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## The Quest For a Transcendental Hero

William Joseph Nolen

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# THE QUEST FOR A TRANSCENDENTAL HERO

A Thesis

by

WILLIAM JOSEPH NOLEN

Submitted to Texas A&M International University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2013

Major Subject: English

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Approved as to style and content by:

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## ABSTRACT

## The Quest for a Transcendentalist Hero (May 2013)

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This work begins by briefly exploring the historical, cultural, and economic factors springing up from the rise of scientific and economic materialism in the crux of capitalism. It is argued that the bourgeois value system strangled the possibility of heroic action in the public arena and thereby eliminated the poet's ability to find a heroic figure in nineteenth century America. The focus is then shifted to the Transcendentalist movement (Emerson, Thoreau and Fuller), who fear the loss of the hero as the loss of inspiration for mankind and the loss of subject matter for poets. The works and ideas of Emerson are interpreted as an attempt at inspiring individuals in the public to step forth into the spotlight of Western society in the hopes of counteracting the trends and forces in modernity that render the metropolitan citizen ineffectual and complacent. Thoreau's experiments in Walden and civil disobedience are examined in the light of early efforts to find venues of political action in the private life of the everyday man as a possibility for heroism. Fuller is sketched as the prototype for modernized vates or prophet as poet/hero. It is argued that Fuller brings to life the dual role of hero and poet via the social activism she attempted in her use of the press in order to make the public aware of the ills in society as a means of mobilization and serving as an apocryphal propaganda. The extent to which each individual succeeded and/or failed is also to be described.

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## CHAPTER I

### SYMPTOMS

And you, in your turn, will be rotten as this: Horrible, filthy, undone,  
 O sun of my nature and star of my eyes, My passion, my angel in one!  
 ...As you moulder with bones of the dead...  
 Ah then, o my beauty, explain to the worms Who cherish your body so fine,  
 That I am the keeper for corpses of love Of the form, and the essence divine!  
 - Charles Baudelaire – “A Carcass” (1857)

For Ralph Waldo Emerson, as well as for Walter Benjamin (almost a hundred years later), the hero and the poet or storyteller shared a symbiotic relationship that drove Western tradition and history for millennia. The hero was the doer, the actor on the stage of the public sphere who loomed large on the horizon of the collective awareness, and the poet or storyteller was the sayer who stood as witness and herald of the doer’s heroic exploits, recording and transmitting not only the story but its hidden meaning to the concurrent masses as well as those descendants the future held. The storytelling epic poet, then, served as historian and artist, whereas the hero lived as activist, moral example and historical progenitor: “The hero is something more than our conscious ideal or dream. He represents not only what we value in the external world...but what we value in ourselves” (Rollin xiv). The hero, then, inspired us to be better than we were by representing an ideal we could aspire to, and as such, served as an impetus of change.<sup>1</sup> Yet without the poet or storyteller, we might never hear of this hero.

The myth or epic poem relates not only the story of the hero’s quest, but serves as a source and transmitter of ancient or traditional wisdom for its listeners as well. Mythology offers the culture surrounding it the needed life models of behavior appropriate to the historical moment (Campbell Episode 2).<sup>2</sup> Without the hero and his story to inspire action in

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The essay is based on the journal model “Put God in Your Debt’: Emerson’s Economy of Expenditure” by Richard A. Grusin from the journal *PMLA*, Vol. 103, No. 1 (Jan., 1988), pages 35-44.

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<sup>1</sup> “The hero of action is the champion of things becoming...the agent of the cycle, continuing into the living moment the impulse that first moved the world” (Campbell 345).

<sup>2</sup> “The prime function of mythology is to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward...teach the individual to die to the past and be reborn to the future” (Campbell 15).

others, nothing changes in any significant way. However, the advent of modernity stripped us of these types of Great Men over the last two centuries, thereby depriving our culture of the direction that accompanied a solid foundation based on a tradition to stand on. This is to a large extent the reason why little has changed in the mode of life for individuals over the last two centuries other than technologically cosmetic advancements. Architecturally, we see urban construction, once centered on religious structures like temples or cathedrals (whose walls retold the myths and poems of their heroes and gods), now embodies the might of financial institutions that narrate no new myths or epics of any kind (Campbell Episode 2). Whereas the nineteenth century witnessed the bourgeois softening of man (which dissolved the strength necessary to produce heroes), the twentieth century mutely watched the aimless wanderings of the poet (which resulted in the cannibalized death of poetry at the hands of advertising, rap/rock music, movie scripting, etc. on the cusp of the new millennium): “[T]he storyteller is by no means a present force. He has already become something remote from us and something that is getting even more distant...the art of storytelling is coming to an end” (Benjamin 83). When the hero dissipated, the poet was sure to follow shortly after.

Although Benjamin did recognize that this process of dissolution of the traditional began before the twentieth century, Benjamin does not describe or explore in his writing how the loss of the hero sets the stage for the later loss of the poet or storyteller.<sup>3</sup> This process coincides with the birth and growth of the middle class and capitalism. A number of other essays and books written throughout the twentieth century seem to argue that a crisis in heroic or epic storytelling existed since the nineteenth century in that the 1800s saw the absorption of the hero into the bourgeois middle class, rendering him impotent.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “This, however, is a process that has been going on for a long time...The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times” (88).

<sup>4</sup> See for example Otto Rank’s *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (1914), Sidney Hook’s *The Hero in History* (1943), Eric R. Bentley’s *A Century of Hero-Worship* (1944) and Stephen Railton’s “Resurrection of Virtue.”



## CHAPTER II

### DIAGNOSIS

Where have all the good men gone and where are all the gods?  
 Where's the great white Hercules to fight the rising odds?  
 Isn't there a white knight upon a fiery steed?  
 Late at night I toss and I turn and I dream of what I need  
 I need a hero

- Bonnie Tyler – “Holding Out For A Hero”

The search or quest for the heroic in nineteenth-century thought is readily apparent to even the most casual reader of its works: Karl Marx’s pleading for the intellectuals to become a revolutionary vanguard for the masses, Friedrich Nietzsche’s call for an over-man to live by a master’s morality, Friedrich Hegel’s reassurance that history must move forward under the leadership of those attuned to a zeitgeist (spirit of the times), the Grimm Brothers’ return to tradition via the fairy tales of the Black Forest in Germany to inspire children and future generations with the examples of princes and woodsmen, William James’ treatment of “life as tragic mystery,” Soren Kierkegaard’s attempt to re-establish a possibility for prophetic life, and Thomas Carlyle’s own work in “hero worship” that influenced the Transcendentalists most directly.<sup>5</sup> Whereas the crisis in the late twentieth century hinged on the absence of a poet bought off by the movie or television (and now the video game) production companies and an audience seduced away from the word by the moving image, the nineteenth-century’s crisis revolved on the growing disappearance of the heroic figure in the swell of capitalism. Without a hero for a muse, the nineteenth-century poet had no epic poems or grand narratives to write, no legends to draw from to inspire the mass of men with, when “literature exists to show the beauty of the world” (“Heroism” 217).

The medieval period had knights and crusaders like Richard the Lion-Hearted and Charlemagne and Roland, the sixteenth century had explorers represented by men such as Christopher Columbus and Hernan Cortez as well as privateers like Francis Drake, the seventeenth century had its martyrs and reformers including Oliver Cromwell and its budding scientists such as Galileo and Isaac Newton, the eighteenth century had its revolutionaries (philosophical and political) exemplified by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and George Washington.

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<sup>5</sup> The works are *Das Kapital*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, *Fairy Tales*, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (respectively).

But, what of the nineteenth century? Who did the nineteenth century have to lead it? Who could its literati look to in order to write adventurous stories about? Who could it draw upon for inspiration? Napoleon Bonaparte? Billy the Kid? Some writers tried to present such men as heroes through the media of biographies or military strategy analyses with the former type and serials (the ancestor of twentieth century pulp novels and comic books) with the latter. However, neither carried the moral compass of a hero nor took hold of the masses' imagination in a way that began to characterize the culture as previous heroic models had, thus demonstrating a symptomatic void characteristic of the age.

Once a close inspection of any candidate began, various problems presented themselves in the pursuit of a hero during the majority of the 1800s. Global, cultural-political or dynastic ambition fizzled in creature comforts. Great gifts of natural talent and skill for leadership appeared rare. Larger-than-life charisma lacked in the public personae of the time. Although Daniel Webster demonstrated such an appeal (evident not only by Emerson's references to the man but also the ten thousand people who attended his funeral in 1852 including General Franklin Pierce and a number of other politicians), Webster (like Emerson himself) was an orator and a poet, a man of words not actions. Leaders with any accomplishments were often driven by selfish motives rather than immortal ideals or they lacked the courage to stand for these ideals in the face of threats to their careers or power bases.

Since 1829, Andrew "Old Hickory" Jackson through to James Buchanan epitomized a line of weak, incompetent or egoistic presidents for America, though the common people were little better as they cared only about carving out their own piece of the American pie. The *New York Times* archives demonstrate that out of two hundred *New York Times* articles on riots between the years 1851 and 1860, less than five percent dealt with slavery, women's rights or anything worthy of public outrage, while ninety-five percent of the riots during the same period stemmed from gang territory, unpaid wages or liquor prohibition. Mass media in the form of newsprint and photography rendered all men mundanely real and served as an active force of tycoon and corporate propaganda, thus nullifying the legend building or mythologizing formerly possible in traditional history via means of oral and literary print media. An example of this can be found in the *New York Times*' 1855 series of articles that defamed and eventually led to the arrest of the leaders of the "Free Love" club (socialists

who spoke against the newspaper industry's loyalties to financial groups, betraying the public trust and the truth).

Inspiring figures grew scarce for the writer-poets of the nineteenth century, and these writers reacted to the drought in heroes through a variety of literary endeavors that stemmed from personal temperament and experience: James Fenimore Cooper and Nathaniel Hawthorne nostalgically resorted to setting their truly heroic narratives in the centuries before,<sup>6</sup> Voltaire, Mark Twain and Washington Irving scathingly satirized un-heroic "commonplace" figures,<sup>7</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle and H. G. Wells desperately created their heroes from scratch out of fantasy,<sup>8</sup> Marcel Proust, Gustav Flaubert and Nikolai Gogol opted to steep their anti-heroes and narratives in a mundane realism that pre-figured twentieth century absurdity,<sup>9</sup> and Lord Byron, Johannes Wolfgang von Goethe and Bram Stoker diabolically idealized the demonic and vulgarly monstrous.<sup>10</sup> In spite of the anti-heroic trends of the nineteenth century, the Transcendentalist circle of New England optimistically (heroically?) struggled to explore the causes of this heroic absence and strived to remedy these causes via an attempt to re-invigorate or inspire their audiences. The Transcendentalists picked up on Immanuel Kant's belief in the inherent goodness of men imbued with rational idealism (via Samuel Taylor Coleridge's translations and original writings) and Thomas Carlyle's battle to empower man with idealism, destiny and divinity against the fatalism inherent in the social and scientific materialism that paved the road for and sprang up around the theories of Charles Darwin and Karl Marx.

The nineteenth-century preoccupation with the expansion of materialism and capitalism and the growth of the middle class was as pervasive as the preoccupation with finding the hero, and in fact, these phenomena were connected. Scientific materialism and economic materialism gained such widespread acceptance as the "only" viable views of the natural world and human life that the two converged to justify one another through capitalism as a world view and way of life. Scientific materialism was nothing new (going back to the Ancient Greeks- e.g. Thales, Aristotle, Epicurus, etc.). However, its advances since the

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<sup>6</sup> *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Scarlet Letter*

<sup>7</sup> *Candide*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow/Rip Van Winkle*

<sup>8</sup> *The Mysteries of Sherlock Holmes* and *The Time Machine*

<sup>9</sup> *Remembrance of Things Past*, *Madame Bovary*, and *Diary of a Madman* (Melville goes so far as to show the absurdity of a hero-villain conflict in *Billy Budd* where neither can survive reality)

<sup>10</sup> *Don Juan*, *Cain*, *Faust* and *Dracula*

seventeenth century, largely due to Francis Bacon's Scientific Method and Isaac Newton's physics, led to its practical applications in engineering in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as demonstrated by James Watt's steam based factory engine and Robert Fulton's steamboat. These apparently successful vindications of materialism resurrected the arrogant fervor and fanatical belief in the scientific method's ability to explain all, something carried over from the Age of Enlightenment (Packer, *Transcendentalist* 22). In addition, the logical consequences of John Locke's empiricism birthed Thomas Hobbes' theory that self-interest fundamentally motivated socialized individuals as the supreme moral imperative and David Hume's skepticism that seemingly proved the impossibility of a human self or soul. Together, these ideologies paved the road to the egoistic sensual addiction and the fatalism towards political action inherent in nineteenth and twentieth centuries' bourgeois lifestyle.

Tying these ideologies into a nexus of nineteenth-century thought can best be seen by examining Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem "Blight." Emerson's narrator chastises the scientist in his dual roles as "scholar" or researcher and "engineer" or developer for not knowing or loving "the flower they pluck" and destroying the environment when he "fells the woods" respectively (454 lines 18-21). This attack simultaneously addresses the epistemological approach of scientific materialism as well as the ensuing commodification of nature resulting from the discoveries and inventions of science. By contrasting science research methodology of "plucking" and "Latin Names" with the traditions of "old men" who "were Unitarians of the united world," Emerson criticizes the dissection of nature into compartmental fields of study that relies on studying objects of nature, not in their natural environment as an integral part of a interwoven ecosystem, but isolated in a lab and classified according to artificially constructed human terms of utility. These terms of utility fluctuate with historical progress and the markets that accompany it. The experiments in coal based combustion technology enabled the locomotive to be born. The nineteenth century's dependence on railways for transportation of goods motivated the engineer to "fell the woods" thus destroying America's pristine forests without concern for the long term effects on man and beast. After all, especially in this day and age, scientific research and development make strange bedfellows with military and industry investors whose funding is driven by whether it will lead to something that can be sold. The scientific method's close

relationship to myopic notions of utility and bourgeois ideas of value blinds us to the larger mysteries of man's relationship to nature:

And strangers to the mystic beast and bird,  
 And strangers to the plant and to the mine...  
 For we invade them impiously for gain;  
 We devastate them irreligiously...  
 Therefore they shove us from them, and yield to us  
 Only what to our gripping toil are due...  
 The rich results of the divine consents...  
 The nectar and ambrosia are withheld.  
 (31-32, 37-38, 40-41, 43, 45)

Since we are driven by immediate concerns of amassing wealth, we exploit and destroy the world on whose safety our own lives hinge. Considering that nectar and ambrosia kept the Olympian Greek gods immortal and eternally young, Emerson's reference illustrates that in pursuit of temporal pleasures bought by capital, we sell out the secrets to our own immortality, much as the amazon forest's secrets for possible herbal cures to medical diseases are obliterated by the middle class pursuit of Brazilian cherry wood for remodeled counter tops. Like the "thieves and pirates of the universe" that we are, capitalism's commodification of all things and all people amounts to a rape and plunder of the natural world around us in the pursuit of the newest product, giving us "the toy's purchase with the length of life" (47, 62). Materialism thus attacks the health of mankind's worldview and the relationship among its members, much like a blight that spreads its spores to infect other men via its channels of commerce. In the end, the hybridization of scientific and economic materialism results in mutating man into a virus that plagues nature, rendering man into the greatest blight upon the gardens of earth. However, scientific materialism did not give rise to economic materialism via the application of its discoveries for production and manufacture alone.

By the 1800s, the common belief among intellectuals was that cause and effect could explain and predict not only natural behavior, but human and historical behavior as well. Georg Wilhelm Hegel's theory on the dialectical movement of history "demonstrated" the individual's role as pawn of larger historical forces. Charles Darwin's South American expedition aboard the Beagle solidified this faith in man's mechanical nature once his theory of evolution equated man and the conditions necessary to his survival with those of animals by describing them as predicated upon the same laws as natural life in general. By the time

Karl Marx published *Das Kapital* in 1867 and Friedrich Engels published *Dialectics of History* in 1883, their deterministic theories of what would later come to be known as social Darwinism or social evolution were already widely accepted. This mechanistic view of man offered him nothing more to hope for than “living well while one may.” Valuing money as a means to power and emphasizing material luxuries, capitalism as an economic system and the bourgeois culture’s way of life may have begun as early as the Renaissance for the remnants of the feudal elite, but had become the “only way to live” for each and all by the 1800s. Capitalism so prevailed as a worldview at this time that Thoreau’s first chapter in *Walden* is “Economy,” and Emerson’s first examination of nature is as “Commodity.” Karl Marx’s critique of capitalism and analysis of history will prove fruitful ground in shedding light on the various shifts that marked the nineteenth century and dissolved the possibility of heroic action. By doing so, we might better bring to light some of the paralleled concerns plaguing Marxist and Transcendentalist ideologies as well as the affinities and tensions in their competing agendas.

Karl Marx’s doubt in the strength and responsibility of the individual in the face of history lies in his assessment that human history is merely an extension of natural history.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, to expect an individual to raise himself independently of historical conditions that pave the road and shape him as such is much like expecting a mountain to spontaneously sprout presidential faces (Mt. Rushmore via parthenogenesis). In fact, ideology is itself a product of the historical environment: “the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought” (Marx 11). Ideas, theories, worldviews, religions, political systems are all “superstructures” built around and on the foundation of the economic structure of any given society, i.e. the technology, resources and those who control these things that are utilized to produce the “necessities of life” dictate the “character of the social, political and intellectual life generally” (Marx 484). As we are raised within certain economic (and artificial) relationships to other individuals, we conceive of artificial reasons, beliefs and customs that justify our mode of production of these “necessities” for existence, and we take these relationships (which are nothing more than

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<sup>11</sup> In the Preface to his first German edition of *Capital*, he states, “The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future...My standpoint, from which the evolution of the economic formation society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he solely remains” (4-5).

phantoms of the mind) to be natural, unalterable and without alternative.<sup>12</sup> Even worse, the “necessities” themselves are in the end merely a list of wants or desires seeded within us and developed by the arbitrary conditions present within the historical environment we find ourselves in (Marx 111). Those in my generation need only look at our youth requiring typewriters, quarters and phone booths in comparison to the current need for laptops with wireless internet and touch screen phones in the face of the phone booths’ extinction to see the nebulous precariousness of our “necessities.” It is in pursuit of these “necessities” that man labors (usually with the aid of various instruments of labor), and by doing so, not only engages nature, but others and himself, thereby changing and being changed in a dynamic process (Marx 115). Interestingly, Joseph Campbell pointed out how temples and libraries have given way to financial skyscrapers in the global transition from traditional societies of antiquity, feudal classes and caste systems to Capitalism.

As for the present economic epoch of capitalism, it is defined by the “immense accumulation of commodities” (Marx 13). The individuals of this epoch are motivated by the selfish and sensually gratifying pursuit of these commodities.<sup>13</sup> Despite talk of being American and fulfilling our duty, we each look out for ourselves and our profit or our belongings. Was the American Revolution about freedom from despotic rule or merely the desire to renege on taxes levied to repair and replace British losses from the French Indian War (a war that saved colonial interests)? And yet, to labor in the pursuit of these objects we desire, the laborer credits his labor to a capitalist who pays him wages at a later date and yet nonetheless owns the product made by the laborer (Marx 120). Marking up the market price of the product from the cost of production allows the capitalist to yield a profit any number of times greater from that invested, especially considering that the laborer must purchase the product back for his own consumption<sup>14</sup>. The laborer (most of the population) is at the mercy of the capitalist, as the laborer often owns no other resources than his own body or labor force. Thus, the capitalist can force the laborers to these terms of agreement because

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<sup>12</sup> “These formulae...that belong to the state of a society, in which the process of production has the mastery over man, instead of being controlled by him...appear to the bourgeois intellect to be...a self-evident necessity imposed by nature” (50) when “Nature does not produce on the one side owners of money...and on the other men possessing nothing but their labor power...This relation has no natural basis” (109).

<sup>13</sup> “The only force that brings them together...is selfishness, the gain and private interests of each. Each looks to himself, and no one troubles him about the rest” (Marx 113).

<sup>14</sup> “Capital is dead labor, that, vampire like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks” (Marx 149).

the capitalist controls the means of production and the means of subsistence required for work, money and survival by all (reaping the benefit of exploiting that majority without resources)<sup>15</sup>.

In the end, the capitalist is as much at the mercy of the system and the commodity as the laborer: all are dominated by the worship of the thing, money and the system: “The domination of the capitalist over the worker is thus the domination of the thing over man, of dead labor over living labor, of the product over the producer...the subject is transformed into object and vice versa...This is the process of alienation” (Marx 383-84). Man is alienated as he becomes less important than the objects he makes; he becomes merely another mechanism in the assembly line he invented, another subject of study that can be calculated and predicted (Marx 391). In fact, “He works for means to live rather than for the purpose of enjoying the productive process of living itself. Accordingly, man is dehumanized and de-graded into an animal by the force of economic necessity” (Parsons 53). Of course, man (be he worker or bourgeoisie) merely sees all this as the natural and universal condition of mankind through the “education, tradition and habit” produced within such a culture (Marx 372).<sup>16</sup>

This falling away of man from his true nature is the end result of a long process of objectification in pursuit of other objects: “the concept of some human home from which man has wandered - some norm that defines man. This is the principle of development--the creative becoming of the individual human being and the species, expressing their fullest and highest potentials in productive, social relations. MAN, socially productive man, was the end” (Parsons 53). In fact, thinkers like Max Weber, Joseph Campbell and Mark Valadez (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*, “Pre-Columbian Philosophical Perspectives” respectively) have argued that the alienating aspects of Capitalism and Industrialization are merely the most logical consequences of Christianity and its doctrine of a fallen Nature or Original Sin, that these created a distinct

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<sup>15</sup> “Whenever a part of society possesses the monopoly of the means of production, the laborer must add to the working time necessary for his own maintenance an extra working time in order to produce the means of subsistence of the owners of the means of production...which may at times lead to compulsory working to death” (Marx 151).

<sup>16</sup> What Marx derides in Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarian philosophy (a uniquely capitalist philosophy if there ever was one) equally applies to the common member of capitalist society: “With the driest naiveté he takes the modern shopkeeper, especially the English shopkeeper, as the normal man. Whatever is useful this queer normal man, and to his world, is absolutely useful. This yard measure, then, he applies to past, present and future...a genius in the way of bourgeois stupidity” (488).



attitude against nature as corrupt and antagonistic to man and God, thereby underscoring a utilitarian use and abuse of nature, man and state as mere resources for the machine to crush and reshape (“progress”).

Emerson echoes these sentiments to some extent in his attacks on the conventional Christianity of the time. Emerson rails against the passive approach of worshippers in conjunction with the dogmatic preaching of its ministers that result in the petrified fossil of Christianity swallowed on Sundays and never practice beyond the pews and pulpits of America in works such as the *Divinity School Address* and “Man the Reformer.” Emerson too sees a link between orthodox Christianity and the Capitalistic sensual nihilism present in America *to this day* and calls for a new faith to match a new way of life given “how the fallen world presents itself to the senses, how a redeemed one might appear. Fallen nature is fixed, redeemed nature is fluid” (Packer, *Emerson’s Fall* 67). For Emerson, the fixed Fallen nature is that of orthodox Christianity (where one is told what to believe and no questions or thoughts are encouraged), that of scientific materialism (where each thing is classified and categorized according to the fixed standards of composition), and that of economic materialism (where each thing is classified and valued according to the market’s standards of use). Emerson’s vision for a new faith or “redeemed nature” attempts to restore fluid experience in exchange for static categories in its emphasis on the self-reliant individual (as dynamic perspective, existential interpretation, divine endowment, etc.). This is why Emerson emphasizes the need to reinvigorate faith by dropping orthodox doctrine and stale decaying rituals in lieu of a re-acquainting of oneself with Nature and Over-Soul. As it has been remarked, “Emerson’s growing certainty that religion in its origin, nature and manifestation is above all about human life and human experience” (Makarushka 1).

The Transcendentalists seem to agree with Marx’s description of the Capitalist indoctrination that colors the very worldview of its victims: “Emerson’s little book...ends by offering a fable of apocalypse in which fallen man recognizes in external nature merely the form of the divine body he has alienated” (Packer, *Transcendentalist* 48). Emerson tells us in *Nature* that commoditization “is the only use of nature which all men apprehend” (36). In other words, it is the habitual way humanity perceives! The very first lines of *Nature* read: “Our age is retrospective...The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we see through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?”

(33). At the dawn of civilization, man saw the world through new eyes that have since become skewed and corrupt over time, yielding a vision of nature and man as objects to be used and manipulated, an inherited, unoriginal and alienated way of viewing the world. Emerson invites us to create a new relationship to the world and to each other. Emerson, like Marx, argues that the rationalist and capitalist penchant for seeing the world as subject-versus-object artificially restricts us and becomes inverted, rendering us docile and arrogant by “distrust[ing] and deny[ing] inwardly our sympathy with nature...[becoming] dethroned, bereft of reason...Man is a god in ruins...Man is the dwarf of himself” (*Nature* 65). *Nature* echoes his poem “Blight,” where Emerson indicts the scientific, technological, capitalist approach to nature and man as piecemeal, dissected, alienated and settling for scraps when we could raise ourselves to greater ideals than comfort and paychecks.<sup>17</sup> Here, Emerson reminds us that business and science make us comfortably numb in being the villains (“thieves” and “pirates”) within the drama of nature and history’s narrative. Thoreau later explains in *Walden* that “most men...through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them” (261). Both men argue that our accustomed concern with material goods and the labor necessary to procure them blind our thoughts and bind our speech and actions.

Marx and the Transcendentalists also agree that the greed and exploitation resulting from bourgeois capitalism results in poverty and slavery to material luxuries (not necessities) for the mass of men. Marx’s description of the “rat race” resulting in the lifelong exploitation of the laboring proletariat echoes Orestes Brown’s “The Laboring Classes” and Thoreau’s observation in *Walden* that men “begin digging their graves as soon as they are born...pushing all these things [commodities] before them”(260). Compare: “The modern laborer...sinks deeper and deeper below the conditions of existence...He becomes a pauper, and pauperism develops more rapidly than population and wealth. And here it becomes evident that the bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class in society” (Marx 384) with: “The whole class of simple laborers is poor, and in general unable to procure anything beyond the bare necessities...The man who employs them, and for whom they are toiling as so many slaves, is one of our city nabobs, reveling in luxury” (Brown 195).

