

RALPH WALDO EMERSON
AND THE EVER-EVOLVING ART OF SELF-RELIANT READING

BY

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

English

December 2012

Winston-Salem, North Carolina

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My efforts and their results are dedicated to my grandmothers Irene Sauban and Jeanne Barton whose lives demonstrated the magnanimous effects of constant reading, and also to my brother William Barton who never hesitates to read from the text of the world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project and I are indebted to innumerable people for their love, support, and patience. I will always have indefatigable gratitude for my time with Eric Wilson, and for his indelible influence on my intellectual development while at Wake Forest University and in London. It must be rare that a graduate student is given the opportunity to study with a mentor whom he truly admires and looks up to, and I am cognizant of how lucky I've been. Similarly, it's difficult to express the extent of my appreciation for Omaar Hena, but it's clear that Wake is unbelievably lucky to employ him for what is certain to be a ground breaking and distinguished career in post-colonial studies. I also must thank my Cal. State professors Chad Luck, Margaret Doane, Cynthia Cotter, and Julie Sophia Paegle for preparing me for the rigors of graduate school and for their encouragement. Whatever successes this paper will accomplish are directly influenced by my nuclear and extended family, and especially my mother Yvonne Marie Sauban. It's by her example and through her monolithic support of all my endeavors that I continue to cultivate my own personal sense of Emersonian self-reliance. This project also bears the ineffaceable influence of my father Richard Barton—who pays Emerson a great compliment by embodying “Man Thinking”—and my brother William of whom I am so proud. I am also thankful for the perennial influence of my “second mother” Jill Henry, who, among countless others things, helped me discover my passion for English in high school. And it would be nearly impossible to form a catalogue of the friends who played an instrumental role in my not going insane during the drafting process, but I am so thankful for Megan, Wes, Emily, Kathleen, and Katie and my Worrellites, who were especially diligent in talking me down from the metaphorical ledge. I love you all, and thank you!

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ABSTRACT

Self-reliance is a significant component of contemporary Emerson scholarship, but few scholars have examined the way in which reading—almost unarguably Emerson’s favorite pastime—can contribute to this canonical Emersonian idea. By delineating a passage in Emerson’s journal which purports to entail the “secret” to self-reliance, I suggest that a key aspect of generating self-reliance is making your “supposed deficiencies redundancy” (Emerson, *Journals* VII: 521), which is the gradual abdication of self-doubt, and that this secret is manifest in passages that describe the act of reading throughout Emerson’s *Essays*. However, that secret—like many of Emerson’s concepts—evolves over his career and takes on new shades of meaning, and my project attempts to trace that evolution to arrive at a sketch of how reading can inform self-reliance. I use the essays “History”, “The Poet”, and “Experience” to demonstrate this evolution and also self-reliant reading’s limitations. Ultimately, I hope to suggest that it’s these very limitations that create the possibility for ethical conduct in an indeterminate world, thereby demonstrating the necessity of reading for living “the good life”.

INTRODUCTION

*Every book is a children's book
if the kid can read.*

—Mitch Hedberg

*One of the great things about books
is sometimes there are some fantastic
pictures.*

—George W. Bush,

U.S. News & World Report,

Jan. 3, 2011

Though “self-reliance” is an idea that continually appears in Emerson’s published and unpublished works, it is notoriously difficult to define. In the words of Lawrence Buell, this is most likely because “Self-Reliance is not reducible to a theology, a social theory, an epistemology, an aesthetic, an educational program,” or anything systemic in the conventional sense of the word (Buell *Emerson* 63). Indeed, the operative word in the phrase is “self,” stressing the highly personal with an emphasis on practice. In championing this doctrine, Emerson consistently points outside the text and at the reader, asking her to “believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all [people], —that is genius” (Emerson SR 121)¹. Emerson’s work only sketches a broad outline of what it means to practice self-trust, a strictly functional and unadorned map with which the reader can fill in using biographical details. Yet the self-reliant path is not an easy one. As Emerson explains in his journal—in an entry dated contemporaneously with the composition of the essay “Self-Reliance”—

¹ All references to Emerson’s individual essays, unless otherwise noted, are cited from *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*. Ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2001.

“And must I go & do some what if I would learn new secrets of Selfreliance? for my chapter is not finished. But selfreliance is precisely that secret, —to make your supposed deficiency redundancy. If I am true, the theory is, the very want of action, my very impotency shall become a greater excellency than all skill & toil” (Emerson, *Journals* VII: 521). What emerges in the published essay is the assertion that “envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that [the self-reliant individual] must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till” (Emerson SR 121). As such, self-reliance is not an exercise in perfectionism. Instead, it is about embracing your deficiencies and realizing that facing individual limitations while obeying instinct is infinitely better than mimicking the example of another. Endemic in personal shortcoming is the pith of individuality, the particularized raw material with which the subject can make her mark upon the world.

Self-reliance, then, is partially dependent upon personal deficiency, and Emerson found that the best way to exorcize those deficiencies lies in the process of reading, which was an endeavor in which he was perennially captivated. As an understudied component of self-reliance, Emersonian reading rests on—what appears to be—a foundational paradox. How is it that an essential element of cultivating self-trust waits in the careful study of other people and phenomena? Henry James is among those who have identified this paradox, and James suggests that the paradox “was because the independence that he had in his eye was an independence without ill-nature, without rudeness (though he likes that word), and full gentle amiabilities, curiosities, and tolerances” (James “Emerson” 622). James ultimately aligns this paradox as evidence

that Emerson “never really mastered the art of composition” (622), but Emerson’s use of quotation and allusion throughout his published work is more deliberate than James allows. Emerson explains in an 1837 journal entry, “The office of reading is wholly subordinate...I see & do, chiefly as it affords me new language, & power of illustration ...I get thereby a vocabulary for my ideas. I get no ideas” (Emerson, *Journals* V, 343). An idea—or a genuine thought—for Emerson, is a component of immutable, individual instinct and an aspiration towards a universal truth, but what reading does is allow the subject to make her deficiencies redundant using the words of another as a template. In another entry in the same year, Emerson goes on to say that the author

is only a more or less awkward translator of entities in your consciousness which you have also your own way of seeing, perhaps of dominating. Say then, instead of too timidly pouring into his obscure sense that he has not succeeded in rendering back to you your consciousness: he has not succeeded, now let another try. (Emerson, *Journals* V, 390)

This is the end goal of reading, for Emerson: to identify an adequate translator—a supplier of a luminous vocabulary—with whom the reader can decode her encrypted consciousness. Emerson makes this clear in the essay “Self-Reliance,” saying, “In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty” (Emerson SR 121). We read to discover that what we had once codified as our own inability now reveals itself, in another’s work, to be quite the contrary. Identifying our own alienated thoughts in a book only acknowledges a new way to say what has already been felt to be true: what once was deficient now reveals itself to be redundant.

Redundancy, here, refers to that which is simultaneously doubled and rendered unnecessary. Reading satisfies both of these conditions independently by providing the medium through which the subject can identify the remnants of her discarded thought and emotions embodied in another's text, and by implicitly dissuading her from continuing to abandon the original textures of her thought in the future. Indeed, what once appeared to be a "deficiency" of thought or character reveals itself through the act of reading to be only an idiosyncratic example of a personal, individualized vocabulary for an idea expressed differently by the author—nothing more. Emerson suggests in "Self-Reliance" that "Kingdom and lordship, power and estate are a gaudier vocabulary than private John and Edward in a small house and common day's work: but the things of life are the same to both: the sum total of both is the same" (Emerson SR 127). With the "sum total"—or, the universal sense of the idea—shown to be draped in the multitudinous textures of individualized and equally-as-viable vocabularies, there is a greater understanding that "If you are true, but not in the same truth with me, cleave to your companions; I will seek my own" (Emerson SR 131). Although it sounds like Emerson is championing exclusion, here, each reader has a common goal: truth. However, the tools that each reader uses in searching for truth are highly variable. Rather than focus on this variability, Emerson asks that the reader "do your work, and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself" (Emerson SR 124). When the reader insists on her own thought she participates in the communal search for truth in an original way, trusting that what lies underneath the individualized vocabularies of personal experience is very much the same.

There does not seem to be a monolithic interpretation lying beneath the individualized vocabularies in the contemporary Emerson scholarship, however, and my study will necessarily side with some of these voices and attempt to qualify the assertions of others. I have deliberately contextualized myself within two specific areas of scholarship: that concerning self-reliance and that concerning Emerson's theory of reading, and my project will show ultimately how the two are compatible. I offer the suggestion that a key aspect of achieving self-reliance is exorcizing the personal perception of deficiency, and thereby my study will have sympathies with the arguments in George Kateb's *Emerson and Self-Reliance* and Stanley Cavell's Emersonian perfectionism. Kateb offers a quasi-paradoxical denotation of philosophical self-reliance as a heightened sense of receptivity, and this is the "highest form of self-reliance" (Kateb *Self-Reliance* 5-6). Kateb expands on this, saying that "the readiness to treat with sympathetic understanding ideas and values that have no sympathy for one another" (Kateb *Self-Reliance* 4), is a key, underlying aspect of the concept Emerson calls "self-reliance" for shorthand. From here, Kateb launches a cogent study that imbues Emerson's intellect with a kind of Keatsian negative capability, or the ability to embrace contrast and contradiction impersonally (Kateb *Self-Reliance* 135). My interpretation of Emersonian self-reliance is similar to Kateb's, and while he uses it to make an argument for Emerson's belief in democracy, I find that implicitly characterizing self-reliance as receptivity is also useful for thinking about Emerson's love of reading. Robert D. Richardson has best captured Emerson's active receptivity in reading comprehension, saying,

When we read actively, we can profit from anything. ‘A good head cannot read amiss,’ said Emerson. ‘In every book he finds passages which seem confidences or asides, hidden from all else, and unmistakably meant for his ear. No book has worth by itself, but by the relation to what you have from many other books, it weighs.’ It was in this frame of mind that Emerson could claim: ‘It makes no difference what I read. If it is irrelevant I read it deeper. I read it until it is pertinent to me and mine, to nature and to the hour that now passes.’ (Richardson *First* 12-13)

Richardson notes elsewhere that Emerson seems to have read everything: “He glanced at thousands of books. He read carefully many hundreds that caught his attention”, and he also had subscriptions to many British and American magazines (Richardson *First* 8). Emerson’s latitudinarian taste in literature is indebted to wide ranging interests, but also the belief that the worth of any individual book is partly determined by “what you have [learned] from many other books.” In this way, through the exponential increase of inter-textual relations enabled by active reading, there is an affirmation and progress that stems from this receptivity.

This progress is, in fact, similar to Stanley Cavell’s characterization of Emersonian perfectionism, which implicitly maintains that a process similar to reading is an important aspect of attaining ideal self-hood. What distinguishes Cavell’s approach from Kateb’s, then, is that Cavell is interested in the ways in which Emerson’s work demands a self-reliant readership. Cavell theorizes that,

Emerson's turn is to make my partiality itself the sign and incentive of my siding with the next or further self, which means siding against my attained perfection (or conformity), sidings which require the recognition of an other—the acknowledgment of a relationship—in which this sign is manifest...the sense I seek to clarify is that Emerson offers his writing as representing this other for his reader. (Cavell *Handsome* 32)

Cavell assumes that an external force is necessary to inspire a subject towards perfectionism, and he maintains that Emerson's work has this propulsion at its foundation. That is, Emerson's work is unique in that it becomes an "other" against which a subject can reject her former self and side with a "sign" of some future subjectivity. Cavell's "recognition" is the examination of a text for a sign of a reader's future self, and, once identified, the reader will feel compelled to discard her "conformity" for the text in which this sign manifests itself. This is a very dynamic process without a clear conclusion, suggesting that "perfection"—as Emerson says in "Experience"—is "to find the journey's end in every step of the road" (Emerson EXP 204). Focusing on the proposed "secret" to self-reliance—which aims to make "your supposed deficiency redundancy"—is an important qualification of Emersonian perfectionism that my project will undertake implicitly. The process of discovering something to be redundant is a form of purification, where doubts about individual ability are gradually shown to be illusory. This is a gentler approach than abdicating one subjectivity for another, and this is one of the primary reasons why reading is essential for cultivating self-reliance.

In addition, a couple of intelligent studies have recently emerged which sketch interpretations of an Emersonian reading, and it is among these that my own work will humbly situate itself. Pamela Schirmeister in her psychoanalytic reading of Emerson's work suggests that "Reading...becomes an identificatory process, a kind of identification of ourselves with the one mind, or, say, a recognition of ourselves through and as that one mind" (Schirmeister *Less Legible* 70). Schirmeister's aim is to demonstrate how Emerson's work demands a third distinction somewhere between rhetoric and philosophy, but her passing observations that concern Emerson's theory of reading, as it reveals itself in the *Essays: First Series*, are acute. She also details the way in which this identificatory process is essential for self-realization, suggesting that "The self is not something there and given, but rather something arrived at interpretively, or, more precisely, a text that is always giving birth to itself through its interpretive acts" (Schirmeister *Less Legible* 73). Schirmeister's characterization of the active reader as a text is useful, as the way in which Emerson discusses reading in his early essays does resemble an inter-textual relationship rather than an organic individual engaging an artificial book. At another end of the spectrum, T.S. McMillin's *Our Preposterous Uses of Literature: Emerson and the Nature of Reading* finds that Emerson's preferred mode of reading—which is a reading that he attempted to inspire in his readers—is one that reflects the multitudinous essence of nature. Whereas Schirmeister maintains that Emersonian reading is an act of self-discovery, McMillin approaches the same issue with the assumption that,

[Texts] are lively, unstable, contradictory, and thus comparable to the text of nature or the world we survey. Hence a method of reading the results in a

conquest of a text's nature is perhaps analogous to our understanding and use ("wise" or otherwise) of nature itself. A closer look at some of the way this conquest proceeds might enable a critical method of interpretation that treats text (and nature) differently. Instead of promoting a practice of reading that masters the subject, consumes the text, and tends toward the end of interpretation, an alternative, "natural" reading would attempt a lively, responsible, continued consideration of the nature of a text in such a manner as to propagate that nature. (McMillin *Preposterous* 87)

McMillin argues against the homogenizing effects of reading to master a text and divert its qualities for the reader's benefit. Instead, the act of reading is an exploration into the kinds of things that inform "the text of nature", and a reader sensitive to this "natural reading" will make it their duty to protect the radical difference endemic to that nature.

Although Schirmeister and McMillin offer competing claims for what constitutes Emerson's theory of reading, my project will offer an overarching claim that has sympathies with both accounts while independently suggesting that Emerson's ideal reading and "self-reliance" are indelibly linked. In Emerson's work, whether reading is a quest for self-discovery or for maintaining alterity depends largely upon the way in which he defines the operations of language, and this approach evolves over the course of his career. In "History", Emerson depends upon a largely transparent notion of language that transfers easily across historical epochs, but by the time he comes to write "Experience" language is mediated, obfuscating, and insufficient. My study begins with "History" instead of Emerson's first book *Nature* to address a gap in contemporary scholarship by tracing a general trajectory of the intersections between Emerson's conception of

language, reading, and self-reliance in only the *Essays*. Additionally, starting with “History”—which is an essay that would more appropriately be titled “Reading History”—offers a more stable starting point from which to launch a precise examination of how Emerson relates to the act of reading in the middle and later parts of his career. And throughout these *Essays*, Emerson continued to maintain that the secret to self-reliance was “to make your supposed deficiency redundancy” and that this revealed itself best in the process of reading, the way in which Emerson taught and exemplified that maxim was subject to its own subtle evolution. Indeed, as Emerson became more aware that language is unable to detail univocal and monolithic representation, his pithy declaration of self-reliance came to mean different things as the words “deficiency” and “redundancy” evolved. A word as personal as “deficiency”—in Emerson’s usage—cannot help but be imbued with different denotative hues as the reader changes; the word will naturally refer to different aspects of her personality depending upon the other assumptions she finds important. Emerson’s speaker, in the published works, is no different. Though Emerson’s secret stays much the same, it comes to mean different things as Emerson becomes more aware of the multitudinous powers of language.

In *Essays: First Series*, Emerson uses the chapter “History” to explicate the secret to self-reliance in a very deliberate and straightforward way where a reader seeks the alternate vocabularies of others to illuminate the depths of her own consciousness. After identifying a luminous vocabulary of this sort, any historical or temporal separations between author and reader collapse, and the reader is ushered into a space where “what Plato has thought, he may think; what a saint has felt, he may feel; what at any time has befallen man, he can understand” (Emerson HST 105). The text becomes a

conduit for the discovery that prestigious thinkers in that past have had access to the same mental facilities and ideas as the present day reader, which garners the realization that “[the old thinkers] were virtuous: did they wear out virtue? As great a stake depends on your private act to-day, as followed their public and renowned steps. When private men shall act with original views, the lustre will be transferred from the actions of kings to those of gentlemen” (Emerson SR 127). No thinker has held a monopolized and privileged relationship with the universe, so this cannot account for the insufficient way we understand texts where “our reading is mendicant and sycophantic” (Emerson SR 127). The reader, then, is not personally “deficient” and acknowledging the ways in which her thought has been doubled in ancient tomes charges her with the duty to trust the original textures of her own thought. At the same time, however, this early essay operates with the assumption that language is mostly transparent, and that it is possible for an ancient thinker’s ideas to appear before a modern reader’s sensibilities with their original intent unscathed. Additionally, with claims like, “A man is the whole encyclopedia of facts” (Emerson HST 105), Emerson also consistently characterizes the reader as a text, and these are important undercurrents in determining how this redundancy functions. As such, in “History”, an active reader is able to discover intensely personal edification in books because the reader and the book are of the same medium, and the best way to characterize Emerson’s early theory of reading is a fluxional, intertextual relationship between reader and physical text.

