

EMERSON'S PHILOSOPHY: A PROCESS OF BECOMING THROUGH PERSONAL
AND PUBLIC TRAGEDY

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This thesis explores Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophical becoming throughout decades of reflection and experience, particularly regarding death and slavery. Emerson was a buoyant writer and speaker, but the death of his five-year-old son and protégé, Waldo, challenged the father's belief in Nature's goodness and the reality of maintaining a tenaciously optimistic outlook. As he was grieving in the mid-1840s, slavery was threatening the Union, and Emerson was compelled to turn his attention to the subject of human bondage. He began his career indifferent to the plight of slaves, but as legislation about the issue brought it closer to his personal sphere, he was gradually yet firmly gripped by the tragedy of human bondage. These simultaneously existing spheres of sorrow – Waldo's death and slavery – joined in refining Emerson's personal philosophy toward greater utilitarian and humanitarian conduct. His letters, journals, essays, and lectures reflect the inward changes caused by outward events, and the conclusions herein are supported by modern grief studies as well as numerous philosophers, literary specialists, and historians.

Jane E. Schultz, PhD, Chair

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Chapter I: Emerson's Philosophy: A Process of Becoming through Personal and Public Tragedy

Since my junior year in college, I have been fascinated with Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophies of life, and during my first year in graduate school, I began exploring his philosophies pertaining to death due to the myriad losses he experienced. I was certain that the deaths in his life impacted his normally idealistic outlook, and I wanted to see both how he viewed death and if his perspective shifted during the course of his life. Where I expected to find devastation and great change in his outlook, I found modern theories of grief speaking to the resilience of an individual in conquering pain. Emerson's hearty view of life made the deaths more manageable and easier to accept. Puritan influences, mid-nineteenth century views, and Transcendentalism came together to shape the man's grieving practice, but I still wondered how the residue of loss would affect his greater philosophies beyond those pertaining to death. The United States was rife with conflict during this time – including disagreements over the transition to an increasingly industrial economy, women's suffrage, immigration, and slavery – and the cultural context of the day pointed in a new direction for research. How did Emerson develop as a philosopher in light of the political conflicts that were happening in the United States? Did he think slavery, particularly, was a terrible thing or a necessary part of American industrial progress? How did such an optimistic man, terribly aggrieved by the loss of his son, look at tragedy that encompassed a nation? My thesis attempts to explore how personal loss and the nation's humanitarian failure in widely enslaving those of African descent altered Emerson's belief system as he encountered sorrow.

While he strived to reach outside common thought, Emerson was still a person of his culture and clearly wrought changes in those around him. Looking at those who influenced and were influenced by him prompted me to look first at those such as Louisa May Alcott who had obvious connections to Emerson through her father, Amos Bronson Alcott. My focus remained, however, Emerson, and research on Alcott did not reveal much more about Emerson and his moral development. I needed something more enticing and more closely related to my research that was already underway: response to tragedy. My prior experience with Emerson amounted to seeing his quotes on calendars and in a few essays I read in my undergraduate education, which highlighted his rosy outlook on life. My work in grief studies disclosed a greater depth to Emerson, but I had forgotten that he lived in a real space and time, surrounded by big thoughts and a nation threatening division. I needed to know how Emerson responded to his country. During this time, I enrolled in Dr. Jane E. Schultz's *The Literature of Slavery* and hoped to find a connection as I had never considered Emerson's view on slavery before. Reading Frederick Douglass's work for the course, while I separately puzzled through where to focus with my Emerson research, led to a chance finding that Douglass and Emerson spoke on the same stage in 1844. Then, the two of them were in similar circles for the remainder of their careers and both developed a friendship – with rumored hints at romantic inclinations from both men – with Margaret Fuller. Finding their connection directed me to a close examination of Emerson's view of slavery and how he came to be at an antislavery event. Keeping in mind my desire to see how misfortune shaped his philosophy in response to death, the adversity of slavery developed a new focus on Emerson's public response to tragedy.

These two avenues, Emerson's personal and public grief, began to shape my research as I approached Emerson's early, middle, and later philosophies to see how his struggles with Waldo's death and slavery affected his developing ideas about life and citizenship. Emerson began life poor, losing his father around age eight. He grew up to be a Unitarian minister but left the ministry shortly after his first wife Ellen died of tuberculosis. He loosely formed a philosophy of Transcendentalism, championing optimism and individual self-improvement. However, through his life experiences, his philosophy was challenged and refined, resulting in a more subdued outlook on society that could no longer surge with Emerson's former buoyancy. He grieved Waldo's death and its premature end to such a promising life, and in a surprising comparison, he puzzled, then grieved, over the United States' anti-black racism. A personal family loss is starkly different than the enslavement and dehumanization of millions of African Americans, yet both causes of sorrow – death and slavery – create spaces from which Emerson re-assessed his philosophical optimism. Each representation of tragedy propelled Emerson into reassessing beliefs that had been previously unchallenged by invasive anguish.

In 1816 while Emerson was still in his teenage years, the aged John Adams wrote a letter to Thomas Jefferson containing the following contemplation of grief; the excerpt emphasizes the mystery of sorrow's purpose: "I have often wondered for what good end the sensations of Grief could be intended. All our other passions, within proper bounds, have an useful object. [...] I wish the pathologists then would tell us what is the use of

grief in the economy, and of what good it is the cause, proximate or remote.”¹ Puzzling over pain permeates historical narrative, and as Emerson shows in the following pages, the “good cause” of grief may simply be its propulsion toward reflection and, perhaps, the realization of living in a broken world and laboring to improve the things one can. Even so, the circumstances that arise and thrust individuals like Adams, Emerson, and all other persons to sorrow are messy, intricate, and difficult to relate neatly in text. For Emerson, it took years to muddle through the complexities of anti-black slavery, and regarding little Waldo, he never found the right phrases to capture his mourning, though his attempts are numerous.

In forming the thesis, I have looked closely at several essays, addresses, letters, and poems that Emerson produced. For his encounters with Waldo’s death, my principal texts are his essay “Experience,” his poem “Threnody,” and several letters written shortly after the death. In “Experience,” Emerson writes about not being able to grieve his son’s death properly, and scholars like Sharon Cameron have taken issue with his response to the loss, as I address in my literature review and the relevant chapter. However, I read Emerson differently and engage with Cameron and others in response to Emerson’s comments as well as looking at modern grief theories that might help elucidate Emerson’s formational thoughts in the early days of loss. “Threnody,” written just after the time of Waldo’s death, guides readers through Emerson’s less distanced thoughts as this poem focuses on his emotional response to Waldo, whereas “Experience” uses Waldo’s death as an allusive example to support a greater narrative about the human

¹ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, March 2, 1816, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, vol. 2, 1812-1826, ed. Lester J. Capon (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 464.

inability to feel things with depth. In this section, he bemoans that humans cannot truly feel “the dearest events,” yet even his ancillary comments regarding Waldo’s death reveal the sorrow Emerson feels at being unable to satisfactorily grieve Waldo.

Through this research, I began to see how Emerson’s personal and professional life naturally shifted the course of his philosophy. Outside of his family sphere, the people of the United States were dealing with a woman’s role in society, state’s rights, and, at the forefront of the political battles, slavery. When I noticed an enticing parallel between tragedy in a family and tragedy in a nation and initiated research into Emerson’s outlook on slavery, I looked again to essays and journal entries, but this time was also largely informed by his public addresses on – or in avoidance of – the topic of human bondage. Two pivotal texts are the transcriptions of “An Address on the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies” in 1844 and “Address to the Citizens of Concord on the Fugitive Slave Law” delivered in 1851. Each of these texts highlights different points in Emerson’s thinking: The first contrasts the British and American approaches to slavery, acknowledging that it’s a bad institution, but that American politics have stifled progress in regards to abolishing slavery. The second address was delivered shortly after the Fugitive Slave Law was enacted in 1850, and in this, readers can see how slavery became personal to Emerson. The Massachusetts resident makes several references to the need for his state to combat the evils of slavery and the widespread political belief that enslaving blacks was nothing to be concerned about. Compellingly he writes,

By the law of Congress, March 2, 1807, it is piracy and murder punishable by death, to enslave a man on the coast of Africa. By law of Congress, September 1850, it is a high crime and misdemeanor punishable with fine and imprisonment to resist the re-enslaving of a man on the coast of

America. Off soundings, it is piracy and murder to enslave him. On soundings, it is fine and prison not to re-enslave.²

This lecture became a frustrated cry against the national law, which not only seemed to endorse slavery, but further required by law those who might be abolitionists to return fugitive slaves who had been recovered—an injunction that flew in the face of abolitionists' moral convictions.

Literature Review

On the issues of public and private loss that Emerson faced and on which my thesis focuses, several scholars have weighed in. Reading Emerson alongside these critics, I engage in hearty analysis and debate over topics that include Emerson's grief period, his response to social issues like slavery, and philosophical shifts over the course of his career. Regarding Emerson's grief, Cameron's "Representing Grief: Emerson's 'Experience'" and Mary Chapman's "The Economics of Loss: Emerson's 'Threnody'" are two crucial texts I evaluated in looking at Emerson's loss. While my conclusions do not closely parallel the arguments these critics make, their work directly addresses Emerson's writing regarding death and thus provides valuable, focused insights. These and other articles explore how Emerson struggled to cope, musing about his dissociation and puzzling over why the death of his son was so much more traumatic than the other deaths Emerson encountered. Peter Balaam's *Misery's Mathematics: Mourning, Compensation, and Reality in Antebellum American Literature* addresses Emerson's deep

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Address to the Citizens of Concord on the Fugitive Slave Law," in *Emerson's Prose and Poetry: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism*, 1st Edition, eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), 365.

grief, particularly bringing in his wife Lidian's perspective and the New England culture that surrounded the Emersons. Cultural mourning practices and Unitarian belief must be considered when studying this topic, and as I researched, I additionally discovered the links between Eastern religions and Emerson's outlook on life. Of particular note is Sarina Isenberg's work on Emerson and Thoreau's section of *The Dial* entitled "Ethnical Scriptures," which interpreted, appropriated, and analyzed various scriptures from the East. Numerous other texts are dedicated to similar topics, such as John G. Rudy's *Emerson and Zen Buddhism*, all of which validate the connection between studying Eastern religion and Emerson's work in Massachusetts.

In addition to reading Emerson's own writing, critical responses to it, and contextual pieces on the time period, I employed modern psychological studies and theories in my research, particularly those focused on grief and responses to trauma. Güler Boyraz, Sharon G. Horne, and J. Brandon Waits conducted a study on connections between having meaning in life and responding to death, and their research, though far removed from Emerson, provides insight into how Emerson's temperament might have assisted him in accepting death. Additionally, studies focused on the death of a child and acceptance of loss guided my research and framework for understanding Emerson's heartache, giving social science perspectives which literary analysis had not yet provided in the conversation. It seemed that other literary critics were focused on Emerson's lack of feeling, attributing this to his lack of caring rather than a common psychological response of numbness.

Pertaining to Emerson's growth as an abolitionist, the literature is more apparent and expansive than his response to Waldo's death. Of particular importance are Len

Gougeon's multiple texts on Emerson and slavery, and his articles serve centrally in my analysis of Douglass and Emerson's roles as abolitionists. Gougeon explores uncharted territory as well as adding a new perspective to a well-trodden path in the evolution of Emerson's silence on slavery and his later role as an active abolitionist. Sparking much controversy, Gougeon's article "Militant Abolitionism: Douglass, Emerson, and the Rise of the Anti-Slave" inspired a large section of my fourth chapter wherein I address Douglass alongside Emerson. Gougeon first suggested to me the myriad connections between Emerson and Douglass, and his work was central to my research, though at times I take issue with his perspective. Gougeon sees gaps in Emerson's address of slavery, and those gaps provide excellent room for future discussion. Though published in 1945, Marjory M. Moody's useful article, "The Evolution of Emerson as an Abolitionist," provides a solid foundation for where to begin deeper analysis and further reading. More generally, W. Caleb McDaniel's article presents provocative insight regarding abolition in general, and his piece "The Bonds and Boundaries of Antislavery" complicates the role of abolitionists in the antebellum period and their role following the war. His questions prompt critical consideration regarding Emerson, Douglass, and others in their approach to eradicating slavery. While the expansive bibliographic references available on Emerson and slavery made me think there might not be much more to say on the topic of his and Douglass's work regarding slavery, this was not the case. This thesis attempts to fill those gaps as part of a farther-reaching evaluation of Emerson's response to tragedy.

Structure

I structure my argument in continued conversation with the critics mentioned above in the following manner: The introductory chapter situates readers within the scope of what I intend to do in the following pages, as well as providing some familiarity with Emerson and his life. Because the third chapter evaluating Waldo's death requires an understanding of mourning culture in the nineteenth century, there is a second, brief chapter exploring Puritan, Unitarian, and Eastern religious views of death, mourning, and the afterlife. The third chapter, then, closely explores Emerson's personal and public work in processing loss before routing into the public tragedy of slavery. This fourth chapter delves into Emerson's evolving response to slavery, which is unexpectedly more dramatic than his reaction to the loss of his child. Douglass appears alongside Emerson as a key figure in his own process of becoming, and his encounters with loss and slavery – far more tragic than Emerson's – help shape his profoundly influential voice against slavery and for human rights. Finally, I close by drawing parallels between Emerson's personal and public reactions to his world, idiosyncratic and expansive alike.

Mourning, Death, and the Afterlife in Unitarian and Eastern Religions

To situate readers in Emerson's philosophy, I explore the context out of which Emerson was writing and processing his grief over Waldo. I begin by briefly evaluating the stalwart Puritan and non-emotional early-nineteenth century culture; my goal is to elucidate views of religion and loss, specifically mourning and the afterlife. Emerson was a Unitarian minister at the start of his career, lived in Puritan New England, and was widely influenced by Eastern religions, though his beliefs about the latter were largely

appropriated to Western perspectives. In the context of New England culture, Emerson was exposed to the responses of those around him to death, grief, and loss, and he reacted to death accordingly despite wanting to be a free thinker. Mourning became a cultural art in the nineteenth century, and death was much closer to families of the bereaved, as all funerary arrangements would have been taken care of without the intercession of an undertaker. The culture surrounding death in Emerson's era is important to understanding his reaction to Waldo's death. Emerson's journals and his work on *The Dial* further reveal important influences from Eastern religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Shintoism. To better understand Emerson's outlook, I examine the texts he focused on as well as a few Eastern religions' perspectives on death and the afterlife. Emerson's philosophy was not purely crafted from Unitarian roots nor from his own thinking, and as such, these Eastern religions and Emerson's interpretation of them deserve space in a conversation regarding his beliefs surrounding death.

Nature Cannot Remake Him: Ralph Waldo Emerson's Confrontation of Transcendent Optimism in the Face of Tragic Loss

In chapter three, devoted to Emerson's personal loss regarding Waldo's death, I work through Emerson's early life and career, moving to the time in which he produced his most widely read texts, such as "The American Scholar," "Nature," and "Self-Reliance." Examining these early texts frames Emerson's philosophical starting point and provides a background for Waldo's death in 1842. Readers become familiar with the Emerson who lost his first wife, Ellen Tucker, to tuberculosis in 1831, left the Unitarian church, and married Lydia Jackson in 1835. Emerson positions himself confidently in his

world, writing in 1838, “if my wife, my child, my mother should be taken from me, I should still remain whole.”³ Having lost a wife, two brothers, and a father by the time he penned those words, this statement cannot be excused as the flippant words of someone who has never lost anyone. However, just a few years later, Waldo died of scarlet fever, and Emerson was changed forever.

The chapter that analyzes Emerson’s struggle with grief compares letters written just after Waldo’s death to letters written decades later. These pieces expose mutually the ways Emerson’s viewpoint stayed the same and the way that time and resilience mended his initially broken heart. Within days of Waldo’s death, Emerson wrote to his dear friend Margaret Fuller, “Shall I ever dare to love any thing again?”⁴ At that early time of grief, Emerson seemed almost determined to stay in the place of tragic loss. Just a few years before, he had been determined to suck the marrow out of life and draw on its fullness, regardless of the fates of those around him. However, Waldo’s death affected him profoundly in a way that even the death of his beloved wife, Ellen, did not. Waldo’s mother and Emerson’s second wife, Lidian – whom he renamed after their marriage – attested to the depth of grief Emerson reached as he failed to find meaning in Waldo’s death. Emerson was accustomed to finding purpose in every blade of grass and sunrise, but the meaning of Waldo’s death escaped him.

His private and public writings reveal different angles of the same grief, at first crippling, then frustrating that Waldo’s death was not made more real and terrible, somehow undermining the love between father and son. At the same time, Emerson

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson quoted in Barbara Packer’s *Emerson’s Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1982), 169.

⁴ Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 552.

wanted to learn from the experience, but in the impossibility of encountering death the way he wanted to or felt was most appropriate, the lessons of loss seemed lost. Readers can see this in letters that Emerson wrote in the days and years after the loss and particularly in his widely anthologized essay “Experience.” Here I integrate some psychological commentary on the loss of a child and trauma theory, as indicated in the review of literature above. Psychologists provide insight into Emerson’s grief cycles, explaining both the way that senses can be deadened by loss or animated to move on. Evaluating Emerson’s work, it’s difficult to see if his response is stymied by grief or if his outlook on life helps him to push forward in a healthy fashion. In the first weeks after Waldo’s death, it appears that the suddenness of the loss dulls all feeling, but that soon Emerson moves fairly rapidly into an acceptance stage. Following Emerson’s writings a few years on, readers observe that he begins to heal, despite determination *not* to heal out of respect for his son, and not to recover too quickly lest he undermine the value he placed on Waldo’s life.

Certainly Emerson deeply loved his son, and his bereavement is as complex as any period of grief. What is less normal, though, is Emerson’s decision to look inside his son’s coffin fifteen years after interment. I more carefully explore his motives in the relevant chapter, but the craving to be near his son reveals Emerson’s desperation for getting Waldo’s death closer to himself. In “Threnody” the distancing and nearness are complicated by Emerson’s choice not to name his son while simultaneously crafting an intimate, raw poem in Waldo’s memory. The primary timeline or date of drafting is unclear, but several lines in “Threnody” express an immediacy as Emerson reaches around in the gloom of grief to find shapes of meaning in the darkness. In this poem,

readers gain insight into the heritage that the father would have passed on to his son and Emerson's reaction to being robbed of the opportunity. Emerson was not close to his own father, who died when he was seven, but he and Waldo were kindling a relationship where Emerson would teach his son but also encourage free thinking and exploration of the world. Emerson was forced to let go of Waldo's corporeal existence, notwithstanding the disinterment fifteen years later. Even then, Emerson reveals little regarding the movement of his son's remains. A great lover of both the natural and spiritual worlds, Emerson had to confront the physicality and ambiguity of Waldo's death. "Threnody" works through some of that turmoil, particularly grappling with the role of fate and the earth's inadequacy to sustain a boy as beautiful in mind and spirit as Waldo.

In "Experience," Emerson writes more formally and with greater scholastic distance about Waldo than he does in "Threnody." The essay genre introduces a different tone, and here Emerson laments once again that in the two years since Waldo's death, he failed to feel the "sharp peaks and edges of truth."⁵ He wants to learn from every encounter, but unfortunately Waldo's death is simultaneously too close and not close enough to gain what he wants from the loss. Surrounding "Experience" is a great deal of scholarship, some of which I heartily disagree with, such as Cameron's suggestion of callousness as the cause for Emerson's distance from Waldo's death rather than recognizing the his agony at not being able to honor Waldo's memory adequately by deeper grief.

