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Author(s): David M. Robinson

Source: *Religion & Literature*, Vol. 41, No. 1, Emerson (Spring 2009), pp. 3-24

Published by: [The University of Notre Dame](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25676856>

Accessed: 07/04/2014 14:43

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“FOR LARGEST LIBERTY”:
EMERSON, NATURAL RELIGION,
AND THE ANTISLAVERY CRISIS

David M. Robinson

In American religious history, Emerson is best known for his fiery dismissals of the moderate liberalism of his Unitarian heritage, and his call for “a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us” (*Collected Works* 1:7). His early lectures and addresses, and his 1836 volume *Nature*, made him the central voice of the Transcendentalist movement, significant first as an expression of a revitalized spirituality that grew from the New England liberal dissent to Calvinism. This early Emerson, who had resigned his Unitarian pulpit in 1832, and attacked the lifeless preaching and lukewarm convention of his colleagues in his 1838 “Divinity School Address” at Harvard, is best remembered for his witness to the mystical ecstasy of the “transparent eye-ball” experience in *Nature* (1:10), a depiction of unmediated access to the spirit that was central to his role as a religious awakener.¹

The enraptured bard of *Nature* and “The Divinity School Address” remained a vital part of the “Emerson” of later decades, but by the mid-1840s Emerson had begun to reorient himself philosophically, as his 1844 essay “Experience,” arguably his greatest work, suggests. Emerson found that the kind of ecstatic experience he described in *Nature* was capricious and difficult of access, and his optimism was tempered by both personal loss and the course of American public events. While he continued as a philosophical idealist, immersed in Platonic and neo-Platonic traditions, and shaped by the Kantian-tinged Romanticism of Coleridge and Carlyle, he made his

idealism subject to a continual interrogation. "A believer in Unity, a seer of Unity, I yet beheld two," he confessed (*The Journals* 5:337). His later work suggests a continuing adaptation to the rapid scientific developments of the 1840s and 1850s on the one hand, and the building national crisis over slavery on the other.²

Among the most significant steps in this reorientation was a series of lectures delivered in London in the spring of 1848 which reflect both the stimulus and the intellectual disquiet generated by his English lecture tour. After lecturing in Manchester and other English cities, Emerson settled into London in early 1848, and with Carlyle's help, sampled the energetic cultural life of the city. He was less interested, and less impressed, by London's literary society than by its vibrant scientific life. As Laura Dassow Walls has noted, Emerson arrived in London during "a highly charged atmosphere" ("If Body Can Sing" 342) when the religious establishment was under assault from the proponents of scientific advance, and the city was still abuzz over Robert Chambers's early evolutionary work *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844). Emerson met Chambers, heard anatomist Richard Owen propound the evidence for his theory of the archetypal vertebrate skeleton, and heard Charles Faraday's theories of magnetism and electricity. He was deeply impressed with the intellectual vigor of modern science, and with what he admiringly termed "the irresponsible security and happiness of the attitude of the naturalist, sure of admiration for his facts, sure of their sufficiency" (*The Later Lectures* 1:137).³

Emerson responded to this fertile assortment of new theories and observations with one of his most ambitious and far-reaching series of lectures, "Mind and Manners of the Nineteenth Century" (1:127-89). At the core of these lectures was the principle that the inner and outer worlds, the mind and nature, developed and operated in accord with the same laws. Emerson believed that natural laws of development governed the growth of human intellect, the course of human civilization, and the evolution of organisms in the natural world. "The universal laws that bound the universe into one and ruled it immutably were not merely descriptive but constitutive," Walls writes, "and since matter was the embodiment of mind, those constitutive immutable laws sought by science were equally true in the moral realm" ("If Body Can Sing" 337). To know the laws of anatomy or geology was thus to know the laws of thought. "The world may be reeled off from any one of its laws like a ball of yarn;—a chemist can explain by his analogies the processes of the Intellect; the physician from his; the geometer, and the mechanician, respectively from theirs" (*Later Lectures* 1:156). While this was not exactly a new idea for Emerson, as readers of *Nature* will recognize, it had impressed him in England with unusual force because of the stimula-

tion of emerging scientific discourse. He believed that the new science could provide insight into human mental processes—the workings of creativity, inspiration, and ultimately, will—and also illuminate the course of human history and social development.

Emerson's engagement with laws of natural evolution, as Ian Finseth has explained, also had important consequences for his thinking about race in the turbulent and critical period of the 1850s. Applying the metamorphic principle of a changing or developing nature to questions of race, Emerson developed "homologous scientific and political narratives describing human moral and social progress in conjoint terms," Finseth observes. In regarding "biological intermixture as the principal dynamic of American progress," Emerson staked out an advanced, but also risky, position in the national discourse on race, theorizing what Finseth terms a "cosmopolitanism of blood" as the trajectory of human social progress (748, 732, 745).⁴ This theory of racial and social progression was closely tied to Emerson's growing interest in scientific evolution, and to the idea of metamorphosis as a foundational philosophical principle. His rejection of the idea of racial fixity helped to bolster his antislavery commitment, one that was also grounded in a larger conception of the evolution of human society through an expanding egalitarianism and inclusiveness.

