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The Republican Philosophy of Emerson's Early Lectures

DANIEL S. MALACHUK

SCHOLARSHIP on Ralph Waldo Emerson has been and probably always will be as idiosyncratic as the work of its subject. Much more straightforward, however, are analyses of Emerson's political thought, which have typically characterized him in one of two ways. He is praised (or vilified) as the genius of American individualism, "the transcendental philosopher who successively separated himself, intellectually and emotionally, from the various crises of the hour [and who] eventually surrendered to a serene acceptance of fate." Or, more recently, he is celebrated as a prominent nineteenth-century social reformer, public intellectual, or cultural critic.¹

Opinion about Emerson's political thought has polarized so readily and completely, I believe, because twentieth-century critics have viewed it through their own political imaginations, and those imaginations are quite different from Emerson's own. Emerson was schooled in what historians today call "republicanism," a tradition of political thought that threads its way through Renaissance Italian and English, American, and French revolutionary period texts.² Although many historians have examined republicanism's afterlife as a nineteenth-century "ideology," only recently have some scholars begun to explore

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¹Len Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), pp. 1–23, esp. p. 2. Gougeon examines how this critical division developed in the decades after Emerson's death.

²For a review of republicanism and its historians, see Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," *Journal of American History* 79 (June 1992): 11–38.

how intellectuals like Constant, Tocqueville, and Hegel actively reinvented republicanism.³ Emerson, too, participated in that enterprise.⁴ By the end of the 1820s, he had been exposed to three versions of modern republicanism: classical, liberal, and cosmic. In the often overlooked early lectures of 1833–40, he began to synthesize those various modes into a unique republican philosophy of self-reliance that would come to define his intellectual contribution to the nation.

Two Modern Republicanisms

Republicanism essentially states that humans are political beings who realize their full potential through the acts of civic virtue required to sustain a republic. Historians have identified two versions of modern republicanism. The first, classical republicanism, originated with Machiavelli. Noting how professional armies tended to turn republics into tyrannies, Machiavelli defined civic virtue (what he called *virtù*) as participation in a citizen militia. He based his ideal citizen-soldier on ancient Roman models like Cincinnatus, the farmer ever ready to exchange his plow for a sword in times of crisis and to return to his fields in times of peace. In a cyclical interpretation of history, which Machiavelli shared with the ancients, republics were perpetually threatened by such uncertainty, an uncertainty of cosmic proportions which Machiavelli designated *fortuna*. Machiavelli often extended his definition of *virtù* to en-

³See, e.g., Biancamaria Fontana's *Benjamin Constant and the Post-Revolutionary Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), George Armstrong Kelly's *The Humane Comedy: Constant, Tocqueville, and French Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), and Stephen B. Smith's *Hegel's Critique of Liberalism: Rights in Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

⁴There are significant exceptions to this general neglect of Emerson's republicanism: Mary Kupiec Cayton's *Emerson's Emergence: Self and Society in the Transformation of New England, 1800–1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), Irving Howe's *The American Newness: Culture and Politics in the Age of Emerson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), and Christopher Lasch's *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991). As early as 1927, Vernon L. Parrington suggested that we read Emerson in relation to the Founders; see *The Romantic Revolution in America, 1800–1860*, 2d ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1954), p. 385.

compass the citizen's ability to repel (or even draw upon) vagaries of *fortuna* in order to sustain the republic.⁵

Anglo-American classical republicanism had its origins during the Interregnum when James Harrington argued in his utopian *Oceana* (1656) that English citizens exercised civic virtue less through martial prowess than through reflection, a meaning he understood to fall within Machiavelli's elastic definition of *virtù*. Harrington reasoned that civic reflection is a direct function of freeheld land. His logic follows Aristotle's in the *Politics*: cultivated land (or the *oikos*) provides freeholders with the leisure to discuss affairs of the state (in the *polis*), and it also gives them an additional motivation to protect the republic (and their private property). In addition to the new emphasis on private property, Harrington also modified Machiavelli's cosmology to satisfy English taste—*fortuna* being interpreted in terms of the Great Chain of Being and Puritan millennialism—but the result was still recognizably Machiavellian: republics are only sustained (against sin now as well as corruption and contingency) through acts of virtue (which could be intellectual as well as physical).⁶

During the eighteenth century, Anglo-American classical republicans drew on Harrington's agrarianism to advocate republics founded upon private property, individualistic (and elite) citizens, rural values, and martial prowess. In the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century, an English "country" argument was developed by political reactionaries like Bolingbroke and poetical ones like Oliver Goldsmith, who were opposed to the new commercial state. In the second half of the century, the country view was also advanced by Americans, first to justify the American Revolution (a pure agrarian republic corrupted by the commercial British monarchy) and then to justify Federalist rule (a natural aristocracy saving the new re-

⁵My definition of classical republicanism is based on the work of J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner. See, respectively, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), esp. pts. 1 and 2, and *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Volume One: The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), chap. 6.

⁶Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, chaps. 10 and 11.

public from mobocracy). Particularly among the New England Federalists, classical republicanism was strengthened by Calvinism. Bemoaning America's post-Revolutionary self-indulgence and corruption and prophesying its imminent decline, Federalist ministers preached what one historian has called "civil millennialism." Mary Kupiec Cayton has described Emerson's childhood among this conservative elite, who "claimed to define patriotism and civic virtue in ways appropriate for all groups in the region," and several commentators have shown that even as a young liberal Unitarian Emerson resorted to this language upon occasion.⁷

Meanwhile, another version of republicanism emerged during the eighteenth century to challenge the dependence on an agrarian model. The same urban markets English Tories and American Federalists denounced as corrupting were hailed by other political philosophers as underwriting the economic and intellectual independence Harrington had deemed essential to republics. Rather than simply disseminating luxuries, *doux commerce*, as Montesquieu and some Scottish political economists referred to it, in fact "sweetened" the citizenry, supplying them, as Thomas Jefferson explained, with the "comforts" necessary to cultivate the modern independent mind. This second version of republicanism, today designated liberal republicanism, still concerned itself with the civic virtue of citizens, but democracy and a market economy had decisively replaced Harrington's feudalism.⁸