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<sup>17</sup> “strangers to the stars...the mystic beast and bird...the plant and to the mine...invade them impiously for gain; we devastate them un-religiously...in the midst of spoils and slaves, we thieves and pirates of the universe...turn pale and starve...to our sick eyes, the stunted trees look sick” (454).

Both Brown and Marx note here the growth of a gap in property between poor (who can barely survive) and rich (who hoard or amass enough wealth for generations), the increase of the number of the poor in the population under capitalism, and the glaringly obvious recognition that the wealthy cannot be trusted to rule.

It is no accident that *Nature*, Emerson's foundation for Transcendentalism, begins with an examination of nature as "Commodity" after his brief introduction: "The misery of man appears like childish petulance, when we explore the steady and prodigal provision that has been made for his support and delight on this green ball which floats him through the heavens" (37). Emerson chastises the "petulance" of childlike men who selfishly refuse to share with their brothers and sisters the "steady provision" available through the abundance of Earth's vast natural resources. As Gerber admits, Emerson recognizes that capitalists betray the power and responsibility they are endowed with by the masses.<sup>18</sup> A key point often ignored here, however, is that Emerson is better suited to assessing society morally, while Marx's attempts to engage in criticism seem to exceed the restrictions placed on him logically as a result of his views. After all, Marx's theory rests on materialism and positivism and must content itself with merely describing the state of things, never reaching the level of a moral assessment. Since "might makes right," he has no ideals to ground his assessment of right and wrong on. This process of exploitation and marginalization described by Marx and criticized by Emerson is cyclical unto death, "A man is fed, not that he may be fed, but that he may work" (*Nature* 37).<sup>19</sup> Fellow Transcendentalist George Ripley went so far as to "resign his ministry and found Brook Farm...as an alternative to the self-destructive exploitation of unchecked capitalism" (Packer, *Transcendentalist* 65).

Brown and Marx claim this system is present "under every government on earth" and endorsed forcibly by all those in power, unwilling to relinquish their status (195, 385 respectively). Given such a circumstance of bare existence and minimal survival as qualities of life in the mass of men, is it any wonder most are too emaciated and broken to stand up for

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<sup>18</sup> "Emerson was against the rule by the wealthy since the wealthy were too often [financial] materialists, men of the senses and understanding only. Rule by such a group could only be false and odious, and result in a world based on the survival of the fittest...The poor, Emerson believed, had a right to expect the support of the virtuous, the generosity of the wealthy, and the protection of statesmen. In a more significantly economic sense, they had a right to share in the resources of the country" (354).

<sup>19</sup> Though the similarity in their assessment of the age is striking, it is by no means being argued here that any of these writers necessarily read one another, as they were concurrent and likely not translated yet. It is merely demonstrating here the presence of certain historical forces and events that were deemed worthy of criticism by these thinkers spread across the globe.

themselves? And if not the proletariat, then who can stand? Brown calls for a heroic brother's keeper when he challenges, "He who is worthy of the name of man, speaks what he honestly believes the interests of his race demand, and seldom disquiets himself about what may be the consequences to himself...The subject must be freely, boldly and fully discussed...whatever may be the fate of those who discuss it" (200). Marx echoes the ideas of unavoidable conflict: "War breaks out into open revolution, and where the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat" (387). Marx and Brown call for intellectuals amongst the middle class to risk all in defending the plight of their brethren: first by spreading awareness, then by mobilization. Brown believes "warfare between the classes is inevitable" (Packer, *Transcendentalist* 65). Violence is par for the course for Marx's deterministic worldview: "The history of man is a history of class strife" (1). To some extent, Emerson agrees that class conflicts characterize history.<sup>20</sup> However, Emerson endeavors to inspire heroic individualism as political action, whereas Marx and Brown push for a revolution carried on by faceless and nameless masses.

Despite that for Marx, the pre-determined path of history endlessly plays itself out contrary to our dreams and intentions, Emerson does not agree that the course of human events necessarily has to continue as it has in the past (in fact, this is where the Transcendentalists and Marx part ways). Emerson quoted Marx only once in his journals in 1853,<sup>21</sup> and it is evident the quote resonated with some his theories on nature and history's antagonistic relationship to men such as those found in essays like "Fate" or "Experience" or "Self-Reliance" or "History." Emerson argues that further class warfare would merely set up a new regime and that most men are hypocrites, much like the abolitionists of New England: "He who does his own work frees a slave. He, who does not his own work, is a slave holder...Alas! Alas! My brothers, there is never an abolitionist in New England" (Journal dated Spring-Summer 1844). He also awakens us to the realization that the struggles against

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<sup>20</sup> "As early as 1822 he wrote to John Boynton Hill that in Boston, as everywhere else, the inhabitants divided them-selves into three classes: the aristocracy of wealth and talents, the merchants and mechanics, and the lowest order of day la-borers and outcasts of every description. Subsequently, he spoke of the conservatives and the democrats, the haves and the have-nots. In 1841, he told a Boston audience: 'The two parties which divide the state, the party of Conservatism and that of Innovation, are very old, and have disputed the possession of the world ever since it was made. This quarrel is the subject of civil history.' The Beards are quick to point out that this was written six years before Marx and Engels startled Europe with their class interpretation of history" (Gerber 353).

<sup>21</sup> "The classes and the races too weak to master the new conditions of life must give way," from Karl Marx's article for Horace Greeley's New York Tribune as a European correspondent- the same position Margaret Fuller had- titled "Forced Emigration."

a democratic state are in fact struggles against ourselves, our friends and our loved ones...we are the problem.<sup>22</sup> There is no global conspiracy of rich, powerful men who sit in some office late at night to plot world conquest and subjugation of all men. These are bogeymen we create as scapegoats to cast our shame and sins upon, thus ridding ourselves of the responsibility that the role we play in the world's state of affairs entails. Any attempt to change the state must be an attempt at changing one's "neighbors" as well as ourselves, and to continue finding bogeymen to blame for "arbitrarily willing thus and so" is to ignore that how we all think must change. In fact, Cyrus Patell effectively demonstrates how Emerson began working as early as the 1830's to 1840's to distinguish his form of "individualism" from the individuality found in Socialism in order to posit the possibility of a utopia established not by some organization of corruptible over-seers but rather by a union of self-governing individuals (449-50). It is a nation of individuals who can think for themselves and act on their own consciences that Emerson aims at...a nation of heroes.<sup>23</sup>

In her review of Emerson's second collection of essays, Margaret Fuller describes American culture as one "occupied...by bringing out the material resources of the land, not generally prepared by early training for the enjoyment of books that require attention and reflection" (379). Emerson's "The American Scholar" address also accuses the middle class of focusing merely on "mechanical skill" rather than on a "love of letters" and describes the intellectual community as a "sluggard intellect" that "depends" too much on European thought (56). The "bookworm" Emerson does not want scholars to become is the lazy collector of facts and ideas of other men produced through the improper use of books (as only source of truth) and resulting in "the sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude" (59). Scholars and centers of learning are so enthralled with scientific modes of understanding, they have gone so far as to create an education program that delegates miniscule areas of expertise to each student and professional, resulting in useless "walking monsters, - a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man" (e.g. experts in specifically the Krebs cycle, or DNA/RNA replication, or Napoleon's strategic demise at Waterloo, or Picasso's

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<sup>22</sup> "The state is our neighbors; our neighbors are the state. It is folly to treat the state as if it were some individual arbitrarily willing thus and so...I lose all respect for this tedious denouncing of the state by idlers" (Journal dated January-March 1845).

<sup>23</sup> "[H]is ultimate goal is a society transfigured by the realization of the potential of individualism...the ideal society would be bound not by the 'artificial restraints' of force but rather by the bonds of love" (Patell 455-56). Love (romantic, platonic, patriotic, civil, Christian, parental, etc.) adds the moral dimension to man as the archetypal motivator to truly heroic action (an element missing in figures like Napoleon and Billy the Kid).

blue period, or micro-processor engineering, etc. who engage in research only relevant or useful to other experts of the same field of the miniscule) (57). Emerson's criticism of American education has gone unheeded for one hundred seventy years as we persist in the wholesale amputation of human knowledge today in the twenty-first century. This emphasis on science-technology in America disposes its scholars towards the bourgeois pursuit of comforts of the living room and café via profit margins, budgets, research grants, publishing or patent royalties and pushes us away from the "anti-social" solitude and worldly poverty necessary of true scholarship, leaving America "timid...tame...thick and fat...indolent and complaisant" (68).

American education therefore is only concerned with creating professionals and tradesmen who are equipped to earn the wages necessary to consume American products but not equipped for much else. This overall pursuit of wealth results in an intellectual laziness and addiction to comfort antithetical to heroism, which "does not sell its justice and its nobleness. Poverty is its ornament" ("Heroism" 182). Emerson's dissatisfaction with the American education system and the resulting Americans produced by such machinery perhaps contributed to a great extent to that isolation and chilliness many have noted in Emerson's demeanor. In fact, "[j]ust when Carlyle was urging Emerson to 'take an American hero...and give us a history of him,' Emerson's book *Representative Men* included no Americans" (Richardson 413). Unlike the rest of America, the Transcendentalists desired to open American eyes to a new way of seeing the world as something more than "for the profit of man," because in the end our ideologies (something we gain through education and experience) shape our approach to the world and each other: "Nature always wears the colors of the spirit" (*Nature* 36). Emerson proclaims in "The American Scholar" address, "Wake them, and they shall quit the false good...This revolution is to be wrought by the gradual domestication of the idea of culture...the up building of a man" (66). It is this bourgeois comfort and fear of danger that the Transcendentalist must confront most directly to inspire heroism in America, an effort much characterized by forceful language: "We believe the aim of all education to rouse the mind to action."<sup>24</sup>

This belief that ideas can inspire and transform despite material, economic and cultural conditions in the environment highlights the idealist bent in Transcendentalism that

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<sup>24</sup> Margaret Fuller "The Wrongs of American Women, the Duties of American Women"

is most commonly attributed to Immanuel Kant's influence through Henry Hedge and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (and that may be so, this paper does not aim at disputing that). However, Emerson's friendship with and influence by Thomas Carlyle is also well established and much more pertinent to the discussion at hand: "Carlyle was proposing...The literary life, if sincerely lived, would serve as well as literary works themselves to shadow forth the Divine Idea to the residents of this time and place...an age of mechanism, an age of soullessness" (Packer, *Transcendentalist* 34). Although Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* was not published until 1840, many of its ideas germinated in his earlier work (e.g. "Signs of the Times" 1828-1829, "On History" 1830 and "Characteristics" 1831). In fact, Emerson extols Carlyle's emphasis of the heroic traits found in those Carlyle wrote biographies about in Emerson's essay "Heroism" (1841). Not only does an examination of *On Heroes* clarify Emerson's own ideas of a quest for a hero, but it also underscores the tensions inherent in maintaining idealist philosophical notions in a predominantly materialist century.

In fact, *On Heroes* makes it somewhat difficult to see where Carlyle ends and Emerson begins. Throughout Emerson's corpus, the similarities are pronounced as early as *Nature* and as late as *Representative Men*. Emerson's *Representative Men* includes Plato as philosopher, Swedenborg as mystic, Montaigne as skeptic, Shakespeare as poet, Napoleon as man of the World, and Goethe as writer. In the next century, Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* assigns the roles of the hero archetype into the categories of warrior, lover, tyrant, redeemer and saint. These much loved categories are to some extent plagiarized knock offs of Carlyle's divinity (Wotan and Jesus), prophet (Mohammed), poet (Shakespeare and Dante), priest (Martin Luther), scholar (Ben Jonson and Jean Jacques Rousseau), and king (Caesar and Napoleon). In fact, as Richardson points out, Carlyle had much to do with Emerson's ideas for *Representative Men* (1850). Emerson turned to Coleridge's "clearer distinctions" in understanding Kant and Fuller's grasp of German poetry for grasping Goethe, but needed Carlyle's biographies to yield him the "inner workings of these men's minds" that might better guide him on his quest for heroic and poetic action in the public arena (Thompson 443).

Emerson's desire for Carlyle to help shape what would later become known as Transcendentalism is evident in Emerson's early supplications for Carlyle to visit America

by offering him lecture circuits and even the editorship of *the Dial*: “it is the opinion of many friends whose judgment I value, that a person of so many claims...would, for at least one season...command all ears on whatever topic pleased him...it was suggested that, if Mr. C. [Carlyle] would undertake a Journal of which we have talked much...do us great service...it could be made to secure him a support...to be called *The Transcendentalist* (Emerson’s letter to Carlyle 30 April, 1835). Emerson felt Carlyle offered Transcendentalism its greatest guidance in his notions of heroism and his assessment of the current age’s hostile environment to heroism. However, the timing was wrong for Carlyle, and he would later assess the Transcendentalists very early on with the same critique that has come to dominate many others since: that the Transcendentalists were idealists to a fault.<sup>25</sup> This rejection forced Emerson to take up the mantle of leadership himself, but it did not prevent him and the others of the circle from appropriating elements from Carlyle’s theories for their own purposes.

Emerson and Fuller’s emphasis on the poet as prophet through the etymology of the Latin word *vates* is something also taken from Carlyle’s works. Coming back to the symbiotic relationship of poet and hero, the special role of the prophet lies in that he unites the hero and poet into one person, performing actions that set the bar and expressing the worldview behind it at once for “the vates has penetrated the divine mystery or the divine idea of the world that lies at the bottom of all appearance” (Carlyle 69). For Carlyle, one invokes the ideal as a standard against which to measure the real, but in the end, one must deal, struggle and come to terms with the real. The vates bridges both worlds in a way that some of the Transcendentalists would endeavor despite Carlyle’s (and subsequent criticism’s) claims to the contrary. The vates utilizes social criticism to highlight and counteract the temporal or illegitimate while edifying through poetic speech and heroic action in the public arena the immortal or eternal or natural elements in man’s condition.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> “I love your *Dial*, and yet it is with a kind of shudder. You seem to me in danger of dividing yourselves from the Fact of this present Universe, in which alone, ugly as it is, can I find any anchorage, and soaring away after Ideas, Beliefs, Revelations, and such like,—into perilous altitudes...Surely I could wish you returned into your own poor nineteenth century, its follies and maladies, its blind or half-blind, but gigantic toilings, its laughter and its tears, and trying to evolve in some measure the hidden Godlike that lies in it;—that seems to me the kind of feat for literary men” (Carlyle’s letter to Emerson 29 August, 1842).

<sup>26</sup> Something Emerson claimed of Carlyle’s writing: [of Carlyle’s *Past and Present*] —“What a man’s book is that! no prudences, no compromises, but a thorough independence. A masterly criticism on the times...The poet is here for this, to dwarf and destroy all merely temporary circumstance, and to glorify the perpetual circumstance of men” (from Emerson’s *Journals* April 1843).



Doing so, Carlyle's divine or prophetic hero lives and speaks a new way of thought, embodies new worldviews that mark a new age (26).<sup>27</sup>

For Carlyle, a great man is not only the leader of men; other "men actually gain something by looking at him...a living light fountain...enlightened the darkness of the world" (3). It is the great man or hero's opposition to the forces of the world around him, be it nature, death or an unjust regime that defines him as such and makes him worthy of worship. The example of the hero shines as a model to emulate in his courage when facing poverty, failure, exile, death despite his all-too-human desire to put bread on his family's table, to succeed, to remain home, to live: "it is a most earnest thing to be alive in this world; to die is not merely sport for a man...it's a stern reality, a serious matter" (Carlyle 7). When we see the hero risking it all in the face of uncertainty and possible doom, we awaken from our self-interested slumber to our true potential. This, of course, leads us to Walter Benjamin's observation in the next section that our modern removal of death from the public sphere eclipses the possibility of finding a heroic response to the certainty of death.

Carlyle goes so far as to measure an epoch's spiritual health according to the "manner it has of welcoming a great man" (37). This measuring stick diagnoses the current epoch and finds it lacking: "These days hero worship professes to have finally ceased...an age that as it were denies the existence of men, denies the desirableness of great men...take the dimensions of him as a creature of the time- the time did everything, he did nothing...such small critics...promote unbelief and universal spiritual paralysis (12-13). Carlyle's invective here is against the materialistic determinism and its resulting skepticism that he finds gaining prominence during his time, e.g. Marx's belief that the creature cannot be responsible when he himself is a product of the times. Carlyle believes this determinism "paralyzes" the spiritual or creative aspect in people as they begin to buy into the idea that we are merely puppets of cause and effect, a determinism promoted not only by scientists and philosophers, but by historians, literary critics and journalists as well, thereby reaching the mass of men and making them unreceptive even when a great man appears. As a result, even if the hero were still somehow possible, he would be rendered impotent by our doubt in him to the extent that he could no longer inspire, his seed of hope falling on the barren soil of our

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<sup>27</sup> "His way of thought became their way of thought - such, under new conditions, is the history of every great thinker still...the history of the world is but the biography of great men" (26).

disbelieving souls.<sup>28</sup> The skepticism or doubt that limits and arrests what we can know, do or be free to become is the essence of the fatalistic inertia characterizing bourgeois society.

These “scientific” ideas of man’s pre-determined fate at the hands of material causes shapes the bulk of men with what Carlyle refers to as a “skeptical dilettantism,” characterized by a nihilistic unmooring from any moral foundation and a fascination with the mere simulacra of greatness, yet plagued by an undercurrent of “despair of human things” that scoffs at the idea of true greatness possibly existing (72). The result leaves us with the pursuit of wealth and pleasure as the only goals worthy of such a life.<sup>29</sup> It is this form of materialism that Emerson combats by seeking “to focus attention on the ways in which society strips idealism away from the individual by encouraging material pursuits” (Patell 454-55). This skepticism inherent even in the children of the age is demonstrated by the empirical demands “stubbornly resisting” Amos Bronson Alcott’s experiments in education (Packer 58). By skepticism, he means not only an intellectual doubt alone, but a moral one as well, not only hero-less, but godless as well with “nothing left but a Mechanical Life” (Carlyle 147). In this mechanistic view, all action springs from some self-interest. Doubt also begins to attack at the limits of what we can know (David Hume) and is unconvincingly addressed by Kant (an issue central to Emerson’s philosophical program according to Stanley Cavell).<sup>30</sup> This doubt attacks man at the source of his soul, for “man lives by believing in something, not by debating and arguing” leaving him without the possibility of action and only with the “Similitude of Acting...[in an] Unbelieving Century with its unblest Products” (Carlyle 150-51). An existential mistrust of men’s true intentions belies the hidden truth that we all live by false exteriors and hidden agendas in the pursuit of power by the means of sophistry. Here we see that some of the seeds of Post-Modernity often attributed to Nietzsche and/or Emerson actually spring from Carlyle as he aptly describes the era of simulacra or

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<sup>28</sup> “The most precious gift that Heaven can give us, a man of genius...with a God’s message to us- this we waste away as an artificial firework, sent to amuse us and sink it into ashes, wreck and ineffectuality” (Carlyle 38).

<sup>29</sup> “In this Sceptico-Epicurean generation, when all is gone but hunger and cant...The truth is, I believe literature to be as good as dead and gone in all parts of Europe at this moment...The same unquenchable, almost frightfully unresting spirit of endeavor, directed to the making of money” (Correspondence to Emerson dated 3 February, 1835).

<sup>30</sup> “For Cavell, the power and promise of Emersonian selfhood begins with the essential rigor of its confrontation with the truth of skepticism. After Nature, and increasingly so, Cavell argues, Emerson devotes himself to understanding the fullest implications of skepticism’s unhappy fact” (Wolfe 139).

appearance and committees of small men overtaking the era of underlying truth and the great man!

This maze of appearances creates the “sad predicament” characteristic of current American politics: we no longer know “how to find the Ablest Man to Rule” (Carlyle 172). It results from the same “skeptical dilettantism” in that because we no longer believe in sincerity, we cannot recognize it when we see it.<sup>31</sup> This labyrinth of directionless choices in a silent universe can only be resolved by first recognizing that “it is false altogether...that this world is a steam engine...there is verily a Divine Right and Diabolic Wrong” (171). One need not be religious to understand Carlyle here: not everyone is meant to rule just as not every choice is the same; some are better while others are worse. One need only look at the consequences of following a Washington versus a Robespierre. Carlyle had hoped that journalism would create his “fourth estate” or that the press would act as the witness (eye and voice) distant enough to “better criticize the state” and thereby guide the mass of men on which ‘better man’ to choose. However, Thoreau’s suspicion that a press relying on subscriptions and advertising could never possibly be impartial proved closer to the mark in the long run. Nonetheless, Thoreau “cited that text [*On Heroes*] in particular as an excellent specimen of Carlyle at his best” (Mariotti 122).<sup>32</sup>

It is in the use of the ideal that one finds direction, for “belief is great, life giving, soul elevating” (Carlyle 66). It is the ideal or the unreachable that gives rise to the judgments of the material conditions so that one can open one’s eyes to what is lacking, imperfect and unfinished. The Transcendentalists believed “[g]reat men...help us grasp some aspect of reality otherwise unreachable...we need great men to redress our imperfections and inspire our efforts” (Packer, *Transcendentalist* 174). Even if the ideal exists only in the imagination of man, it nonetheless offers the “far off approximations” one can strive for in the attempt at bettering the world: “Ideals must ever lie a great way off...if they be not approximated to at all, the whole matter goes to wreck! Infallibly!” (Carlyle 170).

Not only is the hero the leader striving to manifest the ideal in the real, but he is himself the ideal for the rest to follow after in their personal lives and dealings. Carlyle

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<sup>31</sup> “The heart lying dead, the eye cannot see...That a True King be sent them is of small use; they do not know when sent...Not a Hero only is needed, but a world fit for him...By ballot boxes we alter the figure of our Quack, but the substance of him continues...to be forever governed by the Un-heroic” (185-86).

<sup>32</sup> Incidentally, Thoreau’s own fourth estate would consist of the individual walker through nature (See page 64).

offered Emerson and the rest of the circle various models to emulate through the biographies he wrote that always epitomized the heroic example of following one's passion over a career that guaranteed wealth: "Carlyle gave a searching analysis of the possibilities of a career as a man of letters...Carlyle held out no 'fool's paradise'...clearly...one of loneliness, privation and misunderstanding...no certainty of success...no surety of reward" (Thompson 441). Carlyle wrote about these aspects of the poetic lifestyle in his biographies of various poets, but also lived it himself and wrote about it to Emerson in his letters as late as March 1838: "It will be a very brave day when cash actually reaches me, no matter what the number of the coins, whether seven or seven hundred...and strange enough, what is not unlikely, if it be the first cash I realize for that piece of work,—Angle-land continuing still insolvent to me! I believe after all, with the aid of my Scotch thrift, I shall not be absolutely thrown into the streets here, or reduced to borrow, and become the slave of somebody, for a morsel of bread". In response, Emerson basically became his agent by selflessly working to find publishers and readers for Carlyle in America, sending him his royalties, and encouraging him to persevere by using Carlyle's own assessment of the current era's rejection of heroic models to proclaim that Carlyle's lack of a reception presented evidence of his greatness.<sup>33</sup>

The courage to pursue an unknown future by turning one's back on the certainties of a "steady income" thus presents the most common dilemma for both hero and poet living in the bourgeois world. More often than not, men put down pen and sword to pick up briefcase and paycheck. This is why not only has history gone to wreck, but we ourselves as individuals. The lack of a hero and the resulting loss of direction for the poet propel human individuals towards a nihilistic groping through the dark void of existential aimlessness: "Hero worship enters deeply into the secret of mankind's ways and vilest interests in this world" (Carlyle 208). Carlyle offered the Transcendentalists a "philosophy with sentiment and purpose" (Packer, *Transcendentalist* 35). This desire to offer the ideal, a social criticism, and an inspiration for the common man incarnated in Emerson's lecture series, which served as a "handy pulpit" (Packer, *Transcendentalist* 49). The Transcendentalist agenda to resuscitate heroic potential in people was therefore not merely a naïve poetic dream, but a

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<sup>33</sup> "The great men of the day are on a plane so low as to be thoroughly intelligible to the vulgar...so the thoughts of the best minds always become the last opinion of Society. Truth is ever born in a manger, but is compensated by living till it has all souls for its kingdom. Far, far better seems to me the unpopularity of this Philosophical Poem (shall I call it?)" (Correspondence dated 20 November, 1834).

very real and necessary antidote against the infectious unholy trinity corrupting America: scientific skepticism, economic materialism, and their offspring, fatalistic nihilism: “The reclamation of power to determine one’s own life and destiny that Emerson desired to achieve was shared by other Transcendentalists...[who] saw themselves as novices whose task it was to show others the way towards wholeness and healing” (Makarushka 11).

This paper will explore the causes of alarm in nineteenth-century theories espousing the demise of the hero and explore the “Transcendental Circle’s” attempts to rescue the hero from oblivion in the works and lives of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller. The extent of their successes or failures will also be examined. Although, in the final analysis, it will be attempted (in this work and the next) to show how Marx was largely correct in pointing to scientific and economic materialism’s paving the road not only to the demise of heroic action, but to the twentieth century’s loss of direction for the poet: “There is no use of writing of things past, unless they can be made in fact things present: not yesterday at all, but simply today and what it holds of fulfillment and of promises is ours: the dead ought to bury their dead” (Carlyle Correspondence to RW Emerson 19 July, 1842).

### CHAPTER III

#### EMERSON'S ATTEMPT AS POET [FIRST TREATMENT]<sup>34</sup>

You no longer see phoenixes; men are not divine individuals...They are not gods, but the spirit of God sparkles on and about them.

