

Representative Men, Slave Revolt, and Emerson's "Conversion" to Abolitionism

Amy E. Earhart

The year 1844, for Ralph Waldo Emerson, brought rapidly changing social, political, and historical conditions, all of which contributed to his "An . . . Address . . . on the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies," a departure from his previous public thoughts on abolition. In the summer of 1844, Emerson rethought, refined, and redefined his position on the crucial national issues of slavery and abolition. Len Gougeon, in his book *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery and Reform*, suggests that Emerson, during that summer, became an active abolitionist who, in "An . . . Address . . . on the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies," given in Concord on August 1, 1844, "made the transition from antislavery to abolition" (85). Though Gougeon contributes much of value to the study of Emerson and antislavery, he tends to overstate Emerson's position, especially by portraying Emerson as resolving with his 1844 address all reservations regarding participation in active reform. Indeed, "An . . . Address . . . on the Emancipation of the Negroes" is an important public avowal of the abolitionist movement, which makes it necessary to consider why Emerson chooses for the first time to present an oration which shifts the emphasis from the individual toward a group of reformers. However, the address is not a signal of his full acceptance of active reform. As I will show, the address developed from Emerson's reconsideration of reform, which was linked to his recent evaluations of the "representative man" and to complicated contemporary historical developments, including threatened slave insurrection abroad and fears of Britain's ties to antislavery.

On March 3, 1844, just five months before "An . . . Address . . . on the Emancipation of the Negroes," Emerson gave his "New England Reformers" at Amory Hall in Boston during a lecture series on a variety of reforms. Emerson's emphasis in the lecture on the representative man, a topic he continues to develop in his lecture series in Europe during 1847-

48 and fully articulates in *Representative Men* (1850), hints that the "New England Reformers" lecture is in some ways closely related to his "An . . . Address . . . on the Emancipation of the Negroes," though the speech does follow his early thoughts on reform and reform movements and focuses on the improbability of their success. Indeed, a thorough understanding of the representative man helps to explain Emerson's decision to give a pro-abolition speech. Linck C. Johnson, in "Reforming the Reformers: Emerson, Thoreau, and the Sunday Lectures at Amory Hall, Boston," raises interesting questions about the possible effects of Emerson's March 1844 speaking engagement, during which he lectured on the "New England Reformers." Included in the program was not only Thoreau (March 10), whom Johnson speculates gained a place on the program due to Emerson's influence, but also abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison (February 4, 11, April 21), who spoke on the church and religion and the rights of women, John Pierpont (March 31), who spoke on slavery, and Wendell Phillips (March 31), who discussed the annexation of Texas, an issue crucial to abolitionists during the early 1840s (239, 241). Johnson argues that the address was Emerson's "firmest reply to the communitarians" and proposed "the same lessons he had earlier offered to those in the larger society, the lessons of work and of obedience to the very soul of the self, the individual's only secure and reliable guide" (254, 264).

Emerson separates reformers into those who follow the "dictate of a man's genius and constitution" and those who "adopted from another" the hypocritical reformers who refuse to reform the whole and only concentrate on the part, never effectively implementing change ("New England" 362-63). Individualism, not association, is stressed, as Emerson asserts: "The union is only perfect, when all the uniters are isolated" ("New England" 369). He reiterates the necessity of a union of "actual individualism," though he allows for a representative man to move the icy hearts of the unconverted: "In the circle of the rankest Tories that could be collected in England, Old or New, let a powerful and stimulating intellect, a man of great heart and mind, act on them." Only the representative man later elaborated by Emerson will be able to convince the unconvinced and, "very quickly these frozen conservators will yield to the friendly influence, these hopeless will begin to hope, these haters will begin to love, these immovable statues will begin to spin and revolve" ("New England" 372). In addition, Emerson returns to his belief in the power of the ballot. He reports of a man who stated: "I am satisfied that the largest part of these men, on either side, mean to vote right." Emerson responds that men only can vote right if they examine the truth ("New England" 375). The circularity of Emerson's theory indicates that a

representative man could stir the populace to find the truth, and the populace would, in return, "vote right," negating the necessity for reform.

