

Emerson, Modern Literature, and the Question of Goethe

David M. Robinson

I.

“*I* have advertised my new Course & call it the Present Age,” Emerson wrote to Elizabeth Hoar in early November 1839. “But alas it is still Future Age to me” (*L* 2:231).¹ Fearing that he had promised more than he could deliver, he nevertheless launched the series a month later at the Masonic Temple in Boston, and made it a definitive statement of the aims and principles of Transcendentalism. Building on his earlier lecture series on “The Philosophy of History,” “Human Culture,” and “Human Life,” Emerson described the course of history as the continuing revelation of human possibility. But as these series developed, his focus shifted subtly from the unleashing of individual potential to the promise of cultural progress and social reform. In “The Present Age” he portrayed the course of history in terms that seemed to provide a rationale for the *avant-garde* position of his emerging Transcendentalist cohort. While it was a “multiplex and evanescent” era, he admitted, in which there are “many souls-contemporary; many activities; many unlike ends,” this variety existed within a greater duality. “There are two parties to one of which all men belong. The party of the Past and the party of the Future.” He then renamed these “parties” in a way that further politicized them for the turbulent 1830s and 1840s. “Men range themselves here and elsewhere and everywhere either with the Movement Party or the Establishment” (*EL* 3:187).

As this lecture continued, and others followed on such subjects as “Politics,” “Private Life,” “Reforms” and “Education,” it became clear

that Emerson was both defining the “Movement Party” and setting its agenda, and doing so while simultaneously projecting a confidence that these ideas represented an inevitable future, whose coming was as certain as night turning to day. It is of some significance, then, that he chose to place two lectures on “Literature” immediately after his introductory lecture, thus placing literature at the forefront of the era’s key issues. Questions of theology have usually been considered the originating concerns of Transcendentalism, and these were still sizzling in 1840. Theodore Parker’s central sermon on “The Transient and the Permanent” was still a year away, and for many, the religious elements of Transcendentalism remained central. Emerson also placed the lectures on literature before other lectures such as “Politics” and “Reforms” as well, a decision that is also somewhat surprising, given the growing urgency of political and reform issues among the Transcendentalists, and the founding of the utopian community Brook Farm in 1841.

Emerson soon revised the opening lectures on literature into the essay “Thoughts on Modern Literature” for the newly established *Dial*. He and *Dial* editor Margaret Fuller had intended the essay for the first issue, suggesting their sense of the piece as a somewhat programmatic statement for both the new journal and the movement that it represented. Planning problems for the initial issue of July 1840 prevented the essay’s appearance in that first issue, so it appeared instead in the second issue in October 1840. The immediate background of its publication, however, suggests something further about its importance, especially its final section in which Emerson took up Goethe. He was the man “of all men,” Emerson declared, “who has united in himself ... the tendencies of the era” (*CW* 10:113). The standard genealogy of Transcendentalism is a religious or theological one which details the movement’s emergence from Unitarianism and the theological controversies that marked that emergence. As one who has invested much in this narrative, I have no intention of repudiating it. But the insurgent energies of the Transcendentalists were not exhausted on theology. Paralleling that

development from the beginning, and coming in many ways to overshadow it in the early 1840s, was a literary insurrection whose central subject was Goethe. The literary focus of Transcendentalist discourse thus became particularly important with the formation of the *Dial*. The magazine was principally the product of a rising translator and critic, Fuller, and a minister whose aspirations had become increasingly literary, Emerson. Fuller had at one point felt some misgivings about whether she could think of herself as a part of Transcendentalism in its early stages because she was not, and could not be, a minister. This was a burden she carried lightly, however, since she had a very low boredom threshold when it came to biblical exegesis and doctrinal controversy. In early discussions about the formation of a Transcendentalist journal, she wrote to Frederic Henry Hedge, "I fear I am merely 'Germanico' and not 'transcendental.'"² Her "merely" may be ironical – she knew Hedge as an enthusiastic and knowledgeable student of German literature and philosophy – but it does signal her possibly competing conception of what the new views were all about.

