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A Robe of Eloquence: Speech and Power in the Life and Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson

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A ROBE OF ELOQUENCE:
SPEECH AND POWER IN THE LIFE AND LECTURES OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the American Studies Program
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

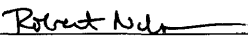
Robert Nelson

1998

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

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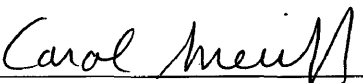


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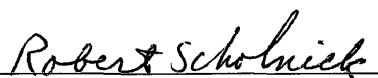
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Robert A. Gross



Carol Sheriff



Robert Scholnick

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ABSTRACT

While not without his critics, the dominant popular and scholarly conception of Ralph Waldo Emerson remains that of the prophet of self-reliance and individualism. As a corrective to this conventional argument, in this thesis I argue that the aim of Emerson's speech, both in theory and in practice, was not entirely liberatory in nature, but often aimed at dominance over others. As a minister at Second Church in Boston, as a lecturer on the lyceum circuit, and as a friend to intellectuals like Margaret Fuller, Emerson consistently sought to control the discourse of others either by silencing them (or, to be more precise, by seeking situations where only he could speak) or by carefully framing the terms of debate so that his ideas appeared to be the "truth."

The narrative of this thesis charts Emerson's continuous struggle to justify his preferred, more authoritarian, form of discourse, the lecture, over alternative, more egalitarian, forms, in particular the conversation. From the very beginning of his career Emerson showed a marked aversion to conversation. As minister of Boston's Second Church in the late 1820s and early 1830s Emerson resisted his parishioners' attempts to engage him in conversation. His decisions to resign his ministry and to invent a career on the lyceum circuit, I argue, were in part motivated by his quest for a vocation where he could speak to audiences rather than with individuals. In the second chapter I analyze Emerson's intellectual encounter with Margaret Fuller in 1839 and 1840. Much as had Emerson's parishioners, Fuller sought encounters with Emerson that were of a more intimate nature than he was personally or intellectually comfortable with. Conversations were her preferred mode of speech, both personally and professionally. Through both her *Conversations* in Boston and her personal conversations with her circle of friends, Fuller presented Emerson with a discursive alternative to the monologue. During the summer and fall of 1840 Emerson struggled to defend the power of the monologue against the challenge of Fuller's more mutualistic and collaborative *Conversations*.

I conclude this thesis proposing that as a result of highlighting the authoritarian dimension of Emerson's discursive theory and practice during the 1820s and 1830s this thesis suggests a new valuation of Emerson's later, post-Transcendentalist work. By focusing on Emerson's early authoritarianism, this thesis suggests that we need to begin to rethink the still common celebration of his earliest work as radical and the denigration of his later work as conservative. The product of Emerson's experience may not have been an enfeebling conservatism. Instead, in the new sense of the subjectivity and limits of the individual and the new appreciation of the conversation as a discursive form that Emerson began to evidence in the essay "Experience," Emerson had arrived at an intellectual position and a social attitude that are more politically palatable to a feminist and postmodern sensibility.

A ROBE OF ELOQUENCE:
SPEECH AND POWER IN THE LIFE AND LECTURES OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Introduction

If there has been a commonplace in criticism of Emerson during the last one-hundred-and-fifty years it is that his prose lacks coherence and that logic and consistency eluded him. In his own day audiences scratched their heads and wondered what Emerson meant as he shuffled through his notes while delivering his lectures. The passage of time did little to clarify his message. References to the obscurity of his works are ubiquitous among critics a generation after Emerson's death. In his famous essay on Emerson, John Jay Chapman observed "the truth seems to be that in the process of working up and perfecting his writings, in revising and filing his sentences, the logical scheme became more and more obliterated." While Chapman ultimately admired Emerson and his message, F. D. Huntington was less forgiving, disparagingly referring to Emerson's "inaptitude for thinking consecutively and logically on any abstract subject." Such comments remain common a century later in contemporary criticism. Eric Cheyfitz has been especially frank, suggesting that in Emerson's works "a logical system of thought, of whatever kind, seems impossible to find. Gaps—abysses and mysteries—abound between paragraphs and often between, and even within, sentences. Putting Emerson aside, we cannot remember what we have read or if we have read anything, in the sense of being able to repeat a coherent statement of the author's. Essays are read numerous times and they slip away, eluding the grasp of comprehension."¹ I imagine that I am not alone in taking some comfort,

¹ Chapman, "Emerson," in Emerson and Other Essays (1898), rpt. in The Recognition of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Milton Konvitz (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1972), 106; Huntington, "Ralph Waldo Emerson," Independent 18 (25 May 1882), rpt. in The Recognition of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Robert E. Burkholder and Joel Myerson (Boston, Mass., 1983), 198; Cheyfitz, The Trans-Parent: Sexual Politics in the Language of Emerson (Baltimore, Md., 1981), 10.

however small, in this refrain as I myself have struggled to make sense of Emerson's baffling, confusing, and so often contradictory essays.

This thesis is my attempt to figure out what Emerson meant. Too often his writings are read in isolation, entirely cut off from the immediate social and intellectual context of their composition or utterance. This thesis takes a different approach. I explicate the ideological, social, and political agenda that led Emerson to compose his sermons, lectures, and essays. My focus is on Emerson's changing conceptions of the power of speech and his continuing attempts to locate himself, both professionally and personally, in social situations where he would be able to realize that power. By this route, the thesis presents a fresh interpretation of what Emerson intended his lectures and essays to mean and, more specifically, what he wanted them to do both for himself and for his audience.

What ultimately emerges is a portrait of Emerson that dissents from the still dominant conception of Emerson as the prophet of self-reliance and individualism.² As a corrective to this conventional argument, I suggest that the aim of Emerson's speech, both in theory and in practice, was often dominance over others.³ In both his professional and personal life, Emerson continually attempted to tell

² For a recent analysis of this position, one that argues that Emerson's ideas were liberatory in their implications, see Albert J. Von Frank, The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).

³ Christopher Newfield, in his essay "Loving Bondage: Emerson's Ideal Relationships," American Transcendental Quarterly V (1991), 183-193, makes an argument that is in many ways very similar to my own. He too suggests that Emerson was a "conservative rather than radical" figure, emphasizing as one of his main themes, as I do in this thesis, Emerson's erasure of individual subjectivity (184). Where I differ from Newfield (beyond a few minor interpretative points) is in my approach and methodology. Whereas Newfield focuses almost exclusively on Emerson's texts and his conclusions are often driven by Gramscian and Foucauldian theoretical perspectives, in this thesis I try to contextualize Emerson's will to power by concentrating on Emerson's often conflict-ridden social interaction with other individuals (though I must admit that my critical stance has been informed by many of the same theorists Newfield cites). For another provocative and thoughtful analysis that portrays

others what to do. As a minister at Second Church in Boston, as a lecturer on the lyceum circuit, and as a friend to intellectuals like Margaret Fuller, Emerson consistently sought to control the discourse of others either by silencing them (or, to be more precise, by seeking situations where only he could speak) or by carefully framing the terms of debate so that his ideas appeared to be the "truth."

Throughout his career and in his personal life, Emerson evidenced a marked preference for monologues rather than dialogues as a form of discourse. He enjoyed delivering sermons and lectures and writing letters, but dreaded conversation. Part of this, no doubt, was temperamental; Emerson was painfully shy and often felt extremely awkward in social situations. Yet his preference for monologues, I argue in the following narrative, also reflected his desire for authority over others. Delivering monologues, first in the form of sermons and later as lectures, allowed Emerson to control discourse, to speak from a position of power where he would not be interrupted and challenged. This was particularly important given Emerson's means of persuasion. He did not rely upon logic to convey his messages. Instead, Emerson, a great celebrator of the "poet," sought to convince his listeners of the truth of his ideas through the beauty of his rhetoric. By delivering monologues Emerson could avoid challenges to which his lack of logic made him vulnerable. Reciting prepared lectures that were carefully crafted beforehand allowed him to rise to the moments of inspired eloquence that were necessary for him to successfully convey his message. Emerson's messages thus depended upon the medium of the monologue.

The narrative of this thesis charts Emerson's continuous struggle to justify the monologue over alternative forms of discourse, in particular the conversation. From the very beginning of his career Emerson showed a marked aversion to conversation. As I suggest in the first chapter, as minister of Boston's Second Church in the late 1820s and early 1830s Emerson resisted his parishioners' attempts to engage him in conversation. To Emerson's thinking, delivering sermons was his primary duty and service to the congregation. That belief often put him in conflict with parishioners who wanted him to devote more energy to pastoral duties, ministering to them on an individual basis. His decisions to resign his ministry and to invent a career on the lyceum circuit, I argue, were in part motivated by his quest for a vocation where he could speak to audiences rather than with individuals. In the second chapter I analyze Emerson's intellectual encounter with Margaret Fuller in 1839 and 1840. Much as Emerson's parishioners had a decade earlier, Fuller sought encounters with Emerson that were of a more intimate nature than he was personally or intellectually comfortable with. Conversations were her preferred mode of speech, both personally and professionally. Through both her Conversations in Boston and her personal conversations with her circle of friends, Fuller presented Emerson with a discursive alternative to the monologue. But again, as with his parishioners, Emerson refused to compromise his conception of speech. In what proved to be an intellectually and emotionally exhausting experience, during the summer and fall of 1840 Emerson struggled to defend the power of the monologue against the challenge of Fuller's more mutualistic and collaborative Conversations.

In this thesis my sympathies incline toward Emerson's intellectual opponents, his parishioners and Fuller. Their efforts to engage Emerson in conversation, I believe, represented attempts to

empower themselves. In refusing to be spoken to and insisting on being spoken with, they were, in effect, defending their individuality and their right to be different. Since I am in some sense unique and different, the logic of their argument went, I cannot simply be spoken to as part of an undifferentiated audience, but must be spoken with on an individual basis. In an explanation of his preference for discussion, Michel Foucault concisely explicates some of the ideological and political issues at stake:

In the serious play of questions and answers, in the work of reciprocal elucidation, the rights of each person are in some sense immanent in the discussion. They depend only on the dialogue situation. The person asking the question is merely exercising the right that has been given him: to remain unconvinced, to perceive a contradiction, to require more information, to emphasize different postulates, to point out faulty reasoning, etc. As for the person answering the questions, he too exercises a right that does not go beyond the discussion itself; by the logic of his own discourse he is tied to what he has said earlier, and by the acceptance of dialogue he is tied to the questioning of the other. Questions and answers depends on a game—a game that is at once pleasant and difficult—in which each of the two partners takes pains to use only the rights given him by the other and by the accepted form of the discourse.⁴

In their insistence that Emerson talk with them rather than to them, both the parishioners and Fuller were defending their rights to disagree and to hold a different opinion, reserving the right not to accept Emerson's ideas as universal truths.