During preparation of the "New England Reformers" speech, Emerson wrote to Margaret Fuller that "I do not think to do much that is new in my Sunday's Lecture." As usual, Emerson related, he was having difficulty divining an ethical position which had a broad function: "When I write I perversely turn my back on ethics, & write on Nature, Poets, Life,—I can write on anything *but* ethics, with my froward pen" (*Letters* 3: 242-43). While it is possible that Emerson refers to other work he was planning for his *Second Series* volume of essays, it is more likely that he was once more reevaluating his stance on "ethics," a move which would demand a possible public acceptance of abolition. The nagging problem of his position on unethical national and community behaviors, which remained unsolved by his philosophy of individual reform, was one he pondered throughout his career. In his journal Emerson writes that "the remedying [of evils] is not a work for society, but for me to do," though he mentions that he does "not know how to attack it [the system] directly, & am assured that the directest attack which I can make on it, is to lose no time in fumbling & striking about in all directions, but to mind the work that is mine, and accept the facilities & openings which my constitution affords me" (*Journals* 9: 85). He reiterates the importance of the individual, though he recognizes that the various positions which are offered to him may be viable, even, perhaps, the position of public reformer.

During the spring and summer of 1844, Emerson continues to waver in his consideration of reform and begins to position himself as a poet-scholar, a representative man of the age. It is important to stress that Emerson is beginning to imagine himself as a representative man, not an abolition hero, as Gougeon likens him. As a representative man Emerson is able to consider himself an individual showing the "capacity" of all men (Williams xxiii). By fashioning himself as such a representative man he connects his desire to "agitate" with a fatalistic sense of being chosen. And it is important to remember that the representative man is one who is never whole but always fragmentary. As Emerson states in "Prospects," heroes "are hints and segments, no more," though of all the types of men—the reformer, the conservative, the transcendentalist, and the poet—the poet is the most complete and has the most to offer others (qtd. in Williams xxv). Williams says, "Each of the great men falls short of the Universal Man, the figure that touches the heavens with his head and treads the floor of the Pit, even though our perceptions of great men give us for a time this illusion. Representative men are not Universal Man, and

they are shown to fail in accord with Emerson's new contrast between the sky of Law and the pismire of performance" (xxxiv). In his conception of representative man, Emerson allows for partial performance; therefore, his eventual retreat from active reform is not to be viewed as defeat but as fully in compliance with his impressions of representative men.

By December 1844 Emerson was beginning research in earnest for a lecture on Napoleon that would later be incorporated into the *Representative Men* volume (Williams xxi). Emerson's decision to turn to Napoleon as a lecture subject is not surprising, considering his thoughts on the representative man in "The New England Reformer." Emerson's "conversion" was more tortured, tentative, and impermanent than Gougeon allows precisely because Emerson's "conversion" was not to the abolition cause, but to a new understanding of the representative man. The abolition movement was merely Emerson's site of communication and connection, rather than the *form* of change itself. In fact, not only was Emerson refining his thoughts on the representative man in the "New England Reformers," but "An . . . Address . . . on the Emancipation of the Negroes" became in many ways a self-test of Emerson as a representative man. Contained within Emerson's reevaluation of the power of the representative man lies the forecast for his unlikely alignment with abolitionists in his August 1 address. There he would assume the role he describes.

The representative man that is mentioned in the "New England Reformers" is enacted in the address where Emerson begins to think of himself as the "powerful and stimulating intellect, a man of great heart and mind," a poet ("New England" 372). Justification of a moving, emotionally charged, activist speech is possible for Emerson for he now considers himself a representative man who is fatalistically compelled to give such a sermon to move the hearts of individuals to action. The power of moving an audience, as Emerson's 1844 journal reveals, became increasingly attractive during the preparation of the address. He proclaims, "When I address a large assembly, as last Wednesday, I am always apprised what an opportunity is there: not for reading to them as I do, lively miscellanies, but for painting in fire my thought, & being agitated to agitate" (*Journals* 9: 70).¹ Emerson recognizes and is tempted by the great power of moving an audience to excitement, though he recognizes the difficulties that reaching his audience entails; "One must dedicate himself to it and think with his audience in his mind, so as to keep the perspective & symmetry of the oration, and enter into all the easily forgotten secrets of a great nocturnal assembly & their relation to the speaker." The rewards, believes Emerson, would be great: "But it would be fine music & in the present well rewarded; that is, he should

have his audience at his devotion and all other fames would hush before his." Though he thinks that moving an audience "is one of many things which I should like to do," he is not thoroughly convinced that such agitation, which "requires a seven years' wooing," is necessarily desirable (*Journals* 9: 70-71). He also repeats this same theme in the journal of 1844, noting, "I went to the public assembly, put myself in the conditions, & instantly feel this *new* craving,—I hear the voice, I see the beckoning of this Ghost" (emphasis mine, *Journals* 9: 71).

