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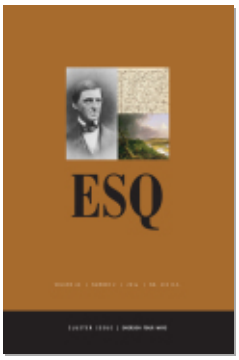

ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance, Volume 60, Number 2, 2014 (No. 235 O.S), pp. 183-208 (Article)

Published by Washington State University
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/esq.2014.0005*

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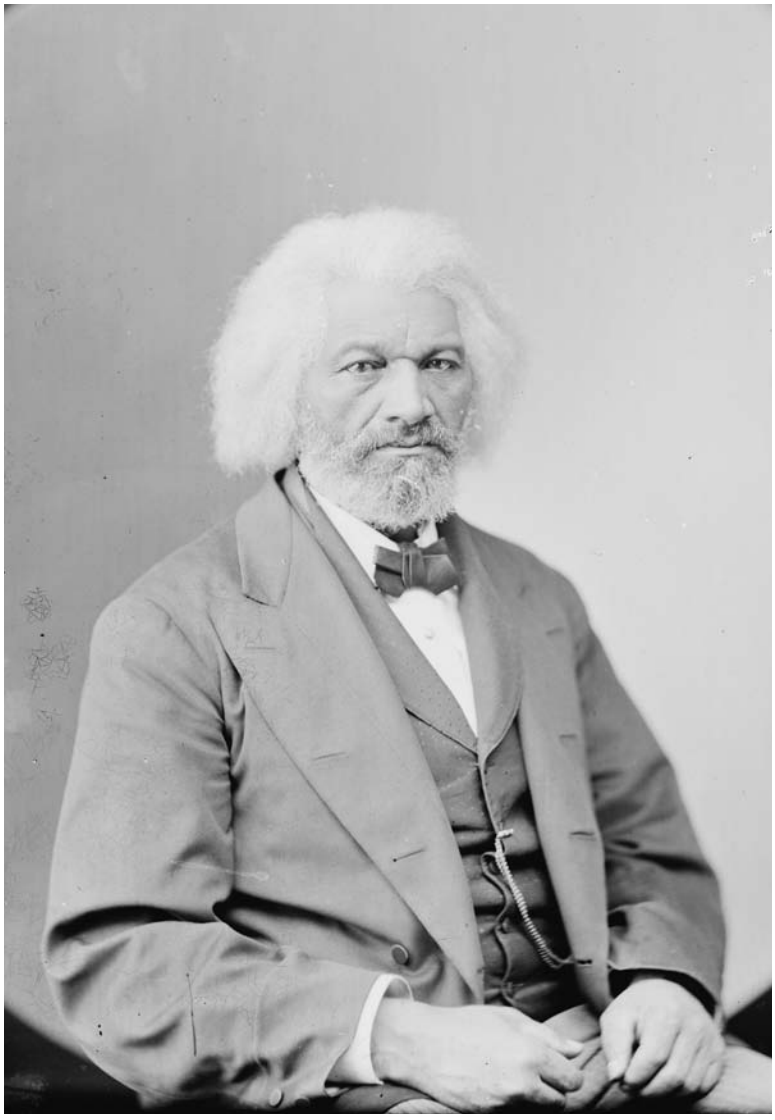
HUGH EGAN

Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1853 poem, "On Freedom," offers a unique angle of insight on Emerson's relationship with the abolitionist movement generally and with Frederick Douglass specifically. The poem is a conflicted meditation on the power of verse to convey "freedom's secret" to the captive slave, and exemplifies Emerson's ongoing approach/avoidance stance toward the cause of abolition. Despite Emerson's "conversion" following his 1844 speech on emancipation in the West Indies, and his further radicalization following the Compromise of 1850 along with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, "On Freedom" demonstrates his continuing difficulty in adapting the fluid, transcendental vocabulary of "sunset skies" and "starry fates" to the obdurate issue of slavery.[1] Even in the midst of this rhetorical struggle, however, Emerson may well have had Douglass in mind as he wrote the poem, for Douglass was engaged in his own effort to wed the material to the metaphorical over the issue of slavery.

The poem first appeared as part of an anthology, *Autographs for Freedom* (1854), published by the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society to raise funds for *Frederick Douglass' Newspaper*. Arranged and edited by Douglass's editorial assistant Julia Griffiths, the collection is comprised of a great variety of pieces—poetry, fiction, philosophical meditation, political



Frederick Douglass. African American abolitionist. Between 1865 and 1880.Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. LC-BH832-30219.

argument—by noted abolitionists such as George B. Vashon, Antoinette L. Brown, Theodore Parker, Williams Wells Brown, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Gerrit Smith, James McCune Smith, Horace Greeley, Harriet Beecher Stowe and others, each of whom provided a signature to accompany his or her contribution. Together with the first volume of *Autographs for Freedom*, published in 1853, which printed Douglass's novella *The Heroic Slave*, this literary fund-raising effort gathered together an extraordinary collection of activist voices—black, white, male, and female—who condemn slavery with an overwhelming passion and urgency. "On Freedom," however, retains a degree of hesitation that distinguishes it from other contributions to this volume. Indeed, the poem focuses upon the dilemma of the poet as much as the slave.

At the heart of Emerson's poem is the speaker's fantasy of engaging in a perfect speech-act, such that "the slave who caught the strain/ Should throb until he snapt his chain." If the poet can provide the perfect inspiration, the slave—and by extension the black race—is wakened into a state of self-reliance: man and race are now capable of gaining freedom by acting upon impulse and aligning with the forces of history and fate. As commentators have noted, Emerson, beginning with his 1844 speech, took an increasingly public role in condemning slavery, but less noted is the fact that Emerson continued to harbor a race-based theory of history that made him skeptical of the efforts of white abolitionists. The black race, Emerson explained in 1844, must free itself "and take a master's part" in human history. How this act of racial self-reliance gets translated into individual human agency is the project of "On Freedom," a project that ultimately founders on the speaker's self-conscious equivocations. Yet beneath the airy images of archangels and mountain-top deities, the fantasy of the perfect speech-act survives. The poem thus serves as a fascinating, if tortured, attempt to marry transcendental principle to single-issue politics. And in mounting this effort, Emerson demonstrates a surprising intellectual congruence with Douglass, the self-reliant ex-slave who subdued his white overseer by force, and whose newspaper Emerson

was supporting by writing the poem in the first place. In fact Douglass's two major pre-1854 publications—the 1845 *Narrative* and the 1853 *Heroic Slave*—share a vision and vocabulary notably consistent with Emerson's poem.

