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EMERSONIAN PERFECTIONISM: A MAN IS A GOD IN RUINS

by

Brad James Rowe

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

Approved:

Paul Crumbley Major Professor	Evelyn Funda Committee Member
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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2007

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ABSTRACT

Emersonian Perfectionism: A Man Is a God in Ruins

by

Brad James Rowe, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2007

Major Professor: Dr. Paul Crumbley
Department: English

Ralph Waldo Emerson is a great American literary figure that began his career as a minister at Boston's Second Church. He discontinued his ministry to become an essayist and lecturer and continued as such for the remainder of his life. This thesis was written with the intent of demonstrating that, in spite of leaving the ministry, Emerson continued to be religious and a religionist throughout his life and that he promulgated a unique religion based upon the principle of self-reliance. At the heart of Emerson's religion of self-reliance is the doctrine of perfectionism, the infinite capacity of individuals. This thesis defines Emerson's perfectionism and then tries to locate him in American Studies by contextualizing him with three of his religious contemporaries that were also preaching the doctrine of perfectionism.

(109 pages)

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ABBREVIATIONS USED FOR FREQUENTLY QUOTED WORKS

CW	The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson
JE	Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson
EL	Essays and Lectures
JMN	The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson
LL	The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson
LE	The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson
EPP	Emerson's Prose and Poetry
YES	Young Emerson Speaks
CS	The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Thesis Background

Ralph Waldo Emerson, until about a year and a half ago, occupied a place in my life that is probably typical of the place that he occupies in most Americans' lives. I had never read one of his essays from beginning to end, only excerpts; and, like most Americans I had heard and read many of his aphorisms, like "To be great is to be misunderstood" ("Self-Reliance" EPP 125). Consequently, I found his words inspiring, and I considered him a great philosopher and a master of language without actually knowing what he had written. Furthermore, upon hearing one of his works quoted, I might respond the way anybody would respond if they wanted to appear knowledgeable with regards to something they actually knew very little about by saying, "Ah, Emerson, what a great American mind," or something to that effect. While I was not being completely honest with myself or with others in making a pretense of knowing Emerson, I must also confess that in spite of never having studied Emerson intently, there was a part of me that thought I knew or understood Emerson, or at least knew about him. After all, it is virtually impossible to grow up in America without some familiarity with Emerson. As Richard Higgins put it in his article "Emerson at 200," "Two hundred years after his birth on 25 May 1803, Emerson is recognized as the architect of American intellectual culture. School syllabi swell with his works and most Americans assume some familiarity with his thought." One will almost certainly encounter some of Emerson's writings in

high school and undergraduate literature courses, but even more common are the encounters with Emerson's one-liners, for very few authors are as quoted or as quotable as Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Emerson is quoted by people with all sorts of different agendas. As Harold Bloom put it in his article "The Prophet of Self-Reliance: Emerson and the Making of the American Mind,"

> Born on May 25, 1803, Emerson is closer to us than ever on his 200th birthday. In America, we continue to have Emersonians of the left…and of the right….The Emersonian vision of self-reliance inspired both the humane philosopher, John Dewey, and the first Henry Ford. Emerson remains the central figure in American culture and informs our politics, as well as our unofficial religion, which I regard as more Emersonian than Christian, despite nearly all received opinion on this matter. (4)

Bloom makes an incredibly bold claim here, stating that Emerson is "the central figure in American culture," however, his claim is easily substantiated. To illustrate Emerson's pervasiveness in our culture and the extent to which his writings can be used to promote various agendas, I will relate a recent experience. Several days ago, while doing a bit of leisure reading of totally unrelated literature, I serendipitously came across some of Emerson's writings; I encountered them while perusing a book by weight-loss guru, Jorge Cruise. At the beginning of each chapter of his weight-loss program, Cruise had an inspirational quotation, the sources of the quotations ranging from Gandhi to Oprah. However, the only person that was quoted more than once (and he was quoted three times) was Ralph Waldo Emerson—to inspire weight loss! Similarly, in his article "Emerson and the Spirit of Theory," Roger Lundin recalls that in 1988, Reebok International clipped sentences from Emerson's Essay "Self-

Reliance" as part of a twenty million dollar campaign to sell their sneakers. Truly, Emerson must be considered one of the central figures in American culture.

Yet, as interesting as Bloom's claim is about Emerson being the central figure in American culture, his popularity is not the main focus of this thesis. Instead, I want to focus on the Emersonian religion to which Bloom makes reference in the previous quotation. As I mentioned earlier, until recently I was quite ignorant of Emerson's history, and of the bulk and nature of his writings. Specifically, until I enrolled in Professor Paul Crumbley's "Topics in Literary Study" seminar, I had no idea of the breadth and depth of religion in Emerson's writings. Without a doubt, this rude awakening was in part due to a lack of familiarity on my behalf with the works of Emerson; but I think that it is equally indicative of the way that Emerson is portrayed in American literary circles, as Kevin Van Anglen points out in his article "Reading Transcendentalist Texts Religiously: Emerson, Thoreau, and the Myth of Secularization." In that article, Van Anglen mentions that there have been two currents of thought when it comes to the interpretation of Transcendentalism—one religious and one secular. He then adds, "The stronger by far of these two schools has been the one that places Transcendentalism in a mostly secular light" (153). This is not to say that Emerson has not been looked at as a religious thinker; it is to say that his contributions to religion have traditionally been viewed as secondary to the importance of his influence on secular culture, and perhaps rightfully so. However, I feel that there is room to reexamine Emerson's self-reliance in terms of its religious significance, and in this thesis, I hope to look at Ralph Waldo

Emerson in a new light, namely, as a religious perfectionist. However, in order to more fully provide the reader with an understanding of my approach to Emersonian religion, it is necessary to provide a brief history of my graduate studies experience.

By profession, I am a religion instructor for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. So as I commenced my graduate work in American Studies, I had high hopes of somehow incorporating religion into my graduate studies. Along the way, I enrolled in a Folklore seminar and shortly thereafter took a course entitled "Shakespeare and Religion." I began to realize that religion would not be such a difficult fit into American Studies after all because of the role that religion plays in shaping culture, history and literature. At about the same time, I became much more acquainted with Emerson via the Topics in Literary Study seminar. I quickly became very fond of Emerson's works, and as my interest in studying Emerson increased, and as I delved more deeply into his writings, I found many parallels between Emerson's thought and that of Joseph Smith (one of Emerson's contemporaries and the founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). But, I lacked scholarly works to substantiate my findings. Shortly thereafter, however, a search in the MLA Bibliography produced several articles about Emerson's religious thinking. Among these articles was an article by John-Charles Duffy comparing him to Joseph Smith; I also found an article by Jared Hickman making comparisons between Smith and Emerson. While the main focus of this paper is not to draw a comparison between these two men, and while neither article makes the same assertions that I will make in my writings, I

was, nonetheless, thrilled at my good fortune in discovering that other scholars saw parallels between these two nineteenth-century figures. I was also very pleased that other scholars saw the value of looking at Emerson's religious thought and were making connections between him and other religionists of his day.

This thesis will be similar to those studies inasmuch as it looks at Emerson in terms of religion and compares him to other religionists. This thesis will also have some similarities with the works of David Robinson and Kevin Van Anglen inasmuch as they, too, advocate viewing self-reliance and Transcendentalism as being religious in nature. In using the term "religion" in this thesis, I do not do so in the traditional sense. Traditionally, if a student undertakes a study of a particular person's religion, the religion referred to means the religious organization to which the person belonged and the dogmas related thereto. In Emerson's case, however, this is not possible considering his abhorrence for religious institutions. This is not to say, however, that Emerson had a disdain for religion. On the contrary, I will seek to establish in this thesis that he saw religion, when practiced in its true form, as something beautiful and venerable and that he made allusions to his religion of self-reliance in the majority of the works that he produced. Therefore, I will look at the religion within—personal religion—as opposed to religion on the institutional level, as it is traditionally examined. But in doing so, I will look at religion as Emerson did, and refer to religion using his terms. I will elaborate much more on this in the body of the thesis. Furthermore, this thesis will not be the first work to look at Emerson as a

"perfectionist" since Stanley Cavell examined Emerson's moral perfectionism. However, this thesis will be the first that I am aware of to look at Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance in terms of religious perfectionism and to make the connections between his philosophies and those of the religious perfectionists of his day. I hope this thesis will contribute to the scholarly discourse with regards to Emerson and provide new insights by looking at him through the lens of religious perfectionism.

Proceeding with Caution

Upon entering the debate about the religiosity of Emerson's teachings in this thesis, I think it wise to consider the following words from Harold Bloom in "The Prophet of Self-Reliance":

> Americans can read Emerson without reading him: that includes everyone in Washington DC pressing for power in the Persian Gulf. I return to the paradox of Emerson's influence: Peace marchers and Bushians alike are Emerson's heirs in his dialectics of power. (5)

Just as Emerson can be used at both ends of the spectrum politically, so, likewise, are his teachings viewed with regards to religion. There are those who feel Emerson's writings were religious in his early years, but that with the passage of time, the religious was completely abandoned in favor of the secular. I argue that perfectionism, self-reliance and religion were always integral to Emersonian thought, subsequently becoming in Bloom's words yet another "heir in his dialectics." In an effort to avoid reading "Emerson without reading him," I will proceed with caution and cite his works extensively in order to remain as true as possible to his original intent.

Chapter Summaries

In Chapter 1, I explore Ralph Waldo Emerson's unconventional religion of self-reliance. Interestingly enough, even making reference to Emerson's credo as his religion causes some controversy because of Emerson's utter distaste for the organized religions of his day. I will establish in the thesis, however, that Emerson described his philosophy of self-reliance as a religion. For Emerson saw religion much the same way that William James did, who wrote the following in his book The Varieties of Religious Experience:

> Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine. (31)

In other words, religion, for Emerson and James, had very little to do with affiliation with an institution and very much to do with the individual and the individual's relation to divinity. Having said this, I will continue throughout the thesis to refer to and to certify the existence of an Emersonian religion. In order to help establish self-reliance as a "religion" and connect it with its contemporary religious philosophies, I will introduce religious perfectionism and establish its centrality to Emersonian self-reliance.

The purpose of Chapter 2 is to demonstrate the prevalence of perfectionism throughout the body of Emerson's teachings, giving particular attention to his middle and late works, inasmuch as Emerson's belief in self-reliance (and therefore perfectionism) in his later years is often questioned.

In Chapter 3, I assert and provide evidence that "perfectionism," as it is found in Emersonian self-reliance, was not unique to Emerson. Rather, it was to be found in the teachings of many religionists. In this paper, I will concentrate on three of Emerson's American religionist contemporaries, namely John Humphrey Noyes, Charles Grandison Finney (both of whom dubbed themselves "perfectionists") and Joseph Smith, Jr. I will draw parallels between their "perfectionist" philosophies and those of Emerson, and by doing so, strengthen the case for Emerson to be seen as a religionist and not exclusively as a literary mind or a philosopher.

CHAPTER 2

PERFECTIONISM WITHIN THE RELIGION OF SELF-RELIANCE

Emerson's Break with Mainstream Christianity

On 9 September 1832, the twenty-nine-year-old minister Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed in his sermon entitled "The Lord's Supper" his inability to continue administering the Communion. Emerson spoke of his disbelief in the ordinance, and subsequently offered his resignation as the pastor of Boston's Second Church. He left the ministry, never to return to the life of a full-time minister, and began his life as a lecturer on a variety of topics which were, at first observation, more secular in nature. To the casual observer it might have appeared that Emerson had abandoned religion, but nothing could be further from the truth. It is true, he had cast aside historical Christianity and his clerical robes, but as Lawrence Buell writes in his book Emerson, "There is simply no way to ignore the centrality of the religious to the thinking of an ex-minister who started his career as a 'secular' writer with a book (Nature) that prophesies the coming of the kingdom of heaven and the restoration of perfect sight to the blind" (160). Emerson had managed to remove himself from institutional religion but was not able to remove the religion from himself. As Donald L. Gelpi observes in his book Endless Seeker,

> Religious passion inspired almost everything Emerson wrote: yet, curiously, to date students of Emerson have failed to produce a systematic study of his religious attitudes and beliefs, even though scholars have commented on both in the course of dealing with other aspects of his thought. This study begins, then, to fill an important gap in Emersonian scholarship. (3)

My thesis, like Gelpi's book, is written with the intention of filling "an important gap in Emersonian scholarship." I, too, feel that "religious passion inspired almost everything Emerson wrote" in spite of his departure from the life of a cleric. As a matter of fact, it was his religious passion, his commitment to the religious feelings which he felt inside that drove him out of traditional American religion.

Evidence for this assertion is found in Emerson's "The Lord's Supper" sermon. Because of its potentially controversial content and its connection to Emerson's departure from the Church, this is probably Emerson's most recognized sermon. However, it should be recognized that while the topic of Emerson's sermon was The Communion, the underlying, governing principle that he was teaching was self-reliance. Indeed, Emerson did spend the bulk of the sermon establishing scripturally his case against the administration of the Lord's Supper, but the ending may be the most significant part of the sermon. He was not just disagreeing doctrinally with the ordinance and questioning whether or not it had been instituted perpetually by Jesus, but was ultimately declaring the self as the preeminent determinant for right and wrong.

> …[T]his mode of commemorating Christ is not suitable to me. That is reason enough why I should abandon it. If I believed that it was enjoined by Jesus on his disciples, and that he even contemplated to make permanent this mode of commemoration every way agreeable to an Eastern mind, and yet on trial it was disagreeable to my own feelings, I should not adopt it.… (EPP 24)

This sermon was not just a farewell to historical Christianity but "a kind of declaration of independence of a stifled spirit" (Mott 24), a proclamation of the religion of self-reliance. Emerson was boldly asserting his doctrine of self-

reliance and the preeminent position of one's "own feelings" over the institutions of the past, even if they were instituted by Jesus Christ—asserting that personal, modern revelation would supersede that which was instituted at another time in another place.

These thoughts of self-reliance and of the need for a break with the Church had long been percolating in Emerson's mind, and now they came to a full boil in this sermon. An early evidence of these percolations is found in Emerson's journal, dated 10 January 1832.

> It is the best part of the man, I sometimes think, that revolts most against his being the minister. His good revolts from official goodness. If he never spoke or acted but with the full consent of his understanding, if the whole man acted always, how powerful would be every act and every word. (EPP 490)

The "good" mentioned here is the self, and that which the self knows deep inside to be the true and right course of action; the "official goodness" is that which society and institutions would have us think is good and right. When one's good does not revolt from official goodness, it is a form of hypocrisy, and, in Emerson's estimation, the person becomes a less powerful being. Conformity was weakness and revolt from official goodness could very well be the most virtuous path. In his own life, Emerson saw the need to revolt from "official goodness" by leaving the ministry.

Therefore, one might say that it was actually Emerson's "religion" that was forcing him to leave official religion. To further solidify this point, one reads from Emerson's 2 June 1832 journal entry that

> I have sometimes thought that in order to be a good minister it was necessary to leave the ministry. The profession is antiquated. In

> an altered age, we worship in the dead forms of our forefathers. Were not a Socratic paganism better than an effete superannuated Christianity? (EPP 490)

It appears that part of Emerson had already left the ministry when he made this entry in his journal and it was only a matter of time before the rest would follow. Three months later, on 9 September 1832, he took the final step necessary to "be a good minister" by revolting against "official goodness" and resigning at Second Church.

Ralph Waldo Emerson: Religious Restorationist

So how does one best explain this "religion" which compelled Emerson to leave mainstream Christianity and his post as a minister? A model for the approach I will take for looking at Emerson's religion is the one taken by William E. Phipps in his book Mark Twain's Religion where he demonstrates that Twain (who was often viewed as atheistic, agnostic or at the very least antagonistic towards religion by many scholars) in actuality did have a religion; it was just not a conventional one. Phipps wrote:

> If religion and theology are stereotyped by those researching MT, it is easy for them to assume they did not matter either to him or to the culture in which he lived. Those who narrowly define religion to mean either orthodoxy or liberalism, modernism or fundamentalism, Catholicism or Protestantism, Christianity or Judaism, Pentecostal or liturgical practices, Western or Eastern faiths, sometimes rightly claim that he was not religious. Moreover, if being religious means being a sanctimonious churchman, MT was certainly antireligious. But MT recognized that the scope of religion is much wider than Christianity of any one standard or heretical variety. (3)

Phipps continues by arguing that even the New Testament refutes the fact that "religion" can be equated with affiliation to an institution, quoting the parable of

the Good Samaritan, the parable of the Last Judgment and the epistle of James as examples. According to these examples, he writes, "'religion' is acting with compassion." Phipps then sheds further light on the issue of Twain's religion by continuing:

> If criticism of a culture's prevalent religion makes someone irreligious, then denouncers of the prevailing national values in every era—from Moses to Martin Luther King, Jr.—would not be religious…. Of the many other definitions remaining is an ethical one: living by a moral code believed to be sanctioned by a divine power. Depending on the definition or definitions one selects, MT can be classified as either "irreligious" or "religious." (4)

Similarly, Emerson can be classified as either irreligious or religious, for he was certainly critical of the culture's prevalent religion, but he did live a moral code that he felt was sanctioned by divinity, his religion of self-reliance. It all depends on the definition of religion that one uses. Phipps' comments on Twain's religion are very enlightening and extremely pertinent in the discourse regarding Emerson's religion and religiousness, and this definition of religion as a divinely sanctioned, personal, moral code best explains Emerson's religion.

