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Transcendental Democracy: Ralph Waldo Emerson's Political Thought, the Legacy of Federalism, and the Ironies of America's Democratic Tradition

BENJAMIN E. PARK

This paper seeks to accomplish three things. First, it contextualizes Ralph Waldo Emerson's political thought by demonstrating that, despite his rhetoric to the contrary and the dominant interpretation within Emersonian scholarship, his political ideas had an intellectual genealogy rooted both in his local New England context and in the broader American culture. Second, it argues that principles and tensions from the Federalist Party lingered long after the demise of the organized group, especially in response to the perceived excesses and extremes of Jacksonian America, and can even be found within a thinker as egalitarian and democratic as Emerson. And finally, the article explores how the ironies of these two previous points flesh out the paradoxical and dynamic nature of America's democratic tradition. By engaging the ironies and paradoxes within Emerson's political thought in microcosm, I argue, one gets a better view of the larger issues at stake within the broader culture.

In an editorial written at the height of the Transcendentalist movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson detailed the ideal human status. "The height, the deity of man," he explained, "is to be self-sustained, to need no gift, no foreign force." Dependence on external influences, contemporary cultures, or existent traditions hindered individual self-improvement. His biggest fear was to be "the child of my circumstances" – instead, he wished to "make my [own] circumstance."¹ Indeed, Emerson's lasting legacy has centered on his staunch views of individualism and iconoclasm. He understood and depicted his message not as a continuation or fulfillment of past generations, but as the revolution of the single individual. "No one," Emerson wrote in 1840, "can converse much with the different classes of society in New England, without remarking the progress of a revolution," even as "the spirit of the time is felt by

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¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert E. Spiller and Alfred R. Ferguson, 5 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971–94), Volume I, 203–4.

every individual with some difference.”² Self-reliance, the belief that an individual soul is not only self-sustaining but the most crucial ingredient for genius, became a hallmark of his thought and a staple of his legacy.³

This image of breaking tradition and establishing new intellectual trends has dominated academic interpretations of Emersonian scholarship. For instance, T. Gregory Garvey has emphasized how, to Emerson, the individual was “a locus so fundamental that any change in it will also change the structure of society as a whole,” and thus all other contemporary movements were inconsequential.⁴ Cornel West has depicted Emerson as founding a radically new philosophical tradition that “evades” all strains of antebellum philosophy.⁵ Lawrence Buell, one of Emerson’s most influential interpreters, has argued for the transnational revolutionist as the crucial framework in which Emerson’s genius can be most fully appreciated: “Emerson is almost always at his most interesting when striving to free his mind from parochial entanglements of whatever sort,” he explained.⁶ Stanley Cavell’s otherwise insightful reading of Emerson-as-iconoclast was dependent on Emerson’s “aversive” relationship with past influences and sources.⁷

However, while such conceptualizations are justified, and likely necessary, in reconstructing Emerson’s own sense of self-image, they limit our ability to place Emerson within the larger American political tradition; indeed, the paradigm of understanding Emerson’s thought as an intellectual disruption has obscured the dynamic relationship he maintained with his broader culture. If Emerson is viewed only as a revolutionary thinker offering a new ideological paradigm, it is difficult to link him to antecedent and contemporary traditions. This emphasis on ideological rupture has resulted in, as one recent historian has put it, “Transcendentalism . . . virtually vanish[ing] from the historical radar screen” – a dearth that is especially seen within studies of the American

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Editors to the Reader,” *Dial*, 1 July 1840, 2–3. Emerson elsewhere wrote that self-reliance works “a revolution in all the offices and relations of men.” Emerson, *Collected Works*, 2:44.

³ Wesley T. Mott, “The Age of the First Person Singular’: Emerson and Individualism,” in Joel Myerson, ed., *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 61–100, 62.

⁴ T. Gregory Garvey, “Introduction: The Emerson Dilemma,” in Garvey, ed., *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), xi–xxiii, 3.

⁵ Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 36–38. See also Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), xv.

⁶ Lawrence Buell, *Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 4.

⁷ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 109. Cavell goes on to explain, however, how Emerson’s thought was based in his “responsiveness” to other people and ideas, but that their influence was more provocative than dependent.

democratic tradition; most Transcendentalist figures, particularly Emerson, are seen as aberrations or singular cases instead of representative figures.⁸

This paper argues that Emerson was indeed influenced by, and even engaged with, the traditions and issues of his political environment. Further, I argue that these questions exemplify central tensions within the mainstream American democratic tradition. Rather than being an aberration, much of Emerson's political thought was exemplary of broader political paradoxes. Embracing, on the one hand, democratic ideals while, on the other, fearing the excesses of democratic culture, Emerson's dynamic political philosophy sought answers to the same questions that have vexed American political thinkers. Specifically, this paper seeks to engage this tension by exploring how Emerson inherited and adapted elements of a specific political culture that would at first glance appear anachronistic: Federalism.

