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# From Quietism to Quiet Politics: Inheriting Emerson's Antislavery Testimony

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**Abstract:**

While Ralph Waldo Emerson has been increasingly acknowledged as an American thinker influential in the evolution of nineteenth-century philosophy, his essays have largely failed to escape the charges of quietism and political apathy bestowed upon them in his lifetime. Yet if Emerson insisted on the importance of silence to the antislavery movement, it was perhaps due to his theory that one's deepest obligations become involuntarily part of the self and thus refuse to withstand representation in direct speech. My article reads Emerson's writing in this light, suggesting more broadly that the common notion that silence and politics are antithetical be reconsidered with regard to the possibility that what constitutes political speech need not be explicit — or even vocal.

**Keywords:** Emerson, testimony, silence, witness, antislavery, quietism, American literature

In sketching ideas for his first abolitionist address, Ralph Waldo Emerson asks in his journal, 'Does not he do more to abolish Slavery who works all day steadily in his garden, than he who goes to the abolition meeting & makes a speech?'<sup>1</sup> The logic of his inquiry is sound: if the people of Concord grew their own food, they would decrease the demand for slave-produced goods and therefore slow the machinery of the slave economy. But the thought is troubling, too, for it is in preparing to make a speech that Emerson wonders about the productivity of his making a speech — an impulse that finds its way into the opening of his address, where he proposes that with regard to abolitionism, 'if one man cannot speak, ten others can; and whether by the wisdom of its friends, or by the folly of the adversaries; by speech and by silence; by doing and by omitting to do, it goes forward.'<sup>2</sup>

Declaiming even in his address the value of his participation is the kind of gesture that has long branded Emerson a quietist.<sup>3</sup> Even scholars who, more recently, have attempted to expose his investment

in politics have had to contend with the reputation and the substance of his reluctance to speak for the movement.<sup>4</sup> But his address raises questions beyond his willingness to be aligned with a cause or the extent of his involvement. Speaking, he is not the one man who cannot speak; yet he mentions that man and refers throughout the address to testimony borne apart from human speech. I want to suggest that this spoken inclusion of the unspoken reflects not a quietism by default (or by idealist design) but precisely a politics of quiet. Quiet for Emerson has a particular and central relevance to the process of testifying and becoming politically responsible, one that may be traced through his early lecture on George Fox, his First-Series essays and his addresses ‘for the cause’. Aligned with his insistence on receptive thinking, morality dictated by singular experience and speech exceeding the verbal, the value of quiet reorients the expectation that ‘moral suasion’ proceeds from argumentative coercion, positing instead a politics requiring no vocal apologetics.<sup>5</sup>

*A shift from acquiring proof to listening to the wind*

Emerson’s address on the tenth anniversary of British emancipation is not, strictly speaking, his first speech with a specifically antislavery mandate, but it is the one that has fully survived in manuscript form.<sup>6</sup> Delivered on 1 August 1844, it demonstrates, for the Women’s Antislavery Society of Concord as well as for contemporary scholars, Emerson’s willingness to engage abolitionist publications, to blatantly oppose the increasing power of southerners over suspected fugitives and to throw his influential weight toward the assertion that antislavery sentiment would, eventually, have the day. The piece does not wholly consist in direct accusation, however. It repeatedly shies away from argumentation: in addition to including silence as a means for the movement’s progression, it expresses some of its most startling images as possibilities rather than factual occurrences, and it concludes with emphasis on the hopeful future of abstractions such as ‘Intellect’ and the ‘sentiment of Right’ (AS, 33). As Oliver Wendell Holmes’s biography of Emerson summarizes, the speech was appropriate but also lacking: ‘This discourse would not have satisfied the Abolitionists. It was too general in its propositions, full of humane and generous sentiments, but not looking to their extreme and immediate method of action.’<sup>7</sup>

The combination of proclamation and indirection sets Emerson’s Address apart from the techniques that marked the movement because

he diverges from the expectation that he personally speaks for the slaves, the fugitives, or the abolitionists. Upon greeting his audience, he immediately excuses his aptitude: 'I might well hesitate, coming from other studies, and without the smallest claim to be a special laborer in this work of humanity.' (AS, 7) He then replaces his less relevant voice with the power of the movement's undergirding principle, claiming 'Therefore I will speak, — or, not I, but the might of liberty in my weakness.' (AS, 7)

Ceding one's own voice was an introductory gesture common to the texts Emerson consulted for his lecture. Yet Thomas Clarkson in *History of the Abolition of the Slave-Trade* and James Thome and Horace Kimball in *Emancipation in the West Indies: A Six Month's Tour in Antigua, Barbadoes, and Jamaica, in the Year 1837* each exchange their right of authorship for voices more intimate with the experience of slavery and emancipation, rather than presuming to step aside for liberty itself. For example, Clarkson's book begins by situating the history to be recounted in the political and social context of the British West Indies before emancipation was effected. '[L]et us suppose ourselves on the Continent', he writes, to 'see' slavery as it is practised there. He then produces a series of sketches, one of which focuses the reader's attention on an imagined but plausible slave woman who, although legally barred from speaking, thereby takes the stage: 'Who is that wretched woman, whom we discover under that noble tree, wringing her hands, and beating her breast, as if in the agonies of despair?'<sup>8</sup>

Clarkson's gesture frames his work as a testimony on behalf of the oppressed, and what follows includes several more literal testimonies through his reiteration of Parliamentary debates. Thome and Kimball even more pointedly circumscribe their duty to present the testimony of others. Setting out to 'conclusively prove' to Americans the success of emancipation in the British colonies,<sup>9</sup> the authors had traveled to collect hundreds of stories, opinions and records on the three islands, and they discerned amid the many accounts a series of propositions, such as 'Immediate abolition went into operation peaceably' (147), to methodically make their point. The text's central section, 'Facts and Testimony', presents quotations and documentation from Antigua to establish 'beyond the power of dispute or cavil' (vi) the benefit of emancipation. It is formatted as an exhaustive listing of propositions, each one validated by an exhaustive listing of testimonial proof.

