

THE GREAT MAN: EMERSON'S THEORY OF SOCIAL REFORM

JENNIFER SEGREST DAVIS


To the Graduate School:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Jennifer Segrest Davis entitled "The Great Man: Emerson's Theory of Social Reform." I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

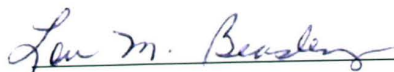
A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Michael Schnell", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Michael Schnell, Major Professor

We have read the thesis and
recommend its acceptance:

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Dr. H.", written over a horizontal line.A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Jim Eichhorn", written over a horizontal line.

Acceptance for the Council:

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Len M. Bessling", written over a horizontal line.

Dean of Graduate Studies

The Great Man: Emerson's Theory of Social Reform

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

Austin Peay State University

Jennifer Segrest Davis

May 2004

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Houston, and children, Polly, Whitney, and Joshua, who enthusiastically supported my efforts, and my grandparents, Willie and Nita Callahan, who have always emphasized the importance of an education to one's happiness and well-being.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank all those who helped me complete my Master of Arts degree in English. I would like to thank Dr. Schnell for his unwavering support and encouragement throughout the thesis process. His patient listening skills and enthusiasm inspired me to do my best. I would also like to thank Houston Davis, my husband, whose love gave me the confidence to strive to achieve my goals.

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze the cultural currents that influenced Ralph Waldo Emerson's theory of social reform and to further clarify his ideas using his writings regarding two major figures of antebellum America, Daniel Webster and John Brown. Sacvan Bercovitch believes that Emerson's paradoxical ideas concerning the individual and dissent provide the basis for consensus in America, and he further states that Emerson's ideas will occasionally support violent resistance. This thesis analyzes the origins of Emerson's support for individual, violent dissent and clarifies his ideas concerning the process of cultural reform.

Using Nancy Rosenblum's definition of romantic militarism as a basis, this thesis traces some of the characteristics of Emerson's hero to the Romantic Movement's emphasis upon individualism and its embodiment, Napoleon. From America's early pioneer myth and its heroes, Daniel Boone and David Crockett, Emerson's hero adopts anti-intellectualism and a willingness to use violence. For Emerson, all culture change must be an individual accomplishment; therefore, he constructs a strong individual based upon these ideas who will act outside society's institutions to reform them. Emerson's support for John Brown and his disdain for Daniel Webster, recorded in speeches, essays, and letters, are evidence of Emerson's belief in the necessity of a strong, violent individual to reform culture.

Preface

The purpose of this thesis is to clarify Emerson's ideas regarding the individual and societal reform and to document some the cultural conditions that contributed to the formation of his ideas concerning the strong individual.

Table of Contents

Section	Page
I. Critical Influences	1
II. The Great Man: Emerson's Theory of Social Reform	3
III. Works Cited	26
IV. Annotated Bibliography	28
V. Vita	33

Critical Influences

I read Richard Slotkin's classic of literary criticism Regeneration Through Violence during the time when I was also reading the essays and lectures of Emerson. I began to consider the origins and character of Emerson's hero. Slotkin's assertion that the violence of the American mythological pioneer is a result of the adaptation of the Indian hunter and rejection of the European saint as a hero helped me understand why Emerson chose to make his hero uneducated and bloodthirsty.

I also came to consider some further implications of the great man and dissent within our culture after reading Sacvan Bercovitch's The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America, Bercovitch points out that much of Emerson's philosophy "is neither American, nor liberal, nor democratic" (315). Much of the philosophy is European and "antibourgeois" (315). Bercovitch contends that Emerson appreciates the utopian goals of Brook Farm but believes that socialism is a flawed methodology. Emerson believes that the only way to achieve a utopian existence is isolate oneself from society. This utopian existence that Emerson seeks through self-reliance echoes the desire of independent settlers such as Daniel Boone to create a place of peace and abundance. Bercovitch also emphasizes that dissent is a necessary part of Emersonian philosophy. Thus, any hero will be in conflict with the dominant part of society. This discussion made me consider the further implications of the great man and dissent within our culture.

One of Emerson's heroes is John Brown. I better understood Emerson's regard for Brown after reading John Stauffer's The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race. Stauffer considers the idealism of four men, Gerrit

Smith, McCune Smith, Frederick Douglass and Brown. He differentiates between those who disapproved of slavery and those, like Brown, who believed in the equality of people of all races. Stauffer notes the belief held by all four men that God's kingdom could be realized on earth. This fervor motivated Brown to violence when his government could not resolve the moral issue. Thus, Brown is idealism in action, and Emerson's comments concerning Brown leaves little doubt that Emerson considered him a hero for this reason.

Each of these sources led me to consider different aspects of Emerson's theory of the great man. Slotkin discusses the origins of the American hero, explaining the violence and uneducated nature of the mythological pioneer. Bercovitch discusses Emerson's contributions to liberal democracy, emphasizing the necessity of dissent. Stauffer's profile of Brown, the embodiment of an idealistic individual dissenting from society, highlights the way in which Emerson claims dissent should work within society. Furthermore, these critics demonstrated for me that historically based scholarship can produce not only criticism of literary texts but of the culture in which those texts take part.

The Great Man: Emerson's Theory of Social Reform

Critics often accuse Ralph Waldo Emerson of lacking a workable strategy for societal change. Emerson's coldness in "Self-Reliance" towards group activity and his own disdain for the abolitionist groups in the antebellum period leave him open to attack from those who desire a workable strategy for righting cultural wrongs. For instance, John Carlos Rowe calls Emerson's transcendentalism a philosophy that "works to rationalize present wrongs" by emphasizing the individual "rather than being about social change" (40). However, Emerson, despite his scholarly image as the "sage of Concord," does offer a radically violent theory consistent with his theory of the individual for how one should reform a culture. Emerson, drawing upon European Romanticism and America's own mythological pioneers, envisions a principled yet anti-intellectual hero who uses violence to reform society. In his own time, Emerson identifies John Brown as such a hero and vilifies Daniel Webster, traditionally praised as an agent of peace. His "Great Man" theory justifies violent dissent by the individual who disrupts cultural institutions.