If Emerson is often depicted as devoid of ideological predecessors, American Federalism is typically understood as lacking political progeny. Rooted in a particular moment, American Federalism is often conceptualized as a movement with few antecedents and even fewer descendants. Out of step with the general democratization that followed the Revolution, it fits awkwardly within the American political canon. Yet if Federalist ideals did indeed continue after the party's downfall, and if one were to identify an individual to exemplify the remnants of Federalism in antebellum America, Ralph Waldo Emerson would seem an odd choice. To a degree, this is true: it would be a gross exaggeration – and a fundamental misinterpretation – to label Emerson a Federalist. His rejection of rigid structures, exultation in the common man, and consistent exclamations about breaking free from past traditions are often posited as the ideals of democracy and the egalitarian nature of Jacksonian America.⁹ Further, Emerson rarely ventured into actual politics by remaining aloof from organized efforts and institutions. Yet Emerson constantly spoke out against and within a specific political culture, and amongst Emerson's political views – and, more specifically, his critiques of America's democratic culture – there is an important lesson about the legacy of Federalism.

This is a paper about ideological appropriations and cultural traditions. It argues for a porous relationship between movements and individuals by examining the continuities between quixotic intellectual bedfellows. More than merely offering a close look at the remnants of Federalist thought, the complexities of antebellum culture, and the tensions within Emerson's politics,

⁸ Charles Capper, "'A Little Beyond': The Problem of the Transcendentalist Movement in American History," *Journal of American History*, 85 (Sept. 1998), 502–39, 502, 535.

⁹ See John Dewey, "Emerson: The Philosopher of Democracy," *International Journal of Ethics*, 13 (1903), 405–13.

it highlights the ironies, continuities, and paradoxes of America's democratic tradition.¹⁰

I

The Federalist Party has maintained an odd position within American historiography. The traditional narrative of the political movement – personified in the rise-and-decline framework of Stanley Elkins and Eric McKiltrick's *Age of Federalism* – framed it as a reactionary movement that originated in the political angst of the 1790s, climaxed with the presidency of John Adams, and declined at the hands of an unruly democratic culture within a few decades. Distinct from the federalist movement that resulted in the Constitutional Convention – though many of the participants in the convention were associated with the later party – the Federalist Party was known for its tenuous relationship with democracy and its acute hesitancy toward populist politics. Federalists held profoundly conservative views about human nature and were cautious about placing too much power in the hands of the people.¹¹ “To what physical, moral, or political energy shall this flourishing state of things be ascribed?” asked a federalist newspaper in 1792. To the “general government,” it responded, regardless of how many people “bellow[ed] tyranny [and] aristocracy.”¹² Jefferson accused them of perpetuating an “analogous branch in the English Government” and held them deserving of the epithets “aristocrats or monocrats, and sometimes Tories.”¹³

With Jefferson's election in 1800, sometimes referred to as the Jeffersonian Revolution due to the larger ideological shift it supposedly represented, as well with the death of Alexander Hamilton shortly afterward, came the unraveling of the party; American victory in the War of 1812, coupled with the Federalists' pending decisions toward national sovereignty at the Hartford Convention being rendered mute by the Treaty of Ghent, seemed a definitive nail in the coffin. In this telling, Federalism took center stage at the moment of America's creation only to fade into the background a mere two decades later.

¹⁰ In portraying the American democratic tradition as a tradition filled with paradoxes and ironies, mostly devoid of a linear development and clear pathway, I am following the scholarship of Kloppenberg. James Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹¹ Stanley Elkins and Eric McKiltrick, *Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788–1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). See also Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 229–304.

¹² Quoted in Charles Beard, *The Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1915), 231.

¹³ Quoted in Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 593.

Yet this traditional narrative has been challenged of late as the legacy of the Federalist Party has been revisited. Marshall Foletta has argued that even as the Federalist Party was crumbling in the wake of the War of 1812, new, young representatives of Federalist political ideals appropriated aspects of the movement in a way that continued to influence antebellum America. “Fully understanding Federalism rests in the recognition that more than just a political party,” Foletta writes, “Federalism represented a distinct political culture” that transcended the party of Adams and Hamilton.¹⁴ Reminiscent of how Daniel Walker Howe divorced Whig ideals from the similarly short-lived Whig Party, Foletta demonstrates how Federalist principles and ideas continued long after the party’s demise. At the center of this lingering ideology was a paradox: “an organic web of reconcilable interests, tended and brought into harmony by the judicious leadership of the best educated and most virtuous.” Translated into the political sphere, it resulted in “an advocacy of egalitarian self-government and aristocratic rule that modern sensibilities often find confusing.” The consistent clash of the ideals of democracy and elitism made a vibrant tradition rife with contradictions.¹⁵

This lingering Federalist persuasion manifested itself in several ways, but made its most prominent impact on the literary stage. With every decade that passed, and in the face of an increasingly heterogeneous culture, a new generation of American writers sought to unify the nation by introducing a central “American” voice. These attempts more often than not included pleas to incorporate an elitist (and gendered) notion of the “man of letters” – someone who would save American culture from the more demotic aspects of democracy’s excesses. As Catherine O’Donnell Kaplan has explained, a number of American authors sought to join a transatlantic movement and “came to believe that the world and everyone within it could be transformed through reading, writing, and conversations.” These activities would have long-lasting effects, for they “would produce the knowledge necessary to free individuals and societies from superstition, ignorance, and moral and physical ills” that plagued the young American republic.¹⁶ For many of those involved, “Federalism came closer than Republicanism to capturing their shared sense that a republic required the guidance of a cadre of enlightened leaders, and that ethos, along with familial and social ties to Federalist leaders, led all to consider themselves Federalists.”¹⁷ To be a “man of letters” – a position of high esteem