Emerson's new-found desire to arouse an audience sheds light on why, for the first time in "An . . . Address . . . on the Emancipation of the Negroes," he supports reform movements; the speech satisfies his new desire to hold the audience in his power. When he notes, in his address, that abolition "is said to have the property of making dull men eloquent," Emerson surely has his own experience in mind (7). The address, then, allows Emerson to taste the power of rousing an audience, a successful venture considering the abolitionists' positive reaction. However, his conception of the representative man, a man created by the age, not by desire for power or prestige, allows him to picture himself as acting against his own will. In fact, the conception of the representative man as both reasoned and inspiring is probably the main reason why Emerson decided to attempt a moving speech. He believed that the representative man "must draw from the infinite Reason, on one side; and he must penetrate into the heart and sense of the crowd, on the other. From one, he must draw his strength; to the other, he must owe his aim. The one yokes him to the real; the other, to the apparent. At one pole is Reason; at the other, Common Sense" (qtd. in Williams xxiii-xxiv). The balance the representative man strikes between reason and connection allows Emerson briefly to position himself with abolitionists and then to withdraw his support of active reform. Emerson's conception of Jesus as an ideal representative man, who connects with God, the highest, and also with the "fishers & women," the lowest, influences his decision to present "An . . . Address . . . on the Emancipation of the Negroes" (*Journals* 5: 249).² The ability to move between the lofty and the low is particularly applicable to Emerson's decision to come out in support of abolition. The abolitionist throngs he lectures were, characteristically, believed to be women and men gathered from both the highest and lowest echelons of society. In some ways abolition is the perfect reform movement for Emerson, as a representative man, to speak to, since it allows him, much like Jesus, to send a message across various classes, to both men and women.

For Emerson the challenge is to reconcile his private quest for spiritual perfection with a public demand for social change, the representative

man in the context of public and private spheres. Emerson remains concerned with the private individual and his (or infrequently her) position, hence his support of the individual reformer's ability to solve larger problems and his strong belief in the individual vote's power to change a corrupt society. On the other hand, Emerson is also concerned with his public position, both in reference to the larger society and to the group which centers in Concord during the spring and summer of 1844. The merger of these two, private and public, or, the individual reformer and the association reformer, could, according to Emerson, both reside in one person: "Life is made up of the interlude & interlabor of these two amicable worlds. We are amphibious & weaponed to live in both. We have two sets of faculties, the particular & the catholic, like a boat furnished with wheels for land & water travel." He continues, "It is never strange, an unfit marriage, since man is the child of this most impossible marriage, this of the two worlds" (*Journals* 9: 105). Emerson ties together both the public "call of conversion," the temptation to feel the power of "converting" a group, and the private man, the individual's power to change himself.

As Larry J. Reynolds has pointed out, "At the heart of Emerson's idealism is the call for spiritual regeneration, for new men, not new social orders" (42). It is Emerson's desire to make new men, rather than enact the superficial changes of law or culture, that leads to his public acceptance and then his subsequent wavering on active reform and, specifically, abolition. The paradox of Emerson's decision to give "An . . . Address . . . on the Emancipation of the Negroes" is that Emerson saw the potential of using the abolitionist platform to create grand changes in the individuals in the audience. Abolition's focus on the structure of society is not helpful because it will only change laws; Emerson's emphasis on the individual, on the other hand, will create real change.

Emerson remains aligned with the concept of individual power, rather than group action. He comments in his journal: "Does not he do more to abolish Slavery who works all day steadily in his garden, than he who goes to the abolition meeting & makes a speech? The antislavery agency like so many of our employments is a suicidal business. Whilst I talk, some poor farmer drudges & slaves for me" (*Journals* 9: 126). He continues his argument by equating true abolitionists with those who effectively boycott slave-produced goods themselves, noting, "Alas! alas! my brothers, there is never an abolitionist in New England" (*Journals* 9: 128). Again, Emerson believes that speeches, the address included, do little to help the overthrow of slavery unless they move the individual to take individuated and personal action.