The common technique of Clarkson, Thome and Kimball reflects the centrality of the presentation of testimony to the abolitionist

movement. Because slaves were excluded from legally testifying, they were understood to depend on northern allies to speak on record.<sup>10</sup> While Massachusetts state law allowed alleged fugitive slaves a writ of habeas corpus and thus trial before a judge,<sup>11</sup> slaves' testimony was generally absent from everyday life in Concord. It remained for the abolitionists to make their speech available — or at least to present an image of how their speech could be made available, and how the nation would change as a result. The movement gained power when their presentations were sufficiently convincing, as is clear from William Lloyd Garrison's excitement at identifying Frederick Douglass in 1841, for the escapee could personally give 'a powerful impetus' to the movement by revealing 'SLAVERY AS IT IS'.<sup>12</sup> (Six years after Emerson's Address, the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, which federally refused to admit slave testimony as evidence in alleged fugitive cases, would reprise the urgency of this issue.)

To let Frederick Douglass speak — as he did with Emerson in August 1844 — is to show that, given the chance, slaves could be valuable citizens; and letting the planters of Antigua speak works to demonstrate that when accorded the power of legal speech, slaves would use it responsibly. Emerson's personification of liberty seems, by comparison, far less engaging and effective. Yet his wording is not accidental. While Emerson notes of Thome and Kimball's accounts of the peaceable transition from slavery to abolition that he had 'never read anything in history more touching' (*AS*, 15), his quotation of their work begins to reveal his methodical divergence from their belief in the function of testimony. Whereas they write, 'We were also informed by the planters and missionaries in every part of the island that there was not a single dance known of, either day or night, nor so much as a fiddle played' (147), Emerson summarizes, 'Throughout the island, there was not a single dance known of, either day or night, nor so much as a fiddle played.' (*AS*, 16)

Although Emerson's revision may appear slight, it resonates with his specific suggestions elsewhere in the Address that the most damning testimony does not spread through the authorized speech of a single individual. In marked contrast to his would-be abolitionist colleagues, at least six times, descriptions of the British movement's growth that seem dependent upon a first-person utterance are skewed, so that information or sentiment is publicized without the human voice.<sup>13</sup>

For instance, when he refers to those who made known the extent of slavery's horror, he never figures them as actually speaking in order

to spread antislavery sentiment. After narrating the atrocities that a witness to slavery might behold, he remarks,

Well, so it happened; a good man or woman, a country-boy or girl, it would so fall out, once in a while saw these injuries, and had the indiscretion to tell of them. The horrid story ran and flew; the winds blew it all over the world (. . .). It became plain to all men, the more this business was looked into, that the crimes and cruelties of the slave-traders and slave-owners could not be overstated. (AS, 10)

It is 'the horrid story' which runs and flies; 'the winds' that blow it all over the world and that work to make it 'plain to all men' — not the pronouncement of the 'good man or woman'. The witness is crucial for beginning a chain through which slavery is publicized, but her testimony becomes valuable on its own, as if the words of the witness become mobilized without the witness herself.

Thus what it means for liberty to speak is, to some extent, that Emerson not; or, more precisely, that the wind and story are given the power to fly beyond the arrangement of the speechmaker's words. In other words, Emerson may originate a process of testifying, but he does not imagine that what he articulates transports a sentiment directly to his audience's ears. If they find themselves touched, the situation suddenly 'made plain', it will be due to the delivery of 'the wind' or something similarly depersonalized — not to Emerson's way with words.

Yet I want to argue that this is not because Emerson does not believe that testimony is key to the movement's success. In the context of his other writings, testimony is precisely what initiates a major moral shift, even as it occurs without a convincing speaker, without argument and, sometimes, without words. In particular, his early lecture on George Fox begins to sketch a concept of testimony that remains unauthorized, and the First-Series essay 'Spiritual Laws' expands the idea in such a way that makes clear why his appreciation for what Thome and Kimball published necessitated his turning away from their method.

### *Speaking truthfully and receiving Advice*

Emerson's attraction to George Fox stems in part from the early Quaker's refusal to swear before the law.<sup>14</sup> Emerson credits him and his friends for having 'first pointed the attention of men to the mischief of

extrajudicial oaths, and to the ethical question of the expediency of an oath' (182). Although Emerson does not detail why Fox understood the courtroom oaths that he repeatedly refused to take as 'extrajudicial' or inexpedient, a look at his source texts reveals that the issue at hand is precisely that of testifying truthfully.

The Quaker injunction against pronouncing judicial oaths derives from a rigid adherence to Matthew 5:34, in which Jesus says, 'I say unto you, Swear not at all', an admonition that has more liberally been read as a prohibition of profane swearing that yet permits the 'I do solemnly swear...' of the courtroom. Yet for the Quakers, swearing represents an attempt to certify the truth above and beyond their commitment to always speaking it. According to William Penn's Preface to George Fox's journal, which Emerson consulted, Quakers are 'under the *Tye and Bond of Truth in themselves*', so that 'there was both no Necessity for an *Oath*, and it would be a *Reproach* to their Christian Veracity to *Assure* their *Truth* by such an Extraordinary way of Speaking.'<sup>15</sup> As Emerson continued to read the journal, he would have encountered much drama as a result of Fox's unwillingness to speak so extraordinarily: he repeatedly, and with considerable wit, stymies the judges trying him for disturbance, stunning audiences and halting the court proceedings as a result.<sup>16</sup>

The discussion of oath-taking included in Emerson's other major source, however, William Sewell's *The History of the Rise, Progress and Increase of the People Called Quakers*, explains that the Quakers finally did not seek exclusion from the justice system, as Fox had seemed to demonstrate. In fact, when they petitioned Parliament in 1694 to be 'relieved' of oath-taking, it was precisely in order that they might be included in the exercise of law.<sup>17</sup> By removing the objectionable requisite oath, they argued, the government might have the benefit of Quaker testimony on a variety of issues: 'For the frequent suits that are brought against the Quakers', but also with regard to cases of 'unnatural deaths', 'trespass or felony, &c' (514) for which they might serve as witnesses. The oath was a problem for the Quakers because it obfuscated the possibility of their testifying, but refusing to swear was by no means equivalent to refusing to testify; rather, they sought, pleadingly, the latter privilege.