¹⁴ Marshall Foletta, *Coming to Terms with Democracy: Federalist Intellectuals and the Shaping of an American Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁶ Catherine O’Donnell Kaplan, *Men of Letters in the Early Republic: Cultivating Forms of Citizenship* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 30–31.

among the educated gentry in America – meant to be hesitant about the more populist impulses that dominated United States culture and to find a way to maintain order while still maintaining a form of democracy.¹⁸

To those with Federalist mindsets, there was no period more in need of maintaining order than antebellum America. In the religious sphere, it has been defined as a “spiritual hothouse”;¹⁹ in the political sphere, Jacksonian politics proved disruptive and tumultuous. Daniel Walker Howe has written that the democrats had a penchant for “clos[ing] their eyes to the problems of pervasive lawlessness and violence that plagued American society in their time.” Elitist associations gave way to impromptu frontier (in)justice, an unrefined and uneducated society that only introduced instability and unchecked havoc.²⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville observed that the “most repugnant” aspect of American democracy was “not the extreme liberty that prevails there but the virtual absence of any guarantee against tyranny.” There was no real liberty in America, Tocqueville continued, due to “the omnipotence of the majority, which may drive minorities to despair and force them to resort to physical force. This may lead to anarchy, but to an anarchy that will come as a consequence of despotism.”²¹

Therefore the period in which Ralph Waldo Emerson was born, matured, and became a public intellectual was not an era divorced from the Federalist impulses that had supposedly disappeared at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Instead, the culture continued to grapple with varying strands of ideologies within a dynamic and, at times, paradoxical democratic setting. James Kloppenberg has written that a “perennial feature of American culture” generally, and of the American democratic tradition specifically, has been a struggle to “strike a permanent balance among [competing and] conflicting ideals.” The development of American political thought does not fit into neat categorizations or tidy intellectual shifts, but rather exhibits tensions between differing influences and ideologies.²² Emerson’s relationship with and reaction against the Federalist heritage of his contemporary New England demonstrates succinctly several of these tensions.

¹⁸ See also William C. Dowling, *Literary Federalism: Joseph Dennie and the Port Folio, 1801–1812* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008); Stephanie Kermes, *Creating an American Identity: New England, 1789–1825* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

¹⁹ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 225–56.

²⁰ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 411.

²¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Library of America, 2004), 290, 299.

²² Kloppenberg, *Virtues of Liberalism*, 7.

II

Emerson was iconoclastic about the cultures he both inherited and inhabited. While he admitted a small number of intellectual forebears like Swedenborg, Coleridge, and Plato, he rhetorically refused to be limited by their examples and maintained that their primary influence was to help him break from tradition. “Go alone,” he urged his audience, in lieu of choosing mentors or idols; “refuse the good models.” While he was grateful for preceding prophets and reformers, he did not seek to emulate them, for “imitation cannot go above its model.” The failings of past generations came from relying too much on the examples of the generations before them.²³ “Our age is retrospective,” he trumpeted in the opening of his literary manifesto, *Nature*. “Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?”²⁴ Success could only be found in breaking away from past traditions. “Whoso would be a man,” he famously proclaimed, “must be a nonconformist.”²⁵ It thus appears oxymoronic to present Emerson as the continuation of any intellectual movement.²⁶

Yet, even if his rhetoric did not allow it, Emerson’s relationship with the political and philosophical tradition in America – and, more especially, in New England – was much more complex. The Unitarians, whom Foletta depicts as the carriers of several Federalist principles, were most often targeted as bogeymen in Emerson’s writings – yet he himself adopted several of their ideals.²⁷ The New England Anthologists, which included Emerson’s father William, were also amongst Emerson’s rhetorical “others” – but Emerson’s philosophy kept several of their intellectual traditions alive.²⁸ Indeed, as is often the case, Emerson’s rhetoric can overshadow important underlying tensions. Like the Unitarians, Emerson maintained the importance of moral superiority as well as the centrality of individual reform; like the Anthologists, Emerson placed paramount importance upon the purity, power, and independence of the human mind in transcending local concerns and parochial problems. Even if Emerson strongly disagreed with *how* other inheritors of the Federalist tradition implemented reform, he still agreed with many of the foundational principles upon which that reform was based.

Further, Emerson maintained a fear of democracy’s excesses and thus empathized with many points of the conservative New England tradition.

²³ Emerson, *Collected Works*, Volume I, 90.

²⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, in *Emerson: Political Writings*, ed. Kenneth Sacks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1–8, 1.

²⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self Reliance,” in *Political Writings*, 53–74, 56.

²⁶ For Emerson’s perspective on intellectual mentorship, see Buell, *Emerson*, 288–36.

²⁷ For the Unitarians within the Federalist tradition, see Foletta, *Coming to Terms with Democracy*, 61–68.

²⁸ See Kaplan, *Men of Letters*, 213.