In some ways Emerson resists this line of criticism. I have used terms like "rights" and "logic," but Emerson never claimed that his

⁴ Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations: An Interview with Michel Foucault," in The Foucault Reader, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1984), 381-382. My own critical attitude on the issues of speech has been profoundly influenced by Jürgen Habermas, particularly his defense and advocacy of an ideal public sphere where power is dispersed among individuals and all individuals enjoy both the right and opportunity to discursively engage and debate with one

message was totally consistent. In fact, in his famous aphorism he championed the notion that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." Emerson maintained that his ideas derived from a "Reason," an inspiration from the soul, that transcended logic or, in Emerson's language, mere "Understanding." Another of the major themes of this thesis is Emerson's development of a transcendentalist vision that offered some protection from criticism and challenges. By maintaining that the individual was part of an oversoul and had access to higher truth, Emerson, in effect, effaced the difference between his speech and Providence's. It was sufficient, Emerson believed, merely to utter his truth. If his message did not command assent, or if in fact it elicited dissent, his conviction that what he was saying was universal truth provided him with some reassurance that he did not need to acknowledge or respond to the differing viewpoints of others. The monologue was the rhetorical expression of this point of view: a form of discourse which in-and-of itself excluded the very possibility of challenge. Emerson's transcendentalism disguised and naturalized the power he sought to wield over his audience. Emerson's belief that all individuals had access to the Godhead is usually considered a liberatory message. However, it also served to mask the power that the transcendentalist speaker attempted to command. According to the Emerson's logic, by looking within the self for universal truths (what Emerson revealingly termed "laws") and expressing those truths to others in sermons or lectures the speaker was merely bringing into consciousness ideas that had always been dormant in the unconsciousness of his audience.⁵ Since his listeners latently possessed but had not

another in the pursuit of (or, perhaps more accurately, the construction of) truth.

⁵ Emerson actually borrowed the term "unconscious" from German idealism to express a new insight into the nature of mind. In Representations of Self in

recognized these truths, his ideas could never be coercive nor his speech authoritarian. His "truth" was in no way arbitrary. It belonged to a higher order: universal, preexisting, natural, divine. Having effaced the difference between himself and the Godhead, Emerson further effaced the difference between himself and all other individuals. Conversation, in Emerson's scheme, became unnecessary since everyone was part and parcel of the same divine consciousness. Despite his proclamations of self-reliance, in Emerson's thought individuality, in the sense of real, substantive difference between individuals—in essence, subjectivity—disappeared as he subsumed both the divine and others within his totalizing consciousness.

the American Renaissance, Jeffrey Steele argues that the "unconscious," both as a word and as a concept, was important in Emerson's thought. Steele writes: "The key term in [Emerson's] new psychological language is what Emerson calls 'the Unconscious' Emerson needed a new terminology to express his perception of mind. Without words like the *unconscious* (decidedly outside the empiricist epistemology prevailing in Unitarian circle), his presentation of spiritual and psychological regeneration would have lacked a transcendent ground" (Steele, The Representation of the Self in the American Renaissance (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1987), 14-15).

Chapter 1

"I have hoped to put on eloquence as a robe":

Speech and Emerson's Dream of Power

"I cannot dissemble that my abilities are below my ambition." These were the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, one month shy of his twenty-first birthday, as he contemplated his prospective career in the Unitarian ministry. Such doubts are probably to be expected from a young man pondering his future. Yet they also reflected the immensity of the tasks he had set for himself. The young Emerson sought nothing less than to embody Christian virtue in his life, possess eloquence in his speech, and command power over his fellow men and women.¹

In his long and complex journal entry, Emerson suggested that the duties of a minister were twofold, "public preaching & private influence." The literary-minded young man felt "encouraged to expect" success at the former. By his own admission, a "keen relish for the beauties of poetry" and an "immoderate fondness for writing" drew him to the ministry. He felt that his poetic mind would be appreciated by congregations since "the preaching most in vogue at the present day depends chiefly on imagination for its success, and asks those accomplishments which I believe are most within my grasp." Emerson fancied that oratorical and literary talents might somehow be congenital. From his father and grandfather, both Congregational ministers themselves, he imagined that he had inherited "a passionate love for the strains of eloquence" that suited him for the role of preacher above all other vocations.

¹ The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. William H. Gilman et al., 16 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1960-82), 2:238 (subsequently cited as JMN). All quotation on the next three pages are from the same journal passage which can be found in JMN 2:237-242.

While optimistic about his potential to be a successful preacher, Emerson was less certain about his ability to exert a necessary "private influence" over his future parishioners. A minister, he believed, needed to command a degree of confidence and strength that he felt he simply did not possess. In his estimation, he had little of the "good humoured independence & self esteem which should mark the gentleman" nor much of the "decent pride which is conspicuous in the perfect model of a Christian man." Instead, the young man felt a crippling sense of social awkwardness, confessing that he was generally "ill at ease . . . among men." A minister who could not gain the respect and confidence of his parishioners through personal interaction would ultimately prove ineffectual as their spiritual leader and guide. Emerson feared this could be his destiny—that his "sore uneasiness in the company of most men & women, a frigid fear of offending and jealousy of disrespect, an inability to lead & an unwillingness to follow the current conversation, [would] contrive to make me second with all those among whom chiefly I wish to be first." To avoid this, Emerson rededicated himself to the pursuit of virtue. If he could "learn to love Virtue for her own sake" he felt sure that he could win respect and become a model Christian worthy of emulation.

Yet Emerson hardly wanted to love virtue merely "for her own sake." His subsequent words reveal that he sought to embody virtue not simply as an end in itself, but as a means to a greater end, namely the capacity to be eloquent in the pulpit. Emerson's entire sentence runs, "I would learn to love Virtue for her own sake, I would have my pen so guided as was Milton's when a deep & enthusiastic love of goodness & of God dictated the Comus to the bard, or that prose rhapsody in the 3rd Book or Prelatry." Accepting a commonplace of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century rhetorical theory, Emerson conflated virtue and

eloquence. Virtue without eloquence and eloquence without virtue were both unlikely, perhaps impossible, scenarios. In his mind, personal virtue became a means of achieving oratorical eloquence. Eloquence, in turn, would become a measure and a testament to his own virtue.²

Being both virtuous and eloquent was a means towards an even greater end: power and influence over his congregation. Though generally expressed in admissions of doubt, Emerson repeatedly referred to his would-be leadership in the self-appraisal he penned in his journal. "There exists a signal defect of character which neutralizes in great part *the just influence my talents ought to have.*" "In my better hours, I am the believer (if not the dupe) of brilliant promises, and can respect myself as *the possessor of those powers which command the reason & passion of the multitude.*" "I cannot assume the elevation I ought,—but lose *the influence I should exert among those of meaner or younger understanding.*" "How should I *strenuously enforce on men the duties and habits* to which I am a stranger?" (all emphases added). Though obviously he was not without his doubts, Emerson took as his mission the shaping of his parishioners' minds and souls. If he could achieve eloquence in the pulpit (which he was confident he could) and virtue in his person (which he believed was possible if he disciplined himself), then he could and would command power over his congregation, enlightening them—even molding them—through the power of his words and his example. In Emerson's mind, eloquent speech would be transformed into influence. Through his sermons, he believed, he would be able to mold his parishioners, elevating their souls and redirecting their behavior in a more spiritual direction. In the

² The perceived connection between eloquence, virtue, and power in the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century rhetorical theory are analyzed in Kenneth Cmiel, Democratic Eloquence: The Fight over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America (New York, 1990), 23-54.

pulpit, he "hoped to put on eloquence as a robe, and by goodness and zeal and the awfulness of virtue to press & prevail over the false judgments, the rebel passions & corrupt habits of men."

This was Emerson's initial hope. The realities of his ministry at Second Church in Boston five years later proved to be quite different. Throughout his almost four-year tenure, Emerson engaged in a continual struggle with his parishioners over his duties as minister. Emerson continued to believe—and sought to convince his parishioners—that he served his congregation best through the composition and delivery of eloquent sermons. While having no objections to pulpit eloquence per se, Emerson's parishioners wanted him to devote more of his energy to pastoral duties, ministering to them on an individual basis.

Emerson's parishioners were by no means alone in this desire for a conscientious pastor. Throughout New England during the 1820s and 1830s personal visits to parishioners had increasingly come to be regarded one of a minister's foremost duties. Only a generation earlier, the delivery of eloquent and learned sermons had been the primary responsibility of the Congregational clergy. Ministers of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Massachusetts, including Emerson's father, William, thought of themselves primarily as scholars. Facing congregations that wanted talented orators in the pulpit and believing that they were improving the spiritual and moral well-being of their communities through the power of words, these ministers devoted a great deal of their time to study and writing. By the time that Emerson became Second Church's minister in 1829, congregations were demanding something more from ministers. They still wanted excellent preachers. Yet they increasingly expected a conscientious and personable pastor. Delivering eloquent, learned sermons was no longer

enough. The Unitarian minister of the Jacksonian period needed to cultivate personal, individual relationships with parishioners. As Reverend Henry Ware, Jr., Emerson's predecessor at Second Church and later a professor of pastoral care at Harvard Divinity School, suggested during his farewell address at Second Church, "private duties of personal and pastoral intercourse are, at least, as important as the public exercises of the pulpit, and in fact necessary to their efficiency and success." Congregations had come to require their minister to be more than a preacher of well-crafted sermons. They also wanted an intimate friend who could offer each individual parishioner spiritual guidance and psychological counseling.³

Being a friend was never a vocational role that Emerson relished. From the very beginning of his ministerial career he dreaded the very notion of engaging with his parishioners in intimate conversations. He felt there was something unmanly about conversation and friendship. Rather than endearing people to one another, intimate interaction undercut people's respect for one another as they learned each other's flaws and weaknesses. As early as a journal entry from 1824 (an entry that was clearly in Emerson's mind a month later when he composed the entry where he took stock of his talents and ambitions for the ministry),⁴ Emerson explained his aversion to conversation and

³ Donald M. Scott, From Office to Profession: The New England Ministry, 1750-1850 (Philadelphia, Pa., 1978), 112-132. In his analysis of the changing role of ministers and the increased emphasis placed on personal and individual attention to parishioners, Scott quotes Reverend Dr. Enoch Pond's The Young Pastor's Guide (1844). Pond suggested that the authority that the nineteenth-century minister's eighteenth-century predecessors had enjoyed had been replaced by the "influence which one pious, intelligent, familiar, devoted friend may be supposed to possess over another. Minister and people are accustomed to live together, now, on the terms of intimacy and equality" (quoted *ibid.*, 121). David Robinson, Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer (Philadelphia, Pa., 1982), 30-35; Ware quoted *ibid.*, 43; Mary Kupiec Cayton, Emerson's Emergence: Self and Society in the Transformation of New England, 1800-1845 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1989), 114-119.