Emerson's dissatisfaction with his tenacity must pique the interest of any Emersonian. The tenets of his philosophy are to be self-reliant and resilient, but in the

⁵ Emerson, *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, 199.

case of losing a child, Emerson questions how even he could respond with such buoyancy. While it could have been a great advertisement for Transcendentalism, that it makes griefs less terrible to bear, Emerson was tormented by not being able to reckon with Waldo's death more satisfactorily. He resisted acceptance of his loss, and this chapter explores the depth of Emerson's inner turmoil in the complex, un-chartable waters of grief. His earlier comment, "if my wife, my child, my mother should be taken from me, I should still remain whole," may not be read the same way again.⁶ The deaths of loved ones did not destroy Emerson, but in the prevailing, he struggled with how to honor a loss and not learn all he wanted to from it. Even so, Waldo's loss demanded reconsideration of this persistence as the philosopher's later works shifted to reflect a more realistic view than the rose-tinted hue that characterized earlier work. Of course, Waldo's death was not an isolated event that occurred in a vacuum that made up Emerson's world. The pain of Waldo's death came amid startling political debates and upheaval on a national level as states argued back and forth about secession surrounding the topic of human bondage. As I discuss in the following section and chapter, Emerson's viewpoint was altered by the actuality of loss and human cruelty. Not all individuals subscribed to his generally buoyant attitude and humanitarian propulsion toward self-improvement, but Emerson took time to recognize the harsh reality and adapt his philosophy to recognize the relentless, humbling truth of loss.

⁶ Emerson quoted in Packer's *Emerson's Fall*, 169.

Called from Poetics and Slavery: Emerson and Douglass's Evolution as Abolitionists

During the same period when Waldo's death forced philosophical reconsideration on a personal level, the rampant humanitarian and political disaster of slavery eventually compelled Emerson to reconsider his view of humankind. Looking at Emerson's approach to slavery, I initially found, alongside scholars like Gougeon, large gaps in Emerson's address of human bondage. While the topic surfaced and reigned in many political conversations, Emerson seemed content to engage slowly with slavery while focusing on more abstract ideas of general self-improvement that would, he hoped, benefit all citizens. Ideally, Transcendental philosophy would encourage people to reach individual enlightenment over time and agree to eradicate slavery. With this view in mind, Emerson did not find it necessary to enter the divisive, angry debate alongside his contemporaries. His lack of involvement lasted throughout the period of some of his most prolific writing and lecturing. Yet, in gradual steps, Emerson engaged with slavery, sometimes mentioning it off-handedly in a speech and eventually head-on as he became a staunch abolitionist by the start of the Civil War. Gougeon, Moody, and others all point out gaps in Emerson's addresses toward slavery, finding his response inadequate for a long time. As I revisited texts I'd earlier mined and found lacking, I discovered a firmer stance developing earlier, even as uncomfortable fissures remain in Emerson's opinions about human bondage during his early career.

At the same time that Emerson was developing his stance from a place of uninvolved privilege, Frederick Douglass was working to escape slavery and growing to be a powerful speaker and writer. The fourth chapter of my thesis, "Called from Poetics and Slavery: Emerson and Douglass's Evolution as Abolitionists," addresses the development

of Emerson's and Douglass's views regarding and actions opposing slavery. Obviously, Douglass's role in slavery was far different from Emerson's, particularly at first, as he did not have the luxury to focus on philosophy. Whereas Emerson could muse about the nature of the world from a fireside in Massachusetts or on casual morning walks, Douglass was born into bondage, and his narrative details horrifying scenes, like watching his Aunt Hester be whipped, being treated like livestock, and being beaten and jailed. Emerson's and Douglass's racial frames of reference separate them, but in 1844, the two men spoke on the same stage for the first time.

Emerson had briefly addressed slavery in 1837, just a year after the publication of *Nature*, but he had otherwise been largely silent. Early on, he references a belief that slavery might just be a natural way for the world to work; by the 1830s he was troubled by the coalescence of resistance to abolitionists because he believed they should be allowed to rebel against the status quo. He was, in effect, more concerned by the lack of freedom for the abolitionists than the bondage of slaves. Though this view seems backwards and troubling, Emerson could have justified his views by the belief that individual men would have to change things through personal self-improvement. In other words, slave owners would realize the folly of their ways and release the individuals they enslaved. However, as Emerson observed slave owners and traders *not* reforming on their own, his optimism was tempered publicly as it was simultaneously being challenged privately between the 1837 and 1844 addresses on slavery. During this time, Emerson was working through the complex perceptions of slave owners, who were not purely evil, but rather often "pillars of the local community" and "well integrated socially, well

connected legally and politically, and well rewarded financially.”⁷ The reality that slave owners could also be kind, well-respected men complicates modern hindsight, which is often shocked by the pervasive acceptance of slavery. Emerson’s initial viewpoint may not have seemed immoral or upsetting to his contemporaries; rather, he would have been in the majority in many circles. Emerson worked to become more enlightened and free-thinking, and his thinking morphed as a result of his willingness to yield to nobler ideas. In 1844 Emerson finally stated more clearly “that the crimes and cruelties of the slave-traders and slave-owners could not be overstated.”⁸ While still not a firm abolitionist, Emerson finally rejected the idea that slavery could be a natural or acceptable institution.

The year that Emerson and Douglass joined one another on the same stage did not lead to the big push that finally, irrevocably, caused Emerson to embrace abolition. That drive accelerated in 1850 when the Fugitive Slave Law was enacted. This law mandated that escaped slaves be returned to their masters regardless of the escapee’s location, which meant that all Americans were bound to comply with returning escaped slaves. Emerson was now compelled to examine the ramifications of slavery on a more personal level because the law dictated that any slave seeking refuge in Massachusetts or any other northern state must be returned to his owner or face legal consequences. With the Fugitive Slave Act in effect, Emerson could no longer distance himself from slavery and scrutinize it through a distanced, philosophical perspective. In the development of his worldview, Emerson also felt compelled to act, as essays like “Self-Reliance” chastised those whose actions did not match their moral convictions. Emerson shared this

⁷ Kevin Bales, “Slavery and the Human Right to Evil,” *Journal of Human Rights* 3, no. 1 (2004), 55.

⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson’s Antislavery Writings*, eds. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 10.

provocative line in his speech in 1851 which came as a response to the Fugitive Slave Act: “The last year has forced us all into politics, and made it a paramount duty to seek what it is often a duty to shun.”⁹ Emerson’s speech suggests that he had been avoiding “jumping on a bandwagon” and getting caught up in the petty conversations of those around him, swirling perpetually and making no movement toward change. Emerson wanted to avoid the senseless topics, but he recognized the moral evil in slavery and the ways in which it dominated everyday life, and not just in the South. Emerson saw the citizens of the United States collectively fail to improve themselves, thus allowing slavery to continue. His idealistic outlook that mankind would gradually move toward a more human rights-based morality proved to be naïve, yet he came to understand that the liberation of all people superseded his personal goals for self-improvement. He began to understand that while not everyone would adopt his view of being better for oneself and in turn improving society, there was still an opportunity for him to do his part.

As Emerson worked to resolve for himself the injustice of slavery in light of the American community’s failure, Douglass was on his own journey involving abolition and activism. As stated above, Douglass’s entry into the world of slavery was neither voluntary nor gradual, but his choice to endanger himself as a spokesperson amounted to volunteerism, and heroic volunteering at that. As a former slave, Douglass had established credibility with well-meaning white abolitionists, credibility that Emerson had not earned. Unfortunately, Douglass was coerced by white abolitionists to relate opinions not his own. His struggle with white abolitionists to exert his independence of thought and action endeared him to Emerson. Douglass’s self-reliance in the face of

⁹ Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 360.

adversity and asserting himself with the objective of self-improvement prompted Emerson to revere him as an ideal man. Douglass spent less time musing about the moral complexities of slavery and more time focused on practical implementation to make things better, such as sharing his story and making slavery more real to those like Emerson who were previously content to sit and think. Douglass had neither the desire nor the luxury to philosophically contemplate slavery, as his life demanded a more active approach. Further, he recognized that the only people who could effectively eradicate slavery would be black people themselves; whites were more reluctant to become antislavery activists and lacked the sense of urgency that slaves experienced.

One of the ways Douglass combatted slavery was through writing, and he published the novella *The Heroic Slave* to expose a slave experience. My reading presents a critique of the ways that whites become activists only when it's convenient to do so. The main characters in Douglass's novella are Madison Washington and Mr. Listwell, black and white respectively. Throughout the course of the story, Washington encounters Listwell at serendipitous intervals, first as a slave, then as a refugee, then as a recaptured slave. Finally, Washington escapes again and liberates dozens of other slaves in an insurrection. On a first reading of the narrative, and as a person inclined to applaud abolitionist goodwill, a reader might see Listwell as a kind, helpful white man who assists at opportune times. However, my analysis sees Listwell as a white man with excuses as to why he does not do more; his primary excuse is that he has done something. Yet, despite the modest actions he takes, Listwell does not position himself to reshape slavery in the United States. More is required, even if that meant an eventual mutiny under Washington's lead. Passive help and reflection would not free slaves.

Reading Douglass's and Emerson's work side by side, I see each man dissatisfied with the common population, but perhaps each man's wishes were realized in part through the character of the other, though they might not have recognized it at the time. Emerson's self-reliant man is found in Douglass, and Douglass's plea for whites to get more involved is realized in Emerson. Each discovered shortcomings in the citizens around them. They recognized that small resistances and self-improvements were not freeing slaves *en masse*, and more must be done. Here Emerson's philosophy was challenged again, and rather than trusting in humanity's inherent goodness and will to act, he ultimately recognized the necessity of the Civil War to awaken citizens of the United States.

The concluding chapter of the thesis closes with thoughts relevant in 1860 and today: action is necessary beyond gentle reflection and readers must be compelled to scrutinize their views as morally good outside of their immediate circles. Emerson's philosophy certainly shifts throughout his seventy-eight years of life, and his willingness to change provides an example for modern readers. The foregoing pages reveal more of this, but Emerson began with a markedly different view of slavery than later on. His open-mindedness and eventual shift exemplify for modern readers how humility prompts change when one recognizes initial error. Now, as in the mid-1800s, whites remain largely apathetic toward racial oppression. Many hesitate to act. Douglass's voice highlights his frustrated response as a black, formerly enslaved, man. He points out the deep injustice of the oppressed needing to fight for themselves with limited or weak assistance from the dominant race. Douglass's frustrations would be as ardent today as they were prior to the Civil War. While the war resulted in emancipating the slaves, the

abolitionist movement clearly did not end racism, even in the United States. While much good was done during Reconstruction, freed slaves were left at a disadvantage in a world with which they were unfamiliar. Douglass and Emerson both encourage a continual process of self-improvement, and this quest for self-improvement remains *necessary* for modern readers to consider. The Civil Rights movement and Black Lives Matter are more contemporary reminders of the work that is yet to be done as today's readers explore racial injustice that continues with African Americans and the millions of immigrants who are often fleeing from situations of equal or greater severity than forced labor. Emerson's serious contemplation of personal and public tragedy prompted him to change his moral standing, and his example, coupled with Douglass's moving work, challenges twenty-first century readers to reconsider their ethical opinions, not to mention actions, in response to prevailing calamity.

Chapter II: A Conglomeration of Beliefs: Ralph Waldo Emerson's Influences Pertaining
to Views of Death and the Afterlife, Including Protestant, Unitarian, and Eastern
Religious Perspectives

Death is certain and constant, but its meaning varies dramatically over time. In the nineteenth century particularly, American death culture became an art defined by mourning practices and funerary customs which were handled by family and close friends. Looking back from the twenty-first century, loss remains personal, but corpses and funerals are handled differently, and the contrast in perspective is important in understanding how Ralph Waldo Emerson grieved for his son and thought about mortality. In antebellum America, a nation divided by race and socioeconomic stratification, death showed “certainty and universality;”¹⁰ it was a process no one could avoid; everyone was surrounded by dying friends and family. Death’s unavoidable presence is represented in poetry, religious writings, letters, and countless other texts that remind readers of its nearness. The bereaved would interact with their deceased family members personally, without undertakers, to quite literally “undertake” the process of preparing the body, arranging for a viewing, and burying the remains.¹¹ When individuals died of one cause or another, “Little in the shape of an institutional shield stood between the lay person and the untidy details of disease and dying.”¹² People could not distance

¹⁰ Lewis O. Saum, “Death in the Popular Mind of Pre-Civil War America,” *American Quarterly* 26, no. 5 (Dec. 1974), 477.

¹¹ Michael J. Steiner, *A Study of the Intellectual and Material Culture of Death in Nineteenth-Century America* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003) talks through this process and the evolution of at-home to professional funerary arrangements in his text.

¹² Saum, “Death in the Popular Mind,” 481.

themselves from death due to cultural expectations and familial obligations of being near the deceased.

Whereas today people consider interacting with the dead in such intimate ways like preparing the body for burial to be an unpleasant duty, nineteenth-century people understood this proximity to death as central to grieving and being responsible for a family member. The preparations and processes, the strict ordinances surrounding rituals of death and dying, gave valuable paths of process for those who encountered loss. Death brought with it emotional and material loss, connecting people in their human experience, but at times, earthly departure was less palpable, even with the intimacy manifest in mourning practices. Harold K. Bush's exploration of the loss of a child in the nineteenth century takes note of the same cultural changes in bereavement after the Civil War, remarking that by the dawn of the twentieth century, "death had become more remote, less, concrete. [...] The American experience of death changed dramatically from a religious, sentimental and intimate event to a much more scientific and business-oriented transaction."¹³ It is in the precursor to this shift, when death was still profoundly intimate, that Emerson lived, grieved, and died. He was situated in a culture still willingly attached to the emotions associated with the gripping tragedy of deceased loved ones, and despite frequent declarations of his desire to avoid the status quo, New England culture permeated his response to death. Emerson came of age in a Protestant and Unitarian culture, but also read widely about Eastern religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Each of these influences – Protestantism, Unitarianism, and Eastern religions – guided Emerson's outlook on mortality. His encounters with death prompted

¹³ Harold K. Bush *Continuing Bonds with the Dead: Parental Grief and Nineteenth-Century American Authors* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2016), 1.

him to draw from a conglomeration of sources in ascertaining his unique perspective – even if it remained frustratingly ambiguous for him – and this mélange of religious and experiential influences resonates across his thinking.

Protestants and Death

Emerson grew up in a largely Protestant culture, heavily influenced by the Puritans who came early to New England and Unitarians who were the leading religious group in Boston at the time of Emerson's ministry there. Of course, Emerson would have been familiar with the varieties of New England Protestant denominations. Puritan thinking influenced not only Emerson but each of those groups and set a standard for religion and responding to death. Conrad Edick Wright points out the close connection in his preface to *American Unitarianism 1805-1865*: "Even the most determined of Transcendentalist rebels could not escape important elements of the Puritan theological legacy."¹⁴ Additionally, the Unitarian faith to which Emerson originally belonged drew much from Trinitarian Christianity despite differing in beliefs about human depravity and the triune nature of God. A brief exploration of the Christian faith, particularly Puritanism and its popularized perception of death in the early 1800s, sets a relevant stage for Emerson's thinking and writing about mortality.

A primary focus of American Puritans and the Protestant churches that they spawned was whether or not one was saved, meaning rescued from sin and eternal punishment in hell by the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. With this

¹⁴ Conrad Edick Wright, *American Unitarianism, 1805-1865: Conference on the History of American Unitarianism: Papers* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society and Northeastern University Press, 1989), xi.

central idea established, one may begin to examine the Puritan view of death. In *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change*, David E. Stannard explains that Puritans could never fully know if they were saved or not. Their “best sign of assurance was to be unsure” of their salvation¹⁵; that is, being confident in your salvation was a sign of taking God’s grace for granted. Similar but not exactly the same as other Protestant religions, Puritans believed in heaven and hell, that “it was in the afterlife that Saints were to be rewarded and the sinful punished.”¹⁶ This view of heaven and hell is directly reflected in Jesus’ words about the final judgement when “All the nations will be gathered in His presence, and He will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”¹⁷ Jesus explains that those who are sheep, who are invited into the Kingdom of God for eternity, will be commended for their righteousness and service. On the other hand, the “goats,” or those who were not righteous in the eyes of God will be subjected to “eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life.”¹⁸ Theologians often debate this point – whether good deeds influence one’s salvation or not – and, along with the Puritans, how to tell who is truly saved. Interestingly, Puritans were afraid of dying, likely due to their uncertainty about what was next, while concurrently “clinging to the traditional Christian rhetoric of viewing death as a release and relief for the earth-bound soul.”¹⁹ Insecurity about their eternal destination built fear, but the anticipation of eternal life in the presence of God bred hope.

¹⁵ David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 75.

¹⁶ Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death*, 76.

¹⁷ Scripture reference taken from Matthew 25:32.

¹⁸ Scripture reference taken from Matthew 25:46.

¹⁹ Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death*, 79.

Hope for eternal life brought comfort to survivors of others' deaths because they could imagine their loved one resting in eternal glory, as well as consolation in anticipation of their own impending passing. In grief, the mourners were to find comfort in God and His eternal provision and promises. Lucy Bregman insightfully examines Christian funerary traditions and remarks, "The congregation is, above all else, the future dead."²⁰ Although funerals are not the focus of this chapter, the ideology surrounding mortality and grief are. Funerary traditions reveal much about how a congregation viewed the afterlife, and to be sure, Emerson's experience with his loved ones' funerals would have propelled him to think about his own mortality. Little more than a century prior to Emerson's time, the expression of grief was less acceptable because sorrow about loss was thought to reveal a lack of trust in God's divine plan. However, later on, grief was understood to be ordinary and not a willful sin. By the nineteenth century, society recognized "the naturalness of grief, representing deep, and deeply embodied, feelings of sorrow as not only an instinctive but also, crucially, a *healthy* response to loss, insofar as they signaled the mourner's engagement with the affective dimension of human existence."²¹ Free to mourn, nineteenth-century individuals understood that such sorrow did not separate them from God and that, even in the pain of someone passing away, there was hope. The Apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Thessalonians, confidently anticipates of the resurrection of faithful Christians: "We want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe

²⁰ Lucy Bregman, *Preaching Death: The Transformation of Christian Funeral Sermons* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), 17.

²¹ Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 30.

that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with him the believers who have died.”²²

The central focus of these two verses is that Christians need not grieve like those who assume that the passing life of the body and soul ends at death, but that they may look forward to the day when the dead are resurrected.

Similar to the diverging minutiae within most religions, Protestant doctrines of resurrection vary greatly, but a consistent theme is the need for steadfast belief in God and Jesus Christ. In Emerson’s New England, having faith in God’s ultimate plan was central to a successful Christian life, and in dying and watching others die, steadfast confidence in God’s sovereignty was essential. When Emerson’s young wife Ellen died of tuberculosis at the age of nineteen, just over a year after the couple were married, Emerson was grief-stricken. Even at that time, he grieved in his journal that “miserable apathy” would fade and that he would “stoop again to little hopes and little fears and forget the graveyard.”²³ Emerson did not want to forget his wife and the sorrow he felt at her passing. Though Ellen completed the culturally expected practice of professing faith again before she died, Emerson could not come to terms with the fact that “the dead do not return.”²⁴ Emerson understood the materiality of her death and had likely been privy to the preparations of her body for burial as a part of mourning practice. However, he questioned the purpose of her death and did not seem to be at peace with God’s allowing her to die. His unrest pulled him further from traditional religion and propelled him to construct a more radical system of belief.

