The Art of the Threshold: A Poetics of Liminality in Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman

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ABSTRACT

Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman were all drawn to visions of transition in the natural world as a way to define the passage between world and self, but their focus on the endlessly unfolding potential of the aesthetic ideal in the "space between" gave rise to a poetics of liminality that makes them distinct. Emerson's foundational conceptions of passage and transition emerge most fully in the writings of Thoreau and Whitman in three interrelated contexts or modes of liminality which parallel—in ascending stages—Arnold van Gennep's *rites de passage*, the tripartite process of initiation, transformation, and reintegration so important in Victor Turner's later theory of liminality. For these three American Romantic authors, liminality can operate in moments of clear vision that stress marked outlines of boundaries or horizons; in transformative moments of interpenetrative exchange that fuse or confuse opposites across the threshold; or in transfiguring moments of sublimity. Here liminality involves a stress both on the physical *place* that serves as a borderline or threshold and on the *process* of passage across that threshold—the "limen" in which transformations are seen to be generated.

The thesis first addresses the ways in which Emerson's key concepts and understandings of spiritual and aesthetic process initiated a widely influential vision of nineteenth-century liminal poetics. Thoreau's very different responses to the Emersonian model of transformation, as it unfolds within the definitive *topos* of the natural landscape, are then considered—first in the liminal spaces of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden*, and then in the darker allegorical contexts of *The Maine Woods* and *Cape Cod.* The final full chapter examines Whitman's later response to Emerson's liminal poetics, especially in the way that the persona of *Leaves of Grass* becomes a transitioning hero of consciousness and mediating interpreter of human experience—

leading a community of readers out of stasis and through threshold moments of conversion. The study concludes with a brief epilogue outlining a subsequent trajectory for writing that emerges from Emerson's liminal poetics—an aesthetic perspective generated by the power (but also the indeterminacy) of continual regeneration and renewal.

ABSTRACT TRANSLATION

Emerson, Thoreau, et Whitman ont tous été attirés par des évocations de transition de la nature comme un moyen de définir le passage entre le monde et le moi, mais l'intérêt qu'ils ont porté au potentiel sans limites de l'esthétique idéale derrière le concept de « l'espace entre » a donné naissance à une poétique de liminalité qui les distinguent. Les conceptions fondatrices des notions de passage et de transition chez Emerson émergent en force dans les écrits de Thoreau et Whitman dans trois contextes ou modes inter reliés de liminalité, qui coïncident – en étapes ascendantes- aux *Rites de passage* d'Arnold van Gennep, processus triparti de l'initiation, de la transformation et de la réintégration, si importante à la théorie ultérieure de liminalité de Victor Turner. Pour ces trois auteurs américains romantiques, la liminalité agit dans des moments de clairvoyance qui soulignent les limites définies de frontières ou d'horizon ; dans des instants de transformation dus à des échanges inter pénétrants qui fusionnent ou confondent les opposés de chaque coté du seuil; ou en transfigurant des moments sublimes. Ici, la liminalité met l'accent sur le *lieu* physique qui sert comme ligne de démarcation ou seuil et sur le *processus* de passage de ce même seuil – le « limen » qui donne naissance aux transformations.

La thèse s'intéresse d'abord aux façons dont les concepts phares d'Emerson et sa compréhension des processus spirituels et esthétiques ont amorcé une vision influente des poétiques de liminalité du dix-neuvième siècle. Les réponses très différentes de Thoreau au modèle émersonien de transformation, tel qu'il se dévoile dans les *topos* définitifs du paysage naturel, sont ensuite étudiés – d'abord dans les espaces liminaux de *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* et *Walden*, puis dans les contextes allégoriques plus sombres de *The Maine Woods* et *Cape Cod.* Le chapitre final examine la réponse

ultérieure de Whitman aux poétiques liminales d'Emerson, notamment avec le personnage de *Leaves of Grass*, qui devient un héro transitoire de la conscience et un interprète médiateur de l'expérience humaine – guidant une communauté de lecteurs hors de l'immobilisme, à travers des moments critiques de transformation. L'étude se conclut avec un bref épilogue décrivant une trajectoire subséquente d'écriture qui émerge des poétiques liminales d'Emerson — une perspective esthétique générée par le pouvoir (mais aussi par l'indétermination) de la régénération continuelle et d'un renouveau.

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I. INTRODUCTION

"In every landscape, the point of astonishment is the meeting of the sky and the earth"
Emerson (544).

The writers of the American Renaissance are often assessed in light of their perspectives on the relationship between human beings and the natural world, or for the ways they envision a passage between world and self that integrates experience and consciousness. Thoreau and Whitman in particular were inspired by the correspondential analogies between nature and spirit defined in Emerson's 1836 *Nature,* but Emerson's larger focus on the dynamic and continual movement of what he often termed "transition" inspired a broader response that informs the way many writers in the nineteenth century conceived of spiritual, intellectual, and aesthetic process. Whitman and Thoreau's diverse perspectives in their writing yield new understandings when read in the context of the aesthetic vision that emerged in the nineteenth century in response to Emerson's transitional "cipher": his vision of what could be termed a 'liminal poetics." But if they both begin from the foundational vision of Emersonian process, they each then develop in strongly divergent ways from this shared point of departure.

Far more than simply an attention to the omnipresence of change as a foundation of the basic laws of the universe, Emerson's liminal poetics unfolds as a comprehensive system of thought that both expresses the spirit of the age in mid-nineteenth-century America and expands the energies of that spirit in recognizable ways. Emerson's distinctive stamp on this poetics—what makes his thinking

decidedly different from that of his contemporaries in both Europe and America—is found in his conception of the endlessly unfolding potential of the aesthetic ideal in the "space between," a potential Emerson first observes in the liminal spaces of the natural world. In short, liminal poetics is an aesthetic perspective—derived from Emerson's vision of endless process—that calls attention to perceived margins and borderlines as points of active transition and transformation, but also focuses specifically on the "limen," or spaces between, as areas in which artistic processes and related spiritual transformations are seen to be generated.

Anthropologist Victor Turner first referred to the concept of liminality in the 1970's after reading Arnold van Gennep's 1908 *Rites de Passage*, in which the transitional or interstitial phase in a rite of passage is identified as the "limen," a Latin word meaning "threshold." Turner subsequently defined the liminal phase or space as "a catalyst for the creative impulse; it frequently generates myths, symbols, rituals, works of art. These cultural forms in turn provide a set of templates, models, or paradigms which are . . . periodical reclassifications of reality . . . [that] incite us to action as well as to thought" (*Ritual Process* 50). Although Emerson did not make use of the specific nomenclature of twentieth-century liminal poetics, his foundational concepts, are, as we shall see, clearly related to later, twentieth-century theories of liminality and modes of transformational allegory—and likely helped to shape aspects of these twentieth-century visions. Pages 16-18 of this Introduction address later definitions and theoretical conceptions of liminality put forward by other scholars as refinements or inflections of Turner's model, but it is first important to acknowledge the groundbreaking contribution that Victor Turner's work made to such later critical understandings of liminal contexts and processes. The author of sixty-

seven articles and nineteen books and monographs published between 1952 and 1986 (three posthumously), Turner had an immense influence in the field of twentieth-century anthropology. Original studies on theories of ritual and liminality include the earlier-cited *The Ritual Process* (1969), *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (1974), and *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage* (1979). Frank E. Manning's, "Victor Turner's Career and Publications" in *Victor Turner and the Construction of Cultural Criticism: Between Literature and Anthropology*, ed. Kathleen M. Ashley (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1990), notes that Turner is "best known for his emphasis on social process" (172), but Ashley's Introduction points out that the essays in her collection "focus on the ways in which Victor Turner's ideas might expand the practice of literary criticism and literary history" (x), and Edith Turner's essay in the collection, "The Literary Roots of Victor Turner's Anthropology" (163-169), provides specific examples of Victor Turner's literary influences. A decade later, the two-volume *Studies in Liminality and Literature*—especially volume I: *A Place that is Not a Place*, ed. Isabel Soto (Madrid, Gateway Press, 2000)—expanded Victor Turner's theories of liminal space and process to include additional cultural and social considerations. My own study turns similarly from Turner's relevance in anthropological analysis to emphasize his connection to a particular aesthetic perspective—a perspective I see as parallel to the mid-nineteenth-century vision developed by Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. In his later writing, Turner highlighted symbolic representations in nature's liminal spaces, rites of passage, the social structures of *communitas*, and the sublime or sacred space—all elements central to the process of a nineteenth-century "liminal poetics."

And, within his own historical period, Emerson's version of a liminal poetics provides the context for new readings of the dynamic aesthetic vision in contemporary writers like Whitman and Thoreau, offering a way in to a more precise understanding of their sense of human and natural interactions, as well as of the ways in which writing conceptualizes and models the process of that understanding—two of the central concerns of American transcendentalism through the mid-nineteenth-century.[1] As Garry Wills notes of this charged period in American literary history: "the borderlines *(limina*) in nature appealed to [writers] who saw, figured there, the great limits to knowledge and time and history that they were meant to transcend . . . 'Margin' was [for them] a charged word, whether used of a field, lake, petal, or cloud. The *edge* of the wilderness gave meaning both to civilization and to 'virgin nature'" (73). Whitman and Thoreau both shared this general tendency noted by Wills, and their particular visions of both perception and representation were powerfully shaped initially by their mentor Emerson's emphasis on liminal borders in nature as models for the dynamic of transition so central to his understanding of the process of thinking and writing:

> Our strength is transitional, alternating . . . The sea-shore, sea seen from the shore, shore seen from the sea; the taste of two metals in contact . . . the experience of poetic creativeness, which is not found in staying at

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[1] The transcendentalists writing during the period F.O. Matthiessen first referred to in 1941 as "The American Renaissance" are also more generally categorized as authors who published during the period of American Romanticism that flourished between 1830-1865. "The American Renaissance" is a designation that has been at the center of some controversies in recent decades largely because of Matthiessen's nationalistic emphasis as well as his exclusion of popular women authors, African-American writing, and other marginalized writers who also published in this period. For the purpose of this study, however, the term is still apt and convenient as a simple designation for a directly-connected line of influential authors in New England and the Northeast—even if limited in some of its broader references. See *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, Ed. Walter Benn Michaels and Donald Pease (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994), and David S. Reynold's *Beneath the American Renaissance* (New York: Knopf, 1988), for contrasting interpretations of the time period Matthiessen identifies as America's "coming to its first maturity and affirming its rightful heritage in the whole expanse of art and culture . . . [with] devotion to the possibilities of democracy" (vii, ix).

> home, nor yet in traveling, but in transitions from one to the other, which therefore must be adroitly managed to present as much transitional surface as possible. (Emerson 641)

Achieving transitions "adroitly managed" to reveal the greatest degree of interrelational surface is a desired feature of both perceptive expository writing and of liminal portage through stages of development or states of being—both are complex processes, often focused on progression through areas in which changes of state are witnessed or experienced. In the visions of Thoreau and Whitman, and of others writing during the American Renaissance, the transitional surfaces traversed in processes of thought and writing are perhaps best aesthetically *imaged* by elements in the natural environment (or the constructed world of forms) which are themselves engaged in various stages of physical transformation. In fact, liminality as a discourse encompasses both essence and process: it addresses and values the physical *space* that is a borderline or threshold between things, as well as the *passage* or movement across whatever that threshold space or borderline demarcates from one level to another.

Physical borderlines and boundaries can serve as liminal markers in nature (and in writing), but in the context of a vision of process, a liminal caesura marks a perceived point of transitional perepity—the brief moment of apparent stasis within a movement toward discovery or transformation in natural and aesthetic processes. Stasis in this context is only the sentient perception of inertia, however, for the liminal phase is a hybrid moment of roiling pressures and juxtapositions in addition to being the essence of potentiality. In Emerson's view, the phenomenon of process is endlessly unabated in spite of what may appear, in effect, to be cessation and "repose." This perception of an internal pause can be limiting even when fleeting, as Emerson suggests in his essay "Self-

Reliance," and empowerment is possible only when the perception of stasis ends and conscious action resumes: "Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state; in the shooting of the gulf; in the darting to an aim" (271). The gerunds Emerson uses to characterize the most valued moment of transition are highly charged: power "shooting" and "darting" toward a realized potential as the "transitional surface[s]" of thresholds are exposed and traversed (Emerson 271, 641). In this sense, writing is a means of empowerment and creative enlightenment; it is an active process of composition in which words reflecting sentient perceptions are arranged in relational patterns that may bring out the transitional potential in a moment—as a scene is revealed as a threshold. Emerson understood that writing as an evolving process necessarily mirrors the unfolding of natural processes; as Robert D. Richardson points out, "Emerson considers nature as the source of the language with which we grasp the universe and negotiate the mind's pact with it" ("First We Read" 28).

Moreover, the paradox of simultaneous movement and stasis—the perception of liminal caesura in the midst of process—is part of the complement of human and natural aesthetics. Angus Fletcher comments that this response of a "complementary art" has occurred during notable periods in literary history, during which "[writers] controlled mutability by fully accepting it."[2] These writers "understood the passingness of things, yet never lost the desire to form that moving constancy into aesthetic shapes" (*Colors* 66). Emerson offers a version of this model for "moving constancy" in his writing, and, in diverse ways, both Thoreau and Whitman share his goal of representing the "controlled

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[2] Fletcher refers specifically to the "Tudor and Stuart poets" in this passage, but he continues with an observation that has decided parallels to Emersonian poetics: "One approach to this complementary art is through the concept of the threshold, or liminality . . . Shakespeare's contemporaries [for example] studied the liminal conditions of living and perception. Their fixations were stages of controlled passage. The movement of living had to be a crossing, through phases of never-ending initiations" (*Colors* 66).

mutability" of aesthetic processes. As Jonathan Levin notes, "Art is an agency of transition because, as Emerson suggests . . . it also challenges familiar forms of perception and understanding and initiates processes that reconstitute them" (67). Reading Thoreau and Whitman in the context of this version of a liminal poetics brings to the fore and helps to illuminate their efforts to re-image "familiar forms of perception" in threshold moments of transition in the natural world—to show how language can be used to identify analogous human processes.[3] In a sense, liminal lines and threshold spaces have an intrinsic relational quality because their interstitial nature allows for the possibility of literally being in two places at once, or aesthetically perceiving the dynamics of change and transformation from within the very processes themselves. Emerson's "taste of two metals in contact" is suggested in the simultaneous potential of liminal spaces to refer to separate, opposed realms while also appealing to multiple sensory impressions. The literary, rhetorical, and allegorical uses to which Thoreau's and Whitman's threshold experiences are applied thus "reconstitute" Emerson's ideals of energy and change in conceptual images which help to define a passage between world and self—or between worlds and stages of selfhood. In fact, this "liminal crossover" of the "space" of moments or events in historical time, and the "timelessness" of passage in a world in which change is constant, is a particular duality of threshold experience: "the liminal crossover . . . marks the moment of prophetic vision in which [one] sees life from the joint perspective of passing and immutability" (Fletcher, *Colors* 124). This moment

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[3] A number of notable critics have highlighted Emerson's correspondential notion of language, and their works have markedly influenced my understanding of Emerson's liminal poetics—even as these works don't identify Emersonian poetics as "liminal" or as characterized by an aesthetic perspective traced back to the lines and spaces found in the natural world. For specific (cited) studies of Emerson's correspondential understandings of language, see Lawrence Buell, Stanley Cavell, Julie Ellison, Sherman Paul, Richard Poirier, Joel Porte, and Stephen Railton, among others.

of prophetic vision is a higher use of liminal potential, one addressed at length in subsequent portions of this study.

In essence, a poetics of liminality offers three interrelated contexts or ways in which this process can be used to investigate the Emersonian aesthetic of transition found in Thoreau's and Whitman's writing. These uses can then be considered within a template for tripartite process found in van Gennep's original conception of *rites de passage,* with its three-part design of initiation, transformation, and reintegration.[4] At the most basic level of "initiation," liminal poetics offers a literal framing technique that marks the outlines and boundaries of Whitman's charged natural scenes and Thoreau's landscapes and flowing rivers; these sketches in outline form allow images to be drawn forth from memory or imagination, bringing past experiences into present existence. The technique clearly demarcates places and things, calling fixed attention to their liminal configurations—even as all but imperceptible transition prevails throughout. This first level of liminal poetics parallels van Gennep's stage of initiation in the rites in that it is a "literal" use of nature's lines and spaces in a framed description of a scene as it is first perceived and then recorded in language. A second liminal approach—studied most fully in selections in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Thoreau's *Walden*—matches dynamic human processes with objective correlatives in the natural world that are seen to be always in transition and transformation.[5] Here perspective is not confined to an

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[4] Van Gennep notes of the *rites de passage*: "Beneath a multiplicity of forms, either consciously expressed or merely implied, a typical pattern always recurs . . ." (191). Victor Turner adds an explanatory context to van Genneps's initial three-part definition: "An important category of ritual which Arnold van Gennep first isolated and named [in] 1908, rites of passage are the transitional rituals accompanying changes of place, state, social position, and age in a culture" (*Image and Pilgrimage* 249). My study expands Turner's use of this model to analyze social structure to include van Gennep's "multiplicity of forms" in animate and inanimate transitions and rites found in the natural world.

[5] My use of the term "objective correlative" differs from T.S. Eliot's definition ascribed in the 1919 essay "Hamlet and his Problems" for the "only way of expressing emotion in the form of art." In a poetics

individuated framework or to one singular, static scene; instead perspective becomes varied and multifold—rendered from a correspondential point of "transformation" between varied scenes. This process brings together a diverse mix of elements—transporting the perceiver out of a formerly settled existence while also, to use Robert Sattelmeyer's phrasing, "dissolv[ing] the difference between perceiver and perceived" (441). This second use parallels van Gennep's middle, transitional stage in that it marks the recognition of correspondence and "crossing" between natural and human processes—a transformative correlation formed in human consciousness and rendered in language. A third mode of the liminal aesthetic advances the analogies of synthesis found in both Whitman's and Thoreau's work to include, in addition, allegories of separateness, but (at least potentially) also to gesture toward allegories of sublimity that might have the potential to bring about a synthesizing new form of *communitas,* the term Victor Turner uses to identify the "relational quality" of "full communication [and] communion" ("Image" 250). Here "reintegration" is achieved in mediation between the sacred and the profane for the adventuring writer/persona who develops as an allegorical "hero of consciousness"; this mode of liminality emerges in moments of threshold and conversion found in the darker or more mysterious margins of experience.[6] These extreme liminal crossings are often difficult to articulate, as seen in moments of sublimity in Thoreau's "Ktaadn" and *Cape Cod*, and in the quest for *communitas* on the part of Whitman's

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of liminality, an objective correlative is the "correlating object" from nature which is matched through liminal process to corresponding processes of the human mind. The term is applied in examples for both Thoreau and Whitman in this thesis, but Frederick Turner earlier expands the use of this term in a similar way in his essay, "Reflexivity as Evolution in Thoreau's *Walden*." Turner uses the term "objective correlative" to emphasize that for Thoreau, "experience was an *activity*, the mind's own active questioning of the world . . . His limnological survey of Walden Pond was the objective correlative of his inner quest for understanding" (77).

[6] Angus Fletcher notes that the threshold is "an edge at which simultaneous participation in the sacred and profane becomes available to the hero of consciousness" (*Colors of the Mind* 167); it is the liminal space of the hero's transforming activity. See pages 20-22 of this introduction as well as Section II (Emerson chapter) for additional explications of the concept of the hero of consciousness.

mediating persona in the Civil War poetry and its sequels. This third use of liminal poetics parallels van Gennep's final stage of reintegration in the rites in that it acknowledges the enhanced insight and heightened consciousness following a transformative passage—as an account of perceived transcendence or sublime experience that is often conveyed through allegory.

Angus Fletcher's characterization of allegory as the supreme "protean device" is helpful in understanding the relationship between liminal language and sublimity, for some heightened forms of allegory can provide encoded access to the incomprehensible or overwhelming aspects of sublimity, access that is not articulated through direct modes of communication. Allegory "pushed to an extreme . . . would subvert language itself," in Fletcher's theory; as a mode of discourse "it is a fundamental process of encoding our speech" (*Allegory* 2-3). If, as Fletcher states, "the oldest idea about allegory" is that it is a "human reconstitution of divinely inspired messages, a revealed transcendental language" (*Allegory* 21, 3), and our human "linguistic figurations are tied to liminal settings" (*Colors* 167), then some "extreme" forms of allegory could potentially lead to the liminal portals of sublimity when language is generated from heightened threshold experiences. In these instances, allegory (as a kind of poetic access) offers the means by which ontological truths are translated and revealed to others; Emerson's Poet, for example—from his threshold positioning—is charged with translating the "passage of the world into the soul of man, to suffer there a change, and reappear a new and higher fact" (456). In effect, the Emersonian "power" of allegory resides in a writer's ability to operate in transitional moments within language, generating shifts and translations between diverse allegorical levels of representation and registers of meaning.

Significantly, liminality as a concept is linked etymologically with the sublime: *limen* as boundary or threshold is in a sense the subtext of sublimity, the *sub limen* "lintel" or "passageway" under (or through to) the realm of things beyond ourselves. The version of the sublime that Thoreau inherited from Emerson, however, is distinct from the earlier European analytics of Burke and Kant (which informed the British Romantic sublime) in several important ways.[7] Although still focused on what has been called the nineteenth-century "problem of nature's surplus signification, its vastness and infinitudes" (Arensberg 8), the American sublime in the nineteenth century involved a "rebegetting of the self" derived from Emerson's antinomian principles voiced in the dichotomy of "I and the Abyss." According to Harold Bloom, American sublimity emerges from the repression of poetic antecedents, and from a subsequent "crossing over" into positive acts of "self-begetting" that erases all traces of those antecedents.[8] Later commentators termed this the "radical solipsism" of the American sublime (Arensberg 11), but Emerson's transcendental focus allows for a balance in which the sublime is seen in terms of dichotomy (or dialectic), but also potential. As Donald Pease notes: "Unlike the Kantian drama where nature's power necessitates the intervention of reason . . . or the egotistical sublime where the self's will to power triumphs over nature, Emerson's sublime strikes a balance. Rather it is a figure of place, a *topos*, which opens up a

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[7] A complete explication of the European analytic of the sublime is beyond the scope of this study, but Emerson would have been familiar with the eighteenth and nineteenth-century nomenclature of sublime experience, especially as it was initially articulated in Edmund Burke's *Enquiry* and Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, as well as in the works of the French *philosophes* (chiefly Rousseau's). Sublimity as a goal in artistic expression in the early British Romantic period references an expansive category, ranging from the achievement of "excellence in composition"—the rhetorical sublime as it was first identified in the Greek treatise *Peri Hypsos*—to the accounts in experience of a literal "sublime encounter" produced by extremes of emotion (astonishment, terror) generated by the mind's response to the incomprehensible, often tied to overwhelming vastness and immensity in nature.

[8] See Harold Bloom's *Poetry and Repression*, 244.

passage between self and world where the sublime is always about to take place."[9] In this sense, the American sublime is always generated from a liminal state of potentiality, but here we also find illuminating examples of how separate authors diverge in their responses to shared points of departure. Whitman's characteristic response is to ground the Emersonian sublime in the ceaseless transitions of the "body as Abyss,"[10] in which the self is the liminal medium through which Emerson's distinction between the soul and Nature—the "me" and the "not me"—is dissolved. Thoreau instead moves the indeterminate potential of Emersonian idealism firmly into the definitive *topos* of the natural landscape. There the borderlines and interstices of nature become charged sites of productive inquiry; in sublime experience they mark the potential of a passage between world and self which (at least potentially) can be rendered in transitional language.