⁴ Near the end of this journal entry Emerson used "James I's propensity to favourites, who successively disgusted him" as an illustration of the dangers

friendship, articulating an attitude and an intellectual position that would change little through the next two decades:

All human pleasures have their dregs & even Friendship itself hath the bitter lees. Who is he that thought he might clasp his friend in embraces so tight, in daily intercourse so familiar that they two should be one? They met in equal conversation. I saw their eyes kindle with the common hope that they should climb life's hill together & totter down hand in hand. But the violent flame of youthful affection rapidly wasted itself. They foolishly trusted to each other the last secrets of their bosoms, their weakness. Every man has his failing, & these no more than others. But Men prudently cloak up the sore side, & shun to disgust the eye of the multitude. These erred in fancying that friendship would pardon infirmities & that a just confidence demanded that the last door of the heart should be unclosed, and even its secret sensuality revealed. They fell in each other's respect; they slighted, disliked, & ridiculed each other & regret & fear remained at last of the consequences of the implicit confidence of violent love. Men must have great souls & impregnable integrity of mind, to run not risks from the indiscreet ardor of these attachments.

Already concerned that he could not win the respect of his parishioners, Emerson feared that the comparatively intimate encounters that his parishioners sought with their pastor would further undermine his authority. Only if he had a "great soul and impregnable integrity of mind" could he safely interact with his parishioners on an individual basis.⁵

Yet his experiences as pastor at Second Church seemed only to confirm his initial suspicions that he did not possess the personal strength and confidence needed for these more personal encounters. Instead of being a means by which he could demonstrate his virtue to his congregation, pastoral visits only betrayed his awkwardness. Both

of friendship (JMN 2:228). He alludes to James again a month later in his journal entry on his ministerial prospects; charging himself to only speak deliberately and thoughtfully (by not engaging in idle, useless conversation), Emerson cautions himself regarding his "propensity to friendship, [which] instead of working out its manly ends, degenerates to a fondness for particular casts of feature perchance not unlike the doting of old Kind James" (JMN 2:241).

⁵ JMN 2:227-228.

Emerson's daughter Ellen and his biographer James Cabot Lodge recount a particularly humiliating pastoral visit where Emerson was called to the deathbed of a member of his congregation to offer the appropriate consolation and prayers as the man passed from this life. In a situation that required composure and ease, Emerson proved hesitant and stiff. Unable to find words that were appropriate, comforting, and reassuring, Emerson caught sight of the medicine bottles by the man's bed and began to talk about glassmaking. The dying parishioner—a veteran of the Revolutionary War—completely lost patience with his shy young minister's awkward attempts at conversation. "Young man," he told Emerson, "if you don't know your business, you had better go home."⁶

Emerson sought to wield power over his congregation through his words. Humiliating encounters with parishioners could only have strengthened his aversion to conversation as a mode of discourse. It seemed that his fears were being realized. His personal failings—his inability to engage comfortably and confidently with others in conversations—were undermining his authority with the congregation. Eloquence in the pulpit had little effect without respect from the pews. Emerson also resented the time required for pastoral visits. From the moment he was ordained as Second Church's minister on March 11, 1829, Emerson found that the amount of time that he had to devote to pastoral duties made it hard for him to pursue literary activities. Each Sabbath, he was responsible for delivering two sermons. In addition, he had to compose a number of lectures to be given during the week. While he had a store of twenty-six sermons that he had

⁶ This story is recounted in James Eliot Cabot, A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 169. It is also found in Robert D. Richardson, Jr., Emerson: The Mind on Fire (Berkeley, Cal., 1995), 91, who

accumulated as an itinerant preacher, nearly all of which he would redeliver at Second Church, he nonetheless felt overwhelmed by the inexorable need for more. Writing to his step-grandfather Ezra Ripley soon after his ordination, he confessed that "I fear nothing now except the preparation of sermons. The prospect of one each week, for an indefinite time to come is almost terrifick." What made what otherwise would have been a welcome prospect to the literary-minded Emerson so "terrifick" was the time he had to devote to his pastoral duties. Emerson told Ripley that these duties were keeping him "exceedingly busy," complaining "it is a new labour & I feel it in every bone of my body. I have made somewhat more than fifty pastoral visits and am yet but in the ends & frontiers of my society."⁷

Emerson attempted to resolve this dilemma not by changing his approach but by repeating his point: the value of a minister lay in his pulpit oratory. While conversations with his parishioners proved often uncomfortable, occasionally even humiliating, in the pulpit he believed he could "prudently cloak up the sore side, & shun to disgust the eye of the multitude." Perched high above the congregation, he could deliver his words deliberately and confidently from a position of strength. Be satisfied with eloquent sermons, he repeatedly urged his parishioners, and be content with fewer pastoral visits. Their role was to listen to him and follow his spiritual guidance rather than insisting on talking with him. Emerson's injunction was an updated version of the ancient Puritan minister's ideal: a "speaking aristocracy" in the pulpit, a "silent democracy" in the benches.

cites Ellen Tucker Emerson's "What I can Remember about Father" manuscript as his source for the story.

⁷ Cayton, Emerson's Emergence, 126-127; Gay Wilson Allen, Waldo Emerson: A Biography (New York, 1981) 131; The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Ralph L. Rusk and Eleanor M. Tilton, 10 vols. to date (New York, 1939-), 1:267 (subsequently cited as LRWE).

Emerson made this point explicitly in a sermon entitled "Conversation," first delivered on October 18, 1829. Emerson warned his congregation of the dangers of conversations and reminded them of the virtues of listening to the spiritual insights of others. Conversation was valuable, he conceded; it facilitated "mutual benefit by the exchange of knowledge by which in almost every case each man is a gainer." But there was a "sadly sore side to conversation" which necessitated them "to keep it to its right office and to find rules for its government." "If one mind is superior," he told his congregation, "the other is benefited in exact proportion to that superiority by the intercourse." Since some individuals possessed superior spiritual insight, it was best to listen to them and absorb their truth. He exhorted parishioners to submit to the authority of their spiritual superiors: "There is a high, a Christian nobleness in that victory over egotism, when a man in the zeal of debate doth frankly and joyfully yield himself to the manifest truth of his adversary." Essentially, Emerson told his congregation to listen to him, their spiritual leader and guide, as a preacher rather than insist on talking with him as a pastor.⁸

If the message was not clear enough, Emerson made it more explicit six months later. Reflecting on his first year as minister at Second Church in his sermon "The Ministry: A Year's Retrospect," Emerson told his congregation that the preaching and pastoral requirements of his position had proved "often in some measure incompatible." Emerson had initially entered the ministry hoping that there he could pursue his oratorical and literary ambitions and exercise authority over his congregation. Yet he continued to find

⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Conversation," in Young Emerson Speaks: Unpublished Discourses on Many Subjects, ed. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Jr. (Boston, 1938),

these ambitions frustrated by pastoral obligations. While he wanted to be in his own home studying and writing to prepare sermons for the Sabbath, he was too often required to visit his parishioners' homes to offer them spiritual and psychological counseling. In a frank admission, Emerson told his congregation that "the minister who makes it an important aim to convey instruction must often stay at home in the search of it when his parishioners may think that he would be more usefully employed in cultivating an acquaintance with them." Hoping to convince his parishioners to accept instruction in the form of sermons and to quit making so many demands upon his time, Emerson pleaded with his congregation to be content with less personal attention: "You will therefore have the charity to think when you do not see your pastor as often or at the times when you could wish it and desire it, that he may be employed with earnest endeavours to speak to you usefully in this place."⁹

Emerson's decision to resign his position as minister of Second Church in 1832 was due, in part, to this ongoing frustration with his pastoral responsibilities. He did have intellectual and theological reservations about the ministry; ostensibly, he resigned his position because he objected to the requirement that he administer the Lord's Supper, a ritual which he felt had become empty and meaningless. Despite this sincere theological misgiving, Emerson's decision to leave Second Church was as much vocationally as theologically motivated. Emerson had entered the clergy hoping it would be an outlet for his literary ambitions and a means whereby he could exercise leadership. From the pulpit, Emerson hoped to change hearts and minds through eloquent preaching. Yet his parishioners continually insisted that he

not only speak to them as a preacher but with them as a pastor. The time he had to devote to his pastoral duties continually frustrated his attempts to compose learned and eloquent sermons. What added to Emerson's frustration with the ministry was his recognition that the clergy did not command the same authority that they had enjoyed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Living in a more democratic, less deferential society, ministers had to compete with newspapers and reformers in the shaping of public opinion. The frustration that Emerson's cousin the Reverend Orville Dewey expressed was not uncommon. "We grapple with the world's strife and trial, but it is in armor," Dewey lamented. "We are a sort of moral eunuchs." Thus even when Emerson did rise to eloquence in the pulpit, his words often fell on deaf ears. The growing burden of pastoral responsibilities was symptomatic of this ministerial decline. Rather than guiding their congregations from on high through their sermons, ministers increasingly had to descend from the pulpit to minister to individual parishioners in intimate, conversational settings. Uncomfortable with his pastoral duties and disappointed in the limited authority he wielded from the pulpit, in October 1832 Emerson left Second Church to search for a vocation that would allow him to pursue his quest for eloquence unhindered and that would enable him the command power through his words.¹⁰

⁹ Emerson, "The Ministry: A Year's Retrospect," in McGiffert, ed., Young Emerson Speaks, 70-71.

¹⁰ Conrad Wright, "Emerson, Barzillia Frost, and the Divinity School Address," in The Liberal Christians: Essays on American Unitarian History (Boston, 1970), 48; Robinson, Apostle of Culture, 44-45; Lawrence Buell, Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance (Ithaca, N.Y., 1973), 46-47, Dewey quoted on 47. On ministerial disempowerment in nineteenth-century America, see Scott, From Office to Profession; Ann Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture (New York, 1977), 3-47; Nathan O. Hatch, The Democratization of American Christianity (New Haven, Conn., 1989), 3-16. Emerson's abandonment of the pulpit was not that unusual. Scott reports that during the 1830s and 1840s men who entered the ministry hoping it would be a "source of intellectual leadership for the society" (incidentally, Scott also

However, Emerson was not done with the pulpit. Over the next six years, he accepted a number of invitations to preach at various Unitarian churches. Occasionally supplying the pulpit suited Emerson. It gave him the opportunity to satisfy his persistent desire to preach without burdening him with the pastoral duties he dreaded so much. This was in many respects exactly what Emerson was looking for. He could command the attention of a congregation on Sunday that would not require that he talk with them during the week.¹¹

During these same years Emerson discovered what would ultimately become his new career as he began to preach from a different venue, the lyceum lectern. In the late 1820s and early 1830s, lyceum societies had begun to spring up throughout New England. These lyceum societies functioned as quasi-civic institutions supposedly acting in the interest of the general public. They invited speakers to lecture on topics that were intended to appeal to a broad spectrum of people throughout their community. In general, these societies shied away from topics that were controversial or potentially divisive. Instead, they chose topics which would fall under the rubric of "useful knowledge"—knowledge that would have practical applications in the lives of the audience. In part, this policy was a matter of practical necessity. The survival of a lyceum depended on its ability to fill the seats of the lectures it sponsored with a paying audience. However, this policy was also ideologically motivated. The conflicts that divided the community—the economic conflict between entrepreneur and mechanic, the political conflict between Mason and Antimason, the

notes that these intellectually-oriented men were often the sons of clergymen, as was Emerson himself) often resigned their ministries in order to pursue more intellectually satisfying positions (119). For an analyses of the intellectual power that eighteenth-century minister commanded in their communities, see Richard Brown, "Rural Clergymen and the Communications Networks of 18th-Century

religious conflict between evangelical Congregationalist and liberal Unitarian—could all be left behind at the door as a diverse audience entered the lecture hall. There a unified, democratic community could be reconstituted through the sharing of a common intellectual and cultural experience.¹²

While Emerson could not have known in the early 1830s that lyceum lecturing could and would develop into a lucrative career, the infant circuit did afford him the opportunity to indulge his fondness for composition and his passion for eloquence. He began his lecturing career with the delivery of four lectures in Boston on the topic of Natural History during the winter of 1833-1834. In the years that followed, Emerson spoke more and more frequently—and more and more profitably—from the lyceum lectern. Between 1835 and 1840, Emerson would deliver twenty-two to thirty-five lectures each year. The fees he received from these lectures eventually became an important part of his overall income. During the lecture season of 1837-1838, for example, he earned over \$1000 by delivering four lecture series in different cities and towns in Massachusetts. Together with the monies he received from his first wife Ellen's estate—about \$1200 per year—this income allowed Emerson to give up preaching entirely in 1838.¹³

New England," in Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865 (New York, 1989), 65-81.

