

“Words Are Finite Organs of the Infinite Mind”: Emerson’s Paradoxical View of Language

Colleen Shuching Wu

Ralph Waldo Emerson often appears as an authority within the historical context and literary movements of his times. However, the focus on his personal aura sometimes takes readers’ attentions away from his writing itself. As Joel Porte points out, Emerson “has manifestly not been accorded that careful scrutiny of his work *as writing*” because there has been too much “emphasis on Emerson’s personal authority, his example, his wisdom, his high role as the spiritual father and Plato of our race” (683). Porte’s statement is important because Emerson’s writing is not only about his perspectives on society, his philosophical thinking, and his thoughts about nature, but also about his language. In this essay, I will examine Emerson’s paradoxical ideas about language and how these ideas conflict with, and thus negatively explain, the way he writes—his inconsistency, his self-dissolving and self-questioning, and his writing against himself.

Emerson’s theory of language as a symbolic system that aims to reach an ideal unity between nature and thought leads to his claim of the limits of language. Nonetheless, such claims are belied by his texts, which often present us with contradictions and redefinitions. Emerson’s claims often await contradictory statements in his essays, which are not bound by the absolute. In “Experience,” Emerson writes that “Gladly we would anchor but the anchorage is quicksand” (3:32). Emerson does not aim to settle on a great idea in his thinking, nor does he desire a resting

place in his searching. In “Circles,” Emerson states that he is “only an experimenter” who “unsettle[s] all things.” “I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past at my back” (“Circles” 2:188). Herwig Friedl notes that “Emerson has repeatedly articulated his sense of a fleeting and paradoxical world without firm underpinning” (*Thinking in Search of a Language* 34). Introducing the history of skepticism, Friedl thinks that Emerson—like Sextus Empiricus, Montaigne, and the pragmatists—shares the “philosophical disposition” of “being skeptical,” so that “Their skeptical quest for truth never ends; they never abandon it” (44). In “Divine Overflowings: Emerson’s Pragmatic Idealism,” Jonathan Levin also notes that “Emerson’s pragmatic idealism is grounded in a delicate balance of skepticism and faith” (18). For Emerson, “Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit” (“Circles” 2:189). Friedl proposes that two concepts—inchoation and transition—from Ritter’s *The History of Ancient Philosophy* became central in Emerson’s thinking in 1838 (111). He concludes that Emerson has “a truly modern and once again un-coerced vision of a world of ever new and unforeseeable, truly contingent possibilities (*inchoation*) and a restlessly flexible dynamic (*transition*)” (117). Levin calls this “energizing spirit” “a transitional dynamic that at once assimilates and recasts available ideals and standards” (44).

Both Levin and Friedl underline the connection between Emerson’s “transitional dynamic” and William James’ pragmatism. Their criticism suggests that paradoxes and contradictions in Emerson’s essays are not only not inevitable but also resolvable. For Friedl, Emerson evades “dogmatic” and “systematic judgements” and “escape[s] the intellectually totalizing coercions of the Hegelian system” (55, 110). Emerson’s essays thus allow oppositions and contradictions as they illuminate a proliferation of points of view and meanings while challenging dogmas and systematic totality. Levin questions the opposition of idealism and pragmatism by claiming “an abiding affinity” between them (17). Levin further explains “the fundamental paradox” in Emerson’s writing—that only when ideals are “individuated” can they

affect the world and that "the continuing development of the individual" means "the continuing development" of "unfolding purposes" in the world (22). Levin answers this paradox by speaking of the "interconnectedness" and "interrelation" among all things (35, 38). Thus, Levin argues that "Emerson rejects a conception of the self as isolated from its world" and that an individual power "serves unfolding purposes that are ultimately much larger than any individual and its narrow self-interests" (27, 43). In short, paradoxes and contradictions in Emerson's writing are positively explained by Friedl and Levin as serving a certain cause—a transitional dynamic, a philosophical disposition against essentialism and totalization, or a pragmatist's engagement in the world. Finding such a cause aims to add coherence and resolve contradictions in Emerson's writing.

Nonetheless, Emerson's view of language is a striking contradiction to the way he writes—a style that celebrates continuous experiments on truth in various contexts. The more essayists search, the more their searching violates and betrays Emerson's definition of language—i.e., the functioning of language as a symbolic system that should aim for the union between nature and mind. Emerson writes, "Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance" (*Nature* 1:18). He adds, "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact" and "Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind" (1:18). Emerson thus emphasizes "this radical correspondence between visible things and human thoughts" (1:19). As "[natural symbols] are found to make the original elements of all languages," Emerson claims that "this is the first language, so is it the last" (1:19-20). Emerson emphasizes "This immediate dependence of language upon nature" (1:20); unsurprisingly, he defines words as "signs of natural facts" (1:18). Emerson allows a thought to be revised, redefined, contradicted, or replaced in his essays, but his view of language suggests no such possibility. What he performs with words in essays thus goes against what he claims about words. For Emerson, "the whole of nature is a

metaphor of the human mind” (1:21), but “Words are finite organs of the infinite mind (1:28). This contradiction speaks to the dilemma of his writing and thus indirectly—and negatively—explains his writing style—a style that goes against what he himself sets forth, a style that shifts, questions definitions and concepts, challenges systems of thought, and even goes against himself.