In a sense, all three contexts or uses of liminal poetics are distinct, but all are interrelated—and varying degrees of liminality are tied to varying modes of perception. Just as Harold Bloom and Donald Pease offer different interpretations of what constitutes sublime experience, so can writers drawn to liminal contexts for their creative possibilities perceive them from distinct subjective vantage points and arrive at widely differing interpretations, even when they begin from a shared point of understanding. Thus margins and borderlines, as well as "objective correlatives" in the natural world, are all addressed in diverse ways by Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman in their writing, and each writer responds differently to conceptions such as *communitas* or the "hero of consciousness" who takes readers through the heightened modes of perception possible in

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[9] Mary Arensberg, *The American Sublime*, 12. Arensberg offers in this quote a summary of Donald Pease's "Sublime Politics" (included in this collection), an essay Arensberg describes as "an excursion through the history of the sublime. . . [that] finally comes to rest on Emerson, whose version of the sublime is ahistorical and unable to be superseded" (12).

[10] The characterization of "body as Abyss," or "the Abyss of My Self" is Harold Bloom's; see *Poetry and Repression*, 256, 266.

liminal contexts. But new considerations of Whitman's and Thoreau's writing are made possible through a perspective grounded in Emerson's liminal poetics, especially considerations focusing on how this perspective helped writers in the nineteenth century to develop correspondential analogies between ascending forms of natural artistry. Tracing perceived boundary sites in language—especially through the Emersonian key concepts of transition, flow, metamorphosis, polarity, and compensation—opens a lens into the dynamic (and diverse) elements in Thoreau's and Whitman's visions of aesthetic processes.

And while Emerson's key concepts—fully explicated in the second section of this study—form a foundational context for the aesthetic that influenced Thoreau and Whitman, they can also be seen as contributing to a recognizable American intellectual tradition that flourished in sustained form between the advent of Jacksonian Democracy and the onset of the Civil War. Moreover, the Emersonian aesthetic as a foundation is readily related to various mid-nineteenth-century notions of a philosophical dialectic, even as Emerson urges an antebellum American readership in his 1836 *Nature* to turn away from "tradition[al]" European ways of thinking: "Let us demand our own works and laws and worship." [11] Sixty-five years later, Sir Leslie Stephen praised "the rapture with which Emerson sets forth the blessings of intellectual independence," proffering "a version that was congenial to his audience at the time"[12]—and perhaps still remarkably congenial to our time as well. As Harold Bloom reminds us in his essay "Power at the

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[11] The Introduction to Emerson's 1836 *Nature* suggests in the first two lines that America's heavy dependence upon European intellectual models amounts to a morbid backwardness: "Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers" (7). The in-text quoted line concludes the opening paragraph of this Introduction with an urgent invocation to "demand" a new philosophy.

[12] The full text of Stephen's essay is included in a 1901 edition of Emerson's complete works (vol. 4, *Nature and Addresses,* Philadelphia: Ticknor), and is reprinted as well in *Bloom's Classic Critical Views: Ralph Waldo Emerson* (89-106).

Crossing" (an essay title that is itself suggestive of a particular poetics of liminality), "Emerson is the mind of our climate, the principal source of the American difference in poetry, criticism and pragmatic post-philosophy . . . the inescapable theorist of all subsequent American writing" (148). But Emerson's version of a liminal poetics was influenced markedly by the insights of nineteenth-century contemporary German philosophers, especially Goethe, as well as interpretations of a German philosophical dialectic developed by Coleridge and Carlyle.[13] Additional influence came from German-educated New England contemporaries of Emerson's—Edward Everett, George Ticknor, and George Bancroft—all of whom praised German idealism in ways that likely resonated with Emerson before he "re-begat" the particular *geist* of the era into his own image and likeness: "That is always best which gives me to myself" (Emerson 81). Emerson's indebtedness to what is essentially the spirit of the age (as well as to individual European and Eastern philosophers) is unquestionably part of the formation of his poetics; he was in some respects a self-designated filter for all forms of intellectual thinking in his era. "Emerson was as well-versed in world culture as anyone in his time," Joel Porte asserts; "Like some immense Moby-Dick of the mind, he strained all this intellectual plankton [of the age] through himself and became—Emerson" (*Consciousness and Culture* 69). Underscoring the attempt to filter a sea of diverse discourse is Emerson's persistent faith in process and transition for the sake of the vitalizing energy they generate.

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[13] Gustaaf van Cromphout's comprehensive monograph, *Emerson's Modernity and the Example of Goethe*, makes a strong case for Goethe's "organic aesthetics" of transitional processes as being one of the defining influences on Emerson's thinking as early as 1827. The influence of a German philosophical dialectic upon Emerson's system of thought is addressed more fully in the next chapter.

As the conceiver of the "vast ebb of a vast flow" that transitions between alternate incarnations of a "God in nature" and a "weed by the wall" (Emerson 406)—polar opposites emerging and reemerging within a single human identity—Emerson locates the generative energy of re-begetting in the liminal moment, the *peripeteia* of what Victor Turner would later term the "betwixt and between" (*Dramas* 232). As Bloom notes, "the Emersonian cunning always locates power in the place of crossing over, in the moment of transition . . . [He] remains *the* American theoretician of power—be it political, literary, spiritual, economic—because he took the risk of exalting transition for its own sake" ("Power" 150-151). And "power" is precisely what is at stake in Emerson's liminal poetics—in a sense it is the inherent reason we should value an Emersonian system of thought—for power is the term most often ascribed to the creative energy generated in the heart of the transitional moment . . . in *all* transitional moments. The alignment of "transition" with the nomenclature of liminality would be a subsequent, twentieth-century identification, but the earmark of Emerson's influence and his focus on a distinct and dynamic aesthetic process is unmistakable in the oeuvres of Thoreau and Whitman. Emerson may not have used the precise terms of the *rites de passage* or the liminal phase, but he understood and seized the power "residing" (to use his diction) within the physical spaces of concepts and their inherent movements (Emerson 271), and he provides one of the wellsprings from which the later nomenclature emerged.

I propose that a twentieth-century aesthetic perspective made possible by a poetics of liminality can be traced specifically to Emerson's "primary figure of the self-evolving circle," because this single "copious" form in nature is comprised of both *essence* and *process:* as the "highest emblem in the cipher of the world" it is "repeated without end" (403). The significance of this eternally transitioning figure is both teleological and

ontological, for—as Emerson notes—"we are all our lifetime reading the copious sense of this first of forms" (403), this key to both philosophical design and being. The circle represents perfection and eternity in Emerson's system; it "symbolizes the moral fact of the Unattainable, the flying Perfect"— a proof that "there are no fixtures in nature," and that the "universe is fluid and volatile" (403). The self-evolving circle regenerates in transitional moments (where power "resides"), even as its self-evolution forms a new horizon (a liminal borderline) with each ascension: "the eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end" (Emerson 403). Thus *perceived* boundary sites in language emerge in sentient patterns derived from the primary eye-circle, where they can be recognized through the earlier-noted Emersonian key concepts of transition, flow, metamorphosis, polarity, and compensation—concepts highlighted throughout Emerson's works which would subsequently find their way into later theories of liminality and modes of allegory.

For example, Arnold van Gennep's earlier-noted explications of *limen* and *rites de passage* are tied conceptually to Emersonian notions of transition, but van Gennep's theory expands in more definitive ways to include the potential for crossing over into the extraordinary: "so great is the incompatibility between the profane and the sacred worlds, that a man cannot pass from one to the other without going through an intermediate stage," involving "liminal rites of transition" (van Gennep 1, 11). "To cross the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world" (20), van Gennep conjectures further, and his threshold moments of conversion would be addressed with greater complexity fifty-six years later in Angus Fletcher's conception of the "protean device" of allegory, in which liminal language can provide "encoded access" to the portals of sublimity.

During the early 1970's, Victor Turner expanded Van Gennep's concept of the liminal by illuminating the potential for aesthetic process and the production of "myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, works of art" (*Process, Performance* 50) from within the liminal phase; Turner notes that his system builds upon earlier notions of the generative "space between," acknowledging that "liminality is a concept borrowed from the French folklorist Arnold van Gennep" (50). Both theorists draw at least indirectly from the wellspring of a creative vision that Emerson had first shared with a mid-nineteenth-century audience in America and in Europe. In addition, Turner's earlier-cited notion of *communitas*—a social, "relational quality" tied to multiple Emersonian key concepts—would come to identify in cultural criticism a "full, unmediated communication, even communion, between definite and determinate identities" (*Process, Performance* 250). Turner also proposed detailed definitions of liminal space which can help us, retrospectively, to understand Emerson's concepts of polarity and simultaneous compensation (addressed in greater detail in the next chapter), noting that "the most characteristic midliminal symbolism is that of paradox, of being *both* this *and* that" (*Blazing the Trail* 56).

Other later twentieth-century elaborations upon the Emersonian philosophy of transition as it evolved into a poetics of liminality include Mihai Spariosu's contribution of the peace-seeking "irenic" mentality of liminal time-space: "[Because] the idea of agon or contest lies at the foundation of the Western philosophy of difference," Spariosu notes, liminal spaces are essential in that they provide "thresholds or passageways allowing access to alternative worlds" in which the peace-seeking "irenic" mentality will not "experience difference as conflict, but rather as an openness and an opportunity" (119). Spariosu's focus on peace-seeking initiatives and the notion of "access to

alternative worlds" perhaps points more directly to Whitman's liminal poetics than Emerson's, but we will see that Whitman draws from Emerson's understanding of process before forming his own essentially "irenic" response, and the idea of "access" for both Whitman and Spariosu is based on fundamentally Emersonian notions of transition and liminal passage from one state to another, one "world" to the next. Shortly after the publication of Spariosu's 1997 theory on irenic liminality, two volumes of *Studies in Liminality and Literature* (based upon research and seminars in 1999-2000 at the University of Madrid), included essays advancing Victor Turner's conception of the liminal space in addition to offering "a first approximation towards a working theory of liminality."[14] Most of the contributors to the two- volume *Studies* build upon Victor Turner's original conception of the liminal phase, but Paul Giles instead "advances a reassessment of Victor Turner['s] idealization of the *limen* as a site that enables a regenerative rite of passage . . . not[ing] that *limen* has been replaced in more recent critical discourse with the term 'border,' with its by now classic definition by Pratt as a contact zone."[15] In his essay, Giles points out that 'Turner's mythic conception of liminality involved an existential passage between one state and another . . . [but] a poststructuralist reconfiguration of liminality would similarly emphasize its ambivalent or double-edged qualities" (Giles 33). Giles here addresses an essential aspect of threshold positioning in noting the darker possibilities of liminal indeterminacy (and its potential

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[14] See volumes 1 and 2 of *Studies in Liminality and Literature*, especially volume 1, *A Place That is Not a Place*, Ed. Isabel Soto, for a summary of the theories presented in volume 1 (pages 7-16), and eight original essays on liminality by scholars attending the 1999 research seminar in Madrid. The working theory of the "liminal" is described in volume 2 as a "transition area between two or more universes which thereby shares in two or more poetics. In a second sense . . . the term 'liminal' [is] . . . centered around the notion of the threshold, or . . . .the idea of a crossover, an entry or a transgression into the unknown, the Other" (8).

[15] See page 10 of volume 2. Editor Isabel Soto points out that Giles' essay, "From Transgression to Liminality: the Thresholds of Washington Irving" (31-46), "argues that [Turner's] liminality be demythologized while due account be taken of its transgressive potential" (*A Place* 10).

for modeling social and ideological struggles, disruptions, and inequalities), but it is important to acknowledge that Emerson's system of thought—in spite of its emphasis on generally positive aspects of unfolding potential—can equally accommodate the ambivalence of polarity and compensation in processes of transition and change.

These later incarnations of the aesthetic derived from Emerson's transitional cipher are linked through "the truth that around every circle another can be drawn" (Emerson 403), and, in language that suggests that he anticipated the trajectories his cipher would inspire, Emerson reminds us that all new combinations of thought "may conveniently serve us to connect many illustrations of human power in every department" (403). Thus the distinct versions of the liminal aesthetic—the tableau framework, generative correspondences within objective correlatives, and allegorical discourses of separation or sublimity from the perspective of, for example, Fletcher's "hero of consciousness"—can be addressed additionally within other "illustrations" in other "departments." At this point of intersect, van Gennep's tripartite structural configuration of the *rites de passage* template, as noted earlier, emerges as a useful way to accommodate the connection: the tableau framework is sketched within the phase of initiation; the middle phase of transformation aligns with generative moments of threshold or conversion; and the final phase of reintegration signals a return, an enlightenment, or an assimilation in *communitas* that is later mediated in writing. In some respects, van Gennep's understanding of the *rites de passages* in human social formations responds to Emerson's aesthetic or spiritual conception of the dialectic of ebb and flow (406), as well as to the implication that forms are connected (and communicated) in threshold insights:

> For groups, as well as for individuals, life itself is a means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and to rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way. . . there are always new thresholds to cross, [and] beneath a multiplicity of forms, either consciously expressed or merely implied, a typical pattern always recurs: *the pattern of the rites de passages.* (van Gennep 189-191).

In some measure, the figure of the "hero of consciousness" presides over each stage of the rites of passage in this poetics of liminality, either as a consciously placed mediating agent whose role it is to communicate liminal insights, or more subjectively as the "creating" author who assumes the dimensions of the hero of consciousness as he or she explores patterns and liminal contexts in the process of writing. Although Angus Fletcher positions the hero of consciousness on "the threshold"—the "edge at which simultaneous participation in the sacred and the profane becomes available" (*Colors* 167)—the term itself is derived from earlier references by Harold Bloom to "the poet . . . as the hero of internalized quest" (*Ringers* 19), and Bloom's subsequent identification of Hamlet (named in a chapter title) as "the hero of consciousness" (*Hamlet* 143). Bloom notes that "our modern ambivalences . . . ring the hero in an aura that is a kind of taboo" (*Hamlet* 147), and Geoffrey Hartman reinforces this sense of the liminal, separate space of the "hero of consciousness [as] a solitary haunted by vast conceptions in which he cannot participate" (*Easy Pieces* 32).[16] Our "modern ambivalences" are underscored by

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[16] Bloom's initial study in 1971, *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition*—a volume dedicated to Geoffrey Hartman—was followed by Hartman's 1973 essay "Reflections on French Romanticism" that was later published in *Easy Pieces.* Bloom's subsequent Chapter 24 "The Hero of Consciousness" in *Hamlet: Poet Unlimited* was published (in 2003) in Bloom's words, as "a postlude to my *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human,"* published in 1998.

the hero's own ambivalence towards the recognition of his liminal positioning (itself an ambivalent stance "between"), and the hero's heightened consciousness. Eric G. Wilson addresses the particular burden of consciousness assumed by the hero-figure he terms "the sorrowful intellectual [who] becomes adept at a special kind of knowledge: he grows into an expert on boundaries, thresholds, borderlines . . . for there on the terminals things reveal their deepest mysteries: their blurred identities, their relationship to opposites, their tortured duplicities" (*Against Happiness* 74-75). Clearly, enhanced liminal insight is both a blessing and a curse for the hero who sees himself (like Hamlet) as "nothing and everything" (Bloom, *Hamlet* 146); Emerson's hero expresses the same earlier-noted polarity in being both a "God in nature" and a "weed by the wall" (Emerson 406). But because Emerson could see the advantages of an insight enhanced by higher consciousness, he reminds us that "many illustrations of human power" (403) are connected when their relationships are made clear by the individual who is the "sayer, the namer," the poet who "stands on the centre" (449) and mediates between differing perspectives. Both Thoreau and Whitman would develop and explore subsequent illustrations of this model in response to Emersonian poetics, and their examples, in turn, inspired others to seek out the "catalyst for the creative impulse" that Victor Turner recognized as emanating from liminal spaces, as well as to fathom the darker impulses of liminal indeterminacy.

In order to connect the "illustrations of human power" through related examples, the second section of this dissertation will address more specifically the ways in which Emerson's key concepts and foundational notions of spiritual and aesthetic process broke the ground for a widely influential vision of nineteenth-century liminal poetics, the theory of which was put into experimental literary practice in Whitman and Thoreau's specific

trajectories (addressed in sections III - V). Emerson's essays "Nature," "Self-Reliance," "The Poet," "Art," and "Circles" will serve as the primary case studies to define a theoretical context that provided not only what Turner called "a catalyst," but also the "models, templates, and paradigms" which ground the symbols and works of art that "incite us to action as well as to thought" (*Ritual Process* 50). In a broad sense, *Nature* and "Art" provide the necessary template for varied tableaux of initiation; "Self-Reliance" and "Circles" introduce examples of the objective correlatives for the "power that resides in the moment of transition" and transformation; and "The Poet" and selections from *Representative Men* and its Preface, "The Uses of Great Men," consider allegorical paradigms for the "hero[s] of consciousness" who may possibly "incite us" to develop our own thoughts and actions.

Sections III and IV then turn to Thoreau's very different responses to a vision of Emersonian transformational process as it unfolds within the definitive *topos* of the natural landscape.[17] Section III focuses first on the scenes of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers,* addressing framing (and attention to borderlines) as figures of initiation and studying Thoreau's response to depicting natural scenes drawn from recollection; the second part of Section III focuses on *Walden's* landscapes and liminal objective correlatives to show the ways in which Thoreau both expanded and focused the scope of Emerson's more abstract poetics and theories of transitional process. Section IV examines liminal contexts in *The Maine Woods*—especially the allegorical subversion of

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[17] I use *topos* in its original sense from the Greek for "place." Much has been made of "Thoreau's sense of place," as evidenced by the frequently cited collection of essays by that name: *Thoreau's Sense of Place: Essays in American Environmental Writing,* ed. Richard J. Schneider (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000). See page 74 of this thesis for an explication of the "topographical sense" of this usage (N 49).

language and mountaintop sublimity of the "Ktaadn" section—as well as addressing a darker aesthetic expressed in the shipwrecks and liminal shorelines of *Cape Cod.*

Section V addresses Whitman's later response to Emerson's liminal poetics, especially in the way that the persona of "Song of Myself" answers Emerson's call in "The Poet" and then becomes a transitioning hero of consciousness and mediating interpreter of human experience—leading a community of readers out of stasis and through threshold moments of transition. Whitman's Civil War poems (in the collection *Drum Taps* and its various sequels) are then addressed as a specific liminal phase in his development as a poet, especially in the way that Whitman saw the war as first challenging and then realizing his earlier poetic ideal. But perhaps the central case study for Whitman's early attempts to construct an aesthetic form leading both poet and readers through "crossings" is found in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," an enacted rite of passage in which Whitman's desire for *communitas* as the mediating spokesperson and allegorical hero of consciousness is addressed in multiple "crossings" of time, space, and subjectivity.

The study concludes with a brief epilogue sketching a subsequent trajectory for writing in this line—the later "art" of the threshold as the aesthetic that opens a lens into specific moments of initiation, transformation, and incorporation or reintegration. The legacy of Emerson's liminal poetics is then considered briefly in the affective responses of later writers responding to the ways the art of the threshold "incite[s] us" to our own patterns of thinking and acting, but the epilogue focuses most specifically on the mode of aspirant philosophical activity Emerson offered as a starting point. In short, Emerson's transitional cipher as both essence (a highly charged symbol of sensory perception—the eye as "the first circle"), and process (the power of endless evolutions of form)—denotes

an aesthetic perspective that markedly influenced one of the major trajectories of the American intellectual tradition by the mid-point of the nineteenth-century.

Liminal poetics could, then, inform new readings of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman as it provides a working perspective for addressing the language and artistry engendered in the liminal space of the crossing or turn. "Threshold insight" affords the dual perspective of change and immutability, allowing the writer to move beyond the concept of transition as "mere" movement (or law of the universe) to respond to the creative impulse that is sparked in the transitional moment. Lawrence Buell rightly acknowledges that, in Emerson's work, "word-artistry [is given] preeminence by positing a primal link between physical nature and language-making" (Buell, *Emerson* 110), but no current studies of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman explore the specific relationship between liminal concepts found in the forms of nature and the language-making that is generated from a liminal perspective. Examples abound in the work of all three writers in which outlines, boundary lines, midpoints, medians, and interstices serve as the key launching points for description and reflection, and this consistent feature resonates beyond Buell's conclusion that Emerson (and those who followed in his poetics) made of nature a "symbolic discourse, [with] each 'natural fact' corresponding to some 'spiritual fact'" (*Emerson* 110). While Buell and others (including Julie Ellison, Sherman Paul, and Richard Poirier) have helpfully highlighted the correspondential notion of language in Emerson, this study differs in that it expands upon that basis to investigate the dynamic processes of transition in the lines and spaces of the natural world in which symbolic

language is generated.[18] Moreover, by reducing Emerson to a practitioner of "the aesthetics of the fragmentary glimpse [with his] conviction that art is about much more than words," Buell narrows the assessment of Emerson's artistic range and fails to consider the expansive, variegated potential of a liminal perspective. In an aesthetics based on fragments, only partial representation is possible—"What is any man's book compared with the undiscoverable All?"—is the quote from Emerson that Buell cites as representative of this dilemma (*Emerson* 113). Buell concludes that "word makers can't hope to make worlds without active engagement with the palpable world," a doctrine that in Buell's view, "Thoreau takes further" and Emerson aspires toward but fails to achieve (*Emerson* 113). But Emerson's artistry is not so much generated from a fragmentary (partial) glimpse as it is generated from a threshold experience in which opposites can be held in a tension and insight rendered from multiple perspectives. Emerson's liminal poetics accommodates both the perception of the fragment *and* the diverse worlds that are perceived beyond it from the space Victor Turner identified as the earlier-noted "betwixt and between" (*Dramas* 232).

Because a poetics of liminality by its very nature enhances perspective, scope, and insight with its threshold point of focus, it acts as a corrective for both the writers who employ it and the readers who subsequently reflect on the artistry produced in liminal spaces and processes. Liminal poetics, then, essentially provides the "means" for moving past the basic acknowledgment of transition to the cognitive accommodation of contrast and contradiction, thereby re-writing ("re-begetting") these negations as essentially new creations. Emerson's aesthetic and philosophical influence on American life and letters

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[18] See note 3 for more information about the widespread critical perception of Emerson's correspondential notions of language; Buell is one of many to highlight Emerson's perception of language as based upon symbols found in the natural world.

has long been acknowledged, but a specific positioning of this influence within a context of liminal poetics is a largely unexplored area of study. In effect, a poetics of liminality—expressed in a tripartite design of the art of the threshold—opens a lens into the aesthetic processes of Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau as key ideological spokespersons and language artisans of the American Renaissance, even as it reaches beyond their oeuvres to reveal the reference points for one of the most significant expansions of the creative imagination in America.

II. EMERSON'S FOUNDATIONAL NOTIONS OF SPIRITUAL AND AESTHETIC PROCESS

Liminal Poetics and an Emerging System of Thought

Although, as the advocate of "self-reliance," Emerson founded his philosophy on the abandonment of all outside influences, his writings made him a powerful influence on an international range of later authors and thinkers. His influence on Thoreau and Whitman is pervasive in ways that suggest that, as Bloom claims, for such writers—as for those following them in this literary line—Emerson became by far the most dominant precursor, *the* archetype, serving as the determining model for tone, voice, imagery, vision and, most fundamental, a notion of the artist's stance and the conception of aesthetic process. In fact, in mid-nineteenth-century America, even writers who developed deep ambivalence about Emerson's way of thinking, often, like Nathaniel Hawthorne or Herman Melville, turning against his paradigm after an early enthrallment with it, still often base much of their work on Emerson's foundational notions—even as they wrestle with them through contradiction and refutation.[19] And the nature of this Emersonian influence is recognized later on by numbers of important authors from diverse cultures around the globe. The power of this enthrallment is perhaps epitomized in the words of Maurice Maeterlinck (the Belgian playwright and poet), in his 1898 essay, "Emerson"—in phrases that highlight the liminal dynamics fundamental to this transmitted vision:

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[19] Generally speaking, representative American writers whose work could broadly be categorized as Romantic (Thoreau; Whitman) are more directly tied to Emerson's foundational notions; other contemporary "dark" Romantics (Hawthorne; Melville) react against the optimism of the Emersonian archetype. Later representative Realists (Twain; Howells) and Naturalists (Dreiser; Crane) held oppositional views which still can be seen (to some degree) as a direct, albeit contrasting response to Emerson's philosophy, with its emphasis on ever-unfolding potential.