But Emerson simply did not uphold this characterization of reading for long, and tracing the way in which it will come to evolve over the course of the *Essays* is essential for positing a sketch of Emerson’s general theory of reading. By time he comes to write

“The Poet”, it is clear that Emerson is not writing with the same faith in the illimitable transferability of language across historical epochs. At this point, however, it would be too strong to suggest that Emerson does not trust language and what it is able to signify; instead, “The Poet” demonstrates how Emerson has simply put his faith in a different aspect of language by characterizing his ideal creative writer as a reader instead. As such, the secret to self-reliance continues to undergird this essay, but the way in which Emerson now understands the word “deficiency” has changed. Where “deficiency” once alluded to a possible short-coming in the reader’s ability to create intellectually stimulating ideas in the shadow of the colossal influence of previous thinkers, it now alludes to the relationship Emerson’s ideal reader has with language in general. Emerson maintains that “poetry was written before time was”, and that the poet’s chief office is to read and interpret the natural phenomena of poetry using a flawed “secondary version” of language (Emerson TP 185, 190). Though the primordial language—what Emerson calls “fossil poetry”—has long since been forgotten, the poet attempts to reaffix the forgotten image that inspired the ideal word with the secondary and deficient use of the word which we are capable of using. The poet is a fixer, and she uses her expression to piece together the forgotten shards of fossil poetry. Throughout the essay, Emerson expresses doubt as to whether or not the poet could ever accurately represent the ideal image that inspired the first usage of a word, but, curiously enough, Emerson celebrates this inevitability rather than despairing. He still maintains that the “Poets are thus liberating gods” (Emerson TP 193), for their expression has the ability to shock other readers out of their cognitive slumber by simply rummaging through the historical annals and forming an interpretation of a forgotten image. In this way, a poet makes her own deficiencies—

or the inevitable gaps present in a “fallen” language—redundant by superseding the commonly held denotation of a word with her own expression. For Emerson, this not only fosters self-reliance in the poet, but in those the poet converses with as well.

Yet by the time Emerson comes to write “Experience”—his great essay on personal loss—he becomes entirely cognizant that there are too many possible meanings endemic in each word, forcing him to admit that “we live admit surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them” (Emerson EXP 204). Indeed, Emerson in this essay is entirely aware that there are whole languages—here, the language of grief—that he does not have access to, for he describes being unable to properly grieve for his son in a meaningful way. Emerson discovers that Waldo’s death “does not touch [him]: something which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar” (Emerson EXP 200). However, what is unique about the essay is that Emerson is still attempting to foster self-reliance in himself and in his reader, though it is clear that what he means by “deficiency” has subtly evolved. Emerson attempts to describe whole worlds of experience that he does not have access to, which inevitably results in gaps between word and thing. At the same time, however, the form of the work—diction and syntax, specifically— independently pushes to the limits of signification to attempt to encapsulate intensely personal and phenomenal emotions in language. Try as he may, Emerson is largely unable to represent the rigors of mourning in language, but the resulting linguistic gaps are sites of potential rather than defeat. These gaps, which are emblemized in the form of the essay, create an avenue for the reader to play an integral role in the content of the work. Indeed, the suspension between mutually exclusive

senses of a single word, phrase, or syntactical particularity cannot last as the act of reading concretizes one denotation or interpretation over another, if only for a short time. In this way, “Experience” is not so different from “History” or “The Poet,” as a primary function of the essay is to encourage active reading—an essential aspect of becoming self-reliant. But, here, the tone is different, despite Emerson’s attempt at an optimistic conclusion. For “Experience” dramatizes the limitations of even the most self-reliant of readers, as we must accept the possibility that the true pith of the essay’s emotional turmoil is inaccessible. The gaps in the essay’s language are invitations for the active reader to lend her biographical detail and subsequently re-envision the essay as a whole. In other words, Emerson uses the form of his essay to invite the reader to make the work’s “deficiency”—which should to be understood in a very general, capacious sense of the word—redundant as the reader plays an active role in the text. But the gaps can never be entirely filled in, as the most potent of Emerson’s assertions in the essay is that what appears as linguistic signification is really just a marker of absence, of that which is unrepresentable. To be truly self-reliant is to accept this possibility and consider a new vocabulary for that absence, rather than demand the presence of a new idea.

Reading with self-reliance does not deconstruct a text, but rather lovingly obliterates it. Actively lending our biographical detail to fill in the semantic gaps endemic in any book simultaneously renders the original illegible while destroying barriers between author and reader in favor of the universal sense of the idea. At the same time, however, it is the reader’s duty to recognize when an author has gone where she cannot follow—as is the case in “Experience”—and allow that some experiences are best signified outside the realms of language. Emerson kept his avid reading interests

throughout his literary career and, towards the end of his life in 1867, he still detailed the importance of cultivating self-reliance in conjunction with his favorite past time:

I suppose every old scholar has had the experience of reading something in a book which was significant to him, but which he could never find again. Sure he is that he read it there; but no one else ever read it, nor can he find it again, though he buys the book, and ransack every page. (Emerson, *Journals*, 320)

Of all the passages in Emerson's journals, this one is, perhaps, the most unexpectedly bitter-sweet. While the experience he details sadly portends the catastrophic memory loss that would afflict him towards the end of his life, it also offers a kind of model for, what he found to be, an ideal mode of reading. This entry offers two contrasting interpretations, but both work to exemplify an idea that I will pursue in defining the ideal Emersonian reader. The literal interpretation of this passage suggests that Emerson has ratified and assimilated the work of another writer into his own thought and has simply forgotten its origin. However, this passage also leaves the possibility open that Emerson is attributing an original thought to some "forgotten" author and searches in vain for the text in which it first appeared. When we read in an Emersonian fashion and with self-reliance, similar difficulties inevitably present themselves. However, the intimate and active role that we play as readers of whole histories of thought in text—where the work is vivified and our experiences are ratified—is the key to fostering self-reliance in ourselves and in others, for the illusory deficiencies we thought we saw in ourselves or in the external world have been made redundant.

CHAPTER ONE

“THE WHOLE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF FACTS”:

TRANSPARENT LANGUAGE, INTERTEXTUAL SUBJECTIVITY, AND IDEAL READING IN “HISTORY”

*It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so
many generations hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
Just as you any one of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd.
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the
bright flow, I was refresh'd,
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift
current, I stood and yet was hurried,
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the
thick-stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd.*

—Walt Whitman, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”

In 1839 and 1840, Emerson fills his journals with questions and ideas about how to foster genuine self-reliance. Yet, in his notebooks from this period, his passion for an intellectual independence and self-sufficiency is primarily focused on relationships cultivated with physical texts. Specifically, Emerson finds himself detailing the connections and intersections between original thought and history. This interest implicitly involves a question of origin: does the individual give meaning to history, or is the true content of individual action teleological and referentially determined by the course of history? The relationship between history and the individual is intricate and involves many factors, but Emerson will argue primarily for the former in his essay “History”. Emerson finds that, “It is not by running after Napoleon that the corresponding element, the Napoleonism in you, is stimulated & matured; but by withdrawing from him, from all, back on the deeps of Home” (Emerson, *Journals* VII,

176). “Home,” here, refers to immutable personal instinct, with “Napoleonism” alluding to the manifestation and the credibility that is lent to that instinct. This is all held in distinction from “Napoleon,” who in the context of this entry represents traditional historical annals. By the time Emerson comes to write “History,” however, there is greater acknowledgment of the ways in which history and individual action mutually inform one another. History is shown to be essential for the education of man, as “Man is explicable by nothing less than all his history”, yet “the [personal] thought is always prior to the fact; all the facts of history preexist in the mind as laws” (Emerson HST 105). The relationship between the two is complicated, as an individual—a “part”—is regularly characterized as encompassing the whole of historical narrative.

Discovering the details of the relationship between a reader and history is important for Emerson, but he also made sure that the first entry of his *Essays: First Series* was imbued with what he found to be the secret to self-reliance: “to make your supposed deficiencies redundancy” (Emerson, *Journals* VII: 521). Emerson’s use of the word “redundancy”, instead of the adjective “redundant”, highlights how dynamic this process is, suggesting that the process of discovering your inabilities to be illusory is a never ending procession. And at this stage in Emerson’s epistemological development, nothing proves this secret more efficiently and completely than reading history. Emerson’s ostensible reason for this suggestion is that reading often reveals to the reader the discarded scraps of her own thought exhumed and dressed in the vocabulary and syntax of some previous thinker. If the reader reads actively, she will find that “[i]n every work of genius, we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than

this” (Emerson SR 121). Indeed, for Emerson, a great book convinces its reader to never to discard her original thought for fear that the idea’s rough semantic texture will prove to be embarrassing, and a work of genius will supply its own luminous vocabulary for the service of polishing up her idea. It is this discovery of another aesthetic vocabulary in the work of some previous thinker that renders the reader’s original idea—which may have been adjudicated as inferior—redundant, but this doubling assures the reader of the quality of her own thought, and in the future this will become another piece of evidence resounding to “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string” (Emerson SR 121). If not, “tomorrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another” (Emerson SR 121).

But asking about the inner workings of this kind of reading still remains, and the answers are revealing for the way in which self-reliance and Emerson’s theory of language will come to evolve over the course of his *Essays*. Indeed, for these early essays Emerson assumes that the use and intent of language—as it appeared thousands of years ago—has remained mostly transparent to contemporary readers. By claiming that, through reading, and “By surrounding ourselves with the original circumstances, we invent anew the orders and the ornaments of architecture” (Emerson HST 111), Emerson makes the curious claim that the ideal reader could surround herself with the exact same conditions as they appear to her in literature. If it were possible for these “original circumstances” to present themselves, the reader would have to assume that the words she reads have been exempt from semantic narrowing and widening over the course of thousands of years, which simply cannot be the case. The word “terrific”, for example,

does not mean the same thing now as it did in the early 16th century; instead, the word that now denotes “an enthusiastic term of commendation” once meant “causing terror” (OED), suggesting that the passing of time does, in fact, alter the meaning of words. Further, a slightly older Emerson in “The Poet” is entirely cognizant of the fact that words weaken and change meaning over time. However, the idea that we inherit the language we use from a much older generation persists in Emerson’s thought even into his old age. In “Quotation and Originality” he claims that “It is inevitable that you are indebted to the past. You are fed and formed by it...Our knowledge is the amassed thought and experience of innumerable minds: our language, our science, our religion, our opinions, our fancies we inherited” (Emerson QO 329). This is, of course, true; but, for Emerson, there is a greater sense of causality between ancient word choice and his own usage, and “History” best exemplifies this early assumption.

If an author’s words are rendered denotatively and connotatively transparent, nothing precludes the reader from assimilating them into her consciousness as if they were her own, thereby doubling and exorcizing her illusory intellectual deficiency. In addition, if Emerson’s conception of the relationship between ancient and modern language is uncomplicated, communicative, and cumulative, then throughout “History” Emerson stresses that these qualities belong to the very fabric of the universe as well. He maintains that

There is a relation between the hours of our life and the centuries of time. As the air I breathe is drawn from the great repositories of nature, as the light on my book is yielded by a star a hundred millions of miles distant, as the poise of my body depends on the equilibrium of centrifugal and centripetal forces, so the

hours should be instructed by the ages, and the ages explained by the hours.
(Emerson HST 105).

As such, the essay “History” operates with an assumption that Emerson explicitly detailed in his book *Nature*, which is that “words are signs of natural facts” (Emerson NTR 35), and these facts do not change over millennia but only reveal themselves to those who seek them out through reading. Indeed, “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” (Emerson NTR 35). And these material appearances do not change substantially over time. The air we have to breathe has been available for centuries and the light with which we see has been millions of years in transit, and these analogies are instructive and illuminating for Emerson. What remains constant through the ages is “This dependence of language upon nature, this conversion of an outward phenomenon into a type or somewhat in human life, never loses its power to affect us” (Emerson NTR 36). The ancient image that once inspired the modern usage of a word remains embedded and traceable for those willing to conduct the investigation, and throughout “History” Emerson tracks the journey of certain words by relying upon their etymological root or ancient usage to better inform the conclusions for which he argues.²

² Here, Phillip Gura’s suggestion that Emerson’s use of language is indebted to a larger, nineteenth century compositional pursuit to reveal the indelible connection between language and nature in order to elevate language’s potential beyond mere sensory experience is an interesting point of resonance (Gura *Wisdom* 94). Similarly, James Warren’s *Culture of Eloquence* painstakingly details the transcendentalist’s debts to thinkers like Jacob Boehme for the idea of “Adamic naming,” which formally posits an ineluctable bond between the power of language and nature (Warren *Culture* 30-51). These studies further my contention that Emerson uses language in “History” in such a way as to inspire transparent resonances with etymological roots and past usages by conducting similar analyses of Emerson’s language in relation to experiential, extra-linguistic, and mythic sources.

Words retain their central meaning as they are handed down to a new generation of careful speakers and writers, which establishes a strong, communicative and transferable quality at the core of language. But language is also communicative in that it will conjure up the same emotion in an immediate sense, as the connotation of the word more or less transfers just as well as the denotation. Regardless of the historical epoch in which the word appears, the reader inherits these assumptions, and this linguistic translucency vivifies an author's words, for "[w]e assume that we under like influence should be alike affected, and should achieve the like; and we aim to master intellectually [sic] the steps, and reach the same height or the same degradation that our fellow, our proxy has done" (Emerson HST 108). Emerson's emphasis on "affect" in this passage connotes the repetition of an individualized response to some idea or natural phenomenon, and there is solace in knowing that a great historical thinker and the reader have the same ability to respond to these stimuli. This also inspires Emerson's belief that just as there is "one mind common to all individual men" (Emerson HST 105), there is also a universal heart, or emotional control center, in which all people are implicated. For Emerson, this transfer successfully characterizes any ancient author—pending that the reader has ratified those words with her own experiences—as a representative and a substitute for the reader, which suggests that the reader and the author can be said to use the same words in exactly the same way with thousands of years of temporal separation in tow. This conclusion is implied in his paradoxical phrase "individual men", which couples the etymological root *indivīdūm*, or "indivisible" and "inseparable" (OED), with the plurality and separation endemic in the grammatical object "men." The act of

reading, then, finds what remains indivisible in the face of thousands of years of temporal division.

This assumption about the illimitable and unsullied transferability of language from an ancient generation to a modern day audience does not reflect a naiveté in Emerson's intellect, but has more to do with the way in which he deciphered subjectivity in *Essays: First Series*. Indeed, a discussion of Emerson's theory of reading and the way it helps foster self-reliance should also track the way in which the general conception of "self" evolves over the course of Emerson's published work. With an idea as tortuous as "self-reliance", focusing on a major component of the enigmatic first half of the compound noun will shed some light on the relationship between a reader and text. And throughout the essay "History", Emerson consistently personifies the "self" using textual qualities rather than human characteristics. It is this textual quality of human subjectivity that clues the reader into "the philosophical perception of identity through endless mutations of form, [which] makes him know the Proteus. What else am I who laughed or wept yesterday, who slept last night like a corpse, and this morning stood and ran? And what see I on any side but the transmigrations of Proteus?" (Emerson HST 116). These transmigrations are contextual and always in flux, though there is an underlying quality that remains immutable throughout. Proteus can assume the ostensible shape of anything he chooses, but he is still Proteus at a fundamental level.

As such, the contextual variations that affect a textual subjectivity do enact a forward progress for an underlying quality in the reader, and Emerson will call this quality "wisdom" in the essay "History." With a word as definitive as "wisdom" as an end goal, it is clear that although Emerson codifies identity as largely contextual, that

does not necessarily lead to relativism, where the entirety of the reader is determined by relational cues. Instead, the reader's subjectivity is detailed as a physical text, and reading other historical texts actively is the best way to uncover this ontological fact. Emerson declares that, "The student is to read history actively and not passively; to esteem his own life the text, and the books the commentary" (Emerson HST 107). Though the reader is a distinct text herself, she can enact a personal progression by engaging the catalogue of commentary—here, historical texts—which wait to be vivified through the reader's extra-literary experiences and opinions. In this way, "All literature writes the character of the wise man. Books, monuments, pictures, conversation, are portraits in which he finds the lineaments he is forming. The silent and the eloquent praise him, and accost him, and he is stimulated wherever he moves by personal allusion" (Emerson HST 107). Emerson uses the word "writes" to detail the way in which a reader gathers new observations from books to interpret her own understanding of the world. Additionally, Emerson employs the word "text", here, with transparent resonances with the Latin etymological root *textus*, which literally translates to "that which is woven" (OED). The verb "writes" connotes the way in which this weaving adds to a reader's subjectivity, for a book is described as a kind of anthropomorphized mirror capable of a reproving silence or a laudatory exclamation. And though Emerson seems to suggest that the end result of this writing is a static, unchanging "text", this text is already bound up in the dynamic process of weaving. Even the process of searching a historical book of "commentary" is physicalized into a movement that a reader enacts by tracing the hues of personal allusion she finds within the book.

