ANGLO SAXONICA

REVISTA **ANGLO SAXONICA** SER. III **N. 12** 2016

ULICES • CEAUL
University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies
Centro de Estudos Anglísticos da Universidade de Lisboa

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SER. III N. 12 2016

EDIÇÃO Centro de Estudos Anglísticos da Universidade de Lisboa
University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies

DESIGN, PAGINAÇÃO E ARTE FINAL Inês Mateus

IMPRESSÃO E ACABAMENTO SerSilito

TIRAGEM 150 exemplares

ISSN 0873-0628

DEPÓSITO LEGAL 86 102/95

FCT Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia
MINISTÉRIO DA EDUCAÇÃO E CIÊNCIA

Este trabalho é financiado por Fundos Nacionais através da FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia no âmbito do projeto PEst-OE/ELT/UI0114/2013

Special issue on **Ralph Waldo Emerson** (1803-1882)

Guest Editors **Isabel Alves**, **Rochelle Johnson**
and **Edgardo Medeiros da Silva**

Número especial sobre **Ralph Waldo Emerson** (1803-1882)

Organizadores convidados **Isabel Alves**, **Rochelle Johnson**
e **Edgardo Medeiros da Silva**

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ESSAYS
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Introductory note

ISSN: 0873-0628 ANGLO SAXONICA SER. III N. 12 2016

Introductory note

The selected essays which comprise this special volume of *Anglo Saxonica* aim to follow up on the rich ideas that emerged from the international conference *Naturally Emerson: Creative Writing, Self-Reliance, and Cultural Agency* organized by ULICES (University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies) Research Group 3 on American Studies, "Interfacing Cultures and Identities", which was held at the School of Arts and Humanities of the University of Lisbon from April 16 to 18, 2015. They result from the *call for papers* sent out afterwards not just to the participants in the conference itself, but also to other interested academics, many of whom manifested their interest in contributing to the volume in the weeks that followed its dissemination. Inspired by the *leitmotif* "What role is left for the artist, the scholar, the self-reliant individual?" the conference aimed to seek out possible ways of responding to the call of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) — the "voice oracular" of American letters — to heed our inner voices, as we search for readings and inscriptions of our human nature in sustainable interaction with the environment at the start of this new millennium. It will be immediately apparent from the essays which follow that the topics addressed by our contributors range far into interdisciplinary thought, delving into different areas of literature, philosophy, ecocriticism, and creative writing. They are proof that Emerson's critique of convention in his own time, whether literary, religious or social, is an enduring legacy for the engaged citizen and the troubled artist and/or scholar alike, continuing to provide ample ground for reflection and discussion in our day and age.

In "Doing what comes naturally: the domestication of bug and humbug at Melville's table", Rute Beirante draws for us possible lines of interpretation between Herman Melville's humorous short story "The Apple-Tree Table; Or, Original Spiritual Manifestations" and Emerson's

essay "Nature". She argues that Melville's narrative is imbued with Emersonian philosophical principles, expressing, though paradoxically, both a rejection and an acceptance of Emerson's ideas and thoughts.

Jeffrey Child's essay "On the Abandonment of American Poetry: from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Mark Strand" offers a compelling analysis of the poetry of Mark Strand in light of Emerson's understandings of the self, identity, and language. Child's special focus on the issue of inheritance (or "cultural belatedness") suggests that Strand negotiates an Emersonian conception of the poet through his own works. The essay deepens our current scholarly understanding of Emerson, Strand, and American poetry more generally. Moreover, it highlights the artist's relationship to his cultural inheritance.

Fernanda Luísa Fenejas's text "'To what end is nature' — Rachel Carson's *Under the Sea-Wind* and Environmental Literature" presents a convincing case for understanding Carson's narrative as integral to the environmental literary tradition. Through an analysis of the ways in which the book fits within various existing definitions of "environmental literature", the essay highlights the importance of Carson's work in terms of environmentalism and environmental aesthetics. This exploration of *Under the Sea-Wind*, with its literary as well as scientific elements, enriches our understanding of both the book and Carson's work within an Emersonian tradition.

Mary Fowke's "Emerson in the Star Garden: Writing and the Sensuous World" is an insightful paper based on personal experience. The association of Emerson with *Jardim da Estrela*, in Lisbon, is an original idea in this non-fiction piece, where the author examines the notions of "slow time" and "timelessness" and how these concepts may provide higher levels of mental well-being for all human beings. The essay is an incursion into the process of autobiographical creative writing through memory.

David Greenham's "Emerson's 'Apposite Metaphors' and the Grounds of Creativity" offers a lucid close reading of Emerson's understanding of the poet in relation to metaphor and nature. Exploring Emerson's "purposive engagement" with the metaphoric and symbolic language, the author argues that, for Emerson, metaphor constituted a "liberating principle for original expression". The essay is an important

contribution to our understanding of Emerson, his work, and his place in Transatlantic literature.

"Traces of Ralph Waldo Emerson in the Poetic Work of A. R. Ammons" by Josef Jařab makes a case for reading Ammons in an Emersonian light, particularly with regard to both authors' understandings of the role of the poet's voice. Tracing a literary lineage from Emerson to Ammons, the essay deepens our understanding of Emerson's presence in modern American poetry while it sheds new light on Emerson's works themselves. Jařab's text, which includes an important discussion on the American Sublime, highlights the fact that these two authors shared many similarities and concerns.

Pedro Madeira's "A Revolution of All Things": *Nature* and *Eureka* or Poe's Transcendental Hoax" offers a shrewd analysis of Poe's prose poem *Eureka* in light of scientific understandings, Romanticism, and Emerson's particular notions of poetry, the poet, and encounters with matter. The author argues that Poe's poem is a critique of Transcendentalism/ Transcendentalists, Emerson included, and as such should be read for its irony and sub-textual references to the movement.

In "'Travelling is a fool's paradise': What We Talk about When We Talk about Emerson's Views on Travelling", Isabel Oliveira Martins uses careful close readings and attention to text to argue that a superficial analysis of Emerson's "Self-Reliance" could lead the inadvertent reader to the wrong conclusion on the subject of travelling, as expressed in the above-mentioned essay. By relying on a variety of texts, the author points out the contradictions in Emerson's phrase, maintaining that the latter's views on travelling may actually provide the means whereby the significance of the (re)construction of the "Self" may be affirmed.

In his clearly articulated paper "Two Houses White", Paul J. Medeiros calls on readers to reconcile environmentalist thought with Emerson's ideas. Its different sections guide the reader neatly through the central argument of the paper, namely the fact that Emerson's thought has been somewhat misconstrued by many environmentalists and ecologists, who have taken at face value many of the ideas expressed in essays such as "Nature" and "Self-Reliance". The author convincingly argues that Emerson's self-reliant individual is primarily concerned with intellectual self-reliance, not physical (fortitude), suggesting that environmentalists and

ecologists should consider Emerson's notion of justice and human dignity if they want to use him as a source of inspiration for their activism.

Lawrence Rhu's "'Where do we find ourselves?': Emerson, Percy, and Ford as Unlikely Soulmates" discusses the ways in which the work of the novelists Walker Percy and Richard Ford suggests, tangentially for the most part, Emersonian language and ideas, including Transcendentalist thought. As Rhu proceeds to make his point clear that it is possible to find "spiritual affinities" between Walker and Percy, "unlikely soulmates" though they may seem, it turns out that their work help us deepen our understanding of Emerson as well.

Reinaldo Silva's "Recycling Emerson's Legacy: The Depictions of the Ethnic Garden in Portuguese-American Writings" is a well-argued and informed discussion of the notion of garden in Portuguese-American literature in relation to Emerson's "Nature". The author centers his discussion on contemporary Luso-American authors like Katherine Vaz and Frank Gaspar as he attempts to highlight the importance of the garden for Portuguese communities in North America by drawing upon contemporary scholarship on ecocriticism.

In "Subtle distinctions": Emerson's "Gifts" and Sentimental Rhetoric of Gift-Giving", Alexandra Urakova offers a fascinating and important discussion of Emerson's essay, "Gifts", contextualizing it within sentimental nineteenth-century etiquette manuals. Through a process of close-reading, she argues that Emerson's essay both draws upon and challenges popular sentimental discourse surrounding gift-giving, suggesting that he develops in the above-mentioned essay his own original theory for exchanging gifts. The essay is an important contribution to the nineteenth-century discourse of gift-giving.

As editors of this collection of essays it is our hope that we may have succeeded in reassessing and updating critically, in modest terms, no doubt, Emerson's literary legacy for future generations of students and scholars alike, in line with his proposition that "the question of the times resolved itself into a practical question of the conduct of life. How shall I live?"

Isabel Alves, Rochelle Johnson
and Edgardo Medeiros da Silva

Doing what comes naturally: the domestication of bug and humbug at Melville's table

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ISSN: 0873-0628 ANGLO SAXONICA SER. III N. 12 2016

Doing what comes naturally: the domestication of bug and humbug at Melville's table

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was a landmark in nineteenth-century America. The ideas of this acclaimed lecturer, essayist, and poet had a strong influence on the development of American culture. He encouraged both the scholar and the poet to stand up and take a central role in the building of the nation's identity. Although inspired by European writers, he urged them to break free from European models in order to create a new American culture based on philosophical, religious, literary and cultural emancipation.

Written after his return from Europe in the aftermath of the death of his wife and the resignation from the ministry in 1836, the essay "Nature" was Emerson's first published work, summing up his ideas and laying down the principles of Transcendentalism. Inspired by Western philosophers such as Plato, Swedenborg, Rousseau, and Kant, this movement rejected traditional religious and intellectual authority. Instead, they proposed the empowering of the self-reliant individual deeply connected to nature and connected to God through nature. The essay shows Emerson's manifest interest in the natural sciences, recently acquired while in France. In Paris, besides attending a lecture on chemistry, he visited the *Jardin des Plantes* and the Cabinet of Natural History, which caused a lasting impact on him: "Emerson's moment of insight into the interconnectedness of things in the *Jardin des Plantes* was a moment of almost visionary intensity that pointed him away from theology and toward science" (Richardson 143). But he did not abandon theology, just exchanged the conventional version of his formative years for a more individualistic, free and unorthodox approach to existence based on his love for nature. In the essay, Emerson suggests a new way of considering nature as a means of approaching the mind of God, since, according to the author, He is present in nature's endless circles:

> Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. (…) Nature is the symbol of spirit (…) We can foresee God in the coarse, and, as it were, distant phenomena of matter (…) behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present; (…) Who can set bounds to the possibilities of man? Once inhale the upper air, being admitted to behold the absolute natures of justice and truth, and we learn that man has access to the entire mind of the Creator, is himself the creator in the finite. (10, 20, 40, 41)

Nature, thus, presented almost as an actual Garden of Eden, is the place where individuals can regain both reason and faith. This faith has Neoplatonic and pantheistic overtones since nature is understood as a symbol of spirit; the spirit in nature and the material phenomena reflect God's presence and, finally, it enables the individual to have direct access to the deity. This access to the mind of the Creator is also said to empower man almost to the level of a miniature god.

In their 1986 article, Teresa Cid and Teresa Alves asserted that Emerson "laid down the foundations for a new epistemology of perception, fusing the worlds of spirit and matter" (97). In a sense, he even tried the fusion of their respective traditional approaches — religion and science — in spite of their methodological and political differences, which did not always allow for a pacific coexistence throughout history, due to the struggle for power of the forces behind both. A meaningful dispute would take place two decades after "Nature", with Darwin's publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859, which gave rise to a huge controversy on both sides of the Atlantic, despite Darwin's concessions to religion and the presentation of his theory as a complement to religious teachings. In 1833, William Whewell coined the word "scientist", and the word "science" began to signify the study of the natural and physical world. By the mid-nineteenth century, articles on scientific questions appeared side by side with fiction, poetry and literary criticism in periodicals, magazines and newspapers (Otis xvii). As science gained in prestige, nineteenth-century literary writers tried to gain credibility by incorporating the voices of scientists or exploring their writing techniques (*idem* xxiv). In terms of the

relationship between science and religion, it is important to acknowledge that Transcendentalism as an intellectual movement was originated in 1830s in the context of the New England Unitarianism, which tried to harmonize Christian doctrines with the advances in the natural sciences. This background eventually contributed to the secularization of the religious beliefs within the movement. At the beginning of "Nature" Emerson declares: "All science has one aim, namely, to find a theory of nature" (7). It is expected that in nature individuals can regain both reason and faith; since these are the tools of perception in science and religion, Emerson seems to be encompassing the two, without neglecting intuition: "a dream may let us deeper into the secret of nature than a hundred concerted experiments" (43).

In "The American Scholar" (1837), Emerson proposes that the scholar be educated by nature, by books, and by action in order to become "Man Thinking". Of the three, nature is considered the first in importance in terms of the influence upon the mind. In the address, Emerson concludes that: "the ancient precept, 'Know thyself,' and the modern precept, 'Study nature,' become at last one maxim" (56). The new motto combines the Greek Delphic aphorism and Platonic maxim with Emerson's own appeal to go into nature.

Some, like his friend and protégé Henry David Thoreau followed this advice literally and went to live in the woods, in Emerson's property, near Walden Pond, outside Concord. The experiment was later shared with the public in the book *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854):

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. (63)

As stated in the text, Thoreau practiced the Emersonian principle of having nature as a teacher through immersing himself in it. First of all, he wanted to apprehend the essential facts of life and life's meaning. In practical terms he intended to live in as simple a manner as possible and to test his self-sufficiency skills. The overall experiment proved to be a voyage of self-discovery and a deep spiritual quest.

Others, like Herman Melville, did not need a programmatic experiment to test the overwhelming powers of nature, while sailing around the globe in extreme conditions. His traveling and working experience was certainly also a path of self-discovery and spiritual development, but without the Thoreauvian artificial attitude about the process in itself. Nevertheless, Melville's adventures provided the subject for his early novels. Meanwhile, Emerson's popularity kept growing and he became an omnipresent character in the American intellectual arena. In addition to the essays, the lectures he gave throughout the country and in Europe proved to be particularly popular. By the mid nineteenth-century, writers and intellectuals in America would naturally consider Emerson's ideas, choosing to follow or criticize them. At best, they would probably do both, given the complexity of Emerson's writings. Such is the case of Herman Melville (1819-1891). This essay addresses the relationship between his short story "The Apple-Tree Table; Or, Original Spiritual Manifestations" and the principles stated in "Nature" (1836). Throughout his life, Melville maintained a permanent interest in Emerson's writings, in spite of a seemingly paradoxical double reaction of acceptance and rejection of his ideas. Melville's works established several dialogues with Emerson's texts, namely in terms of philosophical allusions to idealism and mysticism. These features led several early reviewers to draw comparisons between his books and Emerson's style. In some cases, the similarities may also spring from common readings since both authors had a similar taste for writers and philosophers.

Written in the spirit of "The American Scholar" and "The Poet", the essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850) is considered Melville's "Declaration of Independence" for the American writer (Robertson-Lorant 250). In this essay, he expresses his admiration for Nathaniel Hawthorne's collection of short stories *Mosses from an Old Manse*, published in 1846. Melville also conveys his awareness of the importance of the role of the

writer in the United States and his secret hope of fulfilling his own potential as an author. The collection was written in the early 1840s while Hawthorne was living in the Old Manse, in Concord, a house where his friend Emerson had lived six years before, while writing "Nature". This is acknowledged in the preface to the book — "The Old Manse. The author makes the reader acquainted with his abode" — where Hawthorne also tries his hand at nature writing. In "Hawthorne and His Mosses", Melville evokes both Emerson and Hawthorne as he indirectly alludes to "Nature" through quoting Hawthorne citing Emerson.

> How does Nature deify us with a few and cheap elements! Give me health and a day, and I will make the pomp of emperors ridiculous. The dawn is my Assyria; the sun-set and moon-rise my Paphos, and unimaginable realms of faerie. (Emerson 15)
>
> It was here that Emerson wrote "Nature"; for he was then an inhabitant of the Manse, and used to watch the Assyrian dawn and Paphian sunset and moonrise, from the summit of our eastern hill. (Hawthorne 1124)
>
> So all that day, half-buried in the new clover, I watched this Hawthorne's "Assyrian dawn, and Paphian sunset and moonrise, from the summit of our Eastern Hill." (Melville, *The Piazza Tales* 241)

Praising the deifying qualities of nature, Emerson establishes the dawn and the sunset as outstanding moments of the day. Throughout the successive citations, Emerson's Assyria and Paphos gain substance and come to represent not only Hawthorne's and Melville's empyrean moments of the day, but also the importance attributed to the spirit of the place to be felt in the writers' houses. This same topic can be later found in the prefatory piece of Melville's short story collection *The Piazza Tales*.

Though the influence of Transcendentalism has been traced in several works throughout Melville's life, the response changed with time. Michael McLoughlin considers that his writing career can be divided into two phases with *Moby-Dick* as the pivotal shifting moment (165). According to him, *Moby-Dick* is "both a Transcendental *and* an anti-Transcendental work" as it presents "Transcendental idealism and its

simultaneous subversion"; from this novel on the author assumes a "much darker and increasingly anti-Transcendental philosophical position" (xii, xvi, 165). As Melville grew in his writings and in his readings, the optimistic and popular first sea novels were gradually replaced by more philosophical, somber and speculative writings that did not especially appeal to the general reading public and brought the corresponding share of unpleasant reviews and reduced sales. The dilemma of writing to express oneself as the opposite of writing to please an audience was clearly presented in one letter to Hawthorne:

> The calm, the coolness, the silent grass-growing mood that in which a man *ought* always to compose, — that (…) I fear, can seldom be mine. Dollars damn me (…) What I feel most moved to write, that is banned, — it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other* way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches. (*Correspondence* 191)

Though Melville had previously embraced Emerson's idealism to a certain extent, he gradually departed from what for him became a too optimistic view of the world, without the meaningful dark side that he clearly perceived and portrayed in nature and in men. In the 1850s he even reached the point of criticizing Emerson and Transcendentalism in works such as the novels *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man*. In *Pierre*, the main character affirms:

> Plato, and Spinoza, and Goethe, and many more belong to this guild of self-impostors, with a preposterous rabble of Muggletonian Scots and Yankees, whose vile brogue still the more bestreaks the stripedness of their Greek or German Neoplatonical originals. (245)

In a state of homelessness and despair, Pierre moves in with the "Apostles", a group of idle idealists settled in an old church building, that might represent the Transcendentalists and whose ideals he refutes:

> Away, ye chattering apes of a sophomorean Spinoza and Plato, who once didst all but delude me that the night was day, and pain only a tickle. Explain this darkness, exorcise this devil, ye can not. Tell me not, thou inconceivable coxcomb

> of a Goethe, that the universe can not spare thee and thy immortality, so long as — like a hired waiter — thou makest thyself "generally useful." Already the universe gets on without thee, and could still spare a million more of the same identical kidney. Corporations have no souls, and thy Pantheism, what was that? Thou wert but the pretensious, heartless part of a man. (352)

In *The Confidence-Man* Melville satirizes Emerson in the character of the mystic philosopher Mark Winsome:

> A blue-eyed man, sandy-haired, and Saxon-looking; perhaps five and forty; tall, and, but for a certain angularity, well made; little touch of the drawing-room about him, but a look of plain propriety of a Puritan sort, with a kind of farmer dignity (…) he seemed a kind of cross between a Yankee peddler and a Tartar priest, though it seemed as if, at a pinch, the first would not in all probability play second fiddle to the last. (1043)

Apart from presenting Emerson as an apparent mystic that never fails to take care of his financial affairs, Thoreau is also portrayed in the role of Egbert, the "practical disciple" of Winsome and a "commercial-looking gentleman" (*Pierre* 1052). They both act in a cold way and without benevolence.

Besides Melville's works, his ambiguous attitude towards the ideas and the persona of the sage of Concord is also present in the correspondence and marginalia. Though they were never introduced to each other, Melville attended a lecture in Boston in February 1849 and exchanged letters about it with Evert A. Duyckinck: "I have heard Emerson since I have been here. Say what they will, he's a great man" (*Correspondence* 119). In his next letter, he alludes to a satirical cartoon that had appeared in the *New York Tribune*, portraying Emerson swinging in an inverted rainbow:

> Nay, I do not oscillate in Emerson's rainbow, but prefer rather to hang myself in mine own halter than swing in any other man's swing. Yet I think Emerson is more than a brilliant fellow. Be his stuff begged, borrowed, or stolen, or of his own domestic manufacture he is an uncommon man. Swear he is a humbug — then is he no common humbug. (…) I had

> heard of him as full of transcendentalisms, myths & oracular gibberish (…) To my surprise, I found him quite intelligible (…) I love all men who *dive* (…) I could readily see in Emerson, notwithstanding his merit, a gaping flaw. It was, the insinuation, that had he lived in those days when the world was made, he might have offered some valuable suggestions. These men are all cracked right across the brow. (*Correspondence* 121)

After asserting his independence from "Emerson's rainbow" Melville alternates praise, suspicion and criticism and all on the same page. In spite of greatly admiring the lecturer, he was suspicious of the uncommon "humbug" of "domestic manufacture" that he might be, and deplored Emerson's arrogance.

After attending the lecture, Melville continued to acquire and read Emerson's books for the rest of his life. Meanwhile, he conducted a very lively written dialogue with Emerson's works registered in the extensive marginalia. Melville's annotations convey approval and admiration as well as critique of the excessive optimism or coldness of the author. In the following lines, two contrasting examples are presented. From *The Conduct of Life*: "True & admirable! Bravo!" (*Marginalia* 520). From "The Poet":

> This is admirable, as many other thoughts of Mr. Emerson's are. His gross and astonishing errors & illusions spring from a self-conceit so intensely intellectual and calm that at first one hesitates to call it by its right name. Another species of Mr. Emerson's errors, or rather, blindness, proceeds from a defect in the region of the heart. (*Marginalia* 525)

After meeting Hawthorne, who lived in the Berkshires, and having published the enthusiastic essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses", Melville moved to the Berkshires as well. He purchased the house and the property of Arrowhead, Pittsfield, with borrowed money and spent the next thirteen years farming and writing there. After the commercial failure of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, he turned to magazine writing with the prospect of a steady income and the opportunity to experiment with new techniques.

"The Apple-Tree Table; Or, Original Spiritual Manifestations", published in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* in May, 1856, is the last of the short pieces that Herman Melville wrote between 1853 and 1856, while

trying his chances as a short story writer. As in some other Melvillean works, the core narrative was based on a true story. This particular event occurred at the beginning of the century and was registered in several publications. Melville had access to at least three books containing the description of the incident: Timothy Dwight's *Travels in New England and New York* (1821), David Dudley Field's, *A History of the Country of Berkshire*, Massachusetts (1829) and Henry Thoreau's, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854). He either had the annotated volume in his possession or mentioned the book elsewhere. One other piece of evidence is the fact that each source contains a different set of details used by Melville in his fictional retelling of the episode.

The short story is set in a domestic environment, in the old house of a family of five people — a couple, two daughters and an Irish maid — also present in former stories. Five years after moving to the old house, the father and narrator decides to enter the cobwebbed garret, fetching an odd looking old apple-tree table and a moldy old volume of Cotton Matter's *Magnalia Christi Americana*. According to the narrator the table is "domesticated" and used for tea and breakfast as well as a reading table (381). One night, during the reading of the book he hears an odd ticking — "Tick! Tick!" — coming out of the apple wood. Everyone in the family is astonished, but only on the following night is the cause revealed to the narrator: a shining bug emerges from the old apple-tree table. The maid throws the bug into the fire, but another ticking is heard and a second insect will come out of the table after a hectic night watch by the family waiting for it. These events elicit all kinds of responses from the characters. Melville's story is remarkable due to the way in which he portrays the contrasting reactions of the characters and the philosophical position underlying each different behavior. Just after being published, the story was reviewed in the New York *Dispatch*, as "an amusingly written chapter on Spiritual Manifestations" (qtd. in Hayes and Parker 99). But one could say that beneath the apparently simple and humorous narrative there are inner layers of a subtle philosophical debate.

Written twenty years after "Nature", "The Apple-Tree Table" is a complex response to complex Emersonian principles, where concepts so dear to Emerson, such as reason and faith or science and religion, apparently become antagonistic. The narrator, who professes to oscillate

"between Democritus and Cotton Mather", presents a gloomy and somewhat gothic first description of the table:

> When I first saw the table (…) set out with broken, be-crusted old purple vials and flasks, and a ghostly, dismantled old quarto, it seemed just such a necromantic little old table as might have belonged to Friar Bacon. Two plain features it had, significant of conjurations and charms — the circle and tripod (…) three crooked legs, terminating in three cloven feet. A very satanic-looking little old table, indeed. (*The Piazza Tales* 378)

The reference to Bacon — who was both a scientist and an alchemist — and all the necromantic details seem to place him closer to the "doleful, ghostly, ghastly Cotton Mather" whose "detailed accounts of New England witchcraft" he is reading in the night when it all starts (382-3). As the strange events unfold, the narrator is permanently moving between the two positions, because though he wants to look "as calm and composed as old Democritus in the tombs of Abdera" he confesses that "within me, the contest between panic and philosophy remained not wholly decided" (387-8). This oscillation is also a consequence of the image that he tries to project, since he is afraid but tries to conceal it from the family. There is a particular contrast with the attitude of his "matter-of-fact" wife, whom he considers to be "a female Democritus" (381, 394). This domineering and pragmatic character relies on reason and evidence to analyze the episode. On the other hand, the two daughters, Anna and, especially, Julie, "a poor girl, of a very nervous temperament" who at the beginning of the story "prophecied that, in connection with the table, something strange would happen", think that the table is haunted and rely heavily on intuition and superstition (381-2). Biddy, the maid, is both superstitious and ignorant, as she mispronounces words such as "Holy Vargin!" or "'bomnable bug" (386, 391) and wants to quit her job out of fear. Since its first appearance in the house, the two daughters and the maid are terrified by the table and often cry "Spirits! Spirits!". When, after eating its way out of the table, the second bug emerges, at dawn, an epiphany occurs:

> There wriggled the bug, flashing in the room's general dimness like a fiery opal. Had this bug had a tiny sword by

> its side — a Damascus sword — and a tiny necklace round its neck — a diamond necklace — and a tiny gun in its claw — a brass gun — and a tiny manuscript in its mouth — a Chaldee manuscript — Julia and Anna could not have stood more charmed. In truth, it was a beautiful bug — a Jew jeweler's bug — a bug like a sparkle of a glorious sunset (…) this was a seraphical bug (…) Julia and Anna gazed and gazed. They were no more alarmed. They were delighted.
>
> "But how got this strange, pretty creature into the table?" cried Julia.
>
> "Spirits can get anywhere," replied Anna. (395)

As the girls' fears are replaced by pious wonder and excitement, they keep their "spirit" theory. When the father decides to make inquiries about the incident, they suggest consulting Madame Pazzi, a conjuress. But the mother decides rather to consult Professor Johnson, the naturalist, to have a scientific explanation. At the end of the story, the "eminent" naturalist arrives to "enlighten" their ignorance and present his "computation" about the time that the bug had lain in the egg (396-7). He also despises the "spirit" interpretation: "'she did not *really* associate this purely natural phenomenon with any crude spiritual hypothesis did she?' observed the learned professor, with a slight sneer" (397). But, more than before, Julie is now unstoppable in her belief:

> Say what you will, if this beauteous creature be not a spirit, it yet teaches a spiritual lesson. For if, after one hundred and fifty years' entombment, a mere insect comes forth at last into light, itself an effulgence, shall there be no glorified resurrection for the spirit of man? (…) I still believe in spirits, only now I believe in them with delight, when before I but thought of them with terror. (397)

Merton Sealts considers that "The dialectic of old and new, spiritualism and naturalism, that runs through (…) 'The Apple-Tree Table' is a sign that in the magazine fiction of the mid-1850's Melville was doing more than merely writing to please the public" (94). The subtitle of the short story — "Original Spiritual Manifestations" — and the narrator warning that the incident "happened long before the time of the 'Fox Girls'", imply

that spiritualism is one the topics of the story (382). Spiritualists believe that spirits have the ability to communicate with the living and that they might even be able to provide knowledge about the nature of God. This movement, in which the Fox sisters, from Hydesville, New York, were major figures, had received a great deal of attention by the mid-nineteenth century. These girls allegedly made contact with spirits that communicated with them through rapping noises, audible to the public. Despite some controversy (some considered them to be either a fraud or agents of witchcraft), they became very popular as mediums performing sessions before big audiences. Through this other pair of sisters, Julie and Anna, the narrative embodies a direct critique of spiritualism, since in spite of their final proclamation about the teaching power of spirits and the glorified resurrection, the bug only lived for one more day. Furthermore, Melville also shows how close spiritualism is to Transcendentalism, since the girls repeat the Emersonian idea of the spirit in nature and, in their final statement, they somehow paraphrase Thoreau's metaphor about the resurrection of the bug:

> Every one has heard the story which has gone the rounds of New England, of a strong and beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood, which had stood in a farmer's kitchen for sixty years (…) from an egg deposited in the living tree many years earlier still, as appeared by counting the annual layers beyond it; which was heard gnawing out for several weeks (…) Who does not feel his faith in a resurrection and immortality strengthened by hearing of this? Who knows what beautiful and winged life (…) may unexpectedly come forth (…) to enjoy its perfect summer life at last! (*Walden* 226)

Following Sealts' terminology, the other topic of the narrative is naturalism. According to this philosophical idea, only natural causes or laws govern the natural world. This attitude, developed during the Enlightenment, is ingrained in the scientific method and rejects spiritual or supernatural explanations in the study of natural and physical phenomena. In the story, the wife and, moreover, Professor Johnson, the naturalist, represent the scientific approach to nature that excludes any spiritual possibility, though the explanation about the cortical layers of the slab reminds us of Emerson's

circles of nature. Melville satirizes the naturalist's attitude and hermetic scientific explanation, since his computation is apparently miscalculated:

> It appeared that the egg must have been laid in the tree some ninety years, more or less, before the tree could have been felled (…) Allow eighty years for the age of the table, which would make one hundred and fifty years that the bug had lain in the egg. Such, at least, was Professor Johnson's computation. (397)

The narrative encompasses a satire on both spiritualism and naturalism, which stand for religion and science, given that neither of the two approaches provide a full explanation for the case. According to the principles of "Nature", Transcendentalism embraces both reason and faith, science and religion. So, ultimately, the short story is also a complaint about the incompleteness of the transcendentalist vision of the world that, for instance, excludes the dark or evil side of it.

The short story seems to be in close dialogue with "Nature". It even seems to illustrate several statements from the essay, starting with these lines from the epigraph:

> And, striving to be man, the worm
> Mounts through all the spires of form. (5)

The comparable metaphors of the worm and of the bug both striving to be man through spires was not certainly missed by Melville. Some other examples follow: "Few adult persons can see nature" (10); "Nothing divine dies" (18); "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact" (20). These sentences have their correspondence, respectively, in the portrayal of the girls and in the emergence of the bug, according to the spiritualist and Transcendentalist perspective. There is a sentence that seems to have inspired the detail of the naturalist's miscalculation in the short story:

> But the best read naturalist who lends an entire and devout attention to truth, will see that there remains much to learn of his relation to the world, and that it is not to be learned by any addition or subtraction or other comparison of known quantities, but is arrived at by untaught sallies of the spirit, by a continual self-recovery, and by entire humility. (43)

While Emerson conceptualized the ideal naturalist as a humble truth-seeker who pays attention to both matter and spirit, Melville presents one character whose limited vision prevents him from seeing beyond additions and subtractions.

Throughout the short story there seems to be a deliberate play on the words "hum", "bug" and "humbug":

> Any possible investigation of any possible spiritual phenomena was absurd; that upon the first face of such things, the mind of a sane man instinctively affirmed them a *humbug*, unworthy the least attention. (388)

> I strove to look at the strange object in a purely scientific way. Thus viewed, it appeared some new sort of small shining beetle or *bug*, and, I thought, not without something of a *hum* to it, too. (389)

The first sentence conveys Democritus's attitude of disregarding any possible spiritual phenomena. The second presents the narrator's attempt at a scientific approach when he first sees the bug. In both cases, science seems to be the topic that brings together the "hum" and the "bug". Emerson had used these words in his works, namely in "The American Scholar": "Men in the world of to-day are *bugs*" (66); and in "Self-Reliance": "My book should smell of pines and resound with the *hum* of insects" (266). More important than that is the fact that Melville had previously called Emerson a humbug: "Be his stuff begged, borrowed, or stolen, or of his own domestic manufacture he is an uncommon man. Swear he is a *humbug* — then is he no common *humbug*" (*Correspondence* 121).

To conclude, though Melville called Ralph Waldo Emerson a humbug, he was inevitably attracted to the hum of this bug. Just as the table and bug in the story have been domesticated and integrated in the family's home, at his writing table, Melville has also domesticated Emersonian philosophy, achieving a practical and fictional application of the principles of "Nature". A contemporary of Transcendentalism, a specific movement of American Romanticism, Herman Melville was among the voices that questioned its principles and practices, its virtues and flaws, thus contributing to the discussion and enrichment of the

Concord sage's legacy. Though less optimistic, they still shared many of their readings and aesthetic positions. In this short narrative he decided to explore the limited ability that science and religion have to explain natural phenomena when taken separately. So, he uses this story to criticize some excessively optimistic or limited perspectives of nature, given by science or religion. Melville also shows that in both, there is a thin line between mysticism and mystification, and that is what can quickly turn the hum of a bug into a humbug.

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Abstract

Of the short pieces Herman Melville wrote between 1853 and 1856, while trying his chances as a short story writer, the last was "The Apple-Tree Table; Or, Original Spiritual Manifestations", published in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* in May, 1856. As in some other Melvillean works the core narrative is based on a true story to which he obtained access. Set in a domestic environment, with characters also present in former stories, the action takes place when a bug emerges from an ancient table, eliciting all kinds of responses. The contrasting reactions and the way they are portrayed show that beneath this apparently simple and humorous narrative there are inner layers of a subtle philosophical debate. Throughout his life, Melville maintained a permanent interest in Emerson's writings, in spite of a paradoxical double reaction of acceptance and rejection of his ideas. This article addresses the relationship between this short story and the principles stated in the essay "Nature", as well as other positions of Melville concerning Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Keywords

"The Apple-Tree Table"; Herman Melville; "Nature"; Ralph Waldo Emerson; Transcendentalism

Resumo

Das narrativas breves que Herman Melville escreveu entre 1853 e 1856, enquanto tentava a sua sorte como contista, a última foi "The Apple-Tree Table; Or, Original Spiritual Manifestations", publicada no *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, em Maio de 1856. Tal como em outras obras de Melville, a narrativa central baseia-se numa história real a que ele teve acesso. Situada num ambiente doméstico, com personagens já presentes em contos anteriores, a acção acontece quando um insecto emerge de uma mesa antiga, despoletando vários tipos de respostas. As reacções contrastantes e o modo como elas são retratadas mostram que por baixo desta narrativa aparentemente simples e humorística existem camadas internas de

um subtil debate filosófico. Ao longo da vida, Melville manteve um interesse permanente na obra de Emerson, apesar de uma dupla reacção paradoxal de aceitação e recusa das suas ideias. Este artigo trata da relação entre este conto e os princípios enunciados em "Nature", bem como outras posições de Melville em relação a Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Palavras-Chave

"The Apple-Tree Table"; Herman Melville; "Nature"; Ralph Waldo Emerson; Transcendentalismo

On the Abandonment of American Poetry: from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Mark Strand

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ISSN: 0873-0628 ANGLO SAXONICA SER. III N. 12 2016

On the Abandonment of American Poetry: from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Mark Strand

1. Recovering (from) Romanticism

The search for a native tradition of American poetry is inseparable from the larger literary and artistic movement that not only framed this search but also lent it the raw materials (subject matter, topoi, formal innovations), as well as the conceptual soil, it would need to bear fruits. American poetry, then, is romantic in its (self-)conception, but involves far more than the mere transplanting of a romantic ideology from Europe to the New World. The obvious difference, from the perspective of the American romantics, was that they found themselves compelled to lay the groundwork for a native poetic tradition — the song Walt Whitman heard America singing — using the resources of a European movement intelligible, in each national culture in which it flourished, by means of a reference to a specific cultural past. In American romanticism that past was primarily European, though (as with other forms of European romanticism) an openness to other non-European literary, artistic, philosophical, and religious traditions was part and parcel of the very movement itself. In this respect, Emerson outpaced his romantic peers — not only in his enthusiasm for non-European thinkers and texts, ranging from Confucius to the *Bhagavad Gita*, but particularly in his unwavering conviction that the insights these sources offered transcended whatever historical interest they held. For Emerson, such flashes of transcendence did not serve, as many forms of belief in transcendence do, to reinforce existing dichotomies — worldly/otherworldly, past/present, text/world — but rather to undermine such distinctions radically, even apocalyptically, albeit only for the effective duration of these moments of fusion. This view explains, in part, the privilege afforded to the act of reading in Emerson's philosophy, as well as his articulating this act with a general theory of the ebb and flow of power.

In effect, Emerson's informal program of transcendental reading offered a model for the establishment of a native tradition of American poetry, a model steeped in European romanticism, to be sure, but one whose unswerving commitment to the universalism revealed by and through these flashes of transcendent power set it apart both from other forms of national romanticism and from other strategies for the differentiation of American poetry, such as Whitman's more explicit opposition to older poetic modes of expression as manifested in "Song of Myself" (1855). As Jonathan Levin notes in *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, and American Literary Modernism* (1999), Emerson's emphasis on moments of lyrical transcendence fed both America's philosophical and literary traditions, though arguably the more specific program of what I have called transcendental reading had a greater impact on the latter. In part this is due to the nature of the moments Emerson celebrated, but, equally perhaps, the textual nature of his philosophical thinking struck a chord among poets, for whom the textual dwelling of Emersonian thought offered an amenable habitat.

The textual nature of Emerson's thinking does not, however, entail a loss of conceptual power or complexity, and one of the challenges of reading Emerson is acknowledging the conceptual nature of his thought as it glimmers through the language of his prose, a prose as poetic as it is philosophical. Two concepts that play an important role in Emerson's conceiving of both the moments of fusion described above and the nature of poetic inheritance (without which one cannot become a poet) are the well-known concept of "self-reliance" and the lesser-known concept of "abandonment". A certain reluctance to granting these terms conceptual status — that is, to taking them as words whose meanings do not drift far from the moorings of common usage — must confront the complexity of the terms as they arise in Emerson's writings. This can only be done by examining the specific passages in which they occur, as well as some of the more notable attempts to come to terms with these passages. But, in anticipation of such an examination, it might be useful to point out that, in Emerson's writing, both concepts serve to undermine a conclusiveness that would seem to hover near to their common usage: "self-reliance" comes into play when the self, in a flash of insight, is perceived as a vanishing point; "abandonment" announces a state of fusion so at odds

with our commonly perceived condition as the subjects of our experience that it is described in the language of a departure, even when that departure is declared to be (as we shall see) quite simply "the way of life". In sum, these terms are intimately connected with a "poetics of transition" — a mode of thinking that is both conceptual and transitional and that, for this reason, illuminates the work of the contemporary American poet Mark Strand, allowing us to glimpse his relationship to a line of poetic thinking we have come to associate with Emerson.

Indeed, as I will argue, this line which, beginning with Emerson, engages a wide range of subsequent poets and thinkers, finds itself powerfully restated in the work of Mark Strand, whose own work spans nearly a fifty-year period, beginning the publication of his first volume of poetry, *Sleeping with One Eye Open*, in 1964, and ending with the publication of his last volume, *Almost Visible*, in 2012. Though Strand's poetic career is marked by multiple turns and attempts at redefinition, I will here focus on a specific line of poetic reflection that emerges, and achieves its culmination in, Strand's first two volumes of poetry. The nature of this line of reflection is, I will argue, unmistakably Emersonian, even if its overt poetic echoes belong to Coleridge. But, besides Emerson's own indebtedness to Coleridge, the latter poet — and by extension the English romantic poets in general — allowed Strand to assimilate and subsequently reformulate his own debt to Emerson, as well as that of his more immediate (and problematic) precursors and contemporaries, such as Wallace Stevens, John Ashbery, and Harold Bloom.[1]

Thus far, I have tried to suggest that Emerson's importance to American poetry stems from two convergent aspects of his work: the attempt to establish an American line of (poetic) thinking and the offering, in his work, of a powerful revision of romantic ideas. This convergence occurs within the domain of the poetic subject, and the romantic theme of the emergence of the poetic subject is folded (twice) in Emerson into a story of the fate of America, of the poetic self, and of the poetization of

[1] For a more detailed discussion of Strand's relationship to the romantic tradition, as well as to Stevens in particular, see my *Mark Strand and the Unravelling of Romanticism*, Diss. Universidade de Lisboa, 2004.

philosophical thinking. Though it is only primarily the second of these folds that will concern us here, it is important to emphasize that the general contours of this story are romantic ones.

As Isaiah Berlin has noted, it is in the romantic period that a difference emerges between a conception of tradition as the process in and through which one inherits the terms that mark the beginning of one's thought (i.e. the struggle to establish one's autonomy) and a conception of tradition as an indoctrinating (heteronomous) force (75-77), one before which, to borrow a term from Wittgenstein (via Cavell), the individual (may) find himself bewitched.[2] This difference is not itself a property of tradition, however conceived, but is instead a function of one's relation to one's cultural inheritance, a relation not determined from the outset but rather in the act of relating oneself to this inheritance (in the latter case) or (in the former) of relating this inheritance to oneself. For Emerson and those who followed him, this relationship is enshrouded in a "secret melancholy" ("New England Reformers" 278) that can only be sloughed off (if at all) through an act of abandonment — that is, of subjecting oneself to language (and thus losing oneself as the subject of language). This foundational act, as Emerson conceives it, is one that only poetry, or poetic thinking, can perform, and it must continue to do so repeatedly, with no guarantees of success, and in a state of great precariousness. It is thus the aim of this paper to trace this act of abandonment through the condition known as cultural belatedness, which finds itself embodied in a line of writing that extends from Emerson to Strand.

The terms of Mark Strand's reception of romanticism in general, and of Emerson in particular, led quite early in his career to the severe interpretative reduction of (a thread of) romanticism that is the poem "Keeping Things Whole", which appears in Strand's second volume of poetry, *Reasons for Moving: Poems* (1968). The severity of "Keeping Things Whole" results from its series of intertwined refusals: the past (of the self, of poetry) as a force that communicates with the present; the

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[2] See Cavell's essay "The Philosopher in American Life (Toward Thoreau and Emerson)" for a discussion of the equivalency of terms signaling Romantic despondency and philosophical skepticism, especially page 9.

present (of the self, of poetry) as a place in which the gulf between past and future is bridged. The self (of poetry) thus reduced to a state of (necessarily belated) consciousness can only entertain the old dream of romantic autonomy, or "wholeness", by bequeathing to its (later) self its own absence. This dark fable of romanticism is an attempt both to recover (from) romanticism's promise and to free Strand's own poetic self from the heteronomy of the romantic tradition, or what Harold Bloom calls "the anxiety of influence" (1973). The negativity of "Keeping Things Whole" represented a significant challenge to Strand's development as a poet, and if we view this poem as a displacement of romanticism then the poet's later struggles with the consequences of this poem can also be regarded as an effort to recover (from) romanticism itself, to paraphrase Stanley Cavell. As Cavell claims of the recovery from skepticism in the essay "Recounting Gains, Showing Losses (A Reading of *The Winter's Tale*)", "True recovery lies in reconceiving it, in finding skepticism's source (its origin, say, if you can say it without supposing its origin is past)" (80). One of the assumptions of this paper — and one I think is not out of line with Cavell's own thinking on the subject[3] — is that we might replace the word "skepticism" with "romanticism" in this last sentence and wind up with a penetrating description of one of the great tasks of post-romantic American poetry: that is, that *true recovery lies in reconceiving romanticism*, *in finding its source (its origin*, *say*, *if you can say it without supposing its origin is past)*.

What also needs to be emphasized is that such a recovery cannot be had without doubling back on the past. Cavell goes on to argue that a recovery from skepticism can never occur in its own terms, that its terms are not open to refutation, recovery from such a state arising from a "reconceiving" of its origin, and from a recognition of the presentness of the origin itself. Though his concern is primarily philosophical — or with the philosophical import of literature — Cavell has revealed the dynamic underlying romanticism's most identifiable movement of recovery. This act of reconceiving the source or origin of skepticism is what Wallace

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[3] As the title of Cavell's *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (1988) suggests.

Stevens terms reimagining the first idea,[4] and constitutes, as we shall see, what approaches a compulsive concern and gesture of his poetry, as well as that of Mark Strand, as Harold Bloom notes in an essay on Strand and A. R. Ammons:

> The true epigraph to all of Strand is: "The poem refreshes life so that we share,/ For a moment, the first idea (…)" But the first idea in Stevens is quite deliberately unbearable, since to behold constantly nothing that is not there and the nothing that is would make us inhuman, or at least hopeless company for one another. ("Dark and Radiant Peripheries" 153)

As Cavell argues, in recovering from skepticism, one discovers the ground of one's own authorizing of the present, as if one's relationship to the present were an original one. The ground of this authorization is not the self as subject but rather the subjection of the self to language, precisely what Cavell takes Emerson to refer to when he uses the term "abandonment": "That [Emerson] shows himself undermining or undoing a dictation would clearly enough show that his writing is meant to enact its subject, that it is a struggle against itself, hence of language with itself, for its freedom. Thus is writing thinking, or abandonment" (40). Cavell's description of Emersonian abandonment offers an intriguing version of the romantic quest for autonomy, for the romantic poem cannot simply represent its autonomy. Rather, it must enact it: its freedom cannot be received or inherited but must be achieved or formalized in the process of its articulation. Emerson's late romantic enactment of this process — designated by the term "abandonment" — makes explicit what in earlier romantics lay largely beneath the surface: that the struggle for the autonomy of the poem extends, via writing, to the poetic subject, and that writing involves both poem and poet in a dialectical act of creation and decreation.

For Emerson — but not for Emerson alone — the struggle for poetic autonomy is inseparable from an act of creative destruction or unmaking, writing being by necessity a form of un-writing. Other critics of romanticism

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[4] In *Wallace Stevens* (1977), Harold Bloom describes this moment of reimagining as "Emersonian Fate turning into a metonymic reduction that Stevens will learn to call the First Idea" (27).

— from M. H. Abrams to Jerome J. McGann, in addition to Cavell and others — have also insisted upon the necessity of romanticism's negative moment, refusing to take it as an accidental lapse during the course of romanticism's positive effort of salvation or recovery.[5] If recovery depends upon discovering the source of one's affliction — i.e. that one is not (yet) free — upon discovering that its source lies in one's hands, then the initial recognition of one's suffering would plausibly take the form of being in the hands of such a malady, of being in its possession. Such a condition, as I will argue, is what Harold Bloom has termed "belatedness",[6] though the question of whether this condition refers to an intersubjective predicament, a psychological affliction, or even a state of linguistic mystification cannot be pursued here.

Though not synonymous with Romantic dejection, if we take this to be a static condition, Emersonian abandonment is an integral part of its movement toward recovery. In the introduction to his critical edition of Emerson's major works, Richard Poirier offers further clarification of Emersonian abandonment: "'Abandonment' describes his habit of disavowal, his rhetorical movements of dissociation when it comes to the very things in which he conspicuously puts his trust, like language or literature or nature or even self-reliance" (xviii). Poirier's description of "self-reliance" is equally revealing, and in fact exemplifies what would seem to be the very movement of abandonment itself. Poirier describes Emersonian "self-reliance" as "that only momentary achievement of simul-

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[5] In *Natural Supernaturalism* (1973), Abrams argues that the Romantics did not write about angst or dejection because they considered it to be "the native and inalienable state of man or the necessary condition of artistic creativity" but rather because they held it to be a profound and permanent threat to our chance for experiencing joy (113). In *The Romantic Ideology* (1983), McGann claims that romantic despair "should not be read as a mark of artistic weakness" but rather as "the sign of its ideological truthfulness" (110).