Emerson and Fuller had their first substantial meeting as friends and colleagues in the summer of 1836 when Emerson was in the last phase of writing *Nature*, and Fuller had just published her first substantial essay that involved Goethe, "The Present State of German Literature."³ Fuller's interest in and command of German literature was thus one of the bases of their intellectual exchange. In 1839, the year that Emerson began his lectures on "The Present Age," Fuller published her first book-length work, a translation of Johann Peter Eckermann's *Gespräche mit Goethe* [*Eckermann's Conversations with Goethe*] which included a substantial critical essay on Goethe's achievement and thought.⁴ She presented him in decidedly transcendental terms as the great theorist of self-culture and a thinker who had redefined God as the instinct and potentiality of creative self-expression. Emerson's awareness of Fuller's developing work had a profound effect on his own sense of literature as the new theology of the modern era, and his assessment of Goethe is the core of "Thoughts on Modern Literature."

II.

This essay, like the lectures upon which it was based, is both a pedagogical and advocacy in purpose. In describing the literature of the modern age, Emerson is careful to remind his readers that books are aids to thought, and should never be used as substitutes for thought. “The erect mind disparages all books,” he wrote. Literature itself is “ephemeral,” and must be read “in a wisdom which transcends the instructions of any book.” Nevertheless, “our souls are not self-fed,” and we all remember “the genial miraculous force we have known to proceed from a Book” (*CW* 10:102). As stimulants, starters, sources of questioning, and inspirational models, they hold a central place in intellectual experience. Their value also lies in suggestiveness, a power to bring the reader to the edge of a truth that finally eludes expression. In such intense moments of reading we glimpse a compelling Beyond, in which the ultimate value of literature lies. “Over every true poem lingers a certain wild beauty, immeasurable,” Emerson explained. This kind of “wild” reading is the measure of the value of literature, the thing we always (or should always) seek from an author. In addition to this broader theory of the best use of literature, he also offered his readers a brief literary history of the modern age. He thus proceeded to name the key names and make the important connections among the authors that we now know as the Romantics. He located in Romanticism the freshness and suggestiveness of “books that breathe of new morning” (*CW* 10:103), eventually citing Goethe as the best representative of the modern.

The significance of Emerson’s treatment of Goethe is magnified when we remember Margaret Fuller’s advocacy of Goethe as a modern master, a project that she undertook in the face of heavy moralistic criticism from the New England intellectual establishment. Prominent assaults on Goethe’s moral character included an 1833 condemnation by Andrews Norton, Emerson’s nemesis in the controversy over the Divinity School “Address,” and a scathing attack on Goethe’s character in 1839 by George Bancroft, a rising historian and political figure who

was also a prominent commentator on German culture.⁵ Such attacks had also been made by British critics, and Thomas Carlyle's defense of Goethe and of German Romanticism had been a significant catalyst in the emergence of British and American Romanticism in the early nineteenth century. Despite Emerson's deep friendship with Carlyle, he had never been able to give unqualified support to Goethe. In the notes to the Centenary Edition of *Representative Men*, a volume which included Emerson's most significant essay on Goethe, Edward Waldo Emerson offered some insight into his father's life-long hesitation to endorse Goethe unreservedly. As Edward recounted, Emerson's older brother William went to study Divinity in Göttingen, an important center for biblical studies, after graduating from Harvard. Confronted there by modern German scholarship on the historical origins of the biblical texts, he developed religious doubts serious enough to undermine his ambition to enter the ministry. Knowing of Goethe's sage-like fame, he consulted him in Weimar about his dilemma. Expecting to have his doubts calmed, or perhaps advised to take a different path, Goethe instead encouraged him "to persevere in his profession, comply with the usual forms, preach as best he could, and not trouble his family and his hearers with his doubts." The seeming hypocrisy of Goethe's advice troubled William deeply enough to cause him to renounce a career in Divinity and enter the law. He recounted the encounter to his family, and as Edward speculated, it "must have made a lasting impression on his brother's mind." That initial impression was reinforced, Edward believed, by his father's reading Thomas Carlyle's 1824 translation of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. In Edward's words, the "lax continental morals" of this book administered a further shock to "the young New England minister."⁶ These are not, of course, exactly the grounds on which Emerson portrayed Goethe in the *Dial*, but this residual wariness may well have conditioned Emerson's reading and assessment of Goethe.

