

**Double Writing:
Ralph Waldo Emerson's Theoretical Poetics**

Benjamin Pickford

**Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

December 2014

Abstract

This thesis considers Ralph Waldo Emerson's compositional process of 'double writing' as a distinctly theorised and intellectually coherent practice that generated discrete bodies of text: his private journals and notebooks; and the public essays, lectures, and poems. Throughout Emerson scholarship, critics tend to quote the two bodies without differentiation, often either neglecting the issue of their coexistence or asserting the priority of one form over the other. I contend instead that principles of self-reading, accretive reinscription, and a perpetuated relation to his own text condition Emerson's ideas of poetic agency and the role of literature in broader socio-cultural contexts, to the extent that they become the preeminent factor in shaping his philosophical and literary aspirations.

Focusing on the period 1836-50, from the beginning of the coexistence of public and private corpuses to the point at which he finalises his theory of textual relation, I trace the way in which Emerson's ongoing textual investment first echoes—and later disrupts—aspirations to realise a philosophy of the subject steeped in the romantic tradition. The first part of the thesis examines the two textual bodies insofar as they reflect upon each other and on theories of composition, finding that Emerson gradually loses faith in the function of his public works up to 1842. In the second section of the thesis, I illustrate the continual revision his relation to text undergoes in the major works of the 1840s, as his compositional theory adapts to first conceptualise and then fulfil certain ethical obligations of the scholar and poet. I end by examining the poetic apotheosis figured by *Poems* (1847) and *Representative Men* (1850), which has little in common with his youthful aspirations, but which explains the 'sage'-like mantle he accepted in American life and letters from the 1850s until his death in 1882. As well as revising conceptions of Emerson's literary agency and the structure of his canon, this thesis offers an original reading of the theory of an author's socio-cultural role in the mid nineteenth-century through the example of one of the era's major figures.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my supervisors, Dr Graham Thompson and Dr Matthew Pethers, and the Department of American and Canadian Studies at the University of Nottingham, for their guidance throughout the project.

I am grateful to the librarians at Houghton Library, Harvard University, to Adrienne Donohue at Concord Museum, and to Ilhan Citak at the Linderman Library, Lehigh University, for their help with archival and special collections research.

Funding for a research trip to Massachusetts was provided by the University of Nottingham School of Cultures, Languages, and Area Studies Travel Prize, and by a Research Training Support Grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The degree was funded by an AHRC studentship.

Contents

Abbreviations —		5
Introduction —	Infinity in Askesis: Intention, Imperative, and Emerson's Encounters with Form	6
<i>Part One:</i>	'Knowing after a high, negative way': The Formality of Emersonian Consciousness: 1836-1841	
I —	'Somehow he publishes it with solemn joy': The Ends of Idealism and the Beginning of Writing in <i>Nature</i> (1836)	38
II —	The Labours of Style: Reason's Writing and the Method of an Elemental Language	66
III —	A Poetics of Reiteration: <i>Essays</i> (1841)	118
<i>Part Two:</i>	'Honour your place': Form, Power, and Personae of Text: 1841-1850	
IV —	'In for a mill, in for a million': <i>Essays: Second Series</i> (1844)	150
V —	Lions in Eden: <i>Poems</i> (1847)	211
Afterword —		254
Bibliography —		266

Abbreviations

For regularly cited works the following abbreviations have been used parenthetically in the text, followed by the volume and page number.

- CW* *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. by Albert R. Ferguson, Joseph Slater, Douglas Emory Wilson, Ronald A. Bosco and others, 10 vols (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1971-2013)
- EL* *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. by Robert E. Spiller, Stephen E. Whicher, and Wallace E. Williams, 3 vols (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1959-72)
- JMN* *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. by William H. Gilman, Ralph H. Orth and others, 16 vols (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1960-82)
- L* *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. by Ralph L. Rusk and Eleanor M. Tilton, 10 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939 and 1990-5)

INTRODUCTION

Infinity in Askesis: Intention, Imperative, and Emerson's Encounters with Form

Why need I volumes, if one word suffice?
Emerson, 'The Day's Ration'

A written word is the choicest of relics.
Thoreau, *Walden*

When Edgar Allan Poe distinguished, in 1846's 'Philosophy of Composition', between his own careful literary constructions and the 'species of fine frenzy' by which the 'so-called poetry of the so-called Transcendentalists' was supposed to have been produced, he identified a polarity which conditions a certain attitude in and toward American literature even to the present.¹ While romantic models of inspired authorship by divine efflux have generally been given up, there is a persistent notion that Transcendentalism's distinction depends on the conditions of spontaneity and organicity traditionally common in romantic theories of composition.² This has much to do with the perceived qualities of the archetypal Transcendentalist text—the private journal—a form in which Ralph Waldo Emerson developed his ideas, sketched his lectures, poems, and essays, and generally used as a reflective medium of spontaneous expression and self-analysis throughout his career, famously advocating that his acolytes and friends do the same.³ As Thomas Meaney noted in a recent review article of new editions of writings by Emerson and Thoreau, the journals of such writers were filled with 'vatic utterances and

¹ Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Philosophy of Composition' (1846) in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe, with Selections from his Critical Writings* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1992), pp. 978-87 (p. 979, 986).

² A recent example of this is David Herd's *Enthusiast!*, in which Transcendentalist spontaneity is argued to be the catalyst for a kind of American writing which bears a germ of the vigour of its composition, indicative of the kind of divine immediacy implied by the title. See Herd, *Enthusiast!: Essays on Modern American Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 1-25.

³ See, for instance, the first line of Henry David Thoreau's equally celebrated private journal: "What are you doing now?" he [Emerson] asked. "Do you keep a journal?" So I make my first entry to-day'. Thoreau *The Journal: 1837-1861*, ed. by Damian Searls (New York: New York Review Books, 2009), p. 3.

sudden gasps of meaning [that would become ...] the recognisable American difference in literature, which never likes to be literary'.⁴

The spontaneity and organicity observed in this method also constitute the basis of the other forms used by Emerson and the Transcendentalists. Through our access to extensive cross-referenced editions of journals and collected works we now know the precise extent to which Emerson, significantly more than Thoreau, reused his journals in the composition of works for public consumption. As such, his canon is a kind of 'double writing': a textual body which, when taken as a whole, contains many instances of partial or full repetition, of the reinscription and accretion of passages or lines in different places and different contexts. It appears thus to have a dual aspect: particular instances are either spontaneous or derived, primary or secondary. But idiosyncrasies in the process are widely ignored by critics. Meaney's simple explanation is symptomatic: 'By ladling out wholesale passages of their notebooks into their books and essays, they ensured this immediacy was not lost in their finished work'.⁵ Essentially, the distinction between spontaneity and derivation is fixed and mechanical. The apparent organicity of sections of the published works is actually the product of a cunning contrivance, and Poe's mockery of their disingenuousness was justified.

Yet while this explanation does not want for clarity, it simplifies a problem that ought to be seen as fundamental in Emerson's compositional practice. After all, the extensive use of a private journal seems to imply a complex and multifaceted relation to text on the part of its author prior to or distinct from the impression their work has on a wider audience. And Emerson's journal, as is well-known, is in no sense a mere 'book of days' in the way a conventional diary might be, but a complex system of volumes kept in different conditions, sometimes for different purposes, yet nevertheless held together by sophisticated indexing systems developed by the author. Meaney's comment

⁴ Thomas Meaney, 'Poisoned Arrows', *TLS*, 5614 (2010), 3-4 (p. 4).

⁵ Meaney, p. 4.

simply distinguishes between ‘finished’ and unfinished work, and implies that Emerson’s sole audience was that for which the journal was mere rehearsal. Clearly, this is reductive. So what was the nature of that complex and multifaceted relation of Emerson with his own text, and what does it tell us about literary agency in a broader sense?

The purpose of this thesis is to elaborate the system which I perceive to underlie Emerson’s double writing practice, and explore how and why the philosophical exigencies attending the apparently rather simple phenomena of self-reading and the revision or reinscription of one’s own past writing are actually of crucial significance, first for Emerson himself, but by extension for the writer as a social or ethical functionary. Indeed, Emerson’s thought is at all times conditioned by his unique compositional practice, its possibilities fuelling his intellectual aspirations, and its boundaries defining their limits. Initially, in the early works of the 1830s, this poetic system informs his philosophy of the subject, but later his entire theory of the societal and cultural obligations of the scholar and the poet, and his own ability to fulfil them, is transformed by the demands of a relation to his own writing which never permits either his settled investment in text, or his ability to leave his past inscriptions behind.

Significantly, Emerson’s theory of composition is one of the few aspects of his work which lacks for attention. The mutual study of the *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* and *Collected Works* is a habit of all Emerson scholars, and more often than not no distinction is drawn between that which appears only in the journal, and that which is adapted or altered in the published work. The simple but critical fact that his canon consists of doubled text seldom enters consideration anywhere in Emerson studies. The one scholarly monograph which takes the journals for its primary text, Lawrence Rosenwald’s *Emerson and the Art of the Diary* (1988), offers compelling arguments in favour of neutralising hierarchies between ‘unfinished’ and ‘finished’ versions (something scholars have long done in principle by quoting indifferently from the two

bodies of text), yet does not extend to a detailed analysis of the relational play between forms which, even if not hierarchised, nevertheless occupy different positions of proximity to the author and describe variant conditions of authorial property.⁶

Furthermore, the object of my inquiry is to address a principle which has wider consequences in reconsidering authorship in romantic and post-romantic contexts. Simply by rereading and reinscribing, Emerson is ‘revising’—a term which does not necessitate alterations, but simply the ‘seeing again’ that accompanies a return to one’s past work. Indeed, even revision understood conventionally will include decisions to accept those aspects of a text which correlate with newly refined ideas of its function and coherence. The problem is that revision is given to be opposed to the basic notion of romanticism. A prominent recent book on the subject by Hannah Sullivan reaffirms this view through extensive generalisations, while two wide-ranging studies of romanticism and revision of the last twenty years also decline to offer much that might destabilise or reinterpret the concept.⁷ My proposition here is that Emerson’s discovery

⁶ Although Rosenwald raises the ongoing relation to text in Emerson’s canon, observing that ‘the Emersonian literary system as a whole’ can and should be considered in terms of his perpetually revisited relation to his texts, his main reasoning for rejecting a hierarchised distinction is more spurious. He declines to accept any differentiation in privacy between the published works and journals on the basis that an unknown number of friends and family had, on occasion, partial access to the journals’ contents. True as this is, it hardly detracts from the fact that Emerson rewrote extensively from their contents in the composition of work that he published, establishing a clear distinction in the relative ‘publicness’ of the two forms. Furthermore, the book simply declares its disinterest in the particulars of Emerson’s self-reading and reinscription since it is ‘not likely to yield much light’. His justification is that to do so assumes Emerson to be ‘the reviser of a draft for publication. But the journals are no draft; they are a text. A primary fact about Emerson the writer is that he created *two* texts, two large formal structures, for the same words’. This is a fact which I value in common with Rosenwald, but I find his logic for declining to see how the two corpuses interact in specific instances bizarre and inexplicable. Rosenwald, *Emerson and the Art of the Diary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 8-10, 62-8, and *passim*.

⁷ Hannah Sullivan’s recent *Work of Revision* situates its central claim—that revision becomes a fundamental part of literary composition with the modernists—against the generalisation that precursors, especially romantic precursors, had little to do with it. She does, however, acknowledge that her own distinction is constructed, since ‘[m]any of the romantics did more reworking than they or their publishers liked to pretend’. I wish here to augment this summary by expanding on why a desire existed to ‘pretend’ that romantic composition should be otherwise. Sullivan, *The Work of Revision* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 3, 9, and 25-32. In terms of romantic revision, both Zachary Leader’s *Revision and Romantic Authorship* and Jack Stillinger’s *Coleridge and Textual Instability* dedicate extensive attention to this problematic effect on establishing authoritative, scholarly editions of major works. Both consider some manner in which revision reflects aspects of the author’s broader poetic project: for instance, Leader notes that Wordsworth revises to affirm his conviction in consistent personal self-identity, whereas Byron revises for precisely the opposite reason, to prove to himself that life is as temporally inchoate as he suspects. Stillinger reasonably demonstrates that ‘revision’ exists in every relationship established with the

was that revision could be conceptualised both to aid and to disrupt the realisation of certain romantic ideals. My eventual finding will be that the demands of textual investment, which involves risk and loss insofar as one must submit to the formal exigencies of written language, necessitate that those philosophical ideals be revised, but the process of realisation undergone by Emerson is complex and convoluted.

Revision and Emerson's Reputation

Should doubts remain that this double writing practice is due further analysis, it is worth recalling the fact that it inflects Emerson's most famous 'vatic utterance' in a very significant way. Below is the source for the 'transparent eye-ball' passage in *Nature*, along with the published version. The italicisations are mine, and highlight the major changes:

<p>As I walked in the woods I felt what I often feel that nothing can befall me in life, no calamity, no disgrace, (leaving me my eyes) to which Nature will not offer a sweet consolation. Standing on the bare ground with my head bathed by the blithe air, & uplifted into the infinite space, <i>I become happy in my Universal relations.</i> The name of the nearest friend sounds then</p>	<p>In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed in the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—<i>all mean egotism vanishes.</i> <i>I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being</i></p>
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text, including, of course, those quite distinct from the author, thus devaluing any idea of authoritative editions. He uses this finding to substantiate a rather convoluted theory of 'versions' of given works, in which Coleridge is simply the case study, and as such relatively contingent. However, neither book argues that the process of revision itself is fundamental to how an author conceives of their poetic practice, as I see it to be the case with Emerson. See Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Stillinger, *Coleridge and Textual Instability: The Multiple Versions of the Major Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

foreign & accidental. I am the heir of *circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.*
 uncontained beauty & power. *And if then I* The name of the nearest friend sounds
walk with a companion, he should speak from his then foreign and accidental. To be
Reason to my Reason; that is both from God. To brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or
 be brothers, to be acquaintances, master servant, is then a trifle or a disturbance. I
 or servant, is then a trifle too insignificant am the lover of uncontained and immortal
 for remembrance. (*JMN* V, 18-9. The beauty. (*CW* I, 10)
 entry is dated March 19th 1835)

Some of these alterations are more striking than others. There are many minor changes, which reflect the habitual alterations between textual contexts evident throughout his career. Of these, one might note first the typographical revisions, with hyphens being used extensively in addition to commas to facilitate a sharper division in clauses. The first line quoted is generalised, this being one of Emerson's most common modifications when carrying over journal passages for publication. One might also remark the removal of reference to a 'companion' in this epiphanic moment on the same terms, as a shift from the identifiably personal to the general and typical.⁸ Other lines are moved or slightly altered: the 'heir' of beauty becomes its 'lover', while the 'trifle' of the presence of a brother is differently described, and so on. But these are of relatively slight significance to the semantics of the passage, and the two versions essentially direct the reader in the same manner, with one major exception: there is no mention of the transparent eye-ball, or the sentences which surround it, in the journal. A change as distinctive as this begs some questions. Why does the simple, and supposedly more immediate, 'I become happy in my Universal relations' stand out as so

⁸ For an instructive analysis of the kinds of alterations which became habitual to Emerson in his recompositing process, including the generalisation of thoughts and ideas which previously featured personal pronouns or reference to friends and family, see Glen M. Johnson, 'Emerson's Craft of Revision: The Composition of *Essays* (1841)', *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1980), 51-72.

inadequate while the majority of that which surrounds it survives the cut? What function does the frankly bizarre eye-ball trope serve that its less intrusive precursor does not? And, by speculating on this instance toward more general ends, is there something to be said of Emerson's reading, editing, and rewriting process that is not pragmatically related to a desire to make himself better understood by his readers, but rather has a bearing on the philosophical questions that he pursues?

One can examine the consequences of the inclusion of the eye-ball by attending to those few treatments of *Nature* which pick up on Emerson's decision to alter the journal version. While the first analyses of the issue, such as that of Jonathan Bishop in 1964, consider the change to be simply a mistake or oversight, an 'innocently' produced absurdity, later critics began to articulate positions in which the eye-ball served a specific purpose to condition or correct the impression of spontaneity into which it is embedded.⁹ In 1968, Walter Berthoff remarked on the striking rupture in the passage figured by the trope, much more so than the relatively benign journal alternative, making an argument for the philosophical (if not tropological) coherence of the eye-ball in which the very physicality of the terms used is critical. Berthoff writes that the uncomfortable image 'produces, I have always thought, the flutter of a singularly intense physical sensation'. He elaborates on the level of feeling: "'eye" would have done just as well, but "eye-ball" touches to the quick'; in sum, Emerson's is a language which 'continually modulates between physical images and conceptual abstractions'.¹⁰

Berthoff's comments echo a concern which is always at the heart of Emerson's work, particularly in his early career: the aspiration toward a working monism, a restitution of mind and world other than that of conventional philosophical idealism or skepticism, both positions being excessively intellectualised and inadequate to the

⁹ Jonathan Bishop, *Emerson on the Soul* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 10-15.

¹⁰ Walter Berthoff, 'Introduction' in Emerson, *Nature: A Facsimile of the First Edition* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1968), pp. vii-lxxxii (pp. lxi-lxiii).

realisation of a stable coherence between the material world and the mental processes by which Emerson was convinced it was ordered. Of particular interest here, however, is that Berthoff's last point discloses that this relation is played out constantly within the performances of Emerson's prose in a way which can only be circumscribed by invoking terms of affection, a discourse of relationality which recognises the physical character of the text and the surfeit of signification beyond the semiotics of ordinary language. In the case of the eye-ball, this function becomes its exemplary characteristic. Not only is its apprehension oddly physical—both in terms of its bizarre content and its intrusive and sudden appearance on the page—it's also logically flawed. As David Van Leer wrote in 1986, the trope is a rhetorical figure from which we 'recoil' because, '[w]orse than unreal or embarrassing, the image is intellectually incoherent'. It withdraws the power it presumes to offer in making me only 'part or particle of God'. Indeed, '[t]he very notion of transparency is purgative: everything passes through and nothing is retained [...] A truly transparent eye-ball would have no opaque retina on which to focus the image, and a cynic might claim that all Emerson's lens could really do would be to turn the world upside down'.¹¹

Based on the evidence available to us, therefore, it seems that the passage was altered by way of a cut, a considered and premeditated severance with the spontaneous coherence of the journal original. In its place, a metaphor with only limited precedent (in the words 'leaving me my eyes') is forcibly inserted, and the semantics of that metaphor bear out an implied discomfort in the process. What's particularly interesting about this instance in context is that it seems to directly contravene what Emerson supposes the proper function of language to be later on in *Nature*, where a kind of transparency is lauded in which one might 'pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things' (*CW* I, 20). Yet perhaps the precise opposite is the case: that the

¹¹ David Van Leer, *Emerson's Epistemology: The Argument of the Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 22.

revivifying of language to transform the word itself into a visible—that is, non-transparent—object is exactly what Emerson advocates there. In context, it constitutes a specific expression of doubt as to the practicality of philosophical formalising, actually rather deftly pointing out that maxims such as the *cogito*, with its pithy reduction of the mind-world problem to its essential limits, do little to facilitate the experience of a fundamental or authentic being.¹² More generally, it tells us that words do not give way to ready comprehension in these articulations of high abstraction, and should be perceived to reflect some objective quality, just as a material object reflects light to reveal its own presence and form. In other words, the transparent eye-ball becomes, paradoxically, the exemplary instance of language's non-transparency. The insertion represents a problem experienced in an ongoing relation to text. At the very moment when language is nominally hoped to do most, to convey this sense of immanent immersion in the divine, Emerson steps in as editor and adapts the text toward the converse, introducing a trope which disrupts immediacy and renders the representation paradoxical. Against its content, it is a passage we cannot internalise or cause to vanish into understanding. It tests our credulity and receptivity; it sticks to the page in front of us in its unchanging, intransigent form. Understanding the broader significance of this intervention is the object of all that follows.

The Investment in Form

This intervention by language into the grammar of philosophical formalism, and in another distinct sense into material form, also goes some way toward explaining how the complicated relation to text in Emerson's works might shed light on disagreements in the history of his reception. From his contemporaries Francis Bowen and Andrews

¹² As Van Leer writes, '[i]n its very silliness, the eye-ball avoids the subtle dangers of a concept like the Cartesian *cogito*, which in its restraint seems to prove more than it actually can'. That is, where the *cogito* moves toward synthetic affirmation, the eye-ball maintains mutually exclusive positions in tellingly uncomfortable and convoluted terms. Van Leer, p. 52.

Norton, through to T. S. Eliot's famous statement of 1919 that 'the essays of Emerson are already an encumbrance', to Yvor Winters and Perry Miller, and finally to the New Americanist movement of the 1990s and 2000s, there has always been a vocal section of Emerson's potential audience that strongly objects to the esteem his work has managed to attain and his continued canonical centrality in American literature and thought.¹³ Consistently, criticism has asserted that Emerson surely could not—or otherwise should not—have meant much of what he wrote, and on many occasions the point at issue boils down to a specific formal decision made in the compositional process; a choice between possibilities in syntax, logic, or vocabulary; the use of an inapposite figure or trope, or a word selected less for transparency of meaning than for effecting the recognition of its etymology, or the construction of an unusual internal logic by way of repetition in poetic or conceptual terms, and so on. As Francis Bowen noted when he reviewed *Nature* for the *Christian Examiner* in 1837, Emerson's prose exhibits the 'spice of affectation', and Bowen, who knew very well who had written the anonymously published text, said that 'the author knows better than to offend so openly against good taste, and, in many passages of great force and beauty of expression, has shown that he can do better'.¹⁴ From his earliest readers, therefore, the charge is levelled that Emerson seems to wilfully mislead his audience by way of techniques that are intrusive, obtuse, or otherwise discomfiting.

Emerson's work is curious because it leads us to query the nature of authorial agency at every stage: first, in its compositional process whereby the author returns to and interrogates, corrects, or simply passively reproduces what he finds there; secondly, in the decisions taken at one of those steps against his potential to 'know better'; finally, by appearing to trust and depend on the willingness on the part of the reader to accept

¹³ T. S. Eliot, 'American Literature', *The Athenaeum* (April 25th, 1919), 236-7.

¹⁴ Among the offending passages, Bowen quotes the transparent eye-ball. See Bowen, 'Review of *Nature*', *The Christian Examiner and General Review*, 21 (1837), 371-85 (pp. 371-2).

(or otherwise reject) what is in front of them. As such, against traditional perceptions of his work, it seems appropriate to declare that his writing should be of specific interest to scholars interested in literary form. My reasoning for this is that the invocation of form always has at its core a simple set of questions: why this word and not another? Why the selection of trope, of phrase, of tone, and so on? They are questions asked both of the author/s and, possibly independently, of the text itself, of how it functions according to the choices it embodies irrespective of how its author/s may have come to inscribe the particular linguistic units that we have before us.¹⁵ What's more, because Emerson's career has traditionally been seen to describe a general trajectory from 'freedom' to 'fate', from the prospects of enthusiastic agency in *Nature* to the ironic and self-conscious resignation of the late essay 'Fate', this question of agency as the essence of literary form ought to be considered especially significant.¹⁶

A caveat is perhaps necessary here, since within areas of literary study which are commonly identified as 'formalist' questions of agency have traditionally been deemed irrelevant. New Criticism, predominantly by way of W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's 'intentional fallacy', declined all recourse to discussions of literary agency. In their famous formulation, '[i]f the poet succeeded in doing' whatever it was he set out to do, 'then the poem itself shows' it. If, on the other hand of this argument, 'the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence', and we must go 'outside' the poem, to contextual or 'external' evidence, which is properly the area of literary

¹⁵ Of course, formal analyses ordinarily cannot ascribe authorial autonomy to a single figure if there is any suggestion of intervention on the part of editors, or indeed of non-professional readers acting in the capacity of editors or emendors. Emerson, however, is somewhat unique insofar as, by virtue of financial independence and literary association, he held complete editorial control over his own work as published by James Munroe, later by first Phillips, Sampson, and Company and then Ticknor and Fields, right up until the onset of dementia in the 1870s. In combination with his journal and notebook writings—private texts which, while occasionally read by friends (with Emerson's permission), were principally for his eyes alone—it is reasonable to consider that for almost the entirety of his writing the editorial judgement exercised, in a practical sense, was solely his own.

¹⁶ As his title suggests, this is the principal thesis of Stephen Whicher's influential 1953 study. See Whicher, *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, (1953), 2nd edn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971). The essential parameters of Whicher's argument, and especially his model of a gradual sequence of shifts toward the acceptance of fatalism across Emerson's major works, remain entirely valid.

biography, given to be a wholly distinct category from literary criticism.¹⁷ The object of the New Critics, of course, was the judgement of poetic value and a ‘success’ based on their own criteria of the autonomous artwork, but the rejection of intent as a condition tied to formalist conditions was carried over as a critical norm into the concerns of structuralism and post-structuralism, in which the author becomes a function, first of socio-political structures, and later of language.¹⁸ In the same critical moment, Marxist commentators have argued that the study of form itself, the iconic discipline of bourgeois aestheticism and disengagement, directs attention away from hegemonic ideological structures and thus precludes meaningful (i.e., politically motivated) agency and intervention, making it complicit with those hegemonies.¹⁹

These rejections of formalist approaches in literary studies have been enormously influential, and it has only been in the last ten to fifteen years that scholarship has begun making tentative steps to rediscover value in studies of the material limits of the text. Yet a particular point of interest in this advocacy of a return to a formalist disciplinary attitude is its fundamental recognition that it is a practice which knows of and works within practical bounds: it is ‘askesis, an at least temporary acceptance of disciplinary enclosure’, and, critically, ‘voluntary’, as Jonathan Loesberg has written.²⁰ To elect to study form is to pursue partial rather than totalising ends, and the critic that follows this path must remain cognisant of this fact. But equally, to

¹⁷ W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, ‘The Intentional Fallacy’, in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), pp. 3-18 (p. 4).

¹⁸ The history of this tendency has been well documented elsewhere and need not be elaborated here. Suffice it to say, however, that the principles they describe, of textual genesis being inseparable from the exigencies of the culture and society the author belonged to, or, more pressingly, the language in which he or she exists, were apparent in the nineteenth-century to Emerson and were explicitly interrogated throughout his career, as I will argue throughout.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Terry Eagleton, ‘Ideology and Literary Form’, in *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: Verso, 1978), pp. 102-61.

²⁰ Jonathan Loesberg, ‘Cultural Studies, Victorian Studies, and Formalism’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27 (1999), 539-48 (p. 541). In treatments of romantic literature amongst practitioners of New Formalism, this aspect is especially pronounced. Writing of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, Susan Wolfson notes the ‘antithetical’ relation between that author’s romantic universal and the ‘profanity’ of the necessity that it be pressed into ‘the material form of writing’. Wolfson, ‘What Good is Formalist Criticism? Or; *Forms* and *Storms* and the Critical Register of Romantic Poetry’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 37 (1998), 77-94 (p. 78).

commit to form as a writer entails issues of voluntary partialisation, of a kind of relation to one's own work that is very far from the ideal type of disembodiment found in the New Critical model of the completely successful, immanent, independent poem, and which countenances the lack of authorial autonomy argued for in various forms across the twentieth-century by structuralism, post-structuralism, New Historicism, and so on. As another advocate of a revived formalism, W. J. T. Mitchell, puts it, merely by existing (which means, in a discursive context, to speak; in a literary context, to write) we are 'in fact committed to form and to various formalisms without knowing it'.²¹ Before it is possible to know what it means to make a commitment, we must already have made it; before the ramifications of an act of partialisation can be understood, our will to act considered, the act must be complete.²²

The consequences of this are best brought out in a relatively early essay by Stanley Cavell, who in 1969 wrote on the contested topic of artistic intention in a manner that, with hindsight, would inevitably lead him to Emerson, given the importance that Emerson accords the principle of voluntary partialisation throughout his career. Responding directly to Monroe Beardsley and Joseph Margolis, Cavell entirely rejects the intentional fallacy on the following grounds:

The artist is responsible for everything that happens in his work—and not just in the sense that it is done, but in the sense that it is *meant*. It is a terrible responsibility; very few men have the gift and the patience and the singleness to

²¹ W. J. T. Mitchell, 'The Commitment to Form; Or, Still Crazy after All These Years', *PMLA*, 118 (2003), 321-5 (p. 324).

²² As Mitchell goes on to say, echoing the quote from Cavell which follows in the above, recognising our investment in form means recognising that we have been committed as though against our will: it is likely to seem 'something one discovers about oneself, a situation or condition of engagement that I find myself in', a situation he likens to how one might find oneself 'committed' to an institution following a diagnosis of insanity. Mitchell, p. 323.

shoulder it. But it is all the more terrible, when it *is* shouldered, not to appreciate it, to refuse to understand something meant so well.²³

The significance of Cavell's point, and it is one he would develop over the following decades, is that in writing—indeed, in the creation of any bounded art form—the artist must accept silently (not that they are likely to have the right of reply in any case) all interpretation, however diverse, attendant on what they have created as ultimately what they *meant*. This is why intention is actually a redundant concept—it is probably more problematic than it is worth to seek to ascertain whether a particular reading was intended, but, nevertheless, it must be read as meant insofar as a reader has taken it, according to reasonable principles, to mean something. Rather than become concentrated, determinate, and universal, the artist's thoughts are, at the moment of their manifestation in the partialised final form of the work, made diffuse, impersonal, an indeterminate mass of possibilities which may very well be unrelated to the artist's desire. And yet the artist is responsible for it, and remains responsible in perpetuity.

Returning to the primary subject, this is precisely what form meant to Emerson throughout his career, although his attitude towards its enclosing necessity changed significantly between the mid-1830s and 1850, the period with which this thesis is concerned. He opened his career as a published author with a renunciation of a kind of formalism that had become odious to him. The rejection of the ossified forms of tradition in the opening lines of *Nature* sets a tone which reaches its fullest expression in the Divinity School 'Address'. Here, the type of historical Christianity Emerson attacks is labelled 'appropriated and formal'; the pulpit is liable to have been 'usurped by a formalist' who then speaks with a 'hollow, dry, creaking formality', and so on (*CWI*, 82, 85, 87). But, even as he makes these remarks, Emerson speaks in another register of

²³ Stanley Cavell, 'A Matter of Meaning It', in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), pp. 213-37 (pp. 236-7). Emphasis in original.

form and its uses: 'let the breath of new life be breathed by you through the forms already existing [...] A whole popedom of forms one pulsation of virtue can uplift and vivify' (*CW* I, 92). The amelioration implied here is from bad 'formalism' to a good, revivifying, interrogative 'formalist' practice, and not the abrogation of one's responsibility to a world conditioned by formal parameters altogether, as might initially seem to be the case.²⁴

Form, in its multiple meanings across philosophy and literary theory, was of crucial significance to the way Emerson thought. He was not—was never—merely an egotistic intuitionist, a deluded and enthusiastic pseudo-Kantian in the sense that some of his friends and associates may have been; even from the outset of his career, when his idealist tendencies were at their strongest, secular conditions of particularity and difference consistently dissuaded him from faith in one's capacity to see through the visible world to its spiritual, 'formal' (in a philosophical sense) essence.²⁵ The difficulty in assuming the posture of the man of infinite possibility in a world which, from the moment we exist in it, declines and delimits possibility constitutes the background to a remark in an 1841 address, 'The Method of Nature': 'So we must admire in man the form of the formless, the concentration of the vast, the house of reason, the cave of memory' (*CW* I, 127). In this sentence, Emerson states what later in life he would reiterate as the essence of his philosophy, the infinitude of the private man, but also the contradiction which always faces it: form of the formless, infinitude bound up in the finite, private, and particular, and the idea tied to the materiality of time and of place,

²⁴ Susan Wolfson makes a comparable methodological point in *Formal Charges* in an explicitly literary context. She writes that "'Formalist' criticism [...] names a concern with how poetic form is articulated and valued', which differentiates it from "'formalism,'" which in critical and political tradition typically names an ideologically toned disciplinary commitment that prioritises and privileges form in relation to other possible locations of value'. Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 235, n. 1. Emphasis in original.

²⁵ Accusations of Emerson's delusional intuitionism have been made many times, but the most forceful is probably Joel Porte's treatment in his *Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1966), pp. 68-92. I will address the shortcomings of these assumptions insofar as they specifically impinge on my thesis in chapter one.

‘form’ in the sense of conforming and performing according to determinative principles.²⁶

It is crucial to note, however, that this principle appeared to Emerson primarily, and most forcefully, through his ruminations on language. In January 1835, for instance, he writes that while ‘[t]he Coles and Briggses can finish their sermon, the man of genius cannot because they write words & pages which are finite things & can be numbered & ended at pleasure; He writes after Nature which is endless’ (*JMN* V, 14). And the same generally pessimistic tone inflects other musings on the subject over the following years. In 1838, next to the journal source of the proscription in ‘Self-Reliance’ of fear of contradiction in one’s utterances, he contemplates the tendency to ‘worship the dull God Terminus & not the Lord of Lords’; from another entry later that year: ‘Gladly I would solve if I could this problem of a Vocabulary which like some treacherous wide shoal waylays the tall bark [...] In common life every man is led by the nose by a verb’ (*JMN* VII, 25, 149). Writing means restraint; it also means giving of oneself into the ebb and flow of currents over which the author has no command. As such, writing is always, as it were, ruinous—‘[e]ven the great & gifted do not escape but with great talents & partial inspiration have local cramps, withered arms, & mortification’. At once, however, exigencies are implicitly accepted. Not only is Emerson writing in spite of a distaste for its demands, but in his writing he recognises the principle of choice, a limited function, rather than liberty: ‘A man is a choice’; ‘A Scholar is a selecting principle’ (*JMN* V, 115; VII, 50). By 1843, Emerson’s attitude seems wholly accustomed to this fact: ‘And thou shalt serve the god Terminus, the bounding Intellect, & love Boundary or Form:

²⁶ These are, of course, archetypal romantic preoccupations—they might be rephrased along the lines of the relationship between individual freedom and societal obligation, or between the spontaneous originality of the genius and the shared, legalistic mediums through which that genius is refracted. But while a text like Thomas McFarland’s *Originality and Imagination* is and will remain a major statement of the ‘originality paradox’ that lies at the heart of the ethics of romanticism, an extended study of Emerson in this light can perhaps be justified given that, by McFarland’s own admission, Emerson is peculiarly exemplary in this respect. See McFarland, *Originality and Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp. 14-5, 30.

believing that Form is an oracle which never lies' (*JMN* VIII, 405). Tracing how Emerson came to such a consideration from his earlier positions is a principal aim of this thesis.

What begins in aspirations of singularity, pure identity in mind and act, ends in a complex mediacy through a language which is considered in its doubleness. If Emerson well understood that the demands of writing dictate that he accept some 'terrible responsibility', then this does not mean that he acquiesces without reservation, or without seeking alternatives. Throughout, I will illustrate how discipline in the acceptance of boundedness impacts not simply on Emerson's thoughts on literature and on his own capacity to express (and realise) his personal sense of infinite possibility, but also on his thought on literature's sociality and his own social role as his literary fame grew. Indeed, Emerson's fundamental ethics, for good or ill, come from his literary experience, and the obligation to the world at large derived from this is then explored and fulfilled through the demands of writing undertaken simultaneously in two distinct contexts, private and public.

Literary Ethics: Mind, World, and Language

To get a better sense of how the binaries in Emerson's literary ethics are defined, one can turn to the recent interest in Emerson's role in discourses concerned with the ethical deployment of language acts, which emerged from the ground-breaking work of Stanley Cavell. Cavell, with his background in Austinian speech act theory and Wittgensteinian philosophies of language, was first to draw out Emerson's recognition of the necessity of a kind of abandonment of subjective autonomy in the entry into language. He initially raised the principle in a book treating of Thoreau: 'Writing—heroic writing, the writing of a nation's scripture—must assume the conditions of language as such; re-experience, as it were, the fact that there is such a thing as language

at all and assume responsibility for it—find a way to acknowledge it'.²⁷ What is being acknowledged is its necessary priority, its existence irrespective of ourselves, and thus that our ethical bearing, our sense of place, depends upon it: 'Words come to us from a distance; they were there before we were; we are born into them. Meaning them is accepting the fact of their condition'.²⁸ When he came, a few years later, to apply these ideas to Emerson in addition to Thoreau, he appears to recognise Emerson's stated distaste for precisely this imperative, hence the attitude is not necessarily 'heroic'. On the one hand:

What still wants expression is a sense that my relation to the existence of the world, or to my existence in the world, is not given in words but in silence. (This would not be a matter of keeping your mouth shut but of understanding when, and how, not to yield to the temptation to say what you do not or cannot exactly mean.)²⁹

Or, on the other, that for Emerson (as well as for Thoreau, in Cavell's opinion):

the achievement of the human requires not [Heideggerian] inhabitation and settlement but abandonment, leaving. Then everything depends upon your realisation of abandonment, that you have felt enthusiastically what there is to abandon yourself to, that you can treat the others there are as those to whom the inhabitation of the world can now be left.³⁰

²⁷ Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition* (1972) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 33.

²⁸ Cavell, *Senses*, p. 64.

²⁹ Cavell, 'An Emerson Mood', in *Senses*, p. 145.

³⁰ Cavell, 'Thinking of Emerson', in *Senses*, p. 138.

The space between the concepts raised here circumscribes a crucial set of conditions which are seldom fully interrogated by those writing in Cavell's wake.³¹ The first excerpt describes not taking responsibility, exactly, but seeking to withhold the commitment that entails. It is a mode of writing or speaking that defers the point, but not necessarily by silence, as Cavell observes, which instead suggests a mode of writing around, or away from, the obligation of writing. In the second, meanwhile, the major notion of 'abandonment' is broached, but Cavell is careful to distinguish that this principle demands proper 'realisation' or 'acknowledgement'—it is to bequeath oneself entirely to a world which one no longer inhabits; it is, therefore, a sacrificial act and a submission to legacy demanding much of the author, as the earlier quoted passage from 'A Matter of Meaning it' suggests. It should be clear that these two conditions—the decision either to give oneself over to language, or to try to cheat this exigency—are mutually exclusive, that a writer who might advocate the former but practice the latter—as I will suggest Emerson does in almost all of his writing from the late-1830s onwards—will invariably produce a body of work that straddles a contradiction. It seems to me that much of the major criticism written after or in engagement with the concepts that Cavell raises either overlooks or, more regularly, over-theorises this fact, draining it of its inherent complications in search of synthetic resolution.

Richard Poirier, for instance, argues that the central theme in Emerson's work is that 'the act of self-erasure, of disowning the words by which just a few seconds ago you

³¹ One essay I will not be discussing in detail here is worthy of specific mention insofar as it prefigures some of the crucial principles I'll be covering. The essay, by Mutlu Konuk Blasing, adroitly recognises that language occupies a mediating 'middle term' between the polar principles of mind and world, ME and NOT ME in Emerson's thought, making 'law of the mind incarnate as the law of nature', it is power, but it is also fate and 'puts limits even on thought [...] for it thinks us'. Blasing considers that the fruition of this principle only comes in Emerson's poetry, a reasonable assumption given poetry's very presence and concentration; it is, she writes after Emerson, the "'Fatal *is*" of form', a point I will take up in chapter five in my own discussion of the poetry. I disagree with the terms by which Blasing describes the years of prose as merely 'precursor' to the focus of the poetry, although she is again correct to propose that the latter functions quite differently from the former, as I will discuss later. See Blasing, 'Essaying the Poet: Emerson's Poetic Theory and Practice', *Modern Language Studies*, 15.2 (1985), 9-23.

may have identified yourself, becomes in fact, paradoxically, an indication of selfhood'.³² This may be so, but it constitutes a false abandonment; instead, it withholds commitment on the terms of the former condition quoted from Cavell, and, in perpetuating subjective autonomy, declines the ethical obligation in language. That is not to say that Poirier's observations are not of crucial significance—the mode of a writing which asserts neutrality via non-committal is an Emersonian speciality, and will be a point of discussion throughout this thesis, particularly in chapters two and three. But his reading only offers substantial insight into one side of Emerson's literary concerns, a habit that recurs in later, similar treatments.

In a 1998 essay, Sharon Cameron offers acute insight into the lack of an identifiable self in Emerson's style, and posits that what is uncomfortably apparent in his work is the absence of anything 'personal' at all, instead 'there is characteristically vacancy in the place where we might expect to find a person'.³³ This, she argues, is what underpins Emerson's discontinuous and alogical essayistic prose. But once again, this is a reading that emphasises the literary invocation of neutrality, evident when Cameron goes on to critique Emerson's voice for lacking the authority of which his essays speak precisely because his 'statements are *insufficiently* personal'; non-heroic, contrary to his stated aims, because 'the heroic implies a *person's* contact with the real [...] The legitimacy of [heroic] discourse [...] depends on the visibility of the person speaking', their making a stake for themselves by accepting personal definition.³⁴ True as this is with respect to the aspect of Emerson's work that withholds commitment, it should also be observed that he well knew that confessing personhood was an act of renunciation—'[a] person is finite personality, is finiteness', as he noted in 1837—and therefore

³² Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 11. Poirier is here summarising the content of his essay 'Writing Off the Self', which constituted the final chapter of his *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1987), pp. 182-223.

³³ Sharon Cameron, 'The Way of Life by Abandonment: Emerson's Impersonal', *Critical Inquiry*, 25 (1998), 1-31 (p. 17).

³⁴ Cameron, 'Way of Life' pp. 25-6. Emphasis in original.

Cameron's supposition that the 'missing sense of a person' is 'ethically illegitimate if not indeed simply delusional' seems to me to be always incorporated and prefigured in his work by the excessive presence of aspirations to neutrality discovered there (*JMN* V, 282).³⁵

Finally, the tendency persists among the most recent treatments of Emerson within a post-Cavellian context. Branka Arsić's *On Leaving* is a significant recent study which examines broadly the same Emersonian concepts at the heart of this thesis—for instance, the destabilisation of the subject position both in Emerson's rhetoric and his philosophy and the emphasis on mannerism in language and act. I will return at the appropriate points to Arsić's discussions of these particulars. But in spite of the philosophical sophistication which Arsić's argument certainly possesses, and my broad agreement both with the content and method of much of her book, I disagree with her on a more fundamental level. Arsić's model takes the principle Cavell labels the 'aversive', the necessity of 'abandonment', and portrays it as the single and totalising function of Emerson's philosophical and literary project. The problem is that this model, in spite of Arsić's proposals to the contrary, always ultimately leads us back to *subjective* liberation; these ideas are said to free Emerson (and, by extension, pedagogically demonstrate the processes involved in this liberation to the reader) from the strictures of personhood that he may be let to *live* in an authentic way, a way that is consanguine with the reader's mutual existence. Leaving in Arsić's thesis is also levity, and it permits the avoidance of the kinds of pressing concerns that have always seemed absent from Emerson—whether it be specific social concerns or more testing abstract qualities such as evil—promulgating a thesis in which 'there is no completeness', simply

³⁵ Cameron, 'Way of Life' p. 4. On this point, a 2005 essay by Rachel Cole is worthy of remark insofar as it argues the counter to Cameron's point, making the case that personality in Emerson's work is defined by limitation and restraint in a manner epitomised by language's capacity for the same. See her comments on how personality is invoked by a 'specifically physical textual presence', 'the textual figure of Montaigne as something like a material object', permitting Emerson to see the French essayist as one with whom he could have, as it were, a *personal* relationship. See Cole, 'The Reality Effect: Emerson's Speakers and the Phenomenon of Personality', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 18 (2005), 67-86 (p. 72).

a perpetual process of fluxion. Arsić is led to posit that we should read Emerson in the most ordinary and quotidian sense, so that through her study we should learn about the extent to which ‘the question of leaving and the repercussions that the idea of universal fluctuation has for our everyday lives’.³⁶

The problem in all of these versions of a unitary Emerson is a consistent failure to recognise the extent to which authorial responsibility—indeed, responsibility as such—is a notion taken seriously in his work, even if its models are extremely unstable. Full, uncompromising investment in one’s actions is an archetypal Thoreauvian demand, his criticism of American democracy in ‘Resistance to Civil Government’ (1847) being specifically that in it ‘[t]he character of the voters is not staked, [as such, they are not ...] vitally concerned that [...] right should prevail’.³⁷ Emerson is, of course, much more complicated than this, but he nevertheless states frequently enough simple sentiments similar to those in 1844’s ‘The Poet’, that ‘[w]ords are also actions, and actions are a kind of words’ (*CW* III, 6). Turning back to one of the critics just discussed, therefore, Arsić recognises (if perhaps unconsciously) that writing necessitates commitment if one wishes to be taken seriously and to participate in discourse: as she writes, ‘[m]y *investment*, therefore, is in the epistemological, existential, ethical, and political consequences of Emerson’s idea of universal departing’.³⁸ Yet her

³⁶ Branka Arsić, *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 8, 6, 9. This reasoning may help to justify Arsić’s proximity to Emerson throughout. Although it is philosophically astute, the book is characterised by a lack of direct engagement with scholarly contexts either within or without the confines of Emerson studies, and Arsić’s lack of critical distance can at times be the most powerful, if problematic, factor of her argument. That said, Arsić is not the only recent critic of Emerson to propose that we read him as a kind of guru, perhaps a re-foundationalising response that restores sageness to the sage after the broader tendency of iconoclasm in New Historicist critiques of the 1990s. John Lysaker begins *Emerson and Self-Culture* declaring his intent to ‘defend, by way of Emerson, a living conception of self-culture’, and to read him not within scholarly askesis but ‘personally, to receive it as it bears upon my own life’. See Lysaker, *Emerson and Self-Culture* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 1, 8.

³⁷ Henry David Thoreau, ‘Resistance to Civil Government’ (1847) in *Aesthetic Papers*, ed. by Elizabeth P. Peabody (Boston: Elizabeth P. Peabody, 1849), pp. 189-211 (p. 194).

³⁸ Arsić, p. 12. Emphasis added. This investment, it should be noted, extends to what is expected of the reader as Arsić explains that her book is structured ‘as an itinerary’, its chapters ‘interconnected and designed to have a cumulative effect’, implicitly chastising the flippant reader who might wish to come along only for what immediately interests or concerns them.

argument consistently exonerates Emerson from having to undergo similar obligations. His essays, she proposes, are ‘the writing of this selfless undecidedness’, the murmurings of a ‘purely relational grasslike self, which bends with the wind’.³⁹ As Cavell had written in perhaps his most concentrated piece on the ethical obligation of Emerson’s writing, the 1984 lecture ‘Being Odd, Getting Even’, the demand of language is decisiveness itself, the decisiveness of acting now; it is the demonstration of one’s ‘readiness to subject your desire to words [...], to become intelligible, with no assurance that you will be taken up’.⁴⁰ To declare something undecided or, worse, generally undecidable, as Cavell finds some insubstantial versions of deconstruction to do, is ‘the taking of a posture, and a poor one’: it is, of course, a decision made against the making of a decision, an acquittal, a neutralisation—not leaving one’s utterance to chance, but maintaining sovereignty by declining to limit one’s possibility.⁴¹ Declining to make a decision is ‘selfless’ only insofar as it constitutes the refusal to posit a limited person. In a *personal* sense, however, it offers the subjective liberty of not having to commit oneself, of not being ‘clapped into jail’, and assuming the infinite selfhood that Emerson famously posits in ‘Self-Reliance’ (*CW* II, 29).

If there is a shortcoming in Cavell’s treatment of this theme in Emerson, however, it is to do with the very clarity with which he frames Emerson’s dichotomous attitudes, of the necessity of giving oneself over, and the disinclination to do so. His solution (which he finds underlying Emerson’s thought) is prospective—‘[g]enius is accordingly the name of the promise that the private and the social will be achieved together, hence of the perception that our lives now take place in the absence of either’.⁴² What Cavell’s treatment doesn’t account for, in its concentrated encapsulation

³⁹ Arsić, p. 327, 328.

⁴⁰ Cavell, ‘Being Odd, Getting Even’ (1984) in *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 114.

⁴¹ Cavell, ‘Being Odd’, p. 113.

⁴² Cavell, ‘Being Odd’, p. 114.

of the essential problem, is the process by which Emerson's writing modulates this situation over a period of time, how Emerson appears to recognise, and constantly seeks to recalibrate, the nature of his condition in language: how, most of all, it is reflected in the division in his writing into its 'doubled' form. Indeed, the common principle in all of Cavell's work on Emerson—the tracing of the limits of our agency in the world and in language, which he examines through the lens of a coming to terms with skepticism, with our capacity to know of and intervene in the world without—is something that comes to Emerson not momentarily but gradually, and it is a discovery made through the prism of language. First, language is the type of the world prior to our own self-knowledge; its conventions are our terms of definition, and we must internalise prior to any attempt at expression.⁴³ Secondly, it does not necessarily accept the impress of our will as purely as one might hope—rather, we are bound to accept its laws, and their disruption of any attempt, on our part, of unique self-definition or expression. But, finally, it is nevertheless the epitome of mediums, and acknowledging and practising limited but still legitimate modes of action within its parameters is what Emerson theorises and aspires to.

Against the trite assumptions on literary agency made by vocal advocates of New Americanism in the last twenty years, therefore, Emerson fails to assent to an idea of literature's unambiguous social or cultural power, much less to put such an idea into practice. The work of Donald Pease and John Carlos Rowe, for instance, is so fixed and restricted in its presumption of the efficacy of an author's socio-political agency that it simply cannot accommodate the expansion needed when this condition comes into question.⁴⁴ So, rather than the exertion of personal freedoms, it is discipline and

⁴³ For a more extensive exegesis of the inherited and legalistic elements of this principle as derived from Cavell and illustrated in Emerson's 'Self-Reliance', see David Greenham, 'The Skeptical Deduction: Reading Kant and Cavell in Emerson's "Self-Reliance"', *ESQ*, 53 (2007), 253-81.

⁴⁴ As Donald Pease's definitional argument declared, the New Americanist 'insist[s] on literature as an agency within the political world and thereby violate[s] the fundamental presupposition of the liberal

‘longanimity’ that Emerson admires in writing, and it is just such longanimity—or askesis, to give that word its full sense—that he will eventually come to seek to replicate.⁴⁵ The problem for the reader of Emerson is that the limited acts of will he postulates, and proposes to enact, tend despite the theoretical high-mindedness which accompanies them to end in practice in contrivance and machination. There are multiple reasons why this is repeatedly the case across his career, but broadly speaking, the demand described by Cavell as a ‘terrible responsibility’ appears to be experienced in exactly this way. As I will demonstrate throughout, Emerson is a radical theoretician of the possibilities of literary form, albeit one with some curious flaws that lead him to acquittals, aversion of responsibility, and a general distaste for the theories that otherwise threaten to enclose him, so that the sense of a ‘double writing’ is extended to

imagination’, a point developed in a follow-up article which posited that ‘[p]rimary identification with the sociopolitical strategies of social movements, rather than the academic discipline they practice, leads to a very different description of what it means to be constituted as a New Americanist’. In other words, the validity of their scholarly interest is to be judged according to its efficacy as an agent of social activism. John Carlos Rowe followed this advice to the letter in his *At Emerson’s Tomb* of 1997. Finding Emerson inapplicable to the era’s major emancipatory social movements, Rowe concluded that Emerson’s ‘aesthetic ideology’ functioned to neutralise literature as a space of socio-political agency, so that ‘Emersonian Transcendentalism had an important ideological function to serve in nineteenth-century America: the legitimization of those practices of intellectual abstraction required to rationalise the contradictions of the new industrial economy’. The assumptions made by this school of criticism have more to do with anti-canonical controversy than the specific foibles of their major targets, and as such it is not surprising that they fail to acknowledge their perpetuation of the very notions they claim to be repudiating. What could be more conventionally Emersonian, after all, than calculated iconoclasm in the name of re-establishing a potency lost in the elite discourse of academe? As Elizabeth Maddock Dillon has written, the implicit object of New Americanism is always ‘to reclaim a form of agency that academic interpellation had destroyed [...] an autonomous liberal subject is reconstituted through escaping the academy’. They differ from Emerson, however, insofar as they fail to confront or question whether the ‘impotence’ they experience and look to overcome may be more fundamental—and, as Dillon adds, more *textual*—than they are willing to countenance, for to do so requires a disciplinary commitment they reject by claiming to operate wholly outside of conventional academic prerogatives. Donald Pease, ‘New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon’, *boundary 2*, 17 (1990), 1-37 (p. 16); Pease, ‘National Identities, Postmodern Artefacts, and Postnational Narratives’, *boundary 2*, 19 (1992), 1-13 (p. 8); John Carlos Rowe, *At Emerson’s Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 5; Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, ‘Fear of Formalism: Kant, Twain, and Cultural Studies in American Literature’, *Diacritics*, 27.4 (1998), 46-69 (pp. 50-3).

⁴⁵ Emerson finds cause to discuss a slightly unorthodox use of the term longanimity in reflecting on Andrews Norton’s famous attack in the wake of the Divinity School ‘Address’; unexpectedly, his comments seem to evince praise for Norton’s determination and style without irony, finding instead in his ‘tenacity of purpose [...] what Bacon calls longanimity’. Later that same month, he reflects on a letter penned to Margaret Fuller, recording the lines ‘seeing how entirely the value of facts is in the classification of the eye that sees them I desire to study, I desire *longanimity*, to use Bacon’s word’ (*JMN VII*, 63, 92). In Emerson’s hands, the term comes to stand for a singularity that is the product of discipline, a cultured forbearance required to countenance the demands that writing places upon his concept of liberty, which corroborates the fuller sense of ‘askesis’ in classical Greek as training for a trade or profession.

incorporate the ways in which he first confronts and then evades the responsibility of writing *through* writing, a writing that comes to have very different meanings for the author who depends upon it, and the reader to whom it is nominally addressed.

Before I give an overview of the chapters to follow, it is perhaps necessary to qualify what may appear to be a contradiction in my treatment of Emerson in the context of the above. A perpetual interrogation of informing conditions, and an experimental play against their constrictions, does not quite suit Emerson's youthful objective—the assertion and affirmation of his divine and self-reliant individuality. The overtones of bourgeois subjectivity are never far away in such considerations, as a great many readers and critics of Emerson have written and said. But I find it somewhat unreasonable to hold Emerson fully to account on this; as an author in the post-Kantian tradition, he was neither the first nor the last to give in to the dream of a coherent philosophy of the subject. However, what is significant is that it is in the question of form that Emerson's aspirations and anxieties are played out: it is here that he sees his theories founder, and here that he seeks to subsequently reinvent them. As such, the concessions to Emerson's more exuberant and, to a modern reader, embarrassing ideas in my earlier chapters are necessary if one is to successfully trace the trajectory of his ideas throughout the 1840s.

Synopsis

Part one of the thesis traces the first stage of Emerson's poetic programme, which develops from ideas current in his philosophical and theological milieu and aspires to affirm the character of some essential, intuited self-consciousness through writing, a project which founders on the necessary conditions of literary form already discussed. In the first chapter, I develop the grounds of my thesis on Emerson's interest in form as a principle of secular commitment in more detail. Focusing on his first mature published

work, 1836's *Nature*, I examine the philosophical basis of his theory of consciousness, emphasising the necessity of the secular world of difference and concrete particulars, the NOT ME of Emerson's philosophical scheme, in his ability to register, by a deductive process, the hypothesised structure of the ME as an intuited and universal consciousness. In this process, the discovery of the intuition which Emerson consistently posits actually follows the acknowledgement of how the necessary primacy of the formed world determines the nature of what he terms the 'formless'. Emerson, as has finally been demonstrated in the last twenty-five years, is closer in method to Kant than to Jacobi, Fichte, or other post-Kantian idealists, and I will follow in the steps of critics such as David Van Leer, Patrick Keane, and David Greenham in maintaining the relevance of the post-Kantian tradition, mediated through Coleridge and others, to an understanding of Emerson's intellectual philosophy. However, I will also examine his thought in parallel with some less extensively documented sources, including Victor Cousin and the occasional Transcendentalist Orestes Brownson, with a view to emphasising the nuances that distinguish Emerson's relative complexity and difference from his contemporaries. As I will demonstrate, Emerson's theory of mind differs from that of other romantics in the priority it assigns to legalistic, external structures, and hence a readiness to conform to worldly usage is, in fact, the essential Emersonian predicate.

Chapter two elaborates the justification for the privileging of text as site of the representation necessary to forensically trace the operations of Reason, Emerson's prereflective, impersonal power working through the worldly actions of the person. I analyse Emerson's conviction that a process of writing and self-reading constituted the most effective way of discerning the functions of an innate, intuited, original being, and suggest that this principle derived from contemporary discussions in Unitarian theological journals of Biblical inspiration. Specifically, Emerson appears to have drawn

on the intellectualised interrogation of the epistemology of inspiration to assert a means by which the traces of an intuitive Reason could be the subject of hermeneutical inquiry, particularly insofar as the psychology of suspended subjective sovereignty theorised in these discussions mirrors the kind of inaccessible intuition of which Emerson was certain, but lacked the substantiating evidence for. In the second part of the chapter, I investigate Emerson's continued attempts to theorise and then realise this hermeneutic within his compositional practice, particularly with respect to the addresses of the late-1830s and early-1840s, and the volume *Essays*, published in 1841. While Emerson nominally advocates something like a recursive affirmation of perpetual personal identity by revisiting his journal writings in an attempt to trace there the essence of a more original, depersonalised utterance, in actual fact the modus of an intellectualised inspiration generates a tension between this former impersonal abandonment and the latter expectation of a retained personal agency. The consequence of this tension is that a disjuncture in the authorial persona is registered strongly for the first time, and Emerson appears to recognise a flaw at the heart of his project. Although his attitude to this exigency remains mainly ambivalent so far as the published works go (partly, perhaps, because the journal sources for the works published over this time date from across the 1830s and hence reflect a long period of development in his thought), in the last years of the decade a different set of conditions increasingly preoccupy him, according to which his original conception of double writing is adapted that it might negotiate between the poles of this disjuncture.

Chapter three examines the poetics of reiteration which emerges from this in detail, as it appears both in *Essays* and the journals of the months immediately preceding that volume's publication. Reiteration, which in a linguistic sense can (and does, in this instance) equate to the more or less exact repetition of word, phrase, sentence, or other textual unit, comes to fascinate Emerson because repetition is apparently an instance of

universalisation within the remit of the particular. Indeed, for this very reason, repetition is, philosophically speaking, impossible. In linguistic terms, repetition can, at least, be figured, but doing so typically affects the semantic clarity and transparency of the repeated utterance, hence its use as a rhetorical or poetical device. For Emerson, the poetics of repetition goes further toward an ideal total opacity of language, in which its impersonal character becomes radically visible. The objective is to stabilise one's relation to language and decline the 'commitment' and 'definition' which is a corollary of writing one's self into form. As such, Emerson hypothesises that repetition is a means of preserving subjective neutrality, which is to say infinite possibility, by excluding any possibility of a 'personal' investment in language. This process, of course, is not without problems, and the insubstantiality and provisionality of the programme is noted as I trace how Emerson abandons interest in it almost simultaneously with registering it.

By 1842, his thought on literary form and the nature of a personal relation to it had turned radically, partly because of the provisionality of repetition, but more distinctly because of the effect on Emerson of the sudden death of his son Waldo in January that year. Waldo's death led not only to an outpouring of grief in the journals of the period, but also a renewed focus on the parameters of the personal, and especially on the status of persons other than oneself. For the first time, Emerson pays close attention to the role that the text plays in intersubjective relations, while the thesis of recursive affirmation of the personal through the text is finally abandoned in favour of an acknowledgement that writing is always, in one sense or another, for future persons. As such, the concern in the journals for 1841-44 turns increasingly to legacy, and this becomes the primary subject of consideration in the volume *Essays: Second Series* (1844).

