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“ON THE BRINK OF THE WATERS OF LIFE AND TRUTH, WE ARE MISERABLY  
DYING”:

RALPH WALDO EMERSON AS A PREDECESSOR TO DECONSTRUCTION AND  
POSTMODERNISM

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to Winslow the cat whom intrinsically exudes a stubbornness, tenaciousness, and persistence in acquiring food and attention which are not unlike the characteristics necessary for writing a thesis.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to acknowledge and thank my parents James Deery and Denise Deery for their support and for always fostering my passions no matter how insane or adventurous the endeavor. I would like to acknowledge my sister Amanda for her patience with a younger brother who once thought books were boring. I would like to acknowledge my brother Tim for always being the archetypal example of an intelligent, respectful, and genuine gentleman. Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank Katie Kilgore, whose support and sacrifice has always acted as a sense of calm and comfort, even during the most tumultuous and stressful times.

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MICHAEL A. DEERY

ABSTRACT

Between his pivotal essays “Nature” in 1836 and “The Poet” in 1844, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s increasingly negative and distrustful view of language can best be described as a precursor to deconstruction and postmodernism. Contemporary critics are too quick to dismiss a deconstructionist Emerson. There is evidence within his major essays that Emerson’s understanding of language not only leads him to public and private displays of pessimism, but also to feelings of internal solipsism, agnosticism, and epistemological anxiety. Emerson demanded that mankind should utilize nature and aesthetics to experience the sublime and an immediate and original relationship with God. Yet, Emerson’s essays evidence the idea that art and language itself futilely failed in bringing about an original relationship with God. By the time he wrote “The Poet,” Emerson officially succumbed to the belief that truth and God were ultimately unattainable, a belief that 20<sup>th</sup> century literary criticism defines as deconstructionist and postmodern.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Critical thought regarding Ralph Waldo Emerson has taken multiple paths since he wrote his groundbreaking and acclaimed orations, essays, and poems in antebellum America. Many critics including Lawrence Buell and Len Gougeon have led the scholastic effort toward understanding Emerson's influences and theories. Their criticism on the biological and theoretical life of Emerson has guided the way for scholars and critics to discuss Emerson's ideas concerning nature and art as well as nature and art's inherent ties to human language. Too often, however, these critics take Emerson's ideas out of context and fail to notice pivotal moments when he drastically amended his theories. Their criticism fails to create a readable Emerson that aligns the evolution of his theory with historical accuracy.

Conclusively, it serves academic scholarship better when one views Emerson as a living, breathing human being who developed intellectually through action and reaction, a person whose theories fluctuate and are anything but absolute. Emerson yearned for a



goal that he could not quite reach and preached a theory that he could not wholeheartedly support. Due to his developing understanding of subjective interpretation, Emerson began to display solipsistic characteristics, or see that the “self is the only object of true knowledge” (“Solipsism”). He grew to believe that God was unknowable, and ultimately, his writings emit pessimism because of his evolving, agnostic thoughts.

Emerson arrived at the notion “that the existence of anything beyond or behind material phenomena is unknown and (so far as can be judged) unknowable,” and that “a First Cause and an unseen world are subjects of which we know nothing” (“Agnostic”). Emerson’s solipsism combined with his distrust of language to deconstruct his transcendental theory. He eventually exuded agnostic characteristics as his intense optimism waned. By 1844, his theory of language, though predating postmodernism, can best be understood as an anticipatory discourse of what would, more than a century later, come to be known as deconstruction.

Emerson’s epistemological skepticism and agnosticism are in fact closer to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche in the 1880’s than the poetry of Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman in the latter 1840s and 1850’s. Emerson’s understanding of language inherently tied him not only to Nietzsche, but to the postmodern understanding of deconstruction in the twentieth century as well. His maturing understanding of language anticipates what would be called the deconstructionist movement in critical theory, specifically the scholarship of Jacques Derrida. Though he could never be misconstrued for a postmodernist, Emerson’s increasing skepticism towards language’s ability to ascertain truth (in a world he understood to be structured by and dependent upon

language) aligns him with the postmodern movement and installs his thought as a precursory source for deconstruction.

One of Emerson's foremost critics, Lawrence Buell, dismisses the deconstructive tendencies in Emerson's thoughts. In fact, not a single critic fully develops an academic conversation of a deconstructionist Emerson. Buell never y engages in a deconstructionist reading of Emerson, though he flirts with the idea that Emerson ultimately distrusts language and experiences solipsistic thoughts. In his critical biography, Buell traces Emerson's intellectual evolution and captures a critical understanding of his life. However, he deemphasizes important evidence within Emerson's essays as he argues Emerson only began showing signs of pessimism in "Experience." Buell sees that Emerson ultimately retains the "belief in a purposeful cosmos" that mankind could pursue and attain through various transcendental mediums (Buell 131). He attributes Emerson's temporary pessimism to personal tragedies in his life, but underestimates this pessimism and its origins in Emerson's earlier essays. He omits evidence that proves Emerson came to the realization that his theories of nature, art, and mankind itself were linguistic constructs of the human mind. Therefore, in Emerson's mind, God or this "purposeful cosmos" remained beyond the reach of human cognitive capability.

Len Gougeon, like Buell, presents a broad biographical exegesis, yet his interpretation focuses on Emerson's spiritual, psychological, and intellectual growth. He sees that "Emerson's intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and artistic development reached a fulfillment that was reflected in his remarkable productivity" (Gougeon 104), though, he completely ignores all signs of Emerson's increasingly pessimistic and agnostic attitude.

Though Emerson's philosophy seemingly peaked between 1836 and 1844, it was far from infallible as a theory, as he never found a true "road to truth" (Emerson, "Nature" 3).

Buell and Gougeon misinterpret Emerson when they argue that Emerson continually believed in a "road to truth," as Emerson would come to see that both nature and art are innately crippled due to their linguistic roots. Both critics open interpretational windows as they correctly discern and delineate Emerson's initial formulation that the creative powers of the human mind are capable of circumventing an inefficient human language. Yet, they ignore evidence that Emerson's transcendental philosophy and his theory of God become negated due to his eventual understanding of art and nature as products of human language. Despite the existing biographical and theoretical evidence, Buell and Gougeon inaccurately dismiss any possible reading of Emerson's evolving understanding of language as postmodern and particularly deconstructionist.

Literary critics Robert Kern, Eric Wilson, and Joseph Kronick also advance an understanding of Emerson's developing notions on nature and art. They all correctly deduce that art and nature are inherently tied to the language of man, yet additional criticism can account for unvoiced evidence. Few critics come close to deciphering Emerson's notion of oral and written language as the basis of human understanding. They do not chronologically map how Emerson comes to this notion, nor do they credit this theoretical change as an anticipation of deconstruction or a precursor to postmodernism. A new, analytical approach can be applied to Emerson. There is the need for a critical strategy that dissects his writings and orations as evolutionary stages in

his theories and sees his texts as products of a person who lived, breathed, and faced life tragedies.

Robert Kern and Eric Wilson decipher Emerson's writings as inherently involved with the idea of oral and written language, yet they ignore his biographical life as well as the possibility that Emerson modified his theories between "Nature" and "The Poet."

Kern correctly views Emerson's ideas of nature and the world as being based in language, while Wilson admirably argues that Emerson's idea of nature, like language itself, was innately chaotic. Both Kern and Wilson argue that Emerson's ideas on the sublime were undermined by human language and that man's transcendence through nature was seemingly negated by the linguistic foundation of human knowledge. Yet, they also see that Emerson finds redemption through his aesthetics and they fail to recognize the importance of this display of pessimism in his early essays.

An analysis of Emerson's earliest essays and theory of language through the lens of deconstruction represents an addendum to the academic conversation. When viewing Emerson as an early deconstructionist, his theories are interpreted with historical accuracy. A deconstructionist reading of his work accounts for a dialectical and self-contradicting Emerson as it maps and charts the nuanced evolution of his theories and his life. Emerson naturally progressed into the explicit pessimism that exists in "Experience." He did not abruptly erupt in a public display of pessimism as the current academic conversation suggests. As Emerson matured as a man, a lecturer, and a theorist, he became skeptical of mankind's ability to transcend to God. Seeing Emerson only as an optimist, who is static in his thoughts and theories, represents a partial reading of his work.

Notable critic Joseph Kronick comes closest to positing Emerson as a pessimist and a precursor of deconstruction as evidenced by his views that Emerson ultimately distrusts both the oral and written languages of humans. Yet, Kronick never pinpoints the exact time-line of this distrust, nor demarcates the peaks and valleys of Emerson's theories in the early essays. In a similar manner to other Emersonian critics, he sees Emerson as displaying pessimistic tendencies only in his essay "Experience." In truth, Emerson displayed doubts toward language and human knowledge as early as "Nature," as "the corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language" (15). Emerson did not originally consider language in the manner of a deconstructionist or a postmodernist, but came to this understanding through an evolving, dialectical thought process.

With the commencement of "Nature" in 1836, Emerson startled his audiences with his notorious ideas on the human ability to attain truth or specifically the knowledge one gains when one has an original relationship with God. When he released unto the world this intoxicating idea that man could have a direct and primary relationship with God, Emerson commenced a rise to popularity (or notoriety) that was never seen before. "Nature" can be discerned as the first of many didactic demands made on nineteenth-century America to obtain a personal relationship with God through the natural world. Emerson's oratorical and compositional attacks were meant to jar his audience into intellectual and spiritual self-reliance, yet even then he could not ignore his own doubts that a human could have an original relationship with God. This premonition of mistrust toward language exists even in one of his most famous essays.

In "Nature," Emerson believed that man had strayed too far from the language of nature, which was far superior to the modern language of the nineteenth-century

American. The language of nature is an “emblematic” language, a “picturesque language” that “is at once a commanding certificate that he who employs it, is a man in alliance with truth and God” (Emerson, “Nature” 16, 15). Emerson called for his fellow citizens to return to the language of nature or the language of the “NOT ME” through “emblematic” language, because doing so would allow them to avoid the vulnerabilities present in the contemporary language of antebellum America. By 1844, however, he would come to an understanding of the human linguistic code that includes the language of nature or this “emblematic” language. Emerson would eventually see for himself that his theories of nature, art, and transcendence depended upon the unavailing, human linguistic code for their symbolic importance and value.

Though his foundational treatise on nature in his essay “Nature” was far from static, Emerson ostensibly offered his theory that the human component of the world or the “ME” could attain truth about the universe or an original relationship with God through all that is not human, or the “NOT ME.” Nature represented the majestic link between mankind and God; as such it was vitally important to his theory of a human’s transcendence to truth or an original relationship with that God. Emerson erects his idea of nature as the other or “NOT ME,” yet it is essentially intangible. As nature becomes equivalent to language and as his understanding of language (and its ties to the human conception of reality) complicates, Emerson loses his faith in the existence of a reliable transcendental route to truth.

Emerson’s orations and essays represented a dialectical debate between himself and his rapidly-growing audience, an audience that did not fully understand him. Yet, his writings also represented dialectic, as Emerson had to convince himself of his own

transcendental declarations because of his immense mistrust of language. Between 1836 and 1844, his essays were demands that he and his fellow Americans should search for “an original relation to the universe” (Emerson, “Nature” 3). In his own developing view, however, Emerson’s lecturing audience failed to unite behind his theories of transcendence and self-reliance because of the average American’s inability to fully fathom his language.

In his essays “The American Scholar,” “The Divinity School Address,” and “Self-Reliance,” Emerson’s attacking prose blatantly and heretically questioned accepted doctrine and convention. In his mind, however, his orations and essays failed to spark the populace into seeking an original relationship with the universe. Though he desired such a relationship, the failure of the language of nature (and art) is directly correlated to his own failings with language as an orator. Emerson himself saw that he was unable to unite a nineteenth-century New England audience. As Bonnie Carr O’Neill argues, Emerson’s audience did not understand his thoughts as he himself had gathered and interpreted them. Emerson’s own understanding of his audience’s incomprehension, his resignation that “The Poet” did not exist, and his budding understanding of art as a linguistic construct would combine with his solipsism in causing his turn towards agnosticism in 1844.

Though Emerson experienced popularity over his literature and lecturing, the inability of the American audience to understand him would weigh heavily on his theories. In time, he saw that his call for the representative American, “The American Scholar,” or “The Poet” officially became a futile endeavor. Emerson also saw that the human language which he used to categorize knowledge and to relate his understanding

of the world to his audience was an inefficient medium. His readers or listeners could not have an original relationship with God because neither could Emerson himself. The possibilities of an immediate relationship with the deity of the universe dissolved because of human language's inability to describe it, define it, and essentially allow for its existence.

His chastisement of Christianity in "The Divinity School Address" on July 15, 1838 demarcated Emerson's most overt attack on the American populace's tendency to conform to a conventional, mediated relationship with God. With this speech, he commenced his attempts to bring back his American audience to self-reliance and an unmediated relationship with God by arguing that every man and woman could connect with God in the same manner as Jesus Christ. Yet, Emerson would never find a true route to transcendental truth. As Emerson came to consider that art was a linguistic edifice produced by humans, he would disavow all thoughts that nature and art were truly transcendental pathways to God. Consequently, he would eventually question mankind's ability to attain a transcendental truth about God or the universe that was not tainted by linguistic limitations.

Between the essays "Art" (1841) and "The Poet" (1844), Emerson began to see nature as a part and product of human cognition. It is at this time that he believes that "nature appears to us one with art" (Emerson, "Art" 190). This emerging concept caused him to stray from his earlier stance that humans could only attain the beauty of the world or the truth about God through a sublime exchange with the natural world or "NOT ME." As he attempted to unite man with God through a reconnection with the language of nature, he discovered that human knowledge could not exist without the essential



susceptibilities and vulnerabilities present within human language. He would increasingly begin to believe that nature, art, and the language of nature originated in human language and the human mind. Thus, God or any deity that lay beyond human language could never be cognitively comprehended.

Emerson's distrust of the language in his own essays and orations, in concert with his audience's incomprehension of his language, caused him to abandon his own optimism and youthful innocence. Emerson could not resolve such problems as subjective interpretation and opaque, ossified language. The subjectivity of discursive interpretation and the opacity of language became irresolvable issues for Emerson, as he fought through the arising revelations that truth and God were forever masked by the vulnerable and venal linguistic medium humans must use to locate them.

Emerson's developing thoughts on language caused him to question the human notion of reality, and his inconclusiveness caused him an epistemological and agnostic dilemma. He initially thought that nature and art could bring about sublime experiences. Yet, he would see the power of language as ultimately deceiving and conclude that there were innate constraints on the human capabilities to categorize and communicate information. He eventually became solipsistic when he saw that man could mimetically create life through his own mind and that truth itself was subjectively categorized and interpreted through a corrupt and inefficient linguistic system. Although he would never completely stray from his theistic belief in God, Emerson came to accept that the only knowledge to be found was the truth that he and other humans may never have a transcendental knowledge of truth or God.

## CHAPTER II

### EMERSON'S GOD

Explicating Ralph Waldo Emerson's theological and spiritual foundation allows for a better understanding of his theories of nature and art. Emerson certainly believed that Something or Someone created the universe. With his influential essays "Nature" (1836), "Art" (1841), and "The Poet" (1844), he strove for reliable routes to knowledge of the universe's author. He believed that he could have an original relationship with God and he scoured for ways to find one. During a transitional period from 1836 to 1841, he thought of art, specifically Romantic poetry and orations, as his transcendent medium to God. This transitional period significantly altered Emerson's notions that one could attain knowledge of and ascend to the authorial influence of the universe.

Emerson's own God was not exactly monotheistic or pantheistic, but Emerson's own manipulation of manifold, linguistic manifestations of God. As he attempted to define the invisible, he developed his own vocabulary in defining the supreme deity of the universe. He refers to this deity as "God," "One," the "Original Cause," the

“Universal Being,” the “Supreme Being,” and the “Creator,” amongst countless others over the course of his lifetime (Hallengren 304). He develops his own idiosyncratic concept of faith based off of his own studies and experiences. Emerson’s idea of God and faith certainly derives from Christian origins, but he designs and defines his own faith for himself.