Fuller also worried about these issues of character in Goethe, but his ability to address her particular intellectual needs far outweighed

her doubts. It was, in fact, Goethe's liberalism, his cosmopolitanism, that spoke to her recurring sense of provincial suffocation. Her translation of the Eckermann volume, noted earlier, was one of her most important counter efforts in the Goethe wars. Fuller's volume appeared in George Ripley's *Specimens of Foreign Standard Literature* (1838-45), an ambitious series of fifteen translations of modern European literary and philosophical texts completed largely by authors associated with Transcendentalism.⁷ Ripley's project, itself an overlooked Transcendentalist literary intervention, was a heroic editorial and organizational achievement in American letters. It reflected the Transcendentalists' shared enthusiasm for modern European texts, which they saw as important tools in a mission of cultural enlightenment to an American reading public that was provincial and rigidly self-righteous.

Goethe's challenging works were, as Fuller viewed them, a formidable rejoinder to American provincial complacency, and her Eckermann translation was undertaken with a keen awareness of her compatriots' resistance to him and to modern German culture. Fuller thus presented Goethe as an exemplar of a creed of creative endeavor and ethical duty. Emerson shared, to a point, Fuller's regard for Goethe's work, and he certainly recognized both Goethe and Fuller as important allies in his struggles against Norton, Bancroft, and others. He also recognized Fuller's assessment of Goethe's achievement as a sign of her exceptional capacity to decode the significance of modern Germany for an American audience, and called the Eckermann volume a "brilliant achievement," adding that "I like it for itself, & for its promise" (*L* 2:201-3). Such critical acumen, and such persuasive advocacy was, he recognized, crucial for an ongoing effort to nurture a more open, more inquiring, American. Both he and Fuller saw the *Dial* as a critical venue for this effort. All of these considerations made his pronouncement on Goethe significant. He valued Fuller's appreciation of Goethe even while he held his own sense of disappointment in him as a writer whose great potential had never been fulfilled.

Emerson opened his essay with a theory that the production of literature was a process best understood as an event of discovery or inspiration. Literature, he argued, "proceeds by Fate" (*CW* 10:99), an initially mystifying contention of the seemingly contradictory idea that creative expression is not actually the product of the individual writer's choice, but something will-less and predetermined. He argued instead that "every scripture is given by the inspiration of God" (*CW* 10:99), reiterating the mystical and revelatory process of expression that he had set out in *Nature* and in the bardic Jesus of the Divinity School "Address."⁸ Emerson's conception of historical inevitability was by no means a settled one, and the significance of his later essay "Fate" (1860) is evidence of the continuing tension between will and destiny in his writings.⁹ It is nevertheless somewhat shocking to hear the idea of the inevitable applied to literature, an endeavor that seems essentially an effort of originality, choice, and will. By insisting on this transcendent conception of literature and the act of creativity, Emerson made it clear that he is concerned principally with what he considered an enduring form of writing, the timeless books which "proceed out of the silent living mind to be heard again by the living mind" (*CW* 10:99). This literature is alive, at least to those minds that are equally living, and because of their vitality it will be heard "again" after its original articulation. His literary standard is a kind of cosmopolitan biblicism that includes not only the Western Bible, but "the kindred sacred writings of the Hindoos, Persians, and Greeks, the alphabet of the nations" (*CW* 10:101).

The irony of Emerson's theory of "modern" literature is that it stands in resistance to modernity, refusing the notion that the new creation displaces the old, a stance that is in tension with his characteristic endorsement of freshness and originality. In taking such a stance Emerson is also disavowing the emerging modern divide between a secular realm of the arts and a religious realm of scripture and devotional literature. The novel, the genre in which Goethe had made his greatest global impact, was the most modern of the literary forms, and the furthest from the scriptural.

Emerson's essay thus grapples not only with literature, but more centrally with modernity, principally as embodied in Goethe. While Emerson was, like most of the Romantics, an apostle of the new and thus of Goethe's cohort, his strictures and qualifications of modernity – a Romantic resisting Romanticism – are of crucial importance in understanding the next phases of his development.

