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Reluctant Abolitionist

Ralph Waldo Emerson grew up poor but secure. After the early death of his father, the Rev. William Emerson, in 1811, when Waldo was eight, the family barely scraped by. With deep roots in Massachusetts society, however, Emerson had easy access to education and employment: Harvard College and the ministry. The next signature events were his marriage to Ellen Louisa Tucker in 1829, soon followed by his widowhood and a substantial inheritance from her estate. After his resignation in 1832 as pastor of Boston's Second Church, he would discover his vocation.

Living in Concord since 1835 with his second wife, Lidian Jackson, Emerson's life might have fallen along a narrower trajectory of work and success had it not been for the peculiar institution. His sudden emergence in the mid-1830s as public speaker was practically an explosion, a supernova of fierce individualism and self-reliance. Almost in perfect lockstep, the abolitionist movement grew apace, forcing many Northerners to acknowledge that remaining silent was itself acquiescence.

This chapter describes Emerson's long and troubled reluctance to alter his own direction. He wished with all his heart that slavery would end. He just wished he didn't have to be called on to help end it. His struggle with abolitionism was only resolved close to the Civil War when he became one of its most significant figures. That final part of the story will be told in Chapter 5.

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Emerson lived in a state long in the forefront of American abolition. The 1783 decision *Commonwealth of Massachusetts* v. *Nathaniel Jennison* made Massachusetts the first to end slavery as a legal institution and to do so immediately. By the 1820s, Boston was the center of antislavery

activism. With the founding of the New England Anti-Slavery Society (NEASS) in 1831, followed by the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society the next year, the Bay State took the lead in opposing slavery nationally. That energy was matched locally, with the creation of the affiliate Middlesex County Anti-Slavery Society in 1834, just before Emerson returned to his ancestral home of Concord. The organization that had the greatest direct influence on him was formed soon after, in 1837: the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society. Throughout the next several years, female abolitionists in Concord persistently tried (with only moderate success) to push Emerson forward in their cause.[1]

About the same time as abolition became an active concern locally, Emerson began putting himself under enormous pressure in developing his profession of public lecturing. Unlike most other speakers in the emerging lyceum culture who could fall back on day jobs, this was Emerson's full-time job. Unlike most others, he had no claim to practical expertise. He talked on ideas that held popular interest while attempting to express his deepest philosophical thoughts. Emerson was threading the eye of the needle, with the eye being his idealist thinking and the thread being words agreeable to the public. Recurrent complaints in letters to friends and in his journals of the drudgery of his work shows how much he resented having to spin those threads.[2]

In tension with the all-consuming work binding him to his vocation were soaring expressions of spiritual independence. In "The American Scholar" (1837) and the Divinity School Address (1838), both invited addresses at his alma mater, Emerson championed an extreme form of personal autonomy soon reflected in "Self-Reliance" and other papers in *Essays: First Series* (1841). There he extolled individualism over a moral obligation to care for one's fellow human being. While reformers might work together in common cause, "[i]t is only as a man puts off all foreign support, and stands alone, that I see him to be strong and to prevail." The essay remains a stunning expression of the ego in all its potential. His aunt Mary Moody Emerson called "Self-Reliance" a "strange medley of atheism and false independence," and she was hardly alone in that assessment.[3]

Despite such proclamations of individualism, Emerson's political beliefs were generally liberal and often radical. Raised in a culture of moral perfectionism and guided largely by a mystical Neoplatonic vision, Emerson expressed confidence in an inevitable, if gradual, improvement of society. At the same time, his eclectic embrace of Montaigne's skepticism and a Stoic outlook on the material world – with its notion of

the circularity, or at least ebb and flow, of time and events – conflicted with this sense of progress. But Emerson was not naturally a fatalist. He *wanted* to find a way out of pessimism and into the world of progress: "I play with the miscellany of facts & take those superficial views which we call Skepticism," he acknowledged in his journals, "but I know … that they will presently appear to me in their orderly order, which makes Skepticism impossible. How can a man of any inwardness not feel the inwardness also of the Universe."[4]

To pierce his veil of doubt, he used dichotomies – liberal and conservative, ideal and material, power and fate – to define a balanced tension. Although never fully resolving the tension, he would eventually tilt in one direction, so that liberalism had the upper hand on conservatism, idealism on materialism, and personal agency on fate. These were epic struggles in Emerson's mind, and the triumph of the liberal, ideal, and active individual inevitably became a satisfying, if somewhat cautious and qualified, victory. "We must reconcile the contradictions as we can," he conceded in "Nominalist and Realist."[5]

When it came to abolition, Emerson struggled to reconcile three contradictions. The first was that, although he was opposed to slavery, he did not always stand with the enslaved. In 1822, he wondered: "If therefore the distinction between the beasts and the Africans is found neither in Reason nor in figure i.e. neither in mind or body — where then is the ground of that distinction? … [A]re not they an upper order of inferior animals?" Yet, "No ingenious sophistry can ever reconcile the unperverted mind to the pardon of Slavery [the worst institution on earth]." Even if Africans did not possess the necessary Reason, or higher intellect, to merit freedom on their own, the act of enslaving them was profoundly immoral.[6]

Another contradiction Emerson faced was his desire for slavery to end and yet his hesitancy to work toward that purpose. Moncure Daniel Conway, a committed abolitionist who was always enthralled by Emerson, claimed, somewhat dubiously, that: "Emerson was the first American scholar to cast a dart at slavery. On Sunday, May 29, 1831, he admitted an abolitionist to lecture on the subject in his church." That was Samuel Joseph May, who gave an evening lecture, "Slavery in the United States."[7]

In his church's pulpit, however, Emerson was himself circumspect. Scholars often point to an 1832 sermon in which he demanded that the cause of slavery should be everyone's concern. Rarely do they quote the entire passage: "Let every man say that to himself—the cause of the

Indian, it is mine; the cause of the slave, it is mine, the cause of the union, it is mine, the cause of public honesty, of education, of religion, they are mine." Slavery, one of a litany of "national offences [that] are private offences," was included within a general sentiment about moral improvement. Aunt Mary Moody Emerson knew her nephew, writing to his younger brother Charles: "A reformer! Who on earth with his genius is less able to cope with opposition? Who with his good sense [has] less *force* of mind—and while it invents new universes is lost in the surrounding halo of his own imajanation."[8]

Charles Emerson suffered from no hesitations or contradictions. An ardent abolitionist, with beliefs "as radical as Garrison's or later Wendell Phillips," in 1835 he publicly demanded that, "We must then have immediate emancipation if emancipation at all." It would take Waldo twenty-one years to come to the same position. When Charles died prematurely in 1836, his fiancée, Elizabeth Hoar, and Aunt Mary Moody Emerson turned to Waldo. Emerson had only the most tangential contact with the Black families living in Concord, and they seemed not to make any impression on him. Family pressure on him to speak publicly naturally ran against his own developing philosophy of self-reliance.[9]

With friends and family increasingly committed to abolition, there arose a third contradiction: Emerson's desire for the movement's success but his essential contempt for its participants. The same year Charles spoke, Waldo endorsed the virtue of working to end slavery for, "This is one of those causes which will make a man." Soon after, when Samuel May brought the English abolitionist George Thompson to Emerson's house, the host reflected: "Thompson the Abolitionist is incontrovertible: what you say or what might be said would make no impression on him. He belongs I fear to that great class of the Vanity-stricken." Sympathy for the purpose but disdain for its supporters was a fine line to walk. Emerson's view on the enslaved would evolve, but nearly until the war abolitionists would remain "an altogether odious set of people."[10]

Before Emerson was called to speak, then, he was for ending slavery without feeling sufficient respect for the enslaved, had little inclination himself to work for the cause, and had contempt for abolitionists. Over the next eighteen years, his antislavery talks would largely disappoint. With such tension in his thinking, it is not difficult to see why.

During the summer of 1837, a visit by the Grimké sisters, South Carolinian radicals of enormous courage, ignited the abolitionist spirit in

Concord. Lidian was particularly enthralled and immediately made the cause her life's commitment. That fall, local women began the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, with some sixty initial members growing to one hundred. Observed the *Concord Freeman*: "The truth is, men have faltered and have failed in their duty touching this matter of slavery."[11]

In late September, Concord neighbors wanting to organize a local chapter of the antislavery society asked Emerson to speak. Coming soon after "The American Scholar" address, he likely composed his remarks quickly. The partially preserved talk reflects a cautious, ambivalent speaker who was largely out of step with his audience. But what could anyone expect from an intellectual who less than a month earlier had rung the bell so loudly for nonconformity and self-reliance?[12]

According to official biographer James Elliott Cabot who had access to unpublished materials, Emerson declared that: "we have done all that is incumbent on most of us to do." While he and his audience "may feel the wrongs of the poor slave in Carolina or in Cuba," they had "nearer duties." Then in an argument he would use throughout his engagement with abolitionism, he admonished the antislavery advocate "not [to] exaggerate by his pity and his blame the outrage of the Georgian or Virginian, forgetful of the vices of his own town and neighborhood, of himself." Rather than criticize, the Northerner should show compassion for the slave holder, acknowledging "that his misfortune is at least as great as his sin." Just a half year earlier, Emerson had inscribed in his journals how much he detested the enslaver: "I pray God that not even in my dream or in madness may I ever incur the disgrace of articulating one word of apology for the slave trader or slave-holder." Isn't apologizing precisely what he then did in his talk?[13]