⁷Cayton, *Emerson's Emergence*, p. 7 and chaps. 1 and 2 esp. Nathan Hatch defines civil millennialism in *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 146. For discussion of eighteenth-century classical republicanism, see Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, chaps. 12 and 13, Isaac Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and His Circle: The Politics of Nostalgia in the Age of Walpole* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), and William C. Dowling's *Poetry and Ideology in Revolutionary Connecticut* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990). For specific examples of Emerson's classical republicanism in the 1820s sermons, see Cayton, *Emerson's Emergence*, chaps. 2 and 3, as well as Wesley T. Mott's *The Strains of Eloquence: Emerson in His Sermons* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1989), pp. 116–32.

⁸For liberal republicanism (and the Thomas Jefferson reference), see Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York: New York University Press, 1984). See also Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Albert O. Hirshman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments*

As a student at Harvard from 1817 to 1821, Emerson was exposed to both strains of republicanism. Although the university represented elite Federalist interests, as Cayton has shown, those interests also included modern commerce. Thus the university assumed the responsibility, as Henry F. May notes, of instructing its students in Scottish political economy and Common Sense philosophy.⁹ A complex interplay of classical and liberal republican arguments is evident in Emerson's 1821 Bowdoin Prize thesis on Athens, where he attempts to reconcile republicanism with commerce. Citing the Sophists' "lavish flattery of the corrupt populace," Emerson, like a classical republican, distrusts the decadent intellectual fashions associated with a thriving commercial state.¹⁰ As a devotee of the classical republican John Milton, who called for "frequent Academies" so "that the call of wisdom and vertu may be heard every where," Emerson admires Socrates, whose philosophy sought to make men "patriot[s]" and who was able to reform the Athenians with only "harsh but wholesome precepts of wisdom & virtue" (*JMN*, 1:211).¹¹

for *Capitalism Before Its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 56–63; J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and Donald Winch, *Adam Smith's Politics: An Essay in Historiographic Revision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

⁹In her excellent account of classical republican ideology in Emerson's youth, Cayton overlooks the influence of liberal republicanism on Emerson while he was at Harvard. See her *Emerson's Emergence*, pp. 23–30, and Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 347–48. While some historians, including Cayton, present nineteenth-century republicanism as an elitist and reactionary ideology, others present it as a flexible and vital set of ideas. This is not the place to rehearse this well-known debate: see the issue of *American Quarterly* (vol. 37, Fall 1985) dedicated to republicanism and ideology. While the two other accounts of Emerson's republicanism—Lasch's and Howe's—do describe Emerson's republicanism as more than an ideology, they portray him as heir to classical republicanism only and not the liberal and cosmic strains I define here. See Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, chap. 6, and Howe, *The American Newness*, pp. 25, 55, 70–77.

¹⁰*Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson (JMN)*, ed. William H. Gilman et al., 16 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960–84), 1:211. Further references will appear in the text.

¹¹Emerson could not read Milton at this time "without feeling his heart warm to the love of virtue and greatness" (*JMN*, 2:170). Milton's own call for "wisdom and vertu" is in his *Reason of Church Government Urged Against Prelaty*, in his *Complete Prose Works*, 8 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–82), 1:818–20.

But Emerson also understands, and incorporates into his own thinking, the liberal republican view of commerce. Commerce does not necessarily corrupt virtue; instead, it can function as virtue's handmaiden:

In a money-making community literature will soon thrive. It must always follow not precede successful trade. The first wants to be supplied are the native ones of animal subsistence & comfort & when these are more than provided for & luxury & ease begin to look about them for new gratification the mind then urges its claim to cultivation. [JMN, 1:215]

Emerson is making a liberal republican argument here. Classical republicans like Milton were suspicious of commerce as a means of promulgating virtue and favored instead the indoctrinating academies of Lyncurgus's Sparta. Having closely studied Plutarch, Emerson was sympathetic to the discipline inherent in the example of Sparta, but he also shared the optimism of liberal republicans like Montesquieu, Smith, and Jefferson that modern citizens could intelligently distinguish between cultivating comforts and corrupting luxuries.

A Third Modern Republicanism

Although classical and liberal republicans differed over how to guarantee it, a virtuous citizenry remained the ultimate objective of both camps. All agreed that corruption (in forms ranging from political tyranny to material luxury) and citizens' consequent loss of their intellectual independence posed the greatest threat to a republic. The task for all republicans, then, was to define the setting most conducive to the cultivation of free and civic minds. Classical republicans relied on traditional means to insure political stability, especially an agrarian economy and mandatory participation in the militia. Liberal republicans, on the other hand, believed that appropriate commodities, generated by a modern commercial society, would actually liberate citizens from material concerns—"cultivate" them, just as freeheld property once did—so that they could pursue their civic callings.

