

**Locating representation: Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Brown, and the manifestation of  
biography**

by

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## Abbreviations

**CEC:** Slater, Joseph. *The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1964.

**EL:** Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays and Lectures*. Ed. Joel Porte. New York: Penguin Books, 1983.

**JMN:** *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* will be cited by roman numerals for volume number followed by page number.

**Misc:** Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Works Miscellanies*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911.

**W:** Whicher, Stephen, Ed. *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957.

## CHAPTER 1.INTRODUCTION

Perry Miller's introduction to his book *The Transcendentalists* admits an omission of Ralph Waldo Emerson because "there is not enough space .... were Emerson's part in the pageant to be here represented in accordance with its central importance, all of his publications between 1836 and 1850 would need to be reprinted" (3). Transcendentalism was a branch of American idealism that stressed individual relation to God and the natural world. Emerson's involvement with the movement borrowed from a long history of Transcendental apologists, but nonetheless became the most popular in terms of production and canonization. To be sure, Emerson's Transcendentalism can be identified throughout his ministry at the Second Church in Boston (1829-1832), but his association with the movement is most strong in the mid-1830s and early 1840s, upon his resettlement from the busy streets of Boston to the pastoral woodlands of Concord. Emerson's move to Concord marked a new beginning in his life.

In 1832, Emerson would resign from the ministry. For the rest of the year Emerson would travel throughout Europe, meeting both literary giants and seeing magnificent architecture older than his Union had held its sovereignty. Emerson took with him to Concord a new perspective, an outlook that would find its place in the pages of *Nature* (1836). Upon its publication, Emerson would write, "I like my book about Nature, and wish I knew where and how I ought to live" (W 14). Emerson's involvement with Transcendentalism was guided by an intense desire to understand living and the experiences life had to offer. As Miller suggests, from 1836-1850, Emerson's work was concerned with individualism and the philosophy of Transcendentalism.

Breaking away from the institutions of organized Christianity, Emerson never lost sight of his days as a minister. However, to emphasize individualism and Self-Reliance, he would rely not only on the example of Christ, but on forms of biography. His most prominent account of Self-Reliance comes in a lecture series published under the title *Representative Men* in 1850. Emerson's work with biography, or representative subjects, sought to exemplify the life of one individual as an example of how one ought to live. Emerson's use of biography captured the history of one individual in an effort to stress the Transcendental principles of Self Reliance and representation. In doing so, Emerson urged his audience to live an original existence, rather than copy the life of the past. The Self-Reliance of Emerson's biographies captured individual experiences of history, similar to Plutarch's *Lives* or Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, and included personalities as diverse as Swedenborg, Goethe, Shakespeare, and Napoleon. Emerson would write in *Nature* that "our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" (W 21). Ironically, he rarely chronicled present-day American biographies. But the politics of the nineteenth century would change all of that.

As war within the Union approached, Emerson's work became increasingly affiliated with abolition, and as a result, Emerson began to apply his philosophy of Self-Reliance to an American biography. In doing so, Emerson not only gained momentum for the worth of his country, but presented a model from which others could find inspiration. Emerson did not leave behind European models, but instead became committed to the issues at home.

“Bloody Kansas” of 1856 became a turning point in the abolition campaign that ignited intense debates, even among fellow abolitionists.

The events leading up to “Bloody Kansas” are most interesting in terms of their progression toward an unsettled Union. The Compromise of 1850 was an effort initiated by Henry Clay to find legislation with which both the North and South could live. Embedded within the Compromise was the Fugitive Slave Law, which was shepherded through Congress by Daniel Webster, a Massachusetts senator, and which overturned a ruling that runaway slaves could not be returned to their masters once they reached free states. The Fugitive Slave Law permitted any African American to be returned on the request of anybody claiming to be his or her owner (Martin 234). This legislation ignited intense debate. On the back of the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed in 1854, settling the existence and future of slavery within the Union by popular vote within the territories. In an effort to further their own agendas, Northern abolitionists met Southern slaveholders in Kansas to vote, in hopes of securing enough votes to further their respective ideology. One historian has noted that even though only 1500 men were registered to vote, almost 6000 ballots were counted—votes comprised mainly of Southern border jumpers coming up from Missouri. Because of this influx of Southern votes, a proslavery legislature was elected in Kansas (Martin 470).

As a means to thwart slavery from penetrating further north, a de facto election was held in Kansas to select delegates that could represent the abolitionist’s vote. The vote resulted in a de facto constitution and a resulting convention that honored the northern cause. Two governments, both without recognizing the other, presented their plan to Congress in 1856. President Pierce sided with the Southern faction and denied any validity to the de

facto anti-slavery constitution. As a result of Pierce's decision, Kansas would be admitted as a slave state. "Bloody Kansas" thus became a war zone of conflicting ideologies. It is here that John Brown organized a small army, and enacted guerrilla tactics in the name of God and abolition. Amidst the warfare that ensued, one account details that Brown and his men "dragged five proslavery men and boys from their beds at Pottawatomie creek, split open their skulls with a sword, cut off their hands, and laid out their entrails" (Martin 473). Because Brown was waging warfare in an attempt to stop the institution of slavery, the war in Kansas brought Brown's name to the forefront of the Northern conscience.

Before 1856, Brown was a meager farmer and a jack-of-all-trades. With success being minimal, Brown worked at various enterprises, including hide tanning, land development, and multiple investment opportunities. Most of Brown's attempts ended in failure: an ominous fate that would follow him to Harpers Ferry. But throughout the failures of Brown's life, he remained a deeply devout Christian observer and a believer in the doctrines of the United States. Faith in both Church and State ultimately led him into battle and became divine justification for the violence he enacted. Brown believed that God wanted him to fight against slavery. Brown's involvement with abolition conformed to no rules other than his own. His campaign to stop slavery became an obsession that only Brown would understand, and although his actions inspired many, for most he produced only confusion and calamity.

In 1859, Brown had envisioned capturing the Federal Arsenal in Virginia as a means to open up an underground railroad in the Virginian Mountains, clearing a passageway for slaves to move to Canada. The raid ended in a standoff between Brown's army and Federal troops. Brown was eventually overtaken, jailed, and put through an investigation that

accused him of being “moved and seduced by the false and malignant counsels of others, and the instigations of the Devil” (Bill of Indictment 1). He was executed on December 2, 1859.

Brown’s death came at an apex of debate over slavery, and many perceived his death to be that of a martyr. As with most of the country, Emerson’s liberal and intellectual Concordian circle was divided by Brown’s actions and his subsequent execution. Emerson recognized in Brown’s life and death a principle of Self-Reliance that he could not ignore. In the days after Brown’s execution, Emerson called Brown a “representative of the American Republic” (Misc 252), and a biography from one of America’s most radical abolitionists was utilized to champion Self-Reliance and individualism.

Harpers Ferry has become a location in American history of extreme controversy and debate. As much as Wounded Knee defined the close of the “Indian Wars,” or the slave trade of the South determined much of what would become of race relations in America, Brown’s failure to capture the Federal Arsenal was not without impact. Still unsure of its place as a heroic episode, many consider Harpers Ferry to be the catalyst for the Civil War.

My thesis treats Emerson’s lecture “History,” from *Essays: First Series* (1841)<sup>1</sup>, and Emerson’s subsequent alignment of his philosophy with the life of a radical abolitionist. Lawrence Buell recognizes that “Self-Reliance interweaves disparate strands of religious, philosophical, aesthetic, and political thought” (60). Indeed, Brown would represent all characteristics of Buell’s claim, allowing Emerson a distinctly American biography. Until Brown’s execution, Emerson’s notion of Self-Reliance was primarily philosophical. Brown gave Emerson’s philosophy of biography an identity, a solid embodiment of an otherwise romantic ideal. In this thesis I will trace the evolution of the embedded thesis of Emerson’s “History”—that “there is properly no history; only biography”—through Emerson’s later



works, including “Remarks at a Meeting for the Relief of John Brown’s Family” (1859) and “John Brown: Speech at Salem” (1860).

I will begin with an exploration of Emerson’s trip to Europe in 1832 and the significance of that trip as it informed his conception of American solidarity and the creation of a new history. Emerson’s “History” engages his audience with a first-person notion of reading history and could only have been written after he took in the sights of Europe and found within their essence nothing that America could not create. I will then offer an explication of “History” as communicating Emerson’s understanding of biography and the connection between the past and the present. To aid in my explication, I will illustrate his use of biography as it is presented in “The American Scholar” (1837) in the likeness of “Man Thinking.” There is a sound relationship between “Man Thinking” and biography, and both concepts will inform Emerson’s later works on Brown.

In claiming that Brown gave Emerson’s idea of biography an identity, I readily admit that there is a tension between Self-Reliance and the didactic quality of *Representative Men*. But Emerson’s work is contradictory, and he uses the contradictions as a way of gaining the truth. The contradictions inherent in Emersonian prose are rich for exploration, but they remain a source of agitation among readers who do not take works like “Self-Reliance” (1841) and *Representative Men* (1850) as belonging to a greater whole.

To analyze work by Emerson is a daunting task. Joel Myerson sets the stage by observing that “modern editions of [Emerson’s] writings—letters, journals, notebooks, and published works—comprise nearly fifty volumes .... in the last decade alone, nearly one thousand articles and books have been published discussing his life, ideas, and writing” (3). This is a lot to take considering that within the last several decades Emerson’s work has been

a part of a “reclamation, redemption, resurrection” (Wider 169). Regarding Emerson scholarship, Sarah Ann Wider comments that “here were thoughts, differently assembled, yielding insight where a blind, or blundered, dismissal once operated. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Emerson was scientist, philosopher, pragmatist, ethicist and above all, a writer whose prose emerged from relationship” (169). The relationship between Emerson and Brown is part of the Emerson canon. Until very recently Emerson’s work with abolition has been dismissed, if not ignored. The life of Brown informs Emerson’s notion of biography, and for this reason must be taken into consideration as one event among many that helped shape Emerson’s work.

This thesis is ultimately about Ralph Waldo Emerson and his involvement with John Brown. What makes my study different, though, is that I place Emerson’s response to John Brown against his own notion of “biography.” In doing so, I trace how Emerson applies “Self-Reliance” to many different aspects of American culture, from religious conviction to the abolition of slavery. My hope is that the reader will judge Emerson’s campaign for John Brown through Emerson’s own words, rather than the work of his critics.