Emerson returned to the London lectures periodically over the next three decades, most notably in the 1858 lecture series "Natural Method of Mental Philosophy" (*Later Lectures* 2: 41-129), but it remained a suggestive set of principles and associations rather than a rigorous working through of his fundamental insights. Meanwhile, the pressure of the slavery issue intensified, drawing Emerson's increasing attention and commitment. He had presented his first significant antislavery address in 1844, three years before his English lecture tour. When he returned in 1848, Europe was erupting in revolution and tensions were building over slavery in the United States, dramatically intensifying later with the 1850 passage of the Fugitive Slave Law.⁵

Out of this mix of philosophical readjustment, scientific revelation, and political upheaval, Emerson began to distill a theory of "natural religion" in the 1850s, a trans-historical, non-institutional, and ethically oriented code of first principles. Presented in a variety of lectures and essays in the late 1850s and early 1860s, Emerson's natural religion signaled the development of a post-Christian spirituality among the New England Unitarians and religious liberals, a creed in which "ethics" became the chief factor, and for many, the essence of religion itself. With a national crisis looming, Emerson melded the religion of ethics with a theory of progressive democratic "civilization,"

the new secularized form through which the human religious impulse would express itself.



A key audience for Emerson's lectures on natural religion was Theodore Parker's Boston congregation, the 28th Congregational Society, and its related lecture organization, the Parker Fraternity. The church had been established in 1845 to provide the controversial Parker with a place to preach in Boston, a deliberate response to the ostracism of Parker by the moderate Unitarian establishment.⁶ The political bent of the church was as liberal as its theology. It enabled Parker not only to push the limits of theological doctrine, but also to establish himself as New England's key antislavery preacher. Through the offices of the church, which met in the Boston Music Hall, Parker poured his enormous energy into progressive causes in Boston, but at a great cost to his health. He preached and lectured himself near to death in the late 1850s, accelerating the development of his tubercular condition, and forcing him to leave the church in 1859 in search of a recovery. Parker left the church for Europe in 1859 to search for recovery, and died in Florence on May 10, 1860.

While Parker had worn the mantle of social reformer with pride, he had come to his Boston congregation as a theological—not political—rebel and an exemplar of Transcendentalism's "new views" that had discomfited most of his Unitarian ministerial colleagues. Like Emerson, Parker was moving theologically in a post-Christian direction in the 1840s. While Emerson was displacing "God" with the "Over-Soul" and judgment day with "Compensation," Parker was formulating a version of Christianity as "Absolute Religion," a "method" rather than a "system" of religion that "lays down no positive creed to be believed in" and "commands no positive action to be done." Parker described this "Absolute Religion" in paradoxical terms of freedom and obedience, but his emphasis on a religion of "liberty" was central to his appeal as both a religious experimenter, and later, an abolitionist crusader. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty; the liberty of perfect obedience; the largest liberty of the sons of God." (Parker 282, 284).⁷ Increasingly pulled away from theology and into the antislavery movement, his militancy grew notably in the 1850s and his popular reputation in Boston grew in accord. "I was meant for a philosopher, and the times call for a stump orator," he commented (Weiss 2: 115). Michael Fellman has described "Parker's role reorientation from scholar to popular antislavery

leader” in this decade as a career that was cut off at its zenith, and at the crisis point of the antislavery struggle, by his death (670).

Emerson was a frequent guest at the Music Hall after Parker was forced to leave his pulpit, bringing a religious message in harmony with Parker’s, and sharing his recognition that slavery posed the gravest moral issue of the times. He could not equal Parker as a popular orator and agitator on slavery, but he could, and did, maintain Parker’s insistence that slavery encapsulated the moral and religious challenge of the emerging modern era, one that demanded a new formulation of religion itself. One of the most significant of Emerson’s lectures to Parker’s congregation was “Morals,” first presented on April 26, 1859. It was an occasion, a few months after Parker’s departure, at which his shadow presence would certainly have been felt. Recognizing Parker’s commitment to theological innovation and free expression, and his heroic stance as an antislavery voice, Emerson offered a conception of religion’s translation into pure ethics.

The Music Hall also held another shadowy presence for Emerson’s discourse on “Morals,” the abolitionist crusader John Brown. Emerson would return to the Music Hall the following December to deliver the lecture again at a memorial service after Brown’s execution. Contrary to what one might expect, given their undeserved reputation for dreamy aloofness, Brown’s hold on the Transcendentalists in the late 1850s was very strong. They saw in him a heroically militant enemy of slavery and defender of moral principle, the kind of figure that the times were calling for. Brown spoke in Concord in 1857 where he won many followers, including Emerson and Thoreau, who took him to be a modern day prophet. Parker was one of Brown’s “Secret Six” supporters, along with two others who were active in the Transcendentalist movement, Bronson Alcott and Thomas Wentworth Higginson. As David S. Reynolds has observed, Brown’s “Concord-Boston network” of “supporters affiliated with Transcendentalism” was a crucial source of support, and the influential Emerson’s public defense of him was particularly valuable. “No person advanced this cause more than Emerson,” Reynolds contends (863, 365).⁸

In Brown, Emerson saw an exemplar of the will, empowered in its pursuit of justice, and leading the intellect forward. He saw him as a philosopher through his actions, one who had the courage and skills to take up what increasingly seemed to be a necessary struggle for the good. Brown and Parker were exemplars of the translation of religion into ethics, a process that Emerson believed was part of a necessary evolution of the religious principle in an emerging post-theological era. Emerson cited morality as a first cause, a fundamental ordering principle of the cosmos. “The moral cause of the world lies behind all else in the mind,” Emerson explained. “It

was for good,—it is to good, that all works” (*Later Lectures* 2:133). A concern for “divinity” had now been displaced by a concern for “ethics,” a step that Emerson believed to be consonant with the democratic course of the era. Such concepts as “justice, truth-speaking, good will, and good works” were ideals that “all men agree to honor,” bases of both personal ethics and of a just, egalitarian society (2:131). Such ideals functioned not only as a grounding for decisions and actions, but as a fulfillment in themselves. “Men may well come together to confirm their confidence in goodness. ‘Tis that which all speech aims to say, and all action to evolve. Literature with all its libraries is only apology, interlude, pastime, in the absence of that” (2:132-33).