Amidst this lively debate about the proper setting for the cultivation of civic virtue, a third version of republicanism began to

emerge in the first half of the nineteenth century as certain intellectuals began to reconsider the very essence of civic virtue. Of course, modern republican philosophy had always been concerned with such metaphysical questions. Struggling to refashion ancient political models for an epoch in which the only certainty seemed to be constant uncertainty, modern republican philosophers were tempted to imagine an extra-historical frame of reference wherein citizenship might be defined more permanently. So, for example, Machiavelli used *virtù* to describe not only participation in the city-state militia but participation in the struggle against *fortuna* to achieve stability. Harrington, too, was careful to explain citizenship in agrarian terminology that evoked God's presence in nature even as he discussed real property.¹²

This cosmic focus was revived by the English romantics, particularly Coleridge. Thanks to critics like Nigel Leask and John Morrow, Coleridge's use of Harrington in his 1790s lectures and poetry is now clear, particularly in the poet's writings about property redistribution, agrarian virtues, and democratic ideals.¹³ What has not been recognized, however, is the degree to which Coleridge relied upon Harrington's (and Milton's) idea of Reason, even in his later work. Coleridge's use of the German romantics' distinction between Reason and Understanding in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817) and *Aids to Reflection* (1825) is well known, as is the influence these books had upon Emerson at the end of the 1820s.¹⁴ In the equally influential *The Friend* (1818), however, Coleridge discussed the same

¹²Harrington's pantheism influenced eighteenth-century republicans from John Toland to the young Coleridge. See William Craig Diamond, "Natural Philosophy in Harrington's Political Thought," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 16 (October 1978): 387-98; Margaret Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 80; and Nigel Leask, *The Politics of Imagination in Coleridge's Critical Thought* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), pp. 19-33.

¹³Leask, *The Politics of Imagination*, pp. 19-33; John Morrow, *Coleridge's Political Thought: Property, Morality, and the Limits of Traditional Discourse* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

¹⁴Emerson began to read a lot of Coleridge in 1829, especially *Aids*, the *Biographia*, and *The Friend*. See *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph Rusk, 6 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 1:xxxvi.

distinction but appealed to Harrington and Milton when applying this philosophy to politics.

Coleridge begins his essay on "Reason and Understanding" in *The Friend* with an epigram not from Kant but from Harrington, the thirty-fifth among his *Political Aphorisms*:

Man may rather be defined a religious than a rational character, in regard that in other creatures there may be something of Reason, but there is nothing of Religion.¹⁵

"If the Reader will substitute the word 'Understanding' for 'Reason,' and the word 'Reason' for 'Religion,'" Coleridge writes, "Harrington has here completely expressed the truth for which the *Friend* is contending."¹⁶ Even as he claims to "have no objection to defin[ing] Reason with Jacobi . . . as an organ bearing the same relation to spiritual objects . . . as the eye bears to material and contingent phænomena," Coleridge notes "it must be added, that it is an organ identical with its appropriate objects":

Thus, God, the Soul, eternal Truth, &c. are the objects of Reason; but they are themselves *reason*. We name God the Supreme Reason; and Milton says, "Whence the Soul *Reason* receives, and Reason is her Being."¹⁷

Coleridge clearly misconstrues Jacobi's epistemology, but epistemology is not his concern.¹⁸ He seeks, as the classical republicans Milton and Harrington did before him, to isolate a human essence and to found a state upon its realization. In the sixth essay, "On the Grounds of Government as Laid Exclusively in the Pure Reason," Coleridge clarifies his intentions:

REASON! best and holiest gift of Heaven and bond of union with the Giver. The high Title by which the Majesty of Man claims precedence

¹⁵Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, 2 vols., in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 14 vols. (London & Princeton: Routledge & Kegan Paul and Princeton University Press, for the Bollingen Foundation, 1969-), 4.1:154.

¹⁶Coleridge, *The Friend*, 4.1:154.

¹⁷Coleridge, *The Friend*, 4.1:155-56.

¹⁸Cf. Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Reason, the Understanding, and Time* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961), pp. 14-21.

above all other living Creatures! . . . [T]hou alone, more than even the Sunshine, more than the common Air, art given to all Men, and to every Man alike! To thee, who being one art the same in all, we owe the privilege, that of all we can become one, a living *whole!* that we have a COUNTRY!¹⁹

In Reason, Coleridge believed he had recovered the metaphysical essence of seventeenth-century English republican philosophy, and, for the remainder of his career, his political writings are ultimately concerned with describing the settings conducive to the realization of this metaphysical essence. From Coleridge's vantage point, then, the various property systems advocated by both classical and liberal republicans were just means to this ultimate end—and not the only means at that. So, in addition to the traditional aristocratic agrarianism of *The Lay Sermons* (1816–17) or even the commercial humanism of *The Watchman* (1798), Coleridge also invented new modes of citizen production, including high-brow newspapers (in *The Friend*) and a special “clerisy” (in *On the Constitution of Church and State* [1830]). That group was charged with actualizing “the potential divinity in every man, which is the ground and condition of his *civil* existence, that without which a man can be neither free nor obliged, and by which alone, therefore, he is capable of being a free subject—a citizen.”²⁰

Shortly before launching his career as a lecturer, Emerson wrote that the division of Reason and Understanding made by “Milton Coleridge & the Germans” was “very practical” and that “Reason is potentially perfect in every man.”²¹ In the January 1836 lecture “Ethical Writers,” Emerson recommended to his audience all the authors Coleridge called “Old England” (including Milton and Harrington) as dedicated to “principles”

¹⁹Coleridge, *The Friend*, 4.2:125–26.

²⁰Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of Church and State*, ed. John Colmer, *Collected Works*, 10:52.

²¹Emerson, *Letters*, 1:412, 413. Emerson was particularly influenced by James Marsh's 1829 edition of Coleridge's *Aids*, which explains how “practical” Coleridge's Reason is for American ministers and educators who seek to legitimate moral obligation and find Locke and Common Sense philosophers lacking. See *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. W. C. T. Shedd, 7 vols. (New York, 1884), 1:99, 88.