## CHAPTER 2. EMERSON'S "HISTORY"

When the voice of a prophet out of the deeps of antiquity  
merely echoes to him a sentiment of his infancy, a prayer of his youth,  
he then pierces to the truth through all the confusion of tradition and the  
caricature of institutions.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "History"

Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; to refuse the good models,  
even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love  
God without mediator or veil.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Divinity School Address"

Emerson's work is primarily concerned with Self-Reliance of the individual. As a writer, Emerson wanted his work to illustrate the individual's relationship to the universe; as an American, Emerson wanted the purpose to reflect America's history and draw from it the source of strength and productivity that would define a generation. Emerson's essay "History" (1841) calls upon a generation to create originality that will stand up to the test of time. For Emerson, history can explain the conduct of life, but because "there is one mind common to all individual men," Emerson ultimately concluded that "there is properly no history; only biography" ("History" EL 240). Though this is seemingly a contradictory statement, history and biography accompany each other throughout Emerson's essay.

Emerson's awareness of biography, or more specifically "universal man," is not limited to the essay "History." Indeed, much of Emerson's career as a writer and lecturer was dedicated to finding and celebrating the worth of individual, Self-Reliant principles. By 1859, Emerson came to believe in the abolitionist John Brown as an American representative of these principles. Among lectures such as "The American Scholar" and "History," Emerson found the subject of biography to be of utmost importance to his ideology of Self-

Reliance and representation. Emerson used biography to represent principles of Self-Reliance and to uncover the “mind common to all individual men” (“History” EL 237). Emerson used the notion of biography to emphasize that “every man is an inlet to the same and to all of the same” (EL 237)—that individualism was key to all historical moments, and that the identification of the people with history would reveal a connection between the past and present.

Emerson’s choice of John Brown as an American representative is indeed prominent if not a bit strange, considering the violence and unconventional means of Brown’s actions. Emerson did not align himself with Brown because of his violence, but rather because of the idea that Brown represented. The focus of this chapter, then, is to explicate Emerson’s notion of biography, as described on two different occasions, during the lectures “History” and “The American Scholar.” In doing so we will begin to understand the process by which Emerson chose Brown as a representative, a process that will be further explicated in Chapter Two.

The idea of individualism was worth so much to Emerson that Self-Reliance became a concept that would define the philosophical movement of Transcendentalism. Indeed, “Self-Reliance” (1841) begins, “speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense: for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost, and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgement” (EL 259). The explication of biography delivers a didactic message regarding life and how to live it. In explaining the concept of representative biography, Wesley Mott explores Emerson’s “principle of accepting flux,” which is pertinent to “History” and the broader subject regarding the future of the social and civil life of America. Emerson used the crises of the hour to determine what his subjects

would represent. Mott writes, “Emerson’s stance of philosophical acceptance did not require a static shelter from the world. In trying further to define a posture that would embrace specific misfortunes within a scheme of cosmic meaning, Emerson proclaimed that human nature was designed to respond to adversity with growth of understanding” (21). Emerson used individualism as a point of reference. What Emerson saw in Brown was a biography that represented the whole Union, and Brown’s life allowed Emerson to lecture on the times, using Brown as a guide through one American epoch.

Emerson was attracted to Brown’s abolition campaign and knew Brown would make an effective representative because of his conviction, faith, and American ancestry. But herein lies the contradiction of Emersonian thought as it pertains to representation: Emerson's Self-Reliance does not want mimicry in proximity to truth, but in biography, Emerson champions an individual who will help define an entire generation's truth. The notion of biography is rooted in Self-Reliance, but the contradiction rests on biography as a form of authority and leadership. By the time Emerson claims that John Brown is an American representative, there seems to be a motive beyond philosophy and sheer Self-Reliance. Does John Brown really represent the character and soul of an American populace, as Emerson would have us believe, or does John Brown more fittingly represent the opinions held amongst a northern elite?

Emerson believed that “[the] subject [of] life was ahead of theology, and the people knew more than preachers taught” (EL 285). Life was ahead of theology in that the individual was part of nature’s design. Echoing Platonic idealism, Emerson writes, “[w]e surround ourselves always, according to our freedom and ability, with true images of ourselves in things, whether it be ships or books or cannons or churches” (Misc 192).

Emerson understood that one should privilege life experience over theology because life affirmed a creation of things in which thoughts manifested themselves, thus confirming the Emersonian philosophy that each living soul is a divine entity needing to be understood and utilized.<sup>2</sup> Because individuals were charged with possibility, Emerson never quit urging his contemporaries to provide a posture that would embrace originality. The notion that we surround ourselves with “true images of ourselves in things” is indeed interesting and in need of analysis when Emerson's choice of John Brown as an American representation is taken into consideration. The focus on Biography allowed Emerson to let an American paradigm shine. But the choice of Brown reflected not only Emerson's politics but the American political and social climate during the decade leading up to the American Civil War. Expanding the legacy of biography in *Representative Men* (1850), Emerson declares that “it is natural to believe in great men ... we call our children and our lands by their names. Their names are wrought into the verbs of language, their works and effigies are in our houses, and every circumstance of the day recalls an anecdote of them” (EL 615). Thus Emerson wanted Brown's life to live on as part of an American experience.

My claim in this chapter is that “History” and Emerson's theory of biography reflect Emerson's attempt to create purpose for his generation out of historical discourse and change the world to “make it [their] own.”<sup>3</sup> Emerson's “History” is nothing less than a revolutionary work that “mounted an attack on the social, intellectual, religious and political beliefs which their fathers, not to mention their contemporaries, had blandly held to represent the ultimate of human wisdom” (Smith 483). My hope is that this chapter will allow for a full explication of the philosophy of biography as presented in the essay “History” and “The American Scholar.” From this vantage point I will discuss at length in Chapter Two not only the

process from which Emerson worked, but how Brown gave Emerson's theory of biography an identity, thus declaring, "[Brown] is the true representative of the American Republic" (Misc 333).

My first task in this chapter will be to situate Emerson's independence from European thought and influence as he sought absolute autonomy. Emerson did not want his country to live in the shadows of influence. Emerson's first European trip proved to be a defining point in gaining momentum for his enthusiasm for an American representation, and it taught him to consider the relationship between an individual and historical discourse. Secondly, I will explain the necessity for historical discourse and the Emersonian concept of how to read history. Emerson did not believe history to be a distant memory. On the contrary, Emerson's new history provided an opportunity to further the Transcendental principle of a "common mind" throughout humanity. Emerson's use of biography, then, is an attempt to illuminate the Self-Reliance of individualism. I will focus on Emerson's concept of biography, as it is presented in "History" and "The American Scholar," and his conviction that individual originality was needed to secure an American presence in history's mythology.

***"Many things I owe to the sight of these men": Emerson, Europe, and a New History***

In 1831, grieving over the death of his wife, Emerson underwent wholesale investigation into the matter of all things concerning his existence; he was driven by an intense desire for an original relationship to creation, in which people discovered truths by living everything out at first-hand experience. Emerson's questioning sought to explore every nook of his existence; nothing was left unexamined. Emerson did this to better

understand experience as it was related to him, and not to live according to someone else's truth. For this reason, Emerson never looked upon influential figures without hesitating to distance himself from their authority.

Emerson was deeply inspired by the intellect of European writers and philosophers, and there is no question that their works became part of his own philosophy during the course of his lifetime. From 1832-1833 Emerson traveled throughout Europe. Stephen Whicher writes, "Emerson's year of travel did something to build up his health and more to build up his confidence, chiefly by removing his superstitious reverence for great reputations, in men or in art" (12). Though Emerson would never fully divorce himself from the influence of Europe's greatest writers, he would seek to establish an American representation as solid as anything found in antiquity. In an attempt to foster a "universal mind," Emerson wanted the individual to understand her place within historical discourse, and to realize that she was a contributor to an ongoing narrative.

Throughout his life, Emerson campaigned for individuals to believe in themselves and to establish personal truth. Emerson's "History" focuses all attention on the individual experience within historical discourse. When Emerson states in "History" that "the world exists for the education of each man"(EL 238), he urges the reader to understand his/her own participation in living a life, and that "he should see that he can live all history in his own person" (EL 239). In 1835, Emerson gave a "Historical Discourse at Concord." On this occasion Emerson declares, "the sentiment is just, and the practice is wise. Our ears shall not be deaf to the voice of time. We will review the deeds of our fathers, and pass that just verdict on them we expect from posterity on our own" (Misc 33).



There are many contradictions in Emerson's work, and not the least is his idea of history, and its influence upon present generations. Emerson wrestled with the idea that antiquity was a dominant force, but through all of the contradiction regarding the worth of influence, Emerson understood influence as positive in as far as it would inspire. He explains that "Genius is always sufficiently the enemy of genius by over-influence" ("The American Scholar" W 68). For Emerson, the present generation will be held to the same criteria as that of antiquity and mythology, in terms of worthiness and accomplishment. In doing so, Emerson can situate his contemporaries into his philosophies of "History" by illuminating the power of representation. Emerson wants his audience to take note of the past, but only in order to illuminate the present. For Emerson, historical discourse is always about the present.

Imitation no longer served a purpose. Emerson wanted first-hand exposure to all experiences, which included, as Robert D. Richardson has noted, opening the coffin of his wife, Ellen, one year after her death (3). For Emerson, imitation failed because it undermined the potential of human experience and its subsequent creation. To live a life in response—in submission—to anything but personal truth diminished the worth of Self-Reliance. One passage from Emerson's journal, in January of 1835, reads: "The only true economy of time is to rely without interval on your own judgment. Keep the eye & ear always open to all impressions, but deepen no impression by effort, but take the opinion of the Genius within, what ought to be retained to you & what rejected by you. Keep, that is, the upright position" (JMN V: 6-7). Emerson's "representative" would need to maintain an "upright position" if he were to proclaim worth through his own originality. This is the point at which Emerson employs "prophets" as a model for society. Emerson did not use models to create a

hierarchy, but instead used them to educate his audience on the uses of Self-Reliance.

Emerson, in a sense, was using prophetic models as a way of letting his audience know what Self-Reliance looked like. The tension between Emersonian Self-Reliance and his use of “representative men” is mediated by the understanding that everything Emerson worked for, at its core, was rooted in individualism.

