

Whim Upon the Lintel: Emerson's Poetry and a Politically Ethical Aesthetic

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I would write on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim*. I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation. "Self-Reliance"¹

*E*merson's poetry is fundamental to a reading of his prose, even as it remains among the most underappreciated poetry in American literature. Albert von Frank and Douglas Wortham have given us in the recently published *Collected Works: Volume 9, Poems: A Variorum Edition*, a wonderful tool for provoking new scholarship on and enjoyment of Emerson's poems.² The *CW Poems* excepted, we have no recent extensive commentary on the poetry, thus none that accommodates contemporary developments in scholarship and theory.

In this essay, I read some of Emerson's best poems, with particular attention to "The Rhodora," "The Snow-Storm," the "Ode" to W.H. Channing, "Concord Hymn," "Brahma," and "Boston Hymn," in light of what I have previously termed a politically ethical aesthetics that I think permeates Emerson's texts, directly and indirectly.³ This concern (shared variously by Fuller, Thoreau, and other Romantics) is perhaps even more imperative in the twenty-first century, calling us to imagine the poetically beautiful in terms of the politically just, the just in accordance with beauty, and how we read in accord with how we live. In their refusal to dichotomize political praxis and aesthetic experience,

and in their representation of justice in economic terms, Emerson's poems attest to impulses that make Transcendentalism, forms of idealism, and forms of postmodernity necessarily liberationist in a political sense, with quite material ramifications, as is indicated by Emerson's powerful influence on radical political activists then and now – Thoreau, Fuller, Stanton, Emma Goldman, Martin Luther King Jr, and so on.

One name in such a list is distinctly important for this essay – that of the Cuban intellectual, revolutionary, and national hero José Martí.⁴ Martí makes abundant references to Emerson, wrote an essay "Emerson," translated at least five of his poems, and wrote at least one poem to him – a verse elegy. Martí writes that Emerson's "rages [were] holy," so that when Emerson "saw men enslaved and thought about them, his words seemed to be the Tablets of the Law shattering again on the slope of some new biblical mountain."⁵ Martí repeatedly praises the extravagant and the ecstatic in Emerson's texts – reading his Transcendentalism as not incompatible with, but the harbinger of, political activism, which Martí associates with Emerson's love of nature: "He prefers the teachings of Nature to the teachings of man.... To be good, all he needs is to gaze upon the beautiful" (630). The good and the beautiful, to Martí, are one, and are inseparable from the demand for the possibility of beautiful material lives for all humankind. "In him," Martí hyperbolically asserts, "idealism ... did walk the earth. Emerson has humanized it.... His poetry is the only polemic verse to sanctify the great struggle [for equality] on this earth" (632).

While many scholars have written about Emerson and democracy, debating whether Emerson were progressive or not, and have commented on the Romantic connection of aesthetics and other ideologies, here I emphasize the more immediate political ramifications, as does Martí. I consider the progressive political implications of Emerson's poetry for his time and our own, and read his texts about nature as part of his potentially radical politics. I say "potentially" because our own inclinations inform, of course, how we read.

"Whim," as Emerson uses it in the passage I have chosen as my epigraph, does not just mean "playful impulse." The phrase invokes one of the most foundational Jewish and Christian *topoi*. First, Yahweh mandates the Israelites to strike the blood of the lamb upon the doorposts and establish the feast of Passover to commemorate that act. Second, Emerson's phrase recalls Yahweh's charge after the pronouncement of the Ten Commandments that all Israel should keep the words in their hearts, teach them to their children, and "write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates." And third, the sentence alludes to the Christian appropriation in which Jesus becomes the lamb of God, and the Eucharist, the blood of the lamb.⁶ Emerson thus audaciously displaces Yahweh and Christ with his – and by implication, our – own writing, and his and our "whim."

For at the same time, "*Whim*" refers to the vital connection between the whimsical as playful impulse and the whimsical as what Emerson and other Romantics trusted above all – intuition and imagination. The sentence is thus quite serious. Emerson's "Whim" represents a statement of faith in human creativity that overturns the conventionally religious and the cognitive with disruptive energy. Moreover, as is characteristic of Emerson's texts in their most hopeful moments, he is only able to make the gesture in the optative mood – "I would write," as Stanley Cavell has stressed.⁷ But here, as elsewhere, his text performs as it invokes.

Wallace Stevens picks up on this complex use of the word *whim* in his lecture "Two or Three Ideas," which he delivered in 1951 at Mount Holyoke. In it he mentions New England, indicating that he would especially have had Emerson in mind as he connects the playful, the necessary, and the divine ("The Rhodora" and "Brahma" also clearly informing the lecture). Stevens directly tropes the following two passages from "Self-Reliance": After his phrase on "*Whim*," Emerson dismissively contends, "I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation" (*CW* 2:30). Later, he circles back to assert, "perception is not

whimsical, but fatal,” because its source is “the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct intuition inspiration,” meaning that what may seem whimsical is actually of utmost importance (37).

Stevens’ paragraph almost verbatim echoes Emerson’s progressive valorization of “whim”:

Yes: but the gods – how they come into it and make it a delirious subject, as if we were here together wasting our time on something that appears to be whimsical but turns out to be essential. They give to the subject just that degree of effulgence and excess, no more, no less, that the subject requires.⁸

How we imagine and create our gods, ourselves, and our creative acts is interconnected, Stevens argues; each is fundamentally informed by our “style.” Thus, “aesthetic ideas [are] tantamount to moral ideas.” For Stevens, each individual’s style is “a voice that is inevitable,” something about which each of us has “no choice” (845).