[6] This concept, and its associated theory of poetry, is most fully articulated in Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973). For the present discussion I wish merely to suggest that the Bloomian concept of belatedness is one interpretation among many of the problematic relationship between past and present that characterizes Romanticism and its aftermath.

taneous fusion among agent, action, and words which, for Emerson, *is* the self just before its transfiguring move into another transition" (xix). I want to suggest here that Poirier's definition of "self-reliance" offers an excellent *exemplification* of Emersonian abandonment in action. "Abandonment", I have suggested, is more than a "habit of disavowal", as Poirier suggests: it is a yielding to a process of discovery — a subjecting oneself to language — in which there are no fixed terms and no predetermined destinations, in which one's ontological grounding is transcribed into a text in need of writing. This is why Poirier's description of Emersonian "self-reliance" is so illuminating, and why the concept itself is so widely misunderstood. The key passage for all commentators on Emersonian abandonment occurs at the end of the essay "Circles" (1841). In it, Emerson reminds us that one of our greatest ambitions is to achieve freedom from circles already drawn — from ourselves, from the knowledge derived from past experiences, whatever dividing lines our eyes have come to impose on our surroundings. It is in this restless desire to draw new circles that Emerson locates the process of abandonment:

> The one thing we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our semipiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle. Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm. The way of life is wonderful: it is by abandonment. (175)

2. Reimagining the First Idea

"Wonderful" is not a word that aptly describes the world as it emerges in Mark Strand's early poetry, with its forceful echoes of Coleridgean dejection evident in such poems as "Violent Storm" or "Sleeping with One Eye Open", both from his first volume of poetry, *Sleeping with One Eye Open* (1964). Strand's early poems offer us dark fables of the disaffected imagination, the romantic struggle for poetic autonomy rendered in sparse imagery and wry pronouncements, as if the poet could be both "in and out of the game", as Walt Whitman suggested in "Song of Myself" (1855). Glimpses of Mark Strand's tonal reimagining of the romantic tradition in general, and of Emerson in particular, are already visible in the poem

"Taking a Walk with You" (1964) which, in retrospect, can be read as a kind of formal rehearsal or walk-through for "Keeping Things Whole" (1968). In the former poem, Strand links the old romantic question of whether Being can find in Nature "an adequate reflection" of itself to the medium of power: time. It is revealing to compare Strand's poem with Emerson's understanding, in "Poetry and the Imagination", of the way in which a meaningful relationship to nature can be established:

> While the student ponders this immense unity [i.e. the "varied forms of the selfsame energy" that embody nature], he observes that all things in nature, the animals, the mountain, the river, the seasons, wood, iron, stone, vapor, — have a mysterious relation to his thoughts and his life; their growths, decays, quality, and use so curiously resemble himself, in parts and in wholes, that he is compelled to speak by means of them. His words and his thoughts are framed by their help. Every noun is an image. Nature gives him, sometimes in a flattered likeness, sometimes in caricature, a copy of every humor and shade in his character and mind. The world is an immense picture-book of every passage in human life. Every object he beholds is the mask of a man. (442)

Emerson makes use of a resemblance between man and nature not as a means to knowledge but as a means to expression, as what *compels* the student of nature to speak. Distortion — as "flattered likeness" or "caricature" — is a necessary consequence of nature's rhetorical engagement with man. In both Emerson and Strand, there is the uncanny feeling that the natural world is a "copy" or "picture-book" (Strand calls it an "invention" ["Landscape" 106]) of a story whose recitation is already under way. The effect of this reversal is to make the story of nature a story of the self — "This is the sort of appropriation possible in landscape. The self is extended, the body is the world" (120) — and, ultimately, to make the story of the self a story not about the arrival at a state of knowledge but about the vicissitudes of the self's engagement in the continual ebb and flow of power. This is the gist of another of Strand's passages on nature in which he amends the equivocation latent in the first, replacing a mimetic vocabulary with the language of a self whose relationship to the external world is based on power:

> In *The Prelude*, the self is because it brings itself into being, recalls itself. It emerges from the fabric of the language of retelling. It incorporates, as it were, the very nature that inspires it into being. It makes a silent claim for primacy, and we almost feel that Nature is its invention, or that Nature's self is "by human love assisted," though Wordsworth goes out of his way to deny his work or himself a status equivalent to Nature's. (106)

Yet another characteristic shared by Strand and Emerson in the passages quoted above is the drive toward wholeness, a drive which does not pertain to the physiology of the self but rather to the process of reading, to the rhetorical exchange between nature and the self in which each term is translated into a form of knowledge. This drive is implicit in the notion of incorporation and in the portrayal of naturalistic description as an attempt "to conjure up an entire landscape" (107) — that is, to fill in a landscape not entirely present to the senses. Similarly, this drive underlies the language of a partial resemblance between man and nature — in which resemblance occurs, as Emerson tells us, "in parts and wholes" (442) — and is palpable in Emerson's description of a compulsion to speak through natural imagery. The drive toward wholeness that Strand locates in Wordsworth suggests that the activity of "naming and knowing"[7] is merely one element in a more comprehensive process that involves negotiating one's relationship to time, that is, that involves gauging one's power — past, present, and future. What I wish to emphasize is how the representation of a particular state — even if that state is ostensibly the external one of nature — bears an important performative dimension, and that this aspect of representation is a vital element in the work of writers such as Emerson, with which Strand's poetry is actively engaged.

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[7] Strand describes the sense of freedom that accompanies the representation of landscapes as offering a "relief from naming and knowing" and thus "a way out of the exhausted and claustrophobic limitations of the self; and not necessarily a self without mystery or purpose, but one so pampered, so examined, so named and renamed, that it must go elsewhere to reconstitute its energies. Landscape is a way of finding another self, larger, more general, and, possibly, more basic" ("Landscape" 119).

With this said, it may now be easier to grasp how "Taking a Walk with You", and its deployment of a self/nature (or self/landscape) relationship, offers us less of a truth about the self than of an effort at educating the self to manage its own fluxes of power. The strategy it adopts for this is opening the self to the necessity of openness — or, in romantic fashion, establishing a hyperbolic identification of the self with sheer possibility. This identification begins to emerge as a lack of fit between the self and nature:

> We live unsettled lives
> And stay in a place
> Only long enough to find
> We don't belong.

The self is identified with a certain homelessness or lack of belonging, and the subsequent image of clouds "storming/The vacant air" retrieves Strand's metaphor of the storm in an earlier poem ("Violent Storm") as a manifestation of unleashed imaginative energy and transforms it into a colonizing force. The expression "vacant air" joins the "eyes" of "Violent Storm" as a surface or medium for receiving the brunt of this force, and in a deceptively simple formulation the self is suspended between an identification with the clouds in the passage and with the "vacant air" they move in to occupy:

> Even the clouds, forming
> Noiselessly overhead,
> Are cloudy without
> Resembling us and, storming
> The vacant air,
> Don't take into account
> Our present loneliness.

"Our present loneliness" is not a particularly compelling description of a condition of the self as it emerges through a set of interrelated images in this and earlier poems, but these lines are significant in that — in addition to conveying the latent identification of the self with vacancy that will become explicit in "Keeping Things Whole" — they allow us to grasp the emergence of a certain paradoxical figurative logic, which here involves an important metafigural claim. This logic is evident in the assertion abstracted from the passage above: "Even the clouds are cloudy without

resembling us". The thrust of this sentence derives from the overlapping of two phrases — "even the clouds are cloudy" and "the clouds are cloudy without resembling us" — whose collaborative drift is, in my opinion, unmistakable, and which suggests that the sentence in question is a kind of disguised or figurative proxy for the more direct, "We are cloudy without resembling clouds".

Such semantic prodding allows us to clarify two important aspects of Strand's early work. The first of these is that Strand belongs to the Emersonian line of poetic thinkers who take nature, or nature's images, to be essentially masks of the self, though the word "essentially" cuts both ways, suggesting the need for the sublimation of natural processes and a gap or blank in the self that requires the use of masks for the self's expression (and thus for the possibility of its recognition). The second aspect relates to the peculiar meaning of the word "resembling" in these lines. There is an obvious sense in which saying (or suggesting) "We are cloudy" means "We resemble clouds". But I take Strand to be saying "We are cloudy *without* resembling clouds", which means that a different sense of resembling is here in play, or, rather, that two different inflections of resembling are being (grudgingly) disclaimed: resemblance as certainty and resemblance as priority. The first of these has already been mentioned here but can be summed up as a rejection of the notion that the perception of similarity or resemblance tells us anything about something that lies outside the perceptual process; that is, that resemblance *confirms* the senses. The second rejected sense or inflection of "resembling" finds itself on much shakier ground, for it involves determining which is prior, the cloudiness of clouds or that of the self. Resolving the question of priority requires not so much determining the location of the original quality as it does the site where that quality gains significance. That is why the lines about the rhetorical nature of "the tree we lean against" are misleading:

> The tree we lean against
> Was never made to stand
> For something else,
> Let alone ourselves.

The real question is not whether the tree was *made* to stand but whether it was *meant* to stand, and when in the temporal process of relating oneself

to nature this "meaning to stand" can enter the picture. To say, then, returning to the image of the clouds, that the self's cloudiness precedes that of the clouds themselves is a way of saying that the nature of reality is also determined inwardly, that reality is sensorial images inflected (or "flicked", to borrow a word from Wallace Stevens) by feeling.[8]

3. The Absence of Field

Assuming that Strand's figures remain, at least partly, entwined in the fabric of romanticism, do they lie on the far edges of its critique of an objectified and desiccated knowledge, a knowledge devoid of power, or do they participate in a nostalgia for the reduction to certainty that such a knowledge embodies? Part of answering this question requires determining the nature of the vacancy that emerges in "Taking a Walk with You" and reaches its maximum embodiment in "Keeping Things Whole". In relation to the former, I have suggested a reading in which the certainty of an older conception of selfhood is jettisoned, along with two of the necessary meanings of its companion concept, resemblance. I have also suggested that there is a dual identification in the poem of the self with the clouds it does not resemble and with the "vacant air" that the latter are said to storm. Though cloudy, the self can be compared to a vacancy in that it is determinedly unlike any of the images that its senses can provide. This basis of unlikeness removes from the self the possibility of confirming the nature of its existence via the senses, and this doubt, which both confirms and denies the self, is transformed in the poem into its concluding paradoxical statements of presence and absence:

> And yet why should we care?
> Already we are walking off
> As if to say,
> We are not here,
> We've always been away.

---

[8] Until flicked by feeling, in a gildered street,
I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.
("Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," It Must Give Pleasure X)

This paradoxical gesture, the declaration of one's absence, achieves its subtlest and most paradigmatic expression in "Keeping Things Whole", which can be read as the signature poem of Strand's early work. "Keeping Things Whole" attempts to reduce this gesture to its bare essence, and its repeated appearance in anthologies of contemporary American poetry as representative of Strand's work demonstrates its centrality in understanding the essence and development of his poetic project. Perhaps even more significantly, it is the single poem chosen by Strand to represent his own work in his *Contemporary American Poets* (1969).

If the declaration of the self's absence in "Taking a Walk with You" comes across as somewhat exorbitant, the same paradoxical gesture is managed with far greater power in "Keeping Things Whole". This is no doubt due to Strand's ability to coordinate this gesture more effectively with the poem's particulars, thus making the poem structurally dependent upon it, so that by the time the poem clicks shut on its final word, "whole", it has allowed word, poem, and paradox to function virtually synonymously (l. 17). Understanding how the poem reaches this point involves identifying the series of severe reductions it enacts, as well as the ways it both affirms and undercuts the paradox in question.

The first of these identifications closely resembles those of the speakers of the poems "Violent Storm" and "Taking a Walk with You" with the "eyes" (in the former poem [l. 54]) and the "vacant air" (in the latter [l. 25]). The self is defined as the negation of what it perceives — defined, in this case, as "the absence of field". "Field" should not be taken here as a synecdoche for nature in any narrow or specialized sense or set of processes but rather, as Peter Stitt has suggested, in the broader Emersonian definition of nature as the "Not-Me"; taken, that is, as "field of perception", or that awareness of otherness upon which the sense of self as unifying force is predicated.[9] But the poem pushes beyond this vision of the self,

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[9] "Ralph Waldo Emerson defined the self in relationship not just to itself (as the *doppelgänger* concept does) but in relationship to its total environment, spiritual as well as physical. Emerson divides the all into two massive components — the 'Me,' which may be thought of as the mind, the soul, the personality; and the 'Not-Me,' which comprises all else, significantly including 'my own body'" (203).

and in lines six and seven initiates another severe reduction, based on an identification of the self with movement, which is to say, with time. It does so by cleverly exploiting the semantic disturbance brought about by the formal properties of echo ("In a field/ I am the absence/ of field"), enjambment, and chiasmus ("Wherever I am/ I am what is missing"), thus raising questions about the logical and temporal status of the "I": is it a beginning or an ending, the actor or the acted upon? As if to resolve the uncertainty that brings the first stanza to a close, the second stanza announces a third reduction: that of the self to its body. This reduction — the rendering of the self as body — undermines the poem's first identification but, contrary to expectations, even perhaps to poetic conventions, it reinforces the identification of the poem's "I" with the movement of time. Undermining the identification of the self with what it perceives is itself a theme of romantic thought, particularly of late or critical romanticism. From Shelley's mediations on the fragment and Keats's confrontation of the pastness of the past ("Cold Pastoral!") to Whitman's anaphoric style and rejection of the principle of non-contradiction ("Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself"), the late romantics sought to try to recast the failed ambitions of the first generation of poets and reconcile us with the essential disjunctiveness of experience, what Emerson himself calls "succession" — "We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles" ("The Over-Soul" 153) — thus drawing attention to the necessarily temporal nature of our condition.

In "Keeping Things Whole" Mark Strand strategically empties his cup — that is, his poetic self — in the hope of receiving that influx of power that Emerson called "the transcendentalism of common life": "The poor and the low have their way of expressing the last facts of philosophy as well as you. 'Blessed be nothing', and 'the worse things are, the better they are,' are proverbs which express the transcendentalism of common life" ("Circles" 172). As Emerson tirelessly tells us, abandonment is necessary because we arrive late into nature, and abandonment is our only way to recapture the freshness of the dawn. Abandonment is thus not mourning but rather that moment when mourning begins to transition into some other form or state of being in the world. It may be that this concept is precisely what distinguishes Emerson from Harold Bloom, for whom the poet's lateness is "infinitely mournful". Emerson teaches us that

it is possible to arrive both late and joyously into nature — that is, that a belief in our creative powers and a profound sense of the plasticity of (our) nature might lead to a serene confidence in our ability to draw a new circle, without beginning under the sign of loss. But, ironically and poignantly, for those poets steeped in such Emersonian good cheer, like Mark Strand and Wallace Stevens, such confidence is both illusory and the enabling fiction through which an impossible poetic vision strides into full view:

> an illusion so desired
>
> That the green leaves came and covered the high rock,
> That the lilacs came and bloomed, like a blindness cleaned….[10]

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[10] Wallace Stevens, "The Rock," I, ll. 21-23.

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Abstract

The nature of the American landscape is at the heart of a line of poetic questioning that begins with Emerson and, engaging a wide range of subsequent poets and thinkers, finds itself powerfully restated in the work of the contemporary American poet Mark Strand. Tied up with this question is a more recognizable set of concerns regarding America's relationship to its cultural predecessors and to its own prospective cultural and artistic freedom. In the romantic period there emerged a view of one's relationship to the past that is not itself a property of tradition, however conceived, but instead emerges from (and through) the act of relating oneself to this inheritance. For Emerson and those who followed him, this relationship is enshrouded in a "secret melancholy" that can only be sloughed off (if at all) through an act of abandonment — that is, of subjecting oneself to language. It is thus the aim of this paper to trace this act of abandonment through the condition known as cultural belatedness, which finds itself embodied in a line of writing that extends from Emerson to Strand.

Keywords

Abandonment; American poetry; Emerson; Mark Strand; Romanticism

Resumo

A natureza da paisagem americana encontra-se no centro de uma linha de questionamento poético que tem início em Emerson e, depois de envolver um enorme número de poetas e pensadores posteriores, volta a ser reafirmada de forma poderosa na obra do poeta norte-americano contemporâneo Mark Strand. Ligado a esta questão, pode ser identificado um conjunto de preocupações relativas à relação da América com os seus predecessores culturais e com a sua própria liberdade artística e cultural no futuro. No período romântico, surgiu uma leitura da relação do indivíduo com o passado que não é ela própria propriedade da tradição, seja como for que esta seja concebida, mas que resulta, antes, do (e por meio do) acto de relacionamento do indivíduo com a sua herança. Para Emerson

e para aqueles que o seguiram, este relacionamento é ocultado por uma "melancolia secreta" que apenas pode ser eliminada (se é que pode sê-lo) por meio de um gesto de abandono — isto é, da sujeição do indivíduo à linguagem. O objectivo deste ensaio é localizar este gesto de abandono, por meio da condição conhecida como *belatedness* cultural e da linha de escrita que vai de Emerson a Strand.

Palavras-Chave

Abandono; poesia americana; Emerson; Mark Strand; Romantismo

"To what end is nature?" — Rachel Carson's *Under the Sea-Wind* and Environmental Literature

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ISSN: 0873-0628 ANGLO SAXONICA SER. III N. 12 2016

"To what end is nature?" — Rachel Carson's *Under the Sea-Wind* and Environmental Literature

Introduction

No biographical information about Rachel Carson can fail to mention the significant number of categories that describe her working life: she is referred to as an academic, a scientist, a marine biologist, a naturalist, an environmentalist, a journalist and, less often, a nature writer. Carson's biographer, Linda Lear, labels her as a "biologist-writer-ecologist" ("Rachel Carson's Biography" n.pg.). Actually, Carson worked in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (formerly, between 1935 and 1952, the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries) for fifteen years, first as a radio scriptwriter, and later as an aquatic biologist, scientific writer, editor, and editor-in-chief of that service's publications (Lear, "Rachel Carson's Biography" n.pg.), resigning only after the success of *The Sea Around Us*, published in 1951. She devoted her life to the study of nature and, more particularly, to sea life, becoming increasingly aware of the negative impact of human action on the natural environment.

Although the whole body of Carson's writings[1] reflects her love of nature and her lifelong commitment to its preservation, *Silent Spring* (1962) is her best remembered book. By addressing the poisonous effect of the overuse and misuse of pesticides, namely DDT, on living species, *Silent Spring* not only drew public attention to environmental issues in an unprecedented way but also called for political action.[2] The book is often

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[1] Carson's publications include *Under the Sea-Wind* (1941), *The Sea Around Us* (1951), *The Edge of the Sea* (1955), *Silent Spring* (1962), and *The Sense of Wonder* (1965 – posthumous publication).

[2] Following the overwhelming impact of *Silent Spring*, President Kennedy's Science Advisory Committee drew a report whose recommendations led to legislation limiting the use of pesticides (Friedman 7).

considered as the herald of the environmental movement in the United States[3] (Clark 77).

Because of its far-reaching impact, *Silent Spring* rather overshadowed Carson's previous writings, even if *The Sea Around Us*, published more than a decade earlier, was popular enough[4] to provide her with financial independence and to bring *Under the Sea-Wind*, her first book, to renewed public attention. The first of a trilogy that maps out sea life in a detailed, scientific way, the book did not arouse much interest at the time of its publication in 1941 — a fact that Linda Lear, in the "Introduction" to a recent edition of the book, ascribes mainly to its coexistence with World War II (ix). Furthermore, this was a time still far from the protesting mindset of the sixties, when the upsurge of civil rights movements was far more in keeping with the critical tone of the writer's masterpiece than when *Under the Sea-Wind* was first published. However, *Under the Sea-Wind* provides two keys to appreciating Carson's full body of work: it already sets out Carson's attitude towards nature, which, with great consistency, pervades all her life and work, paving the way for environmental awareness through literary work; and, from the perspective of literary studies, its specific writing characteristics, namely in terms of style and of narrative development, are themselves worth attention, as they illustrate the literary character of a text whose subject matter is mainly scientific and non-fictional.

This essay thus aims to show the importance of *Under the Sea-Wind* as environmental literature as it bridges the gap between scientific language and literariness. On the one hand, Carson provides therein information to teach the reader about the diversity, richness, and laws of the natural world, thereby calling forth a rational response in terms of environmental awareness; on the other hand, she conveys scientific

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[3] Concerns about the environment had been addressed earlier, for example with Conservationism, which, under Theodore Roosevelt's office, aimed at the wise and efficient use of natural resources. However, post-war industrial and economic development, together with the boom of American prosperity, soon overshadowed this emerging trend (Clifford 37).

[4] *The Sea Around Us* was awarded the 1952 National Book Award for Nonfiction.

information by means of a narrative structure and, thereby, makes the text more reader-friendly, while the use of literary devices creates an aesthetic effect. The originality of Carson's style in *Under the Sea-Wind* contributed to the development and the characteristics of environmental literature. Indeed, the defining features of her initial work have become an important dimension in the study of that body of literature.

1. Towards a conceptual framework

Carson's works are all linked by their attention to nature, both as subject-matter and as worldview. The titles of her books all relate to the natural world, either explicitly (*Under the Sea-Wind*) or more implicitly (*The Sense of Wonder*).[5] We might therefore consider them nature writing. However, even if it is undeniable that the natural world is central to nature writing, the idea of nature appears somewhat restrictive from a modern-day standpoint, as Clark argues, since not much is left untouched by human activity. Hence, the word "environment" is more comprehensive and fitting (6). Actually, as Clark further claims, the environment "is, strictly, everything" (85). This broader sense of "environment" over "nature" acknowledges man's role in nature and his ways of interacting with it and changing it and has led many to prefer the term "environmental writing" to "nature writing". Still, this distinguishing trait is implicit in most uses of the concept "nature writing", especially when taken as a genre, as I shall return to later in the essay. On the other hand, it accounts for the interchangeable use of "nature writing" and "environmental writing", as Clark, for example, does (6). Throughout this essay, I will use these terms in accordance with these perspectives.

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[5] The expression "sense of wonder" is used by Lyon to refer to nature writing in general, and more specifically as a trait of American cultural identity: "The literary record time and again displays the claim that there is a lifting and a clarifying of perception inherent in this refocusing, which opens up something like a new world. The sense of wonder conveyed is perhaps very much in the American grain; it may eventually be seen as a more important discovery beyond the finding of new lands" (281).

Lawrence Buell's seminal work *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) relies on a similar lexical proximity of both terms, as its title already suggests. The concept of "environmental imagination" applies, according to Buell, to literary non-fiction (2), and an "environmental" text complies with the following criteria: a) presence of the non-human environment, both as a framing device and as a presence suggesting the implication of human history in natural history; b) the human interest is not the only legitimate one; c) human accountability for the environment is connected to the ethical perspective of the text; and d) there is some implicit sense of the environment as a process (7-8). Buell's study focuses on Thoreau's *Walden* as a canonical work in American nature writing, a landmark in the way western sensibility operates in its homocentric culture and proceeds towards an environmental response (23). In terms of genre, Buell considers environmental writing hybrid and polyphonic (397).

In his well-known classification of American nature literature, Thomas Lyon also makes an introductory note pointing out the fact that the categories he proposes often blur. He states that "nature writing is not in truth a neat and orderly field" (276). Hence, Lyon's taxonomy, as he himself states, illustrates the diversity of the genre and offers an organized classification of its characteristics, but does not aim for it to become an exclusive, accurate pattern when studying the genre (281). For Lyon, nature writing can be divided according to three main dimensions: natural history information, personal responses to nature, and philosophical interpretation of nature. It is the way these aspects interact and the relative weight of each one that accounts for the following categories: Field Guides and Professional Papers; Natural History Essays; Rambles; and, grouped under the heading "Essays on Experiences in Nature", what can be considered as sub-groups: Solitude and Backcountry Living, Travel and Adventure, Farm Life, and Man's Role in Nature (278). In this "Spectrum of American Nature Writing", *Walden* is listed under Solitude and Backcountry Living, while Rachel Carson's *The Sea Around Us* falls into Natural History Essays. The latter is defined by Lyon as "expository descriptions of nature (…) fitted into a literary design, so that the facts then give rise to some sort of meaning or interpretation" (277). The appropriateness of this consideration to *Under the Sea-Wind*, which Lyon has left out of his taxonomy, will be discussed later in this essay.

Finch and Elder, who compiled a number of sample texts in *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* (1990), including Carson's *The Marginal World* (first published in *The Edge of the Se*a in 1955), maintain that nature writing adds characteristics of the literary text, in terms of language and style, to factual descriptions (25). This aspect is particularly relevant to the analysis of *Under the Sea-Wind* that I propose in the next sections.

Considering the perspectives mentioned above, it is important to bear in mind the common aspects they share, such as: the comprehensive meaning of "nature writing", the inclusion of the idea of man and his relation to nature in the concept of "environmental writing", the interchangeability of both terms (despite that distinguishing trait), and the literary, though non-fictional, character of the genre.

The name and works of Rachel Carson have been included in anthologies of American nature writing, for example John Elder's *American Nature Writers* (1996), Finch and Elder's *The Norton Book of American Writing* (1990), or Lorraine Anderson and Thomas S. Edwards's *At Home on Earth: Two Centuries of Women's Nature Writing* (2002). A regular reader of Carson's books would not find it difficult to classify them as nature or environmental writing and to acknowledge their literariness. However, while they are all centred on the concept of nature, the way it is addressed varies, particularly when it comes to style and writing strategies. In the following section, I will examine briefly how *Under the Sea-Wind* is illustrative of nature writing, for understanding how the text embodies the aforementioned characteristics of the genre (namely some sort of fusion of literary and factual elements) will be helpful to the ensuing analysis of the role of narrative as a particular and relevant aspect in this framework.

2. *Under the Sea-Wind* as nature writing

In the "Foreword" to *Under the Sea-Wind*, Carson states the purpose of the book in very simple terms: to make the sea and its life a vivid reality, this based on her personal conviction that the life of the sea was worth knowing (2). This willingness to share knowledge of ocean life was determinant of the form and style of the book. Primarily concerned with the life of sea creatures, it aimed to give a comprehensive, inter-related view of the way they interact in their struggle for life and how they manage to survive.

This, broadly speaking, would place the book in the section of "natural history essays" defined by Lyon, alongside *The Sea Around Us*. In fact, *Under the Sea-Wind* provides "an expository description of nature" (Lyon 277), the relationships among the living creatures being one of the issues studied by the many sciences of natural history. Here, the scientific character of the text is a fundamental trait. First and foremost, it was planned as a scientific work, by someone who was already a biologist and zoologist deeply involved in scientific research and writings as part of her work at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, as mentioned earlier. The idea to produce a complete book derived from the success of an article called "Undersea" that Carson wrote for "The Atlantic Monthly", published in September 1937 (Lear, "Introduction" x).

Thorough research for the book was carried out for more than a year in Beaufort, North Carolina, using in-field outings and detailed observation and notes that would later be articulated in *Under the Sea-Wind.* Carson's observation was carefully scheduled according to the sea tides and moon phases and carried out regardless of weather conditions or daily schedules. The research site chosen offered advantageous characteristics for the purposes of her study, not only because the Beaufort fisheries station was the largest research facility on the West Coast, but also due to the extensive stretch of ocean beach available (Lear, "Introduction" xiv). Her investigation encompassed a diversity of sources, as she mentions in the "Foreword": from scientific and academic books and journal articles to scientific and semi-popular literature and even information from people with some sort of marine experience (6). To make the scientific dimension of book more understandable to every reader, Carson included a glossary of scientific and sea-related terms in the final part.

The contents and organization of the book were also based on her scientific approach; taking the sea as the unifying, ever-present element, her book is organized into three different sections covering distinct marine settings and involving different sea creatures: in section one ("The Edge of the Sea") the shore and the sandling; in section two ("The Gull's Way"), the open sea and the mackerel; and finally, in section three, ("River and Sea"), the deep abyss and the eel. Each particular species, however, by interacting with the others in the marine ecosystem, allows the representation of sea-life to be as wide-ranging as Carson intended.

Does this "expository description of nature", which Lyon refers to as a trait of natural history essays, also fit into a literary design, as he also states (277)? By literary design, he means that facts are described in such a way that they will trigger "some sort of meaning or interpretation" (277). This brief reference, though crucial, falls short of the characteristics that make a text a literary one. Some of these traits, commonly shared by current literary theory,[6] have to do with: a) its formal features as part of the semiotic system — expressivity, delimitation and structure (Aguiar e Silva 562); b) the simultaneous correlation of content and expression, on the one hand, and the urge to communicate (Teles de Menezes 14); c) the use of connotation and the pursuing of an aesthetic formal quest, deliberately turning common language into more artistic forms of expression (15-16); d) the idea of aesthetic pleasure on behalf of the reader (20-22); e) the historical, sociological, anthropological, mythical, symbolic meanings reflected in its semantics; f) the polysemy of literary symbols (Aguiar e Silva 662). These aspects provide a useful framework to clarify the use of the term "literary text" throughout this essay, although it does not discuss each of them in detail.

To begin with, the fact that "Undersea" was first published in *The Atlantic Monthly*,[7] a quality literary magazine of national reputation, already suggests Carson's skills as a writer as well as the potential of the issue addressed. Her writing talent, Lear argues, was also one of the factors that prompted her rising career within the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service ("Introduction" xiii). And Carson herself intended to stray away from the purely scientific, by following the example of the English writer Henry Williamson whom she most admired (xii). Williamson's writings cover a significant range of fields and genres, which accounts for his being described as a "soldier, writer, broadcaster, naturalist, farmer and, above all, visionary writer" by The Henry Williamson Society, a literary and charitable society

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[6] Russian formalism contributed decisively to literary studies, most notably in the field of literary genres, narratology, and the concept of literariness, which emphasised the specific character of the language of the literary text (Paz and Moniz 86; Onega and Landa 23-24).

[7] Renamed *The Atlantic* from 2001 onwards.

dedicated to the study of the writer's life and works (Williamson, "A Writer's Work" n. pg.). Still, his most famous and prestigious book was *Tarka the Otter* (1927), a description of the life of a male otter in the rivers Taw and Torridge and surrounding areas, in North Devon. *Tarka the Otter* is classified as nature writing ("A Life's Work" n. pg.) but its detailed scientific content relies on a story-telling narrative pattern. *Under the Sea-Wind* is also built on the inter-relation of scientific information and narration. According to Lear, the general structure that Carson first envisaged for her work was somewhat inspired by the manner of Williamson (xii). This stage corresponds to the creation of the *fabula* (fable), the general organisation, both chronological and causal, of the events in a story, defined by Russian formalists as opposed to the concept of plot, which, in turn, applies to the aesthetic representation of such events (Reis and Lopes 157). Again, this particular aspect of narrative correlates with the very notion of literary text and is worth mentioning because of the importance of narrative in *Under the Sea-Wind*, as I will discuss below.

Buell's definition of an environmental text is also important when considering this point because it is defined primarily as a literary text; but the criteria he suggests also fit *Under the Sea-Wind*: the most obvious condition is the presence of non-human environment, given that all the narrative takes place in a natural environment, the sea. Other characteristics pointed out by Buell also entail the relation with the human being, namely his interference in the natural world, and the questions of the prevalence of human interest or human accountability. Although humans play a minor role in the narrative framework of Carson's book, the natural world she describes is already touched by them. As she herself states in a letter to Hendrik Van Loon,[8] "Nor must any other human come into it [narration] except from the fishes' viewpoint as a predator and destroyer" (qtd. in Hagood 61). The role of humans is, to whatever extent, threatening to the balance of marine ecosystems and a risk to the beauty and harmony of sea life.

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[8] Hendrik Van Loon was a well-reputed journalist, cultural historian, explorer and illustrator, who first showed great interest in Carson's work after reading her article "Undersea", thus prompting the writing of the complete version, *Under the Sea-Wind* (Lear, "Introduction xviii).

3. The power of narrative

In the letter to Hendrik Van Loon in which Carson mentions what can be considered as the *fabula* of *Under the Sea-Wind*, she already states the primary role of narrative as a device to elude more conventional, scientifically-descriptive nature writing: "(…) the entire book must be written in narrative form (…)" (qtd. in Hagood 61). The term "narrative" refers to a literary mode distinctive from poetry and drama, in the terms defined by Gerard Genette (Reis and Lopes 270), while the term "narration" applies more specifically to the process of narrative telling (247). Also important in a reading of *Under the Sea-Wind* is the meaning of "narration" as opposed to "description". In this dyad, the first term refers to events and to the way they interrelate and develop, while the second conveys more static information, be it about characters, objects, time, or place, thus interrupting the course of events (Reis and Lopes 93, 248). Whereas Carson underscores narrative and narration over description, the latter cannot be neglected, or else scientific content might be poorly supported: "*Under the Sea-Wind* is a series of descriptive narratives unfolding successively the life on the shore, the open sea, and the sea bottom" (Carson, "Foreword" 3). Still, in the same way that description is crucial to content, narrative is essential to define the structure and to complement meaning. The way narrative categories are organised and valued in the construction of *Under the Sea-Wind* is of utmost relevance for the purpose of this analysis, as they contribute decisively to shape the defining pattern of the text, making it depart from a strict scientific format while keeping its scientific content and accuracy. I will thus discuss the use of narrative categories in *Under the Sea-Wind* in more detail.

Narrative categories comprise characters, time, place, plot, narrative perspective, and type of narrator. Time and place provide the basic framework in *Under the Sea-Wind*: we know that a year's time is covered and that the sea life described includes the open sea and the deep sea, starting at a stretch of North Carolina sea coast. Still, place is particularly relevant because it is inextricably linked with facts and scientific content. Also, descriptive features are essential to define it. A good example can be seen in the opening paragraph of the first chapter, "Flood Tide":

> The island lay in shadows only a little deeper than those that were swiftly stealing across the sound from the east. On its western shore the wet sand of the narrow beach caught the same reflection of palely gleaming sky that laid a bright path across the water from island beach to horizon. (6)

This initial excerpt articulates elements from physical landscape and even geographical reference (island, shore, east, western, beach, water) with adjectives and adverbs (wet, narrow, palely, gleaming, bright). These have a dual function: for example, whereas "narrow" gives more specific, though objective, information, "palely gleaming" conveys an aesthetic effect which also discloses further information, about the time of the day.

Throughout the whole book, all the elements that depict physical space contribute to the in-depth representation of the sea, and because all living creatures are part of it, Carson eventually admits to the sea being itself a character:

> In planning the book I was confronted at the very outlet with the problem of a central character. It soon became evident that there was no single animal (…) that could live in all the various parts of the sea I proposed to describe. That problem was instantly solved, however, when I realized that the sea itself must be the central character whether I wished it or not; for the sense of the sea, holding the power of life and death over every one of its creatures from the smallest to the largest, would inevitably pervade every page. ("Foreword" 3)

This sort of considerations reveals Carson's awareness, from the beginning, of concepts from the realm of narratology. The next example links her option as regards characters with that of the narrative point of view: "The fish and the other sea creatures must be central characters and their world must be portrayed as it looks and feels to them — and the narrator must not come into the story or appear to express an opinion" (qtd. in Hagood 61).

Such choices, early considered, are extremely important, for the combination of character and narrator's point of view will enable scientific accuracy through an aesthetic, literary device. In other words, the narrative point of view relies on a third-person, omniscient narrator — a crucial

requisite to convey all the facts that inform the book. In point of fact, and unlike fictional narrative, the portrayal of the characters' world is made possible because of Carson's own investigation and field observation so that here the narrator's knowledge overlaps with that of the scientist.

Also, the narrator's omniscience covers all characters, because they are all equally important to the comprehensive content displayed. The information given, in all its details, aims to represent the atmosphere of the sea, as Carson also says ("Foreword" 3), as well as to give a thorough picture of all the interrelations and the complex tapestry that underlies the cycles of life and death in such a gigantic habitat (Lear, "Introduction" xii) To accomplish that scientific credibility, facts have to be objective, thus excluding all personal, subjective commentary by the narrator, as she explains: "(…) the reader is an observer of events which are narrated with little or no comment" ("Foreword" 3-4). Here, and again, Carson emphasises events (the plot, in terms of narrative category), a core trait of narrative, even if they are consistently supported by description, as shown above.

As far as characters are concerned, their identity, characteristics, and interactions are related with their specific habitat, as the summary of the book structure suggests, but they too comply with an implicit duality, brought together in the narrative: the characters in *Under the Sea-Wind* are all the species dwelling in it, but the main types are transformed into individual living beings, given an identity and a proper name, thus testifying to the writer's intention of creating a text that would give scientific information, while also resembling a fictional one. Proper names appear capitalized and in singular form and derive either from physical characteristics, as is the case with the sandling (Blackfoot and Silverbar), or from the very scientific names of the species they represent, as happens with Scomber, the mackerel (*Scomber scombrus*) and with Anguilla, the eel (*genus Anguilla*, a type of eel). There are further examples: Rynchops, the black skimmer, Pandion, an osprey, Cynoscion, a trout, Lophius, the angler fish, to cite but a few.

A crucial category of narrative, a character conveys meaning or even embodies it not only through proper name, but also by means of characterization and speech (Reis and Lopes 316). Because the characters in *Under the Sea-Wind* are real animals, they are deprived of speech, and

characterisation is limited to physical traits and behaviour, which, in turn, deeply correlate with the plot. Carson, however, makes up for these restrictions by selecting language that brings them closer to human feelings or condition, for example: "Of all the food of the tide zone they loved best these small, egg-shaped crabs" (25), or "Like the older sanderlings, Silverbar had changed her winter plumage of pearly grey for a mantle heavily splashed with cinnamon and rust, the colours worn by all sanderlings on their return (…)" (25). This regular pattern throughout the whole book relies on the ambivalence of the chosen words, as if "love" or "wear" actually express the animals' feelings or conscious decision to do something.

For Lear, this narrative strategy was a means to make characters more real and their behaviour more understandable for readers. To achieve such a purpose, characters were given certain human traits or expressions, which would not be acceptable in a purely scientific text. Even so, Lear considers that coming this close to anthropomorphism, though risky, does not affect negatively the representation of the animal world ("Introduction" xvii).

Observing the behaviour of sea animals indeed allowed the writer (and scientist) to represent it in narrative. In line with Lear's reflection, the process is explained by Carson herself. Unable to know the feeling of fear in a fish, she infers from the way he acts that he is fearful: "[a fish] behaves as though he were frightened. With the fish, the response is primarily physical" ("Foreword" xvii).

In any event, this sort of character may fall into the broader classification introduced by structuralism, namely with Propp and Greimas, who extended the category beyond human beings, thus taking in animals or abstract ideas. In light of this, the new word "actant" (Reis and Lopes 18, 315-6) that Greimas borrowed from Tesnière applies to the one who does the action or is affected by it (18), a concept that seems to fit the living creatures in *Under the Sea-Wind*. Furthermore, the idea of internal verisimilitude that Russian formalism proposed for the study of characters is in keeping with the development of events in Carson's narrative, for this theory highlights how the character's actions (whatever entity that character might be) rely on the web of interrelations that connect it (or him or her) to all the other characters (Reis and Lopes 316). In light of biology studies, this is what happens in any ecosystem where struggle for life depends on the interrelation of all beings, in terms of food, habitat/shelter or repro-

duction, for example — the central point often stated by Carson herself when describing *Under the Sea-Wind*. Here, the lives of characters are narrated over the course of the book in terms of their interaction with the environment, which obviously includes all other living beings there. Carson herself considers this account of the sea creatures' lives as biographies: "I have written the biography of a mackerel, beginning, as biographies usually do, with the birth of my central character" ("Memo to Mrs. Eales" 58) Hagood also uses the term "biological biographies" (61). The animals' life paths are narrated with all the typical landmarks: birth, growth, struggle for survival, reproduction and death, a representative part of the more wide-ranging "biography of the ocean" which, in Lear's words, defines the body of Carson's writings (Lear, "Rachel Carson's Biography" n. pg.).

Such types of characters, no matter the narrative strategies mentioned above, rely most heavily on another category, plot, which is, again, deeply connected with space. Events are biographical, shaped by time, place and all characters, but telling them through past tenses is an important device in *Under the Sea-Wind*. Grammatically, the present simple tense is usually used to describe scientifically evident facts, such as the ones presented in *Under the Sea-Wind.* This tense often implies a repetitive pattern, consistent enough to allow for scientific generalizations and conclusions. However, even if scientific truth constitutes the backbone of the story, Carson rejects the use of the present and replaces it with past tenses. As with proper names, she intends to make her story seem unique, as if what she is telling had happened only once. Using past forms (simple, perfect, continuous) marks the tone of the text, giving it an air of fiction and the format of story-telling, both much more effective in capturing the reader's attention and bringing him closer to the heart of sea life: "About the time the tide was midway to the flood, a wave of motion stroked the tops of the grasses above the terrapin egg bed, as though a breeze passed, but there was little wind that night. The grasses above the sand bed parted" (*Under* 14).

Literary theory defines style as the writer's characteristic way of saying things, through a particular choice of words, rhetorical devices and structure (Cuddon 922): Carson's style in *Under the Sea-Wind* is achieved through the blurring of narration and description, but her use of language goes further into literary features, for example by making use of images and rhetorical devices such as images or metaphors ("(…) [the skimmer]

(…) bringing his dark form into strong silhouette against the gray sheet (…)", "(…) the whisper song of the water (…)" (*Under* 9), "soft tinkling sounds" (12), "the steep face of the rock was green with the soft fronds of mosses that grew where their leaves escaped the flow of water (…)" (133). Interestingly, though, these typical devices serve a dual purpose: creating an aesthetic effect (one of the traits of the literary text, as mentioned earlier),[9] and providing information that is as complete as possible.

That she opted for narrative as a common bond that interweaves all other elements in the narrative, be it scientific or literary, suggests Carson's will to make the book readable to a larger and more diverse public of readers than a strictly scientific book might be. From an aesthetic perspective, narrative appears as a powerful weapon to convey information — story-telling being, from the beginning of times, an effective means of communicating, teaching and learning, as *Genesis* or folk tales notably account for (Reis and Lopes, 80, 83-5). At the time of its publication, this merit was overlooked and the much acclaimed *The Sea Around Us* follows a diverse pattern. Although rich in language and style, it is clearly a scientific book.[10] At a time when environmental concerns were barely felt, the potential of Carson's innovative endeavor was not valued and its pedagogical, democratizing role was only recovered years later. "To what extent?" is a question that still invites some reflection.

4. "To what end is nature" (writing)?

Using a literary style to convey information from natural history helps define Carson's personal response to nature. Although it derives firstly from observation and scientific investigation, it is also, to a great degree, shaped by the sense of wonder that nature inspired in her and which,

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[9] In section two, characteristics of a literary text.

[10] The opening paragraph of *The Sea Around Us* already makes this clear: "Beginnings are apt to be shadowy, and so it is with the beginnings of the great mother of life, the sea. Many people have debated how and when the earth got its ocean, and it is not surprising that their explanations do not always agree (…)" (9).

not accidentally, became the title of her last book, published posthumously, in 1965.[11]

Threats to the beauty and to the balance of the natural world are more openly addressed in Carson's ensuing works, but the references to human action or mere existence in *Under the Sea-Wind*, though minor, always account for some sort of deviation from the otherwise natural course of events. Struggle for survival may become even harder, whenever sea animals encounter human beings or their artifacts, for the most part related to fishery or construction, for example when fish get caught in nets set by fishermen (14) or when some sort of concrete construction, for example a dock, interferes with their movement (12).

As pointed out earlier, in terms of classification, this specific trait allows *Under the Sea-Wind* to be considered an "environmental text", according to Buell's definition, which not only intertwines human history and natural history, but also suggests human accountability and the idea that the interest that humans have is not the only legitimate interest (Buell 7). In Carson's book, this idea that the human interest is not of predominant importance is implied in the very "*fabula*", concerned as it is about sea creatures and their lives. Human responsibility, however, is not portrayed in clearly critical terms. Instead, it is shown to the reader through objective evidence. No criticism is expressed, because as Carson herself stated, all is narrated as if from the point of view of the animals and based solely on their behavior (Lear, "Introduction xvii). Equally important is what this narrative point of view contributes in terms of environmental significance. By pointing out that human presence is reported in the narrative solely as seen from the fishes' viewpoint, as predator and destroyer (Hagood 61), she suggests man's equal role to all other marine species in the food chain. Shoko and Shiori, in an article about Rachel Carson and nature writing, maintain that even when human beings kill animals, they do it as predators just like any other species, being considered on equal terms with all living creatures in nature (16). However, Shoko and Shiori also argue that human intervention in this process highlights the terror or the suffering of animals in the process of being caught or killed, especially

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[11] *The Sense of Wonder*, New York: Open Road, 2011.

because of this being told from the perspective of the sea animals (18). Furthermore, because human beings in the story are also represented from their perspective, there is no room for open criticism (18). These considerations are substantially relevant inasmuch as they reinforce the importance of narrative viewpoint in the construction of meaning, and also because despite the fact that such a narrative device leaves out open commentary on man's role in nature, the idea that man disrupts the natural balance of the world still underlies the narration of events. Another relevant point must be added: however much Carson may have intended to suggest the equal role of human beings and other species in nature, she is obviously aware of the fact that consciousness and free will, which the first have, places them in an advantageous position in the food chain. This aspect is of utmost importance to the discussion of the environmental character of *Under the Sea-Wind*.

Relying on the sea animals' behavior to attain a sort of interpretation of its meaning has enabled some flexibility in terms of word choice. Words or expressions like "dimly remembered" (12), "love", "prefer" (15), are reliable in terms of scientific truth and of the species' narrative point of view; also, they belong to a lexical framework that applies to humans, too, thus creating a certain proximity and empathy with the reader. However, it would not be possible, for the sake of narrative verisimilitude, to accommodate open critical commentary. Even so, ecological awareness clearly underlies *Under the Sea-Wind.* According to Hagood, the fact that *Under the Sea-Wind* foregrounds "the idea of an interdependent community of living species" already hints at an ecological aesthetic, representative of Carson's ecocentric vision of the world (61). From Hagood's perspective, the effect of unity and harmony that the intertwined narrative of the three biographies in the book achieves is disrupted by human presence. This represents "a self-conscious gesture toward a new kind of nature writing" (61). In Lyon's taxonomy, what he maintains about *The Sea Around Us* applies likewise to *Under the Sea-Wind*, thus being in harmony with Hagood's thesis: "(…) [Carson] arranged the facts of oceanography and marine tellingly, so that the drama and interplay of forces pointed inescapably toward a holistic, ecological view of nature" (277). One may draw the conclusion, therefore, that objective facts and the way they are articulated in the narrative development speak for

themselves and make up for the absence of an explicit environmental speech, which would not fit with the structure of *Under the Sea-Wind*.

In addition, the acknowledgement of environmental characteristics in *Under the Sea-Wind* resonates with Lyon's taxonomy in a broader sense. As Lyon moves rightwards in his spectrum of nature writing, the categories that follow "Natural History Essays", under which he placed *The Sea Around Us*, rely on a few distinguishing traits that are worth considering, for example: (1) essays of experience, in which the writer's direct contact with nature provides the setting for the writing (279), and (2) works focused on man's role in nature, based predominantly on interpretation and falling into the scope of philosophical reflection also due to their more abstract, analytical and scholarly tone (280). *Under the Sea-Wind* may be considered an essay of experience, inasmuch as the scientific facts that provide the book content, the story plot, are based to a significant extent on Carson's first-hand contact with the sea world, through her in-field outings, observation and data-gathering. As regards the next category mentioned, works placed under "Man's role in nature", *Under the Sea-Wind* clearly departs from their formal characteristics and style, but still expresses a fundamental interrogation, that of the interaction of man and the natural world. Again, this idea converges with the reading of *Under the Sea-Wind* from an environmental perspective.

An ecocentric environmental mindset, however, may be considered as falling short of humanist concerns. Hagood points out that Carson's "ecocentric preference for the survival of species over the welfare of individual lives" (62) is one of the factors that contributed to the little success the book had when it was first published, as the socioeconomic context of the post-Depression period in America made preoccupations with man's own survival and his well-being much more poignant than that of all the other species (62). She further supports her argument with the ending of the book, where the sea in all its magnificence is bound to conquer land and civilization (62).

Nevertheless, the powerful image that has prompted this line of criticism ("and once more all the coast would be water again, and the places of its cities and towns belong to the sea" (271) invites a diversity of interpretations. The literary characteristics of the text allow an understanding of its symbolism — rather than an eschatological prediction of science-

fiction contour. The final sentence reads as a hyperbole of the beauty of the sea and of its core role in all forms of life, a claim for the preservation of sea life. In this sense, and taken from a twenty-first century perspective, this reads as a metaphor of a call for attention, all the more coherent with the purposes of an environmental text. Hagood herself comes to the conclusion that *Under the Sea-Wind* raises the issue of the significance of human life relative to the life of the ocean (62), which is in accordance with the metaphorical reading of the ending of the book that I suggest.

However, this work goes beyond "ecological literacy" (Hagood 62), for literacy refers to knowledge; but knowledge is a means to a greater end, that of making science understandable to common people. By doing so, a pedagogical effect was achieved: planting the seed of environmental awareness. As pointed out earlier, such sympathy resulted from the democratizing aesthetics on which *Under the Sea-Wind* relies. It must be noted, though, that the true environmental character of *Under the Sea-Wind* only became conspicuous in light of Carson's ensuing books and as the natural world became progressively endangered due to human action.

When Emerson, more than a century before, asked "To what end is nature?" (1), the changes imposed on nature by man were far from being considered threatening. On the contrary, in section two of his seminal essay "Nature", "Commodity", he states the role of nature as "steady and prodigal provision" (7), making clear that nature is for the "profit of man" (8). Had Emerson been able to witness where that "mercenary benefit" (9) would take us to, his reflection on that particular score would probably have been different, for nature was also beauty, and beauty prompts aesthetic delight and cannot be destroyed. Hence, this fundamental, timeless idea reverberates in Carson's thought and writings. Nature is primarily there to love and to admire. Nature writing is to spread word of it, so that it may remain lovable and admirable by human beings.