Emerson had long held the “Moral Sense,” a concept that he had embraced in the preaching of Channing and confirmed in his reading of Scottish common-sense philosophy, as a philosophical foundation. Channing’s “moral imagination” had impressed him deeply in the early 1820s, and was influential in his somewhat agonizing decision to enter the ministry.⁹ Its significance returned emphatically as the national crisis over slavery built. He now found, in himself and others, the moral sense leading the way, as if ethics led to philosophy and not vice versa. As he declared in his first antislavery address of 1844, “The blood is moral: the blood is antislavery: it runs cold in the veins: the stomach rises with disgust, and curses slavery” (*Antislavery Writings* 10). This instinctive, physical response to the violations of slavery suggested that the sources of ethical response might be more fundamental than those of the intellect.

The idea that the slave was fully human and should have a full place in society had particular power in the context of the national debate over slavery in the 1850s. Emerson linked morality directly to democratic principles. “The moral equalizes all,—enriches, empowers all,” he declared. “It is the coin which buys all, and that all feel in their pocket. Under the whip of the driver, the slave shall feel his equality with saints and heroes.” To know that you have the capacity to be a moral agent, and that you are acting in accord with moral principle, whatever your social rank or economic condition, is a powerful and potentially liberating truth. To make his audience realize the slaves’ capacity for moral action, even moral heroism, in both endurance and in rebellion, was thus to humanize them profoundly.

Emerson returned to the slavery issue elsewhere in “Morals,” notably in his direct attack on the moral blindness of Justice Roger Taney’s pronouncement in the Dred Scott decision: “the black man has no rights which the white man is required to respect” (*Later Lectures* 2:140). This “blasphemy,” Emerson asserted, was uttered by “a department of this government, speaking for the people of America.” Such a violation serves as a caution that “we are not safe with our fatal reliance on laws and machinery.” In

an attitude akin to Thoreau's insistence on the primacy of the individual conscience over governmental processes in "Civil Disobedience," Emerson reminds his hearers that right will only be done when "the hero has come to the sticking point and says to himself: I will not be taken alive; I am the government for me" (2:140). The statement carries a strong echo of John Brown's avowal to Thoreau, which Emerson may well have heard also: "It is perfectly well understood that I will not be taken" (Thoreau 400).¹⁰ As Emerson suggests, to acquiesce in a morally questionable legal decision, or in any larger institutional violation of ethical principle, is to be "taken alive," imprisoned and robbed of one's moral freedom, one's capacity to act as an agent for the good. It is to be deprived of, separated from, the vital power that defines the creation itself.

The moral act is thus an act of individual resistance to official or collective power, but it is also, paradoxically, an act that brings one into a more complete connection with others. In resisting wrong, the hero declares: "Once for all, expect no complicity by speech or by silence, by act, or by forbearance to act, from me. But I am for freedom: first my own, and then yours, and everybody's the same, on Kant's principle, 'the intelligent being is its own proper end, and can never become a simple means for the end of another'" (*Later Lectures* 2:140). Emerson's Kantian pronouncement further advances the idea that the integrity of all individuals, including the slave, must be respected. He voices the words of moral resistance dramatically ("I am for freedom") as a model performance of the ethical act. This assertion connects self with other selves, underlining the idea that the private moral act is representative, and potentially collective, in its nature.

Stanley Cavell's description of the Emersonian principle of "aversive thinking," drawn principally from his influential reading of "Self-Reliance," provides important insight into the dynamic of individual resistance and collectivity that Emerson's avowal suggests. For Cavell, aversive thinking is a resistance to the norms and policies of "official culture" (50). It is an ability, not easily achieved or kept, to avert one's patterns of perception, and ultimately one's actions, from those which are expected or required by the institutions of modern society. It is an escape from the pressures of group-think, a resistance to the institutions and the media which propagate cultural norms. Aversive thinking is a withdrawal of assent that helps the individual preserve that which has constituted her particular identity and agency, and to perceive more clearly the course of right action for both self and society. "It is when Emerson thinks of thinking, or conversion, as oppositional, or critical, that he calls it aversion" (36), Cavell writes, a reaction that is closely connected to self-determination and resistance to "society's demand for conformity" (37). Emerson was attempting, Cavell believed, to formulate a

method of thinking that would answer “society’s incessant demands for his consent—his conforming himself—to its doings” (37).

Such resistance is not necessarily a step into isolation, Cavell argues, but a potential mode of connection with others. Averse thinking enables one to find shared ground with others in constructive, honest interactions that Cavell places in the broad category of friendship, suggesting that both moral perfectionism and the cultivation of friendship have an ethical and political dimension.¹¹ Even though resistance requires an act of the individual will in rejecting the claims of society, it also brings us back to “society” in a more meaningful way. “Since aversion is a continual turning away from society, it is thereby a continual turning toward it” (59), if we consider its empowering effect in our capacity to meet others honestly and find points of connection and agreement. Emerson’s resistant hero, the Thoreau-like defier of officialdom that he voices, seems to be engaged in just such a process—asserting an allegiance to “freedom,” but recognizing that such an allegiance, if fully realized, is also a commitment to the liberty and the equality of another: “first my own [freedom], and then yours, and everybody’s the same” (*Later Lectures* 2: 140). It is an affirmation of both resistance and solidarity.