Thus the 'ethical question' identified by Emerson is whether one should be required to swear to the truthfulness of speech before testifying — before, in other words, speaking truthfully. The courtroom oath is 'extrajudicial' because it asks for a speech in excess

of the Quaker's constant obligation to speak justly, in the interest of justice and truth, and it is inexpedient because it delays the witness from offering what he or she has to say.

The Quaker testimony in which Emerson is interested proceeds from an ideal of being bound to the truth as soon as one encounters it, without any certification to bolster its believability.<sup>18</sup> For Fox, the truth was derived by following the voice of Christ as he heard it rather than as it was preached.<sup>19</sup> Yet while Christ is, as might be expected, liberally named as the source of truth in the journal and the *History*, Emerson figures Fox as determined to listen 'to himself only' (*EL*, 169); Emerson also insists on the centrality of the revelations being occasioned 'in orchards, in lonesome places, and by the wayside' (*EL*, 170), although Fox refers to such unpeopled sites in order to oppose them to the comfort he receives from the voice of Christ. Again, these revisions are telling, for they accept the Quaker refusal to swear only when its very underwriting premiss, the authority of Jesus in Matthew, is exchanged for a listening to the self in lonesome places. Beginning to sketch the self of 'Self-Reliance', Emerson describes Fox's revelations in terms of an obligation to the truth that issues from a voice both within and beyond the self:

All [of Fox's doctrines] are symbols or parables of the fact that an infallible Adviser dwells in every heart very silently, very peacefully, not obtruding his counsel, but to the ear sharpened by faith these intimations become words of fate, not one falls to the ground. What is made known to us by this Teacher is attended by a conviction which the opinions of all mankind could not shake and which the opinions of all mankind could not confirm. (*EL*, 172)

The truthfulness at the core of Quaker testimony is, Emerson suggests, obliged not explicitly by God but by an 'Adviser' who 'dwells in every heart' yet exists only 'very silently', not in recordable speech. If, like Fox, one can listen attentively to that Adviser's unarticulated words, one cannot help but become 'unshakably' convinced of their truth and, presumably, the responsibility to speak for and of them.<sup>20</sup> But this truth is unshakable to the precise extent that it is unconfirmable, which means that the truthfulness of the truth may not be assessed by the authority of the court or the collection of evidence. It may not be confirmed by any outside body. As a result, on the record is as true as off, and testifying not only has very little to do with the oath, but, indeed, with accounts that might affirm the witness's integrity.



*Testifying by constraint*

By the time Emerson writes ‘Spiritual Laws’, he no longer attends to the issue of the oath or the legal system.<sup>21</sup> But as his title indicates, he continues to attend to truths that are binding and obligatory even when maintained by Advisers rather than judges.

To follow such a progression is to understand ‘Spiritual Laws’ as tracing the question of how capital-a Advice — unshakable as it is unconfirmable — comes to be known as a law that an individual is obligated to obey. If what marks the law as spiritual is its dwelling, like Fox’s Adviser, ‘in a silent thought’ (*E*, 321) rather than in the archive of the bible or juridical proceedings,<sup>22</sup> then at stake in writing about spiritual laws is understanding how they come to be read; in the context of the metaphor from the Address, the issue is how the winds deliver them to a comprehending listener.

Hence while the essay offers examples of spiritual laws, it seems fundamentally concerned with noting the process by which we understand them, rather than with creating a comprehensive directory of what they are. Emerson is clear that there are always more of them than we know: ‘The simplicity of nature is not that which may be easily read, but is inexhaustible. The last analysis can no wise be made’ (*E*, 308). As a result, the task of his essay is to record in general how analyses may be progressively and successively formed. Thus in listing some specific laws — ‘things fall’ (*E*, 308); ‘Each man has his own vocation’ (*E*, 310); ‘The man may teach by doing, and not otherwise’ (*E*, 316) — he always attends to how they come to recommend themselves. In the case of falling, we may ‘draw a lesson from nature’; each man’s vocation is figured as a matter of heeding a ‘calling’ and silent invitation; teaching is a matter of making something known by bringing the pupil ‘into the same state or principle in which you are’ (*E*, 308, 310, 316).

Emerson’s insistence on how, as well as what, spiritual laws say suggests that they obey their own law: despite eluding an archival code, they speak. Although no human pronunciation causes them to be effected — they ‘execute themselves’ (*E*, 307) — such execution amounts to making themselves known, to articulation. The exercise of the laws is coterminous with their expression; to read them is to become aware of their truth. In contrast to the law that dictates via documentary writing, and that requires oaths and testimonies to proceed (and to convict), spiritual laws become legible because they themselves testify.

Emerson explicitly connects spiritual laws to testimony toward the end of the essay. 'These', he writes of all the examples of laws he has heretofore named,

are the demonstrations in a few particulars of the genius of nature; they show the direction of the stream. But the stream is blood; every drop is alive. Truth has not single victories; all things are its organs, — not only dust and stones, but errors and lies. The laws of disease, physicians say, are as beautiful as the laws of health. Our philosophy is affirmative, and readily accepts the testimony of negative facts, as every shadow points to the sun. By a divine necessity, every fact in nature is constrained to offer its testimony. (*E*, 318)

The 'few particulars' that Emerson has offered in the course of the essay 'show the direction of the stream', which is to say that they show that the stream flows in the way of showing the truth in all its forms. The 'divine necessity', the spiritual law of spiritual laws, is that 'every fact in nature is constrained to offer its testimony', and to offer it each time as a victory of truth.

