

APPROPRIATING THE REVOLUTION: EMERSON AND THE IDEAL RETURN

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Abstract

Ralph Waldo Emerson's early life and education led him to focus on self-development and social concerns. His subsequent individualism and concern for society were not just characteristics of his own personal behavior, but of his vision for the world. The individual and the social form a symbiotic relation critical to understanding this vision. Once Emerson had fully established this vision, he sought to make it known in an attempt to improve American society, which he felt was degenerate and in decline. Emerson suggests that the source of his rejuvenating vision can be found in the principles and ideas of the American Revolution. Emerson appeals to ideals and practice common during the Revolution and immediate post-Revolutionary period. Americans slowly drifted away from practicing these Revolutionary ideals. Emerson appropriates Revolutionary ideals and characteristics to create individual and social change in the America of his day. While this program for change seems clear and straightforward, it becomes problematic when actually applied.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Early Individualism and Sociality	6
Chapter 2: Living up to the System	14
Chapter 3: Ideals and Characteristics of the Revolution	25
Chapter 4: America's Departure	38
Chapter 5: Overlooked Factors	56
Conclusion	63

Introduction

“To be great is to be misunderstood”¹ said Ralph Waldo Emerson in “Self-Reliance” (125). Emerson seems to have lived up to his own standard of greatness. Different voices have made reasonable arguments regarding Emerson’s values. Many critics hold individualism as a value of overwhelming importance for Emerson. David Robinson has shown that “individual growth . . . guided Emerson’s thinking almost from the first” (*Apostle* 4). Lewis Leary has asserted that Emerson “spoke during a period when many reforms were astir, yet he asked only one reformation—that of the individual” (43). F. O. Matthiessen also notes Emerson’s monolithic emphasis on the individual to a point that “may seem so extreme in its individualism as to involve finally the destruction of any valid individuality” (8). Individualism is critical to understanding much of what Emerson wants to instill into his audience; however, this extremeness, as asserted by Mathiessen, can overshadow other aspects or become too dominant as shown in the work of Henry B. Parkes and Cary Wolfe.

Parkes asserts that Emerson’s individualism threatens to “destroy the tradition in which virtues such as his own could be cultivated” (121) and create a version of America without traditional authority and institutions (132). Similarly, Wolfe asserts that Emerson asks his audience to “break free—every day, every moment—from objects and institutions, which we must leave in our wake” (22). These types of conclusions which assert a radical nature of Emerson’s individualism flow quite nicely out of Matthiessen’s perspective; however, Emerson did have a sort of braking mechanism to check extreme individualism: universal access to the Over-Soul, conscience, or what Matthiessen calls “divine superabundance” (8). Without this check on individualism, perhaps the assertions of Parkes and Wolfe could be the final outcome.

¹ All of Emerson’s essays, lectures, addresses, and poetry come from *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*. Eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. New York: Norton, 2001.

Matthiessen thus notes the highly important individualistic side of Emerson, but realizes that it is not the end-all position of Emerson. Like Matthiessen, I would assert that although Emerson often focuses on the individual, there are other factors to consider.

Those who identify a more social Emerson emphasize his involvement within his own social context, which can initially seem at odds with the individualism already mentioned. Len Gougeon has shown that Emerson was an active social reformer for the major movements of his own day and was influenced in this direction by members of his family and community (19). Along similar lines, Eduardo Cadava shows an Emerson preoccupied with contemporary social and political issues (10). This critical camp seems to capture a social side of Emerson as he actively participated in reform movements and concerned himself with issues beyond the singular individual. Gougeon does bridge Emerson's individualism and social activity: "For Emerson, all social problems were really manifestations of individual moral deficiencies, and only individual moral reform could ameliorate social problems" (34). The individualism noted by Matthiessen is useful from Gougeon's perspective because when individuals reform, a better society follows. Gougeon bridges the individualism and social positions to explain Emerson's early preoccupation with slavery and interactions with abolition. Thus, Emerson's actions involve individual reform and social involvement as part of his purpose.

Robert D. Richardson Jr. has stated that

Part of the power of Emerson's individualism is his insistence, at critical moments, that individualism does not mean isolation or self-sufficiency. This is not a paradox, for it is only the strong individual who can frankly concede the sometimes surprising extent of his own dependence. (88)

Richardson shows that while individualism is essential to understanding Emerson, it is insufficient alone. Dependency on outside objects and persons are a part of reality and Emerson's version of it. Richardson also shows that the two primary criticisms of Emerson do not have to be contradictory, but can coexist logically; however, Richardson couches his assertion with "at critical moments" and "sometimes." I would assert that there is work yet to be done in showing how Emerson's version of the world combines individualism and social relations as active constants, not just periodic occurrences. Such work could create additional bridges similar to the one created by Gougeon. Once these bridges are established, one can begin to see what the details of the vision are and where Emerson plans to apply this vision.

Frederic Ives Carpenter claims that Emerson realized that his vision may not have been immediately recognized as a viable option and therefore appealed to the future for its enactment (110). Although the future may have been part of Emerson's hopes for humanity, his hopes were dependent on the present because "Men walk as prophecies of the next age" ("Circles" 176). Commenting on his day, Emerson states, "Amidst the downward tendency and proneness of things . . . will you not tolerate one or two solitary voices in the land, speaking for thoughts and principles not marketable or perishable?" (104). Because Emerson asserts that the world he lives in is more degenerate than progressive, something must be done or his hope for the future is irrelevant. Emerson also thinks that new principles are needed. Sacvan Bercovitch suggests that historically, when confronted "with the inadequacies of [American] society," Americans look backward "for solace and inspiration to [American] social ideals" ("Rhetoric" 29). Indeed, in "The American Scholar," Emerson suggests that there may be no better place to look for these ideals than the American Revolution. Emerson hopes that through these ideals of the American past, he might be able to reconstruct the American present.

I have taken up Emerson on his directive. I will use Bercovitch to revisit America's past to identify ideas that Emerson may have drawn on to create his version of how the world should be. I will narrow Bercovitch's position by focusing on the ideals propagated during the Revolutionary period as directed by Emerson. I will highlight the principles and historical characteristics of Americans living during this period. In some ways, I will follow a method of Emerson, which is to situate the present in terms of historical reasoning and against moral democratic principles. Robinson notes that this was Emerson's method of trying to understand slavery in America in the 1850s ("Emerson's" 222). I will extend Robinson's assertion to demonstrate that Emerson employed this method throughout his early life and characterized his entire vision of the world.

Because Emerson's life underwent many transitions and transformations, I will limit my discussion to Emerson's childhood, formal education, and early public life. In a similar fashion, Emerson's writings also changed over time. My analysis will focus primarily on his prose, lectures, and speeches up to the publication of *Essays* in 1841. I impose these limitations not because Emerson's poetry or later writings lack merit but to highlight some of the original conceptions that he displayed.

I will show in Chapter 1 how Emerson's early life emphasized both individualism and sociality². I will show that they were not just occasions, as suggested by Richardson, for the inclusion of outside tendencies, but that they were of continual importance and impact from early in Emerson's life. I will depart from Gougeon by showing that Emerson was not only involved in the social movements of his day, but also preoccupied with sociality—not just with individual

² By sociality I refer to the noun form of social. I will use social primarily to indicate having or being characteristic of human relations and interactions. These human relations can include personal interactions between two individuals, but they can also indicate much larger and complex relations such as communities and institutions.

reform. In Chapter 2 I will show how these early influences would result in an Emersonian system that would include both the individual and the social intended to improve American society. Chapter 3 will follow the suggestions of Bercovitch and Robinson to delve into the past to find the broader ideals and characteristics that underpin the specific ideas that Emerson's system recommends. This chapter will depart from Becovitch's focus on origins and Robinson's emphasis on the slavery issue and follow Emerson's own direction, which focused on the American Revolution. In Chapter 4 I will show how Americans departed from practicing the ideas propagated during the Revolution, adhered to selfish pursuits, and eventually caused Emerson to create a system for change. Chapter 5 will show that while Emerson's system is a plan for individual and social change, it runs into trouble when applied to Emerson's own day and age.

In brief, I argue that there is no need to give primacy to either individualism or sociality in Emerson; instead there is a symbiotic relationship between the two. By taking ideals from the Revolutionary period and placing them in his own day, Emerson hopes to enact change that will improve both individuals and their social relations. While this system appears to run perfectly well as an idea, Emerson's system breaks down when applied to Americans in post-Revolutionary America.

Chapter 1: Early Individualism and Sociality

Emerson was concerned with both individuality and sociality. There is more to him than just the individualism described by Matthiessen or just the social activity described by Gougen, important as these descriptions are. Richardson does provide a combination of the two, but I want to show how individualism and sociality permeates Emerson's early life in both practice and as a topic of study. This combination of the two is not necessarily a contradiction. Raymond Williams etymologically notes that individual "was rarely used without explicit relation to the group of which it was" a part or was the "recognition of uniqueness within a kind" (*Keywords* 135-136). In other words, discussion of the individual would not have been meaningful without an understanding of the group from which it originated.

In some ways, Taylor Stoehr and Len Gougeon provide starting points for this chapter. Stoehr shows how Emerson's studies and familial relations were never physically very far apart (14). Gougeon shows how Emerson was involved in the social movements of his day, primarily abolition, due to family and community influence. I will push Stoehr's position further to show that the two were inter-related and resulted in the way Emerson viewed the world. I will depart from Gougeon by showing that in addition to participating socially, Emerson was preoccupied with sociality. Early influences and demonstrations of both individuality and sociality would become preoccupations that would later be some of his principle ways of seeing the world.

Early Life

Unsurprisingly, William and Ruth Emerson influenced the early years of their son Ralph Waldo Emerson. In general, the familial economic situation, expectations, and educational structure led Emerson to focus primarily on the self or his self. His father was a minister. As such, there is a certain amount of prestige, honor, and respect that go along with this position;

however, there are not excessive monetary benefits attached to the profession. Emerson's parents met the basic needs and provided more than basic reading material. Although the prestige was a nicety that elevated the Emerson family above common laborers, the lack of monetary means did not create great expectations for the Emerson family to live up to, particularly the children. This socio-economic scenario provided Emerson with some freedom and opportunity to have sufficient means for a somewhat liberal education without the overbearing weight of having to meet any specific level of achievement. The Emerson family emphasized self-teaching as self-development as well. Education was so important to the Emersons, particularly Ruth, that when William died, she took in boarders and undertook additional tasks to get her family educated (Richardson 20). Although her emphasis was religious in nature, she seemed to support the acquisition of knowledge from many different religious views and orientations (21). Her open-mindedness to different perspectives, emphasis on seeking to know as much as possible, and providing books created a sense of the importance of education within the home; with few expectations and their mother as the primary model to follow, the Emerson children had some liberty to pursue their own educations as they taught themselves.

