

Emerson's "Apposite Metaphors" and the Grounds of Creativity

In January 1824, a twenty-two-year-old Ralph Waldo Emerson was beginning to despair of discovering genuine creativity in his own time: "Men in this age", he writes in his journal, "do not produce new works but admire old ones; are content to leave the fresh pastures awhile, & to chew the cud of thought in the shade" (*Journals* 2 208). The extended bovine metaphor long predates the famous opening lines of his 1836 *Nature*: "Our age is retrospective. It builds on the sepulchres of the fathers" (*Works* 1 7). In 1824, the potential artists of Emerson's age are the cheerful "cud" chewers merely mouthing the regurgitated sustenance of an earlier time. As they ruminate "in the shade", their "thought" is one step further removed from an original source and, consequently, they themselves are unoriginal. The theme quietly announced here is that some kind of intimate relationship with nature's "fresh pastures" is required for artistic inspiration. This can be related to Emerson's contemporaneous "theory of strong impulse", an impulse that came to America with the Puritan fathers, who "had done their duty to literature when they bequeathed it the *Paradise Lost* and *Comus*" (*Journals* 2: 197). But what was strong in England, Emerson laments, has in the New World "been dissipated by the unfortunate rage for periodical productions" (197). And rather than building on the Puritan legacy American letters in 1824 are held back by "[t]he community of language with England [that] has doubtless deprived us of that original characteristic literary growth that has ever accompanied, I apprehend [,] the first bursting of a nation from the bud" (197). To return to the opening metaphor of the ruminant in the shade, the fresh nibbled pastures were English pastures — the shady trees of the cud chewers are American. There is a transatlantic originality which has been has yet to be reborn on, or from, American soil. To discover a "strong impulse" for New

England, to find a language that lives within the English inheritance and that can represent America, will be Emerson's great achievement and the beginning of what has come to be called the American Renaissance.¹

Just a few months after the young Emerson had been despondent about the possibility of originality, he believed he had come up against the very limits of thought: "Metaphysicians are mortified", he writes, "to find how entirely the whole materials of understanding are derived from sense" (*Journals* 2 224). The conclusion Emerson drew from this epistemological mortification was to "fear the progress of Metaphys[ical] philosophy may be found to consist in nothing else than the progressive introduction of apposite metaphors" (224). His examples are Plato's "dark chamber" and John Locke's "sheet of white paper" (225), both objects of sense that come to stand for knowledge of the mind. Emerson is here working through a paradox in the Empiricist education that had made up the spine of his Harvard curriculum (Todd 64). In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690/1694), the bedrock of empiricism, Locke had written that "all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheat" (452). In his search for clear and distinct ideas, and in line with a tradition in English philosophy that has been traced to Bacon and Hobbes (Forrester 612-616), Locke had dismissed metaphor from any discourse that was to "inform or instruct" or which would make any claim to "truth and knowledge" (Locke 452). But, at the same time, and this is the paradox that Emerson notices, arguably his most influential ideas were expressed through metaphors, one of the most prominent among them being the "white paper" (88), which was used as part of Locke's argument against the principle of innate ideas and to which Emerson alludes in his journal. This is, of course, precisely Emerson's concern. Metaphors, on these terms, appear to reveal philosophical *aporia*: those moments when the mind, at its fullest extent, requires the support of "apposite metaphors" derived from sense rather than sustaining itself on clear and distinct ideas (see Vogt 1-4; Clark 242-245). Just what happens when Emerson's fears about the

¹ See my "Atlantic Adam".

possibility of American literary originality *and* the metaphorical limitations of the progress of metaphysical philosophy become the enabling vectors not only for an understanding of the mind but also for American literature itself is what I want to outline in this essay. In brief, I argue that Emerson recognises metaphor as a liberating principle for original expression, and I use I. A. Richards' concept of "ground" from his 1936 theory of metaphor to explore in detail Emerson's purposive engagement with figurative language. What this leads to is a fresh interpretation of Emerson's concept of "symbolism" that is outlined in his 1844 essay "The Poet", one of the grounding statements of American literary originality.

