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The University of Tennessee

Awaiting the Seer: Emerson's Poetic Theory

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First Reader: Dr. Coleman

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English 498

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Who could stand among the ranks of Homer, Milton, and Shakespeare as America's poet? Who could found a great American literary tradition? These questions reflected the eighteenth century concern about the state of American literature. William Cullen Bryant, an internationally acclaimed poet after the publication of *Poems* in 1821, was one who addressed these issues (Baym, "Bryant" 1044). In 1825 Bryant was invited to give a series of lectures on poetry before the New York Athenaeum (Bryant 3). The third of these lectures focused on the development of poetry in America as compared to its development in other places and times, responding to critics who questioned the ability of poetry to emerge in a time where "the progress of reason, of science, and of the useful arts has a tendency to narrow the sphere of imagination" (24). Bryant rebukes these doubters, writing that "if...excellence in any art is believed to be unattainable, it will never be attained" and insisting that hope for great poetry should not be abandoned. He argues that "all sources of poetry are in the mind," which remains as capable as ever of creating poetry (26). He admits that circumstances had changed drastically since the poets of classical antiquity had been inspired to produce poetry to explain the mysteries of nature, but he claims that contemporary circumstances were even more advantageous for poetic development (26-28). Rejecting the idea that the increased scientific knowledge of his age had stamped out the mystery of the universe, he asserts that increased knowledge allows recognition of an exponentially greater number of remaining unknowns, resulting in even more mysteries that are "loftier, deeper, and more spiritual" (28). Bryant ultimately maintains that it is too soon to lament any lack of national poetry given all of the potential for its development. Looking forward, he ends his lecture with the claim that any failure of American poetry to emerge would be the fault of individuals, stating that this failure could only be because "Genius sits idle in the midst of its treasures" (35).

It is this very idleness of genius that Ralph Waldo Emerson seeks to remedy in his own poetic theories. Rather than focusing on poetry as a form, Emerson's poetic theories describe the figure of the ideal Poet, whose poetry sprung not solely from his own mind, but from mind in connection with the divine, permeating Spirit of the universe. A few years after Bryant's lectures, in 1832, Emerson resigned from his position in the church, pursuing instead idealist philosophies (Baym, "Emerson" 1107). His character of the ideal Poet appeared as early as his 1836 publication *Nature* as a figure who opened himself up to the mysteries and beauties of the universe. He further develops his ideas in his 1844 essay "The Poet," and his focus on poetry persisted throughout his life, culminating in the 1872 address, "Poetry and Imagination." His ideas are notoriously complex and have provoked extensive criticism on the grounds that they are impossible to analyze because, as Orestes Brownson once remarked, "he hardly ever has a leading thought, to which all the parts of discourse are subordinate, which is clearly stated, systematically drawn out, and logically enforced" (Packer, *Transcendentalists* 106). Indeed, Emerson's conception of the Poet is full of contradictions and tensions, and he is characterized both as a receptacle of divine inspiration and as a spontaneously creative individual, independent of the past yet reliant on tradition, isolated from others yet representative of society. Despite these complexities, exploration of Emerson's poetic theory yields a vibrant and nuanced depiction of the Poet whose ultimate function is to restore humanity to its original, divine ability to fully recognize the truth and beauty in the universe and themselves.

The Poet possesses the ability to truly *live*, which allows him to see the universe more clearly than most men. Emerson comments on this lack of true life in most men, urging us to "live for ourselves,—and not as the pall-bearers of a funeral, but as the upholders and creators of our age" (*Essays* 97). This language suggests that individuals in today's society structure their

lives too much around, and are thus limited by, the past. The funeral that Emerson perceives is not an isolated event, but rather a mode of life. The funeral could be that of past generations, representing the mortality of even the greatest men and their ideas. In this regard, Emerson instructs us to not waste life in tribute to old and dead ideas, but instead to live life and generate our own thoughts. That individuals are pallbearers suggests that they carry around dead ideas. A focus on death indicates the exact type of death-in-life existence that Emerson sought to avoid. Through this imagery, Emerson arrives at the same point he makes in “Self-Reliance” that “imitation is suicide” (259). He presents living as the “upholders and creators of our age” as antithetical to the death-in-life state. This is the Poet’s way of life. He is unaffected by the zombified, unawakened condition of most men. Instead, he “squanders on the hour an amount of life that would more than furnish the seventy years of the man that stands next him” (“Poetry” 17). The Poet’s ability to “squander” life has a surprisingly positive connotation, given its reckless or wasteful implications, suggesting the endless abundance of life possessed by the Poet but recognized by most of humanity.

The Poet’s abundance of life stems largely from the type of relationship he has with nature, and it is in this relationship that Emerson’s idea of truly living is clearest. We see this through Emerson’s description of poetry as a “conversation with nature” and his numerous descriptions of nature as poetic (*Essays* 102-3). Furthermore, Nature teems with life, in contrast with the death-like life in society, and Emerson describes how he grows young again when he enters nature; it is a place of “perpetual youth” (*Nature* 1112). This idea of youth is central to Emerson’s characterization of the Poet as an “eternal man” and Emerson’s ideas regarding humanity’s redemption (“Poet” 1183). He writes that “when all men are innocent, life will be longer and shall pass into the immortal” (*Nature* 1135). This rejection of mortality depends on an

almost familial relationship to nature. Emerson writes that “The poet, the orator, bred in the woods...shall not lose their lesson altogether, in the roar of cities or the broil of loud politics” (1120). Nature is presented as a parental figure to the Poet, and we see a distinct preference for nature over society. It also suggests that the Poet must shape his entire life around his relation with nature, and Emerson’s use of “bred” suggests the primacy of this relationship above all others. The centrality of nature to the Poet necessitates the broken state of society, since no one there would have such a relation to nature. Emerson must wait for the Poet because people in society could not expect to become poets simply by deciding to wander in the woods for a while. Furthermore, this imagery of the poet bred in the woods suggests that nature provides us with a relationship to the divine, echoing the biblical image of the prophet in the wilderness.

The Poet’s unique perception and allows him to connect to the divine in nature to gain inspiration necessary for his poetry. His perception differs from the common individual, and Emerson addresses this by contrasting the view of the “sensual man” and the Poet (*Nature* 1128). He explains, “The sensual man conforms thoughts to things; the poet conforms things to his thoughts. The one esteems nature as rooted and fast; the other as fluid and impresses his being thereon...he invests dusts and stones with humanity and makes them the words of the Reason” (1128). Instead of letting nature define him, the poet “delights us by animating nature like a creator with his own thoughts (1129). By doing so, he creates poetry. This relationship enabled by the poet’s sight, however, is much more complex than simply a matter of the poet’s influence on nature. The creation of poetry, then, is one that does *not* result solely from the assertion of human will. Instead, nature and perception have a push and pull relationship. Though the Poet’s perception enables him, the “words of Reason” that Emerson claims constitute poetry necessitate outside influence. Reason, as Emerson defines it, refers to the individual’s recognition of “a

universal soul within or behind his individual life” (1118). The Poet, however, not only exercises Reason, but lives in relation with Spirit, which Emerson defines as Reason viewed in the context of Nature. Spirit plays a crucial role in the Poet’s abilities; it is “the Creator” and “hath life in itself” (1119). We see the role nature plays in truly living and understand that it is crucial to the Poet’s capacity for poetry. This illuminates Emerson’s idea that the “element of spirit is eternity” and helps us understand Emerson’s description of the Poet as an “eternal man” (1135).

The Poet’s relationship with Spirit reflects nature’s correspondence to the human mind offers humanity knowledge of this correspondence that can redeem it from its fallen state. Emerson writes that the “relation between mind and matter is not fancied by some poet, but stands in the will of God” (*Nature* 1121). This correspondence demonstrates the “pairing of ‘nature and mind’” that Stephen Cushman argues is “unique to Transcendentalism” (90). This unity of nature and mind is usefully addressed by G. Borden Flanagan, who calls it “knowledge of being,” and argues that it is the highest form of knowledge (426). This knowledge of being involves the metaphysical experience of “a kind of union with, or dissolution into being,” which Emerson viewed as “the soul’s culmination” (431). We see distinct evidence of this phenomenon in *Nature*, where Emerson describes his experience of feeling he is a “part or particle of God” (1112). The recognition of this unity characterizes the nature of the Poet as the complete man. Still, tension develops within this proposed form of unity. In his 1838 oration “Literary Ethics,” Emerson argues that the fall of humanity was “the discovery we have made that we exist.” This caused humanity’s fall by forcing us to realize that “we do not see directly, but mediately” (*Essays* 487). This knowledge led to the disunity and brokenness of today’s world that the Poet must reconcile. At first, knowledge of being seems identical to knowledge of existence. Knowledge of existence, however, consists of one recognizing his individual identity, realizing

that he cannot view the world as the Supreme Being does, but only mediately through his own body. Knowledge of being remedies this by reuniting the individual with the Supreme Being and restoring the individual to this original, united state.