He embraced the ideal of democracy and the empowering of the individual man, but grew aghast at what he interpreted as the demotic aspects of American democracy. “Democracy becomes a government of bullies tempered by editors,” he quipped in an 1847 journal entry, just as the Mexican–American War divided the nation’s political opinions.²⁹ Like the Anthologists of the preceding generation or the Unitarians of his day, Emerson worried that contemporary political society without a cultural reform led to anarchy. For instance, unlike many of his contemporary writers, he refused to accept the “middling” rhetoric of populist America, and maintained that a “respectable” or “refined” language was still necessary to symbolize an educated and gentlemanly culture.³⁰ While Emerson was adamant that Americans needed to release the past and focus on the future, he maintained a concomitant fear about where that future appeared to be headed.

Emerson’s famous 1837 “American Scholar” address revealed several of these tensions. First, he critiqued America’s democratic society as “one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters; – a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man.”³¹ This disjointedness invited chaos and hindered American progress. On the one hand, Emerson exulted in the commonality of America: “I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low,” he wrote. “Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds.” This was the Emerson that yearned for a civilization based in nature, a humanity that transformed into a transcendent eyeball through observing common nature’s beauty. But, on the other hand, he still maintained the position of a tutor, not all that dissimilar from the “man of letters” proposed by the Federalist editors of the *North American Review*. “The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances,” he proclaimed. The task of becoming an independent and united nation – to reach the potential that America’s culture promised – required a special role for the “American scholar,” a position that, importantly for Emerson’s mindset, maintained an intellectual hierarchy over the populace.

Emerson’s distrust of radical democracy only grew as his thought matured. His 1842 essay “Politics,” one of his more extended and detailed looks at democracy, was written in a way with which a Tocqueville or a John Stuart Mill could have sympathized. “The spirit of our American radicalism is destructive

²⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman et al., 16 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960–82), Volume IX, 413.

³⁰ Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: William Morrow, 1990), 113–14.

³¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “American Scholar,” in *Political Writings*, 11–28, 15.

and aimless,” he wrote; “it is not loving; it has no ulterior and divine ends; but is destructive only of our hatred and selfishness.” National exceptionalism had made Americans proud of their government and society, but Emerson cautioned that it was time to listen to foreign critiques. “The older and more cautious among ourselves are learning from Europeans,” he explained, “to look with some terror at our turbulent freedom.”³² Emerson’s hesitancy about democracy’s extremity equaled that of someone like John Adams, echoes Tocqueville’s fear of the tyranny of the majority, and can appear out of step with the traditional understanding of the period’s supposed embrace of unfettered democracy.

These fears were born out of the tumultuous period now known as Jacksonian America. Embodying the attitude of its President, politics during the 1820s and 1830s resembled, according to Richard Hofstadter, “the pathology of a nation growing at a speed that defied control, governed by an ineffective leadership, impatient with authority, bedeviled by internal heterogeneity, and above all cursed by an ancient and gloomy wrong” – slavery.³³ Daniel Walker Howe noted that by overemphasizing the “autonomy of the sovereign people,” they stretched the boundaries of the law and of justice.³⁴ America was increasingly divided: the Nullification Crisis in 1832 threatened political union, the removal of the Cherokee tested imperial resolve, and the expansion of slavery into western territories signified that there was no quick and easy moral solution in sight. The growingly national print culture, which was supposed to bring cultural sympathy, only introduced further regional fragmentation, and the American “experiment” appeared at a breaking point.³⁵ Those in New England, then, were only one segment of a larger populace encountering democratic angst and searching for political answers.

Emerson, of course, like the earlier Federalists, was not ready to abandon democracy; rather, what were needed were safeguards to improve and refine civilization. American culture abused democracy, and reform was required to produce worthy citizens. And this is where Emerson embraced – or, more accurately, appropriated – principles from his Federalist forebears. Most especially, Emerson sought to implement a path to moral progression that would enable the development of a refined civilization unified with the transcendental Oversoul and capable of practicing a stable form of democracy.

³² Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Politics,” in *Political Writings*, 115–26, 121.

³³ Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, eds., *American Violence: A Documentary History* (New York: Random House, 1971), 477. ³⁴ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 411.

³⁵ See Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U. S. Nation Building, 1770–1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 303–440.

And in doing so, Emerson ironically repeated the New England centrism and followed many of the traditions that he himself often denounced.³⁶

III

Because the theme of liberalism has so dominated the scholarship on Emerson's political thought, tensions within his ideology are often overlooked. Indeed, many of Emerson's writings were surprisingly paradoxical in that they included ideas that can be persuasively interpreted to represent different ideologies. For instance, the following passage from his famously iconoclastic lecture "Self Reliance" demonstrates a central tension:

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so . . . And now we are men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny . . . obeying the Almighty effort.³⁷

In the first sentence, Emerson the radical individualist was on full display: he urged his audience to trust their own soul and announced that truth and purpose could only be accomplished through individual knowledge. Yet in the very next sentence he seems to subvert the original message. Once an individual's inner voice is obtained, it leads to a form of submission: he defines the climax of self-trust as accepting one's place within an already existent social structure. The cosmos does not revolve merely around democratic zeal, but around submission to an external paradigm.