A commitment to freedom takes the individual beyond the limits of the narrow ego, as Emerson’s growing circle of inclusion (“my own...yours...everybody’s”) suggests. The “self” becomes increasingly inclusive, redefining itself as one among equals. Ethical thinking and ethical acts also erase the “self” in a certain sense, translating it not only into a larger human collectivity, but also into all-encompassing principle. “When I think of Reason, of Truth, of Virtue,” Emerson explains, “I cannot conceive them as lodged in your soul, and lodged in my soul, but that you, and I, and all souls, are lodged in that” (2:136-37). Moral action is expansive, bringing us out of ourselves and into a territory that we do not own or possess, but share. His recognition of the inherent collectivity of moral action, a somewhat surprising position for the philosopher of “Self-Reliance,” in part reflects his experiences as an antislavery speaker and advocate in the 1850s, when he overcame his aversion to political organization and collective action and made himself an increasingly public man and politicized figure. “It is so delicious to act with great masses to great aims,” he observed (2:13).

Individuals become “lodged” in “Virtue” also through its capacity to enable them to see, in a more impersonal way, a larger good than they might recognize if calculating self-interest only. There seems to be a process of enlightenment, even of spiritual fulfillment, that ethical action enables, quite beyond the powerful impact of the human bonds generated through a participation in collective action. “That which is best in nature and life, is, that private access to the heart of the Universal,” Emerson states (2:137).

That the ethical was a pathway to the spiritual was a pivotal precept for Emerson, one much in play through the 1840s as he struggled with waning access to the moments of inspired vision that had marked his early work. While he had advocated in *Nature* that vision could generate praxis, that after conceiving a new world one could proceed to build it, he came to feel, as he wrote in "Experience," that "hardest, roughest action is visionary also" (*Collected Works* 3:48). This insight, filtered through the political turmoil of the 1850s, informs his sense that ethics has come to displace divinity as the gauge of the spiritual. "It is the privilege of moral power always to confer insight," he states. "Wisdom has its root in goodness" (*Later Lectures* 2:138).



The fulfillment that Emerson associates with moral action is not self-fulfillment in any ordinary sense. It is a kind of fulfillment despite ourselves, an experience which comes as a kind of compensation for the sure disappointments of ordinary experience. "Everything connected with our personality fails," he declares. "Nature never spares the individual. We are always baulked of a complete success. No prosperity is promised to that. We have our indemnity only in the sure success of that to which we belong. That, that is immortal, and we only through that" (2:142). The private "self" is only secured by surrender or abandonment to an "aboriginal Self" or "Supreme Cause" as Emerson wrote in "Self-Reliance" (*Collected Works* 2:37, 40). There is, however, a quite different tone in this description of the limits of personality. His stressed repeat, "That, that," gives the declaration an urgency, and also an edginess, that suggest high intellectual tension.

Emerson's description of the inevitable failure of the limited self thus can be linked to an earlier passage in which he somewhat dramatically confronts doubt about the efficacy of moral action. His praise of the ethical, his assertion of the close link between wisdom and the good, has left one question unanswered, a question with which he wrestled continuously during the 1840s and 1850s. He poses that question directly: "The world was made for benefit. Why is it not just?" (*Later Lectures* 2: 139). The basis of Emerson's belief that morality enlightens us intellectually, that the good is the source of the true, is that knowledge itself has a moral cause, that "the moral cause of the world lies behind all else in the mind" (2:133). This is a fundamental faith-statement, a grounding precept from which all other premises flow. While this assumption may be basic to Emerson's metaphysics-

ics, it is a quick and fairly obvious step to the question that he poses, as if in skeptical response to himself: "Why is [the world] not just?"

Emerson's grappling with the problem of evil in the present state of things inevitably brought him to the conclusion that the universe was not perfect, but perfecting. The course of history was a process of gradual progressive development, or melioration, in which a better state was perpetually evolving from the present. It was a response that allowed him to maintain an affirmative view of experience while acknowledging injustice and human suffering. The slavery question, in particular, placed a strain on this stance. His response to his internal query about "justice" illustrates this pressure, generating a series of anxious questions and responses, a terse dramatization of an inner dialogue on social injustice. The paragraph in its bristling entirety is worth considering:

The world was made for benefit. Why is it not just? It was made for melioration. Why does it advance in a spiral line? Christianity came to save it. Is the world saved? The progress of civilization inevitably confirms right. Why does tyranny exist? (2:139-40)

While Emerson is famous for loose structures, intervening voices, and unexpected eruptions in his texts, this is without doubt a surprising and complex passage, suggesting Emerson's barely restrained skepticism. Does the questioning voice represent Emerson's own uncertainty? Is he dramatizing his suspicion in order to counter it for his audience? Emerson used similar strategies in his essays with quite dramatic effect, notably in the dialogue on self-trust with "a valued adviser" in "Self-Reliance" (*Collected Works* 2:30), and his encounter with a skeptical "reader" in "Circles" who accuses him of "pyrrhonism" (2:188). The passage in "Morals" also seems to be the performance of a dialogue in which Emerson gives voice to a nagging doubt, parrying new questions with further elaborations of his faith in progress. In this case, however, it is the skeptic who is given the final word in an unanswered, and resonating, question.

