

Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter now, including display on the World Wide Web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis.

Steve Gaunt

April 4, 2023

Elevated Domestication: Emerson on poetry, change, and permanence

by

Steve Gaunt

John Lysaker

Adviser

Philosophy

John Lysaker

Adviser

Cynthia Willett

Committee Member

Heather Christle

Committee Member

Hwisang Cho

Committee Member

2023

Elevated Domestication: Emerson on poetry, change, and permanence

By

Steve Gaunt

John Lysaker

Adviser

An abstract of

a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences

of Emory University in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of the degree of

Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Philosophy

2023

Abstract

Elevated Domestication: Emerson on poetry, change, and permanence

By Steve Gaunt

In this paper, I claim we should read and write with a focus on provocation and inspiration. I pay special attention to the tensions at play in Emerson's essays, starting from the broader aims of his writing rather than specific claims he makes. I then consider the tools for our discussion, arguing that aside from a philosophical sort of lens, poetry must be involved in its own analysis. I then look at how the highs in human experience relate to poetry, arguing on the grounds of *real* experience that poetry can reach outside time, finitude, and itself. I follow this up, as Emerson does, by considering the lows of human experience, arguing that they reach outside of poetic analysis in a different way, and that they can be worked through in art. Having tackled these disparate states, I reconcile them by arguing for poetry that contributes to self-improvement, keeping in mind our natural oscillation between highs and lows. This culminates into an argument for art that creates an *elevated domestication*—that reaches into our lives and shines beauty beyond artistic mediums.

Elevated Domestication: Emerson on poetry, change, and permanence

By

Steve Gaunt

John Lysaker

Adviser

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Philosophy

2023

Acknowledgements

This thesis wouldn't be possible without Professor Lysaker, who is unafraid of doing things outside of the norm, whether it be studying Emerson in the philosophy department or writing in aphorisms. I also owe quite a bit to Professor Stuhr for his impressive knowledge of pragmatism, and to Professor Christle, who has introduced me to many contemporary poets, some of whom appear in this thesis. Lastly, thank you to Tiffany Low, who has shared her passion for poetry with me since before this project began, reading nearly all my poems, be they good, bad, or badder.

Table of Contents

Note to the Reader	1
Chapter 1. Introduction: provocation and inspiration	2
Chapter 2. Poetry and Philosophy: meaning and analysis	9
Chapter 3. Human Highs: moving outside ourselves	20
Chapter 4. Human Lows: staying inside ourselves	34
Chapter 5. Self-Improvement: where poetry can take us	48
Chapter 6. Elevated Domestication: a possible guide	58
Bibliography	67

Note to the Reader:

This paper proceeds differently than many theses. There are short prose sections, poems comprised of quotes from Ralph Waldo Emerson, poems from others, and original poems. Here's a brief abstract (roadmap) to guide you along your way:

In this paper, I [1] claim we should read and write with a focus on provocation and inspiration. I pay special attention to the tensions at play in Emerson's essays, starting from the broader aims of his writing rather than specific claims he makes. I then [2] consider the tools for our discussion, arguing that aside from a philosophical sort of lens, poetry must be involved in its own analysis. I then [3] look at how the highs in human experience relate to poetry, arguing on the grounds of *real* experience that poetry can reach outside time, finitude, and itself. I follow this up, as Emerson does, by [4] considering the lows of human experience, arguing that they reach outside of poetic analysis in a different way, and that they can be worked through in art. Having tackled these disparate states, I [5] reconcile them by arguing for poetry that contributes to self-improvement, keeping in mind our natural oscillation between highs and lows. This culminates into [6] an argument for art that creates an *elevated domestication*—that reaches into our lives and shines beauty beyond artistic mediums.

1 — Introduction: provocation and inspiration

[1A]

Interpret these words as concrete symbols,
and brand yourself a literalist, lost, for
this song is small— “I am a fragment,
and this is a fragment of me.”¹

Five words without inspiration,
loquacious as the Poet’s thousand.
Do you call the oak loquacious
when it drops its acorn seed?

Do you find the tides superfluous
when, again, the moon comes?
This poem “has as much reason...
as the earth and the sun.”²

Now I’ll ask a question that ends all pretensions to ready-made authority: how would Emerson wish me to write about him? How shall I explain, defend, refute, enliven, and nullify what he has to say? We all borrow from the knowledge of others. The best we can do is to question and respond.

Yet I borrow from others for my response: “the best part of Emersonianism is, it breeds the giant that destroys itself,” says Whitman.³ Or, Emerson is “the sage as anti-mentor,” says Buell.⁴ Then again, the “anti-mentor,” himself, says, “The poet should rejoice if he has taught us to despise his song; if he has so moved us as to lift us,—to open the eye of the intellect to see

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience,” in *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Barnes & Nobel, 2004), 252.

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Art,” in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. VII (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 27.

³ Whitman quote retrieved from Lawrence Buell, *Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 288.

⁴ Buell, *Emerson*, 292.

farther and better.”⁵ He says, “[L]et us treat the newcomer like a traveling geologist who passes through our estate and shows us good slate, or limestone, or anthracite.”⁶

In other words, let us allow others to improve, inspire, and expand us; and, further, let us take them and disregard them as they succeed or fail at this task. While we work to understand the writing others tell us to learn from, we must also sometimes move on. When Shakespeare fails, when The Bible fails, when Emerson fails—put them aside (at least for a time). Those books can wait, and if they’re exceptional, will wait. Instead, see what others have to offer, and maybe even find that something which forever craves elucidation ourselves.

[1B]

An admission: *Emerson inspires me*. While this inspiration involves emotions as far apart as comfort and discomfort, taking us in very different directions, it consistently involves a desire to learn. Sensing that something powerful exists behind his words, it would be as foolish to not learn from him (to not learn from the geologist) as it would be to stick with him if he stopped providing. But in finding him inspirational, I do not mean to say that our views are synonymous, and I certainly don’t mean to say that he expresses things best or most fully (if we allow superlatives at all). Thus I quote Percy Shelley, Robert Frost, John Dewey, and I speak for myself when I find better words. At some points, I mark differences; and when they aren’t conducive to better insight, I go around. But in all instances, I aim to create and inspire.

“The trait and test of the poet is that
he builds, adds, and affirms.

The critic destroys: the poet says nothing

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Poetry and Imagination,” in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. VIII (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 38.

⁶ Emerson, “Experience,” 251.

but what helps.”⁷

In large part, this work is not offering anything new with regards to genre. The combination of poetry and prose is visible in much older works like those from the *zuihitsu* genre which, beginning in the Heian period of Japan (794-1185 AD), “consist[ed] of a series of loosely connected essays and anecdotes, as well as disconnected sentences, fragments, ideas, word pictures, poems, lists, and snatches of conversations.”⁸ Or, more recently, poetry and prose have been paired together in works like William Carlos Williams’s *Spring and All*.

The aim of this work is, in large part, to help old ideas find a voice that speaks in a new context—to enliven old words. This is a somewhat inevitable task, for we so often find ourselves simply repeating the old in new combinations. A recent poem by Jenny Xie, titled “Zuihitsu,” is an example of this sort of work, bringing the titular genre into the twenty-first century:

Sunday, awake with this headache. I pull apart the evening with a fork. White
clot behind the eyes.

Someone once told me, *before and after is just another false binary*. The
warmed-over bones of January. I had no passport. Beneath the stove, two mice
made a paradise out of a button of peanut butter.⁹

As Emerson says of metaphysics from time immemorial—they always oscillate between
“the one, and the two...All philosophy, of East and West, has the same centripiece.”¹⁰ Though a

⁷ Emerson, “Poetry and Imagination,” 19.

⁸ Amanda Rudd, “Following Where the Brush Leads: The Potential of the *Zuihitsu* in American Postmodernist Literature,” *Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature* 1, no. 1 (2011): 42-43, <https://plaza-ojs-uh.tdl.org/plaza/index.php/plaza/article/view/2094>.

⁹ Jenny Xie, “Zuihitsu,” Poetry Foundation (Poetry Foundation), accessed January 22, 2023, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147492/zuihitsu>.

¹⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Plato; or, The Philosopher,” in *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Barnes & Nobel, 2004), 300.

rigid interpretation of this statement would feel less pertinent given real-life examples (for instance, how pragmatism denies preoccupations with unity and duality), the idea still holds substantial weight. After all, pragmatism's stance on metaphysics is a response to the "centripiece" it denies. There is still much to gain, then, from new perspectives on old thoughts, whether it is through genre-work like Jenny Xie's or new metaphysical directions like those found in pragmatism. They have the potential to inspire us anew, just as each spring reawakens the world from harsh winter realities.

[1C]

Emerson's tendency to go between extremes to unsettle the reader changes how we should read him. In one essay, the best Poets harmonize the world and language as "liberating gods";¹¹ in the next, two people can only meet, as globes, at a single point.¹² In one, all people share in a single, unified spirit;¹³ in the next, whatever we thought we discovered is liable to be overturned.¹⁴

The human experience contains highs and lows, and Emerson shows both, often in succession, making it impossible to understand his considered position, if he has one, from a single essay. The historian, Robert Richardson, notes that he alters his perspective even from one essay to the next. Within *Emerson: First Series*, for instance, "'Self-Reliance' affirms the tendency toward individuation" while "'The Oversoul' affirms the existence of 'that great nature

¹¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," in *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Barnes & Nobel, 2004), 227.

¹² Emerson, "Experience," 250.

¹³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Over-Soul," in *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Barnes & Nobel, 2004).

¹⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Barnes & Nobel, 2004).

in which we rest.”¹⁵ In other words, even Emerson’s focus on single subjects shifts within the same book.

To take one line of Emerson as his fully formed opinion is thus to mistake the overarching movement within his collected essays. As John Lysaker says of many methodical analyses of Emerson, “any reading that proceeds by way of such reductions misreads the claims that Emerson advances”; “For Emerson, the reality of writing (and of reading, for that matter) is a reality of witness and provocation, and thus a reality unwilling to celebrate itself on its own behalf.”¹⁶

[1D]

Consider me a witness to Emerson’s power of provocation. One moment, I am sure of the universalizing power of the small and mundane; the next, I confront the limits of that surety. Importantly, though, this is not just a fleeting feeling from his essays. This oscillation also occurs outside (yes, *outside*, in the *everyday*). In proceeding through his work, then, each statement must be considered *in a sense*, that is (less obliquely), they must be considered as parts of a whole, with the other parts often appearing in contradiction, though no less essential to the larger picture. The tension between our highs and lows is central to this paper—both in looking at the two sides of the tension, and whether they can work together in a shared system. This paper admits—

Of the pregnant moon, the glowing
lights on a chandelier,
Of large things and small things besides,

¹⁵ Robert D. Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 335.

¹⁶ John T. Lysaker, “Taking Emerson Personally,” in *Emerson and Self-Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 12 and 23-24 respectively.

Of the Earth's axis, the spinning
 pinwheel on a steeple,
 And the Being of beings

In considering Emerson, then, we are not looking for a place to settle down and build our final home. He is not a foundationalist. “[I]t is not the intention of nature that we should live by general views”;¹⁷ or, more famously—“Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning.”¹⁸ Time and time again, Emerson moves towards a statement about something larger only to tear it down. But this is not owing to any sort of *lack* in our capacities for generalization—we have those capacities as well. Just as nature demands that we not live by general views alone, it propels us towards general views: “Our proclivity to details cannot quite degrade our life, and divest it of poetry.”¹⁹ Essentially, we are both the nominalist and the realist—every one of us (at one time or another).

“We are amphibious creatures, weaponed
 for two elements...the particular and the catholic”

“Since we are all so stupid, what benefit
 that there should be two stupidities!”²⁰

Thus, our competing capacities should not be viewed negatively. Rather, they are a generative force within us, capable of improving our lives. Where “The Poet” fails us, “Experience” may shed light. And where they both fail us, there could be something else that brings us to a better state, that draws a new circle. It should be no surprise, then, that not only is

¹⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nominalist and Realist,” in *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Barnes & Nobel, 2004), 273.

¹⁸ Emerson, “Circles,” 202.

¹⁹ Emerson, “Nominalist and Realist,” 270.