While Emerson established an ever-renewing set of sacred writings as his literary standard, he also offered, as part of the broadly educational aspect of his essay, a mini-history of modern literary development, acknowledging that literature is "in some sort a creature of time" (*CW* 10:99), taking form and character from its era. "The occasion" of literature, the moment of its formation, he admitted, "is administered by the low mediations of Circumstance" (*CW* 10:99). While he found an "immense miscellany" of literary forms in the modern era, including "a vast carcass of tradition every year" (*CW* 10:103), this residue of past eras does not hide the new day's "*subjectiveness*" or its "feeling of the Infinite" (*CW* 10:108, 110). We might call these terms the most concise definition of Romanticism yet devised. Notably, Emerson's definition encompasses a polarity – the autonomous self as opposed to its absorption into the monistic One – that runs through his work from first to last. He had a variety of names for the monistic unity to which he repeatedly returned in his discourse, such as the One, the Soul and the Over-Soul, synonyms that register a struggle to escape from God language and formulate a new religious terminology to replace the exhausted theological vocabulary of nineteenth-century Christianity. The polarity of the self and the One is also imbedded in each of its poles, as if subjectivity closely observed mirrors the infinite, as the infinite mirrors subjectivity. At its extreme, subjectivity decays to solipsism, "as the eye is withdrawn from the object and fixed on the subject or mind" (*CW* 10:108). Yet the self-awareness underlying subjectivity is ultimately rooted in a monistic principle, "the new consciousness of the one mind" that feeds "that insatiable demand for unity – the need to recognise one nature in all the

variety of objects" (*CW* 10:108). In the same way, he found that a sense of the One can produce a self-absorbed alienation in reaction to the discord of the material world. In the arts this surfaces as "a wild striving to express a more inward and infinite sense" (*CW* 10:111). It is as if the glimpse of the infinite drives the soul back into its individuality in a desperate and potentially self-destructive effort to find an adequate respond to the momentary sense of perfection.

For Emerson the singular self and the All are fluid, interpenetrating categories, and in both the individual and in the total course of history they are in constant flux, intermingling and coalescing in a dynamic evolution that continually seeks balance. Emerson traced the modern rise of the subjective to Germany, naming Beethoven as an embodiment of this "wild striving" of the soul, whose wildness complemented a "new love of the vast" that was "always native in Germany" (*CW* 10:111).¹⁰ Through De Staël it traveled to England and America, making Wordsworth's renown "a leading fact in modern literature" (*CW* 10:112). But it was Goethe "who has united in himself and that in most extraordinary degree the tendencies of the era" (*CW* 10:113). In "Thoughts on Modern Literature" Goethe stands as the figure who most thoroughly absorbed the breakthroughs of his age: "geologist, mechanic, merchant, chemist, king, radical, painter, composer, – all worked for him, and a thousand men seemed to look through his eyes" (*CW* 10:113).

Emerson's phrase, "worked for him," is worth noting. It suggests that Goethe was capable of making the growing skills and powers of human ingenuity, all the advances of his day, benefit him. On the one hand, this is exactly what Emerson envisioned and approved in his earlier *Nature*, arguing there that in nature's "ministry to man," all its components "incessantly work into each other's hands for the profit of man." This process then widened when "the useful arts" became "reproductions or new combinations by the wit of man, of the same natural benefactors" (*CW* 1:11). That is to say, the human arts and sciences magnify the powers of nature to the benefit of humanity. But

in “Thoughts on Modern Literature” he wrote of Goethe, as an individual, taking these powers into his own use. Emerson commended the use of nature’s power in *Nature*, in passages that seem to suggest both individual awakening and a newly evolving social world. But the Goethe that we see in “Thoughts on Modern Literature” seems in some senses to divert the role of the “Orphic Poet” or universal prophet to his own enhancement. He offered a portrait of Goethe as the genius who made things “work for him” in a personal and ultimately narcissistic sense.

III.

This condemnation of Goethe is preceded, however, by an almost worshipful appreciation of his prowess as a thinker and writer, and more importantly, of his possession of life itself. This is the section of the essay in which Emerson’s view of Goethe has the greatest consonance with that of Fuller. “Of all the men of this time, not one has seemed so much at home in it as he. He was not afraid to live” (*CW* 10:113). This courage to live, a trait that Emerson himself had learned to appreciate during his early manhood of dangerously fragile health and devastating personal loss, had given Goethe a confidence of spirit that was the source of his achievement. “He was knowing; he was brave,” Emerson wrote; “he was clean from all narrowness; he has a perfect propriety and taste, – a quality by no means common to the German writers” (*CW* 10:113). In separating him from the other German writers who were gaining attention in Britain and America, Emerson was also subtly defending him from the sometimes bitter attacks of his British and American critics. Their “narrowness” and lack of “propriety and taste” were characteristic. As Emerson implied, it may well have been Goethe’s courage and openness to all aspects of human life that most disturbed his critics. Their inclination was to censor the troubling aspects of life; Goethe refused to turn away from anything.