The influence of Emerson's aunt Mary Moody Emerson would solidify this early set of influences. In many ways, Mary Moody would act as mentor to the Emerson children. She was self-taught and always "catechizing, informing, probing, tearing apart ideas and texts, and recommending reading. She expressed herself on every conceivable topic and obliged the boys to do the same" (Richardson 24). The advantage provided by her to Emerson was the emphasis on a variety of subjects, not just religious ones. Educational breadth was increased as well as the amount of available material. Richardson describes Mary Moody as "The single most important part of Emerson's education" (23). Emerson's concern with the self appears to be, in part, the

product of a childhood spent educating himself under these conditions and in this style of knowledge acquisition. This type of education forces the mentored to formulate a personal position on every subject that can come under scrutiny by the mentor. There was no mandate to adhere to the texts in a fashion similar to the mentor. Emerson had no problem with this self-discovery and self-formulating method because Mary, his mentor, would eventually come to dislike Emerson's new formulations (24). Emerson taught himself to acquire and develop his own positions even when not embraced by others; self-development through education marched onward.

Education

Although childhood immersed Emerson in self-development, particular theorists that he discovered at Harvard reinforced and aggrandized this. Perhaps the most noteworthy are Sampson Reed and William Ellery Channing. Reed's influence was first felt at Harvard during his "Oration on Genius" speech. For Reed, the individual is fundamental; it is the starting point to social progress (Richardson 16). Channing, a Unitarian minister and Bostonian, asserted that the individual must rely on the self. "[T]he ultimate reliance of a human being must be on his own mind' even if "[o]ur moral sense might not be as clear and as uniform as we would like" (47). Both these philosophical positions resonated with Emerson's already heavy emphasis on the individual. The individual was the starting position and point of emphasis for these two and continued to be a focal point of Emerson's thought.

As Emerson's Harvard education continued, he was naturally introduced to additional theorists, both living and dead. Emerson responded to some of these newly presented ideas in a revealing manner. In "The Present State of Ethical Philosophy," Emerson "surveys the work of Hobbes, Cudworth, Clark, Price, Butler, Reid, Paley, Smith, and Stewart" (Richardson 15). The

range is impressive, but not surprising. The interesting part is that Emerson's interest lies in ethics and that "Already his question is not 'What can I know?' but 'How should I live?'" (16). This observation is important for two reasons. First, ethics concern the way in which conduct, life, and action are carried out; at the very least this is done at a personal or individual level, but is often applied to all individuals as being a way to carry on and interact in society. Second, seeking for a way to live is searching for some code, instruction, or guide—all prescriptive in nature. Emerson was sorting through the philosophies or stances of the literature that he encountered while at Harvard. He accepted some parts, rejected others, just as any other student would. He was formulating his own version of the world from the material. This material was philosophical. It presented a series of positions that described what was best for humanity or what it should do, as opposed to history, for example, which might undertake describing what humanity did in the past. Emerson had moved on from just acquiring knowledge through reading at home, familial influence and childhood experience; he looked to and sorted through others' work for possible ethical constructs that would help augment and clarify the way he saw the world. An examination of a few specifics may prove to focus our understanding of this vision.

The Scottish Common Sense thinkers, presented to Emerson at Harvard, were also thinking along the lines of 'How should I live my life'" (Richardson 32). The philosophies of the various Common Sense philosophers fit pretty well into Emerson's individual and ethical interests. They "[insist] on the reality of morality" and the "importance of consciousness" (32). These parallel philosophies provide a connecting link to both the self and individual while still permitting Emerson to include ethics, morality, and, therefore, the social; however, they are not necessarily the perfect answer for Emerson to completely adopt at the expense of other philosophers. Scottish Common Sense philosophers tend to neglect the importance of the

humanities, favor the moral too much for Emerson's liking, and seem to exclude some of the aspects of his other favored philosophers (33). Dugald Stewart, a favorite of Emerson, seems to reconcile individualism and sociality to some degree. He emphasizes that the individual mind has been and is the same for all regardless of time and history. The differences between individuals that arise relate directly to the circumstances in which individuals are placed (32). In this manner, the individual and the outside world are able to have a sort of relationship that explained difference and similarity in humanity. "The intellectual universe of Dugald Stewart provide[s] Emerson with a set of working ideas and assumptions, some of which he retained all his life" (29). A concern with the individual and its social relations started early with Emerson and persisted.

Emerson was not only interested in the individual, but studied how it should function. He tried to carve out its place and role according to his vision of the world. Also, in the course of his early studies, Emerson was interested in the social or the relations between individuals. These are not separate interests. They can indeed be differentiated as Emerson does in *Nature*: the Soul is the self and Nature comprises everything else (Richardson 227). In other words, the Soul is the term that Emerson uses to express his interest in the individual. Nature includes individuals in the plural and the environment in which they find themselves. The difference between the singular individual that makes up the Soul and the other individuals that are a part of Nature is what I call sociality. The Soul is restricted to the self and has the option to achieve some degree of self-recognition and personal development. The Soul may be social, but only when interacting with Nature or, more specifically, the other individuals that are comprised therein. Nature is inherently social because of the multiplicity of individuals that are contained within a

similar environment in which they interact. Thus, *Nature* provides a mode in which Emerson may discuss both the individual and the social.

Besides differentiating self and society in *Nature*, Emerson also presents some of their inter-relations. Man “is placed in the centre of beings, and a ray of relation passes from every other being to him. And neither can man be understood without these objects, nor these objects without man” (36). A little earlier, Emerson states that “Nature, in its ministry to man, is not only the material, but is also the process and the result. All the parts incessantly work into each other’s hands for the profit of man” (30). All the parts are the components of nature and the process is the establishing of relations or sociality that will aid each individual in personal development. Therefore, Emerson’s concentration on the individual has a social context and the social context can only be understood with its inherent individuals. Emerson’s writing is a fount of American individualism, but this individualism should be socially situated with other related individuals. Ultimately, individualism and sociality combine to form Emerson’s view of the world.

Adulthood

In part, Emerson must be called a social thinker because of his own sociality as an adult. Emerson was a social creature; he was not a hermit trying to find the meaning of his own soul and better ways to develop himself while shunning society and its influences.

Part of the power of Emerson’s individualism is his insistence, at critical moments that individualism does not mean isolation or self-sufficiency. This is not a paradox, for it is only the strong individual who can frankly concede the sometimes surprising extent of his own dependence. (Richardson 88)

Emerson had friendships and associations with many that would at one time or another attend the Transcendental Club meetings. This was a social gathering with group discussion, not a private conversation between two individuals. Emerson was friends with Bronson Alcott and was interested in his new school in Boston. He forged a bond with Henry David Thoreau despite their differing views. He was constantly meeting with and writing to young intellectuals. “Emerson had been deeply involved in social and political matters for years. He served on the school committee, the cemetery committee, the library committee, and the Lyceum committee” (Richardson 269). Committees are comprised of many individuals who work together to accomplish one or more tasks and goals. Emerson’s political involvement included speaking at abolition movement events and writing to President Van Buren about the disgrace of removing the Cherokee nation (275, 278). Perhaps one of the more overlooked social aspects is that Emerson started a family. He married more than once and had deep, emotional ties to both spouses and offspring. These types of relationships were also present with his siblings. Clearly, Emerson was involved and participated in groups, movements, and interacted with many people with whom bonds were forged.

Some specific social aspects of the Transcendental Club are worth noting. Its conception was centered around the theme that “the state of thought in America [was] ‘very unsatisfactory’” and it reacted against the “arid intellectual climate at Harvard and Cambridge” (245). The members of the club “were dissatisfied, individually and as a group, with the present state of philosophy, religion, and literature in America” (249). Thus, the problems that they discussed were both individual and social in nature. The group met to discuss different topics: ‘Education of Humanity,’ ‘What is the essence of Religion as distinct from morality?’ ‘The Inspiration of the Prophet and Bard, the nature of Poetry, and the causes of sterility of poetic Inspiration in our

Age and country' (this last topic being hosted by Emerson) (246). There was a great concern about American society in addition to the academic nature of some of the discussions. Emerson "attended at least twenty of the thirty meetings" (246). Emerson was interested in society and had contributions that he wanted to make at the social level. In addition to discussion, social activism was a direct result of club meetings.

Margaret Fuller ended up in newspaper journalism, the women's movement, and the Roman revolution. [Theodore] Parker devoted his life to antislavery work. [Elizabeth] Peabody was active in the kindergarten movement and in the movement for American Indian rights. Emerson and Thoreau came out strongly for abolition, [George] Ripley founded Brook Farm, [Orestes] Brownson became a powerful voice first for labor, then for Catholicism. (249)

The meetings and discussions were not just for passing intellectual interests. There was a significant personal commitment to the social reality in which the members found themselves. It was followed up by social action to bring about change.

It is safe to say that alongside the prevalent emphasis on developing the individual, there was a social necessity in Emerson's actions. His social involvement was the outward demonstration of a man who was concerned with people as they related to their own selves and others in society. Social action and concentration was not a parallel subject of interest alongside individualism; the two formed a potential symbiotic relationship that Emerson would try to develop and flesh out over the course of years.

Chapter 2: Living up to the System

F.O. Matthiessen states that Emerson's extreme individualism threatens to destroy individuality; however, this destruction is prevented by Emerson's doctrine "that all souls are equal. . . [and have a] capacity to share directly in divine superabundance" (8). Although this equality demonstrates how each individual can participate in the process of self-development through the opportunity to connect with the divine, it does not address what to do between the individuals with which each would come in contact. Part of what constituted Emerson's sociality within his version of the world was the role of the developing and developed individual to the rest of the individuals in society. This individual's role in society was to impart "truth and health . . . putting them once more in communication with their own reason" ("Self-Reliance" 133), to "be a bringer of hope, and . . . reinforce man against himself" ("Address" 82), and "to cheer, to raise, and to guide men" ("American Scholar" 63). This suggests an inherent inequality of roles between individuals and creates a hierarchy of responsibility. Those that have undergone personal development have the responsibility to aid others in this process. To follow his own dictates, Emerson attempted to impart to others what they needed to do to improve society.

This chapter will be divided into two parts. First, I will discuss the different media or forms that Emerson employs to share his vision of the world. This media is socially important in two ways. The form that each takes is social; it is addressed to other individuals. It is also social because Emerson is following the role of trying to impart the truth, hope, cheer, etc. that is needed to commence or augment individual development in others. Second, I will show how individualism and sociality play their overarching roles as a whole interactive Emersonian system.

Media

One could argue that Emerson's contributions are not prescriptive in nature; however, Emerson's selected media are for distributive purposes, which makes them prescriptive since they are intended for others and tell other people what they should or should not do and give their opinion of the way things should or should not be. Emerson's language, on the other hand, is mostly descriptive. Description is one type of language that is not inherently prescriptive; however, one additional fact must be understood about Emerson's mode of description. He considers his descriptive accounts to be "self-evident, self-validating" (Richardson 227) or what Emerson considers to be truth. This truth is idealized or, in other words, the descriptions are not of the way things are, but of the way they should be to Emerson. Since both individuals and society are far from Emerson's idealized descriptions, they are prescriptive in that those listening should seek that ideal or change from the current state into another. Because the description is yet to be achieved, they are prescriptive. Stoehr has stated that the "transcendentalists never stopped hoping to make life conform 'to the pure idea' in their minds" (14). Emerson has a specific version in mind and expects individuals to adopt his ideas concerning both the individual and society.