After asserting that "the world was made for benefit," Emerson, or perhaps his optimistic persona, faces the most fundamental skeptical question, "Why is it not just?" "You do recognize, don't you, that the world is not just," the skeptic implies, casting doubt on Emerson's theories, and challenging the very accuracy of his perception of things. "How can you speak of the moral cause of things at this historical moment?" the questioner seems to ask. The slave power, after all, had never seemed stronger; the possibility of overcoming it had never seemed so remote. At this point Emerson posits his belief in the law of gradual change, a concept central to his negotiation of the inherent conflict between moral optimism and moral commitment. "It

was made for melioration,” he answers, maintaining that the perfecting of the world is a reality that must be achieved, an ongoing work in progress. Emerson calls on his listeners’ assumptions that history is a narrative of progress, that the present era is an advance over previous ones. The claim of America’s special place and mission, its exceptional status as a vehicle of democracy, was an important national manifestation of this idea. “Why does it advance in a spiral line?” counters the skeptic, observing that the good seems to advance only in an indirect or halting way, circling back in failure even as it attempts to move forward. This question is a version of the first question about justice, and suggests an impatience that we must wait for the success of the good. While we wait, evil and much suffering continues.

Somewhat unexpectedly, especially to a modern reader, Emerson invokes Christianity as a response: “Christianity came to save it.” Emerson was by this point in his career resolutely post-Christian in his outlook. When Bronson Alcott told him in 1853 that his Transcendentalist colleague Frederic Henry Hedge was engaged in an essay on “the importance of a liturgy,” he quipped in his journal that he would “add an Essay on the importance of a rattle in the throat. Afraid of a pope, afraid of a muskmelon” (*Journals* 13:247). Though uncharacteristically dismissive, the remark underlines the distance between the Emerson of the 1850s and the Christian institutions which had shaped him intellectually and professionally. Emerson surely had Parker’s congregation in mind also, understanding that he was speaking to a very different kind of Christian church, one that had begun, with Parker’s leadership, to experiment with the very nature of its own identity and its relationship to Christianity.

In this light, the skeptic’s response to the capabilities of Christianity to save the world can be heard as derisive: “Is the world saved?” In 1859 such a question has heightened meaning in the presumptively Christian United States. Emerson has perhaps offered Christianity as a partial or unsatisfactory answer in order to represent religious faith of a conventional kind as an inadequate response to the nation’s moral crisis. Such a move allows him to point beyond Christianity, to suggest a more encompassing, and perhaps more certain answer to his inner skeptic: “the progress of civilization inevitably confirms right.”

In removing Christianity from the debate and replacing it with civilization, Emerson enunciates a position toward which he had been moving since his entry into the slavery debate. In his 1844 address on West Indies emancipation, he had maintained that “the First of August,” the date in 1834 that Great Britain had brought an end to slavery, “marks the entrance of a new element into modern politics, namely, the civilization of the negro.”

Such a step added “a man...to the human family” and had produced “the annihilation of the old indecent nonsense about the nature of the negro” (*Antislavery Writings* 29). Emerson did not couch this important achievement in Christian, or even specifically religious terms, although he did make it clear that emancipation was a great moral and intellectual step, of enormous value not only to the slaves in the West Indies, but to all black people, and to the entire world. “The civility of the world has reached that pitch, that their more moral genius is becoming indispensable, and the quality of the race is to be honored for itself” (31). Emerson recognized the historical progress of abolitionism as part of a larger historical sweep of egalitarian justice.

While he associated Christianity with this ameliorative process, he saw it as one of many historical agents, and as his dialogue in “Morals” suggests, one which had been surpassed now by secular forces, especially worldwide political movements of democratic reform. In “Worship” (1860) Emerson declared that “we live in a transition period, when the old faiths which comforted nations, and not only so, but made nations seem to have spent their force” (*Collected Works* 6:110). It was not a moment at which one could look to the revival of these religions as a solution to the era’s loss of direction. As he made clear, the day for the renewal of creeds in the traditional sense was past. “We say, the old forms of religion decay, and that a skepticism devastates the community. I do not think it can be cured or stayed by any modification of theologic creeds, much less by theologic discipline. The cure for false theology is motherwit. Forget your books and traditions, and obey your moral perceptions at this hour” (6:114). Even the future church, he believed, would have a distinctly secular character. “There will be a new church founded on moral science,” he wrote, which will have “heaven and earth for its beams and rafters; science for symbol and illustration” and will “gather beauty, music, picture, poetry” (6:128). The moment of historical transition that Emerson sensed can be thought of as the end of a religious era in human history, and the beginning of a new era guided by a more deeply refined morality. “Civilization” was the vehicle of this new era.

The bias and limitations of Emerson’s valorization of “civilization” are clear enough to a modern reader. Its connection with Christianity, however transitory he felt that to be, nevertheless established white European cultural traditions as a kind of vanguard for human achievement. It should, however, be understood that Emerson is invoking in civilization an order of society that is moving toward a more just, inclusive, and egalitarian condition. It is in this sense an idealized conception of civilization, one which bears utopian hopes. His affirmation of progress through the advance of civilization did not blind him to the imperfections of the civilization in which he found him-

self, and he did not hide his dissatisfaction with the present order of things from his listeners. It is therefore significant, and somewhat puzzling, that in “Morals” Emerson seems to undercut his faith in civilization by ceding the last word to the skeptic, who ends her interrogation of Emerson with a question that can be heard as either withering mockery, or plaintive despair: “Why does tyranny exist?” Emerson offers no answer to the question.

The question rings with a kind of authority in the text, leaving his audience without the comfort of an optimistic faith in progress. Such a question was calculated rhetorically, perhaps, for just this reason. Concluding the dialogue with “tyranny” rather than “melioration” hints at the present national crisis, since Southern “slave power” was often characterized as tyrannical in New England antislavery circles. In this sense the question serves as a call to moral attention, intended to waken a righteous anger and militancy in his audience, which could then be translated into more effective resistance to slavery’s continuing existence. But the question also signals a concession to doubt, a full consideration of the possibility that history may have a tragic end, or that its course is open, undetermined, and may therefore depend on the moral decisions and moral actions of those now living. This piercing question dramatically emphasizes both the intellectual complications and high emotional pressures of this public period of Emerson’s career, and this moment of political trial in the life of the nation.



