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The Permanent Literature of the Human Race: Ralph Waldo Emerson and World Literature

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With much to say I put off writing until perhaps

I shall have nothing in my memory.

Now too soon then too late.

I must try the pen &

make a beginning.

(R.W. Emerson 1837, *JMN* 5: 393)

Abstract

Ralph Waldo Emerson is generally considered among the intellectuals who most contributed to the establishment of a quintessentially American literature. Although scholars have noted how much he himself—for his own education as a writer and as a philosopher—had looked for inspiration in foreign authors, and even though his part in a transatlantic network of intellectuals has also been explored, no critical attention has been dedicated to Emerson as a theorist of world literature.

This dissertation examines Emerson's conception of wholeness and his desire to look for unity in diversity, both considered as the philosophical standpoint from which Emerson arrives at a definition of literature as a transnational instrument of knowledge which explores and embodies the universal nature of mankind. I maintain that this characterization of literature, coupled with the realization that new modes of production and circulation were altering the inner workings of literature, led Emerson to conceive of a "permanent" canon of texts that embodied universal values and could resonate with everyone at all points in history.

I trace his interpretation of world literature back to a series of early and later lectures, as well as to his journals, to demonstrate that although not explicitly stated, "permanent literature" serves as a foil to his admittedly more popular and certainly more direct calls for cultural independence and American self-reliance.

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Abbreviations

AW *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*. Edited by Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson. Yale University Press, 1995.

CS *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Edited by Albert J. von Frank et al. University of Missouri Press, 1989–1992. 4 vols.

CW *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Edited by Alfred R. Ferguson et al. Harvard University Press, 1971–2013. 10 vols.

EL *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Edited by Robert E. Spiller, Stephen E. Whicher, and Wallace E. Williams. Harvard University Press, 1959–1972. 3 vols.

JMN *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson.* Edited by William H. Gilman et al. Harvard University Press, 1960–1982. 16 vols.

Letters *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson.* Edited by Ralph L. Rusk and Eleanor M. Tilton. Columbia University Press, 1990–1995. 10 vols.

LL *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson: 1843–1871*. Edited by Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson. University of Georgia Press, 2001. 2 vols.

W *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Edited by Edward Waldo Emerson. Houghton Mifflin, 1903–1904. 12 vols.

Introduction

My first encounter with the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson dates back to 2013, when I was twenty years old, and I had just started my second year at university. I remember vividly the afternoons I spent in a small classroom located in a nineteenth century Roman villa that was built for Rosa Vercellana, a countess from Piedmont who was the favorite of king Victor Emmanuel II. Thinking back, I cannot help but wonder how much Emerson would have been excited to learn that, more than two hundred years after his birth, his works were being taught in a seminar specifically dedicated to American literature taking place in a villa which used to be a meeting place for members of the Italian aristocracy and that would later become part of the largest public university in Europe. However, what ten years ago drove me to Emerson was not his passion for democracy, nor his commitment as an educator. Fresh out of high school and not at all self-reliant, what I appreciated in Emerson was what I considered to be his authoritative and seemingly stable insightfulness. But I was wrong! Not because Emerson is not insightful, far from it, but because the more of his essays one reads, the more he appears to be the "unsettler," the "endless seeker, with no Past at [his] back" that he describes in "Circles" (*CW* 2: 188).

Having—hopefully—learned from him, in what follows I also try to unsettle something, namely the conception of Emerson as a thinker who was solely concerned with the emergence of a quintessentially American literary tradition. I believe Emerson envisioned literature not necessarily as the property of a certain nation, but rather as a diachronic cross-cultural phenomenon. As he writes in his notebook in 1835, "Thought is of no country" (*JMN* 12: 40) and, as history shows, trying to set boundaries around ideas is simply not an option. In Emerson's time, nothing could have stopped the spread across Europe of the ideas behind the 1848 Spring of Nations. More than hundred years later

nothing could have prevented the same from happening during the protests of 1968, and nothing can now be done to set a limit to the movements and ideas (such as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, Climate movement, etc.) that have been motivating millions of people around the world to march on the streets of our cities and make their voice heard.

But is this only applicable to more recent times and to political and social issues that are normally perceived as more urgent because of their pertinence to individual experiences? Although literature has traveled far and wide from the beginning of time, from the first forms of oral literature to contemporary poems such as those shared daily on social media by writers like Rupi Kaur, it was in the nineteenth century that a more sustained effort to firmly locate literature within the borders of the nation-state became more evident. However, while this was happening, the paradigm of world literature started gaining new currency. As Claudio Guillén puts it, it was actually "the rise of nationalism [that laid] the foundation for a new internationalism" (27).

By exploring Emerson's concept of literature in relation to this historical context, with special attention to his philosophy of wholeness, and with no intention of downplaying his at times nationalistic views on literature and culture, I argue that Emerson should be considered as a literary globalist, for—although he never uses the term—in the same years in which Johann Wolfgang von Goethe writes about *Weltliteratur*, Emerson too is sketching a canon of world literature, a list of authors that belong to what he calls the "permanent literature of the human race" (*EL* 3: 210).

In the first chapter of this study, I address Emerson's canonical role within the field of American Literature. I touch upon the question of his Americanism, showing how often he was perceived to be tantamount to the figure of the American intellectual. I then move on to explore the exceptionalist rhetoric that he employed in some of his essays and the way

it intermingles with his nationalist political stances as well as with his cosmopolitan idealist tendencies. I bring the chapter to a close with a reading of Emerson through Kwame Anthony Appiah's concept of "partial cosmopolitanism" to underline the fact that these competing forces did not necessarily stand in opposition to one another.

In the second chapter, I explore Emerson's philosophy of literature, which I see as sturdily grounded in his conception of Wholeness. I begin with a discussion on the meaning of Emerson's "distant vision" to explain how, through this concept, he arrives at a holistic understanding of the world. In the rest of the chapter, I delve further into the implications of the ontological unity that he sees as underlying reality, to then move into a more in-depth analysis of the figures that he considers as "uniters," those who can synthesize unity and diversity.

Having delineated what I believe to be the philosophical foundations of Emerson's literary theory, I progress to the central section of this study. In the third chapter, I provide an overview of Emerson's internationality by exploring the significance of his travels as well as his exposure to and participation in a transatlantic network of intellectuals. This experience is especially significant for his English Literature Series, that I analyze at length and in which Emerson first establishes his theory of a canon of permanently relevant texts. It is in the same series that he identifies—in a rather unsystematic way—three criteria to recognize a "permanent" book: truth, moral sentiment, and universality. After having addressed each of these aspects individually, I turn my attention to other texts in the Emersonian opus—as well as his journals—in which he further explains the qualities that grant endurance to books.

Finally, in the closing chapter, I discuss Emerson in conjunction with other prominent figures of world literature in an effort to situate his theory of permanent literature within

this field and among its theorists, highlighting connections and pointing out instances in which Emerson's discourse deviates from other influential paradigms.

1. The American Orienter: Emerson and American Cultural Independence

Global relevance—and international recognition—of national literatures seems to be often in the hands of single individuals who, with their work, not only secure everlasting fame for themselves, but also succeed in giving prominence to their national culture. Within it, the publication of their works becomes a watershed moment that divides the history of that particular literature in two parts. There seems to be a before and after Shakespeare, a before and after Dante, a before and after Goethe—just to look at some European examples. These writers have acquired their predominant role on the literary scene by means of the revolutionary power of their writings (in terms of content and style), as well as by their ability to create works of literature that made them emerge as representative of the culture of their era. They offered their readers writings that often dealt with new themes or aimed at tackling the most pressing issues of their time, and they did so with an original style which often included neologisms (as in the case of Shakespeare) or with a language which *de facto* was instrumental in setting a new linguistic standard (as it happened with Dante).

Every nation of the globe has its own national literary hero(es), and clearly the United States is no exception. The long nineteenth century, when the US was still a geographically divided and culturally fragmented young nation, was the time when many of its most influential intellectuals rose to prominence. There is little to no doubt that the works of all the writers part of what Francis Otto Matthiessen famously defined as the American Renaissance – Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman – greatly contributed to the international recognition of a genuine American literature. While there are certainly other authors of the period who should have been included in what has been rightly criticized as a scholarly work overly

focused on white male authors, the importance that Ralph Waldo Emerson had on the formation of a quintessentially American cultural tradition can hardly be overstated.

Emerson, more than any other writer included by Matthiessen in his seminal 1941 text *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, is the intellectual who has more clearly articulated the need for the development of an American literary tradition. Time and again, in his essays as in his lectures, he insisted on the necessity of America's cultural independence and by means of his incessant work on the lecture circuit—between 1833 and 1881 he delivered around 1500 lectures in 283 cities across the nation—he not only became one of highest paid and most influential public lecturer of his time, but also acquired the necessary means to share these ideas with the widest possible audience. As any other nation, the US were and still are, in Benedict Anderson's words, an "imagined political community" (6), which especially in Emerson's time had no clear cultural identity. The lack of real cultural hubs, other than the lectures offered within the lyceum circuit, that were open and accessible to the general public—which at that time mostly excluded women and African Americans—meant that mid-nineteenth century Americans had to do without a cohesive entity which could have provided fertile ground where local talents could thrive. Emerson spent his whole intellectual life making his fellow-countrymen aware that America's cultural independence was as necessary as its political independence, and that such a revolution inevitably meant a clear break from the European cultural tradition.

Emerson, like Shakespeare in England, Dante in Italy and Goethe in Germany, created works of literature that strongly resonated with his contemporaries as well as with his later readers. They each managed to have a productive impact on the literary scene of their nations, and this accomplishment resulted in their canonization, both national and international. They all came to be considered as national literary icons and with their works

they have contributed to draw international attention to their respective literatures. As Joel Porte rightly notes in his introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, it was through him that "in literary terms at least, […] America [was] put on the map" (1). Nowadays, Emerson's relevance within and for the American national canon is still easily noticeable when looking at any literary history currently taught in schools and colleges. Every American learns about Emerson and is aware of his importance within American culture. Interestingly enough, not only the idea that he founded American literature is very much engrained in all those who are the least bit familiar with US culture, but it is also currently being transmitted and passed into products of artificial intelligence.

The first months of 2023 will probably be remembered as the time when Chat GPT-3, the chatbot developed by OpenAI, broke the internet. The "chatbot-on-steroids" that, as journalist Gian Volpicelli correctly notes, is characterized by a "rapid-fire production of human-like prose" ("ChatGPT broke the EU plan to regulate AI"), came to be regarded as a significant advancement in the branch of AI known as "natural language processing" (NLP), which concentrates on how computers can analyze and use language like humans do. As Ross Gruetzemacher points out, up until recently AI was considered to perform better than humans at data-driven decision-making tasks, but it was still deemed "inferior to humans for cognitive and creative ones" ("The Power of Natural Language Processing"). For years, AI Language models were programmed using a certain set of language data from which, by means of statistical techniques, they were taught to predict the next word in a sentence. Given the limited data with which they worked, they had obvious difficulties in using language for creative tasks. Chat GPT-3, though, seems to overcome this problem. This particular AI, which can process larger amounts of data in parallel, has now learned to use many different linguistic nuances and a more detailed language, two crucial factors which made it possible for it to acquire a human-like ability to comprehend and produce text.

Not only is Chat GPT-3 now able to understand and employ different kinds of language which adequately respond to the user's requests in terms of tone and linguistic diversity, but what is more interesting is that, unlike other chatbots, Chat GPT-3 does not search the internet to collect information. Its "knowledge" comes from a wide corpus of texts from various sources, such as Wikipedia, news portals, government websites, but also scientific journals, books, podcasts and other online sources. Although its creators explicitly call attention to the fact that Chat GPT-3 "sometimes writes plausible-sounding but incorrect or nonsensical answers" ("Introducing ChatGPT"), many are turning to this particular AI to get information about topics they are not too familiar with. Reflecting upon such a configuration two questions come to mind. Why are more and more people using AI as a source of truthful information when its developers unambiguously affirm its fallible nature? And even when Chat GPT-3 offers correct notions to the users, is it really possible or wise to trust its sources? Not relying on the internet as a source of knowledge means that users are often offered outdated information or simply just a piece of the larger and more variegated discourse produced by the experts of a certain theme.

Chat GPT-3 of course "knows" about Emerson. And what is particularly interesting is that this AI has been evidently instructed on materials that rightly call attention to his importance for American literature. When prompted to share information about Emerson, it immediately writes about his importance to American literature. Even though, when asked to justify such a statement, it remains rather vague and general in its replies, it is surprising to note how much the notion of Emerson as America's cultural hero is predominant in its knowledge on the subject. Clearly, Chat GPT-3 was developed as a language model and should not be used nor trusted as a source of scholarly information, but nonetheless the information on which it bases its replies can and should be critically analyzed, if anything for its incredible popularity among students of all ages and levels.

As a doctoral student writing on Emerson, I felt I simply had to ask Chat GPT-3 to tell me something on Emerson and American literature. To spice things up and test it on its ability to understand linguistic nuances and work with a specific type of language, I asked the AI to write a rap song about Emerson and American literature. The result was instructive and, needless to say, quite entertaining.

Yo, let me tell you about a man
A poet and philosopher, a legend of his land
Ralph Waldo Emerson, his name's known to all
An American icon, he stood up tall
He spoke of nature and self-reliance
And the human spirit's defiance
Against conformity and convention
He preached individualism and intention
Emerson, he was no ordinary dude
His ideas were bold, his vision shrewd
He believed in the power of the word
And his voice was heard, it was always heard
He championed American literature
And saw in it a force of nature, a cultural fixture
He believed that the great works of old
Could be surpassed by American gold
Emerson saw in his countrymen
A new breed of poets and writers, a different ken
He believed in their talent and their voice
And urged them to speak out, to make a choice

So let's raise a glass to this great man
His ideas still relevant, his vision grand
Emerson's legacy lives on
In American literature, his spirit's never gone.

This shows AI has learned a thing or two about rhymes and rhythm, as well as about Emerson's national—and international—recognition as a "legend of his land." The Emerson fans will even maybe get a good laugh out of that pun in line 4, where "he stood up tall" could either be referred to Emerson's height (he was six feet tall) or read as a reference to his proud and unyielding behavior. Jokes aside, what is evident from this text is that Chat GPT-3 has been instructed on materials which evidently highlight Emerson's role as an "American icon." Emerson's emphasis on self-reliance, his interest in nature and his efforts against conformity and convention are all crucial themes in his works, as are his calls for America's cultural detachment from the old and traditional models which he believed were still being imported from Europe. And while all of these themes are mentioned in this AI generated text, Emerson's significance for American literature clearly plays a predominant role. It occupies almost half of the text making it clear that this aspect is of primary importance and one of the key notions that were used to train Chat GPT-3. Is this attention to Emerson as a cultural representative wrong or exaggerated? Certainly not—but it is only one part of the scholarly discourse around this crucial intellectual figure of nineteenth century America, one that should be complemented by other, equally important, readings of the works of the sage of Concord.

As the leading figure of Transcendentalism, Emerson has always been at the center of scholarly debate. This critical attention is not only due to his predominant role on the literary scene of mid-nineteenth century America, but also derives, at least in part, from his multifaceted and extensive corpus of writing. When he was only sixteen, Emerson began

writing in his journal—now published in a Harvard University Press sixteen volume series which comprises more than three million words—and shortly thereafter he started delivering sermons and lectures while continuing to write poems and essays. Emerson was an extremely prolific writer who, using different mediums and genres, addressed an extraordinarily wide array of issues. His interests ranged from literature to politics, from religion to philosophy. He wrote about what he understood as human nature, the soul, but also about daily matters and pressing questions of the time. Such a variegated body of texts has obviously generated a considerable amount of scholarly work. And yet, this thesis wants to draw attention to one aspect which has been so far largely ignored.

By investigating Emerson's concepts of internationality and world literature, I want to contribute to the study of Emerson's literary criticism, as well as present him as an early contributor to the discussion over world literature (and thus also the field of comparative literature), thereby (re)defining his role within the global sphere. What is apparently being passed into artificial intelligence, this version of Emerson as a thinker mainly, when not solely, concerned with the literary present and future of the young nation of the United States, is here problematized and seen as only a part of Emerson' much broader and complicated stance on literature as a cross-cultural phenomenon.

Emerson's thoughts on the Old World—and the world outside of the US altogether—show a complex, polyvalent and dialogical relationship that transcends a simple and fixed categorization. I maintain that his concept of world literature, though not explicitly stated, was part of his thinking from the very start of his career and serves as a foil to his admittedly more popular and certainly more direct calls for cultural independence and American self-reliance. Although Emerson is traditionally remembered for his emphasis on American originality, this project focuses on all those instances where he chose to look beyond the national context, on all those writings where Emerson's mind "tyrannized over by its own

unifying instinct"—as he writes in "The American Scholar" (*CW* 1: 54)—goes on to find relatedness and unity in diversity.

This cosmopolitan version of Emerson, a reading of his works covering the literary world which calls attention to his search for connections and to his relationality, which highlights his impulse to transcend national boundaries, has to be put in dialogue with the more traditional image of Emerson as the father of American literature. A closer reading of Emerson makes clear that dichotomies never truly found a place in his philosophy. As Whitman famously chose to ignore the problem of contradiction on account of his being able to contain multitudes, Emerson similarly refused to be constricted to one opinion only because of (a foolish) consistency which he called the "hobgoblin of little minds" (*CW* 2: 33). The infinite possibilities that nineteenth century Americans thought their country could offer, were also adamantly claimed in the writings of the intellectuals who were in the process of defining the cultural character of the nation. Everything is circular in Emerson; the more options and opinions can coexist in one of his essays the better. As Susan L. Field argues, "the linear form contradiction often assumes, first one statement and then an opposing response, is not the form Emerson uses […] he is more interested in remaining at the site of the contradiction" (134). She believes that this tension interests him "because in this configurational space he finds genesis." This is the same genesis in which another philosopher and important interpreter of Emerson, Stanley Cavell, finds the origin of philosophy, which to him is "something that helps us move past such 'fixated conflicts' as those between 'solipsism and realism,' 'the private and the public,' or 'subjectivity and objectivity'" (Goodman 297).

It is precisely with this in mind that I believe not only that Emerson as the national literary hero *can* coexist with Emerson as a theorist of world literature, but that these two readings of the works of the Sage of Concord *should* be put in a fruitful relation with each

other. In an attempt to transcend "fixated conflicts" which have been perpetuated in literary criticism, I want to situate my work in that configurational space which allows for multiple interpretations of a certain fact to coexist in a productive way. Much like the instruments of an orchestra which function individually but also as parts of a harmonious whole, I intend to offer a new take on Emerson's writings not to hinder the legitimacy of other interpretations, and not even with the intention of surpassing them, but rather with the aim of suggesting an added layer of meaning. Using the musical metaphor, this is not meant as a solo, it is instead an additional cello that wants to play its part and join the string family of the orchestra.

In the last few years, there have been some dissenting studies which sought to add other perspectives to the extensive body of scholarly works focused on Emerson. The very broad theme of Emerson and cosmopolitanism has been explored in works such as Oisín Keohane's *Cosmo-nationalism: American, French and German Philosophy* (2018) in which Emerson, while not described as an advocate for Manifest Destiny or racial nationalism, is depicted as a thinker who, by identifying one single nation as the home of "Man," is problematically privileging "what he takes to be the cosmopolitan underpinnings of the USA" (157). Tom F. Wright, who worked on the lyceum as a cosmopolitan medium, in his 2013 edited volume titled *The Cosmopolitan Lyceum: Lecture Culture and the Globe in Nineteenth Century America* saw Emerson as deeply involved in this cosmopolitan project of democratic culture. Nikhil Bilwakesh, in his 2009 essay "'This prospering country is your ornament': Emerson and the 'Instructive' Value of the Cosmopolitan Project," analyzed Emerson's economic cosmopolitanism in the historical and political context of his time. However, it is only recently that literary criticism has been paying more attention to the topics of Emerson, literature, and the world.

In the past fifteen years, literary scholars from all backgrounds have started to rethink Emerson and his writings through a more trans-national and cross-cultural lens. The most recent effort toward this goal is David LaRocca and Ricardo Miguel-Alfonso's edited collection titled *A Power to Translate the World: New essays on Emerson and International Culture* (2015) which is focused on the numerous non-American writers and texts that influenced Emerson, as well as on Emerson's creative reception in a rather varied selection of non-American books. In *Ralph Waldo Emerson in Context,* edited by Wesley Mott (2014), a whole section is dedicated to Emersonian ideas grouped under the heading "The Wide World" (the telling title of Emerson's first regular journal) as if to signal that his vast spectrum of concepts such as literature, poetry and poetics, or the human mind cannot, and should not, be confined into national boundaries. Another study that goes in the same direction is Leslie Eckel's chapter "Between Cosmos and Cosmopolis: Emerson's National Criticism," part of her 2013 volume *Atlantic Citizens: Nineteenth-Century American Writers at Work in the World*. There, she examines "the familiar textual instances in which Emerson has been mistaken either for America or as the nation's literary spokesman" (99) and instead of perpetuating such readings, she demonstrates how Emerson was "far more invested in philosophical questions such as those of 'immensity' and 'eternity' that mattered to him above and beyond the history of the United States itself" (100).

She confirms that scholars have recently been offering "alternative visions of his involvement in global networks of literature, religion, and politics" (100) and that Emerson's interest in the issue of nationality was definitely not his primary concern. She stresses that, as other critics have noted, he was certainly more "concerned with establishing intellectual and spiritual affinities across national borders than with making patriotic statements in support of his own country" (100). On a similar note, in 2010, Jan Stievermann in his chapter "'We want men… who can open their eyes wider than to a nationality': Ralph Waldo

Emerson's Vision of an American World Literature" included in *Emerson for the Twenty-first Century* (edited by Barry Tharaud), contests Emerson's traditional role as a representative of American cultural nationalism, which he believes:

> used to make him a celebrated patriot liberator, but has now turned him into a frequently scapegoated ideologue of American letters. In place of this inadequate view of Emerson, I argue that he embodies a religiously motivated cosmopolitanism and never really committed himself to an organicist notion of literature as a means of national self-realization. Rather, he aimed at what might be called an American world literature, which he conceptualized as a mode of intercultural translation in the service of mankind's spiritual education and moral self-conquest. (166)

That same year, Johannes Voelz in *Transcendental Resistance: The New Americanists and Emerson's Challenge* notes Emerson's ambiguous stances on the issues of nationalism, imperialism, and racism and argues that his famous equivocality has caused his writings to be considered as either supporting of certain expansionist and imperialist aspects of United States history and culture, or as example of how "cunningly he opened up possibilities of identification and solidarity beyond the temporal and spatial confines of the nation" (205). To him, this inconsistency was instead a conscious choice made to have a "series of truly incompatible positions that served him well on the lecture circuit" (205), but—be that as it may—what seems indisputable is that it is a disservice Emerson to relegate him to play the role of the spokesperson of American cultural nationalism.

More and more scholars have been demonstrating that Emerson, to use Wai Chee Dimock's words, is "*American* only in caricature" ("Deep Time", 770) and that, as Lawrence Buell has pointed out in his landmark text *Emerson*, while being undoubtedly an American

icon, he is also a thinker who "anticipates the globalizing age in which we increasingly live" (3). Immediately aware of the apparent paradox, Buell further asks his readers:

> How can a figure so commonly and understandably taken as a spokesperson for U.S. national values like "American individualism" also be thought of as anticipating a "postnational" form of consciousness? Yet the fact is that Emerson had surprisingly limited patience for nationalism as such and would probably have been far more supportive than critical of the increasing interest being taken today by historians of U.S. culture in how it has been shaped in interaction with transatlantic, transpacific, and hemispheric influences. (3)

In his book, Buell approaches Emerson's writings from several cultural contexts: the regional-ethnic, the national, the transatlantic, and the global. He believes that Emerson strove to not be held back by provincial and national allegiances. As he writes:

> The most striking qualities of Emerson's work often tend to get lost when we yield too quickly to the temptation of casting him as epitomizing the values of nation or regional tribe, instead of conceiving him in tension between such a role and a more cosmopolitan sense of how a writer-intellectual should think and be. Emerson is almost always at his most interesting when striving to free his mind from parochial entanglements of whatever sort. Not that he always succeeded in doing so. Sometimes the effort just led him back to stereotypes again, into programmatic tributes to the greatness of the self-sufficient individual. At best, however, he opened up the prospect of a much more profound sense of the nature, challenge, and promise of mental emancipation, whatever one's race, sex, or nation might be. That is the Emerson most worth preserving. (4-5)

If Buell is right, and Emerson has taught individuals of every race, sex, and nation, the art of mental emancipation, this proves just how strong the cosmopolitan and cross-cultural power of literature is. And this realization cannot but call into question the idea of American literary studies.

After all, as Wai Chee Dimock writes, what does it even mean to refer to "a body of writing as *American*? What assumptions enable us to take an adjective derived from a territorial unit – an *America*, a set of spatial coordinates on a map – and turn it into a mode of literary causality: a set of attributes based on the territorial, determined by it, and subsumable under its jurisdiction?" (2001, 755). In these past twenty years, critics have been working on extending the scope and horizon of American literature and of writers such as Emerson, for as Dimock argues putting the label "American" on a certain work of literature means that we "assume, with or without explicit acknowledgment, that literature is an effect, an epiphenomenon, of the US, territorially predicated and territorially describable" (2001, 755). In her seminal book *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (2009) Dimock maintains that American literature as a construct does not pertain to the nation-state, but to the human species as a whole. A few years prior, in 2007, Paul Giles had argued for what he calls the "deterritorialization of American literature" (in the chapter bearing the same title, part of the volume *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*, edited by Dimock and Lawrence Buell) by stressing the fact that associating American literature with the works produced within the geographical boundaries of what we currently understand as the United States, is a "formulation that should be seen as confined to a relatively limited and specific time in history, roughly the period between the end of the American Civil War in 1865 and the presidency of Jimmy Carter, which ended in 1980" (39). Before the Civil War, he argues, there simply was no well-defined space with

which one could associate the idea of American literature, and after 1980, globalization forced us to reconsider the concepts at the core of American national identity.

Just as Dimock does, Giles goes back to this theme time and again in his writings. In 2011, he further expands on the same idea in *The Global Remapping of American Literature* and, in 2019, in *American World Literature: An Introduction* he makes a point of demonstrating how American literature has now necessarily evolved into a global phenomenon and as such it is to be understood as pertaining to the whole world and not only as concerned with national issues.

All in all, the time seems ripe for scholarship about Emerson to open up to new perspectives. If his philosophy and writings are generally being reconsidered in a more transnational and cross-cultural way, if the fact that he is becoming increasingly less associated with American nationalism cannot go unnoticed, and if the field of American literature itself is clearly being rethought in more global terms, what seems to be still missing is a sustained attention to Emerson as a literary globalist, as a theorist of world literature. What this thesis sets out to do is precisely that. By looking at the writings in which he sketches a world literary canon, and by grounding his understanding of world literature in his desire for unity and wholeness, I argue that Emerson's insistence on relatedness and his organic understanding of the world lead him to rethink literature as a transnational instrument of knowledge which was meant to explore and embody what he refers to as "the universal nature of mankind."

1.1 Emerson's Americanism

Even though, over the past three decades, there has been a sustained effort in understanding Emerson's cosmopolitanism and in situating his work within a literary field which, at his time, was starting to become decidedly global and hence clearly transnational,

many studies still revolve around the idea of Emerson as the most prominent interpreter of Americanness. This characterization dates back to the 1850s, when Emerson had already become a renowned lecturer and writer. Walt Whitman, who back then was writing free-lance journalism, working in a printing office, as well as building—and speculating in—houses all the while putting together the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855), in a manuscript which would later be published in his *Collected Writings*, noted that Emerson "represents the freeman, America, the individual" (*Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts* 1714). Very early in his own lifetime, Emerson emerged as the intellectual who best represented the American character and what people understood as "American values." With his writings, but especially through his lectures he had the opportunity of getting to know Americans, their needs and their aspirations, all of which find extensive place in his writings. In 1850 Theodore Parker, notable religious reformer, a major figure in the abolitionist movement and a member of the transcendentalist movement, wrote:

> Emerson is the most American of our writers. The idea of America, which lies at the bottom of our original institutions, appears in him with great prominence. We mean the idea of personal freedom, of the dignity and value of human nature, the superiority of a man to the accidents of a man. Emerson is the most republican of republicans, the most protestant of the dissenters. (qtd. in LaRocca 108)

Parker, just like Whitman, took Emerson as the writer who best represented the ideals of America. Antebellum intellectuals, despite the many political and social challenges that they faced (and were about to face), still believed America to be the new Canaan founded by the protestant dissenters who settled the colonies in the seventeenth century. Although they could not and did not ignore the issue of slavery which undermined the promise of freedom and dignity for all, they were convinced that those were foundational American values.

Emerson, with his emphasis on self-reliance and on the equality of all human beings—which Daniel S. Malachuk has defined as "transcendentalist equality" (Political Companion, 265)—was the writer who best expressed these ideals.

Amos Bronson Alcott, the educator, reformer, and longtime friend of Emerson's, noted how Emerson's work was not only "best answering the needs of the American mind," but was also the cultural product that, more than any other, had enriched American letters (qtd. in LaRocca 92). In an essay he presented to Emerson on his birthday in 1865, he urged his listeners to

> consider, too, the change his views have wrought in our methods of thinking; how he has won over the bigot, the unbeliever, at least to tolerance and moderation, if not to acknowledgment, by his circumspection and candor of statement […] I consider his genius the measure and present expansion of the American mind. (qtd. in LaRocca 92)

According to Alcott, Emerson actively worked to change the mindset of many Americans. Although he was convinced that not creating independence was a sign of "the impurity of insight," and therefore wrote that having "no school & no follower" was his "boast" (*JMN* 14: 258), Alcott is right in noting the influence his ideas had on nineteenth-century America. Historically, Antebellum America was a "young country just beginning to enjoy its independence and lustily expanding in all directions" (Atkinson XX), but also a nation with no clear cultural center or institutions. Thomas Augst pointed out that many were still struggling to find moral guidance and were actively searching for "practical wisdom outside of institutions and [for] values of liberal learning that we now take for granted" (89-90). In this context, Emerson's lectures were a precious formative moment, a significant educational practice.

Adopting what Angela Ray calls a “rhetoric of provocation” (223), Emerson – despite his best efforts – approached his career as a lecturer as a chance to “persuade men to listen to their interior conviction" (*JMN* 4: 346). Although he never wanted to communicate ultimate lessons, he believed that “the whole secret of the teacher's force lies in the conviction that men are convertible. And they are. They want awakening” (*JMN* 4: 278). Eventually, Emerson tried to use his lectures as a way to give his listeners confidence in themselves and to inspire them to seek their own truth. He attempted to get people to alter their opinion about themselves, an ambition that, as Kelly Larson has noted, was “often bound up with getting them to change their views on what it means to interpret the world around them” (994).

Emerson’s work is then both the result of a specific historical and cultural context, and a reaction to that very same environment. In 1911, philosopher George Santayana argued that Transcendentalism, which to him is a method of “systematic subjectivity,” (7) was

> sympathetic to the American mind. It embodied, in a radical form, the spirit of Protestantism as distinguished from its inherited doctrines; it was autonomous, undismayed, calmly revolutionary; it felt that Will was deeper than Intellect; it focused everything here and now, and asked all things to show their credentials at the bar of the young self, and to prove their value for this latest born moment. (9)

The “calmly revolutionary” character of Transcendentalism, its emphasis on will and its attempts at questioning old customs and traditions is what makes this philosophy “truly American” as Santayana puts it (9). All of these traits are “strikingly exemplified in the thought and in the person of Emerson” (9) who, as Harold Bloom remarks in his 1984 essay “Mr. America,” published in *The New York Review of Books*, emerges then as “the true

prophet of an American kind of charisma." For many commentators, everything about Emerson is quintessentially American. In 1879, Henry James, Jr. (the son of Henry James, Sr. who knew Emerson as a family friend) described his orations as the "most poetical, the most beautiful productions of the American mind" and categorized them as "thoroughly local and national" (qtd. in LaRocca 228). For John Jay Chapman, lawyer and celebrated essayist (1862-1933), Emerson is

> no cosmopolitan. He is a patriot. He is not like Goethe, whose sympathies did not run on national lines. Emerson has America in his mind's eye all the time. There is to be a new religion, and it is to come from America; a new and better type of man, and he is to be an American. He not only cared little or nothing for Europe, but he cared not much for the world at large. His thought was for the future of this country. (qtd. in LaRocca 253)

Chapman is adamantly convinced of the necessity of grounding Emerson in the American cultural scene. Although I think that Emerson's "sympathies" (much like Goethe's) *did* run very much beyond "national lines," it would be impossible to deny that Chapman expresses a point of view that can be easily proven by one part of textual evidence and that would be largely reiterated throughout Emerson's critical reception. For Joel Porte and Saundra Morris, Emerson "asks perpetually about the meaning of America itself" (2), for Harold Bloom with the idea of self-reliance he has *de facto* invented "the actual American religion, which is Protestant without being Christian" ("Mr. America"), for Denis Donoghue Emerson is "the founding father of nearly everything we think of as American in the modern world" (37). And these are only some of the many readings that see Emerson as synonymous with America and American values.

Although I acknowledge the importance of understanding Emerson's role within the specific social and intellectual context of nineteenth-century America, I believe it is also necessary to note that what makes Emerson—and Transcendentalism—quintessentially American, as Santayana writes, would also be "characteristic of any young society with a keen and discursive intelligence" (9). Even though Santayana notes how these same factors could be considered integral to any young society with dedicated cultural critics working to instill the habit of critical thinking, nineteenth-century Americans (as well as later literary scholars and historians) were adamantly convinced of their unique place among all the other nations and that Emerson's message was generally local, when not openly nationalistic.

1.2 "America is another Word for Opportunity:" Exceptionalist Rhetoric in the Nineteenth century

As Ronald A. Bosco asserts, in the nineteenth century "each discernible aesthetic, intellectual, political, or social advance seemed a new confirmation that the evolutionary track of American character and culture represented the final stages of a divinely inspired and guided national destiny" ("A Brief Biography" 46). Americans of this time hold dear what William H. Gass has called the "vision of America, the hackneyed dream" (qtd. in LaRocca 575) of what the country was destined to accomplish. Despite the horror of slavery, many Americans still believed that their country was meant to be a free democracy that would eventually "transmute its social power into the higher forms of thought," "provide for the moral and intellectual needs of mankind" and produce "a higher variety of the human race" (Adams 125). Like most of his contemporaries, Emerson too firmly believed in this ideal, and while noting the flaws of the present, he had enduring faith in the future. Among many other commentators who wrote on this theme, Robert Weisbuch has noted that:

> The youthful Emerson is an encyclopædia of the arguments made in defense of America, fighting its lack of storied history by positing instead a future, turning

> the tables on cultural rawness by celebrating youth and mocking the corruptions of European age, claiming a redemptive stature by which the colony is no longer a pathetically removed suburb of London but the metropolitan center for the reformation of the world. (201)

Since his early days as a college student, Emerson was fascinated with ideal forms and therefore it was only natural for him to believe that America could work towards that ideal society described in the *Declaration of Independence* with its promise of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" for all. As Lawrence Buell explains, this mode of thinking was not only Emerson's, but it was instead the general drive behind Transcendentalist writing that drew "much of its energy and bite from dramatizing the scandal of the stark disparity between the *is* and the *ought*—whether the subject be aesthetics, ethics, epistemology, or politics" ("Manifest Destiny" 183). Emerson wanted to address this discrepancy, and since he believed that the *ought* could be synonymous with the *is* if not in the present, at least in the future, he set out to work towards this ideal himself and noted in his journal that he dedicated his page to "the Genius of the Future" (*JMN* 2: 76).

This forward-looking attitude is a trademark of Emersonian thinking. He felt that mankind had "gathered what we could that was precious from the past; we are preparing to add the results of present science and civilization to these, and this shall form a legacy to the future" (*JMN* 2: 75). Passages like these make evident what Neal Dolan called the "grand scale of the young Emerson's cultural ambition" (42), and although Emerson was more than willing to put his genius to work for posterity in the broadest sense, he also wanted to make an impact on America's future specifically. Accordingly, his interest in the country's moral and intellectual development has often been read as a sign of his commitment to the cause of American cultural nationalism.

Even though, in his journal, he describes himself as "a little cynical on some topics" and recognizes that "when a whole nation is roaring Patriotism at the top of its voice I am fain to explore the cleanness of its hands and the purity of its heart" (*JMN* 2: 302), many critics have associated him with American nationalism. However, I believe that Neal Dolan is convincing when he argues that Emerson's attachment to America was not nationalist, at least not in the traditional sense of the word. More than anything, nationalism to him was a matter of "shared principles" (41). For Emerson, the binding forces of the nation were supposed to be ideas and not blood or economic interests. As Dolan points out, Emerson's support of America was not unwavering:

> Emerson saw America as playing a special role in the ever-unfolding world-historical realization of the universal values of human freedom and rationality, and he loved and celebrated America to the extent that he saw it carrying out this role—but no further. Emerson's love for his country, unlike Lincoln's, was not unconditional. When Emerson saw America betraying its Enlightenment-historical heritage, as we will see that he did during the worst days of the slavery crisis in the 1850s, he withdrew his affections, approved tearing up the Constitution, and spoke out in favor of a preemptive dissolution of the Union. Emerson, young or old, might fairly be called an American exceptionalist but not, in the usual sense of the word, an American nationalist. (41)

Dolan's concluding sentence is particularly significant, especially considering the historical moment in which Emerson wrote. Transcendentalism saw its heyday in the late 1830s and 1840s, the same years that also mark the emergence of the ideology of US Manifest Destiny. This view began to emerge after the annexation of Texas in 1845, when Manifest Destiny quickly became "a catchword for the idea of a providentially or historically sanctioned right

to continental expansionism" (Stephanson xii). However, as Buell— following along the same lines as Ernest L. Tuveson and Daniel W. Howe—remarks:

> As so often is the case, the slogan caught on because the basic underlying idea was already deeply rooted. The dream of the millennial proportions of the British American 'empire for liberty' had been in circulation since before the Revolution [...] But not until the administration of James K. Polk (1845–49), the most aggressive and successful expansionist of any American president, did the vision—including its white supremacist underpinnings—reach its full pitch of zealous enthusiasm. ("Manifest Destiny" 185)

Emerson's own position on this theme can be quite complex to ascertain. His interest in ideal forms made him very sensitive to the faults of the America of his time, and yet, as Cornel West points out, by associating a "mythic self" with Americans and by arguing that such "exceptional individuals" could "overcome all obstacles, solve all problems, go beyond all limitations" he seems to be supporting "an ideology of US exceptionalism that posits the invulnerability and unassailability of the American way of life," (14) of which more in a moment.