The second part of the thesis traces this effect in the journals and works of the 1840s and early-1850s. In chapter four, I identify a theory of literary legacy based on an economy of the gift as it appears in *Essays: Second Series*. Taking the opposite pole to his

previous positions, Emerson appears to accept that the author must immolate themselves in textual production; that they give of themselves in committing themselves to form, and that this gift restores infinite possibility to the future by depriving the authorial subject of the same. In the later sections of this chapter the formal processes necessary in effecting this mode of the gift are examined in detail, the consequence being that Emerson turns out to be nothing like as generous as the theory suggests. Instead, by virtue of recourse to a self-conscious (but nonetheless disguised) plagiarism, Emerson absolves himself of the duty to ‘invest’ and ‘impart’ for the future which he discusses in ‘Experience’, and subsequently demonstrates that the problem of authorial relation to text—of possessing the text, or being possessed by it—remains unresolved by the mid-1840s.

Chapter five considers this irresolution in the context of Emerson’s next published work, the 1847 collection *Poems*, contending that with this volume he finally attains a kind of apotheosis in terms of his poetic project, albeit one which has little to do with his aspirations of a decade earlier. Instead, by way of a more theorised and committed version of the poetic practices seen in 1844’s ‘Manners’, he seeks to refigure the relation of the poet to his work, his legacy, and those who will in time come to read it, changing epistemic expectations on the part of the author and of his audience. As I demonstrate, the corollary of this is that any knowledge we bring to the poems, any expectation accrued in the study of literary skill and tradition, may potentially be challenged by the alternative poetic epistemology Emerson offers, and as such, the received idea that his verse is an aberration not representative of his broader oeuvre is reconsidered. As I argue here, there are reasons why the poetry may seem egregiously bad, pompous, and sententious. In the afterword that follows, the trajectory followed from 1836 to 1847, in which Emerson’s desire to find acquittal of the impossible investment in literature which he poses for himself, and which necessitates vacillation,

contrivance, and various methods of deceit, is concluded as I elaborate on how he formulates his position into theoretical coherence, something eventually published in the lecture 'Shakspeare, or the poet' in 1850's *Representative Men*.

Part One:

**'Knowing after a high, negative way': The Formality
of Emersonian Consciousness: 1836-1841**

CHAPTER ONE

'Somehow he publishes it with solemn joy': The Ends of Idealism and the Beginning of Writing in *Nature*

I know nothing of the source of my being but I will not soil my nest. I know much of it after a high negative way, but nothing after the understanding. God himself contradicts through me. (*JMN* V, 71)

For most of the critical history concerned with Emerson, there has been little question as to where primacy lay in the relationship between the self and its representations. Always, the sovereignty of the 'imperial self' was paramount. Emerson is an intuitionist in the most straightforward and philosophically bankrupt sense, claiming immanent divine insight from the faculty of 'Reason', a pseudo-Kantianism derived from Coleridge.¹ While these claims are based in fact and remain relevant to our reception of his work, criticism has, since the early 1980s, shifted its focus to the consideration of a 'detranscendentalised' Emerson. Alongside the socio-political concerns which dominate Americanist analyses of the nineteenth-century from the last twenty years, there have also been a number of philosophically minded studies which have collectively thrown doubt on the sovereignty of the Emersonian self.² As Emerson's most astute modern reader, Stanley Cavell, made plain in 1984, the reconstructed reader of a philosophical Emerson reacts with 'annoyance at having to stand the repeated, conforming description of Emerson as a philosopher of intuition.' Instead, Cavell regards him a

¹ There are myriad readings of Emerson which draw on this fundamental assumption. In the middle to later years of the twentieth-century, Yvor Winters, Quentin Anderson, and Joel Porte built careers around a critique of the American tradition that had an Emersonian elemental egotism at its heart. Philosophical defences of Emerson were few in the middle years of the twentieth-century, with René Wellek's comments on the inaccuracies in Emerson's understanding of Kant and German Idealism in *Confrontations* dominating the often more sophisticated earlier analyses by Frank Thompson and Henry David Gray. See Wellek, *Confrontations* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 153-212; Thompson, 'Emerson's Indebtedness to Coleridge', *Studies in Philology*, 23 (1926), 55-76; Gray, *A Statement of New England Transcendentalism as Expressed in the Philosophy of its Chief Exponent* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1917).

² For discussions of the tendency toward detranscendentalising Emerson, see Lawrence Buell, 'The Emerson Industry in the 1980s', *ESQ*, 30 (1984), 117-36 (p. 120). See also Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk, eds., *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Lexington KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), particularly pp. 1-39 and 265-304.

‘teacher of tuition’, an exponent of a pedagogy which tutors us to reflexively tutor ourselves, and it is within the parameters of this dynamic that the challenge to absolute sovereignty and self-possession lies.³ For what Cavell and others have hypothesised is a model of the self in Emerson which undergoes stages of self-relation rather than continuous, immanent self-identity.

In this chapter, I will revisit this model with a view to establishing how, at the beginning of his mature career with the publication of *Nature* in 1836, Emerson recognises the primacy of something manifestly distinct from the self—something material, something that is identifiably ‘formal’ insofar as one could self-define by complicity ‘conforming’ to it—in the affirmation of his romantically-derived subjectivity. In enlarging on his philosophical inheritance, Emerson’s thought finds language to be the privileged locus of this affirmation. The reasons for this will become clearer as I go on, but fundamentally, his concern is with the formalities of a language which pre-exists (and is quite distinct from) consciousness. Submitting to such a language in pursuit of self-expression involves an elective affinity, a wilful act of conformity, as certain critics have recognised.⁴ I wish to augment these commentaries by arguing that the nature of this relationship with language is rooted in Emerson’s idiosyncratic compositional practice. His ongoing investment in the texts of his past as the substance of the texts of his present and his future prescribes the terms of his philosophical labour, and this labour in language will in time be the dominant factor of his turn away from idealism.

³ Cavell, ‘Being Odd’ p. 115.

⁴ As discussed in the introduction, this is typified by Cavell, and has been further elaborated in Greenham’s ‘Skeptical Deduction’, pp. 253-81.

Self-Relation: The Identity of ME

I want initially to focus on a few conditions relevant to *Nature* which make this text one of considerable significance not only in setting the terms of his early work, but also as constituting a new mark by which to identify the nature of his relation to his own texts. *Nature*, of course, was the first of Emerson's mature publications, printed under an arrangement with the Boston publisher James Munroe according to which Emerson retained full editorial control and ownership of the plates that would continue into the 1850s.⁵ By 1836, his study contained nearly two hundred unpublished manuscripts and sermons, as well as his extensive journals and poetry notebooks, the contents of which were not published in his lifetime.⁶ As such, the decision to publish—by an author who would write of 'hat[ing] this childish haste to print & publish', and who would rue the necessity of 'confining' and 'defining' in public writing in 1841's *Essays*—constitutes a central point in his thinking (*JMN* VII, 358; *CW* II, 202).⁷ There is a sense, in other words, that Emerson was biding his time; that his theoretical first salvo or 'entering wedge', as he described it to Carlyle, functioned to focus his energies on his methodology and the concision of his statement, a statement that depended on something inherent in the very fact of its being published.⁸ The model I will be exploring here, therefore, depends upon seeing *Nature* not as the invocation of intuitive self-knowledge, even as it does at times declare this as its central doctrine, but instead as

⁵ A smattering of Emerson's callow verse, hymns, and sermons reached print in the late-1820s and early-1830s. In general, these pieces are indubitably minor. See his poem 'Fame', in [Andrews Norton], *The Offering* (Cambridge MA: Hilliard and Brown, 1829), pp. 52-3; 'The Right Hand of Fellowship', in James Kendall, *A Sermon Delivered at the Ordination of Hersey Bradford Goodwin* (Concord: Congregational Church and Society, 1830), pp. 29-31; and 'We Love the Venerable House', in Henry Ware Jr., *A Sermon Delivered at the Ordination of Rev. Chandler Robbins* (Boston: James W. Burditt, 1833), p. 32. The only exception was the 1835 'Historical Discourse, delivered before the Citizens of Concord', which was published in a small run in pamphlet form by C. F. Bemis of Concord.

⁶ See Robert E. Spiller's introduction to the Harvard Belknap edition of *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, (*CW* I, xiv-xv).

⁷ Barry Wood noted this same principle in 1976, but admits that for him the nature of this 'centrality is not exactly clear'. This chapter is intended to clarify one critical role of *Nature* in the context of the major works of the following fourteen years. See Wood, 'Coleridge's Dialectical Method and the Strategy of Emerson's *Nature*', *PMLA*, 91 (1976), 385-97 (p. 386).

⁸ *The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle*, ed. by Joseph Slater (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 149.

a working method, a product in language which permits the exigencies of the medium to inflect the text's object rather than aspiring to an expression as pure as the consciousness that it nominally posits as its principal concern. In other words, *Nature* does and says two very distinct things at once, and this bifurcation, which distinguishes Emerson's romantic obligation to his potentially infinite self from the formalisms of society, language, and the material world, characterises all of his writing in the first stage of his literary career, from 1836 to 1842.

To begin in the simplest terms, *Nature* is a paradoxical title given that Emerson's short text properly focuses on the sovereignty of the individual and his 'kingdom [...] *over nature*' (*CW* I, 45. Emphasis added).⁹ The decision to title the book's first chapter 'Nature' restates the apparent paradox, yet, in the paragraph which concludes the introduction, a striking omission—which to my knowledge has neither been acknowledged nor remarked upon by Emerson's critics—opens up a possibility which qualifies the titular priority given to 'nature' over man. I quote the passage in full:

Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE. In enumerating the values of nature and casting up their sum, I shall use the word in both senses;—in its common and in its philosophical import. In inquiries so general as our present one, the inaccuracy is not material; no confusion of thought will occur. Nature, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. Art is applied to the mixture of his will with the same

⁹ Patrick Keane also makes this observation, albeit in relative isolation, in his *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason: The Transatlantic Light of All Our Day* (Columbia MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003), p. 43.

things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture. But his operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result. (*CW* I, 8)

The second half of the extract emphasises the already granted primacy of nature, a primacy that enacts an extreme generalisation (as Emerson alludes in the phrase ‘inquiries so general’) which will be developed throughout the piece. It is in the first half that the grounds for this are suggested. The ‘NOT ME’ is explicitly defined as nature, matter, man’s productions, the bodily, and so on. Meanwhile, there are terms here which designate what is ‘not nature’, so to speak, but Emerson seems to be hedging somewhat behind the ambiguity of these received concepts. ‘The Soul’, for instance—something not defined here as personal or impersonal. This is problematic—‘ME’ must necessarily be personal—but Emerson also defines the ‘not nature’ as ‘us’, markedly illogical given that ‘all other men’ are NOT ME. The crucial point here is that there is *no mention* of a ME in *Nature*, despite the fact that the choice of term demands the ME as a logical predicate against which the negative is defined, otherwise the formula would consist of a thesis of NATURE and the antithesis NOT NATURE.¹⁰ The question, therefore, is why Emerson opts to posit a logical deduction which begins with the antithesis, both in fact in the terms of the above quoted passage, and more generally in granting nature the primacy implied by the title.

There are, of course, precedents for the terms ME and NOT ME, as there are for Reason and intuition, in the inheritance of German Idealism at the heart of

¹⁰ That Emerson does, in a sense, offer this alternative as afterthought, with the capitalised ‘NATURE’ that follows, indicates that the *effective* primacy lays with NATURE, even as the proper (yet necessarily implied, not asserted) primacy remains with the absent ME. The difference between the postulated logic of NATURE and NOT NATURE, and the unstated ME with its NOT ME, forms the interrogative structure of this chapter.

romanticism, although the path of influence in the case of Emerson has been contested.¹¹ What is commonly shared by critics, however, is the failure to acknowledge the absence of the word ME from the text, and instead the two terms constitute a structuring polarity in which Stephen Whicher's summarisation—that 'it is plain that Emerson's inquiry into the meaning and purpose of nature is at bottom an attempt to assimilate nature into himself, to reduce the NOT ME to the ME'—has generally held firm.¹² Under these conditions the stability and givenness of the ME is presumed, and this is where intuition and Reason come into play. Although both terms are Kantian derivations, they are unorthodox, reflecting instead misprisions in transmission and a desire amongst New England's intellectual radicals to elaborate a sentimental or religiously-derived notion of innate self-knowledge which preceded the arrival of post-Kantian terminology.¹³ An aversion to John Locke's sensualist epistemology was increasingly evident amongst the more liberal members of both Unitarian and Trinitarian wings of the church through the 1810s and 1820s, during Emerson's student years at Harvard and early ministry. Certain established critiques—such as those of the Scottish philosophers Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart, who proposed that there

¹¹ René Wellek's foundational examination states that '[n]o doubt, the terms *Me* and *Not-Me* frequently used by Emerson [...] are ultimately Fichtean in origin, but they come to Emerson through Cousin or Carlyle's essay on Novalis'. Wellek, p. 197. Another early commentator, Henry Pochmann, dismissed the terms as 'commonplaces, [which] need not be referred to any particular source'. See Pochmann, *German Culture in America: Philosophical and Literary Influences 1600-1900* (Madison WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1957), p. 187. I contend that, while the source might not be specifically identifiable, these terms are nevertheless rather more significant than Pochmann suggests, and as such more recent contesting hypotheses on the route by which Emerson adopted these and other terms will be examined throughout this chapter as I analyse the part *Nature* plays in mediating and refiguring the idealist inheritance from Europe.

¹² Whicher, p. 52.

¹³ Alternative, and much more extensive, treatments than I will offer of the development of an intuitive, essential consciousness in Transcendentalist thought which would come to be labelled Reason can be found in Barbara Packer, 'The Transcendentalists', in *The Cambridge History of American Literature: Vol. 2: 1820-1865*, ed. by Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995), pp. 329-604, and particularly 'The Assault on Locke' pp. 350-61. See also Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), and more recently Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007). Versions which place additional emphasis on particular influences include Keane, who finds Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Milton to be the critical sources. See Keane, pp. 37-79. More recently, David Greenham has demonstrated that Emerson used the term 'reason' to conceptualise something akin to divine intuition in the 1820s, and likely picked it up from his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson. See Greenham, *Emerson's Transatlantic Romanticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 35-6.

existed, at the very least, a universal *sensus communis* upon which human cognition was founded without reference to experience—were mainstream enough to have been included in the Harvard curriculum.¹⁴ But increasingly radical voices were also emerging.

Sampson Reed, a Swedenborgian who graduated from Harvard three years before Emerson, wrote in 1826 that:

There prevails a most erroneous sentiment, that the mind is originally vacant, and requires only to be filled up [...] the mind is originally a most delicate germ, whose husk is the body; planted in this world, that the light and heat of heaven may fall upon it with a gentle radiance, and call forth its energies. The process of learning is not by synthesis, or analysis. It is the most perfect illustration of both. As subjects are presented to the operation of the mind, they are decomposed and reorganized in a manner peculiar to itself, and not easily explained.¹⁵

As different from the relatively conservative principles of Reid and Stewart as this is, it nonetheless echoed the widely-held conviction that the element missing from the Lockean epistemology was a hypothesised more original, essential, and absolute basis of consciousness. Consequently, any further criticism of the old way of thinking was eagerly received, and examples continued to appear. In 1829, Alexander Everett—the brother of Emerson’s Harvard tutor, Edward—published a piece in the *North American Review* on Victor Cousin’s critique of the French Sensualist Étienne Bonnot de Condillac. Here, Cousin renounced the insidious influence that was by now perhaps unfairly being held to be the sole responsibility of the English philosopher: “*Contempt of*

¹⁴ Merrell Davis has speculated on this point that ‘it may be that Harvard was already requiring its students to criticise Locke on such “controverted questions” as the purely empirical origin of knowledge, and teaching Stewart’s system for that purpose’. See Davis, ‘Emerson’s “Reason” and the Scottish Philosophers’, *The New England Quarterly*, 17 (1944), 209-28 (p. 214).

¹⁵ Sampson Reed, *Observations on the Growth of the Mind* (1826), in *Transcendentalism: A Reader*, ed. by Joel Myerson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 26-61 (p. 35). Emerson would write ostentatiously of this short book that it was ‘the best thing since Plato of Plato’s kind’ (L I, 176).

Locke is the beginning of wisdom”¹⁶ Finally, and probably most famously, the liberal Congregationalist James Marsh composed an introductory essay to the 1829 American edition of Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection* in which the neglect of a primary moral faculty independent of experience, marked out as Reason, had inevitably led to the ‘habit of using, since the time of Locke, the terms understanding and reason indiscriminately, and thus confounding a distinction clearly marked in the philosophy and in the language of the older writers’.¹⁷

So the traditional history goes. Locke was damned by an entire generation of divinity students, and consequently Emerson inherits a theory the polar opposite to Lockeanism, a notional metaphysical psychology in which Reason is an innate faculty at the heart of consciousness, intuited directly as though it were an infallible moral compass. This, as Cavell and others have noted, is Emerson’s ‘most explicit reversal of Kant’ insofar as the ‘intuitions’ described in the first *Critique* as transcendent, and for that reason, essentially illusory, are instead considered to be genuine and potentially accessible.¹⁸ In spite of the philosophical errors this leads to, there are nevertheless also grounds upon which Emerson can be justifiably defended. Initially, it must be asserted that this Kantian misprision is absolutely the case, both in Emerson’s own thought (in the mid-1830s, at any rate), and in contemporary thought more broadly. A frequently

¹⁶ Quoted, with emphasis, in Alexander Hill Everett, ‘The History of Intellectual Philosophy’, *The North American Review*, 29.64 (1829), 67-123 (p. 83).

¹⁷ James Marsh, ‘Preliminary Essay’ (1829) in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection* (1825) and *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (1840) (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2005), pp. xxiii-lxxvi (p. lviii). See also *Aids to Reflection*, p. 142, where Coleridge discusses the confounding of the terms to the detriment of philosophy, but using Bacon as his example. Indeed, it should be noted that the contemporary hostility towards Locke among so many of New England’s young intellectuals significantly alters the context of Coleridge’s text. Locke is never discussed in this capacity in *Aids to Reflection* proper, but only in Marsh’s introduction to the American edition.

¹⁸ Stanley Cavell, ‘Thinking of Emerson’ p. 129. More recently, David Van Leer has lamented this ‘tendency to reify Reason as an absolute ego’ as the most serious of Emerson’s philosophical errors, and it has been the focus of the most savage criticisms, such as that of Joel Porte in *Emerson and Thoreau* pp. 68-92; Van Leer, p. 5. An alternative 2009 reading by Erin Flynn demonstrates how Emerson resembles Novalis and Hölderlin in his aesthetic interrogation of this romantic metaphysical psychology, and challenges suppositions of assured egotism by suggesting that, like these German romantics, but unlike Fichte, Emerson was absolutely cognisant of the necessary division between the faculties of intuition and reflection, so that the consciousness as object of reflection cannot be identical with what is experienced subjectively. See Flynn, ‘Intellectual Intuition in Emerson and the Early German Romantics’, *Philosophical Forum*, 40 (2009), 367-89.

cited passage from a letter to his brother Edward of 1834 finds him in dogmatically idealist mood:

Philosophy affirms that the outward world is only phenomenal [...] wherein the Understanding works incessantly as if it were real but the eternal Reason when now & then he is allowed to speak declares it is an accident a smoke nowise related to his permanent attributes. Now that I have used the words, let me ask you do you draw the distinction of Milton Coleridge & the Germans between Reason & Understanding. I think it a philosophy itself. & like all truth very practical [...] Reason is the highest faculty of the soul—what we mean often by the soul itself; it never *reasons*, never proves, it simply perceives; it is vision. The Understanding toils all the time, compares, contrives, adds, argues, near sighted but strong-sighted, dwelling in the present the expedient the customary. Beasts have some understanding but no Reason. Reason is potentially perfect in every man—Understanding in very different degrees of strength. The thoughts of youth, & ‘first thoughts’, are the revelations of Reason. (L I, 412-3. Emphasis in original)

The principle dominates the Transcendentalist mind for years. J. A. Saxton stated in a *Dial* article of 1841 that Reason is to be designated ‘the faculty of intuitive perception’, that ‘the ideas of the spiritual, the infinite, of God, immortality, absolute truth, are in the mind’ already, and because of this ‘man possesses this intuitive power of discerning truth’.¹⁹ Almost two decades later, Theodore Parker affirmed this to have been the central doctrine of Transcendentalism, albeit here with a telling nod that the misprision of Kant was to some extent considered and intentional:

¹⁹ [J. A. Saxton] ‘Prophecy—Transcendentalism—Progress’, *The Dial*, 2 (1841), 83-121 (pp. 90-1).

I found most help in the works of Immanuel Kant [...] if he did not always furnish conclusions I could rest in, he yet gave me the true method, and put me on the right road. I found certain great primal Intuitions of Human Nature, which depend upon no logical process of demonstration, but are rather facts of consciousness given by the instinctive action of human nature itself.²⁰

The retrospective nod toward ‘method’ rather than doctrine in this memoir is significant, since this is precisely what we find in Emerson at the outset of his career. By 1836, the idealistic exuberance of the letter of 1834 has ebbed. The opening pages of *Nature* do not bear out the principles espoused elsewhere in the text without problems, especially with respect to the doctrine of intuitive Reason. If Emerson’s ME constitutes the Reasoning, intuiting self, the self which exists absolutely prior to all experience and reflection, then his failure to assert it is curious, both within the terms of his own logic and with respect to the philosophy of the subject in the idealist tradition.

To develop this point, it is worthwhile considering this notional intuited subjectivity within the framework of one of its probable key sources, the model delimited by Coleridge in the twelfth chapter of his *Biographia Literaria*. Coleridge wrote of the ‘Reason’ as a distinct power of intuition throughout his career, labelling it something which ‘may be safely defined the organ of the Super-sensuous’, and it is his capitalisation of the word that prefigures Emerson’s usage.²¹ In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge offered his most rigorous philosophical defence of intuitive consciousness as the basis of the highest moral knowledge. Setting out the terms of the analysis of this ‘spontaneous consciousness’, Coleridge invokes Kant’s differentiation of the

²⁰ Theodore Parker, *Theodore Parker’s Experience as a Minister, with Some Account of his Early Life and Education for the Ministry* (Boston: Rufus Leighton Jr., 1859), p. 42. See also Parker’s *A Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1842), pp. 14-20.

²¹ Coleridge, *The Friend: A Series of Essays in Three Volumes* (London: Rest Fenner, 1818), II, p. 267.

‘transcendent’ (defined here as that which ‘transgress[es] the bounds and purposes of our intellectual faculties’) and ‘transcendental’ philosophy, which abstractly and formally interrogates the structure of the former epistemological principles without collapsing into ‘mere reflection’ or ‘flights of lawless speculation’. However, he also explicitly acknowledges his departure from Kant in a critical respect: that while Kant ‘consistently and rightly denies the possibility of intellectual intuitions’ in a conventional sense, Coleridge declares that he ‘see[s] no adequate reason for the exclusive sense of the term, [and as such has ...] reverted to its wider signification authorised by our elder theologians and metaphysicians, according to whom the term comprehends all truths known to us without a medium’.²² Like many of Kant’s inheritors in Germany, therefore, Coleridge used the elder philosopher’s ideas to supplement a sentimental or religious conviction in an innate, prereflective and pre-experiential basis of consciousness. But Coleridge also abides by a fundamental Kantian prerogative, the principle that *a priori* laws of cognition cannot be intuited independent of experience. As he has it, ‘[k]nowledge without a correspondent reality is no knowledge; if we know, there must be somewhat known by us’.²³ The consequence of this is that the teleology of cognition is not traceable. In Coleridge’s words, ‘[d]uring the act of knowledge itself, the objective and subjective are so instantly united, that we cannot determine to which of the two the priority belongs. There is no first and no second; both are

²² Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817) in *The Major Works*, ed. by H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 155-482 (p. 293, 303). It is well known that Emerson’s first-hand knowledge of Kant was slight—indeed, his personal copy of the first *Critique*, an 1838 London translation, bears little evidence of close reading. But his personal copy of *Biographia Literaria* contains, amongst numerous other markings, a pencil note inside the back cover referencing the differentiation of the ‘transcendent’ and ‘transcendental’ in chapter twelve, suggesting that he was, at the very least, aware of this grounding basis of Kantian transcendental idealism, and probably also of Coleridge’s self-defined difference from it on the point of intuition, prior to 1836. Both of these volumes are held by the Houghton Library, Harvard University. For Kant, see *AC85.Em345.Zy838k. For Coleridge, see *AC85.Em345.Zy834c2.

²³ Coleridge, *Biographia*, p. 295. Kant’s very much more famous formulation of the concept is his maxim ‘Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind’. *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787), ed. and trans. by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 193-4 [A51/B75].

coinstantaneous and one'.²⁴ In *Nature*, Emerson acknowledges this same condition—the basis of consciousness 'does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both', or, more exactly, in 'the blending of experience with the present action of the mind' (*CW* I, 10, 20-1). But at once, instantaneity necessitates retrospective analysis—man 'acts [his condition] as life, before he apprehends it as truth'—a problem to which *Nature* is addressed from its very first line (*CW* I, 7).

In negotiating a philosophically coherent way around this problem, Coleridge, borrowing rather heavily from Schelling, proceeds in methodical terms. There can be no immanent knowledge of the process by which conscious thought arises, for '[w]hile I am attempting to explain this intimate coalition, I must suppose it dissolved'. So, 'I must necessarily set out from the one, to which I therefore give hypothetical antecedence, in order to arrive at the other'.²⁵ Given two 'elements'—'subject and object', for which we might substitute ME and NOT ME—Coleridge acknowledges that two methods are 'equally possible'. Either the NOT ME or object is given precedence, and the subject or ME is derived from it, a condition Coleridge considers symptomatic 'of natural philosophy', or the subject or ME is given precedence, this being the *sine qua non* of 'the transcendental or intelligential philosopher'.²⁶

This is where the curiosity lies with Emerson. It would indubitably be difficult to posit that he is an adherent of the kind of natural philosophy to which Coleridge is alluding—that philosophy of sense, epitomised by Locke, which pursues an ideal 'in the perfect spiritualisation of all the laws of nature into laws of intuition and intellect'—but it is nevertheless the case that nature occupies the primary place in *Nature*; that its

²⁴ Coleridge, *Biographia*, p. 291.

²⁵ Coleridge, *Biographia*, p. 291.

²⁶ Coleridge, *Biographia*, pp. 291-3. As indicated above, the method Coleridge expounds here is essentially identical with that proposed in the early sections of Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism*. Elaborations on Coleridge's reception and transmission are beside the point here, since it is probable that Emerson picked up the major principles, from which he diverts, predominantly from his reading of Coleridge. See F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), trans. by Peter Heath (Charlottesville VA: University Press of Virginia, 1978), pp. 5-33.

structure and logical method—from the foregrounding of nature itself, to its use as ‘commodity’, to the realisation of higher consciousness through various stages toward ‘Spirit’—roughly describes the naturalist trajectory.²⁷ Because the implied ME remains the logical predicate of his philosophical consideration, however, such speculations are necessarily false, but the simultaneous manifestation of aspects of both of Coleridge’s hypothetical antecedents offers an insight into a doubt underlying the entire text of *Nature*. Although Coleridge countenances two equally valid philosophic methods, so far as he is concerned there can be no question as to which is correct, and he takes pains to make his conviction explicit, as he writes: ‘If then I know myself only through myself, it is contradictory to require any other predicate of self, but that of self-consciousness’.²⁸ This condition qualifies the primacy of the ME, but in Coleridge’s treatment, as well as in those of certain post-Kantians on whom he is drawing, this primacy is extended to incorporate notions of agency and of liberty which cannot be sustained under condition of a primary, and thus determining, natural world. If nature has primacy in the method of Emerson’s *Nature*, therefore, this Coleridgean hypothesis cannot be applicable, but the qualification for this requires a further brief diversion through Coleridge’s sources.

Coleridge offers his evidence of absolute freedom in his exegesis of the principal conviction of the transcendental philosopher, a conviction ‘which not only claims but necessitates the admission of its immediate certainty’, the conviction in the affirmation ‘I AM’, which is explained as ‘groundless indeed; but then in the very idea it precludes all ground [...] It is groundless; but only because it is itself the ground of all other certainty’.²⁹ The self-asserting, self-positing ‘I AM’ is thus simultaneously both the evidence of an absolute ground of consciousness and the very being itself of this consciousness in the act of affirmation, while its absolute freedom is presumed in its

²⁷ Coleridge, *Biographia*, p. 292.

²⁸ Coleridge, *Biographia*, p. 299.

²⁹ Coleridge, *Biographia*, p. 294.

groundless and unprecedented act of self-assertion. Coleridge is drawing here on Johann Gottlieb Fichte, the originator and populariser of the terms 'Ich' and 'Nicht-Ich' and post-Kantian idealist whose adaptation of Kant has traditionally been deemed of the highest significance in the development of American Transcendentalism, because the line of influence is manifestly traceable.³⁰ Frederick Henry Hedge, who would go on to be the pivotal member of the 'Transcendental Club', was unique amongst New Englanders for his exceptional familiarity with and grasp of German philosophy, and he published in 1833 an article in the *Christian Examiner* which discussed the Fichtean inheritance in Coleridge in some detail. To quote therefore from the paraphrase of Fichte which Emerson himself read:

[The I] was first unconditionally affirmed to exist, and if allowed unconditional existence must of course exclude its opposite, [it] is now allowed to exist only so far as its opposite does not exist, and the opposite exists only so far as this does not exist, i.e., they coexist by mutual limitation; they define and determine each other. The *I* proposes itself as divisible or limitable, and determined by the *not-I*, and it proposes the *not-I* as divisible and determined by the *I*.³¹

This, in other words, is the affirmation discussed by Coleridge in the *Biographia*: the *I*, which by an act of absolute freedom posits or objectifies itself, also proposes what is 'not-I' as the negative limit necessary for this self-objectification. In keeping with Coleridge, but not exactly with Kant, Fichte termed this process by which the self determined itself and confirmed its unitary identity 'intuition': 'Intellectual intuition is

³⁰ Wellek makes this case in *Confrontations*, pp. 187-212. See also Pochmann, and Stanley Vogel, *German Literary Influences on the American Transcendentalists* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1955), for extended treatments of how German idealism inflected American intellectual culture in the middle years of the nineteenth-century.

³¹ [Frederick Henry Hedge], 'Coleridge's Literary Character', *The Christian Examiner and General Review*, 14 (1833), 108-29 (pp. 123-4).

the immediate consciousness that I act, and of what I do when I act. It is because of this that it is possible for me to know something because I do it'.³²

So long as this Coleridgean/Fichtean model remains central, it sustains hypotheses of a purely subjectivist basis of consciousness, and, in the most recent philosophically-minded interrogation of this influence on American Transcendentalism, Leon Chai reiterates that the New England inheritors of what should be seen as a rigorously metaphysical hypothesis obfuscated its subtleties to affirm their sentimental prejudices. In Chai's interpretation, '[b]y beginning with the subjective nature of the "I" and producing the "not-I" (the world) from it, Fichte in effect transforms the subjective into objective: "I" and "not-I" consist of one and the same element or substance'. And the consequence of this raises the absolute ego to a position of singular significance—it seems as though the 'I' precedes and as it were *creates* the world in its act of absolute freedom. So, Chai argues, does the Transcendentalist epiphany of 'consciousness experienc[ing] itself as divine' find its philosophical justification.³³

In the Emersonian context, however, this argument exceeds the evidence available. Chai continues to find Emerson critically incapable of recognising Fichte's philosophical formality, since he posits that for Emerson one's 'experience of the external world is one and the same with the being of that world, and in the end he is 'impelled' by his understanding of Fichte to 'the immanent knowledge that comes through pure consciousness'.³⁴ Yet while Emerson does at times invoke a system which *looks* remarkably like this, imagining a world which 'becomes, at last, only a realised will,—the double of man', readings asserting Emerson's claim to immanent knowledge negate or collapse the nuances of *Nature* to focus only on the ramifications of its

³² Quoted in Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781-1801* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 298.

³³ Leon Chai, *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 282-6. See also Greenham, who discusses the concept of unitary self-identity in Fichte and Hedge (but not Chai's treatment of it), and, in acknowledging its dissolution into privative personalism, follows similar lines to those I will be examining in this chapter. Greenham, *Transatlantic Romanticism*, pp. 72-8.

³⁴ Chai, pp. 332-3, 337.

notorious and calculated excesses (*CW* I, 25). Hence Chai's reading is excessively credulous of the letter of the transparent eye-ball, according to which a practical immanence of self and divine wisdom is conceivable, rather than its self-dissolving logic. The evidence to counter a purely Fichtean derivation is more widespread and compelling. First, Fichte's influence was seen as problematic at the time. It may be true that his philosophical formality was misunderstood, but even so, this only made his thought the less likely to be accepted: Hedge himself declared the system 'altogether too subjective', while Orestes Brownson criticised Fichte throughout his long career, dismissing his system as 'pure Egotism' and an attempt to 'put the soul in the place of God'.³⁵

And while Emerson surely longed to realise an experience of consciousness which coupled the reflective mode of the Understanding with an *a priori*, prereflective Reason, it was not to be the case. The problem here is with the singularity of the Fichtean subject, in which the self-positing 'I' is identical with the reflecting, analytical 'I'.³⁶ In Emerson's callow and rather unsophisticated phrasing of this concept, he writes to his brother Edward of how '[t]he thoughts of youth, & "first thoughts," are the revelation of Reason', even if 'Understanding[,] that wrinkled calculator', intervenes as mediator and points us back toward the world. 'Yet by & by', Emerson continues, 'after having denied our Master we come back to see at the end of years or of life that he was the Truth. And it is observed that "our first thoughts & third thoughts usually

³⁵ Hedge, 'Coleridge', p. 125. Orestes Brownson, 'Maret on Reason and Revelation', *Brownson's Quarterly Review*, 2.5 (1857), 58-89 (p. 60); 'Porter's Human Intellect, Part 1' (1869) in *Works of Orestes A. Brownson* (Detroit: H. F. Brownson, 1898), II, pp. 383-402 (p. 385). There are reasons to consider Brownson rather more significant in discussions of epistemology in Transcendentalist New England than is usually seen to be the case, a point I will elaborate upon shortly.

³⁶ This principle is the fundamental basis of Fichte's philosophical subject: 'The I is what it itself posits, and it is nothing but this; and what posits itself and reverts into itself becomes an I and nothing else. {Thus it is [only] insofar as I act upon myself and posit myself, [only] insofar as my activity reverts back upon me, that the I arises and that I think about my I. "I am I," and "I posit myself as I": these two propositions mean exactly the same thing'. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy: (Wissenschaftslehre) nova methodo (1796/99)*, ed. and trans. by Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 112. All brackets in original.

coincide” (L I, 412-3). Those lines were written in 1834, and such anecdotal evidence of the apparent singularity of consciousness would not sustain Emerson’s philosophic faith by itself. In 1837, for instance, he recorded the following passage in his journal:

Who shall define to me an individual? I behold with awe & delight many illustrations of the One Universal Mind. I see my being imbedded in it. As a plant of the earth so I grow in God. I am only a form of Him. He is the soul of Me. I can even with a mountainous aspiring say, *I am God*, by transferring my *Me* out of the flimsy & unclean precincts of my body, my fortunes, my private will, & meekly retiring upon the holy austerities of the Just & the Loving [...] Yet why not always so? How came the individual thus armed & impassioned to parricide thus murderously inclined ever to traverse & kill the divine life? Ah wicked Manichee! Into that dim problem I cannot enter. A believer in Unity, a seer of Unity, I yet behold two. Whilst I feel myself in sympathy with Nature & rejoice with greatly beating heart in the course of Justice & Benevolence overpowering me, I yet find little access to this Me of Me. (JMN V, 336-7)

The grammar of that last line is critical, for it figures the entire scope of Emerson’s doubt. English, like German, has distinct subject and object personal pronouns. Fichte (and, by extension, Coleridge) use the subject pronoun ‘I’/‘Ich’, entirely appropriate given the logical priority they accord the subject. Emerson, on the other hand, uses ‘I’ in reference to the reflecting, analytical acts of the self, but ‘Me’ for the hypothesised prereflective consciousness supposed to *precede* it, an expression of reflexive relations in contravention of the grammatical order of the Coleridgean/Fichtean model, which echoes the impossibility of restoring immanence in all stages of personal consciousness. Emerson is by no means unique in this sense—Carlyle rather chaotically used ‘I’ and

‘Me’ indiscriminately, while, perhaps more significantly, Victor Cousin used ‘Moi’ and ‘Non-moi’—but his vocabulary does seem to be considered, while the grammatical disjuncture involved represents a critical early example of the intrusion of linguistic prerogatives into his philosophical model of the mind, a concern which will intensify from the groundwork laid in this text throughout his later work.³⁷

In another hypothesis of the polarities of consciousness from 1838, the implied temporal distance of ‘first and third thoughts’, returned to ‘at the end of years or of life’, restates and develops this disjuncture. Reflecting on archaeology, Emerson reduces its practice to ‘the desire to do away this wild, savage, preposterous *Then*, & introduce in its place the *Now*: it is to banish the *Not Me*, & supply the *Me*; it is to abolish *difference* & restore *Unity*’. But, in a critical additional line, the abolition of difference toward unity comes by way of paradoxical method: ‘Belzoni digs & scratches & climbs & gropes, until he can see the difference between the monstrous work, & himself’ (*JMN* VII, 111). In other words, to ‘supply the ME’ (this vocabulary is important) as a hypothetical

³⁷ Carlyle’s attitude toward the identity of essential consciousness was always less focused and markedly less earnest than Emerson’s, and his most important treatments of the terms of distinction—in his 1829 essay on Novalis, and in *Sartor Resartus*—lack definition. Compared to what I have noted above on Emerson’s nuance in terminology, Carlyle’s Teufelsdröckh asks questions such as “‘Who am I; what is this ME?’”, which collapse the difference in pronouns and restore a unitary notion of subjectivity, even if this narrator fails to identify exactly what it is. See Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (1833-4) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 42. See also Carlyle, ‘Novalis’, *The Foreign Review and Continental Miscellany*, 4.7 (1829), 97-141 (pp. 115-6) for a similar equation of the ‘I’ and ‘Me’ in light of a Fichtean analysis. The impact of Cousin, whose *Cours de Philosophie: Introduction a l’histoire de la philosophie* Emerson read in 1831, is arguably more significant. Emerson’s personal copy bears significant pencil marking in lecture six, in which Cousin uses the terms ‘moi’ and ‘non-moi’, discusses Kant in some detail, declares *raison* to be impersonal, and makes a number of other statements relevant to the concern with subjectivity in *Nature*. Indeed, Cousin was a heavily discussed figure in New England in the 1830s-40s, with Orestes Brownson one of his chief advocates, and I will have cause to refer back to both Cousin and, more pressingly, Brownson’s interpretations of him, in parenthetical remarks here. For Emerson’s pencil markings, see Cousin, *Cours de Philosophie: Introduction a l’histoire de la philosophie* (Paris: Pichon et Didier, 1828), *AC85.Em345.Zy828c, Houghton Library, Harvard University. The notion that Cousin and his translators (specifically, in Brownson’s opinion, the Transcendentalist and founder of Brook Farm, George Ripley) were primarily responsible for the specific terms ‘Me’ and ‘Not Me’ can be partly substantiated by a late essay by Brownson, in which he refers to the introduction ‘into the language [of] such barbarisms as the *me* and the *not-me*’. Brownson, ‘Victor Cousin and his Philosophy’ (1867) in *Works*, II, 307-29 (p. 312). Brownson’s claim is both inaccurate and unfair, since Ripley only published his translation of Cousin in 1838, by which time Brownson himself, along with many others, was already using the same ‘barbaric’ terms. For a general overview of Cousin’s influence in New England, see Georges J. Joyaux, ‘Victor Cousin and American Transcendentalism’, *French Review*, 29 (1955), 117-30.

unitary entity, one must work, and by working Emerson means working by way of difference, that antithesis precedes resolution in an intellectual synthesis.

The Science of Self-Regard

In *Nature*, however, the same principle of temporal disjuncture and resolution via historical recovery is coloured with hints of existential anguish. The opening paragraph of the chapter entitled 'Nature', which follows on directly from the 'philosophical consideration' discussed above, emphasises the gulf in self-knowledge by way of what at first seems to be a conventional series of ruminations on the stars. Apropos of nothing in the preceding passages, Emerson turns his attention to solitude, something not obtained 'whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me', a condition which both alerts our attention that an unusual, metaphysically-inflected notion of solitude is about to be advanced while also preparing the reader for the expectation that the relation to text will have an important part to play in its dynamic. From here, a more essential solitude is advanced, a solitude which is based upon a crisis related to the failure of immanent self-knowledge:

But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars [...] The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and vulgar things [...] The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are always inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence. (*CW* I, 8-9)

This is a considered trope, not simply an inherited romantic commonplace. Emerson was intensely interested in contemporary science, as Laura Dassow Walls has illustrated, and knew that a star was simply another, distant, sun, as was conceived by Giordano

Bruno in the sixteenth-century.³⁸ And if the sun was commonly figured as the type of an intuitive moral power, the Platonic ‘light of all our day’ depicted by Wordsworth in his ‘Intimations of Immortality’, then Emerson is evidently working to a modified set of conditions by setting it at such distance. His scientific awareness guided his decision: Isaac Newton was just one among a number of eighteenth-century physicists to propose a precise measure for the finite speed of light, and by the early nineteenth-century the principle of accurately computing the distance to a star using these calculations and stellar parallax was coming to be well understood, with Friedrich Bessel the first to assert a definite distance in 1838. To look at the stars, therefore, is to look upon not only something immensely distant and categorically inaccessible, but to look upon its light and know that it is historical effect and not representative of the present acts of the star.³⁹ It is, as Coleridge also noted of the instantaneity of intuition, long ‘dissolved’ by the time reflection is turned upon it.

The reflecting ‘I’ in Emerson’s writing is thus in a state of perpetual ‘solitude’: dissociated from the speculated full powers of a complete ME, always belated in its relation to some inconceivably distant and historical intellectual intuition. What’s more, the solar/stellar trope is repeated in *Nature* (indeed, variations on it are repeated frequently throughout Emerson’s early career), but in a manner that further defines Emerson’s departure from both Coleridge and Fichte. Late in the text, Emerson picks up upon the somewhat perplexing line that ‘all natural objects make a kindred impression’ to the stars in an invocation of the solar analogue with ‘Spirit’:

³⁸ The journals are peppered with allusions to astronomy that support this hypothesis. As early as 1832, Emerson would write that ‘Astronomy hath excellent uses [...] Do you believe that there is boundless space? Just dwell on that gigantic thought [...] All is lost in the bosom of its great night [...] it irresistibly modifies all theology’ (*JMN* IV, 25-6). Although Walls recognises the significance of astronomical metaphor in Transcendental philosophies of mind, it should be noted that she makes no specific reference to this passage of *Nature*. See Walls, *Emerson’s Life in Science: The Culture of Truth* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 132, 223.

³⁹ In 1838, Emerson recorded in his journal a comment which proves beyond doubt that he was well aware of these concerns: ‘As they say the light of some stars that parted from the orb at the deluge of Noah has only now reached us’ (*JMN* VII, 78).

And all the uses of nature admit of being summed in one, which yields the activity of man an infinite scope. Through all its kingdoms, to the suburbs and outskirts of things, it is faithful to the cause whence it had its origin. It always speaks of Spirit. It suggests the absolute. It is a perpetual effect. It is a great shadow pointing always to the sun behind us. (*CW* I, 37)

Emerson's point is that the natural world that we perceive restores to us a sense of our relation to intuition because it is, in a sense, created in our perception, generalised into singularity in our 'infinite scope', but there is a subtext in his placing the 'light of all our day' at our backs that depends on his rooting in Platonism. Like Plato, Emerson shares the conviction that sense, and specifically the sense of sight, is the means by which the soul can recover its association with the divine while enclosed in mortal being. The shadow we see, and are encouraged to study, is cast by our own necessary form. Only in this way are we able to perceive its extent as well as its limits.

In other words, therefore, Emerson realises that the fundamental obstacle to immanent self-knowledge is concerned with perspective. In this respect, Emerson is more reminiscent (if somewhat imprecisely) of Kant than of his idealist successors, a point which has been made extensively and compellingly by David Van Leer.⁴⁰ By asserting the primacy of nature, of the NOT ME, Emerson essentially endorses the Kantian 'objectivity thesis'—in Van Leer's words, that 'the notion of experience presupposes the possibility of objects distinct from experience of them'; the necessity, ultimately, that the 'thing-itself' is *a priori* to at least the same extent as the hypothesised

⁴⁰ Van Leer's book remains the most sophisticated and insightful of philosophically-minded scholarly monographs on Emerson, in spite of the fact that the parallel he draws between Emerson and Kant is not corroborated by influence studies. Indeed, as Van Leer notes, the fact that such parallels can be so effective rather gives the lie to any single claim for the backdrop to Emerson's eclectic intellectual development. Van Leer, pp. 7-8.

‘self-in-itself’ that Emerson terms the ME.⁴¹ What is more, self-knowledge depends not upon consciousness being a Ptolemaic locus of the universe, receiving or emitting on all sides as a transparent eye-ball would presumably do, but on being located, on acknowledging that one has a particular perspective with respect to the objects around us, and then on making deductions based on this acknowledgment, as is the case with those astronomers who deduce stellar distance on the basis of parallax.

If, however, the faculty of sight is one of the key tropes of *Nature*, then its relation to the thing looked at is of equal significance. Indeed, the word ‘relation’ or its derivations appears thirty-five times in this short book, and as Van Leer notes, it ‘may be seen as one of Emerson’s key terms and his epistemological point’, a point we may extend beyond the confines of *Nature*’s content to his relation to writing and to text more generally.⁴² Acknowledging relativity in one’s perspective means recognising the fact that one’s perspective is personal, partial, and founded on difference.⁴³ Again and again in *Nature*, this is exactly how perspective is described. Apprehending that we perceive passively and are not simply continuous with the world is more or less given to be the object of all natural science and philosophy. For the naturalist, Emerson claims,

⁴¹ Van Leer, p. 48. The major work detailing Kant’s theory of objectivity is P. F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason* (1966) (London: Routledge, 2005). In a 1983 essay, Robert Abrams pursues a reading of Emerson’s psychology which figures his reflexive, introspective self-analysis as ‘a kind of prayer’, the necessity of which turns on very similar concepts to those under discussion here. As Abrams writes, because in Emerson’s ‘post-Kantian universe’ an authority which validates and permits cognition is indeterminable or inaccessible, and because Emerson’s characterisation of it as the ‘Oversoul’ is always only a ‘projected discovery’, it is necessarily the case ‘that man’s practical inquiry into himself becomes placed in permanent cognitive suspense’. Because our ideas are dependent upon experience, and because experience is, as it were, forced upon us—we cannot exist and refuse it (Abrams, like Van Leer, nods to Kant’s objectivity requirement in this respect)—then the disjuncture in subjectivity is characterised by this effective submission to being determined by the unknowable outside power of the thing-in-itself. As a consequence of this, Abrams argues, Emerson advocates a worshipful condition of receptivity, perpetual “patience and patience” this side of a leap of faith which Emerson, for all his metaphysical yearning, cannot convert into certitude’. Robert Abrams, ‘Emerson at the Limits of Metaphysical Psychology’, *Pacific Coast Philology*, 18 (1983), 14-22. Emphasis in original.

⁴² Van Leer, p. 234 n. 16.

⁴³ See Van Leer once again for further detail on the Kantian parallel here. As he says, against the hypothesis of an immanent knowledge identical with experience based on ‘pure seeing’ in *Nature*, perception necessitates a fundamental separation from the thing perceived in non-dogmatic idealism, for ‘[w]ere my perceptions always identical to objective things [as Chai’s Fichtean hypothesis had it], then self-consciousness could not semantically exist—for “I think X” would mean simply “X”’. In other words, grammar once again intervenes and aligns with perception in refuting the realisation of immanence. Van Leer, p. 50.

'[i]t is not so pertinent to know all the individuals of the animal kingdom, as it is to know whence and whereto is this tyrannising unity in his constitution, which evermore separates and classifies things, endeavoring to reduce the most diverse to one form' (*CWI*, 39-40). But this 'tyrannising unity', this extreme generalisation, is in fact a method toward affirming difference, the more categorical difference which makes perception an issue of relation, between the perceiving observer and that which is perceived. Hence the repeated rhetorical questioning of 'what is the difference' whether or not the idealist premise is true; rather, it is compelling because it is itself an instrument of radical generality in making manifest the issue of relation between phenomena and perception, and in Emerson's words becomes a 'useful introductory hypothesis, serving to apprise us of the eternal distinction between the soul and the world' (*CWI*, 38). Polarising the world, generalising it as NOT ME into homogeneity, means that Emerson's belated ME can be properly supplied as grammatical object, but this object is supplied, or deduced, by recourse to a characteristic circumlocution of grammar: being differentiated as against a generalized NOT ME, it must be 'not-NOT ME', and as such it is the product of a double negative.

This tendency had contemporary currency. Emerson himself wrote more candidly of it in the journals of these years: in June 1840, he wrote of 'feel[ing] too the force of the double negative, though clean contrary to our grammar rules'. And again, later that same year, he praises the habit of children and their forceful speech, not least in 'the strong double negative, which we English have lost from our books' (*JMN* VII, 374, 505). Elsewhere, Orestes Brownson in 1842 convinced himself of the uniquely American character of a philosophy of the subject based on a similar model, oblivious to the fact that Emerson had anticipated him by several years.⁴⁴ At the same time,

⁴⁴ This revelation came to Brownson gradually. In 1836, he had declared himself an advocate of Cousin's eclecticism, and especially his dynamic of the 'moi' and 'non-moi', in an article in the *Christian Examiner* in which the disjuncture between the reflecting 'I' and an original, prereflective mode of consciousness was

however, whatever the possibilities in turning against linguistic and philosophic convention, the efficacy of this circumlocutory method of apophatic self-affirmation leads Emerson to some inevitable doubts, and to self-conscious farce. The following exhortation to seek the apprehension of one's own perspective is a case in point:

A small alteration in our local position apprises us of a dualism [...] The least change in our point of view, gives the whole world a pictorial air [...] Turn the eyes upside down, by looking at the landscape through your legs, and how agreeable is the picture, though you have seen it any time these twenty years! In these cases, by mechanical means, is suggested the difference between the observer and the spectacle, between man and nature. Hence arises a pleasure mixed with awe; I may say, a low degree of the sublime is felt from the fact,

observed. Brownson, along with Cousin, was persuaded of the viability of attempts to restore that original and elemental consciousness by way of an interrogation, in the first instance, of our perception of nature, continuing toward a more fundamental self-regard: 'Our only true method is to begin by ascertaining what is; from what is, the actual, we may pass to its origin, from that to its legitimacy, and thus attain the Absolute'. In a second essay of 1842, however, Brownson has altered his position. Here, he rejects outright the premise of innate ideas as attainable aspects of knowledge, calling such a supposition 'objectionable', and fully recants his belief in the practicality of Cousin's psychology, in which '[t]he soul can study itself by immediate consciousness', for its transgression of a law of logic: '[The soul] then stands face to face with itself, and may be both the subject studying, and the object studied [...] But [t]he simple fact is, that the ME being the subject, that is, the thinker, is not and cannot be the object'. He goes on to correct his earlier writings on a crucial point—'By intuition we have in none of our writings understood seeing by looking *in*, but as the word itself says, seeing by looking *on*. The soul sees nothing by looking into itself. Nay, it can never turn itself round so as to look at, much less into itself. It is the looker, the seer, and the seer and the seen are as distinct in fact, as they are in logic'—something he erroneously claims to be a step forward from 'Kant[, who] assumes that the Me develops itself, without a foreign object, in cognition'. Assuming therefore that it is only by way of recourse to a necessary and *a priori* world of experience that cognition can first arise (the Kantian centrality of this being lost on Brownson), he proudly asserts that acknowledgement of this primacy, that 'man's power to perceive [...] is out of the soul, out of the *me* and not in it, that [perceived objects] exist, and that we perceive them, we depart from what we suppose is a characteristic feature of American Transcendentalism'. Brownson even goes so far as to declare that 'his' finding constitutes the grounds of a uniquely American philosophy, encompassing 'English philosophy as its starting point, [...] all those moral, spiritual, and religious results, for which we and others have valued the metaphysical speculations of modern France and Germany', and a healthy dose of 'our national character'. Although Brownson and Emerson were for a time correspondents and acquaintances, there is no evidence to suggest significant influence on either part, but Emerson's precedence should be assumed, given that *Nature* prefigures those doubts which occurred to Brownson only in his 1842 article. See Brownson, 'Review of Three Works by Cousin', *The Christian Examiner and General Review*, 21 (1836), 33-64 (pp. 40-1); 'Review of Charles Elwood', *The Boston Quarterly Review*, 5 (1842), 129-83.

probably, that man is hereby apprised, that, whilst the world is a spectacle, something in himself is stable. (*CW* I, 30-1. Emphasis added)

As Emerson concedes, the most that might be effectively affirmed from an act as palpably ridiculous as this is that an originary consciousness as a basis of perspective, a predicate ME, ‘probably’ exists.⁴⁵ At this early stage in his career, any doubts are guarded, but there is nevertheless enough evidence to advance the supposition that if nature is, in Emerson’s words, ‘not only the material, but [...] also the process and the result’, then, as Van Leer offers, the ‘mind may be too completely “a part of the nature of things”’, that the ME is merely derivative, not original, and that, in the end, Locke and company were correct (*CW* I, 11).⁴⁶

Of course, in the context of the Emerson of 1836, we are getting ahead of ourselves by extrapolating too far from these speculations. *Nature* remains a text which performatively figures optimism in its declared convictions, even as it prefigures the terms of the problems which will necessitate major revisions of its author’s position throughout the works of the 1840s. But if this apophatic model is at least theorised in *Nature*, then a fuller exposition of its practical mode of realisation is what Emerson seeks. As we have already seen in grammar’s corroboration of theory, language possesses a privileged role with respect to the conditions of perspective and locatedness which underpin Emerson’s concerns, and, indeed, there are further suggestions that it might become that medium by which we can define a ‘fixed point whereby we may measure our departure’ (*CW* I, 39). In *Nature*, linguistic structures and formal tendencies, with their legal and economic norms of use, their establishment of

⁴⁵ See also the opening sentences of ‘Prospects’, where ‘the highest reason’ is given only to be ‘[t]hat which seems faintly possible’ (*CW* I, 39).

⁴⁶ As Van Leer also notes, ‘the argument of [*Nature*] works to undermine its own questions about priorities’—Coleridge’s paired hypotheses thus never resolve in Emerson’s book, each instead recurs consciously or unconsciously in contradiction of the other. Van Leer, p. 69, 55.

commonality, consensus, and convention, figure the conditions of the secular world of the Understanding and the NOT ME. As Emerson writes, '[w]ords are finite organs of the infinite mind. They cannot cover the dimensions of what is in truth. They break, chop, and impoverish it' (*CW* I, 28).⁴⁷ This is why concessions to periphrastic grammar in the logic of the ME are critical and ineluctable; equally, it qualifies the decision to turn an exaltation of being into a convoluted piece of propositional logic wholly distinct from any sense of immediacy of affection: 'What noble emotions dilate the mortal as he enters the counsels of creation, and *feels by knowledge the privilege to BE!*' (*CW* I, 25. Emphasis added).

The ideals espoused in the book's 'Language' chapter therefore seem quite at odds with the compositional exigencies apparent everywhere in the text. But this appearance tells only half the story. If the central paradox in Emerson's thought, which has been well observed throughout his critical history, concerns the conditions and limits of personal freedom and agency, then we ought to ask how such exigencies also affect his investment in language. Hence while adherence to linguistic convention represents conformity, a passiveness toward a condition of the NOT ME detailed most emphatically in 'The American Scholar', so the *proper* use of language—in which original will returns, and 'wise men pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things'—is, in actual fact, also *passive*, albeit now to the terms of the genius of Reason (*CW* I, 20). As he would write in 1841 of a condition we should consider 'transferable to the literary life', the ideal of consanguinity with Reason involves 'glad and conspiring reception,—reception that becomes giving in its turn, as the receiver is only the All-Giver in part and in infancy' (*CW* I, 122-3).

⁴⁷ See also 1841's 'Method of Nature', in which the impossibility of properly figuring infinite truth in this 'intrinsically defective' organ inevitably leads to excess and euphuism: 'Language overstates. Statements of the infinite are usually felt to be unjust to the finite, and blasphemous' (*CW* I, 124).

The problem for the aspiring student of the elemental ego, therefore, is to locate the point at which passivity before the conforming world of the NOT ME may be differentiated from the acts of Reason, and complicity with the exigencies of the secular world seen as distinct from the elective affinities figured by verbal choices made by some facet of the prelinguistic soul. If it is a principle of linguistic form that it marks the record of a constant sequence of choice toward the fullest expression of the thought or concept at stake, then, in a sense, the extant text is a negative image of all *possible* choices, the impress of exigency on all that might have been said, the world connate with thought in the fact of expression. For its author, therefore, the text potentially says a great deal more than it contains; it speaks, for instance, everything he might have said instead of what he did say, and especially of what he excised from prior texts in the processes of reading and reinscription for publication. On a few occasions in the later 1830s, leading up to 1841's *Essays*, Emerson makes reference to a comment of Aristotle that is peculiarly relevant to his own life in and with text, particularly so with respect to the substantial and growing corpus on the shelves of his study that he reread, mined and refined in composing. From Plutarch's 'Life of Alexander', Emerson quotes Aristotle's reply to Alexander's critique that by publishing the totality of his scientific thought, he lessened the distinction of the learning of those who had studied personally with him. This reply, in Emerson's quotation, was that such thoughts "are published and not published" (*CW* II, 85).⁴⁸ Aristotle's essential point, of course, is that apprehension depends upon the acumen of the reader, not the fact of the thought's being in the public domain. But when that reader is the text's own author, the distinction becomes more concrete. What is published *and* not published in this sense are exactly those excisions and elisions alluded to above—the substructure of the piece without which it can stand, but which nevertheless accompanied it in the first instance. The author's

⁴⁸ This is the wording used in 'Spiritual Laws'. Slight variations exist in versions recorded in November 1834 and November 1836 (*JMN* IV, 337; V, 245).

reading, against this distinction, becomes the means by which he or she attains perspective of the coherence of the purely essential and necessary in that text, and as such proper reading reconstructs the creative mood which collaborated with and represented Reason in Emerson's thought: as he put it in a maxim of *Nature*, 'the fundamental law of criticism' is that "[e]very scripture is to be interpreted by the same spirit which gave it forth" (*CW* I, 23).

It is this possibility that underlies the processes Emerson undergoes in relation to his own writing as he brings the mature works—*Nature* being the first—to print. For from *Nature* forward, with increasing focus and methodological seriousness into the early-1840s, Emerson cribs from his journal and notebook writings to compile the works which would reach publication. And in this process of self-reading and rewriting, of the concentration of one's disparate utterances into the singularity of the literary work, Emerson is essentially seeking to compile the clearest textual traces of insight in his writing, to link 'first and third thoughts' in the act of revisory rewriting, to generate what is, in terms of his personal relation to the texts, a restorative reading. His theory being in place, we can now turn to a consideration of the works and journal writings which followed *Nature* to examine the form that he finds in practice.

CHAPTER TWO

The Labours of Style: Reason's Writing and the Method of an Elemental Language

Aspirants to a realised elemental self through the medium of language have always, quite reasonably, been subject to criticism. From its first statements onward, the principles of intuitive knowledge at the heart of transcendental idealism were developed via apparently inevitable recourse to an esoteric, unorthodox, and fundamentally personal vocabulary which was not always understood and often unappreciated. Kant famously published the *Prolegomena* to seek to overcome the indifference with which the first *Critique* was received, an indifference founded, among other things, upon a highly idiosyncratic terminology that left even his most astute contemporaries bemused by a book which seemed to ‘consist [... of] nothing but hieroglyphics’.¹ As the Kantian inheritance moved away from philosophical formalism and toward a more conventional sense of ‘intuition’, personalism in language became more pronounced. By 1829, when James Marsh came to write his prefatory essay to Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection*, linguistic personalisation had become a critical tool of the transcendental philosopher, for if the English writer was restoring a binary forgotten by sensualist thought—that of Reason and Understanding—then ‘[i]n the very nature of things it is impossible for a writer to express by a single word any truth, or to mark any distinction, not recognised in the language of his day, unless he adopts a word entirely new, or gives to one already in use a new and more peculiar sense’.²

Both in America and in Europe, however, contemporary hostility to this habit was rooted in the tradition against which the idealists were set. Francis Bowen, writing

¹ Johann Schultz, quoted in Gary Hatfield’s ‘Introduction’ to Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. ix–xliv (pp. xx–xxi).