Conclusion

Environmental literary studies developed more consistently in the mid-eighties, (Glotfelty xvii), bringing environmental awareness and concerns to the realm of literature and making this relationship, in all its diversity, the object of academic investigation. Thus, the concept of ecocriticism as

a specific field of study emerged, broadly speaking, as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Ecocriticism has most obviously evolved from the dramatic changes in the natural world, as a response to the growing environmental awareness that started to pervade all sectors of society, namely from the seventies onwards.

Silent Spring opened avenues for reflection on the role of man in nature and led to concrete action. But, more than being its predecessor, *Under the Sea-Wind* can now be read as a more relevant text from the standpoint of ecocriticism, departing as it does from a scientific framework.

In a nutshell, *Under the Sea-Wind* is a fine example of nature writing that testifies to the eclecticism and richness of the genre, depicting a view of nature based not only on knowledge, but also on love and beauty. As Lear mentions in her renowned biography of Carson, from an early age she had "a feeling of absolute fascination for everything related the ocean" (*Rachel Carson: Witness*… 8). Clearly, this aesthetic momentum prompted her search for knowledge as well the willingness to share it on a wider scale. Moreover, that beauty and knowledge form a conceptual dyad in her vision of the natural world, or even of the whole world, is a key notion to understanding Carson's work and thought. In the "Foreword" to *Under the Sea-Wind*, this central idea is exposed in a poetic tone:

> To stand at the edge of the sea, to sense the ebb and the flow of tides, to feel the breadth of a mist moving over a great salt marsh, to watch the flight of shore birds that have swept up and down the surf lines of the continents for untold thousands of years, to see the running of the old eels and the young shad to the sea, is to have knowledge of things that are as nearly eternal as any earthly life can be. (xxi)

To share her view, Carson wrote *Under the Sea-Wind* as a literary narrative: non-fictional in content, as its scientific character demanded, but relying on as many traits of a purely literary text, some of them common to fictional ones, as possible. This aesthetic embodies an environmental message, that of taking us "on a journey with the intent to change our attitudes about our relationship with the natural world", as Lear defines the primary and common nature of Carson's work ("Introduction" xvi). This aim is made easier by the democratizing potential of *Under the Sea-*

Wind to reach out to each and every one as it does, thus enhancing its pedagogical efficacy. Furthermore, from a twenty-first century standpoint, Carson's first book calls for more challenging and far-reaching uses of the story, adding her synthesis of beauty and knowledge to the realm of the more scientific and pragmatic side of environmental debate and inviting further reflection on the way sciences and humanities interact so as to face modern-day threats.

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Abstract

Rachel Carson's work is best known in the fields of marine science and environmentalism, due especially to the prominence of *Silent Spring* (1962), in which she describes the threat posed to the natural world by the use of pesticides, thus challenging American policies on environmental practices. Though lesser known, Carson's other writings are also important, not only because of their representation of nature, but also in terms of their genre and style, which attempt at merging scientific content and literary expression. This essay discusses the relevance of Carson's first book, *Under the Sea-Wind* (1941), in terms of nature and environmental writing. It considers how the book's scientific and literary aspects correlate, with particular emphasis on the writer's use of narrative. Finally, the essay also addresses the contribution of Carson's environmental aesthetics to an environmental pedagogy.

Keywords

Environmental writing; literary text; narrative; nature writing; *Under the Sea-Wind*

Resumo

A obra de Rachel Carson é conhecida, essencialmente, no campo da ciência (em especial, da biologia marítima) e dos movimentos ambientalistas, de que o seu livro *Silent Spring* (1962) é emblemático. Nele, a autora denuncia a ameaça da indústria de pesticidas, desafiando as políticas da época em relação a questões ambientais, nos Estados Unidos. Outros livros de Carson, embora menos conhecidos, são também relevantes, quer pela representação da natureza que oferecem, quer em termos de género literário e de estilo de escrita, buscando a fusão entre conteúdo científico e expressão literária. Neste ensaio é analisada a importância do primeiro livro da autora, *Under the Sea-Wind* (1941), no plano da escrita da natureza e ambiental. Propõe-se uma análise da correlação entre as dimensões científica e literária, com particular destaque para a utilização do modo narrativo. É ainda ponderado o contributo desta estética ambiental para uma pedagogia ambiental.

Palavras-Chave

Escrita ambiental; Escrita da natureza; narrativa; texto literário; *Under the Sea-Wind*

Emerson in the Star Garden: Writing and the Sensuous World

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ISSN: 0873-0628 ANGLO SAXONICA SER. III N. 12 2016

Emerson in the Star Garden: Writing and the Sensuous World

> The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another.
>
> William James

> What right have you to take the word "wealth" which originally meant "well-being" and degrade and narrow it by confining it to certain sorts of material objects measured by money.
>
> John Ruskin

For as long as I can remember, I have appreciated, to the point of longing for it, a particular quality of time I think of as languidness. Related to music, it would be a slow tempo, adagio maybe, or even lento itself. In writing "Emerson in the Star Garden", my objective — my desire — was to explore the nature of this appreciation, especially in its relationship to nature itself, as found not only in the country, but also in urban settings, in this case Lisbon's "Jardim da Estrela". In a sense, the writing was a meditative ode to the park, both the park as an "objective" Lisbon environment and as "subjective" terrain, the terrain of my personal history, dating back to my first year in Lisbon, in the mid-90s, roughly twenty years ago.

In my subjective world, the park represents, as parks do for many, a state or states of well-being, not in the sense of my having experienced these more during my first year in Lisbon than now — in fact, the contrary — but in the sense of it serving as a sanctuary in my memory and imagination, one that I find valuable to return to. As a sanctuary, it allows for an uninhibited flow of thoughts that can be charted and travelled through freely; it is both a peaceful and a creative mental space.

The following text is partly an exploration of the nature and qualities of this subjective space, a place where time is experienced as slow and well-being is cultivated. More explicitly it aims to offer a psychotherapeutic perspective on this inner landscape, derived from my practice as a psychotherapist and from Eastern sources of therapy/thinking, including mindfulness as related to the environment. My essay will draw on the work of the Hungarian-American scientist and writer Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who has investigated and written about states of optimal experience; on the writer Eva Hoffman's work on time and memory and the travel writer and essayist Pico Iyer's writing about time and movement. This essay also aims to focus on the writing process itself and how writing about the past — collecting and connecting parts and pieces of one's past self using words as tools — handling them — can be therapeutic.

1. Nature and Interconnectedness

"Emerson in the Star Garden" began with a 2015 conference at the University of Lisbon entitled "Naturally Emerson". According to Ralph Waldo Emerson's biographer Robert Richardson, one of the writer and theologian's life altering insights took place in a park: Paris' "Jardin des Plantes". The year was 1833, just three years prior to the publishing of his most well-known text, "Nature" (1836), when he made his first trip to Europe. "Emerson", writes Richardson, "was moved by the organization of plants according to Jussieu's system of classification and the way all such objects were related and connected" (Richardson 143). His belief in the interconnectedness of all things was fundamental to his spiritual transcendentalism, as when in "Nature" he writes the much quoted phrase: "standing on the bare ground, my head bathed in the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and particle of God".[1]

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[1] Ralph Waldo Emerson. "Nature." 1836. *Emerson Central.* http//www.emerson central.com/texts.htm. Last accessed: August 2, 2016.

These words of Emerson's bear echoes of the Swedish philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), whose philosophy had a significant influence on the American writer. Emerson admired Swedenborg's ability to marry mysticism with science. He saw Swedenborg as a "metaphysical scientist", through his attempt to unify the realm of spirit with the expanding world of material science, viewing the two as interdependent and intertwined. It is interesting to note that when Emerson was in Paris' "Jardin des Plantes" in 1833, struck by Jussieu's scientific classifications, pondering their relationship to the spiritual, the word "scientist" was itself just being coined by the English polymath William Whewell. It is also interesting to witness the current twenty-first-century controversy surrounding such thinkers as Rupert Sheldrake and Graham Hancock, who posit that consciousness is nonlocal (a concept akin to Jung's collective unconscious), and whose questioning of the relationship between the brain and mind is frequently discredited as "pseudoscience". Their focus on spirit chimes in many ways with Swedenborg and Emerson's mysticism.

Hermann Hesse (1877-1962), another northern European thinker who, like Swedenborg, was influenced by eastern mysticism, had a similar belief in the interconnectedness of all things. As an adolescent searching for meaning, I became fascinated with his books and several years ago came across a passage I had particularly liked and had copied down in a notebook. I began my essay with this passage taken from Hesse's short novel *Journey to the East* (1932): "My happiness did indeed arise from the same happiness as the happiness in dreams; it arose from the freedom to experience everything imaginable simultaneously, to express inward and outward easily, to move time and space about like scenes in a theatre" (Hesse 28). The happiness Hesse describes is similar to Emerson's circulating currents of Universal Being, articulated, in particular, in his essay "Circles" in that it arises from a state of free movement or flow. It is this state of being that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi relates to states of happiness and optimal well-being.

In *Flow* (1992), Csikszentmihalyi proposes that optimal experience is achieved by the ability to control what happens in consciousness, moment by moment, in other words, that "the control of consciousness determines the quality of experience" (30). His words reformulate the statement by William James, quoted at the beginning of this essay, that

"the greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another".[2]

Csikszentmihalyi describes intentions as the force that keeps information in consciousness ordered. Functioning as "attentional" structures, they focus us. When we become absorbed by them, we forget ourselves, entering the state of well-being that he calls flow (his choice of the word stems from people he interviewed in the 1970s, using the metaphor of water carrying them along when describing their experiences; they felt taken by an external force synchronicitous with their attentive focusing). As he states,

> When one is in the flow state, he or she is completely engrossed with the one task at hand and, without making the conscious decision to do so, loses awareness of all other things: time, people, distractions and even basic bodily needs. This occurs because all the attention of the person in the flow state is on the task at hand; there is no more attention to be allocated. (*Optimal Experience* 19)

It is the stimulating movement of this flow that I associate with the slow movement of walking or wandering in nature and to strolling through a park. With the only task at hand a sustained openness to the surrounding environment of the park, and to moving through it, external pressures are absent and internal ones, or stresses, including those of excessive thinking and self-consciousness, exert less influence. Pressurized thinking is replaced by the sensory input of the moment: the smells of flowers and other vegetation, of the earth when wet, on qualities of light, on the feel of the air, on surrounding sounds. Nature is not an agent that intrudes upon the mind in the sense of actively or consciously influencing it (or, as Emerson writes in "Nature", "nature never wears a mean appearance"[3] and as it is a domain without language and the thought processes that accompany it, the outdoors provides a context for a type of connection and focus that is

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[2] William James. "The Varieties of Religious Experience." 1902. 2016Xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/WJAMES/cover.html. Last accessed: September 26, 2016.

[3] Ralph Waldo Emerson. "Nature." 1836. *Emerson Central.* http//www.emersoncentral.com/texts.htm. Last accessed: August 2, 2016.

freer than other environments. It was direct experience with nature that Emerson expounded, writing of the importance of going out into solitude, leaving both one's home and society behind. This connection with nature he considered "daily food" — a spiritual connection he described in "Nature" as "intercourse with heaven and earth".[4]

But how exactly to define and explain nature as it is found specifically in a park? In contemporary environmentalism and ecology, the concept of nature itself is being questioned on various fronts. With the genetic modification of plants, for example, doubts arise as to what extent a given plant is to be considered natural. Other interrogations are formulated about the difference between wild nature and wilderness. These distinctions are articulated with particular refinement by the poet and thinker Gary Snyder in his essay "The Etiquette of Freedom", which describes wild nature as being something that can be found almost anywhere, in cities, for instance, and in parks. It is everywhere, including within our bodies.

However, the most incisive question concerns the relationship between culture and nature, which is evolving from a binary opposition towards a more fluid and complex concept. Our present day, Western concept of nature has been founded on Greek dualism: people and the rest, and within this dualism nature has been considered an external space and something to control. From Newton's divine order through to Descartes' systematic method, nature has been considered separate from that which is human; indeed, there has been a hyperseparation between the two. But culture cannot always be separated from nature: take into consideration the "Jardim da Estrela": there is a café and a gazebo in the park, concerts and craft fairs that are an integral part of it, too. Boundaries blur. Contemporary notions of culture, such as those espoused by such thinkers as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, relate culture to the mundane — to quotidian ways of life as well as to forms of signification, such as films and media, that circulate within a society. In *Culture and Society* (1961), Williams writes, for instance, that "culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind" (93). With such conceptualizations, we can understand culture as being thoroughly present in a park.

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[4] Ibid.

Indeed, in contemporary articulations of nature, human beings are no longer viewed as being separate from their environments, but interdependent. In *The Natural Alien* (1985), the environmentalist Neil Evernden, whose views on the nonlocal have affinities with those of the previously mentioned Sheldrake and Hancock, conceptualizes individuals as fields extending beyond the sharp boundaries of our/their bodies and minds and intertwined with the external sensuous world. As he proposes, "if we were to regard ourselves as 'fields of care' rather than as discrete objects in a natural environment, our understanding of our relationship to the world might be fundamentally changed" (47). Similarly, David Abrams in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1997) writes of this intermingling of the human and the non-human. From his perspective, the non-human has its own multiple intelligences which are deeply connected and consanguineous with the human, as when he writes that:

> The cycling of the human back into the larger world ensures that the other forms of experience that we encounter — whether ants, or willow trees, or clouds — are never really alien to ourselves. Despite the obvious difference in shape and ability, and style of being, they remain at least distantly familiar, even familial. It is, paradoxically, this perceived kinship or consanguinity that renders the difference, or otherness, so eerily potent. (7)

It was within this framework of nature (again, Emerson's mindset, as he refers in "Nature" to an "occult relation between man and vegetable"[5], and specifically the Estrela Park in Lisbon, as a sensuous world of interconnectedness, that my writing was situated. Not only did I think of the park as an interconnected environment of humans and nature, in which all life shares sap or blood, but as a site multilayered in time and generations, with the past existing virtually simultaneously, tangentially and even palpably, alongside the present. I perceived time as multi-dimensional, possessing depth usually associated with the visual, rather than linear. In a park, people of all ages coexist: babies in strollers, young couples arm in arm, the elderly with canes. And from all walks of life. Moreover, within the microcosm of

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[5] Ibid.

a park, multiple generations of people, engaged in the same languorous movements, can be easily evoked by the imagination, bringing multiple pasts into the present. And in a park being itself of the essence — BEING, rather than being in transit, being rather than doing. A park more than almost anywhere else, apart from in the wilderness, lends itself to timeless, eternal, existential states. It invites wandering, both physical and mental, and the mental wandering can lead a person through pathways of memory.

In this way, parks lend themselves to contemplation — to allowing memory and the imagination to travel freely. It is when the external environment is non-invasive, unintrusive and slow, that subjective spaces can flourish; a sense of internal expansiveness is fostered and develops through the removal of external pressures. Going further, when internal pressures are also removed — excessive figuring out, judging, calculating and determining — excessive thinking — there is more opportunity to be mindful and consciously choose, as William James proposed, one thought over another: there is more internal silence.

2. Acceleration and Technology: The Non-Sensual World

Back in the mid-1900s, the exceptionally declarative Gertrude Stein stated "the twentieth century is movement" (153). Hers was a world in the wake of industrialization. Earlier on, Walt Whitman had written in *Democratic Vistas* (1871) about the excesses of industrialization, just as nowadays others are writing about the excesses of technology, including those of acceleration. With technology: the internet, texting, Instagram, apps, online banking, booking and buying, communication is virtually instantaneous. Through computers and smart phones, we ceaselessly receive swiftly moving information that travels at constantly accelerating speeds. We are behooved to actively engage in the blocking or damming of incoming barrages or onslaughts of disembodied data in order not to be submerged. In the past couple of years, the word "overwhelm" has expanded beyond its borders as a verb and taken on the weight of a noun describing a condition.

What becomes of our subjective spaces when they are incessantly imposed upon — invaded? They need to be actively cared for — weeded and pruned — in order for certain types of thinking, creative, free-flowing, for example, to be cultivated, like carefully chosen plants. Inner silence

— the peace that lies between thoughts and the foundation for certain varieties of thinking that silence enables — becomes more difficult to achieve. Just as in an oak wood there may be more than 1000 species, there are within us, as Walt Whitman so famously put it, "multitudes"; yet, how to access them — how to access memories, for instance, amidst incoming interruptions? If the terrain of memory is everything that has existed prior to the present, what opportunities exist to travel through it amidst an excess of disorienting incoming data? As Milan Kundera wrote in his novella *Slowness* (1995), "When things happen too fast, nobody can be certain about anything, about anything at all, not even about himself" (qtd. in Honoré 8). The self, in fact, becomes fragmented. Health problems, such as attention-deficit disorder, can be one result, as can identity-related confusion, not to mention stress itself

In *The Art of Stillness* (2014), Pico Iyer refers to research in the new field of interruption science which has concluded that it takes an average of twenty-five minutes to recover from a phone call, with such interruptions typically occurring every eleven minutes. This means, as he writes:

> We're never caught up with our lives. And the more facts come streaming in on us, the less time we have to process any of them. The one thing technology doesn't provide us with is the sense of how to make the best use of technology. Put another way, the ability to gather information, which used to be so crucial, is now far less important than the ability to sift through it. (41)

Or, as Eva Hoffmann puts it in her book *Time* (2011), "In the long run, if we do not give ourselves time to process our experiences, and allow immediate perceptions to settle into memories, the brain — so some researchers speculate — may actually become more dispersed and 'superficial' in its mappings, losing some of its deeper connectivity and experience-shaping powers" (80). She refers to attention deficit-disorder, an increasingly common health condition mentioned earlier, whose symptoms, or causes, she writes,

> Have to do, essentially, with the decrease of tolerance for sustained units of time. …Computer time, which is increasingly the medium in which we live, functions in nanoseconds

> and is making hitherto unimaginable speeds concrete. It is habituating us to ever faster and shorter units of thought and perception, and to focus on the immediate present. (12)

It was as a reaction to excessive acceleration, and specifically to the opening of a fast food restaurant in Italy (the opening of a McDonald's in Piazza di Spagna in Rome), that what is called the "Slow Movement" developed in Italy in the 1980s. The movement was founded on the belief that every living being, event, process or object has its own inherent time or pace, its own "tempo guisto". Eating and drinking, for instance, are best done slowly; similarly, building relationships, gardening, and creative thinking. Other activities are suited to speed: airline travel, sports, using the internet. The "Slow Movement" encourages consciousness around time and an awareness of dimensions of time beyond the linear and chronological. One such dimension is that which the ancient Greeks called *Kairos* — a concept of time that is qualitative rather than quantitative and sequential. It is time in which moments are of an indefinite duration, in which everything can happen, a time of fullness. Similarly, the Japanese have the concept of *ichi-go ichi-e*, which means "one time, one meeting" and expresses a cherishing of time and of treasured meetings. Both share a belief in time mattering almost in the sense of it having matter, or substance, however ephemeral, itself.

3. Taking Time to Process Experience: Engaging in the Sensual World

In writing "Emerson in the Star Garden", I wanted to explore the pleasure of inhabiting, of dwelling in time — the qualitative time of *kairos* and *ichi-go ichi –e*. My desire was for spacious time more than for space itself. Big places have never mattered to me as much as long, slowly unwinding DNA-laden spirally tissues of inner time; that is to say, time as encoded in memory, spanning one's lifetime, and even those of previous generations, at least one's knowledge or experience of them. This is what Eva Hoffman writes of when she describes experiential time during which we can process the flux of life and enjoy the experience of plenitude. She describes it as being accompanied by "qualia", the name scientists give to individual instances of subjective, conscious experience, its qualities and textures. As she writes,

> Each moment within ourselves is sensually and affectively constructed. But if we are not to be creatures of the moment, driven — or riven — by impulses we don't understand, we also need to make sense of the psychic flux, and to make links between our felt past and lived present; and this cannot be accomplished without the more over-arching processes of introspection, self-examination and reflection. Above all, the construction of the more extended time within us happens through the unpredictable, often digressive, sometimes involuntary, processes of affective memory. (It was the taste of a small cake that brought back to Proust the sensuously detailed expanses of the past, and gave him his great opus. No wonder he was a great believer in involuntary memory. (105)

She describes it further as "a predisposition to value purely personal and intimate experience, and to savour the textures of that experience; a predilection for a kind of pensiveness, for musing on small things, and reflecting on larger ones. In other words, a predilection for taking one's time about the flow of living" (3-4).

Certain slow-moving activities lend themselves to the experience of inner, subjective experience that Hoffman describes, among them, strolling, meditating and engaging in creative work, such as painting and other forms of art, crafts and various forms of manual work that focus the body and allow the mind free movement. These include activities like boat building, mechanics, knitting and gardening, when the hands are engaged in repetitive movements. The poet and singer Leonard Cohen describes the engagement that comes with connecting with one's inner world, in his case through meditation, not as empty and austere, as we often imagine meditating to be, but as "luxurious and sumptuous … real, profound and voluptuous and delicious entertainment. The real feast that is available within this activity" (qtd. in Iyer 3).

4. Autobiographical Creative Writing

In looking at the subject of taking the time to process experiences, I would like to focus specifically now on how this takes place within the practice of autobiographical creative writing. Amidst the myriad ways to process

experiences, ranging from thinking to verbal articulation, including conversation and psychotherapy, to the creation of art, writing is one means. In the following section, I will examine the particular ways in which it raises awareness of past experiences and transforms them, resulting, potentially, in a "coming to terms with", or a "state of grace or peace". In relation to "Emerson in the Star Garden", I will do this through examining my own experience of writing in and about the Estrela Park.

As stated earlier, I lived in the neighbourhood of the "Jardim da Estrela" during a six-month period in the mid-1990s. Twenty years later, in 2015, I wrote a piece of creative non-fiction inspired in part by my experiences there and in part by the reframing of them in response to the University of Lisbon's *Naturally Emerson* conference. The inspiration came not from the six-month period, a time that was more exceptional than others in my life, but from my identifying positive elements specific to that period and revisiting them through writing. Some of the positive elements were related to the experience of being in the park and others to features of my life itself, past and present. The *Naturally Emerson* conference provided a frame for my experience in that it reconnected me with Emerson, whom I had felt an affinity with when I had first encountered him, decades ago, through an unused pile of textbooks in a high school English classroom. I still have the copy of *Polarized Man* (1973), given to me by my teacher and with an Emerson quote I had liked highlighted with a pencil: "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind" ("Self-Reliance"[6]).

From January 1994 until July of the same year my mornings were largely free as the teaching I was doing at the time normally began during or after the lunch hour. I developed a routine of walking to the park and settling myself in the café adjacent to one of its small ponds to write for a couple of hours. I usually took just a notebook and pen but sometimes a book as well or something else to read. When the weather was pleasant, as it often was, I would sit outside and nurse a milky coffee in sight of the ducks whose movements and beauty captured my attention. I was taken

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[6] Ralph Waldo Emerson. "Self-Reliance." 1841. *Emerson Central.* http//www.emerson central.com/texts.htm. Last accessed: August 2, 2016.

by the emerald shine of the mallards and mesmerised by the precise way in which they sliced through the water as they left the edge of the pond. I found it curious, too, the way the males darted after the dull coloured females and sometimes tried to push their heads under water as part of their mating rituals. Gradually, I would divert my thoughts from this external world and enter my own subjective world via my notebook and pen. I cannot remember what I wrote back then, but I know that it was a way of revisiting recent experiences and processing them more than about more distant past experiences or developing stories. I was in a city that was new to me, building new relationships, learning a new language and settling in: there were a great many new elements entering my life within a very short span of time. At the end of the two hours, I would be in a more fortified, uplifted state of mind than the one I had been in when I had arrived, thanks to taking the time to look inwards, reflect and attempt to understand.

The writing I did then was largely loose, spontaneous and unformed. I remember someone I had spoken with before my travels to Portugal advising me to "wear my trip like a loose garment", a phrase I had liked, and in a sense my writing in the park was that way too: I was not trying to cut and hem it into shape. It was the writing Julia Cameron named "morning pages" in her influential book *The Artist's Way* (1992), a book I had not read at the time but that I felt an affinity with when introduced to it later. Similarly, when new to Portugal and introduced to the writing of Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935), I felt an affinity with the intensely personal, unformed fragments of his *Book of Disquiet* (1982). But twenty years on, when I wrote "Emerson in the Star Garden", my writing needs and processes were different: I DID want to cut, adjust and re-sew. Forming what I wrote mattered to me.

The act of forming, and structuring content was, and continues to be, important because of its transformational qualities, which I believe are also empowering ones. While loose free writing, of the kind I did twenty years ago — so called morning pages writing — possesses these characteristics, too, they are strengthened by the act of actively forming the content, by the skill involved in crafting it. Looking closely at the act of giving form to content, when the content is autobiographical, is like gazing at the complexity of any system, even like gazing at the ducks in the pond

as I used to do. But if I were to try to put it simply, as though looking through an ordinary magnifying glass, it would be something like this: within an uninterrupted space of non-rushed time, past experiences are given room to be consciously brought into the present moment and transcribed. During the writing process, associations related to the past experience surface and become part of the written text. The process of writing becomes one of consciously bringing forth the known and at the same time of allowing spontaneous memories and thoughts to arise and enter the text. The conscious mind examines this material and brings present moment perspectives to bear on the content. These present perspectives provide "new light" and serve as a transformative element, combined with the skill of using language to articulate and form them. As the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire wrote of self-expression, "to say a true word — which is praxis — is to transform the world" (68). On the minute level of a written text, praxis also takes place and the experience of creating this truth, however "insubstantial", however "purely subjective", is empowering in that it brings energy to the moment — the energy of creation.

In his book *Writing as a Way of Being* (2011), the academic writer Robert P. Yagelski describes his own writing process in a way that is similar to what I have described above, referring particularly to the sense of interconnected timelessness it engenders. Part of the creative energy I have referred to is this: the energy created through the act of travelling back in time and memory and making connections between the past and the present. As Yagelski puts it:

> As I write, I am — but not because of the writing; rather, the writing intensifies my awareness of myself, my sense of being, which is prior to but, right now, coterminous with this act of writing. And if I attend to my awareness—if I become aware of that awareness, as it were; if I focus my attention on my attention during this act of writing, as I am doing right now—it is not my sense of self as a separate, thinking being that is intensified but my sense of self as existing in this moment and at the same time "inhabiting" the physical place where I am sitting as well as the scene in the coffee shop that I am imagining and trying to describe, a scene removed from me

> in time and space at this moment; thus, I am connected to this moment and those other moments I have been trying to describe. (104)

5. Conclusion

Reading Yagelski's words I am taken back to Emerson's "transparent eyeball" of "Universal Being", to the mysticism of Hesse and to Csikszentmihalyi's states of flow and optimal well-being. All of these take place within the context of slow or languid time, absent of distractions. When time is languid it allows for the "weapon of stress" William James describes as the ability to choose one thought over another. The contemporary name given to this is mindfulness. A further articulation of it is what Hoffman describes as "the experience of experience itself". In writing about the slower quality of time in the Communist Poland of her childhood and contrasting it with the accelerated nature of time in twenty-first-century America, she refers to America's trading in of this very experience of experience. Her views raise interesting questions about the essence of how to experience life. In particular, they raise questions about the importance we give to our engagement with the sensory. This engagement involves the taking of time. It also involves interacting with the real — the sensorially-based — as opposed to the virtual. This may be as simple a choice as choosing to enter a park and to engage with the wealth that is found there.

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Abstract

This essay, based on a piece of creative non-fiction set in Lisbon's Estrela Park and inspired by Emerson, explores questions of "slow time" and timelessness. It looks particularly at how these can contribute to mental well-being in an increasingly accelerated world in which virtual experiences are encroaching upon sensorially-based ones. It also looks at "slow time" as an activity related to the accessing and savouring of memories through the process of autobiographical creative writing.

Keywords

Interconnectedness; memory; nature; well-being; writing

Resumo

Este ensaio tem por base um texto de escrita criativa, inspirado por Emerson acerca do Jardim da Estrela, em Lisboa. Explora questões relacionadas com o "tempo lento" e estados de espírito "fora do tempo", focando possíveis contributos para o bem-estar mental, num mundo acelerado e em que as experiências virtuais estão a impregnar a realidade sensorial. O "tempo lento" é também examinado como uma atividade que permite o acesso e a fruição de memórias autobiográficas através do processo de escrita criativa.

Palavras-Chave

Bem-estar; escrita; interconectividade; memória; natureza

Emerson's "Apposite Metaphors" and the Grounds of Creativity

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ISSN: 0873-0628 ANGLO SAXONICA SER. III N. 12 2016

Emerson's "Apposite Metaphors" and the Grounds of Creativity

In January 1824, a twenty-two-year-old Ralph Waldo Emerson was beginning to despair of discovering genuine creativity in his own time: "Men in this age", he writes in his journal, "do not produce new works but admire old ones; are content to leave the fresh pastures awhile, & to chew the cud of thought in the shade" (*Journals* 2 208). The extended bovine metaphor long predates the famous opening lines of his 1836 *Nature*: "Our age is retrospective. It builds on the sepulchres of the fathers" (*Works* 1 7). In 1824, the potential artists of Emerson's age are the cheerful "cud" chewers merely mouthing the regurgitated sustenance of an earlier time. As they ruminate "in the shade", their "thought" is one step further removed from an original source and, consequently, they themselves are unoriginal. The theme quietly announced here is that some kind of intimate relationship with nature's "fresh pastures" is required for artistic inspiration. This can be related to Emerson's contemporaneous "theory of strong impulse", an impulse that came to America with the Puritan fathers, who "had done their done their duty to literature whey they bequeathed it the Paradise Lost and Comus" (*Journals* 2: 197). But what was strong in England, Emerson laments, has in the New World "been dissipated by the unfortunate rage for periodical productions" (197). And rather than building on the Puritan legacy American letters in 1824 are held back by "[t]he community of language with England [that] has doubtless deprived us of that original characteristic literary growth that has ever accompanied, I apprehend [,] the first bursting of a nation from the bud" (197). To return to the opening metaphor of the ruminant in the shade, the fresh nibbled pastures were English pastures — the shady trees of the cud chewers are American. There is a transatlantic originality which has been has yet to be reborn on, or from, American soil. To discover a "strong impulse" for New

England, to find a language that lives within the English inheritance and that can represent America, will be Emerson's great achievement and the beginning of what has come to be called the American Renaissance.[1]

Just a few months after the young Emerson had been despondent about the possibility of originality, he believed he had come up against the very limits of thought: "Metaphysicians are mortified", he writes, "to find how entirely the whole materials of understanding are derived from sense" (*Journals* 2 224). The conclusion Emerson drew from this epistemological mortification was to "fear the progress of Metaphys[ical] philosophy may be found to consist in nothing else than the progressive introduction of apposite metaphors" (224). His examples are Plato's "dark chamber" and John Locke's "sheet of white paper" (225), both objects of sense that come to stand for knowledge of the mind. Emerson is here working through a paradox in the Empiricist education that had made up the spine of his Harvard curriculum (Todd 64). In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690/1694), the bedrock of empiricism, Locke had written that "all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheat" (452). In his search for clear and distinct ideas, and in line with a tradition in English philosophy that has been traced to Bacon and Hobbes (Forrester 612-616), Locke had dismissed metaphor from any discourse that was to "inform or instruct" or which would make any claim to "truth and knowledge" (Locke 452). But, at the same time, and this is the paradox that Emerson notices, arguably his most influential ideas were expressed through metaphors, one of the most prominent among them being the "white paper" (88), which was used as part of Locke's argument against the principle of innate ideas and to which Emerson alludes in his journal. This is, of course, precisely Emerson's concern. Metaphors, on these terms, appear to reveal philosophical *aporia*: those moments when the mind, at its fullest extent, requires the support of "apposite metaphors" derived from sense rather than sustaining itself on clear and distinct ideas (see Vogt 1-4; Clark 242-245). Just what happens when Emerson's fears about the

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[1] See my "Atlantic Adam".

possibility of American literary originality *and* the metaphorical limitations of the progress of metaphysical philosophy become the enabling vectors not only for an understanding of the mind but also for American literature itself is what I want to outline in this essay. In brief, I argue that Emerson recognises metaphor as a liberating principle for original expression, and I use I. A. Richards' concept of "ground" from his 1936 theory of metaphor to explore in detail Emerson's purposive engagement with figurative language. What this leads to is a fresh interpretation of Emerson's concept of "symbolism" that is outlined in his 1844 essay "The Poet", one of the grounding statements of American literary originality.

It was when Emerson began to think about artistic creation, and literature in particular, in the mid-1830s that he re-evaluated the role of the English language, of metaphor and of the place of sensation in writing. He first outlines the possibilities of metaphor — in ways that will become the backbone of the 1836 *Nature*'s theory of language — in his "Introductory" lecture to an upcoming series on English Literature in November of 1835. Here, ten years after his initial doubts, the objects that sensation finds are no longer framed as limits to knowledge. In a radical change of perspective that leaves things just as they were but transforms how they are understood, metaphors have become the very means of knowledge's creative expression by "man". As he writes: "objects without him are more than commodities. Whilst they minister to the senses sensual gratification, they minister to the mind as vehicles and symbols of thought. All language is the naming of invisible and spiritual things from visible things. The use of the outer creation is to give us language for the beings and changes of inward creation" (*Early Lectures* 1 220). Sensations, then, give us objects; but more than that they give us our only access to inner life as "inward creation", not limitation. They have become the "vehicles and symbols of thought".

That Emerson is referring here to metaphor is clarified in the next few lines:

> Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some corporeal or animal fact. *Right* originally means *straight*; *wrong* means *twisted*. *Spirit* primarily means *wind*. *Transgression* means *the crossing a line*. *Supercilious*, the *raising of the eyebrow*. Light and heat in all languages are used as metaphors

> of wisdom and love. We say heart to express emotion; the head to denote thought: and "thought" and "emotion" are in their turn mere words borrowed from sense, that have become appropriated to spiritual nature. (220)

Here, in Emerson's developing theory of language, metaphor, far from being a limit to an understanding of the mind, is what allows us to understand it at all. To grasp how this works in the lecture and in his essay *Nature*, published the following year, and where this passage is employed almost without variation (*Works* 1 18), it is useful to draw on the model of metaphor that I. A. Richards outlined in his *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936). There Richards makes the distinction between the *tenor*, the *vehicle* and the *ground* of a metaphor (96-97, 117). The tenor is the subject of the metaphor, which in the first instance above is the "moral or intellectual fact"; the vehicle the term used, that is, the "corporeal or animal fact", and the ground the thing they have in common that allows the one to express the other. So, in Emerson's first example, "right", as a certain kind of behaviour is the tenor; the word right's original meaning (i.e., straight) is the vehicle. Just what the ground is, though, becomes an important question. Is it directness (moving *right* towards something — if so what?), squareness, rectitude (having a balanced form), being upright? Whichever line we follow appears to lead only to another metaphor. In the second instance, "wrong" is the vehicle, wrong's original meaning (twisted) is the tenor, and the ground is indirectness, warpedness, perversity — namely another series of other metaphors. The implication of Emerson's argument is that the very ideas of right and wrong are only able to be expressed because ways of thinking and objects of sense share certain characteristics — can be straight or twisted. This "sharedness" is what Richards refers to as the ground. This is not to make a stronger claim that language pre-exists thought, but only to say that, for Emerson, thought can only be expressed metaphorically — at least, in the first instance. Objects in the world are the "vehicles" of thought, and the tenor, which is thinking itself, can come to language on the sole condition that a vehicle with the right ground can be found.

If we go back to the metaphor of the ruminant American writers in the shade of the tree, then it can be interpreted as follows: the cud upon which they chew is formed of the dead metaphors bequeathed by the

vitality of earlier transatlantic generations, for "[i]n the writers in the morning of each nation such as Homer, Froissart, and Chaucer every word is a picture" (*Lectures* 1 222). America, even in the very fullness of its own morning, had proven quite unable to express itself in this metaphorical way, and a national literature has failed to come into being. The aim of Emerson's lectures, as they move through the great poets of the English renaissance from Chaucer to Milton, is to attempt to understand how this was achieved in England. First he outlines what he calls "the power of the poet" in what should be now familiar terms:

> The power of the Poet depends on the fact that the material world is a symbol or expression of the human mind and part for part. Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Light and darkness are our familiar expression for knowledge and ignorance and heat for love. Who looks upon a river in a meditative hour and is not reminded of the flux of all things? Throw a stone into the stream and the circles that propagate themselves are the beautiful type of all influence. (289)

Again, the otherwise unavailable tenors of inner life, its *feelings*, which are seeking expression, come to language only through the various grounds of objects of sensation: light (which grounded wisdom earlier and now grounds knowledge), dark, heat, a river, a spreading circle. The poet's job, according to Emerson, is little more than this metaphorical conversion of spirit into matter through the discovery of grounds: "He converts the solid globe, the land, the sea, the air, the sun, into symbols of thought. He makes the outward creation subordinate and merely a convenient alphabet to express thoughts and emotions" (291). Thereby the poet gives us the lexicon for the human mind built up out of the resources of nature and thus to define (and, ultimately, redefine) what it is to be human.

Nevertheless, this resource, though available to all, is not availed of — and is certainly not availed of in Emerson's New England. Rather it is "the habit of men (…) to rest in the objects immediately around them, to go along with the tide, and take their impulse from external things" (226). This may at first glance appear inconsistent (which would hardly be un-Emersonian), because taking an impulse from external things is precisely what the poet is supposed to do; but the idea is that the external world, nature, should be *subordinate* to the poet; not that the poet should be

subordinate to it. In the English tradition Shakespeare is exemplary: "Shakespeare possesses the power of subordinating nature for the purposes of expression beyond all poets. His imperial muse tosses the creation like a bauble from hand to hand to embody any capricious shade of thought that is uppermost in his mind" (293). Shakespeare's gift is exemplary; he is the model poet who opens language and thus unfixes thought, a process which in itself is only enabled by the construction of new metaphors — the opening of grounds. Throughout Emerson's career Shakespeare is the foremost example of the "liberating Gods" of the later essay "The Poet", to which I shall return below.

What Shakespeare and all great poets liberate us from is "custom"; the enemy in many of Emerson's major works, including *Nature*, "The American Scholar", "The Divinity School Address", "Self-Reliance", and "Circles". "Custom", Emerson writes, "is the defacer of beauty, and the concealer of truth. Custom represents every thing as immovably fixed. But the first effort of thought is to lift things from their feet and make all objects of sense appear fluent. Even a small alteration in our position breaks the spell and removes the curtain of Custom" (*Lectures* 1 226). If we find ourselves — and for Emerson we nearly always do — caught up in the narrow circuit of custom, the world appears to have already been successfully fixed into position and thus seems immovable. It is thought that allows for a reordering and a glimpse of beauty and truth. But new thought, as has already been noted, requires a new and vital language; or, rather, and this is important, an old language that can be used in a new way. The world demands a fresh metaphorical inscription to be seen in its right light. In this poetic act both the world and man are liberated from custom. In the early lectures he phrases it as follows: "To break the chains of custom, to see everything as it absolutely exists, and so to clothe everything ordinary and even sordid with beauty is the aim of the Thinker" (228). The poet's task is to clothe all subjects — no matter how quotidian and no matter how sordid (a line put in to excuse both Chaucer and Shakespeare) — with beauty.

What appears at first inappropriate about this particular metaphor of "clothing" is that rather than covering something it actually *reveals* an underlying truth; he has only just written, after all, that "custom (…) is the concealer of truth". But here it is as if the vestment of beauty is transparent — like Eve seen by Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

> *Eve* separate he spies
> Veild in a Cloud of Fragrance, where she stood,
> Half spied so thick the Roses bushing round
> About her glowed (*Book* 9 424-427)

The transparency of Eve's scent and the partially obscuring bushes only add to her nakedness in the leering gaze of the Adversary. Satan's *fallen* eye is the eye of custom. But to the *unfallen* eye Eve's insubstantial veil reveals the innocence of her undimmed beauty. In these lines we have, as so often in *Paradise Lost*, a double view: both fallen and unfallen. Within the poem, beauty's role is to create a site of struggle between fixed and free behaviour — to create a sufficient condition for choice. Even Satan, dazzled by Eve, "abstracted stood/ From his own evil, and for a time stood/ Stupidly good" (*Book* 9 463-5). The first woman's veil of fragrance, her raiment of beauty, acts to enhance the innocence of her underlying form, and what Satan sees in Eve, who "summs all Delight" (454), and albeit only temporarily, is a respite from confusion; the deeper peace of a connection that comes, to borrow Milton's figures, with an escape from the "populous City" to the pleasant "rural sight" and "rural sound" of an Edenic landscape (445, 451). Satan has been liberated by beauty from his fixed pattern of behaviour; and in order to persist in evil he has to choose "the hot Hell that always in him burnes" (467); that is, he has to fall again. And analogously, for Emerson, the clothing of beauty discloses a connection to the whole that reorders our experience: "Every object in nature rightly seen is related to the whole and partakes of the perfection of the whole; a leaf, a sunbeam, a moment of time, and no sane man can wish to lose his admiration" (*Lectures* 1 229). The reader, then, of the ideal poem is like Satan struck stupid by Eve: his Fallen world view collapses in an epiphany of beauty and, for a moment, like the unfallen angels, he stands, as Satan 'stood", rather than falls. It is the poet's task to allow the reader access to this "nature rightly seen" and thus to recover him from the Fall.[2]

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[2] The idea here that beauty allows you to find yourself in harmony with nature is analogous to some tentative research by Mark Johnson that aligns metaphor with Kant's concept of aesthetic judgement and the attunement of the free-play of the imagination with the understanding (Johnson 57-62).

But, and this is equally important, such prelapsarian visions must be receivable by all men: "All men are capable of this act. The very utterance of his thoughts to men, proves the poet's faith, that, all men can receive them; that all men are poets, though in a less degree" (228). The further leap he makes is that all men are already poets "though in a less degree", because all language is, at root, poetical: "[a]s we go back in history, language becomes more picturesque, until its infancy, when it is all poetry" (221). Now this is building to another of Emerson's most famous lines, "[l]anguage is fossil poetry" (*Works* 3 13), but it begins with a less pithy reflection in December of 1841:

> As the limestone in our quarries is found to consist of infinite masses of the remains of animicules, so language is made up of images or poetic tropes which now in their familiar secondary use have quite ceased to remind us of their poetic origin, as *howl* from *owl*, *ravenous* from *raven*, *rotation* from *wheel*, and so on to infinity. (*Journals* 8 160)

His point here is that men are all already poets; as he reminds us in "The Poet": "[t]he people fancy they hate poetry, and they are all poets and mystics!" (*Works* 3 10) People, then, are already located in metaphors — albeit mostly dead metaphors (the difference between the poet and the mystic being that the latter, the mystics, are trapped in the narrow circuit of the dead metaphor: original insight faded to custom). But the very fact that language is metaphorical by nature has, for Emerson, the potential for liberation; a new metaphor opens up a new relation: what is needed to generate new metaphors is merely a new angle of vision, a new take on nature itself.

In order to attain this novelty, this liberty, it is not that we first need to see something new in nature (say, America) and then name it with a new word and thus crack custom (though this must have happened once — but that would have been before there was such a thing as custom). It is rather a process of discovering the vitality in our extant vocabulary that creates the new angle of vision by opening new metaphoric grounds. He tries to sketch the process of metaphorical re-inscription for the concept of "nature" in the in a journal entry of 1841:

> The Metamorphosis of nature shows itself in nothing more than this that there is no word in our language that cannot become typical to us of nature by giving it emphasis. The world is a Dancer; it is a Rosary; it is a Torrent; it is a Boat; a Mist; a Spider's Snare; it is what you will; and the metaphor will hold, & it will give the imagination keen pleasure. Swifter than light the World converts itself into that thing you name & all things find their right place under the new & capricious classification. (*Journals* 7 23)

What is apparent here is that the change in the concept of "nature" is caused by a change in the commanding metaphor, not by some neologism, a scientific or geographic discovery or a philosophical vision. To return to Richards's formulation, when the *vehicle* changes the *ground* shifts, and the *tenor* (here the world) is reinvented accordingly. So, if the metaphor is the "world is a Dancer", then the tenor, "world", takes on the ground of the vehicle, the dancer. This ground is an open one — and that, I think, is key — for "dancing" means something different to every reader and in every time of its utterance, and thus the world itself is as open as the word's usable connotations. Even if the word Dancer is likely to have a core meaning of, say, a tension between rhythmic beauty and liberation; intimacy and formality, individuality and partnership, this will not exhaust the word's potential and thus its power to re-angle vision. If the vehicle shifts to a Rosary, then a whole new ground is opened and the Puritan and the Catholic will come to very different conclusions about the tenor. Any metaphor applied in this way — assuming that it has the energy of novelty — will metamorphose nature. This process is, as Emerson notes, capricious. But even so things find their right place within the classification. Language does not collapse at this proliferation because, in Emerson's theory, it is designed for it. Moreover, and as should be apparent from the range of the metaphors chosen by Emerson, this is necessarily an endless process. Each of his metaphors is either natural (torrent, mist, spider's snare) or found in nature in its widest sense (dancer, rosary, boat). It is when the whole (that is, nature) is conceived anew through any one of its particulars — which are all but numberless — that this metaphorical metamorphosis takes place. The shifting of vision which Emerson calls for is always already

there in the language — all that is needed is someone to point it out through an "apposite metaphor".

But, as already observed, more usually people speak according to custom, according to the fixed dictates of dead metaphor — they are cud chewers rather than grazers, mystics rather than poets. As such, the power to create tends to lay dormant, waiting in the language for the right speaker. Waiting, that is, for the Poet to make the crucial connection between part and whole that will reawaken language. He develops this, albeit not very clearly, in a journal entry in 1841:

> As to the *Miracle* of Poetry. There is but one miracle, the perpetual fact of Being & Becoming, the ceaseless Saliency, the transit from the Vast to the particular, which miracle, one & the same, has for its most universal name, the word *God*. Take one or two or three steps where you will, from any fact in nature or art, & you come out full on this fact; as you may penetrate the forest in any direction & go straight on, you will come to the sea. But all the particulars of the poet's merit, his sweetest rhythms, the subtlest thoughts, the richest images, if you could pass into his consciousness, or rather, if you could exalt his consciousness, would class themselves in the common chemistry of thought & obey the laws of the cheapest mental combinations. (*Journals* 8 70-71)

The miracle of poetry, then, is movement — "transit" — from the whole ("the Vast") "to the particular" and back again in a constantly evolving spiral. This movement, Emerson states, is the universal name "God". It is *movement* that is truth; it is *movement* that is beauty: the ceaseless movement of the whole in each of its particulars. And each particular, when seen aright, takes you through the forest to the great central ever shifting "sea" that is the whole. It is the poet who creates these forest tracks, and therein lies his virtue. For, as Emerson makes clear the poet has no new tools in his consciousness, no new words, beyond those of the standard "chemistry" set owned by all. Poetry, Emerson contends, is the novel arrangement of standard particulars available to all — that is, everyday words — to take advantage of their shifting grounds. Even the neologisms of Milton or Shakespeare are but new compounds on these terms.

It is the poet's use of these words, these endless particulars, to

disclose the whole that turns the "cheapest mental combination" into poetry, and makes the poet as such one with God, that is, a creator. If we go back to 1837 Emerson writes in his journal: "To create, to create is the proof of a Divine presence. Whoever creates is God, and whatever talents are, if the man create not, the pure efflux of the Deity is not his" (*Journals* 5 341). Creation, for Emerson, is all one process: the working through of divinity. To be a creator — a writer, an artist — is to participate in that process. Conversely, if a man does not create then God is absent and originality will not come. But where there is God there is original creation: "You shall not predict what the poet shall say and whilst ephemeral poetry hath its form, its contents, & almost its phrase out of the books & is only skilful in paraphrase or permutation of good authors, in these the good human soul speaks because it has something new to say" (341-342). Creation is not merely the incremental recasting of others' words; it is the novel use of these words — that "common chemistry of thought" — as living metaphors to open new grounds. It is having something new to say and thus participating in creation itself. To create, for Emerson, is always to become one with the divine; and it is only by becoming a conduit for the divine that the poet becomes original. The poet "has conspired with the high Cause and felt the holy glee with which man detects the ultimate oneness of the Seer & the spectacle. All the debts such a man could accumulate to other wit could never disturb his consciousness or originality" (*Journals* 8 70). Emerson uses the apt metaphor "conspire" — to breathe with (recalling his earlier association of spirit with wind) — to figure the poet's relationship with the divine. The poet and God ("the high Cause") are simultaneously inspired with the breath of creation; the word of the poet is its exhalation. It is this extraordinarily elevated sense of the poet's worth that will be fully explored in Emerson's great 1844 essay "The Poet".