I apply this figure of “Whim upon the Lintel” to Emerson’s poetry in relation to his prose, to poetry generally in relation to cultural power dynamics, to poetry in relation to politics, and to the “political” in relation to the “personal” and the “aesthetic.” In each case, my point is to celebrate, and to divert us toward, the whimsical – in all the risky, chancy, even fatal seriousness of that term – and its possibilities for furthering the enactment of beauty and justice.

II.

First, I will turn to two of Emerson’s early nature poems. Carl Strauch, the most important pioneering scholar of Emerson’s verse, establishes 1834 as “The Year of Emerson’s Poetic Maturity.”⁹ In that year and the three or so following, Emerson wrote some of his best poems, most of them treatments of the natural world and our relationship to it. The following two poems, I think, represent the finest of these.

"The Rhodora"

Emerson's lovely sonnet variant "The Rhodora," written in Newton, Massachusetts in May 1834, celebrates the value of a radically democratized and unconventional beauty. The poem contains a number of formalistic transgressions, among them that its sixteen lines appear in an irregular combination of couplets (the first an off-rhyme) and alternating rhyme. It is also a distinctly "New-Englandly" (as Emily Dickinson has put it), as opposed to English *reverdie*, or regreening poem, set "In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes."¹⁰ Accordingly, a central appeal of "The Rhodora" lies in the way it works with the sonnet tradition, and the tradition of other "flower" poems, against the grain of elite and specifically Neo-classical traditions that would require a more regular sonnet, a more classic (indeed cultivated) flower, and not least the money to grow roses. Thus, at the heart of "The Rhodora," (and "The Snow-Storm," as I will address later) are both a Romantic *ars poetica* and a defense of poetry – a simultaneous celebration of Romantic poetics and values, and a repudiation of Enlightenment ideology:

THE RHODORA:

ON BEING ASKED, WHENCE IS THE FLOWER?

In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes,
I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods,
Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook,
To please the desert and the sluggish brook.
The purple petals, fallen in the pool,
Made the black water with their beauty gay;
Here might the red-bird come his plumes to cool,
And court the flower that cheapens his array.
Rhodora! if the sages ask thee why
This charm is wasted on the earth and sky,
Tell them, dear, that if eyes were made for seeing,

Then Beauty is its own excuse for being:
Why thou went there, O rival of the rose!
I never thought to ask, I never knew:
But, in my simple ignorance, suppose
The self-same Power that brought me there brought you. (*CW* 9:79)

“The Rhodora” is a love sonnet to the flower, to the poem, and to poetry. It is also a love story about the rhodora and a red-bird (red, like a rose), the rhodora and the poet, the poet and nature, the reader and nature, and the reader and poetry. The poem’s imagined occasion is the sages’ condescending skepticism about the value of beauty, especially a nonanthropocentric beauty. “The Rhodora” thus exemplifies, in a rhetorical gesture characteristic of many of Emerson’s poems, a response to a confrontational challenge, particularly prevalent in his first volume of verse: “The Sphinx,” the Channing “Ode,” “The Problem,” and many others. “The Rhodora,” moreover, co-exists with “The Problem” as a poem about the equal importance of a poetic career and a more obviously practical, even sacred, vocation.

Such was also, one might recall, an even more painful struggle for Keats because of his decision to switch from a medical career to a poetic one despite the death of his brother, Tom. Tom’s death and broader social concerns inform Keats’s ultimate emphasis on the healing power of poetry, especially in his “Hyperion” poems and, earlier, his 3 May 1818 letter to John Hamilton Reynolds. For Emerson, the professional dilemma involved both his decision to leave the ministry, and cultural anxieties related to post-Puritan and capitalistic nineteenth-century America.¹¹ Indeed, the only unconventional nominal capitalizations in “The Rhodora” are “Rhodora,” “Beauty,” and “Power,” making it, as my co-editor Joel Porte was fond of saying, a poem about “flower power.”

The language of courtly heterosexual love dominates “The Rhodora,” as is customary in the sonnet tradition. The flower’s beauty that is “its own excuse for being” provides delight: the bloom is “To

please the desert," to serve as a "charm," to make the water "gay," and to create – in blatantly sexual, both phallic and yonic imagery – in a "damp nook," a place where "might the red-bird come his plumes to cool" as he seeks to "court" this flower that, in a sort of poetic love triangle, is "the rival of the rose." For while sometimes nature can appear as a threatening female force in Emerson's poetry (as, for example, in "The Sphinx"), when the poet is empowered, he is made so by becoming the lover of nature and yielding himself to her. This emphasis on the importance of love to Emerson is central to Len Gougeon's 2007 book *Emerson & Eros*.¹²

The love relationship resonates in the aphoristic couplet at the heart of the poem: "Tell them, dear, that if eyes were made for seeing,/ Then Beauty is its own excuse for being." "The Rhodora" makes its point in an explicit and oracular tone similar to that of a precursor poem, Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." While that text, even if in quotation marks, asserts "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' – that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know," "The Rhodora" claims "Beauty is its own excuse for being."¹³ Emerson thus both reinscribes and contests Keats. Moreover, the lines occur as a heroic couplet – quintessentially 18th-century, conventional, and "male" – and they employ what we unhappily call "feminine" rhyme. But this "weak" rhyme is actually strengthened by virtue of its centrality, so that the metrics finally embody prosodic androgyny. It is as though the rhyme underscores the point that the "power" of aesthetic and sexual attraction (the "feminine") that "brought me here" is heroic, and empowered in relation to conventional forms of poetry and conventional religion (i.e., the power of "truth").