While he emphasizes that words are finite, Emerson suggests that wise men should still use them appropriately to be “in alliance with truth and God” (*Nature* 1:20). Emerson observes the “evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest” (“Experience” 3:29). Emerson’s words on nature here coincidentally sound like an insight of poststructuralism. Emerson thinks that natural objects easily slip away from our grasp and thus lie beyond our pursuit; nonetheless, without considering the possibility that words might also easily slip away from our grasp, he claims that language is incapable of embodying the mind and soul. However, Emerson may have shown and performed this possibility of language—its escape from our grasp and thus its slipperiness—even though he considers this possibility as its incapacity in his work. When he makes different statements through placing an idea in different contexts (or, to borrow the term from his essay “Circles,” through surrounding it with ever larger circles), he shows not only the capacity of language but also how slippery and fluid words can be. Thus, his claims about words contribute to his performance with words. However, his performance might end up challenging his claims of the incapacity or finitude of words because “[words] cannot cover the dimensions of what is in truth” (*Nature* 1:28).

Emerson’s claims about language may not be what he actually performs with words. Therefore, readers’ perspectives on Emerson’s performances with words may not accord with Emerson’s claims about language, and it is important to look at this issue from both sides. Mutlu Konuk Blasing notices that as Emerson is made into “a spiritual and literary father-figure,” “his insistence on the necessity of poetic forms

has been largely ignored" (9). Emerson's poetic expression is a significant feature in his philosophical contemplation and often indicates his view of language. Porte suggests that we should pay attention to the poetic nature in Emerson's writing: "Emerson [...] is fundamentally a poet whose meaning lies in his manipulations of language and figure" (685). For Porte, what best explains "change, or growth, or consistency" in Emerson's ideas and thoughts is not "his philosophic arguments or discursive logic" but "his poetic imagination" (685). Porte seems to try to reverse the typical assumption that "philosophical arguments" are more logical than "poetic imagination." Emerson, however, often incorporates philosophical ideas in his writing but does not always aim for logic or consistency through them. There are intricate relations between his poetic expressions and his philosophical ideas, which can be oppositional yet complementary at times. It is important to ask, Why does Emerson tend to be inconsistent? and Why does he swiftly change from one idea to another in his arguments? and How is this tendency related to Emerson's poetic expression? How does his interest in poetic expressions (such as simile and metaphor) partially contribute to his peculiar style of writing? How do his poetic expression and his thinking work together as philosophical and poetic discourse?

In "Emerson and the Impossibilities of Style," Adam Phillips concludes that "to have a style is to be averse to one's attained style" and "Style, like the soul, is always becoming; which is why the world (and oneself) might hate it" (144). I think that Emerson's "energizing spirit" leads to a constant renewal of ideas and thus "a transitional dynamic" (Levin's term). Emerson writes, "Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim. This one fact the world hates, that the soul becomes [...]" ("Self-Reliance" 2:40). For Emerson, the world (or the people in the world) would hate the fact that life and power exist only in "the moment of transition" and the past thus no longer matters. How Emerson as an experimenter thinks and explores and how the soul is becoming might

contribute to Emerson's style of writing. However, how does one's style derive from one's aversion to one's attained style? The inherent contradiction in this statement suggests not only Phillips' imitation of Emerson's style of writing but also the confusion and difficulty of defining Emerson's style. Barry Charles Tharaud addresses the issue of style and discusses whether style is a reflection of soul, whether thought creates style, and whether expression could be simply thought's substance in his review essay "How Long is the 'Long Nineteenth Century'?" He concludes that "Emerson's existential shape-shifting" "reflects the unfixed nature of human consciousness" (201).

It is tricky to define Emerson's style, but his paradoxical view of language casts some light on his style. Emerson's ideas of language are widely discussed, and critics tend to agree that Emerson emphasizes the limits of language in his essays. In "Emerson's 'Language as Fossil Poetry': An Analogy from Chinese," Donald M. Murray suggests that "there is a remarkable analogy between the structure of written Chinese and Emerson's theory of language and poetry" (204). Murray's observation is valid because Emerson's theory of language not only emphasizes the correspondences between words and natural facts and between natural facts and symbols of natural facts, but it also privileges the bond between nature and spirit over a relatively looser link between words and nature. In "Essaying the Poet: Emerson's Poetic Theory and Practice," Blasing examines Emerson's place in American poetic history. She also points out that Emerson "conceives of language as a system of symbolic, metaphoric, or analogical relationships representing the correspondences between nature and the mind" (9). Emerson's theory of language is mainly about how words should represent nature and the mind (as well as God and the spirit).

