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EMERSON AND THE CAMPAIGN OF 1851

Leonard G. Gougeon

Generally speaking, Ralph Waldo Emerson did not hold politics or politicians in high esteem. In 1844 the Transcendental poet, philosopher, and social reformer said of politics, in his essay by that name, "virtuous men will not rely on political agents. They have found out the deleterious effects of political association."¹ Later he would say of politicians, "Senators and presidents have climbed so high with pain enough, not because they think the place specially agreeable, but as an apology for real worth, and to vindicate their manhood in our eyes. . . . Surely nobody would be a charlatan, who could afford to be sincere."²

Despite this distinctly negative attitude, however, in the spring of 1851 Emerson did consent to become an active political campaigner for John Gorham Palfrey, Congressional Free Soil candidate from Emerson's own Middlesex District. Emerson spoke on at least nine separate occasions while "stumping" for Palfrey, using his vitriolic antislavery address, "The Fugitive Slave Law," as his text. It was his first and only foray into the realm of partisan politics and it brought him the wrath of the editorial hatchet men and political ruffians who inhabited the somewhat tawdry realm of Massachusetts party politics at the time.

An article in the *Boston Semi-Weekly Advertiser* thoroughly castigated the gentle bard for everything from his treasonous disunion sentiments to his pantheistic religious views, and warned the reading public that Emerson was not "a reliable authority on questions of morals, or a safe guide in the affairs of life."³ An article in the *Liberator* on the same date described an effort on the part of certain "rowdies" to upset Emerson's campaign presentation in Cambridge, where "a considerable body of students from Harvard College did

1. The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. by Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston 1903-1904), XI: 138.

2. *Ibid.*, III: 218.

3. Boston Semi-Weekly Advertiser, May 23, 1851.

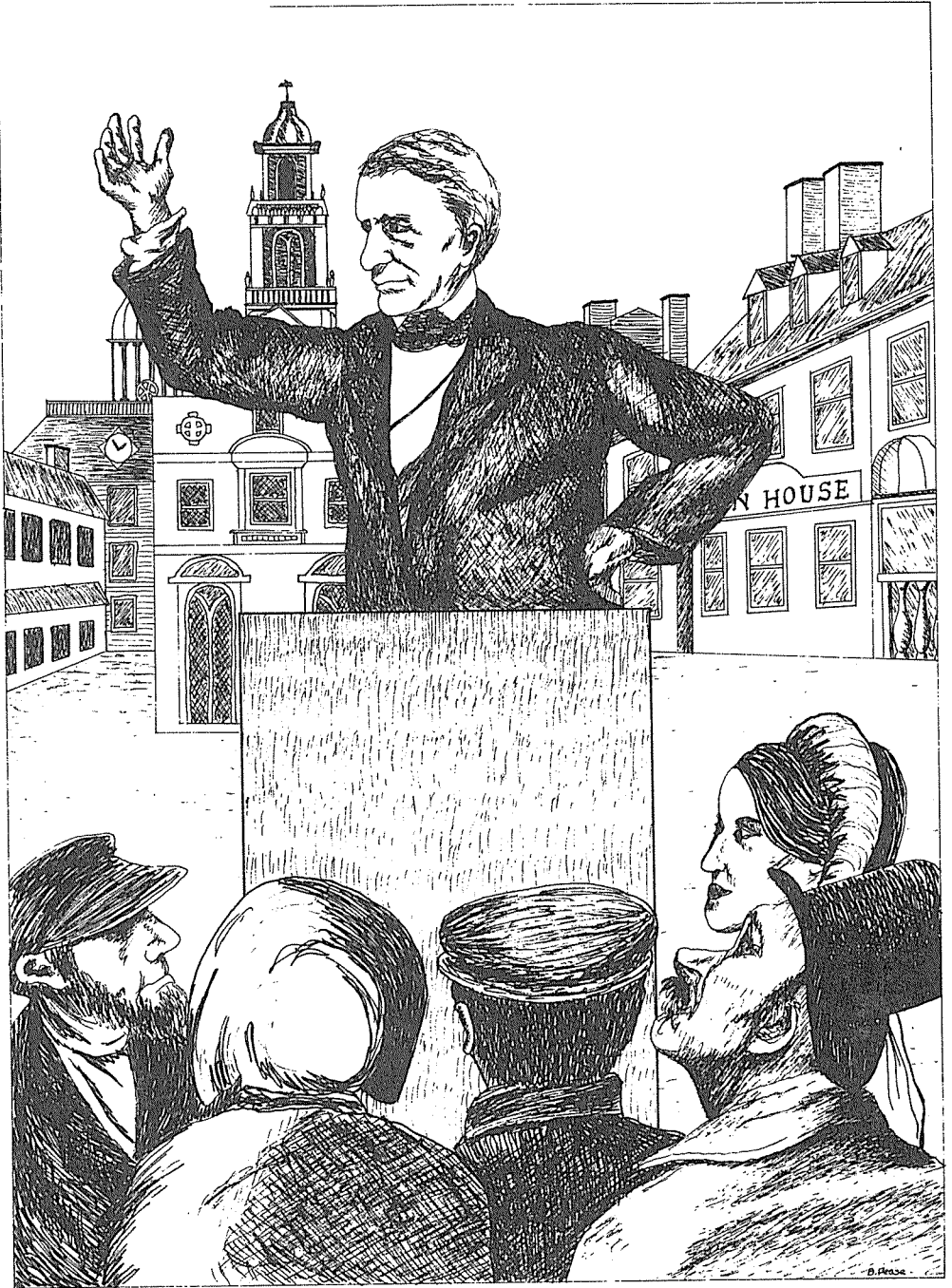
what they could to distract the audience and insult the speaker, by hisses and groans." Overall, the campaign was a unique and distressing experience for the philosophical Emerson, and one which he would not repeat. It is the purpose of this study to relate, for the first time, the story of Emerson's only political campaign, and suggest how the political and cultural reality of mid nineteenth-century Massachusetts compelled this Transcendental reformer to undertake an onerous enterprise for which he was painfully unsuited both temperamentally and philosophically.