■■■

I

"On Freedom"
Once I wished I might rehearse
Freedom's paean in my verse,
That the slave who caught the strain
Should throb until he snapt his chain.
But the Spirit said, "Not so;
Speak it not, or speak it low;
Name not lightly to be said,
Gift too precious to be prayed,
Passion not to be exprest
But by heaving of the breast;
Yet,—would'st thou the mountain find
Where this deity is shrined,
Who gives the seas and sunset-skies
Their unspent beauty of surprise,
And, when it lists him, waken can
Brute and savage into man;
Or, if in thy heart he shine,
Blends the starry fates with thine,
Draws angels nigh to dwell with thee,
And makes thy thought archangels be;
Freedom's secret would'st thou know?—
Right thou feelest rashly do.["][2]

In this poem Emerson contemplates the effects of his language directly upon the slave—which presumes, of course, a slave capable of reading (or listening to) Emersonian verse—but then introduces a misgiving concerning his own project, and then a misgiving concerning the misgiving. Edward Emerson, Ralph Waldo's son, believed this poem expressed his father's "feeling that no muse would help should he attack

in song African Slavery," but this reading simplifies its effect considerably (*Works*, 9:467). The speaker in this poem first expresses the wish to communicate with the slave through the medium of poetry, then claims that wish is inappropriate, but then *does* communicate with the slave, at least indirectly, yielding an inward meditation that turns on itself in a variety of ways.[3]

In the opening four lines, the speaker admits that he once had a surprising ambition: to create verse that would inspire the slave to throw off his shackles and claim freedom. The word "strain" conflates linguistic and bodily forces (lyric strain literally leads to physical strain), invoking an organic fusion of word and deed, as well as an idealized communication between poet and slave. This mystic synthesis is in keeping with Emerson's long-standing transcendental beliefs. As early as his chapter on "Language" in *Nature*, Emerson is always aware of the porous boundary between language and nature, as well as between language and action (*Works,*1:24-35). "Words and deeds are quite indifferent modes of the divine energy," he writes in "The Poet." "Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words" (*Works,* 3:8). In "On Freedom," the speaker yearns to formulate the "meter-making argument" (as Emerson describes it in "The Poet") that will inspire the slave to free himself: the poem is thus an "action," and the slave's self-liberation, we shall see, is a term in a larger language of historical decree. However, given that the speaker "once … wished" he could complete this transaction (but by implication cannot), these opening lines convey primarily the melancholy musing of the poet rather than an urgent call for the slave's freedom. [4]

This wistful sense of paralysis is clarified when the "Spirit" (which I take to be essentially the speaker's muse) corrects the ambition of the speaker by saying that the idea of freedom is too precious to be expressed in poetry: "But the Spirit said, 'Not so;/ Speak it not, or speak it low.'" Here the idealized bond between word and deed is broken, with the implication that some deeds are too grand or important for words. In a draft version of this poem in his journal, Emerson included

the line, "Theme not this for lyric flow," suggesting that the subject of freedom for the slave does not fit the patterned "flow" of lyric, or more specifically, that the overpowering prospect of freedom is diminished when it is put into poetic language.[5] The negation of the oral vocabulary ("speak," "name," "said," "prayed," "exprest") upsets the dream of the perfect speech-act desired in the opening lines. Only nonlinguistic raw emotion, the "heaving of the breast," can express the immense passion of freedom. Of course, the fact that the spirit chastens the speaker in trochaic rhymed verse constitutes an irony that is central to the poem's perplexingly self-conscious effect: the incapacity of language is here being expressed in a shaped and polished linguistic form.[6]

The persistence of the inspiration fantasy re-emerges, however, when the speaker introduces a series of conditional clauses that constitute the second major qualification in the poem ("But … Yet … "). Indeed, the back-and-forth movement is so apparent that the poem appears to stage and interrogate its own sense of irresolution, enacting as it does Emerson's own continuing ambivalence about the relationship between transcendentalism and the issue of slavery. The speaker's muse tells him that if the speaker can find the "deity" who gives the world its beauty and order, freedom's "secret" will become accessible. The long interior quotation is spoken by the spirit to the speaker, and this can have the effect of an internal argument, or a kind of talking to oneself. However, this portion of the interior quotation radiates in another direction as well—namely, it is also the direct advice of the speaker (and the poet) to the slave. This reading reintroduces the theme of the speaker's earlier ambition, but also muffles it. While most explicitly an internal meditation on the impossibility of communicating the source of freedom to the slave, the poem also communicates that source, reasserting the connection between word and deed, but does so in indirect fashion. The poem is thus both an act of self-effacement and self-aggrandizement, both a contemplation of the incapacities of poetic language and a coded belief in the power of words. The many levels of mediation (deity to spirit, spirit

to speaker, speaker to slave, speaker to reader) undermine the poem's attempt at univocality, mirroring precisely Emerson's conflicted stance toward his sense of obligation to the slave. Emerson wished his philosophy to transcend specific, single-issue engagements, but as he discovered in the 1840s and 1850s, slavery presented a single issue that demanded a focused attention from philosopher and activist alike. "The last year has forced us all into politics," Emerson said in his 1851 speech on the Fugitive Slave Law.[7] The poet thus exhibits two motives in tension with one another: he wishes to offer a single, talismanic code for freedom, on the one hand, but also to demonstrate, through the poem's rhetorical complexity, how this enterprise appears to be untenable.