In "The Over-Soul" Emerson writes, "The simplest utterances are worthiest to be written, yet are they so cheap, and so things of course, that, in the infinite riches of the soul, it is like gathering a few pebbles off the ground, or bottling a little air in a phial, when the whole earth, and the whole atmosphere are ours" (2:291). Compared to the "infinite riches

of the soul," words are still worthy but are partial and finite. Emerson's discussion of the limits of language focuses on elaborating the value and greatness of nature, God, the spirit, and the mind, which are at times interchangeable, but words cannot fully represent them. After admiring the beauty of nature and stating that "it was a pain to come within doors," Emerson asks, "What was it that nature would say? Was there no meaning in the live repose of the valley behind the mill, and which Homer or Shakespeare could not re-form for me in words?" (*Nature* 1:14). Tharaud also comments that this quote suggests "the inadequacy of words to convey nature, which implies that language necessarily falsifies nature or at least fails to represent it adequately" (*Paul Bowles: In the American Grain* 63). Nature and spirit are comparable because spirit lies in nature, but words cannot fully represent nature. With the theoretical assumption that words are supposed to capture what words can never fully represent—i.e., nature—language plays a tricky and significant role in Emerson's arguments. Directly after the quote above from "The Over-Soul," Emerson adds, "Nothing can pass there, [...] but the casting aside your trappings, and dealing man to man in naked truth, plain confession and omniscient affirmation" (2:291). Emerson's statement here appears questionable because even if "plain confession and omniscient affirmation" enable one to reach "the infinite riches of the soul," can such be made without utterances, without words or signs? In "Spiritual Laws," Emerson writes, "The wild fertility of nature is felt in comparing our rigid names and reputations with our fluid consciousness" (2:138). For Emerson, nature is fertile, but while our words are finite, our consciousness is fluid.

Emerson's theory that language centers on the bond or unity between nature and the mind shows the influence of German philosophy. In "Emerson and German Philosophy," René Wellek explains how philosophers such as Kant, Schelling, Hegel, and others have influence on Emerson, even though Wellek concludes that the Transcendentalists seek confirmation of their faith in German philosophy, which they do not need to actually because "Their faith was deeply rooted in their minds

and their own spiritual ancestry” (62). Emerson finds that some of the German philosophers’ thoughts highly correlate with his idea of the relation between nature and the mind. Patrick Labriola notes that “Emerson and Schelling refer to nature as the visible appearance of spirit” (129). Wellek points out that Emerson quotes Schelling and “approves expressly of the identity philosophy for its fundamental conception that object and subject are intimately one and that ‘all difference is quantitative’” (51). Wellek also mentions that Emerson “knows of Hegel’s view that nature is objective spirit” (57). In his journals, Emerson notes that “Natural Sciences have made great strides by means of Hegel’s dogma which put Nature, and thought, matter and spirit, in right relation, one the expression or externalization of the other” (462-63). In other words, Emerson reads only what speaks to his mind and agrees with the identity between nature and thought or between matter and spirit. As Emerson thinks that subject and object are one and there is identity between nature and thought, words then are supposed to represent nature and thought. Ideally, this representation should remove any hints of separation between words and nature or thought. Unfortunately, words cannot represent nature or thought well, so Emerson criticizes the limits of language.

One of the conspicuous features of Emerson’s writing style is his inconsistency. As Porte tries to emphasize consistency in Emerson’s works, Richard Poirier finds that Emerson’s inconsistency carries a significant message in both his arguments and his ideas about language. Noting that Emerson has “the best sense [...] of its [genius’] elusiveness,” Poirier then explains Emerson’s style: “Within a given paragraph, he tends not to develop an argument in the direction already laid down by a previous remark but to veer away from it, as from some constraining influence. He wants always to be several steps ahead of himself” (69, 70). Emerson’s wanting “always to be several steps ahead of himself” is easy for the reader to notice because when reading one remark, the reader familiar with Emerson’s works usually knows that the next paragraph or even the next sentence probably will not offer much further

clarification or elaboration. Readers might learn from previous readings that such expectations will be disappointed and that they should figure out each remark on its own. At times, even a sentence can carry divergent messages in Emerson's works. Vivian Hopkins suggests that Emerson "noted the excellent style of Bacon's sentence on 'heteroclite' instances (that is, bodies composed of two different species)" and might pursue a similar style (411). Thus, Emerson often does not pursue consistency but rather aims for divergent messages, so it is not a simple question of whether philosophical ideas manipulate poetic expression or whether his writing style happens to be one of the ideas intended.