Emerson first delivered his uncharacteristically acerbic "Fugitive Slave Law Address" on May 3, 1851 in his home town of Concord, the county seat for the Middlesex District. In part, Emerson was moved to give the speech as a result of his outrage at the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act which became law in the fall of 1850. Emerson's initial fury was mitigated at the time, however, by his faith that the law would soon become a "dead letter" as a result of the moral resistance of the citizens of Massachusetts, and also because of the state's Personal Liberty Law, which made it illegal for a citizen to return a fugitive slave. Emerson's confidence in the matter undoubtedly seemed justified. As one historical commentator has pointed out, "In no city had fugitive slaves felt greater security than in Boston. . . . Massachusetts law protected them, when, following the United States Supreme Court Decision in the Prigg case which prohibited states from legislating on fugitive slaves, the General Court passed a Personal Liberty Act to forbid judges and other law-enforcement officers from acting under the provisions of the national Constitution."⁴

The extradition of Thomas Sims in April of 1851, despite exhaustive legal appeals and the agitation of the Boston Vigilance Committee to free him, convinced Emerson, however, that the law would indeed be enforced. In their presentations, Sims' lawyers, a distinguished group that included Richard Henry Dana, Samuel Sewall, and Robert Rantoul, argued the constitutionality of the Fugitive Slave Law, the applicability of the Massachusetts' Personal Liberty Law, insufficiency of evidence, and other legal alternatives. Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw, however, refused to accept their arguments, or even to honor their writ of *habeas corpus*. Consequently, Sims was ordered to be returned to his owner despite howls of protest from abolitionists and others throughout the state.