Further substantiating the poem's self-undermining stance are the lines describing the deity's habitation and power, which seem oddly out of place in a poem about slavery and freedom—as if Emerson is again trying to smuggle romantic imagery from *Nature* into an abolitionist anthology. The deity, called the "triune lord" in the journal draft but consonant with the more secular "Over-Soul," "world-spirit," or "over-god" in different works by Emerson, resides in a mountain and has dominion over nature, giving the seas and skies their "unspent beauty of surprise."[8] "Unspent" suggests the charged and eternally refreshed potential of the natural world, and the aesthetic and alliterative qualities of these lines appear to take us far from the material or psychological conditions of the slave. However, this same deity has dominion over mankind, as demonstrated by his ability to "waken" "Brute and savage into man," and this language returns us, in potentially essentializing fashion, back to the context of slavery. In a poem about freedom for the slave, this line can sound very much like a racist sentiment. An earlier draft version of the poem has the deity waking "Brutish millions into men," and if anything the use of the plural can appear even more retrograde.[9]

This poetic oscillation opens up a continuing difficulty with Emerson, one that has divided critics of his work, which is that he can appear simultaneously racist and progressive on the issue of slavery. Len Gougeon (along with Joel Myerson,

Albert von Frank, and Linck Johnson) have sought to revive Emerson's abolitionist credentials, while others (including John Carlos Rowe, Peter S. Field, and Cornel West) have argued that he was either indifferent or hostile to the interests of the slave and ended up on the wrong side of history.[10] Anita Patterson and Maurice Lee have presented particularly nuanced portraits of Emerson's stance toward reform movements in general and abolition in particular, tracing contradictions and incongruities with both a skeptical intelligence and an intellectual generosity. Lee, for instance, describes how the issue of abolition turned Emerson into "an exemplar and critic of the Emersonian self," and it is this double-edged strain of self-criticism that I see at work in "On Freedom."[11]

In broad terms, Emerson maintained a "philosophical resignation" (in the words of Philip Nicoloff) regarding the fates of races, with some destined to thrive and others (such as the American Indian, in Emerson's view) doomed to become extinct. [12] Indeed, Emerson's distanced, spectatorial stance concerning the end of slavery, and his resentment toward the urgent and self-congratulatory demands of abolitionists remain jarring sentiments that appear throughout his writing. He expresses his irritation famously in "Self-Reliance," admonishing the cold-hearted abolitionist for his "incredible tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off." This tirade is startling—particularly in the way Emerson's own cold-hearted response appears to mirror the behavior of the "angry bigot"—and, as in his later poem, the issue of slavery is used to test his philosophy as much as promote it (*Works*, 2:51).[13] Recent work by Laura Dassow Walls and Ian Finseth has helped locate Emerson in 19th century discourses on race, and particularly "development theory," which posits race as a fluid construction, open to forces of progressive advancement.[14] Emerson combined this idea with an organic, cyclical sense of racial power and decline, such that human history exhibits a grand parade of dominant races which rise and fall without the trivial aid of do-gooders; the most recent example of ascendancy was, in Emerson's view, the Anglo-Saxon race. He first adapts this race-based theory of history to the issue of slavery in his

watershed 1844 "Address on the Emancipation of the Negroes in the West Indies." In this speech, his first major statement on the evils of slavery, Emerson advances an antislavery philosophy that relies oddly on racialist discourse. At the very end of that speech, for instance, he states: "The genius of the Saxon race, friendly to liberty; the enterprise, the muscular vigor of this nation, are inconsistent with slavery."[15]

As it happens, Emerson was again thinking of the genius of the Saxon race as he wrote "On Freedom" in 1853. In preparation for his book, *English Traits* (1856), one chapter of which is entitled "Race," Emerson filled his 1853 journal with thoughts about the superiority of the Saxon race, thoughts which occasionally intersect with the issue of Negro slavery. This passage from *English Traits*, for instance—

> It is race, is it not? That puts the hundred millions of India under the dominion of a remote island in the north of Europe. Race avails much, if that be true, which is alleged, that all Celts are Catholics, and all Saxons are Protestants; that Celts love unity of power and Saxons the representative principle. Race is a controlling influence in the Jew, who, for two millenniums, under every climate has preserved the same character and employments. Race in the negro is of appalling importance… (*Works*, 5:47-8)

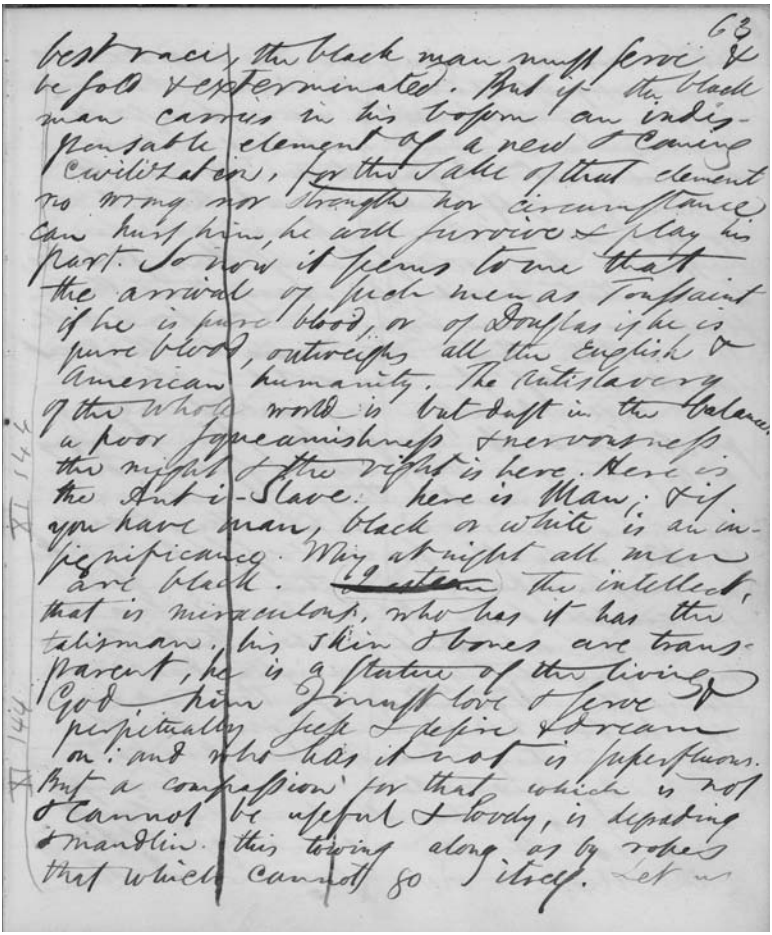
—has its origin in an 1853 journal entry written in close proximity to the draft versions of "On Freedom."[16] While the passage above reads very much as if Emerson believed that race is destiny, in the paragraphs that follow, he considers those forces that resist and modify racial absolutism, and the back-and-forth movement again has the effect of self-examination:

> It need not puzzle us that Malay and Papuan, Celt and Roman, Saxon and Tartar should mix, when we see the rudiments of tiger and baboon in our human form, and know that the barriers of races are not so firm, but that

> some spray sprinkles us from the antediluvian seas. (*Works*, 5:50)

Emerson's expansive sense of mixed blood (and even mixed species) should inform the way we read the transformation of "Brute and savage into Man" in "On Freedom." The reference to the baboon invites racist associations, but Emerson blunts these by collectivizing "our human form." That last alliterative image of the spray from "antediluvian seas" recalls the "seas and sunset skies" of "On Freedom": in both works, Emerson is attempting to tether the plastic fluidity of nature to the fixed issue of race; equally important, in both passages Emerson is trying to think through ways man's racial development is orchestrated by a governing power.