Emerson's philosophical ideas, as many critics point out, at times are outcomes of his learning and rethinking of several significant German philosophers' ideas, and he was rarely under their influence without challenging and questioning them. Such inconsistency in his work also suggests that his poetic imagination at times simply does not surrender to philosophical ideas. In the end, Emerson's philosophical ideas are as fickle as his poetic imagination, so his inconsistency is consistent. In "Self-Reliance," he mocks a "foolish consistency" that would impede "a great soul" (2:33). He rarely sticks to one idea without entertaining its opposite. His unwillingness to stay content with an idea and his continuous thinking and searching often result in unexpected and sometimes contradictory statements in his essays. Emerson at times celebrates poetic expressions that directly embody their intended ideas (i.e., expressions like symbols and metaphors that aim for the correspondence between tenor and vehicle). For example, talking about bankruptcy and the death of his son, he claims that such things would "leave [him] as [they] found [him]" and should "fall[] off from [him]" and leave nothing ("Experience" 3:29). He then comes to a humorous metaphor that corresponds to this idea: "The dearest events are summer-rain, and we the Para coats that shed every drop. Nothing is left us now but death" (3:29). From this perspective, his view of figurative language is quite consistent with his view of language as a system of symbolic representation, but it contradicts his challenging and questioning readily

established ideas in his essays. His thoughts on language (or poetic expression at times) thus contradict the very feature of his writing style—a style that privileges experiments over systems of thought, relative truth over absolutes, and meanings in various contexts over fixed referents.

Critics have discussed the causes of inconsistency in Emerson's writings. Poirier argues that Emerson shifts from one remark to another because of his desire to avoid "some constraining influence" (70). If Poirier's comment is true, Emerson not only knows that words carry constraining influence but also tries to overcome it. Similarly, Prosser Hall Frye also notes that Emerson tends to shift and waver from one topic to another in his works: "Emerson can hardly turn more than two or three sentences without a complete change of topic" (293). Frye sees the shifting nature in Emerson's work as twofold: it is brilliant, but "without dimension" (293). While suggesting that such a style allows each sentence and phrase to be "dropped" and planted "like seeds" in readers' minds, Frye argues that these seeds actually "find their growth outside the author's mind" (293). Frye often points out what is positive in seemingly negative features in Emerson's writing style. Therefore, Emerson's "rhapsodical assertion" is seen as "originality" (298, 299). For Frye, Emerson develops his arguments with inconsistency because there is a correspondence between "ideas and the characteristic peculiarities of his form, his sententiousness and inconsequence" (299). Thus, Emerson's peculiar writing features help manifest his ideas, and as they complement each other, "the former [idea] explains the latter [peculiarities]" (299). Frye further explains Emerson's writing style according to its impact on the reader and adds that Emerson is concerned about the kind of truth that "is likely to vary from individual to individual and from one moment to another, for the observer is never twice alike" (299). However, if the observer is never twice alike and perceptions and interpretations also tend to vary, it would be unnecessary for Emerson to purposefully plant "seeds" in readers' minds and expect their unexpected responses. It might be far-fetched to assume that readers' varied responses are Emerson's

intention, even though Emerson is indeed concerned with a kind of truth that varies.

Unlike Frye, Poirier thinks that Emerson often shifts from one remark to another because one sentence quickly constrains his next sentence, so his desire to be free from "constraining influence" decides the way he develops an argument in his writing. Emerson's attempt to escape the "constraining influence" and to claim "individual autonomy," according to Poirier, is made manifest from "the gaps Emerson likes to create between 'genius' and the text it is supposed to inhabit, between 'genius' and the artists who are supposed to have it, or between one sentence he has written and the one that will follow it" (70). For Poirier, these gaps signify Emerson's "confident hope of effecting a break from inherited culture, even from the immediate historical and cultural commitments implicit in his own uses of language" (70). For Frye, Emerson creates individual momentary understanding of his ideas through a lack of consistency or a peculiar form of writing that is full of sententious and non-consecutive expressions. In other words, for Frye, Emerson invests in the possibility that the seeds of his ideas can grow in each individual's mind differently. Nonetheless, for Poirier, because language somehow carries "the cultural inheritances" "in its syntax" and we live in "its necessities," Emerson uses his writing style to "transform history or language or effectively break the coherences they impose upon consciousness" (70). In *Writing Degree Zero*, Roland Barthes introduces "writing at the zero degree" and explains that it is "a colourless writing, freed from all bondage to a pre-ordained state of language" (76). Barthes then warns that if this ideal exists, it only exists momentarily and readily turns into a piece of history that it aims to be free from. Poirier is also aware that the task of canceling or counteracting the historical influence of language is somehow impossible, so he emphasizes that "Emerson himself recognized the limits of his own enterprise" (70). However, for Poirier, Emerson continues to write in such a style because "Language is the only way to get around the obstruction of language [...]" (72). Thus, it appears to be a dilemma whether one should think of language as a

carrier of historical and cultural inheritances or as a double-edged tool that can help one resist such inheritances while undergoing their influence at the same time.