Emerson would not allow his faith to be categorized for him. His faith and theory of God would be influenced by Unitarianism, as his father was a Unitarian minister and the New England Unitarian movement occurred during his adulthood. He aligned himself with the liberal Christian doctrine of Unitarianism over the strict creed of Calvinism, but he would not be categorized by any sect of Christianity. As quoted in a journal entry by Gougeon in 1831, “In the bible [sic] you are not directed to be a Unitarian or a Calvinist or an Episcopalian [...] I am God’s child” (Gougeon 88). In Emerson’s mind, “Historical Christianity has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion” because it “shows God out of me” and its congregants act “as if God were dead” (Emerson, “Divinity” 58, 59). On the contrary, Emerson believed that God was accessible. The relation of “God to the soul is not a vaunting, overpowering, excluding sanctity, but a sweet, natural goodness, a goodness like thine and mine” (Emerson, “Divinity” 59).

Emerson always located this author of the universe in its natural designs, necessitating that humans strive upward. He saw that “nature has a higher end...namely, ascension, or, the passage of the soul into higher forms,” and there exists “within the form of every creature [...] a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form” (Emerson, “Poet” 206, 205). Emerson followed the notion that humans would always attempt to

define their own existence and the origin of all humanity. He believed it was an innate aspect of the human experience that “our intellect searches out the absolute order of things as they stand in the mind of God” (Emerson, “Nature” 11). He always thought that humans should attempt to reach the center of the universe, to find the truth about God, and to know the purpose of mankind. He would, however, often revise his belief in mankind’s transcendental capabilities.

Emerson himself saw God as representing many different discourses as he attempted to define the divine for himself and for a largely diverse oratorical and literary audience. As Bonnie Carr O’Neill writes, “in the mid- to late 1830s he was gaining a reputation for pantheism, mysticism, and occultism” (755). Along with some aspects of Unitarianism, Emerson constantly studied and preached an amalgamation of methods by which he could describe and define the universe and its author for himself and his audiences.

Emerson’s uniting aim was to inspire a belief in all Americans that they could each have an original relationship with the supreme deity of the universe. As stated, this supreme deity or God was categorized by Emerson under many names: “Law, Mind, Soul, Beauty, Truth, Goodness; Creator, Substance, Form; the Infinite, the One---and the list could be continued forever” (Hudnut 48). Though, this “transcendental world, according to Emerson, is simply the sum—and the source—of all that appears in the natural and human worlds” (Hudnut 47). He would attempt to use the natural and human worlds to reach God. Emerson did not leave open answers on the table, but saw that mind and matter were connected through “Nature” and “Spirit,” which were immediate emanations of God or the creative influence that authored the universe.

As he exhausted all available resources in attempting to reach transcendental truth, Emerson exhausted his vocabulary in defining the grand narrator of the universe. As Emerson is a disciple of Platonism and NeoPlatonism, it is beneficial to examine Emerson's theology after he denounced the cloth and Christianity. Plato's famous Great Chain of Being provides the specific vocabulary needed when describing Emerson's transcendental theory. For Emerson (and many others), God or the "Idea" was the source of the "Form" of nature (Emerson, "Art" 188). The "Forms" of nature represent the recipe for the ingredients of the universe in the mind of God. For Emerson, as for Plato, the forms represent the intermediate realm between nature (including humans) and the universe's creator. Initially, Emerson believed that the "Form" could be tapped through sublime natural experiences. However, Emerson would eventually embrace Neoplatonic thought in his theories, causing poetry to usurp nature as his transcendental medium of choice.

To Emerson, the natural world is formed at the behest of God, and humans attain knowledge through that sensual and phenomenal world. Mankind's knowledge of truth came through the language of nature. In his mind, the language of nature is representative of the processes, elements, or components of the natural world and it brings mankind into union with "Spirit." Emerson sees that "it is not only words that are emblematic; it is things with are emblematic. Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact" and that spiritual fact was necessarily a truth about God (Emerson, "Nature" 13). Emerson etymologically traced words back to their linguistic roots as he argued that metonymic words had a physical and "emblematic" connection to universal ideas.

Metonymic words were akin to the language of nature because they contain “sources for him” that “lie in the elements and sounds of the natural world” and they “expressed the real properties of things” (Kern 41). Metonyms “express a moral or an intellectual fact” (Nature 13). These words “are borrowed from some material appearance,” they are “sensible things” now “appropriated to spiritual nature” (Emerson, “Nature” 13). He argues, “We say the *heart* to express emotion, the *head* to denote thought,” and an “enraged man is a lion, a cunning man is a fox, a firm man is a rock, a learned man is a torch” (“Nature” 13). These words are inherently connected to nature, but also “emblematic” of an idea. This “emblematic” and etymological relationship between language and nature initially allows Emerson himself to believe in his transcendental theory.

Emerson feels that the language of nature could be captured through metonymic language, as “the etymologist finds the deadest word to have once been a brilliant picture” (“Poet” 205). Yet, the “old words are perverted to stand for things which are not; a paper currency is employed, when there is no bullion in the vaults. In due time, fraud is manifest, and words lose all power to stimulate the understanding or the affections” (Emerson, “Nature” 15). In “Nature,” Emerson describes how the language of nature devolves into what he later refers to as “fossil poetry” (“Poet” 205). The language of nature has become fossilized in antebellum America and loses its “currency,” as “the origin of most of our words is forgotten” (Emerson, “Poet” 205).

As human language depreciated, metonymic words were no longer sufficient as they began to represent “trite rhetoric” instead of “universal signs” (Emerson, “Poet” 211). Mankind lost the etymological connection of metonymical language and became

the mere “archives of history” or “a sort of tomb of the muses” (Emerson, “Poet” 205). Emerson, however, began to see that poets and orators could “pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things,” as he saw that artistic “genius is the activity which repairs the decays of things” (“Nature” 15; “Poet” 206). Poetry can recapture the natural and “emblematic” language of metonyms, as “the poet animates nature with his own thoughts” and “unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene” (Emerson, “Nature” 26; “Poet” 211).

Emerson believes humans can regain contact with “Reason” or the “universal soul” through the “emblematic” language of poetry, because “it is the working of the Original Cause through the instruments he has already made” (Emerson, “Nature” 11). “Reason” represents his understanding of the truth about the universe, the knowledge of God humans could attain through the natural world (Emerson, “Nature” 13, 18). If a man or woman returns to the language of nature through the “emblematic” language of poetry, then, he or she is utilizing “Reason” and bypassing “Understanding” (Emerson, “Divinity” 57), which he saw as the antithesis of truth. Truth, for Emerson, is not empirically documented factuality, but an unclassifiable transcendental reality in which God is present and the purpose of mankind is immediately and easily understood. Art, Emerson hoped, could bring mankind back into alliance with truth.

Emerson began to see that art could capture the language of nature through “emblematic” representation and the reanimation of nature. To Emerson, “poetry will revive and lead in a new age” and “will restore to us the simplest states of the mind” (“American” 37; “Art” 189). Art can excavate the language of nature” because, in Emerson’s mind, it “should produce the impression to that made by natural objects”

(Emerson, "Art" 189). A human utilizing "emblematic" language was immediately following the laws of what Emerson called "Reason." Once this person gained "liberation from the dominance of the Understanding" through the language of nature or "emblematic" language, that person is in the presence of transcendental truth (Gougeon 137). Thus, in "Nature" in 1836, he offered his desire for "a return to a greater concreteness, a proliferation of natural objects that restores language to the material substantiality which had partially been lost" (Hallengren 257). He would publicly preach that this return to the language of nature through "emblematic language" would guide mankind back to God.

Between "Nature" (1836) and "The Poet" (1844), Emerson began to value art as the true transcendental path to the spiritual world. Art brought one closer to God, though it was not by means of "methodical ratiocination, but its conventional opposite, intuitive grasp of Truth" (Buell 117). He came to see the poet as a prophetic figure with his pivotal essay "Divinity School Address." Emerson saw Jesus as "The Poet" because "the idioms of his language" and "the figures of his rhetoric" represented the language of nature before it became fossilized by human corruption ("Divinity" 57). In a similar manner, Emerson thought that art, specifically the oratory and Romantic poetry, could become the galvanizing force for the spiritual and sensual realms by recapturing the essence of the language of nature. His thoughts were dominated by the idea that art was as the transcendental conduit and "The Poet" was a prophetic figure.

Emerson came to focus on art as the true route to nature's language. He would come to believe that human language could be elevated through poetry or oratory and thus transcend human and linguistic limitations. Emerson yearned for the quintessential



poet who could return “language to” a “primordial intercourse with nature” and steer it away from the “fossil poetry” of his present day language (Buell 119). His desire for a poet “not to fix language, but to unfix it” is a direct commentary on the ossified state of language (Buell 119). The poet would “unfix” the fossilized, human language and re-attach “things to nature and the Whole” through the “emblematic” language of poetry (Emerson, “Poet” 204). It was Emerson’s dogmatic Neoplatonic belief that the divine was connected with those who mimic the divine that allowed for his initial optimism that transcendental truth could be reached.

The truly representative “Poet” universally states that art “is in me and must go forth of me,” because his “art is the path of the creator to his work” (“Poet” 213). This “Poet” was considered by Emerson to be “the man of beauty” and “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 impart” (Emerson, “Poet” 198). He was captivated by the idea of the representative poet as early as “Nature,” but by the time of his essay “The Poet,” he was desperate for him. He would place all his hope that “The Poet” could return mankind to the time when “every word was once a poem” and to the “poetry” that “was written all before time was” (Emerson, “Poet” 204, 199).

Artistic endeavors such as poetry and orations were assumed to be natural because Emerson deduced that the mimicry of the divine was paying homage to the divine. He believed that nature is beautiful and that “the creation of beauty is Art” (Emerson, “Nature” 12). If the universe, earth, and mankind were God’s artwork, then Emerson believed that the artwork of mankind could spark a more sublime experience than the

relationship of mankind and nature. In essence, “A work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world. It is the result or expression of nature, in miniature” (Emerson, “Nature” 12). Yet, there existed an inevitable dilemma as Emerson never truly developed a definitive semantic difference between the “emblematic” language of poetry, orations, or nature and the “fossil poetry” of his present-day language.

Emerson’s faith in God’s presence in man kept his hope alive that man could gain access to the language of nature through art and poetry. The artistic process of man was natural because it completely mimicked the creation of the universe and naturally explicated the relationship between God’s forms and the universe. The poet’s “speech is thunder, his thought is law, and his words are universally intelligible as the plants and animals,” and all those who create art are “thus liberating gods” (Emerson, “Poet” 207-8, 209). Art and language were thought to be direct emanations of God, yet Emerson would come to question and reevaluate his own understanding of the transcendental capabilities of humans and human language. Emerson himself would come to understand that the limits of human language caused his call for “The Poet” to go unmet, his attempts at grasping meaning to go fruitless, and his orations to fall on deaf ears.

Only after the “Divinity School Address,” “Self-Reliance,” and “The American Scholar” does Emerson evolve his theory of nature from something that exists exterior to the mind of mankind. He would eventually conclude that the “NOT ME” was inherently part of the “ME,” and that nature was merely a linguistic form of classification, an entity that developed through the human intellect. In these lectures as well as in “Nature” preceding them in 1836, Emerson vigorously declared that humans could have an original

relationship with God. His theory relied on artistic endeavors as his conduits to truth or knowledge concerning the world's creation.

Emerson had an understanding of reality that was rooted in language. He had yet to see the full limitations and vulnerabilities of language, which would become evident to him through the failures of his orations, the life-making abilities of art, and the absence of "The Poet." Emerson thought that man could circumvent the ossified language of antebellum America through the natural language of metonym and eventually through the "emblematic" language art. He embraced art, including both spoken word (orations) and written word (Romantic poetry), and argued for the naturalness of Neoplatonism the relationship between art, nature, and emblems. Art created life and nature itself was a metaphor.

"Emblem" is a difficult term to pin down for Emerson. He used the term as a more efficient way of describing the relationship between God and the natural world. Yet, he lambasted its problematic characteristics as early as 1836 in "Nature," and he continued to lambaste it through "The Poet" in 1844. Emerson would never be able to escape the notion that "emblematic" language came from the same origins as "fossil poetry." This internal argument concerning human language complicated when he turned to art for transcendence. The focus on aesthetics as the route to truth caused Emerson to see the murky depths of the human linguistic code. As he increasingly saw nature as a linguistic creation, viewed audiences that misunderstood him, and understood art as an inefficient transcendental medium, Emerson resigned himself to the notion that emblems themselves were corrupt. Emblems were themselves bred out of the language of humans. Emerson began to question the viability of knowledge that exists outside of the human

mind. He would begin to believe that nature, “Spirit,” and God were largely subjective terms, his attempts to define the indefinable. Consequently, his essays and theories would exude characteristics of solipsism and agnosticism.

As Emerson saw that human language was unreliable and that mankind’s understanding of reality was encompassed in human language, he experienced epistemological doubts. In his mind, the grand narrative of life ultimately became fallible and the grand narrator of life became unreachable. Emerson succumbed to the belief that “the emblem of the state of man” was symbolized through the metaphor of “the fate of the poor shepherd, who, blinded and lost in the snow-storm, perishes in a drift within a few feet of his cottage door” (Emerson, “Poet” 210). Though mankind might be surrounded by a natural world that universally indicates a supreme deity, humans are infinitely limited by their language. Emerson resigned himself to the belief that there was an “inaccessibleness of every thought but that we are in” (Emerson, “Poet 210). A man or woman may ostensibly approach a transcendental thought, though “if you come near it,--you are just as remote, when you are nearest, as when you are farthest. Every thought is also a prison” (Emerson, “Poet” 210).

During the rise of his aesthetic theory in the early 1840s, Emerson’s theory of language would foreshadow ideas that would eventually be labeled deconstructionist. Emerson’s theories paralleled twentieth century postmodernist thoughts in the sense that he lost faith in the ability of mankind to have any inclination of objective truth due to the inefficiencies of human language. He originally thought that “the poet” was “the inventor” who could “unlock our chains” and liberate and individual from “the prison” of “thought” and its linguistic ties (Emerson, “Poet” 210). However, he himself could not

avoid coming to the conclusion that the representative person or “The Poet,” like “emblematic” language,” was also a product of human thought and language. Though language “admits us” to “the brink of the waters of life and truth, we are miserably dying” (Emerson, “Poet” 210). By 1844, Emerson understood that the language of nature was dependent upon humans for its symbolic value and the resulting implications on his theory of transcendence were drastic.

Emerson ultimately resigned himself to the understanding that the language of nature was itself a product of a human language that antedates it. He began to see that the inherent corruptibility and vulnerability within human language disallowed any true transcendental pathway to truth, and therefore, man could not have an original relationship with God. Though language and art seemingly brought Emerson to the doorstep of the divine, his essays “Art” and “The Poet” consciously or unconsciously reveal that he would come to see that any meaning beyond language was simply beyond the mental grasp of mankind. His faith in the existence of God arguably survived, yet his faith in the ability to know that God perished.

### CHAPTER III

#### “NATURE”: PATHWAY TO ENLIGHTENMENT?

Any scholar undergoing a critical interpretation of Ralph Waldo Emerson will undoubtedly attempt to convey his or her understanding of Emerson's notion(s) of nature. Unfortunately, most criticism fails to fully notice and diligently articulate the constant change and idiosyncratic evolution that encompasses his theories on nature, art, and language. Emerson's theory of nature is abstract, expansive, and constantly in flux. A critic must locate discreet transitional periods in his theory to open new doors in scholarship. He repeatedly amended this theory, but it underwent the most change between 1836 and 1844. His essay "Nature" can serve as the subject for an anthology, so it helps to limit the focus exclusively to his idea of nature as it relates to human language. Emerson at first explicated the transcendental value of nature, yet over the course of eight years he would retreat from this stance due to nature's ties to a corrupt and vulnerable human language. This initial understanding of nature commences a quarrel between

nature, art, and their linguistic foundation that only intensifies through Emerson's essays "Art" and "The Poet."