Emerson clearly read a lot; he also wrote a lot. Much of that writing was kept in journals. "Emerson's organized, persistent, purposeful journal keeping is one of the most striking aspects of his early intellectual life" (Richardson 42). Keeping a journal is an interesting choice for Emerson. Journals are typically private, contain personal thoughts, actions, history, etc., and they don't talk back, critique, or disagree. They provide an outlet for that which would otherwise remain within the individual. This form of writing is a corollary to Emerson's preoccupation with the personal and individual. The journal provides a physical record of the

processing, reformulation, and synthesis of material that is entering mentally through reading and other forms of instruction. It also provides a place for review and reference for one person: Emerson. This self to self communication and intellectual development can only reinforce Emerson's concentration on the individual. Such concentration is evident since "He wrote constantly, he wrote about everything, [and] he covered hundreds of pages" (42). However, the journal did not only serve as an individualistic device or form. Emerson could not keep all his thoughts and ideas to himself. "He copied letters into his journals and prose from his journals into his letters" (42). In this regard, Emerson strays from typical journal keeping. His system of thought is not entirely private and personal; there was a desire to share at least some thoughts with others. "However eloquent the private Emerson could be in his journals, no writer ever . . . assumed an audience more completely. He always wrote with the orator's sense of audience immediately before him" (*Apostle* 4). Even thoughts that were not shared with others via letters were presented in a way that assumed delivery to other individuals. This difference in journal usage is an interesting shift from the Emerson who had no real friends among his professors or classmates, to the Emerson that would soon try writing letters to some of them if for no other reason than to stir up some intellectual correspondence (41). There is a dualism in form concerning Emerson's journal keeping. It maintains the individual and personal reflection, but also includes social aspects through sharing and audience considerations. This shift in form to include the social is minor; however, as Emerson matured, he would add more social forms to his repertoire.

Emerson's later forms can be divided into two categories: oral and written. In the oral category, the two major forms are speeches and lectures. Speeches are more social than journals and letters and almost pointless if directed to the same individual (ignoring those that practice in

front of a mirror). Why would Emerson the dedicated and avid journal-writer make speeches? Speeches are meant to address many individuals and are typically prescriptive in nature. The orator usually desires to inculcate, instill, propagate, motivate, or otherwise create some sort of instructional stir among the listeners. The orator benefits little from the message (though there are always those that seek fame, honor, and self-aggrandizement). For example, when Emerson delivered his speech before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, his message clearly called for the graduates of Harvard to change their methods of learning. His oration discusses the scholar in America. If there was a group of scholars in America it would be easy to assert this group as exemplary. Emerson suggests change for this group. He states that books “are for nothing but to inspire” (59). Instead of using them for inspiration the contemporary scholar “having once received this book, stands upon it, and makes an outcry, if it is disparaged” (59). Emerson seeks to modify the way the scholar uses books. Instead of using them as foundational material, the scholar should employ them to create original thought. He continues his directions for change concerning books and includes colleges as well. “Colleges and books only copy the language which the field and the work-yard made” (62). Instead of copying, Emerson directs his listeners to a better way:

Life is our dictionary. Years are well spent in . . . frank intercourse with many men and women; in science; in art; to the one end of mastering in all their facts a language by which to illustrate and embody our perceptions. I learn immediately from any speaker how much he has already lived, through the poverty or the splendor of his speech. (62)

Emerson wants to detach this group of students from present methods and direct them to a different type of learning. Emerson attempts to effect a type of social change—educational reform—through a social form—a speech.

Toward the beginning of his remarks, he includes a fable about man in society. The form of a fable is an interesting approach. The function of fables is to illustrate a moral or lesson that should be applicable to whomever hears or reads it. While the lesson explicated by Emerson concerns the individual's role and duty to society and to self, the form provides prescriptive morals and ethics. In this manner, the forms of fable and speech serve to maintain the prescriptive ethic of individual and social development, while also delivering it in a social, mass, and collective setting. The form of lecture also reaches a large group of individuals, but in the form of a series it continues to tell multiple groups the message. While Emerson continues his focus on individualism, self-development, and social responsibility, he directs his message to different large groups on numerous occasions. The forms and methods of delivery are very social.

Emerson's sociality is furthered by his last form of communication. Emerson also writes essays and uses the printed form as a means of delivery. This makes his prescriptions available to a very large audience. The prescriptions become tangible, solidified, and contained in an object; however, Emerson may have preferred lectures and speeches because of their plasticity change. This may be why Emerson had different versions of some of his printed material. Emerson was social in his form and engaged in it personally and repeatedly. His prescriptions for change were directed toward both the personal individual and groups. Not only did he place the individual within a social context, he was also sufficiently concerned about the social world to ensure that his ideas were distributed to many people.

The Individual and the Social

The question may arise, “Why would Emerson spend so much time on the individual, if the social is the larger and more fundamental aspect of his world vision?” There are two possibilities. First, because Emerson is trying to describe how the world should be, there are improvements that he wants to make; one way to create a new and ideal social sphere is to start with the individual, its smallest component. Improved societies and social conditions are not simply removed from one’s pocket and presented to the world. As individuals are motivated into undertaking personal development, their social ties to institutions, politics, economics, etc. will in turn be affected in proportion to the number of individuals involved. Emerson may be turning to and concentrating much of his efforts on the individual as a way to jump start the process. Second, Emerson may feel that the current social conditions are unable to change men, themselves, or both. Society and man are interrelated, but their current interrelations have adverse effects on each other. “The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters,—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man” (“The American Scholar” 57). If individuals specialize in being only a part of the social whole without working together, then the social “body” never functions properly. Because the social state is already in disarray and disunity, the social whole cannot properly aid any individual part. “Social reformation that comes as a result of the forceful imposition of change upon individuals or institutions from without is not true reformation because it deals with symptoms and not causes” (Gougeon 35). Emerson’s focus on the individual is the starting point of change or rebuilding society from the individual up. Until individuals develop themselves and, in turn, seek to assist others in their development, Emerson’s rejuvenating vision for the whole society will be impossible to achieve.

Emerson also points out some interdependence between individuals and sociality. He states that ‘Every being in nature has its existence so connected with other beings that if set apart from them it would instantly perish’ (Richardson 258). As a part of personal development, Emerson asserts that the individual must realize that she depends on the social, particularly on other individuals. This dependence comes with the recognition that the individual is subsidiary to the whole and cannot progress in a state of isolation. As Emerson notes, ‘Insulate a man and you annihilate him. He cannot unfold, he cannot live without a world’ (258). Thus, the individual cannot maintain an island population of one and still adhere to Emersonian prescriptions of individualism. Personal development becomes a social effort with many individuals helping and aiding each other. In “The American Scholar,” Emerson elaborates on this role of helping others in society. Individuals are “to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances” (63). Personal development is not a goal arrived at, but a process. To continue the process, members of society must assist others for their own personal advancement.

Social Structure

One way of explicating Emerson’s understanding of social structure is by analyzing social roles and responsibilities. The first role is held by Emerson himself. He is the executor of his own new society (what better way to do things right than to be writer, producer, and director of your own work?). His responsibilities include describing the new society, but more importantly, to motivate, inspire, and provoke others. The second role is held by the rest of the individuals in society: that of developer and helpmeet. Their responsibilities include developing the self and aiding others to do the same. The underlying and determining factor for both roles of Emersonian social structure is appropriation.

For Emerson, appropriation is the critical factor in personal development. In “Compensation,” Emerson declares, “Whilst thus the world will be whole, and refuses to be disparted, we seek to act partially, to sunder, to appropriate” (141). Emerson is the first appropriator in the system. He has scoured the authors and philosophers of the past and made their ideas his own system—even to become a new personal embodiment of them. Emerson appropriated, internalized, modified, reprocessed, Americanized, and then propagated the ideas Plato, Kant, and Marcus Aurelius (Richardson 233-234). By extension, Emerson is not limited to just these three, but would take ideas that worked under his perception of the world and make them his own.

Such appropriation does not mean, of course, that one adopts the ideas of others because one has no thoughts of one’s own. It does mean that the individual must be free not only to have his own thoughts but to take up the thoughts of others when they coincide with, restate, or extend his own. (173)

Appropriation as a mode of knowledge acquisition is by no means unique to Emerson; however, it is the type of works that he chooses to appropriate that make his system interesting. “The soul active sees absolute truth; and utters truth, or creates” (“American Scholar” 59). Emerson appropriates only those who create and contribute something new in their particular age. These acts of creation are Emerson’s truth. This may explain why Emerson “would not read theological or academic controversy” (220). In this type of writing, ideas are not asserted so much as quibbled over. Controversy does not contribute new ideas or perceptions of the world; instead they rehash old ones in their various particulars. The importance of multiple new ideas arises from Emerson’s position that ‘No book . . . has worth by itself, but by the relation to what you have from many other books, it weighs’ (220). Ideas empower the individual and help

explain the world and its inner workings, but there is no one idea that will solve all problems. Individuals must continually create and contribute. The individual can then learn, grow, and adapt from these ideas as part of personal development. For Emerson, the details and applications must be worked through mentally and applied to the self on an individual basis.

Emerson appropriated past ideas and made them his own as a part of his intellectual development. Just as any student works through new material by breaking down assertions, apposing different arguments, and giving precedence to some perspectives over others, Emerson appropriated the past into some workable form that had value and made sense to him. Emerson wants to leave this process of appropriation up to the individual, but for it to be possible, there must be works to draw upon. Emerson's audience can appropriate from Emerson, other authors and philosophers, personal inspiration, and so forth. Emerson's prescriptions are for self-development, though he leaves the particulars to the individual. In "History" Emerson writes, "How easily these worships of Moses, of Zoroaster, of Menu, of Socrates, domesticate themselves in the mind. I cannot find any antiquity in them. They are mine as much as theirs" (115). The ideas are available if they will only be accessed and incorporated by individuals. They simply become a part of a different day and age. "The student interprets the age of chivalry by his own age of chivalry" (114). The individual of today should continue developing personally and appropriating ideas of the past; however, the alarm of Emerson and other Transcendental Club members is that the innovative and creative responsibility of individuals in the U.S. has ceased. This blocks the appropriative process from continuing to its full potential within the U.S. context. Appropriation is dependent on new works to appropriate from or stagnation sets in. In "The American Scholar," Emerson states that "Genius is always sufficiently the enemy of genius by over-influence" (60). New ideas and insight must be created

by developed individuals without having past ones dominate over them. Naturally there can be relations, but Emerson asks for newness and originality to draw a clear distinction. New material is needed and Emerson noted the severe absence of American sources; he dreaded over-influenced appropriation in self-development and social construction because it would lead to conformity to that which was already in place. “The English dramatic poets have Shakspearized for two hundred years” (60). Progress could not continue without new material to draw upon and the creative process was not taking place; instead it was imitative. The dramatic poets are not identified as being incapable of demonstrating genius (what I would call successful self-development), but of being over-influenced by another genius. This over-influence takes the form of the conformity to the status quo.

