Emerson's Agitation: The American Literary Renaissance and the Formation of Northern Antislavery Ideology

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Introduction

It is an old oracle, that nations die by suicide,
and the sign of it is the decay of thought.[1]

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Abolitionist Wendell Phillips was worried enough to carry a concealed weapon. It was a cold, wintry day on 24 January 1861 in Boston, and an angry, nervous crowd gathered. The Boston police were in attendance, and were determined not to stop the rowdies from disrupting the meeting. Phillips had invited Ralph Waldo Emerson to speak at the annual meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. Ordinarily a crowd of like-minded individuals would listen to the speakers at the Tremont Temple in Boston, but this was no ordinary time. Two months earlier, in November 1860, Abraham Lincoln had been elected president on the antislavery, sectional Republican party platform. Not a single Southern electoral vote went to Lincoln, a clear indication of intransigent division. In December, South Carolina seceded, and ten other slave states went with it. The border states of Missouri, Maryland, Delaware and Kentucky – all slave states – chose to stay in the Union. Abolitionists applauded disunion, and tensions were running high, as indicated by Phillips's feeling that he needed to arm himself when speaking in front of people. William Lloyd Garrison, in his *Liberator,* underscored his support of disunion when he wrote "at last the covenant with death is annulled, and the agreement with hell broken." Emerson echoed his desire for separation if it led to the destruction of slavery. Many Americans, however, were still ardently pro-Union, and

[1] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fortune of the Republic, 1 December 1863," in Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson, eds., *Emerson's Antislavery Writings,* New Haven, 1995, 137.

public expression of anger and violence was growing common. Into this roiling scene Emerson appeared to deliver an antislavery speech.[2]

Antiabolitionist mobs had broken up antislavery lectures before, and Emerson knew that confrontation was likely if he went to Boston. The country was two months away from the Civil War. Though sensing the potential for danger, Emerson wrote in his journal that he would have gone to deliver the speech even if he were mute, and if so he would have "mowed & muttered or made signs." Phillips was delighted that Emerson accepted, and he took the stage first. Pro-Union agitators were indeed present at the hall, and loud and interruptive. They did not like Phillips, and they groaned and murmured when Emerson rose to speak. Some of the hecklers were conservative, antiabolitionist Bostonians, some immigrants, and some even Southern students from Harvard. Emerson took the stage and sympathizers applauded while the rest hissed, booed and cheered for the Union. Emerson attempted to speak and was interrupted. He tried once again and again the noisy crowd silenced him. He waited patiently for the mob to quiet. The *Liberator* reporter noted that a reverend stood and asked the police do something about the disorder. The police refused to respond, and seemed to be waiting for the situation to worsen. When Emerson was eventually allowed to begin, he wasted no time in jumping directly into contentious issues. Slavery, he said, was a "moral pestilence" that is suffocating the nation, and that it "actually decomposes mankind." He looked out over the rustling crowd; he looked certain men in the eye, and said "Here are young men from the Southern country," and they have been educated in the North, in Europe, and yet have

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[2] My narrative in this section based on Len Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform,* Athens, 1990, 264-267; and Gougeon, "Historical Background," in Gougeon and Myerson, *Emerson's Antislavery Writings,* xlviii-li; and *Liberator,* 1 February 1861; see also William Lloyd Garrison, *Liberator,* 14 January 1861.

suffered "blindness, which hides from them the great facts of right and wrong." He brought up ideas that the South burned books and refused to engage open dialectic. Members of the crowd did not like these words, and began shouting Emerson down. He waited for "comparative order" to be restored. The North could no longer compromise, he said, there could be no more concessions. The initial compromise to slavery in the Constitution was "the monstrous concession made at the formation." Civilization and humanity have been stunted. The audience grew more boisterous. There were shouts to "put him out," and other curses. The police began moving through the gallery, Emerson stopped his speech and departed with Phillips. The event was shut down, and when the abolitionists attempted to resume the following night, the mayor of Boston denied their access to the Tremont Temple. Emerson concluded in his journal, "The mob roared whenever I attempted to speak, and after several beginnings, I withdrew."[3]

Antislavery: Emerson's Evolution and Northern Society's Growth

Many literary and historiographical interpretations of Ralph Waldo Emerson emphasize his early work. Emerson spent much of his energy expounding the ideals of self-reliance, of an individual approach to spiritual and moral growth, as well as an individual method for correcting society's ills. One must tend to personal growth before one can engage the political or social sphere. Most Emerson compendia contain his essays and speeches from the 1820s through the early 1840s. His commencement speech at Harvard shocked civil society and he was widely condemned by conservatives. He quit the Unitarian

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[3] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (hereafter *JMN*), Vol. XV, 1860-1866, eds., Linda Allardt, David W. Hill, and Ruth H. Bennett, Cambridge, 1982, 111; *Liberator,* 1 February 1861; Gougeon, "Historical Background," in Gougeon and Myerson, xlviii-xlix; Joel Myerson, "Notes," in Gougeon and Myerson, 221.

ministry, and reiterated his impressions that a man must relate to God and society by himself. He left the church in order to spend time correcting himself, so that he, as a scholar and a poet, might be of service to society. A higher moral power must be utilized by the individual, and then, when the individual's problems are corrected, he may turn to the culture at large. Essays such as "Self Reliance," "Man the Reformer" and "New England Reformers" served to solidify the Transcendentalists' isolated, aloof approach. Without access to his antislavery speeches, which had only been presented as a formidable whole by Len Gougeon in 1990, and collected in a single volume in 1995 by Joel Myerson and Gougeon, many biographers and scholars missed his overt activism. There is a certain laziness inherent in scholarly approaches which claim the Transcendentalists were individualist philosophers not willing to get their hands dirty in the muck of actual events. The lack of an appreciation of Emerson's very public role is curious, considering that Emerson made his living as a lecturer. He was a public speaker, well-traveled, and an integral piece of the rising consumer culture which was expanding at the time of the market and transportation revolutions. He was married to an abolitionist, and as this paper will show, was immersed in a Massachusetts and Concord abolitionism whether he desired to escape it or not.

It is important to stress that Emerson was not an early abolitionist radical. When William Lloyd Garrison started his *Liberator* antislavery newspaper and his relentless activism in 1831, he and his fellow abolitionists were considered radicals by the majority of Northern citizens. Emerson at the time was still coming into his own as a philosopher and speaker. His personal growth mimics the trajectory of society as a whole. There was a time in the 1830s when abolitionists were shunned by mainstream society, if not

physically attacked by antiabolitionist, pro-Union mobs. It is understandable that Emerson would not have been aboard at this early date in the struggle against slavery. As society evolved, so too did Emerson, and Thoreau and Whitman. As Northern society began to cultivate an economic and political antislavery, not just a moral antagonism to slavery, the movement began to go mainstream. With the rise in print culture and transportation improvements, ideas spread quickly, and ideologies could coalesce into movements. Contained within this evolution was Emerson's political agitation. He moved along within Northern society with his increased antislavery activism, and at the same time he helped lead the way. It is clear that Emerson went far beyond the role that traditional scholarship has afforded him with his public and political involvement.

Scholars and popular writers have either ignored or not probed deeply enough into Emerson's very real public and political influence. Oliver Wendell Holmes, in his early biography of Emerson, ignored his antislavery work entirely. Some claim that this was because of Holmes's more conservative views on the issue, and some cite personal jealousy. According to David Robinson and others, the first few biographies threw later scholars off the scent of Emerson's activism. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., offers a fine example of missing the mark when he stated that Emerson "would not make the ultimate moral effort of Thoreau," and that he "lingered indecisively, accepting without enthusiasm certain relations to government but never confronting directly the implications of acceptance." A powerful and unfortunate example of misapprehension was provided by Stanley Elkins in his influential, controversial book *Slavery.* Elkins asserted for the historical record that Emerson and other Transcendentalists failed "to analyze slavery itself as an institution," but they also "failed equally to consider and

exploit institutional means for subverting it." Albert J. von Frank, a contemporary scholar who arrived at different conclusions about Emerson's importance in the political and cultural sphere, oppugned Elkins by saying that he "takes it for granted that institutions are a society's only channels of power." Literature and its influence on society at large is a vital realization, and Elkins's treatise "leaves no room for genuine writers and intellectuals to operate," and that Elkins "cannot imagine how" writers and artists, pubic lecturers and scholars, "*could* function relevantly." Transcendentalists, Elkins said, never strongly related to abolitionists. This may have been true in the 1830s, but, as this paper amply exhibits, nothing could be further off the mark for the two decades which followed. George Frederickson claimed that Emerson was detached from worldly affairs, and oblivious to his cultural environment. He wrote that Emerson "always shunned social commitments and public activity, even to the point of avoiding town affairs in the village of Concord." This is a strange statement to make about a man who made his living traveling around the North and Midwest giving lectures, writing and publishing essays, and serving on Concord's lyceum committee. Stranger still when one reads his extensive antislavery writings and follows him from town to city while he delivered abolitionist speeches against slavery, contributing as he did to the formation of Northern antislavery ideology.[4]

Other writers and scholars continued the trend of misinterpreting Emerson's political engagement, up to and through the 1980s. But the debate deepened with the

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[4] Gougeon, "Historical Background," in Gougeon and Myerson, liii-lvi; Albert J. von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston,* Cambridge, 1998, xvi; See also, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. *The Age of Jackson,* Boston, 1945, 382-384; Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life,* Chicago, 1959, 147-168; George Frederickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union,* New York, 1965, 178-179; Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Ralph Waldo Emerson,* New York, 304.; and Anne Rose, *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830-1850,* New Haven, 1981, 219-220.

work of Len Gougeon, Joel Myerson, David M. Robinson, Albert J. von Frank and a handful of others, who collected Emerson's antislavery materials and started writing about them. That Emerson spoke at all about slavery Gougeon has conclusively proved. This paper follows in their footsteps, but offers critical evidence of what that might *mean,* in a contextual, cultural and societal interpretation. The writers of the American Literary Renaissance – so termed by Lewis Mumford and F.O. Matthiessen – created their best and most important work in the 1850s, at the height of the antislavery and sectional debates. And slavery, as perhaps von Frank put it best, " could be exposed, condemned, and cured only from a vantage point outside and above it," in other words, from the "ideal and the abstract." The scholars who portrayed Emerson as disconnected and ineffectual had it wrong, and they evinced a fairly typical "misunderstanding of the force of ideas and of the power of literature." Literature, writers and ideas matter, and the dissemination of these creative versions of communication help to form cultural identity. In this case, competing cultural identities eventually clashed in the American Civil War, in which almost a million men died. The war was about a way of life, built upon a foundation of ideology. Emerson was immersed in the middle of the ongoing debate, and served an important function in that debate as public celebrity, as social intellectual.[5]

American Renaissance, Text and Context

[5] Albert J. von Frank, *Trials of Anthony Burns,* xvi; for comprehensive explication of the American Literary Renaissance, see F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman.* London, 1941; and Lewis Mumford, *The Golden Day.* Boston, 1957.

The search for Civil War causation has excited the intellectual energies of historians for generations. The relationship of literature, art and ideas to culture and society has also attracted the attention of scholars, philosophers and theorists. Put the two studies together, and a dynamic, engaging discussion arises, an investigation into which is the purpose of this paper. Has literature affected history, have ideas mattered? And how do national, canonical, mythological narratives form, then spread, then impress later generations? Many cultural historians have used the idea of a spreading literate society as one element of the notion of a burgeoning common culture and a growing sense of nationhood and identity. Historians have further shown that the differences in the economies between the industrialized North and the plantation South exacerbated regional cultural identities. This paper examines the above phenomena as they relate to one particular, thorny issue of the antebellum period: slavery. In particular, the Market Revolution, improved technology and transportation advancements had a profound impact on the assemblage of an identifiable antislavery ideology, one that ultimately became the dominant belief, and one that led to the North's solidification of its role in the sectional crisis.

Historians have compiled a litany of reasons for the growth of book publishing. Ron Zboray is one of the leading scholars of the field, and he offers a list: the rise of popular fiction, the increase of public schooling, growth of church societies, community reading groups, lyceums, the "transformation of the reading public," the exponential growth of the economy. But the primary contemporaneous reason, offered by the major publishers themselves, was the "industrialization of printing" and the "progress of printing technology." According to Zboray:

> Such a view holds great ramifications for American cultural history, for the period of growth in the book trade celebrated by the New York Publishers at their festival coincided with the maturation of American literary life. By 1855 all the masterpieces of the American Renaissance – Poe's poems and short stories, Emerson's essays, Thoreau's *Walden,* Hawthorne and Melville's most important works, and even the first edition of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* – had appeared.[6]

The list included the sales phenomenon of the century, *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* which influenced both North and South, and offered an emotional, sentimental view of slavery to Americans. The novel sold millions of copies, and was integral to European and Russian views of American slavery as well. It is not a coincidence that the burgeoning economy advanced hand-in-hand with the flowering of our literary culture. The innovations in technology had much to do with the formations of a nascent national identity, and certainly a Northern identity that would ultimately clash with the South. Mary Kupiec Cayton echoed these interpretations as relates Emerson when she wrote that his "reputation as American prophet became firmly established in tandem with the rise of a national culture industry." Improvements in transportation and technology attending the market revolution, it could be argued, helped the growing antislavery advocates communicate with one another. And as historians agree that the northern advances in industry far outstripped the agrarian South, literary dissemination must have been more advanced in the North than in the South.[7]

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[6] Zboray, "Antebellum Reading and the Ironies of Technological Innovation," *American Quarterly* 40, No. 1 Special Issue: Reading America (March, 1988), 66.

[7] Mary Kupiec Cayton, "The Making of an American Prophet: Emerson, His Audiences, and the Rise of the Culture Industry in Nineteenth-Century America." *The American Historical Review* 92, No. 3, (June, 1987), 615.

Reading the "same books and periodicals" helped stimulate the growth of an increasingly shared culture. Additionally, there were newspaper articles, the written drafts of speeches, and the rise of what we would today call popular culture. For the notion of ideology formation to bear the weight of its potential import, it is necessary that we take a look at how mass print media helped influence the slavery debates in the North. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is an extreme example of bestseller success that resulted from antebellum mass culture, but there are other examples of influence that we need to address.

People shared ideas, read newspapers and discussed them, and attended speeches at lyceums, churches, public halls, and even Nathanial Hawthorne's front lawn. Where there existed a shared literary experience over a piece of fiction, there could also be shared positions over political and economic ideologies. Zboray quotes Henry Read, who lectured to the Philadelphia Athenian Institute and Library in 1838: "'There is a concord of the heart of one which may be answered from the heart of the other. Strangers with an ocean between discover in some sympathy of literature the elements of friendship." As common literary experiences gave rise to friendships, we must also acknowledge the growing propaganda usages that proliferated during this period.[8] As the Post Office's volume increased because of the rise of literacy, the growth in letter writing and reading and the increased geographic mobility of the populace, there was an attendant rise in published communication. When we study the so-termed "American Literary Renaissance," we must discuss it in terms of this "publishing revolution." As there was a dramatic increase in publishing, coupled with the primary engine of the Age of Reform

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[8] Zboray, "The Letter and the Fiction Reading Public in Antebellum America," *Journal of American Culture,* p. 31.

and the rise of literacy, then the well-positioned literary genius of a Hawthorne, Whitman or Emerson can better be explained. Inject this (text and context) into the contemporary political climate and we begin to see how effective was literary dissemination in the formation of opinion. This paper analyzes the relationship between the increasing importance of literature in society to the formation of opposing views that ultimately led to the sectional crisis. Literature, in all its functional parts, had a profound effect on the formation of ideology in the early republic and antebellum period.

The widely disseminated and growing polemic, the antislavery rhetoric that came from radical abolitionist voices on the one hand, and moderate voices on the other, helped create a profound antislavery stance in the North. Whether this stance was moral, practical or economic, all such ideas were offered to the consuming public through speech and writing. Emerson's part in the development of mass culture on the one hand, and Northern antislavery ideology on the other, from his emancipation of British slaves speech in 1844 through the physical assault on Charles Sumner in 1856, John Brown's martyrdom in 1859, and the firing on Ft. Sumter in 1861, is the focus of the current project. My interest, as von Frank aptly wrote it, is aroused when "the party of the word dead-ends into the party of deeds at the point of revolution."[9] And the revolution – "America's Second Revolution" – occurred when the United States went to war with itself.

Transcendentalism was a writing movement, if anything, and its members wrote about themselves, about one another, and spawned many other tracts about it. The body of material that survives today comprises a huge segment of the American metanarrative,

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[9] Albert J. von Frank, 224.

the story of ideas, and the story of the formation of northern attitudes of superiority to and separateness from the South. It is not a stretch to claim that the North's victory in the Civil War had much to do with the solidification of Northern ideas as relates the dominant cultural story, as well as the canonization of the writers of the American Renaissance. According to Charles Capper, antislavery as a part of "a democratic progressivist plot" and also as "a collective historical movement" began to form the metanarrative of the antebellum period, the Civil War itself, and consequently the general story, from a Northern dominant position (winners write history) of America's democratic development. Call it "romantic progressivism" if you will, but the literary influence of Northern antislavery ideologies, especially as evinced in the ideals of the canonical writers whose works have been passed down to us, explicitly form our current interpretations of the North/South imbroglio and the positions staked out by each party in the sectional crisis. Southerners may in today's parlance wryly speak of a "war of Northern aggression," but this interpretation is marginalized in the dominant American historical narrative. In this way, the postbellum literary tradition and the scholarly impetus have helped to form the way we see the antebellum period. As scholars have worked to define Emerson's place at the table, his antislavery writings help solidify our postwar interpretations. A discussion of prewar and postwar influence of the American Renaissance on antislavery ideology and American cultural tradition seems in this light quite compelling.[10]

In speaking of Emerson's affect on fellow Transcendentalists as far as direct social and political action – the turning of an author's intentions into something greater –

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[10] Drawn from Charles Capper, "'A Little Beyond': The Problem of the Transcendentalist Movement in American History," *The Journal of American History* 85, No. 2 (Sept., 1998), 515.

von Frank wrote "but it begins to look as though there are no political motives to action that are not also, first literary." Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Martin Stowell, two Transcendentalists from Worcester, as we will see in Chapter Two of this paper, traveled to Boston in order to free a fugitive slave from captivity. They were inspired to do so by Emerson's political rhetoric. Therefore, when one rushes "voluntarily into physical danger" one necessarily "needs a devotion to abstract principle such as literature and culture alone can provide." Emerson's long-running antislavery rhetoric, especially during these tense and divisive times, was designed to "create heroes" which had been "Emerson's business all along." John Brown as hero and martyr, as reinforced by Thoreau and Emerson, is one example of the power of the word, and of the word as building an American mythology. Additionally, Henry Ward Beecher exemplified a belief in the worth of the literary activism of his time when he wrote that "Art . . . and all human learning should speak" for the "liberation of the oppressed." In the future of America there will be no books remembered that "bear the taint of despotism." Rather, "the literature of the world is on the side of liberty."[11]

This essay entertains often ignored ideas of American aggrandizement, Northern nationalism, and American exceptionalism as being the dominant paradigm that survived the war. Thus, our broad interpretations of the antebellum period have much to do with the influential writings of the members of the American Renaissance, which by virtue of being on the winning side powerfully enhanced the image of America we possess today. Though the voices of the South have not been eradicated, by all means we can say that there has been some element of sublimation. This article suggests that had the South

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[11] Henry Ward Beecher, in Julia Griffiths, ed., *Autographs for Freedom,* Auburn, N.Y., 1854, 274; and Albert J. von Frank, 103.

won, our views of the impact of abolitionists, on the one hand, and the work of Emerson and Hawthorne and their colleagues on the other, would not carry the same weight as they do now. At the very least, our national interpretations of their work would derive from an alternate slant. This sort of retrospective suppositioning might not impress some historians, but there is no question, as far as the influence of the written word, the American print revolution, and the antebellum book are concerned, that there exists a quantifiable and qualifiedly ante- and postbellum impact. These authors were not just writing in a vacuum, readers and listeners contemporaneous to them were not unimpressionable, and readers since have not lost or disinherited the power of their words.