4. Harold Schwartz, "Fugitive Slave Days in Boston," New England Quarterly, XXVII (1954), p. 191.

Emerson and the Election of 1851



Emerson was deeply disturbed by the Sims affair. The depth of his concern at the time is reflected in a letter to a friend, in which he stated, "at this moment, in the cruelty and ignominy of the laws, and the shocking degradation of Massachusetts, I have no heart to look at books or to think of anything else than how to retrieve this crime. All sane persons are shattered by the treachery not only of the officials, but of the controlling public of the moment in Boston. It is one suasion more to destroy all national pride, all reliance on others."⁵

The Massachusetts Personal Liberty Law, upon which Emerson had relied to protect black citizens of the state, sought specifically to nullify the effect of Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, which had never been actively enforced in the North. Emerson was aware of this situation and assumed that the principle of states' rights would prevail in any legal contest arising from a fugitive slave case. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, and the court proceedings of the Sims Case, however, served to dramatically change all that. Despite the fact that many scholars have depicted Emerson as being largely removed from the everyday affairs of life, especially political affairs, his journal accounts at the time of the Sims affair, as well as his subsequent campaigning, show how deeply interested and thoroughly informed Emerson was on contemporary events.

Thus, in reviewing the Sims affair in his journal, Emerson referred specifically to the 1793 Fugitive Slave Law and noted that "the law became, as it should, a dead letter. It was merely there in the statute book to soothe the dignity of the maneaters. And we Northerners had, on our part, indemnified & secured ourselves against any occasional eccentricity of appetite in our confederates by our own interpretation, and by offsetting state-law by state-laws."⁶ Emerson then went on in a reference to the 1843 Personal Liberty Law to note that "it was and is penal here in Massachusetts for any sheriff or town or state-officer to lend himself or his jail to the slavehunters, and it is also settled that any slave brought here by his master, becomes free. All of this was well." Unfortunately, all of this was now no longer well, and Emerson knew exactly where to point the finger. "What Mr. Webster has now done," said Emerson, "is not only to re-enact the old

5. Letter dated April 14, 1851, reprinted in B. D. Simison, Modern Language Notes, LV (June 1940), p. 427.

6. Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. by William H. Gilman et al (Cambridge 1960-1982), XI: 355.

Emerson and the Election of 1851

law, but *to give it force*, which it never had before, or to bring down the free and Christian state of Massachusetts to the cannibal level."⁷

Of course Massachusetts' famous Senator, Daniel Webster, whose March 7, 1850 speech in favor of the "Compromise" made possible the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, wasn't the only actor in the tragedy, though obviously he was a prime one. There was always the hope that the Massachusetts judiciary would assert itself in defiance of the federal government, but Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw chose not to do so. Emerson's exasperation at this fact is expressed in his later journal comment: "What a moment was lost when Judge Shaw declined to affirm the unconstitutionality of the Fugitive Slave Law!"⁸

Undoubtedly as a result of his frustration with public servants such as Shaw and Webster, Emerson decided it was time to take a more active role in the political process, specifically in an effort to elect leaders of greater moral substance and stamina. This inclination is clearly reflected in a journal entry, where he noted "I make no secret of my intention to keep" the people of Massachusetts "informed of the baseness of their leaders."⁹ And in the introduction to his speech, Emerson explained his motivation with the statement: "The last year has forced all of us into politics, and made it a paramount duty to seek what it is often a duty to shun."¹⁰

In the balance of his presentation, Emerson attacked "Mr. Webster's treachery" in the most bitter terms. Among other things, he noted of the once-respected Senator that "all the drops of his blood have eyes that look downward. It is neither praise nor blame to say that he has no moral perception, no moral sentiment, but in that region -- to use the phrase of the phrenologists -- a hole in the head."¹¹ Regarding Webster's finely-wrought Constitutional arguments for preserving the institution of slavery, Emerson asserted his own principled belief that there was a "Higher Law" than the Constitution, and went on to state that "against a principle like this, all the

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., XI: 361.

