

## **The Limits of Self-Reliance: Emerson, Slavery, and Abolition**

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### **Abstract**

In the 1841 essay "Self-Reliance" Ralph Waldo Emerson presupposed a democratic society of free and equal individuals – an idealized America with a veil drawn over racial slavery. As his own commitment to the antislavery cause deepened over time Emerson sought to reconcile his ideal of self-reliance with organized political action necessary to fight slavery.

Recent scholarship has corrected the previously dominant image of Emerson as detached from politics and indifferent to abolitionism. But even as he participated in it, Emerson saw antislavery activism as a distraction from his own proper work of freeing "imprisoned spirits, imprisoned thoughts, far back in the brain of man." Abolitionists, with their single-minded pursuit of a cause, seemed to Emerson to have only a "platform existence, and no personality." Emerson's philosophy of Self-Reliance privileged individual over collective action, and personal experience over concern for distant evils. Emerson was most successful in synthesizing self-reliance with abolitionism when he urged resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law: individuals who resisted the law displayed self-reliance of the kind Emerson celebrated. He also admired the self-reliance of individual fugitive slaves, despite his doubts about the capacities of the black race in general and his ranking Anglo-Saxons over other races and peoples.

Beyond resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law, Emerson's philosophy of Self-Reliance provided less clear guidance for fighting slavery, and Emerson himself vibrated among several contradictory strategies. His support for peaceful, compensated emancipation within an intact Union was irreconcilable with his support for the violent measures of John Brown, whom he celebrated as the model of American self-reliance.

In the 1860 essay "Fate" Emerson reformulates the ideal of self-reliance in a way that reflects the escalating sectional crisis: only through cold-eyed recognition of necessity, he argues, can one preserve a measure of self-reliance in a world that frustrates our will. This reformulation of self-reliance is more suited to human beings living through an inescapable political crisis, and in that respect an advance over the 1841 version. But it depends for its success on clearer comprehension of political causality than Emerson ever achieved.

## THE LIMITS OF SELF-RELIANCE: EMERSON, SLAVERY, AND ABOLITION

“Self-Reliance” is central to the philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson, his most famous and attractive idea. Emerson challenges the individual to “set at naught books and traditions,” to “be a nonconformist,” to recognize that ideas, books, religions, institutions, and occupations acquire life and value only when an individual enlivens them with his or her own experience and effort. “Though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried” (“Self-Reliance” from Emerson 2008, 54).

From the beginning there have been critics who saw in Emerson’s Self-Reliance a kind of “radical egoistic anarchism” that “vaporized the social world,” pitting the individual against the community and its traditions and laws (Whicher 1953, 28-40). But Emerson never claimed that a self-reliant individual possessed unlimited freedom or complete understanding, nor was self-reliance inconsistent with fulfilling one’s duties to others. The self-reliant human being recognizes his or her own limitations – must “take himself, for better or worse, as his portion” – but grasps that traditions, institutions, and received opinions are at least equally limited and imperfect. Self-reliant individuals recognize the call of justice and the obligation to fulfill duties toward others, but do so “in a new and unprecedented way”: not after the customs of others, but as their own inward perception of truth prescribes (Emerson 2008, 54, 66).

As many scholars have noted, there is an affinity between Emerson’s idea of self-reliance and the conditions of a democratic society. Emerson clearly assumes a society of free, equal, and mobile individuals when, at the expense of the “city dolls” of Boston or New York who are lost

if no one hands them a plum position, he praises the “sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont, who in turn tries all the professions, who teams it, farms it, peddles, keeps a school, preaches, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys a township, and so forth, in successive years, and always, like a cat, falls on his feet” (“Self-Reliance” from Emerson 2008, 67). George Kateb describes Emerson’s self-reliance as “a doctrine unthinkable outside democracy” (Kateb 2002, 178). Judith Shklar presents Emerson as a critic of majoritarian democracy but one for whom “democratic political experiences...quite often gave his essays their intellectual purpose and direction” (Shklar 1990, 601).

But was the United States in Emerson’s time a democracy? That depended on the color of one’s skin. For an enslaved man or woman, the America of Emerson’s time was a tyranny, not a democracy; and -- as Emerson recognized -- the institution of slavery radically negates the idea of self-reliance. If Emerson’s philosophy of self-reliance is indeed closely connected with the conditions of a democratic society, then it follows, conversely, that it might not be especially suited to a slave society, or to one (like Emerson’s antebellum United States) in which slavery and democracy live in troubled coexistence. That Emerson’s philosophy of self-reliance condemns the practice of slavery is clear enough, but that is only the beginning of the problem. How to take action against slavery, without along the way compromising or suffocating one’s own intellectual and practical self-reliance: that was the problem that increasingly preoccupied Emerson in the years leading up to the Civil War.

Recently scholars have begun revising the long-held image of Emerson as a thinker detached from practical politics and indifferent or downright hostile to abolitionism – an image unfortunately reinforced by the (recently-corrected) unavailability of his antislavery writings and

speeches. (See for example Len Gougeon's Historical Introduction to Emerson 1995.) Emerson's antislavery commitments were genuine, publicly expressed on numerous occasions, and increasingly radical after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850. But where Emerson's antislavery commitments fit within his philosophy as a whole, and to what extent the growing sectional crisis over slavery may have inflected his later writings, remain largely unexamined questions in the enormous critical literature on Emerson's thought.

In this essay I re-examine Emerson by emphasizing several themes typically treated as marginal to his philosophy of self-reliance: his antislavery addresses (especially his opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law); his ambivalent relation to organized abolitionism; his peculiar theories about race and human progress; and his own political choices during the deepening crisis over slavery.<sup>1</sup> The slavery crisis put the idea of self-reliance to the test, and Emerson knew it. The institution of slavery was both deeply unjust and radically incompatible with self-reliance, both for slave owner and slave. But whether it was possible to act effectively against an evil as politically and morally voracious as slavery, without compromising self-reliance along the way, was another question altogether.

Emerson's original vision of Self-Reliance (in the 1841 essay of that title) took free and equal individuals as its point of departure and did not consider the way in which American slavery challenged that vision. In that essay Emerson was critical of abolitionists for what (fairly or unfairly) he considered their lack of self-reliant thought and action. During the 1840s and

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Shklar in "Emerson and the Inhibitions of Democracy"(1990) does not mention Emerson's antislavery commitments. George Kateb, Emerson and Self-Reliance, (2002, 177-178) sees Emerson's antislavery activity as an "aberration," a "deviation" from self-reliance. See discussion below.

1850s Emerson sought to reconcile his increasing (though still ambivalent) commitment to the antislavery cause with the categories of his philosophy of Self-Reliance and his understanding of his own calling as a philosopher-poet concerned about the whole human condition. He applied the ideal of self-reliance, with varying degrees of success, to a number of slavery-related issues including the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law (which he insisted must be resisted); the spread of slavery to new federal territories; the post-abolition prospects of the black race; and the darkening shadow of violence, disunion, and civil war.

The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 radicalized Emerson's antislavery politics and at the same time conveniently harmonized his self-reliant philosophy with the fulfillment of his antislavery duties. Because the law required individuals of free states to cooperate in capturing fugitive slaves, slavery was no longer some abstract, far-off evil, but something personally and locally experienced and resisted in exactly the way most appropriate to Emerson's philosophy of self-reliance. Conservatives' insistence that the Constitution – including its fugitive slave clause – was sacred provoked Emerson to insist on a “higher law” than any traditionally-received political text, just as he rejected the authority of religious texts in his famous Divinity School Address of 1838 (Emerson 2008, 29-44). Because the Constitution itself (Article IV, section 2) explicitly provided for rendition of fugitive slaves, Emerson's advice in “Self-Reliance” to “set at naught books and traditions” here drew its most political conclusion: a lifeless constitutional clause was entitled to no more respect from a self-reliant individual than a lifeless religion or custom or book. Emerson admired the self-reliance manifested by fugitive slaves – “this man who has run the gauntlet of a thousand miles for his freedom” (“Address to the Citizens of Concord,” in Emerson 1995, 58). He also saw the law as an assault on the self-reliance of free

state citizens whom it required to cooperate in capturing fugitive slaves, against their own judgment and consciences.<sup>2</sup>

But resistance to enforcing the Fugitive Slave Law fell far short of a comprehensive attack on the institution of slavery, and here Emerson's philosophy of Self-Reliance provided less clear guidance. Even as he engaged in it, Emerson saw antislavery activism draining time and energy away from his own proper work of freeing "imprisoned spirits, imprisoned thoughts, far back in the brain" (1852 entry, from Journals Vol. XIII, 80). The slavery issue was different from most of the issues routinely faced by the citizens of a democracy, where one can speak one's mind, do one's duty, and then return to one's vocation. The obstacles to abolishing slavery in the United States were so great that, unless one committed oneself completely to its abolition (as did full-time abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and Frederick Douglass) it was unclear whether one would accomplish anything at all. Emerson simultaneously sensed the pull of total commitment against slavery and rebelled against its personal cost.

