THE RELATION OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON TO PUBLIC AFFAIRS

by

RAYMER McQUISTON

1921

Submitted to the Department of English and the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Approved by:

R. D. O'Leary,

Department of English.

PREFACE

The object of this study is to bring together, in convenient compass, the essential and significant facts concerning Emerson's relation to public affairs. An abundance of material, suitable for this purpose, is to be found in the *Works* and *Journal*, and these have been made to speak for themselves so far as possible. Nevertheless, such a task involves selection, arrangement, evaluation, and interpretation, all of which test human fallibility, and readers of this monograph will probably find much that is open to criticism, and doubtless somewhat that is weak and faulty. Though the aim has been to use primary sources as the basis of this work, there must of necessity be a considerable indebtedness to the scholars who have already dealt with Emerson and his writings, and acknowledgement of such indebtedness is hereby made. References and quotations have been verified, and will be found to be accurate in the main, it is believed. Certain apparent inaccuracies are due to the informal character of the *Journal* itself.

Sincere thanks are due the Committee on Graduate Work of the Department of English for many good criticisms and suggestions, particularly Professor W.S. Johnson, under whose direction this study was undertaken.

Cambridge, Massachusetts, August 18, 1921.

C O N T E N T S

CHAPTER VI

The Civil War

CHAPTER VII

Public Men - America - Summary

CHAPTER I

Emerson's Youth and the Growth of His Ideas

Ancestry - Family traditions - Emerson's retiring temperament - His tendency to solitude and reflection - His youthful interest in things moral and spiritual - His historic environment - Extent of its influence upon him - The development of Emerson's philosophy - His intuitive tendency - His emphasis upon the moral and spiritual - Relation of certain of his ideas to his attitude toward public affairs

No man's career can be predicted with certainty from the history of his ancestry, and this is quite as true of Emerson as of any other man; yet many of his reactions to questions of a political, social and moral cast were foreshadowed in the conduct of his ancestors. One of these, Peter Bulkely, was an educated non-conformist, who came to America and helped establish Concord, rather than endure ecclesiastical tyranny in England. Emerson mentioned his name with pride in his Concord anniversary address as he read the roll of the illustrious founders of Concord. Another of his ancestors was the heroic Reverend Joseph Emerson of Mindon who narrowly escaped being scalped when the village was destroyed by Indians. William Emerson of Concord, the grandfather of Ralph Waldo, was a zealous patriot, who encouraged resistance to the British, and died of camp-fever while a chaplain in the colonial army at Ticonderoga. Emerson's father was of a social temperament, and was a

favorite among persons of authority and influence in the community. He was a Fourth-of-July orator, chaplain of the State Senate, and of the Ancient and Honorable Company, and an overseer of Harvard College. Literary and scholastic tastes were strongly fixed in the family, and schoolkeeping furnished the regular preliminary means of support for the Emersons before they entered the ministry, as they almost invariably did. In his relation to the public affairs of his time, we shall see that Emerson did not depart far from the traditions of his family.

Emerson seems not to have had a normal boyhood. He was from early youth of a shy, retiring, temperament, with a strong tendency to be solitary and reflective. The congenial home life, the strong family affections, and the necessity for intensive application to his studies, all probably accentuated this tendency, and combined with it to keep him out of those rough sports of boyhood which are said to be the ordinary, dependable means of acquiring an accurate knowledge of human nature, and especially of its social aspects. Yet reflection itself saved him from becoming bookish or priggish, and if he failed to participate actively in the life about him, it was not because he had disregarded or overlooked it, but because he had carefully considered its problems and found them less easy and less necessary of solution than the problems of the individual life. Even the poverty and hardship of the family failed to draw him into a consideration of social and economic questions, for it was merely an accidental hardship which fell occasionally upon a profession that normally possessed a position of dignity and influence, and enjoyed a decent and comfortable, though not a luxurious living. Probably he was also beginning to conclude that in the lives of all men poverty and wealth are external accidents that are of small importance in comparison with the great fundamental possibilities of the individual soul. Yet there was much in Emerson's

environment to inspire interest in public affairs. He lived in a community that was replete with the historical traditions of the stirring days of the Revolution; New England's position on the seaboard and her commercial interests kept her actively in touch with the affairs of the United States and of the rest of the world; and all about him were the town meetings which had been the means of developing an active interest in public affairs in many a youth. All these undoubtedly served to bring to him a better and more intelligent knowledge of the history of his country, and, perhaps a keener insight in political and social phenomena, but they could not divert him from his major interest in the moral and spiritual life of the individual.

Emerson was early an intuitionist, and this fact probably accounts for his scattered, selective reading and lack of systematic study, a practice which was at first a source of despair, and later of pride. He told in later life how he went through books, gleaning those individual ideas and sentiments that appealed to him. With him religion and morality were fundamental and axiomatic, and he was more concerned with relating the world to them and interpreting it in terms of them, than he was in securing systematic general knowledge. Undoubtedly the ministerial atmosphere and tradition were partly responsible for this, but Woodberry and others think it is mainly to be regarded as his natural bent. Many a minister's son has yielded to the attractions of the secular world and its activities, and the Presidency itself furnishes some illustrious examples of this. He went to Harvard with his interests predetermined, and everything in the new academic life simply matured the tendencies which his mind had followed previously. The curriculum was sufficiently broad to acquaint him with the fundamentals of knowledge in general. He was not a recluse, and his contact with other students and their interests

was probably approximately normal, as is attested by his active membership in social and debating clubs. He has told how eagerly he went to hear Everett and other orators, and how greatly he was charmed by eloquence of all kinds. Yet this was probably his greatest secular interest, and was indulged mainly because of its relation to the profession which he intended to follow.

During this early part of his life, Emerson was reading, reflecting, and philosophizing, and had no very direct and immediate interest in public affairs, and his utterances upon the subject were mostly suggested by his reading. There are a few observations in his *Journal* that were occasioned by contemporary events. However, he was primarily an intuitive, individualistic, moral philosopher, and things political and social interested him mainly as they affected the individual in his attempt to live a divine life. Yet there was a certain necessity of accounting for social and political institutions and practices. He attempted to find a significance for everything in his philosophy, and to justify the *status quo* so far as possible. He built his system upon things as he found them and did not challenge anything social or political unless it conflicted with the moral intuitions. It was upon these grounds that he first directed his attention to the slavery question, as we shall see later. He did not become committed to social, political, or economic theories, so far as one can learn, and most of his ideas upon such subjects were probably traditional, conventional, or those of his family. Cabot says he inherited his party affiliations from his father, and many of his early attitudes toward public questions were those of his New England environment.

Certain ideas of Emerson's philosophical and moral system, however, are of especial importance in explaining his attitude toward public affairs. His strong indivi-

idualism caused him to have an aversion to those movements which aimed at the reformation of the individual or the improvement of his condition by the reformation of society. Pursued to its logical conclusion, it led him to place an almost absurd emphasis upon the responsibility of the individual for his situation and his duty to make the best of it, a doctrine which fortunately he did not always adhere to consistently. In 1842 he wrote, "It is in vain that you put to me any case of misfortune or calamity - the extremest, the Manchester weaver, the Carolina slave. I doubt not that in the history of the individual is always an account of his condition, and he knows himself to be party to his present estate. Put me in his condition, and I should see its outlets and reliefs though now I see them not.... I can never meddle with other people's facts. I have enough of my own. But this one thing I know, that if I do not clear myself, I am in fault, and that my own condition is matched, point for point, with every other man's. I can only dispose of my own facts."[1] Part of this quotation sets forth another favorite idea of Emerson's, namely, compensation, the doctrine that every condition of life has certain compensating features. Again, Emerson felt that moral and spiritual facts were the fundamental ones, and this often led him to regard political movements as superficial and illusory. This note is sounded clearly in *The American Scholar* in 1837. "These being his functions, it becomes him to feel all confidence in himself, and to defer never to the popular cry. He, and he only, knows the world. The world of any moment is the merest appearance. Some great decorum, some fetish of a government, some ephemeral trade, or war, or man is cried up by half of mankind and cried down by the other half, as if all depended on this

1. *Journal* VI, 303.

particular up or down. The odds are that the whole question is not worth the poorest thought which the scholar has lost in listening to the controversy. Let him not quit the belief that a popgun is a popgun, though the ancient and honorable of the earth affirm it to be the crack of doom."[1]

Another favorite doctrine with Emerson was that the divine was immanent in the human, that the individual was a spark of the divine. This naturally led him to demand as much freedom for the individual as was reasonably possible, and to feel that restraint and oppression were offences against both God and man. Furthermore, his ideal of individual spiritual perfection even led logically to philosophical anarchy. Continually, especially in crises, he asserted that government derived its strength from the good individuals who gave their sanction and support to it, and he argued that the real defence and safety of the individual lies within himself. In 1840, he said in his lecture on *Politics*, "Hence the less government we have the better, - the fewer laws, and the less confided power,"[2] and, "To educate the wise man the State exists, and with the appearance of the wise man the State expires."[3] As a substitute for government, he urged the development of private character, but admitted that, as yet hardly any progress had been made in that direction. His most radical assertion of individualism was made three days before the firing upon Fort Sumter, when he spoke of "the downfall of our character destroying civilization," and said apparently the hour had come "when the civil machinery that has been the religion of the world decomposes to dust and smoke before the now adult individualism; and the private man feels that

1. *Works*, I, 102.
2. Ibid. III, 215.
3. Ibid. III, 216.

he is the State, and that a community in like external conditions of climate, race, sentiment, and employment can drop with impunity much of the machinery of government as operose and clumsy, and get on cheaper and simpler by leaving to every man all of his rights and powers, checked by no law but his love or fear of the rights and powers of his neighbor."[1] This rather extreme assertion had been occasioned, however, by the apparent dissolution of the Federal government, which was appearing in the last few month's of Buchanan's administration, a dissolution that was taking place during a period of great material prosperity and individualistic enterprise.

It might seem from these quotations that Emerson regarded government merely as repression. It would be more nearly correct to say that his conception of freedom demanded a political and social order so arranged as to interfere as little as possible with the attempt of the individual to obey the intuitions of his soul. Personally, he complained only once of any hardship due to governmental restriction of the rights of the individual, and he admitted that government rested on force because of the selfishness of men, and because no one believed in a state founded on love. The fact is that the aspiration for spiritual and moral perfection rather agreed with the ends sought by government than conflicted with them, and Emerson himself said, "I do not call to mind a single human being who has steadily denied the authority of the laws, on the simple ground of his moral nature."[2] Of course, he did not regard government as in any form fixed or final, and he did not, most certainly, discourage any genuine attempt to reform it. Political institutions and practices, he asserted, were all originally expedients devised by man to meet situations and must change with increasing light. Said he in *Politics*, "The statute

1. Cabot II, 603, 604.
2. *Works* III, 221.

stands there to say, yesterday we agreed so and so, but how feel ye this article to-day?"[1]

Yet it is conceivable that the moral nature of an individual might demand revolt against a specific act of government, and as between the moral intuition of the individual and the authority of the government, Emerson would have counselled obedience to the intuition. One is reminded of his famous dictum, "Good men must not obey the laws too well."[2] Still, he was conservative in the application of this doctrine; he was not primarily interested in revolution against the political order, even though his theory recognized it as a possibility, and his practice would have accepted it as a necessity. So true was this that he was much perturbed when he had to consider a genuine case of moral revolt against government, namely, the case of Thoreau, who refused to pay his taxes to the state and local governments, on the ground that they approved and assisted the Federal government in an iniquitous attempt to secure the extension of slavery by war upon Mexico. The solution of this specific problem was found in the sensible recognition of the fact that on the whole the administration of the local government was beneficent and wholesome; that it aided the cause of slavery only indirectly, if at all; that the revenues for the war were mainly derived from tariffs which the purchaser of imported luxuries paid; and that if one desired to revolt against a bad government, he should seek a genuine grievance, and not stick upon a technicality. There is no doubt, however, that though he easily found a practical justification of his own inaction in the matter, he really felt a good deal of sympathy for Thoreau and his contention. Several years later, Emerson, himself found a law which his conscience could not accept, the notorious Fugitive Slave Law, and he openly counselled resistance to it, and Woodberry thinks it

1. *Works* III, 200.
2. Ibid. III, 208.

quite possible that he may have assisted runaway slaves in their endeavor to escape Federal officials. Fortunately for him, the assistance of fugitive slaves was commonly connived at in New England, and if Emerson participated in this rather common practice, the secrecy attending the act, his belief in the sufficiency of the act itself, his dislike of publicity, and good luck, probably all combined to prevent him from ever coming into conflict with those charged with the enforcement of the law. It would be well to repeat, however, that the effort to secure the spiritual perfection of the individual was more likely to bring a man into harmony with the law than into conflict with it, and this assertion finds abundant proof in the experience of Emerson himself, whose consistent practice of such a doctrine during his whole life never caused him any serious embarassment.