Journal entries from this time are probably notes made for the speech. Deep within his initial phase of self-reliance, Emerson first reminded himself that self-cultivation must count for more than any commitment to social reform: "The one important revolution is the new value of the private man." There followed three main themes that for nearly two decades largely framed Emerson's thinking on slavery.[14]

First, he supported abolition through gradualism – a gradualism of moral improvement that was owed "first, for the great duty of freedom or duty to ourselves" and then "duty to our fellow man the Slave." Second, associated with gradualism, slavery "is an almost unmixed evil to the Southerner … [and] the whole state loses in the possibility of cultivation." Third, the "African race" – in fact, all but the Anglo-Saxon race – was behind in human development:

I think it cannot be maintained by any candid person that the African race have ever occupied or do promise ever to occupy any very high place in the human family.... The Irish cannot; the American Indian cannot; the Chinese cannot. Before the energy of the Caucasian race all the other races have quailed and done obeisance.[15]

However much the notes became part of the talk, their spirit was represented there. Cabot observed that, "To the abolitionists this tone appeared rather cool and philosophical, and some friends tried to rouse him to a fuller sense of the occasion." They cautioned him against "allow[ing] his disgust at the methods or manners of the philanthropists to blind him to the substantial importance of their work."[16]

To no avail, for subsequent journal entries indicate Emerson's frustration with having had to make the speech. He took to task Lidian for her reaction to tales of the Middle Passage: "Lidian grieves aloud about the wretched negro in the horrors of the middle passage; and they are bad enough. [But t]hey exchange a cannibal war for a stinking hold. They have gratifications which would be none to Lidian." He mocked himself as well: "Then a friend of the slave shows me the horrors of Southern slavery — I cry guilty guilty! Then a philanthropist tells me the shameful neglect of the Schools by the Citizens. I feel guilty again." Emerson assured himself that, "I cannot do all these things." Attend instead to immediate needs: "Go learn to love your infant, your woodcutter ... & not varnish over your hard uncharitable ambition with this incredible tenderness for black folks a thousand miles off."[17]

Although he might on occasion sign an abolitionist petition, Emerson felt increasing criticism for his refusal to commit fully. Longtime friend and ardent abolitionist Ellis Gray Loring wrote him the next year that the public might misconstrue his position to mean that "we may safely & innocently stand neuter [in the great struggles of the day]." Emerson, however, held firm, believing that, "Men are made as drunk by party as by rum.... Thus you cease to be a man that you may be an Abolitionist."[18]

Little wonder, then, that he wrestled so with his response to the Cherokee Removal of 1838. With the urging of Lidian, he talked on the question and allowed the publication of a letter to President Martin van Buren. While defending Native Americans, Emerson also began making the case that the liberties of protected citizens were equally threatened. The Removal was "a crime that really deprives us as well as the Cherokees of a country." The government has done one immortal act and can well do others: "Will the American Government Steal? will it lie?

will it kill?" His claim that within a moral society physical violence done to the intended victims was also violence done to all others – especially to himself! – became an increasingly common argument. Declaring that the political arena caused him discomfort for, "my genius deserts me.... Bah!," he then foreswore future activism, telling himself: "I will let the republic alone until the republic comes to me."[19]

But he didn't wait for the republic. In the fall of 1841, he delivered a series of Boston talks entitled "Lectures on the Times." Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., recounted that there Emerson "said hard things to the reformer, especially to the Abolitionist." Holmes, who opposed abolition nearly to the Civil War, added wistfully: "It would have taken a long while to get rid of slavery if some of Emerson's teachings in this lecture had been accepted as the true gospel of liberty."[20]

Holmes was certainly right. Acknowledging that "Negro slavery" was one of the "vices" of his day, Emerson argued that "each [reform movement] is magnified by the natural exaggeration of its advocates, until it ... repels discreet persons by the unfairness of the plea, [and] the movements are in reality all parts of one movement." Not content to leave abolition as one of the many movements that antagonized people, for some 300 words Emerson then focused exclusively on antislavery. He deemed "how trivial seem the contests of the abolitionist, whilst he aims merely at the circumstance of the slave." Far more important than enslavement of the body was enslavement of the mind, since "the man of ideas ... says, 'I am selfish, then is there slavery.... But if I am just, then is there no slavery.'" The solution then is to "Give the slave the least elevation of religious sentiment, and he is no slave: you are the slave: he not only in his humility feels his superiority ... but he makes you feel it too. He is the master."

Emerson was making the higher point that "the reforming movement ... is in its origin divine; in its management and details timid and profane." But while expressing hatred of chattel slavery, he actually offered a pro-slavery brief. Southern enslavers, and apparently Emerson, too, followed the Stoic argument that freedom was to be measured by the liberation of the spirit, not the body.[21]

Emerson's circle of antislavery friends could not have been pleased. When it came to applying the early pressure on Emerson, that circle consisted of Lidian, Aunt Mary Moody, Elizabeth Hoar, and Mary Merrick Brooks (Figure 1.1). As the leader of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, Brooks especially "pursued Waldo Emerson with a vengeance." However ambiguous his thoughts on abolition, his growing notoriety

as a public speaker would draw large crowds. As a result, Brooks made Emerson the featured orator at a Concord assembly of August 1, 1844, marking the tenth anniversary "of the Emancipation of the Negroes of the British West Indies." Those talking after Emerson included Frederick Douglass, Samuel J. May, John Pierpont, and Walter Channing. Little is known about Channing, but Douglass, May, and Pierpont were fully committed abolitionists.[22]

Brooks had ambitious designs for the occasion. It was to be an all-day affair, "a jubilee," according to the *Concord Freeman*. A fund raiser for local abolitionist organizations, a large turnout was essential. Brooks had hoped for additional speakers, ones who were famous (Douglass was then hardly known) or, unlike Emerson, fully committed. She wrote cautiously to Loring Moody that, "I hope Emerson will say a word think he will. But we want some good speakers, whose souls are fired with genuine anti Slavery, whose souls are bowed to the earth with the position of our country, and whose words shall burn into the very joints and marrows of pro Slavery." Organizers feared that, without Wendell Phillips (who declined to attend), "great mischief [might be] done to the *holy cause of Disunion*." From the very beginning of their relationship with this most famous American intellectual, abolitionists wanted Emerson for his presence but worried over his words.[23]

Brooks had cause for her concern. By then, the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society had weathered conflicts over direction and reasserted its strong support for Garrisonism: immediate and complete abolition, nonviolence, disunion, and refusal to participate in government. Nothing Emerson had written in his journals suggests he would endorse anything close to that. He dismissed abolitionists: "Very trivial seem the contests of the abolitionist, his objects trifling whilst he aims merely at the circumstance of the slave.... The exertions of the abolitionist are nugatory except for themselves." Soon after, Emerson even stooped to repeating disparaging gossip: "The Standing Committee of the Antislavery Society are said to have been lavish spenders."[24]

Emerson sketched out in his journals key ideas that he was to put into the speech. Particularly developed is what would become its peroration, in which he challenged the enslaved to emerge by the power of new ideas. But lacking new ideas himself, Emerson expressed doubt that he – or anyone – could say something useful: "Does not he do more to abolish Slavery who works all day steadily in his garden, than he who goes to the abolition meeting & makes a speech? ... Whilst I talk, some poor farmer drudges & slaves for me." Embarrassed, he told himself that,

when talking on abolition, he "should sit very low & speak very meekly like one compelled to do a degrading thing."[25]

Once committed to appearing, however, Emerson produced an extensive text, requiring some two and a half hours to deliver. In summary: "The blood is moral: the blood is anti-slavery." But how to convert the blood into action? Emerson urged gentle suasion: "Let us withhold every reproachful, and, if we can, every indignant remark." Southern enslavers would eventually realize that abolition was in their own best interest. They were not malevolent; as he said in his 1837 talk, they were ill-informed.[26]

About the Middle Passage Emerson spoke long and emotively: "I am heart-sick when I read how they came there, and how they are kept there.... For the negro, was the slave-ship to begin with, in whose filthy hold he sat in irons, unable to lie down; bad food, and insufficiency of that." Although many today believe his research for the talk convinced him to be an abolitionist, seven years earlier in his journals he twice reflected on those horrible sufferings without it then moving him to a public commitment.[27]

Further, the transatlantic trade was then illegal and mainly a thing of the past. Its extensive retelling in 1844 deflected from engaging with what was urgent: the ongoing catastrophe of the enslaved. Maurice Gonnaud rightly observes that "he was little troubled with the situation of the slaves themselves." He did make an appeal for the protection of free Black seamen in Southern ports. This was an important defense of Black citizenship in Massachusetts. It was, however, consistent with Emerson's theme in later talks: defending the rights of his state and its citizens without pressing as hard for the freedom of the enslaved.[28]

The largest part of the talk centered on how West Indian abolition evolved quickly from gradual to immediate emancipation. Because free Black people became customers of English manufacturers, Emerson argued that American emancipation would not harm the Southern economy, either. Although demonstrating that immediatism worked in the West Indies, he stuck to a gradualist solution for his own country.[29]

After a meandering and qualified vision of emancipation, Emerson offered a rousing and hopeful conclusion: "The First of August marks the entrance of a new element into modern politics, namely, the civilization of the negro. A man is added to the human family." That day's jubilee had "a proud discovery, that the black race can contend with the white."[30]

Despite this final declaration of Black equality, Laura Dassow Walls rightly points to the complexities in how Emerson characterized race.