The excuse for beauty's being is finally that beauty does supply things fundamental to genuine life – pleasure, joy, transformation, insight, ethics, poetry, love. Such beauty is that of the flower in the woods and the beauty of "The Rhodora" – just as "The Snow-Storm" refers both to a natural storm and the poem; "The Sphinx" to the Sphinx as monument, mythological figure, and the poem itself; and "Brahma" to

the god and the poem. In another interesting gender destabilization, “The Rhodora” serves as a figure for Emerson himself, who defends himself, as in other poems, against his own implicit self-castigation. Indeed, if “This charm is wasted,” then Emerson’s talent is wasted on his writing poetry instead of sermons. Again, the couplet is key, this time in the tone and diction indicated by the apostrophic “dear.” In December of the same year, Emerson addresses himself in a journal entry that echoes his apostrophe to the flower:

Do, dear, when you come to write Lyceum lectures, remember that you are not to say, What must be said in a Lyceum? But what discoveries or stimulating thoughts have I to impart to a thousand persons? Not what they will expect to hear but what is fit for me to say.¹⁴

The Emersonian poet falls for, and poeticizes about, not the conventional rose of European poetic tradition, but the undomesticated indigenously American flower. “[R]ival of the rose” may be read in two ways. The rhodora may be said to “rival” – to be equal to the rose. Yet since the poem is written to the rhodora and not to the rose, in this version of the war of the flowers, the wild bloom wins.

Just as the rhodora exists in explicit contrast to the rose of poetic convention, the “power” that makes the rhodora and makes the poet desire it challenge conventional notions of the creator God. Some expositions of “The Rhodora” have taken, I think, much of the life out of the poem by associating it too closely with traditional religious faith. But Emerson closes the poem in a way that is typical of his verse – he began with a question to end with a riddle. We are never explicitly told what the energizing “power” is. One *topos* for such a riddling response in answer to questions posed by exacting sages is that of Jesus in the New Testament responding to Pharisaical inquisition. Whenever these religious pundits sought to trip Jesus up, he would answer them with a non-answer, just as Emerson does here. Emerson’s tone is *faux-naïve* – he counsels the beloved flower to address the sages from a position he calls “simple ignorance,”

privileging, of course, the "simple ignorance" over the sages' arrogant sophistry. The power that calls the flower and the poet is rather a higher power found through the coalescence of nature, beauty, and poetry. Von Frank quotes the following passage from Emerson's journals as a part of his headnote to "The Rhodora," and we might observe the recurrence of "to court": "The muses love the woods & I have come hither to court the awful Powers in this sober solitude": (*CW* 9:77; *JMN* 4:280).

Finally, "The Rhodora" resonates with three other well-known nineteenth-century American poems. Emily Dickinson, who had read "The Rhodora," supplies an analogue in "God made a little Gentian" (#F520), which celebrates another American, wilder, freer flower. Her gentian "tried to be a Rose – / And failed – [could not bloom] and all the Summer laughed – ," yet finally the gentian achieves a superior beauty, so that eventually the late bloomer, so to speak, trumps the "rose," as the word is now a punning verb:

...

But just before the Snows

There rose a Purple Creature
That ravished all the Hill –
And Summer hid her Forehead –
And Mockery – was still

For, like the rhodora, the gentian has its unconventional season – here a later but also colder time than the rose. And Dickinson's gentian is even more sexualized: it "ravished all the Hill – ."

Both Emerson and Dickinson read yet another famous "gentian" poem, William Cullen Bryant's "To the Fringed Gentian," which Emerson includes in *Parnassus*, his anthology of poems and poem excerpts. The "Fringed Gentian" involves a competition between types of flowers and times of blossoming – this gentian blooms after

violets and columbines, it is a “blossom bright with autumn dew,” yet this flower receives the honor of having this poem written to it.¹⁵

All three poets participate in the longstanding trope of identifying themselves and the beauty of their artistic creations with the particular beauty of each flower. The fringed gentian, Bryant writes, when “The aged year is near its end” “Look[s] through its fringes to the sky.” Thus, at the end of his poem, Bryant wants to “blossom” like the flower:

I would that thus, when I shall see
The hour of death draw near to me,
Hope, blossoming within my heart,
May look to heaven as I depart.

Dickinson’s closing identification perhaps represents an effort to justify her not publishing, whether that circumstance were by design or necessity. Like Emerson, she writes with a sexual undertone:

The Frosts were her condition –
The Tyrian would not come
Until the North – invoke it –
Creator – Shall I bloom?

The question mark at the end of the poem is uncharacteristic of Dickinson. When she uses punctuation other than dashes, she generally does so deliberately. And she often finishes with two opposite meanings suspended together. Here, then, she might ask “Shall I bloom?” with at once intense gentleness and intense desire. All three poems end with an appeal to a divinity: “The Rhodora” with an affirmation of a “Power”; Dickinson by praying to a “Creator”; and Bryant hoping to be able to look toward heaven as he dies.