By allowing herself to be “written” through her active reading, a self-reliant reader becomes a compact compendium of experience and knowledge—with her hesitations about the quality of her thought being doubled and rendered unnecessary. This doubling encourages the generation of a whole new network of relations, which a reader forges and exemplifies with each original action. When we read with self-reliance, we discover that “A man is the whole encyclopedia of facts. The creation of a thousand forests is in one acorn, and Egypt, Greece, Rome, Gaul, Britain, America lie folded already in the first man. Epoch after epoch, camp, kingdom, empire, republic, democracy, are the application of his manifold spirit to the manifold world” (Emerson HST 105). Emerson characterizes his ideal reader of history as a comprehensive text—an encyclopedia—which is etched with only the relevant information about everything in nature and waits “folded” as if it were made of literal paper. At the same time, however, the word “encyclopedia” is etymologically derived from the Greek phrase “an encyclical education” (OED), and this cyclicity is a very dynamic and evolving process unlike what a physical text can offer. Emerson purposively imbues his reader with this tension, for when we discover that, “There is nothing but is related to us, nothing that does not interest us—kingdom, college, tree, horse or iron shoe, the roots of all things are in man” (Emerson HST 111), we are inspired to “unfold” and apply the original textures of our opinions to the template of a historical text. This “unfolding” is contingent upon a test: “We must in ourselves see the necessary reason of every fact—see how it could and must be” (108). Pending this requirement, a self-reliant reader will find that, “He, too, shall pass through the whole cycle of experience. He shall collect into a focus the rays of nature. History shall no longer be a dull book. It shall walk incarnate in every just and

wise man” (Emerson HST 119). Here, Emerson’s language exemplifies the transparency between ancient and more contemporary language by paralleling phrases that, etymologically, are indelibly linked to one another. “An encyclopedia of facts”, for example, is “an encyclical education” of things that are “made” (OED), which resonates deeply with an ideal reader passing “through the whole cycle of experience.” In both regards, Emerson calls for a mode of reading that embodies itself in the flesh of the reader, and he even suggests that this should be evident in her demeanor. He points out that “Men imagine that they communicate their virtue or vice only by overt actions and do not see that virtue or vice emit a breath every moment” (Emerson HST 125), and the same should be true for those who read with self-reliance. Indeed, just as a good writer “shows” her reader a concept or image rather than simply telling it to them, there is something unique about the textual element of our subjectivity that generates novel relations with those we interact with, where both parties are modified after the exchange.

In Emerson’s early essays, then, a discussion of subjectivity inevitably intersects with a theory of intertextuality and this has interesting implications for what Emerson believes to be the ever-evolving canon of historical narrative. When we read actively, we become history and we reshape all of the history that has come before us because we are, in some sense of the word, also a shapeable text. We only come into contact with a curious part-whole fallacy when we strictly consider the possibility of a solely organic entity encompassing and exemplifying the entirety of an inorganic text. The very designs of this hypothetical process raises the problem of just how text and the individual are supposed to be synthesized together with each playing an equal part in the newly generated whole of historical thought and action. Yet it is not clear that Emerson intends

this process to be so complicated. He makes it clear in these essays that “men and women are only half human” (Emerson HST 117), and he is purposively ambiguous as to whatever the other half may be, for that is left to the discretion of an active reader bent on garnering self-reliance. Nevertheless, “History” works to lay the foundation for an ontology of the ideal reader—though this ontology will evolve over the course of Emerson’s published work—while simultaneously exemplifying the ways in which that reader is in a privileged position to reap the benefits of self-reliance.

Emerson will claim later in the essay “Spiritual Laws” that “A man is a method, a progressive arrangement; a selecting principle, gathering his like to him, wherever he goes. He takes only his own, out of the multiplicity that sweeps and circles around him” (Emerson SL 154), which is useful in thinking about how earlier Emerson’s belief in the transparency of language and active reading work together to create the basis for an intertextual subjectivity. If the progressive aspect of a man is like a woven text, then,

The advancing man discovers how deep a property he has in literature, —in all fable as well as in all history. He finds that the poet was no odd fellow who described strange and impossible situations, but that universal man wrote by his pen a confession true for one and true for all. His own secret biography he finds in lines wonderfully intelligible to him, dotted down before he was born.

(Emerson HST 115)

The self-reliant reader discovers that there is never only an individual text—whether it be a person or an actual book—and that the markers of division we erect between texts is

largely arbitrary. Though he wrote over a hundred years earlier, Emerson would largely agree with Michel Foucault's assertion in *Archaeology of Knowledge* that suggests,

The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network... The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands... Its unity is variable and relative. (Foucault *Archaeology of Knowledge* 25-26)

Foucault is interested in advancing his claim independent of a reader or author, but for Emerson this would elide the highly personal quality of this process. People can be woven into this progression through active reading, for the reader's own "secret biography" is a text implicated in this network. And where Foucault implies a distinct part-whole hierarchy between "node" and "network", Emerson's active reader transcends this holistically by embodying the whole of historical narrative, and both part and whole are enlarged in simultaneity as a result. This subtle modification to Foucault's theory of intertextuality fails to adequately capture Foucault's original intent, and a better analogy exists to help explicate Emerson's organic and fluxional by comparison.

Emerson does not shy away from the natural, textual qualities of the individual in these essays, which posits the pith of individuality as highly contextual; moreover, the way in which history and this quality of individuality inform each other in "History" is remarkably similar to the way in which a new classic is said to enter the cannon of literature in T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent". Eliot holds that each new

work of literature is simultaneously distinct and independent while also being an integral part of a web of relations with every other work of literature in that language. He advances that,

The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. (Eliot "Tradition" 101)

Eliot professes that his focus is on writing, and there does not seem to be any causal link of influence that would relegate his idea as an offshoot of Emerson's theory of active reading. Nevertheless, the similarities between the two are remarkable, and this is largely because Emerson's active reading *creates* something—a kind of intertextual connection between reader and history—in the same way as the addition of a new physical text transmogrifies the English canon by modifying its relations so as to accommodate the new member. Eliot continues by calling this process "the historical sense", explaining,

We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own

generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity. (Eliot "Tradition" 100)

Eliot's nomenclature is distinct from Emerson's, but the way in which Eliot's "traditional writer" transcends the fetters of time has deep sympathies with the primary result of Emerson's active reading.³ Emerson declares that,

When a thought of Plato become a thought to me, —when a truth that fired the soul of Pindar fires mine, time is no more. When I feel that we two meet in a perception that our two souls are tinged with the same hue, and do, as it were, run into one, why should I measure degrees of latitude, why should I count Egyptian years? (Emerson HST 114)

That confluent "one" Emerson describes is analogous to Eliot's modified cannon; it is the realization that the reader can participate in and vivify the universal mind, the "one mind common to all individual men" (Emerson HST 105). When this is achieved,

³ Most of T.S. Eliot's work is decidedly un-Romantic and is at odds with Emerson's because Eliot curtails the same poetic agency that Emerson, in places, affirms. Nevertheless, Eliot's conception of the time, which he likely formulated under the influence of the early 20th century phenomenologist Henri Bergson, maintains the presentness of the past, and time as an ever-present whole rather than a series of discrete units. And this theory of time has Romantic resonances, as Eliot critic Terry Fairchild implies by suggesting that, "[b]y merging past, present, and future he creates the eternal present, absolute and relative, never changing and always fleeting, captured in time like the lovers on Keats' urn for future unborn generations" (Fairchild 53).

the reader becomes a part that has encompassed the whole, for “[w]hat Plato has thought, he may think; what a saint has felt, he may feel; what any time has befallen any man, he can understand. Who hath access to this universal mind, is a party to all that is or can be done, for this is the only and sovereign agent” (Emerson HST 105). By using the word “party”, Emerson makes it clear that whoever gains access to the universal mind will be both “a division of the whole” and multicolored and variegated, as his usage of the word is informed equally by both denotations (OED). The two definitions work together to convey the complex intertextual relationship between the active reader and the annals of history, for with the former definition, the presence of a kind of hierarchy is clear. The individual can only take a fractional role in the multifarious hues of the universal mind, so the text must come before the reader. But for the latter, the presence of a hierarchy is not clear, for the individual can be said to *be* an instantiation of the universal, uniquely colored as she is, and as such it is not clear whether the reader or the text actually comes first. Therefore, the double denotation of “party” imbues the subject of the sentence with a blending of particular and universal that is requisite for making “History fluid and true, and Biography deep and sublime” (Emerson HST 112). Emerson alludes to this blend using the form of the passage, as the pronoun “he” is ambiguous, and, in the phrase “[w]hat Plato has thought, he may think”, “he” refers to both the reader and Plato. This syntactic peculiarity is an externalization of Emerson’s contention that “[w]hen I feel that we two meet in a perception...[we] run into one”, and it demonstrates how, with time evaporated, the two textual subjectivities are shown to be part of a larger whole.

However, Emerson’s “confluence” is never totally actualized to the extent where the sources of the participating factors would be erased and melded into one. Individual

identity still remains, even though it is clear that a large part of that subjectivity subsists with the textual relations in which it is a part. What remains for an original contribution to identity are the external factors that the individual places herself in of her own volition.

Emerson explains that,

along with the civil and metaphysical history of man, another history goes daily forward—that of the external world, —in which he is not less strictly implicated.

He is the compend of time: he is also the correlative of nature. His power consists in the multitude of his affinities, in the fact that his life is intertwined with the

whole chain of organic and inorganic being. (Emerson HST 118)

Philosopher John T. Lysaker has taken this passage as indicative of Emerson's conviction that "[w]e exist through what we are not. Non-self forces ...constitute us, e.g., the books we read, the historical period to which we are born, our town, climate, and so forth" (Lysaker "Relentless" 157). While partly true, Emerson's use of the word "affinities" suggests a more complex relationship between self and non-self forces, which is better described as a site of negotiation rather than a one way street. "Affinity" does suggest an intimate relationship but only between two entities which are capable of being considered independently. Indeed, it is this "other" history that Emerson mentions, which a reader cannot find in other texts, is an essential part of subjectivity, as it is the untreated canvas on which self-reliance and active reading decorate. Indeed, for Emerson, "A man is a bundle of relations, a knot of roots, whose flower and fruitage is the world" (Emerson HST 118). Although the reader is described as a text who is indelibly shaped by other texts, she still maintains an individuality through her contribution to the external world. She accomplishes this by opening herself up to be read by others. In so doing, she

simultaneously expands the catalogue of relational affinities she is bound up in, and projects the experiences she has vivified in other texts out into the world. This “projection” is what Emerson means with the suggestion that the reader is “also the correlative of nature”, and careful observers will be able to sense “where” the person has travelled by the way in which they conduct themselves in public. For such a reader, “You shall not tell me by languages and titles a catalogue of the volumes you have read. You shall make me feel what periods you have lived” (Emerson HST 119). This feeling—which is garnered with the observation of a reader who has encompassed and exemplified the annals of history—can also foster self-reliance in the observer, who may find her deficiencies made redundant in the actions of another practicing self-trust. The conduct of such a person should be evident, for,

A man shall be the Temple of Fame. He shall walk, as the poets have described that goddess, in a robe painted all over with wonderful events and experiences; — his own form and features by their exalted intelligence shall be that variegated vest...He shall be the priest of Pan and bring with him into humble cottage the blessing of the morning stars and all the recorded benefits of heaven and earth.
(Emerson HST 119)

A person who has absorbed the annals of history will wear them like a flowing and glorious garment that makes the end of his form and the beginning of robe indistinguishable. As such, the reader cannot help but bring these experiences along with her, wearing the histories of the earth and the stars for others to read themselves.

And it is in the spirit of reading the character of another that has achieved a kind of self-reliance that Emerson offers his concluding thought in the essay “History”, where it is clear that he himself has been inspired by the character of his ideal, creative reader. In the first place, Emerson imbeds an example of the conduct he expects of such a reader as he employs the myth of Antæus to dramatize the necessity of increasing perception of the natural world by asserting, “man is the broken giant, and in all his weakness, both his body and his mind are invigorated by habits of conversation with nature” (Emerson HST 116). What Emerson sees in this latter example is not a remote Grecian myth written in antiquity and dutifully maintained by scholars of classical languages despite the amateur reader’s apathy. Instead, the fable detailing the invulnerability of a giant when in contact with his mother—the earth—and his subsequent demise at the hands of Hercules is only the frame with which the active reader of history need provide the picture from her immediate experience. Just as Emerson interprets Antæus, so is the reader to interact with the whole of historical narrative. But Emerson goes even further than just including a single example of the kind of reading he expects, and he begins to conclude his essay by making his expectations clear to his reader. He declares that,

Broader and deeper we must write out annals—from an ethical reformation, from an influx of the ever new, ever sanative conscience, —if we would trulier express our central and wide-related nature, instead of this old chronology or selfishness and pride to which we have too long lent our eyes. (Emerson HST 120)

So long as there are people vivifying and donning the thoughts and actions of ancient and modern thinkers, history is still being written. The addition of an active reader into the cannon of history grows and grafts healing, sinewy relations between the old and the

new, collapsing temporal distinctions favor of a universal sense of the idea. With chronology and its supposed distance between author and reader ousted, it becomes difficult to be “selfish” or entertain the supposition that the individual is elevated above and exists separately from others. “It is remarkable that involuntarily we always read as superior beings” (Emerson HST 106), but it simply is not the case, nor would it be in our best interest. The secret to individuality is “wide-related”, and hints are all around us in once forgotten tomes.

As it is portrayed in “History”, then, reading is an essential component of generating self-reliance and inspiring it in others, for it best reveals the enigmatic details of selfhood. Reading accomplishes this by utilizing the transparency of language to break down the temporal barriers between author and reader. And it is this faith in the illimitable transferability of language across historical epochs that ultimately exemplifies Emerson’s secret of self-reliance as he understood it while he was writing the first chapter of his *Essays: First Series*. When we identify a thought that we created using the depth of our own experiences reflected in the work of another, it is the exact same idea, as time and distance cannot affect this similarity. As a result, whatever supposed “deficiency” a reader discovered in her own thought that caused her to abandon the idea is found to be illusory, for that same idea can be found again and again during a careful perusal of history. Immediately, this process also reveals the myriad of intertextual links between the individual—whose character demonstrates the plasticity and highly contextual qualities of a physical book—and history, and both benefit greatly and grow from these connections. Indeed, what was once considered “deficient” has been shown to be “redundant”: both repeated and unnecessary. A reader who acknowledges this is

transformed and wears her experiences like a robe indistinguishable from her being, and this inspires others—like Emerson at the end of the essay—to demand self-reliance for themselves. The only way history can be written “broader and deeper” is through the addition of new readers, who can expand the web of textual relations simply by joining and can deepen the idea itself by becoming supporting evidence.

However, Emerson’s conception of the functionality of language begins to evolve from complete transparency towards something slightly opaque but vastly more capacious by the time he begins drafting his *Essays: Second Series*. And although Emerson will still continue to detail the mechanics of his intertextual subjectivity in the other chapters of *First Series*, once he begins to rely on a different understanding of the ways in which language works his ideas about reading and self-reliance also evolve and progress. In “Spiritual Laws”, for example, Emerson begins to attribute qualities of his ideal reader to the figure of “the poet”, and this is symptomatic of his developing understanding that the ideal reader is also a writer in that she takes previous stagnant ideas and makes vivifies them through her privileged relationship with language. Language is no longer transparent, but is rather broken and in need of fixing. Curiously, the process of fixing language has the same transformative powers for the subject as the strictly textual relationship does as it is detailed in “History”, for

If the poet write a true drama, then he is Caesar, and not the player of Caesar; then the self-same strain of thought, emotion as pure, wit as subtle, motions as swift, mounting, extravagant, and a heart as great, self-sufficing, dauntless, which on the waves of its love and hope can uplift all that is reckoned solid and precious in the world, —marking its own incomparable worth by the slight it casts on these gauds

of men, —these are all his, and by the power of these he rouses the nations.

(Emerson SL 162)

There is something unique about the act of writing that elevates the poet to the post of an emperor, who then has the ability to awaken the sleeping giants. Indeed, it is the ability to repair misused diction and rotting metaphors, and “to sweep and scour will instantly appear supreme and beautiful actions, the top and radiance of human life, and all people will get mops and brooms...and that is now the flower and head of all living nature” (Emerson SL 162). Emerson’s poet, as it will be made clear in the essay of that name, only assumes this post after having demonstrated active reading, though what he means by that idea has become more capacious than before. As such, Emerson’s secret to self-reliance remains the same, but it is informed in novel ways by Emerson’s growing theory of language and identity. He even foreshadows this development in the very last line of “History” where he maintains that, “The idiot, the Indian, the child, and unschooled farmer’s boy, stand nearer the light by which nature is to be read than the dissector or the antiquary” (Emerson HST 120). What the idiot, Indian, and the child possess that the academic reader—who privileges analysis to the detriment of synthesis—does not is a clearer sense of vision that exhumes the secrets of nature by revealing the network of connections it shares with the whole chain of organic and inorganic beings. It is this process of seeing—of inspired vision as the ideal mode of reading—that characterizes Emerson’s “poet” above all else, and this has interesting implications for the development of self-reliance in the subject.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CENTUPLE MEANINGS OF EVERY SENSUOUS FACT: “THE POET”, LINGUISTIC INFINITUDE, AND READING THE EXTERNAL WORLD

During my first years in the Sierra I was ever calling on everybody within reach to admire them, but I found no one half warm enough until Emerson came. I had read his essays, and felt sure that of all men he would best interpret the sayings of these noble mountains and trees.