²² Scripture reference taken from 1 Thess. 4:13-14.

²³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert N. Linscott (New York: The Modern Library of the World’s Best Books, 1960), 12-13.

²⁴ Emerson, *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Linscott, 13.

Unitarians and Death

Emerson began his career in the role of a Unitarian minister, but after his wife's fatal experience with tuberculosis, which added to his discomfort with Unitarian practices such as serving communion, he resigned his pulpit. Yet, even though Emerson left the faith, threads of Unitarianism are tightly woven into Transcendental thought and the way he responded to Ellen's death, and in fact her own preparation for it. Addressing the relationship between Unitarianism and Transcendentalism in the 1830s, Wright explains, "Mainstream Unitarians correctly understood Transcendentalism to pose a strong challenge to the special place of scriptural revelation within their theology,"²⁵ but otherwise the two beliefs were not in deep conflict with one another. Emerson took Unitarian ideas and sifted them through his worldview, selecting which pieces to adapt for his philosophical purposes.

One particular area of interest to Emerson was the guilt that frequently plagued those of a religious nature. Guilt would often follow individuals to their graves; the dying wondered whether or not they had accomplished enough good works in their lives. Emerson rejected the burdens of self-reproach, instead promoting positivity and confidence in a life well lived. Where some Protestants might have obsessed over being sorted with the sheep rather than the goats, Emerson was preoccupied with ciphering out what to believe and what to do with his beliefs. Of these changes in Transcendentalism from Unitarianism and Puritanism regarding the end of life, Emerson wrote:

Our forefathers walked in the world and went to their graves tormented with the fear of sin and the terror of the Day of Judgment. We are happily rid of those terrors, and our torment is the utter uncertainty and perplexity

²⁵ Wright, *American Unitarianism*, xi.

of what we ought to do; the distrust of the value of what we do; and the distrust that the Necessity which we all at last believe in, is Fair.²⁶

Emerson rejected the idea of terror at death, choosing to remain noncommittal on the afterlife instead of subscribing to an idea of a beautiful or terrible end. The unknown posed opportunities: there could be great saving in virtue on earth, or one's grave could be the ultimate end. Emerson relished freedom but was still not free of torment. Current life posed its problems. Opportunity to act in whatever way he chose was freely available to Emerson, but he worried that what he did might be incorrect, that it might not truly matter, and that his whole perspective could have been skewed to begin with. All his suppositions might have been based on false premises. Nonetheless, one of the most valuable things Emerson shows throughout his philosophical development is the ability to humbly change one's mind, such as his shift from the fear of death to a focus on the present, which was not without its own terrors.

Of course, Emerson was not the only person to question the Protestant view of mortality. A collection of lectures by three prominent Unitarian ministers published in 1839 features the work of Henry Giles. Giles states in the section entitled "The Christian View of the Retribution Hereafter" that "there is no room in the same universe for a good God and an eternal hell."²⁷ Giles goes on to write about the tragedy of a hell and that humans are better off being extinguished with their last breath than have a soul live eternally in torment. Even in regards to going to heaven, Giles lamented a man losing "his identity and go[ing] to heaven without remembering whom he knew and loved in

²⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960-1982), 8:26.

²⁷ John Hamilton Thom, James Martineau, and Henry Giles, *Unitarianism Defended, A Series of Lectures* (Liverpool: Willmer and Smith, 1839), 772.

life,” or, as Giles further ruminates the alternative to forgetting all the things of earth, a man “must lose his sympathy, become apostate to all his better feelings, and see without pain or pity many given over to despair with whom on earth he walked in dearest friendship”²⁸ Giles’s lecture reinforces the common Unitarian focus on final reunification with God rather than what happens immediately following one’s earthly demise.

Giles argued that if Christians truly believed in hell and the possibility of eternal damnation that “faith in such a doctrine should kill at once the life of joy.”²⁹ How could individuals conceptualize the continual cycle of life, of death, and of loved ones who were not saved, who by the thousands entered into never-ending torture? Giles acknowledges the tragedy and is careful to point out that “God has no pleasure in the death of a sinner.”³⁰ He goes on to write about the goodness and grace of God, concluding that such a God could not allow a place like hell “to be perpetual and eternal.”³¹ Where the Christian faith often adopts a dichotomy between heaven and hell, emphasizing the necessity of accepting salvation in order to be in heaven *with* God as opposed to the alternative, Giles is content with just one place: a type of heaven without hell, which he describes as “a home and refuge [...] where they who were poor shall be made rich; where those who mourned shall be comforted.”³² Giles establishes the Unitarian stance in a belief that all are redeemed and restored to the glory of God. There is no need for hell, given the hell created by earthly suffering. Some Unitarians adopted a belief that there could be a brief time of suffering to expel evil from humans after they

²⁸ Thom, Martineau, and Giles, *Unitarianism Defended*, 772.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 773.

³⁰ *Ibid*.

³¹ *Ibid*, 775.

³² *Ibid*.

died, but ultimately in Giles's view and others', all would end up in the safe refuge of God.

Emerson was familiar with these ways of thinking; after all, he was a contemporary of Giles and well versed in Unitarian theology. At the time of Ellen's death, he was still a minister and embraced many Unitarian beliefs, but by the time his son Waldo died twelve years later, Emerson had become more comfortable questioning their doctrine. His struggle with Unitarian ideas of Waldo's passing is reflected in his poem "Threnody," which was written not long after Waldo had been prancing around the Emerson home full of life. Emerson pinned Waldo's fate on nature, though he was also puzzled that the hosts of angels did not save him and wondered about the metaphysics of heaven. Of course, Emerson would not say definitively how he imagined heaven, likely not having a definite opinion, but, like Giles, he rejected the idea of a place "adamant and gold [...] heaven stark and cold."³³ Rather, Giles and Emerson both pictured heaven as a homey, inviting place which Emerson described with "flowering grass, and scented weeds."³⁴ The common Christian and Unitarian influences that appear in "Threnody" as references to God and heaven warrant exploration in confronting death. Waldo's youth appears to excuse his father from wrestling with the possibility that the boy might be consigned to hell; thus, such a fate is occluded in "Threnody," but Emerson still alludes, in his vague fashion, to the complexities of eternity and the possibility of an afterlife wherein souls are eternally rewarded or punished. Waldo's death poses questions that are

³³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Threnody," in *Transcendentalism: A Reader*, ed. Joel Myerson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), ll. 272-273.

³⁴ Emerson, "Threnody," ll. 275.

larger than the individual child, and the end of his life inspires his father to move beyond the customary religious explanations for the body's travails at the time of death.

Along with envisioning what heaven might be like, Emerson reflects the idea of an abyss in "Threnody" when he talks about Waldo joining Nature, perhaps going to a waiting place before the world will be made new and all will be united with God. Still uncertain about what constitutes the afterlife, Emerson writes that Waldo "must to the wastes of Nature go –" (l. 131). I present deeper analysis of the poem in the next chapter, but in this context, readers must pause to notice the difference between Emerson's and conventional Unitarian outlooks. Does Waldo go to nature or to rest with his Heavenly Father with the rest of humanity? Now or later? Giles's somewhat "easy" approach to punishment reflects the idea that humans are not totally depraved, which is in contrast to many Christian faiths, but Emerson does not address this point related to Waldo. The depravity of man necessitates a Savior, someone the Unitarians lack in their disregard of Jesus' divinity. Furthermore, without a hell, the need for a Savior is extinguished. Once again as with the Puritans, Unitarians did not claim to truly know what happened after death, but they rested in the hope that all humanity eventually rested with God.

Eastern Religions and Death

In *The Dial*, Transcendentalism's storied literary magazine, Emerson and Thoreau devoted a column to sharing various Eastern texts with readers who might not otherwise have been exposed to Hinduism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Though Sarina Isenberg critiques this column as biased by "Western conceptions of the Orient,"³⁵ the influence

³⁵ Sarina Isenberg, "Translating World Religions: Ralph Waldo Emerson's and Henry David Thoreau's 'Ethical Scriptures' Column in *The Dial*," *Comparative American Studies* 11, no. 1 (March 2013), 20.

remains, despite its cultural appropriation, in Emerson's work and the philosophy of Transcendentalism. Based on that column, Emerson's journals, and his vast library, which included texts from the East, it is reasonable to expect remnants of and references to Eastern religions in his writing and lectures. Emerson's understanding of Eastern religions both juxtaposed and complemented the Christian culture that surrounded him.

Philosopher Russell B. Goodman's introduction to Emerson and Hinduism states, "Emerson was a philosophical original, and he transformed everything he touched."³⁶ Like other thinkers, Emerson pursued innovative ideas to challenge conventional thinking, which then led him to develop his own interpretations interspersed with experience and other study. He believed every reader was capable of creating something new when he read, and his amalgamated philosophy derives from reading beyond conventional Western writers. Goodman prefaces his article with the clarification that he does not think Emerson developed Transcendentalism out of Hinduism, but he firmly asserts the Hindu influences he finds in Emerson's work, such as overarching themes of unity, the almost directly echoed rejection of learning more from books than from practice,³⁷ and the heavy focus on experiential learning. Goodman's study of Hinduism's effect on Emerson quotes *The Laws of Manu*, a central Hindu text from around 200 BC: "Single is each man born, single he dies, single he receives the reward of his good and single the punishment of his evil deeds."³⁸ Emerson's writing often reflects this idea of personal ownership of one's fortune, particularly in essays such as "The American

³⁶ Russell B. Goodman, "East-West Philosophy in Nineteenth-Century America: Emerson and Hinduism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 51, no. 4 (1990), 626.

³⁷ See the *Bhagavad Gita*, Victor Cousin's commentary on the *Gita*, and Emerson's assertion in "The American Scholar" that scholars should focus more on their own interpretations of the world than ciphering out others' observations.

³⁸ Quoted in Goodman, "East-West Philosophy," 629.

Scholar” where he emphatically supports the concept of a self-made man, though the individual should not remain selfish while growing on his own; his maturation benefits the community. Goodman addresses the idea of the soul and focuses on the egocentric tones of Emerson’s interpretation of thoughts such as these, but the included references also point toward Emerson’s evolving beliefs about the afterlife. As this excerpt from *The Laws of Manu* implies, each person starts and ends life on his own, regardless of the relationships he forms throughout his existence. Humans are compensated and condemned alone. In Emerson’s reading of instructions similar to these, he either formed or confirmed his belief in the power of the individual to craft his own way of being; an individual eagerly pursuing self-improvement. The phrase “single he dies” demands further analysis in a discussion about the meaning of death. Despite the fact that people often gather to say their farewells to a dying person, a person ultimately dies alone, whether corporeally surrounded by friends and family or not. Even if accompanied physically, the dying one could be spiritually isolated. Following a cyclical reincarnation mindset, life could begin again, and with it, connection, but the end of a life must ultimately be faced unaccompanied. This idea offers insight into Emerson’s apparent inability to make peace with his son’s passing.

The passage from *The Laws of Manu* immediately following the above passage, as printed in *The Unitarian Miscellany and Christian Monitor*, amplifies the idea of aloneness just before, during, and after death. The next piece of wisdom describes the way friends and family fall away and encourages us to pursue virtue in life rather than to focus on people who cannot accompany us in death:

When he leaves his corse [sic], like a log or lump of clay, on the ground,
his kindred retire with averted faces; but his virtue accompanies his soul.

Continually, therefore, by degrees, let him collect virtue, for the sake of securing an inseparable companion; since with virtue for his guide, he will traverse a gloom how hard to be traversed!³⁹

Here readers of the Unitarian magazine are exposed to a Hindu insight regarding death, though it would not have been wholly foreign to them. The concept would be more parallel to Catholicism, but different Protestant denominations vary in their doctrine regarding what one's actions amend in the afterlife.⁴⁰ As *The Laws* attest for the Hindu stance, after someone dies, he is alone but gets to carry his morality along with him. While people fade away, what he has developed in the way of character gets to remain and carry him into a new life in keeping with the concept of karma. Before new life, one's soul had to encounter suffering or blessing as the actions of that physical life would indicate, thereby making virtue a welcome guide.

Buddhism is similar to Hinduism in beliefs about reincarnation. In the text *Emerson and Zen Buddhism*, John G. Rudy explores the challenging way in which Emerson confronts mortality, likening Emerson's cyclical view of life with the Buddhist belief in reincarnation. "Nominalist and Realist," one of Emerson's essays published in 1844, includes the statement, "Nothing is dead; men feign themselves dead, and endure mock funerals and mournful obituaries, and there they stand looking out of the window, sound and well, in some new and strange disguise."⁴¹ As Rudy notes, Emerson's words closely reflect the Buddhist concept of formless beings who strive "not to avoid birth and death [...] but to be free of such conditions while in the very midst of those conditions."⁴²

³⁹ "Sacred Books of the Hindoos" excerpted in *The Unitarian Miscellany and Christian Monitor*. Vol. 6 (Baltimore: Baltimore Unitarian Book Society, 1824) Google Books, 237.

⁴⁰ Consider, for example, the Calvinistic focus on total depravity apart from God, something good works can do nothing to eradicate.

⁴¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, quoted in John G. Rudy's *Emerson and Zen Buddhism* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), 159.

⁴² Rudy, *Emerson and Zen Buddhism*, 160.

While this free-flowing idea is counter to many Western views of concrete events and the distinct beginnings and endings of things, Buddhism embraces an idea that Emerson found appealing for its reimagining of time and space.

Rudy also explores Emerson's consideration of reincarnation in "Nominalist and Realist": "It is the secret of the world that all things subsist, and do not die, but only retire a little from sight, and afterwards return again."⁴³ This text was published two years after Waldo's death, and one wonders how Emerson's views changed to cope with the loss in light of his acknowledgment of Buddhism's notion of eternal essence that cannot be obliterated through time's eternal loop. Damien Keown of the University of London asserts that "Buddhist teachings emphasise [sic] the ubiquity and inevitability of death, and for this reason, Buddhists tend to be psychologically prepared to accept impending death with calmness and dignity."⁴⁴ Keown's summation of Buddhist views concerning death points Emerson's readers to this productive vantage point in evaluating his perspective on mortality. Death permeates human existence, an inescapable detail as illustrated in the Buddhist tale "Kisa Gotami and the Parable of the Mustard Seed." In this story, the young woman Kisa gives birth to a son who dies. She implores the Buddha, who has attained *nirvana* by the time of the story, to resurrect her child:

Some of us may have heard the story of the woman who came to the Buddha in great anguish, carrying her dead child, and begging the Buddha to bring the child back to life. He instructed her to bring him a mustard seed from any household where no one had ever died, and then he would fulfil her wish. The woman searched in vain, and when she could not find any household in which no one had ever died, she suddenly realized the universality of death.⁴⁵

⁴³ Emerson, quoted in Rudy's *Emerson and Zen Buddhism*, 165.

⁴⁴ Damien Keown, "End of Life: The Buddhist View," *The Lancet* 266, no. 9489 (September 2005), 952.

⁴⁵ Ann Goldman, Richard Martin Hain, and Stephen Liben. *Oxford Textbook of Palliative Care for Children*. 2nd Edition. Edited by Ann Goldman and Stephen Liben. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), n.p.

Acceptance is a defining theme for Buddhists in respect to death because the idea of passing from one life to another makes grief more manageable. The neatly packaged moral for the parable above reads, “Therefore grieve not for what is inevitable.” The Buddha routes people away from sorrow and into a tranquil acceptance of what is. Similar to the Puritan view that grudging a lost loved one shows deficient trust in God, Buddhism’s acceptance of death as a part of life directs followers to accept losses with equanimity. Excessive medical treatment indicates “denial of the reality of human mortality, and would be seen by Buddhism as arising from delusion (moha) and excessive attachment (tanha).”⁴⁶ When nothing can save a person, that person must be given up. However, the peaceful acceptance of death cannot be explored without the complementary view of rebirth. The cycles of life and death lead into easier acceptance of death as a person’s physical dying doesn’t mean a total end to that spirit. Because of the complexities of reincarnation integrated in the Buddhist belief system, life does not entirely end at death; it is merely the discontinuation of that being. Where Emerson later takes comfort in Waldo’s being a part of the grander ethereal world, a Buddhist might also find himself comforted by the thought of continued existence in some form. Some small reassurance may accompany those who believe in an afterlife or rebirth as opposed to those who believe that an individual’s death is, indeed, final. Of course, whether or not life continues, those left will still naturally grieve the change and their own irreplaceable loss of that incarnation. Regardless of where the individual’s next cycle takes them, their just-ended cycle disrupts normal life for those who remain.

⁴⁶ Keown, “End of Life,” 954.

All this is not to say that Emerson directly utilized the texts he read from the East, but he did find pieces that fit into his philosophy or that subverted previously held ideas. Emerson's habit of mind was to find new launching points for further reflection. Contrary to many scholars, he did not fixate on dissecting words and phrases or too closely interrogating a text. Reading a text once was enough to spark his own imagination and thought processes, which would lead to some of the foundational ideas in Transcendentalism. Regarding mortality, Emerson seems to have drawn pieces from each tradition mentioned here, welcoming the thought of Waldo joining the Oversoul years after he released Ellen to heaven. His thoughts changed as he read about and experienced different cultural understandings of the afterlife, yet the influences here inform the context out of which Emerson met grief. He could not wholly depart from the cultural heritage bestowed upon him through his geography. As Conrad Edick Wright eloquently states in *American Unitarianism*, "New England's spiritual history continued to speak through Emerson, therefore, and in him we hear alternately the deflected voices of Puritan moral exhortation [...] and that of antinomian mysticism."⁴⁷ Emerson experimented with beliefs in heaven, hell, and reincarnation, desiring the opportunity to transcend any explicit description of his own or subscription to any pre-established idea.

His belief in life's purpose guided him, but perhaps the flaccid concepts regarding mortality robbed him of feeling an analogous calm about Ellen's when she died. She declared at the end of her life, "I have not forgot the peace and joy." Yet, Emerson remained troubled, broken by her loss and unable to commit to any one particular belief that might encourage his heavy heart to move on. At the time of her death, he was still a

⁴⁷ Wright, *American Unitarianism*, 124.

Unitarian minister, but Unitarian beliefs did not satisfy him in addressing the deep, personal loss. In the next decade after her death, Emerson's Transcendental philosophy began to take root as he abandoned Unitarianism in favor of his own mixture of thinking, writing, and lecturing about a new system of belief. Transcendentalist ideology was still in its formational stages when Emerson experienced another devastating loss, the death of his son Waldo. Certainly, the context out of which he wrote, influenced by local and far-off religion, pervaded Emerson's thought, but once again, his personal experience and inquisitiveness shook his beliefs. He could not know with certainty where Ellen was, where Waldo went, and where he himself would go. While free to wonder and sift through texts, drawing new connections between Eastern and Western religious beliefs, Emerson vacillated between optimism about self-improvement and a nagging sense of ambiguity regarding one's future beyond earthly death.