Early on in "The Poet" Emerson restates the importance of the variation of meaning to be drawn from everyday objects: "the highest minds of the world have never ceased to explore the double meaning, or shall I say, the quadruple, or the centuple, or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact" (*Works* 3 3-4). This is clearly a development of his earlier thoughts about metaphor's metamorphic power now straining to express itself as what he will call "symbolism": the liberating effect of the endlessly shifting grounds of metaphorical ascription. The "sensuous fact"

is the particular of nature that can be applied to affirm the whole. Access to this "manifold meaning" is necessarily dual: the poet has to discover it and the reader to grasp it. This is why, as he will say so famously in "The American Scholar" in 1837, that there is "creative reading, as well as creative writing" (*Works* 1 58); a statement originally made about a year earlier in his journal with explicit reference to his ongoing lectures. It is the act of criticism itself, "When", as he puts it in the journal, "the mind is braced by the weighty expectation of a prepared work, the page of whatever book we read, becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant & and the sense of our author is as broad as the world. There is creative reading as well as creative writing" (*Journals* 5 233). Creative reading, then, is the acceptance of manifold meaning; the expectation that we will be stretched, even transformed, by the potential range of each word we read. Creative reading takes us, as readers, to the poet's source.

This source for the poet, Emerson contends, is nothing more than "the conversation they have had with nature" (*Works* 3 4); by which he means the transformation of nature through the application of original symbols; which will, in turn, transform language, the world, and every reader. Now, once again, for most men there is an "obstruction, or some excess of phlegm in [their] constitution" (4) which prevents them from adequately flexing language; rather they remain in thrall to its narrow round. The poet, though, is "the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart" (5). On initial inspection, this line seems to offer us two directions. Firstly, it suggests that the poet is a unique being, capable of accessing a linguistic flexibility that others can only dream of. Secondly, it tells us that the poet is more broadly representative of man; only having a greater degree of what all men possess: namely, the power of metaphorical inscription. The danger here is that, in taking the first line, Emerson elevates the poet above others; implying a kind of egotistical sublime. But actually, and necessarily, the contrary is true for Emerson: the poet is without impediment precisely because he disappears in his poetry. The only impediment is the very egotism that Emerson is often accused of valorising. Ego, or indeed individuality of any kind in the poet, is anathema

to Emerson. Even Milton, who does so much, especially through the idealization of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*, to reclaim the perfectibility of the human, and "[f]rom a just knowledge of what man should be (…) described what he was" (*Lectures* 1 160), fails to successfully remove himself from his work. As such, Emerson complains, "Adam and Milton are often difficult to be separated" (161). Whereas, "[i]t is true of Homer and Shakespeare, that they do not appear in their poems; that those prodigious geniuses did cast themselves so totally in to their song, that their individuality vanishes, and the poet towers to the sky, whilst the man quite disappears" (161). What is sublime is not the man but the poet; the poet who is but the sum of his poems, not more: the man quite "disappears", the poet "towers to the sky". The ideal poet, Shakespeare or Homer, has become transparent before the flux of creation; and thus become part of that flux; and the only way to become that is through the transformation of language itself. In so doing the poet also represents the lapsed potential of all people to receive and impart ever becoming nature, and thus become creative "divinity transmuted" (*Works* 3 4).

For Emerson there is no ego — no individuality — in the poet because "poetry was written before all time was, and whenever we are so finely organised that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word, or a verse, and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem" (5-6). As such, the poet is only present as an individual when he or she makes a mistake, mishears, mis-transcribes what was prior, or adds something extra — such as the cant of Puritanism that marks, so Emerson claims, even Milton's greatest works. Creation on these is certainly not the act of an individual; rather it is a particular state or "organisation" that transcends the individual but which allows for the transcription of a prior creation as accurately as possible. The poet disappearing into the web of nature, and then coming back to report on nature in nature's own form — namely, proliferating metaphor is, arguably, the origin of Emerson's organicism. From this we get Emerson's most famous statement on poetic form:

> For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem, — a thought so alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns

> nature with a new thing. The thought and the form are equal in order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form. The poet has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. (6-7)

The first line is often offered as a defence *avant la lettre* of Whitman based on the rather unlikely assumption that Emerson is suggesting metre is *passé*, when he seems to me to be saying, on the contrary, that metre-making is inevitable; a part of the very structure of nature that the poet is reporting on. Indeed, "[a] rhyme in one of our sonnets", he writes, "should not be less pleasing than the iterated nodes of a sea-shell" (15). The form of poetry when it is novel (a "new thing") necessarily reflects the living structure of nature. Even so the origin of that thought is troublesome to pin down as Emerson's circularity is, to say the least, challenging: "thought and form are equal in order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form". The thought, one might say, is the underlying form that comes to the poet when he disappears into nature's flux; the alignment of his finer organisation, ready to be written down. Earlier Emerson called this "conspiring" with the divine; that is, breathing the same source. This divinely inspired thought, then, is the *form* of the poem that *will be* produced. It is a wholly new creation which is itself an open process of "meaning in multitude". Thus the thought precedes the form in the "order of genesis", that is, in the order of creation. Creation, in the romantic tradition of Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquillity" (42) or Shelley's "fading coal" (228), registers the loss of a more primal experience, which in Emerson's case is an insight into the flowing form of nature as proliferating language. But, and crucially I think, this later form, namely the poem, replicates nature's fluxions rather than petrifying a prior moment, enabling the reader to be "richer" in the poet's "fortune". The very structure of Emersonian symbolism resists stabilization and creates a form for manifold meaning.

Symbolism, then, is the name Emerson gives to language at its highest intensity wherein the meaning of each word is revivified and accordingly the possibilities of man and nature are increased. But necessarily in "The Poet" this creation of novelty does not require anything new to happen:

> The poorest experience is rich enough for all the purposes of expressing thought. Why covet a knowledge of new facts? Day and night, house and garden, a few actions, serve us as well as would all the trades and spectacles. We are far from having exhausted the significance of the few symbols we use. We can come to use them yet with a terrible simplicity. (*Works* 3 11)

The poet, as has been already observed, does not need new words, or even new experiences. What he needs is to recognise the proper value of language as it is; this value lies in the innate ambiguity of all metaphorical grounds that allow even the most mundane word (vehicle) to stand for a deeper spiritual fact (tenor). As such a thing can represent a thought; indeed, only a thing can represent a thought, as at root all language is metaphorical — the aforementioned "fossil poetry". The poet is only the place where this ambiguity reaches its symbolic potential:

> The world thus put under the mind for verb and noun, the poet is he who can articulate it. For, though life is great, and fascinates, and absorbs, — and though all men are intelligent of the symbols through which it is named, — yet they cannot originally use them. We are symbols, and inhabit symbols; workmen, work, and tools, words and things, birth and death, all are emblems; but we sympathize with the symbols, and, being infatuated with the economical use of things, we do not know that they are thoughts. (12)

Here, again, custom disables creativity. All the building blocks are there waiting to be used, but the very economy Americans cherish — calling a spade a spade — leaves them inarticulate. Articulacy comes when a spade is no longer a spade, but the symbol of, say, an enquiry into hidden depths, or of the planting of a new thought in the Earth itself. The physical, sensual, factual world yields the symbols of spiritual expression. But the poet does not hereby become an individual worthy in themselves of celebration, they are but a conduit: "the condition of true naming, on the poet's part, is his resigning himself to the divine aura which breathes through forms, and accompanying that" (15). The poet disappears into pure form, pure creation.

So, far from being an obstruction to our knowledge of inner life, inner life on these terms is the endlessly circulating grounds of the apposite

metaphors we use to describe it; and any poetic description will necessarily re-inscribe that inner life as something else than it was before. That is the purpose of poetry. It is also the ground of a National Literature. In "The Poet" Emerson laments that "[w]e do not, with sufficient plainness, of sufficient profoundness, address ourselves to life, not dare we chaunt our own times and social circumstances" (21). The plainness he desires is the application of an everyday vocabulary; the profoundness is the unreleased potential of metaphor. Emerson's aspiration is clear: "America", he writes, "is a poem in our eyes, and it will not wait long for metres" (22). The landscape, then, is already a poem, already a construction of language; the words used to describe it already anticipate being shaped into a form that can adequately represent its originality; that is, they are awaiting the opening of their ground. When these metaphors become, as they do, a pond, a whale, a scarlet letter, a leaf of grass, a volcano, then a national literature is born. One purpose of Emerson's lectures and essays is to ready the reader for such permanent creation and enable this literature to be recognised when it comes. But they are also a call to potential poets to release language through metaphor, the creative flux that Emerson names as Nature, God, the Cause, Truth, and Beauty. But these words, for all their customary finality, never name a single thing, a discoverable entity; they name an endless process of proliferating meanings and the endless interpretations that will arise from them.

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Abstract

This article offers an original interpretation of Emerson's theory of metaphor as it appears in his lectures and journals of the 1820s and 1830s, in the essay *Nature* (1836), and as it develops into his theory of symbolism in the essay "The Poet" (1844). I argue that Emerson recognizes metaphor as a liberating principle for original expression, and I use I. A. Richards' concept of "ground" from his 1936 theory of metaphor to explore in detail Emerson's purposive engagement with figurative language. What this leads to is a fresh interpretation of Emerson's concept of "symbolism" that is outlined in his 1844 essay "The Poet", one of the grounding statements of American literary originality.

Keywords

American renaissance; Emerson; metaphor; symbolism; Transcendentalism

Resumo

Este artigo oferece uma interpretação original da teoria de Emerson acerca da metáfora, tal como esta surge nas suas palestras e diários das décadas de 1820 e 1830, no ensaio *Nature* (1836), e como a mesma evoluiu para a sua teoria sobre simbolismo no ensaio "The Poet" (1844). Argumento que Emerson entende a metáfora como princípio libertador de uma expressão original, fazendo uso do conceito de *ground* proposto por I. A. Richards, revelado na sua teoria sobre metáfora de 1936, de modo a explorar em detalhe a ligação intencional (*purposive engagement*) que Emerson estabelece com a linguagem figurativa. Daqui resulta uma nova interpretação do conceito de "simbolismo" defendido por Emerson e descrito no acima referido ensaio "The Poet", afirmação basilar da originalidade literária americana.

Palavras-Chave

Renascença americana; Emerson; metáfora; simbolismo; Transcendentalismo

Traces of Ralph Waldo Emerson in the Poetic Work of A. R. Ammons

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ISSN: 0873-0628 ANGLO SAXONICA SER. III N. 12 2016

Traces of Ralph Waldo Emerson in the Poetic Work of A. R. Ammons[1]

Harold Bloom, the literary critic who today seems to decide which contemporary writers, and especially poets, stand a chance to become part of literary history, did welcome in 1993 the book of verse called *Garbage* written by Archie Randolph Ammons as a publication that would have delighted Whitman and Emerson. Obviously, the book pleased some contemporaries as well and so the author received a second National Book Award (the first one had already been awarded in 1972 for his rather prematurely issued and titled *Collected Poems 1951-1971*). During his lifetime, Ammons (he was born in 1926 and died in 2001) published about thirty volumes of poetry, received many prizes and scholarships but could not be called a popular author. Still, for a fine, though not very large, group of admirers, he was certainly around for half a century and became appreciated as an interesting poetic voice, Bloom not being the only one who saw Ammons in the Emersonian tradition.[2]

The poet himself, who took courses on Thoreau and Emerson in his college years, was happy to be compared to the transcendentalists. Although a southerner (from a tobacco farm in Whiteville, North Carolina), he spent most of his life in the north (teaching in Ithaca, New York) and therefore he always boasted to have served as a link between the two cultural localities or polarities. "The movement of my life was a marriage of the South to the North", he said in his *Paris Review* interview in 1996 (Ammons, "The

[1] This contribution was made possible with the support of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, grant no.IGA_FF_2015_IGA_FF_2015_041.

[2] For a whole range of critical views, see "A. R. Ammons 1926-2001," The Poetry Foundation, January 28, 2016, http://www.poetryfounation.org/bio/a-r-ammons.

Art of Poetry" *Interview*). And the spiritual and intellectual embracement of the thought of the Great Sage of Concord was certainly part of this "marriage".

Both men, Emerson and Ammons, started writing poetry after experiencing "an interior illumination" in natural settings (Ammons, "The Art of Poetry" *Interview*): the former when he was seeking a warmer and healthier climate in Florida (running away from the threat of tuberculosis which was widely spread in New England in those days — and Emerson having lost to this illness his young wife, one of his brothers and his close friend, H. D. Thoreau)[3]; the latter, Ammons, was introduced to serious poetry writing when serving in the U.S. Navy in the Pacific (Ammons, "The Art of Poetry" *Interview*). The immediate urge to think in verse came to both during moments of thoughtful loneliness when they felt totally absorbed by nature, when they were unified with the natural environment, especially during spells of isolation, long walks through woods, fields and meadows, strolls along coasts and beaches. For both of them, the image of a poet was a solitary figure in nature, offering himself, with open senses, to a spiritual transcendence, basically religious, even somewhat mystical.

In his ruminations, Emerson concluded that poets, in fact, do not create poetry, as "poetry was all written before time was". The poet for him was just "the namer" or "the sayer" who reveals what is hidden under the surface of the seeming reality ("The Poet" 449). And A. R. Ammons humbly admits to sharing such belief and activities. In his poem "Essay on Poetics", he declares when speaking about nature that

> *the designs are there: I use*
> *words to draw them out* — also because I can't
> draw at all: I don't think: I see: and I see
> the motions of cowpaths
>
> over a non-existent, thousand-acre ranch: (times
> frequently recur in good scope in which I don't see):
> *stop on any word and language gives way:*

---

[3] See Robert D. Richardson,Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* 74.

> … *for language heightens by dismissing reality*,
>
> … all I mean to suggest is that the reality under
>
> words (and images) is too multiple for rational assessment and
> that language moves by sailing over: the
> other way definition has is to accept the multiplicity of
> synthesis:
>
> (*Collected Poems* 298, 301)[4]

The mentioned relation between language and reality was something that had already troubled Emerson, who felt that the poetry of his time did not express the needed correspondence of "the word" to the changing and multiple world, indeed, to the Universe, of which the material world is a part. Bravely, the poet admits:

> I will not hesitate to speak the word
> Committed to me. It is not of men
> It is not of myself — no vain discourse
> Empty oration, tinkling soulless talk
> My heart lies open to the Universe
> I read only what there is writ I speak
> The sincere word that's whispered in my ear
> My prophecy the music of his lips.
>
> (*Collected Poems* 347)

After the list of unworthy traditional poetry (vain, empty, and soulless), Emerson, the poet, declares readiness to embrace openness and new sincerity thus taking the first steps towards modern expression. Yet, another quality of poetic discourse that Emerson thought of very highly involved *speaking* or even *talking* the lines, which was more than bringing some features of prose into poetry. David Porter believes that "Emerson meant to reassociate the written word with the act of speech. He sought a language form of intensive gesture that would not be so much *writt*en or even *spoken as talked* — a sort of splendid conversation" (153). This requirement, certainly a fruitful innovation, appeared repeatedly in modern American

[4] Emphasis added.

poetry in its later course.[5] And Ammons proved to be one of its most efficient users.

Surprisingly, neither Emerson nor Ammons were afraid to use scientific terminology and abstract words in their poetry as they believed that even abstract words have very specific, factual, material roots. "The use of natural history is to give us aid in supernatural history", Emerson claimed in "Nature" (1836), after deciding that "words are signs of natural facts" and "nature is the symbol of spirit" (20). Both men started their education about the world in the field of sciences, be it botany or chemistry; Emerson studied Drummond's *Letters to a Young Naturalist* and Hershel's *Discourse on the Study of Natural History* before his important visit to the *Jardin de Plantes* at the Sorbonne,[6] and Ammons included citations from "The Life of an Estuary" by Robert M. Ingle, an article from the journal *Scientific American*, and a passage from the book *The Science of Botany* as parts of his poem.[7]

Emerson's motivation and interest in studying nature was basically religious, and Ammons, when asked about his religion, called himself neither Baptist nor Methodist, which was the background in his family, but rather "denominated". Still, in his poetry, he found "plenty of room for religion", though, as he put it, "in my case a religion of what we don't yet know rather than what we are certain of" ("The Art of Poetry" *Interview*). Obviously, both men believed that through natural facts they could reach out to a deeper understanding, to a partaking in the spirituality of the natural world. As we know, Emerson, to the surprise and, indeed, shock of the Boston community, walked out of the Unitarian parish to which he had been appointed as minister and preacher, rejecting not God, "by whom he was intoxicated all through his life" (Kazin 31), but saying good-bye to the Church. "Make Your Own Bible" was his message and encouragement — to be a minister without being one of any particular church ("The Divinity School Address" 75).

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[5] See Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry*, an argument pursued all through the book.

[6] See Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* 142, 123.

[7] See Ammons, "Essay on Poetics," in *Collected Poems 1951-1971* 314, 317.

Thus, the list of similarities between these two poets separated by more than a century is numerous, and so are their serious concerns verbally expressed. Studying nature, Ammons, in his private way, decided for the path of a seeker of meaning in "the great open" (*Collected Poems* 5), as he put it in one of his poems, meaning the world of nature and the universe

It is commonly believed that Emerson's worthy and useful legacy can be found in his essays and prose rather than in his verse. But David Porter, in his *Emerson and Literary Change*, tried to make us more aware of Emerson's deliberate search for a redeeming form that would offer a solution to the crisis in the relationship between poetry and reality not just in his time but for the approaching modern literary era (1-6), which he, indeed, managed to do.

Emerson knew that he did not fulfill yet all the requirements he himself demanded and expected from an American poet and so he called himself just a forerunner of those who would follow in the years and decades to come. He, of course, recognized the novelty of the verse that appeared in the anonymously published volume, *Leaves of Grass*, in 1855, and welcomed the young poet at the beginning of a great career. And his own idea of replacing metre with a "metre-making argument" ("The Poet" 450) found the most persuasive practitioner exactly in Walt Whitman.

If we join for a while the critic Harold Bloom, again in his search for literary influences, we hear him confess: "What I heard earliest in Ammons was present to the end: Walt Whitman (...) Walt and Archie both are sly: they *look* easy but they are evasive and offer difficult pleasures. Both are comic celebrants of Emerson's American Sublime" (*The Anatomy* 306).

In his latest book, *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime* (2015), Bloom pairs, rather unexpectedly, Emerson not with Whitman but with Emily Dickinson. Maybe in the need to stress the "New Englandly" vision the two writers shared, the book presents twelve American authors who, to Bloom's mind, represent and have created the "American Sublime". How does the critic define the phenomenon? As a matter of fact, quite vaguely. The same is true of how we should understand "the Daemon" in the title of the book, though it is clear that the two terms are somehow related and may overlap. From the list of chosen authors, it is obvious that they are all original minds, brave thinkers, formal innovators — personalities of modern thought and vision. They all have, in their

individual ways, created something new, not known before, something unexpected, exciting and surprising, something revolutionary, uncanny, or, in Freud's own term, something of the *Unheimliche.*

The American quality of the Sublime has to do with features of the American political and cultural reality — the ideas associated with the American revolution and with the development towards cultural independence preached by Emerson in his essays, lectures, and poems. Now what are the elements and features of this Sublime shared by Emerson, Whitman, and Ammons? Certainly, strong individualism, belief in democracy, self-reliance, self-confidence, and self-awareness. Further, the centrality of nature, its wholeness, its holiness, its spherical and round shapes, its unity with the universe, its constant movement, its being ever in motion, its dynamism and yet permanence, the relationship of one and many, of person and non-person, the things or ideas said even by not being said.

For Europeans, this notion of Sublime was something typically American and it is the Americanness in it that attracts readers from the old continent to American, above all, modern American literature. One of the earliest translators of American poetry into Czech, Jaroslav Vrchlický, wrote in his commentary on Walt Whitman's verse in 1894 that he found it "bizarre" and "lawless" (meaning free) but "very strong"; he also understood the translation as a great challenge, but a task that should not be put aside to be done later but tackled immediately. If he knew the term American Sublime, he might have used it, as he found in Whitman's verse wisdom, pleasure, beauty, courage, though when reading it he also felt an irrepressible awe (Vrchlický III).

Here are Emerson's "Uriel" and Ammons's "Corsons Inlet", looking at the world around as if with similar imaginative eyes:

> With a look that solved the sphere,
> And stirred the devils everywhere,
>
> Gave his sentiment divine
> Against the being of a line.
> *Line in nature is not found;*
> *Unit and universe are round*;
>
> (Emerson, *Collected Poems* 15-16)

And Ammons:

> *in nature there are few sharp lines*: there are areas of
> primrose
> more or less dispersed;
> disorderly orders of bayberry; between the rows
> of dunes,
> irregular swamps of reeds,
> though not reeds alone, but grass, bayberry, yarrow, all…
> predominantly reeds:
>
> I have reached no conclusions, have erected no boundaries,
> shutting out and shutting in, separating inside
> from outside: *I have*
>
> *drawn no lines:*

What follows is, in fact, a description not only of the sensual perception of the observer, but also the poet's presentation of his creative process, which is indeed much inspired by the subject, or rather scenery or action described —

> manifold events of sand
> change the dune's shape that will not be the same shape
> tomorrow,
>
> so I am willing to go along, to accept
> the becoming
> thought, to stake off no beginnings or ends, establish
> no walls:
>
> (Ammons, *Collected Poems* 148-149)[8]

The colon, which was the most favorite punctuation mark of the poet was suggesting continuity and openness — in Ammons's sensitivity linked to roundness, spheres, curves and curvatures (the poet called his book of verse from 1974 *Sphere: The Form of Motion*). And eventually he was prodded into "recognition of wholeness" which was being recognized as "a condition of existence". What troubled him was the finding that wholeness could permit "another wholeness, and another lyric" (*Collected Poems* 296). So, even wholeness could be in motion.

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[8] Emphasis added in both poems.

Emerson believed that the one thing of value in the universe is the active soul, the mentally, spiritually, and permanently engaged individual. Undoubtedly, he himself proved to be a model case that must have enjoyed numerous moments of intellectual and spiritual bliss, ensuing from his attempts at reasoning through the natural in nature to the supernatural, thus experiencing a state of transcendence. A state of mind of the soul is evoked by the ending lines of Emerson's poem "Each and All": "Beauty through my senses stole;/ I yielded myself to the perfect whole" (*Collected Poems and Translations* 10). Ammons may have been less mystical, but "drawing the words from natural facts", as when he was "translating fleshbody to wordbody, leaving his flesh behind" (*Collected Poems* 355), suggesting not just a mere struggle of verse-writing. The process is certainly more demanding and rewarding, not to mention more ambitious. When discussing Plato, Emerson maintained that nature is good, but the intellect is better, although he also believed that to a sound judgment "the most abstract truth is the most practical" ("Nature" 7). Ammons is most efficient when he remembers this piece of wisdom, when he thinks with his eyes and senses and lets his language take in all the material world it wants to represent, interpret, explain, transcend:

> I have appropriated the windy twittering of aspen leaves
> into language, stealing something from reality like a
> *silverness:* drop-capes of ice from peak sheers:

much of the rise in brooks over slow-rolled glacial stones:

> the loop of reeds over the shallow's edge when birds
> feed on the rafts of algae: I have taken right out of the
> air the clear streaks of bird music and held them in my
> head like shifts of sculpure glint: *I have sent language*
>
> *through the mud roils of a racoon's paws like a net,*
>
> *netting the roils:…*
> *my mind's indicted by all I've taken.*
>
> (*Collected Poems* 318)[9]

[9] Emphasis added.

Emerson and his transcendentalist colleagues did not, so he maintained, dictate any forms for writing, as they believed the idea always stood prior to the form of its expression. As a matter of fact, the most frequently quoted ideas of the spiritual and cultural liberator of the new nation come from his prosaic work rather than the verse he left behind. And, frankly, because ideas rather than forms (above all traditional forms) of poetry seem to be the driving force of the poetic work of A. R. Ammons, his verse may sometimes read like thoughtful and very observant prose. Yet, as some critics admit, though easy to read, his poetry reveals itself not so easy to accompany in thought.

Robert Pinsky believes that "some of the most exciting, overwhelming moments in the modernist tradition have come when a poet breaks through into the kind of prose freedom and prose inclusiveness" which he tried to suggest with words like "discourse" and "discursive" (144). Though Ammons admired John Ashbery and his experimentation with poetry, he remained more down to earth, down to nature and close to the transcendental message he followed in most of his work. A few of his earlier poems assumed the form of hymns with the corresponding metaphysical wording, but he also created playful little songs and poems in the style of imagist poetics or haikus. Here is one instance of reflective imagery —

Reflective

I found a
weed
that had a

mirror in it
and that
mirror

looked in at
a mirror
in

me that
had a
weed in it

(*Collected Poems* 171)

Some of Ammons's longer and later long poems were typed on an adding-machine tape. This experiment started with *Tape for the Turn of the Year* in 1965, and then continued in *Sphere* and *Garbage* in 1974 and 1993, respectively, where the tape itself became the hero of the writing process, as the poet himself confessed, offering a special, formal and technical limit (that is a rule) that had to be respected as far as length of lines and the general format were concerned. But these poems still remain very pensive, even in an Emersonian way.

When Emerson proclaimed the cultural independence of America and Americans (in fact, of every individual American) in "The American Scholar" (1837), he was still well informed and indeed knowledgeable as regards the cultural heritage of other lands, the old traditions that he suggested not to follow or imitate any longer. He knew the riches of foreign harvests, be they Greek or Roman, English or German, having studied with an open mind the European "Representative Men". His appeal was, of course, for the "Man Thinking" ("The American Scholar" 63), above all, to get to know himself, to rely on his own intellectual potential, to be self-reliant in every sense.

Emerson's follower, in his own way, we should stress, overtakes most of these liberating efforts, but he is even more radical in declaring his self as culturally independent, especially from the dominating cultures of the Old World. "I have tried to get rid of the Western tradition as much as possible. You notice I don't mention anything in my poetry having to do with Europe or where we come from. I never allude to persons or places or events in history", Ammons said in his interview for the *Paris Review*. "I really do want to begin with bare space, with streams and rocks and trees. I feel nearly aligned with Oriental culture" ("The Art of Poetry" *Interview*). Even though the last two sentences by Ammons might have delighted Ralph Waldo Emerson, the decision to consider Western culture as dead and valueless would have been accepted most likely by the leading intellectual of the American Renaissance with more caution and restraint. Critical as he was of those who were still mimetically dependent on Old World culture, he still remained an admirer of the English, and above all, Anglo-Saxon, cultural and literary values. In Ammons's poetic testament, which despite later publications seems to be by general consent his *Garbage*, Emersonian thought echoes abundantly. Furthermore, even

his aphoristic style brings the two men to another stage of convergence.

In a surprisingly chatty way the modern poet invites himself, Ammons states, to write "that great poem/ the world's waiting for", confessing to a feeling that his mission as a poet remains "unaccomplished" (*Garbage* 13). Was he being too modest after some thirty books? What would an accomplished mission look like? Or was it self-irony? Most likely, Emerson would not find the central statement of the long poem that "garbage is spiritual" untrue or unconvincing. For him, every fact could be sacred or profane, depending on the viewer's mind, on the capacity to see beyond or beneath what we sensually see.

Emerson was convinced that "even the basist material could release its beauty" as some lines from an unpublished poem relate:

> In the darkest, meanest things
> There alway, alway something sings.
> In the mud and scum of things
> There alway, alway something sings.
>
> (qtd. in Porter 27)

After all, he also believed that "even the corpse has its own beauty" ("Nature" 14). So our corpses, and our being all mortal, make us garbage, too, like all the animals, like the food we eat and cast off, like the language we discard, etc. And Ammons literally visualizes how we get rid of our own remains, of those Emersonian corpses. Reality, being spiritual, can still be seen as "holy, holy" (*Garbage* 28), and garbage, nothing but "celestial" (117). But the poet also calls his poem "scientific" (20), though he immediately qualifies the statement, adding that "poetry is not logic, or knowledge or philosophy" (112). This is not a contradictory statement as both Ammons and Emerson believed that scientific examination can help us on our way to spiritual truth.

As in his shorter poems before, it is the giving up to that energy of motion driving the mind, along with the poet's imagination, that we see working as a creative process. What Robert Pinsky says about the earlier Ammons, and modernists of this inquisitive kind, still holds when we read *Garbage*: "the language of description, mastering description and going beyond it to words as means of life" (145). Ammons climbs the heap of garbage, watches the life that is still out there or, in fact, comes to a new

life. He ponders the very word that he employed for the title of his long poem — is it waste, the castoff, the used, the returnable? He jumps from observation to observation, or else takes us along his flow of thought on life and death, on what we do with our lives, on how ready we are for its (our) end — "when does a fact end:" and "what about the spirit, /does it die/ in an instant /being nothing in an instant/ out of matter,/ or does it hold on to some measure of/ time?" (*Garbage* 37-38).

There are, of course, numerous questions that can be raised, most of them lacking clear or less definite answers. This fluttering position between questions and answers is, indeed, the position of the Emersonian "Man Thinking". One answer is that the questioning has to go on, which gives some reason for its justification. Ammons in his poetic work, including *Garbage*, has manifested that it does and this will continue to be a testing ground for thinking men in America and elsewhere. For someone who wished to be nothing more than an amateur poet, it seems a remarkable achievement. In this sense, Ammons's poetry is a great contribution to modern American poetry, in particular to a poetic tradition that we can and should call Emersonian.

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Abstract

Literary historians and theoreticians find echoes of Transcendentalist thought in American literature from the times of the American Renaissance through ensuing decades. But, even Emerson himself might have been surprised how avidly his ideas on nature and poetry were embraced by a poet, a southerner, on top of that, in the latter half of the twentieth century. Archie Randolph Ammons (1926-2001) also planned "to be a naturalist" and, like his master, studied natural sciences, but ended up writing poetry in the Emersonian belief that "poetry was all written before the time was" and, therefore, poets may write but not *create* it. As a matter of fact, poets just become "namers" and "sayers" who draw out in words "designs already there". This is what Emerson thought and Ammons did, too. Observing and interpreting nature was for both poets a helpful way of reaching and understanding the "wholeness" of the universe, of the divine unity of nature and man. Ideas, even near-quotes, from the New England sage can be found in Ammons's poetry. Images of *roundness* and *movement* are seminal for his vision of the world as they were for the transcendentalist. Long walks in nature were for both poets sources of inspiration, triggering states of intuition. Ammons was a very prolific writer, but recognition of his literary achievement came very slow. In fact, there was hardly any before his *Collected Poems 1951-1971* appeared. After that, he was taken into account even by the two most important judgment-makers among literary critics today, Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler, and his status has grown ever since. This essay will also cast an eye on recent critical works, such as David Porter's *Emerson and Literary Change*, Robert Richardson Jr.'s *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* and Harold Bloom's *The Anatomy of Influence* and *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime* in order to support the arguments being made.

Keywords

A. R. Ammons; the American sublime; art and experience; literary influences; modern poetry; Transcendentalism; R. W. Emerson

Resumo

Historiadores e críticos literários têm assinalado a presença do pensamento transcendentalista na literatura norte-americana desde o período do Renascimento Americano. Até mesmo o próprio Emerson teria ficado surpreendido com a avidez com que, na segunda metade do século XX, as suas ideias sobre natureza e poesia foram acolhidas por um poeta sulista. Archie Randolph Ammons (1926-2001) também desejou "ser um naturalista" e, como o seu mestre, estudou ciências naturais, mas acabou a escrever poesia, partilhando, com Emerson, a ideia de que "toda a poesia já tinha sido escrita"; consequentemente, os poetas podem escrever, mas não *criar* poesia. Na realidade, os poetas apenas "nomeiam" e "dizem", desenhando, através de palavras, "padrões já existentes". Isto é o que Emerson pensava; e também Ammons. Observar e interpretar a natureza era para ambos os poetas uma maneira valiosa de alcançar e compreender a "totalidade" do universo, da unidade divina da natureza e do homem. Ideias, e até mesmo citações do sábio de Nova Inglaterra, podem ser encontradas na poesia de Ammons. Imagens acerca de formas redondas e de movimento são seminais para a sua visão do mundo, tal como o tinham sido para o transcendentalista. Longas caminhadas na natureza revelaram ser, para ambos os poetas, fonte de inspiração e geradoras de criatividade. Ammons era um escritor muito prolífico, mas o reconhecimento da sua produção literária deu-se lentamente. Na realidade, este só aconteceu depois da publicação de *Collected Poems 1951-1971.* Depois disso, até mesmo os dois mais importantes críticos literários contemporâneos, Harold Bloom e Helen Vendler, reconheceram o seu valor; o respeito e admiração pela sua poesia não tem parado desde então. Este ensaio pretende reflectir sobre obras críticas recentes — *Emerson and Literary Change* de David Porter, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* de Robert Richardson Jr., *The Anatomy of Influence e The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and The American Sublime* de Harold Bloom — como justificação dos argumentos apresentados.

Palavras-Chave

A. R. Ammons; arte e experiência; influências literárias; poesia contemporânea; R. W. Emerson; o sublime americano; transcendentalismo

"A Revolution of All Things": *Nature* and *Eureka* or Poe's Transcendental Hoax

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ISSN: 0873-0628 ANGLO SAXONICA SER. III N. 12 2016

"A Revolution of All Things": *Nature* and *Eureka* or Poe's Transcendental Hoax

In a recent article for the *New York Review of* Books, Marilynne Robinson hails Edgar Allan Poe's 1848 cosmological "prose poem", *Eureka*, as an anticipation of modern astrophysics, namely, the "big bang-big crunch" hypothesis. He had, Robinson concedes, "neither evidence nor authority for any of it", yet, she maintains he was "absolutely sincere about the truth of the account he had made of cosmic origins, and he was ridiculed for his sincerity".

That is, indeed, the crux of the matter: was Poe serious about *Eureka*? This is strictly a critical problem, the solution of which requires no special knowledge of astronomy.[1] There are many indications that he was not serious, and the fact that, as most scholars agree, his "cosmology" embodies everything he criticized in Transcendentalism, leads me to suspect that he was poking fun at Emerson and his followers. Indeed, it seems rash to assume that Poe would seriously maintain the opinions he ridiculed elsewhere. It is only reasonable to suppose that the ridicule was intentional. I will therefore refer to the voice heard throughout *Eureka*, as the "cosmologer" or the "narrator".

In its own terms, *Eureka* is locked against the possibility of empirical test, rejecting at the outset, as will be seen, the possibility of relative "proof" that defines "science" as we know it. It is, therefore, absurd to say that modern astrophysics confirmed it.[2] Like the ideal theory of nature,

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[1] With obvious irony, *Eureka* predicts precisely this: "I think it advisable to proceed as if even the more obvious facts of astronomy were unknown to the reader" (17). Surely, a serious scientific work should presuppose a reader who could grasp at least "the more obvious facts".

[2] Besides, the resemblance is superficial, since Poe has none of the mathematical models involved in the "big-bang" hypothesis.

prophesied in *Nature* (1836), Emerson's first book, the cosmology of *Eureka* is its own evidence. In fact, *Eureka*'s cosmology is in perfect keeping with the principles of Transcendentalism. I believe Poe meant to imply that Transcendentalists had no way of distinguishing fact from humbug and, indeed, he had accused them of precisely that earlier on. The literalization of Emerson's symbolism is the medium of his satire. Thus, whereas Emerson symbolically presents poetry as criticism on God's "poem", *Eureka* is, quite literally, a criticism on Creation, and, by the same token, the unified impression of the universe obtained by "whirling" seems to be a parody of Emerson's omnipresent "oneness". For our purposes, it makes no difference whether Emerson believed his ideal "science" could be attained — he did not, of course. The point of the joke is that, taken literally, the principles of Transcendentalism put forward in *Nature* allow no other "science" of nature but the kind Poe presents, as a hoax, in *Eureka*.

Inasmuch as it refuses a possible, verifiable, albeit limited, knowledge based on the rational analysis of experience, and replaces it with a quest for an impossible absolute knowledge that cannot be verified, Transcendentalism can be seen as a manifestation of Romantic irrationalism, or, more precisely, anti-intellectualism. The idea that Poe shared this anti-intellectualism, and took, as Yvor Winters put it, Romanticism too far, has often prevented the reading of *Eureka* as satire. But there is good reason to suspect that Poe was less than serious in the texts usually presented as evidence of this, and, conversely, he certainly seemed very serious about his attacks on Transcendentalism, which scholars are in the habit of dismissing as self-serving, ill-tempered effusions. It may be argued that *Eureka*, like the crucial passage of the *Marginalia* which apparently prophesies it, are in fact ironic statements of the "intellectualism" that they apparently deny.

1. *Eureka* as scientific hoax

The cosmology in *Eureka* purports to be derived from a unified impression of the universe on the mind. This sounds as "unscientific" now as it did in 1848, which, of course, is no reason to suspect Poe's sincerity. His tone, however, is. At the outset, Poe's cosmologist devises an absolutely original expedient to do away with the "detail" that allegedly had, until then,

precluded "all *individuality* of impression" (8):

> He who from the top of Ætna casts his eyes leisurely around, is affected chiefly by the *extent* and *diversity* of the scene. Only by a rapid whirling on his heel could he hope to comprehend the sublimity of its *oneness*. But as, on the summit of Ætna, *no* man has thought of whirling on his heel, so no man has ever taken into his brain the full uniqueness of the prospect; and so, again, whatever considerations lie involved in this uniqueness, have as yet no practical existence for mankind. (7-8)

Harriet Holman was perhaps the first scholar to notice the "absurdity of this inflated image" (35). Throughout recorded history, Mount Etna has always been an active volcano and therefore has no *summit.* It "is a truncated cone without a top" (35). This makes it technically impossible to spin on top of Etna.

However, one famous cosmologist *did* climb Etna to further his claims to intuitive, all-encompassing knowledge of nature. Peter C. Page has pointed out that the passage clearly alludes to Empedocles.[3] Author of an ancient scientific poem on nature, he was, by some accounts, adored as a God in Sicily. Diogenes Laertius mentions an alternative tradition, according to which he was an egotistical impostor who simulated his apotheosis by leaping into Etna, so his body could not be found. This desperate hoax was detected when one of his peculiar bronze slippers was found near the edge of the crater. Undermining the credibility of his narrator (as he so often did in his fiction), Poe seems to suggest yet another explanation: maybe the philosopher had taken it into his head to spin on top of Etna. The echoes of this story certainly throw suspicion over the protestation of "humility really unassumed" in the very first line of *Eureka* (7).[4]

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[3] See "Poe, Empedocles, and Intuition in *Eureka*".

[4] Horace's *Ars Poetica* alludes to this tradition: "Eager to be regarded as one of the immortal gods, Empedocles in cold blood leapt into the flames of Etna" (95). Rees's *Cyclopaedia* entry on Empedocles tells the same story and includes Horace's original Latin ("Empedocles").

Considering this allusion, it is a matter of wonder that anyone ever took Poe's narrator seriously when he requires his reader to perform an equivalent "mental gyration on the heel", in order to obtain the unified impression of the universe whence he purports to derive his theory: "We need so rapid a revolution of all things about the central point of sight that, while the minutiae vanish altogether, even the more conspicuous objects become blended into one" (8-9). The use of the term "revolution" in connection with astronomy is itself equivocal. "Revolution", in that particular context, denotes the motion of a body along its orbit, but here designates the apparent motion of "things" attending the narrator's *rotation*.

The fundamental assertion of *Eureka*, the "oneness" or "simplicity" of the universe, implies the abolition of the distinction between subjective perceptions and objective reality, which is thus humorously highlighted.[5] One might conceive this as an assertion of the Romantic creed that reason is folly, if those were not the very principles of the Transcendentalism that Poe so often attacked in his non-fiction, that is, the principles of Emerson's *Nature*: "When we speak of nature, (…) we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects". This, only the poet, "whose eye can integrate all the parts" (494), can achieve.

Poe suggests, instead, that whoever believes that he has "integrated all the parts" must be dizzy with too much "mental gyration".[6] In this sense, *Eureka* is an ironic fulfillment of *Nature*'s prophecy. "Whenever a true theory appears", Emerson wrote, "it will be its own evidence. Its test is, that it will explain all phenomena. Now many are thought not only unexplained but inexplicable; as language, sleep, madness, dreams, beasts,

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[5] To be precise, the assumption is that matter was, originally, "in its utmost conceivable state of — what? — of *Simplicity.* (…) This will be found the sole absolute *assumption* of my Discourse" (22). The tone (one would think the narrator addresses a lax pupil) is itself suspicious.

[6] Peter C. Page is of the same opinion: "the metaphysical unity sought by Poe-as-cosmologer and his dizzy man on Aetna was", itself, "simply impossible" (23). Page, however, accommodates this with the general view that Poe means to imply that any attempt at science is futile, reason is folly and that there is no rational standard of Natural Philosophy. It should be noticed that this view denies the very possibility of a hoax — a genre much favored by Poe.

sex" (493). He therefore encourages his reader to build his own world, predicting that a "correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit" (519).[7]

A bit too literal, the "revolution of all things" in *Eureka* is, in all likelihood, a playful allusion to *Nature*'s "revolution in things". In any case, since it contains no rational argument, *Eureka*'s power to convince is contingent on "mental gyration", Poe's image for the Transcendentalist approach to the study of nature. It may be argued that Emerson never meant to fulfill his promise, but that is beside the point. However ideal his ultimate "science" may have been, the fact remains that *Nature* called for the actual overthrow of empirical science.

Impatient with the *minutiae* of an approach based on *mere* understanding, Emerson would replace it with a suggestive "poetical" reasoning that would account for both matter and spirit, or rather, abolish the distinction between the two. Uncompromisingly, Emerson will settle for nothing less than the "oneness" of a total poetical theory, presumably in the tradition of Empedocles. Therefore, a Transcendentalist who took his writings literally would have to relinquish all "measures (…) of that which distinguishes the likely from the palpable absurd" (Lamb 82).[8] That is the implication of an often misunderstood article in the *Broadway Journal* in which Poe made fun of those who believed the veracity — and many did — of his "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar": "For our parts we find it difficult to understand how any dispassionate transcendentalist can doubt the facts as we state them (…) *Why* cannot a man talk after he is dead? *Why? — why?* — that is the question" (*Essays* 1106).[9] As Poe saw it, "dispassionate Transcendentalism" is a contradiction in terms, since the

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[7] Or rather, he puts these words in a "prose-poem" sang to the author by an "Orphic poet" (518). *Nature*'s last lines, and final prophecy, are attributed to this archetypal poet, and prefaced by Emerson's own prophesying: "Then shall come to pass what my poet said" (519). Throughout my paper, I argue that Poe employs the same fictional device in Eureka to satirize Emerson's use of poetical "tricks" instead of argument.

[8] I borrow Charles Lamb's phrase for its aptness in expressing my point. In all fairness, he was not talking about Transcendentalism, but superstition. But I do believe Poe's satire implies a redescription of Transcendentalism as superstition.

[9] Quoted from the *Broadway Journal*'s "Editorial Miscellanies", December 13, 1845.

poetical mode of inquiry Emerson advocates violates the condition of detachment implied by the word "dispassionate". Poe implies that his hypothetical Transcendentalist would acknowledge no middle ground between skepticism and credulity, and, therefore, would have no grounds on which to reject a consistent theory of nature either, provided it explained everything.

Indeed, Emerson complains that *merely* intelligible systems have "no one valuable suggestion" and encourages his reader not to be hindered by understanding and hope for meaning (*Nature* 517). Replicating this Transcendentalist maneuver, Poe's cosmologist announces that "there is, in this world at least, *no such thing* as demonstration" (*Eureka* 7), and admittedly endeavors to obtain the reader's belief by "suggestion", not argument. Hume himself would admit that Natural Philosophy cannot "demonstrate", and that is why he bases the concept of proof not on necessity, but probability. The narrator of *Eureka*, however, like the Transcendentalists before him, tacitly rejects relative certainties, as if there was no alternative to "suggestion".[10] He later refers *Eureka*'s "sole absolute *assumption*", the "oneness" of the universe, to an "irresistible, although inexpressible" intuition.

But "suggestion" is not an innocent word for Poe to use. It is enough to overthrow his narrator's claims. The force of the latter's fallacious argument lies in the idea of shared intuition. *Eureka* defines "intuition" as "*the conviction arising from those inductions or deductions of which the processes are so shadowy as to escape our consciousness, elude our reason, or defy our capacity of expression*" (22). This, the narrator admits, is "the idea which I have already suggested as that alone which we can properly entertain of intuition" (22). So, regardless of empirical data, the

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[10] Hume's chapter "Of Miracles" concerns the evaluation of testimony: "A wise man (…) proportions his belief to the evidence. In such conclusions as are founded on an infallible experience, he expects the event with the last degree of assurance, and regards his past experience as a full *proof* of the future existence of that event" (80). In "The Mystery of Marie Roget," Dupin expresses a similar view: "you so far augment the probability as to verge upon the certain. What of itself would be no evidence of identity, becomes through its corroborative position, proof most sure" (*Tales* 746). This, of course, limits empirical "science" to verifiable predictions.

reader should admit as truth any belief that he cannot justify, so long as it *feels right*. Does he not *feel* this truth? That is the implied question.

For argument's sake, let us grant the assertion that pure intuitions are necessarily true. Still, as Dupin remarks in "The Mystery of Marie Roget", in public as well as private opinion, intuition can easily be confused with another source of unaccountable beliefs, suggestion:

> When arising of itself — when manifesting itself in a strictly spontaneous manner — we should look upon it [public opinion] as analogous with that *intuition* which is the idiosyncrasy of the individual man of genius (…) But it is important that we find no palpable traces of *suggestion*. The opinion must be rigorously *the public's own*; and the distinction is exceedingly difficult to perceive and to maintain. (*Tales* 757)

If the reader follows *Eureka*'s instructions, he will be in the same frame of mind as its cosmologist, and, he suggests, will have the same intuition. But *Eureka*'s hypothesis is itself "suggested". This means the reader's opinion about it (and about the universe) cannot be regarded as his own, and therefore is not entitled to whatever credibility a genuine intuition deserves. Not only is the theory itself "suggested" rather than argued, Poe's cosmologist "suggests" that all irrational beliefs should be regarded as pure intuitions, and that his belief in "oneness" (itself "suggested" by a dizzy spell) is as valuable as Kepler's "guesses".[11] Poe thus ridicules Emerson's, as he sees it, uncritical reliance on "intuitive" thought, showing the dangers of his "suggestive" style. It is absurd to take the whole universe into one's head, but, through suggestion,[12] it is possible to create the illusion of a shared

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[11] The definition of intuition first appears in what he calls a "very unaccountable if not impertinent epistle" (16) from the distant year of 2848, to define the process by which Kepler reached his laws. According to Poe's future correspondent, Kepler thought he "guessed" them, but they were really the result of "shadowy" deductions and inductions. This ostensible fictional device may be a caricature of Emerson's use of a "prose poem" (see note 5 above).

[12] The term "suggestion" deserves some clarification. Poe uses the term in the sense given in Rees's *Cyclopaedia*: "the act of hinting, or furnishing another with a thought or

intuition, which will persuade the reader that he and the author have actually done it. If suggestions are indeed to be valued over argument, what prevents our hypothetical Transcendentalist from accepting *Eureka* as cosmology? Blind to the train of associations, or "suggestions" that determined his belief, he would have no choice but to admit its suggestions on internal evidence alone (as he would his own intuitions), although he could not understand them — or, as Poe implies, *because* he could not understand them.

2. A Criticism on the Universe

Strictly speaking, the "revolution" in *Nature* is intransitive, radically individual. Each man interprets his own "apocalypse of the mind" (508). He must become the world, transcending the opposition between subjective impressions and objective reality through poetical creation. Yet, paradoxically, in the unsigned "The Editors to the reader", in the first issue of *The Dial*, Emerson speaks of a collective and historical "revolution" in America, a broadening of perspective that was the "spirit of the time" ("Editors" 2).[13] As I have hinted before, he obviously does not mean to imply that the ultimate theory of nature will ever become an actuality, but he does encourage — at least in his early writings — , and quite enthusiastically, the abandonment of all existing science and philosophy, in favor of the "new hope" (2).

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design, or of insinuating artfully into his mind" ("Suggestion"). Implied in this definition is the idea that the patient of "suggestion" mistakes another's thoughts or designs with his own (in approximately the same sense, the word would later become connected with "hypnotism"). The word had also been used, in a different sense, in connection with associationism, namely in Thomas Brown's *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, who preferred it to "association of ideas", arguing that it avoided "the seeming limitation to our ideas, of a tendency, which is common to them with all out other feelings" (71). Emerson's use of "suggestion" matches this sense. So, whereas in Poe suggestion entails deception, in Emerson it is a neutral technical term for the association of "feelings".

[13] "No one can converse much with different classes of society in New England, without remarking the progress of a revolution (…). This spirit of the time is felt by every individual with some difference" (*The Dial* 2).

The Dial is the self-proclaimed organ of the "revolution" and criticism its visible manifestation, and so, Emerson's editorial is a manifesto for a new "poetical" and "unpredictable" criticism, which makes "a new light on the whole world" and "has all things to say" (3). He regards poetry, philosophy and science as artificial distinctions. The object of his criticism being to supersede this "narrow" departmentalization, it must itself be a realization of his ideal, all-encompassing, poetical "science": "Our criticism embraces much more than criticism; were it not so, our criticism would be naught" (3).