Emerson's acceptance of historical inevitability—the fated sense that the deity will turn "Brute and savage into man"—made its way into his other race-based meditations, such as his (similarly conflicted) 1846 poem, "Ode Inscribed to W.H. Channing." Here the speaker marvels that the seemingly cruel "over-god" who "marries Right to Might" and "exterminates races/ By stronger races,/ Black by white faces," eventually "Knows to bring honey/ Out of the lion" and "Grafts gentlest scion/ On Pirate and Turk" (*Works*, 9:79). This belief in historical melioration ("The destiny of organized nature is amelioration," he states in *Representative Men* [*Works*, 4:35]) would appear to eliminate the power of individual human agency in effecting social change.[17] However, on the slavery question Emerson also paradoxically believed in the efficacy of action, but not from the white abolitionist; rather, it was the responsibility of the black man to align himself with the forces of history. In the 1844 "West Indies" speech, he lays out the stakes of black self-reliance in the starkest terms: "If the black man is feeble, and not important to the existing races not on a parity with the best race," Emerson insists, then " the black man must serve, and be exterminated. But if the black man carries in his bosom an indispensable element of a new and coming civilization, for the sake of that element, no wrong, nor strength, nor circumstance, can hurt him: he will survive and play his part." Drawing strength from references to a litany of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best race, the black man must serve & be sold & exterminated. But if the black man carries in his bosom an indispensable element of a new & coming civilization, for the sake of that element no wrong nor strength nor circumstance can hurt him, he will survive & play his part. So now it seems to me that the arrival of such men as Toussaint if he is pure blood, or of Douglas if he is pure blood, outweighs all the English & American humanity. The Antislavery of the whole world is but daft in the balance a poor jequeamishness & nervousness the right & the right is here. Here is the Anti-Slave. here is Man; & if you have man, black or white is an insignificancy. Why at night all men are black. I listen the intellect, that is miraculous, who has it has the talisman, his skin & bones are transparent, he is a statue of the living God — him I must love & serve perpetually. Such a person & dream on: and who has it not is superfluous. But a confession for that which is not & cannot be useful & lovely, is degrading & mandlin. this toiling along as by robes that which cannot go direct. Let us

A Page from Emerson's Journal. MS Am 1280H (47), p. 63, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Reproduction courtesy of Harvard College Library Imaging Services.

black revolutionary heroes, including Toussaint L'Overture, Emerson concludes:

> I say to you, you must save yourself, black or white, man or woman; other help there is none. I esteem the occasion of this jubilee to be the proud discovery, that the black race can contend with the white; that, in the great anthem which we call history, a piece of many parts and vast compass, after playing a long time a very low and subdued accompaniment, they perceive the time when they can strike in with effect, and take a master's part in the music.[18]

The question of human agency within a system of chattel bondage is of course a deeply fraught issue, and Emerson never directly engages the potentially deadening daily life of the slave.[19] (Gregg Crane notes that Emerson's portrait of the individual slave "resists visualization."[20]) Rather, by using language that straddles transcendent, historical design ("indispensable element of a new and coming civilization") and individual agency (the reference to Toussaint), Emerson illustrates how an action can be both divinely inspired and personally authored. In this way, his references to "the black man" work both as a historical, collective term for the race, and as a term that promotes the agency of the contemporary individual black man. Emerson's choice in his poem of the singular "brute" over "brutish millions" confers a similar double meaning.

This crucial element of black individual agency becomes clear in the poem's lines that immediately precede the final couplet:

> Or, if in thy heart he shine,
> Blends the starry fates with thine,
> Draws angels nigh to dwell with thee,
> And makes thy thought archangels be;

If the slave has the "deity" within him, then the external "angels" of God become the internal "archangels" of thought,

thereby blending providential design and human action. The slave then acts, in a process of self-awakening, to carry out the design of the "starry fates." The brute thereby turns himself into a man in the same way Emerson urges mankind to cast off its brutishness in "Self-Reliance." This is nonetheless a delicate intellectual balance, one which strains under the weight of attempting to marry divine and human will over the complicated issue of ending slavery.

The closing couplet—"Freedom's secret would'st thou know?—/ Right thou feelest rashly do"—does not resolve so much as encapsulate the poem's dilemmas. While technically the secret is conveyed by the spirit, via the deity, to the speaker—that is, Emerson goes to great lengths to protect himself rhetorically—the final line of the poem is also certainly the poet's advice to the slave and, boiled down, comes right out of "Self-Reliance": *if you feel it is right, act on it immediately*. The issue, of course, is that the advice is not boiled down, but rendered in language that is both archaic and syntactically complex, seriously undermining the urgency of its message to act on impulse. Similarly, the insistent repetition of the many forms of "thou" in the poem—including "thine," "thy," and "thee"—creates a biblical formality that underscores the distance between Emerson and the figure of the slave. The rhetorical self-consciousness of the poem undermines the unmediated message of the final line, and vice-versa.

■■■

II

By conflating individual agency with racial destiny, Emerson creates the incongruous figure of the self-reliant slave, capable of responding to an inspirational call to transcend his condition and free himself from his bonds. In the process, the slave aligns himself with inevitable historical forces and becomes, like Toussaint, an iconic symbol for his race. This romantic conception of a slave might easily be dismissed as the fantasy projection of a Harvard-educated transcendentalist; however, the figure of Frederick Douglass answers so precisely to Emerson's conception that it is difficult to imagine that

Emerson did not have him in mind as he wrote the poem, whose purpose as we have said was to support Douglass's newspaper. Douglass was the literate, poetry-reading ex-slave who had gained freedom and fame by acting spontaneously and "rashly" on his deepest intuition.