²⁰ Emerson, “Nominalist and Realist,” 269 and 274 respectively.

Emerson not the final word—he doesn't even want us to consider him the final word. There *are* no final words—even though we so often seek to say them, only to find new ones days, weeks, or years later.

[1E]

One of the great benefits to Emerson's writing, then, is that he sees our fallibility without being undone. He sees that we are the sort of creatures who make claims that won't function forever. And he affirms both our capacity to form general views, and to live by particulars. When Emerson fights himself, he is giving us a glimpse of what our lives may look like with closer analysis—a glimpse of how we can work through our inborn strife. Or, to use Whitman's impactful words of affirmation (no matter how many motivational posters they find themselves on)—

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)²¹

Though we have disparate and contradictory tendencies, then, we can balance them by generalizing who we are—by saying we are not those separated faculties alone, but a whole containing those faculties. This, of course, is still followed by a word of caution: even though we can combine the world into a new, grander picture, we still must come down to earth and occasionally live by the particulars we sought to sublimate.

²¹ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Deathbed Edition (New York City, NY: Modern Library, n.d.), sect. 51, 73.

2 — Poetry and Philosophy: meaning and analysis

[2A]

Shall I count to two and explain the universe?
 I tell you, it's true!
 We can push and reverse the same day
 Over and over
 And find there are no words to say
 We can walk the night through
 Saying the things we did and didn't do
 And find ourselves when the night turns gray.

What was it which took us so long?
 Why silence at the break of dawn?
 I gesture towards the clouds,
 And all is as it should be, for you and me,
 The bird on the branch on the tree,
 And words, so full of life—
 Turning, I see you hunch over and cry.

The terms for discussing poetry (what *poetry* and related terms mean, and how we can say what they mean) deserve thorough consideration before analyzing how poetry relates to our highest and lowest experiences. Part of the difficulty is that the process of defining words is not entirely separable from poetry itself. Emerson says, “[T]he poet is the Namer, or Language-maker, naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, and giving to every one its own name and not another’s.”²² Importantly, this original naming is not the same as language in its worn-out state. Over time, poetic origins are lost, even though definitions may remain. This is captured well in “Beauty,” where Emerson says, “Our botany is all names, not powers,” later adding that ornithologists, without poetry, view birds like a “dull

²² Emerson, “The Poet,” 222.

dictionary.”²³ What is at stake, then, is the life of language—whether words carry their weight and potency.

[2B]

Importantly, the Poet is *not* the Definer. The Poet is “the Namer.” A key section of Plato’s *Phaedo* which Emerson quotes reads, “He shall be as a god to me, who can rightly divide and define.”²⁴ “This defining,” Emerson says, “is philosophy.”²⁵ From this, one might say that philosophy and poetry, working together, clarify and enliven language. While the philosopher orders words in a web of shared meaning, the poet sees their place and fills them. Elsewhere, though, Emerson complicates the tasks of the poet and the philosopher, saying, “The critic, the philosopher, is a failed poet”;²⁶ and that a “philosopher must be more than a philosopher.”²⁷ In this way, Emerson wants the tasks of sorting and enlivening language to merge, and he especially wants philosophy to take on more of the poetic.

This call for the poetic even leads Emerson to avoid giving philosophical sorts of definitions. He says, “I am warned by the ill-fate of many philosophers not to attempt a definition of Beauty.”²⁸ Instead, he elaborates on the associated qualities, simultaneously placing “Beauty” in relation to other words, and filling it with the feelings that give it meaning. What this reflects is another strain throughout Emerson’s work, which is a profound wariness surrounding language that seeks anything once-and-for-all. What is required, instead, is a sketch,

²³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Beauty,” in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. VI (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 150.

²⁴ See Plato, *Phaedo* In *Plato: Complete Works*, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 266b. Quoted from Emerson, “Plato; or, The Philosopher,” 300.

²⁵ Emerson, “Plato; or, The Philosopher,” 300.

²⁶ Emerson, “Poetry and Imagination,” 30.

²⁷ Emerson, “Plato; or, The Philosopher,” 298.

²⁸ Emerson, “Beauty,” 154.

a pointed finger, a gesture. As Packer says— “Words cannot embody truth, they can only suggest it.”²⁹ This is because, for Emerson, all is transitory. Our best attempts to capture experience and lasting truth fail. “We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight”;³⁰ we are headed downstream, having forgotten our beginnings. And part of those beginnings is the original poetry of language.

“For poetry was all written before time was,
and whenever we are so finely organized
that we can penetrate into that region
where the air is music, we hear those primal
warblings, and attempt to write them down,
but we lose ever and anon a word, or a verse,
and substitute something of our own”³¹

No matter how talented the poet, what appears to make a claim on infinity will fail, while the ability to make the claim remains. That is, the poet, full of inspiration strong enough to make dramatic claims of divine influence and harmony with the universe, feels what time reveals to be impossible: perfect accord. Through a poem’s isolation of a particular scene, the poet seeks to form a lasting order that relates the poem to the infinite, thereby grasping it. If fulfilled, this perfect accord would dissolve the barriers between language and meaning, reception and conveyance, and time of composition and time at large. Yet this feeling is fleeting, and though it reappears, it never achieves the perfect accord it promised.

This sentiment is captured in Emerson, but is also present in poems about poetry and discussions of poetry more generally. In Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” for instance, the

²⁹ Barbara L. Packer, *Emerson's Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1982), 193.

³⁰ Emerson, “Experience,” 234.

³¹ Emerson, “The Poet,” 216.

invigorating force of inspiration inside the poet is gone, his words “like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing.”³² He wishes for his words to “Scatter, as from an unextinguish’d hearth / Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!”³³ But that power does not last; it comes and goes like the seasons. Though the product of it may last longer (as Shelley’s poetry has over time) even that fades in its own season. The cycle keeps going, though, and even while in the throngs of despair, Shelley writes, “O wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?”³⁴ The poet seeks the invigorating power of poesis, which propels him to make impossible claims on infinity. Shelley writes elsewhere that, as soon as a poet inserts their views into a poem (something Emerson claims is inevitable), the poem loses its effect.³⁵ Lysaker quotes Celan to make a similar point: “For the poem is not timeless. Certainly, it raises a claim to the infinite, it seeks to grasp it through time—but through, not over and above it.”³⁶

Thus, while the philosopher must become part poet to participate in revitalizing language, the task will never reach fruition. This is less because of an inability to merge the linguistic tasks of poets and philosophers, and more because of a necessary separation from original language, which we only inherit in fragments.

³² Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ode to the West Wind,” in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2002), 298, line 3.

³³ Shelley, “Ode to the West Wind,” 301, lines 66-67.

³⁴ Shelley, “Ode to the West Wind,” 301, lines 69-70.

³⁵ Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry,” in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2002), 517.

³⁶ See Paul Celan, “Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen,” in *The Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2002), 396. Quoted from Lysaker, “Taking Emerson Personally,” 22.

[2C]

These fragments change, and meanings shift. From this process, the need to fill (refill) words with life renews. “The poet, by an ulterior intellectual perception, gives them a power which makes their old use forgotten”;³⁷ that is, they fill them, but never completely. The cycle repeats. In order to commence the renewal, new poetic philosophers, new Poets, must speak for their age. Each age requires a renewed effort. The question comes again: “Why should not we also enjoy an original relationship to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition?”³⁸ We need our poets and philosophers; our poets and philosophers cannot satisfy our need completely. We always await an arrival (awaiting, arriving).

The world is a process underway
 [worlding, processing,
 shot through with thoroughness],
 each word given by time, by time
 taken away.
 Do I plant my feet on the ground?
 This page makes it seem so;
 this effort at truth makes it seem so.
 But the pages I’ll write tomorrow!
 The leaves I’ll overturn!

I draw my letters with sticks in the sand
 so the waves may wash them away
 [waving, washing], so that they may wash
 me away
 and leave space for something better.

It is incumbent on us to take up this task, ordering and filling-out language as we are able. In this, we do what poets and philosophers do, and earn their titles. The philosophical poet

³⁷ Emerson, “The Poet,” 222.

³⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Barnes & Nobel, 2004), 9.

and the poetic philosopher are best positioned to define what they are; and, more than that, they must be the ones to do so. “Shakspeare is the only biographer of Shakspeare.”³⁹

There are, of course, always poets taking up this task. Just as the Shakespeares of the world have spoken for a time and place, there are now new poets speaking for the current era. In many ways, the new voices open space for more people in poetry than ever before. Jericho Brown, for instance, both pushes a voice specific to his background as a black, queer man from the South, and to that great shared element that we all partake in (call it Being, the Over-Soul, or whatever you like). In “Duplex: Cento” he demonstrates an original form going by the same name:

A poem is a gesture toward home.
It makes dark demands I call my own.

Memory makes demands darker than my own:
My last love drove a burgundy car.

My first love drove a burgundy car.
He was fast and awful, tall as my father.

Steadfast and awful, my tall father
Hit hard as a hailstorm. He'd leave marks.

Light rain hits easy but leaves its own mark
Like the sound of a mother weeping again.

Like the sound of my mother weeping again,
No sound beating ends where it began.

None of the beaten end up how we began.
A poem is a gesture toward home.⁴⁰

³⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Shakspeare; or, The Poet” in *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Barnes & Nobel, 2004), 325.

⁴⁰ Jericho Brown, “Duplex: Cento,” in *The Tradition* (London: Picador, 2019), 72.

This form, constantly building upon its own meanings to a larger, shifted meaning of the first line, demonstrates the revisionist energy necessary for a poet to speak to a new time. Whether it is this form or something completely different, however, the point remains that poets, from more backgrounds than ever before, are speaking to something that can reach all of us.

Jericho Brown gives us one of many instances of the self-reflexive philosophical effort in poetry, both questioning what poetry is, and demonstrating, through images and associations, the power of his position. Both philosophical poets and poetic philosophers inherit this task of positioning us, of gesturing towards the world hidden behind each word. Insofar as they succeed in this task of repositioning us into a fuller picture of the world, they, like Shakespeare for Emerson, become their own biographers. They give us the closest thing we have to an account of how it was for them to live, of their values and perspectives. And to the degree they succeed at this, they give us the best account of how it is to live in general.

[2D]

Even the word *poetry* requires this positioning. It has different meanings throughout literature, ranging from a fixed form distinguishable by the intentionality of line breaks to a descriptor of anything that moves us (sometimes even sensually). “That meal last night was poetry,” we might say; or, “Those lines of Shelley were pure poetry.” In this way, we may employ the word “poetry” to describe things both inside and outside of what we loosely group under “poems” (according to line breaks, structure, and prosody more generally). But there is also the “capital P Poetry,” which may or may not apply to poems, and involves powers much higher than anything discrete can capture. Part of these differences rests in whether we want to focus on the effects of poems, then apply them to things beyond poetry, or would rather focus on the source of those effects, sticking closer to the poem’s unique characteristics. Both sides have

benefits and may be considered part of the larger meaning of poetry. The former method would call for an exploration of exactly what poetry can create in people and leave room for all sorts of writing techniques and methods, while the latter would call for a careful analysis of divisions between genres.

But perhaps these stringent methods of definition, put together, still miss something by avoiding the Emersonian view. They give a few more potential usages, yet the account still doesn't achieve felt meaning. Rather than demonstrating concepts and gesturing towards words' meanings, they go straight for a specific, analytical definition, and leave the power behind the word unfilled. In this way, even a definition proclaiming the power of demonstration in poetry can fail to exhibit what it defines.