Margaret Fuller's "A Short Essay on Critics", which follows Emerson's editorial, confirms that Emerson was not alone. She makes explicit the analogy — implicit in Emerson's essay — between nature and a book, or poem: "Nature", she writes, "is the literature and art of the divine mind; human literature and art the criticism on that, and they, too, find their criticism within their own sphere" (7).[14] The same symbolism informed, of course, *Nature*, where the study of nature is subjected to the principles of criticism: "'Every scripture is to be interpreted by the same spirit which gave it forth,' is the fundamental law of criticism. A life in harmony with Nature, the love of truth and virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text" (*Nature* 504).

Once again, Poe's narrator seems to fulfill Emerson's prophecies. The universe, "in the supremeness of its symmetry, is but the most sublime of poems. Now symmetry and consistency are convertible terms: — thus Poetry and Truth are one. (…) *A perfect consistency, I repeat, can be nothing but absolute truth*" (*Eureka* 96). If the universe is "a plot of God", then *Eureka* is, quite literally, a criticism on Creation (89). As a theory of nature, therefore, *Eureka* is based on the principles of criticism. However, and this is the point of the joke, the critic-cosmologist, in keeping with Poe's peculiar views on criticism, not Emerson's, treats the universe as an "art-product", purporting to be a judge of plot — these are the exact terms of Poe's theory of criticism. Thus, the "big crunch" becomes a matter of artistic propriety: "Creation would have affected us as an imperfect *plot* in a romance, where the *dénoûment* is awkwardly brought about" (99).

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[14] The article is signed only "F.", but was later owned by Fuller.

Poe's and Emerson's views on criticism, as will be seen, could not be more dissimilar. However, the preface to *Eureka*, signed with Poe's initials, seems to contradict the views he endorses in his criticism, and has traditionally been produced as evidence of Poe's true, deep kinship with Transcendentalism: "To the few who love me and whom I love — to those who feel rather than those who think — to the dreamers and those who put faith in dreams as the only reality — I offer this Book of Truths, not in its character of Truth-Teller, but for the Beauty that abounds in its Truth; constituting it true" (5). Like the principles of "aesthetic" inquiry of *Eureka* themselves, this is indeed reminiscent of *Nature*: "The true philosopher and the true poet are", therefore, "one, and a beauty which is truth, and a truth which is beauty, is the aim of both"; from this point of view, scientific detachment is inconceivable and "a dream may let us deeper into the secret of nature than a hundred concerted experiments" (*Nature* 511).

Under the assumption that the voice that speaks in the preface is the narrator's, *Eureka* has been seen as both poem and treatise, and as partaking of the spirit of Transcendentalism. However, technically, *Eureka* is presented *either* as a "prose poem" or "an essay on the Spiritual and Material Universe", the two subtitles that appear in the cover and in the first page of the text, respectively. Nowhere in the course of the long "essay" does Poe's cosmologist describe his own work as a "poem": he regards it, implicitly, as criticism. The short "Preface", however, states that the work should be treated "as an Art-Product alone — let us say as a Romance; or, if it be not urging too lofty a claim, as a Poem"; and again, "it is as a Poem only that I wish this work to be judged after I am dead" (*Eureka* 5). In effect, the preface contradicts the narrator's claims.

The fact that most scholars were willing to accept *Eureka a*s both "poetical" and "scientific" is a testimony to the extent to which Romantic theory informs our views on literature. The idea that a "poem" or a "novel" can intimate profound truths beyond the grasp of intellect and, at the same time, be more fundamentally sincere, though feigned, than the direct statement of opinion is quintessentially Romantic. But Poe often attacked this very notion. His "Exordium to Critical Notices", for example, sets very specific limits to criticism:

> Following the highest authority, we would wish, in a word, to limit literary criticism to comment upon *Art*. A book is written — and it is only *as the book* that we subject it to review. With the opinions of the work, considered otherwise than in their relation to the work itself, the critic has really nothing to do. It is his part simply to decide upon *the mode* in which these opinions are brought to bear. (*Essays* 1032)

Poe's text is an ostensible reply to the editor of *Arcturus*, whom Poe seems to consider a representative of the gullible ideal Transcendentalist presupposed by *Eureka*. As Poe understands it, criticism can be no "test of opinion", as that writer would have it be:[15]

> For this test, the work, divested of its pretensions as an *art-product*, is turned over for discussion to the world at large — and first, to that class which it especially addresses — if a history, to the historian — if a metaphysical treatise, to the moralist. In this, the only true and intelligible sense, it will be seen that criticism, the test or analysis of *Art*, (*not* of opinion,) is only properly employed upon productions which have their basis in art itself. (*Essays* 1032)

In Romantic literature in general, and in Emerson in particular, poetry is not an art. It is *much more than that*. On the other hand, the view expressed by Poe in the "Exordium", that poetry is an art, has nothing Romantic about it. By presenting his work as "an art-product alone", he

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[15] Though his transcription is mostly accurate, Poe's attribution of the Preface to the second volume of Arcturus (dated Nov. 1, 1841) to Cornelius Mathews is not. He omits — intentionally, no doubt — the co-author of the Preface, Evert Duyckinck. This is a fine example of Poe's broad use of the word Transcendentalism, and, at the same time, an indication that his feud with Transcendentalism was not a matter of principle, not personal antipathy. *Arcturus* was the short-lived organ of Young America. Its editors were as personally hostile to Emerson as Poe was; however, this piece shows that they were faithful to "the spirit of the age". Indeed, this is the magazine of which "[James Russell] Lowell cruelly but truthfully said was 'as transcendental as Gotham *can* be'" (Miller 91).

disclaims, in his own terms, all scientific pretensions.[16] "He must be blind indeed", he wrote in his review of Longfellow's *Ballads*, "who cannot perceive the radical and chasmal difference between the truthful and the poetical modes of inculcation" (*Essays* 685). For Poe, there is an actual contradiction implied. Technically speaking — and Poe, who conceives poetry as an art, is always technical in his criticism —, fiction is never truthful. It cannot lie, either. For Poe, truly artistic poetry is fiction, which means the poet feigns beliefs for which he cannot be held accountable. The same contradiction underlies his comment on Bielfeld's definition of poetry as "*l'art d'exprimer les pensées par la fiction*": "The Germans have two words in full accordance with this definition, absurd as it is — the terms *Dichtkunst*, the art of fiction, and *Dichten*, feign — which are generally used for poetry and to make verses" (*Marginalia* 261).[17]

Poe is emphatically redescribing poetry as fiction, in the sense of make-belief, and along these lines, he shifts the emphasis of the Aristotelian notion of probability or verisimilitude. He maintains that the "most vitally important point in fiction" is "that of earnestness or verisimilitude" (rev. of *Twice-Told Tales* by N. Hawthorne, *Essays* 583). A fiction should seem, but never can be, honest and true. Poe's extensive use of anonymous, first person, unreliable narrators is symptomatic of this conception. In his fiction in general, and in his hoaxes in particular, Poe "feigns" the beliefs of his characters. If all poetry is fiction, like he implies, then all poetry is also dramatic, that is, the best poets always assume a character (this radical definition seems to allow no exception, not even for lyrical poetry). Accordingly, an anonymous review of his own *Tales*, probably written by

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[16] Consequently, he also disallows dreams as a source of scientific knowledge. Once again, Charles Lamb's comments on superstition come to mind: "There is no law to judge of the lawless, or canon by which a dream may be criticized", at least "on the score of absurdity" (83). This seems to be Poe's point.

[17] This is from *Marginalia* 152 (in Pollin's edition), a reworking of an article in the earlier *Pinakidia* (also number 152 in Pollin's edition). Here, Poe adds "absurd as it is", which Pollin mistakes for an indication of Poe's "disenchantment with literary matters German" (See Pollin's note to the text). It seems to me that it is the idea of feigning expression of thoughts that Poe finds absurd: one can either express thoughts or feign expression.

Poe himself, distinguishes "earnestness" from "sincerity": "A writer must have the fullest belief in his statements, or must simulate that belief perfectly, to produce an absorbing interest in the mind of his reader". Of the two, the latter is, apparently, much to be preferred: "That power of simulation [what he calls 'earnestness'] can only be possessed by a man of high genius" (*Essays* 873).

The critic's task is, therefore, to identify the intended effect and be a judge of plot,[18] that is, the adaptation of the composition to its design — in *Eureka*'s case, satire. As far as opinions are concerned, the critic must only judge the "mode" in which they are presented, or the way in which they further the intention ("are brought to bear"). As for the merit of the opinions themselves, generally considered, Poe leaves it, as we have seen, to the specialized public the work especially addresses, who, unlike the critics, will *not* regard it as a poem. *Eureka*, however, does not address any such community, it addresses Transcendentalists, known for the "cant of generality" (*Essays* 1028), against whom Poe writes his "Exordium". People who know everything, and nothing in particular and cannot distinguish between "the poetical and the truthful modes of inculcation".[19]

Indeed, the *Arcturus* manifesto on criticism (to which Poe's "Exordium" is a reply) has no provision against an "earnest" hoax like *Eureka*. It maintains that criticism should look at "the heart of the subject", and have a universal scope:

> A criticism, *now*, includes every form of literature, except perhaps the imaginative and the strictly dramatic. It is an essay, an oration, a chapter in history, a philosophical speculation, a prose-poem, an art-novel, a dialogue; it admits of humor, pathos, the personal feelings of autobiography, the broadest views of statesmanship. (*Essays* 1030)

Taking exception to this "frantic spirit of *generalization*", Poe retorted that a criticism "*can be* nothing in the world but — a criticism. But if it were

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[18] Plot, "properly defined, *is that in which no part can be displaced without ruin to the whole*" (rev. of *Night and Morning, Essays* 148).

[19] See above.

all that Arcturus imagines, it is not very clear why it might not be equally 'imaginative' or 'dramatic' — or a romance or a melo-drama, or both. That it would be a farce cannot be doubted" (1031).

In the Transcendentalist terms of *Arcturus*, a true criticism must also be a poem and a statement on nature as a whole. Ironically, Poe's cosmologist does not present his criticism as a poem, but as an "essay". However, if we assume the sincerity of the author, that is, that he who signs the preface and the dizzy astronomer are one and the same, we must take *Eureka* as a specimen of that "conglomerate science (…) of which we are instructed that it is anything and everything at once", that, according to Poe, passes for criticism but should go under the appellation of "Orphicism, or Dialism, or Emersonism, or any other pregnant compound indicative of confusion worse confounded" (1031).

If *Eureka* were sincere, then Poe would be guilty of Emersonism. But no criticism can be more general than *Eureka* and so, in Poe's own terms, it must be a farce — that is, its nonsense is "brought to bear" by a dramatic conception. Engrossed by the examination of the possibility of absolute sincerity, Poe's ideal Transcendentalist runs the risk of forgetting that absolute insincerity is certainly possible.

3. "Quizzing the Bostonians"

The almost unanimous opinion among critics is that Poe was dead serious about *Eureka*, yet, the general tone of criticism is uneasy. Stuart and Susan Levine are faithful interpreters of the feeling:

> Probably envious of Emerson and generally hostile to New England Transcendentalists, he nevertheless was quite close to them. *Eureka* is, after all, a treatise on the importance of artistic, intuitive, transcendental inspiration as a source of scientific cosmological truth. Poe repeatedly mocked the very ideas in which he seemed to believe most consistently. (*Eureka* 120, note to p. 11)

This, of course, could hardly be called "consistent", and the "after all" expresses a doubt: *Eureka* proves that Poe was a Transcendentalist at heart, and so the fact that Poe ridicules the very positions held in *Eureka* should be disregarded, because *Eureka* must, "after all", be serious writing. What

else *can* it be? I have been arguing that we have been looking at it from the wrong perspective. The fact that Poe ridicules in no ambiguous terms the very ideas that he assumes in *Eureka* — an obviously ironic and ostensibly fictional work — indicates, rather, that he was *not* serious.

However, the Levines' "consistently" suggests that there is other evidence of Poe's Transcendentalism. This is part of a broader issue. Poe is usually regarded as a firm believer in the basic Romantic tenets underlying Transcendentalism. The principles of all subsequent "Romantic" readings of Poe — even G. R. Thompson's — were arguably laid down by Richard Wilbur and Yvor Winters. Despite having very different, even opposite perceptions of Poe's merits — the former is as sympathetic as the latter is hostile — both writers endorse the characteristically Romantic view that poetry "suggests" universal meanings which cannot be grasped by the intellect by deliberately "obscuring", or blocking, particular meanings. They also agree that Poe was blocking *all* particular meanings.

For Wilbur, Poe's visionary poetry develops a mystical symbolism designed to bring about the "destruction of the physical" (37) and to replace it with glimpses of "a dreamland [which] is beyond space and time, infinite and eternal" (36), and therefore beyond the reach of *mere* meaning.[20] The poet is supposed to attain this realm of "absolute ideality" in the "hypnagogic state", described as "a moment of consciousness" (Wilbur 26), between sleep and wakefulness, and to record the ecstasy, later, in writing. Winters agrees but complains that Poe was "pushing some essential romantic notions nearly as far as they could go" (260): "How thoroughly he would rob us of all subject-matter" (Winters 241).

Both readings (Wilbur's perhaps more explicitly) gloss Poe's famous "marginal note"[21] about the "power of words":

> I do not believe that any thought, properly so called, is out of the reach of language. I fancy, rather, that where difficulty of expression is experienced, there is, in the intellect which

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[20] This reminds me of Matthiessen's old description of *Emerson's* views on art and poetry: "As he conceived the creative process, expression was inseparable from intuition, which came in turn from a reality beyond the reach of the understanding" (26).

[21] Number 150 in Pollin's edition.

> experiences it, a want either of deliberateness or of method. For my own part, I have never had a thought which I could not set down in words, with even more distinctness than that with which I conceived it. (*Marginalia* 258)

Apparently recanting his initial opinion that a writer must know what he means (his "intellectualism"), Poe then proceeds to describe what seems to be a different mode of expression, which fits Wilbur's (and Winters's) description of poetry neatly:

> There is, however, a class of fancies, of exquisite delicacy, which are *not* thoughts, and to which, *as yet*, I have found it impossible to adapt language. I use the word *fancies* at random, and merely because I must use *some* word (…). They seem to me rather psychal than intellectual. (258)

Poe can hardly be said to contradict his first statement, which, incidentally, is nowhere as arbitrary as this.[22] Evidently, his use of the word "fancy", being completely arbitrary, is not expression, as he defines it above. It is unintelligible. It has no definable meaning on which two people can agree. But that does not mean that Poe believed it was more than "expression", or that such a thing even existed. In fact, he actually reinforces the opposition between meaning and nonsense.

Poe's otherworldly visions are an absolute impossibility, and emphatically presented as such (in this respect, I agree with Winters) and, therefore, a false alternative to his initial intellectualism.[23] To stress the

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[22] Michael J. S. Williams argues that using the term "fancies" at random Poe "effectively destroys his own argument for the power of words" (11). The implication is that Poe was serious about the ecstasy, not the "intellectualism", and meant to show that language was arbitrary, and expression could never be rational. It seems to me that he was rather making fun of those who, taking these Romantic notions too far, valued nonsense over sense.

[23] Poe implies that much in his poem "To ——— ": "Not long ago the writer of these lines,/ In the mad pride of intellectuality,/ (…) denied that ever/ A thought arose within the human brain/ Beyond the utterance of human tongue" (*Poems* 406). As Mabbott remarks, Poe can only be alluding to the marginal note we have been reading. If it does, then Poe is acknowledging the irony in his visionary project.

point, Poe describes the "hypnagogic" state from which such visions are supposedly brought not as a "moment", as Wilbur suggests, but as "an inappreciable *point* of time" with no duration, and "absolute thought", he adds, demands "time's *endurance*" (258). A record of this chimerical whatchamacallits will "startle the universal intellect of mankind, by the *supremeness of the novelty*[24] of the material employed" and compel "the Heaven into the Earth" (259), Poe promises, while effectively denying that he, or anyone else for that matter, has *ever* written an inspired poem. In fact, he implies that this momentous event in the history of human letters will not take place until the world ends (when Hell can reasonably be supposed to freeze over). The impossible ecstasy is, he ironically concedes, the result of the kind of blind faith which engenders its own proof: "I regard the visions (…) with an awe which, in some measure, moderates or tranquilizes the ecstasy — I so regard them, through a conviction (which seems a portion of the ecstasy itself) that this ecstasy, in itself, is of a character supernal to the Human Nature — is a glimpse of the spirit's outer world" (258). These "things" are, then, at best, a hope of meaning.

This certainly looks like Transcendentalism. In *Nature*, Emerson directly states that it is best to communicate a "hope" of meaning than a "narrow" intelligible meaning: "A wise writer will feel that the ends of study and composition are best answered by announcing undiscovered regions of thought, and so communicating, through hope, new activity to the torpid spirit" (*Nature* 517). Poe certainly alludes to this kind of discourse, but subverts it when he writes that he has not yet lost the hope "of embodying at least enough of the fancies in question to convey, to certain classes of intellect, a shadowy conception of their [the visions'] character" (*Marginalia* 259). The irony is concentrated on his use of the word "intellect" where one would expect "soul". After all, Poe told us that his "fancies" were not "intellectual", but "psychal". He now contradicts that notion to assert his intellectualism, hinting that he is very conscious of his

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[24] Poe's conception of creation excludes the possibility of absolute novelty. Against Coleridge, he states: "The fancy as nearly creates as the imagination; and neither creates in any respect. All novel conceptions are merely unusual combinations" (rev. of *Alciphron* by Thomas Moore, *Essays* 334).

meaning. His unintelligible writing will impress, then, those who supply the lack of a definite meaning with "feeling" and the faith in enthusiasm that Poe so strenuously opposed in "The Philosophy of Composition"; that is, those that seek "a justification for refusing to understand" (Winters 244).[25] Poe ironically presents this as a wonder (deliberately overstating it), but there is nothing wonderful, nor even unlikely in the thing itself: a writer with a "shadowy conception" manages to convince those who share his faith in ecstatic intuition (or the faith he simulates perfectly) that he has caught a glimpse of Heaven. Not only is this not miraculous, it happens every day. Yet, the palpable contrast between sense and nonsense in Poe's text is there to remind us of the ridicule an extreme mystical stance might expose us to.

In one of those unambiguous direct statements that almost no one takes seriously, Poe accuses Transcendentalists precisely of having a soft spot for texts that intimate profound meanings but have none. The poem he read in Boston in 1845 was "not sufficiently transcendental", he wrote, but "did well enough for the Boston audience — who evinced characteristic discrimination in understanding, and especially applauding, all those knotty passages which we ourselves have not yet been able to understand". He confesses that it was a "hoax", with which he was "quizzing the Bostonians" (*Essays* 1087).[26] Yet, no one believed him.

Poe's subversion of the Romantic foundations of Transcendentalism is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the matter of the duration of his fantastical "intuitions", already alluded to. In his essay "Circles", Emerson states that what he calls "divine moments", of intuition and creation, "confer a sort of omnipresence and omnipotence which asks nothing of duration, but sees that the energy of the mind is commensurate with the work to be done, without time" (*Complete Essays* 288). And, in "The Poet", he describes something very similar to Poe's "visionary poetry":

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[25] This is a subversion of Winters's description of Poe "as poet," which I am deliberately turning against him. Unlike Winters, I think Poe was everything *but* sincere.

[26] This is taken from the "Editorial Miscellanies" of *The Broadway Journal*, November 1, 1845.

> For poetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings and attempt to write them down, but lose ever and anon a word or a verse and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem. (*Complete Essays* 322)

The idea that absolute ideas are beyond space and time is, therefore, in full accordance with Transcendentalism, and Poe was certainly aware of this. Yet, he contrasts Emerson's allusiveness with literal preciseness: "absolute thought", that is, thought properly so called, demands time. Showing that the phrase "thought without time" has no meaning, he denies the paradoxical condition of Transcendentalist "intuition", disappointing the expectation of "absolute" intelligence that his use of "transcendental" vocabulary created.

Winters's paraphrase is accurate. Poe does imply that "the poet should merely endeavor to suggest the presence of meaning when he is aware of none"; that he "has only to write a good description of something physically impressive, with an air of mystery, an air of meaning concealed" (245). We can almost hear Winters say "he can't be serious". But then again, and surprisingly enough, Winters himself sounds remarkably Romantic when he talks about Poe. He figures both Hawthorne and Poe "write in advance of their understanding", but believes that whereas Hawthorne "appears to hope for a meaning, to be, somehow, pathetically and unsuccessfully in search of one" (245), Poe gives the impression of having despaired of content. Winters's sympathy with the Romantic quest prevents him from perceiving that Poe is attacking the very conception that Hawthorne supposedly shares with Hawthorne. Poe has had enough of the quest for *absolute* meaning. Plain meaning is enough for him. In this sense, he may have been closer to Winters than the latter thought. However, Winters's response to Poe looks like a vindication of Romanticism, something one would hardly expect from him. It is as if he felt that Poe threatened the very significance of poetry.

Winters presupposes that mysticism and mystification can never be confused by those who have a correct understanding of poetry. Poe, on the other hand, implies that the distinction is untenable. From a rational perspective, a meaning beyond meaning is nonsense, therefore, mysticism

and mystification are indeed quite indistinguishable. To prove his point, Poe artfully pretends to fulfill the prophecy of Transcendentalism, deliberately confusing the promise with the achievement. Emerson, of course, never went that far. As Harold Bloom puts it, his "failure" as a poet was the fatal consequence of his "over-evaluation of poetry", and he was the first to recognize it. The poetry was "never yet written, as he too frequently complains", that could resolve the underlying contradiction in his work: "he believed that poetry came from Dionysian influx, yet he preached an Apollonian Self-reliance, while fearing the very individuation it would bring"; "he does not know how this is to be attained", Bloom adds (59-60). In plainer terms, Emerson was well aware that the individual mind could not take in the universe.[27]

And yet, Emerson did teach us to over-evaluate and expect the impossible. He taught us to regard poetry as a miracle, as the magical synthesis of subject and object. Though he did not mean it literally, but as a warning against the pride of objectivity, he did encourage us to relinquish objectivity. And, as poetry encroaches on philosophy and science, suggestion will take the place of argument, and everything really becomes possible. The object of *Eureka* is to show that once we grant this — there being no degrees of irrationality — we are had. As a hoax, it is the crowning achievement of Poe's art of simulation. It has the form of a treatise, but no substance. Its moral is that poetry deals in semblances of truth — that it is distinguished, for all practical purposes, from philosophy and science, which are subjected to a test of truth, however provisional its conclusions may be.

But we have got so used to thinking that poetry is not an intellectual product that we can hardly conceive of a poet as a rational being. A poem is not a mathematical problem, to be sure, but does that lead to the absurd conclusion that poets do not, or should not use their brains? Taken literally, Emerson suggests that they rely, indeed, on something else entirely. Poe may be a useful antidote for too much suggestiveness. He reminds us that

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[27] It may not be amiss to recall a similar statement by Matthiessen, who also understood that Emerson's criterion of criticism is not adapted to evaluate his, or perhaps, any poet's merits: "We can hardly assess Emerson's work in the light of his theory of language and art, since there is such disproportion between this theory and any practice of it" (5).

poetry is, in a sense, the art of suggestion. Poets have always been known to *suggest* that the impossible is possible, or that they know what no one could possibly know. Yet, poets are no more capable of performing the impossible than any of us. Poe reminds us, in a word, that Emerson is himself essentially a poet, thus arguably providing a more accurate measure of his rival's achievements.

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Abstract

It is notoriously hard to know when Edgar Allan Poe is being serious, or, in other words, which (if any) of his poetical works expressed his opinions. Considering this, it is more than a little surprising that *Eureka*, Poe's cosmological "prose poem", should be ranked by most scholars high on the sincerity scale. It has, in fact, often been presented as proof that Poe was a Transcendentalist at heart, despite his well-known attacks on Emerson and his circle. More broadly, it has been seen as typical of Poe's supposedly exaggerated Romanticism. In my essay, I argue that *Eureka* is not sincere Transcendentalism, but a very elaborate parody of Emerson's *Nature* (1836) and, more broadly, of the Transcendentalist movement embodied by *The Dial*. In fact, I believe Poe's parody defies the very Romantic (and Transcendentalist) notion that poetry can be sincere.

Keywords

Cosmology; fiction; hoax; Romanticism; Transcendentalism

Resumo

É difícil saber quando Edgar Allan Poe fala a sério, ou, por outras palavras, quais dos seus textos poéticos exprimem as suas opiniões (se é que algum as exprime). Sendo este o caso, não deixa de ser surpreendente que a maior parte dos críticos considere *Eureka*, o "poema em prosa" cosmológico de Poe, um dos seus escritos mais sinceros. De modo geral, tem-se visto nele a manifestação mais típica de um Romantismo exagerado. No meu ensaio, defendo que o Transcendentalismo de *Eureka* não é sincero, mas uma sofisticada paródia de *Nature*, o primeiro livro de Emerson, e do movimento Transcendentalista representado por *The Dial*. De facto, creio que a paródia de Poe põe em causa a ideia Romântica (e Transcendentalista) de que a poesia pode ser sincera.

Palavras-Chave

Cosmologia, ficção; *hoax*; Romantismo; Transcendentalismo

“Travelling is a fool’s paradise”: What We Talk about When We Talk about Emerson’s Views on Travelling

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ISSN: 0873-0628 ANGLO SAXONICA SER. III N. 12 2016

"Travelling is a fool's paradise": What We Talk about When We Talk about Emerson's Views on Travelling

In 1868, Henry T. (Theodore) Tuckerman in an article entitled "Going Abroad" stated:

> It is not going abroad, in itself, that we condemn, but the aimless, gregarious, material, and, as it were, reckless vagabondage of our people, or, rather, a class of them, which, within the last few years, has increased to a multitude. They herd together in Paris, cling to their whiskey and buckwheats, never explore what is historic, or assimilate with the socially gifted. Idlers, they grow selfish through dissipation; bold and unrefined, they cherish neither reverence nor admiration for the interests of wisdom and faith. Extravagant, indiscriminate, snobbish, they misrepresent abroad all that is nominally characteristic of our institutions or hopeful in our national life. (533-534)

Tuckerman, himself a travel writer, since he had published, among others,[1] *The Italian Sketch Book* (1835), defined the ideal traveller as a genial optimist whose travels both reaffirm his faith in humanity and enlarge his appreciation of art and antiquity, and thus was not condemning the act of travelling in itself but the way Americans were doing it.

By that time and for the rest of the nineteenth century travel conditions had changed for Americans: after the end of the Civil War they had reached a political and social situation which allowed them to travel

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[1] Tuckerman also published: *A Month in England* (1853); *Maga Papers About Paris* (1867); *America and Her Commentators: With a Critical Sketch of Travel in the United States* (1864); *Isabel, or Sicily* (1839), a blend of travel material with romance.

more and not just for utilitarian reasons but in search of a recreational experience just as their European counterparts (particularly the British) had been doing for a long time. This was also the century that witnessed the rise of the tourism phenomenon, that is to say, the regular travelling *en masse*.

Then again, the technological advances in transportation, namely the railroad and the steamboat,[2] made it possible for a greater variety of Americans to reach Europe in substantial numbers and visit several areas of the European continent more quickly and much more comfortably. Previously that kind of errand had been limited to those who either did it for professional reasons or had the material means to travel, such as was the case of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Nevertheless, or precisely because of this, and just as Tuckerman's words indicate, foreign travel did not often meet with the agreement of what one may consider as patriotic Americans. In general, during the whole of the nineteenth century, and particularly in the early national period, until the Civil War, almost every major writer made a comment ridiculing, criticizing, or at least questioning foreign travel, and almost every one of them wrote a book about travelling abroad. Washington Irving, who spent most of his adult life abroad and was very much responsible for creating not only an image of Europe, and particularly of Spain, but also the literary conventions of American travel writing on Europe, declared in *A Tour on the Prairies* (1835):

> We send our youth abroad to grow luxurious and effeminate in Europe; it appears to me, that a previous tour on the prairies would be more likely to produce that manliness, simplicity, and self-dependence, most in unison with our political institutions. (35)

Yet, Americans seemed to be eager to learn about the lands from which they were now separated by a revolution (and an ocean) and as citizens of the New World they were fascinated with what the Old World had to offer,

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[2] In 1818, the first regularly scheduled clipper ship service between New York and Liverpool was established; the average voyage took 30 days. The *James Baines* set the transatlantic sailing record of 12 days and 6 hours from Boston to Liverpool, in 1855.

mainly works of art, monuments to history, sights associated with great writers, and ultimately to wander among the ruins of the past, a past that was again viewed in a rather contradictory way. In the introduction to his remarkably successful *The Sketch Book* — "The Author's Account of Himself" — Irving summarized the prevailing ideas Americans had about Europe using the voice of his fictional narrator, Geoffrey Crayon:

> But Europe held forth all the charms of storied and poetical association. There were (...) the quaint peculiarities of ancient and local custom. My native country was full of youthful promise; Europe was rich in the accumulated treasures of age. (...) I longed to wander over the scenes of renowned achievement—to tread, as it were, in the footsteps of antiquity —to loiter about the ruined castle—to meditate on the falling tower—to escape, in short, from the commonplace realities of the present, and lose myself among the shadowy grandeurs of the past. (10-11)[3]

On the whole, Irving's characterization of Europe shaped later generations of American travel writers who would propagate a systematically self-conscious American view of Europe, one that allowed Americans to contemplate "the ancient", "the treasures of age", "the ruined castle", "the falling tower" and thus "could wander among the deeds of their ancestors, even celebrate them, but one that reassured them that America was the land of the future and Europe of the past" (Oliveira Martins 182). In other words, there was a nationalistic aversion to admiring anything foreign, which most of the time was seen as nondemocratic and non-American; and at the same time an artistic craving for what Europe could offer, mainly the achievements in art and culture materialized in European scenes.

Within this framework, it may not come as a surprise that perhaps the most famous example of this kind of contradictory impulses is probably Emerson's famous and often quoted remark in "Self-Reliance" (1841) that

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[3] First published in 1819-20 in seven separate installments and then complete in one volume in 1848. It was followed by *Tales of a Traveller* (1824), and when, in 1826, Irving moved to Madrid he set to writing *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (1828), *Chronicle of the Conquest of Granada* (1829) and finally *Tales of the Alhambra* (1832).

"travelling is a fool's paradise", given that he spent years travelling and even wrote *English Traits* (1856), a book which can be described as travel literature. Without the necessary contextualization, particularly if the quotation is not combined with a careful reading of that very same essay or some of Emerson's later writings, one may be led to the conclusion that Emerson had a negative view of travelling. Or else that he was just expressing a patriotic and nationalistic perspective, thus emphasizing the need for Americans to free themselves from the corrupting influences of Europe. The main point of this essay is precisely to argue that Emerson's views on travel, particularly foreign travel, are not to be interpreted literally, and that in fact travelling, which implies mutability, movement, and action may very well be one important factor in the construction of the self-reliant American.

Emerson himself went on three trips to Europe — 1832-33, 1847-48 and 1872-73 — and he visited the American West twice (1866 and 1871), besides having taken several walking tours (Connecticut Valley in 1823, for instance). After 1833, he was quite regularly on the move — "leaving" as it were — because of what became his main occupation — lecturing.[4]

The idea that travelling abroad (meeting the foreigner, visiting Europe) could be a corrupting influence of national values also seemed to be in Emerson's mind, as has often been suggested whenever "The American Scholar" oration is discussed. In 1837, when he delivered this oration before Harvard's Phi Beta Kappa Society, he was thought to be attacking American dependence on European cultural models, urging American youths to devote themselves to the life of the mind, to the creation of a new literary legacy which should stop imitating the muses of Europe, and thus seemed to be asking for a specific cultural nationalism. Actually, in 2003, Kenneth S. Sacks offered another interpretation: "In referring to the American scholar, Emerson fully subverted an established phrase. Used previously with nationalistic and moral overtones, for Emerson it signified freedom from all prescribed culture and conventions" (Sacks 31). In that

[4] In this occupation, he first began lecturing in New England and New York, but eventually travelled as far south as St. Louis and as far north as Montreal.

oration, Emerson invoked the "man thinking" and the "man living", as well as the "nation of men", instead of a specific American nation or a specific and special American man, as Branka Arsić has also recently argued. Arsić claims that Emerson is in fact provocatively telling his audience that "enjoyment in identitarian specificity is, after all, contrary to thinking" (Arsić 257).

Thus, any ordinary man, any thinking man, even a European one, is or can be an "American scholar", meaning that the individual should not conform to the habitual ways of thinking (or of looking at the world), and a novel experience, such as that of travelling, brings the need to compare our experience with that of others and even to compare the judgement of the significance of that experience with the judgements of others.

To some extent that is precisely what Emerson does in *English Traits*. As most of Emerson's work, this is not necessarily a consistent book.[5] Even though he praises England as "the best of actual nations" and states that the English "constitute the modern world, (…) have earned their vantage-ground, and held it through ages of adverse possession", he then adds a long list of faults, which are in the end the result of his own particular (American) way of looking at the English. He criticizes aspects such as their political conduct — decided not by general views, "but by internal intrigues and personal and family interest"; their nationalism in the name of the few — "They cannot see beyond England, nor in England can they transcend the interests of the governing classes"; their interests of property, which lead the strong classes to check the weaker, and finally the Church, which "punishes dissent, punishes education" (*English Traits* 283-84). On the whole, the general view is one of a country which in these aspects is the total opposite of America, or of the idea that Emerson has of America.

Some of the observations in the book have led to a debate whether Emerson admires or attacks the British, but eventually contradiction, inconsistency, logical relationship between sentences left deliberately unarticulated were to be expected in his writing, as already mentioned.

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[5] Emerson was well aware of the fragmentary aspects of his writings, particularly the essays. In a letter to Carlyle, May10, 1863, he declares: "Here I sit & read & write with very little system & as far as regards composition with the most fragmentary result: paragraphs incompressible, each sentence an infinitely repellent particle" (Slater 185).

After all, he was the one who had proclaimed that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds" (*Essays*, "Self-Reliance" 152). On the other hand, this kind of contradictory assessment is quite characteristic of the typical and already mentioned American travel writer who is divided between admiring what is foreign and defending American values.

The same inconsistency or contradiction appears in "Self-Reliance". In this essay it is not so much the act of travelling that Emerson denounces, but the way in which it is done, just as other actions of men that are also presented and examined in the essay. Self-reliance, self-trust, according to Emerson, is "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your own private heart is true for all men — that is genius" (*Essays*, "Self-Reliance" 34). Self-reliance, nevertheless, has two main obstacles: conformity and consistency.

The essay seems to have as its whole point to insist on the opposition between worldly judgement and private judgement. When a man trusts himself he is not only accepting his transcendent destiny, accepting the perception that comes from his heart, works through his hands and is predominant in all his being, but also assuming a role, one that will enable him to become "a guide, a redeemer and a benefactor, obeying the Almighty effort and thus advancing on Chaos and Dark" (*Essays*, "Self-Reliance" 36). Being a nonconformist also apparently implies a life in solitude, within a private sphere, in which man is able to discover his own truths although he may be challenged by society — the collective. But Emerson does not deny the connection between the individual and society:

> What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder, because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude. (*Essays*, "Self-Reliance" 40-41)

The other obstacle, "terror", in Emerson's words, which prevents self-reliance, is consistency. This part of Emerson's text is perhaps the one that has become more popular since from it stems some well-known quotes,

such as "to be great is to be misunderstood" or "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines" (*Essays*, "Self-Reliance" 44). Again, the "true man" must be himself, must speak what he thinks even if he contradicts himself, but once more the connection with society, his country and his times is not denied.

Actually, the essay may also be regarded as an appeal to action, to mutability. Having expounded his ideas on self-reliance, Emerson further adds that this should revolutionize all aspects of human life: "in all the offices and relations of men: in their religion; in their education; in their pursuits; their modes of living; their association; in their property; in their speculative views" (*Essays*, "Self-Reliance" 59). Although he does not deal with all of these subjects, he further expands on this idea particularly where American Religion, Culture, Art, and the spirit of society are concerned. When he discusses American culture, 'self-culture', Emerson focuses on travelling and states:

> It is for want of self-culture that the superstition of Travelling, whose idols are Italy, England, Egypt, retains its fascination for all educated Americans. … The soul is no traveller; the wise man stays at home, and when his necessities, his duties, on any occasion call him from his house, or into foreign lands, he is at home still, and shall make men sensible by the expression of his countenance, that he goes the missionary of wisdom and virtue, and visits cities and men like a sovereign, and not like an interloper or a valet. (*Essays*, "Self-Reliance" 62-3)

In this first part of his argumentation, Emerson is quite clear: travelling for the sake of looking for models outside America (collective) or outside of the Self (private), in other words looking for the object outside the subject, results from the lack of self-reliance, here connected to the want of self-culture and a bit further to the failure of "intellectual action" and of the American system of education (*Essays*, "Self-Reliance" 63-4).

The logical conclusion is that "Travelling is a fool's paradise".[6] Then

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[6] "Travelling is a fool's paradise. Our first journeys discover to us the indifference of places. At home I dream that at Naples, at Rome, I can be intoxicated with beauty, and lose my sadness. I pack my trunk, embrace my friends, embark on the sea, and at

again this premise is regarded in a negative way, because it is associated with a *topos* already dealt with in "The American Scholar" — imitation — which is presented (and perhaps not innocently) as "the travelling of the mind" (*Essays*, "Self-Reliance" 64). To travel to find "Beauty, convenience, grandeur of thought, and quaint expression" may be misleading for the American artist, but ultimately he has to look outside himself in order to create a new work, a new "house", in which the subject and the object will come together:

> … the American artist will study with hope and love the precise thing to be done by him, considering the climate, the soil, the length of the day, the wants of the people, the habit and form of the government, he will create a house in which all these will find themselves fitted, and taste and sentiment will be satisfied also. (*Essays*, "Self-Reliance" 64)

This argumentation, more related to the lack of self-introspection and to the condemnation of imitation, already makes explicit that travelling for reasons other than mere recreation is nevertheless acceptable, as the author argues:

> I have no churlish objection to the circumnavigation of the globe, for the purposes of art, of study, and benevolence, so that the man is first domesticated, or does not go abroad with the hope of finding somewhat greater than he knows. He who travels to be amused, or to get somewhat which he does not carry, travels away from himself, and grows old even in youth among old things. (*Essays*, "Self-Reliance" 63)

Thus, even in this essay, which belongs to the *First Series*, and which on the whole can be considered more theoretical than the ones published either in the *Second Series* (1844), or in later works, travelling is not completely condemned. Nevertheless, at least in this stage of Emerson's thinking, neither is it necessarily viewed as fundamental for the completion

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last wake up in Naples, and there beside me is the stern fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical, that I fled from. I seek the Vatican, and the palaces. I affect to be intoxicated with sights and suggestions, but I am not intoxicated. My giant goes with me wherever I go" (*Essays*, "Self-Reliance" 64).

of the self-reliant individual who, after all, should not conform to other people's opinions or traditional behavior, but instead should endeavor to transform himself, to change through his own private thoughts.

Later, in "Culture", published in *The Conduct of Life* (1860), and on the eve of one the greatest challenges to the survival of the American nation, Emerson returns to the subject of travelling. In this essay, as well as in others from this collection,[7] one can argue that Emerson reviews some of his earlier assumptions, presenting a more articulated view about the relevance of his own previous exhortations, combining theory and the practice of life. While he continues to insist on the power of individuality, which he now names as "egotists"[8], being "the pest of society", culture implies a further involvement of the individual:

> Culture is the suggestion from certain best thoughts, that a man has a range of affinities, through which he can modulate the violence of any master-tones that have a droning preponderance in his scale, and succor him against himself. Culture redresses his balance, puts him among his equals and superiors, revives the delicious sense of sympathy, and warns him of the dangers of solitude and repulsion. (*The Conduct of Life*, "Culture" 132)

Culture succors a man in the sense that it does not create a detached individuality, indifferent to other issues outside of his own experience. Indeed, there is a balance to be obtained, one that after all reveals a tension

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[7] The volume contains nine essays: "Fate"; "Power", "Wealth", "Culture", "Behavior", "Worship", "Considerations by the Way", "Beauty" and "Illusions".

[8] "But worse than the harping on one string, Nature has secured individualism, by giving the private person a high conceit of his weight in the system. The pest of society is egotists. There are dull and bright, sacred and profane, coarse and fine egotists. … The man runs round a ring formed by his own talent, falls into an admiration of it, and loses relation to the world. It is a tendency in all minds. One of its annoying forms is a craving for sympathy. The sufferers parade their miseries, tear the lint from their bruises, reveal their indictable crimes, that you may pity them. They like sickness, because physical pain will extort some show of interest from the bystanders, as we have seen children, who, finding themselves of no account when grown people come in, will cough till they choke, to draw attention" (*The Conduct of Life*, "Culture" 128-129).

forced by both the need for stability and the necessity of departures. Thus, it is not surprising that Emerson also reviews his opinion on travelling. The topic appears as one of the possible means through which amelioration of the individual can be obtained, together with books, society, and solitude, introduced in the following terms: "I have been quoted as saying captious things about travel; but I mean to do justice" (*The Conduct of Life*, "Culture" 139).

His justice does not initially contradict what he had stated in "Self-Reliance". He still insists that travelling abroad is mainly due to a restlessness of the American people, which derives from their lack of character, and travel is certainly useful for certain types of men. Yet, these arguments are somewhat overruled when Emerson adds: "But let us not be pedantic, but allow to travel its full effect" (*The Conduct of Life*, "Culture" 141). In this part of the text, the author very clearly connects travel with mobility, mutability and not just in physical terms. He mentions the idea that travelling is also a means to "have some chance", hence implying the possible material advantages of travel, adding other possible advantages:

> And the phrase "to know the world," or to travel, is synonymous with all men's ideas of advantage and superiority. No doubt, to a man of sense, travel offers advantages. As many languages as he has, as many friends, as many arts and trades, so many times is he a man. (*The Conduct of Life*, "Culture" 141)

Even if there is the phrasing — "to a man of sense" — travel is now regarded in a new light, one that can work as a sort of medical remedy against stagnation (both private and collective).[9] Furthermore, Emerson actually

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[9] "Moreover, there is in every constitution a certain solstice, when the stars stand still in our inward firmament, and when there is required some foreign force, some diversion or alterative to prevent stagnation. And, as a medical remedy, travel seems one of the best. Just as a man witnessing the admirable effect of ether to lull pain, and meditating on the contingencies of wounds, cancers, lockjaws, rejoices in Dr. Jackson's benign discovery, so a man who looks at Paris, at Naples, or at London, says, 'If I should be driven from my own home, here, at least, my thoughts can be consoled by the most prodigal amusement and occupation which the human race in ages could contrive and accumulate'" (*The Conduct of Life*, "Culture" 142).

recognizes that travelling abroad could and should offer a more acute conscience of what is specifically American:

> A foreign country is a point of comparison, wherefrom to judge his own. One use of travel, is, to recommend the books and works of home; — we go to Europe to be Americanized; and another, to find men. … And thus, of the six or seven teachers whom each man wants among his contemporaries, it often happens, that one or two of them live on the other side of the world. (*The Conduct of Life*, "Culture" 141)

This quotation seems to recuperate the interpretation suggested about "The American Scholar", and it should not be interpreted as a defense of blind nationalism. What is being implied here is the idea that man can become a cosmopolitan, someone who, through contact with other people, becomes more self-aware. This very same idea was already present in "Intellect" (1841):

> Every man, in the degree in which he has wit and culture, finds his curiosity inflamed concerning the modes of living and thinking of other men, and especially of those classes whose minds have not been subdued by the drill of school education. (*Essays*, "Intellect" 255)

"Do not seek outside yourself" — the translation of the Latin quote "*Ne te quaesiveris extra*" — with which Emerson opened "Self-Reliance", would certainly imply the critique of any kind of influence that would deviate man from this ultimate purpose. Even if travelling is not ultimately presented as "a storehouse of truths and experiences that shape the self" (Berger 50), Emerson leaves open the possibility that it might be a way to leave "…theory, as Joseph his coat in the hand of the harlot, and flee" (*Essays*, "Self-Reliance" 43). In other words, Emerson's writings almost always ask for new beginnings, which virtually imply change, aversion to stagnation, overcoming of private and external constraints. Stanley Cavell has suggested that the self, for Emerson, "is a process of moving to, and from, nexts" (Cavell 12). Thus, travelling could function in the same way: as the opener or instigator of a process that has the individual as its ultimate reality. In other words, travelling could provide the individual with the opportunity to look within himself, while looking or seeking the Other,

and establishing some sort of dialogue, after which the individual would surpass the act of travel and thus surpass himself.

Finally, this kind of travelling or traveller would after all be an important component of what Branka Arsić suggests as being Emerson's "complex philosophy of leaving, culminating in the existential and ethical insistence that man has to be able to find the power to do what he is unable to do: leave his place" (3). In other words, action, movement, mutability, departures and arrivals that are a part of travelling, and have after all been paradigmatic in the American framework of mind, were not denied by Emerson and can be regarded as having an important role in the (re)construction of the Self.

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Abstract

"Travelling is a fool's paradise" — this quotation appears in Emerson's seminal essay "Self-Reliance" (1841) and it has become one of his most often quoted lines. Nevertheless, without the necessary contextualization, particularly if the quotation is not combined with a careful reading of that same essay or some of Emerson's later writings, the quotation may lead one to the conclusion that Emerson had a negative view of travelling.

I will discuss what we are talking about — or what Emerson is talking about — when "travelling" is mentioned. By relying on a varied range of sources I will try to argue that Emerson's views on travelling may actually suggest its importance in the (re) construction of the Self.

Keywords

Individual; travel literature; travelling; self-reliance; society

Resumo

"Travelling is a fool's paradise" — é uma citação do ensaio seminal de Emerson "Self-Reliance" (1841), a qual se tornou uma das mais conhecidas de toda a obra emersoniana. A leitura que proponho da citação e do ensaio referidos, bem como a sua ligação com outros textos emersonianos, refuta a interpretação de que o autor rejeitava o acto de viajar.

Analisarei do que estamos a falar quando falamos — ou do que fala Emerson — quando o acto de viajar é mencionado. Usando outros textos de Emerson, procurarei mostrar que a visão do autor sobre a viagem pode afinal sugerir a sua importância para a (re) construção do Eu.

Palavras-Chave

Autoconfiança; indivíduo; literatura de viagens; sociedade; viajar

Two Houses White

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ISSN: 0873-0628 ANGLO SAXONICA SER. III N. 12 2016

Two Houses White

1. Introduction

Among the reasons Ralph Emerson is to be included with the founders of American environmentalism are the author's celebrated compositions extolling nature, the author's lifelong participation in outdoor excursions ("The Adirondacs" 182-194), and the author's friendships with environmental authors like Henry Thoreau and John Muir ("Journal LXII" 357). In short, there are good reasons for recognizing Emerson among the nineteenth-century environmentalists and also for re-approaching the author's compositions for fresh, environmental insights for the twenty-first century. But there exist philosophical complications within the compositions that must be brought to light and solved before Emerson's contributions are to be retrieved. First among the complications are the author's expressed commitment to the martial virtue *self-reliance* and his emphatic objections to conventional thinking as given in the oration "Self-Reliance" (*Essays* 39-79). For, if the environmentalism of the twenty-first century pursues the common good of all persons and if new environmentalism envisions world-wide, sustainable practices, then Emerson's self-reliance will not be as suited to the approaching future as those environmental philosophies espousing humanism, prudence, and social cohesion. Everything depends on how self-reliance, a sort of complete virtue for Emerson, is to be interpreted.

What is clear is that Emerson's self-reliance is antagonistic to the prudential thinking needed to form shared, ecological ways of life. However, self-reliance, a quality of individual persons, spans not one but several areas of traditional virtue, among which are *fortitude* and *faith*. An interpretation of self-reliance in light of traditional virtue may help us perceive how, in truth, the author's vision ought to be received. So, let us

contemplate Emerson's self-reliance by the authority of traditional virtue ethics, and let us consider how the fortitude in self-reliance is profoundly at odds with areas of environmentalism besides political activism and outdoor recreation. For this reason, fortitude in Emerson must be deflated and stowed to its proper compartments. But let us also bring to light the background commitment to cardinal virtues *prudence* and *justice* expressed in "Self-Reliance" as part of the definition of self-reliance. For, even with overt antagonism, what Emerson may offer us is the approach to environmentalism, nature, and human life prioritizing both prudence and justice, good habits carefully identified by the tradition of moral philosophy. What we discover is that prudent, just environmentalism emerging from Emerson offers us fresh approaches. If imprudence and injustice account for environmental crises, then the unheard call to virtue given in Emerson's orations and in the compositions of Henry Thoreau remains for us timely.

The interpretation of Emerson's self-reliance that follows is to be guided by the consummate authority on flourishing and the virtues, the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas (I-II, Q. 1 - Q. 5, Q. 55 - Q. 67). For notwithstanding Emerson's commitment to original, outspoken rationality, his main concepts are in truth conventions that belong to the history of European philosophy as given in the compositions of Aquinas, Cicero, Aristotle, and others. In pursuing the overhaul of self-reliance, this essay accordingly pursues the reconciliation of Emerson's thought with the intellectual tradition to which he and Thoreau must belong.