This appeal to an order located outside the self, of course, represents a fundamental paradox concerning Emerson's political philosophy. His sense of submission was not necessarily to cultural and societal values then present in the world – indeed, Emerson himself often spoke against his contemporary's values – but to the cosmological framework of the Oversoul, a metaphysical organizing structure that transcended flawed mortality and was based in ideals and Emerson's own understanding of personal experience. In this sense, those who find their right "place" may actually be meant to overturn their contemporary society with iconoclastic and disruptive thoughts and actions; indeed, the individuals Emerson often identified as the "great men" were nearly always countercultural and socially destructive. Yet determining what dissent and protest was legitimate remained within an ideological hierarchy and mechanism that seemingly validated Emerson's own cultural power, as it was his definition of the Oversoul, and the Oversoul's characteristics, that drove his political ideals.

³⁶ For the New England tradition of desiring the rest of the nation to mimic their regional tradition see Kermes, *Creating an American Identity*.

³⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self Reliance," in *Politics*, 53–74, 59.

Such irony played a crucial role in Emerson's political thought, and hints at a larger tension within the democratic tradition that Emerson both participated in and reacted against. The ideal of liberty was desired, but the fear of the excesses caused many to yearn for cultural constraints. Even Emerson, the prophet of self-reliance and individualism, maintained that a hierarchical structure was, at least to some extent, required to maintain peace and order. Seen in this view, his ideology was much closer to the Federalist and Enlightenment traditions of early nineteenth-century New England than to radical nonconformity described in Emersonian studies during the 1970s and 1980s.³⁸

It is in instances like this, where Emerson embraced both liberty and a constrained order, that Emerson merged American traditions like Federalism with the idealist notions from German and British Romanticism. Crucial to Emerson's social thought was the lingering Neoplatonic belief that individual souls sought, through the embrace of divine virtue, a reunion with an external providence – in this case, an Oversoul. As he explained, “The origin of all reform is in that mysterious fountain of the moral sentiment in man, which, amidst the natural, ever contains the super-natural for man.”³⁹ Though philosophically abstract, these Platonic ideals played a crucial role within Emerson's political thought by constructing a moral ideal that challenged the pragmatic school Emerson has been increasingly grouped with, for his skepticism was often tempered by an acute sense of idealism.⁴⁰ For instance, one tradition that Emerson invoked in his merging of Transcendental and Federalist ideologies – especially his belief in “accept[ing] the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events” – was the classical and Christian concept of the “Chain of Being,” a potent ideological trend that had lasted many centuries even if its legacy and influence in the nineteenth century has been underemphasized.⁴¹

Arthur Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being*, based on his 1933 William James lectures, remain the standard, if problematic, intellectual history of this contested concept.⁴² Emphasizing an underlying order and hierarchy that gave purpose and position to all living beings, the Chain was crucial to how people situated themselves and their lives within the larger cosmos. Though many of the core concepts of this intellectual and social structure were challenged

³⁸ For the misuse and misinterpretation of Emerson during 1970s and 80s, see Neal Dolan, *Emerson's Liberalism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 10–16.

³⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Lecture on the Times,” in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 151–70, 160.

⁴⁰ For arguments of Emerson and pragmatism see West, *American Evasion of Philosophy*, 11; Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1987), 10–17.

⁴¹ Emerson, “Self Reliance,” 62.

⁴² Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948).

during the eighteenth century, it was more adapted than dismissed. The Chain, once static, became dynamic and transformed into what Lovejoy characterized as a “temporal” Chain, which implied that while hierarchical relationships persisted, everyone was still entitled to mobility and progress; this refined framework balanced the Enlightenment’s optimism for humanity’s potential with the lingering hope for social order. New versions of the Chain emphasized a progressive ladder, a merging of mobility and structure.⁴³

Important aspects of the Chain surprisingly remained appealing to Federalists in the early republic, and figures like John Adams, Ezra Stiles, and Noah Webster continued to insist on its relevance. It was appealing to Federalists because it provided a framework in which individual progression was possible, but still reinforced an established hierarchy that could control social order. Adams, for instance, wrote,

Nature, which has established in the universe a chain of being and universal order, descending from archangels to microscopic animalcules, has ordained that no two objects shall be perfectly alike, and no two creatures perfectly equal. Although, among men, all are subject by nature to *equal laws* of morality, and in society have a right to *equal laws* for their government, yet no two men are perfectly equal in person, property, understanding, activity, and virtue, or ever can be made so by any power less than that which created them; and whenever it becomes disputable, between two individuals or families, which is the superior, a fermentation commences, which disturbs the order of all things until it is settled, and each one knows his place in the opinion of the public.⁴⁴

Emerson was primarily influenced by this strand of thought through his exposure to Plato, the Stoics, the Cambridge Neoplatonists, and Kant. Following their cue, Emerson believed, as historian Neal Dolan has put it, “that an immutable moral law bound nature, God, and the soul into one great harmonious, and intelligible cosmos.”⁴⁵ Emerson recorded in his journal during the 1850s, just as debates over slavery were heating up, his disgust with those who disparaged an “appeal to a higher law than the Constitution.”⁴⁶ Even in his 1842 essay “Experience,” the essay most often cited as evidence for Emerson’s skepticism and pragmatic philosophy, he closed by urging readers to embrace the external “axis” that turned the entire world, and to “possess more firmly” the world’s appointed roles.⁴⁷ Self-reliance was not meant to liberate one from a higher ideal or standard, but to provide a setting for obedience to

⁴³ See Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

⁴⁴ John Adams, *Discourses on Davila*, in *The Works of John Adams . . .*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, 10 vols. (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851–56), Volume VI, 285–86, emphasis in original.