- R.W. Emerson – Journal dated May 1846

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Emerson “has become the avatar of the strong mind heroically overcoming personal and social limitations to liberate its genius” (Leverenz 38).<sup>35</sup> Yet, in this un-heroic age, the hero or great man (a successful hero?) must be one “roused to action.” In “The Poet,” Emerson explains that nature uses three templates for creating great men: the Thinker, the Doer, and the Sayer (184). These are paralleled by the love of truth, the love of good, and the love of beauty, respectively. Therefore, the Knower is the scholar who pursues truth, the Doer is the hero who pursues the good, and the Sayer is the poet who pursues beauty. In some great men, these can be found in isolation; in others, however, we may find these mixed in some combination of two or all three. These great men have a new experience typical of the coming age that must be performed or announced so it might be made manifest; it is this which “frees” one from prior forms of thought or experience. Therefore, the poet must think it first, and then speak it, while the hero must think it first, and then do it: “In the order of genesis, thought is prior to form. The poet has a new thought; he has a whole new experience to unfold...Each new age requires a new confession...With what joy I begin to read a poem...an inspiration! And now my chains are to be broken” (186).<sup>36</sup> The hero and poet therefore serve as models of possibility for those in the polis who see or hear them: “The hero is in the press of knights, and the thick of events, and seeing what men want, and sharing their desire, he adds the needful length of sight and arm to come to a desired point” (“Shakespeare” 247). The hero wants what other men want, but is endowed with the “sight and arm” to reach it, i.e. the will, knowledge and skills others lack. The hero’s willful thought that must be expressed by his words or deeds relies on the recognition that “thought dissolves the material universe...where all is plastic”

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<sup>34</sup> All citations in the Emerson chapter for Reynolds refer only to *Righteous Violence*.

<sup>35</sup> Ironically, Leverenz points out how Emerson is popular with intellectuals and business men (38). These are two groups Emerson targeted according to the thesis in this paper as enemies of the hero: intellectuals for being weak idealists who dogmatically preached conformity and the businessmen who corrupt the youth with promises of material commodities at the expense of their dreams and lives.

<sup>36</sup> One must remember that for Emerson, great, hero, poet, scholar are interchangeable (McCormick 297).

(“Fate” 270). The hero sees his aim and unifies all his will and resources to move towards achieving that aim in a “unity of organization, as if the whole energy of body and mind flowed in one direction” at “the whim of will...gallantly contending against a universe of chemistry” (271). In the hero, there is a convergence of thought and matter in a cyclical dynamic process of causation as “Person makes event, event person...History is the action and reaction of thought and nature...everything pusher or pushed” (274, 276). Emerson reveals that the hero must be aware of the terrors of an immovable world and nonetheless strive to carry its weight on his Atlas-like shoulders, never regarding whether it will be possible or stopping to calculate the risk. Ironically, it is the “imbecility” or weakness at the sight of social structures in place in “the vast majority of men” that enables the strong to take and mold these masses or mob for greater feats of good or evil (“Power” 279). Emerson’s hero, though, will not merely use men, but rather will seek to inspire them to their own heroic action. On some level, the rest of mankind already knows this; this explains our attraction to tales of heroism, for we seek inspiration as reminder of what we are capable of becoming, like Vonnegut’s American TV audience witnessing Harrison Bergeron stripping himself of his fetters and handicaps to declare “See what I am become!”<sup>37</sup>

Consequently, if thought must precede action and education moves the mind to thought, then education rouses thought which rouses speech and action. Emerson recognized that to arrest the demise of heroic action he must seek to reach those with the potential for heroism in America by provoking thought in them through educational or motivational lectures. Leverenz correctly notes that Emerson’s agenda is to attempt to reawaken something in America’s youth for the purpose of raising an army of individualists.<sup>38</sup> Leverenz simply does not recognize that Emerson strives to create individualists for the purposes of reviving the epic in America and mankind: some serving as heroes and some as poets: “The first step of worthiness will be to disabuse us of our superstitious associations with places and times, with number and size...Let us feel that where the heart is, there the muses, there the gods sojourn, and not in any geography of fame...here we are: - that is a

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<sup>37</sup> “The interest these fine stories have for us...our delight in the hero, is the main fact to our purpose. All these great and transcendent properties are ours” (“Heroism” 185).

<sup>38</sup> “Here is the ‘egg, embryo, and seminal principle’ of Emerson’s political vision. His personal greatness will come as he emboldens other respectable speakers. His task is to increase their impact in the senates of his frontier country. If they ‘shall be made to speak a voice of wisdom and virtue,’ America can bring about ‘the reformation of the world.’ Emerson’s political motive and calling, in every sense, are therefore to reform their voices” (Leverenz 46).

great fact...See to it only that thyself is here, - and art and nature, hope and dread, friends, angels and the Supreme Being shall not be absent” (“Heroism” 185). Emerson works to revive the recognition that Greek and Roman heroes of Antiquity were in the end no different from the Johns and Roberts of Connecticut and Massachusetts. Even before Emerson had rediscovered himself as a young man in crisis after his first true love’s death and the subsequent tour of Europe in 1832-33, the boy Emerson had some intimation of his calling as a voice in the wilderness in that he did not merely want to follow in his father’s footsteps as minister, but rather to be a “public figure, an eloquent mover of men...[with] visionary schemes of regeneration” (Packer, *Emerson’s Fall* 3, 153). In fact, Emerson’s first experiments towards this agenda took place in addresses at institutes of education. Therefore, Emerson’s early addresses before colleges and universities are an excellent place to begin exploring this agenda.

It is worthy of note that Emerson’s early attempts at rousing the public into action are to be found in his addresses to college graduates such as the “American Scholar” and the “Divinity School Address,” as opposed to a community of farmers or mechanics or blacksmiths. “In a society that defined manhood competitively by possessiveness and possessions,”<sup>39</sup> we see that Emerson recognizes the need to begin with 1) those young and un-jaded enough to be molded,<sup>40</sup> 2) those about to enter positions of consequence and capable of reaching countless others from a position of authority as university graduates, and 3) those who share his background in education who might better understand from where he hails. Basically, Emerson desires to reach them before materialism consumes them, before they sell out to a salary and reputation: “Many extraordinary young men...when we hear them speak of society, books, religion, we admire their superiority- they seem to throw contempt on the whole state of the world...sent to work revolutions. But they enter an active profession and the forming colossus shrinks to the size of man...The tough world had its revenge...They found no example” (“Heroism” 185). Thus, Emerson must reach young graduates before the professional salaries seduce them away with promises of material goods, then crush them by making them compromise their dreams, ideals, and loves, one

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<sup>39</sup> Leverenz page 40.

<sup>40</sup> “The redemption in the heart of youth wherein ‘one heeds neither the praise nor the censure of the world...the possibility of triumph over limitation and conformity’” (Martin 171). Herein, we see that heroism depends on the idealistic attitude accompanying “immortal” youth that verges on naïveté not yet broken into inaction and despair by the forces of the material world.



opportunity at a time. Monetary materialism is a pervasive danger to the possibility of thought or action as professional or existential disappointment robs one of hope and dreams die in the process, darkening one's world view (Martin 171).<sup>41</sup> "Beginning the world anew" seems possible only with the young who are still dreaming egoists that have sharply defined ideas of themselves as a unique "I" when "Emerson's 'I' incarnates a radical beginning" (Martin 165).

The radical beginning or new world Emerson aims to achieve is one that originates in the perspective of the young, the men of tomorrow, by reaching them before "real life" gets its hooks into them via the lure and trappings of materialism and the accompanying desire to fit in. It lurks within the nature of American capitalism to infect us with a "false prudence which dotes on health and wealth" but instead results in a "disease and deformity...[that] certify the infraction of natural, intellectual, and moral laws, and often violation on violation to breed such compound misery...[rendering each of us] a stockholder in the sin" ("Heroism" 182).<sup>42</sup> Note Emerson's use of language by referring to illness ("disease and deformity") in conjunction with business terminology ("wealth," "certify," "compound," and "stockholder") and religious connotations of a Fallen nature ("infraction of natural, intellectual, and moral laws" and "sin") in his assessment of bourgeois culture. To Emerson, the materialistic cycle of working to buy not only causes us to morally sell out, but leaves us little time to think by seducing our focus away from what is truly important to mankind: "When the spirit is not master of the world, then it is its dupe. Yet the little man takes the great hoax so innocently, works in it so headlong and believing, is born red and dies gray...setting his heart on a horse or a rifle" ("Heroism" 183). Emerson must reach these young men before they are seduced away from thinking for themselves.

In the "American Scholar," Emerson tells these young men that as scholars they are the intellect, "Man Thinking" by which he means that the scholar engages in thinking not only for him but for all of mankind, playing into Emerson's almost Hegelian notions of some

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<sup>41</sup> "[I]n 'Man the Reformer' (1841) for example, he [Emerson] bemoans the ways in which the abuses of commerce ravage the prayers of childhood and the dreams of youth...to avoid such a fate, one must begin the world anew."

<sup>42</sup> "Emerson's assessment of Thoreau by claiming there was 'no truer American' stemmed from the fact he lived alone, had no profession, never married, attended no church, did not vote, paid no taxes, ate no flesh, drank no wine, smoked no tobacco, amassed no wealth" (Martin 166) seems more like Hindu renunciation than American heroism until one recognizes that Emerson here is returning to our American colonial roots in the heroism that lied beneath our forefathers' venture into the unknown continent with little to nothing but the clothes on their backs. This country was founded by those who had nothing and left everything behind.

zeitgeist (Spirit of the Times) that the “representative men” are supposed to tap into and embody “as Man Thinking...him nature solicits...him the past instructs; him the future invites. Is not, indeed, every man a student?” (57) This concept is integral to Emerson’s heroic program as the scholar (potentially in every man) is educated by nature and history as a means of preparing him to engage the present in the shaping of the future: as poet or as hero. To think requires the possibility of independent thought, something that the education establishment and the churches not only neglect but actively repress.

In addition, both institutions present this life/world/nature as fallen or inert, something to use and abuse in the meantime while we await death: “Emerson’s criticism of Christianity’s emphasis on the divinity of Christ alone displaces the status of agency from the self and accorded a privileged status to that other world at the expense of this one” (Makarushka 8-9). The end result of refusing Christ’s humanity is not only a “shadow of his true self...almost caricature,” but at the same time, an infinite distancing of his state of being from our own realm of possibilities (Makarushka 16). By this sanitizing of theology and history, human potential “suffers this perversion, that the divine nature is attributed to one or two persons and denied to all the rest” (“An Address” 72). Relying on Christ over 1800 years and an ancient tradition steeped in obscure debate and ritual far removed from the daily lives of its congregation removes the worshipper from a direct relationship to God; this practice denies the people the faith in their own abilities to strive for anything that might allow for the possibility of heroic action or even moral responsibility in such a way that Christ “Words become meaningless noise” (Makarushka 15). Emerson, therefore, wishes to re-humanize Jesus in order to re-empower man: “Alone in all history, he estimated the greatness in man. One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that god incarnates himself in man” (“An Address” 73).<sup>43</sup> Jesus represents to Emerson that most famous of his ideas: that the divine exists within each of us and that we can each be prophet as vates (hero and poet) who takes a unique position of “self-revelation and witness” at one and the same time (Makarushka 14). Jesus as vates or prophet represents what we can each be: self-revelation through private and public action/speech as hero and witness through artistic composition as poet. The vates as finest manifestation of greatness combines the hero and poet in one man who recognizes and fashions his life as artistic production. This idea allows

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<sup>43</sup> “Jesus as Word- as instantiation of God within the soul of a particular man” (Makarushka 3).

each of us the right to not only engage the Bible without the need for a Ph.D. in theology, but to wrestle with the bigger questions of our own existence directly in our lives in the midst of nature: “the condition and expression of individual freedom- experienced as creative engagement, an expression of one’s power to create meaning and perhaps effect change...to engage the world as creators” (Makarushka 104). The scholar (of theology, literature, history, science, etc.) as freethinker then is a prerequisite to becoming either poet or hero.

Nonetheless, since all scholars, poets and heroes must live in the real world and survive in it, the scholar’s education relies on direct experience of nature (“American Scholar” 57-58) and books as sources of the past (58-61). The classification of natural phenomena by the scholar must be recognized as the laws governing the universe as a “continuity of this web of God...always circular power returning to itself” and its correspondence to his own spirit (“American Scholar” 57). To know one’s self is to know nature, and vice versa, because the laws governing each are one and the same; therefore, nature’s study involves an active first hand participation in studying meteorology, biology, astronomy, psychology, geology and so on. This gives the scholar an understanding of the how’s and why’s involved in acting or doing as well as a grasp of limitation and possibility, “perceiving that these objects are not chaotic and are not foreign, but have a law which is also a law of the human mind” (“American Scholar” 58). The irony here lies in the role of experience for Emerson (a complicated issue related to his essay “Experience” which we shall address soon). By understanding the unity of physical forces within the self as well as around it in external nature, one begins to find a unity that points to what Emerson calls the divine, what others call the infinite, what we call here the ideal. Yet, experience (thinking of Lockean empiricism here) also implies practical wisdom (praxis as opposed to mere episteme for Aristotle). The education via books merely familiarizes one with what has been done, how it was done, and is only useful if one digests it by incorporating it into one’s Thinking, Saying, and Doing: “They are for nothing but to inspire...there is then creative reading as well as creative writing” (“American Scholar” 59-60). Personal observations studying nature (inward and outward nature) in conjunction with the writings and observations of others then become the stepping stones and tools for the individual’s construction of a worldview, an agenda, a platform and rationale, and an existential/political quest, echoing Francis Bacon’s platitude “knowledge is power.” Emerson’s hero and poet cannot, must not,

and are not to be dreamers who lose sight of the world they must navigate through, nor mere academics whose vast stores of trivial facts petrify them into inaction.

The omnipresence of the material world and its necessities was never lost on Emerson:

In the morning I awake and find the old world, wife, babes, and mother, Concord and Boston...whilst the debate goes forward on the equity of commerce...New England and Old may keep shop. Law of copyright and international copyright is to be discussed, and in the interim, we will sell our books for the most we can...while the fight waxes hot, thou, dearest scholar, stick to thy foolish task, add a line every hour...right of property is disputed...dig away in your garden, and spend your earnings...to all serene and beautiful purposes. ("Experience" 204-45)

Paying bills and eating cannot be escaped, thus the scholar-poet-hero is no minister living high off the hog by milking his congregation nor a Hindu renunciate turning his back on the world, but rather one enmeshed in its petty and "serene and beautiful purposes." Emerson apparently agrees with Carlyle in the need for one foot in the material and one foot in the ideal world as necessary for a complete individual. In fact, Emerson and Carlyle's business interests and transactions overwhelmingly marginalized their intellectual discussions or their social observations within the almost forty years of their correspondence. Many of their letters echo the sentiments and concerns found in this letter: "You have been very brisk and helpful in this business of the Revolution book...It will be a very brave day when cash actually reaches me, no matter what the number of coins" (Carlyle to Emerson 16 March 1838). The key, nonetheless, is not to allow these material concerns to consume one to the extent that they define our entire existence. This is what enables the alienation and objectification that Marx describes. Rather than allow financial concerns and material desires to consume us and dictate our means of handling those we come across, we must use the material world as opportunities to do much more than take care of ourselves: "I settle firmer in the creed that we should not postpone and refer and wish, but do broad justice where we are, by whomsoever we deal with, accepting our actual companions and circumstances, however humble or odious, as the mystic officials to whom the universe has delegated its whole pleasure for us" ("Experience" 204). As Gandhi said, it is within the mundanely everyday events of our lives that we seize the opportunity to "become the change we want to see in the world" by making choices that aspire to the ideals we wish to manifest.

How these two worlds fit within Emerson's philosophy has presented much trouble to the understanding of and sparked various debates among Emerson scholars. The essays "The Transcendentalist" and "Experience" in particular should be examined briefly here in order to attempt to put to rest various concerns or objections by demonstrating that the material or real/actual and the idealist or ideal are equally present in Emerson's thought within BOTH essays. Many critics like Robinson take the "Transcendentalist" to be an idealist manifesto espousing the evils of the materialist perspective: "In his 1841 lecture, 'The Transcendentalist' he offered his most revealing description of this crisis [of vocation] as the dialogue between an idealistic and defiant but somewhat directionless 'transcendentalist' and the commonsense voice of the 'world'" (29). These points of view only look at isolated sentences of Emerson's that are taken out of context rather than examining the progression of ideas. The lecture was originally presented before the Masonic temple in 1842.<sup>44</sup> Emerson begins by painting all of Western philosophy and history in the guise of an ongoing debate between the Idealists and Materialists, and proceeds to define the position of each.<sup>45</sup> His reference to the materialist Condillac is really a reference to Kantian idealism that limits human knowledge to "phenomena" or appearances, in other words, that we can only know what we perceive or think with no way of verifying the noumena or things in themselves (94). He then proceeds to argue against scientific materialism and capitalist rationale for "normal ways of thinking" by bringing in Hume's skepticism as an attack on our daily though ungrounded reliance on induction to expect the world to continue behaving the same way in the future (94). Basically, Hume and here Emerson argued that induction could not be counted on to guarantee anything when it came to predicting future events. For example, if we observed that cause A preceded effect B 999,999,999 times prior to today, that in no way necessarily means it can in be guaranteed to happen on the one billionth occurrence. Emerson also argues that the sciences and induction cannot account for consciousness itself (Leverenz 40-41). Emerson moves on to describe the values of each ideology: the

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<sup>44</sup> Two notes concerning the Masons: first, the majority of the Founding Fathers (Emerson's American example of heroic figures) were thought to be Masons, and second, the Masons were established on Enlightenment principles of reason and free thought.

<sup>45</sup> Idealists can be exemplified by thinkers like Plato, Berkeley, Kant, and Hegel. They believe in the priority of ideas, ideals and mind in the shaping of physical reality and human history. Materialists by Aristotle, Locke, Newton, and Marx and believe that matter or physical substance constitutes reality and physical forces of cause and effect drive all of human history (not ideas, which are merely justifications for physical or economic events).

materialists value what can be measured and observed (“Society, Government...luxury, every establishment...majority of numbers”), and the idealists value what enhances the mind or spirit as a creative force (“the height, the deity of man”).

Although on a superficial level it appears that Emerson one-sidedly favors the idealist, a closer inspection shows that one cannot live without the other: “The idealist...does not deny the sensuous fact...but he will not see that alone” while the materialist when probed “will perceive that his mental fabric is built up on just as strange and quaking foundations” (94). As Martin notes, “Emerson makes it clear that man does not live by idealism alone,” but utilizes the ideal as a roadmap amidst the material conditions of the world in order to “provide a philosophical structure convenient to the redemption of the soul” (Martin 187). The ideal is necessary as a framework that constructs the worldview we take as a premise for our ethics; it births the values or ideals we strive for and struggle towards in our daily and material lives. Without ideals to aim at, we make no effort, but without experience and consideration of material forces and realities we are doomed to failure that results in no progression. We must live and act in accordance with our thoughts: “Jesus acted so because he thought so. I do not wish to overlook or to gainsay any reality; I say I make my circumstance...The Transcendentalist...wishes that the spiritual principle should be suffered to demonstrate itself to the end, in all possible applications to the state of man” (“The Transcendentalist” 95). A hero or Transcendentalist must guide his material words and actions by his idealist values - he lives in the midst of society, works for his sustenance like any other citizen, and fights (if need be) for his good and that of his fellow men: “clothed, sheltered, weaponed, he knew not how, and yet it was done by his own hand...provided for without selfishness or disgrace...the same absence of private ends” (97). The ideal allows for a moral dimension essential to the hero, acting not out of a concern for himself only but for others or for principles, “united with every trait and talent of beauty and power.” The list of “great men” in the essay consisted of all idealists engaged in politics for the well-being of others or the well-being of truth.

Emerson then engages in an apologetic for the current generation of youngsters who have done nothing yet, yet refrain from engaging in professions by arguing that they wait for their great crusade or quest (98-101). Again, he instructs the scholars and idealists of the need to act: “the good and the wise must learn to act, and carry salvation to the combatants

and demagogues in the dusty arena below” (100). “Below” implies that the hero must not live up above society isolated by high ideals but rather must bring these ideals down to real “dusty arena” of politics despite demagogues and combat. But what must be the cause for which they fight? Emerson quickly dispels all the raging movements of his time “paltry matters...Abolition, Temperance, Calvinism, Unitarianism” (101). There is a greater threat than Negro slavery, women’s suffrage, or religious schism. It is the inaction of the masses of men brought on by scientific and economic materialism (101).<sup>46</sup> This threat is greatest because it infects and thereby enslaves all humanity!

The skepticism that rules our lives leaves us without the possibility of ideals like love or brotherhood or heroism and places us on the path of the routine, the assembly line, and the meaningless. Compare this statement of Emerson’s with Carlyle’s on pages 17-18 of this essay! Yet, here Emerson also recognizes, as did Carlyle, that a hero must wait for the moment when all is aligned for the era to receive him: “It is the quality of the moment...that imports...We will wait. How long? Until the Universe rises up and calls us to work” (101). It dawned on Emerson later in his career that the historical moment had aligned itself for the African American Slavery issue, but that same world was not ready for the war against Scientific-Economic Materialism (Carlyle’s Empirico-Skeptical Dilettantism). Interestingly, Emerson almost prophetically asks about the absence of “old idealists” as to whether they have died or sold out.<sup>47</sup> This is an amazing coincidence that we will also come back to later throughout the essay. He ends the essay by pointing out that the concerns of the day will “be superseded...lost out of memory” whereas the “the thoughts which these few hermits strove to proclaim” will continue to ring out as a call to future generations who might be better suited to rise up or have the fortune of being met with welcoming environmental conditions (104). Contrary to critics’ accusations of naïve idealism in Emerson, this is nothing other than a complete acceptance of the pivotal role that the material conditions play in the production and acceptance of a work and how these dictate the possibility of success for the idealist hero. One worldview cannot exist without the other: “These worlds [the material

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<sup>46</sup> “from the liberal professions to the coarsest manual labor, and from the courtesies of the academy and the college to the conventions of the cotillion room and the morning call, there is a spirit of cowardly compromise and seeming, which intimates a frightful skepticism, a life without love, and an activity without aim.”

<sup>47</sup> “Where are the old idealists?...In looking at the class of counsel and power and wealth...amidst all the prudence and all the triviality, one asks, Where are they who represented genius, virtue, the invisible and heavenly world? Are they dead- taken in their ripeness to the gods...Or did the high idea die out of them, and leave the unperfumed body as its tomb?” (99). (Think Fuller and Thoreau on the one hand versus Emerson)

world and the ideal world] are not in communication, but eclipse one another. Their location with respect to one another seems so far as to assure despair, sometimes so near so as to threaten madness, that it is not nearer. Since the human being inhabits both worlds - this duality for Emerson...defines the human...the hope of one lies in not denying the other, which each would love to do...the suffering of this perception of our separation from ourselves” (Cavell 958). Emerson, therefore, is essentially a dualist who emphasizes the need for idealism in the face of overwhelming materialism.

Perhaps even more problematic for many scholars is the essay entitled “Experience,” yet it can and will be shown that here again the program or agenda is the same or parallel to that of “The Transcendentalist.” For example, Terence Martin claims that “*Nature* the book that sets an agenda for envisioning the ‘possibilities of man’ gives way to ‘Experience’ the essay that obscures the infinite then scrambles to recapture it in the form of an undefiled future” (185). Although there is no disagreement here with his assessment that “Emerson was a writer whose ideas evolved or changed over time (in contexts personal, societal, and philosophical), the essay “Experience” was much too early in his career (published 1844) for the kind of changes Martin is alluding to when he characterizes Emerson as shifting from “Transcendental dualism to grudging empiricism, from idealism to incipient pragmatism” (169). His claim that “Experience” “eclipses the absolute in the hope that the future may reveal the consonance the world so badly needs” suffers from the same limited scope that others had when viewing “The Transcendentalist” as a purely idealist treatise (187). As Packer points out, as late as “Montaigne” (1850) Emerson still employs the old fashioned skeptic (not to be confused with the fatalistic skeptic of modernity) as the “middle ground between the forces of the abstractionist and the materialist...both ridiculous by denying one half of experience” (*Emerson’s Fall* 201). However, something similar occurs when Barbara Packer claims in *Emerson’s Fall* that the openings in *Nature* and “Experience” “suggest the bewilderment that has overtaken this latter day Oedipus as he turns from riddle solving to self-examination” (170). She makes the mistake of thinking (or perhaps merely implying) that *Nature*’s Emerson lacked the self-examining that characterized “Experience,” while the Emerson of “Experience” did not attempt to solve the riddles of man’s place in the cosmos upon which *Nature* revolved. Therefore, we must make the attempt to demonstrate that the dualistic bent exposed in “The Transcendentalist” persists in the essay “Experience.”



“Experience” begins with the poem about the lords of life (Use, Surprise, Surface, Dream, Succession, Wrong, Temperament). Leverenz reads Emerson and his poem as an attack on femininity through the mother figure of nature herself as she (Mother Nature) instructs “little man to shut up, in effect and adjust himself to littleness” based on the poem’s line “Darling, never mind” (51). Then, Leverenz draws the conclusion that Emerson is arguing that the conformity that persuades us to be materialistic stems from the upbringing we receive at mother’s hands (51). A double meaning lies here as we remark that it is unclear if “mother” refers to our biological and literal mothers, who raise us to work and buy a home to furnish and raise a family in, or Mother Nature, who raises the species to struggle for material survival. David Leverenz interprets the line to denote our human mothers, and thereby makes the accusation that “‘Experience’ retreats from [Emerson’s] hopes for manly transformation to a private depressiveness that implicitly accuses the women he takes for granted” (51). Leverenz ends up guilty of scholarship that relies on pseudo-feminist psychobabble to appear critical in that it takes one or two lines in isolation without regard for the remainder of the text. Leverenz’s myopic reading is ironic because “Experience” is one of the essays where Emerson specifically warns us about our penchant for moods, illusions, dreams and colored lenses. This reading neglects the rest of “Mother” Nature’s instructions for the little man: “Tomorrow they will wear another face, the founder thou! These are thy race” (198). The Lords of Life are constructs of the little man himself; he is their “founder,” their creator. These Lords of Life are his “race,” his progeny or legacy, but one that shifts according to his mood: “Tomorrow they will wear another face,” because “Temperament [is]...the inventor of the game omnipresent without name.” In other words, these Lords of Life, which we believe rule our lives, are in the end nothing but productions of our own frame of mind; we suffer in life because we allow ourselves or choose to suffer, and we enjoy it if we decide to exult in our own private and public wonderland. We have an active role in constructing the phenomenological world we inhabit. Nature whispered this to us; it is a secret. Our perceptions or moods or temperaments color our experiences and feed into despair and weariness or into hope and new birth for ourselves and those around us: “Life is a train of moods...and as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus” (200). These moods that color how we perceive our lives are not merely products of chemical reactions we

dub emotions, but are also molded by the ideologies and values we adopt or choose for ourselves.