2. Deflating Fortitude

A remarkable tension is evident between traditional philosophy and Emerson's "Self-Reliance", given in 1841 and published with the first series of *Essays* in the year 1847. In the composition "Self-Reliance", concepts of the tradition like *intellect*, *will*, *virtue*, *power*, *act*, and *contemplation* are called to life to champion the intellectual departure from past systems and abandoned doctrines. Whether the author is successful in making the departure and, of himself, giving forth original thought is a significant question. For, if Emerson's philosophy does wholly depend upon traditional, moral concepts, then the author's proposal to think beyond all tradition is for us doubtful.

Virtue is a traditional, moral concept, and Emerson's original statements about virtue show the author accepts some of what the tradition imparts to us (*Essays* 46, 51, 61-62). Self-reliance, or self-trust, or independence, is for Emerson the name of a virtuous person; to be self-reliant in Emerson's sense is to embody the Socratic ideal of rationality and the Kantian vision of autonomy in which the person abides by the call of his or her own reason and aims to live as one belonging to God. For the perspective informed by the traditional doctrine of the virtues, self-reliance so-described must encompass several areas of virtue, including theological virtue, intellectual virtue, and moral virtue (Aquinas I-II, Q. 55 - Q. 70). So, it is plausible to assert that self-reliance for Emerson describes what is good character, i.e., a grouping of assorted virtues, and not what is one, singular virtue. If self-reliance is composite, then how we are to take up self-reliance will depend on what activities and aims are most important to us. For example, Emerson's self-reliance may be approached as a theological commitment to understanding divine revelation, the virtue *faith*, or as the intellectual commitment to contemplating higher truth, the virtue *wisdom*, or as the moral commitment to enacting what rationality requires, the cardinal virtues *prudence* and *justice*. These and other interpretations of self-reliance, as given in the composition, are each possible and important.

What is clear is that Emerson's self-reliance may be readily received in terms of the traditional virtue *fortitude*, commonly known as the habit of unwavering passion in encounters with adversity and peril (Aquinas I-II, Q. 61, a. 4). The emergence of fortitude in Emerson is to be explained in light of activities and aims of first importance to the author of "Self-Reliance": living in the public world and speaking truth in public forums (44-47, 49-50). Emerson offers key definitions of self-reliance in relation to what is the public: "to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility...when the whole cry of voices is on the other side" (*Essays* 40), "A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition, as if every thing were titular and ephemeral but he" (44), and "If I can be firm enough today to do right, and scorn eyes..." (52). In short, for Emerson, self-reliance is especially comporting and speaking bravely in worldly adversity and peril. Now, this concept of fortitude of Emerson's is more modest than what tradition tells us. Book III of Aristotle's *Nicomachean*

Ethics defines *fortitude* (for Aristotle, *andreias*) as "being intrepid in facing a fine death and the immediate dangers that bring death" (40-41). Similarly, *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas defines *fortitude* as "the virtue which strengthens [man] against dangers of death" (I-II, Q. 61, a. 3). Nowhere in "Self-Reliance" does Emerson propose a life committed to overcoming fear of death nor does Emerson object to the cowardice of those fleeing physical danger. Everywhere Emerson is concerned with the theological-intellectual-moral commitment to speaking what one's own intellect says and with rebuking the cowardice of those who conform in thought and deed to the public.

Textual evidence that Emerson's self-reliance is nonetheless fortitude consists in the substantial array of propositions and arguments that employ terms of war to illuminate what self-reliance is. In "Self-Reliance", Emerson employs the martial vocabulary of *strength*, *fear*, *death*, *force*, *shame*, *contempt*, *loathing*, *scorn*, *courage*, and *pride* (e.g., 41-42, 66). Among numerous examples of what anyone should see as martial reasoning is the author's outrageous, opening argument that the chief value of original thought is to cause in us *shame* for our own *cowardice* in not having expressed those thoughts ourselves (*Essays* 39-40). Clearly this is the Emerson Friedrich Nietzsche claims to read for contentment (Cavell 40). But unlike Nietzsche, Emerson's self-reliance emphasizes subordination to the intellect: "To believe your own thought" (*Essays* 39), and "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind" (44). For Emerson as for St. Thomas, fortitudinous self-reliance is above all trust in the intellect to discern and express universal truth; it is a commitment to the sovereignty of reason and the disposition to forgo all else besides, including the insights of other persons, the obligations of society, and the affections of family. It is true that in Emerson's hands the virtue is enlarged well beyond situations of physical peril in war, but this enlargement may be where Emerson is original. Emerson's self-reliant person is especially one who courageously asserts him or herself in public, who in so doing gives no heed to logical inconsistencies and past commitments, and who pursues in worldly actions the guidance of the intellect come what may. Finally, Emerson proposes that his self-reliance is the mark of great persons and original thinkers who attract the multitudes, themselves complacent and conforming.

Here a second complication is to be noted. Emerson's proposal to "tell men they are not leaning willows" (*Essays* 67) suffers from the issue of authorial irrationality. After all, it is not particularly the business of the self-reliant thinker Emerson champions to aim to improve the general audience. It follows that the author of "Self-Reliance", purporting to give us insight and counsel, must himself be excused from the proposed ideal of outspoken rationality; the reader must also be excused, because any reader of "Self-Reliance" is in all likelihood a leaning willow. This complication is so significant as to place the final purpose of the composition in doubt. Emerson does not intend to give us intellectual satire. There are other complications. Of interest to environmentalism is the complicated approach to nature given in "Self-Reliance" as elsewhere (cf., "Nature," *Miscellanies* 1-74). Just as humans should not depend upon other persons nor conform to one another, so, too, for Emerson, self-reliant persons should be independent of nature. Emerson claims that the self-reliant person finds the appearances of world and nature "under his feet" and "all are his" (*Essays* 54); the original thinker, he claims, is one who issues classification systems to corral nature, whereas the coward is "ashamed before the blade of grass" (58). At the same time, the author asserts that the virtuous person he envisions encounters nature as independent existence and as something with which the self-reliant live (*Essays* 58-59). An environmentalism emerging from Emerson must solve these philosophical dilemmas.

It is not at first evident how Emerson's vision can allow both the subordination of nature and the independence of nature. This discord is solved in the essay "Nature" (*Miscellanies* 45-59). There, Emerson dismisses idealist religions along with the immaterialism of the eighteenth century, Irish clergyman George Berkeley for affirming just what the person who is self-reliant may perceive: appearances of nature to be mind-dependent and "under foot" (55-56, 61). Emerson argues that complete idealism must admit the independent existence of world and nature (*Miscellanies* 61-62). In "Nature", the author proposes that the several meanings of nature "admit of being summed in one", i.e., the concept of nature as independently-existing spirit (59). Thus, for Emerson, the self-reliant person who perceives nature as underfoot commodity, or as aesthetic appearance, or as mind-dependent qualities has not yet attained the intellectual outlook. For Emerson, self-reliant perception finds all nature to manifest self-reliance,

which he tells us is characteristic of spirit. In "Self-Reliance", Emerson affirms: "the vital resources of every animal and vegetable, are demonstrations of the self-sufficing, and therefore self-relying soul" (62).

More troublesome for environmentalism is the opposition Emerson builds between self-reliance and what for the tradition of moral philosophy is the virtue prudence, or habitually deliberating well about what is the balanced course of action for a chosen goal (Aquinas I-II, Q. 58, a. 5). Prudence in Emerson's "Self-Reliance" passes under several guises, among which are *conformity*, *consistency*, *civility*, and *social obligation* (43, 48, 49-50, 52-53). For the author as for Thoreau, the prudence embodied by political leaders and ordinary citizens is the object of fortitudinous contempt. But for any environmentalism advocating conserving natural resources, forming sustainable relationships between humanity and nature, and pursuing the common good of all persons and species, prudence, known traditionally as *practical wisdom*, must be among the important virtues. What is more, according to the tradition of moral philosophy, prudence is the intellectual master among the cardinal virtues, all of which together dispose us to rationality and the attainment of ends (Aquinas I-II, Q. 58, a. 4; Q. 61, a. 4). In short, without prudence no justice, nor fortitude, nor temperance (Pieper 6-8). According to Aristotle and according to St. Thomas, the aim of all prudential thinking is our own happiness attained on Earth. If we allow our own happiness to include diverse peoples and non-human creatures, then our approach to the environment must favor prudential reform, civil regulations, and consensus through public deliberation. For Emerson, such prudence peddles pasts and futures; it is for him as for Thoreau to be indeterminate and leaning (*Essays* 58-59). The former loudly laments the preponderance of prudence in his time: "I hope in these days we have heard the last of conformity and consistency" (52), and "the virtue in most request is conformity" (43).

Emerson continues: "Self-reliance is its aversion" (*Ibid.*). Emerson in "Self-Reliance" and later Thoreau in "Civil Disobedience" propose we have nothing to do with prudential thought (383-386). This antagonism appears founded in fortitude, which is the suitable feeling of confidence for what is true in encounters with adversity and peril, but also the suitable feeling of contempt and aversion for what is intellectually false. For the authors, prudence is intellectually false because practical deliberation

among worldly commitments is, for them, life and intellect divided (*Essays* 43, 48). But if prudence is the virtue most suited for all nations to mitigate climate change and to conduct international negotiations, and if fortitude stands with individualism, hostility, militancy, and chauvinism, then the relevance of Emerson's self-reliance for environmentalism is in jeopardy. Objections to *individualism*, i.e., destructive self-isolation within communities, given in *Democracy in America* by Emerson's contemporary, Alexis de Tocqueville, are to the point (104-108). What is clear is that the contributions of fortitude Emerson would like to emphasize are all in circumstances besides the martial: community gatherings and public meetings, where it is to the good for people to courageously speak their minds. These are also the circumstances for contemporary environmentalism. For environmentalism today, fortitude must be among the virtues of those activists, lobbyists, and stewards who encounter adversity and peril. There is, moreover, an area of fortitude special to environmentalism: the fortitude needed to adventure into wildlands for the purposes of gathering knowledge, conducting stewardship, and recreating outdoor traditions. Beyond these activities and aims, the promise of fortitude ought to be deflated in favor of other cardinal virtues.

3. Prudent, Just Environmentalism

St. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, distinguishes four virtues of the intellect and eleven moral virtues (I-II, Q. 57 and Q. 60, a. 5). To these groups, the angelic doctor adds three theological virtues (Q. 62), bringing the total inventory to eighteen. For the tradition, virtues are to be defined in terms of the particular power of the soul of which they are perfections, the activities of which they are habits, and the end for which each is especially formed (Q. 55). However, the large inventory does not inform us about the myriad ways in which virtues collaborate and serve one another. In short, any account of one virtue must refer to others that give support or guidance. Above all, this insight must be true of the cardinal virtues which, according to tradition, together dispose us to fulfillment (Q. 57, a. 5). St. Thomas asserts the authority of Cicero, who identifies the cardinals to be prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance (Q. 61, a. 3). Any account of one cardinal is to be incomplete if it does not recognize

the others (Q. 58, a. 4 - a. 5; Cicero 140). So, what must be true of Emerson's self-reliance is that prudence, or *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, the intellectual master among the cardinals, plays a guiding role. Given also the first concern of Emerson and his New England community, i.e., the abolition of plantation slavery, what habits of fortitude in public conduct and public-speaking especially support are habits of justice (Payne 35). Reading Emerson's "Self-Reliance" in light of traditional prudence and justice gives us an approach to nature and citizenship suited for the renewal of environmentalism in the twenty-first century.

In *The Cardinal Virtues*, scholar J. Pieper proposes that prudence is a virtue commonly mistaken. Pieper writes, "To the contemporary mind, prudence seems less a prerequisite to goodness than an evasion of it" (4). Prudence so-mistaken is defined as the pursuit of benefits to oneself by means including guile and social reputation. This is precisely the prudence Emerson and Thoreau oppose. But Pieper, following St. Thomas, offers an appraisal of prudence that elevates the virtue to what Emerson and Thoreau extol, i.e., the forefront of good, intellectual-moral character. Prudence, says Pieper, is above all intellectual openness to reality and to the specifics of one's circumstances; prudence is an alertness of mind by which one readily deliberates to conclusions about what is the right course of action, that is, the action suited to human nature and fulfillment. Pieper also insists that for the European tradition to have the virtue is to deliberate oneself and not to adhere to the lead of others (27-28). So, for Pieper, a prudent person is the person who *him or herself* comes to the right decision in emergencies and in situations of worldly contingency, who comports between the extremes of recklessness and indecisiveness, and who unites intellect and willful action together. All this is what Emerson's self-reliant person does. For the tradition, Emerson and Thoreau's dismissal of prudence is, in truth, a dismissal of what is recklessness, for Emerson "roving", i.e., a glaring deficiency of prudence in which persons non-reflectively adhere to the precept that fitting-in and belonging to society leads to human fulfillment (*Essays* 48, 62, 72).

There is additional evidence that what Emerson means by self-reliance captures what the tradition means by prudence. Chief among the evidence is Emerson's unique proposition that the self-reliant will "stay at home" and "stick fast" (*Essays* 62-63, 70-73). Staying at home Emerson

opposes to traveling abroad to locations in Europe and assimilating those hallowed cultures as an approach to fulfillment in America. This portrait of self-reliance stands out for us because what is not being expressed is fortitude. A champion of martial self-reliance may well perceive *staying at home* to be an impediment to virtue and the approach for "leaning willows". But Emerson does not. Emerson's call to stay at home we should hear in its historic, public setting: New England's pursuit of global commerce in Maine timber, in whale oil, and in California gold, and its recruitment of able-bodied persons with monetary reward. The author asserts that his insight is not one of pride nor backwardness: "I have no churlish objection to circumnavigation of the globe" (*Essays* 71). But "staying at home" for Emerson is especially the unwillingness of the self-reliant intellectual to depart New England in what must be a fruitless pursuit of happiness. Similar declarations are given by Henry Thoreau in *Walden* (17, 57, 63-64).

That what is being given by the authors is traditional prudence is evident in the philosophical justification for staying home. Emerson intends "let us sit at home" to be heard as also a metaphor for inward self-reliance: the habitual abiding of a person with his or her true self, thoughts, and heart, and to the place in creation lovingly allotted to human beings as beings with intellect (*Essays* 62-65). In sum, there is in Emerson's self-reliance a thoroughgoing commitment to be what one already is, a rational being, to belong to what one truly belongs to, to neighbors and friends, and to keep to what truly belongs to one. Such a person, for Emerson, is truly living, unified, and dignified; in short, only the self-reliant flourishes (*Essays* 43, 46). All that is external to one's being, Emerson claims, scatters the person with "trifles" and "confusion" (*Essays* 63). The proposal to forgo travel abroad, an ironic proposal for the author Emerson himself to make, receives justification from this insight. For Emerson, it is at last theological: the ultimate end of self-reliance is to fulfill one's belonging to God (*Essays* 41, 55-58).

Self-reliance describes for us just what traditional prudence is, i.e., the intellectual pursuit of flourishing. In short, in being-at-home one is always being prudent and especially prudent. Emerson asserts that it is possible "to be at home" even while traveling; and that this is what self-reliance does (*Essays* 71). For his part, the twenty century, moral philosopher

Pieper insists, for a proper concept of traditional prudence, that the virtue should be understood to include an openness to reality and the ability to receive counsel from others (22). So, like Tocqueville, we may be justly concerned that Emerson's at-home, self-reliant person shuts out reality, excludes other persons, and is thus thoughtless and boorish (107). Thoreau in *Walden* and elsewhere compliments Emerson's self-reliance on this point: Thoreau's philosophical experiment in self-reliant living explores attending to overlooked phenomena, meeting strangers, and living without walls (*Walden* 32, 47-50, 121-139). So, if Emerson does not offer sufficient homage to the wakefulness and receptivity of what is prudence, his friend Thoreau does.

What is promising for us about the kinship between Emerson's self-reliance and prudence is the alternate approach to sustainable practices being offered. For the New England thinkers, what we today call sustainability cannot be the utilitarian, social science of long-term forecasts and models; it must be the moral-philosophical, self-reliant commitment to keeping and tending all areas of one's belonging, "that plot of ground which is given him to till", and doing only this (*Essays* 43). What is more, for Emerson, we ought to regard ourselves as blessed now, we have what is needed and what is sufficient for happiness, and we ought to enact our life accordingly. Such a life, he insists, is "sound and sweet" (*Essays* 46). For anyone thinking like Emerson, resource corporations, global commerce, and international tourism are all ways in which people flee their innermost endowment and home; cowardice and greed follow at the heels.

According to tradition, prudence guides justice; without prudence, no justice (Pieper 5-7). The importance of abolishing plantation slavery, for the author, indicates to us that in all likelihood justice participates in Emerson's self-reliance. But the author acknowledges he finds it possible that one may be self-reliant and at the same time a champion of plantation slavery if one's belonging includes slavery (*Essays* 44-45). So, the importance of the virtue justice for self-reliance is, for us, in doubt. To learn if the tint of justice is infused in self-reliance is first to grasp the traditional concept. For St. Thomas, we may distinguish *general justice* from *special justice*: general justice is the habit of willing what is for the common good, and special justice is a habit of the human will among individual persons; to be just among individuals is to habitually will for other persons what is

their due (II-II, Q. 58, a. 5 - a. 7). In sum, for the tradition, justice is the good habit of the will concerned with the good of other people, whereas prudence is first of all concerned with the intellectual minding of what is one's own. The Aristotelian doctrine of the mean given in Book II of *Nicomachean Ethics* helps us to complete the portrait: at the deficiency of justice is *delinquency*, the human will that habitually fails to will that there are others who have something due and at the excess is *greed* and *being demanding*, the human will that habitually wills what is due to others as belonging to me. Between extremes is the just will, wishing and consenting what is due other people in life. Among the common terms for willing justly are *loyalty*, *diligence*, *good-will*, *open-heartedness*, and *patience* (cf. Cicero 140).

To show that Emerson's "Self-Reliance" expresses the call to justice alongside the call to prudence and fortitude is to give textual evidence of descriptions of self-reliance that express the virtue justice, perhaps in aforementioned terms. Above all, what are needed are statements in Emerson about the importance of other people, of the community and its improvement, and of the disparity between wealth and poverty. Evidence of justice would serve to alleviate the objection that what Emerson's self-reliance gives us is what Tocqueville, in 1845, called pernicious *individualism* (104). But the author's moral objections to customs, charity, and civil life and the author's vision of independence, "What I must do, is all that concerns me, not what the people think", tell us that justice is not what is of first importance to the virtue self-reliance (*Essays* 46). That self-reliance is more profound than Tocqueville's individualism first emerges in the author's claim that, in being self-reliant, I pursue my belonging God who is in me and who endows me with intellect (*Essays* 41, 55-60). For example, Emerson urges, "the absolutely trustworthy is seated at [the] heart" (41), and "Let us not rove; let us sit at home with the cause" (62). In enacting self-reliance, accordingly, I first of all pursue what is due God who loves me; it is, for Emerson, what it means to live with God (*Essays* 57-60). So, Emerson's self-reliance should not be equated with Tocqueville's pernicious individualism.

In "Self-Reliance", what we know to be the habit of justice is at last evident in the special commitment to speaking one's mind and composing one's original thoughts. For Emerson is not at all the Nietzsche-friend who

sees in genuine speech the expression of will-to-power; for him, genuine thinking, speaking, and writing express the voice of God and give us universal truth (*Essays* 57); universal truth is, for Emerson, something due to all people, and sometimes truth-speaking confounds and cowers people (43-44, 63-64). For Emerson, people are transformed and improved by genuine expressions of truth; so, he exhorts conscientious, self-reliant men and women to "renovate life and our social state" and "restore the life of man to splendor" (*Essays* 65-67). Similarly, Emerson claims the self-reliant must be "guides, redeemers, and benefactors" and not "cowards fleeing before a revolution" (*Essays* 41). But these aims and ideals are possible only from the basis of the just will, wishing and consenting what is due others and the community. Since public discourse is the activity of first importance for Emerson, his heroes who liberate people must be writers, orators, poets, and the outspoken. There is also the association Emerson wants us to see between self-reliance and the entrepreneurialism that builds railroads, cities, and theories (*Essays* 45, 53, 69). These intellectual activities must will and pursue the common good, but for Emerson do so from the steadfast adherence to one's own intellect and not from conforming adherence to what is the "popular code" of justice (*Essays* 65). In every case, the act of justice for Emerson must not be something wholly different from the act of life; I am what is justice, and my obligations are to my areas of genuine belonging (*Essays* 45-46). Justice for Emerson is not primarily obedience to civil laws nor moral rules nor social obligation nor is justice due to a public abstract of my life (*Essays* 45).

Above all, there is the idea in Emerson and in Thoreau of *humanity*: that humanity should always be restored to conscience, dignity, and intellect and that self-reliant people are those for whom we may be in awe and to whom awe is due (*Essays* 52-55, 62, 66; *Walden* 13, 98). Accordingly, the constant will to restore humanity to reason and faith is the vision of justice provided by the authors, and this vision of justice participates, for Emerson, in the concept of self-reliance. Without this contribution, Emerson's commitment to the abolition of plantation slavery is un-intelligible. A new environmentalism informed by the New England authors ought to consider if this concept of justice is suited and sufficient for the twenty-first-century issues identified by Pope Francis in the encyclical letter *Laudato Si': Care for Our Common Home* (18-41). Justice today is approached from

perspectives of universal, human rights and from perspectives of distributive justice among nations, corporations, and citizens. To perceive what Emerson and Thoreau offer is, in truth, to perceive a traditional approach which formulates justice in terms of good habits of the human will subordinate to truth and explains societal discontent by pointing to the retreat of good habits comprising self-reliance, e.g., prudence, justice and fortitude.

A prudent, just environmentalism emerging from Emerson's compositions must begin from the precepts that prudent persons seek to be at home in their being and justly act to restore others to their being, which is above all the intellect. From these precepts, particular insights may form about how life ought to be lived and what are the restorative actions to be done. Importantly, what is one's being for Emerson goes beyond one's intellect and heart to include belonging to surrounding nature and other persons. In "Self-Reliance", Emerson writes, "My book should smell of pines and resound with the hum of insects" (51). Similarly: "There is a class of persons by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold; for them I will go to prison, if need be" (*Essays* 45). Contemporary expressions of Emerson's approach in America are environmental philosophies like deep ecology, bioregionalism, and organic, local foods communities. In considering their appeal, we should recall Pieper's caution that truly prudent persons are intellectually alert to new reality and new persons; neither insular transcendentalism nor insular bioregionalism enact what is traditional prudence. But intellectual openness to reality wholly consists with Emerson's environmentalism as given in "Self-Reliance" and in "Nature".

Unique to Emerson are claims about the reality of natural phenomena. Natural phenomena, he observes, exist in their own right, manifest to us self-reliance, and through our contemplation restore us, just as truth-speakers restore us (*Essays* 58-59). So, Emerson's view is that nature contributes to our self-reliance; openness to reality is the intellectual virtue the human must possess to receive this contribution. This, according to a tradition enlightened by authors like John Muir, gives us anthropocentrism (Payne 30-33). It is good to consider whether for Emerson a prudent, just environmentalism may go beyond anthropocentrism to include prudence and justice for the flourishing of non-humans. Emerson's objection to Berkeley's immaterialism in "Nature" suggests the affirmative. It is injustice,

claims Emerson, to propose as Berkeley does that natural phenomena are in the end mind-dependent: "It puts an affront upon Nature", and "Let us speak her fair. I do not wish to fling stones at my beautiful mother" (*Miscellanies* 56). Looking forward and recognizing that environmental crises may be wholly crises of imprudence and injustice, let us by way of conclusion consider a new approach to environmentalism inspired by Emerson and Thoreau and set in terms of what anyone should call *formality*.

4. What Formality Is

Among the virtues of the compositions of Emerson and Thoreau is the commitment to formality shown in their oratory and moral arguments. The formality of the Concord authors is in part inherited from the writing style of their European forebears; evident in Thoreau's literary compositions especially are commitments to classical logic expressed in categorical propositions and syllogisms. In short, what makes Emerson and Thoreau cherished, philosophical orators is the literary incorporation of the traditional idea that creation is wholly populated by beings of particular essences about which categorical propositions may be formed and conclusions poetically deduced. Among the numerous examples of categorical statements: "What I must do is all that concerns me" (*Essays* 46), "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself" (79), "All men recognize the right to revolution" (*Writings* 360), and "Only that day dawns to which we are awake" (*Walden* 357). With the emphatic, formal language of categorical propositions, the authors express what for them is a just regard for the propriety of beings; for us, formality offers rhetorical drama insofar groupings of categorical propositions carry hidden belonging(s) ready for deduction. Chief among the belongings of interest to environmentalism are what Emerson calls "occult relations" between humanity and nature (*Miscellanies* 8). For example, Emerson asserts in the essay "Nature" that when he passes near the self-relying, white pine trees, "They nod to me, and I to them" (*Ibid.*). Once we receive the author's commitment to formality as more than style and as more than incidental, we are prepared to receive the civil environmentalism given in the documents.

Let us include in the concept of formality, therefore, those good habits, actions, and aims pervading not only oration and moral argumentation,

but also the acquisition of knowledge and the conduct of worldly affairs. Let us note features of formality most evident to us in worldly affairs: to be formal is to be available simultaneously as guide and as attendant, as both witness and witnessed; to embody formality is to be fully situated in oneself and to have gathered all one needs to perform one's functions and, at the same instant, to be anticipatory of new persons and things; and to pursue formality is to accommodate the reader, or guest, or innocent subject, who is not yet situated and may be in need. The moral argument for formality emerges in what are the available arguments for good, writing style in public speeches and for expert-hosting at public gatherings: people are approached as beings with intellect and will, people are brought together, misunderstanding and disagreement are diminished, and community goals, attained. In short, formality pursues what is human flourishing. From the perspective of traditional, moral philosophy, formality predominantly forms all our actions to accord with rationality: good judgment becomes possible, and truth emerges of its own. It is worthwhile to observe that all functions of state and of church are conducted with formality; and, at the same time, formality everywhere suffers erosion. Various formalities are just now being expedited, or forgotten.

Formality, after all, is an area of human effort, admitting of being more or less perfected. So, formality is an area of human virtue. Two virtues are evident: the prudence needed to reflect and arrive at good decisions, and the justice needed to serve others what is their due. Let us propose that *formality* is to be defined as *Prudent, just conduct of oneself and of independent others* and that the self-reliance envisioned by Emerson may be freshly translated as formality, that is, *We ought to conduct ourselves and others with formality*. Accordingly, what the compositions of Emerson and Thoreau offer twenty-first-century environmentalism is the opportunity to renew the commitment to what is formality, especially in areas of nature study and non-profit, community service, but also in their chosen areas of composition, contemplation, and friendship.

What may be important for new environmentalism is to champion the formality needed for the acquisition of knowledge about nature. For anyone thinking like Emerson, natural sciences do not always obtain for us knowledge prudently and justly, but give us instead false knowledge gained by bad habits, intellectual and moral. Emerson's philosophy of

perception, given in essays like "Nature", imparts to us an idea of what false knowledge acquisition is. In "Nature", Emerson accounts how small and large variations between perceiver and perceived give us different appearances of beings (48-49). For example, friendly people and friendly pine trees perceived from the country path are, he claims, transformed into frenetic puppets when perceived from the mobile stage-coach. Emerson's point is to show the idealist insight that appearances are mind-dependent. For Emerson, mind-dependence is a way station to a more complete idealism. But Emerson's illustration also serves to portray what imprudent, unjust science does: it reveals beings from perspectives of excessive advantage and from perspectives of insubordinate interest, such as the vantage point of an eavesdropper. For anyone thinking like Emerson, imprudent, unjust approaches to nature yield false knowledge that reveals beings not as they are in themselves but as they are entrapped to be or as what could be taken from them. By contrast, formality in science for anyone thinking like Emerson aims to discover beings as they show themselves of themselves, i.e., as they flourish. To be sure, traditional methods of scientific investigation incorporate formal practices leading to genuine knowledge. But the new environmentalism may observe that human life and nature are today approached by surveillance; knowledge gained is accordingly false knowledge.

Of similar importance is the formality environmentalism may bring to world affairs, especially community gatherings and public forums where environmental proposals are first articulated. Of this formality, all persons have some experience; worldly formality embodies what are habits of prudence and justice and, in every instance, aims to gather the consent of the people. Among the customary approaches to worldly formality are appointed hosts, uniforms, letters of invitation, opening prayers, review boards, and application forms. What prudent, just environmentalism must assume, first of all, is the commitment to lively, formal conduct as the means to general consent; more than this, an environmentalism informed by Emersonian thought may work to bring needed formality to areas of human conduct. For it is plausible that environmental devastation, i.e., unsustainable practices, is in every instance brought about by bad habits in of need invigorating, formal guidance. Non-profit, environmental organizations inspired by Thoreau's characterization of himself as "the self-appointed inspector of snow storms" may contribute to solving twenty-

first-century global issues by serving as invited, formal witnesses on fishing vessels, oil rigs, construction sites, and corporation boards (*Walden* 21). We should add that prudent, just witnesses will require the supporting contribution of fortitude, or bravery, in order to serve well among labor-intensive, dangerous, lucrative enterprises.

It is a remarkable fact of trans-Atlantic, intellectual history that idealists Berkeley and Emerson were each themselves committed to areas of worldly formality, such as hosting visitors and gathering community. Berkeley, on his side, gathered New England people between 1729 and 1731, the years of his departure from Ireland, in the red-painted farmhouse called *Whitehall* and located in the countryside of colonial Rhode Island.[1] Among other worthy activities, Berkeley, in his cool parlor, hosted bible meetings for the congregation of Trinity Church and helped form Redwood Library, all of which today flourish.[2] Philosophers Samuel Johnson of Connecticut and Jonathan Edwards of Massachusetts journeyed to Newport to meet the celebrated author of immaterialism. Emerson, for his part, gathered nineteenth-century friends and visitors in the white-painted, country estate located in Concord, Massachusetts and known today as Ralph Waldo Emerson House.[3] Situated one century and one day's journey apart, these houses white carry unique missions begun by their authors. Today both locations are conducted in service to the general public and community; both, committed to propagating the legacy of the authors and their compositions. In keeping with the tradition of idealism since Plato, we may today perceive that among the insights essential to idealism are insights about prudence and justice, together *formality*. If environmental crises are especially crises of imprudent and unjust habits, such as recklessness, indecisiveness, delinquency, and greed, then our idealist authors promise important contributions. In formality is one possible future for environmentalism.

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[1] Cf. http://whitehallmuseumhouse.org/. Last accessed: July 15, 2016.

[2] Author served as the July 2011 scholar-in-residence of Whitehall Museum House, conducted by the Whitehall Committee.

[3] Cf., Https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/massachusetts_conservation/ralph_waldo_emerson_house.html. Last accessed: July 15, 2016.

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Abstract

Emerson envisions the virtue *self-reliance*. In expressing what self-reliance is, Emerson distances his moral philosophy from the European tradition, from the idealism of like-minded authors, and from what are now conventional areas of environmentalism. To prepare Emerson for twenty-first-century environmentalism, let us reconcile Emerson. This is to be accomplished by deflating the contributions of the virtue *fortitude* to self-reliance and by locating in "Self-Reliance" the call to traditional *prudence* and *justice*. Emerson's commitment to prudence and justice, or what is formality, is a promising area for new environmentalism.

Keywords

Aquinas; Emerson; environmentalism; self-reliance; virtue

Resumo

Emerson concebe a *autoconfiança* enquanto virtude. Ao exprimir o que entende por autoconfiança, o autor afasta a sua filosofia moral da tradição europeia, do idealismo de autores semelhantes, bem como daquilo que hoje em dia são áreas convencionais do ambientalismo. Com o intuito de preparar Emerson para o ambientalismo do século XXI, propomos reconciliá-lo. É uma reconciliação que será feita ao diminuirmos as contribuições da virtude *fortitude* existentes no conceito de autoconfiança, identificando em "Self-Reliance" um chamamento à *prudência* e à *justiça* tradicionais. O compromisso de Emerson quanto à *prudência* e à *justiça* representa uma área promissora para um novo ambientalismo.

Palavras-Chave

Aquino; Emerson; ambientalismo; auto-confiança; virtude

"Where do we find ourselves?" Emerson, Percy, and Ford as Unlikely Soulmates

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ISSN: 0873-0628 ANGLO SAXONICA SER. III N. 12 2016

"Where do we find ourselves?" Emerson, Percy, and Ford as Unlikely Soulmates

My title quotes the opening sentence of Emerson's "Experience", and my essay uses that sentence heuristically, as a provocation and a means to discern unlikely connections between Emerson and two post-World War II southern novelists, Walker Percy and Richard Ford. Of course, it also serves — in a more free-floating, decontextualized manner — to raise philosophical questions about human nature and human identity and to suggest that all three of these writers, like you and me, have a serious interest in responding to such questions. Perhaps that should go without saying, but certain differences can undermine such claims of shared human concern. Who are "we" after all? Does Percy, the Catholic southerner, share any common ground with an ex-Unitarian minister born and reared in ante-bellum, abolitionist Boston? Where does the southern-born but secular and cosmopolitan Ford fit in with these precursors he has made so explicitly his own? Perhaps Emerson's centrality in the American canon makes him an inevitable challenge for ambitious writers whose citizenship defines them as "fellow Americans". Certain differences can also undermine any such claims of community via Emerson.

The connection between Walker Percy and Richard Ford should come as no surprise. In Ford's first novel about Frank Bascombe, *The Sportswriter*, critics have noted Ford's rewriting of many aspects of *The Moviegoer*. Its second chapter, for example, sustains a kind of reverse literary echolalia when Frank presents himself as precisely *not* the scion of a distinguished southern family, unlike both Percy himself and the protagonists of both his first and second novels, *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*. One may search Ford's first Bascombe novel in vain, however, for any traces of Emerson. Yet, in *Independence Day* and *The Lay of the Land*, where Ford's continuing saga of Frank includes numerous touches inspired by Percy, he also incurs a mounting debt to Emerson.

In *The Lay of the Land*, for example, we can observe Ford mining both of these seemingly irreconcilable precursors. The forsaken Frank's desperate quest of Bernice Podmanicsky reprises the end of *The Moviegoer*, and Frank's ongoing dialogue with Mike Mahoney, his Tibetan realty associate, readily invites comparison with Emerson's "Nominalist and Realist". Yet Emerson's legacy, as Percy understands it, was anathema, a view discernible in other prominent southern writers like Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren, and notably going all the way back to Poe. Regional differences seem hard-wired in American psyches not only by traumatic memories of sectional conflict and its consequences (LaRocca *passim*). Ante-bellum cultural differences had already consolidated some of these oppositional sentiments.

Emerson's opening gambit in "Experience", however, sounds like the question that Binx Bolling, Percy's narrator and protagonist in *The Moviegoer*, is asking himself at the start of that novel. "Where do we find ourselves?" (53) finely generalizes Binx's interrogative mood of wonder that day when he finds himself viewing his personal effects on his bureau top in a new light or when he remembers himself, in that same state of mind, examining a dung beetle close-up under a bojum tree in the Orient where he was wounded during the Korean War. It also sounds like just the sort of question that Will Barrett, Percy's protagonist in *The Last Gentleman*, might ask before looking through his Tetzlar telescope at the bricks in a building across Central Park from the window of his room at the Y or coming to himself on a Civil War battlefield far from wherever he last remembers being.

In other words, these characters are both searchers, as Percy uses that term. They are adrift with no grounded sense of orientation or meaning in the world as they find it during spontaneous moments of wonder that give them pause to consider, Who am I and why? Since these characters are undeniably sympathetic creations—despite, or because of, their flaws—we feel invited to join in on Binx's reflections or those of the narrator of Will's story. Ironically, given Percy's demonstrable hostility toward Emerson, the last place we would expect to find either of them is in the middle of an Emerson essay. Yet that is exactly where we discover their most compelling heir in recent fiction, Frank Bascombe.

In *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy*, Jay Tolson makes

the strongest case for Percy's anti-Emersonianism, and Percy's representation of the character Forney Aiken in *The Last Gentleman*, via tellingly Emersonian details, supports Tolson's case, though he does not use this figure to make that argument (nor, to my knowledge, does anybody else). Tolson's reading of Percy's correspondence with Shelby Foote and with Robert Coles helps him understand some of Percy's mixed feelings about Coles's *New Yorker* profile of Percy and the book it became, *An American Search*. Percy felt gratitude that Coles took the trouble to write about him yet disappointment that Coles represented him more positively than he thought he deserved: Coles made Percy more exemplary and inspiring than Percy thought himself to be (Tolson 251-2). Such a flaw, if that is what we should call it, is an Emersonian flaw. After all, the scholar's office, or duty (as we'd put it now), is "to cheer, to raise", according to Emerson ("The American Scholar" 65). We encounter that sense of purpose and obligation at work both in *Representative Men* and in Coles's *Lives We Carry with Us*, which contains an abbreviated version of his profile of Percy along with those of a dozen others.

Thus, when Jay Tolson distinguishes *Pilgrim in the Ruins* from a perfectionist biographical tradition lacking in a tragic sense, he is not only thinking about Percy's misgivings about Coles's book. Tolson is also thinking about certain commonplace ideas about Emerson, and he is deploying them in the service of his overall argument that Percy is fundamentally anti-Emersonian. Tolson frames his biography with this claim and, as his ultimate evidence, he cites Percy's refusal of Harvard's invitation to deliver what Tolson calls "the Emerson lecture": the Phi Beta Kappa address in June of 1987, which marked the sesquicentennial of Emerson's "The American Scholar" (12-13, 466-7).

Both Coles and his colleague at Harvard, William Alfred, had been most instrumental in advancing that invitation. Coles had connected it with recognition of Percy by the Harvard School of Medicine and Alfred with a long overdue Harvard acknowledgment of its Civil War dead who fought for the Confederacy—a significant omission from the plaques lining Harvard's Memorial Hall, which name each of the Union dead and none of the Confederate. In *The Bostonians* (1886) Henry James had drawn attention to this southern grievance, and Christopher Reeve (of *Superman* fame) had portrayed Basil Ransom, the character who makes that point

with quiet dignity in James Ivory's 1985 film adaptation of that novel. Alfred's willingness to urge some gesture of memorialization to the Confederate dead particularly moved Percy. In a letter that informs Alfred that both Percy's father, his foster father (Uncle Will), and his grandfather had gone to Harvard, he signs off "with a warm Confederate handclasp."

> Dear Professor Alfred —
>
> I am deeply touched by your kind letter — The man is as distinguished as the institution-and most especially by your idea of putting Harvard's Confederates in your Cenotaph Memorial Hall. Would you believe that I blinked fast a couple of times? More than a couple — this has to do not merely with the beauty of it but with the fact that my father, Uncle Will (the poet) and Grandfather went to Harvard and I had to imagine what they would have thought. This being the case, I feel obliged to tell you the simple truth — and not lie, as I usually do. The reason I am not coming is because I am not very young and not very healthy (I have already lived 10 years longer than any male in my family in 4 generations) and I know exactly what I want to think about and write about and do not have time to do it and so I do not take time off to do anything like that (— and am also somewhat neurotic) —
>
> A warm Confederate handclasp —
>
> Walker[1]

In discussing Percy's unwillingness to accept Harvard's invitation, Tolson acknowledges two other factors besides Percy's comprehensive antipathy to everything that Emerson stands for. First, Percy admitted that he simply did not know Emerson well; and, second, Tolson feels that Percy may have been acting out of uncharacteristic intellectual timidity. His endorsement of Lewis Simpson's essay "Home by Way of California", which Percy cites as representative of his feelings about Emerson, may derive from both of

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[1] Three letters from Walker Percy to William Alfred are available in the Papers of William Alfred in the Brooklyn College Library Archives and Special Collections. They all pertain to the invitation of Percy to deliver the Phi Beta Kappa Address at Harvard in June 1987. I cite from one, dated November 22, 1986.

these possible motives (Tolson 455, 466). Simpson takes aim at an easy Emersonian target, the poem "Brahma". He reads it without any sympathy as an example of the problem with American transcendentalism, its high-minded idealism ungrounded in historical memory and the concrete realities of human experience, and he summons Thoreau for further illustrations of similar self-delusions. Percy, in fact, has little to say about Emerson, and, frankly, it is hard to defend Emerson on the basis of the usual suspects rounded up for such ceremonies of dismissal: "Brahma", "The Oversoul", and the "transparent eyeball" and the "original relation to the universe" in "Nature", etc. Such transcendental mysticism in which selves shed the baggage of historical experience to merge with others—whether persons, places, or things—smacks of a high-minded hopefulness that the South's experience of defeat and the tragic lessons it imparts put out of reach of Percy's customary perspective.

A specifically anti-Emersonian touch in Percy's fiction occurs in the episode with Forney Aiken, the pseudo-Negro, in *The Last Gentleman*. If you pronounce his first name with any sort of drawl, it sounds like Phony, and Forney represents anxious American inauthenticity with particular reference to John Howard Griffin's 1961 bestseller, *Black like Me*. Griffin, a white American man who underwent medical treatment to dye his skin black, documents the social treatment he received as a person of color travelling throughout the deep South for six weeks in 1959. Forney picks Will up when he is hitchhiking near Metuchen, New Jersey, and he takes Will first to his home in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Forney is a recovering alcoholic who has retreated to the country and hopes that being away from the stresses of the big city will help him sober up. Besides farming, Forney also manufactures sisal tote bags and cedar firkins. He gives Will, as a present, one of the latter from among the thousands of mass-produced identical others gathering dust in Forney's barn. "Firkin" is not a word often used in twentieth-century American speech, though its memorable presence in Emerson gives it a distinctive resonance. Mass production, moreover, is an ultimate enemy in "modern times" — not merely Chaplinesque, as in the 1936 movie *Modern Times*, but Emersonian. The assembly line threatens individuality and non-conformity with regimentation and coercive usurpation of autonomy and personal sovereignty, cherished ideals of transcendental thinking.

After a mishap during their subsequent visit to Levittown, Pennsylvania, Will decides to take his leave of Forney and tries his luck again at hitchhiking. In northern Virginia, Will breakfasts on buttermilk from his firkin where he sits by the side of the road, a moment that brings to mind Emerson's emblematic assertion in "The American Scholar" about worthy literary subjects, which include "the meal in the firkin, the milk in the pan" (69). The philosopher Stanley Cavell cites this passage alongside Kierkegaard's discussion, in *Fear and Trembling*, of the Knight of Faith's ability to experience the sublime in the pedestrian, which is for Percy a canonical example of overcoming the malaise of everydayness that Binx dreads and that challenges Will (*Pursuits* 15; Kierkegaard 52). The Emersonian analogue, however, is not merely unavailable to Percy; it is hostile and warrants harsh satire. Its celebration of ordinary American things of this world — "the near, the low, the common" (68) — bespeaks Romantic self-deception and solipsism.

Will decides to take his leave of Forney after an irate homeowner in Levittown, "a regular La Pasionaria of the suburbs", punches Will in the nose. This racist mistakes Will for a New Jersey real estate agent from Haddon Heights or Haddonfield, a "blockbuster" willing to sell a home in her neighborhood to the likes of the pseudo-Negro. Forney's phoniness aggravates this tense situation when he starts to roll up his sleeve to show the patch of white skin on his forearm that he intentionally left unblackened. Forney has planned ahead, in case of such an emergency, to be able to prove that he really is *not* Isham Washington — another name that signals the *sham* of Forney's entire way of life.

Once Emerson becomes important to Frank Bascombe or, rather, to his creator, Frank has ceased being a sportswriter and has become a realtor from Haddam, New Jersey; so, it sounds as though these traits were inspired by this episode of mistaken identity in Percy's Levittown. Moreover, Frank owns rental property on Clio Street in Wallace Hill, the black neighborhood in Haddam containing streets named after the nine muses of classical Greek literature, like those along St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans, Binx Bolling's hometown.

In their "city upon a hill", the Puritans would never have named any streets after such mythical figures, but Boston still makes a prompt and curious appearance early in the Bascombe trilogy. In *The Sportswriter*

we quickly learn of eight-year-old Ralph Bascombe's death, and this loss may soon remind us of the deaths of Scottie and Lonnie in *The Moviegoer*, as well as those of Jamie and Samantha in Percy's next two novels, *The Last Gentleman* and *Love in the Ruins*. These imponderable deaths represent an uttermost case of personal pain such as Emerson faced in the death of his five-year-old son, Waldo, and addressed in "Experience". They set the terms of life in the fictional worlds of all these novels, which emphasize the mystery of justice on earth via these unaccountable losses of young and innocent sons and a daughter equally free of offense. Job could make a better case for each of them than he can for himself, as could King Lear for Cordelia. Ralph's words in a delirium on his deathbed, however, derive from J. P. Marquand's novel *The Late George Apley*, and they are given early in *The Sportswriter*. "Marriage is a damnably serious business, particularly in Boston", Ralph declares (*Sportswriter* 20). To whom? And why? His parents are there and they will soon be divorced. Ralph's death and their divorce are the undeniable conditions of possibility in what's left of Frank's life when we first encounter him in Ford's trilogy. That is the tragedy of the house of Bascombe, which the broken family survives. Each of its members will live the remainder of his or her life in some relation to that premise of what is yet to come. Surprisingly, to readers attuned to Ford's debt to Percy, the tragic theme of this mysterious injustice, the death of an innocent child, ultimately finds sustained *Emersonian* expression in Ford's *The Lay of the Land*.

Notably, Ralph's name is Ralph, and *The Late George Apley* tells a tale of latter-day Boston Brahmin culture inescapably seasoned with Emersonian turns of thought and phrase. Also, there is another death in *The Sportswriter*, Walter Luckett's suicide near the end of the novel. He leaves behind a letter of explanation to Frank, which is signed "Wally". This new acquaintance from the Divorced Men's Club had pressed Frank into sharing a drink in the Old Manasquan, where he confided in Frank the details of his one-night stand with another man, among other things indicative, in retrospect, of Walter's suicidal unraveling. Almost two decades later, in *The Lay of the Land*, Frank gets drunk in the Old Manasquan, which is now called Old Squatters and has become a lesbian watering hole. There Frank experiences a sort of fantasy séance and finds himself in the midst of a thorough reprise of the opening of Emerson's

"Experience", an essay whose haunted mood signals its author's ordeal of mourning the death of his son, Waldo. "All is familiar", Frank remarks, "although names have changed" (326).

The opening of Emerson's essay becomes a parallel world or spiritual environment during Frank's stop in Old Squatters. Under the influence, Frank thumbs through the New Jersey *Shore Home Buyer's Guide*, where he encounters a spread about Fred Frantal, "Associate of the Millennium". In touting that award winner, this celebratory account's mention of the Frantal family's loss of a son strikes a melancholy chord of recognition in Frank. It also occasions a catalogue akin to Emerson's listing of the Lords of Life in "Experience", though Frank retails his chain of concepts and feelings in the interrogative mood: "I am then truly immobilized", Frank reflects. "And with what? Fear? Love? Regret? Shame? Lethargy? Bewilderment? Heartsickness? Whimsy? Wonder? You never know for sure" (343). Ironically, Frank's experience of such profound uncertainty will eventually release him from the Permanent Period and onto the Next Level, where acceptance enables him to overcome immobilization and recover his forward motion. The next step becomes thinkable beyond this harrowing passage in which Frank continues by wondering whether his son, "Ralph, will turn up at [his] door like Wally". Wally is not Walter Luckett this time but Frank's second wife, Sally's, supposedly dead first husband, the revenant who creates the crisis in Frank's current marriage to Sally.[2]

Besides Frank's refusal to completely abandon hope, a subsequent letter from Sally also signals the possibility of their getting together again. It contains sentences in which the word "experience" keeps "coming up a lot" (as Sally notes parenthetically [381]). The essay "Experience", as mentioned before, moodily represents Emerson's process of mourning the loss of his five-year-old son, Waldo, and such a loss serves as the basic premise of Percy's first three novels and of Ford's Bascombe novels overall. On three separate occasions in *The Lay of the Land*, Ford rewrites the memorable passage in "Experience" about the Fall of Man and our discovery "that we exist" (Emerson 487; Ford 183, 395-6, 457-8).

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[2] Or is he? Ghost stories thrive on precisely such ambiguity, which heightens their capacity to haunt their target audiences.

This signature statement of skepticism as our fated postlapserian perspective decisively blurs the view of Emerson's once-transparent eyeball. Moreover, Emerson's unhappy discovery inspires Frank's sense of himself as entering the Existence Period in *Independence Day*, and Ford's formulation of such categories not only smacks of Percy's borrowing from Kierkegaard concepts like rotation and repetition in *The Moviegoer*. This particular category also strikes the dominant note of the strain of continental philosophy that Percy most often reprises in his early fiction, existentialism. Perhaps transcendentalism and existentialism seem like strange bedfellows. As we have seen in discussing Percy's satire of Emerson via the figure of Forney Aiken, however, Stanley Cavell can hear the harmony in ideas from Kierkegaard and Emerson, though Percy cannot. Richard Ford shares this attunement with Cavell, and, of course, it is tempting to wonder where he learned how to do so. Clearly, he is an attentive and discerning reader and an imaginative thinker and writer, but it remains tempting, if not necessary, to say Ford owes a significant debt to Cavell in this regard since that philosopher has been so successful and influential in opening up Emerson to such philosophical responses.