CHAPTER II

Emerson's Political Sympathies and Affiliations

Preference for democracy - Recognition of its weaknesses - Attitude toward the masses - Dislike of practical politics - Early sympathy with the Whigs - Loss of confidence in them - Attitude toward the Republican Party

Emerson's philosophy, as has been previously noted, was not primarily concerned with political and social questions, and, *per se*, it had no bias in favor of any kind of government. Emerson himself, however, had a strong prejudice for democracy. Probably there were several reasons for this. First of all, he had been born and reared in the atmosphere of democracy, and the common traditional sympathy in favor of it had been instilled into him. He recognized this fact himself. Said he, "Born democrats, we are nowise qualified to judge of monarchy, which to our fathers living in the monarchical ideal, was also relatively right."[1] Democracy was also associated with other things dear to Emerson's heart, general equality of opportunity, freedom of speech, and especially religious freedom. "Democracy is better for us, "he said, "because the religious sentiment of the present time accords better with it."[2] Finally, Emerson inclined to an evolutionary conception of social changes, and he probably regarded democracy as the highest form of political organization that had yet been

1. *Works* III, 207-208.
2. Ibid. III, 207.

achieved. He was not unaware of its shortcomings, however, for he said, "But our institutions, though in coincidence with the spirit of the age, have not any exemption from the practical defects which have discredited other forms. Every actual State is corrupt."[1] Furthermore, he had no blind, unreasoning faith in the infallible wisdom and virtue of the masses, and of their political decisions. As early as 1823, he wrote in his *Journal*, that history truly written and understood does not show the average man's intelligence or virtue ever to have been very high, and declared, "..our first mature glance at the actual state of society falls upon so much deformity and such low moral and intellectual turpitude that the fair fabric of the imagination is speedily undermined."[2] His faith in the masses often received severe tests, especially during the slavery struggles, when the pro-slavery forces triumphed, as they almost invariably did. In 1845, he wrote, "A despair has crept over the Whig party in this country. They, the active, enterprising, intelligent, well-meaning, and wealthy part of the people, the real love and strength of the American people, find themselves paralyzed and defeated everywhere by the hordes of ignorant and deceivable natives and the armies of foreign voters who fill Pennsylvania, New York, and New Orleans, and by those unscrupulous editors and orators who have assumed to lead these masses."[3] In 1853, he asked, "Are we always to be the victims of the meanest of mankind, who kill off as sentimental and visionary every generous and just design? .... In America, we hold out the same bribe, 'roast beef and two dollars a day', and our people will not go for liberty of other people, no, nor for their own, but for annexation of territory, or a tariff, or whatever

1. *Works* III, 207.
2. *Journal* I, 219.
3. Ibid. VII, 12.

promises new chances for young men, more money to men of business."[1] Moreover, Emerson's philosophy was opposed to bringing an individual into conformity with the standards of the masses; rather he believed that the salvation of the race lay in the few select individuals who rose above such standards. Once he exclaimed,"Leave this hypocritical prating about the masses. Masses are rude, lame, unmade, pernicious in their demands, and need not to be flattered, but schooled. I wish not to concede anything to them, but to tame, drill, divide, and break them up, and draw individuals out of them..... The worst of charity is that the lives you are asked to preserve are not worth preserving. Masses! the calamity is the masses..... If government knew how, I should like to see it check, not multiply the population. When it reaches its true law of action every man that is born will be hailed as essential. Away with this hurrah of the masses, and let us have the considerate vote of single men spoken on their honor and their conscience."[2] Yet Emerson was fundamentally a democrat, and his censure of the masses was by no means unmitigated. His optimism enabled him to see beyond the failures of the present to the ultimate triumph of the right cause. A little later in the same lecture, he declared,"To say then, that the majority are wicked, means no malice, no bad heart in the observer, but simply that the majority are unripe, and have not yet come to themselves, do not yet know their own opinions.... That, if they knew it, is an oracle for them and for all. But in the passing moment the quadruped interest is very prone to prevail; and this beast-force, while it makes the discipline of the world, the school of heroes, the glory of martyrs, has provoked in every age the satire of wits and

1. *Journal* VIII, 343-344.
2. *Works* VI, 249.

the tears of good men."[1] In 1844, in his lecture on *New England Reformers*, he had expressed a somewhat more favorable opinion of the wisdom and virtue of the masses of the men: "Nothing shall warp me from the belief that every man is a lover of truth..... The entertainment of the proposition of depravity is the last profligacy and profanation..... I suppose considerate observers, looking at the masses of men in their blameless and in their equivocal actions, will assent, that in spite of selfishness and frivolity, the general purpose in the great number of persons is fidelity. The reason why any one refuses his assent to your opinion, or his aid to your benevolent designs, is in you: he refuses to accept you as a bringer of truth, because, though you think you have it, he feels that you have it not."[2] The immediate and hearty response of the people of the North to the cause of the Union drew from Emerson the declaration that he would never again speak ill of popular intelligence or virtue. This was his most favorable expression of opinion, and needless to say, he found occasion subsequently to modify it. The various quotations which have been made ~~are~~ are not comprehensive, but will be found to be representative, of his opinion of the masses of men. It would be safe to conclude that although Emerson was often disgusted with popular coarseness and folly, and, although he was often disappointed in the failure of the people to vote always for the cause of righteousness, yet he was too much of an optimist to yield long to the discouragements of the moment; and his faith in the ultimate wisdom and soundness of a democracy was unshaken.

Notwithstanding his consistent belief in democracy, Emerson was often disgusted and disheartened with the methods

1. *Works VI*, 252.
2. Ibid. III, 278-279.

and results of practical politics. Sometimes it was the meanness and unfairness of politics that repelled him; sometimes it was the superficiality. In 1837, he recorded in his *Journal* a graphic description of a Whig caucus in Faneuil Hall at which Webster presided. He pointed out that the campaign orator derives his success from his ability to use cheap catch phrases successfully. "Never," he said, "the fineness or depth of the thought, but the good sayings of the very few and very poor particulars which lie uppermost in everyman's mind at the meeting. All appear struck with wonder and delight at this cheap and mediocre faculty, so rarely is it found."[1] Again, he often spoke of the debasing effect of the methods of politics, and he said of political mass meetings, "they show great men put to a bad use, men consenting to be managed by committees, and worse, consenting to manage men."[2] Another interesting observation on this head is found in his *Journal* for 1838. He wrote of seeing his neighbor 'the dictatorial Jacobin' instructing and electioneering voters and added, "And here, thought I, is one who loves what I hate.... All the qualities of man, all his accomplishments, affection, enterprises, except solely the ticket he votes for, are nothing to this philosopher."[3] Sometimes he deplored the lack of seriousness in politics. "In politics," said he, "all are *dilettanti*. No man makes a duty there, but he votes on a magnified whim. Our politics are an affectation."[4] In another *Journal*, he alluded to the tendency to expect a material reward for the vote; "X and Y and so many honest *bourgeois* vote on the expectation of a specific reward. It is as natural in them

1. *Journal* IV, 361.
2. Ibid. VI, 530.
3. Ibid. V, 76.
4. Ibid. VII, 533.

to expect the *place*, as in an ox to expect his hay and stalks; and they are as legitimately angry and implacable, if they are baulked of it. This is the true *wild*, the Hengist and Horsa, unchristianized still in so many ages."[1] Perhaps it was the bitter recriminations of partisanism that most repelled Emerson. In 1835, he wrote in his *Journal*, "A man feels that his time is too precious, the objects within reach of his spirit too beautiful, than that his attention should stoop to such disfigurements, as Antimasonry, or Convent Riots, or General Jackson and the Globe."[2]

In 1824, he wrote in his *Journal*, "And I have sometimes thought the election which an individual makes between right and wrong more important than his choice between rival statesmen."[3] Yet in his *Journal* for 1846, he had asserted that the so-called non-resistants, who went about counselling men not to vote, were a menace to good government because their teachings appealed most strongly to the better classes of citizens, those whose votes were most needed to combat the thoughtless and vicious. In the *Journal* for 1852, he charged the non-resistants with gross inconsistency: "The Purist who refuses to vote, because the government does not content him in all points, should refuse to feed a starving beggar lest he feed his vices."[4] Moreover, it would seem from many other utterances that Emerson undoubtedly felt good citizens should be "punctual at the polls", and probably he himself voted whenever there was an opportunity to do so, although one finds no specific allusion in the *Journal* to his voting.

Emerson was often no less dissatisfied with the results

1. *Journal* VII, 545.
2. Ibid. III, 465.
3. Ibid. II, 22.
4. Ibid. VIII, 280.

than with the methods of politics. He recorded his chagrin and disappointment at the defeat of his fellow townsman, Samuel Hoar, rejected by the voters in favor of a young upstart, whose chief qualification, according to Emerson, was an aptness for political intrigue. Of the election of 1848, he said, "Here has passed an election, I think, the most dismal ever known in this country. Three great parties voting for three candidates whom they disliked."[1] In fact there was much in the results of elections to disappoint and discourage him. During the early part of his life, tradition, environment, and his own natural instincts combined to make him an ardent sympathizer with the cause of the Whig party. Yet during this period the Democratic party was almost continually victorious. The coarseness and crudeness of Jackson were particularly offensive to Emerson, and his frank practice of the spoils system, together with his rather violent and arbitrary exercise of the powers of his office caused the young Emerson to be one of those who feared for the cause of popular government. His utterances during this period are particularly interesting because they show him coming more closely to the heat of partisanism than was his wont, later in life, and because they most nearly approach provincialism, conservatism, and lack of broad sympathy. In the *Journal* for 1834, is the following entry: "Should the Whig party fail, which God avert! the patriot will still have some confidence in the redeeming force of the latent, i.e., deceived virtue that is contained within the Tory party; and yet more in the remedial, regenerative nature of man, which ever reproduces a healthful moral sense, even out of stupidity and corruption."[2] In another entry of the same year he said that the Whigs

1. *Journal* VII, 548.
2. Ibid. III, 357.

could put in merely their own votes, but the 'Tories' used fraud, and he added gloomily, "Let the worst come to the worst, and the Whig cause be crushed for a season, and the Constitution be grossly violated, then you should see the weak Whig become irresistible. They would then acquire the gloom and the might of fanaticism, and redeem America as they once redeemed England, and once aforetime planted and emancipated America."[1] By 1840, Emerson had become more philosophical and less ardent regarding political parties. Following is a brief exposition of his general theory of political parties, as stated in his lecture on *Politics*. He declared that parties are founded upon instincts and have better guides to their humble aims, and better expressions of the crude but real differences which they mark, than the sagacity of their leaders. Parties are perpetually being corrupted by their leaders who use the docility and zeal of the masses to further their own interests. The misguided voters can be absolved, but their leaders are more culpable. Too frequently parties differ merely in the circumstances of the interests which they represent, and have no moral difference, in fact, could easily change positions. The weakness of radical parties lies in their unbalanced leaders; that of conservative parties in their timidity and lack of vision.