Notable critic Eric Wilson incorrectly argues that "Emerson sets out to find the end—the purpose and limit—of nature," though he himself notes that Emerson "cannot settle on a fixed structure for his *Nature* because his subject is illimitable" ("Emerson's *Nature*" 53). As evidenced by the number of his lucid and semantically-debatable definitions of nature, Emerson interrogated and scoured over the subject. In his first and quite possibly his most famous publication, he erected his famous philosophic position that mankind "should [...] enjoy an original relation to the universe" and delineated his transcendental statutes of the "ME" and "NOT ME" (Emerson, "Nature" 3).

According to Emerson, the "NOT ME" is "nature and art, all other men and my own body" ("Nature" 3). The "NOT ME" essentially represents otherness, or that which is different from the "Soul" or "Spirit" of mankind. In Emerson's mind, "the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul," where "Nature" or the "NOT ME" represents the "essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf (Emerson, "Nature" 3). Emerson sees that man should go out into nature or the "NOT ME" in order to access transcendental truth through sublime experiences. He believes there is a tangible boundary between the "ME" and the "NOT ME," and he optimistically argues that the "NOT ME" could unite the "ME" with God. However, he innately erects the belief that the human body is classified under the "NOT ME" and the "Soul" of humans is a part of the "ME." Ironically, he thereby foreshadows the demise of his own theory by implementing a porous boundary between the "ME" and the "NOT ME."

At this point in time in 1836, Emerson heartily believes and preaches that a man or a woman can gain transcendental knowledge from nature, the “NOT ME,” or that which is exterior to his or her own soul. Nature or “the visible creation is the terminus or the circumference of the invisible world,” thus, it can lead mankind back to “Spirit” or God (Emerson, “Nature” 17). Through phenomenal and sensual experiences, one could glimpse the sublime, creating power of the universe. To Emerson, nature was “the road to truth” (Emerson, “Nature” 3). It is “the noblest ministry of nature [...] to stand as the apparition of God” because nature is the “organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead the individual back to it” (Emerson, “Nature” 29). The “Spirit” speaks to the individual through sublime experiences with nature, but also through the language of nature.

In the aptly entitled chapter “Language,” Emerson reveals his philosophy on “emblematic” words and their relation to the phenomenal or sensual world. In the beginning of one of the most critically discussed sections in “Nature,” he introduces his three-fold formula which is essential to his thinking about the linguistic code. Emerson states:

1. Words are signs of natural facts.
2. Particular facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.
3. Nature is a symbol of spirit.

Here, Emerson offers that “all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols” and those “same symbols are found to make the original elements of languages” (Emerson, “Nature” 14). At the dawn of mankind, the language of nature and the original language were one and the same.



Emerson initially believes that there is an “immediate dependence of language upon nature” and an innate dependence of nature upon language (Emerson, “Nature” 15). He argues, “A man conversing in earnest, if he watch his intellectual processes, will find a material image, more or less luminous, arises in his mind, cotemporaneous with every thought” (Emerson, “Nature” 15). Language helps define nature and nature helps define language. When men or women use “emblematic language,” they “are thus assisted by natural objects in the expression of particular meanings” (Emerson, “Nature” 16). Nature is the “unconscious truth,” a part of the “NOT ME” that “becomes, when interpreted and defined in an object, a part of the domain of knowledge” (Emerson, “Nature” 17). As such, Emerson’s theory of transcendence initially rests on the idea that humans were separate from nature.

Emerson argues and attempts to inspire in his lecturing and reading audiences the idea that humans could go gain truth. Humans progressively learn because “every property of matter is a school for the understanding—its solidity or resistance, its inertia, its extension, its figure, its divisibility” and “our dealing with sensible objects is a constant exercise in lessons of difference, of likeness, of order, of being, and seeming, of progressive arrangement” (Emerson, “Nature” 18). The “ME” can have experiences with the “NOT ME” and become closer to God. There is the “potential in physical nature [...] to energize the powers of the human mind once we awaken fully to their inherent interdependence” (Buell 112). All humanity is included in the “ME,” and had the all the available resources of the “NOT ME” to grow intellectually and spiritually.

Though Emerson obviously saw man or woman in a different light than he saw an animal, rock, or tree, critics such as Buell, Wilson, and Kern are incorrect in

presuming that Emerson entirely omitted mankind from his notion of the “NOT ME.” In truth, the boundary was innately permeable. Emerson wrote that “the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old” (“Nature” 30). Emerson was not consciously contradicting himself. He was still developing his theory on nature toward a finalized statement. His essay was, in all actuality, an exercise in public self-persuasion, an attempt at formulating a declarative and concrete definition of nature. As Emerson attempted to convince his audience of nature’s definitive powers, he was still attempting to convince himself.

This inherent contradiction in the divisibility between the “ME” and the “NOT ME” only intensifies as Emerson’s theory on nature developed over the course of the next eight years. He even claims in the latter half of the essay that “nature is so pervaded with human life, that there is something of humanity in all” (“Nature” 30). This proclamation necessitates a more thorough examination of the boundary between the “ME” and the “NOT ME.” Though Emerson believes that nature could lead man to God and transcendental truth, he still doubts his own theory. Emerson depends on a concrete and tangible boundary between the “ME” and the “NOT ME” for his transcendental theory to have legitimacy. Yet, his budding understanding that human language is the very basis by which nature has meaning threatens his desires for transcendence.

In Emerson’s first philosophic statement on the innate relationship between nature and language, the former precedes the latter and “nature itself is the inexhaustible upstream reservoir and source of all the rivers of language” (Richardson 101). Yet, nature and humans are originally connected through language. There exists a:

primal link between physical nature and language-making. On the one hand, words originally derived from natural phenomena (“right originally means straight,” and so forth); on the other hand, nature itself is a kind of symbolic discourse. (Buell 110)

This “primal link” between nature and language is further investigated by Emerson in later essays. The evolution of his theory of language invariably alters his transcendental philosophy.

To Emerson, nature itself is a symbol and “words are signs of deeds, actions, process ... not static conditions” (Wilson, “Emerson’s Nature” 51). He argues that the “emblematic” language of poetry and orations can circumvent the pitfalls of the “fossil poetry” of human language, as linguistic “emblems” are representative of natural “emblems” which are representative of “Spirit” and God. “Emblematic” language is divine because it retranslates the original language of mankind. He states, “As we go back in history, language becomes more picturesque, until its infancy, when it is all poetry” (Emerson, “Nature” 14). Emerson, however, incipiently thinks that humans can avoid language altogether by experiencing God through the natural world. The “natural facts, symbolize spiritual facts,” and “visible events relate to invisible ones” (Wilson, “Emerson’s Nature” 51). Though Emerson formulated that nature led to truth and sublime experience with the natural world allowed man to transcend the visible to the invisible, language always presented complications to his theory.

Emerson borrows this theory from the Christian religion, where “the mere presence of things, like the garden for Adam and Eve, constitutes a language that renders human speech redundant, superfluous, a pointless doubling of the world” (Kern 43). To Emerson, their fall from paradise represents mankind’s requirement for meaning in the world. In a parallel manner, “the invention of human language is thus...a kind of fall,

introducing absence” in order to act as “a means of referring to what is not present” (Kern 44). Consequently, there is a “shift from a language of things to one of words or signs for things,” or a shift from the language of nature to “fossil poetry” (Kern 44). As humans separate themselves from the language of nature, it ossified and thus became useless.

While critics interpret the essay “Nature” as Emerson’s answer to the ontological questions that pervade mankind, it verily represents the preface to one of his lifelong epistemological quandaries. The endeavor to attain the language of nature and transcend to God through it (while avoiding the corruptive power of human language) proves much more difficult than his critics and readers realize. Emerson’s original optimism and spirituality allow him to believe an original relationship with God could be attained through the language of nature, yet he would come to see that it was never an attainable goal.

Emerson’s own theoretical doubts, accompanied by the inclination that his audiences misunderstood his orations, would force him to retreat from his earlier stance that the language of nature or “emblematic” language was distinguished from the language of humans or “fossil poetry.” Emerson first believed that the language of nature was immediately present in the world, but he would eventually resign himself to the conclusion that it was his own mental creation. His idealization that humans could circumvent language was futile because humans could not cognitively categorize sublime experiences (with nature or art) without human language. As he began to see that the languages of nature and humans were innately interrelated, he also found the boundary between the “ME” and the “NOT ME” to be essentially porous, definitively negating nature as a true “road to truth” (Emerson, “Nature” 3).

Emerson overtly sows a seed of skepticism in terms of the transcendental possibilities of mankind. On the subject of the linguistic code, he states:

Whilst we use this grand cipher to expedite the affairs of our pot and kettle, we feel that we have not yet put it to its use, neither are we able. Whilst we see that it always stands ready to clothe what we would say, we cannot avoid the question, whether the characters are significant of themselves. Have mountains, and waves, and skies, no significance but what we consciously give them? (Emerson, "Nature" 16)

When he says that "the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind" ("Nature" 16), Emerson admits that sensual responses to sublime experiences might not have symbolic meaning besides that which the human mind assigns them. Thus, it is discernible that Emerson's understanding of nature is inherently tied to the mind of man and anything but absolute. He sees humans and nature as intrinsically interwoven due to language, and as the "NOT ME" is actually a part of the mental projection of the "ME," his subsequent ideas and theories take directions that are drastically different than he predicts and contemporary criticism interprets.

Emerson cannot put to rest the "doubt of the existence of matter" ("Nature" 27). He continually finds less and less tangible evidence that the "NOT ME" existed externally from the human mind. In Emerson's eyes, there exists a "total disparity between the evidence of our own being, and the evidence of the world's being. The one is a part of the nature of things; the other, incapable of any assurance; the mind is a part of the nature of things; the world is a divine dream" (Emerson, "Nature" 30). "Nature" stands as evidence of Emerson's initial turn toward solipsistic thought. If all of nature merely reflects the powers of the human mind to create a subjective and seemingly systematic order of sensual responses through language, then truth can never be achieved and God can never be reached.

For the time being, Emerson concedes “that phenomena are real enough whether they objectively exist or exist only in the mind,” but critics far too often assume that he fulfilled his “lifelong endeavor [...] to show how the laws and processes of nature are part of the mind, and to work out the relation between mind and external nature” (Richardson 101). There is a “delight” when undertaking the “simple perception of the natural forms” (Emerson, “Nature” 9). Yet, “the power to produce this delight does not reside in nature, but in man” (Emerson, “Nature” 6). He is on the verge of discovering that any value given to nature only exists as a discursive category, a mere projection of the human mind.

His formula of nature followed that the “beauty of the world may” only “be viewed, namely, as it becomes an object of the intellect” (Emerson, “Nature” 11). Nature and “external events came less and less to act as catalytic forces in shaping Emerson’s mind. Rather it seems just the opposite, that his mind would now characterize, interpret, and ultimately comprehend those external events” (Richardson 100). If Emerson began to presume and propose that words are worlds, could he still whole-heartedly believe that transcendental truth was perceivable or attainable?

In his first and most widely-read, published essay, Emerson defines the “ME” and the “NOT ME” as mutually exclusive, yet their foundation is intrinsically cracked and the boundary between them is essentially porous. Emerson’s “emblematic” language is soon be seen by him to be an extension of human language, which undermines his beliefs that nature could lead humans to truth. As early as 1836, Emerson cannot shake his belief that nature does not exist outside of man, because “out from him sprang the sun and moon; from man, the sun; from woman, the moon” (Emerson, “Nature” 34). As his

aesthetic theory materializes, Emerson sees that a person can create the world through language. His theory of nature and language are unable to escape the concern “that the whole material world is nothing more than the mind’s creation” (Buell 111). Emerson’s essay “Nature” (1836) is hence a sign of the commencement of his solipsism and proto-deconstructionist thoughts.

## CHAPTER IV

### “AN ORIGINAL RELATION TO THE UNIVERSE”

Between the interrogational essay concerning and entitled “Nature” (1836) and the aesthetic treatises on “Art” (1841) and “The Poet” (1844), a monumental transition occurs in Emerson’s theories. He releases three pivotal essays, “The American Scholar” (1837), the “Divinity School Address” (1838), and “Self-Reliance” (1841). Each essay assists in altering his outlook on nature and commencing his doubts concerning mankind’s ability to reach God or transcendental truth through nature. He demarcates his aspirations for a higher level of humanity, as he attempts to ascend to transcendental truth and the deity that he believes exists behind the entire universe. Emerson dramatically alters his theories on art and nature as his understanding of human language evolves, though he only addressed these subjects indirectly. Nature or the “NOT ME” is still intact as he progressed and published his way to the year 1841, but his drive for an original relationship with the universe leads him to art as his last chance at attaining some semblance of truth concerning the universe or the deity that created it.



Between 1836 and 1841, Emerson shaped his own theories on nature, art, and language through his own intellectual studies and instinctive inferences. Yet, his theories were also highly influenced by his massive and diverse, reading and lecturing audiences. His desire for an original relationship with God was not merely for himself, but for the mass populace of antebellum America. Commencing his lecturing career around 1834, Emerson gained rapid fame, which peaked around the time he published "Art" in 1841. However, his maturing theories would be affected by the constant dialectic he had with his lyceum audiences, causing his confidence in transcendence to eventually wane. Emerson attempted to convince himself and his audience that a language of nature existed which could be utilized as a conduit to an original relationship with transcendental truth. He would eventually feel that all language failed him, as it would inevitably fail any human who attempted to inspire a new way of thinking.

"The American Scholar," the "Divinity School Address," and "Self-Reliance" significantly develop Emerson's theory of transcendence. Emerson continued his idea that nature was the only route in man's quest for God. He initially asked, "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" (Emerson, "Nature" 3). This question drives Emerson, because "we are now so far from the road to truth" (Emerson, "Nature" 3). He optimistically argued that all persons should strive to "read God directly" because "the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings" (Emerson, "American" 41). In his mind, these "transcripts" represented "fossil poetry" and constituted an indirect relationship with God. The "education of the scholar by nature" was the only education, as the "first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature" (Emerson, "American" 45, 38). According to Emerson in 1837,

men and women still shared amongst themselves an unmediated access to God through nature.

He considers man and nature to be binary opposites, because he understands that the “ME” and the “NOT ME” are separate entities. At this time, Emerson paints a picture of nature and man standing face to face. Nature serves as mankind’s spiritual advisor. Emerson relates that the realm of empirical “nature is opposite of the soul” and “so much of nature” man “is ignorant of, so much his own mind does he not possess” (“American” 39). In other words, man must still experience nature in order to learn. Emerson is certain that there is a “living divinity found in nature which ... must be reclaimed” through nature (Gougeon 131). He publicly searches for ways to gain access to that elusive language of nature. Sublime experiences with nature are the primary method in unearthing this natural language. A true scholar or a representative man knows how to utilize natural resources and self-reliance to attain transcendental truth about God.

Emerson holds the dogmatic belief that natural matter and man belong together. In Emerson’s disposition, the natural world abides by the same “law which is also a law of the human mind,” because both are products of God (“American” 39). Nature and the human mind are thereby connected, yet the boundary between the “ME” and the “NOT ME” has not completely dissipated. Emerson feels that both the natural world and the human mind are cut from the same divine cloth. He says that “nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal and one is print. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind. Nature then becomes to him the measure of his attainments” (Emerson, “American” 39). Emerson maintains that “the ancient precept, ‘Know thyself,’ and the modern precept, ‘Study nature,’ become at

last one maxim” (“American” 39). Though he does not believe that the human mind is equivalent to nature at this time, he continued to comment on the “emblematic” relationship between matter and the mind, nature and language, and thought and action.