The uses of Emerson in the Bascombe novels first become conspicuous in *Independence Day*, where Frank seeks to repair broken ties with his sixteen-year-old son, Paul, whose behavior has become dangerously erratic. Frank gives Paul his "old, worn, individually bound copy from college" of "Self-Reliance" as part of a last-resort effort to connect meaningfully with him (Ford, *Independence Day* 59). Paul is the most resistant of readers, however; he tears a page from his father's special edition and willfully distorts Emerson's familiar sayings. Nonetheless, we hear a transcendentalist credo in Frank's attempt to position himself supportively in Paul's troubled world. As Frank puts it, "This may be the only way an as-needed parent can in good faith make contact with his son's life problems; which is to say sidereally, by raising a canopy of useful postulates above him like stars and hoping he'll connect them up to his own sightings and views like an astronomer" (Ford, *Independence Day* 289).

In *Independence Day* Frank gratefully acknowledges the "bright synchronicity" he sometimes experiences in his daily affairs without mistaking it for a permanent condition. Rather, alteration or polarity frequently defines the rhythm of events as he has come to understand them,

and we can hear Frank opening up to this process in the counterpoint to "bright synchronicity" that he acknowledges as "'the plain fact of [his] existence': that [he] was after all only a human being, as untranscendent as a tree trunk" (94).

"Consistency" is another threadbare Emersonian concept that Frank takes up with refreshing results. It emerges in terms of "completeness", which also suggests challenges of storytelling entailed in representing Frank's experience as fully as possible: "Most people, once they reach a certain age, troop through their days struggling like hell with the concept of completeness, keeping up with all the things that were ever part of them, as a way of maintaining the illusion that they bring themselves fully to life" (Ford, *Independence Day* 94-5). Frank sees this phenomenon, "consistency", not just as an idea or a principle but as a substance, at least figuratively, which rhymes with a thought of Cavell's on this concept: "Then let us take the idea (also) in its sense of viscosity" (*Contesting* 139). "Swampy regret" and the "gooeyness of the past" threaten to mire Frank in remorse. Surrender to these nostalgic moods is a tempting folly that Emersonian echoes in such reflections pointedly warn against.

Of course, the rhythm of events differs from their sequence inasmuch as polarity or alteration stresses the mood of apprehension and the way we take the givenness of experience as it comes, the sequence of events. When what is given is not taken for granted but dawns in the mind with a remarkable difference, we enter the spiritual region where Percy's searchers awaken in their distinctive ways. In "Experience", Emerson calls this place unapproachable because we are already there. He calls it America too, in the utopian sense of an eventual community that we can only realize by a change of heart. Moreover, Frank is a pilgrim on a journey that he recounts, a *homo viator* telling his tale. The narrative shifts back and forth between the immediacy of experience and retrospection: the pilgrimage, on one hand, and the pilgrim's account of it, on the other. A foolish consistency can bog Frank down and retard his progress through the world, but this possibility does not preclude that of a wise consistency, a more settled self on whom experience has not been wasted. Divorce and the death of his oldest child, Ralph, are major losses whose lasting impact can waylay Frank when such memories catch him off guard.

Then "Where do we find ourselves?" if we discover that Percy's

worthiest heir, Richard Ford, can make such creative uses of an American legacy that Percy allegedly defines himself by rejecting as precisely the opposite of what he wishes to say? Were we previously stuck way down yonder or in the Church of Rome, the most likely homes of Percy's heart? Are we now free, thanks to Richard Ford and Stanley Cavell? Or are we back with Percy, the Christian existentialist, a label which Percy feared Coles had affixed to him permanently? It is hard to say, but not impossible.

In the time when the careers of these two novelists of different generations overlap, Cavell began discovering in Emerson futures that apparently nobody else was able to imagine and articulate, or, at least, only very few had managed to do so. Those few, however, figure significantly in a tradition that inspires Percy's early fiction. Nietzsche, who loved Emerson and translated two of his essays, transcribes Emersonian phrases and concepts at key turns in his writing. Heidegger, unaware of their origins, seems to have inherited some of them from Nietzsche. Moreover, Cavell hears in the Preface to *The Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche's answer to Emerson's opening question in "Experience" (*This New* 24-6). That answer sounds even more pertinent when we encounter it as Percy's first choice of an epigraph to *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*, "We are unknown, we knowers, to ourselves (…). Of necessity we remain strangers to ourselves, we understand our selves not, in our selves we are bound to be mistaken, for each of us holds good to all eternity the motto, 'Each is the farthest away from himself'— as far as ourselves are concerned we are not knowers".[3]

In *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, Percy conceives of such an insight — the moment when such words ring true — as the beginning of a search. Both Binx and Will are blessed with such a beginning. Both somehow become present to the scene of their own lives and aware of their own unknowness to themselves. Although Percy demurs from showing us where that blessing ends, both Binx and Will momentarily transcend their

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[3] Later, Percy had second thoughts about this choice and told Jo Gulledge, "I probably should have used a second epigraph at the beginning, following Nietzsche, from St. Augustine: 'God, give us the power to know ourselves.' (The paperback will have it.)" (*Conversations with Walker Percy* 293).

numbness to being or ontophobia, a coinage of Marcel's that Percy borrows elsewhere. *The Moviegoer*'s final words before the "Epilogue" tell us that what Binx wants to know is impossible to say and he evidently knows that for the moment. In *The Last Gentleman* Will declares his need of Dr. Sutter Vaught, a dissolute contrarian and, at least for now, an ex-suicide. It is hard to know who needs who here, but Sutter's Edsel, the notoriously unsuccessful new model that Ford Motors lost billions developing and trying to sell in the late 1950s, waits for Will to catch up with him. Wherever that may lead we do not know.

When Percy first read *An American Search*, however, he noticed a passage from Cavell's *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (156-157, in *The World* 101-102). In a long letter to Coles, he made this comment about it: "A happy confirmation: your quote from Cavell's book on *Ontology of Film*. It exactly expresses *The Moviegoer*'s implied ontology. (I'm glad Cavell wrote it **after** *The Moviegoer*)".[4] Percy sounds like he is cracking a joke on the anxiety of influence, but he is also acknowledging his discovery of a soulmate, plowing the same field where Percy managed to reap abundant harvests. What would Percy say if he discovered that Emerson had previously cultivated that field in memorable lines? Richard Ford, a fellow Southerner, borrowed Percy's voice and Cavell's to find his way to reprise that passage in Emerson's "Experience" and acknowledge an affinity otherwise undetected to our great loss. In such meetings of minds, which Percy calls "plowing the same field" and Emerson "spiritual affinity", we can discern a shareable inheritance that can descend on all sides of various borders intended to keep them out.[5]

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[4] Emphasis Percy's. This letter of December 7, 1978, along with numerous others from Percy to Coles, is in the Robert Coles Collection at Michigan State University. I am grateful to David Cooper for making them available to me and to Robert Coles for unfettered access to his papers at MSU and in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill).

[5] In a letter of May 18, 1968, also in the Robert Coles Collection at Michigan State University, Walker Percy writes to Robert Coles: "I never expected to find a Harvard psychiatrist plowing the same field I plow—very confusing".

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Abstract

"'Where do we find ourselves?'" explores key ways in which two American novelists — Walker Percy and Richard Ford — despite their own spiritual affinity, differ dramatically in their disposition toward Emersonian language and thought. Differences of region and religion predispose Percy to reject, ignore, or otherwise proceed without acknowledgment of Emerson and Transcendentalism except satirically. Ford owes a considerable debt to Percy throughout his series of Frank Bascombe novels, beginning with *The Sportswriter*. Ford's next two Bascombe novels, however, find an increasingly useable literary past in Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and "Experience". The more cosmopolitan and secular Ford recognizes philosophical depths in Emerson that Stanley Cavell has demonstrated. But, despite his interest in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and existentialism generally, Percy seems deaf to a call for any such philosophy as issued by Emerson. Nonetheless, he acknowledges his own spiritual affinity with Cavell's ontology in *The World Viewed*. Emersonian experience includes ranges of thought and feeling routinely overlooked in conventional understandings of its pertinence and comprehensiveness, and Percy falls prey to this misconception. Still these unlikely soulmates warrant recognition, which can help us reconceive spiritual affinities we deny at our cost.

Keywords

Cavell; Emerson; existentialism; Kierkegaard; spiritual affinity

Resumo

"'Onde é que nos encontramos?'" explora o modo como dois romancistas americanos — Walker Percy e Richard Ford —, apesar da sua afinidade espiritual, diferem dramaticamente em relação à linguagem e pensamento de Emerson. Diferenças de região e religião predispõem Percy a rejeitar e ignorar Emerson e o Transcendentalismo. E quando o utiliza, é de modo satírico. Desde *The Sportswriter*, e na série de romances protagonizados por Frank Bascombe, Ford é fortemente influenciado por Percy. No entanto, é nos seus dois últimos romances que Ford se

serve do passado literário presente nos ensaios "Auto-Confiança" e "Experiência". A parte mais cosmopolita e secular de Ford reconhece os fundamentos filosóficos que Stanley Cavell demonstrou existirem em Emerson. Apesar do seu interesse em Kierkegaard, Nietzsche e no existencialismo em geral, Percy parece indiferente à filosofia emersoniana. Contudo, reconhece uma afinidade espiritual com a ontologia de Cavell em *The World Viewed*. A experiência emersoniana inclui uma gama de pensamentos e sentimentos vulgar e convencionalmente negligenciados e incompreendidos, e Percy acaba por se deixar influenciar por essa visão. Ainda assim, estas improváveis almas gémeas solicitam que reconheçamos o que têm em comum, algo que nos pode ajudar a repensar afinidades espirituais que, de outro modo, renegaríamos.

Palavras-Chave

Cavell; Emerson; existencialismo; Kierkeggard; afinidade espiritual

Recycling Emerson's Legacy: The Depictions of the Ethnic Garden in Portuguese-American Writings

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ISSN: 0873-0628 ANGLO SAXONICA SER. III N. 12 2016

Recycling Emerson's Legacy: The Depictions of the Ethnic Garden in Portuguese-American Writings

Writing about the garden in American literature has a long tradition, but this does not apply to emergent contemporary American literatures, especially the Portuguese-American one. In my exploration of this issue, I will briefly outline the scholarly work on nature and the American garden. I will start with Ralph Waldo Emerson's insight in *Nature* (1836) so as to ascertain whether in much later American literary texts nature is still tinged with green, cleanliness, and respected as a locale where one may still become a "transparent eyeball" and feel the "currents of the Universal Being circulat[ing]" (6). Or, instead, is it a toxic wasteland or an over-farmed locale depleted of its natural resources? How has industrialized, mainstream America dealt with these matters after Emerson's insight and even its ethnic minorities, the Portuguese, in particular? These matters will be dealt with by way of delving into contemporary scholarship on "ecocriticism" (Lawrence Buell), the pastoral ideal (Leo Marx), and finally, the georgic mode (William Conlogue) so as to understand the essence and importance of the garden in Portuguese-American writing, especially in the fiction of Katherine Vaz (1955–) and Frank Gaspar (1946–), and in the poetry of the latter. While I aim at focusing on these Portuguese-American voices, I will also contrast canonical, mainstream representations of nature and the garden.

While Emerson viewed nature as imbued with spirituality and permeated by the presence of the Divine, for Edith Wharton (1862–1937), George Washington Cable (1844–1925), and Jack London (1876–1916) the garden was a pleasure, leisure ground. In contrast, in contemporary Portuguese-American fiction, the garden is a place where one can grow vegetables and flowers; a place for preserving one's ethnic identity and ancestral rural way of life; or a retreat from the alienating conditions imposed by the factory, commercial fishing, the whaling or dairy industries,

and intensive farming — activities in which the first generations of Portuguese (mostly Azorean and Madeiran) immigrants, dating back to the nineteenth-century, excelled in the three traditional areas of settlement in the United States: New England, California, and Hawaii. Mainlanders would follow them throughout the twentieth-century. While the first two mainstream writers, Wharton and Cable, were fascinated by the refinement and social status entailed in owning a garden, in *The Valley of the Moon* (1913), London's character Billy Roberts ridicules the Portuguese agrarian ways and mentality. With this novel as a case in point, my goal is to focus on the garden as emblematic of the gulf between the American mainstream and some of its peripheral minority voices, and how it highlights conflicting responses toward culture and life. While assessing some of these notions in Portuguese-American writings, I will also note, in passing, how the garden is a forceful presence in Italian-American writing as well.

Since the nation's inception — that is, with Jeffersonian and Jacksonian agrarianism — the garden and the machine have been at the heart of the American experience, and these realities have galvanized American scholars and writers. Contemporary "ecocriticism" scholars such as Lawrence Buell have called our attention to the dangers of pollution on the American landscape and its physical environment. However, in his attempt to distinguish between "green" and "brown" landscapes — that is, the landscapes of "exurbia and industrialization" (7) — this framework is not applicable to Portuguese-American writings. In the Californian landscapes and gardens of Katherine Vaz's fiction, and those from Massachusetts in the fiction and poetry of Frank Gaspar, Buell's "toxic discourse" does not find a congenial home. References to the ethnic garden abound in the fiction of Katherine Vaz, especially in *Saudade* (1994), and in Frank Gaspar's novel *Leaving Pico* (1999), as well as his three volumes of poems, *The Holyoke* (1988), *Mass for the Grace of a Happy Death* (1995), and *A Field Guide to the Heavens* (1999). The gardens in these writings are not polluted with toxic waste or invaded by the ominous sound of civilization as represented in, for example, the emblematic whistle of the train in Thoreau's *Walden* (1854).

My contention is that in Portuguese-American writing, these matters are nowhere to be seen. Instead, the gardens bring to the fore aspects that are quintessentially marked by immigrant experience. Surrounded by the

hustle and bustle of public, mainstream life, the gardens often reflect aspects inherent in the private, intimate side of the Portuguese ethnic experience in the United States. In addition, these gardens are depicted as oases of tranquility, providing cultural and spiritual sustenance. Moreover, they allow for what Leo Marx views as a "retreat into the primitive or rural felicity", and a "yearning for a simpler, more harmonious style of life, an existence 'closer to nature"' (6). In the context of Portuguese-American life in the United States, for those keen on growing a garden, such an activity allowed for a brief respite from a demanding work schedule — in the New England textile mills, in California's competitive dairy industry, or in the perilous whaling industry in Massachusetts — and a momentary return to a simpler way of life, given that most of these immigrants had been farmers or fishermen back in the old country. These are some of the issues that we encounter in the works of mainstream American writers of Portuguese descent. In essence, the garden functions as the liaison with the old country and as an incentive for recollection of a past that can no longer be retrieved: the stories and conversations exchanged with relatives and friends while tilling the fields, or the competition among women as to whose garden has the most variety.

While planting kale, turnips, tomatoes, peppers, onions, corn, and flowers, for example, the characters in the fictional gardens of Portuguese-American writings experience what William Conlogue defines as the georgic mode — that is, the "earth worker, farmer" and the pleasure involved in husbandry (as opposed to the pastoral mode), meaning a "retreat into a 'green world' to escape the pressures of complex urban life. In a rural or wilderness landscape, the character's interaction with the natural world restores him, and, ideally, he returns to the city better able to cope with the stresses of civilization" (6–8). Without a doubt, this is an idea borrowed from Emerson, for he, too, had been concerned with the consequences of human toil and the industrial revolution on the "body and mind", which, in his view, have been "cramped by noxious work or company", but "nature is medicinal and restores their tone". He goes on to note that the "tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again" (9-10). For these Portuguese immigrants caught in this industrial, back-breaking and alienating web, retrieving their dignity and ancestral culture via the ethnic garden was their

way of becoming, in Emerson's words, a "man again". Writing about the garden, of course, has a long literary tradition in the Western world. While Virgil's *Georgics* and Hesiod's *Works and Days* are the anchors of gardening literature, Andrew Marvell's poetic contributions, too, cannot be ignored. As we will see in the writings of Katherine Vaz and Frank Gaspar, there is really no need to escape into a rural area or even the wilderness, since the setting in *Saudade*, for example, is a rural community in California, while *Leaving Pico* captures Portuguese-American life in a fishing community on the tip of Cape Cod. Whatever retreat there actually is, it is instead into the ancestral culture and the old habits and ways of life, and how these can be safeguarded in a new environment. Challenged and often pressured to assimilate a whole new set of values and ways, the very act of gardening has been a means through which Portuguese Americans have asserted their identity and national origin.

Interest in the garden is not a feature that pertains exclusively to Portuguese-American literature. "It is truly surprising", William Boelhower writes, "how frequently the garden appears in Italian-American narratives" (114). As I have argued elsewhere, the garden and the ethnic meal are intimately related, and this can be seen during both clambakes in *Leaving Pico*, where the guests consume vegetables from their gardens and the seafood from their catch. Such a communal gathering as this one, or even the Italian feast, as Boelhower has noted, function as "an act of historical synthesis in which each participant feels integrated into the semiotic space of his ethnic culture" (116). When writing about the garden of plenty, Luisa Del Giudice notes that the Italians, like the Portuguese in London's *The Valley of the Moon*, do not leave a single inch of land uncultivated. Unnecessary shrubs or trees are eradicated to make way for orchards or vegetable gardens (62). Onésimo Almeida has noted that when buying a house in the United States, most Azorean immigrants appreciate having shrubs in their backyards mostly to set boundaries with their neighbors' property, as they were accustomed to doing in the islands, with the erection of stone walls, whereas most Americans usually do away with fences and walls. Moreover, these immigrants often uproot any trees on their property in order to plant a vegetable and flower garden; maintaining these trees, one believes, would possibly curtail the yield (90). In essence, what Boelhower and Giudice are trying to argue is that food and the ethnic

garden cannot be separated, since both reveal much about one's ethnicity and culture — a trait which characterizes both Southern European/Latin cultures. Erasing one's agrarian background in a new country (the United States) was practically impossible for the Italians and the Portuguese, especially for the pioneer and first generations.

With these theoretical considerations on the garden, to what extent does the ethnic garden touch upon quintessential aspects of immigrant life in Portuguese-American communities in the United States? And how does its representation in the fiction and poetry of Gaspar and Vaz contrast with the gardens in canonical mainstream fiction offered by Wharton, Cable, and London? The most representative poem on the ethnic garden in Gaspar's *The Holyoke* (1988), winner of the 1988 Morse Poetry Prize, is "Potatoes". Unlike his more recent volumes of poetry, *The Holyoke* focuses on certain aspects of the lives of Portuguese Americans in Provincetown, Massachusetts, a predominantly fishing community. It is an unusual poem because it highlights the fondness that the Portuguese evince in growing a vegetable or fruit garden in their backyards. This is an aspect that characterizes Portuguese immigrant life in the United States and shows that even in an industrial setting — as is, for example, the Ironbound section of Newark, New Jersey, which I am very familiar with — the Portuguese still plant vegetable and flower gardens today. In their attempt to hold onto an ancestral way of life, they find in these gardens a spiritual connection with the old country. What is fascinating about the gardens in *The Holyoke* is that they have a little bit of everything. Apart from potatoes and even corn, this one has a patch of kale (to make the famous Portuguese kale soup) and a "patch of anise" (10). The episode of Gaspar's mother digging for potatoes comes in the tradition of Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), in which the narrator digs a few potatoes to make a chowder. Fortunately, the old New England way of life that Jewett so eloquently wrote about at the turn of the century has not entirely disappeared; it is another way of life that the Portuguese keep alive.

Compared with the previous volume, *Mass for the Grace of a Happy Death* (1994), winner of the 1994 Anhinga Prize for Poetry, contains very few poems dealing with the Portuguese-American experience in the United States. The setting in part one of this book, "Chronicle", is Provincetown

during the poet's youth. The poems in parts two and three, "Lamentation" and "Psalm", range from the poet's days in the navy during Vietnam to his days as an undergraduate and graduate student in California, and describe life in the Golden State, the drought, illegal Mexican immigrants being assisted by family members, the youth culture of the 1960s, the border scene, 1970s road culture, and women and sex.

I will focus on the poem with a flower garden from part one, "My Aunt Among the Lilies". At the poem's outset, the reader learns that this garden has a profusion of flowers:

> There were never lilies.
> Irises grew in a bricked
> row along the front of the house,
> hollyhocks spined up behind
> our hedge, and morning glories
> bruised the fence
> with their bitter mouths. (9)

As in several poems written by Gaspar, "My Aunt Among the Lilies" is also imbued with religious imagery. The poetic voice depicts his or her aunt as a "dark saint", presumably a Portuguese widow in mourning, who is walking among the flowers of her garden. She is compared to a medieval knight in full armor, a Crusader, ready for battle:

> .....Why
> did she ever walk this way,
> along the strict borders
> of the house, her dress
> puckered in the summer heat,
> her rosary laced at her wrist?
> For hers was not an earthly
> mission — no concern for
> the watering can or rake
> or spade. (9)

Reminiscent of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Portuguese Jesuits involved in evangelization overseas, this aunt is intent on purging the world of sin. She spots a cricket whose blackness and repulsiveness prompt her to see it as an agent of the devil, crushing it.

Instead of offering a depiction of a Portuguese flower garden in a northern New England climate, the poem evolves into religious matters to stress the staunch Catholicism of certain Portuguese women in Provincetown. In delving into these issues, Gaspar acknowledges his indebtedness to English devotional writers such as Henry Vaughn, whose work, *Silex Scintillans*, he quotes at the beginning of the collection.

Practically all of the poems in *A Field Guide to the Heavens*, Gaspar's third volume of poetry and winner of the 1999 Brittingham Prize in Poetry, are about California, the poet's home. This volume conjures up the memory of lost ones as it focuses on the poet's immediate family, his wife and son. Alice Clemente has noted that there "is a rose garden instead of kale and potatoes" in the backyard (38). The nights are spent either stargazing through a telescope or reading books: John Milton, *The Teaching of Buddha*, the ancient Greeks, Dante, Allen Ginsberg, George Herbert, João Cabral de Melo Neto, and Fernando Pessoa. As the title indicates, "Seven Roses" is a poem about a rose garden. Its poetic voice notes that keeping it is not a very appealing activity because "They demand so much of you./ They want to be fertilized and pruned and mulched". Instead, "All that time out/in the heat" could be spent "bodysurfing or reading a book" (19). While the scent of these roses conjures up images from the past, as an artist, however, he wonders which uses he could put them to:

> If I were Rumi I could make a parable about
> the roses, I could dance into a fainting spell
> and someone on my staff would write down
> the poem I uttered, or if I were Francis
> Ponge I could study the roses in a way that a
> cubist might, just before painting them all up
> and down a stretched canvas. (19)

This poem invites reflection on poetic beauty and art. As a garden that caters to the soul, in *A Field Guide to the Heavens*, Gaspar's portrayal of gardens too is further removed from the ethnic experience he had captured in *The Holyoke*. While "Potatoes" is a poem about how to cope with poverty, survival, and appeasing a family's hunger through the bounty of an ethnic garden, in *A Field Guide to the Heavens*, the gardens invite intellectual and artistic contemplation.

The poem "When Lilacs" reports to life in Provincetown and has strong resonances of Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd". Gaspar's poem begins with a series of images suggesting decay:

> The pine fence rotted and collapsed,
> and then there was nothing between us
> and the abandoned lot of the fishpacking
> company, its wild outbuildings,
> the forges and pumps, the truck barn,
> the coopery, the workshops, silent
> and weedgrown, and the counting-house,
> ivy-choked and gone to pigeons and
> feral cats . . . (67)

In this poem, Gaspar highlights the ambiance of abandonment and decay to capture the death of a way of life, fishing, in a Portuguese-American community. It also evokes his mother's decorating their house with its blossoms. The lilac blossoms function as an anchor in the poet's mind, evoking both a place and past occurrences that can no longer be retrieved.

Leaving Pico is a novel about Azorean immigrant life in Provincetown, and how this community reacts to, or resists, American ways. This novel captures quite well the antagonism between the Portuguese from the Azores, represented by Josie's family, and the *Lisbons* — that is, those from the Continent, represented by Carmine, who is courting Josie's mother, Rosa.

In this novel about Josie's coming of age, there are numerous references to the Azorean presence on the very tip of Cape Cod: the kale and potato gardens, the social clubs and club bands, the fish served during the two clambakes that take place during the course of the novel, the names on the fishing boats (most of which highlight this community's strong Catholic beliefs — the *Coração de Jesus*, the *Amor de Deus*, and so on), the *fado* music played at parties and social gatherings, and the rituals associated with their Catholic calendar throughout the year, namely the sodalities, the festivals with their street processions, the Blessing of the Fleet, and so on.

As Clemente has noted, "Gaspar structures his narrative around two clambakes" (41), and most of the food consumed during both events comes either from the sea or the ethnic garden. But what is actually grown in

these gardens? In the episode in which the firemen and neighbors are trying to extinguish the fire in Madeleine Sylvia's house, the narrator tells us that "Maybe everything was over in minutes. I couldn't tell. But both yards were a mess. Our little garden had been trampled, and kale and turnips lay crushed on the wet ground" (176). With the intent of saving money on food, such a habit also highlights their rural background and way of life in the old country, and how these cannot be easily erased in their country of adoption. In addition to these vegetables, for the last clambake, which is organized to mourn Josie's grandfather, the narrator notes that "Ernestina had already left us with a bushel of sweet corn from her garden" (206). Asked to comment on these literary representations of the garden in his writings, Gaspar has generously shared his insight on this issue. In what concerns the earliest garden that Gaspar recalls, he noted that it

> was the backyard garden that is somewhat fictionalized in Pico. We grew and used mint — it was used to freshen dishwashing and for cooking and cleaning. The yard next door — a huge cannery-row-type affair connected to the Atlantic Coast Fisheries, the town's then biggest cold-storage and fish-processing plant — was rife with wild *funcho*, which filled the air with its odd, sweet smell and was used to make soup. (E-mail to author)

Gaspar went on to enumerate what his family grew in their garden:

> Our little garden had tomatoes and potatoes — those I remember most vividly, and we used the Portuguese names for them, along with *couves*. We kept three ducks (like in the novel) for their large, strong eggs. When we lived for a short time with my erstwhile stepfather in another house around the corner, he kept a larger garden with mostly kale — lots of curly kale — and corn. Then he went away, and the garden era sort of came to an end. I think probably by the mid-fifties most of the big, serious and small serious food-gardens were gone. (E-mail to author)

Growing a garden in the Provincetown of his childhood was a common practice, Gaspar noted, and

> [n]one of this was done in any manifest way to "preserve" tradition. It was simply a part of life, like most of the customs we observed. It was just what you did. No one said, "now we are going to remember some Portuguese things by doing this." It was part and parcel of what life was. I believe that in the 'fifties, we saw the old folks who came from the Islands in the 1880s carrying out the ends of their lives and the ends of the 19th century Azorean way of life they brought with them. (E-mail to author)

Writing about the ethnic garden is not an exclusive feature of Frank Gaspar's poetry and prose. Instead, it is also present in other Portuguese-American writings, as is the case of *Saudade* (1994), a novel in which Katherine Vaz captures the clash between the old and new worlds in a number of ways. As I have argued in "Portuguese American Literature and Anticlericalism: Katherine Vaz's Reshaping of the Tradition", the story in *Saudade* is centered on Clara, a deaf-mute girl from the Azorean island Terceira, who inherits the property of her immigrant uncle Victor who lived in California. Through scheming, Father Teo Eiras convinces Clara's mother, on her deathbed, to sign the deed of the land over to the church. Eventually, he becomes Clara's legal guardian, and both sail away to Lodi, California. Through time, Clara unsuccessfully uses her sex appeal to retrieve her land. As Father Teo Eiras gradually fades out of her life, Clara befriends Doctor Helio Soares. It is during this episode that they both build what, by American standards, looks like an unusual garden. To repay his love, attention, and companionship, Clara, we learn, begins to carry

> cuttings of rosemary and seeds for blackeyed Susans to his house to start a roof garden — a legacy from being born in a small country where people planted their roofs to own more land and as a sign of the melancholy trust that one day a siege must come. Helio bought flats of basil, thyme, and petunias for her projects, and they hauled sacks of dirt up the ladder to strew on his house. Greens, yellows, and pastels soon became visible on the red roof, and from a distance Clara could see her mark like a quilt she had tossed outward from her bed. Most afternoons, when Helio returned from his patients, she was already at work, waving to invite him to

> ascend into the garden. A sunflower leaned against the chimney and herbs were drying on old honeycomb frames. The sun baked the hose when Clara stretched it up to the roof, and the water came out warm enough for tea. She filled a jar with water and crumbled in dried mint. Once while drinking her tea, the heat made them unwind backward, side by side, to take in the light. (206-207)

Before analyzing this passage in further detail, it is worth noting that the farming techniques of the Azoreans referred to in this quote are the object of ridicule in Jack London's *The Valley of the Moon*. To my knowledge, perhaps this is the only novel written by a canonical, mainstream American writer featuring a garden or farm owned by a Portuguese character. As I have noted elsewhere, before London, Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* (which contains an account of Otherness as the Quaker City sails toward the Azores, Europe, and the Holy Land) focused on the agricultural techniques of the Azoreans on the island of Fayal (Faial), especially in chapters five and six. In the case of London's novel, Billy Roberts is envious of the wealth that Antonio Silva amassed in a relatively short period of time, even if it involved growing onions at "his front dooryard (…) clear to the sidewalk". He is reported to clear "three hundred a year on that patch alone" (110).

This mentality is also present in Vaz's *Saudade* in the sense that the novel, apart from evincing other interests, aims at capturing the ways and mentality of Portuguese characters transplanted to American soil. Apart from the strangeness in this rooftop garden, the agricultural mentality under consideration substantiates the ancestral habit of maximizing whatever land was available, regardless of whether these fictional immigrants were now living in spacious California. As islanders, this behavior explains in part why coming from a place where land was a precious commodity and its availability for cultivation limited meant that for them no piece of land, however small, should be left bare. Back in the volcanic islands of the Azores, notes Almeida, the plots of land were usually very small and not one single inch was left uncultivated. Land was vital for their survival and there was simply little or no room for aesthetic purposes such as having a flower garden. Whatever flowers grew, these were often planted on the corners of their properties, unsuitable locales for vegetables to grow (89).

In addition, Vaz's rooftop garden stresses the vulnerability of the Azoreans who, from an historical point of view, experienced various sieges during times of political turmoil. This connection of the people of the Azores to their islands, including their vulnerability to the elements is an issue the 1940 play by Armando Côrtes-Rodrigues, *Quando o mar galgou a terra* captures quite well. It was later adapted to film (1954). A garden such as this one evidently came in handy. This passage also highlights Clara's method of expressing her creativity given that she is an illiterate deaf-mute woman who, through time, learns how to communicate with colors.

It is impossible to read this passage and not compare it with the garden that Alice Walker describes in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983). Despite the obvious ethnic and historical differences, Clara's happiness and creativity are similar to those that Walker describes when referring to black women after Reconstruction, namely her grandmother and mother who refused to let their spirituality and creativity be stifled within. "Black women", Walker writes, "whose spirituality was so intense, so deep, so unconscious, they were themselves unaware of the richness they held. They stumbled blindly through their lives: creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope" (584). By way of reply to Virginia Woolf's complaint in *A Room of One's Own*, and with only the name of Phillis Wheatley to look up to as an emblem of self-expression and creativity, black women like her mother used whatever means to express their creativity, and often channeled it into making a quilt or building a garden. Walker's mother, we learn,

> adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in. And not just your typical straggly country stand of zinnias, either. She planted ambitious gardens — and still does — with over fifty different varieties of plants that bloom profusely from early March until late November. Before she left home for the fields, she watered her flowers, chopped up the grass, and laid out new beds.
>
> When she returned from the fields she might divide clumps of bulbs, dig a cold pit, uproot and replant roses, or prune branches from her taller bushes or trees — until night came and it was too dark to see. (590-591)

Walker goes on to note the following:

> I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible — except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty. (590-591)

This passage suggests that for most African-American women during and after Reconstruction, the garden was the means through which they could give life to their creativity despite their overall illiteracy and poor job skills. Representations of the garden prior to the Civil War in some of the fiction by George Washington Cable, for example, differ from Walker's piece. In the novella *Madame Delphine* (1881), Cable depicts the classic New Orleans *vieux carré* Creole gardens. The theoretical formulations of current postcolonial discourse as postulated by Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for example, could be easily applied to this piece. In essence, this story is about racial prejudice and the fear of miscegenation in the United States before the Civil War, even though it was published after this pivotal episode in American history. It highlights the plight of Madame Delphine's daughter Olive, an attractive young Creole woman who tries to marry a white man to secure economic stability, but who is thwarted from doing so because of legal and social prejudice. In this story, the garden gains an importance of its own, given that a few central episodes take place there. In addition, the gardens highlight the class and race differences prevalent in New Orleans — as is the case with those of Madame Delphine and Père Jerome, Creoles, as opposed to those belonging to Jean Thompson and Doctor Varrillat, white landowners and slaveholders. In addition to reflecting the tastes and flora available to Creoles in New Orleans, these quasi-tropical gardens replete with jasmine and crape-myrtle arouse not only the senses, but also one's sexual drive, as is the case with Monsieur Vignevielle, who is sexually aroused when he sees Olive crossing her garden while he is eavesdropping. This longing for contact with the ethnic Other is an issue that contemporary postcolonial and ethnic studies scholars such as Robert Young and bell hooks have touched upon when arguing that whites fantasize about having sex with darker ethnic minorities (Young 19; hooks 21–22).

In contrast, the gardens owned by the white suburban residents of New Orleans have a typical English style. Sprawling lawns and trees exist profusely, and no strong-scented flowers are to be seen in the gardens of Jean Thompson and Doctor Varrillat. These Southern gardens allow them to enjoy, and even flaunt, their status as leisured slaveholding individuals. Although the gardens of the Creoles and whites are depicted as pleasure grounds, the most striking difference is that they also highlight the clash between the social classes and races living in Louisiana prior to the Civil War.

In *The Amateur Garden* (1914), Cable devotes the book's last of six sketches to "The Midwinter Gardens of New Orleans", in which he recycles issues of class and race raised earlier in *Madame Delphine*. In contrast, the first five sketches focus on gardening in a northern climate, more specifically that of Northampton, Massachusetts. Unlike Wharton's *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904), which I will discuss later, in *The Amateur Garden*, we are not in the presence of a first rank piece of writing on gardening. Briefly, this book depicts the gardens of Northampton as essentially domestic, privately-owned gardens with a profusion of lawns, flowers, shrubbery, and trees. Fruit trees and vegetables are rarely alluded to in these New England cottage gardens. Instead, they too are depicted as pleasure grounds where a particular host entertains his guests on a warm summer day or evening while showing off his wealth. While drawing the reader's attention to the local annual garden competitions and prizes awarded to the best gardens, as a whole, this book is a manual on how one can perfect the art of gardening, as in the sketch titled "My Own Acre". While *The Amateur Garden* may be seen as Cable's attempt to raise money, it is also possible to regard this piece as his own contribution to the emergence of how-to-do manuals in early twentieth-century America, especially by authors who were also writers of fiction.

In the case of ethnic fiction — and in particular, that of Clara, as in most real Portuguese immigrants — growing a garden in one's backyard is emblematic of the ethnic experience in America. It allows for spiritual fulfillment — the work that their souls must have — and is a means of connecting with the old country. Momentarily, at least, these gardeners may daydream about the simpler way of life they left behind, since alienation and drudgery in their workplaces are a daily reality. In contem-

porary Portuguese-American literature, the fictional garden as the one represented in *Saudade* emanates from personal experience, as Katherine Vaz has conveyed:

> My first and most vivid sense of a garden when I was growing up in Castro Valley (a town close to San Leandro and Oakland) was that my Azorean grandfather came over to help my father build a chicken coop, and we kept chickens for many years. For the eggs, I might add; we were much too tenderhearted to kill or eat the chickens. My grandfather was notorious for his sense that any plant was God's gift and if a person knew how to take a cutting from it without injuring or removing the plant from someone's property, then so be it! My father recalls being embarrassed as a boy when his father would stop the car and take a cutting from the roadside — *funcho* was one of his prize cuttings. (E-mail to author)

As to the vegetables and flowers in her father's garden, Vaz stated that

> *Funcho* we had in our yard, as a result of my grandfather's pilfering, and also *fava* beans, though my sister Maria hated them and would go out to stomp on the seedlings. *Couves*, of course, were required — we grew up in the suburbs, but my parents had purchased a lot that was narrow but deep so that they could have a garden. My father did indeed have one of those magical touches — a real green thumb — to the point that he could just about throw a bunch of geranium stems onto the ground and by what seemed like the next day, there'd be a profusion of bright blooms. I'd have to say that this ability of his has very much featured in my fiction; I am not myself blessed with this ability, and therefore it truly seems like magic to me. (E-mail to author)

In contrast to other immigrants, however, Vaz noted that "it was not for necessity that my father grew so many vegetables and flowers; it was for pure love of gardening" (E-mail to author). She then went on to reveal where her father's garden surfaces in her fiction:

> We had a blackberry bush, very untamed, that I used for a scene in Mariana! My father's gardening philosophy was very

> casual — the lids of tin cans attached by strings to posts or trees to scare away crows (I used this in my story, "Fado"), no trim walkways or clearly delineated beds, very here-and there. (E-mail to author)

Whereas for Vaz's father and grandfather, gardening was a pastime and supposedly a marker of identity brought from the Azores, in other Portuguese-American communities, gardening provided food in times of need. Such was the case in Gloucester, Massachusetts, a small fishing town where the Portuguese had settled, "Portagee Hill", as the streets located on the upper part of this fishing town are often known. In an eyewitness account of life in this fishing community, Arthur K. Rose notes that despite the families' economic difficulties, they would often "get together and go on picnics over to Braces Cove, a barren strip of beach on the Back Shore" (2). Instead of buying their provisions at the local grocery stores, they "would pack baskets and even washtubs full of food, mostly from their gardens, and beer and homemade wine" (2). While the sea provided them with fish and their gardens with vegetables, these fishermen and their wives were extremely self-reliant. Without a doubt, these traits had been acquired in the Azores where people, before emigrating, had fared no better. Although during the Depression they (like everyone else across the nation) had faced hard times, they had arrived in America, so to speak, well-equipped to face such hardships. "Most of the people", Rose notes,

> grew their own food in the backyard. What one didn't have, the other did. Corn, potatoes, kale, carrots; you name it, they grew it. They raised chickens for the eggs as well as for food, and sometimes families would get together and buy a pig. That was an all day event in itself; when it came time to get the pig, the families would go to the farm and have the pig slaughtered. (4)

Evidence of immigrant communities attempting to preserve some of their rurality within a cityscape can also be found in the novel by Canadian writer, Hugh Garner, *Cabbagetown* (1968), set in the Toronto neighborhood known as Cabbage Town. It is a story of the impoverished lives intertwining in Depression-era Toronto, a place of great sadness and resignation. Both in Gloucester and Toronto, the ethnic garden was a

response to the availability of green spaces in immigrant neighborhoods in America or Canada. In New England and the Middle Atlantic states most houses have a backyard. Rose also points out that harvest time and the "fall months" were an "especially fond time" for him. "That's when [his] family would put up their fruits and vegetables in preserving jars for the coming winter" (4). Moreover, it "was a lot of work to put the food up in jars, but when it was all over they felt a sense of pride and they knew they had enough to eat for the long New England winter that was facing them" (5). Possessing these survival skills was a plus in such harsh New England conditions. But such expertise, so to speak, had already been acquired in similar, if not worse, economic conditions in the old country during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The vegetable and flower gardens of the ethnic writers under review are completely at odds with equivalent representations by canonical writers, especially those by Edith Wharton in *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*. In this book on Italian gardening, Wharton expresses her distaste for the informal landscape style of eighteenth-century England. She was mesmerized by a more formal style of gardening where — instead of sweeping lawns and trees — statues, flowers, marble, pools, water fountains, cascades, and flower boxes were grouped together to create visual harmony. With such breathtaking Italian vistas imprinted on her retinas, it was inevitable that she would try to transplant them to her familiar American landscape: The Mount, her house in Lenox, Massachusetts. There, she tried to emulate what she considered the perfect combination of architecture and landscape gardening that she had witnessed and described in her sketch "Florentine Villas" in this very same book.

Instead of the refinement, leisure, social status, and debate on Otherness as reflected in the gardens discussed by Wharton, Cable, and London, the ethnic garden in Portuguese-American writing instead mirrors the idiosyncrasies of this particular ethnic background. Ranging from the Catholic fervor to the ancestral rural origins of most Portuguese Americans, in the fiction and poetry of Vaz and Gaspar, the theme of the garden in a way allows for an ethnic rewriting of the fables in which the busy ant or bee is constantly providing for the long and harsh winters. Understandably, the pleasure grounds of Wharton and Cable are nowhere to be seen in Portuguese-American literature, since the so-called pioneer generations in

these writings — that is, the first- and second-generation fictional immigrants — are portrayed as obsessed with creating the conditions for a better life in a new country even if they, like the ants and bees, have to toil night and day. And, clearly, during the phase of rapid industrialization and intensive farming in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries, Emerson's views on nature and spirituality were overlooked as most of America's landscape became a toxic wasteland. From this standpoint, his legacy is merely residual. Worth mentioning, nonetheless, is the movement to protect America's forests from the onslaught of industrialization in the latter part of the nineteenth-century. At the time, national reserves and parks were created so as to counteract the toxic wasteland. A case in point was Frederick Law Olmsted's militancy on behalf of the idea that all American cities should have green areas. His essay "Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns" (1870) is an important contribution to that. Apart from our current interest in environmentalism, ecocriticism, and a greater respect for nature, nature is no longer perceived as a locale for Emersonian pantheists. Whatever spirituality Emerson had noted in nature, it is quite evident that these Portuguese immigrants — and others from rural societies as was the case with the Italians — had grasped and updated it when working in their vegetable gardens. Once here, they became human — an Emersonian man — once again, temporarily free from the alienation imposed by the factory or the fisheries while reconnecting with their ancestral culture, living momentarily as spiritually fulfilled beings.

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Abstract

This essay aims at exploring Ralph Waldo Emerson's discussion of nature and how it may be applied to emergent contemporary American literatures, especially the Portuguese-American one. By delving into contemporary scholarship on ecocriticism one may understand the essence and importance of the garden in Portuguese-American writing, especially in the fiction of Katherine Vaz and in the fiction and poetry of Frank Gaspar. Also worth analyzing is how these contrast with the writings on this theme by a few canonical American writers.

Keywords

Ecocriticism and emergent contemporary American literatures; the writings of Katherine Vaz and Frank Gaspar; the role of the ethnic garden in Portuguese-American literature; the Emersonian legacy of *Nature*

Resumo

O presente ensaio propõe-se explorar o legado de Ralph Waldo Emerson, sobretudo a sua análise da natureza, e a forma como esta está presente nas literaturas emergentes e contemporâneas dos Estados Unidos da América, sobretudo a luso-americana. Ao apoiarmo-nos sobre alguns estudos recentes da ecocrítica, poderemos melhor entender a essência e importância do quintal ou jardim na escrita luso-americana, nomeadamente na ficção de Katherine Vaz e na ficção e poesia de Frank Gaspar. Em seguida, o estudo como estes textos contrastam com outros sobre a mesma temática de autoria de alguns escritores canónicos norte-americanos reveste-se de capital importância.

Palavras-Chave

A ecocrítica e as literaturas emergentes contemporâneas dos Estados Unidos; a escrita de Katherine Vaz e de Frank Gaspar; o papel do quintal ou jardim na literatura luso-americana; o legado Emersoniano de *Nature*

“Subtle distinctions”: Emerson’s “Gifts” and Sentimental Rhetoric of Gift-Giving

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ISSN: 0873-0628 ANGLO SAXONICA SER. III N. 12 2016

"Subtle distinctions": Emerson's "Gifts" and Sentimental Rhetoric of Gift-Giving[1]

This paper, a close reading of the essay "Gifts" (1844), intends to show Emerson's debt to the antebellum sentimental tradition and, at the same time, reflect upon his dazzling yet controversial vision of the gift. It will argue that Emerson's pioneering ideas about gift exchange appeared in the margins and in the gaps of the mainstream sentimental and didactic discourse that was running through the antebellum literature and culture and that furnished a stylistic framework of "Gifts". Sentimental rhetoric is an important point of departure for Emerson's conception of the gift, as his word choice testifies, whereas the essay's ruptures and sudden changes of tone show that he departs from the ethics of sentimental and moves in a different direction in his understanding of the gift. Emerson's concept of onerous gift exchange stems from his apparent discontent with sentimental formulas, which imply the gift's essentially benign, wholesome nature. He rewrites the popular sentimental discourse of gift-giving in terms of insult and violence, anticipating Mauss, and he challenges the idea of affectionate reciprocity foregrounding the twentieth-century's "asymmetrical ethics" that we encounter in the work of such philosophers as Levinas, Derrida, and Marion. This paper, however, will argue that the essay's sentimental clichés and commonplaces — instead of serving merely to frame or to disguise the author's complex philosophical thinking — actively participate in the process of meaning-making. Emerson tests the potential and the limits of sentimental rhetoric in describing gift-giving; he borrows and "estranges" sentimental metaphors, to use the term of

[1] I am thankful to the Institute for Advanced Study, Central European University for the access to resources that helped me prepare the essay.

Russian Formalists, and makes language itself mark the point of divergence from the mainstream notions he is building upon.

My reading shares Richard Rorty's famous assessment of Emerson as an "edifying" rather than a "systematic" philosopher (qtd. in Cromphout 159) and Richard Poirier's belief that "the Emersonian individual exists not in his assertions; it exists in continuous struggle with the language by which it tries to get expressed" (68). Both these premises are essential for the development of my argument since they prompt us to see Emerson as an author whose thought is embedded in the language he employs and is therefore inseparable from its expression. As he himself claimed in his "Address at Opening of Concord Free Library", "the very language we speak, thinks for us, by the subtle distinctions which already are marked for us by its words" (502). It is the sentimental language that "thinks" for Emerson in "Gifts"; therefore, the "subtle distinctions" of Emerson's vision and thought should be detected "at the level of the sentence itself" (Deming 52).[2] This paper will read Emerson's "Gifts" with an eye on rhetorical and formal properties of this work that has presented a problem for critics not least because of its peculiar language and style.[3]

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"Gifts", sandwiched between "Manners" and "Nature" in Emerson's *Essays. Second Series*, is a piece that stands out due to its short size and allegedly insignificant subject matter.[4] In recent years, however, the essay

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[2] Deming, building on Stanley Cavell's interpretation, encourages us to think of Emerson "doing 'poetics' rather than philosophy": "Thinking of Emerson's work in terms of poetics as being not merely a collection of aesthetic rules and precepts governing poetry but as a process that bears on composition of works having language at once as their substance and their instrument, emphasizes the work's awareness of its own rhetoricity" (86).

[3] To my knowledge, the only attempt to read Emerson's "Gifts" in the context of the popular sentimental discourse of his time was made by Litwicki, who is more interested in the essay's content, relating it to the cultural history of gift-giving in the nineteenth-century United States, rather than in the essay's rhetorical and formal aspects.

[4] As Robert Richardson put it, "*Essays. Second Series* is an uneven volume, with short, light pieces such as 'Gifts' in which Emerson shows his awareness of the emotional

has been placed in the foreground of the twentieth-century gift theory canon and received serious critical attention.[5] For example, in Alan Schrift's 1997 anthology, *The Logic of the Gift: Towards an Ethics of Generosity*, "Gifts" is published alongside classical works by Mauss, Benveniste, Bourdieu, Derrida, and others. Thus, we encounter two major critical traditions of reading "Gifts": one that dismisses the text as marginal in Emerson's canon and another that reevaluates it in light of contemporary explorations of the gift.

The latter tradition of reading "Gifts" as a philosophical text anticipating modern gift theory usually brackets out the question of the essay's manner and style. While some Emerson critics ignored the essay since they had been misled by sentences "more appropriate to Miss Manners or Amy Vanderbilt than to the author of 'Self-Reliance'" (Gruzin 44), others tend to draw a line between Emerson's ideas and their expression. For example, Gary Shapiro writes: "Although his advice there that 'Flowers and Fruits are always fit presents' may sound like a simpering cliché, the reason adduced is one that shows a rigorous economic logic" ("The Metaphysics of Presents" 279). The critic points at the essay's incongruity between its language and thought. While claiming that Emerson "articulates what later appears as a crucial theme in Heidegger, Bataille, Levinas, and Derrida", he calls "Gifts" "an essay that seems at first to deal only with commonplaces of manners and etiquette" ("'Give Me a Break!'" 98). Shapiro almost word for word repeats Gruzin's observation: "If Emerson can sound like Miss Manners when he writes that 'Flowers and fruits are always fit presents,' the insight takes on another cast when we read it, as we should, against the background of Kantian aesthetics ("'Give Me a Break!'" 98)". According to this reading, Emerson's essay offers a somewhat static juxtaposition

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reversals that beset both giving and receiving" (400). In his 1988 article, "'Put God in Your Debt': Emerson's Economy of Expenditure", Gruzin remarks: "Gifts' [had] been largely ignored by Emerson critics (and not entirely without a reason — after all sentences like 'Flowers and fruit are always fit presents' seem more appropriate to Miss Manners or Amy Vanderbilt than to the author of 'Self-Reliance')" (44). Shapiro, however, brings our attention to the fact that Emerson placed the essay in the center of the collection ("'Give Me a Break!'"98).

