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# **A POLITICAL COMPANION TO Ralph Waldo Emerson**

**Edited by  
Alan M. Levine and  
Daniel S. Malachuk**

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## Series Foreword

THOSE WHO UNDERTAKE A study of American political thought must attend to the great theorists, philosophers, and essayists. Such a study is incomplete, however, if it neglects American literature, one of the greatest repositories of the nation's political thought and teachings.

America's literature is distinctive because it is, above all, intended for a democratic citizenry. In contrast to eras when an author would aim to inform or influence a select aristocratic audience, in democratic times, public influence and education must resonate with a more expansive, less leisured, and diverse audience to be effective. The great works of America's literary tradition are the natural locus of democratic political teaching. Invoking the interest and attention of citizens through the pleasures afforded by the literary form, many of America's great thinkers sought to forge a democratic public philosophy with subtle and often challenging teachings that unfolded in narrative, plot, and character development. Perhaps more than any other nation's literary tradition, American literature is ineluctably political—shaped by democracy as much as it has in turn shaped democracy.

The Political Companions to Great American Authors series highlights the teachings of the great authors in America's literary and belletristic tradition. An astute political interpretation of America's literary tradition requires careful, patient, and attentive readers who approach the text with a view to understanding its underlying messages about citizenship and democracy. Essayists in this series approach the classic texts not with a "hermeneutics of suspicion" but with the curiosity of fellow citizens who believe that the

28. See "Emerson" in Matthew Arnold, *Discourses in America* (London: Macmillan, 1885).

29. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 203: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more frequently and persistently one's meditation deals with them: the starry sky above me and the moral law within me. . . . I see them before me and connect them directly with the consciousness of my existence."

30. Whicher, *Freedom and Fate*.

31. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*, 21–22, 30.

32. Sacvan Bercovitch, "Emerson, Individualism, and Liberal Descent," in *The Rites of Assent*, 324.

33. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1962), 96.

34. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955).

35. From *The Wealth of Nations*, in *The Essential Adam Smith*, ed. Robert Heilbroner (New York: Norton, 1986), 167.

36. Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 173.

37. C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (New York: Oxford, 1962), 3, emphasis added.

38. Emerson, *Essays and Poems* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 1123.

39. See Dolan, *Emerson's Liberalism*, 169–93.

40. See *ibid.*, 194–222.

41. Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero*; Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson, eds. *Emerson's Antislavery Writings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

42. See bk. 1, chap. 1, of *Wealth of Nations*, in *The Essential Adam Smith*, ed. Heilbroner, 160–62.

## CHAPTER 12

# Standing for Others: Reform and Representation in Emerson's Political Thought

Jason Frank

A man may stand outside the prejudices of religion, country, and race; if such a man be king, he is able to achieve surprising revolutions in society. [But] a whole nation could not possibly rise, as it were, above itself.

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

I find [the great man] greater, when he can abolish himself and all heroes, by letting in this element of reason, irrespective of persons, this subtilizer, and irresistible upward force, into our thought, destroying individualism.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Men*

WAS RALPH WALDO EMERSON a democratic theorist? And, if so, which aspects of his political thought provide the best resources for thinking through the dilemmas of contemporary democratic theory? In recent years, a scholarly reevaluation of Emerson's politics has engaged deeply with these questions, enriching the study of American political thought and offering a more affirmative picture of Emerson as a political thinker. An earlier generation of political theorists often overlooked Emerson's political thought to focus instead on his role as a prophet of the Imperial Self, as a "radical egoistic anarchist" whose theory of self-reliance contributed mightily to America's escapist political culture of "masterlessness."<sup>1</sup> Carey McWilliams, for example, offered an influential view of Emerson the apolitical individualist: "The divinity which Emerson saw in man was a deified self, independent of other individuals and the democratic public alike," McWilliams writes. "Government and politics moved him only to disdain."<sup>2</sup> As the editors of this volume demonstrate in their introduction,

this familiar view has recently come under increasing scrutiny. But even as scholars attend more carefully to Emerson's political activism—especially his militant abolitionism in the 1850s—and, doing so, attempt to integrate his practical affirmation of political participation and “social action” into his theory of self-reliance, the familiar view of Emerson persists. George Kateb, for instance, views Emerson's political activism in the 1850s as a “deviation from his theory of self-reliance, not its transformation.”<sup>3</sup> Many of Emerson's critics and admirers in contemporary political theory seem to agree on one essential point: Emerson is first and foremost a theorist of radical individualism, and this diminishes the value of his work for thinking affirmatively about political activism generally and about democratic politics in particular.

This essay takes a different approach. Building on the recent scholarship emphasizing the political dimensions of Emerson's thought, I examine an important but underemphasized aspect of Emerson's work: his concept of representation. This element of Emerson's writing both troubles the apolitical individualist reading and provides a theoretical resource for better appreciating Emerson's distinctive approach to political activism. Stanley Cavell has noted “Emerson's incessant attention to representation,” and influentially recovered “representativeness” as one of Emerson's “master-tones.”<sup>4</sup> Taking orientation from Cavell's moral perfectionist reading of Emerson, defined and elaborated in his contribution to this volume, I reconstruct an Emersonian theory of political representation that moves the concept beyond an unnecessarily narrow focus on formal institutions of electoral accountability. As I argue below, such a theory can contribute to democratic theory's recent “rediscovery of representation” by exposing the limitations of the all-too-familiar opposition between the “mandate” and “independence” theories of representation explored below in section 2.<sup>5</sup> Emerson outlines a theory of representation that is internally related to his perfectionist understanding of “reform.” That is, it is a theory of representation centered on how a representative could provoke a perfectionist transformation and self-overcoming in the represented—a dynamic expression of Emerson's general preoccupation with the emergent and the yet-to-come—and that can therefore begin to account for the dilemmas of representing a democratic people never at one with itself, but inscribed within a horizon of unrealized futurity. “The coming only is sacred,” Emerson wrote in “Circles” (1841), and the democratic people he envisions—described in “Experience” (1844)

as this “new yet unapproachable America”—is a people that is forever not one . . . yet (413, 485).

In contrast to recent attempts to assimilate Emerson's theory of representation to such familiar theoretical categories as political rotation, public sphere theory, or (strangest of all!) communitarianism, I emphasize here the internal relationship between Emerson's accounts of representation and perfectionist reform.<sup>6</sup> I hope to recover an important element of Emerson's theory of representation unexplored in much of the existing scholarship. Emerson's turn to representation and the democratic importance of the “representative man” is not a departure from his theory of self-reliance—it does not entail heteronomous submission to delegated authority—but is instead a more avowedly public and political elaboration of that theory, one that reveals it not to be a theory of radical individuality so much as a theory of transformative impersonalism. Emerson's representatives elicit the transformative capacities of democratic constituencies forever in the midst of a process of, in Cavell's words, “moving to, and from, nexts.”<sup>7</sup> They disenthral their public of routine capitulations “to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions” (262). Emerson's representative men are not best understood as “individuals who represent the beliefs, values, and ways of life present in their communities.”<sup>8</sup> They neither stand in the place of their constituencies (as the independence view would dictate) nor merely reflect their preferences (as the mandate view demands), but rather reveal the “irresistible upward force” and “capacity” found in all. Emerson's theory of representation does not simply replace one notion of representation with another—that is, it does not establish a more accurate correspondence between the representative and the represented—but instead supplements the insufficiencies of existing theories by revealing a productive dynamic between representative and represented that can better account for the recurring democratic encounter with the emergence and revelation of the new.<sup>9</sup> For Emerson, this emergence is, of course, oriented by the moral horizon of “Spirit,” “Over Soul,” or “Nature,” even though he never gives these aspirational ideals fixed content or philosophical articulation; they do not serve as categorical imperatives or principles of justice that improve their public through an unfolding process of reflective equilibrium. A fixed moral teleology would diminish the very sacredness Emerson identified with the emergent, and unjustifiably narrow his repeated preoccupations with divinity, beauty, character, and genius. Emerson's work is not so eas-

ily domesticated by the prevailing concerns of contemporary democratic theory. “The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves,” Emerson writes in “Circles,” “to be surprised out of propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why. . . . Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm. The way of life is wonderful: it is by abandonment” (414). Emerson’s representative men—far from being inspiring personifications of legible moral law or from simply reflecting the interests of constituents—facilitate such transformative surprise, loss, and abandonment.