9. Ibid., XI: 354.

10. Complete Works, XI: 179.

11. Ibid., XI: 204-205.

arguments of Mr. Webster are the spray of a child's squirt against a granite wall."¹²

Emerson was equally harsh towards those citizens of the state who supported Webster and his philosophy. He noted that in the present situation "one cannot open a newspaper without being disgusted by new records of shame," and he pointed up his earlier false hope that "none, that was not ready to go on all fours would back this law." The monied interests who supported Webster and slavery, said Emerson, "make the world a greasy hotel, and, instead of noble motives and inspirations, and a heaven of companions and angels around and before us, . . . leave us in a grimacing menagerie of monkeys and idiots." Indeed, said Emerson, "the fairest American fame ends in this filthy law." Regarding what might be immediately done about the matter, extreme situations call for extreme actions, and Emerson encouraged his audience to "abrogate this law; then, proceed to confine slavery to the slave states, and help them effectually to make an end of it." For those who feared the political consequences of such defiance, Emerson bluntly advised that "as soon as the constitution ordains an immoral law, it ordains disunion. The law is suicidal, and cannot be obeyed," so let the chips fall where they may.¹³

Needless to say, Emerson's speech was welcomed by abolitionists throughout Massachusetts. Four days later Charles Sumner, himself recently elected Senator from Massachusetts on an anti-slavery platform, wrote that he "rejoiced in reading this morning that you had spoken on the great enormity," and he asked Emerson to repeat the performance in Palfrey's district and in Boston. He added, "your judgment of the Fugitive Slave Bill posterity will adopt, even if the men of our day do not. But you have access to many who, other AntiSlavery speakers cannot reach. Your testimony, therefore, is of peculiar importance."¹⁴ Despite his previous outspoken condemnation of the effects of "party," Emerson did agree to repeat the speech on several occasions throughout John Gorham Palfrey's district, and to aid Palfrey in his pursuit of a Congressional seat on the Free Soil ticket.

12. *Ibid.*, XI: 192.

13. *Ibid.*, XI: 181, 184-185, 189, 201, 206-207.

14. Sumner to Emerson, May 7, 1851, ms. in Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge. This, and subsequent manuscripts, are quoted by permission of the Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association, and of the Houghton Library.

Emerson and the Election of 1851

John Gorham Palfrey (1796-1881), whom Emerson described as "my friend" in a letter at this time, had a long relationship with the Emerson family.¹⁵ As a young Unitarian minister and pastor of the Brattle Street Church, Palfrey was a pronounced favorite of Lidian Emerson, before her marriage to Ralph Waldo.¹⁶ Eventually Palfrey became Dean of Harvard's Divinity School, where he said of Emerson's famous address there in 1838 "that part of it . . . which was not folly was downright Atheism."¹⁷ For his part, Emerson referred to the "snore of the Muses" in turning the pages of the *North American Review* during Palfrey's editorship from 1835 to 1843. Apparently both forgot, or put aside, these early differences. Palfrey eventually left the ministry, as Emerson had done before him, and pursued a career as an historian and politician. He was a "Conscience Whig" in 1850 and in 1851 accepted the compromise policy of Charles Sumner.

The Free Soil Party had been formed in the summer of 1848 as a melange of antislavery Democrats, Liberty Party supporters, and Conscience Whigs. Generally, the party aimed to separate national government from slavery in order to keep it a state institution and confine it to the area it then occupied. In Massachusetts, under the influence of Charles Francis Adams., John Gorham Palfrey, and Henry Wilson, Free Soilers were associated also with equal rights.¹⁸ These objectives agreed with Emerson's position at the time and are reflected in his speech. Palfrey himself might have caught Emerson's eye in his earlier attacks on slavery. In a work entitled *Papers on the Slave Power*, in a chapter entitled "What Can the Free States Do About It," Palfrey suggested repealing the 1793 Fugitive Slave Law and opening the Federal Courts "to the citizens of the Free States threatened with injury to property, person, liberty or life, by the pseudo-legislation of the slave country." He insisted that "the courts of this Union must be open to the people of the Union," and these

15. Emerson to Emily Drury, May 14, 1851, ms. in the Barrett Collection, Alderman Library, University of Virginia.
16. Ellen Tucker Emerson, The Life of Lidian Jackson Emerson, ed. by Delores Bird Carpenter (Boston 1980), p. 39.
17. Joel Myerson, The New England Transcendentalists and the Dial (Rutherford, New Jersey, 1980), p. 34.
18. Merton Dillon, The Abolitionists: The Growth of A Dissenting Minority (New York 1974), pp. 167-168.

would presumably include runaway slaves like Thomas Sims.¹⁹ Emerson concurred with these views in his own presentation.