This influx of spirit is crucial to the Poet's creative abilities. Cushman emphasizes receptivity in the poet's creative process, explaining that poetry "broadcasts continually as an exquisitely organized transmission of divine beauty or soul or spirit" (79). The Poet is not an individual creator, but a creator who is part of the larger creative and divine Supreme Being. In this way, the Poet becomes a divinely elevated man that the titles of seer or prophet suggest, creating the type of beauty through his poetry that most people would attribute only to God. Emerson refers to this influx of Spirit through the theme of abandonment. He argues that the Poet must let go of his individual will and embrace instead what nature shows him, stating that "the way of life is wonderful: it is by abandonment" (*Essays* 414). Thus, the Poet's ability depends partially on allowing himself to open up to the intense truth and beauty of the universe.

Poetry further depends on the interplay of receptivity with the Poet's own perception, allowing him to recognize the harmony and beauty of the universe. Packer notes the resemblance of Emerson's ideas regarding these faculties to those of earlier poet-philosopher Johann Gottfried van Herder, who explained that poets "were not passive instruments of divine inspiration but rather were poets who perceived vividly and spoke faithfully what they saw and heard" (*Transcendentalists* 45). Bonnie O'Neill succinctly links these two faculties of reception and perception, stating that receptivity becomes the "primary mode of the self-reliant individual who trusts his perceptions as registers of moral truth," especially when these perceptions are of nature (743). Packer explains Emerson's connection of the Poet to Spirit, explaining that Emerson "delighted in a portrait of the individual mind and its relationship to nature that made ordinary

perception seem revelatory” (*Transcendentalists* 27). Emerson illustrates this relationship in *Nature* as the sensation of having become a “transparent eyeball” (1112). This imagery suggests the enhanced quality of the Poet’s vision, and this emphasis on vision persists in Emerson’s characterization of the poet, who is also called a “seer” (“Poet” 1193). The transparency of the eyeball represents the unity of the individual and nature in this state, for no distinction of color or border exists to distinguish the eyeball from nature. This indicates that the poet’s perception, like his reception, depends on being in harmony with nature. Emerson writes that this perception of unity “reconciles me to life and renovates nature” (1184). From the poetic perspective, “life will no more be a noise” (1184). Considered in the context of descriptions of the poet as a “bard” and the many references to poetry as harmonious melodies, noise becomes the antithesis to the unity the Poet sees in life (1188). It metaphorically suggests that for most men life is discordant and chaotic. The Poet, however experiences that “the heart and soul of Beauty lies enclosed in human life” through his perception of harmony and unity with nature (*Essays* 106).

Emerson further describes the Poet’s relation to nature as necessarily new and independent of tradition. In *Nature*, Emerson asks “Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” (1110). This rhetorical question hinges upon interpretation of “original.” It can indicate the relation to the universe afforded by knowledge of being, in which humanity relates to Spirit in their original state before the fall. It also suggests that individuals should view the universe in their own way, independent of traditional forms. Emerson explains this need for newness by referring to men who worship in the tradition of their fathers, but do not understand the universe for themselves (1136-37). This dependence on tradition to understand the world is at odds with his desire for “a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition” (1110). Instead, the Poet must be an explorer, modeled by Emerson himself, who writes, “I

simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past at my back” (*Essays* 412). The disappearance of the past is central to Emerson’s ideas regarding spontaneity and independence from tradition. He explains that when men “desert the tradition for a spontaneous thought, then poetry...flock[s] to their aid,” implying that the Poet’s relation to nature must arise entirely from natural impulses, without external stimulus or constraint (100). The idea of the Poet receiving aid from poetry mirrors Emerson’s idea that independence from tradition “is like the lovely varnish of dew, whereby the old, hard, peaked earth, and its old self-same productions, are made new every morning, and shining with the last touch of the artist’s hand” (97). This imagery suggests that nature itself creates newness, which will aid the Poet in his own pursuit. The Poet does not depend solely on the independence of his spontaneous thoughts. Nature complements this spontaneity with its own perpetual newness, suggesting that even though the elements of nature of the thoughts of men may remain the same, it is the quality of being new that gives them poetic qualities. Nature complements the poet’s spontaneous perception by enhancing his ability to function like the dew, restoring to thought the same beauty and vitality as this natural “varnish” gives to a world in which objects themselves remain the same.

Though Emerson demands independence from tradition, he does not throw out tradition as entirely useless. Instead, he confines tradition to a limited and specific role. For Emerson, “the whole value of history, of biography, is to increase my self-trust, by demonstrating what man can be and do” (*Essays* 97). Packer suggests that the Poet must “tap the richness of past literary tradition without being bankrupt by a sense of inferiority to it” (*Transcendentalists* 66-67). This sense of inferiority results in the same death-in-life existence which plagues the pall-bearers. Emerson counteracts our tendency to overrate the past with his democratic description of the

great minds as “only young men in libraries” cautioning us that past men are only men, and should not distract us from the same potential for greatness within ourselves (*Essays* 57).

Instead of this relationship of idolization, Emerson suggests that we use traditional ideas to suit our purposes, rather than to shape them. He treats Shakespeare as the poet most capable of this, describing how “Shakespeare knew that tradition supplies a better fable and any invention can” (*Essays* 713). Shakespeare comes to symbolize yet another crucial element of the Poet’s creative arsenal: memory. Emerson writes that “a great poet, who appears in illiterate times, absorbs into his sphere all the light which is any where radiating...he comes to value his memory equally with invention” (713-14). Emerson presents Shakespeare as making the best use of the past as inspiration. Through Shakespeare, he explains how past literary tradition forms a framework for contemporary poetry that must be respected. He likens this to sculpture in a temple, in which the temple “serves also as a frame to hold the figures...as soon as the statue was begun for itself, and with no reference to the temple or palace, the art began to decline” (712-13). He praises Shakespeare for his adept reading of his place in the literary tradition and his “suffering the spirit of the hour to pass unobstructed through the mind” (711). He also sets up Shakespeare as a contrast to the ideal Poet, however, who squandered his talents on entertaining people rather than expressing truth, love, and beauty (726).

Emerson himself draws greatly upon tradition in his own work as well. Even his ideal Poet exemplifies the influence of tradition. In “The Poet,” Emerson writes that he “look[s] in vain for the poet,” and this search for the complete man who has not yet appeared is thematic within Emerson’s work. From where, then, does he gain the sense that the poet is the most suitable man for the job of restoring harmony to the world. One answer can be found in his 1875 essay “Poetry and Imagination.” He begins his section on imagination by reporting a number of

past poets' and philosophers' ideas about what poetry should be. This drawing on tradition persists throughout the essay, which ends with Ben Jonson's opinion that "the principal end of poetry is to inform men in the just reason of living" ("Poetry" 217). As we see from the role the poet plays in society, Emerson's idealized end to poetry is very much in line with Jonson's. This suggests that the rejection of tradition that Emerson so strongly advocates does not refer to a rejection of past ideas, but of the notion that ideas are validated simply because they have been thought before, or because they are in line with the thinking of great men.

To understand Emerson's relation to tradition, we must also look at him in the continuum of literary tradition. Kete reports that poetry began to encompass "fuller expression of the unique subjectivity of the individual" in the 1830s, but the Transcendentalists operated outside of this trend (22). Packer argues that the Poet's poetic capabilities are themselves a distinctly unique trait. She frames these abilities as a "daimonic gift" that distinctly separates those with a knack for verse from the true Poets with powers of vision and expression (*Fall* 184-85). This suggests that poetry depends upon the Poet's inherent traits or personality. Kete argues that the Poet creates poetry by being an "excellent reader of [himself] and thus [his] world" (22). This interpretation hinges on the Poet's embrace of his own personality and gives a definite personal quality to his poetry that corresponds to Emerson's demand call for spontaneity, self-reliance, and forsaking of tradition for personal experience. Contradictions to this methodology, however, crop up in Emerson's work. Despite a reliance on personality, Emerson explains that when one determines to "detach every object from personal relations...then will God go forth anew into creation" (*Nature* 1137). Cushman's analysis follows this impersonal framework, and she argues that poets are "liberating gods" in that they "deny themselves thoroughly enough to reveal to the rest of us...the way to emancipation from imprisoning materialism." Their self-denial takes the

form of refusing to represent their own personality for the sake of better representing through their poetic vision and expression “what transcends personality” (91-92). Ultimately, these two perspectives on personality seem contradictory, but they work together to clarify different aspects of Emerson’s poetic theory. The two perspectives are reconciled when we separate the divine aspects of the poet’s self from the more limited human ones. The self that the poet must embrace is the divine part of himself, where he loses individuality and becomes a “part or particle of God” (*Nature* 1112). Emerson describes that part of himself that the Poet must deny in his essay “Experience,” which is a melancholy reflection on the limits of humanity in reaching its divine potential. Temperament, as reflected in our moods, is the crucial limiting factor. It destroys our perceptions and “puts all divinity to rout” (*Essays* 475). The Poet is therefore set apart by his ability to overcome temperament.