Since language carries constraining influence, it seems difficult for one to resist it and to come up with a fresh idea. Language thus does not serve any individual mind. Against “the convictions that language exists as a servitor to established ideas of the self,” Poirier later concludes that “Emerson implies that by its very submission to written form, genius is repressed and deformed even before it is further adulterated by institutions of reading” (87, 89). If viewing language “as a servitor to established ideas of the self” is a wrong conviction, this raises a simple question—Why is interpreting language as a servitor to social and cultural situations a right conviction? If language cannot be “a servitor to established ideas of the self” because language has carried in itself some inherent qualities that can never be eradicated by an individual, how can language be completely dominated or controlled by social or cultural forces? In short, why is language purely and fully social or cultural? In *Nature*, after emphasizing the correspondence between an “appearance in nature” and “some state of the mind” (1:18), Emerson asks: “But is there no intent of an analogy between man’s life and the seasons?” (1:19). The answer is yes, and writing an analogy involves an individual’s intent. His words thus cannot be fully social or cultural.

For Emerson, genius is “repressed and suppressed” in his writing not only because language has carried certain social and cultural inheritances but also because language is in no way parallel to genius. Language becomes secondary or ornamental not because it carries those irrevocable social and cultural inheritances but because it becomes aligned to the level of particulars that are always lower than the absolute law, the soul, the mind, and God’s will. For Emerson, “Words are finite organs of the infinite mind. They cannot cover the dimensions of what is in truth. They break, chop, and impoverish it. An action is the perfection and publication of thought” (*Nature* 1:28). However, this does not stop Emerson from using language or emphasizing the necessity of using it,

even though he uses words to devalue words. A few paragraphs before this quote, Emerson says that "wise men pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things; so that picturesque language is at once a commanding certificate that he who employs it, is a man in alliance with truth and God" (1:20). For Emerson, "wise men" should not simply "feed unconsciously upon the language created by the primary writers of the country, those, namely, who hold primarily on nature," and should "pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things" (1:20). Thus, before stating that language is imperfect and insufficient compared to genius and "the infinite mind," Emerson was suggesting that "wise men" should know better to avoid "rotten diction" and the language of other writers by "fasten[ing] words again to visible things." As Emerson suggests that words should be fastened to visible objects, Emerson has followed his previous remark that words are imperfect and seems to try to find a way to lessen the weakness of words. For Emerson, a man with "the simplicity of his character" and "conversing in earnest" will find that "a material image [...] arises in his mind" and it is "cotemporaneous with every thought" and "furnishes the vestment of the thought" (1:20). The reason why Emerson prefers fastening words to visible things instead of the other way around may be that language cannot completely embody the images of nature, and words "cannot cover the dimensions of what is in truth" (1:28). For Emerson, nature is "an appendix to the soul," and it is the "laws of [a man's] mind" and "the periods of his action" that "externalized themselves into day and night, into the year and the seasons" (*Nature* 1:34, 42). Thus, nature is only complementary and even secondary to the great human soul and mind and God's will. As a result, language is even more inferior because it is secondary to nature and thus farther away from "the infinite mind."

Paradoxically, Emerson writes while denying what language can do. However, the more successfully he criticizes the insufficiency of words in writing, the more he shows what language can do. Poirier thinks that for Emerson, "language has at a crucial moment become an antagonist,

and that this is what has happened by virtue [...] of the writer's attentions to it" (74). For Poirier, Emerson's view of language results from his understanding of "the cultural inheritances" that language carries. I think that, for Emerson, language is fundamentally inferior and secondary to the mind and soul. Emerson says that wise men "should fasten words again to visible things," and the word "again" in this quote is significant. It suggests that words and visible things are apart and their relations are to be found or discovered. Furthermore, it suggests that words are originally related to visible things and are supposed to be reunited with "visible things," and since they are not, "wise men" should try to secure the possibility of the union between them. Russell Goodman argues that "Emerson and Thoreau search nature for something raw and wild, a reality independent of human thinking [...]" (2). However, Emerson might not have been looking for "something raw and wild" from the beginning. From the discussion above, Emerson might be aware that words are inherently distant from nature, and "fasten[ing] words again to visible things" is simply an ideal, which simply reveals the difficulty and the impossibility of its own realization.

What language is incapable of doing—the complete embodiment of thoughts of "the infinite mind"—makes Emerson see language as something degenerate compared to God's mighty will. However, he can only deliver God's will and thoughts of "the infinite mind" through language. His suspicion of the functioning of language is similar to his suspicion of how long an idea sustains as he often writes one idea but simultaneously or subsequently questions it. Poirier also observes this difficult dilemma in Emerson's view about words: "the strongest evidence for me of Emerson's own genius is that his way of writing simultaneously affirms and calls into doubt his, or anyone else's, individual authority over language, the language he himself chooses to use" (69). Of course, for Poirier, Emerson understands that there are social and cultural constraints embedded in language, and while Emerson desires to remove these constraints and liberate his individual thoughts, his strong desire and effort happen to make manifest the very existence

of the constraints. However, as he cannot fully stay free from the cultural or social constraints that language carries, Emerson must be insistent and consistent with his effort in resisting the so-called "constraining influence" of language. Differing slightly from Poirier, I think that the difficulty of suppressing the "constraining influence" of language results from Emerson's disbelief in the capacity of language. In other words, it is not that language is too powerful with its constraining influence but that it is too weak and insufficient for Emerson.

