

2016

"The Soul Becomes": Heuristic Emerson

James Alexander Hallam
Bucknell University, jah074@bucknell.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/honors_theses

Recommended Citation

Hallam, James Alexander, ""The Soul Becomes": Heuristic Emerson" (2016). *Honors Theses*. 353.
https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/honors_theses/353

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses at Bucknell Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Bucknell Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcadmin@bucknell.edu.

“The soul becomes”: Heuristic Emerson

By

James A. Hallam

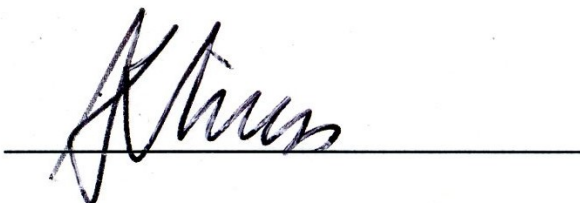
A Thesis Submitted to the Honors Council

For Honors in English

May, 11 2016

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Sandra Kay Morris", is written over a horizontal line.

Advisor: Sandra Kay Morris

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alf Siewers", is written over a horizontal line.

Department Chair: Alf Siewers

Acknowledgements

To Sandra Morris, who has been an inspiration to me from the beginning, thank you for your lessons, mentorship, counseling, and extreme patience.

To Michael Drexler, thank you for the comments, the enthusiasm, and help deciphering various “Hallamisms.”

To Jason Cons, thank you for initiating this process and giving me the confidence to complete it, and thank you for teaching me that making provocative arguments is much more fun.

To all the graduate students, it was amazing to be surrounded by such intelligent people. Nick and Steph, thanks for the questions, the pitchers, and the unfaltering optimism.

To the gentlemen of Tau Kappa Epsilon, thanks for always checking in, helping me unwind, and asking hilariously misguided questions about “that dude who lived in the woods.”

And to my parents, Jacky and Trevor, words are no longer adequate, but thank you for giving me the opportunities and freedoms in life to do something like this.

Table of Contents

Introduction: “the soul becomes”	1
Chapter One: “Self-Reliance”	5
<i>Oscillation</i>	6
<i>Contradiction</i>	9
<i>Diction</i>	13
<i>Concluding Remarks</i>	14
Chapter Two: “The American Scholar”	16
<i>Oscillation in Nature</i>	18
<i>Contradiction in Nature</i>	20
<i>Concluding Remarks</i>	22
Chapter Three: “Experience”	23
<i>Testing Limits</i>	24
<i>Divinity in Disunity</i>	30
<i>Concluding Remarks</i>	37

Chapter Four: “The Poet”	39
<i>Symbols and Metaphors</i>	43
<i>Looking Backwards</i>	45
<i>Finding God</i>	46
<i>Contradictions in Balance</i>	51
<i>Concluding Remarks</i>	54
Conclusion	55
Works Cited	63

Abstract

My research on Ralph Waldo Emerson centers on Emerson's assertion in "Self-Reliance" that "the soul becomes." In other words, the individual is engaged in a dynamic process of growth throughout his or her lifetime. Concentrating predominately on four of Emerson's main texts, my research explores the ways in which Emerson performs this process of growth within his essays. I argue that his inner struggles with himself and the world around him manifest themselves in various ways within his texts, both productively and unproductively. Productively, Emerson writes through his self-doubt and uncertainties, allowing him to arrive at new truths and new convictions. Unproductively, these struggles tend to create contradictions that undermine his message. My work raises questions about Emerson's reasons for including these contradictions that not only undermine his message, but also seem to call into question his entire belief system. Ultimately, I argue that not only are both these manifestations of Emerson's inner struggle, despite fracturing and confusing the text, crucial for his own inner growth, but also the inner growth of the reader. Emerson's readers must struggle to navigate his confusing and contradictory language. Readers must rely on themselves, their own mental processes, to interpret the nonlinear essay, and seek their individualized solution to the text's problems. This indirect way of promoting self-reliance and inner growth within the reader affords his work the organic unity denied by contradictions and lies at the heart of Emerson's immortality and importance for casual readers and revolutionaries alike.

“It came into him, life; it went out from him, truth. It came to him, short-lived actions; it went out from him, immortal thoughts. It came to him, business; it went out from him, poetry. It was dead fact; now, it is quick thought. It can stand, and it can go. It now endures, it now flies, it now inspires. Precisely in proportion to the depth of mind from which it issued, so high does it soar, so long does it sing.”

— “The American Scholar”

Introduction: “the soul becomes”

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s work has served as an inspiration for many influential thinkers and ordinary readers alike, both during and after Emerson’s life. In *Emerson and Eros*, for example, Len Gougeon argues, “Emersonian Transcendentalism soon became an essential ingredient in the ferment of social change that would serve to characterize the period 1830-1860 as ‘the era of reform’ in America” (2). Out of his many published lectures, addresses, essays, letters, and poems, those who study and teach Emerson often select “Self-Reliance” as the emblem of Emerson’s prolific body of work. Many would agree with Emerson scholar Harold Bloom that “Self-Reliance” is Emerson’s “most important essay” (169). The text was published in 1841 in *Essays: First Series* as the second of twelve essays. In it, Emerson encourages his readers to discover their own inner voice, to find their own paths through life, and to form their own assumptions about the world around them and their place within it. Because of its widespread popularity and importance, I will use “Self-Reliance” as any entry point into this thesis.

“Self-Reliance” is deeply interesting, profound, and even troubling simply for the fact that it insists in a variety of ways that “the soul becomes” (129). Emerson believes the soul is in a perpetual state of transition and evolution. Perhaps the most intriguing ideas contained in the essay involve the questions of how the soul changes, how it *becomes*, and lastly, *what* it becomes. My interest in these questions arises from Emerson’s own growth throughout his lifetime and the creation of perhaps America’s most important 19th-century

thinker. What impetus exists for the soul to grow, and how did Emerson discover it?

Gougeon phrases the issue best:

The question, then, simply put is this; how did all this happen? How did a conventional preacher of modest ability, leading an utterly predictable and comfortable middle-class life, eventually emerge as his nation's foremost prophet, seer, and social reformer? And further, what was the source of the dynamic, mystical, and transcendent power that Emerson claimed to have discovered within himself that enabled such a dramatic transformation? (2)

Conveniently for the reader, all Emerson's major essays, "Self-Reliance" included, are littered with personal anecdotes. He continually writes about himself and his own experiences, even seemingly addressing himself in certain sections. As Laurence Buell explains, "Emerson is not talking just about others but also about himself" (64). His personal movements and interjections throughout the texts serve as almost case studies for the reader against his more removed and impersonal principles.

Many important thinkers have attested that Emerson's commentary on how the soul becomes taught them about themselves. For example, in his interdisciplinary study of Emersonian transcendentalism and Zen Buddhism, Palmer Rampell introduces his argument by quoting a "renowned Japanese interpreter of Zen Buddhism," who "described reading Ralph Waldo Emerson for the first time as akin to 'making acquaintance with [him]self'" (621). Bloom similarly claims, "Nietzsche, thinking about Emerson, learned to think about Nietzsche" (174). Emerson's personal movements throughout the text are a valuable display of how the soul becomes, teaching his readers by example. As I will later investigate, the subtle elements of this issue are the most important.

As I look at Emerson's evasive, personal pathways throughout his prose and explore how the soul becomes, two fundamental ideas in "Self-Reliance" are imperative to my search. Buell explains that simply grasping "that Emerson's prose is not merely a test but also an invitation to self-reliant thinking does not bring instant enlightenment about the path he commands" (69). Readers must grapple with Emerson's complexities. One of those complexities is that Emerson believes in inconsistency. Emerson states his unwillingness to remain consistent directly in his claim in "Self-Reliance" that "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adorned by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do" (125). Emerson argues that if one concerns him or herself with remaining consistent, he or she will never grow as a person and become knowledgeable about other perspectives. Emerson does not wish to be considered a politician, a philosopher, or a prophet because all three labels demand a dogged commitment to some set of beliefs. Emerson wishes to explore all. His emphasis on freedom from precedence enables him to entertain new thoughts and adopt new convictions. Inconsistency allows Emerson to continue his personal growth indefinitely as he encounters new experiences and perspectives throughout his lifetime. He acknowledges that the soul, as it becomes, may never reach a final form – a final destination or ultimate perspective in life. Moreover, Emerson's commitment to inconsistency aptly illustrates a second fundamental notion: the fluidity of truth. What is "true" and "right" for an individual in one moment may not be in the next. Both notions are deeply intertwined and interdependent.

Both inconsistency and the fluidity of truth pertain to Emerson's most paramount beliefs about how the soul becomes. According to Emerson, the wellbeing and growth of

the soul hinge on the constant pursuit of an ever fleeting, evasive, and evolving “truth.” Emerson explains, when “the soul...perceives the self-existence of Truth and Right,” it “calms itself with knowing that all things go well” (131). In any given moment, finding some faint remnant of “Truth and Right” confirms that personal growth has not ceased and the soul has not become static – “things go well.” In consideration of both notions, I will analyze inconsistencies and contradictions throughout Emerson’s prose, beginning with “Self-Reliance,” as a way to explore how Emerson arrives at various truths and how he believes that the soul becomes. In my first chapter, I will discuss primary manifestations of Emerson’s inner struggles in “Self-Reliance.” In my second chapter, I will discuss Emerson’s reflections on struggle in the natural world in “The American Scholar.” In my third chapter, I will examine Emerson’s most direct confrontation with struggle in “Experience,” and in my fourth, I will talk about how Emerson’s ideas appear more complete in “The Poet” because of this confrontation in “Experience.” Ultimately, I will argue that in the texts I examine, an undercurrent of inward struggle lies at the center of personal growth for both Emerson and his readers.

Chapter One: "Self-Reliance"

One of the founding principles of Emerson's work prefaces "Self-Reliance." The essay begins with an epigraph in Latin: "Ne te quaesiveris extra," meaning, "Do not seek yourself outside yourself" (120). The epigraph primarily works on two levels. Most literally, Emerson empowers his readers to find their own answers, stressing the crucial importance of personal reflection. He tells his readers to find answers within themselves. Secondly, in a less literal sense, the epigraph conveys a sense of incompleteness within the text. As readers confront Emerson's often difficult language for the next twenty or so pages, the epigraph assures readers that all answers pertaining to how the soul becomes lie within themselves, not the text. The reader must keep looking; the text is merely a supplement. In this way, the epigraph operates as a forewarning that certain aspects of the following text will not necessarily effortlessly and seamlessly align. As I will later discuss, oscillations and contradictions are scattered throughout Emerson's prose and deny the essay any degree of linearity. However, the epigraph seems to propose the ultimate emergence of a dynamic sort of organic whole. The solutions to a reader's inevitable confusion lie within.

Despite its emblematic status, "Self-Reliance" never directly addresses Emerson's fundamental notion of struggle and the impact of inward struggle on the text. The essay is derived from a sermon delivered over a decade earlier in 1830. Following the form one might expect from a sermon, "Self-Reliance" is prescriptive and instructional. The essay is

decidedly positive and empowering. One of the various objectives of a sermon is to reduce abstract ideas to both accessible and practical terms. The minister must make complex ideas accessible to the congregation. In this “sermon,” Emerson omits key notions of struggle. However, as they are a fundamental construct of Emerson’s personal theology, the discreet entrance of struggle into the text is unavoidable. Although never directly addressed, inner struggle in “Self-Reliance” appears in the text in three distinct forms: oscillations, contradictions, and diction.