Chapter III: Nature Cannot Remake Him: Ralph Waldo Emerson's Confrontation of Transcendent Optimism in the Face of Tragic Loss

Optimistic and self-reliant, Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophy affected his approach to politics, religion, and society. His early career was marked by leaving the Unitarian church and embracing the opportunity to build a new culture through Transcendentalism. In 1841, he delivered a pivotal lecture entitled "The Transcendentalist" wherein he described the Transcendentalist as an individual who "believes in miracle [sic], in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy."⁴⁸ Emerson's philosophy promoted individuality and the deep importance of not stooping to join a crowd or be entrenched in futility. However, in 1842, the five-year-old Waldo suddenly died of scarlet fever and challenged the unquenchable optimism Emerson embraced in earlier essays and addresses like "Circles," "Nature," and "The American Scholar." A public figure by this point, Emerson was forced to confront the magnitude of grief he felt at Waldo's death, in contrast to his much-touted philosophy of sanguinity. Prior to Waldo's death, the impact of mortality had not hurt him so deeply, despite its regular presence. Just before turning eight, Emerson faced the loss of his father, which had little emotional bearing on him as his parent was typically absent, and harsh when present. His first wife, Ellen, died in 1831 after fewer than two years of marriage, devastating the young Unitarian minister and causing him to break from the faith, but still not striking him quite as deeply as Waldo's passing would several years later.

⁴⁸ Emerson, *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, 95.

After leaving the Unitarian church following Ellen's death from tuberculosis, Emerson remarried during the summer of 1835 to a woman named Lydia, whom he renamed Lidian. His career as a writer and speaker continued to develop, and the Emersons built a life in Concord, Massachusetts. A year and a half later, the first of the four offspring of their marriage was born: Waldo. In 1838, when Waldo would have been barely a toddler, Emerson wrote, "if my wife, my child, my mother should be taken from me, I should still remain whole."⁴⁹ Having lost a wife, two brothers, his father, and close friends, this statement seems credible and rooted in reflection on the close losses Emerson had already faced. Yet, less than four years later, the beloved son Waldo contracted scarlet fever and died in a matter of days. The sudden and shocking loss forced the Father of Transcendentalism, who publicly espoused resilience and optimism, to reconsider his perspective. The sorrow that overtook him in the days and weeks to follow is reflected in letters, journals, poetry, and essays where he reassesses his idealistic view of life and weighs optimism's opportunity in the face of grief. His writings represent the many fatalities of those around him as he grapples with the contradiction between his established philosophies and personal losses.

Letters and Journals

The night after Waldo died, Emerson wrote a series of letters informing those close to him of his son's succumbing to scarlet fever. To his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, Emerson wrote, "I can say nothing to you."⁵⁰ These six words exhibit the first of many examples of Emerson's inability to express or grasp the depth of his feeling. When words

⁴⁹ Emerson quoted in Packer's *Emerson's Fall*, 169.

⁵⁰ Emerson, *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, 551.

fail the great orator and writer, “his silence speaks despite himself,”⁵¹ and readers feel his loss in the mind-numbing first hours after Waldo died. That same morning, Emerson also penned a letter to Margaret Fuller: “Shall I ever dare to love any thing again?”⁵² Emerson found the loss so crippling in its early days that hope seemed futile; why recover to love again if the loss tossed everything to shreds? Having recently published his first collection of essays articulating the importance of individualism and thriving on one’s own, the realization that someone outside of himself, albeit his offspring, affected him so deeply challenged the indomitable constitution Emerson so valued in himself and others.

Also following the loss, Lidian wrote a letter about “Emerson’s ongoing despair.”⁵³ She observed that her husband “*sees* not how the departure of the child is to be more to us than his presence would have been.”⁵⁴ While characteristically trying to find meaning and learn from the occasion of their son’s death, Lidian noted how her husband could not balance the scale to understand why Waldo’s dying would have been fate’s preferred opportunity for their growth. Emerson would clearly have preferred that the small boy would have matured to adulthood and been able to benefit from the fine training he could have provided in terms of thinking for oneself and exploring the world from one’s own farm or fireside. Instead of living even to school age, Waldo’s illness robbed him of the opportunity to age. With that theft, the father also lost the chance to learn from his bright-eyed boy and share some of his own thinking. Often, in losing a child, “the family may experience the death as being too soon, which may hamper their

⁵¹ Ryan White, “Neither Here nor There: On Grief and Absence in Emerson’s ‘Experience,’” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 23 no. 4 (2010), 286.

⁵² Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 552.

⁵³ Peter Balaam, *Misery’s Mathematics: Mourning, Compensation, and Reality in Antebellum American Literature*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 11.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Balaam, *Misery’s Mathematics*, 11.

acceptance of the loss.”⁵⁵ Making sense of the cycle of life, Emerson was stupefied at reconciling the purpose nature might have had in his son’s premature death. Five years old was certainly too young to die; thus, Emerson’s ordered and didactic world view was shaken to the core.

In this season of loss, Emerson grappled with his resilient philosophies and his place in the natural world. His initial reaction – devastation – forced him to interact with his views on life, “coping with loss at times [challenging] his own more positive view of mortality.”⁵⁶ The morning after Waldo’s death, Emerson wrote another letter to Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, educator and advocate of Kindergarten, whose sisters were married to Nathaniel Hawthorne and Horace Mann: “I cannot in a lifetime incur another such loss.”⁵⁷ His grief seems most poignant here, cutting him deeper than he supposed he could feel. He could not envision loving as intensely again as he had loved Waldo and imagined that another loss would be far too much to bear. Waldo’s death and the impossibility of grieving called into mind each of the previous fatalities, which, he worried, he might not have sufficiently processed.

In a letter a few days later, on February 4, Emerson wrote to Caroline Sturgis, a longtime friend: “I chiefly grieve that I cannot grieve; that this fact takes no more deep hold than other facts, is as dreamlike as they.”⁵⁸ He later wrote again of the impossibility of being able to feel the loss as adequately as he saw fit. He wanted to be shattered, but the shock made him catatonic. The world kept moving on, and Emerson was at a loss to

⁵⁵ Abraham P. Greeff, Alfons Vansteenwegen, and Tina Herbiest, “Indicators of Family Resilience after the Death of a Child,” *OMEGA* 63, no. 5 (2011), 345.

⁵⁶ Ingrid Fernandez, “Necro-Trascendence/Necro-Naturalism: Philosophy of Life in the Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson,” *Death Representations in Literature*, ed. Adriana Teodorescu (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 128.

⁵⁷ Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 552.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

stop its natural cycle, a movement that had heretofore solaced him. His lack of feeling or ability to grasp reality, however, highlights the disassociation with grief. Emerson felt the loss of Waldo strongly but soon numbed himself to the experience, as death often does “numb one’s sensibilities, especially if the loss was traumatic.”⁵⁹ Perhaps he steeled himself to cope because he could not bear to dwell on the pain, but by the time he wanted to face it and learn from it, he had left it aside in his quest to continuously move onward and upward. Though in keeping with his oft-preached philosophy, Emerson’s return to relative normalcy at this point frustrated him deeply. He wanted to remain in a place of deep mourning, yet he began, perhaps against his will, to heal as he found new ways to approach losing his oldest child.

In a study entitled “Accepting Death as Part of Life: Meaning in Life as a Means for Dealing with Loss Among Bereaved Individuals,” psychologists Güler Boyraz, Sharon G. Horne, and J. Brandon Waits articulate the results of their study on individuals’ varying abilities to accept death as a part of life. In speaking with a hundred and sixty bereaved subjects, they discovered a distinct connection between those who had a sense “of [attributing] meaning in life to grieving” and a more positive experience facing loss.⁶⁰ Those who were able to identify purpose in the continued living of their lives, as Emerson at first struggled to do, were more able to move forward with gradual increases in enjoyment and recovery. They found this correlation in other studies they researched as well, sharing that “valuing life, having a sense of purpose, and having a mission in life may serve as protective factors in the face of suffering and may help

⁵⁹ Fernandez, “Necro-Trascendence/Necro-Naturalism,” 134.

⁶⁰ Güler Boyraz, Sharon G. Horne, and J. Brandon Waits, “Accepting Death as Part of Life: Meaning in Life as a Means for Dealing with Loss Among Bereaved Individuals,” *Death Studies* 39, no. 1 (2015), 10.

minimize the negative effects of traumatic life events.”⁶¹ Utmost in his philosophy, Emerson sought significance as he encountered each day. Based on Emerson’s and Lidian’s beliefs about Waldo’s ascent to heaven and the father’s insistence on the cycle of life, Emerson’s understanding of death as a part of life was integral to his processing the loss of one so young. In addition to his cyclical view of life, Emerson knew that his personal and professional lives both continued to be consequential, even without his son.

Despite his professed desire to cling to grief, within two weeks of Waldo’s death, Emerson wrote to Lidian and spoke of resilience of spirit, moving Waldo from life to memory – “the remembrances of the Angel” promising to populate their thoughts even as their daughters continued to fill the mother’s time.⁶² In this same letter, dated February 10, he also made reference to the sorrow that Waldo’s passing would never leave them. He joined his wife in sadness, separated by just a few days since the death, and wrote, “perhaps we shall never be frivolous again, eating of this everlasting wormwood.”⁶³ At this point Emerson was uncertain if the pain would diminish or if he even wanted it to. Yet, despite the life-dimming grief Emerson felt in the short weeks following the initial loss, by the summer after Waldo’s death, Emerson wrote to Margaret Fuller on June 7: “yet I love life – never little.”⁶⁴ Is this propensity for fullness of life denial? Is it a sign of healing? Is it callousness? Is it a culturally curated response?

Emerson’s view of death developed within the religious culture around him, and even his mourning, though seen through his eyes as insufficient, “reflects the social taboo

⁶¹ Boyraz, Horne, and Waits, “Accepting Death as Part of Life,” 3.

⁶² Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 553.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 554.

in excessive mourning or grief in Puritan culture.”⁶⁵ Emerson’s understanding of death and social customs contributed to his reserve, even though he was normally averse to falling in line with societal expectations. In his time, as often remains the case into the twenty-first century, grieving could not entirely overtake one’s daily living. Succumbing too deeply to the pain and sadness encountered through loss exhibited a lack of trust in the Creator and, especially to Emerson’s mind, a lack of trust in fate. A product of his Puritan milieu, Emerson reacted “not to eliminate mourning but to control it.”⁶⁶ Like those around him, Emerson allowed himself to feel *some* pain of loss, but hopefully not too much, hopefully not more than would make him appear out of his senses or as if he had no discipline over his emotions. In theory, Emerson, like those heavily influenced by Puritan beliefs around him, would articulate that death was nothing to fear and was a natural part of life’s cycles. “Puritans confronted death optimistically, with neither doubts nor fears” in order to reflect an appropriate trust in the Divine’s plans, but, as David Stannard suggests, “the evidence does not confirm this interpretation. Instead it suggests that the Puritans were gripped individually and collectively by an intense and unremitting fear of death, while simultaneously clinging to the traditional Christian rhetoric of death as a release and relief for the earth-bound soul.”⁶⁷ Emerson’s world in mid-nineteenth century America was one in which death at any age was common and had to be reckoned with, but in interacting with it intimately, Emerson was perplexed about how to proceed. If it had been himself, he would have likely behaved much differently than when his young son died much too soon. Because he was not the one facing death in 1842, the

⁶⁵ White, “Neither Here nor There,” 294.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 298

⁶⁷ David E. Stannard, “Death and Dying in Puritan New England,” *The American Historical Review* 78, no. 5 (Dec. 1973), 1,324-325.

situation was starkly different. He had no words for it, even if he could begin to internalize the loss in a comprehensible way.

The same year Waldo died, Emerson wrote in his journal about the grief process, shaped, no doubt, by experiencing his son's, first wife's, brothers', and friends' deaths. He speaks to the stages one goes through in facing a loss: first reconciling oneself with the termination of corporeal life and the surrounding arrangements; then experiencing the lack of relationship that person provided:

When the friend has newly died, the survivor has not yet grief, but the expectation of grief. He has not long enough been deprived of his society to feel yet the want of it. He is surprised, and is now under a certain intellectual excitement, being occupied and in a manner amused by the novelty of the event, and is exploring his changed condition. This defends him from sorrow. It is not until the funeral procession has departed from his doors, and the mourners have all returned to their ordinary pursuits, and forgotten the deceased, that the grief of the friend begins.⁶⁸

Emerson had to move forward with the knowledge that Waldo's death was a part of his living. While at first others joined him in grief, more distant relations would have adjusted more quickly than the father and mother. It was then that Ralph Waldo and Lidian were forced to confront the physical and verbal spaces that Waldo once filled. They longed for his "society" to be in their home once more. As two grief psychologists attest, "at its core, grief may be the state of emotional unrest and frustration associated with wanting what one cannot have."⁶⁹ As he referenced in journals and poems later, Emerson wanted his boy to be alive again, to be enlivening the house with his joyous childhood, to be eagerly learning from his father. Emerson clearly would rather that his

⁶⁸ Emerson, *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, 240.

⁶⁹ Holly G. Prigerson and Paul K. Maciejewski, "Grief and Acceptance as Opposite Sides of the Same Coin: Setting a Research Agenda to Study Peaceful Acceptance of Loss," *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 193 (2008), 425.

son had not died, but this wish struggled against his expressions of resilience. It was against his nature to be stuck there—as well as against culture’s expectations—even though stagnation is natural in the face of grief. In contrast to moving toward melancholia, healthy grieving moves toward acceptance, which “by contrast, may represent emotional equanimity – a sense of inner peace and tranquility that comes with the letting go of a struggle to regain what is lost or being taken away.”⁷⁰ Emerson’s outlook assisted him as he came to terms with Waldo’s permanent departure, recalling the statement he made in his journal after his first wife’s death that “the dead do not return.”⁷¹ While the initial grieving was complicated by not knowing if he could ever return to joyous living, Emerson accepted the death as well as he could. His reflection thirteen years after Waldo’s death supports this understanding of his concepts of death: “Our fear of death is like our fear that summer will be short, but when we have had our swing of pleasure, our fill of fruit, and our swelter of heat, we say we have had our day.”⁷² Death is an eventual end, and in Waldo, he could imagine the beauty and perfection of his son without seeing him grow up. Fifteen years after the boy’s death, Emerson opened the coffin but did not write of what he saw inside or how he felt about it. He would never write about his attempt to get closer to his son’s death.

As one reads his journal, Emerson’s gazing at Waldo’s remains a decade and a half after the boy’s death seems to be an odd, isolated, even troubling, event, which is only given a few brief words that could be missed in a cursory reading. Nonetheless, those who have followed Emerson’s journals or grief processes will recall a similar

⁷⁰ Prigerson and Maciejewski, “Grief and Acceptance,” 435.

⁷¹ Emerson, *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Linscott, 13.

⁷² Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 384.

episode with Ellen, who died in 1831. Eighteen months after her death, Emerson traveled alone to the cemetery as he was wont to do each day. This time, on March 29, 1832, instead of his normal visit to talk with his departed wife, he dug up her coffin, opened it, and looked inside. He merely reported these facts in his journal, just as he would later do with Waldo: “I visited Ellen’s tomb and opened the coffin.”⁷³ It appears necessary for him to see her body again, to understand the materiality of her death beyond the emotional pain he was experiencing. It was customary for mourners in the nineteenth century to be near at hand when a person died and closely connected throughout the burial process; buried bodies were supposed to rest in peace, but Emerson violates this rule in personally exhuming his wife. In *National Geographic*’s “When Is It Okay to Dig Up the Dead?”, Mark Strauss quotes the Church of England’s stance: It may be unimportant for the body to be intact after death, but “The phrase ‘laid to rest,’ [...] implies that remains should not be disturbed. The finality of Christian burial should therefore be respected.”⁷⁴ While Emerson and Ellen – and, of course, later Waldo – were not members of the Church of England, a similar view would have been reflected in their Unitarian faith. Mark W. Harris more directly addresses the nineteenth-century Unitarian view of death as one that “became a peaceful deliverance from life with the assuredness of an eternal and heavenly reunion with loved ones.”⁷⁵ This view is reflected in the Emerson household, especially in Ellen’s parting words when she prays, as her husband put it, “that God would speedily release her from her body” that she might enjoy heaven

⁷³ Emerson, *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Linscott, 17.

⁷⁴ Mark Strauss, “When Is It Okay to Dig Up the Dead?” *National Geographic* 7 April 2016.

⁷⁵ Mark W. Harris, *The A to Z of Unitarian Universalism*, (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2009.) Google Books, 46.

and be free from pain.⁷⁶ Normally, this would be the end of it. She would be interred and welcomed to eternal rest. Contrary to normal practices of his day, Emerson still decided to open the coffin of his deceased wife.

In 1857, fifteen years after Waldo's death, Emerson repeated this strange act. This time, Waldo's coffin, its contents certainly decomposed to a skeleton wrapped in clothing, were being moved to the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. More accessible this time as the coffin was already above ground, Emerson lifted the lid and, in his words, "ventured to look inside."⁷⁷ Though he wrote extensively about Waldo's death elsewhere, he scarcely addressed his tampering with the resting places of his loved ones. To gain insight into disturbing both his wife's and son's remains after their deaths, one must consider the cultural view of death again, reorienting to the "impulse to impose meaning on death."⁷⁸ Whereas society would emphasize the value of a spiritual passage to peace and rest, Emerson was unable to endorse the tranquility that accompanied knowledge of heaven's care. He was unable to accept death on such a personal level and was obligated to confront his own beliefs on the meaning of loss. His distress at not being able to carry Waldo's death close to him and to look at the body more than a decade later may be explained by grief psychologists who write, "some individuals will neither want nor have the capacity to accept loss peacefully."⁷⁹ Emerson appears to accept the loss but does not necessarily embrace his capacity to move on. Although a proponent of eternal optimism and life's cyclical nature, Emerson's philosophy bumped into the crippling losses of his

⁷⁶ Emerson, *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Linscott, 13.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 401.

⁷⁸ Ian Finseth, "The Civil War Dead: Realism and the Problem of Anonymity," *American Literary History* 25, no. 3 (Fall 2013), 542.

⁷⁹ Prigerson and Maciejewski, "Grief and Acceptance," 435.

wife and son. Their deaths could not be taken with equanimity, and he had to lift the lids of their coffins once more to disturb the culturally imposed quiet.

Nearly thirty years after young Waldo's death, Emerson's letters continued to reveal new angles to the grief he encountered. A series of letters to and from poet Emma Lazarus reveals his understanding of grief, matured by time and experience. Lazarus's uncle Benjamin Nathan had been murdered, which prompted Emerson to offer his condolences: "I can easily see that this ghastly incident will for a long time refuse to be forgotten or hidden or veiled. It will force seriousness & searching insights into the common day which can hide such grim contingences in the current of life which flowed so softly."⁸⁰ This reflective advice seems to stem from a deeply personal place: his own losses. Waldo's and Ellen's deaths impacted him deeply, allowing him to empathize with the difficulty of an unrelenting pain. Yet Emerson also advised, "Resilience!", averring, "I know how we hate & shun the dismal," and encouraging his fellow poet and friend to be "as self-collected & sane as we can."⁸¹ Though he understood via Lazarus' loss how grief pushes its way into all aspects of life, he also knew that time begins to lessen the pain of grieving. Despite his perception in the few years after Waldo's death that he could not learn from it as he wanted to, Emerson *did* draw lessons he could share with his grieving friend.

"Threnody"

Written about the time he informed family and close friends of Waldo's death, Emerson opens his 289-line poem with reflections on "the darling who shall not return"

⁸⁰ Emerson, *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, 567.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 568.