It was when Emerson began to think about artistic creation, and literature in particular, in the mid-1830s that he re-evaluated the role of the English language, of metaphor and of the place of sensation in writing. He first outlines the possibilities of metaphor — in ways that will become the backbone of the 1836 *Nature's* theory of language — in his "Introductory" lecture to an upcoming series on English Literature in November of 1835. Here, ten years after his initial doubts, the objects that sensation finds are no longer framed as limits to knowledge. In a radical change of perspective that leaves things just as they were but transforms how they are understood, metaphors have become the very means of knowledge's creative expression by "man". As he writes: "objects without him are more than commodities. Whilst they minister to the senses sensual gratification, they minister to the mind as vehicles and symbols of thought. All language is the naming of invisible and spiritual things from visible things. The use of the outer creation is to give us language for the beings and changes of inward creation" (*Early Lectures* 1 220). Sensations, then, give us objects; but more than that they give us our only access to inner life as "inward creation", not limitation. They have become the "vehicles and symbols of thought".

That Emerson is referring here to metaphor is clarified in the next few lines:

Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some corporeal or animal fact. *Right* originally means *straight*; *wrong* means *twisted*. *Spirit* primarily means *wind*. *Transgression* means *the crossing a line*. *Supercilious*, the *raising of the eyebrow*. Light and heat in all languages are used as metaphors

of wisdom and love. We say heart to express emotion; the head to denote thought: and “thought” and “emotion” are in their turn mere words borrowed from sense, that have become appropriated to spiritual nature. (220)

Here, in Emerson’s developing theory of language, metaphor, far from being a limit to an understanding of the mind, is what allows us to understand it at all. To grasp how this works in the lecture and in his essay *Nature*, published the following year, and where this passage is employed almost without variation (*Works* 1 18), it is useful to draw on the model of metaphor that I. A. Richards outlined in his *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936). There Richards makes the distinction between the *tenor*, the *vehicle* and the *ground* of a metaphor (96-97, 117). The tenor is the subject of the metaphor, which in the first instance above is the “moral or intellectual fact”; the vehicle the term used, that is, the “corporeal or animal fact”, and the ground the thing they have in common that allows the one to express the other. So, in Emerson’s first example, “right”, as a certain kind of behaviour is the tenor; the word right’s original meaning (i.e., straight) is the vehicle. Just what the ground is, though, becomes an important question. Is it directness (moving *right* towards something — if so what?), squareness, rectitude (having a balanced form), being upright? Whichever line we follow appears to lead only to another metaphor. In the second instance, “wrong” is the vehicle, wrong’s original meaning (twisted) is the tenor, and the ground is indirectness, warpedness, perversity — namely another series of other metaphors. The implication of Emerson’s argument is that the very ideas of right and wrong are only able to be expressed because ways of thinking and objects of sense share certain characteristics — can be straight or twisted. This “sharedness” is what Richards refers to as the ground. This is not to make a stronger claim that language pre-exists thought, but only to say that, for Emerson, thought can only be expressed metaphorically — at least, in the first instance. Objects in the world are the “vehicles” of thought, and the tenor, which is thinking itself, can come to language on the sole condition that a vehicle with the right ground can be found.

If we go back to the metaphor of the ruminant American writers in the shade of the tree, then it can be interpreted as follows: the cud upon which they chew is formed of the dead metaphors bequeathed by the

vitality of earlier transatlantic generations, for "[i]n the writers in the morning of each nation such as Homer, Froissart, and Chaucer every word is a picture" (*Lectures* 1 222). America, even in the very fullness of its own morning, had proven quite unable to express itself in this metaphorical way, and a national literature has failed to come into being. The aim of Emerson's lectures, as they move through the great poets of the English renaissance from Chaucer to Milton, is to attempt to understand how this was achieved in England. First he outlines what he calls "the power of the poet" in what should be now familiar terms:

The power of the Poet depends on the fact that the material world is a symbol or expression of the human mind and part for part. Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Light and darkness are our familiar expression for knowledge and ignorance and heat for love. Who looks upon a river in a meditative hour and is not reminded of the flux of all things? Throw a stone into the stream and the circles that propagate themselves are the beautiful type of all influence. (289)

Again, the otherwise unavailable tenors of inner life, its *feelings*, which are seeking expression, come to language only through the various grounds of objects of sensation: light (which grounded wisdom earlier and now grounds knowledge), dark, heat, a river, a spreading circle. The poet's job, according to Emerson, is little more than this metaphorical conversion of spirit into matter through the discovery of grounds: "He converts the solid globe, the land, the sea, the air, the sun, into symbols of thought. He makes the outward creation subordinate and merely a convenient alphabet to express thoughts and emotions" (291). Thereby the poet gives us the lexicon for the human mind built up out of the resources of nature and thus to define (and, ultimately, redefine) what it is to be human.

Nevertheless, this resource, though available to all, is not availed of — and is certainly not availed of in Emerson's New England. Rather it is "the habit of men (...) to rest in the objects immediately around them, to go along with the tide, and take their impulse from external things" (226). This may at first glance appear inconsistent (which would hardly be un-Emersonian), because taking an impulse from external things is precisely what the poet is supposed to do; but the idea is that the external world, nature, should be *subordinate* to the poet; not that the poet should be

subordinate to it. In the English tradition Shakespeare is exemplary: “Shakespeare possesses the power of subordinating nature for the purposes of expression beyond all poets. His imperial muse tosses the creation like a bauble from hand to hand to embody any capricious shade of thought that is uppermost in his mind” (293). Shakespeare’s gift is exemplary; he is the model poet who opens language and thus unfixes thought, a process which in itself is only enabled by the construction of new metaphors — the opening of grounds. Throughout Emerson’s career Shakespeare is the foremost example of the “liberating Gods” of the later essay “The Poet”, to which I shall return below.

What Shakespeare and all great poets liberate us from is “custom”; the enemy in many of Emerson’s major works, including *Nature*, “The American Scholar”, “The Divinity School Address”, “Self-Reliance”, and “Circles”. “Custom”, Emerson writes, “is the defacer of beauty, and the concealer of truth. Custom represents every thing as immovably fixed. But the first effort of thought is to lift things from their feet and make all objects of sense appear fluent. Even a small alteration in our position breaks the spell and removes the curtain of Custom” (*Lectures* 1 226). If we find ourselves — and for Emerson we nearly always do — caught up in the narrow circuit of custom, the world appears to have already been successfully fixed into position and thus seems immovable. It is thought that allows for a reordering and a glimpse of beauty and truth. But new thought, as has already been noted, requires a new and vital language; or, rather, and this is important, an old language that can be used in a new way. The world demands a fresh metaphorical inscription to be seen in its right light. In this poetic act both the world and man are liberated from custom. In the early lectures he phrases it as follows: “To break the chains of custom, to see everything as it absolutely exists, and so to clothe everything ordinary and even sordid with beauty is the aim of the Thinker” (228). The poet’s task is to clothe all subjects — no matter how quotidian and no matter how sordid (a line put in to excuse both Chaucer and Shakespeare) — with beauty.

What appears at first inappropriate about this particular metaphor of “clothing” is that rather than covering something it actually *reveals* an underlying truth; he has only just written, after all, that “custom (...) is the concealer of truth”. But here it is as if the vestment of beauty is transparent — like Eve seen by Satan in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*:

Eve separate he spies
 Veild in a Cloud of Fragrance, where she stood,
 Half spied so thick the Roses bushing round
 About her glowed (*Book 9* 424-427)