Emerson’s recognition of human potential through the Poet takes on a decidedly masculine quality. Most obviously, he repetitively casts the Poet in the role of the complete or eternal “man” whose appearance will restore “men,” using these terms almost throughout his work. In “Self-Reliance” Emerson makes one of his rare addresses to both sexes, calling for “men and women who shall renovate life” (*Essays* 274). This specific acknowledgement of women in a few places of his discourse suggests that his emphasis on men is intentional. Furthermore, his listing of the areas of life needing improvement consists of “our housekeeping..., our arts, our occupations, our marriages, our religion...,” indicating that his focus here is not limited to the more philosophical pursuits of scholars and the Poet. Emerson furthers his masculine emphasis by associating nature with femininity, using gender roles to nuance the relation between the Poet and nature. His call to the Poet to “lie close hid with nature” is just one example of the subtle sexuality that Emerson attributes to the Poet’s link to

nature (“Poet” 1195). His emphasis on masculinity can be seen as fear of emasculation because of spiritual, scholarly, or poetic work. In “The American Scholar” he notes how often scholars and clergymen “are addressed as women” because of their lack of spontaneity (*Essays* 60). The remedy he proposes is assert oneself as “Man Thinking” is not only to reassert the power and independence of one’s thought, but also to reassert one’s masculinity.

This call to masculinity, however depends on a reinvention of manhood to constitute independence from social influence. Emerson claims that individuals have become “parlor soldiers” who avoid the “rugged battle of fate, where strength is born” (*Essays* 275). The label of “soldiers,” given the nineteenth century context, naturally implies strength, but the modifier of “parlor” suggests a domesticity. This domesticity, usually associated with women, represents the feminization that Emerson wishes to throw off. His language suggests that men should indeed be soldiers who fight for the mode of living they individually deem appropriate, but that society has reduced them to fighting over social conventions and trivial matters, which should not be masculine concerns. Instead of embracing their ability to choose their own path, individuals merely parody the struggle of living a true life. Emerson calls for individuals to reject social standards as a guide to living, trusting instead their own intuition and embracing nonconformity. By doing so, individuals regain the power they had given over to social convention. Notably, this rejection of social convention allows Emerson to incorporate traditionally feminine qualities into true manhood. His emphasis on the Poet’s receptivity exemplifies this reformation of manhood, since receptivity was traditionally a feminine quality (Morris, “Threshold” 560). Though Emerson does rely on gendered connotations to establish the Poet’s reclaiming of masculinity, his ideas regarding manhood demonstrate the independence of his ideal man from social norms rather than traditionally feminine attributes.

The Poet's unification of individuality with the impersonal has isolating implications for his relationship to society. O'Neill argues that a critical component of the Poet's "individual, impersonal intellection" depends upon independence from the mass opinions of society (741). Emerson is often critical of society, referring to it as a "joint stock company," suggesting the lack of control that any individual has over society and social pressures (*Essays* 261). For this reason, Emerson advocates living outside of these social pressures, advocating solitude as a necessary part of the Poet's existence. This solitude, however, comes to the Poet through the nature of his work. Emerson describes the Poet as "isolated among his contemporaries, by truth and by his art" ("Poet" 1181). The Poet should seek solitude in nature, which Emerson expresses when he says he cannot "freely admire a noble landscape, if laborers are digging in the field hard by. The poet finds something ridiculous in his delight, until he is out of the sight of men" (*Nature* 1133). These laborers are the antithesis to the Poet. Whereas the Poet becomes filled with joy, the laborers are consumed by their toil in servitude to both nature and society. They do not recognize their superiority to nature as the true Poet does. Their failure to understand that Spirit is great than nature detracts from the Poet's perception of beauty and inhibits his delight. Still, Emerson does not embrace solitude unconditionally. He warns against misuse of solitude for the purpose of readying oneself for the public eye, explaining that "not insulation of place, but independence of spirit is essential" (*Essays* 105). This independence of spirit leads to, rather than results from, the Poet's solitude.

Emerson advocates an ascetic lifestyle to complement the Poet's solitude. He addresses the errors of lavish lifestyles in "The Poet," criticizing men who depend upon "the sorceries of opium or wine" in their artistic endeavors (1190). Poetry itself is influence enough, and he writes that "Poetry is not 'devil's wine,' but God's wine" (1190). He demands that the Poet have an

ascetic lifestyle that does not distract him from a simple relationship with the universe of the universe. He says the Poet “must drink water out of a wooden bowl” (1190). This emphasizes the simplicity of the Poet’s lifestyle. The water and the makings of a wood bowl are easily found in nature, and the Poet’s use of these items suggest that he should be dependent on nature alone for his work. Emerson likens modern comforts and a luxurious lifestyle to overly complicated “toys” (1190). His conclusion is that “the poet’s habit of living should be set on a key so low and plain, that the common influence should delight him... air should suffice for his inspiration, and he should be tipsy with water” (1190). Thus Emerson argues that a modest lifestyle enhances the Poet’s capacity for joy.

The Poet unhindered relationship to nature and Spirit enables his poetic capabilities by enabling him to be a “language maker” (“Poet” 1187). Emerson asserts that when language first began, “all was poetry” (*Nature* 1119). He explains that words are simply symbolic of natural facts, which are themselves symbolic of spiritual facts, or universal truth. These definitions suggest that the role of the Poet, then, is to articulate universal truths. Furthermore, it suggests that originally, since all language was poetry, all men were able to use language for poetic expression. Emerson explains that the Poet is now necessary to this expression because men became dislocated from their original relation with the universe, and their ability to shape language to express their thoughts was corrupted (1119). Despite common men’s knowledge today of the symbols language depends on, “they cannot originally use them.” because they no longer understand their origin (“Poet” 1187). Their ignorance results from their living a funeral-like life. Emerson writes that the “use of life is to learn metonymy,” suggesting that the individual who truly lives, as the Poet does, comes to learn how the symbolism of the natural world functions (“Poetry” 15). This metonymy of the natural world to the Universe/Supreme

being serves as the basis for his poetry. Rather than depending on the meaning words have traditionally acquired (as most men do), the Poet sees an original meaning for them in nature, and creates symbol and, therefore, language to express universal truths. Emerson also writes that each “universal truth expressed in words implies every other truth” (*Nature* 1125). The nature of poetry, therefore, is to reveal not just one truth, but all truth. This harks back to the Poet’s role as a unifier. Emerson’s description of the Poet as the complete man can be extended to his poetry as well, for by expressing one truth, poetry expresses the complete truth of the universe.

Emerson captures the nature of the Poet’s relationship with language through his description of the Poet as “the Sayer” (“Poet” 1182). Though he explains that “poetry was all written before time was,” its longevity in written form is dependent on the Poet’s abilities as the “Sayer” (1182). He presents the “Sayer” alongside “the Knower” and “the Doer,” explaining that these are the three children of the universe that “stand respectively for the love of truth, for the love of good, and for the love of beauty” (1182). The names differentiate between these men’s functions, but Emerson also declares the equality of these positions and explains that though one might have a primary function as one of the above, he still maintains command of the other two. Though Emerson separates these three aspects of humanity, it follows that they would complement each other in the “complete man” that he envisions the Poet to be. Robert K. Hudnut breaks down these roles to relate to the Poet as levels of art, equating the producer of art to the “Knower,” the act of producing to the “Doer,” and the actual product of art to the “Sayer” (55-56). This illuminates how the Poet’s relation to Spirit and his knowledge of being equivocate with knowing, and how his expression through poetry is Saying. However, his interpretation of the “act of producing” as doing is more complex than this analysis indicates. Although one might view the act of writing down one’s words as doing, this act depends upon the Poet’s function as a

“language maker” and thus remains intertwined with his role of as the Sayer rather than becoming a separate action of doing (“Poet” 1187).

The language created by the Poet does not become poetry until put in written form. Emerson’s theories, in many ways, echo those of Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Thomas Carlyle, who represented literary men as obligated to represent divine ideas to their contemporaries, though not necessarily in written form (Packer, *Transcendentalists* 33-4). The critical difference arises in that Emerson’s Poet must produce written poetry. We see throughout Emerson’s work that all men have poetic impulses, but that the Poet is set apart by his ability to articulate his poetic thoughts. Through writing, the Poet “detaches and sends away from [his soul] its poems or songs...the songs, thus flying immortal from their mortal parents” (“Poet” 1188). Written form gives poetry its immortality in the eyes of humanity, allowing human understanding of the ideas it contains even after the Poet’s death (1182). Perhaps this preference for written material can be traced back to Emerson’s grief at his brother’s death and his disappointment that his brother’s writing “contained nothing that resembled the brilliance of his conversation” (Packer, *Fall* 30-31). We see here that Emerson’s necessitation of written work might stem from personal experience, and how, though his brother’s thoughts were poetic in nature, his thoughts could not become immortal without writing.