A look at what some scholars have written respecting Transcendentalism and religion is helpful. In his book The Transcendentalists: An Anthology, Perry Miller wrote, "Transcendentalism was not primarily a literary phenomenon…fed by…mere aesthetics." On the contrary, "it is most accurately to be defined as a religious demonstration" (8-9). Commenting on what Miller wrote, Kevin Van Anglen added:

> Transcendentalism, in this view was principally a theology, a spirituality, and a religious reform… with traceable roots in such diverse sources as New England Calvinism, contemporary Boston Unitarianism, the Asian religions, Neo-Platonism,

> Swedenborgianism, and nineteenth-century American religious, social, and political thought. (153)

Miller states that Transcendentalism was not "primarily" literary; Van Anglen calls Transcendentalism "principally a theology, a spirituality, and a religious reform." According to these scholars, Emerson, self-reliance and Transcendentalism did not simply have religious tones to them; religion was at their center. This is the first part of my argument, then, that Transcendentalism and Emersonian thought were primarily religious. David Robinson agrees with this position when he writes "if we think of Emerson as the man who resigned his ministry to pursue a literary career, we miss an essential truth. His first book Nature is a landmark in American literature, to be sure, but it is a text, like most of Emerson's, that proposes a new religious vision, a new theology" (33). But one may argue that there is not yet sufficient evidence to justify calling Emersonian religious thought a "religion." I will address this in a few pages. For now all I ask is that one acknowledges the religious nature of most of Emerson's writings.

If one then concedes that Transcendentalism was a religious movement, and takes into consideration Emerson's radical departure from traditional religion and his emphasis on a return to true religion (both of which I will illustrate in the next few pages), I feel that his self-reliance can best be understood in terms of "religious restorationism," and I will attempt in the next few pages to show how this is an apt categorization of Emerson's thought.

Emerson, like the religionists that I will examine in chapter three of this thesis, was proposing, as Robinson said, "a new theology." I have quoted both

David Robinson and Lawrence Buell as making reference to the religious restorationist language in Emerson's book Nature that speaks of "the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven," but one finds it elsewhere in the writings of Emerson as well. Perhaps the religious restorationist language that will be most familiar to the reader is found in the "Harvard Divinity School Commencement Address." Within that address, Emerson makes it a point to first establish the inadequacy of nineteenth-century organized religion by saying:

> I think no man can go with his thoughts about him, into one of our churches, without feeling, that what hold the public worship had on men is gone, or going. It has lost its grasp on the affection of the good, and the fear of the bad….It is already beginning to indicate character and religion to withdraw from the religious meetings. (EPP 77-78)

Emerson is unmistakably critical of the religious organizations of his day, pointing out their impotence. However, it was not just the organizations that disgusted Emerson. He was equally critical of the religionists who, in his mind, had no religion, like the following one:

> I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say, I would go to church no more. Men go, thought I, where they are wont to go, else had no soul entered the temple in the afternoon. A snow storm was falling around us. The snow storm was real; the preacher merely spectral; and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him, into the beautiful meteor of the snow. He had lived in vain. He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it. The capital secret of his profession, namely, to convert life into truth, he had not learned. Not one fact in all his experience, had he yet imported into his doctrine. (EPP 76)

This pointing out of deficiencies in existing religion, as exemplified in these two quotations, is very significant for the case of any religious restorationist

movement or "religious reform" as Van Anglen labeled Transcendentalism. Simply put, a restoration or reform depends upon the fact that there is a deficiency in current religious practice. Joseph Smith, of whom I will speak at length in the third chapter, did the same thing in his multi-volume History of the Church, when he asserted that God had told him "that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight" (1:6) with reference to the other churches of his day. Emerson and Smith were trying to accomplish the same thing—namely, to certify the existence of a void in religion, to establish the necessity for a restoration.

Once Emerson fully blasts formal religion, he continues in the same address and "proposes a new religious vision" (Robinson 33), a vision of where he felt that religion ought to be going:

> I look for the hour when that supreme Beauty, which ravished the souls of those eastern men, and chiefly of those Hebrews, and through their lips spoke oracles to all time, shall speak in the West also…I look for the new Teacher, that shall follow so far those shining laws, that he shall see them come full circle…. (EPP 81)

I want to point out the hints of restorationism in Emerson's language. He looks into the future "for the hour when that supreme Beauty" which once existed in the souls of men will return. He looks for the laws to be followed again such that they come "full circle." This is the second important point to restorationism—in order for something to be restored, it had to previously exist. Did Emerson feel that his philosophies, his religion of self-reliance and Transcendentalism were original, that they were his contrivances? Hardly. Instead, his feelings were that these concepts were "the very oldest of thoughts cast into the mold of these new times" ("The Transcendentalist" EPP 93). Emerson felt that this true religion

which he was seeking to restore had always existed, that it consisted of the "very oldest of thoughts."

A passage which illustrates the ancient nature of this religion is found in his essay "Religion" which was a part of the English Traits series. In that essay, Emerson asserts that true religion had been around in England for a long time, much longer than the Church of England had been in England, that it had "existed in England from the days of Alfred" (EL 892). Furthermore, it was Emerson's opinion that restoration was as necessary in England as it was in America; and in the same essay, he expresses as much distaste for England's religions as he felt for American religions. With regard to the churches which he came across in his visits to England, he observes:

> …when the hierarchy is afraid of science and education, afraid of piety, afraid of tradition, and afraid of theology, there is nothing left but to quit a church which is no longer one.
>
> But the religion of England—is it the Established Church? No; Is it the sects? No;…, Where dwells the religion? Tell me first where dwells electricity, or motion, or thought or gesture. They do not dwell or stay at all. Electricity cannot be made fast, mortared up and ended, like London Monument, or the Tower….Yet, if religion be the doing of all good, and for its sake the suffering of all evil,… that divine secret has existed in England from the days of Alfred to those of Romilly, of Clarkson, and of Florence Nightingale, and in thousands who have no fame. ("Worship" EL 892)

Once again, there is a lot of restorationist language in this passage. Emerson states that considering the sorry state of English churches, "there is nothing left but to quit" the institutional religions. He continues by pointing out in the following paragraph that the true religion (which Emerson was seeking to restore), had always been among them, but not in the institutions, for religion can

not be "mortared up" any more than electricity, thought or gesture; but the true religion of England was found in the lives of thousands who may or may not have had any affiliation with the Church of England or related sects. Again, Emerson emphasizes the non-traditional, non-institutional nature of this religion which he looked forward to.

Defending Emerson's Self-Reliance as a Religion

Therefore, in the same breath in which I speak of Emerson's desire to restore what he considered true religion, I can not equivocate as to whether Emerson ever intended to go out and organize an institutional religion as so many of his contemporaries were doing. This was never his intention. Rather, he envisioned religion going in quite another direction:

> The religion which is to guide and fulfill the present and coming ages, whatever else it be, must be intellectual. The scientific mind must have a faith which is science….Let us have nothing now which is not its own evidence. There is surely enough for the heart and imagination in the religion itself. Let us not be pestered with assertions and half-truths, with emotions and snuffle.
>
> There will be a new church founded on moral science, at first cold and naked, a babe in a manger again, the algebra and mathematics of ethical law, the church of men to come, without shawms, or psaltery, or sackbut; but it will have heaven and earth for its beams and rafters; science for symbol and illustration. (EL 1076)

The religion which Emerson sought to restore would have no parish, no choir, no ordinances, no established dogmas, but would "have heaven and earth for its beams and rafters," be founded on science and intellect, and be governed by moral law and self-evident truths. True religion was found outside of what most would define as religion. To reiterate this point, I quote again from the Divinity

School Address where Emerson said that in his particular time and place, it was an indication of "religion to withdraw from the religious meetings" (EPP 77-78) inasmuch as the "stern old faiths ha[d] all pulverized" (CW 6:203); and upon one's having withdrawn from formal, lifeless religion, one could then begin to experience true religion, for "God builds his temple in the heart on the ruins of churches and religions" (CW 6:204).

Additionally, Emerson did not believe that this true religion was exclusive to Christianity or to the Occident and in need of being spread to heathen nations. On the contrary, he felt that there were already adherents to true religion to be found in all parts of the world, in all religions. He once queried in his journal: "Can any one doubt, that if the noblest saint among the Buddhists, the noblest Mahometan, the highest Stoic of Athens, the purest & wisest Christian, Menu in India, Confucius in China, Spinoza in Holland, could somewhere meet & converse together, they would all find themselves of one religion?" (JMN 16:91). And of course, if true followers were in all religions, then according to Emerson, they were also outside of all religions.

One of the biggest helps in understanding Emerson's religion outside of officially sanctioned religion comes from one of his contemporaries and acquaintances, William James, the leading psychologist of religion of that time period. James looked at Emerson's beliefs as a religion also, and made the suggestion in looking at religion "to ignore the institutional branch entirely" (29) and focus on religious experience. Additionally, Lawrence Buell made this observation about James' study of Emerson's religion:

> The side represented by James, most impressively in his Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), is Emerson the privatizer of religion into "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine"—to quote James' definition of what religion essentially is. (181)

James' departure from looking at religious institutions and focusing instead on the individual in the study of religion is crucial to understanding Emersonian religion. As I alluded to before, James was an acquaintance of Emerson's (interestingly enough, Emerson had blessed James as an infant in 1842, nine years after Emerson left the ministry), and because of his proximity to and familiarity with Emerson, James may be the best external source for examining Emerson's beliefs. He occupied a vantage point as an acquaintance and as an academic that would have allowed him, to a degree, to observe how Emerson viewed his own teachings; and James obviously felt that Emerson viewed himself as a religionist of sorts. Equally important to a proper perspective on Emerson's religious thought is the need to look at Emerson as a "privatizer" of religion, for this privatization of religion is the heart and soul of Emersonian religion, his religion of self-reliance.

As I continue this discussion of Emerson's religion, I find it useful to look at the root and etymology of the word "religion." Religion comes from the Latin word religare meaning "to tie back." I find it very doubtful that Emerson was ignorant of its meaning. Perhaps that is why he did not hesitate to use the word "religion" with reference to his beliefs in spite of his abhorrence for what everybody else called religion, namely institutional religion. Rather, I think that Emerson viewed religion in much the same way that William James did, and as I

have demonstrated, there is substantial evidence that Emerson believed in the existence of this "religion" and that he also believed that anybody who was a disciple of this "true religion" was "tied back" to the same universal truths, truths that were found inside themselves. For Emerson religion was not in an organization or in building houses of worship, but for the individual to become a house of worship.

I have cited several scholars to establish the case for Emerson's self-reliance to be viewed as a religion and him as a religionist; furthermore, I have quoted Emerson extensively with regards to religion and what he hoped to accomplish in his teachings, but the most convincing language supporting the argument that Emerson's teachings should be viewed as a religion is found in the following quotation by Emerson taken from his journal entry of 7 April 1840:

> In all my lectures, I have taught one doctrine, the infinitude of the private man. This, the people accept readily enough, and even with loud commendation, as long as I call the lecture, Art; or Politics; or Literature; or the Household; but the moment I call it Religion—they are shocked, though it be only the application of the same truth which they receive everywhere else, to a new class of facts. (JMN 7: 342)

This entry, written in the midst of what is often referred to as "Emerson's Transcendental Period," shows unequivocally that Emerson considered his life's work—the promulgation of the doctrine of self-reliance—as a religion, although others struggled to view it as such. I will continue, therefore, for the remainder of this thesis (although it may cause many academics and religionists alike to wince), to be true to what I believe Emerson would want, and refer to self-reliance as Emerson's religion.

Pillar One—The Over-Soul

Emerson's religion of self-reliance was built upon three fundamental doctrines. These three doctrines are interrelated and interdependent and are as follows: 1) The existence of the Over-Soul; 2) personal, direct revelation from the Over-Soul to every man; 3) and the "infinitude" of every man or perfectionism. I will study each of these pillars in the order I have listed them.

The first pillar upon which Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance rests is the existence of a central deity. William Huggard agrees as to the foundational nature of this belief within Emerson's writings. Consider the following statement which he wrote in his book The Religious Teachings of Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Among all of Emerson's teachings, his basic precept is his assertion that God exists. His immediate subject may appear to have little or nothing to do with his belief in a deity. Yet whatever he wrote or said derived directly or obliquely from this belief" (31). This is an excellent insight from Huggard, inasmuch as Emerson's "immediate subject" frequently did not appear to have anything to do with a belief in deity—as in the cases of "History," "The American Scholar," or "Heroism" which appear secular enough in nature—but still taught the doctrine of self-reliance and were as Huggard has noted, "derived directly or obliquely from" a belief in God. In his book Emerson, Buell made a similar observation with regards to deity in Emerson's works when he wrote: "Consider how often he resorts to the 'G-' word in 'Self-Reliance,' no less than fifteen times" (160). It is irrefutable that Emerson believed in a Supreme Being. However, George Santayana, asked the insightful question, "Did he know what he meant by Spirit

or the 'Over-Soul'? Could he say what he understood by the terms, so constantly on his lips, Nature, Law, God, Benefit or Beauty? He could not…" (217).

It appears to be true that, as Santayana postulated, Emerson could not explain what he meant by "God." But in the quotation that follows, taken from Emerson's essay "Spiritual Laws," one sees that he was unequivocal in his declarations of the existence of God, or the Over-Soul (perhaps Emerson's best-liked designation for God and the title of one of his 1841 essays): "A little consideration of what takes place around us every day would show us, that a higher law than that of our will regulates events;…. O my brothers, God exists. There is a soul at the centre of nature, and over the will of every man" (EL 309). While Emerson may not have been able to nail down exactly what he meant by God, he did have some ideas as to the character of Deity. In Emerson's mind, God was synonymous with nature. This is why Emerson in his book Nature personified nature and capitalized it. Emerson felt that by merely looking around himself, man would be forced to acknowledge something higher, something that governed everything and everybody.

This omnipresent or pervasive nature of God was central to Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance because it placed God not only throughout all that was external to man but throughout everything that was internal to man, including the self, the soul. Perhaps this explains Emerson's predilection for the term Over-Soul to describe deity, such that he would entitle his essay about God with that appellative. Emerson's feelings about God's position in the soul of man are stated very clearly in "The Over-Soul" when he wrote that "within man is the soul of the

whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE" (EPP 164). With his Over-Soul concept, Emerson offers a slightly modified version of God to the world. In an article entitled "Emerson, Second Church and the Real Priesthood," Wesley T. Mott points out how "Emerson's deliberate revision of the Gospel definition of 'Emmanuel' ("God *with* us" in Matthew 1:23) becomes at the end of Sermon 43 'this literal Emmanuel *God within us*'" (26), a subtle prepositional change to conform to Emerson's Over-Soul doctrine. Mott then continues by saying "The *bedrock vision* of Emerson's sermons is expressed in what was arguably his favorite Scripture verse—Luke 17:21—'The Kingdom of God is within you'"(26). By having the Over-Soul within man, there was interconnectedness with divinity; man had constant access to the heavens, because the heavens were within him.

Pillar Two—Revelation

This constant access to the heavens is the second pillar of Emersonian religion—personal, direct revelation. To understand the significance of revelation to self-reliance, I think it is wise to make the following point. Upon encountering Emerson and hearing about his doctrine of self-reliance, many people might quickly dismiss him as advocating egotism or insularity. However, Emersonian self-reliance is best understood in the terms set out by Richard Higgins in his article "Emerson at 200":

> After publishing "Self-Reliance" in 1841, he largely stopped using the term because people confused it with insular self-sufficiency. Emerson believed that each person "is an inlet" to the "one mind"

> of creation. Through authentic self-development, we discover this mind and are united with others in a shared creation guided by common moral laws. True individuality is thus never selfish in Emerson's view. "Self-reliance, the height and perfection of man," Emerson wrote in 1854, "is God-reliance."
>
> While Emerson did indeed distrust institutions, the individualism he advocated was not of the isolationist kind. Self-reliance disclosed the link between the individual soul and the Universal Mind, bringing the individual into relation with all.

Self-reliance, as Higgins explained, was a far cry from egotism or insularity; on the contrary, if practiced, self-reliance would actually bring an individual "into relation with all" through the Universal Mind. However, it is easy to understand how a person could make that mistake with regards to self-reliance. In order to understand exactly what it is in the self upon which one is relying, one must first understand Emerson's doctrine of the God within, the Over-Soul, and that in actuality the self upon which man is relying is that God within, "for God is within him, God about him, he is a part of God himself" (JMN 1:253), and that one relies upon the God that "is within him" by heeding and being true to the revelations which proceed from the soul. Emerson expressed the need to heed personal revelation in the following passage from "Self-Reliance": "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the luster of the firmament of bards and sages" (EPP 121). However, Emerson was not the only American religionist who was teaching about this light within—the doctrine of personal revelation. Emerson had a strange bedfellow in the Calvinist Jonathan Edwards, who preceded Emerson by one hundred years in teaching about the inner light in a sermon entitled "A Divine and Supernatural Light Immediately Imparted to the Soul by

the Spirit of God." There were also many of Emerson's contemporaries who taught about the inner light, including George Fox, William Penn and Mary Rotch (Huggard 86-7).