Oscillation

Emerson’s oscillating tendency is the most obvious demonstration of his commitment to inconsistency and the undercurrent of inner struggle it produces. As Buell describes this quality of Emerson’s prose, “This kind of sudden self-corrective swerve was a performance on the printed page of the seriousness at the heart of Emerson’s idea of ‘whim.’ Exploratory, provocative writing, not cautious measured baby-step writing, is how a writer makes good on the Self-Reliance ethic” (68). Oscillations in “Self-Reliance” allow Emerson to explore his mental capacities and arrive at new truths, however “sudden” or disorganized they appear. They are crucial to his dynamic system of beliefs. In this section, I will demonstrate the productivity of oscillations, a reflection of Emerson’s commitment to inconsistency and fluidity, as a manifestation of his inner struggle to discern new truths.

Before discussing my own readings of oscillation in the text, I will first review scholarly criticism pertaining to this notion in order to develop a more precise working definition of the term. A number of scholarly articles reiterate the importance and productiveness of oscillations in the text, all generally agreeing upon two properties of

Emerson's prose: a sort of polarity, and a transitive movement between these poles. The term oscillation aptly invokes both of these constituent notions, even though scholars have used various terms to discuss this quality of his prose. Commenting on this characteristic of Emerson's writing, Bloom posits, "Emerson . . . formulated what he chose to call 'the double consciousness' . . . in accordance with his conviction that 'Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit' " (165). Emerson writes in a perpetual state of transition from one assertion of a truth to the next. As a symptom of his belief in the fluidity of truth, Emerson dispenses a dualistic tendency to virtually every aspect of his prose. Because the essay's voice is dualistic and transitory, Emerson's sermon-like monologue in "Self-Reliance" seems to be met by an imagined congregation. The "double consciousness" produces its own audience. Oscillation, or rather, dialogue between a minister and the congregation, gives the essay momentum, as it *talks things out*. In his essay, "Bi-Polar Emerson," Joseph Urbas confirms this claim. He proposes, "process—or 'transition' as Emerson sometimes calls it—engenders synthesis... Movement and alteration, in Emerson's view, produce synthesis" (96). Giving momentum to the text, oscillations are indicative of Emerson's most productive struggles to grapple with complex transcendental ideas and discern higher truths. As we will see, Emerson's "double consciousness" manifests itself in a multitude of ways.

Oscillations surface most conspicuously in the prose style of "Self-Reliance." Emerson's struggle to reach new truths is reflected in the reader's experience. The reader experiences both moments of confusion and moments of clarity. Moments of confusion are often caused by Emerson's heavily imagistic and metaphoric style. However, the reader's struggle with the text is temporarily alleviated by moments of abrupt clarity. Moments of

clarity are characterized by very precise sentences following disproportionately long moments of confusing language. In one of the essay's first moments of this sort, Emerson writes, "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist" (122). These short moments are often the most resonant parts of the text, containing Emerson's most precise language. Then, the prose style shifts, and the reader must endure moments of confusion until interrupted by a new truth. The oscillation between moments of confusion and moments of clarity conveys a sense of progress and exploration. Emerson struggles to synthesize complex ideas with complex ramifications, but nevertheless, this oscillation illustrates the fruitfulness of struggle. Emerson continues to arrive at new principles – new truths.

Even though, as we have said before, Emerson does not directly comment on the function of inner struggle to ascertain new truths in "Self-Reliance," he does provide a metaphor to illustrate the productivity of these oscillations. He claims, "The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks. See the line from a sufficient distance, and it straightens itself to the average tendency" (125). Emerson is showing how the soul, while in a state of inconsistency and oscillation, continues to grow and "become." Examined with far enough perspective, the journey is shown to be straight and "things go well" (131). This means that even when actions, events, or emotions in life feel alien or severely uncharacteristic, the course of life accounts for this confusion and provides an overcorrection in the opposite direction. In addition, as with sailing, tacking backwards and forwards in this oscillating course is the best way to travel through life. Emerson never seems to return to the same point twice. Bloom explains, "Emerson, being metaphoric, defies commentary; he departs as soon as you characterize him." He "keeps changing as he writes" (165). Bloom is also commenting on the perpetually transitive nature of Emerson

as he appears in the text. He “defies commentary” because truth for Emerson is fluid. Finding one truth only prompts him to continue seeking the next. Dwelling on a single truth would anchor Emerson’s ship, causing his soul to stagnate.

Oscillations between clarity and confusion are also a tool employed to protect Emerson against conformity and consistency. Buell speculates, “It is better to remain at odds with yourself over what choice is right according to the laws of your nature than to fret about satisfying your peers. The discipline of nonchoice protects the individual, at least theoretically, against impetuosity and conformity” (77). Effectually, by never fully committing to certain principles and convictions, Emerson is able to bring anything into question. Emerson forces himself into a perpetual struggle with even his most unchanging beliefs to ensure that he is never simply conforming to a widely held notion. This commitment to inconsistency and struggle also allows Emerson to question society’s most accepted norms and thoughts. Oscillations allow his soul to grow through these struggles.

Contradiction

The text’s oscillation between clarity and confusion offers an insightful commentary on Emerson’s inner struggle for truth, showing how inconsistency allows for personal growth. However, it is not that simple. Contradictions are a second manifestation of Emerson’s inner struggle, and one that is less productive for Emerson. Contradiction is caused when Emerson’s “double consciousness” no longer oscillates, but instead, enters a standstill in tension with itself. The ship’s very existence seems to depend on its position on both horizons. During these moments, Emerson’s inner struggle no longer produces new truths, but instead, threatens to compromise his entire journey. Contradiction, as an

unresolved tension, alludes to a much more formidable degree of inner struggle and enters the text in various ways, exposing Emerson's own self-doubt.

One contradiction that permeates not only "Self Reliance" but also his entire body of work is the relationship between subjective experience and universal knowledge.

Emerson's work "seems to be founded on a self-contradiction: we are entitled to trust our deepest convictions of what is true and right insofar as every person's inmost identity is a transpersonal universal" (59). Buell adds, "The more inward you go, the less individuated you get. Beneath and within the 'private' is a 'public' power on which anyone can potentially draw" (65). By this logic, the transcendental philosophy of self-reliance is not self-reliant at all, but rather reliant on a universal power. The individual only takes part in the discovery of the universal. As I will discuss more deeply in later chapters, Emerson's unresolved problem of where subjective experience ends and universal knowledge begins, and the relationship between the two, surfaces problematically in many moments in his prose. Emerson continually revisits this issue, struggling to establish a balance between the two.

Another contradiction appears in the discrepancy between tone and content in "Self-Reliance." The tone of the essay, following that of a sermon, is didactic and instructive. When Emerson is not writing in the first person, he often addresses a universal "man." He is uninterested in conditional statements or tentative advice; he intends his message to apply to all with a self-proclaimed urgency. However, Emerson's tone is simultaneously subverted by the message it carries. Emerson's message advocates for radical individuality and nonconformity. In one of many powerfully terse statements in the essay, Emerson famously iterates, "Insist on yourself; never imitate" (134). However, doing

so would be to follow his advice and imitate Emerson, and would therefore be simultaneously insisting on someone other than oneself. This moment embodies a fundamental discrepancy in Emerson's work: *listen to me; do not listen to me* – his most problematic contradiction. Emerson's "double consciousness" is no longer able to oscillate, but instead expresses two opposing tendencies simultaneously. The contradiction exists as readers seek his message and attempt to understand how the soul becomes.

In "Self-Reliance," there is also a contradiction between the oscillations of the essay and its content. Approximately half way through his essay, Emerson professes, "Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say 'I think,' 'I am,' but quotes some saint or sage" (128). Because moments of confusion occupy the majority of the text, they tend to push readers towards the refreshingly quotable moments of clarity. Encountering such simple and empowering sentences, readers commit them to memory, and stand in danger of mistaking their crude gist for Emerson's highest speculations. Ironically, it only becomes clear that moments of clarity do not aptly encapsulate Emerson's ideas upon completing the essay. In this context, Emerson's oscillation between moments of confusion and moments of clarity work against his advice to "never imitate," as his style tempts his readers into doing so.

This contradiction between the essay's oscillations and its message also undermines his work and exposes his self-doubt. Problematically, the epigraph is an imitation. In the Norton Critical Edition of *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, a footnote attributes the Latin phrase to Persius, the poet and satirist of Ancient Rome (120). By urging his readers not to imitate, Emerson produces a contradiction that undermines his message. Instead of relying on his own thoughts and words for an epigraph, he "quotes some saint or sage," in this case,

Persius (128). Not only does Emerson undermine his own message, but this undermining also exposes his self-doubt. Emerson's self-reliant commitment to inconsistency betrays him, as he seems unable to demonstrate his own message and uphold his own truths.

Emerson's inconsistency and inner struggle also affect his use of personal pronouns, as he often addresses an implied voice of criticism, the voice of his own self-doubt. This gesture creates multiple speakers, again demonstrating the contradiction between his oscillating processes and the message ultimately produced by that oscillation. Emerson's audience continually shifts from a universal "man," to a second person "you," to himself, the first person "I." At one moment of confusion in the text, Emerson removes himself as the speaker and becomes the second person "you" (131). As Frank Meola explains, Emerson often appears "in dialogue...with himself, his own language, dissatisfied with the freshly uttered statement" (122). As his own critic, for example, Emerson insinuates, "The populace think that your rejection of popular standards is a rejection of all standard" (131). Emerson is considering the existence of personal opinions independent from those of society. Towards the end of the same paragraph, Emerson repossesses the first person in response to his own critique. He answers, "I have my own stern claims and perfect circle" (131). The reader experiences confusion regarding which message is Emerson's. Surely, Emerson does not intend for his readers to listen to the implied voice of criticism with much seriousness, but confusion blurs the line between voices, often making them indistinguishable.

This contradiction is again accompanied by a sense of Emerson's self-doubt. Earlier on the same page, Emerson's dialogue with an imagined critic illustrates his desperation to convince himself of his own message. He writes, "I must be myself. I cannot break myself

any longer for you, or you" (131). The passage suggests that until this point, Emerson has been unsuccessful in upholding his truths against those around him and perhaps also, against himself. The repetition of "you" alludes to an overwhelming multiplicity of oppositional forces. While his commitment to inconsistency affords him a productive oscillation in his work, it also creates irreparable fractures. The fluid nature of not only truth, but also the essay's speaker, escalates the readers' confusion.

Diction

Emerson's chosen medium for "Self-Reliance," a sermon-like essay, seems to place limitations on the essay's content, requiring positive messages as opposed to leaving one amid the tumultuous realities of inward struggle. However, as we have seen through oscillations and contradictions, inward struggle finds its way into the text. Emerson only directly addresses inward struggle in subtle ways on the level of diction. Both of the following moments, despite emerging in an undeniably positive and empowering text, allude to something dark and chaotic beneath the text. Emerson proposes, "If we follow the truth, it will bring us out safe at last" (131). The passage implies that the pursuit of truth is dangerous. The search for truth is the search for safety, protection, and an escape from something potentially harmful. The passage also alludes to a current state of immersion in something smothering and destructive, as the discovery of truth "will bring us out." The reader can only speculate what exactly poses such a formidable danger and psychological entrapment for Emerson.