Emerson personally achieved individual development through appropriation and desired others to follow along in a similar fashion. He announced his ideas, views, desires, and hoped that the process would take place as individuals subscribed to his prescriptions of commencing self-development. Emerson used social media to make his objectives known. Emerson wanted a social atmosphere that would permit individuals to continue their personal development while also maintaining the social relations and dependencies that each individual will need to continue this process.

Social Development

Emerson appropriated ideas from a variety of philosophical sources, but when giving his audience direction concerning which ideas apply to his vision of society, he does suggest one place to look.

If there is any period one would desire to be born in,—is it not the age of Revolution; when the old and the new stand side by side, and admit of being

compared . . . when the historic glories of the old, can be compensated by the rich possibilities of the new era? (67).

What must be examined then is what parts of the Revolution must be sought out by Emerson's subscribing individuals? The revolution that will be examined hereafter is the American Revolution. This is by no means the only time and place that could be examined or proven to exemplify Emersonian ideals; however, a few common sense reasons will suffice to warrant an investigation in this vein. First, Emerson, of course, lived in post-Revolutionary New England. Second, the ideas and ideals from the American Revolution are close enough to Emerson's lifetime to warrant at best continued and at worst residual influence over individuals of this time period. Finally, this reference to "Revolution" would have made the American Revolution readily come to mind in his American audience. An investigation into the social ideals of the American Revolution should help explicate what particulars Emerson might have been referring to for social development. As Emerson states in "The Method of Nature":

What is all history but the work of ideas, a record of the incomputable energy which his infinite aspirations infuse into man? Has any thing grand and lasting been done? Who did it? Plainly not any man, but all men: it was the prevalence and inundation of an idea" (91).

Emerson is social in outward act, but this outward act is also the enactment of his vision of the world. Personal development is made possible through appropriation. New ideas are what Emerson wants people to appropriate from. Emerson also suggests the American Revolution as a source of appropriation for a better society. Through personal and social development, Emerson hopes to provide a better way to personal advancement and an alternative society.

Chapter 3: Ideals and Characteristics of the Revolution

Emerson's recommendation to look to the Revolution as a source for idea appropriation coincides with the scholarship of both Sacvan Bercovitch and David Robinson. Bercovitch notes that part of American culture is the habitual prescription of previous American ideals as a means to overcome contemporary social problems. Robinson asserts that Emerson's difficulty and concern with American slavery was worked through by turning to both history and moral principles. Using Bercovitch to look back for previous American ideals alongside Emerson's directive to return to the Revolution, I identify some of those ideals. This war-period and its immediate aftermath were clearly not the origins of American ideals; however, the post-revolutionary period was when American social ideals were of primary importance in discourse. These ideals were distilled from their origins and used to create a United States. They are new enough for Emerson and his audience to appropriate from because the ideals were present at the nation's creation. Robinson's assertion that Emerson looked back also applies, but, in this case, I will show that this looking back at historical characteristics and national ideals was present from earlier in Emerson's life. This looking back is foundational in describing what was characteristic of Americans immediately following the Revolution. This will provide a contrasting point to Emerson's day that he wants to change that I discuss in the next chapter.

This chapter will first show how Emerson might have carried out his appropriation of this Revolutionary period. Second, it will show that there were basic principles or ideals that related to the creation of the United States which would thereafter relate to Emerson's vision of the world. Third, it will select a few historical characteristics that may give insight into what

Emerson was focusing on.³ Although there may be any number of historical aspects that correspond to Emerson's vision, space restraints require a much briefer and broader approach to distill usable ideals from many different historical participants. This chapter will cover generally the categories of economics, society and politics, education, and spirituality.

Emerson's Access

To understand why Emerson ultimately ends up with a distilled appropriation of the ideas and characteristics of the American Revolutionary period, the ways in which Emerson might have had access to them needs to be established. Up to this point, I have reviewed the way Emerson has appropriated his ideas from the written and spoken word. These forms will not be as useful in this circumstance, particularly the former. As discussed earlier, the Transcendental Club was formed in part due to the lack of any significant literature in a variety of disciplines. Emerson was still waiting for something new and creative. This is not to say that Emerson had no access to historical information on the Revolution. In 1835, after being selected by the Centennial Committee, he researched the role of certain families in Concord that had participated in the Revolutionary War so he could give the Fourth of July speech in Concord (Allen 247). Details were clearly accessible to him. However, ideas were of much greater interest to him because they were creative and could be applied generally, whereas specific actions were in the past and gone. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson states that the "persons who make up to-day, next year die, and their experience with them" (136). Ideas last, whereas experience remains with the individual and is then lost to the rest of society. Specific historical instances cannot be appropriated and applied to Emerson's day because the participants have changed. Ideas, on the

³ By ideal, I mean conceptual constructs that are a guiding code of sorts not necessarily attached to any specific context. By characteristics, I mean the ideal or principle as it has been applied.

other hand, can be applied without a specific context attached. What modes of access focus more on ideas than on specific instances? Three avenues warrant examination as possibilities.

The first is tradition. Tradition may prove useful because Emerson lived in Concord and was only a few decades away from the outbreak of the war. Tradition is a method of transmission that can pass cultural, economic, and popular positions on a variety of issues on to future generations within a similar context. Parents inculcate certain principles and ideas in their children, institutions propagate their doctrines and exert their influences, and politicians circulate perspectives and frequently encourage nostalgia. The parts that individuals consider important remain with the populace. Tradition does not simply evaporate when a new generation arises. The youth adhere to tradition to a certain degree and carry it along. With time, it is possible for tradition to be diluted with innovation, reinterpretation, and abandonment of outdated aspects of a previous time; however, since Emerson was born shortly after the Revolution and lived in one of its important sites, he was easily an heir to the Revolution.

The second avenue is that of personal accounts. Personal accounts provide access to the past from specific individuals. They have not become diluted, as may happen to some generational traditions. They act as a snapshot of the period. Naturally they do not embody all of the ideas and characteristics from the period, but they are claimed as accurate (by the giver), correspond to specific experience, and likely contain at least some of the principle issues. This avenue of access may be the most probable for Emerson since he, among others, was “raised on grandfathers’ tales of Lexington and Concord” (Fischer 289). A distilled version of the Revolutionary period would have been found in the reasons why the war took place or what Grandfather was fighting for. This avenue would have provided specific ideas and

characteristics that would have had a lasting impact similar to the other important parts of Emerson's early life.

Finally, there is poignancy of action. There are moments of incredible merit, emotion, tragedy, excitement, novelty, etc. that create something so memorable that the boundaries of time and geography are overcome. Emerson's "Concord Hymn," captures this phenomenon while referring to the Revolutionary period. "Here once the embattled farmers stood,/And fired the shot heard round the world" (3-4). Emerson suggests that the event of the Revolution is novel and impacts everyone, not just in the American colonies, but everywhere; its significance is so critical to social progress and advancement "That memory may their deed redeem,/When, like our sires, our sons are gone" (11-12). This event and time period will remain with those that become aware of it. The memory is more than the deceased "sons." One must also consider the attached ideas that were behind them fighting in the first place: liberty, unity, a United States, etc. Emerson then requests a particular poignancy to be attached to this moment with "Bid Time and Nature gently spare/The Shaft we raise to them and thee" (15-16.) This is a plea to make the moment timeless and applicable regardless of what follows. Whether or not this holds true for the world is not so much important as that it clearly remained with Emerson. This moment held persisting significance for Emerson and he subsequently directs his audience to the Revolution as well. Behind the event there are principles and morals that were worth a war and worth remembering. Once Emerson has directed his audience's attention to the American Revolutionary period, this figurative relocation begins to take shape.

The Fundamentals

Some fundamental premises of American ideals and characteristics as traditionally understood are summarized by Albert Bushnell Hart:

The fabric of the [American] State rests upon a group of generalizations which are partly in constitutional documents and partly in decisions of the courts, but exist chiefly as unwritten principles of political ethics in the minds of Americans themselves. Of those American principles the vital ones are: personal freedom, which involves the right to be one's own master, to choose one's own calling, to go where one pleases, and to form and express one's own opinions; equality . . . [and] democracy, which means the right to participate in government and thus protect freedom and equality. (68-69)

The ideal of personal freedom or liberty allows for personal change and adherence to what Emerson relies on to realize his social structure; liberty also distinctly coincides with Emerson's version of the self. It has the power of self-development and personal choice regarding life, methods, and actions. Equality does not hold such a critical role because to Emerson, equality is a given. Emerson had already divided up the universe into the "everything that is me" and "everything that is not me" categories with the publication of *Nature* (Richardson 227). These are broader categories than what would make up any differentiation between individuals. By analyzing the human as thinking, reasoning, and acting entity, equality is inherent for Emerson. Democracy is an interesting parallel to Emerson's social structure. Democracy is a system where each individual has power to voice what should be done. This power is coupled with the understanding that the whole is an aggregate of all other individuals with the same power. With this understanding, there is a collective unity as well as a protection of the freedom and equality as asserted by Hart. The United States achieved unity despite facing radical economic differences between the North and South as well as immense property and wealth differences between different classes and individuals (Zinn 98-99). There were clear and distinct differences

between members of the democracy, but enough individuals came together in support of a common national structure. Bercovitch states,

To federate in this sense as *uniters absolutely isolated* is to enact the principle of group pluralism as set out in the very concept of a “United States,” from the Constitution through the Compromise of 1850. (*Transformations* 312)

Individuals and even groups as large as states are able to maintain singular status; yet at the same time, they form a collective or a larger unity to which they all subscribe and contribute.

In many ways, liberty and union (both appear in the Preamble of the Constitution) are a paradox just as individual and social are for Emerson’s social structure. Emerson encourages the individual to have personal freedom, but not at the expense of the social union or others’ liberty; he expects the individual to support the underlying principles and goals of the collective. In Emerson’s vision, members have the liberty to appropriate ideas and ideals as they will, but they are to instruct and help one another in the appropriation process as well as create things that will be available for appropriation in the future. The individual is free to live and appropriate, but must contribute in maintaining the process that makes that freedom possible.

[The Bostonian] idea of liberty was both a corporate and an individual possession It referred not only to the autonomy of each person’s rights, but also to the integrity of the group, and especially to the responsibility of a people to regulate their own affairs. (Fischer 28)

Ideally, the individual was cognizant of and contributed to some degree of reciprocity between the individual and the social; this was an underlying ideal not only at the national level, but in New England as well.

To further extrapolate characteristics of the people that were not necessarily underpinning principles of the new United States, we turn to some of the tendencies and actions of the people in the Revolutionary period concerning economics, politics, society, education, and spirituality. Although each of these is clearly only a part of the American Revolutionary whole and often specific in context, hopefully by looking for connections and parallels, specific ideals and characteristics of the people can be extracted that would have been useful to Emerson.