“Our life” Emerson tells us in the first paragraph of the essay following the poem, “is not so much threatened as our perception... We have enough to live and bring the year about, but not an ounce to impart or to invest. Ah, that our Genius were a little more of a genius” (198). “To impart or to invest” refers not only to the lives we create for ourselves, but to what we create for others as well. We allow ourselves to work for commodities to the point of feeling exhaustion so that we no longer feel the energy or inspiration to do much more and grieve for this loss though it is a choice we daily make. We choose to dedicate our lives to the pursuit of commodities each morning when we wake up to work long hours in the pursuit of goods at the expense of the families we never see: “Every roof agreeable to the eye, until it is lifted; then we find tragedy and moaning women, and hard eyed husbands and deluges of lethe... So much of our time is preparation, so much routine, and so much retrospect that the pith of each man’s genius contracts itself to a very few hours” (199). The agreeable roof is that house we rent or mortgage for thirty plus years of labor, its roof hiding the woman moaning because she’s never to be fully satisfied and the hard eyed husband who no longer believes...in what? Whatever you got. Both administer the lethe (in the form of news, TV, fashion, gossip, gadgets) to themselves to forget what dreams they sold out in the process of attaining “marital bliss.” Our lives and our potential to be more are wasted in the preparation (education for mere profession- degree seekers), the routine (the mind numbing career and the paying of endless bills) and the retrospect (the retirement spent in regret for those lucky enough to reach the golden years) of the average lifespan. And yet, we have no one to blame but ourselves.

Emerson psychoanalyzes himself (but all of us as well) when he explains in “Experience” that “People grieve and bemoan themselves, but it is not half so bad with them as they say. There are moods in which we court suffering in the hope that here at least we shall find reality...it turns out to be scene-painting and counterfeit. The only thing grief has taught me is how shallow it is... [how it] plays about the surface” (199). This much remarked line in the essay is the focal point for most critics in that it demonstrates the inhuman and humane in Emerson at once. Yes, good, but they often take this to extremes in their understanding of the essay as a whole. To what extent are passions and deep emotions

pantomimes and self-indulgences? How often do we play out these scenes because they conform to what others or we ourselves expect as “natural reactions” to “common experiences” (here think of Camus’ protagonist Meursault being condemned in trial more for his lack of outward grief upon his mother’s death than for his shooting of an unarmed Arab in *L’Etranger*)? How often do we indulge in depression or rage because it garners attention from others that might otherwise never come or because it feels good on some level (like licking a loose tooth as a kid or listening to Billie Holiday on a rainy and lonely afternoon)? Emerson echoes Buddha’s idea that tragedy and passionate emotion are in the end attachments and forms of egoism as “a critical analysis would find very few spontaneous actions. It is almost all custom and gross sense” (199). The distance he finds himself surrounded by is the almost solipsistic idealism of Kant’s world of phainomena, and the things he “cannot get nearer to” are the noumenal things in themselves (in this case, loved ones or their deaths) of which we know nothing beyond the appearances. Though it appears a depressing paragraph when he expounds on the lack of effect in the loss of his child, in truth, Emerson demonstrates the resiliency of the unalterable self each of us with which each of us are imbued, in addition to the extent to which we are masters of our own destiny despite our worst efforts. Again, things affect us only because we allow them to affect us or because we feel like we must pretend that they affect us.

Character or temperament is an “illusion” or “prison” similar to mood in that Emerson feels most men trap themselves by these as well. They believe their egos or personalities are “boundaries they will never pass” (201). The mentality of “well we can’t help what we are” discussed earlier in the Marx and Carlyle section that results in what Carlyle dubs as the “Empirico-Skeptical Dilettantism” becomes the norm. Emerson, like Carlyle, blames science and materialism for this growing fatalism in men, in particular medical science.<sup>48</sup> Medicine, psychology and the sciences utilize their studies of cause and effect to convince people they are trapped in chemical and experiential causation and have no will of their own leading to “lives in a sty of sensualism...soon come to suicide” (202). The suicide here is not necessarily physical but more often a spiritual or existential suicide that lends itself to inauthentic modes of life, i.e. conformity. Thus, Leverenz’s Freudian charge that “Ultimately the failure of power to be intellectual rather than worldly comes from how

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<sup>48</sup> “The physicians say they are not materialists, but they are...no escape once caught in this trap of the so called sciences for the man from the links of the chain of physical necessity” (201-2).

our mothers bear and raise us”<sup>49</sup> becomes just another dream constructed by those in psychological medicine that enable our weaknesses so that we find someone else to take responsibility. However, these types of theories are exactly what Emerson struggles against in this essay: “Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion” (200). Leverenz and many others “forget that it is the eye which makes the horizon and the rounding mind’s eye which makes this or that man a type of representative of humanity with the name of hero or saint...As I am, so I see” (“Experience” 209). To those who might bring up the chemical causes behind schizophrenia or autism, Emerson might respond by listing the names of “victims” of such “diseases” who opted to raise themselves beyond their “limitations” (e.g. Van Gogh, Nietzsche, Nash, Caesar, Helen Keller, etc.). If one man or woman can raise him or herself, then all can.

Emerson again pokes at those who are solely abstract idealists by discussing the Brook farmers: “Our young people have thought and written much on labor and reform and...neither the world nor themselves have got on a step...At Education Farm, the noblest theory of life sat on the noblest figures of young men and maidens, quite powerless and melancholy. It would not rake or pitch a ton of hay; it would not rub down a horse, and the men and maidens it left pale and hungry” (203). Just as in “The Transcendentalist,” Emerson insists on marrying thought to action when he states that “Intellectual tasting of life will not supersede muscular activity.” The heart that loves goodness (moral duty to oneself and others) and intellect that loves truth (individual thought) are not enough, only a start. There is an element of Aristotle’s Golden Mean from his *Nicomachean Ethics* or Buddha’s “middle way” in Emerson’s need for the “middle region” between the “cold realm of pure geometry and lifeless science,” and the realm “of sensation” (204). A hero and/or poet requires intellect and worldly experience, thoughts and senses and morals. For them, “The mid-world is best. Nature as we know is no saint...She comes eating and drinking and sinning. Her darlings, the great, the strong, the beautiful are not children of our law, do not come out of Sunday school” (205). It is the walking in both worlds simultaneously, idealism and materialism, that the hero requires so as not to fall into weak naïveté, impotent intellectualism, crass money seeking, or beastly sensualism. If the current essay is a bit on the repetitive side, it is only because of the desire to drive home the emphasis and single

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<sup>49</sup> (51).

minded focus Emerson had throughout both series of essays on his agenda (not only combatting the mortifying effects of materialism as a sole world view, but also of bringing ideals as guiding principles for our actions in a material world in the hopes of inspiring heroic action), while putting to rest any ideas of loss of faith or direction or change of heart during the 1840s. As Emerson himself declares in “Experience,” “the true romance which the world exists to realize will be the transformation of genius into practical power” (213).

By melding the great Truths of material Nature and one’s artistic re-creations of inner ‘truths,’ the scholar-hero can better see the cause for which he must fight, better find the path his journey or quest must expose him to, better plan his strategy in the facing of adversity and conflict, better speak out the message the masses must hear. Thought then is only a precursor to deed: “Action is with the scholar subordinate [to learning], but it is essential. Without it, he is not yet man. Without it, thought can never ripen into truth...Inaction is cowardice, but there can be no scholar without the heroic mind...Only so much do I know as I have lived” (“American Scholar” 61). Without the real world to test oneself against, to test one’s thoughts against, our learning is mere trivia and our words empty noise. The idea that without action a scholar is not a man, much less a hero falls under the “man making words” Leverenz emphasizes as a central element in Emerson’s thought: “Emerson’s manhood comes into being through an agonized struggle with the ‘atmospheric pressure’ of his country’s intellectual timidity” (40). It is through action that we voice our ideas, ideals, and desires as well as gain personal experience or knowledge that improves us. Surprisingly, “even the lives and deaths of those closest to us must ultimately be put to use...as the necessary preceptors in our own education” (Lopez 61). Even in the midst of failure, we cannot escape the fact that we exist in a political arena which requires of us personal action and choices as a result of the fact that ‘no man is an island.’

The social nexus of human existence inevitably makes all human personal action political, including when we fail to act. As Cavell explains, “That you nevertheless avoid express participation or express disavowal is what creates that ghost-state of conformity Emerson articulates endlessly as our being inane, timid, ashamed, skulkers, leaners, apologetic, noncommittal, a gag, a masquerade, pinched in a corner, cowed, cowards fleeing before a revolution” (957). Here, one is reminded of Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Politics* in that both emphasize the need for thinking men to participate in civic leadership for any

possibility of eudemonia (the good life). Plato argues that the philosopher should be king not only because he can make informed decisions, but in addition he does not want the power in the first place (a sure sign of his lack of greed and ambition). Aristotle argues that the most complete man with all the gifts and talents endowed by nature would still be miserable and in danger living in the midst of a mismanaged city-state; therefore, the only recourse is to rule oneself in order to guarantee that the best ruling possible is in place. There may be many reasons currently why we choose not to act, but George Kateb classifies them into two forms of conformity: intellectual dishonesty and existential dishonesty (87). One can conform as a result of an intellectual dishonesty that presumes that the conditions one lives under “must be this way and could never have been otherwise.”<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, one might conform based on the existential dishonesty that one has no will of one’s own, that one is a mere product of one’s environment and circumstances- nature and nurture brought me to this.<sup>51</sup> For Emerson’s politics, not choosing is still choosing.

But to what end should the scholar or hero act? There are three steps necessary in Emerson’s program: awaken their minds through inspiring speeches, make them see what surrounds them (political-economic-intellectual slavery as well as a universal nature swelling with power and yearning to endow it on someone), and finally engage in heroic action in the public arena. This is why Emerson felt that simply joining the Abolitionist movement would never suffice to free anyone: “How could they, he wondered, think clearly about slavery while completely enslaved themselves because they had no idea who they were. First came awareness of mind, then knowledge of the human condition, and finally, action in the world based on this knowledge. Without that sequence, nothing of value could be accomplished” (Geldard 26). It should be clear at this juncture that the objective is to wake men in order to combat scientific and economic materialism as well as the ensuing sensual and apathetic nihilism. As Kateb points out, “The Emersonian tradition...when it turns premonitory, it fears the entrepreneurial excesses of the market economy...[it] find[s] the pursuit of status and wealth the greatest of all hindrances/- The whole idealist endeavor is to confine economic pursuits and to try to avoid having them give their coloring to all of life” (81, 97).

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<sup>50</sup> Reminiscent of Marx’s observations that the bourgeois thinks it has always been thus- discussed earlier in this essay (around page 7).

<sup>51</sup> Reminiscent of Marx when he claims that an individual cannot be held accountable as he is a product of the era- (page 5 of this essay).

Emerson's "Politics" begins with a poem that reminds us "Gold and iron are good to buy iron and gold...Fear, Craft and Avarice cannot rear a state" (213). This often overlooked essay of Emerson's is by far his most Marxist in addition to being contemporary with Marx's own writings. Michael Lopez highlights briefly some of the parallels between Emerson and Marx by discussing their strikingly similar agendas to "restore man to his central place...Both projects are prophecies of Promethean growth, predictions of mankind's progression to its rightful state of power" (85).<sup>52</sup> Like Orestes Brown, Emerson attacks the unfair advantage created by inheritance in the distribution of wealth and property: "One man owns his clothes and another owns a county. This accident depending primarily on skill and virtue of the parties...and secondarily on patrimony, which falls unequally" (214).<sup>53</sup> That the inheritor has done nothing more than been born to the correct set of loins offends Emerson's notions of this country's belief in all men being created equal as well as his belief in the idea of self-reliance. For what could be less self-reliant than to inherit what one has done nothing to build up. Emerson also criticizes the emphasis on property rights in federal and state legislation that allows government sanctioned exploitation of the workers through such structures as inheritance, interest rates, minimum wages, bail outs, foreclosures and auctions, subsidization, prosecution of strikes and protests, and so on. Emerson feels that "too much weight...allowed in the laws to property...allowed the rich to encroach on the poor and to keep them poor...the whole constitution of property is injurious and its influence on persons deteriorating and degrading" (215). The political economic structure behind Capitalism not only enslaves the masses economically, but existentially as well as it material wealth becomes the Holy Grail of each and every man, thus deteriorating and degrading them in that it seduces mankind and democracy away from their true potential. In fact, Emerson alleges that capital will corrupt democracy no matter what legislation or what party is in place, given that "From neither party when in power has the world any benefit to expect in science, art or humanity" (216-17). Thus, capitalism (the American dream) is at odds with democracy (the American experiment).

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<sup>52</sup> Lopez drops the ball when he focuses on superficial distinctions by emphasizing that "Emerson's images are not, as in Marxist theory, of one class burying another" (86). On the contrary, Emerson's battle to re-empower individuals for heroic action to inspire the mass of men (if they had successfully been carried out) would inevitably lead to class conflicts as the capitalist elite and world view are directly at odds with human potential.

<sup>53</sup> The accident of ownership is here attributed to the randomness of nature's endowing one with talent or inheritance and virtue means here excellence, not moral virtue.

However, Emerson ends the essay leaning more in the direction of love-based anarchy than socialism (anarchy in the old sense of little to no government to infringe on the rights of man). Emerson points out that every law and government base themselves on wisdom to legislate for the good of the people, yet no wise men exist to guide these attempts.<sup>54</sup> This is a lesson and an argument against Plato's idea of finding or training philosopher kings to rule, one that Plato himself would learn the hard way through his failure to edify Dionysius I and II of Syracuse, prompting him to write *The Laws* in which he sets up a constitution as sovereign over all men since they cannot be trusted. The point is that no man knows enough to legislate well or justly. Additionally, since no two men can agree on who is wise and what is just; the law is rarely willingly obeyed by all, for if it were, there would be no need for law. Therefore, laws end up coercing individuals, and "This is the history of governments- one man does something which is to bind another...The gladiators in the lists of power, feel through all their frocks of force and simulation, the presence of worth" (219-20). This use of force and coercion and simulation opens up the seduction to political, economic and ideological corruption. Emerson can only conclude that "the less government we have the better...The power of love as the basis of a state...a reliance on moral sentiment...that thousands of human beings might share and obey each with the other the grandest and truest sentiments as well as a knot of friends" (219). Kateb adds, "Emerson insists that to reform others one must reform oneself first, but if one reforms oneself, one no longer is confident in the ability of laws and policies to improve others...a low morality in office holding and participation in movements and one assumes a superordinate position that offends against equality...[therefore] heroes must remain citizens whose actions or endeavors are episodic and intermittent in nature" (101-02). For any great lover of literature, this makes perfect sense: all epic narratives follow only those heroic adventures that occur in an episodic fashion, but we never hear much about what life was like before the quest nor after it. No man can be a hero every day of his life and often merely wants a return to the quiet private life- Odysseus and Aeneas (much like Plato's idealized philosopher in the *Republic* who has power thrust upon him when he only wants his studies) versus those who disastrously desire immortality or power (Achilles, Agamemnon, Oedipus).

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<sup>54</sup> "The idea after which each community is aiming to make and mend its laws is the will of the wise man. The wise man it cannot find in nature and it makes awkward but earnest efforts" (218).



The question of Emerson's politics has sparked much debate, lately centered on George Kateb's and Stanley Cavell's readings of Emerson. For the purposes of this inquiry, however, both thinkers have elements in their writings that are quite compatible and jointly serve to strengthen our running thesis. Both agree that Emerson takes a sharp turn away from Carlyle by denying the elitist idea that all masses of men must succumb to following the few "great men" born to an era; Emerson's American background (as opposed to Carlyle's British one) instills a more democratic idea: that all masses of men should succumb to the "genius" or great man latent within each individual (Cavell 952). This is the goal behind Emerson's push for self-reliance; he hopes that by "[t]rying to dispel the trance of conventional definitions, categories, and preconceptions, one is straining to make individual what is often content to be indistinguishable but that is- as Emerson often suggest- better than it knows" (Kateb 34). Emerson's first step to awaken the demos or populace of the polis to the fact that economic systems and political laws are concepts fleshed out by words created by one or a few men, that these concepts take their power from the agreement or conforming to by each of us "people do not see clearly that all social conventions are...artificial" (Kateb 83). Emerson himself tells us when "dealing with the state, we ought to remember that its institutions are not aboriginal...that they are not superior to the citizen...Society is an illusion to the young citizen...But the old statesman knows that society is fluid...any particle may suddenly become the center of the movement and compel the system to gyrate round it" ("Politics" 213). This awakening to the fluid nature of society and its laws can empower the individual to see the worth of developing oneself and engage through participation by first recognizing that because things were not always this way, they can be changed again. All great changes begin with one person who decides to take one step in a certain direction. The heroic individual must "theorize the movement of democratic individuality to its higher levels...aspire to raise the level of the culture...urge moving that culture...toward more of the extraordinary...self-reliance, independent thinking, newly innocent perception, self-expressive activity, release from convention, public citizenship, presence of conscience and the courage to stand" (Kateb 33).

Emerson's politics then for Kateb are very much in line with a move to incite individuals to leave behind what Sartre calls inauthentic existenz in favor of a seizing

authentically one's individual destiny.<sup>55</sup> This is where the use of the ideal opens up the possibility of creative thought, speech and personal or private action: we imagine what we could be, what we would like to be as an individual. In addition, Cavell enhances Emerson's agenda from one purely resting on personal development to an avenue for social movement as we utilize this inward move to self-cultivation as a springboard for heroic action within the polis or state by again juxtaposing the real material conditions against the ideal we can conceive and strive for: "[as in Plato's *Republic*] imagining the perfected democratic city does not exempt us from acting in the present scene of imperfection...this imagining is what enables us to act...[and] to exist in freedom from a despair of democracy; there is no one other than the likes of us either to act within the present city or to imagine its difference from itself" (957). We first need to recognize that change is possible; then, we must imagine what we want that change to look like before we can actively work to achieve it. Emerson believes this is why "truly the only interest for the consideration of the state is persons...if men be educated, the institutions will share their improvement, and the moral sentiment will write the law of the land...Society always consists in greatest part of young and foolish persons...With such an ignorant and deceivable majority, States would soon run to ruin" ("Politics" 215). These are the alternatives between a populace pushed forward by an ideal striving dualism and one steeped in brute materialism.

Kateb makes two crucial mistakes in his analysis however. First, Kateb criticizes Emerson for his religiosity in that Emerson "fails in taking the final step and removing the religious...thereby not doing enough to honestly make the world more real" (35). Kateb argues that Emerson and the Transcendentalists may have feared being left "too lonely" without a divinity or perhaps weakened their positions by requiring "more than human agency." Several things are worthy of thought. To what extent does Kateb's criticism hinge upon Kateb's own viewpoints as a twenty-first century atheist or humanist? After all, if someone else believes in God then this objection does not really hold. Also, Emerson and the rest are thinking and perceiving from the perspective of nineteenth century individuals who still took the existence of a divinity for granted (they were not nineteenth century

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<sup>55</sup> "One must take responsibility for oneself- one's self must become a project...one's dignity resides in one's being...a person of one's own creating, making, choosing, rather than in being merely a creature [here used as created thing- my insertion] or a socially manufactured, conditioned, manipulated thing: half animal and half mechanical" (Kateb 90).

Frenchmen nor twenty-first century Americans). Moreover, Kateb forgets the central importance religion played in the 1800s America which Emerson inhabited. The pulpit not only offered Emerson his upbringing and early profession, it remained the center of communal life by offering a weekly tradition of socializing and dialogue among the members of American towns and cities since the colonial time period. Religion was the venue wherein thinkers like Emerson might be able to bring to light their theories and ideas. Lastly, and most importantly, whether Emerson labels it Over-Soul or the divine or Kateb calls it the infinite or we refer to it as the ideal, are we not still all referring to something greater than ourselves, the Other as Buber and Levinas refer to it? Is it not simply a matter of semantics? In the end, Emerson wishes to remind individuals to connect with, commune with, and perhaps even abandon one's self to that which lies beyond the borders of one's ego.

The second mistake stems from Kateb's great job of emphasizing how the Transcendentalists and Lincoln took up the dialogue over the meaning of the American experiment as inheritors of the Founding Fathers, but then claims there has been no third generation because there has "not been the need or opportunity for it...being impossible to know what is missing" (82). Emerson may have begun the second generation's dialogue over the true meaning of democracy and the individual in the 1830s and 1840s, but as will be shown later in this essay, the lack of support for this agenda and the pressure to join Abolitionism as the crisis of the day eclipsed Emerson's true program causing him to lose sight of the direction originally intended. When they stopped to concern themselves with slavery and women's vote, the Transcendentalists forgot the bigger fight: the objectification of the human individual in the currents of Sceptico-materialism (a fight, if won, would have quelled all these smaller fires for they all stem from this same source). Consequently, American discussion of what the Founding Fathers started has fallen by the wayside but is reaching a boiling point today. The loss of individual sovereignty in voice and choice, the loss of heroic possibility has led us blindly by the nose to where we stand today: the illusion of partisanship and factionalism, private interest ruling legislation at the expense of the Constitution, war profiteering and unprecedented exploitation of the worker-consumer through tech/media/medical gouging and fleecing as Capitalism now runs unrestrained through the households and senates of this country, a bid for fascism through the declaration of unending wars on concepts like drugs and terrorism and legislation like the Patriot Act and

the National Defense Authorization Act. If Kateb sincerely believes no opportunity or need for a third generation of inheritors to this discussion has presented itself then he either does not watch politics too closely or he is blind. There was a need to speak and act then as now; as Robert Richardson wrote in a foreword, “We have lost our vital connections to our heritage...and our task is now for each of us to regain his or her proper place in the world” (Geldard ix).

Additionally, Cavell makes a mistake of his own, one exposed best by Nancy Bunge in her article, “Why Emerson is Much Too Smart to be a Philosopher.” Cavell’s attempt to depict Emerson as a philosopher in books like *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes* and *Lectures After Emerson* disregard much of what Emerson himself wrote, especially considering that “Emerson considered philosophy inferior to literature” (par. 2). As Bunge notes, Cavell’s argument that Emerson merely lacked confidence in his skills for logical construction “short circuits [Emerson’s] aims” (par. 1). Emerson’s “aims” consisted of those of the poet’s: “The attitude towards philosophy which Emerson expresses in these passages complements his literary goals. While philosophy trades in ideas which language can capture, Emerson attempts to express something beyond concepts and words...Emerson prefers inspiration to analysis...The poet...produces literature that will help Nature achieve what Emerson considers its essential task: ascension” (par. 3). Whereas the philosopher explains away and dissects through analysis society and nature to the extent that the reader has nothing left to do but digest the worldview, the poet leaves much in mystery and utilizes what Kant calls sublime to inspire the reader into a position where one must wrestle with meaning and interpretation (active modes of being). As the reader wrestles to create their own understanding not only of the poem but also the place that poem and the reader take within the world at large, the reader begins internally a process of activity that hopefully results in an outward impetus to action in the political arena. This is what Bunge means by an inspiration to ascension.

Speaking and writing as poets, then, are as much political acts as revolt or protest for the hero: both can change or alter those men who are present to hear or see these acts by reminding them of the dignity of human will. It is exactly the unforgiving world of scientific matter, selfish economics and positivist politics that Emerson urges the “timid” scholars of Harvard to engage in battle, for “Individual identity is defined...as the result of contention

and suffering...[and] national identity is likewise defined as the product of the energies of war- war in either its overt or sublimated forms” (Lopez 4). Engaging these antagonistic forces, the scholar chooses to become poet and/or hero as “The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances” (“American Scholar” 63). In other words, the office of the scholar is to inspire men by demonstrating that they too can arrange a symmetry between what one says and what one does (our words and deeds should corroborate one another, putting an end to simulation or appearances). The scholar/hero must “raise men” by example, demonstrating that they too can become heroic, for as “He lives for us. Men behold in the hero or poet their own being ripened...They are content that their inward justice shall be done by him...They cast the dignity of man upon the shoulders of a hero” (Notebooks 354).<sup>56</sup> Not only does the hero right the wrongs in an appeal to “their inward justice,” but he raises them by representing in his person the dignity of all. We hopefully learn from the hero/scholar/poet that if he can do it, so can we all. This essential aspect of the hero reminds us to look within at our own insights that we may no longer take ourselves for granted: “A man should learn to select and watch that gleam of light that flashes across his mind from within...Yet he dismisses without notice this thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts” (“Self-Reliance” 121). Without heroes, we forget to respect the dignity inherent within ourselves and others. This dignity rests upon the qualities of self-reliance inherent in each and all.

In his essay “Heroism,” Emerson describes the qualities of the hero as including: self-trust, plenitudes of energy and power, a balanced mind, unshakeable will, pride, a contempt for safety, a feeling of always being right, truthful, just, generous of spirit and a good humor, verging on hilarity (178-80). The balanced and educated mind creates strategy; the will, energy and self-trust follow through on the plan with a healthy laugh in contempt at the risks involved: “the education, resistance, discipline- the slavery, the tyranny, the imposition of a goal- we require in order to attain the power necessary to impose a shape on our own lives and on the world we inhabit” (Lopez 59). On the other hand, the petty, common, calculating rat prudently obsessed with health and wealth could never fall into a heroic role, nor would anyone be wise in following such a self-serving pragmatist. The hero is heroic not because

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<sup>56</sup> “Notebooks” in the citations refers to *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* as opposed to the citations labeled “Journal dated” which refer to journal entries taken from *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*.

he necessarily succeeds, but due to a persistency that will push him to success even as it carries the seeds of his own destruction (“Heroism” 186). This idea Emerson inherited from his Aunt Mary Moody’s famous dictum, “Always do what you are afraid to do” (“Heroism” 186).