Before moving any further, I believe it is important to stress the distinction that Dolan makes. If it can be easily shown that Emerson did believe in the exceptional destiny reserved for America, "when it came to commenting explicitly on American mission or identity, [he] was an intermittent nationalist at best" (Buell, *Emerson* 272). In the "Editors' Address to the Massachusetts Quarterly Review" (1847), Emerson writes that to him the only right patriotism "consists in the delight which springs from contributing our peculiar and legitimate advantages to the benefit of humanity" (*W* 11: 387). The local and the global for Emerson did not run on two separate lines, in fact the national had to work *with* and *for* the

international. Even though he described America as "the country of the Future" (*CW* 1: 230) thus implying a special role reserved for his nation, he also wanted its inhabitants to understand that America was "the great charity of God to the human race" (*W* 11: 540). Although exceptional, America was not meant to be exclusive, and Americans were not supposed to be the sole beneficiaries of God's "great charity."

Surely, the passages in which Emerson writes about America as superior (at least in its founding principles) to any other nation on earth are the ones which have received the most critical attention. Despite its shortcomings—social and cultural deficiencies on which he frequently commented and that made America provincial, or that, to use his own words, turned it into an "immense Halifax" (*W* 11: 533)—he was ultimately convinced that America was "another word for Opportunity" (*W* 11: 299) for there "before the eye of every boy" an open future was expanding *(CW* 1: 243). It is interesting to note that Emerson first equated America with "opportunity" in 1852 in "The Anglo-Saxon" (later published as "The Anglo-American"), a lecture he delivered on 7 December 1852 before the Young Men's Association in Cincinnati. There, he writes that Europe was likely not going to "answer the questions which now rise in the American mind" (*LL* 1: 295). He describes Americans as unencumbered by old, rigid standards and strict hierarchies, and posits that, ideally, their nation will give to all "opportunity[ies] as wide as the morning; and the effect is to dig away the peak of the mountain, to change the peak into a vast table-land, where millions can share the privilege of a handful of patricians" (*LL* 1: 295). Even in the midst of the Civil War, when in the spring of 1862 he delivered "American Civilization" at the Smithsonian, he remained persuaded of America's promise of democracy and equality. Although contradicted by the facts, Emerson—like many other nineteenth-century intellectuals—held dear that ideal for most of his life. In 1878, in "Fortune of the Republic," he wrote again that "the genius of the

country has marked out our true policy,—opportunity. Opportunity of civil rights, of education, of personal power, and not less of wealth; doors wide open" (*W* 11: 541).

In this narrative, America is bound to be an agent of change and progress. Aware that many, especially those who were actively fighting against slavery, had trouble reconciling this ideal with the living conditions of exploited minorities and less advantaged classes in the real-life America of his time, in 1847, Emerson writes:

> Certainly then this country does not lie here in the sun causeless; and though it may not be easy to define its influence, men feel already its emancipating quality in the careless self-reliance of the manners, in the freedom of thought, in the direct roads by which grievances are reached and redressed, and even in the reckless and sinister politics, not less than in purer expressions. Bad as it is, this freedom leads onward and upward. (*W* 11: 387)

He seems not to be oblivious to the social and political problems that were endangering America's project. He recognizes the limitations, but he never loses faith in the country's potential to offer new alternatives to the model of nation-states as it was beginning to emerge in Europe. In "The Young American," his 1844 lecture which Robert E. Spiller has defined as Emerson's "battle cry for the new era of industrial expansion and manifest destiny" (*CW* 1: 217), he notes that:

> It seems so easy for America to inspire and express the most expansive and humane spirit; new-born, free, healthful, strong, the land of the laborer, of the democrat, of the philanthropist, of the believer, of the saint, she should speak for the human race […] From Washington, proverbially 'the city of magnificent distances,' through all its cities, states, and territories, it is a country of beginnings, of projects, of designs, of expectations. It has no past: all has an

> onward and prospective look. And herein is it fitted to receive more readily every generous feature which the wisdom or the fortune of man has yet to impress. (*CW* 1: 230)

In Emerson's words at least, America seems to offer something for everybody. The "spirit" of the nation, the promise of a grandiose future is so liberating and rich that neither a mediocre present filled with petty politicians and a blatant negation of human rights, nor little to no glorious history is an issue. Instead, it is a possibility, something that gives America an "onward and prospective look" that makes it "favorable to progress" and the ideal place for the "removal of absurd restrictions and antique inequalities" (*W* 11: 516). The very existence of the county is, for Emerson, the culmination of the "triumphs of humanity" (*W* 11: 515). With such a premise, for him and for many other thinkers of his time, it was only natural that the United States were to assume a dominant political and economic position that would have also enabled them to greatly influence global culture.

Two passages from two essays Emerson wrote at the peak and almost at the end of his career, "The Young American" and "Fortune of the Republic" respectively, reveal Emerson's firm convictions regarding America's role on the global scene.

> In every age of the world there has been a leading nation, one of a more generous sentiment, whose eminent citizens were willing to stand for the interests of general justice and humanity, at the risk of being called, by the men of the moment, chimerical and fantastic. Which should be that nation but these States? Which should lead that movement, if not New England? (*CW* 1: 239)

> At every moment some one country more than any other represents the sentiment and the future of mankind. None will doubt that America occupies this place in the opinion of nations, as is proved by the fact of the vast

> immigration into this country from all the nations of Western and Central Europe. (*W* 11: 515-516)

Throughout his life, Emerson seemed convinced that America was destined to be the "future of mankind." With an almost fanatic conviction, he argued time and again for the nation's exceptional destiny—so much so that he came to be regarded as the living embodiment of crucial American values. However, as these two excerpts show, he saw America acting for "humanity" as a whole and for "the future of mankind." Although he considered the US to be the recipient of God's favor, the country – which more than any other – had Providence on its side and was therefore destined to accomplish great tasks, he believed America had to act in the interests of humankind. The local, the particular, could not be entirely separated from the global and the general.

Emerson thought America could achieve sufficient international influence and show other nations an alternative mode of government and a different kind of society, both more democratic and egalitarian. To Emerson's European contemporaries, however, this enduring faith in the country's social and political potential might have seemed misplaced, especially considering how far this ideal project was from the reality of many Americans. Emerson himself recalls one illustrious example of an eminent European intellectual trying to make sense of what was happening on the other side of the Atlantic.

In *English Traits* (1856), Emerson writes of some of his friends, among them Thomas Carlyle, asking him whether there were any Americans with any theory of the right future of their country. To such a provocative question he replied:

> Thus challenged, I bethought myself neither of caucuses nor congress, neither of presidents nor of cabinet-ministers, nor of such as would make of America another Europe. I thought only of the simplest and purest minds; I said,

> ‘Certainly yes;—but those who hold it are fanatics of a dream which I should hardly care to relate to your English ears, to which it might be only ridiculous,—and yet it is the only true’. So I opened the dogma of no-government and non-resistance, and anticipated the objections and the fun, and procured a kind of hearing for it. I said, it is true that I have never seen in any country a man of sufficient valor to stand for this truth, and yet it is plain to me that no less valor than this can command my respect […] I fancied that one or two of my anecdotes made some impression on Carlyle, and I insisted that the manifest absurdity of the view to English feasibility could make no difference to a gentleman. (*CW* 5: 161-162)

Despite the ridicule that this worldview may have caused, Emerson remained convinced of the value of the ambitious American project that he hoped he would one day see realized.

1.3 “Food for the Mind:” American Literary Nationalism

Emerson’s faith in the American project, however, wavered whenever he analyzed the poor prospects of the literary scene. A few months before the appearance of *Nature* (1836), Henry David Thoreau, at the age of eighteen, in his essay “Advantages and Disadvantages of Foreign Influence on American Literature,” described the United States as a subaltern power:

> We are, as it were, but colonies. True, we have declared our independence, and gained our liberty; but we have dissolved only the political bonds which connected us with Great Britain: though we have rejected her tea, she still supplies us with food for the mind. (40)

The same year in which Thoreau wrote this passage, using words which “vibrate for the first time with his own tone,” as Matthiessen puts it (82), he also grew closer to Emerson, who

would soon embark on his own fight against imported cultural models. A year later, he delivered "The American Scholar" to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard. The lecture, which Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. has famously defined as America's "intellectual declaration of independence" (115) has been read by many as an example of nineteenth-century literary nationalism. Although Emerson's tone seems quite assertive and he boldly proclaims that "our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close" (*CW* 1: 52) and that Americans will from thereon "walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds" (*CW* 1: 69), his faith is located in the future, rather than in the present. The situation of 1837 was a far distance from the independent literary scene that he described.

James Fenimore Cooper, in a letter of that same year, notes that American writers had "a most profound and provincial awe of the old island," and argues that "we must make up our minds, I fear; to live our time as the inhabitants of a mere colony — a century hence things may improve, but not in our day" (300). Robert Weisbuch summarizes the general sentiment among writers of that time:

> Longfellow in 1832 […] charges that 'instead of coming forward as bold, original thinkers,' American writers 'have imbibed the degenerate spirit of modern English poetry.' […] Most American books, Margaret Fuller says simply, 'were English books' and Whitman editorializes in 1847 in the *Brooklyn Eagle* that all is hopeless 'as long as we copy with a servile imitation, the very cast-off literary fashions of London.' Still, in 1869, Lowell is taking up Emerson's notion of 'this tape-worm of Europe' and ascribing the disease wholly to England: 'We are worth nothing except so far as we have disinfected ourselves of Anglicism' (200).

For William Brock, Emerson was one of the many writers who were "desperately anxious to be independent" (242). As Emerson observes in "The Young American," "the public mind wants self-respect" (*CW* 1: 242), by which he means that with admiration being directed outwards rather than inwards, Americans were naturally bound to respect what is foreign, thus becoming "blind to native merit" and easily swayed into "a servile adoration of imported genius" (Thoreau 40-41).

The call for a distinctly American literature began soon after American independence and is evident in the works of the most diverse thinkers of the mid-nineteenth century. American literary nationalism was not only an ideology, but it was also an instrumental factor in nation building. As Robert Levine remarks:

> Desirous of a national literature that would display the emerging United States as different from and better than monarchial England, cultural leaders called for distinctively "American" writings that would draw on native materials (the landscape, Native Americans, colonial history, and so on), emphasize the nation's republican political culture, and bring a new sense of unity and pride to the postcolonial citizenry. (2)

Emerson often uses the rhetoric of nationalism, so much so that as Prentiss Clark asserts "after his death in 1882, U.S. critics claimed him for the purposes of American literary and cultural nationalism, idealizing and in some cases gentrifying him" (*RWE A Companion*, "Reception, Emerson's") to the point that he "suddenly became," Ronald Bosco writes, "*the* American poet…*the* American sage…*the* American philosopher" ("We Find" 272). To be fair, reading Emerson as a cultural nationalist is not an awfully demanding task. After all, time and again throughout his career, he makes numerous explicit references to America's

cultural independence. In this regard, *Nature*'s famous opening sentences are emblematic of Emerson's calls for American literary originality. He writes:

> Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. […] The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? […] The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship. (*CW* 1: 7)

These are some of Emerson's most quoted lines, and they accurately describe what was a very common feeling among mid-nineteenth century American intellectuals, who considered themselves as a strikingly new and different—when not exceptional—people that, as such, had to find their own way to express themselves culturally and intellectually.

However, this novelty obviously needed something old to compare to. Americans had to address—and come to terms with—the influence of literary traditions belonging to the Old World, especially European ones, which were perceived as looming large over the New World's cultural scene. Emerson is not oblivious to the importance of the old literary models, however, he also strongly believed Americans owed it to themselves to feel unencumbered in their efforts to eventually create a wholly American mode of expression. In "Literary Ethics" (1838) he writes:

> The new man must feel that he is new, and has not come into the world mortgaged to the opinions and usages of Europe, and Asia, and Egypt. […] Say to such doctors, We are thankful to you, as we are to history, to the pyramids, and the authors; but now our day is come; we have been born out of the eternal

> silence; and now will we live, – live for ourselves, — and not as the pall-bearers of a funeral, but as the upholders and creators of our age; and neither Greece nor Rome nor the three Unities of Aristotle, nor the three Kings of Cologne, nor the College of the Sorbonne, nor the Edinburgh Review is to command any longer. Now that we are here we will put our own interpretation on things, and our own things for interpretation. (*CW* 1: 101-102)

The victims of Emerson's call for emancipation are multiple, varied, and necessarily illustrious: he begins with the bearers of cultural power in Classical Antiquity, he moves on to powerful symbols and institutions of Christianity in the Middle Ages, and finally proclaims the end of the Great Britain's cultural hegemony in America through influential periodicals like the *Edinburgh Review*. Making a crucial turn, he decides to couple this rebuke of old European institutions with a powerful assertion of faith in a promising American future that seems so much within reach that it becomes present. "*Now* that we are here," he writes, "*we* will put *our own* interpretation on things," indicating that from that moment on, Americans would be the sole exegetes of cultural products in America, no longer parroting the European critics of the past. Not only would Americans soon need to learn to be independent interpreters, they also needed to come forward as original thinkers offering new and original works for the world to decipher: "*our own things* for interpretation" (emphasis mine).

If at the end of the 1830s Emerson very much seemed to hold up hope that such a change could be imminent and occur at any time, as his words in "The American Scholar" and "Literary Ethics" testify, a few years later the moment of cultural independence appeared to him like a substantially more difficult possibility. Indeed, in 1841, he described a bleaker reality:

> We have yet had no genius in America [...] our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians, our boats and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres. If I have not found that excellent combination of gifts in my countrymen which I seek, neither could I aid myself to fix the idea of the poet by reading now and then in Chalmers's collection of five centuries of English poets (*CW* 3: 22).

Emerson's realization is bitter, but final, as the cultural panorama of the United States in the 1840s seems to him as offering little to no trace of a revolutionary figure who will take up the task of creating a new paradigm for the American experience. A country so vast, rich, and diverse that it seemed like a poem waiting to be enjoyed, like a ripe fruit hanging low from a tree, had not found the right harvester. Walt Whitman has often been considered the one who best tried to answer this call, *de facto* using "The Poet," from which the above quotation is taken, to shape his poetic persona and agenda. The publication history of *Leaves of Grass* (starting in 1855) has certainly helped in making this association evident, as Whitman immediately made sure to include—unauthorized by the sage of Concord—Emerson's letter in which he called his collection of poems "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed" (1856). Ed Folsom observes that Emerson's words may have not influenced his own poetic works, and yet have "inspired an experimentation" in poets like Whitman and Dickinson to whom this kind of Transcendentalist poetics has served "as the liberating and defining force" ("Transcendental Poetics" 265) behind their poetry.

If, in retrospect, we can now understand and appreciate the novelty and originality – both in content and style – of what Dickinson and Whitman wrote, throughout his lifetime, Emerson felt he needed to reiterate his message of nonconformity. In his 1844 address "Emancipation in the British West Indies," one of his most extensive pronouncements on slavery and abolition, he notes the endless process of imitation that he thought was dangerously becoming the norm in America. "The owner of a New York manor imitates the mansion and equipage of the London nobleman; the Boston merchant rivals his brother of New York; and the villages copy Boston" (*AW* 19). For Emerson, this tendency to resort to conformity not only bespeaks a lack of creative impulse, but it also shows blind obedience to patterns of authority. Moreover, the hierarchy implicit in this process that sees value decreasing the further one moves away from the Old World, the more one goes into the "villages" of continental US, condemns America to a subaltern position and prevents original expression. As a writer, Emerson himself often chose to rely on foreign models for inspiration, but to him the problem lied in the fact that what Americans were buying— metaphorically and not— from Europe did not "make [them] better men" (*W* 11: 533). In "Fortune of Republic," he describes the grim reality of his time:

> We import trifles, dancers, singers, laces, books of patterns, modes, gloves and cologne, manuals of Gothic architecture, steam-made ornaments. America is provincial. It is an immense Halifax. See the secondariness and aping of foreign and English life, that runs through this country, in building, in dress, in eating, in books. Every village, every city has its architecture, its costume, its hotel, its private house, its church, from England. Our politics threaten her. Her manners threaten us. (*W* 11: 533)

Although successful on a political level, America was still culturally dependent on Europe, and Emerson tirelessly worked to rethink the relationship between these two powers. As

early as 1834, in "The Naturalist," he defined imitation as "the vice of overcivilized communities," as the principal weakness of "our times, of our literature, of our manners and social action" and reprehended Americans for writing derivatively, because "we do not write from facts, but we wish to state facts after the English manner" (*EL* 1: 75).

This reliance on European letters, especially on the British literary tradition, shows a lack of "capital of invention" (*CW* 8: 94) and dehumanizes American intellectuals to the point where, in the 1860s, Emerson describes them as parasites living off the literary achievements of a foreign past:

> Whoever looks at the insect world, at flies, aphides, gnats, and innumerable parasites, and even at the infant mammals, must have remarked the extreme content they take in suction, which constitutes the main business of their life. If we go into a library or news-room, we see the same function on a higher plane, performed with like ardor, with equal impatience of interruption, indicating the sweetness of the act. (*CW* 8: 93)

Although years had gone by since Emerson's declaration of independence which manifested itself in "The American Scholar," it seems that the apprenticeship to the learning of other lands was not drawing to a close. In this passage, he describes American writers and intellectuals as laboring under the tyranny of old ideas, and in his section on "Culture" in *The Conduct of Life* (1860), he asks once again the same question: "Can we never extract this tape-worm of Europe from the brain of our countrymen?" (*W* 6: 145).

For years, he seems to be looking in vain for representatives of what he thinks American character is, and he keeps ardently invoking "grand persons to counteract" (*W* 11: 535) the nation's material wealth. As Robert Milder underlines, "although politically a success, the America Emerson portrays is a cultural and moral failure given to a low

materialism and content to take its thought and art from Europe" (57). If America keeps staying on this path, Emerson is afraid it will never accomplish its grandiose destiny. While it was impossible to ignore the steps the country took to overthrow British rule and create a more democratic form of government, Emerson believes that, as he argues in "Fortune of Republic," "all advancement is by ideas, and not by brute force or mechanic force" (*W* 11: 531). In a particularly powerful passage, he notes and proceeds to condemn the emergent capitalist culture of his time as well as the United States' continental expansion:

> In this country, with our practical understanding, there is, at present, a great sensualism, a headlong devotion to trade and to the conquest of the continent, – to each man as large a share of the same as he can carve for himself, – an extravagant confidence in our talent and activity, which becomes, whilst successful, a scornful materialism – but with the fault, of course, that it has no depth, no reserved force whereon to fall back when a reverse comes. (*W* 11: 531)

With the passing of years, having witnessed and opposed the Indian Removal Act (signed into law by President Andrew Jackson on May 28, 1830), having embraced the antislavery cause throughout the 1840s and 1850s, and having experienced the catastrophe of the Civil War, Emerson started seeing that "confidence in our talent and activity" as "extravagant." The "ample geography" that in 1841 "dazzles the imagination," in 1847, together with the country's material activities, it is the only "colossal" thing:

> One would say there is nothing colossal in the country but its geography and its material activities; that the moral and intellectual effects are not on the same scale with the trade and production. There is no speech heard but that of auctioneers, newsboys, and the caucus. Where is the great breath of the New

> World, the voice of aboriginal nations opening new eras with hymns of lofty cheer? […] We hearken in vain for any profound voice speaking to the American heart, cheering timid good men, animating the youth, consoling the defeated, and intelligently announcing duties which clothe life with joy, and endear the face of land and sea to men. It is a poor consideration that the country wit is precocious, and, as we say, practical. (*CW* 11: 385)

Emerson is discouraged when he remarks that the national conversation only revolves around money (with auctioneers treating human life as a commodity), unnoteworthy events on which the press reports, and mere political schemes. No material advancements can make up for the lack of intellectual prospects. "Let there be worse cotton and better men" (*CW* 1: 121) he writes in "The Method of Nature" (1841), and yet—almost at the end of his career—he seems not to have found these better men who would "speak to the American heart" and act as the "great breath of the New World."

Surely, as these passages show, Emerson was interested in bringing forth the issue of an American literary identity. But it is one thing to work towards a definition of a national literature, and another to argue for the superiority of one's own literary tradition. When Emerson describes Americans as "a puny and fickle folk" (*CW* 1: 120) and notes that "American literature and spiritual history are […] in the optative mood" (*CW* 1: 207), when he remarks that "certainly, 'the social state,' 'patriotism,' 'law,' and 'government,' all did cover ideas, though the words have wandered from the things" (*LL* 2: 11), and that if, at the end of the 1840s, the famine in Europe "only affects potatoes, the sterility in America continu[ed] in the men" (*Letters* 3: 400), the certainty that he is advocating for nationalism, be it literary or not, begins to falter.

There is no point in negating his indissoluble bond to the very concept of America, an idea which—in literary terms at least—he himself contributed to shape. Categorizing him as synonymous with or representative of America is not an exaggeration. However, it is also important to point out that he was not an isolationist, and that, more often than not, he also had an outward-looking attitude and placed value on strengthening international and intercultural bonds rather than merely breaking them. In "American Civilization," he writes: "we want men of original perception and original action, who can open their eyes *wider than to a nationality*,—namely, to considerations of benefit to the human race,—can act in the *interest of civilization*" (*CW* 10: 406, emphasis mine) and in "Literary Ethics" he notes that America has not yet "fulfilled what seemed the *reasonable expectation of mankind*" (*CW* 1: 100, emphasis mine). Emerson's America is not a separate entity which has no relation to outside realities. It exists in relation to—or as a reaction to—other nations. As shown, Emerson defines its plating as God's "great charity […] to the human race" (*W* 11: 540), he desperately looks for American intellectuals who will "act in the interest of civilization" (*CW* 10: 406) and characterizes America's political and intellectual rise not as a reason for national pride but as the fulfillment of what was the "reasonable expectation of mankind" (*CW* 1: 100). His America was not on a pedestal, he did not argue for its superiority, and he had no interest in denigrating other cultures. He saw the United States as a new power on the global scene, one that deserved international consideration and exceptional to the extent that he believed it was their turn to show the world a new political model, another literary tradition, both products of the particular case of America and yet both meant for the general interest of humankind. As Unitarian minister and lecturer George Willis Cooke (1848–1923) put it, "national and yet cosmopolitan is the America [Emerson] believes in so earnestly" (335). In a somewhat paradoxical way, ad Cooke notes, Emerson synthesizes two opposites when he "makes the idea of a universal humanity the very centre of his conception

of nationality" (336). His allegiance to the United States, as Clark maintains, was not narrow nationalism, it was rather an "allegiance to ideals that could be realized in an ever more human and humane existence" (*RWE A Companion*, "America").

1.4 Partial Cosmopolitanism: Emerson's Glocal Discourse

Like Cooke and Clark, many other readers and critics have noted that Emerson's sense of attachment to his own country was often coupled with his interest in the shared future of humanity. His contemporaries, as well as twenty-first century critics, have stressed his peculiar idea of cosmopolitanism and pointed out the international and global resonance of his writings. For Theodore Parker, while Emerson is certainly the "most American, he is [also] almost the most cosmopolitan of our writers, the least restrained and belittled by the popular follies of the nation or the age" (qtd. in LaRocca 108). In Parker's view, Emerson easily transcends national narrow-mindedness, and despite his "indomitable nationality," he did argue for:

> A culture quite cosmopolitan and extraordinary in a young nation like our own. Here is a man familiar with books, not with many, but the best books, which he knows intimately [...] His literary culture is not a varnish on the surface; not a mere polish of the outside; it has penetrated deep into his consciousness. (qtd. in LaRocca 109)

Especially on an intellectual level, Emerson was largely cosmopolitan.[1] Partially aided by the fact that the United States had not yet established a rich literary tradition of their own, Emerson heavily relied on texts from other cultures. He read and was inspired by works of

[1] Interestingly enough, the shift from "cosmopolitan" as a noun to "cosmopolitan" as an adjective is credited to Emerson, who first used it in "The Young American" (1844). Noting the increasingly "heterogenous population crowding on all ships from all corners of the world to the great gates of North America," Emerson is confident that America will write more inclusive, "more cosmopolitan" laws. See *CW* 1: 229-230.

the most diverse traditions, by poetry or prose written in Europe or in Asia that had the power to speak to its readers across time and space.

As philosopher Joseph Blau has noted, with his works Emerson achieved the same result. He "was not, in any way, provincial. He spoke to, and for, all the world, not merely to and for the New England heritage that he adorned or the American heritage that his essays carried to cultured circles both in the British Isles and in Continental Europe" (qtd. in LaRocca 490). Mankind was his audience, and he saw himself as its advocate. His message – although grounded in the American experience – was meant to travel the world and speak to the most disparate cultures. According to Lawrence Buell, Emerson's "own concern was with values that stand the test of time and unite the world" (58). For most of his life, "Americanness was less an object of conscious concern than his participation in an international realm of great ideas, great books, great men" (272). For Laura Dassow Walls, this intercultural community is precisely what Emerson evokes in "The American Scholar," where he argues for an "expansive, even global, view of 'scholars' as those whole human beings who integrate the 'circular power' of planetary nature with the gathered record of the global past and thence take their place in the circle of humanity 'to suffer and to work' with all the rest" (517). These "elite intellectuals" (Walls 518) are not only able to synthesize the past with the present and the future, but they can also rise above national concerns and work for the whole of humankind.

Over the past three decades, there has been an effort to define Emerson's cosmopolitanism and situate his thinking in an increasingly transnational literary field. His interest in the particular life of the individual and in the workings of what he calls "the universal mind" have been used by critics to point out that, in Emerson, cosmopolitan notions and "universal affinity need not come at the cost of local detachment" (Risinger 191). Indeed, he was able to envision a form of "cosmopolitan discourse that acknowledges

the hybridity of local and universal attachments while remaining capacious enough to accommodate the inescapability of place, nation, patriotism, and clan" (Risinger 191).

Cornel West is among the critics who, having noted how Emerson combined local rootedness with an intercultural agenda, argued for a radical rethinking of Emerson's role within the American literary scene:

> We can no longer afford or justify confining Emerson to the American terrain. He belongs to that highbrow cast of North Atlantic cultural critics who set the agenda and the terms for understanding the modern world. We must not overlook the parochialism implicit in his call for American cosmopolitanism, but we can no longer view his call through present-day parochial lenses. (11)

When attempting such a task, it might be useful to consider the writings of another philosopher who dedicated many of his works to the national/cosmopolitan dichotomy. British-born American philosopher, Kwame Anthony Appiah has argued for a kind of cosmopolitanism that exists at the intersection of the local, the national, with the global, the cosmic. In his books *The Ethics of Identity* (2005) and *Cosmopolitanism. Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006), Appiah theorizes a version of cosmopolitanism that is "partial" (or "rooted"). He argues for a cosmopolitanism that values the particular as well as the general, for a concept that, in other words, manages to reconcile "a kind of universalism with the legitimacy of at least some forms of partiality" (*Ethics of Identity* 223). As such, this partial cosmopolitanism establishes itself as a third way between the "diversitarianism of the game warden, who ticks off the species in the park" and "simple universalism" (*Ethics of Identity* 222).

As Appiah points out, the idea of cosmopolitanism dates back to the Cynics of the fourth century BC, who first coined the paradoxical term "cosmopolitan" ("citizen of the

cosmos"). Talking of a citizen—a *politēs*—whose allegiance was not to a particular city, but rather to the *kosmos*, the universe, signaled a "rejection of the conventional view that every civilized person belonged to a community among communities" (*Cosmopolitanism* XIV). The same sense of belonging to a larger community is also evident in later usages of the term. Appiah cites a 1788 essay by Christoph Martin Wieland in which cosmopolitans are defined as those who "regard all the peoples of the earth as so many branches of a single family, and the universe as a state, of which they, with innumerable other rational beings, are citizens, promoting together under the general laws of nature the perfection of the whole, while each in his own fashion is busy about his own well-being" (qtd. in *Cosmopolitanism* XV). However, Appiah contends that while "cosmopolitan universalism represents a challenge to partiality, the existence of group feelings in its turn represents a challenge to cosmopolitanism" (Taraborrelli 103). Local ties and personal bonds cannot be ignored. If we consider the fact that "humans live best on a smaller scale," it is natural to see, Appiah argues, why mankind tends to defend "not just the state, but the county, the town, the street, the business, the craft, the profession, the family" ("Cosmopolitan Patriots" 97).

For this reason, he thinks it best to practice "partial cosmopolitanism," in an effort to join local rootedness with a feeling of belonging to a global community. In this neutralizing middle ground, paradoxes like the "cosmopolitan patriot" and the "rooted cosmopolitan" become realistic markers of character, for people can simultaneously feel "attached to a home of his or her own, with its own cultural particularities" and take "pleasure from the presence of other, different, places that are home to other, different, people" ("Cosmopolitan Patriots" 91). It is important to stress though, that – as Edward J. Lundy points out – this "'partial cosmopolitan' position is neither unprincipled nor uncritically accepting but in a comparative, transnational approach requires scrutiny, openness, an

ability to appreciate common values yet retaining one's respect for locality, for the national, for one's own heritage" (234-235).

In this sense, I argue that Emerson can be categorized as a "partial cosmopolitan." As I have shown, his nationalism cannot be separated from his interest in universal human values, and therefore, in his writings, the parochial is not necessarily in opposition to the cosmopolitan. If we understand patriotism as what nineteenth-century Liberian scholar-diplomat Edward Blyden has once called the feeling of "people with whom we are connected" (qtd. in "Cosmopolitan Patriots" 95), and cosmopolitanism as what anthropologist Paul Rabinow defined as "an ethos of macro-interdependencies, with an acute consciousness […] of the inescapabilities and particularities of place, characters, historical trajectories, and fates" (258), it becomes clearer how patriotism's usually narrow definition can be enlarged and cosmopolitanism's sense of belonging to humanity as a whole can be grounded in smaller communities. Appiah's reconfiguration of cosmopolitanism very well fits Emerson's use of nationalist and cosmopolitan rhetoric, and it provides a useful philosophical and ideological background to interpret his unusual synthesis of what are traditionally conceived as two opposite categories.

While firmly grounded in his own national community, Emerson's interest in universal principles enables him to talk to and for the world, thus transcending local specificity and allowing him to appreciate the value of diversity. If Appiah is right in noting how "the French and American Revolutions invented a form of patriotism that allows us to love our country as the embodiment of principles," then we should reconsider the scope of Emerson's nationalism. The particular American experience has value not only as *American*, but as a narrative that is representative of universal principles. For this reason, even when Emerson writes about specifically American matters, he is able to effortlessly move from the

local to the global, to the point that he seems almost incapable of limiting himself to one or the other.

Although he was often concerned with the present condition as well as the future prospects of the United States, he constantly looked to Europe and Asia. He was not a cosmopolitan with "an unpleasant posture of superiority toward the putative provincial" (Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* XIII) and did not look at the East with "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 3). He placed the same value on the most diverse cultures and experiences, but at the same time he was interested in defining America's cultural character, and he tried to do so with the impressive number of essays that he dedicated to the cause, effectively becoming the nation's cultural guide. His self-appointed mission was to steer the nation in what he thought was the right direction, and although he strived for independence, he never belittled traditional old-world knowledge. Instead, he respected it, at the same time wishing Americans would not just mindlessly repeat it. Looking eastward—since Earth is a sphere—to both Europe and Asia, he *oriented* the nation and tried to "correct its course" by observing carefully the rest of the world, searching for wholeness in multiplicity.

2. Each and All: Ontological Unity and Emerson's Philosophy of Literature

For Emerson, unity was a constant concern. For most of his intellectual life, he noted the "beautiful necessity, which secures that all is made of one piece" (*W* 6: 49) and he looked for ways to articulate what to him was first and foremost an ontological state, but also a "truth that precedes and *shapes* experience" (Engels 12). As William James argued in 1907, "to believe in the one or in the many is the classification with the maximum number of consequences" (58). It is easy to see what he meant by that, because conceiving the world as connected and interdependent or else as fragmented and atomized has obvious ontological, ideological, political and social implications, all of which have been explored and analyzed by Emerson, James' intellectual and philosophical father – as well as his actual godfather. Such a *Weltanschauung* constitutes the bulk of Emerson's philosophy and, functioning just like a seed, it germinates and contributes to make his thoughts grow in new and unexpected directions. I believe that it is precisely because of this conception of wholeness, which he uses as an ontological and theoretical foundation, that he is able to transcend cultural nationalism and build his own global literary canon.

Emerson's own search for oneness, which I will explore in this chapter, begins rather intuitively and somewhat mystically. He perceives an ontological connection between the most diverse objects and tries to find a path that will make this relationality apparent to all. As I will point out, he does so by arguing for the adoption of a different kind of vision, which takes into consideration the concrete parts that make up reality and the everlasting and universal principles behind it, in an effort to *see* (in its double meaning of perceiving and understanding) the Whole that is the true essence of reality, despite the manifold

manifestations of life. After having delineated Emerson' use of vision in his pursuit of wholeness, I will describe the connotations that he attributes to the Whole. It is both divine and immanent to nature, and it is a philosophical construct related to organicism that has social and political implications. Although Emerson believed that everyone could learn how to perceive this all-encompassing unity, as I will show in the final section of this chapter, he was also under the impression that a handful of figures were better equipped to conceive of the Whole. Ideally, philosophers, preachers, scientists, scholars, and poets can all *see* unity in variety, they are all capable of respecting and finding value in the particular, while striving to arrive at the general. It is a move from the local and the parochial towards the global and universal which, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, Emerson himself makes while sketching a canon of world literature. All the ramifications of this philosophical concept were not immediately apparent to Emerson, who pondered over the consequences of the problem of the One and the Many over the course of his life.

Although Emerson *felt* this wholeness, especially at the beginning of his career, he struggled to put this feeling into words, and he searched for ways to set up a method that would systematize this perception, a method whose epitome is Emerson's most famous metaphor. In his rich intellectual life, he produced no shortage of vivid images that effortlessly caught – and continue to catch – the readers' attention, but one in particular has been extensively commented upon by scholars and popularized by the famous caricature sketch by Christopher Pearse Cranch (ca. 1837), namely Emerson's transparent eyeball metaphor from *Nature* (1836).

For James Cox, the transparent eyeball is *the* metaphor that "at once released and defined Emerson's act of imagination" (59). The link between creative imagination and literature can appear quite obvious. However, as Kirk Pillow maintains, imagining is much more than the mere mechanism through which writers produce images, it is rather what he

calls an "interpretative act through which we […] see things *as* this or that investment of meaning, *as* this or that means of transcending the present toward something else" (349). Imagination, in general, but particularly in Emerson's writings, is therefore inherently linked to the act of *seeing* something which the mind then proceeds to transmute into a different form. Here I want to suggest that Emerson's understanding of vision as the ability to visually perceive the surrounding environment and as the creative act of imagining something that transcends the physical world around us, is fundamental to understand his constant shifts from the particular to the universal, his tendency to use the material world of appearances to illustrate the world of ideas, understood in the Platonic sense of the everlasting forms that govern our world.

The theme of Emerson and vision has been thoroughly investigated and many commentators have offered their own take on what Cornel West calls Emerson's "obsession with seeing and sight" (18). However, I believe it is important to understand Emerson's *vision* as both the ability to perceive the world around the subject *and* as a mental exercise in imagining a larger-than-life reality, for such a move could be useful to better comprehend Emerson's metaphysical and ontological concerns with the specific parts and the general facts that he believed defined reality. The obvious starting point of any analysis of Emerson's vision is necessarily *Nature*'s transparent eyeball passage, which has been seen not only as an example of Emerson's conception of sight, but also as the epitome of Emersonian individualism. Countless puns have been made in an effort to stress the correlation of *eye* and *I* in the writings of what is considered to be the philosopher of individualism, and even if Emerson himself remarks that in the process of *trans*-formation (in the etymological sense of "to go beyond form") that he describes in *Nature* egotism finds no room, critics have often read the very same passage in completely opposite terms:

> Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. (*CW* 1: 10)

Emerson affirming that the name of friends sounds to him "foreign" and his disregard for family or for other social relations of any sort have provided textual evidence for readings such as Russel Sbriglia's and Cornel West's who, respectively, affirm that "contrary to all mean egotism vanishing, what comes most troublingly to the forefront in this passage is Emerson the solipsist" (2) and that, it is precisely in this passage that Emerson "masterfully dissociates vision from politics, sociality, and materiality of any sort" (18). While these interpretations can certainly very well describe several passages from Emerson's writings, I would argue that they are not the most convincing readings of the transparent eyeball passage from *Nature,* for they completely bypass Emerson's move of anticipating interpretations such as these. He plainly states that egotism is not meant to play any role in this process where the subject willfully loses their centrality to become a vehicle of something much bigger than the individual, to become a part of God. In this sense, friends, family and any sort of material ties are indeed a "disturbance" for they constrict the subject, and their soul, to one plain of existence, while instead Emerson wants the individual to be able to transcend material and finite reality. This move from the material towards the ideal,

from the particular to the universal, is one of Emerson's most distinctive tendencies, and this process is only possible because of a marked change with regard to vision.

Figure 1. Cranch, P. Christopher. Standing on the Base Ground I Become a Transparent Eyeball. ca 1837. MET, New York.

As Cranch's illustration suggests, what seems to gain a privileged position in this passage is indeed the eye. Caricatures are famous for usually exaggerating a distinctive physical trait and for employing "visual symbols as ideographical shorthand," (Thompson 122), and his drawing does precisely that. The element that Cranch believed to be at the forefront in that passage is the eye, and indeed he does portray "Emerson as a monstrous eyeball on two spindly legs" (Cox 59). In the sketch, the material element and Emerson's corporality are almost entirely eliminated in favor of the element linked to vision, the eyeball, the eye. Emerson's contemporaries—such as Cranch—noticed his emphasis on the visual aspect, and so did the critics who have been extremely prolific in analyzing it. Over the years, Emerson's understanding of vision has been at the center of scholarly debate (see recent criticism such as Russell Sbriglia's "Revision and Identification: Emerson and the Ethics of Skepticism and Sympathy" and Shannon Mariotti's chapter "Alienated Existence, Focal Distancing, and Emerson's Transcendental Idealism," part of her book *Thoreau's Democratic Withdrawal,* or earlier works such as Carolyn Porter's *Seeing and Being: The Plight of the Participant Observer in Emerson, James, Adams and Faulkner* or Kenneth Burke's "I, Eye, Aye: Emerson's Early Essay on 'Nature,' Thoughts on the Machinery of Transcendence," just to name a few), but while these studies have provided readers with stimulating interpretations, a crucial text remains Sherman Paul's 1952 volume titled *Emerson's Angle of Vision: Man and Nature in American Experience*.

In his seminal text, Paul makes extensive use of the term "distant vision" to describe a way of looking at things that, in his reading, seems to have caused Emerson to grow aware of the "blur of relatedness" (75) that characterized the world around him. Paul uses the term in opposition to what the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset has defined as "proximate vision". In his 1949 essay "On Point of View in the Arts," Ortega y Gasset writes that "proximate vision and the distant vision of which physiology speaks are not notions that

depend chiefly on measurable factors, but are rather two distinct ways of seeing" (109) and, as Paul notes, Emerson seems to be constantly adopting both modes of perception at the same time. Paul builds on this opposition between the near, the material, and the far, the universal, and as Shannon Mariotti points out, he comes to describe Emersonian vision as a "synthesis and reconciliation of the 'horizontal' or 'linear' realms of man and nature with the 'vertical' realm of spirit and universe" ("Emerson's Transcendental Gaze" 337).