¹¹ Allen, Waldo Emerson, 221.

¹² For analyses of lecturing as a profession and a cultural phenomenon, see Donald M. Scott, "The Profession that Vanished: Public Lecturing in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America," in Professionals and Professional Ideologies in America, ed. Gerald L. Geison (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1983), 12-28, and Scott, "The Popular Lecture and the Creation of a Public in Mid-Nineteenth Century America," Journal of American History 66 (1980), 791-809; for an account of the establishment of lyceum societies in New England and Massachusetts during the late 1820s and early 1830s, see Carl Bode, The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind (New York, 1956), 41-59.

¹³ William Charvat, "A Chronological List of Emerson's American Lecture Engagements," Bulletin of the New York Public Library 64 (1960), 496, 500-503; R. Jackson Wilson, Figures of Speech: American Writers and the Literary Marketplace, from Benjamin Franklin to Emily Dickinson (New York, 1989), 187.

Emerson was drawn to the lyceum not only because it supplemented his income and afforded him the opportunity to speak. His own developing ideology mirrored the social vision of the lyceum. Both sought to mitigate the social and political divisions of Jacksonian America and reconstitute an organic society where individuals followed the directives of their intellectual and spiritual superiors because they recognized the truth and wisdom of their superiors' guidance.¹⁴ Emerson envisioned himself as one of these superior individuals. Through speech, he believed he could effect the intellectual and spiritual regeneration of his audience by revealing to them transcendental truths.

In "The American Scholar" (1837), Emerson articulated this vision of the speaker's role in society. In his portrait of the Scholar, the intellectual promises to wield vast social power. Emerson described the intellectual as a "great man" (he is intentionally gender specific) whose power is comparable to that of royalty. Through speech, the intellectual leads and instructs the multitude: "Not he is great who can alter matter, but he who can alter my state of mind. They are the kings of the world who give the color of their present thought to all nature and all art, and persuade men by the cheerful serenity of their carrying the matter, that this thing which they do, is the apple which the ages have desired to pluck, now at last ripe, and inviting nations to the harvest."¹⁵

The source of the speaker's power, Emerson maintained, was the universality of his insights. Through contemplation and thought the

¹⁴ Though Cayton's Emerson's Emergence has influenced this thesis in its entirety, I am particularly indebted to her explication of Emerson's vision of society. She argues that Emerson adopted the vision of his Federalist forefathers, attempting in his career to reconstitute an organic society.

intellectual could discover ideas that were universally, transcendently true. "The instinct is sure, that prompts [the Scholar] to tell his brother what he thinks," Emerson believed. "He then learns, that in going down into the secrets of his own mind, he has descended into the secrets of all minds. He learns that he who has mastered any law in his private thoughts, is master to that extent of all men whose language he speaks, and of all into whose language his own can be translated." Transcendental insights revealed that all divisions and differences between individuals were merely superficial. All men shared the same consciousness, a notion that Emerson would later encapsulate in his concept of the "oversoul."¹⁶

This was the key idea that justified, and to a degree disguised, the power that the transcendental speaker sought to wield. While the speaker would command so much power as to be "master . . . of all men," this power could in no way be said to be coercive. He was not telling others what to believe or to do. Instead he was revealing truths to them that were already dormant in their own souls. According to this logic, no speaker could exercise authoritarian power over the consciousness of another because no one had an individual consciousness, a unique subjectivity. If the speaker won over his audience that was evidence of the truth of his insight.¹⁷

In "The American Scholar" Emerson repeatedly urged his audience to be thinking individuals who did not defer to the authority of others. He told them to read books actively and resist the intellectual authority of Europe. Yet side-by-side with the liberatory

¹⁵ Emerson, "The American Scholar," in Nature, Addresses, and Lectures, vol. 1 of The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Robert E. Spiller and Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 64.

¹⁶ Ibid, 63.

Emerson who told the intellectual to "defer never to the popular cry" there was an authoritarian Emerson who assured the members of the Phi Beta Kappa Society that the multitude would defer to the intellectual's cry. "The orator distrusts at first the fitness of his frank confession, his want of knowledge of the persons he addresses, until he finds that he is the complement of his hearers;—that they drink his words because he fulfils for them their own nature; the deeper he dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds this the most acceptable, most public, and universally true. The people delight in it; the better part of every man feels, This is my music; this is myself." Urging people to look inward and discover their own truths was hardly an emancipatory or individualistic act if you were convinced that this process would reveal to them the same truths that you yourself had already discovered.¹⁸

While no one characterized Emerson as authoritarian, some of Emerson's contemporaries criticized his tendency to set the intellectual apart from and above other members of society. The Unitarian minister and reformer William Henry Channing, for example, took exception to some of Emerson's ideas. While sympathetic to the "newness" in general and Emerson's ideas in particular, Channing nonetheless felt that Emerson's vision of the intellectual was too esoteric. Reviewing "The American Scholar" in 1838, Channing suggested that social and spiritual redemption would not occur through the formal communication of abstract principles, by talking at people. Instead, Channing advocated a more social strategy of reform that would be accomplished cooperatively through Christian brotherhood and love: "Not

¹⁷ See Steele, Representation of the Self in the American Renaissance, 1-39, for an analysis of how Emerson, both in theory and practice, self-consciously used language as a means of convincing audiences of the truth of his ideas.

as a scholar, not with a view to literary labor, not as an artist, must he go about among men—but as a brother man." Here Channing can be said to have offered a vision of the reformer as pastor rather than preacher. Channing was not alone in voicing these kinds of criticisms of Emerson's vision of the transcendentalist speaker. In what would prove to be an intellectual and emotionally exhausting experience, in 1840 Emerson would have to defend and grapple with his vocational philosophy as his friend Margaret Fuller confronted him with more socially-oriented conceptions of the transcendental intellectual.¹⁹

¹⁸ Emerson, "The American Scholar," in Spiller and Ferguson, eds., Nature, Addresses, and Lectures, 63.

¹⁹ Channing quoted in Buell, Literary Transcendentalism, 41; a longer excerpt of Channing's review of "The American Scholar" appears in Perry Miller, ed., The Transcendentalists: An Anthology (Cambridge, Mass., 1950), 186-188.

Chapter 2

"We use a different rhetoric":

The Challenge of Fuller's Conversations

Following a social visit to Cambridge on August 14, 1840, Ralph Waldo Emerson accompanied Margaret Fuller back to her home in Jamaica Plain. En route Fuller charged Emerson with being a cold and indifferent friend. This was by no means the first time that Fuller had made this complaint. But on this carriage trip she renewed the accusation with particular fervor. They had known each other for four years; yet Fuller claimed they remained strangers to one another. Two days later, a troubled Emerson recorded that conversation in his journal: "She taxed me . . . with inhospitality of soul. She & C[aroline Sturgis] would gladly be my friends, yet our intercourse is not friendship, but literary gossip. I count & weigh but do not love. They make no progress with me, but however often we have met, we still meet as strangers."¹

Emerson did not dispute the accuracy or fairness of Fuller's accusation, but "confess[ed] to all this charge with humility unfeigned." He was clearly torn between his emotions and his ideas. Though many of his contemporaries commented upon his stoicism, Emerson was not emotionally impervious to Fuller's charge. He longed "to melt once all these icy barriers, & unite with these lovers" and to "form permanent relations with the three or four wise & beautiful whom I hold so dear." However, he felt that indulging his desires in this case would be hypocritical, a violation of his ideas about the transcendental individual. During the last half decade he had been

championing a strict individualism. Only the individual who dedicated himself to the process of self-culture could accomplish real spiritual and intellectual growth. This idea was at the core of both his personal convictions and his public lectures. When Fuller pressed him for a greater intimacy, he refused to let emotional considerations compromise his quest to embody his ideas in his own life. He would not sacrifice his spiritual growth for the sake of friendship: "I must do nothing to court their love which would lose my own. Unless that which I do to build up myself, endears me to them, our covenant would be injurious."²

Over the next two months, Emerson and Fuller exchanged letters in which they debated the nature of friendship in general and their friendship in particular. Though all but one of the letters that Fuller wrote Emerson during the period are lost, it is clear that she continued to press him to become more personal in their relationship. In the sole surviving letter from late September, Fuller expressed dissatisfaction with the limited bond between them. "You did not for me the highest office of friendship," she complained, then went on to fault him with being "wholly ignorant of me." Though Fuller felt a deep affinity with and loyalty to Emerson, she claimed that he resisted their growing intimacy. "[I]n your last letter," Emerson wrote Fuller in reference to one of her lost letters,

you . . . do say . . . that I am yours & yours shall be, let me dally how long soever in this or that other temporary relation. I on the contrary do constantly aver with you that you & I are not inhabitants of one thought of the Divine Mind, but of two thoughts, that we meet & treat like foreign states, one maritime, one inland, whose trade & laws are essentially unlike."³

¹ JMN, 7:509.

² JMN, 7:509-510.

³ The Letters of Margaret Fuller, ed. Robert N. Hudspeth, 6 vols. (Ithaca, N.Y., 1983-1994), 2:159, 160 (subsequently cited as LMF); LRWE, 2:336.