Emerson’s representative elicits or inspires capacities that had remained latent or virtual among the represented. By enabling the actualization of these formerly latent capacities (of self-reliance), Emerson’s representative inspires transformation (self-overcoming) among the represented. As such, representation is an important category of Emerson’s political theory of democratic perfectionism. Although he does not preclude the representative politician, Emerson’s representative men are neither heroes nor kings, congressmen nor party leaders, but poetic public mediators who offer a perpetual exhibition of—and provocation toward—new possibilities. Emerson’s representatives do not “reveal the community to itself,” much less give “public expression to the particular range of qualities that give the community and its members their identity.”<sup>10</sup> They act instead as catalysts of conversion capable of spurring a nation, in Tocqueville’s words, to “rise above itself” without a fateful compromise of democratic autonomy.

The essay proceeds in three parts. In the first, I examine the impact of Emerson’s developing conception of representativeness in the 1840s on his evaluation of reform and reformers. I am particularly interested in how Emerson’s understanding of the representative reformer comes to conceptually underpin and explain his own increasingly radical political activism on behalf of abolition. In the second section, I offer a conceptual elaboration of his theory of representation and its departure from the governing terms of “mandate-independence controversy” in democratic theory. This section emphasizes the centrality of the “representative man” to Emerson’s account of democratic perfectionism. In the concluding section, I sketch some of the political consequences of Emerson’s account through the troubling case of John Brown, who more than any other public figure in the 1850s seemed to exemplify for Emerson the radical reformer as representative man. Brown

appeared to Emerson as a paradoxical personification of the transformative impersonal.

## 1844: Radicalism and Reform

“Perhaps no other American intellectual in the nineteenth century,” Peter S. Field writes, “so consciously and effectively endeavored to have an impact upon both contemporary thought and public behavior as Emerson.”<sup>11</sup> Yet we know that Emerson also took a dismal view of many of the reformers of his time, those “miscellaneous popular charities . . . and thousand-fold Relief Societies” that proliferated in antebellum America, as he wrote in the 1841 “Self-Reliance” (263). Emerson’s writing on reform provides a good point of entry into his thinking on representation. It does so, first, because it brings into initial focus some of the most novel elements of his theory, in particular those elements centered on the provocation and elevation of “the whole of our social structure” (146), as he put it in the 1841 “Man the Reformer,” or the ability to “revolutionize the entire system of human pursuits” (408), from “Circles” in the same year; and, second, because the development of his theory of representation in the essays of the 1840s—beginning especially with *Essays: Second Series* (1844) and culminating with *Representative Men* (1850)—also provided the conceptual underpinnings of his increasingly outspoken political activism on behalf of abolition. Representation was the concept that united commitments that appeared in tension, if not contradiction, in Emerson’s earlier work; representation was a way of navigating the competing imperatives of self-reliance and self-culture, on the one hand—“the doctrine of the independence and inspiration of the individual”—and the practical exaltation of public reform and “social action,” on the other.<sup>12</sup> Emerson’s developing conception of representation—and its internal relation to his conception of reform—provides an important framework for understanding how Emerson translated his theory of self-reliance into an emphatic theory of democratic perfectionism in his more avowedly political addresses of the late 1840s and 1850s.

Emerson was notoriously critical of the myriad reform movements that proliferated in the United States during the antebellum years—which one historian describes as “the most fervent and diverse outburst of reform energy in American history”—disdaining their heavy-handed moralism,

their single-issue partiality, their love of association, and, which these all add up to, their rejection of individual self-reliance.<sup>13</sup> “The superior mind will find itself equally at odds with the evils of society,” Emerson writes in “Montaigne,” “and with the projects that are offered to relieve them” (702). In undertaking the direction of others, in “meddling in other people’s affairs,” reformers too often put themselves into what Emerson called, in the 1844 “Politics,” “false relations” with those they would direct (567). In obsessively pursuing particular causes—abolition, temperance, charity, moral uplift—“the movement party” of reformers exhibited what Emerson, referring to the abolitionist Wendell Phillips, derided as a merely “platform existence.” They were “mere mouthpieces of a party” aimed at reforming a mere fraction of man rather than regenerating the whole “personality.”<sup>14</sup> In much of his writing on reform, Emerson expressed a sentiment vividly echoed by Thoreau in *Walden*: “If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life . . . for fear I should get some of his good done to me,—some of his virus mingled with my blood.”<sup>15</sup>

As persistent as Emerson’s antireform sentiments are in such prominent earlier essays as “The Protest” (1839) and “Self-Reliance” (1841), his thoughts on reform in general, and on abolitionist reformers in particular, assumed a different character in later essays, perhaps especially in two prominent essays from 1844: “New England Reformers” and “Address . . . on . . . the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies.” While Emerson derided the abolitionist reformer as an “angry bigot” in “Self-Reliance,” and ridiculed his “incredible tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off,” in later essays abolitionists became shining exemplars of Reform itself, the very cynosure of transformative inspiration (262). Many Emerson scholars, therefore, consider 1844 a watershed year in the development of both Emerson’s thinking and his political activism, and rightly place the intensifying crisis around slavery at the heart of both of these developments. By 1844, as Gary Collison writes, Emerson had become the authoritative “spokesman for American idealism,” and, as such, it had become increasingly difficult if not impossible for Emerson “to be silent without appearing to condone the continuation of slavery.”<sup>16</sup> Len Gougeon has gone so far as to describe 1844 as the year of Emerson’s “conversion” from moral suasion to radical abolition. Emphasizing the significance of the “Emancipation” address in particular, Gougeon writes that “there can be little doubt that

on 1 August 1844 [the date of the address], Ralph Waldo Emerson made the transition from philosophical antislavery to active abolitionism.”<sup>17</sup> This conversion, Gougeon argues, was sustained “throughout the remainder of the decade [as Emerson] drew closer to the abolitionist movement and its leading figures.”<sup>18</sup>

In the “Emancipation” address, Emerson radically revised his earlier estimation of abolitionist reformers as partial, single-issue bigots and fanatics. The British abolitionists Emerson celebrates there—Granville Sharp, William Wilberforce, Lord Stanley, and others—are taken as regenerative exemplars of idealism, who through their tireless antislavery campaigning exercised a powerful moral force not only on the British public, but on the broader world. “We are indebted to this movement and to the continuers of it,” Emerson wrote, “for the popular discussion of every point of practical ethics, and a reference of every question to the absolute standard” (AW, 28). In his stirring outline of the history of English abolition, Emerson looked beyond the heroic figureheads of the abolitionist movement to also celebrate the “plain men, working not under a leader, but under a sentiment” (AW, 26); Emerson, moreover, elevated black abolitionists and leaders of slave insurrections above the prophetic status of their American and British counterparts. “The arrival in the world of Toussaint, and the Haytian heroes,” he wrote, and “the leaders of their race in Barbadoes and Jamaica, outweighs in good omen all the English and American humanity” (AW, 31). Beginning with the “Emancipation” address, Emerson proclaims that antislavery fanatics, zealots, and enthusiasts illuminate a broadly patterned moral arc of history: “One feels very sensibly in all this history that a great heart and soul are behind there, superior to any man, and making use of each, in turn, and infinitely attractive to every person according to the degree of reason in his own mind” (AW, 27). The defenders of slavery, on the other hand, demonstrated for Emerson their own compromised humanity in the nature of their defense of the institution. They “appeal only to cold prudence, barefaced selfishness, and silent votes,” Emerson wrote (AW, 12). They are partial, “built on the narrow ground of interest,” whereas the abolitionist radicals stand for Nature itself. Slavery, Emerson argues, is not based merely in the human-all-too-human love of “luxury” and material well-being, but instead is animated by a dark lower layer of human motivation: beyond covetousness lurks “the love of power, the voluptuousness of holding a human being in absolute control” (AW, 17).