> He comes to many at the moment when he ought to come, and at the very instant when they were in mortal need of new interpretations . . . He has given to life, which had lost its traditional horizon, an almost acceptable meaning, and perhaps he has even been able to show us that it is strange enough, profound enough, great enough, to need no other end than itself. He does not know any more of it than the others do; but he affirms with more courage and he has confidence in the mystery . . . He puts a shaft of light under the foot of the artisan coming out of his workshop. He shows us all the powers of heaven and earth busied in supporting the threshold where two neighbors speak . . . He is the sage of commonplace days; and commonplace days are the sum and substance of our being."[20]

Maeterlinck here voices a sentiment many shared in the decades following Emerson's death, but his Symbolist's figural sensibility underscores the liminal workings of an Emersonian aesthetic with the language of literal moments of threshold and conversion: the sense of the poet speaking to us from and at the threshold, urging readers into the transformational experience of crossing boundaries; a note on the compensation possible for the lost of the "traditional horizon"; the subliminal conjuring of a "shaft of light" to illuminate creative and supernatural energies emerging from beneath the lintel of a doorway. Moreover, Maeterlinck also puts special stress on the threshold moment of allegorical translation between prosaic and sacred levels; in Emerson's philosophy, even a commonplace event can be revealed as the source of artistic creativity, or a conveyer of

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[20] Harold Bloom includes Maeterlinck's essay in his edited edition of *Classic Critical Views: Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 87-89. Maeterlinck adds further that, before Emerson, "We did not know that the laws of the universe attended upon us, and we turn around and stare without saying anything, like people who have seen a miracle" (89).

universal mysteries. In effect, the aesthetic perspective that gave rise to a poetics of liminality—a perspective generated by the power (but also the indeterminacy) of continual regeneration and renewal— would eventually be recognized in Emerson's work as one of the defining influences of American Literature.

That Emerson arrived at many of his foundational principles through or reading about recent scientific study of the natural world is a well-sustained line of analysis, and this thesis does not dispute those claims.[21] But as Emerson argued for a simultaneous and equally proportioned valuation of science *and* art, my focus is largely on the aesthetic trajectory that can be traced in his work, specifically through a recognizable, "coded" language highlighting the dynamics of transition. These often-repeated Emersonian key words and concepts (the earlier noted transition, flow, metamorphosis, polarity, and compensation), both emerge from and subsequently define the continuing influence of liminal place and process in Emerson's vision. The idea of "transition" and its particular power and potential are at the core of Emerson's poetics, but its foundational offshoots—the related key concepts noted above—expand the idea of transition beyond a status as a basic law of the natural universe to include a recognition of the resulting correspondential aesthetic that is sparked and formed in the transitional moment of perception.

Perhaps not surprisingly, a number of recent critics addressing Emerson's sustained study of science note that his valuation of art and aesthetics is so fundamental that it cannot easily be divorced from a science-based critical inquiry. Clearly, Emerson was influenced markedly by the "early romantic aesthetic . . . to romanticize the world

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[21] Twentieth-century conjectures on Emerson's scientific studies date back to Harry Hayden Clark's 1931 "Emerson and Science" (*Philological Quarterly* 10: 3), 225-260, and expand to include (among other related works): Gay Wilson Allen's " New Look at Emerson and Science"(1975); Carl Strauch's "Emerson's Sacred Science"(1958); Eric Wilson's *Emerson's Sublime Science* (1999), and Laura Dassow Walls' *Emerson's Life in Science: the Culture of Truth* (2003). See pages 30-31 for a detailed explication of the relevant science addressed by more recent critics, including Walls.

itself," Frederick Beiser notes of the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century attempt to realize "a synthesis of science and art" (8, 15). In particular, Frederich Schlegel's alignment of the "creative power in human beings . . . with the *productive principle* in nature itself . . . that productive power of the *natura naturans*" (Beiser 15, 21), directed Emerson to Nature as the forum best suited for human creative endeavors. In fact, not only was art "placed . . . within its general metaphysical context" in Schlegel's doctrine, but *natura naturans* also "guaranteed the *truth* of aesthetic production. For if what the artist creates is also what nature creates through him, then his activity reveals, manifests, or expresses nature itself; it is indeed the *self-revelation* of nature" (Beiser 21-22). Thus, inspired by Schlegel and other early romanticists, Emerson studied the natural world for the ways it reveals the creative principle, but he also, more particularly, studied nature to know better the phenomenon of "change," and other critics who address Emerson's science-based approach analyze the various ways he relates scientific inquiry to conceptual processes.

For example, Peter Balaam's 2009 *Miseries Mathematics* addresses Emerson's creative use of Lyell's geology as a natural model of process and transition (including the earth's varied catastrophic shifts—in examples of massive earthquakes), an influence which Balaam sees as directly tied to Emerson's emerging style and philosophy. Balaam notes that Emerson "borrowed from geological science whatever analogies he could" (24), and "reading Lyell had begun to lead [him] to analogous efforts at articulating the principles in his own work" (36). Similarly, in *Emerson's Life in Science*, Laura Dassow Walls argues that while "Emerson was keenly interested in three of the scientific arenas of the day: theories of transmutation, or evolution; race and species; statistics and probability" (167), he was drawn most to the elements of change and transition that

would eventually give what he called "the poetic key to Natural Science" (qtd. in Walls, 169). Walls additionally points out that Emerson's "reading in Charles Lyell and George Cuvier" had convinced him that "life had undergone successive transformations," but Emerson "did not as yet have a mechanism to account for the changes" (168). A number of critics, including Walls, have agreed that Emerson did eventually arrive at his own conceptions of such a mechanism, but these critics do not then examine in detail the workings of the complex system of thought comprising a poetics of liminality that Emerson developed in the process of these investigations.[22] Although he is rightly seen as non-systematic or even anti-systematic in his thinking, Emerson's poetics do develop as a dynamic system; in effect, he expands the base conceptions of change and transition beyond a status as a natural law of physics to emphasize the resulting aesthetic that is created in the transitional moment, in the liminal "space between." For Emerson, the synthesis of science and a liminal aesthetic is realized in the spirit of the Poet: "By virtue of this science the poet is the Namer, or Language-maker . . . thereby rejoicing the intellect, which delights in detachment or boundary" (456-457). In Emerson's liminal poetics, "boundary" has the potential to be both a limit and passageway; an experience on edges and borderlines can evolve into a threshold encounter in the intellect of the Poet.

Moreover, an assessment of the ways in which Emerson develops the key concepts of transition, flow, metamorphosis, polarity, and compensation will show that

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[22] In *Emerson's life in Science,* Laura Dassow Walls does analyze the evolution of Emerson's method to the point of "becom[ing] a hybrid, a poet-scientist who would legislate for humanity" (197). Walls systematically traces the influence of first Lyell and Cuvier, and then Chambers, Agassiz, and Oken upon Emerson's evolving "dialectical or oscillating movement across the poles of his thought" (196). See also the science-based analysis of Emerson's "method" in the earlier-cited works by Peter Balaam and Eric G. Wilson, as well as Robert J. Richard's *Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe*, and Eduardo Cadava's *Emerson and the Climates of History*, all of which emphasize scientific visions of transition in the natural world as a foundational principal for Emerson's emerging aesthetics. None of these critics, however, considers a key-concept based system of thinking as a way of understanding Emerson's liminal poetics.

liminal contexts are both pervasive and foundational in Emerson's work.[23] The first part of this chapter will note the pattern of repetition and expansion of these key concepts in Emerson's writing, particularly in his published essays and addresses; the second part of this chapter will address the ways in which a number of Emerson's essays and addresses can serve as case studies for an emerging nineteenth-century mode of liminal poetics. I suggest that many writers during the nineteenth-century began to approach nature and the world of forms from the vantage point of liminal process under the tutelage of Emerson—with his stress on what is not so much a celebration of transition itself, but rather on an aesthetic perspective engendered in the "potential" of the transitional moment—a perspective communicated by the Poet from his positioning on the threshold. Emerson's most significant contribution, then, is in developing a system of thought seen to be analogous to the processes of many aspects of contemporary natural science, but which more importantly provided a systemic foundation for an energized way of thinking, living, and writing. In short, the acceptance of impermanence, the embrace of the new that continually transitions and flows from the old—as well as an awareness of the potential of metamorphosis, polarity, and compensation—all contributed to a new vision for writers and thinkers in an era between the rationalism of the eighteenth-century and the realism of the industrial era. Emerson's liminal poetics explains more than the processes of change; it addresses a progression through a teleological and ontological system that can be communicated in language. Admittedly, this vision was part of a larger and more global "spirit of the age" characterizing the first half of the nineteenth-

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[23] I have chosen these five key concepts as representative illustrations of a particular diction in Emerson's writing that addresses a context of liminality. (An expanded canon of keywords—beyond the scope of this study—would also include related concepts such as emanation, ascension, portal, and process, for example.) The assessment of key concept use is limited to the published essays and addresses—except for a few select examples from the *Journals* and uncollected writings—to emphasize the conscious choice of the diction in selections Emerson revised repeatedly, often drawing this material from lectures and initial journal entries.

century, but Emerson more than any other writer or philosopher in antebellum America gave voice to this vision, grounding it in language emanating from the liminal spaces of the natural world.[24] Robert D. Richardson's critical biography, *Emerson,* accounts for the role of natural process as catalysts for Emerson's emerging system of thought through a simple analogy: "As our aesthetics are grounded in nature, so is our language" (230).

Somewhat ironically, Emerson is understood by critics as "the Transcendentalist with the least firsthand knowledge of German philosophy" (Gura, *American* 92), even though (as noted earlier) German idealism is widely credited with providing the philosophic foundation for the rejection of eighteenth-century empiricism and the embrace of change and renewal in all things—factors which became Emerson's keynotes for an American clarion call to "demand our own works and laws and worship" (Emerson 7). But Emerson drew from many lines of thinking in responding to the spirit of the age; as Philip F. Gura notes, "his Idealism originated more in long-term interest in Plato and Neoplatonism, an immersion in Goethe . . . the mediation of British writers like Carlyle and Coleridge, and Sampson Reed's redaction of Swedenborgian thought" (*American Transcendentalism* 91). Admittedly, Emerson was compelled most by the unfolding potential of vitalism and renewal emphasized in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century German thinking, even as many of these tenets were filtered first through Coleridge and Carlyle, in particular.[25] But even as he drew from multiple known and

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[24] For a comprehensive analysis of the global "spirit of the age," especially in light of the influence of German idealism, see Terry' Pinkard's *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism*, and Frederick C Beiser's *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism*, portions of which are quoted earlier in this chapter.

[25] Beiser notes that German Idealism as expressed by Schlegel emphasized "creative *activity*, the *process* by which something is produced." Moreover, the "most essential feature of any romantic work is 'its becoming,' the fact that it is never complete but that it destroys itself only to create itself forever anew" (Beiser 17). See also Joel Porte's *Representative Man* ("Eastering"; "Living Leaping Logos") for more information on the influence of Carlyle and Coleridge in Emerson's "pilgrimage to Europe" (51).

unknown resources, Emerson distilled from these his own system of thought and personalization of the *geist* of the era, basing his line of thinking on a vision of the ceaseless evolutions of transitional process—including those evolutions and transformations that lie outside of our powers of perception.

In the most basic sense, one can deduce from Emerson's science and philosophy that all borderlines in nature and the world of forms are seen to be in varied processes of reinscription—essentially transitioning from one recognizable entity to another—even in the most minute of molecular-level processes. This scientific reality, one Emerson recognized, produces a particular irony of situation, for the traced outlines and boundary markers which may, on one level, point to the static integrity of a scene of description, can also be seen as the active zones of movement and change. Thus, the boundaries or edges defining the world of forms and the spaces between these forms, both animate and inanimate, can all be conceived as liminal to some degree, and the language used to describe a perceived scene can bring out this potential by drawing from a recognizable poetics of the liminal—one addressing both entity and process.[26] The foundational premise of this poetics begins in transition—the "moment" Emerson describes in "Self-Reliance" as the point of origin for power as a form of energy—but transition as a

[26] Although the concept of liminal passage at the site of borderlines and edges on this basis is largely my own viewpoint, a recent query to anthropologist Edith Turner and the subsequent exchange that followed reinforced this possibility of liminal transition outside of the context of a rite of passage. I quote here from my July 20, 2009 interview with Edith Turner, in which I asked Turner if "the liminal can be distilled from the sequence of rites of passage." Turner replied: "I think this is interesting. There seems to be a form of the liminal not to do with rites of passage . . . there's a kind of door, a limen to this. Rites of passage come from that; it doesn't derive from rites of passage. The rites of passage open the cracks into it" (E. Turner).

primary concept is addressed directly and indirectly in at least twelve different essays and addresses written by Emerson between 1841 and 1875.[27]

Patterns of Repetition and Expansion: Key Words and Concepts

Clearly, "transition" is better addressed conceptually rather than chronologically in Emerson's writing, especially since he uses it frequently as a concept to address the pervasiveness of change in all experience. For example, in the essay "Circles," from the 1841 *First Series*—which Emerson biographer Robert D. Richardson refers to as "perhaps his best expression of the endlessly open and unfixed nature of things" (*Emerson* 339), —Emerson warns that "nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit" (413). Although "Circles" is a relatively early essay, Stephen Whicher sees it as marking a point of transition in Emerson's thinking and writing: "'Circles' . . . stands on the edge between the earlier and later periods in his thought and shows internal evidence that his thought is in a state of transition" (27). The concept of transition is the first key to Emerson's system of thought as well as being a descriptor of Emerson's emerging aesthetics—especially in the pivotal mid-point of development Whicher

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[27] The twelve volume Centenary Edition of Emerson's complete works—published in 1903-1904 by Emerson's son Edward Waldo Emerson—includes a comprehensive index in volume XII. The word "transition" is featured in sixteen instances in Emerson's writing between 1841 and 1875 according to this index, and entries are included for additional named key concepts such as flow/flowing (which first appears even earlier in Emerson's writing, in 1836), metamorphosis, polarity, and compensation. I am indebted to Harry Orth, professor emeritus at the University of Vermont and one of the editors of the sixteen-volume *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* for this research advisement regarding a summary account of these five key concepts in Emerson's writing. More recently, Glen Johnson's volume 3 edition of *The Topical Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* of which Harry Orth is the chief editor, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), includes an index noting many of the key concepts, but it does not reference the essays and addresses included in the Centenary Edition.

identifies as the catalyst for the essay "Circles."[28] In another *First Series* essay, "Love," Emerson further addresses the transitional energies of art: "The god or hero of the sculptor is always represented in a transition *from* that which is representable to the senses, *to* that which is not" (333). In this sense, transition is envisioned as a passage from aesthetic form to "formless" meaning or spirit; as a concept it addresses the elusiveness of creative powers. Transition is implied in the subsequent address of "creative power" in the essay "Experience": "But it is impossible that the creative power should exclude itself. Into every intelligence there is a door which is never closed, through which every creator passes" (476). Here transition is necessary to the access of artistic "intelligence"; the creator in effect passes through a liminal portal in the threshold experience of creating a work of art. Transition becomes the source of creative power in the previously quoted passage from the essay "Plato," in which Emerson describes our strength as "transitional, alternating . . . a thread of two strands." For "the experience of poetic creativeness" is itself found "in transition," and it is optimized by the exposure of "as much transitional surface as possible" (641). In a later development of idea in the essay "Power," Emerson finds that "everything good in nature and the world is in that moment of transition, when the swarthy juices still flow plentifully from nature, but their astringency or acridity is got out by ethics and humanity" (980). Clearly, receptiveness to change and "alternat[ion]" is a catalyst for artistic creativity and a source of "everything good"; Emerson encourages us to maximize this potential by expanding the liminal surfaces of transition—"as much . . . as possible"—as we perceive these surfaces in the

[28] For additional analysis of transition as a foundational concept in the essay "Circles," see Joel Porte's *Representative Man: Ralph Waldo Emerson in His Time*, and Leonard Neufeldt's *The House of Emerson*. Neither critic emphasizes transition as the beginning key concept in an integrated system of thought, however.

natural world. Playing upon an analogy between nature and language, transitions between "acrid" matter and "ethical" spirit are expressed with teleological potential; in the liminal designs of natural world, Emerson sees through to the design of the Universe. In the essay "Beauty," Emerson again ties transition conceptually to the key concept of "flow": "Beauty is the moment of transition, as if the form were just ready to flow into other forms. Any fixedness . . . is the reverse of the flowing . . . To this streaming or flowing belongs the beauty that all circular movement has" (1105). This alignment of transition and flow then leads us to a second key aesthetic consideration in Emerson's system of thought; he stresses a process of flowing as opposed to any fixedness of forms as essential to this specific design.

For example, in an 1855 journal entry Emerson would remark that "flowing is the secret of things . . . the instinct of the Universe, in which *Becoming somewhat else* is the whole game of nature, and death the penalty of standing still . . . Liberty means the power to flow. To continue is to flow. Life is unceasing parturition."[29] The characterization of life as "unceasing parturition" emphasizes the power of re-begetting that is engendered in flow—it is the instinct of all things in the Universe to bring forth new emanations, new "flowings." In other examples from the journals and in many uncollected writings, Emerson would continue to repeat the same phrasings with slight variations: "all things are flowing; the nature of things is flowing; all things are in flux." [30]

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[29] See page 460 in *Emerson in his Journals*, ed. Joel Porte (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982) for the full text of this passage. The sixteen volumes of Emerson's journals (the source material from which Porte's quoted text is drawn) contain, as noted earlier, many examples of the key concepts and other related liminal keywords—but a full account of those examples is beyond the scope of this study.

[30] These last three examples are found in the Centenary Edition, volume VII page 145, and volume VIII, pages 71 and 200, respectively; all are examples drawn from Emerson's "Uncollected Prose." I focus primarily on Emerson's eight books of essays and addresses for the specific keyword analysis, omitting the many examples of keyword repetition from the uncollected pieces, the poetry, and the various essays

The concept of flowing, moreover, emerges in the 1836 *Nature* first in an allusion to the divine power that flows like an "unfailing fountain" through us as a creation of spirit: "that spirit . . . does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us . . . As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God; he is nourished by unfailing fountains, and draws, at his need, inexhaustible power" (41). Thus spirit "flows," and expresses (like a moving stream) the "currents of the Universal Being [that] circulate" through the human form (10). Significantly, this system of flowing is part of the earlier-noted transparent eyeball passage; as Eric G. Wilson notes, here Emerson "merges lucidity and obscurity, abstraction and concretion: matter and spirit" (*Spiritual History* 39). In a sense, the whole landscape in the transparent eyeball passage is made to flow at visionary epiphany. In a subsequent example in *Nature,* Emerson offers another implied analogy: "Who looks upon a river in a meditative hour, and is not reminded of the flux of all things?" (21).

The primary importance of flow (or "the flowing") and its variations as a key concept is sustained through Emerson's writing between 1836 and 1860, emphasized in the two earlier noted examples from *The Conduct of Life,* "Power" and "Beauty," but particularly in the first and last essays of the 1860 collection. In the first essay, "Fate," which Emerson biographer Robert D. Richardson describes as the "last full exploration of the meaning of nature and its processes" (*Emerson* 500), Emerson expands and links the concept of flow to "the power to flux" as a conscious endeavor: "Every solid in the universe is ready to become fluid on the approach of the mind, and the power to flux is

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manufactured by Emerson's son out of old lecture manuscripts. (Additionally, the Library of America Edition of Emerson's works used in this study no longer includes "Uncollected Prose," but the Centenary Edition contains the later writings, a number of which are edited significantly by Edward Emerson.)

the measure of the mind" (964). Thus, in Emerson's conception of process, the mind meeting solid-seeming nature triggers the liminal and transitional vision whereby fixed matter is revealed as a moment of flowing spirit. ("To flux," then, becomes for Emerson the vocation of the poet.) [31] But, in Emerson's system, even thoughts themselves also continue to evolve and flow endlessly; in "Illusions," the final essay of *The Conduct of Life*, Emerson remarks that "at last, even our thoughts are not finalities, but the incessant flowing and ascension reach these also" (1121). Even in the sobering discovery of the "illusions of life"—that "in every moment, new changes and new showers of deceptions . . . baffle and distract" (1123)—the mind still benefits from a particular clarity of insight in "the incessant flowing and ascension" (1121). For Emerson, the flowing is also a means by which forms ascend into higher forms in a fulfillment of potential, but ascension is not always a marked amelioration. The essay "Illusions," for example, echoes Emerson's darker recognition in "Experience" of life processes that are so ever-changing and ceaselessly flowing that a particular recognition or emotion cannot long be held; instead these life moments may "make no impression, [or] are forgotten next week" (492).

Moreover, Emerson ties the concept of flow to the specific activities and aspirations of individuals who—like the "hero of consciousness"—have the burden of insight even as they lead others by their example. In *Representative Men*, the cognitive recognition of "flow" is an attribute of enhanced perception: Swedenborg knows "the flowing of nature" (671) and Montaigne's "superior mind" perceives "the flowing power

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[31] Representative critics addressing Emerson's concept of flow as a singular point of emphasis (rather than a key concept in an integrated system of thinking) include F.O. Matthiessen (see chapter 7, "The Flowing" in *The American Renaissance*), and Christopher Windolph (see chapter 4, "Emerson's Flowing Law," in *Emerson's Nonlinear Nature*).

which remains itself in all changes" (702). In the essay "The Poet," Emerson links flow with the idea of metamorphosis, repeating both key concepts and their variations a total of twelve times: The poet "sees the flowing or metamorphosis . . . and so his speech flows with the flowing of nature" (456). Nature "baptizes herself . . . through the metamorphosis again" (457); when "new passages are opened for us into nature, the mind flows into and through things hardest and highest, and the metamorphosis is possible" (460). Moreover, "the metamorphosis excites in the beholder an emotion of joy . . . for, the metamorphosis once seen, we divine that it does not stop" (461). In a sense, metamorphosis is a mid-liminal stage in Emerson's system of thought in the way it addresses the transformative basis of his aesthetic: it is linked with the concept of flow ("flow" makes the metamorphosis "possible"), and it inspires a positive emotion when perceived by the beholder, as does a work of art and the contemplation of beauty.[32] Emerson notes additionally that Plato "defines a line to be a flowing point" (461); with Swedenborg, "the metamorphosis continually plays" (464). Finally, in "The Poet," we are reminded that "the quality of the imagination is to flow, and not to freeze . . . for all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive" (463). Emerson's system of thought is in one sense a model for how the universe works, but it is also a model for how language works—and in this sense the poet becomes the agent of flux who speaks (and generates language) from his threshold positioning, interpreting and translating symbols drawn from the processes of the natural world.

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[32] The significance of metamorphosis as a concept in Emerson's system of thought is noted in Leonard Neufeldt's earlier-cited text, *The House of Emerson,* as well as in Daniel B. Shea's essay, "Emerson and the American Metamorphosis," addressed more fully on pages 41-42 of this thesis chapter. Both critics see metamorphosis as "the" essential element in Emersonian philosophy, but not necessarily the central point of peripety in an integrated system of thinking—followed by the dialectic of polarity and a subsequent compensatory re-balancing.