If Emerson did not know Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* (and he never mentions it in his journal), he certainly knew Douglass's story, even before the *Narrative* was published, and in fact shared the stage with Douglass when he, Emerson, gave his 1844 speech on "Emancipation in the West Indies." As Len Gougeon has recently noted, the passage quoted above which praises Toussaint L'Overture originated in a journal entry which similarly praises Douglass:[21]

> If the black man is feeble & not important to the existing races, not on a par with the best race, the black man must serve & be sold & exterminated. But if the black man carries in his bosom an indispensable element of a new & coming civilization, for the sake of that element no wrong nor strength nor circumstance can hurt him, he will survive & play his part. So now it seems to me that the arrival of such men as Toussaint if he is pure blood, *or of Douglass* if he is pure blood, outweighs all the English & American humanity. The Antislavery of the whole world is but dust in the balance, a poor squeamishness & nervousness[;] the might & the right is here. Here is the Anti-Slave. Here is Man; & if you have man, black or white is an insignificance. [22] (My emphasis)

Interestingly, Emerson chose to omit the Douglass reference in his 1844 speech, but if we put the journal entry and the speech side by side, Douglass now curiously informs the speech, even more so given his physical presence on the stage as Emerson spoke. (Perhaps it is possible that Emerson omitted the Douglass reference due to Douglass's very presence on the stage.) What is clear is that, as Emerson was first

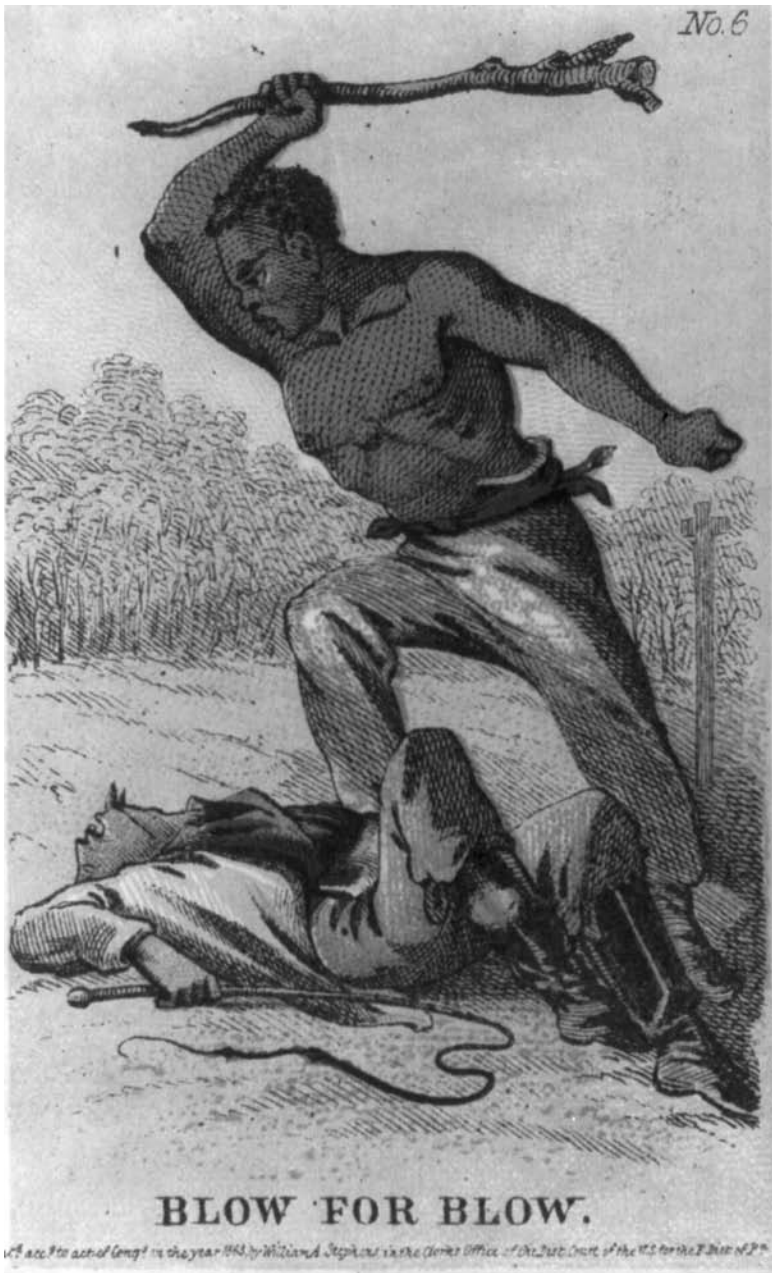
formulating the counterintuitive connection between slavery and self-reliance, he had Douglass in mind. The references to "pure blood" (omitted in the speech) are meant to suggest not genetic racial purity (Douglass was in fact of mixed blood), but rather an unalloyed dedication to the forces of history. In Emerson's view, Douglass is an example of the "Anti-Slave" who demonstrates how weak and ineffectual is the "humanity" of the abolitionist and antislavery movements. Emerson writes in the same journal entry: "The negro has saved himself, and the white man very patronizingly says, I have saved you."[23] In this vein, Emerson's race-based theory of history might strike us as insightfully progressive.

In both his 1845 *Narrative* and his 1853 novella, *The Heroic Slave,* Douglass presents repeated scenes of the Negro resolving to save himself; these scenes certainly anticipate—and perhaps even inspire—Emerson's advice in "On Freedom." (*The Heroic Slave* is possibly another work that Emerson knew as he wrote his poem. It was published in the 1853 volume of *Autographs for Freedom*, the same series that published "On Freedom" the following year.) Len Gougeon has argued that the intellectual careers of Emerson and Douglass proceeded on parallel tracks for decades, and here specifically, I would like to focus upon two Emersonian impulses in these works by Douglass: the first is the fantasy of the perfect speech-act, and the second is the translation of divine intuition into human agency on the subject of slavery.[24] While it is difficult to document an explicit pattern of borrowing or influence (either Douglass from Emerson or Emerson from Douglass), it is clear that both men were engaged by "the transformation of genius into practical power" (as Emerson says at the end of "Experience" [*Works*, 3:86]) as it applied to ending slavery.[25] While for Emerson this process begins with the transcendental poet and moves to the slave, resulting in a rather tortured and self-conscious application of abstract principle to a single cultural issue, in Douglass the process begins with the material conditions of the slave who, through acts of literacy and romantic communion with nature, absorbs currents of transcendental intuition and thereby *becomes* a kind of poet-activist, capable

of immense practical power, including freeing himself from slavery.