Emerson also expresses a preference for certain types of written work to count as poetry. He writes that “picturesque language is at once a commanding certificate that he who employs it, is a man in alliance with truth and God” (*Nature* 1120). “Picturesque language” suggests that imagery and metaphors involving the natural world are the purest form of written work, implying that the Poet would speak naturally in such language. Emerson’s own work suggests this preference, as he explains most of his philosophy in analogies to natural processes. Word choice,

however, is hardly the root of poetic form; meter plays an equal, if not greater, role in defining poetry. Emerson explains that “it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem” (“Poet” 1183). Though at first this seems to express a preference for content over form, Cushman argues that Emerson’s poetic theory was dependent on the formal aspects of meter (89). In “Poetry and Imagination,” Emerson describes how he “believe[s] these meters to be organic, or derived from our human pulse, and to be therefore not proper to one nation, but to mankind” (“Poetry” 46). Because he sees meter as organically human, it follows that meter must be an integral part of any full human expression. Cushman explains that since “what is natural symbolizes the supernatural, the power of meter...has its part to play in symbolizing the power of spirit or soul (89). Not just any form of verse, however, was sufficient to meet Emerson’s ideas. He expresses a preference for epic poets over lyricists. The ascetic lifestyle Emerson advocates for his Poet corresponds to that which Milton advocated for “the epic poet, he who shall sing of the gods, and their descent unto men,” in contrast to the lyricist who “may drink wine and live generously” (“Poet” 1190). The epic poet, then, is a much more highly exalted figure, whose purpose more closely resembles Emerson’s Poet than that of the lyricist.

Language, however, limits poetry through its function as law. Nonetheless, these limitations contribute to the beauty and inspirational quality of poetry. Critic Mutlu Blasing argues that “the essence of language is temporality,” creating tension with Emerson’s idea that the immortality of language allows the Poet to be an Eternal Man. This temporality results from the unity of mind and nature because, through language, “the law of the mind becomes incarnate as the law of nature” (10). Indeed, Blasing argues that Emerson’s Poet is the “spokesperson for language as law” (11). However, language not only represents the creation of natural law, but also necessitates the “counter transformation of soul into fatal law” (10). It distances thoughts

from the individual mind, thereby limiting the thoughts' power, by freezing the flow that enables the metamorphosis of mind into Spirit (10). Blasing interprets the idea of language as "fatal law" to represent death. Though this interpretation gives an accurate impression of Emerson's relation of "circumstance" as the limiting component of Fate, it neglects Emerson's emphasis on power, which "antagonizes Fate" just as fate limits it. Emerson corresponds power with life in way that suggests that it balances the forces of death also present in the idea of Fate. Furthermore, he argues that the "best use of Fate is to teach fatal courage," which he regards as a sort of resignation that whatever life has in store for an individual is what is best for him (*Essays* 954). Though the idea of fatal law is useful for examining Emerson's work, Blasing places an undue degree of emphasis on death, dramatically interpreting the Poet as the Angel of Death (18). Whereas Blasing's ideas surrounding fate focus on limitations, Emerson learns to appreciate these limitation. He explains that "limitations refine as soul purifies, but the ring of necessity is always peached at the top" (*Essays* 952). He sees necessity as fate, and regards it as part of the beauty of the universe, necessary for us to comprehend the beauty of life. He ends his essay "Fate" with a cry of "Let us built alters to the Beautiful Necessity" (967). This call expands Blasing's idea of fatal law, suggesting an inherent beauty. Though language, and therefore poetry, may be fatal law, it inspires individuals to fatal courage rather than dooming them to die.

We must wonder about the Poet's role as a "Sayer" and "language maker" during Emerson's time. How can Emerson show preference for "saying" when his culture emphasized reform and would consider the "Doer" a great individual? In many ways, this emphasis on saying reflects Emerson's vision of a different kind of reform. Packer explains that Emerson claimed to be a reformer himself, "visiting souls in prison and bringing news of their release" (*Transcendentalists* 69-70). This view of reform corresponds to Emerson's vision of the Poet as

a “liberating god” (“Poet” 1191). However, this conception of prison and liberation refers not to a literal release from jail, but to the Poet’s ability to rescue humanity from its fallen state.

Through his poetry, he “re-attaches thing to nature and the Whole,” rescuing the world from its “dislocation and detachment from the life of God” (1186). Emerson writes that “the man of genius should occupy the whole space between God or pure mind, and the multitude of uneducated men” (*Essays* 109) The Poet, then, serves as a bridge between Spirit and the masses, who have not experienced knowledge of being for themselves. Because of this, they cannot see beauty and truth as the Poet can. Yet Emerson’s claim that the Poet will draw people to him with his work suggests that poetry is able to convey the truth and beauty of the universe to the ordinary person, satisfying his need for these things. Individuals are thus indirectly restored to their original place in the universe. Emerson further writes that humanity awaits the “arrival of a brother who can hold him steady to a truth until he can make it his own” (“Poet” 1184). This passage indicates that the indirect restoration of men, which the Poet facilitates, is only a mediate step in the process through which men are fully restored to their original relation with Spirit. The Poet serves as a rehabilitator who provides individuals with the truth and beauty they seek until they understand it well enough to access it themselves.

The Poet not only helps individuals find truth and beauty, but also represents humanity through his poetry. He does this explicitly through his role as the Sayer, since Emerson asserts that “the man is only half himself, the other half is his expression” (“Poet” 1181). Poetry, then, must serve not only to express the Poet’s own thoughts, but those of his generation. This representative function of the poet exists in tension with Emerson’s emphasis on the Poet’s reliance on individual experience. As representative, the Poet depends on his ability to be impersonal. Indeed, “the genius of our life is jealous of individuals, and will not have any

individual great except through the general” (*Essays* 710). This suggests that though a poet may write truthfully, he is not useful unless the rest of humanity can understand his work as the same thoughts they have themselves. Furthermore, he must not only relate, but take direction from his fellow men. Emerson writes that “there is no choice to genius...he stands where all the eyes of men look one way, and their hands all point the direction in which he should go...” (710). Such a statement seems counterintuitive for Emerson, who so strongly argues for spontaneity and independence of mind. To reconcile this contradiction, we must return the idea of the Poet’s receptivity. The Poet must be receptive not only to the truth, morality, and beauty of the universe, but also to the perspective of his generation. Just as Shakespeare responded to the “spirit of the hour,” the Poet must express the general thoughts of his age. Because “the experience of each age require a new confession,” Emerson says that humanity is “always waiting for its poet” (“Poet” 1183). As time passes, the genius of the past generation dies out and can no longer inspire future men. This problem is compounded by Emerson’s view that great men have no successors—they are one of a kind (*Essays* 623). Tension arises, however, when we consider Emerson’s description of the Poet as an eternal man. The true Poet, however, resolves this tension, representing his own time in a way that still inspires future generations.

Emerson’s Poet must be “not only representative but participant” in society (*Essays* 620). He partially fulfills this requirement through his provision of expression, but he can also be seen as participant in a more political sense. Flanagan argues that Emerson portrays “the cultivation of excellence as the purpose...of society” (416). The Poet exemplifies this excellence through his relationship with the universe and the truth and beauty it yields. He therefore functions as the primary cultivator in society. The elitism of Emerson’s ideal society was in tension with the widespread democratic ideals of his day. Orestes Brownson saw democracy as a way to “restore

to individuals their natural rights and to teach them to ‘perform those duties...which everlasting and immutable Justice imposes’” (Packer, *Transcendentalists* 105). Though the end result of Brownson’s vision for democracy is very similar to Emerson’s own hopes for individual reform, it is unlikely that he viewed democracy as its vehicle because of the Poet’s elite status. Emerson may have even feared the results that democracy might have for the Poet. William Ellery Channing viewed American democracy as having created a tyrannous “body of opinion” that resulted in the non-conformist being “considered as usurping an unnatural superiority over the whole” and viewed in a negative light (qtd. in Packer, *Transcendentalists* 28-9). This tyranny poses a threat to Emerson’s independently-thinking Poet. Not surprisingly, Emerson’s views diverge from democracy. Flanagan proposes that Emerson’s views seem at odds with with democracy because they proposed excellence through truth and beauty as their end rather than equality (430). Still, Emerson’s views did not advocate a rejection of democracy so much as a refashioning of the concept. In line with the democratic views of human equality, Emerson explains that the Poet “preaches the equality of all souls” (*Essays* 625). In relation to the Universe, all men are equal. Though the Poet’s main end may be, as Flanagan says, excellence (truth, beauty, morality), this excellence leads to rather than excludes equality as a social result. Despite this admission of equality, however, the Poet is also presented as a “monarch, who gives a constitution to his people” (*Essays* 625). The idea of the Poet as a “monarch” at first seems to contradict the equality Emerson advocates, but this elite status stems from his recognition of his soul’s own greatness rather than its superiority to others. Because of this, he is able to “give a constitution” to humanity in which people recognize their own greatness and equality. Ultimately, the Poet’s participation in society leads to the creation of the ideal society Emerson

envisioned, composed of what Flanagan views as “people oriented toward notions of excellence” (421).