The related key concept "metamorphosis" (as noted earlier), is nearly always linked syntactically with "flow," "flux," and "flowing," but occasionally metamorphosis is addressed in isolation—as a pivotal mid-point of transformation in Emerson's system of thought—in the essays and addresses. In the essay 'The Over-Soul," for example, the science of metamorphosis (elsewhere Emerson acknowledges knowing Goethe's " simple theory of metamorphosis" [33])—provides an analogy for the way the soul progresses spiritually and philosophically: "The soul's advances are not made by gradation, such as can be represented by motion in a straight line; but rather by ascension of state, such as can be represented by metamorphosis,—from the egg to the worm, from the worm to the fly" (389). In Emerson's system, process and potential are intrinsically linked; the soul ameliorates through "ascension of state," and the wondrous, transformative aspects of metamorphosis are emphasized.[34] In a related example in the earlier-noted essay, "Illusions," Emerson explains that "the intellect sees that every atom carries the whole of Nature; that the mind opens to omnipotence; that in the endless strivings and ascents, the metamorphosis is entire, so that the soul doth know itself in its own act, when that act is perfected" (1120). Clearly, Emerson sees the concept of metamorphosis in this example as intrinsically connected with aspirant activity; when "entire," metamorphosis can perfect the soul as it ascends through stages of development.

In a sense, Emerson's own lifetime of aspirant activity is linked closely to this foundational concept of metamorphosis. Daniel B. Shea observes that "the notion of metamorphosis served Emerson well through the distinctive stages of his development"

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[33] The reference appears in Volume X (page 388) of the *Centenary Edition* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co, 1903) 388, in one of the uncollected "Lectures and Biographical Sketches" heavily edited by Edward Waldo Emerson.

[34] From the Greek *meta* (change) and *morphe* (form), metamorphosis, as noted in the *OED,* denotes a transformation, as by magic or sorcery.

(38), and indeed named references to "metamorphosis" span over thirty years—from 1844 to 1875—in Emerson's published works, but the first identification of the term in his writing (according to Shea) appears as early as 1822.[35] Shea continues with a comprehensive assessment of Emerson's use of the key concept, noting that "at various times he employs metamorphosis to mean: the soul's awakening; the perpetual miracle of nature; the leap of natural fact into spiritual fact as symbol or metaphor; simple process; process as becoming and amelioration; the dynamic of nature by which spiritual law is visibly incarnated; and in the social order, the decay of institutions and their replacement by increasingly humane and therefore divine systems of organization" (38). Calling metamorphosis the "most intriguing of [Emerson's] metaphors," Shea still finds that Emerson's primary discovery was that "metamorphosis goes forward in two phases—one progressive, the other regressive" (30, 44). Shea thus begins important recognition of the dialectical workings of Emerson's concept of metamorphosis, but he does not account for the turning point of metamorphosis (in effect, its *perepetia*), in an unfolding system of thought. Because of its centered positioning in Emerson's teleological system, metamorphosis functions at a balance point in the unity of the natural world, and through a philosophy Emerson probably learned in his reading of Heraclitus, unity depends on a balance between opposites. For Heraclitus, change in one direction (progressive change) leads to change in the other (regressive change), and therefore "all things are in a state of flux (*panta rhei).*"[36]

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[35] Shea describes this reference in 1822 as "Emerson's first, fastidious references to a pagan invention . . . [a] 'strange metamorphosis' " (38). Later, Goethe's *Metamorphosis of Plants* would inspire Emerson to "hail Goethe's 'prophetic vision' of metamorphosis" in an 1836 lecture (Shea 39).

[36] See *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature,* 2nd Edition, for Heraclitus' assertion of "balance between opposites." Said to have "written a book entitled 'On Nature,'" (circa 470 BC), Heraclitus believed that "wisdom lies in understanding that the world has an underlying coherence and is a unity" (269). F.O. Matthiessen was one of the first critics to note that Emerson was responding to Heraclitus in

This essential dialectic of progression and regression is addressed and elaborated through two additional key concepts in Emerson's system of thought that define the basis of his liminal poetics: polarity and compensation.[37] Polarity is featured as a key concept numerous times in the essays and addresses: in two of the more significant examples from the 1844 *Second Series*, it is seen first in the essay "Character" in the "positive and negative poles" of "everything in nature" (499); polarity is then implied in "the fact of two poles, of two forces" (565) which operate in the dichotomy between the individual and the state in the essay "Politics." But polarity can also be seen as limited to the dynamics of individual perception in that it is generated by one's perspective: in our "incompetence to solve the times," in the earlier noted essay "Fate," Emerson finds that "our geometry cannot span the huge orbits of the prevailing ideas . . . and reconcile their opposition" –instead "we can only obey our own polarity" (943). Still, for Emerson polarity is ultimately "redeemed" by compensation followed by yet another transition, and the cipher of the circle is endlessly reenacted because of "the circular or compensatory character of every human action" (Emerson 403).

For "compensation" (defined in the OED as a form of "counterbalancing"), Emerson offers a series of pairings and comparisons spread out over at least six of the essays, the largest concentration of which are found in the essay by the same name in the *First Series,* "Compensation." In many instances, compensation is linked conceptually with the related keyword polarity, as opposing poles of thought and form are often

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assessing "the prevailing thought of his century, its reassertion of the Heraclitean doctrine of the Flowing" (69).

[37] Representative criticism addressing Emerson's dialectic and the concepts of polarity and compensation includes: Stephen Railton's "Seeing and Saying: The Dialectic of Emerson's Eloquence," William Torrey Harris' "The Dialectic of Unity in Emerson's Prose," R.A. Yoder's "Emerson's Dialectic," and Lawrence Buell's "Reading Emerson for the Structures: The Coherence of the Essays." These critics note the pervasiveness of dialectic in Emerson's thought, but they do not incorporate polarity and compensation as key concepts in a system of thought based on liminal transition.

counterbalanced in comparison. Robert D. Richardson views the essay "Compensation" as "Emerson's foundational essay on the balance of nature, the idea of the universe as a whole, no part of which can be changed without affecting the other parts . . . [it] bears witness also to Emerson's by now pervasive awareness of change, growth, process, metamorphosis" (*Emerson* 322-323). Emerson begins the essay "Compensation" with acknowledgment that he had planned since childhood "to write a discourse on Compensation" as it would be based on the very stuff of life: the "endless variety . . . the tools in our hands . . . the transactions in the street . . . the nature and endowment of all men" (285). In offering an early comparison of the material disparity between "unprincipled men" and "saints," Emerson notes that "a compensation is to be made to these last hereafter, by giving them like gratification the next day . . . this must be the compensation intended" (286). Two paragraphs later, at the point in the essay that Emerson promises "to record some facts that indicate the path of the law of Compensation" (286), he follows immediately with an extended explication of "polarity" as a definition via analogy through a series of counterbalancing pairs:

> Polarity, or action and reaction, we meet in every part of nature; in darkness and light; in heat and cold; in the ebb and flow of waters; in male and female; in the inspiration and expiration of plants and animals; . . . in the systole and diastole of the heart; . . . in the centrifugal and centripetal gravity; . . . If the south attracts, the north repels. To empty here, you must condense there . . . Whilst the world is thus dual, so is every one of its parts. (Emerson 286-287)

Moreover, this particular sense of duality develops as a version of the notion of dialectic when it is combined with the base idea of eternal flow: "all things are double,

one against the other.—Tit for tat; an eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth; blood for blood; measure for measure; love for love" (293). In the essay "Circles" from the same *First Series,* Emerson would remark upon "one moral we have already deduced, in considering the circular or compensatory character of every human action," but in this essay a more advanced analogy is yet possible: "that every action admits of being outdone" (403). Emerson also explores the compensatory dialectic of conversation in "Circles," for "conversation is a game of circles" in which "each new speaker strikes a new light [and] emancipates us from the oppression of the last speaker" (408). This dialectic, however, is less a movement between opposites and more an indication that Emerson values process over product: the moment of transition between speakers takes precedence over any one example of speech. In the later essay, "Power" (addressed earlier in the context of "flow"), Emerson notes that a "belief in compensation . . . characterizes all valuable minds" (971); in assessing the varying qualities of individuals in "New England Reformers," he observes that "each seems to have some compensation yielded to him by his infirmity" (607). In effect, this system of opposites works as a dialectic in which all things are seen as cantilevering forms that balance one another (such as the "compensate[ing]" good that arises out of "infirmity"), and the goal, ultimately, is to see forms translated into higher forms in Emerson's system of thought. But when ascension isn't possible, the system must still provide for an ameliorating perspective—a compensation for detachment without transition to a higher form. As Julie Ellison notes in an acute insight, because the "condition of detachment unredeemed by transition is one of loss" for Emerson, "he compensates for the failure of transitional energy by introducing teleology . . . Separate insights, images, and sentences are defined, not as the termini of energetic oscillation, but as parts evolving in the direction of wholeness"

(*Emerson's Romantic Style* 190-191). Ellison addresses an essential aspect of Emerson's system of thought in emphasizing process over finished form; the design or purpose in this system is grounded by the activity of "becoming."[38]

In Emerson's teleology, the liminal designs of the natural world are also the designs of the spirit, and compensation and polarity are linked by analogy as key concepts in the 1837 address, "The American Scholar":

> That great principle of Undulation in nature, that shows itself in the inspiring and expiring of the breath; in desire and satiety; in the ebb and flow of the sea; in day and night; in heat and cold; and as yet more deeply ingrained in every atom and every fluid, is known to us under the name of Polarity,—these . . . are the law of nature because they are the law of the spirit." (62)

In this passage, Emerson's assertions of the value of polarity and compensation as completing his system of thought is important because it ultimately points to the role of the poet in interpreting and translating the symbols and designs of the natural world. As Julie Ellison explains, "The purpose of reducing nature to an allegory of spirit is to make the author-idealist feel powerful by treating the world as an element of his own mind: 'Possessed himself by a heroic passion, he uses matter as symbols in it'" (*Emerson's Romantic Style* 91-92).

In effect, Emerson's system of thinking provides a working template for varied transitional processes—in which each variation begins first with points of initiation in the

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[38] Emersonian process and the notion of becoming in this example echo the earlier-cited (and highly charged) gerunds in the passage from "Self-Reliance": "in the shooting of the gulf; in the darting to an aim" (Emerson 271). The "becoming" nature of gerunds—with their "ing" verbal forms acting as nouns—has an etymological origin in the gerund of *gerere*, "to carry on."

acknowledgment of omnipresent change and flowing expansion, is then followed by the midpoint of metamorphic change or reversal, and ultimately moves toward the larger dialectic of polarity and eventual compensatory reconciliation—only to begin the cycle anew. In a sense, the key concepts comprise a staged system of transitional process which is not unlike the template of van Gennep's later *rites de passages*, with its tripartite balance of initiation (Emersonian transition and flow), transformation (Emersonian metamorphosis), and reassimilation or reaggregation (Emersonian polarity and compensation). Moreover, it is the Poet who leads us through the stages of this system of thought, which traces not just mere processes of change, but rather the design of a teleological progression through linked key concepts. As Charles Feidelson, Jr. notes, "Emerson's purpose in generalizing his conception of 'language' was precisely to compensate for the pull of rationalism on words and things alike . . . to describe all human activity as 'intertranslateable language' was to redefine both reality and speech by putting both in terms of creative activity. 'Words,' Emerson said, 'are also actions,' just as 'actions are a kind of words'" (144). Feidelson concludes that "Emerson's work has enduring value because his point of view, partial as it was, implied its opposite," but he also does not see Emersonian doctrines as "elements of a system" (156, 154)—an analysis I contest in my view that Emerson's liminal poetics are highly systematic. Rather (in Feidelson's understanding), Emerson's "originality consisted in trying to take his stand precisely at the gateway through which . . . opposite movements pass" (142). In this sense, Emerson's threshold positioning enables him to more effectively convey liminal insight and experience in set-piece passages found in the essays and addresses, albeit in a more sustained and integrated system than Fiedelson suggests. A full explication of the Emersonian Poet's position at the threshold will follow in part two of this chapter, for it is

in the Poet's transition from "seeing" to "saying" that Emerson conveys—in allegorical form—the essential purpose of his liminal poetics.

Liminal Set-Piece Passages in the Essays and Addresses

Clearly, the major key concepts of transition, flow, metamorphosis, polarity, and compensation are pervasive in Emerson's writing, and taken together as a system of thought they provide a prescriptive to the workings of his liminal poetics. But the essays and addresses are also linked by key liminal images and symbols in set-piece scenes of meditative self-expression and scenic description that work as enactments of liminal experience and vision, as well as by the way the essays can also fit topically into the tripartite structure of van Gennep's *rites de passages*. These scenic descriptions are themselves enactments of access to liminal insight—they signal enhanced and variegated perspectives with their emphasis on outlines, thresholds, borderlines, and interstices. Additionally, the framework of van Gennep's *rites* emphasizes the way that Emerson himself saw his work as aesthetic "process" and continual passage even as the same concepts and images recur throughout his work. Because the *rites* are essentially enactments of transition in recognizable stages—with a mid-liminal phase of transformation leading to an incorporation or re-aggregation—they provide a working template for aesthetic and creative processes. Moreover, van Gennep's rationale for this template is parallel to Emerson's thinking: "The universe itself is governed by periodicity which has repercussions in human life, with stages and transitions, [and] movements forward" (van Gennep 3).

The emergence of a nineteenth-century liminal poetics begins with Emerson explaining his notion of how language and nature are connected aesthetically, for, in Emerson's view, the writer's task is to uncover a *new* aesthetic for written expression—to "pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things" (23). That the new aesthetic is to be found in a liminal context is unmistakable: we are assured as early as in the 1836 *Nature* that the "light" of nature "flows into the mind" at the "moment our discourse rises above the ground line of familiar facts" (23). This crossing of the "ground line" is already an initial threshold experience in which Emerson finds that "good writing and brilliant discourse are perpetual allegories" (23); nature thus becomes a language for the allegorical representing of "natural facts" as "spiritual facts." Almost twenty-five years later, in "Beauty," Emerson remains convinced of this essential connection of nature and language: "All the facts in Nature are the nouns of the intellect, and make the grammar of the eternal language" (1111). In effect, a poetics of liminality promises that, at liminal or threshold moments, through the "language" of nature we can achieve insight into a world beyond the visible realm; within described points of process and transition we have, to use Angus Fletcher's words, the possibility of "simultaneous participation in the sacred and the profane" (*Colors* 167).

Moreover, the most effective descriptions of liminal images are produced, not simply by the scientists who understand on a cognitive level the laws of physics behind nature's transitional processes, but rather by the poets who not only know "where" to look, but also how subsequently to integrate what is seen in language that will enable others to see more essentially. In Emerson's system, the poet sees the flowing of nature and takes that flowing into his language, through a "very high sort of seeing, which [comes] . . . by the intellect . . . sharing the path, or circuit of things through forms, and so

making them translucid to others" (Emerson 459). Various descriptions in Emerson's work of the liminal image of the horizon provide an apt context for this analysis, for Emerson addresses the relationship between the horizon as image in nature and the skilled writer's power to perceive and translate this image in the third paragraph of the opening chapter of *Nature*: "There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet" (9). The poet, then, has the ability to illuminate the liminal "property in the horizon" for the rest of us who are limited to "very superficial seeing" (10), and Emerson centers the poet's power in an image that signals both boundary line constraint and transitional boundlessness—the form and process of the liminal "edge" of perception. The horizon is, in Emerson's liminal poetics, always the "point of astonishment" (544).

Sherman Paul's *The Angle of Vision* (1952), was one of the first to acknowledge Emerson's affinity for the horizon as a point of critical coalescence, the symbolic marker of the dualism of the universe:

> His best focal distance was the unlimited extent: the heavens, the sea, the fields, and preferably the line of the horizon in which heavens and earth, sea and sky met . . . Here was the mystic line, the visible symbol in nature itself of the dualism of the universe. And if the finite limit of the horizon suggested the illimitable, its hazy fading in the distance promised the bipolar unity of the moment of inspiration. (164).

A little over fifty years later in *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination,* Angus Fletcher addresses in general the poet's "delight" in the same image of the horizon in the context of a related duality: ". . . the joy of searching for the horizon is the delight of discovery in its extremist form, in its

limiting idea of the ultimate boundary of our real and imaginary knowledge" (19). But the horizon is also an idea without limits because, as Fletcher explains further, it is "continually changing its inscription of the full reach of what we can see" (22). As noted previously, in the essay "Circles" Emerson cites the *horizon* formed by his foundational cipher of the eye as the "second circle," and so the liminal space of the horizon is linked conceptually to the circle as the "highest emblem in the cipher of the world." But in the earlier (and foundational) *Nature*, Emerson is drawn repeatedly to the liminal outlines of the scenic examples used to initiate his readers into a philosophy of insight, and the horizon recurs as an image of both mystery and illumination: "In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature" (10). This particular insight significantly follows one of Emerson's most disorienting natural images, the figure of the all-seeing "transparent eyeball" through which "the currents of the Universal Being circulate" (10). The transparent eyeball (addressed more specifically at the close of this chapter) is an image evocative of sublime experience and also a paradigm of liminal positioning on a threshold between realms: the speaker stands on "bare ground" and yet his head is "uplifted into infinite space"; he is simultaneously "nothing" and yet "see[ing] all"; he becomes "part or parcel of God" (Emerson 10). The scene in which this altered, heightened state becomes possible is deliberately ordinary, but also foreshadowed by liminal intersects of place and process in an account just prior to the visionary experience of the transparent eyeball passage: "*Crossing* a bare common, in snow *puddles*, at *twilight*, under a *clouded* sky . . . I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the *brink* of fear" (Emerson 10). The fear experienced at this threshold moment is akin to the response of "awe" in then-current

descriptions of the effects of sublimity,[39] but Emerson's liminal phrasing is echoed indirectly in Angus Fletcher's general sense of threshold crossings as "dangerous" yet exhilarating when achieved or completed: "The intensity of a rite of passage raises an accompanying liminal anxiety [which] feels like a border-crossing emotion. As one approaches the border, this anxiety rises, as one crosses it successfully, the anxiety recedes . . . [thus], the special painful uncertainty of thresholdness" (*Colors* 172).

Emerson's "crossing" of the "common" threshold is followed by a recalled liminal experience "in the woods, too" (100), where a man can cast off his years as a snake passes through its slough, and there nature will repair us in endless patterns of regeneration. "What angels invented these splendid ornaments," Emerson asks in the chapter from *Nature* on Commodity, "this ocean of air above, the ocean of water beneath, this firmament of earth between?" (12). And on the liminal firmament of the earth is "the spectacle of morning from day-break to sun-rise"; the "charm . . . of a January sunset [where] western clouds divided and subdivided themselves"; the "live repose of the valley behind the hill"; the "stubble rimed with frost" (15). Emerson continues to remind us in *Nature* that it is the poet who communicates in a "higher manner" (through figural art) the "pleasure mixed with awe" inspired by the spectacle of nature: "By a few strokes he delineates" the outlines and interstices of the natural scene, "not different from what we know them, but only lifted from the ground and afloat before the eye" (34). The poet's higher perception, then, calls our attention to the integrity of the scene through the

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[39] See note 7, especially for the earlier noted examples of Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry in to the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful.* Ed. James Boulton (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame UP, 1958), and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement.* Trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1966).

emphasis made possible by "delineat[ion]"; in effect, the outlines and liminal borderlines of the natural world emerge in language as a result of this descriptive aesthetic process.

The poet is clearly engaged, not in passive mirroring, but in an active process of artistry, and in the essay "Art," Emerson clarifies his sense that "the artist must employ the symbols in use in his day and nation, to convey his enlarged sense to his fellow men" (431). The liminal aesthetic Emerson advocated for the verbal artisans of his day would enable them to delineate through a language of "detachment, in sequestering one object" from "the connection of things":

> The power to detach, and to magnify by detaching, is the essence of rhetoric in the hands of the orator and the poet. This rhetoric, or power to fix the momentary eminence of an object . . . the painter and sculptor exhibit in color and in stone. The power depends on the depth of the artist's insight of that object he contemplates. For every object has its roots in central nature, and may of course be so exhibited to us as to represent the world. (432-433)

But Emerson's focus on the aesthetic perspective empowered through a poetics of liminality has its roots in European philosophy, particularly, as Julie Ellison notes, in the affirmation of German idealism: "In his emphasis on detachment and objectification, Emerson comes closer to the German Romantics than the English . . . [and] Detachment . . . is absolutely essential for art. For Schelling, detachment, 'definiteness of form,' is 'never negation but always an affirmation'" (*Emerson's Romantic Style* 182). Additionally, in an 1841 oration, "The Method of Nature," (delivered the same year as the publication of "Art" from the first series of *Essays*), Emerson speculates on the extent to which language can replicate nature's methods through a process of experimentation in

which the writing process is analogous to scientific study: "By exploring the method of Nature [we can] try how far it is transferable to the literary life" (118).

Thus *Nature* and "Art" both serve as templates of initiation in the *rites de passage* model van Gennep provides, introducing us to "a poetry and a philosophy of insight" and a model for "an original relation to the universe" (Emerson 7). The model is intrinsic to Emerson's system of thought; it is the means by which readers are initiated into the poet's aesthetic possibilities, and are provoked to make a transition to this higher insight themselves. *Nature* and "Art" also provide examples for varied "framing" tableaux—the most basic use of a poetics of liminality—even as the tracing of outlines and the sketching of spaces between may ultimately produce artistry that transcends a mere framework of scenic description. For "true art is never fixed, but always flowing" (438), Emerson assures us in "Art," and in *Nature,* "the health of the eye seems to demand a horizon. We are never tired, so long as we can see far enough" (15). Emerson completes this passage in *Nature* with a description of the "long slender bars of cloud" that "float like fishes in a sea of crimson light"; moreover the earth is "as a shore" highlighting the perceiver's threshold positioning when he "look[s] out into that silent sea" (15).

In van Gennep's conception, the initial stage of the *rites de passage* was originally called "separation"; as the first phase of the schema for the rite it recalls both the assertiveness and perhaps the variability of Emerson's challenge to the poet and the orator: to show the "power to detach, and to magnify through detaching" in order to "fix the momentary eminence of an object" (Emerson 432). The endeavor can lead to fulfilled potential, for an empowered artist in any medium has the ability to exhibit a single object to us in such a way that it "represent[s] the world" (433). In the earlier-quoted passage from his essay on Emerson, Maurice Maeterlinck reminds us that a liminal line of

inspiration emanates from the "shaft of light" Emerson places "under the foot of the artisan coming out of his workshop"; in Maeterlinck's view, his aesthetic has the potential to affirm the aspirations of our "commonplace days"—even in the most ordinary of crossings and transitions. As Emerson first observes, even "from a ring imperceptibly small," the self-evolving circle" that is the "life of man" becomes a symbol of the way in which the ordinary has the potential to transform into the extraordinary—as it "rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end" (Emerson 404).

In the essays "Self-Reliance" and "Circles," Emerson centers on the precise moment of transition in which the locus of power as generative energy resides, and his examples introduce (albeit briefly) objective correlatives[40] to illustrate the middle stage of transitional process that comes after the initial stage of separation. Although most of "Self-Reliance" is better categorized as a paradigm for action on the part of the persona Bloom, Hartman, and Fletcher would later call "the hero of consciousness," Emerson does include here several symbol-invested templates for understanding the primacy of the precise point of transition in all natural processes—seen as the locus in which the poet-hero works, and from which he writes or speaks. For example, the present moment is framed between the past and the future, as Emerson acknowledges in "Self-Reliance," and yet the past and the future are not possible without a point of origin in the present moment: "All things are dissolved to their center by their cause" (270). The initial illustrating image in "Self-Reliance" is a common symbol from the natural world:

> These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; They are for what they are; they exist with God to-day. There

[40] See note 5 for an explication of my use of this term as "correlating (complimentary, reciprocal) objects in nature."