Antislavery writing became a part of American iconography, and it influenced mightily ideas of Northern nationalism and an American unity as nationhood that eventually became the hegemonic view of things. Southern slavery, on the other hand, and attendant proslavery writings, becomes untenable and unsustainable. As slavery loses, so goes the literature of slavery as forming a potential piece of the mythological narrative. Slavery and its literature, alas, are painted as immoral losers, destined for the scrap heap of history. Some moralists might argue that this phenomenon exists because of the South's impossible position of maintaining the "peculiar institution," that it was even God's will that eventually subsumed Southern influence. However, we can see from the vast blanket of literary rumblings that were disseminated in the antebellum period that the very real role of literature, of writers and their art, was one of the vital struts in the bridge away from slavery. Without question, the North won the propaganda wars.

This "winning the propaganda wars" must be in part attributable to the market revolution, to literacy rates, to improved transportation. The railroad and other technological improvements had in effect contributed to the segmentation of America, rather than its cohesion. The South possessed literature, too, and bore her share of readers and writers, but the infrastructural framework that existed in the North generally did not in the South.

Almost a year before composing this thesis, I read Jonathan Glickstein's recent *American Exceptionalism, American Anxiety,* and asked an important – and at the time quite innocent and unassuming – question. In discussing ideas of Northern nationalism, Glickstein wrote about the "free-labor states' ideological preparation for the Civil War." I began a process of thinking about such a preparation, about the coalescence of ideas, about ideological shifts and momentum, and I asked myself, "Is there literature, or were there heavyweights like perhaps Emerson, who contributed to the ideological preparation for the war, and how?" This paper answers the question, while focusing on Emerson as the cultural celebrity and public intellectual. Also, if Glickstein is right when he claimed that "historians have slighted the variety and the magnitude" of appropriating terms and phrases by social activists and reformers when building ideologies, then this paper provides evidence of Emerson's own use of discursive phrasing with his "ideological contributions to the outbreak of the Civil War." Historians have also missed or ignored Emerson's utilization of free-soil, free-labor principles when arguing about the rising slave power in the South. Scholars have slighted his usage of American exceptionalist mythology, and the ideological nation-myths of the Declaration of Independence, when

he actively disparaged slavery. Emerson's words and his agitation were added to the general perfervid rhetoric of the period, a time which proved that words, ideas and language can have dire, culture-forming and society-destroying implications.[12]

The interwoven themes of this discussion are not relegated to the forgotten past. Issues of ideology, cultural meaning, identity and the relationship of literature to society possess a current life of meaning and vitality. Historians such as Sean Wilentz, writing in a 11 December 2005 *New York Times Book Review* essay, bemoaned the "separation of literature and state," that seems to presently exist, claiming that literary writers of today do not partake in or influence politics, and that this trend has "become absolute." Not so for the "formative era" of democratic politics in the antebellum period. Scholars have recently exhibited an interest in cultural biographies of American canonical writers, and have situated literary figures in a political and social construct. David Reynolds wrote of Walt Whitman, Andrew Delbanco on Melville, and the time for a cultural/historical review of Emerson's time, and the political importance of his antislavery agitation, is due. America has always had a place for at least a few public intellectuals. Emerson fulfilled such a position. However, according to recent articles in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review,* and across the Atlantic in the *London Review of Books,* there has not been a person occupying such a place in life and letters since Edmund Wilson. Americans, Stefan Collini wrote, have been "yearning for a period when it seemed easier to be at the heart of things." Wilson, like Emerson, was a writer to whom "History . . . made sure an invitation was sent" when public events reached a boiling point. That these ideas play a part in current discourse compels me to write this paper on a literary figure and the role

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[12] Jonathan A. Glickstein, *American Exceptionalism, American Anxiety: Wages, Competition, and Degraded Labor in the Antebellum United States,* Charlottesville, 2002, 142, 164.

of literature in the formation of cultural ideas. Lionel Trilling lamented the separation of art and politics when he wrote that he wished for a magazine, like the old *New Republic,* that assumed "politics and literature naturally live in lively interconnection." Literature and art are methods of communication, they are links from human individual to comrade and enemy, and they are the conveyance of ideas. As we will see, ideas can grow into competing clusters of ideals which move beyond the realm of thought and rhetoric to the bloody, antagonistic region of a battlefield. And the antebellum arguments against slavery did not pass by a self-reliant Emerson, could not have avoided the attentions of this man of letters, this cultivator of words.[13]

Chapter One

The Public Intellectual and the Beginning of Emerson's Antislavery

When the cannon is aimed by ideas,
then gods join in the combat, then poets are born.[14]

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

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[13] Sean Wilentz, "The Rise of Illiterate Democracy," *The New York Times Book Review,* December 11, 2005, 39; Stefan Collini, "Liquored Up," *London Review of Books,* 17 November 2005, 15-16; Matthew Price, "The Survivor," *Los Angeles Times Book Review,* November 12, 2005, R9-R10.

[14] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fortune of the Republic," 1863, in David M. Robinson, *The Political Emerson: Essential Writings on Politics and Social Reform,* Boston, 2004, 192.

The weeping willows and grand oaks of South Carolina swayed in the uneasy breeze of human conflict. The trees, like the men of the occasion, were solemn. And the indolent, easy seasons of the region produced the moss which hung in natural bunting from the boughs around the men. It was early in the Civil War, and collected for the occasion were the men of the "first regiment of freed slaves" who had given themselves to service in the Union. They stood impressively still, intently and respectfully awaiting their next move. Dr. Seth Rogers of Worcester, Massachusetts, "their white surgeon," stood before the assembled soldiers and surveyed them. He felt a measure of pride; he believed that the North was engaged in the right conflict for the proper reasons. It was Sunday, and services were being performed, out in the open, under the unvanquished southern sky. It was the officer's wish to read something inspirational, some piece of literature that was integral to their collective cause. He read Emerson's Boston hymn:

> Pay ransom to the owner
> And fill his cup to the brim.
> Who is the owner? the slave is owner
> And ever was. Pay him.

On the faces of the new regiment, the newly freed men, the observer saw respect and resolve. There was an air of "solemn religious expression as if the Almighty had at last heard their prayers and this poet was his messenger."[15]

Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a fellow Transcendentalist with Emerson, a writer, reporter, public speaker and abolitionist, was giving a speech in Boston in the

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[15] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Emerson as a Reformer," in *Boston Evening Transcript,* May 25, 1903, in *Literary Comment in American Renaissance Newspapers: Fresh Discoveries Concerning Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott and Transcendentalism,* ed. Kenneth Walter Cameron, Hartford, 1977, 179.

early part of the twentieth century when the above scene was memorialized. Since the Civil War and since the death of Emerson, Higginson had spent his energies writing about those people with whom he worked and whom he had so admired. Like Emerson, he was an important antislavery advocate. He attempted a bold rescue of captured fugitive slave Anthony Burns, and he led a black regiment in the Civil War, an experience which led him to witness the above event. He was an unabashed abolitionist, and he said that Emerson was "the most resolute reformer, not excepting Garrison, whom our nation had produced." This mention of Emerson in the same breath with William Garrison, the most radical and influential of the abolitionists, helps establish how very influential Emerson's antislavery writings and speeches were. As mentioned in the Introduction, scholars have previously discounted Emerson's role in the most contentious issue of the antebellum period. It will be clear from a careful consideration of Emerson's own words, and his involvement in the movement, that he was in fact one of the strongest and most eloquent voices against the oppression of slavery.[16]

This chapter discusses Emerson's emergence as an antislavery advocate and political player in the 1840s. It begins with his signal speech given in Concord at the behest of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, of which his wife, his neighbors,

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[16] Higginson, in Cameron, 178; for insight into Emerson's purported lack of importance, see Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson,* Boston, 1945; Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life,* Chicago, 1959; George Frederickson *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union,* New York, 1965; Taylor Stoehr, *Nay-Saying in Concord: Emerson, Alcott, and Thoreau,* Hamden, 1979; and Anne Rose, *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830-1850,* among many others in the scholarly pantheon. For newer texts which attempt to correct this interpretation, see Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson, *Emerson's Antislavery Writings,* New Haven, 1995; Len Gougeon *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform,* Athens, 1990; Albert J. von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston,* Cambridge, 1998; T. Gregory Garvey, ed., *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform,* Athens, 2001; David M. Robinson, *Emerson and the Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and Ethical Purpose in the Later Thought,* New York, 1993; David M. Robinson, *The Political Emerson,* Boson, 2004; Larry J. Reynolds, *European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance,* New Haven, 1988; and Mary Kupiec Cayton, *Emerson's Emergence: Self and Society in the Transformation of New England, 1800-1845,* Chapel Hill, 1989.

Thoreau's sisters and mother, and many other important Concord women were members. The lecture was called "An Address on the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies," and was given on August 1, 1844. This was the ten-year anniversary of British emancipation, and many antislavery societies throughout the east and west gave rallies on this date annually. This chapter shows how Emerson could not escape the influence of his friends and neighbors, his fellow writers and lecturers, and it also introduces the idea of the importance of the public intellectual. Later chapters will show how his attitudes linked with the political ideology of the Republican Party, and finally, how his words have contributed to the formation of American mythology, the American story.

Emerson's Beginning Antislavery

It was a warm day on the first of August in Concord, 1844, and all of the town's leading citizens were attending an event to commemorate the emancipation of British slaves. Emerson stood before the assembled crowd. Frederick Douglass, the famous black abolitionist and former slave, was there; Samuel May, another renowned advocate, stood in the back of the room. It was well attended, as most of his talks were. Emerson had mentioned slavery in the course of his speeches, and even from the Boston pulpit in the 1830s, but it was here, with this speech, that he solidified his stance and his public avowals against the nefarious institution. And here, on the anniversary of emancipation in the West Indies, he was about to pull out all the stops. Besides his wife, the audience included Thoreau and many neighbors and friends in the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society who had been prodding him for a speech and encouraging him to come forward

with the weight of his celebrity. He did not disappoint them. He spent a fair amount of rhetorical energy describing point-by-point brutalities of slavery, including images of "men's backs flayed by cowhide" and runaways "hunted with blood-hounds into swamps and hills" and descriptions of a planter throwing his human property into a "copper of boiling cane-juice." When he had riveted the audience with these familiar grotesqueries, he said about the spilled blood of the negro: "The blood is moral; the blood is anti-slavery: it runs cold in the veins: the stomach rises with disgust, and curses slavery."[17]

Emerson became inextricably involved with the radical movement of abolitionism, an involvement from which he did not shrink. Sandra Petrulionis, in discussing the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Concord, writes of the "wives, sisters, mother, friends . . ." of the famous men, and American canonical writers, "whose public support eventually directed worldwide political and philosophical attention to the antislavery cause." She also allows that "Abolitionist historiography routinely invokes the names of Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Amos Bronson Alcott, and others" when discussing Concord's antislavery past.[18] This contrasts earlier views of Emerson's role in the escalating conflict. According to Petrulionis, the women of Concord were able to influence and "in some cases, goad" the influential men of their town toward increased antislavery activity. As mentioned earlier, Emerson's wife, Thoreau's sisters and mother, and Alcott's wife, Abby, among others, played this role admirably. When Emerson spoke in Concord in August of 1844, and in Worcester, on

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[17] Emerson, in Robinson, 95; see also Gougeon, 7-33 and Myerson's "Textual Commentary"; as well as the original: Ralph Waldo Emerson, *An Address Delivered in the Court-House in Concord, Massachusetts, on 1st August, 1844, on the Anniversary of the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies,* Boston, (James Munroe and Company), 1844.

[18] Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, "'Swelling That Great Tide of Humanity': The Concord, Massachusetts, Female Anti-Slavery Society," *The New England Quarterly,* 74, No. 3, (Sept., 2001), 386.

August of 1849, "the abolitionist cause gained momentum and increased its stature not only in New England but throughout the world."[19]

Emerson, as we shall see throughout these three chapters, did not only invoke higher moral authority as the reason for abolishing slavery. He also subscribed to political and economic antislavery, and he helped build ideals of Northern nationalism, Northern superiority, and anti-Southern sentiments. To the South he looked that day in the warm summertime Court House in Concord, and he had nothing but scorn to lay at the Southern planters' feet, to the generous applause of his townspeople, and to the approbation of Douglass and May. "The planter is the spoiled child of his unnatural habits, and has contracted in his indolent and luxurious climate the need of excitement by irritating and tormenting his slave." In his anti-Southern propaganda, Emerson did not appear to lose his eloquence.[20] The influential newspaper run by Horace Greeley, *The New York Tribune,* often commented on Transcendental writings and speeches. Greeley also made sure to drum up antislavery sentiment, covered the abolitionists avidly, and, in the mid-1850s when the Republican party was formed, became the prime organ of the party ideology, an ideology which espoused overt sectionalism and ultimately led to the Civil War. Of this early speech in '44, the weekend, "country" edition of the *Tribune* wrote "we have read this address with unfeigned pleasure," and as a piece about Liberty and Slaveholders, it was "but a profound and exceedingly earnest discussion of the great question of Negro Emancipation in its various bearings upon the character of the enfranchised class and upon the interests of society at large." The reporter allowed that they could print only portions of the speech, but that if readers would like the entire

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[19] Petrulionis, 396.
[20] Emerson, "Emancipation," in Robinson, p. 103.

lecture, to "procure the whole," they could contact "C. S. Francis, 252 Broadway." It was common for reporters to print excerpts of speeches, and for illegal copies of them to be published, the practice of which understandably upset Emerson. However, in the interest of studying the role of literature affecting society and culture, the wide dissemination of product was an important aspect of identity formation in the North.[21]

A year later, on the same day in 1845, when William Garrison and Theodore Parker were giving lectures against slavery in Dedham, Massachusetts, Emerson was offering a reiteration of his views in Waltham. The *New-York Weekly Tribune* published sections of it, and wrote "many readers will be as glad to see it as we are to give it place." The gathered crowd was a large one, according to Myerson, and consisted of citizens from all over Massachusetts. It was sponsored by the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and was covered in many regional papers, including the abolitionist *Liberator.* Emerson may have shocked his audience when he claimed that if God had meant to create the Negro to be subjected to torture and slavery, and if God had given up the cause of the Negro, then "He has also given up mine, who feel his wrong, and who in our hearts must curse the Creator who has undone him." We can perhaps hear the murmur in the crowd. In fact, in many of the newspaper accounts of these events, applause, cheering and noise were included in brackets within the article. However, Emerson held up a finger, controlling the crowd: "But no," he said, it couldn't be that way, because there is Right in the universe, in Nature. "Justice is for ever and ever," he asserted, and this was why slavery in America was doomed. The slaveowner, as a member of the Slaveocracy, the Slave Power, was doomed. The planter's condition was "unsafe and unblest," as

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[21] *New-York Weekly Tribune,* Sept. 14, 1844, in Cameron, p. 5. For information on Emerson's angst about illegal copies of his work, see Joel Myerson, *The Selected Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* New York, 1997.

"Nature fights on the other side," and as the industrious and the morally upright must win in the end, "it seems inevitable that a revolution is preparing at no distant day to set these disjointed matters right." And this was in 1845, with no precognition of an impending war, with the Fugitive Slave Law and the Kansas-Nebraska bill a few years away, and the Republican Party as formed around Lincoln nonexistent. These were strong words, it must be allowed, revolutionary words that were not lost on the audience. As it stood, the audience favored these words, as did the abolitionist and mainstream press in the north and the Midwest. The rhetoric of fight and separation were already being bandied about, and Emerson was in the midst of this ideological turmoil.[22]

That same year, the Concord Lyceum was engaged in some excitement that was eventually assuaged by its now famous citizens, Emerson and Thoreau. The firebrand and well traveled abolitionist speaker, Wendell Phillips, was engaged to speak in town. The Curators of the Lyceum protested the involvement of Phillips and resigned their posts. They were replaced by Emerson, Thoreau and Samuel Barrett, all of whom invited Phillips to speak.[23] This small bit of public activism was added to the event which happened on 17 November, 1845. Emerson had been invited to speak at the New Bedford Lyceum, and was on the verge of accepting the appointment. His neighbor and fellow Concord abolitionist, Mary Merrick Brooks, whom Petrulionis has described as "pugnacious" and one of the leading women in the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, whispered the news that eventually led Emerson to cancel his lecture. "I have indirectly received a report," Emerson wrote in a letter to William Rotch, Lyceum

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[22] *New-York Weekly Tribune,* Aug. 16, 1845, p. 6, cols. 4-5; Emerson, "West Indian Emancipation," 1845, in Gougeon and Myerson; also Myerson's "Textual Commentary."

[23] Petrulionis, 386-390; also helpful are Phyllis Cole, "Pain and Protest in the Emerson Family," in Garvey, *The Emerson Dilemma;* and Armida Gilbert, "'Pierced by the Thorns of Reform': Emerson on Womanhood," in Garvey, *The Emerson Dilemma,* pp. 67-92 and pp. 93-114.

curator, "which, by excluding others, I think ought to exclude me." A free black in New Bedford had attempted to purchase a ticket in order to attend a lecture, and had been voted down by the members of the lyceum. Emerson's "informant" supplied the news. Emerson's views of a Lyceum was one shared by a majority of northern and Midwestern devotees, namely that "I think the Lyceum exists for popular education, as I work in it for that," and that the organizations should accept the "humblest and most ignorant to come in, and exclude nobody." And if anybody should be excluded, it should be "the most cultivated." He went on to say in the letter that denying the free black citizen access to the lecture hall goes against everything New England and the free states were supposed to represent. His refusal to speak for the New Bedford Lyceum was joined by future Massachusetts senator, Charles Sumner, a friend of Emerson's. We will meet Sumner in the next chapter, when the Republican party is formed, and when he is beaten on the floor of Congress by a South Carolina congressman. Sumner was one of the most influential of writers and abolitionist politicians and was instrumental in the formation of Northern antislavery ideology. Emerson followed his lead on more than a few occasions, and here, with the New Bedford affair, both wrote letters and agreed to publish them in the *Liberator.*[24]

The Rise of the Public Intellectual and Common Culture

Emerson's views about the public Lyceum in the above letter reflect the rise of the public intellectual. Ideas of the public intellectual, the writer as politically engaged, stood tall upon the lyceum network in nineteenth-century America. The lectures were

[24] Emerson, "Letter to William Rotch," in Gougeon and Myerson, 39; also in Myerson, *Selected Letters,* 309; also "To the Public," *Liberator,* 16 January 1846, p. 10; Petrulionis, 390-399; see also Myerson's "Textual Commentary"; and for a view of the New Bedford affair, see Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero,* 101-107.

advertised, commented upon after the fact, and well-attended. They were a manifest piece of the growth of mass culture. They were spawned in the transportation and market revolutions, were part and parcel of the rise of literacy and print culture, and were instrumental in forming cohesive cultural identities. David M. Scott reports that by the "early 1840s there probably were between 350 and 400 communities that contained a society sponsoring lectures." These lectures were called the "cultural index of the times," by Robert Greef.[25] It is important to recall that there were no radios and no televisions at the time, and people thirsted for this form of bonding through entertainment and edification. Emerson's career flowered during the lyceum era.

Emerson rode the wave of the public lecturer epoch. He caught the first stage of Lyceum development (circa 1826 to 1845), where most lectures were given by local speakers. He presided primarily in the middle stage, or the "public lecture system" organized around a town's lyceums and "young men's associations but depending heavily on paid lecturers of national reputation." This period lasted until just beyond the Civil War. Emerson was able to enjoy the fruits of the last phase of the lecture epoch, which, according to Scott, lasted until the 1880s, and was distinguished by "the emergence of highly paid celebrities, commanding fees of $1,000 or more, on tours conducted by a booking agency like the Redpath Lyceum Bureau."[26] It is important in any discussion of the influence of Emerson's antislavery writings to address the issue of

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[25] Robert J. Greef, "Public Lectures in New York, 1851-1878: A Cultural Index of the Times" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1941, 4-7, in Donald M. Scott, "The Popular Lecture and the Creation of a Public in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America," *The Journal of American History,* 66, No. 4 (March, 1980), 791.

[26] Scott, 792; see also Carl Bode, *The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind,* New York, 1956, vii-viii; David Mead, *Yankee Eloquence in the Middle West: The Ohio Lyceum, 1850-1870,* East Lansing, 1951, 177-238.

the lyceum movement, both in terms of actual social and political ramifications, but also in the formation of public opinion and the creation of American myths.