This last idea summarizes the philosophy of spiritual laws that Emerson has already offered. Yet it also significantly shifts the purview of truth, which may have seemed still to be confided by an Adviser. The testimony of spiritual laws does not emerge only in one's heart, or in the 'lonesome places' sought by Fox, precisely because the heart and the place themselves are now conceived as testifying. 'All things' are the organs of truth: dust, stones, errors, lies, the laws of disease, a shadow — when he writes that 'every fact' testifies, Emerson means not only the principles he has discerned but, precisely, 'all things'. Truth is no longer held within the confines of advice, which suggests a pointed recommendation; it comes from everywhere and speaks from everything. One need not witness a ripe fruit falling to read a spiritual law (*E*, 308); growing, hanging on the tree, rotting on the ground — at each point the fruit (and the flower, and the tree, and the ground) testifies.

To say that every fact testifies may seem to be a colloquialism which demands no more attention than a note in passing: it is common to mention that *x* testifies to *y* in the sense that a falling apple testifies to the the law of gravity, such that the 'evidence' never asks for further consideration. Yet because Emerson associates this testimony with the Truth undergirding spiritual laws, one becomes irrevocably obliged to what the apple conveys: its truth is unshakable, and so one must be as attentive to the apple and its testimony as Fox was to the word of God.

But of course at this point the word of God no longer exists as Fox would have understood it. Once Emerson posits that divine constraint is the requirement to testify, the divine does not certify any narrative or morality: to act according to divinity is not to perform anything in particular, it is only to offer testimony. Similarly, because all things are the organs of truth — ‘not only dust and stones, but errors and lies’ — what is true does not derive from sorting competing claims but is fundamentally the fact of being an organ. Whereas Thome and Kimball imagined that they were amassing facts in order to convince the public of the truth of emancipation’s benefit, Emerson implicitly proposes that a fact only ever proves itself. If emancipation is beneficial, he would counter, its value is not proven by testimony; the fact that it testifies comprises its worldly benefit.

### *Everyday obligations*

Hence it becomes at best difficult and at worst senseless to compare the arguments of political platforms or to favor one religion over another. But the challenge to living with testifying dust and stones exceeds even these wholesale institutional critiques, precisely because all of the facts that testify are all of the things among which one lives. It is not only a pro-emancipation text or a theological treatise that vies for one’s attention, but also and always the claims of the rotting apple or the laws of disease. The fact that these cannot be comparatively evaluated underscores the point that all things testify by obliging one to their truth, rather than by providing information for further contemplation.

In this way, ‘Spiritual Laws’ may be read as revising Emerson’s insistence in ‘The American Scholar’ on the import of the everyday. In the earlier address, ‘all things’ made meaning available, but did not necessarily require one’s attention. Hence the scholar is advised to *seek* significance in the prosaic:

The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and gait of the body; — show me the ultimate reason of these matters; show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking, as always it does lurk in these suburbs and extremities of nature; let me see every trifle bristling with the polarity that ranges it instantly on an eternal law (...). (*E*, 69)

What Emerson asks to be shown here is what is in ‘Spiritual Laws’ always showing, showing before and beyond any request. Neither meal

nor milk nor ballad would stand to be approached; they already would have claimed the scholar before he could choose to study them.

Of course, one does not become immediately obliged to all of the potentially testifying things available at any given moment. But man cannot select, among the various facts of the everyday, which truth to follow, because their testimonial aspect turns him from the witness, the would-be subject, into their object. Certain things claim him: man 'is like one of those booms which are set out from the shore on rivers to catch driftwood, or like the loadstone amongst splinters of steel. Those facts, words, persons, which dwell in his memory without his being able to say why, remain, because they have a relation to him not less real for being as yet unapprehended' (*E*, 312). When an everyday fact testifies, it exceeds the will of its witness, and it also becomes part of his being without granting him a separate perspective from which to understand it. Hence it is perhaps accurate to say that neither is the subject or the object of the other; at the right moment, the man catches, the milk dwells, and the two become a physical and mental mass.

This is not to suggest that the milk in the pan becomes a cartoonish appendage to the man's brain. It is, however, to take Emerson seriously when he writes, 'A man is a method, a progressive arrangement; a selecting principle, gathering his like to him, wherever he goes.' (*E*, 311) What Emerson means to denote by 'man' is not a single human body or even a soul, but the 'method' or 'principle' that works as a 'loadstone', the impulse that attracts 'facts, words, persons' and subsequently thinks and acts through their influence. What is attracted immediately becomes part of what attracts, expanding but also continuously changing the being of the man. In the instance of the milk, once its testimony has impressed itself upon the man, it forever changes him: he cannot think or act without the sense of its meaning.

To figure this dynamic in terms of Emerson's experience reading Thome and Kimball, all that he had read and thought and seen and heard up until that point allowed their account of 1 August 1834 to testify to him; and once it touched him, it became irrevocably a seamless part of how he thought and spoke about the world. Yet this summary belies the complexity that Emerson's theory contains. On the one hand, Emerson becomes himself a testifying 'fact': like the dust and stones, errors and lies, 'A man passes for that he is worth. What he is engraves itself on his face, on his form, on his fortunes, in letters of light. Concealment avails him nothing; boasting nothing. There is confession in the glances of our eyes; in our smiles; in salutations; and

the grasp of hands.' (*E*, 319) Man is as divinely constrained as any other fact, thing, principle, or law to offer his testimony.

On the other hand, by virtue of this constraint, Emerson has no rational will that would isolate the experience of being touched in order to speak about it. What has touched him does not exist as an object of his attention to be discretely identified and presented at will; he cannot 'say why' or account for it any more than he can explain the totality of his being in the world. If, at the same time, he cannot help but confess his acts of witness, this is not because he speaks *about* the experience but as a result of its being unconcealably engraved on his face and behavior. In short, he is not a witness who testifies; becoming a witness entails at the same time becoming a testimony. The formative distinction that would allow one to act as a witness, to deliver testimony on command, has vanished.<sup>23</sup>

One way to summarize Emerson's rethinking of what it means to testify would be to say that he makes it independent of the act of representing an event. Instead of the attempt to recreate a past experience for a listener, testifying becomes one's way of being, a showing of self that includes what one has experienced without figuring the past as a series of recountable occurrences.<sup>24</sup> In fact, for such an occurrence to be isolated and represented would be for it to be wrenched from the amalgamation of thinking and acting that the man has become: it would be made into an object of the self, rather than acknowledged as an inseparable component of the self's being. As a result, what would be reproduced would be, precisely, a representation or an image of testimony, rather than a testimony itself.<sup>25</sup>