Far from being concerned with what others think of him, the hero’s self-reliance leads down the solitary path of Thinker even in the midst of crowds: “To be great is to be misunderstood...your isolation must not be mechanical, but spiritual, that is, must be elevation...it demands something godlike in him who has cast off the common motives of humanity” (“Self-Reliance” 125-31). Fearlessness to recklessness is requisite in anyone willing to stand up and be recognized as “times of heroism are generally times of terror” (187). “This military attitude we call heroism,” must, “dare the gibbet and the mob by the absolute truth of his speech and the rectitude of his behavior” (“Heroism” 178). Emerson recognizes the danger in speaking truth and acting rightly, not the heedless and headless risk of life and safety for mere entertainment common among the adrenaline junkies. Here, we are reminded that a hero must have a legitimate cause in lieu of petty ambition or ego and that that cause is one that hinges on the safety, freedom or peace of those surrounding the hero: “Every true man is a cause, a country, and an age” (“Self-Reliance” 126). It is here in the proper mixture of natural skill, temperament, character, circumstance and will that we find the necessary comingling of fate and power as the zeitgeist or Over-soul incarnates in one flesh to raise that rare breed of man, the hero,<sup>57</sup> “The upshot of all history, that there is a great responsible Thinker and Actor working wherever a man works; that a true man belongs to no other time and place, but is the center of all things” (“Self-Reliance” 126). In a cosmic confluence of economics, politics, thought, art and so on, the great man rises at the proper moment because of his ability to see the “next step” and his courage to describe it for others, thus revealing what they themselves have already been stumbling towards unawares (van Cromphout 56).

This “ability to see” stems from a higher development of reason over the common understanding, as reason is a priori (pre-sensual) and a direct intuitive connection with the

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<sup>57</sup> “In our first move to gain our wishes, we come upon immovable limitations...there is Fate, or laws of the world,” (“Fate” 261). We can only achieve what the world is ready for. Unfortunately, the tension between determinism and metaphysical free-will in Emerson’s thought lies beyond the scope of this paper and can only be mentioned here in passing.

Over-Soul (McCormick 301). Although this distinction in Emerson stems from Coleridge, it actually germinates in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* wherein Kant describes various categories of mind and their corresponding types of knowledge or ideas: "Kant claimed that understanding applies its own categories to experience and generates scientific knowledge, while reason moves from judgment to judgment and seeks to go beyond the limits of experience. Reason tries to apprehend the unconditional" (Blackwell Reference Online). Sense experience or observation used as data by induction leads to conditional (could have been otherwise) theories constructed by the understanding that will always be further tested to determine validity and never be one hundred percent guaranteed therefore resulting in scientific understanding that will always be fallible (David Hume's criticism). The reason, on the other hand, relies on a priori knowledge or ideas, ideas the mind constructed independent of sense experience, logical constructions like the law of identity, the law of non-contradiction, the law of the excluded middle term, etc. The reason therefore deals with absolutes, pure concepts not corrupted by perspective (agendas, worldview, desires, moods and so on). In our terms, the understanding results in materialistic causation based fallible "facts," while reason reaches for the ideal truths.<sup>58</sup>

Whereas Kant and Plato believe development of reason is enough to yield its fruit (wisdom), Emerson takes an Eastern turn in adding a need to lose the self or ego to the Over-Soul as a means to ripen into Man-Doing or Man-Speaking. Without something larger than oneself to guide one, there is a risk of creating a fantasy world far removed from the world at large by creating a cage-like solipsistic madness: "Self-possession is only preliminary to loss of sense of self...a philosophical/poetical immersion or transcendence...influencing the course of one's life...resulting in activity" (Kateb 98). Emerson describes the heroic as "somewhat not philosophical...not holy...it seems not to know that other souls are of one texture with it; it hath pride; it is of the extreme of individual nature" ("Heroism" 182). Nevertheless, there must be some sense of loss of self or ego concurrent with this prideful exuberance of one's identity. Although the hero relies on reason for developing his ideals and formulating strategy, he casts such reason aside when the moment for action arrives and releases himself into that moment: "Heroism feels and never reasons, and therefore is always

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<sup>58</sup> Emerson and Kant's criticism against the relying purely on sense based facts goes back all the way to Plato's polemic against the lover of senses and the artist being twice removed from Truth in contrast to the lover of truth and the philosopher in the *Republic* Books II, VI, and X.

right...the highest deed, and is not open to the censure of philosophers...negligent of expense, of health, of life, of danger, of hatred, of reproach and knows that his will is higher and more excellent” (“Heroism” 182-83). The loss of self is a numbing process after a fashion in that one must become the clay that one sculpts with as we “treat our lives like unified or coherent works of art” (Lopez 63). One creates a “self-trust” and unshakeable will through a “balance of mind” wherein “the need to balance outward force with an equivalent form of inward, human force” (Lopez 88). We see in Emerson a turn to the mystic idea of finding unity with the universe, that life source which animates all things, god, divinity or whatever it might be that the Hindus refer to as Brahma and that he refers to as the Over-soul.<sup>59</sup> In the *Bhagavad Gita* of India, the hero Arjuna sits at a moral crossroads as two armies surround him, ready to clash: does he fight and possibly kill his family members who raised armies to rob him of his throne, or does he abdicate the throne to them to avoid the bloodshed? Duty to family betrayed by spilling their blood or duty to the people ignored by allowing others more corrupt to rule and exploit them? Krishna, the Hindu avatar or incarnation of Brahma, persuades him to fight arguing that the Karmic laws of cause and effect of the living universe had chosen him to rule. The universe speaks and acts through Arjuna as he fights and kills his unjust family. The quieter his mind or ego, the more purely and directly he can be driven by the universe itself. The peace of Nirvana or the quieting of the mind, then, is an attempt at quieting the inner demons of desire, fear, attachment, and social constraint in order to transcend and thereby redeem society (Campbell Episode 2).

But what does it mean to open ourselves up to this Over-soul or Nature when we face the Other? There are many variables to this relationship and how the Other responds to us that depend on each circumstance’s parameters and influencing factors – some of which are constant while others variable (e.g. the individual’s past experiences, their current perspective or mood, who they converse with, what natural phenomena are present, and so on). The mystic hero must always be present consciously to what presents itself before him as “in Emerson’s doctrine, the world exists for our instruction...a highly conscious mind in

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<sup>59</sup> Much has been written about Emerson’s Hindu influences (see “East-West Philosophy in Nineteenth-Century America: Emerson and Hinduism” by Russell B. Goodman, “Emerson and Indian Philosophy” by Dale Riepe and many others). That the *Bhagavad Gita* was his primary influence seems likely not only because of its availability and popularity in translation in the 1800s, but because it is one of the few Hindu texts that argues for ACTION as a result of Nirvana- most other Hindu texts arguing for Renunciation of the world instead. It was first introduced to Emerson in 1831 and he finally read a full translation of the *Gita* in 1845 (Reynolds 112).



any conversation...a colleague or friend...a student or child...the changing tide or shifting wind” (Geldard 30). As a result, one must develop a mind receptive to inspiration or stimuli from any source at any time; this requires combatting the urge back into intellectual or spiritual slumber brought on by daily routine, striving for perpetual wakefulness. These routines include not only the routine actions of a member of society that must work to pay bills or of a biological entity that must feed and drink to sleep and produce waste. The greatest danger perhaps arises from our routine thoughts: opinions, worldviews and feelings or moods that come to dominate our way of seeing what is possible or not. If we are not careful, “an idea in the form of an opinion can hold us in a prison of our own making...dominate our thinking and thus control our lives...about what constitutes duty, responsibility, freedom, obligation, good and evil, justice repentance...about our identities...about our abilities” (Geldard 131). These routines are best combatted by mystic forays into the inexpressible, experiences wherein the mind’s eye loses its rigid boundaries as it contemplates something in such a state of consciousness that the distinction between subject-observer and object-observed meld into what Martin Buber labeled as the “in between.” Try to imagine a phytoplankton becoming aware of itself even as it continues to float in the ocean waves as part of a colony, simultaneously feeling its distinct existence as well as the needs of the colony and the movement of the sea currents at once.

However, no one should make the mistake of conceiving Emerson’s mystic union with Nature or Over-soul as a peaceful tranquilizing state often caricatured by the hippie and new age trends: “Towards all this external evil the man within the breast assumes a warlike attitude and affirms his ability to cope single handedly with the infinite army of enemies. To this military attitude of the soul we give the name Heroism” (“Heroism” 182). In fact, Nature, society and the individual self are entities in a maelstrom of constant conflict and to harmonize is to navigate these opposing forces much as the Taoism of Kung Fu utilizes apparent harmonies to perform violence (e.g. flexibility like the reed to weather and survive storms and the fluidity and quickness of supple water in order to utilize an opponent’s force against him in Aikido), for Emerson’s “psychology and philosophy are founded on a conception of resistance and overcoming...take shape in that rough world. It is only within the limits, only from within the pain, the poverty of the real world, that we can find what the soul always seeks: some form of power. Only that real world, that world against which we

must react, is capable of calling forth our latent powers” (Lopez 4). This is why any allegations that Emerson’s idealism is built at the expense of a material world are ludicrous. Emerson was no naïve idealist when it came to his understanding of the Nature he desired us to commune with. This “mother” creates life only via the endless death of all living things imprisoned by the food cycle: it pits close evolutionary relatives against each other for survival even as it wastes the majority of species that ever lived by extinction. Nonetheless, Nature is a force that one must harmonize with to better utilize in service to one’s own end. Emerson recognizes that “Tough reality- war, evil, terror, danger, pain, want, the harsh necessity of ‘initiated action’ to impress one’s own form on a hostile environment- compels men to self-actualization, to subduing and utilizing the world” (Lopez 54).<sup>60</sup> Mimicking Nature, we follow the same rule of law: use or be used, eat or be eaten.<sup>61</sup> When Emerson commits heresy in “the Divinity School Address” by proclaiming the divine spark within each and all human individuals, we are reminded that we are gods that can shape the world and man in our own image.

As nothing goes to waste in nature (dead organisms and fecal matter are broken down and fertilize soil to feed plants and start life anew, stars’ dust produces the elements that form worlds and the building blocks of life millennia later), so too must the individual in harmony with Nature put everything to use (“all nature- even its heaps and rubbish- and all our experience- even pain and evil”): “suffering and defeat are somehow ultimately determined by what we need, what we can use, and that they can therefore be accepted (even in a sense welcomed) as both necessary and useful...the lives and deaths of those closest to us must ultimately be put to use...made to serve like the ravages of debt and the deaths of fathers as the necessary preceptors in our own education...for the development of ‘great spirit’ and ‘genius’” (Lopez 59-61). Death of loved ones (like Ellen Tucker, whom he loved as himself), foreclosure and unemployment can stir one to thought and action in ways that birth, a home and a check-cashing job might never succeed in accomplishing: pleasure seduces one to slumber as much as routine, even as misery prods us to question “WHY!” There is an iron will that springs from this “education” at the hands of Nature required for manly or heroic

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<sup>60</sup> Or, at least, it once compelled them “Man is no longer, as Emerson once dreamed, eating the world like an apple. The world is eating man” (Lopez 94).

<sup>61</sup> “When the spirit is not master of the world, then it is its dupe” (“Heroism” 183).

action. In conflict, one must often deprive oneself and others, or endure in oneself and in others hardships or birthing/growing pains:

Give all to love;  
Obey thy heart...  
Nothing refuse...  
It was not for the mean;  
It requireth courage stout,  
Souls above doubt,  
Valor unbending...  
Though thou loved her as thyself...  
Though her parting dims the day,  
Stealing grace from all alive;  
Heartily know,  
When half gods go,  
The gods arrive. (“Give All to Love” 446-47)

By losing oneself into something larger (nature, divinity, fellow men), we strive to harmonize within and without, to bring into unity the diverse voices of our conflicting desires and demands and the seemingly diverse elements of society, history, nature under a single will (Geldard 136-37). We begin to recognize that the vast majority of our personal concerns are petty and unending, that embracing them without letting them consume us frees so much of our time and energy, that if death (the ultimate loss of self) is anything like the bliss of union we just felt or experienced, then it is not something to fear at the cost of our dignity and destiny. In this freedom from material concerns lies the source of heroic courage when “Free should the scholar be- free and brave” (“The American Scholar” 64).<sup>62</sup> The resultant courage and perspective open up the possibility of selflessness or penchant for public service or moral outlook required of truly heroic behavior (as opposed to the egomaniacal ambition to “take over the world” found in tyrants like Napoleon or the psychotic break from reality found in mass murderers like Hitler): “The wish to serve, ‘to add somewhat to the well-being of men’ was Emerson’s way of drawing attention away from selfish concerns in order that we might experience a shift in the state of being. Service provides the means of integrating the inner and outer worlds by involving the mind in the world and diverting it from the personal gods of immediate desire” (Geldard 171). The hero/poet will endeavor to remain

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<sup>62</sup> Courage seizes the moment when briefly the eyes are opened to the truth of things, when the heart opens and the judgment affirms the course of action...The courage to be what we are...As we look at the world, we see the weakness, cowardice, corruption and decay...in a natural outrage against the waste of human potential...It is much harder to resist duty that we intuitively accept because it is right, but which we resist because fulfilling it will be inconvenient or dangerous. (Geldard 143-5)

open to and to search out further communication with this greater will in such a way as to better serve it by serving oneself and one's fellow man in whatever way best suits this individual hero/poet. This public service is NOT to be confused with the ineffectual but self-reassuring "do-gooding" that Emerson and Thoreau constantly and critically badger. Effectiveness of action is not the only or primary concern for the hero.

A problem of skepticism as to one's authenticity as a hero/poet in the service of the ideal arises, however, since this mystic awareness tends to be momentary and fragmentary at best in modernity.<sup>63</sup> One is unsure as to whether the daimonae or voices we follow are truly sparked by the Over-soul or merely a demonic psychosis given the prevalence of mental illness and fanaticism that blur the lines between saintliness and insanity. The danger lies in that the great man can use his position irresponsibly or even demonically, that is egoistically or psychotically, rather than morally (a danger particularly prevalent in the materialistic nineteenth century): "Goethe and Napoleon [the only nineteenth century Representative Men], Emerson concluded, failed on the same count. Napoleon in his pursuit of power and Goethe in his pursuit of culture were insufficiently inspired and guided by the Over-Soul" (van Cromphout 63). In other words, these representative men failed by betraying the source of their status as great men, the community and the shared ideals they spoke for. These two began as representative during their rise, but became corrupt at the apex of their trajectory; the height distanced them from the people that lifted them up, an alienation characteristic historically of power and capitalistically of the creature comforts that come along with wealth amassed. No significant distance between great men and their democratic or aesthetic constituency can be tolerated. Great men must always act as a bridge between historical-natural fact and moral truth in relation to their historical situation. Napoleon could not be entitled to any vice as he had Europe's greatest army at his disposal, and Goethe enjoyed too much success and acclaim during his lifetime, when "[v]ice is to be tolerated in a great man only when he is struggling 'with the brute majority' for some human principle. But the pampered genius is not involved in any such struggle, for he is too concerned with self" (McCormick 296). The moral or the ideal guides the hero by offering him what we as mankind can be; it is this that Emerson most desires to reawaken in man.

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<sup>63</sup> It is reminiscent of Soren Kierkegaard's concern with whether one's inward voice is divine or demonic in *Fear and Trembling*.

In this vein, the hero moves mountains and men motivated by the pursuit of “moral perfection,” even at the expense of his life (Journal dated September 17, 1833). As we saw in our discussion of Michael Lopez’s doctrine of use, defeat, ridicule, and even death can become resource material for greatness. What matters most to Emerson is the moral character of the person facing each: “The history of Christ is the best document of the power of Character which we have...this epic splendor around the facts of his death which transfigured every particular into a grand universal symbol for the eyes of all mankind ever since. He did well. This great defeat is hitherto the highest fact we have. But he that shall come shall do better” (Journal dated April 6-12, 1842). Christ’s ability to physically incarnate the most naïve and ideal of dreams (to love all men as God loves them because we are to become the vehicles of God’s will on Earth) in the face of such brutish adversity as betrayal, public humiliation, torture and wrongful execution represents for Emerson the greatest heroic achievement to date: withstanding the worst of the material world to uphold an ideal in such a way as to transform material men. The last phrase illustrates that Emerson expected a new hero to come, for he saw himself as scholar and perhaps poet, but not as heroic in and of himself. Perhaps Emerson recognized that he had the charisma to enthrall middle and upper class intellectuals, but lacked the warmth and personality to engross the mass of men with to the extent necessary to be followed into the public arena. He would wait for another much like John the Baptist would herald and pave the road for “One greater than he.”

Emerson’s search for a hero to serve as the central subject matter of epic poems can best be seen by his relationships and disappointments with Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and John Brown. All three served as hopeful projects for Emerson to groom; all three experiments would fail. It is in his endeavors with these three individuals and his reactions to their consequent “failures” that one sees the transition in Emerson’s thought as he began to recognize that perhaps the historical moment had not yet ripened for his agenda against material-skeptic nihilism and bourgeois inaction. Here he began to recognize that perhaps he would have to settle for African American slavery as a necessary battle in a larger war after all. This transition becomes especially prominent in the 1850s and 1860s (perhaps as a result of his growing dissatisfaction with the decisions and production of Henry David Thoreau and the untimely death of Margaret Fuller in 1850). Disoriented by what he hoped was a

temporary suspension of his personal quest's holy grail, Emerson blindly groped for a foothold to launch his new quest's position from amid the maelstrom that was the fervent, impassioned chaos of public opinion on the slavery question at the time.

Geldard argues that Emerson's work after *Nature* was no "falling away from principle in the light of the harsh lessons of life...but was rather a continuing refinement and clarification of his fundamental stand" (148). He goes on to add that no disillusionment could have brought Emerson so low as that because Emerson never intended for his theories to take hold being too astute an observer of "human nature and the power of materialism to suppose that majorities would transform themselves." It can be agreed that the work Emerson produced throughout the latter half of the 1830s and all of the 1840s served to refine the ideas expounded in *Nature* and the "American Scholar" and "Divinity School" Addresses. However, to argue that Emerson never hoped to transform others ignores the very words Emerson expresses when he states, "Inaction is cowardice, but there can be no scholar without the heroic mind...The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise and to guide men" ("American Scholar" 61-63).

On the opposite extreme, the idea that his writing and ideas are uniformly interconnected and logically consistent is not only to ignore his specifically warning us about the contradictory nature of his writing, but to read his corpus superficially, despite that "responsible studies of Emerson have stressed the developing nature of his work" (Martin 169). Cyrus Patell insightfully demonstrates that the early Emerson's "disjunction between private and public writings over issues of gender and race shows us a writer struggling against the limitations of his cultural moment...public writings masking these unresolved contradictions, setting them aside to concentrate on what were for him the more fundamental and pressing conflicts between self and society, between idealism and materialism" (463-64). Emerson's early agenda in the 1830s and 1840s can best be encapsulated by the confession from his journals as late as August 1, 1852: "I have quite other slaves to free than those negroes, to wit, imprisoned spirits, imprisoned thoughts...important to the Republic of Man" (volume 13 page 80). Nonetheless, his conversion to Abolitionism is complete by 1859's defense of John Brown in the face of Brown's Federal execution.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> His subsequent work is predominantly Abolitionist rhetoric: *Conduct of Life* (1860), "Truth" (1861), "War" (1862), "American Civilization" (1862), "Voluntaries" (1863), "Fortune of the Republic" (1863), and much of

It is NOT being argued here that Emerson's aim to combat materialism and inaction in the hopes of promoting the tradition of the hero and poet completely vanished in the 1850s and 1860s, but simply that it was put on the back burner in the effort to emphasize the Abolitionist agenda, and that this move turned out to be counterproductive in that it ended up eclipsing his original objective not only in his lifetime, but to this very day. In December of 1860, Emerson published *Conduct of Life*, which collects essays like "Power" and "Fate" and "Illusion," wherein we find a crossroads in Emerson's thought between his original program to inspire heroism by combatting against Sceptico-materialism and this new direction towards a single-minded focus on Abolition and other issues of his day (e.g. Mexico and women's rights). "Power" describes the proper uses of personal and political power (like some handbook for the hero) - "Physical force has no value where there is nothing else" (285) and "Concentration is the secret of strength in politics, in war, in trade, in short, in all management of human affairs" (287). The advice to collect support (financial, popular, spiritual, intellectual, etc.) and the reminder of the need to marry force with moral objectives are still attempts at guiding men to greatness, but the essay overwhelmingly emphasizes a characterization of the improper abuses of power found in American politics at the time by heavily relying on the issues boiling over in controversy such as those concerning the Mexican War and Abolition. He rails against the use of vulgar men pursuing free land and glory as the military hand of the United States: "The roisters who are destined for infamy at home, if sent to Mexico...come back heroes and generals" (284). When the government resorts to such alliances it renders justice nothing more than "the power of Lynch law, of soldiers and pirates; and it bullies the peaceable and loyal" (283). Emerson mourns this loss and bemoans that "In history, the great moment is when the savage is just ceasing to be a savage" (285). Despite this shift towards concerns of the everyman, "Fate" still wars against materialism: "All the toys that infatuate men and which they play for- houses, land, money, luxury, power, fame, are the self-same thing with a new gauze or two of illusion overlaid" (275). The essay continues to call out for the need to develop the "double consciousness" of the idealist and materialist expounded on in "The Transcendentalist" in order to better serve the "private and public natures" of the individual (278). However, the call to action in much of *Conduct* is for action in the North against war mongering, land encroachment and slavery.

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the work beyond 1865 focuses on the failure of Reconstruction and America's return to business as usual (Reynolds 75-80).

The reasons for this move in his focus could partially stem from various disappointing events in Emerson's life that began in the 1840s and reached a fever pitch with the Civil War. Most likely of all, however, Emerson felt not only the pressure of New England's intelligentsia and literary community to join the "good fight;" he also saw the uselessness in discussing anything else during the period of 1850 to 1860 given the myopically Negro-slavery-obsessed, volatile political culture in America. Larry J. Reynolds' *Righteous Violence* accurately and exhaustively describes much of the time's Congressional fisticuffs, frontier voter fraud, fanatical murder and tempestuous sermonizing on the pulpit, lecture circuit and newsprint. Carlyle and Emerson both fully recognized the need of an era to be receptive to a hero, poet, or ideal for any chance of success, but the American climate at this juncture was overgrown with the weeds of widespread unconscious slavery to materialism and the plagued by the persistent stinging distraction of Negro slavery to such an extent as to strangle any other vegetation arising out of any other seeds planted.

Emerson's prophetic declaration in "The Transcendentalist" - "Where are the old idealists?...In looking at the class of counsel and power and wealth...amidst all the prudence and all the triviality, one asks, Where are they who represented genius, virtue, the invisible and heavenly world? Are they dead- taken in their ripeness to the gods...Or did the high idea die out of them, and leave the unperfumed body as its tomb?"- sums up the failure that Thoreau and Fuller would represent for him as well as the betrayal he feared to recognize in himself. His journal entry for March to April 1843 states, "Young men like Henry Thoreau owe us a new world and they have not acquitted the debt: for the most part, such die young and so dodge the fulfillment." Although Emerson held Thoreau to be his protégé and "a speaker and actor of the truth," Emerson nonetheless "cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition...the captain of a huckleberry party" (Thoreau's Eulogy 409). Thoreau's isolated experiments in the "wild" around Concord, his penchant for studying nature closely at the expense of human contact, his struggling to sell his literary productions, his predilection to write travel literature rather than cultural-political criticisms of a poetic or philosophical nature all frustrated Emerson's vision of what he hoped Thoreau would become. Feeling that Thoreau wasted his gifts and talents by not taking up the Emersonian struggle, Emerson and much of the Transcendentalist Circle could not understand what Thoreau truly represented not only for them, but America in general: "his contemporaries did



not see him as a theorist or as a radical, viewing him instead as a naturalist. They either dismissed or ignored his political essays, including ‘Civil Disobedience’. The only two complete books (as opposed to essays) published in his lifetime, *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), both dealt with nature, in which he loved to wander" (McElroy par 8). Thoreau would die in 1862, before he could see the final outcome of the Civil War. It seemed that despite Emerson’s ideological disputes with Margaret Fuller and his occasionally expressed opinions of women as deserving of rights but incapable of being as strong as men, Fuller would offer more promise to Emerson’s hopes for an intellectual and heroic heir, a promise that was not apparent at first. She ventured beyond New England to succeed in New York and Europe on her own. She wrote about all those social ills that required battling and swayed public opinion or at least succeeded in commencing open conversation by publicly polarizing the issues with dramatically extreme views. Tragically, however, though he believed Fuller was “formed for action...a right brave and heroic woman” (Memoirs 390), Fuller fell among those who died too young to fulfill their proper heroic role when, on July 19, 1850, her ship from Italy sank off the shore of Fire Island, New York. Fuller was returning to America after serving the *New York Tribune* as overseas correspondent covering the Italian Revolt of ’48-49.

John Brown presented a much more complicated issue for Emerson’s search for a hero. Brown did in any case represent a symptom of Emerson’s loss of his ahistorical or immortal greatness in that Emerson bowed to the environmental pressure to such an extent as selecting someone like Brown as his hero, signifying Emerson’s downfall in his succumbing to the times. Reynolds masterfully chronicles this downfall in one key aspect: Emerson’s attitude towards violent Abolition. In 1830, Emerson argued for the use of only “peaceful means to achieve social justice” (57). In 1844’s “Address on the Emancipation of the Negro in the British West Indies,” Emerson remained steadfast in his brand of pacifism as he “calls upon the black man to engage in moral development and advance his own cause...not through violent rebellion” (59). The ideal of moral development and intellectual education for enlightened consciousness persisted in his 1845 belief that the “bringing culture and civility to Southern masters...would then free their slaves” (59). Still in 1849, Emerson faithfully preached that the days of war were numbered as historical progress and an educated humanity would turn to peaceful dialogue as a “natural advancement” (60). The

Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, though, marked a beginning descent as “Emerson called for civil disobedience...and became more involved in Abolitionism” (66). No advocating of violence came forth publicly yet at this juncture. During the period of 1854 to 1856, Emerson urged mobilization of the Abolition movement but “continued to reject violence as brute force was a Southern trait” (67-8). Reynolds notices the undercurrents of self-doubt in Emerson when he points out that Emerson’s “solution” at a Kansas relief meeting consisted of militia like organization of Abolitionists in the frontier territories akin to that of the Revolutionary colonists and privately funded the purchase of Brown Sharp rifles for the Free State movement out on the frontier (69).