Emerson’s poetry explores application of his poetic theory. Close examination of two of his poems, “The Sphinx” and “Uriel,” confirms his ideal of who the Poet should be while giving further descriptions of the role of poetry itself. “The Sphinx” begins with the Sphinx posing her riddle about the meaning of man. A poet (distinct from the ideal Poet of Emerson’s essays) attempts to answer, and a dialogue occurs between poet and Sphinx, resulting in the manifestation of the Sphinx as nature. Demonstrating radically different results of poetry, “Uriel” presumes to tell the story of the angel Uriel’s fall, presenting his poetic speech about the circular nature of the universe. The other angels, however, reject the truth that Uriel speaks, causing a profound disruption in the world which they inhabit. Though these poems contain poet-characters, they ultimately suggest the impossibility of the appearance of the Poet—the complete man capable of complete expression. This very impossibility works to emphasize the power of poetry itself, demonstrating that the appearance of the Poet is not a necessary precursor to poetry’s transformative power.

“The Sphinx” reflects in its complexity the entire scope of Emerson’s philosophy and “literary method” (Whitaker 179). The Sphinx represents Spirit, demonstrating what critic Thomas Whitaker views as the multiplicity of the universe through her shifting roles in the poem (191). She shows herself to encompass the spirit of both humanity and nature through her multiple functions as critical inquiry, love, perception, Reason, and beauty. The poem is, as critic Sandra Morris notes, “literally a metre-making argument” between the Sphinx and the poet (“Threshold Poem” 547). This dialectic allows the Sphinx to awaken from her “drowsy” state at the beginning of the poem (Emerson, “Sphinx” 1). After the poet realizes and expresses the

necessity of unity with Spirit, the Sphinx reveals the beauty of the universe through her manifestation as nature.

The first stanza of “The Sphinx” demonstrates her need and desire for the Poet as a means for expression. The Sphinx asks, “Who’ll tell me my secret, / The ages have kept?— / I awaited the seer, / While they slumbered and slept;—“ (5-8). Her question implies that she waited for the seer to appear to tell her her secret, and readers familiar with Emerson will identify this seer as the Poet. Through a metaphor of vision, the Sphinx’s statement aligns with Emerson’s characterization of the Poet as one whose superior perception allows him to perceive universal truth. Her question suggests that she is unsure of her own secret because it has been “kept” by “the ages.” “The ages” could refer to the passage of time, invoking the idea presented at the end of the poem that time falsifies all expressions of truth. This corresponds to the problem of generational specificity of poetry that Emerson presents in his essays. To compensate for this, the Sphinx seeks not just a poet, but a seer, suggesting that she waits for someone whose message will be relevant to future generations, as Emerson describes the ideal Poet’s to be. Her reference to others who “slumbered and slept” also suggests that “the ages” could be equivalent to past generations. That they have “slumbered and slept” indicates that their condition contrasts that of the Poet. Instead of being highly perceptive, they have closed eyes and are unconscious to the world. This sleeping state reflects Emerson’s description of the death-in-life existence of the majority of humanity. That the Sphinx uses past tense suggests that the Sphinx has stopped waiting for the Poet even before the poet character of the poem appears. Thus the Sphinx appears desirous of the Poet, but has, at least temporarily, abandoned hope for his actual arrival. As a result, she too starts to slip into a “drowsy” state, approaching the slumbering state of most of humanity (1). This drowsy state corresponds to her lack of expressive capabilities. That she must

ask who will tell her her secret implies that she is unable to express it for herself. Her drowsiness therefore indicates that she is frustratingly silent. Furthermore, her question is framed as “brooding,” which suggests primacy of thought rather than speech (4). It also suggests a negative state of thought, one that is not free from the crippling influence of temperament. Her desire for the Poet stems from her need for expression, confirming the Poet’s role of expressing truth.

The Sphinx’s riddle suggests that an intuitive understanding of multiplicity is key to harmony. In her riddle questioning the reasons for man’s existence, she describes a “babe by its mother” whose characterization parallels Emerson’s description of the Poet as a representation of humanity in its original state (51). Her use of “babe” to refer to individuals corresponds to images of youth in Emerson’s essays, such as the Poet who has “perpetual youth” in nature (*Nature* 1112). The “mother” of whom the Sphinx speaks, then, can be seen as nature, a metaphor used frequently in Emerson’s and other transcendentalists’ writings. This type of relationship exemplifies that which humanity is meant to have with nature and confirms the familial link to nature that Emerson envisions the Poet having. That the infant is “bathed in joy” characterizes the Poet’s abounding cheerfulness (52). The hours that “glide...uncounted” echo Emerson’s descriptions of the Poet as an eternal man whose fullness of life results from his connection with Spirit (53). Furthermore, the Sphinx’s use of a metaphor of perception indicates poetic ability. In the babe’s eyes “shines the peace of all being, / Without cloud” (55-56). “Without cloud” suggests clarity of sight, and connected with the innocence of the infant, it suggests the original state of humanity that Emerson describes in his essays. That peace “shines” from his eyes indicates not only that the infant can perceive the peace of the universe, but that he reflects it back into the universe. This reflection corresponds to the expression of the Poet, whose poetry creates beauty that is added to the universe, but that comes from the beauty already there

to which he is so receptive. Peace also implies harmony with the natural world. In this state, “the sum of the world / In soft miniature lies,” suggesting that because of this harmony, humanity in its original state intuitively unites in its being the entirety of the universe (57-58).

The next stanza, in contrast, depicts humanity’s fallen state, indicating disunity. The Sphinx describes that humanity “creepeth and peepeth, / He palters and steals” (61-62). This description suggests that the individual is no longer the complete man. “Palters” suggests his inability for truthful expression, either as equivocation or mumbling or babbling. This weakness opposes the linguistic capabilities of the Poet and his role as the “Sayer.” Her description of “steals” suggests humanity’s lack of self-reliance. Rather than depending on oneself and one’s intuition, the individual relies on others’ knowledge and tradition as a substitute for personal experience. Perhaps humanity’s deficient expression results from its incomplete vision. Eyes only “peep” instead of seeing a whole. Peeping even suggests a willfulness towards partial vision, from fear of what might be seen. The Sphinx also describes how humanity “crouches and blushes” (49), a description contrasting with the images the Sphinx presents earlier in her riddle of a palm tree “Erect as a sunbeam” and the elephant “Undaunted and calm” (17-20). This opposition suggests that the fallen state of humanity is out of harmony with the natural world. Given Emerson’s theory that nature corresponds with the human mind, the descriptions of nature indicate what humanity should be in its ideal condition, and the contrast describes the depth of humanity’s descent. That humanity “blushes” suggests the shamefulness of its current state. In the final line of the stanza, the Sphinx says that “He poisons the ground” (66). It is tempting to read “ground” as a direct reference to the natural world, but such an interpretation creates tension with the Sphinx’s description of the natural world as pure. Instead, a theological reading of “ground” to mean “the divine essence or center of the individual soul” provides greater depth to

the Sphinx's description of humanity's current state, suggesting that it lacks the connection to Spirit that it once possessed ("ground, n."). Only when viewed through this lens can "ground" be seen to allude to the natural world, since Emerson maintains throughout his essays that connection with nature involves connection with Spirit. First reading the line as reference to a poisoning of the individual soul demonstrates that any poisoning of nature results from the damaged state of the individual mind rather than from direct negative effect on the natural world.