Emerson also found it difficult to settle on any coherent political strategy for addressing the problem of slavery. Though willing to risk disunion, he usually rejected the active secessionism of Garrison, Phillips, and Thoreau – though on occasion he reversed course and advocated secession. During the early 1850s he endorsed a gradualist policy of stopping the expansion of slavery (the Free Soil and Republican Party platforms) combined with compensated emancipation over the long term – a policy that presupposed an intact Union and peaceful

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<sup>2</sup> Here I completely agree with Jack Turner that for Emerson self-reliance was incompatible with knowing complicity with injustice. Turner 2008, 128.

abolition. But later in the decade he lent political and personal support to John Brown's violent antislavery efforts in Kansas and, after Brown's abortive 1859 Harper's Ferry raid, celebrated him as a hero and martyr. Once we get beyond resistance to enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law – where his own philosophy provided relatively clear guidance – Emerson seemed politically rudderless during the 1850s in ways that call into question whether his brand of self-reliance can effectively address so politically complicated an evil as American slavery.

Emerson's philosophy was always rooted in personal experience and for that reason evolved and changed over time. Scholars have noted a very different tone in Emerson's later writings, particularly the keynote essay "Fate" from Emerson's 1860 book The Conduct of Life, where Emerson admits more fully than before the limits on free, self-reliant action and insists that only by embracing necessity can we preserve a degree of freedom in an obdurate world. This shift in Emerson's thinking has been attributed to a variety of causes. But scholars seem rarely to have considered whether and to what degree the sectional crisis over slavery may have shaped Emerson's thinking in a book published on the eve of the Civil War.

I argue that in The Conduct of Life Emerson offers a revised vision of self-reliance, one more appropriate to political engagement than was the version of self-reliance put forward in 1841. Emerson's increased emphasis on constraint in his later writings should be understood to include political constraints of the kind the slavery crisis underscored for everyone. In "Fate" he insists that self-reliant individuals grapple with "the spirit of the times," a requirement he had not stressed in his 1841 essay "Self-Reliance."

The later Emerson's revised, more sober and politically-engaged version of self-reliance is in some respects richer and more persuasive than his 1841 version. But it is also far more

difficult to achieve; Emerson himself fell short of its demands by his less-than-complete comprehension of the political crisis through which he was living. Ultimately I conclude that Emerson's philosophy of self-reliance reached its limits in attempting effectively to address issues of slavery and abolition. His ideal of self-reliance is in the end more suited to a reasonably peaceful, law-governed democracy characterized by free and equal individuals than to a world of masters and slaves, or a nation on the brink of civil war.

## II.

What is most attractive in Emerson's idea of self-reliance is simultaneously what is most problematic: that what individuals make of their lives depends above all on effective and courageous use of their own active mental and physical powers. External supports – economic, political, legal, intellectual, religious – are secondary. A self-reliant individual will find adequate external resources however challenging or primitive the social conditions; an individual lacking self-reliance will not achieve it through external assistance. “Nature suffers nothing to remain in her kingdoms which cannot help itself,” Emerson observes -- which shows that he does not limit the principle to any particular type of society or even to the human species alone. (“Self-Reliance” from Emerson 2008, 65).

Emerson's idea of self-reliance is closely connected with his skepticism about societal progress, at least in his early writings. (The idea of progress later becomes important to his diagnosis of the slavery problem.) To imagine that one's life would somehow be better, freer, and happier in some more advanced society than the one in which providence has placed one, is to fail at self-reliance. “All men plume themselves on the improvement of society; and no man improves. Society never advances. It recedes as fast on one side as it gains on the other.”

Progress is individual, not social. “No greater men are now than ever were.” “Reformers summon conventions, and vote and resolve in multitude” to create a better world, but all in vain, because “It is only as a man puts off all foreign support, and stands alone, that I see him to be strong and to prevail” (“Self-Reliance,” from Emerson 2008, 71-73).

To illustrate the claim that self-reliance is independent of the advanced or backward state of society, Emerson contrasts the “well-clad, reading, writing, thinking American, with a watch, a pencil, and a bill of exchange in his pocket” with “a naked New Zealander, whose property is a club, a spear, a mat, and an undivided twentieth of a shed to sleep under.” The civilized American is not necessarily an improvement on the “wild virtue” of the autonomous savage; as society advances, “for every thing that is given, something is taken” (Emerson 2008, 71).

What is most revealing here, given Emerson’s own time and place, is precisely the comparison he does not make. He does not compare either civilized man or savage man with the life circumstances of a chattel slave – who was far more intimately connected to Emerson’s own social and political world than the savage New Zealander. Emerson’s idealized savage has a hard life, but he is free and for that reason can be self-reliant. If instead Emerson had claimed that the slave on a Southern plantation had just as much chance to achieve self-reliance under slavery, despite the whips, chains, and hounds than the “well-clad, reading, writing, thinking [white] American,” or that any slave truly capable of self-reliance will find his or her way to freedom, these would be hollow exhortations. He does not, of course, make these extreme claims. But neither does he at any point in the essay raise the question of what implications, for his philosophy of self-reliance, follow from the existence on American soil of this massive and entrenched system of plantation slavery.

The institution of slavery does make an offstage appearance in “Self-Reliance” in one especially harsh passage. “If an angry bigot assumes this bountiful cause of Abolition, and comes to me with his last news from Barbadoes, why should I not say to him, ‘Go love thy infant; love thy wood-chopper: be good-natured and modest: have that grace; and never varnish your hard, uncharitable ambition with this incredible tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off. Thy love afar is spite at home’” (Emerson 2008, 56). The passage is not necessarily directed against all abolitionists but arguably only the “angry bigots” among them – though bigoted about what, or toward whom, is never explained. He does refer to “Abolition” itself as a “bountiful cause” (an odd label). Nevertheless the attack on abolitionism sweeps pretty broadly, and prefigures Emerson’s later critical remarks about William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips even as Emerson was making common cause with them; Emerson later calls Garrison’s newsletter The Liberator “a scold” (Emerson, Journals Vol. XIII, 282).

More importantly, Emerson’s attack here misfires: abolitionists had no alternative but to denounce evils “a thousand miles off” because they were not permitted to go south and abolitionize among the slaveholders and slaves, and because – as Emerson elsewhere realizes – New England was complicit in the fate of slaves “a thousand miles off.” Moreover, Emerson’s proposed alternative – at least in this passage -- is not some less “bigoted” and more effective way of opposing slavery, but to urge the unnamed angry abolitionist to drop that activity altogether, and love his own children and neighbors instead of lavishing “incredible tenderness” on “black folk a thousand miles off.” By that standard, a slaveholder who loved his own children and was decent to neighbors would be morally superior to the angry, graceless abolitionist.

This particular passage from “Self-Reliance” was by no means Emerson’s only or final word on slavery and abolition. Nevertheless it is worth asking why Emerson included this passage at all, and how it is connected with the problem of self-reliance.

What seems to disturb Emerson here is that someone would act, and urge others to act, on the basis of something abstract and distant rather than present and directly experienced. Citizens of Massachusetts who have (or believe they have) no personal connection to slavery, who never practice it, suffer it, or give it any thought whatsoever until a rhetorically persuasive abolitionist catches their ear, acquire their political opinions secondhand and in that respect fail at self-reliance. They are instead (as Emerson remarks in an immediately preceding sentence) “capitulat[ing] to badges and names.” To adopt opinions about slavery secondhand, divorced from any lived experience of the institution, is in principle no different than uncritically accepting the dogmas of a church or the ideology of a party. A self-reliant individual “must learn to detect...that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within,” (Emerson 2008, 53) and this is no less essential for opinions about slavery than for opinions on other matters.

In “Self-Reliance” abolitionist agitators seem to serve no useful purpose at all. By the 1850s Emerson had become convinced that abolitionists and abolitionist rhetoric were essential weapons in the battle against slavery; in that respect his position changed. What did not change was his suspicion that abolitionist orators do not exhibit self-reliant thinking of the kind Emerson considered it his own mission to practice and foster in others. In an 1854 journal entry (written during the peak of Emerson’s public antislavery activity) Emerson observes:

Of Phillips, Garrison, and others I have always the feeling that they may wake up some morning and find that they have made a capital mistake, and are not the persons they took themselves for. Very dangerous is this thoroughly social and related life, whether

antagonistic or cooperative. In a lonely world, or a world with half a dozen inhabitants, these would find nothing to do.

The first discovery I made of Phillips was, that while I admired his eloquence, I had not the faintest wish to meet the man. He had only a platform existence, and no personality. Mere mouthpieces of a party; take away the party and they shrivel and vanish.

They are inestimable for workers on audiences; but for a private conversation, one to one, I must prefer to take my chance with that boy in the corner (Journals Vol. XIII, 282)

Emerson here (fairly or unfairly) characterizes abolitionist orators as individuals who think and act entirely to create an effect on an audience, who have no authentic inner life, who do not “know themselves,” and whose ideas are entirely reducible to the party or cause they represent. There is no “gleam of light” flashing across their mind “from within,” which for Emerson is the essential ingredient of mental self-reliance. And yet Emerson concedes that their work is of “inestimable” value, which highlights a tension between self-reliance and effective political action that he never successfully resolved.

The criticism of abolitionists in “Self-Reliance” perfectly explains why it was the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 (which gave teeth to a hitherto weakly enforced constitutional clause) that propelled Emerson into vigorous antislavery activity. Because the 1850 law obligated citizens of free states to assist in rendering fugitive slaves, it made the evil of slavery immediately and obviously something local and directly experienced. (For the fugitive slave battles in 1850s Massachusetts, including Emerson’s role in them, see Von Frank 1998.) In his 1851 “Address to the Citizens of Concord,” Emerson proclaimed: “If our resistance to this law is not right, there is no right. This is not meddling with other people’s affairs: this is hindering other people from meddling with us. This is not going crusading into Virginia and Georgia after

slaves...but this is befriending in our own state, on our own farms, a man who has taken the risk of being shot, or burned alive, or cast into the sea” (Emerson 2008, 139).