[2E]

Poetry vs. poetry & The Poet vs. a poet:

Wait! The world awaits
 an opening
 and the poem's breath
 expands, oxygen,
 breath, breath

To sit and find it coming,
 drawing through,
 the world and me, ordered,
 the world, through me,
 to order and find
 a poem, through,
 and I, through
 a Poem

The various effects of poetry are so different in how they reach readers that it becomes difficult to find any guiding principles for how they function. But wherever the effect is found in

its fullest form—wherever the veil is lifted, the universe opened, the night ordered—mere *poetry* becomes *Poetry*. The power of Poetry is such that it can be likened to any of the extreme transformations found elsewhere. To give one example, Heidegger says, “Truth, as the clearing and concealing of that which is, happens through being poeticized. *All art*, as the letting happen of the advent of truth of beings, is, *in essence, poetry*.”⁴¹ Without going into Heidegger’s specific conception of poetry, which has surprising similarities with Emerson’s, suffice it to say that his use of “*poetry*” here signifies the larger power of *Poetry*, which goes beyond genre and opens a new world. This differs from Emerson in that it does not look for an essence shared by all humans; rather, it looks for a hole, out of which beginnings spring.⁴² He says, “The essence of art is poetry. The essence of poetry, however, is the founding [*Stifung*] of truth.”⁴³

Despite the differences between Emerson and Heidegger, they give way to similar analogies. When discussing Poetry, we are drawn to lifted veils and cleared mist, to unconcealment and improved sight. In this sense, Poetry is no longer constrained to poems, and is distinguishable from the exaggerated uses that, for instance, might call the effect of good food poetry.⁴⁴ When someone uses “poetry” in such a context, they are usually referring to a pleasure that goes beyond description, but that does not necessarily change how they see the world. Other artistic mediums, and even some that we typically think of as opposed to art *can*, however, create Poetry. Emerson writes that “every good reader will easily recall expressions or passages in

⁴¹ Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Off The Beaten Track* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 44.

⁴² John Lysaker helped distinguish the two by saying that, while Emerson focuses on the *whole*, Heidegger focuses on the *hole*.

⁴³ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 47.

⁴⁴ Food is not associated with a better, clearer understanding of the world—with a changed life—in the same way as mediums like painting and poetry.

works of pure science which have given him the same pleasure which he seeks in professed poets.”⁴⁵ Emerson, himself, occasionally references scientific writing in his own work.

“Then the new molecular philosophy shows astronomical interspaces
betwixt atom and atom, shows that the world is all outsider—
it has no inside”⁴⁶

But this shouldn’t diminish the power of poems, and especially poems, to create Poetry. Both *poetry* and *Poetry* can, and often do, come from poems. You’ll know such a poem when you can point to it; or, rather, you’ll know it when it changes how you point to everything else.

[2F]

Though no work can ever completely and permanently lift the veil, some poets are, have been, and will be more capable than others. These poets approach what Emerson calls The Poet, though they will never achieve it absolutely. Even Shakespeare, who Emerson calls “The Poet” in *Representative Men* does not fully earn his title. As a poet, he only approaches The Poet. He was, perhaps, representative of The Poet to some people in his time and many after, but nobody can fully achieve that aspiration. They put in something of their own that will not last through time—that will not even fully reach into Poetry in their own time—and fall short.

This may raise questions as to why we still discuss The Poet at all. The answer is that the ideal provides something poets can strive for and hold their upper limits against. It seeds the idea of a shared root to humanity—one that we can do our best to speak to, whatever particular avenues we take to get there. *The Poet* is thus an ideal we hold separate insofar as it implies a full shift in readers. Emerson expresses this sentiment by differentiating poets from “lyrists.”

⁴⁵ Emerson, “Poetry and Imagination,” 27.

⁴⁶ Emerson, “Experience,” 243.

Thinking of a conversation he had about a highly skilled contemporary writer, he says, “But when the question arose whether he was not only a lyrist but a poet, we were obliged to confess that he is plainly a contemporary, not an eternal man.”⁴⁷

If we could but express a single thing,
plainly spoken, spoken plain,
how we might rejoice a lifetime long!

If The Poet could sing to me,
sing in untapped, retapped harmony,
lighting the sun with the sun.

Then I might rest well at home,
come a kingdom, kingdom come,
and fill the lonesome parts of me.

[2G]

What is essential to this paper is that part of what poetry can do, even when reflecting on itself, is to shine light on how we live by uncovering how we occupy language. Treading the line between philosophy and poetry, the words we use to communicate with ourselves and one another are simultaneously ordered and filled out. In this way, language is revitalized. This task is especially true for poets approaching The Poet, who write poems that we might characterize as Poetry. Normal essay work cannot fully do this—it may define in the way philosophers define, though it risks ordering words into a “dull dictionary.” I will outline how The Poet can create highs in human experience next, and what those highs entail.

⁴⁷ Emerson, “The Poet,” 216.

3 — Human Highs: moving outside ourselves

[3A]

I've seen how it ends up
 Beneath the desk lamp
 Above the cloud above the sun
 Hidden to all except memory
 That which is nearest to me
 To which my blind eyes wend

I've read it in a book
 Stuck it to the wall with a tack
 Seen it covered in ash and soot
 Found love in farming words
 Though not in what was heard
 No, not in what was heard

But in what was felt that time
 Calling not in word, but rhyme
 All the world's relations, and mine,
 And how it all ends up
 From the bottom to the top
 The many and the one

Inside of us is the power, when stricken *just so*, to leap out of our finitude and into the open air. It seems like a contradiction at first: inside ourselves we have the power to be outside ourselves. But the contradiction is only a superficial one. Upon even a small amount of reflection, to be 'outside oneself' is to occupy oneself differently—to proceed *as if* one were outside of their limited perspective. In the moment, however, the state speaks louder than the push to reflection, and the *as if* is erased. Such is the power of our capacity for change and expansion. We can be different; we can grow larger than before. We can be so large, in fact—at least temporarily—as to claim connection to the universe and all its parts.

[3B]

In “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism,” John Dewey outlines how all experience is equally real, even though it varies in terms of factors like truth and actuality. Dewey hears something that frightens him, and upon inquiry finds that it is a shade tapping against a window. Even though the noise no longer scares him, the frightening nature of the initial noise, and the uncertainty leading to it, are both real.⁴⁸ If we apply Dewey’s notion of the “real” to poetry, we quickly see that poetry’s larger effects (Poetry) are *real* in that sense. Whatever might actually be the case, we really have such experiences: we read a poem alone in a dusty basement and our experience tells us we are in fresh mountain air, conversing with all of humanity; we lie on our deathbed, and a poem fills us with a feeling of immense strength. It remains the case that we breathe the dusty air, and our bodies fail us. Yet the feeling remains. And sometimes, that feeling speaks so strongly as to ward off all doubt.

In the opening to “The Over-Soul,” Emerson writes:

Our faith comes in moments; our vice is habitual. Yet there is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences. For this reason the argument which is always forthcoming to silence those who conceive extraordinary hopes of man, namely the appeal to experience, is for ever invalid and vain.⁴⁹

Here, the critique of arguments using experience complicates the Deweyan notion. The difficulty lies in their working with different meanings for the word “real” and for what falls into experience. Though it seems like a lot to rethink, for Dewey, those moments of faith are equally

⁴⁸ John Dewey, “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism,” in *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy: Essential Readings and Interpretive Essays*, ed. John J. Stuhr, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 456-457.

⁴⁹ Emerson, “The Over-Soul,” 186.

as real as the experiences that lead to doubt. Instead of attributing more reality, under Dewey's framework, we might say that there is more *truth* attributed to those moments of faith, and that is what makes the appeal to non-faith experiences "vain."

The importance of Dewey's work lies in the fact that it does not try to hold some experiences over others according to degrees of reality. Poetry takes us someplace we are not, but we still need grounds for saying that, according to experience, we *are* there, feeling those dramatic shifts. Though this may differ slightly from Emerson's notion, an understanding of the different word meanings that Dewey and Emerson work from allows both of them to say something compatible: that poetry really has transformative power.

[3C]

One good example of these points, taken together, is Wallace Stevens's "The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain." The first two couplets read:

There it was, word for word,
The poem that took the place of a mountain.

He breathed its oxygen,
Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.⁵⁰

Of course, the poem did not *actually* take the place of a mountain. It is essentially different in its composition, relating to the mountain only through the feeling it creates. Under any amount of scrutiny, the mountain will remain a mountain, while the poem will fall back to being a poem. Yet the subject of the poem *really* has the experience of breathing the mountain air. The power of the moment is such that a denial of it misses the point—Poetry can create that transformation,

⁵⁰ Wallace Stevens, "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain," in *Collected Poetry & Prose* (New York, NY: Library of America, 2010), 453, lines 1-4.

as confirmed by real experience. For Emerson, these are moments of faith, by which he means glimpses of (connections with) the Over-Soul.

“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.”⁵¹

These moments of connection hold so much sway that they complicate our perception of time and space. They demand some degree of power over the ages, and fight against the pervasive shrinking effect of everyday life. They are a part of life that demands acknowledgment that they are larger than any particular life. Hence the comparison to Heidegger in Chapter 2: Poetry takes us into a space beyond particular beings. Though this space is essentially different for Heidegger and Emerson, both recognize that poetry is penetrating something vital to our existence.

[3D]

To the degree that a work propels us towards the Over-Soul, that it opens worlds, it is modern. A Poem, in the largest and impossible sense, is always and forever modern, maintaining its full capacity to transform us in such a way that we grasp our deepest roots. Speaking of Plato’s long-term impact, Emerson says, “This perpetual modernness is the measure of merit in every work of art.”⁵² Speaking of Saadi, he similarly says, “Through his Persian dialect he speaks to all nations, and, like Homer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Montaigne, is perpetually

⁵¹ Emerson, “The Over-Soul,” 187.

⁵² Emerson, “Plato; or, The Philosopher,” 298.

modern.”⁵³ In this way, Emerson attributes longevity and breadth to great art. Because it speaks to that which we all share, regardless of both our particularities and the particularities of its delivery, it goes beyond temporary ethics or social rights and wrongs. It goes beyond changes in technology or spousal relations. It even goes, to some degree, beyond language itself, reaching that permanent part within us, though its method of delivery is undeniably still a product of language.

“give us a strain of poetry...
and we are refreshed;

produce a volume of Plato, or Shakspeare...
and instantly we come into a feeling of longevity”⁵⁴

Though the people who write these lines will undeniably fade—by dying and by their natural placement within history—their work is better positioned to stand the test of time. Emerson’s *Representative Men* contains many such people, like Plato, who is still taught in every undergraduate philosophy program; Montaigne, who is less frequently read but nonetheless still has academic scholarship and articles written about him;⁵⁵ Shakespeare, who remains on the high school required reading list; and Napoleon, who still looms as a figure representative of the European conqueror’s mentality to this day. To a lesser extent, Goethe still exists in academic circles, and Swedenborg in few if any. The choice of names is less important, however, than the idea that their work remains powerful for a wide array of people. Whether we stick to Emerson’s

⁵³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Saadi,” in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. X (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 442. Of course, some things are lost in translation, but not to the point of obscurity.

⁵⁴ Emerson, “The Over-Soul,” 189.

⁵⁵ For more on Montaigne’s continued relevance, see Adam Gopnik, “Montaigne On Trial,” *The New Yorker*, January 9, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/16/montaigne-on-trial>.

favorites or add in the Sapphos, the Lao Tzus, and the Omar Khayaams of the world, we see that certain author's works stick around for more time than their contemporaries.⁵⁶

Take the famous poem, "Westron Wynde," imprecisely dated as Medieval English:

Westron wynde when wyll thow blow
 the smalle rayne downe can Rayne
 Cryst yf my love were in my Armys
 And I yn my bed Agayne.⁵⁷

While the poem's language—particularly the spelling—makes it feel dated, there is still a trace of something modern in the poem. It speaks beyond its time to the feeling of separation from loved ones, to time spent away from home. Without a doubt, the original author of these lines—if it was even a single person—was of their times. Yet the lines speak into the present and will continue to until the unlikely event that we never have to be away from home or loved ones again.

We might compare this to the Osage poem, "Song of Speaks-Fluently," which has a similar timelessness about it. Introducing it in "Twenty Poems That Could Save America," Tony Hoagland sounds a lot like Emerson, saying, "Poems, some more than others, are songs, passed down through time. It is amazing how far and how long they can travel and still remain fresh."⁵⁸

The poem reads:

To have to carry your own corn far —
 who likes it?

⁵⁶ While all of the "representative men," except perhaps Plato, are Western men, it is worth noting that Emerson read widely and frequently quoted many authors outside of older conceptions of the Western canon.

⁵⁷ Oldest known printed version of the poem, retrieved from Charles Frey, "Interpreting 'Western Wind,'" *ELH* 43, no. 3 (1976): 259, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2872415>.