In understanding Emerson to depart from representing the past, I follow the impulse of several scholars.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps most pointedly, Sharon Cameron's analysis of 'Experience' explains the difficulty of translating what one has experienced into a neat succession of remembered events. She writes, '[D]espite the mind's efforts to wrestle phenomena into comprehensible shape, to ascribe meanings to experience in which it can believe, our thoughts lose their grip. We betray our convictions, or they betray us.'<sup>27</sup> To consider her formulation in the register of testimony, if something that has testified and become part of one is 'wrestled' into shape, its power as an undergirding conviction is betrayed; whereas if one never attempts such wrestling, the body and behavior speak in spite of the withholding. Yet Cameron's use of the verb 'betray' deserves further attention, for it names what is at stake in Emerson's 'Address on the Emancipation' once he shifts testimony from a narration to a constant

emission. If he speaks of the testimony that touched him, he sacrifices conviction for demonstration; if he does not refer to it, it will betray his willful omission. Moreover, such testimony will in turn seem to betray his promise to speak for the movement; his audience will likely feel themselves betrayed as they listen to a thinking inflected by but not about emancipation.

In short, Cameron's formulation figures a paradox that destines Emerson's Address to fail. While he suggests in 'Spiritual Laws' that one may testify by sleeping — 'Human character evermore publishes itself. If you act, you show character; if you sit still, if you sleep, you show it' (*E*, 318) — napping on the podium would hardly raise Emerson's political profile.

Crucially, the situation in which Emerson does not objectify what has testified to him is not a matter of reluctance. As the body is already testifying without the approbation of the will, the issue is rather that one cannot *not* want to testify anymore than one can want to testify.

*Speaking of what may or may not be seen*

Emerson's struggle to betray neither what he has witnessed nor his commitment to promoting the urgency of abolitionism resonates in his rhetorical formulations throughout the Address. That he earnestly wishes that more Americans would witness the situation of the slave and the necessity of emancipation is as clearly discernible as his move away from argument and evidence as strategies for doing so.

When Emerson offers examples of the horrific treatments undergone by slaves, derived from Clarkson (Vol. 2, 247–8, 269), he does so vividly, but he also emphasizes the distance between his audience and the images placed before them. 'If we saw the whip applied to old men', he begins,

to tender women; and, undeniably, though I shrink to say so, — pregnant women set in the treadmill for refusing to work, when, not they, but the eternal law of animal nature refused to work; — if we saw men's backs flayed with cowhides, and 'hot rum poured on, superinduced with brine or pickle, rubbed in with a cornhusk, in the scorching heat of the sun'; — if we saw the runaways hunted with blood-hounds into swamps and hills; and, in cases of passion, a planter throwing his negro into a copper of boiling cane-juice; — if we saw these things with eyes, we too should wince. They are not pleasant sights. (*AS*, 10)

Although the list of abuses is starkly — if shrinkingly — presented, Emerson's systematic use of the conditional 'if. . .' underscores the fact

that no one in his Concord audience is likely to have come very close to observing them. Indeed, his concluding ‘if we saw these things with eyes’ suggests that however his audience may be imagining the events, they lack a fundamental confrontation with them — a physical confrontation, an act of witness. Signaled by an involuntary shudder or ‘wince’, the experience of watching plantation life would change the body, the structure and the thinking of the audience members. Wincing would reveal that representing these scenes in words — ‘They are not pleasant sights’ — departs significantly from bearing their testimony.

Yet later in the Address Emerson seems to attempt to represent his own experience of seeing *with eyes*. In a narration of the Parliamentary actions that led to British emancipation, he pauses to explain what made his research of this success difficult:

Forgive me, fellow citizens, if I own to you, that in the last few days that my attention has been occupied with this history, I have not been able to read a page of it, without the most painful comparisons (. . .). I could not keep my imagination on those agreeable figures, for other images that intruded on me. I could not see the great vision of the patriots and senators who have adopted the slave’s cause: — they turned their backs on me. No: I see other pictures — of mean men: I see very poor, very ill-clothed, very ignorant men, not surrounded by happy friends, — to be plain, — poor black men of obscure employment as mariners, cooks, stewards, in ships, yet citizens of this our Commonwealth of Massachusetts, — freeborn as we, — whom the slave-laws of the States of South Carolina, Georgia, and Louisiana, have arrested in the vessels in which they visited those ports, and shut up in jails so long as the vessel remained in port, with the stringent addition, that if the shipmaster fails to pay the costs of this official arrest, and the board in jail, these citizens are to be sold for slaves, to pay that expense. This man, these men, I see, and no law to save them. (*AS*, 23–4)

In contrast to the series of images that one might see upon traveling south, here the repetition is ‘I see’, and presumably with eyes, for the ‘intrusion’ renders Emerson unable to imagine what is described in the book that is literally before him. This seeing is a not a direct result of reading Clarkson’s account, even the pages of abuses extracted above; nor has Emerson actually traveled to South Carolina to see the legally free and yet legally jailed ‘poor black men’. Indeed, the point is that neither I nor he can account for the process by which Emerson started seeing them — and once started, could not stop seeing, to the extent that he began to see their plight with them.<sup>28</sup> Due to the amalgamation of ‘facts, words, persons’ he had become at that moment, they intruded

upon him, and they did not go away, for having testified to Emerson, they became indissociable from his body, his thinking and his politics. Hence it is they who bring him to demand not sympathy or pleasantries but redress: 'If such a damnable outrage can be committed on the person of a citizen with impunity, let the Governor break the broad seal of the State (. . .). If the State has no power to defend its own people in its own shipping, because it has delegated that power to the Federal Government, has it no representation in the Federal Government?' (*AS*, 24).