Man, nature, spirit and universe are indeed all fundamental parts of Emerson's vision, since as Mariotti argues, his gaze does travel "in a transcending motion, moving up and out, over and above" ("Emerson's Transcendental Gaze" 305), and it is precisely so that he manages to easily situate his vision at the crossroads of the material and the spiritual. In her work on defining Emerson's vision, borrowing his own words, Mariotti describes this all-encompassing motion as a practice of "focal distancing" ("Emerson's Transcendental Gaze" 305). She uses this term to refer to Emerson's tendency to move from the "material realm of particulars to the ideal realm of universals," ("Emerson's Transcendental Gaze" 306) and while her definition accurately characterizes what appears to be a clear pattern in Emerson's writings, the obvious mechanical connotation of the term (focal distance in photography is commonly understood as the distance between the camera sensor and the subject) might not accurately describe the process that she rightly notices.

To better understand this complex dynamic, I think it is necessary to go back to Paul's use of the term "distant vision" and integrate it with the second, perhaps less apparent, meaning of the word "vision." For vision not only pertains to the actual, and decidedly material act of viewing something, but it also refers to the more impalpable act of imagining something; a vision is also a vivid mental concept, a fantasy, a dream. I believe that "distant vision," if intended bearing in mind these two different meanings, is indeed the appropriate

term to be used when describing Emerson's constant work towards a synthesis of particularities and universalities. What he seems to be suggesting is as much a practical shift of focus from the micro to the macroscopical, as it is an imaginative exercise, an attempt at giving substance to a vision, that as such is instead completely ethereal. Simply put, Emerson's constant movement from the material to the universal is his way of looking at the bigger picture, it is indeed a "shift in perception" as Mariotti puts it ("Emerson's Transcendental Gaze" 306), but it is also much more than that. The vastness of this cognitive exercise gives it a visionary quality that makes it akin to a fantasy in which a synthesizing force manages to combine particular and general, nature and spirit.

2.1 With a Snail's Pace: Vision & Imagination

Emerson's search for wholeness starts at the very beginning of his intellectual life. Shortly after his graduation from Harvard, when he is only nineteen, he begins reflecting in his journal on the relationship between the part and the whole, a preoccupation that will accompany him for the rest of his life and which is evident throughout his opus. In 1822, he writes that "human wisdom" makes us realize the imperfection of the single fact or particular occurrence, and as soon as we grow aware of this limitation we are bound to "labour[…] to make out the perfection of the whole from the analogies of the universe which fall under [our] eye" (*JMN* 1: 92). At this very early stage, Emerson seems convinced that human wisdom, and so our intellect or mind, can guide us in perceiving and in finding meaning in relatedness, and that the senses are but a nuisance in what seems to be an entirely intellectual process. In another journal entry of the same year, a curious and eager-to-learn Emerson expresses his frustration in recognizing the impossibility of acquiring "supreme wisdom" in one's lifetime. A failure that, he thinks, is primarily due to the fact that our senses – and to some extent our mind too – can only take in so much at a time. "Our

knowledge is so exceedingly little & imperfect" because "we can walk but a step at a time, and can therefore see but a small part of the little ball we inhabit; and because our eyes are small, and can take in but a little at a glance" but also in view of the fact that "our minds can consider but one idea in the same moment and so out of innumerable events can count but few" (*JMN* 2: 24-25).

If Emerson's initial stance on the possibility of knowledge and of reconciling parts and whole seem rather disillusioned, in the span of a few years he slowly comes to a different understanding of how much our senses and mind can help us in navigating and making sense of the world we live in. In 1823, he states his view in rather clear terms:

> All objects in the universe far as the eye can reach & thought can comprehend them, fulfil some purpose, and are parts of some plan. […] Mind, which in human nature creeps on its long journey to the source of things with a snail's pace, […] by the excellent necessity of its nature, *expands,* as it proceeds; and, in this late age, when it looks no longer with the *timid glance of a child*, but with the *experienced eye of Centuries* into the bosom of nature, it is able to unite things severed by long intervals, to compare mean beginnings with remote & mighty results, & thus to restore order to a Chaos of mighty things. (*JMN* 2: 140-141) (emphasis mine)

In this passage the physical and mental planes of existence seem to be effectively working together. Our eyes and our intellect make us aware of the interconnectedness that Emerson believes reigns in our world, and slowly—"with a snail's pace"—our mind works through the newly acquired information. In what seems to be a sort of coming-of-age process, the mind learns how to move past its "timid glance" to finally adopt the more mature and "experienced eye of Centuries" which enables us to see connections. Vision alone is not

sufficient to make us aware of relatedness, because as Emerson writes in another journal entry from the following year:

> The cases are so few in which we can see connexion & order in events by reason of the narrow field of our Vision that we are glad in our vanity if we can solder with our imaginations into system, things in fact unconnected, can turn the ravishment of devotion or poetry into prophecies by searching up & down in the great garner of History for an event that will chime with a prediction. (*JMN* 2: 251)

In these crucial years for the development of his philosophy, Emerson writes over and over again on the same topic and seems to be struggling to articulate a theory which can explain how and why humans are bound to perceive and look for connections. As shown by these last two quotations, Emerson believes one cannot perceive relatedness by relying on the physical aspect only; our eyes fail us for they can only encompass so much in their "narrow field of vision," but our mind and our imagination make up for our physical inaptness and are instrumental in fulfilling what seems to be mankind's inescapable necessity of putting facts into a system.

Another significant example of Emersonian vision and its implications on his quest for wholeness can be found in his 1829 sermon "*Trifles*" (also known as *Sermon XLIV*). Five crucial years separate this text from the previous quotation. Between 1824 and 1829, Emerson graduated from Harvard Divinity School, married his first wife Ellen Louise Tucker, and began his ministry at Boston Second Church. The scope and the tone of his writings changed drastically and when he wrote again on vision and wholeness, he was not scribbling down thoughts in the private space of his journal, but rather he was addressing an audience

from a pulpit, as their minister. Emerson's first public comment on the topic of vision is made while exhorting his community to recognize the trivial things part of our daily life.

He initially seems to resume from where he left off five years earlier. He distinguishes between the "range of vision of the eye" and the "range of action of the human mind," which he describes as distinct faculties impacting two different spheres of the human experience, the material world and the mental one. The body and the mind appear to be once again on two separate levels, but despite this initial – and obvious – distinction, what is striking is that on this occasion he chooses to remark on their similarity, rather than their difference. The eye and the mind do in fact function in the same way, for they both allow every individual to effortlessly move from the macro to the microscopical. Through our eyes we are able to catch "the dim outline of a mountain a hundred miles distant and examine […] the anatomy of the smallest insect" (*CS* 2: 26), and similarly our mind is "capable of the most comprehensive views that regard God and eternity, and it can dedicate its whole force to the merest straws" (*CS* 2: 26). Emerson seems to appreciate our power to concentrate on the smallest details that made up our world, and yet he warns his audience not to focus too much on them. In an anticipated move that brings the body and the mind more closely together, he cautions his listeners not to focus "the natural eye too exclusively on minute objects" for in doing so the eye will gradually lose "its powers of distant vision and more surely will the *eye of the mind* grow dull and incapable of great contemplation which is daily degraded to little studies" (*CS* 2: 26) (emphasis mine). In this sermon, the "natural eye" and the "eye of the mind," – or the "outward eye" and the "inward eye" as he calls them in his journals– are closely connected and therefore the kind of vision that Emerson preaches about entails both a practical and intellectual shift of focus. It is just as much related to a physical ability of perceiving objects around us as it is to the intellectual capacity of imagining a larger-than-life reality.

It is precisely to this kind of "distant vision" that he will go back time and again in his journals. Between 1831 and 1834, in several entries he writes again on the topic of vision, optics and the whole. In 1831, he states:

> The point of view is of more importance than the sharpness of sight [...] The eye too near turns the fairest proportions of architecture or of sculpture into deformity […] God who is infinite may contemplate any point or atom & it will orderly reveal the whole as it *is* to him. But man who is finite must be set in the right place to see or the order will become confusion to his microscopic optics. (*JMN* 3: 269)

Our existence as finite beings and our fallible senses require us to assume the right position if we want to look at the whole. Unlike God, we are not immediately able to enlarge our optics, and to engage in such an activity, humans have to consciously alter their thinking – their mind – and their vision – their eyes.

What Emerson suggests is then a synthesis between our physical ability to perceive the world around us and our capacity to imagine a different reality. Only if these two factors work together can mankind first notice and then find meaning in wholeness. Although the act of seeing itself, he argues, can sometimes be enough to surpass binary oppositions, for it unifies "the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object" (*CW* 2: 160), it is by mastering the practice of "distant vision," understood as a physical and intellectual act, that mankind can attempt at "rounding & integrating the most disagreeable parts into a pleasing whole" (*JMN* 5: 97).

2.2 "Show me thy relations to me:" Emerson's Wholeness

In his 1997 book *The Emerson Museum: Practical Romanticism and the Pursuit of the Whole*, Lee Rust Brown notes the connection that Emerson makes between wholeness and the eye. Brown points out that Emerson imagines wholeness as a relation "achieved by the eye […] through practical adjustments of relation between the beholder and his object" (72), but also as a quality that can be readily available within the strict frame of the particular. As Emerson writes in *Nature*, "the eye is the best of artists" because by simply putting things in perspective it "integrates every mass of objects, of what character soever, into a well colored and shaded globe, so that where the particular objects are mean and unaffecting, the landscape they compose is round and symmetrical" (*CW* 1: 12), but also every particular thing is a whole in and of itself. In the same essay, Emerson states that "every particular in nature, a leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time is related to the whole, and partakes of the perfection of the whole. Each particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world" (*CW* 1: 27). The minutest of natural objects is in itself a whole world and thus for Emerson, wholeness is the result of perceiving a web of relations connecting the most disparate parts, but it is also an intrinsic characteristic of every particular. It has both an ontological quality and it is the outcome of a process of noting similarities and common roots.

For Jeremy David Engels, "Emerson saw oneness everywhere. He believed in a timeless, universal philosophical truth" (87) which was the expression of a God who to him was "the Universal mind" (*JMN* 5: 170). With similar phrases (such as "the Universal Being," "Universal Spirit," "Universal Nature," and "the Over-Soul"), Emerson referred to the all-encompassing nature in which we exist and that acts as the unifying force behind reality's manifold representations. As Joseph Urbas remarks, Emerson believes that the "outward and onward flow of particulars and evolving forms has an origin or *terminus a quo* in God"

and therefore, he was persuaded that this ontological unity from which all begins and the "necessity driving the flow from it are, he insists, *equally divine*" (16). In his essay "The Over-Soul," he writes of the coexistence of parts and fractions and of the synthesizing power that encompasses everything and that is present in any particular. This power is eternal and universal, it transcends both temporal and spatial boundaries:

> The Supreme Critic on the errors of the past and the present, and the only prophet of that which must be, is that great nature in which we rest, as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart, of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission; that overpowering reality which confutes our tricks and talents, and constrains every one to pass for what he is, and to speak from his character and not from his tongue, and which evermore tends and aims to pass into our thought and hand, and become wisdom, and virtue, and power, and beauty. We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. (*CW* 2: 160)

In this passage Emerson stresses the value of this Unity, which according to him has the potential to work as the guiding force of mankind. It is also a common heart which ensures that each and every single being lives, as Sermon XXXVII puts it, "pulse for pulse in harmony with the universal whole" (*CS* 1: 290). Because of the qualities that Emerson ascribes to it, Unity undoubtedly assumes divine connotations, and this is especially evident in his early journals, in which he often links the idea of unity and the universal mind with God.

In this decisive period of time between 1835 and 1838, before the publication of *Nature* and immediately after he delivered "The American Scholar," he started to think of wholeness predominantly in theological terms and in an apparent opposition to the individual. In his journals he pits his existence as a man against a much greater entity and he envisions the individual as a periphery, or an appendage, of God:

> A man, I, am the remote circumference, the skirt, the thin suburb or frontier post of God but go inward & I find the ocean; I lose my individuality in its waves. God is Unity, but always works in variety. I go inward until I find Unity universal, that Is before the World was: I come outward to this body a point of variety. (*JMN* 5: 177)

This passage is exemplary of at least four issues that would accompany Emerson for his whole life. The essence of God, the body/mind dichotomy, the agency of individuals, and this idea of wholeness working as a binding force are all concerns that he would address time and again. What makes this excerpt interesting though, is Emerson's description of the soul of any individual as an ocean in which individuality gets lost in favor of a unity that is metaphysical and universal. If the body, the outward part of mankind, is unique and varied, the inward, our mind and soul, is shaped by a divine source common to all men and women. Still considered by many readers and critics, the philosopher who – with his idea of self-reliance – theorized an individual completely disinterested in communal efforts and social concerns, Emerson, in several journal entries of these years, is instead rather wary of the individual. He even seems skeptical about the existence of such an entity as the individual. In search for answers, he asks:

> Who shall define to me an Individual? I behold with awe & delight many illustrations of the One Universal Mind. I see my being imbedded in it. As a plant

> in the earth so I grow in God. I am only a form of him. He is the soul of Me. (*JMN* 5: 336)

Emerson experiences some difficulty in defining the individual because, although he notes that many different individuals populate the Earth, he believes that these "many illustrations" actually stem from the same root, from the "One Universal Mind." Individuals then are to him parts of God, and it is this universal God that animates the soul of humans. Surprisingly, little to no agency is reserved to individuals who seem to lose the traditional humanistic centrality and become mere vehicles of God. As he writes in another journal entry, it is the "Universal Central Soul [that] comes to the surface in my body" (*JMN* 5: 187). The individual and his body thus become expressions of a divine entity that, dogmatic differences aside, is universal and can speak to humankind as a whole. When an individual recognizes this indiscernible bond between such a God and him or herself, then he or she will also understand the importance of acting as a proxy of the divine and will therefore strive "evermore to sink the individual in the universal" (*JMN* 5: 187).

In these crucial years for the development of his philosophy, Emerson insists time and again on the fact that men and women become "great by means of the predominance of the Universal nature" (*JMN* 5: 484). Although Emerson does not deny individual value and he appreciates the variety embodied by mankind, he wishes to see a connection established between individual men and women and this divine entity of which all is a part, and everything is an expression. Even though "we see the world piece by piece as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree[,]" Emerson insists that it is the "Whole of which these are the brilliant parts" that truly matters (*JMN* 7: 318).

Seeing that the "whole" is universal and eternal, the fact that we live in parts and in particles, as he writes in *Nature*, is a problem which he passionately tries to solve, and which

is also addressed in “The American Scholar.” At the beginning of his most celebrated essay, Emerson writes of unity and the whole, and he mentions a “doctrine ever new and sublime; that there is One Man, – present to all particular men only partially, or through one faculty; and that you must take the whole society to find the whole man” (*CW* 1: 53). In this address Emerson argues for wholeness and unity and believes that humankind has to move away from a social state made up of parceled individuals and make concrete efforts to go back to that ideal state where there is “never a beginning, there is never an end to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself” (*CW* 1: 54).

Emerson believed wholeness to be ontological, a primordial state that preexisted society, and he wished mankind could find a way to experience what Sacvan Bercovitch has defined as “pre-social harmony” (128). In that state, man and nature—in all their respective declinations—formed a harmonious whole, whose genesis resided in the universal spirit. Interestingly, for Emerson oneness never means sameness. As Engels remarks, Emerson’s conception of oneness is necessarily “grounded in the understanding that while it is possible to expand the perspective from which we see the world, nevertheless we will always see that world from a perspective. The ethics of oneness cannot be an ethics of sameness” (112). A search for connections does not automatically mean a systematic eradication of differences, on the contrary, taking his cue from the natural world – a cohesive unity made up of the most different elements – Emerson often writes of “Unity in Variety” (*CW* 1: 27).

Far from being a homogeneous conglomerate of flora and fauna, nature comprises the most diverse entities and yet it is fundamentally united within itself and with mankind. Emerson has famously noted the correspondence between natural and spiritual facts, and largely drawing on the ideas of Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, who first wrote of a “theory of correspondence” between nature and the spiritual world, he declared the world to be emblematic. In *Nature,* he states:

> Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture. (*CW* 1: 18)

The close alignment that he thinks exists between nature and spirit, things and words, effectively puts the subject in a direct relationship with nature, which not only is the home of men and women, but also another entity from which humankind has some lessons to learn. As he notes in "Success," this connection between humankind and nature, "the correspondence of man to the world" is the "fundamental fact in our metaphysic constitution" (*W* 7: 283). He notes that:

> The mind yields sympathetically to the tendencies or law which stream through things and make the order of nature; and in the perfection of this correspondence or expressiveness, the health and force of man consist. [We need] to watch and tenderly cherish the intellectual and moral sensibilities, those fountains of right thought, and woo them to stay and make their home with us. Whilst they abide with us we shall not think amiss. (*W* 7: 283)

Nature thus appears to be the fountain of right thought, and Emerson wishes mankind was able to always be receptive to this connection. In a somewhat uncharacteristically passionate tone, he writes:

> Ah! if one could keep this sensibility, and live in the happy sufficing present, and find the day and its cheap means contenting, which only ask receptivity in you, and no strained exertion and cankering ambition […] We are not strong by our power to penetrate, but by our relatedness. The world is enlarged for us, not by

> new objects, but by finding more affinities and potencies in those we have. (*W* 7: 282)

Relatedness is what matters the most, because it is only by recognizing these connections that mankind can attempt to discover and make sense of the whole. According to Emerson though, more often than not, men and women live their lives oblivious of their place in this web of relations. Not being aware of this relatedness, or worse, actively trying to live an atomistic existence, has the consequence of losing the connection to this "whole," made of materials and immaterial entities. When this happens, the result is what Emerson calls "the *divided* or social state" where individuals, no longer able to recognize and make use of this "original unit, this fountain of power" (*CW* 1: 53), proceed to live a crippled existence. Emerson writes about an "amputation" that, although not physical, leaves individuals incomplete, lacking a crucial part of their being: "the state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters,—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man. Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things" (*CW* 1: 53). In this passage, Emerson comments on the lamentable lack of wholeness in individuals[2] which, as I have already stressed, is in stark opposition with his need to conceive the world, humankind, and nature as fundamentally united.

The "whole" which Emerson envisions also has cultural and socio-political qualities. For Dewey W. Hall, Emerson is a radical egalitarian, for his idea of "wholeness is predicated upon an understanding of equal relations" between individuals and "animate beings [part of] the natural world" (161-162). Everyone and everything is supposed to partake in this

[2] In the paragraph in which he writes about mankind turning into things, Emerson gets remarkably close to describing the concept of reification as theorized by Marxist theorist György Lukács – for which he used the term *Verdinglichung* ("making into a thing").

democratic, cross-cultural Whole which knows no spatial and temporal boundaries and admits no hierarchy. In this unity, or Over-Soul, as Emerson calls it, hinting at its shared, trans-worldly or supra-mundane characteristic, every person's individuality is embedded and united with one another. It is interesting to note that not only Emerson believes humankind to be ontologically related via this all-encompassing unity, but he also argues that every single individual is indebted to whatever and whoever contributes to the formation of their being. In "Private Life," he says:

> When I remember […] that I am an aggregate of infinitesimal parts & that every minutest streamlet that has flowed to me is represented in that man which I am, so that if every one should claim his part in me I should be instantaneously diffused through the creation & individually decrease, then I say if I am but an alms of All & live but by the Charity of innumerable others […] What is a man but a congress of nations? […] [He is] the insulated result of all that character, activity, sympathy, antagonism working for ages in all the corners of the earth […] Who & what has not contributed something to make him that he is? Art, science, institutions, black men, white men, the vices and the virtues of all people, the gallows, the church, the shop, poets, nature, joy, & fear, all help all teach him. (*EL* 3: 251)

Here Emerson could not be more egalitarian. Everything leaves a mark on the individual who becomes the product of—or the reaction to—whatever force has an impact on them. Mankind is thus inherently relational, it can only exist in connection to other beings, all of which, whether human or nonhuman, national or international, material or immaterial, affect the single individual, who is naturally prone to look for connections. In Emerson's own words:

> Man is an analogist, and studies relations in all objects. He is placed in the centre of beings, and a ray of relation passes from every other being to him. And neither can man be understood without these objects, nor these objects without man. (*CW* 1: 19)

Every single thing is significant for Emerson, the relationship between mankind and nature is essential for him, for only by fully embracing its relatedness with the natural world and with any other form of being, can humankind be aware of the richness inherent in this chain of innumerable relations that are "running from part to part & joining remotest points of time & space" (*JMN* 3: 280).

In a journal entry dated 1826 (when Emerson was only twenty-three years old), he clarifies the value that he attributes to monism with a telling example. He writes:

> He who had precisely examined every wheel, spring, & pin of a watch had no notion of a watch until he had also made their *correlation* & joint operation an object of study so the exact account of every faculty & affection is not at all an account of Man till the Whole has also been beheld in its harmony. The same reasoning can be accurately applied to all the parts of truth that become the object of our knowledge […] In addition to the aggregate force of a thousand particular facts in evidence, is a new evidence discovered only by uniting them together. (*JMN* 3: 47)

The added power that derives from looking for common roots and from exploring connections is what Emerson is most interested in. All across his intellectual production, from his college years to the final time of his life when he came to be regarded as one of America's most prominent cultural critics, he insists on the necessity of a holistic reading of the human experience, which he saw as an ever-evolving democratic system in which

everyone—and everything—can and should participate, and in which the whole, expression of a divine entity, is much more than the sum of its parts.

Whenever Emerson writes about relatedness, he does so by completely transcending spatial and temporal constraints, thus implying that an ontological connection. For this reason, Emerson's belief in the persistence of relatedness could be seen in contradiction with his ideas about fluidity and change, especially considering that he asserts that all things exist in a ceaseless flow of change and that the self undergoes a process of constant metamorphosis. He believes nature, as well as human experience, to be defined not by perfection or permanence, but rather by growth, fluidity, and process—he writes in "Circles" that "there are no fixtures in nature" and that the universe is fluid and volatile (*CW* 2: 179)—and he also defines "being," not as a stable "wall" but as a series of "interminable oceans" (*CW* 3: 42). Despite his firm belief in Heraclitus' famous maxim Πάντα ῥεῖ (all things are in flux), he seems to find this ontological assumption of oneness, unity, and relatedness as the *one* constant element.

This emphasis on connectedness reflects Emerson's interpretation of organicism, the theoretical framework which best describes his sense of relatedness and wholeness. Emerson uses the organic metaphor as a way to synthesize his belief in fluidity with his sense of wholeness. According to Laura Dassow Walls, he uses organicism "to bind the universe into […] a harmonious whole in constant flux" (197). In very general terms, organicism can be defined as the theory which attributes to society (or to the universe as a whole) characteristics analogous to those of a biological organism. Unlike mechanists, who believe that things and facts can be best comprehended if separated into their component parts so that each observed effect is connected to its proper cause, and in opposition to formists, who work with prototypical ideas considered as fixed concepts which can therefore be easily differentiated one from the other, organicists tend to concentrate on the "wholeness of the

whole and they are reluctant to analyze at all" (Adams 118). Stephen C. Pepper describes organic theory as the "world hypothesis that stresses the internal relatedness or coherence of things. It is impressed with the manner in which observations at first apparently unconnected turn out to be closely related, and with the fact that as knowledge progresses it becomes more systematized" (74).

Emerson too refers to a similar process when, in "The American Scholar," he writes about nature's reluctance to render an account of itself to the mind:

> To the young mind everything is individual, stands by itself. By and by, it finds how to join two things and see in them one nature; then three, then three thousand; and so, tyrannized over by its own unifying instinct, it goes on tying things together, diminishing anomalies, discovering roots running under ground whereby contrary and remote things cohere and flower out from one stem... The ambitious soul sits down before each refractory fact; one after another reduces all strange constitutions, all new powers, to their class and their law, and goes on forever to animate the last fibre of organization, the outskirts of nature, by insight. Thus to him, to this schoolboy under the bending dome of day, is suggested that he and it proceed from one root; one is leaf and one is flower; relation, sympathy, stirring in every vein (*CW* 1: 54-55).

Here Emerson appears to be suggesting the adoption of the same process described by Pepper. Both the accounts of the progress of knowledge are based on a constant integration of one fact with another that eventually will lead toward a total integration of the universe. The most important thing that needs to be discovered is not any particular cause or archetypal idea, but relatedness.

Emerson seems to have had this approach since his days on the Unitarian pulpit. Just as he did in the privacy of his journals, he used organic formulations in public as early as 1830. In sermon *CIV*, first preached on 12 January 1831, he praises "the perfection of that web of relations to all beings into which your own lot is woven" (*CS* 3: 84) and while defining brotherhood he explicitly talks about relationships using an organic metaphor. As children of God, he says, "We live but in him, as the leaf lives in the tree […] We shall be parts of God, as the hand is part of the body, if only the hand had a will" (*CS* 3: 87-88). He insists time and again on the individual's place within a network of "universal relations" (*JMN* 5: 18), he advocates for a metaphysical model in which unity and variety form a dynamic reality where, because of the "ontological priority" (Urbas 16) reserved to unity, "the individual is always dying [and] [t]he Universal is life" (*JMN* 5: 223). As he notes in his journal:

> Man is but a relation; – at least all his knowledge & all his thought are relations. He subsists not from himself. He creates nothing of himself. He but changes or seems to change very little the face of the outermost rind of the world with his manifold arts. His action & his suffering are relative. (*JMN* 6: 277)

Connections and relatedness to the natural world and to humankind as a whole are the essence of the individual, who cannot exist outside this web of relations. If not integrated in this wholeness, the individual and his or her life cease to have meaning. However, as Emerson states in his journal, catching a glimpse of this Whole is not at all a simple task; with his work, and especially with his lectures, he sought to alert his fellow citizens to this problem. When noting down the possible topics for a series of lectures in 1836, he wrote of precisely this issue: "There is a tendency in the mind to separate particulars & in magnifying them to lose sight of the connexion of the object with the Whole." (*JMN* 5: 222). Another such tendency, however, according to Emerson, is the opposite one, and he mentions it in the very same list: "It is the constant tendency of the mind to Unify all it beholds, or to

reduce the remotest facts to a single law" (*JMN* 5:221). Humankind is then capable of both, proximate and distant vision are both possible, particular and general facts are equally important, and both the local and the universal are meaningful. The problem that Emerson perceives lies in the fact that not everyone has the tools to conceive of the world while observing it at the intersection of the two.

2.3 Between Identity and Variety: Emerson's "Uniters"

In 1857, writing in his journal, Emerson affirmed that he himself tried to make sense of both parts and the Whole. He starts by noting that he has a few laws when it come to his philosophy, but interestingly, he only decides to list two, which are indicative of his desire to solve the dichotomy between unity and variety:

> My philosophy holds to a few laws, 1. *Identity*, whence comes the fact that *metaphysical faculties & facts are the transcendency of physical*. 2. Flowing, or transition, or shooting the gulf, the perpetual striving to ascend to a higher platform, the same thing in new & higher forms. (*JMN* 14: 191–192)

Physical facts, the many manifestations of life, are to Emerson but the manifold representations of metaphysical facts. According to Urbas, "the physical realm is the order of distribution, difference, variety; the metaphysical realm, that of unity or identity," and when joined together they constitute the two parts of what he calls Emerson's "bipolar metaphysics" (16). If Urbas ascribes this particular attitude to Emerson specifically, Emerson himself seems persuaded that such an outlook is instead the defining feature of philosophy in general. In his essay on Plato (part of *Representative Men*) he describes philosophy as the discipline that can only be practiced by those who can divide, define, and unite. He identifies this power of defining things as the true essence of philosophy and proceeds to give an

account of it in similar, yet clearer, terms compared to the ones he used in his journal. He writes:

> Philosophy is the account which the human mind gives to itself of the constitution of the world. Two cardinal facts lie forever at the base; the One; and the two. 1. Unity or Identity; and, 2. Variety. We unite all things by perceiving the law which pervades them, by perceiving the superficial differences, and the profound resemblances. But every mental act, – this very perception of identity or oneness, recognizes the difference of things. Oneness and Otherness. It is impossible to speak, or to think without embracing both. The mind is urged to ask for one cause of many effects; then for the cause of that; and again the cause, diving still into the profound; self-assured that it shall arrive at an absolute and sufficient One, a One that shall be All. (*CW* 4: 27-28)

Emerson is convinced that mankind *feels* oneness and otherness, it is something that we cannot quite comprehend, but that we are naturally prone to perceive. Although the mind tends to look for wholeness, to strike a balance between unity and variety is not a task that can be mastered by all. In 1867, Emerson comments on this difficulty and writes:

> Identity & Centrality, the one law for atom & sphere, for atom & universe, is indignantly denied by children, whether two years old or a hundred, & is affirmed by those whose eyes are opened. Every breath of air is the carrier of the Universal mind. The child sees the single fact; the philosopher sees in it only the eternal identity. (*JMN* 16: 65)

Those who are unaware of the centripetal force that unites all have yet to comprehend the real nature of life and the true essence of reality. Still children are those whose eyes have

not yet opened to see in every single fact, part of a variety of manifestations, the eternal unity, while philosophers are those who recognize this ontological identity. In another essay contained in *Representative Men*, "Montaigne, or the Skeptic," Emerson describes these two tendencies in slightly different terms to set up his reflections on the French philosopher and essayist:

> Each man is born with a predisposition to one or the other of these sides of nature, and, it will easily happen that men will be found devoted to one or the other. One class has the perception of Difference, and is conversant with facts and surfaces; cities and persons; and the bringing certain things to pass; - the men of talent and action. Another class have the perception of Identity, and are men of faith and philosophy, men of genius. (*CW* 4: 85)

Emerson seems to differentiate between two groups of men: those who are perceptive to difference, whom he classifies as the men of talent and action, and those who are instead inclined to recognize the all-encompassing unity of things, who are the more contemplative kind, men of faith and philosophy. Although one might be tempted to think that the latter category is assigned more value by Emerson, he immediately proceeds to point out—with the paragraph that follows this categorization—that no *single* vision is advisable on its own by stating: "Each of these riders drives too fast." (*CW* 4: 85). The ideal position, as Emerson explains at length and with an abundance of examples in the following pages, is one of equilibrium:

> The abstractionist and the materialist thus mutually exasperating each other, and the scoffer expressing the worst of materialism, there arises a third party to occupy the middle ground between these two, the skeptic, namely. He finds both wrong by being in extremes. He labours to plant his feet, to be the beam

> of the balance. He will not go beyond his card. He sees the onesidedness of these men of the street; he will not be a Gibeonite; he stands for the intellectual faculties, a cool head, and whatever serves to keep it cool: no unadvised industry, no unrewarded self-devotion, no loss of the brains in toil. (*CW* 4: 88)

Emerson's contention is both with the "abstractionists," who are only interested in the metaphysical realm of unity and with the materialists, who are solely concerned with the physical world of variety and manifold manifestations. To solve this conundrum, he advocates for the emergence of a group of thinkers who are able to occupy a middle ground where the synthesis of these two positions is possible.

As I have stated, Emerson describes philosophy as the discipline that is based on a productive integration of the One and the Many. As he writes in the previously quoted passage from his essay on Plato, however, if philosophy is nothing more than the mind's interpretation of the constitution of the world, and therefore, it is an art that can be practiced by everybody who truly ponders on these matters and recognizes that unity and variety are *the* two constituent forces of reality. Although, as I will show, Emerson considers this perception of identity and difference as a characteristic of preachers, scientists and poets as well as of philosophers, I want to first call attention to his description of Plato.

Even though he mentions him among those who are primarily interested in "shining abstractions" (*CW* 4: 86), Plato is among those who, according to Emerson, are entitled to call themselves philosophers, not because of his undeniable erudition or his impressive philosophical accomplishments, but rather because he was a "balanced soul" who perceived these two elements (unity *and* variety) and found a synthesis between them. I believe it is important to stress that, as far as Emerson was concerned, Plato could have been a carpenter, or a baker for that matter, and still be a philosopher because it is his ability to

first note and then find balance between the One and the Many that qualifies him as such: "He cannot forgive in himself a partiality, but is resolved that the two poles of thought shall appear in his statement. His argument and his sentence are self poised and spherical. The two poles appear, yes, and become two hands to grasp and appropriate their own" (*CW* 4: 31). Like the two poles of a sphere, unity and variety are the two parts of a perfectly integrated unicum, and the philosopher is he who can contemplate them both and join them in a harmonic whole.

If, as Emerson remarks in his journal, "all men have thoughts, images, facts, by thousands & thousands" this does not mean that everyone can effortlessly put them into relation, because "only one of many can crystallize these into a symmetrical one by means of the Nucleus of an Idea" (*JMN* 5: 64). To move from particular facts, from the myriad of different objects and conceptions, and to arrive at the universal idea which is the common origin of all, as we have already seen, requires a special kind of vision, and it is a task that not everyone can easily accomplish. David M. Robinson rightly points out that Emerson, throughout his life, continued to seek "confirmations of [his fundamental belief in the integral unity of the world] in almost every human expression or endeavor" ("Emerson and Religion" 172) and only rarely did he seem to find examples of thinkers who perceived identity and difference as the two, equally important, poles of a sphere. In an effort to generalize Emerson's much more complicated stance on this matter, I want to suggest that in his view, at least ideally, philosophers, preachers, scientists, poets and all had the tools to perceive unity in multiplicity.

As Emerson attributed divine connotations to his conception of wholeness, it is not surprising to see him describing preachers as having— ideally—the power to transcend local specificities and particular facts in favor of universals. Emerson himself was trained to be a

minister, and practiced the profession for several years. It was arguably not his vocation, but since he came from a family of pastors, or as Brooks Atkinson writes in his "Introduction" to the 1940 edition of Emerson's complete works, from a "family that instinctively inclined toward the ministry" (xii), for the Harvard-educated son of a leading Unitarian minister this was the most obvious career choice. As Atkinson notes by using the adverb "instinctively," in Emerson's family being ordained was not necessarily a much pondered upon decision. This choice, as Henry Nash Smith points out using Emerson's words, was made by him "before he was acquainted with the character of his own mind" (53), a choice and a life that he later resented so much that he resigned from his role as pastor of Boston's Second Church in 1832.

The value that Emerson found in the Church, however, resided in the fact that while acting as a guide for his community, the preacher had the means to explore humankind's connection with the divine, which was not necessarily a neatly codified Christian God. Rather, Emerson believed it to be an entity that could be reached even without the mediation of a church and did not need men and women to participate in meaningless rituals such as the Eucharist. As such, the ideal preacher that he describes in his journal in 1835 is someone who must not be held back by his individuality and particular circumstances, if he is to assume the role of spiritual leader of a certain group of people:

> He the preacher let him then acquiesce in being nothing that he may move mountains; let him be the mere tongue of us all; no individual but a universal man, let him leave his nation, his party, his sect, town-connexion, even his vanity & selflove at home & come hither to say what were equally fit at Paris, at Canton, and at Thebes. (*JMN* 5: 102)

The departure from his particular context is not necessarily physical. A man can be rooted in his own reality and yet be able to speak of universal values and truths that apply all around the world. A "universal man" is able to see the equality between the varied facts that make up reality and admits no hierarchy among them. It is interesting to note that Emerson emphasizes the preacher's duty to deliver messages that are equally relevant and appropriate across different cultures and locations, be it Paris, Canton, or Thebes, and in this passage in particular the preacher emerges as a unifying force, capable of transcending narrow—and national—identities and connecting with the universal essence of humanity, which is one and divine.

Although Emerson left the pulpit rather early in his life, he continued to be interested in theology, and especially in its relationship with science. Science became a way of corroborating his theological position instead of a dangerous antagonistic force that could shatter the foundations of a more mystical religious sentiment. As he writes in a letter to his aunt Mary Moody Emerson in 1830, "the naturalists are ridiculous when they so often forget their end in their means & learn nothing but the anatomy of a leaf or a fly—& not less ridiculous though far worse are the polemic theologians when they are only polemics" (*Letters* 1: 298-299). If the scientists' fault is to only care for the mechanisms of the world and of nature, religious orthodoxy can also easily turn into fundamentalism. As it is often the case with Emerson, he argues for a dynamic interaction of the two. Already in 1831, in his journal he stresses that:

> The Religion that is afraid of science dishonours God and commits suicide. It acknowledges that it is not equal to the whole of truth, that it legislates, tyrannizes over a village of God's empires but is not the immutable universal law. Every influx of atheism, of skepticism is thus made useful as a mercury pill

> assaulting and removing a diseased religion and making way for truth. (*JMN* 3: 239)

Emerson asserts that a religion that fears science not only disrespects God but also destroys itself. Such a religion can only dictate and exert control over a small portion of God's vast dominion, but it does not act for the unchanging and universal law that encompasses all. In these circumstances, atheism and skepticism appear as a potent medicine, a “mercury pill,” which serve as cure for this diseased form of religion. Scientific advancements or skeptical inquiries are necessary for religion and, to survive, it should embrace them as catalysts for growth and transformation. Only by adopting new ideas and by discarding outdated dogmas, religion can then evolve and align more closely with the universal principles that govern the world. What Emerson suggested was not a rejection of Christianity but a revision of it. As Eric Wilson asserts, Emerson “was about synthesizing, blending, in hermetic fashion, a religious sensibility with scientific rigor” (128).

If some critics, like Wilson, believe that Emerson had no intention of trading religion for science, others, such as Laura Dassow Walls, have gone a step further and argued that he did not merely advocate for the coexistence of religion and science, nor did he solely suggest a reformulation of religion in view of science, but that he actually came see science as a sort of replacement for traditional and tightly regulated religions. In Walls’ words:

> Emerson's Transcendentalism helped science become a substitute for institutionalized religion: first, by separating "permanent" spiritual truth from "transient" religious doctrines; then, by establishing a foundation on which the next generation of scientific naturalists could build a secular faith in the creative processes of nature, of which they would be the appointed priests and interpreters. (224)

For Walls, Emerson found science the best tool to understand the permanent—and universal—spiritual truth which he hoped was going to be explored by "scientific naturalists," the appointed priests of nature. David Greenham puts forward a similar reading when he writes of Emerson's need to understand the relationship between mankind, nature, and the church (1). He cites a journal entry dated November 1833 in which Emerson describes nature as a universal language whose message can be potentially read by everyone, everywhere:

> Nature is a language & every new fact that we learn is a new word; but rightly seen, taken all together it is not merely a language but ~~a scripture which contains the whole truth~~ the language put together into a most significant & universal book. I wish to learn the language not that I may know a new set of nouns & verbs but that I may read the great book which is written in that tongue. (*JMN* 4: 95)

As Greenham notes, the revision in the passage—not at all an unusual occurrence in Emerson's journals—is indicative of Emerson's significant rethinking of nature's role. Nature is not "a scripture which contains the whole truth," it cannot be so easily associated with religion because, as Greenham points out, a scripture is related to a particular system of belief, and as such is necessarily partial. Nature then, in Emerson's words, is a "universal book" uprooted from specific traditions and "almost secularized" (Greenham 2).

However, even though interpretations such as these have their own merits, Emerson's opus relies extensively on the interaction between religion and science, spirit and matter. As Wilson maintains, Emerson argued for the emergence of "naturalist prophets and religious scientists" who with their "faith-driven deductions and empirically minded inductions, [had to search] for God in nature through both devotion *and* reason" (129).