² Marsh, ‘Preliminary Essay’, p. lxviii.

in defence of the Lockean thesis of a language defined and held stable by consensus, stated in 1837 that:

Philosophical truth, of which the subject is man and the end is action, is the exhibition of things as they are, and demands the utmost severity of expression. The value of a principle consists in its unity and entireness. An error in part vitiates the whole. Algebraic simplicity of language is therefore required in its enunciation.³

In other words, by way of their use of an exclusive language, Bowen levels the charge that the Transcendentalists do not participate in nor contribute to the philosophical economy. As he goes on to say, its writers have not ‘worked through’ their arguments ‘by persevering labour and humble trust’, and consequently their writings can have no ‘end’ in instigating worldly ‘action’.⁴

As may be clear from these comments, the terms of philosophical objections to models of intuition and spontaneous knowledge reappear in critiques of the language that represents such models, and this remained the case throughout the twentieth-century. Joel Porte, for instance, claimed Emerson’s philosophical ineptitude was behind the fact that he ‘obviously always meant the same thing’ when using a range of terms, be it ‘sentiment’, ‘sense’, ‘law’, ‘intuition’, or ‘Reason’.⁵ Even critics who have set out to defend Emerson’s philosophical credentials see his linguistic habits as a corollary of his weaker arguments, as David Van Leer implies when he justifies his thesis by proposing that it might be ‘valuable’ and necessary ‘to try to translate Emerson’s private vocabulary

³ Francis Bowen, ‘Locke and the Transcendentalists’, *The Christian Examiner and General Review*, 23 (1837), 170-94 (p. 191).

⁴ Bowen, ‘Locke’, pp. 187-8, 194.

⁵ Porte, p. 69.

into the more public one of traditional philosophy'.⁶ The issue here lies in the relationship between language and thought, and the 'work' entailed in arriving at truth by way of the conjunction of these two. The commonplace that the romantic author writes by virtue of a workless spontaneity, that the arduous task of precise expression familiar to every other era simply does not apply to these post-Kantian intuitionists, has been remarkably persistent. For example, Hannah Sullivan's recent study of revision as the epitome of literary labour in the twentieth-century is respectably nuanced in its exposition of rewriting's increasing importance as compositional habits altered in correlation with historical and technological changes, but its valorisation of the 'work' of revision still implies the denigration of a non-revisory romanticism as literary hubris built upon intellectual idleness. Romanticism, unlike modernism, always its theoretical counter, 'tended to imagine the text existing in its fullest form in the past, in pre-linguistic shape, and even the first rendition on paper as already a transcription of waning imagination. Revision was [...] a threat to a work's organic unity and freshness'.⁷

While this statement is undoubtedly representative of the romantic ideology of genius in

⁶ Van Leer, p. xii.

⁷ Sullivan, p. 3. See also pp. 9, and 25-32. It should perhaps be noted in passing that the critique of workless spontaneity is every bit as typical a romantic habit as was the advocacy of the same. Kant notoriously dismissed the neo-Platonism of some of his contemporaries in declaring that 'things have lately gone so far that an alleged philosophy is openly proclaimed to the public, in which one does not have to work, but need only hearken and attend to the oracle within [...] to accomplish by a single piercing glance within them everything that industry can ever hope to achieve, and a good deal more besides [...] the philosopher of intuition, who makes his demonstration, not by the Herculean labor of self-knowledge from below upwards, but soaring above this, by an apotheosis (which costs him nothing) from above downwards [...] thus] speak[s] from his own observation, and is not obliged to be answerable to anyone else'. Kant, 'On a Recently Prominent Tone of Superiority in Philosophy' (1796), in *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*, ed. and trans. by Henry E. Allison and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 425-45 (pp. 431-2). Porte refers to this very passage, suggesting that it 'might almost have been' written on Emerson, in *Emerson and Thoreau*, p. 87. Indeed, in the eagerness to defend one's hypothesised method of attaining the knowledge of consciousness's structure, the disparagement of the methods of others became among the most symptomatic and effective of evidences of one's own philosophical seriousness. Thus on pretty well exactly the same terms as Kant, Coleridge wrote of his own *bête noir*, French eclecticism, that it was merely a 'popular philosophy, at once the counterfeit and the mortal enemy of all true and manly metaphysical research'. As with Kant and others, the language of a pseudo-philosophy was indicative of its failings: they 'pick and choose whatever is most plausible and showy; [...] select whatever words can have some semblance of sense attached to them, without the least expenditure of thought'. Coleridge, *Biographia*, p. 305. Finally, one might consider Emerson's own ironical and self-conscious remarks in 'The Transcendentalist': 'not only [do the Transcendentalists] withdraw them[selves] from the conversation, but from the labours of the world; they are not good citizens, not good members of society [...] The philanthropists inquire whether 'Transcendentalism does not mean sloth' (*CW* I, 210-11).

a normative sense, I contend here that Emerson's increasing disillusionment with the idea leads to a radical and original refiguration of textual relationship which is wholly focused on the practices of self-reading and rewriting. This chapter will trace first the intellectual justifications for reading one's own work as philosophic and theological labour in early-to-mid nineteenth-century New England, before examining its specific principles and effects in Emerson's thought. My object is to interrogate how Emerson's compositional theories contradict or undermine the normative principle of spontaneous composition, and how, exactly, his processes of textual self-relation can be understood as a form of philosophical labour in keeping with the models developed in the last chapter.

First, the designation of spontaneous artistic production as 'organic' needs analysis. Originally deriving from Coleridge, but with significant contributions too from Germany, the principle of organic production was most extensively analysed in the mid twentieth-century by M. H. Abrams, and explicitly applied to Emerson by a number of critics, but has more recently become part of the tradition most sharply criticised by scholars objecting to romantic disengagement.⁸ The organic theory is more nuanced than some treatments tend to admit, however. According to Abrams's definitive handling of the subject, a properly organic relation to language would necessitate that a personal relation to it would be universal rather than exclusive. Production under these conditions is consistently associated with a prereflective, prelinguistic consciousness: 'An inspired poem or painting is sudden, effortless and complete, not because it is a gift

⁸ For Abrams's overviews, see *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 156-225. For treatments of the organic principle in Emerson's theories and practices of creativity, see Norman Foerster, 'Emerson on the Organic Principle in Art', *PMLA*, 41 (1926), 193-208; Richard P. Adams, 'Emerson and the Organic Metaphor', *PMLA*, 69 (1954), 117-30; Merton R. Sealts Jr., 'Mulberry Leaves and Satin: Emerson's Theory of the Creative Process', *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1985), 79-94. In her defence of the sophisticated literary formalism of the romantics, Susan Wolfson notes that the principle of organic production has become simply a 'synecdoche for romanticism' and the grounds of critique by figures as diverse as Terry Eagleton and Paul de Man, who both take for granted the notion that organic form is an ideology incapable of self-analysis, which leads inevitably to social disengagement or an aesthetics of solipsism. See Wolfson, *Formal Charges*, pp. 5, 10-15.

from without, but because it grows of itself, within a region of the mind which is inaccessible either to awareness or control'.⁹ Being both 'inspired' (an important concept in the epistemic dimensions of this discussion, as I will demonstrate shortly) and 'growing of itself', one's relation to it is passive and determined. So Emerson can propose that 'words are signs of natural facts', since according to the organic theory the choice of words to represent such facts is determined by a natural principle. In the same way, this manner of speaking will negate the partiality of one's utterance, and perspective, because just as 'the plant assimilates to its own substance the alien and diverse elements of earth, air, light, and water', so will the absorption of the natural world under the homogenising effect of perspective also constitute the immersion of that perspective in the organic and universal processes of the natural world.¹⁰ Hence nature in perception and, more importantly, in representation, will be 'the symbol of spirit', the reflection (and confirmation) of its necessary order.¹¹

However, the hypothesis is also potentially destabilised by its own exigencies. For Abrams, the extent to which organicism is purely fatalistic was better observed by German critics than English, but Coleridge nevertheless perceived its essential dilemma:

Coleridge's central problem [...] was to use analogy with organic growth to account for the spontaneous, the inspired, and the self-evolving in the psychology of invention, yet not to commit himself so far to the elected figure as to minimise the supervention of the antithetic qualities of foresight and choice.¹²

⁹ M. H. Abrams, p. 192.

¹⁰ M. H. Abrams, p. 171.

¹¹ See *Nature*, where 'the poet conforms things to his thoughts' in an idealised portrait of this principle (*CW* I, 31).

¹² M. H. Abrams, p. 224.

Coleridge's rather inconclusive negotiation of this problem referred, ultimately, back to his conviction in the precedence of consciousness. As he wrote of Shakespeare, in the case of genius, the subjective consciousness maintains a special degree of control: 'himself a nature humanised, a genial understanding directing self-consciously a power, and an implicit wisdom deeper than consciousness'.¹³ For Coleridge, all falls back in line with the will, such is the demand of a continuously identical 'I', although the mere assertion of his given example does not quite provide the evidence to make the hypothesis stick. However, as we have seen already, and as I will demonstrate further here, the same conditions do not apply with Emerson. If, as Julie Ellison has written, what distinguishes him from Coleridge is precisely this issue of the predominance of the subject, against which Emerson insists upon the irrevocable 'distance or difference between subject and object, mind and world', then the intrusion of an effectively primary NOT ME means that, practically speaking, passivity precedes activity, world continues to precede mind, and his organic or 'inspired' productions will bear the evidence of this.¹⁴ As such, what Emerson will endeavour to find on reading his own work is a way to negotiate that primary passivity, to decipher what is received as given and what consciousness must contribute in kind; in short, to identify what, if anything, in one's writings is truly sovereign and original. Thus, by way of interpretive acumen, he seeks to glimpse the essential perspective by which one relates originally to the world, and, by extension, to the hypothesised universal. What is sought, in other words, is a transpersonal ability to recognise that one possesses an innate style.

Inquiries of this nature in the period inevitably owe much to the hermeneutical revolution taking place in Germany, the development of the 'Higher Criticism', which reread scripture according to humanist and enlightenment principles in order to

¹³ Coleridge, 'Shakespeare's Judgment Equal to his Genius' (1808) in *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. by Thomas Middleton Raysor (London: J. M. Dent, 1960), I, pp. 194-8 (p. 198).

¹⁴ Julie Ellison, *Emerson's Romantic Style* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 180.

challenge dogmatic assumptions about the identity of its authors and other irrational or supernaturalist theologies. These ideas were being carried into a receptive audience amongst New England's intellectual culture by numerous young scholars, authors, and teachers who had been enthusiastic students in German universities. Emerson's brother William studied under Eichhorn at Göttingen in the mid-1820s, while Edward Everett, Emerson's influential tutor at Harvard, had been at the same university a decade previously. Meanwhile, major texts of the movement were being translated and advocated by a new generation of ministers, and Emerson had read Rosenmüller, Griesbach, and Schleiermacher in the years after leaving Harvard divinity school.¹⁵ The primary significance of this, as a number of critics have argued, is that the power granted the hermeneut in the higher criticism had a significant part to play in the ability of Emerson and others to declare themselves free of the constrictions of theological or ecclesiastical formalism, and therefore free to reinterpret religion, philosophy, and the social structure as they saw fit.¹⁶ But newly energised interpretive freedoms also fed into another theological debate taking place in these years in New England which has barely

¹⁵ The influence of higher criticism in New England in the early nineteenth-century has been well documented. The major monograph on the subject remains Jerry Wayne Brown's *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America: 1800-1870* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1969). For its influence on language and belief in Unitarian contexts close to and incorporating Emerson, see Philip F. Gura, *The Wisdom of Words: Language, Theology, and Literature in the New England Renaissance* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), and Richard Grusin, *Transcendentalist Hermeneutics: Institutional Authority and the Higher Criticism of the Bible* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1991). For a treatment which focuses more explicitly on how it reached Emerson, see Barbara Packer, 'Origin and Authority: Emerson and the Higher Criticism', in *Reconstructing American Literary History*, ed. by Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 67-92. For this account of Emerson's reading, see Robert D. Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1995), p. 58.

¹⁶ Both Ellison and Richard Grusin emphasise this point. For Ellison, 'the higher criticism lent itself to being treated by Emerson as a theory of influence. By depriving the world's most influential text of the unitary meaning that proved God's authorship, it demonstrated the power of interpretation to diminish the intimidating aspect of writers and traditions'. See Ellison, p. 6. Grusin, working from a similar base, proposes that the professionalisation of the ministry in New England engendered by theological schools such as Harvard and Andover was reflected in a new understanding of the responsibilities of the ministerial role: that is, the development of a 'critical conscience' and the acceptance of the need to make personally reasoned 'judgements' rather than formalistic reiterations of dogma. These, of course, are hermeneutical requirements, and Grusin proposes that in the 'Lord's Supper' sermon and the Divinity School 'Address' Emerson embodies these principles far in excess of what was deemed necessary by Unitarian orthodoxy. See Grusin, *Transcendentalist Hermeneutics*, pp. 1-79. It has long been the case that Transcendentalist thought was given to have emerged as a literal and necessary extension of Unitarian principles, and a still-pertinent article by C. H. Faust traces this conviction among some of Emerson's contemporaries, as well as analysing its ramifications from a twentieth-century perspective. See Faust, 'The Background of the Unitarian Opposition to Transcendentalism', *Modern Philology*, 35 (1938), 297-324.

received any scholarly attention, and which has significant bearing on the relationship between language and divinely granted, spontaneous thought. The concern here was with the status of divine inspiration and Holy Scripture—a concept that the German humanists had been calling into question with increasing forcefulness.

Unitarianism, as the title of one of William Ellery Channing's most significant sermons made plain, was a 'rational religion', but the history of revivalism in America throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century, and the role that affection and enthusiasm played in these eruptions of religious fervour, ensured that antagonistic forces were always present when discussions of the relative merits of detached intellectualism and unquestioning faith returned to the public arena. Fundamentally, for Channing and others, Unitarianism held a 'pronounced [...] distrust of sudden conversion experiences'—instead, the religious life depended upon a 'rigorous and continuous effort of self-culture', based, above all, on the conviction that religious truth might be attained by way of reasoned analysis.¹⁷ In the 'Unitarian controversy' of the 1820s-30s, in which an emergent Unitarian theology came under sustained attack from orthodox Calvinists, predominantly by means of the journal *Spirit of the Pilgrims*, disputation focused on a couple of problematic doctrines. One major issue was the 'impersonal' unitary identity of God as opposed to the 'three persons' of the Trinity, and it is this principle that dominates the texts that tend to still be analysed with respect to the controversy, such as Andrews Norton's polemic *A Statement of Reasons for Not Believing the Doctrines of Trinitarians*.¹⁸ But equally as significant in the opinion of the time was the question of the authorship of scripture. For orthodox theologians, holy texts were the product of divine, plenary inspiration, and they needed to be, for only by way of their divine status could they be looked to for infallible moral and spiritual guidance.

¹⁷ Packer, 'The Transcendentalists', p. 336.

¹⁸ Andrews Norton, *A Statement of Reasons for Not Believing the Doctrines of Trinitarians, Concerning the Nature of God and the Person of Christ* (1819-33) (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, and Co., 1833).

For Channing and his rationalist contemporaries, however, the revealed word ‘is but a means, and is designed to concur with nature, providence, and God’s spirit, in carrying forward reason to its perfection’. Indeed, it is not the revealed word but ‘our rational nature [that] is the greatest gift of God’.¹⁹ In Channing’s thought, the use of reason is the primary evidence of divine authority in the world—its universality and consistency working toward the unification of our acts and tendencies in a more rigorous system of moral virtue. A subsidiary characteristic of this affirmation of the fact ‘that revelation rests on the authority of reason’ is the demand that scripture is secondary and thus must conform—‘Reason must collect and weigh the various proofs of Christianity’.²⁰ The inevitable consequence of this was that interpretive attempts to distinguish between authoritative articles of scripture and the interpolations of scribes or false claims of religious enthusiasts were seen by orthodox scholars as blasphemous rejections of Biblical authority, and hence as infidelity.

When Emerson uses the terms ‘enthusiasm’ and ‘inspiration’ in his work, therefore, he was writing to a contemporary audience who would have likely held a personal opinion on the meaning and validity of these terms. Indeed, in amongst his frequent use of one or the other word, occasional caveats indicate a self-conscious play on this contentious issue. In ‘The Over-Soul’ of 1841, after proposing a mode of transcendental ‘communication [which] is an influx of the Divine mind into our own mind’, Emerson follows with an important condition: ‘By the *necessity of our constitution*, a certain enthusiasm attends the individual’s consciousness of that divine presence’ (*CW* II, 167. *Emphasis added*). There is little evidence in ‘The Over-Soul’ as to why a prejudice to affirm enthusiasm should be a necessity of our constitution, but a hint is given in ‘Intellect’, later in *Essays: First Series*, as to what Emerson is suggesting. Here, he

¹⁹ William Ellery Channing, ‘Christianity a Rational Religion’, in *Works* (Boston: Walker Wise and Co., 1862), IV, pp. 31-65 (p. 32). For a discussion of some of the prehistory of the development of this doctrine, see Gura, *Wisdom*, pp. 16-8.

²⁰ Channing, pp. 40 and 31-65 *passim*.

discusses analogues for a similar concept, but is careful to tag it as inspiration: 'It seems as if the law of the intellect resembled that law of nature by which we now inspire, now expire the breath; by which the heart now drains in, then hurls out the blood,—the law of undulation' (*CW* II, 197). That inspiration can be depicted as a trope with empirical and scientific overtones implies that it is to be conceived of on contrary terms to enthusiasm, which had been left an unanalysed facet of the 'individual's consciousness' presumably because it was excessively subjective, emotional, or sentimental, and incompatible with analytic explanation. It is within this polarity, between a reasoning mode termed 'inspiration' and a sense of 'enthusiasm' that has to do with affections, the body, and the conditions of our constitution, that the debate with which Emerson would have been familiar lay, and in it lay also the basis of a properly scientific method for the elucidation of a transpersonal sense of self-accordance irrespective of mere affective awareness of one's unitary being.

Inspiration, Intellection, and Textual Relation in Unitarian Theology

Quite apart from concerns specific to the American context, differentiation between the Greek-derived 'enthusiasm' and the Latinate 'inspiration' can be made on etymological lines, and the consequences of the semantic difference are borne out in the relative histories of the two words. Inspiration, deriving from the Latin *inspirare*, the act of breathing in, has in its literal sense an implication of transitivity that is just as evident in its figurative usage as the reception of divine influence. Ontologically, the influence or breath of God derives from an extrinsic source, to which the recipient is a transcendent subsidiary. Hence acts carried out under its influence will be characterised by a degree of suspension of personal agency, and the effects of such action may be deemed inexplicable or alienating either in the moment of their manifestation, or afterward in

non-inspired consideration of the thing produced.²¹ The logical consequence of this is that inspiration cannot be vouched for by the ‘inspirado’ in the act of being inspired. Subject only in an immediate sense to the feeling of alienation, the inspired individual can reflect on the experience only when the mental faculties have returned to a ‘normal’ state.

Enthusiasm, on the other hand—which derives via the Greek *enthousiasmos* from *en-theos*, meaning literally ‘god within’—bears a suggestion of ontological parity between deity and enthusiastic being which its lexical history confirms. As Timothy Clark has written, it was the religious upheaval of the Civil War and Interregnum in Britain which gave enthusiasm ‘the predominant sense of a deluded claim to inspiration’, even though it had always connoted this meaning.²² From the mid seventeenth-century and throughout the enlightenment, the term was used pejoratively to denigrate the claims of sectarians of a nearer relationship or immanent being with God—not least, of course, in the American colonies. Its opponents often sought to drain such claims of their potentially dangerous supernaturalism by appeal to the psychological and intellectual weaknesses of the claimants. Enthusiasm was considered ‘a pathology of the passions’, and described in metaphors of disease which depicted its cause as the improper valorisation of the fervours of emotion and prejudice over the evidences of reason and the labour of intellect.²³ In characteristic manner, John Locke wrote that the conviction of the enthusiast was ‘founded neither on reason, nor divine revelation, but rising from

²¹ See, for example, Timothy Clark’s definition: ‘Inspiration is held to blur conceptions of agency: the writer is possessed or dispossessed [...] Composition may seem to be effortless, even automatic. The writer is often astonished by what he or she has written, yet the result is also seen as a matter of personal credit’. Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 3.

²² Although Clark notes early in his study that ‘*In-spiration* is a late Latin term, usually translating the Greek *enthousiasmos*’, he is also cognisant of the fact that this translation is of limited equivalence, since it is also the case that ‘the use of the Greek *enthousiasmos* [as a substitute for the Latin term] to mean deluded inspiration dates from the early Christian period’. Clark, p. 3, 63.

²³ Clark, pp. 63-4. For a much more extensive history of the uses of the term in religious contexts, predominantly in Britain, between 1640 and 1800, see R. A. Knox, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950). For a discussion of enthusiasm in America see David S. Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm in the New World: Heresy to Revolution* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

the conceits of a warmed or over-weening brain'. As such, their defence would necessarily be passionate rather than intellectual, and Locke facetiously provides his reader with it: 'This is the way of talking of these men: they are sure, because they are sure: and their persuasions are right, only because they are strong in them'.²⁴

By the early nineteenth-century, in spite of the modernisation of the term 'enthusiasm' to denote something closer to its common usage today, the theological-philosophical meaning was certainly not forgotten. Amongst New England's intelligentsia, debates over the nature and range of a theistic deity's secular authority rumbled on interminably, and an enthusiast remained first of all a deluded claimant of divine preference or special *gnosis*. When used, the term was usually accompanied with the sort of responses typical of seventeenth-century England, ranging from genuine concern at the effects on the populace to an amused disdain. In a series of articles in the *Christian Examiner* through 1835, the Unitarian clergyman John Brazer treats of the dangers of that species of thought which 'pervades imaginative and enthusiastic minds; and which, in a world of sense, imperfection, and sin, leads them to seek an unearthly abstraction from present objects, and an impossible approach to God'. These Christians, says Brazer, 'will easily find in the Christian doctrine of Divine Influence, the elements of a perverse nurture and unhealthy growth'.²⁵ In the second part of the article, Brazer quotes Locke approvingly on the subject of his exposing 'all the delusions and excesses of fanaticism and enthusiasm', and notes again the totality of the delusion of immanence: 'There is not a religious zealot in Christendom who is more fully conscious, more entirely convinced of his peculiar illumination, than is the poor maniac of the

²⁴ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), ed. by Roger Woolhouse (London: Penguin, 1997), pp. 616-17.

²⁵ John Brazer, 'Essay on the Doctrine of Divine Influence' [Part One] in *The Christian Examiner and General Review*, 17 (1835), 311-32 (p. 311).

existence and reality of those images which are the creation of his own sick brain'.²⁶

Elsewhere, Brazer's contemporaries were happy to treat the issue with less intellectual rigour, as in an article in *The American Quarterly Review* of 1830 where the reviewer ridicules the author of a text under consideration for claiming to have been 'of an opinion with God' on a given topic. As the reviewer explains at length, he would prefer to constrain the definition of the enthusiast somewhere between the terms 'dupe', 'madman', and 'impostor'.²⁷

Emerson was certainly aware of the essence of these debates. In 1823, at 20, he was still evidently in thrall to Locke on the matter of enthusiasm, as his journal testifies:

Enthusiasm is [...] apt to generate in uncultivated minds a rash and ignorant contempt for the slow modes of education and the cautious arts of reasoning by which enlightened men arrive at wisdom [...] The boor becomes philosopher at once, and boldly issues the dogmas of a religious creed from the exuberance of coarse imagination. The tumults of a troubled mind are mistaken for the inspiration of an apostle, and the strength of excited feelings is substituted for the dispassionate and tardy induction, the comparison of scripture and reason, which sanctions the devotions of moderate and liberal men. (*JMN* II, 84)

Absolutely consistent with Unitarian thinking on the matter, Emerson's description of the enthusiast as a 'clown on a dunghill' also corroborates the tendency to provocation in the rationalist's distaste for revivalism, but the presence of reason in these discussions was not necessarily intended to constitute the hubris that traditionalists saw in it.²⁸ In

²⁶ John Brazer, 'Essay on the Doctrine of Divine Influence Continued' [Part Two] in *The Christian Examiner and General Review*, 18 (1835), 50-84 (p. 59, 58).

²⁷ 'Fanatical Guides', *The American Quarterly Review*, 8.15 (1830), 227-42 (p. 233-35).

²⁸ Emerson in 1823 may have been very much more in thrall of Lockean epistemology than he would be a decade or more later, but this does not mean that he ever fully renounced the conviction that enthusiasm

principle, the careful reasoning of the Unitarian approach to scripture demanded a non-domineering type of intellectualism, not a reduction of the Divine to human knowledge but an increased deference to what one writer in the *Christian Examiner* called ‘our Heaven-inspired reason, the gift and light of the Lord’.²⁹ What was perceived by orthodox Calvinism to be an excess of rationalism in Unitarian thinking was a corruption of this model: the projection of human reason into the form of a cognisable Deity—a ‘God the issue of his own brain’—which is specifically designated an “‘enthusiasm of simplification’”.³⁰ As is to be expected in a round of theological polemicising, however, the two sides were not in fact in absolute disagreement. Unitarianism did not reject inspiration entirely as a point of doctrine, and, even if they did not care to admit as much, those on both sides of the argument were in favour of the use of ‘right reason’ toward the clearer appreciation of Holy Scripture, and developed hermeneutical practices appropriate for their doctrinal preference accordingly. It is in these processes that a more intellectually complex version of the model of divine influence using the term ‘inspiration’ evolved.

An article in the January 1830 issue of the combative Calvinist journal *Spirit of the Pilgrims* offers exemplary evidence of the centrality of inspiration to accusations of religious infidelity at the height of the controversy. It states that ‘a man may be an infidel, without *avowedly rejecting* Christianity’, or ‘treat[ing] the character of the Saviour with open irreverence or disrespect’. Rather, the law transgressed to infidelity is provided in no uncertain terms:

alone is mere delusion. In 1841’s ‘Spiritual Laws’, he would write that the notion or ‘pretense that [one] has another call, a summons by name and personal election and outward “signs that mark him extraordinary, and not in the roll of common men,” is fanaticism, and betrays obtuseness to perceive that there is one mind in all the individuals, and no respect of persons therein’ (CW II, 82).

²⁹ Samuel Gilman, ‘Unitarian Christianity Free from Objectionable Extremes’, *The Christian Examiner and General Review*, 8 (1830), 133-46 (p. 136).

³⁰ The first citation is by the author of the piece, the second a quotation from the work under review. ‘Review of Isaac Taylor’s *Natural History of Enthusiasm* (1830)’, *The Spirit of the Pilgrims*, 3 (1830), 256-79 (p. 261, 275).

The true Christian believes that ‘all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.’ But the infidel, often, does not believe that *any* Scripture is the fruit of a Supernatural inspiration. At most, he believes that only a *part* of the sacred volume is entitled to be thus regarded, and in determining what this part is, as it is wholly undefined, every one must consider and judge for himself. Whatever strikes any person agreeably, as reasonable in itself, and worthy of God, he is entitled to regard as the word of God; but whatever strikes him in a different manner, he may properly reject as no part of the revelation.³¹

In many respects, this article provides a reasonably accurate, if over-generalised, account of Unitarian hermeneutics as they stood at the time. After all, the *Christian Examiner* had recently published an article which claims that ‘though it may seem very presumptuous of us to say so, [...] the full strength of the *argument* for Christianity has not yet been exhibited. We think that the clearer development of *certain* moral truths, and of the mind itself, is throwing a light upon this subject’.³² In consequence, the Unitarian defences which first appeared in 1830 and continued throughout the decade tended to be based on careful elaborations of the intellectual and theological benefits of their model rather than holistic refutations of the Trinitarian claims.

Central among the defences of the Unitarian position was the inappropriateness of language to divine communication. For Norton, who was by no means a liberal theologian, but was an attentive student of Locke and an acute reader, the excessively credulous and literalist reading of key New Testament passages fails to acknowledge a

³¹ ‘What Constitutes Infidelity?’, *The Spirit of the Pilgrims*, 3 (1830), 1-17 (p. 1, 4, 8). The rest of the article is dedicated to proving the point by example, quoting liberally from Unitarian writings on inspiration to demonstrate what the author perceives to be sacrilegious hubris.

³² ‘Review of *The New Testament in the Common Version, conformed to Griesbach’s Standard Greek Text*’, *The Christian Examiner and General Review*, 6 (1829), 353-69 (p. 358). Emphasis added.

simple fact of language. This is its *'intrinsic ambiguity'*, insofar as any given word or phrase deprived of context is 'capable of expressing not one meaning only, but two or more different meanings'.³³ Norton adheres to the Lockean condition that language is based on consent to regulatory conditions and is hence 'conventional'; furthermore, these conventions are mutable throughout history, for '[n]o uniform standard has existed by which to measure the expression of men's conceptions and feelings'.³⁴ Consequently, *all* books, including inspired scripture, for it too was written by men, were subject to conditions of composition—whether tropes, idioms, or rhetorical strategies—enforced by the contemporary language usage. Norton thus proposes an essentially historicist approach to the Bible's text, whereby the 'true meaning' of any passage 'is to be determined SOLELY by a reference to EXTRINSIC CONSIDERATIONS'—in other words, by a scholarly grasp of the historical context, which would itself be governed in line with Channing's liberal Christianity, 'solely by a process of reasoning'.³⁵

Against the orthodox conviction in plenary and verbal inspiration, or theopneusty, in which the scriptures were infallibly and precisely the exact phrasing willed by the divine, the Unitarian approach inevitably devalued the Bible as object of veneration.³⁶ In response to critique from outside, however, the draining of divinity from scriptural language was moderated by others within the church. In January 1830, a contributor to the Unitarian *Christian Examiner* argued for a more measured relationship between the holy scribes, divine influence, and the text they came to compose:

³³ Norton, *Statement*, p. 90.

³⁴ Norton, *Statement*, p. 94.

³⁵ Norton, *Statement*, p. 100. See also Gura's more extensive discussion of the historicist method of Unitarians such as Norton, and his conviction that the theologian of his day had to be 'in the most comprehensive sense of the word, a philologist'. Gura, *Wisdom*, pp. 23-30.

³⁶ The following definition of inspiration as effectively unmediated theopneusty was offered by *The Spirit of the Pilgrims* in April 1829: '[T]he sacred writers were so guided by the divine Spirit, that, in every part of their work, they were rendered infallible, and wrote just what God willed they should write; so that the sacred volume entirely answers to the mind of God, and has nothing, either as to matter or form, which He did not see to be suited to the great object of a divine revelation'. 'Inspiration of the Scriptures, No. VI: What views are we to entertain respecting the nature and extent of divine inspiration?', *The Spirit of the Pilgrims*, 2 (1829), 185-95 (p. 187). Emphasis in original.

The scriptures [...] are not the actual communication made to the minds that were inspired from Above; but they are a ‘*declaration* of those things which were most surely believed among them.’ They are not the actual word of God, but they are a ‘record of the word of God.’ They are of the nature of a testimony [...] It is important to make the discrimination, and to say, that the communication of light and truth was one thing, and the record of that communication another. The communication was divine; the record was human. It was, strictly speaking and every way, a human act. The manner, the style, the phraseology, the choice of words, the order of thought, the selection of figures, comparisons, arguments, to enforce the communication, was altogether a human work. It was as purely human, as peculiarly individual in the case of every witness, as his accent, attitude, or gesture, when delivering his message.³⁷

This is a conciliatory position, since it explicitly upholds the doctrine of inspiration in principle, but at once it also develops the complexity of the Unitarian hermeneutic which takes a rational attitude to its products. Reiterating Norton’s Lockean thesis, the author acknowledges that the ‘style’ of the scriptures is not the product of verbal inspiration but determined by context. But more than this, it was ‘altogether a human act’. In other words, even though inspired, the scribe never ceases to be human, and never loses the idiosyncrasies of individuality. The apostle or evangelist relates to the divine in terms defined by his very personality, an unavoidable exigency, since he writes as a secular being from a perspective within place and history. This proposition is theologically significant, for if the scribe is not ontologically raised to parity with the

³⁷ ‘Sources of Infidelity; the Tenth Discourse, in the new Volume of *Buckminster’s Sermons*’, *The Christian Examiner and General Review*, 7 (1830), 345-65 (pp. 346-7). The prominent Unitarian clergyman and theologian Orville Dewey—who was also Emerson’s cousin by marriage, and whom he described in a journal passage of 1837 as a critical ‘benefactor’—repeated this argument in almost identical terms in the same publication later in the year. See [Dewey], ‘Review of *Lectures on the Inspiration of the Scriptures*’, *The Christian Examiner and General Review*, 8 (1830), 362-91 (pp. 381-5). For Emerson’s comments on Dewey, see *JMN* V, 385.

deity—that is, is not an ‘enthusiast’ in a non-pejorative sense—then there must surely be a shortcoming of conviction in the veracity of the experience. Not having been consciously immanent with the mind of God, how can the thing that they have written be of the mind of God? What is revealed by this problem is an extension of a *partial* revelation important not only to the modern hermeneut’s own understanding of the text, but also, more significantly, to his ability to interpret the character of the faith and relation to God of the ancient scribe. Hence, against the ‘dictation’ model propounded by advocates of verbal inspiration, the Unitarians drew on the evidences of the New Testament itself for their defence:

[Though the scriptures] were written by inspired men, they are not, in the common sense, inspired [...] they were not produced under the miraculous supervision of the Deity. We do not conceive ourselves warranted in attributing so remarkable a dictation to the productions of the apostles and evangelists, when they themselves intimate nothing of the kind. If they felt, if they knew, that what their pens traced was proceeding, not from their own minds, but from the Supreme Mind within them, taking the place of their own, would not so remarkable a fact have been noticed by them, and prominently registered?³⁸

Precisely because the New Testament does not declare unambiguously the divine conditions of its composition, but rather features multiple instances of irrelevant, conventional commonplaces (Paul’s request for his cloak and books in II Timothy 4: 13 being a favourite example), the divine authors could not have been conscious of the scale and significance of their task during the act of writing. Hence the mechanism of divine influence in Unitarian thinking operates behind the scenes, psychologically

³⁸ Gilman, p. 138.

speaking, as writers in the *Christian Examiner* would make more explicit over the following years.

John Brazer tentatively speculated in 1835 that the faculty of consciousness which was party to inspiration was analogous to or identical with ‘that part of our mental constitution, by which thoughts, feelings, suggestions arise, and states of mind take place independently of our volitions’.³⁹ It is, of course, little more than a faint and inadequate hypothesis of a form of subconscious, but it maintains a basic principle of what inspiration is *not*, and cannot be. Actual immanent consciousness of the divine would be enthusiasm, and enthusiasm is a delusion, as Brazer reminds us:

The impression, or state of mind, bears with it, it is said, the marks of its divine origin, and of this they are *conscious*. But of what are they conscious? Of nothing certainly, but the impression or state of mind itself. That it has these marks of divinity is merely a matter of *inference* [... So] all that is made known by consciousness is the existence of the impression; but that this impression is supernatural, which is the very point to be proved, is only an *inference which the mind itself makes* [...] There is then no evidence of consciousness whatsoever.⁴⁰

As such, if the apostles and evangelists were not to be considered enthusiasts, then they cannot have *known* of the divine aspect in their endeavour. And this, indeed, is precisely how some Unitarians came to understand the epistemology of inspiration.

In 1842, the Unitarian minister Andrew Preston Peabody published an article in the *Christian Examiner* which saw fit to facetiously declare the essence of the old dispute dead: ‘No one, we presume, at the present day, would maintain that the very words of scripture were dictated by the divine spirit; [or ...] that there was anything supernatural

³⁹ Brazer, [Part One], p. 315.

⁴⁰ Brazer, [Part Two], p. 56. Emphasis in original.

in Paul's sending for his cloak and parchment'.⁴¹ The correlative of this is the downgrading of the status of the apostles and evangelists from mouthpieces of the deity to 'fallible, yet honest men' whom, it might be proposed, 'may, by the frailty of their own understandings and memories, have grossly misrepresented the language and spirit of Jesus'.⁴² Under these conditions, the modern reader of scripture should be conscious of a critical condition. Based on the gospels themselves, the author points out the necessary human frailty of the disciples in the company of Christ:

according to their own account, they were ignorant of his true character till after his ascension. On the very ascension morning, they asked him, 'Lord, wilt thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' They must therefore have listened to him all along with erroneous impressions. They understood not a large part of what he said, *at the time when he uttered it*. His true glory was veiled from them, *while they were with him*.⁴³

This is the exemplary instance of failing to be conscious of a divine presence in the moment of that presence, and, as the author writes, '[a]ccording to the common laws of the mind', such a failure ought to mean that 'the New Testament must have been tinged throughout by the early misapprehensions of its authors [...] We thus should have had insufficient and unsatisfying Scriptures. But this is not the case'.⁴⁴ The gospels are 'entire and seamless [...] throughout adapted to the higher views of their Master's mission and

⁴¹ A[ndrew] P[reston] P[eabody], 'On Inspiration', *The Christian Examiner and General Review*, 32 (1842), 204-18 (p. 205). Peabody was not immediately related either to Elizabeth Palmer Peabody or Ephraim Peabody, both of whom were Transcendentalist acquaintances of Emerson. However, he would go on to be a major figure in the Unitarian establishment, being editor of the *North American Review* from 1853 to 1863, and preacher to Harvard University from 1860 to 1881.

⁴² Peabody, p. 204.

⁴³ Peabody, p. 208. Emphasis added. This position is borne out by numerous passages in the gospels which indicate the apostles' assumption of knowledge of Christ only after his death. See Luke 9: 45, 24: 31-2 and 45; John 1: 10, 7: 5, 13: 7, 14: 25-6.

⁴⁴ Peabody, p. 208.

character which ensued upon his departure from earth'.⁴⁵ How can this be so? The proposal is for an inspiration that only *conditions* the putting into writing of the scriptures, which draws the conventional aspects of the biography of Jesus together, providing as consistent fabric the divinity of Christ in each act. Hence, referring to the relatively quotidian or domestic incidences that appear often in the New Testament, the author writes:

In this wide diversity of detail we see always the same majestic and god-like image, in no circumstances, however narrow or humble, shorn of a ray of its glory; and when the authors confess that, while the divine original was upon the earth, they knew him not, we cannot help believing, that the image was reproduced and sustained before their inward vision by the spirit of God.⁴⁶

The evangelists did not set out to record a holistic view of Jesus Christ—they *could* not, for they were restricted from doing so by their perspectival ignorance—but only an account of the acts of Jesus. It is through writing that the coherence and universalising power of the 'Spirit of God' works upon the accounts to ennoble the biography of Jesus with the unified and consistent meaning of Christ. Indeed, such harmonising power is only to be recognised after the fact, when '[t]he recurrence of the same harmonies at distant intervals, in the sphere music of time', can be so juxtaposed as to become apparent.⁴⁷ The subtext of this is that the writing practice of the evangelists and apostles becomes the beginning of a hermeneutic as well as the process of engendering inspiration, for only by recording those quotidian incidents and utterances can the presence of divinity be brought within the range of intellectualisation. From John 14: 23,

⁴⁵ Peabody, p. 208.

⁴⁶ Peabody, pp. 212-3.

⁴⁷ Peabody, p. 217.

a passage often referred to by Unitarian theologians, Brazer quotes: ‘If a man love me, *he will keep my words*; and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him’.⁴⁸ That is, the retention and reiteration of the conventional in the words of Jesus will reveal the universal underlying harmony of the doctrine. Or, in other words: ‘Having the affectionate, that is the believing disposition, it would have “the *witness* in itself.” Doing “the will of God, it would *know* of the doctrine”’.⁴⁹

There are, of course, many flaws in this rejoinder to the excessively credulous model of plenary inspiration. Central among them is the conservative objection of 1830 that the means of establishing exactly what part of scripture is inspired remains ‘wholly undefined’ in Unitarian thought.⁵⁰ As both contemporaries and twentieth-century critics have noted, the Unitarian model of reading for inner consistency is undermined by their own theory that religious truth has for centuries been confused by the embeddedness of writers in their own contextual and perspectival understanding. In short, having rationally accepted that the exigencies of history change the meaning of religious acts and texts, it seems bizarre that Unitarian theologians should presume their own exceptionality to this condition.⁵¹ On another note, because Emerson’s conviction in a constant personal relation to Reason is mirrored in his contemporaries’ use of negative theology to deduce the consistent Christ from the secular acts of Jesus recorded by the evangelists, the apparent impossibility of a positive assertion on the part of the Unitarian advocates of this model will also have pertinence for Emerson’s own inquiries. To a large extent, this avenue of Unitarian theology does not provide a hermeneutic toward a better understanding of faith, but rather posits hermeneutics as the practice and meaning of faith itself. It excels at providing methodologies and theoretical processes for reading, but the valorisation of the deductive element renders affective qualities

⁴⁸ Quoted in Brazer, [Part One], p. 328. Emphasis added.

⁴⁹ ‘Sources of Infidelity’, p. 359. Emphasis added.

⁵⁰ ‘What Constitutes Infidelity?’, p. 8.

⁵¹ See, for instance, Gura, *Wisdom*, p. 30.

more obscure than they might have been to begin with—it may even seem as though the deduced self arrived at by this method is more a construction of the intellect than the discovery of its own native condition.

However, perhaps this realisation is precisely what is needed so that more critical questions can be asked. The Unitarian defence of the deductive method usually proceeded by subtracting the conventional or ‘carnal’ from the texts, leaving a ‘Christianity which remains after these are gone [...] freed from its death bandages and grave clothes, restored to its pristine vitality and health [...] disencumber[ed ...] from what we believe to be its corruptions’.⁵² It is, of course, arguable whether this effect is vitalising, or whether, as Emerson was wont to complain, it is ‘murdering to dissect’, another instance of ‘corpse-cold Unitarianism’. But even if Emerson expressed his dissatisfaction with this state of affairs, they remained ineluctable.

In *Nature*, the power of the Understanding which Emerson seeks to disempower in favour of Reason may be described as a ‘wintry light’, but at the same time, all of his recollections of epiphanic moments fall under the same climatic trope: before the transparent eye-ball, another epiphany begins with an establishment of a winter’s setting—‘Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight’; later on, he declares that he can ‘please myself with the graces of the winter scenery, and believe that we are as much touched by it as by the genial influences of summer’ (*CW* I, 44, 10, 14). So diffuse does Reason appear, therefore, that the cold and dissecting Understanding must figure in its decipherment, something Emerson hints at in every one of these tropes from *Nature*. For a brief period, Emerson will try, or at least theorise trying, to trace the acts of Reason in practice. But what is more significant is where the necessarily apophatic intellectual approach will take him, and his writing, as his conviction in his ideal gradually fades.

⁵² Gilman, p. 36.

Double Writing; or, How to Abandon Responsibly

Now we are come & will put our own interpretation on things & moreover our own things for interpretation. (*JMN* VII, 7)

Justifiably, Emerson's engagement with the often petty theological disputes of his day has always been doubted. The Divinity School 'Address', after all, rejects religious formalism in uncompromising terms, as had the 'Lord's Supper' sermon six years previously. Yet the vigour and prominence, not to mention the potential significance of the hermeneutical possibilities, of the discussions of inspiration in the 1820s-30s could not have escaped Emerson's attention, not least since he subscribed to many of the periodicals quoted in the preceding section.⁵³ So although at times he wrote disparagingly of 'our silly religious papers', he nevertheless on occasion embodies Unitarian convictions, not only in his journals but also in the published work (*JMN* VII, 21). On the subject of plenary, verbal inspiration, he entirely endorses Unitarian orthodoxy, as 'The Over-Soul' demonstrates:

An answer in words is delusive; it is really no answer to the questions you ask [...] Men ask concerning the immortality of the soul, the employments of heaven, the state of the sinner, and so forth. They even dream that Jesus has left replies to precisely these interrogatories. Never a moment did that sublime spirit speak in their *patois*. (*CW* II, 168)

⁵³ Indeed, it seems certain that Emerson would have had some knowledge of at least the majority of the articles discussed. Kenneth Walter Cameron's bibliography of Emerson's reading in periodicals up to 1836 includes very nearly every issue of the *Christian Examiner* published between 1824 and 1836, as well as a wide range of other theological journals. See Cameron, *Emerson's Workshop: An Analysis of his Reading in Periodicals Through 1836, with the Principal Thematic Key to his Essays, Poems, and Lectures*, 2 vols (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1964). He also knew some Unitarians at the heart of the discussions, such as Orville Dewey, well, and was of course known to those who opposed Transcendentalism from its emergence, such as John Brazer and Andrews Norton.

As Emerson continues, the utility of scripture in fulfilling religious exigencies is brought further into doubt: ‘These questions which we lust to ask about the future, are a confession of sin. God has no answer for them. No answer in words can reply to a question of things’. Just as he pointed out that the ‘idioms of [Christ’s] language, and the figures of his rhetoric, have usurped the place of his truth’ at Harvard Divinity School, so here the illegitimate use of scripture is an irreligious, indeed ‘sinful’ act (*CW* I, 81). Using Emerson’s own logic, there could be no worse use for scripture than its being sacralised as verbally inspired. Indeed, of all books, the canonical texts of the Bible are the type Emerson refers to when he writes, in ‘The American Scholar’, of the tendency by which ‘[t]he sacredness which attaches to the act of creation,—the act of thought,—is instantly transferred to the record. The poet chanting, was felt to be a divine man. Henceforth the chant is divine also’ (*CW* I, 56).⁵⁴

His stated alternatives emphasise his Unitarian affinities. Like John Brazer, who in 1835 speculated on the prereflective element of consciousness through which God inflects the minds of the faithful, Emerson writes in 1841’s ‘Intellect’ that ‘God enters by a private door into every individual. Long prior to the age of reflection, is the thinking of the mind. Out of darkness, it came insensibly into the marvellous light of to-day’ (*CW* II, 194). The insensibility of this event, its location in prereflective and unconscious mind, endorses the postulate arrived at by philosophical means in *Nature* and promotes epistemology as theological practice. Introspection becomes a process of learning to live in godly manner, and this type of egotism is, nominally at least, a development of Unitarian self-culture.

⁵⁴ The journal passage from which this derives make the religious subtext more apparent: ‘There are but two things, or but one thing & its shadow—Cause & Effect, and Effect is itself worthless if separated from Cause. It is Cause still that must be worshipped in Effect; so that it is only one thing. The worship of Effect is Idolatry. The Church including under the name, Doctrine, Forms, Discipline, Members, is the instant Effect: Weak man adheres to the Effect & lets God go’ (*JMN* V, 356).

But the additional dimension Emerson's approach highlights is the complexity of the hermeneutical principle at stake in the process, a complexity which, as we will see, has the potential to dissuade the hermeneut of his conviction in its efficacy. As Ellison has emphasised, Emerson's work of the later 1830s up to 1841's *Essays* is primarily concerned with hermeneutics and the role of the reader.⁵⁵ The 'American Scholar' focuses on the proper and improper 'use' of books, and, by extension, of canonical history in general. The advocacy of 'creative reading' found here is initially a condition intended to empower an independent American intellectual culture, but its ramifications go beyond this purpose (*CW* I, 58). In the Divinity School 'Address' of 1838, meanwhile, it is the misinterpretation of the deeds and language of Christ that has stymied the church in rigid formalism and ritual. As Emerson writes, Jesus himself was but a hermeneut, and his example, which the author's contemporaries would do well to follow, was to feel 'respect for Moses and the prophets; but no unfit tenderness at postponing their initial revelations, to the hour and the man that now is; to the eternal revelation in the heart' (*CW* I, 81).

Besides these two canonical addresses, Emerson was utterly preoccupied in his lectures of the period with considerations of literature and its uses. Multiple lectures titled 'Literature', one titled 'The Poet', and an entire series on reading English literature were given between 1833 and 1842. At the heart of all of these hermeneutical disquisitions, meanwhile, and the origin of their critical theories, was the ongoing inquiry into originary consciousness and the personal relation to Reason, manifested in journal and notebook writings. Although his journal keeping began as a conscious undertaking and a function of self-tutelage, in later years the exact nature of its primary role often eluded him in his ruminations on the practice, even if the primacy he granted

⁵⁵ Ellison, pp. 5-7, 97-113.

it was never itself in question.⁵⁶ Indeed, the existence of a primary body of text increasingly took on a logical necessity within his epistemological theories. Throughout the later 1830s into the 1840s, the formula Emerson employed depended upon a teleological model of belated self-recognition: in ‘The Over-Soul’ of 1841, ‘the soul will not have us read any other cipher than that of cause and effect’; in 1837, ‘[t]he worship of Effect is Idolatry’, hence, in accordance with the principles espoused in a variety of contexts over these years, ‘[i]t is Cause still that must be worshipped in Effect’ (*CW* II, 168; *JMN* V, 356). The intellectual difficulty for this Emersonian hermeneut is that, according to the ‘American Scholar’, he must duplicate the conditions of the ‘original relation’ in his interpretive perspective upon the world: ‘The scholar of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again’ (*CW* I, 55). This necessitates the logical primacy of one’s own textual body, for in the case of this pseudo-Adamic scholar there are *no* prior texts, no canon or tradition of the sort Emerson criticises our dependence upon. For this scholar, if he is to read, he must first *write* the text in order to do so. And yet, of course, if realising his being depends upon the scholarly attribute—that is, he is defined in and by the act of reading, by a reflection requiring textual proxy—then his existence is belated with regard to the text. The ontology of the Emersonian scholar depends upon a curious paradox—to read, he must write, but to write, he must *be*, which begins with reading—but he declines to explicitly confront or interrogate these demands at this stage in his career.

⁵⁶ In terms of the first of these claims, *JMN* I opens with the seventeen-year-old Emerson making the following invocation: ‘These pages are intended at this their commencement to contain a record of new thoughts (when they occur); for a receptacle of all the old ideas that partial but peculiar peepings at antiquity can furnish or furbish; for tablet to save wear and tear of weak Memory & in short for all the various purposes & utility real or imaginary which are usually comprehended under that comprehensive title Common Place book’ (*JMN* I, 3-4). Innumerable instances might be given to evidence the latter claim, but a typical example appears in a passage of 1838. Wondering, as he often did, about the value of his compulsive writing, he instructs himself to write on unquestioning, that every anecdote recorded is significant: ‘Do not for this a moment doubt their value to you. They relate to you, to your peculiar gift. Let them have all their weight & do not reject them & cast about for illustration & facts more usual in English literature’ (*JMN* VII, 158).

Nonetheless, assuming for now that this primary form of writing can and does exist as Emerson believed, it then enters into a more complex dynamic of self-reading and rewriting as the journals and notebooks were revisited in the composition of the published works. Between these two layers of text that Emerson bequeaths to us lie thoughts, reflections, and comments upon the phenomenology of all aspects of the process—the spontaneous primary writing, the process of initial reading, the act of rewriting as a conditioned ‘uttering again’ or ‘witnessing’ of what was read—which correlate with the epistemological structures of the type of inspiration discussed so far in this chapter. As I will illustrate, Emerson does not discover the immanent self-identity he speculates upon in his more idealist moments, but in the exigencies of the apophatic process alternative protocols emerge which will significantly shape his experiments in language over the following years.

The foundation of my discussion here needs to be stated plainly: Emerson believed in inspiration in principle. He believed, or clearly *wanted* to believe, that it described the influx of Reason into the mind, that his best moments of spontaneity in the journals were its product, and that tracing the source of this influx was to pursue the path to immanent consciousness of divinity.⁵⁷ In spite of this, however, his writings on the subject during the period in question are diffuse and insubstantial. Only in 1876’s *Letters and Social Aims* did an essay treating of inspiration under his name finally appear, and the issues attendant on this volume’s authorship given its publication during the years of the so-called ‘Emerson factory’ mean that it is problematic to read it as if it contained his definitive thought on the matter, a shortcoming evident in the fact that two of the three scholarly considerations of Emersonian inspiration/enthusiasm use it toward concluding that his ideas were hamstrung by irresolution and philosophical

⁵⁷ For its pithiest and most axiomatic representation, see a comment in the journals for 1836: ‘There is one mind. Inspiration is a larger reception of it: fanaticism is predominance of the individual’ (*JMN* V, 169).

vagueness.⁵⁸ However, given that the essay ‘Inspiration’ was cribbed from notes on the topic Emerson had made throughout his life, a flexible and necessarily selective reading reveals consistency in certain points which have a bearing on the ideas structuring the self-reading/rewriting dynamic much earlier in Emerson’s career. Centrally, the inspiration principle possesses attributes which circumscribe the psychology of creativity in a more secular, and hence contemporary, sense, and aptly figures an experience of dislocated and postponed subjectivity which depends upon a very tangible sense of the intrusion of textuality into the realisation of self-consciousness. Most critical of all, the modus of inspiration incorporates a sophisticated model of paradoxically simultaneous wilful agency and receptive passivity in the act of literary production, which will form the parameters of my interrogation here.⁵⁹

So 1876’s ‘Inspiration’ sets the scene with a caveat limiting the scope of what will follow: ‘Of the *modus* of inspiration we have no knowledge. But in the experience of

⁵⁸ As Ronald Bosco writes in the introduction to the recent Harvard-Belknap *Collected Works* edition of this volume, Emerson was sufficiently ill by 1876 that the majority of *Letters and Social Aims* was the product of his earlier journals and notebooks, along with some dictation, edited into essays by his daughter Ellen and his newly-employed literary executor James Elliot Cabot. Indeed, Bosco writes that Emerson displayed only ‘a cordial but disengaged interest in the progress of the book’ during its composition. See Bosco’s ‘Historical Introduction’ to the Harvard Belknap edition of *Letters and Social Aims*, *CW* VIII, pp. xix-ccxiii (pp. xxx-xxxii). Of the critics, Timothy Clark discusses Emerson only in the endnotes of his *Theory of Inspiration*, and only in the context of this late essay. Clark discovers there the measured passivity and incomplete abandonment which characterises Unitarian and Emersonian inspiration, and of which I will have more to say here, but finds this simply illogical and problematic and consequently dismisses Emerson out of hand. See Clark, p. 167 n. 27. David Herd uses Emerson to establish his claim that the enthusiastic tendency characterises American literature, and while his thesis offers original ideas in the instance of a number of his subjects, his treatment of Emerson is flawed insofar as he straightly equates inspiration and enthusiasm, thus obfuscating the critical distinction I am seeking to emphasise here, and then collapses his career into two texts—*Nature* and ‘Inspiration’—concluding that the latter is simply an inadequate development of the former, in spite of the fact that forty years, and Emerson’s decline into dementia, separate them. See Herd, pp. 1-17.

⁵⁹ The third extant treatment of Emersonian inspiration, Elizabeth Dunn’s “‘A Deranged Balance’: Emerson on Inspiration”, treats of this principle, albeit in a manner that cleaves perhaps a little too close to the letter of Emerson’s ideals, and the essay lacks critical insight as a consequence. Dunn designates Emerson’s position a ‘deranged balance’ between the secular self-possession of the Understanding and the abandonment to divine afflatus in pure attention to Reason, but her argument turns on what she takes to be Emerson’s descriptions of empirical states rather than philosophical metaphor, and hence the imperative to ‘oscillate between solitude and experience’ is explained in terms of formulaic credulity: since ‘the unconscious Reason must be allowed to speak, Emerson proposed that men temporarily retire from their active lives in society to a secluded setting that makes few demands on the Understanding, causing it to relax and thereby allowing the Reason to become conscious’. See Dunn, “‘A Deranged Balance’: Emerson on Inspiration”, in *The Cast of Consciousness: Concepts of the Mind in British and American Romanticism*, ed. by Beverly Taylor and Robert Bain (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), pp. 141-50.

meditative men there is a certain agreement as to the conditions of reception' (*CW* VIII, 153). Nine of these conditions are then given, and at first they look very much like romantic truisms, a point which is undoubtedly liable to diminish the interest of critics. But there is more to them than is immediately evident. The list can be paraphrased thus:

1. Health: 'The perfection of writing is when mind and body are both in key'.
2. Letters: Or, more specifically: 'The experience of writing letters is one of the keys to the *modus* of inspiration'.
3. '[D]iurnal and secular rest [...] the daily renovation of sensibility'.
4. The 'power of the will[, which] is sometimes sublime'.
5. Nature's unexpected provocations: Described as 'the atmosphere [as ...] an excitant'.
6. 'Solitary converse with nature', a point which is reinforced by the next condition:
7. The 'essential solitude of habit', by which is meant the ability to find or create solitude *anywhere*. The suggestion of creativity here bears another important implication of will.
8. Conversation: 'Not Aristotle, nor Kant or Hegel, but conversation, is the right metaphysical professor'.
9. New poetry, 'by which I mean chiefly, old poetry that is new to the reader'—in other words, the radical personalisation of literature. (*CW* VIII, 156-65)

With a little analysis, each of these conditions figures an aspect of the dichotomy of impersonal abandonment and retained personal relation which characterises inspiration observed by way of intellection. Considering first the figures of abandonment, or the renunciation of personal will, Emerson's methods initially seem baldly empirical: 'I have

found my advantage in going in summer to a country inn, in winter to a city hotel, with a task which would not prosper at home' (*CW* VIII, 161). There is, however, a sophisticated trope at work in this passage. That such travelling allows one to 'command an astronomic leisure' hints at both the philosophical aspect of solitude associated with stellar contemplation which is arrived at by such means, as well as the paradoxical relation of will in the context of this solitude. The latter principle is elaborated on the next page in 'the experience of poetic creativeness, which is not found in staying at home, nor yet in travelling, but in transitions from one to the other, which must therefore be *adroitly managed* to present as much transitional surface as possible' (*CW* VIII, 162. *Emphasis added*). Abandonment seems to be wilful—the state of receptivity aspired to is instigated by an act of personal agency—but deprivation of the same agency is nevertheless the type of the inspired experience proper. In the context of Emerson's advocacy of travelling, it might be considered an abandonment of home, overseen by the continuance of domestic order.⁶⁰

As the essay continues, other conditions are developed as this principle expands in scope. Conversation, like travel, represents a transition out of personal consciousness, insofar as in its practice 'our thought, hitherto wrapped up in our consciousness, detaches itself, and allows itself to be seen as a thought' (*CW* VIII, 164). The phrasing by which Emerson emphasises '[t]he *experience* of writing letters' is a critical indicator of what we should be attending to in the contemplation of the expulsion of the personal into objective form; writing and reading constitute acts which may seem ordinary, even easy, natural, and automatic when the writing being done is a letter addressed to a friend or loved one, but Emerson implies that the phenomenon is worthy of a more acute

⁶⁰ Indeed, Emerson had experimented with this idea in a more practical sense in July 1846, when he and his family invited a Mrs E. C. Goodwin to run their Concord home as a boarding-house, then contracting from her four rooms in which to live, in an arrangement that seems to have been primarily addressed to the practice of social and familial principles rather than financial exigencies. See Richardson, *Mind on Fire*, pp. 429-32.

interrogation. We ought to look at this spontaneous and supposedly natural communiqué as we might to a ‘looking-glass’ inasmuch as it provides a new ‘wealth of mind in this respect of seeing’, by which Emerson plainly implies self-regard and self-knowledge (*CW* VIII, 157. Emphasis added). Indeed, the essay constantly emphasises that text in general is a predicate for a transition out of our quotidian perspectives—‘I find mitigation or solace by providing always a good book for my journeys [...] some book which lifts me quite out of prosaic surroundings’—a purpose which, it might be said, is also served by the fragmenting of life into days by ‘diurnal and secular rest’ (*CW* VIII, 165, 157). All of these processes of depersonalisation, objectification, and alienation practise the expulsion of a sense of the empowered ME into the spaces of NOT ME, and hence enable it to take on some of the roles given the NOT ME in *Nature*: here, this is the provocation of the unexpected, but also a view outside of lived time, the perspective as seen from the potentially immortal text rather than spontaneous mind.