Sacvan Bercovitch in his book The Rites of Assent claims that America is a land unified by the idea of being an individual. Bercovitch believes that Emerson creates a paradox in his thinking, and this paradox sustains liberal democracy. The individual must resist the established institutions of society, and the establishment or entrenched culture will enlarge or alter its position to include the individual. Thus, a strong, sovereign individual shapes the establishment, which then shapes other individuals through enculturation (Bercovitch 342). Emerson, Bercovitch claims, formulates this paradox by embracing the utopian vision of socialists while still embracing the duties of

the individual. According to Bercovitch, the dissent of the Emersonian individual helps to produce consensus within a society (Bercovitch 309-311). Thus, for Emerson, dissent is necessary for social cohesion.

For Emerson, all dissent must be individual, for he states in “Self-Reliance” that “whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist” (“Self-Reliance” 261). Emerson believes that the misery of mankind is because of man’s submission to institutions rather than the law of nature found within every individual. “The violations,” he writes in “Heroism,” “of the laws of nature by our predecessors and our contemporaries are punished in us also.” He further states, “Our culture, therefore, should not omit the arming of the man” (“Heroism” 373).

The Romantic Movement in Europe and its embodiment, Napoleon, inspired Emerson to create a hero of powerful will, a representative of his nation who imposes his powerful will upon society. Emerson professes his admiration for the European romantic writers and his debt to their view of the hero and of social reform in the essay “Europe and European Books” when he discusses what he considers “golden days” of European literature. A European tour would once show the young traveler “the noble heads of Scott, of MacIntosh, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Goethe, and Humboldt” (“Europe” 1251). Emerson especially admires Wordsworth because Emerson believes that Wordsworth’s poetry is original and changed the politics of the times. Emerson writes:

Hence the antagonism which was immediately felt between his poetry and the spirit of the age, that here not only criticism but conscience and will were parties; the spirit of literature and the modes of living, and the conventional theories of the conduct of

life called into question on wholly new grounds. ("Europe" 1255)

"The influence" of Wordsworth's poetry "modified poetry" and "at last legislation" in "England and America" ("Europe" 1255).

These works of Wordsworth and his European contemporaries exposed Emerson to "romantic militarism," a term Nancy Rosenblum uses to explain the attitude of the first and second generation European romantics toward warfare. The early romantics, such as Wordsworth, ignored the regimented, hierarchical nature of the military and focused on the potential for personal growth, self-expression, and cultural change through warfare (Rosenblum 250). These romantics "were not always passionate about politics or inclined to real aggression but [. . .] wrote about war as the way to enforce justice and as the occasion for self-expression" ((Rosenblum 249). Wordsworth, for example, writing about the Spanish resistance to the French invasion, considers "the sign of national genius" to be "spontaneous popular belligerency on behalf of independence and civil liberty" (Rosenblum 251). Thus, for Wordsworth, war should be unstructured uprisings by people for a common principle. Rosenblum contends that Wordsworth believes that "out of this warfare come miraculous transformations" (Rosenblum 253). Wilhelm von Humboldt's The Sphere and Duties of Government changes romantic militarism by separating it from the institution of the military. Humboldt, a Prussian, lived in a military state and for him the military stifled individuality. Rosenblum contends that Humboldt's "ideal soldier is the reverse of the Everyman" (Rosenblum 257). Rather than make the military consist of a group of mutually inspired people as Wordsworth does, Humboldt envisions "it ennobled, composed of unique, independent characters with sensitive souls and intellectual interests, men who throw off passive attitudes, disdain common

pleasures, initiate action, and love personal liberty” (Rosenblum 257-258). Although Humboldt does not totally reject living in a modern egalitarian state, he does celebrate the opportunity war gives the individual to “elicit the highest and noblest energies” (Rosenblum 258).

The second generation of romantic writers, according to Rosenblum, altered the meaning of romantic militarism by focusing on “personal growth” rather than “a collective action in some ideal common cause” (Rosenblum 258). Militarism then became “an opportunity for the exercise of personal will,” completely changing the democratic ideal of Wordsworth (Rosenblum 258). Hence, the figure of Napoleon exerts a great influence on Chateaubriand, Stendahl, and Musset and on other French writers working after the restoration of the monarchy. According to Rosenblum:

Whether or not romantics subscribed to the cult of Bonaparte, their imaginative recollections of Napoleon as a personality were of one piece. In their minds Napoleon’s achievements as a strategist and his imperial ambitions were insignificant; the inexorable unfolding of his own power and personality in the world was their inspiration. (260)

Even if the individual dies in the process of the exercising his or her individual will, the death “was a form of self-assertion” (Rosenblum 261). It is “a public act and a demonstration of personal qualities” (Rosenblum 261). Death in war then becomes a creative action, much like writing. Rosenblum contends that romantics such as Byron, Hugo, and even the American Thoreau use romantic militarism as a metaphor for the effects of “the imagination’s efficacy and power” (Rosenblum 262).

Emerson's writings reflect the influence of both generations of romantic writers described by Rosenblum. When Emerson writes in his essay "The American Scholar" that "a nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the divine soul which inspires all men," he echoes Wordsworth's thoughts concerning "national genius" (59). Like Humboldt, Emerson also sees war as calling forth the power of the individual. In his essay "Power" Emerson writes:

The triumphs of peace have been in some proximity to war. Whilst the hand was still familiar with the sword-hilt, whilst the habits of the camp were still visible in the port and complexion of the gentlemen, his intellectual power culminated. (980)

For Emerson, then, the discipline, determination, and stamina associated with being a warrior increase the ability of the individual to excel in the "finest and softest of arts" ("Power" 980). Thus, the man of action improves his genius in other areas due to his martial exploits.