Although Emerson "shared the lively interest in the findings of science of his time, particularly in the emerging studies of geology and biology" (Whicher 28) and eagerly read Herschel, Cuvier, Humboldt, Galileo, Newton, Laplace, Lamarck, Linnaeus, and Davy among many others, he wished to see the naturalists proceed in their scientific achievements by means of systematic experimentations coupled with enduring faith.

Science is not only tightly associated with religion, but it shares with it the preoccupation of giving humankind an account of both the Whole and its parts, of both unity and variety. As I have already shown, whenever Emerson talks about wholeness, he also refers to the natural world, whose diversity is a manifestation of the one unifying force that is the essence of reality. Stephen Whicher argues that for Emerson, scientists should be able to reconcile "moral character" and "natural history," thus situating themselves at the intersection of religion and science, and the act of cataloging facts and providing explanations should not "sever [them] from the Whole but [should] unite [them] to it" (*JMN* 7: 277). It is essential to keep in mind that for Emerson particular facts are only relevant insofar as they are seen in connection with the whole. What truly matters is the circuit of relations:

> What is there for a Standard of true Beauty except the entire circuit of all harmonious relations of the great Whole of Nature, which no cogitative power can embrace? All particular beauties scattered up & down in Nature are only so far beautiful as they disclose this circuit of all relations of the great Whole more or less, in themselves. (*JMN* 5: 129)

True beauty then, lies for Emerson in the comprehensive and interconnected relations within the entirety of nature, and it is the scientist's duty to observe and comprehend both the Whole and its constituent parts, to make apparent the intricate connections within

Nature in order to uncover the harmonious relations that contribute to its beauty. Emerson thought of himself as an interpreter of nature, and he thought he was bound by the same responsibilities pertaining to natural scientists: "I read my commission in every cipher of nature, and know that I was made for another office, a professor of the Joyous Science, a detector & delineator of occult harmonies & unpublished beauties" (*JMN* 8: 8).

Those who practice science, then, are drawn to look for connections and are moved by the harmonies they find in nature. When looking for a cause, "naturalists" recognize relationships and discover commonalities that do not result in mere lists, but are helpful to move from the micro to the macro and from the particular to the general:

> This passion, the enthusiasm for nature, the love of the Whole, has burned in the breasts of the Fathers of Science. It was the ever present aim of Newton, of Linnaeus, of Davy, of Cuvier, to ascend from nomenclature to classification; from arbitrary to natural classes; from natural classes, to primary laws; from these, in an ever narrowing circle, to approach the elemental law, the *causa causans,* the supernatural force (*EL* 1: 80)

For Emerson, the aim of true science is not mere classification, and he seems to be frustrated when the study of nature becomes the simple labelling of infinite particulars: "I do not wish to know that my shell is a strombus or my moth a Vanessa, but I wish to unite the shell & the moth to my being" (*JMN* 7: 71). When science becomes dead classification, it loses all its relevance. There is no point in compiling endless catalogues of names and facts if these are not put in perspective, if connections are not drawn among natural objects and between natural objects and mankind. As David M. Robinson notes, Emerson "realizes the danger of the means, classification, becoming an end in itself" ("Emerson's Natural Theology" 85) and insists on the fact that science should be a search after identity and be driven by "the impulse

to search resemblance, affinity, identity, in all its objects" (*W* 8: 7). Those who use science as a way to accumulate particular fact after particular fact in a gargantuan collection of meaningless factoids are entirely missing the point of scientific inquiry and are not pursuing true science. They are examples of an "avaricious man [who] seeks to add to the number of his toys" and stand in clear opposition to "the scientific man" who is instead in the business of "find[ing] new relations" (*JMN* 8: 250).

In 1833, Emerson himself felt this call to bring nature's material variety back to its original unity. When, at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, he first noted the interconnectedness of nature and had his famous epiphany, he noted down in his journal his desire to be a "naturalist." Until then, Emerson mostly *felt* this wholeness, but the visit at the botanical garden, which was laid out on Antoine Laurent de Jussieu's natural system of classification, was arguably what made him realize that classification, in its ideal form at least, also implied connection (Richardson 140). The visit at the Jardin des Plantes was crucial to the development of Emerson's philosophy because there, he recognized that "all things in nature are intimately related, both to one another and to the human observer," and that in nature resided "a grand unity that would, once revealed, explain how a wild diversity of heterogeneous natural facts actually composes a great, unified whole" (Branch 77). In Paris, Emerson came to realize "how much finer things are in composition than alone" (*JMN* 4: 198) and how closely nature is related to mankind. For Urbas, Emerson's description of his visit at the Jardin des Plantes is the best example of "the feeling of consanguinity or oneness with nature" (21) which he had felt from very early on in his life:

> Not a form so grotesque, so savage, nor so beautiful but is an expression of some property inherent in man the observer, —an occult relation between the very scorpions and man. I feel the centipede in me—cayman, carp, eagle, & fox. I am moved by strange sympathies. (*JMN* 4: 199-200).

Emerson's use of the term "man the observer" here reminds the reader of the "man thinking" that he would later describe in "The American Scholar." In this passage, Emerson does not refer to any particular man or a group of men for that matter, but to an ideal individual who can feel the connection between himself and nature. However, he himself feels this powerful bond. Emerson thought that many would, like him, eventually experience this connectedness, and in a speech delivered twice in a few weeks at two different colleges in New England in 1845[3], twelve years after his epiphany in Paris, he writes:

> I find a provision in the constitution of the world for the class of scholars, for the theorist, the uniter, for him who is to show identity and connexion where men see nothing but fragments, and to supply the axis on which the frame of things turns. In all the tastes and endeavors of men in reference to all that is permanent and causal, we are made to feel that nature has dearly at heart the formation of the speculative man or scholar. It is an end never lost sight of, and is prepared in the original casting of things. (*LL* 1: 84-85)

As this quotation makes clear, Emerson does not need this "uniter" to be a certain figure in particular. Considering the fact that Emerson is convinced that any human can accomplish whatever they set out to achieve if they internalize the lesson of self-reliance and if they are receptive to both identity and variety — like Plato who is a balanced soul, like the ideal preacher who is a universal man, and like the model scientist who effortlessly moves from the particular to the general — then it becomes evident that Emerson does not necessarily call for a philosopher, a preacher, or a man of science to make sense of the Whole. In fact,

[3] As Bosco and Myerson explain in the *Later Lectures*, "Emerson delivered his untitled discourse before the Philomathesian Society of Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vermont, on 22 July 1845, substantially repeating it on 6 August before the Philorhetorian and Peithologian Societies of Wesleyan College in Middletown, Connecticut." (*LL* 1: 81)

other figures who are predominantly associated with connecting parts to the Whole in Emerson are the scholar and the poet.

In Emerson's opus, the role of the scholar and the poet often overlap. As a matter of fact, the issue has been discussed at length among Emerson scholars, so much so that pretty much everyone has commented on the connections – and the ambiguity – between these figures that Emerson also identifies as "uniters." Scholar and poet are not the only two that share some similarities. Emerson's liberal use of the various terms has generated an impressive number of hyphenated categorizations which have been used by critics to delineate the characteristics of Emerson's hybrid "connexionists."[4] There are "poet-preachers" (Waggoner 22), "poet-scholar" (Mudge 299, Machor 162), "poet-metaphysician" (Urbas 1) and many more—seemingly odd—couples, as well as the occasional triad, as in Gary Collison's "poet-philosopher-scholar" (188). According to Mary Kupiec Cayton, "poet, literary man, orator, scholar, naturalist—all were different names for the same thing, as far as Emerson was concerned" (158). This is possible because what matters the most to Emerson is that, regardless of their specific profession, all of these figures had to be receptive to identity and variety. In a letter to his wife Lydian, he describes himself as a poet, but not in the traditional sense of the word: "My singing be sure is very 'husky,' & is for the most part in prose, still I am a poet in the sense of a perceiver & dear lover of the harmonies that are in the soul & in matter, & specially of the correspondence between these & those" (*Letters* 1: 435).

The very term "poetry" was used by Emerson "to cover a wide range of writing, embracing imaginative prose as well as verse" to emphasize "imaginative perception rather

[4] A term that, as Urbas notes (3), Emerson himself invented when he wrote in his journal "We are natural believers; Connexionists; Causationists" (*JMN* 9: 350).

than technical proficiency as essential to the making of true poetry" (146). Furthermore, as Cayton remarks, poetry, just like being a minister or a scholar, were not—or should not have been—tied to a profession, but were rather designations applicable to "the lover of nature in a new guise" (158). No separate vocations were needed to be a poet or a scholar, because despite the different classifications, ideally, they both had to work to "reveal affinities and correspondences hidden from most people." Philosophers, preachers, scientists, poets and scholars should all serve as the "medium between first principles and the bulk of humanity" (Machor 162).

Emerson himself tried to fulfil this role and believed that to perceive first principles and archetypal ideas—which was arguably just one, or the Whole—was a sign of intellectual maturity. Although all potentially are able to perceive this ontological oneness, the poet seems to be in a privileged position to do so. As he writes in "Intellect," in 1841:

> [A]n index or mercury of intellectual proficiency is the perception of identity. We talk with accomplished persons who appear to be strangers in nature. The cloud, the tree, the turf, the bird are not theirs, have nothing of them: the world is only their lodging and table. But the poet, whose verses are to be spheral and complete, is one whom nature cannot deceive, whatsoever face of strangeness she may put on. He feels a strict consanguinity, and detects more likeness than variety in all her changes. (*CW* 2: 201)

There are several stylistic and lexical choices in this passage that demonstrate that Emerson kept thinking about these issues in similar terms throughout the years. Ever faithful to mercury metaphors, after the "mercury pill" that could cure diseased forms of religion, Emerson refers to the perception of identity as a sign on an imaginary thermometer capable of measuring intellectual maturity. When he describes the poet's verses as "spheral" he uses

the same globular image that he would later employ in *Representative Men*, in the passage where he writes about Plato's ability to contemplate the one and the many as the two poles of a sphere. Moreover, in this excerpt he expands upon the heart metaphor that he uses on several occasions in the *Sermons* and in "The Over-soul," by referring to a "strict consanguinity" that the poet feels with nature and its particulars, hinting at the same "common heart" (*CW* 2: 160) which shares its blood and beats "pulse for pulse in harmony with the universal whole" (*CS* 1: 290). Like he wrote about his own experience at the *Jardin des Plantes*, where he felt an "occult relation" and "strange sympathies" connecting him to the natural world, so does the poet perceive a likeness between him and "the cloud, the tree, the turf, the bird," but also with the "cayman, carp, eagle, & fox" (*JMN* 4: 200).

This is not always the case though, because not everyone recognizes this connection at all times. More often than not, humankind is not aware of the fundamental unity that is the "nature, cause, process, and expression" of the universe and only notes a "diaspora of multiple substances into irretrievable difference and isolation" (Dunston 97). Furthermore, Emerson believes this situation can cause two different kinds of problems. First of all, although everyone can become a scholar, some claim to be one without actually having grasped the true essence of the Whole. In his journal Emerson notes down: "There are few scholars. The mob of so-called scholars are unapt peasants caught late, coated over merely with a thin varnish of Latin, & reading-room literature, but unlearned & unintelligent; they sleep in the afternoons, read little, & cannot be said to have faith or hope" (*JMN* 7: 130-131). These "bookworms," as he calls them in "The American Scholar" (*CW* 1: 56), have in a way interrupted their journey towards true knowledge, and only appear to be erudite, but their wisdom has no practical value. Similarly, for a poet to be truly accomplished, he or she should not only be able to read and interpret the symbols of nature, but ought instead to do so with the intention to elevate the audience: "The Poet should not only be able to use

nature as his hieroglyphic, but he should have a still higher power, namely, an adequate message to communicate; a vision fit for such a faculty" (*JMN* 8: 229).

The greatest problem he or she should solve is the isolation that results from a partial vision which only focuses on particulars. In "The Poet," Emerson defines this state of things as a "dislocation and detachment from the life of God," and suggests that a possible solution lies in the hands of the poet. By means of "re-attach[ing] things to nature and the Whole,—re-attaching even artificial things, and violations of nature, to nature, by a deeper insight" (*CW* 3: 11), the poet has in fact the power to correct this less-than-ideal condition. In his journal, Emerson writes of the unifying force that pertains to poetic "vision," of what—in *Nature*— he would later call "the most poetical sense [resulting from] the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects" (*CW* 1: 9). Although the passage from *Nature* is not exactly identical to the one from his journal, he expresses the same idea in both excerpts using slightly different terms. One morning, while looking at the "charming landscape" (*CW* 1: 9) around him, he focuses the eye on all of the scenery's particulars and proceeds to note that:

> Mr. Meriam owns this field, Mr. Bacon that, Mr. Butterfield the next, but the poet owns the whole. There is property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts. And the best part of all these men's farms the face which they show to the poet's eye, they do not possess but he. The view of the field & wood at the distance of quarter of a mile has no property in it. (*JMN* 5: 113)

Despite the importance of constituent parts, the poet can conceive of them while integrating them in the Whole. This unity is the property of the poet, but it is not an estate or something that can be inherited or regulated with "warranty-deeds" (*CW* 1: 9), it is an ability rather

than a material asset. It is a power to recount, as Clark asserts, "the ordinary and profoundly consequential intimacies in which we exist, and through which our lives take shape" (*RWE A Companion,* "Introduction").

Discovering these "consequential intimacies" should be the highest aim of any education, which should give mankind the tools "to sink what is individual or personal in us, to stimulate what is torpid of the human nature, and so to swell the individual to the outline of this Universal Man and bring out his original and majestic proportions" (*EL* 2: 12). This is exactly what Emerson suggests when he describes the scholars' mission: "The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances," (*CW* 1: 62) for he "plies the slow, unhonored, and unpaid task of observation" (*CW* 1: 62). By closely looking at nature and at the world, the scholar too is supposed to act as a "unifier" searching for common roots that can lead towards universal facts.

This "unifying instinct" that he refers to in "The American Scholar" (*CW* 1: 54), this constant emphasis on identity and variety, this sort of obsession with his "old thrum," as he calls it in 1837 (*JMN* 5: 376), of the One Mind as the only true antidote to his contemporary society, which he perceived as regrettably atomistic, is instrumental to my argument that sees him as searching for connections and relatedness not only in nature and society, but also—and less apparently—within the literary world. His monism and organicism are two particularly apt philosophical standpoints from which it is possible to explore his interest in wholeness within the global literary scene. On its way to become a full-fledged international industry ever more interconnected and yet still somewhat rooted in the local, literature's mechanisms were starting to appear increasingly similar to what Emerson saw as this perpetual movement between unity and variety. Just like organicism and monism are able to note the "various and changing complex of phenomena," and manage to synthesize them

all—without erasing them—into a "non-temporal, fixed unity" (Adams 124), so literature was becoming more and more global and yet maintained its local specificity.

Emerson was one of the first[5] to observe this phenomenon, and forever moved by his search for wholeness, in his 1840 essay "Thoughts on Modern Literature," he also started to look for interconnectedness within the literary world. There, he writes about the

> Insatiable demand for unity, the need to recognize one nature in all the variety of objects, which always characterizes a genius of the first order. Accustomed always to behold the presence of the universe in every part, the soul will not condescend to look at any new part as a stranger, but saith, – 'I know all already, and what art thou? Show me thy relations to me, to all, and I will entertain thee also' (*W* 12: 313).

If men of genius should have the inclination to perceive oneness in diversity and to look for the universe in every part, they should also notice that the same phenomenon exists in literature, where complete strangers, divided by countless years and myriad miles, can recognize their own thoughts in the great works of the past. Emerson constantly looks for this interconnectedness between every part, and he does so also when he approaches literary themes. In the same essay he writes about another element of modern poetry, namely the "feeling of the infinite," or

> The perception now fast becoming a conscious fact,—that there is One Mind, and that all the powers and privileges which lie in any, lie in all; that I as a man may claim and appropriate whatever of true or fair or good or strong has

[5] As I will explain in the fourth chapter, he was in the company of his European contemporaries, Karl Marx and Johann W. von Goethe.

> anywhere been exhibited; that Moses and Confucius, Montaigne and Leibnitz are not so much individuals as they are parts of man and parts of me, and my intelligence proves them my own,—literature is far the best expression (*W* 12: 316-317).

In this passage, Emerson not only mentions the "One Mind" which makes it possible for the powers and privileges which lie in any to lie in all, but he also includes a rather unusual list of religious figures and intellectuals whom he regards as integral parts of a universal conscience. This internalization of the most diverse authors and thinkers is possible because Emerson believes them to be representative of universal principles and because he is convinced that, despite national and cultural differences, all of humanity shares the same values.

Emerson's relationality does not imply an erasure of all differences, it is not a westernizing—or even an Americanizing—of works of literature that have been produced in less hegemonic contexts. Instead, he tries to synthesize the local with the global, and not only does he appreciate specificities, but he also seems to place the highest value on those literary works that are able to speak to humanity across time and space. His attention to what he calls "thread[s] of connection" (*W* 6: 36) and his interest in observing "how far the roots of every creature run" (*W* 6: 36) implies a mental attitude — and a philosophy— that emphasizes ontological kinship and metaphysical unity but still recognizes and appreciates specificities.

One example of this attitude can be found in Emerson's less appreciated and often overlooked poetry.[6] As a matter of fact, Emerson's preoccupation with wholeness was not

[6] To write noteworthy poetry was Emerson's lifelong ambition. As Lawrence Buell points out in his book *Emerson*, he "preferred to call himself either 'scholar' or 'poet.' To be a 'poet' was a youthful dream and a role

only one of the central themes of his prose writings, but it also became the subject of some of his poems, chief among which "Each and All," and "Xenophanes." In the latter, an ode the Greek philosopher Xenophanes—which he mentions time and again in his journals, especially when discussing wholeness[7]—Emerson expresses in poetry the philosophy of the poem's namesake, without ever mentioning his name but constantly hinting at nature's unity in multiplicity, or as he calls it in his journal by referring to the way Italians referred to beauty, "il più nell'uno" (*CW* 1: 17):

By fate, not option, frugal nature gave
One scent to hyson and to wallflower,
One sound to pine-groves and to water-falls,
One aspect to the desert and the lake,
It was her stern necessity. All things
Are of one pattern made; bird, beast, and plant,
Song, picture, form, space, thought, and character,
Deceive us, seeming to be many things,
And are but one. Beheld far off, they part
As God and Devil; bring them to the mind,
They dull its edge with their monotony.
To know the old element explore a new,
And in the second reappears the first.
The specious panorama of a year

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he intermittently indulged. 'Scholar' was his usual self-descriptor. Poet he would have liked to be; scholar he never doubted that he was" (40).

[7] As Christopher J. Windolph explains in *Emerson's Nonlinear Nature*, Xenophanes is a source of great inspiration for Emerson: "Seeing the divine manifested in and by the world, he argued for the unity and singularity of the godhead […]. He believed God to be a single incorporeal and eternal being, of the same nature as the universe and, like it, spherical in form" (31).

But multiplies the image of a day,

A belt of mirrors round a taper's flame,

And universal nature through her vast

And crowded whole, an infinite paroquet,

Repeats one cricket note. (*W* 9: 138)

It is hardly surprising that Emerson decides to begin this poem by noting the *cause*[8] of Nature's oneness: it could not have been otherwise. Afterall, as he says in his journal, "All things said Xenophanes tend to oneness," things may appear to be different to mankind, but "The human mind is ever searching for the πο στω the point of view the Sesame to the whole Mystery of being, – which attained the whole shall become possible & intelligible" (*JMN* 6: 277). Nature, in its endless variety of forms, is ever repeating "one cricket note" and Emerson – like Xenophanes – never grew tired of adjusting his vision in order to be able to note connections and ultimately find the common root uniting all the branches of the natural world and, thus, of the human experience.

Emerson's monism is particularly interesting because although he places enormous importance on the One, he never tries to dissolve the many in it. As his poem "Each and All" makes rather clear, the particular and universal are equally important and each loses meaning without the other:

[…] All are needed by each one;

Nothing is fair or good alone.

[8] Emerson called humans "causationists" in his journal (*JMN* 9: 350) and he attributed to poetry the task of looking for the Cause: "Poetry is the perpetual endeavor to express the spirit of the thing, to pass the brute body, and search the life and reason which cause it to exist; —to see that the object is always flowing away, whilst the spirit of necessity which causes it subsists" (*CW* 8: 8).

I thought the sparrow's note from heaven,

Singing at dawn on the alder bough;

I brought him home, in his nest, at even;

He sings the song, but it pleases not now,

For I did not bring home the river and sky; —

He sang to my ear, — they sang to my eye.

The delicate shells lay on the shore;

The bubbles of the latest wave

Fresh pearls to their enamel gave;

And the bellowing of the savage sea

Greeted their safe escape to me.

I wiped away the weeds and foam,

I fetched my sea-born treasures home;

But the poor, unsightly, noisome things

Had left their beauty on the shore,

With the sun, and the sand, and the wild uproar.

[…] (*W* 9: 5)

Although this poem is not opened by a direct reference to wholeness and unity, an explicit allusion appears soon enough, at line 11, with the words "All are needed by each one;/Nothing is fair or good alone." The rest of the poem quoted above proceeds to explain

these two lines with two examples from the natural world, the first of which features a sparrow's birdsong which, once taken out of its context and isolated from its relations, ceases to be pleasurable to the ear—"but it pleases not now,/For I did not bring home the river and the sky." The second contains a recurring metaphor that Emerson seemed to appreciate particularly, for he used it on several occasions to make the same point[9]: the image of the seashells which, when abducted from the seashore, lose all of their value and aesthetic relevance, because the latter resides in their connection with "the sun, and the sand, and the wild uproar."

As these lines – as well as the previous pages – demonstrate, Emerson's philosophical concerns were dominated by his search for unity, a quest that he began well before he became a public figure, and which would accompany him for the rest of his life. He commenced his inquiry because of a feeling, which he later strived to formalize by adopting a different kind of "vision" that was not limited by experientiality but sought to be a way to peer behind a curtain of particulars. In Emerson's opinion, such a mission is reserved for philosophers, preachers, scientists, poets, and scholars, all of whom are in the best position to do so. Even though anyone can attain this particular type of vision and contemplate the one and the many, each of these figures has a special sensibility that gives them the tools to do so. According to Emerson, unity in multiplicity can be successfully observed by philosophers, whose task is to investigate the nature of reality, by preachers and scientists, whose disciplines are so inherently related to the whole (via God and Nature), and by poets and scholars, whose ambition should be to synthesize all of the above by "re-attach[ing] things to nature and the Whole."

[9] He uses it in *JMN* 4: 291, in "The Naturalist" (*EL* 1: 74) and in one of his essays on Shakespeare (*EL* 1: 317).

Earlier in this chapter, I have quoted a passage from *Representative Men* in which Plato is described as a balanced soul because he can synthesize unity and variety, and "his argument and his sentence are self poised and spherical. The two poles appear, yes, and become two hands to grasp and appropriate their own" (*CW* 4: 31). The spherical quality of this thinking resembles, Emerson believes, the planet on which we live: "The chrystal sphere of thought is as concentrical as the geological globe we inhabit. As all our soils & rocks lie in strata, concentric strata, like the coats of an onion, so do all men's thinkings run laterally, never vertically" (*JMN* 7: 452). The all-encompassing ontological unity that Emerson sees as pervading reality naturally expands to thinking, and therefore, to the product of mankind's "thinkings," literature. Although he never explicitly refers to the concept of world literature, when he, the uniter, looks for connections and sees a universe in every part and every part as a universe, giving value to the particular and celebrating the universal, he somewhat instinctively starts to build an international and intercultural "constellation" of intellectuals whose message could resonate with readers notwithstanding temporal, spatial, and cultural boundaries.

3. “Thought Is of No Country:” Emerson & World Literature

Emerson’s philosophical concern with identity and variety, and especially his emphasis on relatedness, have manifold implications. The consideration of reality and nature as an interrelated system resulted in a dynamic interpretation of the world, which, under the impact of the Scientific Revolution, was relevant for philosophers and scientists alike. Just as Immanuel Kant before him – who, in the *Theory of the Heavens* published in 1755, wrote of nature’s systematic connections (qtd. in Weinert 24) – and like his contemporary Alexander von Humboldt – who in his 1844’s *Kosmos* described nature as characterized by “unity in diversity” (qtd. in Weinert 28) – Emerson too noted the ontological oneness of the natural world and of reality which to him were both the expression of the Universal Mind.

This attention to relationality, the tendency to conceive of the world not just as *a world*, a single entity and an enclosed space, but as a *cosmos*, a harmonious and vast universe, necessarily implies a move from specific circumstances and particular facts towards universal principles and global cross-cultural concerns. Its consequence, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, is a shift from the local to the global, from the national to the international, from the micro to macroscopical, a widening of the individual’s perspective that Emerson started to put into practice with increasing frequency after he decided to leave his corner of the world to explore Europe and experience its culture first-hand.

During his time at Harvard, Emerson started keeping a journal, a habit that would last for almost sixty years—perhaps forced by the growing difficulty he found in reading and writing because of his worsening eyesight. Interestingly, he decided to give a title to his earliest, college-day attempts at journaling, calling his first notebooks “Wide World.” This

title seems to indicate that, from a very young age onwards, Emerson was fascinated with the sheer scale of the world that surrounded him, but this vastness—compared to the minute proportions of an individual—could also be perceived as intimidating, as this journal entry makes rather evident:

> Who is he that shall control me? Why may not I act & speak & write & think with entire freedom? What am I to the Universe, or, the Universe, what is it to me? … I am solitary in the vast society of beings; I consort with no species; I indulge no sympathies. I see the world, human, brute & inanimate nature; I am in the midst of them, but not of them…. I say to the Universe, Mighty one! thou art not my mother; Return to chaos, if thou wilt, I shall still exist. I live. If I owe my being, it is to a destiny greater than thine. Star by Star, world by world, system by system shall be crushed,—but I shall live. (*JMN* 2: 189–190)

Shortly before Christmas in 1823, Emerson, only twenty years of age, was evidently struggling to find his place in the world which, as the passage quoted above shows, was already conceived by him as a mighty universe. As Clark notes, Emerson's writings of those years show the image of a young man "haunted by feelings of aimlessness and alienation" (*RWE A Companion*, "A Brief Biography"). In complete opposition to the "occult relations" and "strange sympathies" that he would feel ten years later at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris (*JMN* 4: 199-200), the individual seems here to exist only in antagonism with (and separated from) the universe, so much so that Emerson declares that he would "still exist" if the universe were to return to chaos.

The wide world with which Emerson started to engage during the years of his education at Harvard was, at least initially, only available to him through secondary sources. Until 1826, he stayed in New England, only venturing out of it for health reasons: he traveled

to Charleston, South Carolina, and St. Augustine, Florida in the winter of 1826-1827 hoping to find some remedy for tuberculosis as well as a cure for his eye problems. However, even though these relatively short trips provided him with only a glimpse of the variety of the human experience[10], his successive journey to Europe, which he undertook in an extremely significant period of time in his personal and professional life, was a much more valuable opportunity to truly widen his physical and intellectual world, one that coincided with a noticeable change when it comes to the value he placed on tracing connections. In the period between his Harvard years and his voyage to Europe, Emerson began abandoning—slowly but surely—his old atomistic attitude and, as it is well known, started to perceive the "currents of the Universal Being circulate through [him]" (*CW* 1:10).

As I have already hinted at, between his trip to the South and his first voyage to Europe in 1832, Emerson's circumstances changed quite rapidly on several occasions. Once he returned home to Massachusetts in 1827, Emerson was determined—after years of doubts and changes of heart—to become a minister after all. He began writing and delivering sermons at his father's church and, in the meantime, he filled the rest of his time by reading great authors—among whom Richardson quotes Montaigne, Plutarch, Plato, and Herder (80)—and by writing poetry. That same year, while preaching in Concord, New Hampshire, he met Ellen Tucker, his future wife, whom he married on September 30th, 1829, a few months after he was asked to be a minister for Boston's Second Church, a job offer he was happy to accept. By that time, Ellen had already been sick with tuberculosis, and she kept

[10] As Peter S. Field points out, "Emerson's months in the South, particularly his convalescence in St. Augustine, Florida, proved a great boon. Not only did he recover his health, a process that he measured in his slow but steady weight gain, but he took intellectual advantage of his first trip outside of the parochial confines of his New England home. Exposed for the first time to Spaniards, slavery, and southern manners, as well as to Catholic mass and atheism, Emerson gained a better perspective on the world and his place within it" (*RWE: The Making of a Public Intellectual* 73). Especially through his friendship with the former crown prince of Naples (and nephew of Napoleon) Achille Murat, who was in exile in Florida and who held political opinions that he found questionable, Emerson came to articulate his ideas in a clearer form.

having episodes for the rest of her short life. In August 1830, with Ellen's condition worsening, the couple entertained the idea of abandoning the church and resettling in the South, but they ultimately abandoned the idea—Ellen's health never improved, and she died on February 8th, 1831. According to Richardson, this was a pivotal moment in Emerson's life:

> Ellen's death undermined both Emerson's personal world and the public institutional world he had embraced while married. He reacted to being separated from Ellen by separating himself from the church, from Boston […] the loss that darkened his life also freed him. Ellen's death cut Emerson loose. Excluded from conventional happiness, he abandoned conventional life. (118)

Understandably, his personal tragedy set in motion other events that radically changed other areas of his life. The consequences of Emerson's lingering doubts about institutionalized religion and his own vocation soon materialized, as he complained about old dogmas and questioned his own role as a minister. His problem with "old inherited forms" (Richardson 126) would ultimately prove insurmountable and, in September 1832, he decided to officially step down from his church duties, a choice that meant "giving up institutional affiliation and support, a guaranteed social position, and a generous and assured salary" (Richardson 126).

With no certainties about his future, leaving behind his "short existence as a good Boston professional," as Buell calls it (14), Emerson set sail for Europe on Christmas Day of 1832. He would not be back home until October 1833, and it could be argued that this European trip was instrumental to his other, more intimate, journey towards self-discovery. His trip to Europe was not the Grand Tour usually undertaken by upper-class Americans, he certainly didn't fit the profile of a wealthy young man seeking to experience the sights of Europe out of boredom or simple curiosity by traveling along "routes forged by British

nobility during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (Finkelman 1). Emerson's trip was also a rather spontaneous decision. After his resignation and a fall in which he was often ill and disheartened, he saw that a brig, the *Jasper*, was about to leave Boston for Southern Europe and he was quick to settle all of his affairs and got ready to sail away to the shores of Europe.

Emerson's association with travel, much like his connection with literary nationalism, presents a nuanced and intricate dynamic that occasionally exhibits elements of apparent contradiction. After all, he is renowned for the resounding assertion that he made in "Self-Reliance," namely that "travelling is a fool's paradise" (*CW* 2: 46). In the same essay, he admonishes his readers—or more precisely, his *American* readers—that travelling is a symptom of a lackluster self-culture, according to Emerson an endemic condition of American society, which unfortunately usually resulted in a mindless idolatry of the Old World: "It is for want of self-culture that the superstition of travelling, whose idols are Italy, England, Egypt, retains its fascination for all educated Americans" (*CW* 2: 46). Again, in an effort to discourage his fellow countrymen to mindlessly wander through the Old Continent, Emerson narrates in "Art" of his own experience in Italy as the sudden realization that he had left perfection back at home:

> There I saw that nothing was changed with me but the place, and said to myself – 'Thou foolish child, hast thou come out hither, over four thousand miles of salt, water, to find that which was perfect to thee there at home?' […] [what] I fancied I had left in Boston was here in the Vatican, and again at Milan and at Paris, and made all travelling ridiculous as a treadmill. (*CW* 2: 215)

If not approached with the right mindset, travel can be a futile task, akin to the meaningless and repetitive endeavor of stepping on a treadmill.[11] Emerson performs the remarkable feat of turning the supposedly glamorous experience of the Grand Tour—a privilege reserved for high society—into a form of punishment that makes the reader picture exhausted wealthy Americans being forced to roam aimlessly through Europe.

A closer look at these passages reveals that what Emerson seems to be arguing for is not an outright boycott of travel, but rather a revision of its purposes. He is not suggesting that Americans should simply not travel, but they should do so for the right reasons and with the right frame of mind, which is to say they should experience new contexts not as ideal models to supplant their own, but as something that should be used in a comparative perspective—much like he did with Murat in Florida—in order to learn dialectically from diversity. As a matter of fact, these quotes not only highlight the absence of a complete substitution or erasure of either Europe or America, but they also underscore a profound realization of the interconnectedness and interdependence that exists between cultures and nations. As he writes in "Culture," part of his 1860 book *The Conduct of Life*, travel is not inherently negative:

> No doubt, to a man of sense, travel offers advantages. As many languages as he has, as many friends, as many arts and trades, so many times is he a man. A foreign country is a point of comparison where from to judge his own. One use of travel is to recommend the books and works of home, — we go to Europe to

[11] In the nineteenth century, the treadmill was invented by English engineer Sir William Cubitt, as a type of punishment for prisoners who had to climb stairs which were attached to a wheel. Hugh McAtamney, while writing about the New York treadmill, explains that "every two minutes a bell sounded, and one prisoner stepped off and was permitted to sit still for a few minutes while another took his place. In this manner the operation continued incessantly for several hours. As well as receiving punishment, the prisoners ground the corn or grain for the supply of food to the establishment. When the wheel was in operation each person ascended a distance equal to 2,500 feet in an hour" (128).

> be Americanized; and another, to find men. For as nature has put fruits apart in latitudes, a new fruit in every degree, so knowledge and fine moral quality she lodges in distant men. And thus, of the six or seven teachers whom each man wants among his contemporaries, it often happens that one or two of them live on the other side of the world. (*W* 6: 147)

Since any individual is the "aggregate of infinitesimal parts" (*EL* 3: 251), and since character is only formed through an integration of particular influences, it is not surprising to learn that Emerson looks favorably at the added power that the "right" kind of travel can bestow upon humankind. In this passage, Emerson constructs the first "use" of travel as a kind of national self-realization: Americans can benefit from their experiences abroad by learning what it is to be American by means of self-other comparisons. Spending time on the Old Continent should bring any "man of sense" to realize his own specificity all the while noting the essential Identity—and so the fundamental unity—that pervades the most different cultures. The second aim of travel is consistent with another of Emerson's lifelong interests: the search and "use" of likeminded people and especially of what he considers "great men." These figures are clearly not exclusively native to any particular nation, and as I will show later in this chapter, although born and raised in many different countries, they are universal, and their works belong to the human race. Some of these men were bound to be born and/or reside in distant lands, as Emerson explains in "Uses of Great Men," leaving home to go and meet them is one of the correct ways to travel: "I do not travel to find comfortable, rich, and hospitable people, or clear sky, … But if there were any magnet that would point to the countries and houses where are the persons who are intrinsically rich and powerful, – I would sell all... and put myself on the road today" (*CW* 4: 3). In keeping with these (later) reflections, he decided to leave for Europe to meet some of the thinkers he considered to be the most remarkable and most representative of his age.

As the passage from "Culture" has already demonstrated, Emerson was not a staunch opposer of all travel, and he himself realized, with time, that he had been too firm and one-sided in his wholesale condemnation, which was in actuality mainly aimed at raising an American consciousness.[12] In the same essay, he admits he had by then acquired a reputation for "saying captious things" (*W* 6: 145) about travel, a public image that stood in sharp contrast to his personal history. He had been, in fact, a proficient traveler, as William W. Stowe notes:

> Emerson traveled widely, not just in Concord, like Thoreau, but up and down the United States, all through Europe, and as far away as Egypt. A therapeutic trip to Florida in 1827 not only arrested his incipient tuberculosis but taught him something about the differences between places and their effect on theoretically unchanged selves. The European tour that followed the death of his first wife and the end of his brief career as a parish minister helped mend his health and set him on a new intellectual course [...] These trips were followed by a lecture junket to Great Britain in 1847—48, which included a visit to revolutionary Paris and led to the composition of *English Traits*, an extended tour to England, France, Italy, and Egypt, with his daughter, Ellen, between October 1872 and April 1873, and numerous forays on the American lecture circuit, one of which took him as far as California. (75)

Every one of these trips that mark a specific time in Emerson's personal and intellectual life has its own importance. However, it can be argued that his first European tour is the event

[12] Jason Berger also makes this point when he remarks that "travel in toto, therefore, was not a negative concept in Emerson's thought or experience; rather, it was only the common 'superstition' of travel, one engendered by a lack of 'self-culture, that he censures" (49).

that had the more profound—and certainly more noticeable—impact on Emerson as a man and as a philosopher. As previously stated, the 1833 tour coincided with a widening of Emerson's perspective, as he started to slowly reject an atomistic attitude toward the outside world and came to embrace relations and connections, among mankind and with nature. From this moment on, the establishment of a "virtual" network among individuals, nations, and cultures becomes a valuable approach for Emerson. The *inter*personal, the *inter*national, and *inter*cultural all contribute to the achievement of "a grander perspective on reality" (Berger 55), one on which Emerson started to work while traveling through the Old Continent.

As David M. Robinson points out, although Emerson's trip to Europe was meant as a journey aimed at renewing "his severely tested faith and optimism" ("Becoming the American Adam" 81), he did not start it in high spirits. A little more than a week after the start of his sea journey, Emerson was asking himself why he decided to travel to Europe. When his doctor suggested him to undertake a sea voyage hoping that it would help Emerson's poor health, he initially considered traveling to the West Indies—he even started reading books about them (Richardson 127)—but then, as he confessed in a letter to his brother William, "in a few hours the dream changed into a purpureal vision of Naples & Italy" (*Letters* 1: 359). The reasons behind this choice are not entirely clear, but what is evident is that once he boarded the *Jasper* headed for Malta, he himself started wondering what made him travel to the Old Continent. In his journal he writes that one morning at sunrise he stopped to look at the clouds and perceived them in a "global and planetary connection" (Berger 54). He then opened his "spirit's ear to their most ancient hymn" and imagined them asking "What […] goest thou so far to seek—painted canvass, carved marble, renowned towns? […] You get no nearer to the principle in Europe. It animates man. It is the America of America. It spans the ocean like a handbreadth. It smiles at Time & Space." (*JMN* 4: 104).

At the beginning of his very first international voyage, Emerson is already skeptical toward a certain kind of travel that is moved by the desire to find "the principle" in Europe. He is already convinced that "the principle" that made the Old World great is the same idea that can be observed at work in more contemporary times and in younger nations that have yet to establish their role in the world. The "principle" that Emerson refers to is the universal and eternal spirit of mankind, it is not a property of Europe, nor only endemic to America. It can be ascribed to the entirety of the human race and can manifest itself everywhere and at all times. It is the expression of the divine and universal mind that, as discussed in the previous chapter, animates humankind.