This bravery and openness made him a “resolute realist” with “a sturdy determination to see things for what they are.” Impressed with the

range of Goethe's achievements – poet, novelist, insightful traveler, connoisseur of art and architecture, innovative scientist – Emerson believed that his astonishing curiosity and openness magnified the importance of his perceptiveness: "a thousand men seemed to look through his eyes" (*CW* 10:113). Combining this receptivity to facts and events with his rejection of "all conventions, all traditions" (*CW* 10:113-14), Goethe made himself a finder of causes and a theorist of connections, a holistic intellectual whose inclusive understanding of the course of interlinked events allowed him to tower over his contemporaries as the master thinker of the era. The problem was that he knew it. Sewn into Goethe's God-like knowledge was "his Olympian self-complacency," a trait that distanced him from others and prevented him from uttering his "whole heart manlike among his brethren," as Shakespeare and Milton did. As Emerson put it, "no man was permitted to call Goethe brother" (*CW* 10:115). His intellectual accomplishments came at the cost of his empathy and compassion for others. He was less a consummate artist than a performer who does not share his knowledge but shows it off instead.

Although Emerson objected to the something that he finds sensationalist in Goethe, it appears that he is not referring to the sensations produced by novels such as *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, 1774) and *Elective Affinities* (*Die Wahlverwandschaften*, 1809). He objected instead to Goethe's reluctance to show himself as a fellow man in his works, and give the appearance that he was not directly speaking to his readers as a fellow soul. As Emerson put it, "He hid himself, and worked always to astonish, which is an egotism, and therefore little" (*CW* 10:115). Emerson found head and heart out of balance in Goethe, a costly disproportion that limited the usefulness of his great mind and talents. Modern readers, who know something of Emerson and of the history of his reputation, will appreciate the irony that Emerson himself has been criticized, both in his own age and ours, for an element of cold abstraction and intellectual aloofness in his philosophy.

Emerson elaborated this critique in an assessment of Goethe's *Meister* novels, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, 1795-96) and *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years* (*Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, 1829), works that seem unexpected candidates for repudiation given the uproar over *Werther*, with its powerful presentation of raw and destructive romantic passion, and *Elective Affinities*, with its skeptical treatment of marriage and its teasing suggestiveness about adultery. These more inflammatory novels Emerson left aside to focus on the realism of the *Meister* novels, which seemed to accept too readily the human penchant for foible and iniquity, and its corresponding proclivity to calamity. He characterized Goethe as a writer intent on bringing his readers back to earth, back into the realm of the "actual," and admitted his suspicion that Goethe understood his own intentions as a realist very well. Goethe emphasized the powerful role of error, greed, and chance in the lives of men and women, rather than their capacity to aspire and hope. He voices that strategy in a confessional apology that Goethe might offer for his purposes. "I have given my characters a bias to error. Men have the same. I have let mischances befall instead of good fortune. They do so daily. And out of many vices and misfortunes, I have let a great success grow, as I had known in my own and many other examples" (*CW* 10:117). These words, to a modern ear, and to many of Emerson's contemporaries as well, may sound like approbation. Emerson's characterization of Goethe's intentions makes him in many senses the father of the novel, the modern literary form that was the narrative of human shortcomings, iniquities, and misfortunes.

Emerson, however, took Goethe's focus on the limits of human possibility as a grievous shortcoming. In an interpretation that seconded the New England resistance to Goethe in an unexpected and singular way. The era's great thinker had failed, despite his vast accomplishment, to uphold what Emerson regarded as the crucial element of "hope" in the human character. In "The Over-Soul," an

essay written in the same period as "Thoughts on Modern Literature," Emerson termed the skeptic's "appeal to experience ... forever invalid and vain. We give up the past to the objector, and yet we hope. He must explain this hope" (*CW* 2:159). Goethe's devotion to a courageous realism became, from this perspective, a gesture of denial toward human potential, and Emerson portrayed that denial as a product of Goethe's skepticism and his ego. As Emerson wrote, "We can fancy [Goethe] saying to himself; – There are poets enough of the Ideal; let me paint the Actual, as, after years of dreams, it will still appear and reappear to wise men" (*CW* 10:117). Goethe's presumed confidence in an eventual vindication for his skepticism carried with it a disdain for his contemporaries, indeed for the human community, an example of that quality in Goethe's character that Emerson had termed "Olympian self-complacency" (*CW* 10:115).