> is no time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence. Before a leaf-bud has burst, its whole life acts; in the full-blown flower there is no more; in the leafless root there is no less . . . But man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time. (270)

In the absence of former (past) roses and better (future) ones, "there is simply the rose" in Emerson's paradigm, and thus "time and space are but physiological colors which the eye makes" (270), and nothing more. Still, even as it is "perfect in every moment of its existence," the rose is always in a process of continual transition—and thus an emblem of transience as much as a marker of momentary perfection. For the rose clearly provides the objective correlative for analogous human processes, and as with other present objects, it is always seen as something about to unfold into something "else"— not always, however, as a positive sign, despite Emerson's focus on "perfection" in this passage. But the "self-sufficing, and therefore self-relying soul" has its "demonstrations" for success in the objects and processes of the natural world: "the genesis and maturation of a planet, its poise and orbit, the bended tree recovering itself from the strong wind, [and] the vital resources of every animal and vegetable" (272). The key is to live as a person who "does not postpone his life, but lives already" (275), and that goal can only be accomplished in the present moment, in the center of transition itself. This center is not a static place, but rather a place through which energies flow—a moment within a process that is always in transition.

The central subject of "Self-Reliance," however, is found in a power objectified in gerunds which appropriate the strength of active verbs, as we saw in a central passage cited earlier: "Power . . . resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state; in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim" (271). Here Emerson forces a focus on the nominative energy of transition, where all is perceived as movement and animated process. Still, as noted earlier in this study, the "moment of transition" is illuminated through the polarity of its contrast with "the instant of repose" (271): the brief moment of perceived stasis within a movement toward discovery in natural and aesthetic processes. In this sense, a limen marks a perceived point of transitional peripety for Emerson, and its breadth—even in the microscopic space of the most minute of processes—is parallel to the liminal inertia that van Gennep describes in the middle phase of his *rites de passage:*

> The phenomenon of a *transition* may be noted in many . . . human activities, and it recurs also in biological activity, in the application of physical energy, and in cosmic rhythms. It is necessary that two movements in opposite directions be separated by a point of inertia." (van Gennep 182)

In contrast, the essay "Circles" offers as an objective correlative of the theme of impermanence (or perhaps as an image cluster), the first circle of the eye as an instantly recognizable form. But more significantly the circle here is developed as an emblem without evidence of repose or inertia: ". . . throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end . . . There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees" (Emerson 403). In subsequent passages in this essay, Emerson suggests that the aspirant individual—the one seeking to know the "full force or truth" of the self—will generate more and "deep[er]" self-evolving circles,

and if the "soul is quick and strong, it bursts over . . . boundar[ies] on all sides, and expands another orbit on the great deep," refusing all attempts " to stop and to bind" (404). The context of aspirant activity generates an unexpected shift from the perfect bounded or closed circle image to a more dialectically spiraling construct of a ladder of human activity:

> Every man is not so much a workman in the world, as he is a suggestion of that he should be. Men walk as prophecies of the next age. Step by step we scale this mysterious ladder: the steps are actions; the new prospect is power . . . The continual effort to raise himself above himself, to work a pitch above his last height, betrays itself in a man's relations." (405-406)

Even here, however, the pattern of seemingly-continual ascension is an illusion; it is perhaps "dear to men" as one of those ideas "which have emerged on their mental horizon, and which cause the present order of things as a tree bears its apples" (407-408). Emerson reminds us that "the natural world may be conceived as a system of concentric circles, and we now and then detect in nature slight dislocations which apprise us that this surface on which we now stand is not fixed, but sliding" (409); the transitional movement of the self-evolving circle is ongoing even when its movement and energy are all but imperceptible. Still, we cannot conceive of "incessant movement and progression" without "some principle of fixture or stability in the soul"—outside of and untouched by the flowing: "Whilst the eternal generation of circles proceeds, the eternal generator abides" (412). But then the eternal generator within also seems to be the subject of the process of change; we alternate between perceptions of the self as "God in nature" *and* as a "weed by the wall." So it takes courage simply to trust in the energy of "this vast ebb of a vast flow" (406) presiding over the extremes of transitional processes. What prevails

throughout, however, is the generative energy of process itself, which takes precedent in Emerson's system of thought over the momentary impressions of specific, alternating perceptions.[41] Arnold van Gennep explains in 1908 that "in one sense, all life is transition, with rhythmic periods of quiescence and heightened activity" (ix), and in Emerson's vision perhaps our weed-like periods of quiescence are made bearable by the promised counterbalance of an apotheosis in nature. We "value the poet," Emerson conjectures, because the poet's artistry "smites and arouses [us]" (409), so that we can see our own possibilities within the ebb and flow of life's eternal transitions.[42]

In the essay "The Poet" and in the prelude to *Representative Men,* "The Uses of Great Men," Emerson explains more fully the mediating role of the representative individual, the exemplar of the "abandonment" needed to be open to the uncertainties of life's wondrous passages.[43] Angus Fletcher's "hero of consciousness" fits the Emersonian template for the mediating individual of insight, for both are empowered in an essential recognition of the transitional moment. In fact, Fletcher's hero of consciousness is enlightened *at* the liminal intersect—the threshold—because (as noted earlier), it is "the edge at which simultaneous participation in the sacred and the profane becomes available" (*Colors* 167). Emerson's duality of human identity as both the sacred "God in nature" and the profane "weed by the wall" points to such an "edge" for simultaneous participation, marking the point at which a poetic sensibility has, in Fletcher's words, the "capacity to reconcile opposed and discordant perceptions of the world and nature" (*Colors* 167). No doubt Fletcher's poet of insight—in this case,

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[41] F.O. Matthiessen notes that "unlike most poets who have contemplated mutability, Emerson found no cause for anguish . . . [his] unshaken confidence lay in the river's progression onward" (70).

[42] Charles Feidelson conversely points out that Emerson "was interested in reconciliation; and his great, though amiable, failing was too simple a confidence in the power of poetic harmony" (138).

[43] For an analysis of Emerson's "predilection for what he calls 'abandonment,'" see Richard Poirier's *The Renewal of Literature,* 74, as well as Stanley Cavell's "Thinking of Emerson," 136-138.

Coleridge—requires a hero's courage to negotiate the challenge of the threshold-gateway as a "sacred via transitional," found in all cultures as a crossing that is "dangerous, [with] an ancient, rigorous mythography and rite" (*Colors* 168). Emerson's Poet similarly acts with courage from his threshold positioning to liberate us through expression of the flowing, by first "unlocking, at all risks, his human doors" to "suffer" the passage of "ethereal" energies through his consciousness (Emerson 459). Emerson notes additionally, in "Uses of Great Men," that "we love to associate with heroic persons, since our receptivity is unlimited, and with the great, our thoughts and manners easily become great. We are all wise in capacity, though so few in energy" (626), and the flawed "representatives" (each a mixture of characteristics both sacred and profane) at least in some aspect derive their power where it "resides in the moment of transition" (271). Emerson is quick to warn of the "excess of the influence of the great man," but the counterbalance to this excess is itself found on a liminal threshold point: ". . . yonder in the horizon is our help: —great men, new qualities, counterweights and checks on each other . . . We balance one man with his opposite, and the health of the state depends on the see-saw" (627-628).

Still, the flawed heroes of *Representative Men*: Plato ("the Philosopher"); Swedenborg ("The Mystic"): Montaigne ("the Skeptic"); Shakespeare ("the Poet"); Napoleon ("the Man of the World"); and Goethe (the "Writer"), are all limited by their human boundaries: "the power which they communicate is not theirs" (623). Thus there is, as Emerson concludes, something "deceptive about the intercourse of minds. The boundaries are invisible, but they are never crossed . . . the law of individuality collects its secret strength" (628). Clearly, the flesh and blood gifts of representative men must be counterbalanced with the rejuvenating insights of other timely representatives, for, in the

end, Emerson notes bluntly, “every hero becomes a bore at last” (627). Ultimately, then, flow must continue unabated through other vessels, and not be fixed as one statement by one voice. “Each philosopher, each bard, each actor, has only done for me, as by a delegate, what one day I can do for myself,” Emerson reminds us in “The American Scholar,” for “we have come up with the point of view which the universal mind took through the eyes of one scribe; we have been that man, and we have passed on. First one; then, another; we drain all cisterns” (67).

And yet Plato presents (as noted earlier), the model for the “balanced soul” capable of resolving “two poles of thought” within a single artistic synthesis; Emerson chooses him as the representative of balanced philosophical insight because his achievement shows us that, through a dialectic of thought, our “strength is transitional, alternating . . . a thread of two strands” (641). Swedenborg, as “the Mystic,” may have “early [fallen] into dangerous discord with himself,” exhibiting significant “theological bias,” but he also “rendered double service to mankind, which is now only beginning to be known” (689). Swedenborg saw power in translating everyday objects into emblems of spirit, but he sought to freeze this correspondential process rather than accepting the endless figural rebirths of continual flow. Montaigne’s skepticism may have disillusioned many in light of our inclination to be “natural believers” (701), but, as Emerson points out, he also shows us a “domain of equilibration” in which we can learn to avail ourselves “of the checks and balances in nature” (702). Napoleon was without “the merit of common truth and honesty” and yet he appeals to the common human denominator as “the incarnate Democrat . . . the idol of the common man, because he has in transcendent degree the qualities and powers of common men” (727-728). Goethe “draws his rents from rage and pain” and “buys the power of talking wisely . . . by acting rashly” (747),

but he more significantly "has said the best things about nature that were ever said" (753); in fact, as noted earlier, Emerson's understanding of transition and natural processes largely came through Goethe.[44] Like Goethe, Shakespeare, too, is less flawed than other human approximations of the ideal; like other "great men" he is not "original" (710), and yet "his mind is the horizon beyond which, at present, we do not see" (718).

In "The Poet," however, Emerson offers access to the ideal shining beyond the capacities of the varied human powers exhibited by such representative men, and in that access we may find an epiphanic vision parallel to van Gennep's conception of the final phase in the liminal process of incorporation—a return, an enlightenment, or an assimilation into a transformed *communitas* that can be mediated in writing. Emerson's essay "The Poet" describes the "nature and functions" of the Poet as "representative," but the scope of that representation also provides a template for the reach of all others: ". . . for the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth" (448). The Poet is isolated among his peers but his pursuit of truth through art "will draw all men sooner or later"; his skills and his insight are highly valued because "adequate expression [of the truth] is rare" (448). Like Fletcher's hero of consciousness poised at the locus of the threshold, Emerson's Poet "is the person in whom . . . powers are in balance"; he is "representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart"; as "the sayer, the namer . . . he is a sovereign, and stands on the centre" (448, 449). Here "the centre" represents not the status of authority but a liminal positioning that allows the poet to filter

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[44] See Gustaaf Van Cromphout's earlier-cited *Emerson's Modernity and the Example of Goethe* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1990).

impressions from the natural world and then translate them for the "partial" individuals who do not yet share his higher form of seeing.

Fletcher's hero of consciousness—like Emerson's Poet—draws power by representing and leading readers through the moment of transition, but Fletcher emphasizes the hero's role in understanding the "passingness of things" while still maintaining a "desire to form that moving constancy into aesthetic shapes." (*Colors* 65). The idea aligns readily with Emerson's description in "The Poet" of the poem as an aesthetic object—created by the poet—and conceived by "a thought so passionate and alive . . . it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing" (450). And for Emerson, a poet's "deeper insight" reveals that all natural objects and all works of art (including mechanical inventions like the railway) "fall within the great Order," where "Nature adopts them very fast into her vital circles, and the gliding train of cars she loves like her own" (454). In the Poet's "centered mind," all of creation can be reconciled and recognized in transitional energy; in fact the poet *sees* the very process of liminal transition while it is underway in the world of forms:

> The poet, by an ulterior intellectual perception gives [things] a power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts eyes, and a tongue, into every dumb and inanimate object . . . the poet turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession. For through that better perception, he stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing or metamorphosis; perceives that thought is multiform; that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form . . . (465)

This passage is particularly significant in that it identifies the most crucial activity of the Poet after his transition from seer to sayer: that of empowering. The Poet "gives" power to objects in the original sense of a creator bestowing animation upon that which was previously inanimate, impelling those objects and forms to ascend into higher forms. "Power" is both the general ability to perform effectively and the specific capacity to realize inherent potential, and power (or empowering) is at the heart of Emerson's transitional moment—where it resides in various gerundive forms of "becom[ing]" (271).

Thus in one sense the Poet leads us though his "better perception" and his mid-liminal "centered" positioning on the threshold of experience to the final phase of van Gennep's *rite de passage:* a reaggregation or incorporation—following transitional perepity—that can be seen as an ascension into the fruition phase of liminal passage. Emerson named this particular moment of metamorphosis the "higher end" of nature . . . "namely, *ascension,* or the passage of the soul into higher forms" (458), and it is the Poet who recognizes ascension by sharing the "path" of its transitional power:

> This insight, which expresses itself by what is called Imagination, is a very high sort of seeing, which does not come by study, but by the intellect being where and what it sees, by sharing the path, or circuit of things through forms, and so making them translucid to others." (Emerson 459)

One is reminded in this passage of Maeterlinck's earlier-quoted acknowledgment of Emerson as the "sage of commonplace days" who "puts a shaft of light under the foot of the artisan"; clearly the Poet's "high sort of seeing" through the power of the Imagination is what enables him to light the path of a particular aesthetic for others. Emerson's use of the word "translucid" (as opposed to the more common use of "translucent"), emphasizes a process in which the lucidity and clarity of intellect is more specifically empowered, as

opposed to a less cognitive "illumination" resulting from an infusion of light into the world of forms—in which the movement is from ground to figure, or matter to spirit.[45]

Of course, Emerson also cautions against the Poet merely speaking with the "intellect, used as an organ"; rather, the Poet must trust the intellect to "take its direction from the celestial life" (459) in order to achieve higher access: "For if in any manner we can stimulate this intellect, new passages are opened for us into nature, the mind flows into and through things hardest and highest, and the metamorphosis is possible" (460). The aspirant quality of a desired passage "into and through things highest and hardest" does not present a static vision of the ideal, and it requires a particular focus to counterbalance the unending nature of this procession—what Fletcher later called the sometimes "painful uncertainties of thresholdness" (*Colors* 172). Perhaps the hero of consciousness is tested, as Hamlet was, at the threshold point of transition: "If readiness is the stance within the doorway, then a mindset of confidence or courage is the ideal mode of readiness" (*Colors* 179). In this respect, Harold Bloom's insight (noted specifically in *Shakespeare, the Invention of the Human*) about Hamlet as a "transcendental hero" (406) for whom "there is nothing but the readiness" (422) offers an additional perspective for the empowerment possible *in* the moment of transition. In effect, the stance of readiness is found in the point of transitional peripety, and it affords a glimpse into the realm of the sacred; Bloom explains this stance of readiness as "a willingness to let everything be . . . through a confidence in a final consciousness" (*Shakespeare* 422). It is important to note, though, that Emerson also challenges the Poet

[45] The word "translucid" has an etymological connection to a particular kind of liminal space: the OED notes that the root "lucid" refers to "a period of sanity between periods of insanity or dementia, or (formerly) a period of remission in a disease" (1640). Thus Emerson's use of translucid in the above quoted passage is suggestive of a "crossing over" into a liminal intersect—the space of intellectual insight, but also a locus of cognitive health and clarity of vision that is consistent with Emerson's metaphor of transcendent "seeing."

to ascend beyond the stance of readiness of the hero of consciousness found in Bloom's and Fletcher's paradigms, for in his view it is possible—through courage and "abandonment"—to transcend the conscious intellect and draw new power at the threshold:

> It is a secret which every intellectual man quickly learns, that, beyond the energy of his possessed and conscious intellect, he is capable of a new energy (as of an intellect doubled on itself), by abandonment to the nature of things . . . there is a great public power, on which he can draw, by unlocking, at all risks, his human doors, and suffering the ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him . . . ("The Poet" 459)

Emerson's Poet is in this sense a mediating agent for the "ethereal"; by taking the "risk" of opening the liminal portals of his human self he achieves a kind of apotheosis in the natural world ("I am a God in nature") and, like the transparent eyeball in *Nature*, the Poet experiences "the currents of the Universal Being circulat[ing] through" him; he is "part or particle of God" (10), giving voice to metamorphosis. In effect, Emerson here envisions the Poet as a flesh and blood manifestation of the transparent eyeball in the first chapter of *Nature*, the transcendent (and often transparent) "being" that emerges at the liminal point between "bare ground" and "blithe air" (10). For as a liminal image, the transparent eyeball mediates between nature and spirit at a promised point of conversion; it accommodates the polarity of being "nothing" and "seeing all." But Emerson moves in this passage from the image of the eyeball "seeing" in the initial passage in *Nature* to the Poet's higher power of "saying" what is seen in "The Poet." [46] Instead of merely

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[46] In "The Circles of the Eye," James M. Cox notes that the "metaphoric eyeball" effects a complete "conversion of the 'I' into the Eye, of the Self into the Seer" (59). But Richard Poirier (in an example

experiencing "the currents of the Universal Being" as they flow and circulate (as the eyeball image does in its transparency), the Poet as language-maker communicates the very currents of transcendent power. Moreover, it is in the transition from seeing to saying—itself a rite of passage—that the poet feels the access of power. This metamorphosis or flow seems to have an electric energy, and the Poet becomes a conduit for this power, and for ethereal insights, as he shares "a certain power of emancipation and exhilaration for all men . . . Poets are thus liberating gods" (461). Emerson expands this analogy through the liminal contexts of dreaming and transcending boundaries when he urges the poet to "persist," to "draw out . . . that *dream*-power" which transcends "all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity" (467).

As Leonard Neufeldt explains, Emerson sees the self as actively participating in transitional energies, especially along liminal borderlines: "The world, to him, was both a 'spectacle' awaiting form and an endlessly changing field. Like the world, the self, too, according to Emerson, always lives on the border prospect of being defined, and redefined, never resting, but always participating in the changing field" (70). Moreover, just as power in a general sense resides only in the "moment of transition," the power of the Imagination is not found in stasis, but movement: "But the quality of the imagination is to flow, and not to freeze" (Emerson 463). In *Blazing the Trail*, Victor Turner addresses the "creative experience" in art and literature as a phenomenon of movement called *flow*, a concept originally defined by his colleague Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as

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making use of liminal terminology) finds that the image of the transparent eyeball—in spite of its later conversion from Seer to Sayer in "the Poet"—is an example of Emerson's "refus[al] . . . to promise [his readers] anything *beyond* the experience, anything humanely or socially useful. He is content to be suspended at what we have heard [William] James call a 'momentary margin'" (*The Renewal of Literature* 201).

"the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement . . . in which action follows action according to an internal logic which needs no conscious intervention on our part" (*Blazing* 61). This psychological or anthropological concept of *flow*, though it is not necessarily triggered by an Emersonian moment of seeing, points to the breaking down of boundaries of self-consciousness that limit our expansion into the challenge of new possibilities. This recalls Emerson's earlier advisement that the Poet is "capable of a new energy . . . by abandonment to the nature of things"; he need only trust "this instinct, [and] the mind flows into and through things hardest and highest" (460), showing us that metamorphosis is possible.

Emerson concludes his essay "The Poet" by noting that his version of what would later be termed the "hero of consciousness" has not yet been found: "I look in vain for the poet whom I describe . . . Time and nature yield us many gifts, but not yet the timely man, the new religion, the reconciler, whom all things await" (465). But liminal intersects offer possibilities for the eventual emergence of the "reconciler," and just as Fletcher's version of the hero of consciousness draws power from the "edge at which simultaneous participation in the sacred and the profane becomes available," so, too, will Emerson's promised reconciler find Beauty "wherever day and night meet in twilight . . . wherever are forms with transparent boundaries, wherever are outlets into celestial space" (468). In the liminal space of transition, the Poet ascends "beyond the energy of his possessed and conscious intellect" and creates "with the flower of the mind"(466). In the Poet, perhaps, we are able to see the final incorporating and reaggregating stage of the *rite de passage*, and within this process—through the poet's artistry—join the Emersonian hero of consciousness as he "unlocks our chains and admits us to a new scene" (463). "If we fill the day with bravery, we should not shrink from celebrating it"

(465), Emerson reminds us, and the ideal Poet would light the way for us by doing both. Thus, we are urged by this Poet guiding us through life's passages to become poets of a higher order ourselves—to transition from seeing to saying—an advisement both Thoreau and Whitman were inspired by in their own work.

The Legacy of Emerson's Liminal Poetics

How, then, does this Emersonian poetics of liminality take on a central, catalyzing role in the way that Thoreau and Whitman approached the relationship between human beings and the natural world, as well as the relationship between nature and language? Various images as signs of the playing out of key Emersonian concepts are featured in diverse ways in both Thoreau's and Whitman's writing, but Emerson's more fundamental contribution is one of a particular *attitude* or stance of receptivity to the potential offered in liminal spaces. Thoreau and Whitman (as well as other writers after them) responded in divergent ways, however, to Emerson's focus on "potential" and the varied liminal frameworks from which it emanates.

Although painted in broad strokes, Lawrence Buell's summary analysis of Emerson's legacy (in *Emerson*) offers three clear theoretical contexts for understanding Emerson's influence on the writers who followed him. Buell acknowledges first that "whether by support or example, Emerson did catalyze a number of important strains of American writing," especially in his "advocacy of a literary language close to nature" (*Emerson* 142). Buell then identifies the "three specific theories of U.S. literary distinctiveness that assign Emerson a central part": first the "thesis that American poetic difference consists in form-breaking"; second "[Harold] Bloom's . . . wave of Emerson-

genius theory [in] achieving a language of aboriginal self-hood [and] self-begetting"; and third, "[Richard] Poirier's more recent build[ing] on both mythologies, advancing a pragmatist reading of Emerson's poetics" (*Emerson* 143-144). Buell concludes his theoretical assessment by noting "the new Americanist criticism of the last two decades" that "tends to see tensions between margin and center (race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality) as more central to U.S. cultural history than any supposed aesthetic mainstream" (*Emerson* 145). But Emerson's liminal poetics provides both the language and the methodology for approaching "tensions between margin and center," as well as for understanding at least some of the theoretical contexts for form-breaking, genius theory, and pragmatism. Although Emerson's focus is generally on the potential and possibility of liminal contexts, his emphasis on a particular "bravery" in attitude needed to face the indeterminacy of continual transition highlights as well the fact that his vision of liminal passage does not merely celebrate the harmonious balance of consensus; as a model of process, the "betwixt and between" realm of margins and thresholds can, in Emerson's view, often also be characterized by tension, apprehension, confusion, and struggles between opposing voices and forces.