It was only by "a new principle … an idea," Emerson maintained, that Black people could succeed. Otherwise, they faced a brutal destiny:

> If the black man is feeble, and … not on a parity with the best race, the black man must serve, and be exterminated. But if the black man carries in his bosom an indispensable element of a new and coming civilization … he will survive and play his part.… I say to you, you must save yourself, black or white, man or woman; other help is none.

Although Emerson had made White activism essential to British emancipation, he put the burden entirely on American Black people themselves: "The anti-slavery of the world, is dust in the balance before this [the idea of Black self-reliance]." Despite many scholars hailing this as a turn in his thinking on abolition and race, in his journals Emerson continued to express a belief in Black inferiority and a resistance to political activism.[31]

The talk justified Mary Brooks's concerns. Well-noted in some antislavery publications, prominent abolitionists remained cautious of Emerson's commitment. Poet John Greenleaf Whittier (Figure 1.2) read the speech "[w]ith a glow of heart, with silently invoking blessings," because previously, "How *could* he sit there, thus silent?" He wrote Emerson, affirming, "That you join with us in supporting the great *idea* which underlies our machinery of conventions and organizations, I have little doubt after reading thy Address." That Whittier underscored "idea" might have been his way of acknowledging that Emerson endorsed the principle although perhaps not quite the actual cause. If so, his instinct was correct. Whittier took the opportunity to ask Emerson to address another gathering on abolition, and Emerson promptly declined.[32]

The editor of the Concord, New Hampshire, *Herald of Freedom*, Nathaniel P. Rogers concluded that "his remaining in known unconnection (I can't stop for approved words) with us operated as a virtual discountenance and opposition." In his later review of the published version of the talk, Rogers was equally acerbic: "I would suggest to the gifted author of the Address, that a tour of anti-slavery field service would be most healthful to his own powers of writing and speech.… He wants outdoor exercise. And I know none like the hard service of abolitionism." The comment cut Emerson to the quick. Reflecting on it three years later, he wondered whether, rather than going to England on a lecture tour, he should remain and speak nationally on abolition. Emerson chose to go to England.[33]

Maria Weston Chapman, editor of the *Non-Resistant*, a Garrison-connected publication, drafted an article, never published, arguing that the address actually harmed the cause: "Hundreds of young persons have

made [Emerson] their excuse for avoiding the Anti Slave battle & talking about the clear light." In a letter to Garrison, she went further, noting that, although "rousing the wrath of the Cambridge powers," the talk contained "sentiments which differ only in shading from their own."[34]

Emerson continued along as if he had never given the address, assuring himself that: "I do not prosecute the reform because I have another task nearer." Sending Carlyle a copy of his speech, Emerson apologized for his "intrusion … into another sphere, and so much loss of virtue in my own." As for abolitionists, they were mere posers: "Do not then, I pray you, talk of the work & the fight…. This is not work. It needs to be done but it does not consume heart & brain." Much as his critics feared, he was reluctant to be an essential part of the movement for a dozen years to come.[35]

Why was it so important that Emerson speak in 1844? It had, of course, to do with Texas. Until then, the guiding settlement concerning slavery was the Missouri Compromise of 1820. To maintain the balance in the Senate, Missouri had been brought into the Union and Maine was separated from Massachusetts. But in 1836, Texas declared its independence from Mexico. As that created a *casus belli* with Mexico, complex negotiations between Texas and Mexico and between Texas and President John Tyler made its entry into the Union a central issue in the presidential contest of 1844. The possibility of Texas joining as a slave state threatened the balance established by the Missouri Compromise. When Emerson spoke in August, the prospect of new slave-owning territory gave stunning urgency to antislavery. But Emerson rarely responded to political events and certainly not to ones that did not touch him personally. To whatever extent Emerson was influenced by friends and family, that influence could not be counted on to bring Emerson entirely over.[36]

On March 1, 1845, Tyler affirmed the congressional resolution to annex Texas, sparking further demonstrations. Four days later, in support of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, Emerson and Thoreau helped convince the Concord Lyceum to invite Wendell Phillips to lecture. When in protest stalwart Concordians John Keyes and the Rev. Barzillai Frost resigned from overseeing the Lyceum, Emerson and Thoreau were elected to replace them. Often interpreted as confirming Emerson's commitment, this is how Emerson explained his actions in his journals:

> I pressed the acceptance [of Phillips] … on two grounds; 1. because the Lyceum was poor, & should add to the length & variety of their Entertainment by all innocent means…; 2. because I thought in the present state of this country the particular subject of Slavery had a commanding right to be heard…. [T]he people

FIGURE 1.1 Mary Merrick Brooks painted by Alonzo Hartwell, 1852, Boston, Massachusetts. Concord Museum Collection, bequest of Mrs. Stedman Buttrick, Sr.; Pi413.

must consent to be plagued with it from time to time until something was done, & we had appeased the negro blood so.

Variety of speakers (and entertainment!) came first in Emerson's mind. He certainly wasn't thinking hard about the end of slavery. "From time to time" was his strategy for "apppeas[ing] the negro blood." Resignation, probably reflecting household pressure rather than personal commitment, is Emerson's tone.[37]

Despite inviting Phillips, Emerson remained firm in his criticisms. In early fall, he went to an antislavery convention in Concord but expressed venomous contempt for these "wretched & currish speakers" who resembled "patients … taking nitrous oxide gas." After listening to a May 1846 lecture by abolitionist Parker Pillsbury in Concord, he observed: "Pillsbury … is … not to be silenced or insulted or intimidated by a mob, because he is more mob than they; he mobs the mob." Emerson attended these local events out of civic and familial duty. But he maintained a hostile distance.[38]

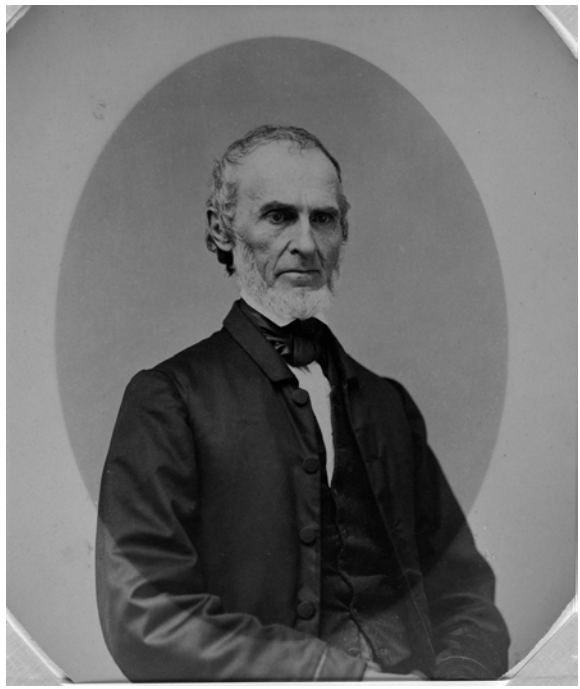

FIGURE 1.2 John Greenleaf Whittier. Unknown artist, *c.* 1866. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

Until his trip to England in October 1847, in other invited anti-slavery talks Emerson spoke on themes similar to those in his 1844 address. On August 1, 1845, he again commemorated abolition in the British Empire. He declared against racism but announced that he had no desire to make the case: "I believe there is a sound argument … in reply to this alleged hopeless inferiority of the colored race. But I shall not touch it. I concern myself now with the morals of the system." For, as slavery harmed White people as well, if somehow it were possible to "elevate, enlighten, civilize the semi-barbarous nations of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama … you shall have a race of decent and lawful men, incapacitated to hold slaves, and eager to give them liberty." Moral improvement of White people was his vague ("somehow possible") hope. Until then, enslavement might actually benefit Black Americans: "To many of them, no doubt, Slavery was a mitigation and a gain. Put the slave under negro drivers, and it is said these are more cruel than the white." Emerson had earlier expressed something

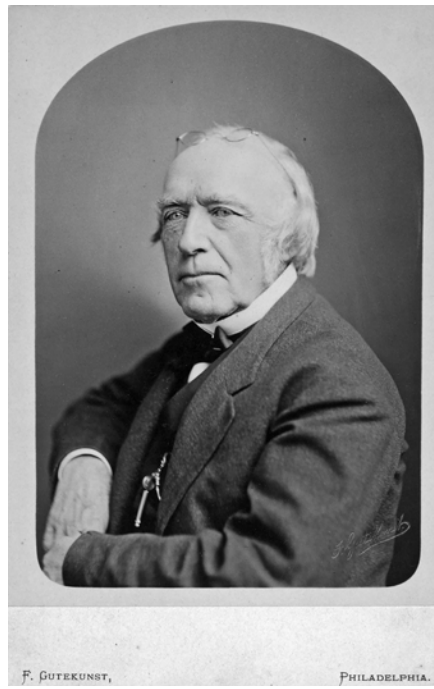

FIGURE 1.3 William Henry Furness. Photographer: Frederick Gutekunst, *c.* 1875. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

similar in private, but to say it publicly harmed the cause. Abolitionists were right in worrying that Emerson's statements could be fuel for the opposition.[39]