As Emerson was rethinking his relationship to the representative man, he was reiterating the importance of a multiplicity of viewpoints. He writes in his journal: "If we were not of all opinions; if we did not in any moment shift the platform on which we stand, & look & speak from another, if there could be any regulation, any one hour rule, that a man should never leave his point of view oftener than once in 15 minutes, or never without sound of trumpet! I am always insincere, as always knowing there are other moods" (*Journals* 9: 66). Emerson's reversal on abolition in "An . . . Address . . . on the Emancipation of the Negroes" becomes less surprising when considered in this context; a shifting viewpoint becomes a means to knowledge. The critic of Emerson's antislavery position must be aware of his impermanent views. Unfortunately, the overemphasis placed upon Emerson's public statements by some critics tends to devalue such contradictions made in Emerson's private musings. It is necessary to recognize the public statements of Emerson, including his "An . . . Address . . . on the Emancipation of the Negroes," as exploratory thoughts rather than personal resolve.

As Emerson was rethinking and refining his conception of the representative man, revolutionary political events challenged his thinking and played a role in his decision to cast himself among the abolitionist throng. Emerson was reading both Thomas Clarkson's *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament* (1808, a new edition 1838) and *Emancipation in the West Indies: A Six Month's Tour in Antigua, Barbadoes, and Jamaica, in the Year 1837* by James A. Thome and J. Horace Kimball (1838), in preparation for his address. Gougeon maintains that, "Such vivid and gruesome accounts brought home to the gentle Emerson, for the first time, the understanding that the suffering of slavery was a hard and horrible fact, not an abstraction. The effect on him was clear and immediate" (76). It is hardly likely that this is the first time that Emerson had been exposed to accounts of slavery, but it was the first time that Emerson reacted to slave revolt.³ *Emancipation in The West Indies* focuses on Antigua's security after emancipation and is full of notations regarding slave insurrections. There are many personal accounts such as that of Mr. Favey, who states, "One of the blessings of emancipation has been, that it has banished the fear of insurrections. . . ." Another testimony, by Dr. Daniell, notes, "The same gentleman informed us that during slavery, he used frequently to lie sleepless on his bed, thinking about his dangerous situation—a lone white person far away from help, and surrounded by hundreds of savage slaves; and he had spent hours thus, in devising plans of self-defense in case the house should be attacked by the negroes." With emancipation,

"Mr. A sleeps in peace and safety . . ." (qtd. in Thome and Kimball 38). The text emphasizes that after emancipation all are safer.

Indeed, the fear of insurrection troubled white Americans, Emerson included; critics such as Eric Lott and Eric Sundquist have shown that the fear of slave revolts was key to the literary landscape of antebellum America. Lott contends that slavery, during the 1840s, was perceived as dangerous, that "It threatened to spark the sort of 'European' conflict on American soil" (203). And Eric Sundquist's careful study of slave revolts in America, the Prosser, Vessey, and Turner revolts, as well as abroad, revolts in Haiti which connect with Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno," indicates slave revolts invaded the literary imagination. Emerson's work would also have been affected by such a climate. In fact, he writes, in an 1837 journal entry, that "The horrors of the middle passage are the wens & ulcers that admonish us that a violation of nature has preceded. I should not—the nations would not know of the extremity of the wrong but for the terrors of the retribution" (*Journals* 5: 382). It is retribution, not unethical behavior, that Emerson identifies with the slave trade. I would argue that this sentiment could be extended to the general institution of slavery, with the slave revolts the "terrors of retribution" which haunt Emerson's brief alignment with abolition.

In addition to his access to accounts of revolution, 1844 brought a variety of insurrections which must have reinforced the concerns of revolt suggested in Emerson's readings. *The National Anti-Slavery Standard*, during the spring and summer of 1844, reported "problems" in Cuba and Haiti. In Haiti, a bloody uprising against the standing government occurred. Armed Haitians, black and mulatto, attacked whites in an attempt to drive them from the island. In Cuba, a plotted uprising among the slaves was discovered. On the heels of an insurrection on November 5, 1843, that left six whites, men, women, and children dead, any suspected plot proved terrifying to white islanders (Paquette 210). Heavy tolls on human life were felt in the aftermath of the potential insurrection in Cuba. Whites recognized that "The white population of our island have most narrowly escaped the fate of those of St. Domingo, and even now very little security is felt by the greater portion, from the impossibility of knowing how far the machinations of the mulattoes and negroes have been counteracted." The May 30 *Standard* reports that "upwards of 3000" slaves were killed for supposed implication in the plot, "and that they [the Cuban government] were actually *strangling* twenty-five daily, by the public executioner at Mantanzas! There were upwards of 3000 confined in the prisons at Havana" ("Negro" 205).