So to assist a fugitive slave in Massachusetts, and to refuse to cooperate with legalized kidnapping, is precisely to exhibit self-reliance in one’s opposition to slavery. No one needs an abolitionist orator to tell him or her that this law is wrong; Emerson believes one’s own natural moral sense will show the way. This is to offer assistance to a flesh and blood human being whom one can see and meet “in our own state, on our own farms,” not an abstract victim a thousand miles away. Between 1841 and 1851 Emerson’s thinking evolved and changed in many ways; but there remains a direct line between his critique of abolitionism in “Self-Reliance” and his reasoning for urging resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law in 1851.

To abolitionists like Garrison or Phillips, the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law merely made obvious the free states’ longstanding complicity in upholding slavery – even back in 1841 when to confront people with this truth made abolitionists appear “angry bigots.” Abolitionists offered assistance to fugitive slaves, but never forgot the plight of the millions “a thousand miles off” for whom escape was not possible. Emerson’s preference for acting from direct local and personal experience of slavery would have limited abolitionists’ capacity to mount a comprehensive nationwide attack on the institution. Whether any effective, nationwide attack on slavery was possible, and what strategy it would follow, was of course another question.

### III.

To evaluate Emerson’s troubled relation to abolitionism it helps to survey the range of options – none of them good -- available to citizens of free states who judged the institution of slavery radically unjust. Slavery was no ordinary political issue. It was the kind of evil for which,

unless one threw all one's time and energy into the battle, one was unlikely to accomplish anything at all; yet one might throw oneself fully into the battle and still accomplish little. What in Emerson's case has sometimes been interpreted as indifference toward slavery appears in a different light once all the difficulties are taken into account. "I waked at night, & bemoaned myself, because I had not thrown myself into this deplorable question of Slavery, which seems to want nothing so much as a few assured voices," he wrote to himself in 1852. But this would mean "my desertion of my post, which has none to guard it but me. I have quite other slaves to free than those negroes, to wit, imprisoned spirits, imprisoned thoughts, far back in the brain of man, -- far retired in the heaven of invention, and which, important to the republic of Man, have no watchman, or lover, or defender, but I." (Journals Vol. XIII, 80). This passage reveals, not indifference toward slavery, but instead a fierce battle between two duties, both of which Emerson recognizes as legitimate, and which come into conflict because the time demands of fulfilling each duty are enormous. He was to remain divided between these two types of duties for the remainder of his active life as writer and thinker.

Citizens of free states found themselves in the peculiar position of being politically and morally implicated in supporting the institution of slavery, without having any constitutional right or power either to abolish the institution or to withdraw their support. Thus the usual reformist advice, to "work within the system" to effect change, rang hollow in this case. Even in the unlikely event of a congressional majority committed to abolition of slavery, the antebellum Constitution prohibited the federal government from interfering with slavery in the states where it existed. Any such action would have been unconstitutional, unenforceable, and greeted by immediate secession of most slave states from the Union. Yet this same antebellum Constitution

positively obligated citizens of free states to return fugitive slaves. And the federal government was constitutionally obligated to “insure domestic tranquility,” which included, if necessary, assisting slave states in suppressing slave insurrections. Thus there was little a slavery-hating citizen of Massachusetts could directly accomplish through regular political channels to fight slavery in South Carolina or Georgia. A natural reading of the Constitution would appear to give Congress the power to restrict or abolish slavery in federal territories not yet states (Article IV section 3), and in the District of Columbia (Article I section 8); and this narrow channel for federal action against slavery would become essential to the platform of the Republican Party at its birth in 1854. But Southern leaders threatened to dissolve the Union rather than allow slavery to be subjected to future geographical confinement; this was not a bluff. (For the Southern perspective on the constitutional contest over slavery, see Read 2009.)

Alternatively one might decide to forego political action and instead work to “change minds and hearts” about slavery through books, speeches, petitions, and public information campaigns. The drawback of this strategy was not, as one might suppose, that it was too tame and safe – “mere words.” On the contrary, it was a dangerous activity, and downright impossible where it mattered most: in the slave states themselves, where abolitionist mailings were confiscated by the local post office (with the complicity of the federal government), and any practicing abolitionist would have been lynched on sight. Slaveholders regarded abolitionist speech and writing as deliberate attempts to foment slave insurrections, and were ready to go to extreme lengths to prevent it from infecting their own communities. Even in northern states it was dangerous to be an abolitionist; some were lynched and others (including Garrison and Phillips) physically assaulted. Antislavery petitions, no matter how respectfully phrased, and

despite the First Amendment guarantee of the “right to petition the Government,” were prohibited from Congress under the infamous “gag rule” (1836-1844), a bipartisan agreement to suppress public debate over slavery for the sake of national unity. (For the legal as well as illegal efforts to suppress abolitionist speech, see Steward 2008; Miller 1996.)

Thus to speak out publicly against slavery was not a safe or trivial act – not even in the North. This is worth emphasizing because Emerson’s own antislavery efforts consisted almost entirely of public speeches and publicly-circulated letters. Unlike Garrison and Phillips, he did not organize meetings or publish antislavery newsletters, though he sometimes spoke at their meetings and produced pieces for their publications. It would be wrong to downplay Emerson’s public antislavery utterances as “mere words,” because under the peculiar circumstances of antebellum America to speak against slavery was to act against it, in the only readily available way. The abolitionists as a movement were never more than marginal as a political party seeking votes; and some, like Garrison and Thoreau, foreswore voting altogether because it legitimated a system corrupted by slavery. Abolitionists’ power lay in their words, and in this respect Emerson made his contribution.

Nevertheless the question remained: beyond words, what then? And here abolitionists were internally divided in ways that shed light on Emerson’s own uncertain course. One option was for the free states themselves to secede from the Union. This was the position of William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and Henry David Thoreau, among others. The rationale was that only in this way could citizens of free states end their moral complicity for supporting a Union that permitted slavery. The newly-independent free states would then be absolved of their

obligation to return fugitive slaves and could for the first time serve as a beacon of liberty to the oppressed slave.

Thoreau in “Civil Disobedience” lays out the moral logic behind the free-state-secessionist position: it is not his duty, he says, to devote his entire life to abolition of slavery, a goal which may lie outside his power; but “it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it” and cease any more to give the evil his active support (Thoreau 1982, 117). Thoreau’s refusal to pay taxes to Massachusetts was intended as an act of individual secession from the state, for the purpose of provoking the state of Massachusetts to follow his example and secede from the Union.

The obvious objection to the secession of free states from the Union (which, despite its antislavery intention, would have been structurally identical to the Southern proslavery secession of 1860-61) is that it does little for the vast majority of Southern slaves left to languish in a Union now unrestrained in its proslavery policies; and it squanders any future hope of employing the power of the federal government against slavery. That was the principal objection of Frederick Douglass, the escaped slave turned abolitionist, who at first accepted the Garrison/Phillips argument for free state secession and later turned against it (Douglass 1994, 705-706).

Emerson himself occasionally flirted with secession, and was willing to risk disunion rather than capitulate on the Fugitive Slave law, but for the most part he rejected the secessionist position. He also rejected the principled refusal to vote exemplified by Thoreau and Garrison. “Those who stay away from the election think that one vote will do no good,” Emerson wrote in an 1854 journal entry. But they should “no more stay away from the election than from honesty

or from affection.” (Journals Vol. XIII, 304) Like Thoreau, Emerson engaged in conscientious refusal to obey the Fugitive Slave Law. But nowhere does Emerson recommend a policy of pure refusal like that of Thoreau. Emerson looked instead for some more positive course of action against slavery, one that sometimes entailed active involvement in electoral politics in a way Thoreau’s response did not.

The Republican platform (and its predecessor, the Free Soil Party) condemned slavery as an evil, attempted to restrict its expansion, and sought eventually abolish it according to some long and imprecise time frame. This at least allowed one to stake out a moral position against slavery while still remaining in the Union and working within the existing constitutional framework. It gave its supporters something positive and practical to organize for, vote for, and legislate upon. On the other hand, it arguably made one complicit in continuing to support slavery in the states where it existed. In this respect at least, Emerson was willing to make what he considered a principled compromise. Near the end of his 1851 Address to the Citizens of Concord (where he urges refusal to obey the Fugitive Slave Law) Emerson attempts to move beyond mere refusal. He identifies himself as a Unionist (which distinguishes him from Garrison, Phillips, and Thoreau) and says “I strongly share the hope of mankind in the power, and, therefore, in the duties of the Union.” He proposes that we first abrogate the Fugitive Slave Law; then “proceed to confine slavery to slave states” (the Free Soil position); then invites “any expert statesman” to “furnish us a plan for the summary or gradual winding up of slavery.” He has been told that “it will cost a thousand millions of dollars to buy the slaves,” but considers it an acceptable price to pay “to sweep this mountain of calamities out of the earth.” He mentions in passing “the new importance of Liberia,” which suggests he might support the widely

entertained (if morally questionable) idea of emancipation-with-removal of freed slaves to some other part of the world, though he doesn't clarify his meaning here (Emerson 2008, 148-149). All of this aligns Emerson's thinking (at least in 1851) closer to what became the ideology of the Republican Party, than to the position of Garrison or Phillips.

