a disastrous position. In April 1864 Gilbert Haven, a Methodist abolitionist, characterized the Civil War as part of a larger world war between aristocracy and democracy. Haven argued that each nation’s fight for a constitution that assures freedom emboldened other nations around the world to achieve democratic institutions. The American conflict over slavery was a part of this global effort. Haven posits that “all peoples are fast becoming one.” While northern and southern rhetoricians called for apocalyptic action that would lead to war, Haven

warned that within the larger world arena America would become extremely vulnerable during its apocalyptic “sanctification through violence” (National Sermons 448-71). The tottering aristocracies of Europe might grant the Confederacy quasi-recognition and attempt a final alliance against the Union.

In the *Christian Advocate and Journal*, L. S. Weed, an obscure Methodist minister from Brooklyn, characterized the mood of the times as apocalyptic.

Weed saw the contemporary scene in terms of strife:

...debates in Congress, and Parliament, and Chambers;
insurrections in the Ottoman Empire and Greece; the
upheaval of society in Russia; the Italian difficulties; the
discontent of Hungary and Poland; the distensions of
Germany; the unrest of France and Spain; the tramp of
foreign mercenaries in Mexico, and the rage of civil
conflict and the boom of cannon on our shores....
ascending dust of the world’s gathering squadrons for the
decisive conflict. (November 20, 1862)

This global sense of impending violence served to legitimate the “apocalyptic” solution to conflict. Global violence could be a sign that Providence was imposing a universal design on the world. This atmosphere only fueled the belief in apocalyptic rhetoric. Yet, an Emersonian belief in social change emphasizes an eschatological process of re-making community that does not involve destroying it first. In the Old Testament, during eschatological “last days,” the Hebrew people consistently reconceived the terms of community. The Babylonian, Assyrian and Hittite forces of destruction were never redemptive. Instead, the Hebrews thought of social change in terms the covenant. They felt that there had been a falling away from the covenant and prophets urged the people to renew their relation to Yahweh. A “saving remnant” emerges to become the source of

cultural renewal. A fraction of the community would remain in a private covenant with their god even after the temple had been destroyed. The private, saving remnant preserves the covenant and rebuilds institutions. Never repudiating their god because the events of history did not verify their interpretation of his words, the Hebrews instead re-read the text and look for their own misunderstanding of Yahweh's will. In Hebrew eschatological thought the meaning of events is not self-evident. Emersonian thought is more eschatological in that destruction of the community is never required in order for meaning to unfold in history.

Recently scholars have related the failure of apocalyptic hopes after the death of Jesus to the development of gnosticism (Elaine Pagels, Hans Jonas in *Interpreter's Bible* 367). Hans Jonas claims that when apocalyptic hopes are devastated and an external redemptive force fails to break through history, in spite of the "santification through violence," a mood of despair overcomes the people. Out of despair, gnosticism is born. After the destruction of the temple in 70 C. E. the patristic fathers became "gnostic fighters" in their attempt to establish a church, reinterpret the law, and renew the covenant during a time of despair when withdrawal from the world was tempting to many. Although they were engaged in a community of relations that would become the church, the gnostics remained skeptical about institutional authority (365-7). In gnosticism, a loss of faith in external authority drives the individual to locate the source of security and order inward. The material world is considered completely fallen. Through access to the god of pure "light" who exists outside of the laws of nature and the material world, salvation is achieved. The gnostic, that is, centers an understanding of god

in the self: a knowledge of self that knows the origin of selfhood in “pure light.” All men retain a “fleck” of that light. The material world was made by the creator god who hopes to distract men from their attempt to reunite all the flecks to reconstitute the unity of the god of light. Instead of projecting patterns of knowledge on institutions or systems of knowledge that enable prediction, the gnostic claims that insight into the self is the key to understanding “being.” Paul Ricoeur emphasizes that the source of deliverance for the gnostic is completely external to the material world.

...salvation comes to man from elsewhere, from out there, by a pure magic of deliverance, without any connection with human responsibility or even personality...because evil is thing and world, myth is knowledge. (Ricoeur 293)

The initiate claims a radical freedom in relation to the laws of the material world because these laws actually distract the gnostic from a contemplation of pure being. Gnostic withdrawal can take the form of complete asceticism or complete libertinism. Gnosticism has existed along side the Hebrew and Christian attempt to rebuild community since 70 C. E.(Pagels).