Other conditions develop the paradoxes of agency within this context. The declaration that the will is ‘sometimes sublime’ is curious, since so much of Emerson’s early work endeavours to propose the absolute secularity of individual wilfulness. But the machinations of inspiration under the requirements stipulated necessitate compromise, and the ‘adroit management’ we are to impose according to the essay requires that the inspirado acknowledge this fact. The lesson of *Nature* is that we cannot forego our personality, or the intellectual power that defines us. Reason can only be hypothesised; we are always belated by the time we get around to thinking reflectively. Not long into ‘Inspiration’, a familiar Emersonianism directly references this temporal disjuncture: ‘He is fain to make the ulterior step by mechanical means. It cannot so be done’ (*CW* VIII, 151). Yet the mechanistic interventions of will are the only means by which he is willing to countenance an effective resolution to his problem. Philosophical

solitude is a challenging attitude to sustain, Emerson admitting that his own endeavour toward it requires that all secular ‘conditions [... are] right for my success, slight as that is’. Its premises demand that we look at it with intellectually astute respect, which means to recognise precisely the ‘inconceivable delicacy’ of this ‘machine with which we are dealing’, a considered phrase which bluntly reneges on his commitment to its essential organicity (*CW* VIII, 162). Because of the vacillations that this essay performs, it is by no means unreasonable to consider ‘Inspiration’ a failure of logic, an incomplete and ambivalent attempt at its subject. But then its closing lines should at least alert us to the fact of its failure, portraying in both subject matter and syntax a febrile and complex mix of coexisting principles of will and passive obedience which simultaneously seem the product of a disordered mind and one at the height of its powers of expression. Indeed, one might say that it is the kind of utterance made by one whose Emersonian ‘mind and body’—the types of agency and passivity—are ‘both in key’:

These are some hints towards what is in all education a chief necessity, the right powers of government, or, shall I not say, the right obedience to the powers of the human soul. Itself is the dictator; the mind itself the awful oracle. All our power, all our happiness, consists in our reception of its hints, which become ever clearer and grander as they are obeyed. (*CW* VIII, 166)

The roots of this irresolution are Emerson’s preoccupation in the later 1830s. The hopeful inspirado of that decade still expressed his desires in his journal—‘What’, he records in 1835, ‘can be truer than the doctrine of inspiration? of fortunate hours?’ (*JMN* V, 100). Indeed, when he came to write the first draft passages of the ‘American Scholar’ in 1837, he invoked ‘the Allwise’ to ‘give me light’ that he might succeed (*JMN* V, 347). Yet by 1841’s *Essays*, another voice has crept into his thoughts on the subject.

The principle of inspiration itself persists, but the tone is different: in 'History', it is invoked as an ideal insofar as the art work should 'affirm [...] that it was done by us and not done by us', but at once the paradox of wilful abandonment becomes troublesome:

The universal nature, too strong for the petty nature of the bard, sits on his neck and writes through his hand, so that when he seems to vent a mere caprice and wild romance, the issue is an exact allegory. Hence Plato said that 'poets utter great and wise things which they do not themselves understand'. (*CW* II, 7, 19)

The 'exact allegory' in this extract refers to a previously mentioned 'unceasing succession of brisk shocks of surprise' in inspired production at what the writer has done, though apparently not done by himself. But the significant tonal change here lies with the oppressive nature of the experience. Emerson might easily have opted for a more lightsome trope than that of an inspiring cause sitting on the poet's neck. Throughout *Essays*, this tone emerges again in related contexts. The 'light of all our day' remains at our backs here as it has been throughout Emerson's thought, and attempts to turn toward it remain impossible, but now, in addition, the reader is warned against any aspiration of doing so. There is an implication of the effects of submission to enthusiasm when he writes that '[a] certain tendency to insanity has always attended the opening of the religious sense in men, as if they had been "blasted with excess of light"' (*CW* II, 167). And not only is this dazzling and disorientating, but specifically oppressive. The statement in 'The Over-Soul' that 'every moment when the individual feels himself invaded by [enthusiasm] is memorable' seems fairly innocuous, but it perhaps ought to be considered in relation to a later analogue in the same essay between the enthusiastic force and that of the 'saints and demigods whom history worships [...] though in our lonely hours we draw a new strength out of their memory, yet,

pressed on our attention, as they are by the thoughtless and customary, they fatigue and invade' (*CW* II, 167, 174). Such heroes, as Emerson writes in 'Heroism', embody the 'military attitude of the soul', and in spite of their virtues, on which he was undoubtedly informed by Carlyle, Emerson also shares Carlyle's recognition of its limited utility as an ideal trope: '[t]here is somewhat not philosophical in heroism; there is somewhat not holy in it' (*CW* II, 148).⁶¹

The philosophical, and the holy, lie instead with the processes of intellection, and with the security of method. The Unitarian uneasiness with the pure abandonment of enthusiasm is reflected in Emerson's willingness only to trace cause from effect, to adopt a 'philosophy' he describes as 'affirmative' insofar as it 'readily accepts the testimony of negative facts, as every shadow points to the sun' (*CW* II, 90). Again drawing on his knowledge of optics, the principles of light and vision are raised to reinforce conditions of relation and mediacy rather than immanence. In 'Intellect', it is observed that '[t]he ray of light passes invisible through space, and only when it falls on an object is it seen' (*CW* II, 199). In 'The Transcendentalist', an address given later in 1841, the trope is developed: 'The light is always identical in its composition, but it falls on a great variety of objects, and by so falling is first revealed to us, not in its own form, for it is formless, but in theirs' (*CW* I, 201). The implication of these points is that self-regard becomes a process undergone by literally looking at our own shadows, which might be defined as a creation 'done by us, and not done by us'. The shadow is not done by us insofar as we cannot create this impression of ourselves without the sun behind us. But it is done by us inasmuch as it is not irresistible—we might retire into the shade, for example—and in that the shadow we cast is like a daguerreotype, a unique 'form'

⁶¹ Enthusiasm also carries this dual aspect throughout *Essays*. The kind of passionate conviction which relates back to the religious meaning has its virtues still. As Emerson writes in 'Circles': 'Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm'. But in any act of this sort, the tendency to destabilisation and excess—'as in gaming and war, to ape in some manner these flames and generousities of the heart'—punctures the efficacy and validity of the virtue (*CW* II, 190).

punctuating the formlessness of the light that surrounds it, the very type of a semi-willed impression of our unique identity upon visible matter.

These instances from 1840-1 represent developed thinking on a concept which had been increasing in relevance up to the publication of *Essays*. The significance of unique, original forming is first postulated amongst works published in Emerson's lifetime in the 'American Scholar', wherein soul to nature is as 'seal to print': 'in proportion as a man has anything in him divine, the firmament flows before him, and takes his signet and form' (*CW* I, 55, 64). As he would elaborate in 'Self-Reliance', the essay which does most to invoke the necessity of originality in thought and actions, form that is not original by definition 'conforms', and '[t]he objection to conforming to usages that have become dead to you, is, that it scatters your force. It loses your time and blurs the impression of your character' (*CW* II, 31-2). The prevention of a kind of 'lost time' and the urgency of a defined 'impression' becomes the focus of Emerson's attention in all theoretical ruminations on this principle throughout *Essays*. First, the contingency and temporal mutability of secular manifestations of spirit is acknowledged:

Through all the bruteness and toughness of matter, a subtle spirit bends all things to its own will. The adamant streams into soft but precise form before it, and, whilst I look at it, its outline and texture are changed again. Nothing is so fleeting as form; yet never does it quite deny itself. (*CW* II, 8)

Based on its emergence in his own diverse acts, Emerson labels this 'my Proteus nature' elsewhere in the same essay (*CW* II, 8). The inconsistency of the effects of what is conceived to be a singular power is exactly what intellectual practice is directed toward resolving. So, in the concluding passages of 'Circles', Emerson eulogises 'Character' as possessing a more singular aspect than we are commonly able to detect: 'Character dulls

the impression of particular events' (*CW* II, 190). If the particularity of impression registered in phenomenal experience is dulled, it is because what he terms 'character' has the capacity to homogenise it, to impose singularity of habit, of perspective, upon it. Against the 'foolish consistency' of conformity and superficial self-accordance damned in 'Self-Reliance', he implicitly posits a *proper*, innate consistency identified in intellectual reflection.⁶² As he unequivocally puts it in 'History': 'The philosophical perception of identity through endless mutations of form, makes him know the Proteus' (*CW* II, 18).

These published statements seem to me to reflect back upon the revisory use of the journals that preceded them. Within their pages, Emerson had long been theorising whether and how his journal writing practice might help realise his study of 'cause' in amongst the detritus of textual 'effects'. The frustration, as it was most precisely formulated in the essay 'Love', lay with the lack of perspective that characterised lived time:

[A]ll is sour, if seen as experience. Details are melancholy; [whereas] the plan is seemly and noble. In the actual world—the painful kingdom of time and place—dwell care, and canker, and fear. With thought, with the ideal, is immortal hilarity, the rose of joy. Round it all the muses sing. But grief clings to names, and persons, and the partial interests of to-day and yesterday. (*CW* II, 100)

Not that the days and hours of life never offered exceptions to this anguish, however. Epiphany, clearer visions of the world and the mind occasionally arose within experience, and such moments were Emerson's best guess as to what the influxions of

⁶² Indeed, this reversal of the immediate sense of 'Self-Reliance' is enacted by the essay itself. In the sentence which follows that containing the discussion of a 'foolish consistency', Emerson declares that he 'may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall', a sharply ironic statement given its flat disagreement with the 'affirmative philosophy' of 'negative facts' discussed above (*CW* II, 33).

Reason looked like. So when he wrote in 1836 that '[t]he days & hours of Reason will shine with steady light as the life of life & all other days & weeks appear as hyphens to join these', a linguistic metaphor is his crucial hint as to the method of a singular representation of his own being and his own divinity (*JMN* V, 200). At the head of 'Journal C', which Emerson kept between 1837-8, he copies from Montaigne an epigraph of Horace which described books as 'faithful friends' to whom one would, as it were, write, so that, in time, the record would figure an apprehensible residue, his 'whole life [...] open to view, as if printed on a votive tablet' (*JMN* V, 278). Emerson, however, was so attuned to this idea that the epigraph is little more than confirmatory. Not only had he already been acting in this manner for a decade or more, he had also already theorised it to his satisfaction. As he wrote in 1835: 'The life of a contemplator is that of a reporter. He has three or four books before him & now writes in this now in that other what is incontinuously said by one or the other of his classes of thought' (*JMN* V, 82). In the manner of this simple accretion, Emerson presumed he would be gradually recording the history of his own innate tendencies.

Such a mode of writing is stereotypically romantic. As Ellison has written with respect to this facet of Emerson's compositional ideology, the 'extraordinary instability of a limited number of positions may be the definitive attribute of Emerson's style', and its modulation comes simply from the manner in which quotidian 'anecdotes' are recorded, giving the impression 'that life is taking shape, that time itself bestows form'.⁶³ This certainly embodies the principle of passive abandonment, of submission to organic necessity, although the fact that Emerson does not stop here means that we must refrain from assuming his simple adherence to organicist doctrines. As both inscriber of these fragments and their reader, secondary layers reveal the intervention of intellection. Within *Essays*, some strikingly explicit and optimistic reflections on the process are

⁶³ Ellison, pp. 83-4, 191.

evident. In 'Self-Reliance': 'let me record day by day my honest thought without prospect or retrospect, and, I cannot doubt, it will be found symmetrical, though I mean it not, and see it not' (*CW* II, 34). Or, in more detailed terms, in a passage from 'Circles' which was copied verbatim from the journals:

Today, I am full of thoughts, and can write what I please. I see no reason why I should not have the same thought, the same power of expression to-morrow. What I write, whilst I write it, seems the most natural thing in the world; but yesterday, I saw a dreary vacuity in this direction in which I now see so much; and a month hence, I doubt not, I shall wonder who he was that wrote so many continuous pages. (*CW* II, 182)

Given its content, it demands this verbatim reproduction. The object in this reading/rewriting, as Emerson states uncomplicatedly in 'History', is to invoke a detached intellect in reflection and by doing so read interrogatively, 'remed[ying] the defect of our too great nearness to ourselves' (*CW* II, 4). Again, on the same page of the same essay: 'It is remarkable that involuntarily we always read as superior beings'. The justification for this lies with a literary prerogative. For 'literature', in Emerson's opinion, 'is a point outside our hodiernal circle, through which a new one may be described. The use of literature is to afford a position whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it' (*CW* II, 185).⁶⁴ Submitting ourselves to the literary, we return to it as readers, and in this capacity he proposes that

⁶⁴ The otherwise somewhat cryptic reference in 'Spiritual Laws' to 'our preposterous use of books' also seems to relate to this point. 'Preposterous' is a word of two prefixes, etymologically speaking, since it derives from the Latin *prae* (before) and *posterous* (coming after). Hence its figurative meaning of nonsensicality, of something's being back-to-front. What Emerson seems to be suggesting, however is that if the point of books is that they are outside the hodiernal, then preposterous they must be, being both before and after the problematic present. As such, the quality of 'preposterousness' is, in fact, the *correct* use of books, properly understood. T. S. McMillin, working from a similar basis, make much of the temporal subtext of this term in his *Our Preposterous Use of Literature: Emerson and the Nature of Reading* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), pp. 9-11 and *passim*.

the renounced will returns in the ability to ‘command’, to hold ‘purchase’. Or, to put it another way, as Emerson does in ‘Prudence’, it is the prudential benefit of ‘keeping one’s word’ as per the gospel imperative:

[L]et him likewise feel the admonition to *integrate his being* across all these distracting forces, and keep a slender human word among the storms, distances, and accidents, that drive us hither and thither, and, by persistency, make *the paltry force of one man reappear to redeem its pledge, after months and years*, in the most distant climates. (*CW* II, 139. Emphasis added)

The Limits of Romantic Self-Reading

Emerson’s extensive use of his journals in the act of interrogative self-reading may be unusual, but he does have precedents. Literary interpretation as psychological inquiry, particularly with respect to the ideology of genius, had become something of a romantic convention by the mid nineteenth-century. As M. H. Abrams notes in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, ‘[f]or good or ill, the widespread use of literature as an index—as the most reliable index—to personality was a product of the characteristic aesthetic orientation of the early nineteenth-century’.⁶⁵ Abrams dedicates a chapter of his book to this principle, tracing its emergence in the late Renaissance as the principle of style by which an author’s moral as well as aesthetic virtues might be judged, to the romantic fixation with the holy trinity of immortal, impersonal stylistic perfection—Shakespeare, Milton, and Homer.⁶⁶

Although Emerson clearly borrowed much from Coleridge and others in the valorisation of the eternal style of this trinity of authors, his own inquiries are of a somewhat different and more interesting nature. The hermeneutical system he

⁶⁵ M. H. Abrams, p. 227.

⁶⁶ M. H. Abrams, pp. 226-62.

advocates, deriving as it does from new attitudes in Biblical criticism, duplicates in several critical respects the thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher, intersecting with and then diverting from it in a way that anticipates the latter's critics, and ultimately complicating notions of psychologism in literary interpretation.⁶⁷ As Hans George Gadamer's influential twentieth-century account in *Truth and Method* puts it, Schleiermacher is lauded in the modern era not simply for his remarks on 'grammatical interpretation', which are nonetheless of no mean significance, and deal with the issues that arise in the subjective use of a legally structured, 'pre-given totality of language', but rather for postulating a scientific and universal principle by which 'psychological interpretation'—that is, the divination of intent and of the personality behind the text—might be organised.⁶⁸ In Schleiermacher's words, one recognises authorial presence initially as a 'collaborat[or] in the language', but the process of interrogation that follows necessitates divining between those parts of the language he simply 'preserves' by repeating and reproducing its conventions and formalisms, and those occasions on which he 'produces something new in it' according to the conditions of his unique personality.⁶⁹ He terms the latter of these principles 'style', but it requires hermeneutical labour to trace, primarily because, as with Emerson, production may be unconscious or only semi-conscious (Schleiermacher too entertained the idea of genius), and because its

⁶⁷ Schleiermacher was well known in New England by the mid nineteenth-century. Emerson had read parts of his *Critical Essay on the Gospel of St. Luke* as part of his extra-curricular theological training in the late-1820s. See Richardson, *Mind on Fire*, p. 58, and Emerson's notes on the volume (*JMN* VIII, 486-8). Later, his treatises on religion were popular reading for the wider Transcendentalist circle. This is not to suggest, however, that Emerson's hermeneutical theories were in any way directly influenced by the German, whose *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, a collection of posthumously compiled lecture notes and transcripts, was published only in 1838 and did not reach an English translation until late in the twentieth-century. Rather, Emerson's parallelism with Schleiermacher is a quirk of intellectual history which has potentially interesting consequences, as I will explore here. For more on Schleiermacher's reception in New England, see Robert D. Richardson, 'Schleiermacher and the Transcendentalists', in *Transient and Permanent: The Transcendentalist Movement and its Contexts*, ed. by Charles Capper and Conrad Edick Wright (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1999), pp. 121-47.

⁶⁸ Hans George Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd revised edn (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989), pp. 186-7.

⁶⁹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism, and Other Writings* (1838), ed. and trans. by Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 91.

singularity is not absolute: ‘Individuality of style is supposed [...] to be able to be modified via forms but yet remain the same’.⁷⁰

Schleiermacher’s object—predominantly within the context of New Testament studies, but applicable to secular texts as well—was to attain understanding of the singularity lying behind textual production, hence the significance of his work to historicist theology and religious history. More pressing with respect to Emerson is the methodological clarity with which Schleiermacher developed his thesis, and the parameters of what it claimed to be able to identify. As Gadamer paraphrases it, ‘[i]nsofar as utterance [...] has [...] an external form, it is not simply the immediate manifestation of the thought but presupposes reflection. This is primarily true [...] of what is fixed in writing and hence of all texts’.⁷¹ This is an important point, for Emerson presumes that spontaneous writing is precisely that—it does not refer to the power of reflection, or at least his *own* power of reflection. If they are as a matter of necessity the product of reflection, if the written or spoken word must be a ‘construction’, and by definition cannot be ‘spontaneous’ in the proper sense, then the power reflecting is presumably not that of the fully conscious mind. So, as Gadamer states, ‘every act of understanding is for Schleiermacher the inverse of an act of speech, the reconstruction of a construction. Thus hermeneutics is a kind of inversion of rhetoric and poetics’.⁷²

This has the consequence of making the reader—the hermeneut—not only party to the creative process (hence there can be Emerson’s ‘creative reading as well as creative writing’), but also elevates him beyond the author in terms of the author’s self-knowledge. As Schleiermacher famously had it, the task of the hermeneut is:

⁷⁰ Schleiermacher, pp. 96-7.

⁷¹ Gadamer, p. 188.

⁷² Gadamer, pp. 188-9.

[T]o understand the utterance at first just as well as and then better than its author. For because we have no immediate knowledge of what is in him, we must seek to bring much to consciousness that can remain unconscious to him, *except to the extent to which he himself reflectively becomes his own reader*. [However, o]n the objective side he has even here no other data than we do.⁷³

So we always read as ‘superior beings’, since we read with relatively more sapience, and necessarily with a detached, disinterested impartiality toward distinguishing between universal original and the quotidian and conventional. In Emerson’s own definitions of style, this is exactly the point he pursues: if the ‘adoption of a [guiding] principle transform[s] a proser into an orator’, then we recognise it in ‘[e]very transgression that it makes of routine[, which] makes man’s being something worth’ (*JMN V*, 70). Indeed, frequently in Emerson’s journals the reader’s participation is both theorised and anticipated as absolutely necessary. Given that the context of the journal is private, it additionally suggests acknowledgement that this reader will always be Emerson himself.⁷⁴ As he writes: ‘What’s a book? Everything or nothing. The eye that sees it is all [...] a sage shall see in it secrets yet unrevealed; shall weigh, as he reads, the author’s mind; shall see the predominance of ideas which the writer could not extricate himself from, & oversee’ (*JMN V*, 93). Once and for all, therefore, the book saves ‘lost time’, as it were, by enabling its reader to transcend the temporal strictures that bound the author and ‘oversee’: ‘So write on, & by & by will come a reader and an age that will justify all your context. Do not even look behind. Leave that bone for them to pick & welcome’ (*JMN VII*, 118).

⁷³ Schleiermacher, p. 23. Emphasis added.

⁷⁴ On this point, see a rather cryptic entry of March 1835. ‘I will read & write. Why not? All the snow is shovelled away, all the corn planted & the children & the creatures on the planet taken care of without my help. But if I do not read nobody will’ (*JMN V*, 25).

Yet there remains, in the last-quoted extract from Schleiermacher, a curious point which specifically differentiates him from Emerson, demonstrating the turn in the latter's attentions away from the impracticable ideality of the theory so far discussed, if not yet completely from its egotistic overtones. On the 'objective side', the author of the text has no more to go on than any other reader might have on picking it up after the completion of the act of writing. Does, therefore, he have a subjective insight enabling enhanced understanding? Common sense would suggest so, and Schleiermacher appears to agree. Indeed, his whole hermeneutical enterprise ultimately turns on what he termed 'congeniality'—that is, the capacity to presume an empathy with the author to complete the interpretive puzzle, a putting-himself-in-place he described as the 'divinatory method'.⁷⁵ What is fascinating in Emerson is the way in which, within his attempts to realise his ideas within the reading/rewriting process, he gradually finds himself renouncing a presumption of self-identity between his author and his reader, between two temporally distinct aspects of himself.

As with the whole tendency of Emerson's thought in these years, there is no Damascene moment whence his attitudes irrecoverably alter. Doubts intrude into the journals only to be rebuffed by later entries, even if the overall scheme is a slide into a more fundamental questioning of his idealist convictions. But some points do stand out nevertheless. For example, the central dilemma emerges in what seems to be an error of judgement, a momentary oversight, in the opening pages, inscribed in 1837, of Journal C. This is the volume headed by the Horatian epigraph copied from Montaigne quoted earlier, in which the writer entrusts his secrets to books as 'faithful friends', that he might return to read them in future and find the vista of his life arranged before his eyes. In the entry on the following page, however, there is no suggestion of temporal disjuncture: 'A poem, a sentence causes us to see ourselves. I be & I see my being, at the

⁷⁵ For a definition, see Schleiermacher, pp. 92-3. See also Gadamer's elucidation of the 'congenial' act, 'the possibility of which depends on a pre-existing bond between all individuals'. Gadamer, p. 189.

same time' (*JMN* V, 278). This statement seems to reflect an idealistic mood, but how might that change in the rereading if that reader sees, 're-visions' or revises it, with a less receptive, perhaps less credulous eye? Can the reader and author merge, do they share traits, and if so, are these traits positive or negative with respect to the principles Emerson has theorised? The inevitable singularity of a literary form modulated by time is a critical prejudice of his in the mid-1830s, a notion that finds expression in numerous statements to the effect that as 'character is like a quincunx or an Alexandrian stanza,— read it forward, or backward or across, it still spells the same thing' (*JMN* V, 184).⁷⁶ In other words, we cannot read anything but what character infuses into the text, just as the author cannot but write as his character dictates.⁷⁷ In a sense, therefore, they share this virtue of receptivity.

Yet, in a number of entries in the same period, the inevitability of right expression comes into question. In October 1836: 'The diamond & lampblack it seems are the same substance differently arranged. Let it teach the importance of Composition' (*JMN* V, 233). Whose is the will deemed here 'important?' In a significant sequence of pages from the early summer of 1837, Emerson openly acknowledges that this agency might, in fact, be not that of nature but his own, either conscious or unconscious, and not therefore necessary or divine: 'Let not a man decline being an artist under any greenhorn notion of intermeddling with sacred thought. It is surely foolish to adhere rigidly to the order of time in putting down one's thoughts & to neglect the order of thought. I put like things together' (*JMN* V, 335). Twice in the following pages, he expresses critical and original concerns relevant to his own practice. The first is the famous entry which 'find[s] little access to this Me of Me', derailing his metaphysical

⁷⁶ See also 'Self-Reliance' and 'Spiritual Laws' for two further instances, plus another journal entry of November 1836 (*CW* II, 34, 86; *JMN* V, 236).

⁷⁷ See also an entry a few pages on that reinforces the textual element in this inevitable expression of character: 'a certain sublime serenity is generated in the soul of the Poet by the annoyances of the press. He sees that the spirit may infuse a subtle logic into the parts of the piece which shall defy all accidents to break their connexion' (*JMN* V, 190-1).

aspirations of the mid-decade. The second directly undermines the self-reading hypothesis: 'Why rake up old MSS to find therein a man's soul? You do not look for conversation in a corpse' (*JMN V*, 336-7).

The fuller consequences of this are disclosed in a further passage from 1839, which Emerson himself cross-referenced back to the just-quoted entries of summer 1837. Here, the journals are again, briefly, in optimistic mood, with time's formative element and the impartiality of observation once again at the centre of his thought. If lived time seems not to move in a consistent direction, but pulls us in myriad directions:

Be it so; Is any motion different? [...] The voyage of the best ship is a zig zag line on a hundred tacks. This is only microscopic criticism. See the line from sufficient distance & it straightens itself to the average tendency. All these verses & thoughts were as spontaneous at some time to that man as any one was [... Yet] coming from so narrow an experience as one mortal, they must be strictly related [...] and seen at the perspective of a few ages will appear harmonious & univocal. (*JMN V*, 216-7)

It is impossible to assert definitively whether the cross-referencing linking this passage back to the selection from 1837 was conscious and roughly contemporary with its inscription, or whether it was part of one of Emerson's later journal indexing programmes. But whether he was fully or only partly conscious of his reversal, it is a reversal nevertheless: he is, effectively, writing back to himself, yet in a manner that doesn't exactly substantiate the impartiality he claims of the reader toward his textual effects. Declining to acknowledge the 'foolishness' of relying on time's modulation of form, of the confession of will he had recognised two years earlier, he instead reinscribes his ideal, a process which looks, it must be granted, like wilful intervention.

Judging by the tendency of the journals between 1837 and 1839, however, we ought not to be surprised at how Emerson has allowed wilfulness to appear in the reading principle, just as, over the same period, he acknowledges his personal agency in composition. From 1837 onward, he repeatedly expresses doubt in the ability to identify with or interpret the self who once wrote these pages, just as he evinces distrust in the self who will come to read them. It begins that summer with an isolated and at this stage highly abstruse statement, apropos of nothing: 'If Jesus came now into the world, he would say—You, YOU! He said to his age, I' (*JMN* V, 362). He makes no similar theoretical propositions later that might shed light on his meaning, but what does emerge shortly afterward is a sharp, ironical, and sometimes aggressive second-person address to self which continues over the following years. In the autumn of 1837: 'Who set you up for Professor of omniscience? & cicerone to the Universe?'; the following June, in comment on a somewhat moonstruck entry: 'Don't laugh. I am in earnest'; in September: 'Can you not get any nearer to the fact than that, you old granny?' (*JMN* V, 416; VII, 38, 91). During the same period, he makes the point yet more explicit in writing that '[Bronson] Alcott wants a historical record of conversations holden by you & me & him', in which Emerson and Emerson appear to be the first and second persons of the trio (*JMN* VII, 67-8). By virtue of the attempt to realise it in practice, the ideality of his own theory has gotten the better of him; the text interrupts and extends self-difference rather than collapsing it, a necessity which, he implies, is a fact of secular being to which not even Jesus would have been immune.

And so a note of anxiety creeps into his writing. It is hardly correct to say that he agonises in any way—indeed, his acceptance of the need to redact his theory seems easy and blithe given that he continued to write, lecture, and publish over the years in question. But it does gradually distort the principles of the doctrine of style, at least insofar as Emerson is convinced of his possession of one. For the belief in style as

concept doesn't ebb—the definition of 'good' style, that '[n]othing can be added to it neither can anything be taken from it' of summer 1837 is exactly reproduced in another entry of late 1842: 'It is the merit of the Poet to be unanalysable. We cannot sever his word & thought' (*JMN* V, 364; VII, 471). But against the backdrop of distrustful writing-to-self, the keenly felt sense of subjective disjuncture, a different literary object emerges, a sense of a theoretical or conceptual poetics in place of organic and spontaneous genesis which starts to transform Emerson's relation to his own text.

From the evidence of the journals, Emerson found little of what he sought in the act of self-reading. Over time, he became increasingly candid, and in the summer of 1841 he simply renounces all faith once held in his hermeneutical endeavour:

We animate as much as we can, and we see no more than we animate. I find a few passages in my biography noticeable. But it is the present state of mind which selects these anecdotes and the selection characterises the state of mind. All the passages will in turn be brought out. (*JMN* VIII, 48)

So much for 'hyphenated Reason'; indeed, so much for readerly impartiality. If 'all the passages' are excerptable according to the reader's mood, it is hardly likely that any possess divine emphasis. Not that it causes Emerson much distress: three pages later, he is singing the praises of writerly agency and 'method'.⁷⁸ But there is a model for this method present already in the text of the journals.

A couple of years earlier, he had been expressing doubts about another facet of self-reading, perhaps its most concentrated and uncomfortable aspect: that of reading aloud one's own text to an audience in the lecture theatre. His misgivings emerge in the

⁷⁸ 'It is much to write sentences; it is more to add method, & write out the spirit of your life symmetrically [...] to arrange many general reflections in their natural order so that I shall have one homogenous piece [...] this continuity is for the great' (*JMN* VIII, 49).

record of a dream in December 1839: 'I saw a man reading in the library at Cambridge, and one who stood by said, "He readeth advertisements," meaning that he read for the market only & not for truth. Then I said,—Do I read advertisements?' (*JMN* VII, 327).

A few weeks later, doubts resurface:

These lectures give me little pleasure. I have not done what I hoped when I said, I will try it once more. I have not transcended the coldest selfpossession [...]
Alas! alas! I have not the recollection of one strong moment. A cold mechanical preparation for a delivery as decorous,—fine things, pretty things, wise things,—but no arrows, no axes, no nectar, no growling, no transpiercing, no loving, no enchantment.—

And why?

I seem to lack the constitutional vigour to attempt each topic as I ought. (*JMN* VII, 338-9)

Mere sermonising, in other words, and not the revivification of epiphanic moments into a singular literary experience. So, a few weeks later again, he proposes what seems to be an alternative stylistic principle: 'By confession we help each other; by clean shrift, and not by dictation' (*JMN* VII, 340).

Emerson had always seen confession as a function of great writing: in 1834, he noted that, in the case of the major poets and philosophers, 'the greatest passages they have writ, the infinite conclusions to which they owe their fame are only confessions. Throughout Goethe prevails the undersong of confession & amazement; the apothegm of Socrates; the recantation of Man' (*JMN* IV, 298). By the later 1830s, confession has been reconfigured in light of the failure to discover innate style. Instead, Emerson is considering whether a willed confession might be made to structure a text that accepts

the failure of personal revelation, but yet advances the philosophical protocols to which that revelation aspired. It is not only the journals that propose this possibility—the published work reproduces Emerson’s doubts and his alternative hypotheses to reflexively figure the new system. In ‘The Over-Soul’, the principle of style is invoked, but on this occasion in a more ambiguous manner that figures a ‘negative fact’ rather than simple, positivistic affirmation. The ambiguity circumscribes the shift in Emerson’s thought:

Character teaches over our head. The infallible index of true progress is found in the tone the man takes [...] If he have not found his home in God, his manners, his forms of speech, the turn of his sentences, the build, shall I say, of all his opinions will involuntarily confess it, let him brave it out how he will. (*CW* II, 169)

In other words, the necessary conclusion, the truth of the matter, will find expression, but that ‘confession’ will not necessarily echo the expresser’s aspirations to grandeur. The same principle appears also in ‘Spiritual Laws’: ‘A man passes for that he is worth. What is, engraves itself upon 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 salutations; and the grasp of hands’ (*CW* II, 92). And, finally, from ‘The Over-Soul’ once more: ‘But if a man do not speak from within the veil, where the word is one with that it tells of, let him lowly confess it’ (*CW* II, 170).

Is this, therefore, what Emerson comes to do? Essentially, yes, although his ‘lowliness’ might still be questioned. At times in *Essays*, he lapses into the conditional to the detriment of the idea of the hermeneutics of style: the ‘reason for the last flourish’ of any individual’s actions might be obvious to our eyes, ‘*could* we lay him open’, while

the otherwise forthright ‘Self-Reliance’ is constrained by the strikingly ambivalent remark that ‘I suppose no man can violate his nature’ (*CW* II, 91, 34. Emphasis added). Emerson’s decision to copy another of his pieces of ironic second-person self-address directly from journal into the published essay ‘Circles’ also playfully and publically undermines his philosophical authority.⁷⁹ But most of all, the relation between confession and a willed abandonment, a statement that affirms not commitment but neutrality, is what Emerson seeks to understand. On numerous occasions in the journals of these years, curious analogical statements appear and reappear, being always slightly different, but always also the same. Consistently, they touch on notions of a will *not* to do something, an active expression of indifference which seems philosophically significant. The first appears just after having given the Divinity School ‘Address’: ‘In preparing to go to Cambridge with my speech to the young men, day before yesterday, it occurred with force that I had no right to go unless I were equally willing to be prevented from going’ (*JMN* VII, 43). Thereafter, recurrences appear intermittently. In September 1839: ‘Those only can sleep who do not care to sleep & those only can act or write well who do not respect the writing or the act’; in May 1840: ‘Criticism must be transcendental, that is, must consider literature ephemeral & easily entertain the supposition of its entire disappearance’; later, in an undated entry but certainly after 1843: ‘The transcendental & divine has the dominion of the world on the sole condition of not having it’ (*JMN* VII, 244, 352; VIII, 528). The aspiration, it would seem, is to arrive at a system which permits the performance of agency while acquitting him of investment in it, allowing him, at least in principle, to return to a condition of polar neutrality. By mid-1842, he is just about able to define it, and ‘demand of men that they

⁷⁹ The square brackets in the following indicate the additions made in the version which appears in ‘Circles’, otherwise, the two versions are identical: ‘And thus, O circular philosopher, [I hear some reader exclaim,] you have arrived at a fine Pyrrhonism, at an equivalence & indifference of all actions & would fain teach us that *if we are true*, forsooth, our crimes may be lively stones out of which we shall construct the temple of the true God’ (*CW* II, 188; *JMN* VII, 521). The insertion, of course, becomes a significant ironical statement in the context of the self-reading as self-undermining common in Emerson’s work by the time of its composition.

should exhibit a conduct which is at once continence & abandonment; “a wanton heed, & giddy cunning” (*JMN* VIII, 241). This is possible because, in 1841’s *Essays*, he has finalised a theorisation of what this mode of poetics might be, and it is to the elucidation of that poetics I now turn.

CHAPTER THREE

A Poetics of Reiteration: *Essays* (1841)

A man's *style* is his intellectual Voice only in part under his control. It has its own proper tone & manner which when he is not thinking of it, it will always assume. He can mimic the voices of others, he can modulate it with the occasion & the passion, but it has its own individual nature. (*JMN* III, 26)

Emerson wrote the above in 1826, when he was 22 years old, and had by no measure attained to his intellectual maturity. Still, it demonstrates well enough the genesis of a hopeful presumption that there is an ideal conception of style, an asserted signature of Reason through oneself, which preoccupied him throughout the 1830s. By the end of that decade, however, the exigencies of language, of the world without the self, and generally of the insufficiency of personal will had intervened to problematise the resolution that the discovery of one's innate style would have constituted. I have already suggested that learning to 'confess' constitutes a method of negotiating one's insufficiencies while continuing to write, but the nature of a confessional language remains to be analysed. To do so, it is necessary to reconsider certain principles discussed in the last chapter: specifically, the mode by which an ideal and natural style might have been identified, which is to say its fundamental internal consistency. In *Essays*, consistency in word or action is something Emerson directly interrogates, and aspects of his inquiry lead to interesting consequences.

In 'Self-Reliance', he asks a rhetorical question which has become famous in American cultural history: 'Why drag about this corpse of your memory, lest you contradict somewhat you have stated in this or that public place? Suppose you should contradict yourself; what then?' (*CW* II, 33). I will have more to say on the general sense of this passage later, but for now, I want to emphasise that last sentence. I am inclined to read the dissipation of this 'supposition'—'what then?'—not merely rhetorically; that

is, not merely as it functions rhetorically to register indifference to conventional concerns toward corroborating Emerson's main points in 'Self-Reliance'. For example, put this supposition in the context of a hypothesised inevitable style. If his 'suppose' means that I *can* contradict myself, is this contradiction founded in fact, so that the thesis of inevitability in style is squarely dismissed by virtue of a radical freedom of will? Or does it flag up our partial understanding of the concept of stylistic likeness, by which we assume that how we act or write ought to look or to mean consistently along principles of similitude? Furthermore, based on the latter of these points, if there is a mode of secular 'likeness' apparent in language which is not correlative with a singularity of style, then what might be inferred from the action of such likeness/unlikeness, whether the product of conscious will or circumstance?

These are formal questions in two senses of the term. First, the appearance of likeness may be said to play analogically into the field of concepts of pure identity and pure difference, or, in other words more common in Emerson, the universal and the particular. The paradox of perceiving unity in the atomised world of particulars is what we speak of when we speak of repetition, and repetition, in the abstract, is the mode of unchanging similitude on the temporal plane when seen from the point of view of one whose temporal experience is constituted by a linear sequence of moments.¹ Repetition becomes interesting, philosophically speaking, because it permits an infusion of the universal into the particular, so long as we deem it to be possible. Hence, on

¹ Hence the tendency, early in philosophical treatments of repetition, to acknowledge that it is a formal category impossible in any real sense. See Gilles Deleuze, for instance: 'If repetition is possible, it is due to miracle rather than law. It is against the law [...] If repetition exists, it expresses at once a singularity opposed to the general, a universality opposed to the particular [...] an eternity opposed to permanence. In every respect, repetition is a transgression'. To these models of antinomianism at the heart of repetition, we can add Maurice Blanchot's remarks on the same subject published a year after Deleuze: 'Repetition is transgression insofar as transgression displaces transgressive repetition, rendering it impossible'. That is, while repetition itself would seem to transgress the law of instances which asserts an ever present *différence* (ontological, temporal etc.), transgression (as a 'going-across') immediately reasserts a topographic difference, stripping repetition of its possibility. See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (1968), trans. by Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 3; Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* (1969), trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 272.

these grounds, I would like to suggest that Emerson's 'what then?' does not register the irrelevance of the question of what happens when one is either openly repetitive or openly contradictory, but is rather a speculative lunge at the meanings attendant on secular likeness and unlikeness, repetition and contradiction (but more especially the formal, impossible principle of repetition), at almost exactly the same time as the most radical philosophical voice in Europe, Søren Kirkegaard, put the question of 'whether repetition was possible and what it meant'.²

Secondly, it is worth noting that Emerson refers specifically to language in this extract, and with good reason. The law of language is its necessary repeatability: its economy depends upon transferability across contexts and demands. It would be patently useless if each word could be used only once, only in the particular instance of its coining. But there remains a distinction between repeatability in language practice and repetition—the former facilitates the apprehension of unique semantic properties by making language available to us, while the latter erases difference and therefore prevents semantic identification. In other words, while repetition is the necessary quality of language's semantic possibility, this does not mean that language permits repetition to simply *appear* as such. So the appearance of repetition which openly flouts this condition means that we are looking away from what we might habitually dismiss as the tedium of too apparent repetition in a narrative, for example.³

² Søren Kirkegaard, *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs* (1843-4), trans. by M. G. Piety (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 3.

³ Gérard Genette's discussions of 'frequency' in literary language are illustrative in this respect, since they demonstrate how orthodox stylistic devices such as what he terms 'iterativity' (the synthetic narrativisation of repeated instances, such as Proust's 'for a long time I went to bed early') and 'singulative narrative' (where a single instance becomes paradigmatic, standing as type for all other repetitions) negotiate having to simply repeat oneself in every instance. In doing so, the iterative or singulative enables the inflection of repetition with new meanings arrived at by virtue of narrative synthesis. Genette goes on to stress that, traditionally, an unaltered repeated utterance seems 'purely hypothetical, an ill-formed offspring of the combinative mind, irrelevant to literature', except in highly formalised 'modern texts', since its presence undermines the progressive quality of narrative. See Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 113-60.

Elsewhere, linguistic repetition is attended to only in specialised contexts, such as the study of poetic diction. Metrical rhythms, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, etc.; all depend upon the reader's capacity to recognise aural or visual parallelism which gives an impression of repetition, and these principles lead to my final remark on this theme. My reading of Emerson so far has been based on an assumption that he is theorising something he never openly discusses in theoretical terms, certainly not openly in the published works. Rather than see a problem in this, I hope that I have demonstrated that an effective way of bringing intellectual consistency to his work is to trace the parallels in repeated tropes, phrases, words, and so on, in order to deduce the theoretical constants. This admittedly very literary way of reading for tropological reflections is hinted at by Emerson as the proper way to read any and every text: as he writes in 'History', 'each man [...] must attain that lofty sight where facts yield their secret sense, and poetry and annals are alike', which signifies that the formalistic reading strategies applied to one must equally be turned on the other (*CW* II, 6). It is under such conditions that we are to understand the properly Emersonian 'style'. In this sense, his philosophical engagement with language allows play within the 'forms' of poetics—interference in the particular, contextual uses of language—to inflect analogically the 'forms' of philosophy: the principles of singularity and unity which lay at the base of his central ideas.

Singularity and Repetition on a Personal Level

To begin to understand why this is the case, it's worth looking at two studies from the slim scholarly history of Emersonian repetition which both turn on a specific theoretical concern of critical interest to my thesis, even as they approach the issue from very

different angles.⁴ The two appraisals were published a year apart in the mid-1980s. In Julie Ellison's *Emerson's Romantic Style* (1984), repetition is conceived to be a necessary practice in the poetics of the fragment characteristic of a late romantic literary style. Drawing heavily on Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy's *L'Absolu Littéraire* (1978), Ellison develops their thesis of metaphysical singularity indicated through literary fragmentation in Emerson's works. In Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, the impossibility of 'saying everything' and achieving romantic holism is displaced by the poet's generation of a patently incomplete work, demanding the interference of a reader/critic, which thus both alludes to the possibility of the absolute work by positing a structure in the form of disconnected poles, and claims its potential for itself by integrating reading practice into its very realisation as a work.⁵ Within this framework, Ellison posits that repetition has two significant effects:

Repetition forces us to take out one interchangeable part and insert another. To adopt Emerson's terminology, it creates the 'interval', 'break in continuity' [...]

⁴ Lawrence Buell was the first scholar to draw attention to the fact that Emerson, the archetypal critic of conformity, imitation, and forthright advocate of spontaneity, was actually a strikingly repetitive writer. In *Literary Transcendentalism*, he emphasised that the formal type of 'catalogue rhetoric', long recognised in Whitman, was also a fixture of Emerson's work. For Buell, the catalogue of repetitions constitutes the necessary poetic form to corroborate the Transcendentalist insistence of the 'relationship and totality' of all things. Buell's argument recognises the limited totality of what can be represented by the text, and hence the way in which he sees the partial text aspiring to holism by way of a formal gesture is actually very close to French theoretical treatments of the romantic fragment, which I will touch on in a moment. See Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism*, pp. 166-87. Besides Ellison and Wayne Anderson, the two scholars who I will discuss centrally, there has been very little attention paid to this tendency in Emerson's work after Buell. The only relatively recent treatment is by Lisa Steinmann, who features a chapter on Emerson in her *Masters of Repetition*, although her use of the term relates only to those generic 'inherited literary models', what poetry is supposed to 'look like', which she finds recurring in Thomson, Wordsworth, Shelley, and finally Emerson's poetry. Steinmann's primary interest is how this tradition coheres with the oft-stated claims of these poets for modes of 'power' declared to exist in poetic production, and by this she means, emphatically, how print culture is to be seen as a socio-political actor. Hence her thesis is generally extrinsic to my concerns regarding the literary-philosophical status of the meaning of repetition, particularly so insofar as for Steinmann repeated romantic tropes such as solitude, idleness, reveries in nature, etc. are merely 'rehears[ed] long-standing commonplaces about poetry' in Emerson's work, and are reduced to stand as the conventions which problematise Emerson's statements elsewhere on poetry and thinking poetically as modes of worldly 'action', a concept which Steinmann reads very literally. Lisa M. Steinmann, *Masters of Repetition: Poetry, Culture, and Work in Thomson, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Emerson*. (New York: St. Martin's, 1998), pp. 135-96.

⁵ Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. by Phillip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1988), pp. 39-58 and *passim*.

Such intervals affect the reader by intensifying the figurative or fictive quality of language and thus diminishing its capacity for true and final naming.⁶

Ellison's argument here that language changes somewhat in repetition, becoming 'figurative and fictive', suggests an alteration in its basic semantic function that reveals repetition to be a classical formal device.⁷ As the Russian Formalists argued in the early twentieth-century, incidents in 'defamiliarisation' of language are critical to developing philosophical conceptions of literary form, and, as I argue later, Emerson has his own distinct take on the principle of defamiliarising.⁸ Ellison uses similar concepts here to explain how the apparent likeness between repeated 'interchangeable' parts 'strengthens the distinction between part and whole rather than subsuming the "partial" into the "complete"', leading to a deferral of a claim to holism which, paradoxically, effects a more authentic potential singularity according to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's model.⁹ Essentially, in Ellison's thesis repetition interferes with our normative relation to language, but it is worth noting briefly that in this model defamiliarisation returns us—once again, paradoxically—to a mode of domestication in one's own subjectivity. By way of 'point[ing] us toward an unavailable wholeness of vision and becom[ing] identified with the intuition of completeness they precipitate', repeated fragments align

⁶ Ellison, p. 173.

⁷ Hence language's 'diminished capacity for true and final naming' under such conditions, although this claim, and that on the prior page of Ellison's text on how repetition 'drains away meaning', need to be considered with caution as relatively conventional utterances of the post-structuralist context of this text's composition. Fictive and figurative qualities should, perhaps, also *generate* meaning, or at least new loci for meaning, and this is what I'll be examining here. Ellison, p. 172.

⁸ See, for instance, Viktor Shklovsky, who writes that the 'technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception'. Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique' (1917), trans. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, (Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 3-24 (p. 12). The idea itself is older, however. As Susan Wolfson has emphasised, it was a romantic conviction: Percy Bysshe Shelley declared in 'A Defence of Poetry' that poetic form has the power to 'purge [...] from our inward sight the film of familiarity' and 'strip [...] the veil of familiarity from the world'. As such, there is precedent for supposing that Emerson made formal decisions toward a similar effect. See Wolfson, *Formal Charges*, p. 21, see also pp. 3-4, 7.

⁹ Ellison, p. 167.

with the expression of the intuitive and the felt; that is, a more proximal relation of language to subjective experience.¹⁰

In an article published in 1985, Wayne Anderson makes a similar point by way of a very different approach. Focusing on what he terms the ‘rhetoric of reiteration’ in Emerson, Carlyle, and Coleridge, Anderson highlights the common denominator among these three as the concept of intuitive Reason. Based on the fact that Reason is of necessity ‘without proof’, Anderson argues that in their shared ‘attempt to express the indemonstrable premises of faith, imagination, and intuition, ideas that are by definition prior to syllogistic development, they rely on declaration and reiteration much more often than orthodox speakers or writers’.¹¹ While evidently taking a more empirical line than Ellison, stressing that repetition constitutes a ‘simple insistence [that] can be seen as persuasive’ in rhetorical terms, Anderson nevertheless also emphasises the semantic differences attending repeated utterances, and sees this as specifically relevant to the exposition of otherwise inexpressible concepts of subjective experience.¹²

What is foregrounded, in other words, is the fact that repetition has a special significance within the intersections between relative personal and impersonal qualities of language. That both critics align it with the *apparently* personal and familiar, because intuitive and subjective, experience of Reason is provocative: surely, one might claim, nothing is more impersonal, linguistically speaking, than a recognition of the sense that repetition illustrates the disconnection of context from language, of language’s transferability and indeterminate signification, and, finally, of the impersonalisation of the utterances of the language user. The paradox evident here has recognisable qualities, of course. Reason working through consciousness is both personal and impersonal in

¹⁰ Ellison, p. 174.

¹¹ Wayne C. Anderson, “‘Perpetual Affirmations, Unexplained’: The Rhetoric of Reiteration in Coleridge, Carlyle, and Emerson”, *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 71 (1985), 37-51 (p. 37).

¹² Indeed, despite the methodological differences, Anderson’s claim for ‘the power of such rhetoric to create presence and hence adherence’ in distinction to the ‘dry understanding’ of the epistemologies of Locke and Kant precisely echoes the type of linguistic turn in romantic poetics highlighted by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy. Anderson, p. 49.

Emerson's thought on inspiration—'done by us, and not done by us'. As Richard Poirier has argued, and all assertions on linguistic legality corroborate, this phrase might equally be applied to language use in general.¹³ Such is the basis not only of Poirier's own arguments for pragmatist interventions in the linguistic field, but also of the whole history of structuralist linguistics back to Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*. But there are questions of method and of utility in labelling language in this way: method, because seeing language in this respect while using it is a practice that demands some suspension of both belief and sincerity; utility, because the recognition of altered semantic facility demands an alteration in the thinking and the perceived ends of language practice. Or, to put it another way, this is Emerson on the correct if discomfiting 'use' of a friend, who, we recall, is 'done with' in the same way as a book:

A friend [...] is a sort of paradox in nature. I who alone am, I who see nothing in nature whose existence I can affirm with equal evidence to my own, behold now the semblance of my being in all its height, variety and curiosity, reiterated in a foreign form; so that a friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of nature. (*CW* II, 120)

A masterpiece 'of nature' is defined as such because it perfectly sustains the highlighted paradox of personality in impersonality, which means to sustain doubleness, to maintain at once attraction and repulsion in the nature of magnetic poles. To translate this into literary terms, reproducing such a masterpiece as a book would involve isolating the kind of linguistic form in which the necessity of impersonality is acknowledged and confessed, but making it in a way that *is* confessional: that has the inflection of the

¹³ Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, pp. 3-33.

personal and the quality of avowal, and is not an impersonal language reducing the subject-agent to a reproducer of forms.

The consequence of this distinction is that Emerson is not necessarily making a general claim about all language. It can stagnate in traditions, as he often observed. In October 1838, in the wake of the controversy over the Divinity School ‘Address’, Emerson wrote in his journal of the characteristic of ecclesiastical writing and sermonising: ‘How sad to behold aught coming in that name [of God, ...] which gives no light, which confounds only, which shines on nothing, affirming meantime that it is all light; which does nothing, affirming steadily that it does & is all’ (*JMN* VII, 121). Affirming without action—this is the conventional, formal, ritual use of language Emerson rejects. The characteristics of ‘great’ writing, on the other hand, are given in ‘The Over-Soul’ as what is discovered ‘in Homer, in Chaucer, in Spenser, in Shakespeare, in Milton’: ‘They seem frigid and phlegmatic to those who have been spiced with the frantic passion and violent colouring of inferior, but popular writers’ (*CW* II, 171). Emerson uses the terms ‘frigid’ and ‘phlegmatic’ in praise, of course. As such, good writing is initially characterised by an impersonal aloofness. It is, in this basic sense, ‘neutral’ to our affections. But Emerson’s terms are characteristically efficient in expressing another signification. Phlegmatic derives from the Greek *phlegein*—to burn; frigid, the Latin *frigus*—cold. Hence Emerson places such writing precisely between the tropes of the fire of the affections and the chill of intellect, between body and mind, instinct and reflection, suspended between poles, and consequently neutral in a more literal sense.

In this etymological sleight of hand, there’s a hint of the type of sustained double sense of language Emerson manifests throughout *Essays*. The simple juxtaposition of two terms whose dominant meanings depend on figurative constructions of their etymological roots returns us to *Nature* and the attention paid

there to this fact of language, where ‘*Right* originally means *straight*; *wrong* means *twisted*’, etc. (*CW* I, 18). The effect is to strip away the accretions which have given the terms a too uniform surface character and settled into formalism, and instead reveal language’s basic metaphorical dependence. This, in a sense, is a realisation of its ‘figurative and fictive’ quality. But this is merely a suggestion. Emerson’s other methods of realising linguistic doubleness are more emphatic, and by exposing the tiers of repetition, one can make such methods manifest. The necessary first step in this direction involves developing his thesis on the acknowledgement of neutrality in language.

Among the starkest evidences of repetition in Emerson’s work are his anaphoric reiterations of words and phrases from work to work, and within works themselves. It occurs in many different contexts—at its most basic, it involves terms which, by virtue of repetition, take on a special significance within the Emersonian system. For example, there are those which I have already raised in one or another context: the scholar, the significance of the stars, of the sun, of warmth, and of light. The redefinitions accompanying these spread out across Emerson’s work, giving it an internal semantic logic, although one might fairly say that this is a characteristic of most writers. More striking, then, is the manner in which terms cluster or recur suggestively in apparently unrelated contexts. The phrase ‘[c]rossing a bare common’, which opens the portrayal of the transparent eye-ball experience in *Nature*, echoes across Emerson’s later work, and it is an echo which once again draws attention to the semantic blurring of verb, adjective, and noun employed. In ‘History’, Emerson depicts another wintry scene, and notes that ‘one will see as readily the origin of the stained glass window with which the Gothic cathedrals are adorned, in the colours of the western sky seen through the *bare and crossing* branches of the forest’ (*CW* II, 12).¹⁴ To the attentive reader of Emerson, such

¹⁴ As well as ‘crossing’ and ‘bare’ which appear so strikingly here, the word ‘common’ is used frequently by Emerson, and its employment within even only loosely related contexts invokes parallelism. For example, after the ‘common’ is crossed in *Nature*, Emerson later exhorts that we aspire to similar

repetition evokes a sudden sense of *déjà vu*; a shock of recognition in language by which semantic clarity is not necessarily attained, but a sense of importance for the evoking phrase is. The closest analogue in Emerson's writing might be said to be the praise of detached thought from 'Self-Reliance': 'In every work of genius we recognise our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty' (*CW* II, 27). A skeptical reader might argue that this is merely Emerson deceiving us into believing in the efficacy of his own rhetorical project—if a reader finds words, concepts, or phrases echoing as 'thoughts' in his writing, it is only because Emerson has previously put them in his or her mind. But any writer practising such a technique runs a significant risk, which Emerson recognises. In *Nature*, he writes of the postlapsarian 'corruption' of language: 'old words are perverted to stand for things which are not; a paper currency is employed when there is no bullion in the vaults' (*CW* I, 20). And 'paper money', as he writes in 'Compensation', 'may be counterfeited or stolen' (*CW* II, 67).

These two terms identify Emerson's principal interests. 'Counterfeit' acknowledges the transferability (and perpetual economic validity) of the disconnected signifier; 'stolen' the fact that it may be used entirely without one's intention or permission. The consequence is that such a language is purely impersonal. Whether counterfeited or stolen, it retains use value, making it not void of meaning *per se*, but certainly void of me. Though we may anticipate Emerson recoiling from this, he does not. Rather, the impersonal, and the disjuncture it signifies, is elevated to a position of fascination and awful praise. If we posit that the process of defamiliarisation and depersonalisation in language consists of an interruption or overturning of our accepted relation to material form, then analogues begin to appear in striking instances from

transcendent moments by learning 'to see the miraculous in the common' (*CW* I, 44). It continues in 'The American Scholar', where Emerson exhorts the 'poetisation' and 'embracing' of 'the common', and in *Essays* comes to stand for the Over-Soul repeatedly as the 'commonality' of the universal mind, which is, of course, what Emerson first claims to have sublimely experienced in literally crossing the 'common' in *Nature* (*CW* I, 67; *CW* II 3, 159, 164-5). Eric Wilson emphasises the polysemantic nature of these terms in some detail, with specific attention to the religious subtexts, in *Emerson's Sublime Science* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999), pp. 139-44.

Emerson's texts. Aversion from the familiar is etymologically linked to aversion from the familial, and, for all that Emerson seldom quotes directly from scripture, three times in 1841's *Essays* he evokes Christ's threat to the family: 'I shun father and mother and wife and brother, when my genius calls me' (*CW* II, 30).¹⁵ Indeed, in 'Intellect', he effectively makes Christ the exemplar of this tendency toward an aversion to the familiar, and marks the aversive tendency as among the most meaningful principles of the gospel.¹⁶

This links to a more severe 'defamilialisation' which occurs only in the journals, although its relevance goes well beyond these textual limits. In amongst entries written in the winter of 1839-40 on the subject of friendship, many of which would find their way into the essay of that title in *Essays*, Emerson writes of one of his semi-autobiographical personas, 'Guy': 'Guy wished all his friends dead on very slight occasion. Whoever was privy to one of his gaucheries, had the honour of this Stygian optation. Had Jove heard all his prayers, the planet would soon have been unpeopled' (*JMN* VII, 333). In this brief and tongue-in-cheek narrative, Guy goes on to learn that ideal relations might be sustained by other means than death. That said, death in the frame of friendship continues to play on Emerson's mind. A few pages later he paraphrases from a letter he had written to Samuel Gray Ward, 'I see persons whom I think the world would be richer for losing' (*JMN* VII, 340). Emerson was no stranger to the experience of the death of those closest to him, as has been extensively documented. But death comes to refer to more than just personal circumstances in Emerson's work. As such, he contextualises his comment to Ward in the next entry in the journal, describing death as it is presented 'in a novel or poem' as 'but the mechanical

¹⁵ See Matthew 10: 34-5, and Luke 14: 26. For the other instances in *Essays*, see 'Compensation' (*CW* II, 58-9) and 'Intellect' (*CW* II, 203).

¹⁶ Here, Emerson turns the imperative to stand for a general truth: 'Jesus says, Leave father, mother, house and lands, and follow me. Who leaves all, receives more. This is as true intellectually, as morally' (*CW* II, 203).

sublime’—a crude, secular, metaphorical image of true sublimation, so that ‘the faintest thought must always be superior to the most imposing death in the fable’ (*JMN VII*, 341). With his attention focused toward the ideal, Emerson’s analogy of the attainment of thought with death is purely dialectical. The ‘thing’ dies, ontologically speaking, in the sublimation to thought.

By the time Emerson came to write ‘Compensation’, the compensatory status of thought as synthetic benefit of the death of the ‘real’ was well established:

The death of a dear friend, wife, brother, lover, which seemed nothing but privation, somewhat later assumes the aspect of a guide or genius; for it commonly operates revolutions in our way of life, terminates an epoch of infancy or of youth which was waiting to be closed, breaks up a wasted occupation, or a household, or style of living, [etc.]. (*CW II*, 73)

This loss of family and ‘familiar’ in the severance from the redundant material ‘household’ is repeated wherever Emerson treats of the demands of pure consciousness in *Essays*. If we aspire to self-consciousness, then the household of ‘Compensation’ has correlate in the conception of the body of man as the ‘house of reason’, as Emerson wrote in ‘The Method of Nature’ in mid-1841, and it must be treated in the same way, by death and dissection (*CW I*, 127). Hence the hypothesis of ‘History’, that we might find Reason in man easily, ‘could we lay him open’ (*CW II*, 11). The corpus/corpse of our writing is akin to this, and I have already discussed how our writing can be optatively posited as the location for a restorative reading of the operation of prereflective consciousness (albeit in a manner exhibiting an inescapable temporal disjuncture). If we abide with the ideal premise of this thesis, then we perceive writing and death uniting in Emerson’s work to forward the positive virtues of disembodiment

as the facilitator of higher thought. He summarises this thesis in ‘Intellect’, stating that any act of thought ‘disentangled from the web of our unconsciousness, becomes an object impersonal and immortal. It is the past restored, but embalmed [...] It is eviscerated of care’ (*CW* II, 194). Yet there is a word in this extract—‘embalmed’—which doesn’t agree with the ideal sense of the dialectic.