The idea of accomplishing today what was done in the past is a central principle in “History.” Because “the student is to read history actively and not passively; to esteem his own life the text, and books the commentary .... I have no expectation that any man will read history aright, who thinks that what was done in a remote age, by men whose names have resounded far, has any deeper sense than what he is doing today” (EL 239). During his first trip to Europe, Emerson had inspected the antiquated sites of Europe; after all, antiquaries have stood for centuries as the structures of man’s greatest achievements. Joseph Slater writes, “He needed diversion, leisure, and perspective if he was to design, in his thirtieth year, a new pattern of life and thought. And so he carried ruins to ruins; he marched through museums, inspected cathedrals, crossed the Alps, and filled his journals with travel notes” (CEC 53). Emerson concluded that what he saw was nothing his American brethren could not produce—what, if anything, could antiquity then provide? Emerson writes, “All inquiry into antiquity,—all curiosity respecting the pyramids, the excavated cities, Stonehenge, the Ohio Circles, Mexico, Memphis,—is the desire to do away this wild, savage, and preposterous there or then, and introduce in its place the Here and the Now” (EL 241). As Emerson fashioned a new life for himself, he also desired America to draw influence from the past, but only in the capacity to look inward at the present hour. To this end, influence

served its purpose to inspire and to educate each individual regarding the possibilities of the present generation.

It is nearly impossible to recreate the originality of the past. And most historical discourses are glorified with the passing of time. What Emerson experienced in Europe is important here because he deconstructed the notion of a cultural hierarchy. Emerson took in the sites yet thought of the accomplishments forthcoming from home. Histories are only useful in as far as they can motivate a movement of the present. On this Kerry Larsen writes,

The point of doing so, as Emerson sees it, is not to enhance our knowledge of the past but to make that knowledge possible. On his view, historical understanding is the name we give to the act of affirming a correspondence between the inclinations and actions of agents in the past with the inclinations and actions of agents at a later time.

(17)

This “correspondence” will produce an awareness of a “universal mind,” in which historical fact will be read as a series of symbols. Though a highly debated concept among Emerson critics, the universality of natural symbols in the surrounding world seems to be a common sentiment for New England Transcendentalists. In 1821, when Emerson heard Sampson Reed’s prophetic words that “thoughts fall to the earth with power, and make a language out of nature” (qtd.in Miller 52)<sup>4</sup>, and in Reed’s oration he found a point of interest: that historical discourse could aid the present regarding their future. Emerson understood historical discourse to be a language, universal in nature: history speaks to all people because the principles of historical discourse are facts of humanity and can be readily identified as part of the human condition.

Because “History” is primarily concerned with the act of reading history, Emerson concluded that we need to understand and respect history in order to recreate it. We must understand that “A Gothic cathedral affirms that it was done by us, and not done by us” (“History” EL 241). We are to be educated on history’s construction and “put ourselves into the place and state of the builder” (EL 241). The association between the past and present is that they are intrinsically linked to historical forms. The trip to Europe allowed Emerson to see the truth in the juggernaut of European culture and influence, and it was not until he would break free from this—the idea that Europe contained the essence of originality and intellect—that Emerson could begin to fashion an American contribution. In 1833, Emerson writes from Liverpool,

[God] has shown me the men I wished to see,—Landor, Coleridge, Carlyle, Wordsworth; he has thereby comforted and confirmed me in my convictions. Many things I owe to the sight of these men. I shall judge more justly, less timidly, of wise men forevermore. To be sure not one of these is a mind of the very first class, but what the intercourse with each of these suggests is true of intercourse with better men, that they never *fill the ear*—fill the mind—no, it is an *idealized* portrait which always we draw of them. (W14)

Emerson's desire for Self-Reliance resulted from many factors, not the least being his relationship with Europe, and may be in part the reason Emerson chose John Brown as a representative American. Emerson needed to find a subject with depth and weight; Emerson needed to find a subject that would shake the complacency of his contemporaries and make them take notice

Emerson used historical discourse as a blueprint from which civilizations could draw inspiration, producing events in the present epoch that do not simply mimic the past, but complement history while a generation finds its way to creating their own history. For example, during the eighteenth century France found itself bogged down with issues of “the rights of people, the role of the state in society, the values of democratic society, notions of ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ in political life, the concept of the ‘nation at arms,’ the place of religion in modern society and politics, and the question of economic freedom and the sanctity of property” (Merriman 495). Emerson at once found a subject in Napoleon and France’s struggle, not because the discourse presented a subject larger than life, but because the story, he believed as an American, a descendent of the Revolution, was of life: historical discourse is the story of the common doing uncommon deeds, and one could assume that the same action from history could be applied to any generation. When Emerson declares in “History” that “[t]here is one mind common to all individual men” (EL 237), he emphasizes the unity of a commonality of humans via the “Over-Soul.” And of this commonality Emerson concludes, “[o]f the works of this mind history is the record” (EL 237).

Emerson believed in Brown because his life apart from abolition was plain and ordinary yet Brown’s actions, for Emerson, were full of principle. Brown’s life went beyond that of the common individual and exhibited a life of action and courage. For Emerson, Brown was an ordinary American who stood for and accomplished extraordinary deeds. Because history is not a phantasmagoria and does not merely live on plaques adorning monuments, biography would be the agent through which history could be kept alive for each successive generation. Larsen writes, “Figuring out the meaning of a particular event in the past evidently involves figuring out what a particular agent or collection of agents meant by

bringing it about” (1). Emerson used Brown’s life as a way to emphasize the urgency of the abolition cause.

The crux of “History” is how to properly read the past to emphasize Self-Reliance within historical discourse. The essay’s core seeks to establish the active reader amongst an order of ageless truth and action, the mythology of history that allows Emerson to write, “I have seen the first monks and anchores without crossing seas or centuries” (EL 250). The idea that all of history is of a “manifold world” reached only by the “universal mind” leads to Emerson’s call for America to rise above mere influence and to adopt the same principles and characteristics that were found in the past. Thus, “when a thought of Plato becomes a thought to me—when a truth that fired of Pindar fires mine, time is no more” (EL 249). The “universal mind” is the way in which mythology and history will cease living dormant in a past world that no longer is relevant for a present generation; to be an “active reader” of history will indeed create the awareness of shared thought in connection to the past. In this context, biography is used to present a concise image that not only will define Self-Reliance but also relay the message to an audience with economy. If the “Over-Soul” binds us together, then one man from the fables of history will indeed remain for future education.

When Emerson wrote “History,” he did not envision that a civil war would divide America, or that Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis would become representatives of each divided half of the Union. Nor did he know that John Brown would lead a small band of followers into Kansas territory and take up arms against southern squatters. John Brown’s militancy would arise after Emerson constructed the idea that it would no longer suffice to sit idly at home and read of great civilizations that have left their mark. Emerson’s “History” charges we must “sit solidly” and not “be bullied by kings or empires” (EL 239). There are

two points of interest that I would like to discuss regarding this passage. First, the pronoun “we” is indeed a direct address to the American public to throw off the old notion that history has already been written and that Emerson’s generation should accept an inferior role in historical discourse to that, of say, Greek philosophers or European revolutionaries. And secondly, while individuals “sit solidly,” the action required is that they “transfer the point of view from which history is commonly read, from Rome and Athens and London to himself, and not deny his conviction that he is the court, and if England or Egypt have any thing to say to him, he will try the case; if not, let them for ever be silent” (EL 240).

The individual, in Emerson’s mind, was to find a personal angle from which to interpret historical discourse, chiefly that of the individual’s own experience. For Emerson, personal experience went beyond any notion of authority. The act of reading put the individual in proximity to historical discourse because “we sympathize in the great moments of history, in the great discoveries, the great resistances, the great prosperities of men;—because there law was enacted, the sea was searched, the land was found, or the blow was struck for us, as we ourselves in that place would have done or applauded” (“History” EL 239). On this front, Emerson took Self-Reliance and biography as principles that could secure an originality and purpose in the work, life, and soul of the American people by the notion that history exists for us. Because “we have the same interest in condition and character” (“History” EL 239), historical discourse would foster an awareness of similarities between the past and present rather than the differences. Frank Shuffelton asserts that “in the essay ‘History’ this brash conflation of different narrative possibilities represents a strategic maneuver in Emerson’s campaign to reorient the democratic individuals’ relationship to knowledge, to the ‘philosophical arrangement of things’” (53). I agree with Shuffelton that

“History” is presenting a first hand account to the witness and birth of knowledge; nevertheless, when Brown is later accepted as an “American representative,” Emerson is doing so in order to further an American paradigm of originality and representation. Stanley Cavell confirms my assertion that Emerson was working to secure an American biography:

America, as Emerson was beginning to write, had as yet to inherit effectively a patrimony in European philosophy; no one had proven that the encounter of Americans with philosophy was feasible ... to express America’s difference (one would say, to justify its existence, its independence) was for Emerson’s generation most pressing in its call for a mode of literature that expressed the American experience. (4)

Emerson used Self-Reliance and biography as principles that could secure originality and purpose in the life of the American people, and to explore what the “American experience” really was.

At the time of Brown’s raids at Kansas and Harper’s Ferry, Emerson’s America was unsure of itself. Emerson’s journals reveal a writer coming to terms with the worth of his own country, understanding and using its history as it progressed toward industrial proportions. But no matter how contradictory, Emerson’s quest for an “American experience” became paramount. Emerson’s insistence on creating history within the present is directly proportional to the need he felt for America to be autonomous and strong. Reading history properly, then, is of utmost importance because, “there is nothing but is related to us, nothing that does not interest us,—kingdom, college, tree, horse, or iron shoe, the roots of all things are in man” (EL 244). Emerson’s idea of reading history presents a power with Self-Reliance, and can be disseminated through the “universal mind” of society.



Cavell emphasizes the question that haunted American intellectuals during the nineteenth century: Are we as good as the rest? This question would be most pressing to American philosophical circles of the nineteenth century, the cause of which can be found in the increasing attacks by British and other leading European intellectuals upon democracy, abolition, and the worth of the “American cousins.” In his “Latter-Day Pamphlets,” Thomas Carlyle addresses the “American cousins” by asking and declaring:

What great human soul, what great human thought, what great noble thing that one could worship or loyally admire, has yet been produced there? None: the American cousins have yet done none of these things ... they have doubled their population every twenty years. They have begotten with a rapidity beyond recorded example, Eighteen Millions of the greatest *bores* ever seen in this world before,-- that hitherto is their feet in History! (120)

Though by no means a comprehensive extraction of anti-American sentiment, Carlyle's comments are relevant because such opinions would motivate Emerson to enthusiastically embrace an American representative who would head up a movement that would champion originality and representation. In a sense, Emerson was eager to unveil an American biography, promoting strength and autonomy. Emerson's idea of biography would be born from the present day.