In his 1846 Independence Day speech at Dedham, Massachusetts, his vision for slavery's demise remained vague and secondary: "There are other crimes besides Slavery and the Mexican war, and a more comprehensive faith, I hope, is coming, which will resolve all the parts of duty into a harmonious whole," an opaque statement that must have perplexed the July Fourth audience. The reporter for the *Liberator*, abolition's leading publication, wrote caustically about the "calm, philosophical Emerson, closely scrutinizing, nicely adjusting the scales, so that there should not be a hair too much in the one scale or the other, telling us the need be of all things." Emerson continued to blame Northerners who are "old traders" strapped to their own economic interests in "this mercantile country." He soon declined to talk at a Boston rally later that year protesting the return of a fugitive from slavery known today only

as Joe. Once again he justified his decision by attributing slavery to the interests of "the [Northern] mercantile body."[40]

Even putting his signature on a piece of paper caused him difficulty. In 1846, he refused to sign a petition on behalf of Charles Turner Torrey, ill and incarcerated for assisting a fugitive from slavery. Torrey would soon die in prison. The following spring, Mexico and the United States went to war over a boundary dispute that could, and did, strengthen the South politically. Mary Brooks used all her persuasive powers on him. The previous year he had joined nearly two hundred other Concord men in petitioning to oppose the annexation of Texas. Now, mightily Brooks tried to get him to sign a petition for disunion. He initially demurred, and whether in the end he did endorse the petition is not known.[41]

He continued to rationalize his inaction with accusations of Northern hypocrisy, telling himself: "I like the southerner the best; he deals roundly, & does not cant. The northerner is surrounded with churches & Sunday schools & is hypocritical." Seemingly defending the philosophy of the free product movement without himself practicing it, he speculated: "let us, if we assume the dangerous pretension of being abolitionists, & make that our calling in the world, let us do it symmetrically. The world asks, do the abolitionists eat sugar? do they wear cotton? do they smoke tobacco?" Some nine years earlier, he had accused Lidian of being similarly hypocritical. But if one is not going to do *everything*, one must at least start by doing *something*.[42]

Doing something was exactly what Henry David Thoreau did. Or rather, what he did not do: inspired by Bronson Alcott's recent example, for the past few years he had not paid the modest state poll tax. He was arrested probably on July 23, 1846, spending the night in the Middlesex County Jail in Concord before an unknown individual (perhaps his Aunt Maria) paid his bill. Despite the poll tax not going to the war effort, Thoreau's gesture suggested resistance to the conflict.[43]

In the theatrical version of the story, Emerson visited, asking what he was doing in jail. To which Thoreau replied: "Waldo! What are you doing *out* of jail?" That exchange is, of course, imaginary. Emerson's second best-known reaction, fully historical, was a conversation with Alcott, who recorded in his journals: "Emerson thought [Thoreau's resistance that resulted in going to jail] mean and skulking, and in bad taste."[44]

Emerson's brief comment to Alcott belied a deeper inner struggle involving several stages of thought. When first learning that Thoreau was in prison, in his own journals Emerson actually *praised* his actions: "My friend Mr Thoreau has gone to jail rather than pay his tax. On him they

could not calculate. The abolitionists denounce the war & gave much time to it, but they pay the tax." Emerson used Thoreau's moral constancy to illuminate abolitionist hypocrisy.[45]

Admiration for Thoreau also produced an explicit contrast to his own inaction. Almost immediately following that enthusiastic endorsement of his friend, he told himself not to "run amuck against the world." Instead, "wait until you have a good difference to join issue upon. Thus Socrates was told he should not teach. 'Please God, but I will.' And he could die well for that. And Jesus had a cause. You will get one by & by. But now I have no sympathy."

After comparing himself to Socrates and Jesus, he then turned to those he found most distasteful, wondering why they hadn't followed Thoreau to jail: "The Abolitionists should resist [& go to prison], because they are literalists; they know exactly what they object to.... Remove a few specified grievances, & this present commonwealth will suit them. They are the new Puritans, & as easily satisfied."

Having reproached abolitionists, as he often did, for their limited goal (of ending slavery!), Emerson's mood then changed. Immediately returning to Thoreau, he wrote with the disgust he would express to Alcott that their friend was misanthropic and misguided:

> But you, nothing will content. No government short of a monarchy consisting of one king & one subject, will appease you. Your objection then to the state of Massachusetts is deceptive. Your true quarrel is with the state of Man.... The state tax does not pay the Mexican War. Your coat, your sugar, your Latin & French & German book, your watch does. Yet these you do not stick at buying.... This prison is one step to suicide.[46]

Driven by what Cornel West considers "his guilt and shame about his [own] inaction and impotence," Emerson interjected himself into the comparison between Thoreau and abolitionists. Abolitionists were narrow-minded Puritans, Thoreau was misanthropic and hypocritical. Satisfied that no cause had yet measured up spiritually to what Socrates and Jesus had died for, he told himself he was comfortable with remaining uncommitted. Thoreau, of course, would make the event central to an 1848 Concord talk that, at the urging of Elizabeth Peabody, he published the following year as "Resistance to Civil Government." By its later name of "Civil Disobedience," it has become one of the most influential political tracts of the last two centuries.[47]

Emerson sailed for England in October 1847, returning in July 1848. The following August in Worcester at one of the largest abolitionist rallies to that time and at the invitation of Garrison, Emerson again

commemorated emancipation in the British West Indies. Continuing to hold out a gradualist hope of Southern improvement, Emerson set the bar low: Southerners were "barbarous" and "in the animal state." But they "are as innocent in their slaveholding as we are in our Northern vices." Emerson was firm in his faith, for "the course of history … is a constant progress of amelioration." As for those actively struggling to achieve that amelioration in the present, they are "our friends who are carried forward this great work." Even in public, although far more tactfully, Emerson distinguished between them and himself.[48]

In the decade of the 1840s, Emerson talked four times on slavery: three times on the anniversary of manumission in the British West Indies and once on July Fourth. He clung to his philosophical position of gradualism, that eventually Southern White people would somehow come to understand the immorality of their position. At the same time, he hastened to remind listeners that they were hypocrites in ignoring their own indirect support for enslavement through their intricate economic ties to the South. Emerson never offered specific suggestions on how to attenuate those ties, nor did he do anything practical in his own life. He also had difficulty saying much positive about the very victims of enslavement. Yet he was sought after to talk at commemorative events, for, as Whittier had asked: "How *could* he sit there, thus silent?" He drew the largest audiences of any public speaker in America. Far better to have him seen on the dais uttering confusing words than not to be seen at all.

Over the next four years, in 1851, 1854, and 1855, Emerson delivered three antislavery addresses. Taken together, they reveal an intellectual who by nature held at arm's length the very issue. Beset by internal contradictions over the cause and engaged in an all-consuming vocation, Emerson's thrusts into the political arena were at times inspiring, contradictory, and disappointing. The solutions he proposed varied from the gradual amelioration of Southern White people, moral suasion by the North, free-state secession, Northern purchase of the enslaved, civil disobedience against the Fugitive Slave Law, and even actually acknowledging the South's right to enslave.[49]

Of course, the aims of American abolitionism were highly complicated and contested. Early in the nineteenth century, White antislavery proponents, addressing what for many was the problem of an increasingly large number of free Black people, debated the question of Black emigration (especially to Haiti) or colonization (in Liberia) as end points for the manumission of the enslaved. Should that manumission be one of gradualism, promoted by the American Colonization Society, or immediatism,

championed by the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS)? Should abolitionists try moral suasion to stir the conscience of Southerners? The various schisms in the movement, brought on largely by Garrison's disparagement of organized religion, commitment to immediatism, support of women's rights, pacificism, and rejection of political activism (indeed, of even voting), produced successive fragmentations.[50]

Emerson, then, was not alone in struggling to offer solutions. But none of his talks or extensive journal entries argued deeply for any particular course of action. Policy implications eluded Emerson, and proposed tactics seemed somewhat arbitrary or spontaneous. If (say) Garrison and Phillips consistently pushed for northern secession, Emerson might at times embrace, and other times ignore, that solution. Garrison refused to vote, but Emerson thought abstaining from voting silly. Instead, Emerson campaigned for John Gorham Palfrey's election to Congress in 1851, but then never again did direct political work. In fact, in his 1856 Kansas speech, Emerson appeared to drift away from government intervention: "I own I have little esteem for governments.... Who doubts that Kansas would have been very settled, if the United States had let it alone?"[51]

Although by 1830 immediatism had become the predominate strategy of antislavery activists, gradual moral suasion remained Emerson's default approach. It accorded with the perfectionism in which he was raised and, as becomes clear in Chapter 3, was aligned with his Neoplatonic spiritualism. Moral suasion, however, meant working within a system that suppressed rebellions and enforced rendition of the enslaved. In the South, speeches and publications supporting abolition were often censored or their authors threatened with incarceration or violence. Emerson knew that or needed only to recall William Ellery Channing's 1835 *Slavery*: "In large portions of the Slave-holding States freedom of speech on this subject is at an end. Whoever should express among them the sentiments respecting slavery ... would put his life in jeopardy," warned the Unitarian minister.[52]

The moral suasion that might have seemed improbable but rational in the 1830s became untethered to reality by events of 1846, 1850, and 1854 as the federal government progressively furthered the spread and legitimization of slavery. When Emerson spoke, there was little chance of its succeeding. He would finally come to admit this, praising John Brown because, "He did not believe in moral suasion;—he believed in putting the thing through." Bound to his method of posing contradictory positions, Emerson could not resolve the challenge of slavery by dialectics.[53]

The end of the Mexican–American War in 1848 threatened to upset the political balance in the country and, eventually, in Emerson's own world. The Mexican Cession included what would eventually become all or parts of Texas, Utah, New Mexico, Kansas, Colorado, and Arizona. Guided primarily by Henry Clay, a series of bills combined to form the Compromise of 1850. Texas had already come into the Union as a slave state and California was about to enter as a free state. The remaining massive territory would be divided into states whose individual status would be determined by popular sovereignty on which the balance in the Senate hung.