To put this into context, it’s worth recalling that when Andrews Norton publicly attacked Emerson in the wake of the Divinity School ‘Address’ in 1838 his objections were specific. Mainly, he reproached both Emerson and the organisers for permitting an unorthodox thinker to vent his ideas at the heart of New England Unitarianism, but he also raised concerns over the ‘incoherent’ doctrines espoused, none more so than Emerson’s superficially bizarre description of ‘the religious sentiment’ as ‘the embalmer of the world. It is myrrh and storax, and chlorine and rosemary’ (*CW* I, 79).¹⁷ We can justify Emerson’s knowing use of this term by recourse to the thesis of inspiration discovered through proxy, hence the ‘religious sentiment’ is not mere enthusiasm, but that which ‘embalms’ the world in order that I may apprehend it, a product of the act of perception as described in *Nature*. But this preservation belies a critical fact. In a sublimatory dialectic, the thing which dies on the way to thought must disappear for the thought to attain self-subsistence and coherence. The ‘embalmed’ corpse will do anything but—indeed, it is an affront to and an intervention in a natural process of dissolution which we might otherwise expect Emerson to find beautiful.

The meaning of this becomes more pressing when we consider how Emerson formally mirrors the discussion of the ideal dialectic in *Essays*. The previously quoted passage on that subject constituted the basis of the concluding paragraph of ‘Compensation’. In the next essay, ‘Spiritual Laws’, and on what is effectively the next

¹⁷ Andrews Norton, always an acute if reactionary reader, drew attention to this phrase in a letter to the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, published on the 27th August 1838, as evidence of why Emerson’s ‘Address’ was an ‘incoherent rhapsody’. Norton, ‘The New School in Literature and Religion’, reprinted *Transcendentalism: A Reader*, pp. 246-50 (p. 249).

page of text, the introductory passage offers a very different conception of death, retaining the unsettling presence that the dialectic negates: ‘Even the corpse that has lain in the chambers, has added a solemn ornament to the house’ (*CW* II, 77). The ‘ornamental’ corpse plainly has no ‘use’, but is solely adornment, an object of interest and fascination.¹⁸ The consequence of this is that we must revise our understanding of Emerson’s relation to the bodily, which never seems more alien a principle than in the corporeal remnant of death. There is a long and consistently reproachful critical tradition addressing Emerson’s apparent disinterest in bodily exigencies and its effects, along with those of secular reality, on the mind.¹⁹ But this is a construction which notes only one side of his continual play between poles. In the journals, wherever Emerson writes of a purely ideal relation to the world—such as the assertion that ‘sunsets & starlights, [...] swamps and rocks [...] are no doubt a Sanscrit cipher covering the whole religious history of the universe’—he will within days inevitably balance the text with the absolute contrary. In the instance of this example, Emerson writes in the same week in June 1840: ‘I think we can never afford to part with matter. How dear & beautiful it is to us! As water to our thirst, so is this rock to our eyes & hands & feet’ (*JMN* VII, 375, 377). In the space of a week, Emerson swings from the dogmatic idealism of Bishop Berkeley to the refutation of Samuel Johnson in reflecting on his rock.

¹⁸ There is famous anecdotal evidence that Emerson was ‘fascinated’ in this way by the bodily aspect of death. Some fourteen months after the death of his first wife, Ellen, he entered the family tomb and opened her coffin. Recorded in a tantalising and uncharacteristically guarded entry in his journal for March 29th, 1832, the single line ‘I visited Ellen’s tomb & opened the coffin’ is followed incongruously by an unrelated quote from Aristotle’s *Ethics* (*JMN* III, 7). Emerson repeated the act in July 1857: when moving the coffins of his mother and of his first-born son, Waldo, to his family plot in the recently consecrated Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, he records in his journal that ‘[t]he sun shone brightly on the coffins, of which Waldo’s was well preserved—now fifteen years. I ventured to look in the coffin’ (*JMN* XIV, 154). Richardson emphasises the ‘essentially’ Emersonian nature of the interest shown in this act in the introduction to his *Mind on Fire*, p. 3.

¹⁹ This tendency begins in a letter Thomas Carlyle wrote to Emerson on having read *Essays* for the first time: ‘These voices of yours which I liken to *unembodied* souls, and censure sometimes for having no body,—how *can* they have a body? They are light-rays darting upwards in the East; they will yet *make* much and much to have a body!’ *Correspondence*, p. 296. The breadth of instances in modern scholarship cannot possibly be covered here, since one might consider every critique of Emerson’s idealism to turn on this concept to a certain extent. For an example which demonstrates that the tendency remains resolutely contemporary, see Thomas Constantinesco’s psychosexual reading of how Emerson negotiates the bodily intrusions of friends in “‘Discordant Correspondence’: Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Friendship””, *New England Quarterly*, 81 (2008), 218-51 (pp. 247-50).

But death takes us a step farther, precisely because of its special power of persistence, its disarming and fascinating ‘ornamental’ quality. Drained of vitality, the corpse nonetheless remains, continuing to condition our relation with it after the fact of thinking, of ‘original’ being-with the world, ought to have passed on to a new ‘original’ moment. On these terms, we might reconsider the question of ‘Self-Reliance’: ‘Why drag about this corpse of your memory, lest you contradict somewhat you have stated in this or that public place? Suppose you should contradict yourself; what then?’ Setting the tropes of the impersonal back into literary terms, Emerson dragged the ‘corpse’ or ‘corpus’ of his memory everywhere he wrote, in the form of the reappearance of the past writings of the journals. The presumed virtues of this modulated form of repetitive consistency, detailed in the last chapter, survive in occasional comments within *Essays*, as in the already quoted lines from ‘Prudence’ whereby the prudent individual would ‘feel the admonition to integrate his being [...] and keep a slender human word among the storms, distances, and accidents, that drive us hither and thither, and, by persistency, make the paltry force of one man reappear to redeem its pledge, after months and years’ (*CW* II, 139). The notion that time bestowed form, that the act of rewriting was merely concentration and revelation of one’s innate tendencies, persisted still in mid-1839, when he posits how what were disparate utterances of particular moments now ‘occupy but four lines & I cannot read these together without juster view of each of them than when I read them singly’, something which he would ruminate on two months later in defending his own ‘practice of Composition which seems to young persons so mechanical & so uninspired’ (*JMN* VII, 191, 216).

But these pages from 1839 revisit something that Emerson had already acknowledged his doubts about, and by the time he was focused on bringing his older writings to bear in the composition of *Essays* another philosophic sense of the meaning of repetition and the consistency it engenders begins to emerge. The processes of

repetition may not be comfortable—in ‘Self-Reliance’, he speaks of the way in which we ‘repeat by rote the sentences of granddames and tutors [...] painfully recollecting the exact words they spoke’, and an experience of ‘painfully’ and precisely ‘recollecting’ his own ‘exact words’ is articulated unambiguously in private writings of the period (*CW* II, 39).²⁰ Yet, as he came to discover, in this mechanical, coldly intellectualised view which developed from the apophatic method explored over the prior years, the principle of repeatability, of trans-temporal and trans-contextual singularity, seemed to possess a power verging on the occult. In the early summer of 1839, he wrote the following lines reflecting on a walk with Caroline Sturgis:

I thought how charming is always an analogy, as, for example, the iteration which delights us in so many parts of nature, in the reflection of the shore & the trees in water; in Architecture, in the repetition of posts in a fence, or windows or doors or rosettes in the wall, or still finer the pillars of a colonnade; in poetry rhymes & still better the iteration of the sense as in Milton’s

‘though fallen on evil days

On evil days though fallen & evil tongues’

and the sublime death of Sisera,—‘At her feet he bowed, he fell; where he bowed there he fell; where he bowed, there he gave up the ghost;’ where the fact is made conspicuous, nay colossal, by this simple rhetoric. (*JMN* VII, 210)²¹

To what ‘fact’ is Emerson referring here? Simply the meaning of the individual line which is repeated, or the power and aspect of repetition itself? He is not forthcoming

²⁰ See the journal entry for October 7th, 1840, when Emerson was nearing the completion of the volume of *Essays*: ‘I have been writing with some pains Essays on various matters as a sort of apology to my country for my apparent idleness’. Emerson goes on to describe the rewriting process as ‘such a mechanical work, a seeming wise,—a cold exhibition of dead thoughts’ (*JMN* VII, 404-5).

²¹ The passage is revisited in ‘Poetry and Imagination’, in *Letters and Social Aims* (1876) (*CW* VIII, 24-5).

enough to leave a clear indication in this journal passage, but by a process of comparison the latter possibility gains in strength. The reiteration of vocabulary and phrasing in each quoted instance indicates that one's relation to the phrase (whether as writer, or reader, or both) is not complete. The phrase does not disappear in thought but is instead reasserted, different in vitality precisely insofar as it is seen to be reasserted. The already complicated issues surrounding textual 'possession' in Emerson's thought become even more complex, as the text itself begins to exert a power of fascination and persistence at odds with the expectation of its dissolution in thought.

Indeed, in *Essays*, the principle is explicitly put into consideration. Take, for instance, the declaration in 'Love' that '[w]ho hears me, who understands me, becomes mine,—a possession for all time' (*CW* II, 115). Here, one's personal investment in the text directly leads to its efficacy as a rhetorical tool, where language is a faculty of achieved wilfulness. Yet elsewhere, a quite different attitude is adopted. 'To be great is to be misunderstood' is Emerson's infamous and provocative declaration in 'Self-Reliance', and the reasoning behind this lies in the renunciation of claims of ownership; that greatness comes not in being misunderstood as such, but in wilfully accepting that possibility (*CW* II, 34). The theoretic ideal for Emerson—who wrote, lectured, and conversed at length on writing, speaking, and conversation—is to 'know that there is somewhat more blessed and great in hearing than in speaking. Happy is the hearing man: unhappy the speaking man [...] if I speak, I define, I confine, and am less' (*CW* II, 202). If we must speak (and we must, for utterance, or the proxy of text, is necessary to self-knowledge), then Emerson seeks to find a way to speak without the 'commitment' accompanying claims to full ownership of the utterance. Rather, he articulates the telling desire that one could first speak, and then 'that he could pass again into his neutrality! Who can thus avoid all pledges, and *having observed, observe again* from the same

unaffected, unbiased, unbribable, unaffrighted innocence, must always be formidable’ (CW II, 29. Emphasis added).

What here is given as a will to neutrality concentrates the kind of contradiction in terms that such a phrase signifies: willed neutrality brings ‘formidability’—power and agency, not neutered inefficacy—and we might emphasise the pun on the ‘ability’ to ‘form’. Putting this back into linguistic terms, it is a power to speak or write in a mode that consciously renounces the presumption of dialectical power or ordinary semantics. Rather than being a language of declaration and presumptive authority, Emerson tells us that the mode of speech we need requires a radical rethinking: ‘We have yet to learn that the thing uttered in words is not therefore affirmed. It must affirm itself, or no forms of logic or of oath can give it evidence. *The sentence must also contain its own apology for being spoken*’ (CW II, 88-9. Emphasis added). Not only is this to be starkly different from ecclesiastic language which ‘affirm[s ...] steadily that it does & is all’, but does nothing; it is also to be in opposition to the dialectical mode of negation in which language conveniently vanishes or ‘dies’ in the moment of being understood. In other words, it is a language that goes forth, but without commitment, as though it had ‘no right to go unless it were equally willing to be prevented from going’, as is the tendency of his confessional statements during these years.

Emerson’s language of confession is therefore built around the ability to make it ‘affirm’ in a way that does not operate by negation; rather, it affirms itself, like a confession of faith, or evangelism, which, as Ernesto Grassi has pointed out, involves a ‘showing’, a making-present wherein language ‘leads before the eyes a significance’ adhering to the materiality and bodily residue of the text itself.²² Of course, we cannot simply expect language to *declare* that it is doing this in the normal manner. It must ‘act’,

²² Ernesto Grassi, *Rhetoric as Philosophy* (University Park PA and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), pp. 19-20. This model can, of course, lead to the veneration of the book if misconstrued, slipping back toward the convention of verbal inspiration.

and not simply aim to tell. The kind of doubleness necessary to enact this process demands something akin to style, or rather, perhaps—to use the term which Emerson often employs as its synonym—tone.²³ There are suggestions of such a function occasionally apparent in the more orthodox linguistic mode in *Essays*. In ‘The Over-Soul’, which, we must remember, is where Emerson makes his most emphatic declarations regarding the inadequacy of language—‘[m]y words do not carry its august sense’—he also makes reference to the tropes of ‘want and ignorance’ as being really ‘the fine innuendo by which the soul makes its enormous claim’, and to the way in which other tropes of aversion (‘conversation [...] surprises [...] the instructions of dreams wherein we often see ourselves in masquerade’) are ‘the droll disguises only magnifying and enhancing a real element, and forcing it on our distinct notice’ (*CW* II, 160, 159, 161). If innuendo can be said to rely on an inflection of tone, then we are looking again for that in the language which bears the stylistic marks of the intervention of will. And this is where Emerson’s ideal premises are modified by the exigencies of the utterance to be made.

Neutralising Language

Throughout the summer of 1839, the points of style and wilfulness were to intersect repeatedly in Emerson’s journal. In this period, Emerson is intent on remedying the

²³ Although Jonathan Bishop’s work on Emersonian ‘tone’ doesn’t entirely echo the argument I make here, he does raise certain principles which are worthy of consideration. For Bishop, ‘[t]one [...] is always personal; with tone one enters a world where people exist’. The existence of persons is given to be a wholly independent question to that of the existence of language, and as such impressing ‘tone’ upon language constitutes a unique personal intervention into the legally-structured linguistic field. Bishop’s comments that Emerson ‘personates’ rather than simply expressing his personality are particularly pertinent given the turn away from any expectation of a revelation of style in the works of the later 1830s onwards, although the manner of the personation I am tracing here is less a constructed personality than the construction of a language which neutralises all investment of personality—an ‘impersonation’, therefore, that emphasises impersonal nature. See Bishop, pp. 128-43.

flaws of ecclesiastical language, in which, because ‘we pray not aloud [but ...] in form, we are constrained to excuse ourselves to others with words’ (*JMN VII*, 207). A month later, in early July, Emerson has turned the focus of doubt onto himself, evidently concerned by the lack of an emergent personal style. Over two days, he enters the following into his journal:

Ah could I hope to enact my thought! Do not covet nor hide nor sneak in relation to MSS. or thoughts or Literature.

I went to the woods & heard the wood thrush sing Ah Willie Willie, He Willio Willio.

We want all the elements of our being[...]

Yet a majestic soul never unfolds all these in speech. They lie at the base of what is said & colour the word but are reserved [...]

The rich inventive genius of the painter must all be smothered & lost for want of the power of drawing and when I walk in Walden Wood as on 4th July I seem to myself an inexhaustible poet, if only I could once break thro’ the fence of silence, & vent myself in adequate rhyme. (*JMN VII*, 227-8)

Besides the significance of a general focus on the doubt in style throughout this extract, there are a few points worth emphasising. First, the wood thrush, whose ease of expression invokes envy; not least, perhaps, because its onomatopoeic song emphasises its own ‘will’, and Emerson’s lack of ability to apply the same to his own productions. Second, the place in speech where these critical ‘elements of our being’ remain; at the foundation and as the possibility of speech, but always occult. Third, that ‘adequate rhyme’ is the superior imagined mode of expression.

Six days after having written the above, Emerson's doubts seem somewhat mitigated. 'Will' has evidently been the subject of some reflection—'Beauty dwells also in the Will'—and the possibility of style is being contemplated again, even demanded: 'we ask that a picture shall not give us only a superficial pleasure. We must have authentic proof that an artist has been there also' (*JMN VII*, 229-30). At the same time, throughout this period, Emerson is reiterating phrases in the journal with unusual frequency. On May 28th: 'There is no history: There is only Biography'; June 12th: 'I said all History becomes subjective, and repeats itself'; June 18th: 'There is no history, only biography' (*JMN VII*, 202, 211, 216). On the 3rd of July: 'Perception not whimsical but fatal'; then again on July 17th: 'Perception is not whimsical, but fatal' (*JMN VII*, 223, 230). Intimation that these thoughts of style and incidents of repetition might be related comes in entries for the 14th and 18th September. In that of the 14th, he laments our corruption by language once again, and our tendency to formalism in the way that '[t]he singer repeats his old song, the preacher his old sermon, the talker his old fact'. Yet he closes this entry with an acknowledgement that contradicts the pessimism of what precedes it: 'Wordiness is not the fault of this time only or of any class. It is incident to Man[;] Saints & Heroes have not escaped. George Fox lapses into bookfull & George Washington' (*JMN VII*, 240-1). And, as if to condition the preceding remarks on stagnation in repetition, he writes on September 18th (so immediately following the 14th in textual terms—there are no entries for the 15th, 16th or 17th) of having heard a former pupil of Margaret Fuller, Jane Tuckerman, singing, that although '[t]he tone of her voice is not in the first hearing quite pure & agreeable', nevertheless, '[h]er songs were better with every repetition. I found my way about in the hollows & alleys of their music better each time' (*JMN VII*, 241).

As such, although Emerson frequently declared his lack of interest in retrospection, it is fact that 'the new in art is always formed out of the old' and so one

might as well investigate the inevitability of repetition as a locale of meaning in a work, as well as a potential opportunity for stylistics (*CW* II, 210). Consider, therefore, this passage from ‘Intellect’, which has no precedent in *JMN*, and so perhaps reflects on Emerson’s more developed thinking on the topic by early-1841:

The thought of genius is spontaneous; but the power of picture or expression, in the most enriched and flowing nature, implies a mixture of will, a certain control over the spontaneous states, without which no production is possible. It is a conversion of all nature into the rhetoric of thought, under the eye of judgement, with a strenuous exercise of choice. And yet the imaginative vocabulary seems to be spontaneous also. It does not flow from experience only or mainly, but from a richer source. Not by any conscious imitation of particular forms are the grand strokes of the painter executed, but by repairing to the fountain-head of all forms in his mind. (*CW* II, 199)

If we straightforwardly accept the confidence apparent in this last sentence, then we must reject the plain uncertainty of all of the preceding. So, instead, if we consider this last line more carefully within the context of what comes before, we note that Emerson claims that the ‘grand strokes’ of the artist come from this pure internality, that as such great art comes ‘mainly’ from intuition. But for the ‘scholarly’ writer struggling to assert himself with tone and style, the necessity of ‘a certain control’ must be accommodated. Does this passage tell us, therefore, that under certain circumstances, perhaps when ‘the sun is hid’, as Emerson puts it elsewhere, that the wilful act of ‘conscious imitation’ might be in some way revelatory?

Consider also how Emerson writes both of the use of ‘adequate rhyme’ and of getting closer to the occult founding possibility of speech in the summer of 1839.

Emerson's entry for the 27th June is solely concerned with this principle of rhyme, and its implications are compelling. He begins with the distinction: 'Rhyme; not tinkling rhyme but *grand Pindaric strokes*'—immediately, a form of imitation in ordinary uses—that of phonemes reflecting back on earlier phonemes—becomes capable of 'grand strokes'. But we are deceived if we think that Emerson's rhyme is merely literal. He continues: 'Rhyme which knocks at prose & dullness with the stroke of a cannon ball. Rhyme which builds out into Chaos & Old night a splendid architecture to bridge the impassable [...] I wish to write such rhymes as shall not suggest a restraint but contrariwise the wildest freedom' (*JMN VII*, 219. Emphasis added).

This is not mere rhetorical bluster. There are specific and relevant issues underlying it. Rhyme as that which 'bridges the impassable' suggests its capacity to bind, if not resolve, a transitional tension as challenging as that between impersonal and personal, between ME and NOT ME, between the respective notions of universality and particularity. Wordsworth, in his own focused discussion of poetic form in the 1800 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, puts this in a manner peculiarly relevant to the concerns of this chapter in declaring for rhyme and for 'metrical language' 'a principle which must be well known to those who have made any of the Arts the object of accurate reflection; I mean the pleasure which the mind derives from the perception of similitude in dissimilitude'.²⁴ If the orthodox conception of language argues for the radical particularity of utterance in context, then the category of rhyme at least weakens the manifestness of dissimilitude and hints at the re-rendering of the linguistic field, so that the shock of apparent unity irrelevant to ordinary semantics is foregrounded. So, this rhyme which hits 'prose and dullness' like 'a cannonball' seems directly applicable to

²⁴ William Wordsworth, 'Preface' (1800) in Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2003), pp. 5-25 (p. 20). In 'Xenophanes', a poem originally written in the late-1830s but published in 1847's *Poems*, Emerson records this sentiment in the piece's closing lines as a kind of a poetic epiphany: 'And universal Nature, through her vast | And crowded whole, an infinite paroquet, | Repeats one note' (*CW IX*, 269).

Emerson's comment a few months later that 'those only can act or write well who do not respect the writing or the act' (*JMN VII*, 244).²⁵ Rhyme transcends its literal restraints under such conditions to become a destructive force on language's orthodox formalist mode. And the same 'rhyming' effect that links the instances of the words 'rhyme' and 'grand strokes' in passages already examined comes into play a few pages further on in terms of this concept of deference to forms: 'Never exhort, only *confess*. All exhortation, O thou hoarse preacher! *respects* others & not thyself, *respects* appearances & not facts & therefore is cant' (*JMN VII*, 253. Emphasis added). By way of inference, therefore, one can claim that confessional writing would have the characteristics which rhyme possesses; it would explicitly disregard normative and formalistic patterns in language use—indeed, it would *attack* them in order to restore linguistic doubleness, and to test the principle of will as the realisation of personal intervention in language.

This, in sum, is why the writing of confession is also the writing of repetition. In a stance of antinomianism which breaks the law of language by making language speak only for its limited, legal status, repetition disavows one's interest and self-definition in what was said. Simultaneously, it severs language from the context of utterance, in doing so restoring the visibility of its radical impersonality. As such, Emerson to some extent achieves the objective he sets himself in 'The Over-Soul' to 'indicate the heaven of this deity, and to report what hints I have collected' in 'profane' and secular language (*CW II*, 160). In the ideal realm of pure intersubjectivity, pure immersion in the 'one mind

²⁵ This, of course, is also another of Emerson's analogical statements of neutralised commitment, of going only under the condition that one is equally willing to be prevented from going. The radicalism of Emerson's inquiry into these principles in the mid nineteenth-century is underlined by way of comparison with later poets' interrogation of the same ideas: as Catherine Martin writes, Stéphane Mallarmé's investigation of rhyme aspired to 'unlock the dream of a complex but coherent system where the sounds that make up words have some hitherto unrecognised intrinsic meaning', but at once the French poet 'feared' that the same might 'signal [...] a meaningless, "absurd" reflex of language, where sounds [merely] invoke the other sounds from which they distinguish themselves in order to signify'. Emerson's willed renunciation of will opens him to the chaos attendant on this possibility, and I will return to this topic with respect to its most significant manifestation in *Poems* (1847) in chapter five. See Martin, 'The Gift of the Poem: Mallarmé and Robert Duncan's *Ground Work: Before the War*', *The Modern Language Review*, 103 (2008), 364-82 (p. 377).

common to all men' of the Over-Soul, language would be irrelevant. This is precisely *why* it is declared to be profane. This fact recurs again and again in Emerson's work, and language itself becomes the indicator of relative particularity. As he writes in 'Circles': 'The length of the discourse indicates the distance of thought betwixt the speaker and the hearer. If they were at a perfect understanding in any part, no words would be necessary thereon. If at one in all parts, no words would be suffered' (*CW* II, 184-5).

But these hypotheses need to be qualified. The restoration of a prelapsarian immediacy of thinking and acting, which has long been referred to as the ideal which drives Emerson's thought, is not consistently treated with credulity. Emerson, like many other late romantic thinkers, identifies with the philosophical exigencies of the postlapsarian condition.²⁶ First among these is the dependence on the world, the NOT ME as it is discussed in *Nature*, or the 'imps of matter', as he terms it in 1840's 'Thoughts on Modern Literature', and the recognition of a perpetual recourse to this is embodied in the persistence of material language which thwarts the sublimatory dialectic.²⁷ Like Christ, who enjoins his disciples in John 14: 23 'If a man love me, he will keep my words', Emerson posits a religious sense attendant on the materiality of text in advocating the 'keep[ing of] a slender human word' in 'Prudence'. This has none of the ritual sacredness that imbues the text in the instance of theopneusty, however. For Emerson, the repetition of the individual word reveals first its broader range of meanings—historical, etymological, etc.—and then its simple existence as an indicator of language's generalised impersonality, and in maintaining this term in the *correct* way, it becomes (like the confessions of faith of Christ) even a valid object of worship.

²⁶ Stanley Cavell was among the first to make this point a precondition for the proper understanding of Emerson. See Cavell, 'Being Odd', p. 112. One might also note the necessity of the primacy of the secular in this passage from 'Spiritual Laws': 'Let us draw a lesson from nature, which always works by short ways. When a fruit is ripe, it falls. When the fruit is despatched, the leaf falls. The circuit of the waters is mere falling. The walking of man and all animals is a falling forward' (*CW* II, 80).

²⁷ 'Imps of matter' is employed as a general term for the secular interruptions to the poet's ideal reveries which prevent him from being absorbed into the circuit of his own thought. I will discuss this term, and its connotations, in more detail in chapter four. See 'Thoughts on Modern Literature', *The Dial*, 1 (1840), 137-58 (p. 138).

A final example of Emerson's repeated tropes, and the etymological decay of formalistic usages involved, will serve to clarify why this is the case. Emerson spoke of proverbs and fables in a manner that, to the modern eye, is perhaps old-fashioned. First, in 'History', he conflates fable, history, and literature: "The advancing man discovers how deep a property he has in literature,—in all fable as well as in all history. He finds that the poet was no odd fellow who described strange and impossible situations, but that universal man wrote by his pen a confession true for one and true for all' (*CW* II, 17). Why, we might ask, is this 'confession' true for one and all? Emerson elaborates, slightly, in 'Compensation', although much of it is repetition: "The human soul is true to these facts in the painting of a fable, of history, of law, of proverbs, of conversation. It finds a tongue in literature unawares'. He reiterates the declaration on the next page, although here some hints of the signification begin to come through: "Still more striking is the expression of this fact in the proverbs of all nations, which are always the literature of Reason, or the statements of an absolute truth, without qualification' (*CW* II, 62-3). A proverb, as Emerson suggests here, is an aphoristic, unchallengeable utterance. By definition, it commands universal assent, and transcends normal linguistic conditions to become one of Emerson's much venerated 'facts'. Such universal assent indicates absolute truth, and so, when spoken, they are a 'plain confession of the inworking of the all', as Emerson also claims here. (*CW* II, 62)

But there are other facts demanding universal assent, and the term 'fable' brings us toward realisation of these. Fable derives from the Latin *fabula*, 'story', but more than this, it links back further to the verb *fari*—'to speak'. What Emerson links together in typically abstruse fashion is the manner in which simply *saying*, preferably in a way that does not confuse the issue with commitment, such as 'keeping a slender word', demands universal assent insofar as it reveals the radical, universal impersonality of language. As such, when Emerson comes to write on shared language in the mode of conversation

later in *Essays*, he draws attention to our paradoxical investment in it: ‘Conversation is an evanescent relation,—no more’ (*CW* II, 122). Why, exactly? Emerson does, at least, later make his point fairly explicit: ‘In all conversation between two persons, tacit reference is made as to a third party, to a common nature. That third party or common nature is not social; it is impersonal; is God’ (*CW* II, 164). The use of language in this context reveals us to ourselves, and reveals our distance from the impersonal, in which we are nevertheless invested, and into which, by an act of will, we can invest. By way of an utterance of willed repetition (and Emerson’s repetitions, so often prefaced ‘I have said’, are consciously and wilfully tautological) the impersonal is perceived to echo back to us—by confessing our exclusion *in* repetition, we are absolved, to a certain extent, by a manifestation of the impersonal, a secular ‘indication’, as Emerson would have it, of the impersonal and of God. In this way, by virtue of an intellectualised attitude of fascination in a conventional image of likeness, language becomes extensively correspondent with Emerson’s conception of divinity. In our ‘use’ of it, we are required to have ‘faith’ that we might ‘mean what we say’ as we abandon ourselves to it, as Cavell has put it. But more than this, Emerson’s employment of its ‘parts and particles’ to the end of figuring radical likeness constitutes a willed intervention that is both confessional of its humility while nevertheless reifying the divine as present impersonal; words ‘acting’ and not merely ‘exhorting’, by which the manifested divine is partially an act of the self, and fulfils the criteria of inspiration properly understood.

Postscript

I remember when a child in the pew on Sundays amusing myself with saying over common words as “black”, “white”, “board”, &c twenty or thirty times, until the word lost all meaning & fixedness, & I began to doubt which was the right name for the thing, when I saw that neither had any natural relation, but all were arbitrary. It was a child’s first lesson in Idealism. (*JMN* VIII, 30)

The practice of repetition is never quite substantial enough to sustain the theoretical model it aspires to, and, as the above extract from August 1841 illustrates, Emerson soon wrote of finding it callow. However, even though its poetic expediency was fleeting, it still exhibits a certain power. Accepting it meant accepting certain conditions, of which Emerson was conscious. In 1840's 'Thoughts on Modern Literature', he recorded another of his figurations of the assumption of neutrality and here the linguistic element is critical. Emerson asserts that the 'erect mind [should] disparage [...] all books' as mere 'primer learning'; that we must eventually 'learn to judge books by absolute standards', accepting 'that all literature is ephemeral', and readying ourselves for 'the supposition of its utter disappearance'.²⁸ Ephemerality and disappearance are the functions of a literature of repetition, as it acts on language to make one's relation to it apprehensible only on the most foundational level.

For clarification of how Emerson conceived of this principle, one can examine a final example which rehearses the conditions just described. It is a passage inscribed into two of Emerson's journals—one being a notebook carried on walks, the other the long-term 'Journal E'. Here, aspects of the point under consideration come into conjunction in an unresolved paradox. It begins with an intense confection of the claims and counterclaims of particularity and ideality:

Why should I wish to do or write many things,—since any one well done contains my history? Why should I see with regret the felling of the woods, & fear lest my son should lack the lessons his father drew from nature, when I have known myself entertained by a single dewdrop or an icicle, by a liatris, or a

²⁸ Emerson, 'Thoughts on Modern Literature', p. 140.

fungus, and seen God revealed in the shadow of a leaf? Nature is
microscopically rich, as well as cumulatively. (*JMN* VII, 373; VIII, 468)

Opening in a supposition that one particular act or piece of writing could function, paradigmatically, as the type of his whole character, Emerson immediately states its apparent opposite—that if one particular speaks of all, then another might do the job just as well, and nothing about that first particular is of specific value. The woods, which were Emerson’s initial type, can well be ‘felled’, a term which makes explicit its lapsarian connotations: one particle implies other particles, a continuous reminder of successiveness and a perpetually enacted ‘fall’ back into the experiential and differentiated world. Writing reflects this. Reinscription intimates a new particular, even if it exactly resembles the prior inscription. In this way, we are reminded that even if repetition constitutes an antinomian ‘transgression’, the etymology of this term restores topological difference.²⁹ Hence repetition is always also a return to particularity, and it can, naturally, be read singularly in this respect.

When Lawrence Buell remarked on how Emersonian repetition had gone unnoticed, he speculated on the reason by pointing to the fact that his readers had always been inclined to focus on the pithiest aphorisms alone, not noting the network of analogical parallels which reinforce their strength.³⁰ So here, once again, we see the restoration of matter, of experience over the pure forms of philosophy, since Emerson always goes back to the material text to refigure the moment of sublimation in that same text’s dissolution, and must accept the risk of departing from his unorthodox relation to language in every cyclical repetition of the process. In this respect is Emerson’s fascination with the textual to be understood, and this facet is never more potently suggested than in these instances from his journals for 1840, where the mutually

²⁹ See Blanchot’s remarks in n. 1, above.

³⁰ Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism*, p. 174.

exclusive concepts of universality appearing in infinite plurality and paradigmatic singularity cohere around the double writing of the same thing. Were his writing ideal, then he should not need to write ‘many things’, including the repetition of this passage. A single inscription would be philosophically sufficient. Yet, in 1841, he remains unwilling to leave the question to ‘fall’ to utter contingency. There must be a willed retainer, and in this repeated effort to emphasise sustained, material singularity, he finds his stylistic opportunity in a mode which will return him perpetually, and as if transfixed, to the writing/reading/writing of his journals.

As the decade progressed, however, the provisionality of a poetics of repetition was swiftly negated as new preoccupations reframed the relation to text in Emerson’s thought. In the second part of this thesis, I illustrate how his concerns were reversed. The investment he seems unable to recoup from text is now accepted as personal loss, his writing no longer restitutive but an act of bequest; a change which will, of necessity, require a revision of his poetic theory and practice.

Part Two:

**'Honour your place': Form, Power, and Personae of
Text: 1841-1850**

CHAPTER FOUR

'In for a mill, in for a million': *Essays: Second Series* (1844)

I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. (*CW* I, 8)

Late in 'Experience', published in 1844's *Essays: Second Series*, Emerson confesses a very specific sense of maturation: 'I am not the novice I was fourteen, nor yet seven years ago' (*CW* III, 47). The implied dates are significant ones in Emerson's career. The modern reader, informed by biography, will note that 1829-30 saw Emerson ordained a minister and married, before he lost his wife Ellen to tuberculosis early in 1831. But even his contemporaries would likely note the significance of the period 1836-7, which saw the publications of *Nature* and 'The American Scholar', the two major statements of a nascent Transcendentalism prior to its confrontation with the establishment in the Divinity School 'Address' of 1838. This sense of maturation is reflected in other themes present in the opening pages of the essay which suggest emergent differences in his thought. One is the troublesome allusion to society, which is nevertheless a somewhat unusual concession given the indifference of many of his earlier statements on the topic: 'Let us treat the men and women well: treat them as if they were real: perhaps they are' (*CW* III, 35). The other, which influences the change in attitude toward sociality and dominates the essay in general, is the cataclysm in Emerson's personal life—the death in early-1842 of his five-year-old son, Waldo.

Since Stephen Whicher's *Freedom and Fate* of 1953, which aligns the period surrounding Waldo's death with the most pronounced shift in Emerson's movement from optativity to fatalism, critics have extensively drawn on the references to Waldo's death in 'Experience', in 'Threnody', and in the journals to explain the differences in his

writing apparent throughout the 1840s.¹ The journals in particular take on a new tone: although he never records a specific instance of Waldo's suffering, recollections of the child are interlaced with musings on death, and on the look of a world shrunk by the death of his son. At the same moment, this worldview inflects and alters his thinking on his relation to text, and the role that textuality plays in sociality and ethics. In his early career, Emerson directed his studies of literary composition and formal exigency toward a recursive realisation of an elemental personal consciousness. The implausibility of this principle of expression, which is likely to be pretty clear to the modern reader, had also by 1841 disclosed itself to Emerson, and his attentions were directed instead towards means of negotiating the failure of language to reveal him to himself in salvaging his philosophical convictions by way of increasingly complex poetic contrivances. With the death of Waldo, however, questions of obligation and ethical investment, of what it means to define one's person in the limited forms of language, come to the front of Emerson's worldview and his writing.

Death is significant because it marks the cessation of personhood; it is the most palpable of the conditions of finiteness which preoccupied Emerson. Of the many potential parameters that might limit the scope of the person, none is so exacting and ubiquitously recognised as death.² Waldo's death sets final bounds on his father's conception of the child's person. But this imposition of bounds on the father's understanding of the son also feeds into a broader set of themes touching on Emerson's sense of his own person (and the personally felt grief which evoked a sense of maturation), the concept of interpersonality, and the role of the literary text in all this.

¹ Whicher, pp. 94-122. In biographical contexts, Richardson acknowledges the imperative that attends Waldo's death in his *Mind on Fire*, see p. 382.

² There are very few definitions of the 'person' which disagree with this: perhaps the only major theological model is the Augustinian hypothesis of the persistence of both the immaterial soul and the material body in the afterlife. Otherwise, the view that death terminates personality was common at least as early as Epicurus, and was restored in Renaissance and early Enlightenment thinking. This, of course, need not mean the cessation of the soul. See Augustine, *City of God*, ed. and trans. by Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1871), II, pp. 384-92.

Emerson would have known well Locke's definition—that a person is constituted as 'the sameness of a rational being' over time, a mind which retains identity in a body which retains identity—and this sense of continuity has remained a fundamental predicate in philosophies of the self throughout the following centuries and up to the present.³ I have illustrated how Emerson employed text to try to assay and determine his own ongoing literary personality throughout his earlier career, and the failure to achieve this has increasingly emphasised its opposite, the sense that language imposes a finitude that leaves its living author outside of the text. Personal finitude, however, enables sociality: foregoing aspirations to the infinitude of one's private mind, and instead becoming partial in a world in which other minds are countenanced, means playing a 'part' or particle and acknowledging the rather simple fact that one *is* only in relation to the world or NOT ME.

The sense that linguistic finitude too might have something to do with sociality had always been present in Emerson's work, as the epigraph above, from *Nature*, indicates. In this respect, the roles of author and reader represent bounded distinctions in relation to text that interfere with the singularity and continuity of personhood, and in thinking of this we might recall the following passage from 'Circles':

Our moods do not believe in each other. To-day I am full of thoughts and can write what I please. I see no reason why I should not have the same thought, the same power of expression, to-morrow. What I write, whilst I write it, seems the most natural thing in the world; but yesterday I saw a dreary vacuity in this

³ Locke, pp. 312, and 296-314 *passim*. Locke's arguments in the chapter titled 'Of Identity and Diversity' remain a critical starting point for many approaches of the philosophical definition of personhood. Rachel Cole's recent analysis of the person in Emerson's thought notes that this principle also underlies the major inquiries on the subject published in the last twenty years by George Kateb and Sharon Cameron. See Cole, pp. 68-70.

direction in which now I see so much; and a month hence, I doubt not, I shall wonder who he was that wrote so many continuous pages. (*CW* II, 182)

Singularity is explicitly replaced by differing capacities here, as Emerson distinguishes in himself the person of then (the author) and the person of now (the reader), never assuming that the ontological distinction be collapsed to grant both roles to a single being at a single moment. In the twentieth-century, the ontological relationship between the writing subject and text, or between the writing and the reading subject, became explicitly associated with death. As Maurice Blanchot wrote in 1949's 'Literature and the Right to Death', 'for [the author] the work has disappeared, it has become a work belonging to other people, a work which includes them and does not include him'—in it, he is finite, bounded, essentially (if not actually) dead.⁴ And death, Emerson finds in 1842 (though it was something he knew well enough beforehand), being the most radical of the measures of distinction between persons, actually characterises one's fundamental relationship with them. This is why all other persons were categorised NOT ME in *Nature*, a distinction which permits no means by which we can distinguish them from the other aspects of the world lying under this designation, among which are, of course, the corpses of the dead.

The thesis of repetition offered an avenue away from this discontinuity, disruption, and boundedness, and enabled Emerson to claim for neutrality, of being absolved of having to commit, which potentially conferred infinitude on personal consciousness. In such a way was he able, in 'The Over-Soul', to simply turn other persons into another faculty of personal self-revelation: 'Persons are supplementary to

⁴ As Blanchot goes on to say, in his idiosyncratic way: 'when I speak, death speaks in me'. The giving oneself over to everyone described here is, of course, another iteration of the recognition that submitting to language equates to a renunciation to claims of sovereignty: 'Why make it public if the splendour of the pure self must be preserved in the work, why take it outside, why realise it in words which belong to everyone?' Blanchot, 'Literature and the Right to Death', in *The Work of Fire*, trans. by Charlotte Mandell and Lydia Davis (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 300-44 (p. 306, 323).

the primary teaching of the soul. In youth we are mad for persons. Childhood and youth see all the world in them. But the larger experience of man discovers the identical nature appearing through them all. Persons themselves acquaint us with the impersonal' (*CW* II, 164). However, the 'larger experience' presented here is surpassed by the recollection or discovery of the primacy of sociality Emerson seems to recognise in the death of his son. This prefaces a radical *volte face* in his authorial attitude, since, for the first time, he openly and *publicly* discusses the role of the author as one of defining and delimiting, and the act of writing as legacy undertaken not for his personal (authorial) benefit, but for the benefit of the reader to come. This may still be a person who goes by the name of Emerson: in his compositional model, the text continues to constitute the development, while limiting the scope, of subjectivity. In the Emersonian model of self-reading as a hermeneutic of personal consciousness, the author is patently not a coherent subject, since the text is written without clear authority—only in this proxy is full realisation to be discovered. So a realised subject can be read from the text, but it is necessarily in the form of an absence: that of the author Emerson, whom the reader Emerson no longer is. It is more important, however, that the reader of the text is equally likely to be another person entirely, and Emerson's text will not be picked up by someone who has the desire to identify so readily with its author.⁵ Naturally, this will entail a sharp revision of what the text and its forms mean, or ought to mean, with respect to the persons constituted by it, associated with it, or connected through it.

The parameters of this concern, which will come to be manifested in new figurations of form, are most evident in 'Experience', the second essay of *Second Series*.

⁵ This principle has many precedents—initially, perhaps, Heraclitus offered Emerson a model of plural and sequential personhoods. Branka Arsić points to another possible source in noting how Montaigne quotes lines from Plutarch's 'E at Delphi' in the concluding remarks of his *Apology for Raymond Sebond* with which Emerson was likely to have been familiar: 'Nobody remains one person, nor is one person; but we become many persons [...] For without change it is not reasonable that a person should have different experiences and emotions; and if he changes, he is not the person; and if he is not the same person, he has no permanent being, but changes his very nature as one personality in him succeeds to another'. Quoted in Arsić, pp. 299-300.

But the prelude to this in the first essay, ‘The Poet’, offers a chance to perceive the break in thinking before the new model is foregrounded. Here, Emerson reiterates principles of poetic ideality, the organicism of the poet’s natural style, and the power to render the presence of the universal through rhyme, all familiar from the works published between 1836-41, but founders somewhat on an unusually clear expression of doubt: ‘I look in vain for the poet whom I describe’ (*CW* III, 21). So when ‘Experience’ opens in antipophora—‘Where do we find ourselves? In a series, of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none’—the question relates in one way to the *Second Series* in which *we* now find ourselves, in the place and personae of readers in relation to this text, still immersed and unsure of its textual or intellectual bounds or ‘extremes’ (*CW* III, 27). Meanwhile, having just passed through moments representing the figuration of the ideal, pessimism, and finally hope in our reading of ‘The Poet’, we are equally uncertain as the author’s position. From here, ‘Experience’ elaborates on the nature of textual relationship by way of metaphor, in a manner marked by stark differences from the earlier works.

Whereas in the past the emphasis had been exclusively on the meaning of the world, nature, the text—NOT ME—‘to me’, to the person of the text whom we tend to assume to be the author, here Emerson articulates the grounds of a thesis of what aspects form should have in relation to hypothetical future persons. This entails a change in the authorial persona, the locus of the text becoming infinitely prospective and no longer the mediate reflexivity it had been in earlier works. So, in ‘Experience’ Emerson writes of our sense of inadequacy before nature: ‘that it appears to us that we lack the affirmative principle, and though we have health and reason, yet we have no superfluity of spirit for new creation[.] We have enough to live and bring the year about, but not an ounce to impart or to invest’ (*CW* III, 27). The word ‘reason’ may not be

capitalised, but its mere appearance is telling.⁶ Self-sufficiency and the old innate concepts are well and good, but alone they are no longer adequate to the exposition of Emerson's philosophical preoccupations. Beyond the cyclic (and repetitive) motion of 'bringing the year about', we should aspire to superfluity, 'imparting', 'investing'. How does this pertain to literary form? The closing lines of the paragraph hint at an answer for both this question and that of where we 'find ourselves': 'We are like millers on the lower levels of a stream, when the factories above them have exhausted the water. We too fancy that the upper people must have raised their dams' (*CW* III, 27). This sense of belatedness is universal: the 'too' discloses that at every stage upstream the same experience of living at the end of history was felt. But the moral imperative here is against such dam-raising. Imparting superfluity is given to be incumbent upon us, and doing so has a secondary effect downstream in addition to any effect it has upon ourselves.⁷ In other words, it is in this opening to 'Experience' that Emerson acknowledges that the theorisations which permit his own retreat to neutrality and his personal acquisition of infinite possibility do not necessarily enable his reader to experience the same effect. Indeed, these ideas are exhaustive, relentlessly consuming, and declare exemption from history. It is the full recognition, at last, that his project to date has been ethically questionable, and if Emerson is to begin to countenance the existence of other persons, his literary endeavours ought in some way to be of use to them.

This sense of obligation is what undermines the utility of the literary form of repetition. For repetition is renouncing form. I mean this in both senses. Repetition is a formal strategy, and as form it announces neutrality—itsself a renunciation of what form

⁶ Not least, it is worth mentioning, because the capitalised Coleridgean 'Reason' so common in all his work up to *First Series* never appears in this volume.

⁷ See also the 1841 address, 'Man the Reformer', in which Emerson prefigures this trope in valorising 'men who have in the gravity of their nature a quality which answers to the fly-wheel in a mill' (*CW* I, 160).

demands, which is commitment. Emerson had openly despised its partiality in 1841, as he wrote in 'Intellect': 'Happy is the hearing man: unhappy the speaking man [...] if I speak, I define, I confine, and am less' (*CW* II, 202). But, by 1844, he inverts the maxim, writing instead of 'the necessity of speech and song; [...] these throbs and heart-beatings in the orator, at the door of the assembly, to the end, namely, that thought may be ejaculated as Logos, or Word' (*CW* III, 23). The obligation of the poet or orator standing on a threshold, declaring to those on the other side of that door, signifies a formal (and potentially oratorical) responsibility which is the opposite of repetition's renunciation, the latter standing for an open resignation to equivocity. Being neutral may enable one to rest in the realm of infinite personal possibility, but such placid idealism always threatens to consume the world of matter we depend upon to realise ourselves, from the NOT ME of *Nature* through all modes of proxy so far discussed, and regurgitates nothing to restore the same benefit for the future but the sign of the satisfied exhaustion of the world. In the years leading up to the publication of *Essays: Second Series* in 1844, Emerson seeks a way in which to recalibrate his thought, and his conception of form and composition, so that it fulfils the conditions of this sense of commitment.

The evasion of a marginalising sense of belatedness was achieved by figuring nature as being in the service of a personal self-realisation; a 'steady and prodigal provision [...] made for his support', a 'divine charity', as he put it in *Nature* (*CW* I, 11). But the notion of a given world from which we self-compose is problematic. The question of our entitlement is metaphysically and metaethically troublesome, while the Unitarian-derived modus of inspiration has made rather too comfortable the act of personal self-realisation via what can be considered exploitation of a deferred and occult agency. Hence Emerson comes to bring these issues closer to the centre of his ideas in the early-1840s. As he writes in his journal in March 1842:

Hell is better than Heaven, if the man in Hell honours his place, & the man in heaven does not. It is in vain you pretend that you are not responsible for the evil law because you are not a magistrate, or a party to a civil process, or do not vote. You eat the law in a crust of bread, you wear it in your hat & shoes.

The Man—it is his attitude. The attitude makes the man. (*JMN VIII*, 207)⁸

Emerson belatedly acknowledges the condition his work has suggested since 1836. We do not simply give ourselves to ourselves through the proxy of nature: nature offers itself to us, and its laws shape the consciousness it forms. But this is not all that he is saying—we should pause to consider the dimensions of agency and formal relations one step further. The man in hell is ‘better’ situated, has greater moral stature, if he ‘honours his place’. That is to say that he pays homage to where he finds himself. And the mode of homage implicitly proposed is that of taking responsibility for that which nature has given us.

This is not necessarily a kind of husbandry or preservation in a recognisable, secular sense, which may entail a manipulation of the material toward an intellectualised model of how nature *should* exist in relation to us. Rather, it is an ‘attitude’ by which we give our permission to be formed by the conditions of forms, while nevertheless accepting responsibility as though it were formed by our own will—we become complicit and accessory to the processes of nature, as it were, but must also shoulder responsibility when it errs, a variant of the ‘terrible responsibility’ raised in the 1960s by Cavell.⁹ Part of this obligation requires that we maintain and diversify the particularity of

⁸ This principle evidently preoccupied Emerson. In ‘Man the Reformer’ the previous year, he had expressed an almost identical statement: ‘We are all implicated, of course, in this charge; it is only necessary to ask a few questions [...] to become aware that we eat and drink and wear perjury and fraud in a hundred commodities’ (*CW VIII*, 147).

⁹ Cavell, ‘A Matter of Meaning It’, pp. 236-7.

the realm of forms by contributing, or giving back in kind, while keeping the same attitude to the forms we restore as to those we take. What is implied in this sketch is essentially an economy which transcends the problematic ideal/material dialectic to make the subject a non-invasive conduit of a type of universal consciousness in relation to being, rather than a self-conscious last human bringing the world under dominion for the purposes of self-realisation, or manipulating it imperfectly to declare one's own ahistoricity. So when in 1841's 'The Method of Nature' Emerson declares that it is '[n]ot thanks, not prayer [that] seem[s] quite the highest or truest name for our communication with the infinite,—but glad and conspiring reception,—reception that becomes giving in its turn, as the receiver is only the All-Giver in part and in infancy', he describes this relation to nature in the framework of the gift, but as a gift with certain characteristics which will turn out to be essential: a gift *not* to be received with thanks, a conspiring which links the senses of complicity in a surreptitious act and the intake of divine breath already seen in inspiration, a philosophical 'gladness', or, more correctly, 'happiness', which comes from a kind of personal abandonment (*CW* I, 122). It is not, however, the abandonment of the strictures of personality in aspirations to flux or perpetual mutability—rather, it's about accepting personhood, 'abandoning' it as faculty of self, as it were, to fend for itself.

In the chapter to follow, I elaborate upon how Emerson's relation to the secular, *Nature's* NOT ME, occupies the unquestioned centre of his thought and writing in a development on the moods of the preceding years. As a consequence, he theorises the terms of an author's ethical and social obligations on the level of the gift. In the chapter's final section, however, I illustrate that he fulfils his own expectations only on the level of another poetic contrivance, although, on this occasion, it might be deemed ineluctable.

Textual Economics I: Handsome Necessity

The essay ‘Experience’, perhaps the most universally appreciated and discussed of Emerson’s works, contains a notorious passage on death expressed by way of economic metaphor: ‘In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate—no more’ (*CW* III, 29). Perhaps the most curious aspect of this oddly repugnant sentiment, however, is not only that it befits the essay, but that it belongs to the trajectory of Emerson’s thought from the middle years of the 1830s up to the publication of this essay in 1844. In ‘Experience’, the analogy figures a disjuncture from the worldly investment which we, along with Emerson, are wont to take as given. However, as Sharon Cameron has best noted, ‘Experience’ is unusual simply because it ‘is the only [essay] to thematise dissociation’ as well as enacting it.¹⁰ Throughout his early career, he exhibited a similar sense of disjuncture, but his negotiation there of an essentially philosophical dualism was more subtle. ‘Experience’, by contrast, succeeds by virtue of the bluntness of its analogy, but its role here, in describing an ontological and emotional investment in the processes of the world that fails, also echoes his sense of relation to himself and the world through text.

Hence the use of economic terminology to interrogate the relation of the intellect to the exigencies of empirical reality is perhaps not so obtuse. Throughout *Essays: Second Series*, he incorporates economic vocabulary in a manner that renders it more fundamental; essentially, he emphasises simply that it is a discourse of relationality, and we ought to be wary of conceiving it otherwise. The analogy reveals a lack of security: no more of his person was invested in Waldo than might be in a ‘beautiful estate’; likewise, the presumed return of secure personal sovereignty by virtue of the

¹⁰ Sharon Cameron, ‘Representing Grief: Emerson’s “Experience”’, *Representations*, 15 (1986), 15-41 (p. 31).

labours of double writing has come to naught.¹¹ The worlds (textual as well as empirical) in which Emerson presumed himself invested have granted no reciprocal affirmation, and as such his modes of incorporation to date appear spurious. So the odd phrasing of societal obligation in 'Experience' can be explained: 'Let us treat the men and women well: treat them as if they were real: perhaps they are' (*CW* III, 35). The condition of a social and ethical structure in which Emerson, and his writing, is able to play a part requires his complicity to sustain the fabric of its reality. He must not shut down the possibility contained by that 'perhaps'.

Second Series is, in many ways, a text advocating refoundationalism. In terms of the acceptance of realities, Emerson rhetorically returns us to absolute beginnings in search of the graspable. Even the most rudimentary of meetings warrants disclosure:

As the first thing man requires of man, is reality, so, that appears in all the forms of society. We pointedly, and by name, introduce the parties to each other [...] they look each other in the eye; they grasp each other's hand, to identify and signalise each other. It is a great satisfaction. (*CW* III, 79)

The barely disclosed point underlying this extract touches on the dependence of mutual personal recognition through a 'pointed' interaction or relation, which harks back to a discussion of the poet in the *Dial* essay of 1840, 'Thoughts on Modern Literature'. Here, Emerson coined the phrase 'imps of matter' to represent the reciprocal factor of a poetic relation to the world, as when the 'poet rambling through the fields or the forest' would not descend from his ideas and 'awake to precise thought, if the scream of an

¹¹ It is worth remarking that Emerson's investment in his son was always considered tenuous. He recorded his emotions on the night of Waldo's birth in the following terms: although he found the child beautiful, a 'lovely wonder', he could 'see nothing in it of mine; I am no conscious party to any feature, any function, any perfection I behold in it. I seem to be merely a brute occasion of its being' (*JMN* V, 234).

eagle, the cries of a crow or curlew near his head did not break the sweet continuity'.¹² The 'imps' represent an 'imperative' to attend to the world just as much as they represent that world's inevitable and necessary intrusion into the formation of our consciousness: the sense of 'impale' concealed behind the word 'pointedly' seconding the essential physicality of this realisation. More than this, however, the evocation of the transparent eye-ball in the scene's locale demands that we reconsider that trope's validity, revising and revisiting the scene of 1836's *Nature* but doing so to restore the affective capacity of its particular realities. Lest we retain any allegiance to an idealist reading of the trope, a further and more explicit revision in the essay 'Nature' in *Second Series* enacts conclusion. In this essay, we are taken once again to 'the gates of the forest' where the world falls away from the idealist's mind: indeed, the opening page of 'Nature' rehearses the postures of transcendence of *Nature* with great precision. But lest we 'be rapt away into all that we dream of heaven' and heedlessly meander amongst the 'upper sky', nature prods us awake, 'takes a grave liberty with us, and shames us out of our non[-]sense' (*CW* III, 99-100).

So much, therefore, are we pointedly and bodily pinned back by the secular, but there is more to be said on the way it affects (and effects) our own re-formations in the world. In this respect, the limits of affect, especially the limits of our interventionary powers in the realm of what is felt, are of specific relevance. In 'Experience', just after having touched on the inability even of death to give us a tangible sense of reality in human interaction, Emerson writes: 'I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition' (*CW* III, 29). Stanley Cavell's justly celebrated disquisition on this extract and the 'hand' of handsomeness in a 1988 lecture stresses the underacknowledged frequency with which Emerson refers to the hand to make a

¹² Emerson, 'Thoughts on Modern Literature', pp. 137-8.

philosophical point. Cavell's lecture, which is as much about Heidegger and Nietzsche as it is Emerson, specifies a 'mode of thinking' signified by this too-tight grasping hand—an 'interpretation of Western conceptualising as a kind of sublimised violence'—against which an alternative mode of knowledge as 'reception' will be adopted.¹³ Cavell's logic is wholly correct since it accurately figures a mode by which we must be complicit with and receptive of the secular, although to my mind he does not develop the thought along with Emerson sufficiently to expose all that is implied in unhandsomeness. Just before the above quoted passage from 'Experience', a less violent trope is used to figure the import of nature and our typical response: 'The dearest events are summer rain, and we are the Para coats that shed every drop' (*CW* III, 29). Throughout his work, Emerson emphasises our wont to shield ourselves from nature, and from the impositions of the kind of 'reality' he has now made central to his thesis, with convention and staid formalism; the 'fine house, fine book, conservatory, gardens, equipage' and so on, used 'as screens to interpose between himself and his guest', as he puts it elsewhere in this volume (*CW* III, 79). Not only are our sensitivities naturally weak, therefore, but we exacerbate the problem; a fact that Emerson responds to in his characteristically provocative use of tropes which suggest an exaggerated physicality, or an excessive literalism, points which I will return to later. What is intended is an atavistic reconsideration of how the hand teaches in its necessity.

The second epigraphic poem for 'Character' offers a simple and concise précis of this point:

Work of his hand

¹³ Stanley Cavell, 'Aversive Thinking', in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism. The Carus Lectures, 1988* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 38-41. Cavell had originally raised the metaphor in 'Finding as Founding', a lecture given in 1987 and first published in 1989. See Cavell, 'Finding as Founding', in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 110-40 (p. 117).

He nor commends nor grieves:
Pleads for itself the fact;
As unrepenting Nature leaves
Her every act. (*CW* III, 52)

The hand, unlike the conceptualising mind, is absolutely conditioned by the terms of nature: it ‘pleads for itself the fact’ at hand, so to speak, in a move which is always first conditioned by receptivity and acknowledgement. What I take Emerson to be suggesting is the manner in which the hand reveals to the mind the pliancy of any given particular ‘matter’—say the grain in wood or stone, the ductility, malleability, or brittleness of a metal. No element in nature being absolutely complicit with the willed intervention of the human mind, it is the task of the hand to assay qualities and weaknesses, and doing so requires attentive tactility and a receptive intellect. The pure conceptions of ideality weaken rather than strengthen us by virtue of their suspension of this sense, or ‘nonsense’.¹⁴ As Emerson states in the closing passages of ‘Experience’: ‘I have not found that much was gained by manipular attempts to realise the world of thought’ (*CW* III, 48). What he now candidly espouses, in other words, is the necessity of ‘feeling’ for form: that form precedes us; we must accommodate the particular qualities of any given form to be able to use it, and not expect form to materialise our every concept on demand.

Language’s formal legality means that it constitutes part of the same system, and in *Second Series* Emerson regularly acknowledges that our own ontological dependence on the particular impositions of nature makes the particular impositions of language precisely suited to the reciprocal exposition of our condition or place. So, in ‘Nominalist

¹⁴ A journal comment on Charles Lane, Bronson Alcott, and the Fruitlands project echoes this sentiment. Lane, Emerson writes, has ‘[n]o eye for Nature, and his hands as far from his head as Alcott’s own’. See too an earlier entry on ‘a perfect man, [who] would need no other instruments than his eyes & his hands’ (*JMN* VIII, 404, 194).

and Realist', Emerson recalls the principle of the 'imps of matter' and regards pure conceptual idealism to be:

[F]at rebellion. Nature will not be Buddhist: she resents generalising, and insults the philosopher in every moment with a million of fresh particulars. It is all idle talking: as much as a man is whole, so he is also a part; and it were partial not to see it.

As such, nature importunes us of our obligation to activity, and most symptomatic of our condition is the activity of literature:

We fetch fire and water, run about all day among the shops and markets, and get our clothes and shoes made and mended [...] If we were not thus infatuated, if we saw the real from hour to hour, we should not be here to write and read, but should have been burned or frozen long ago. [Nature] would never get anything done. (*CW* III, 139)

Much as this seems only a reminder of the dependency of literary acts on a substructure of labour, it is also a designation of such acts as functions of that same labour. Literary acts are acts of particularisation ('genius' being defined in the journals in this period as 'detach[ment] from the mass of life a particle not before detached so that I see it separated'), and so their own notion of 'getting things done' is cumulative, productive, and not self-consciously Sisyphean, as the not-getting-done of repetition patently is (*JMN* VIII, 190). As a newly detached particular, every production in the conceptualisation of the artwork after the failure of repetition signifies not superficial

similarity but a new 'break' in our existing conception of the world—a world again greater than our generalisations, and momentarily infinite.