Conspiracy theories abounded in the national consciousness, and the potential revolt played on white fears, leaving whites to believe that

holding a people enslaved might not be worth the risks incurred. The material Emerson was reading that summer reinforced the same message—every white person slept more securely after emancipation than before. When Emerson observes in his "An Address . . . on . . . the Emancipation of the Negroes," "If there be any man who thinks the ruin of a race of men a small matter, compared with the last decoration and completions of his own comfort,—who would not so much as part with his ice-cream, to save them from rapine and manacles, I think, I must not hesitate to satisfy that man, that also his cream and vanilla are safer and cheaper, by placing the negro nation on a fair footing, than by robbing them," he was considering the possibility of revolts produced by the prolonged system of enslavement ("Address" 8).

Of course, one may wonder why Emerson was untouched by earlier slave revolts. The answer, it seems, lies in the impact that the revolts had on white Americans not directly associated with slavery. The Prosser, Vessey, and Turner revolts earlier in the century terrified the South, but Northerners continued to believe the uprisings were merely regional. The 1844 Cuban and Haitian revolts revealed that others could be drawn into the aftermath of rebellion. The loss of liberties and deaths of Americans in Cuba implies that those not directly associated with slavery would also pay the price of the sin. The May 9 *Standard* records that, "Whites and blacks are alike implicated, and many American citizens have been arrested and placed in irons and in the stocks, whom we have every reason to believe innocent." The great numbers who were held were "arrested merely on the single accusation or extorted evidence of a slave, under the torture of the lash. The most trifling conversation, or the least suspicious act, is sufficient to send one to prison, where he is neither allowed opportunity for defense, or the consolation or sympathies of his friends and countrymen." The lack of due process was problematic, and the "strong feeling against Americans" was surprising and frightening ("Servile" 195). Not only were Americans being incarcerated for suspected participation in the plot, but, Michael Murphy, a Portland, Maine, sailor, was shot during the uproar following the discovery of the potential insurrection. The mass executions, atrocities, and Americans' arrests and murders would have indicated to Emerson that continued bondage of slaves often harmed those supposedly separated from the institution—white, Northern bystanders. Such occurrences would indicate that the loss of personal rights proved how slavery could not only remove the rights of those enslaved, but the rights of those who had no direct involvement in the slave system; the system was out of control and needed adjustment. Emerson could therefore adopt the position, in his forthcoming "An . . . Address . . . on the Emancipation of

the Negroes," that slavery harms not only those in bondage, but those who are slaveowners and their fellow countrymen as well.

While Haiti and Cuba demonstrated the horrors of slave insurrection even for those not directly involved with the slave trade, the potential slave revolt in Cuba was more frightening to many Americans because they saw Cuba as the next link in a global British plot which would eventually destroy American freedom and democracy. Americans increasingly came to believe that the British desired to recolonize the United States and that abolition was key to the empire's efforts. By the 1840s, British expansion was intimately tied to the overturning of slavery, and Cuba was viewed, in the popular press, as the most likely site from which the British plot would converge and then emerge. Because of this, the threat of Cuban slave revolts in 1844 would have reminded Emerson of the historical and cultural pressures which tied slavery to Britain and stirred him to more carefully consider his position on abolition.

In the popular imagination the British quest for world dominance included designs on the United States. Melville considers the British Empire's expansion in *Mardi* (1849). In the "Dominora and Vivenza" chapter, Melville ponders the expansion of Britain, King Bello, over land and people: "Notwithstanding his territorial acquisitiveness, and aversion to relinquishing stolen nations, he was yet a glorious old king" (473). Vivenza, the United States, throws off King Bello, though it retains its British character: "Did not their bards pronounce them a fresh start in the Mardian [British] species" (472). Though some predicted that Bello was losing control over his territories and that he "had somewhat abated his efforts to extend his dominions" (473), he "lived on; enjoying his dinners, and taking his jorums as of yore. Ah, I have yet a jolly long lease of life, thought he over his wine; and like unto some obstinate old uncle, he persisted in flourishing, in spite of the prognostications of the nephew nations, which at his demise, perhaps hoped to fall heir to odd parts of his possession" (474). The British Empire rumbled on, regardless of predictions of its destruction, while the "nephew nations," including the United States, waited for it to dissolve so they could seize its possessions. Not only, then, do "nephew nations" like America retain the British character, but we may also assume that such nations inherit Britain's penchant for expansion. Melville's discussion of Britain's expansion reveals the crux of abounding anti-British conspiracy theories; Britain would make a bid for lost colonies, the United States included. On the other hand, America, retaining a British character, would attempt to gobble up its own territories from Britain.