In his only other direct mention of inner struggle, Emerson expresses the importance of not only escaping danger, but conquering it as well. Early in the essay, he

claims, "And we are now men . . . not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort, and advancing on Chaos and the Dark" (121). The peculiarity of his diction is intentional. The passage seems to denote an important objective along the voyage of the soul. The soul is "advancing" against "Chaos and the Dark," standing up against danger that threatens to encroach. At no other moment in the essay does Emerson repeat either "Chaos" or "Dark," which is strange not only because they are capitalized to draw the reader's eye and signify importance, but also because Emerson seems to assign them a divine importance. Not just pursuing truth, but also conquering "Chaos and the Dark" is the ostensible wish of the "Almighty." Therefore, the absence of both terms from the remainder of the text is a strong indication that "Self-Reliance" does not contain every element of how the soul becomes. Self-reliance is a more difficult goal than one might imagine. Again, the reader must speculate about the metaphoric significance of "Chaos and the Dark" in the background of the essay as an apparently crucial step towards personal growth.

Concluding Remarks for "Self-Reliance"

As we have seen, Emerson's inner struggle for personal growth enters "Self-Reliance" in various ways, both productively and unproductively. Productively, oscillation is an explorative process that allows Emerson to reach new truths and bring all else into question. Unproductively, contradictions undermine the dualistic tendencies of Emerson's writing and expose his self-doubt. The question remains: what is the purpose of self-doubt and other insurmountable personal struggles, and why are they included in his essays? As I explore other texts, as they more directly comment on inner struggle for personal growth, I

hope to provide further insight about Emerson's reasoning for including more unproductive inward struggles in his texts. Returning to the epigraph of "Self-Reliance," all answers lie within the reader. Therefore, I will ultimately conclude that these fragmenting aspects of the text serve the reader in their own journey of the soul.

Chapter Two: “The American Scholar”

In Emerson’s pursuit of personal growth and ways to deal with inner pain and struggle, he also turns towards nature and society. “The American Scholar” is an Oration delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1837. As an occasional address, written for a public occasion, it deals largely with the individual’s outward relationships and responsibilities to society. The content of the oration is inseparable from its medium. As it concerns the individual’s place within society and nature, and the individual’s relationship to each, “The American Scholar” offers important additions into how the soul becomes. The essay uses the physical world in nature to comment on the existence of oscillations, contradictions, and self-doubt on the voyage of the soul. Emerson concludes that nature corresponds to the soul, and therefore may answer questions about how to deal with his most unproductive and mentally arresting inner struggles.

Emerson begins the speech by describing the current state of society and the individual’s perpetual state of struggle against it. Society and its members are pitted against each other, both presumably in a mutually exclusive state. He explains, “The priest becomes a form; the attorney, a statute-book; the mechanic, a machine; the sailor, a rope of a ship” (57). Every member of society has become a blind component of a larger function. Society has eliminated the existence of the individual and dehumanized them. Emerson worries that contemporary society has no place for the scholar, the professional thinker.

He states, “the scholar is the delegated intellect. In the right state, he is, *Man Thinking*. In the degenerate state, when the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or, still worse, the parrot of other men’s thinking” (57). The intellect has no place in the degenerate state. He is a mere thinker because society does not provide a meaningful outlet for ideas that disrupt the larger economic machine.

In “The American Scholar,” to remedy society, Emerson urges people to bring their individual and private existence into the public world as a contribution to the betterment of society. Similarly as in “Self-Reliance,” Emerson prompts his audience to value introspection and develop a consciousness about their place within the world around them. Emerson simply declares, “Know thyself” (58). Echoing the epigraph of “Self-Reliance,” the solutions to society’s problems, and all things for that matter, lie within the soul. According to Emerson, “The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul” (59). When the soul of every citizen is activated, the individual will again play a role in society’s larger function, and the soul will no longer be defined and limited by a title or occupation. Moreover, Emerson believes that society will be reborn through the rebirth of its individual members. However, in order to change society, mere thinking will not suffice. Emerson explains, “Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it, he is not yet man. Without it, thought can never ripen into truth” (61). Emerson continues by defining action as, “The preamble of thought, the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious” (61). For Emerson, truths surface through action and the conscious consideration of ideas in real world applications. It is not enough to entertain ideas without acting upon them in society.

Emerson dreams of a society where the soul and society are united – where humanity and individualism are brought to the larger collective. When a soul is active, and the individual represents the entire capacity of his or her soul, not just the portion described by his or her occupation, “poetry will revive and lead in a new age” (56). What Emerson means by “poetry” is a spirit in society that represents the balance and blending of facts and sentiments, words and sounds, society and the soul. The struggles of society between these competing notions are really just the struggles of its individuals. Society can only progress once its individuals have settled this problem. When the soul and society are rejoined, America will “fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill” (56). Critiquing the industrialization and economic dehumanization of Europe, Emerson dreams of an America led by individuals pursuing self-actualization, not profits. He adds, “Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all. Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier” (57). Individuals must reestablish their ties to the larger society, not just to their particular place in it. Emerson believes that regardless of occupation, an individual must also be a scholar, a critical thinker. Interestingly, Emerson removes the article before each noun in the second sentence, undoing the fragmentation and disjointedness between humans in pursuit of similar goals. Every individual is part of and responsible for every aspect of society. As we have seen and will continue to see, inner growth for Emerson often hinges on the settling and balancing of opposite notions.

Oscillation in Nature

Emerson uses the natural world to affirm the duality yet unity of the soul. Speaking about those just beginning their inward journey, Emerson writes, “To the young mind, everything is individual, stands by itself. By and by, it finds how to join two things, and see in them one nature . . . whereby contrary and remote things cohere” (58). Emerson is describing the process by which clarity and confusion are seen as interdependent and reliant on each other – all part of a single existence and single journey of the soul. Emerson uses nature to demonstrate the natural occurrence of oscillation. He asserts, “That great principle of Undulation in nature, that shows itself in the inspiring and expiring of the breath; in desire and satiety; in the ebb and flow of the sea; in day and night; in heat and cold; and as yet more deeply ingrained in every atom and every fluid, is known to us under the name of Polarity” (62). “Polarity” and “Undulation” are capitalized to signify their importance. By illustrating the inward tendencies of the soul in the physical world, Emerson is reminding himself as well as his readers not to be dissuaded by inconsistency and the familiar feeling of being pulled in opposite directions.

Emerson uses his observations of nature’s duality to acknowledge the importance of oscillation and inner struggle for personal growth. While “Self-Reliance” is an implicit and personal demonstration of inner struggle through Emerson’s oscillations and contradictions, “The American Scholar” is a more explicit demonstration of the individual’s inconsistency and struggle for truth. For both the reader’s and his own pursuit of truth and inner growth, Emerson states, “what is always true, that, the seer’s hour of vision is short and rare among heavy days and months” (60). Emerson is acknowledging the oscillation between moments of confusion and moments of clarity. He is also commenting on the

overwhelming presence of confusion and the relative rarity of clarity and truth, and coming to terms with that reality. Emerson determines that this oscillation is a truth in itself. Moments of clarity cannot arise without an inner struggle with confusion. When the soul is active and able to oscillate, “The mind now thinks; now acts; and each fit reproduces the other” (62). Emerson realizes that clarity and confusion are intrinsic and fundamental parts of the same continuous mental process; both exist interdependently. He concludes that moments of confusion are necessary to bring about clarity.

Reiterating his emphasis on the individual as the catalyst for social change, the soul, but also society, must embrace an explorative oscillation between differing ideas and points of view. Emerson states, “The world is nothing, the man is all; in yourself is the law of all nature” (68). Although society has stripped away humanity and individualism from its citizens, the true nature of humans is displayed everywhere around us. Nature shows us that oscillating between poles is the proper, most productive, and most natural way to think critically and discern truths, for the individual and for society. According to Meola, Emerson “sought a balance between the radical doubters and the fervent believers . . . in himself and in his nation” (121). These conflicts offer a productive exploration into optimal and new solutions. Society can only improve by oscillating between different ideas, reaching truth by repeated trial and confusion. In this way, nature affirms Emerson’s beliefs.

Contradiction in Nature

Emerson also turns towards nature to settle his more formidable inner struggles and self-doubt. He posits, “In self-trust, all virtues are comprehended” (64). However,

during the moments of self-doubt exhibited in "Self-Reliance," Emerson begins to doubt his most fundamental beliefs. In "The American Scholar," because Emerson believes that, "in yourself is the law of all nature," he turns towards nature to confront the unresolved tensions of his voyage. Emerson reconciles himself to self-doubt and contradiction by observing a divine unifying power in the motion of life in nature, "There is never a beginning, there is never an end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself. Therein it resembles his own spirit" (57). Every aspect of Emerson is a crucial part of him. While discussing the cycle of the day, Emerson says, "Every day, the sun; and, after sunset, night and her stars" (57). To most, not realizing the reflection of the soul in nature, this familiar process goes unnoticed. But, as an active soul, "The scholar is he of all men whom this spectacle most engages. He must settle its value in his mind. What is nature to him?" (57). As every individual must find their own truths and not imitate others, an individual must also determine the "value" of nature to him or her personally. Emerson must decide how nature emerges whole despite its chaotic appearance at times, and how he must deal with self-doubt and his most daunting inner struggles.

Emerson implies that, united by the rule of oscillation, both nature and the soul only appear chaotic when examined in isolated instances without any degree of wider perspective. Therefore, there is nothing to fear about the darkest regions of the soul. Emerson encourages his audience, and himself, to approach darkness within the soul, to advance on inward struggle. He adds, "fear is a thing, which a scholar by his very function puts behind him. Fear always springs from ignorance" (64). The scholar is informed by nature, and can therefore possess the self-trust to examine darkness. Emerson is ultimately

affirmative. If we look clearly at nature and ourselves, we can see that all is well. He writes that if writing to avoid our fears:

So is the danger a danger still; so is the fear worse. Manlike let him turn and face it. Let him look into its eye and search its nature, inspect its origin,—see the whelping of his lion,—which lies no great way back; he will then find in himself a perfect comprehension of its nature and extent; he will have made his hands meet on the other side, and can henceforth defy it, and pass on superior. (65)

As he must “turn and face it,” struggle informs Emerson’s becoming of his soul. Similarly to how he must emerge “safe at last” in “Self-Reliance,” fear and danger are in a constant state of entanglement with his soul, perhaps producing his self-doubt. Emerson concludes that after this direct confrontation, he will emerge “superior,” and the journey of his soul will be further along.

Concluding Remarks for “The American Scholar”

Through his observations of nature, Emerson possesses the perspective necessary to analyze his more formidable sources of inner struggle in his life. Importantly, nature does not give Emerson any explicit reasons for the existence of unconquerable struggles. Nature only suggests that an organic whole ultimately exists within the soul, as it does within itself. However, as I will discuss in the next chapter, Emerson’s ideas about explorative oscillation, the usefulness of inconsistency, and the all-encompassing power of the soul, are soon tested by his most disheartening inner struggle.