The inheritors of Emerson's liminal poetics (including, at least in part, Thoreau and Whitman) would explore these darker possibilities of the liminal to a far greater degree than their mentor, but it is essential to note that Emerson laid the groundwork for such expansions of perspective. Even Hawthorne and Melville, for example, who saw far more ominous potential in nature's varied borderlines than did Emerson (and other Transcendentalist contemporaries), still can be seen to be reacting against an Emersonian system of thought that remains "foundational" to their own darker trajectories. Assessing the relation of these divergent critical responses to the vision of an Emersonian poetics of

liminality presented here is beyond the scope of this study—although of course my own work is significantly informed by a number of the scholarly insights Buell identifies in his three-part theory of the lines of American "literary distinctiveness" that can be traced back to Emerson. F.O. Matthiessen, for example, traces a particularly democratic form-breaking in Emerson's "organic form [which] shapes, as it develops, from within" (*American Renaissance* 134), a theory reinforced by the later insights of Albert Gelpi and Norman Foerster.[47] Poirier's work follows a different trajectory, building on Matthiessen's and Bloom's theories in "advancing a pragmatist reading of Emerson's poetics," as Lawrence Buell observes (*Emerson* 144), but neither Matthiessen nor Poirier place Emerson in a singular category of influence on American literary history.[48] Conversely, Harold Bloom perhaps most emphatically (and convincingly) places Emerson at the center of nearly all emergent American life and letters from the midpoint of the nineteenth-century to the present day, by naming him—universally—as "*the* American theoretician of power. . . [in] exulting transition for its own sake" ("Power" 151). Perhaps most closely paralleling and elaborating upon such insights in Bloom, I turn now to the aesthetic responses of the two contemporary writers—Thoreau and Whitman—who would subsequently address a variety of complex issues involving

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[47] See Gelpi's "Emerson: the Paradox of Organic Form" in David Levin (149-170), and Foerster's "Emerson on the Organic Principle in Art" in Konvitz (108-120) for analysis of Emerson's organic form-breaking and renewing. "The poet cannot dictate the form arbitrarily," Gelpi notes, "but he has to help it define itself from within" (161).

[48] Both Matthiessen and Poirier have been quoted in the context of an Emersonian poetics at earlier points in this chapter, but Poirier's comments about Emerson's system of thought (and its inherent optimism) is perhaps a noteworthy contrast to my own emphasis on a system based upon a poetics of liminality. Poirier observes: "A 'circle' or discursive formation does far more than passively reflect or represent some form of truth presumed to be external to it. Rather, an Emersonian 'circle,' like a Foucauldian 'discursive formation,' actively creates truths and knowledge and then subtly enforces their distribution. It follows that truths and systems of knowledge are to be viewed as themselves contingent, like other convenient fictions, and scarcely the worse, if you are an Emersonian pragmatist, for being so. It is fictions that give us hope" (*Poetry and Pragmatism* 22).

"world" and "self" in light of the groundwork laid by Emerson's focus on transition in a poetics of liminality.

III. THOREAU: *A WEEK* AND *WALDEN*

Emerson's Key Concepts and the Forms of Thoreau's Topos

"Word makers can't hope to make worlds without active engagement with the palpable world," Lawrence Buell acknowledges, in noting Thoreau's image-based approach to Emerson's poetics (Buell, *Emerson* 113), and it is clear that Emerson's key concepts and visions are traced and tested in "palpable" examples and concrete forms in Thoreau's writing. Emerson's coded language for liminal place and process—especially as seen in the concepts of transition, flow, metamorphosis, polarity, and compensation—introduced Thoreau to both the power and the indeterminacy of continual regeneration and renewal, although Thoreau rarely makes use of the keywords themselves as abstract references in his writing. Of course, Thoreau was markedly influenced by the correspondential analogies between nature and spirit defined in Emerson's 1836 essay *Nature*, and this inspiration drew Thoreau to the borderlines and thresholds in nature for his focal points: the horizon at dawn and twilight; the reflective surfaces of ponds and rivers; the outlines of mountain peaks against the arc of the sky; the desolate shoreline between the eastern seaboard and the Atlantic. For Thoreau, the question was not simply about human experience and its correspondence with or separateness from the natural world, but more essentially about the way to write perceptively about that relationship—by finding in nature the analogies for his own aesthetic process.

But even as he is drawn to the same liminal outlines and "spaces between" as his mentor Emerson was in defining "nature as the symbol of spirit" (20), Thoreau rejects the abstractions generated by Emerson's transitional cipher in favor of an "active

engagement with the palpable world," to use Buell's earlier-cited phrasing. In doing so, Thoreau eventually comes to an understanding of nature as "more" than mere symbol, and this discovery leads him to base Emersonian idealism in concrete images found in the definitive *topos* of the natural landscape.[49] The literary, rhetorical, and allegorical uses to which Thoreau's threshold experiences in the natural world are applied thus "reconstitute" Emerson's ideals of energy and change in word patterns relationally imaged in nature. Concrete images and their corresponding processes thus give form and substance to Emerson's visions of process, making the abstractions of transition, flow, metamorphosis, compensation, and polarity more conceptually accessible. Thoreau's vivid examples of regeneration and re-inscription add insight into Emerson's liminal poetics even as they reveal Thoreau's own conception of the relationship between nature, self, and spirit.

A brief comparison of the eye or lens image of transcendent "selfhood" in Emerson's *Nature,* the earlier-addressed transparent eyeball, and a correlative example found in Thoreau's *Walden,* the transcendent "self" standing in the abutment of the rainbow's arch, serves as a representative illustration introducing both similarities and differences in Thoreau's and Emerson's versions of a liminal aesthetic. In short, neither the image nor the landscape framework are read as "natural" forms in Emerson's philosophical, metaphysical description; Thoreau's image of self and the described

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[49] Addressed in brief in note 17 of the Introduction, *topos* as a term invokes its original usage as the Greek word for "place." But *topos* is also used here in its vernacular sense of the abbreviated term for topographical maps and surveys, which represent the exact physical features of a place or region. In fact, the etymology of "topography" points to the connection between representation of exact physical features and the act of writing: the word originates from the Greek *topographein*, "to describe a place": *topos*, place + *graphein*, to write. Although Rick Van Noy does not address *topos* in this sense, he does devote a chapter to Thoreau in *Surveying the Interior: Literary Cartographers and the Sense of Place*, noting in his Introduction: "I begin with Henry David Thoreau, who, before he was a writer, was a skilled surveyor and cartographer" (5).

rainbow landscape framing it are recognizable, albeit markedly illuminated elements in nature. There are, however, significant parallels between the two images of transcendent self, and Thoreau's version can be seen as a possible corrective to Emerson's. [50]

The "I" in Emerson's *Nature* figuratively becomes an eye, but as an image it thus becomes other-worldly, disembodied, immaterial: the eyeball stands on "bare ground," its head "uplifted into infinite space" (10). Thoreau's "I" in the example from *Walden* also experiences a transformation, but the associations are all recognizably natural, even as this human self purports to have once "stood in the very abutment of a rainbow's arch" (Thoreau 484). Both selves, though, are given clear liminal positioning in the space between: Emerson's "I" stands on the surface of the ground and is linked "with its head bathes in blithe air" to infinite space; Thoreau's "I" also stands at a linking point—the "abutment" or point of contact between the sky and the ground where the rainbow's arch appears to touch the earth's surface. Moreover, Emerson's "I" is able to "see all," and is charged with transcendent energy in the process of transformation: "I become a transparent eyeball . . . the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me" (Emerson 10). Thoreau's "I" also experiences a heightened, charged form of seeing from within the rainbow's arch, "which filled the lower stratum of the atmosphere," and was not only "tinging the grass and leaves around" but also "dazzling me as if I looked through a colored crystal" (Thoreau 484). Emerson briefly experiences an un-self-conscious unity with the transcendent in which "all mean egotism vanishes" and he becomes "part or particle of God," (Emerson 10), even as he becomes the totality of the

[50] Emerson's *Nature*, published in 1836, was closely studied by Thoreau; the "rainbow's arch" sequence which appears in the "Baker Farm" chapter of *Walden* was most likely drafted in later versions of the manuscript, after 1850. See Adams' and Ross' *Revising Mythologies: The Composition of Thoreau's Major Works*, page 58: "Figure 2: Stages in the Growth of *Walden*."

landscape as it flows into the lens; Thoreau has a corresponding brief, transcendent, and un-self-conscious experience of fusion or unity, but one remaining recognizably in the natural world—where he is immersed, as he says, in "a lake of rainbow light, in which, for a short while, I lived like a dolphin" (Thoreau 484). Emerson's self thus experiences a high-romantic amelioration in this moment of insight; presumably he is void of self-interest and social motivation in this state where "all mean egotism vanishes" (10). Thoreau's self is also in a state of romantic innocence—similarly ameliorated in a direct bond with the natural world—in which he briefly cavorts "like a dolphin." Emerson's self is perhaps less exuberant, but in the same "transparent eyeball" paragraph he acknowledges: "In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man" (10), and refers as well to the "greatest delight which the fields and woods minister" (11). Still, Emerson's delight is abstract—the "suggestion of an occult relation" (11); Thoreau's delight is direct and "dolphin"-like as he frolics on a lake of light. Emerson's experience is essentially visual and meditative—all converges in a disembodied seeing, while other senses evaporate. Thoreau's experience integrates multiple senses with physical movement and response.

The larger narrative frameworks for both passages similarly engage in a discourse on property, the horizon, and the paradox of ownership, and both suggest by implication the higher value of "seeing" the landscape independently of material possession. In the paragraph preceding the transparent eyeball passage, Emerson cites the "charming landscape . . . made up of twenty or thirty farms" owned by various named persons, "But none of them owns the landscape," the "property in the horizon which no man has" (9). Only the poet has access to this horizon, "the best part of these men's farms," to which "their warranty-deeds give no title" (Emerson 9). Thoreau's rainbow-arch passage in the

"Baker Farm" chapter of *Walden* is followed by the account of John Field, "with his horizon all his own, yet he a poor man, born to be poor . . . not to rise in this world" (489). John Field is tethered to the land and lacks a sense of adventure with his "boggy ways"; he is like others who "are where they are, buying and selling, and spending their lives like serfs" (Thoreau 488). "Rise free from care before the dawn and seek adventures," Thoreau admonishes, and like Emerson, Thoreau denounces the notion of property: "Enjoy the land, but own it not" (488). Unlike Emerson, however, Thoreau does not see the horizon as an abstract image for the special "property" of the poet—instead he advances toward the literal horizon as he delivers his admonishment, running "down the hill toward the reddening west, with the rainbow over [his] shoulder" (Thoreau 488). The action may in some ways serve as a literalized embodiment of Emerson's key concepts of transition and flow, but Thoreau challenges Emerson's abstract idea of ownership even as he no doubt shares an awareness of 'property" that can be 'owned" imaginatively and intellectually. When Thoreau runs toward the west—leaving the lighted arch behind—he distinguishes his message from Emerson's with concrete images as he "paints [in words] the very atmosphere and medium through which we look" (Thoreau 394). Emerson's aesthetic drew Thoreau to the liminal spaces and borderlines of the natural world, but Thoreau distances himself from Emerson's abstractions to perceive and represent nature directly in as many contexts as possible—even from within the dazzling medium of a rainbow's arch.

Thoreau's first two major published prose works, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden*, may have been shaped by Emerson's emphasis on liminal borders as models for the dynamic of transition so central to an understanding of the process of thinking and writing, but both also demonstrate and play out the implications

of a physical, image-based approach that moves away from Emerson's understanding of nature as symbol. Reading *A Week* and *Walden* within the context of a poetics of liminality brings to the fore Thoreau's concrete re-imaging of "familiar forms of perception" in nature's borderlines, transitional surfaces, and transformative processes to show how language can be used to identify analogous human processes, even as Thoreau learned from Emerson's representative key concepts a way to perceive aesthetically the dynamics of change and transformation from within the very processes themselves. A poetics of liminality, then, provides several interrelated contexts for considering Thoreau's nature writing in these first two major works. At the most basic level (evidenced in Thoreau's nature writing in general, although most markedly in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*), liminal spaces serve initially as a literal framing technique, allowing Thoreau to sharpen his focus on a scene of description by delineating the outlines and interstices of the natural landscape. Thoreau relies most on this sketching of boundaries and borderlines as a catalyst for recollection of prior perceptions of natural scenes; the language of borderlines literally draws the image forth from memory, bringing past perceptions into present experience. Thoreau's second, intermediate use of liminal poetics calls attention to transitions in the natural landscape that are mirrored in the human mind; the dialectic between the sky and the reflective surface of a pond, for example, becomes an objective correlative ("sky water") for the mind's ability in peak moments of "reflection" to make a transition from daydreaming, meditation, or sleep to a state of full consciousness. Thoreau refines this intermediate, rhetorical use of liminality in several key chapters in *Walden:* "The Bean Field," "The Ponds," "The Pond in Winter," and "Spring."

Tracing perceived boundary sites in set-piece passages from these first two published works opens a space in which to investigate Thoreau's aesthetic process, with its attention to correspondential vision and clear stages of transformation. As noted earlier, Thoreau distinguishes himself from Emerson in the way he moves the indeterminate potential of "the ideal" firmly into the realm of "the real"—the definitive *topos* of the natural landscape— for it is in the "place" of *A Week's* and *Walden's* natural landscapes that Emerson's key concepts emerge from the realm of the abstract to materialize as concrete and visible forms. That Thoreau found inspiration for his writing in nature's varied borderlines is, as noted earlier, a largely unexplored area of study, but it is Emerson's poetics of liminality that opens a lens into the aesthetic processes through which Thoreau's language becomes commensurate to his direct experience in the natural world.

Liminal Frameworks in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*

The title of Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, as Linck C. Johnson has noted, seems through diction alone to establish "temporal and spatial boundaries" from the outset, and it would be reasonable to assume Thoreau intended clear structural parameters for this first major prose work.[51] The topic of the opening chapter, "The Concord River," and the Saturday through Friday listing in the Table of Contents reinforces this impression of highlighted, intended space and time patterning: what

[51] From "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau.* Ed. Joel Myerson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) 40. Johnson's definitive text *Thoreau's Complex Weave: "The Writing of a Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," with the Text of the First Draft* (Charlottesville, UP of Virginia, 1986), is the most complete account of Thoreau's writing of the book.

follows, we expect, should be systematic, chronological, clearly demarcated. And yet, as many modern critics have observed, there is little in this 400-page volume that is systematic in narrative approach, chronological beyond the configuration of successive days, clearly demarcated or contained in topic and theme.

Thoreau's earliest critics were similarly challenged by thwarted expectations for the aesthetic design of the narrative. Emerson's 1846 response to Thoreau's lengthy (and still growing) manuscript of *A Week* makes use of an interstitial metaphor to characterize the risk of failure in sustaining a clean temporal and spatial narrative line when it is weighed down by excessive prose ornamentation: "The narrative of the little voyage, though faithful, is a very slender thread for such big beads and ingots as are strung on it."[52] There has long been disagreement on how to characterize those varied "big beads" threaded throughout the narrative of *A Week*—literary allusions and commonplace aphorisms; historical anecdotes and religious and social critiques—as well as the larger ingot casings in which purpose and essence are presumed to be cast. Critics have argued over just what Thoreau intended this book to be—noting, for example, that the work may have been written as a neoclassical travelogue pointing toward emerging romance; a mythic quest that plays out on an archetypal river journey; an historicized social critique of nineteenth-century America; a pastoral elegy written in honor of Thoreau's deceased brother John (his companion on this river journey); or a "counter elegy" written by a scientist and social satirist. [53] The "slender thread" of Thoreau's narrative seems to

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[52] Emerson's letter (volume 3: 384) was sent to the publisher Evert Duyckinck of Wiley and Putnam in support of Thoreau's manuscript, but reservations about the book's unity and cohesiveness are clear in Emerson's acknowledgement of the slender premise of the journey structure. See *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk and Eleanor M. Tilton.

[53] Lawrence Buell's *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* views *A Week* as a "literary excursion" developing out of conventional neoclassical writing that moves in the direction of emerging romance. For studies of *A Week* in light of myth and quest motifs, see: Stephen

vanish into the imperceptible in the face of so many critical arguments and counter-arguments; it becomes difficult in this context to discern the framing outlines of the original journey—the one-hundred-and-ten mile river passage and hiking trip from Concord, Massachusetts to the White Mountains of New Hampshire and back.

And yet clearly delineated structures—both in the natural landscape and the narrative design—are unmistakable in this text, first in Thoreau's premise of a voyage and return on moving water, and then through the framework of title and chapter headings as well as the dawn-to-dusk configuration of each day. It is important to note that a number of modern critics acknowledge that *A Week's* natural and narrative structures are evidence of the early stages of a developing aesthetic process—the book is replete with precursors for Thoreau's later (far more successful) synthesis of experiential nature and written account in *Walden*.[54] I would argue, however, that *A Week's* aesthetic failures are not due to the excess of reflective digressions that crowd the narrative—the varied beads and ingots that weigh down the slender thread of the river journey—but rather are the result of Thoreau's inability in this first major prose work to define or enact in language the *passage* between world and self that integrates experience and consciousness. As Thoreau himself admits in the "Friday" chapter of *A Week:* "When the poetic frenzy seizes us, we run and scratch with our pen . . . delighting in the dust we make, but we do not detect where the jewel lies, which, perhaps, we have in the mean time cast to a

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Adams and Donald Ross, Jr., *Revising Mythologies: The Composition of Thoreau's Major Works*, Sherman Paul *The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration*, and Frederick Garber *Thoreau's Redemptive Imagination*. For *A Week as* historicized social critique, see Robert F. Sayre's *Thoreau and the American Indian*. For critiques that consider *A Week* in the tradition of pastoral elegy, see Linck C. Johnson's aforementioned work; for *A Week* as "counter elegy" see Ning Yu's "Thoreau's Critique of the American Pastoral in *A Week.*"

[54] Buell, Adams & Ross, Paul, Garber, McGregor, and Johnson all acknowledge the foregrounding in *A Week* that made the aesthetics of *Walden* possible. See also Daniel H. Peck's *Thoreau's Morning Work: Memory and Perception in "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," the Journal, and "Walden."*

distance, or quite covered up again" (278). *A Week's* "major theme . . . [is] the rift between the abundant meaning inherent in Nature and the possibility of poetic access to it" (637), David B. Suchoff observes, but in the attempt to uncover the jewels of nature's meanings Thoreau never fully enacts in this prose work what he suggests: that natural transitions and processes are reflected in the mind's own processes and transitions.

Liminality becomes a useful context for addressing Thoreau's attempt at poetic access in *A Week,* but in spite of Joseph C. Schopp's assertion that "Thoreau clearly designed his journey as a *rite de passage* with its typical tripartite structure of separation, transformation, and reintegration" (96), the narrative falls short of van Gennep's balanced delineation of transformative stages.[55] Still, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* can be seen as an early experiment in a developing aesthetic because Thoreau here recalls memories and later recollections of his journey within a liminal context, and the attention to boundary lines in nature (and in narrative) provides a basic framing technique within which to observe relational processes. Thoreau's first description of the Concord River in *A Week's* opening chapter is framed by clearly measured, interstitially positioned lines in a natural scene: "The sluggish artery of the Concord meadows steals thus unobserved through the town, without a murmur or a pulse-beat, its general course from southwest to northeast and its length about fifty miles; a huge volume of matter, ceaselessly rolling through the plains and valleys of the substantial earth . . ." (12). The passage traces the river's borderlines in a globally expanded landscape; it also gestures figuratively towards the life-giving potential of circulating waters with an apt

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[55] Schopp's "Of Time and the River" acknowledges Thoreau's efforts in *A Week* to "invest the world of natural phenomena with emblematic connotations" in the tradition of Emerson (96), but Schopp's argument that the book is "designed" as a liminal rite of passage is difficult to sustain in an analysis of *A Week's* full narrative. Thoreau may have intended a more balanced three-part structure, but intention and design are not one and the same— the rite of passage framework is not realized successfully, in spite of Schopp's claim.

metaphor. But the brief liminal description does not point to the "initiation" phase of a tripartite design for a rite of passage within a journey, the structure suggested in Schopp's earlier-cited essay. Instead, a poetic digression follows ("Sure there are poets who did never dream / Upon Parnassus, nor did taste the stream"), and the reflective commentary after the framed sketch of the "sluggish branch of the Concord" contains no hint of the arterial metaphor found in the opening description: "Rivers must have been the guides which conducted the footsteps of the first travelers . . . They are the natural highways of all nations . . . through the most interesting scenery" (12-13). The chapter closes with Thoreau noting simply, "I resolved to launch myself on [the river's] bosom and float whither it would bear me" (13), but the particular course and direction of a river's flow are hardly happenstance; these outlines are recognizably etched into the natural landscape. Perhaps Thoreau's earlier characterization of the Concord in this first chapter— the river as "a huge volume of matter"—applies in some measure as a description of the aesthetic difficulties in the expanding text.

There are, however, sustained passages of balanced natural description in the second, "Saturday" chapter in *A Week,* and Thoreau's attention to detail is consistent and sharply focused in an evocative paragraph in which outlines, interspersions, and borderlines are definitively emphasized: "We glide noiselessly down the stream . . . The banks had passed the height of their beauty, and some of the brighter flowers showed by their faded tints that the season was verging toward the afternoon of the year . . . in the still unabated heats they seemed like the mossy brink of some cool well" (18). Blossoms, birds, and sunbeams are set in relief against clearly drawn boundaries formed by water, land, and sky:

> The small rose-colored polygonum raised its head proudly above the water on either hand . . . in front of dense fields of the white species which skirted the sides of the stream, its little streak of red looking rare and precious. The pure white blossoms of the arrow-head stood in the shallower parts, and a few cardinals on the margin still proudly surveyed themselves reflected in the water . . . while from the more distant waysides which we occasionally passed, and banks where the sun had lodged, was reflected still a dull yellow beam from the ranks of tansy, now past its prime. (18-19)

The passage of river-view description, with its clean borderlines, beams, and margins, continues for an additional four paragraphs describing the journey away from the village of Concord, until the travelers turn from "familiar outlines, and addressed . . . new scenes and adventures" (20). But the rest of the chapter is a series of long digressions and musings, interspersed with only a few linear references to the natural landscape: "To the right and left, as far as the horizon, were straggling pine woods with their plumes against the sky" (33). At twilight, in the closing paragraphs of the chapter, Thoreau looks out at the "straight, geometrical line" of his boat's mast (framed through the triangular opening of his tent "against the water and the sky"), listens to the sounds of animals at night, and proclaims that "language is the most perfect art in the world" (34-35). Producing the "perfect art" of language commensurate to one's experience in the natural world—especially language addressing the significance of that experience—would continue to be the rhetorical and philosophical challenge of *A Week's* unfolding narrative. David Suchoff argues that the "major theme of Thoreau's *Week"* is, as noted earlier, essentially the "rift" between Nature and "poetic access to it," but he also sees in the narrative "at

least the possibility of a union between the mind and Nature"—even though poetic language is in "disproportion . . . to the natural truths it would evoke" (673).