As I have asserted, fears of British expansion, and the United States' anxieties regarding colonization, became displaced onto concerns of slavery.⁴ Many believed that the link between abolition and Britain was clear, and as countries freed their slave populations, popular culture imagined Britain moving closer to its reassertion of control over the United States. Hence, potential countries of colonization, such as Cuba, became sites of conflict between the two countries. The seeming British plot to take over the U.S. was reinforced by American abolitionists' contact with British abolitionists. Abolitionists, particularly Boston abolitionists, corresponded voluminously with British abolitionists, invited British speakers to their city, attended antislavery meetings in Britain, and filled the abolitionist press with news from Great Britain. James Stewart finds that such interaction was perceived as, "simply a confirmation of well-planned British plots to destroy civic harmony in Boston and scatter seeds of insurrection in the South. The rapine, pillage, and carnage that were to follow would foretell the collapse of all social order and the 'reenslavement' of America" (116). While American abolitionists believed that they were translating the British abolitionist movement into an American movement, the majority of Americans saw the connection as evidence of British control expanding into America. More importantly, popular imagination's version of the British plot included a British-planned slave insurrection of the sort feared in Cuba. The potential 1844 slave revolts, therefore, aroused fears of potential British control of the United States.

Emerson, as well, was not immune from considering British expansion in the context of the peculiar institution. Not surprisingly, "An . . . Address . . . on the Emancipation of the Negroes," though a celebration of Britain's decision to end slavery, considers the import of slavery on both Britain and the United States, to the United States' disadvantage. After recounting the history of antislavery in Britain, Emerson states "in the last few days that my attention has been occupied with this history, I have not been able to read a page of it, without the most painful comparisons." He says that "Whilst I have read of England, I have thought of New England" ("Address" 23). Emerson's musings on Britain and the United States in the 1844 address foreshadow Emerson's later thoughts on the two countries which crystallize in *English Traits* (1856). Emerson, like Melville, believed that America retained portions of the British character, but that America was a new and emerging nation, rising out of the best remnants of the British empire. As Emerson reiterates at the end of "An . . . Address . . . on the Emancipation of the Negroes," "there is progress in human society" (33). America was evidence of that progress. Emerson also argues, in the address, that "the

history of mankind interests us only as it exhibits a steady gain of truth and right, in the incessant conflict which it records, between the material and moral nature" (8). And, this is exactly the manner in which Emerson comes to view British expansion. Unlike America, Emerson believed that England was in a state of "arrested development."

As John Peacock has succinctly remarked, Emerson thought that "England's age is over; though once united and predominant, she will be eclipsed by America" (67). To Emerson, "The genius of the Saxon race, friendly to liberty; the enterprise, the very muscular vigor of this nation, are inconsistent with slavery" ("Address" 33). The concept of the Saxon, transported from Britain, prospering in an American environment, is evidence of the continued progress of history, the evolution of Britain in the improved United States (Peacock 67). The British end of slavery, celebrated in Emerson's address, threatened his conception of America as the country which could surpass the English. The United States' continued insistence on, and even expansion of, slavery while Britain took the lead in ending the institution dented Emerson's beliefs; only with the dissolution of slavery would Emerson be able to justify his conception of America. Britain's antislavery policy, viewed within the context of Emerson's developing theory of America's emerging status, provides yet another reason for Emerson's decision to present his abolitionist speech. Spurred by the potential freedom of slaves in Cuba, disappointed with America's lagging performance, Emerson briefly aligns himself with abolition.

Key to Emerson's vision of Britain's eclipse is his faith, in the early 1840s, in America's economic and commercial abilities. In "The Young American," published in the April 1844 edition of *The Dial*, Emerson focuses on America's rising economic position in contrast to Britain's waning financial capability. But, more importantly, Emerson mentions his belief in free trade as the only force able to abolish slavery ("Young" 496). The same economic argument for the destruction of slavery resurfaces in the address. He notes that though there is a pleasing exoticism and obedience about black slaves rather than white service, "if the Virginian piques himself on the picturesque luxury of his vassalage, on the heavy Ethiopian manners of his house-servants, their silent obedience, their hue of bronze, their turbaned heads, and would not exchange them for the more intelligent but precarious hired-service of whites," the financial costs of such servitude are extreme. Emerson says, "I shall not refuse to show him, that when their free-papers are made out, it will still be their interest to remain on his estate, and that the oldest planters of Jamaica are convinced, that it is cheaper to pay wages, than to own the slave" ("Address" 8). The economics of slavery, claims Emerson, are not in the planter's interest.