To understand Emerson’s withdrawal into his “scholar’s closet,” it is necessary to recognize the distinction between the kind of work done by the “saving remnant” during times of cultural crisis and complete gnostic withdrawal from the material world. Emerson used the transcendental rhetoric of engagement at a time when apocalyptic rhetoric proposed that the only solution to cultural paralysis was war. Instead of moving to a position of gnostic withdrawal from the material world, transcendentalism proposes that the individual engage in the struggle to remake cultural institutions not withdraw from them or destroy them in

hopes of a sanctification through violence. Emerson did not give up the idea of reconstituting a “church.” Instead he proposed that the mind of man and the laws of the material world existed in a relation of “correspondence.” The problem was that men were not regulating the relation between “power and form.” Through Reason man imagined his relation to the world. It was necessary to interrogate that relationship. In 1833 in the essay “Nature” Emerson asks, “What is truth?... What is good?” (CW I 75). By 1844 in “Experience,” he is asking, “Where do we find ourselves?” (CW III 45). By moving out of abstract questions into spatial questions concerning orienteering, Emerson creates a space in time for understanding how ideals are experienced in the present moment. In this essay he considers any other unit of time an “illusion.” He questions our ability to know anything about the past or future. We have a precarious ability to know anything about “history”:

Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find our selves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight. (CW III 45)

Nonetheless, this is not an ahistorical perspective. Emerson would love to know, “if only we could know.” But fables of mind, illusions, and surprise all keep us from “revelations” about patterns of truth in time. Imposing fables on history keeps us from engaging the present. While we do not have the ability to live in “history,” we do have the ability to live in “experience.” Stephen Whicher claims that in “Experience” Emerson attempts “to marry faith and skepticism...” as the political events of 1844-5 pushed him more and more toward skepticism.

Yet, if Emerson's skepticism is examined in relation to the religious rhetoric of the day and the gnostic language of withdrawal into the elite "exceptionalism," Emerson's language can be appreciated more keenly for its historical concerns. Emerson's language is of hope, but that hope is not validated by providence or even empiricism. Instead, it relies on a new way of understanding history and our ability to be present to one another.

Emerson's sense of history does not rely on sequences of events. He considers such linear sequences one of the illusions of mind. In eliminating our habit of relying on past events and traditions to train our ability to "see" and "hear" in the present, in eliminating all predictive patterns of understanding the future, Emerson forces on history an "open space" of radical conscious engagement in personal time and space. In understanding the "original relations" we create in the present, original because they are not determined by the past or attempting to control the future, we understand how we are engaging other human beings in the present through the relations we form in language. It is out of the present that the future will evolve because those relations stimulate new forms of relation whose form cannot be predicted. While the future cannot be predicted the hope is that as long as language keeps men in "circles" of exchange, the future will be formed by human sensibilities and relations. In emphasizing the original relations created in the present, Emerson distinguishes himself from a gnostic claim to American exceptionalism with its abstract claims to power and authority.

In making this move away from an American claim to “sacred space” Emerson defies his own Puritan forbears who were Puritan ministers. In coming to America, the Puritans fled corrupt institutions and found a new space distanced from, though economically dependent on, English authority. They conceived of America as the “vacant continent” provided for them by providence. In this place they would create new institutions that would eventually purify European culture.¹ The Puritans conceived of America as a place, a stage on which they would create a pure center from which to redeem the world. Here in this space, divine providence would intersect with history and bring forth a redemptive design. In choosing to flee England, however, there was some anxiety. Perhaps, as the Puritans who stayed argued, the institutions must be purified from within by confronting English authority directly, not through withdrawal. Followers of Oliver Cromwell stayed. The Puritans who choose to flee, chose the gnostic response to cultural chaos. Redemption would take place without engaging the problems of the failed institutions in England. In a “Promised Land,” in a new “space” free from history, they could generate an elite community.

The Gnostic discourse of self exists, therefore, in primary relation to a discourse of apocalypse. Peter Bulkely, Emerson’s Puritan ancestor, fleeing the corrupt institutions of England, describes the need for an individual private covenant in 1633.

God conveys his salvation by way of covenant, and he doth it to those only that are in covenant with him...this covenant must every soul enter into, every particular soul must enter into a particular covenant with God; out of this

¹ For an extended discussion of the “vacant continent” see Harry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land*. For a critique of Smith see Myra Jehlen, *The American Incarnation*, 29.

way there is no life. (Greven, Protestant Temperament, 236)

While it was vital that each Puritan soul enter into a private covenant with God, without institutional ritual or sacrament, “saints” were allowed into the Puritan community only after their conversion experience had been approved by the other members of the church. Ann Hutchinson challenged this requirement of “approval” and claimed an individual relation to the Puritan covenant was possible. Her claim showed how precariously balanced the communal authority was. While the individual covenant was with God, a community in the church validated the conversion experiences of the elite, and magistrates administered the communal covenant. As the institutions failed individuals, as they may have failed Puritan women, the individual retreats into private revelation, a gnostic withdrawal.