—John Muir, “Emerson in Yosemite Valley”

Though its title suggests otherwise, “The Poet” is primarily concerned with active reading as opposed to just creative writing. Throughout the essay Emerson claims that both the reader and the writer are necessary for the creation of a literary work, and this parallel is a clear invitation to the reader to supplement a text with her own biographical information. Yet the terms of this parallel, which Emerson detailed as primarily concerning reader and text in “History”, have evolved to be more capacious by the time Emerson comes to write *Essays: Second Series*. With “The Poet” Emerson explicitly acknowledges a multiplicity of relations—far greater, in fact, than what he maintained in “History”—held between subject and object, and the most beautiful subjectivity is informed by the most possible relations and meanings. Indeed, “the highest minds of the world have never ceased to explore the double meaning, or, shall I say, the quadruple, or the centuple, or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact” (Emerson TP 184). Yet Emerson develops this possibility even further in the essay by purposively abstracting the poet to a process of seeing rather than a description of a concrete individual. As a result, Emerson’s theory of reading in this essay has evolved from a

strictly textual relationship to something much broader and experiential, where the poet is characterized as “reading” the natural environment. This is subtly different than what he maintained in “History”, where the reader is a text dually implicated, but separately, in an intertextual realm and in the external world. As Emerson publishes work that moves away from the assumption that language is not transparent, it becomes evident that there are natural gaps in language that allow for degrees of meaning that Emerson had not previously envisioned.

“The Poet” celebrates these gaps in language as the necessary conditions for transcending an “individual set of relations” and ushering those who read like a poet into a realm where “the world is nothing, the man is all” (Emerson “American Scholar” 68). Ironically, the greater number of gaps that Emerson recognizes between word and thing, the more capacious his theory of active reading becomes. By elevating reading into a process of seeing—which the poet is in a privileged position to accomplish—Emerson takes the two separate offices that defined his active reader in “History” and melds them together. The reader is no longer simply a text in the external world; instead, the reader is a text with the external world. That is, the reader no longer needs to concern herself with only that which is only written down in historical tomes, for the entire world waits for her to read it and through her interpretation and expression enter into a broadened intertextual relationship with it. A reading of this sort reveals that “the mighty heaven...exhibits, in its transfigurations, clear images of the splendor of intellectual perceptions; being moved in conjunction with the unapparent periods of intellectual natures” (Emerson TP 187). Emerson’s emphasis on “transfigurations” reveals that although “[t]he Universe is the externalization of the soul”, this relationship is a constant

site of negotiation. Indeed, the more the subject reads, the better she can encompass and exemplify the whole of nature, serving as a particular that can explain nature using the details of her own newly expanded experience.

Emerson wastes little time before offering his own definition of his ideal creative writer, and it is clear that this writer has access to a special kind of perception. Emerson says, “The poet is the person . . . without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart” (Emerson TP 184). With the emphasis on “seeing” and traversing “the whole scale of experience,” Emerson makes it explicitly clear that poet’s offices are experiential and lie outside the actual composition of verses. Emerson believes that “if any phenomenon remains brute and dark, it is because the corresponding faculty in the observer is not yet active” (Emerson TP 187), but the poet has such active faculties that few sensory stimuli goes unobserved. Like Emerson’s self-reliant reader of history, the poet exhumes the forgotten connections between even the most remote natural phenomena and some corresponding feature capable of assimilating it into her own consciousness. For Emerson, “This insight, which expresses itself by what is called Imagination, is a very high sort of seeing, which does not come by study, but by the intellect being where and what it sees, by sharing the path, or circuit of things through forms, and so making them translucent to others” (Emerson TP 191).

Imagination”, here, is used with a specialized, Coleridgean denotation, and Emerson likely characterizes his poet’s faculties as imbued with primary imagination as opposed to secondary. According to Coleridge, the primary imagination is “the living

power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (Coleridge *Literaria* 144), and it represents a seamless blend of subjectivity and objective, external phenomena. The primary Imagination also synthesizes ostensibly disparate objects by identifying a universal cause at their foundation. Emerson’s poet has an active synthetic sensibility of this sort, capable of illuminating any phenomenon that was previously “brute and dark.” Further, it is not enough to just illuminate the unknown chasms of natural phenomena, but the poet should also offer an explanation for what she sees. Not offering this justification would be similar to observing only the primary qualities—aspects like shape, texture, and weight— of an object without identifying what that object is. Emerson goes even a step further, saying, “The poet did not stop at the color, or the form, but *read their meaning*; neither did he rest in this meaning, but he makes the same objects exponents of his new thought” (Emerson TP 194; emphasis mine). Once the poet has discovered the “meaning” of a natural phenomenon, her work still is not finished, for she will naturally apply her Imagination to examine the impact of that meaning on already existing interpretations of different phenomena.

Emerson’s use of the word “read”, however, makes it explicitly clear that the functions of the Imagination—and of the poet in general—are more similar to reading than they are to writing. But what exactly is Emerson’s ideal poet reading? Emerson’s theory of ideal reading is no longer a strictly textual relationship, and the connections the reader discovers and fosters through her imagination are found in nature. This progression stems partly from the realization that language is multifarious and exponential, where a single symbol can emblemize multitudinous sets of observation.

However, this relies on the assumption that language is not transparent, as a word properly read can be refracted through infinite natural phenomena. However, this also suggests that a word is affected by time in a way Emerson did not acknowledge in “History”. This is especially problematic,

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

(Emerson TP 185)

No poet ever “writes” a poem, and this is largely because our language is unable to represent “those primal warblings” that make up the ideal poem. Emerson’s suggestion that this poetry is already “written” in a language other than our own maintains that any subsequent attempt to “write” poetry can only amount to a palimpsest: an illegible mess of marks that results from attempting to write on top of an already written text. And it is in this linguistic tangle that humans inevitably take their liberties with what they see and hear, substituting their own inadequate symbols in an attempt to encapsulate a full sense of that ethereal and ideal realm of sight and sound.

Substituting a “meaning of our own” for a word in the ideal, primordial language in which poetry is written is problematic for two reasons. First, the meaning we can offer is necessarily limited by the breadth of the reader’s personal experiences, which, when compared to the complete compendium of understanding, cannot help but be found lacking. Second, and relatedly, our interpretation of “that region when the air is music” is

already affected by time, as our personal experiences are relegated to the historical period in which we live. These two factors rob us of the understanding that,

though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency, because for the moment it symbolized the world to the first speaker and hearer. The etymologist finds the deadest work to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is a fossil poetry. As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origins. (Emerson TP 190)

Language in its secondary use—which is the only form we are capable of using—is deficient in some fundamental way, as it has become disconnected from “the picture” that once inspired its denotation. Emerson does not pretend to be a poet capable of completely reaffixing word and original image, for he will eventually admit that “I look in vain for the poet whom I describe” (Emerson TP 195). Although he is confident that such a person can exist, the best we have done so far are “the men of more delicate ear [who] write down these cadences more faithfully, and these transcripts, though imperfect, become the songs of nations” (Emerson TP 185). For even the details of this imperfection leads the reader to a startling conclusion about the relationship between nature and the ideal language in which poetry presents itself. This association is clear,

“when any man goes by with an ear sufficiently fine, he overhears [the first poem], and endeavors to write down the notes, without diluting or depraving them. And herein is the legitimation of criticism, in the mind’s faith, that the

poems are a corrupt version of some text in nature, with which they ought to be made to tally” (Emerson TP 191).

As readers, we are twice removed from nature. Our language is only a shoddy substitution for the ideal language, which is itself only a “corrupt version” of natural phenomena. We cannot help but misrepresent nature with our language as it is only a representation of a representation: a collection of sounds descended and adulterated from a word that was once attached to an original image, which is itself only an attempt to transcribe the musical notation of primordial poetry.

With all of this in mind, then, the original question is qualified but ultimately remains: what does the poet read if she is twice removed from nature? The poet has a privileged position in relation to these “primal warblings”, and it is largely due to the sympathies her mind has with the primordial beauty that started the world. Emerson maintains that “the world is not painted, or adorned, but is from the beginning beautiful; and God has not made some beautiful things, but Beauty is the creator the universe” (Emerson TP 185). Beauty is the creator of the universe insofar as it represents a blending of objective, natural phenomenon with subjective, moral meaning, and the poet is representative of this blend. “The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and stands on the centre”, yet this privileged position as a meaning-making potentate is awarded “because he sees [the meaning], or comes one step nearer to it than any other” (Emerson TP 185, 190). The poet comes closer to the “centre”—or the ideal image at the genesis of a word— but cannot realize the full, symbolic implications using a language that is “fallen”, twice removed, and infected by time.

However, our deficient language, in some ways, bolsters the office of the poet, and this will come to inform Emerson's secret to self-reliance. That secret continues to maintain, as it did in "History", that inadequacy is at the core of self-reliance, and what Emerson's ideal reader does is strive to use these deficiencies to her advantage. Emerson declares that, "A beauty not explicable, is dearer than a beauty we can see to the end of" (Emerson TP 188), and this opacity is largely due to the way in which we use symbols, including language. In paying tribute to beauty—the creator of the world—"we use defects and deformities to a sacred purpose" (Emerson TP 189), knowing that we can use our language to multiply the relations through which beauty arises. For beauty is not represented as a solely objective phenomenon lurking in the ethereal, Platonic realm in "The Poet." Instead, beauty is a relation between two things—a subject and an object. Emerson's "centre" is only a place insofar as it functions as the first concentric circle of a spider web, where the structural integrity of that ring will determine the stability of the entire web. That is, the important aspect of the "centre" is that it is bound up in the most relations within the entire applicable universe. The poet is closest to this center by virtue of her being the representative of beauty, and, therefore, beauty is the process of attaining and understanding the greatest number of relations that can be had between a subject and an object. Our limited language, however, ensures that another component of beauty is inaccessibility, which the poet represents, ironically, by uncovering and explaining new relations between symbols. Discovering a new meaning or interpretation for a relationship that was previously thought to be fixed and static makes the multiplicity endemic in every symbol that much clearer and the ideal image seem that much less attainable. Emerson explains,

The inaccessibility of every thought but what we are in, is wonderful. What if you come near to it, —you are as remote, when you are nearest, as when you are farthest. Every thought is also a prison; every heaven is also a prison. Therefore we love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode, or in an action, or in looks and behavior, has yielded us a new thought. He unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene. (Emerson TP 194)

The facts that “all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead” (Emerson TP 195), suggests that the subject can never truly arrive at the thing-in-itself, which is here represented as the ideal “thought.” The poet is most sensitive to these fluctuations, and, by introducing another node in the web of relations between subject and object, “admits us to a new scene” but not the “ultimate scene”. Discovering a whole new way in which to think about a symbol demonstrates the implicit infinitude at an idea’s core, keeping whatever ideal nature the symbol is supposed to have “as remote, when you are nearest, as when you farthest.”

Emerson calls this idea—the demonstration of a symbol’s infinite relations—the poet’s expression, which increases beauty by establishing the inaccessibility of the “primal warblings” of ideal poetry while implicitly showing how the inadequacies of our secondary language can be used for this purpose. Emerson asks that we “with new hope, observe how nature, by worthier impulses, has ensured the poet’s fidelity to his office of announcement and affirming, namely, by the beauty of things, which becomes a new, and higher beauty, when expressed” (Emerson TP 187). Indeed, it is the poet’s expression

that intimates self-reliance by making our supposed linguistic deficiencies redundant. In the pursuit of this latter goal, and,

Beyond this universality of the symbolic language, we are apprised of the divineness of this superior use of things, whereby the world is a temple, whose walls are covered with emblems, pictures, and commandments of the Deity, in this, that there is no fact in nature which does not carry the whole sense of nature; and the distinctions which we make in events, and in affairs, of low and high, honest and base, disappear when nature is used as a symbol. (Emerson TP 188)

The poet's expression is an example of a "superior use of things" as it characterizes the natural world as a kind of text filled with divine "emblems, pictures, and commandments". Emerson's "divinity" and "deity", here, refer to the sum total of possible relations between subject and object. As such, what the poet's expression can show is how every symbol is implicitly linked to every other—how a single fact in nature can be shown to encompass the whole. And the process of coming to encompass another of these relations is "beauty." For example, the word "rose", in perfect transparency, would only refer to a deeply colored flower with a certain smell and thorns on its stem. But a poet's expression that uses the word "rose" may show how the symbol is implicitly linked to the representation of love, temporality, death, country, and any number other ideas thereby detailing how fecund the symbol "rose" truly is. The fact that, through the poet's expression, the word "rose" alludes to five things in simultaneity puts at a distance the idea that the word has a univocal correspondence with that deeply colored flower. Yet it is precisely this distancing that creates beauty through the absence of the accessibility of that once monolithic meaning, for, as readers, we better understand the

multi-hued infinitude built into every word. To the extent that this phenomenon can be called a “poem”, Emerson declares further,

With what joy I begin to read a poem, which I confide in as an inspiration! And now my chains are to be broken; I shall mount above these clouds and opaque airs in which I live, —opaque, though they seem transparent, —and from the heaven of truth I shall see and comprehend my relations. That will reconcile me to life, and renovate nature, to see trifles animated by a tendency, and to know what I am doing. (Emerson TP 186)

The poet’s expression is fundamentally revelatory, as it is the process through which Emerson discovers that the mode of perception he thought was transparent was actually opaque. Yet the poem accomplishes this in a curious fashion. A poet’s expression ultimately clarifies and demonstrates the multitudinous relationship between subject and object and, subsequently, between word and thing. However, it achieves this transparency by adding to the general opacity of language—that is, by adding another interpretation of the relationship between nature and the reader. And it is this very opacity, that as it deepens increases inaccessibility and “beauty”, ushers the reader into acknowledging the fullest extent of her relations. She finds that she herself is bound up in everything else, as a symbol might be in a system of communication.

Even the subtlest evolution in Emerson’s description of the functions of language will send concentric shockwaves through his conception of subjectivity, his theory of reading, and, ultimately, qualify slightly his secret for self-reliance. However, through it all, it is still clear that reading is requisite for generating self-reliance, for Emerson

compares his ideal creative reader to a “liberating god” throughout the essay. Further, the secret of self-reliance remains much the same, but it is susceptible to the same kind of semantic broadening and increasing opacity that affects the entirety of Emerson’s idea of language. To cultivate self-reliance the reader still needs to find a way to make her “supposed deficiencies redundant”, but this deficiency is now focused on the gaps endemic between original image and word. By exemplifying the ways in which a symbol can be appropriated in a variety of contexts, the poet’s expression can also provide alternatives for the most important symbol of all: the subject. These gaps indelibly inform subjectivity, too, for Emerson has narrowed—and simultaneously broadened—the way in which he discusses identity, though it is still in a fundamentally textual way. That is, Emerson characterizes his ideal reader as a “symbol”, or, more appropriately, as a kind of word. In a literal sense this is much less capacious than the entire text he discussed in “History”, but his “fallen” view of language that he utilizes in “The Poet” imbues each word with manifold meaning, far greater than the single, transparent denotation he assumed in his earlier essays. And though the reader still holds the same intertextual relations with other texts, “The Poet” suggests that the reader is not just one text at one time but is rather a “quadruple, or the centuple, or much more manifold” symbol (Emerson TP 183).

It is through the poet’s expression—which reveals and explicates the depths of human subjectivity—that a reader who can interpret nature in this same way will find that her “chains are to be broken”. At a fundamental level, the poet’s expression is the demonstration that the meaning of every symbol is manifold, so it does not necessarily need to take the form of spoken language. Emerson explains briefly that “[t]hings admit

of being use as symbols, because nature is a symbol, in the whole, and in every part. Every line we can draw in the sand, has expression” (Emerson TP 187) because the meaning of a line in the sand is open to variable interpretation. But what kind of liberation is this exactly, and how do the effects of this liberation serve as the germinating seed for fostering self-reliance? Expounding this release and Emerson’s evolving notion of subjectivity are prerequisites for tracing self-reliance, as they both work in confluence to portray an independent individual. The poet’s expression serves the reader by revealing the multiplicity endemic in every symbol and this inaccessibility increases beauty—the creator of the universe—but these features also work to liberate the reader from some aspect in her subjectivity. Emerson describes this characteristic of the poet’s expression, saying,

The world being thus put under the mind for verb and noun, the poet is he who can articulate it. For, though life is great, and fascinates, and absorbs, —and though all men are intelligent of the symbols through which it is named, —yet they cannot originally use them. We are symbols and inhabit symbols; workmen, work, and tools, words and things, birth and death, all are emblems; but we sympathize with the symbols, and being infatuated with the economical uses of things, we do not know that they are thoughts. The poet, by an ulterior intellectual perception, gives them a power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts eyes, and a tongue into every dumb and inanimate object. (Emerson TP 189)

The mind approaches the world as it would a text—an object to which syntactical and grammatical qualities can be attributed. This textual relationship is appropriate and

natural, and most literate people are cognizant of the symbols that inform its makeup. However, the poet is also made responsible with the understanding that humans are symbols, too, and this might attempt to circumscribe human experience within textual confines. Our lives are allegorical; everything that we experience has an analogue on more than level of reality, but the success with which we see these possibilities is limited by our experiences and the language we use. As such, Emerson's poet realizes that, by virtue of being emblematic and symbolic of something larger, humans are "written" and open to variable interpretation just like every sensuous fact. Proposing an "original use" for a symbol, which is a gift that too few people seek, forges a new relation between the subject and an object and exhibits the inherent multiplicity at the core of every symbol. However, what the poet realizes that too few others do is that people are bogged down by these limiting textual conditions also.