The ideas behind the formation of public opinion are foundational, especially as relates the idea of antislavery went mainstream, as antislavery became popularized, "white-ified," and no longer marginalized. Emerson's own increased role in antislavery work followed the national trend. Mary Kupiec Cayton addresses what the popular audiences who responded to Emerson might have thought, or who they were.[27] Cayton writes:

> "What such an audience made of Emerson is a perplexing question. Its primary concern lay neither with literature nor theology. Yet, to understand the making of Emerson as a 'popular' intellectual, it is crucial to know the mind of his audience. Between 1840 and 1855, Emerson began to be seen not primarily as a religious or literary figure but as something else, and the coalescence of a bourgeois mercantile audience via the press had much to do with this redefinition of role."

There is coalescence, again, and ideas, the formation of ideas, and the search for identity. Here the mercantile audience, the well-off middle of the bell curve, the literate and the educated, those who would make up the bulk of the political antislavery advocates, were defining themselves. Here is the definition of self, contained within the rubric of the American metanarrative. Identification becomes important. Emerson addressed these people, and consequently, these people, who held real social power, influenced society. The coalescence of this audience corresponds to the coalescence of Northern nationalism, of Northern ideas of antislavery, and subsequently they play an active role in the ideological preparation for the Civil War.[28]

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[27] Relate this to Sean Wilentz's recent article in the *Times,* discussed in the Introduction.

[28] Mary Kupiec Cayton, "The Making of an American Prophet: Emerson, His Audiences, and the Rise of the Cultural Industry in Nineteenth-Century America," *The American Historical Review,* 92, No. 3 (June, 1987), 604.

Emerson traveled all over the east and the Midwest. He was on the road for months at a time, year after year. Emerson traveled to Pittsburgh in 1851, to Cincinnati, to St. Louis. His lectures, as expressed via his person, or published accounts of them, reached far and wide in the burgeoning Northern economy. His visits to these young men's associations, reading rooms, library groups, and mercantile collectives, helped shape "the character of popular response to him," and, in turn, served to act "as a catalyst for the cultural consolidation already underway in the region."[29] These were mostly businessmen and the economic elite of the cities and towns of the Midwest, and consequently these groups "helped create an Emerson in line with commercial values." What Cayton does not address, however, is how these commercial values – whether Emerson subscribed to them or not – were closely linked to free labor ideology expounded by the Republican party, which would officially form a few years later. The bulk of audiences which listened to him talk of self reliance or self culture, would also hear him speak of moral issues, of cultural imperatives, of antislavery in their midst. As antislavery became more popular, as the cities and the states of the North identified the adverse effect slavery had on *them* personally, so Emerson's pro-Northern and anti-Southern rhetoric increased. The majority of his audiences certainly did not have abolitionist tendencies. There were no tears shed for the immorality of slavery. Nonetheless, Emerson's message would have reached them and would have encouraged the coalescence of Northern views on the issue. Cultural consolidation is the key term here.[30]

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[29] Cayton, 607; see also Mary Kupiec Cayton, *Emerson's Emergence: Self and Society in the Transformation of New England, 1800-1845, (*Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

[30] Cayton's footnotes on page 607 are informative, and offer not only supportive evidence, but interesting reading, as well. A small sampling: Cleveland, Marietta, Ohio, Detroit, as noted in *Michigan History*

Scott writes that the overall goals of the lectures was to enhance "the good of the audience and society." A lecture was supposed to be "serious and moral," which certainly describes Emerson's substance and style. It is important to note that the lecture societies promoted the inclusion of the entire public, "to embrace all members of the community, whatever their occupation, social standing, or political and religious affiliation." As detailed by Scott, the lectures were effectively advertised, often in the beginning of the season, and right before an event, and they were "reported in the next issue of the paper as a newsworthy event." [31] Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Horace Greeley, Wendell Phillips, Henry Ward Beecher, William Alcott and even the arch-abolitionist William Garrison were among those public lecturers most famous and best paid. The lectures were seen as a public good, and were expected to be utilitarian. Emerson had always wanted his writing to be useful.

Those men and women who were able to secure a public lecture often found themselves catapulted into a public role from a private one. In fact, Emerson's *job* was that of public lecturer. And, "in 1838, in Springfield, Illinois. . . a young lawyer with political aspiration named Abraham Lincoln gave a lecture to the Springfield Young Men's Lyceum in which he gave a nonpartisan analysis of the problems of democratic leadership and order revealed by an anti-abolitionist mob's murder of Elijah Lovejoy."[32]

Cayton provides a very interesting theory of culture-making; "As the lecture system of which he was part became more solidly entwined with the making of the urban

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Magazine, Emerson in the rest of Michigan, in Illinois, Iowa – "Culture through Lectures," from *Iowa Journal of History and Politics,* Emerson in St. Louis, in Indianapolis "that great railroad town." He also visited Minnesota, according to *Minnesota History.* And Wisconsin.

[31] Scott, 793; helpful, too, is Cayton, *Emerson's Emergence,* Chapel Hill, 1989; and Joel Myerson, *Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson,* New York, 2000,

[32] Scott, 798.

commercial order, his lecture performances came to be part of a canon of acquired learning that defined the parameters of knowledge and behavior within the new international bourgeois way of life, and he himself the representative *par excellence* of 'culture.'" The new international bourgeoisie, by the way, which subscribed to notions of freedom and liberty -- as seen in the popular movements in the European revolutions of 1848, the Russian aristocracy's freeing of the serfs, the gradual increase in the acceptance of Protestant newspapers in Italy, the French nobility's siding with the North in the American Civil War -- a movement, at least in the West, toward the mass bourgeois culture which we know today. Slavery was unsustainable in this movement. Southern slavery was looked down upon by the burgeoning elements of western bourgeois culture. As Emerson became a "representative" voice for this way of life, his antislavery speeches and writing would help influence the formation of Northern ideology against slavery, against the "Slave Power," and against the Southern moral and economic system. Emerson played a key role in the formation of this ideology. Though he did not hold sway in the political arena, his impact in the cultural one proved tremendously important.[33] Emerson, in his 1845 speech in Waltham, was more than happy to provide evidence of his pro-North articulations, charging his comrades to "enlighten, civilize the semi-barbarous nations of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama." It was imperative, he said, to "touch those selfish lords with thought and gentleness," to cultivate them and acculturate them, to educate them, and if you do this, he exhorts, you will have "a race of decent and lawful men, incapacitated to hold slaves."[34]

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[33] Cayton, 615.

[34] Emerson, "West Indian Emancipation," 1845, in Gougeon and Myerson, *Antislavery Writings,* 38.; see also *New-York Daily Tribune,* August 7 1845, p. 2; *National Anti-Slavery Standard,* 14 August 1845, p. 1; Emerson, "Speech of Ralph Waldo Emerson," *Liberator,* 15 August 1845, p. 130.

As we will see throughout these three chapters, small town and city newspapers not only covered lectures in their own town, but also in neighboring towns, in the general vicinity, and in larger metropolitan areas like Boston and New York. Scott reports, and evidence found in papers will show, that the *Hampshire Gazette,* for example, routinely covered events reported on in the *Boston Herald* and Greeley's *New York Tribune.* This was especially true if "stars" such as Oliver Holmes and Waldo Emerson were the featured speakers. The weekly edition of the *Tribune,* which often acted as a magazine for outlying areas, was distributed all over the country, with its coverage of Transcendentalism, Emerson's antislavery speeches, and eventually Republican party ideology, which will be detailed in Chapter Two of this paper. This was an ideology that brought to the surface a heretofore inexpressible sectionalism, that established and reiterated political antislavery as a mainstream movement, and that brought the United States a president named Abraham Lincoln, which led to the South's secession and finally to the Civil War. Contained within the contours and convolutions of this movement were the pro-abolitionist, pro-Republican, overtly anti-Southern and antislavery sentiments of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The weekly edition of the *New-York Tribune* found its way to the "reading rooms of thousands of young men's associations, library societies, lyceums, and mechanics' institutes."[35] Scott sounds a final note that the lectures themselves were most often published soon after they were given, and further disseminated in individual or collected form. The idea of a local lecture reaching "broader, but distant" publics is the point to underscore here. This is an important element in the rise of print culture, the formation of celebrity and the coalescence of wide

[35] Scott, 798.

sweeps of what we call popular culture. Text and context worked in concert to help establish notions of Northern nationalism and identity, and finally a mainstream, widely-popular antislavery ideology that, as mentioned by Glickstein in the introduction, formed the "ideological preparation for the Civil War," which ultimately allowed for America's most famous clash of ideas, the "irrepressible conflict" of competing civilizations.

The lecture circuit was not a small thing, either in geographical scope or in time. Oliver Wendell Holmes, for example, "in the 1851-1852 season" traveled the country and lectured "in more than seventy different places" in the space of four months. Emerson followed much the same schedule, and a survey of his lecturing schedule is helpful in judging the scope of his reach and the import he had on cultural formation. Joel Myerson provided a timeline in his *Selected Letters*: Emerson in '43 lectured in Maine, and around New England and Maryland; in 1850, Midwestern tour; in April of '52, Midwest and Montreal; January, '54, Midwestern tour; and this pattern continued in '57, '60, '63, '65 -'68, '71. These tours were often several months long, included New England dates, and also included several trips across the Atlantic.[36]

Scott writes that "the role of the *New York Tribune* and other metropolitan dailies like the *New York Herald* and *Boston Herald* in the emergence of a national communications system was enormous."[37] For the lecturer, it gave him prestige and a

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[36] Myerson, *Selected Letters,* pp. 20-25; Scott, 799.

[37] Scott, 799; and Allan R. Pred, *Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information: The United States System of Cities, 1790-1840,* (Cambridge, 1973); for more information on reading, lectures and the antebellum period, see Ronald J. Zboray, "The Letter and the Fiction Reading Public in Antebellum America," *Journal of American Culture*; John Higham, *From Boundlessness to Consolidation: The Transformation of American Culture, 1848-1860,* Ann Arbor, 1969; Barbara Finklestein, "Reading, Writing, and the Acquisition of Identity in the United States, 1790-1860," *Journal of American History;* Ronald Zboray, "Creation of a Public in Mid-Nineteenth Century America," *Journal of American History,* 66 (1980); R. Jackson Wilson, *Figures of Speech: American Writers and the Literary Marketplace, from Benjamin Franklin to Emily Dickinson;* and finally, Ronald Zboray, "Antebellum Reading and the Ironies

role as a "public intellectual," a yearning best expressed in the Introduction about Edmund Wilson in the twentieth century. As also noted in the Introduction, this sentiment seems to be the basis of Wilentz's call for a political role among today's literary elite. As far as the advent of American celebrity worship is concerned, Scott quotes a commentator as reporting that "the chief Lyceum lecturers are personally more widely known than any other class of public men. Additionally, an estimate of a speaker reaching fifty thousand bodies in a season, not to mention the numbers reached through press coverage and published books, the system's reach is indicative of its influence. Scott writes that "precise figures are impossible to attain, but by fairly conservative estimate attendance at public lectures in the North and West probably totaled close to 400,000 people a week at the peak in the 1850s."[38] For advertising men and politicians eager to reach the people, these were enticing numbers. Consider the advantageous use Franklin Delano Roosevelt made of the radio, or the benefits television provided for John F. Kennedy. The public lecture in the nineteenth century, with widespread newspaper coverage, yielded very real influence, in both qualified and quantifiable terms.

The Road to Fugitive Slaves and the 1850s

The second half of the 1840s saw the increased phenomenon of free Northern blacks beings captured and imprisoned in the South. These citizens of the North were being enslaved because southerners were losing slaves to the North, by land in some

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of Technological Innovation," *American Quarterly,* 40, No. 1 Special Issue: Reading America (March, 1988: 65-82.

[38] Scott, 800; also informative are David M. Robinson, "Emerson's 'American Civilization': Emancipation and the National Destiny," and Stephen L. Esquith, "Power, Poise, and Place: Toward an Emersonian Theory of Democratic Citizenship," in T. Gregory Garvey, *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform,* Athens, 2001, pp. 221-233 and pp. 234-254.

cases, and especially by northern vessels that had docked in southern ports. "Kidnapping Committees" sprang up in Massachusetts and other states to address the wrongs done to their people. These were during the years before the Fugitive Slave Law was enacted, requiring Northerners to return runaway slaves to their southern owners. The turmoil that increased during this period before the law was a harbinger of things to come.[39] In a "Letter to the Kidnapping Committee," 23 September, 1846, Emerson wrote regarding an abducted Northern citizen by the South: "I feel irreparable shame to Boston of this abduction," calling the event "flagrant" and a "crime." Emerson wrote the letter to Samuel Gridley Howe, a leading citizen, a fellow abolitionist, and a champion of the oppressed. According to Myerson, Emerson had been "invited by Howe, Samuel Sewall, Charles Sumner, Theodore Parker and the Committee on Arrangements" to participate in a protest event at Faneuil Hall, Boston. They were protesting the abduction of a runaway slave who had "arrived in Boston as a stowaway on the *Ottoman.*"[40] Apparently, runaway slaves on northbound vessels were common.

Several times in the '44 address "Emancipation in the British West Indies," Emerson railed against the South's policy of stealing free citizens of the North. He stood in the summer warmth of the Concord Court House and let loose upon current events. "Black men," he said, "as freeborn as we," absolute "citizens of this our Commonwealth of Massachusetts," have been arrested by "slave-laws of the States of South Carolina, Georgia, and Louisiana." They had been arrested in ships "in which they visited these ports, and shut up in jails." The game was, the shipmaster had to pay "room and board"

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[39] See Gougeon, "Historical Background," in *Emerson's Antislavery Writings;* also von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns.*

[40] Emerson, "Letter to the Kidnapping Committee," 1846, in Gougeon and Myerson, 43; also see Myerson's "Notes," 211.

for the freeman prisoner, and if he could not, the imprisoned citizen would be sold as a slave. Not only abolitionists, but moderate citizens of the North were enraged by this policy. The high tones and rhetoric of sectionalism were on the rise. Emerson exhorted his fellow citizens to remain hushed no longer.[41]

Elizabeth Hoar, daughter of Judge Samuel Hoar, had been engaged to Emerson's brother, Charles. Charles died in 1836, and Elizabeth remained a friend of the family's for the rest of her life. According to Petrulionis, "Waldo considered her one of his closest confidantes."[42] And Joel Myerson writes that Charles died a year after they were engaged, and that "Emerson treated Elizabeth Hoar as his sister. The whole family treated her as a member, and the Emerson children considered her their 'aunt.'"[43] When the Emersons' daughter, Ellen, was born in 1839, he wrote Elizabeth and begged her to come meet the newborn and to "come and take care of us all."[44] Charles Emerson supported radical abolitionist William Garrison. Emerson had already given his antislavery speech commemorating the abolition of West Indian slavery in August of 1844 when Elizabeth and her father journeyed to South Carolina at the behest of Massachusetts governor George Briggs. Briggs had asked the Hoars to secure a meeting with South Carolina governor James Hammond. The judge and his daughter were implored by Briggs to be the official voice of protest against South Carolina's new practice of arresting free blacks caught in the Port of Charleston, some of whom

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[41] Emerson, "Emancipation in the West Indies," in Robinson, pp. 109-111; see also Gougeon and Myerson, 7-33; and *New-York Daily Tribune,* 5 August 1844, p. 2; *Liberator,* 16 August, 1844, p. 129; Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero,* 88-90; *The Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies,* (London: John Chapman, 1844; Emerson's *Collected Letters,* Volume 8, p. 611; and *Orations, Lectures, and Addresses* (London: George Slater, 1849).

[42] Petrulionis, 406; see also Armida Gilbert, "Emerson in the Context of the Woman's Rights Movement," in Myerson *Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson,* 211-250.

[43] Myerson, *Selected Letters,* 33.

[44] Emerson, "To Elizabeth Hoar, February 24, 1839," in Myerson, *Selected Letters,* 192.

happened to be Massachusetts citizens.[45] Emerson's complaint that these men could not be protected by the State or the Federal Government inspired his fellows. He spoke in front of yet another crowd: "And this kidnapping is suffered within our own land and federation, while the fourth article of the Constitution of the United States ordains" that citizens of all the states "shall be entitled to all privileges and immunities of citizens in the several States."[46]

Free blacks on Northern vessels were being imprisoned, South Carolina asserted, because southern slaves were utilizing the ships in order to escape bondage. Father and daughter were denied an audience with Hammond, and, so the story goes, they "nearly fell prey to a violent mob, indignant over what it viewed as Yankee interference in Southern affairs."[47] This was a precursor – one of many – to the antagonisms engendered by the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and an indication of North-South bickering over policies. The policies, of course, were extensions of their respective ideologies. Emerson was clear where he stands on the issue: "The Congress should instruct the President to send to those ports of Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans, such order and such force, as should release, forthwith, all such citizens of Massachusetts," as were being held without being charged with any crime, save that their skin was black.[48] High rhetoric continued, words that might have seemed strong in 1844, but would eventually carry more weight when Abraham Lincoln was elected to the presidency in 1860: "As for dangers to the Union. . ." he said, "the Union is already at an end, when the first citizen of Massachusetts is thus outraged." The idea of a Slave Power, which will be

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[45] Petrulionis, 406-410.
[46] Emerson, "Emancipation," in Robinson, 110.
[47] Petrulionis, 406.
[48] Emerson, "Emancipation," in Robinson, 111.

further investigated in Chapter Two of this paper, begin to appear. Emerson said that "scandalous rumor that has been swelling louder of late years . . . that members [of the Government] are bullied into silence by southern gentlemen." In dramatic form, he went on to chide that the "majority of free States," as they are pulled and pushed by Southern States, are "schooled and ridden by the minority of slave-holders."[49]

It is imperative to note that Judge Hoar, rebuffed in South Carolina, was an integral member of Emerson's "Saturday Club," an influential club that met one Saturday during each month in Boston. Members included the cream of social, political and intellectual life. For those searching for connections that would supply Emerson's inspiration and rhetoric with political import, here is one of those connections. These were leading politicians, businessmen, editors and writers, the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly,* great poets, lecturers: They included, in addition to Judge Hoar, Samuel Gray Ward, Louis Agassiz, Benjamin Pierce, James Russell Lowell, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Richard Henry Dana, Jr., Edwin Whipple, John Sullivan Dwight, Ebenezer Hoar (Elizabeth's brother), Oliver Wendell Holmes, Nathanial Hawthorne, and Charles Sumner. When studying the interconnectivity of political, cultural and social players in the North, this is an instructive list to examine.[50]

On August 3, 1849 in Worcester, a crowd gathered outside in a hospital courtyard. On a sunny, beautiful New England week leading up to the event, citizens of Worcester would have seen a large poster, three feet by four feet, advertising an event, much like concert posters seen on kiosks today. On Grove Street, near the Thayer Building, on

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[49] Emerson, "Emancipation," in Robinson, 110-112.
[50] Myerson, *Selected Letters,* p. 395 and p. 416.

Highland Street and directly downtown on Main, passersby took note of the upcoming lecture. Bankers and county workers downtown, near Federal Square, would have seen the broadside and responded. Financiers, clerks, accountants, lawyers, academics, teachers, doctors tradesmen and most of the middle and upper classes would be sure to attend, whether they believed with the sentiments contained in the lecture or not. Worcester was one of the thriving cities in New England, and the residents took pride in their civic institutions, and their ability to draw top speakers on the lecture circuit. There was excitement in the air, and voices abuzz with anticipation. The broadside read as follows:

EIGHT HUNDRED THOUSAND SLAVES SET FREE!!

The Anniversary of Emancipation in the British West Indies
will be celebrated in the
CITY OF WORCESTER, On Friday, August 3d.
By a general MASS MEETING of the Friends of Freedom
If the weather be pleasant, the Meeting will be held in the
HOSPITAL GROVE
Commencing at 10 o'clock A.M.
If the weather be unfavorable, the meeting will be in the spacious
City Hall,
Among the Speakers, who have engaged to be present, are
Wendell Phillips, Wm. Lloyd Garrison, Theodore
Parker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Adin Ballou,
Charles C. Burleigh, and Robert Morris.