Chapter Three: "Experience"

"Experience," written shortly after the death of Emerson's five-year-old son, Waldo, from scarlet fever, is his most direct confrontation with darkness and inner struggle. Buell calls "Experience" Emerson's "most soul-searching essay" (130). The essay interrogates the notion of perspective and how we must view the passage of life. Emerson believes that like all else, our perspectives are subject to inconsistency. Commenting on the transitory quality of perspective, in the essay's epigraph, a self-authored poem, Emerson writes, "Tomorrow [our perspectives] will wear another face" (198). Emerson's discussion of perspective and grief, in conjunction with his paramount beliefs maintained throughout his larger body of work, offers an interesting interrogation of his philosophy's limitations, ultimately creating, within the essay, a stronger and more complete transcendental ideal. As he had written on the topic of fear in "The American Scholar," Emerson now knows he must "turn and face" his inner darkness and self-doubt, however daunting and existentially threatening the task (64).

The uncharacteristically depressive mood of "Experience" is the byproduct of a culmination of factors in Emerson's life during the mid-1840s. Buell writes, "many readers find the explanation for its despondency in the author's confession of inability to keep grief alive after his son's death" (125). Emerson is despondent because unconquerable grief has made him desensitized to life and death alike. Emerson finds himself trapped in an apathetic limbo between grieving and comprehending his son's death. Porte describes the

tone as “The mood of loss combined with numbness—the sense of being *out of touch*” (180). According to Len Gougeon, in addition to the premature death of his son, the “unusual tentativeness and uncertainty in this essay . . . derives from Emerson’s own growing discomfort with the general badness of the present time in America” (160). The increasing emphasis on industrialization and materialism amidst an economic system dependent on slavery characterizing the latter half of the 19th century contributes to Emerson’s cynicism. The stage was thus set for Emerson to do what he had not attempted in his other essays – to reconcile the function of grief and despair within an otherwise unwaveringly affirmative belief system.

Testing Limits

In the essay, it seems as though Emerson’s grief causes him to doubt himself and reconsider multiple of his fundamental principles. Buell explains that the essay “revisits in a minor key a number of Emerson’s earlier affirmations” (125). Throughout the essay, Emerson rewrites many of his principles in a negative light. For example, as I pointed out in my first chapter, Bloom stresses that Emerson believes, “Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit” (165). Now, however, Emerson writes, “I take this lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition” (200). At a time when Emerson just wishes to retreat from life and regroup, life continues. Emerson begins to resent this transient quality of life, associating his belief in fluidity with “the most unhandsome part of our condition.” He also poses more serious and threatening revisions. Most problematically, by redefining the journey of the soul as a process similar to climbing a staircase on which

we are lost, instead of as the tacking of a sailboat, Emerson undermines his confidence in oscillating, of struggling to find higher truths, and of becoming.

Emerson concludes, rather problematically, the journey of the soul is a linear path, not “a zigzag line of a hundred tacks” (125). Emerson begins “Experience” by asking, “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 seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight” (198). In contrast to Emerson’s famous “voyage of the best ship” in “Self-Reliance,” which oscillates—or tacks—through life in a progressive and explorative manner, the “stairs” in “Experience” offer a much more linear understanding of life and our journey through it. While the idea of a ship on a vast ocean illustrates the infinite number of routes between two points, there are only two directions on a staircase – up or down. There is also a certain fluidity in the act of sailing. If time on the ship were divided up into an infinite number of increments, each increment would show the ship at a slightly different position. However, on a staircase, each step must be climbed individually, defining life as no longer a dynamic and fluid journey, but rather a fragmented, deliberate set of objectives taken in one set direction.

Rewriting the “voyage of the soul” as a directly linear journey makes Emerson experience a feeling of disorientation and complacency in life. Emerson’s grief causes this change in perspective from viewing life as a zigzag journey to viewing it as a straight line, so he finds himself awakening to this new metaphor, unable to comprehend the path of his life thus far in such a confining model. Even more troubling is the uncertain origin and destination of a staircase, leading Emerson to worry about his inability to see either

beginnings or endings clearly. Life seems to be an endless staircase; his despair takes a heavy toll. His inability to see his destination at the top of the stairs is reiterated when he says, "An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with" (200). Here, he is not at sail on a sea through which we are bound to right, but on an innavigable one. Emerson experiences anxiety towards not knowing where he is and where he is going. He no longer trusts his intuition to guide him.

Without a destination in sight, Emerson now distrusts his oscillations and inner struggles to guide him. In "Self-Reliance," he believes that when the zigzag course of the ship is viewed from a "sufficient distance," "it straightens itself to the average tendency" (125). In other words, the soul's aggregate "tendency" is in a single direction. The oscillations, or inner struggles, of the ship determine that direction. As long as Emerson allows himself to oscillate through his inner struggles, he does not need to worry about a destination or where he is pointed. However, Emerson now finds himself, "In a series, of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none" (198). Emerson is heading in an almost arbitrary direction. He directly addresses this consequence of his stair metaphor when he asks, "Of what use is genius, if the organ is too convex or too concave, and cannot find a focal distance within the actual horizon of human life?" (200). Without a clear vision to guide him, he is just moving blindly through life. Emerson is worried that his inner struggles may lead him astray instead of serving as his guiding light.

Emerson's reconsideration of the fundamental beliefs discussed above not only undermines his concept of the journey through life, but it also causes him to doubt any form of universal experience. According to Buell, "To the orphic poet's call to 'Build therefore your own world,' 'Experience' replies, 'I have not found that much was gained by

manipular attempts to realize the world of thought' " (125). In his most optimistic works, Buell maintains, Emerson emphasizes the "imperial poet's ability to manipulate earthly matter" (134). For this reason, as explained in both "Self-Reliance" and "The American Scholar," the individual can grow by committing him or herself to critical thinking. However, amidst his despair, a crushing realization now settles on Emerson. He cannot, according to Buell, balance "maximum freedom of imagination consistent with belief in a purposeful cosmos. "Experience" is his fullest realization of this dual effect" (131). In other words, if the conscious mind and journeying soul can create its own world, then perhaps life is not sturdy and universal, but vulnerable and subjective. I alluded to this contradiction in Emerson's work in my "Self-Reliance" chapter. Emerson must now resolve this problematic relationship between the universal and subjective. Emerson begins to question the existence of reality beyond individual experience, viewing the universal and subjective as mutually exclusive concepts. Unable to find them in balance, he concludes that life is only subjective, a "succession of moods or objects" (202), without any "average tendency" of direction or truth.

Without the existence of universal truth, Emerson questions the ability of critical thought to serve as the impetus for inner growth. As previously discussed, Emerson's call to "Know thyself" in "The American Scholar" emphasizes the importance of critical thought as crucial for the individual to grow as a person. However, while dwelling in his despair at the beginning of this essay, Emerson begins to realize the shortcomings of this force. Gay Wilson Allen explains, "When consciousness is examined, it dwells within itself, and has no way of testing the accuracy of the lenses through which it sees the external world, if there is an external world" (438). Therefore, even if Emerson were to pick his next direction after

careful consideration, no longer relying on the aggregate of his struggles and oscillating tendencies, the decision would still come from a place of deceptive ignorance.

Emerson becomes skeptical about any correspondence between his inner thoughts and the world around him. He writes, "Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion. Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and, as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus" (200). Without a belief in the "average tendency," life becomes merely a "series" of illusions. He writes, "We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them" (204). Emerson cannot even think critically about these illusions without deceiving himself, so he surrenders to a new purpose "to skate well" on life's illusions. This perspective towards life goes against much of his transcendental philosophy. Without his faith in introspection, Emerson becomes indifferent and numb towards his outward experiences and the world around him. Porte argues, "unable to wander anywhere but in the ghastly labyrinth of his own perceptions, Emerson sees his internal blankness and emptiness everywhere" (184). Emerson is atypically and utterly skeptical towards life during much of "Experience."

Emerson even wonders whether his soul is entirely empty, whether even our innermost thoughts are misguided illusions. Referring to new developments in science, he reasons, "the new molecular philosophy shows astronomical interspaces betwixt atom and atom, shows that the world is all outside: it has no inside" (205). Emerson wonders whether universal truths exist because there is no transcendent condition of the internal thought through its ability to connect with the external. Life is merely a succession of

experiences, or moods, which have no significance for any greater cause or journey for inner growth.

Such despair and numbness have more severe consequences as they influence Emerson's perspective on the death of his son. Without his belief in the universal and the power of critical thought, he reverts to purely logical and impersonal reasoning to comprehend his son's death. In a moment near the beginning of the essay, Emerson writes:

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. If tomorrow I should be informed of the bankruptcy of my principle debtors, the loss of my property would be a great inconvenience to me, perhaps, for many years; but it would leave me as it found me,—neither better nor worse. So is it with this calamity. (200)

Emerson's method of reasoning produces a rather cynical and crude sounding attempt to reconcile himself to his son's death. Because life is just a succession of experiences and everything is outside the soul, Emerson reasons that the death of his son is no different than the loss of a possession. Moreover, Emerson desperately tries to convince himself that two years is a long enough time to mourn. It is time to move on. Yet, his impersonal logic at this moment evidently does not resolve Emerson of his grief or of his numbness. If this reasoning were sufficient, the essay would not continue.

In thinking about the death of his son and the despair it has caused in him, both the physical event and his internal reaction to it, there is a glimmer of hope for Emerson as he concludes that dwelling in despair, as opposed to apathy, is not productive. He writes, "There are moods in which we court suffering, in the hope that here, at least, we shall find

reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth. But it turns out to be scene-painting and counterfeit. The only thing grief has taught me, is to know how shallow it is" (199). Emerson concludes, "I grieve that grief can teach me nothing" (199). Grief does not produce its own end, or, as Buell explains, "tragedy brings no compensation at all" (126). Emerson is reporting the findings of his experiment with the antithesis of his philosophy, the opposite of his affirmative principle: negativity and despair. He finds that dwelling in his grief does not produce any solution for him. However, in this failure to find a remedy in grief, there is an implied hope for a more positive solution.

Divinity in Disunity

Emerson realizes the need for something more. He realizes that his beliefs do not hold up in the face of self-doubt and despair, or, as Gougeon argues, "Emerson himself seems to sense this deficiency" (160). "Experience" therefore becomes Emerson's attempt to work through the death of his son, to face his skepticism, and to emerge stronger on the other side. As Allen explains, "Experience" "shows most clearly his own experiences," but it also shows "how he adjusted to them" (435). By the end of the essay, through his rediscovery of the divine quality of life, he is able to rebuild his belief system, reaffirm his original beliefs, and emerge from the essay with a stronger philosophy and higher degree of self-trust.

Midway through the essay, Emerson regains his composure and relocates divinity within the journey of life. He affirms his previous conviction that humans are created to be in transition: "know that 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" (206). Although he is still not entirely convinced in this section, he urges himself to "finish that stint" – to rely on self-trust that life is not directionless and not all is illusory; truth exists. Interestingly, in this passage, Emerson appropriates Biblical diction to suggest that the transitional state of humans is the will of God, the will of the divine spirit. With their strange tone, the words seem to come to Emerson at his darkest time. Towards the end of the essay, Emerson puts this repossessed belief in more practical terms. He writes, "Divinity is behind our failures and follies also" (203). He is talking about our physical actions as well as our mental tendencies. Even his grief may not be excluded from the divine processes of life. The divinity of life shows there is something essential and powerful in the journey of the soul, making Emerson much more optimistic in the latter half of the essay. He decides, "Life is a series of surprises, and would not be worth taking or keeping, if it were not" (206). His redefining of "series" in a positive light is significant during this moment.