To borrow Theodor W. Adorno's ideas of metaphysics to further understand Emerson's dilemma, Emerson might intend to use language to secularize his transcendental ideas or God's will, but, by doing so, he mingles the absolute and transcendental truth with the particulars of the empirical world, which simultaneously threatens the possibility of the transcendental truth (18-19). Emerson's distrust of language is related to the fact that he is critical and suspicious of the possibility of securing the transcendental truth through words. Such distrust influences on his usage of metaphor.

Emerson's metaphor draws attention especially when an image might embody or represent a philosophical idea at first but they push each other to an unexpected or different direction as an argument develops. For example, Emerson writes, "Every ship is a romantic object, except that we sail in. Embark, and the romance quits our vessel, and hangs on every other sail in the horizon. Our life looks trivial, and we shun to record it" ("Experience" 3:28). In this example, a ship seems an embodiment of romance at first; however, this metaphorical idea quickly changes as the ship "we sail in" does not carry the same romantic signification. Then, Emerson quickly has the divergent perceptions of "our vessel" and "every other sail in the horizon" parallel those we have about our own life and the lives of others. Thus, a metaphor is created, broken, and recreated. In "Poetry: A Note in Ontology," John Crowe Ransom discusses how to approach and represent an object: "The way to obtain the true Dinglichkeit of a formal dinner or a landscape or a beloved person is to approach the object as such, and in humility; then it

unfolds a nature which we are unprepared for if we have put our trust in the simple idea which attempted to represent it" (82). When a writer imposes an intended idea or thought on an object or an image while creating a metaphor, what the writer is "unprepared for" might be always missing. Even though Emerson argues that words are "finite organs" and seem to be inferior to the great mind, this view of language does not necessarily make him control or stabilize the metaphorical expressions in his essays. We might get a very refreshing idea about language from the way he describes nature and the beauty in nature: "I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition" ("Experience" 3:29). He also reminds us of such evanescence in *Nature*—"The beauty that shimmers in the yellow afternoons of October, who ever could clutch it?" (1:14). Similar to Ransom's idea in the quote above, Emerson describes the beauty that comes unexpectedly: "Therefore does beauty, which, in relation to actions, as we have seen, comes unsought, and comes because it is unsought, remain for the apprehension and pursuit of the intellect [...]" (1:16). Therefore, what Emerson proclaims about language—its insufficiency or incapacity—might not be what he performs with words. The more he distrusts it, the more he pursues it. In the end, he shows how sufficient his words are. Looking from this perspective, I wonder if Emerson could agree that words might be just like the evanescent objects and the beauty he describes—those objects which tend to "slip through our fingers" when we try to "clutch" them. Emerson performs this "infinite" possibility of words—their slipperiness and fluidity. The more he distrusts words, the more he shows this possibility. What he does with words thus endlessly goes against what he proclaims about words.

Emerson's style of going against his own claims and statements is pervasive in his writings. Even though some criticism suggests that Emerson's view of the limits of language motivates him to be an experimenter with words and to overcome constraints embedded in words, I think that his claim of the limits of language and his

performance with words are a striking contradiction. Emerson tends to write against himself and thinks that contradictions are sometimes necessary as a text develops. This tendency is relevant to his inconsistency and his self-dissolving and self-questioning in writing. Blasing's essay offers a sharp perspective on this issue. Blasing points out that "Emerson's stance in the essays [...] is one of waiting and desiring" as Emerson could not find the poet he describes and Emerson's poet is the ideal man that cannot exist (12). Emerson's poet is ideal because "The poet represents a fulfillment of, or an end to, this desire; in contrast to the ever-expanding consciousness of the 'circular' essays, the poet is perfected, self-contained, and 'spherical'" (12-13). Emerson's poet represents the union of the world and the mind, or of nature and the mind. Blasing argues that while "the figure of the poet is a personification, a metaphor, for the destruction of metaphor, language, separation" in essays, "Emerson does not really want his poet to appear; he only wants to propose him in order to desire him" (13). Therefore, the poet can never exist.

Blasing thinks that Emerson's poet is a metaphor because it is a figure proposed to make possible the union between nature and the mind that perceives it, and to bridge the gap between them. As the separation between nature and the mind is inevitable, the poet turns out to be a figure, a metaphor, that aims to end any metaphors of the union. Blasing's criticism appears similar to Jacques Derrida's idea that one metaphor that could assure the proper meanings of metaphors is only "the dream at the heart of philosophy" ("White Mythology" 268). While viewing language as a symbolic system that aims to fulfill the function of representation, Emerson nonetheless shows language as a system that can never perfectly perform this function in his essays. Blasing argues that "'Circles' is the ideal Emerson essay" because "In constantly enlarging his point of view, 'the endless seeker' acts out the rhetorical progression of an essay, which is the medium of desire" (12). We thus see in Emerson the performance of the freedom of endless searching that for him, characterizes the essay. An essay itself is a medium of desire as it

consists of traces that an essayist creates and leaves in the search for truth with words. Blasing points out that while the poet is proposed to be a figure that must “submit to language as the law of nature” and pursue the union between nature and the mind, Emerson, critics, and the essayists are freed in “circles” (21). An essayist can go around and around in circles without being bound by the absolute or fate, while the poet cannot.