Emerson's elevation of the abolitionist reformer to the status of representative in the "Emancipation" address is tied to a concomitant shift in his evaluation of slavery itself. In order to embrace the abolitionist reformer as a universal exemplar—as what will later be developed in terms of the representative man—Emerson views slavery itself as a form of universal crime. While the pervasive theme of "complicity," as Jack Turner has insightfully described it, "hovers in the background" of many of Emerson's works, and is explicitly associated with the lessons abolitionists taught the American public, this theme takes on a new salience in his antislavery addresses beginning in 1844.<sup>19</sup> The most moving passages in the "Emancipation" address, for example, demonstrate civilization's complex implication in the barbarism of slavery and reveal slavery as a question of universal responsibility. Emerson's focus on complicity and implication resoundingly rejects the self-proclaimed innocence of those not directly involved in the institution of slavery (i.e., his New England neighbors) and those who comfort themselves by the distance of slavery from their own sensuous experience. Indeed, the very pleasures of sense, Emerson suggests, anesthetize civilized subjects and disguise the barbarism that lurks hidden within their own experience: "If any mention was made of homicide, madness, adultery, and intolerable tortures, we would let the church-bells ring louder, the church organ swell its peal, and drown the hideous sound. The sugar [the slaves] raised was excellent: nobody tasted blood in it. The coffee was fragrant; the tobacco was incense; the brandy made nations happy; the cotton clothed the world" (AW, 20). This theme of personal complicity and sensuous captivation is reiterated in a number of Emerson's antislavery speeches, and seems to mandate and help explain both his increasing political activism over the issue and his emphasis on the difficulties of public disenfranchisement. Complicity emerges not just from commerce and the commodity's hidden and bloody origins, but from democracy itself, insofar as individuals are taken to be responsible for actions carried out in their name. As Emerson wrote in his journal: "It is impossible to disengage/extricate oneself from the questions in which your age is involved. You can no more keep out of politics than you can keep out of the frost."<sup>20</sup>

In recovering the forgotten importance of such essays as the "Emancipation" address, Gougeon and other authors of what the introduction of this volume calls "the new history" have definitively revived an older understanding of the activist Emerson obscured by the more familiar portrait of him as

radical individualist, withdrawn scholar, or mystical romantic. But there has been less emphasis in this literature on whether Emerson's increasing political activism was accompanied by a similar conversion in his political thinking beyond what some have characterized as the pronounced deflation of his otherworldly transcendentalism. As one of Emerson's contemporaries put this point, in his antislavery addresses there is "no more feeling in the skies, after the absolute, but sharp observation on human life and manners."<sup>21</sup> In *Virtue's Hero*, Gougeon carefully excavates the proliferation of Emerson's explicit and increasingly radical antislavery statements in the late 1840s and 1850s without situating them in relation to any broader conceptual changes in Emerson's thought. By contrast, Amy E. Earhart's examination of Emerson's 1844 "conversion" emphasizes intellectual over political causality, and argues that the conceptual reevaluation of reform occasioned by Emerson's growing preoccupation with representativeness explained his growing abolitionist activism and underwrote his understanding of abolitionist reformers in the "Emancipation" address. Earhart argues that Emerson's conversion was not just to becoming more active in the abolitionist cause, in other words, "but to a new understanding of the representative man."<sup>22</sup> The abolition movement was "merely Emerson's site of communication and connection rather than the *form* of change itself."<sup>23</sup> We need not take sides in this methodological dispute over historical causality to benefit from the perspective Earhart's analysis opens up—that is, from her demonstration that Emerson's growing political activism was accompanied and supported by (as opposed to caused by) his developing conception of representativeness and its relation to reform. Whereas Emerson's August "Address . . . on . . . the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies" is the centerpiece of Gougeon's account of Emerson's growing political activism, Earhart focuses on his earlier "New England Reformers," delivered on March 3 of that year. If the abolitionist reformer appears for the first time as a representative man in Emerson's August "Emancipation" address, it is only because Emerson's conception of representativeness—which, despite Earhart's claims, is already invoked in outline form in such influential essays as "The American Scholar" (1837) and "The Poet" (1844)—had been extended beyond the withdrawn scholar and poet to encompass more explicitly political activity in "New England Reformers."<sup>24</sup>

In "New England Reformers," Emerson develops a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate reform that can be productively translated into



representative versus unrepresentative reform. Echoing earlier critical comments on the partiality of reform, Emerson writes that “every project in the history of reform, no matter how violent and surprising, is good, when it is the dictate of man’s genius and constitution, but very dull and suspicious when adopted from another” (592). This would seem to be but another articulation of the credo of self-reliance—“trust thyself” or “what I must do is all that concerns me” (260, 263)—but the force of the essay is to articulate an approach to reform that can stimulate “fertile forms of antinomianism” and a “spirit of protest and detachment” without being captivated by the narrow partialities that have marred previous reform efforts (592). Emerson writes that the reformer has typically “become tediously good in some particular,” but has failed to recognize that “the wave of evil washes all our institutions alike” (596–97). For Emerson, then, the reformer has failed to exemplify a promise of total regeneration.

In contrast to these partial scolds, Emerson invokes a reformer capable of uniting a public without diminishing individual self-reliance—indeed, a type of reformer who can stimulate self-reliance. Such a representative reformer, for Emerson, works to inspire enactment primarily through the informal mechanisms of a public space of appearances rather than through political organizations, civic associations, and electoral institutions. The idea of the representative reformer is important to several of the essays that immediately follow “New England Reformers,” particularly those that make up *Representative Men* (1850). Emerson celebrates the power of a reformer who is “a powerful and stimulating intellect, a man of great heart and mind,” who can by example disenthral the public and elevate them above their captive partialities: “Very quickly . . . frozen conservators will yield to the friendly influence [of these reformers], these hopeless will begin to hope, these haters will begin to love, these immovable statues will begin to spin and revolve” (602). This representative reformer does not flatter people but “exposes” them, reveals them to be men “instead of ghosts and phantoms.”<sup>25</sup> In this essay, Emerson portrays a representative reformer who resonates with and helps to reveal in the public the “general doctrine of the latent but ever soliciting Spirit” (605). The representative reformer elicits what is latent in the public, and this revelation, as we will see, involves a dynamic of transformation and self-overcoming central to his account of the “Uses of Great Men,” the remarkable essay that opens *Representative Men*.

Emerson’s increasing political activism, then, was also accompanied by a conceptual change in his account of the reformer as representative, but this conception of representation must be brought into sharper conceptual focus. Earhart still sees Emerson as “teetering between social reform and individualism” in the essays from 1844, whereas I argue that his developing conception of representation becomes a more deliberate means of navigating, if not definitively resolving, this animating tension in his work. Doing so requires looking beyond the essays of 1844. The representative man stimulates a public ethos of self-reliance on which Emerson believed democracy was necessarily based. While the view of the representative reformer who is free of partial attachments and can elicit a transformative and critical capacity in those he represents—the public who see themselves represented in him—is elaborated in “New England Reformers,” the essay with which *Essays: Second Series* ends, it is important to note that these issues are most clearly conceptualized in “The Poet,” the essay with which *Essays: Second Series* begins. In order to understand what is most distinctive about Emerson’s theory of representation—and how it shaped his approach to politics and public life—it is not enough to show that he extended this theory to include reformers and political activists in and around 1844. We first need a clearer conceptualization of what that theory of representation entailed in the first place. Before we understand Emerson’s contributions to a theory of political representation, we must first see how this theory developed in his influential essay on the public role of the poet.

### Representation: Beyond Principles and Persons

Emerson’s concept of the representative poet is, as Robert Richardson observes, “the cornerstone of the democratic aesthetic Emerson was to work out over the next ten years.”<sup>26</sup> It also powerfully prefigures Emerson’s later conception of the representative reformer, and some of the most distinctive elements of this conception. “The poet is representative,” Emerson writes, because “he stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth” (448). By connecting the poet’s representation with “the commonwealth,” and with the abandonment of “his privacy of power as an individual man” in favor of “a great public power” (459), Emerson signals that the representative poet he envisions

does not stand above and against but rather stands with and for some kind of political constituency (an implication famously elaborated by Walt Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*).<sup>27</sup> However, this constituency is not best described as a “community,” or an existing collectivity “contented with a civil and conformed manner of living” (447). Indeed, Emerson’s poet is “isolated among his contemporaries,” passes for “a fool and a churl for a long season,” and might be accurately characterized as untimely in Nietzsche’s sense: out of step with the settled doxa and conformities of the present (448). While Emerson emphasizes the capacity of the poet to speak for—to “express,” “publish,” “utter”—he also insists that what is being expressed, published, and uttered is a “secret” held by all, a democratically distributed capacity to converse with Nature. Even if “the great majority of men seem to be minors . . . or mutes, who cannot report the conversation they have had with nature,” the poet’s words, his “meter-making argument” and “freer speech,” make such a report. The poet thus reveals that “nature has a higher end, in the production of new individuals, than security, namely *ascension*, or the passage of the soul into higher forms,” an insight at the heart of Emersonian perfectionism (458).