Now, Emerson comes to discern life's "succession of moods" in a changed way. He writes, "If I have described life as a flux of moods, I must now add, that there is that in us which changes not, and which ranks all sensations and states of mind" (208). This is Emerson's return to his belief in the universal. Emerson reestablishes the existence of an "average tendency" in the soul, a direction in life determined by self-trust, inner struggle, and oscillation. Understanding life as a "succession of moods" informed his first comprehension of his son's death as having no actual impact on his life. Now, by adding a universal force acting as an undercurrent to this "flux of moods," Emerson returns to the notion that there is something unchanging in life. Just because Emerson has suffered a major tragedy, he can still affirm his transcendental philosophy. He is still in some ways

the person and thinker he was before his son's death, carried by the same universal current. He does not need to completely rework all of his major beliefs, but perhaps only needs to revise and expand on certain aspects. Emerson is also acknowledging that life is not completely random and misguided. The death of his son does not have to remain a chaotic, isolated, and antithetical part of his life. It is part of his journey, and he must deal with it as such.

Due to his renewed perspective, Emerson again rewrites the "voyage of the best ship" from "Self-Reliance" to include the presence of this divine power. He writes, "Power keeps quite another road than the turnpikes of choice and will, namely, the subterranean and invisible tunnels and channels of life" (206). Although they are not visible from our surface view, the power of life, what Emerson means as the divine spirit, operates in unseen ways, traveling through "invisible tunnels." In the following paragraph, he adds, "Underneath the inharmonious and trivial particulars, is a musical perfection, the Ideal journeying always with us, the heaven without rent or seam" (207). Although our inner struggles and oscillations guide our journey through life, as our voyage tacks backward and forward, and often on the highway, there is something else unseen and powerful acting as our compass. This power is "always with us."

By adding this divine power to the journey of life, Emerson is demonstrating his regained ability to balance the notions of the subjective and the universal; they are not mutually exclusive. Richardson comments on Emerson's renewed ability to reconcile opposites. He argues, "There is no answer to this dilemma, no solution, but there is a best course of action... Life is possible only as a balance between power and form—a balance that depends on a paradox and exists only as a pull of opposites" (402). Emerson reaches a

similar conclusion about the form of life – life is a contradiction existentially dependent on its nature as such. Emerson settles the contradiction first posed in my “Self-Reliance” section – the relationship between the subjective and the universal: there is a power that underlies and unites them. By the end of “Experience,” Emerson finds again that the “freedom of imagination” and “purposeful cosmos” are not mutually exclusive, and the universal and the subjective have an important, interdependent relationship. The universal and subjective can exist together.

Emerson reaffirms the necessity of keeping everything in balance throughout life. He writes, “Everything good is on the highway. The middle region of our being is the temperate zone. We may climb into the thin and cold realm of pure geometry and lifeless science, or sink into that of sensation. Between these extremes is the equator of life, of thought, of spirit, of poetry,—a narrow belt” (204). Emerson continues this idea by adding, “Everything runs to excess: every good quality is noxious, if unmixed, and, to carry the danger to the edge of ruin, nature causes each man’s peculiarity to superabound” (206). We must have variety in life in order to truly grow as people. Emerson is also considering his despair in relation to this metaphor. He admits that “Everything runs to excess,” meaning his despair and grief over the death of his son, but that is a natural tendency. Moreover, he is implying that he cannot always be self-reliant and affirmative at all times because then, he would have no variety of perspective and he would be unable to oscillate and struggle with himself to grow as a person: “every good quality is noxious, if unmixed.” We need sorrow and self-doubt to truly understand, comprehend, and appreciate happiness and self-trust.

Emerson also reconsiders the most stressful and dismaying aspects of our existence and how they function in the journey of life. Speaking about his renewed perspective, he writes, "The new statement [of affirmation] will comprise the skepticisms, as well as the faiths of society, and out of unbeliefs a creed shall be formed. For, skepticisms are not gratuitous or lawless, but are limitations of the affirmative statement, and the new philosophy must take them in, and make affirmations outside of them" (209). Emerson's notion of "unbeliefs" refers to the necessity of not denying the struggles and negative aspects of life. One must acknowledge them and affirm life amid them. Later in the essay, he famously asserts, "And yet is the God the native of these bleak rocks. That need makes in morals the capital virtue of self-trust" (211). Emerson implies that we must always affirm every aspect of life as an important and divine part of a whole. Emerson is affirming that all things may not always align in our lives, but something divine causes all to cohere. We must not dwell on extremes, but rather, allow ourselves to see not only the particulars but also the whole of the soul's journey. Additionally, seeing divinity as "the native of these bleak rocks" of life teaches us about "self-trust." When confronted with hardship, we must depend on "the capital virtue of self-trust" to not be overcome with our despair, knowing that life's divinity is "always with us." Divinity is in the process, oscillation, and journey of life, through good and bad, but never limited to a single instance. Divinity is in all, and we must never lose sight of that fundamental.

Emerson's returned emphasis on the divine power of life allows him to again rewrite various other principles that were assigned a pejorative undertone towards the beginning of the essay. Emerson revisits his dubious attitude towards a direction in life. As I discussed before, at the beginning of the essay, Emerson is no longer able to trust his

intuition, and the external world is merely a series of illusions, so Emerson feels completely lost on his journey through life. However, through the reemphasis on oscillations as a guide in life and the inherent divinity of that process, Emerson is led to rewrite, "The partial action of each strong mind in one direction, is a telescope for the objects on which it is pointed" (211). The human eye may not have the ability to see where it is going, but that does not mean the individual is directionless. Through his self-trust, Emerson is able to reaffirm that the actions in the soul, no matter how inconsistent, are in "one direction." Emerson concludes, "our greatness is always in a tendency of direction, not in an action" (208). By saying this tendency is "not in an action," Emerson is implying that this direction may not always be obvious to us, or in a physical expression, but "there is that in us which changes not" (208). Even if we are ignorant of it, we still have direction.

Emerson is also now able to think about his complacency and disorientation at the beginning of the essay, and even shed an affirmative light on that desperate feeling. He reasons, "If any of us knew what we were doing, or where we are going, then when we think we best know! We do not know today whether we are busy or idle. In times when we thought ourselves indolent, we have afterwards discovered, that much was accomplished, and much was begun in us" (198). Ironically, his defeated and numb attitude at the beginning of the essay serves as his impetus to examine the limitations of his belief system and challenges him to reaffirm his truths in the face of hardship. Emerson's stasis and complacency force him to examine his beliefs from different perspectives, ultimately allowing his soul to grow from that experience.

Ultimately, Emerson sees unity in his life, despite his inward struggles and inconsistencies. As evidenced by the rewriting of various ideas, as well as his struggle with

perspective on his son's death, "Experience" is a dynamic essay. "Experience" is perhaps Emerson's most crucial essay in that he is able to slowly work through a potentially paralyzing moment in his past. "Experience" ultimately allows Emerson to see not only his relation to the current moment, but also his relation to the entirety of life, the universal. He concludes, "Life will be imaged, but cannot be divided nor doubled. Any invasion of its unity would be chaos" (210). On the topic of darkness, despair, and struggle, Emerson now believes that these things only become chaotic when viewed in isolation. By maintaining their relationship to the whole, as does nature, Emerson can achieve perspective in even the most unfathomable and depressing moments in life: "I know better than to claim any completeness for my picture. I am a fragment, and this is a fragment of me" (212). Even this essay is nothing more than a small part of Emerson's life. However, this lament is less defeated than it may seem. It is perhaps a strangely optimistic surrender to fragmentation amid, nonetheless, unity. The essay has allowed Emerson to work through his skepticisms, but ultimately, his soul will continue to grow and progress not just because of its proposed compromises, but because he rediscovers the direction he has in life that never actually left him.

Emerson maintains an optimistic outlook on life that prevents himself from losing sight of the whole. He argues, "It takes a good deal of time to eat or to sleep, or to earn a hundred dollars, and a very little time to entertain a hope and an insight which becomes the light of our life" (212). As demonstrated by the essay, one thought can change your entire perspective. Emerson comes to see divinity in the "series" of life, and through that observation, is able to comprehend tragedy in his life. One should not lose sight of the bigger, "musical" picture. He concludes the essay with a reassurance to himself: "in the

solitude to which every man is always returning, he has a sanity and revelations, which in his passage into new worlds he will carry with him. Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat: up again, old heart!" (213). The tone of the message is perhaps that of a father speaking to his son, encouraging him to continue with self-reliance in the face of inner instability and public ridicule. His transcendental beliefs are reinforced with optimism and resilience.

From revisiting and doubting multiple truths throughout the essay, Emerson emerges from "Experience" with a new, paradoxical truth: uncertainty. Porte argues, "Emerson staggers to his feet, determined to continue up the ladder, even though the darkness has not lifted. It may be that he was encouraged by remembering his own sentence from the conclusion to "Circles": " 'A man,' said Oliver Cromwell, 'never rises so high as when he knows not whither he is going' " " (186). Simply through his determination to keep going, Emerson is able to bless the unknown. The existence of uncertainty is a testament that Emerson's soul is not stagnant. He is not lost on an "innavigable sea," but progressing towards a destination on the horizon, sailing forth into uncharted territories and unknown seas.

Concluding Remarks for "Experience"

Ultimately, in "Experience," Emerson reaffirms the power of consciousness and critical thought through his optimistic change in heart – the rediscovery of divinity in life. Interestingly, there is no concrete reason for this rediscovery in the "series" of life. Yet, his rediscovery of the divine reconstitutes his transcendental beliefs and causes him to again rewrite multiple principles in a now affirmative and hopeful light. Arguably, Emerson's

truths towards the end of the essay are new sort of affirmative than those in any other essay. Because there is no external, concrete reason for this affirmation, Emerson is demonstrating the power of his belief in intuition. Through his slight change in perspective, Emerson is ultimately able to emerge from "Experience" with a fortified belief system and higher degree of self-trust. His soul, his thoughts, and his new perspective caused this change.

Chapter Four: “The Poet”

“The Poet” appears immediately before “Experience” as the first of nine essays in Emerson’s 1844 *Essays: Second Series*. According to a footnote in the Norton Critical Edition of *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, “The essay is best read as a companion piece to “Experience” because “The essay is from a lecture Emerson delivered, but Emerson substantially recast the lecture as he was writing “Experience” after the sudden death of his firstborn son, Waldo” (183). For this reason, because “The Poet” was in certain ways shaped by the writing of “Experience,” I chose to discuss it afterwards, and therefore, as an essay arising in part from the struggles and revisions of “Experience.” Then, I suggest, “The Poet” reflects Emerson’s heightened level of self-trust and the newfound resilience of his beliefs – both the primary achievements of “Experience.” His confidence is not only reflected in the ambition of the task at hand, as I will address first, but is also reflected in his ability to articulate the fundamental relationship between the physical and the mental worlds in multiple ways.