In 1857, John Brown visited New England and briefly met Emerson, and “persuaded Emerson to reconsider his peace principles” (69). John Brown, whom Emerson did not know well despite Emerson’s pretensions, would turn out to be a charismatic but violent murderer who lacked the guidance of the kind of true moral reasoning Emerson had demanded earlier in his career, but nonetheless, he militarized the Abolitionist movement and maybe even hastened the Civil War. John Brown’s use of New England and Transcendentalist money to purchase weapons led to quite a misadventure when he used these weapons on unarmed homestead farmers who owned no slaves themselves in Missouri and in the fiasco of a failed attempt to free slaves and arm them at Harper’s Ferry (that ironically began with the murder of a black man left on watch). The use of these Transcendentalist-funded weapons landed Brown in jail, placed him on trial for treason and murder, and had him executed. Before, during and after the trial and execution of Brown, Emerson steadfastly composed words defending his deeds as heroic undertaking in the promotion of freedom. Here, Emerson suffered from what he warned against in “Power,” “there are sublime considerations which limit the value of talent and superficial success. We can easily over praise the vulgar hero” (288). Emerson had become trapped by the lenses of mood he warned against in “Experience” as he began to be taken in by the “omissions and lies of Brown” (Reynolds 70).<sup>65</sup> To some extent back then and to a larger extent now, Emerson lost credibility in his support of a man delivered up to the law by his own sons. Reynolds utilizes a comic anecdote of a trip Emerson and Thoreau made to the Adirondacks and compares it to

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<sup>65</sup> “In John Brown, Emerson thought he had found the hero...He attempted to delineate Brown’s moral significance on the basis of selective interpretations of selected facts...insignificant exaggerations as Emerson made” (McDonald 395).

Emerson's writings of the same trip in order to offer various observations about Emerson the fallible flesh-and-blood man: he was willing to "delete unpleasant facts...embarrassment," he suffered from class consciousness (the guides working for the group remained unnamed), and his debacle with a clumsy attempt at hunting produced by a change of heart illustrates a "tendency to get caught up in the 'contagion of passion' of those surrounding him with violent action" (74). These observations adequately sum up the failings of Emerson at this stage of his career and life that enabled him to become swept up in the Abolitionist furor.

In every case, those he hoped might rise could not live up to Emerson's standards of a hero. Emerson ended his days without finding his hero, fanatically grasping at the Union Army's victory in the Civil War for any pathetic excuse of heroism, and by doing so capitulating on many if not most of his earlier ideas, much to the despair of those surviving members of "the Club." His belief that the Union Army served to free slaves and fought heroically in service to moral ideals as he had always preached could only stand up to reality for someone who did not visit the South or hear Southern witnesses recount the countless atrocities perpetrated by the common herd of soldiers and officers that often find themselves at war. The war had unveiled the barbarism inherent even in his educated New Englanders; Abolitionism had derailed him from his true purpose; the deaths and perceived failures of his greatest protégés simultaneously fulfilled and disillusioned his youthful prophecies and promises. These eventually took a toll on Emerson: "The Civil War and its aftermath...was the period of his intellectual decline...The War had given Emerson a subtler hurt, in making him forsake the independence he had always said was essential to his thought...no longer formidable. His new 'committed' lectures upset his daughter Ellen" (Stessel 189). Though a reader can still find vestiges of Emerson's truest ideals espoused in his later writing, it nonetheless also betrays many of those same ideals. In the end, Emerson's writing carried the tone of a man at odds with himself, as if the attempt at standing with one foot in each world, the ideal and the material, had finally succeeded in rendering him in twain.

## CHAPTER IV<sup>66</sup>

### THOREAU'S HERO AS EVERYMAN [SECOND TREATMENT]<sup>67</sup>

I walk a lonely road  
 The only one that I have ever known  
 Don't know where it goes  
 But it's home to me and I walk alone

I walk this empty street  
 On the Boulevard of Broken Dreams  
 When the city sleeps  
 And I'm the only one and I walk alone  
 -Green Day - "Boulevard of Broken Dreams"

Both Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau overlap in much of their thinking, as would be expected between a mentor and protégé. The issue of heroism presents a key nuance in their thinking, however. Whereas Emerson spends much effort analyzing the ideological lineage of the present era's worldview to better trace the perfidious connections between scientific materialism, religious skepticism, moral nihilism and capitalism briefly alluded to by Thomas Carlyle, Thoreau focuses his energies on living practically in the mode of existence he desires to promote and on struggling with the means to accurately convey this endeavor to those around him (his readers and neighbors and fellow Transcendentalists). Despite Emerson's promises that each man has the potential to be heroic, one look at his list of the necessary gifts of a hero reveals that there is an underlying element of aristocratic thinking in Emerson's idea of the hero (perhaps disguised due to the tenor of American sentiment or perchance a belief in the abilities of all men to reach a super-heroic potential- a debate in Emersonian scholarship that rages to this day).

In Thoreau, we find however, that he not only describes very human gifts and everyday circumstances for his hero, but then he goes on to live daily by this code and expresses this value system in the minutest of details. In other words, Emerson's aristocratic recipe for a rare and possibly unattainable hero is contrasted by Thoreau's democratic

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<sup>66</sup> All citations of Reynolds in the Thoreau chapter refer to *Righteous Violence*.

<sup>67</sup> Brian Walker's "Thoreau on Democratic Cultivation" exhaustively treats Thoreau's ideas of self-cultivation as well as the Greek and Thoreauvian ideas of excellence and the good life that are requisite for heroic possibilities. It is a must read for further exploration of Thoreau's concept of the hero in spite of its elitist or aristocratic tone that persists even though the author made every attempt at dispelling it...a tone that is inconsistent with much of Thoreau's writing and behavior.

method for everyday heroism, the still European metropolitan versus the uniquely American frontiersman, the theoretical versus the practical. This disunion of thought may be a key reason for Emerson's disparaging comments in Thoreau's eulogy. It is a testament to Thoreau's individuality and self-reliance that he should thus distinguish himself from his mentor by navigating into new waters - not only his writing style, ideology, and arguments, but also his life and his choices. As Carl Bode explains, "Thoreau consistently showed far more than the usual amount of aggressiveness and independence...Thoreau had to prove himself. He made a point of doing so by word and deed" (687).

In *Walden*, Thoreau describes the lives of common men as lives of "quiet desperation" (263). Doomed to slavery from birth and chained by material goods unto death, a "fool's life" bred by a pivotal mistake conceived and agreed to by each and all men (260-61). In fact, it is the emphasis on and distribution of material wealth in a capitalist system that produces the very evils it spends great wealth to combat: "if all men were to live as simply as I did, then thieving and robbery would be unknown. These take place only in communities where some have got more than is sufficient while others have not enough" (*Walden* 421). Crime and victimization, poverty and wealth, conflict and alienation are all produced by one common mistake: the belief that our lives and happiness depend on "treasures that moth and rust will corrupt."<sup>68</sup> Notice that Thoreau emphasizes that we choose to believe in the value of these trinkets and consequently choose to pursue these goods by working almost non-stop. However, the meanness or common persecution grounds the very possibility of heroism in the mass of men; the very fact of suffering offers the opportunity to stand against the source of the suffering: "The heroic actions are performed by such as are oppressed by the meanness of their lives" (July 18, 1842). We repeatedly place value on objects over men based on these beliefs, and thus, constantly choose for ourselves lives resembling the rat race in a wheel that goes nowhere. These decisions that act as the source of our struggle, also potentially offer us a source for our freedom as we recognize that we can decide otherwise.

Of course, this is easier said than done for we are raised in this frame of mind and are perpetually surrounded by temptation and pressure to conform, often by those we love dearly. Even love, then, seduces us to the inevitable worship or fetishism of objects. Even

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<sup>68</sup> Thoreau echoes Marx here in that we are the sources of our own misery.

though Capitalism enslaves us with the cycle of labor and consumption, it simultaneously robs us of the ability to fight back by keeping us comfortable. The heroic inevitably faces off against something immeasurably larger than oneself...the system or the machine that is the human world. Thoreau embraces this opportunity to fight against something, however, for there is nothing epic in a lack of struggle.<sup>69</sup> Thoreau presents us with the paradox that the greater the stakes inherent in the near impossibility of rebelling against this economic system, the greater the heroism in resisting it.

The rich (as responsible for maintaining the status quo) cannot, therefore, under normal circumstances do anything heroic; only the struggling working class can. Thoreau believes that the measure of an individual man is commensurate to his ability to reject the status quo in favor of his own world view or set of ideal based values to live by in the private domain.<sup>70</sup> For Thoreau, our era's status quo is economic materialism and the capitalist worship of and enslavement to the product or commodity. The common man need only command himself with his own laws- his ideas- in order to stand upright; the alternative is to be commanded by another: "The stern command is- move or ye shall be moved- be the master of your own action or you shall unawares become the tool of the meanest slave" (June to July 1846). However, it is in mindless acceptance of "tradition" that we become dupes of the system; our true enemies are not other men, but the ideas and objects they/we choose to worship, live, work and die for.<sup>71</sup> The daily endless routines of work, nourishment and restlessness in the mind numbing pursuit of the products we purchase at the expense of our liberties train us to sleepwalk into conformity like pre-maturely old men, resulting in "Old deeds for old people" when what the world needs are "new deeds for new" men (*Walden* 264). It is the possibility of these new deeds based on new ideas that Thoreau wants to inspire in his readers and those he comes across in the street through his "advice" and through his personal example.

As Brian Walker points out, Thoreau utilizes the unassuming but rich traditions of the "advice-mode" and the self-cultivation model in order to present an avenue of possibility for

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<sup>69</sup> "He cannot be said to succeed to whom the world shows any favor. In fact, it [the world] is the hero's point d'appui, which by offering resistance to his action, enables him to act at all. At each step, he spurns the world. He vaults the higher in proportion as he employs the greater resistance of the earth" (September 21, 1840).

<sup>70</sup> "At each step, man measures himself against the system" (Thoreau's Journal January 31, 1841).

<sup>71</sup> "I have found that the outward obstacles which stood in my way were not living men- but dead institutions" (Thoreau's Journal June to July 1846).

new political action as an individual without the need for a movement's conformity or the rigid promotion of a specific ideology (155-59). Thoreau recognizes that the best we can do for others without force is to set an example and advise, no more: "I confess, that practically speaking, when I have learned a man's real disposition, I have no hopes of changing it for the better or worse in this state of existence" (*Walden* 372). A revolutionary is the one who begins by revolutionizing himself or as Thoreau's great admirer Mohandas Gandhi said "Become the change you wish to see in the world." The average man can be heroic by being revolutionary as a private individual choosing for his own life. Thoreau's hero does not seek the light of fame or sway over the masses, just the opposite: "I would not have anyone adopt my mode of living on any account. [...] I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead" (*Walden* 325). Thoreau's agenda is merely to demonstrate to others that it is possible to become something other than a producer-consumer, but what the new identity will become is the responsibility of each individual to determine and mold. Thus, Thoreau's heroism lies more in a frame of mind than in larger-than-life deeds: "What a man thinks of himself, that it is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate" (*Walden* 263). We determine the paths our lives take as we conceive what is conceivable and what inconceivable; how we value or undervalue ourselves frees us or limits us in our day to day. This is why Thoreau endorses Socrates' emphasis on the Apollonian motto of "know thyself," but Thoreau tellingly rephrases it as "Explore thyself" (*Walden* 561). The self is not "knowable" but rather "explore-able" as it is not a simple subject one can simply know but an evolving one that one must explore. Thoreau advises us that we are capable of change: "We think we can change our clothes only" (571). Thoreau's understanding of identity is as a dynamic work in progress, in contrast to the Socratic (and conventional Western) conception of a stable, unchanging self. Thoreau's heroic frame of mind then is an attempt to understand oneself in order to work on oneself; one studies and learns in order to live better.<sup>72</sup>

The hero's journey to understand and recreate himself first begins by turning away from the community one hopes to improve; solitude is requisite and forays into nature can fill

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<sup>72</sup> "To be a philosopher is...to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life not only theoretically, but practically" (*Walden* 270) and "You must get your living by loving" ("Life Without" 636).

such a need: “In society you will not find health, but in nature...Society is always diseased and the best most so...The doctrines of despair, of spiritual or political tyranny or servitude were never taught by such as shared the serenity of nature” (“A Natural History” 33).

Surrounded by the artificial commodities constructed by men and the capitalist world view, it becomes easy to get lost as much within the cacophony of competing voices as within its labyrinth of possession, our lives’ paths becoming about accumulation in the never ending pursuit of enough. Kateb rightfully alleges that “Thoreau goes so far as to advocate voluntary poverty” (97). However, since we are surrounded by the materialistic mode of life and thought within the city limits or confines of the living room, we must walk away from these to break free and thereby become reacquainted with ourselves. Self-cultivation is simultaneously a digging away to uncover or find an original seed or a potentiality of a self as well as a planting, watering, growing, and experimenting towards a new self.

In the process of finding or constructing one’s true self, one also comes face to face with the true aspect of society. In many of Thoreau’s nature writing based essays, we see that excursions into the wild become a retreat from the numbing and brainwashing effects of modernization; we are better able to critique the society we live in via the necessary distance from which to remark the factors, mechanisms, and factions that daily assault our senses to such an extent as to convince us that no alternatives exist. Only by stepping away will the noise of our busy lives recede to the extent necessary for us to recognize how we fritter away our lives and how it doesn’t have to be this way: “A progressive series of departures- from society, from history and from nature in its familiar guise...the essay [“Walking”] is more an exercise in stripping away...the summit of Wachusett serves as a post for observing the world from which withdrawn...an observatory of the state” (Martin 177). Nature then offers not only a refuge from the hoi polloi, but a vantage point from which to survey the inner as well as outer worlds.

Thoreau appreciates that those who live and travel within nature’s confines are daily reminded that there is so much more to human existence than material goods and the current human perspective; this outlook opens one up to recognizing the arbitrary nature of what society labels as a productive life, and in fact sees the bourgeois world view as a form of mental illness: “Really to see the sun rise or go down every day, so to relate ourselves to a universal fact, would preserve us sane forever” (“Life Without” 646). Rejuvenated by nature



and our veils of capitalistic illusion removed, we are now better able to chant Thoreau's anti-commodification/anti-capitalist mantra: "Simplify. Simplify" (*Walden* 344). As Thoreau futilely explains to the Irish immigrant John Field in *Walden*, the more products we desire, the more we work to buy them, the more we need products to help us work, and so on. Here Thoreau exhibits his learning from the Eastern thought found in Hindu texts like the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita* that recognize that the senses expose us to desires which pull us further into illusion and cycles of enslavement: we see it in a window, we want it, we must work to buy it, but it's never enough: "Signs were hung out on all sides to allure him; some to catch him by the appetite...some by the fancy...and others by the hair or the feet or the skirts" (*Walden* 417-18). Like the Hindu renunciant, Thoreau wishes us to turn our backs on this world and its worldliness by retreating into the wild of nature, ascending mountains in quest of illumination, attaining a new vantage point or perspective that we can then bring back with us into the lower depths of modernity.<sup>73</sup> The opening paragraph of *Walden* reminds us that when he began writing his notes for it he "lived alone in the woods" and "Yet, at present, I am sojourner in civilized life again" (258). Notice that Thoreau, unlike the Hindus, does expect us to return from our summit, ready to live better, simpler lives and set an example for others.<sup>74</sup>

This is the first of two types of withdrawal Thoreau endorses. This withdrawal into nature and its double-sided vantage point lend themselves to self-cultivation or self-culture which represents the whole purpose of government and human society for Thoreau (a purpose not yet achieved and perhaps one society recedes from more and more). Nonetheless, Thoreau believes that democracy stands or falls on the basis of its people, the better thinkers and doers they are, the better the democracy stands and runs (Cafaro 185). However, Mariotti builds off of Thoreau's writings to argue that "modernity contributes to a sense of alienation understood as a loss of critical capacity and the ability to think against conventions. These losses are dangerous, given that critique and negation are central to an understanding of what it means to be human and to have a self...we cannot truly have

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<sup>73</sup> Thoreau believes that "At the portal of this mythic and surreal world, the travelers leave their extra baggage behind, a stripping away of social trappings before the advent of primal reality...If society conventionally oppresses and weighs down the individual...this ascent to creation threatens to disassemble the self...the pattern of withdrawal and return is a perspective for refreshing the self" (Martin 180-181).

<sup>74</sup> The idea of going above to return and go back under is a motif that Nietzsche runs away with in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and Plato brings out in his Allegory of the Cave in the *Republic*.

democratic self-government without this kind of critical self' (xii). As early as Thoreau's lifetime (and probably even earlier than that), the gossip-like-nature and rudimentary vocabulary of newspapers in conjunction with the propensity for conformity and rote-memorization-approach in American education produced superficial, unquestioning citizens who were unprepared for the intellectual development requisite in a fully engaged and fully functioning democracy. Given the absolute lack of privacy, lack of intellectually stimulating media, and lack of any withdrawal to nature in most twenty-first century Americans, this lack of critical analysis has reached epidemic proportions today. On a steady diet of *Real Housewives* and *Jersey Shore*, is it any wonder that the public overwhelmingly votes into office politicians with catchy sound bites, no political platforms or long term strategies, and Faustian alliances to the same financial entities exploiting the people who voted them into office in the first place? In describing his own period, Thoreau might as well have been seeing into the future of our present day America: "Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous...When we are unhurried and wise, we perceive that only great and worthy things have permanent and absolute existence- that petty fears and petty pleasures are but the shadow of reality" (*Walden* 348). Our priorities are completely screwed up by this lack of ability to critique. In fact, the need of this self-cultivation of the individual is so great that Greeks and other expounders of virtue ethics as well as Thoreau have often argued it as the "chief end or telos of man" and therefore the chief end of the state (Cafaro 25-26).

Thoreau's concept of morality or virtue aims closer to the Greek notions of excellence in the service of living well, rather than to Christian ideas of goodness in desire of heaven or fear of Hell, and obviously rejects the bourgeois concept of civic morality as conformity and productivity. Cultivation of oneself yields virtue or excellence (arête) that better enables one to reach the good life (eudaimonia). The Greeks generally considered this endeavor the province of the aristocracy, as they were the sole members of society with the natural gifts and leisure time to develop themselves. Thoreau, being a son of democracy, believes all men can develop their gifts individually if they but had the leisure time that could come only by living frugally;<sup>75</sup> ergo the emphasis on economy found throughout *Walden* and in his advice for others, e.g. the Irish family, the neighboring farmers and citizens of

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<sup>75</sup> "Give me the poverty that enjoys true wealth" (*Walden* 445).

Concord, and so on (Cafaro 119). Thoreau constantly works to waken others from the lull of the work-buy monotony: “Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep” (*Walden* 343). Thus, blinded by the frenzy of pursuing products hailed by storefront fashions in the streets places us in such debt as to work our entire lives in a stupor to pay it off at the expense of time for bettering ourselves, just as being polite for politeness sake comforts us into thinking we are civilized and moral people, when in fact Thoreau believes “manners and etiquette make us into formulaic unthinking and habitual creatures” (Mariotti 105). Therefore, there is a huge difference between virtue ethics and morals based on manners or etiquette: the first is self-centered on internalized struggles with one’s weaknesses in order to strive after personally held ideals- resulting in a uniformity within and without as one becomes one’s harshest critic, while the latter becomes obsessed with what others think of one and thereby promotes hypocrisy and post-modern dissimulation.<sup>76</sup> Consequently, Thoreau insists on removing oneself from the crowd or herd of bourgeois communal life (what Thoreau calls “the herd of men feeding heartily on coarse and succulent pleasures” - *A Week* 207) by receding into the isolation of nature’s embrace.

Perhaps the most pervasive lesson for developing one’s humanity and heroism throughout *Walden* (to be found in the examples of the lakes, the animals, the remnants of former inhabitants, the seasons and the weather) lies in the recognition that perception of the natural world must be allowed to sensually invigorate one’s spirit, resulting in the learning of some wider truth. An obviously recurring example of such natural wisdom lies in the lesson expressed each dawn by the rising sun but noticeable only to the man in nature who rises with the day and sees the miracle of birth each morning: “The man who does not believe that each day contains an earlier, more sacred and auroral hour...has despaired of life, and is pursuing a descending and darkening way” (*Walden* 342). Thoreau’s constant return to dawn comprises nature’s first lesson for the hero: each sunrise brings new possibility for creation, choice, and action as “Poetry and art and the fairest and most memorable of the actions of men date from such an hour. All poets and heroes, like Memnon, are the children of Aurora, and emit their music at sunrise” (*Walden* 342). Dawn awakens in us the appreciation that we are not dead yet, and as living men, we can still choose a different life to the one calling us siren like from the depths of urban sprawl to our spiritual deaths. Cafaro admits that

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<sup>76</sup> This distinction between forms of morality brought to light by Emerson and Thoreau would later birth Nietzsche’s slave and master moralities.

Thoreau's emphasis of the morning served to offer the individual a reminder of the daily possibility of new and possibly heroic action (Cafaro 17).<sup>77</sup>

This attention to detail in one's perception of nature opens up the mind to possibilities that come only from returning to the wild wherein one comes across new experiences that one cannot find in the everyday rut of a sleep-walker civilization. David Robinson describes Thoreau's agenda to call the individual back into the wild and away from the numbing recesses of civilization "a powerful attack on America's obsession with work and consumption... *Walden* is an aggressive critique...exposing the thralldom of endless labor that depleted them of both perspective and energy and the pointless and wasteful search for satisfaction and social status through ownership and the consumption of goods" (*Natural Life* 83). It is this attention to detail in perceiving and thought that only a simple life in nature can provide and that urban life in all its overstimulation and rapidity nullifies. Thoreau asks, "Why should we live in such a hurry and waste of life?" (*Walden* 346). Thoreau points out that his contemporaries pursue products, gossip, and the places they find them in, such as "the depot, the post office, the bar-room, the meeting house, the school house, the grocery, Beacon Hill, or the Five Points," but that these only serve to pull them forward faster into the currents of modernity: "we allow only outlying and transient circumstances to make our occasions. They are, in fact, the cause of our distraction" (*Walden* 384).

In the 150 years since Thoreau lived, this situation has only worsened and sped up the pace of its tempo. The storefronts and Internet catalogues constantly change trends that keep us buying new wardrobes every season: "I am sure that there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable, or at least clean and unpatched clothes, than to have a sound conscience" (*Walden* 277). The magazine covers display what we can never live up to in order to sell diet books, diet foods, cosmetics, and cosmetic surgery. The radio/TV/tablets bombard us with the petty lives of small people blown up to larger than life proportions on reality shows cater to an appetite for gossip expanded to voyeuristic proportions and sell tell-all memoirs and DVD collections. The newspapers breed fear and hopelessness with their daily reminders of crime and political corruption so that we sign up for home security services and vote for more law enforcement (raising government expenditures). The senses are consumed by the

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<sup>77</sup> "Like Coleridge, he could have written an ode to dejection...But Thoreau knows that such dejected twilight thoughts provide no impetus and no guidance for right living...such hopelessness leads to lethargy and laziness."

unnecessary but much desired carrot and stick of capitalism. In order to afford all of this, we race from job to job, pay bills, take kids to school and practice, shop, curse red lights, cut each other off in traffic, etc. The frantic pace of the rat race ends only in the coffin, nonetheless leaving behind funeral costs for our families. In the meantime, our ethical ideals and moral treatment of others are sacrificed as we discard people by the wayside of our lives, constantly finding ourselves too busy even for our children: “Society is commonly too cheap. We meet at very short intervals, not having had the time to acquire any new value for each other” (*Walden* 387). It is only by removing oneself to nature that one slows down enough in relative silence long enough to begin thinking and revaluing again.

This need for silence and solitude is what Thoreau refers to when he writes, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life” (343). Here he means deliberately in the same way as Aristotle in his *Nichomachean Ethics*: the power of reason to examine an object or issue from all angles in order to better weigh its importance, the options available to one and what the consequences may entail: “Thoreau makes it clear that possibilities can be explored only by those who live deliberately...suggests an essential connection between such deliberation and human freedom” (Cafaro 18).<sup>78</sup> Living and thinking deliberately not only improve our personal private lives as we choose more wisely, but also enable individual citizens to vote intelligently for their benefit and that of the state. Living deliberately thus becomes one of the stepping-stones towards self-cultivation, achievable through a withdrawal into nature through “such activities as walking and huckleberrying that aim to recover and recuperate the critical qualities we must have to be real democratic citizens” (Mariotti 6).

Thus, when Emerson chastised Thoreau for wasting his talents by withdrawing into the woods, he had not understood that such activities served Thoreau as a political, cultural, psychological and intellectual means of attaining the distance necessary to assess his contemporary culture. Emerson suffered from the same conformity to the traditional definition of politics as “young men who had ceased to be young, and had concluded that it was safest to follow the beaten track of the professionals- all these generally said that it was not possible to do so much good in my position” (*Walden* 403). Emerson could not see what

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<sup>78</sup> Deliberate reason is a capacity that Aristotle does not feel all humans have equally, believing women and slaves had less of this ability than Greek males and consisted of the primary the reason they should not have access to rule the lives, their households or politically.

Thoreau instinctively knew: that close association with large groups of any kind (despite their aims or agendas) entailed limitation and complicity to the extent of succumbing to unconscious habituation, escapable only via withdrawal: “For Thoreau, mass based protests would share too many of the symptoms of mainstream politics, for in them we stop thinking for ourselves and become subjects...Emerson’s notions of political and social leadership are limited to a conventional understanding of politics” (Mariotti 130). Although Thoreau would speak at Abolitionist rallies and write for their journals, he did so as a freelance agent or loosely associated individual, not as an active and regular dues-paying member.