In the months leading to the outbreak of war, Emerson returned to his concept of melioration, expounding it more forcefully, despite his apparent moments of doubt, as the best and only answer to questions such as “Is the world saved?” and “Why does tyranny exist?” A belief in an ongoing process of social improvement, what he had come to think of as the gradual advance of civilization, allowed him to maintain a steady view of the reality of social injustice and of oppressive practices such as slavery, without surrendering his faith in the “moral cause of the world.” It was also a concept that cohered with his philosophy of transition or flux, a recognition that both human experience and the natural world were in constant metamorphosis, a network of energy and ever-renewing vitality. Emerson found in current evolutionary theory what Fineth calls a “seemingly universal melioration—a process of correction and improvement in natural forms that went forward in all places and at all times” (737), and drew from this interpretation “a method for conceiving of human progress in terms that bridged the scientific and the spiritual” (738). Human religion and human civilization, he believed, were

further manifestations of a progressive evolutionary cosmos. "Melioration is the law" Emerson told Parker's congregation in "Moral Sense," a March 1860 lecture closely related to "Morals" (*Later Lectures* 2:147). The following November he returned to lecture on "Reform," using his belief in the constant change and renewal of the natural world to frame the question of social reform.

Social reform begins, Emerson argues, when citizens are freed from the mistaken beliefs and practices of society, recognizing that these are not necessary or immutable, and that there are other ways of proceeding, an imaginable better state of things for which to strive. When "a man sees that the evil institution in which he has always lived has no root in the world," that evil "begins to die" and eventually "must end" (2:153). A process of change and renewal is a law of both natural processes and social change. "Nature is rich, but to a defender of the establishment, to a fixture, to one who has halted and sat down, she gives nothing" (2:154). True reformers are able to revitalize the networks of relations and codes of conduct that constitute society and government. They conceive of the world in terms of greater possibilities, looking through what is toward what might be. "But through the eyes of the theorist, stares at me a formidable, gigantic spirit." Such spirits are the agents of melioration, overturning the present order when it has hardened into place. "The inevitableness of the new spirit is the grand fact" (2:155).

Reform movements are the indicators of a society's vitality. To endorse reforms, however, does not entail an endorsement of reformers themselves as individuals. While Emerson found collective action increasingly right and necessary, he reserved the act of moral judgment for the individual. "Abolitionists are not better men for their zeal," he remarked, adding pointedly, "I flee from bitter, sterile people to the unpretentious whom they disparage" (2:156). It is the cause, the vision of the better, that gives the reformer authority. A reformer may be an "egotist" or a "tyrant," Emerson admits, but "what of that? What have you to do with his nonsense? only with his sense. He is not to have any ray of light, any pulse of goodness, that I do not make my own" (2:156).

The egotistic limitations of reformers notwithstanding, Emerson saw hope in the experimental churning of American society at mid-century, noting that "many of [the reforms], like those touching trade, and property, and political law, put the reformer in a war-like attitude, and require courage of a high degree." His inclination, except in the case of slavery, was to theorize more broadly than to advocate for specific causes, so it is instructive to take

note of the range of specific reform efforts that he mentions in this instance. They include

questions of ecclesiastical and of civil right, of Man's Rights, and Woman's Rights, of the consent to wrongs, of the majority and recognising the state by voting; the tenet of non-resistance and universal peace; the resistance to slavery; the political questions of tariff and trade and of banking; of the right of the people to instruct their representative; of the treatment of Indians, of Boundary Wars, of the Congress of Nations. (2:156)

These political issues are, he notes, "pregnant with ethical conclusions" (2:156), epitomizing the fact that in modern culture the ethical and the political have become inseparable.

Arguing that "the part of man is to advance," he urges an openness to the potential truths of a range of dissenting religious, behavioral, and political positions, including Mormonism, Spiritualism, homeopathy, "the relation of labor to capital as presented in Owen and Fourier," and the project of universal education, the universal free and secret suffrage" (2:156-57). Emerson was neither a Spiritualist nor a Fourierist, but his stance is to advocate "for largest liberty" (2:157), to engage in open-minded consideration of the manifestations of dissent and the movements of change in all aspects of society. One should "stand always for the Better, not for himself, his property, his grandmother's spoons, his corner lot, and shop-till" (2:157). Openness to the process of constant change enacts in the social realm the law of nature. "Nature's endurance is by perpetual creation," he observes. "Incessant flux, as of a river, as of fire, as of time, marks all her works" (2:157-58). The antislavery crusade thus epitomized a series of reforms that shared a concern with egalitarianism and inclusiveness. For Emerson, the slavery issue was the preeminent of these causes, both in terms of its gripping emotional power and its direct challenge to fundamental democratic principle. The question of how to oppose slavery challenged Emerson morally, forced him to reconsider the nature of his vocation as a "scholar," made him swallow his distaste for prolonged public controversy, and drove him into public advocacy. But it was not a question disconnected from other concerns about justice and equality in American culture.