Goethe's doubts about human potential rendered him an artist who preferred to stay smugly within the bounds of the "Actual," and thus in Emerson's view, made him a critic of the "Ideal." A year after "Thoughts on Modern Literature" was published, Emerson delivered a lecture on "The Transcendentalist" (also later published in the *Dial*) in which he defined Transcendentalism as "Idealism as it appears in 1842." He also described the Transcendentalist as one who "believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy" (*CW* 1:204). Clearly these transcendental virtues are not the virtues of Goethe. The belief that Goethe was in some respects arrayed against "miracle," "the new influx of light and power," "inspiration" and "ecstasy" was behind Emerson's critique of him, and it explains the emotional apostrophe that is one of the most notable moments of "Thoughts on Modern Literature": "Yes, O Goethe! But the ideal is truer than the actual. That is ephemeral, but this changes not" (*CW* 10:117). Emerson reversed the values of "Actual" and "Ideal" here by giving permanence to the ideal, and designating the actual as transitory. Goethe's enduring distrust of human aspiration thus represented a defeatist, even cynical withdrawal.

As Emerson put it, emphatically voicing his objection to Goethe's philosophical determinism, "he accepts the base doctrine of Fate, and gleans what straggling joys may yet remain out of its ban" (*CW* 10:118).

IV.

We might best think of this critique as political. The Goethe that Emerson presented is conservative in the political sense. He may be a sage but he is not a reformer, and not one who can inspire or stimulate reform in others. He is, as Emerson charged, "the poet of the Actual, not of the Ideal; the poet of limitation, not of possibility; of this world, and not of religion and hope" (*CW* 10:118). The term "hope" stands out in this passage as an indication of Goethe's position as a barrier to the forces of change and reform that the Transcendentalists were beginning to speak for more directly. That the *Dial* was conceived as an organ of that new era is thus important in understanding Emerson's position. His assessment anticipates a political turn in Transcendentalism that would accelerate during the four years of the *Dial*'s publication, 1840-1844, and reach its apex in the middle and late 1840s as each of its major figures – Emerson, Fuller, Ripley, Parker, and eventually Thoreau – entered into significant political reform activities and statements. Emerson made the reformist indictment of Goethe's work clear in the following passage, one of the essay's most stinging:

The limits of artificial society are never quite out of sight [in Goethe's work]. The vicious conventions, which hem us in like prison walls, and which the poet should explode at his touch, stand for all they are worth in the newspaper. We are never lifted above ourselves. We are not transported out of the dominion of the senses, or cheered with an infinite tenderness, or armed with a grand trust. (*CW* 10:117)

Goethe may have been the master of his era in some respects, but he cannot be, in Emerson's view, the prophet of the new era.

In suggesting that we consider Emerson's critique of Goethe political in nature, I am swimming against the current of Emerson's own words in summarizing his case. He couched his closing argument in explicitly moral terms, returning to the concept of balance to emphasize his feeling that "Goethe had not a moral perception proportionate to his other powers." Yet this was not a particular or limited weakness that can be isolated and explained separately. The lack of a strong moral sense caused him to fail "in the high sense to be a creator" and "spend on common aims his splendid endowment" (*CW* 10:11), a waste that reduced the whole of his potential literary and philosophical impact. Emerson thus denied Goethe the role of "creator," the very role that, for Fuller, he fulfilled so fruitfully. It seems clear that this difference of perspective was embedded in Emerson's deep but turbulent friendship with Fuller, and recognizing it helps us understand the intellectual differences that divided them. The temperamental differences that are often cited as barriers to their relationship were real, but it is important to remember that despite their close and supportive alignment on many key issues, there were important questions of philosophy and aesthetic sensibility that divided them.

As Emerson elaborated Goethe's "moral" failing, it becomes evident that his sense of the moral encompasses politics, and was often best expressed as politics. Goethe's "moral" fault lay in his unwillingness to entertain and encourage a vision of emergent egalitarian justice. Goethe "declined the office proffered to now and then a man in many centuries in the power of his genius – of a Redeemer of the human mind." The term "Redeemer" carries a religious aura, but Emerson's redeemer at this point sounds less Christ-like, even less like the bard figure of the Divinity School "Address," than we might expect. He is a "Redeemer of the human mind," a term Emerson pointedly chose over "soul" or "spirit." We get closer to his meaning when Emerson disappointedly lamented that "we feel that a man gifted like [Goethe] should not leave the world as he found it" (*CW* 10:119). Considering this charge, it becomes clearer that Emerson increasingly felt that to be a

moral writer is to be a writer whose works can inspire hope for a changed world.