As part of the Compromise, in exchange for the end of the slave trade in Washington, DC, the South insisted on a new Fugitive Slave Law. The Constitution contained vague language about property that was designed to have fugitives returned to their enslavers (Article 4, Section 2). But that interpretation had not been much enforced, and Massachusetts, among other states, protected those who escaped through its "Personal Liberty Laws." The new legislation created a federal structure for the capture and rendition of "fugitives from labor" (the word "slave" is never used), made that rendition far easier for the enslaver, and punished those who aided and abetted fugitives. Southerners saw it as a loyalty test of whether the North intended to uphold the Constitution concerning property and as a measure of future Northern compliance.[54]

Facing opposition from both the most ardent proslavery and pro-abolitionist senators, the Great Compromiser prevailed on Daniel Webster for help. Webster, who had earlier pronounced annexation of Texas "a great moral, social, and political evil," spoke on March 7. Perhaps he thought the speech might have the same effect as his 1830 Second Reply to Hayne, becoming another watershed moment demonstrating his determination to preserve the Union. But he essentially declared that, "the South is right, and the North is wrong," or at least that is how many Northerners understood his intention. When Webster was soon afterwards elevated to Secretary of State, he became the unofficial leader in President Millard Filmore's cabinet. With the president's backing, Webster pushed hard and successfully for passage of the legislation.[55]

What abolitionists called "The Bloodhound Bill," the Fugitive Slave Law saw its greatest application in 1851, when fifty-nine of sixty-seven known fugitives were returned to the South. In February, freed by Black members of the Boston Vigilance Committee, fugitive Shadrach Minkins escaped to Canada. Concord played its part, with members of

the Bigelow and Brooks, possibly also the Thoreau and Whiting, families helping Minkins move ahead. Ann Bigelow was a central member of the Concord Female Society. When interviewed several decades after the events about those who aided fugitives, she failed to mention, perhaps pointedly so, participation by the Emersons. Or at least, by Waldo. She noted that "Mr. Nathan Brooks [a cautious lawyer, politician, and husband of Mary Merrick Brooks] and Mr. Ralph Waldo Emerson were always afraid of committal—we women never—they must obey the law." In his 1868 eulogy to Mary Merrick Brooks, Wendell Phillips suggested Emerson's similar inaction in Concord's work against the renditions of Thomas Sims (1851) and Anthony Burns (1854). Concordians were disappointed in Emerson's lack of participation.[56]

With an eye toward keeping Southern support for his own presidential bid, Webster proclaimed that Minkins's rescue was "strictly speaking, a case of treason." Many Bay Staters were outraged. The week following Webster's speech, at an oppositional rally at Faneuil Hall Theodore Parker pronounced: "I know of no deed in American history, done by a son of New England, to which I can compare this, but the act of Benedict Arnold!" James Freeman Clarke agreed: "We are now on the opposite sides of the moral universe."[57]

Whig newspapers in Massachusetts ran some 70–6 against Webster, but nationally support for Webster's speech was overwhelming. Letters of encouragement flooded Webster's Washington office. Locally, Boston elite rallied around him. Webster's former district elected to Congress his friend Samuel Eliot over Charles Sumner by a margin of five-to-one. Even Unitarian churches lined up for Webster. Boston cannons firing salute to Webster could be heard as far as Cambridge, fittingly as key Harvard faculty endorsed the law.[58]

In the early weeks of April, there appeared in two Boston newspapers an evolving multiple-page letter of gratitude for "you [Webster] have pointed out to a whole people the path of duty, have convinced the understanding and touched the conscience of a nation." The letter expressed proudly that, among the signatories:

> there is an ample representation, by persons of all ages, of whatever Boston contains of intellect and character, of wealth, of position, or of activity in affairs and in most of the leading professions and occupations.... We are happy to see, that the Address is also subscribed by several of the leading Professors of the Theological Seminary at Andover, men who are known all over the country, and by the President of Harvard University, whose name will require no special indication.

The precise text and number of names varied by edition until its last appearance, in the April 15 *Boston Courier*. In his journals, Emerson counted 987 signatories.[59]

The social distinction of those endorsing Webster caused dismay among abolitionists. Charles Sumner, then leader of the Massachusetts Free Soil Party and increasingly close to Emerson, recollected that the letter was "signed by several hundreds of the most conspicuous citizens," and named merchants, lawyers, physicians, Harvard-associated "scholars like Ticknor, Everett, Prescott, Sparks, Holmes, and Felton; divines like Moses Stuart and Leonard Woods." Sumner despaired that its supporters worked "to exclude from public life all who continued their protests against the Compromise."[60]

Through mid-April Emerson lectured in the Midwest and, perhaps while still traveling, reflected morosely:

> I think there was never an event half so painful occurred in Boston as the letter with 800 signatures to Webster.... Many of the names very properly belong there,—they are the names of aged & infirm people [Emerson initially wrote "ideots" [[*sic*]] and then deleted it], who have outlived everything but their night cap & their tea & toast![61]

Psychologically, the vast support for Webster and not the condition of slavery defined Emerson's subsequent abolitionist talks.

From New York, Emerson wrote a letter, probably at the invitation of Mary Merrick Brooks, to be read at the annual Middlesex Anti-Slavery Society meeting on April 3 in Concord. It was then published in the April 18 *Liberator*. Emerson urged resistance to the law "in every manner, singly or socially, in private and in public, by voice and by pen — and, first of all, by substantial help and hospitality to the slave, and defending him against his hunters." Emerson himself offered no assistance to the fugitive, as Concord's female abolitionists constantly complained.[62]

On the very same day as the Middlesex meeting, Thomas M. Sims, a fugitive from Southern slavery, was captured in Boston. Although not the first fugitive to be caught under the new law, Sims was the first in Massachusetts. His capture set off a firestorm of protest. To no avail: Sims was sent back to the South ten days later.[63]

Theodore Parker, a leader of the Boston Vigilance Committee that had tried to prevent the rendition, sent Emerson a copy of his April 10 published sermon, *The Chief Sins of the People*. A week later, Emerson acknowledged with gratitude the forty-page screed: it is "the foremost consolation to me in the bad times.... [N]othing has restored to

me a degree of hope & the promise of returning spirits like this brave harangue." Eight days later, Alcott noted that Emerson was at work on a talk requested by Concord citizens desiring to hear his "opinions upon the Fugitive Slave Law, & upon the aspects of the times."[64]

Of his three abolitions talks between 1851 and 1855, this was the most self-motivated, with Emerson recording one of the longest, most coherently connected entries of his entire massive journal. His anger and disgust with Webster ended up in the 1851 Concord talk and the 1854 address in New York. As Emerson was completing his second decade of recording private thoughts intended for subsequent public use, the entries have both a spontaneous and self-conscious tone:

> Bad times. We wake up with a painful auguring, and after exploring a little to know the cause find it is the odious news in each day's paper, the infamy that has fallen on Massachusetts, that clouds the daylight, & takes away the comfort out of every hour. We shall never feel well again until that detestable law is nullified in Massachusetts.

The "bad times" were Emerson's own bad times: pain blocks his daylight and takes away his comfort. Not the centuries-old institution of slavery, but the new law and its attack on the sovereignty of his state is what disturbed Emerson. There followed an oath never fulfilled: "All I have, and all I can do shall be given & done in opposition to the execution of the law."[65]

Webster was the main target of Emerson's rage. He was the great betrayer, burdened by "the deep servility of New Hampshire politics which have marked all prominent statesmen from that district." Indeed, "The word *liberty* in the mouth of Mr Webster sounds like the word *love* in the mouth of a courtezan." (Emerson's emphases.) Repeated in his 1851 Concord address, that assessment became emblematic.