By 1841, although Emerson was still attached to the cause of the Whig party, his ardor had begun to abate. He had become more radical in his political opinions, and, although his radicalism was always tempered and restrained by common sense, he was becoming impatient of the ultra conservatism, the timidity, and the lack of a high and clear aim which was the great fault of the Whigs. In 1841, he had written in his *Journal* the following entry concerning the Whig party," It is not the proposition, but the tone

1. *Journal* III, 359.

that signifies.... Every proclamation, dinner-speech, report of victory, or protest against the government betrays its thin and watery blood..... Instead of having its own aims passionately in view, it cants about the policy of a Washington and a Jefferson.....What busines have Washington or Jefferson in this age? ... They lived in the greenness and timidity of the political experiment.....They shocked their contemporaries with their daring wisdom; have you not something which would have shocked them, If not, be silent, for others have."[1] In 1842, he asserted that there was very little difference between the Whig Party and the Democratic Party, although he believed the Democratic leaders were worse men than the Whig leaders. "To vote at all for either party," he wrote "is Whiggism, and it is only a little more to vote for those whose bias is conservatism."[2] Yet he felt that he still had many points of sympathy with the Whigs, and he preferred them to the Democrats, whose leadership, he thought, was corrupt and vicious. During 1842, Emerson visited New York, where he probably got some knowledge at first hand of the methods of Tammany politicians, about whom he had hitherto known only by hearsay. At least, he wrote in his *Journal* that his visit had made him less diffident of his political opinions. In 1846, he wrote, "The Whigs have only for their system the defence that they maintain it until something really good appears."[3] This is probably an accurate summary of Emerson's attitude toward the Whigs between 1840 and 1850. He was not satisfied with them, but he felt that they could at least be depended upon to maintain the *status quo* against the aggressions and usurpations of the Southern Democracy, which was fast securing

1. *Journal* VI, 88.
2. Ibid. VI, 276.
3. Ibid. VII, 179.

control of the party of their opponents. On this point he was to receive a painful disillusionment. The Whigs combined with the Democrats to pass the Compromise of 1850, and crushed the idealistic hopes of men like Emerson, that they would stand firm and unyielding against the demands of the pro-slavery party. Great was Emerson's disappointment, and his denunciation of the Whig leaders, particularly Webster and other New Englanders, was scathing. "There is," he wrote, "one benefit derived from the movement lately. The most polite and decorous Whigs, all for church and college and charity, have shown their teeth unmistakably. We shall not be deceived again. We believed, and they half believed, that they were honest men. They have been forced to take prematurely their true and ignominious place."[1] Finally in 1852, he declared that the only difference between the Democrats and the Whigs was that one pushed forward into evil, whereas the other held back; both, however, were being carried irresistibly forward. In 1857, he said the Democratic Party was the party of the poor marshalled against the rich, but that it was officered by self-seeking deserters from the Rich or Whig Party. "These leaders," he said, "are Whigs and associate with Whigs, that is they are the dining, drinking, and dancing, and investing class, and by no means the digging and hoeing class."[2] The rise of the Republican Party must have been watched with interest by Emerson, although there are no references to it in the *Journal* for this period. Possibly he had come to be rather distrustful of any political party as a sincere and consistent opponent of slavery. Probably he also distrusted the Whig Element which was prominent in the membership of the new party, and certainly the leaders(including Lincoln) were too timid and conservative in their pronouncements against slavery to suit

1. *Journal* VIII, 212.
2. Ibid. IX, 85.

Emerson. Yet there were many fearless and uncompromising opponents of slavery among its leaders, men like Seward and Sumner, and they gave promise of what the ultimate attitude of the party would be. The appeal of these men and the desire to support any movement that promised at least some opposition to the encroachments of slavery must have enlisted the sympathy and support of Emerson. With the coming of the Civil War, Emerson identified himself quite naturally with the Republican party because he felt it had become the only consistent representative of the cause of morality and freedom. In 1864, he wrote in his *Journal*, "Our Democratic party shows itself very badly in these days, simply destructive, and 'would tear down God from Heaven if they could.'"[1] He advocated the renomination and reelection of Lincoln, although he had criticised his conservative policy earlier in the war. In fact, it was the more radical anti-slavery element in the party that appealed to Emerson, and at the close of the war he preferred the policies of Stevens and Sumner to those of President Johnson. Yet he was opposed to certain Republican policies, notably the steadily rising doctrine of protective tariffs. Moreover, he was not by nature partisan, and had allied himself with the Republican party because it had become identified with a great moral issue, namely, the restriction and destruction of slavery. With the disappearance of the issue, and with a satisfactory settlement of the problems of Reconstruction, Emerson's interest in parties also disappeared, and no further allusions to them are found.

1. *Journal* X, 52.

CHAPTER III

Emerson's Economic Ideas

Emerson's subordination of all things to the moral and spiritual - Property - Attitude toward the acquisition and use of wealth - Opposition to tariffs - His attitude toward financial crises

Emerson's views upon economic questions, like his views upon all public affairs, were determined by three factors: his belief in the supremacy of moral and spiritual interests, his belief in progress and idealism, and his strong common sense. As an advocate of the supremacy of moral and spiritual interests, he refused ever to accept any other interest as of paramount importance to the individual, or even to society; as a believer in progress and idealism, he favored any rearrangement of economic affairs which promised greater opportunity for all; while lastly his common sense recognized the necessity of wealth, and the limitations of reform, and revolted against visionary plans for abolishing the evils of society by the artificial process of a different distribution of wealth. He was well aware that great evils were connected with the institution of property, and he was not averse to reform, But he also knew that many of these evils were owing to fundamental weaknesses and vices of man, and as a result, all human institutions were burdened with evils. In 1841, he wrote, "The question of property wants seers... The staunchest whig and the poorest philosopher are all on the property side, all abettors of the present abuse, all either owners or enviers....no man deserves to be heard against Property; only love, only an Idea, is on the right

side against Property as we hold it."[1] For this reason, he felt that no communistic or socialistic tenure of property would eliminate the evils of society, "for as long as all people want the things we now have, and no better things, it is very certain that they will, under whatever change of forms, keep the old system."[2] Moreover he asserted that no distribution of wealth must be made which would remove the incentive to industry, and that many who are poor under the present system are responsible for their own condition, and would be a burden upon the State under a socialistic arrangement. Yet he realized the deficiencies of the existing order, and saw how its injustices and inequalities often operated to crush that kind of life in men that he most desired, for he concluded his adverse consideration of the proposed socialistic scheme in France with this note of regret: "And there is a great multitude also whom the existing system bereaves of all culture and all hope. The masses, ah, if you could read the biography of those who compose them!"[3]

Emerson did not regard the acquisition or possession of wealth as evil in itself. He often praised the energy and initiative of American business men, and watched with pleasure the great commercial expansion of the United States and the development of her material interests and industries, movements whose beginnings and progress were prominent features of his age. And certainly he had no sympathy for that peculiar crusade against the use of money to represent values or facilitate exchange. He thought that the acquisition of wealth was generally the result of industry, perseverance, financial prudence, and service of some sort to society. He was not greatly alarmed at the growth of

1. *Journal* VI, 128.
2. Cabot II, 537.
3. *Journal VII, 431.*

large fortunes, although he thought that they might some day be a menace to society. Moreover, he felt that superior ability was bound to assert itself in some form of aristocracy, and of all aristocracies, he preferred one founded upon wealth. He enumerated its advantages in his lecture upon *The Young American* in 1844: "But the aristocracy of trade has no permanence, is not entailed, was the result of toil and talent, the result of merit, and is continually falling, like the waves of the sea, before new claims of the same sort."[1] Emerson also realized that society itself rested upon a materialistic basis, and that the finer civilization of modern times would not have been possible without commerce and industry. "It is Trade,- Trade which is the mover of nations, and the pillar whereon the fortunes of life hang," he said, "all else is subordinate."[2]

Although his common sense recognized the necessity of wealth, and the general wisdom and justice of the acquisition and tenure of it in modern society, yet Emerson opposed wealth as an end in itself, and he often felt that an improper use was made of it. He once said that the former of these two evils was as if a man should interrupt a company in order to make a speech, and then forget what he intended to say. As to the use of money he said that only those men ought to be rich that would use their money benevolently. He was especially incensed when the interests of wealth were selfishly allowed to prevail over those of humanity and progress, and in 1854, he declared, "The lesson of these days is the vulgarity of wealth. We know that wealth will vote for the same thing which the worst and meanest of the people vote for. Wealth will vote for rum, will vote for tyranny, will vote for slavery, will vote against the ballot, will vote against international copyright, will vote against schools, colleges, or any high

1. *Works* I, 378.
2. *Journal* I, 260.

direction of public money."[1]

Emerson was not an adherent of any specific economic theory. His nearest approach to any was his opposition to protective tariffs, which his common sense and his sense of justice and fairness could not accept. He declared that he could never be convinced of the wisdom of tariffs in general, and thought it wrong, to use his own somewhat extreme illustration, that so heavy a 'fine' should be put upon the raisers of tropical fruits as to enable men to build costly conservatories in which to raise them in Massachusetts. "We punish," said he, "the planter there and the consumer here for adding these benefits to life."[2] He believed that taxes should rather be laid upon articles of luxury, or upon those articles, such as liquors and opium, the consumption of which should be discouraged upon grounds of social policy. His opposition to tariffs remained to the end of his life, and in the last volume of his *Journal* is an entry containing this statement: "I hate protection of trade in our politics....."[3]

Emerson's attitude toward financial affairs is most typically illustrated by his utterances during the panics of 1837 and 1857. He accepted none of the ordinary superficial partisan explanations of these crises, recognizing the truth of the situation, that the causes of such crises were deep-seated and complex. He thought that, although paper money might have been largely responsible for bringing on the panic of 1857, the use of it was a real convenience and benefit, just as railroads and steam boilers were conveniences, but increased the possibilities of accidents. He asserted that a panic was a better test of the financial soundness of any institution than any bank examiner.

1. *Journal VIII, 449.*
2. Ibid. X, 229.
3. Ibid. X, 312.

His complacency is shown by his assertion that the true medicine for hard times was sleep, and that sleep was the result of hard labor. One entry in the *Journal* makes especially clear his philosophical and reflective habits, even in a panic: "The black times have a great scientific value. It is an epoch so critical a philosopher would not miss...What was, ever since my memory, solid continent, now yawns apart and discloses its composition and genesis. I learn geology the morning after an earthquake."[1] He almost rejoiced in the misfortune attending financial calamities, because it demonstrated the folly of wealth pursued as an end in itself, and proved the ~~the~~ supreme importance of the spiritual and moral interests as the true object of life. He wrote in the *Journal*, "I see a good in such emphatic and universal calamity as the times bring. They dissatisfy me with society.....Behold the boasted world has come to nothing. Prudence itself is at her wit's end. Pride and Thrift and Expediency, who jeered and chirped and were so well pleased with themselves, and made merry with the dream, as they termed it, of Philosophy and Love,--behold they are all flat, and here is the Soul erect and unconquered still."[2] Emerson was not blind to the hardships that panics caused, but he refused to allow his philosophical complacency to be disturbed by them. "You may regret," he said, "if thereby you can help the sufferer, but if you cannot, mind your own business. Then instantly you are comforted. Then instantly the evil begins to be repaired."[3]

1. *Journal* IV, 243.
2. Ibid. IV, 241.
3. Ibid. IV, 245.

CHAPTER IV

Society

Emerson's individualism - His recognition of the benefits of society - Place of social classes in his philosophy - Early attitude toward the lower classes - Labor - Aristocracy - The Woman's Rights Movement - Opposition to war.