LET WORCESTER COUNTY
give a good account of herself that day. Let the HEART of
the Commonwealth be moved from its depths. Let a mighty
voice go up, in the name of GOD, demanding that His
PEOPLE SHALL GO FREE.
COME ONE AND ALL,
and Keep the Fast which GOD HAS CHOSEN – even "to undo the
heavy burden, and let the OPPRESSED GO FREE"[51]

[51] Broadside from the Friends of Freedom, Worcester, MA, August 1849, courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

The Friends of Freedom put on the event, and thousands attended, as they did in Waltham and Dedham for Emerson's other lectures. According to Joel Myerson, the third of August instead of the first was chosen "because President Zachary Taylor had named the first a day of national fasting and prayer due to a cholera epidemic." Abolitionists scorned the move as a "false act of piety."[52] The Friends of Freedom were also responsible for the annual publication of antislavery "gift books." These books came out every year between 1839 and 1858, with two exceptions. Emerson was featured in the 1851 book seven times. These books were of the highest quality, with beautiful paper and gilded spines. They played a distinct role in the formation of antislavery ideology and are uniquely literary. In them, Emerson was joined by some of the biggest abolitionist and literary names of the era. To name a few: Frederick Douglass, John Quincy Adams (Sixth president of the United States and Massachusetts Congressman, who presided at the "Kidnapping" event at Faneuil Hall), Longfellow, Theodore Parker, Wendell Phillips, Garrison, James Russell Lowell, J.R. Giddings (Congressman from Ohio), Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Browning, Cassius Clay, T. Wentworth Higginson, William Furness, Alexis de Tocqueville, James Freeman Clarke, and Harriet Beecher Stowe.[53] The *Liberty Bell* volumes were not the only antislavery giftbooks. One famous series was the *Autographs for Freedom,* books which contained famous authors and their signatures beneath their antislavery piece. Horace Greeley wrote "The Dishonour of Labor," in one, to be addressed in Chapter Two, William Seward wrote "The Basis of the

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[52] Gougeon and Myerson, "Notes," 211.

[53] From *Liberty Bell* by Friends of Freedom, seen in the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA; also, to learn more about the antislavery giftbooks, see Ralph Thompson, "The Liberty Bell and Other Anti-Slavery Gift-Books," *The New England Quarterly,* 7, No. 1 (March, 1934), 154-168.

American Constitution," Gerrit Smith talked of the "odium of slavery," in a piece. Emerson, for his part, included a poem with the lines "That the slave who caught the strain/Should throb until he snapt his chain." And there is his signature affixed.[54] Charles Sumner, famous senator and Emerson friend, wrote in *Autographs,* "Ours is a noble cause; nobler even than that of our fathers, inasmuch as it is more exalted to struggle for the freedom of *others,* than for our *own.* The love of right, which is the animating impulse of our movement, is higher even than the love of freedom. But right, freedom, and humanity, all concur in demanding the abolition of slavery." It was signed and written in Boston on October 16, 1852.[55]

Congressman Joshua Giddings, who would play a role during the vigorous opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act in the 1850's, also wrote for the *Liberty Bell.* His addition spoke of the importance of literature and literary figures in the formation of ideology. He wrote, "Your liberty bell will soon ring out its peal. Hundreds of annuals, periodicals, and newspapers are agitating the public mind; hundreds of lecturers, and stump speakers, and ministers, are proclaiming the gospel of Freedom; historians are recording the important events which are transpiring around us, and the cause moves onward with increased velocity."[56] Over time the impressive array of writing, and the collected weight in sum, played a major role in solidifying Northern constructive antislavery ideology.

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[54] Julia Griffiths, ed., *Autographs for Freedom,* Boston, John P. Jewett and Company, 1854. Emerson quote, 235; Gerrit Smith, 225; The book was also published in Cleveland, Ohio, and in England during the same years, 1853 and 1854.

[55] Charles Sumner, "Letter of October 16, 1852," in Griffiths, *Autographs,* 77. Permission to quote by the American Antiquarian Society gratefully acknowledged.

[56] Joshua Giddings, "Letter to Mrs. Chapman, from Jefferson, Ohio, August 20, 1857 and Extract from Speech in Congress," in *Liberty Bell,* 1857, 18. Permission to quote by the American Antiquarian Society gratefully acknowledged.

In the meantime, citizens of Worcester followed their impulse after reading the antislavery broadside. Knowing that nationally, and internationally, famous men would be addressing the assembly, and made their way to the hospital grounds. Thousands were in attendance. Newspapers around the country advertised the event, and covered the event after the fact. In his Dedham speech of 1846, Emerson railed against the annexation of Texas as a slave state in December of 1845, and consequently the Mexican-American War of 1846. It was this war for which Thoreau refused to pay his taxes and spent the night in jail. Here in Worcester, however, Emerson was once again remembering the emancipation of slaves in the West Indies. His voice, even though he had a cold, rose over the assembled throng, and he said "there is no purer anniversary certainly, than this." He said that the job before the abolitionists and Friends of Freedom was especially welcome, and that they should all congratulate one another and not be afraid. "One must look to the planters," he asserted, "of the South with the same feelings that he would regard the spider and the fly," and he paused a full stop. "It is barbarism," he said. "The people are barbarous. They are still in the animal state." He looked out over the crowd; he was in control of himself, despite his "miserable state of health." He spoke of the people of the South: "They are not accountable like those whose eyes have once been opened to a Christianity that makes a return to evil impossible." He used vigorous language once again, not know that a war was upcoming in a little more than a decade, when he stated calmly "revolutions . . . never move backward." Emerson went on to give examples of human cultural and societal evolution, from barbarians and Vikings to more cultured peoples. "The people of the South are by their climate enervated. They have been demoralised by their vicious habits." And it is imperative, he maintained, that as the

old barbarians had given way to civilization, so too must the South move toward a cultured civilization in which the institution of slavery "should become discreditable, and should perish, as the old institutions which have gone before." The relation of tyrant to slave cannot continue. Emerson swayed on his feet, overgazing the crowd. Women fanned themselves with bits of paper, men with their hats. He aimed his strong language to the South, past the Mason Dixon line that would soon be rendered altered, as the repeal of the Missouri Compromise was fast approaching, as the decade of the 1850s stood half a year away. He applauded the abolitionists, those "preachers of freedom" who had been carrying on the good work, the work of Nature. We are indebted to these people, he said, and perhaps he pointed to Wendell Phillips and William Garrison, and to the assembled crowd. All of these good people, he intoned, "have anticipated the triumph which I look upon as inevitable." The word – inevitable – and it fits well with Seward's "irrepressible conflict," was used, not for the first time. And the 1850s were just around the corner, where so much would unfold as the nation slipped toward civil war; and to Emerson it was Providence that guided them in this work against slavery; and a fragile Union was further threatened; and he said to the people on that day, if you are going to be a fool, then be a fool for virtue and not a fool for vice.[57]

[57] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Antislavery Remarks at Worcester, 3 August 1849," in Gougeon and Myerson, pp. 47-50; see also the *Liberator*, "Remarks of Ralph Waldo Emerson," August 17, 1849, p. 131. It is possible that Emerson delivered this speech extemporaneously, as he was sick and as he felt impelled to speak anyway.

Chapter Two

Republican Party Ideology, Emerson's Political Agitation and Growing Sectional Antagonism

"Great is the mischief of a legal crime."[58]

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

The sound of gunfire was distinct amid the groaning, shouting men. A man hired by the Federal Marshal to guard the fugitive slave lay inside the courthouse door bleeding to death. Thomas Wentworth Higginson – minister, writer, abolitionist – was in the crowd in Court Square, in Boston near the majestic State House, attempting to smash through the door and lead a charge on the courthouse in order to rescue the prisoner. Higginson and a few others, including some free blacks, were breaching the door with a large battering ram. It was dark in the square, and a voice rang out to douse the streetlamps. The courthouse in Boston, in defiance of state law to the contrary, had been

[58] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Address to the Citizens of Concord on the Fugitive Slave Law, 3 May 1851," in Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson, eds., *Emerson's Antislavery Writings,* New Haven, 1995, 63.

turned into a temporary federal prison. Federal agents by the dozen stood inside the entryway with knives and guns. Soon there would be federal troops, cavalry, marines and an artillery battalion guarding the lone prisoner upstairs. Those would-be rescuers in the square had just come from a rousing antislavery forum at Faneuil Hall that specifically protested the arrest of the fugitive, exhorted by famous abolitionist agitators Theodore Parker, Wendell Phillips and others. Some advocated nonresistance, some physical force.[59]

A man would die, many were injured, there were arrests, and ultimately the attempt to rescue the self-emancipated slave Anthony Burns would fail. Eventually, the United States charged Higginson, Parker, Phillips – all friends of Emerson's - with treason. A trial date was set. Parker had issued a broadside, determined to dissuade Massachusetts from providing aid to the federal government with another "kidnapping." His placard announced "A Man Was Stolen Last Night by the Fugitive Slave Bill Commissioner, We Will Hold His Mock Trial on Saturday, May 27, at 9 O'clock in the Kidnapper's Court." He went on to ask the prophetic question, "Shall Boston Steal Another Man?"[60] The general excitement this May had first been caused by Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska bill. Then the unrest had been ignited by the arrest of runaway slave Anthony Burns a day after the House of Representatives had passed the above bill. These events, in turn, had followed the Compromise of 1850, which included the infamous Fugitive Slave law, a decree that demanded of any state or territory to return fugitive slaves to their owners in the South. Northerners argued that

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[59] This account of the Anthony Burns affair drawn from Albert J. von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston,* Cambridge, 1998, 52-70; see also Len Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform,* Athens, 199-201.

[60] Henry Steele Commager, *Theodore Parker,* Boston, 232; and Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero,* 200.

these laws effectively repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which established that slavery would be contained below the latitudinal line of 36°30'. Now, antislavery advocates argued, slavery and the Slave Power could spread into the federal territories and even into the northern states themselves. A few earlier episodes had tested the resolve of antislavery Northerners, especially those in Massachusetts, most notoriously with the Sims and Shadrach runaway slave cases.[61]

Sims had been returned to his owners and publicly flogged, and Shadrach had been successfully freed from his prison by force and taken to Canada. Each event had galvanized antislavery forces in the North, as well as proslavery ideologues. The fugitive slave cases were but a few of the many incidents in the 1850s that had begun to solidify sectional differences and manifest partisan strain. Anthony Burns, the lone man in question, had merely taken it upon himself (with an inch of bone permanently exposed in his right hand, due to an injury which had exacerbated his desire to escape) to hop a northbound ship in a southern port. After a few months of working and living in Boston, he was arrested and charged under the Fugitive Slave Law. He was imprisoned in the Boston courthouse-turned federal prison, prepared to meet with an appointed Slave Commissioner, and soon dramatically united with his owner and sent back to Virginia. Emerson was struggling with the laws of the land, and said in a speech to fellow Concordians, "I have lived all my life in this State, and never had any experience of personal inconvenience from the laws, until now."[62]

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[61] Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero,* 191 and 200; von Frank, *Anthony Burns,* 52-70.

[62] Emerson, "Address on the Fugitive Slave Law, 1851," in Gougeon and Myerson *Emerson's Antislavery Writings,* 53; also von Frank, *Anthony Burns,* 70-84.

These scenes of "kidnapping," as we have seen in the previous chapter, continued to incense the northern populace. As the nation slipped ever closer toward the Civil War, an increasing number of volatile issues continued to foment sectional agitation, which would draw Ralph Waldo Emerson further into the conflict. Northern antislavery ideology continued to coalesce, and Emerson made certain to leave his mark. From his journals arose his lectures, and his lectures applied pieces of a developing Northern nationalism. This Northern antislavery/ antisouthern ideology of Emerson's would merge effortlessly with the new sectional party that rose in 1854, the Republican Party. Emerson admonished the men of wealth in Boston, and wrote "Judges, Bank Presidents, Railroad men, men of fashion, lawyers universally all take the side of slavery." He went on to compare them to animals, referring to them as he would in more than a few speeches as "quadrupeds," and cajoling them to "neigh, & bray, & follow a handful of oats." As Northern antislavery Republicans would later do, Emerson wrote that the South did not excel in literature or science, that men and women of the South are devils, "the women have a worm between their lips," and that there is "not a gentleman, not a hero, not a poet" born in the entire region. "In fifty years," he asserts acerbically, "since Mr Jefferson, not a breath of air has come to the intellect or heart."[63]

Fugitive Slaves and Kansas-Nebraska

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[63] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (hereafter *JMN*), Vol. 14, 1854-1861, Susan Sutton Smith and Harrison Hayford, eds., Cambridge, 1978, 405-406; recall also "kidnapping" in Chapter One, Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, "'Swelling That Great Tide of Humanity': The Concord, Massachusetts, Female Anti-Slave Society," *The New England Quarterly,* 74, No. 3 (Sept. 2001), 406-410.

As the major political parties and the two sections North and South struggled to maintain equanimity in the face the problems inherent in slavery, they continued to negotiate truces and force compromises that would extend the purported peace. The struggles for political accommodation and compromise existed because of a desire of both sections to save the Union. Thus, in 1850, a new bill was forwarded that would force Northerners to apprehend fugitives from southern slavery and return them to their owners. This provision of the Compromise of 1850 was the Fugitive Slave Law. It provoked an instantaneous reaction from those already opposed to slavery – the abolitionists – but it also brought many heretofore moderates and slavery apologists into the fold. These events in the early 1850s began to tear at the fabric of national parties like the Whigs and the Democrats. Third parties such as the Free Soil and Liberty parties began to garner members and gather attention. Attempts to hold national parties together (those of northern and southern constituents under one roof) would begin to falter. As we will see in the next section, the Republican Party arose from the fervid energies of this period, and it would capitalize on sectionalist, mainstream momentum.

In April of 1851, thirty-five leading citizens of Concord petitioned Emerson to speak to them on the issue of the Fugitive Slave Law. Emerson wrote and gave the speech in May of that year. Many newspapers covered it, including the *Liberator,* which stated that the speech "is said to have been one of the ablest and most forcible of that distinguished gentleman's productions." Joel Myerson reported that Emerson was then asked to give the speech to many other cities and towns. Emerson in fact used the speech to stump for Free Soil candidate to Congress, John Gorham Palfrey. This was Emerson's first active engagement, outside of voting, with overt political involvement, and exhibits

the importance he attributed to antislavery agitation and the hope for a political solution to the problems of the day.[64]

Emerson echoed his fellow transcendentalist Henry Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" with his own brand of dissent. He always invoked a "higher law" when discussing the morality of law and the right of human social endeavors. "An immoral law makes it a man's duty to break it, at every hazard," he said to his fellow citizens of Concord and in each lecture around the state. "An immoral contract is void," he insisted, refuting the Fugitive Slave Law, and "an immoral statute is void." He exhorted the assembled wherever he went to ignore and refute the infamous law, a sentiment that would be endorsed by abolitionists and mainstream citizens alike. He emphasized with flair that

> there is not a manly whig, or a manly democrat, of whom, if a slave were hidden in one of our houses from the hounds, we should not ask with confidence to lend his wagon in aid of his escape, and he would lend it. The man would be too strong for the partisan.[65]

These calls for nullification attributed to sectional tensions, even as deep into the decade as 1857 discussions of this law continued. Ohio Congressman Joshua Giddings, in a speech before Congress and a recorded tit for tat with a southern Representative, claimed provocatively that "gentlemen will bear with me when I assure them and the President that I have seen as many as nine fugitives dinging at one time in my house." This address would also be published in the *Liberty Bell* antislavery annual, as would some of Emerson's verses about freedom. Giddings emphasized the higher law concept that Emerson always spoke of, and his words seemed to be targeted at provoking the ire

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[64] See Joel Myerson, "Textual Commentary," in Gougeon and Myerson, *Emerson's Antislavery Writings,* 164-168; also *Liberator,* 9 May 1851; Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero,* 165-167.

[65] Emerson, "To the Citizens of Concord," 57-60.

of his southern colleagues. He said that when runaway slaves found their way to his door, on the way to Canada and freedom, he did not "turn round to consult the Fugitive Law, nor to ask the President what to do." Rather, without hesitation, and as Emerson declared time and again, he "obeyed the Divine mandate, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked."[66] Daniel Webster, the famous statesman from New England, supported the Fugitive Slave law to the ultimate detriment of his political career and his legacy. He often charged abolitionists who subverted the law with treason, and he joined southern politicians in doing so. Giddings, in his speech before Congress, said that he could not see himself "seizing a fellow being and returning him to the hell of Slavery," and after a dramatic pause he added, "if that be treason, make the most of it." Congressman Bennet of Mississippi then asked, "I want to know if the gentleman would not have gone one step further?" Giddings replied that he would have indeed. He would have "driven the slavecatcher . . . from his premises," and "kicked him from my dooryard," and then, his voice rising, he finished with "had he attempted to enter my dwelling, I would have stricken him down upon the threshold."[67] This agitation is interesting to note when one further considers the fact that Giddings was expelled from the House of Representatives in 1842 "for suggesting that slavery was a local institution with which the federal government could have no connection."[68]

Emerson often invoked the "barbarous" law many times during this period. "I do not wish to hold slaves," he wrote in his journal for 1852. An excerpt from the journal reads as follows:

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[66] Joshua Giddings, "Extract From a Speech in Congress," in *Liberty Bell by Friends of Freedom,* Chapman, ed., ?, 19.
[67] Giddings, 20.
[68] Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War,* Oxford, 1995, 82.

> But how then can you maintain such an incredible & damnable pretension as to steal a man on these loose innuendoes of the law that would to allow you to steal his shoes? How, but that all our northern Judges have made a cowardly interpretation of the law, in favor of the crime, & not of the right? The leaning has been invariably against the slave for the master.[69]

According to Emerson, the Fugitive Slave law was immoral and wrong and could not prevail in the end. It was also an example of the growing Slave Power and an example of the domination of a small slaveholding elite in national politics. Original compromises, including the Constitution, were supposed to keep slavery within its southern borders. Now, to many in the north and west, it seemed to be spreading inexorably and dangerously. South and North seemed to be set at odds and drifting apart. "The south does not like the north," Emerson said in his Concord speech, "slavery or no slavery, and never did."[70]

In a journal entry exploring ideas and sentiments which would energe in speeches, Emerson continued his ideological attack on the South. The whites of the South, descendents of Jefferson and Madison, have kept alive through the ages "this mild form of cannibalism" and "obsolete piece of barbarism." He went on with verbal jabs: "they do not eat men, but only steal them, & steal their earnings." And when the slaves, as Sims and Shadrach and Anthony Burns and many others, eventually ran or stowed away (or sued for their freedom as Dred Scott had) to attain freedom in the North, "we are to hunt them & hold them & give them back." He tacked on an interesting question for himself and the future reader: "Pleasant, is not it?" But if you try to keep the "scoundrel

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[69] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *JMN,* Vol. 13, 1852-1855, Ralph H. Orth and Alfred R. Ferguson, eds., Cambridge, 1977, 114.
[70] Emerson, "To the Citizens of Concord," 67.

that hunts them" at bay, or remove the former slave to Canada, "that is treason against the United States!"[71]

Emerson might have imagined he could disappear for awhile after the initial furor of the years following the enacting of the Fugitive Slave law, retreating from the public sphere, and working on his book or his meditations on the individual in society. Once again, events of the age would compel him to step forward and address the throngs on the lecture circuit. In this case, it would be the new law of the land and the trials of Anthony Burns. The Kansas-Nebraska Bill was introduced by Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas, nemesis of Abraham Lincoln in the famous debates, in 1854, and it was passed by the House of Representatives in May of that year, a day before Anthony Burns was arrested. The new bill effectively and explicitly (in the final version of the law) repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820. In the latter action, the problem of new states being admitted to the burgeoning nation was solved by the declared 36°30' line and the admittance of Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state. The slave versus free, Liberty versus Bondage ideological battle would simmer during the 1830s and 1840s, as various gag rules and agreed silences amid the governing parties failed to deal with a problem that would soon boil over into sectional warfare. With the Kansas-Nebraska bill, the territories vying for statehood – Nebraska and Kansas at the time – were to deploy the concept of "popular sovereignty" to determine whether or not they would remain free or slave. Now slavery, according to northern antislavery agitators, was free to roam. Also, the law had the effect of sparking sectional skirmishes in Kansas, which

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[71] Emerson, *JMN,* Vol. 14, 1854-1861, Smith and Hayford, eds., 388.

would provide a prelude to the Civil War in 1856, during the era of "bleeding Kansas" and John Brown, which we will visit in the next chapter.[72]

Emerson addressed the new 1854 law in New York City in early March of that year. He read it as a part of an antislavery series at the Tabernacle in response to Kansas-Nebraska. It was covered in many local and regional newspapers.[73] "Events roll, millions of men are engaged," he said at the time, not knowing that a war would arrive to involve the millions. The crowd was thick and heavy at the Tabernacle that evening, with thousands present. He informed this crowd, referring to Douglas's new law, that one thing is beyond a doubt, namely "the worthlessness of good tools to bad workmen," and he goes on to say that papers are "of no use," nor resolutions, nor platforms, nor "laws nor Constitutions any more." He took issue with those who claimed that black people were an inferior race: "the plea that the negro is an inferior race sounds very oddly in my ear from a slave-holder."[74] The main argument that many southern politicians, including Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Roger B. Taney in the Dred Scott case, used for the perpetuation of slavery was the baseness of the Negro. Taney argued in the case that disallowed citizenship for black people that Negroes were "so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect."[75] Emerson concludes his speech by declaring that "the Fugitive Slave Law did much to unglue the

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[72] Information for this general paragraph taken from von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns,* 54-60, 248-249, and 306-307; also Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero,* 199-201; Merrill D. Peterson, *John Brown: The Legend Revisited,* Charlottesville, 2002, 60-70.