⁵⁸ Tony Hoagland, "Twenty Little Poems That Could Save America," *Harper's Magazine*, July 18, 2013, <https://harpers.org/2013/04/twenty-little-poems-that-could-save-america/>.

To follow the black bear through the thicket —
 who likes it?
 To hunt without profit, to return without anything —
 who likes it?
 You have to carry your own corn far.
 You have to follow the black bear.
 You have to hunt without profit.
 If not, what will you tell the little ones? What
 will you speak of?
 For it is bad not to use the talk which God has sent us.
 I am Speaks-Fluently. Of all the groups of symbols,
 I am a symbol by myself.⁵⁹

Both “Westron Wynde” and “Song of Speaks-Fluently” create their modernness with simple poetic techniques and intimately human topics. They force us to reach beyond the moment and into a shared part of who we are throughout human history, both in how we convey emotion through language, and in the similitude of those emotions. But the force of these poems is not simply in the fact that we share emotions with the author, or that language has persistent elements. In “Westron Wynde,” rhyme, alliteration, and assonance are at play, while in “Song of Speaks-Fluently,” alliteration and repetition stand out. But whatever the techniques, their power is there. It would require a great deal of hubris for someone to attempt to edit these poems into something better. Excepting artists like El Greco, who wished to repaint Michelangelo’s “The Last Judgment,”⁶⁰ the poems defy the editorial eye—they are written *just so*. The conclusion: there are many paths by which poems approach Poetry.

⁵⁹ Osage poem by Speaks-Fluently, entitled “Song of Speaks-Fluently,” retrieved from Hoagland, “Twenty Little Poems That Could Save America.”

⁶⁰ See Jo Ann Lewis, “El Greco of Toledo,” *The Washington Post* (WP Company, June 27, 1982), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/magazine/1982/06/27/el-greco-of-toledo/bbced546-6729-4a02-a407-0895cfa7fc6c/>.

[3E]

Poetry can take on many different forms, working from many different sorts of harmonies. Some of them may even use purposeful dissonance. Yet there is a link between the most dissonant Poetry and the most harmonic. For Emerson, it is the union of nature and thought through language:

The imagination wakened brings its own language, and that is always musical. It may or may not have rhyme or a fixed metre; but it will always have its special music or tone...Poems may please by their talent and ingenuity; but, when they charm us, it is because they have this quality, for this is the union of nature with thought.⁶¹

This conception of Poetry has a peculiar balance. Every word must be exactly right, yet there is no fixed path to a successful Poem. Two poems could be radically different, yet still work to the same larger effect. “Westron Wynde” and “The Song of Speaks-Fluently,” for instance, have appreciably different prosodies, yet both leave the reader with an indelible mark.

Because of this, precise guidelines for poetry become near-unfathomable. Rather, the only guidelines that can be given are loose and deal mostly with the effect. “The great poets,” Emerson says, “are judged by the frame of mind they induce.”⁶² He also writes that poetry “must be its own end, or it is nothing,” and that in the best poetry (Poetry), “the sense dictates the rhythm,” rather than a rhythm being forced upon the sense.⁶³

⁶¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, preface to *Parnassus* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), x-xi.

⁶² Emerson, preface to *Parnassus*, iv.

⁶³ Emerson, “Poetry and Imagination,” 29.

[3F]

Here, the literary critic Cleanth Brooks does a good job of seeking out what, at poetry's core, makes it work. After analyzing ten well-known poems, he questions what makes very different poems manage to have a strong impact. Rather than discussing meter, rhyme, or repetition specifically, he subordinates technique to the structured attitude it creates: "the apparent irrelevancies which metrical pattern and metaphor introduce do become relevant when we realize that they function in a good poem to modify, qualify, and develop the total attitude which we are to take."⁶⁴ In this way, the degree to which a poem becomes Poetry is connected to the strength of the total attitude formed, and not the techniques used to get there. We may, for instance, easily analyze how the repetition in "Song of Speaks-Fluently" drives home the cycle of daily burdens that we must persist through, though this is only important insofar as it contributes to the poem's effect on the reader—for Brooks, the total attitude they, for a time, take. Whether we focus on the total attitude, positioning, or some other word for the state we take away, what is most important is that all techniques are subordinated to it.

Another one of Brooks's main points in the chapter, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," is that poems escape paraphrase—they refuse to be explained or reduced (an inevitability in explanation) on any terms but their own. He says, "[M]ost of our difficulties in criticism are rooted in the heresy of paraphrase. If we allow ourselves to be misled by it, we distort the relation of the poem to its 'truth'."⁶⁵ In referring to the poem's "truth," Brooks is working from the view that poetry opens something which is true in a way we can't paraphrase. It is not like a math theorem, which may be explained verbally or with dry logic. Rather, it is specific to poetry,

⁶⁴ Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1975), 209.

⁶⁵ Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn*, 201.

and perhaps other art, remaining inexplicable in non-artistic forms. This conception of truth, which is not restricted to semantic and grammatical content alone, finds a friend in Emerson, who views truth as something often left to the intuition of a well-balanced mind.

“We know truth when we see it, from opinion,
as we know when we are awake that we are awake.”⁶⁶

Just as Poetry defies guidelines and explanations, the receptivity of the poem’s ‘truth’ relies on a similar leap within the reader. This leap does not take place so much through careful consideration as through a well-balanced ability to receive. In taking in Poetry, the ideally-balanced reader—were such a thing possible—would receive the poem’s full effect, and therefore its full “truth” upon the first reading. The unique truth present in poetry only admits so much reflective analysis, meaning that the reader needs to be positioned correctly before reading the poem. Just as a piece of art may at one time feel dry and dead, and a decade later burst with life—or the reverse—the context of a reading changes the reception. To the extent that a poem reaches *Poetry*, the possible dispositions one may have when entering the poem expands, such that more people, over more time, may receive the poem’s “truth.” When positioned well enough for this to occur, Poetry can create experiences which, in the moment, and sometimes long after, speak to us as truer than the rest of our experience.

[3G]

The power of poetry to alter one’s world is well-exemplified by poems ending in imperatives. This is not to say that imperatives, as a technique, are somehow better than other techniques. Rather, they are better suited for demonstrating the shift created by the poem both

⁶⁶ Emerson, “The Over-Soul,” 192.

inside and outside of the text. In these instances, the poem does not simply end with an insular thought or idea—it reaches outside of the poem and to the reader. It directly mediates a transition that already must take place—the switch from departing the poem to arriving in the world.

If we're to follow Brooks's line of thinking, we'd say that when we depart from a good poem, we take on the poem's total attitude and carry it with us into the world. Though the terminology of *total attitude* is less important, the real point of emphasis is on some sort of disposition change.⁶⁷ By disposition, I mean a state prompting us towards certain actions as we arrive back in the world.

One of many examples of this transition through imperatives is Robert Frost's "The Pasture":

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
I sha'n't be gone long.—You come too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf
That's standing by the mother. It's so young,
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
I sha'n't be gone long.—You come too.⁶⁸

Found at the start of *North of Boston*, the poem propels the reader into a more open reading of his other poetry. "You come too" both welcomes us to join, and as an imperative, tells us to join. We are not just filled with the pleasant images of farm labor—we are beckoned into them. Even though we don't *actually* go out into the pasture, the altered disposition, as discussed through

⁶⁷ John Lysaker recommended the term *bearing*, as opposed to "total attitude," due to its many applicable meanings. This seems like a better term than Brooks's, though the point remains.

⁶⁸ Robert Frost, "The Pasture," in *North of Boston*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1924), 8.

Dewey's conception of experience, is no less real to the reader. In fact, the disposition, insofar as it mediates action, becomes an agent of change in our shared material world.

The power of poetry to move us in this way is captured well by another poem—Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo"—which also ends in an imperative. The poem's subject observes an old Greek sculpture before entering a second-person address. By going to the second person, Rilke creates room for an imperative that is simultaneously representative of the sculpture's effect on the subject, and the poem's effect on the reader. Famously, it reads, "for here there is no place / that does not see you. You must change your life."⁶⁹ This is what Poetry does in a microcosm: it tells us to no longer live the way we've been living. We've opened a world, we've taken on a new total attitude, we've had an experience pervaded with truth, we've stood "before the secret of the world," so our lives cannot be the same.⁷⁰ We must change them.

[3H]

Unlike the aforementioned provocative uses of imperatives to facilitate a transition into the real world, language that reroutes us back into our lowest experiences fails to take us anywhere. Just as there is a "heresy of paraphrase," there is a broader heresy of undemonstrative analysis. The question is, how can we talk about Poetry, about the limits of human experience? To some extent, we can't. Capital-P Poems have a way of pushing beyond whatever limits we may feign. They have their own truth content—one that is real and felt, though not in a purely semantic or grammatical way. But to some extent, we also can. We can, for instance, proceed with technical analyses so long as they are subordinated to something larger, as Brooks suggests.

⁶⁹ Rainer Maria Rilke, "Archaic Torso of Apollo," Poets.org (Academy of American Poets), accessed September 2022, lines 13-14, <https://poets.org/poem/archaic-torso-apollo>.

⁷⁰ Emerson, "The Poet," 219.

We can also work with poetry in its own language—we can adopt poetic techniques with the uncertain hope for poetic effects. At one level, these techniques are groupable into traditional prosodies. At another level, those reaching for our highest experiences involve techniques like affirmation in the face of criticism or a certain extravagance with full knowledge of the eventual fall. Emerson says, “And so, throughout, the poet affirms the laws; prose busies itself with exceptions,—with the local and individual.”⁷¹ In this way, writing that does not fit the genre of poetry may be poetic insofar as it adopts important aspects of the genre, such as persistent affirmation.

[31]

We cannot be content, in searching for our upper limits, with the critical nature of prose, with a dry record of facts and a dryer attempt to tear down even the poetry there. This may serve a purpose somewhere, but not in grasping our ecstasies. For that lofty goal, we need something larger:

In poetry we say we require the miracle. The bee flies among the flowers, and gets mint and marjoram, and generates a new product, which is not mint and marjoram, but honey;...the poet listens to conversation, and beholds all objects in nature, to give back, not them, but a new and transcendent whole.⁷²

Any reader of poetry should know that it will not be the dry line which finally takes hold of them at the end of the day. Those may dominate them for most of their lives, but a fresh couple of lines can change their world. Packer rightly says, “This perpetual upward striving or ‘excess of life’ is the quality ‘which in conscious beings we call *ecstasy*’ and suggests how poetry is to be

⁷¹ Emerson, “Poetry and Imagination,” 17.

⁷² Emerson, “Poetry and Imagination,” 8.

written.”⁷³ The idea that an ecstatically written line produces a similarly ecstatic reading is often true in poetry, but also in philosophy, in science, and in simple conversation. We can read Poetry in the places we least expect it, and find our lives changed for the better. The thought is enough to break out into song.

Tonight I drink of the eternal,
That which refuses to be named
But publishes itself again and again

Tonight the air is cleaner
It is clearer than before,
The full moon exploding itself into the night sky

Should I stop and wonder why
The world smiles at me,
Stand agog, gawking at my ecstasy?

Should I stop and thank the tapping birches,
See what night creature there perches,
And record it in a bedside book?

No word could ever disclose
What the soul comes to know,
And what I try to name is never mine

Yet somehow a light is contained in me
And refuses to wait for reflection—
Here and now, all is recollected:

There is no light shined outside,
There is no truth which isn't gleaned,
Only tonight and me (a slip of the veil)

⁷³ Packer, *Emerson's Fall*, 192.