The transparency of Eve's scent and the partially obscuring bushes only add to her nakedness in the leering gaze of the Adversary. Satan's *fallen* eye is the eye of custom. But to the *unfallen* eye Eve's insubstantial veil reveals the innocence of her undimmed beauty. In these lines we have, as so often in *Paradise Lost*, a double view: both fallen and unfallen. Within the poem, beauty's role is to create a site of struggle between fixed and free behaviour — to create a sufficient condition for choice. Even Satan, dazzled by Eve, "abstracted stood/ From his own evil, and for a time stood/ Stupidly good" (*Book 9* 463-5). The first woman's veil of fragrance, her raiment of beauty, acts to enhance the innocence of her underlying form, and what Satan sees in Eve, who "summs all Delight" (454), and albeit only temporarily, is a respite from confusion; the deeper peace of a connection that comes, to borrow Milton's figures, with an escape from the "populous City" to the pleasant "rural sight" and "rural sound" of an Edenic landscape (445, 451). Satan has been liberated by beauty from his fixed pattern of behaviour; and in order to persist in evil he has to choose "the hot Hell that always in him burnes" (467); that is, he has to fall again. And analogously, for Emerson, the clothing of beauty discloses a connection to the whole that reorders our experience: "Every object in nature rightly seen is related to the whole and partakes of the perfection of the whole; a leaf, a sunbeam, a moment of time, and no sane man can wish to lose his admiration" (*Lectures* 1 229). The reader, then, of the ideal poem is like Satan struck stupid by Eve: his Fallen world view collapses in an epiphany of beauty and, for a moment, like the unfallen angels, he stands, as Satan 'stood', rather than falls. It is the poet's task to allow the reader access to this "nature rightly seen" and thus to recover him from the Fall.²

² The idea here that beauty allows you to find yourself in harmony with nature is analogous to some tentative research by Mark Johnson that aligns metaphor with Kant's concept of aesthetic judgement and the attunement of the free-play of the imagination with the understanding (Johnson 57-62).

But, and this is equally important, such prelapsarian visions must be receivable by all men: “All men are capable of this act. The very utterance of his thoughts to men, proves the poet’s faith, that, all men can receive them; that all men are poets, though in a less degree” (228). The further leap he makes is that all men are already poets “though in a less degree”, because all language is, at root, poetical: “[a]s we go back in history, language becomes more picturesque, until its infancy, when it is all poetry” (221). Now this is building to another of Emerson’s most famous lines, “[l]anguage is fossil poetry” (*Works* 3 13), but it begins with a less pithy reflection in December of 1841:

As the limestone in our quarries is found to consist of infinite masses of the remains of animicules, so language is made up of images or poetic tropes which now in their familiar secondary use have quite ceased to remind us of their poetic origin, as *howl* from *owl*, *ravenous* from *raven*, *rotation* from *wheel*, and so on to infinity. (*Journals* 8 160)

His point here is that men are all already poets; as he reminds us in “The Poet”: “[t]he people fancy they hate poetry, and they are all poets and mystics!” (*Works* 3 10) People, then, are already located in metaphors — albeit mostly dead metaphors (the difference between the poet and the mystic being that the latter, the mystics, are trapped in the narrow circuit of the dead metaphor: original insight faded to custom). But the very fact that language is metaphorical by nature has, for Emerson, the potential for liberation; a new metaphor opens up a new relation: what is needed to generate new metaphors is merely a new angle of vision, a new take on nature itself.

In order to attain this novelty, this liberty, it is not that we first need to see something new in nature (say, America) and then name it with a new word and thus crack custom (though this must have happened once — but that would have been before there was such a thing as custom). It is rather a process of discovering the vitality in our extant vocabulary that creates the new angle of vision by opening new metaphoric grounds. He tries to sketch the process of metaphorical re-inscription for the concept of “nature” in the in a journal entry of 1841:

The Metamorphosis of nature shows itself in nothing more than this that there is no word in our language that cannot become typical to us of nature by giving it emphasis. The world is a Dancer; it is a Rosary; it is a Torrent; it is a Boat; a Mist; a Spider's Snare; it is what you will; and the metaphor will hold, & it will give the imagination keen pleasure. Swifter than light the World converts itself into that thing you name & all things find their right place under the new & capricious classification. (*Journals* 7 23)