Whatever the specific motivation, Emerson launched himself full throttle into Palfrey's campaign. In a letter to Theodore Parker on May 9, Emerson responded to a request that he give his speech in Boston with the statement that "I am not sure that it is worthwhile to read my lecture in Boston. I am to read it in Lexington, in Fitchburg, & it is asked for in Cambridge, & Waltham also, -- which, if I do, you see, is stumping for Palfrey's district." He added: "I then think to print it, and send it to my Boston Class in that form."²⁰ In a letter to Emily Drury he also noted that he was "now for a few days, repeating in many places in my county of Middlesex, a speech on the Slave-Bill, . . . in the hope that Dr. Palfrey. . . will be elected at the next canvass."²¹ A week later he told Ainsworth Spofford, whose own pamphlet *Higher Laws* served as something of an inspiration for Emerson's speech, that "the Law is so bad & the servility of the people such, that it is better to say the right thing over & over in twenty places, than to be silent in nineteen."²²

Undoubtedly, one of the major reasons why Emerson had hoped to stay out of the public controversy regarding slavery is because it invited the kind of public harassment which he loathed. Emerson was bitterly attacked following the presentation of his famous "Divinity School Address" in 1838, and since that time he had succeeded, for the most part, in staying out of the limelight as far as the controversies which agitated the public press were concerned. Except for polite notices and occasional commentaries on his lectures, and every now and then a gentle satire of his transcendental style, Emerson rarely attracted the attention of the local press. With his new foray into politics, all that was to change.

Emerson's stumping for Palfrey did not escape the notice of the opposition, and, as noted earlier, an article in the *Boston Semi-Weekly Advertiser* on May 23, 1851 castigated him for everything from his disunion sentiments to his Pantheistic religious views. The

 19. John G. Palfrey, Papers on the Slave Power, First Published in the "Boston Whig" (Boston, n.d.), pp. 81-82.

20. Emerson to Parker, May 9, 1851, ms. in Houghton Library.

21. Emerson to Drury, May 14, 1851, ms. in Barrett Collection, Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

22. Letter published by C. C. Hollis, in New England Quarterly, XXXVIII (1973).

Emerson and the Election of 1851

article noted that "Mr. Emerson though 'not mingling' as the editor of the [Worcester] Spy observes, 'in the active business of life,' and never attending political meetings, has nevertheless attended and spoken at the meetings of the Garrison Abolitionists, and may therefore be fairly looked upon as a decided Abolitionist of that school." The author then went on to warn his readers about the "extremes" to which the Free Soilers had carried their views regarding slavery and how dangerous these views were to the preservation of the Union. He pointed out that "All that was urged against the law by Mr. Emerson in his lecture at Worcester, according to the Spy, would have applied equally well to *any* law providing for the surrender of fugitives." Thus, agitators like Emerson "are doing their utmost to increase an excitement *ostensibly* against this particular law, but *really* against the provision of the Constitution, on which it was founded." The author went on to note that "a portion of Mr. Emerson's lecture at Worcester consisted in a virulent attack on Mr. Webster," whom the writer then defended largely on the basis that Webster's efforts were aimed at preserving the Union. The writer then returned to his point that "if these men were not beyond the reach of their reason on this subject, we should ask Mr. Emerson himself, whether he does not believe and admit, that if the doctrines of his lecture were sustained and enforced in the Free States, the Union would be infallibly severed."

Having thus concluded the substance of his attack on the constitutional implications of Emerson's view, the writer then launched a personal attack. "We see it announced that Mr. Emerson is taking an active part in the agitation carried on the present week, in the Congressional Districts where elections are to be made on the 26th instant. The citizens of those districts will, we think, be inclined to ask themselves a few questions, as to the qualifications of Mr. Emerson to act as their counsellor in the discharge of the important duty, which will devolve upon them next Monday. We live in times that need prudent and practical men. We have never heard Mr. Emerson ranked in that class." The author then suggested that Emerson was not "a reliable authority on questions of morals, or a safe guide in the affairs of life." To reinforce the point he reminded his readers that Emerson's address at the divinity school at Cambridge drew upon him the public rebuke of one of the truest and best of men, the late Dr. Henry Ware, Jr. if we are not mistaken." He added, "the most dangerous and objectionable sentiments are embodied in that address."