Like the second generation of romantic writers, Emerson values the man of action. He tolerates vice in his hero because the ability to exert one's will over others is an expression of nature's power. However, Emerson expresses only "qualified admiration" for the genius who does not eventually reform himself. In Emerson's correspondence with Carlyle concerning Goethe, Emerson expresses his problems with the personal morality of Goethe:

Then the Puritan in me accepts no apology for bad morals in such as *he*. We can tolerate vice in a splendid nature whilst that nature is battling with the brute majority in defense of

some human principle. ("To Carlyle" 107)

The only way an immoral genius can "retain our sympathy" is by turning his efforts "inward" and reforming himself ("To Carlyle" 108). If the great man does not eventually reform himself, his genius "loses its nature & becomes talent, according to the definition – more skill in attaining the vulgar ends" ("To Carlyle" 108). Thus, if the man of action fails to discipline himself, he loses the power of nature.

Like the later generation of Romantic writers, Emerson admires Napoleon for his power and ability to act, but he differs from them because he views Napoleon's lack of ideals as a flaw which leads to his eventual downfall. In Emerson's essay on Napoleon, Emerson contends that Napoleon is "no saint, no hero in the high sense" (728). Emerson catalogues Napoleon's great vices and bad habits so that Napoleon appears petty. Emerson writes that Napoleon was disloyal, "unjust," and "monopolizing" (743). Napoleon was also a "liar," "gossip," and "thief" (743). "He would," Emerson writes of Napoleon, "steal, slander, assassinate, drown, and poison as his interest dictated. He had no generosity; but mere vulgar hatred" (743). In addition, Napoleon was, according to Emerson, "not a gentlemen . . . but an imposter and a rogue: and he fully deserves the epithet of *Jupiter Scapin*, or a sort of Scamp Jupiter" (744).

Although Napoleon was "no hero in the high sense," Emerson still considers him great because he represents the French middle class (728). All of Napoleon's vices and talents are characteristics of France. Bonaparte is the "idol of the common men" and just like the middle class, he pursued wealth, not higher morals, and had no scruples about how he achieved power (729). According to Emerson, Napoleon realized that he was the perfect man for his time and rationalized his decisions by claiming his efforts were for

the people of France. Napoleon was still divine because he was self-reliant. “His principle means are in himself,” Emerson writes of Napoleon, “He asks counsel of no other” (732). Napoleon disposed of “cant and hypocrisy” by not offering excuses for his actions. He met the qualifications of the great man Emerson describes in the essay “Heroism” because he was “scornful of being scorned” (“Heroism” 372). Napoleon’s failure to dominate Europe “is not his fault” because he was nature’s “experiment . . . of the powers of intellect without conscience” (“Napoleon” 744). The hero failed because once the population determined that his motives were selfish, the masses no longer saw his connection with nature and deserted him. His power to lead people derived from his link with the over-soul, and once this link severed, true power left him (“Napoleon” 745).

Napoleon was a failed experiment, but because his power derived from Nature his self-reliance justified his violence. Emerson anticipates the moral problems associated with Napoleon’s constant warfare and answers:

Horrible anecdotes may, no doubt, be collected from his history, of the price at which he bought successes; but he must not therefore be set down as cruel; but only as one who knew no impediment to his will; not bloodthirsty, not cruel, but woe to what thing or person stood in his way! Not bloodthirsty, but not sparing of blood, – and pitiless. (“Napoleon” 732)

The implementation of the hero’s, and by association Nature’s, will palliates any violence that the hero commits. “All power is of one kind,” Emerson writes in his essay “Power,” “a sharing of nature in the world” (972). People who are party to the divine through self-

trust will be “strong with their [own] strength” (972). Napoleon, then, is a national hero who advanced the history of his country through the violent imposition of his will.

Ideally, for Emerson, the hero uses violence to advance the cause of some moral principle. Bercovitch states that, “As a utopianist, Emerson could accommodate ideas of all kinds, could even support insurrection under extreme circumstances. He demanded only that insurrection serve the cause of utopia” (Bercovitch 338). In “Heroism,” Emerson states that “it behooves the wise man to look with a bold eye into those rare dangers which sometimes invade men, and to familiarize himself with disgusting forms of disease, with sounds of execration, and the vision of violent death” (380). The individual will may require violence in order to maintain its integrity, and “Heroism” exalts the individual who perishes for principle. For example, Emerson claims that “Elijah Lovejoy gave his breast to the bullets of the mob, for the rights of free speech and opinion, and died when it was better not to live” and the “the unremitting retention of simple and high sentiments in obscure duties is hardening the character to that temper which will work with honor . . . in the tumult, or on the scaffold” (“Heroism” 380).

Another source for Emerson’s “Great Man” theory is the frontier mythology of America. From the myth of the pioneer, Emerson draws the uneducated “natural man,” who uses violence to advance a “felt” morality. The lack of education, in Emerson’s thought, makes the hero more in touch with nature. In “The American Scholar,” Emerson writes that “Books are the best of things, well used; abused among the worst . . . They are for nothing to inspire” (57). One finds truth in nature, not in a system of education. “The book, the college, the school of art, the institution of any kind, stop with some past utterance of genius . . . They pin me down. They look backward and not

forward," Emerson writes ("American" 57-58). For Emerson, heroism is "the avowal of the unschooled man" and too much education, thought or "intellectual activity" might hinder the hero from doing "the highest deed" ("Heroism" 374). Contemplation and education hinder the hero because, for Emerson, truth is felt rather than learned.

"Heroism," Emerson writes, "feels and never reasons, and therefore is always right" (374). Society enculturates those within it; therefore, those who seek solitude with nature are more capable of feeling truth.