Reading and writing literature also served Thoreau as essential morning exercises in self-cultivation and nature observing: “The student may read Homer or Aeschylus in the Greek without danger of dissipation or luxuriousness, for it implies that he in some measure emulate their heroes, and consecrate morning hours to their pages” (*Walden* 323). However, morning reading exercises improve the student of humanity not only in the obvious ways of adding facts or information to better make sense of the world. The reading of “true books” inspires us with the exploits of heroic individuals from history in such a way as to recognize for ourselves that we too can be heroic since “True books challenge us because we fall so far behind the models that they give...With effort and attention, the individual may use ‘heroic literature’ to germinate and expand his or her own heroic dispositions” (Walker 172-73). The true books referred to predominantly revolve around the epic poems and myths of the ancient Greeks, Romans and Hindus for Thoreau, preferably in their original languages. This brings to light one of the central tenets of this paper: the Transcendentalists covered here recognized the need for heroic individuals to emulate and poets to record their exploits as a means of perpetuating the seeds of greatness for future generations: “When a noble deed is done, who is likely to appreciate it? They who are noble themselves...He [John Brown as hero] has liberated many thousands of slaves, both North and South. They seem to have known nothing about living or dying for a principle” (“The Last Days” 680-81). Thoreau would spend his life trying to be poet at times and trying to be hero at other times, in the hopes that someday he might inspire future generations to become more fully themselves (a feat he achieved in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to some extent).

Thoreau also felt that reading and writing assisted in training one’s mind in the ability to pay attention to detail and the interpretive art of hermeneutics in addition to a development

of discipline or will because for Thoreau these activities entailed a “determined and careful scrutiny of a work- in which each word is weighed as it contributes to the emerging patterns of a text...thus one aspect of a much larger process of listening, translating, and decoding our entire experience” (Robinson, *Natural Life* 104-05). Thoreau basically approached nature and life phenomenologically as texts that one must identify patterns in to better gauge one’s own understanding of it (hero as awakened/ poet as reader of events) as well as to better navigate through when choosing and acting (hero as awakener and writer of his own destiny/ poet as composer of words). We can best see this approach to life as text and text as life in the parallels between Thoreau’s methods of exploring nature macrocosmically (sauntering), exploring nature microcosmically (scientific/ empirical observation of minutiae), and writing “his excursionary style of walking around a topic and looking at it from various angles” (Mariotti 131).<sup>79</sup> This consistency of character was considered by Greek moral philosophers and Thoreau as a virtue displaying nobility. His contemporaries, however, considered his strict adherence to his virtues as odd and even at times as rude. The very criticism launched against Thoreau ends up being his saving grace as a heroic and moral figure in that what others dismissed as lack of manners or outright rudeness ended up being simplicity of approach to appear externally as he existed internally. In other words, Thoreau exhibited no hypocrisy and attempted to live according to principle in society as in himself.

This dual stimulation of body and mind in the smallest of facts is best exemplified vividly in the battle of the ants (*Walden* 474-77). A microcosmic examination of the details behind one conflict between two breeds of ants absorbs four pages of *Walden*, yet his literary allusions and metaphors throughout this passage end up constructing a macrocosmic and scathing assessment of human civilization. The comical description of warring ants entertains the senses much like when we were kids, but the underlying lessons about the absurdity of ideology, warfare, patriotism from the perspective of the universe presents a stinging criticism of American society in particular: “In his mock epic battle of the ants,

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<sup>79</sup> For examples of Thoreau’s microcosmic studies consult his journals and essays for passages that serve as extensive physical descriptions of the appearances and behaviors of various individual phenomena he encounters (e.g. the huckleberry, the loon, the dawn, the fox, the hoeing of beans, the ponds that stand at the center of his work *Walden*). The macrocosmic endeavors lie in each work as a whole: *Walden*, “Ktaadn” or *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* as studies of the environment and community surrounding and interacting with him at given points in his life. As for his circumnavigating verbal meanderings as stylistic modes of writing that parallel his sauntering through nature, many Thoreau scholars have expressed much frustration at this.

Thoreau juxtaposes polarities of man's savage and civilized tendencies, scoring his comic criticism through severe contrasts of man's heroic pretensions with his actual...contemporaneous meanness" (La Rosa 610).

It must be noted that Thoreau's greatest insights and criticism are often couched in humorous terms, bringing to light that Thoreau's hero must have an epic sense of humor that verges on the existentially absurd: "The man who could hoe beans heroically...or can hail a mosquito as genuinely Homeric, has much to give an age with our fondness for any existential posturing, the more absurd the better" (West 1053). For Thoreau as for the Hindu, a perfect divine being would have no need of creating a world filled with beings other than for sport or humorous entertainment (West 1057). When we laugh, especially at ourselves, we share in the divine joke. The role of humor in demonstrates not only a humility but also a courage lacking in most "civilized men." As Thoreau candidly reflects on an old man most people in Concord regarded as simple minded, he explains the basis of his interest in the old man, "because he was so quiet and solitary and so happy withal; a well of good humor...His mirth was without alloy...he would greet me with a laugh of inexpressible satisfaction" (*Walden* 396). If we can laugh at ourselves then we do not fear failure or public scrutiny, becoming brave enough to attempt new things and come forth honestly without fear of being judged for lack of manners by the kangaroo court of public opinion. Thoreau himself often identified himself with that half-crazy cry of the loon: "the loon is a sacred projection of Thoreau's own elusive self mocking and shape changing self" (La Rosa 618).<sup>80</sup> In laughing at ourselves and all else, we demonstrate a flexibility of role that embraces the civilized scholarly thinker as well as the wildly uncivilized frontiersman. Both roles simultaneously confront the unknown within us as much as outside us.<sup>81</sup> Humor naturally results and healthily erupts from not allowing those forces opposing us to conquer our spirit in addition to carrying the tension of walking both paths (Taoism) or the middle way (Buddhism) or the Golden Mean (Aristotle).

Thoreau's hero-poet must incorporate some of this wildness within himself as a means of creating the unforeseeable, unpredictable, unconstrained, humorous and

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<sup>80</sup> Colloquially, we take the use of word "loon" to refer to those afflicted with mild forms of mental illness—something many critics like Carl Bode mistakenly waste lifetimes trying to prove about poor Thoreau, like his argument that Thoreau suffered from severe Oedipal complexes that resulted in lifelong searches for replacements for his father and a fixation with older women 683-96).

<sup>81</sup> "To discover a pathway to the gods, he must be savage and civilized at once" (La Rosa 617).



revolutionary. Closely akin to the possession espoused by nature worshipping religions, Thoreau presents the hero-poet as manifesting the very creative powers of nature in word, choice, and deed: “The poet thus recreates in a shared enterprise the energy of nature through poetic expression” (Robinson, *Natural Life* 35). “The wild is the preservation of the world” assumes as much a motto for environmentalism as it heralds the need for preserving the wild and unpredictable in oneself. Those who heroically participate in revolting from the unjust status quo or birthing a new state or speaking on behalf of the weak and silent take their courage and inspiration from the wild.<sup>82</sup> To give birth to new possibilities, there must be something elemental and a return to the primordial or animalistic in a hero that he may become capable of achieving great things, a carnivorous zest to overpower and live at any cost: “Life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest” (611). The uncivilized in nature’s wildness represents non-conformity, the survival of the fittest symbolizes the egoism necessary to follow your own path, and bloodlust embodies the will to sacrifice the expectations of loved ones. One faction’s hero is another’s villain; the revolutionary must be willing to be seen as a terrorist by those he threatens: “The frontier...could be the abode of the gods and Satan; the two must be fronted and brought into imaginative concordance...the frontier means confrontation, continuous warfare and possible annihilation” (La Rosa 615). Like the Romantics before him, Thoreau does not sterilize or rationalize nature and the wild in his portrayals, but rather emphasizes their unpredictability, destructive potential and uber-complexity. Thoreau embraces that the wild allows for violence when necessary: such as in cases of sustenance, search for territory, selection of a mate, self-defense, in a word- survival. Thoreau bares his wild fangs at various moments in *Walden*, such as his urge to bite and eat a woodchuck he sees or his knack for slipping in and out of Concord through the alleys like a raccoon scavenging for trash bins (456).

Wildness, however, does not mean arrogance or tyranny for Thoreau. It is, rather, to “recover a forgotten capacity for play, and relearn the free expression of a creative chaos...natural energy, creativity, and originality” that the rigid restraints of law, custom, manners and trends crush (Robinson, *Natural Life* 156). Ironically, the time spent in the wild that begins as blood shedding from the hunt, in the end becomes a source of our humanity, while the modernization that discourages use of the gun in the name of becoming civilized

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<sup>82</sup> “The founders of every state which has risen to eminence have drawn their nourishment and vigor from a similar wild source” (“Walking” 610).

merely ends up alienating us (*Walden* 459).<sup>83</sup> The violence of hunting in the boy gives way to the inclination for preservation in the fully-grown man just as the “philanthropy” of the civilized serves to aggrandize the ego of the rich at the expense of the poor kept in a dependent welfare state. These paradoxes become visible to the eye trained by nature, not that trained by the schoolmaster. These ironies and paradoxes in nature as in Thoreau’s writing offer the wisdom of the East: opposite states in appearance are simply within the mind diverse, but in actuality one and the same.

This appreciation for perceiving nature authentically lends itself to Thoreau’s penchant for walking and his acceptance of the wild. The wild is not only savage, it can be cruel, as we are reminded when we consider that Thoreau’s close brother died as a result of lockjaw from the tetanus he became infected with during their walks. Despite this loss, Thoreau immortalizes his coming to terms with his grief through his touching portrayal of this last trip with his brother in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, which “signifies a tacit acceptance of the conditions of the world, a recognition that life persists, even flourishes, under conditions that are also in some senses brutal and tragic” (Robinson 59). As we take in nature in her unabashed multiplicity that paradoxically gives rise to uniformity, we see through newly enlightened eyes (as opposed to old utilitarian eyes):

...we studied the landscape by degrees...rock, tree, house, hill, and meadow assuming new and varying positions as wind and water shifted the scene, and there was variety enough for our entertainment in the metamorphoses of the simplest objects. Viewed from this side the scenery appeared new to us...As if our birth had at first sundered things, and we had been thrust up through into nature like a wedge, and not till the wound heals and the scar disappears do we begin to discover where we are, and that nature is one and continuous. (“A Week” 208-09)

The old utilitarian in us utilizes the reason to divide things into categories of useful and useless, never recognizing the inter-relatedness of all things nor the unique beauty of every object nor the wholesome washing over us of all things that sweeps us into the bosom of the universe if we but let it. In fact, it is this acceptance that awakens Thoreau to the idea that “our desires to control events...is misguided” (Robinson, *Natural Life* 62). Such realizations are necessary as they liberate the hero from such small minded and fear-inducing concerns as

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<sup>83</sup> “We cannot but pity the boy who has never fired a gun; he is no more humane, while his education has sadly been neglected...No humane being past the thoughtless age of boyhood will wantonly murder any creature...He goes thither at first as hunter and fisher, until at last...he distinguishes his proper objects as a poet or naturalist it may be and leaves the gun and fish-pole behind.”

success, failure, life or death. This is a lesson he exemplified years later by uncharacteristically opening up socially as he faced his “death is the most eloquent testament to the success of his life and a final valuable window into his ethics” (Cafaro 230). Thoreau especially made time and room for the children of the area to visit him in his infirmity and deathbed that he might model this final instance of private heroism for the subsequent generation, not yet the loss Benjamin would later discover in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

There is courage in the humility Thoreau recommends to his audience, “to live- when living is dying- always requires courage” (West 1054). Death reminds us of our limits, rendering us humble before ourselves. The humility of recognizing one’s limitations and respecting the rights of others are essential to Thoreau’s hero: “when I have learned a man’s real disposition, I have no hopes of changing it for the better or the worse” (*Walden* 372). Far from fatalism, Thoreau recognizes each individual’s right to self-determination even at the cost of his or her happiness in this life, a lesson painfully clear in Thoreau’s encounter with the Irishman John Field, despite Thoreau’s very human irritation at the disappointment in failing to impress Field (*Walden* 451-54). The idea of humility walks hand in hand with the idea of simplicity. Together, they empower each man to become not only rich in the time requisite for the cultivation of the self, but to become self-sufficient enough to live free from compromise, thus enabling an honesty with himself and all others, as well as removing the motivation for the evils of worldliness. Thoreau goes so far as to claim the simple life would cure most of society’s greatest ills when he claims, “if all men were to live as simply as I did then, thievery and robbery would be unknown” (*Walden* 421). Thus, Thoreau turns traditional American thought on its head by arguing that the American Dream of material prosperity defies the possibility of American Freedom:

[H]e [John Field] rated it as a gain in coming to America, that here you could get tea and coffee, and meat every day. But the only true America is that country where you are at liberty to pursue such a mode of life as may enable you to do without these, and where the state does not endeavor to compel you to sustain the slavery and war and other superfluous expenses which directly or indirectly result from the use of such things. (*Walden* 453)

Capitalism directly conflicts with democratic freedom in that the pursuit of material goods inevitably pushes us to coerce and exploit others, thereby depriving them of their freedoms as well as depriving us of our own: “there is nothing, not even crime, more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, aye, even to life itself, than this incessant business” (“Life Without” 632).

Thus, capitalism-swayed democracy stands in the way of individual liberty and it must be rebelliously fought.

We see this common motif of rebellion throughout Thoreau's writing, even in those works least considered political- his travel writing, where he uses the Romantic symbols of rebellion against reason (mythology) and purification through destruction of what stood before (fire) in such figures as Prometheus, Atlas and Lucifer (Martin 182): "While the explicit theme of *Walden* is the promise of rebirth and immortality, an additional undertone implicit in the cycle of rebirth is the appeal of death and destruction- Nature as wild- forces of destruction are inseparable from the forces of creation" (Reynolds 117). Thoreau's Jesus in *A Week* has stripped away the dead historicism of New England's Christianity to become an "agent of change and reform" resulting in "This activist Jesus, much more a politically oriented figure than Emerson's Jesus poet of the Divinity School *Address*" (Robinson, *Natural Life* 56-57). However, Thoreau desires individuals to rebel not just against capitalism like Marx, but against all forms of conformist acceptance: intellectual, cultural, inter-subjective, but most of all political and legal coercion. In the end, capitalism and conformity prevent true ideals and principles from gaining ground in the public arena. And for the Greeks and Thoreau, private decisions and public action are two sides of the same coin that must be guided by moral principle in order to be truly counted as human, which is seen here not as derived by social convention, but as guided by an individual's well thought out philosophy or outlook on life. One's ideals (created after much thought) should drive one's choices: "Cultivation is a model of ethico-political action that sees a continuity between self-fashioning in the household and the broader shaping of the political community" (Walker 159). It is the acting in private and public according to one's ideals or values that allow one despite success (epic hero) or failure (tragic hero) to stand forth as a truly human exemplar: "Morality necessarily involves action from principle, which brings something radically new and incomparably great into the world, Thoreau believes" (Cafaro 179). Thus bringing in moral, physical and intellectual virtue or excellence into the political realm introduces heroism to the masses by being a "touchstone for his society" (Cafaro 188, 191).

"Resistance to Civil Government" or "Civil Disobedience" argues exactly this point. Despite Thoreau's criticisms of organizations of do-gooders, he supported the Abolition

movement throughout his private life and public career: “[Even though] Thoreau had lampooned professional reformers, he respected those who were sincere and whose deeds embodied their words” (Petruionis 212). His criticism primarily targeted those who merely play-acted or posed at involvement or those who did so as busybodies as well as those who self-servingly built themselves a career out of it, being “too eager to redirect attention from their own lives and avoid attending their own affairs” (Mariotti 20). Slavery pressed upon Thoreau as a grievous concern the whole of his life. His own family had raised him as a member of the Underground Railroad. They hid fugitives, nursing some to health, and buying railway tickets for others. His mother and sisters were, in fact, founding members of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society. Slavery issues such as those of Sims, Burns and Brown were the only other extensive journal entries outside of his observations of nature: “Thus in addition to voicing his antislavery convictions in various forums, Thoreau also acted on these beliefs, often at considerable personal risk” (Petruionis 208, 210). The American government of his time could not be trusted to safeguard “Life and Liberty” when it allowed deceit and violence among its own citizens in order to maintain its union “Thoreau made it very clear that freedom could not exist for anyone while slavery remained because the government that guaranteed his liberty could not be relied upon as long as it sanctioned slavery” (Petruionis 212).

The dead institution of government that utilizes taxation, military force and public infrastructure to safeguard private interests while it masquerades as efficient protection of the public good looms before Thoreau as just that system which he feels he must spurn. Such an institution loses sight of its original intent and purpose as established by the Constitution: “This American Government- what is it but a tradition, though a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity” (“Resistance” 110). Its democratic structure, by definition of the majority, comprises in itself a use of physical strength to unjustly constrain the will of the minority and the individual (“Resistance” 111). Law is another tool of fear to create “respect” for whatever whim happens to become legislated, creating a “race of wooden” machine men to carry out the dictates of the state (“Resistance” 112). Besides creating conformity in the individual, any government’s attempt to legislate (even in those rare cases FOR the benefit of mankind) objectifies human beings as much as capitalism’s exploitive labor practices does in that “if

government tries to promote moral improvement by continuous activity it will degrade the people whom it is trying to improve by treating them as objects in need of repair” (Kateb 88). Therefore, even when the government tries to legislate justice by inculcating morality into the people, it ends up being unjust as it disposes men to obey and follow blindly rather than think and choose for themselves with the result that when “Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them” (“Resistance” 119). However, human beings must at all times cultivate their own individual consciences in such a way as to be capable of critiquing government and its laws so that “if a law commands what is seriously wrong, it must be disobeyed” (Kateb 88).

The individual must reserve the right to resist and revolt when the machinery of government is unjust (“Resistance” 113). For Thoreau’s time, that injustice resided in the sanction and protection of slavery and the carrying out of the Mexican War as a means of appropriating more land (“Resistance” 113). He admits that it is not the “duty” of any individual to dedicate his life to righting the wrongs of the world, but he also argues that it is his responsibility to insure he does not participate in such injustices (“Resistance” 117). This highlights the fine line between resisting injustice and “do gooding” for Thoreau. Thoreau does demand that we each refrain from harming others without just cause and even goes so far as to “resist for the sake of others,” but he also carries the “emphatic rejection of the idea that individuals exist in order to actively promote the well-being of others (do-gooding)... Thoreau wants people to take care of themselves, not to be taken care of” (Kateb 33, 88-89). This refusal to participate is something readily available to any and all (whether organizations to redress civic injustice or unjust government itself) seems to some small and egoistic and requires answers.

This is the second type of withdrawal Thoreau describes: a refusal to participate in institutions, whether just or unjust. This withdrawal (the refusal to participate) often strikes readers as disavowing responsibility for unjust institutions but without rectifying the circumstances for those affected (Thoreau may be in the clear, but African Americans were still enslaved). Cafaro for example argues that separation is weakness and that movements are “necessary to eradicate political immorality” (181). Cafaro does not understand Thoreau’s well-deserved mistrust of groups or their penchant for organizing or creating new conformity not only in political action but thought and speech as well. All groups infringe,

limit and curtail individual possibility (Thoreau could be susceptible to this infection as readily as anyone else: think of the militarism found in sections of *Walden*, as well as his essays on slavery like “The Last Days of John Brown”- Walker 163). However, individual action can start off small, but nonetheless create a chain reaction of other individuals who take similar actions or diverse actions but in approximation of a common goal while nonetheless still retaining their autonomy. This is something writers as diverse as Cafaro and Walker can agree on.<sup>84</sup> Over time, such withdrawal carried out by many though independent constituents can sever unions and halt social, political and economic mechanisms through its revolutionary essence as long as it is driven by the detachment derived from moral ideals rather than self-preserving cowardice or slothful apathy:<sup>85</sup> “Action from principle, the perception and performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary...It not only divides states and churches, it divides families; aye it divides the individual, separating the diabolical in him from the divine” (“Resistance” 119). It is these divisive little choices in our lives that can stimulate others to act, if not in accord with us, at least in accord with themselves; “There are in each of us the seeds of a heroic ardor...which need only to be stirred in with the soil where they lie by an inspired voice or pen” (July 13, 1838). The importance is not to find followers, but to inspire others as individuals who now search for their own path by illuminating the fact that “there are as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one center” (*Walden* 266).

As Walker extensively demonstrates, Thoreau was highly conscious of the fact that any form of cultivation (literal-agricultural, as well as social-political) took root only by displacement of something pre-existing with an equal right to live but now condemned to rootlessness and/or death (164). Therefore, Thoreau considered it imperative that an individual strive to avoid making decisions of any kind for others as much as humanly possible and to cultivate himself but without the certainty of one’s “righteousness”

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<sup>84</sup> “[A] few heroic conscientious objectors could lead more people to act”(Cafaro 188). And “Since the world shaping that is entailed in the cultivation model moves out from each individual directly into the family and community, it serves as a good framework for conceiving social projects within civil society...has advantages for modern thinkers who worry about...an essentially coercive state structure” (Walker 159).

<sup>85</sup> As Reynolds discusses in *Righteous Violence*, Thoreau’s notions of detachment which “transforms bloody actuality into heroic spiritual joy” that stems from a “unity of soul with a supreme being eliminated fear of death” was heavily reinforced for Thoreau personally by his readings of Hindu texts, and the *Bhagavad Gita* in particular (118-119). It can also explain Thoreau’s ambivalent or seemingly contradictory attitudes towards violence- as Siva explain to Arjuna: dualities like peace or war are merely human constructs of the mind, illusions: all peace is built on violence and all war strives for peace, for example.

characteristic in most ideological ‘-isms’ that would give rise to the totalitarian nightmares of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: “A very few- as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men- serve the state with their consciences also...He who gives himself entirely to his fellow men appears to them useless and selfish” (“Resistance” 112-13). Not an easy task to be sure, to perfect oneself, set an example for others yet leave for them their freedom- one must almost be divinely inspired. This inspiration stems from living, “so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically” (270).

Thoreau paradoxically argues that by living honestly as private individuals, we become public figures (the inward impulse becomes an outward sign).

To prove his point, Thoreau describes his own life as a rebel in the tax evasion incident wherein he was jailed overnight (125-30). In spite of Thoreau’s small step towards revolt and the somewhat comical night in jail, Thoreau’s actions and speech would reach Martin Luther King, Jr., one hundred years later to inspire the Civil Rights movement in America and Gandhi before that, to inspire the pacifist revolt in India. Thoreau did live by his thoughts in that he also participated in the Underground Railroad despite the Fugitive Slave Act threatening him with imprisonment (*Walden* 402). However, the quiet life Thoreau lived and advocated struck most (including Emerson) as un-ambitious and a form of cowardice: “Thoreau lacked the broad influence...failed to command the respect of his peers. Unable to convert others to his ideas or arouse them” (Powell 29). That no revolt followed after him, only the ridicule of those who considered him a eccentric at best and anti-social at worst, demonstrated no weakness in him as a hero, but rather that: “Revolutions are never sudden. Not one man nor many men...suffice to regulate events...They are famous or infamous because the progress of events has chosen to make them its stepping stones...The most important is apt to be some silent and unobtrusive fact in history” (Thoreau’s Journal dated December 27, 1837).



## CHAPTER V

### FULLER'S SELF-FULFILLMENT [THIRD TREATMENT]

The mystical “transparent eye ball” experience Emerson reports in *Nature*, the center of interest in the book, seems to make the real world, especially social reality, melt away.

- David M. Robinson “Margaret Fuller & the Transcendental Ethos”

The Margaret Fuller we are concerned with in this essay is the later Margaret Fuller, born in her move to New York to write for Horace Greeley’s *The New York Daily Tribune* and reaching her apex during her travels in Europe as a foreign correspondent, because of the severe transition in her development as a thinker, writer and activist that these moves signaled for her life and career. In any case, some brief discussion of her earlier thought and work must be considered as the seeds of her later thought and life. Though first placed on the path of learning by her father since she was a toddler<sup>86</sup> and later primarily self-taught given the time period’s rules on the education of women, Fuller eventually began in 1836 an intellectual relationship with Ralph Waldo Emerson that became integral to her development but did not define it.

Emerson’s estimation of Fuller as heroic rested on her lifelong commitment to acting on behalf of those she loved and her capacity to love almost inclusively any that came into meaningful contact with her. Fuller took the financial responsibility of her family upon the demise of her father in 1835, giving up at the time an offer to fulfill her dream of traveling throughout Europe, opting instead to help her brothers through university. Not merely satisfied with minimally satisfying her job requirements as a teacher to put bread on the table, she excelled in teaching to the extent of working in Rhode Island in 1837 as the highest paid teacher in America. However, she discovered that teaching children could not challenge her deep intellect nor feed her voracious appetite for literature and discourse. Returning to Massachusetts by 1839, Fuller combined her financial needs with her social agenda to improve women’s rights and education.

Fuller established her paid salon-like “Conversations,” wherein she led educational discussions aimed at empowering Boston’s upper class women with training similar to

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<sup>86</sup> “My father- all of whose feelings were now concentrated on me- instructed me himself” (“Autobiographical Romance” 26).