Emerson acknowledged in a sermon entitled "Self and Others" that this doctrine of the inner light was not a new doctrine, and that it "does not belong to any church but to a certain elevation of mind in all churches. It is not a doctrine of any sect but of all devout Christians" (YES 161). Emerson then continued, giving an early glimpse of his feelings on Universal Truth, by adding that the doctrine of inner light was "not the property of Christians but of men. For before Christ had declared the character of God and his relations to the human mind, humble and thoughtful men had communed with their Maker and rejoiced in the conviction that God dwelt within them" (161). Later in his career, Emerson would again rock the boat of Christianity with this concept of the universality of truth by placing the Bhagavad-Gita on equal standing with the gospels (Richardson 114-115). But, for Emerson, wherever there was a man's soul, there also was the Over-Soul; and where the Over-Soul was, there was revelation being poured into the mind of the individual. Emerson's belief in the availability of revelation to all men is apparent in the following words from his "Divinity School Address":

> Meantime, whilst the doors of the temple stand open, night and day, before every man, and the oracles of this truth cease never, it is guarded by one stern condition; this, namely; it is an intuition. It cannot be received at second hand. Truly speaking, it is not an instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul. What he announces, I must find true in me, or wholly reject; and on his word, or as his second, be he who he may, I can accept nothing. (EPP 72)

The "doors" to the temple of truth and revelation "stand open, night and day, before every man." Every man has equal access, no matter what his situation.

But, this revelation was not just a nicety offered to humankind, according to Emerson; it was to be his supreme, governing source of truth, the final word, the law. In Emerson's estimation, one man speaking or writing to another can not actually impart truth to him or instruct him; he can only provoke the hearer such that he will use the "intuition" or light within himself to go and find the announcement true for himself "or wholly reject" it. Emerson had stated in the sermon "Self and Others" that the light within was "no new or peculiar doctrine" (YES 161). However, what was new or peculiar about Emerson's doctrine of the inner light or revelation was the preeminent position that it occupied; he declared the absolute supremacy of personal revelation above all else, whereas personal revelation was secondary to the rest of Christianity.

This doctrine, taught as "Obey thyself" in the "Divinity School Address" and "Trust thyself" in "Self-Reliance," sorely chafed traditional Christianity. It chafed many religionists because, if the individual occupied the first position with regards to the declaration of truth, then that would relegate to second position Moses, Peter, Paul and even Jesus. For much of Christianity, this was heresy and bordered on atheism, because of the way it discredited the godliness and preeminence of Christ. But for Emerson, it was Christ's obedience to this principle of revelation which gave him a position of preeminence. In his "Divinity School Address," Emerson said of Jesus:

> He felt respect for Moses and the prophets; but no unfit tenderness at postponing their initial revelations, to the hour and the man that now is; to the eternal revelation in the heart. Thus was he a true man. Having seen that the law in us is commanding, he would not suffer it to be commanded. Boldly, with hand, and heart, and life, he declared it was God. Thus is he, as I think, the only soul in history who has appreciated the worth of a man. (EPP 73)

Emerson revered Jesus as being the only man who had lived true to "the eternal revelation in the heart," he was the only man who had looked inside himself and "declared it was God." Emerson did not feel that he was doing Jesus Christ any injustice in his treatment of him; rather Emerson felt that Christianity was doing the injustice, in revering Christ wrongly, by being content to receive religion second-hand from Jesus in the Bible rather than doing as he had done and seeking their own revelation. "We too must write Bibles, to unite again the heavens and the earthly world" wrote Emerson ("Goethe; or the Writer" EL 761).

Most of the Christian religions of Emerson's time considered revelation a thing of the past, something that had died with the apostles. Emerson criticized this belief in his "Harvard Divinity School Address" by saying "Men have come to speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead." He continued:

> It is my duty to say to you, that the need was never greater of new revelation than now. From the views I have already expressed, you will infer the sad conviction, which I share, I believe, with numbers, of the universal decay and now almost death of faith in society. The soul is not preached. The Church seems to totter to its fall, almost all life extinct. (74-75)

Emerson felt that religion was almost "extinct." In his mind, religion was dying because the lifeblood of religion and faith—revelation—was cut off, and that in

order for true religion to be restored, man needed to learn again to follow the inner light.

Pillar Three—Perfectionism

If a man were true to the inner light, if he followed his revelation, what would it reveal to him? The answer lies in the final pillar of Emerson's religion of self-reliance—perfectionism. In a quotation I examined earlier in this chapter, Emerson claimed in his journal that in all his lectures he had taught but one doctrine, "the infinitude of the private man." Buell's response to Emerson's statement, in his book Emerson, is "He exaggerated, but not by much. What he liked to call Self-Reliance is the best single key to his thought and influence" (59). Self-reliance is, indeed, the best single key to Emerson's thought and influence—it was, after all, according to him, his religion.

However, a closer look at Emerson's declaration of belief concerning the "infinitude" of man reveals another vein of religious thought—the doctrine of perfectionism. For in reality, this declaration of religion by Emerson, has more to do with the possibility of self-perfection (with infinitude inferring the possibility of perfection and the term "private man" referring to the self) than self-reliance. Self-reliance could probably be best described as the vehicle used to achieve perfection, or in the striving towards one's infinitude, and has more to do with Emerson's interrelated doctrine of revelation (which I have already discussed in this chapter). Perhaps I am trifling with semantics, but I don't think so. At any rate, Emersonian perfectionism is paramount to his religion and inseparably intertwined with self-reliance, for Emerson believed that if a man were self-

reliant, remaining true to the God within, his possibilities would be limitless. It seems to me then that Emerson's self-imposed label of "religion" for his doctrine of self-reliance coupled with the use of "infinitude" with regards to man in his definition of his religion provides a good starting point for an examination of Emerson through the lens of religious perfectionism.

As I begin looking at Emerson as a perfectionist, it is important to note that I am not the first to look at him in this light. Stanley Cavell also examined Emerson in terms of perfectionism in his book Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism. This is, therefore, not a completely new line of reasoning. Cavell looked at Emerson, however, in terms of moral perfectionism, and used his "Carus Lectures as an opportunity to recommend Emerson, despite all, to the closer attention of the American philosophical community" (33). In those lectures, he examined him in terms of moral perfectionism, contextualizing Emerson's perfectionism with that of other perfectionist philosophers such as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey.

Similarly, my endeavor in this thesis is "to recommend Emerson, despite all, to the closer attention of the American" religious community, placing him in the context of Noyes, Finney and Smith. Taking this comparison one step further, it is important to note that Emersonian perfectionism, while corresponding with the moral perfectionism of his fellow philosophers on many points, disagreed on many others. The same is true when looking at Emersonian thought with respect

to religious perfectionism; he differs from the other religious perfectionists in many regards.

For now, I will endeavor to define Emersonian perfectionism. I mentioned earlier in this section Emerson's use of the word "infinitude" to describe man's potential. I think it is of interest to look at another example of Emerson's use of the word "infinitude" in his writings. The centrality of man's infinitude to Emerson's doctrine is evident in the following passage from "The Harvard Divinity School Address":

> The true Christianity—a faith like Christ's in the *infinitude* of man—is lost. None believeth in the soul of man, but only in some man or person old and departed. Ah me! No man goeth alone. All men go in flocks to this saint or that poet, avoiding the God who seeth in secret. They cannot see in secret; they love to be blind in public. They think society wiser than their soul, and know not that one soul, and their soul, is wiser than the whole world. (EPP 78, emphasis added)

One of Emerson's peeves was the over-adoration of historical figures, not because he was unwilling to recognize their accomplishments, but because the individual, upon declaring "this saint or that poet" as heroic and worthy of emulation, was limiting himself as to what heights he might attain by setting his sights on the finite—the heights attained by his hero. Christ, according to Emerson had a faith in his infinitude and achieved it: "Alone in all history, he estimated the greatness of man. One man was true to what is in you and me" (73). Emerson said that Christ "felt respect for Moses and the prophets," but in Emerson's mind Christ's greatness was found in "postponing" the revelations of Moses and the prophets "to the hour and the man that now is" (73). He did not put too much stock in "this saint or that poet" but saw God in himself.

Christ's attainments and greatness were every man's inheritance in Emerson's eyes. Men simply choose to spend their lives in the slums of achievement. "A man is a god in ruins," and "Man is the dwarf of himself" ("Self-Reliance" EPP 53) are just two of many Emersonian phrases that at once express man's infinite potential and tendency to live far beneath that potential. Emerson believed in the capacity of man to be perfect, in the possibility of another Christ, the possibility of another man to be "true to what is in you and me" (73). Consider the two following phrases:

> A true conversion, a true Christ, is now, as always to be made, by the reception of beautiful sentiments. (74)
>
> I look for the new Teacher, that shall follow so far those shining laws, that he shall see them come full circle. (81)

By the use of the article "a" in the first sentence, Emerson demonstrated the infinitude of every man, not just Christ. For Emerson, another Christ, another Teacher was not outside the realms of possibility. There is the possibility that another Christ "be made" now as there had "always" been that possibility. It is this possibility of perfectionism, this limitlessness of possibility, this infinitude of man that defines Emersonian perfectionism. Its attainment hinges upon following "those shining laws" and being true to those "beautiful sentiments" that are in the soul of every man. It was this perception of man's infinitude that would define Emersonian perfectionism, and that (as he himself stated) was to be found in all of his lectures. Emersonian perfectionism would produce a society of Christs, perfect individuals, unafraid of what society thought of them, guided exclusively by their inner lights. Everybody would belong to the same religion—but not an

institutional religion—the church of the soul, receiving direction directly from the Over-Soul. Emersonian perfectionism does not deal with healings, miracles, salvation or an afterlife. It is concerned with the perfection of the character of individuals as illustrated in the following passage from "Self-Reliance":

> If God has made us with such intention as revelation discloses, then it must be that there are in each of us all the elements of moral and intellectual excellence, that is to say, if you act out yourself, you will attain and exhibit a perfect character. (14)

Due to the focus on the development of character, Emerson is generally and aptly grouped with the moral perfectionists. I have chosen to examine his perfectionism in this thesis as religious, however, because he viewed the perfection of the individual as religious.

Hopefully, in this last section I have laid a proper groundwork for understanding Emersonian perfectionism. Emerson's writings are replete with examples of perfectionism that I have not shared. For this reason, chapter two will be meaningful to the reader not only because it will demonstrate the prevalence of perfectionism in Emerson's works but will also paint a fuller, more descript picture of Emersonian perfectionism.

CHAPTER 3

THE PERVASIVENESS OF PERFECTIONISM IN EMERSON'S WORKS

Roots of Perfectionism in Emerson's Mother and Aunt Mary

Perhaps the earliest glimpses of perfectionism in Emerson's life can be traced back to two women—his mother and his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson. While neither one of them preached perfectionism per se, they both taught, directly or indirectly, principles which would lead to the development of Emersonian self-reliance and perfectionism.

I will speak just briefly of Emerson's mother and then write at length about Aunt Mary. From his mother, Emerson appears to have inherited a hunger for personal, direct religious experience and an open mind with regards to religion. Ruth Haskins Emerson "led a deeply religious life. Every day after breakfast she retired to her room for reading and contemplation and she was not to be disturbed" according to Robert Richardson, in his book, Emerson: The Mind on Fire (21). From her, the Emerson boys learned to value religion, for she was a "strong believer and a practicing, observing Christian" (21). She read widely, with no allegiance to the teachings of any particular church. Furthermore, she did not read books that were academic, polemical or that had anything to do with theology or church government, for she was not interested in such things. The common thread in most of the books read by Emerson's mother is that they were spiritual self-help books—books which focused on personal, religious experience. She was not concerned with the religious affiliation of the author; she was much more concerned with the religious experience that the work offered her, hoping

for insights into self-cultivation and ways to experience a more religious life. Surely his mother's devotion to individual spiritual experience and her quest for truth in diverse places did not go unnoticed by the young Emerson, and contributed to the development of his doctrines of self-reliance and perfectionism in their early stages.

But perhaps Emerson's most important source for his religion of self-reliance was his Aunt Mary, whom Lawrence Buell referred to as a "living example of vernacular spirituality" (60). Mary Moody Emerson was a four foot, three inch spitfire of a woman. She possessed an incredible energy as exemplified in this passage from Emerson's biographical sketch of his Aunt:

> She had the misfortune of spinning with a greater velocity than any of the other tops. She would tear into the chaise or out of it, into the house or out of it, into the conversation, into the thought, into the character of the stranger,—disdaining all the graduation by which her fellows time their steps: and though she might do very happily in a planet where others moved with the like velocity, she was offended here by the phlegm of all her fellow creatures, and disgusted them by her impatience. She could keep step with no human being. (CW 10:407)

These lines are valuable not only because they give us insight into the ambition of Aunt Mary but also because they give us a glimpse of her non-conformist self-reliance. Emerson observed that "She could keep step with no human being." It appears that Emerson felt that his Aunt Mary not only marched to the beat of a different drum, but the drum with which she kept time was from another planet. Her aversion to conformity is well illustrated in the following passage from Carlos Baker's Emerson Among The Eccentrics:

> Her idiosyncrasies were legion. She insisted on using her thimble as a seal for letters, liked best those adversaries who argued back,

> and often took out her teeth in company "to give herself more ease." She could not bear to throw away medicines: if she found in several old bottles a drop or two of laudanum, quinine, or antimony, and a few old pills, she mixed the lot together and drank off the potion. At meals she was always contrary, saying, for example, that she never took tea and preferred cocoa. When given the cocoa, she'd add a spot of tea to make her lively and another of coffee to get rid of the taste. (20)

In his Aunt Mary, Emerson would have observed at an early age somebody who was willing to "shun father and mother and wife and brother" when called upon to do so by her genius ("Self-Reliance" EPP 123). She epitomized his doctrine of self-reliance, and her life, as Emerson once expressed it in a letter, was a "transcendental way of living" (LE 1:423).

She was brilliant, well-read and "a vigorous theologian. Above all, she was an original religious thinker, almost a prophet" (Richardson 23). In Emerson's biographical sketch of Mary Moody Emerson, he wrote the following regarding her religious thought:

> By society with her, one's mind is electrified and purged. She is no statute-book of practical commandments, nor orderly digest of any system of philosophy, divine or human, but a Bible, miscellaneous in its parts, but one in its spirit, wherein are sentences of condemnation, promises and covenants of love that make foolish the wisdom of the world with the power of God. (CW 10:408)

However, it was not just the fact that she was a religious woman that made Mary Moody Emerson noteworthy. Religious women were not out of the ordinary in Emerson's time; Aunt Mary was distinct in her nephew's eyes because she was a walking, living, breathing source of scripture, "a Bible." Again, she was, at least in part, an example of the religion of self-reliance that Emerson tried his whole

life to perpetuate, and traces of her religious views can be seen in Emerson's religious thought.

For example, like Emerson, she did not accept the consubstantiality of Christ with God—which belief contributed to Emerson's doctrine of perfectionism (I will examine Emerson's views on Christ later in this chapter). She also was a strong proponent of personal revelation and the God within, telling Emerson in letters that "the relation between you and your Creator, if you have one, remains paramount" and that the only dictate to which one ultimately had to be true is "the divine personal agency, as of your own consciousness" (Emerson, Mary 314). All of these teachings contributed to Aunt Mary's own version of perfectionism, as she taught it to Emerson in a letter when she expressed her belief that human beings could "reach perfection by their own free agency and divine help" (314). All in all, the life, teachings and beliefs of Mary Moody Emerson provided a seedbed wherein Emersonian perfectionism could germinate and begin to grow "in the glow of her pure and poetic spirit, which dearly loved the Infinite" (CW 10:408).

With such examples of self-reliance and perfectionism as Emerson had in his mother and his Aunt Mary, he was well on his way to the development of his own doctrine of perfectionism; and Emerson's beliefs begin to coalesce in his journals. He wrote on 14 December 1823:

> I see no reason why I should bow my head to man, or cringe in my demeanor…when I reflect that I am an immortal being, born to a destiny immeasurably high, deriving my moral and intellectual attributes directly from Almighty God, and that my existence and condition as his child must be forever independent of the control or will of my fellow children,--I am elevated in my own

> eyes to a higher ground in life and a better self-esteem. But, alas, few men hold with a strong grasp the scepter of self-government.… (JE 1:301-2)

He continued on this theme a week later, 21 December 1823:

> Who is he that shall control me? Why may not I act & speak & write & think with entire freedom? What am I to the Universe or, the Universe, what is it to me? Who hath forged the chains of Wrong & Right, of Opinion & Custom? And must I wear them? Is Society my anointed King? Or is there any mightier community or any man or more than man, whose slave I am? ...I say to the Universe, Mighty one! Thou art not my mother; return to chaos, if thou wilt, I shall still exist. I live. If I owe my being, it is to a destiny greater than thine. Star by star, world by world, system by system shall be crushed—but I shall live. (EPP 485)

It is easy to see how many people mistake Emerson's self-reliant and perfectionist rhetoric for arrogance upon reading prose that places his own destiny above that of the universe, language that defies the rights and wrongs and customs of society. But the things that he wrote in his journal were, in his opinion, true for all men. Emerson was not pounding his chest in self-aggrandizement, he was declaring man's potential. Earlier in the year, he had also written of man, "There is no other separate, ultimate resource, for God is within him, God about him, he is a part of God himself" (JE 253). Emerson's doctrines of man's infinite potential and reliance upon the God within to obtain that infinite potential, were beginning to take shape.