“The Poet” represents Emerson’s most self-defining essay. As argued by Sandra Morris in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, “Emerson seems to have identified himself primarily as a poet” (218). Vincent Leitch supports that claim, writing, “In the 1830s Emerson said, ‘I am a poet . . . That is my nature and vocation’ ” (614). Leitch notes that after Emerson “resigned as minister of his Boston church . . . he explained, ‘It is my desire to do nothing which I cannot do with my whole heart’ ” (614). Although the

decision reflects a culmination of disagreements and concerns regarding traditional religion, it also conveys the importance of Emerson's new self-proclaimed title as "a poet." Emerson commits himself to his new occupation "with [his] whole heart." Therefore, writing an essay to adequately explain and defend what Emerson determined to be not only his "vocation," but also his very "nature," must have been a daunting task and one that finally was shaped by his confrontation with his soul's darkness in "Experience."

However, Emerson's task is even more daunting because not only is he endeavoring to write his self-defining work, but he is also attempting to articulate what was for him a fundamental and universal destination on the journey of the soul. Expressing the achievability of the title of "poet" for all his readers, he writes, "we do not speak now of men of poetical talents, or of industry and skill in metre, but of the true poet" (185). As Morris clarifies, "By 'poet,' Emerson didn't mean exclusively a writer of verse, but instead a person whose energy is fundamentally both iconoclastic and – as he emphasizes in his lectures and essay "The Poet" – affirmative, creative, and imaginative. For Emerson, the best preachers, the best scholars, and even the best social activists are all poets" (218). Participation in the actual production of poetry is not a prerequisite for the title. Instead, Emerson implies the defining qualities of a poet to be a transitive energy, multidimensional perspective, and active mind – qualities he saw in himself limited by his proximity to the Church before relinquishing his position as minister. Becoming a poet is therefore the aspiration of anyone and everyone, further complicating the task at hand and emphasizing the importance of the essay.

Emerson begins the essay by reaffirming his belief in the dependence of the physical world on conscious thought. In the first paragraph, he writes, "the intellectual men do not

believe in any essential dependence of the material world on thought and volition. Theologians think it a pretty air-castle to talk of the spiritual meaning of a ship or a cloud, or a city or a contract, but they prefer to come again to the solid ground of historical evidence" (183). Emerson is comparing traditional intellectuals and theologians to the kind of poets he aims to discuss in this essay. He argues that it is not enough to simply "talk of the spiritual meanings" of symbols. One must see the "essential dependence of the material world on thought and volition" in order to be a poet in Emerson's definition of the term. As we have seen throughout his works, this relationship, the dependency of the physical on the mental, lies at the heart of Emerson's beliefs. It is what gives the soul its power to not only create the physical world around it, but also, as I will discuss, instate the soul as the omnipotent, god-like creator. In his tersest rendition of this idea we have seen yet, he writes, "The Universe is the externalization of the soul" (187). Emerson's confidence in this claim is unfaltering.

During a moment towards the end of the essay, Emerson echoes a famous line from "Experience" in an antithetical context, again displaying his confidence and self-trust even as he is writing "Experience:"

How cheap even the liberty then seems; how mean to study, when an emotion communicates to the intellect the power to sap and upheave nature: how great the perspective! nations, times, systems, enter and disappear, like threads in tapestry of large figure and many colors; dream delivers us to dream, and, while the drunkenness lasts, we will sell our bed, our philosophy, our religion, in our opulence. (194)

As I discussed in my previous chapter, in “Experience,” Emerson writes, “Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion” (200). He is commenting on the numb, complacent quality of life that alienates the mind from the physical world. However, in “The Poet,” the notion of a “dream” carries an entirely different connotation. In this passage, Emerson seems to be daydreaming – imagining – in his newfound perspective, unable to comprehend, in a positive way, the innumerable possibilities of life. He is also demonstrating the power of perspective’s ability to not only change the physical world and the reality of how life appears, but also to expose new perspectives. Therefore, the question remains, how does Emerson finally explain this relationship between the mental and the physical; how is it that the mind can alter the world? Surely, Emerson’s confidence suggests a deeper understanding of this relationship than in parts of “Experience.”

The connection between the mental and the physical, and how they interact, is a problem Emerson has revisited throughout his body of work. In *Nature*, published anonymously in 1836, before both of his essay series, Emerson writes, “Reason transfers all these lessons into its own world of thought, by perceiving the analogy that marries Matter and Mind” (39). In this early work, Emerson concludes “Matter and Mind” are united by analogies, the use of physical things to invoke abstract ideas, in the world of “Reason.” However, Emerson’s despair following the death of his son tests this theory. In “Experience,” in a statement previously discussed, Emerson states, “We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them” (204). He cannot see the connection between the mental and physical worlds. All we see is “surfaces,” and no greater thought can deliver us to anything deeper. Therefore, in “The Poet,” Emerson again turns towards the “analogies” themselves for answers.

Symbols and Metaphors

Emerson discusses the powerful impact of symbols on the mental world and in his writing. He writes, "Small and mean things serve as well as great symbols... Bare lists of words are found suggestive, to an imaginative and excited mind" (188). Even small, physical items, can spark the mind of a "true poet," bridging the physical world with the mental processes. This idea is demonstrated countless times throughout Emerson's prose. The introduction of a new metaphor tends to have a pervasive and extensive impact on his reasoning for multiple pages, if not an entire essay. In my "Self-Reliance" chapter, I discussed his metaphor for life as the "voyage of the best ship." This metaphor informs many of his beliefs about the inconsistency and fluidity of life. In "Experience," his metaphor of the "stairs . . . which go upward and out of sight" also creates his reasoning, effectively undermining and reversing his "best ship" metaphor. Early in "The Poet," Emerson stresses the importance and impact of symbols as a form of mediation between the physical and mental worlds.

Emerson stresses the usefulness of metaphors and symbols, but also warns of their transitive nature as mental tools, not truths in themselves. He writes, "For 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" (195). As we saw with Emerson's reuse of "dream delivers us to dream," all language and expression evolves and changes. Symbols are merely tools that allow the poet to explore new possibilities and perspectives, but the poet should never settle on a single metaphor. As he also articulates in the essay, "The poet . . . perceives the thought's independence of the symbol, the stability of the thought, the accidentality and fugacity of the symbol" (189). Physical representations are an

“accidency,” meaning they provoke certain mental processes and ideas that are ultimately larger than the symbol. As Emerson argues, the idea always comes before the physical form. Understood as such, Richardson adds, “Emerson insists that the true symbol does not constrict but liberates because it is based on a full understanding of nature as something neither static nor fixed” (373). The lack of stable meanings in symbols is a positive quality because instead of arresting a physical object and pinning it to a single explanation or thought, symbols are a way for the mind to explore itself – a key ingredient for the kind of thinking and introspection necessary for personal development.

Emerson transfers this logic of the relationship between symbols and their meanings to a more general context, the relationship between “Matter and Mind,” concluding that both are neither linear nor static, but multidimensional and transitive. In “The Poet,” Emerson writes, “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” (183-184). Not only does a symbol’s meaning often change, but also, a symbol may have multiple, even contradictory, meanings. The symbol’s meaning therefore—how the mental interacts with the physical—is also determined by perspective and mood. Wedding the mental and physical through symbols does not create a singular “world of thought,” as articulated in “Nature,” but rather, a plethora of new worlds. In “The Poet,” Emerson now writes, “Men have . . . found within their world, another world, or nest of worlds; for, the metamorphosis once seen, we divine that it does not stop” (193). New perspective, new meanings, and therefore new “worlds” always exist for the “true poet,” so long as there is critical engagement between the poet and the symbol.

Looking Backwards

Emerson also looks for other ways the physical and mental worlds are united. Reminiscent of the process of writing “Experience,” Emerson now turns towards the poet’s expression of and interaction with symbols in writing. As Emerson states near the end of “The Poet,” “Art is the path of the creator to his work” (196). The writing of “Experience” plays a fundamental role in this discovery. Richardson argues, “There is a new world of health in Emerson’s remark in “The Poet” that ‘genius is the activity that repairs the decay of things.’ During the dark, busy, confusing days and months after Waldo’s death, Emerson went searching for qualities in himself that might be capable of fighting back against death and decay” (374). Reflecting upon the therapeutic impact of “Experience” as the essay progressed, Emerson discovers that the expression of words, the act of *writing things out*, is what rejoins the mental world with the physical world, and allows him to comprehend life’s most confusing, despairing, and insurmountable realities. He realizes that divinity comes from his ability to create, to write essays, and by doing so, to transform the world around him and his own mind. Emerson’s inner poet or “genius” is able to repair the fragmentation and disorientation experienced in the wake of his son’s death by interacting with new symbols. When he can initiate the process of literary creation, starting in his darkest moment, he can arrive somewhere entirely new.

Emerson concludes, following the process of writing “Experience,” that the poet’s interaction with symbols is inherently difficult and painful: “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” (184). Interestingly, Emerson believes that through this creation, the “true poet” inevitably expresses his or her “painful secret.” As I have argued

throughout this thesis, undercurrents of struggle guide Emerson's movements throughout his prose. These undercurrents surface yet again in "The Poet," as Emerson believes that coming into contact with one's inner "true poet" exposes a "painful secret," an inner struggle within the soul. Moreover, an individual must "study," must make an effort, in order to articulate this "secret." Emerson means that the journey of the soul is not as easy and simple as one may think, but through commitment to introspection and the personal growth of the soul, one can attempt to articulate the most difficult aspects of life, and in doing so, as Emerson demonstrates in "Experience," emerge stronger and affirmative in a more complex way.

Emerson also concludes that this need for expression is what grants us membership in the human race. Richardson explains that "The Poet" is a "major statement of international romantic expressionism, the idea that expressing our thoughts and feelings is not only one of the fundamental and given aspects about human nature—a basic drive, like sex—but also one of the main *purposes* of human life" (371). Not only is our expression what makes us human, according to Emerson, but it is also our primary objective in life to express ourselves, and in doing so, accomplish personal growth. The mental and physical are united in humanity's need for expression. In this context, physical objects employed as symbols allow humans to connect on a deeper level.

Finding God

Len Gougeon argues that the mission of the "true poet," as Emerson has articulated it, is a religious venture: "Since the poet seeks to deliver humankind from the guilt of the Fall and to return to the paradise of childlike unity, thereby reuniting the spirit and the

flesh, her function becomes in the fullest sense of the word, a religious one. Emerson eventually came to view his own artistic function as poet, lecturer, and essayist, in this religious light" (56). Gougeon argues that there is a religious undertone to the essay that seeks to repair the rupture caused by "the Fall" and reestablish unity. The "true poet" must reunite the "spirit and the flesh." As we have seen throughout his prose, Emerson is constantly attempting to find balance between opposites and settle their contradictory, parallel existences. In "Experience," Emerson addresses the contradiction in his writing between the subjective and the universal, ultimately finding them in balance. In "The Poet," Emerson must settle the contradiction between the mental and the physical.