At the same time, however, the poet—who is herself "written", emblematic, and symbolic—is able to pierce through this limiting textual layer fraught with emblems and symbols using her expression. For just

As the eyes of Lyncaeus were said to see through the earth, so the poet turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and possession. For, through that better perception, he stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing metamorphosis; perceives that thought is multiform; that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form; and, following with his eyes the life, uses the forms which express that life, and so his speech flows with that flowing of nature. (Emerson TP 190)

Emerson's use of visual diction pushes the poet's abilities beyond the mere composition of verses into an extra-literary mode of "sight" and interpretation. The poet's "better perception" reveals a central law at the foundation of the constant change that surrounds her. According to Emerson, every creature is always attempting to ascend into a higher form of consciousness. As a result, every living thing is pushing against the limits of its own textuality and endeavoring to create the potential for new analogues to be perceived at the core of its own emblematic nature. The primary office of the poet, then, is vigilant observation to the constant change in the natural world that in effect brings about manifold meaning in other arenas of human experience.

Emerson's paradoxical characterization of his ideal poet maintains that she is simultaneously written and beyond writing; she is herself a symbol and able to explicate the centuple meanings at the foundation of any symbol. The question then becomes, "how does the poet operate in this textual double-bind, and what relevance can Emerson's reader exhume from this process for cultivating self-reliance?" It is instructive that Emerson codifies the word "poet" as only half organic form, which then acts as a conduit for the other half: a process of seeing. Simply being a person is not enough, "[f]or all men live by truth, and stand in need of expression. In love, in art, in avarice, in politics, in labor, in games, we study to utter our painful secret. The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression" (Emerson TP 184). As Emerson will contend later, "[w]ords are also actions, and actions are a kind of words" (Emerson TP 185), suggesting that there is an element of human existence that is ontologically rooted in language. Ironically, Emerson uses the word "expression" to mean that which can sift through the multiple layers of meaning as an extra-literary mode of seeing even

though the word itself connotes being intimately bound as a linguistic act. In contrast, it is the flesh-and-blood body that is indelibly emblematic and symbolic, and it is irrevocably rendered to a textual level regardless of how vehemently it may strain against those limits. Emerson makes this remarkably clear by declaring that “[t]he expression is organic, or, the new type which things themselves take when liberated” (Emerson TP 191), rather than maintaining that the physical body is what persists unfettered. The poet is, in fact, written and beyond writing, but Emerson inverts the applications of those two qualities. It is the poet’s expression that is “beyond writing” despite the fact that it is necessarily delivered as a linguistic act. This paradoxical rendering of “expression” is warranted by the emphases Emerson places on the poet as a seer and a reader—rather than just a writer—and on the rippling effect this “expression” will induce outside the literary work, shaping and informing the reader, who is herself written, an emblem, and a symbol. This latter effect has the ability to garner a novel sense of self-reliance in the reader, informed in simultaneity by the realization that her organic form is inextricably bound in language by virtue of the manifold allegorical meanings at an ontological level. Additionally, this is coupled with the opportunity to “turn the world to glass” and put these meanings in their rightful places with her expression.

It is the poet’s expression—which is also her interpretation and her “reading”—which is the necessary first step for cultivating self-reliance, as it shows the reader a textual and allegorical aspect of herself, which pushes the reader to create her own expression as a result. Through that expression, the reader will find liberation by discovering that the relationships she thought were limiting were only a small part of a

whole web of relations in which she could form an integral part. In this way, a reader can achieve self-reliance and make her supposed deficiencies redundant in the sense that her limitations are no longer necessary and have been superseded. When charged with expression, “a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is a conductor of the whole river of electricity. Nothing walks, or creeps, or grows, or exists, which must not in turn arise and walk before him as exponent of his meaning. Comes he to that power, his genius is no longer exhaustible” (Emerson TP 197). Discovering the beautiful secret that there is no accessible, ideal image that we would be able to ascertain comes with the solace that everything we see can be partly explained from personal experience. The world can exist as a text with which a reader can enter into an intertextual relationship, but there is not a single interpretation to be had as a result. The reader herself is a symbol capable of multiple explanations, and only through a poet’s expression—hopefully her own—can she step closer to realizing the total of those relations. This privileged information is invaluable insight into how subjectivity and the world operate and this will influence the way in which the reader interacts with nature. Though Emerson does not pretend to be a poet capable of an expression of this sort, towards the close of the essay he gives a tacit example of how linguistic symbols can be used in this way, and his brief expression contains an invitation for the reader to practice self-reliance.

Emerson is always careful to exemplify the conclusions for which he argues, and the “The Poet” contains a number of passages that demonstrate the inherent infinitude of the linguistic symbol. Emerson declares that the “Poets are thus liberating gods. Men have really got a new sense, and found within their world, another world, or nest of

worlds; for the metamorphosis once seen, we divine that it does not stop” (Emerson TP 193). While Emerson uses the content of his sentence to further his claim about the liberating effects of active reading, the form exemplifies poetic expression by playing on the denotations of individual words to create the possibility for novel interpretations. As Emerson describes the newly freed men, he maintains that they “have really got a new sense” and the word “sense” is used with two mutually apprising definitions that exemplify the fundamental multiplicity that informs its makeup. Emerson also maintains elsewhere that “[t]here is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the *sense of our author* is as broad as the world (Emerson “American Scholar” 60, my emphasis).

When the reader considers that the word “sense” in the context of these passages signifies both “justified conclusion” and “a set of sensory faculties” in simultaneity and that neither single denotation would inform the meaning of this sentence better than another, the idea of a monolithic, ideal meaning behind the word “sense” becomes more remote. This is exactly the point, though, for through this inaccessibility the poet represents beauty: the manifold applicability of any number of luminescent symbols. Every word has a history and is only a twice-copied substitute for an ideal image, and active reading discovers the ways in which a concept has twisted and turned through the epochs. The result is a much fuller interpretation of these passages. “Sense”, in Emerson’s usage, is a justified and conclusive mode of seeing and reading, and studying how those two denotations can be synthesized together using the primary Imagination will create the opportunity for the reader to use symbols in a similar way. Similarly, Emerson uses the

word “divine” in the former sentence above to mean both “a characteristic of a deity” and “prescience”, blending the two definitions together to suggest that the active reader can both create—in the sense of a deity bringing new entities into existence—meaning and also predict the far-reaching significance of a symbol in context.

But a careful reading of “The Poet” reveals that Emerson has been demonstrating the implicit, multitudinous nature of the symbol throughout the essay, as the form of several of his sentences inherently supports the content’s conclusions. In another representative passage, Emerson maintains that the poet “stands among partial men for the complete man and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth” (Emerson TP 184). Multiple readings of the individual words “partial” and “commonwealth” recast a seemingly concrete sentence as a shining beacon of potentiality to which an active reader can return many times to look for personal inspiration. The meaning of this sentence becomes much richer after discovering that the word “partial” means both “a part of a whole” and “prejudiced” (OED), and registering the subtle hues of meaning endemic in every linguistic symbol has the potential to set off a syllogistic series of revelations in the words surrounding the symbol in question. That is, the multiple meanings of “partial” immediately recontextualize the word “complete” and creates the implication that “complete” will not now be out of context if it refers to that which “has all its parts” and something “without a defect” (OED), like a bias. As such, the subject of the sentence—the poet—can now be said to be a person who represents the whole of nature but without a predilection for any of the parts. The poet then stands among those who may have insisted on an “individual symbol for an universal one” (195), and this penchant for an individual symbol precludes that person from realizing how a symbol

plays a necessary role in the meaning of every other symbol. This, in turn, practically ensures that the person will be unable to create a “complete” expression in the same sense as the poet, which may affect that person’s realization that she herself is a symbol. Qualifying the subject of the sentence then reveals the multiplicity in the verb “apprises”, as the alternate denotation of “complete” as “without a defect” suggests that the verb can mean both “to show” and “to estimate the worth of” (OED). These two possibilities work together to suggest that the word “commonwealth” means both “the body politic” and, simply, a “wealth common to all people” (OED). The poet, then, is representative of all the people and also establishes the worth of the gifts and wondrous opportunities that are available for those people. Ultimately, therefore, discovering the multiple meanings of even a single word will gradually reveal how large and beautiful the spider web of relations between symbols is and this is the primary project of a poet’s expression.

As Emerson demonstrates the way in which a simple sentence or phrase can be explicated into entire potential paragraphs, he shows how “we are far from having exhausted the significance of the few symbols we use... Every word was once a poem” (Emerson TP 189). But Emerson does not pretend to be a poet capable of revealing the relations between all symbols, and towards the end of the essay, Emerson shifts into the second person, appealing to the reader to help him find the poet he seeks. After considering some examples of the ideal poet, including the mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg, Emerson admits outright that “I look in vain for the poet whom I describe” (Emerson TP 195). Though it is clear that he has experienced the liberating effects of a true poet’s expression, once that new relation between subject and object becomes uninteresting or is taken for granted, it is revealed that the poet “does not know the way

into the heavens, and is merely bent that I should admire his skill to rise” (Emerson TP 187). The disparity between the heavenly ideal image and the deficient language we have access to leads Emerson to “tumble down again soon into my old nooks, and lead the life of exaggerations as before, and have lost some faith in the possibility of any guide who can lead me thither where I would be” (187). Emerson’s admission that no external poet can lead him to where he needs to be is the clearest injunction for the reader to cultivate her own poetic expression and self-reliance. Indeed, as the essay closes, it is evident that Emerson uses the second person pronoun to allude to the reader, rather than an already established poet. The office is not easy, “The conditions are hard, but equal” (Emerson TP 197), but “Thou shalt have the whole land for thy park and manor, the sea for thy bath and navigation, without tax and without envy; the woods and the rivers thou shalt own” (Emerson TP 197). When a poet reads her natural environment with the understanding that her deficiencies are easily made redundant through her expression she will find that “though thou shalt walk the world over, thou shalt not be able to find a condition inopportune or ignoble” (197-8).

Emerson’s uncharacteristic shift into the second person—away from his speaker—is symptomatic of another development in his conception of language, subjectivity and self-reliance that will find full expression in his essay “Experience.” For language, what started as indefatigable faith in a fundamental transparency of words across historical epochs in “History” finds new and different strength when Emerson acknowledges the beauty of opacity and the multitudinous meaning of every symbol in “The Poet.” But by the time Emerson composes “Experience”, which is an essay written in the aftermath of the catastrophic loss of Emerson’s son Waldo, there is a greater

acknowledgement of the negative repercussions of this semantic opacity. With the gap between word and thing widened even further, Emerson—for the first, extended time in “Experience”—acknowledges a strain of indeterminacy between nature and the subject that will find full expression later with sentiments like, “Providence has a wild, rough, incalculable road to its end, and it is of no use to try and whitewash its huge, mixed instrumentalities, to dress up that terrific benefactor in a clean shirt and white neckcloth of a student in divinity” (Emerson “Fate” 263). And one of the primary instruments that Emerson alludes to is language, and “Experience” details the first of Emerson’s recognitions that there are entire lexicons that are not accessible to him. Here, he finds that—though he is cognizant of the enormity of his loss with the death of his son—that he is unable to use the language to grieve adequately. He fears that, without the proper vocabulary, Waldo’s death “would leave me as it found me, —neither better nor worse” (Emerson EXP 200), which would ostensibly cast entire worlds of experience as void for generating true self-reliance.

But Emerson’s treatment of language in “Experience” is only an evolution from his conception of language as it appears in “The Poet”, and the endemic multiplicity of the symbol that Emerson explained in that latter essay has far reaching implications for the project of self-reliance. Though Emerson professes being unable to pierce through the surface of grief and arrive at a larger meaning in “Experience”, he relies on the idea that a word can mean more than one thing at any given time to create the opportunity for the active reader to use the essay to generate self-reliance. As such, Emerson comes to exemplify the secret to self-reliance in a new way, for this time the supposed “deficiency” is in the speaker of the essay itself—who is purportedly unable to represent

grief—and what is being made redundant is language of the work itself, which can be used to signify the reader's extra-literary experiences instead. Like the poet figure who leads Emerson to the brink of heaven to see the ideal, primordial image without showing him the way in, Emerson cannot lead the reader to true self-reliance given the fundamental subjectivity of the concept. What he can do, however, is offer his essay as a kind of template and a test-run for the active reader to concretize her experiences into her own expression, which only stems from the understanding that any given symbol has hidden centuple meaning waiting to be exhumed.

CHAPTER THREE

“MY BOY, MY BOY IS GONE...[AND] I CAN SAY NOTHING TO YOU”: “EXPERIENCE” AND THE LIMITS OF SELF-RELIANT READING

*I measure every Grief I meet
With narrow, probing, Eyes—
I wonder if It weighs like Mine—
Or has an Easier size.
—Emily Dickinson, “561”*

In “Experience”, the process of reading still ostensibly delivers the same benefits as Emerson reports in “History” and “The Poet”, but Emerson has now adopted a new and more pessimistic point of view concerning the inherent multiplicity of the linguistic symbol which he expounded in “The Poet.” Emerson finds that there are some aspects of reality that he would like to exhume the monolithic, ideal image from beneath the infinite layers of fallen yet beautiful signification, and “Experience” is largely about his being disappointed at this impossibility. Every symbol can be refracted through any natural phenomenon—pending that the user of the symbol makes the new connection using the depths of personal experience—and Emerson laments that, “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” (Emerson EXP 200). As a result, there are some ideas that deserve the most eloquent and comprehensive expression and explication, but our deficient language occludes the ability to truly report the magnitude of the concept.

As it turns out, Emerson has good reason to lament the inability to reach a univocal reality through the confines of language, as the time period in which

“Experience” was written is coupled with the death of Emerson’s son Waldo in January 1842, and this was a source of perennial devastation for Emerson. Two months after the loss Emerson alluded to his ravaged emotional well-being in his journal, saying, “I comprehend nothing of this fact but its bitterness,” and on his death bed forty years later was heard murmuring to himself, “oh, that beautiful boy” (Emerson *Prose and Poetry* 200, 455). Literary critic Sharon Cameron offers a cogent explanation for Emerson’s evolving conception of language in her article “Representing Grief: Emerson’s ‘Experience’”, and she posits, “One explanation for the disjunctiveness of the [essay’s tone] is that the man who insists upon an imperviousness to grief (‘this calamity... does not touch me’) is so devastated by the subject from which he claims himself exempt that he can say no more about it” (Cameron “Representing” 18).⁴ Cameron rightly touches on a unique, textual double-bind in the essay which reveals Emerson attempting to use his own vocabulary to explain how language is insufficient for detailing the loss of his son. However, try as he might, the grief consistently overwhelms Emerson’s vocabulary in the essay, and it is also clear that Emerson refuses to defer to another’s vocabulary to detail such an intensely personal event. Emerson alludes to both of these conclusions in a letter to his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, saying, “My boy, my boy is gone. He was taken ill of Scarlatina on Monday evening, and died last night. I can say nothing to you” (Emerson *Prose and Poetry* 551). And, for “Experience”, the result is a number of instances of semantic and syntactical markers of absence that attempt to push beyond the confines of

⁴ Cameron’s suggestion is in line with a number of primary accounts of Emerson’s behavior after Waldo’s death. Louisa May Alcott remembers that, after inquiring as to Waldo’s well-being on that fateful morning, “[h]is father came to me so worn with watching and changed by sorrow that I was startled, and could only stammer out my message. ‘Child, he is dead,’ was his answer. Then the door closed and I ran home to tell the sad tidings. I was only eight years old, and that was my first glimpse of a great grief, but I never have forgotten the anguish that made a familiar face so tragical” (Alcott “Reminiscences” 90).

linguistic signification towards a well-spring of emotion that does not lend itself well to the confines of language. This latter dilemma is what informs Cameron's suggestion that Emerson "can say no more about" the death of his son despite the fact that the devastation from the event would be apparent for the rest of his life.

Emerson's theory of language has changed again, but, remarkably, the pith of achieving self-reliance remains the same. The "deficiencies" that Emerson offers in "Experience" are personal—that is, they are rooted in Emerson's inability to use language to represent his own emotional turmoil. However, the reader is offered the opportunity to make these "supposed deficiencies redundancy" through the understanding that an inadequate linguistic symbol has a respectful distance built into its deficiency that even the most self-reliant reader cannot ford. What "Experience" demonstrates is how the truly self-reliant reader—by acknowledging the brimming multiplicity of syntactical and semantic symbols—is able to recognize that there are entire realms of personal experience, like Waldo's death, that cannot be subsumed into even the most comprehensive of vocabularies. The self-reliant reader accomplishes this by reading the absence that underlies the syntactical symbols and diction that Emerson uses in the essay. As such, "Experience" is a test-run for a kind of self-reliant reading that can be traced through "History" and "The Poet", and it exemplifies this reading by revealing its limitation. Emerson maintains throughout the essay that, "The baffled intellect must still kneel before [the first cause], which refuses to be named, —ineffable cause, which every fine genius has essayed to represent by some emphatic symbol" (Emerson EXP 208), or that there are some paths upon which the reader cannot embark, and understanding which routes these are is essential to cultivate true self-reliance. For when we concede that

there are some emotional experiences that cannot be encapsulated in language we simultaneously fortify the integrity of that experience while avoiding the possibility of cleaving to another's vocabulary rather than using our own. For those of us who have never lost a son, it seems clear that the language we use—devoid of that terrible emotional referent—could never come close to explicating the depths of that experience with which Emerson himself evidently struggles. Admitting that sometimes we just do not understand is the best way to cultivate a larger understanding, and discovering these fundamental limitations is essential for reading with self-reliance, as it shows how those supposed deficiencies are redundant in that they are indispensable for appreciating the magnitude of the issue at hand.