But Emerson was always more attached to the philosophy of self-reliance than to the platform or strategy of any political party, and in one important respect this led him into commitments irreconcilable with the peaceful, gradualist, Unionist antislavery approach of the Republican Party.

In 1856 Emerson organized public efforts to provide assistance, including arms, to antislavery settlers in Kansas. The 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, designed to defuse the slavery controversy by allowing territorial legislatures to decide whether slavery would be permitted or prohibited during the formative pre-statehood phase, had in fact produced a race between proslavery and antislavery settlers to gain control of unorganized western territories, and in Kansas a guerilla war between the two sides. In his speech at an 1856 Kansas Relief Meeting, Emerson proclaimed that "the people of Kansas" (meaning the antislavery settlers there) "ask for bread, clothes, arms, and men, to save them alive, and enable them to stand against these enemies of the human race." He asks his listeners to give "lavishly" to the cause, and makes explicit the connection to self-reliance: "They have a right to be helped for they have helped themselves...He only who is able to stand alone is qualified to be a citizen" (Emerson 1995, 112-113). So here self-reliance takes the form of individual, armed self-defense.

One might expect that Emerson would actively encourage the use of federal authority to prohibit slavery in Kansas; that goal was central to the national Republican strategy of restricting

the spread of slavery. But curiously Emerson treats this as a low priority: “I own I have little esteem for governments...Who doubts that Kansas would have been very well settled, if the United States had let it alone?...I am glad to see that the terror at disunion and anarchy is disappearing. Massachusetts, in its heroic day, had no government – was an anarchy” (Emerson 1995, 113-115). He supports this with the dubious claim that California in the early days of the Gold Rush, when no law or government existed anywhere near the gold fields, was characterized by “perfect security” because “Every man throughout the country was armed with knife and revolver, and it was known that instant justice would be administered to each offence, and perfect peace reigned.” Emerson attributes this supposedly peaceful Gold Rush to the racial traits of “the Saxon man” who is “not a pirate, but a citizen” (Emerson 1995, 115). (In fact this idea of an orderly, predominantly Anglo-Saxon Gold Rush was doubly inaccurate.) Emerson here makes the questionable assumption that if the federal government simply refrained from acting one way or the other, slavery would never spread to the western territories. Thus despite his occasional convergence with the Republican agenda and active support for some of its candidates in Massachusetts, Emerson’s thinking drifted away from the Republican insistence on the constitutional right and moral duty of Congress affirmatively to outlaw slavery in the territories.

The most famous of the antislavery Kansas warriors was John Brown, whose use of violence against proslavery settlers on the Kansas frontier was far from merely defensive.<sup>3</sup> Brown stayed at Emerson’s home at least twice during his trips to Massachusetts to raise money

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<sup>3</sup> In the Pottawatomie Massacre of May 24-25, 1856, John Brown led a group of antislavery raiders who entered the homes of proslavery Kansas settlers and killed five.

for his various armed antislavery initiatives, and Emerson raised money for Brown. Emerson's immediate reaction to Brown's 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry – that Brown was “a true hero, but he lost his head there” – indicates that Emerson was not informed in detail about Brown's activities and plans, and had no advance knowledge of Harper's Ferry (Gougeon, *Historical Introduction to Emerson* 1995, xlvi-xlvii). But Emerson certainly knew that, in general, John Brown was willing to use violence against slavery, and admired him for it. Emerson's praise of Brown implicitly criticizes other abolitionists for their sentimentality and impotence: “He believed in his ideas to that extent that he existed to put them all into action. He did not believe in moral suasion; -- he believed in putting the thing through” (Emerson 1995, 119).

Brown became for Emerson an instance of what the latter had called “Representative Men” in an 1850 book by that title.<sup>4</sup> Emerson calls Brown “a representative of the American public” and observes that “gentlemen find traits of relation readily between him and themselves” – which is precisely what defines a “representative man” in Emerson's thought. “Nothing can resist the sympathy which all elevated minds must feel with Brown, and through them the whole civilized world.” As a representative American, Brown naturally exhibits self-reliance, not only in action – in his armed individual courage – but also on the level of thought. In contrast to those who see only constitutional forms, Emerson observes, those only are free who “like John Brown, use their eyes to see the fact behind the forms” (Emerson 1995, 118-119).

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<sup>4</sup> Emerson's “Representative Men” are central to Shklar's “Emerson and the Inhibitions of Democracy” (1990). But Shklar does not mention Emerson's opposition to slavery or his admiration for John Brown.

In becoming Emerson's representative American, Brown in effect takes the place of the disgraced Daniel Webster. Webster in Emerson's view forfeited that status when he "sold" himself to the slaveholders and supported the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. A strikingly large percentage of Emerson's furious words and writings in response to the Fugitive Slave Law is directed at Webster, who Emerson had once idealized as "the completest man," a true statesman, but who became "the victim of his ambition" and "to please the South betrayed the North" (Journals Vol. XIII, 111-112; see also the detailed critique of Webster in his March 7, 1854 speech on the Fugitive Slave Law. Emerson 1995, 74-79).

Brown's violent, extra-legal antislavery efforts were irreconcilable with the Republican and Unionist antislavery agenda Emerson otherwise supported, or with his own recommendation for peaceful, compensated emancipation. Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry was a nightmare for Republican leaders who sought (unsuccessfully) to reassure Southerners the Republican Party was not John Brown in disguise. Emerson's idealized picture of Brown makes little sense as coherent national policy toward slavery. It makes more sense as a clue to Emerson's search for the representative, self-reliant American man amid a crisis where previous idols had crumbled.

#### IV

Perhaps the most troubling element in Emerson's political thought is his view of race. At the same time that Emerson fiercely opposed enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law and condemned slavery as a violation of "higher law," he often privately, and sometimes publicly, speculated about whether the Negro race was so uncivilized and inferior as to be fated to ultimate extinction in the evolutionary struggle of races. "It is plain that so inferior a race must perish shortly like the poor Indians," he wrote in an 1840 journal entry (Emerson 2008, 127). In a

journal entry from the 1850s he wondered whether some races were doomed evolutionary links between humanity and the lower animals: “Races. Nature every little while drops a link. How long before the Indians will be extinct? then the negro? Then we shall say, what a gracious interval of dignity between man and beast!” (Journals Vol. XIII, 54). In the essay “Fate” from The Conduct of Life (1860) Emerson spoke of “race living at the expense of race” as though this were an eternal historical law, part of the “wild, rough, incalculable” ways of Providence that no one should sentimentalize and no one can change (Emerson 2008, 197-198). He added that “the German and Irish millions, like the Negro, have a great deal of guano in their destiny”; they come to America “to ditch and to drudge, to make corn cheap, and then to lie down prematurely to make a spot of green grass on the prairie” (Emerson 2008, 202). On Emerson’s supposed “scale of races” the Anglo-Saxon race was, at least at present, superior to all others and for that reason England was able to rule the far more populous and distant population of India (Journals Vol. XIII, 216). Emerson took seriously (if also skeptically) the writings of “racial scientists” like Samuel Morton and Robert Knox from whom antebellum slave owners drew for their racial defense of slavery (Journals Vol. XI, 392; for Emerson’s judgment that racial science is “too early” to reach reliable conclusions, see Journals Vol. XIII, 233, 288).

Yet Emerson genuinely admired and respected escaped slaves. He insisted that the state of Massachusetts had a duty to protect the rights of its black citizens against arbitrary treatment in Southern ports (Emerson 1995, 23). (The laws of South Carolina and several other slave states required the incarceration of free negro merchant seamen from other states or nations for the duration of their layover in the state.) In 1845 he refused an invitation to speak at the New Bedford Lyceum because of its policy of excluding blacks from membership (Gougeon,

Historical Background in Emerson 1995, xxxiii). In his 1844 Address on Emancipation in the West Indies, he claimed that the peaceful and orderly result of emancipation had annihilated “the old indecent nonsense about the nature of the negro...It now appears, that the negro race is, more than any other, susceptible of rapid civilization” (Emerson 1995, 29-30).

Because Emerson’s own remarks on race in general, and the black race in particular, swing widely in both directions, it is not surprising that assessments of his views on race reflect these variations. Nell Irvin Painter characterizes Emerson as the “philosopher-king of American white-race theory” and describes in particular how Emerson’s Anglo-Saxonism “racialized as Celts” the impoverished Irish immigrants (Painter 2009). Emerson’s antislavery commitments are not mentioned anywhere in the essay. At the other extreme Len Gougeon claims that Emerson’s growing commitment to the antislavery cause led him completely to overcome his earlier view of black racial inferiority; that by 1845 Emerson “rejects this position outright” and argues passionately against doctrines of racial inferiority (Historical Introduction to Emerson 1995, xxxii). Gougeon’s picture of an Emerson by mid-1840s clearly standing for racial equality takes as definitive some of Emerson’s public statements on the subject, but underplays remarks in Emerson’s journals and published writings through the 1850s that point in the opposite direction and that suggest Emerson had not made up his mind on the subject.