Bryant’s “To a Waterfowl,” which Emerson also includes in *Parnassus*, participates in this web of intertextuality. That poem begins with a question – “Whither .../ ... dost thou pursue/ Thy solitary way?” –

and contains a menacing "fowler" who roughly parallels "The Rhodora's" "sages." The waterfowl, too, appears near water, is alone, has wings that fan cold air (instead of warm plumes), and exists in a "desert" (meaning, in both poems, a wild, desolate, i.e. deserted, solitary place). Most importantly, it, too, is associated with a "Power" about which the poem speaks at its end:

There is a Power whose care
Teaches thy way along that pathless coast –
The desert and illimitable air –
Lone wandering, but not lost.

...

He who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,
In the long way that I must tread alone,
Will lead my steps aright. (29-30)

Yet while Bryant is mostly concerned with the Power that guides the waterfowl and, it is hoped, the speaker, in "certain flight" – paths of conventional certainty – Emerson instead focuses on natural and poetic beauty as the energizing force of the universe.

"The Snow-Storm"

A similar resistance to containment and emphasis on the power of Romantic beauty is central to "The Snow-Storm." Like "The Rhodora," it invokes poetic conventions – here, snow poems, and poems about the paradoxical conjunction of form and freedom especially pertinent to sonnets. One might think, for example, of Millay's "I will put chaos into fourteen lines," Frost's "The Silken Tent," and, in a variation on the theme, Countee Cullen's "Yet Do I Marvel."

Probably written shortly after a heavy snowstorm in Concord on 29 December 1834 (*JMN* 4:381 ff.) the poem was first published in the *Dial* (January 1841). John Greenleaf Whittier uses lines 1-9 as an epigraph to his then-popular long narrative poem "Snow-Bound" (1866), one of the many snow poems by New Englanders, among them Dickinson's "It sifts from Leaden Sieves –," Robert Frost's "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening," and James Russell Lowell's "The First Snowfall."

An extended comparison, virtually a metaphysical conceit involving the snow-storm as mason, sculptor, architect, and poet, structures "The Snow-Storm." The poem explores a correspondence between natural and artistic creation, and, like "The Rhodora," asserts the value of American and Romantic politics and aesthetics:

THE SNOW-STORM

Announced by all the trumpets of the sky,
Arrives the snow, and, driving o'er the fields,
Seems nowhere to alight: the whited air
Hides hills and woods, the river, and the heaven,
And veils the farm-house at the garden's end.
The sled and traveller stopped, the courier's feet
Delayed, all friends shut out, the housemates sit
Around the radiant fireplace, enclosed
In a tumultuous privacy of storm.

Come see the north wind's masonry.
Out of an unseen quarry evermore
Furnished with tile, the fierce artificer
Curves his white bastions with projected roof
Round every windward stake, or tree, or door.
Speeding, the myriad-handed, his wild work
So fanciful, so savage, nought cares he

For number or proportion. Mockingly,
On coop or kennel he hangs Parian wreaths;
A swan-like form invests the hidden thorn;
Fills up the farmer's lane from wall to wall,
Maugre the farmer's sighs; and, at the gate,
A tapering turret overtops the work.
And when his hours are numbered, and the world
Is all his own, retiring, as he were not,
Leaves, when the sun appears, astonished Art
To mimic in slow structures, stone by stone,
Built in an age, the mad wind's night-work,
The frolic architecture of the snow. (*CW* 9:90)

This carefully-constructed storm of a poem celebrates, as Brian Harding has emphasized, the "frolic architecture" of both poetic and natural creation.¹⁶ It does so most beautifully in the wild "frolic" of its "architecture" of diction, syntax, and imagery. Amid its blank verse, an atypical form for Emerson, the poem is replete with other complex prosodic devices, many of them melodic: alliterative play with beginnings of lines – "Announced .../ Arrives"; internal rhyme with consonance and assonance – "Arrives ... driving/ alight ... whited/ Hides"; Miltonic enjambment – "the courier's feet/ Delayed"; puns on poetic terminology – "feet," "number or proportion," "numbered"; complex interwoven diction – "fierce artificer," "frolic architecture." And, as the last of these phrases suggests, the poem oxymoronicallly represents snowflakes as stones.

"The Snow-Storm" is at once the storm, the poem, and the poet. Snowflakes represent words, images, and tropes. The nature of the sculpting force is not as simple or genial as it might seem – it is precisely dangerous, disruptive, playful, irreverent, suggestive of rebellious ideologies, both political and aesthetic. The storm is "wild," "fanciful," "savage," "mocking," "mad," "frolic." It doesn't care for "number or proportion" in conventional eighteenth-century

meter or hierarchical national structures. The energy is virtually diabolic – “A swan-like form invests the hidden thorn.” In teasing irony, the wind “Mockingly” hangs “Parian wreaths” in derisive burlesque of the nineteenth-century American fad of imitating Greek architecture. Here, the storm mocks bad art. Yet while we have often read the poem as a Platonic denigration of poets as merely bad imitators, “Art” goes on “To mimic” the storm, suggesting that the artist’s imitation of nature is at best ambivalent, and that the two creators agonistically tease one another.