4 — Human Lows: staying inside ourselves

[4A]

“We have such exorbitant eyes
that on seeing the smallest arc,
we complete the curve,
and when the curtain is lifted
from the diagram which it seemed to veil,
we are vexed to find
that no more was drawn
than just that fragment of an arc
which we first beheld.”⁷⁴

Tidings (coming from *tídung*) and tide (coming from *tíd*) share a common Old English root of *tíð*, which roughly means “time.”⁷⁵ Just as high tide gives way to low tide, often leading boats aground, glad tidings give way to unwelcome tidings, meaning bad news. We cannot remain in the upper limits of human experience at all times, if we are even fortunate enough to spend some of our time there. Buell points out that “Emerson would dearly love to affirm unity and harmony of being, although he knows that lived experience usually refutes this.”⁷⁶

Deaths of loved ones permeated Emerson’s life and left a profound impact on his writing. When his first wife, Ellen Louisa Tucker, passed at the age of nineteen, he was so greatly impacted that he eventually resigned from his church and sailed to England.⁷⁷ Taken by great grief again after his son, Waldo, passed away, Emerson was forced to confront harsh realities once again, spurring him to write “Experience.”⁷⁸ The essay is understandably one of his heaviest. In the opening paragraph, he says, “Ghost-like we glide through nature, and should not

⁷⁴ Emerson, “Nominalist and Realist,” 267.

⁷⁵ “tíd,” in *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, Bosworth, Joseph, Thomas Northcote Toller, Christ Sean, and Ondřej Tichy, accessed December 2022, <https://bosworthtoller.com/30411>.

⁷⁶ Buell, *Emerson*, 208.

⁷⁷ Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, 5.

⁷⁸ Dan Chiasson, “Ecstasy of Influence,” *The New Yorker*, August 31, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/09/07/ecstasy-of-influence>.

know our place again.”⁷⁹ It is remarkable that this paragraph shows up right after his effusive essay, “The Poet,” in *Essays: Second Series*, which ends by saying that, for Poets, “there is Beauty, plenteous as rain, shed for thee, and though thou shouldst walk the world over, thou shalt not be able to find a condition inopportune or ignoble.”⁸⁰ It strains imagination to picture the same author writing both of these sentences and placing them only two pages apart in their book. Yet, as Packer says, “We are to go directly from the ejaculations of praise for the poet...to the exhaustion and depletion of the opening paragraphs of ‘Experience’.”⁸¹

[4B]

The new depleted states that Packer mentions are just as real, and even more persistent than those brought about by (through) Poetry. Following the same Deweyan framework that I presented in Chapter 3, where all experiences are on an even playing field with regard to *realness*, we must make room for the monotony of everyday life to stand just as strong.

Yes, there was also that day our blood ran thick and fervent. We could not sleep. We could not sleep and who would’ve wanted to? But that was one day. And it was not the first day or even the hundredth. So long spent walking Purgatory. So long. Did you know, between the sweet sensation of love once had, and had again, there lie a circular track we cannot depart? Did you know? That each and every day, we try to build, only to lay flat—

Though the monotony may speak to us with less truth, or less emotion, it speaks nonetheless, and its message is persistently disheartening. Emerson says, “So much of our time is

⁷⁹ Emerson, “Experience,” 235.

⁸⁰ Emerson, “The Poet,” 233.

⁸¹ Packer, *Emerson's Fall*, 197.

preparation, so much is routine, and so much retrospect, that the pith of each man's genius contracts itself to a very few hours."⁸² Elsewhere, William James, who in his talk to students twice quotes Emerson, expresses a similar sentiment, temporarily tearing down the preoccupations of poets and artists:

Yet so blind and dead does the clamor of our own practical interests make us to all other things, that it seems almost as if it were necessary to become worthless as a practical being, if one is to hope to attain to any breadth of insight into the impersonal world of worths as such, to have any perception of life's meaning on a large objective scale. Only your mystic, your dreamer, or your insolvent tramp or loafer, can afford so sympathetic an occupation...⁸³

We are hardly able to make time for the highs of human experience. Sometimes we go so long without them that it is a wonder we ever had them.

[4C]

In Dewey's philosophy, he outlines the difference between *experience*, which is simply the continuous result of an organism existing in its environment, and *an experience*, which is marked off from the continuous chain of experience as having its own pattern, structure, and resolution. All distinct experiences are separable insofar as they possess these organized structures—insofar as they have an aesthetic quality.⁸⁴ It is no surprise, then, that while so much

⁸² Emerson, "Experience," 235.

⁸³ William James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," in *Talks To Teachers On Psychology; And To Students On Some Of Life's Ideals* (Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY, 1925; Project Gutenberg, 2005), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/16287/16287-8.txt>.

⁸⁴ John Dewey, "The Live Creature and Aesthetic Experience," in *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy: Essential Readings and Interpretive Essays*, ed. John J. Stuhr, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 521.

of our life is spent on daily tasks, we have a preference in our memory for the infrequent experiences that carry more aesthetic weight. These memories can be good or bad, and may or may not come from art, but they are the ones that stick with us.⁸⁵

The other side of this fact, though, is that most of our lives—which either have more minor aesthetic qualities or do not create *an experience* at all—are spent in unremarkable states.

“We do not know to-day whether we are busy or idle...
our days are so unprofitable while they pass,

that 't is wonderful where or when we ever got anything...
We never got it on any dated calendar day.”⁸⁶

It takes little reflection before the precedence given to the highs seems unrepresentative of how we live. We may even wonder whether what we thought was so powerful actually contained that power, or if it was all mere fantasy.

[4D]

Experiences like those brought about by Poetry are hard to capture, but it is no longer because they take us so far beyond our limits (as was outlined in Chapter 3). Rather, we are so limited in our capacities that any meaningful analysis of who we are comes with a built-in set of failures. The very necessity of perspective to have an experience carries with it the impossibility of another perspective. Emerson says, “Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue.”⁸⁷

William James expresses a similar sentiment:

⁸⁵ Overwhelming emotions, however, are linked to less of an aesthetic quality. Hence, the answer isn't to seek out extremes. See Dewey, “The Live Creature and Aesthetic Experience,” 525.

⁸⁶ Emerson, “Experience,” 235.

⁸⁷ Emerson, “Experience,” 237.

We are practical beings, each of us with limited functions and duties to perform. Each is bound to feel intensely the importance of his own duties and the significance of the situations that call these forth. But this feeling is in each of us a vital secret, for sympathy with which we vainly look to others.⁸⁸

We are irredeemably caught up in ourselves and the best we can do is to remedy it, slowly and steadily, though we know there is no complete fix. James goes on to talk about the natural tendency of some humans to find immense power in the smallest things, such as Whitman's ability to see poetic matter in the Brooklyn Ferry—but he admits that, for the vast majority of people, this simply doesn't apply.⁸⁹ We are so thoroughly caught up in our own worlds and interests that we can't tap into the small beauties which surround us.

In this state, it becomes a wonder whether the beauty ever existed at all. In "Beauty," Emerson says, "The new virtue which constitutes a thing beautiful, is a certain cosmical quality, or, a power to suggest relation to the whole world, and so lift the object out of a pitiful individuality."⁹⁰ But in "Experience," he previously said that, by and large, we keep the pitiful individuality, and in some respects, necessarily.

at the bottom of a hill, falling
deeper, taken
deeper, into the mist,
my mist, blue now,
green, and yellow mist,
and split
off
from the hill.

a hand, reaching, a hand
from it all
seeking to grasp

⁸⁸ James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings."

⁸⁹ James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings."

⁹⁰ Emerson, "Beauty," 161-2.

to touch
 its-space-between to your-
 space-between
 the air and the sky
 the daylight and the sun,
 to grasp, for once,
 to grasp and hold,
 a word
 any word, and you,
 another word
 apart

As much as we seek to jump outside of ourselves, to push the world into a new unity, we constantly confront our limitations: “I am a fragment, and this is a fragment of me.”⁹¹ We step outside our home and, across the street, see the container that held us, only to find a new, larger one surrounding us.

[4E]

It is no wonder that Montaigne, who Emerson labels “the Skeptic,” is the person whom he considers “the frankest and honestest of all writers.”⁹² Referring to his famous *Essais*, Emerson says, “It seemed to me as if I had myself written the book in some former life, so sincerely it spoke to my thought and experience.”⁹³ Importantly, what spoke to Emerson’s experience is a skeptical account of the world, full of self-containment and constant consideration. Rather than the ejaculatory nature of “The Poet,” which seeks something thought strains to grasp, we have the inward looking, we have a dedication to a philosophy “of fluxions and mobility.”⁹⁴ From this outlook, there are no reliable constants that we can fully latch onto.

⁹¹ Emerson, “Experience,” 252.

⁹² Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Montaigne, or the Skeptic,” in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 93.

⁹³ Emerson, “Montaigne, or the Skeptic,” 92.

⁹⁴ Emerson, “Montaigne, or the Skeptic,” 91.

Even if something seems permanent now, it is likely to fail us in the future. Yet we still seek full belief, even as the briefest of considerations reveals the folly.

“There is not a piece of science
but its flank may be turned to-morrow...
not the so-called eternal names of fame,
that may not be revised and condemned.”⁹⁵

“A man of thought must feel the thought
that is parent of the universe:
that the masses of nature do
undulate and flow.”⁹⁶

In a similar vein as Lysaker, Lawrence Buell picks up how Emerson’s writing style reflects this uncertainty and provokes us accordingly. He says that Emerson likes to leave room for his readers and listeners to finish what he only gestures at, and accordingly “favors an antisystematic kind of writing: an aesthetic of the suggestive fragment.”⁹⁷ What this opens is, rather than a move back to analytical philosophical writing, a style that works within the limitations of human experience. Emerson’s “Experience” and many of his other essays are themselves emblematic of a sometimes-disjointed style focused on provocative fragments rather than the clear, mathematical presentation of an idea. Just as discussion of “The Poet” demands verse, “Experience” demands a verse of its own—albeit very different.

[4F]

It is worth noting that what we today think of as writing fitting this description would not have even been around in Emerson’s time. Though he served as an inspiration to many later

⁹⁵ Emerson, “Circles,” 205.

⁹⁶ Emerson, “Montaigne, or the Skeptic,” 103.

⁹⁷ Buell, *Emerson*, 312.

writers, Emerson never read Modernist poetry. And were we to engage in some sort of counterfactual history, any judgment of whether Emerson would've liked later poets would only be uneasy speculation.

When Whitman, who strongly influenced Modern poetry, used a laudatory letter from Emerson as evidence of his praise for *Leaves of Grass*, he left Emerson in an awkward position whereby he couldn't give his more considered view without appearing ridiculous.⁹⁸ Whitman, often considered "America's Poet," is noticeably absent from Emerson's works. He would frequently mention, and even wrote a eulogy which later became an essay on his disciple, not-so-disciple Thoreau. He riddled his essays with excerpts from poets like Carlyle, Wordsworth, and Vyasa.⁹⁹ He even wrote an essay entitled "Persian Poetry," and one specifically on Saadi. But the poet most associated with a switch in American poetry, Whitman, received no such treatment. Thus, when we're looking for poetry appropriate to the transitory sort of metaphysics seen in Emerson's "Experience," it would be wise to occasionally depart from Emerson's favorites, even though his favorites are still capable of doing some of the same work.¹⁰⁰

[4G]

That said, the style of writing that "Experience" demands shouldn't be restricted by the images immediately conjured up by Buell's use of the term "fragment."¹⁰¹ Fragmented writing may be one way of writing through human lows, though there are many other ways of proceeding from a limited perspective. What exactly this entails isn't clear, though at the

⁹⁸ Jerome Loving, "'A Well-Intended Halfness': Emerson's View of 'Leaves of Grass,'" *Studies in American Humor* 3, no. 2 (1976), 61.

⁹⁹ Vyasa is the traditionally accredited author of the *Mahabharata* and compiler of the *Vedas*.

¹⁰⁰ For Emerson's favorites, see his edited collection: Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Parnassus* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970).

¹⁰¹ Buell, *Emerson*, 312.

baseline it must involve a *working through*. It is not enough to let oneself run off in praise of traditional verse or prose. Our relations, the language we use to express those relations, and who we are to analyze it all, must be topics within writing. This is not to say that more traditional prosodies are bad in their own right—rather, they are called into question when we wish to proceed from an outlook informed by human lows.