The Poet's response to the Sphinx indicates unity with Spirit in one of its aspects as love. Love makes possible the dialectic between the poet and the Sphinx by functioning as common, unifying ground. The poet answers the sphinx saying "Say on, sweet Sphinx! thy dirges / Are pleasant songs to me" (77-78). Morris highlights this unusual response, arguing that his can respond to the Sphinx's question "because he refuses to see her conventionally" ("Threshold Poem" 555). She also emphasizes that the poet is "receptive" to the Sphinx's articulations (555). This receptivity corresponds to the traits of the poet that Emerson outlines in his prose that enables the Poet to create poetry. Furthermore, the ability of this poet to view the Sphinx from his own experience rather than crediting her with traditional characteristics establishes his credibility as the Poet and creates the possibility that this poet might be the seer whom the Sphinx awaits. Critic Gayle Smith argues that the Poet's words "prove[] that he is...a lover." She emphasizes that the Poet's success necessitates love, and that in the poem, the poet's empathy for the Sphinx allows him to answer her question. Referring to Emerson's essay "Experience," she uses the idea that "affection blends, intellect disjoins subject and object" to argue that had the poet used only his intellect to answer the question, he surely would have failed (139). Love allows the poet to answer and clarifies his perception. His unconventional perception also shines through his reference to "dirges" as "pleasant songs". He continues, saying that "deep love lieth

under / These pictures of time; / They fade in the light of / Their meaning sublime” (79-82). This answer seems a strange start to answer the Sphinx’s question, since she has said nothing about love during her own speech, but it suggests that love for humanity is the motive for her question. He realizes that the “pictures of time,” referring to the images of man’s mortality that are part of the Sphinx’s riddle, are motivated by “deep love” because he responds with empathy, a recognition of unity. The issue of mortality itself “fades in the light” of the meaning created by love, allowing the message of death to be overcome by the Sphinx’s feelings of love. Love is also seen in the “great mother[’s]” questioning response to humanity’s fallen condition. The Sphinx relates this love in her questions, describing how “At the sound of her accents / Cold shuddered the sphere” (69-70). Morris interprets this shuddering as the result of the great mother’s “protective indignation” and “menacing[.]” tone (“Threshold Poem” 553). Notably, the Sphinx uses the great mother’s question as her own, suggesting her complete understanding of nature. That she is a figure of love suggests that rather than serving as a simple representation of the inanimate natural world, the Sphinx can be identified with Spirit and the force of love behind creation. Her loving nature unites her with the poet’s own nature as a lover.

The Poet’s recognition of unity allows for effective expression and therefore poetry. Examination of the Sphinx’s question demonstrates her own poetic abilities, allowing us to see her questions themselves as poetry. Indeed, we see that she is not only able to perceive the fallen state of humanity, but she is able to express truthfully, yet another characteristic that supports a view of her as a poet. Morris comments on the poet’s ability to respond to the Sphinx’s questions, arguing that the mythological function of the sphinx was to block language and one’s ability to respond. She extends this argument to Emerson’s prose argument that the man without expression is only half himself (“Threshold Poem” 554). The poet of “The Sphinx,” however,

possesses the ability to respond to the Sphinx despite her blocking abilities, which Morris views as the poet's most basic answer to her question (554). Furthermore, the poet answers "aloud and cheerfully," suggesting the forcefulness of his expression compared to the Sphinx's silent, brooding state (66). This emphasis on the poet's voice demonstrates the strength of his poetic abilities. Morris also notes that the initial function of the poet's speech is to encourage the sphinx to self-expression, as he encourages her to "Say on, sweet Sphinx!" ("Threshold Poem" 555). His encouragement to self-expression also reflects the function of the Poet in Emerson's prose as one who speaks truth until others can express it for themselves. Morris also views the poet's initial address to the Sphinx as his "naming" of her (555). This language suggests that the poet performs the fundamental role of Emerson's ideal Poet as a Sayer and Namer.

The content of the poet's answer reveals the limitations of his poetic ability because of his limited perception of unity. The poet in the poem finishes his address by claiming that the Sphinx's "sight is growing blur" and that "her muddy eyes" need to be cleared (106-07). He questions her perception because of the simplicity of his answer of love. To him, her question functions as an indication that she cannot see "love at the center," implying weak perceptive abilities (101). The Sphinx replies also in terms of vision, rebuking the poet for insulting her vision (Whitaker 183). She instead declares the role she has played in the poet's own perception, stating "of thine eye I am eyebeam" (22). An eyebeam refers to a "glance", or an "emanation" of the eye ("eye-beam"). That she positions herself as this part of the poet's perception suggests that she allows the poet to see. This sentiment further suggests that her identity lies with Spirit, which operates behind nature and creates it. Thus, her rebuke is well founded, since the Poet relies on Spirit to enhance his perception of nature. Furthermore, her declaration functions as a metaphorical assertion of unity with the poet. This unity represents knowledge of being, which is

crucial to poetic capacity. That the Sphinx perceives this unity indicates that the Sphinx herself possesses some poetic ability, but the poet's inability to see this indicates that he cannot be Emerson's ideal Poet, who would recognize himself as a "part or particle of God" (*Nature* 1112).

Whitaker suggests that this lapse in vision occurs because the poet "fails to apply to himself" the truth that he sees (186). In his response to the Sphinx, the poet asserts that "Profounder, profounder, / Man's spirit must dive; / To his aye-rolling orbit / No goal will arrive" (81-84). This suggests that man is in need of depth rather than linear progression of thought. "Aye-rolling" and "orbit" suggest that circularity characterizes individual thought processes. Furthermore, since "no goal will arrive," these circular thought processes are never-ending—there is no ultimate destination. That the poet fails to recognize how he himself is affected by the circular nature of things further demonstrates his lack of identity with the multiplicity of Spirit. In response to the poet, the Sphinx asserts that "couldst see thy proper eye, / always it asketh, asketh; and each answer is a lie" (115-16). This retort suggests that the poet is not as perceptive as he believes. The poet's assertion of superior vision to the Sphinx demonstrates that his perception is limited by pride. Ironically, he addresses pride in his answer to the Sphinx's question, stating that "pride ruined the angels, / Their shame them restores," but he does not recognize the pride in his own answer (89-90). The Sphinx's rebuke serves to shame the poet and allows him to recognize the multiplicity that restores him to unity with Spirit.

The content of the poet's answer also suggests that the figure of the ideal Poet would be an impossibility. He states that humanity's current state results because "the Lethe of nature / Can't trance him again, / Whose soul sees the perfect, / Which his eyes seek in vain" (78-80). Notably, this problem, represented as "love of the best," seems like a problem plaguing those who are awake and able to see (74). Thomas Whitaker interprets his answer to mean that "man is

necessarily imperfect because of his infinite perfectibility” (179). Given this interpretation, however, tension arises regarding the role of Emerson’s Poet in restoring humanity to its original state. Whereas his essays suggest that the arrival of the Poet will lead to the restoration of all humanity, the suggestion of necessary imperfection in “The Sphinx” leads to doubt about whether the Poet anticipated in the essays can actually exist as Emerson envisioned. The Sphinx’s response also indicates the general impossibility of the existence of the ideal Poet. She argues that the poet is always the “unanswered question” and that time will falsify all his thoughts, refuting Emerson’s idea of the Poet as the eternal man capable of expressing eternal truth (113). Ultimately, the poem suggests that the ideal Poet is an example of “the perfect, / Which his eyes seek in vain” (79-80).

Though casting doubt on the possibility of the ideal Poet, the dialectic between the poet and the Sphinx produces poetry in the ideal Poet’s absence. The beauty of the Sphinx’s final manifestation in nature demonstrates the power of expression even if the ideal Poet cannot exist. As a result of their poetic dialog, the Sphinx undergoes an unveiling as her beauty is revealed through nature. This stands in contrast to the traditional Sphinx, who would either kill or be killed in response to the poet’s answer (Morris, “Threshold Poem” 559). Instead,

Uprose the merry Sphinx,
 And crouched no more in stone;
 She melted into purple could,
 She silvered in the moon;
 She spired into a yellow flame;
 She flowered in blossoms red;
 She flowed into a foaming wave;
 She stood Monadnoc’s head. (121-28)

Her transformation indicates the unity of the individual with Spirit that has been achieved through her conversation with the poet. It reflects poetry’s role in revealing the beauty of the universe. The correspondence between Spirit and nature that Emerson proposes in his essays is

confirmed through the Sphinx's transformation, and the poet's ability to perceive her beauty indicates his recognition of unity with Spirit and therefore his improvement due to poetry's effects. The Sphinx, too, is enhanced and restored by poetry (Morris, "Threshold Poem" 559). Her conversation with the poet has awakened and enlivened her from her drowsy, brooding state at the beginning of the poem. The poem ends with a presentation of the Sphinx as "the universal dame" speaking through "a thousand voices" (129-30). Once again, nature is seen symbolically through the Sphinx. That she speaks through a thousand voices suggests that multiple poets give her voice. This idea is further seen in her statement that "Who telleth one of my meanings, Is master of all I am" (131-32). This corresponds with Emerson's statement that one natural truth implies all others. Thus the Sphinx suggests that even partial poetic capability is enough for the creation of poetry and its transformative effects. Poetry, therefore, triumphs, despite the absence of the ideal Poet.