However, the speaker in the opening of "Experience" seems to understand very little, and this tone is remarkably different than the awe-inspired and revelatory spirit that imbued "The Poet." He asks,

Where do we find ourselves? In a series, of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair: there are stairs below us, which we see to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight. . . . Our life is not so much threatened as our perception. Ghostlike we glide through nature, and should not know our place again. (Emerson EXP 198)

Though the initial question is intensely personal, by using the pronoun "we" it becomes clear that Emerson is interested in a larger human condition as well. His opening image, which is that of a person standing in the middle of some infinite staircase, alludes to a

paralytic hesitation after discovering the amount of ground that still remains to be covered. This lack of forward momentum conveys a sense of hopelessness, as Emerson likens our position to an ethereal form simply passing through nature without effecting any circumstantial change. For Emerson, our inability to influence change is a direct result of our widespread misunderstanding of the kinds of things in nature. Emerson aggrandizes this misunderstanding by making the distinction between nature and the subject a categorical difference, as a spirit and a physical object would be fundamentally dissimilar. By constantly misperceiving the external world, it's also difficult to discover the kinds of relationships a subject can have with it. Our helplessness is a partial consequence of the fact that "Direct strokes [Nature] never gave us the power to make; all our blows glance, all our hits are accidents. Our relations to each other are oblique and casual" (Emerson EXP 200). In an unprecedented way, Emerson declares that human potentiality is naturally stunted and ineffectual, as there is a perpetual misrecognition between subject and object that discounts the possibility of a meaningful relationship with nature.

Although Emerson's opinion on the possibility of a significant reading of a natural text has changed dramatically, it is clear that his epistemological conviction which holds that active reading is central to the discovery of essential aspects of subjectivity is still intact. And self-reliance still remains among these essential qualities. Instead, it is the general efficacy of that reading to foster genuine change in the reader that is being called into question. Emerson declares that,

When I converse with a profound mind...I am first apprised of my vicinity to a new and excellent region of life. By persisting to *read* or to think, this region

gives further sign of itself, as it were in flashes of light, in sudden discoveries of its profound beauty and repose, as if the clouds that covered it parted at intervals...But every insight from this realm of thought is felt as initial, and promises a sequel. I do not make it; I arrive there, and behold what was there already. (Emerson EXP 208, emphasis mine)

Reading still exhumes luminous connections between subject and object, which in turn will reveal wonderful new ways of living and seeing to the reader. Further, reading is still progressive in that a disciplined and active reader will find aspects of this “excellent region of life” in the natural world, as if some curtain were slowly parting to expose the true profundity of its comprehensiveness. But what has changed, for Emerson, is his ability to explain the relevance of these incandescent connections from personal experience, which is an essential aspect of self-reliant reading and necessary for the ratification of any reading into personal truth. Though reading a fresh text is still as provoking as ever, Emerson finds that he cannot lend his experiences to a closer examination of the newly forged connections the text contains. Instead, he finds “what was there already”, and this keeps him from truly understanding and exemplifying what the text is offering him.

Finding “what was already there” in a text implicitly details the conviction that personal expression is wholly unable to communicate meaningful experiences, and this can lead to the *prima facie* adoption of another’s words into a personal vocabulary simply because they belong to someone else. In a very literal sense, an assimilation of this sort would be more alike to reading with deference as opposed to self-reliance. Emerson finds regretfully that,

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...Men seem to have learned of the horizon the perpetual retreating and reference. 'Yonder uplands are rich pastrage, and my neighbor has fertile meadow, but my field,' says the querulous farmer, 'only holds the world together.' I quote another man's saying; unluckily, that other withdraws himself in the same way, and quotes me.

(Emerson EXP 199)

We have become accustomed to deferring to someone else's language—and, therefore, their experiences—rather than affirming our own, as this alien vocabulary has a strange, seductive appeal to it by virtue of its being another's. Simply residing in a quotation is only a “retreat and a reference”, and this is problematic because seeking shelter in another's lexicon without examining its foundation elides the understanding that that very shelter is itself only a part of an infinite whole and one person's “truth”. Earlier, in “Self-Reliance”, Emerson warns against these conclusions, declaring that, generally speaking, “Our reading is mendicant and sycophantic” (Emerson SR 129), but that this should not keep us from affirming that “If you are true, but not in the same truth with me, cleave to your companions; I will seek my own” (Emerson SR 131). Yet, in “Experience”, Emerson expresses the inability to “seek his own” truth for fear of not having a sufficient vocabulary, and it is clear his conception of language has evolved beyond the transparent model in “History” and the sublime multiplicity in “The Poet”.

Indeed, Emerson's language in “Experience” is constantly pushing against its denotative restrictions in an attempt to encapsulate the visceral feeling of loss and

hopelessness, and the self-reliant reader should see how this process is working.⁵ At the same time, the reader should also recognize that the absence endemic in Emerson's vocabulary when he attempts to reconcile himself to the death of his son speaks volumes. However, evidence of this emotional trauma is nowhere to be found in a literal reading of Emerson's line which alludes to the event: "In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate, —no more. I cannot get it nearer to me" (Emerson EXP 200). An initial reading of this line envisions the dash as a definitive mark of punctuation, which adds to the tragic sense of what precedes it by suggesting that it is only with the terms of the loss that Emerson is intimately acquainted. Taken at its most literal, this line maintains that there is no edificatory potential during even the most taxing states of mourning. However, the dash's syntactical ambiguity occludes the elevation of this possibility into a definitive interpretation because the dash can also be read as a manifestation of a paralytic hesitation on the speaker's behalf. On this latter reading, the dash signifies a tortuous searching for the proper linguistic signification to sift through the well-spring of traumatic emotion that stems from the loss of a loved one and comes up empty. Though both readings eventually meet to maintain that Emerson is unable to describe the edificatory import of suffering, the reason why the readings encounter this end respectively is subtly different. On the former, and more traditional, reading, Emerson reaches this conclusion through the sentiment that he cannot pierce through the surface of the world's phenomena to reach a cogent explanation for

⁵ This approach is an instantiation of Richard Poirier's suggestion that "Emerson's writing *enacts* the struggles by which he tries to keep his own language from becoming 'faked'" (Poirier *Poetry and Pragmatism* 27). Poirier ultimately contends that this antagonism inherent in the form of Emerson's prose is an attempt to remain relevant and to avoid being concretized. In "Experience", however, while it's clear that the form and content of the essay are working together to accomplish a larger rhetorical goal, this is achieved through absence and negation, and this suggests that the operative aspect of the form is the ineluctable emotion underneath the language that is unable to be concretized.

suffering's import at an ontological level. David Van Leer represents this former reading in a novel and refreshing way. He suggests that "Emerson sees that grief is not really a question of degree—that it derives its truth not from its intensity . . . Pain is real so self-evidently that quantitative considerations are irrelevant" (Leer *Epistemology* 158). This phenomenological analysis of grief touches upon the unquantifiable nature of the emotion, which would suggest that Emerson's "no more" is symptomatic of his knowledge and control of language. That is, Emerson uses the dash to make a primarily logical and philosophical point: grief either exists or it does not.

However, it is not entirely clear that this passage demonstrates the logical precision and mastery of language that Van Leer assumes it does. Instead, the tone of this enigmatic line seems to be alogical and emotionally charged. By taking the dash to represent more of a hesitation rather than a definitive mark of punctuation, this latter reading inscribes the dash as the site of an ineffable yet ineluctable presence of a deep-seeded anguish that escapes the surface treatment of language. The overwhelming and visceral emotional gravity that manifests in the loss of Waldo can only bring the phrase "no more" to the surface, which in its brevity makes the limits of language visible. Emerson cannot bring the meaning of Waldo's death nearer to him not because there is too little to find, but because there is too much to carry. The liminal space between insensitivity and super-sensitivity in the mark of the dash is an insoluble syntactical gap where Emerson's meaning is ambiguous and can be said to be unrecoverable. The result, however, is not a nihilistic and meaningless phrase, but a brimming multiplicity inscribed in the dash which invites the reader to explore the numerous the possibilities while ultimately leaving the mystery intact. Every reader has a choice: she might join Emerson

as he maintains that grief lacks ontological meaning or understand that the dash merely stands in for a sea of emotional turmoil that cannot be symbolized within the confines of language. But the self-reliant reader sees that initial ambiguity as a gift, and acknowledges that the answer might lie between these two interpretations or be something entirely different. By allowing the language to stay fundamentally suspended, the ideal reader simultaneously acknowledges the infinitude indigenous in the symbol while precluding the possibility of simply accepting Emerson's language without first ratifying it through personal experience. The syntactical failure of the dash to provide division and order does not render the symbol ineffectual, but instead casts the mark as a synecdoche for absence. And, in fact, this absence implies devastation more potent than any set of words ever could, and this absence is the primary "text" which the truly self-reliant individual reads.

The essay's consistent liminality between presence and absence is not limited to syntactical structures, however, for Emerson consistently uses words in such a demanding way as to force them to realize their limitations and attempt to push beyond its denotative referent. As Emerson continues to detail the emotional trauma that he has become all too acquainted with, he asserts, "I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature" (Emerson EXP 200). Jonathan Bishop has taken this line as confessional, and a moment where Emerson realizes that "Grief could have carried him a step into real nature, a step farther, indeed, than his philosophy up to that time had gone...But apparently this step could not quite be taken" (Bishop *Soul* 198). However, it is not clear that this sentence should be taken in its most literal sense, for the repetition stresses the operative nature of the verb "to grieve," which reasserts the inevitability of

the emotion. As such, there are two ways to interpret this sentence, one of which Bishop ignores. Rather than the literal reading, the showcasing of the different forms of “grief” suggests that Emerson means something different with each usage, and the stretching of the word to accommodate two different meanings elucidates language’s limitation to refer to emotional states.

Until this moment, Emerson has made it clear that grief is a fundamentally shallow experience that lacks didactic potential. Further, grief cannot be used to forge meaningful connections with others, and is equally responsible for the fact that “our relations to each other are oblique and casual” (Emerson EXP 200). This unfortunate state of affairs is bound up in the connotation of the second use of “grief” in the aforementioned sentence, which, interpreted alone, does suggest an inability to “take another step into real nature.” However, by using the word “grieve” as verb, Emerson tacitly maintains that the word has a deeper and more comprehensive meaning than what appears in the second usage. As such, there are two ways to read this dichotomy. For the first, making grieving the action of the sentence acknowledges the ontological necessity and irrevocability of the emotion, and casts the visceral presence of grieving as its own evidence to justify its existence. Whereas the second sense usage of “grief” is added in conjunction with the hopes that it will serve as a means to “carry me one step into real nature,” the verb “grieve” is used with the sense that it is an unfortunate and unavoidable end in itself. As such, this sentence embodies the inevitability and recurrence of the grieving process. What this suggests, then, is similar to Jonathan Bishop’s analysis of the line: Emerson repeats the word in different forms to allude to a linguistic and conceptual stasis where the act of expressing grief is fiercely cyclical and lacks forward momentum.

Emerson maintains that grief cannot take him anywhere, but this realization only reveals itself through the process, and eventual redoubling, of grief. Grief does show him something; it shows him the inevitability of grief. Though “grief” suggests that only the surfaces of objects exists, “grieve” makes it clear that the subject has no other choice than to experience the emotion. This repetition becomes an ontological fragment of what it means to experience the process of grieving: the sense of hopelessness, the foreclosure of possibility, and the sense of bewilderment are all intact.

However, there is another way to read this line which does not charge the verb “to grieve” and the noun “grief” with a hopeless and momentum-less cyclicity, and although this suspension is not progressive in the conventional sense of the word, this absence is significant. As before, this reading suggests that the failure of Emerson’s form alludes to an absence through presence, and charges the verb of the sentence to be purposively inadequate. The close conjunction of the verb and noun forms of “grief” suggests that Emerson intends to allude to something which cannot be enclosed in language through a failure of referral. Here, Emerson uses the verb “grieve” not because it accurately details the rigors of the mourning process, but precisely because it does not. The sentence is laden with hesitation and exhaustion, signifying Emerson’s searching for the right verb to emblemize his frustrations with the lack of edificatory potential in grief. This searching uncovers nothing, and so he uses “grieve,” despite the paradoxical implications it will have with the noun form “grief” two words later. On this reading, “grieve” has little in common with its denotation in any dictionary, but is instead an empty vessel whose only function is to allude to something extra-literary, phenomenal, and intensely personal.

What a rhetorical reading of the form of this sentence provides, then, is the suggestion that there are two mutually exclusive interpretations which invite the reader to concretize her assumptions about Emerson's use of repetition in this line. Although this concretization is a necessary component of reading comprehension, what the self-reliant individual truly reads is what attempts to escape the confines of language. That is, what is being made redundant, here, is the idea that Emerson's diction and syntax is somehow insufficient for alluding to the trauma of Waldo's death. By reading the absence that underlies the profound sense of suspension and hopelessness—which is emblemized by ambiguous diction and syntax in the essay—the self-reliant reader acknowledges that the terrible emotional referent in the essay is unattainable. However, the extent to which the reader participates in that suspension is largely determined by her extra-literary preconditions, and this will determine the extent to which she can vivify Emerson's own "vocabulary" for grief. If this adoption of diction isn't possible, then the reader should acknowledge this inaccessibility.

While "Experience" is not wholly exempt from what appears to be narrative progress, even the terms of this consecution are not always clear. One of the essay's major developments is towards an ostensible optimism that informs many of the work's conclusions, but even the language that Emerson uses to portray these conclusions is multifarious and complex. As Emerson introduces this tonal shift he says,

Life itself is a bubble and a skepticism, and a sleep within a sleep. Grant it, and as much more as they will, —but thou, God's darling! heed thy private dream: thou wilt not be missed in the scorning and skepticism: there are enough of them: stay there in thy closet, and toil, until the rest are agreed what to do about it. Thy

sickness, they say, and thy puny habit, require that thou do this or avoid that, but know thy life is a flitting state, a tent for the night, and do thou, sick or well, finish that stint. Thou art sick, but shalt not be worse, and the universe, which holds thee dear, shall be the better. (Emerson EXP 205-6)

The inclusion of the dash opens another realm of possibility other than the literal interpretation of this paragraph. Envisioning the dash as only punctuation makes a stark visual distinction by becoming a chasm between “they” and “thou.” Though Emerson has utilized the strangely ambiguous and inclusive pronoun “we” until this point, the shift into the second person is an exercise in exceptionalism and independence.

But the dash also pushes beyond the circumscribed realm of the sentence and attempts to refer a revelatory, inclusive emotion that Emerson does not—and perhaps cannot—encapsulate in language. In the first place, the dash is a site of deferral, for it keeps Emerson from completing a former train of thought, one that was focused on the needs and impulses of the ambiguous “they.” In this deferral there is also an allusion to an extra-literary manifestation of potentiality. The dash emblemizes, as if for the first time, Emerson’s recognition of something new and fresh, which is anthropomorphized into the pronoun “thou.” This renewal of intellectual vigor and the subsequent realizations of possibility that imbue the remainder of the paragraph are entirely phenomenal, but Emerson alludes to the abrupt surprise that only a revelation of this magnitude could provide with a nonlinguistic, syntactical character. Indeed, the impact signified by the dash is so profound that the paragraph maintains its optimistic tone despite being imbued with language that is blatantly negative in connotation; though Emerson uses forms of the word “sickness” three times in two sentences—and uses

words like “puny”, “toil” and “flitting”—it is clear that he is approaching his ideas from a new frame of mind that, as readers, we may not understand or have access to.

Additionally, the impact that the form of this paragraph has on the tonal shift in “Experience,” is not limited to the inclusion of the dash in the second sentence, as other aspects of the paragraph are signifying a greater progress, too. If the dash refers to an extra-literary revelation, then the colons that repeatedly manifest implicitly detail the aftermath of Emerson’s revelation. The colons that separate a number of the clauses act like little gates against which each idea finds an independent articulation; however, syntactically, they also suggest an unfolding of an idea into its detailed parts: a single clause that initially appears independent is then linked as the encapsulation of what is to follow, which is in turn an encapsulation for the next. This simultaneous syntactical separation and interdependency mirrors Emerson’s desire to obey only the terms of a “private dream” while acknowledging the potential social effect this will have. Moreover, as Emerson then metaphorically compares life to a temporary tent, it becomes clear that this passage is primarily interested—in content and syntax—with movement and progress, and the colons exemplify this by dramatizing the passing of time as a key aspect of their grammatical function. The revelatory dash, then, is maintained and expanded upon by the colons. It is this progress that renovates the idea that “life itself is a bubble and a skepticism” into a radical alternative, which holds that the universe is uniquely interested in the subject’s personal works and fate. This may, in fact, be a shade of the revelation that affected Emerson so profoundly as to shift the tone of the essay. And, with this idea as both signified and embodied in the language, the passing of time becomes an ameliorating force that armors the subject to endure the most potent instances

of suffering, regardless of how endless they may initially appear. As before, the function of the dash is not clear; but in its grammatical failure, the dash alludes to something far greater, beyond the limiting connotations of the words he uses.