Similarly to Chapter 3, we run into difficulties analyzing poetry according to typical metrics alone. We still wish to achieve some sort of attitude, outlook, or disposition from poetry, and the metrics we use to assess it are subordinate. The quote from Cleanth Brooks still applies: “the apparent irrelevancies which metrical pattern and metaphor introduce do become relevant when we realize that they function in a good poem to modify, qualify, and develop the total attitude which we are to take.”¹⁰² But now these subordinate features require more attention, given that we are looking for ways to work through a monotonous or troubled state. An appropriate characterization of poetry fitting the language of Emerson’s “Experience” would be something like the last stanza of Robert Frost’s “The Lesson for Today”:

I hold your doctrine of Memento Mori.
And were an epitaph to be my story
I’d have a short one ready for my own.
I would have written of me on my stone:
I had a lover’s quarrel with the world.¹⁰³

Though Frost is admittedly less radical, and less at the boundary of how we relate to our own language than poets like Celan, Césaire, or even other Modernists, he demonstrates here how less

¹⁰² Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn*, 209.

¹⁰³ Robert Frost, “The Lesson for Today,” in *The Poems of Robert Frost* (New York, NY: Modern Library, 1946), 408.

experimental poetry can still help us work through our lows. Whatever the prosody, the attitude in Frost's poem comes from an outlook which takes into account enduring human strife.

In the poem, the speaker enters a debate of whether his time or a long-passed poet's time is worse: "Let's celebrate the event, my distant friend, / In publicly disputing which is worse, / The present age or your age."¹⁰⁴ Going through the similar maladies present across the ages, the titular line of the poem says, "O paladins, the lesson for today / Is how to be unhappy yet polite."¹⁰⁵ Frost does not forget, however, that the poet does wish to do something with human lows when they write. Though dark, he says, "There's nothing but injustice to be had, / No choice is left a poet, you might add, / But how to take the curse, tragic or comic."¹⁰⁶ What's important here is that all attempts to create an appropriate aesthetics for human lows are also attempts to move away from them.

[4H]

The very process of putting lows into art is an act seeking some sort of transformation. Whatever way we poeticize a bad or unremarkable experience, there is a degree of pleasure in the art. This is true of even the densest, most challenging poetry. As Adorno says in "Commitment," "[P]leasure can never be completely ignored in the total aesthetic effect, no matter how relentless the work."¹⁰⁷ To a lesser extent, we may apply this out to *all* forms of writing and communication, which are decidedly apart from what they seek to represent.

¹⁰⁴ Frost, "The Lesson for Today," 404.

¹⁰⁵ Frost, "The Lesson for Today," 404.

¹⁰⁶ Frost, "The Lesson for Today," 405.

¹⁰⁷ Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," (*New Left Review*, 1974), 88, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/i87/articles/theodor-adorno-commitment>.

This apartness is both a temporal separation from initial experiences, and a difference in outlook insofar as writing and communication form a degree of separation from the experience. The temporal separation has been established by many different philosophers, and is true both intuitively and upon reflection. One among many, William James writes, “The instant field of the present is always experience in its ‘pure’ state, plain unqualified actuality, a simple *that*, as yet undifferentiated into thing and thought.”¹⁰⁸ Communication, having to pass through this undifferentiated state to express concepts, always must occur *after the fact*. The difference in outlook is between remaining in the state you are currently in without any will to seek something else, and the effort outlined in Frost’s poem—the willingness to have a “lover’s quarrel with the world.”

[4I]

In a way, then, the subject-matter of “Experience”—the monotony of our lives—is already something outside of the aims of writing. Writing, and especially verse, takes us out of the monotony of everyday life. The closest equivalents would be the sorts of writing that don’t provide what Dewey calls *an experience*—that is, writing with a low aesthetic quality. Nonsensical daily news about animals, for instance, may tug at our emotions, but not enough to make it into our memories just minutes later. Many conversations, too, are less memorable than others, leaving nothing important enough to stick with us. Hence sayings like “shooting the breeze” and “shooting the bull.” But as soon as the persistent lack of meaning in our lives, the incessant confrontation with our limitations, is reflected upon in a way that *works through* it, we

¹⁰⁸ William James, “A World of Pure Experience,” in *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy: Essential Readings and Interpretive Essays*, ed. John J. Stuhr, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 189.

push towards writing that has an aesthetic quality and subsequently lacks similarity to the circumstances “Experience” reflects upon.

In the essay, Emerson constantly pushes against himself, albeit in infrequent spurts and fragments. As Richardson says of Emerson, “The brio with which he writes about routine gives even complaint a lively energy.”¹⁰⁹ Whereas his earlier reflection on how we spend our days emphasized the tediousness of life, he later says, “It takes a good deal of time to eat or to sleep, or to earn a hundred dollars, and a very little time to entertain a hope and an insight which becomes the light of our life.”¹¹⁰ What was more negative, through the effort of *working through* in the essay, adds the positive potential present in small moments. Even a meditation that doesn’t depart from negative states may have a similar effect on the reader, however, insofar as it provokes them into working through their own problems. This may occur in many ways, such as through questioning whether things are as bad as they’ve been presented, or seeing what is good through contrast.

“Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end
of illusion.” “There is no power of expansion in men.”
“They stand on the brink of the ocean of thought and power,
but they never take the single step that would bring them there.”

“But what help from these fineries or pedantries? What help
from thought? Life is not dialectics.”¹¹¹

Emerson calls for people to stake their claim to the present, and in doing so, to fill their life with less of the cyclically dreary thoughts, even as they claim the circumstances that provided them. He says that “we should not postpone and refer and wish, but do broad justice where we are, by

¹⁰⁹ Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, 401.

¹¹⁰ Emerson, “Experience,” 253.

¹¹¹ Emerson, “Experience,” 237, 240, 240, and 240 respectively.

whomsoever we deal with.”¹¹² As an alternative to writing and thinking one’s way through their conditions—both of which are on display in the essay—Emerson also encourages work and activity. He says, “To fill the hour,—that is happiness; to fill the hour and leave no crevice for a repentance or an approval.”¹¹³ Though a dreary recommendation, it represents what *working through* may look like outside of poetic influence.

[4J]

What we arrive at, then, is a simultaneous call for poetry that takes into account the wearisome parts of our lives, pushing us *through* our difficulties rather than ignoring or sticking inside them; and for a more thorough and active engagement with the present. The former may take on many different forms and, aside from poetry, happen through many different mediums. Emerson’s essays are exemplary of this effort; but we may also see it in writing as disparate as Robert Frost and Paul Celan. Should these efforts fail, however—in fact, should they fail or succeed—any lasting transformation will require the application of new perspectives to our present lives through everyday activity. And behind all of these positive applications of new perspectives, there will forever remain, nonetheless, the monotony which takes up most of our time.

Just as “The Poet” leads directly into “Experience” in *Essays: Second Series*, “Experience” leads to art that works through—art that becomes Poetry. No matter how long we linger in one state, the potential for the other remains. The trick is getting out of the lows and into the highs even though the lows seem to take up so much of our time. And, further, it is

¹¹² Emerson, “Experience,” 242.

¹¹³ Emerson, “Experience,” 241.

finding those long-lasting shifts in perspective that usher us into many new improvements, occurring like centuries, days, and hours—one after another.

5 — Self-Improvement: where poetry can take us

[5A]

Than anytime before
 More, better
 When different, somehow
 Than anytime before
 Birds like, leaves like, water like
 Drowning
 Than anytime before
 The levee broke, the bomb dropped down, the rumor
 More, better
 When hidden, somehow
 Bedridden, but breathing, and sleeping, getting
 Better, more so
 Than anytime before
 Richer, thicker, deeper in mind
 Unhidden like
 Owls in holes in trees, like moles poking out, like the first sliver of moon
 Promising more
 Than anytime before
 The first kiss, running faster
 Forward, whole, like
 Statues, like ideas, not like you, who
 Better, more now
 Since you, now flesh, now here, now you
 Arisen through words
 Richer, thicker, full of life
 More so, and more so, and more so
 Speaking, different, somehow, saying
 Trying here to say
 Better, you, like you better
 Than time, better you
 Than anytime before

There is a lesson we never learn for good, no matter how many times it's taught: we are capable of richer, fuller lives. We need frequent reminders—that the lows of human experience do not add up to nothing; that, everywhere, there is growth from our limitations. It is precisely because we cannot reach out and grasp eternal truth in a lasting way that we can also improve ourselves. There is no growth without fault, no correction without fallibility. What links

Emerson's writing is this constant push towards improvement, whatever state we are in. Though he often goes to our lows, he cannot resist the urge to push us towards something better.

In the same span of time where his son died and he wrote "Experience," Emerson also finished "The Poet." In his biography of Emerson, Richardson says, "Waldo's death may have permanently saddened Emerson by removing part of his capacity for hope, but the evidence of "The Poet" is that the loss of Waldo forced Emerson back into a kind of activity that heals."¹¹⁴ In Emerson's essay on Montaigne, he says, "Let a man learn to look for the permanent in the mutable and fleeting...though abyss open under abyss, and opinion displace opinion, all are at last contained in the eternal Cause."¹¹⁵ In other words, even in the darkest moments, there is a connection to something larger. With an orientation towards the "gods still sitting around" us,¹¹⁶ even when we cannot see them, there is a path out of the cyclical lows; there is a path to new knowledge, to an improved self.

What is so special about Emerson is that throughout his work, he keeps the highs and lows. He expresses both without dismissing either. Both have their standing in the course of our lives, so any philosophy which is to apply to human experiences lying even hours apart must cover similar breadths. It is not enough to be a skeptic or poet alone, so Emerson writes of Montaigne *and* Shakespeare; it is not enough to live by general or particular views alone, so Emerson engages both separately, and writes of them together in "Nominalist and Realist."

Importantly, in all these pursuits, Emerson is never idle. There is never a dead thought. When we are in a numbing stasis, he does what Lysaker says Emerson wanted from all writing—

¹¹⁴ Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, 375.

¹¹⁵ Emerson, "Montaigne, or the Skeptic," 105.

¹¹⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Illusions," in *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Barnes & Nobel, 2004), 414.

he provokes us.¹¹⁷ And when we are soaring to new heights, he still provokes us, but not to bring us down. The greatest thing we can ask of any philosophy, of any poetry, of any company, is that it improves us, from whatever state we are in. When we are too anxious or uncertain, we need new directions and perspectives to stabilize us; when we are too carefree and certain, we need a jolt that pushes us into deeper questioning. Great writing reaches us like a friend who suggests ways to improve, and recognizes that the way to that improvement isn't always criticism. It is in this push for improvement that the highs and lows, and the effort to write about them, reconcile themselves.

[5B]

Still far from “The Poet,” Emerson’s “Circles” takes a more positive view on our limitations—one that gives greater depth to the last line of “Experience” (“the true romance which the world exists to realize will be the transformation of genius into practical power”).¹¹⁸ Here, Emerson once again returns to our powers of expansion. Accordingly, the main point of “Circles,” if we’ll allow a brief engagement with “the heresy of paraphrase,” is this: though we constantly run into our limitations, we also confront them and grow through new generalizations. Each generalization is vulnerable to being overturned by a new one, yet it is in that process that we improve. Explaining why we read Emerson, Lysaker says, “[W]e keep the company we do...because it promises a deepened self-knowledge whose translation into practical power provides a life more fully lived, that is, one with richer and deeper relations.”¹¹⁹ At the base of it

¹¹⁷ Lysaker, “Taking Emerson Personally,” 23-24.

¹¹⁸ Emerson, “Experience,” 254.

¹¹⁹ Lysaker, “Taking Emerson Personally,” 17.

all, no matter what point the reader is at, lies the potential for self-improvement, human growth, human flourishing.

Still time to kill
 Before the next to come
 Time to burn until there's none
 Still time to sit and watch the birds
 To sit and slow my words
 Still time to savor what's left
 Time to stave off death
 Still time to ask or know
 Still time for plants to grow

The relation of personal improvement to poetry is one, like all writing, of provocation and the breaking of habits. Emerson says, "People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them."¹²⁰ And this is exactly what The Poet does. Emerson says, "He smites and arouses me with his shrill tones, breaks up my whole chain of habits, and I open my eye on my own possibilities."¹²¹ Thus, when we find ourselves caught in the monotony described in "Experience," Poetic writing can carry us out. By working through human lows in a way that engages the imagination, poets open our minds to possibilities we hadn't considered.

This idea was explored by Percy Shelley, who in his essay, "A Defence of Poetry," outlines the benefits of poetry by explaining how it can expand our imagination:

The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts...¹²²

¹²⁰ Emerson, "Circles," 211.