Emerson’s representative poet is a productive mediator through which the represented of the “commonwealth” come to an elevated apprehension of themselves and their capacities. This apprehension is more than mere understanding or conception and marks a conversion or transfiguration of subjectivity: through it the representative poet sparks an aversion to the “settled” selves they have become. Emerson insists on this transformative arousal and provocation throughout “The Poet.” Through the poet, “new passages are opened for us in nature . . . and metamorphosis is possible”; poets are “liberating gods. . . . They are free, and they make free”; “We love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode, or in an action, or in looks and behavior, has yielded us a new thought. He unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene” (463). The representative poet—whom Emerson broadly associates with inventors in many forms, actions as well as odes—frees the public from the privations of a private existence, and thereby enables self-reliance, the “reliance of the attained on the unattained/attainable” self, in Cavell’s words.<sup>28</sup> This transformative provocation does not compromise the self-reliance of the represented, because the poet is “more himself than he is” (448). Even though Emerson describes the poet in familiar romantic terms as “the sayer, the namer,” even as “a sovereign”

who “stands at the center” (449), the representative poet is not Shelley’s heroic “unacknowledged legislator of the world,” “the influence which is moved not, but moves,” because the power of Emerson’s representative poet derives only from the fact that “through better perception, he stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing or metamorphosis” (456).<sup>29</sup> Only through the poet’s impersonal “abandonment to the nature of things,” Emerson writes, is his speech “thunder” and his thought “law.” He is only “representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart” what is already there for all to see and to be (448).

In *Representative Men*, Emerson generalizes the characteristics of the representative poet to other regions of cultural and political life—religion and philosophy, statesmanship and war—and in doing so further emphasizes this theme of dynamic interdependence and receptivity. Emerson’s continual preoccupation in *Representative Men* is, as Andrew Delbanco writes, the “dependency of the great on the common.”<sup>30</sup> It is widely recognized that Emerson envisioned *Representative Men* in part as a response to Thomas Carlyle’s *Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841), and the contrast between Carlyle’s heroes and Emerson’s representative men further illuminates what is distinctive and avowedly political in Emerson’s conception. Carlyle argued that “Universal History . . . is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here,”<sup>31</sup> and that the recognition of heroic authority was “inexpressibly precious” in a disenchanting modern world where a leveling materialism had reduced human life to the insignificant statistical aggregates of a “machine universe.” For Carlyle, the hero marked the very possibility of significance in an age of entropic mediocrity. “The voice of the world’s Maker” speaks only through singular heroic examples, he wrote, and this voice commands first and foremost an obedience and hierarchical authority that “extends from divine adoration down to the lowest practical regions of life.”<sup>32</sup> Because the heroic is about the centrality of authority and subordination in human life, for Carlyle the “most important of Great Men” is the king, the one to whom he dedicates the longest and concluding chapter of his book. Carlyle’s king is “he to whose will our wills are to be subordinated, and loyally surrender themselves, and find their welfare in doing so.”<sup>33</sup> Of course, the political consequences of the ordering authority of the king directly contradicted the democratic tendencies of the age, which Carlyle emphasized throughout: “Find in any country the Ablest Man that exists there; raise him to the supreme place,

and loyally reverence him; you have a perfect government for that country; no ballot-box, parliamentary eloquence, voting, or constitution-building, or other machinery whatsoever can improve it a whit. It is the perfect state; an ideal country."<sup>34</sup>

Emerson's engagement with Carlyle's *Heroes* drew out the more explicitly political dimensions of his theory of representation and provoked him to more clearly reconcile his affirmation of the importance of extraordinary individuals with his committed democratic egalitarianism. Judith Shklar is surely right that *Representative Men* was an elaboration of Emerson's worry about "the impact of greatness on the rest of us," and an attempt to navigate "the tension between the sense of the apartness of the great and the claims of humanity."<sup>35</sup> Emerson was preoccupied with acknowledging both the vital importance and use of "great men" within a democracy, and the alluring danger of worshipful submission that lurks in this acknowledgment. In "Emerson and the Inhibitions of Democracy," Shklar brilliantly demonstrates that Emerson navigates this tension in the very movement of his argument in "Uses of Great Men," as it "zig-zags" between affirmations of the inspiring exceptions of the great, and their ultimate dependence on the general and the common for their greatness.<sup>36</sup>

But the novelty of Emerson's emphasis on the democratic importance of representative men in general and representative reformers in particular goes beyond Shklar's emphasis on the "inhibitions of democracy" or what Robert Richardson similarly describes as Emerson's attempt to "reconcile the reality of the unequal distribution of talent with a democratic belief in the fundamental equality of all persons."<sup>37</sup> Emerson was clearly concerned with elaborating how greatness and heroic individuality—traits most clearly associated with an aristocratic culture—could be made not only compatible with democracy but vitally essential to it. However, bracketing the more esoteric dimensions of Emerson's account of representation—either by assimilating the representative's provocation of "ascension" and "metamorphosis" to the practical considerations of change and "rotation" in representative government, as Shklar has done, or by reducing the representative's exemplary ability to "surprise us out of our propriety" to a more capacious model of "deliberative justice" or "public reason" than provided by contemporary political liberals like John Rawls, as Rautenfeld has done—obscures much of what is most provocative about his work and too quickly assimilates it within familiar rubrics of representation.<sup>38</sup> To fully grasp Emerson's

contribution to an idea of political representation beyond the formal institutions of electoral politics, we must see the political salience without losing sight of mystical provocations of earlier essays like "The Poet." The question of what it is that the representative represents—neither principles, I will argue, nor persons—returns us to Emerson's perfectionism, while giving it a much more avowedly public or political dimension than do familiar interpretations that focus primarily on dynamics of individual self-culture.

What most clearly distinguishes Emerson's representative men from Carlyle's heroes is the distinctive way Emerson envisions the dynamic and productive *relation* between representatives and the represented, and how this relation stimulates perfectionist transformation. The great man "must be *related* to us," Emerson writes, and our life receive from him some promise of explanation" (617). Reversing Carlyle's insistence on the ordering authority and causal power of the hero, Emerson's representative does not impose form and meaning upon a public world, but is instead—like Shakespeare as described in that chapter—characterized by "being altogether receptive" to this public (711). "The greatest genius is the most indebted man," Emerson declares. "He will not have any genius great, except through the general" (710). "It is easy to see that what is best written or done by genius in the world was not man's work," he continues, "but came by wide social labor, when a thousand wrought like one, sharing the same impulse" (715). Emerson reverses Carlyle's focus on the self-sufficient singularity of the hero, which he deems superficial in its attention to appearances of greatness, and instead reveals how the power and the truth of the "great man" is actually an emanation of the too often hidden influences of the common and the low, the ordinary and the general. Rather than being captivated, for example, by "the learned member of the legislature at Westminster or at Washington" who "speaks and votes for thousands," Emerson demands that readers look for the myriad and subtle influences that sustain and animate that greatness. "Show us [instead] the constituency, and the now invisible channels by which the senator is made aware of their wishes. The crowd of practical and knowing men, who, by correspondence or conversation, are feeding him with evidence, anecdotes, and estimates." The effect of this changed preoccupation will "bereave" the "fine attitude and resistance" of the great of "something of their impressiveness" (715). The effect of this changed orientation is to disenthral the public of their dangerous tendencies of worshipful reverence, to cultivate a sense of "the speedy limit to the

use of heroes,” and the realization that “every benefactor becomes so easily a malefactor” (628).