Not only is Emerson's emphasis on an economic argument against slavery a less radical position to adopt at this time period, but it does little to deal with issues of race equality that other abolitionists are addressing.⁵ Essentially his economic arguments suggest that monetary rewards from the dissolution of slavery benefit whites, in the same manner that he recognizes that whites are protected from revolt after emancipation. He states, that "In every naked negro of those thousands, [the British] saw a future customer." In fact, the British recognized "that the slave-trade, by keeping in barbarism the whole coast of eastern Africa, deprives them of countries and nations of customers" ("Address" 21). To Emerson, the British realization of the economic gains in slavery's dissolution would be more apparent in the United States' superior economic position. Emerson's view of America as the epitome of commercial success, a view clearly articulated in "The Young American" earlier in the year, is reiterated in "An . . . Address . . . on the Emancipation of the Negroes" and becomes another reason why slavery can not exist within the United States.

The crucial intersection of Emerson's reading, historical events, and national fears finally did what individual Southern slave revolts earlier in the decade could not—they convinced Emerson to support active reform in his "An . . . Address . . . on the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies" on August 1, 1844. With Emerson's address, he considers the effects of slavery and emancipation on the non-slaveholding white population of the United States. He recounts the cruel treatment of slaves and the importance of public sentiment to challenge such wrongs. For the first time, Emerson agitates and moves his audience; he inspires them to fight the evil of slavery: "The sentiment of Right, once very low and indistinct, but ever more articulate, because it is the voice of the universe, pronounces Freedom. The Power that built this fabric of things affirms it in the heart; and in the history of the First of August, has made a sign to the ages, of his will" ("Address" 33). He accepts and tests the mantle of the representative man. Though Emerson's August address signals a break from his prior political stance, the economic arguments he sets forth as reasonable means of ending slavery are less radical than those being proposed during the same time period by other groups.

Shortly after "An . . . Address . . . on the Emancipation of the Negroes," Emerson retreated into his multiplicity of viewpoints position, as he immediately denounced his emancipation speech to friends. In a letter to Carlyle dated December 31, 1844, he wrote, "though I sometimes accept a popular call, & preach on Temperance or the Abolition of slavery, as lately on the First of August, I am sure to feel before I have done with it, what an intrusion it is into another sphere & so much loss of virtue in my

own" (Emerson and Carlyle 373). He reiterates his separation from political reform, fearing the loss of individual integrity. John Greenleaf Whittier wrote to Emerson and asked him to send a letter supporting Charles Torrey. Emerson, thought Whittier, was in support of the abolition cause: "That thou canst sympathize with us in the great idea which underlies our machinery of conventions & organizations, I have little doubt after reading thy Address." On September 13, Emerson responded that he was too busy with what "must seem frivolous work beside that to which you challenge me." He reiterated, "I have not the sort of skill that is useful in meetings for debate, but should be likely to waste other people's time or my own" (*Letters* 3: 260). He continues by writing, "Since you are disposed to give so friendly a hearing to opinions of mine, I am almost ready to promise you as soon as I am free of this present coil of writing, my thought on the best way of befriending the slave & ending slavery. We will see" (*Letters* 3: 261). Emerson's tentative support and retraction of his position on slavery is less pronounced than in his letter to Carlyle, but he returns to the ambivalence of his pre-address position. Though the strength of his denunciation depends upon his reader, such as Carlyle, a virulent racist, or Whittier, an abolition supporter, the outcome is the same; Emerson resigns himself, once again, to a separation from active reform. The only change which has occurred in Emerson's position is that he is now open to the idea of slipping in and out of a moderate abolition position.