Harvard students: “she wished to...bring these women out of their stuffy parlors and help them acquire the knowledge and self-reliance that would compel men to accept them as their equals” (Madison 428). Fuller attempted to educate these women in such a way as to redirect their attention and focus from nurturer and provider of domesticities for the husband, brother, father towards themselves in an effort to cultivate themselves: “the gain of creation consists always in the growth of individual minds...and in the continual development of that thought, the thought of human destiny...That which was once clearly conceived in the intelligence cannot fail sooner or later to be acted out” (*Woman* 253-54). Like Thoreau, Fuller did not have a desire of teaching others what to think, but merely advise them that they should learn to think for themselves. The goal consisted of offering these women the possibility of and tools for accomplishing a more well-rounded identity to complement and inspire a better form of man in addition to being a model to other women: “Margaret Fuller spoke prophetically of such a figure as the ‘self-centered woman’ able to live ‘a beautiful, powerful...complete life’” (Lopez 135). Thus, even her “purely intellectual” projects served as launching pads for her activism, though it was perhaps not clear to her then that she headed in this direction. In fact, Emerson, so impressed with her, appointed her to become the first editor of the magazine *The Dial* between 1840 and 1842.<sup>87</sup>

Although she agreed with Emerson and Thoreau in many ways, Fuller never shied away from blazing her own intellectual path. Agreeing with Emerson’s and Thoreau’s ideas of self-cultivation, “Fuller sought to encourage her audiences to attend to their individual intellectual and spiritual growth” (Reynolds, *Righteous* 39). Emerson sought such self-cultivation for achieving greatness and Thoreau for the possibility of withdrawal, whereas Fuller recognized that “only by first becoming a better person could one begin to address public problems calling for solutions” (Reynolds, *Righteous* 40). As a contributing member of the Transcendentalist Circle, Fuller accepted Emerson’s conception of Man Thinking, Saying and Doing as the means of reaching individual full potential, but conceived of the triple aspect in her own terms. For her, the means to achieving this path could take one of three forms: thought, action and intuition (*Woman* 250). If Emerson represents thought or intellect and Thoreau action or life, then Fuller must be positing herself for intuition. The distinction between thinking and intuition hinges on distinctions made by Immanuel Kant in

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<sup>87</sup> The majority of the details in this brief biography originated in Jeffrey Steel’s Introduction to *The Essential Margaret Fuller* (xi-xv), unless noted otherwise.

his *Critique of Pure Reason*, where he distinguishes between reasoning based of sense derived information (contingent in nature- Coleridge's understanding or Fuller's thought) and reasoning based on knowledge found in the mind prior to sensation (necessary and universal- Coleridge's reason or Fuller's intuition). It is intuition and inspiration she refers to by her Muse in the Muse or Minerva and Athena dichotomy present within women (Minerva being wisdom or intuition and Athena as empirical based reason) (*Woman* 309). This "spiritual" element in well-developed women and men offers a possible source for "direct knowledge" given by the "singleness of life" serving as a harmonizing mechanism in the life of the hero/ine, appearing in the form of prophecies to the uninitiated (*Woman* 310). This intuitive connection with one's surroundings supplements thought and action by filling in the gaps always present in one's decision-making process. Such intuitive gifts endow the hero/ine with what appears to others as epiphanies or visions divinely sent or as divine providence or fate that molds the outcome of events in favor of the hero/ine. Yet, Fuller warns that "sight must be verified by life" in order to assure one of one's genius and prove one's sanity (*Woman* 311).

Here we see an element not as pronounced in Emerson and Thoreau given their positions as males in nineteenth-century American society: the need to test one's grasp of reality against the grain of conventional reality. This issue needing resolution probably resulted from her constant need to prove herself to herself and others considering that she was an independent and strongly opinionated woman in the nineteenth century: "And were all women as sure of their wants as I was, the result would be the same. But they are so overloaded with precepts by guardians who think that nothing is so much to dreaded for a woman as originality of thought or character, that their minds are impeded by doubts till they lose their chance of fair free proportions" (*Woman* 262). This century particularly scrutinized women in search of deviations from the socially accepted norms and often characterized such women as "hysterical" or "mentally/emotionally unhinged." Women found too stubborn or stringent in their ideas were often ostracized if not outright diagnosed with some malady that led to their commitment in a "sanitarium" and consignment to human experimentation, torture, and/or humiliation while under "medical" custody.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, Fuller grew accustomed to the constant self-examination germane to such an antagonistic

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<sup>88</sup> See Victorian period literature such as the Bronte sisters novels, Gilman's "The Yellow Wall Paper," de Maupassant's "The Necklace" and countless other examples.

environment. All the same, the question of whether a “hero/ine” departs from reality as a result of some egomaniacal self-aggrandizement is a legitimate concern to address in the theories of these three thinkers: as one cultivates oneself away from the confines of conventional perception, how can one prove one is not going off the deep end? This need to ground ourselves inevitably returns us to the other; the need for verification revolves on a need for other people (this is why Thoreau’s questing hero must return from the mountain and wilderness to civilization just as Fuller’s heroine must love-- both choices serve to test one’s insights and present opportunities for action).

Besides the thought or learning of Emerson, the choices or actions of Thoreau and Fuller’s intuition, the heroine requires love: “God is living, now, today; and all beings are brothers, for they are his children. Simple words enough, yet which only an angelic nature can use or hear in their full free sense...but soon the lower nature took its turn, and the era of the truly human life was postponed” (*Woman* 249). It is love that most unites man and brings him closer to that utopian dream of an earth based Eden; it is love that grounds and justifies the motivation of the hero-ine towards activism. However, Fuller points out how the majority of mankind (and Christianity in particular) may circulate “simple words” like these in empty gestures of propaganda dissemination, campaigning catch-phrases, and as a means of appeasement to one’s conscience. It is the lack of “brotherly love” that has cast us out of this paradise in the first place: “The name of the Prince of Peace has been profaned by all kinds of injustice toward the gentile whom he said he came to save...towards the red man, the black man” (*Woman* 253). Those who often claim to represent the “Prince of Peace” in the end fall short of fulfilling Christ’s message because of these words’ radically unnatural expectations and meaning, so that “only an angelic nature” fully understands or lives them.

Nonetheless, Margaret Fuller endeavored to live as such an angelic nature: “Fuller possessed a warm and generous nature that made it natural to sympathize with the lowly and oppressed...saw the revolutions motivated by a desire for freedom and justice” (Reynolds, *European* 61). Love guides not only towards the need for racial equality, but towards an equality among the sexes (gender). Gender relations in the household ground and structure all other social relations given the central and primordial nature of gender in the family, the cornerstone of all society. Fuller goes so far as to claim that man cannot evolve or progress any further in any significant way until he liberates and incorporates woman and all other

minorities into the social, political, intellectual structure: “We cannot expect to see any one sample of completed being, when the mass of men still lie engaged in the sod...While any one is base, none can be entirely free and noble” (*Woman* 250).

The virtues of love and equality require the respect for and cultivation of the individual to reach authenticity. No incomplete, uneducated, dependent person could ever achieve a union with another as the union should be of two complete individuals, not halves or portions of one or the other (something Fuller was very much aware of): “If any individual live too much in relations so that he becomes a stranger to the resources of his own nature, he falls into a distraction or imbecility...union is only possible to those who are units. To be fit for relations...souls...must be able to do without” (*Woman* 312).

Yet, in order to achieve complete individuality, one must achieve the full growth of the duality inherent in all human beings, the masculine and feminine (*Woman* 343). Each person contains within the personality masculine and feminine traits that must be cultivated fully in their own respects as a means of achieving a balance that produces a well-rounded human being; without this, no true relation is possible not only in marriage but in all relations. For example, the hero must have feminine love or compassion to create a moral center within him to drive his male courage and violence towards righteous defense of the weak, while the heroine must have male courage to support her own feminine compassion. Therefore, this androgynous balance is necessary for any heroine or leader of men: “Wherever the poet or artist gave free course to his genius, he saw the truth [of his own dichotomy], and expressed it in worthy forms, for these men especially share and need the feminine principle” (*Woman* 344).

Knowledge, wisdom, compassion and sympathy are better developed by incorporating these complementary elements of the psyche, thus enabling a leader of men to not only feel his fellow men’s plight, but to inspire through an intuitive expression that compels its listeners and readers much like Fuller is commonly held to have been capable of in her addresses and conversations. Fuller’s ability to feel the plight of others was typified by her experiences traveling west in 1843: “What she saw was the chaotic, violent and greed-driven colonization of the frontier degraded not only the indigenous people, but the Anglo European whites as well, particularly the women... [while the Circle persisted in] petty intellectualities, cant, and bloodless theory at home” (Lukens 184). Indeed, Fuller so

embodied her own ideals, she could not sit idly by without stepping out of the shadows of the academic and into the public arena to fight in accord with “her desire to put her theories of social equality into practice and to lead her own life according to the radical reforming urges of her conscience” (Lukens 184).

The years 1844 and 1845 marked a key turning point for Fuller as she took decisive steps to distance herself from Emerson and the Circle. Her extensive travels and the accompanying writings effectively forced her to recognize that her instinct to act upon the injustices she witnessed could not be shared with her colleagues: “Fuller’s method was beginning to differ from Emerson’s in that it was informed by her own emotional response and by the experience she ironically found wanting in him” (Lukens 188). In 1844, she published her book *Summer on the Lakes* and moved to New York City for “an opportunity to move conscience and philosophy to action” (Lukens 184) by working at *The New York Daily Tribune* for Horace Greeley, where she began as a literary critic but quickly “became keenly interested in the improvement of the city’s charitable institutions and reformatory institutions” (Madison 433).

New York offered her a fresh start and a cesspool of social injustice that required addressing by a voice brave enough to issue the call from the urban wilderness: “Our round of visits to the public institutions, I want to make a beginning...Now is the time for me to see and write about these things...I feel as if something new and good was beginning” (December 31, 1844- to William Channing). The transition from scholar to journalist or author to reporter marked a move from books to living people as subjects of study and as products molded. This transition from art to reporting, from literary projects to deadline-driven articles turned out to improve her writing by augmenting her ability to write “poetically,” “polemically,” and “prophetically”: “her sketches that have certainly more immediacy, and probably more fidelity and force because of their immediacy...Fuller’s socio-political concerns, which supplanted her interest in art, resulted, paradoxically, in the best writing she ever did” (Reynolds, *European* 57, 62). Her masterpiece *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* was published in 1845 as America’s first book-length treatise on the need for equality among men and women. A sensational public reaction greeted her publication as society split into factions in praising and condemning her text, a reaction Fuller would completely endorse given her penchant for individual thought.

“[I]n her capacity as a newspaper reporter, with the chance to scrutinize society’s ills and institutions at close range,” Fuller hoped to immerse herself in life in the midst of society rather than a phantasmagoria of ideas to better attack the evils of the world (Lukens 185). Ironically, Fuller decided to use the technology and media responsible for undermining the hero in Carlyle and Emerson and derided by Thoreau as gossip rags as the vehicle to her version of heroic action in the public sphere. The institutions she refers to include the women’s correctional facility, the poor house, the orphanage, mental hospitals, the men’s prison and of course slavery (Reynolds, *European* 57). Fuller did not just write about these for Greeley’s paper in order to shock or titillate, she sincerely desired to make known to the public the impoverished conditions of these people as a wakeup call for the need to act, journalism as activism: “On Saturday, we went up to Sing Sing...WC addressed the male convicts...They listened with earnest attention, many moved to tears, some to a better life...as I looked over that sea of faces marked with the traces of every ill, I felt that, at least, heavenly truth would not be here kept out by self complacency and a dependence on good appearances” (November 23, 1844- to Richard Fuller). Not only did she plan to examine the miscarriages of justice in all manners of social institutions, Fuller planned on “calling upon her individual readers to examine their own contributions to the betterment of society” (Lukens 188).

By 1846, she traveled to Europe as one of the U.S.’s first female correspondents by reporting on the conditions of art, ex-patriot lifestyle, poverty, the working class and finally the Italian revolution. What she saw in her travels left her no option but to focus on the political and economic concerns of the European people, eventually ignoring the arts, cultures and lifestyles that most bourgeois American readers originally craved from her: “I did not think as I saw...the soul of the people imprisoned and held fast as in an iron vice, that it would burst its chains so soon” (*These Sad* 211). Fuller’s conscience, however, could not stomach articles on the frivolities of the upper class in the face of such widespread upheaval: “In her view, the commercial classes had heartlessly exploited the laboring poor and the ruling despots had denied them basic political rights” (Reynolds, *European* 61). Not simply a mute witness or bemoaning widow, Fuller eruditely reports the social ills in Europe in such

a way as to launch her own criticisms against America:<sup>89</sup> “In letter 18...she uses the European scene as the basis for a severe indictment of American society, especially its capitalism and slavery” (Reynolds, *European* 65). It is in letter 18 where Fuller expressly details her quest and dream of having those who demonstrate greatness leading the masses to their own freedom and justice: “only of a small minority that I can say as yet seriously take to heart these things...what is wanted for their country- for mankind...Could we succeed...combine...the achievements of Genius with the happiness of the multitude, we might believe Man had now reached a commanding point in his ascent” (*These Sad* 165). The climax of her quest for a struggle to enjoin came with the Roman-led Italian Revolutions of 1848, where she finally embraced her calling as a socialist revolutionary and political activist (Reynolds, *Righteous* 40).

Margaret Fuller was content with neither idly awaiting a hero like Emerson nor quietly living in the woods like Thoreau. In fact, Fuller’s disagreements with Emerson and Thoreau “were rarely over aims or the metaphysical foundation of those aims, but rather over the means of achieving them” (Robinson, “Margaret Fuller” 84). She wanted a leader to raise an army and take to the streets: “For the children of the future cannot rest in any but the holiest nook, they must be out in the avenue righting the wrongs” (October 27, 1843). Socialism as a means of forcing social justice in an attempt to create utopia was the essence of any great human being: “Sages and lawgivers have bent their whole nature to the search for truth...one seed for the future Eden...poet...artist...philosopher...historian...man of science” (*Woman* 248). Given her lifelong predilection for German, her compassion for the workers and the poor, and her experiences abroad, it was only natural and perhaps inevitable that Fuller should come across Marx and adopt Socialism:<sup>90</sup> “This pattern certainly exemplifies the trend toward a historical consciousness...embodying itself politically in reform movements and utopian socialism” (Robinson, “Margaret Fuller” 90).

Fuller’s time in Paris, France, at a time when Socialism rang out in the streets and in the parlors among the students, intelligentsia, workers and writers (like Georg Sand, Pierre Leroux, Felicite Robert de La Mennais, Victor Considerant, and so many more) would only

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<sup>89</sup> “The history of our planet in some moments seems so painfully mean and little, such terrible bafflings and failures...such a crashing of the mass of men beneath the feet of a few, and these, too, of the least worthy...Must I not confess in my country to a boundless lust of gain? Must I not confess to the weakest vanity” (*These Sad* 163, 165).

<sup>90</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ *The Communist Manifesto* was published in 1848.



serve to exacerbate her already growing sympathies (Reynolds, *European* 60-61).<sup>91</sup> However, Fuller's exposure and attraction to Socialism predates her experiences in Paris (1846-47) given that she translated a German article "The Social Movement in Europe" for the *Tribune* in March of 1845, wherein she explains the theories and ideals of Marx and Engels (Lukens 194). By the time she is engrossed in the Italian Revolutions of 1848, it is safe to say that "Fuller counted herself among the extreme left of the Army of Progress and found herself ready to engage in the revolutions of the world" (Lukens 195), causing Elizabeth Barrett Browning to label Fuller "one of the out and out Reds" (Von Mehren 17). Despite the disapproval back home of Socialist sympathies by Fuller, many did identify with her descriptions of using revolt on behalf of justice, in particular the Abolition movement that wavered indecisively before this on the question of arms: "Fuller's dispatches...exerted a strong influence on Americans, especially Abolitionists, encouraging them to regard violence as a legitimate means of dealing with oppressive government...Fuller indirectly influenced the Civil War by helping shift the Abolitionists to a pro war stance" (Reynolds, *Righteous* 18, 39).

In the midst of Fuller's finding a love affair with Giovanni Ossoli who fought as a republican and participating in the political ferment of Italy's short lived rebellion by nursing in the hospitals in 1848-49, she finally (though briefly) achieved her dream of taking the youth "out into the avenues to right the wrongs": "When in 1849 the Republic of Rome was declared and French forces assaulted the city...[Ossoli] took up his post on the walls of the city and Margaret assumed the role of director of the Hospital of fate Bene Fraterelli, to which the wounded were sent every day" (Kearns 122). In the leaders of the revolt, she saw men finally rising to their true heroic calling as redeemers of man, flesh and blood men that match the hero's qualities described earlier: "These are...men whose hearts glow with that generous ardor the noble product of difficult times. Into their hearts flowed wisdom from on high- thoughts great, generous, brotherly...they will have lived a period of true life" (*These Sad* 222). With the exception of Whitman, who manned the medical tents during the Civil War, only Fuller witnessed the flesh and blood harsh and cruel realities of heroic rhetoric

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<sup>91</sup> From dispatch #12 in Paris- "La Mennais and his coadjutors published in La Reforme an honorable and manly Protest, which the public rushed to devour the moment it was out of press...the only crumb of comfort offered to those who have the nobleness to hope that the confederation of nations may yet be conducted on the basis of divine justice and human right" (*These Sad* 121).

practically and politically applied up close and personal; these experiences would take their toll on her spirit: “War near at hand seems to me even more dreadful than I had fancied it. True! It tries men’s souls, lays bare selfishness in undeniable deformity... it breeds vice...her starving poor stretch out their hands in vain” (*These Sad* 280). The bloodshed, casualties, and final defeat of the republican forces of Italy may have birthed a weariness of soul in Fuller, but not a fatalistic quenching of her hopes for tomorrow: “If I live, which I hope I shall not, for I am very tired of the battle with giant wrongs, and would like to have someone younger and stronger arise to say what ought to be said” (*These Sad* 245).

It is in these correspondences reporting on the Italian revolt for democratization that she anticipated Nietzsche and became contemporary with Kierkegaard on some level by constructing a heroic mask or role for herself to play as the drama unfolded, developing the character of feminine revolutionary and daughter of liberty in the front at considerable risk to her safety: “the woman who spoke on behalf of Italian liberty in the *Tribune* was an artful creation...by adopting this public persona that was fiercely committed to Republicanism, Fuller became in the eyes of sympathetic readers a romantic revolutionary heroine” (Reynolds, *European* 75-76). This is NOT to say that she pretended or created dissimulation in a post-modern sense, but rather that she emphasized some aspects of her true self and allowed other aspects of herself to wither away in her journalistic voice. The purposes behind such role-playing served to better place herself as a human face in the rebellious drama and communicate the real-world plight of the people involved, a direct contrast to the sterilizing “objectivity” journalism tends to pretend: “How much I shall have to say on that subject if I live, which I hope I shall not, for I am very tired of the battle with giant wrongs, and would like to have someone younger and stronger arise to say what ought to be said” (*These Sad* 245).

Superficially, an observer may accuse Fuller of complete fabrication on her part with respect to her public persona, for, as Reynolds points out, “Whereas the *Tribune* persona is bold, resolute, optimistic, the persona of the private letters is frightened, uncertain, and pessimistic...In many ways, the private Fuller, the woman concerned with human beings as opposed to abstract ideas is more heroic because of her vulnerability than the persona of the *Tribune* letters...for them [readers] a more ideal and stoic revolutionary was in order” (*European* 76-77). Reynolds is on the right track in his assessment. Fuller, far from being

fake or hypocritical, merely demonstrates what is essentially human and heroic: we are all plagued by doubts in those quiet, lonely hours before dawn, and must struggle not to let those fears conquer us or voice these hesitations before others when they themselves are already being harassed by their own demons: “As the siege of Rome progressed...Fuller saw that the cause was doomed, yet she elevated all to an epic level in her letters by focusing on the bravery and heroism of the people...upon the hero’s features as he prepares to meet his fate” (Reynolds, *European* 67, 72). Despite her Dantian journey to reject much of Emerson’s merely scholastic outlook, she nonetheless kept the idea that the poet must display the hero in such a guise as to empower and inspire those who come after with the hope for further possibility.

The first half of the nineteenth century would, in the end, defeat the heroic rebellion for democracy and liberty: “For me as I heard the tramp of great force come to keep down every throb of generous, spontaneous life, I shuddered at the sense of what existence is under such conditions, and felt for the first time joy over the noble men that have perished” (*These Sad* 316). Though beaten and worn out, Fuller’s heroic determination could never be permanently broken: “At this moment all the worst men are in power, and the best betrayed and exiled. All the falsities, the abuses...seem confirmed. Yet it is not so...Soon you, all of you, shall ‘believe and tremble’” (*These Sad* 322). These and many other equally prophetic passages towards the end of her time in Italy strived to still offer hope to a demoralized and broken people who were about to be re-subjugated after having briefly tasted sweet freedom.

Following the crushing defeat of her rebellion, Fuller, her lover Ossoli and their infant child sailed for Fuller’s home of Massachusetts but died tragically by shipwreck within sight of the American coast in 1850. Her life’s journey, comprised of a quest for romantic love (Eros) and brotherly love (Agape), guided her to find both in Italy; losing her struggle for her brethren (rebellion) as well as the product of her more personal love (her child at sea moments before her own death), Fuller faced her destiny as heroically and tragically as she faced her life by going down with the ship. There had been an earlier gulf growing between Emerson and Fuller that she might have characterized as his fatalistic emphasis on the self-sufficiency of the “self” contrasted against her belief that associations of men and women were necessary. Fuller could not accept Emerson’s idea that isolation could successfully combat the attempt to crush individualism by the forces serving the status quo; it seemed to

her that would only assist those forces better by enabling them to “divide and conquer.” Whereas Emerson believed organizations became complacent as a result of the bureaucratic nature of many individuals with conflicting ideas working together to the extent of bogging down their possibility of political action with the endless discussions of committee work, Fuller had to redirect her efforts in a newly rekindled belief that people needed one another: “the primacy of the individual and the ineffectiveness cooperative reform efforts, two convictions she would eventually reject in Europe” (Reynolds, *European* 57). In the end, however, her life and death were destined to alter Emerson’s own course as his “work on Fuller’s memoirs forced him to reexamine and struggle in coming to terms with her life...her memory informed his growing political engagement” (Reynolds, *Righteous* 45). Unfortunately, Emerson and Thoreau’s elections to concentrate their efforts on fighting solely slavery in their later careers betrayed Fuller’s persistence in combatting all forms of injustice and most importantly their own original agendas to war against the root causes of these injustices: scientific skepticism and capitalistic decadence. Fuller never lost sight of the exploitation of workers, the infringement on women’s rights, the forces seducing away from republican democracy, and the other evils present then and now (Reynolds, *Righteous* 41). Fuller’s only tragic failure was dying young, not only in Emerson’s eyes, but our own, as we ask ourselves what might have been had she lived.

## CHAPTER VI

### PROGNOSIS

Where are the old idealists...In looking at the class of counsel and power and wealth...amidst all the prudence and all the triviality, one asks, "Where are they who represented genius, virtue, the invisible and heavenly world? Are they dead- taken in their ripeness to the gods...Or did the high idea die out of them, and leave the unperfumed body as its tomb?"

- Ralph Waldo Emerson "The Transcendentalist"

Marx was ultimately right. The Civil War turned out to be not only a war about human dignity; it turned out to be the war to determine the means of production for America's future: Northern industrial exploitation of the wage worker versus the Southern agricultural exploitation of the slave...basically a war of evils. Northern ability to churn out weapons and ammunition from its army of factories and soldiers from its never-ending line of immigrants coming off Ellis Island supplied the materials and labor force necessary to overpower the South. Looking backward, we can easily see with our twenty-twenty hindsight that the capitalism and bourgeois culture of the North defeated not only the Southern agricultural way of life, but also India's caste system, Oriental feudalism, and the European Socialist experiments. The twenty-first century births a new millennium thus far characterized by global markets opening up to capitalist expansion of conglomerate conquest. Emerson and Thoreau sided with Northern bourgeois society against Southern slavery ("the lesser of two evils?") as an attempt at salvaging some aspect of their quest, given that the original Transcendentalist agenda became grudgingly swallowed up by the swarm of popular opinion and its legion-like voices. Fuller never lost sight of the true enemy to heroism, but her crusade was cut short.

If a spectrum that measured the extent of Marxist or Socialist support in a thinker's ideology could be established, each of these three Transcendentalists would be placed at the three extremes of the spectrum. As her correspondences and camaraderies allude to, Fuller would obviously sit on the far left extreme of being fully Marxist in her sympathetic desire to see all equally partake in their share of resources. Thoreau would of course be the moderate in that he desires an end to capitalistic fetishism (worship of the product) and its ensuing rat race, but stops short of advocating revolt in order to redistribute the wealth given that he opposes any attempt to legislate morality for individuals. Emerson, being the oldest, would

naturally fall at the extreme right, not as a capitalist (for he rejected it as much as the others), but rather the far right of anti-Marxism in that he resisted the idea of allowing the mass of men to dictate the policies and values of the individual. In the end, however, he could fight off joining the Abolitionist form of mass morality only for so long.

Nevertheless, the aim of these three thinkers was the same: fight capitalism and bourgeois culture to reinvigorate a moral outlook and independent self-reliance that could enable individuals for heroic action in a democratic arena. The methods differed radically. The Emersonian hero struggled to ascend to greatness, much in the tradition of conquering Agamemnon or Alexander of Macedonia, willing to shape and mold history in his own image. However, becoming swept up in their own rhetoric and failing to see their indebtedness to those around them, Agamemnon and Alexander would be assassinated by those close to them and die alone. Though not literally assassinated by those around him, Emerson died without the Circle he had come to love in his own way. The Thoreauvian hero marched to the beat of his own drum and desired nothing more than to be left alone, at home in the world, much like Odysseus, Hector and George Washington, who were all called to fight other people's fights, people who would in the end never understand them. Thoreau too would die misunderstood by those who loved him most. Fuller's heroine tried to right the wrongs of society at the expense of her own life, mirroring revolutionaries like Lenin and Trotsky, Che Guevara, and Crusaders like Oedipus who would all die in exile (to some extent like Fuller) or be assassinated by those they tried to free.

Despite the disagreements concerning the proper approach to heroism among these thinkers, they were united in their need for finding heroism in the business-as-usual, callous world in which they lived. Their quest was not so much for one or a few men and women as much as for a new perspective for the common everyday person in the streets: a new way to think and a new way to love. Emerson's groundbreaking trailblazing continues to inspire readers in universities to this day, while Thoreau's quiet simplicity led some to create twentieth century pacifism and the American Civil Rights movement and continues to lead many youthful environmentalists to the wild woods, and Fuller's words call young women to continue the fight for women's rights she started in America on foreign shores. However, given the color and tenor of twenty-first century society, with its spectator of human misery via reality TV and mindlessly voracious appetite for technologically material goods, I can

only echo what Fuller felt at the end of the Italian revolt: “For me as I heard the tramp of great force come to keep down every throb of generous, spontaneous life, I shuddered at the sense of what existence is under such conditions, and felt for the first time joy over the noble men that have perished.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> *These Sad But Glorious Days*, 316.

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