(l. 8). In a painful juxtaposition, Emerson notes that only a “few days ago” (l. 32) Waldo had stepped around the house and delighted in being a small boy. Rawer than the later written and polished essay “Experience,” this genre switch to a song-like poem provides a more reflective and mournful approach to Waldo’s death. Where “Experience” laments distance between the author and his son, “Threnody” more immediately grapples with Waldo’s loss. The poem works through Emerson’s devastating bereavement and expresses how Nature fails him and puts him at the mercy of fate.

More than losing one so dear to him, Emerson laments the loss of lineage he forfeits through Waldo’s death. In contrast to his relationship with his own father, where he exemplifies the American ideal of the self-made man, Emerson hoped to shape Waldo into an even better version of himself. After his father’s death, the eight-year-old Emerson was compelled to accept neighborly charity, whereas his own son could live a comfortable life, focusing his energies on creativity and exploration. Rather than being left without a father, with no one to guide him in the wide world, the tables were reversed for Emerson: he was a father without a son to raise. Fatherhood “offer[ed] Emerson the opportunity to re-imagine a father’s relationship with his son as loving rather than stern, producing affection rather than rebellion”⁸² – an opportunity canceled by Waldo’s death. As the Father of Transcendentalism, Emerson clearly had much he wanted to pass on to the next generation, but he was robbed of this in the most direct and hereditary sense. In her essay “The Economics of Loss: Emerson’s ‘Threnody,’” Mary Chapman tackles the growing importance of paternity in young America, emphasizing not only the “public paternity characterized by power, authority, and leadership” but also the private side of

⁸²Mary Chapman, “The Economics of Loss: Emerson’s ‘Threnody,’” *The American Transcendental Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (2002), 79.

“literal paternity characterized by intimacy, vulnerability, and relation.”⁸³ Rebellious against the power struggles fatherhood might occasion, Emerson came to embrace the latter, literal kind of paternity that Chapman describes. He was able to interact warmly with Waldo and cultivated a deep connection with his firstborn son.

With Waldo, as we see in “Threnody,” Emerson grieves “I gave thee sight – where is it now? / I taught thy heart beyond the reach/ Of ritual, bible, or of speech;/ Wrote in thy mind’s transparent table” (l. 199). Though Emerson’s philosophy often rejected the idea of paternity in the past for its tendency to push people into arbitrary norms, he came to recognize the links that could be made between father and child. The philosopher aimed to teach Waldo beyond standard education of the time, which was largely characterized by biblical study and rote memorization. Though he dismissed neither biblical education nor worldly knowledge, this father wanted Waldo to look beyond typical lesson books and see the world with his own young eyes, indeed as Transcendentalism would have counseled. Growing up as the heir of Emerson, Waldo would have been encouraged to explore and see things anew. Instead, as Emerson prescribed it, Waldo “must to the wastes of Nature go –” (l. 131), his early death truncating the opportunity for self-actualization. Losing his son also cut Emerson off from having his own child serve as a model for Transcendentalism. The public nature of Emerson’s life broadcast this personal loss and perhaps pushed Emerson into the uncomfortable position of no longer having a protégé to embody his philosophy.

Halfway through the poem, as Emerson struggled with Fate’s cruel way, he lamented, “No angel from the countless host . . . Could stoop to heal that only child/

⁸³ Ibid., 73.

Nature's sweet marvel undefiled" (l. 123) and continued to write about how the world was unworthy of Waldo's pure spirit. Yet, at the same time, he distanced himself from his son, writing, "I never called thee mine, / But Nature's heir" (l. 127). Despite paternal affection and the desire to have Waldo carry on his name, Emerson declares that the boy was never even his. Interestingly, Emerson never mentions Waldo by name in "Threnody." Neither does he refer to his son directly as "my son"; instead he uses phrases like "my darling," and other context clues point to their relationship. Readers can deduce Waldo's association, but the implications are not as clear as they might have been. He also does not use "I" because of his attempt to create distance between them. He cannot get the death closer to him. It is *too* close, but also easy to push off onto Nature. Despite his contention that Waldo was the product of nature, he comments that "the world and not the infant failed" (l. 139). It was not Waldo's weak constitution that gave him over to scarlet fever, but rather the refusal of Nature or the angels to save him. Perhaps a little idealistically, characteristic of his nature, Emerson goes on to say of Nature that "It was not ripe yet to sustain/ A genius of so fine a strain" (ll. 140-41). Because Nature could not keep Waldo alive, immune to or unconquered by illness, Nature was inadequate. Where he expects cycles of the natural world to sustain his son, cycles fail, and Emerson must declare that the world simply could not contain him in the long term.

Further emphasizing the disappointment that nature causes, Emerson comments on the wind in the opening lines of "Threnody." He writes,

The South-wind brings
Life, sunshine, and desire,
And on every mount and meadow
Breathes aromatic fire;
But over the dead he has no power,
The lost, the lost, he cannot restore;

And, looking over the hills, I mourn
The darling who shall not return. (ll. 1-8)

Here readers observe the themes that set up the poem. There is an emphasis on the natural world with Emerson's expressed appreciation of wind and the life and breath that it brings. With Waldo's death, the breeze does not quite lose its effect, but its power cannot restore the dead. Emerson cites this breakdown, mourning that Waldo's death is not reversible. In so many instances, a wilting plant can be brought back to life through the natural progression of seasons—of new life, growth, fading, death, and rebirth. However, despite Emerson's great confidence in nature and in his son's transcendent goodness and being, he knows that "the darling" will not be laughing and running throughout the house anymore. The boy is dead. Though the day searches "far and wide," Emerson writes that it "cannot find him" and "the south wind searches, / And finds young pines and budding birches;/ But finds not the budding man" (ll. 22-26). Late in January when Waldo died, the world would have been bitter cold and in winter's dormant state, but with spring soon approaching, the father could hope to see that the world would spring anew with budding branches bursting forth. Yet, his knowledge of death starkly and unabashedly reveals its unrelenting permanence—a permanence that Transcendental optimism cannot alter.

In the poem's closing stanza, the imagery of cyclical existence resonates in the lines "Blood is blood which circulates, / Life is life which generates, / And many-seeming life is one" (ll. 243-245). Emerson's Transcendental philosophy often emphasized the tides of time and drew upon Eastern concepts of reincarnation. However, a cyclical view of life is largely missing in this poem, which focuses more on the tragic loss of an irreplaceable life. Emerson includes a few lines that are reflective, but his broader philosophies are not

in keeping with the tone of the rest of the poem. He appears to be forcing himself to see an eventual reincarnation-like hope in the loss and closes by writing, “Lost in God, in Godhead found” (l. 289). He pleads for the Oversoul to accept his son and provide solace for his painful loss. Yet, he cannot finally relinquish Waldo to this vastness. Emerson dealt more traditionally with earlier deaths, yet Waldo’s role as heir to intellectual and physical property cut too deeply for him to bear, despite his assertion in 1838 that death would not undo him.

In 1841, the year before Waldo was born, Emerson wrote “Self-Reliance,” which became one of his most noteworthy essays. In it, he dissuaded his readers from simply embracing majority views and reproached them for their fears: “We are afraid of truth, afraid of fortune, afraid of death, and afraid of each other...”⁸⁴ He chided modern men who fell prey to social ambitions and became unthinking slaves to cultural values. In the same paragraph, he continued, “We shun the rugged battle of fate, where strength is born.”⁸⁵ The fear of death had certainly touched Emerson, but in previous deaths, he had coped more effectively than in this rugged battle of Waldo’s death. In “Threnody,” Emerson expresses remorse for Nature “who lost” and “cannot remake him” (l. 27). Fate’s battles raged, building character that Emerson could not yet see. He was forlorn without his son, yet the experience of losing Waldo didn’t seem real enough to educate him the struggle numbed rather than empowered the grieving father. Following the admission that Nature had failed, Emerson wrote, “Fate let him fall” (l. 28), believing that fate swallowed Waldo.

⁸⁴ Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 131.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Emerson draws inspiration, at least, from writing about death, but it amounts to cold comfort. Mary Chapman points out, “if the chief goal of mourning is to recover one’s voice, manifest in elegy by inheriting the prosopopoeic voice of the poet, ‘Threnody’ fails and renders Emerson’s grieving melancholic and incomplete.”⁸⁶ Though readers get a sense of his feeling, or distance from it, Emerson was not yet emboldened from the loss in a way that helped him recover his voice. He craved a lasting, deep bereavement that honored the depth of his feeling, but the death also stymied his Transcendental commitment to resilience. Resilience took on a new meaning. Instead of believing that the world would constantly improve, Emerson now focused on enjoying what the world had to offer in her fractured state. As Chapman remarks, Waldo’s death “marks a shift in Emerson’s career from assertiveness to resignation, his prior belief in freedom replaced by a submission to fate as a beautiful necessity.”⁸⁷ With this admission, he could once again experience pleasure and progress, despite “the blasphemy of grief” (l. 204), which, in its ambiguity, was unbearable.

“Experience”

In one of his most famous essays, Emerson mourns that grief has failed to provide deep, cutting sensation because it “never introduces [him] to reality.” He would “even pay the costly price of sons and lovers” to learn the lessons that grief offers.⁸⁸ Emerson was inclined to find meaning in everything, but despite losing many close to him, including a son and a wife, he had not been able to feel the “sharp peaks and edges of

⁸⁶ Chapman, “The Economics of Loss,” 84.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 75.

⁸⁸ Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 199.

truth.”⁸⁹ Wanting to find solace in learning something new about himself, about nature, or about humankind, Emerson was left instead with emptiness.

Oft-debated and speculated about, Emerson’s declaration, “in the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate, – no more” is not a capitulation, as several scholars suggest. Sharon Cameron’s “Representing Grief: Emerson’s ‘Experience’” posits that his statements are “insistent denials of feeling”⁹⁰ rather than recognition of Emerson’s dissatisfaction with this state. Cameron’s idea that Emerson’s grief is deeper than his words might first communicate is plausible, but reading Emerson as a man who *wants* to feel deeply only reveals his failure to do so. Where Cameron writes that Emerson appears to move forward, his grieving as “absolute adequacy,”⁹¹ Emerson’s expression, “I cannot get it nearer to me,” suggests frustration. He would like to absorb the loss but is numbed to it, perhaps because it has “overwhelmed [his] capacity to cope.”⁹² Commenting that the death of young Waldo “leaves no scar,” Emerson writes, “I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, not carry me one step into real nature.”⁹³ From Cameron’s perspective, it would seem that Emerson is either lying or that he does not feel the death deeply enough. But where Cameron reads denial, one may also read acceptance of loss and resistance to acquiescence.

Emerson moves too rapidly to acceptance to his own mind, encouraged by the staunch promotion of resilience. Cameron argues that this is Emerson’s mind attempting

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Sharon Cameron, “Representing Grief: Emerson’s ‘Experience,’” *Representations* 15, (Summer 1986), 15.

⁹¹ Cameron, “Representing Grief,” 16.

⁹² Bessel A. Van der Kolk, and Alexander C. McFarlane, *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*, eds. Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Lars Weisæth (New York: Guilford Press, 1996), 488.

⁹³ Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 200.

“to render itself unconscious of the grief occasioned by the death” of his son.⁹⁴ This is arguable, but she sees Emerson as lying to his readers instead of appreciating the depth of his bereavement. In fact, Emerson was ashamed that he was able to move on when it seemed that the death should have incapacitated him. He could not be stuck in grief, having lived so long with the mindset that “dedication to one thought is quickly odious.”⁹⁵ His thoughts must be fluid and dynamic, not fixated on Waldo’s death. Yet, his persistence to move forward prevented him from feeling the loss to its full potential, a depth of feeling that Emerson imagined could teach him something valuable.

Rather than dismissing Waldo’s death, as scholars like Cameron argue, Emerson reveals his frustration about his puzzling ambivalence in “Experience.” He writes, “The Indian who was laid under a curse, that the wind should not blow on him, nor the water flow to him, nor fire burn him, is a type of us all. The dearest events are summer-rain, and we the Para-coats that shed every drop.”⁹⁶ The Indian is cursed with unfeelingness, of not being able to participate in nature’s events, which Emerson also feels. If nature is the cause of life and embodies the fullness of it, if its existence offers solace and perspective and growth, then Emerson’s likening himself to one cut off from it is anything but acquiescent. This distance he feels from his son—from nature—illustrates the deep pain he felt at not being able to feel a deeper pain. The man who looked upon his first wife’s face in her coffin, exhuming the body a year after her death, was thwarted in his desire to be close to the dead, though he tried again later with Waldo. Where he grasped at his son’s

⁹⁴ Cameron, “Representing Grief,” 18.

⁹⁵ Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 202.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 200.

passing and the lessons it could teach him, nature “lets them slip through our fingers when we clutch hardest.”⁹⁷ Emerson was less satisfied than he seemed.

Though he was worried about his dearth of feeling in the wake of Waldo’s death, Emerson’s reaction represented, according to modern psychologists, a step forward in the grieving process. In *On Death and Dying*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross reminds mourners that “acceptance should not be mistaken for a happy stage. It is almost void of feelings.”⁹⁸ Emerson’s work in “Experience” exemplifies precisely what Kübler-Ross relates; that his Para-coat analogy resembles feeling insulated from the tragedy of Waldo’s death. He copes with his acceptance by reminding himself that “temper prevails over everything,”⁹⁹ and that he is the type of man to move on. Emerson has looked at life and found not that it is wanting, but that there is much to be seen and considered, despite its disappointments: losing a son *and* not being able to feel it fully. As Ingrid Fernandez writes in her piece on death and life in Emerson, “decay is the nourishment of all creation,”¹⁰⁰ and without decay in the natural world, there is no possibility of continuation. Human decay offers a purpose insofar as the cessation of life guarantees nature’s renewal. Emerson cultivated an appreciation of simple beauty in new opportunities and rebirth from painful times, including this wisdom in “Experience”:

I am thankful for small mercies. I compared notes with one of my friends who expects everything of the universe, and is disappointed when anything is less than the best, and I found that I begin at the other extreme, expecting nothing, and am always full of thanks for moderate goods.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Scribner, 1969), 124.

⁹⁹ Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 201.

¹⁰⁰ Fernandez, “Necro-Transcendence/Necro-Naturalism,” 126.

¹⁰¹ Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 204.

Contrary to his friend who carried high hopes for each day and was consistently let down, Emerson downplayed expectation and anticipation, which could be thwarted by misfortune and decay. After Waldo's death, he instead endeavored to be gratified with little and glad when good things came about. The sorrow that tempered his lofty expectations resulted in increased contentment.

Conclusion

Emerson's persistent guilt and emotional numbness in "Experience" and in his letters and journals—whether before or after he made sense of the loss—were indeed central to the grieving process. Instead of thinking him indifferent to the deaths around him, we observe his acceptance and his reverence for each new day, despite the human absences. Emerson famously wrote in "Experience," "the years teach much which the days never know."¹⁰² A grieving man moves forward but sometimes looks back and remembers with fondness his loss; his personal and public writings reflect this meandering journey until Emerson ultimately takes solace in a "Nature that is in fact a giant, collective graveyard in which all types of matter are infinitely recycled."¹⁰³

Emerson's temperament made him unable to grieve for Waldo as he wanted to, but his acceptance was in keeping with his own commitment to resilience and the "multidimensional grief states that evolve and diminish in intensity over time."¹⁰⁴

Emerson addresses hope in the second paragraph of "Experience" when he writes the following words: "In times when we thought ourselves indolent, we have afterwards

¹⁰² Ibid, 207.

¹⁰³ Fernandez, "Necro-Trascendence/Necro-Naturalism," 127.

¹⁰⁴ Prigerson and Maciejewski, "Grief and Acceptance," 436.

discovered, that much was accomplished, and much was begun in us.”¹⁰⁵ Despite Waldo’s recent death, Emerson could already sense the personal growth underway in a time of sorrow. Facing death so often early on, the years offered Emerson perspective that life would ebb and flow. In the terrible pain of Waldo’s death, Emerson imagined his beloved cycles would bring him joy and meaning once again. As Boyraz, Horne, and Waits conclude, “having meaning in life may foster acceptance of death, which in turn may influence the grieving process,”¹⁰⁶ and Emerson’s life and work exhibit just this level of meaning meeting experience. In a journal entry written three days after Waldo died, Emerson wrote, “the sun went up the morning sky with all his light, but the landscape was honored by this loss.”¹⁰⁷ Nature reflects how he strove to be: constant in hope though sobered by grief. Emerson experienced great grief but stalwartly clung to hope. He knew “that life perpetually promises us a glory we can never realize”¹⁰⁸ but unwaveringly pursued that glory and encouraged others to do the same. In the ensuing pages of “Experience,” Emerson referenced “that in us which changes not” – his optimism – and once again cried, “Up again, old heart”¹⁰⁹

As time elapsed and Emerson’s philosophy continued to form, he wrote the essay “Immortality” based on a talk delivered in 1861. Still ripening his ideas about loss and renewal, he wrote, “On the borders of the grave, the wise man looks forward with equal elasticity of mind, or hope ... for it is the nature of intelligent beings to be forever new to

¹⁰⁵ Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 198.

¹⁰⁶ Boyraz, Horne, and Waits, “Accepting Death as Part of Life,” 9.

¹⁰⁷ Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 223-24.

¹⁰⁸ Stephen E. Whicher, “Emerson’s Tragic Sense,” in *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), 667.

¹⁰⁹ Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 208, 213.

life.”¹¹⁰ At the graveside, coffin lids lifted and remains revealed, Emerson had no words to share as he gazed on the remains of Ellen, then Waldo; like many mourners, following traditional Protestant practices, his own philosophy, or any amalgamation of religious responses, Emerson could not make sense of the losses he faced. Perhaps he looked within himself and realized the gap between his idealized philosophy and his personal experiences. On the borders of the graves he opened, no thrilling insight was recorded. The gravesides were bleak, but looking back, he seemed to see new hope for the future and to resist death’s crippling grip. Amid the swirl of a war-mad nation when “Immortality” was published, Americans contemplated loss in the deaths of Civil War soldiers. Such losses again drew Emerson toward reflection and opportunities for change in the coming years.

Harkening back to an earlier declaration in “The American Scholar,” Emerson could not help looking to the future: “Genius looks forward: the eyes of man are set in his forehead, not in his hindhead: man hopes: genius creates.”¹¹¹ Tempered by the decades that passed between this statement and the Civil War, Emerson retained faith in the future, though perhaps with a less rosy glow. He could still learn, a conviction that steadied him in the carnage of war. Until his death in 1882, Emerson lived his own decrees: “The eloquent man is he who is no beautiful speaker, but who is inwardly and desperately drunk with a certain belief.”¹¹² He championed optimism; Emerson returned unbridled to his desire to live richly and enjoy each hour. He remembered his son, but in remembrance, his thoughts rose to the joy of having known him and of having loved

¹¹⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Immortality” in *The Complete Works* (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1904; Bartleby.com, 2013), n.p.

¹¹¹ Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 59.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 296.

Ellen and those who had gone before. Refusing to be crippled by grief, perhaps Emerson failed to learn the lessons that more extended, disabling mourning could have taught him. But in keeping with his philosophy, he had to soldier on; in this soldiering, he ultimately absorbed the knowledge that his philosophy and experience taught him early on: “Life only avails, not the having lived.”¹¹³

¹¹³ Ibid, 129, taken from “Self-Reliance.”