Like Emerson, Douglass fantasizes in his *Narrative* about the perfect speech-act that would snap the chains of slavery. He summarizes, for example, John Aikin's "Dialogue between a Master and Slave"—from Caleb Bingham's *The Columbian Orator*—in which a slave discourses so persuasively about his condition that his master frees him.[26] Bingham's philosophy in putting the volume together was to demonstrate, in the words of Granville Ganter, "that speech is an action."[27] Douglass describes, too, how Hugh Auld grants him deep insight into his own condition by refusing to allow Douglass to read. Auld's particular objection to reading—"It would forever unfit him to be a slave"—"sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought" (*Narrative*, 37). In this way, Auld's discourse is ironically the perfect speech-act, leading directly to Douglass's realization of the "pathway from slavery to freedom" and triggering a resolution to learn how to read (*Narrative*, 38). The power of literacy has been much written about in Douglass, and in slave narratives in general, but less examined in the *Narrative* is the coded capacity of words to unlock specific avenues of insight and to stir the reader/listener to new levels of commitment.[28] Douglass writes, for instance, of the talismanic power of "abolition," a word that becomes fused with its deed in his imagination (*Narrative*, 43). It's as if Douglass in his *Narrative* literalizes Emerson's metaphorical message in "The Poet": "With what joy I begin to read a poem, which I confide in as an inspiration! And now my chains are to be broken … " (*Works,* 3:12). While poetry proper does not serve as the primary mode of suasion in Douglass—although we should note he does cite "the slave's poet Whittier" and closes his *Narrative* with a poetic parody—Douglass shares Emerson's sensitivity to the profound power of language to quicken philosophical ascent as well as, in Douglass's case, practical resolution.

Douglass was of course renowned as the slave who had physically subdued his white overseer—the ultimate act of



Blow for Blow. Henry Louis Stephens, artist. Circa 1863. Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. LC-USZ62-53189.

agency—and by 1853, the story of his epic struggle with Covey had made its way into the popular mind by virtue of the great success of the 1845 *Narrative*. Elements of that confrontation, in fact, appear to seed Emerson's poem. Before his fight, Douglass, for example, meditates on his fate on a Sunday morning while perched on the "lofty banks" of Chesapeake Bay and watching the ships move freely about. With "no audience but the Almighty," Douglass addresses the ships in what is clearly meant to be seen as an alternative to a traditional Sunday prayer service. In language that mirrors Emerson's phrase, "draws angels nigh to dwell with thee," Douglass soliloquizes, "You are freedom's swift-winged angels that would fly round the world!" and translates this divine insight into a promise of human agency: "I will take to the water. This very bay shall yet bear me into freedom" (*Narrative*, 59). In this section of the *Narrative*, Douglass also repeatedly refers to himself as a "brute" as opposed to a "man." As if anticipating Emerson's transformation of "Brute and savage into man." Douglass calls himself "a man transformed into a brute!" at the hands of Covey (*Narrative*, 58). In his Chesapeake Bay soliloquy, he says, "O why was I born a man, of whom to make a brute!" (*Narrative,* 59). After remembering how Covey "had used me like a brute for sixth months," Douglass finally decides to fight him, thereby reversing the brutalizing process and encouraging the emergence of his manhood: "you have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (*Narrative*, 64, 60).

Douglass is surprised by his resolution to fight Covey—"from whence came the spirit I don't know"—but he is clearly summoning a spiritual courage that aligns him with an Emersonian sense of history and fate; in rising up against Covey, Douglass is spending some of Emerson's "unspent beauty of surprise." As he explains earlier in his story, when he gives thanks for being the only slave selected to be taken to Baltimore, Douglass had always had a sense of providential design and his own agency within it:

> I may be deemed superstitious, and even egotistical, as regarding this event as a special

> interposition of Divine Providence in my favor. But I should be false to the earliest sentiments of my soul, if I suppressed the opinion. *I prefer to be true to myself, even at the hazard of incurring the ridicule of others, rather than to be false, and incur my own abhorrence.* From my earliest recollection, I date the entertainment of a deep conviction that slavery would not always be able to hold me within its foul embrace; and in the darkest hours of my career in slavery, this living word of faith and spirit of hope departed not from me, but remained like ministering angels to cheer me through the gloom. The good spirit was from God, and to him I offer thanksgiving and praise. (*Narrative*, 36. My emphasis)

The italicized sentence reads as if it is straight out of Emerson's "Self-Reliance," published four years earlier than the *Narrative*, in 1841. Interestingly, however, it is surrounded by a testament to divine Providence, and, as in Emerson's poem, we have a parsing of divine and human agency on the issue of breaking the bonds of slavery. Douglass too has the "deity" within him, and once again, like Emerson's angels, Douglass's "ministering angels" are sent from God but take up residence in the individual slave.

Similarly, in Douglass's novella *The Heroic Slave*—published in 1853 just as Emerson was sketching out drafts of "On Freedom"—the protagonist Madison Washington repeatedly escapes the bonds of slavery and eventually inspires a slave revolt by aligning himself with cosmic forces of nature and history. John Stauffer has written about how Douglass developed an interest in Byron after his trip to England, Ireland, and Scotland (1845-47), and one senses a Byronic cast to the romantic imagery that evokes Washington's legacy at the start of the story.[29]

"Like a guiding star on a stormy night," Douglass writes, imagining Washington as as a spectral presence in the natural environment, "he is seen through the parted clouds and howling tempests; or, like a gray peak of a menacing rock on a

perilous coast, he is seen through the quivering flash of angry lightning, and he again disappears covered with mystery."[30] In the opening scene, very reminiscent of the Chesapeake Bay soliloquy, the white first-person narrator first glimpses Washington "near the edge of a dark pine forest"; the slave is talking himself into escaping by contrasting his state of bondage with the freedom of birds, snakes, and reptiles. Like Douglass, he calls himself a "brute," but vows to follow "the North Star" as a path toward freedom (*HS*, 176, 178). (We should note that *Frederick Douglass' Paper* was originally named *The North Star*, further underscoring the impulse to fuse word and deed.) Now occupying the position of both slave and poet, Washington, through the eloquence of his soliloquy, moves the white narrator to a new activism: "From this hour I am an abolitionist" (*HS*, 182). Washington's language—"His words were well chosen and his pronunciation equal to that of any schoolmaster," says the first mate of the *Creole*—stirs men (both black and white) to action (*HS*, 233). After his encounter with Washington, this first mate, for instance, vows never again to set foot on a slave ship. Like Emerson, Douglass indulges the fantasy of the perfect speech-act, and while Washington's words are often directed to his fellow slaves, Douglass also reverses the racial terms of "On Freedom," with the black man serving as "poet" and the white man becoming inspired to do what he can to stop slavery.