The very great importance that Emerson attached to the individual caused society to play a correspondingly smaller part in his philosophy. He did not ignore society, but regarded it as subordinate; the great and final issues of life were to be solved for the individual and by the individual. Said he, "Societies, parties, are only incipient stages, tadpole states of men, as caterpillars are social, but the butterfly not. The true and finished man is ever alone. Men cannot satisfy him; he needs God, and his intercourse with his brother is ever condescending, and in a large degree hypocritical."[1] Yet society and its processes were a part of life, and had to be reckoned with, even by an individualistic philosopher. Moreover, Emerson recognized the necessity of society, and its close relation to the individual and to things moral and spiritual, and this of course, interested him in it. Besides, he had a certain fundamental curiosity, which was interested in all of the phenomena of life

Emerson was not hostiletto society, and his rather

1. *Journal* III, 322.

friendly attitude toward it can be typically illustrated by his statement in the *Journal* of 1824 concerning institutions; "Institutions are a sort of homes. A man may wander long with profit, if he come home at last, but a perpetual vagrant is not honoured."[1] Moreover, he held that social life was not inconsistent with the life of solitude and reflection; the soul might be solitary and reflective in the midst of society, or it might be restless and unsatisfied, longing for the distractions of the world, even in a wilderness; all that could be determined only by the individual soul. It will therefore appear that his attitude toward society was fundamentally different from that of Rousseau. He continually extolled the advantages which have been made possible for man by the accumulations of civilization; and he once likened the modern world to a comfortably furnished home. His attitude was also different from that of the Brook Farm reformers. Although he sympathized with their attempt to simplify life, and although he preferred the society of a small group to that of a larger one, yet their scheme of life laid undue emphasis upon the material side of life, and his common sense saw that it rejected all of the advantages of the outside world, all of the privacy of the home, without securing any greater opportunity for solitude and reflection.

Fundamentally, the existence of social classes was not a matter of great significance in Emerson's philosophy. A man's place in the social order was not the supreme consideration in his life. Whatever his social status, the integrity of his moral and spiritual life was in his own control, and could be affected only by him. This was the great fact in life, and all other considerations were subordinate to it. Moreover, according to the doctrine of compensation, inequality in rank, fortune, and endowment

1. *Journal* I, 320.

is always compensated by the addition or subtraction of other qualities. Theoretically, then, social classes and social inequalities were matters which Emerson might consistently have ignored in a thoroughgoing adherence to his philosophy, and he might even have counselled acceptance of things as they are. Yet in this regard, as in all others, whatever his reflections might have been, it is certain that he would never have allowed the implications of a philosophical doctrine to controvert the dictates of reason, justice, and humanity. He recognized the existence of social classes, and he knew that there were substantial reasons for them, some traditional, some social, some individual. At the same time, he must have reasoned that if every man is a spark of the divine, and if the divine is the supreme fact in man's life, then every man must naturally assume an importance and an equality in the eyes of his brother man that would tend to obliterate class distinctions and unite all men in a bond of common sympathy and understanding. His attitude, therefore, toward social inequalities was not determined by the necessities of a philosophical system, although undoubtedly it was considerably influenced by his general theories of life. In Emerson's early life there was much that tended to put him out of sympathy with the lower classes. He was a quiet, retiring youth, with a strong natural inclination to things moral and spiritual. His home life was quiet and congenial, and his contacts abroad were with persons of refinement, culture, and influence. As might have been expected, therefore, his early references to those lowest in the social scale, are largely concerned with their shortcomings. Their turbulence was distasteful to him, and his moral sensibilities revolted against the coarseness and materialism that appeared so often in their lives. He seems even to have regarded some of them with fear. In 1824, he wrote in his *Journal*, "It is a great step from the thought to the

expression of thought in action...If the wishes of the lowest class that suffers in these long streets should execute themselves, who can doubt that the city would topple in ruins. Do not trust man, Great God! with more power until he has learned to use his little power better."[1] Yet as he grew older, his knowledge of these classes increased with his wider observation and reflection upon the outside world, and with increased knowledge, came understanding and even a degree of sympathy. A quotation concerning class antagonisms from one of the *Journals* will suffice: "...and it seems to every meeting of readers and writers as if it were intolerable that the Broad Street Paddies, bar-room politicians, the sots and loafers, and all manner of ragged and unclean and foul-mouthed persons without a dollar in their pocket should control the property of the country and make the lawgiver and the law. But is that any more than their share whilst you hold property selfishly? They are opposed to you: yes, but first you are opposed to them: they to be sure, malevolently, menacingly, with songs and rowdies and mobs; you cunningly, plausibly, and well-bred; you cheat and they steal; you sleep and eat at their expense; they vote and threaten and sometimes throw at yours."[2] An observation recorded still later concerning the laborers employed in building the railroad through Concord would seem to indicate that he believed hard work to be necessary to discipline the rough and turbulent masses. Part of his statement follows: "And thus peaceful shovels are better, dull as they are, than pikes in the hands of these Kernes; and thus the stern day's work of fifteen or sixteen hours, though deplored by all the humanity of the neighborhood, and though all Concord cries Shame! on the contractors, is a better police than the sheriff and his deputies to let off the peccant humors."[3]

1. *Journal* III, 360.
2. Ibid. VI,100.
3. Ibid. VI, 450.

Yet with Emerson labor was part of the gospel of life, and in time it pleaded the cause of the lower classes. He might dislike their vices, but he could not despise the men that did the world's work. It is not recorded whether he ever expressed himself concerning the organized labor movement, then in its infancy. But it became increasingly plain to him that the services of the working classes deserved recognition and respect, and he accorded it to them. In 1844, he wrote, "The whole human race spend their lives in hard work from simple and necessary motives, and feel the approbation of their conscience...There must be not a few fine words, but very many hard strokes every day to get what even an ascetic wants."[1] In 1848, he wrote, "Who are you that speak of these men? Have you a title to sit in judgment on industrious, effective, producing men who have not indulged themselfes by sitting in a corner and year by year surrounding themselves with new screens from dust and light and vulgarity, but have exposed themselves by labor in the open air to your inspection and criticism? ....Away with you! These are no gentlemen, but servants,- earnest, muscular, toilsome, reliable servants, whom God and man must serve and honor."[2] Then too, With the years Emerson's sympathy for the oppressed, his democracy, and his desire for equality of opportunity increased, and with these came a desire that America should permit no mere accident of birth or circumstances to stand between the individual and self-realization. Nowhere is this more conspicuously illustrated than in his remarks concerning the American Party. Said he, "I hate the narrowness of the Native American party. It is a dog in the manger. It is precisely opposite to all the dictates of love and magnanimity: there-

1. *Journal* VI, 544.
2. Ibid. VII, 519.

fore, of course, opposite to true wisdom."[1] Moreover he came to admire the primitive hardihood, frankness, and strength of character of the rough and ready pioneer, and the energy and seriousness of the immigrant. These people represented the lower classes at their best, and their frankness and sincerity furnished a pleasing contrast to the artificial life of the cities.

If Emerson was not a believer in artificial class distinctions, neither was he a believer in artificial leveling. He believed that there existed a genuinely superior element in the human race, which constituted a legitimate aristocracy. The nature and functions of this true aristocracy varied with the age, but its existence was inevitable, and it performed real services for society. His earliest statement upon the subject, recorded in the *Journal* of 1824, is typical, and comprehensive of his later declarations: "Aristocracy is a good sign.... It must be everywhere. 'Twere the greatest calamity to have it abolished.... No man would consent to live in society if he was obliged to admit everybody to his house that chose to come.... Envy is the tax which all distinctions must pay."[2]

As might have been expected, Emerson's attitude toward the movement to secure equality of rights for women, was typical of his general attitude toward a problem of social inequality. In 1851, he wrote in his *Journal*,"To-day is holden at Worcester the Woman's Convention. I think that as long as they have not equal rights of property and voting they are not on the right footing."[3] There follows in the *Journal* a somewhat extended discussion of the movement, in which Emerson stated that he believed that the inequality in the rights of the sexes had come out of a savage and

1. *Journal VII*, 115.
2. Ibid. I, 311.
3. Ibid. VIII, 258.

military period, in which woman could not defend herself, and, consequently was assigned to a man for protection. He thought that legally married women should stand in a partnership relation to their husbands. Aside from its effort to secure voting and property rights, he did not think much of the movement, and believed that woman could best raise her status otherwise by the development of her peculiarly feminine qualities, and by her own personal charm and accomplishments. His conclusion, in a characteristic vein, asserted that the vast majority of women lived dreary lives for the same reason as the vast majority of men.

In 1855, he consented to address the Woman's Rights Convention during its sessions in Boston. He asserted woman possessed a superior susceptibility to moral sentiment. Woman, he said, had been prominent in all great moral advances, and he declared, "I can say, for one, that all my points would sooner be carried if women voted."[1] He ridiculed the assertion that women were not competent to deal with political issues, and said that they could hardly show less genuine interest or intelligence in political affairs than the average male voter. Furthermore, their idealism would have a purifying influence upon politics, and if they could be contaminated by politics, it was high time that politics were reformed. In many respects, he said, the history of the progress of society was the history of the gradual emancipation of woman. Yet, he was opposed to propaganda to secure the vote, and believed it would come if necessary or essential, and he concluded with these prophetic words: "I do not think that it yet appears that women wish this equal share in public affairs. But it is they, and not we, that are to determine it. Let the laws be purged of every barbarous remainder, every barbarous impediment to women. Let the public donations for education be equally shared by them,

1. *Works* XI, 420.

let them enter a school as freely as a church, let them have and hold and give their property as men do theirs - and in a few years it will easily appear whether they wish a voice in making the laws that are to govern them."[1]

Emerson was early impressed with the tremendous social waste, as well as the folly and iniquity of war in general. He was proud of the American Revolution and of the part which his ancestry had played in it, but he felt that few wars could be justified on so good grounds. In 1835, he wrote Henry Ware Jr. that he favored the abolition of war, as inhuman and unmanlike, and that he would gladly study the "outward signs and exponents of that progress which has brought us to this feeling."[2] By 1837, he had become radically opposed to war, as the following quotations from the *Journals* will show: "How foolish is war. Let the injured party speak to the injurer until their minds meet,"[3] and "But if a nation of men is exalted to that height of morals as to refuse to fight and choose rather to suffer loss of goods and loss of life than to use violence, they must not be helpless, but most effective and great men; they would overawe their invader, and make him ridiculous; they would communicate the contagion of their virtue and innoculate all mankind."[4] His early views upon the subject of the abolition of war are expressed more moderately and at some length in his address before the American Peace Society in 1836, and I have undertaken to summarize them: War had been a necessary step in the evolution of the race, but its usefulness had passed. The instinct of fighting was fundamentally an instinct of self-help, and was taking a new and higher development with the progress

1. *Works* XI, 423.
2. *Journal* III, 574.
3. Ibid. IV, 275.
4. Ibid. IV, 297.

of civilization. The sympathy with war was a juvenile and temporary sentiment, "and as all history is the picture of war, as we have said, so it is no less true that it is the record of the mitigation and decline of war."[1] Not only, said he, was sentiment opposed to war, but also the interests of commerce and industry. Moreover, the increasing condemnation of the causeless butcheries of wars in the past, indicated the progress that had been made against war, even though the doctrine of the right of war still remained.

Emerson realized the practical difficulties that would attend the attempt to secure universal peace, but asserted that every good now enjoyed by society once appeared visionary and impracticable, and declared, "It is the tendency of the true interest of man to become his desire and steadfast aim."[2] Furthermore, he argued that the necessity of war and of the preparation for war depended upon, and was indicative of the state of mind of civilization. "Thus, "said he, "we are always daunted by the appearances; not seeing that their whole value lies at bottom in the state of mind. It is really a thought that built this portentous war-establishment, and a thought shall also melt it away."[3] Civilization, he said, had passed successively through the stages of offensive warfare, and defensive warfare to the third stage of sacrifice and devotion to the common good. He asserted that it was of little consequence how the abolition of war would be accomplished; the spread of the sentiment against it in the hearts of men, was of principal importance. A Congress of Nations, however, seemed to him the most promising means of securing peace; and he believed that the sentiment against war would find its greatest champion in the United States.