"Uriel" speaks similarly to the triumph of poetry. Uriel is initially presented as a good model for the Poet, but the negative effects of his poetry mean that he does not fully represent the redeeming Poet that Emerson calls for in his essays. The limitations that surround him in Emerson's poem illustrate the effects of circumstance on even ideal personalities. Still, though Uriel's fall emphasizes the impossibility of the Poet, the profound consequences of his speech nonetheless demonstrate the powerful effects of poetry itself.

Emerson draws heavily on literary tradition in "Uriel", and knowledge of this tradition allows us to better understand the poem. Emerson's Uriel with his "piercing eye" doubtless alludes to Milton's Uriel, the "sharpest sighted spirit in heaven" (Malpezzi 162). Critic Kevin Van Anglen explains the source text in *Paradise Lost*. Uriel is the angel who addresses Satan, who is disguised as a Cherub in order to cunningly determine the location of earth. He answers

the questions that Satan asks, deceived by his appearance (147). Van Anglen argues that his truthful response sets up the primary parallel between Milton and Emerson's Uriel, as one who will give a truthfully answer those who question him about the universe (148). Malpezzi discusses the resulting fall, noting the similar chaotic results of both Uriel's sentiment and the fall of Adam and Eve (165-66). Though the falls presented in "Uriel" and *Paradise Lost* differ in nature, both center around ideas of contrasting states of harmony and chaos. Malpezzi contrasts them, arguing that *Paradise Lost* presents a moment of change that results from action, while in Emerson's poem, Uriel's speech causes this change (169). The allusions to Milton function to characterize Uriel as a being who causes radical change through truth. The difference in how he does so, however, gives credibility to the power of language and poetry.

Uriel is presented as a poet through his remarkable perception. Reference to Milton's *Paradise Lost* suggests the superiority of Uriel's perception, as he is described as being "God's... eyes" and having "perfect sight" (3.649-50, 4.576)]. Emerson emphasizes Uriel's perception throughout the poem, especially in regards to his poetic capacity. He prefaces Uriel's pronouncement by describing that he has "a look that solved the sphere," suggesting that his look enabled him to perceive and comprehend his universe (4). "Solve" can clearly indicate that Uriel explains the sphere, comprehending the mythic world of which he is a part. "Solve" simultaneously refers to dissolving and effectively destroying. Emphasis on perception is seen again in the description of Uriel speaking "with piercing eye" (23). Piercing also suggests that Uriel is able to piece through "what seems" in order to best determine "what subsisteth." This distinction is set up early in the poem, Emerson presents young deities talking about "law of form, and metre just, / Orb, quintessence, and sunbeams, / What subsisteth, and what seems" (10). Furthermore, piercing suggests a cutting or penetration—some sort of damage. Although

Uriel may have the best perception, his perception is also what effectively “solves”, or dissolves, his place in his world, since his fellow angels are not ready to accept his insight as truth.

The disruptive results of Uriel’s pronouncement suggest that his limitations stem from circumstance, the nature of the world in which he lives. The “shudder” that “ran around the sky” after he speaks bears striking similarity to the “cold shudder[]” of earth as a result of the great mother’s question in “The Sphinx” (“Uriel” 24, “Sphinx” 60), indicating disharmony in the universe. This disruption is also seen in Uriel’s pronouncement of having “stirred the devils everywhere” (16). The positioning of devils in Paradise is necessarily contradictory and problematic, indicating that the harmony prior to Uriel’s pronouncement was “what seems”—illusion rather than truth. Uriel’s sentiment pierces through the illusion of harmony, as can be seen in the break that stems from the other god-like figures inability to recognize the sphere as Uriel does. They instead insist on clinging to linear forms such as the sunbeam they discussed, and “The stern old war-gods shook their heads; / The seraphs frowned from myrtle-beds;”, rejecting of Uriel’s sentiment (25-26). This rejection can be seen as a manifestation of the devils present in Paradise. “Stern old war-gods” suggests militancy regarding tradition and a prejudice against new insight or creative thought. Though portrayed as gods, these characters represent forces that hinder humanity from occupying its original relation to the universe. Their antagonistic relationship towards humans could allow them to be seen as devils. The positioning of the seraphs in myrtle-beds suggests that they too can be characterized as devilish agents. Malpezzi remarks that in *Paradise Lost*, Satan tempts Eve, he ‘directs’ her ‘beyond a row of myrtles’ (163). The allusive quality of Emerson’s work suggests that a similar devilish influence can be attributed to the seraphs.

The nature of language plays a central role in determining the devastating results of the poem. The “laws of form, and metre just” that the deities talk about at the beginning of the poem weigh heavily on the outcome of Uriel’s insight (10). “Laws of form” references Plato’s ideas regarding the world of forms, which influenced Emerson’s own idealism. The pairing of laws of form with meter associates poetry with the perfection of forms, evidencing the divine elevation of poetry and its [intended] role in the world. This pairing also allows us to read “law of form” as a reference not just to Platonic abstractions, but to poetry’s own formal aspects. This suggestion echoes Blasing’s idea that the formalities of poetry give it its power. These formalities give poetry a kindredness to Emerson’s ideal of perfection/truth, thus allowing poetry to reveal the truth that Emerson desires. However, rather than animating and inspiring, Uriel’s poetry functions more along the lines of Blasing’s death-saturated descriptions of language as fatal law. However, the distorted effects of language here could stem from Uriel’s presence in a mythical world. Emerson writes that “fate appears as vindicator in the world of mortals” (*Essays* 952). This corresponds to the language of “metre just” in the poem. Uriel’s position in the mythical realm of Paradise, among deities rather than mortals, could account for the seemingly unfair results. Despite Uriel’s pronouncement, “a forgetting wind / stole over the celestial kind,” suggesting their willful ignorance of the truth Uriel speaks (41-42). This willful ignorance of truth results in their fall into knowledge of existence because of their only partial recognition of the universe. Their initial philosophical conversation indicates their knowledge of existence and desire to understand it. Their prideful rejection of Uriel’s truth, however, shows that they do not recognize the unity of the universe. Because they reject his knowledge, they reject knowledge of being, and they can only ever be incomplete and fallen.

Uriel's relation to language also indicates his poetic capacity, and the results of his words demonstrate their poetic quality. Allusion to Milton initially indicates Uriel's great expressive capabilities. Milton presents him as "interpreter through highest Heav'n" [cite], a role that corresponds to the Poet's job of interpreting truth for society. In Emerson's poem, Uriel speaks "with low tones that decide" (13). This description echoes Uriel's role as interpreter, as he decides for the other deities the difference between "what subsisteth and what seems" (12). As a result of Uriel's words "The balance-beam of Fate was bent; / The bounds of good and ill were rent; / Strong Hades could not keep his own, / But all slid to confusion" (29-32). Witemeyer writes that the bending of Fate could represent a distortion, suggesting that the effects of Uriel's words are negative. Indeed, it "seems to the holy festival / The rash word boded ill to all" (27-28). However, given these deities' flawed perception, that the effects appear this way to them suggests that their reality is much less devastating. Critic Richard Hardin argues in this vein, suggesting that "bent" could also mean broken. That the "bounds of good and ill were rent" could suggest that the boundaries themselves are torn apart. Thus, Uriel's pronouncement of circularity is effected, and the opposition of good and ill is dissolved in favor of unity. The resulting confusion can then be seen to stem from the other deities' inability to recognize unity. The confusion thus applies not to the state of the world they occupy, but rather to the state of their own minds.

Paradoxically, though Uriel's companions are fallen, the poem focuses on the "lapse of Uriel" rather than that of his companions (3). This lapse can be seen not as a direct descent into evil, but rather as a lapse in poetic ability. The "sad self-knowledge, withering, fell / On the beauty of Uriel," evidencing his fall (33-34). Malpezzi reads this as a physical alteration of beauty as an allusion to "Milton's use of visible form to mirror inward reality" (167). This

theory, however, implies that Uriel falls into immorality, an idea that conflicts with his potential as a poet, his ability to speak the truth, and the beauty of poetry itself. Witemeyer offers the more useful interpretation that Uriel's "sad self-knowledge" results from his recognition "that he has no true place in the community of angels," and that this knowledge causes his fall (102). A key point in Emerson's characterization of the Poet is his ability to represent the mind of his generation. Uriel, being rejected by his companions, fails to represent the Poet in this regard. His fall, then, reflects his loss in ability to be the Poet rather than moral shortcomings. His resulting social status also differs substantially from the Poet represented in Emerson's essays. The results of Uriel's pronouncement also reflect the social relations of the Poet found in Emerson's essays. After his pronouncement, Uriel "Withdrew, that hour, into his cloud" (36). This corresponds to Emerson's description of the Poet who is "isolated by truth and by his art" ("Poet" 1181). However, Uriel can be seen to have more agency in his solitude than the figure of the Poet. Whereas isolation *happens* to the Poet, Uriel *chooses* to withdraw into his cloud as a result of the unpopularity of his truth. Uriel's solitude also deviates from that of the Poet, who will eventually draw people to himself through his poetry. Instead, Uriel is "doomed" either to "long gyration / In the sea of generation, / Or by knowledge grown too bright / To hit the nerve of feebler sight" (37-40). Though these alternatives indicate that Uriel will continue to be surrounded by creation and by truth, he is "doomed" by isolation and inaccessibility. "Gyration" implies circular motion, which reflects the circularity that Uriel expresses. Since the others reject this idea, it follows that Uriel will be alone in his circular movement. That his knowledge cannot "hit the nerve of feebler sight" suggests that the other deities will never be able to recognize the truth of his words. Thus, he cannot fulfill the role of the Poet, whom Emerson characterizes as necessarily engaged with society through drawing others with the truth of his ideas.