At other crucial points, too, Washington's decision to free himself is spurred by the contemplation of a sublime natural environment, one which encourages a sense of his own place in a larger cosmic design. For example, he is driven from his hiding spot in the woods by a fire of "savage magnificence," biblical in its force and one that provokes him to further acts of courage: "I ran alike from fire and from slavery" (*HS*,193, 194) When he is a chained slave aboard a slave ship, the environment of the sea inspires in him thoughts of freedom: "It is one thing," the first mate says after the mutiny, "to manage a company of slaves on a Virginia plantation, and quite another thing to quell an insurrection on the lonely billows of the Atlantic, where every breeze speaks of courage and liberty"

(*HS*, 228). Clearly Washington is blending the "starry fates" with his own personal fate and acting on a divinely inspired impulse. The final section of *The Heroic Slave* begins with a quotation from Byron's *Childe Harold*—"Know ye not/ Who would be free, *themselves* must strike the first blow"—which is directly consonant with Emerson's message to the slave on "On Freedom": "Right thou feelest, rashly do" (*HS*, 225).

■■■

In 1841, Emerson wrote his brother William about his fantasy of the perfect speech-act: "I have a dream sometimes of an eloquence … that drawing its resources from neither politics nor commerce but from thought, from the moral and intellectual life and duties of each man, shall startle and melt and exhalt the ear that heareth, as never the orators of the caucus or the parliament or the forum can."[31] Emerson exhibits the strain of applying this apolitical fantasy to an issue saturated in politics and commerce in "On Freedom." He declares he cannot express the secret of freedom, but then does express it, and thus runs the risk of being seen as the disengaged, philosophical idealist on the one hand, and the paternalistic white know-it-all on the other. Emerson, I believe, comprehends these risks and tests the limits of his own philosophy in this poem, much as he does in "Self-Reliance," where abolition is the whetstone on which he sharpens his transcendental philosophy. As Emerson was struggling to fit Platonic abstraction to the material conditions of slavery, Douglass was, in broad terms, undergoing his own *agon* which might be seen as an inversion of Emerson's. Having separated from William Lloyd Garrison over the issue of the mutability of the United States Constitution, and having started his own newspaper, Douglass sought to define the philosophical basis of his own liberation, and did so in terms that, at points, resemble transcendental philosophy. The full story of this transition does not take place until the 1855 publication of *My Bondage and My Freedom*, which begins with a quotation from poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge and provides a more cerebral (if less trenchant) account of Douglass's life. Thus, besides

being indicative of Emerson's conflicted stance toward the issue of slavery, "On Freedom" provides a compelling vantage point from which to view the trajectories of America's two most important 19th century public intellectuals as they cross and re-cross one another.

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NOTES

1. "Conversion" is the term used by Len Gougeon in "Emerson's Abolition Conversion." See *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform*, ed. T. Gregory Garvey (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 2001, 170-96. For Emerson's continuing radicalization, see Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform* (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1990).
2. *Autographs for Freedom*, ed. Julia Griffiths (Rochester: Alden, Beardsley & Co., 1854), 235-36. The volume first appeared in December, 1853. The final quotation mark is inadvertently omitted in the original text. The poem as it appears in *The Complete Works* is retitled "Freedom," and is slightly revised, with two additional lines at the end: "'Freedom's secret wilt thou know?—/ Counsel not with flesh and blood;/ Loiter not for cloak or food;/ Right thou feelest, rush to do.'" Emerson, *The Complete Works*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903-4), vol. 9, 198. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Works.* For a summary of the poem's composition history, see *The Poetry Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph H. Orth, et. al. (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1986), 796.
3. There have been two previous substantial discussions of this poem. Len Gougeon endorses the view put forward by Edward Emerson and thus, according to Gougeon, there remained (even in 1853) "a chasm between politics and poetry." In this way, Gougeon makes a distinction between Emerson's prose and his poetry. See *Virtue's Hero*, 189-90. Russ Castronovo reads the poem as Emerson's meditation on the difference between "the limitless tautology of freedom" as expressed in "The American Scholar" and the more contextualized, circumscribed definition of freedom as it might apply to the African American slave. The speaker's "liberatory impulse is desublimated in the encounter with 'the slave … who Should throb until he snapt his chain.'" Castronovo makes much of the fact that the poem is titled

"On Freedom" rather than "Freedom," without noting that the final version of the poem is indeed titled "Freedom." See *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Durham: Duke UP, 2001), 31-33. While Castronovo sees the poem as a "fumbling to endorse abolition," neither discussion examines theme of human agency in the poem.

4. Another poem in the collection, similarly interested in conveying the poet's inability to find appropriate language for freedom, illluminates the distinctive stance of Emerson's speaker. This is "A Wish" by abolitionist Caroline M. Kirkland:

> "Could I embody and unbosom now,
> That which is most within me;—could I wreak
> My thoughts upon expression, and thus throw
> Soul, heart, mind, passions, feelings strong or weak,
> All that I would have sought, and all I seek,
> Bear, know, and feel, and breathe,— into *one* word,
> And that one word were lightning"—
> I would speak it, not to crush the oppressor, but to melt the chains of slave and master, so that *both* should go free.