Philip Nicoloff in Emerson on Race and History links Emerson’s treatment of race to his shift from an earlier, more individualist, anti-historical philosophy to a later preoccupation with constraints on human freedom imposed by nature and history. Nicoloff observes that Emerson believed “there were relatively permanent inequalities among the races of men,” but that racial characteristics “were capable of painfully slow modification” (rather than being fixed once and

for all); that Emerson's "increasing stake in the abolitionist cause" (which Nicoloff mentions only in passing) steered him away from some of the more extreme racial positions available at the time; and that in the end, "Emerson never became more than a relatively mild 'racist'" by the standards of the time (Nicoloff 1961, 120-123). Nicoloff's interpretation is reasonable but does little to resolve the puzzle of how Emerson reconciled his racial views with his genuine, if troubled, abolitionism. Emerson may have been a "relatively mild racist" compared to most white Americans of his day and age. But his racial views were markedly more "racist" than those of the abolitionists with whom he made common cause, and that is the comparison that matters for understanding Emerson's relation to abolitionism. (For the abolitionist movement's shift during the 1830s to an unprecedented affirmation of racial equality see Stewart 2008, 35-57.)

The distance between Emerson and other abolitionists on race comes across in Emerson's own report of an 1850 conversation with William Lloyd Garrison, who, Emerson complained, "neighs like a horse" whenever Emerson suggested that "the fate element in the negro question" had to be considered (Journals Vol. XI, 231). Emerson does not explain what he means by this "fate element"; but if what he said to Garrison resembled what Emerson later wrote about race and fate in his published essay "Fate," it is no surprise that Garrison objected.

It does not advance our understanding of Emerson either to denounce him for obnoxious racial views, or to excuse him as merely reflecting his time. Emerson's racial ideas were actively gathered, not passively absorbed. They were not typical of the abolitionist circles he frequented in the 1850s. Emerson was no more disposed to embrace abolitionist orthodoxies than orthodoxies of any other stamp; and he probably prided himself on his independence of thought

in matters of race. Emerson's understanding of race was, for better or worse, interwoven with his thinking about self-reliance, slavery, and the progress of civilization.

The most important conclusions Emerson drew about race were the following: first, that slavery equally brutalizes both master and slave, such that both southern whites and their black slaves subsist as "inferior races"; second, that it is the duty of a superior race (England, or New England) to display benevolence toward an inferior race, which means abolishing a barbaric institution; and third, that after abolition the black race will be thrown on its own resources and either make an essential contribution to humanity, or in the long run disappear.

In his 1844 Address on Emancipation in the West Indies, Emerson described how slavery deprives the slave owner of self-reliance and keeps him at a low level of civilization by suffocating the moral sense (Emerson 1995, 19-22). But in his journals Emerson drew out what he considered the natural corollary: that if the slave owner is brutal and low, so is the slave and vice-versa. This directly challenged the tendency of many abolitionists to idealize the virtues of the suffering and abused slave. (On some abolitionists' romanticizing the suffering negro as a "natural Christian," see Fredrickson 1971, 97-129.) Emerson considered this mythology and remarked in his journal that the "philonegro" (or lover of the negroes) is no better than the "misonegro" (or hater of the negroes) (Journals Vol. XIII, 82). In another journal entry he writes:

But the secret, the esoteric of abolition, -- a secret, too, from the abolitionist, -- is, that the negro & the negro-holder are really of one party, & that, when the apostle of freedom has gained his first point of repealing the negro laws, he will find the free negro is the type & exponent of that very animal law... whose law is to prey on one another, and the strongest has it. (Journals Vol. XIII, 35, undated entry from the 1850s; see also Journals Vol. XIII, 198.)

In this passage Emerson uses “the negro” as the representative of barbarism. Elsewhere Emerson indicates that white slave owners are chiefly responsible for slavery’s barbarism. But in either case the result is the same: slave owner and slave equally participate in a brutal institution that stifles intellect and moral sense in both. Emerson also predicts that the brutalizing effects of slavery on both white and black will not immediately disappear with abolition.

Here Emerson treats Southern whites as inferior to the white citizens of New England in a way that parallels how southerners (indeed, most white Americans) regarded blacks as inferior to themselves. This may be poetic justice, but to talk of southern whites as a kind of “inferior race” was rhetoric unlikely to warm slaveholders to Northern proposals for peaceful abolition.

Yet despite his rude expression, Emerson has a point. If the oppressions of slavery did indeed make the slaves morally superior to their oppressors (as in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin) – there would be less urgency about abolishing slavery. If on the contrary slavery equally corrupts and barbarizes both master and slave, the argument for abolishing it becomes stronger because it pulls a whole civilization down – though the risks and difficulties of abolition and its aftermath become more obvious also.

Emerson’s observations here about slavery and abolition seem deeply pessimistic. Yet there is a ray of hope concerning slavery that was absent in Emerson’s original 1841 essay “Self-Reliance.” Recall that in that essay Emerson had insisted all progress was individual, not social; that “society never advances” but that self-reliant individuals learn to thrive on whatever abundant or scarce resources their social environment provides. There Emerson assumed free and mobile individuals and did not allow American slavery to complicate his democratic, egalitarian picture. In these later passages that describe the barbarizing effects of slavery on both

master and slave, Emerson implicitly admits that the social and institutional obstacles to individual self-reliance are sometimes greater than individuals can overcome.

Therefore moral and intellectual progress – collective as well as individual – is necessary to remedy the poison of slavery. But how is it possible for a brutish race (whether white or black) to improve? Here Emerson’s assertion of the superior morality of the more civilized peoples or races, and their duties toward less civilized peoples or races, enters the picture.

Emerson’s observations about the English nation with respect to the world, and his parallel claims about New England compared to the American South, exemplify his intertwining abolitionism with his understanding of race. Part of what made England a superior nation, in Emerson’s view, was precisely that it took the lead in abolishing slavery and the slave trade and thus “exceeded the humanity of other governments” (Journals Vol. XIII, 153). In his 1851 public “Address to the Citizens of Concord,” a blistering denunciation of the Fugitive Slave Law, Emerson closes, not with any ringing appeal to racial equality, but instead praise for the superiority of the Englishman and his civilization: “Every Englishman in Australia, in South Africa, in India, or in whatever barbarous country their forts and factories have been set up, -- represents London, represents the art, power, and law of Europe.” This supposed moral superiority, not physical force, in Emerson’s view enabled the English to rule Africa and India. Emerson then makes the American parallel explicit: “Every man educated at the northern schools carries the like advantages into the south. For it is confounding distinctions to speak of the geographic sections of this country as of equal civilization” (Emerson 2008, 150-151). New England’s superior degree of civilization compared to the South is shown above all in its people’s unwillingness to condone legalized kidnapping of escaped slaves, just as England’s

superiority is manifest in its jurists' willingness to "read the law with the eye of freedom" and nullify slave laws; Emerson demanded that New England's judiciary follow that example (Emerson 2008, 140-141). It is natural for a lower civilization to recognize and submit to a higher one: "Every nation and every man bows, in spite of himself, to a higher mental and moral existence." Thus New England in its opposition to slavery should be leading the nation and giving its law to the South. But New England's politicians (Webster above all) betrayed this moral superiority by capitulating on the Fugitive Slave Law, and "this royal position of Massachusetts was foully lost" because "the well-known sentiment of her people was not expressed" (Address to the Citizens of Concord, in Emerson 2008, 151).

Emerson makes clear that it is the duty of a higher civilization or race to honor its own moral and intellectual standards even in its relations with a lower civilization or race that acts on the basis of brutality and force. For only by honoring its own standards, which includes the love of liberty as well as the duty to protect the weak and vulnerable, can a higher civilization hope to improve a lower one. "I think this matter of liberty is one of those rights which requires a fine sense to appreciate, & with every degree of civility it will be more truly felt & defined... Where there is any weakness in a race as in the black race" it becomes a "matter of concession & protection from their stronger neighbors." For it is "the very nature of courtesy, of politeness, of religion, of love, to prefer another, to postpone one's self, to protect another from one's self. That is the distinction of the gentleman, -- to defend the weak & redress the injured, as it is of the savage & the brute, to usurp & use others" (Journals Vol. XI, 412-413).

It would thus follow that citizens of New England, as representatives of a higher civilization, are obliged to protect and defend oppressed American slaves even if the slaves

themselves, like their masters, are savage and brutal. Representatives of higher intellectual and moral standards are not justified in abrogating those standards, even if the other parties – whether slave owners or slaves – do not yet honor those same standards. Emerson’s moral imperative here does not require reciprocity: what matters is whether a higher civilization honors its own intellectual and moral standards.

Emerson occasionally makes this point in a shockingly one-sided way. In a journal entry from 1851, referring to the Fugitive Slave Law, he remarks: “The absence of moral feeling in the whiteman is the very calamity I deplore. The captivity of a thousand negroes is nothing to me” (Journals Vol. XI, 385). This echoes an earlier entry from 1840, where Emerson remarks of the negroes that “it is plain that so inferior a race must perish shortly like the poor Indians,” but adds: “Yet pity for these was needed, it seems, for the education of this generation in ethics” (Emerson 2008, 127). In both passages Emerson speaks as though what mattered was only the ethical standards of white citizens, oppressed negroes or Indians functioning only as opportunities for white citizens to hone their ethical faculties. Taken at face value these statements collapse into incoherence: it makes no sense to speak of moral duties toward persons whose welfare does not matter. Fortunately Emerson cannot and does not stick to this extreme statement of his position; his genuine sympathy for fugitive slaves contradicts the statements quoted above. But those statements are nevertheless useful as exaggerated ways of making a point Emerson considered essential: that the moral character of white citizens of the North was at stake and would stand or fall on whether they capitulated to a clearly immoral law.