Emerson's journal comments which lead up to the "An . . . Address . . . on the Emancipation of the Negroes" also suggest that he is not entirely convinced of the worthiness of abolition lectures, noting such thoughts as, "Eloquence at Antislavery Conventions is dog cheap" (*Journals* 9: 69). The address is an uncomfortable experiment for Emerson. Indeed, he proclaims that participation in public debates often leaves him feeling polluted, and "I wish on my return home to be shampooed & in all other ways aired & purified" (*Journals* 9: 71); Emerson was certainly not invigorated after his reform experiment as he had hoped. And, built into his conception of the representative man was the potential for removing himself from an abolitionist position. He was merely one man among many; "No man in all the procession of famous men is reason or illumination, or that essence we were looking for; but is an exhibition in some quarter of new possibilities" (*Representative* 19). Emerson had advocated a new forum of action, a reform of individuals cast upon the abolitionist stage, and was ultimately disenchanted with the experiment. He was left with the feeling that he had betrayed his individual position; his only reply seemed retreat.

Perhaps most telling is Emerson's decision to exclude the address from his *Essays: Second Series*, which was published October 19, 1844, opting to include instead "New England Reformers," an understated, individualistic piece. Ralph Rusk speculates that the address was in press around the same time period as the second series of Essays (*Letters* 3: 259, n. 73). However, Emerson clearly sees the "An . . . Address . . . on the Emancipation of the Negroes" as separate from the larger body of his work, represented in his essay collection. Thus, Emerson's support of abolition in "An . . . Address . . . on the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies" was not a position with which he felt comfortable as Gougeon envisions; rather, he teetered between social reform and individual reform throughout his life. However, he continued to assume that he, the poet-scholar, the representative man, could move in and out of various efforts and opinions such as abolition. The events which occurred during the spring and summer of 1844 were enough to convince Emerson that he should throw himself, however impermanently, into the abolitionist throngs. He had trouble, however, convincing himself that the journey needed to be prolonged and wavered throughout the antebellum period between active reform and aloof individualism. Emerson's 1844 musings on slavery, as they connect to representative men, slave revolt, and Britain, left him unsatisfied and unconvinced that affiliation with active reformers was a desirable position. In the next few years, Emerson returns again and again to his thoughts on the representative man and Britain, slowly teasing both away from their popular connection to slavery. By the time Emerson leaves the United States for Britain, in the fall of 1847, he is ready to embark on a close study of both representative men and Britain within a European context out of which will develop his 1850 *Representative Men* and the 1856 *English Traits*.

Texas A & M University
College Station, Texas

Notes

¹The journal shows that Emerson initially wrote "your" and scratched it out to replace it with "my," suggesting he was initially reluctant to present himself as the agitator.

²Williams notes the connection between this passage and Emerson's concept of the representative man. I identify the connection between this passage and abolition.

³The Alcotts and the Thoreaus' involvement with antislavery groups like the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society during the 1830s, in addition to Lidian Emerson's antislavery support, would make discussions of slavery inevitable. Emerson was also moved by Frederick Douglass' experiences. Though Frederick Douglass' classic narrative was not published until 1845, the year after the address, his story was known as he began to include his personal testimony in public speeches prior to the publication of his narrative. As Robert

Richardson indicates, Emerson was deeply impressed by Frederick Douglass during the time period prior to the address (398). In fact, Douglass attended and spoke at the Concord antislavery fair where Emerson gave his address (Gates 1056).

Also, Emerson's desire for a more impassioned stance on public issues may well have been inspired by Caroline Sturgis, who has recently been tied to antislavery societies. Indeed, a letter which Emerson writes to Sturgis on July 20 raises some interesting questions: "After this printing, I fancy, I shall shed the author, & be a greatly more companionable person. You must aid in the reform. I mean to take to reading, & who knows but to *feeling* also? I who have lived in the dry light & the ablative case" (*Letters* 7: 606). Emerson recognizes that his work following the publication of the *Second Series* of essays will take a new course, one more closely aligned with that of feeling and emotions. This metamorphosis will "shed the author," a hint that Emerson will experiment with a move from an "ablative" individual of self-focused concern to a more public reform position. With this in mind as he prepared his address, Emerson may have seen the speech as a visible sign of his commitment to "feeling." Sturgis mentions that she hopes to visit Concord during the first week in August and to attend his upcoming speech (*Letters* 7: 605); what better time to fulfill his "reform" than with Sturgis in attendance?

⁴America's anxieties of colonization occur, primarily, in response to the conflict between democracy and colonization. In many ways, Britain represents all the United States wants to become and all the United States fears.

⁵Boston abolitionists, in particular, address both the end of slavery and race equality. Various campaigns, such as the desegregation of trolley cars, schools, and public entertainment facilities, are occurring at this time period. Emerson's "Address on the Emancipation of the Negroes" remains more interested in moving others to action than in addressing practical political movements.

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