(one of Emerson's synonyms for Reason). In his next lecture on "Modern Aspects of Letters," he again praised Coleridge:

His reverence for the Divine Reason was truly philosophical and made him regard every man as the most sacred object in the Universe, the Temple of Deity. An aristocrat in his politics, this most republican of all principles secured his unaffected interest in lowly and despised men the moment a religious sentiment or a philosophical principle appeared.²²

Emerson recognized Coleridge's real value, which lay in his eloquent recovery of seventeenth-century republican Reason, not in the various and inconsistent means he invented to foster it. Armed with that knowledge, Emerson, in the early lectures, was able to develop the democratic possibilities of Coleridge's "Divine Reason" without reference to the political contrivances Emerson—supremely focused as he was on the cosmic citizen—recognized as Coleridge's "harmless freak[s]."²³

The Republican Philosophy of Emerson's Early Lectures

Between 1833 and 1840, Emerson gave a lecture series every winter. Traditionally critics have treated these lectures as drafts of the more famous *Essays* of 1841 and 1844.²⁴ I contend, however, that Emerson used the early lectures to develop a republican political philosophy of self-reliance, a version of self-reliance, in fact, that makes more sense—*because* its republican

²²*The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson (EL)*, ed. Stephen Whicher, Robert Spiller, and Wallace E. Williams, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966–72), 1:361–62, 378. Further references will appear in the text.

²³See the 25 November 1836 journal entry: "I told Miss Peabody last night that Mr Coleridge's churchmanship is thought to affect the value of his criticism &c. I do not feel it. It is a harmless freak & sometimes occurs in a wrong place. . . . But [it] is perfectly separable" (*JMN*, 5:252). Much later, in *English Traits*, Emerson would note specifically of *Church and State* that Coleridge had "narrowed his mind" when he "attempt[ed] to reconcile the gothic rule and dogma of the Anglican Church, with eternal ideas" (eternal ideas being another of Emerson's many synonyms for Reason) (*Emerson: Essays and Lectures* [New York: Library of America, 1989], p. 902).

²⁴See, e.g., David Robinson, *Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982): "[f]or Emerson himself, the lectures form an invaluable bridge from the pursuit of preacher to that of essayist" (p. 72).

origins are still intelligible—than the poeticized version presented in “Self-Reliance” of *Essays I*.

As is well known, Coleridge’s political development was greatly influenced by events in revolutionary France. The variety of his political contrivances for guaranteeing the cultivation of Reason clearly displays that impact, for Coleridge advocated relatively democratic measures prior to the Jacobin Terror and relatively aristocratic ones thereafter. During his first twenty years as an intellectual, Emerson’s political growth was essentially the reverse of Coleridge’s. Raised in the elite and reactionary classical republican milieu of Federalist/Calvinist Boston, Emerson gradually came to accommodate modern changes, political as well as economic, through the 1820s and 1830s. His training in market-friendly liberal republicanism accounts for the shift in part, but the cosmic republicanism he learned from the “aristocratic” Coleridge was the greater impetus for change.

Indeed, Emerson’s entire enterprise of lecturing can be understood, I believe, as his attempt to promote his newly acquired cosmic republicanism, the universal realization of Reason. Coleridge’s concept of Reason had a large role in leading Emerson to abandon the pulpit for the lectern, for he came to view the Unitarian service as he did Coleridge’s Anglicanism: unnecessary to the cultivation of intellectual independence (or what he was beginning to call Reason). The well-known 1831 journal entry—“Calvinism stands . . . by pride & ignorance & Unitarianism . . . by the opposition of Calvinism[,] the mere creature of the understanding”—concludes with Emerson’s new pledge to “call you . . . to that which your whole Reason enjoins with absolute sovereignty” (*JMN*, 3:301, 302). In 1834, he imagined a “real religion” which held, simply, that “God is in man.” The new concept involved “a pretty rapid abandonment of forms of worship,” since worship “declares that God is not at one with himself.” This new gospel, in need of dissemination, corresponded with “the renovation & exaltation of preaching into real anxious instruction” (*JMN*, 4:313, 314).

The universal presence of Reason in all persons, in short, led

Emerson to conclude that the time had come to dispense with empty forms and embrace “real anxious instruction.” Later in 1834, noting certain promising transatlantic developments—“[t]he best sign . . . in the dark times is the increasing earnestness of the cry . . . that a systematic Moral Education is needed,” a cry heard from “Channing, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Owen, Degerando, Spurzheim, Bentham[,] . . . Carlyle[,] Pestalozzi”—Emerson likens this new education to the genesis of the first American republic: “Why not a moral Education as well as a discovery of America?” (*JMN*, 4:326, 327). A 9 December 1834 journal entry, in which Emerson responds to the “stale sophism” that “a plain practical Man is better to the state than a scholar,” illuminates the central role Reason played in bringing him to the lectern. “A public action,” Emerson declares, “should be of that simple humane character as to be fully comprehensible by every citizen of good capacity as well the uneducated as the educated. . . . They should not be addressed to the imagination or to our literary associations,” Emerson explained, “but to the ear of plain men.” Emerson describes the new reflective civic virtues of cosmic republicanism:

[Public actions] are . . . such as plain men—farmers, mechanics, teamsters, seamen, or soldiers—might offer, if they would gravely, patiently, humbly reflect upon the matter. There is nothing in their want of book-learning to hinder. This doctrine affirms that there is imparted to every man the Divine light of reason sufficient not only to plant corn & grind wheat by but also to illuminate all his life his social, political, religious actions. . . . Every man’s Reason is sufficient for his guidance, *if used*. . . . Democracy/Freedom has its root in the Sacred truth that every man hath in him the divine Reason or that though few men since the creation of the world live according to the dictates of Reason, yet all men are created capable of so doing. [*JMN*, 4:356–57]

Beginning in the winter of 1833–34, the first three lecture series (on topics often not of Emerson’s own choosing) show how skilled he was at modulating the major versions of republicanism to persuade “plain men . . . to reflect upon . . . the dictates of Reason.” In general, Emerson uses classical republican con-

cepts to frame his topic: agrarian or martial virtues, corrupting luxuries, and looming decline. Later in the lecture, however, he reconfigures those notions to glorify not a national solidarity but a shared truth, which he calls variously “Reason,” or “the Absolute,” or “sacred Truth.” In the first winter’s series on natural history and science, for example, Emerson uses traditional republican terminology to suggest that the study of natural science will help preserve America’s agrarian virtues. Whereas his freeheld land once afforded the citizen leisure for political reflection, nature now provides the natural scientist (who stands for a new type of citizen) with a similar opportunity for contemplation. In “The Uses of Natural History,” for example, Emerson argues like an English country republican that an excessively refined division of labor has “remove[d] men into cities, and give[n] rise to sedentary trades and professions” (*EL*, 1:6). He goes on to embellish his portrait of the corrupt and unreflective city-dweller: “the subdivision of labor has removed each process so far out of sight, that a man who by pulling a bell can command any luxury the world contains, is in danger of forgetting that iron comes of a mine and perfume out of a cat” (*EL*, 1:12).