[73] *New-York Daily Tribune,* 8 March 1854; *New York Herald,* 8 March 1854; *National Anti-Slavery Standard,* 18 March 1854; *Boston Evening Transcript,* 11 March 1854; *Liberator,* 17 March 1854, as found in Myerson's "Textual Commentary," Gougeon and Myerson, 170.

[74] Emerson, "The Fugitive Slave Law, 7 March 1854," in Gougeon and Myerson, *Emerson's Antislavery Writings,* 82 and 85.

[75] Roger B. Taney, Supreme Court Chief Justice, "Dred Scott Decision, 1857," in Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero,* 231.

eyes of men, and now the Nebraska Bill leaves us staring." People of the North were in shock; ideas that the South was an aggressive power were on the increase. Foreshadowing the rise of the Republican party, Emerson claimed that the national Anti-Slavery Society "will add many members this year," as the anger about Southern incursions spread to the mainstream, and "The Whig party will join it. The Democrats will join it. The population of the Free States will join it." Indeed, antislavery Democrats and moderate and radical Whigs would join Free Soilers to form the sectional, antislavery Republican party of Abraham Lincoln. And Emerson called for this to happen sooner than later. And finally, to show that he did not simply advocate an individual aloofness, he affirmed that "there is a Divine Providence in the world which will not save us but through our own co-operation."[76] Ending slavery in America would take the moral righteousness of the divine, coupled with the hard work and agitation by the people.

Emerson spoke for many in the North when he gave a lecture in Boston on 25 January 1855 at the Tremont Temple in response to the outrage triggered by the Anthony Burns affair. Perhaps hoping to withdraw to Concord and his interior self-reliant life in order to work on saving himself as he forever advocated, he was nevertheless again agitated to respond to current political events. Angry and provoked, he said that "this outrage of giving back a stolen and plundered man to his thieves was ordained and under circumstances the most painful." He reminded his audience that the laws of Massachusetts provided enough of a countervailing force against the United States government, a government obviously controlled by the Slave Power. He provided that

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[76] Emerson, "Fugitive Slave Law," in Gougeon and Myerson, 89.

the state could have resisted the move to return Burns, "but no judge had the heart to invoke, no governor was found to execute it." The law, and especially the federally appointed Fugitive Slave Law commissioners, "feared collision" between the state and federal courts. Nobody in a position of power had the guts or the moral resolve to do anything about the aggressive and growing slaveocracy. Emerson complained that he and the audience lived in a world of skepticism, "the sickness of the time," and that the Governor of Massachusetts, normally a man of great esteem, lacked the gumption to overcome the age's skepticism, an era when "governors do not govern, when judges to not judge, when Presidents do not preside, and when representatives do not represent."[77]

The New Sectional Party: 1854

The events of the early 1850s added to a sectional strife that had been brewing for decades. Agreements to ignore the issue of slavery in national political parties fell apart. As more people began discussing the slavery issue, the movement to abolish the institution moved farther away from the original abolitionists. It became a mainstream movement. In many ways, Emerson mirrored the general trajectory of northern antislavery: he was mild to noncommittal in the 1830s, his voice grew louder in the 1840s, and then, in the 1850s, he and his northern neighbors were engaged in outright, strident agitation. As we have seen with the passage of the Fugitive Slave law and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, northerners were convinced that an insidious Slave Power was working stealthily to take over the country. At this time a new movement arose, one which played down the generally unpopular moral antislavery of the abolitionists in favor

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[77] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Lecture on Slavery, 25 January 1855," in Gougeon and Myerson, *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, 101.

of what was called political antislavery. Here was a new ideology that appealed to white Northerners irrespective of their feelings towards black people. It was a political movement which appealed to white fears about chattel slavery, and how that institution adversely affected white, Northern interests.[78]

In 1854, disaffected antislavery Democrats, tired of their commitment to ignoring Southern slavery and its incursions into the territories, radical and moderate Whigs, Freesoilers and members of the antislavery Liberty Party formed a new, popular sectional Republican Party. This was the party that would nurture the rise of prominent politicians William Seward of New York, Salmon P. Chase of Ohio, and Abraham Lincoln of Illinois. This was the first strong, vibrant, potentially influential antislavery party, and one which Southerners watched warily. The Republicans would lose the national election in 1856, with John C. Fremont on the ticket. But they won in 1860 with Lincoln, which caused South Carolina and then the rest of the South to secede, rather than face the new aggressive national antislavery party. There were radical Republicans and conservative Republicans, and they found common ground on economic and political issues. This new version of antislavery ideology centered around the notion that slavery was bad for business, a contagion which degraded the idea of labor and the laboring classes, and an affront to the proud American free market and liberal institutions. Northerners lauded the economic system in the North, based on free labor and the right of labor to choose where to work, negotiate with capital (and vice versa), and move freely in search of upward mobility and a better life. Northerners pointed to their burgeoning cities, their universities and civic institutions, their literature and arts, their canals and

[78] This introduction in broad strokes to the Republican Party is drawn primarily from the seminal work by Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War,* Oxford, 1995, 11-73.

railroads and factories, in fact the entire apparatus of the Market Revolution, as evidence of Northern superiority. The South, meanwhile, was backward, slow, aristocratic, and anti-American.[79]

The Republicans presented themselves as the party of the American Dream, of American exceptionalism, which from Ben Franklin to Abraham Lincoln believed that America was the "best poor man's country" in which one could work hard, remain temperate in behavior, save money, and eventually succeed in climbing the social ladder. Southern slavery, on the other hand, served only to drag the white laborer down, to degrade his status, and to infect the entire region with a negative, slow-paced economic lethargy. Slavery was an economic disease, never mind sentiments about the slaves themselves, and it was anti-free market: here was a class of workers who existed outside the market, and wage scales, and the positive, upward pressures of market forces. Eric Foner noted that "many Republicans were more concerned with preventing the extension of slavery " than they were with destroying the institution in the South. This was so because people still wanted to preserve the Union, and they feared potential violence. Foner added that Republicans, and a growing number of citizens in the northern states, "were convinced that the establishment of free labor settlements in the border states would demonstrate the superiority of free to slave labor."[80]

Interestingly enough, Emerson harbored many of the nascent ideas behind Republican party ideology. This association is not discussed by any of the major Emerson scholars. He subscribed to the political and economic antislavery views in addition to his overt moral aversion to slavery and his identification with the abolitionists.

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[79] Foner, "The Idea of Free Labor in Nineteenth-Century," a New Introduction, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men,* x-xxxix.
[80] Foner, *Free Soil,* 52-53.

In his lecture on slavery of January 1855, Emerson expounded his ideas of freedom in the North and his hope that they would extend to the country as a whole some day. "The theory of our government is Liberty," he said. Slavery could not exist in America, he asserted, because it went against the very foundation upon which the great country was founded. America professed belief in Liberty in its sacred institutional documents, and yet the world looked upon slavery and wondered at American hypocrisy. "The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the States," he intoned, and "the land of the brave and the home of the free" all exhibited that Americans were "the receivers and propagandists of this lesson to the world." These ideals were why the country was born. Each man's liberty must be "compatible with the liberty of every other man." The very meaning of America rests upon these fundamental ideals, and "it was not a sect, it was not a private opinion," but it was the result of human evolution, both of individuals and society. "It is our national pride," he said. Therefore, how can there be the existence of a *thing,* an institution, which goes against all we hold sacred? His answer: "most unhappily, this universally accepted duty and feeling has been antagonized by the calamity of southern slavery."[81]

Salmon P. Chase, one of the primary Republican politicians who battled with Lincoln for the presidential nomination at the end of the decade, reiterated Emerson's view of liberty and freedom. These were Northern notions which were quickly cementing into an ideology. Chase claimed that slavery was "a local institution," and therefore should not be spreading, as it was, and that "the federal government was barred by the Fifth Amendment from creating the condition of bondage anywhere in its

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[81] Emerson, "Lecture on Slavery, 25 January 1855," in Gougeon and Myerson, 104.

jurisdiction." Foner wrote that Chase had asserted in the Senate that "freedom is national; slavery only is local and sectional." This phrase – "freedom is national" – would become "the rallying cry" of the Republican party and would further reinforce the idea of two nations at odds: one for Freedom, the other Bondage; one for Liberty, the other Slavery.[82]

Emerson exhibited additional elements of the Republican ideology that was manifesting itself in the mainstream when he said in a lecture, "if the south country thinks itself enriched by slavery, read the census, read the valuation tables, or weigh the men. I think it is impoverished." He claimed with a shrug that young men must be born in the South of some education and talent, some "ability as elsewhere," but that "some blight is on their education." He first gave this lecture in Boston, and, according to Myerson, he repeated it in New York, Philadelphia, Rochester, and Syracuse. Newspapers around the region covered the lecture and its contents. These included the *Boston Daily Evening Traveller, Boston Daily Journal, New-York Daily Tribune, National Anti-Slavery Standard (*printed in the *New York Herald* in conjunction with a notion of a man in the audience who cheered Governor Seward, an antislavery advocate from New York), the *Rochester Daily Union* and the *Syracuse Daily Standard.*[83] The weight of Emerson's messages in his lectures and printed materials were added to the general formation of antislavery, anti-Southern ideology.

As has been shown in this paper, Emerson's peregrinations contributed to the formation of a national, Northern culture. His movements also added weight to Republican ideology. Mary Kupiec Cayton wrote "the transition in the Midwest from

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[82] Foner, *Free Soil,* 83.

[83] Emerson, "Lecture on Slavery," 100; see also Myerson's "Textual Commentary," 171-172.

institutions for self-culture to institutions for the spread of culture can be seen in microcosm in the transformation of the lecture into a form of popular entertainment." Keep in mind that this was an era before radio and television, and the spread of culture was fostered by public lectures, by the print revolution seen in books and newspapers. "The process mirrored a larger one, in which 'culture' was becoming a form of consumption necessary for the maintenance of one's class standing." Emerson became one of America's first celebrities, one of the "first symbols of this culture," and as such his antislavery writings, lectures and speeches had to have possessed a degree of import heretofore underappreciated. As Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson have effectively argued for a reconsideration of Emerson's political role, it is important for us to bear in mind that "Emerson the public personality contributed to a national system of culture that was effectually the consumption of well-known texts and performances."[84]

Recall, too, the discussion in chapter one of Southern congressman Preston Brooks's role in expelling Judge Hoar and his daughter from South Carolina when they had gone to investigate reports of kidnapping Massachusetts residents, the free black seamen aboard northern ships. Preston Brooks was the congressman from South Carolina who beat Senator Charles Sumner from Massachusetts on the floor of Congress. Louisa Whiting, another outspoken member of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society who often penned letters published in the *Liberator,* had on a trip to the South met Preston Brooks. She added her voice to the chorus which would one day become part of the Republican platform, that slavery adversely affected the white population of the South, both master and non-slaveowning whites. She wrote that the system of slavery

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[84] Mary Kupiec Cayton, "The Making of an American Prophet: Emerson, His Audiences, and the Rise of the Culture Industry in Nineteenth-Century America," *The American Historical Review,* 92, No. 3 (June, 1987), 615, 618.

"renders the master no less a 'victim' than the slave." She also wrote that southern men obviously could not control their sexual appetites, as evidenced by the growing population of mulatto slaves there. These are examples of Northern attitudes against the South, but appear in this paper because of the meeting Louisa had with Preston Brooks. When Brooks heard that she was from Concord, "he proudly informed her of his role" in ridding South Carolina of the Hoars' officious presence. According to Whiting, Brooks said "right or no right, Mr. Hoar must be silenced." Presumably this is the attitude he held when Sumner was giving his famous antislavery speech in Congress.[85]

Douglass Scott, in his work on the antebellum lecture circuit, showed how Northerners saw their intellectual and cultural pursuits as superior to the South. The lecturers themselves believed that their system of public edification examplified Northern superiority. In Scott's work, a compelling case is constructed about the lecturers on tour and about how these decades in the nineteenth century were characterized by self-exploration and identification. There were few institutions that could guide young intellectuals who wanted to be writers, professors, doctors, lawyers or other professionals. Often they had to invent themselves, and the lecture circuit was one outlet for the eager, hardworking intellectual. Scott explained how lawyers in competitive markets and aspiring writers and naturalists who otherwise lacked as formal outlet, used the lecture circuit to make themselves. This included theologians and ministers as well. Arguably the most interesting aspect of his research, however, pertains to the audience members. They, too, were often in search of themselves, their potential and their prosperity. To a person they seemed to buy into the ideal of the American dream, which

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[85] Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, "'Swelling That Great Tide of Humanity': The Concord, Massachusetts, Female Anti-Slavery Society," *The New England Quarterly,* 74, No. 3, (Sept., 2001), 414.

was soon to be effectively utilized by the Republican party in the 1850s. It was the dream of upward mobility, hard work, and success. The ideologies of free labor and free soil would help the Republican party organize ideas around antislavery, as they pointed to the South as an example of un-American, non-free market backwardness. As Foner wrote, "to the self-confident society of the North," all things economic, the tendency for upward mobility, and "the spread of democratic institutions" were integral to the Northern idea of "progress."[86] The lecture circuit trumpeted this notion of democratic education and progress. The audience members were often young professionals, people who wanted to invent themselves, meet with success, and find a piece of the American pie. Emerson's "Self-Reliance" essay appealed to them, as did his antislavery materials. Scott writes that "most Americans coming of age in these decades led a somewhat dislocated existence, and many of them were forced to strike out on their own . . . with few institutions to guide them . . . and few unambiguous cues to follow." Life was a process of "continuing self-construction" and entailed searching for new opportunities, prospects and advantages. The Republican party ideology evinced a "go West, young man" attitude, as a way for people to meet with success, relieve some of the social pressures in the urban northeast, and solve labor competition and depressed wages. One of the main tenets of their ideology was to keep slavery from spreading into the western territories, to keep the land open to free Americans. The audience members at antebellum lectures seemed to be a part of this class, a people who could "go West and

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[86] Foner, *Free Soil,* 38.

start afresh." Scott adds that "The lecture-going public was thus made up of people who perceived themselves in motion, in a state of preparation or expectation."[87]

The sensibilities of lecturer and audience seemed to be linked into a common culture that soon became identified as distinctly Northern. As the intellectuals giving speeches, the reporters covering them and the audiences appreciating them, the American nation as perceived by Northerners existed in similar fashion. The Northern view of America was as the audiences were: in motion, expectant and eager to define and re-define itself. In a search for understanding, for a definition of freedom, justice and equality, for manifestations found in the Declaration of Independence, the North was hungry to distinguish itself and to solve the slavery problem that threatened the Union. Individual citizens were seeking definition, as was the young, troubled nation. Into this mix stepped the most famous lecturer of them all, Waldo Emerson. In his second "Address on West Indian Emancipation," as early as 1845, he highlighted differences between North and South. He claimed that the southern gentlemen *wanted* to attain culture and civility and that the North should "elevate, enlighten, civilize the semi-barbarous nations of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama." He added that the educated, wealthy North should remove some stereotypical items, namely their "Bowie-knife, rum-bowl . . . dice-box, and the stews," and if this were accomplished you would remove "the brute, and infuse a drop of civility and generosity," and you would "touch those selfish lords with thought and gentleness."[88] A reporter for the *New York Herald,* in an article covering a later speech, wrote of slavery that Emerson "drew a terrible picture of its

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[87] Donald M. Scott, "The Popular Lecture and the Creation of a Public in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America," *The Journal of American History,* 66, No. 4 (March, 1980): 791-809.
[88] Emerson, "West Indian Emancipation, August 1, 1845," in Gougeon and Myerson, 38.

influence upon the youth of the country, whose aspirations for everything that was good or great were made subservient to its power."[89]

As the lecture system was lauded as uniquely democratic because it sidestepped or transcended social, sectarian and partisan divisions, it should be noted that Emerson utilized his popularity and his unique position of access to address sectional, abolitionist and political topics. And he did so in a lecture system that "can be said to have created and embodied an American public," a public that was becoming aware of itself, and able to identify itself as uniquely American, and eventually, Northern. The lecture system was democratic, even embodying Jacksonian tenets of Everyman, and "the system was thought to create and embody public opinion – the opinion that the public held in common," and the ideas that respected formers of opinion like Emerson espoused. The popular lecture for many was sacred space, was nation-forming, and "was a ceremony," which as a whole "brought the public into self-conscious existence." Brooks, adding to many other observers, wrote that the lecture system "was a collective ritual that invoked the values thought to define and sustain the community as a whole."[90]

The public intellectual on the lecture circuit contributed to the formation of a nation achieving awareness of itself. Higginson wrote that the lecturer moved all over the north and west, weaving "together this new web of national civilization."[91] Emerson's collected letters are filled with correspondence to lyceum curators, to town directors of cultural events, to editors at papers chastising them for printing "supposedly verbatim" the points of his lectures, for terms of contracts, money owed, apologies for

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[89] *New York Herald*, "Emerson's Anti-Slavery Lecture at the Tabernacle," February 7, 1855, 296, cols. 1-2, in Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Literary Comment in American Renaissance Newspapers: Fresh Discoveries Concerning Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott and Transcendentalism,* Hartford, 1977, 22.

[90] Brooks, 808.

[91] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "American Lecture System," 49. (?)

missed appointments, explanations for not being able to make certain dates, and answers to specific requests on individual lectures already given or topics they would like to hear in a speech. Popular lecturers visited hundreds of towns during a lecture season and were covered in hundreds more newspaper and magazine articles. The lecturers became "legitimate spokesmen of what was thought to be the national culture." Quite compelling from the perspective of power and influence, the lecture system was not as democratic or as inclusive as the mythology held it to be. For example, urban immigrants, rural farmers and the lower classes rarely if ever attended the lectures. It was a system for the middle and upper classes, for the elite, for "overwhelmingly white Anglo-Protestant" citizens, and, "it was almost exclusively a northern public."[92] In short, it was a northern, white, native-born public which in the middle of the 1850s would come to form the bulk of the Republican party, as the Whigs and the Democrats of the Second Party system dissolved under the weight of the growing sectional tensions. It was a Republican party which would finally be the expression of political antislavery, and a coalescence of pro-Northern attitudes that represented final ideas of the Union as a whole. Emerson eventually embodied this sentiment, and he would become one of its most forthright, vigorous spokesmen, a man looked to for inspiration and guidance during tumultuous times.[93]

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[92] Brooks, 809.