Emerson believes that the western pioneer, free from an education which glorifies Europe and its traditions, will lead the young country's population to a new culture more aligned with the will of nature. Emerson contends that in Europe, a few institutions have most of the power and so stifle the individual. Now society requires an "antidote": the "bruisers, who have run the gauntlet of caucus and tavern through the county or the state, have their own vices, but they have good nature, strength, and courage" ("Power" 976-977). The "Hoosier, Sucker, Wolverine or Badger- or whatever hard-head Arkansas, Oregon, or Utah sends, half-orator, half assassin" to govern will "educate the potentate" on how to be a natural, powerful individual, rather than missing "the sovereignty of power" like that masses in Europe ("Power" 976). The pioneer men Emerson seeks disdain the inaction education requires. They:

Cannot read novels, and play whilst; cannot satisfy all their wants at the Thursday Lecture, or the Boston Athenaeum. They pine for adventure, and must go to Pike's Peak; had rather die by the hachet of a Pawnee, than sit all say and every day at a counting room desk. ("Power" 979)

Emerson viewed the frontier hero in much the same way other citizens of the early republic did. The immigrants from Europe encountered a seemingly natural paradise peopled by the Native Americans, and a myth evolved framed by the immigrants' need to justify their presence in the New World (Slotkin 30). According to Richard Slotkin, "it was the figure of Daniel Boone, the solitary, Indian-like hunter of the deep woods, that became the most significant, most emotionally compelling myth-hero of the early republic" (21). The violence involved in the settlement of the land and the values of the yeoman farmer blend in the being of Daniel Boone. Much of the Boone myth derives from a book about the Kentucky wilderness, The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke by John Filson (Slotkin 9-10). This book describes Kentucky as a natural paradise "where nature makes reparation for having created man" (Filson 108). In this new land, Boone says, "you shall eat bread without scarceness, and not lack anything in it" (Filson 109). This wilderness, then, will provide the immigrant with all he or she needs to live without the fear of privation. The wilderness morally uplifts the immigrant as well. Although Boone and his brother are in the wilderness far from their families, nature comforts them and provides them with happiness. Boone tells his brother Squire that:

You see how little nature requires to be satisfied. Felicity, the companion of content, is rather found in our own breasts than in the enjoyment of external things: And I firmly believe it requires but little philosophy to make a man happy in whatever state he is. (54)

Thus, the wilderness of Kentucky provides Boone and his companion with all they need to be physically and morally fit, despite their isolation from society. When Squire Boone returns home, leaving Daniel in the wilderness alone, nature provides him with happiness. “No populous city, with all the varieties of commerce and stately structures, could afford so much pleasure to my mind, as the beauties of nature I found here,” Boone says (56).

However, in order for the immigrant to partake of the benefits of the wilderness, it must first be conquered. According to Slotkin, Boone “had to retain a positive vision of a perfected civilization as his final goal” to “resist the terrors of his environment” (310). Thus, Boone conquers the wilderness for the moral improvement of mankind. Filson’s narrative provides early America with the embodiment of a determined individual, who, though having much in common with the Indian, must destroy the natives in order to establish the perfect civilization. Boone describes Kentucky as:

lately a howling wilderness, the habitation of savages and wild beasts, become a fruitful field; this region, so favourably distinguished by nature, now become the habitation of civilization. (Filson 49)

He envisions the future cities of Kentucky, cities he claims cannot provide him the happiness of nature, as “rival[ing] the glory of the greatest on earth” (50). Once settlers such as Boone conquer the land, Boone says that, “Peace crowns the sylvan shade,” and in it he enjoys “the prospect of it [the wilderness] being, in a short time, one of the most opulent and powerful states on the continent of North America (81). Therefore, the goal of a moral utopia justifies the violence required to destroy the Indian.

The destruction of the Native American required extreme violence; thus the mythic frontier hero is extremely violent. Boone claims to love peace; he says, "May the Lord Almighty Goodness banish the accursed monster, war, from all lands, with her hated associates, rapine and insatiable ambition" (81). However, this ideal of the perfect civilization requires Boone to clear the land of its former inhabitants. Boone's narrative is rife with attacks on Indians and bloodshed. At the end of his narrative he says:

To conclude, I can now say that I have verified the saying of an Old Indian who signed Col. Henderson's deed. Taking me by the hand at the delivery thereof, Brother, says he, we have given you a fine land, but I believe you will have much trouble in settling it. -My footsteps have often been marked with blood, and therefore I can truly subscribe to its original name [Dark and Bloody Ground]. Two darling sons, and a brother, have I lost by savage hands. (80)

However, following the conclusion of the settlement of this land, "purchased with a vast expense of blood and treasure," "the scene is changed" (81). The violence begets a society which promises to be a place "where afflicted humanity raises her drooping head" (108).

According to Slotkin, the fact that Boone is a hunter enhances the violence of the mythic frontiersman. In the mythology of Europe in the Christian and pre-Christian era, the hunter "has traditionally been regarded as an accursed being" because "his pursuit of beasts makes him bestial – a figure of lust, rapacity, and materialism." The Native American myths praise the hunter and often as "an initiation into a higher state of being" (Slotkin 307). Thus, the adoption of a hunter such as Boone as the national hero means

the rejection of “the life of contemplation essential to the saint and the intellectual” and the acceptance of “the hunter’s anti-intellectualism, his pursuit of the material and ephemeral, and his love of exploit and violence for the sake of blood-stirring excitement” (307).