In the "Sunday" chapter of *A Week,* for example, Thoreau initiates a potentially instructive poetic analogy on the surface of the river: all of nature seems to be "rejoic[ing] in the delicious light and air" of Sunday leisure—even meditating bullfrogs have "Sabbath thoughts" while "eying the wondrous universe in which they act their part," but humans fall short of this natural harmony. "We should consider that the flow of thought is more like a tidal wave than a prone river" (83), Thoreau conjectures briefly in a long digression that follows the initial "Sabbath thoughts," and the narrative's "longing to attain a match between poetic and natural origination" (Suchoff 675) dissipates. "This Sunday ended by the going down of the sun, leaving us still on the waves" (92), Thoreau remarks near the close of the chapter, acknowledging "the great blessing" (93) of a narrative end point, of ". . . getting sleep and forgetting where we were . . . able to forget our enterprise every twelve hours" (93). In fact, twelve hour temporal frameworks provide the outline for the narrative structure of the remaining chapters with their days-of-the-week titles, each measured in dawn-to-dusk configurations. Thoreau offers an initially promising analogy between "the lapse of the river" and "human life," early in the "Monday" chapter, noting "a tide in the affairs of men . . . and yet as things flow, they circulate, and the ebb always balances the flow" (100). The liminal language of a figurative balance point between ebb and flow marks this observation, but the natural river scene remains absent from the narrative for nearly thirty successive pages in the chapter. Finally, in a passage that anticipates in nuanced ways the ideas expressed in the thawing sandbank sequence in *Walden,* Thoreau returns to the river and its borderlines:

> As we sailed under this canopy of leaves we saw the sky through its chinks, and, as it were, the meaning and idea of the tree stamped in a thousand hieroglyphics on the heavens. The universe is so aptly fitted to our organization that the eye wanders and reposes at the same time. (128)

Thoreau then notes the presence "on every side" of "something to soothe and refresh this sense": the pine spires, finer cobwebs, myriad leaves, and oaks that comprise these hieroglyphics. These observations are prompted by the change noted in the borderline of the river bank; instead of the familiar trees that had previously "fring[ed] the water's edge," Thoreau finds a "new tree to us," the lime or linden with its ancient and global associations, which "overhung the water with its broad and rounded leaf" (128), shading the sailors on the river from the sun in the sky. "Leaves are of more various forms than the alphabets of all languages put together" (129), Thoreau conjectures at the close of this passage, but the full synthesis of the language of the "patented leaf" would not be realized until the "Spring" chapter of *Walden.* [56]

In some instances in *A Week*, Thoreau uses a liminal image from the natural world to describe a particular narrative or compositional difficulty, and the technique anticipates the more successful synthesis of experiential nature and written account found in *Walden* and *The Maine Woods*. The chapter "Tuesday, " for example, opens with a "fog so dense" that Thoreau is compelled to recall in "story" the view from the top of Saddle-back Mountain and Hooksack Mountain in earlier sojourns (147-155), until finally the "fog disperses" (155). Perhaps fog as a liminal agent between sky and earth becomes analogous in this passage to literal and figurative obscurity—the actual scene is obscured

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[56] For an impressive explication of this passage in the "Spring" chapter of *Walden*, the leaf as "protean device," and Thoreau's indebtedness to Goethe's "exact sensorial imagination" in *The Italian Journey*, see Christina Root's "The Proteus Within: Thoreau's Practice of Goethe's Phenomenology."

from view, so a previous ascent is recalled and rendered in story form. Here Thoreau's account is defined by visual borderlines: he looks down from "from the Hoosack Mountain, where the road crosses it"; his route for the ascent "lay up a long and spacious valley . . . sloping up to the very clouds between the principal range and a lower mountain"; he notes that a linear "stream ran down the middle of the valley" (147). The attempt to synthesize the natural lines of the scene with the inner consciousness of the scene's significance is also addressed in liminal terms, but Thoreau's language here involves only conjectures about the possibility of a mountaintop experience of the sublime: "It seemed a road for the pilgrim to enter upon who would climb to the gates of heaven. I crossed a hay-field, . . . still gradually ascending all the while with a sort of awe, and filled with indefinite expectations as to . . . what kind of nature I should come to at last" (147). Only in the closing paragraphs of the chapter does Thoreau return fully to the landscape, citing the "fringed" borderlines which close out human thoughts and human history: "Still, the ever rich and fertile soils accompanied us, fringed with vines and alive with small birds and frisking squirrels, the edge of some farmer's field or widow's woodlot . . . and man and the memory of man are banished far" (189).

The subject of "man and the memory of man" is clearly part of the intended framework for Thoreau's subsequent "Wednesday" chapter with its sustained essay on friendship, but Thoreau also sketches the natural framework of this literal part of the journey. His opening focus, in fact, is on the *transitional* points in the river: the falls (both natural and constructed) which change the direction and the intensity of the water's flow, and the locks and canals that must be passed through before the river once again opens up and "spreads out into a lake reaching a mile or two without end" (209). At this point, while floating "far from that tributary stream on whose banks our Friends and

kindred dwell," Thoreau observes that "our thoughts like the stars come out of their horizon" (211). But the implied possibility that natural transitions can be reflected in the mind's own processes and transitions is not fully realized in this chapter, and the liminal space of the horizon does not function as the wellspring for this intended synthesis. In a subsequent passage, however, Thoreau does suggest that nature's transitional phases can reflect via analogy the thought processes of friendship: "As surely as the sunset in my latest November shall translate me to the ethereal world, and remind me of the ruddy morning of youth . . . so surely my Friend shall forever be my Friend, and reflect a ray of God in me . . . as I love nature . . . and flowing rivers and morning and evening, and summer and winter, I love thee my Friend" (232). The language here is replete with thresholds: sunset, the "November" stage of late life, the "flowing" from states of extremity—morning to evening, summer to winter—and it anticipates Thoreau's later emphasis on moments of threshold and conversion in passages from *Walden* and *The Maine Woods.*

In fact, the conversion moment of mountaintop sublimity which Thoreau addresses in the "Ktaadan" section of *The Maine Woods* is anticipated in the "Thursday" chapter of *A Week*, although in markedly reduced form. Still, the "Thursday" chapter marks the physical turning point of the river journey to the mountain high point in New Hampshire; it includes the brief account of the ascent of Mount Washington (noted on page 257 in single cryptic understatement: "we were enabled to reach the summit of Agiocochook"), and the "commence[ment]" of the "return voyage" (257) as the travelers retrace their steps in the waterways. It would be possible to see in this three-part design of the chapter (approach, ascent, return) the outlines of Joseph Schopp's earlier-cited argument for the tripartite realization of van Gennep's "*rite de passage.*" ("Of Time" 97).

But Thoreau's single-line summary, "we were enabled to reach the summit of Agiocochook" (257), does not lead to the portals of sublimity in this account, and instead a series of historical digressions follow the transitional point at the mountain's summit.

In a somewhat surprising assessment of this moment in *Revising Mythologies*, Adams and Ross stress the importance of reading the "Saddleback episode" of the "Tuesday" chapter (the temporal midpoint of *A Week's* seven day structure) as "a prelude to the ascent of Agiocochook in 'Thursday,' where its full significance will be revealed" (85). If Thoreau intended to convey the significance of the ascent of either mountaintop in this passage, there is no acknowledgment of a moment of transformation at the summit—nor anything parallel to what would be a recognizable transition point in *a rite de passage*—and the potential for liminal language to signal or initiate sublimity is never realized. In fact the liminal spaces and borderlines of the natural world are essentially absent from this turning point chapter except for occasional references—"The trees made an admirable fence to the landscape, skirting the horizon at every side" (260)—and it is clear that Thoreau has not yet found a way to effectively fuse experiential nature and written account. "Unfortunately, many things have been omitted which should have been recorded in our journal" (270), Thoreau admits simply in the closing paragraphs of the "Thursday" chapter; "It is not easy to write in a journal what interests us at any time, because to write is not what interests us" (270). Still, in an isolated passage in the "Thursday" chapter, Thoreau anticipates with liminal language the development of a later "border life" approach—the "frontier" philosophy which will come into fruition in *Walden* and the essay "Walking." After an initial explication of historical "boundary-making" in 1726 Haverhill, New Hampshire, Thoreau addresses the transient nature of the interstitial lines of this human enterprise: "But we found that the frontiers were not

this way any longer . . . Go where we will on the *surface* of things, men have been there before us . . . and our boundaries have literally been run to the South Sea" (248). A man must confront whatever "may come between him and the reality" he faces, Thoreau asserts in a relational pun, as "the frontiers are not east or west, north or south, but wherever a man *fronts* a fact" in the "unsettled wilderness between him and Canada, between him and the setting sun, or, farther still, between him and *it* " (249). The interstitial language that physically places the frontier in what could be considered as an Emersonian moment of transition recalls also the possibility of a stage of transformation and recognition that fits van Gennep's tripartite design for a rite of passage.

Thoreau's final chapter, "Friday" (with its autumnal emphasis) opens with a more recognizable structural pattern for transition, and ultimately, conclusion: "That night was the turning point in the season. We had gone to bed in summer and we awoke in autumn; for summer passes into autumn in some unimaginable point of time, like the turning of a leaf" (272). Nature's seasonal shifts prompt a corresponding human response of movement and transition: "We heard the sigh of the first autumnal wind . . . the cattle were restlessly running to and fro, as if in apprehension of the withering of the grass and of the approach of the winter. Our thoughts, too, began to rustle" (273). Thoreau's rustling thoughts move rapidly through more digressions and historical anecdotes, but he also retains more faithfully the autumnal theme, noting "The constant abrasion and decay of our lives makes the soil of our future growth" (286), and even in digression on "our summer of English poetry" he references a corresponding advance "towards its fall . . . with bright autumnal tints" (298). In fact, Thoreau in this passage presents a better sense of the process for synthesis, of "Nature, rightly read" (310), than he has attempted in any of the previous chapters of *A Week.* An awareness of the ultimate liminal transition from

life into death and the afterlife seems to be acutely present in the "Friday" chapter, perhaps because of Thoreau's brother John's death, perhaps because of the autumnal framework of the chapter, and logically because the literal river journey is drawing to a close even as it stands figuratively for the life journey: ". . . we live on the verge of another and purer realm. . . the borders of our plot are set with flowers, whose seeds were blown from more Elysian fields adjacent" (309). Thoreau knows that "history still accumulates like rubbish before the portals of nature (and "Friday" has its share of historical digressions), but a larger, cosmic understanding is suggested in this closing chapter, as Thoreau alludes in nuanced ways to an Emersonian awareness that "this world has many rings" (312), and there are liminal "interval[s] between that which *appears,* and that which *is"* (314). The closing pages of the "Friday" chapter are replete with borderlines and transitional moments framed in the natural scene:

> As it grew late in the afternoon, and we rowed leisurely up the gentle stream, shut in between fragrant and blooming banks . . . we seemed to detect the hues of our native sky in the southwest horizon. The sun was just setting behind the edge of a wooded hill . . . the whole river valley undulated with mild light, purer and more memorable than the noon . . . The last vestiges of daylight at length disappeared, and as we rowed silently along with our backs toward home through the darkness, only a few stars being visible, we had little to say, but sat absorbed in thought, or in silence listened to the monotonous sound of our oars . . . and the valleys echoed the sound to the stars. (316-317)

"Silence" marks this sense of awe before the universe, and nature's borderlines,

interstices, and points of transition provide a contextual framework—an early aesthetic of description—for the passage between world and self that integrates experience and consciousness.

In the last paragraph of the narrative, after noting that a distance of fifty miles is covered on this final day of the literal journey, Thoreau remarks that he has returned to the same "Concord mud" which comprised the original "port of entry and departure for the bodies as well as the souls of men" (14) in the opening pages. The boat's keel "recognize[s] . . . some semblance of its outline preserved" in the mud from the date of departure, and the returning voyagers tie it to a wild apple tree whose stem still displays the wear marks of earlier moorings. Here, in liminal outlines, Thoreau offers a thematic counterpart to the text's earlier identifications of the borderlines of time and history, the traces of earlier moments in the assessment and "fronting of facts." Perhaps in these closing images are the palimpsest tracings for later, more balanced forays into the exploration of the relationship between human and natural transitions and transitional processes, but Thoreau never fully enacts in this prose work what he suggests: that natural transitions and processes are reflected in the mind's own processes and transitions—or can provide the figures with which to represent such mental movements.

Still, as Robert Kuhn McGregor has noted, Thoreau was forced to draw upon the recollection of natural scenes in composing the draft of *A Week*; having only "the sketchiest of notes of the journey taken with his brother . . . he tried to reconstruct the adventure from memory as well as he could" (64). McGregor points out that Thoreau "turned to natural history volumes . . . to lend reality to his subject" of a journey through nature (73), but Thoreau's composition owes more to a framing technique made possible by a poetics of liminality – the delineation in prose sketches of the outlines and interstices

of the river and surrounding landscape—to render a scene he is unable to fully recall and for which he has few recorded details. In most of the scenes of natural description in *A Week,* a poetics of liminality provides an initial way to image nature in order to provide a working framework for "the journey to higher and better thoughts . . . as the week progressed" (McGregor 65). But the developing aesthetic rarely moves past the descriptive frame in this first work, perhaps, as McGregor considers, because "Henry Thoreau understood that he had not yet done more than cross the threshold in the study of nature" (86).[57] A second, significant use of liminal poetics will characterize the developing aesthetic in Thoreau's next major prose work, where the rhetorical uses of nature are rendered in language that reflects the mind's ability to mirror nature's transitions and stages of transformation. In *Walden,* Henry David Thoreau will cross the threshold in the study of nature into transformational experiences of synthesis and conversion.

Walden's Generative Poetics of Liminality

In an 1859 journal entry, ten years after the publication of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers,* Thoreau reflects on the incomplete development of themes often found in early attempts at writing: "In his first essay on a given theme, [the writer] produces scarcely more than a frame and groundwork for his sentiment and poetry . . . Most that is first-written on any subject is a mere groping after it, mere rubble-stone and

[57] McGregor's diction does not necessarily reinforce the context of assessing *A Week* through a poetics of liminality, but his "threshold" reference provides an apt transition to an assessment of *Walden's* "study of nature" within liminal frameworks.

foundation."[58] When *Walden* was published in 1854 after eight years of reflection and revision, Thoreau had moved beyond "frame and groundwork" in his nature writing by finding analogies in language that more closely replicated the dynamics of his foundational subject: spiritual transformation imaged through the vision of transition in the natural world. "All perception of truth is in the detection of an analogy," Thoreau notes in an early journal entry (4: 46), and potentially shared correlations between human and natural processes are best detected where their analogous "power[s] reside," to use Emerson's phrasing, "in the moment of transition between a past to a new state" (271). Varied forms of analogy are themselves examples of liminal and transitional process, and ultimately Thoreau's "perception of truth" applies to analogies found in both nature and the human spirit. Moreover, a poetics of liminality provides an aesthetic vantage point from which to observe changes in processes of thought as well as changes in physical states of being, allowing Thoreau to compare dynamic human experience with the generative characteristics of a natural scene that is seen to be, in an Emersonian sense, *always* in a process of transformation.

In a subtle irony, Thoreau laments the "narrowness of [his] experience" in the opening pages of *Walden*, explaining that "I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body else whom I knew as well" (325); in the admission that he can only speak for himself Thoreau also suggests that he prefers a single perspective. The desire to expand his narrow experience and to make it more dynamic by matching it with generative energy in nature is at the core of Thoreau's "experiment" at Walden Pond; he

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[58] Thoreau's February 3, 1859 entry (vol. XI of the *Journals*, 438-439) notes as well the aesthetic development possible in the drafting process of writing, for even "sentences [which] at first lie dead" will have "some life and color . . . reflected on them from mature and successful lines" in a prose passage "when all are arranged" (438).

notes simply in these opening pages: "Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me" (330). An analogy with the way "the soil . . . is suited to the seed" is offered as a transformative conjecture a few paragraphs later: just as the seed "has sent its radicle downward . . . its shoot upward," so does man "rooted . . . firmly in the earth" enable himself to "rise in the same proportion into the heavens above" (335). The analogy of correspondence between growing plant and enlightened human being emerges from liminal crossings between earth and sky; concrete forms in nature demonstrate the process of Emersonian transition and gesture toward the shape-changing metamorphosis of seed to plant; mortal man to celestial soul. In fact, all of *Walden* is an extended analogy on cultivation and self-cultivation: a "field" Thoreau wants to "cultivate."

Not all of *Walden's* early liminal passages make use of balanced analogies to synthesize experiential nature and written account, however. Thoreau uses a basic framing technique to provide an initial survey of the natural scene in his second chapter, "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," and the context recalls the delineated prose sketches found in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers:*

> I was seated by the shore of a small pond, about a mile and a half south of the Village of Concord and somewhat higher than it, in the midst of an extensive wood between that town and Lincoln . . . but I was so low in the woods that the opposite shore, half a mile off . . . was my most distant horizon. (391)

The sketch outlines clear boundaries and measured distances of shores, horizons, and woods between; earlier in the chapter Thoreau remarks with an intended pun, "With respect to landscapes,—I am monarch of all I *survey*'" (388). But later in the same "survey[ed]" scene of description, Thoreau watches the pond "throw off its nightly

clothing of mist . . . while the mists, like ghosts, were stealthily withdrawing in every direction into the woods" (391); the liminal layer of rising mist is one of the "constantly changing substances without definite bounds" that Adams and Ross find in Thoreau's aesthetics for "favorite images of indistinctness" (96). An "overcast, mid-afternoon sky" above Walden Pond following a "gentle rainstorm in August" provides another liminal space of transformation: when the "shallow" air above the pond is "darkened by clouds," the water below, "full of light and reflections, becomes a lower heaven itself" (391). The pond is "a small sheet of intervening water"; it forms a natural interstice on the surface ("like a thin crust") of "all the earth beyond the pond" (392). Liminal contexts in this scene provide the early forays for Thoreau into threshold experience; they open an Emersonian interplay between the "real," physical landscape and the ideal beyond it.

But *Walden's* early demand for full participatory consciousness is made recognizably distinct from Emersonian idealism by its directness; it does not rely on nature's ability to "reflect the wisdom of [our] best hour" (Emerson 9). Instead, Thoreau advocates for an "encouraging" idealism that is unmediated and active rather than reflective and symbol-driven: "I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor" (394). Moreover, Thoreau further separates his view in this passage from Emerson's understanding of Nature as symbol of spirit by calling for a more aggressive experiment, a "more conscious endeavor" than Emerson's offer of an approximate and "try[ing]" conjecture in "The Method of Nature": "It seems to me . . . we should piously celebrate this hour by exploring the *method of nature*. Let us see *that*, as nearly as we can, and try how far it is transferable to the literary life" (Emerson 118). And in an earlier-cited passage, Thoreau looks beyond the possibility of what may be "transferable" to instead

engage experiential nature directly: ". . . it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do" (394). Indeed, "we are enabled to apprehend at all . . . only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality which surrounds us" (399). For Thoreau, the process of "perpetual instilling and drenching" takes place most often along liminal borders or is effected in liminal crossings; it involves a commitment to "front only the essential"; to "live deep and suck out all the marrow" from deep interiors; to "cut a broad swath and shave close" along liminal borderlines (394).

In fact, Thoreau's fact-based approach to "instilling and drenching" can be seen as a direct challenge to Emerson's concession in "The Method of Nature," in which Emerson questions rhetorically, "The method of nature: who could ever analyze it? That rushing stream will not stop to be observed. We can never surprise nature into a corner; never find the end of a thread; never to tell where to set the first stone" (119). Shortly after expressing his contrasting desire to "drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms" (394), Thoreau counters with a definitive method for analysis of both natural and human processes:

> Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe . . . till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we call *reality* . . . and then begin, having a *point d'appui*, below freshet and frost and fire . . . (400)

In this passage from the second chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau responds to the Emersonian key concept of "flow"—both the model in nature (Emerson's "rushing stream that will not stop to be observed"), and the correlatives found in human "flowings" (which

Thoreau defines as currents of opinion, prejudice, tradition, delusion, and appearance)—with a corrective liminal counterbalance. In this case, the conscious endeavor of "work[ing] and wedg[ing]" downward beneath the deposits and sediments on the surface of the globe (the "alluvion" of all negative emanations perceived through human consciousness) will eventually bring us to the "hard bottom" of reality. Still, other passages contradict this impulse of reaching rock bottom, and the opposing stance of "bottomlessness" reflects a version of Emersonian polarity that Thoreau clearly understood. Walter Benn Michaels' essay, "*Walden's* False Bottoms," for example, elaborates on the capacity of Thoreau's variegated perspective to reflect opposing and relative truths simultaneously.[59]

As in later passages in *Walden,* Thoreau advocates going down in order to ascend: in the descent through liminal layers of "freshet and frost and fire" we find the starting point of our direct perception of things "real." Consciousness emanates from the mind, and Thoreau finds that his "intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things" (400). The head is thus "an organ for burrowing" and descending through liminal layers into the space between where the "richest veins" are found (400-401). Thoreau concludes the second chapter of *Walden* with the promise "here I will begin to mine" (401)—figuratively using his head to "mine and burrow" through Walden's varied landscapes—and in the process he sets forth a traceable template for his most significant set-piece passages in the second half of the text. Thoreau's announcement in the last line of the second chapter that he will "mine" the earth's surface for human and natural truths is realized in the digging and hoeing of "The Bean-Field"

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[59] Walter Benn Michaels' "Walden's False Bottoms" introduced the critical possibility that *Walden* is effectively and productively addressed from an anti-foundationalist, deconstructionist perspective.

chapter in *Walden* (446-455), and then, in the subsequent pond chapters ("The Pond," and "The Pond in Winter"), he fulfills an additional announcement made in the second chapter: he fishes and drinks the Walden's waters only to "drink deeper" and "fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars" (400). Finally, Thoreau's search (announced as well in the second chapter template) for "the richest vein . . . somewhere hereabouts" is realized in the thawing sandbank sequence of the "Spring" chapter (561-576), where "it is wonderful how rapidly and yet perfectly the sand organizes itself as it flows" (567), and where the veins of "this one hillside" reveal the secret of things: the very "principle of all the operations of Nature" (568).

In these set-piece passages, Thoreau's second, intermediate use of liminal poetics calls attention to transitions in the natural landscape that are mirrored in the human mind; it is best seen in *Walden* where reflections are generated from specific boundaries and transitional surfaces on the landscape. In the chapter, "The Bean Field," for example, horizontal rows of beans—with each plant growing vertically from roots to shoots—form a grid of liminal intersects between the organic depths of the soil, the crust of the soil's surface, and the air above. The human activities of planting and hoeing explore and transform the transitional point of "this portion of the earth's surface" as long-existing vegetation is replaced with a new "pulse" of power that, in an Emersonian sense, resides in this transformational process: ". . . my rows, my beans . . . attached me to the earth, and so I got strength like Anteus" (446). The analogy is generated from the kind of liminal space Victor Turner identifies as "a catalyst for the creative impulse," and it prompts a rhetorical question of comparison: "What shall I learn of beans or beans of me?" (446). The learning exchange on the surface of this landscape extends well beyond the immediate scene, in spite of an initial framework with its finite configurations of time

and space. Not unlike the narrative approach used in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers,* Thoreau's poetic process in "The Bean Field" opens with what appear to be tight structural parameters: this is the seventh chapter of *Walden,* the length of the rows planted with bean seeds added together equals seven miles, and the processes for hoeing, weeding, and harvesting are disciplined seasonal activities in a field of two and a half acres, last cleared fifteen years earlier. But clear narrative borderlines soon yield to more poetic awakenings at the points of liminal transition: the downward growing bean roots that "attach [Thoreau] to the earth" also teach him to recognize what Wai-Chee Dimock refers to as "deep time," the *longue duree* that emerges in tangible evidence unearthed by hoeing (in an Emersonian sense, "adroitly managing") the land's transitional surfaces.[60]

Thoreau begins by noting his own markers on a landscape first seen by him in earlier "infant dreams" where now "a new growth is all around, preparing another aspect for new infant eyes" (446), but the recognition soon expands beyond personal configurations of time and space. Thoreau determines that his crop has become a "connecting link between wild and uncultivated fields" (448); his hoe disturbs the "ashes of unchronicled nations" from beneath the soil's organic depths, reminding him of the centuries of cultivators of the earth "who in primeval years lived under these heavens" (449). But for the Thoreau of *Walden,* going down (to turn over the "roots" of natural forms or of words) is not a movement toward static grounding or rooting, but rather a descent that always makes possible a correspondent movement upwards toward

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[60] See Wai Chee Dimock's "Introduction: Planet as Duration and Extension" in *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time.* "Deep time" (3), is a way of capturing the reality that American literary works of art "have a much longer history than one might think"(4) and are "a much more complex tangle of relations . . . weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures" (3).

transformation at the point of threshold. For in the air—well above the transitional crust of the earth's surface—the trajectories of circling night-hawks form "seamless copes" in the eye of the sky, or perhaps higher circles in "heaven's eye" (449). As the night-hawks counterbalance one another in alternating patterns of "soaring and descending, approaching and leaving" (449), they prompt for Thoreau a correspondential analogy between the human and natural world; in fact the pair of hawks circle the sky "as if they were the embodiment of [his] own thoughts" (449).