Having established his context, Emerson then modulates the country republican argument into that pantheistic, cosmic key he learned from Coleridge. “It is in my judgment the greatest office of natural science . . . to explain man to himself . . . [to] give man his true place in the system of being” (*EL*, 1:23). In “On the Relation of Man to the Globe,” Emerson argues likewise that nature, once the site of martial and agrarian virtues, now “may serve the noblest purposes to the intellect” (*EL*, 1:29). Even if Emerson therefore concludes that natural science allows us to “look at the world in quite another light from any in which our fathers regarded it” (*EL*, 1:28), he is essentially replicating Harrington’s argument that nature prompts reflection. What has changed is the degree of access to that reflective moment: now city-dwellers might learn the virtues once available only to the freeholder. In “The Naturalist,” as well, Emerson argues that we have become “the cossets of civilization,” enjoying “a refinement which consists very much in mul-

tipling comforts and luxuries . . . and has the bad effect that crutches have of destroying the use of the limbs they are meant to aid" (*EL*, 1:76). Born in an age blessed by a rapidly expanding understanding of nature, "we should not be citizens of our time . . . if we neglected to avail ourselves of [this] light" (*EL*, 1:83). Again, the value of natural science's light is not strictly intellectual; it has its civic purpose: "[t]he benefit to the community, amid the harsh and depraving strife of political parties, of these pure pursuits is inestimable" (*EL*, 1:82–83).

While the 1833–34 series approaches republicanism through a revised agrarianism, the 1834–35 series does so through revised biographies. Emerson pointedly canonizes those who championed sublimated modern virtues like love and intelligence during key moments of republican history such as fifteenth-century Florence or seventeenth-century England. So, rather than present to his audience the traditional and familiar series of militaristic innovators, Emerson populated his republican history with leaders whose power is only analogous, not identical, to that of the citizen-soldier.²⁵

Michelangelo (before whose tomb in Florence in 1833 Emerson's "flesh crept," though Machiavelli's tomb also received "consideration" [*JMN*, 4:168]) is to be admired for his heroic labors in the arts; even "[t]he midnight battles, the forced marches, the winter campaigns of Julius Caesar or Charles XII do not indicate such strength of body and of mind" (*EL*, 1:107). When Michelangelo refuses to be salaried by the papal state, Emerson asks, "does it not resemble the spirit of George Washington's acceptance of the command of the American armies?" (*EL*, 1:112). Luther, "who shook to the centre . . . the whole fabric of tyranny in the world," is also noteworthy, for he "achieved a spiritual revolution by spiritual arms alone" (*EL*, 1:143, 127). His "prodigious efficiency" emerged out of a "singular union" of "warlike genius" and "amiable and jocular habits" (*EL*, 1:141, 140, 141). "His violent impulses enable[d]

²⁵On the role of the innovator in republican philosophy, see Pocock's discussion of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, *The Machiavellian Moment*, chap. 6.

him to strike with effect and his simple good nature enable[d] him to recover himself for a new blow" (*EL*, 1:141). Emerson praises the others in turn for similarly sublimated virtues: Milton for his "antique heroism" yet "perfect humility," George Fox for a revolution of love that exemplified "the most republican principle"—that "God is our Father and all we are brethren" (*EL*, 1:156, 167).

One obvious difference between the 1833–34 and 1834–35 series of lectures is the role history plays in the second. Emerson is interested not only in describing the civic virtues defined by his age but in showing how these civic virtues have shifted over time, albeit by referring to a limited procession of "great men." After 1835, Emerson continues to narrate histories of republicanism, and increasingly they are histories of "plain" as well as of "great" folk. In "On the Best Mode of Inspiring a Correct Taste in English Literature," a lecture delivered in the summer of 1835, Emerson addresses a customary republican theme: the civic importance of leisure time. As a historian, Emerson recognizes that leisure is bestowed "on those employments to which the custom of the day gives importance." And, as a republican historian, he delineates the progression from classical to liberal to cosmic republicanism, noting that "those who if born in a military age would be soldiers[,] in a trading community become speculators, and in a reading community become men of letters" (*EL*, 1:211). In other words, one custom of the day—the new periodical literature—suggests to Emerson that reading is coming to replace "War, Antimasonry, or Commercial bubbles" as the individual's essential activity—and "so much the better for the state" (*EL*, 1:216). This new leisure-time activity, Emerson exhorts, must be pursued with the same "zeal" that once "fired the nation's leaders . . . [and] bore up an entire generation upon its swell" (*EL*, 1:216).²⁶

²⁶Uncharacteristically, Emerson even promotes a few specific "mechanical means" to further the cause, urging his audience to take up seventeenth-century English authors (like Milton and Harrington) instead of the daily newspaper, to sponsor a brigade of scholars to teach that "[r]eading must not be passive" and is "the lifeblood of the literary republic," to send cheap editions up the Mississippi, and to form new literary societies after the example of the English coffeehouse (*EL*, 1:210, 213–16).