Emerson's “History” is not a simple reiteration of the philosophies of Carlyle or Coleridge<sup>5</sup>; it is in fact a manifesto, a charge for the American people to seek autonomy and autocracy.

For Emerson, the use of great biographies worked in concert with mythology, in that biography could encourage and nurture any generation to take from the representative forms

what it needed to embrace its own enthusiasm and action. When Emerson declared that John Brown's hanging would "make the gallows as glorious as the cross" (JMN V: 334), he attempted to induct Brown's works and sacrifice into the minds of people anywhere.

Emerson was fascinated with biography and "representative men" because he wanted to elevate one individual—not unlike the Christian use of Jesus—to exemplify Self-Reliance for the masses. Since history exists apart from the present, its isolation creates characteristics that act as a representation for future generations regarding the conduct of life, and thus are copied from generation to generation. History instructs because "the manners of that period are plain and fierce," and "the reverence exhibited is for personal qualities, courage, address, self-command, justice, strength, swiftness, a loud voice, a broad chest" ("History" EL 248). History is given the qualities of an individual: a biography that is representative of strength. Emerson never gives us historical discourse for history's sake; there is always a motive to historical narrative. Everett Carter writes, "[m]yth, for Emerson, was not primitive lie but eternal and timeless truth. Yet his view of mythology was neither a retrospective nor a pessimistic, backward-looking devotion but a forward-looking one, completely consistent with, indeed supportive of, the American idea" (91).

To find an "American idea" within John Brown's biography is a bold step in Emerson's career. Though he was never one to shy away from controversy, for Emerson to embrace Brown would be to go beyond mere idealism. The national argument after Brown's actions revealed how complex the situation between the North and the South had become. And by choosing Brown, Emerson was able to explicate his own position regarding the politics of slavery.

*“Whenever a man comes, there comes revolution”: Biography and “The American Scholar”*

Emerson’s “History” is an attempt to teach his auditors how to read historical discourse so that the subject of historical narrative would demonstrate the worth of the reader’s generation, not diminish its value. Emerson’s speech on “The American Scholar” becomes an important document defining an individual’s proximity to historical discourse and explicating the ideas of biography that eventually led Emerson to embrace the figure of Brown, as one not confined to the past or to hero worship.

Throughout Emerson’s career he utilized philosophically driven forms of biography like that found in “The American Scholar.” Delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1837, one year after “History” was given, Emerson demonstrates the use of biography as it pertains to the benefit of society. These paradigms were an attempt to explain the ideal state of society, the convergence between the individual and the natural world. At no time does Emerson better illustrate the importance of the individual life than during “The American Scholar.” The division of society through occupation and social status—the “distribution of functions” (EL 54)—disables the individual from disengaging with conventions that lead to being “metamorphosed into a thing, into many things” (EL 54). Emerson explains that, “the state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters,—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man” (EL 54). Emerson’s theory of biography is most engaging here, because in the likeness of “Man Thinking,” “The American Scholar” has utilized the surrounding world and gone beyond mere scholarship to find that “the soul active sees absolute truth; and utters truth, or creates” (EL 57). “Man Thinking” is no longer

divided, through the forms of convention, into individual parts; rather, “Man Thinking” is Emerson’s template biography, unique in its completeness and originality, because as an “Active reader” he has gone beyond the role of mere scholar by “surrounding [himself] with the original circumstance” (“History” EL 245). For this reason Emerson came to reject the role of the “scholar,” and replace him with a more complete idea of “Man Thinking.” This is not mere semantics, but rather “[i]n this distribution of functions, the scholar is the delegated intellect. In the right state, he is, *Man Thinking*. In the degenerate state, when the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or, still worse, the parrot of other men’s thinking” (EL 54).

This rebirth of biography from common to uncommon is a principle of the Emerson canon until his final days as writer and orator. In 1878, Emerson greeted a crowd with the declaration that “it is a principle that is true for economy as well as in hydraulics, that you must have a source higher than your tap” (Misc 345) and is a sentiment that holds true when Emerson begins “The American Scholar” by declaring, “we come up hither to read one more chapter of his biography” (EL 64). The Emersonian trait of using pronouns, such as “his” in the previous quotation, is a way for Emerson to instigate any individual’s involvement with the philosophy of his lectures and essays. Emerson is welcoming a future of quintessential heroes, or, as Sacvan Bercovitch notes, “a prophetic biography of the American self” (36). Emerson is not often seen as a biographer, but his work, when taken as a whole, can begin to be seen as work of a writer concerned with national character, always focusing on individual experience.

“The American Scholar” is a work that Emerson believed to be the potential of the American public. He wanted his country to live democratically, free from the hierarchy of

tradition and authority. Rob Wilson comments that “[t]he latent, if not politically pre-conscious, mission of the biographer, becomes to represent another personality who can strikingly act out the liberal project of American culture as a consensual adventure toward achieving states of freedom and risk within a globally regenerative plot of self-invention” (106). The defining characteristics of Emerson’s “Man Thinking” will indeed be universal in his application to individuals throughout society.

By 1859, Emerson had become dissatisfied with an abstraction like “Man Thinking”; rather, representation now takes the specific physical form of the radical abolitionist, John Brown. Emerson prepares his audience for the moments in which they will prove themselves. “The American Scholar” reiterates Emerson’s claim in “History” by evoking an urgency of the present and the necessity for an awareness of Nature and circumstance. Emerson declares in “History” that “he hears the commendation, not of himself, but more sweet, of that character he seeks, in every word that is said concerning character ... in every fact and circumstance,—in the running river and the rolling corn. Praise is looked, homage tendered, love flows from mute nature, from the mountains and the lights of the firmament” (EL 239). As Brown would exhibit, most of Emerson’s heroic paradigms, when fully realized, has a duty in society. Emerson’s description at “The Dedication of The Soldier’s Monument in Concord,” April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1867, details the purpose best when he states,

The man of principle ... The man who, without any flourish of trumpets, titles of his action abroad, expecting none, takes in solitude the right step uniformly, on his private choice and disdaining consequences,—does not yield, in my imagination, to any man. He is willing to be hanged at his own gate, rather than consent to any compromise of his freedom of the suppression of his conviction. I regard no longer

those names that so tingled in my ear. This is a baron of a better nobility and a stouter stomach. (Misc 200)

The liberated independence of Emerson's "representative man" lead by example. They are defined by Self-Reliance and their lives teach the rest of society not only how to be self-subsistent, but in stoic tradition, to know thyself and be a god.

"The American Scholar" describes a society in which there is no division between social class, instead, "man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all" (EL 64). When Emerson tells us that in this society there is "one man" from "fables which out of an unknown antiquity convey an unlooked-for wisdom, that the gods, in the beginning, divided man into men, that he might be more helpful to himself; just as the hand was divided into fingers, the better to answer its end" (EL 64), it is hard to ignore the humanity within his prose. Beyond the awareness of social stratification, Emerson saw biography as a "fable" that could be used as a lesson or sermon. Perhaps this is a reiteration of "History" when Emerson declares "[t]he creation of a thousand forests is in one acorn, and Egypt, Greece, Rome, Gaul, Britian, America, lie folded already in the first man" (EL 237). Because "History" tells us that there is a "universal mind" in which "each individual man is one more incarnation" (EL 237), society must and cannot divide its members into categories, thus separating each from the other; in a Transcendental mood Emerson wishes to abolish all such division lines so that each individual may become "transparent" and become not a mere worker, but a man of the age. Society is in prime position due to its multitudes because "[e]very revolution was first a thought in one man's mind," and "when the same thought occurs to another man, it is the key to that era" ("History" EL 238). The collective conscience that is the "key" to an era is first developed within an individual's "universal

mind,” which can give “worth to particular men and things” (EL 238). Emerson’s use of biography in this context allows for individualism to stand as a sign of strength, and it is in the “first man” principle that Emerson finds a transition from history to biography.

Emerson recognized that the journey out of the constraints of society to self-realization was an arduous path; but in awareness of historical discourse, and the fulfillment of becoming what nature intended, “Man Thinking,” or, “the first man” (EL 237), is “he of all men whom [nature] most engages” (EL 65). Brown wants to give “worth to particular men and things” because he could represent an idea that was American, and the actions and conviction that guided his work for abolition would be linked, by Emerson, to religion and American history. Indeed Emerson used Brown’s biography as “the key” to not only abolition, but to the power of originality as his country approached a civil war. Thus Emerson’s “Man Thinking” has discovered the nature within, and “he must settle its value in his mind” (EL 65). Emerson asks, “what is nature to him?” (EL 65), and indeed the great question has been asked. Upon understanding nature, one “shall see, that nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal, and one is print. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind” (EL 56).

In Chapter Two I will explore the process through which Emerson found principle in the biography of one of America's most radical abolitionists. During the Civil War, Emerson encountered much intellectual conflict within himself, though by the time of Brown’s execution, an American representation would be produced. Brown and the abolitionist cause were circumstances from which a philosophy could materialize. John Brown gave Emerson’s philosophy of biography an identity. The quest for an American contribution now

rested with Brown's character, and the actions of Kansas and Harpers Ferry became part of the American experience.



### CHAPTER 3. FINDING JOHN BROWN

War heals a deeper wound than any it makes.

--Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journal XV*

And I summon you to regard with due honor those men who born in each evil age ...  
take a beeline to the rack of the inquisitor, the axe of the tyrant.

--Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journal XV*

Nearly half a decade before the Civil War, Emerson understood the crises facing the Union to be rooted in “structures of representation” (Cadava 149). The Union was falling apart, and as the inevitability of war approached, Emerson welcomed the strife; and as we see in his journal quoting from Heraclitus that, “war is the father of all things,” the strife would only make the Republic stronger.

As Emerson dedicated much of his life to promoting Self-Reliance and to finding subjects who would readily embody that characteristic, the crises preceding the Civil War and the urgency of abolition became an interest to Emerson as it informed his philosophy of representation. Although the events leading up to the Civil War impacted all areas of American life, Emerson found himself especially consumed by the campaign of abolition and with the biography of John Brown. By the time the Civil War began, Emerson did not believe in governments, but instead championed the politics of the individual. In his rare affiliation with social causes, Emerson found Brown to be a manifestation of his philosophy of “biography.”

When Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry culminated in Brown's execution in 1859, Emerson seized the opportunity to declare a national hero and to promote the cause for which Brown gave his life, a subject I will engage with in this chapter through the “Remarks at a

Meeting for the Relief of John Brown's Family" (1859), and "John Brown: Speech at Salem" (1860). In a sense, Brown gave Emerson's philosophy of Self-Reliance an identity. In choosing Brown as representative, Emerson makes a striking departure from his earlier abstract models and presents a distinctly American biography. Although Brown is subject of much controversy, it was Emerson's notion that Brown "believed in his ideas to the extent that he existed to put them into action" (Misc 254) that garnered his attention. By 1860, war and violence became as much an influence in Emerson's lectures as Nature and Self-Reliance; the political and social climate surrounding the war created a circumstance that even Emerson could not escape.

***"Let us sit at home with the cause": John Brown and Self-Reliance***

Emerson's use of biography in the theater of war was an attempt to compound and solidify Transcendental principles, and with the outcome of Harpers Ferry it became an attempt to address the political and social climate of the day. Although some critics have noted Emerson's inability to move effectively from Transcendental philosophy to practical reform movements, Emerson's philosophy of biography utilized Brown, and effectively theorized an active Transcendentalism. Len Gougen writes that "Emerson recognized that the Union was in a deep crisis, and that its survival and the survival of all that it represented was at stake. Extreme circumstances justify extreme measures" (290). As Gougen attests, the circumstance of the nineteenth century, and in particular abolition, proved to be a subject that Emerson could use to further ideas of biography and Self-Reliance. By the 1860s, Emerson was not a "disinterested scholar" as some critics have noted, but rather a philosopher discouraged and in need of a mode of operation in which to frame his work (Garvey 139).

Michael Stryck has noted that “two camps have emerged: those who portray Emerson’s activism as an anomaly, inconsistent with his larger transcendental project, and those who portray Emerson’s activism as a natural extension of this project” (139). If indeed Transcendentalism can be seen as a “project,” then Emerson’s efforts to align abolition and Union causes with the biography of Brown stresses his conception of “History” by proposing that one individual could represent an entire front of political and social issues. The socio-political climate surrounding the war created a circumstance few could escape.

The purpose of this chapter is to approach the abolitionist Brown as a subject Emerson used for identity, thus providing a host for the abolition and union causes. As Stryck suggests, “with the message of Self-Reliance in its place, Emerson sought to be more than its messenger: he sought its application,” and the principle of abolition became an “extension” of Self-Reliance (Garvey 140). As Emerson would have it, all “representative men” deserve an observance of their lives; the violence and the cause of Brown’s actions would be more than welcomed by Emerson in uncovering an American biography of Self-Reliance.

American culture during the nineteenth-century was heavily influenced and dominated, at least as perceived by a New England philosophical circle, by a European contribution. The absence of American solidarity on a world stage troubled Emerson as he worked from Concord, perfecting lectures and essays to instigate his audiences’ awareness of the present hour. Kenneth Sacks notes that,

Although in breaking free from European control the new country had adopted a more enlightened form of government, expectations that America would also surpass Europe in arts and letters had so far been disappointed. Emerson, whose

grandfather had died in the Revolutionary War and whose own journals reflect a passionate pride in the American polity, struggled with America's seeming lack of cultural imagination. At times he tried to rationalize the failure ... as natural reflection of broader historical trends: 'the history of America since the revolution is meager because it has been all that time under better government, better circumstances or religious, moral, political, commercial prosperity than any nation ever was before. History will continually grow less interesting as the world grows better.' Yet he persisted in worrying that 'there is yet a dearth of American genius. (28)

Although conditions in America during the crises of the Civil War seemed bleak and devastating, to a philosopher in need of a subject, they offered a theater that Emerson would negotiate to define an "American genius." Brown and the crises of the Civil War would be the "shining moments" (EL 161) that would declare a national hero. Although Brown lacked cultural refinement, the politics which Brown exhibited in his plight would indeed raise the awareness of American democracy by exulting the Self-Reliance inherent in such a system. Emerson writes in his journal from 1862 that, "in a Democracy, every movement has a deep seated cause" (JMN XV: 298). Emerson understands democracy as a system allowing the individual to act upon his/her own experience: "Democracy, Freedom, has its root in the sacred truth that every man hath in him the Divine reason" (JMN VI: 133).

The politics of the Civil War would diminish Emerson's enthusiasm for cultural refinement. No longer was there a dialogue between European and American letters that Emerson found pressing; Emerson now concentrated his work on properly navigating the turmoil which shrouded the Union during the nineteenth century, as it informed American

biography. The War and its ramifications replaced Emerson's primary biography of "Man Thinking" with the representative citizen soldier. The battlefield became the textbook. From Concord, Massachusetts, on December 8, 1862, Emerson informs Carlyle, "Here we read no books. The war is our sole & doleful instructor. All our bright young men go into it, to be misused & sacrificed hitherto by incapable leaders" (CEC 536). Emerson understands circumstance during "The American Scholar" when he writes, "books are for the scholar's idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings" (W 68). At this point, the hour dictated that Brown would take the place of "The American Scholar," urging every Unionist to "be sure you are right, then go ahead" (JMN XV: 183). The Kansas battlefield was the proving ground for Brown's army. The politics of war would demand that Emerson's "representative" now be militant in its focus. Emerson writes that, "the cannon will not suffer any other sound to be heard for miles and years around it. Our chronology lost all old distinctions in one date" (JMN XV: 55). In the midst of extreme violence and chaos, Brown's life would be used by Emerson to define all "chronology" of the civil war and beyond.

Emerson understood Brown to be not only a perfect representative for the anti-slavery movement, but in Brown's life Emerson found the necessary subject from which future generations could find a subject who stood "for facts, and for thoughts" (EL 625). Emerson declares in "John Brown: Speech at Salem,"

I am not a little surprised at the easy effrontery with which political gentleman, in and out of Congress, take it upon them to say that there are not a thousand men in the North who sympathize with John Brown. It would be far safer and nearer the truth to

say that all people, in proportion to their sensibility and self- respect, sympathize with him. (Misc 262)

Emerson's Salem Speech seeks to address Brown as the subject from which "all people" could "sympathize." In that "all people" will find "sympathy" with Brown, Emerson's rhetoric implores the use of an extremist as it aids the abolitionist cause. Although Emerson's involvement with abolition was primarily from behind the podium, naming Brown as an American representative would clearly define where Emerson stood on the issue: support for Brown would mean support for abolition. Emerson was concerned with what Brown represented more than he was with the specifics of Brown's attacks. Emerson's "relief speech" describes this idea when Emerson declares, "[Brown] believes in the Union of the States, and he conceives that the only obstruction to the Union is slavery, and for that reason, as a patriot, he works for its abolition" (Misc 252).

Emerson's "John Brown: Speech at Salem" does not hesitate in its attempt to align Brown with a Christian ethos. Not only does Emerson explain that Brown kept "an oath made to heaven," but posits that Brown was "a shepherd and herdsman ... [Brown] knew the secret signals by which animals communicate" (Misc 261). Because Brown was fond of the "Golden Rule," his "oath" and his uncanny ability to understand "secret signals" of nature would place Brown at a unique advantage to "protect the weak and lowly against the strong oppressor" (Misc 262). Brown's faith would be used by Emerson to stress his allegiance not only to the cause of abolition and the future of the Union, but to the divinity of God. Emerson understood his audience well enough to know that Brown could be aligned with a religious rhetoric that would justify the violence as a means of protecting humanity.

In the simplicity of Brown's biography, Emerson would find the divinity of nature and God that would guide and carry out the cause to which Brown gave his life. It is important that Emerson does not restrict Brown's lesson to one group and calls him a subject from which "all people" could learn. Brown's existence speaks directly to "History" when Emerson declares,

Of the universal mind each individual man is one more incarnation. All of its properties consist in him. Each new fact in his private experience flashes a light on what great bodies of men have done, and the crises of his life refer to national crises. Every revolution was first a thought in one man's mind, and when the same thought occurs to another man, it is the key to that era. (EL 238)

Because "every age has its religion and its mythology" (JMN XV: 400), the crises of the war would feed the biography of John Brown, creating an American representative of Transcendental proportions. Emerson would draw interest first to Brown's personal life, explicating ties to church and family. This concentration on the ethos of Brown would draw his audience to a topic quite personal for a New England audience. Emerson declares that "the hero of Harpers Ferry has provoked an extreme curiosity in all parts of the Republic, in regard to the details of his history. Every anecdote is eagerly sought, and I do not wonder that gentlemen find traits of relation readily between him and themselves" (Misc 251). To aid in this reception, Emerson tells his audience that "[Brown] is so transparent that all men see him through" (Misc 252). Brown's "transparency" proved useful to Emerson because it suggests universality, a union with the "Over-Soul"; Emerson describes Brown as "a man to make friends wherever on earth courage and integrity are esteemed, the rarest of heroes, a pure idealist, with no by-ends of his own" (Misc 252).

By stressing Brown's personal qualities, Emerson can make a violent and radical abolitionist accessible to nearly every American. Emerson championed Brown as not only a hero, but an individual whose actions and life could aid in helping the observant understand their life more clearly. He proclaims that there is a "relation" between "gentlemen" and Brown. Although this is somewhat exaggerated considering the fact that to some Brown was guilty of treason and murder, Emerson's claim is not without merit because he ultimately wanted the idea of Self-Reliance and abolition to remain. Brown was merely a vessel. Emerson continues his description of Brown by linking him with his revolutionary ancestors, describing the stock from which Brown was born. Emerson states, "[h]e joins that perfect Puritan faith which brought his fifth ancestors to Plymouth Rock, with his grandfather's order in the Revolution" (Misc 252). It is important for Emerson to align Brown with a revolutionary and national past, to exhibit that Brown truly was "born into a state of war" (EL 201). The audience will understand Brown's American ancestry as part of Brown's identity, and his work in Kansas and Harpers Ferry can be read as a duty to his country and the American people. Emerson wants Brown's American lineage and his work for abolition to have a "symbolic effect" (Garvey 201): to nurture an understanding that Brown's work is an original attempt, albeit revolutionary, of an American experience.