⁴⁵ Dolan, *Emerson’s Liberalism*, 13.

⁴⁶ Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, Volume II, 248.

⁴⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience,” in *Essays and Lectures*, 469–92, 490.

the dictates of a shared conscience. This was a powerful idea during a period in which executive orders, legislative acts, and judicial decisions emphasized the sovereignty of the individual over federal authority, an ideological mantra copied in the cultural renaissance and religious democratization. "If anyone imagines that this law is lax," he wrote, "let him keep its commandment one day." This "universal voice" spoke to "every heart" that listened, and drove public life through philosophical intuitions.⁴⁸

This notion had a profound impact on his political thought, because it allowed individuals to maintain freedom while still maintaining an orderly whole; souls could seek truth through their own life and intuition, even if those promptings led them to an already established position within an expansive chain of existence. This was not terribly dissimilar to what Nathan Hatch has described as one of the major ironies of American democratizations: while individuals are given the freedom to choose allegiances, they are often willing to submit to the authoritarian structure of their chosen affiliation.⁴⁹ Most importantly, a close reading of Emerson's writings demonstrates how he worked within ideological traditions that were in existence long before his transcendental "awakening." Indeed, even if Emerson proclaimed his philosophy as a new age of thinking, a moment when the human mind finally became "aware of itself," it was still drawing from the traditions and cultures that he vehemently denounced.⁵⁰

IV

Central to Emerson's political thought was a cohesive and synthetic relationship between recognized intellectuals and the rest of the world. An important part of America's democratic failure, he reasoned, was an environment that forced "the scholar [to fly] for refuge to the world of ideas," which isolated the educated gentry from the common populace. This was a drastic mistake, for it allowed "unreal and fantastic" falsehoods to dominate the public arena and influence popular opinion. Such an environment discouraged the rising generation from striving for any significant education and knowledge. "The young man, on entering life," Emerson mourned, "finds the way to lucrative employments" more desirable than truth. This is the cause of degeneration within American society, for "the trail of the serpent reaches into

⁴⁸ Emerson, "Self Reliance," 264.

⁴⁹ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 125–60.

⁵⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson, 12 vols., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903–04), Volume X, 305–54, 326.

all the lucrative professions and practices of man.”⁵¹ Like many others during the period, Emerson feared that the exploding capitalistic zeal overshadowed cultural refinement and led to a demotic culture that stultified intellectual and moral progress; indeed, as George Fredrickson has shown, Emerson was only one of several northern intellectuals who feared that a cultural anarchy had destabilized their privileged position.⁵²

The solution was for American society to place more importance on education, truth, and virtue. “Let ideas establish their legitimate sway again in society,” he reasoned, “let life be fair and poetic, and the scholars will gladly be lovers, citizens, and philanthropists.” It was not through the neglect of standard, practical work – indeed, Emerson continued to emphasize that manual labor would “never grow obsolete” – but through the combination of the work of both hands and minds. “Knowledge, Virtue, Power are the victories of man over his necessities, his march to the dominion of the world.”⁵³ Emerson condemned the American political tradition as bifurcated, rudimentary, and inchoate. It was left to his generation to right the democratic ship, the first step being a reevaluation of the scholar’s role.

Crucial to this cultural project was the promotion of educated individuals and the embrace of the singular figure that stood above the rest of society. This was done through education, with the expectation that the wisest and most capable individuals would rise to the top of society. “To educate the wise man, the State exists,” Emerson explained, “and with the appearance of the wise man, the State expires.”⁵⁴ Government was designed to provide a path for enlightened and intuitive leaders who in turn would revolutionize and civilize the surrounding culture. American culture failed because it focussed on the many rather than the few; rather, focus should be on the few who would then influence the many.

This was a revolutionary idea for Emerson, one that he believed would reform all aspects of American society and culture and have direct relevance in the political realm. “We are to revise the whole of our social structure, the state, the school, religion, marriage, trade, science, and explore their foundations in our own nature,” he proclaimed. This was a crucial transition in social progress, for humankind would finally recognize that “we are to see the world not only fitted the former men, but fits for us, and to clear ourselves

⁵¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Man the Reformer,” in *Political Writings*, 101–14, 103–4.

⁵² George M. Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union*, with a new introduction (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 9–15. While Fredrickson astutely touches on Emerson’s anxiety over democracy, he maintains the paradigm of Emerson breaking from his intellectual predecessors that is challenged in this article.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 10307.

⁵⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Politics,” 123.

of every usage which has not its root in our own mind.”⁵⁵ Tradition was to be pushed aside due in no small part to its failure to provide the perfect society, and the next step was a radical break from previous generations, setting democracy in an improved and revised trajectory.

The irony, of course, was that much of Emerson’s ideas and solutions grew out of – rather than against – his New England ancestors. Importantly, Emerson continued the New England tradition of a perceived cultural hierarchy and posited his own ideals as the desired ideals for the entire nation. By claiming that the “constitution & law in America must be written on [the] ethical principles” of transcendental knowledge, he established an ideal of truth that everyone must similarly obtain.⁵⁶ As Stephanie Kermes has noted, New Englanders “came to believe that in the creation of the new American identity their region should serve as a model for all other Americans.”⁵⁷ These were the very types of traditional shackle that Emerson wished to break free of, yet they continued to play an important role within his ideological framework.