Chapter IV: Called from Poetics and Slavery: Emerson and Douglass's Evolution as Abolitionists

In 1861 at the start of the American Civil War, Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke and wrote against the evils of human bondage, his voice a loud proponent against the institution of chattel slavery. His words and message by the start of the Civil War were clear, but they had not always been. One of the founding voices of Transcendentalism, Emerson is well-known for championing optimism, his belief in progress, and the role of self-reliance in individual and cultural progress, but his early philosophy was shaped in part by reckoning with the tragedy of slavery in the United States. Over the course of four decades and a career of speaking and writing on either side of the Atlantic, Emerson was forced to confront slavery's foundation and its existence in opposition to his ideals. Further, he had to honestly assess the state of young America and reconcile his philosophy to address the deteriorating moral condition of his country. Concurrently, one of the most famous African-Americans of the nineteenth century, Frederick Douglass, was escaping from bondage, travelling with abolitionists to share his story, and eventually demanding the opportunity to articulate his own ideas about abolition, equality, and women's rights. Both men began and ended their journeys regarding abolition in starkly different places from one another; through interactions with the tragic reality of the world – from philosophical and physical vantage points – Emerson and Douglass ultimately concluded that a war might be morally inevitable for a nation gripped by slavery.

Emerson's Journey, Speech in 1837

Over the course of nearly forty years, Emerson moved from a view that slavery reflected the natural order of things¹¹⁴ to becoming a staunch abolitionist; these four decades are bisected into non-address and a formulated stance. In 1837, Emerson first publicly lectured on slavery, but, as exhibited by silence in essays and on his speaking tours, he was largely reserved between 1837 and 1844. In 1837, as Len Gougeon identifies, Emerson's discourse exposes his focus on "the principle of free speech, which was then threatened by a nearly universal repression of abolition oratory, rather than the great moral and social issue of slavery."¹¹⁵ Here Emerson defends abolitionists' opportunity to organize and speak against an issue rather than condemning slavery directly, a fact that critics like Gougeon and Shari Goldberg take issue with, particularly given the heated political climate in which Emerson lived. Boston and the surrounding area in the mid-1830s were hotbeds of political activism.¹¹⁶ In 1837, Emerson declared, in a speech that Gougeon calls "tepid and philosophical to a fault"¹¹⁷ and failed to please abolitionists, that he would leave the public alone. He had already spoken against obnoxious abolitionists¹¹⁸ and reasoned that people would come around. They did not.

¹¹⁴ Marjory M. Moody, "The Evolution of Emerson as an Abolitionist," *American Literature*, 17, no. 1 (March 1945): 2; Len Gougeon, "Emerson and Abolition: The Silent Years, 1837-1844," *American Literature* 54, no. 4 (1982), 568. Gougeon cites Emerson's "belief in the basic inferiority of the Negro" in the mid-1830s.

¹¹⁵ Gougeon, "Emerson and Abolition," 560.

¹¹⁶ Len Gougeon, "Abolition, the Emersons, and 1837." *The New England Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (September 1981): 348, 350. Gougeon's piece encapsulating ideas Ralph Waldo Emerson's family expressed points out that his brother, Charles Emerson, spoke against slavery in 1835, and his wife, Lidian, also worked toward the abolitionist cause years before Emerson fully adopted this fight for social justice. Later in his article, Gougeon calls "Middlesex County, in 1840, a stronghold of abolition principles" (350).

¹¹⁷ Gougeon, "Abolition, the Emersons, and 1837," 36.

¹¹⁸ Leonard Neufeldt. "Emerson and the Civil War." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 71, no. 4 (October 1972): 504: "Emerson was thoroughly annoyed with [abolitionists'] political frenzy and antipathy toward a scholarly address." He resented the chaos abolitionism inspired and its adverse approach to individual moralizing.

Despite abolitionist criticism of his non-engagement, Emerson held true to his Unitarian belief “that spiritual advancement was dependent upon men’s own efforts,”¹¹⁹ necessitating personal moral reform over ineffectual public enforcement.¹²⁰ Further, his penchant for Eastern philosophies exposed him to works that “reinforce[d] his basic optimism that all things tend naturally to goodness” in time. Emerson felt confident “that even an abomination like slavery would finally yield to” an evolving goodness that individuals would not resist.¹²¹ However, as Emerson came to see, the evils of slavery did not recede in the United States as the decades elapsed, “his optimism ... tempered by both personal loss and the course of American public events.”¹²² Instead, slavery continued to propagate as new states entered the Union; families were severed, and human bodies, too, were violated under the cruelty of slave owners. As his Transcendental philosophy took shape, Emerson would repeatedly cast his gaze on “the importance of individuality, especially individual moral responsibility.”¹²³ The historical context of Emerson’s movements brought abolitionists to speak in and around Concord, their words familiar to Emerson’s ears but not in conversation with the Transcendentalist’s own ideas, as he was sequestered with other issues of moral concern. Nonetheless, because Emerson’s sensitivities were shaped by grating questions of equality and individual improvement, he was unable to avoid exposure to anti-slavery ideas.

¹¹⁹ Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970), 155. Len Gougeon cites this and other ideas from Howe on Unitarianism, emphasizing the importance Emerson’s religion plays in his philosophical evolution.

¹²⁰ Gougeon, “Emerson and Abolition,” 561.

¹²¹ Len Gougeon, “Emerson, Poetry, and Reform.” *Modern Language Studies* 19, no. 2 (1989), 40.

¹²² David M. Robinson, “‘For Largest Liberty’: Emerson, Natural Religion, and the Antislavery Crisis.” *Religion & Literature* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2009), 3.

¹²³ Gougeon, “Abolition, the Emersons, and 1837,” 356.

1844 Speech

For the seven years following his half-committed speech in 1837, Emerson continued speaking and writing, gaining credibility and recognition while producing some of his most famous works, including “Experience,” “Self-Reliance,” and “Circles.” These iconic essays, enunciating central pillars of Transcendentalism, offer insight into the author’s prowess in language and thinking. Even so, the essays fail to address slavery directly again until the ten-year anniversary of British emancipation in 1844.¹²⁴ Positing that Emerson uses his quiet approach effectively, Goldberg contends that at this point in his career Emerson was prepared to “engage abolitionist publications, to blatantly oppose the increasing power of southerners over suspected fugitives,” and to leverage his authority on behalf of the movement. Nevertheless, he “repeatedly shie[d] away from argumentation,” failing to use the authority he had earned as the Father of Transcendentalism.¹²⁵ Despite barely taking a stance on slavery before this date, Emerson unabashedly claimed, “It became plain to all men, the more this business was looked into, that the crimes and cruelties of the slave-traders and slave-owners could not be overstated.”¹²⁶ Though Goldberg criticizes this speech as less direct than it might be, Emerson’s movement from relative silence on the subject to a definitive statement mark an important shift in his addressing the evils of slavery.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ While the Slavery Abolition Act was accepted in 1833, it was not enacted until 1834, thus creating the start of the ten-year timeline leading to the ten-year anniversary being honored in 1844.

¹²⁵ Shari Goldberg, “From Quietism to Quiet Politics: Inheriting Emerson’s Antislavery Testimony,” *Paragraph* 31, no. 3 (2008), 282.

¹²⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson’s Antislavery Writings*, eds. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1995), 10.

¹²⁷ *The Liberator* reports after this speech the following, as quoted in Gougeon’s “Emerson and Abolition: The Silent Years, 1837-1844,” 575: “Before we saw notice of this celebration, we were not aware that Mr. Emerson had sufficiently identified himself with the abolitionists.”

In rebuttal to those who would argue that “the planter does not want slaves, he only wants the immunities and the luxuries which the slaves yield him,” Emerson asserted “the love of power” that slave owners felt and its damning effects on both enslaver and enslaved.¹²⁸ Economic arguments for slavery crumbled when Emerson established with certainty that slave owners who had mechanical machines would not, in fact, liberate their human machines. Emerson explained that England was able to emancipate her slaves ten years prior to this speech because “the planters [were] not, excepting in rare examples, members of the legislature.”¹²⁹ America’s legislators were caught in the “voluptuousness of holding a human being in [their] absolute control” and had no intention of considering emancipation as a Congressional issue.¹³⁰ Politicians too closely benefited from the forced labor of slaves to objectively right its wrongs through liberation. Emerson suggested that “a million freemen” could approach Congress and insist upon slavery’s eradication because, “if ordinary legislation cannot reach [Congress], then extraordinary [legislation] must be applied.”¹³¹ He accused the legislators of being caught in their own love of power and thus ignoring proposed laws, yet he persuasively declared that if enough people rose to confront Congress, slavery could be outlawed. The future would prove his point.

From then on, Emerson more closely and deliberately enunciated a moral rejection of human bondage as he joined the multitude of voices at the Women’s Anti-Slavery Society and declared that recognizing the inherent equality of blacks added “a man ... to

¹²⁸ Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 350.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 353.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 350.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 354.

the human family.”¹³² Also a speaker at the society meeting, Frederick Douglass listened as the Transcendentalist confronted American slavery. The ex-slave likely agreed with Emerson’s denunciation of American apathy, wherein “well-being consists in having a sufficiency of coffee and toast, with a daily newspaper.”¹³³ From their mutual attendance to honor the emancipation of slaves in the British West Indies in 1844, Emerson and Douglass would often move in the same circles in their respective fights against slavery, even forming friendships with the same people, such as Margaret Fuller.¹³⁴ Emerson’s focus in 1844 was not yet trained on fighting slavery, as the issue had not yet become personal to him. By contrast, Douglass’s cognizance and position as a former slave, with no chance of distance from the topic, compelled him more deeply to combat slavery as a matter of human rights. The 1844 speech moved Emerson closer to evaluating slavery as a moral blight: “The genius of the Saxon race, friendly to liberty; the enterprise, the very muscular vigor of this nation, are inconsistent with slavery.”¹³⁵ In order to uphold her honor, he enjoined the United States to address her hypocrisy and ultimately his own delay.

Fugitive Slave Law

With the 1850 passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, Emerson determined that, despite the unfortunate turn of events now involving the North in slavery’s clutches, the

¹³² Ibid, 356-57. By this point in 1844, Emerson has also developed a “new found faith in the ability of blacks to compete successfully in life and, thus, to improve themselves,” Gougeon, “Emerson and Abolition,” 574.

¹³³ Ibid, 351.

¹³⁴ Fuller and Emerson’s emotional and intellectual attachment hedging on a full-blown affair is well known, but Emerson similarly suspected romantic undertones in Fuller and Frederick Douglass’s friendship. Emerson’s writings are almost entirely void of Douglass’s name, and this is, according to scholars such as Christina Zwaarg in her article on Fuller, Douglass, and Emerson, because of Emerson’s racial disapproval and jealousy. Additionally, Egan points out that in a draft of the 1844 speech, Emerson struck out Douglass’s name when he saw Douglass in attendance.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 359.

new ruling would not cause much harm, just as the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793 had become a “dead letter.”¹³⁶ As the months progressed and the law was not, in fact, ignored, Emerson was compelled to reckon with the personal implications of slavery as they affected his life. He had to move from silence to address slavery’s evils, which had not dissipated in humanity’s “inevitable” move toward goodness. Slavery’s effects could now hypothetically reach Emerson’s cozy home; a slave’s presence, and therefore the threat of a slave catcher’s reclamation work, could disrupt Emerson’s comfort and peace of mind as he philosophized about moral good.¹³⁷ By the April following the enactment in September of 1850, Emerson wrote a letter containing these words: “at this moment, in the cruelty and ignominy of the laws, & the shocking degradation of Massachusetts, I have no heart to look at books, or to think of anything else than how to retrieve this crime.”¹³⁸ Perhaps thinking of his own political stances, Emerson wrote in “Spiritual Laws” that “Human character evermore publishes itself. If you act, you show character; if you sit still, if you sleep, you show it.”¹³⁹ Before the Fugitive Slave Law, Emerson was content to moralize from a distance. He could sit still, waiting for humans to reform themselves, but he discovered that he could not be quiet any longer. No longer able to muse about man’s growth, Emerson actively joined the anti-slavery movement. He was now an abolitionist.

On May 3, 1851, Emerson delivered a speech on the Fugitive Slave Law to nearly three dozen of Concord’s male citizens. Rising to the public eye on the topic of slavery

¹³⁶ Gougeon, “Emerson, Poetry, and Reform,” 42.

¹³⁷ Moody, “The Evolution of Emerson as an Abolitionist,” 14: Moody argues that the North could disengage from slavery, not paying heed to the atrocities of slavery in the South. Largely ignored, “only after slavery had become a political and economic issue did it become, for many, a moral issue.”

¹³⁸ Letter from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Emily Drury, dated 14 April 1851. Printed in *MLA*, LV (June 1940) and quoted in Len Gougeon’s “Emerson, Poetry, and Reform,” 47.

¹³⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays & Poems* (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 318.

over a number of years, Emerson declared in his opening statement, “The last year has forced us all into politics, and made it a paramount duty to seek what it is often a duty to shun.”¹⁴⁰ The silence he had adopted before and the luxury of a broad focus on moral issues had been stripped away by the “illuminating power of a sheet of lighting at midnight” as the Fugitive Slave Law went into effect over the whole United States.¹⁴¹ As critic Wendell Jackson says, “He learned that there *were* times when even the most abstracted poet or writer must face in a tangible fashion an evil which threatens to make smaller the life around him, and that writers and scholars indeed do have practical, long-term obligations as citizens.”¹⁴² Emerson’s speech went on to describe that Christian religion and the Constitutional values of Americans were incongruent with the current state of racial affairs.

Emerson chastised a man he had formerly admired, Massachusetts Senator Daniel Webster, in his shift from slavery’s adversary to one who pushed for the law’s passage. Emerson wrote, “It is contravened by all the sentiments. How can a law be enforced that fines pity, and imprisons charity?”¹⁴³ His own shift came not in turning his back on slaves as Webster did, but in moving from passive observation, as a peaceful founder of a major philosophical movement, to anger: “when justice is violated,” he wrote, “anger begins.”¹⁴⁴ Finally, true to his defense of moral good, Emerson responded with fury as the issue of human bondage “turn[ed] every dinner-table into a debating club,” and brought the slave-holding South to “Cape Cod and Berkshire.”¹⁴⁵ The Emerson with

¹⁴⁰ Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 360.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 361.

¹⁴² Wendell Jackson. “Emerson and the Burden of Slavery.” *CLA Journal* 25, no. 1 (September 1981), 55.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 364.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 365.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 367, 372.

which today's anthology readers are familiar is not the Emerson who made this journey in antebellum America. Though essays from the thirties and forties are common trademarks of his career, Emerson's rejection of slavery in the 1850s permeated everything he thought and "ultimately drew him out from his private mental places as a scholar" and into the public, heated debate on slavery.¹⁴⁶

In the 1850s, Emerson began to speak and write in support of the slave's cause, delivering his "Address to the Citizens of Concord on the Fugitive Slave Law" at least eight more times after the initial address in May 1851. Though Emerson's hope that men would come around to goodness through individual enlightenment was disappointed, his philosophy was personally effective. He moved from musing about morality to fighting – albeit cerebrally – for the freedom and equality of blacks,¹⁴⁷ aware that merely giving philosophical space to moral problems would not awaken citizens to wrongdoing. As Leonard Neufeldt notes, "Emerson was resigned to the prospect of civil war," and sought bloodshed as a necessity to reawaken the United States to her error as speeches and essays were not effectively awakening Americans to the evils of slavery.¹⁴⁸ The dawn of war became "the terrible beginning of a new salvation blessed by enthusiastic hope"¹⁴⁹ that America would come to her senses and end both the war and slavery. Emerson, at long last, confronted slavery and did not resign himself to silence any longer.

¹⁴⁶ Neufeldt, "Emerson and the Civil War," 502.

¹⁴⁷ Robinson, "For Largest Liberty," 8: "To know that you have the capacity to be a moral agent, and that you are acting in accord with moral principle, whatever your social rank or economic condition, is a powerful and potentially liberating truth. To make his audience realize the slaves' capacity for moral action, even moral heroism, in both endurance and in rebellion, was thus to humanize them profoundly."

¹⁴⁸ Neufeldt, "Emerson and the Civil War," 509, and "Even in the worst slaughters, especially of Northern troops, he was able to find virtue," 510.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 510.

Douglass's Journey

In 1841, Frederick Douglass became a thrilling addition to the anti-slavery movement when William Lloyd Garrison recruited him to show “slavery as it is”.¹⁵⁰ Even before Douglass and Garrison met, however, Douglass reminded readers in *My Bondage and My Freedom* that he “had already the spirit of the movement, and only needed to understand its principles and measure.”¹⁵¹ Douglass’s assertion reminded readers that even before Garrison harnessed his story, the ex-slave had the agency and understanding to be an anti-slavery proponent. Unlike Emerson, Douglass did not need to be convinced to rally against slavery. The long decades it took Emerson to engage are contrasted by Douglass’s obvious immersion in slavery since his birth. As a young child, Douglass witnessed Captain Anthony’s overseer, Mr. Plummer “take great pleasure in whipping a slave,” and Captain Anthony frequently whipped Douglass’s Aunt Hester.¹⁵² Hester’s beatings struck both Douglass and readers, their gory details bloodying Douglass’s memory: “I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing.”¹⁵³ Scouring any chapter of Douglass’s *Narrative*, the jarring abhorrence Douglass felt against slavery is palpable.

Douglass’s revulsion to slavery and slave owners from a young age bore “the entertainment of a deep conviction that slavery would not always be able to hold [him] within its foul embrace.”¹⁵⁴ Whereas Emerson’s journey was about understanding the necessity of speaking out against slavery and immersing himself in abolitionist politics,

¹⁵⁰ William Lloyd Garrison, Preface to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 7.

¹⁵¹ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855, reprint, New York: Penguin, 2003), 261.

¹⁵² Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845, reprint, eds., William L. Andrews and William McFeely. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997), 14.

¹⁵³ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 15.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 28.

Douglass's journey began with extricating himself from bondage. Rather than needing to be persuaded to join the movement, Douglass had to elude his bonds before he could construct philosophical, political, or literary antislavery objectives. For Douglass, abolition was about more than a philosophical set of ideals because they were rooted in concrete memories such as Aunt Hester's whipping, Mrs. Auld's debasement from slaveholding, and Mr. Covey's dedication to breaking Douglass's spirit.

Despite the less-sturdy platform Douglass had for public speaking, given his and Emerson's conference attendance in 1844, his "'status' as a self-freed slave and literate Black was a compelling force in the reception of his message."¹⁵⁵ In the era of chattel slavery, Douglass's verbalization of his experiences contributed to engagement in the overall national story as he wrote openly about his experiences. Douglass's firsthand accounts were hard for his audiences to reconcile with the propagandized myth that slaves were well provided for and content. Douglass's life emphasized his stance against slavery and toward emancipation, equality, and human rights for women and particularly blacks. He was capable of much more than simply sharing his story, as citizens in his time could tell by listening to his powerful rhetoric and reading his elegant prose. For example, he describes slavery as "robes already crimsoned with the blood of millions and even now feasting itself greedily upon" his and his fellow-slaves' "own flesh."¹⁵⁶ In fact, his verbal virtuosity should not have surprised Douglass's contemporaries as much as it

¹⁵⁵ Rachele C. Prioleau, "Frederick Douglass: Abolitionist and Humanist." *The Howard Journal of Communication* 14 (2003), 179.