Emerson’s skepticism aggrandizes into solipsistic mistrust as he debates which came first: thought or action. He argues for both cases. On the one hand, “thinking is a partial act,” but on the other, “the astronomer comes to discover that geometry, a pure abstraction of the human mind, is the measure of planetary motion (Emerson, “American” 39, 43). As language for Emerson is inherently tied to nature in “Nature,” thought is also tied to action. As Emerson began to see that language precedes nature, he also began to see that the mind precedes nature as well. He revealed as much when he states, “Not he is great who can alter matter, but he who can alter my state of mind” (Emerson, “American” 47). For this reason, Emerson searches for a person who can inspire transcendence and bring mankind back into union with God.

In “The American Scholar,” Emerson amplifies his efforts in finding that representative person who can transcendently alter the state of the mind of man. His quest for the quintessential poet only increases after 1837. Emerson deduces “that poetry will revive and lead in a new age” (“American” 37). He feels that his orations and Romantic poetry can inspire, in himself and his audiences, the sublime feeling of an original relationship with God. Language, if used in the metonymical manner of his orations or Romantic poetry, usurps nature in terms of its ability to transcendently alter the state of another person’s mind. He argues that “man hopes: genius creates. Whatever talents may be, if the man create not, the pure efflux of the Deity is not his—cinders and

smoke there may be, but not yet flame” (Emerson, “American” 41). For this reason, Emerson comes to consider art to be the true conduit to transcendental truth.

In the “Divinity School Address” (1838), Emerson continues this public and personal search for a personal relationship with the universe and God. Emerson has intense faith that his lecturing could help inspire others to do the same. He publicizes his search for an original relationship with God, while also publicly commencing his idea of the poet figure as the representative prophet. He gains the attention of his fellow Americans and immediately aggrandizes his lyceum reputation through his complex, religiously-charged language and his irreverent declaration that God and mankind are innately united. Emerson proclaims that the Christian Messiah, Jesus Christ, shares the same characteristics of his idealized poet.

Around this time, Emerson completes his intellectual turn to aesthetic endeavors as the unmatched means by which mankind could reach the divine. In Buell’s words, “the ‘poet’ and ‘prophet’ get used as synonymous epithets for Jesus” because each has a direct knowledge of God (118). Emerson strains himself in searching for a person who, similar to Jesus, can speak in and translate the language of nature. In interpreting nature’s language, “The Poet” or the representative person provides mankind with “the instant effect of conversing with God” (Emerson, Divinity 65). Emerson argues that Americans are too preoccupied worshipping “Jesus [...] whose name is not so much written as ploughed into the history of the world” (Emerson, “Divinity” 56). He contests that the “idioms of his [Jesus’] language, and the figures of his rhetoric, have usurped the place of his truth” (Emerson, “Divinity” 57). The language of Jesus was pure poetry or

“emblematic,” yet Emerson argues that later generations, including his contemporary nineteenth-century listeners, had mistranslated it through human language.

Emerson argues that Jesus’ language might have been interpreted correctly at one time. Though in Emerson’s eyes, Jesus’ audience misinterpreted it, as they themselves categorized and expressed their thoughts through human language. This idea ironically foreshadows Emerson’s own problems with audience incomprehension and misinterpretation. As Emerson’s popularity (or notoriety) soars from 1837 to 1841, he experiences elation at the possibility of inspiring pragmatic change. He spoke to a voluminous American “audience of diverse intellectual backgrounds, including the East Coast elite, the rising urban professional class, and the merchants and farmers of rural communities” (Carr O’Neill 759). The capacity crowds at his lectures would initially instill optimism within Emerson. His inability to inspire those audiences, however, forces him to make alterations in his theories.

Emerson vehemently believed in the art of oratory. He held “high ambitions for oratory as a public office and an important form of mass communication” and “he respected the orator as a person of tremendous influence over his audiences” (Carr O’Neill 742). He states, “The orator distrusts at first the fitness of his frank confessions, --his want of knowledge of the persons he addresses, ---until he finds that he is the complement of his hearers;---that they drink his words because he fulfils [sic] for them their own nature” (Emerson, “American” 47). With a platform for his theories, Emerson gained confidence in his ability to instill the need for scholarship, self-reliance, and an original relationship with God within his readers and listeners.

Never before had an American orator reached such a broad audience. America “in the mid-nineteenth-century” was “a print based culture” that held high esteem for “the art of oratory” (Carr O’Neill 748, 742). Emerson rapidly gained popularity between the publishing of the “Divinity School Address” and “Self-Reliance.” There was a “celebrity culture that was developing in American in the 1830s and 1840s,” mostly due to “the expanding marketplace for cheap newspapers and magazines” and the popularity of the lyceum (Carr O’Neill 740). Emerson may not have thought of himself as a celebrity, but he reached a widespread American audience. The “fundamental infrastructure of the mass print marketplace” was “in place by the 1840s,” facilitating an “intense personalization of literary figures that is the hallmark of celebrity” (Carr O’Neill 747). With so many Americans reading or listening to Emerson, he attempted to instill and inspire within them his own theories of transcendence and an original relationship with God.

Emerson’s optimism peaked. He committed himself to the possibility of an original relationship with God. He held public post where he could “poetize theology” and preach his “secular ministry” to a large array of people (Buell 118; Carr O’Neill 754). Yet, even in one of his earliest published texts, Emerson expressed hints of pessimism and doubts toward the possibility of ascending to God. Mankind might actually be “in the presence of certain divine laws,” but “they will not be written on paper, or spoken by tongue. They elude our persevering thought” (Emerson, Divinity” 54). Though he publicly expressed subtle skepticism toward the human ability to experience transcendental reality, Emerson felt that man was “part or particle of God” (Emerson, “Nature” 6). He was steadfast in his thought that “The Poet” and his

“emblematic” language could act as the translator and translating device that brought man back to the language of nature.

Emerson continues with his attacking prose style in both his essays “The American Scholar” and the “Divinity School Address.” He expresses extreme disdain for traditional texts and conventional literature, which he regards as second-hand truths. He argues that “books are for the scholar’s idle times” and that the love of the hero “corrupts into the worship of his statue” (Emerson, “American” 41, 40). As he stated previously, texts and “books which once we valued more than the apple of the eye, we have quite exhausted” (Emerson, “American” 49). A second-hand text consists of unreliable human language or “fossil poetry.” Emerson refuted such second-hand experiences and truths. Mankind should even “refuse the good models, even with those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil” (Emerson, “Divinity” 64).

Emerson’s innate admiration of Jesus Christ as representative man was due to Jesus’ relationship to God. Jesus “belonged to the true race of prophets” because “he saw that God incarnates himself in man” (“Divinity” 57). In both these essays, Emerson offered that a person should mimic Jesus and “read the language of nature” (Hallengren 280) for himself or herself in continuing his or her attempt to hear and translate that language of nature into the human language. Yet, he believed that “Historical Christianity dwelt, it dwells, with the noxious person of Jesus” rather than the faith of Jesus, causing the antebellum American society to forget that mankind was entitled to an original relationship with God. (Emerson, “Divinity” 58). Emerson believed that orators

and poets could unite their listeners and readers with God in a way that equals Jesus' relationship with God.

Emerson sees that art and "The Poet" could lead mankind back to truth because the act of creation is godly. He argues that anything "that [...] shows God out of me, makes me a wart and a wen" (Emerson, "Divinity" 58). He states his belief that God arose through man to spur the act of admiration and homage. There exists the need for mankind to mimic the divine and "there is a sacredness that attaches itself to creation" (Emerson, "American" 40). Emerson comes to tout "The Poet" as his last desperate hope for transcendental truth. Yet, as human language corrupts Jesus' rhetoric, it corrupts the language of "The Poet" well. Emerson's belief that God exists within man, his expanding aesthetic theory, and his self-declared incapacity for grasping truth cause solipsistic and epistemological dilemmas for his transcendental theory in the years that follow.

Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" (1841) truly bridges the gap between his developing transcendental theory in "Nature" (1836) and the rise of his aesthetic theory in "Art" (1841) and "The Poet" (1844). In "Self-Reliance," Emerson affirms his understanding that the transcendental truth or knowledge of God comes from the "ME" as well as from the "NOT ME," or from within as well as from without. More specifically, truth comes from "Intuition" and "tuition" (Emerson, "Self-Reliance" 139). The "sources" of "tuition [...] come exogenously" or are "impressed by nature in the form of inspirations," while intuition is more "mnemonic and intuitive" (Hudnut 40). This essay also represents a pivotal point in Emerson's theory of human knowledge. Rather than learning from the "NOT ME" or nature, man must only learn from himself.



He argues that “Intuition” is God speaking to mankind through the language of nature. Emerson sees that “Intuition” is like “Reason” in the sense that they both allow a man or woman to experience transcendental reality. Through “Intuition,” a person can see “with open eye the mystery of the soul” (Emerson, “Divinity” 57).

Emerson still thinks that man should go out into the natural world to learn. Every “book should smell of pines and resound with the hum of insects” (“Self-Reliance” 137). Yet, the “primary wisdom” is considered to be “Intuition, whilst all later teachings are tuitions” (Emerson, “Self-Reliance” 139). He even expresses that “nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind” (Emerson, “Self-Reliance” 133). The churnings and productions of the mind are believed to be direct emanations of the divine realm of “Spirit.” Emerson officially affirms his notion that a person should “live wholly from within” (“Self-Reliance” 134). His turn to solipsism nears completion as he states that “no law can be sacred to me but that of my [own] nature” (Emerson, “Self-Reliance” 134). Though he still believes in transcendence, he trusts no knowledge other than his own.

Emerson begins to understand that knowledge originates from the “ME.” Following his own “impulses,” he argues that “the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude,” and “whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist” (“Self-Reliance” 135, 133, 135). In “Self-Reliance,” Emerson offers that social “conformity” exists if:

you maintain a dead church, contribute to a dead-Bible society, vote with a great party either for the government or against it, spread your table like base housekeepers,--under all these screens, I have difficulty to detect the precise man you are. And of course, so much force is withdrawn from your proper life. (135)

Emerson finds social conformity in housekeeping, if it is predicated another's thoughts. This ideal of social nonconformity is tested as he himself sees "nonconformist" thoughts and problems with human language develop in his own lectures and on his own lecturing tours.

Emerson's lyceum popularity was largely due, not to his inspiring words, but to his audience's ironic infatuation with his physical and intellectual prominence. There existed a "disparity between" his "own priorities and the audience's valuation of him," and Emerson saw that his lectures and discourses ran the "constant risk of communication's failure" (Carr O'Neill 742, 743). Though he spoke to a plethora of people and earned a living speaking, his lyceum fame was a direct result of his celebrity status. His popularity aggrandized because of his "audience's intense interest in his physical person," though it was "often at the expense of the lectures or his ideas" (Carr O'Neill 740). Language was less important in Emerson's speeches than his physical presence and his reputation.

Emerson's grand, transcendental demands were not only unmet, they were also incomprehensible to the majority of his American audience. Despite "the clarity of Emerson's message of self-reliance and aversion to personal influence, audiences' continued and increasing reverence for him corroborates claims that he was popularly misunderstood" (Carr O'Neill 753-54). His observers and listeners often could not comprehend nor did they desire to understand his rhetoric. Emerson's grand designs of transcendental inspiration were unraveling. As Emerson's aura usurped his orations on transcendence and an original relationship with God, Emerson's mistrust of all language escalated.

In “Self-Reliance,” Emerson hints at his proto-deconstructionist view of language. As Emerson begins to theorize that God comes from within the breast and mind of mankind, he also continues his search for the representative “Poet” who can decipher and translate God’s voice through the language of nature. In searching for the “aboriginal Self” and the language of nature, Emerson discovers that words are elusive and arbitrary labels. He announces, “Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong against it” (“Self-Reliance” 134). This increasing mistrust of language and his turn to solipsism lead to ontological and epistemological doubts within Emerson’s theories.

Emerson’s transcendental theory contains the notion that man or woman obeyed his or her own instincts. All persons can utilize “Reason” through their “Intuition” in order to reach “The Oversoul” or the mediating entity between the “ME” and “Spirit.” Yet, his aesthetic theory sparks concerns that the “Me,” “The Oversoul,” and even “Spirit” are linguistic constructions. Emerson already thinks that the “Supreme Being,” God, or “Sacredness” comes from within. He begins to think that human language is an amalgamation of discourses that mankind subjectively assigns to natural objects, actions, and sensory experiences. Emerson views the world as a summation of “communities of opinion,” where in each and all “their every truth is not quite true” (Emerson, “Self-Reliance” 135, 36). He admits to himself and his audience that reality is comprised of human language, which is inescapably inefficient and tragically unreliable.

The essays “Self-Reliance” and “Nature” contain the same evidence that the “ME” and the “NOT ME” are intrinsically tied together. Emerson does not believe the natural world is a figment of his imagination, but if “time and space are but physiological

colors which the eye makes” (Emerson, “Self-Reliance” 141) and if language lacks the ability to grasp meaning, then neither the language of nature nor “emblematic” language can reach transcendental truth. He is under the impression that “God is here within,” as “we first share of the life by which things exist, and afterwards see them as appearances in nature” (Emerson “Self-Reliance” 143, 140). The empirical and phenomenal realm of nature may actually exist as a separate entity from mankind in Emerson’s mind. However, the boundary between the two, the “ME” and the “NOT ME,” is increasingly dissipating. His only hope of transcendental truth lay in the “emblematic” language of art. He bases all his trust in the notion that mankind can learn from human artistic endeavors, yet continually struggles with the idea that the language of nature can be interpreted and released to the world by “The Poet.”

Emerson avoids an even earlier epistemological dilemma as he unyieldingly believes “The Poet” and “his new perception” can lead America in seeing through the enigma of nature (“Self-Reliance” 141). He holds out hope that the “Supreme cause” could be reached by mankind (Emerson, “Self-Reliance” 142). Emerson puts all of his stock in the ability of artistic endeavors and the Neoplatonic notion that the mimicry of God is divine. Though he sees that God is essentially present in mankind, the existence of “The Poet” represents his last-ditch attempt at experiencing transcendental reality. He believes “The Poet” is the truly representative person who knew how to translate the language of nature and could communicate it to the American populace. Emerson, as an interpreter of his own theories, still attempted to find evidence that humans had the ability to transcend to God.

Emerson yearns for a goal that he cannot quite reach and preaches a theory that he cannot whole-heartedly support. His theory of “Self-Reliance as aspiration rather than achievement” acts as a profound foreshadowing of the futility of “The Poet” (Buell 114). Emerson only trusts himself and proclaims that other people should only trust themselves in terms of accessing knowledge and transcendental truth. He disdains any notion of second-hand knowledge, yet he himself attempts to teach his oratory and reading audiences through essays or indirect “tuitions” (Emerson, “Self-Reliance” 139).

Though Emerson argued that each person should seek primary or firsthand knowledge, he paradoxically imparted second-hand knowledge to others through his lectures. However, he enabled and justified his theory through symbolism that rings of religious language:

And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before revolution, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort, and advancing on Chaos and the Dark. (“Self-Reliance” 132)

Emerson’s unbridled faith in God’s existence allowed him to hold the faith that “every heart vibrates to that that iron string” of “The Oversoul” (“Self-Reliance” 132). He resiliently retained the hope that transcendence was possible and that it could be inspired within others as well.

Emerson believed that every man or woman could only attain subjective knowledge. However, since he saw that knowledge was imparted directly from God, he thought it was transcendental truth. He trusted human language only when emblematically utilized, such as in his orations or poetry. Art was the only efficient form of relaying transcendental truth. He still believed in a transcendental reality because he

still believed that there was a distinct separation between the “ME” and the “NOT ME.” Furthermore, his increasing abandonment of nature as the path to God and his developing aesthetic theory allowed him a renewed belief in transcendence. At the commencement of the 1840s, Emerson would focus all of his efforts on this search for “The Poet” and ardently argue for the transcendental powers of art.