¹²¹ Emerson, "Circles," 207.

¹²² Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," 517.

Through imagination, we see new possibilities in what was always present. Though what's actual remains the same, a chain of unimaginative reason may forever churn out the same few results, missing something that is already there. "Reason," Shelley says, "is the enumeration of quantities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those quantities, both separately and as a whole."¹²³ It is not until the qualities hold value, until they are able to be interpreted according to their real, felt effect, that we see things more clearly. This difference is the same as the difference between an analysis which fails and succeeds at being poetic, between the dry definition and the word which is ordered and filled with life.

[5C]

It is worth noting, however, that the differentiation between imagination and reason is for the sake of explanation. Just as there is no fixed separation between Poetry and poetry, between The Poet and a poet, imagination and reason are lines we draw with degrees of clarity rather than correctness. Nobody has achieved the status of The Poet; there is no poem that has fully risen to Poetry; and there is no isolated imagination without reason or reason without imagination. Imagination without order carries as little meaning as reason without imagination. The former is like a note scrawled in the middle of the night, its meaning indecipherable in the morning; the latter is like that same note, read and left unshared by a computer program. The trick is fully developing both—it is having the philosopher who is also a poet, the nominalist who is also a realist. To quote Emerson again— "We are amphibious creatures, weaned for two elements, having two sets of faculties, the particular and the catholic."¹²⁴ We float between the two without

¹²³ Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," 510.

¹²⁴ Emerson, "Nominalist and Realist," 269.

fully departing either. Our task is to balance them to fit our current needs, to keep us alive and growing. We must deal in particulars to live, and we must deal in generals to reach new heights.

[5D]

Poetry guides us to new highs by creating a path to an improved state which still acknowledges where one is as they compose and read. Insofar as poetry approaches Poetry, it moves one from low to high, or high to higher. This is true regardless of one's circumstances going into a poem. Two of the poems discussed as examples of this earlier—"Westron Wynde" and "Song of Speaks Fluently"—demonstrate how the monotony on display in "Experience" can give way to the ecstasies of "The Poet." Both deal with different sorts of human hardship yet elevate the reader by putting it into verse.

Elsewhere, the attempt to go outside of one's state to something better takes place by altering how we occupy language itself. Celan's "Engführung," for instance, written at a time when the language used to memorialize the holocaust was under question, attempts this work. In the opening section, he displays the ambiguity with which one proceeds at this task, forced to use the same tool he questions—language:

Taken off into
the terrain
with the unmistakable trace:

Grass, written asunder. The stones, white,
with the grassblades' shadows:
Read no more — look!
Look no more — go!¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Paul Celan, "Engführung," in *The Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2002), 119, lines 1-7.

This is an attempt to rise from the lowest possible states in language—to go from incomprehensible communication to something which not only gestures at important topics, but changes how we perceive them. In the face of the ambiguity we are introduced into, Celan asks that the reader change how they read—that they don't read but "look," and don't look but "go." In this way, he seeks the same transition from artwork to "practical power" that was mentioned at the end of Emerson's "Experience." He seeks to alter how we perceive the world by changing how we inhabit language.

Though it is much harder to work through, and admittedly remains a mystery to even the most informed and trained readers, Celan's "Engführung" shows how the *working through* done in poetry sometimes must reach down to the question of language itself. This requires what often appears to us as ambiguity, subverting linguistic norms more than other poetry. Such an effort is not *better* than traditional verse in any absolute way, though it does help us work through different issues. While both approach Poetry, each is sure to be more impactful for some readers than others, given what they enter the readings with. Even in the face of calls to change perception through language, however, it is important to note that there remains a modernness in the works of art that near Poetry.

[5E]

In accordance with Emerson's recognition of the breadth of human experience in his work, and especially in "Nominalist and Realist," we see a similar breadth in the poetry that raises us to new highs and improves us. A philosophy that takes human experience as static fails in the same manner as an account of poetry that takes one style, or one author, and puts it above all others. Though there are exemplars who stand out in their time and to some degree throughout time, like Shakespeare for Emerson, there is still a place for all sorts of different

poets and styles to achieve the same effect. The best poem is always *for a certain person and at a given time*. “Westron Wynde,” for instance, however much it speaks through time, will have a stronger effect on a person afflicted with longing for home and loved ones than someone without such issues. The poem is great because it can still deliver an impact to such people, though its applicability remains limited to some degree.

In contemporary poetry, there is an unprecedented expansion of voices, such that people who had fewer of their particular conditions recognized in the past can now experience elevation specific to their hardship. The twenty-fourth Poet Laureate of the United States, Ada Limón, for instance, deals specifically with womanhood and Latina identity. In a poem entitled “Wife,” she balances the connotations of the word with her lived feelings as someone who’s been labeled with it:

Housewife,
fishwife, bad wife, good wife, what’s
the word for someone who stares long
into the morning, unable to even fix tea
some days, the kettle steaming over
loud like a train whistle, she who cries
in the mornings¹²⁶

Limón remains fully aware of where she comes from, all-the-while opening a world that all readers can share in and improve from. She does this both by complicating the more straightforward message with the resultant feelings of inaptitude that wifehood brings on, and by creating a poetic harmony that hits at our shared humanity.

The reality that poetry is impacted by time and place does not mean, however, that all poetry is equal in its ability to provoke and improve us. Certain poems like Limón’s rise above

¹²⁶ Ada Limón, “Wife,” Poetry Foundation (Poetry Foundation), accessed January 2023, lines 13-19, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147502/wife-5b61e969a97f6>.

others, creating a greater, lasting transition out of whatever state the reader entered with. As Cleanth Brooks observed after reading ten canonical Western poems, what makes poems have a strong impact is less that they share a common style, content, or form, and more that their structure creates a harmonious unity.¹²⁷ This unity can be formed in many different ways, impact certain people more than others, and send us in different directions. Though Brooks prefers the analogy of this harmony to dramas,¹²⁸ it still has a lot in common with musical harmonies. Shared between the two is that musical harmonies don't have to happen in a single way, can impact certain people more than others, and can take something dissonant and form a different sort of harmony. And just as not all music improves our lives or has much longevity, not all poems approach Poetry.

[5F]

To improve from poetry, the reader must put in work as well. Though poems really can and do change our lives for the better, the ability to create that change relies on the reader's prior efforts, and on their fully engaging in the transition from the poem to practical concerns via action. The former involves, among other things, education that teaches critical thinking, informs us of what references may appear, what symbols are commonly used, and how to go about reading a poem. This education may or may not take place through school, and is often informed by cultural knowledge. The latter, however, is partially mediated by the poem insofar as it creates a push towards a real-world application. As discussed through the use of imperatives in Chapter 3, the poem, to varying degrees of success, assists in the disposition change that determines how the reader will move forward in their life.

¹²⁷ Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn*, 195.

¹²⁸ Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn*, 204.

The new disposition formed by the poem is analogous to what William James calls the “strenuous mood.” In “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” he says, “The deepest difference, practically, in the moral life of man is the difference between the easy-going and the strenuous mood.”¹²⁹ While James goes on to focus on religion’s ability to create the strenuous mood, we can just as easily expand the concept out to poetry. After all, “the contemplation of a work of great art,” Emerson says, “draws us into a state of mind which may be called religious.”¹³⁰

[5G]

So far, I have mostly focused on the ability of poetry to create a change in us, but it is important to remember that there is also a poet behind these poems. We, as humans, are not content to simply take in and receive—we also must release and impart. “The man is only half himself, the other half is expression.”¹³¹ Or, stated otherwise, “On one side in primary communication with absolute truth through thought and instinct, the human mind on the other side tends, by an equal necessity, to the publication and embodiment of its thought.”¹³²

Part of how we maintain our flourishing, whether trying to move from a low to a high state or a high state to a higher one, is to express ourselves. Poetry, as the key ground for experimentation with language, is important as a way of fulfilling our need for expression. We are not content to read poetry—we also must write it, and write it in the way that best allows us to express ourselves, in all our complications.

¹²⁹ William James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” in *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy: Essential Readings and Interpretive Essays*, ed. John J. Stuhr, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 214.

¹³⁰ Emerson, “Art,” 26.

¹³¹ Emerson, “The Poet,” 214.

¹³² Emerson, “Art,” 18.

6 — Elevated Domestication: a possible guide

[6A]

if you don't carry it with you, you found it not;
if not at your home, nowhere. to rise up and out
and through the muck,

to carry it with you—the stone from the creek,
the wind brushed against your face and etched
in the skin a thousand times. you know

you carry it not. you carry it not. and then one day,
the sky promising rain, the words tumbled in dust
on the windowsill,

wiped clean, the book, ink spilled across it,
and your skin tattooed purple, ink, purple, a word,
a word—

carry it with you, the word, carry it with you,
and know it at bell's chime: the many, the one,
at home, at home.

So far, this paper has dealt with how we talk about poetry and how we can improve ourselves through it, both from the highs and lows of human experience. Though the paper itself has denied a fully essayistic structure, it still admits a few central threads. When discussing poetry, we must engage poetic language rather than philosophical and analytical language exclusively; poetry can facilitate the highs of human experience, with great Poetry providing elevated experiences across generations; the lows of human experience defy criticism in a different way than the highs, and can be worked through in writing; and poetry's unifying thread amidst highs and lows is its ability to improve people's lives.

But I have yet to set forth any sort of aesthetics—any sort of guiding principle for what makes good art aside from that it creates some sort of whole (which may be dissonant), and that this whole transfers to the reader, subsequently improving their life. Though to a certain extent

poetry denies and works beyond guiding principles, especially principles dealing with traditional questions of prosody, the real transition that determines the merit of a poem is that it creates an *elevated domestication* in the reader. In this final section of the paper, I will sketch an aesthetics of poetry that avoids the trap of prioritizing one style over another, and that keeps the real Poetic effect present across the genre. I will do this while still arguing for *elevated domestication* as an important guide for determining the extent to which art approaches Poetry.

[6B]

Elevated domestication is the improved state, the changed perspective that sees beauty in the everyday moments of one's life. Adaptation level theory, as explored in a study by Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman, found that the financial gains from winning the lottery didn't create a higher level of happiness.¹³³ The theory suggests that this result is the product of *contrast*, which refers to the diminished pleasure in past experiences once one has increased their wealth; and *habituation*, which refers to the tendency to adjust to the new circumstances with the same baseline happiness. Though material gains can help in certain situations, life improvement is largely a product of a changed perspective and disposition, such that one interacts differently with the world. The answer is less likely to be that you should move to a new place, or that you should determine your job based on the amount of money it brings you. Those things can help, but the answer is more likely to be that you should change how you perceive your world. For some, this requires medication and therapy, though for others, the change can take place by reading and communicating with people who provoke new thinking.

¹³³ Philip Brickman, Dan Coates, and Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, "Lottery Winners and Accident Victims: Is Happiness Relative?," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36, no. 8 (1978), <https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.36.8.917>.

While Buell says that Emerson “distrusted systematizing too much” to form an aesthetics,¹³⁴ Emerson still suggests what we might look for, more broadly, from poetry. He says, “I now require this of all pictures, that they domesticate me, not that they dazzle me.”¹³⁵ What he means by this is that great art can come from any place we inhabit, and that it can be simple and powerful.

“Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful,
we must carry it with us, or we find it not.”

“Life may be lyric or epic, as well as a poem or a romance”¹³⁶
whether in the Catskill Mountains or Kathmandu.

Throughout Emerson’s essays, he calls for art that comes from one’s everyday experiences. In essays like “The Poet,” he wants artists that work from the unique American perspective to emerge, and in “The American Scholar,” he wants the same in academics. The desire to leave one’s current location, or to improve societal standing, is unlikely to create lasting improvement. Though distant writings can inspire us, we must always demand the same inspiration from our place and time. To a younger America, Emerson says, “We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe.”¹³⁷ What’s required is a change in perspective, a change in disposition, such that one sees the beauty in their current location. This, in essence, is elevated domestication.

¹³⁴ Buell, *Emerson*, 109.

¹³⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Art,” in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. VII (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 215.

¹³⁶ Emerson, “Art,” 213 and 217, respectively.

¹³⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Barnes & Nobel, 2004), 66.