In the 1835–36 lectures on “English Literature,” Emerson again discusses reading, especially the reading of literature, as the next logical setting for the cultivation of civic virtue (or, in the language of cosmic republicanism, the realization of Reason). The task of literature in all ages, Emerson declares, is to make people conscious of the truths they already embody, a process he refers to as “reception.” In a standard republican argument for the importance of independent-mindedness, Emerson states that reading literature helps the citizen recognize and understand the ideas that would otherwise “tyrannize over him” (*EL*, 1:218). Insisting upon the democratic possibilities of reading literature (“[a]ll men are capable of this act”), he goes so far as to revise Machiavelli’s “proud and cruel” maxim of the three classes of men (“those who invent; those who understand; and those who neither invent nor understand”): “the class which receives, the class which perceives, and the class which embodies truth” (*EL*, 1:228).²⁷ Unlike Machiavelli’s oligarchy, Emerson’s classes are not fixed: the embodyers can become receivers.

Emerson uses English literary history to demonstrate how more and more citizens have become just such receivers. Beginning with the “Age of Fable,” English authors “avail[ed] themselves of all that familiar imagery which speaks to the common mind” (*EL*, 1:262) and, from Chaucer’s “gentilesse” forward, sought to define gentlemanly conduct. Emerson believes this pedagogical initiative—writing for the common reader about uncommon men—represents the “most liberal and republican creed” (*EL*, 1:278), for it is dedicated to the universal realization of Reason, or “principles.” Emerson worries, however, as did Coleridge, that contemporary English and American authors have forsaken this pedagogical initiative; instead, the new authors make “incessant appeals to the passion . . . and to the superficial tastes” (*EL*, 1:381).

Unlike Coleridge, though, who finally dismissed the modern mind as hopelessly enslaved to the selfish calculations of the Understanding, Emerson is confident that this superficiality will

²⁷His editors suggest that Emerson found this maxim in Coleridge’s *Friend* (*EL*, 1:228n).

prove only “[a] suspension of the creative spirit of literature in England and America” (*EL*, 1:382). He foresees that every member of his audience—and not just a new literary clerisy—will recognize that truth is “infinite” and that “nothing which has been done forecloses any of its avenues” (*EL*, 1:383). In fact, recommending that all individuals become not just readers but authors, Emerson urges his audience not to trust blindly in custom, for they thus make themselves “impertinent lodgers, not citizens of the world” (*EL*, 1:385). Rather, modern citizenship demands that all persons realize their Reason, or “receive the Absolute”:

Every man—by the gift of intellectual powers is made and prepared to be a literary man. . . . He has a nature far greater than he knows and resources on which he has never drawn. Let him know that the great questions affecting our spiritual nature are not one of them decided. They are all open to discussion and every candid and inquiring mind is a candidate for truth. . . . No man is yet fully a man or has had half the consciousness of being until his intellect has been so stimulated that he has awaked from the sleep of custom, and beheld himself and all nature from the ground of the Absolute. [*EL*, 1:383–84]

By the mid-1830s, then, Emerson understood modern history as sponsoring the progressive emergence of more and more individuals who had learned that the self-trust once associated with agrarian, martial, and commercial activities might now be better accomplished by intellectual reflection, especially that reflection provoked by literature. The task that lay before Emerson was to develop a historical narrative that explained this transition from martial and commercial virtues to intellectual ones. Although all four winter lecture series between 1836 and 1840 consistently depict the historic development of the “self-trusting” or “self-sustaining” “character”—what in the 1841 *Essays* would be famously announced as “Self-Reliance”—I will concentrate on a few lectures from the 1836–37 series, “The Philosophy of History,” for they best illuminate how Emerson developed the republican history reiterated in the lectures of 1837–40.

In the months leading up to the 1836–37 series, Emerson’s journal entries reflect his preoccupation with the problem of in-

novation in history. Earlier he had celebrated the natural scientist, Michelangelo, and Milton; now he questioned whether the course of modern history could really be explained by such gentle souls. For classical republicans like Machiavelli, founding and sustaining republics was often a bloody battle between *virtù* and *fortuna*. In an October 1836 entry, Emerson pondered the issue: "What of these atrocious ancestors of Englishmen—the Briton, Saxon, Northman, Berserkir? Is it not needful to make a strong nation that there should be strong wild will?" (*JMN*, 5:100).²⁸

As he began to draft the "Philosophy of History" series, Emerson came to realize the inadequacy of a historical narrative that did no more than trace the sublimation of the martial impulse and the rise of the intellect. He needed to revise the Machiavellian dynamic to free space for appreciating that innovators might work in tandem with, rather than simply do battle against, the cosmos. It was at this time that Emerson developed a new understanding of "Necessity," a term that previously suggested to him only mechanistic philosophy.²⁹ According to Emerson's new definition, Necessity described not only the pressing reality of historical events as guided by Providence but *also* an individual's daring engagement of—or the even bolder surrender to—that reality. For Emerson, "Necessity" meant virtue as well as fortune.³⁰

This new understanding of Necessity—lending weight to both sides of the virtue/fortune dynamic, as it were—freed

²⁸In September 1836, Emerson admits that he "dislike[s] the gruff jacobin manners" of local politicians but that "[o]ut of Druids & Berserkirs were Alfred & Shakespear made" (*JMN*, 5:216–17). Emerson even reckoned his own vocation to require some of the old *virtù*, as in this February 1836 entry: "I would not have a man dainty in his conduct. Let him not be afraid of being besmirched by being advertised in the newspapers, or by going into Atheneums & town meetings, or by making speeches in public" (*JMN*, 5:127).

²⁹See an 1832 entry about "the Scheme of Necessity" (*JMN*, 4:8).