Emerson, as an audience member himself, continued to dialectically examine his theories as he unveiled them. He searched high and low for “the road to truth,” yet it eluded him. As transcendental reality escaped Emerson, he rapidly lost confidence in his transcendental theory. He continued to carry the heavy burden that human language was untrustworthy, while also dealing with an American audience that read and listened to him, but did not understand him. Though there were members of Emerson’s audience who may have understood him, however, “it is widely accepted that Emerson’s audiences consistently misinterpreted or failed to understand his lectures” (Carr O’Neill 741). As “his reputation for greatness preceded him to the platform” (Carr O’Neill 754), his transcendental message was nullified. Ironically, Emerson’s blossoming celebrity status assured that his reputation and physical demeanor superseded his language in the minds of his audience members.

It is quite discernible that Emerson’s audience directly disobeyed his lectures condemning socially conformist action. His audience took a “greater interest in a single figure than in the ideas or works he or she expressed in the public sphere” (Carr O’Neill 740). Emerson vehemently offered that “attraction to persons is empty,” yet his own popularity was due to a notoriety that “undercut the assurances of self that are intrinsic to individualism” (Carr O’Neill 739, 748). Though he may not have immediately known of

his audience's inability to comprehend his thoughts, he would come to see that his lectures and all artistic endeavors were vain attempts at transcendence, as they were compromised by the limitations of language. This archetypal example of the communicative failure of human language symbolized why Emerson could not gain any semblance of confidence in his transcendental theory or his belief that mankind could have an original relationship to the universe. Not only was human language failing Emerson, but it was also working against him.

"The American Scholar" (1837), the "Divinity School Address" (1838), and "Self-Reliance" (1841) are prime models of Emerson's attack and retreat prose. Though he was the author of these essays, Emerson was an audience member as well. He attacked and retreated from many of his arguments as he dialectically debated with himself over the course of time. Emerson's thoughts on the "ME," the "NOT ME," and language were intrinsically incongruent and inconsistent, as he had to attempt to convince himself that the hierarchal structure of the Great Chain of Being was an essential or natural aspect of life. As he proceeded to write "Art" and "The Poet" in 1841 and 1844 respectively, his understanding of language matured through his aesthetic development. His inescapable solipsism and mistrust of language would cause his sporadic pessimism to maturing into agnosticism, leading him to unanswerable, epistemological inquiries. More specifically, Emerson would come to question the "a priori" existence of the Great Chain of Being, eventually concluding that mankind had no access to transcendental truth because human knowledge could not escape the clutching vulnerabilities and limitations of human language.

## CHAPTER V

### THE ASCENSION OF EMERSON'S AESTHETICS

After the optimism of “Nature” (1836) and the declarative demands of “The American Scholar” (1837), the “Divinity School Address” (1838), and “Self-Reliance” (1841), Emerson’s aesthetic philosophy evolved and came to dominate his lectures and texts. Emerson’s search for the language of nature paralleled his search for sublime pathways that could bring one closer to God. With his lectures “Art” (1841) and “The Poet” (1844), Emerson became heavily invested in the hope that artistic endeavors, specifically orations and Romantic poetry, could act as conduits for transcendental truth. He was initially invigorated by the idea that art represented the use of “emblematic” language and could return mankind back to the language of nature. He publicly expressed his theories concerning the powers of artistic “emblems” in both essays, while also desperately calling for the one representative person, or “The Poet,” to create this art and lead mankind back to God.



As Emerson began to see that he failed to inspire his audiences, his intrinsic skepticism of language and increasing solipsistic thoughts compounded into agnostic doubts that mankind could have an original relationship with God. As Emerson would continue to argue for artistic endeavors he would also discover, through his developing understanding of “emblematic” language, that the language of nature was a mere extension of human language. Though he attempted to posit art as the new pathway to enlightenment, theoretical issues emerged that caused Emerson to infer that the unreliable and inefficient human language actually preceded all human interpretation, analysis, and comprehension. After he came to the conclusion that nature, art, and the language of nature are cognate structures sharing a linguistic grammar system, Emerson began to see the world through a deconstructionist lens. Consequently, he was forced to rethink man’s ability to attain God or a transcendental truth about the universe.

Though contemporary critics have opened new portals into the aesthetic theory of Emerson, they are too quick to discount his developing agnosticism due his mistrust of language, solipsistic attitude, and failures at grasping meaning. It is true that philosophers had not fully articulated a theory of deconstruction in antebellum America. However, Emerson arrived at an attitude toward language and an epistemological understanding of the world that prefigures ideas that other thinkers, roughly one-hundred and twenty years later, would come to call deconstruction. Though a few critics and others such as Stanley Cavell and Robert Kern brush upon Emerson’s theory of language, they underutilize the evidence that suggests his understanding of human language adumbrates deconstruction.

A deconstructionist Emerson is quite usable in the sense that one can specifically trace his theories of nature, art, and language as well as demarcate his exact path to pessimism. A reading of Emerson as a precursor to deconstruction allows one, not only to understand his idiosyncratic and evolving theory of language, but to discernibly see his transition from the archetypal optimist in “Nature” to the prototypical pessimist in “Experience.” In seeing Emerson as developing a theory of language that is akin to that of Jacques Derrida in the twentieth century, readers can discern the nuanced development and deconstruction of his transcendental theory.

Using Derrida’s essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences” (1966), one can see that Emerson came to see nature and art as components of a linguistic structure. His expanding aesthetic theory originates as a search for “totalization,” or a center from which all life originates (Derrida 99). Yet, through this aesthetic ascension, Emerson comes to understand that:

both the law which somehow governed the desire for a center in the constitution of structure, and the process of signification which orders the displacements and substitutions for this law of central presence—but a central presence which has never been itself, has always already been exiled from itself into its own substitute. (Derrida 91)

Emerson experiences what Derrida calls a “rupture,” which causes him to see that this central presence or “center is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*” (Derrida 90). The “rupture” occurs as Emerson began to see that the language of nature and the “emblematic” language of art were both discursive substitutes for truth. Nonetheless, “the substitute does not substitute itself for anything which has somehow existed before

it” (Derrida 91). Though nature and art appear to be reflections of the divine, they are merely assigned value because of the very absence of truth.

Emerson’s aesthetic study shows him that the relationship between a word and the object in nature it refers to is an arbitrary one. Moreover, there is no causal relationship between the inherent properties of a natural object and the nature of the sign used to denote it. He comes to understand that the endless subjectivity in artistic and linguistic interpretation is constant. He discovers “that the domain or the play of signification henceforth has no limit” and therefore “one cannot determine the center and exhaust totalization because the sign which replaces the center, which supplements it, taking the center’s place in its absence – this sign is added, occurs as a supplement” (Derrida 99). Emerson extrapolates that attempts at natural or aesthetic truth represent what Derrida called “supplementarity,” which is the endless repetition of deferral and difference of meaning that exists in any linguistic system (Derrida 99). In turn, Emerson begins to see that complete meaning or transcendental truth of the “purposeful cosmos” is always postponed through human language.

Initially, language represented the innate interconnection that Emerson found between nature and art. He originally thought that both nature and art contained life-making abilities and represented conduits to sublime, transcendental experiences. Within these sublime moments, Emerson believed humans could reach a transcendental truth beyond their mental, physical, and emotional capacities. In sublime experiences, “the individual is able to perceive reality as a collage of symbols and concepts” (Gougeon 113). During these same sublime experiences, Emerson thought mankind excavated the “fossil poetry” of human language and renewed it through “emblematic” language. As

Emerson began to focus on his aesthetic theory in “Art” and “The Poet,” he initially believed a human, when experiencing a moment of sublimity through nature or art, was immediately connected with the language of nature.

Emerson considered art to be a portal through which a person could glimpse the divine, just as the natural world was a conduit to God in “Nature.” Art “should restore to us the simplest states of the mind”; it should be “religious” and “it should produce a similar impression to that made by natural objects” (Emerson, “Art” 189). Emerson held “almost a religious veneration of literature,” as he initially held the hope that one could “read god directly” through art (Hallengren 292-93). Emerson wrote of art that “nothing less than the creation of man and nature is its end” (“Art” 192). Since art paid homage to the creator of the cosmos, it inspired a sublime experience that rivaled natural experiences. Emerson came to believe both art and nature were dependent upon human language for their existence.

Emerson transitions from nature to art as he sees both as “emblematic” entities. He “consistently associates words with objects in nature and insists upon their organic, symbolic, and emotive quality” (Gougeon 107). He comes to describe both nature and art as “symbols” that are “fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance” (Emerson, “Poet” 211). Not only are words directly related to objects in Emerson’s mind, but they are also becoming understood as equivalent to natural processes. He argues that “words and deeds are quite indifferent modes,” as “words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words” (Emerson, “Poet” 199). These active, organic, and “emblematic” words can be found in the art of his

orations or Romantic poetry. Emerson feels that a return to the language of nature is the only route for mankind, as he originally thinks it can bypass corrupt human language.

“Art” and “The Poet” express Emerson’s hope that creating and experiencing artistic endeavors would lead one to God through orations and Romantic poetry. The “need to create” stirs man into the mimicry of the divine (Emerson “Art” 192). Emerson expresses the idea that his orations and Romantic poetry could renovate the language of nature through “emblematic” language. The “artist, the orators” are considered to be the leaders of society,” because “the power to detach, and to magnify by detaching, is the essence of the rhetoric in the hands of the orator and the poet” (Emerson, “Art” 188). The orator and “The Poet” must utilize “emblematic” language, the retranslated language of nature, in order to realign mankind with God.

Emerson not only locates a relationship between language and nature, he locates a relationship between the mind of man and nature. The natural world or “nature appears to us one with art,” because both are “the work of genius” (Emerson, “Art” 190). In Emerson’s mind, art is “less an imitation of nature than the reproduction of the impression nature makes on the mind” (Kronick 250). The cognitive state of the perceiving mind is important to Emerson’s theory of aesthetics. If “we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry” that understanding of the beautiful “with us, or we find it not” (Emerson, “Art” 190). Emerson’s brief biographical analogy concerning his tour of Rome helps illuminate his understanding of the importance of the perceiver in a sublime experience. He notes:

There I saw that nothing was changed to me but the place [...] when I came to Rome, and to the paintings of Raphael, Angelo, Sacchi, Titian, and Leonardo da Vinci. “What, old mole! workest though in the earth so fast?” It had traveled by my side: that which I fancied I had left in

Boston was here in the Vatican, and again at Milan, and at Paris, and made all traveling ridiculous as a treadmill. ("Art" 191)

To Emerson, the most important thing when experiencing art or nature is the state of the human mind experiencing and perceiving it. This passage represents his understanding of the essential subjectivity that is present in the human interpretation of art and nature. He also subtly reveals his annoyance with the automatic admiration of historical figures, texts, and artists as well. He feels this deification is an act of conformity. Nevertheless, he considers a sublime experience to be subjective.

A piece of art is only as good as the person who interprets it and the human language he interprets through, just as a sublime experience with nature is only as good as the interpreter. However, any interpretational subjectivity is initially negated by Emerson's understanding of "The Oversoul," which he believes connects all men with the language of nature, "Spirit," and God. Emerson believes the art of oratory and Romantic poetry can unite America in a single transcendental experience, in which all involved are connected through "emblematic language." Yet, "The Oversoul," like nature, God, and transcendental truth, is found by Emerson to rely upon fallible, human language.

In his essay "Art," artistic endeavors palpably begin to supersede nature as the central focus to his transcendental theory, acting as his personal and preached pathway through which humans can reach the "Supreme Being." Art, preferably a Romantic poem or an oration, becomes the preferred "vehicle through which humanity returns to...divinity" (Gougeon 154). Emerson contends that it is man's duty to honor this higher power through mimicry of the sublime act of creation, as well as to search for the most efficient route to transcendental truth.

Humanity is the meaning behind artistic endeavors in the exact same manner that God is seen to be the meaning behind nature. Art “becomes a higher natural creation by virtue of its attachment to the human realm which transcends nature. Thus it is seen that humanity is the meaning behind a work of art” (Hudnut 90). Art not only galvanizes God and man in Emerson’s mind, but it also allows mankind to reach and preach the language of nature at any moment in time. This artistic pathway to truth, the divine, or God is no less effective than nature in reaching them. Nature is art, as “nature is a symbol, in the whole and in every part” (Emerson, “Poet” 202). In a parallel manner, art, containing “a thought so passionate and alive, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing” (Emerson, “Poet” 200). Emerson sees that “nature” is offered to “all her creatures...as a picture language” (“Poet” 201). In a similar manner, the natural and aesthetic worlds are considered to be discourses that spur images in the mind of the reader

Emerson draws analogies between natural matter, visual arts, and the grammatical properties of language. He regards the art of oratory and Romantic poetry as the pinnacle of possibility for human language, yet any “useful art” has the ability to produce the “picture language” that communicates a transcendental truth (“Art 192”; “Poet” 201). This “picture language” is the “emblematic” language that is able to bring mankind back to the relationship with the language of nature and “Spirit.” These pictures communicate analogously to the way a language communicates. Emerson states:

The painter, the sculptor, the composer, the epic rhapsodist, the orator, all partake one desire, namely, to express themselves symmetrically and abundantly, not dwarfishly and fragmentarily. They found or put themselves in certain conditions, as, the painter and the sculptor before some impressive human figures; the orator, into the assembly of the

people; and others, in such scenes as each has found exciting into his intellect; and each presently feels the new desire. ("Poet" 213)

Though Emerson prizes poems and orations, he also sees that visual arts like "picture and sculpture are the celebrations and festivities of form" (Emerson, "Art" 192). Human language can ascend to this "picture language" through these "useful arts" and thus inspire others to ascend to this "picture language."

Similar to the literary arts, visual arts represent the characteristics of discourse for Emerson. Bonnie Carr O'Neill, in her article on Emerson as a lecture and celebrity, highlights one of Emerson's journal entries concerning visual aesthetics. After witnessing "a performance by the celebrated ballerina Fanny Elssler" in 1841, Emerson dotes upon her performance in a journal entry (Carr O'Neill 751). Emerson "suggests that her performance is [...] a form of communication between dancer and audience" (Carr O'Neill 751). The visual aesthetic of the dancer, in Emerson's eyes, signifies subjective responses from her audience and represents a form of communicative discourse.

The ballerina and the ballet's choreography combine to impress upon the minds of the audience members. In Emerson's view, the ballerina's body clouds the "emblematic" message of the ballet itself. He sees that the ballet represents the failure to inspire because it borders the line between art form and debased amusement. Thus, he cautions that all "useful arts" must consist of "performances that metaphorically express the truths he [Emerson] constantly seeks" while not falling into the realm of mere "spectacle or display" (Carr O'Neill 751). His journal entry conveys an understanding that the visual aesthetic of the ballerina "engages a dangerous exhibitionism that courts approval by arousing desire" (Carr O'Neill 751). The physical presence of the ballerina compromises



the visual aesthetic as a transcendental medium. However, at this point in time of his life, Emerson has faith that the visual aspects of art would not universally interfere with its transcendental message and “The Poet” or orator has the ability to circumvent debased art and “fossil poetry” through “emblematic” language.

Emerson does not believe that one reads art or nature as he or she reads a philosophical, literary, or historical text. He does hold the view, however, that art, as nature, contains discursive characteristics. Emerson is going through the process of understanding that one can only translate knowledge through thoughts structured grammatically according to the human linguistic code. He states that “thought is prior to the form,” yet he maintains hope that this “thought” is the transcendental thought of “The Poet” (Emerson, “Poet” 200). He is developing the idea, however, that the “nature pre-exists in the mind, is caused by the mind, sustained by the mind, and in all its laws analogous to the mind” (Hudnut 25). As he began to see the deceptive power of all human words, as well as the fact that “nature itself” was “essentially symbolic, things, being thoughts,” Emerson would truly lose “confidence in the sacred character of the symbol” (Hallengren 300).