Emerson's connection of ethical power with progressive social change and the perpetual currents of nature's transition and renewal were the groundwork for his pronouncement of a post-theological and post-ecclesiastical form of reverence and worship, a "Natural Religion" which he expounded

at the Music Hall on February 3, 1861. Emerson's sense that Christianity had been superseded by "civilization," and that its theological claims had been displaced by a deeper recognition of the centrality of ethics, was a signal that humanity was entering an era beyond mythology, in which the core principles of all the world's religions would coalesce. He represented religion as a global phenomenon, expressed mythologically in quite different forms through human history. "We know that the world was made at one cast," he begins. "We find analogy, unity, throughout Nature. What we find in ourselves, we recognize all around us" (2:178). The various forms of religion and mythology across human history and geography were codes which could yield an ultimately familiar account of human experience. History, and its religions, thus gave modern individuals versions of themselves, confirming through various means a set of perceptions and principles that were embedded in the symbology and laws of the natural world. "Whatever man sees, he has a key to in his mind. And, hence, science. Hence, and better, is he prepared to understand the history of Men. And of Religion" (2:178). He found the same analogous unity in "the creeds of civil nations" which expressed "some familiar dogma now held, or once held, by himself or his countrymen" (2:178).

Taking note of the increasing availability of translations of ancient texts, Emerson again characterized his historical moment as one of profound change with regard to religious understanding. Every nation is "yielding up its sacred books or traditions to our eyes: And we find in our mythology a key to theirs, and in our inspirations a key to other inspirations" (2:178). His recognition of an ongoing process of modernization and secularization, closely connected with the breakthroughs in modern science, suggests how little bound he was to Christian theology and ecclesiastics, and how distant such concepts as a personal deity or a conventional doctrine of immortality were from his principal concerns. Emerson had himself been living a nearly constant life of religious change. His father had been among the founders of the Boston Unitarian movement, and his Aunt Mary Moody Emerson pressed upon him from an early age an even deeper legacy of generations of Puritan piety.¹² Although he retained his respect for her powerful intellect and spiritual perception, he could not be reconciled to tradition, especially when it presented itself to his imagination as the dreary enchainment of Calvinist dogma. To see past forms of religious belief as a necessary order seemed to endanger the future, especially at a moment when clear moral recognition and vital new thinking were required. We must dismiss, he argued, the claims of tradition. "It is claimed that the terrors of the old religious system were wholesome checks on the conduct of men," he observes. "But their lives were darkened by it, their minds obscured, their moral sense injured"

(*Later Lectures* 2:181). Rather than clarifying and reinforcing the capacity for moral discernment, the religion of the previous generations had injured it. Religion had, paradoxically, become an obstruction to itself.

“Religion degenerates into forms,” Emerson warned (2:182). But to be genuine, to be useful, it had to be newly invented, or perpetually recovered in a new mode of expression. This transition is already in process, he argued, and cannot be reversed. “‘Tis safe to say, that no one holds the Christian traditions as they were familiarly held in the last generation. We rest on the moral Nature, as the whole world shortly must” (2:183). The replacement of these older patterns of belief in New England was part of a larger global historical narrative, a successive shedding of the immoral and the unjust. “The ancient and the modern religions were immoral,—full of selfishness: God belonged only to the gentes, and in no wise to the plebs.” The modern church, he feels, citing “the Catholic and the English Episcopal Church” and “the fathers of New England” is still “tainted with this barbarism” (2:183). Religious progress is a movement toward “the plebs,” the achievement of a greater inclusiveness and deeper respect for the individual. “The progress of religion is steadily to its identity with morals” (2:183).

Religion was thus advancing through the relinquishment of mythology and of supernatural claims, and thereby engendering a “Science of Ethics” (2:182), the newly emerging stage of human spirituality. Each of the world’s religions has achieved “summits” of insight, each of which holds an “identity...with every other inspiration” (2:185). From these humanity has profited, but the supernatural claims that accompanied these insights have become obstructions to understanding. “Buddha, Confucius, Zoroaster, Mahomet, Edda: They all claim miracles. But we do not therefore accept them. We measure them by their civilizing power. Thus, Christianity gains and thrives against the sensual interests of men. We hold it therefore in honor. So does Buddhism, so Stoicism, and every high enthusiasm” (2:183-84). Religion must finally prove itself in the realm of morals, not of supernatural claims.

The process of gradual change that Emerson describes does have, however, one important limitation. Its time frame is vast, and it makes no guarantees to individuals, or to nations or races, or even to human eras. “Nature and moral laws work in cosmical and secular periods: they can well wait and work slowly. Races are insignificant, ages are a span, to these long eternal powers. They can well afford to drop a race and an age out of the flowing eternity” (1:186). Emerson’s use of the phrase “races are insignificant” was calculated to have a shocking impact on his 1861 audience, as it does on readers of today. The statement is itself consistent with Emerson’s view that distinct human “races” were not permanent fixtures of history,

but amenable to change and amalgamation through racial intermixing. But the larger significance of the statement is to establish the idea that melioration is not a law that can be counted on to deliver particular results at a particular historical moment. We are promised success, but a success that cannot be measured in our own terms. "Though we fold our hands, these laws will execute themselves," he maintains, but "we can ill afford to wait such distant avengers" (2:186).

Emerson's image of the folding of the hands raises, quite intentionally, the problematic question of the celerity of justice, an issue that, as we have seen, he faced in his dialogue with the impatient skeptic in "Morals." He responds with an important distinction, attempting to preserve both a faith in the victory of the good, and the imperative to act for that victory. As humans we must acknowledge the significance of time measured in human terms, in generations. "We are not afraid that justice will not be done," he says, "but that we shall not live to see it" (2:186). History may be tragic in its parts, but these partial tragedies are bounded by the horizons of a particular generation. The possibility of the delay of an ultimate justice reminds each individual of her necessary part in bringing justice to be. Moreover, he maintains, the possibility of belonging to, and advancing, a cause larger than ourselves or our era is the only form of immortality that natural religion can provide. "The laws are of eternity, but we are short-lived. Our compensation is our own eternity. By our bodies we belong to the nineteenth century, but by our sentiment and sympathy, we also take hold on eternity" (2:186). While he does not claim here that slavery will be ended in his generation, he does avow that fighting for its end is in itself a salvific act.