In Davy Crockett, many of the details of the mythic frontiersman come into sharper focus, especially the lack of formal education, which Crockett does not consider to be a hindrance. Crockett says in his autobiography that the poverty of his father precluded Crockett from having “any learning” (16). Later, at age twelve, when his father has the money to send him to school, he attends only four days, later running away from home rather than attending school because “home and the school-house had both become too hot for me” (Crockett 32). Crockett believes that education does not teach one the moral law of nature and does not prepare one for participating in life. He lives at Shoal Creek “for two or three years without any law at all” and the increase in population leads the settlers to “set up a sort of temporary government of [their] own” (Crockett 133). Although they “lived in the back-woods, and didn’t profess to know much, and no doubt used many wrong words,” the group successfully constructs a government (Crockett 133). The neighbors consider the laws to be inherent in nature, and therefore do not attempt to make or explain them. “We didn’t fix any laws for them, tho’; for we supposed they would know law enough, whoever they might be” (133). Later, when Crockett serves as a magistrate for Giles County, Tennessee, he claims:

My judgments were never appealed from, and if they had been they would have stuck like wax as I gave my decisions on the principles of common justice and honesty between

man and man, and relied on natural born sense, and not on law learning to guide me; for I had never read a page in a law book in all my life. (135).

Thus, Crockett is the frontiersman, who though uneducated, dispenses nature's justice fairly due to his reliance on his own "sense" (135).

This "sense" of natural justice leads to Crockett's fame (Crockett 135). For his "sense" places him above politics and makes him immune to the compromise of his principles to which the usual politician easily succumbs. Crockett advertises himself as above the party process that makes the antebellum government move. "Look at my arms," Crockett says in his Narrative, "you will find no party hand-cuff on them!" (211). His background allows him to be "the people's faithful representative" as he is "without the yoke of any party on me" (210-211). However, his role as a "the public's most obedient, very humble servant" does not necessarily mean that he will consult the public when making decisions. His own innate morality will dictate how he casts his votes while in Congress. "What is . . . agreeable to my feelings as a freeman," Crockett writes, is that "I am at liberty to vote as my conscience and judgment dictates to be right" (210). He stands against his party, his constituents, and his president when he votes against the "Indian bill" (Crockett 206). He writes, "I was willing to go with General Jackson in every thing that I believed was honest and right; but, further than this, I wouldn't go for him, or any other man in the whole creation," and he claims that "my conscience yet tells me that I gave a good honest vote, and one that I believe will not make me ashamed in the day of judgment" (Crockett 206).

James Fenimore Cooper, a contemporary of Emerson, synthesizes similar Romantic and pioneer influences when creating his fictional incarnation of the Emersonian hero, Natty Bumppo (Slotkin 485). The first book of the Leatherstocking Series, The Pioneers, is published in 1822 and the last book, The Deerslayer, is published in 1841, two years before Emerson first collected his essays and published them. In The Deerslayer, Bumppo is a child of nature who disdains the wisdom of society and adopts the lifestyle and mythology of the Indian culture. Natty Bumppo, like Emerson and Boone, believes that God is in nature. According to Deerslayer, the forest, unlike society, “will not deceive you, being ordered and ruled by a hand that never wavers” (Cooper 11). He asserts that society and governments make laws, but “laws don’t all come from the same quarter” (34). Natty, like Filson’s Boone and Emerson’s hero, distrusts knowledge derived traditions and books. The emotional connection Natty feels with the wilderness links him with his deity. He finds that the higher sort of seeing about which Emerson speaks is done by feeling truth. During a discussion about Christianity with his Indian companion Chingachgook, Natty defines sin as a “blindness of the mind, which hid[es] the right from view,” and he claims that the profound truths of God “lie beyond our understandin’ though they may and do lie close to our feelin’s” (442). Therefore, reasoning, rather than depending upon one’s instincts, is the source of wrongdoing and confusion concerning the purpose and laws of God. Natty, after trying to explain original sin and salvation to Chingachgook, concludes his theological discussion by telling the Indian that “the time will come, I hope, when you’ll *feel* these things; for, after all, they must be *felt*, rather than reasoned about” (443).

Natty Bumppo is illustration of the American adoption of the Indian hunter as a hero. Natty's many names document the evolution of his character from a Christian white child to a young, untested warrior living among the Indians. "My names," he tells Hetty Hutter, "have come naturally" and reflect his accomplishments and personality traits (50). He receives the name "Deerslayer" because he has yet to kill prove himself as a warrior (52). However, when he later slays an Indian warrior, the warrior bestows the name of "Hawkeye" upon him (107). Violence, rationalized by a moral standard of one's own creation, becomes the way in which Natty Bumppo evolves into a true warrior. "Deerslayer is portrayed," according to Slotkin, "as a man consciously seeking to create his own character through his deeds as a hunter" (498). As men of action who instinctively know truth, the heroes of Cooper and Emerson are the amalgamation of the European Romantic heritage with the mythological American pioneer.

While Cooper's hero is a fictional creation, the purpose of Emerson's hero is more overtly philosophical and didactic. Emerson believes that history progresses through strong individuals, and he exhorts his contemporaries to behave in a manner that will further advance civilization. When constructing his hero, Emerson foresees a representative of the people, a man of powerful will, who implements his will using violence like Napoleon. Emerson's hero, however, will be moral, and this moral wisdom will derive from the hero's qualities as a natural sage and an independent thinker, in the manner of Davy Crockett. He will act to create an improved society, in which, as Daniel Boone prophesizes "peace, descending from her native heaven, [will] bid her olives spring a-midst the joyful nations; and plenty, in league with commerce, [will] scatter blessings from her copious hand" (Filson 81). This violent, focused, uncivilized

individual will be the subversive force that Bercovitch claims Emerson believed necessary “to sustain the polarity of self and society upon which consensus depends” (Bercovitch 345).