Despite Uriel's failure to be the Poet, the end of the poem demonstrates the angels' inability to totally ignore his sentiment, demonstrating that the power of poetry does not rely on the realization of the ideal Poet. Malpezzi notes that though Uriel withdraws, he is not "silenced." Instead, "his words continue to resound" in the heavens (170). Although the angels willfully ignore the truth of Uriel's statement, their ignorance does not change reality. Instead, they keep the truth "secret... / If in ashes the fire-seed slept" (43-44). Malpezzi argues that this represents the angels' inability to "extinguish the significance" of Uriel's sentiment, despite their willful ignorance. He interprets the ashes as the angels' willful ignorance and forgetfulness, noting that "the flame of knowledge can be rekindled" (168-69). This demonstrates that the angels have no control over truth itself. This corresponds to Emerson's view of poetry as a fact of the universe [go back to theory]. Furthermore, the angels cannot fully resist the truth-revealing effects of poetry. Their forgetfulness and ignorance is not as strong as the truth they repress. Instead, "now and then, truth-speaking things / Shamed the angels' veiling wings" (45-46). This shame corresponds with the idea presented by the poet in "The Sphinx" that pride caused the angels' fall, and shame restores them. In "Uriel," their shame results in their inability to keep the truth veiled. Furthermore, their partial, temporary restoration from "truth-speaking things" confirms Emerson's idea of the ability of poetry to restore humanity to its original position in the universe. "Truth-speaking things" can be seen as poets, though Emerson's emphasis on temporality in the same line suggests that they are not the Poet. Still, these lines set a precedent for desiring the appearance of the Poet as one who could permanently shame the angels and fully restore them.

Thought "The Sphinx" and "Uriel" suggest the impossibility of Emerson's ideal Poet, they nonetheless complement his poetic theory. Notably, the progression of each poem seems to

run counter to the other. “The Sphinx” begins with desire for the ideal Poet, but the dialectic poetic dialog demonstrates that his appearance is not necessary for the creation of powerful and revelatory poetry. “Uriel” begins with poetry itself, spoken by a poet with potential to be the ideal Poet, but who is limited by circumstance. The catastrophic result hints at desire for the ideal Poet whose message will have a restorative impact. This circularity of the two poems together illustrates the limitations of circumstance that prevent the appearance of the ideal Poet while instilling faith in the power of poetry and hope for the ideal Poet. This faith and hope, much more than expectancy of the reality of the Poet’s appearance, lies at the heart of Emerson’s poetic theories.

Though his essays and poetry lay out only theoretical or mythological criteria for the ideal Poet, Emerson’s work had very tangible effects on American poetry. Emily Dickinson was one of the first to be influenced by his work, avidly reading his work in the 1840s and throughout the rest of her life (Tufariello 177). Her poetry exemplifies Emerson’s view that the poet’s perception should allow the familiar world to be seen in a new way (177). She confirms Emerson’s viewpoint that poets should be explorers and seekers and adheres to the idea he once expressed that “Every word was once a poem,” demonstrating the representative capacity of language by “appropriating, interrogating, testing and redefining” her own words (181-82). Still, Dickinson doubted Emerson’s idea of correspondence between language and the natural world (181). For her, words themselves were the “gems” that Emerson saw in the natural world and that words reflected (178). In addition, she could not represent Emerson’s masculine conception of the Poet because of her gender, though critic Catherine Tufariello suggests that Emerson would have praised her work, had she actually sent it to him (174-76). Ultimately, though, Dickinson’s reluctance to have others view her work constitutes a very significant limitation on

the degree to which Emerson's influence can be seen. Whereas Emerson presented the ideal Poet as a public figure whose work would inform and restore all of humanity, almost all of Dickinson's poetry remained unpublished until after her death. Thus, though she found Emerson's ideas inspirational, Dickinson could not agree the public role he advocated for the Poet.

Walt Whitman fulfilled Emerson's vision of the ideal Poet most immediately and most thoroughly. He once aspired to the career of a lecturer, but he switched his focus to answering Emerson's call for a great American poet after reading "The Poet" (Baym, "Whitman" 2190). Whitman's *Preface* to his 1855 publication of *Leaves of Grass* paraphrases many ideals for the Poet found in Emerson's work, and Whitman credited Emerson "with bringing him from a simmer to a full creative boil" (Tufariello 166-67). In key moments of "Song of Myself," he demonstrates in his poetry many of the poetic ideals found in Emerson's essays (169). He describes himself as a "lover" of earth, experiencing for himself the closeness to the natural world that Emerson advocates (Whitman 445). He also presents a vision of unity with the Soul, or Spirit, central to Emerson's thought, as when he describes the union of self and Soul in "Song of Myself":

"I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,
How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript
heart,
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet." (87-90)

These descriptions suggests a very intimate relationship between himself and Spirit in nature. The image of the Spirit stretching from his beard to his feet to envelop him suggests that he is totally encompassed by this union. Whitman's poem so powerfully expressed the themes that

Emerson called for that Emerson himself praised Whitman's poetry as "the most extraordinary piece of wit & wisdom that America has yet contributed" (Emerson, Letter 1251).

Though Whitman distinctly tried to embody Emerson's Poet, Emerson wrote in a 1859 journal entry, "This is my boast that I have no school & no follower. I should account it a measure of the impurity of insight, if it did not create independence" (qtd. in Tufariello 162). This journal entry displays the centrality of self-reliance to any would-be Poet, and Whitman demonstrated his independence from the tradition Emerson had created. The form of his verse is one area in which Whitman's work differed from Emerson's poetic theory. Emerson emphasized meter and regular form as a crucial part of the best poetry. Whitman, however, wrote in free verse. Furthermore, the both the source and impact of the beauty Whitman discovers differ substantially from Emerson's theories. Though both envision a unity of the individual with Spirit, Emerson's union with Spirit occurs *through* nature. Though Whitman recognizes that this union is aided by being present *in* nature, he pulls the soul back into the human body (Tufariello 174-75). Additionally, as is apparent from the above lines depicting his union with Spirit, his work contains an eroticism that Emerson's entirely lacks. This eroticism accounts for a deviation from the ascetic lifestyle that Emerson advocates in his work, as Whitman views himself perpetually as "clean and pure" (169). Furthermore, Whitman's unity with Spirit led him to experience a sense of identity with all of humanity (173). This oneness is expressed through multiple stanzas in which Whitman expresses himself through the identity of others (170). This kinship with humanity contrasts with Emerson's claim that the Poet becomes isolated because of his abilities, or only inspires others from a distance. Whitman openly displayed this independence from Emerson's ideas, stating he had no interest in becoming "any man's mere follower" (162). Yet Whitman's insistence on his own personal experience of the unity of the

world and the ability of that experience to shape his writing demonstrates Emerson's lasting legacy in shaping American poetry.

Emerson's long-term impact can be seen through a number of twentieth and twenty-first century poets' responses to Transcendentalism (Morris, "Poetry" 671). This response is particularly apparent in the work of Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost, though it appears in the poems of several others such as John Ashberry, William Carlos Williams, and Hart Crane. Even Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, who resisted many of the key tenets of Transcendentalism, display signs of Emerson's influence, and the modernist periodical *The Dial* "existed self-consciously as the descendent" of the literary magazine Emerson once edited (672). Especially important to Modernism and its focus on poetry was the idea of the "supreme importance" of poetry to literature that Emerson displayed in his poetic theory (673). An interest in nature is also maintained in modern and postmodern poetry that, reflecting Emerson, results in the confirmation of the self through connection with nature, thematically seen in the works of the poets listed above in addition to others such as Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder (675-76). The Beat Generation poets also figure into the line of Emerson's poetic descendants through their devotion to Walt Whitman. The long-lasting and widespread impact of Emerson's poetic theory demonstrates its centrality to American poetry. Though Emerson might argue that we are still awaiting the appearance of his ideal Poet, one cannot doubt the role the Poet has played in the emergence of a rich American literary tradition.

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