As has been demonstrated in earlier chapters, a change in Emerson's theory of language may be indicative for the way in which he discusses subjectivity, and these things in confluence are important for a comprehensive understanding of how reading can continue to foster self-reliance in the midst of such flux. Indeed, the forward progress emblemized by the colons and the revelatory dash are towards a complete subjectivism where the subject is detached from possibility of affecting the external world, yet this subject is somehow determined to adhere to the fickleness of her own mood. Emerson suggests that "God delights to isolate us every day, and hide us from the past and the future. We would look about us, but with grand politeness he draws down before us an impenetrable screen of purest sky, and another behind us of purest sky" (Emerson EXP 206). All we have access to is our present, yet even this present is ineffaceably informed by mood, and "Temperment also enters into the system of illusions, and shuts us in a prison of glass which we cannot see" (Emerson EXP 201). As such, Emerson's unfortunate characterization of the subject in "Experience" becomes akin to a determined subject within an indeterminate world. Emerson creates this paradoxical construction by using a vocabulary of incarceration while declaring that "we live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them" (Emerson EXP 204). As before, Emerson's language refers to both of these possibilities at the same time—sometimes in a single word— and this poses a delicate assignment for the self-reliant reader, as it becomes

necessary to trace how a subject can be determined and undetermined at the same time without simply taking Emerson's word for it.

Emblematic of this suspension is Emerson's assertion that, "in accepting the leading of sentiments, it is not what we believe concerning the immortality of the soul, or the like, but *the universal impulse to believe*, that is the material circumstances, and is the principal fact in the history of the globe" (Emerson EXP 208-9). Emerson polemically suggests that the belief in the immortality of the soul is subsumed by the general impulse to believe in anything at all, yet even this latter conviction is incorporated as only a fact in what Emerson calls "the history of the globe." This "history" is much more convoluted than it first appears, for the word "globe" should not be read as roughly equivalent to idea of the "earth." Instead, Emerson employs the word "globe" to signify an entirely abstract and objective idea with another that is perfectly concrete and subjective, and this is precisely the limitation that Emerson's determined and undetermined subject faces. In so doing, the word—and the subject herself—is stretched beyond any single denotation and faces referential limitations. In the first, objective sense, a globe is an ideal representation of a terrestrial body or a celestial grouping of constellations, and, following Alfred Korzybski, it's clear that not only is the map not the territory, but "no map represents *all* of 'its' presumed territory" (Korzybski *Science* xvii). Further, when symbolized in language, "globe" becomes an abstraction of what was already abstract, and it seems unlikely that this extra cognitive distance could accurately represent the pith of the earth. However, it is from within this blind spot that the second sense of "globe" arises, for the post-classical Latin usage of *globus*—from which the word "globe" is eventually derived—was used to mean "eye or eyeball" (OED). This

attempt to refer to the concreteness of the human eye bolsters Emerson's assertion that "it is the eye which makes the horizon" (Emerson EXP 209), but the tension between cartographic abstraction and the concreteness of the human eye in "the history of the globe" creates a subtle and multifarious dependent clause. The word "globe" fails to refer to a single genus of idea, leaving it suspended between literal and figurative meanings. However, in its failure to refer to an existing conceptual corpus, the word succeeds in alluding to an unrepresentable space of potentiality. It is not clear how a word can encompass something perfectly abstract and concrete and the same time, but the word does not foreclose this possibility. And it is exactly this possibility that informs the content of Emerson's subjectivism, as the core of subjectivity is said to be only influenced by its relationship with the outside world—where all our blows are "casual and oblique"—while also suggesting that the subject creates the world in keeping with her temperament.

Emerson reports feeling this progression towards a complete subjectivism acutely, and he sees few alternatives but to declare that, "Thus inevitably does the universe wear our color, and every object fall successively into the subject itself. The subject exists, the subject enlarges; all things sooner or later fall into place. As I am, so I see; use what language we will, we can never say anything but what we are" (Emerson EXP 210). Here, and in a number of places towards the end of "Experience", it seems as though Emerson is becoming more comfortable with the idea that he cannot represent grief in any satisfactory way. If it is true that "life is a train of moods like a string of beads", then we should feel comfortable to "animate what we can" and accept that this is only a part of a gloriously painted picture (Emerson EXP 200). In moving towards this recognition,

Emerson partially reverts back to utilizing the conception of language as outlined in “The Poet”, where recognizing a limitation is acknowledging Beauty, the creator of the universe. In doing the best that he can to represent grief, Emerson discovers that a complete encapsulation of the emotion is impossible, and the self-reliant reader is charged to infer the meaning of these traces of absence. However, such an encapsulation may not even be preferable as it leaves intact a catalogue of possible relations between subject and object to be explored, which are the germinating conditions for Beauty.

As such, the content of what some have called the “optimistic” conclusion to the essay is likely a recounting of the inevitability of limitations and the possible benefits they can propose to a self-reliant reader. But in the unfolding of these benefits there is also a much greater acknowledgement of an indeterminacy that Emerson has never truly dealt with in an explicit fashion. He declares that an example of a “more correct writing” should “confess that we have arrived as far as we can go. Suffice it for the joy of the universe, that we have not arrived at a wall, but at interminable oceans”, and this is sentiment with which Emerson imbues the end of “Experience” (Emerson EXP 208). And these interminable oceans are not necessarily anything to be afraid of or to lament. Instead,

How easily, if fate would suffer it, we might keep forever these *beautiful limits*, and adjust ourselves, once and for all, to the perfect calculation of the kingdom of known cause and effect...But ah! presently comes a day—or is it only a half-hour, with its angel whispering—which discomfits the conclusions of nations and of years! (Emerson EXP 206, emphasis mine)

The problem is not that there are limits—which Emerson implies using the adjectival form of the creator of the universe—but is rather that these limits seem to evolve without the consideration of direct human involvement. The problem, in other words, is that even language is unable to affect our indeterminate natural condition. What “Experience” emblemizes, then, at its conclusion is a full spectrum conceptual evolution in detailing the functions of language. Though the linguistic transparency for which Emerson argued in “History” had dissipated by the time he comes to characterizes the inherent multiplicity of the symbol in “The Poet”, the death of his son Waldo—and Emerson’s subsequent inability to express the rigors of grief in a denotatively satisfying way—reveals a natural indeterminacy that seems immune to human interaction.

Similarly, reading with self-reliance acknowledges that there are certain vocabularies—though they be written in our common language—to which we do not have access, and recognizing this fundamental limitation simultaneously creates an ethical mandate. As “Experience” comes to a close, Emerson reports feeling more comfortable with this possibility, saying,

All writing comes by the grace of God, and all doing and having. I would gladly be moral, and keep due metes and bounds, which I dearly love, and allow the most to the will of man, but I have set my heart on honesty in this chapter, and I can see nothing at last, in success or failure, than more or less of vital force supplied from the Eternal. The results of life are uncalculated and uncalculable.
(Emerson EXP 207)

By implicitly contrasting “the will of man” and the “grace of God”, Emerson declares that our native indeterminacy does not respect any pre-established boundary, as the defining feature of our existence is unknowable chance. Yet, seemingly despite the details of Emerson’s newfound “honesty”, the closing lines of the essay declares “Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat: up again, old heart!...there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power” (Emerson EXP 213), and the tone of this assertion is not clear given his previous conclusions. Though it may appear as though Emerson is simply raging against the indeterminacy he detailed over the course of “Experience”, the closing clause puts an unprecedented emphasis on personal conduct at the expense of knowing the pith of the objective world. With the world’s indeterminacy being simply what there is, Emerson’s “practical power” is the acknowledgement of what a subject can expect to accomplish despite these natural conditions, and the conflict between the two creates the possibility of ethical conduct.

Although he is writing 150 years after Emerson, contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou condenses our ethical mandate in such a way as to reveal striking resonances with “Experience” and with many of Emerson’s published works after. As an answer for the Emerson’s haunting question “How shall I live?”—which is a question that Robert D. Richardson in *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* has rightly identified as one of Emerson’s guiding compositional questions— at the beginning of his late essay “Fate”, Badiou provides a kind of answer in his *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Badiou would have us “Do all that you can to persevere in that which exceeds your perseverance. Persevere in the interruption. Seize in your being that which has

seized and broken you” (Badiou *Ethics* 47). There is not sufficient evidence to suggest a causal link between Emerson’s essays and Badiou’s philosophy, but it is clear that they are responding to the same issues, and Badiou can be read as an acute diagnostician for the indeterminacy like that which concerns “Experience” and some of Emerson’s later essays. Badiou maintains that

If there is no ethics ‘in general’, that is because there is no abstract subject, who would adopt it as his shield. There is only a particular kind of animal, convoked by certain circumstances to *become* a subject—or rather, to enter into the composing of a subject. This is to say that at a given moment everything he is—his body, his abilities—is called upon to enable the passing of a truth along its path. (Badiou *Ethics* 40).

Emerson’s “up again, old heart!”—when contextualized in the end of “Experience”—can be read as a dramatization of Badiou’s points as they appear here. Armed with the understanding that there is no general answer to a question like Emerson’s intensely personal “How shall I live?”, the individual is charged with using her unique circumstances to the best of her ability, and this process, for Badiou, makes a subject out of an animal. This newly created subject uses her circumstances—or, that which will become her “practical power”—to exemplify a truth in a novel way, and thereby participate in its legacy.

Putting Badiou in parallel with Emerson also brings into focus the importance of reading for “Experience” while simultaneously revealing how Emerson’s evolution towards indeterminacy brings the ethical into focus. Badiou reminds us that “The

concept of situation is especially important, since I maintain that there can be no ethics in general, but only an ethic of singular truths, and thus an ethic relative to a particular situation (Badiou *Ethics* lvi). Emerson is situated in “Experience” as unable to engage the emotional referent with the superficial and generalizing effects of language, and reading with self-reliance seeks to preserve the ethic relative to that particular situation. This does not mean that readers should wholly abjure their hermeneutical talents, as Emerson still upholds and exemplifies the multiplicity endemic in every linguistic symbol, as he did in “The Poet”. The ways single words and syntactical structures can be interpreted in multiform fashion demonstrates the remarkable beauty of which language is capable. Yet this beauty always comes with the recognition that language cannot represent the wonders and terrors of our most vivid personal experiences, and this leaves us with a duty: to admit that sometimes the best understanding is to confess that we do not understand, thereby preserving the pith of the author’s emotional experience to be whatever it may be.

CONCLUSION

*When I read a good book,
say, one which opens a
literary question, I wish that
life were 3000 years long.
Ralph Waldo Emerson,
Journals, 1866*

What I have hoped to show is that Emersonian self-reliance is best understood as a purification of subjectivity and that, for Emerson, reading is a necessary component of this ablution. Reading offers the opportunity to make the reader's supposed deficiencies "redundancy", but the definition of "deficiency" varies over the course of Emerson's literary career. Pinning down what "deficiency" comes to mean in each of Emerson's published works is difficult, as the denotation of the word is bound up within discussions of language and subjectivity, and these discussions themselves are intricate and subtle. Roughly speaking, however, "deficiency" evolves from referring to the reader herself to qualities endemic in language, and the troubling implications of what was championed in "The Poet" as the centuple meanings of every sensuous fact find expression in "Experience". Throughout this evolution, reading exorcises the illusion of this deficiency, even, as in "Experience", if it comes to reading and understanding the markers of absence that are built into insufficient diction. But Emerson is also adamant that "[l]ife is our dictionary" (Emerson AS 62), as he puts in "The American Scholar", and most analyses of Emerson's work should also give an account of how his work aims to enrich the lives of those who would read his work carefully. If reading is necessary for self-reliance, then is it just as necessary for living a fulfilling life?

Therefore, a necessary consideration, which doesn't truly present itself until Emerson acknowledges a natural indeterminacy between word and event in "Experience", is the possible intersections between self-reliant reading and ethics, as the two are not necessarily synonymous. Instead, what presents itself in Emerson's later work are the implicit ways self-reliant reading can inform leading an ethical life, especially to the extent that ethics is moral correctness dictated by truth and personal circumstance. "Fate"—a chapter from Emerson's later book of essays entitled *The Conduct of Life*—for example, is explicitly struggling with what a self-reliant individual can do in the face of cosmic indeterminacy, and his conclusions resonate strongly with French philosopher Alain Badiou's ethical system as sketched in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Admittedly, Badiou is a radical figure on the outskirts of traditional ethical discourse, but his focus on the revolutionary potential of the individual in relation to the general good has luminous implications when brought into focus with "Fate", and this is the primary reason for proposing a short comparative study of both thinkers.

Badiou's book, however, is not an entirely "Emersonian" system, as Badiou's larger ethical project is to establish moral right and wrong without the necessary existence of transcendental alterity. However, it's precisely this detranscendentalized foundation of ethics that justifies the trans-historical link between Badiou and Emerson, as it's clear that self-reliance can operate without the necessary existence of God, though it can be compatible with divine alterity, too. Emerson rarely explicitly alludes to "God" in his published essays, but many critics have cogently shown the ineffaceable influence of Unitarianism on Emerson's thought long after he resigned from Boston's Second

Church in 1832. However, because Emerson only tangentially refers to a transcendental Other, a Judeo-Christian system of morality cannot fully encompass Emerson's thought, and Badiou's detranscendentalized conception of immortality and the ways in which a personal event can forever alter subjectivity are insightful for addressing the aspects of Emerson's thought that escape a Unitarian classification. Further, Badiou, by focusing on the virtues of personal perseverance, can also reveal Emerson's determination after "Experience" to live a hopeful life, and it becomes clear that this latter aspect is essential for the act of self-reliant reading.

It's clear that, in "Fate", Emerson struggles to sketch the ethical implications of a growing, natural indeterminacy that he contested and raged against in "Experience", and, as such, "Fate" provides a couple of insights into the importance of the limitations of self-reliant reading. As that essay opens, Emerson declares, "To me, however, the question of the times resolved itself into a practical question of the conduct of life. How shall I live? We are incompetent to solve the times" (Emerson "Fate" 261). This pragmatic question directly concerns Emerson's truth "which the world exists to realize" at the end of "Experience", where "the transformation of genius into practical power" (Emerson EXP 213) is a shift away from gifted perception of the world towards measuring the import of that perception for the possibility of the "good life". By using the word "incompetent", Emerson again suggests that "all our blows glance, all our hits are accidents" (Emerson EXP 200), but he tacitly maintains with his question "How shall I live?" that there is something the individual can do despite this indeterminacy. That is, "[i]f we must accept Fate, we are not less compelled to affirm liberty, the significance of the individual, the grandeur of duty, the power of character", and we aim to accomplish

this “[b]y obeying each thought frankly, by harping, or, if you will, pounding on each string, we learn at last its power” (Emerson “Fate” 261). It’s still possible for the individual to have liberty and grace, and these qualities come from “obeying each thought frankly”—or continuing to “believe your own thought” (Emerson SR 121) despite whatever indeterminate evidence presents itself to the contrary. This observance of each original thought informs the “self” half of “self-reliance” by refusing to adjudicate another’s vocabulary as superior to the original textures of an individual’s thought. But just as important to “self-reliance” is what Emerson alludes to with the phrase “pounding on each string”, as it’s *perseverance* in obeying original thought that best encapsulates the idea of “reliance”. For Emerson, persevering in trusting original thought is the pith of liberty and the secret to the significance of the individual, and it’s with this quality that Emerson will answer the question “How shall I live?”

The natural environment through which the individual perseveres in trusting her own thought has changed dramatically since *Essays: First Series*, and, as a result, this environment has made it much more difficult to trust the efficacy of original thought. Emerson now maintains that, “[t]he Circumstance is Nature. Nature is, what you may do. There is much you may not. We have two things, —the circumstance, and the life. Once we thought, positive power was all. Now we learn, that negative power, or circumstance, is half” (Emerson “Fate” 266). Whereas chapters like “Spiritual Laws” in the *First Series* declare that “[t]he face of external nature teaches the same lesson. Nature will not have us fret and fume” (Emerson SL 151), “Fate” is one of Emerson’s more explicit acknowledgements that the meaning of Nature varies according to circumstance. His admission to what “once we thought” is an allusion to the early essays, where nature and

the individual will are described as working together in a relationship that, in places, is described as determinism. Here, however, Emerson divides this relationship into the antipodal powers of “positive” and “negative” forces, and nature is characterized as the latter through its sympathies with indeterminate chance. The “life”—or the will of the individual—is the positive power, and this force has the synthetic ability to align itself with that which cannot be altered. Emerson uses a number of indigenous cultures as an example, explaining,

I cited the instinctive and heroic races as proud believers in Destiny. They conspire with it; a loving resignation is with the event. But the dogma makes a different impression, when it is held by the weak and lazy. ‘Tis weak and vicious people who cast the blame on Fate. The right use of Fate is to bring up our conduct to the loftiness of nature. Rude and invincible...are the elements. So let man be. (Emerson “Fate” 269)

If nature is fundamentally indeterminate and unconcerned with human interaction, then there is power in the voluntary renunciation of a complete understanding of natural events. Through this repudiation the individual actually aligns herself with nature by casting her will as “rude and invincible”. Natural indeterminacy, then, is a gift, for it is an example of how the individual should live her life. If there is no determined link between the subject and the environment, then the impetus is on the interpretative powers of the individual to enrich her experience while occupying the environment, despite the lack of necessary, causal relations between the two.