For Emerson, Self-Reliance is about "nonconformity" and how to "understand the voices which we hear in solitude," always fighting when they "grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world" (EL 261). Brown's revolutionary past allows him to share blood with those who were unwilling to accept the mandates of King George III, took up arms, and defended their position. The history of American Self-Reliance, however violent, is not lost on Emerson. When Emerson describes Brown's heritage as "a farmer, the fifth in descent



from Peter Brown, who came to Plymouth in the Mayflower, in 1620” (Misc 251), he is letting his audience know that Brown not only deserves to be a “representative,” but that his purpose can be found in the lineage of his past.

It is important for Emerson to find historical roots for his subjects. In the 1835 speech, “Historical Discourse at Concord,” Emerson makes sure to align his town with that of a radical past. Emerson tells his audience that, “I shall not be expected, on this occasion, to repeat the details of that oppression which drove our fathers out hither. Yet the town of Concord was settled by a party of non-conformists, immediately from Great Britain” (Misc 35). Similarly, Emerson begins with Brown’s lineage because, as Emerson explains in “Uses of Great Men,” “he must be related to us, and our life receive from him some promise of explanation. I cannot tell what I would know; but I have observed there are persons who, in their character and actions, answer questions which I have not skill to put” (EL 617). Emphasizing church, family, pilgrim ancestors, and the blood of an American revolutionary, Emerson found Brown’s background to be as necessary as his fighting proved to be against slavery. In keeping with “Uses of Great Men” Emerson wanted the biography of representative men, like Brown, to inform on the history of all. If “our life receive[s] from him some promise of explanation,” Emerson must utilize Brown’s history to explicate not only the present epoch, but to aid the audiences’ own awareness into their past.

One of the most revealing statements from the “relief speech” comes from Emerson’s admission that,

[Brown] believes in two articles—two instruments shall I say?—the Golden Rule and the Declaration of Independence; and he used this expression in conversation here concerning them, ‘better that a whole generation of men, women and children should

pass away by a violent death, than that one world of either should be violated in this country.' There is a Unionist,—there is a strict constructionist for you. He believes in the Union of the States, and he conceives that the only obstruction to the Union is slavery, and for that reason, as a patriot, he works for its abolition. (Misc 253)

Emerson addresses an audience primarily consisting of Northern sympathizers who, for the most part, would offer allegiance to the abolitionist cause. But in giving his speech, Emerson chooses his words carefully. The point must be made that Brown acts on his American rights and his Christian duty

Emerson understands his audience and for this reason seeks to utilize Brown's use of the Declaration of Independence and the Bible. Being two very important works for an American Christian, he is right to call them "instruments" because they form the basis of his action. He declares in "John Brown: Speech at Salem" that "[Brown] grew up a religious and manly person, in severe poverty; a fair specimen of the best stock of New England; having that force of thought and that sense of right which are the warp and woof of greatness" (Misc 261). Emerson details Brown's youth while relating it to his audience. He quickly takes the subject of Brown and immediately following the details of Brown's religious upbringing, launches into a description of New England stock. Emerson declares that, "our farmers were Orthodox Calvinists, mighty in the scriptures; had learned that life was a preparation, a "probation," to use their word, for a higher world and was to be spent in loving and serving mankind" (Misc 261). It is as if in using Brown, he is able to detail an American history, or at least a New England one. Emerson's "American" rhetoric encourages his audience members to redefine their position in regards to the abolitionist cause, to seek

out their past as Emerson would employ in “History.” The rhetoric used only makes Brown stronger, guided by principles imbedded in an American conscience.

In “Remarks at a Meeting for the Relief of John Brown’s family” (1859) before the execution of Brown, Emerson uses the occasion to stump for an agenda regarding the future of Massachusetts. Emerson’s speech uses Brown’s incarceration to focus on the conditions of Government, and the forms that Government falls victim to. He focuses on the politicians and begins a tempered diatribe by declaring, “[i]f judges cannot find law enough to maintain the sovereignty of the state, and to protect the life and freedom of every inhabitant not a criminal, it is idle to compliment them as learned and venerable ... at a pinch, they are no more use than idiots” (Misc 255). Emerson admits in his “relief” speech that there is a failure in government, and in doing so stresses the urgency of Brown. Self-Reliance, as embodied by Brown, was a threat to the socio-political forms to which government conforms. Emerson’s enthusiasm for Brown’s Self-Reliance stems from Brown’s ability to take action that circumvented any civil law government created. No bills or votes, just pure action. Emerson charges that, “your *habeas corpus* is, in anyway in which it has been, or, I fear, is likely to be used, a nuisance and not a protection; for it takes away his right reliance on himself, and the natural assistance of his friends and fellow citizens, by offering him a form which is a piece of paper” (Misc 256).

The “relief speech” is one of several politically charged lectures, and they mark an anomaly in Emerson’s lecturing career; they deal in the “everlasting now” as Carlyle’s Professor Teufelsdröckh would have it, and they attempt to address the immediate climate of the nineteenth century, as Emerson lived and witnessed. Bliss Perry notes that Emerson was an individual “who quietly left Concord for lecture engagements and as quietly returned, but

during the journey it was certain that he had dropped a bombshell somewhere” (“Critical Reception” 27).

Emerson hesitated when it came to deliver speeches that aligned him with a particular reform movement. But the subjects of his earlier lectures are indeed informed by the Self-Reliance of the Declaration of Independence, and by the time Emerson begins to cite Brown in 1859, there is little to be imagined as to where Emerson stands in relation to politics and reform. Like Brown, Emerson is a strict constructionist, and he believes in the Declaration of Independence. Emerson understands Brown’s actions to be the proper manifestation of the “laws of nature” (Martin A-2). For Emerson, Brown’s actions were entirely acts of Self-Reliance. During “Remarks at a Meeting for the Relief of John Brown’s Family”” Emerson declares, “[y]ou remember [Brown’s] words: ‘if I had interfered on behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, of any of their friends, parents, wives, or children, it would all have been right. But I believe that to have interfered as I have done, for the despised poor, was not wrong, but right’” (Misc 253). Brown worked for the “unalienable rights” guaranteed to all. Emerson’s use of Brown’s own words not only presents Brown as an activist concerned with protecting those without power, but also strongly questions the hypocrisy of an American government using the power of its own documents. On this front it is not hard to understand why Emerson believed in Brown. Brown not only took up arms against the “evil” of slavery, but in doing so lived out the agreement found in Declaration of Independence, between the framers and citizens. As the Declaration states, and as a system of Democracy can nurture, Brown acted against a force he found to be “unjust.” Because the Declaration of Independence suggests that the cause for a

revolution needed to be apparent and profound, Brown's actions, although militant and violent, were justified and sustained a dialogue regarding the future of the Union.

***“Every Principle is a War- Note”: Finding a Representative in the Context of War***

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, war functions for Emerson as a general metaphor, not specific in its purpose; he uses war to champion ideas of adversity and courage. Emerson begins his lecture on “The Fugitive Slave Law,” at the Tabernacle, in New York City, 1854<sup>6</sup>, by declaring, “I do not often speak to public questions; they are odious and hurtful, and it seems like meddling or leaving your work. I have my own spirits in prison;— spirits in deeper prisons, whom no man visits if I do not” (Misc 205). But by 1850, with the passing of that law and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, he goes on to say the “spirits” were unlocked, and Emerson stepped into the public light on a political platform.

Emerson's “Fugitive Slave Law” condemns all in connection to the bill. Emerson admits that “I have lived all my life without suffering any known inconvenience from American Slavery. I never saw it; I never heard the whip” (Misc 207). Emerson's immersion into activism did not come from personal involvement, as say Whitman or Oliver Wendell Holmes, in as much as it came from personal distrust of Congress and his belief in the right of citizens to be free. Emerson's distrust of Congress can be seen during his lecture on “The Fugitive Slave Law” when he challenges Webster. Emerson continues,

I never felt the check on my free speech and action, until, the other day, when Mr. Webster, by his personal influence, brought the Fugitive Slave Law on the country. I say Mr. Webster, for though the bill was not his, it is yet notorious that he was the life and soul of it, that he gave it all he had: it cost him his life, and under the shadow of

his great name inferior men sheltered themselves, threw their ballots for it and made the law. I say inferior men. (Misc 207)

As Emerson saw it, the Fugitive Slave Law was but the beginning of a long decade of injustice and oppression. Emerson's speeches from this point begin to take the tone of an abolitionist condemning the disease plaguing the nation.

The Civil War found everyone involved to be so strongly opinionated that Northern abolitionists waged war even among themselves. Conflicts arose from disagreements over interpretations of the Constitution, to personal desire for publication success (Cain 45-59). To be sure, confusion reigned supreme within the North. The decision to go to war did not come easily. Because of the confusion wrought by extreme socio-political situations and convictions, Emerson was right to define his cause through Brown. When Emerson championed Brown, the abolitionist cause, at least for Emerson, found its clarity in one man's life. Still, Brown's aggression needed to be exonerated with a specific purpose.

War was a certain catalyst that provided much fodder for Emerson in his lectures on heroism and virtue. Emerson's "Heroism" (1841) indirectly addresses a nameless heroic figure, foreshadowing Brown, by explicating the proximity of an individual to the source of conflict. Emerson declares,

Heroism works in contradiction, for a time, to the voice of the great and good.

Heroism is obedience to a secret impulse of an individual's character. Now to no other man can its wisdom appear as it does to him, for every man must be supposed to see a little farther on his own proper path than anyone else. Therefore just and wise men take umbrage at his act, until after some little time be past; then they see it to be in unison with their acts. (EL 202)

Because conflict and death were sometimes necessary for the benefit of future generations, Emerson would write, “we see the dawn of a new era, worth to mankind all the treasure and all the lives it has cost, yes, worth to the world the lives of all this generation of American men, if they be demanded” (JMN XV: 64). Emerson’s journal entry seems to be without emotion or concern. Brown’s work in Kansas and Harpers Ferry, however violent or radical, would produce a subject that would allow Emerson to decipher the conflict dividing a nation apart. Edward Stessel holds Emerson accountable for too much fervor, claiming, “it is not hard to understand Emerson’s early enthusiasm for the war, but it is startling that he was able to maintain his full enthusiasm even when the sufferings of the War became apparent” (184). Stessel is right in considering Emerson’s position of authority during the war. Emerson by this time was a prominent figure on the lecture circuit, and was indeed respected amongst Bostonian elite. But there is one constant throughout his work: idealism. To this end there are many critics who find Emerson to be an inaccessible, albeit, emotionless writer incapable of getting beyond a staunch Northeastern demeanor.. Emerson is not known for his emotion, and in the case of Brown, Emerson wanted to present a representation out of the chaos, and the subsequent benefit from those who would sacrifice their lives for the future of the Union. The “dawn of a new era” would indeed foster violence, but a necessary means to an end.