[93] This reminds me of my idea of "circles of dominant influence." Namely, that the middle and upper classes both produce and consume what turns out to be the dominant culture. Literature plays one of the ultimate roles in this cycle of influence. Literature is first and foremost produced by those who can read and write, and who have the leisure time, education and means to do the writing. The finished products, whether books, articles in periodicals, or speeches in front of lyceums, are in turn consumed by people of the same ilk, i.e. those who are educated and who can read and write. Those on the margins, those without literate culture, or those poor immigrants, blacks and women, to name a few of the traditionally disenfranchised, end up not receiving a voice in the construction of an overall culture. In fact, when we do read about slaves, for example, or the lower classes, it is often because of the impelled vigor of the dominant part of the cultural unit. Additionally, scholars and academics are of the mostly middle and upper

Emerson was associated not only with Charles Sumner, but he also published with some of the leading Republican politicians. The Hon. William Seward, governor of New York and presidential aspirant in the Republican Party with Lincoln, wrote *Autographs for Freedom,* during an encomium for the Declaration of Independence and ideas of our free and liberal national heritage. In keeping with the spirit of the age, Seward wrote "if there were no such common Humanity, then the poor of great Britain would not be perpetually appealing to us against the oppression of landlords on their farms and work-masters in their manufactories and mines; and so, on the other hand, we should not be, as we are now, perpetually framing apologies to mankind for the continuance of African slavery among ourselves." This emphasizes one of the leading Northern sentiments, that the South and its peculiar institutions were holding the United States back, as the world looked on, not just morally, but economically and intellectually. It was difficult to uphold, or ask other countries to uphold, the ideals declared in our sacred documents while slavery continued. Seward, with a nod toward the famous phrase, while comparing our Constitution with a Higher Law, wrote "it is, moreover, a true philosophy, deduced from the nature of man and the character of the Creator. If there were no supreme law, then the world would be a scene of universal anarchy, resulting from the eternal conflict

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classes, and they through the generations perpetuate this so-called mass culture. Therefore, to ground the circle of dominance in the current discussion, we see that Emerson was a member of the elite class, an intellectual, a landowner, an influential member of society, supported by and supportive of his fellow members in said society. His views are encouraged by this class. Eventually the bulk of the middle classes coalesce around political antislavery, as expressed by the Republican party, mostly white, nativist, and Anglo-Saxon Protestant. In turn, the Republican party wins the election of 1860, then ultimately the Union wins the Civil War, and this strata of the populace, which had been doing all the writing and reading and propagandizing to begin with, retains the most pervasive position in the construction of the overall American myth – the metanarrative of American exceptionalism, free market and free labor and America as land of the free. When studying the role of literature in any element of cultural formation, it is important to keep in mind who is doing the reading and receiving. Emerson was a member of the writing, winning class, the section of not only the North, but the nation as a whole, which was determining what and who America was, and who was busy recording the story for history. The Northern viewpoint, as seen through the Republican party, became the dominant narrative in more ways than one.

of peculiar institutions and antagonistic laws."[94] This eternal conflict noted in annual of 1854 is one that would not go away.

Many abolitionists and mainstream politicians feared that a spreading slaveocracy threatened the healthy institutions of the North. For example, Jay wrote about the encroachment of the Slave Power, a central tenet in the Republican and Northern antislavery ideological construct: "such is the unholy and gigantic power that, leaving its territorial domain, has usurped the seat of freedom – that has established at our capitol a central despotism, and bends to its will with iron hand the Legislative, Executive, and Judicial branches of our Federal Government." He claimed that "freedom in our fair land has so long slumbered beneath such an outrage."[95] Salmon Chase expounded this view with exclamatory zeal when he wrote, "restrict slavery in the slave States! prevent its ingress into territories! repeal the Fugitive Slave Law! put the government . . . on the side of freedom!" This Republican party platform would eventually lead to emancipation in the South. According to Foner, the Slave Power idea was "based on the assumption that a small aristocracy of slaveholders" controlled both life in the South and the federal government.[96]

Horace Greeley employed the ideals of free-labor in his arguments against slavery. Here is one of the prime arguments of the Republicans heading toward the sectional crisis, and the fact that Emerson is linked to this position increases his association with the antislavery cause. Greeley was not an abolitionist. He wrote, "the fundamental, essential cause of slavery and its concomitants, ignorance, degradation and

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[94] William Seward, "The Basis of the American Constitution," in Julia Griffiths, ed., *Autographs for Freedom,* Auburn, 1854, 202-206.
[95] John Jay, "The Encroachment of the Slave Power," in Griffiths, *Autographs,* 192.
[96] Foner, *Free Soil,* 119-120.

suffering on the one side, as of idleness, prodigality and luxury-born disease on the other, is a false idea of the nature and offices of Labor." He argued that the idea of Labor being a negative one is incorrect, that labor is not a "curse." He claimed that Labor becomes a curse when associated with "human perverseness, misconception and sin" and that too many people (Southern slave owners in particular) "seek to engross the product of others' work, yet do little or none themselves." He claimed that people can not, and should not, enjoy more than the material rewards that a fair day's work would produce, and that one cannot enjoy the fruits of one's labor "without doing the work." Moreover, if this fact were generally realized, the "death-knell of Slavery in general – in its subtler as well as its grosser forms – would be rung."[97] Emerson, in his first famous antislavery address on the emancipation of slaves in the West Indies, chided Southern slaveowners for their love of the black man's labor. He said that, more often than not, the freed slaves would remain where they were, preferring their homes and jobs. He added that "the oldest planters of Jamaica are convinced, that it is cheaper to pay wages, than to own a slave."[98]

In Greeley's essay he runs a list of Republican and Northern free-labor ideology. Namely, that a rich man who "exchanges business for idleness" or a man who educates his male offspring for a profession "rather than a mechanical or agricultural calling" or a woman who prefers a rich suitor "of doubtful morals or scanty brains" to a man with less money but of "sound principles" and "sound sense," or mother who "is pleased" when a daughter is noticed by "a rich lawyer or merchant" and who spurns a young laborer or artisan, or man who marries a woman for her wealth, or young man who encourages "short business hours and long dinners," or a teacher who thinks of pay first before the

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[97] Horace Greeley, "The Dishonour of Labor," in Griffiths, *Autographs,* 193-194.

[98] Emerson, "Emancipation in the British West Indies," in David M. Robinson, *The Political Emerson: Essential Writings on Politics and Social Reform,* Boston, 2004, 94.

qualities of her job, or Abolitionist who is afraid of being caught engaging manual labor or sends someone two miles to fetch a ride – each of the people living in the manner above described might be "shocked" to discover that Greeley thinks that he or she is "a practical and powerful upholder of the continued enslavement of our fellow-men."[99] The free labor ideology invoked by Foner is here adequately evinced as it relates to the antislavery ideas that had become political antislavery as the 1850s unfolded.

Emerson, whether unconsciously or not, spent much of his intellectual defenses for the abolition of slavery allied with Republican ideology. This is nowhere more in evidence than the "Emancipation" address. He first waxes about the market system in the North: "we peddle, we truck, we sail, we row, we ride in cars, we creep in teams, we go in canals – to the market, and for the sale of goods." He calls this the "national aim." And he exhibited sarcastic amusement when he imagines being a slaveowner: What?, all this labor for free? "The sugar they raised was excellent . . . the coffee fragrant." Did this system work for the British planters in the West Indies, he wondered? Emerson went on to show what the plantation owners learned after they freed the slaves:

> It was shown to the planters that they, as well as the negroes, were slaves; that though they paid no wages, they got very poor work; that their estates were ruining them, under the finest climate; and that they needed the severest monopoly laws at home to keep them from bankruptcy. The oppression of the slave recoiled on them. They were full of vices; their children were lumps of pride, sloth, sensuality and rottenness . . . Slavery is no scholar, no improver; it does not love the whistle of the railroad; it does not love the newspaper, the mailbag, a college, a book, or a preacher who has the absurd whim of saying what he thinks; it does not increase the white population; it does not improve the soil; everything goes to decay.[100]

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[99] Greeley, in Griffiths, 196-197.

[100] Emerson, "Emancipation in the British West Indies," in Robinson, 106-107.

This is explicit Republican ideology that would, through two decades of political agitation, ultimately express itself with Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War. Emerson went on to argue that slavery is bad business. The British mercantilists noted that if slaves were paid wages, "the slaves would build houses, would fill them with tools . . . with hardware," and that eventually even negro women would "love fine clothes as well as white women." In short, even dim-witted merchants could see "a future customer." And eventually, if freed slaves in the South became wage laborers, the region as a whole would catch up with the North in both economics and education, in freedom and civility. This Republican conception of labor and political economy is what Foner meant by quoting William Seward that slavery "impaired the strength of the entire country and subverted the 'intelligence, vigor, and energy' which national growth required."[101]

Emerson continued to speak out on slavery as the decade marched toward the elections of 1860. On his lecture tours he was expressing many of the ideals of the new Republican party. He had spoken his mind in protest to the Fugitive Slave law and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Emerson assuredly desired to retire to his home in Concord and work on his books, and his isolationist, transcendental philosophy. Perhaps after 1855 he imagined that events were settling down into some form of stasis. A bloody assault on Charles Sumner in Congress by a Southern Representative in 1856, further bloodshed in Kansas, and the arrival of John Brown on the scene would once again thrust Emerson into the political fray. The Republicans would lose in the national election of 1856 to a Democrat, but change and dangerous times were in the air. When 1860 arrived and Lincoln won the presidency, the South no longer felt it could abide by the compromises

[101] Foner, *Free Soil,* 51; and Emerson, "Emancipation," in Robinson, 107.

of the Union. There would be war and Emerson's take on it: but first, there was the shocking, brutal beating of Sumner. And Emerson would address the North in 1856 with "I do not see how a barbarous community and a civilized community can constitute one state."[102]

[102] Emerson, "Assault on Charles Sumner, 26 May 1856," in Gougeon and Myerson, 107.

Chapter Three

Emerson's John Brown and the Beginning of the Civil War

This act makes that the lives of our heroes
have not been sacrificed in vain.
It makes a victory of our defeats.[103]

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, reacting to the Civil War and Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation

On 22 May 1856, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner gave a speech in front of Congress for which he would, quite literally, be bludgeoned by a fellow Congressman. Sumner's speech has come to be called "Crime Against Kansas," and was delivered during a time of heated sectional passions. He rose before his colleagues and spoke about the terrible crimes being perpetrated by proslavery factions against antislavery settlers in Kansas and about the lack of intervention by federal authorities. It was a "bitter denunciation" of the "slave oligarchy," an oration against the creeping encroachments of the Slave Power. He banged his fists and raised his voice amid hisses and boos against, and occasional applause for, his disgust with events in the western territory. Sumner verbally attacked and impugned the character of two southern senators, Butler of South Carolina and Mason of Virginia. When he was finished, and he was seated at his Senate desk in the Chambers, Preston S. Brooks, Representative from South Carolina and Butler's nephew, crept slowly up to him, furious and silent. Brooks carried a heavy cane and his aim was certain. He raised the cane above his head and brought it down on

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[103] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The President's Proclamation, 12 October 1862," in Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson, eds., *Emerson's Antislavery Writings,* New Haven, 1995, 131.

Sumner's shoulders. He raised it again and struck Sumner's neck and skull several times. Sumner fell from his chair. He never had a chance to defend himself. He lay there bleeding, unconscious. The North reacted with vehement outrage. Brooks was able to withstand efforts to expel him from the House of Representatives because of Southern support and the unanimous backing of his home district. Sumner would survive, but he would not be able to resume work for three years. He returned in December 1859.[104]

The Assault on Charles Sumner and Bleeding Kansas

The context of Sumner's speech and Brooks's violent response was sectarian blood flowing in Kansas. As a result of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, the question of slavery in either territory was left up to the local population in what was called "popular sovereignty." Proslavery and antislavery advocates rushed to settle the land. "Open warfare" existed between the two sides in Kansas. "As a result of this conflict," Gougeon allows, Kansas "had in effect two governments" by the end of 1855. Freesoilers from New England and the northeast, some with the help of the New England Emigrant Aid Society, which had a chapter in Concord, hoped to keep the territory free – free soil for free labor and free of blacks, as well. These settlers were concerned with their own conditions with respect to degraded labor and free labor ideology, and not with the moral problems of chattel slavery. They wished to transplant their ideas of a free society to the territories. Politicians in the Republican party watched developments closely, as did Emerson. Scholars have estimated that the battles in the western territory

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[104] This version of the attack drawn from Len Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform,* Athens, 1990, 220-221; David Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War,* New York, 1960, 282-288.; and Joel Myerson, "Textual Commentary," and "Notes," in Gougeon and Myerson, *Emerson's Antislavery Writings,* 175, 218.

– which gave it the name "Bleeding Kansas" – claimed over two hundred lives and "$2 million in property destroyed" in 1856.[105]

Emerson kept a concerned eye on the events in Kansas. He received much of his information about the conflict from Franklin Sanborn, a resident of Concord who would also teach Emerson's children. Sanborn was a secretary for the Free Soil party of Massachusetts and a member of the State Committee of Massachusetts for dealings with the territories. As we will soon see, he was also responsible for introducing abolitionist martyr John Brown to Emerson and Thoreau. Sanborn would be implicated in the Harper's Ferry "Secret Six," a group which supported Brown's movement with money and guns, and would include Theodore Parker and Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Emerson reacted strongly to the Charles Sumner's beating and to events in Kansas. On 26 May 1856, four days after the assault, Emerson spoke to a gathering in Concord. This was a talk at one of the many "Indignation Meetings," which were held in "most northern towns and cities." The speech was widely reported in the regional and abolitionist press. "I think we must get rid of slavery," he said, "or we must get rid of freedom." Here Emerson reinforced the growing sectional splitting and equated the North with Freedom and the South with Slavery. He underscored these differing ideologies when he continued praising the North as "adorned with education, with skilful labor, with arts, with long prospective interests, with sacred family ties, with honor and justice," while he condemned the South with "life is a fever; man is an animal, given to pleasure, frivolous,

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[105] Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero,* 217.

irritable, spending his days on hunting and practising with deadly weapons" so that he can "defend himself against his slaves."[106]

In 1854, when the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed, Sumner had begun his political agitation from within the halls of power. Emerson wrote to him and commended his activism, and exhorted him to keep up the good work. His salutation read "My dear Sumner," and went on to say "I thank you heartily for your brave temperate & sound Speeches." He went on to proclaim the "vast importance" that the epoch had thrust upon all of them and the good fortune that Massachusetts experienced "in having you in the Senate in these eventful years." Later that year Emerson also invited Sumner to speak in Concord, promised that his wife would bake Sumner a cake, and insisted that he should "come to my house." Emerson and Sumner would also share membership in a Boston social and intellectual group, the Saturday Club.[107] Though it would not be accurate to say they were the best of friends, they were comrades nonetheless, and each provided the other with continued support during the antebellum and war years. In his journal of 1856, after the assault, Emerson wrote that "but this stroke rouses the feeling of the people, & shows everybody where they are. All feel it." He added that some pretended to be too busy to notice, but they could not "deceive themselves or us. He added that history and current events had taught them the "fatal blunder" of supporting a "false position" like slavery. And he said of both compromises (1820 and 1850) that the North should "not compromise again, or accept the aid of evil agents." He asked of himself

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[106] Emerson, "Assault on Charles Sumner, 26 May 1856," in Gougeon and Myerson, *Writings,* 107; see also *Boston Evening Telegraph,* 29 May 1856, p.1; *Boston Evening Transcript,* 31 May 1856, p.1; *Liberator,* 6 June 1856, p. 91; *National Anti-Slavery Standard,* 14 June 1856, p.1. Also, the "Indignation Meetings" taken from a note explaining a journal entry in Susan Sutton Smith and Harrison Hayford, eds., *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks,* (hereafter *JMN*), Vol. 14, 1854-1861, Cambridge, 1978, 92.

[107] Emerson, "To Charles Sumner, June 9, 1854," and "To Charles Sumner, April 4, 1855," in Joel Myerson, ed., *The Selected Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* New York, 1997, 380.

about raising an army in Massachusetts and going it alone as a Northern Union. Here were overt disunion sentiments that were fueled by the attack on Sumner.[108]

Emerson's anger at the Sumner barbarity and his growing anti-Southern sectionalism was foreshadowed in early 1856. Oliver Wendell Holmes, who was responsible for much of the early scholarly misinterpretations of Emerson's abolitionism and antislavery work, gave an anti-abolitionist speech in New York. (Holmes consciously ignored Emerson's abolitionism in his biography of Emerson.) Holmes, according to the *Boston Daily Advertiser* and Ralph Rusk, had disparaged the abolitionists as "traitors to the Union." The speech was widely denigrated in the abolitionist and Republican press, including Greeley's *New York Tribune*. Theodore Parker and Wendell Phillips also expressed their disapproval. Emerson, who respected Holmes, felt that the poet needed to be corrected. His response to Holmes's speech is indicative of Emerson's own accelerated sectionalism, but is also representative of the growing tensions in the public at large between North and South. Hostilities between the two sections, and the various antagonistic ideologies, were on the rise. Emerson wrote of the attempts to keep the Union together with slavery intact, "no manly person will suffer a day to go by without discrediting, disintegrating & finally exploding it." He placed the word "union" in quotations, sarcastically, and asserted that the union "they talk of, is dead & rotten."[109]

With increasing speed and assurance, citizens in the North were willing to discuss disunion. Already the sectional Republican Party was gaining momentum. Emerson and others hoped that it would win the executive in 1856. John C. Fremont, the Republican

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[108] Emerson, *JMN,* Vol. 14, 93.

[109] Emerson, "To Oliver Wendell Holmes, Concord, March, 1856," in Ralph L. Rusk, *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson, in Six Volumes,* Vol. 5, New York, 1939, 17-18.

candidate, lost the election to Democrat James Buchanan. The Republicans ran on a platform that upheld the ability of the federal government to control the spread of slavery in the territories, and in Washington D.C., and for the containment of slavery in the South. The Democrats, still a national party, instead supported a platform which upheld the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The Republicans lost in 1856, but it was a difficult win for the Democrats and stood as a harbinger for the elections of 1860, when Lincoln would claim the White House. Emerson had already abandoned hopes that "moral suasion" would end slavery in the United States, the position of many abolitionists. Emerson, as evidenced by his speeches and his journals, was becoming convinced that nothing gentle would suffice. Sectional friction increased, and the word "split" more and more entered cultural conversation. Southern-directed use of force by the federal government to return fugitive slaves, the bloody sectarian battles in Kansas, and Sumner's bludgeoning persuaded Emerson, according to Gougeon, "that southern slavery was now not only hostile but aggressive." The Slave Power was on the march, controlled the federal government, and was soon to dictate the policies of the United States. "In light of this," Emerson and other northerners felt, "the dissolution of the Union might indeed be a necessary protective measure for the North."[110]

For Charles Sumner, the man who compared the Revolution of "our fathers" to the antislavery cause, the Indignation Meetings, and Emerson's address specifically, fueled his desire to continue his work. In 1852 he had written that the Revolution was a noble cause, but the new struggle against slavery was more noble, given that "it is more exalted to struggle for the freedom of *others*" than for one's own freedom. He added that

[110] Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero*, 223-228.

"right, freedom, and humanity, all concur in demanding the abolition of slavery."[111] When Emerson said to the assembled in Concord that his words should be directed to the ailing Sumner, "that every man of worth in New England loves his virtues" and "every friend of freedom thinks him *the* friend of freedom," Sumner replied in a letter. Sumner wrote that his house possessed "every printed word of yours" and that they were "treasured." He added "your name is daily mentioned with admiration & delight." Sumner went on to say that "often since that most beautiful speech of yours," he thought of Emerson's support while he lay convalescing "weak & fettered to my bed," and that when thinking of the speech "my eyes have moistened."[112]

As Sumner healed, events in Kansas continued the trend toward sectional violence. Repeated calls for help from the antislavery settlers found their way to the North. Emerson and his colleagues wasted no time in responding. Kansas aid societies existed all over New England, and Emerson's Concord was no exception. In June 1856 Emerson, Thoreau and others collected money for the beleaguered freesoilers in Kansas. Some of the money went for clothing, and some notoriously supplied weapons and ammunition. Franklin Sanborn furnished reports after visits to Kansas and would soon be responsible for introducing John Brown to Emerson and Thoreau in Concord. In his journal, Emerson noted that the Kansas relief meeting raised $962 "subscribed on the spot." Soon thereafter more was added, for a total of $1130, "and it will probably reach 1200, or one per cent on the valuation of the town." Emerson notes that during that particular subscription, $1360 was raised, and that in September, after Emerson spoke at

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[111] Charles Sumner, "Letter of Oct. 16, 1852," in Julia Griffiths, ed., *Autographs For Freedom,* Boston, 1853, 77. Permission to quote from the American Antiquarian Society gratefully acknowledged.
[112] Charles Sumner, from a letter to Emerson in Emerson Manuscripts, Houghton Library, Harvard University, 16 August 1856, in Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero,* 225.

another Kansas Relief Meeting, $640 were contributed to the whole, with Emerson providing $50 of his own. These were impressive figures for nineteenth-century Massachusetts.[113]

Emerson traveled to Cambridge during the second week of September for an address at an additional Kansas Relief Meeting. Echoing Sumner's earlier comments about "right" being on the side of freedom, he said "there is a peculiarity about the case of Kansas, that all the right is on one side." With dramatic rhetorical flair he added, "we hear the screams of hunted wives and children answered by the howl of the butchers."[114] He was there to speak and raise the fire of antislavery in the Boston area and to raise money for Kansas. This money would be going to purchase Sharpe's rifles and ammunition. Emerson "supported the arming of the antislavery farmers in Kansas as a necessary measure."[115]

The speech in Cambridge that day was well attended, and many newspapers, including the abolition press, covered the event. Emerson asked his fellow New Englanders to scrimp and save in order to provide funds for the Free Soil farmers in Kansas, those advocates of freedom and those missionaries of liberty. We know that at least 200 Sharpe's rifles were proffered by citizens of Massachusetts and given to John Brown. "We must learn to do with less, live in a smaller tenement, sell our apple-trees, our acres, our pleasant houses." People must not worry about their debts right now, he declared, but "save and earn for the benefit of the Kansas emigrants." Emerson also called on the governor of Massachusetts and the legislature to do something to protect

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[113] Emerson, *JMN*, Vol. 14, 96.
[114] Emerson, "Kansas Relief Meeting, 10 September 1856," in Gougeon and Myerson, *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, 111.
[115] Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero*, 222-229.

citizens who had moved to federal territories and were being "pillaged, and numbers of them killed and scalped," saying that they should "neither slumber nor sleep till they have found out how to send effectual aid" to the poor settlers of liberty and freedom. He castigated anyone who dallied, came up with excuses or deferred to technicalities of the law or of bureaucratic red tape.[116]

The federal government did not escape castigation. Emerson blamed the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act for creating problems far beyond the fact that they coddled and encouraged the Slave Power. They also maliciously worsened the Kansas problem. "The government has been the chief obstruction to the common weal," Emerson voiced in his speech. He claimed that the territories would have been settled without incident had the government left them alone. This thinking was reiterated in his journal when he wrote "the government has been an obstruction, & nothing but an obstruction" and the "government has made all this mischief." His audience in Cambridge heard his most biting, angry speech. He went so far as to say that "the government armed and led the ruffians against the poor farmers." Then he disparaged the populace for allowing their patriotic pride in mythological words to obstruct their morality. Emerson's tone was sarcastic and caustic: "But this is Union, and this is Democracy; and our poor people, led by the nose by these fine words, dance and sing, ring bells and fire cannon, with every new link of the chain which is forged for their limbs by the plotters in the Capitol."[117]

Citizens of Massachusetts could not freely travel through the South and speak their minds, he said. There was no room for dissent, no ability to question the insidious

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[116] Emerson, "Kansas Relief Meeting," 113.