Emerson was particularly concerned with the dangerous tendency of the tragic vision to slide over into complacency. His indictment of Goethe's "Olympian self-complacency" (*CW* 10:115) rings throughout the essay as a warning against a philosophical skepticism and determinism that saps the human mind of hope and motivation. The unsettled soul, the discontented soul, the striving soul, are for him the necessary elements of both moral soundness and the advance of justice. Unease with the imperfect present moment, of which Goethe had too little, constituted for Emerson the sign of life. "Man is not so far lost," he argued, "but that he suffers ever the great Discontent, which is the elegy of his loss and the prediction of his recovery" (*CW* 10:120). The recognition of the incomplete and the flawed thus became for him the promise of newness that Goethe had refused to trust. "The ache of spiritual pain," Emerson wrote, is not the end point of tragedy, but the recognition that "will write the annals of a changed world, and record the descent of principles into practice, of love into Government, of love into Trade" and "of simple living and of clean and noble relations with men" (*CW* 10:120). These were the utopian hopes that would mark Emerson's evolving work over the next two decades.

Oregon State University

Notes

¹ The following editions of Emerson's works will be cited by abbreviation in the text, with volume and page number following. *CW*: *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson *et al.* 10 Volumes (Harvard UP, 1971-2013). *EL*: *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert E. Spiller, Stephen E. Whicher, and Wallace E. Williams, 3 volumes (Harvard UP, 1959-72). *L*: *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk and Eleanor Tilton, 10 volumes (Columbia UP, 1939, 1990-95). This essay was written to celebrate the completion of the *Collected Works* edition with the publication of its tenth volume, *Uncollected Prose*

Writings, edited by Ronald A. Bosco, Joel Myerson, and Glen M. Johnson.

² *The Letters of Margaret Fuller*, ed. Robert N. Hudspeth, 6 volumes (Cornell UP, 1983-94), I:226.

³ Margaret Fuller, "The Present State of German Literature," *The American Monthly Magazine* 8 (July 1836): 1-13.

⁴ S[arah] M[argaret] Fuller, trans., *Conversations with Goethe in the Last Years of his Life, Translated from the German of Eckermann* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, and Company, 1839). Quotations from the "Translator's Preface" to this volume will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁵ See A[ndrews]. N[orton]., "Recent Publications Concerning Goethe," *The Select Journal of Foreign Periodical Literature* 1 (April 1833): 250-75; and [George Bancroft], "Goethe: His Character as a Writer and as a Man," *Christian Examiner* 26 (July 1839): 361-68.

⁶ For Edward Waldo Emerson's account of William Emerson's encounter with Goethe and its impact, see *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Centenary Edition, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson, 10 Volumes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903-04). Volume IV: *Representative Men: Seven Lectures*, 367-68.

⁷ On Ripley's *Specimens* series, see Barbara L. Packer, *The Transcendentalists* (U of Georgia P, 2007), 64.

⁸ On the Divinity School "Address," see Stephen E. Whicher, *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (U of Pennsylvania P, 1953), 72-76; David M. Robinson, "Poetry, Personality, and the Divinity School Address," *Harvard Theological Review*, 82 (1989): 185-99; and Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (U of California P, 1995), 288-92.

⁹ For readings on "Fate," see David M. Robinson, *Emerson and the Conduct of Life* (Cambridge UP, 1993), 134-39; Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, 500-503; and Lawrence Buell, *Emerson* (Harvard UP), 278-87.

¹⁰ Emerson is careful to qualify his description of Beethoven by attributing it to "those who understand" (*CW* 10:111) his music, a group

in which he is presumably not included. He may be deferring here to Fuller, a passionate Beethoven advocate, or to John Sullivan Dwight, a Transcendentalist who was also a key proponent of Beethoven. On Fuller's love of Beethoven, see Megan Marshall, "Margaret Fuller on Music's 'Everlasting Yes': A Romantic Critic in a Romantic Era," *Margaret Fuller and Her Circles*, ed. Brigitte Bailey, Katheryn P. Viens, and Conrad Edick Wright (U of New Hampshire P, 2013), 148-60. On Dwight, see Ora Frishberg Saloman, *Beethoven's Symphonies and J.S. Dwight: The Birth of American Musical Criticism* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1995).