Something else he was questioning during his journey towards the old continent, alongside the reason for his trip, was the true nature of his own character. As Berger maintains, Emerson's relationship with travel was already multifaceted at the time of his first significant voyage. For him, travelling was meant to be both a discovery of distant lands and of inner depths: "For Emerson, travel […] appears to be part and parcel of a process of self-development – with time itself moving and 'passing,' bringing him closer to implied truths" (Berger 52). Building on Branka Arsić's description of the Emersonian self as characterized by "migration, mutation, and metamorphosis" (6) and on Stanley Cavell's remarks about the self being a "process of moving to, and from, nexts" (3), Berger claims that travel, for Emerson, potentially assumed a significant role in shaping and redefining one's identity (50).

There are a few passages in his journal that exemplify the influence that travel may have had in shaping Emerson's identity. While still in the middle of the Atlantic (close to the Azores) on January 7th, 1833, Emerson started to have new doubts about his vocation, particularly questioning his potential as a scholar, which was especially troublesome considering that he had left the ministry with the hope of becoming one. The man who

would be remembered by posterity for his emphasis on self-reliance, confessed in his journal that he felt "ashamed of myself for a dull scholar. Every day I display a more astounding ignorance" (*JMN* 4: 107). No longer a minister and not yet a lecturer, not a poet nor a scholar, while crossing the Atlantic Emerson felt he was far from being the kind of self-reliant man he would later advocate for. While searching for a new identity and for his true vocation, he questioned his talents:

> Seldom I suppose was a more inapt learner of arithmetic, astronomy, geography, political economy than I am as I daily find to my cost […] my memory of history […] is as bad; my comprehension of a question in technical metaphysics very slow, & in all arts practick, in driving a bargain, or hiding emotion, or carrying myself in company as a man for an hour, I have no skill. What under the sun canst thou do then, pale face! Truly not much, but I can hope […] I am content to belong to the great *all*, & look on & see what better men can do, & by my admiration realize a property in their worth (*JMN* 4: 110-111).

Unsure about his own qualities, this pale-faced Emerson of the early years felt he could not do that much and declared himself to be content to be part of a larger whole and look at what "better men" could do. After all, he was travelling to Europe to do precisely that, to have a chance of meeting (and possibly establish a connection with) his "intellectual idols." What is of greater importance, however, is that contrary to the way he was feeling when he was a student at Harvard, he was now starting to feel happy to belong to a greater "all," the Whole of which he would write at length in the following years.

However, his more profound journey towards these discoveries was just at the beginning. He reached Malta on February 2, 1833 and after three weeks there, two of which

he spent in quarantine[13] and one exploring the island, Emerson's sailed for Syracuse, from where he started exploring Italy, where he visited Naples, Rome, Florence and Venice, among other cities. After Italy, he traveled to Switzerland, France and, of course, England and Scotland.[14]

Sicily was his first real destination, he was fascinated with the islands' past occupants, especially the Greeks and Romans, and as Richardson highlights, the island reminded him of the Plutarchian heroes Timoleon and Dion. They were both "republican heroes, enemies of tyranny who were remembered in Emerson's America for not only conquering the tyrants of Sicily and restoring the Republic but for themselves refusing absolute power when they could easily have had it" (133). At the time, Europe was hardly a beacon of democracy, as the Revolutions of 1848 would make abundantly clear, but Emerson managed to find in its past the Greek democratic ideal that America was also trying to pursue.

After having visited other parts of Sicily he headed towards Naples—which he toured extensively and found beautiful, even though he did not particularly enjoy the many beggars, pickpockets, and others who tried to profit from travelers who were visiting the city and its surroundings: "One must be thoroughly reinforced with the spirit of antiquity to preserve his enthusiasm through all the annoyances that await the visitor of these ruins" (143). On a path towards other ruins, at the end of March Emerson arrived in Rome, where he would stay for a month. He found the city to be filled with impressive marbles and paintings, and even though he had complained that Italy looked like a nation of "little men" (*JMN* 4: 142) where all the talented painters were sadly a thing of the past, Rome managed to somewhat

[13] Half amused and half resentful, Emerson writes in his journal: "So we are in Malta, in the renowned harbor of Marsa Muscette the Quarantine roads for a fortnight, imprisoned for poor dear Europe's health lest it should suffer prejudice from the unclean sand & mountains of America" (*JMN* 4: 115).

[14] Interestingly, as Richardson points out, Emerson "liked the idea of entering Europe 'at the small end'" and, travelling his way up the continent, he reversed "the route Goethe and others had taken" (133).

change his mind. In his journal he writes: “It is a graceful termination to so much glory that Rome now in her fallen state should be the metropolis of the arts […] The Caffés are filled with English, French & German artists, both sculptors & painters” (*JMN* 4: 159). This network of foreign artists and intellectuals proved extremely useful to Emerson. As reported by Richardson, “through a man named Eichtal he obtained a letter of introduction to John Stuart Mill, who in turn would give him a letter to Thomas Carlyle” (135).

He then moved up north to Florence, where he was pleasantly surprised by the absence of beggars and terribly impressed with the famous Italians buried at Santa Croce:

> I passed with consideration the tomb of Nicholas Machiavelli but stopped long before that of Galileus Galileo, for I love & honor that man, except in the recantation, with my whole heart. But when I came to Michel Angelo Buonaroti my flesh crept as I read the inscription. I had strange emotions, I suppose because Italy is so full of his fame. I have lately continually heard of his name & works & opinions; I see his face in every shop window, & now I stood over his dust. Then I came to the empty tomb of Dante who lies buried at Ravenna. Then to that of Alfieri. (*JMN* 4: 168-169)

As this passage encapsulates, Emerson's sojourn in Italy was characterized by his engagement in reflective ruminations on a splendid bygone era—or, rather, several splendid bygone eras—as well as the appreciation of the notable individuals who contributed to the shaping of this illustrious past. This window onto history helped him in conceiving of humanity as one, united through time and space, and this realization is exemplified by a couple of passages that he dedicates to architecture and art: “When I walk up the piazza of Santa Croce I feel as if it were not a Florentine nor an European church but a church built by & for the human race” (JMN 4: 175) and, earlier, in Rome at the Vatican museums: “Go &

see it, whoever you are. It is the wealth of the civilized world. It is a contribution from all ages & nations of what is most rich & rare" (*JMN* 4: 150). But Emerson was not only looking at the past. With an eye towards the future, he was also adamantly trying to find his place in a nascent international network of intellectuals who, thanks to improvements and technological advancements in traveling, as well as the printing and distribution of books, were just starting to feel closer despite the great distances separating them. The acquaintances he made during his time in Rome were not an isolated event, as he persevered in his efforts to forge connections with fellow intellectuals—especially those proficient in the English language. It has to be noted, however, that not all of these connections were with comrades in spirits. In Fiesole, just outside Florence, he famously met Walter Savage Landor, an English poet he admired but whose views on literature and art did not really correspond with Emerson's. After Florence, he traveled through northern Italy, stopping in many cities (including Venice and Milan) before making his way to Switzerland and France, where he would put a temporary halt to his networking to focus on the natural sciences.

Famously, one of Emerson's most notable moments in France was his visit to the Jardin des Plantes. It is not surprising to learn that he was extremely fascinated with the exhibits he found there, especially considering the fact that he had already been reading extensively on natural science even before his arrival in Europe. Indeed, one the main points of contention with Landor was the relevance of John F. W. Herschel's work, whose *A Preliminary Discourse on the study of Natural Philosophy* Emerson characterized as a "noble book" (*Letters* 1: 342-343) which taught him that all objects of nature are bound together "in a close and compact web of mutual relations and dependence" (136), just like he was able to witness in Paris. Although this is a pivotal moment in Emerson's intellectual history—especially for the development of *Nature*—and, as I have shown, a decisive event for the

development of his idea of Wholeness, my primary aim in reporting the most salient facts of his first trip to Europe is to show how much they contributed to the expansion of his intellectual perspective, which started to emphasize relationality and internationality considerably more than ever before.

To do so, it is necessary to comment on perhaps the most significant leg of his trip, which is to say his visit to England and Scotland. Apart from what he wrote in his journal as he toured Great Britain, an interesting source for learning about his stay in the United Kingdom is the first chapter of *English Traits* (which he would publish in 1856), in which Emerson describes his 1833 encounter with a number of English writers, including Landor, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth and, most notably, Thomas Carlyle.

Soon after his arrival in England, Emerson was busy organizing his meeting with Coleridge. He went to his house and left a note expressing his desire to meet him, a desire that Coleridge did not hesitate to accommodate, meeting him on the very same day. He describes his appearance as "a short thick old man with bright blue eyes, black suit & cane & anything but what I had imagined, a clear clean face with fine complexion—a great snuff taker which presently soiled his cravat & neat black suit" (JMN 4: 408). His meeting with the great English poet was, however, somewhat of a letdown and, although they talked at length, in *English Traits* Emerson recalls that the conversation had soon turned into a monologue: "As I might have foreseen, the visit was rather a spectacle than a conversation, of no use beyond the satisfaction of my curiosity. He was old and preoccupied, and could not bend to a new companion and think with him" (*CW* 5: 7).

After that, he traveled north to Edinburgh, hoping to meet Thomas Carlyle. Finding his house proved more difficult than anticipated[15], but when he managed to reach Ecclefechan, a small village in the south of Scotland, Emerson—brandishing his Roman note of introduction—finally met Carlyle, an author he had been reading (unknowingly) for years[16]. The two talked extensively about literature, religion, philosophy, and politics, and when they went for a walk, they started a conversation about the soul, an anecdote which Emerson shares in *English Traits*:

> It was not Carlyle's fault that we talked on that topic, for he had the natural disinclination of every nimble spirit to bruise itself against walls, and did not like to place himself where no step can be taken. But he was honest and true, and cognizant of the subtile links that bind ages together, and saw how every event affects all the future. 'Christ died on the tree: that built Dunscore kirk yonder: that brought you and me together. Time has only a relative existence.' (*CW* 5: 9)

Emerson had finally found a true kindred spirit, and even though they did not necessarily agree on all fronts, Carlyle left a great impression on Emerson, and it is interesting that in this particular time in which Emerson was starting to put relationality more into focus he ended up discussing the way every event affects the future. Emerson was immediately fascinated with this seemingly reclusive Scottish author, and described him as "tall and gaunt, with a cliff-like brow, self-possessed, and holding his extraordinary powers of

[15] Emerson recalls the difficulty he had in finding Carlyle's house in *English Traits*: "From Edinburgh I went to the Highlands. On my return, I came from Glasgow to Dumfries, and being intent on delivering a letter which I had brought from Rome, inquired for Craigenputtock. It was a farm in Nithsdale, in the parish of Dunscore, sixteen miles distant. No public coach passed near it, so I took a private carriage from the inn. I found the house amid desolate heathery hills, where the lonely scholar nourished his mighty heart" (*CW* 5: 7).

[16] Richardson remarks that "Emerson had learned the name Thomas Carlyle only two months before setting out for Malta, but he had been enthusiastically reading the anonymously published essays of this 'Germanick new-light' writer for years" (145).

conversation in easy command; clinging to his northern accent with evident relish; full of lively anecdote, and with a streaming humor, which floated every thing he looked upon" (*CW* 5: 7). In turn Carlyle, reporting the meeting to Mill in a letter, said that what he loved about Emerson "was his health, his unity with himself; all people and all things seemed to find their quite peaceable adjustment with him, not a proud domineering one, as after doubtful *contest*, but a spontaneous-looking, peaceable, even humble one" (438). Even though, at the time, Emerson was still developing an idea of Unity that involved the self, Carlyle seemed to perceive his character to be balanced—a balance that perhaps derived from Emerson's ability to seemingly spontaneously synthesize opposites and find a "unity with himself."

Just a few days after meeting Carlyle, on August 28, Emerson went to visit William Wordsworth at Rydal Mount. Wordsworth appeared to him as "a plain looking elderly man in goggles" who sat down and "talked with great simplicity" (*JMN* 4: 222) mostly about America. Emerson recalls in his journal that the English poet, somewhat prophetically, asserted that the United States would have to go through a civil war to resolve their problems: "He has even said what seemed a paradox, that they needed a civil war in America to teach them the necessity of knitting the social ties stronger" (*JMN* 4: 222). Even though the two talked at length about literature and Wordsworth decided to even show Emerson the places where he composed his poems while reciting them, and despite the fact that Emerson described him in his journal as all in all a pleasant man (*JMN* 4: 225), he would later reminisce about their meeting in different terms. In *English Traits*, Wordsworth is described, in a similar way to Coleridge, as a somewhat disappointing man:

> To judge from a single conversation, he made the impression of a narrow and very English mind; of one who paid for his rare elevation by general tameness and conformity. Off his own beat, his opinions were of no value. It is not very

> rare to find persons loving sympathy and ease, who expiate their departure from the common in one direction, by their conformity in every other. (*CW* 5: 12)

Emerson's retelling—and remodeling—of these encounters in *English Traits* leaves the reader with a much worse impression of these British authors. The additions he makes in the book, especially in the sections devoted to Coleridge and Wordsworth, paint a whole different picture of these great men of British letters, one that has often been read as "politely abusive" (Weisbuch 211). This had led many scholars, chiefly among them Robert Weisbuch, to define *English Traits* as a "recollection of a conversion experience by which a youthful Emerson […] overthrew his venerations and became an American author" (213). Although in the book Emerson clearly looks at the relationship between Britain and America, I believe that when Weisbuch writes that "it could never be Emerson and Europe but can be only Emerson or Europe" (193), or that European writers had to be "disowned for Emerson to become himself," he is going too far in his reading of Emerson as a literary nationalist. As it is clear from his journal,[17] a personal repository of thoughts Emerson compiled with no intention to participate in the creation of a nationalist agenda, and now a scholarly resource which Emerson, as Bosco notes, used as "an extension of private life" so much so that "there—perhaps only there—he could be completely himself" ("A Brief Biography" 18), what was deeply influenced by his first trip to Europe and by his meetings with Landor, Coleridge, Carlyle, Wordsworth was his personal sense of self.

[17] Emerson has famously defined his journal as his "Savings Bank," a definition which has been often quoted to comment on his composition process which relied extensively on the "private, spontaneous, eclectic entries of his journals" (Gougeon 95) or to even suggest "an alliance between economic valuation and mental evaluation" (Grossman 227). If reported in its entirety however, this journal entry becomes decidedly more interesting. In 1833, Emerson writes: "This Book is my Saving Bank. I grow richer because I have somewhere to deposit my earnings; and fractions are waiting here that shall be made integers by their addition" (*JMN* 4: 250). It describes Emerson's preferred method of composition, but it also shows how his thinking naturally tended to move from the part to the whole, and thus betraying his desire to synthesize diverse single elements in order to reach wholeness.

When in Liverpool, on September 1st 1833, as he was waiting to leave Europe and set sail for America aboard the *New York*, Emerson drew his conclusions on his trip through the Old Continent, which lasted well over half a year. In the privacy of his journal, he writes candidly on his coming-of-age, which happened while wandering the streets of Europe:

> I thank the Great God who has led me through this European scene, this last schoolroom in which he has pleased to instruct me from Malta's isle, thro' Sicily, thro' Italy, thro' Switzerland, thro' France, thro' England, thro' Scotland, in safety & pleasure & has now brought me to the shore & the ship that steers westward. He has shown me the men I wished to see, —Landor, Coleridge, Carlyle, Wordsworth— he has thereby comforted & confirmed me in my convictions. Many things I owe to the sight of these men. I shall judge more justly, less timidly, of wise men forevermore. To be sure not one of these is a mind of the very first class, but what the intercourse with each of these suggests is true of intercourse with better men, that they never *fill the ear*—fill the mind—no, it is an *idealized* portrait which always we draw of them. Upon an intelligent man, wholly a stranger to their names, they would make in conversation no deep impression—none of a world-filling fame—they would be remembered as sensible, well-read, earnest men—not more. (*JMN* 4: 78-79)

What Emerson had learned from his time in Europe was to trust his own intuitions more and to not be intimidated by the great names of contemporary men, who were "sensible, well-read, earnest," but not the ideal men that Emerson "wished to see" when he left Boston in 1832. Somewhere along the way in the Old World, Emerson found the confidence in his own vision that he initially lacked. As David LaRocca remarks, if the scenery did not affect Emerson that much, "he did find a measure of his capacities in speaking with the living heroes of English literature and philosophy" (*Emerson's English Traits* 297). In the "Historical

Introduction" to *English Traits*, Philip Nicoloff points out that one of the goals of this first voyage around Europe was "the larger question of what to do with his life—what use for this shy, tardy, vaguely yearning self?" and suggests that for the whole duration of the trip, Emerson adopted "a policy of skeptical resistance" for he "wished to be stirred, but on his own terms" (*CW* 5: XVI). I believe it is important to tell the story of his 1832-1833 European tour, because Emerson was indeed stirred—not so much by the literary men he wished to meet, and not even that much by the sights he visited—but by the *relatedness* he started to feel more clearly in connection to the natural world, as well as by means of the network of intellectuals with which he engaged in Europe, and also through his first real contact with different cultures and different traditions.

When Emerson was about to leave England, he admitted in his journal that he was looking forward to going home: "Glad I bid adieu to England, the old, the rich, the strong nation, full of arts & men & memories; nor can I feel any regret in the presence of the best of its sons that I was not born here. I am thankful that I am an American as I am thankful that I am a man" (*JMN* 4: 81). England's past—and by extension Europe's— was too crowded, almost claustrophobic, for Emerson's developing self, but although he appreciated the endless possibilities that were such an integral part of his country's political and intellectual independence[18], he also equated his nationality with his belonging to the human race, thus reducing, and perhaps even to the point of completely erasing, his local ties and particular concerns in favor of a universal alliance with humankind. In a rather surprising

[18] A particularly interesting example of this attitude can be found in the final section of a poem Emerson writes on his way back to home. To him, the starkest contrast that exists between Europe and America is that his native land is a place where, unlike Europe, "man asks question[s] for which man was made / A land without nobility or wigs or debt / No castles no Cathedrals and no kings / Land of the forest" (*JMN* 4: 320). The wilderness and the freedom from traditions and outdated political model were what Emerson most appreciated in the American experience, and what he thought, as I have shown in first chapter, made America the country of the future.

way, as a result of his first international trip, Emerson learned that beyond apparent differences—such as nationality—there is a fundamental oneness of humankind. He asks himself, "what matter whether this hill & yon green field be called Garofalo, Terni or Ipswich & Cape Cod. Let the soul once be fully awake & its thought is so much that the place becomes nothing" (*JMN* 4: 320). In one single statement Emerson unites rural Italy to popular sea destinations in Massachusetts, in an effort to stress the fact that if travel is approached with a receptive "soul" then the place becomes unimportant. As he further explains:

> It is an unworthy superstition for seers to go to Italy or France & come home & describe houses & things. Let them see men & magnify the passages of common life. Let them be so Man-wise that they can see through the coat, the rank, the language & sympathize promptly with that other self that under these thin disguises wholly corresponds to their own. (*JMN* 4: 320)

What Emerson believes to be the right reason to travel is not to be able to describe material things. If Emerson were to write this passage today, he would probably say that travel is not about postcards, souvenirs, and social media posts. What truly matters for him is the establishment of a relationship with the people that live in those "houses" and who use those "things," and who are only apparently different from the observer. What Emerson came to understand evermore during and after his first tour of Europe, is that there is a fundamental unity behind the diversity of the human experience, and therefore empathy—or sympathy to use Emerson's word—and intercultural awareness should be the two pillars of travel.

3.1 Emerson's English Literature Series

I would argue that the lesson Emerson learned about relatedness within the natural world, among intellectuals, and among peoples in general, is reflected in the different series

of lectures that he started to work on soon after he disembarked in New York on October 7, 1833. As Stephen E. Whicher and Robert E. Spiller stress in the "Introduction" to the first volume of his *Early Lectures*, when Emerson got back to Boston he had to face the "same uncertainties about his future that he had left behind him the previous December" (*EL* 1: XV), but driven by a new force which gave him a clear "sense of direction" (*EL* 1: XVI), he welcomed the invitation[19] to deliver the inaugural lecture to the newly instituted Boston Natural History society and happily accepted the several other invitations he received to preach in Plymouth. After his return to Boston, he immediately started writing and then delivered four lectures on science, one of the topics he was most interested in and which he had also extensively explored during his time in Europe.[20]

These lectures mark the start of Emerson's long lecturing career. From 1833 until the end of his "active life almost a half century later, lecturing was Emerson's primary occupation, the profession which provided the main source of his earned income and the first form of public expression of his ideas" (Whicher and Spiller *EL* 1: XIII). Some numbers are perhaps useful here to get a sense of how much lecturing meant to Emerson. Between

[19] As Whicher and Spiller note, this major event in Emerson's life was made possible by his cousin, George Emerson—"an influential member of many of the groups from which Emerson received invitations to speak" (XXII)—and by his brother Charles, who made the "arrangements for his first lecture, to be given less than a month after his debarkation" (*EL* 1: XXI). Charles's account of Emerson's first public address is particularly passionate. He wrote to their brother William that "Last evening, Waldo lectured before the Natural History Society to a charm. The young and old opened their eyes and their ears—I was glad to have some of the stump lecturers see what was what and bow to the rising sun" (*Letters*, 1: 397).

[20] Whicher and Spiller give a short account of the many visits Emerson made in Europe to men of science and natural museums: "In Florence, he visited Professor Amici and saw his optical instruments and he comments on the wax replicas of the human organs in the Museum of Natural History. In Padua, he heard Professor Caldania lecture on anatomy, and in Switzerland, he visited the watch factories as well as scenes which recalled Gibbon, Voltaire, and Calvin. [In Paris he audited] the lectures of Jouffroy, Thenard, and Gay-Lussac at the Sorbonne; he also visited the College Royale de France and the Jardin des Plantes. On July 13, 1833, he describes the collections in the Cabinet of Natural History in great detail and comments on the arrangements in Jussieu's system of plants outside in the garden. At the Mazarin Library, he attended a seance of the Class of Science in the Institute where he saw Biot, Arago, Gay-Lussac, Jouffroy, and others. In London, among other sights, he lists the Gallery of Practical Science, London University, and the Zoological Gardens" (*EL* 1: 2).

1833 and 1881 he delivered around 1500 lectures in 283 cities across the nation—covering the East, the Midwest, and going as far as Missouri, Iowa, and California—and became one of the first Americans to make a career out of lecturing. He came back from Europe desirous of a new professional venture, one that he soon found within the lyceum movement that, in those years, was starting to gain new traction.

Before the 1830s public lectures already existed in the United States, but until then they had been a privilege reserved for specialized audiences, namely people who were enrolled at a university or who were part of a society or an association. In the early 1830s reformers and lecturers like Josiah Holbrook contributed to democratizing access to this form of education by having lectures sponsored by the town lyceum, an organization which could be joined by paying an annual fee. Other groups, like the mechanics' institutes and young men's associations started to offer lectures covering topics of general interest open to all those who were interested. But it was in the 1840s that the popular lecture came to be a true cultural and educational phenomenon. With the content of the lectures being often—more or less accurately—reported in newspapers, the public lecture became not only a pleasant evening in which one could learn about the most diverse topics, but also a powerful tool which "was crucial to the imagination of the federal form of the nation" (McGill 107). In these years, it was the newspaper coverage of the themes addressed in the lyceum circuit what, according to Tom F. Wright, was truly "[holding] out the promise of shared national experience through a media ecology linking village, town, and metropolis, allowing diverse actors to hear, read, and debate about the same message" (3-4).

The democratic quality of the lyceum as well as the chance it offered to use oratory in practical ways while educating the masses were two crucial factors that made this form of culture particularly interesting to the young Emerson. He was also not entirely untrained for it, for his own experience in the church had prepared him for this change. As Carl Bode

observed, in the earliest years of the lyceum movement ministers in particular "found the lecture platform the easiest to stand on" (31) as lectures oftentimes resembled the style and the form of a sermon. As scholars have often remarked, in it Emerson found his true calling. Peter S. Field argues that:

> The public lecture yielded him those crucial elements that empowered his genius: money to make ends meet, an ideal means to observe the salubrious development of the nation, as well as an unmatched opportunity to commune with his fellow citizens. Most importantly, lecturing guaranteed that his knowledge had—as William James would shortly describe it—a 'practical cash-value. ("The Transformation of Genius into Practical Power" 493)

All these reasons contributed to the establishment of Emerson as an extremely successful public lecturer. Although, every now and then, he resented this career choice,[21] he eventually came to understand the value of the lecture which he will later describe as "an organ of unparalleled power for the elevation of sentiment and enlargement of knowledge" (*LL* 1: 48). He believed it represented everything the true orator would ask for: "here is a convertible audience, and here are no stiff conventions that prescribe a method, a style, a limited quotation of books and an exact respect to certain books, persons or opinions" (*JMN* 7: 265) and, soon after his return from Europe, he used it to communicate to his audience what he had learned during that voyage.

Emerson's first lectures draw extensively on his experience abroad. He not only delivered a series on natural philosophy, or science, which he will later used as the backbone

[21] As he frankly admits in an 1843 letter to Samuel Gray Ward, lecturing was – at least for the first part of his career – his last resort. There he writes: "whenever I get into debt, which usually happens once a year, I must make the plunge into this great odious river of travelers, into these cold eddies of hotels & boarding houses – farther into these dangerous precincts of charlatanism, namely, 'Lectures'" (*Letters* 7: 523).

of *Nature*, but during the winter of 1834 he also gave two lectures before the New Bedford congregation on Italy, in which he narrated some of the events that occurred while he visited the country.[22] In February 1834, he met Lydia Jackson—who would later become his second wife—while preaching in Plymouth. As Richardson notes, in the early months of 1834, although Emerson displayed a growing dedication to lecturing, he "had not yet found his subjects; neither illustrated travel lectures nor science would sustain his full interest long" (169). At the beginning of 1835, he started working on a series of public lectures on the topic of biography, which he would later deliver before the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge at the Masonic Temple in Boston. The series featured essays on Michelangelo, Martin Luther, John Milton, George Fox, and Edmund Burke, and while this collection of lectures is not entirely focused on literary matters, it is an early example of Emerson's growing interest in the formation of an international constellation of influential individuals belonging to different European traditions. In September 1835, he married Lydia Jackson in her family home in Plymouth and the day after the wedding, the couple moved to their new home in Concord. That fall, Emerson began working on a more ambitious project, a series of ten lectures on English literature,[23] which he again delivered before the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge at the Masonic Temple in Boston, from November 1835 to January 1836.

[22] He remarks, in slightly different terms, the point he also made in his journal about the irrelevance of names and places, once again stressing the fact that there is an essential unity behind the manifold diversity of the human experience: "The stranger in a new costume and a foreign language only reminds you of some well known character and utters the old truths. And so perhaps the best result of all your experience is the conviction that names and places are of small importance, that the most diverse circumstances read the same lesson. A truly diligent and well regulated mind will attain to the same thoughts and feelings in Sicily, in Rome, in New England" (*EL* 1: 90).

[23] This was a rather unusual choice at the time. As Richardson explains, "There were at the time no English departments in colleges, no surveys of English—let alone American—literature, and few histories of the subject [...] there was just barely such a thing as a professor of English, the first one being appointed in England in 1827" (214).

ENGLISH LITERATURE	
-	On the Best Mode of Inspiring a Correct Taste in English Literature
1	English Literature: Introductory
2	Permanent Traits of the English National Genius
3	The Age of the Fable
4	Chaucer
5	Shakspear [first lecture]
6	Shakspear [second lecture]
7	Lord Bacon
8	Ben Jonson, Herrick, Herbert, Wotton
9	Ethical Writers
10	Modern Aspects of Letters

Even though many American intellectuals[24] were resolutely arguing for a clear break of the cultural ties that still connected them to their former rulers, people in the United States still felt that, despite their differences, they shared a cultural tradition with the British. This series of lectures is particularly relevant to understand Emerson's evolving conception of a canon of permanently relevant texts, because in these essays he explores a number of British authors seemingly in an effort to gauge the relevance that their works still have in American culture and the way in which they are related to American readers and writers, but at the same he analyzes their literature with criteria that do not necessarily need to be applicable to English literature only, but can instead be extended to other national literatures. In other words, through his survey of British literature, which includes Chaucer,

[24] William Ellery Channing is one of such intellectuals, and in his widely read "The Importance and Means of a National Literature" (1830) he laments that "reading is confined too much to English books" (41).

Shakespeare, Bacon, Jonson, Herbert, Herrick, Byron, and Coleridge, Emerson is driven by three purposes: he explores this sense of relatedness with English culture that many Americans still felt and that was just beginning to be challenged: by sketching a literary history of the English, he wants to encourage his countrymen to autonomously pursue their own creative goals; and crucially, he starts to work on a series of requirements that a certain work of literature needs to fulfil to be permanently relevant. Employing one of his trademark modes of cognitive inquiry,[25] Emerson demonstrates his propensity to transcend the confines of particular instances and traverse towards broader, all-encompassing insights. Drawing upon a handful of English texts, he extrapolates universal principles that regulate the enduring permanence and timeless relevance of literary works which go beyond the temporal confines of their original era.

These lectures contain a great number of Emerson's earliest considerations on what he believes to be some of the most important works of English literature. Beginning with Anglo-Saxon culture and moving through the course of the series towards the nineteenth century, he provides his audience with his very own canon of English literature, and he begins doing so with a few introductory remarks on the role and responsibilities of scholars, who are of course those who have the means to help in selecting the most noteworthy literary works of any literature.[26] Emerson's first ever lecture on English Literature, which he

[25] As Windolph points out when he analyzes the ending lines of "Xenophanes," Emerson's poem dedicated to the Greek philosopher makes apparent this tendency: "We see in the dissimilarity between Emerson's argument here and prevailing attitudes today a fundamental contrast in point of view: the Aristotelian penchant for seeing the particular within the general set against the Baconian preference for evincing the general by regarding the particular (32). In this respect, Emerson was very Baconian, and from Bacon he borrowed the famous theory of induction which the English philosopher formulated in the *Novum Organum* (1620) and which sought to compensate Aristotelian deduction's inability to produce new knowledge.

[26] In tracing the development of Emerson's thoughts on literary matters, I will consider "On the Best Mode of Inspiring a Correct Taste in English Literature," the address he delivered at the sixth annual meeting of the American Institute of Instruction in August of 1835 as an integral part of his English Literature Series, which he would deliver just a couple of months later before the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in Boston.

wrote and delivered in preparation for the ten lectures in the series proper, titled "On the Best Mode of Inspiring a Correct Taste in English Literature," is indeed filled with references to the figure of the scholar who, according to Emerson, should only take this path because of a vocation and not for monetary reasons. Scholars cannot be made, "they must be born" (*EL* 1: 210), and for this reason, he believes that two classes of people can be identified:

> 1. The natural scholars, though now hindered by unfavorable circumstances from the knowledge of their powers and calling.
>
> 2. The much larger class in the community who bestow their leisure on those employments to which the custom of the day gives importance, those who if born in a military age would be soldiers in a trading community become speculators, and in a reading community become men of letters. (*EL* 1: 211)

Aside from highlighting Emerson's early preoccupation with scholars in the United States, this categorization individuates those who will have the duty to "make ingenuous persons acquainted with the wealth of their mother tongue" (*EL* 1: 211). These educators should build their curricula bearing in mind that via the English language, all the works belonging to another nation's literature (that of Great Britain) are available to Americans, and were indeed written in their native language. Emerson makes this point very early in the lecture:

> The Instructor should consider that by being born to the inheritance of the English speech he receives from Nature the key to the noblest treasures of the world in the native and translated literature of Great Britain and America. I think the first step towards producing a revolution in our state of society would be to impress men's minds with a deep persuasion of the fact that the purest

Although they are not formally part of the same series of lectures, Whicher and Spiller group them together and, when looking at the content, one can observe a clear overlap of themes and purpose.

> pleasures of life were at hand unknown to them; that whilst all manner of miserable books swarm like flies in the land, the fathers of counsel and of heroism lie neglected; care is not taken to bring them into the country. It cannot be doubted that they are little known. The farmer in winter kitchen, the maid in her chamber that love to read Milton and Thomson and Young without knowing they are literature are the true knowers, worth all study. (*EL* 1: 211-212)

This passage already encapsulates some of the key points that would emerge from Emerson's "English Literature Series" and offers a glimpse into his aims. Firstly, he alludes to the shared cultural legacy between England and America, making sure to underscore that even after the two nations have parted, the shared use of the English language—which, he points out, is an international language that Americans speak from birth—still ties them together. This linguistic commonality (as well as the English language's increasingly international reach) enables a widespread accessibility of literary works written in English and even in other languages, since translations of foreign books are often readily available—so available that, Emerson seems to suggest, they may as well be part of a *global* literature in English. Finally, Emerson makes a comment on both the changing literary market and on the value that should be attributed to these "fathers of council and of heroism." He laments the fact that while a great number of uninteresting books seems to be published and distributed across the United States, these worthy authors do not receive the same treatment and are not brought "into the country." Considering his characterization of these authors as part of the noble "treasure of the world" that is the "native and translated literature of Great Britain and America," what he seems to be arguing for is the popularization of a transnational body of works written in English.

He soon comes back to this point, a few paragraphs later, when he makes an explicit comment on the mechanical means that were such an integral part of to the diffusion of

knowledge and that, in those years, were so rapidly changing. Emerson's issue with material wealth and with his country's exclusively technical and economic advancements has been extensively noted and commented upon. In this passage, however, he seems to find at least one good use for the technological innovations of his age:

> Of inventions and contrivances to aid us, I have already stated I have no hope from them. The only mechanical means of importance which we have not, is cheap editions in good type but on cheapest paper of the best authors: Bacon, Milton, Shakspeare, Taylor. I should be glad to see cargoes of these books sailing up the Missouri and Red river and the bales unloaded by the half Indian hunter of the west prairie. Let them go out as magnets to find the atoms of steel that are in the mountains and prairies. For there are native poets and philosophers and I would give them a chance of being reached. (*EL* 1: 215)

Although Emerson only mentions Bacon, Milton, Shakespeare, and Taylor in this passage—after all, this is part of a lecture on English Literature—he reiterates the same message as the beginning of his talk but frames it as an opportunity for new American literati to emerge rather than as an example of how America has thus far failed to produce its own literary offspring. The works of these British authors should, in Emerson's opinion, traverse the whole of America from north to south on boats, substituting themselves for the goods produced through slave labor. This is one of the first hints that Emerson gives to his listeners (and now readers) that literature is strictly tied to the democratic development of the American nation. Not long before, he takes another jab at the southern slaveholders with another caustic remark about the power of literature. He says that books are "the benefactors or the enemies of mankind" and that "nothing is more natural than the terror of the Southern planter at a Tract and nothing more vain than his resistance. They rend and they establish empires" (*EL* 1: 214). These words indicate that, from the very beginning of

his lecturing career, Emerson had the intention to highlight the civilizing power of literature, an attitude that would not change throughout the years. Even though he lived through the Civil War and witnessed for himself that no tract would eventually stop the southern planter, in 1878 he was still persuaded that, as he writes in his lecture titled "Fortune of the Republic," "all advancement is by ideas, and not by brute force or mechanic force" (*LL* 2: 323). He wishes letters would assume their rightful place in America, lest other—less ideal and more problematic—forces would: "I think it concerns the welfare of society that letters should occupy that subordinate place which if they do not fill arms or horses or huckster or riot will" (*EL* 1: 216). To avoid the risk of seeing arms, horses, hucksters or riots take too much control of the public life in America, Emerson tries to convey to his audience the message that "every man [is] capable of some interest in literature" and that it is to everybody's gain that literature should be studied.

While making this point, Emerson is aware that many of his listeners would soon be discouraged in the learning process because of the gargantuan amount of books that they think they should be reading. For Emerson, "complain[ing] [about] the number of good books" is "idle" (*EL* 1: 213) because

> Books are like the stars in the sky which seem innumerable but begin to count them and they diminish apace. There are scarce a dozen of the first magnitude. If you approach the study of European History it seems to be a library by itself. But the great facts are soon mastered […] I have not the presumption to contemn the endless research of painful antiquaries. I only venture the opinion that study of these subjects is better than wide reading. So in English literature a very few names, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakspear, Bacon, Milton and Taylor, are a class by themselves that for mere number of volumes need never appal the readers of Southey and Scott. And to him who has read these books what

> remains to be read like them? For the second class of the same age, Ben Jonson, Herbert, Herrick, Marvell, Cowley, Cudworth, Dryden. And for the third, Pope, Addison, Swift, Hume, Butler, Johnson, Gibbon, Smith. (*EL* 1: 213)

In a way, these lines are Emerson's attempt at anticipating the audience's possible doubts about the feasibility of being a well-read person, which he soon dispels through a couple of similes. The first is, of course, scientific, and refers to the existence of only a few truly bright stars in the night sky that make the others appear dimmer. The second is closer to the matter at hand, since it describes the enormous number of events that compose European history and reduces them to a select few whose importance is carefully considered and ultimately decided by scholars, who regard some events as more significant than others not because of personal preference, but only after having devised an accurate set of criteria that can justify their decision. Emerson believes that a close—and perhaps almost scientific—study of a few texts is preferable to having only a surface-level knowledge of a wide variety of unimportant works. Knowing the name—and only the name—of all the stars in the universe is meaningless when compared to having an understanding of the mechanisms and of the laws that regulate the most significant ones. That is not to say that there is only one class of stars—or European historical events—that is worthy of being studied. In fact Emerson, in this lecture, seems to envision a sort of tier system, one that helps to answer the question "And to him who has read these books what remains to be read like them?" to which Emerson provides a long list of names as an answer, composed of authors that are not "prioritized" like Shakespeare or Bacon, but are still important and deserving of scholarly inquiry.

According to Emerson, the constitution of this constellation of authors is not a result of happenstance, but the consequence of the intrinsic qualities of their works. Moreover, this constellation does not change—as real constellations do—through time, because the

most important characteristic that Emerson ascribes to it is its permanence, as he explains in the central part of his lecture:

> It will fortify [the instructor] […] to observe the firm laws that determine literary reputation, that there is no luck in literary reputation, but that a public not to be bribed and not to be entreated and not to be overawed, decides upon every man's fame. Only those books come down which deserve to *last*. Blackmore, Pollock, Bulwer may *endure* for a night but Homer and Moses *last forever*. There are not at any time in the world apparently more than a dozen persons who read and understand Plato; never enough to pay for an edition of his works; yet to *every generation* they come down, as if God brought them in his hand. And so with all sterling books, their *permanence* being fixed by no love or hatred but by their own specific gravity or the intrinsic importance of their thoughts to the *constant* mind of man. (*EL* 1: 212, emphasis mine)

Unsurprisingly, this passage shows Emerson's use of a remarkable quantity of lexical items related to time and permanence: he talks about books and authors that *last forever*, about those works that *endure* the test of time and are read by *every generation*, because readers of different eras—and different cultures— equally acknowledge their *permanence* and note how these writings relate to the *constant* mind of humankind. In this except, Blackmore, Pollock, and Bulwer are like ripples on water, they are akin to a fleeting breeze, felt for a moment and then gone, whereas Homer and Moses are like the Scirocco, or the Mistral, ever-enduring winds that remain unchanged through time. Like these winds, unconcerned with those who experience them, the endurance of these authors and their works is not determined by external factors like popularity, fame, or readership, but by their power to constantly speak to the "constant mind of man." In this way, Emerson makes a reference to the "Universal Mind" that he often writes about and that, as I established in the previous

chapter, is inextricably linked to his idea of Wholeness. This shared mind is unchanging, it remains stable through time and space because it is both *constant* and *universal*, and therefore to speak of books that are attuned to this everlasting mind of man necessarily means to allude to the existence of a body of works that comes from different ages and springs from diverse cultural traditions. Like in many other instances, Emerson hints rather implicitly at an international set of books that are universally and eternally recognized as significant for humankind. It is in passages like this one that he starts to entertain the idea of the existence of what we would now call World Literature.[27] Adopting a remarkably scientific attitude, Emerson notes that he is only an observer of the mechanisms that regulate this establishment of a canon. Even though, as he says in his journal, "a scholar is a selective principle" (*JMN* 7: 50) who should perceive and record anything "new or good [that] is going on," scholars are only supposed to select worthy works according to principles that, though internalized and made their own, are external to them, forever true, and universally applicable.