Emerson was not completely unresponsive to Fuller's appeals. He clearly valued his growing friendship with Fuller and the young people—Sturgis, Anna Barker, and Sam Ward—she had introduced to him. Writing to Sturgis shortly after his interview with Fuller, Emerson expressed his affection for both her and Fuller. He admitted that he could be cold at times. However, he protested that despite his icy demeanor he was sincerely attached and devoted to both of them: "I confess to the fact of cold & imperfect intercourse, but not to the impeachment of my will . . . and not to the deficiency of my affection. If I count & weigh, I love also You give me more joy than I could trust my tongue to tell you." Part of him wanted to forsake his solitude and immerse himself in these friendships. "With all my heart I would live in your society," he wrote Sturgis. "I would gladly spend the remainder of my days in the holy society of the best[,] the wisest[,] & the most beautiful I will engage to be as true a brother to you as ever blood made." He expressed similar sentiments to Fuller. In mid-September, he momentarily appeared to surrender to her requests. Though his words betrayed ambivalence, he pledged to embrace his friendships: "Since I have been an exile so long from the social world and a social world is now suddenly thrust on me I am determined by the help of heaven to suck this orange dry I abandon myself to what is best in you all."⁴

Despite these occasional admissions of emotions and attachment, throughout their correspondence Emerson more often defended his solitude. In late August—only two weeks after Fuller accused him of "inhospitality of soul"—Emerson declared his need for solitude. Only

⁴ LRWE, 2:325, 332. An essay that suggests that Emerson was "preoccupied" and romantically interested in Fuller is Marie Olesen Urbanski, "The Ambivalence of Ralph Waldo Emerson towards Margaret Fuller," Thoreau Journal Quarterly 10, no. 3 (1978), 23-36.

in solitude, Emerson claimed, could he accomplish real spiritual growth: "I find my solitude necessary & more than ever welcome to me . . . Nay my solitary river is not solitary enough; it interrupts, it puts me out, and I cannot be alone with the Alone." A week later he again apologized to Fuller for his need for solitude, declaring that "I have need to stay at home,—for do you know any person who has gone so far into society lately as I?" While Emerson used spiritual arguments to defend his solitude, he was also trying to reserve sufficient time to complete the composition and revision of his current literary project, the Essays.⁵

Emerson and Fuller's correspondence on the issue of friendship came to a sudden and somewhat dramatic end in late October 1840. In a letter that has not survived, it appears that Fuller pressed Emerson about their friendship even more adamantly than she had before. In this letter Fuller clearly invested a great deal of emotion, reporting to Sturgis that its composition gave her "pain." Whatever its exact contents, it provoked a defensive and decidedly negative response from Emerson. The intimate and passionate nature of Fuller's letter unnerved him. In his reply, he expressed to Fuller his regret and his dismay that their correspondence had become so personal: "I have your frank & noble & affecting letter, and yet I think I could wish it unwritten. I ought never to have suffered you to lead me into any conversation or writing on our relation, a topic from which with all

⁵ LRWE, 2:328, 329. Just as Emerson had found that time-intensive personal relationships with his parishioners handicapped his literary efforts during his ministry, a decade later he made the same complaint about his friendships. On October 21, 1839, he complained in his journal that his friendships, while personally rewarding, took too much time away from his reading and writing: "How can I not record though now with sleepy eye & flagging spirits so fair a fact as the visit of [Bronson] Alcott and Margaret Fuller who came hither yesterday & departed this morning. Very friendly influences these, each & both. Cold as I am, they are almost dear . . . What is good to make me happy is not however good to make me write. Life too near paralyzes Art" (emphasis added). JMN, 7:273.

persons my Genius ever sternly warns me away." He enjoyed the company of the intelligent and witty Fuller, but was unwilling to become more intimate with her. He urged her to be content with an intellectual, impersonal relationship: "Let us live as we have always done, only ever better; I hope, & richer. Speak to me of everything but myself & I will endeavor to make an intelligible reply." He left her little choice in the matter, unilaterally ending their correspondence on the topic of their friendship: "I see very dimly in writing on this topic . . . Do not expect it of me for a very long time."⁶

In this letter Emerson suggested that their conflict was caused, at least in part, by an inability to communicate with one another. "We use a different rhetoric," he told her. "It seems as if we had been born & bred in different nations. You say you understand me wholly. You cannot communicate yourself to me. I hear the words sometimes but remain a stranger to your state of mind."⁷ As he had a decade earlier in his relationships with his parishioners, once again Emerson conflated the issues of friendship, intimacy, language, and speech. Emerson perceived in Fuller's letters more than merely an effort to change the nature of their personal relationship. Emerson sensed that Fuller's effort to redefine their relationship was also an attempt to convert him to a different model of personal and discursive interaction between individuals. Implicit in her criticism of Emerson as a friend was a critique of his notions of speech and of his ideas about the ideal relationship between intellectual and society. In his letters to Fuller he was not only guarding his valued privacy, he was also constantly advocating and defending both a mode and a tone of discursive interaction that he considered essential to the process of

⁶ LMF, 2:167; LRWE, 2:352-353.

⁷ Ibid, 353.

self-culture and which served as the ideological basis of his lecturing career. Though he obviously had personal reasons for resisting Fuller's request for greater intimacy—most obviously the possibility that such a friendship could be construed as a betrayal of his marriage—at this point in his career, Fuller's "different rhetoric" not only threatened Emerson personally. Her ideas threatened his sense of vocation, his dreams of power, and his very identity.

Part of the difficulties Emerson and Fuller experienced in their relationship during 1840 involved gendered conceptions of friendship. During the nineteenth century it was commonplace for women to develop very emotional and very demonstrative friendships with one another. Culturally associated with love and the heart, women's logical emotional outlet was other women. Since women were considered to have distinct personalities and different characteristics from men, it only made sense that they would turn to other women for intimacy. These friendships, as historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg suggests, were characterized by extreme "closeness [and] freedom of emotional expression."⁸

By including Emerson within her circle of friends, Fuller was essentially inviting him, even expecting him, to participate in her version of feminine friendship. Fuller had intensely emotional relationships with the three young friends, Sturgis, Barker, and Ward, to whom she introduced to Emerson in the late 1830s. She no doubt hoped for something similar in her friendship with Emerson. However, Emerson was unwilling to go along. For reasons of temperament and gender, he simply did not have the ability to be as open and forthcoming about

⁸ Nancy F. Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835 (New Haven, Conn., 1977) 160-196, esp. 168-188; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-

his feelings as Fuller could be. As he wrote to Fuller, "sometimes you appeal to sympathies I have not." Emerson found the intensity of this kind of feminine friendship threatening and uncomfortable. He urged Fuller to allow him to "keep a safe distance from all the instructive extremes of life & condition."⁹

Historian Mary Kupiec Cayton has argued that "when Fuller began her campaign to convert Emerson to her own feminine ideas of friendship, ideas that neither necessarily recognized as gender-based, he chafed. She expected overt emotion and disclosure of intimate feelings; he could not give them." However, it appears that Emerson did sense the gendered dynamic of his relationship with Fuller. Though by temperament he was undisposed towards open expressions of love, he also thought it unmanly to reciprocate the affections tendered by women. In his relationship with Fuller, Emerson attempted to play the role of the boy he described in "Self-Reliance":

The nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature. A boy is in the parlor [a traditionally feminine space] what the pit is in the playhouse; independent, irresponsible, looking out from his corner on such people and facts as pass by You *must court him; he does not court you.* [emphasis added]

In this passage, Emerson assumes the existence and the naturalness of a female support network—a support network that is so natural that it does not even need to be mentioned explicitly. As a boy, Emerson and his brothers took for granted the devotion of their mother and of their beloved aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, along with a variety of domestic servants. He brought the same perspective into his adult relationships

Century America," in Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York, 1985) 53-76, quote on 74.

⁹ Anne Rose, Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830-1850 (New Haven, Conn., 1981) 181; Cayton, Emerson's Emergence, 212-213; LRWE, 2:352, 343.

with women. It is "healthy" for a man to expect women to be affectionate companions, both subservient and peripheral to men. Throughout late 1840, Emerson applied this idea in his relationship with Fuller. "I take it for granted that everybody will show me kindness & wit, and am too happy in the observation of all the abundant particulars of the show to feel the slightest obligation resting on me to do any thing or say any thing for the company," he told her. She could court him; he would not court her. As he wrote her on October 22, 1840, "Can one be glad of an affection which he knows not how to return? I am. Humbly grateful for every expression of tenderness—which makes the day sweet and inspires unlimited hopes Therefore, my friend, treat me always as a mute, not ungrateful though now incommunicable." Matters of the heart were one of the few areas where the transcendental speaker preferred to remain silent. Emerson could accept and occasionally even appreciate the love his female friends offered him. Yet, as a man, he felt he could not return their affection.¹⁰

In his journals, lectures, and essays during the preceding decade and a half Emerson had developed an intellectual and philosophical system that justified his attitude and behavior. His ideas about friendship remained largely consistent with those he had laid out in his journal entry about friendship in 1824. He still felt that intimacy revealed and encouraged weakness. To be truly valuable, he

¹⁰ Cayton, Emerson's Emergence, 214-215; Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in Essays: First and Second Series (New York: Vintage Books/The Library of America, 1990), 31; David Leverenz, Manhood and the American Renaissance (Ithaca, N.Y., 1989) 63; LRWE, 2:352, 351. There is additional evidence that Emerson sought to play the part of the "boy" he describes in "Self-Reliance" in his relationships. In a passage from "Friendship" that Emerson drew from journal entry from June, 1839, Emerson used the same metaphor, this time portraying himself as the independent observer, the man who looks out from his parlor at those who pass by: "I chide society, I embrace solitude, and yet I am not so ungrateful as not to see the wise, the lovely, and the noble-minded, as from time to time they pass my gate" ("Friendship," in Essays, 112).

maintained, friendship should not and could not involve intimacy and sympathy. A true friend offered thought, not affection; character, not love. The role of a friend was to serve as an example, a spectacle, inspiring a man to improve himself. In "Circles," Emerson even goes so far as to suggest that a friend's expressions of affection and love were a hindrance to spiritual development. A friend should instead stand as a model of greatness:

The continual effort to raise himself above himself, to work a pitch above his last height, betrays itself in a man's relations. We thirst for approbation, yet cannot forgive the approver. The sweet of nature is love; yet if I have a friend I am tormented by my imperfections. The love of me accuses the other party. If he were high enough to slight me, then I could love him, and rise by my affection to new heights. A man's growth is seen in the successive choirs of his friends.

In a passage from his journal in late 1839, Emerson again suggested the negative impact of affection, this time explicitly in gendered terms:

"Be not so much his friend that you can never know your man, like fond mammas who shut their boy in the house until he is almost grown a girl." A friendship that involved too much affection, in which friends coddled one another, would destroy self-reliance and effectively result in emasculation.¹¹

To avoid this, Emerson maintained that ideal friendship should be manly and even combative. In the essay "Friendship," published in 1841, Emerson suggested that a friend should be "a nettle in the side" and a "beautiful enemy, untamable." A friend should offer "manly furtherance, or at least manly resistance" rather than sympathy—"a mush of concession." A true friend, he maintained, should be an example of excellence that revealed one's own flaws and shortcomings, thus prodding one into renewed efforts at self-culture. In these

¹¹ Emerson, "Circles," in Essays, 176; JMN, 7:332.

ideas, Emerson offered almost the antithesis of the feminine ideal of friendship. Friends should not offer approbation and affection, but instead "resistance" and "slights."¹²

Fuller's ideas about friendship were quite different. In a letter to William Henry Channing from 1841, Fuller described the differences between her and Emerson's conceptions of friendship:

The more I think of it, the more deeply do I feel the imperfections of your view of friendship which is the same Waldo E. takes Our friends should be our incentive to Right, but not only our guiding but our prophetic stars. To love by sight is much, to love by faith is more; both are the entire love without which heart, mind, and soul cannot be alike satisfied. We love and ought to love one another not merely for the absolute worth of each but on account of a mutual fitness of temporary character. We are not merely one another's priests or gods, but ministering angels, exercising in the past the same function as the Great Soul in the whole of seeing the perfect through the imperfect nay, making it come there. Why am I to love my friend the less for any obstruction in his life?