It seems paradoxical for Emerson to link his antislavery argument to a theory of unequal races and civilizations. Emerson himself was not entirely consistent in this regard. Some of his

strongest antislavery statements presuppose a universal human nature rather than depending on higher and lower “races” or civilizations. When he denounces the Fugitive Slave Law from the escaped slave’s point of view, he puts aside assumptions of higher and lower races and instead denounces legalized “kidnapping” in terms of a violated, universal human nature: “A man’s right to liberty is as inalienable as his right to life” (Emerson 2008, 139). The fugitive slave, he remarks elsewhere, “has certified, as distinctly as human nature could, his opinions. And to take him back is to steal” (Journals Vol. XI, 411). This argument, which focuses on the escaped slave as an individual, does not depend on any theory of higher and lower civilizations or races.

## V

There is one conspicuous problem with Emerson’s characterization of abolition as the duty of a more powerful and civilized race toward a weaker and less advanced race. This would seem to deprive slaves of self-reliance and instead make them the dependent beneficiaries of their liberators’ benevolence. Emerson was aware of this problem and attempted, with varying degrees of success, to resolve it.

If indeed (as Emerson claimed in “Self-Reliance”) “Power is in nature the essential measure of right” and “Nature suffers nothing to remain in her kingdom which cannot help itself” (Emerson 2008, 65), then the ideal of self-reliance would appear to require self-liberation by slaves. Individually it was possible for a small percentage of slaves to liberate themselves through escape. But collective self-liberation, without outside support, was nearly impossible under the circumstances for black slaves in the American South. For non-slave-owning white Americans blithely to insist that it was “up to the slaves to free themselves” would mask the formers’ own complicity in upholding the institution of slavery. If slaves in the American South

did collectively liberate themselves entirely by their own efforts, this could be accomplished only by extreme violence; the ensuing race war would take both races several steps away from civility and back into the reign of brute force. And a race war on American soil probably would not foster among white citizens – even in the “higher civilization” of New England -- the virtues “of courtesy, of politeness, of religion, of love” upon which Emerson places such importance. For all these reasons Emerson could not simply insist that self-reliance required pure self-liberation by the slaves. All of his attempts to apply the philosophy of self-reliance to liberation of slaves include both generous assistance by free white citizens and black self-help in some form.

Here as elsewhere the case of fugitive slaves best suits Emerson’s wider vision of self-reliance. For fugitive slaves take upon themselves the first fateful and dangerous step toward freedom. This initial act of courage then entitles them to assistance by free citizens of the North, who in the process manifest their own moral standards and self-reliance by refusing to act as cowardly pawns of the slave owners. For the philosophy of self-reliance, assistance to fugitive slaves is a win-win scenario.

Emerson underscores the centrality of self-reliance when he claims that “it is a greater crime to re-enslave a man who has shown himself fit for freedom, than to enslave him at first...” (“Address to the Citizens of Concord,” in Emerson 2008, 142-143). This might be read as implying that those slaves who do not escape to the North are not “fit for freedom.” Emerson does not actually say this, though he unquestionably assigns fugitive slaves a higher rank than other slaves in the scale of self-reliance. What matters is that a fugitive slave has “shown himself” fit for freedom, i.e., made that virtue obvious to citizens of the north, who then must consciously choose whether to support individual self-reliance or collaborate in suppressing it.

But the relatively small number of slaves who successfully escaped to the North (and more securely, to Canada) did not fatally weaken the institution of slavery. Abolishing slavery for the millions left behind was impossible without collective action in some form. Here Emerson runs into difficulties reconciling white emancipatory benevolence with black self-reliance. This awkward balancing act is on display in Emerson's first important public abolitionist statement, his 1844 "Address on the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies." In the early part of the address Emerson portrays the black race as a helpless victim: from the earliest historical records, he claims, "it appears, that one race [the Negro] was victim, and served the other races." Slavery commenced in America because "we had found a race who were less warlike, and less energetic shopkeepers than we." Emerson's formulations here simultaneously chastise the enslaving race, and suggest that the enslaved race lacked the self-reliance that would have prevented its servitude. (Emerson 1995, 8, 20)

At first Emerson speaks as though liberation of West Indian slaves came entirely from above, reflecting the enlightened benevolence of England. Because England was in Emerson's view the most advanced and civilized of modern nations, its moral sense and enlightened self-interest mastered its love of sugar and strong drink; it freely decided to abolish slavery in its colonial dominions rather than having abolition forced from below. "Other revolutions have been under the insurrection of the oppressed; this was the repentance of the tyrant" (Emerson 1995, 26). This top-down abolition captures one of Emerson's philosophical themes: that the mark of a more civilized people is "to defend the weak & redress the injured." But it leaves out the even more essential theme of self-reliance on the part of the oppressed. Near the end of the Address Emerson himself recognizes the problem and attempts to resolve it. "I have said that this event

interests us, because it came mainly from the concession of the whites; I add, that in part it is the earning of the blacks. They won the pity and respect they have received, by their powers and native endowments” (30). In this rather half-hearted praise Emerson concedes the slaves a role, but clearly a subordinate role, in their own liberation from slavery in the British West Indies.

Emerson’s praise of peaceful, regime-initiated abolition in the British West Indies contrasts with his admiration, later in the same address, for Toussaint L’Overture, who led the successful (and violent) 1790s slave uprising in the French colony of San Domingue, which became the republic of Haiti. “The arrival in the world of such men as Toussaint,” Emerson remarks, “outweighs in good omen all the English and American humanity. The anti-slavery of the whole world, is dust in the balance before this...The might and the right are here: here is the anti-slave: here is man: and if you have man, black or white is an insignificance” (Emerson 1995, 31). Here Emerson appears to reverse course, now praising bottom-up, violent, anti-regime acts of slave self-liberation instead of the peaceful top-down British model. He clearly admired both peaceful abolition from above (for exemplifying the morality of a higher civilization) and violent abolition from below (for displaying forceful self-reliance). But whether it is possible to combine both of these virtues in the same act of abolition is a question Emerson leaves unresolved.

The idea of self-reliance continues to shape Emerson’s speculations about the long-term future of the black race after its liberation from slavery. (What follows next must have been jarring to many abolitionists in the audience.) Emerson introduces his characteristic theme of history as a ceaseless struggle among races in which the strong flourish and the weak perish.

Over the long run, Emerson claims, nature

...will only save what is worth saving; and it saves not by compassion, but by power. It appoints no police to guard the lion, but his teeth and claws...It deals with men after the

same manner. If they are rude and foolish, down they must go. When at last in a race, a new principle appears, an idea, -- that conserves it; ideas only save races. If the black man is feeble, and not important to the existing races, 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, for the sake of that element, no wrong, nor strength, nor circumstance, can hurt him: he will survive and thrive. (Emerson 1995, 31)

Emerson here envisions the future of the black race in radically polar form: either the newly-liberated black race takes the lead in the progress of civilization, or it perishes – as though nothing in between was possible. Emerson’s chilling word “exterminated” remains unexplained: does he mean cultural assimilation or biological extinction? Nor does Emerson suggest that a chronically oppressed race merits continued assistance after abolition of slavery. Once slavery has disappeared, it seems, the race is on its own and either survives or perishes on its own power. Emerson here echoes his original idea of self-reliance as success or failure in a more or less fair contest among free citizens; but now that idea has been transformed from individual self-reliance into a evolutionary contest among collective agents: peoples and races.

In the public 1844 address, Emerson spoke as though the black race was already showing itself capable of thriving in this demanding post-abolition contest. In his private journals, then and later, he expressed much greater doubts. Nor does the example of some unquestionably self-reliant black individuals – the fugitive slaves he admires – appear to resolve his doubts about the capacity of the race in general.

It is impossible and unnecessary to determine once and for all what Emerson’s “real position” was on the capacities of the black race. Emerson was clearly engaging in an internal debate – sometimes laying out one side of that debate, sometimes the other. He did not believe his antislavery principles obliged him to take sides on a matter on which he remained undecided.

Over the long term, he thought, history would answer the question of whether the black race was capable of surviving and thriving on its own power.

## VI

Emerson's thinking altered in important ways between 1841, when "Self-Reliance" was published, and The Conduct of Life (1860) with its keynote essay "Fate." The precise character of the shift is debated, but clearly in his later writings Emerson is more attentive to the limitations on individual self-reliance than he was in his youth. Emerson himself notes this shift in "Fate" where he observes: "Once we thought, positive power was all. Now we learn, that negative power, or circumstance, is half" (Emerson 2008, 201). Emerson never relinquished the fundamental ideal of self-reliance: setting aside books and traditions and thinking and acting according to one's own "positive power." But by the late 1850s he saw the individual as relatively less powerful, and circumstance or fate as relatively more powerful, than when he first issued his ringing call for self-reliance. Emerson begins the essay "Fate" by lamenting the "immovable limitations" that individuals encounter in their attempts to realize their wishes or to reform the world (Emerson 2008, 196). He speaks of "torrents of tendency" against which individual resistance is "ridiculously inadequate... a protest made by a minority of one, under compulsion of millions." He demands that we recognize the "odious facts" of our own limited power: "A man's power is hooped in by a necessity, which, by many experiments, he touches on every side, until he learns its arc" (Emerson 2008, 203).