Blasing’s observation concerning the difference between Emerson’s poet and essayist is valid since a lot concerning criticism suggests Emerson’s preference for symbolic meanings in his poems. Nonetheless, since Emerson never claims that the language in his essays is different from that in his poetry, his theory of language remains the same. Emerson’s claim of the limits of language, which is of course related to his theory of its functioning, and his performance with words thus appear contradictory. This contradiction is ironic and intriguing because Emerson appreciates contradictions and shifts of ideas and perspectives in his essays as essayists are free in searching continuously and experimentally and refuse to be settled with any great ideas or philosophers. Highly aware of the risk and illusion of reaching an absolute thought, Emerson states that “Every thought is also a prison” (“The Poet” 3:19). In “Experience,” Emerson also writes, “Our love of the real draws us to permanence, but health of body consists in circulation [...]. Dedication to one thought is quickly odious” (3:32). Emerson then added that he once indulged in reading Montaigne but quickly switched to others. Paradoxically, while an essayist searches and prizes “perpetual inchoation” of ideas in writing, the act of searching for differences and meanings in diverse and contingent contexts nonetheless questions and challenges the purpose of words that Emerson defines and asserts—i.e., the functioning of language as a symbolic system that should aim for the union between nature and the mind (“The Method of Nature” 1:124). In “Poetry and Imagination” Emerson writes, “You shall not speak ideal truth in prose uncontradicted: you may in verse” (8:28). To speak truth, Emerson searches in circles, and his prose includes

contradictions. For Emerson, going against his own claims and being inconsistent in an essay are simply inevitable.

For Emerson, going against his own claims and statements is not contrived or schematized since a text develops in circles and not in a straight line. Emerson said, "I liked everything by turns and nothing long" ("Nominalist and Realist" 3:145). Emerson tends to place an idea in a larger or different context as a text progresses, and as the meanings of an idea vary in different contexts, a text might not progress toward a final conclusion. Thus, Emerson's essays are often regarded as inconsistent or fragmentary. In "Love," Emerson writes, "That which is so beautiful and attractive as these relations, must be succeeded and supplanted only by what is more beautiful, and so on for ever" (2:188). Therefore, for Emerson, what comes next in a text might replace what it is preceded by, and the act of replacement goes on forever. In the next example, Emerson criticizes how subjectivity intervenes with writing history and suggests what should replace previously written history. Emerson writes, "Broader and deeper we must write our annals [...] if we would trulier express our central and wide-related nature, instead of this old chronology of selfishness and pride to which we have too long lent our eyes" ("History" 2:40). For Emerson, even historical records and accounts should be examined, questioned, and rewritten.

In "'The Turn of His Sentences': The Open Form of Emerson's Essays: First Series," Martin Bickman also suggests that "Circles" is an important essay by Emerson as it shows his style of writing. Bickman regards Emerson's shifts of points of view and change of thought as "turns." Phillips also notes that Emerson writes as if "each sentence was a leap," which leads to "the fits and starts of a style that wanted nothing more than to be always beginning" (139). Quoting J. Hillis Miller, Bickman explains that when a text "turns," it signifies a self-reflection and a questioning of its own medium. Bickman thinks that turns allow a text to "stand while permitting further writing and reading in new and often opposed directions" (60). For Bickman, a turn allows a text to move in a direction that is not supported by the thought that precedes it.

In “Circles,” Emerson writes, “Every several result is threatened and judged by that which follows. Every one seems to be contradicted by the new; it is only limited by the new” (2:305). Bickman thinks of “Circles” as “a saturnalia of turning” and argues that Emerson’s “act of perpetual self-qualification and expansion can be epitomized” in the quote above (69). Emerson suggests that a result is ready to be challenged and redefined by what follows in a text; furthermore, a result begotten from a context tends to be contradicted by another that arises from a different context. For Emerson, for a result to be constantly challenged and contradicted by the new ones does not lead to an easy celebration of profundity or diversity of meanings but comes to a direct questioning because replacing an existing idea signals a judgment on it and a new result will also suffer the same risk of being replaced.

As discussed above, Emerson’s theory of language as a symbolic system that aims to reach the ideal of the unity between nature and thought leads to his claim of the limits of language. Nonetheless, the claim of the limits of language is contradicted by what he performs with words in a text—a text that allows contradictions and redefinitions to be created when contexts vary, a text where the signification of an idea is highly contingent on context and the circle in which it is placed. As Emerson’s ideas and claims often shift and are highly relative, contingencies weigh over the absolute or fate. Emerson discusses how new thoughts quickly take over old thoughts: “The Greek letters last a little longer, but are already passing under the same sentence, and tumbling into the inevitable pit which the creation of new thought opens for all that is old” (“Circles” 2:302). A word is bound to obtain meanings in a sentence just as an idea might secure meanings in different contexts, and this is how a thought might be challenged, contradicted, or replaced in a text. Words thus do not have to locate the original contexts in nature as Emerson claims that they should.