Regarding Emerson's philosophical views, the author noted that these, while they are clothed in a "misty jargon," have presented Emerson in "the acknowledged character of a perpetual doubter, or

inquirer; that he has been most anxious to lead his hearers to the habit of questioning authority of every description." Finally, returning to his concern with Emerson's implied opinion "that the Union of the States ought to be broken up, and the country plunged into Civil War," the writer wondered if the "same habit of speculation" led Emerson to these conclusions as "lead him to the expression of perpetual uncertainty, whether Christianity is anything, -- or whether God and Nature be not one."

Not only did Emerson have to contend with such bitter attacks in the press, but in at least one instance in the campaign, probably for the first time in his lecturing career, he was booed and hissed by his audience. The occasion was the presentation of the Fugitive Slave Law speech in Cambridge. The account in the *Liberator* of May 23, 1851 tells the story:

A considerable body of students from Harvard College did what they could to disturb the audience and insult the speaker, by hisses and groans, interspersed with cheers for Webster, Clay, Fillmore, Everett, and "Old Harvard!". . . . These *young gentlemen* showed themselves qualified to play the part of *Rowdies* as completely as any of the disciples of Captain Isiah Rynders himself. Mr. Emerson's refinement of character, scholarship, and mild and dignified deportment, could not save him from their noisy, yet feeble, insults.

The event undoubtedly made a significant impression on the gentle bard, and on others. Thirty years later James Thayer would recall in a letter to Emerson's wife Lidian, that it was one of his Emerson's "finest nights that I ever saw, to see with what dignity he waited for them to stop and then went on to the next word of his address."²³

Despite such disturbing events, Emerson followed through on his commitment to Palfrey's campaign, and delivered his address on the "several occasions" noted in his letter to Parker. Nevertheless, and not surprisingly, on reflection, he did not consider it to be the best use of his energy, nor was it particularly pleasing to him. He was, after all, a poet, not a politician. Thus he noted in his journal: "I like that [Charles] Sumner & [Horace] Mann & [John Gorham] Palfrey

23. Thayer to Lidian Emerson, December 1883, ms. in Houghton Library.

Emerson and the Election of 1851

should not be scrupulous & stand on their dignity but should go to the stump. They should not be above their business."²⁴ A few months later he would reflect, while at work on Margaret Fuller's *Memoirs*, "In my memoirs, I must record that I always find myself doing something less than my best task. In the spring I was writing politics; now am I writing a biography, which not the absolute command, but facility & amiable feeling prompted."²⁵

Regardless of such reservations, Emerson followed the election closely and dutifully recorded the results in his journal.²⁶ The voting took place on May 26, and Palfrey lost to the Whig candidate Benjamin Thompson in his bid for office in this special election, by a plurality of eighty-seven votes out of thirteen thousand. In noting the closeness of the vote, Sumner pointed out that the returns of Lancaster's seventy-nine Whig votes had been improperly sealed and therefore might be thrown out, and these, added to a few others, might change the result. Palfrey, however, refused to even consider obtaining victory through a re-count.²⁷ In Concord, at least, Palfrey was victorious. There was probably some solace also in the fact that Charles Sumner had been successful in the preceeding month in gaining election to the United States Senate, through the vote of the state legislature. As an outspoken opponent of slavery, Sumner would now assume the seat once occupied by Daniel Webster, and many people saw more than poetic justice in this. One partisan observer commented that "the victory this day consummated dates from the 7th of March, 1850," when Webster "stood up in the Senate and repudiated the long-cherished sentiments of Massachusetts."²⁸ Emerson possibly saw some compensation in the event also, and records in his journal a neighbor's remark that "Sims came on a good errand; for Sumner is elected."²⁹

24. Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks, XI: 380-381.