Emerson urged that we come to see the great men in a new light, not to diminish their greatness but to apprehend it as a catalyst for better appreciating and realizing our own. As he wrote in “Experience” (1844): “Instead of feeling a poverty when we encounter a great man, let us treat the new comer as a travelling geologist, who passes through our estate, and shows us good slate, or limestone, or anthracite,” who reveals the riches within us (489). The distance between the great man and the common man merely simulates an internal distance between the selves we are and those we have yet to become, between our “attained” and “unattained/attainable selves,” as Cavell puts it. “True genius will not impoverish, but will liberate, add new sense” (623). Rather than inspiring ascent, the inherited discourses of heroism and genius frame the “masses” as “food for knives and powder,” passive recipients of noble beneficence, “sacks and stomachs” (616). These discourses diminish the significance of the common; they thus not only contradict a commitment to democratic equality, but sustain fundamental misunderstandings of the nature of the relation between the great and the common, framing it as one of simple hierarchy and subordination. From Emerson’s perspective, such discourses preserve the narrow partiality of the hero—emphasize his “wealth” over the “commonwealth”—and deny the hero the very power of representativeness that Emerson wants to recover: “The power which [great men] communicate,” in short, “is not theirs” (624). What “entitles” those in the “position of leaders and lawgivers” is that they “teach the qualities of primary nature,—admit us to the constitution of things” (624). Great men, for Emerson, rely on those they represent because their greatness resides in this representativeness. “Great men exist so that there may be greater men” (632).

Although this theme is most pronounced in *Representative Men*, it does not originate there. Already in “Self-Reliance” (1841), for example, Emerson describes the common phenomenon of reverence for the great and the heroic—“the joyful loyalty with which men have everywhere suffered the king, the noble, or the great proprietor to walk among them by a law of his own”—as “the hieroglyphic” through which common men “obscurely signified of their own right and comeliness, the right of every man” (268). Here, too, Emerson counsels looking beyond the evidence of merely empirical observation, to a more careful attentiveness to the significance communicated

beyond the appearance of surface hieroglyphics. However, in the later work Emerson places much stronger emphasis on the importance of the decentering relationship between representative and represented as a catalyst for disseminating a broader *public* ethos of transformative self-reliance, giving individual cultivation (“self-culture”) a more pronounced political dimension. Like the poet, Emerson’s representatives enable a transformative act of recognition, an act that defines their very representativeness. “Man is endogenous,” Emerson writes in “The Uses of Great Men,” but his “unfolding” is facilitated through encounters with “other men,” and the great man, the man of “genius,” is, Emerson writes, “the *otherist*” (616). The representative will not reduce the represented to “underlings and intellectual suicides,” but awaken an unrealized latent capacity. “Each philosopher, each bard, each actor,” Emerson writes, “has only done for me, as by delegate, what one day I can do for myself” (67).

The emphasis in *Representative Men* is therefore on the productive rather than the passive or merely mimetic nature of the relationship between representative and represented, which clearly distinguishes Emerson’s conception of representation from the two most familiar views of representation in democratic theory, which together make up the so-called “mandate-independence controversy.”<sup>39</sup> Hanna Pitkin describes the “mandate-independence controversy” as the “central classic controversy in the literature on political representation,” and she succinctly summarizes the debate as follows: “Should (must) a representative do what his constituents want, and be bound by mandates or instructions from them; or should (must) he be free to act as seems best to him in pursuit of their welfare?”<sup>40</sup> The mandate view, taken to its fullest extent, reduces the representative to a mere agent of the represented, acting only on the basis of their explicit instructions. This position reduces the representative to a servant of the represented, a passive instrument of their interests or preferences. Because the mandate view is anchored in the express wishes of voting and petitioning constituencies, it is often associated with the highly localist “actual” view of representation that came to dominate American politics in the wake of the American revolutionaries’ critique of the British Parliament’s claim of “virtual representation.”<sup>41</sup> In the terms of contemporary democratic theory, the descriptive literalism of the mandate view makes it broadly compatible with “aggregative” conceptions of democracy, which “take expressed preferences as the privileged or primary material for democratic decision

making” rather than decisions based in moral justification and reasoned deliberation.<sup>42</sup>

The independence view, by contrast, emphasizes the normative importance of independent deliberation and judgment on the part of the representative. It is not the explicitly articulated preferences of the represented that are essential but the broader, more objective, and “unattached” interests of the constituency taken as a whole. Edmund Burke gave the canonical expression of this view in a 1774 speech to the electors of Bristol: “Your representative owes to you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.”<sup>43</sup> James Madison provided the canonical American articulation when he wrote in the *Federalist* no. 10 that rather than merely reflecting the partial views of constituents representatives will “refine and enlarge” them, and that “the public voice pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public good, than if pronounced by the people themselves.”<sup>44</sup> Representation is not evaluated here on the basis of how accurately it corresponds with the stated interests or preferences of the represented (whether articulated through votes or opinion polls), but with an ability to judge independently of them. If the mandate view risks reducing the representative to a passive instrument, the independence view seems to undermine accountability and undemocratically to inflate the wisdom, expertise, or superior rationality of the representative. The eighteenth-century language of a “natural aristocracy” captures an important aspect of this view, and, in the terms of contemporary democratic theory, it is typically associated with deliberative conceptions of democratic politics.

Because Emerson emphasizes the broadening and transformative dimensions of representation, his view is sometimes compared with an independence theory of representation. Jay Grossman, for example, argues that Emerson, like Madison, endorses a view of representation that “filters” out the narrowly parochial views of the represented, and attains an “enlarged” perspective that can take a better view of the whole.<sup>45</sup> From Grossman’s perspective, Emerson is engaged in an ongoing discursive battle over whether the political (and the poetic) project of representation in the United States was to represent an elevated and purified version of “the will of the people,” or whether it was instead to convey that will in a more directly correspondent, mandated form. There are passages in Emerson’s work that would seem to accord with this view, as when he writes that political representa-

tives who truly represent “do not need to inquire of their constituents what they should say, but are themselves the country they represent” (496). However, the independence theory ultimately too closely resembles the heroic ideal that Emerson contrasted to the democratic uses of great men. At the same time, Emerson’s view is far indeed from the opposing mandate theory of representation, which, at its most radical, goes beyond the mere reflection of interests of constituents to the actual resemblance of them.<sup>46</sup> Some have tried to read Emerson in this way, and there are scattered passages that can confirm this view as well, as when, for example, Emerson writes, “the reason he knows about them is that he is of them” (617).<sup>47</sup> However, the “receptivity” of Emerson’s representative is poorly conceived in the terms of instruction or even shared beliefs, values, or ways of life.

Notice that both the independence and mandate theories of representation correspond to something objectively given, “ontic,” often an “interest.” In the case of the independence theory, this is generally thought of in terms of what Pitkin calls an “unattached interest.” This interest is a more or less objective, fixed, public interest which can be discovered through the reasoned reflection and deliberation of elite representatives; it might be construed as the representation of a principle rather than empirical persons. The mandate theory of representation, by contrast, anchors representation in persons, in the explicitly stated interests or preferences of the represented. If the former view of representation is untethered from responsiveness to the mandate of the represented, the latter is never more than a pale copy of the original. The stage is thereby set for a familiar argument: “It just isn’t really representation,” the mandate theorist will say, “if the [representative] doesn’t do what the constituents want.” “It just isn’t really representation,” the independence theorist responds, “if the representative isn’t free to decide on the basis of his own independent judgment.”<sup>48</sup> Both of these familiar views leave the commonwealth as it is and neglect what I take to be a central component of Emerson’s theory of representation as a theory of democratic perfectionism: its productive and transformative capacity, its ability to provoke transformations in individual and collective selves.

The key to understanding the radicalism of Emerson’s distinctive theory of representation as a dynamic relation between representative and represented—and its direct challenge to the mandate and independence views—is its grounding in what Sharon Cameron has identified as Emerson’s “impersonal.” Emerson’s representative men do not represent

interests—neither unattached objective interests nor subjective preferences—but that is because neither do they represent *persons*. “Persons are poor empirical pretensions,” Emerson writes in “Nominalist and Realist” (1844), and representatives at once reveal and provoke the overcoming of such partial pretensions (576). The impersonal is Emerson’s “antidote for the egotistical, the subjective, the solipsistic.”<sup>49</sup> As Emerson declares in the “Over-Soul” (1841): “What we commonly call man, the eating, drinking, planting, counting man does not, as we know him, represent himself, but misrepresents himself. Him we do not respect, but the soul, whose organ he is, would he let it appear through his action, would make our knees bend” (387). The “commonwealth” and “public power” of the representative, then, is not made up of “what we commonly call man.” Indeed, Emerson’s representatives provoke an abandonment of such personhood, an ascension beyond confining (and conforming) individualism.