By the time he published “The Poet” in 1844, Emerson cannot ignore his solipsistic thoughts and agnostic inclinations. To Emerson at this time, “nature’s creative powers [...] are totally derivative,” and it “has no ability, within itself, to produce. It is even [...] created by the self,” as art is created by the self (Hudnut 53). He begins to question the existence of natural phenomena as entities that are distinctly separate from the human mind, further jeopardizing the already porous boundary between his notions of the “ME” and the “NOT ME.”

Emerson's writings continually reveal his understanding that humans precede nature. It is the human capacity to linguistically categorize and grammatically express the sensual and empirical responses to nature that give it symbolic meaning. He offers, "But the highest minds of the world have never ceased to explore the double meaning, or I shall I say, the quadruple, centuple, or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact" (Emerson, "Poet" 197). It is becoming apparent to Emerson, though, that even "the highest minds" of mankind create and comprehend the "manifold meaning of every sensuous fact" through corrupt human language ("Poet" 197). Interpretation and meaning is not static and finite, but subjective, capricious, and even arbitrary.

The grammar of nature or the "picture language" of nature is seen by Emerson to be an inessential aspect of the world. He surmises that mankind projects discursive symbolism upon natural phenomena via mental processes that are structured by human language. As nature and art are seen by Emerson as both being conjured or created by the human self and susceptible to the capriciousness of human language, one must wonder whether his theory of transcendence and his belief in mankind's original relationship with God are still completely intact. At first, Emerson considers nature and art to be transcendental signifiers. As the existence of nature and art is determined to be indefinable and incommunicable, Emerson concludes that the corrupt and capricious human linguistic code can never be avoided.

Contemporary criticism finds that Emerson finds redemption in his aesthetic theory. Though critics note a slight pessimistic turn in Emerson's theories, they see that he never wavers from his stance that art was the one, true "discourse" that is "transparent to the world, based on the notion of the world itself as a discourse" (Kern 39). Most

Emersonian critics, however, do not fully investigate his understanding of art and nature as discourses. His essays “Art” and “The Poet,” separated by three years, offer discursive evidence that Emerson begins to understand that the knowledge that mankind possesses or can possess is represented through the discursive symbols and grammatical structure that comprises human language.

The discursive symbols of nature and art merely spark subjective meaning through their relationship to other discursive symbols present in the human linguistic code. Emerson is initially interested in art because he thought it represented “an alternative to language within language” and believed it represented “language as a medium of creative expression” (Kern 46). Yet, there is overt evidence in his earliest essays that proves that he sees that art itself is a product of human language that is and can only be defined, reified, and interpreted through human language.

The art of oratory and Romantic poetry seemingly represent a route that one can use to gain the language of nature. They seem to Emerson more “organic, sensual, and symbolic” than the average discourse present within human language (Gougeon 94). However, Emerson comes to the realization that even artistic endeavors are subject to a plethora of interpretations. He sees that he himself carries with him the same idiosyncratic and subjective ability to interpret art wherever he travels and no matter what he is viewing. In a similar manner, he believes that the visual aesthetic of the ballet produces both good and bad perspectives and perceptions. These artistic experiences exemplify for Emerson that there is an innate disconnect between signifier and signified. It is the linguistic limitation in the speech of his orations, the failure of America to

produce transcendental art, and the nonexistence of “The Poet” that finalize his turn to solipsism and agnosticism.

Emerson interpreted the failure of language on his lyceum circuit not as a twentieth century critic would interpret it. As a devotee to transcendentalism, a man who saw that he was running out of time and legitimate tracks to transcendental truth, Emerson was becoming agnostic. His essays “Art” and “The Poet” reveal that his most important and most ambitious transcendental demands went unmet by his audience. Between the sublime intentions of his lectures and the signified cognitive response of his audience, Emerson witnessed firsthand the breakdown of communication. In his mind, America in the nineteenth century would fail to produce “The Poet” or the archetypal art form that could represent the true “road to truth.”

Around the time after Emerson wrote “Art” in 1841, “Emerson’s career as lecturer really gained momentum” because of “his recently published *Essays*, and the buzz from that book, combined with his compelling oratory” (Carr O’Neill 746). Ironically, the visual component of Emerson’s aestheticism was more important in determining the audience’s interpretation and reaction than the “emblematic” aesthetic of Emerson’s message. As noted in Carr O’Neill’s article, “it is widely accepted that Emerson’s audience’s consistently misinterpreted or failed to understand his lectures” (741). Emerson experienced a popularity rivaled by few Americans in the nineteenth century, causing him a false sense of confidence in the oration as a viable transcendental medium. Though Emerson would not ever see himself, the orator, as the artist or “The Poet” who could unite all of America in one transcendental aim, the success of his

lectures and his own personal experiences with art incipiently sparked his confidence in the transcendental capabilities of artistic endeavors.

Though his audiences might have misunderstood most of his language, Emerson spoke to packed crowds, which allowed him the initial impression that his aesthetic theory might prove to be the true “road to truth.” However, Emerson’s misinterpreting audience is further evidenced by the fact that “the Emerson lecture” was “less a dialectic of reason and sympathy than a seduction in which Emerson plays the ultramasculine role” (Carr O’Neill 744). In fact, his audiences ironically conformed to an ideal of him as a celebrity figure, which completely contrasts the essential components of “Self-Reliance.” As Emerson saw this unintentionally inspired conformity, his agnostic attitude intensified.

As antebellum America experienced the rise of print-based culture, Emerson saw his audience’s vision of him mold into an ideal and a stereotype. His nineteenth-century audiences “collaborate with instruments of mass communication in generating interpretations” of his orations “that serve their interests and desires” (Carr O’Neill 742). Unfortunately, Emerson also believed that this kind of “cooperation with intrinsically flawed social movements” was “a kind of conformity” (Carr O’Neill 753), the very act which he loathed the most. Thus, the art of the oration and the lyceum circuit tragically failed him in terms of sparking pragmatic and spiritual change in the American populace. Only the emergence of “The Poet” could steer Emerson away from solipsism, agnosticism, and epistemological angst.

Emerson regarded “popular amusements skeptically” and he viewed visual aesthetics “as temptations to the greatest transgression imaginable” (Carr O’Neill 749).

Yet, Emerson himself contributed to an art form that depended upon visual as well as discursive aesthetics. Carr O'Neill notes that "the distinct pressures of Emerson's ideals for oratory and his audience's attentiveness to physical presence each generate expectations and responses that may not agree with each other" (754). Emerson's physical presence and "reputation for greatness preceded him to the platform," ironically giving his orations the characteristics that permeate "popular amusements" (Carr O'Neill 754, 749). A substantial portion of Emerson's audience experienced and interpreted the exact opposite of what he intended for them to experience and interpret.

During one of his orations, each audience member's interpretation was subjective, idiosyncratic, and remote from Emerson's own discursive priorities of aesthetic inspiration, causing "communication's failure" (Carr O'Neill 743). Each audience member who had a "sympathetic identification" with "the Emerson lecture" (Carr O'Neill 744) had a tainted, conformist interpretation of Emerson as a celebrity and an ideal. There is certainly the possibility that Emerson may have confused an audience member's misinterpreting experiences as legitimate, sublime experiences. He would have certainly noticed his own rising reputation due to his large audiences. Yet, his New England audiences failed to become the inspired transcendentalists that he hoped they would become. They failed to comprehend and unite behind his idea of an original relationship with God. Consequently, this ironic disconnection between Emerson and his audience caused him an even deeper mistrust of human language. His emerging sense of solipsism and his doubts toward the possibilities of mankind's transcendence to God led to his agnostic state.

Emerson sees that experiences with art are not only subjectively interpreted by each audience member, but they are interpreted through an inefficient linguistic system as well. Consequently, Emerson's audiences could have easily misunderstood his lectures, ignored his language, or feigned sublime inspiration from them. The audience might have recognized "higher truths through their sympathetic identification with the speaker" (Carr O'Neill 744). Those "higher truths," however, are incongruous with the truths Emerson wanted to inspire. During an oration, "the speaker and audience are separated by intellectual ability and personal achievement" (Carr O'Neill 743). In a parallel manner, the speaker and an audience member are separated by his or her interpretation of an oration's transcendental message. Though Emerson had many audience members, he had few who understood him as he wanted them to understand him. During the time he wrote "The Poet," Emerson was beginning to understand that the "emblematic" properties of art, as with nature, are unessential aspects of life and merely mental projections from the mind of man.

Emerson resolves that the importance of the symbol or symbolic discourse is completely dependent upon the language the human interpreter (of art or nature) uses in mentally categorizing and understanding it. Even the best art shows him the boundlessness and essential subjectivity within symbolic interpretation, which is due to the very nature of human language. Emerson rethinks the validity of the connection between "every sensuous fact" and their linguistic labels due to "the accidenty and fugacity of the symbol" ("Poet" 197, 205). The "fossil poetry" of human language is not only far-removed from the truth, but the language of nature and "emblematic" language represent second-hand knowledge as well. Emerson concludes that all human language is

a mere projection of the human mind, causing his search for the center of all things to suffer significantly.

Emerson aesthetic and transcendental theories rely on the existence of the representative poet. In his mind, this person might counterbalance the negative effects of “fossil poetry.” The “signs and credentials of the poet are, that he announces that which no man foretold,” and he “adorns nature with a new thing” (Emerson, “Poet” 199, 200). Yet, Emerson never confirms the existence of “The Poet.” He states, “Man, never so often deceived, still watches for the arrival of a brother who can hold him to a steady truth” (Emerson, “Poet” 201). Emerson’s declaration of failure in “The Poet,” coupled with the knowledge that his later essay “Experience” (1844) is critically accepted as clearly pessimistic, makes it difficult to interpret that he thinks of himself as “The Poet” in his essay.

Emerson originally thought he could inspire through his orations, essays, and poetry, yet he could not unite America in the manner that he desired. Notwithstanding, he remained committed to finding this “utopian or transcendental poet who mediates between his human audience and the realities of the universe” (Kern 37). Emerson’s faith in God and transcendental entitlement allowed his hope to exist. As he saw that the creation of art rivaled the process of creating a world, “The Poet” was seemingly prophetic for Emerson. The “Poet is Creator,” while “nature is created and is being created” (Hallengren 297). In Emerson’s mind, “The Poet” appeared to partake in the divine by mimicking the sublime creation of the natural world by God, and thus could hopefully transcend human language in ascension to God. Yet, nature itself could not escape the entanglements of human language.



In the midst of writing “Art” and “The Poet” in the early 1840s, Emerson’s idea of nature certainly becomes less tangible and more linguistic. He argues, as an aspiring poet, that “a rhyme in one of our sonnets should not be less pleasing than the iterated nodes of a seashell” or “the resembling difference of a group of flowers” (Emerson, “Poet” 207). The discourse of art is equivalent to the discourse of nature. Emerson believes “The Poet” is “an interpreter” who has “a conversation...with nature,” a person whose “emblematic” and symbolic “speech flows with the flowing of nature” (“Poet” 198, 205). He begins to predominantly define nature through its discursive, figurative, and subjectively interpretative qualities, making it a mere extension of human language.

Emerson becomes fully encompassed in a discursive and solipsistic understanding of reality. For “Emerson, nature, humans, and language are dynamic processes,” or “interwoven tropes,” that comprise the human understanding of reality (Wilson, “Weaving” 5). Emerson sees that these “dynamic processes,” “interwoven tropes,” or discourses are symbolically allotted value by humans. He views the boundary between one natural object and another as a mere difference in semantic definition. It is in this manner that Emerson comes to see that art and nature are inherently tied together through language. Emerson argues that “the distinctions which we make in nature disappear when nature is used as a symbol” (“Poet” 203). The furiously forthcoming knowledge of the futility of symbols causes him to lose confidence in his transcendental theory. Nature becomes an indistinct symbol, a mere linguistic entity. If nature and the language of nature are considered to be indistinct, then “The Oversoul,” “Spirit,” and God are altogether indistinct as well.

Most literary scholars see that Emerson gives his poet prophetic power, as the poet's "naming" acts not as "art," but as "a second nature, grown out of the first, as a leaf out of a tree" (Emerson, "Poet" 205). However, it is truly the fleeting and fluxional characteristics of a linguistically-based notion of nature that allow Emerson's idea of artistic endeavors to attain such transcendental capabilities. The value or definition of nature is subjectively defined by "The Poet" just as it is subjectively defined by the average man or woman. Both "The Poet" and man are "the sayer, the namer," and the "Language-maker" (Emerson, "Poet" 199, 205). Emerson concludes that humans give nature its meaning and they project the symbolic value upon that which they linguistically label. In Emerson's mind, "not only" has human "language" become much more "remote from the truth," it essentially masks and combats truth (Kern 46). As Emerson's thoughts develop in the early 1840s, he arrives at his ultimate inference that "we are all symbols, and inhabit symbols" ("Poet" 204). Having descended into solipsism and a deep mistrust of language, Emerson sees that humans can have no knowledge outside of the mind and the symbolic, linguistic system humans use to decipher meaning.

Art, like nature, has been critically accepted by contemporary critics of Emerson as being a constant, transcendental conduit that is consistently revered by him throughout his life. Unfortunately, Emersonian scholarship does not fully appreciate Emerson's awareness of the limitations of the human mind and his understanding of the human language as an erratic and arbitrary symbolic system. For a brief tenure, art almost accomplishes for Emerson what orthodox religion and nature cannot achieve. Art seems to allow Emerson the sublime feeling of nature as well as the creative capabilities of God.

Yet, art and nature fail him as paths to transcendental truth. He succumbs to the notion that all humanity is destined to follow “the fate of the poor shepherd, who, blinded and lost in the snow-storm, perishes in a drift within a few feet of his cottage door” (Emerson, “Poet” 210).

Humans are unable to ascertain any transcendental truth about the universe or its creation beyond the entanglements of human language. Emerson resigns himself to the idea that the “emblem of the state of man,” is that of “the poor shepherd,” because “on the brink of the waters of life and truth, we are miserably dying” (“Poet” 210). Mankind cannot circumvent human language or escape the “inaccessibleness of every thought we are in” (Emerson, “Poet” 210). Though he had thought the mind of man to be sacred and “wonderful,” Emerson’s developing notion that “every thought is also a prison” drives him to the downtrodden, solipsistic, and agnostic state that scholars agree predominate his essay “Experience” and his later life (“Poet” 210).

Emerson overtly examines his understanding of the exalted American poet in his essay “The Poet.” His hope for the “representative” person, who “stands among men for the complete man,” proves to be futile (“Poet” 198). The desire and demand for the actual existence of “The Poet” is flawed from its very linguistic foundation. Yet, rather than retreating from the confidence that characterize his earlier essays, his tone is of complete desperation and resignation. Emerson is destined to “look in vain for the poet whom” he describes (“Poet” 212). As with “The American Scholar,” the self-reliant individual, and the representative man, Emerson never actually finds “The Poet.” Even if a person can become the ideal of “The Poet,” he or she immediately and unconsciously cloaks any apprehension of objective transcendental truth with an essentially subjective

human language. “The Poet” represents a full retreat from the earlier, optimistic attack that is “Nature,” as Emerson recognizes that human language is an inescapable abyss.

Emerson’s idea of “The Poet” ultimately deconstructs his own truth-locating capabilities. Nature might exist outside of human language, but man has no way of attaining objective knowledge of it or the creative cause behind it. When a man or woman attempts to categorize the elements and entities that he or she perceives in the phenomenal world, it automatically enters the realm of human language.