Perfectionism in the Sermons

I would like to quickly examine early Emersonian perfectionism as found in a couple of his sermons. I use the phrase "early perfectionism," because although I do believe that Emerson was a perfectionist at a rather young age and

maintained his perfectionist philosophies throughout his life, I would certainly not go so far as to say that Emerson's views on perfection were the same at age twenty as they were at age forty or sixty; it was not a static, unchanging ideology. Rather, Emersonian perfectionism evolved as a result of the vicissitudes of his life. Therefore, perfectionism, as it was modeled by his mother and aunt, was but in its seminal stages and continued to germinate during his young years as a preacher.

Emerson, as a young preacher, already felt strongly about the infinitude of man. In his sermon dated 25 July 1826 and entitled "Pray Without Ceasing," Emerson made the assertion that all men actually do pray without ceasing—whether they know it or not—that every action, every word, every thought, every exertion in truth is a prayer to God, expressing to him the desires of their hearts. His second assertion in the sermon is just as bold, wherein he states, "And these prayers are granted. For is it not clear that what we strongly and earnestly desire we shall make every effort to obtain; and has not God so furnished us with powers of body and of mind that we can acquire whatsoever we seriously and unceasingly strive after?" (EPP 5). One sees here the muted beginnings of perfectionism in Emerson's public language, wherein he tells us that God has "furnished us with powers of body and of mind" to accomplish anything.

Emerson's sermon based on Matthew 16:26 (which has since been assigned the number ninety) begins with similar subtle perfectionist prose, speaking of man's "infinite nature." The first two sentences read:

> All the instructions which religion addresses to man imply a supposition of the utmost importance, which is, that every human

> mind is capable of receiving and acting upon these sublime principles. That which is made for an immortal life must be of an infinite nature. (EPP 13)

However, within this sermon one begins to see the dynamics of Emersonian perfectionism. For although Emerson begins the sermon with the same muted tones he had used in earlier sermons, by the year 1830 Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance was much more developed and he was becoming more bold in his declarations regarding self-reliance and perfectionism. As a matter of fact, this sermon is the precursor to his famous 1841 essay "Self-Reliance." Here are a few lines that show the more overt nature of perfectionism in Emerson's now seedling religion of self-reliance:

> It is no small trust to have the keeping of a soul. And compared with their capacity men are not such as they ought to be. (EPP 14)
>
> They do not know, because they have not tried, the spiritual force that belongs to them. (14)
>
> If God has made us with such intention as revelation discloses, then it must be that there are in each of us all the elements of moral and intellectual excellence, that is to say, if you act out yourself, you will attain and exhibit a perfect character. (14)
>
> The lesson that may be gathered from this scripture is to value our own souls, to have them in such estimation as never to offend them, and this is the theme of the present discourse. I wish to enforce the doctrine that a man should trust himself; should have a perfect confidence that there is no defect or inferiority in his nature. . . . (14)
>
> Let him fully trust his own share of God's goodness, that if used to the uttermost, it will lead him on to a perfection which has no type yet in the Universe save only in the Divine Mind. (15)

Towards the end of the sermon, Emerson appears to seek reconciliation between his revolutionary doctrines and conventional Christianity by saying: "It is

important to observe that this self-reliance which grows out of the Scripture doctrine of the value of the soul is not inconsistent either with our duties to our fellow men or to God" (16). However, he was in no way compromising his insistence on self-reliance and perfectionism. Rather he was asserting that self-reliance was not a deviation from true religion, but essential to true religion. In his mind, Emerson's self-reliance was not straying from the doctrines of the soul but adhering perfectly to them.

Nevertheless, a schism was developing between Emerson and other Christian religionists. Biographer Robert D. Richardson went so far as to describe the schism by writing, "As the new year, 1830, began, Emerson was working out a new and strikingly modern theology" (97). This "new theology," as I have endeavored to illustrate, had its genesis before 1830; but, continuing with the analogy of the seed, 1830 does appear to be the year when his religion of self-reliance sprouted from the ground and took on a more visible, seedling form. As Emersonian self-reliance became more visible, the differences became harder to ignore for Emerson and for those with whom his doctrines did not sit well. His self-reliance was not highly regarded by some and as Buell put it in Emerson, some "nineteenth-century conservatives saw Emerson as a slippery slope to atheism" (161). As the schism widened, it became apparent on both sides that action would have to be taken. Within two years Emerson would find himself resigning his post as a minister in the Unitarian Church.

Perhaps another of the vicissitudes which I mentioned earlier that contributed to the dynamics of Emersonian self-reliance and perfectionism was

the passing of his nineteen-year-old bride, Ellen Tucker Emerson. Ellen died 8 February 1831, leaving him "with a sense of less and regret that he never entirely outlived" (Richardson 111). Perhaps the inability to find solace in the faith of his fathers compelled him to look for answers to life's questions in the development of his religion of self-reliance. Shortly after Ellen's death, Emerson penned these lines in his journal:

> Give up to thy soul—
> Let it have its way—
> It is, I tell thee, God himself
> The selfsame One that rules the Whole
> Tho' he speaks thro' thee with a stifled voice
> And looks thro' thee shorn of his beams,
> …let thine eyes
> Look straight before thee as befits
> The simplicity of Power….
> And since the Soul of things is in thee
> Thou needest nothing out of thee. (JMN 3:291-292)

Emerson was finding his answers within himself and became increasingly convinced that the "One that rules the Whole" was to be found within oneself and that since "the Soul of things" was in every person, there was no need to seek for anything outside of oneself—the keys to knowledge, the answers to life's problems and the path to perfection lay dormant in the breast of every man.

On Christmas day, 1832, Emerson set sail for England. His embarkation marked more than the beginning of a tour of Europe; it was the beginning of a new phase of life. Richardson summed up this stage in Emerson's life in the following manner: "His wife was dead, his career in the ministry finished. He was leaving theology and the pastoral office behind and setting out toward a goal he could not see but which he knew involved both literature and natural history"

(127). I agree with most of Richardson's statement, but I take issue with his belief that Emerson was leaving theology. Richardson either forgot that he had mentioned thirty pages earlier that "Emerson was working out a new and strikingly modern theology" (97) or failed to recognize that Emerson's departure from orthodox Christianity was not to abandon religion but to pursue his "new and strikingly modern theology," a theology that, as he mentioned, "involved both literature and natural history."

On Sunday, 8 September 1833, as he sailed on the return trip from Europe, he wrote in his journal, "this is my charge plain and clear, to act faithfully upon my own faith, to live by it myself, and see what a hearty obedience to it will do" (JMN 4:83). In the same entry he continued:

> I believe that the error of religionists lies in this, that they do not know the extent or the harmony or the depth of their moral nature; that they are clinging to little, positive, verbal, formal versions of the moral law, and very imperfect versions too, while the infinite laws, the laws of the Law, the great circling truths whose only adequate symbol is the material laws, the astronomy, etc., are all unobserved, and sneered at when spoken of….
>
> But the men of Europe will say, Expound; let us hear what it is that is to convince the faithful and at the same time the philosopher? Let us hear this new thing. It is very old. It is the old revelation, that perfect beauty is perfect goodness…. A man contains all that is needful to his government within himself…. The purpose of life seems to be to acquaint a man with himself. (JMN 4:83-84)

In these lines, one sees that Emerson's theology, his religion of self-reliance, was now developing deep, strong roots and was mature enough to stand alone, separate from all other religions, religions which he felt were "imperfect versions" of religion.

On 9 October 1833 Emerson's boat arrived in Boston. As Emerson disembarked, he hit the ground running with his new religion. He was offered a chance to preach at his old church and seized the opportunity to teach self-reliance and perfectionism. I have included a long passage from the sermon which he preached (later assigned the number 165); I felt nothing could be removed as every line is essential to my argument that Emerson's self-reliance should be called a religion and that doing so is crucial to understanding the development of his religion and the place of perfectionism in his developing thought.

> There is a revolution of religious opinion taking effect around us as it seems to me the greatest of all revolutions which have ever occurred that, namely, which has separated the individual from the whole world & made him demand a faith satisfactory to his own proper nature whose full extent he now for the first time contemplates. What is my relation to Almighty God? What is my relation to my fellowman? What am I designed for? What are my duties? What is my destiny? The soul peremptorily asks these questions—the Whence & the Why—and refuses to be put off with insufficient answers.
>
> It is because so many false answers have been offered that in many earnest well-intentioned men, reason has been so far shaken from her seat that they have assorted with the infidel & the Atheist so called. The questions are now again presented, because the wonder of the surrounding creation begins to press upon the soul with the force of a personal address.
>
> And what is the answer?
>
> Man begins to hear a voice in reply that fills the heavens & the earth, saying, that God is within him [self], that there is the celestial host. I find that this amazing revelation of my immediate relation to God, is a solution to all the doubts that oppressed me. I recognize the distinction of the outer & the inner self—of the double consciousness—as in the familiar example, that I may do things which I do not approve; that is, there are two selfs, one which does or approves that which the other does not & approves not; or within this erring passionate mortal self, sits a supreme calm immortal mind, whose powers I do not know, but it is stronger than I am, it is wiser than I am, it never approved me in

> any wrong. I seek counsel of it in my doubts; I repair to it in my dangers; I pray to it in my undertakings. It is the door of my access to the Father. It seems to me the face which the Creator uncovers to his child.
>
> It is the perception of this depth in human nature—this infinitude belonging to every man that has been born—which has given new value to the habits of reflexion & solitude. This has caused the virtue of independent judgment to be so much praised. This has given its odour to spiritual interpretations. Many old & almost forgotten maxims have been remembered up from where they lay in the dust of centuries & are seen to beam new light. Such are the old pregnant maxims "Know Thyself" *Est Deus in nobis agitante calescimus illo*; the stoical precept, "The Good Man differs from God in nothing but duration" *Bonus Vir nil nisi tempore a deo differt*; the inscription on the gate of Athens "But know thyself a man & be a god"; "Revere thyself." (CS 4:209-210)

This quotation provides incredible insight into Emerson's religion. The first thing that it reveals is that Emerson felt he was part of a revolution, not a literary revolution or a political revolution or even a philosophical revolution, but a religious revolution. In spite of the fact that he had resigned the pulpit at Second Church in Boston in 1832, he was still a religionist. In his article "Emerson and Second Church in Boston" Wesley Mott points out that "Emerson never resigned from the *ministry*. In fact, he continued to serve as a supply preacher as late as 1839—well into his most radically Transcendentalist period" (28). It is central to my argument that Emerson's efforts continue to be viewed as religious.

The second observation one can make is that Emerson's religious revolution was unique in that it did not include the organization of a new church. He was convinced that people were not finding the answers to the big questions in the churches and they never would. He felt that the only way to receive those answers was through a personal religion, an individual religion, a religion of self-reliance. He believed that the "infidel and the Atheist so-called" were such

because of "insufficient answers" from the religious organizations. He further believed that people from all over the world in all sorts of cultures and religions (perhaps even some of those who were so-called infidels and atheists) were finding and consulting the God within and discovering the religion of self-reliance. That is what eventually caused him to write in his journal, "Can any one doubt that if the noblest saint among the Buddhists, the noblest Mahometan, the highest Stoic of Athens, the purest and wisest Christian, Menu in India, Confucius in China, Spinoza in Holland, could somewhere meet and converse together, they would all find themselves of one religion?" (JMN 16:91)

Lastly, we are able to observe the budding doctrine of perfectionism in this bulky passage—the "infinitude belonging to every man that has been born," the knowledge that if any man will look inside himself he will see God, and that "man differs from God in nothing but duration" (CS 4:209-210). He further encouraged his listeners to "know thyself a man and be a God" (4:209-10). Emerson preached that there was a "depth in human nature" that was for the most part undiscovered and therefore not being utilized and it was his intent to inspire men to do so.

While these perfectionist thoughts were revolutionary, perfectionism and self-reliance had not yet reached the point where mainstream Christianity was completely willing to cast Emerson aside as a heretic, but the gap between his religion and theirs was ever widening.

Perfectionism in Emerson's Middle (Transcendental) Years

The following poem, written in Ralph Waldo Emerson's journal shortly after his 1832 resignation from his post as the minister of Boston's Second Church, portrays perfectly Emerson's religion of self-reliance that caused his break with the Second Church and that would characterize the remainder of his life.

> I will not live out of me.
> I will not see with others' eyes
> My good is good, my evil ill
> I would be free—I cannot be
> While I take things as others please to rate them
> I dare attempt to lay out my own road
> That which myself delights in shall be Good
> That which I do not want—indifferent,
> That which I hate is Bad. That's flat
> Henceforth, please God, forever I forego
> The yoke of men's opinions. I will be
> Lighthearted as a bird & live with God.
> I find him in the bottom of my heart
> I hear continually his Voice therein
> And books, & priests, & worlds, I less esteem
> Who says the heart's a blind guide?
> It is not.
> My heart did never counsel me to sin
> I wonder where it got its wisdom
> For in the darkest maze amid the sweetest baits
> Or amid horrid dangers never once
> Did that gentle Angel fail of his oracle
> The little needle always knows the north
> The little bird remembereth his note
> And this wise Seer never errs
> I never taught it what it teaches me
> I only follow when I act aright.
> Whence then did this Omniscient Spirit come?
> From God it came. It is the Deity. (CW 9:394)

All three of the pillars of self-reliance are evident in the poem. Pillar one, the Over-Soul, is labeled "wise Seer," "Omniscient Spirit," and "Deity" in this piece.

The second pillar, revelation from the Over-Soul, is spoken of by Emerson as being "in the bottom of my heart" where Emerson is able to "hear continually his Voice." Lastly, and most importantly, for my argument, are the evidences of perfectionism: "My good is good. My evil ill." Here Emerson gives preeminence and perfection to the innermost part of the individual. Above all books, above all preachers the inner voice takes precedence for declaring the truth, pure, clear and perfect. It was Emerson's belief that a man could be perfect if he would learn to follow the Voice in the bottom of his heart. Three times in this poem he uses the term "never" and once the term "always" to illustrate the perfect and impeccable record of the Voice within to guide him aright. According to Emerson, a person need never go wrong again if he would follow his heart. Emerson's perfectionism and his religion of self-reliance left the seminal stage and were now maturing nicely as he entered his transcendental period.

One of Emerson's most well-known works and the one that most epitomizes Transcendentalism is his book Nature, which was first published in September of 1836.

As Emerson's perfectionism and self-reliance became more overt in his Transcendental period, the contrast between his religion and orthodox American religions became more marked. Emerson's perception of perfectionism and the infinitude of man stand out in stark contrast to those found in Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." In that sermon, Edwards, a Calvinist Puritan, taught:

> The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is

> dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours…and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the last night.... And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell, since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending his solemn worship. Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell. (qtd. in American Poetry and Prose 82)

In Nature, Emerson offered quite a different view of man when he wrote:

> As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God; he is nourished by unfailing fountains, and draws, at his need, inexhaustible power. Who can set bounds to the possibilities of man? …we learn that man has access to the entire mind of the Creator, is himself the creator in the finite. (EPP 50)

Edwards has man dangling from God's hand "as one holds a spider" over the fire, while Emerson places man in God's bosom; Edwards' man feels the heat of the fire, but Emerson has man drinking from cool, "unfailing fountains"; Emerson places "inexhaustible power" at man's fingertips, while Edwards' man is powerless, hoping God does not get the whim to drop him into hell while he yet sits in church. Emerson's man has no bounds to his possibilities and has access to God; whereas man, according to Edwards, is lower than a serpent, "worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire." This snippet is not the only example of perfectionism in Nature; on the contrary, perfectionist prose abounds in this work. Here are found Emerson's famous one-liners, "A man is a god in ruins" (53) and

"Man is the dwarf of himself" (53), that both epitomize Emerson's beliefs in the infinitude of man and in man's propensity to underachieve.

The comparison between Emerson and Edwards may not be entirely fair, however, due to the fact that they were not contemporaries with Edwards preaching a century earlier than Emerson. But an experience recounted by Emerson in his journal upon his return from England to the United States shows that he was also very much at odds with his contemporaries. He tells of attending worship services on Sunday, 20 October 1833 in Newton, Massachusetts. In his account he tries at first to be merciful in his description of the pastor, a "Mr. B., a plain serious Calvinist, not winning, but not repelling"; but in the end, Emerson confesses:

> Yet I could not help asking myself how long is the society to be taught in this dramatic or allegorical style? When is religious truth to be distinctly uttered, what it is, not what it resembles? …What hinders that, instead of this parable, the naked fact be stated to them? Namely, that as long as they offend against their conscience they will seek to be happy, but they shall not be able, they shall not come to any true knowledge of God, they shall be avoided by good and wise men, they shall become worse and worse. (JE 220-221)

It is worthy of note in this passage that in addition to one's progress toward perfection only coming through self-reliance or listening to the God within, Emerson further asserts that the person who is not practicing self-reliance will not find happiness, can not know God and will even be affected adversely in his social life. Emerson was now becoming very bold in his declarations of self-reliance and perfectionism.