The apocalyptic solution to internal problems externalizes the terms of the dilemma; it projects the need for power outside the self onto the pattern of history, onto Providence. Gnostics continue this trajectory, but in despair over the failure of culture, move Providence out of the material world. In so doing, the gnostics eliminate the possibility of failure, argument, and dialogue. Harold Bloom describes the gnostic withdrawal as complete:

It is a familiar formula to say that failed prophecy becomes apocalyptic, and that failed apocalyptic becomes Gnosticism. If we were to ask: “What does failed Gnosticism become?” we would have to answer that Gnosticism never fails.... [A] vision whose fulfillment, by definition, must be always beyond the cosmos, cannot be said to fail within our cosmos. (Bloom Rediscovery 69)

For Emerson the individual is always mistaken. Self-reliance is not a source of truth, every move into consciousness is a “fall” into the material world. “Man thinking” is engaged in a transitive process because in the material world change is constant and dialogue is necessary. As a rhetorical move, gnosticism may be characterized as a move to “higher ground,” a “higher ground” that obviates all the terms of discussion. For the gnostic, remarkably little can be truly known or argued other than that which is verifiable through personal witness: a kind of intuitive consciousness derived from pre-sensory awareness, from memory of the pure essence of “light.” While external sources of authority posit patterns and models, that define the course of events in ways that enable individuals to determine outcomes and predict the future, gnostic internal knowledge is concerned with bearing witness to being. For the gnostic, the source of evil and destruction in the material world is not due to sin but to ignorance, a lack of understanding of being. An essential alienation from the material world is necessary to cultivate a relation to pure being. Gnostics rely on personal conversion experiences as a creative process distinct from the laws of the material world. Outside institutional authority, through a spiritual guide, the convert is initiated into a sacred process or *techne* (Lee 109). Emerson provided a way of resisting an understanding of language as *techne*.

Emersonian transcendental thought meditates on the process of forming ideas, on the structure of the first idea: origins in relation. While this retreat to a “first beginning” in the imagination can seem gnostic, the imagination engages the material world in apperceptive awareness. Ideas become “facts” if they

achieve “original relations” to experience in the present. Gnostic “*techne*” is abstract and need not relate to the material world. The Emersonian engagement is won or lost by its ability to achieve “incarnation” (Jehlen). Systems and technologies cannot be abstract; they always create human relation. Only ideas that achieve a lived relation to experience through circles of exchange can become part of the “forms” through which we nurture life in culture. While the “Declaration of Independence” was a “fiction” imagined by the founding fathers of the nation, it became a “fact” when communities of people accepted its syllogistic logic. By focusing on the principles that precede action, and keeping the engagement on the level of individual self-reliance, Emerson defines action in terms that are incompatible with apocalyptic thinking and gnostic retreat.

Nonetheless, there are confusing similarities between the gnostic way of imagining and the transcendental “first idea.” Like the gnostic, Emerson yearns for monistic wholeness and an end to conflict and opposition. Both the gnostics and Emerson are concerned with what can be known and what is illusion or distraction. For the gnostic the material world is a distraction. For Emerson it is here, in the material world, that the imagination tries out its “first idea” like a “call” that listens for a response in dialogue (Circles).

Transcendental rhetoric of engagement and correspondence existed side by side with the rhetoric of American evangelical gnostic discourse. Charismatic leaders used the sensory power of language to create an arena of experience outside of institutions. Great masses of people outside the institution of the church, through individual rites, could “know” their own experience of

conversion. Outside of the church, in tents, in make-shift meeting halls, gifted orators tapped into the “energy” of mass groupings and “charged” the audiences to accept a “rebirth” whose source of authority was the electricity of the *techne* itself, of the abstract language of their own “being and rebirth.” This source of self whose “home” was in a different cosmos, achieved an uncanny identity in this one (Long).

The gnostic withdrawal into a new form of identity characteristic of evangelical movements was a symptom of a larger cultural anxiety regarding definitions of identity. While the abolitionist debate and the threat of war ravaged the nation, witnesses to both slavery and Cherokee removal became extremely anxious about the sources of their own identities, about safe places for those identities they could call “home” (Wald). Philip Fisher posits that periods of civil war are “without ideology because two or more rhetorics of self-representation, national purpose, and historical genealogy are in wide enough circulation to elicit complete support, even to the point that people are willing to die for them” (Fisher xv). Patricia Caldwell contends that this very lack of ideology produced a space in culture for the expression of new voices from oppressed identities. Caldwell confirms the cultural anxiety at the basis of this emergence. A unitary narrative of identity granted individuals the power to vote and own property but the ideology that supported that narrative fractured because so many people could not find their own identity in this definition. Individuals were unable to recognize themselves in definitions of selfhood that granted rights and privileges to citizens. When the excluded or repressed individuals do emerge

into public awareness or when aspects of repressed selfhood emerge, that identity is experienced as the “uncanny double” both recognized and unfamiliar, or the familiar that is not recognized as self (Wald). The self seems to exist “elsewhere” in an undefined gnostic space.

The lack of cultural cohesion produced, then, both anxiety and a space for creative expression. Charismatic leaders of all types emerged in this vacuum, including the great orators of the slave debate, Calhoun and Webster. When this debate paralyzed the nation, there was no longer an assurance that “higher laws” would emerge out of the democratic process controlled by the “unitary” source of identity. Institutional sanctions on identity so threatened the population that the anxiety resulted in a need for assurance of identity in an open space cleared by the tent, fields of electrical energy, charismatic personalities, and the assertion of language. Emily Dickinson, who refused such excitements, describes the waves of revival fervor well as she compares them to the loss experienced after the ecstasy of love. When the evangelical movements left the scene, the sense of loss deepened.