1. *Works* XI, 158.
2. Ibid. XI, 163.
3. Ibid. XI, 163.

In the years that followed Emerson remained consistent in his general opposition to war, but with the advent of the Civil War he modified his position somewhat. He had seen the steady refusal of the slaveholding interests to yield to moral suasion; he believed that all conciliation with them in the past had been almost wholly to their advantage; he had gradually been forced to believe that the abolition of slavery could be secured only by destruction of it; and, finally, he believed the abolition of slavery a matter of sufficiently great moral importance to justify war. Consequently, he gladly accepted the issue of war, even though he admitted it would cost heavily in money and lives. His declaration that sometimes the smell of powder is good, is too well known to need repitition here. He recognized the many benefits of the War, and was desirous that it should be fought to a decisive and successful conclusion, however great the cost might be. Moreover, he modified somewhat his opposition to war. Undoubtedly he still sincerely desired the mitigation of it, yet he realized that there might be occasions when it was morally unavoidable, and consequently he withdrew his extreme and unqualified opposition to it. I quote the following statement of his position from the *Journal* for 1862: "Though practically nothing is so improbable or perhaps impossible a contingency for me, yet I do not wish to abdicate so extreme a privilege as the use of the sword or the bullet. For the peace of the man who has forsworn the use of the bullet, seems to me not quite peace."[1]

1. *Journal* IX, 362.

CHAPTER V

Participation in Public Affairs - Slavery

Superior importance of the moral and spiritual duties of the individual - Letter to Van Buren - Interest in slavery - Opposition to it on ethical and religious grounds - Early dislike of anti-slavery agitators - First speech on slavery - Increasing hostility to slavery - Address on West India emancipation - Changing conception of the negro - Responsibility of the North for slavery - Advocacy of compensatory emancipation - Northern subserviency - Texas and Mexico - Violent opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law - Emerson actively enters the struggle against slavery - Supports the Free State Party in Kansas - Admiration of John Brown - Attempt to address the mob at Tremont Temple.

Emerson's philosophy of life did not, of course, forbid him to take an active part in public affairs, but there was much in it and in his own temperament that militated against his direct participation in political and official duties. Such duties had to be performed, his good sense would have asserted, and therefore they are legitimate, but they are not the most important of man's duties. Political affairs, though a necessary part of this life, like it, were transient and superficial; they did not constitute a supreme obligation and interest, as in the case of religion and morality. Emerson seems to have been wholly destitute of that sort of ambition which makes public life attractive to so many men. On the other hand, he possessed an insatiable interest in things moral and spiritual. It must not be inferred from this statement that Emerson shut himself off from the political life

of his day as a religious recluse might have done. On the contrary, I suspect few men of so pronounced a religious and philosophical bent have ever taken so lively an interest in public affairs. But he felt that he lacked the capacity for participation in public affairs, and since there was no lack of persons who were anxious for public office, why should he not devote himself to greater and more abiding interests for which his intuition told him he had both interest and capacity? Moreover, he knew from observation that practical politics were inextricably interwoven with narrowness and selfishness, and from these, as well as the bitterness of partisanism, his idealistic nature shrank. Finally, he had a feeling that human progress was affected very little by practical politics, that real changes in the affairs of men were evolutionary, and took place in the minds and hearts of men, rather than in the political arena. In 1835, he wrote in the *Journal*: "Certainly a man would be glad to do his country service, but he cannot cram his service down its throat. It is time enough if he come when he is called. It is enough for him if he has eyes to see that he is an infinite spectator, without hurrying uncalled to be an infinite doer.... He cannot work directly on men, but obliquely. Few men bring more than one or two points into contact with society at once; they must be content to influence it thereby."[1] In 1844, he said: "The stream of human affairs flows its own way, and is very little affected by the activity of legislators. What great masses of men wish done, will be done; and they do not wish it for a freak, but because it is their state and natural end."[2] These two passages illustrate Emerson's attitude toward participation in public affairs. It was this attitude that he consistently maintained through most of his life, and abandoned with extreme reluctance, and then only in the case of public questions that clearly

1. *Journal* III, 465.
2. *Works*, XI, 139.

possessed great ethical significance. Even then, he entered the lists, not as a politician, but as a crusader against a specific evil.

The first occasion in public affairs on which Emerson felt that his loyalty to morality and justice was sufficiently challenged to justify action on his part, was the removal of the Cherokees during the administration of Van Buren. This seemed to him, as to many others, a great wrong to the Indians, and an action which reflected upon the national honor. He was greatly disturbed by it. In his *Journal* for 1837, he wrote, "Then is this disaster of the Cherokees brought to me by a sad friend to blacken my days and nights."[1] Yet he was loath to act in the matter, and did so largely because no one else would, as his own words show: "This tragic Cherokee business which we stirred at a meeting in the church yesterday will look to me degrading and injurious, do what I can.... I stir in it for the sad reason that no other mortal will move."[2] At last, urged by friends and pressed by his conscience, he wrote a letter to Van Buren. The letter was couched in dignified and respectful language, but protested strongly and effectively against the proposed action, as opposed both to ethics and sound public policy. To an unbiased reader, it seems almost a model of its kind. Yet to Emerson the task was an uncongenial one, as the *Journal* testifies: "Yesterday went the letter to Van Buren, a letter hated of me, a deliverance that does not deliver the soul... Yet I accept the Dartmouth College invitation to speak to the boys with great delight. I write my journal, I read my lectures with joy, but this stirring in the philanthropic mud gives me no peace. I will let the Republic alone until the Republic comes to me. I fully sympathize, be sure,

1. *Journal* IV, 424.
2. Ibid. IV, 426.

with the sentiment I write, but I accept it rather from my friends than dictate it. It is not my impulse to say it, and therefore my genius deserts me."[1]

Emerson was not again induced to enter the public forum until the slavery question became a moral issue that could not be ignored. His reactions to the slavery question constitute the most interesting and important phase of his relation to public affairs, and therefore demand detailed consideration.

Emerson early took notice of slavery, and his wrestling with the problem continued until he became an open and avowed advocate of abolition. His first reference to slavery occurs in the *Journal* for 1822, and it was, of course, the ethical and religious aspects of the problem which first concerned him. He was, even at this very early age, evolving that ethico-religious philosophy of man and nature which was later to constitute the central theme of his lectures and literary productions. In his philosophizing, he was attempting to e examine all of the phenomena of life and society to determine their relation to the moral and spiritual life. It was therefore inevitable that he should be profoundly interested in slavery. In the *Journal* to which reference was made, he recorded a poetic and dramatic account of the manner in which slaves were captured. Although he opposed slavery on moral and religious grounds, he admitted that men are not all equally endowed mentally or by the circumstances of their birth. "Throughout society there is therefore not only the direct and acknowledged relation of king and subject, master and servant, but a secret dependence quite as universal, of one man upon another, which sways habits, opinions and conduct. This prevails to an infinite extent and.... the same pleasure which the dog and horse feel when they rely upon the superior intelligence of man is felt by the lower parts of our species

1. *Journal* IV, 430.

with reference to the higher."[1] He went on to say that man's dominion over domesticated animals is to be justified upon two grounds, namely, their want of reason, their adaptation to our wants, and their own advantage; and he admitted that the same considerations offered strong justification for slavery. This juvenile reasoning sounds strangely cold, and will, doubtless, seem to many not characteristic of Emerson. It is, however, only an instance of his attempt to apply common sense to problems of an ethical nature. He was not willing to ignore the facts of any situation, however repulsive they might be, and he knew idealism must take practical considerations into account, even though it need not always bow to them. Indeed he concluded this consideration of the question in what seems a more characteristic manner, namely, by referring it to the moral intuitions: "To establish," he said, "by whatever specious argumentation, the perfect expediency of the worst institutions on earth is *prima facie* an assault upon Reason and Common Sense. No ingenious sophistry can ever reconcile the unperverted mind to the pardon of slavery; nothing but tremendous familiarity and the bias of private interest. Under the influence of better arguments than can be offered in support of slavery we should sustain our tranquillity by the confidence that no surrender of our opinion is ever demanded, and that we are only required to discover the lurking fallacy which the disputant acknowledges to exist."[2] Emerson could not but feel that slavery was a travesty upon religion and justice, for, he asserted, the slave was not only denied the ordinary amenities of life that were open to other men, but, possessing an immortal soul, passed through this life and into the Great Beyond without learning of God, and without any opportunity to understand and practice human virtues. These

1. *Journal* I, 181.
2. Ibid. I, 185.

considerations, modified somewhat by more mature thought, but also fortified by continued reflection upon the subject, stuck in Emerson's mind, and could not but make him an uncompromising opponent of slavery sooner or later. By 1835 his opposition to slavery had become much more pronounced, as will be clear from the following outburst against some of the clergy who had undertaken to defend slavery: "Let Christianity," he wrote, "speak ever for the poor and the low. Though the voice of society should demand a defence of slavery, from all its organs, that service can never be expected of me. My opinion is of no worth, but I have not a syllable of all the language I have learned, to utter for the planter. If by opposing slavery, I go to undermine institutions, I confess I do not want to live in a nation where slavery exists. The life of this world has but a limited worth in my eyes, and really is not worth such a price as the toleration of slavery. Therefore, though I may be so far restrained by unwillingness to cut the planter's throat as that I should refrain from denouncing him, yet I pray God that not even in my dream or in madness may I ever incur the disgrace of articulating one word of apology for the slave-trader or the slave-holder."[1] It was in this year that he opened his church to anti-slavery speakers, and from this time forward, the references in the *Journal* to slavery increased both in number and bitterness.

Yet Emerson was slow to align himself with anti-slavery agitators. In 1837 he made his first speech on the subject of slavery. He deprecated the closing of the churches and most of the halls to the discussion of the slavery question. "But," said he, "when we have distinctly settled for ourselves the right and wrong of this question, and have covenanted with ourselves to keep the channels of opinion

1. *Journal* III, 446.

open, each man for himself, I think we have done all that is incumbent upon most of us to do. Sorely as we may feel the wrongs of the slave in Carolina and Cuba, we have each of us our hands full of much nearer duties.... The secret, the esoteric of abolition - a secret too far from the abolitionists - is that the negro and the negro-holders are really of one party, that when the apostle of freedom has gained his first point of repealing the negro laws, he will find the free negro the type and exponent of that very animal law; standing as he does in nature below the series of thought."[1] Emerson's failure to ally himself promptly with the anti-slavery agitators was due further to his constitutional dislike of controversy, and to a conviction for many years that most of those who were actively engaged in the propaganda against slavery were lacking in seriousness, earnestness, and stability of character. In 1835 he had recorded his opinion of George Thompson, as a small man who considered the objections to him as aimed at the cause that he represented. As late as 1844, he had asserted that the man who worked steadily in his garden did more to abolish slavery than the one who went to the Abolition meeting and made a speech. Many anti-slavery agitators, he thought, rated themselves and their services too high, and he argued that they indulged in those very luxuries that were produced by the institution of slavery, at the same time that they denounced the planter for keeping slaves to enable him to live in luxury. Certainly, Emerson's slowness to champion openly and ardently the crusade against slavery did not proceed from a lack of the courage necessary to espouse a cause that he knew was right, but unpopular. On the contrary the first support that he gave the anti-slavery agitators was a fearless defence of

1. *Cabot* II, 425-429.

their courage in holding and asserting their opinions, and a demand that they be accorded the privilege of being heard. In 1837, while reading his lecture on *Heroism,* he raised his eyes from the manuscript, and said extempore: "It is but the other day that the brave Lovejoy gave his breast to the bullets of a mob for rights of free speech and opinion and died when it was better not to live."[1] Woodberry says that his words rang out, clear as a rifle shot, in the quiet hall, and that they sent a thrill through his auditors , never to be forgotten. Gradually he began to realize that his systfictures could not be applied to many of the men and women who were devoting themselves to the opposition to slavery. He could not fail to recognize the worth and services of men like Garrison and Phillips. In 1844, he wrote of Garrison, "I cannot speak of that Gentleman without respect."[2] In the same year he wrote in the *Journal,* "I wish that Webster and Everett and also the young political aspirants of Massachusetts should hear Wendell Phillips speak."[3] In the following year when a question arose whether the local lyceum should accept the proffer of a lecture on slavery by Phillips, Emerson urged acceptance because it would add variety to the course, and "Second because I thought in the present state of this country, the particular subject of slavery had a commanding right to be heard in all places in New England, in season and sometimes out of season; that as in Europe the partition of Poland was an outrage so flagrant that all European men must be willing, once in every month or two to be plagued with hearing over again the horrid story, so this iniquity of slavery was a ghost

1. *Works* II, 262.
2. *Journal* VI, 541.
3. Ibid. VI, 542.

that would not down at the bidding of Boston merchants, or the best democratic drill-officers, but the people must consent to be plagued with it from time to time until something was done, and we had appeased the negro blood so."[1] When Emerson had arrived at this degree of sympathy with the anti-slavery agitators, it required only the development of a situation that was naturally passing from bad to worse to draw him into the struggle himself.