Boston was rotten throughout, Emerson continued in his journals, for its leaders "are all involved in one hot haste of terror, presidents of colleges & professors, saints & brokers, insurers, lawyers, importers, jobbers, there is not … so much as a snatch of an old song for freedom dares intrude." Emerson there named names, condemning George Ticknor Curtis, who, as American Commissioner in Boston, ordered Sims returned and Judge Lemuel Shaw who ruled against Sims. Concerning the recent mayor of Boston and current congressman and treasurer of Harvard, he asked, "Can the reputed wealth of Mr [Samuel Atkins] Eliot restore his good name?" Men of the cloth were identified: "Andover & Boston preachers, Dr [Orville] Dewey & Dr [Daniel] Sharpe … deduce kidnapping from their Bible."[66]

Notably, there is one essential name Emerson didn't mention: that of Thomas Sims. All he could say is that "the state of Massachusetts ought to buy that fellow." He later repeated the absurd rumor that "this young mulatto" was the son of a congressman who was Webster's friend. Disturbingly similar to when he suggested that enslaved Black people have their "gratifications," Emerson then labelled Sims's return to chattel slavery "a good errand," since "Sumner is elected, Rantoul & Palfrey are likely to be." In the talk as well, Emerson failed to name Sims, twice referring only to the "poor black boy."[67]

A month later, Emerson gave "Address to Citizens of Concord on the Fugitive Slave Law, 3 May, 1851." Although journal entries and the speech largely accord, there is a significant difference. The journals named individual Bostonians whom Emerson held to account. Saddling Webster with stupidity, immorality, and ambition, in the talk Emerson turned vague when assigning blame to others. Sims's return to slavery was laid at the foot, not of specific individuals, but of Boston institutions: "The learning of the Universities, the culture of elegant society, the acumen of lawyers, the majesty of the Bench, the eloquence of the Christian pulpit, the stoutness of Democracy, the respectability of the Whig party, are all combined to kidnap him." In the journals, Emerson acknowledged: "What a moment was lost when Judge [Lemuel] Shaw declined to affirm the unconstitutionality of the Fugitive Slave Law!" In the talk, what he had to say is this: "What is the use of courts, if judges only quote authorities, and no judge exerts original jurisdiction, or recurs to first principles?"[68]

How much more powerful it would have been if he named individuals and tied their failure to this higher idea. In *The Trial of Theodore Parker* (1855), Parker, who, unlike Emerson, quickly published and distributed his talks, named prominent Bostonians who had given support to the Fugitive Slave Law. Wendell Phillips would proudly call out Moses Stuart and later individual Cotton Whigs. But as will be discussed in the next chapter, Emerson was always cautious about making enemies socially.[69]

Beyond anger and frustration with Webster and unnamed Boston elite, Emerson had little to propose. Using, as Phyllis Cole observes, "a language of folly and filth rather than tyranny to describe the statue," he declared his philosophical distance:

> I accept your invitation to speak to you … *for there seems to be no option*. The last year has forced us all into politics, and made it a paramount duty to seek what it is often a duty to shun…. I wake in the morning with a painful sensation, which I carry about all day … which robs the landscape of beauty, and takes the sunshine out of every hour.[70]

Emerson expressed greater dismay for a law that robbed him of his tranquillity than for the institution of slavery that turned humans into chattel. Although he didn't want to engage in politics, the law made him so unhappy that, in the manner of Stoics, he calculated that direct action would bring him less trouble than would avoidance. Albert von Frank suggested caustically that the Fugitive Slave Law "set more than a few white people in the North to planning how *they* might escape slavery."[71]

The previous November, the Rev. William C. Whitcomb in a published sermon declared hyperbolically: "the new Fugitive Law … will *enslave you and me* as well as the *black* men,—IT WILL MAKE SLAVES OF US ALL. Talk not of the *Free States!* There are none such now!" But the new Fugitive Slave Law did not put Northern White people under a legal obligation to become catchers of fugitives. They were subject to prosecution only if they abetted those fugitives, something Emerson never did undertake.[72]

When he asked: "What shall we do?" his obvious answer, aligned with Free Soil policy, was: "First abrogate this law, then proceed to confine slavery to slave states, and help them effectually to make an end of it." How to end it? His solution was to buy the freedom of the enslaved: "A thousand millions [dollars] were cheap."[73]

That was his proposal in 1844 as well, and it angered abolitionists. It conceded the Southern argument that the enslaved were, indeed, property. It directly contradicted a founding principle of the American Anti-Slavery Society as declared in its *Declaration of Sentiments*: "if compensation is to be given at all, it should be given to the outraged and guiltless slaves, and not to those who have plundered and abused them." William I. Bowditch had pronounced against it, not only for moral, but also for practical reasons, "because for every slave we buy we strengthen the hands of the slaveholder, and give him an additional stimulus to uphold slavery." To Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., Emerson "seems to have formed a party by himself in his project for buying up the negroes." Not having good answers or none he wanted to help effect, he chose what for him was the easiest solution rhetorically.[74]

Throwing other darts almost randomly, Emerson suggested that "the Union is no longer desirable." When taking the position of dissolving the Union, he was apparently siding with Garrison – the very thing he had argued against in his 1846 "Ode Inscribed to W. H. Channing." But the declaration was so convoluted that it is unclear whether Emerson was taking Garrison's position or just expressing the emotion of the moment.[75]

Emerson then made a stunningly inappropriate offer. He proposed that, if the South would leave Massachusetts to its own laws, "We will never intermeddle with your slavery." How did this square with his hope of purchasing the freedom of the enslaved or with his belief in moral amelioration of the South? Can one who promised not to "intermeddle" even be antislavery? The Rev. Daniel Foster registered his disappointment. Emerson's address, he wrote in his journals, "wanted point & practicality. It was too much a dream, too little real, having hold of the victim of this great Diabolism with uncertain grasp."[76]

Concord neighbors invited Emerson to talk after he had publicly expressed anger over the Fugitive Slave Law. But his address offered no intellectual direction for the cause of abolition. It was essentially a defense of his own self-reliance: that if he were, at least in theory, to help his fellow human beings achieve their freedom, he might lose his own. It does not appear that he was asked again to talk in Concord about slavery.

As a narrow attack on Webster and by implication on his political followers, the speech succeeded. At the behest of Charles Sumner, Emerson gave it several times in support of John Gorham Palfrey's Free Soil Congressional campaign. Political stumping earned Emerson occasional ridicule in the press and jeering from audiences, including Harvard students who disrupted Emerson and Horace Mann. The *Boston Daily Advertiser*, "more in sorry than in anger," labeled Emerson "a decided abolitionist." This was hardly the case. At the same time Emerson wrote defiantly to himself: "The absence of moral feeling in the whiteman is the very calamity I deplore. The captivity of a thousand negroes is nothing to me."[77]

Willing to give "Address to Citizens of Concord" as a political attack on Webster, he refused to present it in other abolitionist settings, turning down invitations to speak at a Worcester meeting on July 25 and at the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society on August 27. Declining an 1852 request from friend Ainsworth Rand Spofford to talk in Cincinnati, he told Spofford that he might have travelled nationally and spoken for the cause "If I were younger, I should go on such a mission." Instead that year, at the not-young-enough age of forty-nine, Emerson gave some seventy lyceum talks, including one in Montreal after crossing the frozen St. Lawrence River on foot. He apparently did not speak at the annual celebration of the Emancipation of the West Indies in 1853, something he at least had done in the previous decade. He disappointed the Vigilance Committee by refusing to sign a petition to remove the Suffolk County

sheriff who had participated in Sims's capture. This, after so criticizing the Fugitive Slave Law as a "filthy enactment" that he would "not obey."[78]

Emerson had firmly returned to a separate self-cultivation, writing in August 1852:

> I waked at night, & bemoaned myself, because I had not thrown myself into this deplorable question of Slavery.... But then, in hours of sanity, I recover myself, & say, God must govern his own world ... I have quite other slaves to free than those negroes, to wit, imprisoned spirits, imprisoned thoughts, far back in the brain of man ... which, important to the republic of Man, have no watchman, or lover, or defender, but I.

Emerson's reaction was similar to his actions in 1838 when, after writing a letter protesting the Cherokee removal, he withdrew from activism in disgust.[79]

Linck Johnson rightly observes that, "For nearly three years after he first raised his voice against the Fugitive Slave Law, Emerson delivered no address outside the lyceum circuits, where he cast himself and was viewed by others as an apostle of culture, not a crusader against slavery." For three years, tumultuous in the history of the antislavery movement and of America, Emerson remained silent. In weighing his commitment to the cause, this remarkable lacuna needs to be fully acknowledged.[80]

Apparently, the only time Emerson broke silence was to announce that he was being silent. In the early fall of 1853, Emerson penned in his journals a poem he entitled "Liberty." It was published the next year in a volume to raise money for supporting abolitionist activity in Rochester, and begins:

> Once I wished I might rehearse
> Freedom's paean in my verse
> That the slave who caught the strain
> Should throb until he snapt his chain
> But the Spirit said, "Not so
> Speak it not, or speak it low."