Emerson’s emphasis on dialogue, education, and personal awakening echoed what the literary Federalists of the early nineteenth century had also invoked. Catherine O’Donnell Kaplan, in her study of the American intellectual circles Emerson often denounced, described how these individuals believed they could transform the world through the same principles. It was through these activities that government “would produce the knowledge necessary to free individuals and societies from superstition, ignorance, and moral and physical ills,” thereby creating “the personal and market networks that would disseminate such information.” This, in turn, would “inspire the affectionate bonds that would spur further collaboration and inquiry.”⁵⁸

This connection between culture, civilization, and politics was certainly blurry, but it represented a bedrock principle of Emerson’s politics: when philosophies and ideas are destabilized through experience, and spiritual independence is the standard, cultural improvement is the only solution to improve the political sphere. In this trend Emerson shared definite sensibilities with the Whigs of his day, though he never grasped their emphasis on political and community organization; his reform was based in the individual, not in collective activism. Whigs, he feared, were too backward-thinking in their mindset and demeanor, and the foundation for a new culture must be established by severing ties with institutional precursors. However, these new cultural foundations were required to be built with some materials; to

⁵⁵ Emerson, “Man the Reformer,” 110.

⁵⁶ Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, Volume XV, 221.

⁵⁷ Kermes, *Creating an American Identity*, 1.

⁵⁸ Kaplan, *Men of Letters in the Early Republic*, 14.

accomplish this, then, in an action of philosophical irony, Emerson used the building blocks provided by the ideas, figures, and events of his surrounding culture. Thus Emerson's democratic vision was not as novel as his rhetoric implied; rather, he was using cultural forms and methods already at his disposal.

Both Emerson and his New England predecessors felt that there was a paramount need within a government and community to promote morals and virtues. "The end of all political struggle, is, to establish morality as the basis of all legislation," Emerson wrote. "'Tis not free institutions, 'tis not a republic, that is the end; – no, but only the means: morality is the object of government."⁵⁹ Similarly, William Dunlap, a leading literary Federalist at the turn of the nineteenth century, wrote how the period had arrived "when the mind of man is expanding to receive the whole light of truth," and government was finally equipped and ready to provide nothing "short of the *whole* truth" of morals and virtues for its citizens.⁶⁰ Human beings were depraved creatures, yet were still capable of being mended and reformed through a correct moral system. Both Emerson and Dunlap were drawing from a reformist strain identified as a crucial element of American identity construction, where the quest and achievement of high morals enabled a civilization to progress and reform – an intellectual enterprise of especial importance in New England. Yet more than just reflecting the ideological tradition of the area, Emerson also embodied the predominant class and social elements of his region, for his understanding of the self and idea of cultural ethos did not encompass the growing urban working class in the mid-Atlantic, the expanding frontier culture to the West, or the slave society of the South.⁶¹

That Emerson not only continued but embraced a sense of moral and ideological hierarchy – the idea that individuals needed to be guided in order to maintain peace and commence reform – may appear anachronistic when compared with his egalitarian rhetoric. Yet such was the paradox at the center of his political philosophy, and an irony of the Transcendentalist movement in general. Though often heralded as deeply committed to the "dream . . . of a common humanity," as one recent historian has described them, most Transcendentalists maintained the idealist belief in reaching an absolute truth, a connection through an ever-present external reality, and a hierarchy of

⁵⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, ed. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 153.

⁶⁰ William Dunlap, "Remarks on the Love of Country," *New York Messenger* (Nov. 1797), 581–83, 582, emphasis in original.

⁶¹ See Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, 2nd edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), esp. 189–211.

morals that necessitated a teacher as much as a student; individuals were meant to learn for themselves – as long as the others' conclusions matched their own.⁶² In this vein, Emerson continued the tradition of his New England forebears by positing his own set of ideals as the enlightened – or transcendental – model for others to emulate.

V

Emerson became even more hesitant about the selfish nature of American democracy toward the end of the 1840s. The increasingly loud slavery debates, the failure of numerous social experiments, and the raised awareness of labor disputes drove Emerson to be more pronounced in his cultural critiques. A trip through Europe in 1848 allowed him to witness firsthand the revolutions then taking place and encouraged him to reconsider – as it did many others at the time – the nature and characteristics of American democracy as compared to the rest of the world.⁶³ As a result, his 1850 publication of *Representative Men* was a much more direct, practical, and indicting manifesto of his political thought than previous texts. In it, Emerson lectured on the personae of six popular seventeenth- and eighteenth-century figures as representative of different strains of human development. This collection, especially the essay focused on the merits and ills of democracy, is Emerson's most extended and cogent description of political culture. It is also significant in that it is more directly written in response to his surrounding culture more than any of his other works.