The year 1844 is, for this reason, and for a number of others, a significant date in tracing the history of Emerson's growing opposition to slavery. In this year occurred the jubilee to celebrate the tenth anniversary of West Indian emancipation, and Emerson delivered an address for the occasion at a meeting in Concord. This address sets forth in some detail his views upon the subject of slavery at that time, and deserves rather full analysis. One statement in it is especially significant. Nature, Emerson asserted, would save only what was worth saving and did so, not by compassion, but by power. Men must be saved through themselves, and neither propaganda nor vituperation would avail against eternal fact. Then he said, "I esteem the occasion of this jubilee to be the proud discovery that the black race can contend with the white."[2] In support of his statement, he pointed to the progress that the West Indian negroes had made since their emancipation, and to Toussaint L'Ouverture as an example of negro genius and negro capacity for attaining freedom. This shows clearly that Emerson had changed his conception of the negro, and changed it to such an extent as to sweep away all of the arguments for slavery and objections to emancipation that he had once been willing to concede possessed a semblance of truth. Slavery must go. "There

1. *Journal* VII, 5.
2. *Works* XI, 145.

have been moments, I said, when men might be forgiven who doubted. Those moments are past."[1]

Moreover he fixed the responsibility for slavery quite as much upon the North as upon the South. The Southern planters demanded slavery, not because it was moral, but because it enabled them to live in comfort, and even in luxury. Northern merchants and statesmen were glad to escape the odium of the slave drivers, but they selfishly and abjectly defended and protected the institution of slavery because they too desired to live in comfort and luxury upon the cheap products of slave labor. Whatever might be their private life, Northern statesmen had consistently betrayed the best sentiment of their constituents whenever there had been a critical occasion in the struggle against slavery, and had made a byword of their office. Slavery had degraded the whole national life. "America is not civil whilst Africa is barbarous."[2] The South could not be expected to free the slaves of her own volition and at her own expense, and since slavery was a national plague, he advocated compensatory emancipation as the best solution of the problem.

The years that followed 1844 brought with them a train of events that served to increase Emerson's opposition to slavery, and to increase his disappointment and disgust at the servile and mercenary conduct of the North and her statesmen. Prominent among these events was the seizure of colored citizens of Massachusetts by officials of South Carolina, and the expulsion of Judge Hoar who had been delegated to protest against the act. Emerson was bitter in his reproaches of Carolina and no less bitter in his denunciation of the lack of resistance on the part of New England. Several

1. *Works* XI, 147.
2. Ibid. XI, 145.

pages of the *Journal* are filled with his reflections upon these events. Like many another far-seeing man, Emerson realized that Texas and much of the Mexican territory must ultimately come under the control of the United States, but the circumstances and the manner in which it was acquired afforded him still further evidence of the high-handed policy of the pro-slavery party and the weakness and suppleness of the opposition. He declared that the only real opposition to the War had come from Benton and Calhoun, who, contrary to their sectional interests, had had the courage to do more than any Northern congressman had dared do either for his constituents or for right and justice.

The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 was a rude assault upon the anti-slavery sentiment of the North, and Emerson was as profoundly stirred by it as any. He abandoned all faith in the integrity of the New England representatives who had aided in the enactment of the Law, and he denounced them bitterly, even Webster, whom he had admired from youth. To him the Law was an stounding revelation , both of the suppleness of the North and of the aggressive spirit of the pro-slavery forces. Slavery had not only held its own at the South; it had dared come North and outrage Northern rights and sentiments in order that its satisfaction might be complete. For Emerson there could be but one course, resistance to the law while it was on the statute books, and denunciation of it until it should be repealed. He declared that Congress had given legal sanction to a wrong, and had demanded of citizens that they commit crime or be guilty of violating the law. On May 3, 1851, he addressed a meeting of the citizens of Concord, called to protest against 'this filthy law.' He declared: "The last year has forced us all into politics. There is an infamy in the air....I have lived all my life in this State, and never had any experience of personal inconvenience from the laws until now.... But the Act of Congress of September 18,

1850, is a law which every one of you will break on the earliest occasion,- a law which no man can obey or abet the obeying without loss of self-respect and forfeiture of the name of a gentleman."[1] The only benefit (benefit) that he would concede might come from such a law was that it might make slavery more odious. He refused to accept the arguments that Webster and Others brought forward that the law was constitutional and that acceptance of it was necessary to preserve the Union. With Seward, he believed in a 'higher law' and he attacked the sincerity of motives of those who appealed to the Constitution in order to defend an immoral law, and excuse themselves for supporting it. "Webster and Choate," he said, "think to discredit the higher law by personalities; they insinuate much about transcendentalists and abstactionists and people of no weight. It is the cheap cant of lawyers and merchants in a failing condition, and of rogues. These classes usually defend an immorality by the practice of men of the world, and talk of dreamers and enthusiasts."[2] As for the Union, such a law tended to its dissolution, rather than to its preservation. It created a situation that made the Union, not only weaker, but unbearable. "Let us," he said, "respect the Union to all honest ends, but let us also respect an older and wider union, the laws of nature and rectitude...Let us not lie nor steal, nor help to steal, and let us not call stealing by any fine names such as union or patriotism."[3] There 不 worse things than disunion: "The worst mischiefs that could follow from Secession and new combination of the smallest fragments of the wreck were slight and medicable to the calamity your Union has brought us. Another year, and a

1. CabotII, 578.
2. *Journal VIII, 197.*
3. Cabot II, 584-585.

standing army, officered by Southern gentlemen to protect the Commissioners and to hunt the fugitives, will be illustrating the new sweets of Union in Boston, Worcester, and Springfield."[1] In fact Emerson had begun to believe that there were fundamental differences between the North and the South, which might make separation desirable. Said he, "I am willing to leave them to the facts. If they continue to have a binding interest, they will be pretty sure to find it out: if not, they will consult their peace in parting. But one thing appears certain to me, that, as soon as the constitution ordains an immoral law, it ordains disunion."[2] Finally, the only possible escape from the dark situation that he saw, lay in compensatory emancipation: "There can never be peace whilst this devilish seed of war is in our soil. Root it out, burn it up, pay for the damage, and let us have done with it. It costs a hundred millions. Twice so much were cheap for it.... I would pay a little of my estate with joy; for it darkens my days. It is a local, accidental distemper, and the interests of a continent cannot be sacrificed for it."[3]

Emerson was now drawn definitely and actively into the struggle against slavery. He repeated his Concord speech a number of times in behalf of his friend, Doctor John G. Palfrey, who was a candidate for Congress from his district. At Cambridge, he was hissed and hooted by young men who sympathized with the South, and his radical views were generally disapproved by the so-called respectable classes. In 1854, in beginning a speech against the Fugitive Slave Law, he declared that it was contrary to his practice to speak to public questions because he felt that to do so was generally hurtful and distracting to men of the profession

1. *Journal* VII, 186-187.
2. Works XI, 206.
3. *Journal VIII*, 202.

and interests that he had most at heart. But, he asserted, the particular question was such as must be of concern to all who possessed even the simplest and most fundamental characteristic of students and scholars, namely, the ability to read and think and respond to the moral sentiment. This speech is noteworthy for a brief and clear statement that the moral sentiment of the individual is superior to law and government, and that law and government derive their strength and efficacy from the sanction given them by men of high moral worth: "And no man has a right to hope that the laws of New York will defend him from the contamination of slaves ? another day until he has made up his mind that he will not owe his protection to the laws of New York, but to his own sense and spirit. Then he protects New York."[1] In January of 1855, Emerson delivered one of a course of lectures on slavery given at Tremont Temple in Boston. He was reluctant to do so, and wrote his brother William that he felt as unfit for anti-slavery agitation as Hamlet for the task imposed upon him. Nevertheless, he felt it had to be done, and he resolved not to shirk because it was uncongenial and even disagreeable work. In this lecture, he reasserted his conviction that slavery must go. The evils attending it were so great that the matter no longer admitted of argument. The only question really remaining was the best way in which to get rid of it. He pointed once more to the purchase of the West Indian slaves by the British government as suggesting the remedy. "I say buy, - never conceding the right of the planter to own, but that we may acknowledge the calamity of his position, and bear a countryman's share in relieving him; and because it is the only practical course, and is innocent."[2]

The Kansas-Nebraska struggle brought Emerson still more actively into the war upon slavery. The effrontery of the

1. *Works* XI, 235.
2. Cabot II, 568-593.

pro-slavery forces in their attempt to establish slavery by statute and protect it by force in territory that seemed to be destined by nature to be free, could not appear to him otherwise than outrageous, and even criminal. Yet the apathy and servility of the people drove him almost to exasperation and despair. In 1854, he wrote in the *Journal* concerning the Nebraska Bill, which Douglas was proposing, "It is only done by Douglas and his accomplices by calculation upon the brutal ignorance of the people, upon the wretched masses of Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, and so on, people who can't read or know anything beyond what the village democrat tells them."[1] This discouraging prospect, however, could not withdraw Emerson from a cause that he felt to be one of fundamental right and morality, and the success of which was therefore imperatively necessary; rather it intensified his feeling for such a cause and made his adherence to it more firm. Moreover, the struggle soon assumed such aspects as would have stirred even a phlegmatic person to action if he possessed any anti-slavery convictions, and Emerson was far from being phlegmatic. On May 26, 1856, he addressed a meeting of the citizens of Concord to protest against the attack on Sumner. Sumner's consistent opposition to slavery and his refusal to play politics had secured for him Emerson's approval. He reviewed Sumner's public life, praised his spotless record, and took occasion to answer the trivial accusations which his detractors had brought against him. After denouncing the assault upon him as the barbarous act of a man representing a barbarous state, he declared, "The whole state of South Carolina does not now offer one or any number of persons who are to be weighed for a moment in the scale with such a person as the meanest of them all has now struck down."[2]

1. *Journal* VIII, 443.
2. *Works* XI, 248.

Emerson took an active part in the raising of funds for the Kansas settlers. At a meeting in Cambridge, he advocated buying food, clothing, and arms for them, and asserted that they had shown a resolution to save themselves, and therefore had a claim upon the support of others. He urged all to make even extreme sacrifices to aid them, and advocated that the State of Massachusetts, itself, should assist them, maintaining that it was her duty to find means to protect her citizens. "But first, "he said, "let them hang the walls of the state-house with black crape, and order funeral services to be said for the citizens whom they were unable to defend."[1] The peculiarity of the case of Kansas, he said, was that the right was all on one side. He bitterly criticised the President, and fixed the whole responsibility for the disorder upon the federal government, which for many years had been "the chief obstruction to the common weal." He declared that he had little esteem for governments, and that he set the private individual first, then the primary assembly next, and, last of all, the government. There was no Union, he said, when no citizen of Massachusetts could travel in honor and safety through the South, and no one in the South dared denounce kidnapping: "I am glad to see that the terror at disunion and anarchy is disappearing."[2] The struggle to abolish slavery would be more difficult than the Revolution. He advised the formation of Committees of Safety in the towns,and said that all Americans should come home to save their country before it was necessary to "depart to some land where freedom exists."