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I've known a Heaven, like a Tent-
 To wrap its shining Yards-
 Pluck up its stakes, and disappear-
 Without the sound of Boards-
 Or Rip of Nail- Or Carpenter-
 But just the miles of Stare-
 That signalize a Show's Retreat-
 In North America-

Emerson found the idea of mass redemption through charismatic rhetoric “incredible.” Yet his insistence on a self-reliant relation to language and ideals does not constitute a withdrawal from the masses. Instead, he claims that the only way the masses of people can form a community is through self-reliance. Self-reliance is the source of real engagement in human relations. The church had failed as an institution in the pre-Civil War years, but for Emerson there was still the need for a “church” of people in public circles of exchange, engaged in dialogue about “dogma,” the relation between “power and form.”²

Emerson’s own “self-centered” response to the cultural crisis of the pre-Civil War years might be described as Lockean gnosticism. Like the gnostics, Emerson posited a belief in the imagination independent of sensory experience. Ironically, this is in marked contrast to the evangelists who used the sensory experience of language to produce the “gnostic first idea” in their listeners. Yet, Emerson believed that the imagination was, nonetheless, part of the material world. In book III of Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Locke claims that complex ideas are made up of simple ideas, the hard pellets of sensation. Simple ideas can be arranged in a variety of ways to produce complex ideas, and those arrangements are “voluntary,” not designed according to fixed natural patterns. Made up of the hard pellets of sensation, ideas in language in turn become a part of the sensory world through the experience of language. Simple ideas are expressed in the world with the same sensory impact as other material phenomena. Evangelical orators used this understanding of language. In opposition to this use of language,

Emerson proposed that ideas are arranged independent of natural patterns, that they are independent of the “hard pellets of sensation.” Instead he claims the ideas of man are creating the material world and our ability to apprehend it through the senses. His “handbook on nature” attempts to describe a spiraling process of thought that frees the senses, making men capable of imagining one another. The ability to imagine what is not there on the sensory level paradoxically enables the individual to gain the self-reliant ability to apprehend difference, to “see” and “hear” the other (Nature).

According to Perry Miller, Locke’s formulation of “simple ideas” was his “weapon against enthusiasm, incantation, and priestcraft, his guarantee against perversity” by educating men to a more objective use of the senses (Errand 172). Miller situates Locke’s effort to separate language from the systems of theologians and the enthusiasm of rhetoricians within the context of the Royal Society’s attempt to “separate the knowledge of Nature, from the colors of Rhetorick, the devices of Fancy or the delightful deceit of Fables” (HRS 62 qt. in Errand 170).

In his own effort to use Reason to do the work of participating in the “vast affirmative” process of language, Emerson employed gnostic language against the very enthusiasm of gnosticism’s withdrawal from the world. Emerson’s use of “correspondences” in the essay “Nature” indicates that, while ideas originate in Reason, apart from the process of mirroring world, nonetheless, they participate in the “virtue” of the creation itself. Like Locke, Emerson believed that the “simple ideas” are embodied in language and, thereby, are received as another sense

² In the essay “circles” Emerson carefully calls for such discussion.

impression when used by one individual to communicate to another; but they are formed in Reason independent of those sense impressions. In contrast, charismatic preachers attempted to use language as a sense impression to create the experience necessary to conversion. For Emerson ideals are not dependent on experience and sense impressions. The work of reason is independent of language as a sense impression. Emerson avoided using language as a persuasive sensory experience. Instead, Emerson's language stimulates the listener's own reasoning capacities. One must be a "strong reader" to understand Emerson. He will not swoop the reader into a sensory experience of "meaning." His aphorisms demand that the reader re-imagine his first idea.

The voluntary arrangement of simple ideas is always subject to re-arrangement by the community of thinkers, by circles of awareness. Conceived in Reason, ideas are incarnated in the phenomena. Emerson poises the gnostic mind in the moment before creation, before the mind receives sense impressions, but insists that ideas become part of the growing organic exchange language makes possible. Language does become an "incarnate" part of the sensory phenomenon both felt by others and changed by the experience of the other. Yet, it is not produced by the sensory phenomenon. Here Emerson differentiates himself from Carlyle as well as Edgar Allan Poe. Poe's narrators control the sensory effects of their use of language. Carlyle's heroes control meaning for the listener. Emerson advocates "circles" of exchange not heroes and hero worship. Instead of powerful orators influencing the sensory impact of language in culture, Emerson understands that each individual must become a center of exchange.

Yet, language suffers a “fall” as it is integrated into organic networks of exchange. While the gnostic mind attempts to win the argument by moving to a higher ground, Emerson insists that the place for the imagination is the world, where all individual arguments can be lost the moment they begin to circulate in exchange. This is a more vulnerable position than the gnostic stance, or as Emerson would call it a “transitive” position. The first speaker in language exists in relation to a listener who becomes a second speaker. The self does not remain in control of language, but it does remain in relation through language. Fallen into its relation to sense impressions, the imagination now opens up sensory awareness. The individual imagination is able to function in relation to “seeing” and “hearing” in community.