[117] Emerson, *JMN*, Vol. 14, 97; and Emerson, "Kansas Relief Meeting," 114.

laws. But in the South people were silent until death, refusing to vocalize against the grain. "In the free states, we have a snivelling support to slavery." The judges failed to properly interpret the laws; they were cowards. Emerson also took on the President when he stated that the president chided the fractious Kansans, saying that if they had a problem they should take it to the courts. But in court, as Emerson phrased it, when the settler who was plundered or abused arrived, "he finds the ringleader who has robbed him, dismounting from his own horse, unbuckling his knife to sit as his judge." Emerson compared the Revolution with the problems faced in 1856. When Massachusetts was "in its heroic day," there was government, there "was an anarchy." Individuals banded together against tyranny and created a new land. A new revolution was called for, he demanded of his audience. "A harder task will the new revolution . . . be." Then, the colonists threw off a foe 3,000 miles away. But with slavery and the Slave Power, "vast property, gigantic interests, family connections, webs of party, cover the land" with an inextricable framework of vested interests that "immensely multiplies the dangers of war." Emerson called for nothing less than a revolution, for disunion as opposed to Union with slavery; he made a verbal, rhetorical cry for war. These were not the calm words of a casual observer. Emerson had been pushed to a radical position by the events of the day. Emerson told his audience that if the side of Liberty were to lose such a war, "anyone luckless enough to remain alive" would have to "depart to some land where freedom exists." William Lloyd Garrison, arch-abolitionist, editor of the *Liberator,* and leader of the cause for almost thirty years, noticed Emerson's Kansas speech. He wrote Emerson and asked him to sit for a daguerreotype, so that a lithograph of Emerson could accompany those of Theodore Parker, Wendell Phillips, Samuel J. May, and Gerrit

Smith, all vocal and longtime abolitionists. Emerson had officially joined that vaunted club of radicals.[118]

The money Emerson and his townspeople and the citizens of Massachusetts raised went to clothe and arm the freesoil settlers of Kansas. Two hundred rifles and another two hundred or so pistols made their way into the hands of settlers who were fighting the proslavery border ruffians. The man who led this guerrilla collection of farmer-soldiers was John Brown. John Brown was a famous abolition soldier who crusaded in Kansas and eventually commandeered the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry. Some said he was a murderer and a terrorist. To others, he was a hero and a martyr. His story has been passed down to us from disparate sources. The myth of John Brown continues to be debated, and no small segment of that debate was provided by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau. John Brown paid a visit to Concord in 1857, and there found a radical meeting of the minds.

Emerson's John Brown and the Creation of American Mythology

Here is one story of what happened on the night of May 23, 1856. It was a night as dark and obscured as subsequent attempts to unravel the mystery have been. John Brown and a band of men, including his sons, were well armed as they traveled along Pottawatomie Creek. The small group of settler-guerrillas led by Brown was known as the Pottawatomie Rifle Company. They hiked away from Lawrence, Kansas after border ruffians had sacked the town. The elder Brown had heard of the beating of Charles

[118] Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero,* 227; and Emerson, "Kansas Relief Meeting," 114-116.

Sumner at the hands of Preston Brooks, and he was angered and possibly seeking revenge. The band arrived at a cabin owned by the Doyle family, known proslavery settlers. Brown ordered "old man Doyle" and his sons out of the cabin and marched them for a distance through the darkness. They halted in the middle of a road. John Brown drew out his revolver and shot the elder Doyle in the forehead. Brown's sons descended upon the others and killed them with knives and swords. The vengeful gang continued along the road and murdered two other known proslavery sympathizers. Brown, it was said by some, sought nothing but destruction. "He sought war and revolution, first in Kansas, then in the nation." This same man, this guerilla warrior, would, just nine months later, lunch with Henry Thoreau and dine with Waldo Emerson.[119]

But did it happen that way? Nobody can be certain. Some claimed Brown murdered Doyle in cold blood. Some stated that he was defending himself. Others asserted that Brown did not pull the trigger on old man Doyle, but that he ordered the slayings. For his part, biographer David Reynolds wrote that some people dismissed "John Brown as a psychopath who had come to Kansas only to stir up trouble," while others, namely "Brown's defenders" ultimately "have explained the act as retaliation against proslavery aggressions in Kansas." Hagiographers have exculpated Brown's actions on that night, as would Emerson in his own way. Pottawatomie was not simply payback for atrocities committed by southerners. It was the result of pent-up frustration and anger at the South's own aggression and violence. Lawrence wrote that "it was an impetuous expression of long-delayed retaliation for years of Southern violence against

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[119] This account of the Pottawatomie Massacre is one of many versions in Merrill D. Peterson, *John Brown: The Legend Revisited,* Charlottesville, 2002, 63-65; see also David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights,* New York, 2005, 149-178.

abolitionists and against blacks." And "at Pottawatomie," he continued, "John Brown gave the South some of its own medicine." Brown was reacting to years of southern violent culture, a culture which condoned "eye-gouging, bowie-knife stabbing and scalping, hanging, burning over slow fires, whipping, tarring and feathering," a litany of abuses which served to reinforce anti-Southern ideas. Elements of this violence were contained in the savage beating of Sumner by Brooks. But Brooks's own behavior after to his act heightened the fury of men like Brown and Emerson.[120]

Preston Brooks gloated to his constituents and colleagues about nearly killing Charles Sumner. Northerners like Brown fused anger with action when they heard of the beating and its aftermath. The same form of North versus South ideological formations would occur after Brown's execution in 1859. They were events which galvanized the North against the South and further engendered the sectional crisis. Brooks's confident boasting after the assault enraged Brown. Brooks reported that he had landed "about thirty first-rate stripes" on Sumner's head and body with his cane, and he added:

> every lick went where I intended. For about the first four or five licks he offered to make a fight, but I plied him so rapidly that he did not touch me. Towards the last he bellowed like a calf. I wore my cane out completely but saved the head, which is gold. The fragments of the cane are begged for as sacred relics. Every Southern man is delighted and the abolitionists are like a hive of disturbed bees. They are making all sorts of threats. It would not take much to have the throats of every Abolitionist cut.

The problem with these provocative words, perhaps not readily apparent to Brooks's admirers, was that the "disturbed bees" would soon coalesce into a formidable oppositional power ready to avenge secession. As mentioned earlier, Brooks's constituents insisted he keep his job and voted to retain him in the House. Added to that

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[120] Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist,* 149, 159.

were "editors, mass meetings, and student groups" which "hailed him throughout the South." Reynolds described the *Richmond Enquirer*, the leading newspaper in the South, as calling antislavery senators dogs who "have become saucy, and dare to be impudent to gentlemen" and must be "lashed into submission." The *Enquirer* inelegantly continued by warning the North that for "every vile word spoken against the South" they would be smacked again like Brooks with his cane, "and they will soon learn to behave themselves like *decent dogs* – they never can be gentlemen." Such fighting words went well beyond verbal braggadocio and positioned arrogance as testament to outright warfare.[121]

As noted above, Franklin Sanborn introduced John Brown to the leading citizens of Concord and other Massachusetts towns in February 1857. Emerson was taken with the stern, well-spoken Brown. He wrote in his journal, "Captain John Brown of Kansas gave a good account of himself in the Town Hall last night." Emerson agreed with Brown when the latter admonished the peace party in Kansas, which "discountenanced resistence." Both believed that violent resistance was necessary against the proslavery forces in the territory. Emerson approved of Brown's insistence that "one good, believing, strong-minded man is worth a hundred, nay twenty thousand men without character" and that "right men will give a permanent direction to the fortunes of a state."[122] Brown returned to Kansas with weapons and ammunition and continued his fight there. But he was plotting a bigger adventure. He felt that it was necessary to take the fight into southern territory. He dreamed up the Harper's Ferry scheme and enacted it in 1859.

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[121] Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist,* 161.
[122] Emerson, *JMN,* Vol. 14, 125-126.

After the Dred Scott ruling of 1857, which understandably incensed the North, and a relatively quiet year in 1858, John Brown returned to Concord in order to drum up support for his cause in 1859. Abolitionists and transcendentalists alike readily gave him funds, and, it has been noted, did not ask many questions. As with the Pottawatomie Massacre, scholars dispute the foreknowledge that men like Theodore Parker, Franklin Sanborn, Wendell Phillips, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and even Emerson or Thoreau, possessed of Brown's next move. In the autumn of that year, Brown made his way toward Virginia. He invaded the South with a small fighting unit of eighteen men, stormed the arsenal at Harper's Ferry, and held it for two days of skirmishes and bloodshed. His plan was ostensibly to incite a rebellion in the South, perhaps of slaves themselves and antislavery advocates. He hoped to establish a base in the South for further guerilla warfare in the Virginia mountains and a portal through which freed slaves would make their way to Canada. After two days, the armory was retaken, some of Brown's men were killed, and Brown and the survivors were captured and imprisoned. They were charged with treason in November. Brown was held in a southern prison for a month, and on 2 December 1859 he was executed by hanging. The Virginia governor contemplated a lesser sentence, knowing what martyrdom would entail, but he caved to southern pressure. Brown gave an impressive, rousing speech from prison, one which solidified his ideological impact. And, on the way to the gallows, it was said that he picked up a small black girl and kissed her. Paintings and poems commemorated this report. The North rallied around their martyr, ignoring many of the man's more dubious acts such at Pottawatomie Creek. Many have hypothesized that the first shot in the Civil War happened with John Brown at Harper's Ferry, in 1859, and not in 1861 at Fort

Sumter. Emerson and Thoreau, duly inspired, played their respective roles in contributing to the Brown myth.[123]

Brown was officially charged with treason on 1 November 1859. On the eighteenth of that month, Emerson journeyed to Boston to deliver a speech at the Tremont Temple. Brown had a large family to support, and people knew that he was going to be hanged, so they held meetings to aid Brown's family. The *Boston Atlas and Daily Bee* wrote that the Temple "was thronged. A fee of 25 cents for admittance was asked, and the sum taken was large." The paper equated the large crowd and the significant money raised for Brown's soon-to-be widow and children as indicative of "deep and wide-spread sympathy for the old hero." The meeting was chaired by John A. Andrew, who would be governor of Massachusetts during the Civil War.[124] Emerson began to weave a tale of John Brown while the soldier was still alive, seated in prison, a story which would contribute to his lasting myth. He noted that Brown was deeply religious, and was a farmer, "the fifth in descent from Peter Brown, who came to Plymouth in the Mayflower." His grandfather fought in the Revolution, and Brown was an obvious "representative of the American public." He was "the rarest of heroes, a pure idealist," and this was conjoined with his "simple artless goodness" and his "sublime courage." After each incantation, the text of the speech notes, there was applause. Brown believed that the only obstacle to a peaceful Union was slavery, and that is why he "as a patriot . . . works for its abolition." Emerson recalled what Brown had boldly declared to the Court: "If I had interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the

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[123] This paragraph draws from Merrill D. Peterson, *John Brown: The Legend Revisited,* 29-31, 94-96; David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist,* 309-33; and Len Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero,* 225-337.

[124] *Boston Atlas and Daily Bee,* "Meeting to Aid John Brown's Family," 21 November 1859, in Gougeon and Myerson, *Emerson's Antislavery Writings,* see Myerson's "Textual Commentary," 176-177, and "Notes," 219-220.

intelligent, the so-called great . . . it would all have been right. No man in this court would have thought it a crime. But I believe that to have interfered as I have done, for the despised poor, I have done no wrong, but right." In his journal for the period, Emerson noted about Brown that "it is very easy to see that he will be a favorite of history, which plays mad pranks with dignitaries, &, if so, that he will drag gentlemen into an immortality not desirable."[125]

Emerson anticipated some of his own myth-making that would occur after Brown's execution. He wrote to himself of the "inevitable sympathy" that writers and the "civilized world generally" would feel after he was gone. Virginians and their passions would be forgotten. Public opinion "has softened every hour" since its "first harsh judgment of him." He is what judges and lawyers call "crazy" precisely because he is governed by ideas. "Ideas make real societies," Emerson wrote in his notebook. "My countryman is not James Buchanan," rather his countryman was "Thoreau & Alcott & Sumner," as well as "every just person, every man or woman who knows what truth means." This included John Brown. Emerson was taken with Brown's avowed path of truth and righteousness and his willingness to act upon his ideas. In his speech before the assembled throng in Boston, he went on to the point of raising money for the family. The money would be for his large family, his fellow soldiers on the run, and "every man who loves . . . the Declaration of Independence" who, as Brown surely does, "sees what a tiger's thirst threatens him in the malignity of public sentiment in the slave States." Applause was drawn when Emerson said that Brown did not believe in moral suasion; rather "he believed in putting the thing through." Emerson concluded that "in

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[125] Emerson, "Speech at a Meeting to Aid John Brown's Family, 18 November 1859," in Gougeon and Myerson, *Emerson's Antislavery Writings,* 117-118; and Emerson, *JMN,* 334.

administering aid to John Brown's family, we shall remember all those whom his fate concerns . . . and not forget to aid him in the best way, by securing freedom and independence in Massachusetts."[126]

And then in December the state of Virginia executed John Brown. He was dead, and any sectarian fervor both for and against him swelled. David Robinson has called the raid on Harper's Ferry and Brown's subsequent martyrdom an indication of the "inevitability of the Civil War." Whether or not you believe in retrospective declarations of inevitability, it is clear that the two sides were headed toward either conflict or resolution. On the day of Brown's execution, Thoreau organized a commemorative service in Concord. Speakers agreed to read from the texts of others, so as to avoid seeming to associate with treason. Nonetheless, the gathering was controversial. A month earlier, as Richard F. Teichgraeber noted, "the most controversial" of Emerson's Brown statements occurred. The *New York Daily Tribune* reported Emerson as uttering that "the Saint, whose fate yet hangs in suspense, but whose martyrdom, if it shall be perfected, will make the gallows as glorious as the cross." This line we find attributed to Mattie Griffith in Emerson's journal. He described her as "a brilliant young lady from Kentucky" in a letter to a friend in Concord.[127]

The controversy over the speeches merged in 1860. On 6 January 1860, Emerson spoke to a gathering in Salem about John Brown. Teichgraeber noted that Emerson was linked with Thoreau "in his willingness to risk public disapproval and scandal in rallying to Brown's defense." Interest in canonization and the formation of mythology existed at

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[126] Emerson, *JMN,* 335; and Emerson, "Speech at a Meeting to Aid John Brown's Family," in Gougeon and Myerson, 118-120.

[127] Richard F. Teichgraeber III, *Sublime Thoughts/Penny Wisdom: Situating Emerson and Thoreau in the American Market,* Baltimore, 1995, 136; Emerson, *JMN,* 333; and Emerson, "To Abby Larkin Adams, Concord, September 23, 1857," in Ralph L. Rusk, *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* 5:83-84.

the end of the nineteenth century, as it does today. One reason "for including Emerson and Thoreau in the American canon of required learning was the exceptional courage they supposedly had shown in speaking out at once for John Brown." The majority of Northerners, on the contrary, "initially condemned the raid on Harper's Ferry as the work of a dangerous fanatic." Emerson, however, stated unequivocally in his speech that John Brown was "the founder of liberty in Kansas." As far as mythmaking is concerned, he told the story of a young John Brown meeting a slave child, a boy, who influenced him and impressed him. Emerson reported, in telling the story, that the colored boy was without friend and possessed no hope. "This worked such indignation in him that he swore an oath of resistance to Slavery as long as he lived. And thus his enterprise to go into Virginia and run off five hundred or a thousand slaves, was not a piece of spite or revenge, a plot of two years or of twenty years. . .," or, we should note, not the work of a daft madman, a man who, detractors claimed, was certifiably insane, and it was "the keeping of an oath made to heaven and earth forty-seven years before. Forty-seven years at least, though I incline to accept his own account of the matter, at Charlestown, which makes the date a little older, when he said, 'This was all settled millions of years before the world was made.'"[128]

Emerson added further to one version of the burgeoning Brown legend. He pointed out that Brown grew up "religious and manly" in Ohio, of "the best stock of New England," and this ties in to the antislavery sentiment of many midwesterners as noted by Foner. In the west and in the territories, it was the New Englanders of propriety who advocated abolition, and the Southerners of barbarity who held vigorously to slavery.

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[128] Emerson, "John Brown, 6 January 1860," in David M. Robinson, *The Political Emerson: Essential Writings on Politics and Social Reform,* Boston, 2004, 155; and Teichgraeber, *Sublime Thoughts,* 138-139.