The six-line last sentence of the poem is particularly notable, building its effect “in slow structures, stone by stone,” the many commas and convoluted syntax slowing the reader’s progress. The sentence then culminates in a flourish to affirm “The frolic architecture of the snow” that has likewise been performed in the poem.

This tendency to imbed disruption within what might seem more conventional also characterizes Dickinson’s poetry. “It sifts from Leaden Sieves,” for example, implies that “it” is simply “snow.” But closer attention reveals that the referent expands in ambiguous directions. In Emerson’s “The Snow-Storm,” a subtle yet unmistakable echo of *Paradise Lost* reinforces the sinister hint. The key word is “artificer,” a Miltonic term that has accumulated much intertextual resonance. In Book Four, Milton writes that Satan was the “Artificer of fraud; and was the first/ That practiced falsehood under saintly show.”¹⁷ The snow, or whatever power the artificer is for Emerson, then, belongs to the large family of Romantic poet-figures who are, indeed, Romanticized descendants of the Miltonic Satan as artist/arch-deceiver. Accordingly, for “The Snow-Storm,” as for “The Rhodora,” intertextuality provides an important key to the poem’s riddling, connecting it as well to “Uriel,” whose eponymous poet figure is named for Milton’s archangel of the sun.

Such allusive intricacy continues in the twentieth century. The “artificer” turns up similarly in Wallace Stevens. In “The Idea of Order at Key West,” Stevens writes of a woman walking and singing beside the sea:

It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hour its solitude.
She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
As we beheld her striding there alone,
Knew that there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.¹⁸

The woman simultaneously represents poet, singer, and muse, for "what she sang was uttered word by word," which words in turn inspire the words of Stevens' poem. The figure is preeminently the "maker" of the world, a term suggesting the poet as maker and, etymologically, artificer.

III.

Even in his first lyceum lecture, "The Uses of Natural History" (November 1833), Emerson consistently contrasts "delight" in natural beauty with commerce, capital, and business interests. He makes an invidious comparison between two forces in the woods – the snowflake and the railroad:

You cannot go out when the snow is falling in a calm
still air and catch the little hexagon upon the palm of
your hand and measure the invariable angles of the radii
of the star without a finer delight than ever sprang from
the consideration of the convenience of the general
railroad with which it covers the country for the
woodcutter and the farmer."¹⁹

This same association of justice with economics and with natural and poetic beauty orchestrates some of Emerson's abolitionist poems, including "Ode" (to W.H. Channing)²⁰ in *Poems*, and, as I will explore later, "Boston Hymn," in *May-Day and Other Pieces* (1867).

“Ode” Inscribed to W. H. Channing

The Channing “Ode,” a difficult poem, is traditionally read as proclaiming Emerson’s resistance to participation in direct political action:

I cannot leave
My honied thought
For the priest’s cant,
Or statesman’s rant.

If I refuse
My study for their politique,
Which at the best is trick,
The angry Muse
Puts confusion in my brain. (*CW* 9:146)

Emerson, however, was at the time directly involved in the movement, having already delivered his first blatantly abolitionist lecture, “Emancipation in the British West Indies,” in 1844. Throughout the “Ode,” Emerson again debates with himself, so that after these stanzas another chastising voice enters, calling the poet/scholar to task:

But who is he that prates
Of the culture of mankind?
Go, blindworm, go,
[reminiscent of the shortsighted bookworm of the American scholar]
Behold the famous States
Harrying Mexico
With rifle and with knife!
...
I found [in New Hampshire and, by synecdoche, the North]
The jackals of the negro-holder. (146-47)

Emerson, as he did in "The Uses of Natural History," and as he will in "Boston Hymn" – often literally and figuratively connects injustice with materialism and maldistribution of wealth. The North is complicit for the reason of financial gain:

Boston Bay and Bunker Hill
Would serve things still; –
Things are of the snake.
...
[Indeed,] Things are in the saddle,
And ride mankind. (147-48)

Thoreau will later echo these lines in *Walden*, insisting that "we do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us."²¹

Finally, the preference of the "muse" over political action is, at the end of the poem, shown to be based on a false dichotomy. Instead, the two are allies in a vexed but beautiful harmony in which poetry and political action are always inevitably, even if uncomfortably, allies in the cause of justice. For when the ultimate test comes, "Half for freedom strike and stand; – / The astonished Muse finds thousands at her side" (149).

"Concord Hymn"

A particular political event occasions the final poem in *Poems*, "Concord Hymn," a long-measure hymn that a choir sang to the tune of "Old Hundred" at the celebration of the dedication of the monument commemorating the first battle of the American Revolution. The poem, like "The Rhodora" and "The Snow-Storm," is thus manifestly of New England, with its celebration of the homespun Minutemen "farmers," its "rude bridge," and revolution.

**CONCORD HYMN
SUNG AT THE COMPLETION
OF THE BATTLE MONUMENT,
JULY 4, 1837**

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood,
And fired the shot heard round the world.

The foe long since in silence slept;
Alike the conqueror silent sleeps;
And Time the ruined bridge has swept
Down the dark stream which seaward creeps.

On this green bank, by this soft stream,
We set today a votive stone;
That memory may their deed redeem,
When, like our sires, our sons are gone.