Emerson's preoccupation with limitation in "Fate" does not make him any less concerned with freedom and self-reliance. His aim instead is to preserve freedom and self-reliance by casting them in a form less vulnerable to the limitations and ravages of the world. Freedom

means comprehending precisely the necessities that hem us in: “Intellect annuls Fate. So far as a man thinks, he is free” (Emerson 2008, 205). Sometimes in the essay Emerson speaks as though freedom were simply the recognition of necessity, a stoic embrace of circumstances one cannot change. At other times Emerson’s freedom- through- recognizing- necessity invokes the practice of natural scientists, inventors, and statesmen, who paradoxically acquire power over nature -- and over other men -- by subjecting nature’s necessary laws to “fixed calculation” (202).

In “Fate” and its companion essay “Power” from The Conduct of Life, Emerson appears more concerned with the possibilities and limitations of political action than he was in “Self-Reliance,” where he had scoffed at those who depended for support from political parties, conventions, votes and resolutions. “It is only as a man puts off all foreign support, and stands alone, that I see him to be strong and prevail” (Emerson 2008, 73). In “Fate” Emerson still admires the human being who can stand alone, but “standing alone” with respect to politics has now come to mean something rather different. The opening paragraph of “Fate” asks the practical (and very Socratic) question, “How shall I live?” The answer is that individuals must learn how to reconcile their own “polarity” – their own individual uniqueness -- with “the spirit of the times.” Emerson admits that “we are incompetent to solve the times” and yet, instead of calling for detachment, urges individuals to enter into events and find their own “private solution” to “the riddle of the age” (Emerson 2008, 195-196). In “Power” Emerson observes that “all power is of one kind, a sharing of the nature of the world,” and then immediately applies this to politics. The self-reliant man is the one who “is made of the same stuff of which events are made,” who “is in sympathy with the course of things; can predict it. Whatever befalls, befalls him first; so that he is equal to whatever shall happen” (Emerson 2008, 220-221). In his original

essay “Self-Reliance” Emerson favored the man detached from political foolishness. Now in 1860 he admires the man who can best navigate a political torrent from which no one can escape. The publication date sufficiently indicates the events Emerson had in mind.

Scholars have attributed the new emphasis on constraint in Emerson’s later writings to a variety of causes, among them the hard lessons of experience, private grief and loss, consciousness of his own advancing age and declining powers, disillusionment with reformist utopias like Brook Farm (see Emerson 2008, 93-99), and receptiveness to contemporary developments in natural science. All of these are plausible factors. But it is also worth asking how the escalating sectional crisis over slavery, and Emerson’s own active engagement in that crisis, might have shaped his thinking about fate, freedom, and self-reliance at a time in which political events increasingly spun out of anyone’s control. The marks of the slavery crisis are abundantly evident in The Conduct of Life, beginning with Emerson’s revealing lament that “we are incompetent to solve the times.” His discussion of universal themes like fate, power, culture, religion, and wealth frequently employs illustrations from the slavery crisis. In “Fate” he talks about “strong natures” who were once “inevitable patriots... until their life ebbs and their defects and gout, palsy and money, warp them,” and then specifically mentions Daniel Webster (who betrayed Emerson’s onetime admiration by supporting the Fugitive Slave Law) (Emerson 2008, 200) In “Power” he refers to “sectional interests urged with a fury that shuts its eyes to consequences, with a mind made up to desperate extremities, ballot in one hand, and rifle in the other...” (Emerson 2008, 223) Modifying his earlier emphasis on spontaneity, Emerson now concedes the importance of “drill, the power of use and routine,” and offers as an example the abolitionist Wendell Phillips who “stumped it through New England” for fourteen years -- here

belatedly praising the same characteristic, Phillips' "platform existence," Emerson had earlier scorned. Hundreds more traces of the sectional crisis mark The Conduct of Life.

The marks of the sectional crisis go deeper than Emerson's choice of contemporary illustrations. There is an affinity between the central problem addressed in "Fate" and "Power" – how to preserve individual freedom and capacity for action against "torrents of tendency" – and what must have been the anxious experience of American citizens during the 1850s. Many experiences acquaint one with "immovable limitations"; but nothing underscores that point more clearly than the attempt to rid America of slavery. No doubt age and experience teaches most human beings that their powers are more limited than they once imagined. But the political powerlessness felt by many American citizens, young and old, during the escalating crisis of the 1850s is of a different order altogether.

The classic study of the shift in Emerson's thinking over time, Stephen Whicher's Freedom and Fate (1953), nowhere suggests that the sectional crisis of the 1850s contributed to Emerson's growing preoccupation with fate and limitation – this despite Emerson's explicitly linking "fate" with "the spirit of the times." Whicher does not discuss Emerson's antislavery activities at all (except briefly to note Emerson's moral zeal during the Civil War). Instead Whicher's thesis is that Emerson belatedly realized the emptiness of his earlier unbounded faith in individual freedom – the illusion that "he could set up the infinitude of the private man as counterpoise ... to the imperatives of society and the power of fate" (Whicher 25). Whicher claims that for Emerson's idealized individual, "no community is possible." At first this individual imagines he has the power to transform the world, and entertains "deep sympathy with reform as a general idea." But he is unwilling to participate in actual reforms (Whicher mentions

Emerson's refusal to join the Brook Farm communal experiment) because practical engagement with the community threatens his limitless freedom. Time and experience, Whicher claims, cured Emerson of his "millennialism"; he realized that the world resisted his will and ultimately bid his "farewell to action," opting instead for purely personal liberation (72-82). Finally recognizing "the old fact of his powerlessness," Emerson "surrender[s] to fate," (116) relinquishes his "evangelical attitude toward social change" and adopts instead an "organic and evolutionary point of view" (131) that lends itself politically to a kind of patrician conservatism (163).

There is unquestionably some truth in Whicher's account of Emerson's learning through painful experience that individual self-reliance cannot easily overcome a resistant world, and chafing against the restrictions imposed by participation in social and political reforms. But Emerson's growing preoccupation with fate and limitation during the 1850s emphatically did not coincide with a "farewell to action"; on the contrary, the slavery crisis led him to become far more politically engaged than ever before. Far from slipping into genteel conservatism, he fiercely denounced precisely the comfortable Beacon Hill and Wall Street patricians who collaborated with the slave power. He privately lamented the time and energy he spent in antislavery activities, but continued to engage in them. Whicher's interpretation remains insightful on many points, but some of its conclusions become unconvincing once Emerson's antislavery engagements are taken seriously.

George Kateb in Emerson and Self-Reliance (2002) does take Emerson's antislavery activities seriously, but sees them as the abandonment of self-reliance – a "suspension of individualism" in favor of "mobilization, military discipline, and eventually...conscripted self-sacrifice" (Kateb 186). For Kateb what is essential in Emerson's philosophy is self-reliant

thinking: a willingness to suspend all authorities and fixed intellectual positions and (anticipating Nietzsche) simultaneously to entertain multiple and conflicting moral perspectives without choosing among them (32). Kateb ranks self-reliant action lower than self-reliant thought, because what can be achieved in action is always far more limited than what can be grasped in thought. “Self-reliant being and doing, whatever their worth, come up against tremendous obstacles in oneself and in the world, and approach impossibility” (37). Kateb in effect saves Emersonian self-reliance from a recalcitrant world by privileging thought over action.

Emerson’s antislavery efforts exemplify Kateb’s “tremendous obstacles” to self-reliant action. Kateb argues that, upon the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, Emerson set aside his individualist principles and instead “urges solidarity – indeed mobilization – on others, and, when the occasion arise, does not shrink from advocating violence in the effort to destroy slavery. That profound change is a deviation from his theory of self-reliance, not its transformation” (177-178) Kateb notes Emerson’s “wholly uncharacteristic praise of mobilized human beings” after 1850, and finds especially uncharacteristic Emerson’s 1855 remark that it is “delicious to act with great masses to great aims” (Kateb 186; original passage Emerson 1995, 105) Kateb accepts Emerson’s refusal to obey the Fugitive Slave Law as a genuine exercise of self-reliant citizenship, but sees Emerson’s participation in organized abolition efforts, his association with John Brown, and his later support for the Union war effort as irreconcilable with Emerson’s own philosophy: “The advocacy of violence is inconsistent with the theory of self-reliant activity” (185). Kateb concedes that eradicating slavery may have justified the temporary sacrifice of self-reliance, but calls it sacrifice all the same.

Kateb rightly emphasizes the enormous obstacles to individual self-reliant action, especially amid the contest over slavery. But his attempt to salvage Emersonian self-reliance in the face of a recalcitrant world by privileging thought over action runs counter to one of Emerson's central purposes in The Conduct of Life: to preserve the capacity for self-reliant action even under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. In "Fate" and "Power" Emerson seeks to maintain both individual thought and individual action amid the cruel necessities occasioned by "the spirit of the times." Whether Emerson effectively solved that problem, either in general or in his own case, is an open question. But Kateb's interpretation sidesteps that problem rather than pointing us toward Emerson's (successful or unsuccessful) attempts to resolve it.

Moreover, a crisis like the one Emerson (and the nation) faced in the 1850s – a crisis that demanded total commitment, and in the end left no one untouched – weakens the distinction between self-reliant thought and self-reliant action. If one cannot think clearly and effectively under such conditions, one cannot act clearly either; and conversely, a vacillating or confused course of action betrays unclear thinking. Here failure at self-reliant action and failure at self-reliant thought go hand in hand, so the stakes are high -- as Emerson recognized.