The so far rather unappreciated lecture "On the Best Mode of Inspiring a Correct Taste in English Literature" is indicative of Emerson's approach to literary studies, of his tendency to extrapolate universals out of particulars, and of his (somewhat ambivalent) intention to build a bridge across the Atlantic while at the same time affirming the need for new and originally American intellectual works. The relationship between England and the United States was often characterized—both by him and by later scholars—as one resembling a "parent-child" dynamic, a metaphor that captures the affinity and discord that

[27] In a way, this could hardly have been otherwise. The concept of World Literature gained new currency in Europe just a few years earlier through Goethe, and would only be introduced in the English translation "World Literature" to the United States when Margaret Fuller translated Johann Peter Eckermann's *Gespräche mit Goethe* as *Conversations with Goethe in the Last Years of his Life* in 1839. Emerson read the original German, but only in 1837, two years after this series of lectures.

characterizes the two nations, but also makes one think of a natural power imbalance. Reading Emerson, however, it seems that the bond could be more aptly characterized as fraternal—the amicable and yet somewhat frustrating relationship with an older brother who can be annoying or intimidating but also someone who is likely to share your values and occupies an important place in your existence. In his physical, intellectual, and metaphorical transcendence of the national boundaries, in his travels as well as in his choice of lecturing about English literature, Emerson was looking for relatedness and not trying to comment negatively on the unbalanced power relations between the two cultures.

Ultimately, "On the Best Mode" shows what seem like two competing tendencies in Emerson. On the on hand, this talk—and others that followed it—are clearly focused on English literature, and therefore other literary traditions outside of it are discussed only in passing. It should be noted, however, that Emerson does mention them, and every time he discusses literature in more general terms, he rarely fails to mention the names of some of the most representative writers of an array of different cultures and epochs. In this lecture, which is necessarily general in nature for it represents Emerson's first attempt at offering a critical interpretation of literature, along with a handful of English authors Emerson cites Plato and Homer (Greece), Moses (i.e. the Old Testament),[28] and many other exemplary writers who seemingly hold the most prominent role in their culture:

> Let [the teacher] aquaint himself with these treasures; let him mark, learn, eat, and digest these books as Scriptures approved by the voice of Human Nature in several ages. They shall be sweet in the mouth and sweet in the belly. These let him read to the exclusion of the crowd of mediocre writers. Multum non multa

[28] Moses is traditionally considered the "author" of the first five books of the Bible, which were dictated to him by God. Emerson often quotes his name in conjunction with other literary authors, in a way overlooking his biblical significance to transform him into the author of Judaism and Christianity's most sacred books.

(Aphorism of Aquinas). The Persians read Hafiz, the Chinese Confucius, the Spaniards Cervantes. (*EL* 1: 212)

Although his professed aim is to exhort instructors to use the most adequate method to teach only the most significant authors of English literature, Emerson occasionally mentions—often in conjunction—foreign authors *and* the "universal mind" that all of humanity shares, hinting at a larger picture in which the most representative writers from different traditions find their place in constellations not at all dissimilar from the one that Emerson sketches out in the following series entirely dedicated to the British. In a way, Emerson starts his canonizing work not only for English literature, but he also seems to already pick Shakespeare's equals in several other nations' literary histories. Cervantes provides the best contribution to Spanish literature, Hafiz does the same for Persia, and Confucius for China. All of their works and many others are what Emerson calls the "Scriptures approved by the voice of Human Nature in several ages," thus highlighting once again the common sentiment animating any truly great work of literature.[29] At this stage the parameters and criteria that identify a literary work as permanent are not yet precisely laid out or firmly established. His observations on this issue are comparatively limited, and are more or less encapsulated by the reference to their relevance to the "constant mind of man" and by the elegantly phrased but rather vague remark about their "specific gravity."

As Emerson progresses in his lectures of the "English Literature Series," and as he undertakes a more in-depth exploration of individual authors, the refinement of his selection criteria becomes increasingly apparent. It becomes evident that he is not only providing his personal selection of English authors and explaining their faults and merits, but

[29] Not only does Emerson describe these international literary works as Scripture but, as a consequence of his readings of religious writings of the East, he would also later work on a "more global scriptural anthology or world bible" (Hodder, "Asia in Emerson" 380) in the "Ethnical Scriptures" column of the 1842 *Dial*.

he is also thinking about literature in more general terms[30]—what it is, how it works, who produces it, and which works pass the test of time. Thematically, the series contains three parallel discussions which, in a very Emersonian fashion, are simultaneously developed across different lectures. The first one is concerned with the definition of literature and the function Emerson assigns to it, the second deals with the role of scholars and intellectuals, and the third contains an early theorization the criteria that regulate the Emersonian literary canon.

In his "Introductory" lecture he defines literature as "the books that are written. It is the recorded thinking of man. It contains the utterance of man upon all knowables. It has its deep foundations in the nature and condition of man" (*EL* 1: 218). Although a description of literature as the "books that are written" is far from ground-breaking, this definition is interesting because it shows that from the very beginning Emerson considers literature as a universal form of expression available to the whole of humanity. He considers it as deeply rooted in our very nature as human beings, and it is as basic as our need to breathe, eat, and drink. A few pages later, Emerson alludes to his understanding of nature through which one comprehends metaphysical truths when he affirms that the world is the mirror of the soul, thus hinting at the theory of correspondence between Nature and spiritual facts which has already been discussed in the previous chapter and that is so fundamental to his aesthetics. Every man, he writes, should show this relation by uttering "the oracles of the mind in appropriate images from nature" and should therefore participate in the creation of literature which is defined as "the clothing of things of the mind in the things of matter" (*EL*

[30] In the first lecture, he describes his intentions after he received the invitation from the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge: "At the request of the Society, I have attempted to prepare a course of lectures 'on topics connected with English Literature.' I shall endeavor in the present Discourse, by defining the nature and aim of Literature, and the interest which human nature has in it, to show how large a field of inquiry it opens, to show at once the attractions and the dangers of the road" (*EL* 1: 218).

1: 225). For Emerson, literature is then an actualization of what we initially can only imagine, it is a tangible transposition of what we think. As the kind of distant vision that he had in mind to synthesize the particulars and the Whole, literature too works between the actual and the imagined.

Having thus defined literature, Emerson proceeds to clarify its purposes. The aim of literature is, according to him, to traverse between the spiritual and the natural world, it needs to "give voice to the whole of spiritual nature as events and ages unfold it, to record in words the whole life of the world" (*EL* 1: 226). Even though he decides to focus his first series of lectures on a national literature, from his very first years as a lecturer, Emerson demonstrates that he conceives of literature in global terms, calling attention to the fact that the "whole life of the world" should be its object. If it is almost natural to speak of specific literatures that appear to share some common traits and are more or less located in one particular region, it is also impossible to reduce literature to its most provincial characteristics—as he explains at length in the series, truly great literary works are significant regardless of national or temporal constraints. In fact, works of literature almost always take inspiration from literature written in foreign lands and in the distant past. When Emerson explains that in the "study [of] the literature of any cultivated nation, you must meet the majestic ideas of God, of Justice, of Freedom, of Necessity, of War, and of Intellectual Beauty" (*EL* 1: 231), he unfailingly mentions universal ideas to characterize the best books of a single nation. A few lines earlier in the same lecture, Emerson points out that "there is no insulated genius or book," and he follows through with this line of thinking in his lesson on Chaucer, in which he highlights the endless chain of relations that ties literature together:

Figure 2. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. "Bust of the Roman god Janus." *The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1569.*

> The truth is all works of literature are Janus faced and look to the future and to the past. Shakspear, Pope, and Dryden borrow from Chaucer and shine by his borrowed light. Chaucer reflects Boccacio and Colonna and the Troubadours; Boccacio and Colonna elder Greek and Roman authors, and these in their turn others if only history would enable us to trace them. There never was an original writer. Each is a link in an endless chain. To receive and to impart are the talents of the poet and he ought to possess both in equal degrees. He is merely the marble mouth of a fountain into which the waters ascend and out of which they flow. This is but the nature of man, universal receiving to the end of universal giving. (*EL* 1: 284)

Emerson characterizes literature as both reaching towards the future and yet anchored to the past, and in the space of a single paragraph he moves all across Europe and covers more than two thousand years, highlighting connections between authors spanning from classical antiquity to the English Renaissance. Additionally, this movement seems to be happening westward, almost pointing to the next destination on the other side of the world, the United States. What might immediately catch the attention of anyone familiar with Emerson's most popular essays, however, is the statement concerning the impossibility to find a truly original writer. The "imitation is suicide" rhetoric that he would soon after employ in "Self-Reliance" seems incompatible with this emphasis on literature as a chain of relations that renders originality impossible. Nevertheless, Emerson never argued for a complete eradication of past models, as long as those using them does so as a source for inspiration and not as a blueprint for mindless replication—in this way, artists have to participate in a system of exchange and distribution of ideas across different nations and different times.

Another cue pointing to this ambivalent nature of the English Literature Series, which is supposedly focused on a specific tradition and yet frequently transcends these

limits, lies in the title of the last essay in the series, "Modern Aspects of Letters."[31] When criticizing Byron's poetry, Emerson lists three questions literature should answer, namely: "What faculties does [it] excite? What feelings does [it] awaken? What impressions does [it] leave?" Emerson does not provide definitive answers to these questions but, taking his cue from English Romanticism—more specifically from John Keats—he tries to make his point clearer by stating that he believes literature should have two aims: "There are two ends to one or both of which all works of literature are or should be composed: Truth and Beauty. A work must be written to one of these ends or it is naught" (*EL* 1: 382). Regarding truth, Emerson argues:

> […] If a book of general speculation only contains propositions that cannot be denied, it may not yet carry on its face the reason why it is written [...] Is this written to communicate one new truth? Does it contain things which had a necessity that they should be uttered? (*EL* 1: 382)

A few lines later, addressing the second aim, beauty, Emerson completes his thought by saying:

> The other principle to which the mind lives, is Beauty […] The rhythm of verse, the splendor of imagery, the sallies of wit, lyrics, tragedy, romance, devotional writings aim purely to express and gratify the love of beauty that haunts the human mind. This, like the other, is felt to be a spiritual and eternal principle, and a sufficient reason for the existence and publication of any word or work in which it inheres. (*EL* 1: 382)

[31] The title is possibly a reference to the seventeenth-century Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns (*Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*), the famous dispute over the respective merits of the literature of classical antiquity vs. the "modern" European literatures in the vernacular.

Emerson argues that works of literature should aim for at least one of these two principles, seemingly suggesting that the satisfaction of one of these two might be enough to justify the publication of a literary work. After all, works containing new truths are supposedly expressing thoughts that *had* to be uttered, thus contributing to the expansion of human knowledge. And when it comes to beauty, given the traditional value that has always been associated with aesthetic pleasure, it is almost natural that literary texts deemed beautiful have reason to exist. Although Emerson seems to initially divide the two, he eventually observes that Truth and Beauty "always face each other and each tends to become the other" (*EL* 1: 382). It is perhaps for this reason that, when he writes about the different criteria that give permanence to literary works, he only lists one of the two, Truth.

When it comes to theorizing a canon, a factor of primary importance is how to determine which books deserve what Emerson calls an "enduring dominion" (*EL* 1: 380). As I have pointed out earlier, he opens the series by asserting that there is no luck in literary reputation, and therefore throughout the course of the lectures he identifies—quite unsystematically—three different features that grant works of literature an "antidote against oblivion" (*EL* 1: 358). He is persuaded that certain books stand the test of time because they are the product of truth, they contain a clear moral, or they deal with universal principles. In delineating these factors Emerson does not really address the interplay between them. Ideally, every text part of the permanent literature that he envisions should have all these three characteristics, but he also often writes of books that are permanent by only referring to one of these criteria. Additionally, it has to be noted that he does not appear to arrange them in a clearly defined hierarchy, all of the above are significant and can guarantee permanence to a literary work.

In his canonizing efforts, Emerson claims many illustrious victims—some of whom, it must be admitted, are surprising. One the last to be expunged from the list of worthy authors

is none other than Sir Walter Scott. Even though Emerson states his intention to treat him with "cheerful respect," in the very next sentence he defines him as a "careless and incorrect writer" (*EL* 1: 375). The problem he finds in his books is not necessarily the "quite artificial and pedantic" dialogue or his relatively uninteresting characters—Scott's fault is for Emerson much greater, and it costs him the exclusion from the permanent literature that he envisions:

> He has done little for permanent literature. He has been content to amuse us. He has not aimed to teach. Let it not be said that this is not to be expected from the novelist. Truth will come from every writer, let the form be what it may, who writes in earnest. "Fictions have often been the vehicle of sublimest verities." What Scott has to contribute is not brought from deep places of the mind and of course cannot reach thither. […] The vice of his literary effort is that the whole structure was artificial. Scott is no lover or carer for absolute truth. (*EL* 1: 375-376)

For Emerson, Scott has failed to act as a maieutic preceptor, because he only wrote as an entertainer—a flaw that is not dependent upon the genre to which his books belong. Although Emerson was not particularly fond of the novel—throughout his life he maintained the conviction that poetry was the highest form of literary expression—if Scott had written "truthful" novels, he would have seen no reason to comment so negatively on his works and exclude him from his canon. After all he quotes, probably from William Ellery Channing, a sentence that could be found in commonplace-books of the era: "Fictions have often been the vehicle of sublimest verities." Scott was apparently satisfied to firmly grasp the reader's attention but never cared for Truth and therefore his works cannot resonate with readers beyond his time or reach the "deep places" where the "universal mind of man" resides.

According to Emerson, Scott has only provided his readers with a caricature of the real world:

> The conventions of society are sufficient for him and he never pondered with the higher order of minds, Milton, Jonson, Wordsworth, De Stael, Rousseau, the enterprise of presenting a purer and truer system of social life. […] By the force of talent he accomplished his purpose but the design was not natural and true and daily loses its interest as swarms of new writers appear. (*EL* 1: 376)

Although, by means of his talent, he was able to be a successful writer and enjoy a wide readership, he is not to be confused with those intellectuals who envisioned a different kind of social life, among whom he mentions—for the first time in this series—two French writers, Mme de Staël[32] and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.[33] Since Scott seems not to be interested in such a project, Emerson "expels" him from his canon of British Literature. Permanence does not equal fame, and the great authors are not necessarily those whose works are popular, but those who aim at bringing their readers closer to truth by showing them their reflection in their works. When this happens, they are worthy of being truly appreciated and can claim their rightful place in the canon. For Emerson, the best authors write earnestly about mankind and human life, and through their work the readers profit by learning meaningful lessons about the world and themselves. As Emerson notes, there are

[32] Emerson started reading Madame de Staël in 1822, when he was only nineteen. He initially read *Corinne* and *Germany*, and soon moved on *to Considerations sur la Révolution* and her *Mémoires*. It was one of Emerson's guiding figures and it is through her that he learned much of his German philosophy. His mentioning of her name here is significant not only because she represents France and she is perhaps the only female author that Emerson is willing to include in his canon, but because she conceived of literature in similar terms. In 1826, in his journal, Emerson notes down her observation about "primitive ideas in the Human species" that reappear "in all times, & among all nations" (*JMN* 3: 336) and in one of the lectures of this series, "Ben Jonson, Herrick, Herbert, Wotton," he quotes her definition of the "immutable nature of man" from *The Influence of Literature upon Society*.

[33] The mentioning of Rousseau—the writer of *The Social Contract*—is surely not coincidental here. As Richardson observes, Emerson had been reading *Emile* in 1828 (86).

those who might be tempted to think that “every acre and rood and square inch of Truth's field has been digged and ransacked and no more treasures can be brought thence” (*EL* 1: 383) and that, for this reason, they might not pursue Truth, but Emerson remarks:

> Nothing is infinite but truth, and the first lessons and degrees which we take in it teach us that nothing which has been done forecloses any of its avenues. It is that sphere out of which we cannot go, whose centre is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere. It is not made poorer by so much as a thought for all the wit and science that has been in the world, but replenishes itself forevermore and makes itself entire to every mind. (*EL* 1: 383)

Truth never loses its power because everything that has been done with this scope is forever productive and generative. Expressing a truth does not imply the end of a thought, but it is instead a seed which others can make use of. While conveying this message, Emerson employs one of his favorite images, that of a sphere which, as previously discussed, not only symbolizes wholeness, but also the circularity of truth whose fire can never be extinguished and can germinate and bring fruit to anyone who is willing to engage with it. It is only by treating these truths of life that books can go beyond the limits of time and be relevant forever. As Emerson states earlier in the series:

> Books only have life so long as they express the thoughts of living men, and as soon as speculation is divorced from human concerns and copies books instead of life it withers into pedantry. Literature is the oak which cannot grow in a figured porcelain flower pot, but needs for its sufficient support and nourishment the earth itself. (*EL* 1: 262)

The author who wishes to write a permanently valid book, according to Emerson, needs to refrain from mindless imitation, especially if said imitation is of books of the past and not of

reality. As he would write in "The American Scholar" a couple of years later, "books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst" (*CW* 1: 56), too often writers emulate thoughtlessly and thus become the "parrot[s] of other men's thinking (*CW* 1: 53). To be at its best, then, literature should instead be the original interpretation of a writer interested in "human concerns," an effort which results in truthful words about the reality we inhabit, and which needs the totality of the human experience to sustain itself, like the oak that cannot grow in a flowerpot but needs the whole Earth (and hence the globe) for support.

This concern with totality is also connected with the second criterion that Emerson devises, which pertains to the moral realm—indeed, to pass the test of time, books should also contain a moral sentiment, a term which has been extensively commented upon by scholars. David M. Robinson, for example, calls it "the bedrock of consistency" (*Emerson and the Conduct of Life* 7) of Emerson's philosophy, while Joseph Urbas—following along the same lines—sees in the concept of moral sentiment the "best basis for any general account of the unity of Emerson's thought" (*Emerson's Metaphysics* 157), and it designates "the desire of union with the Cause of all" (*LL* 2: 149). As Neal Dolan eloquently articulates it, Emerson believes in "an integrative moral, aesthetic, and analogical faculty of consciousness that accurately relate[s] parts to wholes under the emotional guidance of a moral feeling that Emerson called variously 'the sentiment of virtue,' 'the moral sentiment,' or 'the moral sense'" (139)[34]. Interestingly, Dolan points out that this moral sentiment is what gives access to the highest truths both in the early as well as in the "later" Emerson, thus highlighting the connection between truth and moral sentiment that he hints at in the English Literature Series.

[34] For a more in-depth exploration of moral sentiment in Emerson, see Joel Porte's chapter titled "The Moral Law: Emerson's Cosmic Vision," part of his book *Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict* pp. 69-77.

For the penultimate lesson of the series, as Whicher and Spiller point out in their introductory note to the lecture, Emerson "abandoned his first plan to discuss a group of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers—Milton, Dryden, Clarendon, Locke, Addison, Johnson" and chose to focus on "the ethical formula which was implicit in many of the previous discussions" (*EL* 1: 356). This is yet another example of how much Emerson approached this series not as a systematic and chronological study of English Literature,[35] but instead leveraged these lectures as a platform to interrogate and validate his own literary beliefs, one of which is the moral sentiment that should guide authors when composing their works. Indeed, Emerson believes that writers should address the "depth of man's nature and powers" so that their readers can recognize genius in their works, and at the same time find, through their writings, "love and courage in human beings" (*EL* 1: 359). He expands this point further and states that:

> The noble aphorism "Man is good but men are bad" indicates, that, under the vicious peculiarities of each individual, is a common nature which is pure and divine. In proportion to the inwardness of the thought or feeling a writer addresses, in that proportion are his compositions durable [...] an utterance out of the heart's conviction of a social right or of a moral sentiment will be equally pertinent in the ears of all men and to the remotest times. Moral science is that Muse who alone hath immortality. (*EL* 1: 359-360)

[35] In the first lecture of the series, he even admits that what he was setting out to do was not to provide a complete history of the English literature. Such an endeavor, he says, is beyond his capabilities and it is complicated by the fact that "our discipline in books is not extensive enough and is not exact and profound enough. But whover is able, I am not. I have not read all the books that are popularly included under that name. Far less can I persuade myself that I understand the true place in history which each writer occupies, or know the master thought which is the key to his genius" (*EL* 1: 217).

In this passage, Emerson's use of the concept of moral sentiment does not reflect all of the meanings that he would, in the course of his career, attribute to the term and that can be evinced from the critical interpretations that I have quoted earlier. The term is, however, obviously correlated with Emerson's idea of morality that he seems to locate, once again, in his conception of the Whole. The ideal "Man" is good, whereas particular men are bad he remarks by quoting an aphorism that he ascribes to Rousseau. If the essential nature of "man" is benign, then only the books that speak to that core are truly "durable." Emerson's morality, as he would clarify much later in "Moral Sense" (1860), is all but egotistical and as far as it could be from unrestrained liberal individualism. Moral sentiment is "the desire of union with the Cause of all. It is the adoption of the welfare of the whole world as our welfare, in pure sincerity, to the extent of preferring our own ruin to the least damage to society" (*LL* 2: 149). As Robinson explains:

> The moral act was a choice, perhaps of self-sacrifice or perhaps of self-assertion, which was ultimately measured not by its contribution to the individual but by the individual's contribution to the larger whole that transcended the particular self. The immoral act was the attempt to sever the individual form the demands of this larger unity. (*Emerson and the Conduct of Life* 21)

Morality is then for Emerson a conscious decision to be of service to the Whole in spite of one's self, while immorality is constituted by an act of detachment and of isolation from the unity of the Whole. This is one of the reasons he would not include Byron among his pantheon of English writers: "it is the capital deduction from Lord Byron that his poems have but one subject: himself" (272). Byron's poems are limited by their subject matter, they only speak of particulars and, even worse, they focus too much on their author, becoming a "burden on society:" "very few men have sufficient strength of mind to speak of […] fact and persons clean of every reference to themselves and their personal history" (*EL* 1: 272).

If moral sentiment is not yet completely developed in these early lectures, it is nonetheless true that Emerson's understanding of its role in literature did not change much despite the passing years. In 1870, thirty-five years after he delivered these lectures, he would write in his journal about Plutarch—a man Emerson otherwise finds not that "deep" (*JMN* 16: 204)—and his morality:

> He had a commanding moral sentiment, which indeed is common to all men, but in very unlike degree, so that in multitudes it appears secondary, as if aped only from eminent characters, & not native. But in Plutarch was his genius. This clear morale is the foundation of Genius in Milton, in Burke, in Herbert, in Socrates, in Wordsworth, Michel Angelo, and, I think, also in many men who like to mask or disguise it in the variety of their powers,—as Shakspeare & Goethe. Indeed, we are sure to feel the discord & limitation in men of rare talent in whom this sentiment has not its healthy or normal superiority; as, Byron, Voltaire, Daniel Webster. (*JMN* 16: 205)

Stressing once again the common nature of humanity and the shared principles that tie it together, Emerson explains that, even though it might seem otherwise, everyone possesses this moral sentiment—only in different measure. It is most prominent in great men, geniuses, but it is also present in some of those thinkers whose works seem to hide their nature. As is often the case, Emerson's lists in this respect are not exclusively English, but feature a Greek, an Italian, and a German writer among those who possess this quality, and a French one (Voltaire) and an American (Webster) between those who do not. The latter group is obviously not lacking in talent or intelligence, but has according to Emerson an underdeveloped sense of morality. Unfortunately for Byron, he is again included among those who fail to demonstrate an adequate (or "healthy) moral sentiment, and is indeed the

first of the list, which ends with a figure that turned from hero to arch-rival for Emerson: Daniel Webster.[36]

The microscopic optics of those who decided not to use their moral sentiment constituted Emerson's biggest concern. As Alex Zakaras maintains, Emerson "was not so much concerned about reflective immoralists. He was much more worried about people who possessed sound moral intentions but whose moral and political choices were clouded by timidity, lack of self-awareness, or a habitual deference to unjust political and economic structures" (100). If moral sentiment is to be interpreted as the "capacity to measure human action in terms of the law of the whole" (Robinson *Emerson and the Conduct of Life* 21), then a refusal to participate in this extension of vision is a failure to move from the particular to the universal, which is a move within, without, and across time. As he writes in "Character," moral sentiment is instrumental in gaining a more advantageous perspective to understand the world:

> The moral element invites man to great enlargements, to find his satisfaction, not in particulars or events, but in the purpose and tendency; not in bread, but in his right to his bread; not in much corn or wool, but in its communication. Not by adding, then, does the moral sentiment help us; no, but in quite another manner. It puts us in place. It centres, it concentrates us. It puts us at the heart of Nature, where we belong, in the cabinet of science and of causes, there where all the wires terminate which hold the world in magnetic unity, and so converts us into universal beings. (*W* 10: 95)

[36] Although early in his life Emerson was impressed by Webster, he was quick to condemn him after he backed the Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Law.

It is only by listening to this moral sentiment that one can contemplate the causes and the hidden laws of the world, and it is only through the help of a moral element that individuals can find their place "at the heart of Nature" and understand the relations that tie them with the rest of existence. When all of these things happen, individuals can finally become universal beings.

It is once again evident that the criteria that Emerson discusses regarding the "permanence" of literature are inextricably interconnected. Moral sentiment is here shown to be not only related to truth, but also connected to universality, the last—but not least—of these criteria. At the time, this fact had been evident to Emerson for at least a couple of years. As he wrote in his journal during his voyage to Europe (more precisely, while he was in London), the traveler, "is not now to be answered any longer in his earnest assertions of moral truth by the condescending explanation that these are his prejudices of country & education." His experience abroad had demonstrated to him that moral truth "hold[s] true through all the most violent contrasts of condition & character" (*JMN* 4: 78). By 1833, Emerson had established a firm belief in the universality of moral character which, despite the starkest differences of context, acts as a unifying force for mankind.

Adding to and completing the two criteria that I have been discussing, universality is the third criterion, and perhaps the most important, used by Emerson to identify a noteworthy—and permanent—literary work. According to him, any such book should address universal themes. If a book can tell us something about ourselves, something that is true for everybody and forever, then it deserves everlasting attention. In short, universality causes permanence. As shown earlier, even before beginning the series, Emerson stresses that the endurance of "sterling books," as he calls them, is determined by "the intrinsic importance of their thoughts to the constant mind of man" (*EL* 1: 212). However, he does not truly clarify what he means until his lecture on Chaucer, the fourth

one of the series. There, he immediately points out that "the single fact that he continues to be read by his countrymen now for near five hundred years, might well draw our attention to him" (*EL* 1: 271). His persistence through time, Emerson notes, is remarkable especially because if "in the first hundred years of his fame, it was common to speak of Lydgate, Gower, and Chaucer as the English poetical triumvirate," now "the name of Chaucer remains alone" (*EL* 1: 271). To this fact Emerson adds his own observation that:

> In literature, one is ever struck with the fact that the good once is good always, the excellent is brand new forever. The average physical strength is so fixed, that among thirty jumpers the longest jump will be likely to be the longest of three hundred; and a very long jump will remain a very long jump a century afterward. Not less stable are intellectual measures. Richard Hooker wrote good prose in 1580. Here it is good prose in 1835. (*EL* 1: 271)

Emerson notes that, after having survived for hundreds of years, Chaucer's works can safely be categorized among the permanent ones, like exceptional feats of physical prowess are likely to remain impressive throughout the ages. Emerson had the opportunity to address the same topic in the company of Wordsworth a couple of years earlier. In his journal he recalls the conversation in which he told him that "Tintern Abbey" was apparently everyone's favorite, but that those who were part of the "more contemplative sort preferred the Excursion & the sonnets" (*JMN* 4: 224), to which Wordsworth replied that those were his favorite too because they "touched the affections of any others, for what was more didactic, what was to theories of society & so on might perish fast but the others were a κτημαεςαε[37] — what was good today was food forever" (*JMN* 4: 224). Emerson had therefore been thinking about permanence at least since his trip to Europe, and by the time

[37] Whicher and Spiller translate this Greek expression as "a gain forever."

he gave the lecture on Chaucer, he was eventually persuaded that universality had to be one of the prime factors in assessing the endurance of literary works:

> The poems of Chaucer have great merits of their own. They are the compositions of a man of the world who has much knowledge both of books and of men. They exhibit strong sense, humor, pathos, and a dear love of nature. He is a man of strong and kindly genius possessing all his faculties in that balance and symmetry neither too little nor too much which constitute an individual sort of Universal Man and fit him to take up into himself without egotism all the wit and character of his age and to stand for his age before posterity. He possesses many of the highest gifts of genius and those too whose value is most intelligible to all men. (EL 1: 272)

Emerson praises Chaucer for his worldliness, he traveled widely and learned a great deal about mankind and literature. Much like Plato before him, to Emerson he is the embodiment of a balanced soul, epitomizing the concept of "universal man." His works are "intelligible" to all because they address topics to which everybody can relate. His message is so immensely relevant that, with time, he came to be regarded as the representative "of the entire humanity of that period" (*EL* 1: 272).

Chaucer is not alone in this respect. When Emerson describes the works of Shakespeare, the quintessential English author, he also identifies universality as the reason for the permanence of his oeuvre. Like Chaucer, who does not include details about his life or circumstances, there is hardly any Shakespeare in Shakespeare's works—being a universal man himself, he speaks for everybody with no trace of egotism:

> Shakspeare added to this towering Imagination this self-recovering, self collecting force. Universality is the trait that all men remark in him. It is

> exceedingly difficult to extract an autobiography from his works, so impartial and devoid of all favorite moods and topics are his works. And he recognizes in certain thrilling strains the spiritual truths which are the basis and fountain of our being. Moreover he joined to it a habit of the most subtile and searching speculation into the cause and foundation of man's being and faculties. (*EL* 1: 297)

According to Emerson, Shakespeare not only identifies the spiritual truths that are deeply engrained in the human spirit, but he also uses his works in an effort to drift into philosophical speculations concerning the metaphysical and ontological nature of mankind. He believes Shakespeare is asking the same questions that "the most resolute skeptics" would ask about matters of "life and death and man and nature," like "what is this conscious being? Has the world any real existence, or do we dwell only in a picture gallery which the sovereign Mind paints on Space and Time?" (*EL* 1: 297). Shakespeare is obviously no conventional philosopher—he does not write tracts or essays, but in his sonnets and plays there are "speculations that being stript of all local and accidental features have an equal interest to all men" (*EL* 1: 315). In his works, "every man finds […] what delights and instructs him," a power that makes Shakespeare "a Catholic[38] or Universal mind of very great cultivation and one who by books, by discourse, and by thought formed his own opinions, who wrote with intention and who knew that his record was true and in every line he penned has left his silent appeal to the most cultivated mind" (*EL* 1: 304).

Another one of Emerson's scholarly heroes, Francis Bacon, not only finds a place in his lectures, but he is also presented as one of the intellectuals who managed to perhaps

[38] Emerson uses the term not in the religious sense, but in accordance with its etymology: from the Greek καθολικός, meaning "universal."

further enlarge his horizon even though Emerson considered him to be less than ideal on a personal level. In the seventh lecture he proclaims:

> The most obvious trait in the genius of Bacon, is, the extent combined with the distinctness of his vision. Not less than Shakspear, though in a different way, he may claim the praise of Universality […] His expansive Eye opened to receive the whole system, the whole inheritance of Man. He did not appreciate only this or only that faculty, but all the divine energy that resides in him, and sought to make it all productive. None ever hoped more highly of what man could do. (*EL* 1: 326)

As noted earlier, Bacon was admired by Emerson for his inductive method that was so congenial to Emerson's philosophical imagination, and in this passage, he appreciates both his attempts at conceiving of the Whole and his tendency to make his thinking useful in inspiring mankind to greater tasks.

Apart from singular examples of universal minds, in several of the lectures Emerson inserts periodic comments on universality and its relationship with the permanence of literary works. He even includes a quote from Madame de Staël in which the French author comments on how those who write by addressing facts that relate to the Universal Mind of Man: "'A writer,' says Mme de Stael, 'who searches only into the immutable nature of Man, into those thoughts and sentiments which must enlighten the mind in every age, is independent of events." Writing with this kind of universality means addressing what de Staël defined as the "immutable nature of man" (*EL* 1: 341).

Considering the existence of *one* essential and basic nature of humankind that is unchanging and unshakable despite the passing of time and regardless of local specificities, Emerson believes that the authors whose place in the canon is permanent and

unquestionable are those who speak to and of this universal nature. Unlike old scientific tracts and fleeting religious and philosophical pamphlets that only address momentary concerns, Emerson believes that not all literature needs to be subject to the same fate. In "Ethical Writers" he says:

> There is a class of writers who carry *an antidote against oblivion* in the very direction of their thought, who address certain feelings and faculties in us which are alike in all men and which no progress of arts and no variety of institutions can alter; those writers, namely, who have not to do with opinions but with Principles; those who write not upon *local* institutions or particular men and to particular ends but to the *general* nature of man. There is a class of writers who do not please but who help us by addressing not our taste but our human wants, who treat of the permanent nature of man, who treat of duties and aim with Socrates to make fair and perfect souls and whose writings *keep sweet through all ages.* (*EL* 1: 358, emphasis mine)

According to Emerson, certain books are going to be a fixture in the canon for, by addressing universal themes and the "general nature of man," they carry an "antidote against oblivion." Parochialism would cost them dearly, and although there is a value in the local and specific context in which they were written, which can of course feature in their pages, if they aspire to achieve enduring recognition, they would need to combine that with an interest in the permanent traits of mankind. Since the aesthetic value associated with, say, a certain genre or style can mutate through time, what Emerson deems more important for this permanent literature is to address our "wants" as human being rather than our particular (and perhaps momentary) taste.

All three criteria that Emerson identifies in the course of this series, that constitute his earliest attempt at a definition of those permanent works that although originating from different traditions will eventually become parts of a global canon, are somehow related to the idea of wholeness, so central in his philosophy. Truth (with its infinitude and its being rooted in the totality of the human experience), moral sentiment (with its reference to the law of the whole), and universality (what concerns the "general nature of man") are all—in a variety of degrees—tied to the concept of unity, a theme Emerson also directly addresses in the series. In his second essay on Shakespeare, Emerson makes an explicit reference to what he considers to be the "law that lies at the foundation of literature," namely the "union of many parts each of which came solitary and slowly into the mind," a law that is best expressed by the word "Composition" (*EL* 1: 317). To clarify his thoughts, he proceeds with one of the usual images that he often associates with the harmony of the whole, that of the shells on the beach—which, as I have already explained, he also uses in the poem "Each and All," as well as in the journals (*JMN* 4: 291) and in "The Naturalist" (*EL* 1: 74). Composition, in the Latin sense of *componere* (to put together, to collect several parts and then find a synthesis among them), Emerson points out, is always superior to the perfectness of its constituent parts:

> Composition is more important than the elegance of individual forms. Every artist knows that beyond its own beauty the object has additional beauty from relation to surrounding objects. The most elegant shell in a cabinet does not please the eye like the contrast and combination of a group of the most ordinary sea shells lying together wet upon the beach. The boy walks upon the shore and charmed with the colors and forms of the shells he gathers them up and carries them home. When he comes home he can find nothing in his pocket but dry ugly

> mussels and snails. They have lost all the beauty which they had when they lay wet and social on the shore touched by the sea and under the sky. (*EL* 1: 317)

Early in his intellectual life, Emerson recognizes that individual forms, however elegant and perfect, would always be incomparable to the beauty of the Whole of which they are but a part. Although one might pick and choose with the outmost care and the most refined taste the most elegant shells from the beach, when these are taken away from all the other shells part of their context and are placed in a cabinet, they lose all their beauty and value. The same applies to literature both at the micro and macro level. According to Emerson, the single lines of a poem are rarely as significant and beautiful as the poem itself, and in a larger scale, books too need to be considered in a wider perspective not only to gain some points of comparison, but also because their relations add meaning, value and beauty to them.

Emerson's philosophical interest in relationality and wholeness coupled with the sense of belonging—for better or for worse—to a larger network of intellectuals across nations that he had the chance to at least partially experience during his time in Europe, led him to the development of a conception of literature that called for the recognition of the existence of a permanent canon of universally relevant authors that is only roughly sketched in the English Literature Series in which only a few non-English writers are mentioned.

With his several references to the constant mind of man, to the immutable nature of man, Emerson argues that humans share the same mind and nature, and hence that, as long as authors write in earnest and with a moral sentiment, their participation in a certain national culture hardly matters— if they are to endure through time, they need to be able to speak to every nationality and any epoch. In a way, then, the Series contains its own negation. Its professed national focus, although present, is often expanded beyond its narrow scope. By means of the national, Emerson also writes about the international and

the global. After all, if great writers are able to transcend national boundaries and their work can resonate with readers anywhere and at any point in history, does it still make sense to only speak of national literatures, to only look at one part of the Whole?

3.2 Permanent Literature Beyond the English Literature Series

Emerson's sustained interest in relationality, wholeness, universality and the permanence of literature can be observed in a number of remarks that he made in public—in his lectures—and in private—in his journal and notebooks. As pointed out earlier, although his sense of relatedness and his perception of wholeness can be traced back to his sermons, and even to some of his earliest journal entries, it was his trip to Europe that gave him the means to more accurately understand how that could also to be applied to the relations between nations, and thus could be instrumental to conceive more precisely of the international context.

In "On the Relation of Man to the Globe," one of Emerson's early lectures on natural science that he delivered sometime between December 1833 and January 1834, he notes how the diversity of nature, whose different riches are distributed in every single part of the globe, forces mankind to establish relations and work harmoniously towards the establishment of a system of exchange that would benefit all:

> Nature has no capital city where she accumulates her splendid treasures. She has divided her goods among all the zones. It has been said, 'Every degree of latitude has its own fruit' […] And so she acquaints her children with each other, and contrives to impart whatever invention one man makes, to millions. On this great market of the world she gives opportunity to each, to ask after the family of the other, and what are the news. (*EL* 1: 41)

Even though Emerson's description of this mechanism is very idealistic—and is completely oblivious of the imperial powers that had been exploiting other nations for their own financial gain—it is nonetheless interesting to see him drawing connections between nations and humankind. The world he depicts is already a global market which, despite its emphasis on commerce and trade, for Emerson is also what provides a chance to establish connections, to ask "after the family of the other, and what are the news." In passages like this one, Emerson starts to look at reality on a more global scale and he seems to be almost suggesting that globalization is but a natural process. More interestingly, he notes that nature itself facilitates this exchange of information and promotes the creation of a global network to which everybody can contribute, with material things as well as with intellectual goods.[39]

This global network that unites mankind is not only related to the mechanisms of nature or a simple consequence of trade. It is also connected to the "great discovery" that Emerson refers to in his introductory lecture to the Philosophy of History Series that he delivered in December 1836 at the Masonic Temple in Boston. As Whicher, Spiller and Williams remark in their introduction to the series, in those years Emerson was forcefully drawn to embrace organicism and, as discussed in chapter two, the ideas of growth and process as well as a "dynamic dialectic based on the identity of opposites" (2) became ever more important to him. Organicism entailed a holistic understanding of the Whole as comprised of many interrelated parts which would lose much of their meaning when considered individually. Since this is true for the whole universe, Emerson realizes that it must be the case for humankind as well:

[39] For the similarities between Emerson's analysis and Goethe's theorization of a global literary market see the next chapter.