Spirit, that made those heroes dare
To die, and leave their children free,
Bid Time and Nature gently spare
The shaft we raise to them and thee. (*CW* 9:307)

"Concord Hymn" is sometimes disparaged as a weak, patriotic poem in which Emerson stoops to popular political celebration. It also doesn't seem Emersonian for Emerson to write a hymn in celebration of the forefathers when generally he wants to overthrow them. However, given the context, the poem affirms revolt. The American Revolution, after all, was a revolution to overthrow what was perceived as an oppressive government. Such activists as Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and John Wannaucon Quinney use these very actions and the

documents upon which America was founded to indict America for its hypocrisy and to call it toward greater justice.

As in "The Snow-Storm," the poem's ambivalence toward conventional forms of deference – in the former to Nature, in this to "founding fathers" – emerges clearly in single words. Ostensibly, the poem celebrates how wonderful the "sires" are. However, the word "redeem" not only implies that the "sons" need to redeem, remember for posterity, the heroic deeds of the fathers; but also to "redeem," make amends for, their sins. Another odd locution, that the fathers "dare/ To die and leave their children free," seems patriotically to praise the fathers for sacrificing their lives in battle so that their children could be free of England's domination. However, grammatically, the line also reads that the fathers died and then their children became free – that the children's freedom is predicated upon the death of the fathers.

"Brahma"

Emerson's concerns become much more openly and collectively political in his second volume of poetry. The second section of *May-Day*, "Occasional and Miscellaneous Pieces," opens with "Brahma," one of Emerson's most famous (and, given how frequently it was parodied, infamous) poems. Essentially a riddle (a form common both to Emerson and Dickinson) with an implicit "What am I?" as its undertone, "Brahma" is one of Emerson's most beautiful and important poems, and another of his most difficult. Written in long measure (quatrains of rhymed iambic tetrameter, a standard hymn form – and the word "hymn" appears in the poem), "Brahma" is structured by a catalog of ostensible oppositions that the poem ultimately presents as illusory. Scholars have variously identified Brahma (the creator god of Hinduism) as the soul, nature, God, or the creative force of the universe. I tend to think of it in the specific terms found in the poem – as what, often in the form of poetry itself, sustains life. The readers of the opening references to the "slayer" and the "slain" at the time of the first publication of "Brahma" in 1857 were already pondering the possibility of internecine war, a subject of the *Bhagvat-Geeta*, a text directly informing

“Brahma” along with *The Vishnú Purána*. Those who read *May-Day* had just lived dreadfully through their own experience of such a war. The first word, “If,” emphasizes the entangled contingency of the oppositions:

BRAHMA

If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and fame.

They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.

The strong gods pine for my abode,
And pine in vain the sacred Seven;
But thou, meek lover of the good!
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven. (*CW* 9:365)

Structurally, while the basic form of “Brahma” is hymnic long measure, the poem is in some ways as deviant from conventional hymns as its pronouncements. It is unusually dense with syntactic play, rhetorical gestures, and sound devices. Repetition within and across lines links words with alliteration and internal rhyme (“Far,” “forgot,”; “same,” “shame,” “fame”). The syllabication and parallel parts of speech serve to replace the “red slayer” of the first line with the “meek lover” of the

penultimate one. In two of several instances of complex oxymoron, the actually present "vanished gods" who "appear" in the poem in the second stanza are stronger than the "strong gods" in the last stanza who weakly "pine" for the stronger Brahma (who actually exists instead, for Emerson, amid his beloved pines of the natural world). Finally, the only "feminine" rhyme of the poem occurs in the last stanza, where Emerson again uses metrics to signal reinstitution of "the feminine" amid an otherwise hyperphallic religious system.

The first stanza poses the two most fundamental conundrums – the mystery of how killing and being killed can be the same; and the mysterious, fluid nature of the "I" who at once can "keep" (stay), "pass" (go), and "turn." We find enjambment only in this one line – "the subtle ways/ I keep, and pass, and turn again" – to emphasize the fluidity and turning without stoppage. And here "turn" may also suggest "trope," since a main point is the power of the hymn, of the poem, of poetry.

The second stanza undoes distinctions of time and space. Whatever seems "far" away or to be "forgot" is actually "near." Present circumstances of difficulty and ease, "shadow" and "sunlight" – metaphorically, among other things, despair and cheer, confusion and insight, war and peace – ultimately participate in the one force that sustains life. "Vanished gods" have not vanished, because they appear in the poem – a locution that gives additional meaning to Emerson's use of perhaps his favorite biblical aphorism, "The kingdom of God is within" (Luke 17:21), where "within" also means within this speech, essay, poem. In addition, for Emerson, what is a "god" – in the best sense of the term, that which leads to benevolence and life – cannot ultimately pass away but is always reimagined and renamed as it and we change in our rearticulation and recreation of divinity. Hence, "shame" and "fame" rhyme – end up being the same, so to speak – because something more fundamental than reputation is at the heart of existence for Emerson. In stanza three, "Brahma" answers the riddle of its existence in an echo of the riddling "I am" statements of the *Geeta* and the Hebrew Bible. People "reckon ill" when they do not perceive the reality of "Brahma" in

that they think both badly and unhealthily. The divine force is most fundamentally the energy of life itself. It is “wings” that we all “fly” on even as we try to flee them – recalling the simultaneous reassurance and caveat in “Self-Reliance,” from early Muslim thought – “‘Thy lot or portion of life,’ said the Caliph Ali, ‘is seeking after thee; therefore be at rest from seeking after it’” (*CW* 2:50). The trope is inverted in this case – seeking becomes fleeing – so that the assertion gains perhaps even more strength. Here, the halves have come together and incorporate into them, beautifully, at once “doubt” and affirmation (the “hymn”). Hence, our faith and our doubt participate together within a process of life that involves ourselves and our articulations. “Brahma” is ourselves, our poetry, this poem we are reading, the poem we each make of it, and the range of our conceptions and articulations.