What is apparent here is that the change in the concept of "nature" is caused by a change in the commanding metaphor, not by some neologism, a scientific or geographic discovery or a philosophical vision. To return to Richards's formulation, when the *vehicle* changes the *ground* shifts, and the *tenor* (here the world) is reinvented accordingly. So, if the metaphor is the "world is a Dancer", then the tenor, "world", takes on the ground of the vehicle, the dancer. This ground is an open one — and that, I think, is key — for "dancing" means something different to every reader and in every time of its utterance, and thus the world itself is as open as the word's usable connotations. Even if the word Dancer is likely to have a core meaning of, say, a tension between rhythmic beauty and liberation; intimacy and formality, individuality and partnership, this will not exhaust the word's potential and thus its power to re-angle vision. If the vehicle shifts to a Rosary, then a whole new ground is opened and the Puritan and the Catholic will come to very different conclusions about the tenor. Any metaphor applied in this way — assuming that it has the energy of novelty — will metamorphose nature. This process is, as Emerson notes, capricious. But even so things find their right place within the classification. Language does not collapse at this proliferation because, in Emerson's theory, it is designed for it. Moreover, and as should be apparent from the range of the metaphors chosen by Emerson, this is necessarily an endless process. Each of his metaphors is either natural (torrent, mist, spider's snare) or found in nature in its widest sense (dancer, rosary, boat). It is when the whole (that is, nature) is conceived anew through any one of its particulars — which are all but numberless — that this metaphorical metamorphosis takes place. The shifting of vision which Emerson calls for is always already

there in the language — all that is needed is someone to point it out through an “apposite metaphor”.

But, as already observed, more usually people speak according to custom, according to the fixed dictates of dead metaphor — they are cud chewers rather than grazers, mystics rather than poets. As such, the power to create tends to lay dormant, waiting in the language for the right speaker. Waiting, that is, for the Poet to make the crucial connection between part and whole that will reawaken language. He develops this, albeit not very clearly, in a journal entry in 1841:

As to the *Miracle* of Poetry. There is but one miracle, the perpetual fact of Being & Becoming, the ceaseless Saliency, the transit from the Vast to the particular, which miracle, one & the same, has for its most universal name, the word *God*. Take one or two or three steps where you will, from any fact in nature or art, & you come out full on this fact; as you may penetrate the forest in any direction & go straight on, you will come to the sea. But all the particulars of the poet’s merit, his sweetest rhythms, the subtlest thoughts, the richest images, if you could pass into his consciousness, or rather, if you could exalt his consciousness, would class themselves in the common chemistry of thought & obey the laws of the cheapest mental combinations. (*Journals* 8 70-71)

The miracle of poetry, then, is movement — “transit” — from the whole (“the Vast”) “to the particular” and back again in a constantly evolving spiral. This movement, Emerson states, is the universal name “God”. It is *movement* that is truth; it is *movement* that is beauty: the ceaseless movement of the whole in each of its particulars. And each particular, when seen aright, takes you through the forest to the great central ever shifting “sea” that is the whole. It is the poet who creates these forest tracks, and therein lies his virtue. For, as Emerson makes clear the poet has no new tools in his consciousness, no new words, beyond those of the standard “chemistry” set owned by all. Poetry, Emerson contends, is the novel arrangement of standard particulars available to all — that is, everyday words — to take advantage of their shifting grounds. Even the neologisms of Milton or Shakespeare are but new compounds on these terms.