> We early arrive at the great discovery that there is one Mind common to all individual men; that what is individual is less than what is universal; that those properties by which you are man are more radical than those by which you are Adam or John; than the individual, nothing is less; than the universal, nothing is greater; that error, vice, and disease have their seat in the superficial or individual nature; that the common nature is whole. (*EL* 2: 11)

As it is reflected in the English Literature Series—as well as many of his early lectures—Emerson's mind is fixated upon the idea that the individual is never as important as the universal. However great the difference between people, nations, and cultures, the universal traits that reside in the common nature of humankind are more relevant. When one is reminded that Emerson often recurred to this kind of rhetoric, the discussions that he sometimes initiated on individual, national, or cultural differences need to be recontextualized and put into a broader perspective, one which takes into account that these concerns are always secondary when compared to his emphasis on unity and universality.

Time and again, Emerson insists on the necessity to sink the individual into the universal. This is needed not only because the Whole is more significant than its particulars, but also for a practical reason—since there is a common nature of humankind, everything that humans create originates in this unity. As Emerson explains in "Art," part of the Philosophy of History series his *Early Lectures*: "The universal soul is the alone creator of the useful and the beautiful; therefore to make anything useful or beautiful, the individual must be submitted to the universal mind" (*EL* 2: 44). This is the same philosophical outlook that lies at the heart of his conception of literature as expressed in his earliest lectures on the English tradition, and it continues to be a guiding principle throughout his opus. He addresses the same issue in "History," the first essay to be collected in *Essays: First Series*

(1841), which he starts with two epigraphs, the second of which recites: "I am owner of the sphere,/Of the seven stars and the solar year,/Of Caesar's hand, and Plato's brain,/Of Lord Christ's heart, and Shakspeare's strain."[40] Following along the same lines in the essay proper, Emerson makes yet another reference to the universal mind of man:

> It is the universal nature which gives worth to particular men and things. Human life as containing this is mysterious and inviolable, and we hedge it round with penalties and laws. All laws derive hence their ultimate reason; all express more or less distinctly some command of this supreme illimitable essence. (*CW* 2: 4)

Like these laws, humans have all—to various degrees—access to the universal mind in which every single subject exists, but not all of them make use of it: "to this universal mind all men are born. In very few is it active" (*EL* 2: 12).

Those who are actually in touch with the universal mind can—and in fact must—understand the value that lies in going beyond their individual circumstances. Like he asserted while addressing the public at the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge during his English Literature Series, any individual who wishes to engage in long-lasting artistic pursuits needs to disengage from their specificities:

[40] As Saundra Morris explains in "Metre-making" Arguments: Emerson's Poems," part of the *Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson* that she co-edited with Joel Porte, "Since the poem never identifies a subject, this quatrain is on one level the 'I am' of children's riddles and a tradition extending at least back, for instance, to the Old English *Exeter Book.* The purest such construction among the epigraphs, this is the only motto in the first-person voice of its own subject, a common rhetorical strategy in riddling also employed quite frequently by Emerson's contemporary, Emily Dickinson. As in 'The Sphinx,' the phrase in this context also recalls the riddling 'I am' of God that I mentioned in conjunction with 'The Sphinx,' and Coleridge's concept of the secondary imagination outlined in *Biographia Literaria,* the creating, synthesizing power of the mind that Coleridge calls 'the infinite I AM.' Also, especially in the context of this epigraph, the phrase imports considerable theological weight from Eastern traditions. It directly echoes a text very dear to Emerson, the *Bhagavad-Gita,* in which the speaker of the 'I am' is the soul: 'I am the soul which standeth in the bodies of all Beings'" (238).

> The artist, who is to produce a work which is to be admired not by his friends or his townspeople, or his contemporaries, but by all men; and which is to be more beautiful to the eye in proportion to its culture, must disindividualize himself, and be a man of no party, and no manner, and no age, but one through whom the soul of all men circulates, as the common air through his lungs. (*EL* 2: 48-49)

Emerson believes that permanence can only be acquired by means of universality. It is only by excluding all parochial concerns and individual interests that one can aspire to make his works relevant to mankind. This, according to Emerson, cannot be entirely evident at first. Many young aspiring intellectuals might wrongly assume, like Emerson himself did before his first European tour, that there are exceptional men whose leadership and intellectual prowess they can also hope replicate in small parts, while in actuality they too are—or can be—just as "heroic." As he writes in "Literary Ethics," which dates back to 1838, just a few years later than his first lectures:

> The impoverishing philosophy of ages has laid stress on the distinctions of the individual, and not on the universal attributes of man. The youth, intoxicated with his admiration of a hero, fails to see, that it is only a projection of his own soul, which he admires […] The difference of circumstance is merely costume. (*CW* 1: 103)

The universal nature of humankind makes all difference of circumstance irrelevant. The perception of variety should not hinder us from understanding that unity is the essence of humankind, and that circumstances are but a costume that tries to conceal the radical identity of humans.

One way of recognizing this unity is through the words of the poet—one of the figures capable of synthesizing the Whole and its particulars that I have mentioned in the

second chapter—to which Emerson will continue to ascribe this faculty throughout his life. He thus describes this uniting figure in "The Poet" (which he writes between 1841 and 1843), published in *Essays: Second Series* in 1844, and does so again in "Poetry and English Poetry" (1854) whose title betrays his tendency to always speak of both the particular and the general, like in the English Literature Series of 1835. In the 1854 essay, he writes of the power to detect identity that is poetry's prime nature: "poetry seems to begin in the slightest change of name, or, in detecting identity under variety of surface" (*LL* 1: 302), and while this observation of the metaphorical—or as Emerson would say, symbolic—capacity of poetry seems to be his only concern here, these lines are soon followed by a quote from Emanuel Swedenborg, in which the Swedish philosopher alludes to the unimportance of particular circumstances when it comes to higher things: "Names, countries, nations, and the like are not at all known to those who are in heaven; they have no idea of such things, but of the realities signified thereby" (*LL* 1: 303). The specific conditions of particular contexts, although significant for those who experience them, are an obstacle for the creation of works of art that truly aim at reverberating with a variety of different readers through the ages. As he did in his series on English Literature, Emerson thinks that an "antidote against oblivion" can be found by the author who "purges out of his thought every vestige of personal limitation and respires the air of pure truth" and will therefore "speak or write or do what is durable, what is intelligible to all times and countries. The works of such minds are the masterpieces of art and literature" (*EL* 2: 12). In his 1839 lecture titled "Literature [first lecture]," which is one of the two essays which will be incorporated in "Thoughts on Modern Literature," published on the second number of *The Dial* in 1840, he makes the same point about the necessity for "disindividualization" and its relation to permanence using slightly different words:

> In the spirit in which they are written is the date of their duration and never in the magnitude of the facts. Every thing lasts in proportion to its beauty. In proportion as it was not polluted by any wilfulness of the writer but flowed from his mind after the divine order of Cause and Effect, it was not his but nature's and shared the sublimity of the sea and sky. (*EL* 3: 203)

As he clearly established in the English Literature Series, the permanence of books is completely intrinsic to the works, and cannot be influenced by any external factors such as a critic's personal opinion, commercial success, or publicity. By the time he wrote this piece, he had been thinking about the mechanisms behind the permanence of literary works for many years and never once thought any such endeavor to influence this natural process could work, and is understandably amused by the fact that many "imagine that books are dice and have no merit in their fortune, that the Trade and the favor of a few critics can get one book into circulation and defeat another" (*EL* 3: 203). Instead, as he adds a few moments later, "all that gives currency still to any book advertised in today's newspaper in London or Boston, is, the remains of faith in the breast of men, that not adroit bookmakers but the inextinguishable soul of the Universe reports of itself in articulate discourse today as of old" (*EL* 3: 204).

Although this is a system that seems to be able to regulate itself, the sheer number of volumes that exist in the world begs the question of which ones should be read and which ignored—or, at least, be given less priority, as in the tier system that he envisioned in his earliest lectures.[41] In one of his most prominent later essays about literature, which bears

[41] In "Books" Emerson writes, "there is always a selection in writers, and then a selection from the selection" (*W* 7: 195).

the mononymic title “Books,” part of *Society and Solitude* (1870), Emerson tries to give an estimate of this infinite mountain of books:

> In 1858, the number of printed books in the imperial library at Paris was estimated at eight hundred thousand volumes, with an annual increase of twelve thousand volumes; so that the number of printed books extant today may easily exceed one million. It is easy to count the number of pages which a diligent man can read in a day, and the number of years which human life in favorable circumstances allow to reading; and to demonstrate that though he should read from dawn till dark, for 60 years, he must die in the first alcoves. (*W* 7: 193)

While Emerson applauded the comparatively wide availability of books in his time, their growing numbers created a problem. The impact of the diffusion caused by “tracts, by appendixes, by cheap editions, by circulating libraries and book clubs” (*EL* 3: 211) was both positive and negative, because if good books were becoming more easily available, so were “bad” books, and in even greater numbers. All of these figures notwithstanding, he still believes that, in their discovery of the great minds, people can be guided towards a comparatively smaller canon of works that everyone needs to know, and these can be a select few from every nation:

> As all nations have derived their culture from a single book, — as the Bible has been the literature as well as the religion of large portions of Europe; As Hafiz was the eminent genius of the Persians, Confucius of the Chinese, Cervantes of the Spaniards; so, perhaps, the human mind would be a gainer if all the secondary writers were lost, — say, in England, all but Shakespeare, Milton and

> Bacon, — through the profounder study so drawn to those wonderful minds. (*W* 7: 194)

In this quotation Emerson repeats the same names he used in the "On the Best Mode," stressing once again the "Multum non multa" principle of Thomas Aquinas. The books that survive the test of time, or rather the authors (Emerson has a penchant for quoting names rather than titles), can stand in for an entire cultural tradition, for they are their *representatives*.

While explaining the reason for the permanence of certain books, Emerson argues that the works that "get fairly into the vital air of the world" are those that contain "what tens of thousands feel though they cannot say" (*W* 7: 195), and these writers do so for their nations and all of humankind. As he did in the English Literature Series, he seems to find that in speaking truthfully to the common soul of man, books can gain permanence:

> [Our age] has all books. The wisdom of the world, it has not let die. And here let us with grateful heart acknowledge the gift of the spiritual nature to whose works no date is fixed. How can we be truly said to live confined to one age, who, by virtue of books, live in all ages? How can the age be a bad one which gives me Plato and Paul and Plutarch, St. Augustine, Marlow, and Beaumont and Fletcher, Donne and Sir Thomas Browne beside its own riches? See our presses groaning with every year new editions of all the choice pieces of the first of mankind […] In literature whilst many masters sung a vulgar strain, and talent was perverted as ever, yet over all has brooded a certain higher melody, now retiring, now prevailing, and constraining at last all jarring notes which sought at first to drown it, to fall into unison with it, or to cease. (*EL* 3: 208)

Indeed, in the Antebellum, with paper and labor costs becoming cheaper, as well as with new technological innovations like the steam-powered press and binding machines, the print industry surged. In the excerpt quoted above, Emerson is more appreciative of the abundance of books that are easily available in his era and argues that since not only the works of his day are being published, but nearly all of the books of the past are still being printed, his age cannot be a bad one. Even though, in recent times, there have been several writers whose works were not attuned to the universal mind of man, Emerson observes that, due to the natural way in which permanent literature is selected, these works have in time been overshadowed by the "higher melody" of universal books. Furthermore, Emerson notes how his age managed not only to harmonize its constituent parts, but that it was also successful in expanding out of national boundaries in search for relations and identity with foreign literatures:

> Beside the entire mass of what may be called the *permanent literature* of the human race from Moses and Homer down, which every age reprints, our age has sought out with avidity the history of civil liberty, explored every monument of Anglo-Saxon history and law, and eminently in the period of the English Commonwealth. It has out of England devoted much thought and pains to the history of philosophy. It has groped in all nations where was any literature for the early poetry, not only dramatic, but for the popular sort, the ballads, the songs, for the Nibelungen Lied and Hans Sachs in Germany, for the Cid in Spain, for the ruder verse of the interior nations of Europe and in England for the ballads of Scotland and Robinhood. (*EL* 3: 210)

The most diverse influences converge into Emerson's modern literature, which makes extensive use of the past—after all, permanent books are good in all ages and are an endless

source of inspiration—and of the best (new and old) works pertaining to many different traditions.

As I have pointed out throughout this study, there are countless examples of Emerson's quite unsystematic attempts at establishing an international canon of literary masterpieces, and both his works and his journals are rife with remarks. In the aptly titled "Literature," delivered in Boston in January 1837, Emerson speaks again of the conjunction between literature, permanence, and universality:

> The pleasure which the work of genius gives us is proportionate to the fidelity with which it renders the soul in the picture it draws. And those writers who exhibit the inwardest parts of human nature yield the deepest and most enduring delight. This fact rightly seen may show the importance of the annals of literature to the student of History. Every book is an experiment on the human mind […] and, if we could accurately know the history of the editions of a few books, — of the Bible, of Thomas A Kempis, of Bunyan, of the Arabian Nights, of Blackstone, of the Essay on the Human Understanding, of Shakspear, and Don Quixote, — we should have valuable elements do the study of men. (*EL* 2: 59)

In this passage, Emerson highlights the intrinsic connection between the work of genius and its ability to accurately depict the essence of the human soul. He goes as far as saying that only by reading certain books, among which he lists several titles and authors, one can get a sense of the human mind. Among the books and authors that best exemplify and speak to the general nature of mankind he mentions the Bible, the German-Dutch priest Thomas A Kempis, John Bunyan, William Blackstone, the *Arabian Nights*, John Locke, as well as the Spanish novel *Don Quixote* by, once again, the Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes, putting together a remarkably diverse micro-canon of works whose publication history would

provide valuable insights for the study of humanity. Indeed, this is not a rare occurrence in Emerson's works or journal entries—he frequently compiles lists of authors (and, sometimes, books) that belong to different national traditions.

The Bible is for Emerson the quintessential universal book. It stands at the top of Emerson's ideal pyramid of reading—interestingly though, he finds equivalents of this most sacred book all around the world, once more stressing the idea of a common human nature and soul. The sacred texts of other religions are just as sacred as the Bible, they are "kindred texts" from which all other books, in a sense, are derived:

> This old collection of the ejaculations of love and dread, of the supreme desires and contritions of men proceeding out of the region of the Grand and Eternal by whatsoever different mouths spoken and through a wide extent of times and countries, seems, (especially if you add to our canon the kindred sacred writings of the Hindoos, the Persians, and the Greeks,) the alphabet of the nations, and all posterior literature either the chronicle of facts under very inferior Ideas or when it rises to sentiment the combinations, analogies, or degradations of this. The elevation of this book may be measured by observing how certainly all elevation of thought clothes itself in the words and forms of speech of that book. (*EL* 3: 204)

The religious texts that he hints at and that he adds to this *canon* become the "alphabet of the nations," a term which Emerson uses to highlight the fact that these sacred texts are an inextinguishable resource from which writers extract their works—not by copying but by drawing on their basic affinity with these books. In "Books," he refers to this international and intercultural canon of spiritual texts which include the sacred books of the Hebrew and Greek scriptures, together with the "Desatir of the Persians, and the Zoroastrian Oracles;

the Vedas and Laws of Menu; the Upanishads, the Vishnu Purana, the Bhagvat Geeta, of the Hindoos; the books of the Buddhists; the Chinese Classic, of four books, containing the wisdom of Confucius and Mencius" (*W* 7: 218),[42] and defines them "the majestic expression of the universal conscience" (*W* 7: 219) that speak to any soul more vividly and more truthfully than many contemporary cheap books. This is another example of how Emerson expands his canon to the whole globe and finds relations and identity everywhere, to the point of calling these texts the "the Bibles of the world" (*W* 7: 218).

Going back to literature, in his selection of worthy authors he at times makes choices that might at first seem arbitrary and out of place, like when he includes a single foreign author in lists of English writers. One such instance can be found in his journals, when he finds himself in the Providence Library and makes a list of the authors that in his opinion should be present in every English-language library:

> Providence Library. It seems to me that every library should respect the culture of a Scholar & a poet. Let it not then want those books in which the English language has its teeth & bones & muscles largest & strongest, namely all the eminent books from the accession of Elizabeth to the death of Charles II. Shakspear, Bacon, Jonson, Marlow, Herrick, Beaumont, & Fletcher, North, Sidney, Milton, Taylor, Dryden, Cotton the translator of Montaigne, Donne, Marvell. (*JMN* 7: 43)

Aside from quickly compiling yet another partial canon—this time of the relevant literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth century—Emerson gives continuity to his remarks about the English language in his first series of lectures. The works available in translation and

[42] Wai Chee Dimock points out that Emerson was not at all "bothered by counterfeit texts, such as the Desatir or the Zoroastrian Oracles" (*Through Other Continents* 35) to the point that he includes them in this list.

whose relevance is palpable in another national tradition might as well be part of it, and accordingly Emerson inserts Charles Cotton's name, but only because[43] he is the chief translator of a cornerstone writer of the time as well as a personal hero of Emerson's: Michel de Montaigne. Emerson goes even further in other journal entries, like the following one, which he will later use in a slightly modified version in "Books:"

> I thank the translators & it is never my practice to read any Latin, Greek, German, Italian, scarcely any French book, in the original which I can procure in an English translation. I like to be beholden to the great metropolitan English speech, the sea which receives tributaries from every region under heaven, the Rome of nations, and I should think it in me as much folly to read all my books in originals when I have them rendered for me in my mother's speech by men who have given years to that labor, as I should to swim across Charles River when ever I wished to go to Charlestown. (*JMN* 8: 357)

Not only does Emerson make the relations with distant authors evident in his more nationally focused essays on literature, but he also does the opposite—almost to stress just how connected authors across the world are—when he discusses foreign literary traditions. Here like in his earliest lectures, the "great metropolitan English speech" serves as a vehicle for, and not an obstacle to, an international canon of world authors.

This international canon is referenced multiple times in Emerson's works as well as, even more frequently, in his journals, primarily through extemporaneous lists of authors which either share a particular quality that makes them part of this canon of permanent

[43] This is not to say that Emerson does not appreciate translators. In fact, in "On the Best Mode," he thinks of them as equal to the best authors: "translations are rare because to be a good translator needs all the talents of an original author" (*EL* 1: 214)

literature or are simply quoted as universal writers. One of his journal entries, for example, which he will also use in "Books," recites:

> There are books of no vulgar origin but the work & the proof of faculties so comprehensive, so nearly equal to the universe which they paint, that although one shuts them also with meaner ones, yet he says with a sigh the while, this were to be read in long thousands of years by some stream in Paradise. Swedenborg, Behmen, Plato, Proclus, Rabelais, & Greaves. (*JMN* 8: 254-255)

This passage is exemplary of Emerson's use of these lists, he often starts with a general remark about books or works of art and, at the end of his argument, he provides a list of authors with little further explanation, but which is obviously linked to the point he just made. Often these remarks are intertwined not only with theoretical principles and criteria, but also with practical ones, like in this instance:

> Everything good, we say, is on the highway. A virtuoso hunts up with great pains a landscape of Guercino, a crayon sketch of Salvator, but the Transfiguration, The Last Judgment, the Communion, are on the walls of the Vatican where every footman may see them without price. You have got for 500 pounds an autograph receipt of Shakspeare; but for nothing a schoolboy can read Hamlet, and if he has eyes can detect secrets yet unpublished & of highest concernment therein. I think I will never read any but the commonest of all books; the Bible, Shakspeare, Milton, Dante, Homer. (*JMN* 8: 284-285)

This paragraph is particularly pregnant with concepts that are very dear to Emerson, the first of which is a passion for the democratic nature of culture. He often praises the poetry that can be found in common things, and (especially after his voyage to Italy) was enthusiastic about the possibility to freely appreciate art in public spaces. Therefore, he criticizes the

choices of "virtuosos," and exalts the possibilities of "footmen" and "schoolboys" who can visit the Sistine Chapel or read Shakespeare at no cost. These observations are concluded with one of his tenets when it comes to the economy of reading—since time is finite and there is a canon of books that contain the "few great voices of time" (*W* 7: 194), he will be content to read the "few standard writers who are on every private shelf" (*W* 7: 193): the Bible, Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, Homer.

As a matter of fact, this principle does not only apply to literature, as Emerson explains in another journal entry[44] that is concerned with reading and the finitude of human life:

> Famed Books
>
> It is always an economy of time to read old & famed books. Time is a sure sifter. Nothing can be preserved that is not good, and I know beforehand that Martial, Plautus, Terence, Pliny, Polybius; or Galen, Kepler, Galileo, Spinoza; Hobbes, Bacon, Hooker, Erasmus, More, &c will be superior to the average intellect. In contemporary merits, it is not always possible to distinguish betwixt notoriety & fame. (*JMN* 7: 90)

This list is noteworthy because it includes many men of science. Despite Emerson's own fascination with the topic, he thought that these scientists or natural philosophers deserved everlasting attention, just like their literary colleagues because they all expressed truth that needed to be uttered. As he writes in "Literature," the books that do not perish often belong to three "classes:" "the very highest class of books are those which express the moral element, the next, works of imagination, and the next works of sciences — all dealing with

[44] Like many other entries that I have quoted in the last few pages, this passage too found its way into "Books."

realities: what ought to be, what really is, and what appears […] Those books which are for all time, are written indifferently at any time" (*EL* 3: 202-203).

The permanent books that Emerson identifies throughout his career find extensive treatment in "Books" where, after having commented on the difficulty of approaching literary studies because of the vast number of books that exist in the world, he proceeds to offer "three practical rules" which, very uncharacteristically, are explicitly listed and numbered in his text.

1. Never read any book that is not a year old.
2. Never read any but famed books.
3. Never read any but what you like.

It is interesting to note that all of the rules he lists are proscriptive; they all start with "Never" rather than "Read." This is probably because, as should be evident by now, Emerson tried to find a way to narrow down and define the books that needed to be read in opposition with the books that did not. His aim in this lecture is to do precisely that, and he reminds his audience that permanent books "become organic culture of the time" and that, generally speaking, "college education is a reading of certain books which the common sense of all scholars agrees will represent the science already accumulated" (*W* 7: 191). Reading without method is extremely difficult, because guidance is hard to come by—as he says in the same essay, "the colleges, whilst they provide us with libraries, furnish no professor of books. And I think no chair is so much wanted" (*W* 7: 191). For this reason, students should be thankful for the work of those who, like him are attempting to offer some help with navigating this sea of books. He believes some gratitude is owed to "those great masters of books from time to time appear, — the Fabricii, the Seldens, Magliabecchis, Scaligers, Mirandolas, Bayles, Johnsons, whose eyes sweep the whole horizon of learning" (*W* 7: 192).

Learned men and literary critics such as these help readers in choosing what to read, and Emerson wants to follow in their footsteps. Probably in an effort to do so, in 1842 he jots down in his journal one of the most extensive and comprehensive of his lists, which I report here:

Thou shalt read Homer
Æschylus
Sophocles
Euripides
Aristophanes
Plato Proclus, Plotinus,
Iamblichus, Porphyry,
Aristotle
Virgil

Plutarch
Apuleius

Chaucer
Dante
Rabelais
Montaigne
Cervantes
Shakspear
Jonson
Ford
Chapman
Beaumont & Fletcher
Bacon
Herbert
Marvell

More

Milton

Moliere

Swedenborg

Goethe. (*JMN* 8: 292-293)

This journal entry provides quite a different number of authors and it better shows the breadth of Emerson's canon that is usually only hinted at on other occasions. It also bears a clear instruction at the beginning—"thou shalt read"—and his preceded by a couple of entries in the previous page which address literary prescriptions. The first one is a heartful praise of whoever "in this great empty continent of ours […] under a farmhouse roof" reads Homer and the Greeks for they are "unlimited benefactor[s]," (*JMN* 8: 292) who make use of culture to counterbalance the materialism of his age, and the second is an appreciation of Rabelais, who according to Emerson should not be "skipped" because "he is the source of so much proverb, story, & joke which are derived from him into all modern books in all languages" (*JMN* 8: 292). Emerson's canon here starts in Classical Antiquity with Homer in Greece, moves through Rome, England, goes back to Italy, France, Spain, and then England again, to end in the Germany of his time with Goethe after having visited France—once again—and Sweden. It is more overtly extensive than ever, but in "Books," Emerson produces an even more detailed account of what needs to be read, along with lengthy explanations as to why each author is deserving. He starts again with ancient Greece, of which he thinks "there are five which we cannot spare," which interestingly enough, are somewhat different from those listed in the previous quotation. He includes Homer, Herodotus, Æschylus, Plato, and Plutarch, acknowledging their own merits and pointing out how much they have influenced other authors belonging to other traditions, like he does when he mentions Æschylus's *Prometheus*, a "poem of the like dignity and scope as the Book

of Job, or the Norse Edda" (*W* 7: 198), or when he points out that through Plato, the reader can "explore modern Europe in its cause and seed," because, since literature is Janus-faced—as he described it in the English Literature Series—Plato "contains the future, as it came out of the past" (*W* 7: 198). The relatedness that connects the whole of literature is palpable in this overview, as it is the feeling that, regardless of its specific time and space, literature's inner workings are stable through the ages and across different cultures. When writing about Homer, Emerson notes that:

> It holds through all literature that our best history is still poetry. It is so in Hebrew, in Sanskrit, and in Greek. English history is best known through Shakspeare; how much through Merlin, Robin Hood and the Scottish ballads! — the German, through the Nibelungenlied; — the Spanish, through the Cid. (*W* 7: 197)

After these five great authors, Emerson lists the Platonists—Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, Synesius, Jamblichus—among those who "cannot be skipped" (*W* 7: 202). Then he moves on to Rome, and cites Livy, Horace, Tacitus, and Martial, only to skip a few centuries and land in Italy again with the Italian writers of the Middle Ages: Dante, Boccaccio, and Michelangelo for his sonnets and letters. Furthermore, to get a sense of English literature, one should go back to the "legends and mythologies [of] the Younger Edda and Heimskringla of Snorro Sturleson" (*W* 7: 206) and to other historical sources which can offer a glimpse of Northern Europe before the Norman conquest of England. His list of canonical English writers is extensive as usual:[45] "Shakspeare, Spenser, Sidney, Raleigh, Bacon, Chapman,

[45] A notable omission in both of these lists is his friend Thomas Carlyle, one of Emerson's personal favorites. He often praises his Scottish mentor, whom he sees as a "continuer of the great line of scholars in the world, of Horace, Varro, Pliny, Erasmus, Scaliger, Milton, and well sustains their office in ample credit & honor" (*JMN* 8: 388), but perhaps the reason he does not feature as often in his lists is Emerson's aversion to the inclusion of his contemporaries, who still need to wait for the sift of time.

Jonson, Ford, Beaumont and Fletcher, Herbert, Donne, Herrick; and Milton, Marvell and Dryden" (*W* 7: 207).

Emerson then moves on in his list by making the singular choice of grouping works according to their genre, a decision that is peculiar because it contradicts both his admitted frustration with those who attempt at dividing books according to their epoch or genre (*EL* 1: 231) and his tendency to always suggest authors in general, and never specific books. Among autobiographies worth reading, he mentions the works of St. Augustine, Benvenuto Cellini, Montaigne, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, Cardinal de Retz, Rousseau, Linnæus, Gibbon, Hume, Benjamin Franklin (the only American in this list), Burns, Alfieri, Goethe, and Haydon. Next, he addresses "another class of books closely allied to these, […] *Table-Talks,*" (*W* 7: 208) and he mentions Saadi, Luther, Aubrey, Spence, Selden, Boswell, Eckermann (for his *Conversations with Goethe*), Coleridge, and Harlitt. Then, even more peculiarly, he dedicates a section to "individual caprice" (*W* 7: 209) tailored to any reader's personal taste[46], and "*vocabularies*" (*W* 7: 211), or "inventories" of knowledge, among which he cites Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* and Cornelius Agrippa's *On the Vanity of Arts and Sciences*. Then he lists the works that he groups under the label "Imaginatives," meaning novels, which are "that allowance and frolic the imagination finds" (*W* 7: 213).

Emerson was famously ambivalent on the merits of the novel, and he lists some of the most popular novelists of his day, many of whom he personally did not enjoy:[47] "men

[46] He lists his very own "*Favorites,*" including Cervantes, Rabelais, Montaigne, Sterne, Burke, among many others (*W* 7: 208-209).

[47] I have already mentioned Emerson's critique of Scott and Byron elsewhere, but in his journal he also expresses his distaste for Dickens' works in a passage that also takes a jab at Hawthorne and Cooper: "I have read Oliver Twist in obedience to the opinions of so many intelligent people as have praised it. The author has an acute eye for costume; he sees the expression of dress, of form, of gait, of personal deformities; of furniture, of the outside & inside of houses; but his eye rests always on surfaces; he has no insight into Character. For want of key to the moral powers the Author is fain to strain all his stage trick of grimace, of bodily terror, of murder, & the most approved performances of Remorse. It all avails nothing. There is nothing memorable in

flee for redress to Byron, Scott, Disraeli, Dumas, Sand, Balzac, Dickens, Thackeray and Reade" (*W* 7: 213). However grim the present might look, he seems to have hope for the future of the genre. In the following lines he mentions the first female author of this list, George Sand, as a "great step" (*W* 7: 214) in the maturation of the novel, and later he praises Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* for being one of those novels that ask "the most serious questions" (*W* 7: 215).

Before declaring that "there is no room left" (*W* 7: 218), Emerson stresses the importance and the value of the Genius of the past. If contemporary literature appears at times sterile to him, readers can find solace in "books of rich and believing men who had atmosphere and amplitude about them" (*W* 7: 217), like "The Greek fables, the Persian history (Firdusi), the Younger Edda of the Scandinavians, the Chronicle of the Cid, the pome of Dante, the sonnets of Michel Angelo, the English drama of Shakspeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, and Ford [and Bacon, Milton, Wordsworth, Goethe]" (*W* 7: 218). This emphasis on the permanent value of certain works of literature may seem to stand in open contradiction with one of Emerson's most famous passages from "The American Scholar:"

> As no air-pump can by any means make a perfect vacuum, so neither can any artist entirely exclude the conventional, the local, the perishable from his book, or write a book of pure thought that shall be as efficient, in all respects, to a remote posterity, as to contemporaries, or rather to the second age. Each age,

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the book except the *flash*, which is got at a police office, & the dancing of the madman which strikes a momentary terror. Like Cooper & Hawthorne he has no dramatic talent. The moment he attempts dialogue the improbability of life hardens to wood & stone. And the book begins & ends without a poetic ray & so perishes in the reading" (*JMN* 7: 244-245).

> it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this. (*CW* 1: 55-56)

Although he adamantly believes in the necessity of producing new and original literature (in his case American in nature, and the result of a truthful interpretation of the present age) he never argues for a manufacturing of literature *ex nihilo*. As I have amply demonstrated, according to Emerson the literature of the past maintains its relevance to the readers of any age and nationality precisely because of another concept that he discusses in "The American Scholar," that of "creative reading" (*CW* 1: 58). Since this literature was written expressing certain truths, often including a moral element, and addressing universal principles, it endured through time and managed to travel far and wide, to the eyes and minds of "strangers from another age" (*W* 7: 190), who are supposed to critically engage with these texts and read them *creatively*, extracting from their universal scope a meaning that particularly resonates with them. As Henry David Thoreau put it in *Walden* (1854):

> For what are the classics but the noblest recorded thoughts of man? They are the only oracles which are not decayed, and there are such answers to the most modern inquiry in them as Delphi and Dodona never gave. We might as well omit to study Nature because she is old. To read well, that is, to read *true* books in a *true* spirit, is a noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object. Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written. (100-101, emphasis mine)

The fact that it is a poor argument to neglect the study of nature because it is old holds true for literature as well. The classics mentioned by Thoreau, coupled with all the other works

that are universal in nature, belong to what Emerson calls the *permanent literature of the human race*, and have the power to stay relevant through time. This is only possible, as Emerson writes in "The American Scholar," if one of the criteria of his canon is respected, in this case truth: "Precisely in proportion to the depth of mind from which it issued, so high does it soar, so long does it sing. Or, I might say, it depends on how far the process had gone, of transmuting life into truth. In proportion to the completeness of the distillation, so will the purity and imperishableness of the product be" (*CW* 1: 55).

3.3 Transatlantic or Transnational? Emerson and Asia

"Books" ends with the aforementioned acknowledgement that its author has already filled the limited space of this canon but has neglected some of the most important texts: "and yet I might as well not have begun as to leave out a class of books which are the best," declares Emerson at the close of his essay. What he is referring to are, of course, the already quoted "Bibles of the World," or "the sacred books of each nation, which express for each the supreme result of their experience" (*W* 7: 219). It has to be noted here that throughout the pages of this study, and indeed through the earlier years of Emerson's works and of his journals, names outside of the Western tradition are extremely rare, especially when compared to the wealth of European names that he usually features. This is one of the comparatively rarer instances in which Emerson's knowledge of other literary and religious cultures (especially the ones in Asia) comes through. This is somewhat surprising since, as Kurt F. Leidecker points out, "nearly all biographers of Emerson have noted his Oriental learnings" (40), but one needs to bear in mind that his relationship with "the East" developed through time, became more intense, and gained clarity as he progressed in his intellectual journey.

Yet, it is undeniable that Emerson was one of the earliest "orientalists" of the new world.[48] As Alan Hodder explains, "Emerson was arguably the first American to embrace Asian religious and philosophical traditions as an important complement and corrective to biblical traditions" ("Asia in Emerson" 376), but his first approach to these traditions was mediated by his education and the culture of his time. Hodder points out that, in his youth, Emerson fell prey to the usual preconceptions of the age, which his father William Emerson contributed to spread[49] despite his aunt's best efforts:

> As a young man, Emerson never fully escaped the sense of religious chauvinism and moral superiority characteristic of his time and place. On the one hand, he unthinkingly absorbed the platitudes of the Romantic era, conceiving Asia, and particularly India, as the land of mysticism and the cradle of civilization. 'All tends to the mysterious East,' he piously affirmed in one of the earliest entries of the journal he called his 'Wide World.' By the same token, he was quick to mock the 'immense goddery' of the Hindu pantheon. In a letter to his Aunt Mary Moody Emerson in 1822, he even dismissed European orientalist scholarship as 'learning's El Dorado.' ("Asia in Emerson" 377)

[48] As Hodder explains in the chapter "Asia," part of *Ralph Waldo Emerson in Context*, "Emerson was not, to be sure, the first American to discover an interest in the cultures of Asia. As far back as the 1720s, Cotton Mather, scion of New England Puritanism, had carried on a pointed correspondence with Danish missionaries in Madras, while later in the century, the cosmopolitan Benjamin Franklin pursued a vigorous interest in Confucianism through an ongoing exchange with William Jones, the British magistrate and scholar who helped initiate the Western study of Sanskrit and Indian studies in the West. In 1794, a transplanted English Unitarian, Joseph Priestley, produced the first sustained study of Asian religions in the United States, and not long after, American Unitarian Hannah Adams included a survey of Asian religions in her own studious overview of world religions" (40-41).

[49] William Emerson wrote several articles on Asia in the journal he edited, the *Monthly Anthology and Boston Review*, often repeating the widespread prejudices that were popular among his contemporary Bostonians.

A few years later, however, Emerson had seemingly begun to change his mind on these foreign traditions. In a journal entry which dates back to 1825 he writes: "We remember with pride and gratitude the venerable men who in all past time have instructed humanity from these *oriental sages* who gave the first direction to the understanding down to the accomplished orators whose accents yet ring in the ear of this generation" (*JMN* 2: 337 emphasis mine), acknowledging the circular nature of influence which creates a powerful connection—and indeed a metaphorical bridge through time and space—between his conceptions of the "East" and the "West." As I have already anticipated, Emerson's interest in these cultural traditions is—at least in principle—tied to the exploration of commonalities between religions, an interest that was coherent with the aims of earlier studies of "the Orient" he conducted in the previous years.

Emerson had then a basic knowledge of some of these texts as early as his college years, but Frederic Carpenter rightly notices that their influence seems to appear only much later in his works. As he explains:

> This comparative absence of Orientalism[50] in his published works through 1841, taken in connection with a slow increase of interest as shown in his reading lists, and journal, is important. Beginning in 1837 Emerson was reading a steadily increasing number of Oriental books. 'Calidasa, the Code of Menu, Zoroaster, Buddha, Confucius, the Vedas, the Koran, the Vishnu Sarna', and several more general titles appear between 1837 and 1841. (12)

[50] Orientalism has acquired a significantly more politically charged meaning after the publication of Edward Said's book by the same title, in which he defined it as a "a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world; it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power" (12).

Richardson also points out that it was through Cousin that he escaped his "Indian Superstion"[51] phase when, in May 1831, Emerson started "reading the Bhagavad Gita as described by Victor Cousin" (Richardson 114) in his *Cours de l'histoire de la philosophie*. It was with the mediation of the work of Cousin that Emerson "learned that India possessed powerful sophisticated scripture of its own, religiously as well as ethically a match for the Christian scriptures" (114). Since the very beginning Emerson writes of religion as one of the great unifiers, and it is understandable that he was fascinated by the correspondences in their aims, endurance, and the "translatability" of their messages. This meant that, when Emerson and Thoreau worked at the "Ethnical Scriptures" column on *The Dial*, they translated some of these texts "encouraging a modern, comparative view of Christianity and suggesting its place as one faith tradition among the world's religions" (Robinson "The 'New Thinking'" 99).[52]

Emerson was not only interested in the religions of Asia and had in fact started mentioning more and more specific authors and works in his private writings a few years earlier. In 1841, he writes in his journal:

ORIGINALITY

> All originality is relative. Every thinker is representative. Locke thinks for thousands just as much as clay or Cushing at Washington vote for thousands. […] [and] there are fountains all around Milton or Saadi or Menu from which they draw, —friends, lovers, books, traditions, proverbs. (*JMN* 8: 67)

[51] "Indian Superstition" was the title of one of Emerson's poems from his college years.

[52] For a more comprehensive treatment of Emerson's interest in the comparative study of religion, see Wai Chee Dimock's chapter "World Religions: Emerson, Hafiz, Christianity, Islam" part of her book *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time*, pp. 23-51.