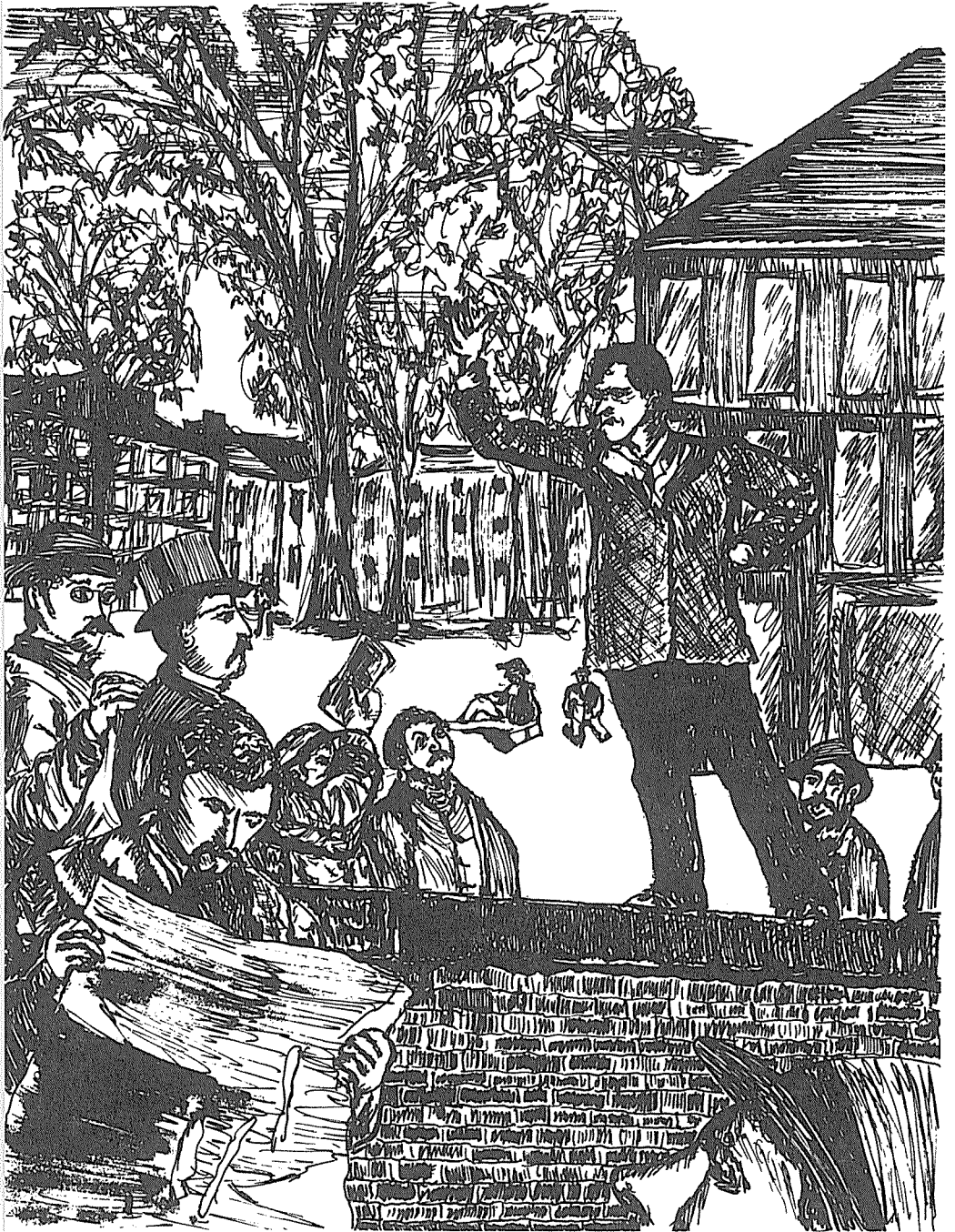
25. Ibid., XI: 434.