Although the war became a powerful influence, Emerson always held tight to the power of a thought. The idea behind the rhetoric remains the same. Similar to the sacrifice given by Emerson’s grandfather’s generation, as the opening lines of *Nature* decree, the death toll might provide “our own works and laws and worship” (EL 7) for Emerson’s America. Besides a motive for Emerson’s statement, the idea behind the sacrifice instructs and inspires Emerson. We do not know if Emerson would really sacrifice an entire

generation of youth, but the idea behind the sacrifice was paramount and informed the urgency with which the abolitionist cause was waged.

For Emerson, the perfection of war rests in what it could do to affect perception. During Emerson's address on "War" (1838) he declares, "the people imitate the chiefs" (Misc 181). On one front the battlefield became a microcosm of society. The death and violence, although simplified, was an amplification of adversity at home. On the other front, war became an "eye opener" (JMN XV: 202) and a "new glass to see all our old things through" (63). Emerson did not shy away from addressing a death toll as a reality in sustaining war. Emerson understood that the violence and necessity of Brown's actions provided a circumstance in which all involved would be asked to act in an otherwise uncommon manner. To this end, war became the great metaphor for which Emerson could apply his philosophy or biography and representation. Michael Lopez notes, "[f]or war was, like power itself, one of the nineteenth century's master tropes. It functioned as a particularly rich, if elusive, metaphor, an analogy that could be relied on for all manner of uses, regardless of whether or not those uses dissolved the boundary between the figural and literal meanings of the word" (190). By the time Brown's men reached Kansas, the line between figurative and literal meanings had been erased.

In "War" Emerson begins his speech by stating, "[w]ar ... in the remote past ... appears a part of the connection of events, and, in its place is necessary" (Misc 179); however, Emerson ends his lecture declaring, "it is the ignorant and childish part of mankind that is the fighting part" (Misc 183). In 1838, Emerson respected war as something of timeless importance; the Greeks and Romans provided leaders who presented an opposition that, "on its own scale, on the virtues it loves, it endures no counterfeit, but shakes the whole



society until every atom falls into the place its specific gravity assigns it” (Misc 180). War as a history lesson was essential. War, too, became necessary and accepted means to an end in 1854.

After “bloody Kansas” armed conflict shifted from that of an esoteric exercise to an issue pressing Emerson’s generation and in the theater of abolition was a welcomed event. Although Brown’s force in Kansas was shocking to some, it quickly garnered Brown an identity as a radical abolitionist. Brown used what one historian calls “an act of terrorism” (Whitman 4) for various reasons. First, Brown needed to send a strong message to Southerners settling in Kansas territory. The armed force would open their eyes to an abolitionist not afraid to part ways from the pacifism of abolition and deliver a blow that would strike fear into the hearts and minds of those on both sides of Brown. Secondly, Brown’s violence, particularly in Kansas, would help organize the anti-slavery movement in the hinterland. When Brown arrived, there was little guidance for those wishing to fight those in support of slavery. Brown gave some abolitionists direction because of the urgency to which his actions implied. The immediate response to the force in Kansas was that those connected to both sides took notice of the issue at hand. Brown signaled a battle cry through his work in Kansas (Martin 234). Emerson understands the necessity for Brown’s work. The institution of slavery began to take its toll on Emerson as it increasingly encroached upon Emerson’s Concord. Gougen attests that, “[e]vents in the 1850s ... the use of force in returning fugitive slaves, the violence in Kansas, ... must have convinced Emerson, as his journal comments indicate, that Southern slavery was now not only hostile but aggressive” (223).

In 1856, Emerson declares that “there is this peculiarity about the case of Kansas, that all the right is on one side” (Misc 241). The confrontation in Kansas delivered a message to either side that neither would back down to opposition. Emerson’s distrust of politicians and leaders can best be seen in his 1856 lecture “Speech on Affairs in Kansas.” Emerson declares, “I own I have little esteem for governments. I esteem them only good in the moment when they are established. I set the private man first” (Misc 244). Emerson’s distrust of government and his adulation for soldiers finds a similar characteristic: that individualism should always supersede conformity. Although soldiers fight in groups and for a common cause directed by a leader, Emerson found the soldier heroic in that “this self-subsistency is the charm of war,” “for this self-subsistency is essential to our idea of man” (Misc 199). As Edward Stessel points out, Emerson transferred allegiance from the scholar to the soldier. The isolated warrior became Emerson’s “representative man” during the years leading up to the Civil War.

The political rebellion of John Brown answered the philosophy of Emerson's "History," aided by the conflict of the war as a paradigm that Emerson could use for political persuasion. Brown would at once diminish the hierarchy of historical discourse by creating a revolution of the present. “Heroism” is not only a calling for Self-Reliance, but an uprising, declaring,

Our culture therefore must not omit the arming of the man. Let him hear in the season that he is born into the state of war, and that the common wealth and his well-being require that he should not go dancing in the weeds of peace, but warned, self-collected and neither defying nor dreading the thunder, let him take both reputation

and life in his hand, and with perfect urbanity dare the gibbet and the mob by the absolute truth of his speech and the rectitude of his behavior. (EL 201)

To be "born into the state of war" is Emerson's description of an individual standing against adversity, and thusly depicts a biography well worth noting. The subject of "Heroism" is in dialogue with a revolutionary past. As Emerson understood American history, "Heroism" declares a doctrine of rebellion and subversion. Understanding the Declaration of Independence to be a manifesto based on real grievances, Emerson's lecture finds virtue in standing against adversity, and the "arming of the man" is the individual warrior that will take leave of popular sentiment and live against popular vote. The Self-Reliance of one or of the multitudes taking up arms against an oppressing or overwhelming force is the autonomy Emerson wanted his work to inspire, whether it is to break from tradition or to define something that the "fathers" did not create. Emerson's address on "War" in 1838 describes the benefits of war: "it is a temporary and preparatory state, and does actively forward the culture of man.

War educates the senses, calls into action the will, perfects the physical constitution, brings men into such swift and close collision that man measures man" (Misc 180). War functioned as an expedient to culture's ills; war took ordinary citizens and put them in extraordinary situations. The "swift" action in "critical moments" becomes the defining characteristics of war. The "swift moments" that enables man to "measure man" is akin to the Shakespearean portrayal of warfare of sword play and honor. For a man who mistrusted all "forms," war provided a theater that was fast enough to avoid becoming a form. The immediate action of hand combat, or the decision making of generals in their war chambers promoted the order of Emersonian Self-Reliance.

*“There are people whose strong individuality traverses, like the Arethusa fountain, the bitter waters of the sea, and arrives pure”*: *Emerson on Brown’s Violence*

At the core of Emersonian “biography” is a philosophy of Self-Reliant individualism. Whether called “prophet,” “poet,” “man of the world,” “religion,” “gods of fable,” or “representative,” one thing is certain: Emerson’s prophets would live according to their own truth. John Brown efficiently denied any devotion to a cause other than Christianity and the abolition of slavery, and in Brown’s modest existence Emerson found one heroic individual who would stand as an American biography.

But to many Brown was guilty of treason and murder. Brown’s plan and ultimate failure to invade the Federal Arsenal at Harpers Ferry in order to expand the Underground Railroad and arm fugitive slaves with weapons, provoked a widespread dialogue over the issue of slavery. After an examination of Brown and his men, The Mason Report (1860), which represented the findings of a five-man committee investigating Brown’s actions at Harpers Ferry, declared that, “there can be no doubt Brown’s plan was to commence a servile war,” and if “the several states . . . do not hold it incumbent on them, after the experience of the country, to guard in future by appropriate legislation against occurrences similar to [Brown], the committee can find no guarantee elsewhere for the security of peace between the States of the Union” (United States 32). Indeed, Brown’s raid would not end with his capture but would act as an expedient to the cause of abolition.

The bloodshed of Harpers Ferry and Kansas is quite removed from the simplicity of Concord’s orchards and the tranquility of Walden Pond; thus Brown’s violent campaigns in both Kansas and Harpers Ferry created an enigmatic biography for Emerson to work with.

Emerson embraces Brown not because of the violence but because of the action. Emerson declares that “John Brown was an idealist. He believed in his ideas to the extent that he existed to put them all into action” (Misc 254). What inspired Emerson was the need for Brown to fulfill his obligations, directly proportional to the enthusiasm and courage which helped carry the action out. Emerson was not alone in his praise for Brown. Henry Ward Beecher addressed a crowd in 1859, asking that, “no man pray that Brown be spared. Let Virginia make him a martyr” (Ward 91). And Thoreau admitted, “I rejoice that I live in this age—that I am his cotemporary” (49). It has been reported that even the Southern men interrogating Brown from his jail cell were impressed with the clarity and conviction of his answers.

Although Brown had his supporters, he found an even number of people strongly against what he represented. His actions beginning in Kansas created a serious debate, labeling Brown “insane” and “misguided” (155). One of the clearest oppositions to Brown comes from Henry Wise, the Governor of Virginia:

What is this but anarchy? What does it mean but ‘confusion worse confounded,’ and the overthrow of all rights, of all property, of all government, of all religion, of all rule among men? Nothing but mad riot can rule and misrule with such sentiments as these. There can be no compromise with them, no toleration of them in safety or with self-respect. They must be met and crushed, or they will crush us, or our Union with non-slaveholding states cannot continue. (137)

In contrast, Emerson tells his audience in 1860 that, “[Brown’s] 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 twenty years, but the keeping of an oath made to Heaven and earth forty-

seven years before” (Misc 260). Emerson's contention that Brown was “born” into the role of abolitionist is further advanced when he declares that “I incline to accept [Brown's] own account of the matter at Charlestown, which makes the date a little older, when [Brown] said, ‘this was all settled millions of years before the world was made’” (Misc 260). Indeed, in true Emersonian fashion, the just cause found its genesis at the outset of the creation of all things. Brown's action aligns him with providence and divine will. The abolitionist cause, as taken up by Emerson employs the rhetoric of a movement sanctioned by God.