Brown was a man "having that force of thought and that sense of right" which determine greatness. One version of events, by way of example, was explained in 1883 by David Utter, a Unitarian minister, when postbellum interpretations of antebellum writing and events would influence later generations of scholarly and popular interpretations. He wrote that men will one day "cease paying tributes to his name." Peterson thought that Utter's position viewed history as "extraordinarily kind to Brown, largely because of lawless New England Transcendentalism." Peterson called Utter's account of Pottawatomie "hysterical," and this serves to present to us the complexities of legend-creation, literature and the role of the historical record. Eventually one position begins to predominate and influence the majority of the interpreters of events.[129]

Emerson addressed the controversy that arose because of his eulogistic encomium. His voice rose in power, and his words have traversed the centuries. He allowed that he was not surprised "at the easy effrontery with which political gentlemen, in and out of Congress" declaim that "there are not a thousand men in the North who sympathize with John Brown." Emerson paused for those words to sink in; there may have been nods in the audience. But he replied that "it would be far safer and nearer the truth to say that all people, in proportion to their sensibility and self-respect, sympathizes with him." One cannot "see courage . . . and the love that casts out fear" without admiration. Genuine gentlemen would be on Brown's side, but not the so-called gentlemen of "scented hair and perfumed handkerchiefs;" rather men of "gentle blood and generosity" would know which side was right. He painted a quick image of a soldier who gave his water to another who required it more. Gentle blood, and knighthood even,

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[129] Emerson, "John Brown," in Robinson, 155-157; and Peterson, *John Brown,* 65.

are meant to protect "the weak and lowly against the strong oppressor." Emerson continued to build a defense of John Brown, and his peroration was designed to strike a blow. Of the people who criticized any defense of Brown, Emerson lashed out that "nothing is more absurd than to complain of this sympathy, or to complain of a party of men united in opposition to Slavery." One might as well complain of "gravity, or the ebb of the tide." Whose fault is it, he asked, for the existence of Abolitionists? He answered: "The Slaveholder." It was "blind statesmen" who went hunting for the "heresy" of mercy. And the hunters would need everybody they could summon to find the origin of mercy "and a very strong force to root it out." How hard would the slavery sympathizers have to look? Emerson concluded: "For the arch-Abolitionist, older than Brown, and older than the Shenandoah Mountains, is Love, whose other name is Justice, which was before Alfred, before Lycurgus, before Slavery, and will be after it."[130]

As we can explain Emerson's role in the mythmaking of John Brown, which historians and biographers have had to grapple with ever since, we can also find in the postbellum interpretations of prewar antislavery campaigns the solidification of Northern nationalist interpretations. These events, and these writers on the "right" side of the conflict, coexist in a panoply of thought and rhetoric that has been built into the American narrative which sustains us to this day. Thoreau's speech, the "Plea for Captain John Brown," was, as Gilman Ostrander asserted, "the first important public defense of the man delivered in the country." Importantly for our purposes, we know that the speech was delivered in Concord to a full house, then in Worcester, then in Boston. It was covered extensively by the press, much of it negative. One can imagine the intrinsic

[130] Emerson, "John Brown, 6 January 1860," in Robinson, 155-157.

power of the address as listeners absorbed it, wrote about it, spoke of it to friends. All of literary Massachusetts would have been apprised of Thoreau's John Brown address. Journals and newspapers reported on it. And now, a century and a half later, the words still trickle, offering a vivid portrait of a moment in the American narrative. These moments, captured in print, remain the thread of our grand metanarratives. American mythmaking about the antebellum period, about the slavery issue, comes out of the literature of the day. Great impetus was given to the dissemination of words in this era before radio and television. A newspaper report or a published speech was everything. Types and forms of communication around which opinions were formed, ideologies coalesced.[131]

The process of American mythmaking was further enhanced by Emerson's mention of John Brown in the same breath with Lincoln. Of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, he wrote that "this, and one other American speech, that of John Brown to the court that tried him," were examples of American morality at its zenith. Ostrander added that: "slight as the contribution was, it served to link Brown's name with Lincoln from that point on in the writings of the Brown partisans." A story is told, and a version of history is recorded. While the original aim of this paper was to locate the influence the writers of the American Renaissance had on antislavery ideologies in the North, my research has revealed that their veracious, palpable influence has been the postbellum formation of the American mythology surrounding North versus South. Ostrander concluded his article by stating that "while the writings of other nineteenth-century Brown apologists, such as Sanborn and James Redpath, are no longer widely read, the

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[131] Gilman M. Ostrander, "Emerson, Thoreau, and John Brown," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review,* 39, No. 4 (March, 1953), 713-726.

eloquent praises of Emerson and Thoreau have been incorporated into the body of their country's great literature." There it is: their antebellum writings, whether overtly against slavery, or even against early abolitionism, or the defense of John Brown, have contributed to a lasting impression of the era, and a vital, inextricable piece to the American narrative.[132]

In the aftermath of Brown's execution, the federal government attempted to go after members of the Secret Six. Franklin Sanborn contemplated an escape to Canada. Higginson, as he had after the Anthony Burns fugitive slave affair, mulled a hasty retreat to Europe. Federal marshals came to Concord to arrest Sanborn and bring him back to Boston. "To all those present," Teichgraeber wrote, the lesson learned was that "not even Concord was now safe from the aggressive power of Southern slaveholders." Citizens of Concord endorsed resolutions that claimed the "fame of Old Concord" demanded that "the doctrine of the Revolution, that 'resistance to tyrants is obedience to God,' is our doctrine." As the marshals reached for Sanborn, the town rose in his defense. Myerson noted that after Sanborn refused to honor a subpoena because "he feared for his personal safety," the marshals arrived to take him into custody. Instead, "he was defended by a crowd of fellow citizens, including Emerson, who physically prevented his arrest." Additionally, Anne Whiting, sister of Louisa whom we met in the first chapter, played her role in the John Brown affair and Concord abolitionism. According to anecdotal evidence relayed by Petrulionis, Anne attempted to obstruct authorities who had been sent to arrest her Concord neighbor. Anne, according to Emerson's daughter, Ellen, jumped on the carriage, placed herself between Sanborn and his detainers, and "fought

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[132] Ostrander, 726.

with a cane" while sustaining minor wounds herself. According to another resident, she also startled the carriage's horses with a broom "so that their plunging would hinder the abductors."[133]

Many aspects of Emerson's speeches were based upon a revolutionary impulse derived from the righteous morality based in the Declaration of Independence. If one type of oppressor could be cast off, so could another. African-American writing, such as David Walker's quite radical *Appeal,* and slave rebellions such as led by Nat Turner, were contemporary examples revolutionary rhetoric supported by the Declaration myth. In so many words, the Declaration supported "armed resistance to tyranny." The political-religious violence engaged by John Brown was centered in this kind of conviction, defensible by the word of God and by American political documents. As Walker argued "for the full humanity of the Negro and thus for his inclusion into the precepts of the Declaration," so did Brown on the slaves' behalf. Walker urged his readers to "enact their own form of independence by violent resistence." Nat Turner chose action built upon these ideals, and Turner and others constructed a "subsequent mythologization of it, in the same way that Emerson would with Brown's attempted rebellion. Americans held a formal "right of revolution," as exhibited by the colonial overthrow of the British crown, and Turner's, as Brown's, was an "ingenious enactment of the central American myth of the Declaration." Abolitionists such as Garrison, Frederick Douglass, Wendell Phillips, Theodore Parker, and literary figures such as

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[133] Teichgraeber, *Sublime Thoughts,* 137-138; Myerson, "Notes," in Gougeon and Myerson, 220; Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, "'Swelling That Great Tide of Humanity': The Concord, Massachusetts, Female Anti-Slavery Society," *The New England Quarterly,* 74, No. 3, (Sept., 2001), 415-416; see also Jeffrey Rossbach, *Ambivalent Conspirators: John Brown, the Secret Six, and a Theory of Slave Violence,* Philadelphia, 1982; and Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero,* Ch. 8; for greater insight into the roles Emerson and Thoreau played in breathing life into Brown's legend, see James C. Malin, *John Brown and the Legend of Fifty Six,* Philadelphia, 1942, Ch. 11.

Bronson Alcott, Thoreau, Emerson, Lydia Maria Child, William Ellery Channing, all evoked these themes when eulogizing Brown. According to Harold K. Bush, noted woman's rights activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton said that she would not hesitate to "consecrate her own sons to martyrdom, to die, if need be, bravely like John Brown." Frederick Douglass asked, "How shall slavery be abolished?" He answered that it would be "the John Brown way." Emerson subscribed to these views, and his endorsement of Brown went a long way toward establishing the Harper's Ferry raid in the American mythic pantheon.[134]

After John Brown was executed, a decision made by Virginia's governor almost against his will and after instantaneous martyrdom for Brown in the North, his widow and his daughters "had come to Concord early in 1860" with the intention of staying in Concord and attending school. "Initially they were the Emerson's houseguests," and then the Alcotts took them in. Abby Alcott wrote in her diary that the Brown's oldest daughter was feeling the effects of the past few months. "Are we not beginning to reap in the Storm what was there Sown in the whirlwind – I dread a war – but is not a Peace based on such false compromises and compacts much more disastrous to the real prospects of the Country generally – and Freedom in particular." She answered herself in the affirmative. She also added that John Brown's death was the signal event of the year, and "the hour and the man both came at last to reveal to the south their sins – and the Slaves their Savior."[135]

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[134] Harold K. Bush, "Emerson, John Brown, and 'Doing the Word': The Enactment of Political Religion at Harpers Ferry, 1859," in T. Gregory Garvey, ed., *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform*, Athens, 2001, 199-202; see also Paul Finkelman, "Manufacturing Martyrdom: The Antislavery Response to John Brown's Raid," in Finkelman, ed., *His Soul Goes Marching On: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid,* Charlottesville, 1995, 60-61.
[135] Petrulionis, 401.

As Sanborn was traveling back from a trip to Nebraska and Kansas, where he met with Brown and had returned to cast about for financial and moral support in Massachusetts, Ellen Emerson represented much of the general discourse in the North at the time when she conjectured that the North might leave the South. "I always feel," she wrote "as if a civil war was a thing to be welcomed." After John Brown's death, Concord resident and novelist Louisa May Alcott wrote that residents engage "a daily stampede for papers," and that there were expressions of indignation "over the wickedness of the country" and the "cowardice of the human race." We must always keep in mind that the North's anger and anti-Southern expressions were fueled and amalgamated by Brown's martyrdom. It was a martyrdom that many had warned Virginia's governor about. It came to eventful fruition, galvanizing the North's stance against the South as the nation sat precipitously upon the year 1860.[136]

Set against this backdrop of violence, the increasing sectional language of war and anger, and the martyrdom of John Brown, which coalesced as no other event the North's collective outrage, Abraham Lincoln was nominated as the Republican Party's choice for the presidency. Earlier, southern agitators for slavery had indicated that they would advocate secession if any Republican won the presidency. Indeed, the era of compromise was over.

Abraham Lincoln's Victory, Southern Secession and the Civil War

Abraham Lincoln won the Republican Party nomination over Salmon P. Chase and William Seward in 1860. Then he won the White House, and South Carolina

[136] Petrulionis, 416; and Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeleine B. Stern, eds., *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott,* Boston, 1987, 49.

seceded, followed by the rest of the South. The cannons were aimed and fired at Fort Sumter in April 1861, and the nation was at war. A long process of ignoring slavery, then agitating for and against it, then engaging compromises, fighting words, and steady violence had finally culminated in a war that pitted American against American, Northerner against Southerner. Emerson had prophesied this outcome in his journal when he wrote somewhat viciously, "I see the courtesy of the Carolinians, but I know meanwhile that the only reason they do not plant a cannon before Faneuil Hall, & blow Bunker Hill monument to fragments, as a nuisance, is because they have not the power." He added, in a worried tone, "They are fast acquiring the power, & if they get it, they will do it." Emerson supported the fighting pluck of his fellow Northerners, and of John Brown, but he worried about overconfidence. Some had claimed that Northerners were superior fighters, and would quickly crush the South. Emerson, however, was not so certain: "when I see, that uniformly a Southern minority prevails, & gives the law. Why, but because the Southerner is a fighting man, & the Northerner is not."[137]

As the war progressed, it quickly became apparent that it would be longer and bloodier than anticipated. Emerson believed that the only way to redeem the destruction and loss of lives was to end slavery forever. It is important to keep in mind that emancipation was not an automatic result of war. There were plenty of people, North and South, who wanted to end the war on yet another compromise. Emerson campaigned against such moral weakness. In April 1862 he published a famous essay titled "American Civilization" in the *Atlantic Monthly,* "the most influential periodical in the nation." Emerson connected the destiny of the slaves with the destiny of the nation and

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[137] Emerson, *JMN,* 14:96, 127.

argued that it was fundamentally necessary to end slavery. Emerson detailed a long list of historic civilizations, and why they were successful. He wrote "Civilization depends on morality. Everything good in man leans on what is higher," and yet he pointed out that "our Southern States have introduced confusion into the moral sentiments of their people, by reversing this rule in theory and practice, and denying a man's right to his labor." Here again was the Northern nationalist, free labor view of how a civilized nation should structure itself – an indication of Northern superiority as regards civilization. And he asked, "why cannot the best civilization be extended over the whole country, since the disorder of the less civilized portion menaces the existence of the country?" American Union failed because it had attempted to hold together two separate states, a superior state "where labor and the tenure of land and the right of suffrage are democratical," and, of course, an inferior region in which "the old military tenure" of prisoners and slaves and a small minority controlling power, which "makes an oligarchy." The two do not go well together, he underscored in the essay.[138]

Emerson moved on to urge the complete abolition of slavery that must be the result of the war. "Emancipation is the demand of civilization. This is a principle; everything else is an intrigue." Such an act would put the North and South on equal footing for the first time in the nation's history. He directed the essay both at the people and the federal government. "Again, as long as we fight without any affirmative step taken by the Government," then without question "they and we fight on the same side, for Slavery." Conquering the enemy is one thing. But the nation must also free the slaves, else the process of compromise and escalation of violence and conflict would have to be

[138] Emerson, "American Civilization," in Robinson, 158-176.

repeated. But the North had a weapon, a final weapon. "Congress can . . . abolish slavery" by an edict under the conditions of war. "There can be no safety until this step is taken." The North could not yield, not under the pressure of wartime defeats, wartime taxes or the strain on normal lives.[139]

The *Atlantic Monthly* article was read in the North and in the South, offering evidence of its widespread reception. It profoundly affected Colonel George H. Gordon, of the Second Massachusetts Regiment, Commander of the Third Brigade. The colonel read the article in his tent in a camp near Edinburgh, Virginia. Inspired, he decided to write Emerson a letter. He wrote that the blacks expressed joy when they witnessed the advancing columns. "The blacks are our faithful friends," Gordon wrote, "and as against the rebels of the south." He claimed that the freed blacks could be trusted, and that since he was touring the South, even on a military campaign, he had seen and heard "sad stories and criminal outrages narrated by this unoffending people." Emerson responded promptly with his own letter in the third week of April. "I am glad to have this weighty testimony on behalf of the negro," he penned. "My fear is that he needs every advantage." And when the all of the chains weree removed from all of the slaves, Emerson did not doubt that the freed slave "will be able to get to his feet & insist on wages for his work." Emerson said that it was good for Northerners to visit the South and see for themselves the destructive way of life. Those who do "come back Americans & not provincialists." He thanked the colonel for his service, and expressed his hope that the war would bring "an honest world there." The dissemination of the article, its value as propaganda, and its apparent inspiration for the fighting men represent Emerson's

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[139] Ibid., 173, 175-176.

continued crusade against slavery and for the future of the nation as the war progressed.[140]

Emerson – and to his mind all right and moral gentlemen – got his wish on 22 November 1862 when Lincoln issued his preliminary proclamation of emancipation. He immediately set to work on an address to commemorate the occasion, which he delivered on 12 October, before the Parker Fraternity in the Music Hall in Boston. Lincoln had "been permitted to do more for America than any other American man." Lincoln took his time to arrive at this decision, Emerson said, because of the immense weight of it. All the people of the land, and all foreign nations, held a stake in the outcome of Lincoln's decision. And "against all timorous counsels, he had the courage to seize the moment." Life in America had become soiled, the people were weary, and "America had lost much of its attraction in the later years." However, with one powerful move, "the virtues of a good magistrate undo a world of mischief." Emancipation *had* to be the result of so much loss and destruction, and after such a long build-up, would be "an event worth the dreadful war, worth its costs and uncertainties." Black people would finally be protected by American law. And the President "has paroled all the slaves in America." Now that the cause of the war had been removed, he argued, the normalcy of nature and trade might help to "establish a lasting peace." In his journal, however, Emerson expressed some of his fears about the proclamation. "It seems to promise an extension of the war," he wrote, and "there can be no durable peace . . . until we have fought this battle." As the war slogged on, Emerson wrote that he looked at occasional Southern victories "as I look at those of the Mussulman over Christendom – due to fanaticism, to the petulance &

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[140] Emerson, "To George Henry Gordon, April 21, 1862," in Joel Myerson, *Selected Letters,* 409, and his Note, 409.

valor of a people who had nothing else . . . & must . . . raid here & there." But the small defeats were "incident & not crises to a well principled man, not affecting the general result." A nation could only become great through trial. The North must buckle down and "accept the benefit of the War: it has not created our false relations," he wrote in his notebook, "they have created it. It simply demonstrates the rottenness it found. The war revealed that which was intolerable and wrong, what "breeds all this bad blood." And at long last, the President has precisely and effectively addressed the principle problem in American society.[141]

When Walt Whitman desired to contribute to the war effort, he turned to his colleague and fellow literary figure, Ralph Waldo Emerson. In January 1863, Emerson composed a letter in order to help Whitman's cause. He addressed the letter to none other than Lincoln's old foe for the presidency, William Seward, now Lincoln's Secretary of State. Emerson wrote that Whitman was a "man of strong original genius," and he allowed that this came "with marked eccentricities." Whitman's writings "are more deeply American, democratic, & in the interest of political liberty" than any other poet of the age. Whitman was a "child of the people," and his talents would be useful "if the Government has work that he can do." Whitman, whether or not directly aided by Emerson, did work for the United States during the war. Emerson sent many such letters, referring his son, his nephew, addressing a couple that had lost their son, and indicating

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[141] Emerson, "The President's Proclamation, 12 October 1862," in Gougeon and Myerson, 129-135; also the *Atlantic Monthly* 10 (November, 1862), 638-642; *Commonwealth,* 15 November 1862, p.1; and Emerson, *JMN,* Vol. 15, 1860-1866, Linda Allardt, David W. Hill and Ruth H. Bennett, eds., Cambridge, 1982, 293-300.

in speeches and in his journals and active involvement throughout the war. As mentioned above, he did not wish to see a cessation of the war short of a total Northern victory.[142]

The British government and many Americans in the North and South wanted to negotiate a peace, one which would keep the political and economic landscape relatively intact. Emerson was appalled at this notion. He wrote one of his most compelling and popular speeches of the era, "Fortune of the Republic." He traveled from New York to Maine to Vermont delivering the lecture, throughout the end of 1863 and into 1864. The lecture was well attended and broadly covered in the press. There were British who supported the Confederacy, as well as French wavering.[143] Many war-weary Americans desired an end to hostilities as well and were willing once again to compromise. Emerson believed a comprehensive victory by the North and a Southern surrender were necessary for America to finally stand free and strong, in tune with American, mythological ideals of liberty and freedom. Further, there was no guarantee that Lincoln would win re-election. According to Myerson, Emerson was angered by Britain's failure to "support the North in its struggle against the dark forces of corruption and moral degradation" as manifested by the South. He exhorted the North to continue the fight, recognizing that there would be personal loss, that a generation might even be sacrificed: "When men die for what they live for, and the mainspring that works daily urges them to hazard all, then the cannon articulates its explosions with the voice of a man." And America must persevere, because "we are coming – thanks to the war – to a nationality." England had failed during one of the most important moments in history. When

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[142] Emerson, "To William Henry Seward, January 12, 1863," in Myerson, *Selected Letters,* 411.

[143] For a deeper, yet non-professional analysis of this and the role of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* affecting foreign policies toward North-South America, please see Bryan V. Knapp, "The Shot Read 'Round the World," proseminar paper at UCSB – no really.

magnanimity was required, "you had none." Unquestionably, America had stood for great and grand things, but must see through to "strike off the chains which snuffling hypocrites have bound on the weaker race." The North must "imperil your lives and fortunes for a principle." The words continued, he pushed and he prodded with his eloquence, and he plainly demanded that "the end of all political struggle," for which people were giving property, prosperity and lives, "is to establish morality as the basis of all legislation."[144]

A land of equality is what the North was fighting for, and Emerson's voice rang out over the crowd, over New England, across the nation, and beyond the ages to our present era; and they will continue to exist and possess importance as long as people read and societies debate, as long as the ideologies of liberty and freedom and the doctrine espoused in the mythological Declaration exist as the principles of American culture and nationhood. Documents mean something; literature commands attention and bears the seeds of ideas; ideas make a person walk, or love, or fight or die. Words are collected into phrases, and these phrases present our cultural communication. Emerson was not an idle philosopher, and there was no confusion on his part whether to be socially and politically engaged. Emerson continued to speak and write throughout the war, and during Reconstruction afterwards. He never shirked from a political fight if he saw the need for a declaration of what he thought to be moral and right. He believed he was an instrument of Nature's power to effect social change and to influence the lives of men. And his words were there that day under the weeping willows and grand oaks of South Carolina, mingling with the uneasy breeze of human conflict, when Thomas Wentworth

[144] My narrative influenced by two sources: Robinson, *Emerson's Political Writings,* 185; and Myerson, "Notes," in Gougeon and Myerson, 222-223; quotes from Emerson, "Fortune of the Republic," Gougeon and Myerson, 137-154.

Higginson, fellow agitator, assembled the first regiment of freed slaves. The trees, as the men of the occasion, were solemn. "Pay ransom to the owner," the voice sang. "Who is the owner? The slave is the owner, and ever was. Pay him." The freedmen listened to the words of a Northern poet, they stood firm on the earth, the scene became an image in the American narrative, and Emerson's words a contribution to the American story.

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