The Kansas struggle brought Emerson into contact with John Brown, and the character and conduct of Brown made a strong appeal to him. He records in the *Journal* the favorable impression that Brown made upon him as he told his experiences

1. *Works* XI, 253.
2. Ibid. XI, 261.

at a meeting of citizens at the Concord town hall. He agreed heartily with Brown's denunciation of the doctrine of non-resistance. E. W. Emerson says that Brown was a man of dignified and attractive appearance when he first saw him in his father's home, but that he had almost become wild when, a year later in the town hall at Concord, he told of his experiences in Kansas. This must have made a profound impression on Emerson, and have intensified his sympathy for a man whose fate was so tragic. It does not appear that he was at all aware of Brown's Virginia project, but he would have probably approved it.[2] In his lecture on *Courage* delivered in Boston while Brown was awating sentence of death, he spoke of him as "that new saint, than whom none purer or more brave was ever led by love of men into conflict and death, - the new saint awaiting his martyrdom, and who, if he shall suffer, will make the gallows glorious like the cross."[1] It is only fair to note that this statement was omitted from the essay published ten years later, "the distance of time," says Cabot, "having brought the case into a juster perspective."[1] While Brown was still awaiting execution, he addressed a meeting at Tremont Temple for the relief of his family. He characterized him as "the rarest of heroes, a pure idealist, with no by-ends of his own," and asserted that there was not at that moment another citizen in the land more worthy to live or as deserving of public and private honor as he. He contrasted his purity of character and heroism with the servility of his judges, and asked, "What avails their learning or veneration? At a pinch they are no more than idiots."[2] After the execution of Brown, Emerson addressed a memorial meeting in Salem. He reviewed Brown's life, which he said had been

1. Cabot II, 597.
2. *Works* XI, 272.

noble and romantic, and called him 'the founder of liberty in Kansas.' He concluded with the assertion that the attempt to stamp out abolition would not succeed, because abolition was identical with love and justice,"which was before Alfred, before Lycurgus, before slavery, and will be after it."[1]

Emerson's final service to the anti-slavery cause,before the beginning of the Civi War, was a speech in Tremont Temple, Boston, on January 24, 1861. Phillips had asked him to attend,"and," Emerson wrote, "esteeming such an invitation a command, though sorely against my inclination and habit, I went, and though I had nothing to say, showed myself.....The mob roared whenever I attempted to speak, and, after several beginnings, I withdrew."[2]

1. *Works* XI, 281.
2. Cabot II, 599-601.

CHAPTER VI

The Civil War

The rejuvenation of national life - Emerson's hope of emancipation - His Smithsonian address - His arguments for emancipation - The Emancipation Proclamation - Emerson's visit in Washington - His impressions of the government - His attitude of loyalty and support - His criticisms - His general satisfaction with the course of the war - Preservation of the Union - Reconstruction - Emerson's radical sympathies

Emerson was in the midst of a course of lectures on *Life and Literature* when the news of the attack on Fort Sumpter reached Boston. Instead of giving one of his regular lectures, he spoke upon *Civilization at a Pinch*. He asserted that it was a relief to know that at last the issue had become clear, and expressed great satisfaction at the unanimous response of the North to the call of loyalty and freedom. "How," he asked, "does Heaven help us when civilization is at a hard pinch? Why, by a whirlwind of patriotism, not believed to exist, but now magnetizing all discordant masses under its terrific unity. It is an affair of instincts;.....It is the day of the populace; they are wiser than their teachers.....I will never again speak lightly of a crowd."[1] The war was far from being merely a calamity. It had rejuvenated national life and spirit, and had called forth the virtues of courage, loyalty, co-operation. "We have been very homeless," he said, "some of

1. Cabot II, 599-601.

us, for some years past, - say since 1850; but now we have a country again."[1]

Emerson's great hope was that the war would bring emancipation. In the *Journal* for 1861, he wrote, "But to me the first advantage of the war is the favorable moment it has made for cutting out of our cancerous Slavery. Better that war and defeats continue until we have come to that amputation."[2] He believed that the war could not continue long until the North should become the champion of freedom, and the South of slavery. He was able, however, to understand Lincoln's refusal to declare for emancipation immediately upon the outbreak of the war. "If," he said, "Mr. Lincoln appear slow and timid in proclaiming emancipation, and, like a bashful suitor, shows the way to deny him, it is to be remembered that he is not as free as a poet to state what he ideal or desirable, but must take a considered step, which he can keep. Otherwise his proclamation would be a weak bravado, without value or respect."[3] As time went on, however, he became impatient with the delay, and fearful lest the opportunity for emancipation should be lost. In his lecture on *American Civilization* at the Smithsonian Institution, on January 31, 1862, he warned the North that it had always lost its advantage by compromising and hesitating. "The evil you contend with," he said, "has taken alarming proportions, and you still content yourself with parrying the blows it aims, but as if enchanted, abstain from striking at the cause."[4] In the *Journal* for 1862, there is an entry for August 30, which summarizes the case for emancipation as Emerson saw it. First of all, he argued for emancipation

1. Cabot II, 599-601.
2. *Journal* IX, 335.
3. Cabot II, 62.
4. *Works* XI, 300.

because of the eternal right of it. Secondly, he believed that it was necessary to create an army in the rear of the enemy, and that emancipation would do it. His third argument shows more political acumen than has been commonly credited to Emerson. He asserted that unless the North declared for emancipation, the South might ultimately be forced to do so in order to gain foreign recognition. The the heart of the Union cause would then be gone. The blockade would be raised. The border States, California, Wisconsin, and Minnesota might secede, or even prefer to join the Confederacy, rather than help pay for subduing the South under such circumstances, and the Eastern States would be left to pay for a lost cause or be forced to repudiate a debt that was mainly owed to them. When the Emancipation Proclamation was finally issued, Emerson hailed it as the greatest victory of the year. "Great is the force of the Proclamation," he wrote, in the *Journal*, "It works when men are sleeping, when the army goes into winter quarters, when generals are treacherous or imbecile."[1] He conceded the wisdom of the President's delay, but asserted that, although a difficult and dangerous course, it was the only one open to him, and that there must be no turning back.

After delivering his lecture at the Smithsonian Institution, Emerson spent a few days in Washington. He saw and talked with Sumner, Chase, Bates, Stanton, Wells, Seward, Lord Lyons, Representative Hooper, Governor Andrew, Governor Fish, Mrs. Fremont, and others. He was received and entertained on terms of considerable intimacy by persons of influence, and gained a good deal of confidential information regarding the condition of the government and the state of public affairs. His impression, as recorded in the *Journal*, was that there was a considerable lack of unity and harmony in the government, and absence of a clear and definite

1. *Journal* IX, 450.

policy as to slavery. In May of 1863, Secretary Stanton appointed Emerson to serve on the Board of Visitors to West Point. He took an unexpected amount of interest in the inspection of the institution. He was well pleased with the conduct of the Academy, and believed it well suited to the development of industry, probity, veracity, and loyalty. In his report he stated that the administration appeared to him judicious, and more mild than he had supposed. He recommended that competitive examinations be established, and that the preliminary examinations be made more rigorous in order that it might not be necessary to teach elementary subjects to the cadets before proceeding to their more advanced and specialized training.

This summarizes Emerson's more intimate relation to the war and the government. His attitude toward the government throughout the war was one of consistent loyalty and support. Not that he did not find much to criticize. But the aim of those in authority came more and more to coincide with the policies that he had advocated earlier; he knew that difficulties, not easily understood by the outsider, beset officials; and finally, he realized that government, like human nature, had its limitations. Hence it was that his criticisms were mainly confined to more or less critical observations recorded in the *Journal*. Most of these grew out of his impatience with what he felt was timidity, irresolution, and a disposition to temporize with slavery. Lincoln's policy of awaiting the mature development of public sentiment before proclaiming emancipation, very nearly exceeded Emerson's patience, and he often felt that the President lacked vigor in the prosecution of the war. He was frequently aware of a breakdown of the governmental war machine, due to administrative weakness and political intrigue, as the following quotation from the *Journal* shows: "Our commerce has somewhat grand

in its power....But our politics are petty and expectant. The Government is paralyzed, the army paralyzed, and we are waiters on Providence. Better for us, perhaps, that we should be ruled by slow heads than by bold ones, whilst insight is withheld. Yet one conceives of a head capable of taking in all the elements of this problem, the blockade, the stone fleet, the novel landings, insurrection, English ill will, French questionability, Texas."[1] However, he felt that the government had shown itself equal to, and even superior to the masses of the people in energy and initiative, and, best of all, it was honest and well intentioned: "I say it were happier, if Genius should appear in the Government, but if it do not, we have got the first essential element, namely, honesty. And let us hold that gift dear."[2]

Emerson was quite as often disappointed in the attitude of his fellow citizens toward the war, as he was in the policies of the government. The war had reduced his own income to the point of causing him real hardship, yet he was able to write his brother, "But far better that this grinding should go on bad and worse than we be driven into a hasty peace or any peace restoring the old rottenness."[3] It was hard for him to realize that the ability of the average man to adhere steadfastly and consistently to a cause was not so great. The *Journal* contains many complaints of the lack of enthusiasm, which followed the great outburst of patriotic fervor at the beginning of the war. Yet, on the whole, he was satisfied with the progress of the war, and found less reason for pessimism than for optimism. The war had revealed many elements of national strength which had been undreamed of during the years of peace and prosperity - moral energy, unselfishness, and heroism. Spiritually and morally

1. *Journal* IX, 364.
2. Ibid IX, 363.
3. Cabot II, 613.

it had "substituted chronic hope for chronic despair." Moreover Emerson's philosophical idealism, led to an optimism that was not disturbed by solicitude for the fate of any particular institution. He often thought of the war as a tester of men and things; if they could not survive it, why should he be concerned? They simply were not in accord with the eternal, and it was no fault of his. It was sufficient for him if he and his countrymen were seriously and earnestly pursuing a policy that was ethically sound, and this they were doing, so long as they were making war upon slavery. It is therefore not surprising that he was not greatly disturbed by the early victories of the Confederacy. To him, these victories appeared spectacular; the cause of abolition was not lost, though one army had been defeated by another. "But ideas and their slow massive might are irresistible at last."[1] As might be expected, to one who held such a philosophy, the preservation of the Union was not the supreme consideration. It was secondary; the war on slavery was primary. In fact, early in the war, Emerson did not think that the Union could be preserved because he felt that other elements of incompatibility between the North and the South besides slavery made for disunion. Even in 1864, when Lincoln had been reelected to the Presidency, and the victory of the North was assured, he rejoiced in the defeat of the forces of pro-slavery and political evil, but still conceded the possibility of disunion, although by this time he was beginning to feel that with the abolition of slavery the principal cause of disunion had been removed. It is only just to state also that at the close of the war, Emerson recognized the immense importance of the preservation of the Union.