Emerson’s representatives are a “collyrium to clear out our eyes from egotism.” They “enable us to see other people and their works” (626). They do so by way of tapping into a “sympathy and likeness” that is common although inarticulate, public but obscured by convention, virtual yet resonant. The tapping of this latent commonality is an important aspect of Emerson’s account of how the privations of private existence are overcome: “All that respects the individual is temporary and prospective, like the individual himself, who is ascending out of his limits into a catholic existence” (631). Emerson uses many different terms, with differently textured connotations, for this underlying impersonal commonality: universal mind, Nature, Over-Soul, Whole, Power. As already noted above, in “New England Reformers,” he calls it “the general doctrine of the latent but ever soliciting Spirit” (605). Although the influence of German Idealism on this doctrine is clear, it should not be overstated, and can lead to a misunderstanding or domestication of Emerson’s thought on these points. Emerson’s representatives don’t represent persons, but neither do they represent or exemplify a principle or law, at least not one that can be given a clearly articulate and universally accessible determination. Emerson does not attribute a philosophically articulate principle to this commonality, and it is not based in a universally law-conferring transcendental subjectivity, as it is for Kant. Neither, however, is it accurately described as shared values or as an ascriptive identity. Emerson goes out of his way both to insist on the universal circulation of this “divine fire” of commonality and to proclaim its

resistance to a final legibility, articulation, or representation. This ambiguity has enabled both theists and immanent vitalists to find inspiration in Emerson’s work. Emerson can be read as a “geographer” of the infrasensible and immanent as well as the supersensible and transcendent regions—that is, the regions of sensation and affect prior to being organized as experience as well the regions of inspiration and faith.<sup>50</sup> This is not a controversy that Emerson’s work definitively settles, but his appeal to “the general doctrine of the latent but ever soliciting Spirit” operates on both the infrasensible and transcendental levels to dissolve sedimented certainties of ontic particularity. Emerson insists on such productive ambiguities: “I unsettle all things” and “break the chain of habits” (412), he writes in “Circles”; in “Montaigne” he declares, “The philosophy we want is one of fluxions and mobility, we are but volitant stabilities, houses founded on the sea” (696).

In spite of these bold proclamations, Emerson recognized how difficult the practical realization of these insights must be, due to the powerful inertia woven into being, or what Emerson calls the “perpetual tendency to the set mode” (582). Social conspiracies against such transfigurations and self-overcomings are countless, as Emerson writes in “Self-Reliance,” because of “one fact the world hates, that the soul becomes” (271). Legislated consistencies and imperative conformities define social life, as individuals are mandated through countless daily interactions to remain the individuals they have always been. The greatest single obstacle to transformative becoming is an ossification of the very self one is said to rely upon. “Each man is a tyrant of tendency,” he writes in “Self-Reliance,” and no tendency is more captivating than the partialities of personhood (582). The representative encounter with transformative impersonality oriented by the “doctrine of the ever-soliciting Spirit” works to liberate the represented from what Cameron calls “the tyranny of egotistical self-enclosure.”<sup>51</sup> Emerson’s representatives take us outside of ourselves and enable us to forget ourselves, to be “surprised out of our propriety.” As Emerson writes of Napoleon, by “transcending the ordinary limits of human ability,” he “appeals to the imagination” and “wonderfully encourages and liberates us” (739).

The words that Emerson uses to describe this transformation emphasize the radicalism of the transformation he envisions—it is not merely a change of view or a shift of opinion, but of conversion and transfiguration. As Emerson writes in the concluding paragraph of “Circles” (1841): “The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be

surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle" (414). For Emerson, the representative who can elicit such transformative circle drawing, or assist us in the endogenous "unfolding" previously discussed, little resembles the political representatives of his time, if by that term we mean the formal representatives of the state (but neither does he necessarily exclude these figures). The fact that Emerson's representatives are *not* American politicians—indeed, not American at all, and, with the qualified exception of Napoleon, not politicians either!—should not obscure their avowedly public and political character. They are a key component of Emerson's theory of democratic perfectionism. It may well be that *Representative Men* has not received the attention it deserves from some of Emerson's more politically oriented readers because it seems to be less obviously political than are, for example, his writings on slavery and abolition. I have tried to demonstrate the continuities rather than the differences across these works. As recent scholarship has emphasized, in the late 1840s and 1850s Emerson became more politically active and also more radically critical of the formal politics of (representative) state institutions. This simultaneous development in Emerson's thinking and practice—growing political activism and growing disgust with institutions of electoral politics—often revolved around the question of representation and misrepresentation. Emerson's developing conception of the representative reformer was invested in envisioning a new form of politics, one where competing claims of representation were central, and where the representative reformer was explicitly contrasted with the (misrepresentative) claims of elected officials. Emerson's controversial attack on the famed Massachusetts Senator Daniel Webster, contrasted with his even more controversial celebration of John Brown, exemplifies Emerson's distinctive negotiation of this problem in some of his antislavery writings.

### John Brown, Representative Man

"I have little esteem for government," Emerson wrote in 1856. "I esteem them good only in the moment they were established" (AW, 113). What Emerson disdained in established rather than inaugural government was what he called "the blunder which stands in colossal ugliness in the governments of the world": "undertaking for another" (567). According to

Emerson, there is no governance of others in inaugural moments of political self-constitution like 1776, when each is "his own governor" and stands "on his own feet."<sup>52</sup> The dim view of established political institutions, however, including the institutions of representative government, is reiterated in many of Emerson's essays and has helped sustain his image as an apolitical individualist. "Leave governments to clerks and desks," Emerson disdainfully wrote in "American Scholar" (67). He loathed partisan politics that demanded loyalty to platform ideologies and political institutions built around bureaucratic hierarchies. He rejected the idea that political participation was a good in itself. "The end of all political struggle is to establish morality as the basis for all legislation," he wrote. "'Tis not free institutions, 'tis not a republic, 'tis not a democracy, that is the end,—no but only the means" (AW, 153). "At the heart of Emerson's idealism," Larry Reynolds summarily writes, "is the call for spiritual redemption, for new men, not new social orders."<sup>53</sup>

Emerson's disparaging view of formal political institutions often translated into a similar view of the political representatives—"senators and sovereigns"—elected through them. At one point in the *Conduct of Life* (1860), Emerson suggests that elections should be decided by weighing candidates on hay scales, and in his journals he wrote contemptuously of a neighbor who busied himself with "teaching his little circle of villagers their political lessons": "Here thought I is one who loves what I hate. I hate numbers, he cares for nothing but numbers and persons."<sup>54</sup> Emerson occasionally made an exception for the great Massachusetts Senator Daniel Webster, in whose law office Emerson's younger brother Edward had begun his career.<sup>55</sup> Webster was seen by many contemporaries as the "one eminent American of our time, whom we could produce as a finished work of nature" (AW, 66). However, Webster's decisive support for the Compromise of 1850—and especially its strengthened Fugitive Slave Law, requiring the capture and return of escaped slaves in the North—occasioned perhaps the most vitriolic public attack Emerson ever delivered, driven by a pervasive sense of outrage and betrayal. "The fairest American fame ends in this filthy law," Emerson announced (AW, 65). In his celebrated embrace of "Union," Webster had presented himself "as the representative of the American continent," as "the most American man in America," but his actions in 1850 revealed him to be far from representative in Emerson's sense. Webster was sullied in compromise. "Union" for him was merely the authority of existing

legal contracts which assured that “government exists for the preservation of property” alone. He “lives by his memory,” Emerson declared; “he adheres to the letter.” Webster was not representative because only “what he finds *already written* will he defend. For he has no faith in the power of self-government; none whatever in *extemporizing a government*” (AW, 66–67). Webster and other political representatives merely stood for the given, for existing law, existing interests, existing persons. Making the connection with political self-constitution explicit, Emerson writes that Webster was “happily born late—after independence had been declared.” “In Massachusetts, in 1776, he would . . . have been a refugee” (67). Emerson elaborated on Webster’s misrepresentation in a revealing journal entry from 1851: “Webster truly represents the American people just as they are, with their vast material interests, materialized intellect, & low morals. Heretofore, their great men have led them, have been better than they, as Washington, Hamilton, & Madison. But Webster’s absence of moral faculty is degrading to the country.”<sup>56</sup> Far from raising the nation above itself, Webster’s example left the represented further diminished and degraded.