Emerson's belief in the powers of creation manifests itself in a religious discourse throughout the essay. In discussion of the physical world's dependence on the mental, the conviction of the "true poet," Emerson explains the power of ideas and their priority over physical forms with the following logic:

For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form. The poet has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. (186)

Referring to "the order of genesis" invokes the metaphor of divine creation. It also emphasizes the power behind words – the creative power of the conscious mind and the mental realm. Towards the beginning of this quotation, Emerson also employs this logic to

emphasize the power of the poet. Although the poet does not possess the ability to create new plants and animals, the poet instead creates poems. In a true poem, issued from the “true poet,” the idea produced by the poet’s mental capacity is what determines the form or “metre” of the poem, the physical representation of that idea. Most importantly, Emerson seems to equate these two forms of creation as being of the same and equal power; however, he does so with an important qualification. Emerson has in mind a power of God that is beyond the confining force of traditional religion. While the creator of traditional religious practice is a restrictive and governing power, the poetic creator represents the complete opposite. As Emerson asserts late in the essay, “Poets are thus liberating gods” (193). According to Emerson, every soul possesses this ability for transformative, divine creation.

This type of creation involves the power of becoming. The poetic creator values the poetic process over the poem itself. Richardson explains, “it is significant that Emerson’s call for a specifically American poetry is confined to this one paragraph, which ends, ‘But I am not wise enough for a national criticism, and must use the old largeness a little longer.’ The essay finishes not with a call for national poetry but with a coda on the theme of preferring process over product, origins over ends, expression over possession. Poetry is not finally an end in itself” (374). Ironically, the poetic and creative processes are more of a final end than actual poems. On the journey of the soul, creation never ceases. The poet must continue to grow as a person endlessly throughout life. There is no final form or product in life.

The religious undertone of Emerson’s writing appears in multiple other places during “The Poet,” and, indeed, his other texts. Later in the essay, Emerson writes, “What

we call nature, is a certain self-regulated motion, or change; and nature does all things by her own hands, and does not leave another to baptize her, but baptizes herself; and this through the metamorphosis again" (190). Examined through the Emersonian lens of nature, the physical world, as the "externalization of the soul," Emerson is again commenting on the inner, divine powers of the poetic creator. Nature "baptizes herself," so in other words, the "true poet" baptizes him or herself into his or her own religion and selfhood. Additionally, this excerpt addresses the inner growth of the soul, saying that it occurs through a "self-regulated motion." "Motion" invokes the fluidity of the human experiences, as a nonlinear "voyage of the best ship." By this process being "self-regulated," Emerson is again addressing the power of the individual in the process of personal growth. "Regulated" is an interesting word choice because it implies that this process occurs partially autonomously. Referring back to "Experience," Emerson encapsulates this idea of "regulated" personal growth when he writes, "We do not know today whether we are busy or idle. In times when we thought ourselves indolent, we have afterwards discovered, that much was accomplished, and much was begun in us" (198). In other words, the individual is not always completely aware of his or her inner divine powers, but as long as we continue to create, its constructive impact is always felt. The impact of Emerson's dynamic journey through "Experience" appears throughout "The Poet," its "companion piece."

Emerson's discussion of the poet's duties and function in society is decidedly empowering. He claims that an individual possesses a new set of transcendental powers when he or she becomes a "true poet," a creator and transformer of the world:

he is capable of a new energy . . . then he is caught up into the life of the Universe, his speech is thunder, his thought is law, and his words are

universally intelligible as the plants and animals... For if in any manner we can stimulate this instinct, new passages are opened for us into nature, the mind flows into and through things hardest and highest, and the metamorphosis is possible. (191)

This passage is particularly compelling because it describes the process of a poet's divine creation. In language, thought adopts a physical form and language has the power to help shape the physical world. Thoughts become laws because they govern the perspectives of the individual. Most interestingly, words manifest themselves as "plants and animals," complex and misunderstood beings with existences of their own. In another reference to despair and his essay, "Experience," Emerson claims that through these poetic powers, the individual "flows into and through things hardest and highest, and the metamorphosis is possible." By confronting darkness and struggle in life, one can not only emerge stronger and more affirmative, as Emerson does at the end of "Experience," but also undergo "metamorphosis." New experiences and new convictions change an individual's physical form, and therefore he or she can emerge capable of greater thoughts, greater feats, as the soul continues on the journey of life.

Emerson ends "The Poet" with a new doctrine of his religion. In his very lengthy, final paragraph, he rewrites the Ten Commandments not in the voice of a traditional god, but in the voice of the poetic god. Instead of the "Thou Shalt Not" of the original text, Emerson simply says, repeatedly throughout the paragraph, "Thou shalt." For example, Emerson's final commandment is, "*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; and *thou shalt* possess that wherein others are only tenants and boarders"

(197, emphasis mine). This is perhaps Emerson's most empowering assertion to himself and to the reader. Instead of that in the restrictive, governing voice of the original text, the poetic god is liberating and democratic, allowing each person the poetic powers of creation. The entire world is at the poet's fingertips, and the poet may construct it and reconstruct it however he or she likes.

Contradictions in Balance

Emerson's discussion of divine power in the creative process answers a question first raised during "Experience." In "Experience," Emerson's return to his belief in the divine guidance of life, midway through the essay, drastically changes his outlook on life and his despair. However, he is not definitively able to locate the source of this divinity, instead relying on his intuition and faith. In "The Poet," Emerson is actually able to locate the source of this divine power, as I have argued, in the poet's ability to create through interactions with symbols and metaphors, effectively bridging the world of thought with the physical world and affirming his belief that critical thinking does in fact impact both the reality of an individual and the personal growth of their soul. In "The Poet," Emerson is able to connect his conclusions reached in "Experience" about the relationship between the universal and subjective to his conclusions about the relationship between the mental and the physical.

As every part of nature represents the whole, Emerson believes the individual poet represents all humanity. He declares, "The poet is the person in whom these powers are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the

largest power to receive and to impart” (184). Not only are single experiences representative of all experience and the universal, but also the “true poet” is also representative of all humanity. Through expression and creation, the poet, a single member of humanity, becomes the collective, the universal.

Following this logic, even Emerson’s most depressing moments during “Experience” have a universal value. Emerson states that the poet “shall draw us with love and terror, who sees, through the flowing vest, the firm nature, and can declare it” (195). To deny certain aspects of human experience would be to deny universal truth. The poet must express the transitive, inconsistent, and often-contradictory existence of humans. Porte observes Emerson perform this belief through the organization of *Essays: Second Series*. Porte argues that “The Poet” “serves as the culmination of the heady anti-lapsarian vision . . . to offset the gathering darkness that follows ‘Experience’ ” (177). Both perspectives are important. The proximity of these two, counteracting essays in their publication is intentional and telling.

Bringing the subjective and the universal together with the poet’s expression, Emerson believes that only personal experiences offer entry into the universal. While distinguishing between “true” poets and those who just write poems, Emerson criticizes the latter: “even the poets are contented with a civil and conformed manner of living, and to write poems from the fancy, at a safe distance from their own experience” (183). Emerson is arguing that a poet must speak directly from his or her own experiences, however revealing or daunting, in order to gain access to universal truths. Subjective experiences serve as an entry point into the universal – a belief Emerson articulates only towards the end of “Experience.” Allen emphasizes that Emerson attempts “to make poetry

a matter of experience and not theory, especially theory based on authority” (432). This insistence also demonstrates Emerson’s definition of a “true poet” – not someone who necessarily creates poems, but someone who approaches life with a transcendental, poetic energy.

Emerson, in “The Poet,” also adds to this belief, in addition to what he said in “Experience,” claiming that moments viewed in isolation possess a connection to universal truth. Remembering that nature “is the externalization of the soul,” Emerson writes, “nature is a symbol, in the whole, and in every part” (187). In conjunction with Emerson’s discussion of symbols, he means that even isolated objects can serve as impetuses for larger mental stimuli. Moreover, Emerson claims that another reason isolated instances possess universal truth is because their creator possesses that quality. He asserts, “For 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 of the universe” (185). Drawing on his understanding of the physical world’s dependency on the mental world, because the individual is the creator of the universe, and the individual is inherently beautiful, then the world is also inherently beautiful – in part and in whole. Every small and seemingly menial experience is the product of divine creation. Therefore, despair only arises when the poet ceases to create and ceases to bridge the mental and the physical, the subjective and universal. As Emerson declares, “from the heaven of truth I shall see and comprehend my relations” (186). Only through the perspective of a poet do all things relate and coincide.

Emerson argues that every poet must contribute their expression of metaphors and their ability to create to all of humanity, in hopes of conveying the unfathomably wide spectrum of human experience and truth. In a way, there is a public responsibility for the

expression of the “true poet.” As Emerson states, “The poet has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune” (186). The poet must first come to an idea, and then he or she must articulate it. One who hears the “true poet” becomes “the richer in his fortune.” In this passage, Emerson equates thoughts with experiences. In the context of the following essay, “Experience,” he is thus able to view his despairing thoughts about the death of his son as valuable experiences laden with universal truth – another demonstration of how the writing of “Experience” makes Emerson more affirmative of his beliefs and also allows him to write “The Poet.” For his confrontation with his soul’s darkness, “all men will be the richer in his fortune.”

Concluding Remarks for “The Poet”

At the end of my previous chapter on “Experience,” I included Joel Porte’s suggestion that Emerson may have remembered an idea first proposed in “Circles” as he neared finishing the essay. That idea in “Circles” claims that uncertainty in life is a testament to the soul’s growth to an unprecedented level. Uncertainty is viewed in an affirmative light. Echoing this early essay, towards the end of “The Poet,” Emerson writes, “A beauty not explicable is dearer than a beauty which we can see to the end of” (188). Emerson is again embracing life’s uncertainty. In the context of Emerson’s journey through life, encountering and guided by internal struggles, Emerson is blessing his inability to see his destination. In fact, seeing a destination could actually be a bad thing. As evidenced by Emerson’s emphasis on the creative process, not the creative product, there is no end to creation; there is no final destination.

Conclusion

As Emerson concludes towards the end of both “Experience” and “The Poet,” there is still an inescapable degree of uncertainty in life as “the soul becomes.” In both instances, Emerson views his uncertainty in a positive light, as a testament to his progress in “Experience,” and as the source of life’s beauty in “The Poet.” The reader, attempting to come to terms with his prose, also experiences Emerson’s ultimate uncertainty and confusion. Strangely, however, readers also often receive this uncertainty and confusion with Emersonian affirmation and positivity. Len Gougeon cites a newspaper article discussing, with the exception of “Self-Reliance,” Emerson’s growing body of work: “the majority of his writing, while well-respected, was seen, as a critic in the *Saturday Review* put it at the time, as ‘more easily reflected upon than described, more easily felt than reflected upon’ ” (194). As expressed by the article, Emerson’s prose seems to invoke primarily and most naturally some intangible, emotional response, rather than a coherent, intellectual rendering of an argument. However, there is evidence that audiences were pleased with this quality in his prose and lectures, as Emerson’s more coherent public orations sometimes prompted the negative response of not only newspapers, but also members of his own family. In the introduction of his book, *Battlefields Rising: How the Civil War Transformed American Literature*, Randall Fuller captures the expectations of Emerson’s audiences to be left with ambiguity and uncertainty:

In 1857, he spoke before an Amherst audience... The lecture met with a surprisingly tepid response. 'Ralph Waldo Emerson's lecture greatly disappointed all who listened,' reported the local paper. 'It was in the English language instead of the Emersonese in which he usually clothes his thoughts, and the thoughts themselves were such as any plain commonsense person could understand and appreciate.' In the spring of 1861, his oldest daughter, Ellen, attended one of his lectures and afterward wrote to her sister: 'I understood the whole lecture, and really I don't like to understand them, because I'm afraid they may be a lighter kind of lecture than the others used to be, and I couldn't bear to have Father come down at all from his pinnacle.'