In “The American Scholar,” Emerson uses the gnostic myth of the god of light to unite the images in the essay but, at the same time, rejects the gnostic withdrawal. Meaning in language is not derived from revelation or sensory impressions. Meaning is derived from the whole man’s “fall” into relation and out of gnostic “control” of abstract *techné*. Opening with the tone of a jeremiad, Emerson derides the American intellect as “sluggard,” with “heavy eyelids.” Before the end of the paragraph, however, he moves into the gnostic language of stars and light in order to assert that the American intellect will reinvigorate itself: “Who can doubt that poetry will revive and lead in a new age, as the star in the constellation Harp, which now flames in our zenith, astronomers announce, shall one day be the polestar for a thousand years?” (“American Scholar” CW I 82).

To possess themselves, “all laborers must embrace one another” (82). But before they can embrace one another, they must embrace themselves. Focussing on the gnostic theme of unity, Emerson critiques the destructive analytic mind that divides the whole world into binaries and prompts man to fetishize his relation to himself by fixing his relation to abstract ideals. The analytic mind divides the world into an opposition between good and evil. For Emerson the two are so intertwined that being is itself sundered in the separation. In addition, the analytic mind projects objective “units” on the world. These units achieve hierarchical relations. For Emerson the classifications in nature must be conceived in terms of its circulation through an inexplicable web of relations (83). Finally, the analytic mind achieves independence by withdrawing from intimate relations with the world. For Emerson, man is intimately bound to his relation to nature, but conscious of that relationship and thereby generative within its terms.

Through analytic thinking man has divided himself up into body parts, fetishizing his relation to himself (82). Man has become a “thing,” allowing economics and language to define him, instead of using economics and language as *techne* to construct his own sensory relation to phenomena: “He sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm. The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars. The priest becomes a form; the attorney a statute-book; the mechanic a machine; the sailor a rope of the ship” (83). The task is for man to achieve a sense of wholeness that would allow him to generate ideas that have integrity and are, therefore, capable of achieving

relation, and of resisting opposition and objectification. “Man thinking” can again attain the “wholeness” necessary for cultural relation. To be present to its time, the soul must be generative. Books cause “grave mischief” because the soul withdraws to libraries, regresses, becomes the sluggard intellect, memorizing meaning instead of generating new meanings. “If it were only for a vocabulary, the scholar would be covetous of action” (CW I 97).

Yet, action can also be determined by the analytic mind. Focusing on the gnostic theme of unity, Emerson describes the destructive analytic mind that divides the whole world into binaries and fetishizes his relation to himself. In this view every aspect of life comes with “two handles: beware the wrong handle” (CW I 84). Instead of the scholar spending his time trying to determine which is the “right handle” Emerson suggests that the world is a whole and the scholar can see the world whole, he is “-beholding and beholden” (“American Scholar” CW I 85).

What is nature to him? There is never a beginning, there is never an end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself. Therein it resembles his own spirit, whose beginning, whose ending, he never can find, so entire, so boundless. Far too as her splendors shine, system on system shooting like rays, upward, downward, without center, without circumference, in the mass and in the particle. Nature hastens to render account of herself to the mind. (85)

In proposing an alternative to the analytic mind that divides the world into binaries and fetishizes one’s relation to the self, Emerson proposes that man can only see through his mind. To see the world as whole he must conceive of himself as part of a whole. In nature, man is both beholder and beholden. This perspective is then not omniscient. Only by understanding the limits placed on

one who is a part, can man begin to imagine “systems on systems.” The task is for man to achieve a sense of himself that would allow him to generate ideas that have integrity and are, therefore, capable of achieving relation not opposition and objectification. “Let [man] not quit his belief that a popgun is a popgun, though the ancient and honorable of the earth affirm it to be the crack of doom. In silence, in steadiness, in severe abstraction, let him hold by himself; add observation to observation, patient of neglect, patient of reproach, and bide his own time” (CW I 102). Generative action grows from within; it is not reaction to external causes or persuasions. Violent apocalyptic action can accomplish no more in the evolution of consciousness than a popgun.

In the context of the debate over slavery and definitions of selfhood in nineteenth-century America, this retreat to meditation before action is the key to unifying the nation. “The world of any moment is the merest appearance. Some great decorum, some fetish of a government, some ephemeral trade, or war, or man is cried up by half mankind and cried down by the other half, as if all depended on this particular up or down” (102). The more aware of the private self the man becomes, the more he will be united to all other laborers. Emerson claims that the right “handle” to grasp is the hand of another man. External forces cannot unite individuals. Men only come together through recognition of the “private” self: “the deeper he dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true” (102).