Emerson’s comments concerning two of the most famous men of the antebellum period, Daniel Webster and John Brown, demonstrate his belief in the necessity of violent, individual dissent within liberal society. Initially, Emerson has great respect for Daniel Webster because he sees Webster as a principled man involved in politics rather than simply a politician. As early as 1831 he expresses his admiration in the poem “Webster.” He writes:

Let Webster’s lofty face

Ever on thousands shine,

A beacon set that Freedom’s race

Might gather omens from that radiant sign. (“Webster” 1-4)

In his correspondence with Thomas Carlyle, Emerson writes that although Webster “has his own sins, no doubt,” Carlyle “must hear him speak, – not a show speech, which he never does well, – but *with cause*” (“To Carlyle” 245-246). Emerson claims that Webster shares his feelings about the importance of the individual when he boasts that Webster, like Henry VIII in Shakespeare’s play “loves a *man*, too” (“To Carlyle” 246). His praise of Webster derives from his conviction that Webster stands for the principles of individuality and morality.

Webster’s support of the Fugitive Slave Law exposes him to Emerson as one who, unlike Napoleon, Boone, and Crockett, upholds institutions rather than the will of nature. Webster’s primary goal is not to rid the country of a moral abomination but to preserve

peace and government. “No man is at liberty to set up, or affect to set up, his own conscience above the law,” Webster wrote in published letters to groups (Baxter 478). Webster not only fully supports the legislation, but also, in defending it, disdains the idea of individual protest. He claimed that the Fugitive Slave Act represents “the majority will and must therefore be obeyed” (477). Baxter, a biographer of Webster writes that “Webster’s greatest miscalculation was his devaluation of moral principles in politics” (419). The most important issue to Webster was the “observance of the Compromise to maintain the Union” and avoidance of “bloodshed and disruption of basic institutions” (478).

For Emerson, Webster’s abandonment of morality was a deep disappointment. In 1854 in wrote a new poem concerning Webster, and this time he writes:

Why did all the manly gifts in Webster fail?

He wrote on Nature’s grandest brow, *For Sale*. (“1854” 1-2)

Webster’s support of the Fugitive Slave Law leads Emerson to publicly denounce him as one who had the gifts to lead others, but not the moral strength. Emerson claims that “it was the misfortune of his country that with this large understanding he had not what is better than intellect, and the source of its health. It is the law of our nature that great thoughts come from the heart.” Webster, though well-educated and gifted, “wanted that deep source of inspiration” (“Fugitive” 782). However, because he possessed many more talents than those who surrounded him, “He too is responsible; they will not be. It will always suffice to say – ‘I followed him’” (780).

Although Daniel Webster disappointed Emerson’s hopes for a national hero, John Brown did not. Emerson expressed his admiration for Brown in a speech he gave at a

fundraiser for the Brown family following the raid at Harper's Ferry. In Brown, Emerson sees the traits of all Americans. Just as Napoleon was representative of the values of the French middle class, Brown "was happily a representative of the American Republic." Emerson tells the crowd of Brown's family history in the United States, which, Emerson says, began with "Peter Brown, who came to Plymouth on the Mayflower in 1620" ("Brown" 795). All of his ancestors, like the relatives of most of the Americans of the time, were farmers, and Emerson carefully constructs a patriotic Brown family history by describing how Brown's relatives fought in the Revolution and aided the troops in the War of 1812.

For Emerson, John Brown may be "representative" of the qualities of the typical American, but he is not average. Brown, like Boone before him, has a utopian vision and the determination to implement this vision through violent means. John Stauffer writes in The Black Hearts of Men that "eventually, Brown would seek to make his home and country a heaven on Earth" (89). Brown viewed the instability and loss of his mother as "discipline" from "the Heavenly Father" (89). This discipline would be needed to fulfill his vision of the implementation of God's will in society. At first, according to Stauffer, Brown hoped "to gain a degree of independence" from "society and its vicissitudes" by becoming a business owner (91). However, after failing at several careers, Brown became an "outcast to white society" and sought to replace a sad existence "with the 'authentic' and sublime visions in his Bible" (92). For Brown, the cruelty of slavery was an impediment to implementation of God's will; therefore, he dedicates himself to its eradication (58).

Like Crockett, Brown made moral decisions based upon the dictates of his conscience, which to Brown was an extension of God. Stauffer comments that for Brown and several of his closest companions, “the kingdom of God was not some place above or beyond this world . . . God resided within them and theoretically within all people” (16). Therefore, Brown views himself as “an instrument in God’s hands” (Stauffer 58). Emerson also believed that Brown was a tool of a greater power.

Emerson writes to Carlyle in October of 1870 that:

Genius is but a large infusion of Deity, & so brings prerogative all its own. It has a right & duty to affront and amaze men by carrying out its perceptions defiantly, knowing well that time & fate will verify & explain what time & fate have through them said. We must not suggest to Michel Angelo, or Machiavel, or Rabelais, or Voltaire, or John Brown of Ossawottomie (a great man,) or Carlyle, how they shall suppress their paradoxes & check their huge gait to keep accurate step with the procession on the street sidewalk. They are privileged persons.

(“To Carlyle” 575)

Emerson claims Brown “believed in his ideas to the extent that he existed to put them into action” (“Brown” 796). Thus, Brown becomes the leader that Emerson hoped Webster would be for the young country. Brown, unlike Webster, does not seek justification for his beliefs or methods in courts or constitutions.

Emerson believed that the institutions of education, church, and government, would not solve the crisis of slavery. He disdains the “coldness and indifferentism of scholars and literary men” (“Fugitive” 791). The philosophers, statesmen, and writers “have the power” to make a statement concerning slavery, but they “have not spoken out”

("Fugitive" 791). "We should not forgive the clergy, . . . nor the Government" for their failure to address adequately the moral problems associated with slavery ("Fugitive" 791). For Emerson, the answer to the slavery question then was not institutions but individual men. "I think," he told the crowd in Concord in 1851, "we demand superior men, that they be superior in this – that the mind and the virtue shall give their verdict in their day, and accelerate so far the progress of civilization" ("Fugitive" 790). In contrast to the scholars, this "superior" man must be emotional. For the religious, knowledge of the teachings of Christ will not help a nation of laws with a moral crisis. For the correct interpretation of laws, individuals "need Christ in the heart" ("Fugitive" 787).