By maintaining a perpetually renewed relation of being imposed upon by nature, the system of our productions demands that they themselves are 'impish' in the same way. Reiteration, therefore, has not totally passed off if we seek to reciprocate and broaden the range of the forms which are agents in the development of consciousness, except now the reiterative similarity exists solely on a categorical, and not experiential level—it is the phenomenological process attendant on form, and not the particular parameters of the form itself, which recurs.¹⁵ As such, the currency value of any given form is irrelevant: the aspect of the forms of exposition may change radically, and does, as Emerson had realised earlier in his career.¹⁶ In this context, the recurrent economic metaphors of the text make more sense: Emerson's object is to break with any conventional understanding of the exchange rate between thought and language act, language act and effect. So, in 'The Poet', the absent ideal starkly resets language. If the world consists to us of 'emblems':

[W]e sympathise with the symbols, and, being infatuated with the economical uses of things, we do not know that they are thoughts. The poet, by an ulterior intellectual perception, gives them a power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts eyes, and a tongue, into every dumb and inanimate object. He perceives the thought's independence of the symbol, the stability of the thought, the accident and fugacity of the symbol. (*CW* III, 12)

¹⁵ This, of course, was also the object of the prior iteration of repetition. The shift reflects the formal shortcomings of the prior model, rather than its conceptual flaws.

¹⁶ See pp. 101-2 above.

And so on. The poet's distinguishing feature is his lack of sympathy in his relation to language. As the master and manipulator of the symbolic economy, he is able to pinpoint and so modify when and how each word 'obtained currency', as Emerson goes on to say.¹⁷ This is not as simple as it sounds—after all, in 'The Poet', Emerson had asserted that the poet does not and has not existed. Additionally, if this economy is to be broken through, he is not clear in this essay on how, precisely, that is to be done, except not through mastery and a 'grasping' manipulation. But in continuance with the motives and limited means of repetition, what we find in *Second Series* is that Emerson, short of mastery, recurses to elaborating a revolutionary model of writing which ostensibly negates the very ideological fallacy of our contemporary use of the term 'economy', whether in the symbolic or monetary sense.

Textual Economics II: The Sympathies of Reading

By granting Emerson liberty from the exigencies of conventional economics, I am, of course, flouting the most central of the claims of New Historicism. The example most fitted to my comments now and throughout this chapter is Joseph Fichtelberg's *Critical Fictions*, in which Emerson is cast as one among a number of nineteenth-century American writers whose personal losses in the unstable antebellum economy led them to a sentimentalised critique and attempted rehumanisation of the market, displacing its impersonality with renewed 'sympathy' and 'sincerity'.¹⁸ Indeed, Fichtelberg's claim for Emerson's sympathetic relation to his readers is particularly pertinent given what I have to say here. But while the realisation that authorship can be considered a mere function

¹⁷ As Richard Poirier points out, William James's advocacy of an empowered recalibration of the 'cash value of words' is prefaced in these thoughts of Emerson. See Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, p. 81.

¹⁸ In Fichtelberg's words, the writer's sentimental critique—their 'critical fiction'—sought 'to humanise economic crisis and make it more manageable [... to] turn [...] vast, impersonal economic events into intimate conspiracies—betrayals of moral trust'. The object was to inculcate a 'true economy', which 'could be found only in a genuine exchange of feeling' and transferable sentiment. I will explore the ramifications of this latter point in Emerson, and my specific objections to it, in greater detail below. Joseph Fichtelberg, *Critical Fictions: Sentiment and the American Market 1780-1870* (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003), pp. 14, and 1-22, 125-41 *passim*.

of a capitalist market has paid dividends in scholarship of the last twenty years, New Historicism can, on occasion, be strikingly reductive, and its tendency to assume the primacy of the most obvious visible referent whenever we historicise a literary text is the most egregious of such flaws.

Reading therefore against assumptions that the appearance of economic terminology in Emerson's work is merely epiphenomena of his financial misfortunes under the presidency of Martin van Buren, my intention is to elaborate on his understanding that all economic transvaluations—whether monetary, or linguistic—are relative and whimsical.¹⁹ This path has already been indicated by Richard Grusin, who, in 1988, demonstrated its necessary trajectory despite beginning an argument from a position sympathetic to New Historicist methods. Attempting to identify economic aspects in Emerson's thought, Grusin employs Emerson's accounts, letters, and financial papers. From these methodological openings, however, Grusin's text ends in reiterating the same fatalistic principle over and over—"the acquisitive logic of the marketplace cannot account for the economy of the soul [...] the discontinuity between the economy of the soul and the economy of the marketplace [...] Emerson represents the market economy of trade as discontinuous with the spiritual economy of expenditure"—illustrating that the use of such tropes ought only to lead us away from blithe acceptance of what their primary signification should be.²⁰ The effect of Emerson's use of economic metaphors, apparently linked to his financial situation, is actually a rhetorical performance illustrating a dead end: the terms used patently fail as

¹⁹ Indeed, Emerson constantly challenged his audiences on the value of such terms. In the most general sense, we might recall his exacting association between the semiotic status of words and a currency of promissory notes, the currency of deferral to which the 'Language' chapter of *Nature* refers, suggesting awareness of the implication of coinage in the etymology of the word 'semiotic'. Later, in the address 'Man the Reformer', he called upon his audience to 'learn the meaning of economy' other than that of 'base origin' which we see on a daily basis (*CW* I, 154). Finally, in *Second Series*, the reckoning that trade inculcates 'false relations between men' is a rephrasing of a passage from the journals considered from the opposite perspective, that '[t]he view taken of Transcendentalism in State Street is that it threatens to invalidate contracts' (*CW* III, 152; *JMN* VIII, 108).

²⁰ Richard Grusin, "'Put God in Your Debt': Emerson's Economy of Expenditure", *PMLA*, 103 (1988), 35-44 (p. 37, 39, 40).

an effective exposition of a ‘spiritual economy’, the context they are invariably used to depict.²¹

As Branka Arsić has perhaps most effectively and extensively argued, Emerson is no philosopher of dwelling and habitation, no proto-Heideggerian, but one who theorises ways of departing from stasis and averting from habit.²² Within this paradigm, it is clear that the economics Emerson is exploring bears little obvious relation to that word’s etymology of ‘household management’—there can be no ‘dwelling’ in an arbitrary and dislocated system with no basis of constancy.²³ Having a feeling for language means renouncing aspirations to *live* in it—hence a possible reason for the necessity of the poet’s non-existence, for the kind of secure footing and abidance he would need to have in language cannot be found: ‘all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good [...] for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead’ (*CW* III, 20). In his language, the poet is dead. If there is a way to live on somehow—alongside it, in spite of it—the economics involved must relinquish aspirations of management or the manipular, and it is in this way that Emerson’s methods can begin to be understood.

The objective is to be, or at least seem to be, as it were, dead—to disappear, and by doing so make one’s language purely generative, not pointing to the author’s world which is, in the context of the text, always of the past. There is more than one way of achieving this effect, and Emerson’s intellectualisations of its model only begin to

²¹ As he writes in the journals for 1841: ‘All histories[,] all times furnish examples of the spiritual economy; so does every kitchen & hencoop. But I may choose then to use those which have got themselves well written’ (*JMN* VIII, 28). In other words, potential analogues are virtually unlimited but no one is specifically apposite—the effect comes in how the analogue is represented rather than from the subject it speaks of.

²² As mentioned earlier, I differ from Arsić insofar as I perceive there to be a point at which Emerson encounters the limit of such a model. This and the following chapter elaborate on Emerson’s acquisition of a kind of literary dwelling in the final years of the 1840s. See Arsić, pp. 1-17 and *passim*.

²³ Emerson rather loosely covers this ground in the long epigraphic poem to ‘Politics’, which follows a narrative trajectory from relative economies—‘Gold and iron are good | To buy iron and gold | [...] Nor kind nor coinage buys | Aught above its rate’—through allusions to Greek myth, whose original language gives us the foundation of our word, plainly referenced in the final lines: ‘Then the perfect state is come | The republican at home’ (*CW* III, 115).

appear in the journals in the early-1840s, a point I will return to in a moment. Its precursor exists in a literary practice he had been working with for some years already; an excessive, exaggerated, superfluous seeming prose. This has its origins in the dissatisfaction with formal exigencies—as he noted in 1835, writing ‘after Nature’ must be ‘endless’; the result will surely be a ‘cumbrous embarrassed speech: [the writer] uses many words hoping that one, if not another, will bring you as near to the fact as he is’ (*JMN* V, 14, 51). This kind of crisis in language was by no means uniquely Emersonian. One might recall Thoreau’s declaration in the conclusion of *Walden*: ‘It is a ridiculous demand which England and America make, that you shall speak so that they understand you [...] I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be *extra-vagant* enough’.²⁴ Or a recent essay by Alex Calder on Melville, which finds in his novels the ‘excessive and extravagant qualities’ which in most instances might simply be written off as ‘bad writing’.²⁵ Calder’s analysis shares something with Thoreau’s description of his own prose—the etymological sense that Thoreau makes explicit in dividing ‘*extra-vagance*’, consciously striding outside of linguistic yards and bounds. As Calder writes, overdoing writing can ‘gesture [...] beyond conventional signs to nominate a more essential quality of things’, which is to say it transgresses normative symbolic economies. He goes on to describe such a tone as ‘modal dissonance [...] what] happens when an apparently inappropriate or affected or off-key style of writing invades and infects a host text [...] it loses transparency’.²⁶

This, of course, is exactly what occurs with the transparent eye-ball, a trope which seems designed to intervene in our complicity with semantic contracts, but the tendency which is evident as early as 1836 persists until 1844. In ‘Experience’, for

²⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854) (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), pp. 427-8

²⁵ Alex Calder, ‘Blubber: Melville’s Bad Writing’, in Samuel Otter and Geoffrey Sanborn, eds., *Melville and Aesthetics*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), pp. 11-31 (p. 13).

²⁶ Calder, p. 23, 28.

instance, we may experience incredulity or alienation on reading excessively literal tropes and analogues like the comparison he makes between the death of his son and financial losses. Additionally, Arsić notes a number of linguistic mannerisms found in his work which work in much the same way: ‘immigrant words’ are drawn from other disciplinary or contextual uses (‘caducous’, for instance, in ‘Experience’, an unusual term with both biological and legal meanings which I will discuss in chapter five), while at other times repetitions force us to recognise Emerson’s focus on interrogating or subverting conventions associated with individual words, something which this thesis has acknowledged throughout.²⁷ Indeed, even the blasé habit of contradiction that so many readers have found unsatisfactory in Emerson’s work could be said to fall under this category.²⁸ The broader question is how this principle plays out in terms of theorised personal relations to text under the new conditions in Emerson’s thought of the early-1840s.

Even if it does not always explicitly say so, most of the criticism treating of Emerson’s linguistic theory turns on this theme of a language gesturing beyond normative economies. The question of relation which accompanies it is revealed in the varieties of the responses of a range of Emerson’s readers. So, Barbara Packer writes that the method of excess is the reason that a number of his readers—from his contemporary Francis Bowen, to Yvor Winters, to Jonathan Bishop—have struggled to accommodate what seems to be overt and grotesque silliness or inappropriateness in his writing. Focusing on the eye-ball trope and a passage from ‘Circles’, Packer considers

²⁷ Arsić, pp. 307-8.

²⁸ In this respect, one might consider a recent essay by Andrew Taylor which posits that Emerson is a ‘radically moderate’ writer. Taylor’s piece weighs up the aversion to structural singularity which has put so many critics off Emerson and argues instead—in the tradition of Cavell—for Emerson’s process-oriented, performative, and provocative style. Essentially, Emerson is given to be a writer of imbalanced containment rather than of dialectical synthesis, his prose ‘exhibiting a generously moderating force, stylistically unsettled and unsettling, discursively unwilling to succumb to the paradoxically conventional seductions of extremism’. In other words, moderation is given to be a modulation of dissonance, in parallel with Calder’s hypothesis. Andrew Taylor, ‘A Man is Conservative after Dinner: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Michel de Montaigne and the Appetites of Moderation’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 48 (2012), 1-18 (p. 7, 15).

whether the ‘funny’ sound of such passages comes from florid, unphilosophical vocabulary and syntax (as the rationalist and staunch Lockean Bowen thought, branding Emerson’s ‘Old Saxon idiom’ a writing exhibiting ‘bathos with malice prepense’) or from the themes and images addressed, but, either way, the response has been one of near universal bemusement and critique of Emerson’s authorial decision. As Packer summarises, ‘[m]ost critics seem to agree that the lapse[s were] unintentional’.²⁹

Packer goes on to argue that Emerson’s revisions from *JMN* to published works offer a significant indicator to the marks of intention, and hence she proposes that this writing is a means of provocation developed to provide an alternative to the open attacks on theological dogmas of the time, the negative consequences of which Emerson had experienced in 1832 and 1838.³⁰ Elsewhere, other sympathetically-minded critics have echoed and developed on the same idea. A writing of provocation is not direct, and certainly not didactic. So, reflecting on Emerson’s ungainly, intrusive prose, Cavell describes Emerson’s writing ‘calling’ us to thought, inciting us to see the ‘vocation’ in provocation which obliges us to acknowledge our relation to conformity, which is to say our relation to conventional economies, and the thinking thereon which in itself constitutes a severance with their order.³¹ Equally, when Richard Poirier proposes that the very character of literature is that it is ‘words in excess of the minimum daily requirements of human beings’, he means specifically that a language of ‘volatility’ demands an ‘intense relation’ on our part: we ‘participate as readers’ in what Emerson experiences of language, and its ‘extravagance’ should, in words Poirier takes

²⁹ Barbara Packer, ‘Uriel’s Cloud: Emerson’s Rhetoric’, *Georgia Review*, 31 (1977), 322-42 (p. 328, 327); Francis Bowen, ‘Review of *Nature*’, p. 371.

³⁰ Packer stays within a narrow context—that of a single passage in ‘Circles’—because her focus is on how one writes out of a particular stranglehold: in this case, of a type of religious opinion. Given a choice of ‘denunciation’ or ‘parody’ as his public means of attack, Emerson chose the latter, Packer asserts, lest he be seen to be a ‘contemptible’ self-appointed prophet. See Packer, ‘Uriel’s Cloud’, p. 340.

³¹ Cavell, ‘Aversive Thinking’, p. 38.

from William James, “continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement” which is the normative economy.³²

But there is an aspect of such discussions that ties them to Emerson’s earlier career, attitudes, and style. Each of these models posits an author who makes demands on us as readers, but they decline to consider what problems are raised and risks taken by the author who makes them. Essentially, all presume the author’s aloof neutrality. By 1844, however, Emerson has begun to revise his attitude, so that the manner of excess and exaggeration has firmer theoretical footing:

Given the planet, it is still necessary to add the impulse; so, to every creature nature added a little violence of direction in its proper path, a shove to put it on its way; in every instance, a slight generosity, a drop too much. Without electricity the air would rot, and without this violence of direction, which men and women have, without a spice of bigot and fanatic, no excitement, no efficiency. We aim above the mark, to hit the mark. Every act has some falsehood of exaggeration in it. (*CW* III, 107)

This is a complex and suggestive passage. ‘Given’ puns on a double meaning—we are ‘given’ the planet, but it is so fundamental a condition we are wont to take it without acknowledgement, a necessary predicate, ‘a given’ received without obligation of thanks, and so we remain merely self-sufficient: ‘it is still necessary to add the imp[-]ulse’. Excess is energy, a superfluity which will yet power more mill-wheels. To reframe this in a linguistic context, if we cannot write with symbolic mastery, if we cannot write economically as just expending enough effort to have the controlled, intended effect which fulfils the poetic ideal, then we must write in a manner which conducts the

³² Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, p. 11, 12, 45, 58.

excesses and fanaticism appropriate to our condition, *even if it is falsehood*. The point is that the writing which extends its benefit to unknown futures may require a certain disregard of what one feels to be true, or, to put it another way, the renunciation of sincerity between author and reader. This means that the neutralised author can be reconsidered from another perspective. Packer's revised version of the essay 'Uriel's Cloud', published in *Emerson's Fall* (1982), loosely figures this alternative: 'Emerson's tendency from the first is to efface himself, to leave the reader no clues as to how his text is to be privately performed. If his reticence leaves room for the freedom of the reader, it also invites his distortions and mistakes'.³³

Emerson's own theorisations of this principle are a good deal clearer than is usually acknowledged, although—in the early-1840s, at least—there is no doubt that he vacillates over his position. For instance, in July 1842 he extols the reader's privilege: '[t]he power to excite which the page for moments possessed it derived from you. You read it as you read words in a dictionary or hear a sonorous name of some foreigner and invest the stranger with some eminent gifts' (*JMN* VIII, 191-2). Elsewhere, however, he declares his authorial investment uncompromisingly: 'I would have my book read as I have read my favourite books not with explosion & astonishment, a marvel and a rocket, but a friendly and agreeable influence' (*JMN* VIII, 106). Although phrased relatively benignly, this nevertheless demands a wholly receptive audience. Between these poles, other stances are implicitly postulated. Should one invest in that which declines investment, and thereby instigate a tragedy native to literature's aspirations? Or, must one become neutral, sincerely declining impossible investment? Perhaps there is even a way to appear to give sincerely, but actually do no such thing. Suffice it to say for now that the consequence of Emerson's vacillations is that criticism which focuses on the authorial function in his work diverges quite plainly on such lines. Packer recognises

³³ Barbara Packer, *Emerson's Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1982), p. 20.

the problem, but abides with the conviction that we should look for and countenance authorial intention, even if that intent discloses a desire to disappear into neutrality, something Arsić echoes more recently in noting that Emerson's excesses 'aim at various kinds of disidentification [... they are] guerrilla like tactics'.³⁴ Cavell advocates receptivity since it is that which invokes genuine personal, and hence moral, thought. Poirier colours the relation with tragic overtones, casting Emerson's attempts at expression in an unpliant, unsubmitive language as a 'continuous struggle' against 'resistance', characterising Emerson as 'the greatest of his extended tribe because more than any of the others he offers himself as a truly sacrificial figure'.³⁵ In Harold Bloom's work, the principle is fetishised to an extraordinary extent, anxiety of influence leading to an Oedipal will to power and usurpation as the dominant reason for the existence of literary writing.³⁶ Julie Ellison, meanwhile, writing in more or less the same critical moment as Bloom, Poirier, Cavell, and Packer, wholly empowers the reader—*any* 'critical reader', that is, not just Bloom's poet: 'The critical reader is suddenly flooded with a sense of his own power', something Ellison labels 'the hermeneutical sublime'.³⁷

This disparity is indicative of a condition which needs greater exposition. The essential problem is that the relation between author and reader never seems equal or reciprocal. Provocation does not resolve into fellow feeling. The reader is either implored by the author to show some sympathy, or the reader disempowers the author, or the author the reader. On all counts, sympathy is presumed to be in short supply. As

³⁴ Arsić, p. 308.

³⁵ Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, p. 67, 27, 31.

³⁶ Bloom, of course, has written extensively on Emerson. See his *Ringers in the Tower* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971), pp. 217-26; *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 160-76; *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1975), pp. 95-126; *Figures of Capable Imagination* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), pp. 46-75; *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 235-66; *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 145-78. Bloom's writings have been an important and hugely influential contribution to scholarship, but his arguments are tendentious and can seem totalitarian. David Wittenberg launches a scathing attack on this aspect of Bloom's well-known thesis, or, as Wittenberg calls it, the poetic 'attempt [...] to have the last word', in his *Philosophy, Revision, Critique: Rereading Practices in Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Emerson* (Palo Alto CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 112-130.

³⁷ Ellison, p. 8.

I see it, the presumption of writing to an unsympathetic reader is critical to understanding Emerson's philosophical model of the literary text in *Second Series*, but it does present dilemmas. Once again, these are reflected in the criticism. Traditionally, Emerson was given to be notoriously aloof, whether on personal terms, as Margaret Fuller found, or in relation to his audiences.³⁸ Contemporary reviews alternately wrote of his quasi-mystic concealment behind a consciously arcane vocabulary or accuse him of cowardice or charlatanism for his refusal to engage either in person or in his writing with pressing socio-political concerns.³⁹

More recently, however, Emerson's literary personality has been subject to revision. Richardson's *Mind on Fire* asserts his vivacity and charm (albeit mainly in comparison with the intransigent Thoreau), while Fichtelberg's reading through the lens of nineteenth-century sentimentalisms demands that Emerson be seen as a more gregarious character. As he writes: 'Emerson redeemed [his] debts through an imagery of sympathy and sincerity. He aspired to be a transparent medium, an affectionate general equivalent like money itself, trading on feeling'.⁴⁰ Leaving aside for now this odd and suggestive analogy with money (I will pick it up later in the chapter), such notions

³⁸ See Emerson's remarks on Fuller's comments about his personality (*JMN* VII, 301-2).

³⁹ See, for instance, Samuel Gilman's article from the *Southern Rose* of November 1838, where the author 'submits' some of Emerson's 'incomprehensibilities' regarding the religious sentiment, which 'bewilder [...] his hearers amidst labyrinths of beautiful contradictions', or a review of 'The Method of Nature' which appeared in the *Knickerbocker* in 1841, of which the author states that 'there is nevertheless not a thought in it, which is worthy any thing, that would not have produced ten-fold more effect had it been left open to the hearer or reader's mind, instead of being covered with a grotesque garb of motley language'. Both reproduced in Joel Myerson, ed., *Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 57, 58, 109.

⁴⁰ Fichtelberg, p. 118. Such readings, it should be noted, have become increasingly popular. Theo Davis's 2007 study of a similar set of principles in American literature posits that an emergent literary nationalism sought to identify itself by promulgating a sense that 'experience' (in Davis's study, this means categorical structures of feeling or responses to events) was nationally universal, and could be generated via the literary text. So, Emerson among other writers 'conceived of experience as a domain of hypothetical, typical responses, and [...] their central literary project was the evocation and shaping of such typical experience'. Like Fichtelberg, the sentimental experience becomes transferable; subjectivity is overcome toward secular ends and in a secular sense, the object of literature being mutuality and sympathetic identification. Literary experience, in Davis, becomes explicitly 'formalised'—singular, categorical, and trans-subjective. See Theo Davis, *Formalism, Experience, and the Making of American Literature in the Nineteenth-Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 2 and 109-37.

of sympathy and transparency as factors of literary relationality can be tried against the theorisations advanced in *Second Series*.

Emerson's explicit references to this kind of relationship in the volume tend to be mocking and self-reflexive, as in 'Nature': 'But it is very easy to outrun the sympathy of readers on this topic, which schoolmen called *natura naturata*, or nature passive. One can hardly speak of it without excess' (*CW* III, 103). Excess is exactly what Emerson has given us, of course. Since his poet is unsympathetic, we can hardly expect Emerson to confess his own desire for the sympathies of his readers, and so, twice more in the volume, he warns us off: sympathy is a false relation, or, at the very least, it is incommensurable with the relation of reciprocal provocation: 'Not less I dislike a low sympathy of each with his neighbour's needs. Must we have a good understanding with one another's palates?' (*CW* III, 81). The sympathetic individual, he writes elsewhere, gives himself up not for the benefit of others, but for their vices.⁴¹ So far as the theorisation goes, it is a writer's moral imperative to transcend the demand or expectation of sympathy, and, in the more personal reflections of critics on Emerson, this is exactly what we find. This is not only the case with his harsher critics—Yvor Winters, Perry Miller, Francis Bowen—but with those who are, ultimately, more 'sympathetic' (an instructive paradox in itself). Richard Poirier, for instance: 'Emerson makes himself sometimes amazingly hard to read, hard to get close to'.⁴² Or, more exactly, Stanley Cavell, who explained his long delay in coming to read Emerson as based in his feeling that Emerson's works, for a long time, 'seemed empty to me. They seemed to me repellent, quite as if presenting me with something for which I could not acknowledge my craving'.⁴³ The difficulty recognised here, to be conceptualised, needs

⁴¹ See 'Experience': 'A sympathetic person is placed in the dilemma of a swimmer among drowning men, who all catch at him, and if he give so much as a leg or finger, they will drown him. They wish to be saved from the mischiefs of their vices, but not from their vices' (*CW* III, 46-7).

⁴² Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, p. 31.

⁴³ Cavell, 'An Emerson Mood', p. 152.

to be figured in terms which accommodate all of its relational conditions. First, no writing is apologia, nor can it carry over a specific intended effect. As writing of provocation, it can only energise: any reciprocal or compensatory effect on the writing subject cannot be anticipated. It is not, therefore, trade or exchange, nor is it speculation. What Emerson gives us comes with no conditions of acceptance. Indeed, its acceptance is something he appears to be indifferent about. Understanding it in economic terms requires recourse to principles on the margins of economic theory, and the theory best suited is that of the gift economy.

Textual Economics III: The Gift of Writing

Even from the outset of such a theorisation, however, it is evident that Emerson's approach has some idiosyncratic qualities. For most of the history of gift theory, a distinctly modern approach to economics which owes much to the rise of anthropology as a discipline, the economic emphasis in its thought demands that gifts operate on a principle of exchange. In other words, this alternative economic model still depends on a familiar set of relations: a debtor and creditor, the defined giving subject as well as the defined receiving subject. So it is interesting to note that when the renowned gift theorist Marcel Mauss touches on models which subvert this exchange function, it is to Emerson that he turns:

The unreciprocated gift still makes the person who has accepted it inferior, particularly when it has been accepted with no thought of returning it. We are still in the field of Germanic morality when we recall the curious essay by Emerson entitled 'Gifts'. Charity is still wounding for him who has accepted it,

and the whole tendency of our morality is to strive to do away with the unconscious and injurious patronage of the rich almsgiver.⁴⁴

Mauss refers to the short essay ‘Gifts’ which sits at the heart of *Second Series*, of which more in a moment. His comment also plainly echoes Emerson’s treatment of charity in ‘Self-Reliance’ (*CW* II, 30-1). But if Emerson perceives harmfulness or weakness in the acceptance of gifts, this doesn’t mean that he won’t endorse giving under certain conditions. In ‘Nature’, while still discussing the necessity of excess—of euphuism and the superlative—in writing on nature, Emerson brands ‘[l]iterature, poetry, science, [...] the homage of man to this unfathomed secret’, and in so doing alludes via an etymological pun on the *homo* in ‘homage’ to a gift at the limits of possibility, an *ecce homo* of humanity’s limit in its best forms, given for no anticipated return but only as perpetuating offering (*CW* III, 103). As a mode of ‘honouring one’s place’, it is a kind of endorsement of one’s dwelling—household sustenance, or economy, in other words—enacted via receptivity and complicity. In the ideal sense, we simply reiterate the world and render a state conceptually identical with that in which we found it by restoring the ontological break with understanding, manifested by way of the introduction of a new ‘impish’ particular. As Emerson puts it in ‘Gifts’, our greatest gift in perpetuating ourselves is essentially a mode of surrender to ‘handsome’ necessity. We give to fulfil our obligation, because we are compelled, because that compulsion perpetuates the world, because the world provides us with the means of self-realisation.⁴⁵ The difficulty

⁴⁴ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1925), trans. by W. D. Halls (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 83. Grusin also refers to Mauss’s remarks in his discussion of an economy of gift, projection, and expenditure in Emerson. See Grusin, “Put God in your Debt”, p. 35.

⁴⁵ In David Wittenberg’s chapter on Emerson in *Philosophy, Revision, Critique*, his argument—essentially about the reading and rereading of history in Emerson’s work—coincides with my own, and against Bloom, insofar as he emphasises Emerson’s interest in potentialities made possible by the existence of the new text, rather than what it means to the poetic subject himself: ‘Whereas for Bloom the end of the process of revisionist reading remains the formation of the poetic subject over and against the precursor,

of a gift is only that ‘the impediment lies in the choosing’: in fact, ‘one is glad when an imperative leaves him no option’, and necessity dictates choice, the play on ‘imps’ effortlessly translating impediment to imperative, inaction to action (*CW* III, 93, 94).

But this kind of giving has certain conditions. Principally, it does not invoke exchange: the receiver does not accept the gift sympathetically; in fact, they seem not to accept the gift at all. On the part of the giver ‘the expectation of gratitude is mean, and is continually punished by the total insensibility of the obliged person’ (*CW* III, 95). If a gift is to be a gift, it must be received without the sense of receipt, without the recipient entering a cycle of exchange by being obliged to the benefactor; with indifference, in other words. For the same reason, an act of giving which is conscious of itself ‘is flat usurpation’, a gift made only with sight of the recipient’s obliging return (*CW* III, 95). If a gift can only be received with indifference, so must it be made—‘Let him give kingdoms or flower-leaves indifferently’: as gift, any given thing has no differential value, but is defined solely by the conditions of being given (*CW* III, 96).

Emerson is caught in a curious bind here which encapsulates his interrogation of the economics of literary investment. On the one hand, in these remarks, he resembles no one so much as Jacques Derrida, for whom the principle of the pure gift is ‘aneconomic’—it absolutely precludes all modes of exchange and the relational factors on which exchange is predicated. This makes it very difficult to effectively discuss the economic principle on practical terms, and I will return to this startling modern parallel in a moment. On the other hand, Emerson, like many of his literary contemporaries, was a favoured author of the lucrative gift book vogue which was the primary project of a number of American publishing houses from the 1830s to the late-1840s.⁴⁶ In this

Emerson’s fatal gesture toward a future is absolutely and inextricably linked to the continual process of acceptance by future readers’. Wittenberg, p. 143.

⁴⁶ Two general histories of the gift book in America in the relevant period exist: Frederick Faxon, *Literary Annuals and Gift Books: A Bibliography, 1823-1903* (1912), Reprint (Pinner: Private Libraries Association,

context, the economic principles espoused in ‘Gifts’ are destabilised, because the contradiction between the theorised gift I’ve begun to outline and the literary commodity of the gift book could not be more evident. In handsomely bound gift books, Emerson published one piece of prose and six poems between 1844 and 1847, the years immediately following the publication of *Second Series*.⁴⁷ His work appeared alongside that of fellow Transcendentalists Christopher Cranch, Frederick Henry Hedge, and William Henry Furness, the latter a close friend of Emerson and the editor of all volumes of *The Gift* and *The Diadem* to which he contributed. There were also popular authors, such as Lydia Sigourney, while in *The Gift* of 1845, Emerson’s poems appear alongside the first publication of Poe’s ‘Purloined Letter’, which is a coincidence worth pursuing for a number of reasons.

In a recent article Alexandra Urakova analyses ‘The Purloined Letter’ in the context of its first appearance in *The Gift*, and, in view of the fact that there are no scholarly treatments of Emerson’s work in gift books, her findings will also be the grounds upon which we can consider the relevance of the mode here. As Urakova writes, the gift book was ‘not just a periodical: it was also an expensive present and object of luxury: an exquisite artefact’. As such, it was a conspicuous commodity: ‘reading is replaced by looking and showing; [...] the exaggerated care [taken of the book] stresses the souvenir’s economic and symbolic value’.⁴⁸ In other words, therefore, the economy of the gift book described by Urakova is precisely what Emerson expressed his distaste for in the essay ‘Gifts’. As Meredith McGill notes in *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting*, the gift book operated within certain economic,

1973), and Ralph Thompson, *American Literary Annuals and Gift Books: 1825-1865* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1936).

⁴⁷ The complete list of Emerson’s gift book contributions is as follows: ‘The Garden of Plants’ appears in *The Gift: A Christmas and New Year’s Present* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1844), pp. 143-6. ‘The Poet’s Apology’ and ‘Dirge’, in *The Gift* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1845), pp. 77 and 94-6. ‘Loss and Gain’, ‘A Fable’, ‘The Fore-Runners’, in *The Diadem: A Present for All Seasons* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1846), pp. 9, 38, 95. ‘The World-Soul’, in *The Diadem* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1847), pp. 76-8.

⁴⁸ Alexandra Urakova, ‘“The Purloined Letter” in the Gift Book: Reading Poe in a Contemporary Context’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 64 (2009), 323-46 (pp. 330-1).

social, and cultural power structures. Describing the ‘asymmetrical conditions of gift book circulation’, McGill writes:

Generally purchased by men and given to women—often as part of the courtship process—gift books are situated at a pivot point between economic and affective systems of exchange. As they pass from purchaser to receiver, suitor to woman sought, gift books also need to be transformed from mass-produced commodities into another kind of currency, ‘tokens of affection’ that will be rewarded by a return of the same.⁴⁹

Urakova adds that the fact that many gift books contained stories or poems detailing mementoes or ‘forget-me-nots’ (there was even a British gift book called *The Forget-Me-Not*) was wholly correspondent with its extra-literary function, ‘more or less explicitly remind[ing] the reader of its functional, gift-related character’.⁵⁰ Hence the gift book existed as a token instigating the circuit of obligation Emerson saw and explicitly rejected—this literary gift has no specifically philosophical merit, but operates entirely within the economic and social criteria of genteel society: the expectation of a certain kind of response to a certain kind of gift. The form could be critiqued from within: as Urakova finds with Poe, the author might sympathetically comply with readerly expectation and market conditions, while simultaneously managing to disclose the true terms of the contract entered into. Urakova writes that the movement of the purloined letter between the persons of the text until it is rightfully restored to its proper addressee (in which process the facilitator, Dupin, receives a sizeable cheque) is a reflection on the economic function of the gift book itself—the story self-reflexively complies with

⁴⁹ Meredith McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 34. Urakova’s argument is based in part on this same discussion in McGill.

⁵⁰ Urakova, p. 332.

expectation while revealing the project of its ‘frame’, this being an easing of the mechanism of social and affective economies in exchange for financial reward. In contrast, however, Emerson’s offerings comply with expectations only in loose and apparently circumstantial ways.

In his earliest contribution, ‘The Garden of Plants’, presented as ‘A Leaf from a Journal’, Emerson recollects his trip to the titular garden in Paris. In this respect, he engages to some extent with a gift book convention: what Ralph Thompson has called ‘flowers and flower language’, the description of plants and fruit which themselves reference another kind of conventional gift.⁵¹ Yet Emerson very quickly turns away from the contextual currency of these symbols toward typically Emersonian preoccupations, recasting them in the symbolic economy of his own thought. From the first lines, he implicitly questions the rectitude of the approach of the French scientists, presenting it as a ‘ransack’ of nature. We ought to read this ‘Botanical Cabinet’ not for its scientific virtues, nor its exotic beauty, but as ‘a grammar of botany’, a ‘natural alphabet’. In essence, we are being gently encouraged to read this description not for our store of knowledge—Emerson even instructs us ‘you need not write down’ the Latin name of a parrot described—but as token of a renewed hermeneutic of nature extrinsic to any economy of nature’s use-value, much as 1836’s *Nature* had done.⁵² ‘The Poet’s Apology’, meanwhile, which appeared in the following year’s *Gift* and was later published in 1847’s *Poems* as simply ‘The Apology’, seconds these principles. As Emerson’s poet says:

Chide me not, laborious band,

For the idle flowers I brought;

⁵¹ Thompson claims there were ‘at least fifty’ gift books or annuals in Britain and America during the period which featured a title alluding to this convention. See Ralph Thompson, p. 17.

⁵² Emerson, ‘The Garden of Plants’, in *The Gift*, (1844), pp. 143-6.

Every aster in my hand

Goes home loaded with a thought.⁵³

Which thought, it ought to be stressed, is not the same as that which attaches to the thought of the gift of flowers, or the gift of the flowery gift book, but rather a facet of Emerson's organically inflected epistemology. More significant, however, is the very notion of this poem as 'apology' when it is anything but. The poet exonerates himself from both affective and social expectations ('Think me not unkind and rude, | That I walk alone in grove and glen') and economic productivity ('Tax not my sloth'), and posits that his poem itself is the 'second crop thine acres yield'. In other words, it is not a justification based on the terms of the economies alluded to, but simply presents itself as pure and uncomplicated productivity, given (and given to be understood) with sympathy neither expressed nor expected. The poem operates solely on its own terms.

Emerson's gift book contributions are, it must be acknowledged, at best only minor infractions of the contractual obligation of the gift book. They do not expose the machinations at work in the project, and Poe's 'Purloined Letter', in Urakova's reading, seems to offer a much richer analysis of the extent of authorial liberty in this print culture. But they do indicate a degree of intransigence; that if the contract is not exactly rejected, nor is it necessarily given much consideration.⁵⁴ Emerson offered what he

⁵³ Emerson, 'The Poet's Apology', in *The Gift*, (1845), p. 77.

⁵⁴ Some additional context on how Emerson came to appear in these volumes in the first place offers a possible explanation for his acquiescence without concessions to the particular contractual expectations involved. His earliest contributions were solicited by his close friend, William Henry Furness, who was editor of *The Gift*. Record survives in Emerson's letters of Furness's requests, and evidence can also be found there that most pieces were written for the express purpose of inclusion in these volumes. Initially, it seems as though Emerson sought to supply the work of his friends in place of his own, mentioning William Henry Channing's verses, but in the same letter he accepts the invitation to write specifically for *The Gift* (L VII, 587-8). When the contributions are mentioned in correspondence with Furness, Emerson's tone is invariably self-deprecating and offers little insight into his attitudes toward the gift book enterprise, although they do suggest that Emerson was paid \$25 for his contributions (L VII, 591-2, 595, VIII, 59). On one occasion, he acknowledges the lack of aesthetic credibility the volumes commanded, but at once implies that he had a peculiar interest in their phenomenon: in March 1846 (likely to have been some months before the deadline for submissions for a book sold expressly for the Christmas market) he writes to Furness enquiring about the 'last day of grace or opportunity for the

wanted to offer, what he had to offer. Nothing was rejected nor returned for changes. With the sketchy information we have available, this doesn't constitute a conclusive demonstration of a properly indifferent literary gift by itself, but it is nodding in the right direction. In this respect, turning to the contemporary parallel in Derrida becomes instructive. It is perhaps correct to have reservations about the rectitude of introducing a thinker so disparate at this juncture, but Derrida's thought on the gift is of peculiar relevance here, not only in terms of its evident similarity, but more compellingly because the absolutist, theoretically uncompromising manner of deconstruction has much that echoes the position Emerson comes to find himself in with respect to the hypothesis of the gift noted above: that it doesn't just complicate notions of exchange and invoked obligation, but flatly refuses them. In Derrida's analysis, this same logic is applied to press the possibility of the gift out of any but theoretical existence, something Emerson seems to have acknowledged. For Derrida, the true gift must be 'aneconomic': 'For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, countergift, or debt. If the other *gives me back* or *owes me* or has to give me back what I gave him or her, there will not have been a gift [... T]he gift is annulled [...] each time there is a restitution or countergift'.⁵⁵

Indeed, precisely what Derrida claims as departure 'from the tradition' of gift theory (and a dissociation from the 'gift' that the genre of theory can claim to be) turns on this point, and its correlative—that the gift, as in Emerson, depends on no fellow feeling between giver and receiver, no consciousness of the gift: 'If [the receiver] recognises it *as gift*, if the gift *appears to him as such*, if the present is present to him *as*

contributors to the *Diadem*, for writing to order seemed to attract Emerson: 'in these negative ages it is often the sole inspiration' (L VIII, 71). But the fact that Emerson only published in volumes edited by Furness suggests, finally, that his obligation to the form extended only so far as his loyalty to his friend. His contributions were entirely of his own selection, and although on two occasions he offers limited editorial powers to Furness to alter the compositions within described parameters, Furness did not do so, and published all compositions intact.

⁵⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 12. Emphasis in original.

present, this simple recognition suffices to annul the gift. Why? Because it gives back in the place, let us say, of the thing itself, a symbolic equivalent'.⁵⁶ The consequences of such a model are significant. The kind of relation demanded is not simply one which refuses sympathy, but one which destroys the basis of relationality entirely. In Emerson's words, the functioning ideal gift 'must be the flowing of the giver unto me, correspondent to my flowing unto him' (*CW* III, 95). Which is to say a state of pure fluxion and boundlessness, and, in Derrida's late twentieth-century terms, it becomes a type of the absolute: 'if there is a gift, it cannot take place between two subjects exchanging objects, things, or symbols. The question of the gift should therefore seek its place before any relation to the subject, before any conscious or unconscious relation to self of the subject [...] the subject and object are arrested effects of the gift, arrests of the gift'.⁵⁷

This is evidently not a disquisition on the kind of relation that exists between the courting giver of a gift book and the courted recipient. Instead, we are returned to the questions of mutual investment in the relationship focused on the text, an economy interrupted by any recourse to extratextual, normalising contexts. I realise, of course, that it is perhaps implausible to insist that we can think of there being no 'outside-text' here—for this reason, all discussions of the literary gift are *practically* flawed. In a rare modern essay on the infrequently discussed essay 'Gifts', Gary Shapiro touches on this issue whilst invoking the same parallel that I have here between Emerson and a post-structuralist version of the gift seen in Derrida and others. Shapiro's article is a fairly general influence study which speculatively posits that Emerson may have turned Nietzsche in a direction later followed by other Continental thinkers on the topic of the gift. But, in a point which has specific relevance to my concerns, he calls 'Gifts' 'a meditation on the impossibility of the gift'—impossible precisely because its economic

⁵⁶ Derrida, p. 13. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁷ Derrida, p. 24.

principle is aneconomic in a practical sense: ‘Emerson proceeds [...] to evoke the idea of a primary economy; however, he does this only to contrast it with the actual world in which false gifts of gold and silver misrepresent both giver and recipient’.⁵⁸ In this sense, we can perhaps tolerate Emerson’s gift book contributions, because they are self-consciously not really gifts at all. Instead, they are wry disquisitions in poetic or prosaic form suggesting their non-giftness by way of oblique reference to another kind of literary production.⁵⁹

But rather than settle in this conception of a merely impractical notion of the gift, I would like to pursue the theoretical point a step further, because common ground between this mode of impossibility and another more necessary one is not far away. In doing so, I am returning again to the hypothesis of a closed economy between author and reader, along with a gift concept which absolutely precludes sympathy and will not permit of the mutual existence of giver and receiver, something discussed explicitly in *Second Series*. In reflexive manner, Emerson writes of the author from the perspective of a reader, stating: ‘he thinks we wish to belong to him, as he wishes to occupy us. He greatly mistakes us’ (*CW* III, 141). We do not, cannot, and must not acknowledge his subjectivity. The reader’s use of the author is grossly unsympathetic—it is ‘only to melt him down into an epithet or an image for daily use’ (*CW* III, 141). This denial of the authorial subject is simply the reduction of a life and oeuvre to part or particle of culture, a becoming representative. In 1850’s *Representative Men*, the product of a lecture series Emerson had been delivering and developing since 1845 which takes this point as its general topic, the principle of the gift is firmly reiterated in the introductory essay. The book’s titular figures do not ‘give’ in such a way that we become consciously

⁵⁸ Gary Shapiro, “‘Give Me a Break!’ Emerson on Fruit and Flowers”, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 13 (1999), 98-113 (p. 109).

⁵⁹ Which is exactly what Urakova finds to be the case in Poe, who conceived of an ‘opposite’ project to that of the gift book in his own *Stylus*, wherein all content textual and pictorial would be “in strict keeping with the Magazine character” and not attenuated by subjection to the needs of an extratextual economic order. Predictably, the project never got further than its prospectus. See Urakova, pp. 338-9.

obliged to them—Emerson’s absolutist sentiment in the short sentence ‘Gift is contrary to the law of the universe’ makes sense because it declares consciousness of the giving, and invokes restitution: ‘Serving others is serving us’ (*CW* IV, 6). So the gift of writing truly conceived would need to be a writing which belied no notion of its being a gift, and no notion of an originating subject.

Becoming ‘representative’, as the poet is said to do, enables him to ‘stand [...] among partial men for the complete man’, but this ‘standing for’ also renders him a sign in the sense that he becomes identical to his work, reduced to the ‘epithet or image’ that we make of him (*CW* III, 4). In this sense, the poet becomes synonymous with the conditions attendant on his form for the reader—which is to say, his ‘completion’, or death, in becoming formal—an effect banally reflected in the reduction of life and oeuvre to an adjective, Emerson to the Emersonian. If the effect is banal, however, the act of making the gift is nevertheless profound. Giving oneself to be ‘melted down’, ‘the artist is in some degree sacrificed’, and is absolved of the conditions of subjective being in this act and the unconscious acquisitive act of the reader (*JMN* VIII, 108). In such a way, therefore, by infinitising and restoring a world, are poets ‘liberating gods’, because, as Emerson writes in the seldom quoted sentence which follows this, they self-immolate so that others might be entitled to find ‘within their world, another world, or nest of worlds’ (*CW* III, 17).

Framing these discussions within the concerns which began this chapter, what takes place with respect to persons and the personal under such conditions? In the most immediate sense, a ‘personal’ response which does not detect the gift as gift, such as that discussed by Sharon Cameron, would very likely declare it unnerving: one finds no author’s voice here, because it would have been received in such a way that no giver could be perceived. It would appear literally to be ‘no one’s voice’.⁶⁰ Or, if we see the

⁶⁰ Cameron, ‘Way of Life’, p. 17.

gift being made, as Cavell seems to do, the other side of the coin has us repelled by the singularity and unrelenting usurpation of what is being thrust upon us. Cavell experiences it as what he calls a ‘philosophical mood [given] so purely, so incessantly, giving one little other intellectual amusement or eloquence or information, little other argument or narrative, and *no other source of companionship*’.⁶¹ It is a mode of asking that is so fixated with the conditions circumscribing its own personality that it leaves no room for dialogue or fellow-feeling, but appears to possess the counter-person of the receiver. In either case, the effect does not seem stable or benignly productive, but then it never could be. As Derrida’s later theorisation of concerns realised by Emerson affirms, the gift, properly conceived in its aneconomic state, necessarily declines manifestation: ‘the gift is the impossible. Not impossible but *the* impossible. The very figure of the impossible’. Defined as being inexhaustible (since it ceases to be if it is received), it is an ‘interruption’, neither part of time nor of topology, ‘an *atopic* and *utopic* madness’.⁶² In spite of the double bind whereby the gift is impossible on both practical and theoretical terms, however, Emerson cannot rescind on the effort to make it. The words from the opening pages of ‘Experience’, Emerson’s discovery of the obligation to produce text—to ‘invest, impart’, mean that he cannot abscond from the demand that he produce the gift of writing. The obligation to produce the impossible leaves him awed by the power that text can be thought to possess, and the consequences lead towards a catastrophic destabilisation of authorial self-identity.

When Emerson writes in the journals that ‘[i]n writing, the casting moment is of greatest importance’, it is because *everything* depends upon the success of the impression made in the moment of inscription (*JMN* VIII, 113). To fulfil an obligation demands commitment to an act of particularisation and definition, and because that particularisation is inherently singular it cannot be revised or restated—except, of

⁶¹ Cavell, ‘An Emerson Mood’, p. 152. Emphasis added.

⁶² Derrida, p. 7, 13, 28, 35. Emphasis in original.

course, as repetition, which announces itself by its stark antinomianism in this respect. Not surprisingly, Emerson judges ‘remarkable [...] the overfaith of each man in the importance of what he has to do or say. The poet, the prophet, has a higher value for what he utters than any hearer, and therefore it gets spoken’ (*CW* III, 109). If the utterance succeeds, one is ‘happy’: happiness depends upon ‘Expression [...] That man is serene who does not feel himself pinched & wronged, but whose condition *in particular and in general* allows the utterance of his mind; and that man who cannot utter himself goes mourning all the day’ (*JMN* VIII, 106-7. Emphasis added). This is not the will to power, but ‘serene’ and ultimately contingent, as the ‘hap’ of happiness discloses. It is a *proper* acquittal, in other words, with which subjective agency or contrivance has little to do. Yet, on the other hand, any failure is visible and traceable to the source in the subject as unfulfilled obligation. In terms of the notion of writing as gift, this means that the entire hermeneutical future of one’s utterance and its every future mutation remains one’s responsibility even as it is entirely disassociated from oneself.

In ‘New England Reformers’, the address which concludes *Second Series*, Emerson writes of the reformers who are flawed precisely because they do not give, but merely restrict the world and demand assent to their opinions:

The reason why any one refuses his assent to your opinion, or his aid to your benevolent design, *is in you*: he refuses to accept you as a bringer of truth, because, though you think you have it, he feels that you have it not. *You have not given him the authentic sign.* (*CW* III, 164. Emphasis added)⁶³

⁶³ Emerson accuses reformism generally of subtraction and withdrawal in the journals for October 1841: ‘Well, now you take from us our cup of alcohol as before you took our cup of wrath [...] You take away, but what do you give me? [...] No, this is mere thieving hypocrisy & poaching’ (*JMN* VIII, 116). His alternative is encapsulated by the concluding passage of 1841’s ‘Man the Reformer’ and that address’s advocacy of reform by example. The model provided is one of casting forth one’s best productions, giving profusely and indifferently: ‘Is there not somewhat sublime in the act of the farmer, who casts into the ground the finest ears of his grain? The time will come when we too shall hold nothing back, but shall

And this principle leaves Emerson, he who would give, in an unenviable, nay impossible, position. For although he chides the reform movements for failing to offer the 'authentic sign', this sign is nevertheless wholly problematic: it is madness. It is an attempt at the absolute utterance and the utterance of the absolute, while closedness and limitation are the fundamental nature of literary form and of the commitment that form entails. Emerson acknowledged as much when he noted, in July 1842, that every man is of two parts, 'a sane and an insane. The sane thinks; the insane speaks. Our thought is as great as the horizon & this wide cope overhead; our speech petty, sneaking; so that we seem mocked by our own organs' (*JMN* VIII, 188). Cleaving close once again to Derrida's interventions in gift theory, to aspire to absolute expression in the limited forms of language is essentially 'to torment one's mind trying to find that which, by definition, cannot be found where one is looking for it [...] To look for the impossible is that form of madness in which we seem to have enclosed ourselves up to now [in simply speaking of the gift]'.⁶⁴ Sincerity in giving means authorial immolation, giving away everything entirely, as in the potlatch ceremony discussed at length in Mauss's work, which Derrida brands the gift that '*gets carried away with itself*' and which Mauss terms 'the most madly extravagant' of gifts, 'not even a question of giving and returning, but of destroying, so as not to give the slightest hint of desiring your gift to be reciprocated'.⁶⁵

It is sensible to apply a limit to this theoretical possibility. The sincere gift requires the entire abandonment of limits and bounds, entering a trajectory of inexhaustible, impossible profusion. Indeed, it requires a giving up of subjectivity itself, a submission to universality, which is not so much absolute knowledge as 'absolute

eagerly convert more than we now possess into means and powers, when we shall be willing to sow the sun and the moon for seeds' (*CW* I, 160).

⁶⁴ Derrida, p. 34.

⁶⁵ Derrida, p. 46. Emphasis in original. Mauss, p. 47.

forgetting'.⁶⁶ In claiming to pursue this, Emerson seems to renounce an alternative model of possible sincerity—the confessional, so significant in the thesis of repetition and its acknowledgement of secular limits. As such, giving sincerely means *being* insincerely, and therefore the limiting utterance must be made under false convictions of possible success. If, on the other hand, the author is conscious of the partiality of their being subject, of the conditions which circumscribed the confessional, then aspiring to the gift and the contingent 'happiness' that accompanies it means that they are, once again, aspiring to acquittal, to being absolved. Paradise won through absolution (a paradise which is attained in the orthodox fashion, by the loss of the personal, which is to say death) is, indeed, something to aspire to, and all the better if it can be done without the troublesome business of actually having to undergo the act of dying, as Emerson comes to demonstrate.

Playing Dead: 'Manners'

How, therefore, to explain the process by which Emerson gives effectively but insincerely? In addressing this, we can pick up the earlier quotation from 'Nature' which first alluded to the 'falsehood' appropriate to our condition:

Every act hath some falsehood of exaggeration in it. And when now and then comes along some sad, sharp-eyed man, who sees how paltry a game is played, and refuses to play, but blabs the secret;—how then? Is the bird flown? O no, the wary Nature sends a new troop of fairer forms, of lordlier youths, with a little more excess of direction to hold them fast to their several aim; makes them a little wrongheaded in that direction in which they are rightest, and on goes the game again with new whirl, for a generation or two more. (*CW* III, 107-8)

⁶⁶ The term is Derrida's.

That this passage appears in the essay ‘Nature’ is significant: once again, Emerson renounces the youthful claims of his earlier piece by that title in implying that he is no longer the ‘curly, dimpled lunatic’ described further down the page but the ‘sad, sharp-eyed man’ of this passage. Indeed, he might even be more ‘sharp-eyed’ were he a little more sincere, given the additional confessions of impotence and of the mechanical character of his poetics present in the journal draft of this extract.⁶⁷ He permits himself occasional exasperated doubts on the same theme later: that ‘there is throughout nature something mocking, something that leads us on and on, but arrives nowhere, keeps no faith with us’; he wonders ‘[w]ere the ends of nature so great and cogent, as to exact this immense sacrifice of men?’ (*CW* III, 110-1). But the whole principle of the gift turns on renouncing this exhausting, world-ending side of his maturity; on effecting new excesses, as the lunatics are given to do by nature and without thought. So, in ‘Experience’, alongside the hints of defeatism present in Emerson’s disquisitions on fate, the universe, and the place of his work in it, new measures designed to restore exuberance in effect begin to appear. His confession in that essay—‘I know better than to claim completeness for my picture. I am a fragment, and this is a fragment of me’—is opposed to the demand of form to commit, and so runs against the ethical obligation that form constitutes (*CW* III, 47). But he is conscious of this: a few pages earlier, the problem of the non-correlation of sincerity and morality ends in fatalism, if one must remain sincere:

⁶⁷ ‘Aim above the mark to hit the mark. Every act hath some falsehood of exaggeration in it, every sentence. For the infinite diffuseness refuses to be epigrammatised, the world to be shut up in a word. The thought being spoken in a sentence becomes by mere detachment falsely emphatic’ (*JMN* VIII, 87). The fact that Emerson struck out the very clear description of ‘falsehood of exaggeration’ lying in language acts, in sentences, indicates that he was at least concerned with trying to veil his poetic principles of exaggeration, excess, and detachment enabling the impression (if not the fact) of the ‘emphatic’. This corroborates the impression of the gift, but also reveals the contrivance used to exert that impression, of which I will have a lot more to say here.

I would gladly be moral, and keep to metes and bounds, which I dearly love, and allow the most to the will of man, but I have set my heart on honesty in this chapter, and I can see nothing at last, in success or failure, than more or less of vital force supplied from the Eternal. The results of life are uncalculated and uncalculable. (*CW* III, 40)

It is this attitude which underlies the form of the bulk of this essay, with its short, aphoristic and, to my mind, consequently fatalistic sentences, expressing an exasperation which lifts towards the conclusion, as Emerson's effort of will returns him to hope and faith. But beyond the local confines of the essay, beyond its internal logic, this poetic turn grates against his own earlier honesty and constitutes the author's deceit of us, as readers, and of 'Emerson' himself as well, of what honesty asks us and him to accept—that a settled conclusion cannot be simply abandoned, that a conviction sincerely felt cannot be idly tossed away.

In other words, this is what the principle of insincerity starts to look like in practice, and twice more in *Second Series* Emerson references this aspect of his poetics in extremely candid terms. First, in 'Nature', in the midst of the fatalistic confessions already quoted:

A man can only speak, so long as he does not feel his speech to be partial and inadequate. It is partial, but he does not see it to be so, whilst he utters it. As soon as he is released from the instinctive and particular, and sees its partiality, he shuts his mouth in disgust. For, no man can write anything, who does not think that what he writes is for the time the history of the world; or do anything well, who does not esteem his work to be of importance. My work may be of

none, but I must not think it of none, or I shall not do it with impunity. (*CW* III, 110)

The fact that Emerson tells us about the principle of deception in the same volume as he practises it upon us wholly corroborates the paradox in this passage, which describes the flitting inconstancy in the encounter with form, its native power as much as the author's exclusion from that power. So he reiterates, when his attention returns to the topic in 'Nominalist and Realist':

No sentence will hold the whole truth, and the only way in which we can be just, is *by giving ourselves the lie*; Speech is better than silence; silence is better than speech;—All things are in contact; every atom has a sphere of repulsion;— Things are, and are not, at the same time;—and the like. (*CW* III, 143-4. Emphasis added)

To make the gift of writing, we must also make a gift to ourselves—the 'gift' of 'the lie'. It is as given that we are to be insincere. Knowing that there is nothing more to say, Emerson posits that we must at that very moment begin to speak, begin to write. In other entries in the journals withheld from full elaboration in the published works, we see this exact principle addressed in processes where Emerson seems to try to write himself out of fatalism and the dulled mind of maturity. In a passage written in the early autumn of 1841, shortly before Waldo's death: 'why do I write another line, since my best friends assure me that in every line I repeat myself? Yet the God must be obeyed even to ridicule' (*JMN* VIII, 96). Here, the obligation to write seems to lead inevitably to fallacy and ridicule, not truth and realisation, and in a slightly later entry of the same period the point is reiterated with more precision: 'Yet is it not ridiculous this that we

do in this languid, idle trick that we have gradually fallen into of writing & writing without end. After a day of humiliation & stripes if I can write it down I am straightaway relieved & can sleep well' (*JMN* VIII, 126).

In comparison with the 'serene' happiness of the theory of well-cast writing, the cathartic sloughing-off of text here is quotidian and rather banal. But the suggestion that this process is a 'languid idle trick' is interesting. Of course, this was written before Waldo's death, and thus before Emerson's concerns intensified. On those terms, we perhaps shouldn't be surprised that these kinds of statements never found their way into later published work in exactly this format. But this is surely not the only reason that the passages are withheld. Were Emerson's conscious performances so obviously ridiculous and contrived, then the impression of sincerity would be very plainly compromised. And the obligation of the gift which requires the perpetuation of this ridiculous performance even after Waldo's death only underlines the paradox at the heart of Emerson's poetic principle. No matter the extent to which Emerson was affected by this loss and the philosophical doubts it engendered, what he came to write as a consequence of it was written for the exact reason of breaking with the maturity he now felt. He was led to a writing which simply 'honoured his place' and *not* his personal knowledge and experience of that place.

The instance in *Second Series* when this comes to a head is the essay 'Manners', a piece which has received no serious scholarly attention.⁶⁸ 'Manners' is nominally a fairly

⁶⁸ Arsic is, to my knowledge, the only critic of Emerson to give more than passing note to this essay, and I agree with most of the terms she deploys to characterise it. Arsic notes that a discourse on manners is of considerable significance if we are thinking of how an author is to be personally present or invested in a text—after all, the essence of manners is repeatability, and as such a mannered gesture does not need the presence of a unique person to be completed: 'manners are a purely external relation between two "energies" or two nonpersonalised lives; they are like gestures without persons'. Of course, our uptake of ritual also constitutes our capacity to become a social being, and a non-social being, which would be a being without language in any sense, is unlikely to be at all, so our investment in the mannered is, like our investment in language, necessary as much as it is concessionary. Arsic goes on to figure Emerson's treatment of manners within her thesis of leaving the habitual, and her conclusion is interesting: that the term 'manners' undergoes Emerson's process of semantic destabilisation and is given, in the essay on the subject under discussion, to come to mean its exact opposite: manners are 'a law-breaking energy, [... a usage which] put[s] the meaning of the word in discord with itself, thus itself becoming a "manner" of

innocuous reflection on convention, mores, the value of etiquette and gentlemanliness in revealing our better innate nature, and so on. Much like ‘Gifts’, which Robert Richardson calls a ‘light, short piece’ in the most recent major biography of Emerson, ‘Manners’ seems one of the weaker chapters in ‘an uneven volume’ normally passed over in favour of the more compelling essays around it.⁶⁹ Yet this essay is turned inside out by a closer (and better informed) reading, to reveal a window on the machinations involved in the literary mode of the gift. Its opening sentence, lifted from Rabelais, seems innocently based in the concerns of the title, figuring cultural insularity and xenophobic misunderstandings: ‘Half the world, it is said, knows not how the other half live’ (*CW* III, 71). The Rabelaisian allusion, however, hints that things are perhaps not so straightforward. A world deemed divisible into two precisely equal parts is difficult to conceive, unless we consider it as the ‘world’ that exists for the author and presumed reader, or reader and presumed author. If this is a textual world of two, then ‘it is said’ that sympathy does not exist, at least. Author and reader never meet, for each is absent while the other engages with the projected text. The overtones here again bring Emerson parallel with his contemporary Poe and the latter’s ‘Philosophy of Composition’; in fact, Emerson is a great deal closer to Poe’s compositional theory than has ever been acknowledged.⁷⁰

To understand why, we can start at the essay’s epigraph, a fourteen line poem contained within a single set of inverted commas. It’s no sonnet—the opening four lines form a quatrain separated from the following ten by a single line break. But the whole

speaking’. What I have to say here significantly develops this double sense of the term by revealing how Emerson figures two very different states of authorial responsibility adhering to a single text. See Arsić, pp. 303-6.