Finally, Kateb's unsupported claim that Emersonian self-reliance requires pacifism confuses the issue by injecting a premise Emerson himself did not accept. Emerson was never a pacifist, his writings frequently display admiration for military valor, and he never suggests that self-reliance is incompatible with sometimes resorting to violence. Emerson's support for John Brown does reveal something askew in Emerson's thinking – here I agree with Kateb -- but that John Brown was not a pacifist is not the main problem.

I argue that what Emerson's ideal of practical self-reliance most needed, yet most conspicuously lacked, during the crisis leading up to the Civil War was a clear political diagnosis. When Emerson remarks in "Fate" that "the riddle of the age has for each a private solution" (Emerson 2008, 196), he does not mean by "private" a detached, apolitical stance – for by this time he recognized political detachment was not possible. He seems instead to mean that each individual has to navigate his or her own way through the crisis; only in that way can we preserve a measure of self-reliance, either in thought or action.

What then does this require? Self-reliance amid a political crisis would not necessarily mean the capacity to bend events to one's will, for the whole premise of "Fate" is that our power in this regard is extremely limited. Nor would it require self-reliant individuals to abstain from political and military organization (as Kateb claims). In a crisis that presses in from all sides, and for which inaction means complicity in injustice, one cannot preserve self-reliance simply by abstaining from political parties and armies.

What it would require, if we apply Emerson's own standard, is a clear understanding of the political causes of the crisis and some effective compass for guiding individual action through that political storm. In both "Fate" and "Power" Emerson places enormous importance on understanding causes as the key to self-reliance; only through the intellect is fate transformed into freedom. "All successful men have agreed in one thing, -- they were causationists. They believed that things went not by luck, but by law" (Emerson 2008, 219). A clear understanding of causes will not release one from necessity, but it makes one at least incrementally more self-reliant and free than someone who does not understand events at all. "He who sees through the design, presides over it, and must will that which must be...Of two men, each obeying his own

thought, he whose thought is deepest will be the strongest character” (Emerson 2008, 206-207). Clear understanding of causes in turn provides a clear course of action and thus makes self-reliance possible – at least for “strong characters” who resolve for themselves “the riddle of the age” even if they are not individually competent to “solve the times” (Emerson 2008, 195-196).

Emerson’s vision here of self-reliance in troubled times is thoughtful and persuasive, and in important respects an advance over his description of self-reliance in the original 1841 essay. The self-reliant individual of 1841 enjoyed a relative detachment from politics possible only with peaceful, law-governed democracy as its foundation. Emerson’s self-reliant individual in “Fate” and “Power” is swept up in an unpredictable crisis and can take nothing for granted.

But did Emerson’s own understanding of the crisis meet this standard of clarity? Did he find a clear course of action and thereby successfully resolve for himself “the riddle of the age”? His success in this regard was at best limited. By the time he published The Conduct of Life Emerson had sought for at least fifteen years to oppose slavery in his own way: to find a different philosophical outlook on the problem of slavery and race, and a different political strategy, than that represented by the most prominent abolitionists and antislavery organizations. He admired Garrison’s and Phillips’s passion for the cause and admitted the effectiveness of their efforts, but criticized what he considered their philosophical narrowness, their lack of self-reflection, and their addiction to the public platform. He also rejected their secessionism and, at least for a time, explored ways in which slavery might be peacefully abolished without sundering the Union.

On the philosophical plane, he recognized that his time and energy were increasingly drawn into the slavery crisis, yet was reluctant to sacrifice his vocation to liberate “imprisoned thoughts, far back in the brain of man.” He attempted to reconcile these two conflicting duties by

placing the crisis over slavery and race into a much wider, more detached and enduring philosophical and scientific perspective; this effort at synthesis is exemplified in The Conduct of Life. Recognizing that his earlier detachment from politics was no longer possible, he sought a new kind of balance for himself between political engagement and philosophical reflection – increasing the former without sacrificing the latter.

If we evaluate the aims behind Emerson's approach to slavery and abolition, we will find them consistent with Emerson's enduring vision of intellectual and practical self-reliance. The results, however, are a different matter. In his political approach to the slavery crisis, Emerson did not find any new path; instead he vibrated between at least three paths marked out by others, each path perhaps consistent on its own terms but irreconcilable with one another: the pro-Union, gradualist position of the Republicans; the free-state secessionism of Garrison, Phillips, and Thoreau; and the violent agenda of John Brown. If for the sake of argument we assume his preferred approach was the gradualist, pro-Union one (and the others perhaps resorts of despair) then to be effective this would have required a more careful analysis of national politics than Emerson ever attempted. Compensated emancipation was unlikely to be enacted in any case; but to combine this proposal, as Emerson did, with the claim that New England represents a superior civilization, and that Southern slave owners and slaves are equally barbaric, was unlikely to better the odds of passage. Emerson's passionate rhetorical support for the Free Soil/Republican platform of keeping slavery out of new states and territories was weakened by his excessive faith in armed individual "self-reliance" in furthering that goal.

Emerson's wider observations about the politics of the slavery crisis are occasionally insightful but often woefully superficial. He tends to reduce complicated political and

constitutional questions to simplified individual types, and even more dubiously, to physiological phenomena. “A good deal of our politics is physiological,” he asserts in “Fate”; the difference between a future Whig and Free-Soiler is evident in an embryo’s fourth day; “All conservatives are such from personal defects” (Emerson 2008, 200). This view of politics leaves little room for debate or persuasion. Emerson’s fascination with John Brown owes more to Brown’s apparent “physiological” superiority than to rational assessment of political means and ends. Emerson’s aim in assimilating politics to physiology was to place the political crisis of the day into a wider and longer-term evolutionary and scientific perspective. But the results are unpersuasive.

Emerson’s attempts to reconcile political engagement with philosophical detachment frequently misfire. The premise that one becomes self-reliant by recognizing and embracing necessity is promising. But as a political ethic this embrace of necessity can lead in two very different directions between which Emerson alternates. One direction leads toward clear-eyed political engagement: one who embraces and comprehends necessity can acquire some modest control over forces that would otherwise crush us. That is what I emphasized above, and perhaps it was Emerson’s main point. But Emerson intersperses activist-leaning passages with others promoting a kind of bland providentialism that leads in the opposite direction. In “Power,” immediately after vividly listing all the indicators of a coming crisis (“sectional interests urged with a fury which shuts its eyes to consequences”), and observing that everyone “hardens himself the best he can against the coming ruin,” Emerson turns around and asserts that these fears are vastly exaggerated, that the solid exchange value of government bonds reveals “the enormous elements of strength” which “make our politics unimportant” (Emerson 2008, 223). This tendency to downplay the importance of politics is reinforced philosophically by Emerson’s

faith in a benevolent Providence. The overall direction of Fate and the Universe, he assures us, “is toward benefit”; all the horrors of war and suffering are part of a higher plan which “pleases at a sufficient perspective” (Emerson 2008, 210-211). This line of thought can easily lead away from clear comprehension of political causes and effects. However such passages are evaluated philosophically, they suggest that personally Emerson remained deeply ambivalent about sustained political engagement and sometimes, if only in imagination, wished to place himself a thousand miles above its wrenching dilemmas. Taking spiritual solace in Providence is understandable under the frightening circumstances, but it is not the same as the clear-eyed comprehension of causality Emerson calls for in his more politically engaged moods.

### Conclusion

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s philosophy of self-reliance is most obviously suited to a relatively peaceful, law-governed democracy characterized by free, equal, mobile individuals. The actual American social order that gave birth to Emerson and his philosophy did approximate that ideal for many of its white citizens. For slaves it was a different matter altogether. To what degree Emerson’s philosophy of self-reliance could speak to the reality of slavery, and to the very difficult challenges of abolishing it on American soil, remained an open question.

As Emerson became progressively more committed to abolition, he sought wherever possible to cast his opposition to slavery and his vision of its abolition in the language of self-reliance. In some respects the application of self-reliance to slavery was straightforward: slavery denied self-reliance; fugitive slaves displayed it, as did white citizens who refused to become kidnapers. In other respects Emerson’s philosophy of self-reliance encountered greater

challenges: in attempting to resolve the conflict between political engagement and political detachment, and in his broader speculations about peoples and races.

In his late writings Emerson sought a revised, more restrained vision of self-reliance, one that recognized the limited power of human beings confronting a difficult and sometimes violent world. Emerson's call to turn fate into (limited) freedom by recognizing necessity and paying close attention to causality as well as "the spirit of the times" contains the seed of a more politically engaged version of self-reliance – and also one less preconditioned on a healthy democracy than the version Emerson set forth in 1841. But this new ideal of self-reliance is much more difficult to achieve. Emerson himself fell short of its demands in his uncertain and inconsistent response to the sectional crisis culminating in the Civil War.

To observe that Emerson's philosophy of self-reliance could not fully address the sectional crisis over slavery and abolition is not to judge that philosophy a failure, but merely to acknowledge its limits. Nor should Emerson himself be judged harshly for failing to find a clear path through a crisis in which nearly every American was confused and internally divided. Emerson's determined efforts to do battle with slavery while remaining true to his philosophy of self-reliance remain instructive to everyone who has ever been torn between duty and reflection; and to anyone fortunate enough to experience an America closer to the one Emerson hoped for than the one in which he actually lived.

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