Incontrovertibly, “The Poet” not only “unfixes the land and the sea” (Emerson, “Nature” 24), but he “unfixes” the idea that words are direct emanations of God and directly connected to natural, sensorial, or phenomenal objects. Thus, any form of knowledge that humans can attain is merely a linguistic façade that masks the raw truth within or beyond the world of man.

The essay “The Poet” represents Emerson’s resignation that the perfect poet, the representative person who can bring transcendental truth to the American populace, does not exist. This treatise on aestheticism is not an “instruction manual to poets on how to return to poetry” (Maibor 165), because Emerson never admits that “The Poet” actually exists. As he is in the midst of realizing that “emblematic” language and the language of nature are products of human language itself, the essay “The Poet” can be analyzed as a public indication of his solipsism and agnosticism. Emerson’s essay ultimately represents “rapturous desperation. No human, no modern human anyhow, seems able to reach the poet’s lofty plateau” (Buell 120). Emerson’s public demand for “The Poet” is silenced as he resigns himself to the belief that there can never be an “original relation to the universe” (Emerson, “Nature” 3).

Emerson's doubts on the existence of "The Poet" compound with the failure of his own orations to aggrandize his own mistrust of human language. Though he already had developed an intense skepticism of the human linguistic code, he confirms his worst solipsistic fears that nature and art are an extension of the "emblematic" language that is created by mankind. Emerson concludes that "fossil poetry," metonymic language, and "every law of nature may be traced to depend for its existence on the mind" (Hudnut 29). As he resolves that both nature and art are "emblematic" and linguistic products, his idea of the "ME" becomes equivalent to his idea of the "NOT ME," causing his belief in transcendental reality to dissipate.

The critical commentary surrounding Emerson is predominantly concerned with the pessimistic turn that his prose takes in "Experience." During the late 1830s and early 1840s, however, Emerson observes and experiences the failure of art and the nonexistence of "The Poet." As Emerson drifts into solipsism, he simultaneously declines into agnosticism. The transcendental and "emblematic" capabilities that Emerson found in art are negated by the human language that characterizes the foundation of their existence. Emerson derives that the mind of man is the source of the human language that represents the discursive foundation of reality. He expresses that man is in danger of forgetting that "all forms of beauty [...] had their origin from thoughts and laws in his own breast" (Emerson, "Art" 190). Emerson succumbs to the understanding that his quest for transcendental truth is unavailing. There is an essential problem in human language, and the "breadth of the problem is great" (Emerson, "Poet" 198), too great for Emerson to overcome.

In Emerson's evolving mind, he determines that even the archetypal human poet can merely "help people see that all natural phenomena are but expressions of mental experience" (Hudnut 62). "The Poet" can only delineate the linguistic limitations of the human mental experience. Emerson initially hopes that nature and art can act as a centripetal force for humans, yet in all actuality they act as a centrifugal force. He attempts to gather knowledge concerning God or the authorial influence of the universe through nature and art while avoiding human language. Unfortunately, in his essays "Art" in 1841 and "The Poet" in 1844, Emerson officially resolves that art, nature, and the language of nature can never be discerned without being corrupted by human language. Therefore, any knowledge of "Spirit" or God that mankind can attain through nature or art is inherently debased by human language.

## CHAPTER VI

### BREAKING DOWN THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN THE “ME” AND THE “NOT ME”

As Emerson’s understanding of language deepens and complicates between 1836 and 1844, he sees that the boundary between the “ME” and the “NOT ME” dissipates. Emerson not only disavows the possibility of an original relationship with God, he disavows the possibility of knowledge that exists exterior to the entanglements of a corrupt human language that originates in the corrupt mind of man. Critics point to the personal tragedies in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s life in describing his theoretical trajectory toward pessimism. They argue that his pessimism overtly seeps through his essay “Experience” (1844), yet it merely aggrandizes and comes to a head at that time.

Emerson’s primary mistrust of human language and understanding of a permeable boundary between the “ME” and the “NOT ME” commences in “Nature” (1836). Few critics have discussed Emerson’s understanding of the linguistic substructure of reality. No critic has lucidly and fully brought to light the idea that Emerson’s theories contained

deconstructive and solipsistic tendencies as early as 1836. As Emerson's inability to grasp truth and his solipsistic tendencies spur agnostic repercussions within his theories, the development of his theory of language between 1836 and 1844 can best be defined as deconstructionist and a precursor to postmodernism.

The transcendental theory of Ralph Waldo Emerson, once representing the epitome of optimism, deconstructs due to his descent toward solipsism and agnosticism. As Emerson begins to understand that all his thoughts on reality are based in human language, he cannot escape a solipsistic attitude. His turn to solipsism, his disbelief in art as an "emblematic" and transcendental conduit, and his doubt toward the existence of "The Poet" drive Emerson into the agnostic belief that God can never be known. Emerson disbelieves in an original relationship with God and he eventually refutes the idea that mankind can have transcendental knowledge concerning "Spirit," God, or a "purposeful cosmos." Emerson's emerging theory of language, developed through his transcendental and aesthetic theory, causes him epistemological anxiety.

By the time he wrote "The Poet," Emerson questions the legitimacy of nature as a tangible entity and mistrusts the possibility of mankind's original relationship with God. In "Nature," Emerson argues that "a symbol is nothing dreamy or obscure (or 'romantic') but something clear and immediate. As in a visible or sensible natural fact, it serves as a mediator to the mind" (Hallengren 285). His understanding of symbols dramatically alters just as his understanding of human language deepens and his transcendental and aesthetic theory complicates. It is "natural for Emerson to equate words with experience, with facts, and also with emotions, affections, and flesh" (Gougeon 108). Though Emerson views nature as innately symbolic in 1836, he sees that the symbolic structure of



nature is corrupt. As he witnesses the world-making abilities of language through art, he questions his own understanding of reality.

From 1836 to 1844, Emerson's idea of reality evolves from a static definition to a fluid one. He first "imagines nature as a book of symbols with fixed meanings" in his essay "Nature" in 1836 (Buell 131). Yet, in 1844, he retreats from that belief, as he argues that the imagination can create nature, and "the quality of the imagination is to flow and not to freeze" (Emerson, "Poet" 211). As the "imagination" creates art and its world-making abilities through a linguistic structure, everything (including nature) must admit to being as fluxional and as capricious as mankind itself. Emerson offers that all "things admit of being used as symbols, because nature is a symbol, in the whole and in every part" ("Poet" 202). He even reverses his theory of "emblematic language," stating that "all symbols are fluxional" (Emerson, "Poet" 211). As all "things admit to being used as symbols," and even "nature is a symbol," then the language of nature, "The Oversoul," and "Spirit" are fluid symbols as well. As his theory of symbols or symbolic language begins to encompass his notion of reality and his understanding of subjective interpretation deepens, Emerson exudes utter solipsism.

When Emerson states that "things admit of being used as symbols" (Emerson, "Poet" 211), he suggests that all the discourses that encompass nature, art, and human reality are essentially symbolic. Natural phenomena, the language of nature, and "emblematic" language are considered by Emerson to be human discourses that are symbolically-charged into developing extensive meaning. His materializing solipsism forces him to interrogate and reevaluate his understanding of the entire hierarchal structure in the Great Chain of Being. "The Oversoul," the laws of Nature, and the laws

of Spirit are all vulnerable as mere linguistic categorizations in Emerson's mental lexicon. Even the "Supreme Being" itself only exists through an unavailing human language. As Emerson sees that there is no legitimate proof (outside of human language) that the sensory entities of nature may exist exterior to the human mind, he concludes that mankind lacks the ability to attain objective knowledge of the creative cause behind the universe. His increasingly deconstructionist view of language and solipsistic view of reality halt Emerson's belief in the transcendental capabilities of mankind.

After art and nature became congruent and equivalent in his mind, Emerson begins to see that everything he knew, knows, or could know through human language is merely an indistinct symbol. If "nature, humans, and language are all dynamic processes [...] and interwoven tropes," then it is true that "the world is a text" or a discourse (Wilson, "Weaving" 5). In the early 1840s, discourse and semantic meaning envelope Emerson's thoughts, as he devotes many of his published and unpublished writings toward finding transcendental transport to God. This "persistent idea that nature implies a book" (Wilson, "Emerson's Nature" 45) begins as a key component of his transcendental theory. Yet, the symbolic and "emblematic" characteristics of nature assist in halting Emerson's theory of transcendence once he discovers that the language of nature does not exist. He concludes "that natural phenomena are too fluxional, unsettled, to refer to only one meaning" (Wilson, "Emerson's Nature" 45-46). He discovers that meaning is essentially subjective and that the "signs and scripts of nature are constantly moving outside of themselves" (Wilson, "Emerson's Nature" 45). Emerson, far removed from his static definition of "Nature" in 1836, understood eight years later in 1844 that the natural world was merely a part of a linguistic lexicon. He

saw that linguistic definitions are but discursive substitutes for the truth concerning the universe.

There is no better biographical evidence for Emerson's mistrust of language than in the discursive disconnect that he experienced between himself and his audiences during his orations. Emerson led a popular career as an orator, however, his lectures and essays failed to bring about the spiritual, transcendental, and pragmatic change that he intended for them. His complex language was incomprehensible to much of his audience and his celebrity status combated his transcendental message. Though he spoke to large gatherings of people and lived off his earnings, his audiences' proneness to social conformity and their inability to interpret his language caused him persistent doubts that America could possibly produce the transcendental aesthetic and "The Poet." Each audience member perceived and interpreted his lectures subjectively and idiosyncratically, and neither he, nor "The Poet" could control the interpretations of his message.

The transcendental message Emerson attempted to signify to his audience was incongruent with the message that was signified within the minds of his audience. As many of Emerson's audience members conformed to the celebrity ideal of him or focused more on his physical demeanor than his language, they miscomprehended his orations, preventing his audience from unifying behind his attempt at inspiring transcendentalism. The ironic and even tragic disconnect between Emerson and his audience assisted him in fully understanding the fractured relationship between signifier and signified. Emerson witnessed his audiences misunderstand him, while he was also forced to realize that "The Poet" was an ideal that could never be achieved.

The symbol, once fixed and set in stone for Emerson, comes to represent the inherent and disparate disconnectedness in reality. The apparent, “presenting reality,” is actually an “unreality” due to the limitations of language (Buell 127). Emerson increasingly comes to the notion that human language is the origin for all thought. A person cannot penetrate through the linguistic encasement and find a center, because humans assign and label that center themselves. Emerson discovers that a word or a label is actually a self-imposed or self-projected “sign in nature’s text, a hieroglyph” that can only describe “its own design” (Wilson, “Emerson’s Nature” 47). He eventually resigns himself to the belief that the linguistic endeavors of humans can only describe and point to the properties of its linguistic structure. In a deconstructionist manner, Emerson disregards his attempts at locating a signified and resigns himself to the notion that semantic symbols are subjective human creations. Emerson amends his transcendental theory as he begins to see that the discursive components of a linguistic system cannot refer to anything else but themselves.

Emerson originally thinks that human “language must somehow be escaped from in order to fully be *in* the experience” (Maibor 154). He comes to see, however, that human language is unavoidable. For this reason, mankind is unable to reach transcendental truth or an original relationship with God. The human understanding of nature through human language is a mask of reality and “nothing stands behind the mask but another mask” (Kronick 249). Emerson’s understanding of language in many respects symbolizes the postmodern notion of “the impossibility of classification,” because “every natural fact” is merely “an emanation, and that from which it emanates is an emanation also, and from every emanation is a new emanation” (Wilson, “Emerson’s

Nature” 52, 43). As with other discursive entities, nature and the language of nature are thus themselves considered to be linguistic constructs.

Emerson knows the nature of a symbol is to be arbitrary or capricious. The symbol of nature, “in the whole, and in every part,” is merely the extension of the “ME” and the language of the “ME” (Emerson, “Poet” 202). The “NOT ME” cannot exist separately from the “ME,” because it is merely the mental projection of the “ME.” Initially, Emerson’s transcendental vision includes a transition from sublime experiences with nature or art to the universal and symbolic truth inherent in them, but he gathers that all natural, phenomenal, or sensory facts only exist as separate entities from each other through human language. There is no finite or immediate meaning in a person’s particular experience with natural phenomena or aesthetic endeavors. Emerson increasingly surmises that “the meaning of the world is outside the world” of human language, causing him to lose “confidence in an innate ‘transcendancy’ of reality” (Hallengren 303).

Consequently, Emerson comes to view nature or the “NOT ME” as a symbol spurred by mankind’s need to strive for God. Similar to art, nature is considered to be a textual discourse, a mere branch of the human linguistic code. Emerson is forced to evolve his theories as he discovers that the signs of nature, art, or any discourse are not fixed, but fluid entities due to their inherent linguistic foundation. His understanding of human language evolves and the “NOT ME” becomes intangible. As the “NOT ME” and “The Poet” are nothing more than fictitious creations of his mind, Emerson retreats and settles into the solipsism and agnosticism that pervades his essay “Experience” in 1844.

In utilizing Derrida's theory of deconstruction, one can precisely determine the moment in Emerson's theories "when, language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse ... that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely outside a system of differences" (Derrida 91). By the time he wrote "The Poet," art and nature are understood to be equivalent. Emerson retreats from his previous position that a natural relationship exists between an "emblem" or sign and the thing it signifies, as the signification is subjective, idiosyncratic, and projected upon by the interpreter of the sign.

Further bolstering the argument that Emerson sees nature as a linguistic entity, he increasingly uses personification in representing nature as well. Throughout the course of the eight-year period between 1836 and 1844, Emerson anthropomorphizes nature and literally views it as a mirror image of mankind. In "Nature" (1836), one can "imagine nature as humankind's divinely appointed servant" (Buell 112). Nature "paints moving men and children, beggars, and fine ladies, draped in red, and green, and blue, and gray" (Emerson, "Art" 189). Emerson metaphorically compares the natural world to a steward and the natural world's organic processes to artistic endeavors in order to relate his understanding of that natural world. He also delineates the fluidity and fluctuating qualities of nature by relating it to the discourse of mankind. In "The Poet," Emerson sees that a man or woman may have a "conversation...with nature" (Emerson, "Poet" 198). Nature is not only linguistic construct, but it is also a reflection of humans.

Emerson not only associates nature metaphorically with a work of art, but he also associates it with humanity as well. The meaning of nature is encapsulated in language

because that is the only communicative medium available to humans. Whether nature speaks or is created, it is merely a symbolic representation of mankind's linguistic lexicon. Emerson discovers that nature's discourse is merely projected upon nature by mankind and he comes to know reality as a substantially discursive reality. The thought-process or the "speech" of a person "flows with the flowing of nature" (Emerson, "Poet" 205). However, the human language underlying that thought-process or "speech" actually comprises the perceivable substances of the natural world. As Emerson's theory of nature, art, and transcendence begins to deconstruct, he arrives at the postmodernist premonition that the discourses in the human linguistic code can only reflect values and meanings that humans assign to them.

Emerson believes in the existence of phenomenal, empirical, or sensorial nature. Yet, any notion of nature or the sublime feeling that one attains from nature is merely a mental and linguistic projection of the perceiver. He argues that mankind's attempt at labeling and categorizing "Nature" is allegorically comparable to phenomenal "objects slipping through our clutching fingers" (Cavell 244). The encapsulating entanglements and inefficiencies of human language are too great for transcendental knowledge to exist. Emerson's "fear" of the "insufficiency" of "language" dominates his theories and he completes his transition from a man who offered "a perpetual contending with the fate or condition of finitude" to one that perceives an inescapable, "intellectual lack in human knowledge" (Cavell 247). In his mind, there is a "state of subjective detachment in which thinking persons cannot help but live," which inherently disallows Emerson or any human a "maximum freedom of imagination" that is "consistent with the belief in a purposeful cosmos" (Buell 129, 131).