[5] This is not least because it was referenced by both Nietzsche and Mauss.

between meaning and form, content and expression, commonplace and insight. While sharing many of Shapiro's ideas and bearing on his research, I will take a different lead. An examination of Emerson's thought as a *dynamic* and *controversial* process of writing, rewriting, and edifying — particularly as it moves from one "simpering cliché" to the other in search of meaning — reveals that he was considerably more indebted to the sentimental discourse surrounding gift-giving than suggested by previous critical readings of the essay. We especially see this in Emerson's peculiar way of thinking, as captured in his choice of words.

Both Gruzin and Shapiro rather disparagingly compare Emerson with Miss Manners, the ironic mask of Judith Martin, a twentieth-century journalist and columnist writing on etiquette. Choice and bestowal of gifts are, indeed, among Martin's recurrent topics. Remarkably, in one of her relatively recent entries entitled "Miss Manners: There Are Worthier Causes than Underwriting Others' Weddings", she discusses the appropriateness of giving money instead of gifts at weddings in a language reminiscent of nineteenth-century sentimental rhetoric.

> Now that the ancient and charming custom of exchanging presents is deteriorating into simply paying people by the milestone, Miss Manners supposed that she would not have to become involved (…). Presuming reasonable reciprocity, what good does it do people in the same social or family circles to keep paying one another? Surely it has nothing to do with the custom of selecting and treasuring symbols of emotional ties. (n.pg)

Gifts as "symbols of emotional ties" date back to the antebellum sentimentality with its sweet tokens, souvenirs de coeur, and treasured mementos, such as "curls, yellowed letters, preserved childhood garments, dried clovers, withered roses" (Sternberger 60).

Emerson's essay contains its own catalogue of similar "symbols", ranging from flowers to hand-made artifacts and poems.[6] In the first

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[6] Marcel Mauss, mentioning "Gifts" in his *Essai sur le don*, makes a remarkable mistake in that he calls the essay "Gifts and Presents" instead of "Gifts" (63). Mauss is correct in the sense that a large part of Emerson's essay deals with the choice of appropriate

paragraph of "Gifts", Emerson mentions Christmas and New Years as occasions for bestowing presents: while "it is always so pleasant to be generous, though very vexatious to pay debts", "the impediment lies in the choosing. If, at any time, it comes into my head, that a present is due from me to somebody, I am puzzled what to give, until the opportunity is gone" (525). In the opening lines, Emerson readdresses our attention from "why give" to "what to give", a rhetoric device used, for example, in Catherine Beecher's chapter on charity in *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841): "That we are bound to give *some* of our time, money, and efforts, to relieve the destitute, all allow. But, as to how much we are to give, and on whom our charities shall be bestowed, many a reflecting mind has been at a loss" (168). Emerson works from the opposite premise, the idea that giving is abundant and absurd rather than matter-of-fact ("It is said that the world is in a state of bankruptcy, that the world owes the world more than the world can pay, and ought to go into chancery, and be sold" (525). Yet he likewise chooses to be practical and instructive and allegedly leaves metaphysical questions aside: "I do not think this general insolvency, which involves in some sort all the population, to be the reason of the difficulty experienced at Christmas and New Year, and other times, in bestowing gifts" (525). Emerson uses the words "presents" and "gifts" interchangeably throughout the essay, but at least in the first two paragraphs he mainly speaks of gifts in the narrower meaning of presents, focusing on the practicalities of their bestowal. The latter aligns the opening of the essay with the sentimental discourse of domesticity and thus may mislead the reader.

In Emerson's catalogue of appropriate presents, flowers and fruit head the list. To Emerson, flowers are "always fit presents" "because they are a proud assertion that a ray of beauty outvalues all the utilities of the world (…) delicate flowers look like the frolic and interference of love and beauty" (525). Further in the paragraph, he refers to flowers as to "sweet hints" of nature: "Who am I to whom these sweet hints are addressed?" (525). The choice of words is noteworthy. Calling flowers "fit presents"

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presents for different occasions. While "gift" (*don*) and "present" (*cadeau*) are synonyms, the word "present" is deprived of complex symbolic and social connotations of the word "gift" and refers mainly to material things being offered as part of casual practices/rituals of giving.

and nature's "sweet hints" was, indeed, very much akin to the sentimental discourse of the time. Florilegias and flower albums were at the peak of their vogue in the 1840s, as were gift books, richly ornamented, and Christmas-related annuals that often had flower names: "Violet", "Iris", "Magnolia", "Lily of the Valley", "Forget-me-not", "The Wreath of Flowers", "The Garland", and the like. To a sentimentalist, a flower is the giver's messenger speaking of his or her heart — "a token of love from me to thee", as an anonymous gift book poem has it (*The Token* 2). Flowers are "breathing love in each tone" and speaking "a sweet language", in the words of a sentimental poetess Fanny Osgood (233). The flower's ephemeral, transient character makes it a pure, nearly a verbal sign or token, of affection. At the same time, it can be kept and treasured as a souvenir (a dried rose or a clover) or taken care of (a living plant).

Numerous antebellum stories where flowers figure as presents allow us to detect that Emerson's discussion of flowers as perfect gifts was, indeed, intertwined with the mainstream sentimental rhetoric. Harriet Beecher Stowe's "The Tea Rose" (1842) is particularly congenial with Emerson's "Gifts". The story's character, a French immigrant — herself bearing a floral name, Florence — decides to give a beautiful tea rose to a little seamstress. Her American cousin, Kate, does not understand this gesture and calls it "sentimental", suggesting that poor people have no time for sentiments and luxury: "When one gives to poor people, one wants to give them something *useful* — a bushel of potatoes, a ham, and such things" (92). Florence disagrees:

> Why, certainly, potatoes and ham must be supplied; but, having ministered to the first and most craving wants, why not add any other little pleasures or gratifications we may have it in our power to bestow? I know there are many of the poor who have fine feeling and a keen sense of the beautiful, which rusts out and dies because they are too hard pressed to procure it any gratification. (92)

In this story, a flower is an object of luxury seemingly inappropriate for charity purposes, but it is also a sign of nature's universal beauty accessible to everyone: "Do not these show that the human heart yearns for the beautiful in all ranks of life?" (Stowe 92-93).

Emerson's attitude to charity was by far more complex and ambiguous than Stowe's, yet in "Gifts" he does allow a supply of first wants for the one who is in need.

> For common gifts, necessity makes pertinences and beauty every day, and one is glad when an imperative leaves him no option, since if the man at the door have no shoes, you have not to consider whether you could procure him a paint-box. And as it is always pleasing to see a man eat bread, or drink water, in the house or out of doors, so it is always a great satisfaction to supply these first wants. (535)

However, unlike bread and water, flowers are perfect — or "fit" — gifts for Emerson, precisely because they transcend utilitarian values.[7] As Cromphout comments, since "the essential role of flower is to embody beauty and since beauty eclipses utilitarian values, flowers are *essentially* useless" (101, emphasis in original). Whether Emerson's "sweet hints" or Stowe's "little pleasures", flowers pertain to the same ideal realm of unconditioned love and supreme beauty and epitomize the sentimental idea of a gratuitous gift.

If a flower is a gift par excellence, the anti-gift is jewelry; you pick a flower in the garden or in the field, but buy jewelry in the shop. For Emerson, gems are also "tokens of compliment and love" but "barbarous" ones: "Rings and other jewels are not gifts, but apologies for gifts" (536). Here again we encounter a typically sentimental disjunction between "a simple flower" and "a cold jewel". Rings and jewels functioned as sentimental gifts but only if understood metaphorically (say, a gem of a poem)[8] or as signs of affective ties (a ring with an engraved forget-me-not

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[7] As Emerson says in "Uses of Great Men": "If you affect to give me bread and fire, I perceive that I pay for it the full price, and at last it leaves me as it found me, neither better nor worse: but all mental and moral force is a positive good. It goes out from you, whether you will or not, and profits me whom you never thought of" (620). If the gift of bread and fire "leaves me as it found me", the gift of a flower, following this logic, will be a surplus of meaning.

[8] This explains why many gift books had "gem" names as well: "The Opal", "The Amethyst", "The Amaranth", "The Pearl", "The Jewel", "The Gem of the Season". Those were gems of poetical brilliance or jewels of spiritual values.

or a locket with a miniature portrait). Other than that, gems were stock symbols of vanity, selfishness, and insincerity. Too expensive, they represented consumption society at its worst as the antipode of sentimental affectionate communities and unions of kin souls. We find this in a different tale on charity by Stowe, "Christmas Story; or, The Good Fairy" (1850), written a couple of years later than "Gifts". Here there is a vivid description of jewels as heartless, anti-sentimental presents indicating satiety. The story's character Eleonore wants to buy her mamma a Christmas gift but finds herself at a loss: "She has three card cases, four gold thimbles, two or three gold chains, two writing desks of different patterns; and then as to rings, brooches, boxes, and all other things, I should think she might be sick of the sight of them" (212). Eleonore's aunt advises her against buying her mamma a "hard, cold, glittering ring, that now cheers nobody, and means nothing, that you give because you must, and she takes because she must" (218). Likewise, Emerson claims in "Gifts" that it is a cold, lifeless business when you go to the shops to buy me something, which does not represent your life and talent, but a goldsmith's. This is fit for kings, and rich men who represent kings, and a false state of property, to make presents of gold and silver stuffs, as a kind of symbolical sin-offering, or payment of black-mail" (536). While flowers are fit for everyone, jewelry is "fit for kings" but even so, it is "a kind of symbolical sin-offering" rather than a token "of compliment and love".[9] In a word, Emerson's preference for flowers over jewels appears to be conventionally sentimental.

The same juxtaposition of flowers and jewelry may be found in antebellum behavior manuals: "To present a young lady with an article of jewelry (…) ought to be regarded as an offence, rather than compliment", we read in Eliza Leslie's famous *Behavior Book: A Manual for Ladies*

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[9] Litwicki argues: "Emerson's dismay at the way that commerce was reshaping gift-giving was not unique in this period" and gives an example of the essay "Hints for an Essay on Presents" published two years later in *Godey's Lady's Book* where "the writer began with nostalgia for the time when '[g]ifts used to be pleasant things', being 'the most natural expressions of good-will and affection'. This had been nearly destroyed, however, by the modern tendency to transform the gift into 'something which can be bought with money!' The author lamented the fact that 'a birthday present or a New Year's gift (…) must now be a costly article of *bijouterie* whose worth can be reckoned in dollars'" (n. pg.).

(1851) (180-181). A gentleman who really respects a lady will not offer her anything more than "a bouquet, a book, one or two autographs of distinguished persons, or a few relics or mementos of memorable places — things that derive their chief value from associations" (181). Not only does Leslie rank a bouquet as first in her list of appropriate gifts, but she also emphasizes the value of gifts evoking associations. Commenting on this fragment from Leslie's book and reading it alongside Emerson's "Gifts", Dickinson observes that "the recognition of such associations was essential in a society still ostensibly wary of mass commercialization in commemorating personal relationships" (57). In the second paragraph of "Gifts", Emerson aligns himself with this sort of thinking when he writes that

> we might convey to some person that which properly belonged to his character, and was easily associated with him in thought…The only gift is a portion of thyself. Thou must bleed for me. Therefore the poet brings his poem; the shepherd, his lamb; the farmer, corn; the miner, a gem; the sailor, coral and shells; the painter, his picture; the girl, a handkerchief of her own sewing. (536)

Leslie most certainly knew Emerson's essay; "things that derive their chief value from associations" reads as a paraphrase of Emerson's "easily associated with him in thought". Yet more importantly, both authors shared the same discourse in that they reproduced a number of sentimental clichés: flowers as perfect gifts; jewels as "cold" and offensive; and gifts as tokens associated with the giver.

Still other authors of etiquette manuals knew of Emerson's "Gifts" and echoed the same paragraph concerning associations. Samuel Roberts Wells, author of antebellum manual entitled *How to Behave: A Pocket Manual for Republican Etiquette, and Guide to Correct Personal Habits* (1856), not only alludes to Emerson but also extensively quotes from "Gifts": he concludes his small chapter "Presents" with the above referenced fragment "The only gift is a portion of thyself…" (82). In this chapter, Wells states that while gentlemen are allowed to give commercial albeit inexpensive presents to ladies, the gifts made by ladies to gentlemen "should be little articles not purchased but deriving a priceless value as being the offspring of their gentle skill: a little picture from their pencil or a trifle from their needle" (82). "A trifle from their needle" is undoubtedly

a replica of Emerson's "handkerchief of her own sewing". Since a lady had no money of her own, it was natural that she would use her "gentle skill" to make a "priceless" present — priceless in the sense that its sentimental value exceeded its market value. For example, in the early sentimental novel, *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) by William Hill Brown, a character looks at the embroidery made by his sweetheart and ruminates:

> Did not her fingers trace these beautiful, expanding flowers? Did not she give to this carnation its animated glow, and to this opening rose its languishing grace? Removed as I am… from the amiable object of my tenderest affection, I have nothing to do but to admire this offspring of industry and art. It shall yield more fragrance to my soul than all the *bouquets* in the universe. (23)

Associations with the giver endow a gift with special significance, making it at once a memento and a token of affection.

There is a significant difference between Emerson's essay and the above referenced behavior manuals. Both Leslie and Wells move the idea of associated gifts to the sphere of gentility and manners by placing it in the gendered context (gifts from ladies to gentlemen and from gentlemen to ladies). When Emerson says that "a man's biography" should be "conveyed in his gift", he speaks of course on a more general level (536). However, the very inclusion of allusions and references to "Gifts" in behavior manuals points to its relevance to popular discourse of the day. Seen in this perspective, his much-cited statement — "The only gift is a portion of thyself" (536) — may be interpreted as an epitome of sentimental ethics. Mary Louise Kete quotes this aphorism to support her thesis about the nature of sentimental gifts: "such tokens of affection … are actual vehicles or vessels of some essential quality of a person. Or, to use literary terms, they are not metaphors but synecdoches" (53). Kete claims that "to give the self" is "possible only through the mediation of a synechdochically related subject such as a tear, a lock of hair, or a verse remembrance" (54). Emerson, who himself gives the gift of a poem (and the gift of an essay!), comes very close to such giving, partaking in what Kete calls "sentimental collaboration" — "the exchange of sympathy establishing the ground for participation in a common cultural or intellectual project" (xiv). Such reading of "Gifts" shows the essay's indebtedness to

the sentimental discourse surrounding gift-giving on a deeper level. Not only does Emerson speak about gifts in the manner of etiquette manuals, but he also provides didactic literature of his time with ready formulas that then circulate as clichés in turn.

Yet the assertion that immediately follows — "Thou must bleed for me" (536) — appears to be the turning point of Emerson's essay, at once the uttermost expression of sentimental discourse and a point of break or departure from it, a rupture in its flow. Bleeding connotes the sentimentalist tendency towards transgression, liquid being a fundamental "affective principle of sympathy", in the words of Jonathan Elmer (109). While "in the sentimental novel, what 'floweth' most of all are tears" (Elmer 109), a bleeding heart was still its commonest cliché. In Richardson's *Clarissa*, a "bleeding heart" is mentioned ten times (390, 433, 958, 979, 994, 1101, 1220, 1337, 1339, 1372), in *Pamela*, four times (27, 117, 171, 229; Pamela also says, "Indeed, indeed, sir, I bleed for what her distresses must be, [483]), and in Brown's *The Power of Sympathy*, twice (41, 66). Yet, Emerson in "Gifts" speaks about presents and not about broken hearts; the verb "to bleed", evoking images of sacrifice and wound, sounds dissonant to the general tone of the essay and anticipates the essay's turn in the next paragraph to the theme of antagonistic reciprocity and "harmful patronage" (Mauss 63).[10]

The change of style in the next paragraph is, indeed, conspicuous: "It is not the office of a man to receive gifts. How dare you give them? We wish to be self-sustained. We do not quite forgive a giver. The hand that feeds us is in some danger of being bitten" (536). Emerson's claim that "it is not the office of a man to receive gifts" comes, indeed, like the bolt out of the blue after the lengthy discussion of the appropriateness of flowers, fruits, and handkerchiefs: this statement seemingly contradicts all the practical advice given by the author of "Gifts" heretofore and sounds decidedly unsentimental. Now Emerson speaks rather "as the champion of self-reliance", in Osteen's words (13). In "Self-Reliance", he expresses a

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[10] "In recalling Emerson's curious essay on *Gifts and Presents* we are not leaving the Germanic field: charity wounds him who receives, and our whole moral effort is directed towards suppressing the unconscious harmful patronage of the rich almoner" (Mauss 63).

deeply anti-sentimental vision of charity, claiming that giving "compromises one's identity as a self-reliant man", in the words of Susan Ryan (79). Emerson writes in "Self-Reliance", "[t]hen, again, do not tell me, as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they *my* poor? (…) though I confess with shame I sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is a wicked dollar which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold" (251-253). Benevolence un-mans the self-sustained man not only when he receives charity but also when he bestows it.[11]Also, Emerson seems to be generally uncomfortable with the idea of unequal exchange that charity always implies.

In "Gifts", expanding the subject from charity to giving as such, Emerson is even more radical. We learn that the feeding hand can be bitten, and the debtor wishes to give his benefactor a slap. But the violence is reciprocal, since giving is a flat usurpation and puts a debtor in eternal debt. This idea will be echoed in *Walden*, where Thoreau compares a benefactor with "that dry and parching wind of the African deserts called the simoom, which fills the mouth and nose and ears and eyes with dust till you are suffocated". He adds that he would run from such a person "for fear that I should get some of his good done to me — some of its virus mingled with my blood" (61). In Thoreau's interpretation of Emersonian ideas, benevolence is not only violent but also contagious.[12] It is noteworthy

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[11] Ryan places "Emerson's rejection of benevolent relations" in contrast "to many of his contemporaries, for whom achieving self-reliance also involved attaining the position of benevolent agent. In place of the benevolent dyad, Emerson championed another pairing: friendship between peers who are explicitly *not* in need" (82).

[12] Thoreau and Emerson in their joint critique of charity and of organized charity in particular, were not alone; rather, as Ryan observes, they expressed widely held views: many of the contemporaries resisted the sentimental propaganda of charitable giving. Critics writing about philanthropy in the United States observe that it presented a problem for Americans as there was something about the idea of charity "going against the democratic grain" (Bremner 2). Ryan writes, for example, about "the antisentimental grain of antebellum benevolence" itself that stemmed from resistance to "giving unreservedly in a culture that in many ways valued reserve" (19). Moreover, uneasy feelings about charity were observed on both sides. In her famous book *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), which contained important albeit biased information on American etiquette, Francis Trollope speaks of the inability of American poor to

that "Gifts" was a text that inspired authors as distinct as Miss Leslie and Thoreau.

In the same paragraph, Emerson formulates what he sees as the true gift that is the exchange between the equals but immediately dismisses it as excessive: "The gift, to be true, must be the flowing of the giver unto me, correspondent to my flowing unto him. When the waters are at level, then my goods pass to him, and his to me. All his are mine, all mine his. I say to him: How can you give me this pot of oil, or this flagon of wine, when all your oil and wine is mine, which belief of mine this gift seems to deny?" (537). The passage concisely conveys the controversy at the core of the essay. Flowing onto someone as bleeding for someone makes giving legitimate but, at the same time, it seems to eliminate the gift, to make the very act of giving redundant and absurd, and, when seen in the terms benevolence or debt, offensive. If all his are mine and all mine his, there is no place nor justification for giving. This returns us to the opening of the essay: "the world owes the world more than the world can pay, and ought to go into chancery, and be sold" (535). Yet even here, getting at the level of metaphysical generalization, Emerson does not forget to add practical advice in the manner of contemporary behavior manuals: "the expectation of gratitude is mean", "do not flatter your benefactors" (537).[13]

It is this controversy between the necessity and the redundancy of giving that, however, marks Emerson's break from the contemporary sentimental ethics of gift-giving from which he derives much of his

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receive charity with gratitude as a typical trait of American character and a sign of typically American love of "bargain-making": "I could never teach them to believe, during above a year that I lived at this house, that I would not sell the old clothes of the family; and so pertinacious were they in bargain-making, that often, when I had given them the articles which they wanted to purchase, they would say, "Well, I expect I shall have to do a turn of work for this; you may send for me when you want me." But as I never did ask for the turn of work, and as this formula was constantly repeated, I began to suspect that it was spoken solely to avoid uttering the most un-American phrase 'I thank you'" (72-73). Characteristically, Trollope, a person with a different cultural background, takes the desire of her dependents to be self-sustainable ("to do a turn of work for this") as ingratitude.

[13] Here he is building on the eighteenth-century commonplace views about the necessary balance between self-love and love for others, as von Cromphout points it out (96-97).

argument. Besides, the gift as a portion of oneself, as an emanation of the giver, comes into conflict with the mutuality and reciprocity implied in the sentimental gift economy. Sentimental gifts, tokens of affection and souvenirs, were expected "to be rewarded by a return of the same", in the words of McGill (33). The gifts were given in exchange of equivalent signs of love or gratitude or remembrance. For Emerson, instead, the problem with giving begins with reciprocity. Shapiro relates "Gifts" with "Compensation" where "the laws of the world are said always to require that any natural gift be compensated for by a corresponding defect" ("'Give Me a Break!'" 100). In "Gifts", Emerson points exactly at the gap between gift exchange and the spirit of disinterestedness attributed to the true or ideal gift, even if the latter is impossible. With this contradiction in mind, we can reread the essay and see, indeed, the "subtle differences" between a flower as a model gift in sentimental poetry or fiction and a flower as an appropriate Kantian gift in Emerson's essay.[14] For Emerson, a flower has something about it that can be given but cannot be possessed. Likewise, in "Nature", he speaks of the land owned by Miller, Locke, and Manning: "But none of them owns the landscape" (9). In "Love", he claims that we "cannot approach beauty" of roses and violets (332). In "Love", it also says that a lover "feels the blood of the violet, the clover, and the lily in his veins" (331). Giving as bleeding for someone is a similar act of unity with the world, transcending the subject-object relationship limited by reciprocity.

In the last paragraph of the essay, Emerson returns to the rhetoric of sentiment and love: "I fear to breathe any treason against the majesty of love, which is the genius and god of gifts, and to whom we must not affect

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[14] Shapiro discusses Emerson's indebtedness to Kant in detail. For example, he mentions that "in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant's lists of things that we find beautiful invariably begin with flowers (…). Flowers — at least some that we are expected to call to mind — are incontestable examples of natural beauty. Thus, they give a rhetorical weight to these lists, which sometimes move from the natural to the artistic, including landscape gardening and carpets with arabesque patterns; note that many of these are variations on floral patterns" ("'Give Me a Break!'" 102). There is apparent congeniality between Kantian and Emersonian vision if we consider the following statement from the *Critique of Judgment*: "Flowers, free designs, lines aimlessly intertwined and called foliage: these have no significance, depend on no determinate concept, and yet we like them" (Shapiro, "'Give Me a Break!'" 103).

to prescribe. Let him give kingdoms or flower-leaves indifferently. There are persons, from whom we always expect fairy tokens; let us not cease to expect them" (538). Yet he speaks of love almost in impersonal or extra-personal terms, on a highly generalized level ("the majesty of love"). "Indifferently" is a key word here: if a gift is a sign of love, it does not matter what to give — a flower-leaf or a kingdom. Ironically, Emerson's last paragraph undermines the appropriateness of the list of gifts presented earlier in the essay. Persons who bestow fairy tokens on us are but agents of love and, therefore, their offerings are not subject to the laws of reciprocity fraught with insult, violence, and debt. The same applies to hospitality: "The best of hospitality and of generosity is also not in the will but in fate" (538). Such mistrust of gift as exchange in the spirit of twentieth-century philosophy, especially if we think of Levinas and Derrida, can be explained by the fact that gift as a debt or gift as commerce are equally dismissed in "Gifts" ("For the rest, I like to see that we cannot be bought and sold", [538]). Emerson's ideas about love, gift, and reciprocity are also echoed in Zigmunt Bauman and Tim May's 1990 book, *Thinking Sociologically*: "We can say (…) that the requirements of reciprocity in a loving relationship are double-edged. Strange as it may seem, the least vulnerable is love as a gift: there is a preparedness to accept a beloved's world, to put ourselves in that world and try to comprehend it from inside — without expecting a similar service in exchange" (87). Rewriting a sentimental formula of a gratuitous, ideal gift (love's "fairy tokens") in his controversial manner, Emerson transcends the sentimental notion and develops a vision akin to the aforementioned trend in twentieth-century ethical thought.

The essay's flickering, elusive meaning may be illustrated by its epigraph, a poem about gifts of love that Emerson originally wrote in 1842 and then later included in "Elements and Mottos" in 1867:

> Gifts of one who loved me, —
> 'Twas high time they came;
> When he ceased to love me,
> Time they stopped for shame. ("Gifts" 533)

Shapiro points to the contradiction in the poem's choice: "the gift the poet (Emerson) brings here is one that tells us precisely of the failure of the gift

(that is, the gift given to the speaker) to arrive on time or at the right time. The poem is a gift that hints at the impossibility of the gift by its story of disappointment and its elegiac tone" ("'Give Me a Break!'" 99). Introducing the subject of love, the motto also echoes the last paragraph: the majesty of love "giving kingdoms or flower-leaves indifferently" is the only legitimate reason for bestowing gifts; when love ceases, gifts are too late to come. Finally, the poem is "a personal statement","it seems to tell a little story, in which the speaker says that his gifts from the other, the former friend or lover, never came quite at the right time" ("'Give Me a Break!'" 99). The "little story", whether of a friend or a lover, is, indeed, a sentimental story that may be imagined in a hand-written album or in a gift book. The poem may be read as an unsophisticated complaint of a girl abandoned by her lover (When *he* ceased to love me), a sentimental female voice in the margins of the essay.

Sentimental culture thus provided the author of "Gifts" with a language that he appropriated or, rather, purloined to frame his thoughts and develop his ideas. These ideas manifest themselves in the ruptures and discontinuities of the advisory discourse, and in the odd word choice and change of tone, indicating Emerson's struggle with the language "that thinks for us" by "subtle distinctions" (502). His insights are the result of the incoherence and self-controversial, "edifying" nature of his thinking, at odds with fixed meanings and stylistic clichés that he, nevertheless, does not hesitate to use, at times seriously, at times tongue-in-cheek, so that he could express and test his thoughts. As he himself nicely put it in "Experience": "Use what language we will, we can never say anything but what we are" (qtd. in Richardson 400). Clashing the gift of love and a "slap", a catalogue of "fit" presents and the idea of excessiveness of giving within one essay, he creates a theory of gift-giving that was novel and pioneering for his time.

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Abstract

In my paper, I reread Emerson's "Gifts" (1844), an essay usually placed in the background of the twentieth-century gift theory canon (Schrift 1997, Ostin 2002). The essay contains a dazzling yet controversial vision of the gift. Emerson presents us with a list of appropriate gifts for different occasions and yet questions the very legitimacy of gift-giving. He sees the donation of gifts as an individual act of self-sacrifice ("thou must bleed for me") and, at the same time, transcends it by attributing true gifts to the impersonal power of love giving "kingdoms and flower-leaves indifferently". Seeing Emerson as an "edifying" rather than "systematic" philosopher in the terms of Richard Rorty, I attempt to understand his controversial thinking by closely reading the essay and analyzing its rhetorical strategies, largely relying on Emerson's own statement that "[t]he very language we speak, thinks for us, by the subtle distinctions which are already marked for us by its words". As the analysis reveals, Emerson draws on the rhetoric of contemporary sentimental discourse about gifts reflected in behavior manuals and sentimental fiction and, thereby, develops his own original theory of gift exchange, anticipating the asymmetrical ethics of gift-giving in modern philosophy.

Keywords

Antagonism; gift; language; reciprocity; sentimental

Resumo

Neste trabalho efectuo uma nova leitura do ensaio de Emerson "Gifts" (1844), o qual esteve durante o século XX na base do cânone da teoria sobre o que constitui uma prenda (Schrift 1997, Ostin 2002). O ensaio em causa contém ideias surpreendentes e ao mesmo tempo controversas acerca de acto de ofertar. Emerson apresenta uma lista de prendas apropriadas a diferentes ocasiões, ao mesmo tempo que questiona a própria legitimidade do acto de oferecer um presente a alguém. Ele entende o acto de oferecer como sendo uma acção individual de auto-sacrifício ("thou must bleed for me"), transcendendo-a, porém, ao atribuir a verdadeira

prenda ao poder impessoal do amor, pois só este pode dar "kingdoms and flower-leaves indifferently". Seguindo Richard Rorty, e considerando Emerson, o filósofo, mais "edificador" do que propriamente "sistemático", tento compreender o seu controverso pensamento através de uma leitura atenta ("close reading") deste ensaio, analisando as estruturas retóricas empregues e fazendo uso de uma afirmação do próprio Emerson de que "[t]he very language we speak, thinks for us, by the subtle distinctions which are already marked for us by its words". Tal como a minha análise revela, o pensamento de Emerson tem por base a retórica contemporânea no que concerne a prendas, e acerca da qual se pode ler nos manuais de boas-maneiras e na ficção sentimental, desenvolvendo a partir dessa retórica a sua própria teoria original sobre troca de presentes e antecipando a ética assimétrica sobre o acto de ofertar na filosofia moderna.

Palavras-Chave

Antagonismo; linguagem; prenda; reciprocidade; sentimental

Concluding notes on a remarkable conference

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ISSN: 0873-0628 ANGLO SAXONICA SER. III N. 12 2016

Concluding notes on a remarkable conference

The *Naturally Emerson Conference* was quite a unique event as we may gather not only from the hereby published essays but by referring to the material circumstances in which it occurred. Under the auspices of ULICES and the School of Arts and Humanities of the University of Lisbon, a handful of international scholars, together with their Portuguese peers, American Studies students and researchers as well as occasional guests, celebrated the Emersonian legacy in such a spirit and with such gusto that it genuinely emulated those reunions of that company of eccentrics, in Carlos Baker's words, who throve around Ralph Waldo Emerson and placed Concord on world maps. The parallel with the Transcendentalist group and the reference that goes beyond a single name and identity is intentional, in as much as it acknowledges the reach of a personal, individual influence and simultaneously brings out the historical period in which an enduring United States cultural tradition was fostered as well as the many offshoots it has produced to this day.

A fair appreciation of the three components in the subtitle of this international meeting, *Creative Reading, Self-Reliance and Cultural Agency*, highlights the diversity of fields to which Emerson and his company of eccentrics reach out. As the conference ran, the launching of *Natural in Verso*, a bilingual anthology edited by José Duarte and Margarida Vale de Gato, was indeed prompted by the need to find a literary conveyor of such a reach, as if Emerson's challenge to the men and women of his time, which Teresa Cid's "Foreword" highlights, were not subject to the wearing out of the centuries and could find material testimonial in these pieces produced by women and men of different allegiances and nationalities, who, however, lent nineteenth-century images and feelings to the emotional coloring of our times.

The diversity of presentations may give an idea of the breadth of the conference. Rochelle Johnson, Professor of English and Environmental

Studies at The College of Idaho, was invited to deliver the opening plenary lecture on "Transcendental Entanglements: The Role of 'Universal Spirit' amid a Cosmos of Becoming", and she stroke a fundamental chord as she claimed that Emerson's endorsement of the universal spirit called for individual self-reliance as well as cosmic engagement, the spiritual figuring in such a process as a bedrock against an exclusively materialistic understanding of life. Johnson brought Ralph Waldo Emerson and other Transcendentalists, namely Thoreau, into the heart of contemporary dilemmas and environmental concerns, and her presentation was an appropriate doorway into the speculative bend of some of the participants' contributions to the debate. It was the case of, for instance, Joseph Urbas's, who challenged current-trend-metaphor-driven readings of Emerson in favor of acknowledging the metaphysical ground of Emersonian thought; or, of Mario Avelar, who claimed that modern identity as featured in Charles Taylor's conceptual framing was clearly indebted to the nineteenth-century precursor; or, finally, of Paul Borges, who argued that Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau's concept of the self within the totality of being was borrowed from the Indian spiritual scriptures titled *The Upanishads*.

A more pragmatic approach to Transcendentalism was offered by Viriato Soromenho-Marques, who explored Emersonian influences in Henry David Thoreau, showing how deeply they operate, for instance, in the field of cultural agency, and how, on such an account, *Walden* may feature as a forerunner of contemporary environmental writings. In this same vein, but giving it a particularly contemporary turn, Lanka Horstink's presentation emphasized "the struggle for self-reliance" and linked it to "free agency in food and seed production", thus providing a theoretical framing to *Seed Act*, the docu-film directed by Sara Braga. Focusing on small-scale agriculture, the documentary illustrated how biodiversity and changed feeding habits may be regarded as an antidote to environmental collapse, thus offering us a truly ecological perception of the human habitat and suggesting how such a perception may win over the growing anxiety about the exhaustion of the earth's resources.

Alternative ways to established modes of living are at the core of Ecocriticism and Nature Writing, with literary antecedents that go back to the Transcendentalist view of the world. This was a strain that ran throughout the conference and which found literary expression in a good

number of the papers presented, along with Emerson's literary influence on a variety of contemporary writers. Nuno Marques explored Lawrence Buell's distinction between a first and second wave of Ecocriticism, elaborating on their distinctive features, the former, literary and denunciation-oriented, the latter, dealing with the material world of garbage or toxic waste. His conclusive remarks held a note of hope which included a reference to the Anthropocene as an envisioned future stage of humankind characterized by the human impact upon Earth geology and ecosystems.

Generally-speaking, the conference was organized as a series of panels thematically integrated and clustered around the keynote lectures. As the above remarks illustrate, contributions were split along two axes, one focusing on Emerson and the Transcendentalists' effort to substantiate an alternative worldview against the onrushing capitalist system, raw expansion at the cost of Native Indians, slavery of other human beings for profit and prevailing materialistic goals; the other, examining their legacy as appropriated in subsequent years and decades by literary practitioners, philosophers, cultural critics, linguists, more succinctly, all those involved in the study of human expression and the appraisal of human agency. Such a split ran across the different panels and, on such an account, the sway between the past and the present was constant and enlivened the debates, a dynamic that resurfaces in this collection of essays gathered around similar concerns.

Some of the approaches offer, as already mentioned, unusual angles on questions of Emersonian identity, adding depth to the age in which a truly distinctive American culture was founded. For instance, the focus of Isabel Oliveira Martins on Ralph Waldo Emerson as a "prolific traveler", the established relation to issues of the "Self", the link to basic tenets in several of his writings, shed light on an angle of Emerson's life and literary production that had not received much critical attention until recently.[1] Pedro Madeira and Rute Beirante, in their turn, offered new perspectives

[1] This issue is also discussed by R. Jackson Wilson in the essay "Emerson as Lecturer: Man Thinking Man Saying", where he argues that Emerson's adult and public life were forged in intensive travelling and communication with his lyceum audiences. However, the link with Emerson's identity and philosophical writings is to my knowledge raised for the first time in Oliveira Martins's essay. (Cf. *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson* 77).

on central issues in *Nature* by a change of focus, the former through the lens of Edgar Allan Poe, the latter through that of Herman Melville. Crucial as parody and distortion of the 1836 book on nature is to the analysis of *Eureka*, its brilliant rendering of a sublime "oneness" in terms of aesthetic theory does not invalidate, merely provides, a different platform from which the outreach of Emersonian diversity may be observed, while the contradictory response of Herman Melville in his literary achievement mirrors depth of character, suggesting a more complex identity than that of the naïve Transcendentalist.

As evidenced by the essays in this volume, the legacy of Ralph Waldo Emerson extends beyond gender boundaries, reaching into different forms of culture, from societal use to entertainment and the arts. Such a legacy is visible in contemporary poets, namely in Archie Randolph Ammons and Mark Strand, discussed by Josef Ja ab and Jeffrey Childs, respectively. Thematic borrowings about nature and poetry in the former, and similitude of strategies in what regards the latter's appropriation of metaphoric levels, legitimate the foundational (and bewitching) role of Emerson as a translator of experience into the artifact of poetry. Reinaldo Silva took up the question again when he focused on Portuguese-American culture in the United States. A given influence, however, is not necessarily spelt in similar stylistic modes or even in the use of similar tropes to embody lyrical or fictional emotion. Flowers may share the garden with vegetables without abolishing the pleasure of men and women in nature.

Borders are alien to Emerson's experience and therefore to his legacy. They are literally abolished, as Duarte Braga's panel contribution made evident, when two twentieth-century Indian poets from Goa, Paulino Dias and Adeodato Barreto, model their poetry after Emerson's "Brahma". They are dislocated as Fernanda Luísa Feneja examined Rachel Carson's successful attempts at creating a hybrid language to convey her scientific inquiry into nature, earning for herself a distinguished place among scientists with environmental concerns. Borders are metaphorically abolished again, when, according to Alexandra Urakova, the thematic layer in the essay "Gifts" finds echoes in the works of Marcel Mauss, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion and Zygmunt Bauman. Interestingly, all these twentieth-century thinkers traversed the boundaries between several fields of knowledge: sociology and anthropology (Mauss); philosophy and literature *inter alia*

(Derrida); philosophy and theology (Jean-Luc Marion); sociology and philosophy (Bauman). From their different points of view and their distinctive allegiances, these instances are witness to cross-cultural convergence among the different participants or explorers of territories that are not the exclusive domain of a particular inquiry but, as the centuries go by, become, so to say, a common lot for shared perceptions and worldviews.

Taking the cue from one of the scholars and critics included in this volume, Lawrence Rhu, the centrality of Emersonian influence in the culture of the United States is better judged when featured in the confrontation of creative work from different fields. One century after Walt Whitman's disruption of the boundaries of poetic form and language, Stanley Cavell's invitation of "ordinary language" and "passionate utterance" into his own philosophic inquiry, the inclusion within its premises of film and literary study, the preference for the autobiographical mode, cannot but reinforce the pattern that evokes familiar resonances. The blueprint is distinctively cultural and indigenous, even when it borrows from many other cultures and philosophies. It was laid out in a "little azure-coloured *Nature*", where language features as the central chapter and, as such, bridges the discontinuity between what exists *per se* and its appropriation and use by the perceiving mind.

On the other hand, Emerson's reliance on visual imagery in his journals and essayistic writings found in American cinema a natural habitat, along with themes of a distinctive Emersonian ring. Teresa Castilho's insightful analysis of *Boyhood*, a coming-of-age drama film directed by Richard Linklater, underlined features of the movie as an artful variation upon the Emersonian concept of the "original call", showing how such a theme is developed as the camera follows the twelve-year boy's quest for the meaning of his life and how such a quest returns to the spectator a protagonist who embodies the virtues of honesty and integrity, which have been featured as national ideals since they were extolled as traits of the self-reliant decent *Americanus*. Mark Twain gave them individualistic semblance in the proto-character of Huckleberry Finn, and we are able to recognize the progeny in a succession of films, of which I mention two for their comparative closeness to Linklater's, Terrence Malick's The *Tree of Life* (2011) and Robert Redford's *A River Runs Through It* (1992). The most obvious differences between them, however, also cut across

Emersonian territory. In these movies, the process of growing-up engages a transcendental view of experience which Linklater exchanges for the flow of the twelve years wherein the six-year-old boy grows into an eighteen-year-old freshman, not to mention the emphasis on the "here and now" of such a process.

The appropriation of a philosophy of life by cinema makes evident Emerson's cultural reach and widespread influence. He held interrelacional practice as the proper method, from his earliest 1836 book to the very last one, *The Conduct of Life* (1860), staging man as a "bundle of relations" and becoming the living proof of the concept in his own writings (*The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. V, 1835-1838 266). As such, he moves back and forth between the auto-biographical and the essayistic modes, breaks boundaries between prose and verse, inviting language, aesthetics, metaphysics, rhetoric, natural science, history, psychology, in short, whatever pertains to the realm of knowledge and sensibility, into his different inquiries about nature and human agency. References to many of these perspectives, as becoming of the variety of angles on the human condition, are to be found in the *Journals* and *Miscellaneous Notebooks*, which have been and are still intriguing Emersonian scholars and readers alike. There is — and there could hardly have been — no mention of movies, but there are plenty of references to music, musicians and to all musical genres, including the liturgical, as well as the rhetorical use whenever the comparison or the metaphor seems appropriate. Along with other acoustical annotations about sound, these occasions betray Emerson as a sensorial writer whose experience of the world is inclusive and therefore appealing to our age of experimental orientation.

Christina Katopodis, who integrated the panel on "Sound and Transmission", approached the acoustical Emerson from an unusual angle, examining the role of silence in the Emersonian soundscape and presenting an unusual paper, which, in her own words, deals with "the musical semiotics of nature, from her rests and breaths to her rhythms". Following on Emerson's footsteps, natural environment becomes the place where, liberated from the shackles of egotism, the human being is able to access full harmony. Most interestingly, Katopodis's focus on "breath", "rhythm", "silence", and "pause" suggested the continuity between what to Ralph

Waldo Emerson was the mute music of nature and the trends of American music composed by Charles Ives and, later, by John Cage, who endowed the trope of silence with structural functionality in their compositions. Integrating the same panel, Anabela Duarte's "*Lingua Vernacula* in Thoreau's *Walden*: The Owl, The Echo and The Bell", added a complementary point of view which underscored how this disciple and friend of Emerson was able to disrupt conventional verbal/musical patterns. In consonance with his ideological and ontological posture, Thoreau devised an innovative pattern of human/non-human sounds that has become what this ULICES researcher designated as a *lingua franca* of alternative impact.

As these "Notes" draw closer to the end, it is opportune to consider the role of the two roundtables and the workshop in the general economy of the conference as they relate directly to its thematic engagement with "Creative Reading, Self-Reliance and Cultural Agency". The same may be stated about David Greenham's plenary lecture on "Emerson's Creation and Criticism", who chose to depart from apparently contradictory Emersonian statements about the nature of creative reading and creative writing as well as about interpretation. Greenham was intent on understanding "to what extent [Emerson] successfully overcomes the problems that he, as a critic, creates for himself as an artist", a challenging proposal in as much as the clash between the poet and the critic might betray an insurmountable identity split and a breach in coherent thinking. Illustrating his argument with abundant quotations from Emerson's *Journals*, David Greenham not only invited his audience to follow in the footsteps of a brilliant argument but, in his recurrent quotations, also provided ample evidence of creative writing of the best kind. His lecture was, indeed, a theoretical digression on some of the issues that the morning workshop supervised by Terry Gifford on "Nature Writing" had raised. Attended by a numerous audience, the workshop afforded the opportunity to experiment with creative writing techniques, after having dealt with questions of form in "Amulet", the ecological poem by Ted Hughes, as well as in other poems. The participants in the workshop were, then, invited to produce a prose piece related to one of the poems, which was followed by a final discussion of the pieces presented.

Greenham's lecture was also a fitting framework to the roundtable chaired by Margarida Vale de Gato, with its focus on "Creative Readings,

Creative Writings and Language". A poet and translator herself, she coordinated the debate among the other writers in a session that explored the subject of creative writing, both as practice and course supervising.[2] Each participant came forward with his/her own personal experience, and those who supervise or have supervised courses on this matter mainly dealt with their composition, offering variants on procedure. They generally agreed upon the notion that the process thrives on its own dynamics and such a thing as contradiction may have as fruitful a resolution as in Emerson, who makes the most of creative reading and creative writing in his journals, essays and poetry. Language, the third thematic component of the debate received little attention from the panelists who, probably, had not had enough time to explore such a complex item. Present-day orientation was thus unexplored as was unexplored the link to Emerson's observations on a subject about which he writes extensively not only in *Nature*, but also in many other texts, providing a pattern built on the yoking of images from discrete semantic fields into the typical visual assemblage of the American literary text.

The second roundtable, which I chaired, gathered scholars from a variety of areas and focused on "Emerson's Legacy".[3] Regrettably, the role

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[2] Panel composition: Margarida Vale de Gato, a poet and translator, is Professor of American Literature at the School of Arts and Humanities (Chair); Diana Almeida, a practicing photographer, is involved in creative writing projects, including one at the Museum Collection Berardo; Luís Carmelo, a prolific novelist and essayist, founded an online creative writing school (EC.ON); Rui Zink, a well-known fiction author, has supervised creative writing courses in Portugal from the early 1990s onwards; and Terry Gifford, who has authored seven books of poetry, introduced practice-based Ph.D. programs at Leeds University in Theatre, Dance and Creative writing, and is a member of the Spanish Group GIECO (Literature and Environment). He is currently *Profesor Honorifico* at the Universidad de Alicante.

[3] Panel composition: Teresa F. A. Alves is Emeritus Professor of American Studies at the School of Arts and Humanities and a researcher at ULICES (Chair); Teresa Cid is Director of ULICES and Professor of American Studies at the School of Arts and Humanities; Lawrence Rhu holds the Todd Chair in the Italian Renaissance at the University of South Carolina and has extensively published in Italian, English and American Renaissance literature; Isabel Alves is Professor of American Literature and Culture at UTAD and a Researcher at ULICES on Environment and Ecocriticism; Christina Katopodis is an English Ph.D. student at the CUNY Graduate Center and

of Emerson as a translator and as a historical agent was not subject to a wider appreciation in the conference. It would have been interesting to consider whether his practice as a literary translator overcomes or not the problems that he as a critic and interpreter of other writers' work posed to himself. It was further regretted the absence of a body of critical work, a panel, perhaps, on Emerson's political action, which was only indirectly addressed during the conference. It was as if his situation as a citizen had been completely severed from his creative achievement in those years marked by economic depression, with its attending trail of socio-economic difficulties and unrest, westward expansion and injury to the Native population, and finally, by the Civil War and racial prejudice.[4] Besides being a poet, a critic and a philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson was also the man who opposed the "Fugitive Slave Law", the removal of Native Indian tribes from their fertile lands, and who sided with the Abolitionists, was distressed by John Brown's death, loathed Manifest-Destiny policies, and who entrusted *The Dial* to the editorship of Margaret Fuller, a friend and the well-known champion of the cause of women. In his own time, Emerson made history and induced many others to adopt a changed view of life and of the values that guided them in the "construction" of their own worlds.

In a way, the roundtable on "Emerson's Legacy" summed up the contributions of the conference participants as they have been previously described in these "Notes", inviting the audience to join in the recollection of what in our time calls for indebtedness to the influential reach of Emerson, Thoreau, and other Transcendentalists. Notions such as self-reliance, cultural agency, the perception of human endeavor, the worth of common man and woman, environmental concern and the rising consciousness about the survival of humanity and its dependence on the

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teaches at Hunter College. Her research in nineteenth-century American Literature includes Darwin's influence on Emerson and William James, as well as the Transcendentalist Pragmatist underpinnings of feminist thought.

[4] In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion*, Joel Porte alerts us to the "danger of neglecting the actual record in its density and richness in favor of [criticism's] own theses — seeing Emerson, for example, as an endless seeker, with no past at his back, a sort of Transcendental rocket racing into trackless space and attempting to drag American Literature with it" (4).

preservation of nature, are all endowed with the Emersonian quality of mind and of his influential writings upon the group of men and women who gravitated around him. They began by sketching the profile of what, less than a century before, had become a nation with a political constitution, but without real cultural autonomy. As such, they stand at the roots of a new worldview and a new sensibility to alternative proposals and solutions that helped pave the way to the "The American Century". On its way, and starting in Emerson's time, cultural autonomy has been recognizably diversified by numerous tributaries that occasionally influence, at times hide, but do not swerve from the powerful undercurrent of its destination. Taking an active part in historical occurrences such as the abolishing of slavery and the defense of Native Indian culture, Emerson and his circle have also had a real impact on the history of the world at large, which for a time looked up to United States as the model it coveted.

By placing the emphasis on "Self-reliance, Creative Reading and Cultural Agency" the Lisbon conference acknowledged origins, while by submitting Emerson's legacy to the lens of time appropriated transition and shift in paradigms so characteristic of the present age. The willingness to evaluate how change modifies but still validates a given legacy, lends these final "Notes" a particularly symbolic character for they are intended as a small tribute to the group of scholars and researchers who debated Emerson and his company of eccentrics in an enthusiastic but simultaneously humble vein, for they knew that they were not able to exhaust their subject-matter and would merely further the relentless march of inquiry towards other opportunities and times.

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Paul J. Medeiros serves with New England universities and colleges; in 2015 and 2016, Medeiros served among the visiting faculty of Providence College in Rhode Island. Scholarly projects explore environmental humanities in light of ethics, moral philosophy, and areas of nineteenth-twentieth-century European philosophy. Recent, non-profit appointments include *New Bedford Whaling Museum*, *The Thoreau Society*, and *Whitehall Museum House*.

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