I wrote earlier that Emersonian self-reliance and perfectionism had left the seminal stages and was now in full blossom. That does not mean, however, that

Emerson's religion remained static; it was continually developing. One development in the doctrine of perfectionism was Emerson's belief in an "unbroken continuum of Being between 'God' and man" (Lyttle 60). Emerson wrote in his journal in October 1836 (and later part of it emerged in his essay "The Over-Soul"):

> And what is God? We cannot say but we see clearly enough. We cannot say, because he is the unspeakable, the immeasurable, the perfect—but we see plain enough in what direction it lies. First, we see plainly that the All is in Man….That is, as there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinity of Space, so there is no bar or wall in the Soul where man the effect ceases and God the cause begins. (JMN 5:229-230)

One year later Emerson's journal contains these additional thoughts on the topic of the interconnected nature of God and man:

> Who shall define to me an Individual? I behold with awe and delight many illustrations of the One Universal Mind. I see my being embedded in it. As a plant in the earth so I grow in God. I am only a form of him. He is the soul of Me. I can even with a mountainous aspiring say, *I am God*, by transferring my *Me* out of the films and unclean precincts of my body…. In certain moments I have known that I existed directly from God, and am, as it were, his organ. And in my ultimate consciousness Am He. (JMN 5:336-7)

This revolutionary rhetoric would certainly cause uproar in mid-nineteenth century Christianity and cries of "Blasphemy!" and "Heresy!" But Emerson's statement, "I am God," was not a claim that he was the Messiah with the intent that all men bow down and worship him. On the contrary, Emersonian self-reliance argues that every man can make the same claim in acknowledgement of the God within. "I am God" implies "You are God." It was never said with the purpose of elevating himself above his fellow man.

As I continue my discussion of perfectionism in the Transcendental years, it will become increasingly apparent that Emerson's belief that there is "no bar or wall in the Soul where man the effect ceases and God the cause begins" (JMN 5:229-230) is foundational to Emerson's religion of Self-Reliance and his essay that would bear the same name. "Self-Reliance" begins with the Latin phrase "Ne te quaesiveris extra" (EPP 120). Translated, it means "do not seek yourself outside yourself," but it could just as easily say "Do not seek God outside yourself" because of the afore-mentioned unbroken continuum between God and man. Emerson went to great lengths in this essay to convince people that everything that they needed for perfection could be found within them.

Another well-known aspect of Emerson's self-reliance is its criticism of organizations and institutions (including churches) with the intention of helping people progress. In "Self-Reliance" he wrote, "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company in which the members agree for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater" (EPP 122). Upon uniting oneself to any of society's various organizations, a person surrendered self-rule to a degree, and subsequently limited his progress. Emerson abhorred charities, societies and philanthropic causes for the same reason. In his estimation, they were imperfect solutions to society's problems. A person would never become perfect or realize his potential by joining any of these organizations. Development and perfection had to take place on the individual level and the path towards that perfection would be delineated by the voice

within, not by the regulations imposed by some agency or by adherence to a policy or practice of an organization.

Emersonian perfectionism required nonconformity. "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist." He continues, "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world" (EPP 122). A person could never achieve any kind of greatness while doing what everybody else was doing; perfectionism required going it alone.

> What I must do, is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder, because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude. (124)

Emerson then presented a list that included Pythagoras, Socrates, Jesus, Luther, Copernicus, Galileo and Newton, making the case that what made them great was their unwillingness to conform, their willingness "in the midst of the crowd" to keep "the independence of solitude."

Emerson also knew, however, that there were critics of his self-reliance who would mistake it for self-indulgence or antinomianism and within the same essay he offers a response to that criticism. "I have my own stern claims and perfect circle…. If any one imagines that this law is lax, let him keep its commandment one day. And truly it demands something godlike in him who has cast off the common motives of humanity, and has ventured to trust himself for a

taskmaster" ("Self-Reliance" EPP 131). Self-reliance was far from easy in Emerson's mind; the easy road was to conform to the baseness and commonness of humanity. Self-reliance required "something godlike." God was within every person and if one learned to obey the God within, soon a god would be manifest on the outside, also. One could argue that the main thesis of "Self-Reliance" was to assert and demonstrate the perfectibility or "the infinitude of the private man" as illustrated in the poem that begins the essay:

> Man is his own star; and the soul that can
> Render an honest and perfect man,
> Commands all light, all influence, all fate. (EPP 120)

Emerson had nothing short of perfection in mind for those who would adhere wholly to his religion of self-reliance.

According to Emerson, the part of man that everybody sees is merely the "organ" of the divine part of the individual, as stated in "The Over-Soul," another essay from the transcendental period.

> That which we commonly call man, the eating, drinking, planting, counting man, does not, as we know him, represent himself, but misrepresents himself. Him we do not respect, but the soul, whose organ he is, would he let it appear through his action, would make our knees bend. (EPP 164)

The very sight of the self-reliant man, who listens to his soul and lets it shine through him "would make our knees bend." Such is the godly potential of every man. But for those who still mistake self-reliance for self-indulgence, the rest of the passage is very helpful. He makes a very clear distinction between the two.

> When it breathes through his intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through his will, it is virtue; when it flows through his affection, it is love. And the blindness of the intellect begins, when it would be something of itself. The weakness of the will begins when the

> individual would be something of himself. All reform aims, in some one particular, to let the soul have its way through us; in other words, to engage us to obey. (164)

To understand Emerson's self-reliance, it is paramount to understand this duality within man. In Emerson's mind, the "soul" within us which we must obey is God, the Divine, the Over-Soul, the Spirit, Nature, Beauty or whatever you wish to call it; the "individual" is the carnal, natural part of man, the wart, the wen, the dwarf, the sot. Self-reliance is the submission of the individual self to the soul, bringing about reform, development, progress and eventually perfection, whereas self-indulgence is the individual self heeding the self, disregarding the soul and bringing about the ruin of man.

Perfectionism and Emerson's Perception of Christ

Certainly one of Emerson's most famous works is his "Address" to the Harvard Divinity School. This address contributes greatly to our discussion of perfectionism because of Emerson's views on Jesus Christ as expressed in this work. Emerson professed in his journals a "reverence unfeigned" (JMN 5: 72) for Christ. However, in spite of his reverence for Jesus, his views on Christ differed vastly from most of mainstream nineteenth-century Christianity. Up until this point in his career, one might have thought that the rift between Emerson and Christianity could have been mended. After all, he was still giving sermons and for the most part was probably still viewed as being part of mainstream Christianity. But Emerson's statements on Christ and Christianity in this address were so inflammatory and divisive that after delivering it, he was not invited back to Harvard to speak for thirty years. Within one year he would give his last

sermon, and he would come to be viewed by many as having completely abandoned religion. I have already expressed my disagreement with that idea and will now focus on the evidence of perfectionism in the address.

About one-third of the way into the address, Emerson accusingly said:

> Historical Christianity has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion. As it appears to us, and as it has appeared for ages, it is not the doctrine of the soul, but an exaggeration of the personal, the positive, the ritual. It has dwelt, it dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus. (EPP 73)

Taken out of context, it is not difficult to imagine the faculty at Harvard and the rest of Christianity being up-in-arms over this statement, wherein he seemingly attacks historical Christianity and the worship of Christ. Emerson's own Aunt Mary had previously expressed disapproval of his "withering Lucifer doctrine of pantheism" (Emerson, Mary 314), so I am certain that she was incensed by these remarks about Jesus. Similarly, it rocked the religious world of much of nineteenth-century America to hear that they were dwelling "with noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus." These were immensely incendiary remarks. But I believe they are often misconstrued. Within the context of the complete address, one is able to observe that this comment was made with the intent to eradicate the practice among Christians of looking for guidance in the words of other men, including Jesus. A few years later when asked by the publisher James Munroe how he felt about Jesus and the prophets, Emerson responded by saying:

> It seemed to me an impiety to be listening to one and another, when the pure Heaven was pouring itself into each of us, on the simple condition of obedience. To listen to any secondhand gospel

> is perdition of the first gospel. Jesus was Jesus because he refused to listen to another, and listened at home. (JMN 13:406)

It is useful, therefore, to reconcile Emerson's alleged "reverence unfeigned" for Christ with this statement about Christ, to demonstrate that they are not contradictory.

While orthodox Christians would have been accusing Emerson of blasphemy and false worship, he would have had similar words for them. In his mind, it was they who were guilty of "impiety," corrupting Christ's life, ministry and teachings and making them something that they weren't. Emerson wrote that Christ was "as I think, the only soul in history who has appreciated the worth of a man" ("Address" EPP 73). Or in other words, Christ still occupied a singular place in Emerson's mind; it was just not for the same reasons that Christianity revered him. "Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul…. Alone in all history, he estimated the greatness of man. One man was true to what is in you and me" (EPP 72-73). It was not because he saw Christ as above all men that Emerson revered him; rather, it was because Christ, seeing God in himself, had accomplished what every other man had failed to accomplish. Emerson felt that the reason Jesus was worthy of admiration was because he had understood self-reliance, had seen the possibility of perfection, and had achieved it.

At an earlier point in the address, Emerson set the stage for discussing Jesus' attainments and role by describing the possibility of the same for all men.

> The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul. These laws execute themselves…. Thus; in the soul of man there is a justice whose retributions are instant and

> entire. He who does a good deed is instantly ennobled. He who does a mean deed is by the action itself contracted. He who puts off impurity thereby puts on purity. If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice. ("Address" EPP 70)

Christ understood the laws and the doctrines of the soul, obeyed them, and put on Deity, seeing "that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, 'I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks'" (73).

But in Emerson's mind, these attainments were not exclusive to Christ; he felt frustrated by the fact "that men can scarcely be convinced there is in them anything divine" ("Address" EPP 78), and he despaired that "the true Christianity—a faith like Christ's in the infinitude of man—is lost" (78). It is worth noting in this statement the sameness between what he perceived to be Christ's doctrine and his own doctrine. Emerson felt Christ's doctrine was the same as his doctrine of self-reliance—a belief in the infinitude of man (perfectionism). Emerson's lamentations about what he perceived as a misplaced Christ can potentially cause readers to think these were efforts to remove Christ from religion. For example, Buell labels Emerson's comments about Christ in "Experience" as a "tart reduction of Christology to optical illusion" (215). But it is essential to understand that Emerson was not blasting Christ; to blast Christ's doctrine would be to blast his own doctrine of self-reliance. He certainly saw Christ differently than others saw him, but he was in actuality lambasting men for their folly in their perception of Christ, for selling themselves short and failing to believe in and attain their own infinitude as Christ had done.

Perfectionism in Emerson's Late Years

Stephen Whicher, in his book Freedom and Fate, asserts that Emerson's inner life was marked by "a burst of energetic affirmation subsiding after the trauma of his first son's death [1842] into stoic acquiescence" (98). Whicher further argues in his essay "Emerson's Tragic Sense" that in Emerson's later writings, he was no longer so optimistic about the potential of the individual; that in his later years he submitted to a "sense of limitation" (EPP 666). However, in his book Emerson, Buell disagrees with Whicher by arguing, "The shift was far less dramatic than that" (98). I agree with Buell. While it would have been, of course, impossible for Emerson to be unaffected by the tragic, premature death of his five-year-old son, Waldo, he does not thereafter fade completely into "stoic acquiescence." A solid vein of self-reliance runs through Emerson's post-1842 essays which is similar to and consistent with the self-reliance of his earlier essays. Furthermore, self-reliance in its true Emersonian form is antithetical to acquiescence or conformity and will have nothing to do with anything perfunctory or half-hearted. Consequently, my endeavor in this last section of chapter two will be to demonstrate that Emersonian self-reliance and perfectionism continued to be the focus of his teaching even in his later years and that Emerson never acquiesced.

For example, in 1854 he was still teaching self-reliance and perfectionism. In an address he gave that year entitled "Seventh of March Speech on the Fugitive Slave Law," he spoke energetically of self-reliance and perfectionism, declaring "that self-reliance, the height and perfection of man, is reliance on God" (LL

1:344). Emerson was evidently still preaching self-reliance as the vehicle to attain man's perfection, even at this point in his career. But the fascinating part of this quotation is his use of "God" rather than the soul or inner lights or some other term. Some might argue that down through the years Emerson—the former minister—ceased to believe in God, or they may simply fail to acknowledge that God occupies a place in his self-reliance, seeing it as just a philosophy of self-improvement without recognition of any outside force. For example, in Emerson Buell explained Self-Reliance thus:

> To sum up so far, Self-Reliance is an ethos or practice intended to retrieve a person from the state in which adult people usually languish, acting and thinking according to what is expected of you rather than according to what you most deeply believe. It requires not impulsive assertion of personal will but attending to what the "whole man" tells you. (77)

Buell makes no mention of God, Spirit, the Over-Soul, guiding lights or even the divine part of man that Emerson calls "the Soul," instead it is the "whole man" providing the guidance.

I believe that this is due to the fact that Emerson was frequently cloudy with his terms in teaching self-reliance. For example, in "The Natural History of Intellect" he wrote: "The height of Culture, highest behavior, consists in the identification of the Ego with the universe," and the man who does so "shall be able continually to keep sight of his biographical ego," controlling it and subjecting it "as rhetoric, fun, or footman, to his grand and public ego, without impertinence or ever confounding them" (JMN 11:203). There is no mention of God or anything divine here. But closer scrutiny reveals that the same elements of self-reliance are all present. Emerson just uses interchangeable terms. The

"height of culture, highest behavior" refers to man's infinitude or potential for self-development. How does one attain that height of culture? By making his "biographical ego" (the self) the servant or footman to the "grand and public ego" (the soul, his conscience, the Over-Soul, the voice that tells him his duty to mankind and to himself). Self-reliance can be very hard to nail down, but if a person looks at the whole corpus of Emerson's works, it seems irrefutable that self-reliance was Emerson's religion and although he may not have been able to tell you exactly what he meant by the term "God," he was consistent in expressing the presence of something infinite and spiritual inside him that was not him, something that guided him towards perfection.

One term that Emerson used frequently in discussing man's infinitude is "genius," which is generally thought of as great intellectual capacity, a talent or an aptitude for accomplishment, possessed by an elite few. Emerson explained that genius was in actuality universal, but was only manifest in those that applied the principles of self-reliance; Emerson always equated genius with adherence to his religion of self-reliance.

> It is true that genius takes its rise out of the mountains of rectitude; that all beauty and power which men covet, are somehow born out of that Alpine district; that any extraordinary degree of beauty in man or woman involves a moral charm. Thus, I think, we very slowly admit in another man a higher degree of moral sentiment than our own…. But, once satisfied of such superiority, we set no limit to our expectation of his genius. For such persons are nearer to the secret of God than others. . . . ("Worship" EL 1063)

He who follows with rectitude the religion of self-reliance, obeying his moral perceptions, has genius and has no limits upon him. He is near to the "secret of God."

I would like to continue to address self-reliance, perfectionism and this notion of genius by next looking at Emerson's essay "Experience." This seems to be the work that is most cited among Emerson's later works for illustrating his supposed departure from his belief in the infinitude of man. Therefore, by tackling it I hope to show that even in his more subdued moments, he was still a proponent of self-reliance and man's infinitude.

Genius, although not manifest to the same degree in every person, is within all of us, according to Emerson, and to a greater degree than we can imagine. We are all equally entitled to it, and we are all equally capable of it. It was a common theme throughout "Self-Reliance and "The Over-Soul." In "Self-Reliance" he wrote, "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men—that is genius" (EPP 121). Emerson would have us be unequivocally loyal to that individual, inner genius above all else. To disbelieve or to believe halfheartedly, is to abandon genius. It is being disloyal to God, and God will not have "cowards" (121) as his instruments. In "Experience," Emerson continues to preach "genius." In one instance, he capitalizes "Genius," using it not just in the traditional sense discussed above, but also as a name for God, the Over-Soul, the Universal Spirit, to illustrate the end result of following one's genius (198). Throughout the essay, Emerson's passion and energy on the subject of genius remain constant as here illustrated:

> Very mortifying is the reluctant experience that some unfriendly excess or imbecility neutralizes the promise of genius. We see young men who owe us a new world, so readily and lavishly they promise, but they never acquit the debt; they die young and dodge the account: or if they live, they lose themselves in the crowd. (201)

Emerson may have been referring in part to the recent death of his son, Waldo, when he referred to young men of promise who die young. Waldo was only five, but no doubt Emerson had high hopes for him and felt that Waldo "never acquit[ted] the debt." Regardless of whether or not he was thinking of his son when he penned these words, Emerson's passion on the subject of genius is very evident here, using words like "mortifying" and "imbecility" to discuss the failure to live up to one's genius, to achieve one's infinitude. Who among us has not been appalled as we watched a young person of great promise fall far short of his or her potential? It is this falling short that Emerson is addressing in this essay that causes him to seem to have a subdued or lamenting spirit to his voice, and not his acquiescence on self-reliance.

Emerson addresses this matter of genius further in men of accomplishment whose genius is readily apparent to us. They seem out of our league and their accomplishments out of our reach. But in "Self-Reliance" he discusses the high esteem in which we hold Moses, Plato and Milton, and proclaims that the reason we hold them in such high esteem is "that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men but what they thought" (121). In other words, self-reliance is what made these minds great; they followed their genius! If we, too, are to be great, then we must follow our genius; it is not enough for us to imitate Moses, Plato or Milton for "imitation is suicide" (121). To imitate is to throw one's hands in the air and proclaim, "I am nobody of consequence that I should have a unique thought with its origins in the Divine. I am dead. Only the great philosophers live." That is not Emersonian self-reliance. Similarly, in

"Experience," Emerson discusses more great minds—Hermes, Cadmus, Columbus, Newton and Bonaparte and warns us not to esteem them too highly; instead, he says "when we encounter a great man, let us treat the new comer like a traveling geologist, who passes through our estate, and shows us good slate, or limestone, or anthracite, in our brush pasture" (211). Great philosophers have their place. They are guides. They are assistants. But they are no greater than we.