26. Ibid., XI: 379.

27. Frank Otto Gatell, John Gorham Palfrey and the New England Conscience (Cambridge 1963), p. 200.

28. David Donald, Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War (New York 1960), p. 202.

29. Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks, XI: 363.



Emerson and the Election of 1851

Emerson's participation in Palfrey's campaign demonstrates clearly the error of the claim that Emerson, and the Transcendentalists generally, "took next to no part in politics at all."³⁰ Indeed, in addition to this exceptional campaign experience, Emerson was a conscientious citizen who took politics and voting very seriously. As he told one correspondent in November of 1851, "I make a point of conscience of casting my vote on all second Mondays of November."³¹ After the election in the spring, he said in his journal: "I do not forgive any one for not knowing & standing by his own order. Here are clergymen & scholars voting with the world, the flesh, & the devil, against Sumner & freedom."³²

Not surprisingly, Emerson continued to feel somewhat ambivalent about his effort at political campaigning, a feeling which might have been stimulated in part by the failure of his candidate. Later in the summer he would tell Thomas Carlyle, almost off-handedly, that "in the spring the abomination of our own Fugitive Slave Bill drove me to some writing & speechmaking, without hope of effect, but to clear my own skirts. I am sorry I did not print, whilst it was yet time. I am now told the time will come again, more's the pity."³³

Nevertheless, abolitionists in Massachusetts and elsewhere were generally pleased with Emerson's activism and encouraged him to make further efforts. In July, Wendell Phillips invited him to again celebrate the Emancipation in the British West Indies, this time in Worcester.³⁴ However, Emerson declined, insisting that he felt his recent spate of campaigning was enough, for the time at least.³⁵ Similarly, in August he declined an invitation to speak before the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society, but congratulated that organization for their efforts "in a good cause."³⁶

30. Stanley Elkins, Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life (New York 1959), p. 147.

31. Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. by Ralph L. Rusk (New York 1939), IV: 265.

32. Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks, XIII: 20.

33. Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle, ed. by Joseph Slater (New York 1964), p. 470.

34. Phillips to Emerson, July 22, 1851, ms. in Houghton Library.

35. Emerson to Phillips, July 25, 1851, ms. in Houghton Library.

36. Emerson to Adeline Roberts, August 27, 1851, ms. in Essex Institute, Salem.

Failing to persuade Emerson to make further speaking engagements for the moment, some abolitionists hoped to persuade him to publish his now famous attack on the Fugitive Slave Law. Wendell Phillips suggested to Ann Weston, a prominent Boston abolitionist, that she might encourage Emerson to publish at least parts of the speech in the *Liberty Bell* for the following year. Phillips was especially interested in Emerson's "analysis of Webster, which was very acute & finely wrought."³⁷ When that strategy failed, Phillips persuaded Thomas Wentworth Higginson to try to convince Emerson to allow the printing of the piece. Higginson's letter in November read in part, "what right have you *not* to print your Lecture on the Fugitive Slave Law? By reading it you have certainly already conceded that you ought to print it. If it was worth putting into plaster it was worth putting into marble."³⁸ As it turns out, Emerson did not publish the lecture in his lifetime, which is somewhat curious in the light of his remarks to Carlyle and the obvious desire on the parts of many abolitionists to see it in print. It is possible that Emerson felt that after the election, the moment had passed for the publication of such an occasional piece, or, as he noted in his letter to Spofford, the content of the speech was quite similar to Spofford's own pamphlet *Higher Laws*, which Emerson had read prior to preparing his speech. As he said to Spofford: "I shall not hide the most unblushing plagiarisms if I print it."³⁹ Eventually, however, the speech was printed in the *Centenary Edition* (1903-1904) of Emerson's complete works, edited by his son Edward. It remains there now bearing eloquent testimony to the philosopher's first and only political campaign, and his enduring concern with politics in Massachusetts.

37. Phillips to Weston, August 26, 1851, ms. in Boston Public Library.

38. Higginson to Emerson, November 17, 1851, ms. in Houghton Library.

39. Emerson to Spofford, letter published by C.C. Hollis, in New England Quarterly, XXVIII (1973).