Brown, the individual, sought to abolish institutions he saw as obstacles to the realization of his utopian vision for America. The gap between this utopian vision and the realities of antebellum America eventually led Brown to violence as a means of accomplishing change (Stauffer 91). In many ways, Brown's violent methods are a result of America's rejection of the European saint and adoption of a new national hero- the frontier hunter derived from what settlers regarded as a Native American pattern. For Slotkin, any American hero will thenceforth be violent and anti-intellectual. According to Stauffer, Brown attributes his skill as a warrior to his "association with the Kansas Indians" (169). Brown imitated the Indians' war cries during battle and relied "on their fighting tactics" (196). Brown often refers to himself after the Kansas affair by an Indian moniker, "Osawatomie Brown." He spent time with the Indians as a boy in Ohio, and in his autobiography, Brown says that he mimicked Indian dress and manners, even hunting and talking like them (Stauffer 196). The transcendental hero's emotion, then, derives from an association with what the white man considers savage and visceral.

Brown, like Crockett, derives truth instinctively. Just as Davy Crockett legislates without any formal legal training, the transcendental hero instinctively knows what is right and worthy. "Simple hearts," Emerson writes in the essay "Heroism," "put all the history and customs of this world behind them, and play their own game in innocent defiance of the Blue-Laws of the world" ("Heroism" 377). Once the hero determines truth, he is, like Napoleon, a man of action. Emerson exhorts the hero that "when you have chosen your part, abide by it, and do not weakly try to reconcile yourself to the world" ("Heroism" 379). John Brown did not disappoint Emerson in this regard, for Emerson boasts, "He believed in his ideas to that extent that he existed to put them all into action" ("Brown" 797).

Ideally, for Emerson, fundamental change occurs through men of action like John Brown rather than through authors of compromise like Daniel Webster. Thus the evidence bears out Bercovitch's conviction that Emerson tolerates violence under extreme circumstances and that he views conflict as necessary. The implications of this truth are that, for Emerson, true societal change occurs through an isolated individual who acts upon an innate morality. A true reformation of society must be led by a strong individual, and Emerson, drawing from pioneer mythology and the Romantic ideas of the time, forms a hero who is violent and idealistic. Therefore, in Emerson's version of history, John Brown's portion is larger and more important than that of a legal scholar like Daniel Webster. "It is easy to see," Emerson writes, "what a favorite he [Brown] will be with history, which pranks with temporary reputations" ("Brown" 796). For Emerson, "heroes" like John Brown are necessary for the advancement of society. Thus,

the individual leads, and society will eventually follow and embrace the truth the hero espouses.

Works Cited

- Baxter, Maurice G. One and Inseparable: Daniel Webster and the Union. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984.
- Bercovitch, Sacvan. The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Cooper, James Fenimore. The Deerslayer. Philadelphia: Macrae Smith Co., 1940.
- Crockett, David. A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett of the State of Tennessee. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1973.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The American Scholar." Porte 51-72.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Emerson: Essays and Lectures. Ed. Joel Porte. New York: Viking Press, 1983.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ed. Brooks Atkinson. New York: The Modern Library, 2000.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Europe and European Books." Porte 1250-1260.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The Fugitive Slave Law." Atkinson 777-792.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Heroism." Porte 371-381.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "John Brown." Atkinson 793-798.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Napoleon; or, the Man of the World." Porte 727-745.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Power." Porte 971-986.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Self-Reliance." Porte 259-282.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "To Thomas Carlyle." 20 November 1834. Slater 106-111.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "To Thomas Carlyle." 8 August 1839. Slater 244-246.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "To Thomas Carlyle." 15 October 1870. Slater 574-576.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Webster 1831." Atkinson 739.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "1854." Atkinson 740.

Filson, John. The Discovery and Settlement of Kentucke. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, Inc., 1966.

Rosenblum, Nancy L. "Romantic Militarism." Journal of the History of Ideas 43.2 (1982): 249-268.

Rowe, John Carlos. At Emerson's Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature. New York: Columbia Press, 1997.

Slater, Joseph, ed. The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle. New York: Columbia UP, 1964.

Slotkin, Richard. Regeneration Through Violence: the Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1973.

Stauffer, John. The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002.

Annotated Bibliography

Castronovo, Russ. "Political Necrophilia." Boundary 27.2 (2000): 113-148. Castronovo argues that Emersonian philosophy is not only impractical but dangerous because it allows any group to rationalize any political stance, regardless of the morality. For Castronovo, transcendental philosophy is a means of rationalization of any abstract ideal to support any cause.

Chittick, V.L.O. "Emerson's Frolic Health." The New England Quarterly 30.2 (1957): 209-234. This essay effectively links Emerson and Davy Crockett by comparing the aphorisms of the two men and showing the similarities in meaning and philosophy.

Collison, Gary. "Emerson and Antislavery." A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ed. Joel Myerson. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. 179-210. Collison defends Emerson's reputation against those critics who claim that Emerson held himself above the social problems of antebellum America. Collison contends that Emerson's attitude towards slavery evolved and matured into a hatred of slavery with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850. He also claims that one cannot completely understand Emerson's impact on the abolitionist movement simply by reading his works. Emerson was one of the most respected men in America, and his participation in the anti-slavery movement, though less than other leaders, had tremendous influence.

Gougeon, Len. "Emerson and Abolition: The Silent Years, 1837-1844." American Literature 54.4 (1982): 560-575. This article offers insight into the years before the Compromise of 1850, years many critics claim are void of abolitionist activity

for Emerson. Gougeon contends that during these years Emerson's transcendental philosophy made him reluctant to join any group, and he initially felt that Africans might be an inferior race. However, his journals reveal that the attacks on abolitionist leaders influenced him to change his stance, and the conduct of free blacks in the West Indies proves to Emerson that people of African descent are capable of governing themselves. Like Collison, Gougeon views the decades preceding the Civil War as a time when Emerson's opinions concerning slavery evolved into a passionate hatred of the institution.