One of the most puzzling moments, as Robert Frost, who adored “Brahma,” wittily remarks in his essay “On Emerson,” occurs in the final two lines: “But thou, meek lover of the good!/ Find me, and turn thy back on heaven.” Clearly, as a part of its appropriation of the language of the Beatitudes, the text suggests an alternative to what Emerson calls “historical Christianity” – i.e., conventional religion. The semantic ambiguity of these lines represents also, I think, a Derridean *aporia*, or moment of linguistic bifurcation and undecidability. The issue is whether or not it is good or bad to be a “meek lover of the good.” I like to let both meanings resonate together. The first way to read the lines is: “You bad meek lover of the conventionally termed good, find me instead and rise above traditional notions of heaven.” And the second: “You [celebratorily, as in “The Humble-Bee” and “Boston Hymn”] meek one who loves goodness will find me and no longer need or desire conventional heaven.” In either case, the end of the poem resists apparent contradictions and conundrums, and refuses to seek heaven at a distant time or place. As Emerson ostensibly said (according to his son), “Heaven is here and now, or nowhere and never.”²² “Brahma” finally affirms existence amid life’s rationally incomprehensible vicissitudes and tragedies.

The conjunction of social/political justice, individual action, and poetry is central to *May-Day* as a volume. The book's content and publication date of 1867 ask us to read *May-Day* along with Melville's *Battle-Pieces* and Whitman's *Drum Taps* as part of the literary response to the war itself. Fundamental roles of poetry in the volume involve the calling individuals and nations to political and social justice, and the healing of wounds caused in the struggle. Some poems in *May-Day* treat the war directly. Many others address it obliquely, either tropically or through such subjects as camaraderie, reconciliation, and restoration. The long title threshold poem and others simultaneously invoke poetry, sexual passion, and rebirth, in the tradition of *reverdies*, and connect seasonal cycles (like more contemporary *May Days* that might come to mind), poetry, and the triumph of justice – "The snow-flake is her banner's [freedom's] star," Emerson writes in "Voluntaries," then spring heals and rejuvenates (*CW* 9:391).²³

A number of lines in "May-Day" allude to the war through martial and emancipation imagery, with an embedded discourse of economics:

Spring is strong and virtuous,
Broad-sowing, cheerful, plenteous,
Quickening underneath the mould
Grains beyond the price of gold.
So deep and large her bounties are,
That one broad, long midsummer day
Shall to the planet overpay
The ravage of a year of war. (*CW* 9:320-21)

"Boston Hymn"

Among the poems about the war, the strongest is perhaps "Boston Hymn." One of the most striking characteristics of this 22-stanza poem is that paradoxically, it is not so much a hymn to God as a hymn from God. All except the first quatrain is spoken by God to the audience. And the

lines appear in indirect present tense, in the imperative mood, without quotation marks – a rhetorical gesture that functions to blend the voice of the poem with that of God, thus causing the poem to command with the authority of God.

The text consistently represents God and nature as enemies of concentrations of power and money. Freedom is grounded in common people and modest means. God's initial quatrain critiques kings (and thus England, for the conflation of the Revolution and abolition also dominate this poem) specifically on behalf of the economically oppressed:

God said, I am tired of kings,
I suffer them no more;
Up to my ear the morning brings
The outrage of the poor. (*CW* 9:381)

While "suffer" here means that God will no longer put up with "kings," it also suggests that the suffering of the poor causes God to suffer.

The connection of power and poverty continues in the next quatrain, where God asks whether she created the earth to be a place "Where tyrants great and tyrants small/ Might harry the weak and poor?" (381). Then, when God establishes the nation ("Columbia"), she immediately decides – wildly – to redistribute wealth, to empower the disfranchised, and to abolish the practice of living off surplus value:

I will divide my goods;
Call in the wretch and the slave:
None shall rule but the humble,
And none but Toil shall have. (382)

Such emphases dominate, and as in the Channing "Ode," make the most forceful and moving quatrain of the poem:

Pay ransom to the owner,
And fill the bag to the brim.
Who is the owner? The slave is owner,
And ever was. Pay him. (383)

"God" thus forcefully calls for a freedom based both on racial equality and on an ethic that cuts to the core of the capitalism that reigned then and dominates even more fully now.

Thoreau mandates in "Resistance to Civil Government" ("Civil Disobedience"), extending the wonderful charge that when one lives "sitting upon another man's shoulders," one must "get off him," that "If I have unjustly wrested a plank from a drowning man, I must restore it to him though I drown myself."²⁴ This figure of drowning resonates with Emerson's trope in his original verse epigraph to the essay "Illusions," of the initially threatening yet finally salvational "waves of mutation" (*CW* 8:164-65). An exploration of the anxious delight of inevitable perpetual change, the poem celebrates the ongoing metamorphosis that announces itself in the first two words, "Flow, flow," foregrounded by their opening repetition and spondaic meter (a sort of counterpoint to Tennyson's "Break, break, break/ On thy cold grey stones, O Sea!"). At the poem's close, though, we find that humanity actually rides this ongoing and menacing wave "to power,/ And to endurance."