In accounting for what intruded upon him, Emerson lets his audience see what he has witnessed. But they only do so without eyes, as it were, for as soon as Emerson creates an image out of his past experience he isolates what retains its import only insofar as it has become inseparable from him. Even his own iteration is not an act of bearing witness, for he cannot force himself to behold again what has unexpectedly testified to him. Instead, he to some extent betrays his fundamental conviction; as he writes in 'Intellect', he deflates its truthfulness when he aestheticizes it: 'the moment we cease to report, and attempt to correct and contrive, it is not truth.' (*E*, 419) His truth becomes out-standing from his speech because it stands within him at every moment.<sup>29</sup>

This is not to say that there is no truth in Emerson's speech, or that his audience will remain untouched by the images from Clarkson's text or his own mind. Yet if they are so touched — if they bear witness, if they become themselves abolitionist testimony — they will, in turn, be without recourse to make others see with eyes what they have seen. Abolitionism would have become their conviction only to elude the representational speech expected to convince.

Thus Emerson can no more effect a 'convincing' argument than he could anticipate which moment would find any particular audience member suddenly beholden to the suffering of slaves, fugitives, or free blacks. It might be that, walking home from the lecture, the image of a pregnant woman set in the treadmill for refusing to work 'intrudes' upon someone, so that he sees it and winces. Or it might be the phrase 'The sugar they raised was excellent: nobody tasted blood in it' that intrudes (*AS*, 20), or a phrase without the least reference to blood. None would be explicable in hindsight, because they would have ceased to be objects, becoming instead aspects of the ever-developing history and activity of the person to whom they testified and with whom they now revolt against injustice.

In contrast to Thome and Kimball's investment in the potential of 'established facts' from which 'reason cannot fail to make its



inferences' (vi), Emerson's thinking divorces the value of his speech from its power to convince. Any effect he has on his audience derives not from his wielding of power, but from the mutual power of attraction between their 'loadstones' and his ideas. Thus when he turns at the conclusion of the Address to 'The Intellect', 'The sentiment of Right', 'Freedom' and 'The Power', it signifies the hope that the strength of these principles, separated from argument, may have found new dwellings. The capital-letter abstraction purposely summarizes the potential end result of so many testimonies resulting from so many verbal constructions. Emerson cannot take personal credit for effecting such shifts; he offers his eloquence to assist the cause, but it is the principles rather than the proffered facts that will have done the work. To return to his formulation quoted earlier, even when inspired by his speech, the testimony of liberty happens as the work of the wind rather than the agitated individual.

No wonder, then, that Emerson's contemporaries and many of his critics thought and think him a quietist. His tactic is in fact to 'quiet' his words and appearance in order to allow his true character to testify with the integrity that it would have if he sat still or slept. Abolitionism 'goes forward' 'by speech and by silence' because it is in silence that one peacefully, yet ardently, exposes one's commitment to virtue — Right, Freedom, Power — and lets what cannot be spoken speak.

The word quiet is indeed particularly apt, for although Emerson's approach is not identical to a quietist passivity, it does resonate with the Latin *quiesco*, from which 'quiet' is derived. *Quiesco* denotes a rest or repose, but it is distinct from the noiselessness associated with silence, designated by *sileo*. As a verb, *quiescere* may mean 'to suffer or allow quietly, to peaceably permit a thing to be done' or 'to make a pause in speaking'.<sup>30</sup> In both senses, what is connoted is not an action dissociated from doing or speaking, but rather the recognizable instance of a suffering or pause within, and yet interrupting, the flow of agency and speech. The related uses of the term to indicate land lying fallow or the ocean without waves<sup>31</sup> similarly emphasize a repose that breaks with the expected state of things without fundamentally changing their essence.

Emerson's quiet also registers as a temporary break, with first-person speech and intentional argument, that 'peaceably permits' the work of abolition to be done. It is in asserting the value of speech *and* silence, and narrating the wind's responsibility for reporting atrocity, that Emerson 'pauses' the structure of argument in order to allow other voices, those to whom he is indebted and cannot represent,

to testify. How they do so may not be identifiable, but that they do so is evidenced by the increasing momentum of the movement. As Emerson explains in his closing lines: 'The sentiment of Right, once very low and indistinct, but ever more articulate, because it is the voice of the universe, pronounces Freedom. The Power that built this fabric of things affirms it in the heart; and in the history of the First of August, has made a sign to the ages, of his will' (*AS*, 33). Silence, the wind, Right, and Power speak by literally re-posing the masses, converting their attitude and voices and gestures and pauses to those that testify for freedom.

*Reading language as raked*

What I am calling Emerson's 'politics of quiet' must not be conflated with the position that slave suffering is too atrocious to be expressed in language, that its horror is ineffable beyond linguistic articulation. Emerson calls attention not to what may not be pronounced due to its content, but to what registers as a sign or offering that, once perceived, loses its status as 'content' and becomes an aspect of being. By opposing the supposed relationship between testimony and representation, the issue of quiet circumvents that of representing the 'unspeakable' thing and instead becomes a reconception of speech that contains, not things, but pauses where the force of the thing registers.

By way of conclusion, I wish to emphasize Emerson's intervention in this regard, for the transposition from ineffability to quietly testifying has consequences not only for reading his work (overtly political and otherwise) but for thinking more generally about how the suffering of slaves finds its way into the canon of American literature. Near the beginning of the Address, Emerson makes what seems to be a claim for the 'unspeakable' nature of slavery: 'Language must be raked, the secrets of slaughter-houses and infamous holes that cannot front the day, must be ransacked, to tell what negro-slavery has been' (*AS*, 9). Language must be torn apart, he seems to say, painfully and perhaps to the point of obliteration, because the truth of slaughter-houses and holes cannot be put into the words currently available.

In Stanley Cavell's reading, Emerson cannot perform in the course of his speech that which he calls for, as an address that raked language would likely be incomprehensible. Yet Cavell understands the violence of raking not as an active destruction of language, but as an activity that loosens and aerates it, altering its structure without sacrificing its use. In shifting the form of language, the ideas and thoughts

borne of it would also shift, so that those who raked language would find themselves similarly ‘loosened’ to a new dimension of thinking, one with more space or pause or wind than packed content. Cavell emphasizes the purpose of such a shift in ‘telling, which is to say, in counting and recounting (...) every enslavement’ (211), for in performing a linguistic and subjective rearrangement, raking would allow for the assessment of the depth of slavery’s influence (‘what negro-slavery has been’) in defining American subjectivity.