In an attempt to provide the nation with an understanding of identity that unites “all laborers” Emerson claims that the deepest, most generative parts, of the self identify with a vast array of dispersed forms of identity.³ Once the private man has interrogated his own relation to the ideals that form the ground of his thought and enters into a dialogic relation to other men in the community, Emerson proposes that man becomes sensuously alive to the language of the other. This formulation obviates the possibility of dividing men into slaves and non-slaves; and it obviates retreating from the problem created by such definitions. When identity is not fetishized, objectified, and contained in hierarchically arranged units, individuals perceive others as equal to themselves, wholes that are part of a whole. “Centers everywhere, with a circumference nowhere....” (Circles). In contrast, when governments fetishize a definition of selfhood, degenerate forms of life develop: “herds,” “bugs,” the “mass” who “lost the light that can lead [them] back to [their] prerogatives” (CW I 103). As Emerson argues

This revolution is to be wrought by the gradual domestication of the idea of culture. The main enterprise of the world for splendor, for extent, is the upbuilding of a man.... It is one light which beams out of a thousand stars. It is one soul that animates all men. (CW I 107)

If souls are active, Emerson argues, there is no need for a top down approach by authorities of all kinds in the institutional framework of the nation. Rather, order is achieved by a population of people actively engaged in the transitive relationship between “power and form.” It is possible for “poetry and art” to “glimmer” “through philosophy and science, through church and state” (CW I

³ Melville comments extensively on Emerson’s idea in Moby Dick when Pip falls overboard.

110). The “conversion of the world” is arrived at through “principle” not by creating geographical sections, “north and south” (CW I 115): “A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men” (115). It is transcendental language that provides the individual connection to ideals and encourages the dialogue among men, and “each and all,” regardless of category or hierarchy: Being circulates.

The individual can be outside of the institutional framework of authority in the nation and yet be intimately connected to the generative ground of culture. The transcendental position does not withdraw from engagement. Unlike gnostic thinking, transcendental thinking begins in a fundamental relation of “trust” rather than suspicion. “God’s daring, believe the world was made for you.” (Nature). The effort is to be more intimately connected, to be “part and particle” of being. Emersonian despair resulting from the failure of culture to nurture community prompts a retreat into an “abyss” that is essentially related to nature not a withdrawal from the natural world. For Emerson we have not access to the objective existence of the natural world. In acknowledging the need to relate to nature, Emerson is acknowledging the need to relate to others who are simultaneously imagining nature. What that objective existence is, we may never know, but we can acknowledge what others see. We are beholding them while they behold us. Eschatological thinking for Emerson entails constant engagement. For Emerson each moment is a “fulfillment,” part of a spiraling growth pattern. The ordinary is the eschatological, the miraculous. Language is always related to both Reason and the laws of the phenomena in which we live.

Language is not a “secret language” of revelation. Emersonian creativity is associated with rebuilding the institutions of culture, renegotiating the relation between “power and form,” not an “initiation” into an elite gnostic community of “the elect” who “know” and nurture a witness to “being” that is pure, holy and separate. “Gnosis” is the self-knowledge so essential to the gnostics because it connects them to an ultimate transcendent purity. For Emerson, self-knowledge is vital because it demonstrates that individual is always mistaken, is always part of and subject to an ever-shifting transitive surface of exchange that can only be maintained through constant attention (266). The individual exists in a transitive relation to an impossible ideal. Nonetheless, attention is imperative. Emersonian transcendentalism depends on a radical sympathy existing within humanity. Individuals are not inured from sympathy with others in a gnostic sense of sanctity. Nor does the community of individuals collapse into a model of identity arrived at by rites of assent (Bercovitch).⁴ Instead, it is a sense of deep alienation that provides the individual with the ability to relate, to be in community. Most important, the Emersonian self lives with a sense of limit. With the courage of his own narcissism, in the essay “Experience” Emerson acknowledges that in spite of the need to do the work of becoming self-reliant, that work does not grant the individual a privileged status of any kind:

How long before our masquerade will end its noise of tambourines, laughter and shouting, and we shall find it was a solitary performance? A subject and an object,-it takes so much to make the galvanic circuit complete, but magnitude adds nothing What imports it whether it is Kepler and the sphere, Columbus and America, a reader and his book, or puss with her tail? (CW III 80)

⁴ For a complete discussion of Bercovitch’s thesis see Rites of Assent.

Like the early patristic fathers of the church, Emerson is a gnostic-fighter. He rejects the subject-object split of the intellect, as did the gnostics. Nonetheless, each rejects that dichotomy for different reasons. The gnostics reject the material world as objectively evil and identify with a subjective purity that transcends the material world. From their elite position, gnostics gain a moral freedom. Emerson claims that moral judgments cannot be made from the individual self:

We believe in ourselves as we do not believe in others....that which we call sin in others is experiment for us....everyman thinks a latitude safe for himself which is no wise to be indulged to another. The act looks very differently on the inside and on the outside, in its quality and in its consequences....Especially the crimes that spring from love seem right and fair from the actor's point of view, but when acted are found destructive for society....Evil has an objective existence, but no subjective. (CW III 78)

Emerson's conception of subjectivity insists that the individual subject in self-reliance finds his identity bound up with the identity of the other in the material world. This sympathy keeps us from making arrogant claims to "antinomian" revelation (78). This distinction regarding moral law is a crucial difference between Emerson and the gnostics. The soul is "not twin-born but only begotten." All souls are one; even the material world is a part of the soul. Emerson imagines culture to be an organic living presence. Each part nurtures the whole even if we do not understand it "objectively." It is the task of consciousness to become aware of the vast affirmative, the vast ecological relations of which we are a part. Part of the problem is that the eye cannot integrate all the parts. In making this argument, Emerson is dismantling the whole idea of American exceptionalism. America will not save the world by imposing

its elite institutions on “degraded” cultures. Instead, the hope of American identity relies on the ability to “trust” the material world, and “fall” into a sensory relation to the phenomena.