³⁰If Emerson had known Machiavelli better, he might have recognized that the *virtù/fortuna* dynamic was reciprocal enough to support this analysis of deeds within history. Lasch links Emerson's cosmology to Machiavelli's *fortuna* (see *The True and Only Heaven*, pp. 261–65). Emerson defines his new idea of Necessity in "Art," from the 1836–37 series: "[e]very department of life [is] sublime when seen as emanations of a Necessity contradistinguished from the vulgar Fate, by being instant and alive, and dissolving man as well as his works, in its flowing beneficence" (*EL*, 2:42).

Emerson to become a cultural historian of fortune as well as a biographer of great men's virtues; and as a cultural historian, he inevitably tackled the question of the form Necessity assumed in his own era. For most of Emerson's life, commerce had been the easy answer for both classical and liberal republicans, although their attitudes about that Necessity differed. Emerson comprehended both the reactionary and progressive responses to commerce. In September 1836, expressing the classical, reactionary view, he declared that no American art existed because American artists "are not called out by the necessity of the people." The arts have traditionally been "enlisted in the service of Patriotism & Religion," but the contemporary "mind of the race has taken another direction, Property" (*JMN*, 5:211). Thus, "[t]his age will be characterized as the era of Trade, for every thing is made subservient to that agency," including Government, Patriotism, Martial Ardor, and Romance (*JMN*, 5:237).

And, yet, upon further reflection, Emerson—unlike both classical and liberal republicans—seems to have decided that commerce did not ultimately characterize the age: rather, commercial activity signified the presence of a greater, and as yet undefined, Necessity. It is in his lecture "Politics" that Emerson, striving to illuminate this unknown Necessity of the era, draws on all three versions of republicanism available to him: classical, liberal, and cosmic. As his opening invocation of the cosmic republic suggests, the real Necessity of the age is to universalize the realization of Reason:

There is something grand in the idea of a State. It is a melting of many interests into one interest; of many millions of men as it were into one man, and this for good ends purely: for better defence, for better husbandry, for better counsel, for better action. The common conscience of all the individuals becomes the law of the State and invisible as conscience is, envelopes like a net, all the cities, villages, farms, over sea, over land to the farthest island colony of the people. [*EL*, 2:69]

Emerson recognizes that the "purity of the idea suffers some deduction" in "actual society," but "it is only on the supposition of a common nature, of an identical mind that any government

is possible, so always the bases of politics must be explored and all corrections of political errors derived out of the ideal Commonwealth" (*EL*, 2:69–70).

The ideal Commonwealth recognizes that persons are unequal in all respects, save one—"that they are all possessed by one mind."

Government, Society is possible, only because all men have but one mind, and in consequence really but one interest. The consciousness of this fact is the root and prolific cause of all revolutions in favor of freedom. God is our Father and all we are brethren, instinct whispers in the ear of every man. Down topple before this . . . all the artificial ranks of the earth. . . . The voice of Reason to every man, is, Reverence thyself, and its effect, as far as his reason unfolds, goes steadily to insulate him, to make him not a citizen but a state; and of course with its whole power it demands a Democracy. [*EL*, 2:70–71]

In Emerson's view, modern governments are blind to this fundamental democracy and are focused instead on property. Unjust laws—from slavery to "agrarianism"—have thereby resulted. But this national law—which in the United States is clearly dedicated to commerce—is not the final law, nor does it define the true Necessity of the age (*EL*, 2:76). Offering a few examples of how laws actually follow upon the deeds of persons, Emerson concludes that the historical realization of Reason by more and more persons will lead not only to the separation of personal and property law but reveal the growing irrelevance of law, property, and even government. The historical realization of this Necessity, Reason, is commerce, but most people have mistakenly assumed commerce itself to be the real Necessity. But commerce, Emerson shows, in making more and more property available to a growing number of people, fosters in them the desire for something more than property—for Reason. Thus proceeds Emerson's cosmic revision of the liberal republican's *doux commerce* argument:

Property is merely the obedience of nature to human labor and follows of course the moral quality of the persons who create and hold it. With the progress of any society, with the cultivation of individuals, the existing forms [i.e., the current infatuation with property, the un-

just legal system, etc.] become every day of less consequence. Every addition of good sense that a citizen acquires destroys so much of his opposition to the laws of nature and the well-being of society and of course brings the power of his property on the side of justice. Knowledge transfers the censorship from the statehouse to the reason of every citizen and compels every man to mount guard over himself. . . . The education of every man is bringing him ever to postpone his private to the universal good, to comport himself, that is, in his proper person, as a State, and of course whilst a whole community around him are doing the like, the persons who hold public offices become mere clerks of business, and in no sense the sovereigns of the people. [*EL*, 2:78]

Like the liberal republicans, Emerson acknowledges that property educates or “cultivates” its owner, but for him that education does not ultimately reflect back on commerce or the commercial state. Instead, both prove superfluous to the “ideal commonwealth”:

The last ages have been characterised in history by the immense creation of property. . . . Now no dollar of property is created without some direct communication with nature and of course some acquisition of knowledge and practical power. The creation of all this property and that by millions, not by a few, involves necessarily so much education of the minds of the proprietors. With power always comes the consciousness of power and therefore indomitable millions have demanded forms of government more suited to the facts. [*EL*, 2:80]

Emerson then catalogs the democratic struggles taking place around the world: in London, in Spain, in Portugal, and in South America. There is of course “ignorance and selfishness on both sides” of these struggles, and “Party . . . distorts all facts and blinds all eyes.” Nevertheless, notes our historian of Necessity, “if we rise above the hubbub of parties . . . we shall see that Humanity is always the gainer, that the production of property has been the education of the producers, that the creation of so many new households and so many forcible and propertied citizens, has been the creation of lovers of order, knowledge, and peace and hating war” (*EL*, 2:81).