While Emerson conceived of his ideal friend as a "beautiful enemy" who would inspire him through "slights" and "manly furtherance" to improve himself, Fuller conceived of her ideal friend as a "ministering angel" who would help her through "love" to attain perfection. While Emerson refused, as he wrote in "Friendship," to "provide for [any] infirmity" in his friend, Fuller continued to love her friend despite any "obstruction in his life." Like Emerson, Fuller appears to have recognized the gendered nature of these difference, writing in this same letter to Channing, "the manly mind might love best in the triumphant hour, but the woman could no more stay from the cross, than from the Transfiguration." Emerson wanted to see only what was perfect—"the triumphant"—in his friends so he could improve himself

¹² Emerson, "Friendship," in Essays, 120, 121, 120.

through emulation. Fuller wanted to see her friends' imperfections so she could help them improve themselves through love and support.¹³

Beginning in the fall of 1839, Fuller attempted to use this conception of friendship as the basis for an organized effort to help women improve themselves. On November 6 of that year, twenty-five women drawn from Massachusetts' cultural and intellectual elite, many of them personal friends of Fuller, gathered at Elizabeth Peabody's bookstore in Boston to participate in Fuller's first series of Conversations. Her stated objective was to help these women "systematize thought and give a precision in which our sex are so deficient." Through the Conversations, Fuller hoped to remedy, or at least mitigate, some of the educational deficiencies that prevented women from taking more active roles in antebellum thought, culture, and society.¹⁴

Fuller envisioned the Conversations as a mutualistic, collaborative effort on the part of women to help each other learn to think and express themselves more intelligently—"a point of *union* to well-educated and thinking women" (emphasis added). Like Emerson, Fuller had faith in the radical potential of speech; yet she differed from him in believing the most advantageous speech was collective in nature. She refused to lecture to the participants like a "paid Corinne."¹⁵ Instead, she insisted that the women's active participation

¹³ LMF, 2:214-215; Emerson, "Friendship," in *Essays*, 124; Dorothy Berkson, "Born and Bred in Different Nations": Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson," in *Patrons and Protégées: Gender, Friendship, and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Marchalonis, Douglass Series on Women's Lives and the Meaning of Gender (New Brunswick, N.J., 1988) 14-15.

¹⁴ LMF, 2:87.

¹⁵ Fuller's reference to Gerain de Staël's novel *Corinne* is telling. As Mary Kelley has recently argued, while Fuller was attracted to the "brilliant," literary de Staël, she was often more attracted to the "practical" example of Maria Edgeworth. In the "Conversations" she rejected a model of reform based upon de Staël and embraced a model more in line with the practical example of Edgeworth that seemed to offer more immediate results through institutional, organizational means (Kelley "Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of

in the Conversations was essential if these women were to gain the skills necessary to empower themselves. In a society where women were largely excluded from the public sphere, listening to someone else lecture would only exacerbate their sense of intellectual inferiority. Only by developing and articulating their own ideas could these women gain the confidence and experience necessary to effect their own spiritual and intellectual emancipation. "I am so sure that the success of the whole depends on conversation being general," Fuller wrote Sophia Ripley about the Conversations, "that I do not wish any one to join who does not intend, *if possible*, to take an active part. No one will be forced, but those who do not talk will not derive the same advantages with those who openly state their impressions and consent to learn by blundering as is the destiny of man here below." Fuller envisioned the Conversations as an exercise in and application of friendship. Just as she believed that friends should recognize each other's "imperfections" in order to help one another grow towards perfection, in the Conversations she wanted them to "learn by blundering." Just as she refused to ignore any "obstructions" in her friends' lives, in the Conversations she wanted the women "to state their doubts and difficulties with the hope of gaining aid from the experience or aspirations of others." In the Conversations, Fuller wanted these women to do more than merely talk; she wanted them to bare their souls to each other, "lay[ing] aside the vague generalities, the cant of coterei criticism and the delicate disdains of *good society*." Only if they were willing to be intimate, sincere, and personal—"Willing that others should think their sayings crude, shallow or tasteless" and willing "to see their friends undefended by rouge or

candlelight"—could these women "secure real health and vigor" (note Fuller's use of the word "friends" in reference to the participants). Fuller refused to assume the role of a seer lecturing or performing behind a lectern or on a stage. Instead she wanted to be a "guide," a "ministering angel," who would serve as a friend to these women, helping them to improve themselves.¹⁶

The conception of the ideal discursive dynamic embodied in both the Conversations and Fuller's conception of friendship functioned as a critique of Emerson's ideas about the transcendental speaker. Emerson had long wanted his speech to embody and testify to his personal strength. Back in 1824 he had berated himself because "a score of words . . . issue from me daily, of which I am not the master. They are begotten of weakness and born of shame." At that early point in his career he dedicated himself to becoming a man "who never makes the slightest mistake in speech or action; one in whom not only every important step of life, but every passage of conversation . . . are measured & dictated by deliberate reason." He sought out venues like the pulpit and the lyceum where he could speak deliberately, and he avoided more intimate conversational situations where he felt speech revealed weakness. The lyceum, he reflected in 1839, offered the speaker the ideal opportunity to demonstrate his strength, "here he may lay himself out utterly, large, enormous, prodigal, one the subject of

¹⁶ LMF, 2:86-88, 97. Berkson, "Born and Bred" in Marchalonis, ed., Patrons and Protégées, 20. The women who participated in the Conversations saw them as more than just an educational opportunity and Fuller as more than just a teacher. Many came to consider Fuller an intimate friend. Their expressions of affection for Fuller evidence the same emotional intensity as those Smith-Rosenberg describes as characteristic of nineteenth-century feminine friendships. For example, Caroline Dall reported feeling "sad because it was the last time that I should see Margaret. She does not love me; I could not venture to follow her into her own home, and I love her so much!" Elizabeth Hoar once told Emerson that "Had she been a man, any one of those fine girls of sixteen, who surrounded her here, would have married her; they were all in love with her, she understood them so well." (Dall quoted in Paula Blanchard,

the hour. Here he may dare to hope for ecstasy & eloquence." Strength beget strength, weakness beget weakness. If the speaker could manifest virtuous perfection to the audience through his speech and bearing, Emerson believed, then he could inspire and guide them to attain that same perfection in their own lives. Yet, if he showed any weakness, his speech was worthless, or worse, would corrupt his audience.¹⁷

Conversation, Emerson felt, too often encouraged displays of weakness that handicapped all and benefited none. In a journal entry from May 1840 where he praised Bronson Alcott's conversation, Emerson explained his general objections to conversation:

In conversation, Alcott will meet no man who will take a superior tone. Let the other party say what he will, Alcott unerringly takes the highest moral ground & commands the other's position, & cannot be outgeneralled. And this because whilst he lives in his moral perception; his sympathies with the present company are not troublesome to him, never embarrass for a moment his perception. He is cool, bland, urbane, yet with his eye fixed on the highest fact. With me it is not so. In all companies I sympathize too much. If they are ordinary & mean, I am. If the company were great I should soar: in all mere mortal parties, I take the contagion of their views & lose my own. I cannot outsee them, or correct, or raise them. As soon as they are gone, the muse returns; I see the facts as all cultivated men always have seen them, and am a great man again.

Alcott was the exception that proved the rule.¹⁸ Only the truly great could benefit each other in conversation. Emerson's conception of valuable conversation reproduced the logic of his position on the ideal dynamic of the lecture. A great conversationalist, like a great lecturer, is superior to those he talks to. He is a general who "commands the other's position" "outsee[ing]," "correct[ing]," and

Margaret Fuller: From Transcendentalism to Revolution [Reading, Mass., 1987], 151; Hoar quoted in Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli, 281).

¹⁷ JMN, 2:240, 7:265.

¹⁸ Among the reasons that Emerson applauded conversation with Alcott was that Alcott's ideas seems so similar to his own. "I had a very good talk with the majestic egotist," Emerson wrote Fuller of Alcott in October 1940, "and found

"rais[ing]" others through his speech. The speaker's superiority allows him to raise the audience to new levels of spiritual and intellectual insight. Yet if the audience converses with the great man, their inferiority infects him like a "contagion" and he sinks to their level, "the ordinary & mean." Once again, Emerson's ideas about speech embodied a conservative, anti-democratic view of the social order where the great man speaking on high instructs and inspires the silent multitude.¹⁹

Fuller's vision of the way conversation functioned could hardly be more different. Far from engendering weakness among all, the expression of "crude, shallow or tasteless" words and the admission of "doubts and difficulties" were essential to the processes of self-improvement and group empowerment. Conversation allowed individuals to encourage and support one another, helping each other to grow spiritually and intellectually. Only by stating their opinions frankly could each individual "test and classify" each of her ideas, recognizing what was insightful and rethinking what was not. Collectively, this process would allow "what is invaluable in the experience of each [to be] brought to bear upon all."²⁰ Fuller's *Conversations* and her ideas about friendship challenged Emerson's belief that personal and discursive relationships should involve rivalry and competition where individuals strove to outdo one another in spiritual attainments. Fuller maintained that admissions of weakness were not infectious. Instead, conversation allowed

as ever that I might as well quarrel with my own conscience as with him" (LRWE 2:344).

¹⁹ JMN, 7:346-347.

²⁰ LME, 87.

participants to pool their strengths and insights, thus elevating the entire group.²¹

Fuller continually attempted to get Emerson to accept this more mutualistic conception of friendship. She thought that as friends she and Emerson should help one another along their spiritual quests. In October 1840, Fuller wrote Sturgis about her wish to aid Emerson in his spiritual quest, her "desire to teach this sage all he wants to make him the full-formed Angel." This was too cooperative a conception of friendship for Emerson. Friends should not help one another, but be self-reliant individuals. In a late-1839 journal entry, Emerson suggested that a person should

Treat your friend as a spectacle. . . . Stand aside; give them room; let them mount and expand There must be very two before there can be very one. Let it be an alliance of two large formidable natures, mutually beheld, mutually feared, before they yet recognize the deep identity which beneath these disparities blends in a sublime unity. Are you the friend of your friend's buttons, or of his thought? To a great heart he will still be a stranger in a thousand particulars, that he may come near in the holiest ground.