Yet the phrase may be understood to mean another way. That Emerson does rake language, by making pauses visible, has been the claim undergirding my argument for a politics of quiet. This to say, however, that not only does Emerson tell, as in recount, through a process of bringing pause to language: it is through the pauses in language that we may tell, as in discern, the subject at hand. In order to discern, language must have been raked for us, which means that the possibility of understanding what we inherit comes from pause, from quiet, that disrupts every account. It is in witnessing how Emerson has raked language, and how, following Cavell, he has found himself interrupted from speaking as a result, that ‘what negro-slavery has been’ becomes visible, becomes palpable as a force that, we may see with eyes, tears apart those to whom it testifies.

This is to suggest, finally, that it is not only in representational speech that political inclinations or past occurrences become part of the texts we read and thus bear relevance to the present day. We may not be able to trace whether Emerson’s politics of quiet was efficacious, whether anyone or anything intruded upon his audience members during or after his Address. But the quiet within the Address has not left it; and if we can discern that, and tell of it, then it has marked our sense of the horrors of the nation’s past — and of how our reading bears responsibility for them.

## NOTES

- 1 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. IX, edited by Ralph Orth and Alfred Ferguson (Cambridge, MA, Belknap, 1971), 126.
- 2 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson’s Antislavery Writings*, edited by Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1995), 7 (hereafter *AS*).
- 3 Representative characterizations of Emerson as a ‘quietist’ include F. O. Matthiessen’s understanding that Emerson ‘conceived of the heart in such

pure isolation that his speculations now seem remote from violent actuality' (*American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1968), 181) and Barbara Packer's summary: 'Transcendentalism was of little immediate use to reformers who wanted to feed the hungry or free the slave; indeed, the quietism the movement fostered and the self-absorption it encouraged favored existing institutions' ('The Transcendentalists', in *The Cambridge History of American Literature. Volume 2: 1820–1865*, edited by Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), 399).

- 4 In his introduction to *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2001, xxi), editor T. Gregory Garvey posits two characterizations of Emerson, the Transcendentalist and the reformer, that exist in 'a unique dynamism'. While his collection grapples with this dichotomy, my essay resists distinguishing between a patient, thinking Emerson and an angry, active one. In recontextualizing what is political about Emerson in terms of seemingly apolitical points in his essays, I do not wish to reinforce an idealist view of him but to expose the insufficiency of such a designation. Albert von Frank, Kenneth Dauber and Kerry Larson seem to approach Emerson's philosophy of political concepts similarly; in von Frank's book, see especially his equation of emancipation with 'producing a free point of view' (*The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1998), 282), as well as Dauber's work on the representative ('On Not Being Able to Read Emerson, or "Representative Man"', *boundary 2* 21:2 (1994), 220–42) and Larson's on equality ('Emerson's Strange Equality', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 59:3 (2004), 315–39).
- 5 'Moral suasion', the tactic of changing of individual minds to generate a critical mass, represented the core of William Lloyd Garrison's antislavery approach. For Emerson's position on receptive thinking, see 'Intellect', in Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays & Poems* (New York, The Library of America, 1996), 415–28 (hereafter *E*), as well as Stanley Cavell, 'Finding as Founding' (*Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003), 110–40 (hereafter *ETE*)); on morality dictated by singular experience, see an 1828 letter to Charles Emerson (*The Selected Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Joel Myerson (New York, Columbia University Press, 1997), 98) as well as Len Gougeon's *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1990); hereafter *VH*); on speech exceeding the verbal see Cavell's 'Emerson, Coleridge, Kant' in *ETE* as well as the discussion below.
- 6 The clumsy full title of this speech as it was published is 'An Address Delivered in the Court-House in Concord, Massachusetts, on 1st August, 1844, on the Anniversary of the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies.' It will hereafter be referred to as the Address. According to Gougeon,

- Emerson delivered an antislavery address in November 1837, although it only survives in outline and brief quotation (see his remarks in *AS*, xv–xvi). Gougeon’s influential assertion is that the 1844 address represents Emerson’s ‘transition from antislavery to abolition’ (*VH*, 85).
- 7 Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York, Minerva, 2002), 181.
  - 8 Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, 2 vols (London, Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1968), Vol. 1, 13.
  - 9 James A. Thome and J. Horace Kimball, *Emancipation in the West Indies. A Six Months’ Tour in Antigua, Barbados, and Jamaica, in the Year 1837* (New York, The American Antislavery Society, 1838), iii.
  - 10 It is relevant to note that the nation’s approach to collecting testimony was broadly exclusionary at this time. In contrast to the current juridical investment in hearing from as many persons as possible, a stricter assessment of the eligibility of the witness, based on the efficacy of the theological oath, held sway. Those who did not believe in the divine retribution associated with swearing were prohibited from testifying before the Supreme Court as late as 1834, when one potential witness’s ‘transcendental’ association of God and Nature led to his exclusion. See ‘A Reconsideration of the Sworn Testimony Requirement: Securing Truth in the Twentieth Century’, *Michigan Law Review* 75:8 (1977), 1681–1707.
  - 11 The law referred to took effect in 1785, prior to the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. Massachusetts was exceptionally aggressive in protecting the rights of its citizens by taking literally and seriously its state constitution’s declaration that ‘All men are born free and equal’ (Robert M. Cover, *Justice Accused: Antislavery and the Judicial Process* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1975), 44). After the Supreme Court’s decision in *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* in 1842 threatened states’ rights to protect alleged fugitives against the Constitutional expectation that they would be returned, Massachusetts passed a ‘noncooperative’ Personal Liberty Law in 1843 (Thomas D. Morris, *Free Men All: The Personal Liberty Laws of the North 1780–1861* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 109). At the time of Emerson’s Address, then, the state would not permit its judicial process or buildings to support fugitives’ capture — which effectively constrained their opportunity to present their case, even if in an effort to prevent their enslavement. See Morris, chapters six and seven.
  - 12 William Lloyd Garrison, Preface to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New York, Library of America, 1994), 5, 7.
  - 13 Six instances of this depersonalized phrasing, for reference purposes: ‘Therefore I will speak, — or, not I, but the might of liberty in my weakness’ (*AS*, 7); ‘The horrid story ran and flew; the winds blew it all over the world