The essay “Experience” is a description of wholeness as it is felt in “part.”

Man is like a bit of Labrador spar, which has no lustre as you turn it in your hand until you come to a particular angle; then it shows deep and beautiful colors....Of course it needs the whole society to give the symmetry we seek. The party-colored wheel must revolve very fast to appear white....Like a bird which alights nowhere, but hops perpetually from bough to bough is the Power which abides in no man and in no woman, but for a moment speaks from this one and for another moment from that one. (CW III 57)

The whole man exists in partial relations to those other whole beings with whom he seeks relation. “The innavigable sea washes between all we converse with,” yet man recognizes the other for his wholeness nonetheless (CW III 48). This is the space of relation described in “Experience.” Here each person is whole, yet, the very unity that is granted all other selves, prevents us from coming into full relation to them. Like two globes, individuals touch at one point. Therefore, all sympathy is partial and must be “imaged”:

Two human beings are like globes, which can touch only in a point, and whilst they remain in contact all other points of each of the spheres are inert; their turn must also come, and the longer a particular union lasts the more energy of appetency the parts not in union acquire. Life will be imaged, but cannot be divided nor doubled. Any invasion of its unity would be chaos. (CW III 77)

Since we can only touch one part of the other’s wholeness, we grant it as self-evident and imagine into the wholeness of the other. This is an important imaginative move at a time of national debate over the definition of selfhood to be used in our national documents. Emerson posits it as a norm in social practice to

imagine into the wholeness of the other, thereby extending a claim for personhood to all Americans. Everyone is invited into the Emersonian “abyss.” However, to be a “part” of the space of the universe is work, the work of individual self-extension. Not only is it imperative that one imagine one’s own self-reliant identity but that identity is only perceived in part by the other at any time. It is also part of the work of identity to imagine into the other, imagine their wholeness. Being part of nature guarantees one a place in the “abyss” instead of a place in relation to institutional authority. The “circulation of being” generated through nature and its ecological relations inspires the imagination in Reason and the result is recognition, sensory awareness through “eyes” and “ears.” From this position in the “abyss” the individual acknowledges other subjects with a right to self-extension. That right to a place in nature is part of self-evident “higher laws.” Elaine Scarry calls this act of recognition “sympathy”:

An act of human contact and concern, whether occurring here or in private contexts of sympathy, provides the hurt person with worldly self-extension: in acknowledging and expressing another person’s pain, or in articulating one of his non-bodily concerns while he is unable to, one human being who is well and free willingly turns himself into an image of the other’s psychic or sentient claims, an image existing in the space outside the sufferer’s body, projected out into the world and held there intact by that person’s powers until the sufferer himself regains his own powers of self-extension. By holding that world in place, or by giving the pain a place in the world, sympathy lessens the power of sickness and pain, counteracts the force with which a person in great pain or sickness can be swallowed alive by the body. (Scarry 50)

Scarry traces the path through which governmental, or abstract power uses control of bodies to create its own self-extensions, erasing the capacity for

private self-extension. This discussion provides her with a definition of narcissism as the lack of an inner identity that has the language to defy the powers that inflict pain. Once this sense of internal identity is lost, the individual identifies with the source of power, the very power inflicting the pain. Without a sense of inner authority defended by our social compacts, governmental power in the nineteenth-century was boundless in its expansive expression of its own abstract identity. Railroads, telegraph systems, banking systems, inter-state commerce all became part of the government's image of a united nation. These systems required that human identity be defined in objective terms. Emerson insists on radically subjective definitions of the "space" within which identity extends. While institutions and governments had become unable to sympathize with the slaves and Indians, and instead, gained power from their ability to display control over these groups, Emersonian transcendentalism provided a space for the expression of sympathy. By establishing a bond of sympathetic connection between all men, -"all men share the same soul"- Emerson counters the force of authority that attempted to separate the bodily pain of the slaves and Indians from the issues of power.

In his study of cultural narcissism, Christopher Lasch also works with a definition of narcissism founded on an internal lack of identity. Obsessed with filling the void, the individual covers up the lack by mirroring external models. Emerson's strong moves to establish internal sources of "higher law" works to defy the external sources of authority that attempt to impose these models on the human imagination. Nonetheless, the self-reliant Emersonian identity seems to

have much in common with the narcissistic identity. It is only in recognizing Emerson's "blessed nothingness" at the center of identity that one can begin to distinguish between the narcissistic void and the "vast affirmative" out of which the self re-attaches itself to the whole. Out of the yearning for attachment within the material world community is created. The Emersonian void, the place of complete loss, is filled with self-trust out of which connection, not power, is generated.