Three Conclusions

Coming of intellectual age in an era rife with old and new republican theories, Emerson began to piece together a republican philosophy in his early lectures that would culminate in a progressive, liberal, and democratic ideal of self-reliance. A description of precisely how that process moved forward awaits a thorough analysis of Emerson's canonical works of the 1840s and 1850s in light of his early republican philosophizing. In anticipation of that detailed investigation, I would like to offer three preliminary conclusions.

First, the historical narrative Emerson developed in his early lectures may help explain how the committed abolitionist of the 1840s and 1850s could be so complacent about industry and individualism (modern developments his fellow reformers viewed as related threats to the republic) and so hostile toward the fashionable communitarian and agrarian movements (which his fellow reformers heralded as the republic's salvation). Emerson summarized that historical narrative in his introduction to the 1837–38 series "Human Culture." If we "compar[e] the character of the institutions and books of the present day, with those of any former period"—ancient Judaea and Greece, "the Italian era," the Reformation, and the Elizabethan age—Emerson reasons, we see "that the tone and aims are entirely changed."

The former men acted and spoke under the thought that a shining social prosperity was the aim of man, and compromised ever the individuals to the nation. The modern mind teaches (in extremes) that the nation exists for the individual; for the guardianship and education of every man. The Reformation contained the new thought. The English Revolution is its expansion. The American Declaration of Independence is a formal announcement of it by a nation to nations, though a very limited expression. [*EL*, 2:213–14]

Recognizing, in short, that civic virtues were now cultivated by individuals and not by societies, Emerson could at once call for the liberation of all human beings and yet refuse to join his voice to either the jeremiads against individualism or industry (though he was critical of the "excesses" of both) or the paeans

to the utopian movements that would return America to the “shining social prosperity” of yore.

My second observation is that Emerson’s anarchistic tendencies—which have been noted by several critics³¹—flow logically from his republicanism. As he argued in “Politics,” self-reliance—that is, the determination “to postpone [one’s] private to the universal good, to comport [oneself] in [one’s] proper person as a State”—rendered government little more than the work of “clerks.” Emerson elaborates on this conclusion in the version of “Politics” he presented in the 1839–40 series “The Present Age”:

[I]t follows since the real government is ever this Theocracy whose seat is not in the heart of only one man or one set of men, but in the heart of every man, that all forms of government are in themselves imperfect and evil. They are a surrender of that which the man ought not to surrender: he does by delegate that which he should do himself. They are temporary:—as much as he has delegated, he must some day resume. [*EL*, 3:246]

A third conclusion, and the most important one in my view, is that Emerson’s philosophy of self-reliance itself cannot be adequately understood within either the Lockean tradition or the Puritan antinomian tradition (to reference two of the better-known theses). The republican tradition is a (I would even hazard *the*) crucial source of Emerson’s thought here.³² Properly “educated,” citizens become “self-reliant” insofar as they are reliant upon Reason, aware, that is, of the greater civic—indeed

³¹See Parrington, *The Romantic Revolution*, p. 385; Howe, *The American Newness*, p. 32; and George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Press, 1995), pp. 190–91.

³²When republicanism is defined only in its classical form, it appears in the nineteenth century as little more than a reactionary, communitarian ideology. In this light, John Patrick Diggins’s conclusion in *The Lost Soul of American Politics: Virtue, Self-Interest, and the Foundations of Liberalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1984) is irrefutable: “Emerson’s romantic individualism and traditional classical republicanism stand at the opposite poles of American thought” (p. 205). However, when liberal and cosmic republicanism are taken into consideration, we begin to see that Emerson’s “celestial, not civic” idea of virtue (Diggins, p. 224) was in fact part of his original and important republican philosophy.

cosmic—whole to which they are indebted. The point is clear in “Ethics,” from the series “The Philosophy of History”:

[T]he one maxim which makes the whole of Ethics of the Mind [is] Self-Trust . . . that is, not a faith in a man's own whim or conceit as if he were quite severed from all other beings and acted on his own private account, but a perception that the mind common to the Universe is disclosed to the individual through his own nature. . . . Nothing is sacred but the integrity of one's own mind. Absolve you to yourself and you shall have the suffrage of the world. . . . Speak your privatest thought and it shall be the universal sentiment. [*EL*, 2:151]

On the one hand, the challenge faced by Emerson's citizen is no different than that encountered by Machiavelli's, or even Aristotle's: to retain independence of mind in the face of corruption. On the other hand, as Emerson noted in the series “The Present Age,” “[t]he problem which belongs to us to solve is new and untried. Born in the age of cultivation and criticism we are to carry it with all its triumphs and yield it captive to the Universal Reason” (*EL*, 3:199). Classical republicanism was finally of no help, for although it valued a cultivated citizenry, it did not especially value a democratic one, which to most classical republicans seemed inimical to stability. Liberal republicanism, while it recognized that a globalizing commercial system would require—indeed result in—an increasingly universal citizenry, could only suggest an ongoing “sweetening” of that population. Emerson's greatest insight was to foresee that an education in sweetness would not be sufficient. Indeed, such an education was—and must be understood to be—merely preparation for the education of Reason:

Educated in the shop and mill, taught that nature exists for use and for the raw material of art, conveyed, clothed, fed by steam; bred in traditions, and working in state, in church, in education, and charities, by mechanical methods, we are yet made to hear the auguries and prophecies of the soul, which makes light of all these proud mechanisms and calls us to the Holy and the Eternal not by men but alone, not by Bibles but through thought and lowliness . . . [and] a reliance on principles and the habit of reposing childlike on the lap of the incessant soul. [*EL*, 3:199]

These last lines, as well as the last lines of the previously extracted passage, can be found essentially intact in “Self-Reliance,” perhaps Emerson’s most profound essay and one that will always stimulate debate. One voice that has not yet been heard in that debate, however—and has not been heard in the greater debate about Emerson’s political philosophy as a whole—is the republican’s.

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