The most recent interpreter of the piece acknowledges that "the poem focuses on the dilemma of the poet as much as the slave."[81]

In the meantime, he devoted all his efforts to professional advancement. Converting his experience in the UK into a marketable book, *English Traits*, proved a dreary and emotionally draining experience. His lyceum work was prodigious, and he often travelled in difficult weather conditions to meet his speaking obligations. Throughout it all, he carefully avoided the question of slavery.[82]

Here is what he did do. Towards the end of his immensely popular talk "England," he chastised the English for effectively creating two countries. One was "rich, Norman, Saxon, learned, social" and the other "poor, Celtic, peasant, drudging Chartist England." Yet, "I only recognize this fact in passing: it is important that it is stated;—it will not help us now to dwell on it." Another lyceum lecture was "London," more narrowly focused on the imperial capital. He repeated there the assessment of "England" virtually verbatim, adding: "Freedom in America has developed two Americas,—one, white and exclusive; and the other, black and excluded." This brief allusion to Black people, parallel to Celts, of being "excluded," shows how measured Emerson was in the lyceum. Perhaps it was more than just measured, for he concluded the discussion by again saying that dwelling on it "will not help us now." Did he not appreciate that this was almost an *anti*-abolitionist sentiment?[83]

Many lyceums forbad presenting controversial topics. As he so often talked about constraints, Emerson might have circumvented the prohibition by offering a lecture on (say) servitude. That topic could have enveloped various kinds, philosophical and material, allowing him to mention chattel slavery in America. In "Man the Reformer," an 1841 talk given to the Mechanics' Apprentices' Library Association in Boston, Emerson deftly wove in a poignant reference. Describing the complexities of the current economy, he noted that, "We are all implicated, of course," and gave this example: "The abolitionist has shown us our dreadful debt to the southern negro. In the island of Cuba, in addition to the ordinary abominations of slavery, it appears, only men are bought for the plantations, and one dies in ten every year, of these miserable bachelors, to yield us sugar." Going well beyond the issue of economic dependency, Emerson illuminated the suffering of the enslaved. That he did not later look for opportunities to integrate similar themes is a stark reminder of how little he wanted to talk for the cause.[84]

When in 1855 he had returned to speak directly on slavery, he leveraged his talk by coordinating it with lyceum opportunities. A month before giving the invited lecture "American Slavery" in Boston, Emerson addressed the Bangor (Maine) Anti-Slavery Society, likely with the same address, for which he received $20. The previous two days, he had delivered three other lectures in Maine on non-slavery topics (for which he collected $100). He then gave "American Slavery" on January 25, 1855, to "an immense crowd" in Boston. Over the next month he repeated it in no fewer than five other venues and was well compensated: $100 by the Massachusetts, $50 by the New York, and $30 by

the Philadelphia Antislavery Societies; $25 by the Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society of Rochester; and an unknown sum by the Worcester Antislavery Society. The last time he gave it, he received $20 in Syracuse. Emerson's usual lyceum fee was around $25, so he was being paid at or above market price. Emerson integrated these presentations into his existing lyceum schedule, giving other talks in thirteen proximate locations during the same month. The AASS had developed its own lecturing system, but Emerson chose to arrange these antislavery talks himself, just as he did his lyceum lectures. Carefully coordinating appearances, he efficiently monetized these lectures along with talks given in nearby lyceums.[85]

In 1854, Emerson's three-year silence on slavery was about to end. Whatever faith the country had in the Compromise of 1850 was shattered in early January 1854 when Stephen Douglas proposed in the Senate that a massive territory known generally as Nebraska should enter "with or without slavery." The subsequent Kansas–Nebraska Act effectively overrode the Missouri Compromise of 1820 that had prevented slavery from spreading north of 36° 30.' Recollected prominent Boston businessman Amos A. Lawrence: "On January 4, 1854, the beautiful dream came to an end. We went to bed one night, old-fashioned, conservative, compromise, Union Whigs, and waked up stark mad Abolitionists." Lawrence, Kansas was subsequently named for his financial support during the struggle to keep the territory free soil.[86]

Two months later, Emerson gave "Seventh of March Speech on the Fugitive Slave Law, 7 March 1854," marking the fourth anniversary of Webster's notorious speech. It was the thirteenth and final talk in a weekly series at the New York City Broadway Tabernacle, put on by the American Anti-Slavery Society, with Furness, Garrison, Parker, and Phillips immediately preceding Emerson. That Emerson hadn't spoken on slavery for so long and yet was the last of a series of famous activists indicates how prized he was for his notoriety.[87]

Despite Webster being dead for nearly two years, both Parker and Phillips tore into his memory, and, along with Garrison, spoke at fever pitch. *The New-York Daily Times* referred to "Parker's extraordinary diatribe." But Emerson's own talk elicited mixed response. The *National Anti-Slavery Stand* characterized it as "a tame repetition of Parker and Phillips." The *Boston Transcript* praised the address, although perhaps faintly: "those who entered the hall, thinking that the speaker could find no new form in which to exhibit his hackneyed subject … found that, in the hands of the master, the old theme wears a new beauty when clothed with the graces of his thought."[88]

Emerson approached the event with his usual hesitation: "I saw the great audience with dismay," he recorded in his journal, "& told the bragging secretary, that I was most thankful to those who stayed at home; Every auditor was a new affliction, & if all had stayed away, by rain, or preoccupation, I had been best pleased." When speaking in the lyceum, Emerson carefully counted attendance, always happier when the seats were filled. Here, the reverse was the case: he hoped for a sparse crowd since abolitionist enthusiasts were his "affliction."[89]

Four days earlier, Emerson had written to Concord friend Emily Mervine Drury that he was "not quite ready to speak" and to his brother William the very day of the talk that he was still writing it. Having just returned from an extended season of lyceum lecturing, Emerson composed the talk quickly, and it showed signs of haste. The legal authorities he consulted were the same and listed in the same order as those he had included in his 1851 talk, clearly having been cribbed from the earlier lecture.[90]

In 1851, Emerson gave a well-planned address requested by his neighbors that turned out to be a predictable rehash of established positions combined with unsupportable new ones. Perhaps precisely because it was a quick and troubled work, as had been "The American Scholar," the 1854 speech expressed innovations Emerson may not have had time to refine or eliminate. Electrifying, it contains more of substance than any of his other abolitionist talks.[91]

Emerson started as he did the 1851 "Address to the Citizens of Concord," regretting that he had been drawn into politics. But there is an important difference. In the earlier talk he lamented the necessity since it was not the scholar's primary duty to act. Now, however, he used that position to announce that political engagement had become the scholar's responsibility. His duty was to speak at a "public event" only when it affected "the well-being of students or scholars." He then acknowledged that "the class of scholars and students … comprises every man in the best hours of his life." The rapid expansion of newspapers meant that "this class has come in this country to take in all classes." Although a slippery argument, Emerson extended the audience of scholars to include everyone listening to the address.[92]

The address blended the idealism of his earliest talks with the essential dichotomy of fate and power that preoccupied Emerson during the decade of the 1850s. As discussed in Chapter 6, with *Representative Men* as background Emerson began expanding his understanding of self-reliance to put the individual in the service of society and democracy. In powerful

statements, he announced: "For it is,—is it not?—the essence of courtesy, of politeness, of religion, of love, to prefer another, to postpone oneself, to protect another from oneself." For, "Liberty is the Crusade of all brave and conscientious men." An enlarged sense of self-reliance would allow each American to recognize a greater collective truth than any one person could utter.[93]

Although finally putting full passion into an antislavery speech, once again Emerson withdrew. In February, Anthony Burns had escaped enslavement in Virginia and found work in Boston. Discovered because of a letter he sent his brother, Burns was arrested on May 24 and ordered to be returned to enslaver Charles F. Suttle. Active abolitionists, including Theodore Parker, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Wendell Phillips, were arrested in attempting to free Burns. Throughout Burns' highly publicized trial that stirred Boston and in which his supporters were threatened with violence, Emerson remained in Concord, finishing *English Traits*. "Deep in his work," observes von Frank, "he wrote no letters at this time and discouraged all visitors but family." Emerson disparagingly thought abolitionists fighting the rendition were "forced into a theatrical attitude."[94]

Thoreau, on the other hand, addressed the situation in his powerful "Slavery in Massachusetts," delivered at a July Fourth antislavery rally in Framingham, Massachusetts and published in the *Liberator* two weeks later. A savage indictment of rendition, Thoreau called out the magistrate in the Burns case, Edward G. Loring, using brilliant ridicule: "Every moment that she [the Commonwealth of Massachusetts] hesitated to set this man free—every moment that she now hesitates to atone for her crime, she is convicted. The Commissioner on her case is God; not Edward G. God, but simple God." Thoreau was eager to name names and to publish his remarks. If not fully an immediatist then, he certainly stood at the very brink.[95]

Emerson continued the year with modest gestures toward abolition. He helped organize an indignation meeting about the Kansas–Nebraska Act that instead was deferred to a larger People's Convention in Boston, which he attended on July 7. Two days later and a month after Burns was sent back south, some dozen Concordians (including Mary Merrick Brooks, William Whiting, the Emersons, and the Thoreaus) met and apparently answered in the affirmative: "If a slave, who was making his escape, should come to your house, would you aid him by giving him shelter?" The next day Emerson invited Theodore Parker to speak, explaining that, "The design of the inviters is to draw the town to hold

weekly meetings on Sunday evening for liberty." Historians have called it the Concord Vigilance Committee, modeled on the Boston one. That is doubtful. It only pledged to serve as an underground railroad for the fugitive, not as a committee to physically disrupt rendition. Whatever came of the group, it is not known, but there is no evidence Emerson ever gave active assistance to a fugitive. All later testimony points to the contrary.[96]