In “Emerson’s Decomposition,” Nikhil Bilwakesh discusses one of Emerson’s final works, *Parnassus*, and points out that as Emerson did not write the book but compiled it, *Parnassus* has been considered less

valuable for readers concerned with Emerson's authorship. Emerson views words as fragments and considers words trite and rotten, and Bilwakesh argues that Emerson aims to have words secure meanings in "fresh contexts": "Every word, once itself a poem, is continually 'quoted,' until overuse and misuse effect a corruption of language rendering words misrepresentative or 'rotten.' But when we etymologically fasten words to their material bases in nature and use them in fresh contexts, we revivify trite language" (538). However, how can "material bases in nature" that we "etymologically" fasten words to be "fresh contexts"? If "material bases in nature" are really where words come from and where words "etymologically" belong, they are original or old contexts rather than "fresh" contexts. Emerson allows a thought to be revised, contradicted, or replaced in his essays, but his view of language suggests no such possibility as he thinks that words should fulfill the union between nature and thought and that words should best represent nature. Nonetheless, when not addressing the topic of the functioning of language, Emerson comes to a very sharp poststructuralist critique of how an origin is forever receding in one's pursuit: "Men seem to have learned of the horizon the art of perpetual retreating and reference" ("Experience" 3:28). If this perspective is on words, words do not need to secure the supposed origin and do not have to be fastened to "visible things" in nature. Words no longer need to find a referential point in nature or reality but are in a dynamic of continual referencing.

In *Nature*, Emerson writes, "Every surmise and vaticination of the mind is entitled to a certain respect, and we learn to prefer imperfect theories and sentences, which contain glimpses of truth, to digested systems [...]" (1:41). Emerson proposes that an idea or thought might be a fragment but is still significant because it might reveal some truth. Therefore, Emerson's going against his own claims in a text as well as his contradictions and inconsistencies may result from his philosophical thinking that fragments might speak of truth while a system of thought might not. An idea can be easily challenged, contradicted, or replaced by an idea emerging from a later or a different context. Emerson recognizes

the value of a text that shifts and includes contradictions. Emerson nonetheless does not view language with the same philosophy. If “material bases in nature” are simply one context of words, words can obtain meanings in other contexts as well. Words thus do not have to represent nature, and Emerson’s style of writing validates this point of view.

In “Experience,” Emerson writes, “I know better than to claim any completeness for my picture. I am a fragment, and this is a fragment of me” (3:47). Fragments might contain and reveal “glimpses of truth.” This philosophy might explain what Poirier observes of Emerson’s style—that his writing often “simultaneously affirms and calls into doubt” any authority (69). Each idea or result stays valid as it contains some truth; therefore, even if it might be ready to be contradicted, questioned, or replaced by another one, it “is entitled to a certain respect.” Emerson’s style of going against his own claims shows to what extent truth can be relative and contingent. The more he affirms an idea, the more he is willing to break from it. In the end, Emerson’s style of going against his own claims in his essays suggests how much he is willing to risk established ideas, concepts, and even his own personality for the sake of being truthful. It is thus not surprising when he shows how much he appreciates the possibility of going beyond his personality in his journals. In “Historical Introduction” to Volume VIII of the *Harvard Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Ronald Bosco especially introduces the last ten years of Emerson’s life when Emerson turns to quotations and translations in his journals. In his journals, Emerson translated a piece of writing by Karl August Varnhagen von Ense, which is quoted by Bosco and later by Bilwakesh. The piece is about how one faces aging when hope is gone and the downfall is near:

We could not hold out, if we lived merely in our own personality; if our sympathies with the Universal, the intellectual, the progressive, with men & humanity did not bring us rich consolations & inspirations, which far outgo the personality. And yet, it happens that this last,

in many moments, with terrible counterpoise jerks all the
rest into the air. (176)

Therefore, thinking of what best consoles and inspires us when facing aging and death, Emerson's answer might be those which "far outgo the personality." Emerson's attempt and ability to "outgo [his] personality" resonates with the writing style in his essays—a style that allows a text to shift, to question definitions and concepts, to challenge systems of thought, and to go against himself. In the end, it is not a style contrived but a style effected, because real experimenters cannot simply aim for experiments without directly violating the basis on which the adventure is predicated. In other words, the adventure of continuous experiments occurs and persists only when the thesis that an experimenter sets forth with is firm and not experimental. Such is the dilemma for all modernists, and critics such as Friedl and Levin consider Emerson a modernist.

Harbin Institute of Technology, Shenzhen

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