It is the poet’s use of these words, these endless particulars, to

disclose the whole that turns the "cheapest mental combination" into poetry, and makes the poet as such one with God, that is, a creator. If we go back to 1837 Emerson writes in his journal: "To create, to create is the proof of a Divine presence. Whoever creates is God, and whatever talents are, if the man create not, the pure efflux of the Deity is not his" (*Journals* 5 341). Creation, for Emerson, is all one process: the working through of divinity. To be a creator — a writer, an artist — is to participate in that process. Conversely, if a man does not create then God is absent and originality will not come. But where there is God there is original creation: "You shall not predict what the poet shall say and whilst ephemeral poetry hath its form, its contents, & almost its phrase out of the books & is only skilful in paraphrase or permutation of good authors, in these the good human soul speaks because it has something new to say" (341-342). Creation is not merely the incremental recasting of others' words; it is the novel use of these words — that "common chemistry of thought" — as living metaphors to open new grounds. It is having something new to say and thus participating in creation itself. To create, for Emerson, is always to become one with the divine; and it is only by becoming a conduit for the divine that the poet becomes original. The poet "has conspired with the high Cause and felt the holy glee with which man detects the ultimate oneness of the Seer & the spectacle. All the debts such a man could accumulate to other wit could never disturb his consciousness or originality" (*Journals* 8 70). Emerson uses the apt metaphor "conspire" — to breathe with (recalling his earlier association of spirit with wind) — to figure the poet's relationship with the divine. The poet and God ("the high Cause") are simultaneously inspired with the breath of creation; the word of the poet is its exhalation. It is this extraordinarily elevated sense of the poet's worth that will be fully explored in Emerson's great 1844 essay "The Poet".

Early on in "The Poet" Emerson restates the importance of the variation of meaning to be drawn from everyday objects: "the highest minds of the world have never ceased to explore the double meaning, or shall I say, the quadruple, or the centuple, or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact" (*Works* 3 3-4). This is clearly a development of his earlier thoughts about metaphor's metamorphic power now straining to express itself as what he will call "symbolism": the liberating effect of the endlessly shifting grounds of metaphorical ascription. The "sensuous fact"

is the particular of nature that can be applied to affirm the whole. Access to this “manifold meaning” is necessarily dual: the poet has to discover it and the reader to grasp it. This is why, as he will say so famously in “The American Scholar” in 1837, that there is “creative reading, as well as creative writing” (*Works* 1 58); a statement originally made about a year earlier in his journal with explicit reference to his ongoing lectures. It is the act of criticism itself, “When”, as he puts it in the journal, “the mind is braced by the weighty expectation of a prepared work, the page of whatever book we read, becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant & the sense of our author is as broad as the world. There is creative reading as well as creative writing” (*Journals* 5 233). Creative reading, then, is the acceptance of manifold meaning; the expectation that we will be stretched, even transformed, by the potential range of each word we read. Creative reading takes us, as readers, to the poet’s source.

This source for the poet, Emerson contends, is nothing more than “the conversation they have had with nature” (*Works* 3 4); by which he means the transformation of nature through the application of original symbols; which will, in turn, transform language, the world, and every reader. Now, once again, for most men there is an “obstruction, or some excess of phlegm in [their] constitution” (4) which prevents them from adequately flexing language; rather they remain in thrall to its narrow round. The poet, though, is “the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart” (5). On initial inspection, this line seems to offer us two directions. Firstly, it suggests that the poet is a unique being, capable of accessing a linguistic flexibility that others can only dream of. Secondly, it tells us that the poet is more broadly representative of man; only having a greater degree of what all men possess: namely, the power of metaphorical inscription. The danger here is that, in taking the first line, Emerson elevates the poet above others; implying a kind of egotistical sublime. But actually, and necessarily, the contrary is true for Emerson: the poet is without impediment precisely because he disappears in his poetry. The only impediment is the very egotism that Emerson is often accused of valorising. Ego, or indeed individuality of any kind in the poet, is anathema