In 1854, Emerson wrote in his journal, "Shall we say, that the acme of intellect is to see the eye?" He continued "to see God with the spiritual eye, to see your infinitude" (JMN 13:297). Intellect, greatness or genius, whatever you want to call it, is not something reserved for a select few. However, a select few actually see their infinitude, see God within themselves. But the most common among us has genius within him. Wrote Emerson, "I carry the keys of my castle in my hand, ready to throw them at the feet of my lord, whenever and in what disguise soever he shall appear. I know he is in the neighborhood, hidden among vagabonds" ("Experience" EPP 201). Genius and the infinite possibilities that come with it are everywhere to be found, even "hidden among vagabonds"; but men, not knowing who they are, live in intellectual, moral, spiritual and ultimately physical slums.

Tones of self-reliance are visible throughout "Experience." Without question Emerson would have been altered by the death of his son, Waldo. Furthermore, the untimely deaths of his young bride, Ellen, his father and his brothers, Edward and Charles, and the financial woes which continually pursued

him all would have had a dampening effect on Emerson. But these vicissitudes did not obliterate Emerson's belief in self-reliance and perfectionism, rather they only contributed to the dynamics of his religion. Perhaps the best way for me to emphasize my point is by quoting Emerson's closing remarks in "Experience." According to Whicher's analysis, at the time that Emerson wrote this essay, he would have been in his state of "stoic acquiescence." However, I declare that self-reliance is found abundantly in "Experience" as is generally the case in the mature Emerson and that he does not acquiesce. Rather, I find it difficult to not detect self-reliance and a belief in the individual in this concluding passage of "Experience" and throughout the essay:

> Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat: up again, old heart!—it seems to say,—there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power. (213)

Genius, in Emerson's mind, would yet prevail. Men would attain their infinite potential and the religion of self-reliance was the means by which they would accomplish it.

Late in Emerson's career, one is still able to find perfectionism and self-reliance being preached. The essay "Worship" will serve as a final example of Emerson's maintained fervor for these central doctrines. "Worship" was published as part of his book The Conduct of Life in 1860. It begins with the lines:

> Draw, if thou canst, the mystic line,
> Severing rightly his from thine,
> Which is human, which divine. (EL 1053)

This language is very reminiscent of what David Lyttle described as "the unbroken continuum of Being between 'God' and man" (60) that is so central to self-reliance and perfectionism. Emerson recognized that he had "two selfs, one which does or approves that which the other does not and approves not" (CS 4:215-16) and he is asking us to try and draw the line between the two selves, where the infinite, divine self ends and the finite, carnal self begins. His point is, of course, that the two (although recognizable as two) are inseparable, that every man has divinity within him and an infinite potential.

"Worship" is aptly named because it is a thorough treatise on the same, summarizing Emerson's feelings about churches, religious sentiments and worship as it should be properly practiced. It serves as an excellent recapitulation of all that Emerson sought to accomplish throughout his career, namely a radical renovation of the way that men worshipped. Emerson first opines, "The stern old faiths have all pulverized. 'Tis a whole population of gentlemen and ladies out in search of religions" (EL 1056). He continues his criticism by asserting, "Not knowing what to do, we ape our ancestors; the churches stagger backward to the mummeries of the dark ages" (1059). But he also provides the solution: "The cure for false theology is motherwit. Forget your books and traditions, and obey your moral perceptions at this hour" (1062). As always, Emerson counseled individuals to practice self-reliance, to look inward to know how and what to worship.

The mature Emerson continued to contend that when a man learns to be self-reliant and obey his moral perceptions, he has "changed his marketcart into a

chariot of the sun" ("Worship" EL 1063); for one who adheres to the religion of self-reliance, finite, terrestrial things give way to things of an infinite, celestial realm.

CHAPTER 4

EMERSONIAN PERFECTIONISM IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN RELIGION

Background of Religious Perfectionism

Perfectionism within Christianity can be traced back to Christ's New Testament mandate to mankind: "Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). However, the subject of perfectionism, or the perfectibility of man, appears to be much older, even within Judeo-Christian tradition. Job, for example, was called "a perfect and an upright man" (Job 1:8) as was Noah (Genesis 6:9). But a more common source for perfectionist thought is in the writings of Aristotle and the ancient Greeks.

> To perfect oneself, Aristotle suggests, is to achieve an end, a specific end. The general perfects himself as a general by achieving victories over his opponents, the doctor perfects himself as a doctor by achieving health in his patients. And, as we have already seen, Aristotle presumes that there must be an end appropriate to man as such, as distinct from man qua general and man qua doctor. The only problem is in what that end consists. Aristotle's preliminary answer is that the end for man is *eudaimonia*—traditionally, if somewhat misleadingly translated as "happiness" or "well-being." (Passmore 59)

Aristotle's brand of perfectionism was based upon the fact that just as a doctor sought to become a perfect doctor through success in his endeavors for the health of his patients, a man becomes a perfect man through success in his endeavors as a man. Man, in other words, existed to achieve "a specific end." This end he labeled eudaimonia.

I will not refer to Aristotelian perfectionism as a religion in this discussion because, while it was a system of beliefs, there is no mention about one's relation to the Divine. The reader will recall that the definition I am using for religion is "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (James 181). Therefore, Aristotle's perfectionism falls more under the category of moral perfectionism. Thomas Hurka, a neo-Aristotelian, in his book, Perfectionism, elaborates on this moral perfectionism.

> This moral theory starts from an account of the good life, or the intrinsically desirable life. And it characterizes this life in a distinctive way. Certain properties, it says, constitute human nature or are definitive of humanity—they make humans human. The good life, it then says, develops these properties to a high degree or realizes what is central to human nature. Different versions of the theory may disagree about what the relevant properties are and so disagree about the content of the good life. But they share the foundational idea that what is good, ultimately, is the development of human nature. (3)

While Emerson's perfectionism was very much concerned with "the good life" and is frequently (and I might add not incorrectly) discussed in terms of moral theory, I choose to classify his brand of perfectionism with the religious perfectionists because of the centrality of the divine in Emersonian perfectionist thought.

By choosing to focus on the religious aspect of Emersonian perfectionism, I omit many important influences on his thought. However, every academic work, while being as comprehensive as possible, by nature must be somewhat exclusive. I will therefore, just in passing, mention a few influences. I mentioned Aristotle; Emerson was also well-read in the works of Socrates, Plato and

Plotinus. It is paramount, therefore, to acknowledge that the writings of the Greeks and the idea of moral perfectionism indubitably played significant roles in the development of Emerson's strain of perfectionism. Many proponents of perfectionism that were closer to Emerson's time were also influential. He read Gerando, Schleiermacher, Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Kant; he read Marx, Goethe, Locke, Hume and Hegel, all of whom expressed varying degrees of religiosity within their diverse teachings and philosophies of perfection. The possibility of perfection for humanity was an ever-present theme in Emerson's thoughts and he was very aware of moral perfectionist theorists and their teachings.

One of the moral perfectionists that closely resembled Emerson was Benjamin Franklin. Franklin's scheme for moral perfection included a list of thirteen virtues which he sought to master. The end of Franklin's plan, like Emerson's was to bring about the perfection of the individual. The difference between the two lies in the role of religion in their respective schemes. Franklin wrote in his Autobiography "tho' my Scheme was not wholly without Religion there was in it no Mark of any of the distinguishing Tenets of any particular Sect. I had purposely avoided them; for being fully persuaded of the Utility and Excellency of my Method, and that it might be serviceable to People in all religions, I would not have any thing in it that should prejudice it" (157). For Emerson, on the other hand, Self-Reliance and perfectionism were his religion.

Even after narrowing the scope of my study to religious perfectionism, there must be some exclusion. Eastern writings also played a role in the

development of Emersonian thought, particularly the Bhagavad-Gita, which he called "the first of books" (JMN 10:360); he considered "Hindoo books the best gymnastics for the mind" (CW 8:15) and read them continually, especially in the later years. His study and assimilation of the religions of the Orient was significant. Lawrence Buell wrote, "He never learned Sanskrit, never visited a temple, perhaps never even met a practicing Hindu or Buddhist, and repeatedly confused the two religions. But he did manage to de-occidentalize himself well enough to become 'the pre-Civil War American who most fully realized the philosophical significance of Asian thought'" (172). While Emerson had no intention of converting to Hinduism or any other Eastern religion, he found many of their teachings useful in the development of his perfectionism, particularly the view of "the material world as an illusory mask of the God that lay within all beings" (Buell 179) which contributed to his doctrine of the Over-Soul.

The Bible was certainly not his only source for religious perfectionist thought. However, due to the fact that all three of the contemporaries that I will be examining in this third chapter fall under the classification of Christian Perfectionists, I will only pursue the development of Christian perfectionism leading up to the time of Emerson and his fellow religionists. But I felt it was important to acknowledge that there were other influences on Emersonian Perfectionism.

As I mentioned earlier, Christian Perfection has its roots in the New Testament. Among the reformers who played a part in the development of Christian Perfectionist thought, perhaps the most important is John Wesley. His

famous treatise "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection" was monumental for Christian Perfectionists who would follow. In that text, he wrote the following:

> In the year 1729, I began not only to read, but to study, the Bible, as the one, the only standard of truth, and the only model of pure religion. Hence I saw, in a clearer and clearer light, the indispensable necessity of having "the mind which was in Christ," and of "walking as Christ also walked" even of having, not some part only, but all the mind which was in him; and of walking as he walked, not only in many or in most respects, but in all things. And this was the light, wherein at this time I generally considered religion, as an uniform following of Christ, an entire inward and outward conformity to our Master. Nor was I afraid of anything more, than of bending this rule to the experience of myself; or of other men; of allowing myself in any the least disconformity to our grand Exemplar.
>
> On January 1, 1733, I preached before the University in St. Mary's church, on "the Circumcision of the Heart," an account of which I gave in these words: "It is that habitual disposition of soul which, in the sacred writings, is termed 'holiness'; and which directly implies, the being cleansed from sin 'from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit' and, by consequence the being endued with those virtues which were in Christ Jesus, the being so 'renewed in the image of our mind,' as to be 'perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect.'" (Wesley 367)

Wesleyan Perfectionism held that if a man became completely free from sin through the grace of God, he would, as a result, be "endued with those virtues which were in Christ" and become perfect. Like all of the later perfectionists which we will examine, Wesley was not well received by many due to his teaching this doctrine. He continued:

> But after a time, a cry arose, and, what a little surprised me, among religions men, who affirmed, not that I stated perfection wrong, but that "there is no perfection on earth," nay, and fell vehemently on my brother and me for affirming the contrary. We scarce expected so rough an attack from these; especially as we were clear on justification by faith, and careful to ascribe the whole of salvation to the mere grace of God. But what most surprised us, was, that we were said to "dishonour Christ," by asserting that he "saveth to the

> uttermost," by maintaining he will reign in our hearts alone, and subdue all things to himself. (Wesley 368)

Wesleyan Perfectionism contrasted markedly from Emersonian Perfectionism in its emphasis on Christ's role in the perfection of man. Wesley was "careful to ascribe the whole of salvation to the mere grace of God," asserting that man's path to perfection was made possible wholly by Jesus, whereas Emerson would have considered such talk as dwelling "with noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus" ("An Address" EPP 73). Emersonian Perfectionism had no mediator. A man was to go it alone, following the lights within; Christ was merely an example of one who had done that. The finished product of Emersonian Perfectionism was the perfected character of the individual, not freedom from sin.

At this point in the thesis, one has cause to ask, "If Emersonian Perfectionism is so different from Wesleyan Perfectionism, why do you insist on grouping him with the religious perfectionists rather than the moral perfectionists?" The answer to that question can be very complex inasmuch as religious perfectionism and moral perfectionism frequently cross paths and intertwine; Emerson's perfectionism is no exception and is perhaps the best example of a splendid hybrid uniting the two. But I am going to try and keep the answer simple by referring back to William James' definition of religion that I am using in this thesis. A man's religion, in this case, refers to men as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine. By virtue of Emerson's own words on self-reliance and perfection, I will persist in classifying it as religious perfectionism because of its dependence on the

divine, recalling Emerson's statement that "the height and perfection of man" was attained by self-reliance, which he elaborated was actually "reliance on God" (LL 1:344). So, although moral perfection was the end of Emersonian perfectionism, its religiosity can not be ignored.

One of the most powerful religious perfectionist influences on Emerson's thought was Quakerism with its belief in the individual's ability to experience God. Robert Richardson noted this development in Emerson's thinking:

> What Emerson now perceived was that the "reason" of Milton, Coleridge, and the Germans was another name for what the Quakers recognized as the inner light. The same phenomenon was explained philosophically and logically by one group; it was made practically available and psychologically real by the other. Together, these conceptions of reason make up the fundamental basis, the necessary bottom rung, of Emerson's self-reliance. Coleridge and the Quakers both show why it is reasonable, indeed necessary, to trust the basic self. (167)

This passage is instructive for two reasons. First of all, it demonstrates the crossing over and melding of religion and philosophy that I mentioned above, with Emerson making "reason" and "the inner light" synonymous. Emerson probably would not have made any distinctions between religious and moral perfectionism, but would have considered them as one. Secondly, Richardson points out that the Quakers' "inner light" was the "necessary bottom rung of Emerson's self-reliance" and consequently, I would add, is essential to his form of perfectionism.

His belief in the potential for man to be perfect and never err again is illustrated by the journal entry that Emerson made after an encounter with the Quaker, Mary Rotch. Her thoughts left such an impression on him that he wrote,

"Can you believe, Waldo Emerson, that you may relieve yourself of this perpetual perplexity of choosing? & by putting your ear close to the soul, learn always the true way" (JMN 4:264). This inner light doctrine was the reason Emerson acknowledged that "he felt closest to Quakerism" (Buell 60) of all religions when asked in one instance about his religious affiliations. Throughout his career, the inner light was paramount to Emersonian self-reliance and perfectionism.

The Second Great Awakening brought with it a great deal of Religious Perfectionism that ranged the whole spectrum from Wesleyan Perfectionism to Emersonian Perfectionism. As I mentioned earlier, Finney, Noyes, Smith and Emerson were all contemporaries and experienced or participated in the Second Great Awakening to some degree; for this reason it is important to acknowledge its influence as a force in the development of these four men's various forms of religious perfectionism. I will introduce each one of Emerson's contemporaries, progressing from the one that I feel most closely resembles Wesley in his form of Perfectionism (Finney), then I will look at Noyes, and lastly, Smith, whom I feel most closely resembles Emerson in his form of perfectionism.

Overview of the Life of Charles Grandison Finney

Charles Grandison Finney was born to Sylvester and Rebecca Rice Finney on 29 August 1792 in Warren, Litchfield County, Connecticut. He was the seventh of nine children. When he was two, his family moved to Oneida County, New York and not long thereafter to the southern shore of Lake Ontario where the family maintained a farm until 1836.

Young Finney showed great promise in his studies, but was limited in his education by a lack of adequate educational institutions in the region. This caused him eventually to return to Warren, Connecticut, where he studied for two years at the Warren Academy. He said of his education, "I acquired some knowledge of Latin, Greek & Hebrew. But I was never a classical scholar…" (Finney Memoirs 7). Finney ultimately decided to pursue a law career and began to study at a law office in Adams, New York.

Leading up to his time in Adams, Finney had not been very involved in religion. He described his religious background by writing that "Up to this time I had never enjoyed what might be called religious privileges. I had never lived in a praying community, except during the periods when I was attending the high school in New England; and the religion in that place was of a type not at all calculated to arrest my attention" (Finney Memoirs 8). However, while studying law, Finney began to attend the sermons of George Washington Gale, a Calvinistic preacher in Adams. Finney, though unimpressed by the preaching, continued to attend and shortly thereafter purchased the first Bible that he ever owned. Much like Emerson's experience with Barzillai Frost that he recounted in his famous "Harvard Divinity School Address" (EPP 76), Finney felt there was no life in Gale's preaching and told him as much, saying "Mr. Gale, you don't believe what you preach; were I in your place, holding the truth you declare, I would ring the church-bell, and cry in the streets, 'Fire! Fire!'" (Headley 128). Soon, Finney began to feel a concern for his soul and determined to make a serious investigation into religion.

As a result of his investigation, he had an indelible conversion experience when resorting to the woods to pray on 10 October 1821; subsequently, he immediately commenced his career as a preacher. He was encouraged by those close to him to go to Princeton to study theology, even at their expense; but he refused, for like Emerson, he disapproved of the formal religious training which was being given at the time, opining that those who had undergone such studies "had been wrongly educated; and they were not ministers that met my ideal at all of what a minister of Christ should be" (Finney Memoirs 47). Instead of pursuing formal training, Finney began preaching as a missionary and met with great success in revivals throughout New York, Ohio, Delaware, much of New England and eventually Britain, teaching what was called by many the New School in theology, because of its differences to Calvinism. Eventually, Finney and his consorts found it necessary to have a home for their theology and thus established Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, where they could train missionaries according to their particular breed of preaching. Oberlin College also became not only a training ground for missionaries, but one of the foremost institutions in the United States for the advancement of the rights of women and African-Americans.