¹⁵⁶ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 57.

did. But historians have observed that white abolitionists feared his independence of thought and his political shrewdness.¹⁵⁷

Douglass's denunciation of systematic racial bondage is exhibited throughout his autobiographical accounts, the *Douglass Monthly*, and his single work of fiction, *The Heroic Slave*. In these pieces, evidence of Douglass's interactions with other thinkers becomes apparent, just as any activist's work exposes the cultural launching points surrounding each new response, including his interaction with Emerson. Gougeon argues that, during Emerson's 1844 speech, Douglass was awakened to the concept that slaves were the only ones who could truly end slavery.¹⁵⁸ Positing that the slave was his own instrument of deliverance put Douglass in alignment with Emerson's advocacy of self-reliance. Steeped in self-reliant philosophy, Douglass would also have read William Ellery Channing, whose work strongly influenced Emerson, and "consistently maintain[ed] that only slaves and slaveholders [could] work directly to remove the evil of slavery."¹⁵⁹ Forced into slavery by birth, Douglass created an opportunity for slavery's eradication by speaking to concepts of "self-reliance, self-improvement, and the humanity of Black people."¹⁶⁰ In 1862, when Douglass wrote about the damaging effects of slavery in the *Douglass Monthly*, he referenced the crippling impact that not only slavery but the mistreatment and subordination of blacks had on the individual's temperament; "all manly aspiration and self-reliance die out," Douglass writes.¹⁶¹ An

¹⁵⁷ The Garrisonian conflict that severed Douglass from most white abolitionists must be acknowledged here, though room is not available in this essay to fully explore the topic.

¹⁵⁸ Len Gougeon, "Militant Abolitionism: Douglass, Emerson, and the Rise of the Anti-Slave." *The New England Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (December 2012), 637. At Emerson's 1844 speech, Gougeon asserts, "Douglass learns the value of physical resistance and the reality of his own self-reliant power."

¹⁵⁹ Gougeon, "Emerson and Abolition," 561.

¹⁶⁰ Prioleau, "Frederick Douglass," 181.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 182, Douglass quoted in Prioleau. Without an opportunity for agency, black lives are reduced. As Prioleau goes on to say, "the unrelenting attack on [Blacks'] humanity crushed any aspirations for

emancipated and proud black man, Douglass cited Emersonian ideas of self-reliance as central to full, free living and to the fight for freedom.

Though he adopted Transcendental principles of self-reliance,¹⁶² Douglass criticized those who refrained from taking action, writing in the *Narrative* that slaves and supporters of the slaves' cause stay quiet for their safety, but "suppress the truth rather than take the consequences of telling it" and thus allow slavery to continue unchecked.¹⁶³ More damning for whites who sit in cozy homes than blacks who risk torment, Douglass exposed the apathy of those who would help only at their own convenience—where their comfort might be compromised. As his experience shows, abolitionists were too often happy to share the stage to recount stories of slavery's evils, but did not give the oppressed an opportunity to shape philosophy or even radically change their own lives.

The Heroic Slave

A close reading of Douglass's novella, *The Heroic Slave*, further reveals the damaging effects of silence when one has the opportunity, white or black, to be active and instead remains silent. Mr. Listwell, first identified as "a Northern traveler,"¹⁶⁴ has three chance encounters with the magnetizing and eloquent Madison Washington. In the

liberation, equality, or self-determination." Where self-liberation may be the surest form of freedom, Douglass makes the point that many blacks had been reduced to a state of not believing in their own opportunities for freedom. Pro-slavery individuals stripped blacks of their place as humans.

¹⁶² And potentially his quiet politics, to a degree. See W. Caleb McDaniel, "The Bonds and Boundaries of Antislavery." *Journal of the Civil War Era*, 4, no. 1 (March 2014): 87. In alignment with Emerson's earlier, passive approach, "Erica Ball and Margot Minardi have argued that for many free black northerners, simply living a particular kind of life could be a deeply political act." However, for a white man to quietly live in opposition to slavery, even if it was refraining from buying products like tobacco from an agricultural system deemed sustainable through oppression, is far different than a free black to live as a hard-working, morally upstanding citizen. The latter's lifestyle is able to stand as a witness of equality, but the former's role of passive politics can be far less effective.

¹⁶³ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 22.

¹⁶⁴ Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave* (1853, reprint, New York: W. W. Norton & Co.): 2, 144.

opening scene, the unnamed traveler, a potential Everyman from the North, hears Washington speaking in the woods, and, while the two do not meet, Listwell is urged toward abolition through the concealed yet personal encounter. Though Douglass does not narrate Listwell's prior experience with slavery or blacks, the scene inspires hope in readers as they see the traveler thinking in opposition to his culture, perceiving a slave, and beginning to understand the distinctive struggle of one man in a race of oppressed people. Later, when Washington stumbles upon the Listwells' home, the man of the house tells their guest that he became an abolitionist in those woods and that he regularly "[spoke] of the circumstance, and the deep concern he had ever since felt to know what had become of [Madison]." ¹⁶⁵ However, Listwell's concern does not appear to prompt him toward any heroic action, as that is left to Madison Washington in the face of white inaction.

Listwell's declaration when he first encounters Washington, that he will do what he "is able to do," ¹⁶⁶ might encourage readers to believe that he will return to his home in Ohio and speak against slavery or even take a more active role in its abolition. However, Part II opens with a subtle hint that Listwell's – and perhaps the Everyman he can be read to represent – intentions are not as promising as Douglass and his readers might desire. Listwell is a man who, five years after his heart is awakened in earnest for "the speedy emancipation of slavery," ¹⁶⁷ is sitting comfortably at home with his wife. When Washington is welcomed into their home, Douglass presents Listwell's character as one who is sympathetic toward slaves, a friend even, but not an active fighter for their cause.

¹⁶⁵ Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 2,149.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 2,147.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*.

Yet Washington needs more than the deep concern Listwell feels, absent of action and reminiscent of those such as Emerson. Douglass may or may not have written of Listwell's comfort as a critique of white security in the face of slavery, but he crafts a similar image when Washington relates how frustrating it was for him to "[peep] through the rents of the quarters" of his "fellow slaves seated by a warm fire...as though their hearts knew no sorrow."¹⁶⁸ The parallels in the scenes of inactive black slaves and inactive Listwells next to cozy fires ring of a coincidence too similar to overlook. Perhaps Washington did not mean to convey a similar distaste in regard to the "cowardly acquiescence¹⁶⁹" he names in relation to the slaves, but arguably Listwell exhibits another act of cowardice: Though his "impassioned" heart signifies his knowledge of slavery's evils, he is content in this text dedicated to heroism to hold Madison Washington in his memory for five years.

Speaking directly of the slaves, Washington condemns their complacency, but the bold truth he proclaims may also apply to any human when he declares, "where there is seeming contentment with slavery, there is certain treachery to freedom."¹⁷⁰ Douglass's rhetoric points to people like the pre-1850 Emerson, who had opportunities as well-educated citizens and a platform to speak, but chose not to address slavery. Not only did Douglass regret how submissive slaves unwittingly countenanced the continuation of bondage, but he also calls free men to account through his critique of the Listwells, pointing clearly to his contemporaries who would turn a deaf ear to slaves' cries. When

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 5,150; Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 64: In Douglass's own *Narrative*, he writes, "I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one." This commentary grates against anyone, slave or free, who would be anything but outraged at the institution of slavery.

¹⁶⁹ Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 2,150.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 2,150.

evaluating Douglass's novella as a critique of white inaction,¹⁷¹ readers must credit Listwell's dedication to getting Washington to Canada, and his contribution to feeding and clothing the hungry and the naked. Were the story to end with Washington's letter of celebratory freedom, reproach might be unnecessary. However, Washington's story continues as he is again enslaved, and Douglass demonstrates the power of black agency in a culture that typically strips blacks of opportunities to act on their own initiative. Jane E. Schultz argues a similar point in her article on *The Heroic Slave*, calling readers' attention to the fact that "Washington's success as a liberator does not depend on the gestures of whites who profess solidarity with the antislavery cause."¹⁷² Indeed, Listwell and other similarly complacent white "abolitionists" must not pretend that their words of encouragement are the key to freedom. Black slaves such as Washington and Douglass progress as a result of their own agency and free-thinking, with or without the support of well-meaning but contented whites.

What is required in view of Listwell's inactivity is Madison Washington's action. As Gougeon argues in an article linking Emerson and Douglass's views of anti-slavery and self-reliance, "Washington serves as an exemplar of Douglass's evolving concept of the self-engendered anti-slave."¹⁷³ Gougeon argues that, through exposure to Emerson's transcendental and self-reliant philosophy, Douglass recognizes the necessity of slaves

¹⁷¹ This passive approach is demonstrated again during Listwell's second journey to Virginia, when Wilkes categorizes him as a slave-owner, which he doesn't contradict, in order to secure his personal safety. Though the Northern traveler's choice is an effort to simply "blend in," the words of caution against contentment with slavery reverberate. Perhaps his correcting Wilkes' assumption would have done nothing and led to nothing, but this mindset, which Listwell and millions of other white Americans in the pre-Civil War United States adopted, plays a part in sanctioning the continuation of slavery. Listwell's being persuaded that "a buyer of men and women stood the best chance of being respected" (2,160) reeks of timidity, a timidity that will not help break the chains of slaves, of those he professes to befriend.

¹⁷² Jane E. Schultz, "Gimme Shelter: The Ironies of Refuge in Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave*," *The Journal of African American History* 102, no. 1 (2017): 53.

¹⁷³ Gougeon, "Militant Abolitionism," 643.

being the ones to truly bring about the end of slavery. This idea may have its origin in Emerson's advocacy of self-reliance as a characteristic to empower chattel slaves, but similarly, literary critic Hugh Egan argues that Emerson's description of the poetic slave is portrayed "so precisely" by Douglass "that it is difficult to imagine that Emerson did not have him in mind" when articulating images of this self-liberating slave.¹⁷⁴

Regardless of who inspired whom, Emerson and Douglass's similar intellectual circles would have made each aware of the other's movements and ideals, even as they changed throughout the nineteenth century. Further, in responding to these two concurrent thinkers, readers must check themselves before assuming that the white man necessarily inspired the black man. *The Heroic Slave* makes a case for the opposite to be true when, at the very beginning of the novella, Listwell is inspired to "fight" for the abolitionist cause through hearing Washington's speech, which he thinks no one else can hear. "If Douglass's hero occasionally interacts with members of the white community," Schultz further articulates, "he does not solicit their aid."¹⁷⁵ Douglass does not tie his protagonist's fate to the benevolence of those such as Listwell; nor should his readers.

In *The Heroic Slave*, the Northern traveler sees a chance to remain safe despite his horror just moments after Washington is described as "chained and fettered, and bound for the market."¹⁷⁶ There is guilt for those complicit in slavery,¹⁷⁷ and Listwell and his kind are surely complicit. When Washington tells how his wife was killed next to him and he was re-enslaved, Listwell says, "I fear I can do nothing for you," but quickly

¹⁷⁴ Hugh Egan, "'On Freedom': Emerson, Douglass, and the Self-reliant Slave," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 60, no. 2 (2014): 195.

¹⁷⁵ Schultz, "Gimme Shelter," 55.

¹⁷⁶ Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 2, 161.

¹⁷⁷ Robinson, "For Largest Liberty," 9: "As Emerson suggests, to acquiesce in a morally questionable legal decision, or in any larger institutional violation of ethical principle, is to be 'taken alive,' imprisoned and robbed of one's moral freedom, one's capacity to act as an agent for the good."

continues, “Put your trust in God, and bear your sad lot with the manly fortitude which becomes a man.”¹⁷⁸ While this statement is intended as encouragement, Listwell seems to dismiss Washington’s fate, excusing himself from being a part of changing Washington’s “sad lot” aside from slipping three files into the slave’s pocket and hoping for the best. Douglass nudges readers to recognize the violence easily associated with the transfer of a tool that could be used as a weapon. Yet, the slave wields another more powerful weapon: his voice. Washington knows how to use his voice through experience and an intelligence that even well-meaning whites could overlook. Once again, readers see Washington acting powerfully as an independent agent, regardless of the involvement of half-hearted abolitionists.

The resolution of the novella shows Madison Washington using these files to free the black men on the slave ship. The slaves overcome the white sailors, and we see Listwell “gladly shaking off from his feet the dust of Old Virginia.”¹⁷⁹ Washington carries out heroic deeds on his own; Listwell would not likely have become an abolitionist without the self-advocacy that Washington preached in the forest. The white Everyman is humane to view blacks as unrightfully enslaved, but Douglass’ *The Heroic Slave* makes self-reliance both the necessary and perhaps only option, whereas white “abolitionists” are content to return to the comfort of their homes. The text illustrates that it is ultimately up to the slave to revolt with a noble spirit, to awaken those like Listwell to slaves’ humanity and to act with fortitude when whites are deaf to the plight of those who are “guilty of no crime but the color of [their] skin.”¹⁸⁰ Listwell supports

¹⁷⁸ Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 2, 163.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 2,165.

¹⁸⁰ Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 2,146.

Washington's cause through shelter and tools, but ultimately, Washington, the oppressed, must use his force of being and self-reliance to reject bondage in the face of white men's silence. Certainly, Douglass, whose life often parallels Washington's in its heroism and self-determination, greeted the challenge of overcoming slavery and became one of the loudest voices for its eradication. Though Emerson was disappointed that people could not "be better," he might have clung to ideals of self-reliance as he watched slaves like Douglass work for their freedom and develop their voices. Ultimately, self-reliance is what freed Madison Washington and innumerable slaves, whereas voices such as the fictional Listwell's and the very real Emerson's were hesitant to speak. Listwell's character may remind readers of Emerson before the Fugitive Slave Law: he could return home and live in comfort, not having to be confronted with the evils of slavery unless he chose to venture beyond his own hearth. But, finally, Emerson used his position of privilege to address the abomination that saturated Douglass's life.

The year after the anthology *Autographs for Freedom* printed *The Heroic Slave*, Emerson's poem "On Freedom" was published in the second volume of the series. "On Freedom" explores the relationship between the poet and the slave, verse inspiring "Brute and savage into man" (l. 16).¹⁸¹ Emerson's language is reminiscent of Douglass's frequent use of the word "brute" in his autobiographical texts, and though Emerson does not directly name Douglass, he was fully aware that "On Freedom" was for inclusion in an anthology published to benefit Douglass's newspaper. Emerson skirts around mention of Douglass's name in this and other texts,¹⁸² but "Douglass was the literate, poetry-

¹⁸¹ Notably, Emerson seemed convinced on occasion that inspiration could free slaves and disregarded some of the practical, deadly reasons that might dissuade them.

¹⁸² The reader will recall mention of Douglass's alleged romantic relationship with Margaret Fuller and Emerson's ensuing reluctance to include Douglass's name in his works.

reading ex-slave who had gained freedom and fame by acting spontaneously and ‘rashly’ on his deepest intuition.”¹⁸³ The interlocking ideologies of these two men rattled and complemented the other’s ideas for years to come. Egan points out that Emerson sought for men to be freed through intellectual pursuits, embodied in part by Douglass’s literary journey, which played a heavy role in his emancipation, and led Emerson to recognize the immediate need of ending slavery. As Egan further emphasizes, Douglass’s introduction to abolition “begins with the material conditions of the slave who, through acts of literacy and romantic communion with nature, absorbs currents of transcendental intuition and thereby *becomes* a kind of poet-activist, capable of immense practical power, including freeing himself from slavery.”¹⁸⁴ The characters at play in *The Heroic Slave* and the unnamed cast of “On Freedom” reflect concurrent streams of thought which flow between Emerson and Douglass.

Together in Movement

From Douglass’s birth, he was a slave, intimately involved in the institution. Though he could have chosen not to attempt escape, chosen not to share his story, chosen not to push beyond the limits his race placed on him, Douglass was never given a choice about whether or not to be a slave. By contrast, Emerson had the luxury of considering slavery from a more distant perspective. He could participate in its eradication or not, until he felt compelled to be a part of the movement. Early in his career, Emerson believed that people would eventually become morally upright and benevolent individuals through exposure to poetry, nature, and philosophy. The torturous, not to

¹⁸³ Egan, “‘On Freedom’: Emerson, Douglass, and the Self-reliant Slave,” 196.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 197-98.

mention long-lasting and publicly sanctioned, culture of slavery defied his optimistic stance and caused him to consider slavery's immorality sooner. Emerson was forced to confront his idealistic views with tragic reality, especially after the Fugitive Slave Bill went into effect. Emerson's experience with constructive grief in the previous decade readied him for the antislavery activism of the 1840s and '50s.

Douglass was not introduced to the cruelty of slavery over a protracted period. His introduction was concurrent with his cognizance. Emerson had little to overcome in his fight to eradicate slavery; he merely risked his reputation. On the other hand, Douglass had much more at stake in his fight for emancipation and equality for all blacks. Evaluating both Emerson and Douglass at the decade anniversary of British emancipation, Goldberg establishes that the philosopher failed to be as "engaging and effective" as the former slave who was able to demonstrate how "slaves could be valuable citizens" and use speech "responsibly" if allowed to do so.¹⁸⁵ Where Emerson could merely share what he had witnessed in abolitionist New England, Douglass was able to speak from his own physical experience because "testimony is precisely what initiates a major moral shift."¹⁸⁶ Emerson knew that Douglass's experience was invaluable in awakening the United States to its moral hypocrisy. Even more than Emerson, however, Douglass recognized the double standard surrounding the founding fathers' assertions of freedom.

As stories circulated and abolitionism gained momentum, Emerson and Douglass both saw that, more than action or essays on the good of man, America needed "political

¹⁸⁵ Goldberg, "From Quietism to Quiet Politics," 284

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 285.

upheaval,” and that “civil war seem[ed] inevitable.”¹⁸⁷ Coming at anti-slavery from different perspectives, both men realized that a war would make Americans rethink national identity, just as Emerson had had to rethink his own identity at the time of Waldo’s death. When slavery became personal and he could see its damning effects up close, Emerson was forced to reckon with the faulty assumption that slavery was a fixed and immovable institution. Like other abolitionists, Emerson and Douglass had different focuses, agendas, and approaches, but “the fundamental conflict of mid-nineteenth-century America was not the squabbling between moderates and radicals within the antislavery movement.” Instead, the core battle by the 1850s was “the life and death struggle between those who hated slavery and were prepared to risk war rather than extend its life, and those who defended slavery and were willing to go to war to preserve it.”¹⁸⁸ Regardless of approach, Douglass and Emerson rallied against slavery to bring about the moral transformation on which continued American democracy depended.¹⁸⁹

How America responds to upheaval, Emerson might write today as he did in his journal in 1865, is “not a question [of] whether we shall still be a nation... but whether we shall be the new nation, the leading Guide and Lawgiver of the world.”¹⁹⁰ Modern readers are left to observe the effects of the great Civil War and determine whether or not the hope Emerson expressed was realized in the years following mass bloodshed and

¹⁸⁷ Prioleau, “Frederick Douglass,” 188.

¹⁸⁸ Oakes, *Freedom National*, xxii quoted in McDaniel, “The Bonds and Boundaries of Antislavery,” 96.

¹⁸⁹ As a former slave and an idealist philosopher, Douglass and Emerson, respectively, look at slavery from starkly different perspectives, and their documented movements toward their eventual response to the Civil War present much intellectual fodder modern readers can learn from in making informed decisions about how to engage in current topics. Studying Emerson and Douglass in this light grants insight to modern readers as they engage their philosophies with real-world events, whittled into practical, livable testimony.