As the war continued Emerson became a prominent advocate for emancipation, insisting that the nation must make this the explicit goal of the war. As Richard F. Teichgraeber III has shown in his reassessment of the later public phase of Emerson's career, "it was in the second half of the 1860s that Emerson achieved the stature of a national presence" (519). He used his resources as a well-known author and lecturer to place the war in the larger context of an advancing global egalitarianism, in which the freeing of the slave represented a liberation of civilization itself from the chains of barbarism. "Emancipation is the demand of civilization," he argued in "American Civilization," an 1862 essay published in the influential *Atlantic Monthly*. "That is a principle; everything else is an intrigue" (509). In a subsequent *Atlantic* article later that year, he welcomed President Lincoln's decision to embrace emancipation: "A day which most of us dared not hope to see, an event worth the dreadful war, worth its cost and uncertainties, seems now to be close before us" (*Works* 11:319). He understood emancipation as an act

that would transform the entire nation and its war effort, giving public will and public policy the grounding of an unquestioned moral cause. “The force of the act [emancipation] is that it commits the country to this justice,—that it compels the innumerable officers, civil, military, naval, of the Republic to range themselves on the line of this equity” (*Works* 11:319).¹³

Emerson linked the fundamental demand for freedom and justice that emancipation represented to other goals of progressive reform. He urged the elevation of labor in “American Civilization,” using the slave-holding Confederacy to exemplify the trampling of labor and of human rights in barbarous nations. “For Emerson,” Len Gougeon has argued, “emancipation was just the first step in the reinvention of American democracy” (167). In other addresses during and just after the war, such as “Perpetual Forces” (1862), “Fortune of the Republic” (1863), and “Progress of Culture” (1867), now little known among either literary scholars or historians of the period, Emerson set forth an ethical rationale and a public agenda that helped to shape the relatively brief period of progressive egalitarian achievement in the decade after the war.¹⁴ Unwavering in his belief that in his generation’s moment of historical transition, a “natural religion,” a religion of pure ethics, had emerged, he saw the antislavery struggle as part of a global advance of a civilization based on the principles of egalitarian democracy.

Oregon State University

NOTES

1. For discussions of Emerson’s early development, see Robinson, *Apostle of Culture*; Mott; and Richardson.

2. Emerson’s later work is enjoying a revival of interest (or perhaps a first discovery) in recent scholarship. For discussions of his later career, see Robinson, *Emerson and the Conduct of Life*; Gougeon, *Virtue’s Hero*; Richardson, 411-573; Walls, *Emerson’s Life in Science*; and Buell, 7-58.

3. For information on Emerson’s London visit of 1848, see Walls, “‘If Body Can Sing’” and Robinson, “Experience, Instinct and Emerson’s Philosophical Reorientation.”

4. Finseth’s essay is a signal contribution to our understanding of Emerson’s developing conceptions of both evolutionary theory and racial issues. See also Cadava for a helpful discussion of Emerson’s views of race in connection with concepts of natural law. For an

earlier and still useful discussion of Emerson's views of race, see Nicoloff.

5. For the development of Emerson's antislavery stance, see Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero*; Col-lison; Gougeon, "Fortune of the Republic;" Gougeon, "Emerson's Abolition Conversion;" and Buell, 242-87. For Emerson's impact on the antislavery movement, see Von Frank.

6. On Parker and his church, see Grodzins, "Theodore Parker and the 28th Congre-gational Society."

7. For a discussion of Parker's concept of absolute religion, see Grodzins, *American Heretic*, 137, 147-48.

8. The extent to which Emerson and Thoreau were cognizant of the extent of Brown's violent past is an open question. Reynolds has recently argued that they supported Brown in the probable knowledge of his past, including the Pottawatomie massacre: "It is often maintained that the Transcendentalists would not have supported John Brown had they suspected his role in the Pottawatomie murders. The evidence suggests, however, that they knew of it and yet embraced him anyway" (221-22). See Bush for a reading of Emerson and Brown in the context of American political religion.

9. Channing's Harvard Dudleian Lecture of 1821, *A Discourse on the Evidences of Revealed Religion*, was of particular importance to Emerson in his early development. See *JMN* 2:238, and Robinson, *Apostle of Culture*, 36-38. On the roots of Emerson's moral sense doctrine, see Richardson, 29-32.

10. Thoreau reports the comment in "A Plea for Captain John Brown." See also Reyn-olds, 223-24.

11. Cavell's discussion of the role of friendship in Emersonian "perfectionism" has opened an important recent consideration of the issue. For an illuminating recent discussion of the ethical dimensions of Emerson's conception of friendship, see Lysaker, 180-85. See also the forthcoming essay collection, *Figures of Friendship: Emerson and Thoreau*, ed. William Rossi and John Lysaker (Indiana UP).

12. For information on Emerson and Mary Moody Emerson, see Cole.

13. For further discussion of Emerson's advocacy of emancipation during the Civil War, see Gougeon, "Fortune of the Republic" and Robinson, "Emerson's 'American Civiliza-tion.'"

14. On Emerson's advocacy for progressive causes in the 1860s, see in particular Teich-graber; Gougeon, "Emerson and the Reinvention of Democracy;" and Robinson, "Emerson, American Democracy, and 'Progress of Culture.'"

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