The Compromise of 1850 radicalized Emerson beyond this critique of Webster, and led him to more broadly conclude that the United States “has ceased to be a Representative Government.” Again, the appeal was to inaugurate or to enact a reformatory politics through channels outside electoral institutions. “Nothing remains but to begin at the beginning to call every man in American to counsel,” Emerson wrote. “Representatives do not represent, we must (now) take new order and see how to make representatives represent us.”<sup>57</sup> The crisis in representation Emerson declared in 1850 only intensified in the following years, and involved a crisis of both political institutions and of language itself. Writing in 1856, Emerson declared: “Language has lost its meaning in the universal cant. *Representative Government* is really misrepresentative” (AW, 113). Emerson responded to this crisis with increasingly strident calls for “a spontaneous expression of the injured people; in fault of their leaders creating their own, and shaking off from their back these degenerate and unworthy riders.”<sup>58</sup> The people as they could be had no representative in government in the 1850s, and their spontaneous expression was hindered by the lack of inspiring example.

Much to the discomfort of some of his liberal admirers, no man seemed to better exemplify the ideal of exemplary representativeness in the crisis period of the 1850s than “the hero of Harpers Ferry,” John Brown. Emerson

met Brown during the latter’s fund-raising visit to Concord in 1857, and was deeply impressed by Brown’s unwavering commitment to higher principle and to action. Emerson affirmed Brown’s own belief in the superior importance of a single “good, believing, strong-minded man” who might “give a permanent direction to the fortunes of a State.”<sup>59</sup> After Brown’s failed 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry, Emerson delivered two remarkable speeches, both of which were subsequently reprinted and circulated. These lectures, as David Reynolds writes, “helped open the floodgates of Northern appreciation of Brown.”<sup>60</sup> They are remarkable not only for their courageous eloquence in defense of Brown—whose execution, Emerson declared, “will make the gallows glorious, like the cross”—but for the justifications that he provides.<sup>61</sup> Emerson celebrated Brown alongside some of history’s most luminary moral heroes and affirmed him as a true “representative of the American public” (AW, 117). Connecting this provocative claim with his own distinct conception of representation, Emerson roundly rejected the “easy effrontery” of “political gentlemen” who asserted that Brown was not in fact representative and that there are “not a thousand men in the North who sympathize with him.” “It would be far safer and nearer the truth,” Emerson responds, “to say that all people, in proportion to their sensibility and self-respect, sympathize with him” (AW, 123). Indeed, “nothing can resist the sympathy which all elevated minds must feel with Brown” (AW, 118). To sympathize with Brown appeared to be both the outcome and the potential cause of such elevation insofar as Emerson’s lectures were meant to provoke this sympathetic conversion in his public. For Emerson, Brown appeared as a collyrium for the morally clouded eyes of the nation, a prophetic voice awakening the nation from its trance of complicity and corruption.

For Emerson, Brown was a glowing example of the abolitionist crusader who was not partial or interested, but spoke for the regeneration of the whole. If Emerson had come to see the abolitionist reformer in representative terms by 1844, Brown in 1857 became the purest exemplification of this ideal. He was “the rarest of heroes, a pure idealist, with no by-ends of his own” (AW, 118). Echoing the arguments of his “Emancipation” lecture, Emerson wrote that it was a mistake to treat abolitionists like Brown as engaged in a “personal affair.” Brown was not a heroic *person* fighting against slavery, but a representative of a universal resistance to enslavement: “No matter how many Browns [the slaveholder] can catch and kill, he does



not make their numbers less, for the air breeds them"; "The air this man breathes is liberty, & is breathed by thousands and millions."<sup>62</sup> Brown was Emerson's paradoxical personification of the impersonal. "He was of no agent of party or persons, he saw through the "idolatry of forms," and "believed in his ideas to put them all into action" (AW, 119). Indeed, Emerson celebrated the fact that in his raid at Harpers Ferry, Brown demonstrated that he "did not believe in moral suasion;—he believed in putting the thing through." As Thoreau would say in his own remarkable address "A Plea for Captain John Brown" (1859), Brown was an enthusiast who "did not set up even a political graven image between him and his God."<sup>63</sup>

In both Brown addresses, Emerson emphasized the captivating mystifications of "forms" as a brand of "idolatry," and celebrated Brown's violent acts as having the power to disenthral the public of such forms. "Rather than recoil from Brown's violence," Reynolds writes, "Emerson dwelt on it."<sup>64</sup> But why? Emerson's simultaneous affirmation of Brown's violent immediatism—his appeal to the spirit beyond the letter of the Law—and his representativeness brings us back to the heart of what is most novel and provocative about Emerson's theory of representation and its relation to reform. Brown exemplifies the more radical dimensions of Emerson's democratic perfectionism and what Aletta Norval has described as his vision of aversive citizenship.<sup>65</sup> He does so because Emerson envisions Brown's spectacular acts as catalysts for converting the public they elicit into a more elevated form. Emerson's controversial celebration of Brown was a continuation of this conversion. Both Brown's acts and Emerson's celebration of them are attempts to elicit and enact what Emerson described as a "new public." The "arid forms which states incrust themselves with," Emerson would later write in response to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation (1863), are occasionally interrupted by "a poetic act and record." Such poetic acts and records "provoke no noisy joy, but are received into a sympathy so deep as to apprise us that mankind are greater and better than we know. At such times, it appears as if a new public were created to greet the new event."<sup>66</sup>

Some of his recent admirers have explained Emerson's account of representative reformers through the concepts and preoccupations of contemporary public sphere theory and the norms of democratic deliberation. The account I have given here challenges that interpretation. Much that is distinctive and provocative about Emerson's understanding of the dynamics of representa-

tiveness is lost if we read him as a "precursor" to contemporary deliberative democrats.<sup>67</sup> Emerson certainly did envision transformation, conversion, and regeneration occurring primarily through an informal public rather than the formal institutions of representative democracy, but the public he envisioned was not the deliberative space of public reason endorsed by contemporary advocates of political liberalism. As the representative example of John Brown suggests, the converted public envisioned by Emerson was neither coolly deliberative nor even free of spectacular violence.

The public Emerson envisioned and addressed—and the representative figures the public was built around—had the capacity to convert and regenerate, not just persuade or convince. This formulation resonates with Rousseau's famous description of the lawgiver in the *Social Contract*, and it may not go too far to say that Emerson's representative men, especially the representative reformers exemplified by Brown, confronted a speech situation similar to that modeled by Rousseau's lawgiver: how to inspire a public to see their own latent capacities exemplified in speech and deed, and thereby convert that public to its unattained ascendant self without denying their own self-reliance. The lawgiver, like the representative reformer, may aspire to (re)found a people and to elicit their ascendant self, "but in the end it is up to the people themselves to accept or reject his advances."<sup>68</sup> Emerson's representative men were not Carlyle's heroes; their greatness instead depended on creating a public that would affirm their representativeness, and that affirmation was the very sign of representativeness.

Like Thoreau, Emerson seems to have conceived this question of popular acceptance or rejection as a problem of arousal or awakening. The representative reformer enacts what Cavell calls "a seduction from our seductions (conformities, heteronomies)."<sup>69</sup> Emerson believed the poetry of Brown's acts could rouse and startle a nation to "rise above itself." As such, Emerson's vision of the representative reformer was a productive mediator of collective self-overcoming, a figure of transformative disenthralment and conversion. The ultimate demonstration of Emerson's commitment to a public of transcendent reformation and conversion rather than reasoned deliberation and moral uplift comes not only in what he explicitly says so much as what his writing continually does. What Rousseau said of the speech of his lawgiver can perhaps be equally said of Emerson's prose: it "compels without violence and persuades without convincing." Similarly, Emerson's Reason—"this subtilizer, and irresistible upward force"—is closer to the

lawgiver's "sublime reason" than to the "public reason" celebrated by contemporary deliberative democrats. Emerson's representative reformers do not just change opinions; they trigger new ways of seeing, of perceiving, and they reorient passionate commitments to another frame of reference. That John Brown attempted to do so through an inspiring act of antislavery violence is troubling, but also revealing. It may be tempting to translate the moralizing influence of representatives into the imperatives of a politics of deliberative engagement, but this would be a domestication of Emerson's thought, and a misunderstanding of its profound but deeply ambiguous legacy for democratic politics and democratic theory.