To understand this distinction further, it is helpful to re-examine Emerson's views on scientific discourse as it relates to religious claims. In "Experience" Emerson critiques the scientists who attempt to understand the relation between spirit and matter. These scientists believe they can arrive at objective truths. This attempt to control the transitive relation between the subject and the object is seen as oppressive. In his own formulation, the subject is dedicated to a transitive relation to an impossible ideal and there can be no closure. He names these scientists "slave-drivers" because they deprive men of their freedom and disable the imagination with theories of the self:

I know the mental proclivity of physicians. I hear the chuckle of the phrenologists. Theoretic kidnappers and slave-drivers, they esteem each man the victim of another, who winds him round his finger by knowing the law of his being; and; by such cheap signboards as the color of his beard or the slope of his occiput, reads the inventory of his fortunes and character. The grossest ignorance does not disgust like this impudent knowingness. The physicians say they are not materialists; but they are:-Spirit is matter reduced to an extreme thinness: O so thin! But the definition of spiritual should be, that which is its own evidence. (CW III 52-3)

What follows is Emerson's description of "that which is its own evidence" in life. Illusion relies on the necessity of succession (55). Yet, the illusion of succession creates only "slippery surfaces of life," and the best we can hope for is to keep our balance, "skate well" on this surface. Our own need to keep moving, must not be defined by this surface but our own "muscular activity" (58). Without fixed principles or "evidence" on which to act, man must rely on the "only ballast" there is, "respect for the present hour," the immediate engagement with "actual companions" and "circumstances" (60). We know nothing of the past and can predict nothing about the future. "We may climb into the thin and cold realm of pure geometry and lifeless science, or sink into that of sensation. Between these extremes is the equator of life, of thought, of spirit, of poetry, a narrow belt" (CW III 62).

"Experience" begins with the question, "Where do we find ourselves" (45). In a "narrow belt," between matter and spirit which is the "Emersonian abyss."

We fancy that we are strangers, and not so intimately domesticated in the planet as the wild man and the wild beast and bird. But the exclusion reaches them also; reaches the climbing, flying, gliding, feathered and four-footed man. Fox and woodchuck, hawk and snipe and bittern, when nearly seen, have no more root in the deep world than man, and are just such superficial tenants of the globe. Then the new molecular philosophy show astronomical interspaces betwixt atom and atom, shows that the world is all outside; it has no inside....The mid world is best. Nature as we know her is no saint. The lights of the church, the ascetics, Gentoos and corn-eaters, she does not distinguish by any favor. She comes eating and drinking and sinning....(63)

In the "mid world" between matter and the spirit, which Emerson claims is the best, "life wears a visionary face" and the "hardest roughest action is visionary

also.” When decisions are made in this Emersonian space, it is a choice between “soft and turbulent dreams.” Knowing is not possible: “I am very content with knowing, if only I could know. This is an august entertainment, and would suffice me a great while” (CW III 84). Giving up any hope of knowing, Emerson nonetheless claims that “there is a victory yet for all justice” based on the capital virtue of self-trust. Appeals to a providential design in history or an elite status for American identity will not serve these Emersonian terms of justice. Instead, the ability to construct simple ideas voluntarily and “see” and “hear” the results of those ideas in the sensory world will serve the cause of justice. Our sensory awareness of others will challenge our ideas as we develop the imaginative capacity for sympathy, the capacity to give images of self-extension to those peoples who are not able to do it for themselves because of oppression. For Emerson those images, those simple ideas are poetic. The poet is “free” and his duty is to “make free” in this “poem” America (“The Poet” CW III 32):

In our way of talking we say “That is yours, this is mine”; but the poet knows well that it is not his; that it is as strange and beautiful to him as to youAnd therefore the rich poets, as Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Raphael, have obviously no limits to their works except the limits of their lifetime, and resemble a mirror carried through the street, ready to render an image of every created thing. (CW III 41)

The ability to form simple ideas, “wherever are forms with transparent boundaries” and take those ideas into the limits of a lifetime and see those ideas critiqued in the sensory awareness that creates sympathy with every image of a created thing in the streets, is, for Emerson, the beginning of justice. The image that Emerson leaves us is not an image of the other but rather of that space of

“extension” into which he invites all to self-trust: “And yet is the God the native of these bleak rocks. That need makes in morals the capital virtue of self-trust. We must hold hard to this poverty, however scandalous, and by more vigorous self-recoveries, after the sallies of action, possess our axis more firmly. This life of truth is cold and so far mournful; but it is not the slave of tears, contrition and perturbations” (“Experience” CW III 81). It is this space that Emerson protects until the oppressed can emerge into the “bare common.” It is Emerson’s “blessed nothingness,” the “abyss” out of which all identity emerges “holding firm to its own axis.”

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