One reason I love Emerson's poetry and prose is their aesthetically and ethically beautiful invocation of faith in "waves of mutation." This image sounds as intimidating as does "postmodernity" to some ears (we might remember also that Emerson was criticized for his unintelligibility and reliance upon European jargon). "[W]aves of mutation" suggests our weakness in light of forces that threaten to dominate, hinting (with "mutation") of our becoming dehumanized cyborgs. I challenge us to imagine our postmodern condition as instead leading us to understand ourselves as inevitably but happily contingent, relational, and non-universalized subjects. We might, indeed, use the disruptions to which postmodernism is so attentive to help us restore the Thoreauvian plank to

the drowning from whom monopoly capital manifestly wrests it. Emerson's texts, I believe, reassure us that we need not fear drowning when we benevolently yield an unjustly obtained plank, for such yielding would ultimately enhance life, whether or not at the expense of keeping, say, national dominance afloat. That's a point at which, for example, our goodness, as in "Self-Reliance," must have some edge to it.

Emerson's poetry and prose interconnect natural and linguistic beauty in a way that demands beautiful politics of justice and love, and of our aesthetics an ethical praxis. Such is the mandate to which I believe the end of the Divinity School "Address" calls us – that of seeing "that the Ought, that Duty, is one thing with Science, with Beauty, and with Joy" (*CW* 1:93). Thus, I ask, can poetry and beauty help us minister to the world and its individuals in the face of the worst that can happen? I, with Emerson, would hope they can, and I, with him, would urge us not to abnegate that responsibility. For, as Emerson audaciously and poignantly laments in his 1844 essay "Politics," "The power of love, as the basis of a State, has never been tried" (*CW* 2:128).

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Notes

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," *Essays: First Series* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP), 30. Vol. 2 of *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 10 Volumes, 1971-2013. I cite *CW* parenthetically in all subsequent quotations of the texts included there. I am grateful to our editor Barry Tharaud for his substantive and editorial suggestions.

² The volume extends the work of the indispensable *The Poetry Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph H. Orth, Albert J. von Frank, Linda Allardt, and David W. Hill (Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 1986).

³ See, for example, "Twentieth-Century Poetry," *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, ed. Joel Myerson, Sandra Harbert Petrucci, and Laura Dassow Walls (Oxford UP, 2010), 671-81, and the forthcoming "Poetry and Poetics," *Emerson In Context*, ed. Wesley T. Mott (Cambridge: Cambridge UP).

⁴ For help with Martí, and for our many associated conversations, I am grateful to Charles Sackrey, editor of a foundational and still frequently-cited book in working-class studies, *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class*, 2nd Edition, ed. Charles Sackrey and Jake Ryan (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1984; Lanham, MD: UP of America of Rowman and Littlefield, 1995).

⁵ José Martí, "Emerson," *On Art and Literature: Critical Writings*, Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Philip S. Foner (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1982), 149-67. Excerpt reprinted in *Emerson's Prose and Poetry: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Joel Porte and Saundra Morris (New York and London: Norton, 2001), 628-32.

⁶ *The Holy Bible: King James Version*, Exodus 12, Deuteronomy 6:9, John 1:29.

⁷ See, especially, his two essays on Emerson in *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition* (San Francisco: North Point, 1981).

⁸ Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), 847.

⁹ Carl Strauch, "The Year of Emerson's Poetic Maturity: 1834," *Philological Quarterly* 34 (October 1955), 353-77.

¹⁰ See [The Robin's my Criterion for Tune –] F#256, Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, ed. R.W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1999).

¹¹ For an analysis of these cultural anxieties, see Lisa Malinowski, *Masters of Repetition: Poetry, Culture, and Work in Thomson, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Emerson* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998).

¹² Len Gougeon, *Emerson & Eros: The Making of a Cultural Hero* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007).

¹³ John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (London: Heinemann, 1978), 373.

¹⁴ Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1960-82), 4:372. This volume and others hereafter referred to as *JMN* parenthetically in the text.

¹⁵ William Cullen Bryant, *Poetical Works of William Cullen Bryant* (New York: D. Appleton, [1878]), 181-82.

¹⁶ Brian Harding, "'Frolic Architecture': Music and Metamorphosis in Emerson's Poetry" (*Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*, ed. A. Robert Lee (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1985), 100-117.

¹⁷ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (NY: Longman, 1997), 4:21, p. 221.

¹⁸ Stevens, 106.

¹⁹ Emerson, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. 1, ed. Stephen E. Whicher and Robert E. Spiller (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1966), 15.

²⁰ William H. Channing, Unitarian minister, Christian socialist, member of the Transcendental Club, abolitionist speaker, and co-editor with Emerson and James Freeman Clark of *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller*.

²¹ Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1971), 92.

²² Edward Waldo Emerson, *Emerson in Concord: A Memoir Written for the "Social Circle" in Concord, Massachusetts* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1888), 249.

²³ Eduardo Cadava, *Emerson and The Climates of History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1977).

²⁴ Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Reform Papers*, ed. Wendell Glick (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1973), 71, 68.