⁶⁹ Richardson, *Mind on Fire*, p. 400.

⁷⁰ As Poe put it in the lines quoted on the first page of this thesis: ‘Most writers [...] prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition—and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought [...] the wheels and pinions—the tackle for scene-shifting—the step-ladders and demon-traps’, etc. His target in this piece was, of course, ‘the so called poetry of the so called Transcendentalists’. Poe, ‘Philosophy of Composition’, p. 979, 986.

nevertheless seems consistent within its inverted commas, and is credited to Ben Jonson. The accreditation is correct—Jonson did write all fourteen of these lines. But the line break which separates the two pieces of text acts as a disguised ellipsis and a substantial erasure. The quatrain comes from Jonson’s masque *Love Freed From Ignorance and Folly* (1611), the following ten lines from an entirely separate work, another masque, *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* (1618). Yet Emerson provides no indication that such substantial editorial work was involved: the lines appear as though, by happy coincidence, they began as a unity which when transcribed entirely fitted the new setting. Emerson has a history of misrepresenting his sources or adapting quotations: for a famous example, we might recall the opening sentence of ‘Self-Reliance’ and the ‘verses written by an eminent painter’ whom Emerson elects not to name, let alone quote the mentioned verses. But this is not so unusual in a broader literary context—allegations of plagiarism in literature, often well-founded, occur in every era, and Chaucer, Montaigne, Shakespeare and Milton are among the accused.⁷¹ Aside from its direct relevance to allusions to the secrecy of composition in the opening sentence of ‘Manners’, therefore, this abuse of Jonson is a pretty minor infraction endemic to all manner of writers. However, this instance is not isolated—in fact, it’s a mere prelude to what takes place on the next page.

What follows once ‘Manners’ gets underway takes the intertextual hints of the epigraph in combination with the Rabelaisian opening and quietly runs riot. The ostensible subject is the cultural difference observed by ‘our Exploring Expedition’ when they ‘saw the Feejee islanders getting their dinner off human bones’, or ‘the rock-Tibboos’ who ‘still dwell in caves’, or ‘the Bornoos’ who ‘have no proper names’. This miscellany of exotic oddities must come from somewhere other than Emerson’s

⁷¹ Thomas McFarland nods toward the idea that plagiarism, or at least accusations of plagiarism, constitutes the dominant constant of literature as he details this pantheon of plagiarists in his *Originality and Imagination*. See McFarland, pp. 22-30.

personal experience, of course. But the point of curiosity is not simply that Emerson cribbed from his library for the information: rather, he copied the prose he found almost to the letter. As Joseph Slater's notes to the Harvard Belknap *Collected Works* edition of *Second Series* suggest, 'Emerson's debt to [Giovanni Battista] Belzoni's *Narrative of the Operations within the Pyramids, Temples, Tombs and Excavations, in Egypt and Nubia* (London, 1822) was greater than the quotation marks [apparent, briefly, in the opening paragraph of 'Manners'] indicated'.⁷² This is evident when the passages from Emerson and Belzoni are held up against one another:

The husbandry of the modern inhabitants of Gournou (west of old Thebes) is philosophical to a fault. To set up their housekeeping, nothing is requisite but two or three earthen pots, a stone to grind meal, and a mat which is the bed. The house, namely, a tomb, is ready without rent or taxes. No rain can pass through the roof, and there is no door, for there is no want of one, as there is nothing to lose. If the house does not please them, they walk out and enter another, as there are several hundreds at their command (Emerson, *CW* III, 71).

When a young man wants to marry, he goes to the father of the intended bride, and agrees with him what he is to pay for her. This being settled, so much money is to be spent on the wedding-day feast. To set up their housekeeping, nothing is requisite but two or three earthen pots, a stone to grind meal, and a mat, which is the bed [...] The house is ready, without rent or taxes. No rain can pass through the roof; and there is no door, for there is no want of one, as there is nothing to lose [...] If the house do not please them, they walk out and enter another, as there are several hundreds at their command

⁷² See *CW* III, p. 200, n. 71.5.

(Belzoni).⁷³

At this point in ‘Manners’, Emerson introduces quotation marks and directly references Belzoni by name. So what is the significance of his not doing so before? We must ask this question by a circuitous route, examining first the context of Emerson’s unattributed quotation. The differences in the above quoted text are minimal—a semi-colon is replaced with a comma, ‘does’ replaces ‘do’; plainly, the most significant addition is the reminder that this is no ordinary house, but ‘namely, a tomb’, a point I’ll come back to shortly.⁷⁴ The elisions, therefore, are perhaps more notable. In the Belzoni original, the context is a discussion of marital ritual, as is indicated in the excerpt above, and the elided sentences all tie the discussion to that context. Emerson’s elisions thus decontextualise the passage, but, more importantly, they also singularly emphasise the subject of household management—an ‘economy’, in other words. Finally, Emerson’s decision to preface the whole with the statement that this economy is ‘philosophical to a fault’ is curious: is the simplicity and self-sufficiency of this economy *excessively* philosophical? What might a less faulty economy consist of, and does this alternative have anything to do with the formal practice in evidence here?

As ‘Manners’ continues, so does Emerson’s plagiarism. The next sentence after the reference to Belzoni, which begins ‘In the deserts of Borgoo’, is a compression of discussions lifted from A. H. L. Heeren, and uses the exact phrasing of Heeren’s translator, D. A. Talboys.⁷⁵ But here, Emerson’s own words crop up amongst the purloined sentences to provide insight into the compositional process at hand. As he writes, the barbarians described in these excerpts of imported text are not so far away

⁷³ Giovanni Battista Belzoni, *Narrative of the Operations within the Pyramids, Temples, Tombs and Excavations, in Egypt and Nubia*, 3rd edn (London: John Murray, 1822), I, pp. 284-5.

⁷⁴ These changes are also present in the journal original of the passage, where Emerson *does* name Belzoni and uses quotation marks more appropriately (*JMN* VII, 103).

⁷⁵ See A. H. L. Heeren, *Historical Researches into the Politics, Intercourse, and Trade of the Carthaginians, Ethiopians, and Egyptians*, trans. by D. A. Talboys, 2nd edn (Oxford: D. A. Talboys, 1838), I, pp. 221-2 and 230-1.

from the civilised West when the products of such barbaric cultures are themselves imported: 'But the salt, the dates, the ivory, and the gold, for which these horrible regions are visited, find their way into countries, where the *purchaser and consumer can hardly be ranked in one race with these cannibals and man-stealers*' (CW III, 71. Emphasis added).

The parallel here, in the context of everything I've said so far in this chapter, should be perceived to lie in the dynamic between the overt, surface characteristics of the text, and its arguably less 'civilised' substructure, which is deliberately concealed. There is no immediate reason why the reader should be conscious that such a text acts as a gift. Overtly, the manner of the prose of 'Manners' rather plainly echoes the concerns of its title: it begins in a conventional mode of asserting consensus with the words 'It is said'; it dips into established literary and scientific tradition for its intertexts; it goes on to ostensibly laud etiquette, 'the gentleman', and other tasteful nineteenth-century received wisdoms. But this mannered prose in fact only thinly disguises the 'cannibalism', the 'man-stealing' of Emerson's composition. The consequence is that for the unsympathetic reader who does not follow up the hints provided—the hints of Jonson, of Rabelais, and of the manipulation of Belzoni—the recycled text is renewed, given new setting, given to appear as new. At the same time, the person of the giver is concealed—although Emerson seems to give the text to us, it is not, strictly speaking, his to give, and in his passing on of the plagiarised text the authentic original donor disappears. By doing this, he neatly side-steps his impossible obligation—he gives, but the gift is insincere. But this realisation is not the end of the matter. This essay both ruminates on and serves as an example of the practice of how to accommodate the fact that just as the writer of the gift inherits language in general, so he inherits its extant forms. The question is therefore how one is to live amongst such dead forms, how one

is to make new the world built upon them and formulate an economy which expends, but which does not acquire or consume.

We can read ‘Manners’ against its sources in this respect. For Belzoni’s inhabitants of Gournou are in a similar position: these are a people ‘who live in sepulchres, among the corpses and rags of an ancient nation, which they know nothing of.’⁷⁶ As Emerson emphasised in his adaptation of the source text, the fact that the houses are ‘namely, tombs’ means the people of Gournou lead a necropolitan existence. This is why their economy is ‘philosophical to a fault’; not only because it is harshly frugal, but because it’s a housekeeping which accommodates the dead a little too visibly, and with too great a philosophical contentedness. To live contentedly among the dead is bad manners and indecorous, albeit with respect to the living and the future rather than with respect to the dead. The inhabitants of Gournou are not like Emerson the plagiarist and giver, but Emerson the ‘sad, sharp-eyed man’. Being philosophical to a fault is akin to being honest to a fault: it involves staring a little too dispassionately, a little too sincerely, at the reality of the situation at hand. And the situation at hand is the contested status of personality—of the person of the bequeathing writer and the mutually exclusive person of the reader for whom the text must always be new. When Emerson is ‘honest’, he proposes his doubt and places bounds on the range of possibility available to future persons. As we have seen, pessimism dominates these discussions—Emerson is sure in maturity only that, intellectually speaking, the security of personhood has not come to him, while the personhood of others is only ‘perhaps’ the case. We can have only an elective, and never chemical or necessary, affinity with them.

Yet the opposition between this sincerely pessimistic experience of the author and the jocund, disseminating performance of the donor is neither resolved nor held in

⁷⁶ Belzoni, p. 283. This sentence is the only one Emerson places within inverted commas (*CW* III, 71).

binary opposition, but exists simultaneously with another more personal voice which is more or less apparent throughout *Second Series*. Not only the honest, confessional moments throughout the volume, but also the continuously dropped hints which lead to suspicions about the purpose of this particular essay, suggest that Emerson never seems comfortable with the theoretical bind he's driven himself into, and as a consequence the formal hypotheses of the volume end in problematic irresolution. Again, close readings in 'Manners' examining the spaces between Emerson's intertexts illuminate the concerns attendant on this point. First, the fact that both pieces of text borrowed from Jonson are taken from the Renaissance form of the masque is worth highlighting, because it nods to the masking/unmasking through which he toys with his reader in these pages while also implying the special relevance of the piece to the conditions of personhood. For if we overlook the word's normative sense—that a person is a being possessing both biological and mental consistency—we note that it is a word which has the interesting quality of having two meanings that are precisely opposed to one another. Its normative use is what we find in the phrase 'the person of the king': that is, the king's body, mind, and soul alone, without reference to the socio-political function of his being the king. Yet, etymologically, the classical Latin *persona* was a mask worn by an actor, and, by virtue of a disappeared synecdoche, this comes to stand in general for a part or role performed, the king as mere function.⁷⁷ In 'Manners', Emerson extends the play on this distinction.

In general, of course, a text is defined by its exclusion of the authorial person if the word is used in the normative sense and demands literal and immediate presence, physical as well as intellectual, of the referent that the author's name is presumed to indicate. Sharon Cameron's proposition that Emerson's personality is unnervingly only 'rhetorical', and 'is not visible except through style', is by no means unique, even if his

⁷⁷ The *OED* traces this classical meaning to its hypothesised origin in an Etruscan word, *phersu*, meaning mask.

work makes the problem both more visible and more troublesome than other writers.⁷⁸

But we must remember the extent to which the proxy of the text has been essential to Emerson's philosophy of self-realisation throughout the late-1830s. The turn from text disclosing person to text disguising persona in 'Manners' is therefore significant, and we should anticipate that certain consequences are inevitable. Emerson's characterisation of the gentleman in the piece is telling in this respect.

For Emerson, the gentleman is not simply a man of fashion or of good manners but has a 'personal force [that] never goes out of fashion'. As he goes on to say, that force does not necessarily consist of moral rectitude. Instead, 'bruisers and pirates are of better promise than talkers and clerks [... The gentleman] is good company for pirates, and good with academicians' (*CW* III, 73,74). Emerson does not mean that he is merely adaptable, however. In yet another appropriated and adapted quotation, which this time has both inverted commas and accreditation even as it is used discontinuously with its source context, Emerson writes: 'I am far from believing the timid maxim of Lord Falkland, ("that for ceremony there must go two to it; since a bold fellow will go through the cunningest forms,") and am of opinion that the gentleman is the bold fellow whose forms are not to be broken through' (*CW* III, 74). As Slater notes, Emerson lifts this quote from a contemporary novel, which itself lifted it from an older history.⁷⁹ The phrase 'cunningest forms' does not appear in either of these sources, however, and the adaptation is significant. Two persons may attend the ceremony or 'masque' of Emerson's text, two are presumed, but the two cannot go together. So this 'bold fellow' is free to take whichever cunning forms are available, and this is precisely what Emerson does. We may think him the benevolent gentleman if we do not 'break

⁷⁸ Cameron implicitly acknowledges this by way of allusion to 'Foucault's author-function' in the same comments. See Cameron, 'Way of Life', p. 26.

⁷⁹ Slater suggests that Emerson found this quotation in a footnote in Robert Plumer Ward's *Tremaine; or the Man of Refinement*, (London: Henry Colburn, 1825), II, p. 70. The footnote itself refers to Edward Earl of Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England* (Oxford: Sheldonian Theatre, 1707), I, p. 81. See Slater, in *CW* III, 201, n. 74.11.

through' them, and not breaking through is accepting at face value, literally: it is accepting the mask or *persona* and not interrogating the *pathos* of the person behind it.⁸⁰

But if we are unsympathetic in this way, we are undoubtedly subject to the personal force of someone Emerson chooses to associate with pirates, an author who is cunning, manipulative, and opaque. It is worth recalling here the odd analogy Fichtelberg makes that Emerson 'aspired to be a transparent medium, an affectionate general equivalent like money itself'.⁸¹ In the 'saintly economy' he sees Emerson and others aspiring to, the concept of money may not be tainted with the inevitable problems it consistently meets in use. But Emerson seldom mentions a paper currency without this acknowledgement. So, in 'Compensation' in *First Series*, he writes of how 'signs, like paper money, may be counterfeited or stolen' (*CW* II, 67). Within a symbolic economy, monetary or otherwise, the counterfeit operates exactly as effectively as the authentic token so long as its inauthenticity remains concealed. The 'new' text of 'Manners' may not be authentically new, but it acts in the mode of the gift for all those unaware of this fact. Indeed, just as Derrida emphasises in his reading of the gift in Baudelaire's 'La Fausse Monnaie', the counterfeit is no less a gift for the recipient whose use of it generates possibility. As the narrator of Baudelaire's short prose piece remarks, '[t]he counterfeit coin could just as well, perhaps, be the germ of several days' wealth for a poor little speculator'.⁸² Alternatively, it might 'also lead him to prison'. The point is

⁸⁰ Should we therefore 'break through the mask?' The Melvillian overtones in this Emersonian consideration, from 'The Quarter-Deck' chapter of *Moby Dick*, indicate that the desire to do so is monomaniacal; its end, as sought by Ahab, is only exhaustion of what remains unknown, not epiphanic realisation but impudence rising to contempt. As he declares: 'That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the White Whale agent, or be the White Whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him'. So the singularity of Ahab's purpose (and Ahab is so singular in this chapter that his thought and act exactly coincide—'you could almost see that thought turn in him as he turned, and pace in him as he paced') is most akin to Emerson's 'sad, sharp-eyed man', who would rather declare the world closed than bequeath it still full of possibility. Seeing through the mask, therefore, does not automatically engender a desire to destroy it to prevent future audiences from undergoing the same realisations, but invokes an ethical decision for the reader to make. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851), ed. by Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford (New York: Norton, 2002), p. 140, 137.

⁸¹ Fichtelberg, p. 118.

⁸² Charles Baudelaire, 'La Fausse Monnaie' ('Counterfeit Money') (1869), trans. by Peggy Kamuf, reprinted in postscript in Derrida.

that, in this instance, the donor has no interest in the consequences of the gift. This coheres with the terms of the gift theory, but it also has relevance to the broader set of problems we find in ‘Manners’ and throughout the volume. For the giver of the counterfeit coin does not expend anything: it is as though, in Baudelaire’s words, the act of knowingly giving a counterfeit coin is an attempt ‘to win paradise economically; in short, to pick up gratis the certificate of a charitable man’.⁸³

And so, in *Second Series*, a comment that appears toward the end of ‘Experience’ becomes especially relevant. There, Emerson writes ‘I say to the Genius, if he will pardon the proverb, *In for a mill, in for a million*’ (*CW* III, 48. Emphasis in original). Invoking the obligation to give that the mill stood for, Emerson declares his investment but does not invest.⁸⁴ In disseminating counterfeits, he gives nothing away. He gives nothing away from his own person—that is, he does not wilfully sacrifice himself in his utterance for the good of the future reader. But equally, he gives nothing away of who he is or would claim to be: he does not sincerely reveal anything of his deception, but conceals himself behind the textual *persona*. What follows in ‘Manners’, therefore, does not endear the sympathetic reader, the one who goes through the mask, to Emerson or his enterprise. Even as he laments in the middle of the essay that it ‘seem[s] as if man was of a very sly, elusive nature, and dreaded nothing so much as a full *rencontre front to front* with his fellow’, he slips back into the masque (*CW* III, 79). Like ‘Cardinal Caprara’, who ‘defended himself from the glances of Napoleon by an immense pair of green spectacles’, like Dupin in Poe’s ‘Purloined Letter’, who adopts the same disguise, Emerson again fences himself away (*CW* III, 80). Towards the end of ‘Manners’, he

⁸³ Baudelaire, in Derrida. The essay ‘Quotation and Originality’, from *Letters and Social Aims*, is outside the remit of this thesis, not only because it was not published until 1876 but also because it is doubtful just how much authorial input the elderly Emerson had (see p. 94, n. 58 above). However, the fact that quotation there is said to operate on an ‘extreme economy’ corroborates the concerns he was dealing with in the early-1840s (*CW* VIII, 94).

⁸⁴ Or, perhaps, invests as little as possible that he may be acquitted, since a mill is also one tenth of a cent.

goes so far as to dedicate his essay to a defence of the type of benevolence found in the manipulation he has sought to practise on his reader:

Let there be grotesque sculpture about the gates and offices of temples. Let the creed and commandments even have the saucy homage of parody. The forms of politeness universally express benevolence in superlative degrees. What if they are in the mouths of selfish men, and only used as a means of selfishness? What if the false gentleman continues so to address his companion, as civilly to exclude all others from his discourse, and also to make them feel excluded? (*CW* III, 85)

Excluding all others, especially the authors of these plagiarised texts, so long as the reader feels taken into confidence, the actions of the counterfeiter succeed. Melville's famous criticism is correct—Emerson is a confidence trickster.⁸⁵

But Emerson always insinuates that the trick is played for the benefit of his unsympathetic readers, for whom the world is infinitised, and not so much for himself. After all, in the context of the high seriousness that plays across other parts of the volume, where the fact which instigated this whole notion of the gift—Waldo's death—is touched upon, the performances of 'Manners' and other essays are foolish in the extreme. Indeed, it might be said that Emerson makes a clown of himself. There are compelling parallels with such behaviour which say something of his significance to a Continental tradition that more usually goes unacknowledged. In many ways, Emerson resembles the romantic author theorised by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy in their *Literary Absolute*. For the romantic author who comes at the end of a

⁸⁵ Indeed, it is known for a fact that Melville read 'Manners'—his copy contains marginal marks, although it is not believed that he read the volume until 1861, four years after the publication of *The Confidence-Man*. See William Braswell, 'Melville as a Critic of Emerson', *American Literature*, 9 (1937), 317-34 (p. 319, n. 14). Braswell also treats of the commonly accepted view that *The Confidence Man* satirises Emerson on p. 329.

historical tradition, the obligation is to be sociable and generative rather than withdrawn and pessimistic. What Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy term both ‘geniality’ and ‘*Witz*’ (essentially, ‘wit’) in the authorial persona exists because of the kind of abandonment to a societal whim it entails: ‘the major exigency with regard to *Witz*, [is that] one must abandon oneself to its fundamentally involuntary character’, and the exemplary feature of writing which ties it to geniality is that it can embody this abandonment, ‘as the passage into form, into the formal legality of the work’.⁸⁶ But releasing oneself merely to a societal whim—being its *Witz*—involves putting on affectation, dishonesty, and clowning. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy use Friedrich Schlegel’s concept of ‘transcendental buffoonery’ to designate this. Later, of course, we can see the laughter of Nietzsche as a continuation of the same, but there it is apparently less well modulated, less measured, than we find in the reasonably balanced words of Emerson.

This is why Emerson, finally, is so curious. For although he cannot give himself over to the infinite profusion of the gift, this does not exactly lead him into a collapse into fatalism or pessimism. Throughout *Second Series*, the problem is held in balance less by skilful moderation than in the tension of fascination. There is neither apparent order nor resolution in the structure of the essays in that volume: ‘Manners’ precedes ‘Gifts’, so the trick is promulgated before the theory that might go some way to revealing it is perceived. ‘Gifts’ is followed by ‘Nature’, where, more than anywhere else, Emerson confesses his doubts and reveals ‘the lie’ he seeks to give himself. So the honesty found in ‘Experience’ and the declaration of investment made there is fulfilled via the mechanisms of ‘Manners’ only to be punctured again by a restoration of the honest, and in this sense more ‘personally’ felt, voice in ‘Nature’. The consequence is that the series seems just as arbitrary as that discontinuity of our moods that Emerson laments in ‘Experience’, and, as such, we neither ‘find ourselves’ nor the person of the author but

⁸⁶ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, pp. 54-5.

discover a vacillation between rhetorical modes, between the 'persona' performed and the guarded, doubting voice of a more mature sincerity. The point is that Emerson never commits to the theory espoused here. He harbours a residual claim to sovereignty: he cannot undergo the demand of immolation which comes with giving his text away. But neither can he renounce what the theory stands for and return to a recursive and progressive mode of writing. In this way, textual relation remains an unresolved dilemma as we leave this volume, and it will stay in the balance into the later 1840s. The notion of possession is at stake, of one's possession of a text or being possessed by a text, and interpersonal relation remains a corollary of this problem that Emerson struggles to accommodate.

At the very end of 'Nominalist and Realist', which essentially concludes the essays of *Second Series* ('New England Reformers' being, strictly speaking, an address), Emerson reiterates the paradox of the entire volume in a rich passage of self-mockery. Beginning by setting the context, a recent conversation between himself and 'a pair of philosophers' (identified in the journal source for the passage as Charles Lane and Bronson Alcott), he presents the contradictions of the genial and honest aspects of his nature: 'I endeavoured to show [...] that I loved man, if men seemed to me mice and rats; that I revered saints, but woke up glad that the old pagan world stood its ground', and so on. The closing lines have evident comic effect:

Could they but once understand, that I loved to know that they existed, and heartily wished them Godspeed, yet, out of my poverty of life and thought, had no word or welcome for them when they came to see me, and could well consent to their living in Oregon, for any claim I felt on them, it would be a great satisfaction. (*CW* III, 145)⁸⁷

⁸⁷ See *JMN* VIII, 386 for the original of this passage and the direct reference to Lane and Alcott.

Painting himself simultaneously as an over-effusive enthusiast and a humorous grouch, Emerson entirely dispels the seriousness that followed Waldo's death in which the strategy of the gift was founded. The desire of 'satisfaction' is ironic, as it was in the absurdly rudimentary 'satisfaction' of finding reality in shaking someone's hand. Giving will not lead to satedness: it is always something we bear forth and away from ourselves, and hence literature conceived of as gift tends away from any notion of reciprocity: 'Our music, our poetry, our language itself are not satisfactions, but suggestions' (*CW* III, 110). He may write in the same essay of how 'we continue our mummery to the wretched shaving', a reference to the necessary clowning of the writer in his abandonment to form made without fondness (*CW* III, 135). Yet without it, he would have neither justification nor obligation to write at all. Only in 1847, with the publication of his collected *Poems*, does Emerson finally find a writing practice which corroborates the theory arrived at in *Second Series*, to which I now turn.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lions in Eden: *Poems* (1847)

Is there no change of death in paradise?
Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
Hang always heavy in that perfect sky?
Wallace Stevens, 'Sunday Morning'

All writing is by the grace of God. People do not deserve to have good writing, they are so pleased with the bad. In these sentences which you show me I can find no beauty, for I see death in every clause & every word. There is a fossil or a mummy character which pervades this book [...] I like nurseries and gardens. Give me initiative, spermatic, prophesying man-making words. (*JMN* VIII, 148)

The development of Emerson's terminology across his early career suggests that the ascent of the poet constitutes the apotheosis of his conceptual scheme. By the mid-1840s, the poet had fully usurped the scholar to become the icon of the representative man in his thought.¹ Over the same period, the question of how his own verse mirrored this ideal was beginning to be answered as it gradually found publication—first, in 1839, in James Freeman Clarke's *Western Literary Messenger*, and then from 1840 to 1844, under Margaret Fuller's editorship, and later his own, Emerson published a substantial number of verses in *The Dial*. More appeared in gift books edited by William Henry Furness in the winters of 1844, 1845, and 1846. Finally, in late December 1846, Emerson's first collected *Poems* was published in two editions: one in Boston, the other in London.

This simultaneous transatlantic publication demonstrates Emerson's fame in both Britain and the United States; it is the kind of event which signals the apogee of a writer's career. The lack of appreciation accorded this volume, however, begs a number of questions as to what kind of an apotheosis *Poems* might figure. On the one hand, no major American writer has produced two bodies of work which are regarded with such

¹ For an extensive discussion of the background to this shift in terminology, see Leonard Neufeldt, *The House of Emerson* (Lincoln NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), pp. 47-71.

variance in respect as Emerson. While his essays continue to form the spine of American letters in the nineteenth-century, it has always been acceptable to dismiss the poems. As Leslie Fiedler once wrote, acquitting the prejudices of generations of scholars, '[e]asiest of the lines of American verse to forget, or remembering, to despise, is the verse of Ralph Waldo Emerson'.² This curious distinction, which also structures virtually every critical appraisal of Emerson's poetic output, is interrogated at length in this chapter. But more than this, based on the path this thesis has described—in which Emerson has increasingly demonstrated vacillations over his obligations and freedoms in relation to text which show no sign of imminent resolution—we might reasonably ask what kind of apotheosis he could possibly hope to achieve by turning his attention to the most concentrated formal 'shaving' literature has to offer, that of the metrical stricture of the lyric. I argue that Emerson achieves a kind of poetic apotheosis with this volume, but it has little to do with the repute attendant on his transatlantic publication, or his being feted as a representative poet in his time. Rather, it has to do with possibilities which depend on the fact that the verse seems egregious or unsatisfactory, unbecoming of an author of repute and talent; a kind of 'bad writing' which has something to do with Emerson's consideration in the second epigraph above. If, in 'Manners', he had demonstrated how to write while concealing the 'death in every clause and every word' which lay behind that piece, *Poems* picks up similar concerns but finds new ways of turning formal conditions to the effect of acquitting the author of his obligations with respect to the text. Here, as I will demonstrate, the principle of the gift remains pertinent, but Emerson's main concern is how an epistemology of poetic acts and poetic form renders that gift more effective.

In terms of the poetry's value, the normative critical position has changed little since the mid nineteenth-century. A very small number of verses, such as 'Days' and

² Leslie Fiedler, *Waiting for the End* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1964), p. 209.

‘The Snow-Storm’, are consistently anthologised. Perhaps one or two, certainly ‘Concord Hymn’ and, arguably, ‘Days’, are even effectively lodged in America’s collective cultural memory. But the scholarly history of Emerson’s poetic endeavours is miniscule by way of comparison with that treating of his prose writing, with only two scholarly monographs directed predominantly to the poems in the last fifty years, and the consensus on why this is the case is long settled.³ Even in 1845, Frederick Henry Hedge had seen enough to prefigure it when he wrote that although ‘Mr Emerson possesses all the intellectual qualifications of a great poet’, he had ‘not fulfilled the destination implied in these endowments [because of ...] a defect of temperament—an excess of purely intellectual life’.⁴ A ‘little more feeling’ is what is given to be lacking in Emerson’s poetry, and in this criticism lies both of the standard objections of the following one hundred and sixty years. On the one hand, as Matthew Arnold put it, Emerson’s poetry often seemed mechanical, contrived, unnatural: he was ‘not one of the born poets’.⁵ And on the other, the excess of intellectualism is understood to have led Emerson to an impossibly idealistic theorisation of the poet’s capacity, which led to an anxiety that hamstrung all attempts to realise it in his own work.⁶ Indeed, for others who have written more extensively on Emerson’s poetry, this distinction becomes the central thesis. As David Porter writes, ‘[i]n short, the poetry failure and the prose triumph were inseparable’, mainly because Emerson’s verse demonstrated the very limits of the poetic conventionality with which his theoretical prose took issue, and the latter would give impetus to those American poets, such as Whitman and Dickinson, who

³ The two volumes are Hyatt H. Waggoner’s *Emerson as Poet* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), and David Porter, *Emerson and Literary Change* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

⁴ Frederick Henry Hedge, ‘Writings of R. W. Emerson’, *The Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany*, 38 (1845), 87-106 (pp. 100-1).

⁵ Matthew Arnold, ‘Emerson’, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, 50.295 (May 1884), 1-13 (p. 3).

⁶ A conventional example of measured criticism in this line is given by Harold Bloom in *A Map of Misreading*, p. 167.

could take up the newly created theory and put it to practise in a successful rejection of stymied form.⁷

It should not be taken for granted, however, that improprieties in the verse are simply marks of poetic incompetence; that these kinds of lapses are unintentional in the same way that Emerson's bizarre or inappropriate tropes were for a long time considered to be.⁸ One might again consider the example of Melville, who in recent years has been exonerated of presumed literary misdemeanours, his 'bad' writing instead read as attempts at richer performances in text than earlier readers were able to appreciate, as Alex Calder has noted.⁹ This extends to his own under-read poetry, according to Cody Marris, who argues that Melville's poetic output in his later career does not merely signal the solipsistic escape from the vicissitudes of the literary marketplace that critics have traditionally seen it to be, but constitutes the exploration of a wholly new lyric form which figured the representational challenges of the Civil War. As Marris writes, Melville incorporated the war 'by inscribing conflict into the very structure of [his ...] poems', a conflict that emerges in the 'eschew[al of] perfect rhymes and disrupt[ed ...] metric patterns', staging 'on the level of poetic structure a subtle undoing of instrumental rationality'.¹⁰ I do not propose to demonstrate that Emerson seeks to represent anything on such figurative terms: he is, unquestionably, more metaphysical in his aims. But could the range of infelicities critics have identified in *Poems* be reconsidered according to a more coherent poetic ambition, similar to that found by Marris in Melville?

Those infelicities, it should be emphasised, are numerous but connected. His metre and phrasing is often conditioned by logic: line ends match phrase ends, while

⁷ Porter, p. 3. For a more extensive survey of critical opinion from the 1840s up to the 1970s, see Waggoner, pp. 3-52.

⁸ See the discussion of Packer on this point in chapter four above, pp. 171-2.

⁹ Calder, pp. 11-31. See also the discussion on p. 170 above.

¹⁰ Cody Marris, 'A Wayward Art: *Battle-Pieces* and Melville's Poetic Turn', *American Literature*, 82 (2010), 91-119 (p. 109, 110, 112).

negative propositions invariably necessitate positive counterpropositions to give the verses a consistent pattern which tends to lead to readerly ennui. The ‘argument’ of the piece dominates in other ways—Emerson was fond of the use of a synthesising, ‘beamed in’ voice to reconcile poetic dilemma and disparity, and the voice is generally given to a force or figure in the realm of nature: in *Poems*, he voices, among other things, a squirrel, a pine-tree, a mountain, the earth, God, and Allah by this method. Twentieth-century critics have identified this type of impersonal address as a contrivance which seeks to enact the grand resolution of natural processes, language, and the human mind that Emerson so often ascribes to the poetic act, but it is given to be a failure. Instead, the preacherly tone and bloodless abstraction invoked by this mode corroborates the long history of a perceived impersonality and coldness in the poetry.¹¹ Finally, and entirely in keeping with the mechanical character of these predominantly intellectual poems, Emerson’s rhyme schemes and metrical frames can be astonishingly banal. Any reader acquainted with the volume will recognise what Porter labels the ‘familiar thumping cadence’ of metrically identical rhyming couplets or alternate lines: indeed, Thoreau criticised Emerson for precisely this tendency to ‘slope to the rhyme’ too readily, to the extent that it made certain pieces sound ‘like a parody’.¹²

My continued concern with literary form thus needs qualifying in the context of the current discussion—one cannot escape the poems’ fairly indubitable conventionalism and the disappointment this engenders following the experimental approaches advocated in the works of the preceding years. But perhaps those readings which slide into critique when faced with the very obvious incongruities of his verse are missing a crucial point. Arguments that focus on the disparity of Emerson’s poetic

¹¹ For discussions of the dissociated voice, intellectual abstraction, and numerous other shortcomings which ‘dog’ the poetry, see Porter, pp. 8 and *passim*.

¹² The poem that Thoreau had in mind when making these comments was ‘Ode to Beauty’. See *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. by Walter Harding and Carl Bode (New York: New York University Press, 1958) p. 146.

practice and theory are well represented in existing scholarship, and they tend to proceed inevitably to some level of recognition of Emerson's failure and consequent irrelevance as a practitioner of literary form. Indeed, the disjuncture between theory and praxis becomes simply the crucial fact for just about everyone to have written on Emerson's verse. Most, including Porter and Elisa New, two critics who will be central to my concerns here for reasons that will become clearer later in the chapter, hold the aforementioned conviction and hypothesise Emerson's poetic redundancy to varying extents.¹³ For others, it is something that must be acknowledged in order that it might subsequently be overcome or overlooked as the critic proves Emerson's poetic worth in some unorthodox sense. The logic of this is that he wrote with such power and poetic liberty in the essays that the poems surely cannot be just an aberration. This course is advocated by H. Hyatt Waggoner and R. A. Yoder.¹⁴ If the disjuncture cannot but be acknowledged, however, this does not necessarily mean that it should dominate the discussion. As I will demonstrate, conditions which only really find full expression in Emerson's private meditations on his poetry have just as extensive an effect on his poetic practice as any publicly theorised ideal, and these conditions, along with other shifts in his thinking and reading habits in the mid-1840s, have a significant part to play in defining specific formal obligations and strictures that the poet must accept and obey.

The Properties of Poetry

To reset the problems emergent in the theory/praxis dichotomy described above, it is pertinent to think of how Emerson's verse foregrounds, in its egregious flaws, an over-extended intellectual grasp: the 'beamed-in voice', the dominance of logic, a preacherly

¹³ New echoes and endorses Porter's point that Emerson's poetry is a failure except insofar as it permits the extravagance and impossibility of his poetic theory, but she goes further in arguing for Emerson's redundancy in the history of American poetry as a direct consequence of this proto-post-structuralist attempt to create a 'poetics free of the poem'. See Elisa New, *The Regenerate Lyric: Theology and Innovation in American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 41 and 27-55 *passim*.

¹⁴ See Waggoner, pp. 6-7; R. A. Yoder, 'Toward the "Titmouse Dimension": The Development of Emerson's Poetic Style', *PMLA*, 87 (1972), 255-270.

sententiousness—all echo the grandiose pomposity of the sphinx in the volume's first piece, who questions across the first and second stanzas:

'Who'll tell me my secret,
The ages have kept?—
I awaited the seer,
While they slumbered and slept:—

'The fate of the man-child;
The meaning of man;
Known fruit of the unknown;
Daedalian plan'. (*CW IX*, 5)

The point here is that, from the first lines of the volume, the principle of some esoteric poetic knowledge—the prerogative of the 'seer'—is paramount. As such, we might ask how Emerson's verse goes on to function as a statement on, or an act within, the parameters of this principle? The epistemic remit of poetry is given in these lines to constitute profound insight into the structures of mind and world, but we can also consider that some less nebulous aspects belong under the same designation. This does not only mean the role of the poet with respect to his audience, but also the poet's epistemic relation to that which his text contains. This is an extension of those questions of investment in text as an ethical issue already considered, but brought now into more categorical terms by conceiving of its epistemological boundaries, the poet's possession or property rights with respect to the text, its themes and elements.

Although Emerson found publication as a poet only once he had established an authorial career, he had been writing verse which would eventually appear in print since

the 1820s. Many verses were circulated amongst friends, but otherwise most of these early pieces were written privately and for personal reading, much as his journals and notebooks were composed. Such verse was, as Yoder notes, ‘not consciously prepar[ed ...] for a poetic career. The role of his journal poetry is unquestionably self-expression, dialogue with oneself [...] a means of formulating one’s private convictions’.¹⁵ In this earlier period, therefore, they constitute a private concern, something palpably restricted to Emerson’s possession. Only in 1845-6, the period immediately preceding the publication of *Poems*, does Emerson become anything like a public poet, and this period was, of course, as much about compositing as it was about writing the final verses to flesh out the volume. This period therefore constitutes another spell of double writing, of preparing private and personal texts for public consumption, but there are points of interest here that make *Poems* unique, and its engagement with the finer points of textual property more pronounced.

Of course, the notion of the property of one’s text extended far beyond the concerns of this volume. Emerson had always published by way of an arrangement in which he retained ownership of the printer’s plates, and with it complete editorial authority. In return his publisher, James Munroe for all volumes up to and including *Poems*, and Phillips, Sampson, and Company, followed by Ticknor and Fields, thereafter, took on less monetary responsibility and hence less risk in the venture. *Poems* was therefore simply a continuation of existing habits, except that in the run-up to publication Emerson explored numerous options with other publishers before deciding, for reasons that I consider to be more than merely remunerative, to stick with tradition and ‘the property of my own book’, as he described it to his brother William (*L III*, 350).¹⁶ The editorial control in perpetuity this model facilitated was, however, used more

¹⁵ Yoder, p. 256.

¹⁶ For an extensive discussion of these explorations and the publication history of *Poems* which does emphasise the remunerative restitution this might ensure, see Joseph. P Thomas, “The Property of My

extensively with *Poems* than with any other volume. Emerson significantly altered pieces long after publication, as his heavily marked personal correction copy of this first edition, now in the Houghton library, testifies.¹⁷

On the other hand, this retention of ownership is problematised as Emerson's habits in *Poems* do not correlate with his attitude to what might be deemed personal property or private knowledge in his prose works, and the indicators of possession usually altered in journal passages which found their way into printed prose are consistently dealt with in the opposite way here. As Glen M. Johnson has noted, Emerson habitually depersonalised excerpts from his journals and generalised personal pronouns when preparing prose works for publication.¹⁸ In *Poems*, however, pieces are conspicuous precisely because of their personal address. This characterises 'Ode, Inscribed to W. H. Channing', and 'To J. W'. in particular, and, while both poems caused controversy in New England circles, the latter, inscribed to a young divinity student, John Weiss, who was a minor voice amongst critics of Goethe in the mid-1840s and whom Emerson apparently barely knew until late 1846 at least, seems oddly and unnecessarily personalised.¹⁹ In addition to this, as well as the evidently personal nature of poems such as 'To Ellen, at the South', 'To Eva', and 'Threnody', Emerson wrote of 'Dirge' that its subject was the deaths of his brothers Edward and Charles, and that he might have printed the lines 'in the Dial but for their personality', a fact which did not stop him submitting them first to *The Gift*, and later reproducing them in *Poems* (L VII,

Own Book": Emerson's *Poems* (1847) and the Literary Marketplace', *The New England Quarterly*, 69 (1996), 406-25. It should not be considered implausible that Emerson might hold strongly contradictory views with respect to monetary and literary economies; indeed, the paradox of simultaneously exercising and forfeiting property rights figures his whole poetic endeavour, as I will argue here.

¹⁷ As well as heavy marking in both pencil and pen, many poems are marked for deletion in this volume by having their pages torn away completely. The changes are, however, impossible to date, since they appeared and/or disappeared variously in further editions of *Poems* published over the following twenty-five years. Emerson, *Poems* (Boston, James Munroe: 1847),*AC85.Em345.846pba(D), Houghton Library, Harvard University. The changes in this copy are also discussed in Albert von Frank's 'Textual Introduction', in the recently published Harvard Belknap *Collected Works* edition. See *CW* IX, pp. cviii-cxlvii (p. cxiv).

¹⁸ Johnson, p. 52.

¹⁹ See von Frank's comments on this episode in *CW* IX, 52-3.

592). Most significant of all, Emerson was directly challenged on this issue in the weeks after *Poems* was published when his close friend Caroline Sturgis complained of being able to recognise herself, and others, as poetic subjects. Emerson's response, which has gained a moderate level of notoriety, is suggestive but oblique, and utterly unapologetic. His poems, he states, are

consciously fabulous to any actual life & purposes of mine, when I write them, & so manifestly, that, after a short time, they take rank in my memory with other people's poetry, as intellectual exercises, &, after a little while, are as readily exposed to other eyes as odes on Napoleon or Apollo. But the seeing you [sic]—suggested that these poems which the day before were poems,—were personalities, & they instantly became unspeakably odious to me. (*L VIII*, 106-7)

His advice, therefore, comes in the imperative—'To you the verses are & will be nothing'. And as a consequence, articulating clear positions on poetic property or knowledge becomes difficult. They may be plucked from life, and they may be returned to and dealt with at leisure. Yet they are, at once, akin to 'other people's poetry', detached, expelled, and radically impersonal to *all* parties—Emerson, to whom their familiarity would be 'odious', and his reader, to whom they 'will be nothing'.

Since the status and conditions of personality in the works of the early-1840s had been repeatedly questioned and refigured, what to make of this further turn, in which writing personally effectively depersonalises, becoming instead a mode which Emerson comfortably declares archly dispossessive, deadening, and prone to 'warp away' from life as does any verse which fails to live up to the expectation of 'Bardic sentences' (*JMN IX*, 367)? Critically, we can assert that he differs enormously in both principle and practice from many poets who wrote in his wake, and the disinclination to

accept this leads to comparisons which tell us plainly what these verses are not, but perhaps not so much about what is original in the Emersonian approach. The examples of Porter and New are instructive in this respect, each treating their subject by way of substantial comparisons with another American poet—Porter uses Whitman, New opts for Frost. In each case, the problem revealed by the comparative approach is the extent of Emerson's chilly intellectualism. So, whereas Whitman celebrated the 'concrete', the individual, and the particular in poems which give an image of vitality and disparity, Porter levels at Emerson the charge that in his poems, 'meaning displaced particularity, morality displaced reality, and clarity displaced body. The world was glass'.²⁰ In much the same way, New approaches Emerson's work with the conviction that its intellectualism prevents it from being part of the key American mode—that of the lyric—because the lyric 'is precisely a genre of determination', a poem borne out of 'dire necessity [...] the rock pile of singularity [...] a limit where the determinations of the poem and the undeterminable square off'.²¹ The fact that both Porter and New concentrate on the pleasure of the 'concrete' in the poetic utterance would have pleased Matthew Arnold, who criticised Emerson for lacking precisely this quality.²² Furthermore, this discloses both Porter's and New's preconception of the terms by which poetry is to be enjoyed, a notion of poetic knowledge—of our already 'knowing' what we expect a poem to be, and the standard against which we judge it—which is of questionable provenance and to which I will return later. More pressingly, both Porter

²⁰ Porter, p. 17, 19, 15.

²¹ New, pp. 41-2.

²² Arnold writes that he sought to attain a 'real estimate' of Emerson's poetic ability, that he might determine his 'legitimacy'. He very quickly finds against Emerson, since by not meeting his expectation of being 'plain and concrete enough', he is 'in other words, not poet enough'. Arnold, pp. 3-4. Waggoner discusses Emerson's perpetual exceptionality in the American tradition, and how this has always been conceived in negative terms, from Arnold, to Eliot, to the New Critics, and beyond. See Waggoner, pp. 6-7. Since 1974, little has been written that challenges or modifies these critical orthodoxies.

and New are addressing aspects of the commitment to form.²³ And the very fact that both use these grounds to critique Emerson evidences the fact that in his poetry, the questions I have been putting to his work earlier in the thesis do not apply in quite the same way. The suggestion made by both of these critics is that the Emersonian poem seeks synthesis, a completed knowingness declared by the poet, *for* the poet, rather than the lyrical possibility of disparity and multiplicity. Hence it is implied not only that the poet has the last word, but that there is a wilfulness evident in this finalising act and its fatalistic form that disempowers anyone who might have a future encounter with this text. In the first instance, therefore, this is the mode of ‘possessiveness’ I intend to interrogate.

Aggrandising Poetic Knowledge

A fatal and final form is, of course, implied in the lines already cited from ‘The Sphinx’, that “‘Known fruit of the unknown; | Daedalian plan’”. Secular formation suggests the consummation of knowledge, a realisation which retains elements of Emerson’s early theses of the manifestation of mind in an inevitable style, a point to which he was still directing occasional attention in the mid-1840s: ‘Form’, he writes in an entry of 1844, ‘is the mixture of matter & spirit; it is the visibility of spirit’, a definition derived from a maxim attributed to Zoroaster repeated three further times in various journal entries between 1844 and 1847 (*JMN IX*, 117).²⁴ Yet the benefit and, indeed, the nature of the knowledge derived from this act hangs in the balance, as it had done since the shift in Emerson’s thought attending Waldo’s death in 1842. According to the theorisation developed around that time, and postulated in *Essays: Second Series*, literature entails

²³ Indeed, one of New’s remarks encapsulates the condition of form as choice which structures this thesis: ‘Only by the exquisite, honing movement of verbal choice does the lyric poem emerge, made of these words and not others’. New, p. 42.

²⁴ For the other three examples, including the original copied from Thomas Taylor’s translation of the Chaldean Oracles, see *JMN IX*, 81, 352, 356.

giving away, granting not the reflexive acquisition of self-knowledge and literary empowerment but instead entering its author into a movement of infinite regress and investment without restitution. In *Second Series*, this led to confessions of doubt and the consequent adoption of a mannered and masked voice, and in *Poems*, similar tendencies are evident.

In a primary and fundamental sense, one might consider the extraordinary extent to which Emerson belittles or disputes the value of his poems, such that it is as if he seeks to *disown* them. In the years leading up to 1847, his letters constantly reiterate his dissatisfaction with and lack of interest in his poetic endeavours. The volume was solicited, Emerson repeatedly states, by friends and later by publishers. Reflecting on these requests in a letter to his brother William, he confesses doubt in his ability to fulfil them, ‘uncertain always whether I have one true spark of that fire which burns in verse’.²⁵ We may be tempted to credit such comments to a veneer of assumed modesty, but Emerson goes so far against his stated ideal of the poet’s ‘calm affirmation’ at times that our doubts should not simply be dismissed. Consider a letter sent to William Henry Furness, editor of *The Gift* and Emerson’s lifelong friend, treating of his submissions for that volume with maudlin apologies; Emerson describing his submissions as ‘rude dirges’, drawn ‘out of their sad recesses for you’; as ‘sombre’ and ‘little’ (*L VII*, 591-2). Paradoxically, one of those submissions was the already discussed ‘The Poet’s Apology’, later reprinted as ‘The Apology’ in *Poems*, in which the poet’s exemption from apologia and liberty from the secular works of man constitute the central points.²⁶ In the journals, meanwhile, the reflections are much the same. In 1840, he may have been content to write that ‘a poem, another’s or my own, I read with joy’, but later in the decade, perhaps with a promise already made to set his verses into the finality of print, Emerson

²⁵ *L III*. 227. See also *L III*, 234, 288, as well as *L VII*, 591-2. The last of these letters mentions Elizabeth Hoar as the friend who first prompted Emerson to publish his poems.

²⁶ See the discussion of this poem on pp. 183-4.

writes: 'I hope every man is not to be confined to his own poetry. For tho' I like to make mine well enough, I know few unhappier employments than to read it & I wish to read Mr Tennyson's' (*JMN* VII, 68; VIII, 471).

At times, meanwhile, the poems themselves advance and develop the same notion. The fatal singularity of form was the primary concern of the years surrounding *Essays: Second Series*, and the poetic necessity of such a grand and austere conception is perpetuated into *Poems*. In 'Monadnoc', the mountain of that name is elevated to an exemplar of singularity and permanence, the opposite of our 'insect miseries', and the ideal which poetic form is imagined to resemble:

O barren mound, thy plenties fill!
We fool and prate;
Thou art silent and sedate.
To myriad kinds and times one sense
The constant mountain doth dispense. (*CW* IX, 131-2)

But the fact that 'Monadnoc' and its apostrophised 'Mute orator!' is immediately followed by the popular children's verse 'Fable', in which a squirrel chastises a now rather less eloquent mountain for an insult ('little prig') with the rejoinder "If I cannot carry forests on my back, | Neither can you crack a nut", is very obviously bathetic (*CW* IX, 115-6). Indeed, *Poems* is composited in such a way that similar pairings and sequences emerge which go to great lengths to undermine the high seriousness of the poetic theses occasionally advanced, and I'll have cause to look at other instances of this in time. In yet more concentrated ways, individual poems do this as well, as ostensible attempts to manifest poetic ideals in practice deconstruct themselves of necessity.

Among such pieces, ‘Woodnotes II’ carries special significance. It was originally published in *The Dial* in 1841, written that year and evidently the product of the hypotheses of rhyme, repetition, and poetic metre which characterised the journals in the period surrounding *Essays: First Series*. Its opening lines, however, have a new pertinence in the context of concerns only raised fully in 1844’s *Second Series*:

‘Whether is better the gift or the donor?

Come to me,’

Quoth the pine-tree,

‘I am the giver of honour’. (*CW* IX, 103)

The pine-tree’s opinion here is at odds with the theory of the gift developed over the following years, the effect being that the tree, by 1846-7, seems hubristic in implying the superiority of the alms-giver in the proposed distinction. And this indication of hubris, once noted, consumes the rest of the piece as it progresses. Thematically, the poem belongs amongst a cluster of pieces at the heart of *Poems* for its content—the organic transformative power of nature, and the appositeness of this to writing, which, Emerson says in the journals, ‘should be the settlement of dew on the leaf, of stalactites on the wall of the grotto, the deposit of flesh from the blood, of woody fibre in the tree from the sap’; in other words, writing ought to proceed inevitably from thought: we should ‘ask the fact for the form’ (*JMN* IX, 207; VIII, 101).²⁷ But in ‘Woodnotes II’, the sententious tree undermines the theoretic dream and figures an increasingly conspicuous acceptance of failure. Once again, its placement in the volume is significant. It precedes

²⁷ Yoder notes that this organic transformation, which has been taken by many to be Emerson’s *modus operandi*, was actually valid only for a short period around 1840-1, and that ‘doubt and detachment’ better characterise his long term programme. See Yoder, pp. 259, 264-6. Neufeldt offers a reading which, in seeking to validate the notion of organic transformation, instead imposes it on Emerson’s poems, and claims that such a process is enacted through a naturalistic use of punctuation, a proposal which seems to me to be a contradiction in terms. See Neufeldt, pp. 143-68.

the 1846 composition 'Monadnoc', and prefigures the ventriloquism found there. But whereas the mountain voiced in 'Monadnoc' is described in a paradox which nods to the contrivance by which this inanimate form speaks as 'Mute orator', granting itself as 'pure use' or commodity to man who, as Emerson put it in 1841, might 'reduce it under dominion' to the end of self-assertion, the pine-tree is positively boastful:

'What prizes the town and the tower?
Only what the pine-tree yields;
[...]
I give my rafters to his boat,
My billets to his boiler's throat;
And I will swim the ancient sea,
To float my child to victory'. (*CW* IX, 105)

Indeed, the poem as a whole constitutes three hundred and eighty lines of euphuism on nature voiced by the increasingly boorish tree, perhaps accepting an inevitable readerly lethargy (without making any concession to it) in its repetition of imperatives to "Hearken! Hearken!" in lines 152, 249, and 313. Theodore Parker might be forgiven for remarking that 'a pine-tree which should talk as Mr Emerson's tree talks would deserve to be plucked up and cast into the sea'.²⁸

If this prolixity is intended to represent an organic and necessary form, filled as it is with examples of what Lawrence Buell called 'catalogue rhetoric'—the fulsomeness of nature and its identity in difference given in descriptive lists of natural phenomena, or lists of analogous characteristics in a sequence of lines beginning with an identical preposition—then our interest is piqued when around the midpoint its effect seems to

²⁸ The possibly apocryphal remark is recorded in Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Contemporaries* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1899), p. 19.

go awry.²⁹ Initially, the ventriloquism of the tree becomes self-conscious, although still in the mode of a divine and non-human origin:

‘And, far within those cadent pauses,
The chorus of the ancient Causes!
Delights the dreadful Destiny
To fling his voice into the tree’. (*CW IX*, 107-8)

Taking up the subject of this ideal poetic voicing, the pine-tree’s narration turns at once to the divinity of poetic rhyme and metre as a means of invoking unity in disparate particulars. Yet there are suggestions around this point that this project is destined to be ineffective. First, the tree’s expostulation of the theme is typically pompous and exclusive:

‘In music he repeats the pang
Whence the fair flock of Nature sprang.
O mortal! Thy ears are stones;
These echoes are laden with tones
Which only the pure can hear’. (*CW IX*, 108)

If our ‘ears are stones’, then we are perhaps exonerated from blame for hearing ‘laden’ slip toward ‘leaden’ in the monotonous rhythm of the poem’s tetrameter. But there are other indications around the same point that the tree is not so compelling a poetic persona as it seems to believe. Just after the above, the tree extends an invitation to the human poet:

²⁹ Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism*, pp. 166-87.

‘Talk no more with feeble tongue;
No more the fool of space and time,
Come weave with mine a nobler rhyme’. (*CW IX*, 108)

Which, in the context of ‘Woodnotes II’, is an entirely empty offer. This verse is in no way dialogic, the poet being permitted only to voice occasional lines (‘Quoth the pine-tree’) in cuing up another oratorical deluge from the ventriloquised tree. What’s more, nor is the promise of ‘nobler rhyme’ convincing. Over the following thirty lines, the tree extols its musical nature a further four times on the same tack. First: “‘Come learn with me the fatal song | Which knits the world in music strong’”; then, in the elemental poetic rhythms of nature:

‘Come lift thine eyes to lofty rhymes,
Of things with things, and times with times,
[...]
For Nature beats in perfect tune,
And rounds with rhyme her every rune’

From here, the tree continues in familiar manner, extolling its own poetic wisdom:

‘And the ripples in rhymes the oar forsake.
The wood is wiser far than thou;
The wood and wave each other know’.

After which, it is left only to lament, once again, the poet's exclusion: "But thou, poor child! unbound, unrhymed, | Whence camest thou, misplaced, mistimed?" (*CW IX*, 109). Yet the tree is hardly as poetically profound as it makes out. The poem, which, for the most part, consists of rhyming couplets of iambic tetrameter, is neither rhythmically nor phonically pure. There are printers' rhymes everywhere, despite the fact that the tree presumably does not need the mediacy of writing to make its rhyme stick. Likewise, the moulding of lines to scansion or rhyming necessity leads to syntactical chaos on a number of occasions (for instance, "Speak not thy speech my boughs among" and "The least breath my boughs which tossed"), while a suggestion is made of the inappropriateness of linguistic legality to the ideals the tree espouses in the halting and overlong second line of the couplet "My branches speak Italian, | English, German, Basque, Castilian" (*CW IX*, 108). Eventually, the 'grand-strokes' of rhyme so emphatically advocated in this and other works of the period are subtly brought under inquiry as the poetic figure of repetition, that which is hoped will manifest recognition of the fulsome richness of nature for man's ends, is instead brought to bear in lines disclosing this notion's antithesis: "To thee the horizon shall express | Only emptiness and emptiness" (*CW IX*, 110). In other words, the 'voice-flinging' engaged in by Emerson here is nothing like as natural as the tree would have its listener believe, and, by way of this increasingly reflexive undermining of his own poetic edifice, the poet hints to the reader his own loosening grip and ineffective will, veering away from intellectual settlement and synthesis rather than supplementing it.³⁰ When the tree instructs in parentheses "And thou,—go burn thy wormy pages", before ending the

³⁰ On this point, the essay by Mutlu Konuk Blasing discussed briefly in my introduction supplements my thesis by proposing that 'poet's "mean" by becoming instruments of fate'—that is, by allowing language's own necessity to condition, inflect, and develop their argument rather than simply emphasising and framing it. Emerson's poems have a highly idiosyncratic way of figuring this, and its full process will be elaborated throughout this chapter. Suffice it to say, however, that I am in full agreement with Blasing on the point that Emerson's concern with poetic form did not entail the development of a new poetry, least of all an 'American' poetic tradition. Rather, his interest is more elemental: 'He only discovers, to his surprise, that his form is Form and his fate, Fate'. Blasing, pp. 9-23.

piece in extolling the fluidity and impermanence of thought through all substances and forms, the imperative seems to apply to this poet as much as any other, since all fail to effectively voice and place formal bounds on mute nature as broadly as the tree's verbosity might imply (*CW IX*, 111).

Alternative Poetic Epistemologies

Although 'Woodnotes II' properly belongs to the period after the publication of 1841's *Essays* and the emergence of doubt in the efficacy of metrical language at that time, the final statements of the pine-tree remain important because they preface a turn (or, more properly, a return) in Emerson's ideas evident in the journals of the mid-decade. For the fugacity of thought and transience of forms, which had always been a factor in his thinking, received new impetus in these years from his intense and original interest in a pantheon of Eastern texts, from the Persian poetry of Hafiz, to Buddhist and Hindu mysticism, to Chinese philosophy. In the main, the effect of this reading on Emerson was not revelatory, but rather evoked, and then complemented and confirmed, convictions he had earlier held. Be this as it may, the consequences nevertheless had an important part to play in conditioning the epistemic principles of poetic acts in the lead-up to the publication of *Poems*.³¹

The effect of this reading returns ideas which had subsided since 1841-2 to the centre of Emerson's thinking. In perhaps the most significant instance of this, Coleridgean 'Reason' suddenly reenters Emerson's lexicon after he had maligned the term for a number of years, and its manifestation comes in direct opposition to the condition of form as finality, fatalism, and *Logos* that equally characterised other work of

³¹ A substantial body of work exists on the proposed influence of Oriental thought on the Transcendentalists. To my mind, however, any assertion of direct influence on Emerson is overstated—it seems more likely to be the case, as Sarina Isenberg has recently written, that Emerson read Eastern texts for confirmation in analogues of ideas he had long held to be true, which came from Coleridge, German Idealism, and liberal Unitarianism rather than intact from Buddhism or Sufism. See Isenberg, 'Translating World Religions: Ralph Waldo Emerson's and Henry David Thoreau's 'Ethical Scriptures' Column in *The Dial*, *Comparative American Studies*, 11 (2013), 18-36.

the period. Here Swedenborg, who by now is receiving not unmeasured praise but the critique we find in *Representative Men*, comes under attack for his prolixity and excess of system:

The intricacy & ingenuity of your insanity makes you only the harder to be undeceived. This is the excess of form. The fallacy seems to be in the equivocal use of the term *The Word*. In the high & sacred sense of that term used by a strong Oriental rhetoric for the energy of the Supreme Cause [in act,] all that is predicated of it, is true: it is equivalent to Reason. (*JMN IX*, 302. Emphasis and square brackets in original)

Although the passage is nominally addressed to Swedenborg, the second-person pronoun implies self-address and critique too, since Emerson had been subjecting himself to a kind of formal askesis since 1842. As ever, therefore, the mutually exclusive concepts of formal singularity and the formless infinity of spirit constitute the polarities on which Emerson's ideas are built, but, at this point in time, the dichotomy is expressed in a particularly schizophrenic manner, flitting between valorisation and damnation of the formal endeavour from one page to the next. Throughout, Emerson's interest slides, as was his tendency, toward absolutes. In this context, his Oriental reading offers notions of infinite flux, endless metamorphosis, and, emphatically, a trajectory which warps away from every exigency of form otherwise at the heart of his contemporaneous work. And this relates directly to questions of poetic possession, property, and will. In passages copied out of H. H. Wilson's 1840 translation of the *Vishnú Purána*, Emerson's interests are clear:

The notions that 'I am,—this is mine,' which influence mankind, are but delusions of the mother of the world, originating in thy active agency [...] The words 'I' & 'mine' constitute ignorance [...] Dispel, o lord of all creatures, the conceit, of knowledge which proceeds from ignorance. (*JMN IX*, 320-1)³²

If Reason is permitted back into consideration, therefore, it should be clear that the attendant attempt to deductively recover a prereflective ME and the scope of what is 'mine' does not come with it.