Oberlin Perfectionism

The first recorded teaching of perfectionism by Charles Grandison Finney was in February 1837 in the Broadway Tabernacle in New York City. The following passage from his memoirs explains how perfectionism emerged as a topic for his sermons:

> Those sermons to Christians were very much the result of a searching that was going on in my own mind. I mean, that the Spirit of God was showing me many things in regard to the question of sanctification that led me to preach those sermons to Christians…. But I have long been satisfied that the higher forms of Christian experience are attained only as a result of a terribly searching application of God's law to the human conscience and heart. The result of my labors up to that time had shown me more clearly than I had known before the great weakness of Christians, and that the older members of the church as a general thing were making very little progress in grace. I found that they would fall back from a revival state, even sooner than young converts, by far….
>
> In looking at the state of the Christian church as it had been revealed to me in my revival labors, I was led earnestly to inquire whether there was not something higher and more enduring than the Christian church was aware of; …I had known considerable of the view of sanctification entertained by our Methodist brethren. But as their view of sanctification seemed to me to relate almost altogether to states of the sensibility, I could not receive their teaching. However, I gave myself earnestly to search the Scriptures, and to read whatever came to hand upon the subject, until my mind was satisfied that an altogether higher and more stable form of Christian life was attainable, and was the privilege of all Christians. (Finney Memoirs 391-92)

The "view of sanctification entertained by our Methodist brethren" is a reference to Wesleyan Perfection. This is further evidenced in the first sermon preached at the Broadway Tabernacle, wherein he also states that he had read Wesley's "Plain Account of Christian Perfection." But Finney was convinced, as he stated, that perfectionism meant more than to have a perfect heart and mind before God, that a "higher and more stable form of Christian life was attainable, and was the privilege of all Christians." Like Wesley, Finney preached that perfection could only be attained through the grace of Jesus Christ, but he believed that if a person had indeed sanctified himself through Christ, that sanctification would manifest itself in the form of a perfect, sinless life.

Perhaps the greatest difference between Emerson and all of the Christian perfectionists that I will examine in this chapter was their view of Christ. Finney, Noyes and Smith, like Wesley, all claimed that perfection came through Jesus Christ; I mentioned earlier that Emerson would have considered this part of the "noxious exaggeration about the person of Christ" ("An Address" EPP 73). However, Finney's brand of perfectionism starts to resemble Emersonian perfectionism in other regards. Finney would have agreed with Emerson, first of all, that "Man is the dwarf of himself" (EPP 53), and that "an altogether higher and more stable form of Christian life was attainable" (Finney Memoirs 392). He continued, "I was satisfied that the doctrine of sanctification in this life, and entire sanctification in the sense that it was the privilege of Christians to live without known sin, was a doctrine taught in the Bible, and that abundant means were provided for the securing of that attainment" (393). This concurs nicely with Emerson's self-reliance which Buell labels "a way of life" (63). Perfection, for Emerson, was not something to be attained in the after-life but to be attained now, insisting "a greater self-reliance must work a revolution in all the offices and relations of men" ("Self-Reliance" EPP 131), but he lamented that because of failure to be self-reliant "our age yields no great and perfect persons."

A fundamental difference between what Emerson and Finney considered perfection can be seen here and it is traceable back to their distinct views on Christ. Finney's perfectionism was much more focused on being clean from sin, or sanctification. Sanctification was rarely a topic with Emerson. Emerson's perfection required the individual to go it alone, relying upon the Soul for

guidance—seeing Christ and his life as important to the perfection of the individual only as an example of the possibility of attaining perfection—not as integral to the individual's perfection. On the other hand, Finney's perfection, which was synonymous with sanctification, was inextricably tied to the Atonement as performed by Jesus Christ.

The two forms of perfectionism also similarly required the disciplining of one's self to the will of God. Robert Thomas, in his book The Man Who Would Be Perfect wrote the following about Finney's perfectionism:

> Perfectionism reflected the concern for self-control, continuity, and direction in life.
>
> …In their attempts to reintegrate man, society, and God, Finney, Asa Mahan, and other Perfectionists exhorted men to submit unequivocally to the will of God as Paul and Christ had done. One of man's greatest sins was to have a will separate and opposed to God's, while security and bliss were obtained in an "annihilation of his own will" and a merger with the Lord's. (Thomas 31)

This annihilation of one's own will in a merger with the Lord's is reminiscent of Emerson's words with regards to the Over-Soul in his essay "The Over-Soul":

> When it breathes through his intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through his will, it is virtue; when it flows through his affection, it is love. And the blindness of the intellect begins, when it would be something of itself. The weakness of the will begins when the individual would be something of himself. All reform aims, in some one particular, to let the soul have its way through us; in other words, to engage us to obey. (EPP 164)

The terminology differs—for Emerson it is the Soul, for Finney it is God—but the principle is the same: Perfection will only be attained by the individual's obedience to the Divine, and not trying to "be something of itself." In Finney's Lectures on Systematic Theology, he taught that only after having annihilated

one's own will in favor of following God's would the soul be "in a state to really respect itself," so that it could "behold its own face without a blush" (379).

Overview of the Life of John Humphrey Noyes

John Humphrey Noyes was born 3 September 1811. His father experimented with several vocations, including a short stint as a minister, but ultimately he became a successful mercantile businessman and politician. His mother was a member of the Congregational Church and made certain that her children were reared, in Noyes' own words, "in the fear of God" (2). Noyes graduated from Dartmouth College in 1830, and began to study law; however, his study was cut short by his conversion at a religious meeting in his hometown of Putney, Vermont. This was very pleasing to his mother inasmuch as she had always designed and intended that Noyes should be a minister. Shortly after his conversion, he entered the theological seminary in Andover, Massachusetts, studying there for one year before transferring to Yale Theological College. He eventually graduated and received his license to preach. It was at this time that he began to teach the doctrine of perfection, and soon thereafter, due to his refusal to acquiesce with regards to the doctrine of perfectionism, his license was revoked. He preached in various locales, eventually establishing the Oneida Community in 1848, espousing perfectionism and promoting other behaviors that were often not looked upon favorably by those outside of the community. Noyes was recognized as a very charismatic and influential preacher, winning many adherents to his cause. Whitney Cross, in his book The Burned-Over District, wrote: "The two highest caliber mentalities to be observed in the whole story of western New York

religious enthusiasms belonged to Charles Finney and John Noyes, the two leading perfectionists of the period" (238). However, Noyes' charisma was not sufficient to deter the law from pursuing him for his practice of "complex marriage," which included sexual practices that were considered deviant at the time. He eventually had to seek exile from the law in Canada and died in Niagara, Ontario, Canada, on 13 April 1886.

Parenthetically, I would just mention that the "Burned-Over District" mentioned by Whitney Cross was a region of Western New York that played a huge role in the Second Great Awakening. The region had been subjected to so many religious revivals from so many different denominations and had experienced so much religious fervor that it received the sobriquet as a result. Interestingly, Joseph Smith, the other perfectionist which I discuss in this paper, also emerged from this region. Emerson would have had some association with the region, but not to the degree that the other three perfectionists did.

Oneida Perfectionism

Noyes propagated a form of perfectionism that was very similar to that of Finney. His perfectionism along with Finney's and Smith's differed from Emerson's in that it was Christocentric, with man's advancement and perfection depending on Christ's atonement. Furthermore, he, along with Finney, believed in the individual's ability to live a perfect, sinless life. Sanctification was at the center of his perfectionism. Therefore Noyes' perfectionism has many of the same commonalities and differences with Emerson's perfectionism that Finney's has. But Noyes did take perfectionism further in two crucial respects.

First of all, Noyes made the unique assertion on 20 February 1834 that he, personally, had become perfect and maintained that he remained thus throughout his life. Neither Emerson, nor Finney nor Smith, for that matter, ever made such a claim. Robert Thomas, in his book about Noyes, summed up the aftermath of Noyes' declaration of perfection in the following manner:

> Within a few hours, the news spread that Noyes believed himself to be perfect, and along with the rumor went the cry that he was crazy. His room was daily filled with the curious and contentious, making Noyes feel like a misfit, but he steadfastly held to his beliefs. (48)

As one would expect, his bold claim aroused cries of "Heresy!" and "Blasphemy!" from all over the Christian community. In that regard, all four of the perfectionists were similar; all four faced some degree of criticism because of their perfectionist views, with Noyes and Smith even being wanted by the law, and Smith eventually losing his life. As one proponent of perfectionism put it, "Some persons no sooner hear the word 'perfection' than they immediately take fire" (Thomas 32). All four brands of perfectionism caused controversy and were highly criticized.

Noyes was also somewhat like Emerson in his disdain for institutions, governments and philanthropic organizations. Noyes was more extreme, however; at the height of his career in the Oneida Community he refused to acknowledge any body of authority, determining like Emerson's friend Thoreau to pursue a course of "civil disobedience." In January 1837, before a small group of perfectionist believers in Putney, Noyes made his "Declaration of '76" in which he declared his independence from the United States government for its

tyranny and insensitivity to the plight of the Negroes and Indians (148). Noyes felt that the United States was ripening for a revolution like the one that rocked France, but a revolution that would be led by Christ rather than Napoleon. In principle, Noyes, like Emerson, felt that the perfectionism which he promulgated, if observed, would revolutionize the world. Subsequently, Noyes and Emerson felt that individual perfectionism should be the pursuit of every man rather than spending time engaged in a particular moral reform such as abolition. On one occasion, Noyes voiced this sentiment to William Lloyd Garrison in the following manner**:** "'All the abhorrence which now falls upon slavery, intemperance, lewdness, and every other species of vice will in due time be gathered into one volume of victorious wrath against sin…. If you love...the forefront of the hottest battle of righteousness…set your faces toward perfect holiness'" (qtd. in Cross 238). In this regard, Noyes' perfectionism closely resembled Emerson's, for Noyes, like Emerson, had a vision of how individual perfection would translate into public perfection. Emerson wrote in "Self-Reliance" that if men would adhere to "what is dictated by your nature as well as mine, and if we follow the truth, it will bring us out safe at last" (EPP 131). While Emerson's "battle" for perfection does not involve the "wrath" and vehemence that Noyes apparently envisioned, both men felt that if men would set their faces toward perfection, society's ills would disappear and be taken care of.

One last thing which set apart Noyes' form of perfectionism was his approach to its establishment. Finney, while relentlessly preaching the doctrine of perfectionism, never sought to organize a community of perfectionists. Noyes

was a part of and the founder of the Putney and Oneida perfectionist communities, respectively. It was within these communities that Noyes proliferated the notion of complex marriage—an arrangement whereby the sharing of "spiritual mates" (Thomas 88), or what might be called wife swapping today, was practiced—a practice for which Noyes and his accomplices were severely criticized by other Christians. While complex marriage appears somewhat central to Noyes' beliefs, I will not discuss it further inasmuch as it is peripheral to this thesis. Emerson considered joining, but never actually participated in, a communal experiment at Brook Farm. Noyes Oneida Community was established with the intent to put in practice the perfectionist ideals that he taught; similarly, Brook Farm was created with the intent to put in practice Transcendentalist ideals. Many of Emerson's close friends participated in the experiment at Brook Farm. However, it appears not to have coincided closely enough with Emerson's ideas on self-reliance and perfection because he never joined them.

As an interesting side note, I think it is also significant to mention how Finney viewed Noyes' brand of perfectionism. Finney was aware of Noyes and his brand of perfectionism and for the most part agreed with Noyes' teachings on Christian perfection. He disapproved, however, of their sexual irregularities and Noyes' extreme views on government. In his very first lecture on Christian perfection, he made a point of distancing his form of perfectionism from Noyes and those in Oneida by saying the following: "I disclaim entirely, the charge of maintaining the peculiarities, whatever they be, of modern Perfectionism. I have

read their publications, weeping, and have had much knowledge of them as individuals, and I cannot assent to their views" (Memoirs 393).

Overview of the Life of Joseph Smith

Joseph Smith was born 23 December 1805 in Sharon, Vermont to Joseph and Lucy Mack Smith and was the fifth of eleven children. Smith, Sr. and his family were no strangers to hardship, poverty and adversity, and moved about several times trying to break free of their indigent circumstances. The Smith family moved to Palmyra, New York in 1816, and it was there that young Joseph Smith became witness to the events that would earn that region the nickname of the "Burned-over District," an "analogy between the fires of the forest and those of the spirit" (Cross 3) referring to the "habitual revivalism (3) that took place in that area. The Smiths in those early years, although professing a belief in Christ, were not loyal to any particular denomination. Rather, like Emerson, they had expressed somewhat of an aversion to the organized religions of their day. As a matter of fact, in her History of Joseph Smith, Lucy Mack Smith recounts that after several encounters with religionists, she had concluded, "that there was not then upon the earth the religion" (36) she sought. Joseph Smith, Jr., recalling in later years in History of the Church how he had felt at the time, described it thus:

> My mind at times was greatly excited, the cry and tumult were so great and incessant. The Presbyterians were most decided against the Baptists and Methodists, and used all the powers of both reason and sophistry to prove their errors, or, at least, to make the people think they were in error. On the other hand, the Baptists and Methodists in their turn were equally zealous in endeavoring to establish their own tenets and disprove all others. (1:3)

This moment of great turmoil proved to be a rich breeding ground for the development of Smith's own religious thought and eventually his brand of perfectionism.

In 1820, in the midst of this confusion, Smith had his "First Vision" experience, which would really be the commencement of his religious career. He went on to bring forth The Book of Mormon and establish The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1830 and continued in the capacity of prophet of the Church until his death on 27 June 1844. During those fourteen years of leadership in the Church, Smith fled persecution for himself and for his people by leading them from New York to Ohio, then to Missouri, and finally to Illinois, where he was killed.

Smith's Perfectionism

Joseph Smith's perfectionism, I reiterate, was like that of Finney and Noyes in its belief in man's utter dependence on Christ's atonement and grace for perfection. In that regard Emersonian perfectionism stands alone and unique as the only strain of religious perfectionism in this study that proclaimed the capability of the individual to attain perfection without mediation.

Smith, like Emerson and unlike Finney and Noyes, never actually labeled himself as a perfectionist or described his teachings as perfectionism. Furthermore, I am unaware of either Smith or Emerson being classified as religious perfectionists by other scholars. However, the preaching of the possibility of perfection is prevalent enough in the literary corpus of both men that I feel that there is a case to be made. I mentioned earlier that Emerson had

been studied rather extensively as a moral perfectionist, so it is not like his teachings on perfection were obscure, undetected or ignored. They have just not been examined from the angle of religious perfectionism, and I assert there is value in doing so. John Passmore, in his book The Perfectibility of Man, traces the concept of perfection through the ages from Aristotle to Plotinus to John Wesley to Karl Marx, examining the ways that various thinkers, religious and non-religious alike, have sought to accomplish the perfection of humanity. This thesis, in essence, is a microcosmic addition to that dialogue, showing how these four nineteenth-century figures contributed to the pursuit and study of perfection. For that reason, I have added Joseph Smith into this discussion. Smith, and Emerson for that matter, while never labeling themselves perfectionists, had at the core of their respective religions belief in the perfection of man.

One aspect of religious perfectionism in which Smith closely resembled Emerson was in the value of personal revelation. I established earlier that revelation was one of the pillars of Emerson's religion of self-reliance. It was similarly paramount to Smith. In a general conference of the Mormon Church held in Nauvoo, Illinois on 3 October 1841, Smith emphasized the need for revelation while criticizing the churches which would not recognize its centrality to religion. He said "The best way to obtain truth and wisdom is not to ask it from books, but to go to God in prayer, and obtain divine teaching….What! New revelations in the old churches? New revelations would knock out the bottom of their bottomless pit, new wine into old bottles! The bottles burst and the wine runs out!" (History of the Church 4:425-6). Just as emphatically, Emerson said in

his Harvard Divinity School Address that "Men have come to speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead…. And it is my duty to say to you, that the need was never greater of new revelation than now" (EPP 75).

Perfectionism as preached by both Emerson and Smith not only preached the necessity of revelation but hinged upon its preeminence. Personal, modern revelation superseded any other source of guidance, including the Bible or any other sacred writings. Smith taught:

> God said, "Thou shalt not kill," at another time He said, "Thou shalt utterly destroy." This is the principle on which the government of heaven is conducted—by revelation adapted to the circumstances in which the children of the kingdom are placed. Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire. (History of the Church 5:135)

In Smith's mind, revelation reigned supreme. He used two Bible passages to illustrate that God's will at one point may not be God's will in a future circumstance. Modern revelation superseded all past revelations. Only by reliance on revelation, or the dictates of the God within at the present moment, could a man act perfectly and thus progress towards perfection according to Smith. Emerson placed a similar emphasis on modern revelation from God, saying that "He speaketh, not spake" ("An Address" EPP 78). For a man to be perfect, he must follow God's individualized instructions for him, the revelations of the past to other men would not suffice.

Emerson and Smith also had commonalities in their views on Deity. In the "Over-Soul" Emerson wrote: "Ineffable is the union of man and God in every

act of the soul. The simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God" (EPP 172). In other words, as the individual submits to the will of God, he becomes godly, eventually becoming godly enough that he becomes indistinguishable from God. For having made the declaration, he was called a heretic. Emerson placed God within reach of man. By declaring the heavens opened and revelation a possibility, Emerson was teaching that a man could be taught infinitely by the heavens, measure upon measure, until he attained the stature of the heavens. In Nature, Emerson taught "A man is a god in ruins" and "…man is the dwarf of himself" (53). Clearly, he felt that men in general were living far beneath their potential, that most men were merely the ruins of the edifice that could be occupying the self-same space or dwarves living in habitations that were intended for giants and gods. Considered particularly blasphemous and incendiary were Emerson's teachings on Jesus, because of the way these teachings brought Jesus to the level of man. For example, Emerson taught:

> Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being there. Alone in all history, he estimated the greatness of man. One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, 'I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or, see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think.' ("Address" EPP 73)

This passage is doubly powerful in advancing Emerson's cause, owing to its language that both portrays Jesus as human, placing him amongst "the

prophets" and "man," while at the same time, elevating humanity, demonstrating man's ability to declare with Jesus "I am divine."