Setting aside the provocative image of a female speaker seeking to "embody and unbosom" her inmost essence, Kirkland's poem expresses both a poetic frustration and a tremendous urgency; it is a desperate wish to find the right word to break the chains of both master and slave. Emerson's speaker, by contrast, dwells much more in his own head, constructing the more wistful sentiment that he once wished he could write this kind of liberating verse. (*Autographs for Freedom*, 209)

5. *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* ed. Gilman et al. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, Belknap Press, 1960-82), 8: 231.
6. Most of the poem's lines are in catalectic trochaic meter, with seven-syllable lines opening and closing with a stressed syllable, as in Blake's "Tiger tiger, burning bright."
7. *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, ed. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995), 53.
8. For draft version, see *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, vol. 8, 231. Emerson's use of the term "over-soul" is developed in "The Over-Soul" (*Works*, vol. 2, 265-97). Emerson uses the term "world-spirit" in *Representative Men* (*Works,* vol.4, 185); he invokes the "over-god" in

his poem, "Ode Inscribed to W.H. Channing" (*Works,* vol. 9, 76-9), cited later in this essay.

9. *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, vol. 8, 231.
10. See Gougeon and Myerson, *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*; Gougeon, "Emerson's Abolition Conversion"; Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero*; Albert Von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998); Linck Johnson, "Reforming the Reformers: Emerson, Thoreau, and the Sunday Lectures at Amory Hall, Boston," *Emerson Society Quarterly* 37 (1991), 235-89; John Carlos Rowe, *At Emerson's Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997); Peter S. Field, "The Strange Career of Emerson and Race," *American Nineteenth Century History* 2:1 (Spring 2010), 1-32; Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: a Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989), 9-41.
11. Anita Patterson, *From Emerson to King: Democracy, Race, and the Politics of Protest* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997); Maurice Lee, *Slavery, Philosophy, and American Literature, 1830-60* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge UP, 2005), 169.
12. Philip L. Nicoloff, *Emerson on Race and History: An Examination of* English Traits (New York: Columbia UP, 1961), 126.
13. For a provocatively counter-intuitive reading of this passage from "Self-Reliance," see Martha Schoolman, "Emerson's Doctrine of Hatred," *Arizona Quarterly,* 63:2 (Summer 2007), 1-26.
14. See Laura Dassow Walls, *Emerson's Life in Science: The Culture of Truth* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003), 176-87; and Ian Finseth, "Evolution, Cosmopolitanism, and Emerson's Antislavery Politics," *American Literature*, 77:4 (December 2005), 729-759.
15. For an interesting reading of this speech in connection with "The Poet," see Michael T. Gilmore, *The War on Words: Slavery, Race, and Free Speech in American Literature* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2010), 54. Gilmore's interest in the "irresistibility of a divinely inspired vocabulary" overlaps with mine, but he does not consider the racialized discourse of the 1844 address.
16. *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, vol. 8, 216.
17. Another passage from *Representative Men* appears to speak directly to the slavery issue: "We see, now, events forced on which seem to retard or retrograde the civility of ages. But the world-spirit is a good swimmer, and storms and waves cannot drown him." *Works*, vol. 4, 185. In his Emancipation Proclamation address, Emerson put it this way: "Lib-

erty is a slow fruit. It comes, like religion, for short periods and in rare conditions, as if awaiting a culture of the race which shall make it organic and permanent." See *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, 129.

18. *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, 31.
19. A discussion of the question of human agency within a system of chattel bondage is well beyond the scope of this essay, but to establish some of the intellectual reference points on this issue, see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985); Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1972); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997).
20. Gregg Crane. *Race, Citizenship, and Law in American Literature* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002), 101.
21. Len Gougeon, "Militant Abolitionism: Douglass, Emerson, and the Rise of the Anti-Slave," *The New England Quarterly* 85:4 (December 2012), 629.
22. *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, vol.9, 125.
23. *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* vol. 9, 126.
24. Len Gougeon, "Militant Abolitionism," 622-657. Gougeon's invaluable article unearths a host of Emerson/Douglass intersections, both practical and intellectual, which are consonant with the thesis I am advancing here. He notes, for example, that the abolitionist lawyer, Ellis Gray Loring, had close ties to both Emerson and Douglass in this period. Emerson consulted Gray on specific details of his 1844 speech, and Gray arranged Douglass's final purchase from his "owner," Hugh Auld, in 1846. Our overall arguments, however, are slightly different. Where Gougeon sees nothing conflicted or counterintuitive about Emerson's conception of the self-reliant slave (or "anti-slave"), I see this conception as the product of an imagination being pulled in two different directions. Gougeon argues that both Douglass and Emerson together embraced an increasingly militant brand of abolitionism, and he discusses both Douglass's *Narrative* (1845) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). In my view, there is more of a chiastic relationship between the intellectual careers of Emerson and Douglass; that is, as Emerson the transcendentalist struggles to accommodate the material facts of slavery, Douglass the ex-slave struggles (in his own way) to accommodate the currents of transcendentalism.

25. In this regard, see Gregg Crane's discussion of "higher law" philosophy as it applies to both Emerson and Douglass: *Race, Citizenship, and Law in American Literature*, 87-130. While Crane does not discuss Emerson's poem, or the specific question of human agency, he is fascinated by what is fixed and what is fluid in the philosophies of both men, and sees a "cosmopolitan" mutability as central to their political visions.
26. Frederick Douglass. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 42. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Narrative*.
27. Granville Ganter, "The Active Virtue of *The Columbian Orator*," *The New England Quarterly* 70:3 (September 1997), 466.
28. For commentary on the importance of literacy and authorship in Douglass' *Narrative*, see for example Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the 'Racial' Self* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987), 98-124; Robert B. Stepto, "Narration, Authentication, and Authorial Control in Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* of 1845," in *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction*, ed. Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto (New York: Modern Language Association, 1978), 178-191; Wilson J. Moses, "Writing Freely? Frederick Douglass and the Constraints of Racialized Writing," in *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Cambridge UP, 1990), 66-83; John Carlos Rowe, *At Emerson's Tomb*, 109-112. For the importance of literacy to the slave narrative, see for example James Olney, "'I was born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," in *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), 148-74; William Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The first Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1986).
29. John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001), 60-1.
30. Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, *Autographs for Freedom*, ed. Julia Griffiths (Cleveland: John P. Jewett and Co., 1853), 175. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *HS*.
31. *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1836-41*, ed. Ralph Rusk and Eleanor Tilton (New York: Columbia UP, 1939-95), 2:460. Maurice Lee cites this letter in his *Slavery, Philosophy, and American Literature*, 174.