Gougeon's concern is to demonstrate that "Ralph Waldo Emerson was a committed social reformer all of his life. He was deeply concerned with and involved in the major social reform movement of his time, antislavery." Emerson was not the aloof transcendentalist, silent on the major social issue of his time, portrayed by biographers such as Oliver Wendell Holmes. The first chapter, a useful survey of earlier biographies of Emerson, traces this misrepresentation of Emerson to Holmes' biography and the occasional nature of many of Emerson's lectures on slavery which led to their being overlooked.

Gougeon points out that Emerson's antislavery stance was not based on a belief in racial equality. In fact, Emerson's doubts about black equality persisted throughout his life, at least in his private thoughts recorded in his journals. At the same time, Emerson publicly welcomed evidence that supported belief in equality such as the successes in Liberia and the British West Indies. Equal or not, Emerson believed blacks were persons and that slavery was a violation of freedom which offended the moral sense. This sense could become atrophied through becoming accustomed to slavery or silenced by financial interest. From the beginning, the elimination of slavery was part of Emerson's larger moral vision of an America freed of crass commercialism.

Emerson, like Channing, believed that social change must be brought about by moral persuasion. "Social reformation that comes as a result of the forceful imposition of change upon individuals or institutions from without is not true reformation because it deals with symptoms and not causes, sins but not sinners." And so Emerson emphasized the duty to express opinions on slavery and avoided organized political movements which would threaten his individuality. Emerson felt great discomfort with the political actions he did take, such as his letter to Martin van Buren protesting treatment of the Cherokees, and opposed the abolitionists' stance of dissolving the union with slave states. Emerson was also repelled by the signal mindedness of the abolitionist cause. His stance was reinforced by conversion to transcendentalism and its belief in a benign fate in which slavery would eventually disappear.

Around 1846, the philosophical tension between belief in fate and freedom turned Emerson's thoughts to the role of great men in history. Emerson's concern is still with finding the personal meaning of life within fate. Yet the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law leads Emerson to endorse civil disobedience, taking in 1852 the position he criticized Thoreau for six years.
earlier. Gougeon documents the numerous antislavery lectures Emerson delivered during the 1840s and 1850s.

Yet in 1855 Emerson still insisted on seeing slavery as one aspect of a larger problem, skepticism about human virtue. A diminished faith in human possibilities and a higher law lead to the acceptance of the certainty of things, to the materialism that accepts slavery. But historical events have damaged Emerson's optimism about fate. And his belief in a moral elite as a source of persuasion and moral conversion has been undermined by the criticisms of abolition advanced by cultured individuals such as Holmes and Webster. Now, social problems can be solved in two ways: the inefficient man-way of voluntary cooperation, legislation, and compromise; or the unexpected events or natural causes of the preferable god-way. In the mid 1850s Emerson is stressing the importance of voting and not compromising with slavers. However, by the late 1850s fate is no longer a beautiful necessity, but something to be opposed and directed by human will and duty, Emerson is contributing to the purchase of rifles for antislavery Kansas farmers, and depicting John Brown as a misguided hero. Fate provokes human power to aspire to moral reform and redirection. And fate acts to undermine slavery through unexpected events such as the civil war.

This is the portrait Gougeon paints of Emerson the social activist. It is not fully convincing. The Emerson who emerges is concerned to remove slavery so that America could fulfill its moral role as the highest developed human society and redeem itself for its policies towards Indians. Emerson may have realized that culture without a social program is not enough to guarantee social justice, yet his concern is still with the historical culture and not with individual freedom. Perhaps this demonstrates his lingering doubts about racial equality.

Finally, there is Gougeon's interpretation of Emerson's remark that he would write on the lintels of the doorpost, Whim. This indicates Emerson's willingness to act on impulse and accept whatever ruination may result from this gesture. So interpreted, the remark is consistent with the portrait of Emerson as a social activist. But Whim is written in the place of religious identification, and so suggests a person who views individual realization as more significant than social causes.

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The title of Kaufman-Osborn's book suggests that there was a problem getting a clear focus for the many parts of the book. It