(...). The more it was searched, the more shocking anecdotes came up, — things not to be spoken' (10); 'Every horrid fact became known' (13); 'these absurdities would still come flashing out, — these absurdities of a demand for justice, a generosity for the weak and oppressed' (21); 'Here was no prodigy, no fabulous hero, no Trojan horse, no bloody war, but all was achieved by plain means of plain men, working not under a leader, but under a sentiment (...). It was the masters revolting from their mastery' (26); 'The sentiment of Right, once very low and indistinct, but ever more articulate, because it is the voice of the universe, pronounces Freedom' (33).

- 14 Emerson's editors note that the lecture was 'perhaps the closest to Emerson's heart of any in the [Early] series' (Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. 1, edited by Stephen E. Whicher and Robert E. Spiller (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1959), 164 (hereafter *EL*)). It was delivered on 26 February 1835.
- 15 George Fox, *A journal or historical account of the life, travels, sufferings, Christian experiences and labour of love in the work of the ministry of George Fox, who departed this life in great peace with the Lord, the 13th of the 11th month, 1690* (London, Thomas Northcott, 1694).
- 16 See especially his trial in Lancaster in 1664, which is rendered in dialogue in Fox's journal (467–8) and ends in Sewell's account with Fox astounding the public by pointing out the hypocrisy of his being given 'a book to swear on, that commanded him not to swear at all' (107).
- 17 William Sewell, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Increase of the People Called Quakers: intermixed with several remarkable occurrences*, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia, Uriah Hunt, 1823), 513–14.
- 18 See the series of testimonies (labeled as such) that precede Penn's preface, which do not authenticate the journal that follows but describe the writer's experience of Fox's life (i–xvii).
- 19 *The Journal of George Fox*, edited by John L. Nickalls (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1952), 11–12.
- 20 Packer's reading of the 'Lord's Supper Sermon' is relevant here, for it is framed as Emerson's intervention into the Unitarian debate of how to certify spiritual testimony. As she puts it in a reading consistent with the above discussion of 'George Fox', for Emerson, 'one witness to spiritual truth was enough, and its radiance made all external aids superfluous' (Packer, 'The Transcendentalists', 438).
- 21 The essay was published in 1841.
- 22 The insufficiency of an archive to contain spiritual laws is variously articulated throughout the essay, perhaps most directly in Emerson's assertion that texts cannot be relied upon to impart their meaning: 'No man can learn what he has not preparation for learning, however near to his eyes is the object' (*E*, 313).

- 23 It is worth noting that Emerson's conflation of the witness and (his) testimony stands in contrast, but is certainly relevant, to much recent scholarship on the subject of testimony. Shoshana Felman's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York, Routledge, 1991) and Jacques Derrida's *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000) are both radical in their own right, but neither does away with the distinction between the speaker of testimony and the object witnessed in the direct way that Emerson does. Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York, Zone Books, 2002), which insists on desubjectification as a major principle, does not approach Emerson's thinking of the consequences of a de-objectified testimony for everyday life.
- 24 The sense that nature, especially, says itself without offering any objective content, is traceable throughout Emerson's essays. See, for example, 'Nature': 'nature is already, in its forms and tendencies, describing its own design' (*E*, 7); 'The Poet': 'nature does all things by her own hands, and does not leave another to baptise her, but baptises herself; and this through the metamorphosis again' (*E*, 457); or 'Goethe, or, the Writer': 'Every act of the man inscribes itself in the memories of his fellows, and in his own manners and face (. . .). In nature, this self-registration is incessant, and the narrative is the print of the seal' (*E*, 746).
- 25 While I am reading Emerson as suggesting a non-representational aspect of testimony, his theory of testimony accords with his thinking of the representative in *Representative Men*. The representative man is not one who actively re-presents something that has previously been present, but one who speaks of the 'identity of the observer with the observed': 'The reason why he knows about [the things observed] is, that he is of them (. . .). Their quality makes his career; and he can variously publish their virtues, because they compose him.' (*E*, 619) This analysis of what it means to be representative of course bears on America's representative system of government. Rather than expect that structure to work most effectively through proxy speech, Emerson seems to suggest, elected politicians must understand themselves to comprise their constituency and participate in it.
- 26 See Eduardo Cadava on Emerson's writing of history, especially his Preface to *Emerson and the Climates of History* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997); Donald Pease's analysis of 'Self-Reliance' (*Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Context* (Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987); and Cavell's 'Finding as Founding' in *ETE*.
- 27 Sharon Cameron, 'Representing Grief: Emerson's "Experience"', *Representations* 15 (1986), 21.
- 28 Emerson's interest in the southern imprisonment of free black sailors may have been brought about by his neighbor, maritime law expert Samuel Hoar, who later in 1844 would travel to Charleston as an investigating Massachusetts

Commissioner, only to be expelled by the South Carolina legislature (von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns*, 29).

- 29 By regarding the men who intrude as subsequently dwelling with him, Emerson's idea of the witness still does not appropriate their suffering as his own. As Saidiya Hartman points out, the abolitionist technique of imagining one's own body as that of the slave becomes an exercise in empathic self-affirmation 'at the expense of slave suffering' (*Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), 20). What becomes legible in Emerson's Address is instead the fact that their suffering has become a part of his concern that he cannot 'expend' without expending himself. In other words, he is not suffering, but suffering (as in permitting) their suffering.
- 30 'Quiesco', in *A Latin Dictionary*, edited by Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, the Perseus Digital Library Project <http://perseus.tufts.edu>, consulted 23 January 2007, 2 p.m.
- 31 See 'Quiesco' I, B 3–4.