As it became certain that the South was to be subdued, and the Union preserved as the result of the war, Emerson

1. *Journal* IX, 456.

attached himself to those who held radical views regarding the terms of peace and the policies of reconstruction. With many others, he feared that the North might yield to a policy of compromise that would permit the South with its superior political astuteness to undo much that had been done, and perhaps even to become the arbiter of the situation. If the two sections were to continue under the same government, he felt that it was unthinkable that the war and the peace should be concluded in such a manner as to permit the possibility of a restoration of the old conditions. In 1865, he wrote in the *Journal*, "'Tis far the best that the rebels have been pounded instead of negotiated into a peace. They must remember it, and their inveterate brag will be humbled, if not cured....General Grant's terms certainly look a little too easy..... and I fear that the high tragic historic justice which the nation, with severest consideration should execute will be softened and dissipated and toasted away at dinner-tables."[1] To Emerson, the great problem following the war was how to make secure the fruits of victory. He believed that this could best be accomplished by enfranchising the negroes and raising the status of the poor whites. The wisdom of such a policy doubtless seemed clearer to him because his conception of the negro's abilities had steadily grown higher. In 1867, he wrote in his *Journal*, "You complain that the negroes are a base class. Who makes and keeps the Jew or the negro base, who but you, who exclude them from the rights which others enjoy?"[2] In one of his ledgers of uncertain date, but most certainly belonging to the post-war period, there is the following entry: "How much will has been expended to extinguish the Jews! Yet the tenacities of the race resist and prevail. So the negro sees with glee, through all his miseries, his future possession of the West Indies(and of the Southern

1. *Journal* X, 93.
2. Ibid. X, 199.

States of America) assured. For he accumulates and buys, whilst climate, etc., favor him against the white."[1] It is therefore not surprising that Emerson regarded President Johnson as merely an obstructionist, and felt that the policy of Sumner and Stevens was not only the safest and best for the North, but the one which the facts of the situation warranted, and indeed made inevitable.

The triumph of the radical policy of reconstruction was eminently satisfactory to Emerson, and closed for him the great struggle which had occupied so much of his time and energy since first he had begun to wrestle with the slavery question in his early manhood. This, as we have seen, was the only question that had ever been able to draw him actively into public affairs, and his interest in matters political and social seemed to have spent itself; during the remaining years of his life, he withdrew to his more congenial interests, and had little, if any interest in public affairs, and no connection with them. Two matters which have not been treated elsewhere in this paper demand brief consideration, however, before it is closed. They are Emerson's opinions of public men, and his conception of America and her destiny.

1. *Journal* X, 472.

CHAPTER VII

Public Men - America - Summary

Basis of Emerson's interest in public men - Webster - Lincoln - Hoar - Sumner - Patriotism - Faith in America as the champion of the ideal - Nature and extent of Emerson's influence upon public affairs.

Emerson's great interest in character, especially in strong character, drew his attention quite as much to public men as to public affairs. They might attract or repel him, secure his approval or disapproval, but they could not fail to gain the attention of a philosopher so much interested in the motives, the aims, and the ends of life. Strength, even rugged strength, and seriousness of purpose were the qualities in public men which appealed most greatly to Emerson. This accounts for the fact that, although he thoroughly disliked President Jackson in his youth, he later expressed admiration, if not approval of him. It was for this same reason that Webster early won his adoration. To the youthful Emerson, Webster seemed to embody all of the strength of right and justice when he replied to Hayne. But as the years went, and Emerson became more engrossed with the struggle against slavery, he felt the flagging of Webster's idealism, and was at last convinced that his hero had become the slave of political ambition, and that he was wasting his splendid strength in pursuing the ends of practical politics. In 1843, he wrote in the *Journal*, "Daniel Webster is a great man with a small

ambition," the small ambition being of course the Presidency, to gain which, Emerson thought Webster had forsaken the the cause of consistent opposition to slavery. Webster's subsequent conduct, especially his support of the Fugitive Slave Law, removed the last vestige of Emerson's admiration. In 1851, he wrote in the *Journal*,"Webster truly represents the American people just as they are, with their vast material interests, materialized intellect, and low morals. Heretofore, their great men who have led them have been better than they, as Washington, Hamilton, and Madison. But Webster's absence of moral faculty is degrading to the country."[1] Many other utterances, quite as bitter, might be quoted, but this one is typical. Even Emerson's considered judgment was hardly less severe. It is to be found in the entry that he made in the *Journal* upon hearing of the death of Webster: "Nature has not in our days, or not since the days of Napoleon, cut out such a masterpiece. He brought the strength of a savage into the height of culture....He was a statesman, and not the semblance of one.... But alas! he was the victim of his ambition; to please the South, he betrayed the North, and was thrown out by both."[2]

Emerson had been disappointed with the nomination of Lincoln instead of Seward in 1860, and as late as 1863, he regarded Lincoln as uncouth and lacking in the dignity and seriousness that a great public man ought to possess. Gradually, however, the President's evident sincerity, his good sense, and his far-seeing wisdom impressed themselves upon him, and he could overlook, or even admire much that had earlier been distasteful to him. In his eulogy of Lincoln, at Concord, on April 19, 1865, he declared, "Old as history is, and manifold as are its tragedies, I doubt if any has caused so much pain to mankind as this has caused, or will

1. *Journal* VIII, 216.
2. Ibid. VIII, 335.

on its announcement."[1] He told how his opinion of the President had steadily improved until he recognized his true greatness, and asserted that he had been true to what was best in the American people. "He is the true history of American people in his time. Step by step he walked before them; slow with their slowness, quickening his march by theirs, the true representative of this continent; an entirely public man; father of his country, the pulse of twenty millions throbbing in his heart; the thought of their minds articulated by his tongue."[2]

Emerson's fellow townsman, Judge Hoar, was perhaps his ideal of a practical politician of probity, who relied upon his honor, efficiency, and judgement for his influence. Numerous entries in the *Journal* testify to Emerson's admiration of him, and his good opinion of him seems never to have been shaken. Probably Emerson thought more of Charles Sumner than of any other great public man of his day. Sumner's clean cut idealism and his fearless support of the right, regardless of political consequences, made Emerson his warm admirer. In 1869, Emerson described him as, "Clean, self-poised, great-hearted man, noble in person, incorruptible in life, the friend of the poor, the champion of the oppressed."[3] The admiration was reciprocated. Among the last words of Sumner, according to Judge Hoar, were, - "Judge, tell Emerson how much I love and revere him." Hoar replied, "He said of you once that he never knew so white a soul."[4]

By no means the least interesting or significant topic for us in our attempt to arrive at a clear understanding of Emerson's relation to public affairs, is his conception of America and her destiny. It is clear that, however radical

1. *Works* XI, 329.
2. Ibid. XI, 335.
3. *Journal* X, 291.
4. Ibid. X, 430.

Emerson's idealism might be, it always was tempered by his strong common sense, and therefore never drew him into conflict with what was right and reasonable in the realm of practical affairs. Moreover, he regarded the political and social organization of his country with more than mere tolerance. However much his own inclinations naturally withdrew him from active interest and participation in public affairs, and however much he found it necessary to criticise his countrymen and their politics, when his attention was directed to public affairs, there can be no doubt that America was very dear to his heart. His early *Journals* are replete with entries that express his faith in America as the land of the future, and he never abandoned that belief, even when the outlook seemed darkest to him, and when he was most severe in his criticism. To him America presented the possibility of realizing the ideal. In his lecture on *The Young American* in 1844, he said, "it seems so easy for America to inspire and express the most expansive and humane spirit; new born, healthful, strong, the land of the laborer, of the democrat, of the philanthropist, of the believer, of the saint, she should speak for the human race. It is the country of the Future."[1] Nor was Emerson lacking in that affection for the native land which is commonly called patriotism. Woodberry and others have not failed to note in him a certain preference for his country and the things of his country which they thought was excessive enough to warrant the name of provincialism. Perhaps such criticism is justified in a mild degree. Certain it is that Emerson disliked travel, that he always came back to America more gladly than he went away, and that his country and her affairs possessed a greater interest for him than the antiquity and culture of Europe. It is significant that this same youthful faith in America as the hope of the future is the keynote of his last great

1. *Works* I, 871.

public address, *The Fortune of the Republic*, which he read on March 30, 1878, in the Old South Church. He warned his countrymen against excessive partisanism, love of wealth and ease, and lack of idealism, and then he said, "The genius of this country has marked out our true policy, - opportunity."[1] "Our helm is given up to better guidance than our own," he declared, and then expressed the faith that America, despite her shortcomings, would be guided by the noble and the ideal in realizing her destiny. "I could heartily wish that our will and endeavor were more active parties to the work. But I see in all directions the light breaking. Trade and government will not alone be the favored aims of mankind, but every useful, every elegant art, every exercise of the imagination, the height of reason, the noblest affection, the purest religion will find their home in our institutions, and write our laws for the benefit of man."[2]

* * * * *

In closing this survey of Emerson's relation to public affairs, some consideration ought to be given to the character and extent of his influence upon his times. Woodberry asserts the unsystemmatic and aphoristic character of his utterances has often made it possible for faddists to cite them in support of their doctrines. This is probably true, but it is a fault that is to be charged quite as much to the inherent character of the essay as a literary genre, as to the particular style and content of Emerson's essays. Such a use of Emerson's words has been more conspicuous than significant, and need not concern us here. Undoubtedly, however, in his own day, Emerson's somewhat extreme and striking expression

1. *Works* XI, 541.
2. Ibid. XI, 544.

of his thought, enabled men of more radical inclinations to use his prestige for the defence and support of their doctrines. Perhaps Emerson was not altogether unwilling that this should be so. He believed that one of the most wholesome tendencies of his time was its ferment, its disposition to question social institutions and practices. He had none of that conservatism that abhors all change as merely destructive. It was a maxim of his that nothing would perish that was in accord with the eternal, and he received with cool and unruffled curiosoty all proposals to alter customs and institutions. Moreover, Emerson, himself was somewhat of a radical, and if he became convinced that a cause was essentially ethical, he did not hesitate to ally himself with it, even though to do so might shock greater lovers of social safety and respectability. This is most apparent in his relation to the agitation against slavery. Yet Emerson's strong instinct for what was practical and his dislike of propaganda kept him from becoming a professed agitator in any cause. The truth is that he often disappointed the radicals, and no less often, he made the conservatives uneasy. This makes it difficult to delimit exactly the nature and degree of his influence. His direct service to the anti-slavery cause must have been very great, for he threw the weight of his strong personality and his mature prestige squarely against slavery. Yet we must remember once more, that he was not primarily an agitator, and he avoided the personalities and recriminations of controversy. His relation to the movement therefore was less striking than that of Garrison or Phillips. Emerson's indirect influence upon affairs can hardly have been less than that which he brought to bear directly upon them. Many of the best and ablest spirits of his day and of the rising generation looked to him for their inspiration. The frank acknowledgements that Sumner and Lowell made of their indebtedness to him are but a small part of the proof that

might be adduced for this statement. In many ways he expressed the best and most characteristic spirit of his times. He brought to public questions the disposition to test all things anew, but strong common sense kept him from becoming visionary or ultra-radical. Much of the strength and soundness of his influence lay in the emphasis that he put upon the ethical aspects of public questions, in his freedom from partisan bias, and in the spirit of courage with which he inspired his fellow countrymen to attack the problems of their age. He never permitted the crudities or the temporary failures of his country to shake his faith in America and her mission as the champion of the ideal, and this was the basis of the sound and optimistic patriotism which he preached to the youth of the land. Unquestionably, Emerson's influence upon men and affairs was greatest in his own time, but the strength of his influence was due in the main to the peculiar qualities of his genius, and it retains a certain perennial potency. To a large number of readers and admirers, he has remained to this day an interpreter and exponent of the best and most liberal spirit of his country.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cabot, James Elliot. A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson. 2 vols. Houghton Mifflin Co. Boston and New York. 1888.

Cooke, George Willis. Ralph Waldo Emerson: His Life, Writings, and Philosophy. James R. Osgood and Co. Boston. 1882.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Complete Works. 12 vols. Ed. Edward Waldo Emerson. Houghton Mifflin Co. Boston and New York. 1904.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Journals, 1820-1872. 10 vols. Ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes. Houghton Mifflin Co. Boston and New York. 1909.

Firkins, O.W. Ralph Waldo Emerson. Houghton Mifflin Co. Boston and New York. 1915.

Woodberry, George Edward. Ralph Waldo Emerson. English Men of Letters. Macmillan Co. New York. 1907.

INDEX