[6C]

Wallace Stevens's "The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain," which I quoted from earlier, goes on to demonstrate this aesthetic admirably. In the poem, the speaker elucidates the effect of the poem he wrote in the past, the remaining stanzas pointing towards the ability of art to change how we view our own lives:

It reminded him how he had needed
A place to go to in his own direction,

How he had recomposed the pines,
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,
Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:

The exact rock where his inexactnesses
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged,

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
Recognize his unique and solitary home.¹³⁸

The "outlook" and "view" both refer to the changed perspective the poem's author had sought when originally composing the poem. Though the full effect discussed in the poem may not be achieved, and Stevens may not even want to make it seem as if it ever could be achieved, it remains a possible goal for poetry. More precisely, this goal is to view ourselves anew, as if outside ourselves, such that there is poetic order where there previously wasn't.

Importantly, though, this feeling of being outside oneself comes from a poem, and not from a specific material object. It comes from the reader exercising their imagination. In "Poetry and Imagination," Emerson says, "The very design of imagination is to domesticate us in

¹³⁸ Stevens, "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain," 435, lines 5-14

another, in a celestial, nature.”¹³⁹ Here, too, the aim is to domesticate oneself. It is for the speaker to “[r]ecognize [their] unique and solitary home,” and for this new understanding to elevate them beyond where they previously were—for the speaker to become “complete in an unexplained completion.”

Poetry can never fully achieve this shift, however, in the same way that a poem can never fully be a Poem. Just as the use of the conditional (“the outlook that would be right”) suggests, it is impossible to perfectly order one’s position in life through poetry alone. But this, of course, doesn’t mean that a new order isn’t still approachable. Just like Poetry, elevated domestication admits degrees, with the highest appreciation of the beauty in one’s life forever out of reach. “Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning.”¹⁴⁰ And, as mentioned before, there is subsequently a constant call for self-improvement.

[6D]

Part of elevated domestication, though, as highlighted in Stevens, is that we must occasionally go away from the familiar to find a better relationship with our surroundings. Emerson illustrates this in his essay on Plato by emphasizing the balance between variety and unity, saying that poesis “is not found in staying at home, nor yet in travelling, but in transition from one to the other, which must therefore be adroitly managed to present as much transitional surface as possible.”¹⁴¹ The Poet, to achieve the disruption which allows readers to improve—“to draw a new circle”—must first break up the old habits of thought and action. They must manage

¹³⁹ Emerson, “Poetry and Imagination,” 10.

¹⁴⁰ Emerson, “Circles,” 202.

¹⁴¹ Emerson, “Plato; or, The Philosopher,” 303.

the states of departing and arriving such that the domestication, when it occurs, is colored by a new perspective.

Charles S. Peirce, in his essay, “The Fixation of Belief,” looks at different methods of establishing belief from a state of doubt. Importantly, he writes that “doubt is the only immediate motive for the struggle to attain belief,”¹⁴² meaning that we must be moved to question—to have some doubt about our current habits—if we’re to change our beliefs. Though Peirce’s focus is mainly on what we do once the doubt has already formed (since there is no drive to investigate matters when beliefs are fully fixed), it is worth noting that poetry *can* move us to doubt. It can go beyond the empty thinking that Peirce associates with much of philosophy, and impact us in a tangible, practical way. By altering our perception of the world, poetry introduces doubt where there wasn’t before, and opens the possibility for the formation of beliefs that better fit our lived experience. In the way that muscles must be torn to come back stronger, our beliefs must be scrutinized with genuine doubt to improve. This process is part of how our domestication becomes elevated.

[6E]

Emerson promotes art that flows and is in transition—that reforms our current state into something better. He says that “true art is never fixed, but always flowing”,¹⁴³ and that “[t]he interruption of equilibrium stimulates the eye to desire the restoration of symmetry, and to watch the steps through which it is attained.”¹⁴⁴ But, just as has been discussed in this paper, there is

¹⁴² Charles S. Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” in *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy: Essential Readings and Interpretive Essays*, ed. John J. Stuhr, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 70.

¹⁴³ Emerson, “Art,” 216.

¹⁴⁴ Emerson, “Beauty,” 156.

still room for very different sorts of poetry to achieve the aims of self-improvement, of elevated domestication. We can easily see, for instance, how this sort of thinking might give way to an aesthetics of estrangement, but it can also occur through the simple act of writing, of putting something into verse and giving it a life of its own. “We are immersed in beauty,” Emerson says, “but our eyes have no clear vision. It needs, by the exhibition of single traits, to assist and lead the dormant taste.”¹⁴⁵ This line of Emerson’s, rather than an aesthetics of estrangement, moves into something more akin to William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow.” It says that by isolating parts of our world, we can alter people’s perception of the beauty which lies around them.

In the still of the
year, blossoms wane,
and the sound of crickets
gives way

to silence. Not exactly
quiet, but still — the tree
standing without wind. So that
you hear the full
weight, pressing down,
of its manifold
pipes, barked and
barren. So that the nothing

finds its center.
So that, from all edges,
bursting, is a world
on its axis, and you,
also an axis, reach out,
splayed,
in the still of the year.

¹⁴⁵ Emerson, “Art,” 210.

That we don't need to go far from our own experience to see and express this beauty is obvious to Emerson, who, as a matter of experience, sees that "the best parts of many old and many new poets are simply enumerations by a person who felt the beauty of the common sights and sounds."¹⁴⁶ While someone caught up in the lows of human experience may require a greater departure from the everyday sights and sounds—from where they've become domesticated—simple poems are often the greatest source of a shift. There is room for both in moving poetry to Poetry, as well as in creating elevated domestication.

The first quiet night of the year, everything
gone away. No sound but those I make.
How could I forget the world—so still—the world
so empty? How could I record its
silence? Sitting on a bench, the falling snow
overcomes me.

[6F]

At the start of this paper, I quoted Emerson, saying, "The trait and test of the poet is that he builds, adds, and affirms. The critic destroys: the poet says nothing but what helps."¹⁴⁷ Later in the same essay, he says, "I know the pride of mathematicians and materialists, but they cannot conceal from me their capital want. The critic, the philosopher, is a failed poet."¹⁴⁸ The point of writing should not be to convince the reader of a position if that position proves to be of no help. If elevated domestication does not improve you where you currently are, does not shed light on what is valuable in poetry, then it does not provide elevated domestication.

¹⁴⁶ Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," 11.

¹⁴⁷ Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," 19.

¹⁴⁸ Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," 30.

I set out to achieve something which might be of use, taking a thread of Emerson and amplifying it. I aimed to capture the real force of human highs and lows, and how they might be felt and worked through in poetry—how poetry might improve our lives, again and again, elevating and re-domesticating us. I set out to do this because it seems discussion and effort, properly directed, would find no better place than one that affirms our experience and uplifts us.

We live for those moments which take us up and out to something better, and which keep us there. The Poet, uniquely capable of providing this, holds in the palm of their hand the ability to express our shared world in a way that opens its latent possibilities. It is true—the philosopher, the critic, the mathematician, the scientist, each and every one of us—we all search for this effect, though each of us follows different avenues. And along those avenues, many even begin to achieve it. They open a world that is a bit better. We are all poets, every one of us, even if we fail to feel the hands of the universe which massage us into verse. Even if we keep beating the same old drum to no new effect, twiddling our thumbs and speaking words which dodge the facts, cursing ourselves and giving curses to ourselves. Enough of concealing our inner poets. Enough of criticism that fails to open the door it analyzes.

The game we play, we make, of poetry, the rules
and structures laid out, the rules made clear
as we can, we can, as poetry, layed out. Don't
think twice about it. Fall down without an ink
or trace. And let it settle, let it frost. Settled,
it was settled. And we lost the sheet that says the
rules, the rules. Opening, a can, of words, a can,
spraying out on paper, a sheet of midnight notes,
promising, a hint, of something, a glimmer, of sun,
a glimmer. Standing there after the storm, after
it all, and making sense as we can: there lies the
words of God, the words of God lie—no, there
lies our home—crying, we stare, staring, we cry.

Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor. "Theodor Adorno, Commitment, NLR I/87–88, September–December 1974." Translated by Francis McDonagh, *New Left Review*, PDF from <https://newleftreview.org/issues/i87/articles/theodor-adorno-commitment>.
- Bosworth, Joseph. "tid." In *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, edited by Thomas Northcote Toller, Christ Sean, and Ondřej Tichy. Prague: Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2014. <https://bosworthtoller.com/30411>.
- Brickman, Philip, Dan Coates, and Ronnie Janoff-Bulman. "Lottery Winners and Accident Victims: Is Happiness Relative?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36, no. 8 (1978): 917–27. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.36.8.917>.
- Brooks, Cleanth. *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1975.
- Brown, Jericho. "Duplex: Cento." Poem. In *The Tradition*, 72. London: Picador, 2019.
- Buell, Lawrence. *Emerson*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Celan, Paul. *The Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*. Translated by John Felstiner. New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2002.
- Chiasson, Dan. "Ecstasy of Influence." *The New Yorker*, August 31, 2015. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/09/07/ecstasy-of-influence>.
- Dewey, John. *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy: Essential Readings and Interpretive Essays*, edited by John J. Stuhr, 2nd ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, IV. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987.
- _____. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, VI. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003.
- _____. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, VII. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.
- _____. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, VIII. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010.

- _____. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, X. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013.
- _____. *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Barnes & Nobel, 2004.
- _____. *Parnassus*. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970.
- Frey, Charles. "Interpreting 'Western Wind.'" *ELH* 43, no. 3 (1976): 259–78. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2872415>.
- Frost, Robert. *North of Boston*, 2nd ed. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1924.
- _____. *The Poems of Robert Frost*. New York, NY: Modern Library, 1946.
- Gopnik, Adam. "Montaigne On Trial." *The New Yorker*, January 9, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/16/montaigne-on-trial>.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Off The Beaten Track*, edited and translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Hoagland, Tony. "Twenty Little Poems That Could Save America." *Harper's Magazine*, July 18, 2013. <https://harpers.org/2013/04/twenty-little-poems-that-could-save-america/>.
- James, William. *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy: Essential Readings and Interpretive Essays*, edited by John J. Stuhr, 2nd ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- _____. *Talks To Teachers On Psychology; And To Students On Some Of Life's Ideals*. Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY, 1925; Project Gutenberg, 2005. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/16287/16287-8.txt>.
- Lewis, Jo Ann. "El Greco of Toledo." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, June 27, 1982. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/magazine/1982/06/27/el-greco-of-toledo/bbced546-6729-4a02-a407-0895cfa7fc6c/>.
- Limón, Ada. "Wife." Poetry Foundation. Poetry Foundation. Accessed January 2023. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147502/wife-5b61e969a97f6>.
- Loving, Jerome. "'A Well-Intended Halfness': Emerson's View of 'Leaves of Grass.'" *Studies in American Humor* 3, no. 2 (1976): 61–68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42573104>.
- Lysaker, John T. *Emerson and Self-Culture*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008.

- Packer, Barbara L. *Emerson's Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays*. New York, NY: Continuum, 1982.
- Plato. *Phaedo*. Essay. In *Plato: Complete Works*, 49–100, edited and translated by John M. Cooper and G.M.A. Grube, respectively. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1997.
- Peirce, Charles S. *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy: Essential Readings and Interpretive Essays*, edited by John J. Stuhr, 2nd ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Richardson, Robert D. *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997.
- Rilke, Ranier Maria. "Archaic Torso of Apollo." Poets.org. Academy of American Poets. Accessed September 2022. <https://poets.org/poem/archaic-torso-apollo>.
- Rudd, Amanda. "Following Where the Brush Leads: The Potential of the Zuihitsu in American Postmodernist Literature." *Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature* 1, no. 1 (2011): 42–49. Retrieved from <https://plaza-ojs-uh.tdl.org/plaza/index.php/plaza/article/view/2094>.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, edited by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat. New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2002.
- Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poetry & Prose*. New York, NY: Library of America, 2010.
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. Deathbed ed. New York City, NY: Modern Library, n.d., est 1933.
- Xie, Jenny. "Zuihitsu." Poetry Foundation. Poetry Foundation. Accessed January 22, 2023. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147492/zuihitsu>.