Emerson might still believe in a “purposeful cosmos.” Yet, he sees that the belief in such a universe does not come from a reliable source, but from linguistic conjecture and faith. Emerson ultimately extrapolates “that questions about ends are endless” (Wilson, “Emerson’s Nature” 54). Mankind cannot penetrate through the discursive maze that comprises reality. The “continuity between mind and nature,” exemplified in Emerson’s famous metaphorical passage on “the transparent eyeball,” actually reveals Emerson’s ideas that “the real properties of things” only reflect “the processes by which ideas and concepts are built up in the mind” (Kern 39, 41). To Emerson, the linguistic system humans employ makes them the center of all things. Without the existence of a language of nature that is directly connected to the origins of the universe, mankind’s possibilities of knowing God or transcending to God expire.

The boundary between the “ME” and the “NOT ME” disintegrates until it finally dissipates. He always feels a “profound sense of participation with which he viewed” (Parkes 225), yet Emerson concludes that nature is merely an emanation of the mind of man. Emerson, like “Nietzsche,” saw that humans have absolutely no “ability to withdraw their projections that condition our experience with the natural world” (Parkes 226). His maturing sense of the world-making abilities of language and his notion of man’s participation in the creation of the “NOT ME” aggrandize his solipsism and lead to his deconstructionist characteristics.

There is a plethora of textual and biographical evidence suggesting that Emerson’s theories became deconstructionist and solipsistic. He began to see the subjectivity of the human mind through artistic endeavors and the high probability for miscommunication during his lecturing tours. Between the years 1836 and 1844,



Emerson constantly scribed ontological and epistemological interrogations in his orations, essays, and journal entries. In fact, there is even biographical evidence that Emerson resigned himself to the belief that the world existed only within the mind of humans. Len Gougeon reflects upon a particular biographical account of Emerson, in which:

Ellis Gray Loring, a Boston, Lawyer, abolitionist, and longtime friend of Emerson, describes a conversation he had with him on the topic of divinity just months before Emerson delivered his famous, and infamous, “Divinity School Address.” In his journal, Loring notes “After considerable conversation, I discovered that [...] he does not believe, or rather positively *disbelieves* in any thing out of himself. He carries idealism to the extreme. Consequently, if there is a God, he is God.” (Gougeon 130)

This anecdotal passage of a New England lawyer indubitably acts as evidence that Emerson was in a state of supreme solipsism. Emerson might not have wavered from his belief that phenomenal entities or natural matter distinctively exist, however, he saw that mankind could not obtain any reliable or objective truth concerning the natural world or the “purposeful cosmos” behind it. The contemporary critical conversation surrounding Emerson’s texts erroneously locates his own transcendental redemption through the ascension of his aesthetic theory. However, the compilation of both textual and biographical information supports the analysis that his aesthetic theory only exacerbated his deconstructionist and solipsistic thoughts.

Critics of Ralph Waldo Emerson have ignored his intrinsic mistrust of language and have failed to interrogate his belief in the availability of transcendental truth. With “literature’s ability to reinvent the world in words,” there arises “a springboard for entertaining” the critical thought that Emerson sees “the whole world is nothing more than the mind’s creation” (Buell 111). Critics such as Lawrence Buell, however, resist

this hypothesis. He cites the “creative imagination” and “physical nature’s potential to energize the powers of the human mind” as signs of optimism (Buell 111). Yet, Emerson saw that both the powers of the “creative imagination” (the world-making abilities of art) and the linguistic properties of nature can only lead a person back to the conclusion that reality consists and exists discursively within the human mind.

There are notable critics, however, who acknowledge the argument that Emerson sees that reality, including God, is a linguistic construct. Robert Kern recognizes that “it is equally clear that Emerson is haunted by the idea of language as the embodiment of its own reality and fearful perhaps that he becomes the means or agent of this embodiment when he writes” (39). Neither nature nor art proves to be adequate or efficient in relaying transcendental truth to mankind. Yet, Kern does not structure his interrogation of Emerson in context with chronological history or within the evolution of Emerson’s thoughts and beliefs. His argument on Emerson’s theory is static and he ignores the evidence that Emerson commences his solipsistic, deconstructionist, and agnostic thoughts in the 1830s.

Emerson’s spiritual and aesthetic optimism allows for his belief in transcendence when he wrote “Nature” in 1836, but his developing solipsism and mistrust of language suffocate his hopes. He determines that “reality” merely “consists of a seamless, eternal flux with the individual as the central, enduring figure around which all things flow” (Gougeon 149). To Emerson, the individual creates his own subjective perception of reality and the “Supreme Being.” By the time he published the “The Poet” 1844, Emerson cannot avoid the notion that humanity is at the center of reality, because

mankind is the originator of the all-important linguistic code through which humans communicate.

The linguistic code, however, cannot refer to or define anything that exists outside that linguistic code, including a deity such as God. Emerson infers that the language humans use to describe or define sense perceptions of natural phenomena or sublime experiences with art is actually the supplementation of symbolic labels and semantic meanings. God, or the center of mankind, is unreachable and indescribable due to the fundamental limitations of language. Emerson begins:

thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of the present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. (Derrida 91)

He determines that nature, nature's language, and "emblematic" language are mere attempts at substituting a reality that is indefinable. Furthermore, Emerson's notion of language as untrustworthy and inescapable endorses the classification of his theory of language as a precursory component for postmodernism, specifically deconstruction.

Emerson's philosophic "quest" is "grounded in the conviction that the world itself is meaningful and that its meaning constitutes a truth prior to language" (Kern 39), however his "quest" ends in futility. Nature and art fail to act as transcendental conduits. If Emerson believes in "what Jacques Derrida critically designates a 'transcendental signified,'" then nature" or art "for Emerson is the signifier" (Kern 39). In the early 1840s, he begins to fully fathom the symbolic powers and vulnerabilities of human language. His aesthetic ascension and oration career ironically reveal to Emerson the loose ends of language. His "version of the sublime" leads to an impending "pessimism-despair over the inability to fix meaning" (Wilson, "Emerson's Nature" 55). As both

nature and art are considered to be linguistic constructs, they can only describe their own linguistic properties. It ultimately becomes impossible for Emerson to attain knowledge of “a truth prior to language” or outside of language (Kern 39). Though he still believes that there is a “transcendental signified” or a “purposeful cosmos” that exists beyond the confines of human knowledge and language, he concludes that humans have absolutely no access to it (Kern 39; Buell 131).

In his essays “Art” and “The Poet,” Emerson foreshadows the theoretical footsteps of Jacques Derrida. He discovers that mankind can “never step outside the play of representation” because reality is truly a “realm of textuality” (Kronick 242). Emerson understands that reality consists of comprehensible discourses that are merely “emblematic” emanations of emanations. Ultimately, “if thinking leads us back to language and if no external authority is available,” Emerson sees that mankind could merely affirm “the world as repetition” and he discovers that “there is no a priori value to the world” and that “presence is derived from repetition” (Kronick 243, 244). Humans can decipher meaning by analyzing “what deconstruction calls the ‘text’: the setting up of infinite reference,” but “texts [only] lead to texts” (Kronick 244). As a discourse cannot transcend the discursive matrix of reality, transcendental truth cannot be reached. Though Emerson still believes that “the power of the spiritual or the divine lurks in the process of symbolization itself,” he infers that any attempt at deciphering the code of reality is a mere masking of the truth.

Similar to Derrida and his theory of deconstruction, Emerson sees that the presence of meaning originates in mankind. Though Emerson’s idea does “not negate the world,” he sees there is only “the possibility of repetition” (Kronick 244-45). By 1844,

he absolutely disbelieves in the possibility of a transcendental truth that exists and circumvents human language. Emerson's theory of language acts as a precursory component to deconstruction and post-modernism, due to his increasing loss of faith in "emblems" and his arising doubt concerning the validity of man's ability to attain objective truth about God. He surmises that any sublime experience with nature or art is inherently meaningless. Emerson is "being faithful to the struggles of one who *would* be liberated, convinced of the rights to liberation, but contending against the limits from which no human being can hope altogether to shake free" (Buell 124). Though humans might experience a spiritual connection with each other and the "Supreme Being" through something that is akin to the notion of "The Oversoul," a person's inability to adequately express, to explain, or to interpret that spiritual connection negates any possibility of transcendence. Language does not create "an orderly master narrative," nor can it "chop the world into discrete, logical units" (Wilson, "Emerson's Nature" 50). To Emerson, the universe exists outside the boundaries of human language and transcendental reality exists beyond the comprehension of the human mind.

Emerson's belief in man's ability to experience and understand an original relationship with God was most certainly fallible. Emerson's earlier essays and orations had called for the individual to pursue an "original relation with God," yet his own mistrust in the linguistic medium of those texts and speeches would ultimately deconstruct his transcendental theory. Though commencing his transcendental theory in "Nature" in 1836, his hope for its sustainability waned as he saw an intrinsic corruptibility and vulnerability in nature and art. However, Emerson's understanding of human language did not mature until he himself saw the subjectivity and fractured nature

of cognitive perception, witnessed the failure of communication on his lyceum circuit, and declared the absence of “The Poet.” Between 1836 and 1844, his theories would undergo a dramatic evolution in which the boundary between the “ME” and “NOT ME” dissipated, the notion of the language of nature disappeared, and the representative man became understood as an impossible ideal.

Emerson inherently plants subtle seeds of doubt in “Nature,” but begins to overtly reveal his concerns and suspicions of language in “Art” (1841) and “The Poet” (1844). The linguistic limitations of nature, art, and mankind directly correlate to the arising epistemological dilemma that develops in his theories. As Emerson experiences his own battle with miscommunication and the subjectivity of discursive interpretation in his lecturing career, he sees that linguistic signs can never produce their intended significations. Finally, it is the death of “The Poet” in Emerson’s eyes that causes his resignation to solipsism and agnosticism. Emerson comes to question the “emblematic” meanings of faith and life after these events and after the deaths of his first wife Ellen in 1831, his close confidant (Henry David Thoreau’s brother) John Thoreau Jr. in 1842, and his young son Waldo in 1842. Tragedies in his personal life and complications in his theories combined to transform his optimistic outlook in “Nature” (1836) into the pessimistic prose of “Experience” (1844). Though the current critical conversation states that Emerson’s epistemological and existential doubts truly come to light in his essay “Experience,” he himself reveals palpable concerns over a person’s ability to experience transcendental reality many months and even many years earlier.

Emerson’s theoretical evolution has massive implications on his transcendental theory, as well as on critical scholarship of that theory. His interrogation of the

seemingly sublime characteristics of nature and the elevating abilities of art reveals to him that they are both essentially constructs of human language. The border between the “ME” and the “NOT ME” is primarily understood to be permeable. Emerson palpably proves to himself that mankind cannot ascertain transcendental truth. The pessimistic tone of “Experience” incontrovertibly commences much earlier in his theory concerning transcendental possibilities of nature and art. More importantly, Emerson’s theory of language anticipates deconstruction and the agnosticism that he develops (due to the vulnerabilities and inconsistencies of language) antecedes postmodernism.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

The contemporary critical conversation underestimates an analysis of Emerson's essays and orations that views him through a lens of deconstruction and postmodernism. Though many critics have discussed the importance of language to Emerson's theory of nature and art, the current criticism's analytical aim is too grand, as many critics miss and omit evidence due to aggrandized aspirations. Rather than interpreting the entire corpus of Emerson's life's work or attempting to pin down his definitive thoughts on his evolving theories, it is more enlightening to view Emerson as an organic, living, and breathing individual who constantly and consciously amends his theories over short periods of time. Between his essays "Nature" in 1836 and "The Poet" in 1844, Ralph Waldo Emerson's understanding of language becomes increasingly equivalent to that of deconstruction and Jacques Derrida. His solipsistic and agnostic characteristics are parallel to that of postmodernism in the twentieth century.



No critic has shown that there is a chronological connection between Emerson's understanding of language and his developing theories of nature and art during the years 1836-1844. In a parallel manner, no critic has truly considered Emerson's theory of language or his developing solipsism as a precursor to postmodernism. Yet, he comes to the understanding that human language created and gave meaning to the world. His mistrust of that language is best described as increasingly and decidedly deconstructionist. Emersonian scholars view Emerson as taking a pessimistic turn in his other 1844 essay "Experience." This interpretation is mostly due to the death of his wife and young son. His pessimistic turn also occurs because of the failure of nature and art, however, as he derives that human language is the foundation for all human understanding. Emerson's maturing theory of language causes him to come to the conclusion that the "ME" is actually equivalent to the "NOT ME." Human language antecedes the language of nature, as Emerson sees for himself that the language of nature and "emblematic" language are developed through human language. Finally, no other critic has argued that there is enough evidence to suggest that Emerson permanently retreats from his public proclamations that man can have an original or primary relationship with God.

Lawrence Buell's critical biography attempts to delineate the theoretical trajectory of an evolving Emerson. Buell succeeds in opening windows to nuances in Emerson's theories. Yet, he omits key evidence that suggests that the Emerson of 1836 had a pessimistic outlook and that the Emerson of 1844 had an overtly agnostic point-of-view. Buell glosses over the theoretical evolution of Emerson's entire life, but he refuses to stake a claim concerning the evolution of Emerson's transcendental theory. Buell refutes

Emerson's oncoming agnosticism by arguing that Emerson's aesthetic theory reaffirms his own transcendental demands. Yet, his aesthetic theory has intrinsic, linguistic flaws and his quest for the representative person or "The Poet" is overtly denied. Emerson merely continues and deepens his pessimism in "Experience," he does not commence it.

In a similar manner, notable critic Len Gougeon presents an extensively critical and biographical reading of Emerson that promises to delineate the philosophical, spiritual, and emotional journey of Emerson's entire life. However, his interpretation incorrectly views Emerson's transcendental theory as remaining intact. Gougeon, like Buell, sees that Emerson comes to comprehend language as subjective and mistrustful. However, neither connects Emerson's mistrust of human language and experiences with the deconstruction of his transcendental theory. Each of these eminent, Emerson scholars provides an articulate exegesis of Emerson's lofty demands of nature, art, and mankind. Yet, neither Buell nor Gougeon follows Emerson's transcendental theory as it unravels before 1844. Though they both offer theoretical and biographical evidence that supports Emerson's mistrust of language and resigned understanding that there ultimately can be no original relationship with God, these critics fail to notice that this evidence antedates his later agnostic and deconstructionist characteristics.

The aim of most Emersonian scholars is admirable, as they desire to create an accessible Emerson by perfectly categorizing his entire life and cognitive development. Yet, it is impossible to define and pin down Emerson's theories as they existed over his lifetime. Though critics present biographical and textual material to anchor their arguments concerning Emerson's theory of transcendence and language, too often their high aims cloud their research and analysis of Emerson. Through a similar mode of

misinterpretation, other critics read Emerson entirely out of chronological context. These critics too often utilize a single quote to encompass an entire theory or use quotes from decades apart to set Emerson's theories in stone. The aim of an exegesis on Emerson should not be to dogmatically define his theories or to encapsulate his entire life as representing a single thought or pattern of thoughts. It is of greater benefit to academic scholarship when an academic analysis of Emerson limits itself in chronological and theoretical scope.

Between his essays "Nature" (1836) and "The Poet" (1844), Emerson loses his confidence in the abilities of human language, the existence of a language of nature, and a tangible barrier between the "ME" and "NOT ME." Due to his mistrust of language and the failure of nature and art, Emerson experiences solipsism and disavows the possibility of an "original relation to the universe." Emerson's theory of language sparks his descent into solipsism and despondency during the time that he writes his most seemingly optimistic essays. Emerson's solipsism and subsequent agnosticism causes him epistemological angst and doubts concerning the existence of God. Though Ralph Waldo Emerson may not be canonically aligned with deconstruction and postmodernism, his major essays between 1836 and 1844 reveal his theories, specifically his theories on language, are definitively deconstructionist and primarily postmodern.

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