Economics

Just after the Revolution, about three-quarters of the people were “self-supporting farmers, competent shopkeepers, skilled artisans, [and] moderately successful professionals” (Rossiter 253). In other words, all sorts of jobs, work, and livelihoods were present for the upkeep of individuals and their families. There was opportunity and freedom of personal choice. For example, in Boston after the alienation of loyalist merchants from the general public in 1776, other merchants had room to expand or take their place (East 49). There was also the opportunity “to develop old trading routes or to blaze new ones, the former method appealing to the conservative element which was especially strong in Boston” (250). As opportunity presented itself, the individual could make a profit in the chosen way. Despite livelihood differences, individuals seemed to base economic efforts on “ambition, self-respect, industry, pride in personal independence, capacity for social co-operation, and faith in themselves” (Rossiter 253). At the individual level, the relationship between the self and the social comes into play again. Americans pursued economic survival through ambition and industry, which led to the satisfaction of being self-sufficient; also, they demonstrated a capacity for cooperation and establishing interrelations. They demonstrated both individual development and social interaction.

After peace was established, there was a “nation-wide commercial depression” (East 239). The magnitude and encompassing reach of such an event “shows how the country had become economically unified, and consequently, how readily the situation would lend itself to re-adjustment” (239). Economically, there was a unity demonstrated by individuals who were industrious and cooperated. The individual at the micro level and the economic situation at the national or macro level were already quite knit together at the finish of the Revolutionary War. As with Emerson’s system, that which affects the individual eventually involves the group as well. If the individual does not employ personal industry while cooperating with other individuals, then it will be impossible to improve collectively. Only when individuals develop personally through self-sufficiency and maintain the same for others can they achieve some sort of social wellbeing. The individual and social are interrelated; one individual does not change drastically without placing a corresponding imbalance upon the group. The miserable economic depression that befell Americans was not a national incident, but something experienced individually and waded through together.

Society and Politics

At the Constitution’s inception,

No one felt that living in society was for ordinary people a matter of choice; men—by which was obviously meant men and women, not to mention children—were by their natures social beings. (Pole 80)

American society was characteristic of interrelations. Americans went to church together, traded among themselves, and made friendships. Americans also had ideal people to look to regarding how to act in the new United States. “Thomas Jefferson argued for American greatness in . . . pointing out that although a young nation with a small population, America had already a

pantheon of heroes” (Gilje 114). American society, it was thought, had the potential to create great individuals who would contribute to the people and image of the United States.

Whereas American sociality was ubiquitous, Americans differed concerning their views on government. Americans believed that “living under *political* society, under government, was strongly felt to be a matter of choice” (Pole 80). There was no idealized government per se, but the Revolutionary War proper seems to indicate that there was some tacit acceptance of government provided that the fundamentals such as liberty were given to its citizens; however, Americans thought they had the choice whether to live under such politics.

Sociality was considered inherent during the Revolutionary period, while being under the influence of politics was not. These positions give great insight into Emerson’s writings. There seems to be a lack of the political in Emerson’s writings. This lack may be deliberate in that Emerson was permitting the individual to decide to be political or apolitical as part of self-development and growth. As noted earlier, Emerson was to a small degree politically conscious and active; however, this does not seem to be a primary concern in his writing. The importance of sociality is much more significant. Emerson asks the individual to depart from contemporary collective relations. In “The Transcendentalist,” Emerson notes that “It is better to be alone than in bad company. And it is really a wish to be met,—the wish to find society for their hope and religion,—which prompts them to shun what is called society” (100). Emerson does not have to request that individuals disassociate themselves from the contemporary political jurisdiction because the option already clearly existed in the minds of Americans; however, he must explicitly ask for a withdrawal from society because, to Americans, this goes against their basic assumptions. It is also clear that the concept of society is not to be abandoned, just the contemporary attributes and particulars; Emerson desires to reform it or perhaps start over.

Education

Education was a key value before, during, and after the Revolutionary period.

The early national period witnessed the foundation of professional schools, starting with medicine, law, and divinity. At the undergraduate level, however, Protestant, Catholic, and public colleges all emphasized a liberal education—that is, one designed to develop the student’s intellectual powers rather than to provide vocational training. (Howe 462)

If educational opportunities were not ubiquitous, then the belief in the importance of education was. Shortly after the war, reformers “wanted to make sure that the general population received enough education to become a virtuous citizenry and guarantee the future of the republic” (Gilje 118). Also, female “education became increasingly important in the early republic to ensure the proper training of elite women to fulfill their roles as republican women and cultured hostesses” (110). The desire to provide education to both men and women was a relatively wide-spread value. One begins to understand why Emerson’s mother was so keen on keeping her children supplied with educational opportunities, even to the point of renting out the home. Education was critical, and Emerson’s father would have had first-hand experience in qualifying himself for his profession in this manner. It comes as no surprise that New England education, particularly Harvard University, was at the top of the Transcendental Club’s list of concerns. Education creates a legacy of access to opportunity, a value that parallels the economics of that day. It gives liberty to thought, provides additional choices for the exercise of personal freedom, and strengthens the position of the individual. Education is also often a social activity between teacher and student. Education works well within the Emersonian system because of its possible individualism and sociality. Much of Emerson’s writing talks about the development of people

in general, but when he focuses on instructing and learning, the results are discussions of the American Scholar and the Transcendentalist. Education and learning is a critical aspect of Emerson's personal development and social structure.

Spirituality

The spiritual characteristics of the Revolutionary period overlap to some degree with other areas. This is because American religion focuses extensively on liberty. Americans may associate with religion according to their personal beliefs. This opens up avenues to plurality of faiths and orientations. However, this often entails associating with some group of similar believers, joining a group, or establishing sociality. It also permits disassociation because liberty is constantly maintained by the individual. Therefore, in the American context, religion is created by and adhered to by the individual while also maintaining a social backdrop.

Ruth E. Bloch shows that "The assertion that liberty was God-given or God's cause was a standard refrain in American revolutionary arguments" and often extended to include rights of the individual (61). The fundamental idea of liberty was not just a power exercisable by the individual, but was also associated with having a divine origin. Liberty then was not just confined to society or granted by government, but was considered innate and supported by religion.

Religion-backed liberty flowed over into the political realm. Liberty is directly associated with God and as such the individual had rights that should be recognized by the governing body. Liberty "often meant freedom from state laws discriminating against nonestablishment and itinerant preachers . . . [and] liberation from all forms of civil tyranny" (20). Liberty was an undergirding principle for Americans and as such it was not held solely within the confines of religion. Once Americans accepted religions' version of liberty, this

version began to be applied similarly to other areas. As this religious liberty was applied to sociality, there arose a “confidence in the incremental, if not necessarily steady, improvement of human society” (103). Not only the spiritual rejuvenation of the individual was expected, but an amelioration of society as a whole. In the 1780’s, the spillover would include education and “commercial development” which would be valued intellectually in common by both spiritual and secular leadership (103) which broadened the concept of liberty. Religion thus consolidated and amplified ideas and characteristics of the Revolutionary period; however, this effect was not limited to the United States proper. In 1792 John Mercer, in an oration at William and Mary declared that the American task at hand was to spread liberty throughout and ‘regenerate the old world’ (190). In this fashion, liberty took on a role of unifier of not just the U.S., but also of all people in all places. Personal spirituality and salvation was not enough. Religion had to do more than just revitalize individuals one at a time. It had to liberate large groups and eventually the world.

For Emerson, spirituality is not relegated to religion per se, but is based on conscience. Although he would eventually leave the ministry, he retains the religious-style diction. He was at odds with various figures over religion throughout his life such as Andrews Norton over “The Divinity School Address” (Richardson 299-300). This was because he delineated his own new spirituality and religiosity. For Emerson, the spiritual combines with the individual, the individual permitting, and refinements to the individual can proceed thereafter. Emerson was not concerned with the structure of religion; the religious feelings and ideas that permeated America, however, were of primary interest.

The United States: Revolution and Emerson's Day

This brief analysis of the underlying ideas and characteristics of the period immediately following the Revolution shows there is a distinct relationship between the individual and the larger group of which it is part.

American life, economic, social, and religious was lived in various forms of community the more exposed facets of life . . . brought home most intensely the physical and, not less, the psychological necessity for mutual support and for collaborative effort and protection in everything from house building to military defense. (Pole 77)

Values and principles were prevalent in the culture of the Revolutionary period. Individuals were industrious and tried to cooperate with each other economically. Americans tried to be on good terms with each other and looked up to national role models. Self-development through education aimed to make better citizens of both men and women. Individuals were free to follow their own religious beliefs and permitted others to do likewise. These may have constituted some of the ideas and characteristics that Emerson was drawing on because they correspond well with own sense of sociality and the role of the individual. These principles and ideals may have been what Emerson was directing his nineteenth-century audience to look back upon. To look back and make this comparison between the two ourselves, the analysis must turn to Emerson's day.

Chapter 4: America's Departure

In his analysis of the American Jeremiad, Sacvan Bercovitch describes it as both “lamenting a declension and celebrating a national dream” (“Rhetoric” 28) and fulfilled by returning to a previous time’s ideals and characteristics (30). This chapter will attempt to demonstrate the declension that Emerson sees in his contemporary society. Emerson’s realization of social and individual declension may be for any number of reasons. This chapter is not meant to be exhaustive or exclusive, but does posit possibilities that correspond with the categories laid out in Chapter 3. It will postulate why the idea-oriented Emerson begins to look at some of the more material aspects of his society. It will then provide a contrasting version of the characteristics outlined in the previous chapter and how they changed over time until arriving at Emerson’s day.

Looking Outward

Throughout Emerson’s early educational development, he appropriated ideas from various sources that clarified his vision of the world. One may even say that his focus on appropriation and apprehension of knowledge led him to forget or ignore certain aspects of the outside world. His primary world was one of ideas rather than a material reality. As mentioned earlier, Emerson created almost no friendships or lasting bonds with classmates, professors, or other acquaintances while at Harvard. His attractions to certain individuals were based on their ideas and assertions more than their personal characteristics. This introspective phase would eventually end and be replaced by a concern with the individual/social relationship that has been tracked throughout. This change is for two reasons. Emerson had worked through enough material to know what his views were. He solidified his position prior to 1841 by leaving the ministry. It showed that he was making a formal break from any previous position or belief

system. Emerson had been considering this break since 1831 (von Frank 56). “Emerson had now moved beyond Unitarianism” (Richardson 197). He declared to his journal, ‘Henceforth I design not to utter any speech, poem or book that is not entirely and peculiarly my work’ (186). Once having embodied, synthesized, and claimed as his own a substantial body of thought, Emerson had created a sufficiently complete system that he could call his own. He was thereafter able to look outward and prescribe to the world around him.

This looking outward leads to the second reason for which he abandoned his introspective phase: maturation through personal hardship. As early as 1823, Emerson records in his journal that ‘the dreams of my childhood are all fading away and giving place to some very sober and very disgusting views of a quiet mediocrity of talents and constitution’ (46). The fancies and relative ease of youth were fading quickly. The ideals and perceived structure of the way things could be was contrasted against the way the world was. His maturation took a large step by marrying Ellen Tucker in 1829 (von Frank 43). While the courtship and engagement that took place the year before (35) were part of Emerson’s awakening to the world around him, it was Ellen’s death in 1831 (55) that began the series of harsh realities that would cause Emerson to look at the world around him. Charles died in 1836 (Richardson 224). As noted earlier, Emerson had few extra-familial ties in his early years, making these attachments very poignant and deep. These familial losses caused introspection, but also an analysis of life in general. “What had been affirmed out of conviction becomes confirmed by experience, even painful experience” (Hughes xi).