to Emerson. Even Milton, who does so much, especially through the idealization of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*, to reclaim the perfectibility of the human, and “[f]rom a just knowledge of what man should be (...) described what he was” (*Lectures* 1 160), fails to successfully remove himself from his work. As such, Emerson complains, “Adam and Milton are often difficult to be separated” (161). Whereas, “[i]t is true of Homer and Shakespeare, that they do not appear in their poems; that those prodigious geniuses did cast themselves so totally in to their song, that their individuality vanishes, and the poet towers to the sky, whilst the man quite disappears” (161). What is sublime is not the man but the poet; the poet who is but the sum of his poems, not more: the man quite “disappears”, the poet “towers to the sky”. The ideal poet, Shakespeare or Homer, has become transparent before the flux of creation; and thus become part of that flux; and the only way to become that is through the transformation of language itself. In so doing the poet also represents the lapsed potential of all people to receive and impart ever becoming nature, and thus become creative “divinity transmuted” (*Works* 3 4).

For Emerson there is no ego — no individuality — in the poet because “poetry was written before all time was, and whenever we are so finely organised that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word, or a verse, and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem” (5-6). As such, the poet is only present as an individual when he or she makes a mistake, mishears, mis-transcribes what was prior, or adds something extra — such as the cant of Puritanism that marks, so Emerson claims, even Milton’s greatest works. Creation on these is certainly not the act of an individual; rather it is a particular state or “organisation” that transcends the individual but which allows for the transcription of a prior creation as accurately as possible. The poet disappearing into the web of nature, and then coming back to report on nature in nature’s own form — namely, proliferating metaphor is, arguably, the origin of Emerson’s organicism. From this we get Emerson’s most famous statement on poetic form:

For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem, — a thought so alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns

nature with a new thing. The thought and the form are equal in order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form. The poet has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. (6-7)

The first line is often offered as a defence *avant la lettre* of Whitman based on the rather unlikely assumption that Emerson is suggesting metre is *passé*, when he seems to me to be saying, on the contrary, that metre-making is inevitable; a part of the very structure of nature that the poet is reporting on. Indeed, “[a] rhyme in one of our sonnets”, he writes, “should not be less pleasing than the iterated nodes of a sea-shell” (15). The form of poetry when it is novel (a “new thing”) necessarily reflects the living structure of nature. Even so the origin of that thought is troublesome to pin down as Emerson’s circularity is, to say the least, challenging: “thought and form are equal in order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form”. The thought, one might say, is the underlying form that comes to the poet when he disappears into nature’s flux; the alignment of his finer organisation, ready to be written down. Earlier Emerson called this “conspiring” with the divine; that is, breathing the same source. This divinely inspired thought, then, is the *form* of the poem that *will be* produced. It is a wholly new creation which is itself an open process of “meaning in multitude”. Thus the thought precedes the form in the “order of genesis”, that is, in the order of creation. Creation, in the romantic tradition of Wordsworth’s “emotion recollected in tranquillity” (42) or Shelley’s “fading coal” (228), registers the loss of a more primal experience, which in Emerson’s case is an insight into the flowing form of nature as proliferating language. But, and crucially I think, this later form, namely the poem, replicates nature’s fluxions rather than petrifying a prior moment, enabling the reader to be “richer” in the poet’s “fortune”. The very structure of Emersonian symbolism resists stabilization and creates a form for manifold meaning.

Symbolism, then, is the name Emerson gives to language at its highest intensity wherein the meaning of each word is revived and accordingly the possibilities of man and nature are increased. But necessarily in “The Poet” this creation of novelty does not require anything new to happen:

The poorest experience is rich enough for all the purposes of expressing thought. Why covet a knowledge of new facts? Day and night, house and garden, a few actions, serve us as well as would all the trades and spectacles. We are far from having exhausted the significance of the few symbols we use. We can come to use them yet with a terrible simplicity. (*Works* 3 11)

The poet, as has been already observed, does not need new words, or even new experiences. What he needs is to recognise the proper value of language as it is; this value lies in the innate ambiguity of all metaphorical grounds that allow even the most mundane word (vehicle) to stand for a deeper spiritual fact (tenor). As such a thing can represent a thought; indeed, only a thing can represent a thought, as at root all language is metaphorical — the aforementioned “fossil poetry”. The poet is only the place where this ambiguity reaches its symbolic potential:

The world thus put under the mind for verb and noun, the poet is he who can articulate it. For, though life is great, and fascinates, and absorbs, — and though all men are intelligent of the symbols through which it is named, — yet they cannot originally use them. We are symbols, and inhabit symbols; workmen, work, and tools, words and things, birth and death, all are emblems; but we sympathize with the symbols, and, being infatuated with the economical use of things, we do not know that they are thoughts. (12)

Here, again, custom disables creativity. All the building blocks are there waiting to be used, but the very economy Americans cherish — calling a spade a spade — leaves them inarticulate. Articulacy comes when a spade is no longer a spade, but the symbol of, say, an enquiry into hidden depths, or of the planting of a new thought in the Earth itself. The physical, sensual, factual world yields the symbols of spiritual expression. But the poet does not hereby become an individual worthy in themselves of celebration, they are but a conduit: “the condition of true naming, on the poet’s part, is his resigning himself to the divine aura which breathes through forms, and accompanying that” (15). The poet disappears into pure form, pure creation.

So, far from being an obstruction to our knowledge of inner life, inner life on these terms is the endlessly circulating grounds of the apposite

metaphors we use to describe it; and any poetic description will necessarily re-inscribe that inner life as something else than it was before. That is the purpose of poetry. It is also the ground of a National Literature. In “The Poet” Emerson laments that “[w]e do not, with sufficient plainness, of sufficient profoundness, address ourselves to life, not dare we chaunt our own times and social circumstances” (21). The plainness he desires is the application of an everyday vocabulary; the profoundness is the unreleased potential of metaphor. Emerson’s aspiration is clear: “America”, he writes, “is a poem in our eyes, and it will not wait long for metres” (22). The landscape, then, is already a poem, already a construction of language; the words used to describe it already anticipate being shaped into a form that can adequately represent its originality; that is, they are awaiting the opening of their ground. When these metaphors become, as they do, a pond, a whale, a scarlet letter, a leaf of grass, a volcano, then a national literature is born. One purpose of Emerson’s lectures and essays is to ready the reader for such permanent creation and enable this literature to be recognised when it comes. But they are also a call to potential poets to release language through metaphor, the creative flux that Emerson names as Nature, God, the Cause, Truth, and Beauty. But these words, for all their customary finality, never name a single thing, a discoverable entity; they name an endless process of proliferating meanings and the endless interpretations that will arise from them.

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an original interpretation of Emerson's theory of metaphor as it appears in his lectures and journals of the 1820s and 1830s, in the essay *Nature* (1836), and as it develops into his theory of symbolism in the essay "The Poet" (1844). I argue that Emerson recognizes metaphor as a liberating principle for original expression, and I use I. A. Richards' concept of "ground" from his 1936 theory of metaphor to explore in detail Emerson's purposive engagement with figurative language. What this leads to is a fresh interpretation of Emerson's concept of "symbolism" that is outlined in his 1844 essay "The Poet", one of the grounding statements of American literary originality.

KEYWORDS

American renaissance; Emerson; metaphor; symbolism; Transcendentalism

RESUMO

Este artigo oferece uma interpretação original da teoria de Emerson acerca da metáfora, tal como esta surge nas suas palestras e diários das décadas de 1820 e 1830, no ensaio *Nature* (1836), e como a mesma evoluiu para a sua teoria sobre simbolismo no ensaio "The Poet" (1844). Argumento que Emerson entende a metáfora como princípio libertador de uma expressão original, fazendo uso do conceito de *ground* proposto por I. A. Richards, revelado na sua teoria sobre metáfora de 1936, de modo a explorar em detalhe a ligação intencional (*purposive engagement*) que Emerson estabelece com a linguagem figurativa. Daqui resulta uma nova interpretação do conceito de "simbolismo" defendido por Emerson e descrito no acima referido ensaio "The Poet", afirmação basilar da originalidade literária americana.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Renascença americana; Emerson; metáfora; simbolismo; Transcendentalismo