By late summer, the Boston Vigilance Committee invited Emerson to talk as part of a group of three antislavery advocates. The other two were Frederick Douglass, who had by then broken with Garrison by embracing the Constitution as a vehicle for Black liberation, and Congressman Charles Wentworth Upham, an outspoken opponent of the Kansas–Nebraska Act, but one who had turned hostile to Emerson and Transcendentalism. They were joined by three Southerners who stood against abolition: Senator Sam Houston, Congressman Thomas Hart Benson (both of whom also had opposed the Kansas–Nebraska Act), and conservative enslaver Senator Robert Toombs.[97]

The Committee specifically chose not to invite the more radical Parker, Garrison, and Phillips, all of whom then felt slighted. Garrison and Phillips refused to participate at all, "because of its non-partisan character." Insulted, Parker wrote an indignant letter to organizer Samuel Gridley Howe, who responded affectionately: "What do you mean by abusing folks for not having red-hot Garrisonian abolition lectures, when they expressly state that they are going to have an 'independent' course, and one representing all shades of opinion?" Emerson was selected because he could be counted on to offer acceptably moderate sentiments. He filled his journals with some sixty pages of notes devoted to "WO Liberty." About one-quarter of this material went into his next talk on abolition.[98]

In opening the West to slavery, the Kansas–Nebraska Act was a cataclysmic event leading directly to the Civil War. Even some supporters of the Fugitive Slave Law, such as Edward Everett and the Cotton Whig congressman William Appleton, protested. More than 3,000 ministers in New England signed a petition against "this great moral wrong," and the 200-foot scroll was delivered to Washington. Emerson had taken notice in his journals: "There is nobody in Washington who can explain this Nebraska business to the people,—nobody of weight. And nobody of any importance on the bad side. It is only done by [Stephen] Douglass & his accomplices by calculation on the brutal ignorance of the people." Despite confusing the spelling of the Senator's name with that of the

great Black abolitionist's, Emerson understood the grave consequence of settled law becoming unsettled: "But what effrontery it required to fly in the face of what was supposed settled law & how it shows that we have no guards whatever, that there is no proposition whatever, that is too audacious to be offered us by the southerner."[99]

In his speech, however, he made no effort to "explain this Nebraska business to the people" nor to identify the shifting sentiments of conservative elements he had criticized in earlier talks. Emerson was still condemning the Fugitive Slave Law, arguing again that White people, too, had lost their liberty. Even when defending civil liberties in Massachusetts, Emerson missed the mark. Because of their resistance to the incarceration and return of Burns, the Boston Vigilance Committee and the 500-person Boston Anti-Man Hunting League became so successful protecting fugitives in Boston that the law was essentially no longer enforced there. Although there were numerous Black and White members of the Boston League who lived outside the city, Emerson himself never joined.[100]

Late in life Austin Bearse, abolitionist and member of the Vigilance Committee, published an extensive recollection of its actions in defense of fugitives from enslavement. His book, which does not mention Emerson even once, ends in 1854, when that crisis was effectively resolved in Boston. Without understanding it, Emerson was flailing a dead horse. What was then most urgent to speak out against was the spread of slavery in the West. But Emerson was still focused on personal freedom in Massachusetts.[101]

In his 1851 address, Emerson had proposed compensation to the South. At the end of the 1855 talk, he dwelled on that solution. He acknowledged abolitionist criticism of his earlier proposal, for he was "never conceding the right of the planter to own." Naively, however, he asked: "Was there ever any compensation that was enthusiastically paid as this will be?.... Every man in the land will give a week's work to dig away this accursed mountain of sorrow once and forever out of the world." Throughout this cluster of talks, Emerson emphasized that the North was mercantile and that, "The Party of Property, of education, has resisted every progressive step." When he suggested Northern wealth as the solution to slavery, surely he could see that it was precisely wealth that the North most wanted to hold on to. Antislavery radicals, too, opposed compensation, believing it would implicitly acknowledge humans as property. Astonishingly, after disputing the Southerner's "right ... to own," Emerson rushed headlong into that verbal trap, urging that, "It is really the great task fit for this country to accomplish, to

buy the *property* of the planters, as the British nation bought the West Indian slaves."[102]

Despite random suggestions and strategic blunders, on a personal level Emerson was making progress in his emerging belief that he must join others in defense of freedom: "I do not cripple but exalt the social action. A wise man delights in the powers of many people." Even more directly, he pronounced: "Men inspire each other.... It is so delicious to act with great masses to great aims. For instance the summary or gradual abolition of slavery."[103] Emerson was moving toward common cause.

Abolitionists hoped Emerson would later return to New York's Broadway Tabernacle and to Philadelphia, but he continued to decline invitations, citing publishing and lyceum responsibilities. In particular, he put off recurrent requests from William Henry Furness (Figure 1.3). A schoolmate since early childhood and a classmate at Boston Latin School and Harvard College, Furness was, in Perry Miller's assessment, Emerson's "life-long (and possibly his only really intimate) friend. He was to preach Emerson's funeral sermon." Their correspondence exudes a deep love and sentimentality, fully confirming Miller's judgment. Emerson never missed the chance to include Furness's Philadelphia on his lyceum circuit and he usually stayed with his friend.[104]

Settling in Philadelphia soon after ordination, Furness became minister of the First Unitarian Church, growing the congregation over the next fifty years so robustly that it twice required new buildings. His early work on the miracles question, *Remarks on the Four Gospels* (1836), aligned with Transcendentalist interpretations; Miller describes it as: "In the guise of Biblical criticism, it is a prosaic [Emerson's] *Nature*." Although struggling to resist the moral call of abolition for fear of dividing his congregation, by 1839 Furness became an ardent spokesperson for the antislavery cause.[105]

In January 1855, Emerson wrote Furness that, "I have a pretty good lecture this time." That must have been "American Slavery," the well-compensated talk he had just written for the Boston conference. The dates couldn't be agreed on, and when later that year Furness asked for another talk, Emerson confessed: "I believe I make the worse antislavery discourses that are made in this country. They are only less bad than slavery. I incline this winter to promise none."[106]

Furness persisted, writing back immediately, rightly reminding him: "Remember your own good word. It is not the speech that one makes in these days that profits, but the side he takes." But Emerson continued to claim both a lack of inspiration and time, for "the pain of slavery &

detestation of our politics [are] only working the wrong way to make me more dumb & sterile.... I am pinned to a printer probably till 1 December, and thence onward I have a long western journey.... After that, new engagements follow here." Claiming lack of inspiration and professional obligations, Emerson sidestepped any additional commitments, even at the request of his oldest and most like-minded friend.[107]

Furness tried a final time on October 18, 1856, concluding his letter to Emerson: "The struggle is tremendous. It is the world's battle.... How grand it is to see the cause of God & man making its way against the passions, the interests, the will of man!... Don't you want to make an Anti Slavery Speech which shall be 'the terror of the earth'? I do."[108] Furness continued to make powerful abolitionist speeches. Emerson did not.

After delivering "American Slavery" in Syracuse on February 25, 1855, Emerson never again gave an abolitionist talk outside of Massachusetts. With the exception of an emancipation speech during the Civil War, even those he did give in his home state were not so much about the principle of abolition as they were directed responses to individuals and events: Charles Sumner, John Brown, and free soilers in Kansas. Chapter 5 will show that they were less about abolition than a reaction to violence against other White people.

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In the broadest strokes, Emerson's antislavery message before 1850 was that moral amelioration of White America must precede physical liberation of the enslaved. Abolition without individuals achieving a higher spiritual purpose would result in only a small gain. After 1850, Emerson overlaid moral amelioration with outrage for Webster. The politician's support for the Fugitive Slave Law insulted his sense of self-reliance and personal autonomy. Infuriating Emerson, it replaced in his speeches consideration of slavery or of those who suffered from it.

All the while, Emerson strategically maintained his distance. He published only his 1844 address on British emancipation which had an audience in the UK willing to pay for it. He reported that friends urged him to print his 1851 talk, and six months later, despite the deep ambivalence he expressed to Carlyle, he was still intending to do so. But he did not.[109]

Parker and other abolitionists published their speeches as quickly as possible. Even Thoreau, as hesitant to identify with the movement as was Emerson, put his antislavery talks and essays into print. Consequently, although not nearly so well known as Emerson otherwise was, he became as famous when it came to abolition. Cornel West observes

that, if eventually "Emerson did become quite active in the abolitionist movement," compared to Thoreau he did so "at relatively little risk." Although he had his lyceum reception to consider, Emerson also had a far wider circle of support. Abolitionists accepted his complex moral expressions and political gaffes because what was most important was his showing up just often enough to be counted.[110]

The abolition movement caught Emerson when his complex professional life of speaking and publishing commanded his full attention and energy. Busily constructing one of the most interesting careers in American history, he believed he was destined for this role – which, as he wrote, is "important to the republic of Man, have no watchman, or lover, or defender, but I." Emerson's career also brought him enormous fame and not a little fortune. He thought it required total devotion, and that constrained how he presented himself. The next chapter highlights the pull of these forces as he committed to professional and social success.[111]