Events continued to befall Emerson that would get his attention primarily through personal acquaintances and family concerns that were common parts of life such as death or events going on in the regional or national arena (discussed below). Emerson awakened to

certain occurrences that were not originally pressing. In some ways, Emerson experienced what he states to be critical in personal development. In his address before the Divinity College at Cambridge, Emerson states, “it is not instruction but provocation, that I can receive from another soul” (72). In “Self-Reliance,” he asks for an imparting of “truth and health in rough electric shocks, putting them once more in communication with their own reason” (133). These shocks made Emerson grow, but also made him attend to things that he was perhaps ignoring before the hard news was delivered. One result from the death of his brother Charles was *Nature*. “[I]n some ways *Nature* was Emerson’s open letter for the world on behalf of Charles, who is ‘the friend’ so movingly apostrophized at the end of the chapter ‘Discipline’ (Richardson 225). Hard times caused Emerson to rethink the world with these new events weighing on him. He therefore had to expand and reconcile his vision of the world to account for growing up, tragedy, and life in general; basically, his ideal version did not match up to the world around him.

Negative personal and national events led Emerson to initiate a comparison between his social reality and the ideals of preceding generations. There was a discrepancy between the two and Emerson was determined to create some sort of change and transformation. Not only was the ministry in Concord not matching up with his ideals and vision of the world, it was too narrow a venue. Society could not be reformed on a large scale within the walls of a small New England church with its doctrines and structure already in place. Emerson needed a return to previous ideals for the entire society and he set out to begin such through the media already discussed.

Emerson’s call for a return to ideals was a call for change. To better understand why that change was necessary, the path that the United States took right after the Revolution up to

Emerson's day must be charted; in other words, what transpired between the Revolution and Emerson's day that would have led him to call for such a return only a few decades later?

Economic Evils

The typical economic woes that beset the people of the United States are not too surprising considering they had just fought a war. "[A]fter eight long years of war and economic dislocation, Americans were too exhausted to do much more than put their affairs, too long neglected, in order" (Rakove 81). The war had caused much sacrifice of the people. Vocations, investments, and the daily routine that provided the necessities of life were put on hold for the national struggle. After such a sacrifice on behalf of the nation, it only made sense for Americans to return home and try to create some sense of normalcy and daily living. Although this response seems reasonable at the individual level, for a nation that was just underway, commitment to the collective was still critical. The U.S. faced "financial insolvency" (Cohen 313). Just as the people had sacrificed their time and efforts, the Revolutionary leadership had poured as much money into the effort as possible; yet, by the 1780's the nation's financial problems remained as they steadily headed toward bankruptcy (Rakove 88). Shortly after the war, American merchants again began importing goods from Great Britain to sell and distribute. The British did not match this trade policy. They blocked all American shipping into their ports both in Great Britain proper as well as its West Indies colonies (90). Other "foreign demand for many American products, including wheat and tobacco, proved unstable" (McCoy 136). The U.S. would try to develop its economy without this typically profitable avenue, forcing it to be more independent. Though valiant efforts were made to secure some form of economic independence, failure was the only result under both republican and federalist attempts (Higginbotham 169). As if lack of funds and foreign trade reciprocity were not enough to leave

a feeling of economic despair on U.S. leadership and people alike, the U.S. also faced extensive debt, problems with “banking facilities,” and a broken “currency system” (Greene 5).

“[I]dleness and underemployment of resources, human and otherwise,” were also prevalent (McCoy 136). Ultimately, “there was a nation-wide commercial depression after the peace settlement” (East 239). These were some of the problems that the nation faced as it began its new existence. These circumstances resulted as natural consequences of war and national conception; however, they also marked the uphill economic battle that would have to be fought to make some sort of financial headway in the future.

While the nation was trying to respond and adapt during its Revolutionary aftermath, the people were changing. Upon returning home to put personal affairs in order, Americans became focused on themselves. Americans “showed themselves far more interested in accumulating material goods and promoting the immediate welfare of themselves and their families” than in their local community or the new United States (Greene 6). They must have perceived the initial national sacrifice as enough. Personal pursuits were the new order of the day despite the economic woes. There was no rallying to the communal needs this time around; the individual came first. As early as 1777, David Ramsey noted that “A spirit of money-making has eaten up our patriotism” (qtd. in Cohen 314). In that same year William Gordon sent a letter to John Adams:

As to [economic] abuses, they are enormous and almost without number

Instead of having our affairs conducted with economy, the Continent hath been plundered, and business carried on at the most expensive rate (314)

The individual was vying for personal economic gain; this in and of itself was not necessarily wrong. Liberty was to provide opportunities for the individual. The problem was that this was

being pursued at the expense of national unity according to Ramsey and of business ethic, according to Gordon. Thus, individual opportunity was taken advantage of, but at the cost of others. Although these perspectives were relatively isolated and few in number, they do show that there was some early apprehension toward the ability of Americans to live up to the Revolutionary ideal of having personal freedom while maintaining cooperation and unity.

As time went on, it became clear that American economics “fell considerably short of the full measure of independence that the Revolutionary generation of the late eighteenth century had aspired to” (McCoy 146). In 1820, Henry Clay asserted that the U.S. was “politically free,” but “commercially slaves” (qtd. in McCoy 131). The U.S. leadership’s economic objective had been to create one American economy in an autonomous fashion instead of perpetuating the North/South dichotomy present from the nation’s creation (132). This proved particularly problematic because “Glutted markets for American tobacco, grain, and cotton drove prices down, discouraged production, and sapped the industry of the republican citizens” (134). The national dilemma was aggravated by hard times at the local level. The infrastructure was also under stress.

The era’s economic graveyard was piled high with the bones of canal, turnpike, and railroad company failures. Heavily capitalized steamboats, one of the period’s adornments blew up at an alarming rate. (Pessen 124)

Novelty and technology may have created excitement and high expectations for growth and development, but the reality was much more dismal and uncertain. The banking problems present in the late eighteenth century continued into the next. The panics of the twenties and the thirties were characteristic.

[The] currency [of banks] was too often of dubious character and poor reputation, precisely the qualities which induced that lack of confidence on the part of its possessors that in turn led them to make their fateful run on banks for a redemption the latter could not give. (138)

These successive and widespread panics may have something to do with the continuing characteristic that was common just a few decades prior. “The transcendent American value according to most contemporaries was materialism. The distinguishing feature of the American was his love of money” (25). This love of money can conflict with the industry and cooperation values described earlier. Money that originates from industry did not create this characteristic of Americans. It was the love of the end product that led individuals to employ any method that would get them there. Cooperation does not necessarily have to be employed. This love can supplant these two values making them hollow at best and unpracticed at worst. American love of money continued throughout multiple generations and was alive and well right up to Emerson’s day.

To what extent Emerson was aware of all of these events is difficult to say, but he did direct his attention to money and economics on a few occasions. Emerson

had many claims on his income: he helped support his mother and his brothers Charles and Bulkeley and he loaned large sums of money to the strapped William in New York Worries about money figure prominently in his correspondence for the next decade, through the financial panic and crash of 1837 and into the mid-1840s. (Richardson 175-176)

These economic shocks directly affected Emerson’s family and relations. He was to a large extent the breadwinner and money lender in the Emerson clan. He was concerned for those he

loved and cared for as they teetered near financial distress. He did not even feel financially “well-off” himself (176). Although they may not surface in his prescriptive writings, American economics played a significant role in his personal life. Because of this familial economic condition, it would not have been strange for Emerson to also analyze American society’s economic situation as well.

Passionate Politics

Robinson asserts that for Emerson, “Politics were distasteful . . . a necessary evil at best” (*Apostle* 142); however, Emerson was politically vocal in particular moments of disgust. When it came to politicians, their policy, reform, etc., Emerson would simply bring it down to the level of ethics (156). Unfortunately, the politics of the U.S. following the Revolution were far from crystalline and pure of heart; ethics, often times, were a forgotten subject.

In any new nation, it is understandable to have some political shakiness after the initial creation. Things are still experimental and untried. The tenuous situation, however, did not entirely disappear even after a few years.

Tensions among exponents of competing ideologies about nature and goals of the American polity had, by the 1790s, produced deep party divisions and a vigorous competition for power of a kind traditionally regarded as a harbinger of the collapse of popular governments. (Greene 6)

Naturally there would have been difference of opinion on how to run the newly created United States; however, when power is the primary objective instead of the well being of the people, the pathway to collective progress becomes blocked and exchanged for individual or party gain. The characteristics of “debilitating partisanship” and “political degeneration” soon took hold (Cohen 313). ‘Pretended patriots’ . . . were responsible for precipitating much of the factional

squabbling that plagued public discussions in the 1780's' (Yazawa 298). Individual politicians under the guise of patriotism were causing political problems and probably brought questionable associations for a sentiment that had proved so useful and unifying during the war period. In politics, similar to the economic woes of the time, individuals put the self first and let collective consequences follow without much concern.

The new republic's leadership hoped to pursue and maintain peaceful international relations. "The war of 1812 proved that hope short-lived" (Higginbotham 168). The war created difficult times and the U.S. took a severe military beating that resulted in the destruction of the capital. This destruction extensively lowered morale and shook confidence in both citizen and politician alike. There is no easy way of assigning blame in this case. This tragic and demoralizing event was simply a series of events that the U.S. leadership had to deal with that were beyond their control; however, this war signified that the U.S. was not invulnerable to the effects of politics whether from failures at home or abroad.

As the 1800's got underway, politics began to have a negative effect on the U.S. at the individual level. There were many times when "Chicanery, corruption, incompetence, short-sightedness, greed, opportunistic politics, among other things, explained the failure of many projects" (Pessen 124). Such characteristics sacrificed public and collective interests and responsibilities for personal gain. As personal interests took the place of national interest, the scene became ugly. This was particularly true of the election of 1828 which 'splattered more filth in different directions and upon more innocent people than any other in American history' (165). It was no longer enough for the individual to place the personal wants and goals in front of the national and collective objectives; other individuals' right to pursue their goals were to be demeaned, curtailed, sacrificed, etc., in the name of politics and leadership. The 1828 contest

was described as ‘not a conflict between opposing principles, but a conflict between opposing men’ (165). This created a schism between leadership and its constituency. Principles took a back seat so that the presidency could be secured for a man, not for ideas.

Sub-Standard Sociality

After the Revolutionary War, one could expect a certain level of realization of those ideals that were sought by the patriotic Americans. However, “in what should have been the warm afterglow of the successful republican revolution, harmony, unity, and homogeneity appeared to be little more than fond wishes” (Cohen 313). Obtaining that which was sought proved difficult. The ideals desired and fought for did not match up with what was practical and readily achievable. Instead of social progress there were social problems. By 1778, there were a few voices that already noted a decline in American morals and standards (Yazawa 294). Such claims were hardly the general consensus, but the downward trend eventually became more widely noted, surprising many contemporaries. In 1786 John Brooks asked,

Could anyone have conceived that a people who had given such signal displays of fortitude and patriotism during the Revolution could soon, very soon, so far forget their own dignity and interest, as to abuse their liberty, and prostitute it to the purposes of licentiousness? (294)

Morality had been modified or forgotten and previous virtues or values had been pushed to one side. As discussed earlier, it would have been to some degree expected for the continued self-interest of the people to be placed ahead of the collective interests; however, Brooks noted that the people were abandoning previous morals at the expense of personal dignity and liberty. It seems that instead of adhering to the ideals of the recent past, some Americans were only interested in ideals if they served self-interest.