Smith also promulgated many equally incendiary teachings about the potential of man. Smith's teachings about Christ may be seen as a hybrid of the other perfectionists and Emerson. Smith did believe in Christ as a mediator between God the Father and humanity, agreeing in that regard with Finney and Noyes. However, like Emerson, he also believed Jesus Christ was a man, the one man who "was true to what is in you and me" ("Address" EPP 73), the only man who had attained perfection and become a God, and having done so, provided all other men with the example and means of also attaining perfection. Jesus' progression from man to God as part of Smith's perfectionist doctrine is best noted in the difference between Christ's mandate "Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48) as a mortal in Jerusalem and his slightly modified mandate to the people in the Western Hemisphere in The Book of Mormon: "I would that ye should be perfect even *as I*, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect" (3 Nephi 12:48; italics added). It was Smith's belief that Christ, while sinless in his life, had not yet reached the end of the path to perfection (Jesus had not yet attained godhood, or the same stature as God); but by the time that he spoke as a resurrected being to the people in the Americas, he was perfected, or complete in his development and had become as God the Father. Like Emerson, it was this doctrine that wrongfully humanized Deity in the minds of many Christians and drew much criticism for Smith.

Smith's perfectionism even takes things one step further. He not only claimed that Jesus was at one time a man and had become perfect and attained godhood, but taught the same about God the Father. In his History of the Church, Smith recorded his teachings from the funeral of a man named King Follett. The remarks were given with the intention of providing comfort and by way of explanation of the destiny of man. Due to some of its groundbreaking doctrines, it became a landmark address, known as the "King Follett Discourse." Smith taught:

> God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God, who holds this world in its orbit, and who holds all worlds and all things by His power, was to make himself visible—I say, if you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form—like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man; for Adam was created in the very fashion, image and likeness of God, and received instruction from, and walked, talked and conversed with Him, as one man talks and communes with another. (6:305)

Smith's brand of perfectionism came with a new twist, going beyond that of Emerson and historical Christianity, proposing a past for God and a plan for perfection with components that extended beyond mortal life.

Smith, like Emerson, was sailing uncharted waters. Their teachings gave Deity a human side, and deified humans. Their similar views on Christ and Smith's unique views on God the Father were very central, however, to their brands of perfectionism—central because they provided models of success, proof that the system worked, so to speak, examples of the infinitude of man being attained. Smith, as opposed to Noyes, while proposing a path to perfection did not consider himself as having attained it. He wrote "If you wish to go where

God is, you must be like God…. Search your hearts, and see if you are like God. I have searched mine, and feel to repent of all my sins" (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith 216). Smith, like Emerson, felt man could rebuild his ruins and "be like God." However, in spite of somewhat similar perfectionist beliefs, their approaches to perfectionism differed in two other key respects.

First, Smith's perfectionism required the performance of the ordinances of baptism and eternal marriage by ordained, authorized priesthood holders from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Emerson would have scoffed at the idea. His feelings on attempts to re-create a religious institution with dogmas and liturgies are very clear in his "Address": "I confess, all attempts to project and establish a Cultus with new rites and forms, seem to me vain" (EPP 80). He believed instead that the "remedy to their deformity is, first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul" (80).

Secondly, as I mentioned earlier, Smith's perfectionism extended beyond mortal life, believing that perfection was attainable for all of humanity, but that Christ was the only one who achieved it in this life, and therefore looked into eternity for the completion of the process for the rest of humanity. This is, again, in stark contrast with Emersonian perfectionism which, like the moral perfectionists, was more concerned with perfection in this life.

Religious Perfectionism: A Democratic Phenomenon?

One of the most significant commonalities in the four religious perfectionists examined in this thesis is the democratic nature of their religious undertakings. Earlier in the thesis I quoted Kevin Van Anglen's statement that

Transcendentalism was a "theology, a spirituality, and a religious reform…with traceable roots in such diverse sources as New England Calvinism, contemporary Boston Unitarianism, the Asian religions, neoplatonism, Swedenborgianism, and nineteenth-century American religious, social, and political thought" (153). Van Anglen was astute enough to see the religious roots of Emerson's works and Transcendentalism; but equally interesting is his observation that Transcendentalist literature had roots in American social and political thought. The same is true for religious perfectionism. Robert David Thomas, in summing up the background of American religious perfectionist thought, made the following observation:

> Perfectionism, of course, has deep roots in Western culture; it has always been an important element in the national character, as Americans have played out their destiny as God's chosen people. Democracy, asserted one national magazine of the period, was boldly energetic in its quest for a better world and "a higher perfection of social institutions." Henry James, Sr., was even more lavish in his praise of democracy's ideals. He was certain they heralded the moral perfection of man and would usher in a promised age of harmony and "infinite love."
>
> ...both for the culture and the individual, therefore, the ideal of perfection was a constant reminder of God's intentions for man. (Thomas 28-9)

In the same way that democracy challenged the monarchy and aristocracy of England and gave individuals power, democracy in religion encouraged individuals to imagine and pursue a spiritual future commensurate with God's designs for them as his chosen people. As a result, this democratic phenomenon was conducive to the development of the doctrine of perfectionism in American Christian religions.

Many of these ideas are traceable to the Revolutionary War. When causes for the Revolutionary War are discussed, taxation without representation is generally the primary culprit. In other words, Americans—feeling that their voices were not being heard—revolted. As a result, Americans won for themselves the right to have their voices heard in a democratic government, but the victory for the voice of the people played a significant role in the reshaping of American religious thinking, too. Therefore, the Revolutionary War serves as a useful backdrop in looking at American religious perfectionists. Nathan Hatch wrote in The Democratization of American Christianity:

> Above all, the Revolution dramatically expanded the circle of people who considered themselves capable of thinking for themselves about issues of freedom, equality, sovereignty and representation. Respect for authority, tradition, station, and education eroded. Ordinary people moved toward these new horizons aided by a powerful new vocabulary, a rhetoric of liberty that would not have occurred to them were it not for the Revolution…. The correct solution to any important problem, political, legal, or religious, would have to appear to be the people's choice. (6)

The American people, enjoying their newfound voice, wanted to be heard in religion as well as politics. Hatch calls this movement "The democratization of American Christianity" in his book bearing the same name.

Hatch uses several American religionists, including Joseph Smith, to illustrate how for the American people it was not enough to have democracy in their government; but having achieved it and enjoying the power to express satisfaction or dissatisfaction, they now sought to apply the same principles to religion. Hatch quotes Barton Stone, who in breaking from the Presbyterian Church declared that "only by renouncing all institutional forms could 'the

oppressed…go free, and taste the sweets of gospel liberty'" (77). Many Americans felt that institutionalized religions did not represent them and that there was a need for a religious revolution as much as there had been a governmental revolution. These words spoken by the preacher Elias Smith in 1809 express this idea of a religious revolution even more clearly:

> "Let us be republicans indeed. Many are republicans as to government, and yet are but half republicans, being in matters of religion still bound to a catechism, creed, covenant or a superstitious priest. Venture to be as independent in things of religion, as those which respect the government in which you live." (qtd. in Hatch 69-70)

During Emerson's era American Christianity was becoming democratic with new religions springing up everywhere, leaving behind the "catechism, creed, covenant," and priest of the past, and the religious perfectionists were no exception. Men no longer believed that they needed an educated, trained clergy to speak for God; Americans were becoming "independent in things of religion," and seeking the voice of God for themselves.

All four of the religionists that I examine in this work were part of this democratic shift in religion towards the "ultimate perfection of society" which Whitney Cross explained in his book The Burned-Over District in the following manner:

> This basic assumption of direct divine interposition in individual concerns gave peculiar energy and direction to other assumptions held by religious radicals in common with the rest of their contemporaries. The dogma of American democracy, vigorously rising in Jacksonian days, contained a supreme optimism, a belief in the ultimate perfection of society through progressive improvement in humankind. Church folk shared this conviction in a qualified form. They believed progress to be attainable by human effort and practically inevitable. (199)

The "basic assumption of direct divine interposition in individual concerns" was fundamental to all four of the religious perfectionists examined in this thesis, but to none more than Emerson.

As I established earlier in the thesis, personal revelation was one of the three pillars of Emerson's religion of self-reliance. Emerson's religion of self-reliance with its accompanying form of perfectionism could be considered one of the most extreme expressions of democratic religious thought. Emerson had a well-known aversion to institutions; and ultimately his answer to government, religion, and all other cultural institutions was the perfection of the individual by adhering to his religion of self-reliance. In his essay "Spiritual Laws" Emerson provided the formula a man should follow to achieve perfection:

> O my brothers, God exists. There is a soul at the centre of nature, and over the will of every man, so that none of us can wrong the universe. It has so infused its strong enchantment into nature, that we prosper when we accept its advice, and when we struggle to wound its creatures, our hands are glued to our sides, or they beat our own breasts. The whole course of things goes to teach us faith. We need only obey. There is guidance for each of us, and by lowly listening we shall hear the right word. Why need you choose so painfully your place, and occupation, and associates, and modes of action, and of entertainment? Certainly there is a possible right for you that precludes the need of balance and willful election. For you there is a reality, a fit place and congenial duties. Place yourself in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom which animates all whom it floats, and you are without effort impelled to truth, to right, and a perfect contentment. Then you put all gainsayers in the wrong. Then you are the world, the measure of right, of truth, of beauty. If we will not be mar-plots with our miserable interferences, the work, the society, letters, arts, science, religion of men would go on far better than now, and the heaven predicted from the beginning of the world, and still predicted from the bottom of the heart, would organize itself, as do now the rose, and the air, and the sun. (EL 309)

Although one questions whether or not Emerson really believed in the logistical possibilities of such a plan, according to the ideal, one needs only to place himself "in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom" by obeying what his inner lights tell him. If men would do that, "the heaven predicted from the beginning of the world…would organize itself…" and the result would be a heaven-like society of self-governing, self-reliant individuals who listen to the God within and fulfill the "fit place and congenial duties" that are assigned to them by the Over-Soul. This was the ultimate form of government—of the people, by the people, without any intermediate organization.

Just as democracy was young and new and powerful in American politics, it was equally so in American religion. Democracy played a strong role in the growth of perfectionist religions; people were choosing the way they wanted to be governed religiously as well as politically and many found the perfectionist doctrines of Finney, Noyes, Smith and Emerson appealing.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In the preface to the Norton Critical Edition of Emerson's Prose and Poetry, one finds the following words of praise and recognition for Ralph Waldo Emerson:

> As we approach the year 2003—the two hundredth anniversary of Emerson's birth—we are once again challenged to reassess and reimagine his crucial presence in American culture. Emerson has regularly been canonized, decanonized, jettisoned, and recovered, but he will not go away; he does not need, as they say, to be brought back, because he remains an ineluctable voice in American letters. His writings have helped shape literary study, philosophy, politics, social reform, and indeed—directly or indirectly—how we live our lives almost two centuries after his birth. (xi)

Emerson truly is a figure whose presence in American culture requires continual reassessing. In this thesis, I have sought to be part of that reassessment, looking at Emerson as a religious figure inasmuch as it is impossible to separate Emerson's thought from the religious, however unorthodox his religious thought may be. It pervades his entire body of literature.

With regards to Emerson and religion, Lawrence Buell confessed, "There is simply no way to ignore the centrality of the religious to the thinking" of Emerson (160). However, he also stated in the same book that "Self-Reliance is not reducible to a theology" (63). I obviously disagree. I have just written ninety pages trying to establish that self-reliance and perfectionism were Emerson's religion. But I think that if Buell, Emerson and I were able to sit down together, we could come to an agreement on this issue. Buell was correct in asserting that self-reliance was not a theology or a religion, if theology is defined as a dogma

decided upon by clerics or a religious institution. However, to use Buell's own words, "there is simply no way to ignore" the fact that Emerson called it his religion. I think that we would find our agreement, however, in conceding that it was a religion—just not in a traditional sense; rather, Buell himself describes the religion of self-reliance quite aptly when he goes on to describe "Self-Reliance as a personal life practice" (63). This is what Emerson and William James appear to have had in mind when they referred to religion, in our afore-mentioned definition.

To once again touch on my central argument, I return to what George Santayana concluded about Emerson, all of which seems to reinforce my point:

> Those who knew Emerson, or who stood so near to his time and to his circle that they caught some echo of his personal influence, did not judge him merely as a poet or philosopher, nor identify his efficacy with that of his writings….They flocked to him and listened to his word….They felt themselves in the presence of a rare and beautiful spirit, who was in communion with a higher world.
>
> This effect was by no means due to the possession on the part of Emerson of the secret of the universe, or even of a definite conception of ultimate truth. He was not a prophet who had once for all climbed his Sinai or his Tabor, and having there beheld the transfigured reality, descended again to make authoritative report of it to the world. Far from it. At bottom he had no doctrine at all. The deeper he went and the more he tried to grapple with fundamental conceptions, the vaguer and more elusive they became in his hands. Did he know what he meant by Spirit or the "Over-Soul"? Could he say what he understood by the terms so constantly on his lips, Nature, Law, God, Benefit, or Beauty? He could not…. (217)

As Santayana stated in the first paragraph, Emerson was not "merely…a poet or philosopher." His teachings were of a spiritual nature, such that those who listened to him "felt themselves in the presence of a rare and beautiful spirit, who

was in communion with a higher world." Santayana is right. Emerson was not just a poet and a philosopher, he was also a religionist. Now while I find Santayana's tribute to Emerson beautiful, stirring and quite accurate, I do have to take issue with him in one respect. Santayana said that "At bottom [Emerson] had no doctrine at all." I concede that Emerson perhaps could not say with certainty what he understood by Nature or God, and that perhaps he did not know exactly what he meant by Spirit or the "Over-Soul." However, "at bottom," Emerson did have a foundational doctrine of which he was certain, and that was the doctrine of self-reliance, which he taught religiously (I intentionally use this term as a doble entendre to mean that he taught it with great diligence throughout his life and as his unique form of religion). Again, the strongest argument can be found in Emerson's own words where he wrote, "In all my lectures, I have taught one doctrine, the infinitude of the private man" (JMN 7:342). And if the religion of self-reliance is indeed the heart of Emerson's literary corpus, then perfectionism is the lifeblood.

The following snippet from "Self-Reliance" provides a concise and colorful summary of Emerson's doctrine of perfectionism and the process of self-discovery that takes place when one eventually practices self-reliance and finds greatness within:

> That popular fable of the sot who was picked up dead drunk in the street, carried to the duke's house, washed and dressed and laid in the duke's bed, and, on his waking, treated with all obsequious ceremony like the duke, and assured that he had been insane, owes its popularity to the fact, that it symbolizes so well the state of man, who is in the world a sort of sot, but now and then wakes up, exercises his reason, and finds himself a true prince. (EPP 127)

Emerson offers an incredible insight when he notes that the fable "owes its popularity to the fact, that it symbolizes so well the state of man." It is well-liked because it is a reflection of reality; it strikes a chord that rings true in men's hearts. Emerson believed and taught all his days that we are all dukes and princes; perfection is within every individual's grasp; but many are unaware of the greatness within them and consequently continue their lives as "sots." Emerson's lifetime opus then, according to the article "Emerson: The Ideal in America," was to inspire individuals to eradicate their inner sot in the following manner:

> In his essays and lectures, Emerson sought to evoke "the infinitude of the private man." His aim was to show the individual its true relationship, that of identity, with "the Supreme Cause." He taught and embodied a spirituality that transcended sects and even religions, and in a world where people are defining themselves in more and more narrow terms, his words still resonate with those seeking an authentic experience of "the Over-Soul." (Beardsley)

While his words resonate with many (myself included), Emerson remains complex and while I completely agree with Stephen Whicher's assessment that "The more we know him, the less we know him" ("Emerson's Tragic Sense" 39), I suggest that one thing we do know about him is that self-reliance was Emerson's doctrine—his religion, and that perfectionism was central to Emersonian self-reliance.

Emerson's self-reliance and perfectionism were his answer to the religious excitement that was so prevalent in nineteenth-century America. Earlier in this thesis, I quoted Emerson as having made a statement that shows how religious thought was fundamental to all the most important changes taking place in

America. He said that there was a "revolution of religious opinion taking effect around us as it seems to me the greatest of all revolutions which have ever occurred" (CS 4:209). The revolution demanded a religion that would satisfy the needs of individuals and help them reach their infinite potential.

Emerson was in the middle of this revolution. All four of the religionists I have examined considered themselves to be part of the revolution—a religious revolution that, like the American Revolution, was democratic in nature and that had at its roots the questions posed by Emerson: "What is my relation to Almighty God? What is my relation to my fellowman? What am I designed for? What are my duties? What is my destiny?" (CS 4:209). Religious perfectionism was the answer that each of them found to these questions—and in turn preached, each in his unique way.

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Abbreviations

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JE	Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson
EL	Essays and Lectures
JMN	The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson
LL	The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson
LE	The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson
EPP	Emerson's Prose and Poetry
YES	Young Emerson Speaks
CS	The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson

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