Emerson calls these interpretative powers “the intellect”, and this is the greatest power an individual has against crippling indeterminacy and inefficacy. The intellect makes a conscious, psychological decision as to the effect fate—as evidenced through nature— will have on it. Emerson outlines this possibility clearly, saying, “If you please to plant yourself on the side of Fate, and say Fate is all: then we say, a part of Fate is the freedom of man. Forever wells up the impulse of choosing and acting in the soul. Intellect annuls Fate. So far as a man thinks, he is free” (Emerson “Fate” 269). Our indeterminate relationship with nature—as perhaps bolstered by the inabilities of language—is simply “what there is”, and these conditions constrict and direct our organic form towards certain inevitable conclusions. This, for example, was the chief concern underpinning “Experience”, as Emerson demonstrated the fundamental way in which language couldn’t touch Waldo’s death. However, the intellect represents something above-and-beyond this organic form, and the profound revolutionary potential built into this supplement contains the possibility of ethical conduct. Badiou starts with remarkably similar premises, dividing the genesis the ethical conduct into a tension between *what there is* and an extra quality particular to human thought. Badiou also begins by positing a natural indeterminacy where all there is in the world are differences, and he calls this quality of our existence “objectivity”. Further, he says,

It is clear that *what there is* (multiples, infinite differences, ‘objective’ situations – for example, the ordinary state of relation to the other, before a loving encounter) cannot define such a circumstance. In this kind of objectivity, every animal gets by as best it can. We must suppose, then, that whatever convokes someone to the composition of the subject is something extra, something that happens in

situations as something that they and the usual way of behaving in them cannot account for. (Badiou *Ethics* 41)

For Badiou, if “objectivity” is all there is, then the human is only an animal, and Emerson would add that a sense of fate would be particularly strong for this animal. But unlike most animals, human beings have a choice to be something other than a mortal, being-for-death animal. Badiou explains,

To be sure, humanity is an animal species. It is mortal and predatory. But neither of these attributes can distinguish humanity within the world of the living... [With humans] we are dealing with an animal whose resistance, unlike that of a horse, lies not in his fragile body but in his stubborn determination to remain what he is – that is to say, precisely something other than a victim, other than a being-for-death, and thus: *something other than a mortal being*. An immortal: this is what the worst situations that can be inflicted upon Man show him to be, in so far as he distinguishes himself within the varied and rapacious flux of life. (Badiou *Ethics* 11-12)

Badiou detranscendentalizes immortality by making it a feature of the active intellect. Because human beings are animals, their mortality can be defined as the primal urge to satisfy the conditions through which organic being is sustained. Morality, in other words, is seeking food, shelter, sex, and other basic needs. Immortality, by contrast, resides in the thought that inspires an animal to push against obtaining its basic needs towards a larger idea. In this way, the animal becomes literally “not mortal”, and, for Badiou, this contains the potential for an immortal human subject. However, as the terms imply,

immortality is not a static state of ideal being, but is rather something through which a mortal being can slip in and out. In “Fate”, Emerson subscribes to an estimation of human potential very similar to this, though the poles might best be described as “fated-being” and the “self-reliant.” Yet it’s clear that Emerson finds a kind of transcendence in the mutual recognition of these opposites, as “The revelation of Thought takes man out of servitude into freedom” (Emerson “Fate” 269), and this freedom stems from the self-reliant mind. Emerson continues, “A man speaking from insight affirms himself what is true of the mind: seeing its immortality, he says, I am immortal; seeing its invincibility, he says, I am strong” (Emerson “Fate” 270). Emerson acknowledges that the mind is immortal, and this immortality is best defined as that which resists the temptations of “fated-being.” Implicit in both Badiou’s and Emerson’s descriptions of the way in which the mind can interact with natural circumstances is the idea that resistance and perseverance are essential aspects of achieving this specialized sense of immortality. Badiou explains that this is because “Man, as immortal, is sustained by the incalculable and the un-possessioned. He is sustained by non-being” (Badiou *Ethics* 14), or, in other words, by possibility, potentiality, and hope. Though indeterminate nature may have nearly convinced us that we are unable to reach things as they are, a key aspect of immortal thought is contributed by the possibility that things could always be otherwise, and, for both Badiou and Emerson, the process of sustaining this hope is an essential aspect of ethical conduct.

Thinking, then, is an act of perseverance, as it transcends strictly mortal conditions—which may at a given time appear stark and conclusive—by appealing to

what could possibly be the case, or what Badiou calls “non-being”. Our circumstances are naturally indeterminate, according to Emerson, and,

“If the Universe have these savage accidents, our atoms are as savage in resistance. We should be crushed by the atmosphere, but for the reaction of the air within the body. A tube made of a film of glass can resist the shock of the ocean, if filled with the same water. If there be omnipotence in the stroke, there is omnipotence in the recoil” (Emerson “Fate” 269).

The act of recoiling is the source of immortality—which Emerson bolsters by attributing a transcendent sense of “omnipotence” to the subject whom resists—as that very action alludes to the possibility of something other than what is presented by nature to the perceiver. But resisting that which seems to be irrefutable natural fact is rarely easy, and it isn’t always clear just how persistence is even possible. Emerson’s deficient use of language in “Experience”, for example, consistently detailed the struggle to adhere to an intensely personal emotional event that couldn’t be adequately represented in language, and the frustration from the disconnect was nearly palpable. Responding to similar concerns, Badiou declares his fundamental ethical maxim as being: “Do all you can to persevere in that which exceeds your perseverance. Persevere in the interruption. Seize in your being that which has seized and broken you” (Badiou *Ethics* 47). The foundation of ethics, for Badiou, is essentially: “Keep going!’ Keep going even when you have lost the thread, when you no longer feel ‘caught up’ in the process, when the event itself has become obscure, when its name is lost, when it seems it may have named a mistake” (Badiou *Ethics* 79), and for Emerson this persistence should be qualified as that which

allows the self-reliant to continue to uphold the textures of her original thought, regardless of how deficient she may think them to be.

Implicit in Badiou's ethical estimation is the idea that events literally create human subjects, as the event presents the opportunity to supersede mortal conditions and possibly become immortal through the resistance endemic in active thought. In "Fate", too, Emerson comes to the understanding that this revolutionary aspect of human thought actually allows for a causal relationship between humans and nature. It's as an immortal that "one may say boldly, that no man has a right perception of any truth, who has not been reacted on by it so as to be ready to be its master (Emerson "Fate" 271). Emerson's vocabulary of servitude here implies that the subject cares for and sustains her experiences which have proved true, and Badiou would agree with Emerson's diction here. The gratitude the subject might feel for the event that proposed the possibility of attaining immortality comes from the fact that the subject simply is someone "who bears a process of truth. The subject, therefore, in no way pre-exists the process. He is absolutely nonexistent in the 'situation' before the event. We might say that the process of truth *induces* a subject" (Badiou *Ethics* 43, emphasis in original). And though events like the death of a loved one are terrible and inspire a very real sense of helplessness, there can be little doubt as to whether or not such an event radically revises the receiver's ontological core. Emerson comes to this realization himself in "Fate" divulging that, "The secret of the world is, the tie between person and event. Person makes event, and event person" (Emerson "Fate" 274). Nature's blow can devastate, but hidden in this direct blow is an ethical opportunity: resist, think your own thought, and persist. If successful, then the subject will experience a flicker of immortality and "A man will see

his character emitted in the events that seem to meet, but which exude from and accompany him. Events expand the character” (Emerson “Fate” 276). Indeed, though some events may be terrible, the more events a subject can experience, the more capacious her character will be and the more opportunities she will have to attain immortality.

Therefore, active reading is not only essential to cultivating self-reliance, but it also helps to explain why self-reliance is an important aspect of subjectivity through its clear intersections with ethics and attaining the “good life”. The pivotal role reading can have in the discussion about self-reliant subjectivity and the ethical is multihued. Reading can directly contribute to an ethical life through the self-reliant declaration to “keep going!” and trusting “that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men” (Emerson SR 121), and it accomplishes this by continually unveiling fluxional worlds of potentiality as well as an avenue in which to gather the kind of experiences that will expand personal character. Badiou’s “non-being” and Emerson’s “thought” are both hinged with what could potentially happen as opposed to what appears to be the case, and this hope is essential for ethical conduct. And there’s good reason behind Emerson’s admission in his essay “Wealth” that “Wealth begins...in books to read” (Emerson “Wealth” 514)⁶, and his use of the infinitive concretizes the infinite potential that is imbued in books that haven’t been read yet. His chapter entitled “Books” in *Society and Solitude* details at length this connection between reading, immortality, and the ethical, saying,

⁶ References to “Wealth”, “Character”, “Books”, and “Progress of Culture” are cited from *The Complete Prose Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. G.T. Bettany. New York: Ward, Lock and Co., 1891.

We owe to books those general benefits which come from high intellectual action. Thus, I think, we often owe to them the perception of immortality. They impart sympathetic activity to the moral power. Go with mean people and you think life is mean. Then read Plutarch, and the world is a proud place, peopled with men of positive quality, with heroes and demigods standing around us, who will not let us sleep. (Emerson “Books” 448)

Emerson doesn't explicitly detail what he means by “the perception of immortality”, but the phrase's parallels with “Experience” and with “Fate” demonstrates the ways in which reading can increase potentiality, thought, “non-being”, and, therefore, the ethical. Emerson's “high intellectual action” refers to that which annuls fate, and holds that “so far as a man thinks, he is free” (Emerson “Fate” 269). This germinating aspect of liberty simultaneously contains within it the possibility of attaining a flicker of immortality by superseding mortal conditions through the potential for resistance, and books can help to cultivate this transcendence by inspiring active thought. A book shows us a vision of the world that can be different than what appears to be the case from the vantage point of our circumstances. Our personal circumstances can, at times, seem dire and conclusive, and if we choose to circumscribe our “*universal impulse to believe*” (Emerson EXP 209) within these conditions, then “you think life is mean.” But a book shows us an alternative. The world a book reveals to us is populated with “heroes and demigods standing around us”, and this possibility is so vivid as to keep us from slumping back into our old assumptions and ideas about the way the world operates. Seeing an alternative universe populated with demigods—or those whose being occupies the liminal space

between divinity and morality—can inspire the reader to walk the same line between satisfying mortal conditions and aspiring towards immortality through thought.

Similarly, reading increases the number of experiences from which the reader can use to expand her character. Though many of us have been fortunate enough never to have lost a child, reading an account of the aftermath of such an event can inspire the use of the empathetic intellect to try and understand that trauma. The efficacy of this empathy has its limits, as Emerson demonstrated in “Experience”, but respecting those limits is itself an event—in Badiou’s and Emerson’s sense of the word—which can also expand the moral sensibility. Emerson differentiates his belief in the edificatory potential of reading from Montaigne in “Books”, and this potential partly stems from gathering the experiences portrayed or alluded to in literature. Emerson finds that, “Montaigne says, ‘Books are a languid plea-sure;’ but I find certain books vital and spermatic, not leaving the reader what he was: he shuts the book a richer man” (Emerson “Books” 450). Reading sustains life and generates it, forever altering the active reader who is looking to have her experiences vivified in the words of another. If an active reading of this sort is successful, then that text becomes an aspect of the reader’s subjectivity. Emerson explains in his essay “Character” that self-reliant readers feel captivated “in their devotion to their favorite books, whether Aeschylus, Dante, Shakspeare, or Scott, as [they feel] that they have a stake in that book: who touches that, touches them” (Emerson C 217).

In this capacity, reading bolsters Emerson’s assertion that “Person makes event, and event person” (Emerson “Fate” 274), and he continues to expatiate the intersections between books and ethical conduct along the aforementioned lines. Indeed, several

chapters in *Society and Solitude* and *Letters and Social Aims*—which are the last two collections of work published within Emerson’s lifetime—continue to characterize reading as a fundamentally hopeful endeavor, which doesn’t disprove the indeterminacy that imbues “Experience”, but rather describes it as not being as great of a hindrance as Emerson first supposed. In July 1867, just a few years before he was afflicted with catastrophic memory loss that kept him from lecturing and just 15 years before his death, Emerson delivered a lecture aptly titled “Progress of Culture” on the promises of the future. He says,

And more, when I look around me, and consider the sound material of which the cultivated class here is made up, —what high personal worth, what love of men, what hope, is joined with rich information and practical power, and that the most distinguished by genius and culture are in this class of benefactors, —I cannot distrust this great knighthood of virtue, or doubt that the interests of science, of letters, of politics and humanity, are safe. I think their hands are strong enough to hold up the Republic. I *read* the promise of better times and of greater men.

(Emerson PC 627, my italics)

In “Experience” Emerson opines that with “[p]atience and patience, we shall win at the last” (Emerson EXP 212) even though he spent the duration of that essay demonstrating how such a success was impossible. But as his personal and professional lives were gradually extinguishing, he found that living an ethical life was not only possible but that future generations—like those belonging to the “great knighthood of virtue”—were well on track to discovering its implications for themselves. He divined this comforting assertion using a faculty he had developed all his life: reading. Reading with self-

reliance is a fundamentally hopeful endeavor, as it is informed by potentiality and the possibility of attaining immortality through active thought. However, there is a practical element to this hope, too. Emerson declares in “Fate” that the “knot of nature is so well tied, that nobody was ever cunning enough to find the two ends” (Emerson “Fate” 273), but just because no one has ever been successful in finding the extremities of her being doesn’t discount the attempt to do so. And this, simply put, is why we read: to discover the sublime intricacy of our web of relations with nature, and just what we can do as a unique component to strengthen its fibers.

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SCHOLASTIC VITA

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Experience Summary	Experienced in independent academic lecturing as well as leading class room discussion in conjunction with a faculty adviser. Well versed in content tutoring, writing instruction and guidance, and proofreading, most recently as a summer faculty member at Choate Rosemary Hall and graduate student at Wake Forest University. Strong technical command of the English language; familiarity with virtually all writing styles. Competent researcher, grant writer, and organizer.	
Education	M.A., English, <i>Wake Forest University</i>, Winston-Salem NC GPA 3.86	<i>12/12</i>
	B.A., English, <i>California State University</i>, San Bernardino CA Major GPA 4.0	<i>6/10</i>
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Selected Professional Experience	Summer Faculty Member in English – <i>Choate Rosemary Hall</i>, Wallingford, CT Team-taught one literature and one writing course for five weeks under two senior faculty members. Prepared and delivered approximately half of the lesson plans and in-class materials. Evaluated student journals, quizzes, tests, and essays and assigned grades. Coached middle school swimming and organized inter-grade competitions. Facilitated and helped to chaperone extra-curricular activities in New York City and Boston. Served as a dorm adviser for ten high school advisees and helped ensure their academic and personal success with close communication with deans and fellow teachers.	<i>6/12 – 7/12</i>
	Adjunct Lecturer and Resident Adviser–<i>Wake Forest University</i>, London, UK Independently conceptualized, designed and implemented a section of Humanities 180 for WFU’s study abroad program at the Worrell House in London. Led weekly class sessions, evaluated student essays and presentations, and coordinated and encouraged cultural immersion in English cities. Established guidelines for and continually assessed the personal conduct of fourteen undergraduates in conjunction with a house manager, resident professor, and housekeeper.	<i>11/11–4/12</i>
	Graduate Teaching Assistant – <i>Wake Forest University</i>, Winston-Salem, NC Co-Instructed a section of English 300: Poetics, Politics and Ethics with Dr. Omaar Hena. Initiated and moderated class room discussion on a weekly basis. Advised and guided students in choosing paper and presentation topics. Received detailed instruction in college level English and writing pedagogy.	<i>9/11–12/11</i>

	Graduate Writing Center Tutor – <i>Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC</i> Reviewed undergraduate and graduate student essays for twelve hours a week. Discussed micro and macro-level writing concerns, conducted organizational and brainstorming sessions, and motivated students to engage in editorial practices. Organized and conducted workshops on relieving writer’s block and developing research questions and outlines.	9/10 – 12/11
Honors	Paul K. Richter Travel Scholarship , <i>Wake Forest University</i>	6/11
	(2) Summer Research Grant , <i>Wake Forest University</i>	6/11 & 7/12
	Book Review Publication , <i>Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture</i>	8/11
	Graduate School Summer Scholarship , <i>Wake Forest University</i>	6/11
	Graduate School Tuition Scholarship , <i>Wake Forest University</i>	9/10 – 6/12
	Commencement Address Speaker Department of English , <i>California State University</i>	6/10
	Undergraduate of the Year Award Nominee , <i>California State University</i>	6/10
	University High Honors and Departmental Honors Departments of English and Philosophy , <i>California State University</i>	6/10
	Dean’s List , <i>California State University</i>	9/07 – 6/10
Community Service Experiences	Vice President , <i>The International English Honors Society Sigma Tau Delta</i> Programmed events dedicated to promoting literacy in the surrounding community. Developed and coordinated on-campus poetry and fiction readings by students and visiting writers. Organized 2009 induction ceremony for new CSUSB members. Elected by a jury of peers and outgoing officers.	5/08 – 6/10
	Current Member , <i>The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi</i> Recognized as helping to comprise the top ten percent of college seniors at CSUSB. Arranged on-campus events designed to raise awareness for educational and vocational opportunities.	9/08 – Present
	Active Volunteer , <i>Golden Key International Honour Society</i> Active participation in local efforts to promote literacy in primary education. Collaborated with other members in cultivating the surrounding physical area through community services.	9/08 – 6/10
	Philosophy Ambassador , <i>California State University</i> Advised prospective philosophy majors on class selections, obtaining summer internships, and exploring employment opportunities.	9/09 – 6/10