Other observers noted that morals eventually reached so low that only ‘legal honesty’ seemed to have place among the general populace (Yazawa 294). This morality seems to be present only because of the “legal” consequences for moral infringement instead of actual moral adherence. “Heedless of the relationship between private ambition and public calamity, the people blithely ignored the symptoms of decline” (Cohen 314). As noted by individuals such as Brooks, poor moral choices made by individuals weakened the social fabric originally weaved with revolutionary ideals. This decline did not seem to have any immediate consequences, particularly individually. Instead, some Americans abandoned morality at the expense of society and they remained disinterested in halting the process of social decline; Americans’ aggregate social character did not seem to matter much at the personal level. There was still the persistent presence of the Revolutionary ideals, morals, and standards in the minds of the people, but many actions did not reflect them. “The gap between the ideal and the real, which earlier served as evidence of unfortunate behavior, was now taken as indicative of erroneous standards” (Yazawa 292). The failure to adhere to ideal morals and standards early on was seen only as individually delinquent because the morals were still in sufficient effect that the majority recognized them as the norm and attempted to put them into practice. As this adherence broke down, there was some discomfort in not matching up to previous expectations. Instead of correcting their personal behavior, individuals called the standards into question and ultimately found in them the fault; it was as if the people proclaimed, “It’s not our fault, it’s the standards!” Excusing one’s self did not change the character of either the individuals or the society at large, but perhaps it assuaged a few consciences.

By Emerson’s day, a new set of characteristics held sway. Selfishness was the characteristic of choice (Pessen 12). After a few decades of putting the self first regardless of

collective interests or even other individuals, this became the norm and expected way of living. Opportunities existed to maximize personal economic gain at the expense of others. A collective outlook was a characteristic of the past.

Americans were also characteristically practical. “Americans were interested in men more than principles, immediate success rather than long-range consequences or ethics” (15). This tied in well with selfishness. The question became one of “What can be accomplished for me now?” not “What kind of person will this make me?” or “How will this affect the community and those I live with?”

The American was also a conformist (17). This conformity matched one’s self to that which was easiest to accomplish (hence, practicality) while keeping social upkeep to a minimum (selfishness at work once again.) These characteristics did not embed themselves in the people overnight, but when they did settle, Americans went with the flow and did as everyone else did. There was no reason not to.

Americans did not forget the values of the Revolutionary period, the passage of time and the creation of new characteristics notwithstanding. In fact, they continued to be professed and asserted as something distinctly American. The façade did not hold up to scrutiny. Foreign “observers found glaring contradictions between American lip service and practice or between their professed and actual values” (28). Americans may have changed their tendencies and characteristics, but they had not entirely modified their rhetoric to match (apparently there was a shortage of worldly praise for practically ubiquitous pretentiousness.)

It is in understanding these new American characteristics that Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” seems to make more sense. “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist” (122). To instigate change, Emerson called for an abandonment of current practice.

Let us affront and reprimand the smooth mediocrity and squalid contentment of the times and hurl in the face of custom, and trade, and office, the fact which is the upshot of all history, that there is a responsible Thinker and Actor working wherever a man works. (126)

Emerson called for a social overhaul of his day's social morals and standards. His objective is to recruit individuals and instigate change among them; this objective will not necessarily be popular because for "nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure" (124). It is clear that Emerson was aware of just how far these individuals had to go to return to what they professed to value.

Effectuating Education

The value of education never really seemed to deviate from the time of the Revolution to Emerson's day. It was constant and high on the list of "Values to Develop" of both leadership and common citizenry. However, education ran into problems when it came into contact with other areas of concern.

Although the leaders' dream of a republican education for all was not lost, little was done in the decades immediately following the Revolution, largely because ordinary people did not want to spend their money on taxes for public schools.

(Wood 359)

Economic self-interest trumped the desire for a school system that would provide public education. Although this self-interest seems straightforward enough, it still seems strange that Americans would keep education as an ideal and goal despite being incongruous with money and tax issues; this disparity ultimately demeans the value.

What is most striking about the Revolutionaries' educational hopes is how hollow they eventually came to seem. All the leaders' educational efforts to make Americans into good, virtuous republicans seemed to go awry. Their valiant attempts to inculcate benevolence and to control the scramble for moneymaking were simply overwhelmed by the new commercial forces let loose in post-Revolutionary society. Demagogues and vulgarity seemed almost everywhere to supplant affection and civility. (359)

Although leadership struggled and ultimately failed to achieve any significant educational goals, their failure brings into question just how fervent and determined they were to bring it to pass. Certainly preventing national breakdowns and maintaining a defense would trump education since one must maintain national status before teaching a nation, but the reluctance of the citizenry to allocate funds at the local level seems to indicate that the materialism and selfishness discussed earlier were more powerful than this professed ideal. Emerson ran into educational issues that affected him directly. Generally, he had publicly voiced his concern that Americans had failed to bring forth some sort of imaginative work (Richardson 295). The Transcendental Club cited the problems of American secondary education. "When Emerson ends [his English literature] lecture series championing an American literature, he is not thinking of the past but of American literary possibilities in the present (215). Emerson is searching for some sort of light within the social gloom that should have been created, at least in part, through education.

Perhaps the most personal event regarding education involved Bronson Alcott whom Emerson at one time called 'the most extraordinary man and the highest genius of the time' (von Frank 124). Alcott had established the Temple School in 1835 in Boston, which permitted both boys and girls to attend. "He believed in and deliberately practiced a dialogic mode . . . [and] he

recognized and honored each of his students as an individual and a mind” (Richardson 212-213). Alcott’s approach was liberal and controversial; however, he still published *Conversations with Children on the Gospels* which characterized his teaching at the school. This clash between liberal and conservative views on education would ultimately cause the closure of the school, but Emerson defended Alcott and his school against the assaults of Boston newspapers (von Frank 122). Educational success, even when coupled with Emerson’s defense, was not enough to overcome the outrage of Boston. This shock to Emerson would mark the difference between the American educational disposition and the ideal that was supposedly in circulation during Emerson’s day. This particular shock could have moved Emerson toward a more general inspection of American education. It is not surprising that “The American Scholar” was delivered two years later.

Spiritual Schisms

Religion flourished in the Revolutionary era because religious leaders emphasized liberty. Although this match worked well ideologically between the national and the religious, in practice

religion appeared to be becoming a source of discord rather than stability, as people seemed to be more intent on following their own personal dispositions rather than regarding the larger interest of the society. (Greene 7)

This assertion at first seems problematic. Liberty not only freed the individual through choice of relationship to God and sect, it also constituted the freedom to create versions of God and additional sects. As a result, this post-war period was ‘the time of greatest religious chaos and originality in American history’ (Hatch 392). This seems to work along the lines of the group pluralism mentioned earlier. Freedom created newness and more choices, but this plurality was

also problematic. “The resulting culture pulsed with the claims of heterodox religious groups, with people veering from one sect to another, and with the unbridled wrangling of competitors in a ‘war of words’ (402). The plurality was by no means respected. Sects persecuted other sects and their membership. Members of opposing religions considered each other rivals instead of Americans or community members. This aggressive and “unbridled wrangling” tries to limit the liberty of individuals who have not adhered to the aggressor’s religious group. The religious groups take advantage of their religious liberty, but when other individuals use it in another way, the choice is condemned. Religious adherents created an us/them paradigm that was maintained well into Emerson’s day. This oppositional paradigm was not only between sects, but also between perceived religious types. The newer religious groups that were actively using religious liberty came to see some of the more established religions as the new enemy of the American people; this developed into a general zealous sentiment of anticlericalism (394-398). In 1808, Elias Smith asserted that traditional clergy tried

to draw men into a *slavish dependence* on them; that by representing the Scriptures as a *dark book*, they have *hood winked* the followers of Christ, and others, that they might render them *implicit believers* in their arbitrary *decrees*, and make them, without control, subservient to the views of their *ambition, avarice, pride and luxury*. (397)

These zealous religious folk soon extended their fervor to include lawyers and physicians to their list of targeted enemies (397). Although this was hardly the end or upset of more traditional religious orientations, this period did show certain individuals infringing upon others’ liberty in the field of religion.

By Emerson's day, sectarian animosity continued, but the principle development was the fascination with the Millennium. This Christian doctrine was adhered to by many religious sects and described how plague, death, and catastrophe would end the world (Howe 285-287); the righteous of the sect describing the foretold Second Coming of Christ would, of course, be the notable exception to this catastrophe. This exclusiveness not only cast off all groups and individuals that did not belong to the organized sect, but also created a differentiation, gradation, or hierarchy of members within the sect itself. The group focused on itself, requiring members to reach certain levels of religious individual progression or development. At the community level where more than one sect was present, it was no surprise that "Cities grew unevenly and often unhappily in large part because of . . . religious tensions" (Pessen 75-76).

In some ways, one could associate the liberty of choosing religious relations with Emerson. He "wanted no more secondhand God" (Richardson 288); this version of deity was unsatisfactory when one "can read God directly" ("The American Scholar" 60). In this regard, Emerson parallels Abner Jones who in 1792 declared himself free from religious institutions and sought to preach with only the Bible as an aid; he refused "to allow any human mediation" (Hatch 399). Despite Emerson's break with formal Christianity and the criticism that he received from it, Emerson seems to have adhered to religious liberty and used it to satisfy his own convictions; similarly, as his own sect, he was not immune to the remonstrations that followed.

The difference between the immediate aftermath of the Revolution and Emerson's day is a shift toward the self at the expense of society. Even individuals were at risk of having their use of liberty harassed by others who had acted similarly. Money was the primary value of Americans;

however, the values of the previous generations were not forgotten. Americans simply did not put them into practice.

Chapter 5: Overlooked Factors

I have demonstrated that Emerson notices a disparity between the ideals of the Revolution and the way that his contemporary society acts. As outlined in Chapter 2, Emerson is prescriptive. He desires individuals to implement or enact his system to create a real version of society from his mental one. His vision is based on those previous ideals that still seem to be recalled by his audience to some degree. This chapter will show that while Emerson's plan to enact change or start over seems theoretically sound, it proves problematic when applied to America. It will also show some of Emerson's thoughts that indicate he may have understood these potential problems in part.

When Things Don't Work Right the First Time . . .

Emerson's calls on his contemporary society to hearken back to the ideals found in the Revolution in the manner Bercovitch finds typical of American ideology; however, Emerson seems to do it in a problematic fashion. For Emerson, the way to embody ideals is to appropriate them and then re-embody them in the present. He puts no significance on when the idea was created or applied; the human condition is enough for him to employ any idea. In "The American Scholar" Emerson states, "This time, like all times is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it" (67). Time is not an important factor because, to Emerson, each individual is a constant as exemplified in "Self-Reliance": "No greater men are now than ever were. A singular equality may be observed between the great men of the first and of the last ages" (135). Each individual is equal and is allotted a space and a time; individuals must simply take advantage of the now. "Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds" ("American Scholar" 67). That which is true for him now will help him understand the past and future. In "History" he asserts that "there is properly no History; only Biography (108).