In fact, in both poems written in 1845-6 and the journals of the time, the poetic act always entails a renunciation of knowledge as possession or personal property. As such, in a move which anticipates and explains the ventriloquistic tendency of *Poems*, Emerson writes in a journal entry of June 1846: 'If the poet *could only* forget himself in his theme, be the tongue of the mountain, his egotism would subside and that firm line which he had drawn would remain like the names of discoverers of planets, written in the sky, in letters which could never be obliterated' (*JMN IX*, 433. Emphasis added). Besides the repeated expression of doubt in the possibility of effective poetic ventriloquism, Emerson emphasises the fact that the namer of a planet takes no ownership of it, *per se*, but bequeaths it to the future. He grants it linguistic and intellectual currency by giving name, just as the poet seeks to bequeath by giving voice to the mountain or tree. So, ideally, it is the 'poetic gift we want, but not the poetic profession [...] not bookmaking and bookselling, not cold spying & authorship' (*JMN IX*, 268-9). In the poems themselves, therefore, we find once again notions of a poetics of gift giving, a poetic act which is built around the poet's self-renunciation, but a renunciation that cannot become overtly conspicuous lest some expectation of

³² For the source of these quotations in the original text, see *The Vishnú Purána: A System of Hindu Mythology and Tradition*, trans. by H. H. Wilson (London: The Oriental Translation Fund, 1840), pp. 584-5, 659, 585.

restitution be mistakenly invoked. In *Poems*, the term that comes to be used to conceptualise and develop this principle is the ‘amulet’.

In ‘Guy’, a poem composed in the productive period of 1845-6, the amulet finds its first expression in the volume amongst meditations on the poetic ideal. Guy, whom Emerson sometimes used in the journals as an alter-ego fully given over to the demands of Idealism and his poetic hypotheses, is fated to whatever consequences are implicit in such demands. So, in a generally positive sense, he is ‘Attempered to the night and day, | Interchangeable with things’, and, as such, ‘Needs no amulets nor rings’ to reflectively assure himself of the security of being (*CW* IX, 61).³³ The poem itself is not explicit on what is meant by these items, but the following lines offer a clue: ‘Guy possessed the talisman | That all things from him began’. A superior mode of self-possession is thus granted, but the word ‘talisman’ is significant. As Albert von Frank notes in his introductory remarks to the piece in the recent Harvard Belknap *Poems*, talisman derives from the Greek *telos*, and hence the term implies definite fulfilment. Guy is thus possessed only of a certain fate, a notion which gains additional credence when, in the next line, he is compared to Polycrates, whose immense good fortune prefigured his inevitable destiny of loss and tragedy, something implied to be native to the productions of the genuine, giving poet.³⁴

The significance of this only becomes apparent later in the volume, where, apparently contrary to Guy’s condition, the author produces his own ‘Amulet’ in a short poem of that title. It sits amongst some of the most personally significant pieces in the collection, preceded by ‘To Ellen, at the South’ and ‘To Eva’, both poems written for and about his first wife before she died in 1831. Such poems ought, we would suppose, to have been of great significance to Emerson as mementoes of their short marriage and

³³ See *JMN* VII, 99 and 333 for the use of the character of Guy as an alter-ego.

³⁴ For background to Emerson’s inclusion of this figure, see *JMN* V, 93-4. See also Edward Emerson’s notes to the poem in *Centenary Edition. The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1903-4), IX, p. 416 n.1.

his lost love. So it is curious that ‘The Amulet’, written in the early-1840s, should clearly reject this principle. The piece begins in a brief rumination on the unchanging nature of a portrait which ‘smiles as first it smiled’, likewise, ‘The ring you gave is still the same’, but despite the poet’s desires otherwise, neither ‘amulets nor rings’ nor any other formed production, however singular it is, can absolutely represent the absent referent so far as the poet himself is concerned:

Alas! That neither bonds nor vows
Can certify possession;
Torments me still the fear that love
Died in its last expression. (*CW* IX, 187-8)

In the verse that follows, ‘Thine Eyes Still Shined’—another early piece for Ellen—the doubts of ‘The Amulet’ seem to have been suddenly and inexplicably overcome: it is, on the surface, an amulet-poem of memorial and recollection. Yet the surviving draft of the piece tells a different story. There, an extra stanza makes explicit reference to a miniature Emerson owned of Ellen:

I need not hide beneath my vest
Thy picture, the pride of art,
Thy picture burns within my breast,
And the chain is round my heart.³⁵

³⁵ Also excluded are a number of lines of direct address which candidly express Emerson’s love in the first-person, an elision which adds further credence to this reading. See *The Poetry Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. by Ralph F. Orth and others (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), p. 27. See too *L*, 269 for an early reference to this miniature.

In other words, by excluding the stanza this short poem renders its representation of memory impersonal and non-specific—the poet now *only* finds his amulets in nature—and by doing so he more emphatically (and in fact) enacts the sentiment otherwise described in the elided stanza and more readily accepts the conditions given in ‘The Amulet’. That he does not explicitly tell us so is to be expected, for his poetic obligation is to give up the kinds of possession implied in these verses, but to do so without announcing the giving up.

The amulet, both in the poem by that title and across the volume, thus stands at once for the necessity of poetic production and the inevitability of poetic failure, at least so far as that production is intended to constitute an icon or avatar of the poet’s experience and knowledge.³⁶ The consequence is that Emerson, by the mid-1840s, is exploring alternative systems of poetic epistemology, and within these explorations an assortment of influences conspires to drive his thought toward some subtle refigurations of the poetic enterprise. In ‘The Sphinx’, Emerson had described form as the ‘known fruit of the unknown’, a phrasing which rather obviously nods to the Tree of Knowledge and the kind of knowingness implied in the expulsion from Eden. Indeed, the knowledge which constitutes Original Sin, the knowledge we inherit both within Christian theology and as the Cartesian philosophical and cultural tradition of the West, is our impression of self-awareness and self-possession, as Emerson plainly put it in ‘Experience’: ‘It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have

³⁶ A curious letter, sent to Daniel Jefferson—an English admirer of Emerson’s work—in June 1846, is worthy of remark in this context. Jefferson had written requesting a calotype—essentially, an amulet in photographic form—of Emerson. He responded in the negative, explaining that ‘my friends declared that I was a very bad subject for that style, and that every impression was a painful misrepresentation, which they could not consent to go abroad’. Considered in isolation, this anecdote simply suggests Emerson’s dissatisfaction with poetic iconography, but its significance is amplified by the other major subject of the letter—immortality, and particularly poetic immortality—in which he discusses how lives and acts are a sequence of perpetual dying: ‘we are continually casting off shreds of personality’ which are irrecoverable, and hence ‘one who has the habit of requiring self-evidence in every article of his creed will, I apprehend, be sensible of a slight coldness or deadness in almost every remark that is made in houses concerning future life’. Instead of attempts toward self-gratifying ‘knowledge’ of the world to come beyond death, Emerson valorises ‘a direct poetic emancipating emanation of the thing spoken of, which point corroborates his poetic thinking entirely, as I will argue below (*L. VIII*, 82-3).

made that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man' (*CW* III, 43).³⁷ Too late it may be, but Emerson laments nonetheless that he 'would give all for a new knowledge', and so he seeks alternative paradigms for different epistemic possibilities (*JMN* IX, 436). Initially, this comes in his Oriental reading. From the *Vishnú Purána*, Emerson copies out details of the 'Story of the Párijáta tree', a tree of knowledge in a distinctly different tradition, which 'enabled everyone to recollect the events of a prior existence; so that, on beholding their faces in that tree, all the Yádavas contemplated themselves in their (original) celestial forms' (*JMN* IX, 320).³⁸ The Párijáta tree, which is further described as 'the common property of all worlds', thus stands for a restitution of the worldly and divine quite opposed to the strictures imposed by Eden's forbidden Tree of Knowledge, and this example inflects Emerson's frequent allusions to the latter throughout his writing of the mid-to-late-1840s.

We can observe the meeting of these two models in further examples of the text he copies into his journal from the *Vishnú Purána*. In one, he records that '[e]mancipation from existence is the fruit of self-control [...] Foolishness has been the character of every king who has boasted, "All this earth is mine—every thing is mine—it will be in my house forever;"—for he is dead' (*JMN* IX, 321).³⁹ And, in another transcription, the declaration of emancipation is equated with wisdom and, once again, the fruiting body: 'Emancipation, is that which the sage seeks. He looks upon heavenly fruition as an impediment to felicity. He seeks final emancipation [...] "Of what avail is ascent to the summit of heaven, if it is necessary to return from thence to earth"' (*JMN* IX, 308).⁴⁰ In all of these quotations, the source of interest is the structure of a knowledge averse to possession, acquisition, or empowerment. When Emerson reflects,

³⁷ See also 'Uriel' in *Poems*, where this connection is reiterated in the lines 'A sad self-knowledge; withering, fell | On the beauty of Uriel' (*CW* IX, 34).

³⁸ See *The Vishnú Purána*, p. 589.

³⁹ This passage is the source of Emerson's poem 'Hamatreya', and I will have cause to return to it, and to the poet's 'taking possession' of it as a frame for his verse, shortly. See *The Vishnú Purána*, p. 488.

⁴⁰ See *The Vishnú Purána*, pp. 210-11.

a few pages later, that ‘form is imprisonment and heaven itself a decoy’, the reason is that both are equally false promises rooted in the aspiration of perpetual self-possession and a self-consciousness that has a determinable secular origin. One’s own formations do not lead to liberation via expression or the guarantee of self-knowledge, while heaven cannot be emancipating if its promise depends on committed and binding assurances of redemption issued while still alive in the world. Instead, the fruition of being is in an emancipation that is complete, without a restorative mode: ‘That which the soul seeks is resolution into Being above form, out of Tartarus & out of Heaven; liberation from existence is its name’ (*JMN IX*, 322).

Yet all of this does not equate to a swing so radical that the obligation to form is thereby negated. The schizophrenic flitting between polarities leads to the confession of realisations that ‘[w]e are made of contradictions,—our *freedom is necessary*’ (*JMN IX*, 335. Emphasis in original).⁴¹ If the inheritance of sin determines the possibility of our freedom, then the inheritance of form ought to function in the same way. Indeed, much as a readiness to accept formal obligation was seen as a simple fact of maturity in the opening pages of ‘Experience’, so in 1846 Emerson would write ‘I grow old, I accept conditions; [...] that the sins of our predecessors are on us like a mountain of obstruction’ (*JMN IX*, 363). The question we have before us is thus how the visible fruit of Emerson’s mind, the poems themselves, negotiate between two sets of influence: on the one hand, the ‘fruition’ which signifies emancipation in his Eastern reading, and on the other, the trope of the Forbidden Fruit in the Judaeo-Christian tradition—the fruit of self-awareness, of personal expression, and the self-recognition that, in the Fallen world, is the knowledge of limit and of death.

Emerson had, in fact, been conceptualising poetry in these kinds of terms for several years. He had written in 1843 that ‘a poem should not need its relation to life to

⁴¹ A line which, of course, later constitutes the essence of the essay ‘Fate’ (*CW VI*, 12). Indeed, the substance of that essay is formed of journal entries made in the later years of the 1840s.

explain it; it should be a new life, not still half engaged in the soil like the new created lions in Eden' (*JMN* VIII, 372).⁴² If the poem is not native with the lions of Genesis 1: 29-30, immanent with the earth from which they were formed, still herbivorous and deathless, then they are characterised by a freedom conditioned by the Fall, carnivorous, both symbol and cause of death. Indeed, the point is made yet more explicit in two journal passages of the following years: the poet's history is 'testified by the mystic and devout, the history of the Fall, of a descent from a superior & pure race'; in fact, Emerson 'supposes' that the 'office of poetry' was 'imparadising' (*JMN* IX, 241-2, 376).

To better understand what this means in context, and what relation it has to the epistemic dimension of poetry, we should look to 'Threnody', the penultimate piece in the volume. This elegy on Emerson's dead son, Waldo, concludes a sequence of pieces concerned in various ways with limits. From the poet's 'death of inanition' amongst worldly surfaces in 'Blight', to the bound 'acre' of Concord Emerson eulogises in 'Musketaquid', to the memorialisation of his brothers Charles and Edward in 'Dirge', the closing poems bring the reader's attention to a tight focus on the function of death in 'Threnody'. And, indeed, this poem is worthy of closer attention, for it is representative of every aspect of Emerson's verse, both in aspiration and actuality. Like so much of his poetic project, the piece is distinctly double-voiced, being clearly bisected by a double line break after line 175. In its first section, which seems to have been written soon after Waldo's death in January 1842 based on the presence of drafts in the journals of that time, the narration is in the poet's own voice with its attendant emotion, the loss of the 'darling', 'hyacinthine', 'gracious boy' leaves the poet despairing 'I am too much bereft' (*CW* IX, 290-4). Such lines typically displeased early twentieth-century critics with a clear idea of what constituted canonicity: this 'too intense personal sorrow' could not 'compete with smoother and more academic elegies', but the bisected

⁴² Emerson surely has Milton in mind in this analogy. See *Paradise Lost* (1667), ed. by Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Bk. VII, l. 463-6, p. 181.

voices of the poem are reflected in a divided critical tradition.⁴³ The second part, completed sometime during the productive period of 1845-6, is narrated—and the death thus transformed and intellectualised—by one of Emerson’s ‘beamed-in voices’, and consequently later twentieth-century critics, influenced now by the Whitmanian legacy, have critiqued its supposed loss of focus and power by virtue of its very *impersonality*.⁴⁴ In other words, this conjunction of personal experience and synthesising intellect, of the emotional property of its author subjected to a study of disinterested impartiality, is a poem absolutely concerned with polarities of possession.

Yet the bisection into possessive categories is not quite as simple as this. In the first section, the poet’s intense personal lamentation can be distracting, but it remains the case that his claim over the departed child is, and, in the context of the piece, has always already been renounced. It is, in fact, as though the synthesis enacted in the second half is already implicitly observed. Although he may declare that ‘I had the right, few days ago, | Thy steps to watch, thy place to know’, this observation and knowledge is relational rather than possessive, as the second person pronouns stating ownership suggest. Indeed, the very next line—‘How have I forfeited the right?’—simultaneously discloses the free will of the poet (‘forfeit’ rather than deprivation or loss) and his lack of knowledge of how he came to will it so (*CW IX*, 291). This is to say that the poet is, by some method, responsible for his own inability to possess and incapacity to know. As a matter of fact, the only noun used with the first person possessive in the poem with respect to the child appears as ‘my truant’, reiterating that it is the very nature of the poetic subject, and the poet’s handling of it in language, to warp away from its author. Under these conditions, we can examine the closing lines of the first section,

⁴³ W. R. Cairns, *A History of American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 236.

⁴⁴ See John McAleer, *Days of Encounter* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1984), p. 313, and Gay Wilson Allen, *Waldo Emerson* (New York: Viking, 1981), pp. 396-7.

and observe the emergence of almost the opposite meaning to that which might be apparent in a first reading:

O child of paradise,
Boy who made dear his father's home,
In whose deep eyes
Men read the welfare of the times to come,
I am too much bereft
The world dishonoured thou hast left.
O truth's and nature's costly lie!
O trusted broken prophecy!
O richest fortune sourly crossed!
Born for the future, to the future lost! (*CW* IX, 294-5)

This can be read as lamentation, a memorialising of the boy's potential never to be fulfilled, its eye to the past rather than the future. But there are reasons to see it otherwise. 'Child of paradise' Waldo may have seemed, but there is something problematic in granting this totemic status. He was at once iconic of a prelapsarian past, tangibly present, and prophetic of a redeemed future. In other words, to know this boy is to know all possible worlds, a continuity of promise which cannot correspond with death or expulsion from divine immanence. In consequence, the two ambiguous lines of the passage demonstrably re-enact the Fall as they figure its exigencies. A world already 'dishonoured' cannot sustain a 'child of paradise', but at once, the death of the paradisiacal child dishonours an otherwise honourable world. And, more importantly, the readiest possibility of the last line is that the child is lost to any possible future because he is bound by the author's memory, and bound by this memorialising and

testamentary poem. But at the same time, this child is lost *to* the future, to a future inaccessible and unknowable, a life in legacy in which the engendering author accepts he will have no hand and can exert no will. It is, in other words, a poetic ‘will and testament’ in a quite different sense, the gift of the *poet’s* death insofar as he announces his own exclusion from its futural possibilities.

In this way, the attitude of the ‘Deep Heart’s’ answer, which follows immediately on the above, is more readily apprehensible. The lines “Worthier cause for passion wild | If I had not taken the child” reflect, admittedly rather insensitively, on the fallacies of a possessive knowledge alluded to in the preceding stanza.⁴⁵ The extensive meditation on a receptive, intellectualised attitude averse to the ‘blasphemy of grief’ which follows thus effusively affirms and celebrates the trajectory evident in the first part, rather than merely chastising and correcting its errors. In its closing section, this celebration tends toward a discussion of the poetic act which in some ways invokes Emerson’s ideals of poetic organicity and natural synthesis, but also endorses the other concerns already raised here and helps us to see more clearly the broader scope of his poetics. Thematically, the poet remains a perpetuator of creation—“Revere the maker; fetch thine eye | Up to his style”—but in the following words—“and the *manners* of the sky”—the implication that reverence and the perpetuation of the cycle of creation requires mannerism and performance, akin to the ethical dynamic of the 1844 essay ‘Manners’, is suggested (*CW IX*, 297. *Emphasis added*). An engendered future rather than a memorialised past structures the poetic epistemology:

‘Not of adamant and gold

⁴⁵ A letter from Thoreau to Lucy Brown—Emerson’s sister-in-law—reflects the sense that Waldo’s death was seen to be a perverse necessity amongst the Concord group: ‘I was not startled to hear that he was dead;—it seemed the most natural event that could happen. His fine organisation demanded it, and nature gently yielded its request. It would have been strange if he had lived’. See *Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, p. 63.

Built he heaven stark and cold
[...]
Built of furtherance and pursuing,
Not of spent deeds, but of doing'. (*CW IX*, 297-8)

But if persistent hints of organicity still occur amongst these lines (“No, but a nest of bending reeds, | Flowering grass and scented weeds”), something else is evidently in the ascendant in the poem’s conclusion:

‘Waters with tears of ancient sorrow
Apples of Eden ripe to-morrow.
House and tenant go to ground,
Lost in God, in Godhead found’. (*CW IX*, 298)

This very explicit allusion to the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is critical to fathoming *Poems* as a single and sustained poetic act. The fruit of Emerson’s thought is unripe until this perpetual ‘tomorrow’ of the reader, and as such, the poet and his audience are never contemporaneous. The rejection or misunderstanding of his endeavour in almost all of the scholarly literature turns on this point. In terms of the Whitmanian legacy, this Emersonian notion is anathema. To look again at David Porter, who incessantly uses Whitman as his point of comparison, or Elisa New, who depends upon Frost, the implausibility of such comparisons emerges clearly in some very different expectations of the fruiting trope. Porter, for instance, holds up these lines of Whitman’s ‘Come up from the Fields Father’ in a reflection on ‘Threnody’:

Where apples ripe in the orchard hang and grapes on the trellis’d vines,

(Smell you the smell of the grapes on the vines?

Smell you the buckwheat where the bees were lately buzzing?)⁴⁶

New, meanwhile, quotes from Frost's 'After Apple-Picking', especially focusing on what she describes as the 'heft of Being' dominant in its lines, such as when the poet's narrator 'feels the pressure of a ladder round' against the arch of his foot, a pressure New connects to metrical feet as much as to the poet's body.⁴⁷ Neither critic, however, alludes to Emerson's own 'Apples of Eden' in treating of these other, more vaunted apples of the American tradition. Instead, the tangible, sensual, organic 'concrete' world into which a symbolically loaded Edenic apple quite plainly does not belong becomes a fixation. So Porter valorises Whitman for 'restoring the world that Emerson had annihilated', creating a 'gestic' rather than a 'static' language.⁴⁸ New, meanwhile, engages with the tropological subtexts of Frost's apples. A poetry that evinces the qualities of organicity and locatedness in time and place is 'a fallen genre', a designation from which Emerson is excluded, for he 'withhold[s ...] the self from the implications of poetic speech [...] the lived sense of time, the pang of seized particular, the long arch of an ascent[. These] are a few of the poetic virtues Emerson's poems systematically resist'.⁴⁹

Surely, however, the declaration that the 'Apples of Eden' will ripen 'tomorrow' is not simply to 'unwrite' the Fall, as New has it, but in some way to provide for its being re-experienced and rewritten, even if it be unquestionably true that this experience is not something obviously undergone in Emerson's poems themselves, to the extent that it is so evident as to appear 'systematic'. Indeed, there is very much more of significance in Emerson's considerations of the value of fruit, theoretic and actual, pre-

⁴⁶ Walt Whitman, 'Come up from the Fields Father', in *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Francis Murphy (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 327-8. Porter, p. 34.

⁴⁷ New, p. 43. Robert Frost, 'After Apple-Picking', in *Selected Poems*, ed. by Ian Hamilton (London: Penguin, 1973), pp. 68-9.

⁴⁸ Porter, p. 34, 39.

⁴⁹ New, p. 43, 46.

and postlapsarian, to consider against this line. As Emerson well knew, it is a matter of necessity that ‘when a fruit is ripe, it falls’, but if this fruit signifies immanence and singularity with its source before ripening, if it then fell away from the mind which brought it to fruition, it cannot be restored by any means to that which bore it (*CW* II, 80). The kind of model implied here is notoriously raised in ‘Experience’, where Emerson wrote of the death of Waldo that ‘it does not touch me: something which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar. It was caducous. I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature’ (*CW* III, 29). The epistemic revelation Emerson finds in the death of Waldo is that his every connection was caducous—it was fated to fall away, leaving no enrichment or development. Equally, in the other meaning of ‘caducous’—that of a lapsed estate or testamentary gift, an inheritance not claimed—Emerson’s ‘house and tenant’ are not restored as might be intended by the will of the author, but are given back to the earth. He bequeaths freely and generally, not specifically and privately.⁵⁰ And, increasingly throughout the journals of the mid-1840s, this construct is developed. Waldo’s death was akin to a falling fruit, which is akin to the fruit of one’s mind—all seem, by an organic necessity, to fall away offering no return, as Emerson implies in a passage treating of self-doubt: ‘But how if you have no security of [...] a [promising] result; how if the fruit of your brain is abortive, if cramp & mildew, if dreams & the sons of dreams, if prose & crotchets & cold trifles, matter unreadable by other men & odious to your own eyes be the issue?’ (*JMN* IX, 203). It is the nature of writing, however, to accept

⁵⁰ Mary Chapman draws attention to this meaning, and its connection to the ‘house and tenant’ of the penultimate line of ‘Threnody’, but neglects to accommodate the clear invocation of a lapse or loss in the inheritance. Instead, she aligns with conventional wisdom in seeing Emerson as inheriting some kind of ‘consolation’ from the poetic memorial to Waldo, that the father’s poem becomes, by a recursive movement, the ‘child’s poetic bequest to his father’. It should be clear that I see all such restitutive modes as anathema to the epistemological structure of Emerson’s poetic programme. See Chapman, ‘The Economics of Loss: Emerson’s “Threnody”’, *American Transcendental Quarterly* (June, 2002), 1-15. For another recent example of a reading of ‘Threnody’ which sees the poem facilitating consolation for its grieving author, see Keane, pp. 489-511.

and even to invoke caducity. Not only is a persistence of epistemic involvement plainly denied: “Fruitur fama,” no never. The poet is least a poet when he sits crowned. The transcendental & divine has the dominion of the world on the sole condition of not having it’ (*JMN IX*, 420).⁵¹ More than this, there is always a methodical ploy involved, as disclosed in a remark which begins in consideration of the relative monetary value of peaches in the orchard and at a city market: “That is the main consideration in fruit, to put the tree out of sight [...] Jugglery, or the order of wonder, always consists in putting the tree out of sight’ (*JMN IX*, 310).

Reenacting or reinvoking fallenness, even if to celebrate it, is not necessarily conducted through sanguine correspondence with a poet wise enough to make language effectively *prelapsarian*—to ‘fasten words again to visible things’, as Emerson had put it back in 1836 (*CW I*, 20). Indeed, this is the central paradox of a conviction that poetry, to be properly representative of the ontological condition of postlapsarian mankind, must be forceful and concrete, sensually evocative of that of which it speaks (“Smell you the apple?”) in spite of the stark fact of its absence. A great talent this may be, and it is a talent much valorised in the American tradition, manifested in what Lionel Trilling called the ‘exquisite particulars’, but it need not exclude the validity of other poetic possibilities. Indeed, in Emerson’s late essay ‘Poetry and Imagination’ (which had its origins in a lecture given in 1854, but was not published until 1876), familiar considerations from earlier poetic treatises are revisited, but in a phrasing which plays into these considerations. Here, it is the ‘common-sense which [...] takes *things* at their *word*’, an attitude New would have us believe the lyric enables, but which is surely recidivist. It is no wonder that New postulates this as a rather blunt counter to a post-structuralist poetics ‘free of the poem’, because the nature of such arguments is to refute once and for all the notion that we might ever again hold poems in such regard. Instead,

⁵¹ See too *JMN VIII*, 528, where this Latin phrase—‘he delights in fame’—is also inscribed in a similar context.

Emerson leads us away from the preconceptions of Arnold and all who accept his distinctions in supposing that our ‘interest is gradually transferred from the forms to the lurking method’ (*CW* VIII, 1-2. Emphasis added).

This method is in no way singular. It is the exigencies of language as much as the will of the author that facilitates its play, as was implied in ‘Woodnotes II’. The attitude of the reader is obviously of critical significance too. In all ways, in fact, it can feel to author or to reader as though ‘someone is “doing” him’, as Emerson wryly puts it in the same late essay; that the poem is never an organic, sound, vitalising edifice of enrichment but a device of deceit, a mechanism that operates not only to undo the practicality of Emerson’s own ideals, but any knowledge we may feel entitled to bring to the poem (*CW* VIII, 2).

Pomology and Poetics

To put it another way, Emerson understood the exigencies of fruit and of horticulture more deeply than to assume its natural and organic virtues, something of which the ingénues of Bronson Alcott’s communitarian experiment at Fruitlands, for example, were certainly guilty. Throughout the mid-1840s, up to his departure for England in late-1847, contemporaneous with the process of composing and completing *Poems*, Emerson was occupied at length with planting an orchard on land he had recently acquired adjoining his estate.⁵² Not only was he in the business of acquiring large numbers of pear and apple trees, therefore—a process he recorded in the journal notebook ‘Trees’, in which, it is worth noting, drafts of the second part of ‘Threnody’ are to be found (*JMN* VIII, 518-49). He was also immersed in the science of pomology, being particularly influenced by Andrew Jackson Downing’s *The Fruit and Fruit Trees of*

⁵² Richardson dedicates a short chapter to this in his *Mind on Fire*, a fact which ought to recommend its significance to Emerson scholars, even if this has not, as yet, fully come to pass. See Richardson, *Mind on Fire* pp. 433-5.

America, just published in 1845.⁵³ And here, as Edward Emerson later recounted, the human part in the process of cultivation and the amelioration of the fruit tree was the point of Emerson's greatest interest. The crab-apple or wild pear, Downing explains, is destined in northern climes to 'a perpetual struggle with nature', and '[i]t is thus only in the face of obstacles, in a climate where nature is not prodigal of perfections, and in the midst of thorns and sloes, that MAN THE GARDENER arises and forces nature to yield to his art'.⁵⁴ Most important in the cultivation of excellent fruit, therefore, is the suspension of organic processes, such as rearing from seed, which are likely to return the variety to its wild state. Instead, '[i]t will be remembered that our garden varieties of fruit are not natural forms. They are the artificial productions of our culture'.⁵⁵ And the means of facilitating this—which if Emerson did not already know, he would have learned in detail from Downing—is grafting, the combination of new growth from one tree with the old root-stock of another, to produce a reliable and consistent example of a cultivated variety.⁵⁶

As such, if Emerson speaks often of fruit, and of gardens, in the journals of these years, he is not merely troping on some organic ideal, but the 'lurking method' which underlies its possibility. He *knew* that the apparent organicity of poetic spontaneity was a fraud—as he wrote on more than one occasion, he 'hated early poems', precisely because they visibly belied this fact (*JMN* VII, 249, 316). For the same reason, he saw that his own poetry would always be unripe to his own eyes.⁵⁷ In most cases, his poems were developed from prose passages in the journals, and if not there, from the works of other poets or other traditions—Gray's 'Elegy' speaks often from

⁵³ For more detail on Emerson's interest in this volume, see Edward Emerson's notes in the *Centenary Edition: Complete Works*, V, pp. 336-7, and Richardson, *Mind on Fire*, p. 433.

⁵⁴ Andrew Jackson Downing, *The Fruit and Fruit Trees of America*, (1845), (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1847), p. 1.

⁵⁵ Downing, p. 4.

⁵⁶ For Downing's discussion of the method, its history, and the processes involved, see Downing, pp. 12-9.

⁵⁷ 'A glance at my own MSS. might teach me that all my poems are unfinished, heaps of sketches but no masterpiece' (*JMN* VIII, 132).

between the lines of pieces in *Poems*; ‘Hamatreya’ comes directly from a passage copied out of the *Vishnú Purána*; there are translations of German translations of Persian poetry, rewritings of Hafiz in ‘Bacchus’, and so on. But if these adaptations, adoptions, and versified mutations are plainly not purely organic and essential examples of ‘fact’ leading ‘form’, nor are they usurpations of the tradition by an anxious Oedipal author in pursuit of assurances of self-possession, or vague, unconsciously bad reflections of natural processes forcibly pressed into linguistic legality. They are, instead, the grafted products of husbanded old root-stock, a perpetuation of traditional fruit devoid of any attempt to establish new variety. The significance of his poetic project rests in this principle.

In 1844’s ‘Manners’, he had demonstrated an earlier version of the same idea, there positing that the comfortable cohabitation of dead tradition and living present constituted a mode ‘philosophical to a fault’—that is to say, a mode that makes too many concessions to the synthesising powers of intellect, and too few to the processes necessary to sustain life and provide for future possibility. *Essays: Second Series* manifestly struggled to enact this same cohabitation—Emerson failed there to disengage from his text, to accept the principle he observed in ‘Manners’ that with authors and their work as with orchard keepers, ‘the flower and the fruit, not the grain of the tree, [is] contemplated’ (*CW* III, 73). The achievement of the graft comes not in the immediate success of the artificial procedure itself but in the satisfaction produced by its fruit, a fruit which is far removed from its organic origins. In the dissolution of his claim over his productions, his acceptance of their project as merely a slight furtherance and perpetuation of their cultural tradition, Emerson distinguishes himself from the alternative poetical ideal which seeks to draw the reader near to discuss his method in a state of sanguine understanding. He is not Whitman because the imperative to

emancipate himself from his own text precludes him from the possibilities the later poet saw as permitted, even necessary.⁵⁸

In this way, Emerson's peculiar poetic apotheosis can be contemplated. If it be the poem's task to figure and enact fallenness, to make this realisation—of fatedness, the acknowledgement of false wisdom, a possibility of moral redemption—part of the literary phenomenon, then it is highly questionable whether the poet himself should be granted the right to tell us these facts, to let us into his own knowledge as his familiar. Rather, perhaps the poet's task is to figure the unknowing into which, as he eventually comes to know, he must project himself. To go from the 'Known fruit of the unknown' at the beginning of *Poems* to the 'Apples of Eden' at its end is to enact a kind of Socratic wisdom, a conscious unknowingness, as the trajectory of the volume. Emerson's paradoxical humility comes as a product of his inability to think but in absolutes and polarities. For instance, the nature of fruit is always also its opposite—organic, and yet artificial, fulsome as nature, but imprisoning when troped as knowledge. Such poles dominate his thought, of course: freedom is necessary; committing to form is liberating; 'emancipation from existence is the fruit of self-control'; wilfulness enables abandonment. We should not be surprised, therefore, that when Bronson Alcott read *Poems* in 1847, he found the volume utterly representative of this structure, as Emerson recalls:

⁵⁸ The significance of Emerson's attempts to restock and perpetuate his cultural inheritance extends beyond his 1847 volume. A recent article by Nikhil Bilwakesh discusses his 1874 poetic anthology *Parnassus*—a diffuse compilation of poetic fragments from almost two hundred poets—proposing that the volume represents a unique 'late compositional style [...] which relies on quotation as the primary unit of composition', a style Bilwakesh terms 'Emerson's decomposition'. Indeed, what Bilwakesh finds to be the case in *Parnassus* is equally evident in the epistemic concerns of *Poems*: that in *Parnassus* 'Emerson consistently strove to author, or authorise, works that would "outgo the personality"' by way of 'translation, redactions, [and] compilations'; that, '[a]long with his memory' in his old age, 'Emerson's authorial personality dissolves'. *Poems* is important therefore because it anticipates the completed *Parnassus* project by almost thirty years and reveals that Emerson's poetic endeavour was singularly conceived and intellectually coherent. I would go further than Bilwakesh, however, in positing that the regenerative process has broader significance than simply refreshing a staid poetic tradition: in particular, it has significant philosophical and social implications, on which I will elaborate here and in the postscript. Bilwakesh, 'Emerson's Decomposition: *Parnassus*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 67 (2013), 520-45 (p. 527, 528, 537).

Alcott, among many fine things he said of my volume of Poems, said, the sentiment was moral and the expression seemed the reverse.

I suppose if verses of mine should be compared with those of one of my friends, the moral tendency would be found impressed on all mine as an original polarity, that all my light is polarised. (*JMN IX*, 464)

Indeed, in ‘Sursum Corda’, Emerson had hinted that something like this was to be deemed a poetic necessity. This poem, ambiguous in its apparently simultaneous advocacy of humility and self-regard, demands that the following address be made by the poetic soul:

‘Here I am, here will I abide
Forever to myself soothfast;
Go thou, sweet Heaven, or at thy pleasure stay!’
Already Heaven with thee its lot has cast,
For only it can absolutely deal. (*CW IX*, 171)

From absolute commitment (or absolute renunciation) comes absolution, which is to say the apotheosis of the literary endeavour, the *effective* merging or inseparability of author and work.⁵⁹ We can easily cast the most common complaints against *Poems* in this light: its absolute omniscience, sententious intellectualism, and deadening logicity all become necessary features. How can Emerson sincerely present an ongoing world, a poetic notion that makes ‘the poem as voiced and experienced, not as object, but as

⁵⁹ Once again, compare Bilwakesh on this point: ‘This author in decomposition [...] is literally *absolved* from the individuality of traditional authorship’. Bilwakesh, p. 533. Emphasis in original.

movement across the page and mind', as New says of the lyric?⁶⁰ He is not there: he does not, cannot, know these works. So the absolute declaration of knowledge, possession, command; these reports of nature told and not shown and shared, all invoke their polar opposite—a world from which the poet is acquitted, disappeared, oddly and uncannily absent except in the texts they bequeath to us. It is, in other words, quite as though he performs his death by way of his authorship.⁶¹

Back in 1835, in a letter to Lidian which predates their marriage, Emerson had characteristically reflected that '[t]he danger of such attempts as this striving to write Universal Poetry is,—that nothing is so shabby as to fail' (*L I*, 445).⁶² But, along with the general current of his poetic theory, we should expect that this idea will have been subject to modification. Hence by 1846, now less enamoured of the heroic ideal for the poet, and more specifically of his capacity to fulfil it, he articulates a very different manifesto befitting the poet he perhaps *could* be:

Do they stand immoveable there,—the sots, & laugh at you socalled poetry?
They may well laugh; it does not touch them yet. Try a deeper strain. There is no
makebelieve about these fellows; they are good tests for your skill; therefore, a
louder yet, & yet a louder strain. There is not one of them, but will spin fast
enough when the music reaches him, but he is very deaf, try a sharper string.
Angels in satinette & calico,—angels in hunting knives, & rifles,—swearing
angels, roarers with liquor;—O poet, you have much to learn. (*JMN IX*, 441)

⁶⁰ New, p. 11.

⁶¹ New, like most critics of Emerson, registers this experience very clearly: 'The voice of Emerson's poems frequently issues from a place designedly unplaced, a place without dimension or extent'. Something like a performance from beyond the grave. The problem is that, like most critics of the poetry, she is too ready to see this as merely symptomatic of poetic failure. See New, p. 51.

⁶² The letter is also transcribed into a contemporary journal (*JMN V*, 138-9).

This is a poetry of preparation rather than redemption, anticipatory rather than revelatory. Indeed, it constitutes Emerson's assertion of his commitment to the artifice of his project, to a poetic possibility not the preserve of benign nature, a spurious 'beauty' not to be possessed, but actualised instead through screeching, dissonant, non-musicality; through aggression, violence, a manifestly contrived and excessive manner. It is an emphasis that seemed to be more obvious among Emerson's earlier readers, many of whom, including Franklin B. Sanborn and Charles Ives, remarked on it.⁶³ Perhaps because subversion and antagonism became common aesthetic practices throughout the twentieth-century, Emerson's attempts according to 1847 standards have seemed less striking to readers than those of other more idiosyncratic and dissonant poets.

My final remarks, however, are addressed to any doubts we might still entertain as to the coherence and singularity of what Emerson sought to achieve through metrical language. 1852's 'Days'—one of his more universally appreciated poems—offers an articulation of precisely these themes in a form which is closer to the expectations of an audience anticipating poetic consanguinity. For here Emerson is unusually candid, providing his readers with a lens onto the whereabouts of their poet at the apogee of his project, if only for the briefest of moments:

I, in my pleached garden, watched the pomp,
Forgot my morning wishes, hastily
Took a few herbs and apples, and the Day
Turned and departed silent. I, too late,

⁶³ Emerson's one time acolyte Sanborn started this trend by declaring that 'he purposely roughened his verse'. After this, Charles F. Richardson wrote in 1889 that Emerson was absolutely 'deliberate in his quaintest, most irregular, and cacophonous verse'. Katherine Lee Bates, in 1897, described Emerson as, 'if not an acknowledged master, yet a poet whose lyricism is so strange and rare as to defy the critics'. Or, as Ives recorded in *Essays Before a Sonata*, 'If Emerson's manner is not always beautiful in accordance with accepted standards, why not accept a few other standards?' See Waggoner, pp. 24-9, for these and other instances of the supposition of deliberately difficult writing. Ives, 'Emerson', in *Essays Before a Sonata* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1920), pp. 11-45 (p. 29).

Under her solemn fillet saw the scorn. (*CW IX*, 427)

Fleetingly, we see Emerson ensconced in this bounded, 'pleached garden', renouncing the impossible aspirations of his youth and instead committing himself to a perpetual re-enactment of the Fall: like the lions in Eden, who were 'given every green herb for meat', the poet takes his appointed herbs, but he is sustained also by the apple that concludes the paradisiacal state.⁶⁴ With that, he quits the reader's attention along with their progressing world, retiring into the shadow of the text whence he is bound and embedded in perpetuity.

⁶⁴ Genesis, 1: 30.

Afterword

They see in my garden that I must have some other garden. (*JMN* VII, 379)

What, therefore, of the social effects of Emerson's contrived acquittal? This can be considered by way of an analysis of the concepts and ideas that preoccupied him in the mid-to-late-1840s. By the evidence of the journals, it seems fairly clear that the project of *Poems* concerned him only intermittently. Instead, the work of the era which dominates these pages is *Representative Men*, the lecture series first given in draft form in the winter of 1845-6, and revised continuously until its publication in 1850, which takes as its primary subject the societal and civilising functions of the 'great men', among whom are to be included the philosopher, the writer, and, most central of all, the poet. From the very earliest stages of the project, it is pertinent to Emerson's poetic concerns. Shortly after the first journal reference to a 'Pantheon course of lectures' which already contains the six names of the series in sketch, he writes that his representative 'Man of the World', Napoleon, 'was France', and continues as follows:

A man of Napoleon's stamp almost ceases to have a private speech & opinion. He is so largely receptive & is so posited that he comes to be an office for all the light, intelligence, wit, & power of the age & country. He makes the code,—the system of weights and measures [...] Every line of Napoleon's therefore deserves reading as it is the writing of France, & not of one individual.

Napoleon was truly France. (*JMN* IX, 139, 140-1)

Such are the general terms by which the romantic hero is identified, which in real terms led to a personality cult that Emerson critiques in the finished lecture. But there are aspects in the above excerpt which offer a more compelling point of comparison with

the themes of acquittal so far considered—we ought to note that Napoleon too ‘almost ceased to have a private speech and opinion’. Indeed, the effective disappearance of the person of such significant figures into their work and legend had always fascinated Emerson in excess of any adherence to the type of the romantic hero. In 1835, he remarked on the fact with respect to the status of Jesus’s historicity, reflecting the Unitarian hypotheses of the time: ‘When the gods come among men they are not known. Jesus was not. Socrates & Shakspeare were not’ (*JMN* V, 12). By 1845, now at work on *Representative Men*, the principle has taken on fundamental significance: ‘Is it not strange that the transcendent men, Homer, Plato, Shakspeare, confessedly unrivalled, should have questions of identity & of genuineness raised respecting their writings?’ (*JMN* IX, 184).

Of the names given in these two extracts, the constant is Shakespeare, Emerson’s representative poet, and, in the context of Emerson’s own poetic enterprise, the lecture on this subject is the most significant in *Representative Men*. In some respects, the mode of thought in evidence in these excerpts echoes Victorian Bardolatry and prefigures his later endorsement of the work of Delia Bacon, but with Emerson the interest never lies in deducing who might really have been behind Shakespeare’s improbable genius. Rather, the fascination is with the wild divergence in our knowledge of our inheritance—this sense that biographical vagueness somehow becomes a necessary corollary of the work of genius; that, as we have seen in the last chapter, great poetry demands a renunciation of life. And, in *Representative Men* itself, when Emerson comes to discuss his representative poet, it is this principle which dominates.

‘Shakspeare, or the Poet’ opens in a manner that immediately belies Emerson’s preoccupations. ‘Great men’, he writes, ‘are more distinguished by range and extent, than by originality’. Indeed, originality is in fact a hindrance—‘The greatest genius is the most indebted man’, and ‘[g]reat genial power, one would almost say, consists in not

being original at all; in being altogether receptive; in letting the world do all, and suffering the spirit of the hour to pass unobstructed through the mind' (*CW* IV, 109-10). The practical meaning of these considerations is stated explicitly in what follows. Shakespeare's greatness, Emerson proposes, lies not in originality and invention but in the archetypal mode of literary receptivity: 'in common with his comrades, [he] esteemed the mass of old plays waste stock, in which any experiment could be freely tried' (*CW* IV, 111). And so the lecture continues, in a register which alternates between exposition of this theoretical position and the elucidation of evidence to substantiate his conviction that Shakespeare's greatness is to be explained by virtue of the fact that he was a cultured plagiarist.

The parallel that is emerging here between the Shakespearean and Emersonian compositional models is illustrative of how Emerson had come to conceptualise literary significance by 1850. In some respects, his ideas remain consistent with his earlier convictions. Literary receptivity—or plagiarism—mirrors the kind of genius he had extolled in his earlier career in a number of ways. We might recall the facts that the poet-priest should be rooted in the heart of his culture, according him the status of locus of his time, the voice of the Over-Soul at that historical moment—all principles that he reiterates with respect to the Bard. But Shakespeare is curious because he presents the *method* by which one could fulfil that representative function of merging with one's work, of disappearing in biographical terms, more pragmatically. The essence of Emerson's lecture turns on Shakespeare's peculiar distinction in this light. He mocks the inquiries of the Shakespeare Society, active in London throughout the 1840s, with their fixation on 'whether the boy Shakspeare poached or not, whether he held horses at the theatre door', and so on (*CW* IV, 116). The point is precisely that almost nothing could be said of Shakespeare's personal life that indicated his genius. As Emerson records, '[h]e was a goodnatured sort of man, an actor and shareholder in the theatre,

not in any striking manner distinguished from other actors and managers'. Which leads him to an ironical confession: 'I admit the importance of this information. It was well worth the pains that have been taken to procure it' (*CW* IV, 118). The reason is that it leaves us in just the same position as Shakespeare's esteemed contemporaries—Bacon, Spenser, Donne, and Jonson—who were oblivious to the genius going about his personal affairs amongst them. '[T]heir genius failed them to find out the best head in the universe. Our poet's mask was impenetrable' (*CW* IV, 117). As mere man, it is as though the poet never existed.

Emerson, of course, is not so credulous as to entertain the reality of this idea. But the functional efficacy of this disappearance does persuade him that Shakespeare intended and enacted it as part of his poetic programme, that plagiarism permits acquittal of responsibility in two senses, and both of these are important in understanding where Emerson stands at the threshold of the decade, still exploring the polarities at the heart of his thought but now according to new possibilities, that a private writing enables the fulfilment of public duties, public writing private freedoms, a double writing in a sense heretofore not fully considered. First, with respect to the reception of a cultural tradition in his plagiarism:

The poet needs a ground in popular tradition on which he may work, and which, again, may restrain his art within the due temperance. It holds him to the people, supplies a foundation for his edifice, and in furnishing so much work done to his hand, *leaves him at leisure*, and in full strength for the audacities of his imagination. (*CW* IV, 111. Emphasis added)

'At leisure', the poet is exonerated from the exhaustion and self-immolation that might otherwise attend his labours in the name of society and culture. And yet, in what

immediately follows, the same leisure is held to be the most civil and appropriate of social actions. 'In short', Emerson writes, 'the poet owes to his legend, what Sculpture owed to the temple'. Because sculpture in antiquity grew as a subordinate function of architecture, its place was always subsidiary and defined in the form of 'ornament' or 'relief'. Even at the height of classical culture, 'the prevailing genius of architecture still enforced a certain calmness and continence in the statue'. Without such adherence to the perpetuation of cultural standards, Emerson claims, the sculpture made for its own sake was inferior, gaudy, and extravagant. So, he goes on to declare:

This balance-wheel which the sculptor found in architecture, the perilous irritability of poetic talent found in the accumulated dramatic materials to which people were already wonted, and which had a certain excellence, which no single genius, however extraordinary, could hope to create. (*CW* IV, 112)

In other words, a complicit submission to the bounds attending the rearticulation of extant tradition re-enacts the kind of commitment Emerson had consistently recognised in literary formalism—one contributes in the accepted currency of exchange, in the phrasings, styles, and vocabularies which present themselves most readily and conveniently. Indeed, he noted more than once that language itself was a tissue of quotation.¹

In this instance, however, the possibility of exoneration possesses a doubled sense: the writer is permitted an ongoing existence both within and without the text in different modes, and the without in this instance—being dispossessed, detached, and

¹ In 1842, he made the following entry in the journal: 'He that comes second must needs quote from him that came first. You say that Square never quotes: You say something absurd. Let him speak a word, only to say, "chair," "table," "fire," "bread,"—What are these but quotations from some ancient sage? (*JMN* VIII, 236). Parts of this journal entry are reproduced in 1868's 'Quotation and Originality'. See *CW* VIII, 106.

concealed—is not analogised with death, but is instead given to be a state of ease and leisure. Recalling Baudelaire’s dictum of the counterfeiter in ‘La Fausse Monnaie’, who seeks to ‘win paradise economically’, here we find Emerson exclaiming the virtue of the Shakespearean method: ‘What an economy of power! and what a compensation for the shortness of life!’ (*CW* IV, 110).

Biographical studies reinforce the suggestion that Emerson’s desire for an escape of some kind was wide-ranging in the late-1840s. As Richardson notes, at the same time that Emerson truly threw himself into public life as a lecturer—going from fifty-four lectures given in 1846 to as many as eighty per year in the early-1850s—he began to experience a sense of ennui and lethargy, eventually leading to his decision to spend ten months in England and France in 1847-8.² This sense of dissatisfaction and a loss of focus surfaced too in the journals: in 1847, he reflects on having ‘wished for a professorship [... for] the pulpit that I might have the stimulus of a stated task’ (*JMN* X, 28). A candid reconsideration of his aspirations is evident in the same period. The function of the writerly gift depends upon the capacities of the writer to fulfil it, and Emerson’s impersonality in the following statement does not diminish the sense that it is autobiographical: ‘They do as they can, or they must instruct you equally by their failure as by their talent. That is they must teach you that the world is farmed out to many contractors, and each arranges all things on his petty task, sacrifices all for that’ (*JMN* X, 149). Failure here—especially, perhaps, a cultured failure—is justified a place alongside works of genius in the necessary matrix of ongoing culture, and in this, it seems, lay the possibility to which Emerson applied himself.

Besides *Representative Men* and *Poems*, Emerson’s ‘petty tasks’ and insignificant ‘contracts’ of these years have usually been seen as corollaries or causes of his lethargy, for he spent many months on the most focused self-reading of his career.

² Richardson, *Mind on Fire*, pp. 418, 436-8.

Professionally, he was tasked to compile his earliest works into a new volume, *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, published in 1849, while also preparing revised editions of the first and second series of *Essays*. In 1847, he also read over his entire corpus of journal and notebook writings in order to compile two 400-page indexes to themes and topics, useful in the compositing of future publishable work, but a tedious labour to complete. For my concerns, both of these enterprises ought to be of particular interest—they represent the most extensive and wide-ranging of Emerson’s interrogations of his own text, in which the contemporary concerns of investment and property should really be most evident. Yet this is not the case. On the contrary, what is more striking is how little these processes preoccupy his thought according to the evidence of the journals. Bits of his index crop up on occasion, while in July 1847 he wryly remarks that ‘[a]mong the seven ages of human life the period of indexes should not be forgotten’ (*JMN* X, 132-5, 105). The revised editions, meanwhile, are barely mentioned in the journals, while the revisions themselves are consistently minor. Indeed, as Paul Lauter has noted, the only really significant consistent set of changes in *Essays: First Series* reflects a change in Emerson’s attitude to personal sovereignty: personal ‘resolutions’ become ‘choices’, clear statements of action are replaced by commitments to observance, and the attitude to the world without becomes one of cultured acceptance and complicity rather than wilful independence and obstinacy.³

Despite the absence of extensive rumination on the themes of revision and correction with respect to the indexes and republished works, however, the contemporary journals are nevertheless filled with entries that touch metaphorically on

³ The most extensive analysis of the kinds of revision undertaken appears in Lauter’s 1961 essay ‘Emerson’s Revisions of *Essays: First Series*’. Lauter’s survey identifies 5000 verbal changes, but, aside from the changes in emphasis on the lines of wilfulness detailed above and the addition of poetic epigraphs to each essay in the manner of *Second Series*, these changes concern punctuation, verbal clarity, and an increased tendency to trace effects from particular cases to general, something Emerson had already developed a habit of doing in his revisions from *JMN* to published work. See Paul Lauter, ‘Emerson’s Revisions of *Essays: First Series*’, *American Literature*, 33 (1961), 143-58 (pp. 149-50). Richardson too asserts the insignificance of the revisions in his *Mind on Fire*, p. 436.

these concerns, and the metaphor in every instance draws on Emerson's preoccupation with the garden and the orchard. Where, in prior years, the rewriting process seemed to lay behind the oft repeated sentiment that '[a]ll spiritual activity is abridgement, selection', in the period in question this becomes a fact of horticulture: 'Shall he see that all his gardening is a selection, and then a new, and then a newer selection, and not apply that lesson to his life?' (*JMN* VII, 62; X, 112). Not only this, but the garden also becomes the lens through which Emerson studies the concepts of investment and possession, and in this respect the attitude I have been describing, of withholding the liberty to be at ease by not giving of oneself as emphatically as might once have been advocated, is consistently evident.

In the early summer of 1847, he records that '[i]n the garden a most important treatment is a good neglect. It must be a capital care that will make tomato or apple or pear thrive like a lucky neglect. Put a good fence round it & then let it alone a good deal. Fence it well, & let it alone well' (*JMN* X, 91-2). Put another way, this is learning to publish and be damned. The alternative course was one that he well understood, having once followed it himself:

In an evil hour I pulled down my fence & added Warren's piece to mine. No land is bad, but land is worse. If a man own land, the land owns him. Now let him leave home, if he dare. Every tree and graft, every hill of melons [...] all he has done and all he means to do, stand in his way like duns when he so much as turns his back on his house. Then the devotion to these vines & trees & cornhills I find narrowing and poisonous. I delight in long free walks. These free my brain & serve my body [...] I think I compose easily so. But these stoopings & scrapings & fingerings in a few square yards of garden are dispiriting,

drivelling, and I seem to be robbed of all energy, & I have a sort of catalepsy, or unwillingness to move, & have grown peevish & poorspirited. (*JMN X*, 93)

Is this a reflection on gardening, or on the compositional labours involved in revisiting a large textual investment that leaves Emerson spent and directionless, craving, as he twice states, ‘freedom?’ Better, therefore, to try to attain that finer, dispossessive knowledge indicated throughout *Poems*, paraphrased in a journal entry of 1848: ‘he only has apple trees who knows them, & treats them as apple trees. Else the apple trees have him’ (*JMN X*, 350). Or, applying to literature the essentials of orchard-keeping, entertain ‘that dream of writing in committee’, which for Emerson is conceived as follows: ‘The Seckle pear is the best in America. But it is small, & the tree is small. So we bud an apple tree just above the root, and the bud becomes root’. The graft produces stronger and more excellent fruit, and hence he asks ‘[c]an we not help ourselves as discreetly by the force of two in literature?’ The notion of ‘discreetly helping ourselves’ nods to the contrivance by which Emerson will go about this, and so he continues in summing up: ‘But it requires great generosity & rare devotion to the aim in the parties & not that mean thievish way of looking at every thought as property’ (*JMN X*, 154-5). Generosity, an attitude of ‘rare devotion’—these are the terms of gift-giving, but, within these private passages, there is no longer any disguising how the gift must be conceived. Indeed, lines within the above excerpt found their way into Emerson’s lecture on the greatest benefactor in English literature—Shakespeare—perhaps the ‘seckle pear’ put him in mind of the poet whose name is a near homograph of that fruit.

If we are to finalise an answer as to how Emerson conceived of his role as author with respect to the society and culture to which he belonged, these metaphors of cultured neglect, a kind of *laissez-faire* approach to his work’s effects, must be the foundation. Indeed, ‘Fate’—that much admired essay published in 1860 which is

traditionally recognised to represent Emerson's late thought in its fullest iteration—originates in journal passages inscribed amongst the language of horticulture detailed above, and between its lines the role of the poet who does not meet Emerson's ideal, the preparatory rather than revelatory author, is typified according to the preceding principles. In 'Fate', Emerson demonstrates his interest in the nascent statistical sciences and the work of Adolphe Quetelet in a new means of anticipating genius: 'Doubtless, in every million there will be an astronomer, a mathematician, a comic poet, a mystic' (*CW* VI, 10). We might therefore ask—what if Emerson himself acknowledges he is not this genius, not the representative of his time in this authentic sense? The answer is given in the tone and attitude of the essay: whatever is, is—it is not the prerogative of man to challenge but to honour his place. Fate is defined as '[w]hatever limits us', but we remain free to turn towards and accept that limitation (*CW* VI, 11). Hence, 'learn to swim, trim your bark, [...] learn to skate'; these are Emerson's imperatives, to accept impressionability, or 'docility', as he puts it more than once in this essay, to learn to watch and tolerate 'this cropping-out in our planted gardens of the core of the world' (*CW* VI, 17, 11).

And yet, lest we see this highly methodical acknowledgement that literary production can be reduced to mere bit-playing and groundwork as too creditable, too humble, we should not forget that Emerson also theorised a state of ease and leisure for the author as a subsidiary, compensatory function. In the closing pages of 'Shakspeare, or the Poet', Emerson's praise of the Shakespearean method and its success gives way to a brief counterstatement, in which he explains that 'this bard and benefactor', who might have transcended his time and place and came closest to becoming the truly representative poet, still held enough back that he failed to become universal. As Emerson notes, he enjoyed the leisure his literary practice afforded him: 'it must even go into the world's history, that the best poet led an obscure and profane life, using his

genius for the public amusement' (*CW* IV, 123-5). In a similar way, Emerson sought absolution—if not that he might pursue 'profane' ends, at least that a measure of freedom remained to him.

We might consider this against the attitude of his committed friend, Thoreau. In 1845, Emerson recorded that 'H[enry] complained that when he came out of the garden, he remembered his work' (*JMN* IX, 206). The implication is that Thoreau failed to treat the garden as Emerson did; he failed, perhaps, to acknowledge that principle of cultured neglect, to constructively forget his works. A few years earlier, a similar principle was noted, but this time more exactly tied to literature: 'At all events, I begged him [Thoreau], having this maggot of Freedom & Humanity in his brain, to write it out into good poetry & so clear himself of it' (*JMN* VII, 144). The kind of catharsis implied here, when considered within the framework of Emerson's broader project, uses abandonment as a subsidiary part of a larger mechanism, which might be described as a moderation between the demands of his poetic theory and his capacity to realise it, between the poles of 'contenance and abandonment', as he would put it in 1850 (*JMN* XI, 230). It has often been observed that Emerson was oddly, even uncomfortably, worldly and comfortable when compared to some of his more enthusiastic contemporaries. This condition might be drawn on to demonstrate his innate conservatism, a trait which kept him from involvement with anti-slavery agitation until his hand was forced by the fervour surrounding the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850.⁴ But there may be another way to conceive of how and why he ceded his reservations to take on a major public role in abolitionism in the 1850s, which is when, I would contend, his poetic theorising more or less comes to an end. So long as he registered the demand of

⁴ Sharon Cameron offers one of the most insightful and compelling of such arguments in relation to Emerson's impersonality: 'the heroic implies a *person's* contact with the real. This source and this source alone gives it authority, as Dickinson, Whitman, Melville, and, of course, Thoreau knew. Emerson, strangely, *doesn't* know this'. Or, perhaps, he knows and prefers an alternative means of exonerating himself, which the sharp-eyed reader sees through, as Cameron does here. See Cameron, 'Way of Life', pp. 25-6. Emphasis in original.

full commitment, of the need to ‘cast myself upon the Age’, as he wrote in 1839, or to ‘throw [his] body at the mark’ as it was put in 1843, then a fulsome social endeavour was beyond the capacities of his writing as it stood in those years (*JMN* VII, 300; VIII, 400). Resolution was, perhaps, never very far off: in 1841, he knew enough to instruct ‘H[enry]. T[horeau]. that his freedom is in the form’ (*JMN* VIII, 96). At the time, this was something that Emerson himself had yet to fulfil. But by the decade’s end, via the machinations and means described in this thesis, a freedom arrived at through literary innovation from the demands of full social or political commitment was his, and his relation to the world through his texts was at last established on stable principles. His acceptance of his own acculturation, his elevation to representative in his own time, to be spokesperson or ‘sage’ of his age, directly attends this exoneration.

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