There is a sense that Emerson is building an epic of the human condition and that Brown enables the epic to reflect directly the American experience. By the time the violence erupted in Kansas, Emerson's philosophy of biography began to take shape and to be informed by specific happenings in Emerson's time. The philosophy of the “war-like attitude” and the “Grecian state,” of Emerson's earlier lectures, find a solid circumstance in which to employ their meaning. Emerson's “Speech on Affairs in Kansas” addresses the audience with the subject of Self-Reliance: “in these calamities under which they suffer, and the worse which threaten them, the people of Kansas ask for bread, clothes, arms and men, to save them alive, and enable them to stand against these enemies of the human race. They have a right to be helped, for they have helped themselves” (Misc 242). Indeed, “Bloody Kansas” became a manifestation of Emerson's essay “Heroism” when he describes the “war-like attitude” as being “his ability to cope single-handed with the infinite army of his enemies” (EL 201). When Emerson's philosophy meets up with Brown—in what Lewis Hyde calls “on-the-ground-history”—Emerson utilizes the circumstance at hand. Hyde writes,

The prophetic voice juxtaposes today and eternity to make it clear that the latter may inform the former. It sets the mundane against the imaginary so that we might see whether or not they match up . . . there is a revelation. You see what matters and what doesn't, and then you act, for 'this is the heroic age' itself, as long as we will agree to be its heroes. (126)

Because Brown was an American and because wars of abolition were being waged on American soil, Brown's heroism, if agreed upon by a people, would find its "prophetic voice" from which they could center their efforts.

The echoes of *Nature* are very strong in Emerson's "Remarks at a Meeting for the Relief of John Brown's Family." Emerson explains,

[Brown] did not believe in moral suasion, he believed in putting the thing through. He saw how deceptive the forms are. We fancy, in Massachusetts, that we are free; yet it seems the Government is quite unreliable. Great wealth, great population, men of talent in the Executive, on the Bench,—all the forms right;—and yet, life and freedom are not safe. Why? Because the judges rely on the forms, and do not, like John Brown, use their eyes to see the fact behind the form. (Misc 254)

I mention *Nature* because in it Emerson campaigns for "our own works and laws and worship" (EL 7). The heroic qualities of Brown's biography will not be "retrospective" but rather active in the creation of "action proportioned to Nature" (EL 7). In fact, the heroic theme presented on behalf of Brown's family is rich in allusions to Emerson's past lectures. Emerson's ideas of biography stem from a thought expressed in his lecture "War": "a man does not come the length or the spirit of martyrdom without some active purpose, some equal motive, some flaming love" (Misc 195). Although Emerson understood "religion" as

defining moments of individual experience, the notion of biography is heightened when coupled with the cause of abolition. The “purpose” of Brown’s life was found to be abolition, but the benefit would exceed even that, and thus “one finds a relation in the church, another in the profession, another in the place of [Brown’s] birth” (Misc 251). The result of Brown’s sacrifice would not only aid the North, but for Emerson the heroism of Brown would unite his audience through everyday endeavors.

Emerson was not asking for miracles. What occurred to Emerson was that “representative men” had the ability to become heroic because they lived apart from any organization’s identity, yet they might have the same ancestry as an entire society. Brown stood for abolition, but he also stood for himself. Readers of Emerson cannot forget that he wanted to design a relationship with the universe that was unique to his own generation. The children would no longer live in their fathers’ world. The Civil War and the actions of John Brown enabled Emerson to champion every individual by upholding the life of one; the biography of John Brown would be extraordinary in what it presented to a people.



## CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION

In 1865 Emerson returned to Harvard as the keynote speaker for the July commemoration speech. Nearly thirty years after the institution barred his presence after the heretical “Divinity School Address,” Emerson once again looked into the audience of graduates. Emerson’s speech is both a praiseworthy and optimistic recognition as he looks toward the future at an American generation. Emerson begins,

Mr. Chairman and Gentleman:

With whatever opinion we come here, I think it is not in man to see, without a feeling of pride and pleasure, a tried soldier, the armed defender of the right. I think that in these last years all opinions have been affected by the magnificent and stupendous spectacle which Divine Providence has offered us of the energies that slept in the children of this country;—that slept and have awakened. I see thankfully those that are here, but dim eyes in vain explore for some who are not. (Misc 319)

There is no way of telling what Emerson must have felt as he stood before Harvard’s graduating class of 1865, to whether or not he paused to considered his words from “History” or “The American Scholar.” By 1865, Emerson’s awareness that “[e]vents, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves” (EL 53) had been illuminated by the events of Brown in Kansas and Harpers Ferry and by the crises of the Civil War. My thesis has bridged Emerson’s early works of “History” and “The American Scholar” with his later works on Brown, and contextualized Emerson’s progression from a writer of a distinctly American philosophy of Self-Reliance and a man able to apply his thought to serve a need of his American generation.

Somewhere between Emerson's resignation from his ministerial duties and his first trip to Europe, he came to regard the self as sacred. No longer could Emerson adhere to the ritual of the Eucharist, and no longer could Emerson bear to see his country live on "foreign harvests" (EL 53). The trip to Europe was a momentous event: he met with some of Europe's brightest thinkers, and as a result, returned to America with a renewed vision regarding his country and his work. Thinking of his American neighbors, Emerson considers a meeting between them and the "better men" of Europe:

upon an intelligent man, wholly a stranger to their names, they would make in conversation no deep impression, none of a world-filling fame;—they would be remembered as sensible, well-read, earnest men, not more. Especially are [Landor, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Carlyle] all deficient, all these four,—in different degrees, but all deficient,—in insight into religious truth. They have no idea of that species of moral truth which I call the first philosophy. (W 14).

Emerson's work would now consist of a philosophy that would encourage his country to seek out its essence: an originality of strength and Self-Reliance.

Emerson's ideas of Self-Reliance and biography became a naturally proceeded from his days as a minister, capturing the essence of freedom issued in Christ's teachings. Emerson's prophets would be models from which to draw inspiration, and it wasn't until Brown and his men reached Kansas that Emerson began to utilize an American biography. Until the issues prior to the Civil War, Emerson kept his models of "representative men" reserved to Europeans. The absence of an American prophet was most pressing, and the events leading up to the Civil War provided a theater, in an American context, for his concepts of biography and Self-Reliance.

Emerson navigated the strife facing the Union to inform his concept of an American biography. As early as 1837 in “The American Scholar,” Emerson was encouraging his audience to be aware of the moment when they could read nature directly. No longer would it suffice to read of great moments in history, but Emerson wanted his country to be aware of the present hour, and to act accordingly so that “our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, [may] [draw] to a close” (EL 53). The concept of biography as put forth in the lecture “History” seeks to establish a relationship between the pages of history and the individual of the present. When Emerson asks his audience in 1837 to consider, “what light new days and events have thrown on [the scholar’s] character” (EL 53), he awaits the circumstance that will prompt an individual to rely upon his own truth and understanding. The circumstance surrounding Brown and his raids in Kansas and at Harpers Ferry found the subject that Emerson would use to usher in a new generation. Emerson found his subject in the trenches of the abolitionist war, and in the work of Emerson we can see not only the politics of a decade unfold, but the creation of American originality.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For future reference, I will use dates of publication rather than the date of actual lecture.

<sup>2</sup> The “Over-Soul” concept needs mentioning here because Emerson believed that the soul was an overarching entity that, “circumscribes all things ... it contradicts all experience. In like manner it abolishes time and space” (EL 387). Because the “Over-Soul” abolishes “time and space” it becomes most interesting when paired with a reading of “History.”

<sup>3</sup> Manifestoes, becoming popular in modern literary circles, give purpose to generations through their force of language and direction. Although modernity is a broad term, there are characteristics of which Marshall Berman gives us an idea:

To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction. It is to be overpowered by the immense beauracracic organizations that have the power to control and often destroy all communities, values, lives; and yet to be undeterred in our determination to face these forces, to fight to change their world and make it our own. It is to be both revolutionary and conservative: alive to new possibilities for experience and adventure, frightened by the nihilistic depths to which so many modern adventures lead, longing to create and to hold on to something real even as everything melts (13).

Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss modern tendencies in Emerson’s writing, it is important to note that he is deliberate in demanding of his American brethren to live in accordance with a conscience of and for producing originality.

<sup>4</sup> In 1831, Ralph Waldo Emerson was eighteen years old. On a fateful afternoon he sat in the audience of Harvard’s Divinity School and listened to Sampson Reed deliver his “Oration on Genius.” Emerson heard what the man was saying, and came to regard Reed’s oration as a work he would classify as “native gold.” “Oration on Genius” was radical because Reed spoke about the spirit of God inside of the human soul. Reed believed in first-hand experience, and would so proclaim, “[t]he finger of death has rested on the church”, words of truth to the young Waldo, who by this time had his own growing disenchantment with organized religion and second-hand knowledge.

When Reed made the declaration that “[t]he genius of the mind will descend, and unite with the genius of the rivers, the lakes, and the woods. Thoughts fall to the earth with power, and make a language out of nature” (qtd. in Miller 49). In rebellion against organized Christianity, Reed would orient Emerson through an elaborate intellectual framework ushering in philosophies of Swedenborg and Locke, thus emerging in Emerson a concept of originality that a younger generation could fulfill. Emerson would draw upon Reed’s philosophy by suggesting that a union between man and nature could produce the “genius” necessary in creating original action. Though a whole chapter could be written on originality as a transcendental concept, Emerson would borrow the idea and further its cause for his American countrymen. In 1821 Reed declares, ‘the time is not far distant’ in which a generation would break the bondage of antiquated influence, and live according to the truth found in their own generation’s existence (Miller 53).

<sup>5</sup> Emerson’s claim that “there is properly no history; only biography” is a reiteration of Thomas Carlyle’s notion that “History is the essence of innumerable biographies” (“Miscellaneous Essays” 141). Although both Carlyle and Emerson found a common ground in the notion of representation, it was the difference that Emerson believed all individuals were capable of greatness, while Carlyle understood great men to be chosen at birth that created distinction between the two.

For an excellent discussion on Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s relationship concerning their similarities and disagreements consult Joseph Slater’s *The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle*, 1-95; in particular 30-52.

Coleridge’s definition of “contemporary genius” and his discussion of “models” are worth mentioning here also. See Chapter one of *Biographia Literaria*.

7 There are two versions of “The Fugitive Slave Law” in publication. The first was given in 1851; I will, of course, be referring to the 1854 edition.

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