In September 1840, Emerson used these ideas (and almost these same words) to reject Fuller's theory of friendship:

²¹ On these points, see Annette Kolodny, "Inventing a Feminist Discourse: Rhetoric and Resistance in Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*," *New Literary History* 1994 (25): 355-382. In her brilliant essay, Kolodny argues that while Fuller drew upon some of the major rhetoric texts of the nineteenth century, specifically Richard Whately's *Elements of Rhetoric*, in developing rhetorical strategies, she rejected some means of persuasion that Whately advocated because she considered them overly coercive and characteristic of a masculine discourse of power that she sought to avoid. "In inventing a discourse appropriate to feminism," Kolodny suggests, "Fuller rejected alike the authoritarianism of coercion and the manipulative strategies of the disempowered, endeavoring instead to create a collaborative process of assertion and response in which multiple voices could—and did—find a place." This, Kolodny rightly argues, was quite different from Emerson's model of rhetoric: "in contrast to the liberal individualism of Emerson's 'self-reliance,' Fuller was attempting to forge an ongoing collective search for a social philosophy of female 'self-dependence . . . and fullness of being'" (quotes appear on 375 and 376). Also see Susan B. Smith, "'The liberal air of all the zones': Another View of the Emerson-Fuller Relationship," *CCTE Studies* 52 (1987), 28-35.

I find or fancy in your theory a certain wilfulness [sic] and not pure acquiescence which seems to me the authentic mode. Our friend is part of our fate; those who dwell in the same truth are friends; those who are exercised on different thoughts are not, & must puzzle each other, for the time. For the time! But who dare say how quickly the old eternity shall swallow up the Time, or how ripe is already in either soul the augury of the dissolution of the barriers of difference in the glimpse of ultimate unity?²²

At one point Emerson had evidenced some interest in, or at least some ambivalence regarding, Fuller's more social, collaborative perspective. In a letter written to Fuller on November 27, 1839, Emerson, who referred to himself as a "poor hermit," thanked Fuller for introducing him into the society of her friends: "I delight much in what I dreamed not of in my first acquaintance with you—my new relations to your friends." What Emerson appreciated about these new friends was more than the pleasure he took in their company. The letters, poems, and journal entries they shared with him were, in his view, of a more substantive value. "How fine these letters are!" Emerson told Fuller regarding a packet she had recently sent him. The "wit" of these letters made him "a little impatient of my honourable prison—my quarantine of temperament wherefrom I deal courteously with all comers, but through cold water." Emerson recognized that Fuller presented him with a different way of speaking to other members of society. Emotionally cheered and intellectually stimulated by his initial induction into Fuller's circle of friends, Emerson initially expressed some interest in her perspective, telling her that he would "come yet to know the world through your eyes."²³

However, while he expressed interest in her ideas and enthusiasm about her friends, in this same letter Emerson objected to the tone of Fuller's and her friends' literary labors. He thought their language

²² LMF, 2:170; JMN, 7:332-333; LRWE, 2:336-337.

too passionate. "Superlatives must be bought by many positives," he told her. A passionate life and passionate words were not for him. "It seems to me," Emerson wrote Fuller, "that these raptures of fire & frost which so effectually cleans pedantry out of conversation & make the speech salt & biting, would cost me the days of wellbeing which are now so cheap to me, yet so valued."²⁴

During the course of 1839 and 1840, Emerson began to feel increasingly unsettled by Fuller's views on friendship, which he recognized were integral to the pedagogical strategies she employed in the Conversations. He perceived the potential of the Conversations to affect social and cultural change with some ambivalence. Writing in the Memoir of Margaret Fuller Ossoli (1852) after Fuller's death, Emerson described the transformative power of the Conversations: "In this company of matrons and maids, many tender spirits had been set in ferment. A new day dawned for them; new thoughts had opened; the secret of life was shown." While he thought and talked about the thinker's ability to change society, Fuller was developing and implementing a plan to accomplish such change. What Emerson found threatening about this was that she was accomplishing such change by employing a discursive and pedagogical perspective radically different

²³ Ibid, 2:238-240.

²⁴ Ibid, 2:239-240. Christina Zwarg makes a similar argument regarding Emerson's rebuke of Fuller. She argues that Fuller saw her epistolary relationship with Emerson as an "potential model for social change The conversational structure was what attracted her; the give-and-take between them resisted the usual hierarchy found in most dialogues between men and women and seemed preferable for the development of new model [sic] of social interaction." Zwarg argues that Emerson was disturbed by "the erotic [and radical] power of writing" that their exchange revealed to him and retreated "to his older model of agency and eloquence: solitary, blocked communication." Zwarg, Feminist Conversations: Fuller, Emerson, and the Play of Reading, Reading Women Writing Series, ed. Shari Benstock and Celeste Schenck (Ithaca, N.Y., 1995), 32-58, quotes on 47, 56.

from his own, a perspective that, in fact, amounted to a critique of his own ideas about speech and the role of the intellectual.²⁵

Recognizing her implicit critique of his ideas, in his correspondence with Fuller over the course of 1839 and 1840 Emerson became progressively defensive about issues of language. On October 20, 1840, Emerson told Fuller that he could hardly foresee how they could "reconcile our wide sights" and come to terms with each other's personal and intellectual positions. He told her that nothing less than "a strong passion, or the opportunity of a great work accurately adapted to one's latent faculties . . . could give me a look through your telescope or you one through mine." "The first will never come to such as I am," he told her. He felt he could not equal—nor did he want to equal—the level of passion he discerned in Fuller. To be as passionate as she was to indulge in unmanly speech, overflowing with sentiment and superlatives; it would undermine the measured confidence and strength that he wanted his life and his words to evidence. But the second, a "great work," he did not "absolutely despair of." For the last half decade he had proclaimed the thinker's ability to elevate the masses, transforming their lives and souls through the expression of ideas. Yet he could hardly claim that his own speech had had this transformative effect. He could not respond to Fuller's repeated challenges to his ideas about speech by pointing to any successes of his transcendental efforts. He admitted to her that he still had something to learn before he could turn ideas into practical power: "I delight to find that I have not quite done learning, nor have I absolutely cut off my hands, though my life for so many years might lead one to think so." Yet he rejected Fuller's critique of his

²⁵ *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, Vol. 1, [ed. James Freeman Clark and Ralph Waldo Emerson] (Boston, 1852), 337-338.

discursive perspective, telling her that what he needed to learn was not to be found in her ideas, but remained locked somewhere within his own: "If new thoughts & new emerging facts should not renovate me as a better seer, let us not fail to practise still the sure old methods, for it is not divine to be in a hurry."²⁶

In his lectures, Emerson declared that the intellectual could change the world through the expression of ideas. He had developed a theory of friendship that was intellectually consistent with his vocational choice. He maintained that a friend should be valued solely for the ideas he expressed. In a journal entry from June 1840, Emerson recorded his preference for epistolary friendship. A true friend offered words and ideas, not love and affection:

To my friend I write a letter, & from him I get a letter. That seems to you a little. Me it suffices. It is a spiritual gift worthy of him to give & of me to receive. It profanes nobody. In these warm lines the heart will trust itself as it will not to the tongue, and pour out the prophecy of a better & godlier existence than all the annals of heroism have yet made good. To us even the society of our friend is as yet far from poetic.

During the autumn of 1840, Emerson continually reemphasized this idea in his correspondence with Fuller. What he valued in her friendship, he told her, was not her company or any mutual affection, but her insights:

Now & then we say things to our mates or hear things from them which seem to put it out of the power of the parties to be strangers again. Especially if any one show me a stroke of courage, a piece of inventive wit, a trait of character, or a pure delight in character when shown by others, always I must be that man's or that woman's debtor as one who has discovered to me among perishing men somewhat more clean & incorruptible than the eternal light of these midnight stars.²⁷

²⁶ LRWE, 2:249.

²⁷ JMN, 7:370; LRWE, 2:352-353.

Emerson's repeated attempts to define both the personal and intellectual boundaries of his relationship with Fuller failed. He was unable either to convince Fuller to adopt his perspective or to remain silent about hers. In both the Conversations and in her friendships Fuller encouraged people to talk with one another, to develop their ideas in dialogue with each other. For the champion of "Self-Reliance," the only ideas of value, at least in theory, were those that were discovered through introspection. Developing ideas collaboratively was an admission of weakness and a recipe for spiritual and intellectual failure. In late October 1840 Emerson had reached a point where he became unwilling to continue his conversation with Fuller on the issues of friendship and speech. He was not able to dominate this discussion, so he chose to end it. "I see very dimly in writing on this topic," he wrote her. "Do not expect it of me for a very long time." The only way that they could continue to be friends was if he was allowed to control the mode and the tone of their discourse—they should only "exchange reasonable words." Unfortunately for Fuller, Emerson retained faith that what "Reason" revealed to him were universal truths. Emerson's efforts to limit Fuller's speech to "reasonable words" was thus the culmination of his repeated attempt to restrict Fuller's speech to the reiteration of his own ideas.

Conclusion

"I know that the world I converse with is not the world I *think*":

The Experience of the Transcendentalist Speaker

In a startling, famous passage, Emerson, in his essay "Experience," reflected on the death of his son Waldo, who had died suddenly in early 1842 at the age of five:

In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate,—no more. I cannot get it nearer to me. If tomorrow I should be informed of the bankruptcy of my principal debtors, the loss of my property would be a great inconvenience to me, perhaps, for many years; but it would leave me as it found me,—neither better nor worse. So is it with this calamity: it does not touch me: some thing which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar. It was caducous. I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature.

What is initially so startling is the seeming callousness of the passage. To compare his son to a piece of property, to suggest that his son's death left him "neither better nor worse" seems brutal even for a man who had a reputation for being cold. Yet, the changed attitude towards nature that Emerson manifested in this passage—something in which he once found nothing but beneficence and promise he now despaired of knowing at all—registers just how profoundly Waldo's death affected him. The experience did touch him. It did leave scars. As numerous scholars have suggested, his grief spurred him to reexamine his transcendental optimism and faith in self-reliance.¹

Yet if Waldo's death served as the immediate catalyst that led Emerson to rethink his ideas, the intellectual outcome of that process

¹ For an intelligent analysis of the impact of Waldo's death on Emerson's thought, see Cayton, Emerson's Emergence, 219-238.

evidenced the influence of Fuller. She may have failed to win from Emerson the intimacy she wanted, but she effected his thinking profoundly, perhaps more than she realized. In the shifting contours of Emerson's thought in the mid-1840s we see the enduring influence of their conversation.