The Sufi mystical poet Saadi, who lived in the thirteenth century, to whom Emerson dedicates a poem in 1842 on *The Dial* and who is here compared to Milton, is one of the recurring figures of Emerson's "Eastern canon," together with Hafiz, another Persian poet who lived a century later. According to Dunston, Emerson initially read their poems in the German translation by Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, who translated Hafiz's *Divan* and, in 1818, wrote an anthology of Persian poetry, *Geschichte der Schönen Redekünste Persiens* ("East of Emerson" 109), but soon after he himself started trying his hand at translating Hafiz, a "practice" that he "kept up for the rest of his life" (Dimock "World Religions" 44). By 1858, when Emerson published his essay "Persian Poetry" in *The Atlantic Monthly*, he was already well-versed in Eastern knowledge. In this essay he lists the "seven masters of the Persian Parnassus, — Firdousi, Enweri, Nisami, Dschelaleddin, Saadi, Hafiz, and Dschami," whom he praised because they added knowledge to the world with their intuitions "which are the formulas which supersede all histories" (*CW* 8: 124), hinting at their profound and universal value. Looking for relations and identity, before filling the last pages of the essay with translations of Persian poetry, Emerson proceeds to describe some of these authors in terms of their Western equivalents: Firdousi, the writer of the epic poem *Shanameh*, who lived between the tenth and the eleventh century, is described as "the Persian Homer" (*CW* 8: 126) and Hafiz is "the prince of Persian poets [who] in his extraordinary gifts adds to some of the attributes of Pindar, Anacreon, Horace, and Burns the insight of a mystic, that sometimes affords a deeper glance at Nature than belongs to either of these bards" (*CW* 8: 129). Considering that Emerson searched for unity in diversity and never tried to eradicate difference in general, his treatment of these Persian writers is far from an attempt to appropriate or westernize them. Emerson is not pursuing cultural homogeneity, and his parallels between Western and Eastern authors can be read as ways to explain to his readers the style of these writers in more familiar terms. As the quote about Hafiz makes evident,

these authors have merit in and of themselves, and their specific qualities cannot and should not be ignored.

A few years later, again in *The Atlantic*, Emerson wrote a piece entirely dedicated to Saadi, in which he addresses again the topic of moral sentiment, one of the three criteria that I identified as his yardsticks for the detection of permanent literature in the English Literature Series. In the article, he describes Saadi in this way: "though he has not the lyric flights of Hafiz, has wit, practical sense, and just moral sentiments. He has the instinct to teach, and from every occurrence must draw the moral, like Franklin" (*CW* 10: 441). Unlike Scott, and like Franklin, Saadi has demonstrated an interest in teaching, and specifically, in imparting moral lessons—which Emerson believed to be necessarily universal. Perhaps for this reason he sees Saadi standing alongside some of the pillars of his permanent canon:

> The commanding reason of his wider popularity is his deeper sense, which, in his treatment, expands the *local* forms and tints to a *cosmopolitan* breadth. Through his Persian dialect he speaks to *all nations*, and, like Homer, Shakspeare, Cervantes, and Montaigne, is *perpetually* modern. (*CW* 10: 442, emphasis mine)

By means of his deeper sense, Saadi transcends his specificities and becomes a global author. Emerson describes him as a speaker of the Persian dialect, not language, perhaps in an attempt to stress both his being grounded in a certain cultural context and his ability to be intelligible to the whole world. Saadi's poems—as all the best works of literature—are not local, but cosmopolitan, for they are not constrained by irrelevant details about their authors. As Emerson explains in his journal, it is imperative to "use your literature more impersonally, [to] strip it of this accurate individuality. Take all that you call Dante, the whole mass of images, thoughts, & emotions, & believe what is certainly true, that it is not poorly confined to certain Florentine flesh & blood but that it is an eternal flower of the World"

(*JMN* 7: 274). The best of books are imperishable, and just like Saadi and Dante's poems, there is at least another masterpiece of the East, the *Bhagavad Gita*, that retains its power through time and space. As Emerson recalls in his journal, he read the *Gita* with a friend and it "was as if an empire spake [sic] to us, nothing small or unworthy but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age & climate had pondered & thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us" (*JMN* 10: 360).

If Emerson uses Western authors to explain Asian works, Asian knowledge and culture were useful to him in his works focused on Europe. Carpenter notes that his interest in Asia started to be more visible after 1845 and argues that this fascination can be perceived especially in *Representative Men* (1850). He explains that Emerson's "Orientalism" played a significant role when writing the essay on "Plato," the first of his *Representative Men*, in which he "converted the Greek philosopher into half an Orientalist, devoting a large part of the essay to the Oriental aspect of his thought" (14). Emerson found in Plato and his "balanced soul" the perfect author to synthesize his ideas of West and East[53]: "the unity of Asia and the detail of Europe, the infinitude of the Asiatic soul, and the defining, result-loving, machine-making, surface-seeking, operagoing Europe, Plato came to join, and, by contact, to enhance the energy of each" (*CW* 4: 31). However, Plato is not the only one to be compared and put into conversation with Asian authors, as Carpenter points out:

> The other *Representative Men* came in for their share of Oriental comparisons. Goethe especially lent himself to such treatment. In fact his writing had introduced Emerson to some of the new Oriental material — especially that of Kalidaa and some of the Persian poets. Shakespeare, in turn, seemed to share

[53] Roger Sederat calls this "Emerson's all-encompassing Platonism that unifies if not obviates differences among national literary traditions" (183).

> the supreme poetic quality with the Orientals; while Montaigne furnished a striking contrast to them. So the new volume came out with a disguised but rich lading of Oriental materials. (16-17)

These aspects of *Representative Men* are yet another example of Emerson's ceaseless search for relatedness[54], which was evidently not limited to European and American authors. Even though it might seem less apparent at times, he attempted to create a canon of interrelated texts that was not only meant to weave a web of European minds, but instead sought to include Asian literature, philosophy, and religion, thus not simply establishing a transatlantic connection, but effectively trying—and arguably succeeding—to forge a global literary canon.

Emerson tried to establish an approach to literary studies that took its cue from the methods of the natural sciences, one that, although it accounted for every single manifestation of a certain fact, also tried to find connections in an effort to reach the Whole, the universal nature of mankind. In "The Humanity of Science" (1836), he writes:

> The most striking trait of modern science is its approximation towards central truths. On all sides it is simplifying its laws and finding one cause for many effects. Unexpected resemblances in the most distant objects betray a common origin […] from a common law at the foundation of terrestrial natures may spring

[54] As a matter of fact, and perhaps because to some degree he always looked at the East as the cradle of civilization, Asian culture became in Emerson's mind a starting point for all the others. As he notes in "Quotation and Originality:" "It is only within this century that England and America discovered that their nursery tales were old German and Scandinavian stories; and now it appears that they came from India, and they are the property of all the nations descended from the Aryan race" (*W* 8: 187). Emerson refers to the obsolete concept of an "Aryan race," which would later be associated with National Socialism but at this point in history does not yet have such a negative connotation.

> a great variety of surface actions. This is the theory of comparative anatomy. One grand idea hovers over a wide variety of forms. (*EL* 2: 27)

Emerson mentions the inner workings of science and notes that "many effects" are traced back to "one cause." Since, as he argues in "Books," "the best rule of reading will be a method from Nature" (*W* 7: 194), I believe it would be correct to interpret Emerson's efforts towards the construction of a canon as working with the same approach. Science has comparative anatomy, books have comparative literature.

4. Conclusion

Among the Argus-eyed: Situating Emerson's World Literature

Among the authors that Emerson included in the list of canonical writers that he jots down in his journal, Goethe's name stands alone, separated by a line break, as his only contemporary. Although Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was born some fifty years before Emerson, and despite Emerson's initial dislike for the German poet,[55] Goethe came to be one of the authors that he most admired. As Vivian Hopkins has observed, Goethe's influence on Emerson's thought is remarkable: "heightening Emerson's aesthetic consciousness, helping Emerson to shape his theory of organic form, stimulating his reflections about the creative and receptive mind, Goethe laid the foundation for Emerson's theory of art and literature" (342).

It was probably Margaret Fuller and Thomas Carlyle's appreciation of Goethe that convinced Emerson to retrace his steps and reconsider his works. In an 1839 letter to Fuller, he thanks her for her translation of Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe,* which he defines as a "beneficent action for which America will long thank you. The book might be called—Short way to Goethe's character—so effectually does it scatter all the popular

[55] As Frederick A. Braun explains, the young Emerson look at Goethe's morals as extremely flawed. According to Frederick, Emerson was "still too much of a Puritan rigorist by inheritance and natural feeling to look with much charity upon the life of a poet as unlike his own, officially, socially, perhaps morally, as Goethe's was, or to read, without a shock to his religious modesty the details of Goethe's description of the struggle of a soul with sin to gain a mastery over itself and attain finally an inner freedom" (24). Emerson's attitude towards the German writer did not soften until much later in his life, as demonstrated by this journal entry which dates back to 1834, in which he writes: "[Goethe] seemed to me—all-sided, gifted, indefatigable student as he is,—to be only another poor monad after the fashion of his little race bestirring himself immensely to hide his nothingness, spinning his surface directly before the eye to conceal the Universe of his ignorance" (*JMN* 4: 298).

nonsense about him, & show the breadth of common sense which he had in common with every majestic poet, & which enabled him to be the interpreter between the

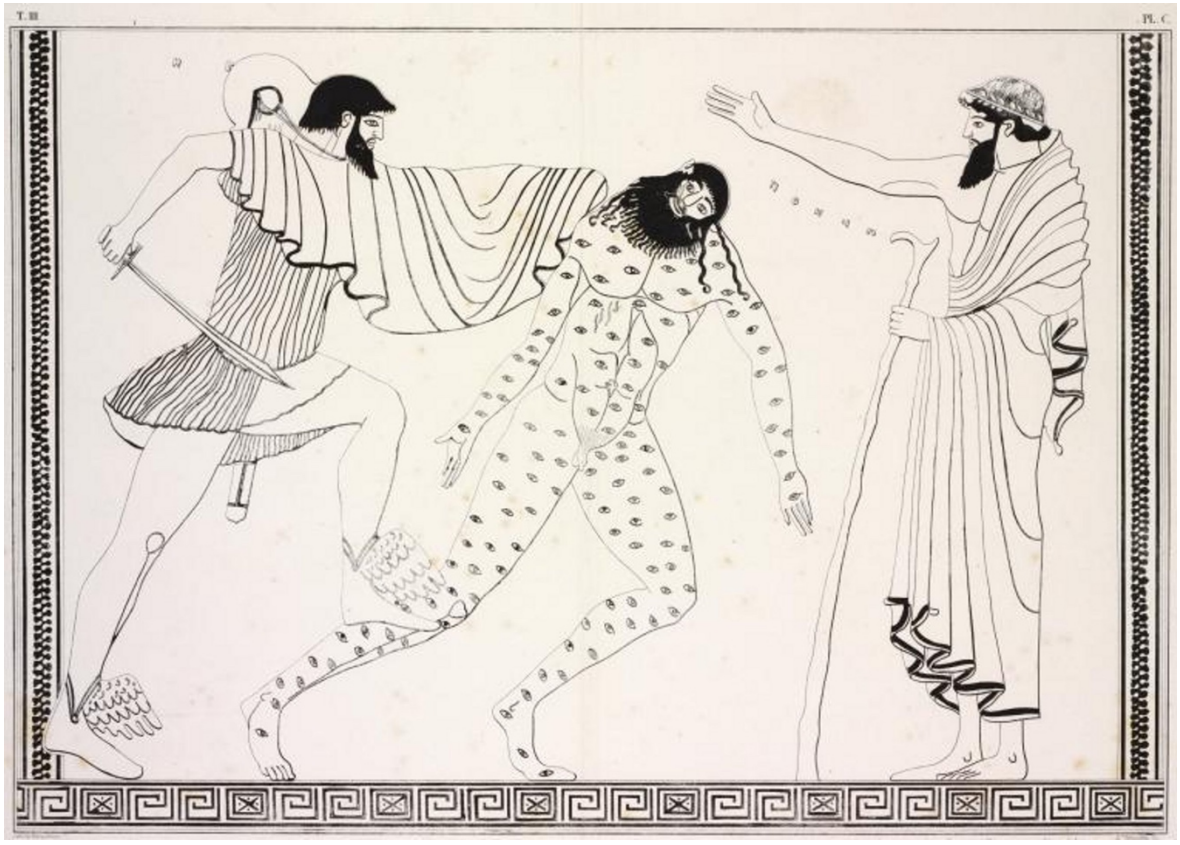

Figure 3. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection*, The New York Public Library.* "Mercury kills Argus, who is represented with his body covered with eyes." The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1844 - 186

real & the apparent worlds" (*Letters* 2: 201-202). Carlyle, in turn, had translated *Wilhelm Meister* and written several essays on German literature, which Emerson started reading before his trip to Europe in 1832, and the long correspondence between him and Emerson probably helped in fostering Emerson's interest for Goethe. Emerson's appreciation for the German writer is especially evident in the essay he dedicated to him in *Representative Men*, in which he describes Goethe as "the philosopher of […] multiplicity, hundred-handed, Argus-eyed, able and happy to cope with [the] rolling miscellany of facts and sciences" (*CW*

4: 156). This holistic approach to contemporary society was especially important to Emerson, who never ceased to find value in the ability to perceive unity in multiplicity. Like Goethe, he was acutely aware of how the cultural landscape around him was changing, and believed that the German writer had been exceptionally able to make sense of the manifold facts of modern life:

> He appears at a time, when a general culture has spread itself, and has smoothed down all sharp individual traits; when, in the absence of heroic characters, a social comfort and cooperation have come in. There is no poet, but scores of poetic writers: no Columbus, but hundreds of post captains with transit-telescope, barometer, and concentrated soup and pemmican: no Demosthenes, no Chatham, but any number of clever parliamentary and forensic debaters; — no prophet or saint, but colleges of divinity; no learned man, but learned societies, a cheap press, readingrooms, and bookclubs, without number. There was never such a miscellany of facts. The world extends itself like American trade. We conceive Greek or Roman life, life in the Middle Ages, to be a simple and comprehensible affair; but modern life to respect a multitude of things which is distracting. (*CW* 4: 156)

Although Goethe belonged to a different generation, Emerson could feel the same contrast between the growing accessibility of culture and the endless multiplicity that it generated, which dissipated knowledge and made the appreciation of Genius an increasingly arduous task. For Emerson, this was both a problem and a possibility. His complaints about this issue are numerous, like when, in "Literature," he criticizes the fact that:

> Acres of printed paper every day pass into the fire because no high purpose inspired the composition […] In looking at the library then of the present age we

> are struck with the fact of so immense a *miscellany*. It can hardly be characterised by any *species* of book for every opinion old and new, every hope and fear, every whim and folly has an *organ*. It prints a vast *carcass* of tradition every year with as much solemnity as a new revelation. (*EL* 3: 207 emphasis mine)

According to Emerson, unlike in the past, even the most uninspired and unoriginal writers could now have their books printed. By means of one of his usual *organic* metaphors, he does not mention genres and instead writes of *species* of books that are not simply published, but find an *organ*. And yet, because not every book endures, most of them soon turn into *carcasses*.

Although such a description of the mechanisms of cultural production is rather bleak, it is also true that Emerson, faithful to his distrust of "foolish consistency," seems to, at times, applaud the mechanical means that allowed the production, diffusion, and permanence of literature:

> The manufacture of books is the art of arts that has impelled thought & information like a torrent over the globe, the art by means of which he that sits recluse & obscure over a midnight lamp is able to speak in thunder to societies & nations & in the exercise of a higher power deride, leave behind him, the impotent prerogatives of Kings. 'Tis the device by which the subtile creations of the intellectual power which come & go in the vision of genius but leave no trace when the soul that entertained them is extinct are invested with the permanent attributes of matter & made to speak to all countries & times. (*JMN* 2: 297-298)

The "art of arts" is not sculpture, painting, oratory and not even poetry, it is instead the practical, and somewhat messy, act of putting words on a sheet of paper. In those years, the

introduction of the steam-powered cylindric press and of the binding machine made production increasingly faster, and distribution too became easier thanks to "roads, railroad lines, and waterways" that were instrumental in making possible the circulation of "this nascent mass consumer culture of print" (Zboray and Saracino Zboray 106). As Dena Mattausch remarks, "as a result of these innovations the book trade in America soared from 2.5 million dollars in 1820 to sixteen million in 1856, while newspapers increased from two hundred in 1800 to twenty-five hundred by 1850" (552). Much more involved than Emerson in this booming business of printing was Walt Whitman, who famously worked as a compositor in several New York shops. Marrying the arts of bookmaking and poetry, "Whitman did not just *write* his book, he *made* his book, and he made it over and over again, each time producing a different material object that spoke to its readers in different ways" (Folsom, *Whitman Making Books* 3). Just like Emerson, Whitman was understandably excited by "the craft preservative of all crafts," (*Walt Whitman's New York* 45) the only medium that could give longevity to otherwise ephemeral art and knowledge. The consequences of these technological innovations were multiple, but for literature it meant the emergence of a proper literary market that offered a wealth of new, lesser-known authors together with reprints of older texts. Emerson manifested his desire to see bales of books travelling north and south, east and west, all across the country, so that anyone in the United States could have a chance to educate themselves through reading. But this universal access to books also brought about several considerations about the nature and scope of literature itself, among which questions of circulation, canonicity, universality, translation, genre, and the merits of circumscribing different literary traditions. Many of these questions were also being asked on the other side of the Atlantic ocean by European intellectuals, especially by the writer whom Emerson calls the "philosopher of multiplicity," Goethe.

The German *Dichter* first used the expression *Weltliteratur* in 1827, in a piece for *Über Kunst und Altertum,* in relation to the review of the French adaptation of one of his plays. Like Emerson, he had noticed the political and cultural developments that were influencing the circulation of literature, and used a relatively new term, but he never actually provided a clear definition for (or a systematic explanation of) it. Goethe's first use of the term is related to reception, which necessarily entails a discussion on the circulation of books and the interplay of literary works coming not only from Europe, but also from the rest of the world:

> I have something higher in mind, which I want to indicate provisionally. Everywhere one hears and reads about the progress of the human race, about the further prospects for world and human relationships. However that may be on the whole, which it is not my office to investigate and more closely determine, l nevertheless would personally like to make my friends aware that l am convinced a universal world literature is in the process of being constituted, in which an honorable role is reserved for us Germans. (qtd in Pizer *The Idea of World Literature* 23)

Even though they are relatively vague, Goethe's words reflect the historical, political, and cultural climate of Europe in the 1820s and 1830s. Goethe made this observation in 1827, slightly more than a decade after the Congress of Vienna of 1815, and about twenty years before the Revolutions of 1848. As John Pizer remarks, Goethe believed that the discussion on "a universal 'Weltliteratur' was enabled by the fact that all (European) nations, shaken by war and then left to their own devices, realized that they had already adopted foreign influences. This led to a desire for greater contact with one's neighbors, for a free exchange of ideas" (*The Idea of World Literature* 19). Like Emerson, Goethe's outlook on literature was influenced by his many interests. A polymath by nature, the German writer interpreted the

literary scene of his time through the lens of science: “Goethe's vision of a new literary modality emerging from the progress generated by the increasingly international nature of discursive interchange reflects the holistic perspective that guided his forays into the natural sciences” (Pizer *The Idea of World Literature* 23).

Emerson developed his conception of permanent literature in a similar manner. He was familiar with Goethe’s work, but he never used the term world literature, and although his concept shares many of the same concerns, the two are not exactly alike. Like Goethe, who searched for the *Urpflanze*, the original plant, an ideal form that would enable anyone to see unity in diversity in the whole world, Emerson observed the wholeness of nature and used it as an inspiration for his interpretation of the literary world. Emerson noted the developments that were altering the mechanisms of literary production, circulation, and reception, and started interrogating himself on the functions and inner workings of literature. In this sense, their theorizations have a common origin, which lies in their holistic approach to nature and their global literary awareness. Like Emerson, Goethe did not only notice connections between literary works in Europe, but expanded his readings to include Asia, where he found the same similarities in spirit that Emerson found, as when he told Eckermann that he had read an unspecified Chinese novel and had found it “not as strange as one would suppose” because “people think, act, and feel almost exactly as we do, and very soon one senses that one is like them”(92).[56] This simple realization made Goethe once again express the need for *Weltliteratur*. In the same episode, narrated by Eckermann, he is quoted as saying:

[56] Pizer notes that this episode “does not by itself absolve Goethe of the charge that is paradigm is informed by a Eurocentric perspective [but] his remark does indicate that a truly global perspective of the literary scene is sometimes to be found in his articulations of concept” (“Goethe: Origins and Relevance of *Weltliteratur*” 5).

> "I realize more and more," said Goethe, "that poetry is a common property of mankind, and that it appears everywhere and at all times in hundreds and thousands of men. One is a little better at it and swims a little longer on the surface than the other; that is all. […] if we Germans do not look beyond the narrow circle of our own environment, we all too easily fall into […] pedantic arrogance. Therefore I like to look around in foreign nations and advise everyone to do the same on his part. National literature means little these days; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everybody must endeavor to hasten its coming. (94)

Not only is Goethe's communal characterization of poetry reminiscent of Emerson's "recorded thinking of man" (*EL* 1: 218), but the swimming metaphor he uses is also strikingly similar to a passage in Emerson's journal, where he writes that "the books of men of genius are divers or dippers. When they alight on the water they soon disappear but after some space they emerge again" (*JMN* 7: 361). Like Emerson, Goethe places a great deal of importance on the figure of the author, so much so that, in his case, authors are both the producers and consumers of *Weltliteratur*. Indeed, according to Pizer, Goethe's world literature is "a process whereby men of letters in diverse nations learn from each other through relays of literary reception enhanced through translation activity" ("Goethe: Origins and Relevance of *Weltliteratur*" 6). Emerson's transatlantic web of men of Genius is remarkably similar,[57] but his conception of permanent literature does not revolve exclusively

[57] Like Goethe, Emerson himself participated in this web of relations. He traveled to Europe on several occasions and personally met some of his literary idols, but he never met Goethe (who died shortly before Emerson's trip to Europe and, at this time, he was not one of Emerson's favorite authors). Aside from these biographical facts, the transatlantic connection was also important for professional reasons. After meeting Carlyle, "armed with just four copies of the recently published *Sartor Resartus* and lending them strategically, Emerson was able to create an extraordinarily avid demand for the work among Boston intellectuals. He then became Carlyle's unofficial literary agent in the U.S." (Sacks 85). It should also be acknowledged that Carlyle

around writers as Goethe's *Weltliteratur* does. In Emerson's theorization, commonalities and kindred spirits are spread through space *and* time, whereas in Goethe's conception much of the emphasis is placed on the contemporary. Additionally, for Emerson men of letters are not the sole, privileged receivers of these border-crossing and time-travelling literary works. Indeed, if both had noted the proliferation of books of lesser quality, according to Pizer, this did not bother Goethe too much:

> He makes the prescient prophecy that popular works – "what appeals to the masses" – will soon enjoy a limitless expansion. He finds it fortunate, however, that given the increased interchange possible for those devoted to higher things ("dem Höheren") […] the serious-minded can form their own modest school until the flood of popular (trivial) literature has passed. ("Goethe: Origins and Relevance of *Weltliteratur*" 6)

Goethe's world literature seems to maintain a certain sense of elitism. As Vladimir Biti puts it, "Goethe does associate *Weltliteratur* with mutually enriching interaction, but he means an interaction among a number of initiated agents who exempt themselves from the mob at home and abroad" (146), whereas Emerson regards literature and its circulation a herald of democracy, especially in the context of a young nation like the United States. Just like he would welcome the spread of Homer's poems under the roofs of the farmhouses in rural America, he is keenly aware of the "beneficient influence" of literature, capable of transforming the Saxon barbaric colonizers in "the bards and gleemen [who] forgot their sanguinary burden of wolf and raven and slaughter and showed themselves by a natural revolution the humanizers and civilizers of their countrymen" (*EL* 1: 216), and he believes

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wrote the preface to Emerson's 1841 *Essays: First Series*, which greatly contributed to the popularity of Emerson in Great Britain.

this didactic and civilizing power to be one of the most important functions of literature. Even though Emerson could be perceived as somewhat aloof at times, he had no desire to isolate himself from the bulk of the population, but instead worked as an educator his whole life, meeting ordinary people every day and stating, in his most famous address, "The American Scholar," that "the literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time [...] I embrace the common,—I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low" (*CW* 1: 67).

Emerson's concept of permanent literature is necessarily embedded in the world literary discourse—it appears roughly at the same time as Goethe's *Weltliteratur* and it deals with the same questions and preoccupations that are still part of any theory of World Literature. If Goethe is commonly seen as the starting point of this paradigm, it has to be noted that, through time, the idea has pollinated and generated several diverse critical perspectives. Perhaps the most quoted definition of what "world literature" means today is David Damrosch's answer to the titular question of his book *What Is World Literature?* (2003): "I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in the original language," it consists of all those works that "stem from widely disparate societies, with very different histories, frames of cultural reference, and poetics" and that are nonetheless "actively present within a literary system beyond that of [their] original culture" (4). For Damrosch, circulation is the key factor that has to be considered when analyzing the works that are part of the canon of world literature. According to Franco Moretti, instead, world literature is "not an object, it's a problem" (46), and with this observation, Moretti shifts the attention from world literature as an object to the critical method needed to account for it. The *problem* with world literature is that it is both difficult to define its essence and challenging to find the most appropriate theoretical approach to it. Without trying to resolve this matter in these few

pages, I believe it is important to situate Emerson among some of these "Argus-eyed" theorists who tried—and are still trying—to explore the implications of looking at literature from a global perspective.

In the closing lines of the last chapter, I have hinted at a connection between Emerson's admiration of his contemporary scientific advancements and his approach to literature, juxtaposing his discussion of comparative anatomy with the idea of a comparatist Emerson. Of course, the term "comparative literature" has a long critical history which is necessarily intertwined with that of world literature. The first critical attempt—written in English—at defining the discipline of comparative literature is Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett's appropriately titled *Comparative Literature* published in 1886. According to David Damrosch, Posnett's book is somewhat atypical as far as comparative literature studies go, because it features an extremely broad selection of texts from the most disparate cultural traditions ("World and comparative literature" 102). In fact, comparative literature as an academic discipline has been criticized, as early as the Interwar period, precisely because of the discrepancy between its professed aims and its actual practices. As Mads Rosendahl Thomsen explains, the first "problem" of comparative literature is that it

> should ideally be about world literature, but in practice it is mostly about Western literature. Arguments can always be made about how big a share Western literature should take up, and how much bias regionalism might reasonably count for, but even then, the fact remains that comparative literature seems to have lost most of its curiosity with respect to the literatures of the world. One reason could be that specialists appear to take care of this aspect, but that is a poor argument, and contrary to the idea of comparative literature, which should be more inclusive. (21)

Comparative literature is then often limited in scope also because it tends to focus too narrowly on the study of texts in the original language, a fact that, as Thomsen argues, effectively shrinks both the number scholars that can work within this field as well as the variety of texts that they can address. Another problem of comparative literature is its "old habit" of building canons of—mostly European— "great texts,"[58] thus further undermining its own position as a discipline.

In view of these criteria and the close relationship that exists between world literature and comparative literature, one could ask: is Emerson to be counted among the earliest comparatists? Claudio Guillén has argued that for comparative literature to become a "plausible project" two events need to occur: "one, […] a large number of modern literatures—literatures that recognize themselves as such—come into existence; and two: […] a unitary or absolute poetics ceases to be an accepted model" (27). Emerson was born in 1803, when "national literature" as a "category […] was gaining magnitude and influence" (Millim 216), and when Neoclassicism was on the wane, with Romanticism "battling" to replace it. Furthermore, American literature was in the process of finding its footing, as demonstrated by Emerson's own work, but also that of his mentor, William Ellery Channing, who in 1830 wrote of national literature as "the manifestation of a nation's intellect in the only forms by which it can multiply itself at home, and send itself abroad. We mean that a nation shall take a place, by its authors, among the lights of the world" (4). In other words, all the conditions seemed ideal for Emerson to be a staunch comparatist, even in the modern sense of the term. It is true that, like traditional comparative literature does, Emerson read many foreign texts in the original—he frequently translated poetry—and had in mind a more or less clear-cut set of authors whose works were worthy of being studied. However, he

[58] Comparative Literature has "tended to compare influences and cross-currents between European languages and within the Western canon: Goethe in France; Shakespeare in Germany; Ibsen in England" (Helgesson 311).

confessed—or somewhat proudly asserted—that he found texts in their original language to be a nuisance more than a treasure, and stated that he would always prefer them in translation, and that the Italian *adage* "i traditori traduttori" (*CW* 7: 204) was quite an ungrateful characterization of the noble and creative profession of the translator. Moreover, Emerson's emphasis on the ontological unity underlying his permanent literature, coupled with the great neoclassical influence that the Scottish Common Sense Philosophy had in shaping his poetic tastes (Liebman 29), meant that Emerson was arguably not at all enthusiastic about the lack of a poetic standard.

If he cannot be counted among the comparatists, it should also be acknowledged that Emerson's permanent literature is not synonymous with any particular and more contemporary world literature discourse. Perhaps the clearest problem in this sense is constituted by the clash between Emerson's treatment of this wealth of literary texts as a definite canon and Damrosch's statement that "world literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading" (*What is World Literature?* 281). Emerson's seemingly monolithic idea of a canon indeed seems, at least apparently, a serious hindrance for his inclusion in this group of critics. However, it has to be noted that, unlike a great number of comparatists, Emerson's canon has impressive breadth, and it includes different genres and several non-European works. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Emerson rarely gave his readers a clear list of titles of works, but rather he chose to mostly mention authors by their names, almost in an effort to transfer agency to his audience. Later in his life, Emerson seemed to leave even more room for the canon to be enlarged by the readers themselves—in "Books," he significantly included a rule in which he suggested that people should read only according to their taste in a move that resembles Damrosch's idea about canonical works being only partially accepted and integrated with other texts: "different groups within a society, and different individuals within any group, will create distinctive congeries of works, blending

canonical and noncanonical works into effective microcanons" (*What Is World Literature?* 298). Furthermore, it must be noted that Emerson's preoccupation with canonicity is partially dictated by the enormous quantity of books that are starting to become available at his time. His response is, in this sense, a very practical one—after all, there simply is no time to read everything, as Franco Moretti famously asserted. From this perspective, Emerson's solution to this hurdle is closer, say, to Damrosch's approach—who states that readers of world literature today make their own reading lists by looking for constellations of texts (*What Is World Literature?* 281)—than to Moretti's, whose concept of *distant reading*, motivated by the same problem, is just as practical but perhaps even more ruthless than Emerson's canonizing efforts.

The "permanent literature" that Emerson envisions can surely appear to be the result of a simple arbitrary decision, but it is informed and motivated by Emerson's perception of relatedness and by his firm belief in a universal mind that unites mankind. At a time when new connections were becoming possible through technology and yet the world was starting to become ever-more fragmented into smaller, sometimes quite flawed political entities, Emerson looked for a unifying force and found it in the ideas behind a selection of texts that could show the limits of parochialism and the potential of wider connections. When the needs of a globalized economy started to transcend national borders and forcibly involved everyone and everything in a new form of togetherness, Emerson noticed that literature could, in turn, do the same thing. He was not the only one to make this consideration among his contemporaries. As a matter of fact, before being reconceptualized by theorists in the hyper globalized, neoliberal, postcolonial world of today, the concept of world literature was, soon after Goethe, picked up by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, who described it as such:

> The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. […] In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, *universal inter-dependence of nations*. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature. (136-137 emphasis mine)

With Marx and Engels, the term acquires a decidedly more economic connotation, but at the same time, as it often is the case, it also becomes an "ideological instrument that would connect people and make them aware of their interdependence. The world literature of Marx and Engels is thus a Janus-faced phenomenon" (Thomsen 13). The focus here is not only on production, but also on consumption, two issues that Emerson also considered in his meditations on the permanent literature of mankind and on its circulation. Although his political views did not necessarily align with those of Marx and Engels, he shares with them the idea of the "universal inter-dependence of nations," a core concept that has frequently been used in world literature theories.

The issue of universality is at the center of Rabindranath Tagore's interpretation of world literature, which he terms "Vishwa Sahitya," a nomenclature that he used for the first time in a lecture that he delivered to the Indian National Council of Education in 1907. Born in 1861 in Calcutta, Tagore was the first non-European to be awarded the Nobel prize in 1913, for "his profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse, by which, with consummate skill, he has made his poetic thought, expressed in his own English words, a part of the literature of the West" (nobelprize.org). The irony of these words is surely not lost on anyone

who knows about Tagore's reluctance to switch from Bengali to English in his poetry and about his literary relevance in India and Bangladesh. Apart from his accomplished career as a creative writer, Tagore also had a profound impact on the history of world literature. His choice to translate the concept with the words Vishwa Sahitya is especially significant, as Bhavya Tiwari notes:

> Tagore's conscious choice of 'Vishwa' or 'World' over 'Tulnatamak' or 'Comparative' literature presents an interesting stance on the future of comparative/world literature departments in the Indian subcontinent, and beyond that, his second term, 'Sahitya,' takes us into a still different realm and era. The word 'sahitya' has its etymological roots in Sanskrit and does not have the same resonance as the word 'literature' in English. Unlike 'literature,' which loosely means anything written and printed, 'sahitya' simply means 'togetherness' and harmonious 'coexistence.' (32)

This emphasis on the interconnectedness and "togetherness" is not only nominal, but it is reflected in his conception of world literature, that he believed to be characterized by what Emerson too would call "wholeness" and "universality." Tagore passionately argued against atomistic knowledge, which he saw as "mere curiosity:"

> If we want to understand man as revealed in action, his motivations and his aims, then we must pursue his intentions through the whole of history. To take isolated instances, such as the reign of Akbar or Queen Elizabeth, is merely to satisfy curiosity. He who knows that Akbar and Elizabeth are only pretexts or occasions; that man, throughout the whole of history, is incessantly at work to fulfill his deepest purposes, and to unite himself with the All, it is he, I say, who

> will strive to see in history not the local and the individual, but the eternal and universal man. (qtd. in Bose 3)

This passage might as well have been lifted from one of Emerson's lectures. Both Emerson and Tagore were firmly opposed to modes of inquiry that emphasized selective and partial knowledge and instead celebrated a holistic approach. In literary terms, Emerson's permanent literature and Tagore's Vishwa Sahitya share the most important characteristic, which is the focus on the common nature of mankind:

> Literature is not the mere total of works composed by different hands. Most of us, however, think of literature in what I have called the manner of the rustic. From this narrow provincialism we must free ourselves; we must strive to see the work of each author as a whole, that whole as a part of man's universal creativity, and that universal spirit in its manifestations through World-Literature. (qtd. in Bose 4)

Once again, these words are incredibly reminiscent of Emerson's ideas of the Whole and of the immutable nature of mankind, as well as their reflection in the "permanent literature of the human race." Emerson too perceived not only unity in variety, but also wholeness in the particulars: "each particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world" (*CW* 1: 27). If one remembers the fact that Emerson derived his monistic sense both from Plato and the *Bhagavad Gita*, it is easy to see why he won Tagore's admiration—during a trip to the United States, he stated: "I love your Emerson. In his work one finds much that is of India. In truth he made the teachings of our spiritual leaders and philosophers a part of his life" (Millard 247-248).

As noted at the beginning of this study, Emerson's cosmopolitanism is also rooted in his experience as a nineteenth-century American. Even though his fascination and engagement with a broad array of diverse cultural traditions is evident, so are his

attachment to the founding ideals of his country and his efforts to facilitate the emergence of a distinctly American literature. This does not constitute, however, a real obstacle in the delineation of his concept of permanent literature. As Samira Sayeh and David Damrosch have argued, the French critic René Étiemble held the same opinion:

> [He] believes that it is through the expression of self and the respect for a national identity that one can learn how to open up to the rest of the world and to value different cultures. It is vital to have a healthy attachment to one's own national cultural heritage and language, and these should constitute a first step toward the attainment of a universal culture and order. (56)

Although Emerson arguably dedicated more attention to Wholeness, he never neglected variety—in fact, he considered these two ideas the poles of a sphere that would lose its shape if it lost one of the two. As a literary theorist, Emerson did not move away from these principles, and would probably agree with Weigui Fang's statement about the relationship between national and world literature: "National literature is in fact the most important part of world literature and vice versa. National literature without a connection to world literature would be provincial, because it would lack comparability" (11). As Pizer notes, since the emergence of Goethe's paradigm of *Weltliteratur*, the "dialectic between the particular and the universal" has been driving the "world literary dialogue" ("Goethe: Origins and Relevance of *Weltliteratur*" 7). As I have argued throughout these pages, the same dynamic exists in Emerson's development of his concept of permanent literature. He conceived of the poet as the one "re-attach[ing] things to nature and the Whole" (*CW* 3: 11), and he envisioned the role of the scholar in a similar way—a selecting principle who could synthesize the national and the transnational. To use Claudio Guillén's words, "If poetry is an attempt to reunite what was the splintered, the study of literatures is a second effort, a meta-attempt, to assemble, discover, or confront the creations produced in the

most disparate and dispersed places and moments: the one and the many" (23). An attempt that Emerson, as I hope I have demonstrated, made throughout his career, even though for too many he still remains the philosopher of individualism, separation, and fierce American independence. Judging from his conception of Wholeness and looking at the global considerations that he made on the topic of literature, interpretations that imprison him in any of those categories are neglecting one of his dearest concerns: relationality. In truth, Emerson cannot be reduced to any of the above, as this journal entry encapsulates:

> Men are so close in their connexions & press so hard on each other that it is improbable a strong sentiment, or a marked character should anywhere arise without sending its strong contagion to an indefinite extent […] Man of every hue & race is sensitive to the lot of man & though the drops be severed a moment from the mass of waters they always rejoice to reunite in a perfect union. (*JMN* 2: 254)

The relations that he perceives operate comprehensively. As I have shown, his appreciation for non-American works is not a mere question of inspiration or a biographical detail, it is often sustained by comments and explanations of what he thinks their objective "value" is for any reader of any time, and not just himself. When he writes about literature, he often does so by putting literature in those "larger frames of reference" that Eckel also mentions (100), and therefore I believe that the American literature that he argues for is not intended as an ideological tool to isolate America or to elevate its literature above all the others, but is instead designed to work in concert with all the other literary traditions.

His cosmopolitanism, albeit rooted in his very special kind of "nationalism," has clear consequences for his literary concerns, consequences that I have explored throughout this study. Although his appreciation for foreign texts is evident and has been extensively

commented upon, what has gone unnoticed and what I have highlighted is his more or less systemic way of analyzing the "value" and permanence of these texts. I believe that Emerson's concern with literary mechanisms makes him not only a theorist of literature but, more interestingly—since he identifies commonalities and uses the same criteria to assess the permanence and "value" of a large variety of texts belonging to different literary traditions—he effectively works as a literary globalist and a theorist of *world* literature, one who, as such, deserves to be recognized as one of the earliest voices writing of a new paradigm for literature.

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