In other words, people trump events, environment, and other conditions. “You shall not tell me by the languages and titles a catalogue of the volumes you have read. You shall make me feel what periods you have lived” (119). Clearly it would be impossible to go back and actually live certain periods, but through the embodiment of its ideas, or in our Revolutionary case ideals, Emerson states that this personal incorporation can take place.

The problem with Emerson’s method is that it severs the ideals from the reality to which they are inseparably attached. Raymond Williams’ work *The Country and the City* highlights the downfalls to such a strategy. A “persistent and particular version of the Golden Age, a myth functioning as a memory, could then be used . . . as an aspiration” (43). The Golden Age for Emerson is the Revolutionary period as put forth in “The American Scholar.” Emerson has not created a utopic vision of place, but of ideals. He remembers these ideals and appropriates them to apply them to his day. Williams continues by showing that this appropriation of the Golden Age is

the idea of an ordered and happier past set against the disturbance and disorder of the present. An idealisation, based on a temporary situation and on a deep desire for stability, served to cover and to evade the actual and bitter contradictions of the time. (45)

The American ideals are indeed promising and work together quite nicely in the abstract. Emerson notes that most Americans do not adhere to these ideals in the mode that they were originally intended during his day. What is missing is the *practice* of them. The problem with overlooking the historical practices according to Williams is that “step by step, these living tensions are excised, until there is nothing countervailing, and selected images stand as themselves: not in a living but in an enameled world” (18). For Emerson, the process is not even

done in steps but instead, all at once. Emerson wants the ideals to stand alone and then be incorporated by the people in his day, but so doing does not guarantee his desired effect.

Emerson might have been on the right track to making this discovery on his own in his essay "Compensation." In the beginning of the essay, Emerson desires to impress upon his audience that everything has its attached opposite or corresponding part so that "the world is thus dual, so is every one of its parts" (139). Two paragraphs later he writes, "The same dualism underlies the nature and condition of man" (139). After establishing that humanity is no exception to the nature of polarity and attachments, he asserts that the tendency is to try and divide and split these dualisms; he then notes, "This dividing and detaching is steadily counteracted. Up to this day, it must be owned, no projector has had the smallest success" (142). If Emerson would have realized that by trying to wrest the ideals from their social, economic, and political underpinnings that he was fighting against his own asserted dualism, perhaps he would have approached appropriation in a much different manner.

Emerson's appropriation of Revolutionary ideals fails in two regards: people and circumstance. People are human and as such they have limitations, faults, tendencies, weaknesses, and so forth. "[I]ndividual Americans showed, in one area after another, that they had neither the will, nor the commitment, nor the interest required to sustain . . . the successful functioning of a republic (Greene 6). This failure was not limited to the individual level. "[P]olitical leaders enjoyed only limited success in resolving the various problems confronting American society in ways that were compatible with the goals they had articulated before and during the war" (5). Ideals present a good goal, but achieving them is a different matter altogether. "The Revolutionaries were certainly excited and optimistic at the outset, and they took up their responsibilities with a sense of urgency and nervous expectancy" (Wood 356). The

desire to succeed and do well were present, but Americans seem to have at least somewhat understood the difficulty that lie ahead; their capacity would be challenged because ideals are a perfect or the best version of something and people are not incorruptible. This analysis of the post-Revolutionary period shows that, in general, American capacity was insufficient. The people soon came to see that “the vision of a self-sacrificing, public-spirited society held out by the republican enthusiasts in the immediate wake of independence [did not] any longer seem to be attainable” (Greene 6). Leaders who should have been a bit more capable or aware of more relations in achieving ideals found that they “could not implement goals that were incompatible with the basically private and highly individualistic predisposition of the society over which they presided” (11). These failures and shortcomings highlighted “an ever-widening gap between the way men were and the way they ought to be” (Yazawa 292). These problems and issues were “found in the people themselves” (294). As discussed in Chapter 4, selfishness, love of money, and pretentiousness seem to have been the overriding factors.

In all fairness, this may be why Emerson focuses so much on the individual. This is the place where more buoyancy is required against the typical and common pitfalls of humanity.

We want men and women who shall renovate life and our social state, but we see that most natures are insolvent, cannot satisfy their own wants, have an ambition out of all proportion to their practical force . . . (“Self-Reliance” 131)

Emerson wants individuals to be stalwart and adherent to principle as much as he is. In “Spiritual Laws” he writes, “The man may teach by doing and not otherwise” (157). Emerson considers himself to be in the teaching or prescriptive position. He has personally adhered to his own ideals and precepts. Emerson’s task at hand then is to move outward: “But the good and wise must learn to act, and carry salvation to the combatants and demagogues in the dusty arena

below” (“The Transcendentalist” 100). Emerson is the example that others can follow; however, Americans in his day seem to be incapable or at least unwilling to practice and embody the ideals set out in the Revolution. Emerson recognizes this to some degree, but still seeks out converts to his social prescriptions. However, the qualified potential initiates seem to be few in number.

It is circumstance that seems to be Emerson’s bigger oversight. In “The Transcendentalist” Emerson asserts that “I make my circumstance” (95). This seems true on a very personal and individual level. Those that plant seeds will have a better chance of harvesting a crop. Those that build a shelter may reduce the effect of the weather on their daily lives. The part of circumstance that Emerson fails to take into consideration is happenstance.

Natural sequences of growth and development, sequences essentially beyond the control of man, tended toward decline. The most that one could hope to accomplish in this realm of long-term trends was to forestall the slide into corruption. (Yazawa 294)

Things happen that thwart even the best of intentions. Natural disasters, decisions of foreign powers, short-sighted leadership, etc. could all be potential factors (among a very long list) over which no outside individual has any control. “[L]ife was precarious and contingent . . . people’s expectations, even their best calculations, were frequently dashed by unforeseen events” (Cohen 321). Circumstance can trump people. Even those who adhere rigorously to the ideals can have outside influences, conditions, or even other people overpower what they originally intended to do and be.

Emerson ignores the critical attachments of human weakness and outside circumstances to the ideas that he appropriates. By so doing, he creates a myth of achievability that has been shown to break down soon after it is put into American practice. Americans tend to drift away

from Revolutionary ideals and toward self-interest. Between the Revolution and Emerson's day, not much time passes. The ideals remain familiar. In other words, the context and historical foundation is similar between the Revolutionary America and the one Emerson lives in. Applying the same ideal values to the same society will likely result in similar, if not the same, results. Where the process originally came up short, it will likely do so again. The question then remains: "If things don't work right the first time, do we pretend they didn't and try again?"

Whether Emerson could have created a full rejuvenation of American society seems shaky at best. Not only was he combating decades of shifts away from the ideals of the Revolution, but from some of his own noted principles and tendencies. In "Circles" Emerson writes, "Men walk as prophecies of the next age" (176). The tendencies and characteristics of men in Emerson's day indicate something far from ideals and more toward individual self-aggrandizement in more than one category. These walking prophecies seem to indicate more of the same degeneracy. In "Compensation," he states that Americans "do not believe there is any force in to-day to rival or recreate that beautiful yesterday. We linger in the ruins of an old tent" (149). In "Spiritual Laws," he notes that "Every society protects itself" (156). Emerson has an uphill battle on his hands. He does not have the confidence or faith of the people to carry out a full recreation. He cannot see that when his ideas for society meet material America, the ideas are inadequate to create significant change. American society is resistant to this type of change and will protect its status quo. Emerson's vision is lacking in additional modifiers, motivations, and corrective measures to create a different context that could lead to real change.

Perhaps what Emerson hopes for as part of this ideal quest is found in "Circles:" "A new degree of culture would instantly revolutionize the entire system of human pursuits" (177). I agree that this is the case, but this path to success itself is most difficult to negotiate. A culture

of one is not sufficient; at least a majority of Americans would need to make the change from their trends and tendencies. Then again, perhaps it is the culture of one that will have the desired effect. If that one would follow Emerson's model of developing the self and thereby create a new rejuvenating culture, then the aid that individual gives to other individuals may be sufficient to make the Emersonian process start anew. Granted, this is an ideal scenario that would require the adherence of most if not all Americans, but perhaps when ideals are the goal, an ideal scenario is what America needs.

Conclusion

I have analyzed Emerson in two important ways. I have shown that Emerson is concerned with both the individual and the social. He situates both within a single system where they are interdependent. I have also shown that Emerson directs his audience to the ideals of the Revolution as a plan to improve individuals and society. This plan ultimately proves inadequate.

Emerson's early life demonstrates that familial influences focused his education on self-teaching and personal development. His formal education would lead to more socially-oriented questions of ethics or, in other words, the way the individual should act among other individuals. Emerson's education allowed him to create a vision of the world based on his early experiences and interests.

Once he had developed this vision, Emerson sought to engage socially with others and instruct them about how the individual could develop and how individuals should interact. Emerson, therefore, was both individualistic and socially oriented. This dualism also existed in his ideal social system as individuals developed and made sure that others could do the same. Each developed individual had the social responsibility to aid other individuals in the development process. Not only is Emerson social in participating in social reforms as Gougeon asserts, but maintains social activity between individuals as part of his improved society. Moreover, his writings are not just social at critical moments as asserted by Richardson, but remains constantly so to keep individuals and society improving instead of becoming degenerative or static.

After Emerson had fully developed his system, he instructed others to look to the Revolution as a place to find ideas to enact in the present. This past, itself no doubt idealized, is characterized by unselfishness and cooperation for the larger community or nation. As time

progresses, there is a shift away from ideal adherence and practice among post-Revolutionary Americans that was characteristic of selfishness and love of money. The previous values are still professed, but they are only rhetoric instead of accurate characterizations of the people. Emerson fails to recognize this tendency in Americans and dooms his appropriated ideals to repeated inefficacy.

Did Emerson change after 1841? The answer is yes, but the nature of that change needs to be analyzed in terms of both individualism and sociality as a combination central to Emerson's thinking. Does he maintain his grasp on ideas or does he begin to work more with the material world? What new roles or responsibilities—if any—does he give individuals to carry out to aid other individuals? The inclusion of sociality in Emerson's reasoning may help elucidate how he describes his later versions of individualism. Also, looking at the American culture that provides the context for Emerson, what remains to be worked out is why Americans shift from one set of values—Revolutionary, republican—to another—commercial, liberal—but still maintain at least a rhetorical connection to the previous set? It remains unclear why a clean break is not enacted, particularly when those older values have no apparent effect on behavior. Yet, precisely those previous values are called upon by Emerson to create a better society. What makes Americans linger in the past, at least rhetorically or nostalgically, yet refuse to make them a part of practice in the present? This could be a way to deny that America is “just one more profane nation in the wilderness of this world” (“Rhetoric” 35) or a vague hope that people and conditions will somehow get better given more time. Perhaps Americans want to give the alluring concept of America yet another try with each ensuing generation.

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