(3-4)

The confusion experienced by readers and listeners does not mean that Emerson's contemporary audiences were in any way less literate than those of the current moment, but rather, that this was a design of his prose. Public audiences and readers of his prose expected this property and actually celebrated Emerson's ambiguity. This response raises the question of what it was exactly that Emerson gave his readers and listeners – why did they then, and why do they now, seek confusion?

As we have seen throughout his essays, Emerson does not just write about his beliefs, but also performs them. As Buell writes, "His compressed, metaphorical prose was intended both to perform self-reliant thinking and provoke it" (68). As we see in "Experience," he writes through his despair and feelings of disorientation as a way to overcome them. Emerson is committed to giving his audience an unadulterated and accurate portrayal of his life and growth as a person. He could have easily written an essay

centered on the beliefs reached towards the end of “Experience,” cutting out his most antithetical statements, but that would have deprived his readers of the confusion and uncertainty he worked with. However, Buell also emphasizes another aspect of Emerson’s prose. He not only wished to perform thinking, but also to “provoke it.” Emerson’s prose enacts a dynamic process within the author, while generating the same process within the reader.

Emerson’s performance throughout his prose denies it any surface level cohesiveness. As Buell posits, “To discuss Emerson as a philosopher you must first face the question of whether he was a philosopher at all” (199). Emerson does not give his readers a cohesive philosophy or set of beliefs. Because his work is a performance, it encapsulates the highs and lows of life. Therefore, the reader cannot assume any single sentence or idea is truly illustrative of Emerson’s affirmative beliefs. In his prose, oscillations and contradictions, chief manifestations of Emerson’s inner struggle, guide the text. Oscillations allow Emerson to explore both new and old ideas to discern new truths. Contradictions are a little more complex. As we have seen, they fragment Emerson’s work as a reflection of his self-doubt. But, on the other hand, they drive Emerson to continue reworking and reexamining his ideas. Often, figuring out the complicated and contradictory relationship between two opposing notions and bringing them into balance is a major thread connecting an entire essay. For example, “Experience” can be understood as an examination of the relationship between the subjective and universal, and “The Poet” as an examination of the relationship between the mental and the physical.

As one reads Emerson, it is also the reader’s turn to perform self-reliant thinking. Returning to the epigraph of “Self-Reliance” discussed in the first chapter, Persius declares,

“do not seek yourself outside yourself.” The answers to life do not lie anywhere other than within the soul of the reader. Both oscillations and contradictions contribute to the reader’s sense of uncertainty and confusion. However, both notions, in different ways, in conjunction with the active mind of the reader, function in veiled ways to serve the reader and grant Emerson’s work an organic wholeness. As predicted by the Latin proverb, the unity of his work depends on the additive of the reader. This time, a new dynamic relationship arises, and must be settled not by Emerson, but instead, by the reader – the relationship between the text and the reader. Through active, creative reading the reader can settle a problem introduced in my first chapter between Emerson’s tone and message – how does one follow Emerson while not imitating him?

Oscillations in Emerson’s prose not only allow Emerson to productively explore different truths and convictions, but they also force the reader to develop his or her own responses to the text. Primarily discussed in my first chapter on “Self-Reliance,” Emerson oscillates between speaking clearly and precisely, and speaking in utterly confusing sentences with multiple voices. To discern Emerson’s message in “Self-Reliance,” the reader must struggle to navigate his confusing language amid disconnected and sporadic moments of clarity. During one moment of confusion in “Self-Reliance,” Emerson writes, “And now at last the highest truth on this subject remains unsaid; probably cannot be said” (129). The highest truth cannot be written in part because a truth for Emerson is not necessarily a truth for his reader, and discerning the highest truth is a deeply personal endeavor. Importantly, this “highest truth” rests in a confused moment in the text, emphasizing the importance of that confusion. Moments of confusion in the text prompt the readers’ own moments of clarity and truth as readers must rely on themselves, their

own mental processes, to interpret the nonlinear essay. Therefore, Emerson is ultimately successful in provoking readers to unearth their inner voices and pursue truths, despite his contradicting message. Effectively, readers are both listening and not listening to Emerson simultaneously, satisfying the contradiction between tone and content discussed in my first chapter.

The contradictions and tensions produced by his self-doubt allow the reader to grow more than any single line of his prose. Essentially, for Emerson and his readers, contradictions frustrate, and through frustration, new truths and convictions are pursued. Contradictions are a main reason Emerson cannot be considered a philosopher, or his works a philosophy. Similarly to a religion, a philosophy can be adopted and followed, or to use Emerson's word, imitated. For the reader, complexities ensure that the simple regurgitation of a well-crafted Emerson sentence does not masquerade as the product of a reader's own self-reliant thinking. The reader must rely on their own thoughts and perform their own brand of self-reliant thinking.

Emerson wants his readers to manipulate and rethink his ideas. As he states in another essay, "Fate," "The riddle of the age has for each a private solution" (262). In another reiteration of this premise, during *Nature*, he similarly asks, "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" (27). For Emerson, his texts exist as the "externalization of the soul," as a part of nature and the external world (187). His readers must seek their individual relationship to his work. Through this idea, Emerson's articulation of the relationship between the subjective and the universal is complete. Universality still coincides with the subjective because every individual has his or her own, private and unique relationship to the universal. The universal is not normalizing or

prescriptive, but instead liberating and expansive. Therefore, true to the words of Persius, through the additive of the reader, Emerson's work becomes whole and unified, but in a perpetually changing way. It is constantly *becoming*.

Although "The American Scholar" does not provide much insight into the interworking of despair and struggle, other than to say that all parts belong to a single whole, it does offer insight into how to read Emerson's work. This is to be expected because of the subject matter of the address. It deals less with our introspection and mental existence, and more with our external relations to nature and society. In it, Emerson discusses the role of books, implying the inclusion of his own into this discussion, for the active soul. He states, "Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst... They are for nothing but to inspire" (59). Again, Emerson warns his audience about imitation. Referring to books as instruments, he asserts, "Man Thinking must not be subdued by his instruments. Books are for the scholar's idle times . . . But when the intervals of darkness come, as come they must,—when the sun is hid, and the stars withdraw their shining,—we repair to the lamps which were kindled by their ray, to guide our steps to the East again, where the dawn is" (60). He alludes to the inevitability of periods of darkness and insurmountable inward struggle, "as come they must." Relying on the inspiration of other people's thinking is only a step in the process of self-actualization. His works serve the reader as an impetus to create their own thoughts. By providing the active mind with new symbols and metaphors, books can stimulate exploration of new ideas and perspectives that, as he demonstrates throughout "Experience," help remedy the inevitable, depressed periods in life. At another point in the lecture, he writes, "There is then creative reading as well as creative writing" (60). Emerson is referring to the process

of the reader is responding to texts in an individualized and unique way. In periods of darkness, Emerson gives us his works as a way to generate our own creations, an endeavor that is, correctly performed, inherently creative.

These ideas about the reader's crucial role for Emerson appear in other moments in "The Poet." He writes, "An imaginative book renders us much more service at first, by stimulating us through its tropes, than afterwards, when we arrive at the precise sense of the author. I think nothing is of any value in books, excepting the transcendental and extraordinary" (194). Emerson is attempting to push his readers away from the clear and informative portions of his texts. He wants readers to focus purely on "the transcendental and extraordinary," in hopes that there, the reader's own mental processes will be provoked into action, and self-reliance will be performed without imitation. Later in the essay, he adds, "The figs become grapes whilst he eats them" (195). Although not intended as such, this is the perfect way to describe Emerson's work. The reader, by consuming and even recreating Emerson's ideas, forms the organic whole of the work.

This wish to stimulate creation within his readers demonstrates Emerson's primary motive as a poet. As is well documented, Emerson was a member of a society that rode on the coattails of not only Europe, but of a previous revolutionary generation whose legacy was not sustained. As Fuller explains, "His was the generation that had grown up in the shadow of the founding fathers, a restive, energetic generation that sought to establish a culture and intellectual home for itself" (3). In hopes of creating this new, quintessentially American society and future, in "The Poet," Emerson points his audience towards the endless possibilities of the land around them – the symbols waiting to be rewritten. He writes, "America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it

will not wait long for metres" (196). Although he refers to the physical land, he is implying that America is a symbol of self-reliance and new beginnings. The people just have to see it as such, with the eyes of true poets, for a new America to be born. As he argued in "The American Scholar," society must be created, built, and reformed by the personal contributions of every, single individual. Emerson's motives were to inspire and to create the America he wanted to see.

In an interview in 1993, literary theorist Harold Bloom stated, "Emerson is God" (Leitch, 613). Although his is obviously a theatric overstatement, Bloom has a point. In "The Poet," the closest Emerson ever gets to a single set of functioning beliefs, as I argued, he emphasizes process, not product. As the soul must continue to grow throughout life, never ceasing, so must society. In order to produce the American society of which Emerson dreamed, he would become god, but the poetic god, not one of traditional religion. He wished to overthrow tradition and blind following, so he does the most divine act possible – he creates other creators. In his readers, Emerson sets in motion of series of ceaseless and perpetual creation. Even 150 years later, people continue to read his works, and as they do, Emerson is immortalized and the ideal of self-reliant thinking remains a doggedly personal and incomplete endeavor.

Works Cited

- Allen, Gay Wilson. *Waldo Emerson: A Biography*. New York: Viking, 1981. Print.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015. Print.
- Buell, Lawrence. *Emerson*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2003. Print.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Emerson's Prose and Poetry: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism*. Ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. Print.
- Fuller, Randall. "Introduction: Emerson's Dream." Introduction. *From Battlefields Rising: How the Civil War Transformed American Literature*. New York: Oxford UP, 2011. N. pag. Print.
- Gougeon, Len. *Emerson & Eros: The Making of a Cultural Hero*. Albany: State U of New York, 2007. Print.
- Leitch, Vincent B. "Ralph Waldo Emerson." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Norton, 2001. 613-17. Print.
- Meola, Frank M. "Emerson Between Faith and Doubt." *New England Review* 32.3 (2011): 111-23. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Oct. 2015.
- Morris, Sandra. "'Metre-Making' Arguments." *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. 218-42. Print.
- Porte, Joel. *Representative Man: Ralph Waldo Emerson in His Time*. New York: Oxford UP, 1979. Print.

Rampell, Palmer. "Laws That Refuse To Be Stated: The Post-Sectarian Spiritualities of Emerson, Thoreau, and D. T. Suzuki." *The New England Quarterly* 84.4 (2011): 621-54. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 May 2015.

Richardson, Robert D. *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*. Berkeley: U of California, 1995. Print.

Urbas, Joseph. "'Bi-Polar' Emerson: 'Nominalist and Realist'" *The Pluralist* 8.2 (2013): 78-105. *JSTOR*. Web. 3 Jan. 2016.