"Experience" marked the emergence of a less authoritarian Emerson, an Emerson who had, at least in part, accepted what he had previously rejected and refused: the subjectivity of the individual and the dialogue as a discursive model. Throughout the 1830s Emerson had proclaimed the essential identity of all people. Universal access to the Godhead meant that as people untapped the divine fount within themselves their differences from one another would dissolve away as they approached the spiritual perfection all humans were capable of realizing. In "Experience" Emerson tempered this idea and acknowledged individual difference. "There is no adaptation or universal applicability in men, but each has his special talent," he now claimed. Access to the Godhead no longer meant that individual differences were superficial. Instead, Emerson had come to believe that since the oversoul was infinite and inexhaustible, each of us, in our separate selves, expressed some particle of that universal soul. Our most distinctive qualities were not a measure of our imperfection—our inability to fully access the Godhead—but instead were testaments to the illimitable nature of that Godhead. No longer did Emerson maintain that the individual alone could know and do all. Instead he suggested that "it needs the whole society, to give the symmetry we seek . . . Like a bird which alights nowhere, but hops perpetually from bough to bough, is the Power which abides in no man and no woman, but for a moment speaks from this one,

and for another moment from that one."²

The speech of all individuals was valuable, Emerson now claimed. In this assertion Emerson had come to adopt, in part, an attitude more compatible to Fuller's ideas about the value of friendship and conversation. While there certainly were other competing voices in the essay that adopted different positions (the existence of these voices is another indication of Fuller's influence, which I shall discuss below), in "Experience" Emerson departed from his earlier notion that conversation with imperfect individuals invariably compromised the transcendentalist's progress towards spiritual perfection. Now he claimed that there was some value in society: "Something is learned . . . by conversing with so much folly and defect. In fine, whoever loses, we are always of the gaining party. Divinity is behind our failures and follies also." While he still championed the spiritual efficacy of self-reliance, he no longer assumed that his insights were universal. He had come around to a position his parishioners and Fuller had urged him to adopt. "I have learned that I cannot dispose of other people's facts," he admitted, "but I possess such a key to my own, as persuades me against all their denials, that they also have a key to theirs." That individuals differed with him was no longer an indication of their spiritual immaturity. Instead, it meant that they were following their own unique spiritual paths.³

The structure of the essay reflected Emerson's conversion to a less authoritarian mode of discourse. Unlike earlier compositions such as Nature, in which Emerson confidently and authoritatively moved from lower to higher truths, multiple narrative voices are heard in "Experience." As Emerson surveys the "lords of life," two narrative

² Emerson, "Experience," Essays: Second Series, vol. 3 of Collected Works, ed. Joseph Slater et al., (Cambridge, 1983), 33-34.

voices—the voice of skepticism and the voice of faith—emerge and converse with one another.⁴ During the course of the essay, Emerson tacks back and forth between these two voices. In the subsection on “illusion” and “temperament,” which are discussed together in the essay, the voice of skepticism is heard. Realization of omnipresent illusion casts doubt over the individual’s ability to know anything, to find reality. Something as profound as the death of his son, Emerson claimed, was illusory. Even “grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature.” Temperament too limits the individual’s access to truth. While the “moral sentiment” was certainly not powerless, temperament “fix[ed] the measure of activity” that the introspective transcendental individual could undertake. The voice of faith in the subsection devoted to “succession” answers this voice of skepticism. While in the subsection on illusion and temperament Emerson lamented the individual’s inability to discover any permanent reality, in the succession subsection that very impermanence becomes a mechanism of renewed faith. While the individual limited by temperament can never gain access to the whole of the Godhead in any one moment, that access is progressively, if still only partially, gained through time as the individual succeeds through a series of different moods. Of further comfort to Emerson is his new belief that while each individual has only partial access, universal access is achieved through the collective experience of all.⁵

A “conversation” also occurs between the next two lords of life, “surface” and “surprise.” In the subsection on surfaces, a skeptical

³ Ibid., 34, 46.

⁴ My subsequent analysis has been particularly influenced by Robinson’s reading of “Experience” in Emerson and the Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and the Ethical Purpose in the Later Work, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture, ed. Eric Sundquist (New York, 1993), 54-70; and by Zwarg’s reading in Feminist Conversations, 149-155.

⁵ Emerson, “Experience,” in Slater et al. eds., Essays: Second Series, 29-31.

voice claims that since "Nature hates peeping" and resists the individual's attempt to sound her depths, it is best to adopt a pragmatic stance and make the most of life in the moment rather than insist upon perpetual, or even occasional, insight. Again manifesting a changed attitude towards interpersonal interaction, Emerson suggested that:

Without any shadow of doubt, amidst this vertigo of shows and politics, I settle myself ever the firmer in the creed, that we should not postpone and refer and wish, but do broad justice where we are, by whomsoever we deal with, accepting our actual companions and circumstances, however humble or odious, as the mystic officials to whom the universe has delegated its whole pleasure for us. If these are mean and malignant, their contentment, which is the last victory of justice, is a more satisfying echo to the heart, than the voice of poets and the casual sympathy of admirable persons.

In the subsection on surprise, the voice of faith answers this position. While the individual can accomplish little in a moment or a succession of moments, he will be repeatedly surprised by a growing wisdom and insight, not something that he willfully achieved, but something he received from the infinite generosity of the divine. Once again, Emerson showed a greater appreciation for conversation with others. While their conversation was imperfect, through divine dispensation it miraculously proves to be edifying:

The years teach much which the days never know. The persons who compose our company, converse, and come and go, and design and execute many things, and somewhat comes of it all, but an unlooked for result. The individual is always mistaken. He designed many things, and drew in other persons as coadjutors, quarreled with some or all, blundered much, and something is done; all are a little advanced, but the individual is always mistaken. It turns out somewhat new, and very unlike what he promised himself.⁶

⁶ Ibid., 35-36, 40.

In the subsection on "reality," the voice of faith affirms the reality of man's moral sense. Within man there is something for which Emerson cannot find an appropriate name but which he labels "Being" that "changes not, and which ranks all sensations and states of mind." While one's perception of what is reality and truth are unprovable, faith that something is reality or truth is all that we can obtain and, ultimately, all that we need. This faith is proof in-and-of itself: "So in accepting the leading of the sentiments, it is not what we believe concerning the immortality of the soul, or the like, but *the universal impulse to believe*, that is the material circumstance, and is the principal fact in the history of the globe." The voice of skepticism answers this affirmation in the subsection on "subjectiveness." Faith that reality exists, this voice asserts, could be misguided: "perhaps there are no objects. Once we lived in what we saw; now, the rapaciousness of this new power, which threatens to absorb all things, engages us. Nature, art, persons, letters, religions, -- objects, successively tumble in, and God is but one of its ideas." Man's faith in the reality of his own individual perception becomes a nightmare. Personal whim becomes a justification for unconscionable acts: "We permit all things to ourselves, and that which we call sin in others, is experiment for us The act looks very differently on the inside, and on the outside; in its quality, and in its consequences. Murder in the murderer is not such ruinous thought as poets and romancers will have it, it does not unsettle him . . . it is an act quite easy to be contemplated." Emerson's escape from this nightmare involves a renewed assertion of a strained faith, a pragmatic act of spiritual will. Only through continual and sincere

efforts at "vigorous self-recoveries," efforts to make our subjective beliefs divine and good, can we hope that those beliefs and our actions will not be sinful, but be virtuous.⁷

While the voice of faith ultimately has the last word in the conclusion of "Experience," what distinguishes the essay from Emerson's previous works is that the contradictory truths articulated by the skeptical voice are, first, articulated, and, second, that they are not categorically denied.⁸ Emerson ultimately salvaged the core of his transcendentalist ideology and maintained his faith that "the true romance which the world exists to realize will be the transformation of genius into practical power." Yet that that ideology no longer manifested itself in the definitive, coercive voice of his earlier essays and lectures is evidence that Emerson had become converted to a less authoritarian vision of the transcendentalist's spirit and speech. In "Experience," Emerson showed a new humility and forswore his earlier will to knowledge and power: "I know better than to claim any completeness for my picture. I am a fragment, and this is a fragment of me."⁹

This profound shift in Emerson's thought during the early 1840s has not suffered for critical attention. Repeatedly scholars have suggested that beginning in the mid-1840s Emerson began to retreat from

⁷ Ibid., 42-43, 43, 44, 45, 46.

⁸ This use of a dialogic style was not entirely new to Emerson. Multiple voices—the conservative, the reformer—were articulated in his 1841 lecture series "Lectures on the Times." But the "conversation" of those lectures was comparatively superficial. Voices in those lectures were articulated only to be denied, silenced, and superceded by the voice of the poet/transcendentalist who subsumes them within himself. The degree to which, and the tone with which, the voice of faith responds to the voice of skepticism in "Experience" is much different—Emerson doesn't show the error of that voice the way he does the contrary voices articulated in "Lecture on the Times." Instead he acknowledges and to a degree accepts its critique of his earlier position as articulated by the voice of faith.

⁹ Emerson, "Experience," in Slater et al. eds., Essays: Second Series, 49, 47.

a radical faith in the power of ideas and spiritual insights and adopted a more conservative, skeptical position.¹⁰ My purpose in this conclusion has not been to challenge this commonly accepted narrative. Instead, I want to propose that as a result of highlighting the authoritarian dimension of Emerson's discursive theory and practice during the 1820s and 1830s this thesis suggests a new valuation of the political and cultural implications of this shift. Though recent scholarship has increasingly shown a greater appreciation for Emerson's later work—his post-transcendentalist work, so to speak—it nonetheless remains common to devalue that work relative to his early lectures and essays, to portray it as a betrayal of an earlier radicalism. By focusing on Emerson's early authoritarianism, particularly how his transcendental ideology denied subjectivity and how in his speech he sought to silence other voices, this thesis, I believe, suggests that we need to begin to rethink this valuation. The

¹⁰ The classic articulation of this position is Stephen E. Whicher, Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson (Philadelphia, 1953). Whicher argued that if Emerson's early thought was characterized by his embrace of a philosophy of self-reliance where the individual possessed a revolutionary power, in his later thought he came to acknowledge forces that restricted and restrained the idealist's power: "From an intense rebellion against the world in the name of the Soul, he moved to a relative acceptance of things as they are, world and Soul together; from teaching men their power to rise above fate, he turned to teaching them how to make the best of it" (124-125). Two more recent studies that analyze this shift, repeating the general outline of Whicher's narrative are Cayton, Emerson's Emergence, and David M. Robinson, Emerson and the Conduct of Life. Cayton argues that between the composition of "Self-Reliance" in 1839-40 and "Experience" in 1843-1844 there occurred a "fundamental change in [Emerson's] attitude toward self, society, and the nature that underlay the two" (221). The Emerson of "Self-Reliance" is "confident and sure throughout," certain that "the individual could know all" and could effect dramatic change. The Emerson of "Experience" is radically different; he "insists that there is no truth that we can know," that the individual is "trapped within his own consciousness, and condemned to an ignorance of nature's true aims" (231-232). Robinson suggests that "in the early 1840s Emerson entered a period of crisis that centered on the viability of his program of self-culture and its connections to the fulfillment of the visionary" (3). The outcome of this crisis, Robinson argues, was a tempering of Emerson's early radical transcendentalism and his adoption of an intellectual and moral position that anticipated pragmatism.

product of Emerson's experience may not have been an enfeebling conservatism. Instead, in his new sense of the subjectivity and limits of the individual and his new appreciation of the conversation as a discursive form, Emerson had arrived at an intellectual position and a social attitude that are more politically palatable to a feminist and postmodern sensibility.

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