———. "Emerson, Carlyle, and the Civil War." The New England Quarterly. 62.3

(1989): 403-423. Gougeon establishes the importance of morality within Emerson's philosophy through an analysis of a philosophical conflict between Thomas Carlyle and Emerson. Carlyle's support of the South, based upon his belief in the superiority of those with white skin, angered Emerson. Emerson, in his letters to Carlyle and in lectures, chides the British and Carlyle for their lack of idealism.

Guinn, Matthew. "Emerson's Southern Critics." Resources for American Literary Study

25.2 (1999): 174-191. This interesting article concerning Southern views Emerson refutes assumptions by many critics that Emerson was not sufficiently active in the abolitionist movement. Guinn studies the reaction of southern literary critics to Emerson's works, and he finds that Emerson's emphasis on the individual and the influence of German philosophy upon his thought greatly troubles antebellum southern critics. These reviews reveal that southerners considered Emerson threatening enough to their institutions to vilify him in print.

Hammett, Theodore. "Two Mobs of Jacksonian Boston: Ideology and Interest." The Journal of American History 62.4 (1976): 845-868. This article does not address Emerson's writings directly; however, Hammett demonstrates how antebellum Americans viewed violence as an acceptable means of political change. The personas of Andrew Jackson and the pioneer figures made violence a tolerable means through which one could change society. Through an analysis of two separate instances of antebellum mob violence, Hammett shows that these mobs wanted to reform society rather than destroy the existing social order.

McCormick, John O. "Emerson's Theory of Human Greatness." The New England Quarterly 26.3 (1953): 291-314. This valuable article connects Emerson's philosophy with that of Victor Cousins. According to McCormick, Emerson solves the moral issues associated with heroes such as Goethe and Napoleon by borrowing from Cousins the idea of a man whose "character is at once determined by and determines the character of the group he represents" (303). Thus, power is the defining characteristic of the hero.

McDonald, John J. "Emerson and John Brown." The New England Quarterly 44.3 (1971): 377-396. McDonald offers a helpful analysis of the perceptions of Emerson and Thoreau regarding John Brown and the effects of these views on Brown's legacy. McDonald claims that Emerson "attempted to delineate Brown's moral significance on the basis of selective interpretations of selected facts" (395). For Emerson, Brown was the hero about which Emerson had written in his earlier lectures.

Marr, David. American Worlds Since Emerson. Amherst: U of Massachusetts Press, 1988. In this book Marr discusses Emerson and his influence on later writers. In one especially interesting chapter, Marr compares an early Emerson essay, "Nature," with a later one, "The Conduct of Life." Marr's comparison is important because he establishes that in "Nature" one learns to be self-reliant by retreating from culture; however, in "The Conduct of Life" one becomes self-reliant by reading certain books, listening to appropriate music, and studying philosophy. This education teaches the masses to think, not individualism. Therefore, Emerson's philosophy is not consistently contemptuous of culture.

Moody, Marjorie. "The Evolution of Emerson as an Abolitionist." American Literature 17.1 (1945): 1-21. In this important article, Moody effectively argues that Emerson's attitude towards abolition went through three stages. Early in his career, Emerson believed that slavery was unjust but reflective of a natural order in which "some should lead and some should serve" (2). Later, his objection to the abolitionist movement was mainly philosophical; he believed that the responsibility for freeing the slaves belonged to the slaves and slave-owners. Finally, the "personal dishonor forced upon him" by the Fugitive Slave Law motivated him to alter his philosophy to include collective social action and speak against slavery (21).

Peterson, Merrill D. John Brown: The Legend Revisited. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002. This book is an interesting study of the reaction of people in different time periods to John Brown. Although the book does state the facts of Brown's life, the work is mainly concerned with opinions of people about his life.

Peterson shows how even before his death people on both sides of the slavery debate were fighting to define the legacy of John Brown,

Rowe, John Carlos. At Emerson's Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature. New York: Columbia UP, 1997. This introduction offers an intelligent analysis of the modern application of Emerson's transcendental philosophy. He condemns critics like Len Gougeon, who Rowe says have treated Emerson's philosophy and political activism separately. Rowe argues that when considered together, Emersonian philosophy and any political activism are incompatible. Transcendentalism is too focused on the individual to bring about societal change, and Rowe uses as proof Emerson's own later writings concerning slavery where Rowe says that Emerson advocates economic and political solutions rather than a return to self-reliance.

Ryan, Barbara. "Emerson's 'Domestic and Social Experiments': Service, Slavery, and the Unhired Man." American Literature 66.3 (1994): 485-508. Ryan claims that concern for the condition of servants in New England shaped Emerson's opinions about slavery and political activism from 1837 to 1844. His journals indicate that he is disturbed by the separate lives led by his servants and his family within the same house, and Ryan claims that Emerson conducts a social experiment integrating the two groups using Thoreau and a young boy as subjects. These experiments affected Emerson's views on abolition because through them he saw that the wages paid a servant are more moral than bondage without pay and absolve the New England upper class of any guilt.

Vita

Jennifer Segrest Davis has a B.A. in English and an M.A.T. in Instruction and Curriculum from The University of Memphis. After a one year internship at Overton High School in Memphis, Tennessee, she taught middle school for five years at Benton Hall School, a school focused on helping students with learning disabilities, emotional issues, and attention deficit disorder. A recipient of the Dogwood Award for Literary Criticism, an award given each year by the Austin Peay State University faculty for the best graduate paper, she currently is an adjunct instructor in the Department of Languages and Literature at Austin Peay State University.