When Emerson chose a historic figure to represent democracy, he selected the Romantic and cult figure Napoleon – an odd decision given that Napoleon was a despotic emperor. Yet Napoleon spoke to what Emerson saw as both the possibilities and the potential problems of democracy: “The instinct of active, brave, able men, throughout the middle class everywhere,” Emerson explained, “has pointed out Napoleon as the incarnate Democrat. He had their virtues and their vices; above all, he had their spirit or aim.” Bonaparte, in particular, embodied the capitalist drive that Emerson believed pervaded Jacksonian America: the desire for “good society, good books, fast traveling, dress, dinners, servants without number, personal weight . . . precisely what is agreeable to the heart of every man in the nineteenth century, this powerful man possessed.” Napoleon was the idol for contemporary

⁶² Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 306.

⁶³ See Timothy Mason Roberts, *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009).

America because of his overpowering will and success in achieving all the wealth of which any citizen could ever dream.⁶⁴

Emerson explained how the Bonaparte model was emblematic of the rise and fall of democracy, and how it related to the radical political culture of Jacksonian America. The Bonaparte-as-democrat could not be separated from the Bonaparte-as-failed-emperor because both images were driven by the same motive: greed and power. In using the Napoleon story to distill a broader taxonomy of politics, Emerson posited, “the democrat is a young conservative; the conservative is an old democrat.” Further, an “aristocrat is the democrat ripe and gone to seed; – because both parties stand on the one ground of the supreme value of property, which one endeavors to get, and the other to keep.” In this way, “Bonaparte may be said to represent the whole history of this party, its youth and its age”; he was “an experiment under the most favorable conditions” of a society purely driven by greed and a desire to conquer, for the urge to succeed came at the cost of another’s loss.⁶⁵

If that was not clear enough, Emerson closed his essay on Napoleon in a didactic voice that was rare in his generally abstract rhetoric. After noting how all of Napoleon’s achievements came to naught, Emerson argued that such a destiny accompanied any form of radical democracy:

It was not Bonaparte’s fault. He did all that in him lay to live and thrive without moral principle. It was the nature of things, the eternal law of man and of the world which balked and ruined him; and the result, in a million experiments, will be the same. Every experiment, by multitudes or by individuals, that has a sensual and selfish aim, will fail.⁶⁶

Thus Napoleon came to represent the rise and fall of radical democracy, at least when democracy was based on “sensual and selfish” principles – Emerson’s primary critique of Jacksonian America.

Emerson’s Napoleon-as-democrat essay appeared at the cusp of a decade that questioned democracy’s potential. The legacy of Jackson, the arguments of Henry Clay, and the debates between Stephen Douglas and Abraham Lincoln brought the issue of democratic governance and moral conduct to the nation’s conscience.⁶⁷ The expansion of America’s empire, the impending Civil War, and the push for extended suffrage forced Americans to reconsider their democratic tradition. As the moral grounding seemed to be disappearing from under their feet alternative and, at the time, even radical cultural indictments and proposals were offered. Among these were Emerson’s, and his late writings maintained an underlying tragic undertone that tempered his humanist zeal

⁶⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Napoleon; or, the Man of the World,” in *Political Writings*, 169–76, 170–71.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁶⁷ These tensions are recently and artfully explored in John Burt, *Lincoln’s Tragic Pragmatism: Lincoln, Douglas, and Moral Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

and acknowledged democracy's excess. Friedrich Nietzsche, for one, found in Emerson the perfect blueprint on which to build an anti-foundationalist moral philosophy, due to its potency for experimenting and experiencing progress in a world of shattered truths; he also based his own antidemocratic views on Emerson's malleable political legacy.⁶⁸

Emerson likely meant the association with Napoleon the dictator and American democracy to be jarring and absurd. He had grown increasingly frustrated with American culture and decided that the abstract idealism of his essays was no longer sufficient. And he was not alone in his critique of American consumerism: to the frustration of many, the three decades preceding the Civil War gave rise to a strong pro-business, consumerist, and expansionist movement within America.⁶⁹ The response to this movement varied, but included reactions like spiritual separation, labor reform, and even Fourierist experiments.⁷⁰ As much as Emerson wished to be understood as unfazed by his surrounding circumstances, much of his ideas' hostility toward selfishness can be interpreted as a reaction against this movement.

VI

Despite his rhetorical emphasis on individualism and the rejection of contemporary traditions, Emerson's political thought contained many elements from his culture and represents central tensions within the American democratic tradition itself. Indeed, even his insistence on the originality of his thought and the concept of an ideological revolution were not new, as both had been common features not only of American authors in general, but of the literary Federalists of the early nineteenth century in particular.⁷¹ While it is true that Emerson was an iconoclast and sought significant reform, he still worked within and never fully escaped an ideological framework inherited from his New England – and in some cases Federalist – forebears. It is only through acknowledging this connection that divergences can be more fully appreciated. And finally, Emerson's complex and porous relationship with his Federalist forebears represent not only the tensions within his own political thought, but also the tensions of the broader American democratic tradition

⁶⁸ See Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 1–15.

⁶⁹ See Yonatan Eyal, *The Young American Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party, 1828–1861* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁷⁰ See Carl Guarnieri, *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 9.

⁷¹ See Kaplan, *Men of Letters in the Early Republic*, 201–202.

more generally. How can a political culture dedicated to expanding civil rights and duties harness the concomitant decentralization of authority? Even as generations and movements came and went, paradoxes continued and evolved. Ideological appropriations and cultural transformations are ambiguous and amorphous concepts in which rhetoric often overshadows reality, and the slow march to modernity often embodies adaptation as much as it does revolution.