## Notes

Epigraphs are from Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 418; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Uses of Great Men," in *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 615–32, 625. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent Emerson citations refer to this volume and are cited parenthetically.

1. Quentin Anderson, *The Imperial Self: An Essay in American Literary and Cultural History* (New York: Knopf, 1971); Stephen E. Whicher, *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), 49; D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 3.

2. Wilson Carey McWilliams, "Emerson: The All and the One," in this volume, 48.

3. George Kateb, "Self-Reliance, Politics, and Society," in this volume, 73.

4. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 11, 53 (see also Cavell, "Aversive Thinking: Emersonian Representations in Heidegger and Nietzsche," in this volume, 110).

5. Nadia Urbinati, *Representative Democracy: Principles & Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 5.

6. On rotation, see Judith Shklar, "Emerson and the Inhibitions of Democracy," in this volume, 61–62; on both public sphere theory and communitarianism, see Hans von Rautenfeld, "Thinking for Thousands: Emerson's Theory of Political Representation in the Public Sphere," *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 1 (2005): 184–97.

7. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 12.

8. Rautenfeld, "Thinking for Thousands," 184.

9. I intend this to be analogous to Cavell's argument that Emerson's moral perfectionism does not offer an alternative and self-sufficient "theory of the moral life," but rather addresses itself to "the possibility or necessity of the transforming of oneself and of one's society"—Emerson's thematic of "reform"—that is a part of any moral, and I would add democratic, theory (see Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 2).

10. Rautenfeld, "Thinking for Thousands," 187.

11. Peter S. Field, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Making of a Democratic Individual* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 210.

12. Emerson, "Lecture on Slavery, 25 January, 1855," in *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, ed. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 91–106, hereafter cited parenthetically as AW.

13. Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), ix.

14. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Journals, 1841–1877* (New York: Library of America, 2010), 625.

15. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 118.

16. Gary Collison, "Emerson and Antislavery," in *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Myerson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 179–210, 189.

17. Len Gougeon, "Historical Background," AW, xi–lvi, xxx. See also Len Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform* (Athens: University Press of Georgia, 1990).

18. Gougeon, "Historical Background," xxxvii.

19. See the opening of Jack Turner's essay in this volume; see "Man the Reformer," 135–50, 137.

20. Emerson, *Selected Journals, 1841–1877*, 779.

21. Cited in Gougeon, "Historical Background," xliii.

22. Amy E. Earhart, "Representative Men, Slave Revolt, and Emerson's 'Conversion' to Abolitionism," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1999): 287–303.

23. *Ibid.*, 290.

24. I argue below for the importance of "The Poet" to Emerson's theory of representation, but his turn to representation as a way of navigating the tension between self-reliance and public reform can already be found in "The American Scholar." Collison recognizes this tension in "The American Scholar," if not the importance of representation to engaging it, when he writes, "The tension between

the conflicting demands of Emerson's creative genius for isolation and disengagement and the demands of his public role as guide and preceptor to his community and to humanity would continue to define and plague Emerson throughout his career" (Collison, "Emerson and Antislavery," 188).

25. *Ibid.*, 602–3.

26. Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 372.

27. On Whitman's development of this theme, see my essay "Aesthetic Democracy: Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the People," *Review of Politics* 69, no. 3 (2007): 402–30.

28. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 12.

29. Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry*, ed. Albert S. Cook (New York: Ginn, 1890), 84.

30. Andrew Delbanco, introduction to *Representative Men: Seven Lectures* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), vii–xiv, xii.

31. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 1.

32. *Ibid.*, 203.

33. *Ibid.*, 196.

34. *Ibid.*, 197.

35. Shklar, "Emerson and the Inhibitions of Democracy," 60.

36. *Ibid.*, 58.

37. Richardson, *Emerson*, 414.

38. Rautenfeld, "Thinking for Thousands," 184.

39. Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), 144–67.

40. *Ibid.*, 145.

41. See, for example, Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (New York: Norton, 1969), 162–88.

42. See, for example, Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 13–21, 15.

43. Edmund Burke, *On Empire, Liberty, and Reform: Speeches and Letters*, ed. David Bromwich (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 55.

44. Jacob E. Cooke, ed., *The Federalist* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 62.

45. Jay Grossman, *Reconstituting the American Renaissance: Emerson, Whitman, and the Politics of Representation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 128.

46. This view was given a classic American articulation during the debates over constitutional ratification by the Anti-Federalist Brutus: "The very term, representative, implies, that the person or body chosen for this purpose, should

resemble those who appoint them—a representation of the people of America, if it be a true one, must be like the people. It ought to be so constituted that a person, who is a stranger to the country, might be able to form a just idea of their character, by knowing that of their representatives. They are the sign—the people are the thing signified" ("Brutus III," in *The Anti-Federalist: Writings by the Opponents of the Constitution*, ed. Herbert J. Storing [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981], 122–27, 124).

47. See, for example, Rautenfeld, "Thinking for Thousands," 184.

48. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, 150.

49. Sharon Cameron, "The Way of Life by Abandonment: Emerson's Impersonal," in *Impersonality: Seven Essays*, by Cameron (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 79–107, 80.

50. I take the term "infrasensible" from William Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 85. For the immanent vitalist Emerson, see George J. Stack, *Nietzsche and Emerson: An Elective Affinity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992); for a good example of the theistic Emerson, see Daniel S. Malachuk's contribution in this volume.

51. Cameron, "The Way of Life by Abandonment," 83.

52. Cited in Richardson, *Emerson*, 535.

53. Larry Reynolds, *European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 42.

54. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Journals, 1820–1842* (New York: Library of America, 2010), 642.

55. Richardson, *Emerson*, 177.

56. Emerson, *Selected Journals, 1841–1877*, 552.

57. *Ibid.*, 423.

58. *Ibid.*, 538.

59. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Courage," in *Society and Solitude: Twelve Chapters* (Cambridge: Fields, Osgood, and Co., 1870), 225–50, 242.

60. David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 369.

61. *Ibid.*, 366.

62. Emerson, *Selected Journals, 1841–1877*, 725.

63. Henry David Thoreau, "A Plea for Captain John Brown," in *Civil Disobedience and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1993), 31–48, 37.

64. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 223.

65. In addition to Cavell, see Aletta J. Norval, *Aversive Democracy: Inheritance and Originality in the Democratic Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

66. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "On the President's Proclamation," *Atlantic*, November 1862, 638–42, 638.

67. Alex Zakaras, *Individuality and Mass Democracy; Mill, Emerson, and the Burdens of Citizenship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 10.

68. Honig, "Between Decision and Deliberation," 6.

69. Cavell, "Aversive Thinking," in this volume, 117.

## CHAPTER 13

# Emerson's Democratic Platonism in *Representative Men*

*G. Borden Flanagan*

THIS VOLUME HAS SOUGHT to correct two trends in Emerson scholarship—the underappreciation of Emerson's political thought, and the tendency to read doctrines and positions into Emerson that belong more to ourselves (or to our enemies) than to him. Scholars tend to assimilate Emerson to what is familiar and useful. His works ask for this mistreatment by virtue of their complexity, subtlety, and charm, all of which can be either off-putting to those who want action and political utility in their authors, or beguiling to those seeking authoritative allies. In the face of Emerson's poetic obscurity, it can be difficult not to bend him to suit our instincts. Postmodernists seek to marshal his charm on their behalf, libertarians on theirs, communitarians on theirs, and so on, each with real but partial textual backing.

The tendency to assimilate Emerson to what is familiar in contemporary political thought is clear in the scholarship on *Representative Men*. Judith Shklar argues (rightly, I believe) that Emerson was caught between his respect for equality and his recognition of the simple superiority of great individuals such as Shakespeare. Shklar's thesis is that this tension is resolved for Emerson not so much by an argument, but by his moral commitment to democratic decency, a commitment she shared. Emerson's commitment to equality was more recognizable to Shklar than his argument for it, and that is where she took her stand. Neal Dolan, our fellow contributor, laid the ground for my essay by arguing in his *Emerson's Liberalism* that *Representative Men* is an attempt to counteract certain drawbacks of modern rationalism by means of advancing a new kind of spirituality. He interprets *Representative Men* through the lens of Ernst Gellner, Emile Durkheim,