¹⁹⁰ Emerson, quoted in Neufeldt, “Emerson and the Civil War,” 512.

political upheaval.¹⁹¹ Emerson ultimately believed that war would produce the moral shift that individual responsibility could not; indeed Douglass believed that slavery could only be eradicated through military action and that prominent antislavery voices must be heard. In the postbellum period, blacks were technically free, but Emerson, Douglass, and their peers still had work to do. Much of this work remains, and current voices continue to confront the frail yet deeply ingrained foundations of racism.

Emerson's grief at the national tragedy of slavery challenged his idealistic philosophy and belief in ingrained moral good. Yet, the anguish he faced served to build a more practical set of governing principles with which to interact with the world. In the 1840s, Emerson's struggle with grief was a personal loss that became public, whereas his 1850s struggle with tragedy was with the public evil of slavery, which challenged his personal complacency and philosophy of moral good. Both the personal challenge that became public and the public challenge that became personal were routes running through idealism, doubt, reconsideration, and, eventually, clearer words and actions. While Waldo died and thus ended Emerson's opportunity to respond to the same situation with newly shaped ideas, slavery continued, rampant. Sorrow seemed barren in Waldo's loss, with the exception of offering comfort to others facing loss, but the sorrow of slavery birthed new movements and words that would push Emerson until the end of his career.

¹⁹¹ Robinson, "For Largest Liberty," 20: "While he does not claim here that slavery will be ended in his generation, he does avow that fighting for its end is in itself a salvific act."

Chapter V: In Conclusion: Pliable Beings

Emerson died in 1882, but his thinking reverberates well into the twenty-first century. His essays deliver intriguing food for thought on posters and birthday cards, yet he remains a rich and complex source of study for students of literature and philosophy. I began my project admiring Emerson, though I didn't agree with all of his ideas. I appreciated his powerful reflections on society, his constant desire to be a better person, and his self-reliance; his insistence that human beings should always question the status quo. I developed sympathy for him as I studied his reactions to Waldo's life and death, imagining his joy in his son's birth and growth, and then his sorrow in watching his little boy die. The psychological aspects of Emerson's extensive writing fascinated me, given that few scholars have researched his ideas about loss.

Then I studied Emerson and slavery. Emerson was educated, free-thinking, open-minded, and kind, but his initial response to slavery as a young man frustrated me. I read things I wanted to unread, learning that the man who had become a luminary could stand idly by as slaves were sold and mutilated. Not only did he fail to resist slavery, but he accepted it, voicing the opinion in his journal that perhaps blacks were inferior: "Nature has plainly assigned different degrees of intellect to these different races, and the barriers between are insurmountable. This inequality is an indication of the design of Providence that some should lead, and some should serve."¹⁹² Emerson justified slavery by believing that God created some races as intellectually inferior to others, which in turn justified white oppression of blacks. Emerson penned these thoughts at the age of nineteen, and

¹⁹² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1909), 181.

despite his youth and lack of experience, those words could not be unwritten, and were even echoed in other journal entries where he mused about the role of race.¹⁹³ I was in too deep to change my thesis topic, but Emerson irritated me. How could he – a man so devoted to thinking for himself and avoiding conventional standards – countenance human bondage like he did?

I had already drafted my third chapter on Emerson's response to Waldo's death and planned how the broader project would fit together, so I reluctantly continued my research. Emerson spent years avoiding slavery but finally considered it more completely and found it repugnant. Researching and writing the fourth chapter on Emerson, Douglass, and slavery became satisfactory in the end. Emerson's thinking came around to where I hoped it would have been all along. I came to see how he rejected the long-lasting perception of his contemporaries that slavery was "a reasonable, legally sanctioned action reflecting a divinely ordained order, believed as firmly in ancient Babylonia as in Alabama in 1820."¹⁹⁴ The historical roots of slavery were hard for me to comprehend, even as I read Kevin Bales' article in *The Journal of Human Rights*, where the co-founder of the organization Free the Slaves acknowledges that slavery has been visible for thousands of years and that it "predate[s] both written laws and money."¹⁹⁵ I didn't excuse Emerson's tolerance of slavery based on its long duration, but as I examined his life, I began to recognize how massive slavery's impact had been on Emerson's nineteenth-century society. Thinkers like Bales forced me to recognize how much bigger slavery was, and is, beyond my irritation at Emerson. Bales cites "Sumerian

¹⁹³ See Egan's article critiquing "On Freedom" for further evaluation of Emerson's problematic views on race.

¹⁹⁴ Bales, "Slavery and the Human Right to Evil," 60.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

drawings in clay that survive from 4000 BC [which] show captives taken in battle being tied, whipped, and forced to work.”¹⁹⁶ I often associate slavery with the American Civil War, but becoming more cognizant of its larger global context jostled my narrow perspective and forced me to consider more broadly the tributaries of proliferating human bondage and how broadly it has been sanctioned, even if merely by indifference. I studied Emerson’s path toward rejecting his passivity and becoming an abolitionist, and realized, as I saw how widely slavery had been accepted in Emerson’s day, that his views were fairly typical, despite his dedication to nonconformity.

Yet I remained rattled by the way he began, and I saw in Emerson uncomfortable reflections of my own apathy, given my recognition of how long slavery has been thriving – one of history’s uncomfortable truths. A hundred and fifty years after Emerson wrote the majority of his work, I was free to critique his philosophical evolution from my own “enlightened” perspective. But, I sensed that someone could just as easily confront me as I confronted Emerson; indeed, as I have criticized all non-Nazis leading up to and during World War II, with this question: Why did you do nothing? The Emerson I admired was passively aware of slavery for many years. Similarly, I find myself convicted of my own lethargy regarding political events outside of my Midwestern sphere.

Before this project, I was content to shake my head in disbelief at the people who watched slavery propagate and was amazed that Adolf Hitler and his thousands of supporters were as successful as they were in annihilating European Jewry. Emerson’s and my own philosophical evolution taught me about the racial inequality that persists today in the United States and greater world. Take, for example, the Syrian genocide,

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

which has its own awareness campaign. Despite a vast global media network, we are free to disregard half a million Syrians killed for their ethnicity and six million refugees who have fled for safety.¹⁹⁷ Progressives mount movements like Black Lives Matter because some people still believe that black lives *don't* matter, at least not as much as white lives. We lack little knowledge about foreign genocides and domestic racism, but despite horrors around the world, we still disregard them. I am afraid for when future generations ask me what I did about Syria. About modern African genocides and civil war. About racism. About human trafficking, which continues to proliferate in the twenty-first century.

I am afraid because I am like Emerson and Douglass's white northerner who sits apathetically by a warm, snapping fire with all kinds of creature comforts while her fellow humans are bought, sold, raped, tortured, and murdered. From Emerson, I learned that I – that we – can change my apathy and discover that self-reliance, as he celebrated and defined it, is not the same thing as self-centeredness. Emerson's problematic beginnings are redressed by his evolution, yet Douglass's trajectory unsettles me far more. Like Emerson, I get to choose whether or not I will act to reform social and political ills. But as a result of probing Douglass's life and writing, I am hauntingly aware that we must pay attention to those who cannot choose because they are already implicated in the vile fabric of racism as its maligned object.

Thankfully, Emerson demonstrates that even if we are slow learners, we can learn. Perhaps the wisdom in Emerson's personal and public response to pain is that our initial thinking can fail us. Certainly, Emerson's approach to death and slavery changed over time: his initial beliefs, based on tradition and study, altered because of the personal

¹⁹⁷ "Syrian Civil War Fast Facts," *CNN* online, last modified May 3, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/08/27/world/meast/syria-civil-war-fast-facts/index.html>.

and national losses he witnessed. His New England education was valuable in establishing a frame of reference from which to view the world, but ultimately, what shaped Emerson, as he would likely agree, were his experiences. Waldo's death demanded that he reconsider what he believed about mortality from Puritan, Unitarian, and Eastern religious influences. The shattering experience rattled Emerson's faith in God, his certainty of the afterlife, and his self-reliance, given the deep influence his son – protégé and embodiment of budding potential – had made on him in half a decade.

In losing his son, Emerson began to understand that he could not willfully sift away what he didn't want. He could not retain beautiful encounters with nature without also accepting the painful finality of death or the failures of people of goodwill. He could not pretend that each young person would mature into a giving, productive member of society despite being taught to be self-reliant, non-conforming thinkers. Sometimes, against all human likelihood and expectation, young people die. Sometimes, even if they are given the opportunity to live, they choose to pursue oppression instead of goodwill. In roughly the same decade as Waldo's death, Emerson was forced to reconsider how the world functioned, rife with shrouded hate; even more unsettling was the evil publicly enacted in the broad light of day as chattel slavery flourished in the United States. The personal and public sorrow Emerson faced corresponded within him. Through death or corruption, some humans do not develop as Emerson initially believed they would: to act with moral conviction and fulfillment for the greater good. The resounding pain at Waldo's death did not contribute to Emerson's understanding of slavery so much as it released him to reexamine his earlier, socially imparted perceptions of humanity.

The mid-1840s to late 1850s became a time of marked reconsideration. His first series of essays published in 1841 contains the piece “Compensation,” which includes wisdom Emerson would come to understand more profoundly in later years. He writes,

Our strength grows out of our weakness. The indignation which arms itself with secret forces does not awaken until we are pricked and stung and sorely assailed. A great man is always willing to be little. Whilst he sits on the cushion of advantages, he goes to sleep. When he is pushed, tormented, defeated, he has a chance to learn something.¹⁹⁸

In this excerpt, Emerson reveals awareness of himself and his fellow men, understanding that they will not gain resilience if they are not beaten down and forced to overcome. Some of Emerson’s overcoming emerges only after suffering in the wake of Waldo’s death.

Although Emerson encountered the death of his son as psychologically traumatic, the depth of the tragedy did not immediately provide him with startling insight. Harold K. Bush’s *Continuing Bonds with the Dead: Parental Grief and Nineteenth-Century American Authors* explores parental losses contemporary to Emerson’s, and in his introduction, Bush nods to modern psychology by summarizing that “for most survivors, the death of a child becomes the crucial event for the remainder of their lives.”¹⁹⁹ Losing his son to scarlet fever marked a shift in Emerson’s thinking, but the profound personal loss could not alter the finality of death. His grief in view of his inability to comprehend Waldo’s fate is reflected in the essays, poems, and letters discussed above. The second tragedy explored in the preceding pages irrevocably changed Emerson, pushing him into action in ways that Waldo’s death did not. The two tragedies are scarcely comparable,

¹⁹⁸ Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 146.

¹⁹⁹ Bush, *Continuing Bonds with the Dead*, 1.

though both “pricked and stung”²⁰⁰ him to new consideration of the world. Waldo was valuable and beloved, but his death was an intimate family loss brought about by bacteria. Slavery, on the other hand, curtailed the pursuits and livelihoods of millions of people based on an arbitrary definition of racial inferiority. Emerson’s worldview changed both in response to individual death and widespread oppression, despite the differences in scope that personal and public sorrow wrought on him.

Whereas he searched fruitlessly to find meaning in Waldo’s death, Emerson’s encounter with slavery presented him with new opportunities for action. As he became aware of the moral injustice of slavery, he was able to seek action through speaking and writing against human bondage and no longer marginalizing blacks as morally or intellectually inferior. Had slavery lasted only a decade, it is unlikely that Emerson would have arrived at the same conclusions. He needed time to grow into an abolitionist and to realize that his early assumptions were faulty and how they failed humanity. Out of his despair grew the opportunity for change. In “Compensation,” Emerson acknowledges, “Treat men as pawns and ninepins, and you shall suffer as well as they. If you leave out their heart, you shall lose your own.”²⁰¹ His understanding of how loss prods growth was not fully realized when “Compensation” was published, nor was his acknowledgment of the suffering linked to slavery. Initially, Emerson did not recognize the equality of blacks and whites and forfeited an opportunity to share the full ripeness of these sentiments through his own narrowmindedness. What man is truly profiting when his gain comes from the subjugation of others, from dehumanizing another? Emerson’s thinking dramatically changed after “Compensation” was published, not because he rejected

²⁰⁰ Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, 146.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, 144.

mistreating others but because he finally recognized that slavery left out the hearts of the yoked whose lives were just as valuable as those who called themselves masters.

For Emerson, as in many world religions, we find the recurrent theme of redemption amid suffering: as Bush notes, “something uniquely meaningful and redemptive can emerge from life’s greatest tragedies.”²⁰² Though Bush specifically addresses the death of a child, urging readers to reflect on the tragic beauty of untimely death, we might also apply his idea to the institutional problem of American slavery. Slavery propagated a mindset that remains startlingly prevalent today, in which whites are superior and meant to create rules for all of humanity. The Emancipation Proclamation encouraged a false sense of rectitude for Americans and continues to be presented as a document that solved the entanglements of racial oppression. Upper elementary-aged students are conferred the “facts” that slavery ended and blacks were given equal opportunity to succeed beginning in 1863. The stark differences in what was considered separate but equal as a result of *Plessy vs. Ferguson* in 1896 are widely disregarded, and in the twenty-first century, racism continues unabated in inaccurate political representation, “disproportionate ... morbidity and mortality,” and the overrepresentation of blacks in American prisons.²⁰³ A hundred and fifty years after slaves were declared free by law, racism remains deeply entrenched in American culture.

The hope of humankind is that terrible evils may be confronted and eradicated even in small ways. The human struggle to make sense of pain finds its way into each angle of this project, whether the pain is from Emerson’s grief from losing Waldo or from

²⁰² Bush, *Continuing Bonds with the Dead*, 3.

²⁰³ Gilbert C. Gee and Chandra L Ford, “Structural Racism and Health Inequities: Old Issues, New Directions,” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 8 no. 1 (2011), 115.

bitterly recognizing his country's long-lasting tolerance of racism. When we, alongside Emerson, consider Douglass' early fate—his youthful loss of innocence, his separation from family, and slave society's emphasis on animalizing those in bondage—we should be appalled by the sheer impossibility of lives so truncated. We should be sickened, but even more so, we should not forget what is past or overlook what is present. Emerson and Douglass produced literature about their experiences of loss and atrocity for others to consider and learn from; they understood that the great offspring of literature is empathy and that empathy ought to lead to action.

Yet for all that Emerson read and wrote in the cerebral sphere, his physical encounters changed him most profoundly. His thinking was shaped by the things he read, but the observations he could not capture in text formed the basis of his change of heart. So, too, for us twenty-first century citizens, the essays we read begin to whet our interest, but what we personally encounter in the material world propels us to action and lasting change. Waldo's death gripped his father more deeply than the previous deaths he encountered, likely due to the potential Emerson saw in Waldo's youth. Concurrently, the extensive, cruel nature of slavery eventually convinced Emerson of its horror and the necessity to eradicate its foul legal treatment of humans. These two tragedies in particular unsettled Emerson's otherwise stalwart spirit. Emerson's point of view evolved less optimistically as he aged, yet his new perspective made him more able to speak to arcane parts of human existence, which in turn led him to humanitarian action. The 1816 letter John Adams penned to Jefferson on the value of grief warrants reconsideration, given Emerson's growing understanding of the constructive potential of tragedy: "I have often wondered for what good end the sensations of Grief could be intended. All our other

passions, within proper bounds, have an [sic] useful object. [...] I wish the pathologists then would tell us what is the use of grief in the economy, and of what good it is the cause, proximate or remote.”²⁰⁴ Emerson and Douglass encountered cavernous sorrow and sought to make sense of inexplicable events in their lives to help them grow individually as well as publicly to improve the nation. They did not necessarily declare the value in the pain and loss they endured, but their writing reflects a deep richness in understanding humanity.²⁰⁵ Without pain, neither would have been shaped as he was.

Emerson’s growing skepticism was more practical and practicable in a country that needed fewer people to muse and more people of conviction to act. His life and work prompts readers to consider the redemptive qualities found in anguish, whether personal or public, affecting millions over the course of history. Emerson’s evolution helped him empathize with and advocate for slaves across the nation—a process that drew him away from metaphysical study and made him a critic of the slave-holding “pillars of the local community.”²⁰⁶ Emerson’s great discovery in seeing the depth of the tragedy of slavery was realizing that it was not a necessary evil. In September of 1862, Emerson wrote “The President’s Proclamation” in response to Abraham Lincoln’s declaration that on January 1, 1863, all slaves in the southern states would be free, despite Lincoln’s words not having power in the seceded states. Emerson responded heartily to the Emancipation Proclamation by seeing purpose in the carnage of war and wrote that, in addition to freeing the slaves, the document also signified that “the lives of our heroes have not been

²⁰⁴ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, March 2, 1816, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, vol. 2, 1812-1826, ed. Lester J. Capon (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 464.

²⁰⁵ Also recall the excerpt from Emerson’s “Compensation” for one of his reflections on the positive gains won from hardship.

²⁰⁶ Bales, “Slavery and the Human Right to Evil,” 55.

sacrificed in vain. It makes a victory of our defeats. Our hurts are healed.”²⁰⁷ Emerson found profound meaning in the Civil War’s hundreds of thousands of deaths and believed that the American people had acted on the best instincts of humanity; that from the deep sorrow of slavery had come redemption, “appris[ing] us that mankind are greater and better than we know.”²⁰⁸ Slavery’s initiators and defenders would recede as a new generation instituted the social and legal reforms that would end human bondage on the North American continent. In effect, Emerson welcomed improvement as recompense for prior evil.

Of course, even a casual historian knows that the Civil War did not end until more blood had been shed. Equality was not realized for African Americans at the time of the Confederate surrender two years after the Emancipation Proclamation. Slavery did not and has still not ended globally or nationally, despite Emerson’s optimism and faith in human progress. At the end of “Slavery and the Human Right to Evil,” Bales implicates readers in condemning global citizens’ complicity in slavery:

A globalized system of human rights implies that a violation anywhere requires responses from everywhere. Because we can know about violations in almost any part of the world and because our actions can have some impact on the continuation or termination of those violations, we are potentially implicated.²⁰⁹

Bales suggests that eradicating slavery requires moral reform on a vast scale, something Emerson espoused a hundred and fifty years earlier. The solution to end slavery is beyond the scope of this thesis, but a search for a solution is as necessary now as it was in the nineteenth century. The deliberate, reflective work that Emerson embraced in the face

²⁰⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The President’s Proclamation,” *Atlantic Monthly* 10, No. 61 (Nov. 1862), 639.

²⁰⁸ Emerson, “The President’s Proclamation,” 638.

²⁰⁹ Bales, “Slavery and the Human Right to Evil,” 64.

of personal and public tragedy remains compulsory for modern citizens on the way to effective action. He never lost hope that others would similarly wrestle with their assumptions.

Emerson wrote less often in the latter years of his life, but the printed words did not reflect cessation of thought. Rather, his time became dedicated to action more than abiding in reflection. In 1863, he triumphantly celebrated the enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation, yet in the same document of commendation cautioned that “It must not be a paper proclamation.”²¹⁰ The words on paper needed to translate into political action. Emerson had faith in the lived future of Lincoln’s words and encouraged his readers to revel in “the new hope [emancipation] has breathed in to the world.”²¹¹ In the closing lines of Emerson’s celebration of the legal end of slavery in the United States, he writes, “Happy are the young, who find the pestilence cleansed of the earth, leaving open to them an honest career. Happy the old, who see Nature purified before they depart.”²¹² Expressing contentment in the progressive reform that had been achieved for both slave and free, Emerson’s philosophy advanced: his numerous letters, essays, speeches, and journals implore action, invite nonconformity, allow for the humility to admit one’s culpability, and embrace public and personal transformation.

²¹⁰ Emerson, “The President’s Proclamation,” 640.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 642.

²¹² *Ibid.*

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