The cultivation of a bean field is connected in deep time to ancient and "sacred art[s]," because the human and natural analogies generated from liminal spaces prompt a dual perspective—two parallel but contrasting recognitions—that Thoreau notes in balanced prose: "It was no longer beans that I hoed, nor that I hoed beans" (449). The chapter which began with the discrete, finite parameters of seven measured miles of focused activity expands in this vision of fusion or communion into seemingly limitless measures of space and time, and even the expected yield transcends the artist's metaphoric expectations: "These beans have results that are not harvested by me" (455). Thoreau's discovery, then, is not simply one of shared human and natural experiences that span generations and cross the boundaries that normally separate cultures and entities, but perhaps a larger cosmic awareness of those categories of experience not contained by temporal and spatial parameters: "results" expressed through a transformative language that attempts to replicate the generative characteristics of scenes that are in continual transition.

Thoreau first speculates on the counterbalancing energies beneath and above the earth's surface—as well as their desired proportionate structures in human activity—in the earlier-noted passage from the opening chapter of *Walden:* "The soil, it appears, is

suited to the seed, for it has sent its radicle downward, and it may now send its shoot upward also with confidence. Why has man rooted himself thus firmly in the earth that he may rise in the same proportion into the heavens above?—for the nobler plants are valued for the fruit they bear at last in the air and light, far from the ground…" (335). "The Bean Field" chapter continues this speculation, and in many respects, the aspirant activities of planting and hoeing are seen as analogous to the processes of art and writing—both forms of self-culture are valued for "the fruit they bear." Thoreau describes himself as a "barefooted" and "dabbling . . . plastic artist" (447) while hoeing his measured rows of beans—noting that his hoe "tinkled against the stones," in this humble artistry producing a "music [that] echoed to the woods and the sky" (449). The analogy between hoeing, music, and ultimately writing as creative processes makes hoeing itself an art of the threshold: Thoreau goes down to the roots of his words, tapping into their "magnetism" and turning them over to aerate them with "'vital spirits' from the air" (451, 452). The activity of hoeing thus becomes an Emersonian "experience of poetic creativeness" in which transitions are "adroitly managed to present as much transitional surface as possible" (Emerson 641); flowering vegetation as well as figures of speech emerge from transitional surfaces to grow into the air. And if, as Goethe believed, "language is never a direct expression of the objective world, but only a reflection of it,"[61] perspectives that allow us to observe more closely points of transition and transformation have the greatest potential to generate word patterns reflecting more

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[61] The full text of Goethe's point in *Scientific Studies* alludes to the "constant motion" of transitional processes: "We are insufficiently aware that language is, in fact, merely symbolic, merely figurative, never a direct expression of the natural world, but only a reflection of it . . . In the realm of natural philosophy . . . things are in constant motion. They cannot be held fast, and yet we must speak of them; hence we look for all sorts of formulas to get at them at least metaphorically . . . The scientist [should] convey his views on natural phenomena in a multifold language. If he could avoid becoming one-sided and give living expression to living thought, it might be possible to communicate much that would be welcome" (277).

fully the dynamic essences of nature. Liminal poetics opens a lens into the moments of threshold and conversion in the natural world that are mirrored in human thought, as well as revealing through that same lens the processes of human thought that are mirrored in nature—a reflective and relational dynamic in *Walden* seen in the chapters "The Ponds," and "The Ponds in Winter."

Thoreau's account in "The Ponds" of the "memorable and valuable" human experience of "fishing from a boat by moonlight" is (as in prior set-piece passages) initially sketched with marked attention to discrete and quantified spatial and temporal boundaries. The experience takes place "in forty feet of water . . . twenty or thirty rods from the shore" during the "hours of midnight" (462). A "long, flaxen line" descends and "communicat[es] . . . with mysterious nocturnal fishes . . . dwelling forty feet below," or another liminal probe, the "sixty feet of line" extending from the boat, communicates through its "slight vibration" the presence of "life prowling around [the pond's] extremity" (462). But the liminal line that connects sensory human experience with the pond's extremity as well as its depths serves also as a conduit between the mind's activity and nature's energies and dynamic rhythms. Because transitions in the natural landscape (between water, earth, and sky) are mirrored in the very processes of contemplation, "thoughts [that] had wandered to vast and cosmological themes in other spheres" are pulled back to the scene at hand through the "faint jerk" on the fishing line that connects the water's depths with the air above the reflective surface of the pond. The mind returns from "dream[ing]" to be linked once again to the human experience of fishing from a boat positioned at the liminal point between the water's depths and the night sky above. Language that mirrors the dynamics of transition between the landscape and the mind marks as well the conversion point of hooking a particular idea or fish—these activities

are linked relationally, forming dynamic mirror images of one another on either side of the pond's reflective surface: "It seemed as if I might next cast my line upward into the air, as well as downward into this element which was scarcely more dense. Thus I caught two fishes as it were with one hook" (463). In such a moment, the reflecting surface of Walden Pond emerges as a perfect medium for Thoreau's mental reflections; direct contact with a fish lurking in the deep waters images the possibility of new retrievals out of the unformed unconscious spirit of this philosophic fisherman.

The prose dialectic here —catching "two fishes . . . with one hook"—marks a point of synthesis between experiential nature and the human meditations both inspired by and mirrored in the natural world, a dialectic that was largely lacking in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers.* A poetics of liminality suggests that one's position at a point of transition— in this case, a man in a boat on the water's permeable surface—allows two diverse activities taking place in separate but parallel spheres ("fishing" beneath the surface and "thinking" above it) to merge in consciousness and find expression in a single pattern in language. The agent of both activities has perceived correspondence at the line of contrast and separation; he "cast[s] a line" simultaneously into submerged and celestial spheres, and the results (the "two fishes"), are drawn forth from opposite ends of this single arc of movement through water and sky. In effect, the writer-artist's liminal positioning between two spheres—his conscious recollection of that positioning—gives him the ability to fuse the world of experience with the world of ideas in charged language.

The water's surface is the portal or passageway between contrasting spheres, but because of its transparency and reflective qualities, the pond itself becomes a lens through which multiple forms of perception are possible. Thoreau again begins with

exaggeratedly specific structural parameters in sketching the boundaries of the pond and its surroundings: "half a mile long and a mile and three quarters in circumference, [it] contains about sixty-one and a half acres . . . The surrounding hills rise abruptly from the water to the height of forty to eighty feet," and rise even higher on the "southeast and east[ern]" shores "within a quarter and a third of a mile" (463). But different vantage points along these clearly drawn borderlines yield varying perspectives, and "two colors at least" are perceived in response to different combinations of distance, light, and atmospheric clarity. Yet even from the same vantage point, the pond's reflective properties and its lens-like liminal positioning on the earth's surface open portals between distinct spheres: "Walden is blue at one time and green at another, even from the same point of view. Lying between the earth and the heavens, it partakes of the color of both" (463). Multiple hues are visible as well in the complex "iris" of the pond's surface, and the "fluctuation[s]" of rising and falling water levels generate a widening of the eye image with analogies in language that point to a broader human countenance:

> By this fluctuation the pond asserts its title to a shore, and thus the *shore* is *shorn,* And the trees cannot hold it by right of possession. These are the lips of the lake on which no beard grows. It licks its chaps from time to time. (467-468)

In the "mind's eye" of the writer, the water's edge is a "woven . . . natural selvage" (471), and both Nature and the artist have eyes that can serve as portals of exchange and reciprocity: "A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature. The fluviatile trees next to the shore are the slender eyelashes which fringe it, and the wooded hills and cliffs around it are its overhanging brows" (471). But just as the writer's powers of

perception transcend the sensory insights afforded by vision, the initial, singular "earth's eye" image of the pond expands into multiple reflective realms—mirror images expressed in language made accessible from liminal vantage points:

> Ay, every leaf and twig and stone and cobweb sparkles now at mid-afternoon as when covered with dew in a spring morning. In such a day . . . Walden is a perfect forest mirror, set round with stones. Nothing so fair, so pure . . . lies on the surface of the earth. Sky water. It needs no fence . . . It is a mirror which no stone can crack, whose quicksilver will never wear off. (473)

Robert Sattelmeyer notes that the "portrait that eventually emerged" in the drafting of *Walden* "emphasized the purity of the pond and the myriad ways that any natural fact, carefully and accurately perceived, dissolves the difference between perceiver and perceived" (441). In fact, the pond as a "walled-in . . . field of water" (Thoreau 468, 473) acts as an image of correspondence, "continually receiving new life and motion from above," and "betray[ing] the spirit that is in the air" (473). The pond's liminal positioning as both place and process is intrinsic: "It is intermediate in its nature between land and sky" (473), and as an objective correlative of the mind it becomes the means by which the processes of perception and cognition can be better understood. Thoreau seems aware as well that a conscious change in a viewer's positioning can expand the clarity of the pond's line of demarcation between earth and sky. "The glassy surface of a lake" is a liminal boundary between the atmosphere above and watery depths below, but a new perspective (afforded "when you invert your head") turns a fluctuating transitional surface into a slender, definitive borderline that reveals additional complexities in the invisible air: ". . . it looks like a thread of finest gossamer stretched

across the valley . . . separating one stratum of the atmosphere from another" (471). Multiple perspectives at the pond's surface expand the perceiver's critical recognitions of juxtaposed "truths" and their corresponding images: "As you look over the pond westward you are obliged to employ both your hands to defend your eyes against the reflected as well as the true sun, for they are equally bright" (471).

But a poetics of liminality also makes possible simultaneous perspectives of correspondence and separateness, especially as a pond with "seemingly bottomless water" (474) is both charged with potential and also characterized by degrees of indeterminacy—the transparent medium upon which one is not always certain of the distinction between what is reflected and what is "true." Thoreau recalls a moment from his youth during which he "paddled . . . to the middle" of Walden pond for the first time, "floating over its surface as the zephyr willed . . . in a summer forenoon, dreaming awake" (475). The experience is one of liminal ambiguity, a marker of the Romantic sense of an intuitive bond one shares with the natural world in childhood; but the same locus of the pond in later years will provide a context for insights into human separateness from nature's life-sustaining powers. For the ponds' "water[s], which should be as sacred as the Ganges at least" (476), are also conduits for human avarice and greed; "the railroad has infringed on its border"; its fringed shores have been "laid bare by woodchoppers," and "ice men have skimmed it" (476) in each passing winter. Even when Thoreau links the waters of adjacent ponds in his summary description (Flint's Pond, Goose Pond, but especially White and Walden Ponds, the "Lakes of Light"), his emphasis is on how easily we become blind to the superior worth of these "liquid and ample" expanses. The ponds and their sacred waters are "secured to us and our successors forever . . . they are too pure to have a market value; they contain no muck" (481), and yet men who "disregard" water's

life-sustaining powers instead waste their energies in pursuit of material gain—here represented by "the diamond of Kohinoor" and other precious stones. "Nature has no human inhabitant who appreciates her" (482), Thoreau laments in his closing paragraph, but insights into what correspondences may be possible are gleaned in liminal spaces and threshold experiences.

In "The Pond in Winter," Thoreau seems to be making a similar claim regarding a contemporary human response to "frozen" water, but in this instance he is able to demonstrate a more definitive commercial value: harvested ice cut from the pond is highly marketable in hot summer months in the nineteenth-century. In fluid form, these waters are taken for granted; in the winter, they create the context for an animated scene of commerce. "For sixteen days" in the dead of winter, Thoreau watched from his window as "a hundred men at work like busy husbandmen with teams and horses" (559) cut blocks of ice, only to see these "securely labor[ing]" workers vanish later into Nature's larger balance of silence and solitude as if they had never been: ". . . and now they are all gone . . . and no traces will appear that a man has ever stood there" (559). At this point, Thoreau moves away from the idea of commercial human activity to a more universal (and life-affirming) consideration: "Thus it appears that the sweltering inhabitants of Charleston and New Orleans, of Madras and Bombay and Calcutta, drink at my well" (559). In a sense, this affirmation is a reversal of Shelley's claim in "Mont Blanc," where ice from the mountain's glacial summit melts and is carried off in fluid tributaries to become the "breath and blood of distant lands" (line 122). Walden's waters are carried off to distant lands in frozen blocks, but the essential recognition is of a shared confluence of all the earth's waters, so that "the pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges" (559). Even though Thoreau wakes to "bathe [his] intellect

in the stupendous and cosmogonal philosophy of the *Bhagvat Geeta*," this kind of deep space recognition is elusive, "…so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions" (559).

The chapter "Spring," which follows "The Pond in Winter," sustains a similar initial image of waters frozen and thawed, and again an allusion to Shelley's "Mont Blanc" seems to echo in Thoreau's phrasing—this time in the description of the sound that accompanies the spring thaw: "the music of a thousand tinkling rills and rivulets whose veins are filled with the blood of winter which they are bearing off" (565). Even if Thoreau doesn't have Shelley's poem in mind, the emphasis on the vast interconnectedness of things is a continual refrain in these passages, culminating in this chapter in the unlocked "secrets" of life in the thawing sand and clay of the liminally positioned railroad cut. Thoreau observes the thawing "phenomen[on]" as he passes through the "deep cut . . . on [his] way to the village," and he is immediately drawn to the artistry of the materials which comprise the unusual forms emerging from the bank's vertical surface: ". . . sand of every degree of fineness and of various rich colors commonly mixed with a little clay" (565). The "hybrid product" that takes shape as a result of combined laws of currents and vegetation is fascinating as a "grotesque" form of "architectural foliage," but it is also aesthetically pleasing, as "impress[ive] as . . . a cave with its stalactites laid open to the light" (566). The palate for this composition is complex and proportioned: "The various shades of the sand are singularly rich and agreeable, embracing the different iron colors" as the "flowing mass reaches the drain at the foot of the bank" and flattens into broad "strands . . . still variously and beautifully shaded" (566). The patterns formed by the thawing railroad cut are "the creation of an hour," observed just as they are in the process of emerging into form, and Thoreau is

"affected" by their sudden emergence: ". . . as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me" (566).

The correspondential analogy between natural and human artistry is made possible by Thoreau's liminal positioning as he observes this transitional process while passing through the deep sides of the railroad cut, but the disparate composition of a "hybrid product" also has its analogy in language.[62] The diverse combinations of diction, sound, rhythm, and imagery that result from intensive observation lead Thoreau to the realization that, like Emerson's ever-expanding liminal circles, "the very globe continually transcends and translates itself, and becomes winged in its orbit" (567) as forms ascend into higher forms. Nature's particular artistry in the railroad cut provides an interstitial template for analogous aesthetic design; Thoreau observes that "it is wonderful how rapidly yet perfectly the sand organizes itself as it flows, using the best material its mass affords to form the sharp edges of its channel" (567). The process of "frost coming out of the ground" is by analogy Spring itself in its earliest form: "It precedes the green and flowery spring, as mythology precedes regular poetry" (568). Thoreau then concludes the railroad cut analogy with the same artist's materials that framed his opening observation, noting that everything on the "living earth" is "plastic like clay in the hands of the potter" (568), a kind of "living poetry" comprised of organic elements. In fact, the natural template, in its continual flowing, transcends the aesthetic of all fixed forms of human artistry: "You may melt your metals and cast them into the most beautiful moulds you can; they will never excite me like the forms which this molten earth flows out into"

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[62] One of the definitions of "hybrid" is "a word composed of elements from different languages," and Thoreau sustains a spirited multi-language word play in several long paragraphs in the railroad cut passage (566-568), concluding finally that "The Maker of this earth but patented a leaf. What Champollion will decipher this hieroglyphic for us, that we may turn over a new leaf at last?" (568).

(568). But writing as a form of artistry can mirror the balance of downward and upward trajectories in nature, at least in the way that Thoreau sees descending, submerging processes in the natural world leading to counterbalancing ascents. Thus going down to roots beneath surfaces is also a process of discovery of the roots of words, so that "turning over a new leaf" additionally effects transition in the etymological renewal of a dead metaphor. In this sense, Thoreau returns to the organic origins of figural language, and his discoveries will potentially "yield results" for himself (and others) that extend beyond the immediate scene of the railroad cut—or the pond and bean field.

Clearly, the relationship between human beings and the natural world is essentially one of sustained correspondence in the season of spring, with its "symbol[s] of perpetual youth" (570). Thoreau offers the persistent image of "the grass-blade, like a long green ribbon [that] streams from the sod into the summer" in spite of late spring frosts and the dry covering of "last year's hay" (570). By analogy, "our human life but dies down to its root, and still puts forth its green blade to eternity," and all living things participate in the transition "from dark and sluggish hours to bright and elastic ones . . . a memorable crisis which all things proclaim" (571). In this sense, "crisis" is defined literally as "turning point"—the moment of transition between contrasting seasons which helps to "preserve the equilibrium of Nature" (572). In spring, all nature "is so rife with life" that some living things "can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another," with "little account . . . to be made of it" (576). Even darker elements in the natural world can be accommodated in a relationship of correspondence, and we should be "refreshed by the sight of [Nature's] inexhaustible vigor, vast and Titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees" (575).

But generative liminality can also accommodate contrasting states of synthesis and separation, and the language of paradox often marks a recognition made from a liminal positioning. Liminal spaces are charged with potential, but they are also characterized by degrees of doubt and indeterminacy, oppositions that remain confusing rather than harmonious, as well as more affirming recognitions of human separateness from the more ominous elements of the natural world. "Vast and Titanic features" are linked to a perception of Nature's "inexhaustible vigor" in the closing chapters of *Walden,* but in the "Ktaadn" section of *The Maine Woods,* the word "inhuman" follows the same descriptors, and Nature is separate: "Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got [the beholder] at a disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty" (640). *Walden's* energies may be grounded in language matched with the generative characteristics of natural scenes that are always in transition, but in the "Ktaadn" section of *The Maine Woods*, as well as in the desolate seascapes of *Cape Cod,* analogous language often depicts contrast and alienation, and in sublime moments language transitions into what Angus Fletcher refers to as the "encoded speech" of allegory.[63] Still, the accommodation of Nature's energies in a language of separateness is an artistic achievement expressed in Thoreau's third expansively allegorical use of liminal poetics, especially in descriptions of human experience in the natural world that are not readily articulated, or that reveal other perspectives on relationships of "correspondence."[64] Unquestionably, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and

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[63] Fletcher's *Allegory* notes that "allegory says one thing and means another. It destroys the normal expectations we have about language, that our words 'mean what they say' . . . In this sense, we see how allegory is properly considered a mode: it is a fundamental process of encoding our speech" (2-3). *Walden*'s correspondential analogies break down in passages found in "Ktaadn," and our expectations are at times subject to an "inversion" that is perhaps better addressed by the "protean devise . . . of allegory" (2,1).

[64] Although the desire to experience a potential sublime encounter is often generated by a desire to know nature's deeper mysteries, the anticipation frequently produces forms of anxiety. Robert Sattelmeyer's

Walden reflect more of the generative potential of Emerson's liminal poetics, and in some measure they both accommodate the transitional movements of acknowledged rites of passage—especially *Walden.* In effect, Thoreau's emphasis in *Walden* on points of separation and initiation, transformation, and ultimate reaggregation—staged within a seasonal framework—is, perhaps, his most significant contribution to nineteenth-century understandings of human and natural correspondence. But sections of *The Maine Woods* and the prevailing emphasis of *Cape Cod* would challenge *Walden's* generative patterns and tripartite passage of ascension and general amelioration, and the less life-affirming analogies and liminal contexts in these two works are addressed in the next chapter.

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essay, "The Remaking of *Walden,"* notes that Thoreau's first trip to the Maine wilderness in 1846 had brought him into contact with "a kind of nature that threatened to extinguish rather than heighten consciousness" atop Mount Ktaadn, where he "had also faced the fact that 'the true source of evil' . . . is the self" (437).

IV. THOREAU: *THE MAINE WOODS* AND *CAPE COD*

Limited Liminal Contexts in "Chesuncook" and "The Allegash and East Branch"

Thoreau's three trips to the Maine wilderness between 1846 and 1857 are addressed in the three sections of *The Maine Woods,* "Ktaadn," "Chesuncook," and "the Allegash and East Branch," but it is the account of the ascent of Ktaadn and the journey toward and away from the mountain (section one) that marks an artistic and philosophical turning point in Thoreau's development as a writer. "Thoreau brought the full strength of his maturing prose to bear in describing his experience atop the mountain," McGregor notes in *A Wider View of the Universe,* and "all of [his] celebrated writings praising wilderness came after this moment" (80, 72).

Ironically, the second and third parts of *The Maine Woods,* "Chesuncook," and "the Allegash and East Branch," were both written after the artistic "turning point" of the Ktaadn account, and neither are characterized by Thoreau's third expansively allegorical

use of liminal poetics that marks both "Ktaadn" and later, *Cape Cod.* I would argue that this use or mode of allegory and the pursuit of sublime experience is at the core of what McGregor found to be the "pivotal event in Thoreau's intellectual development" (71), but both allegory and sublimity—as well as clear examples of a liminal poetics inherited from Emerson—are all but absent from the final two sections of *The Maine Woods.*

For even though the tripartite text of *The Maine Woods* is a posthumous construction, Thoreau himself acknowledges that the accounts of his final two trips to Maine were drafted after he had written "Ktaadn," and a number of critics have noted that stylistically and thematically, the second and third Maine narratives are markedly different from Thoreau's previous nature writing, and perhaps consciously so. In this sense, "Ktaadn" may well mark a turning point for Thoreau, but a subsequent turning point marks the transition between "Ktaadn" as the first Maine trip in 1846 and the accounts of the two trips that followed in 1853 and 1857. Both "Chesuncook" and "The Allegash and East Branch" feature "brief passages that celebrate imaginative (subjective, unifying, creative) perception," Adams and Ross argue in *Revising Mythologies*, but these passages are "dwarfed by the surrounding sections in which Thoreau's perception is overwhelmingly scientific (objective, analytical, detached)"; they mark Thoreau's transition from "poet and mythmaker to become the naturalist and anthropologist of his later years" (Adams and Ross 192). But what is most noticeably absent from the final two Maine narratives is the pervasive liminal context of the "Ktaadn" section, except for a few rare examples in passages of description and reflection.

With notable consistency, both "Chesuncook" and "The Allegash" feature early mists, fog, and rain that occupy the space between the perceiver and the natural forms to be perceived. These meterological conditions are essentially liminal mediums which

appear to obscure the physical features of the landscape from clear view, but which also offer opportunities for subsequent and differing kinds of insight. In "Chesuncook" Thoreau remarks, "It rained all this day and till the middle of the next forenoon, concealing the landscape almost entirely" (657), but through that same rain he gradually becomes "exhilarated by the sight of the wild fir and the spruce-tops . . . peering through the mist in the horizon" (658). Rain is similarly featured in the opening pages of "The Allegash," but conditions worsen and grow "more and more stormy as the day advanced . . . steadily . . . all day," so that Thoreau and his companions "saw but little of the country" (716). Even "Mt. Kineo, which was generally visible . . . had a level of cloud concealing its summit, and all the mountain-tops about the lake were cut off at the same height" (722). But later in "The Allegash," when "the heavens were completely overcast, the mountains capped with clouds," the surface of the lake nearby made other heightened forms of perception possible: "there was reflected upward to us through the misty air, a bright blue tinge from the distant unseen sky of another latitude beyond" (727). In these instances, rain, fog, and mists are liminal mediums not simply because of their positioning in the space between perceiver and perceived, but also because they allow for experiences that, as Garry Wills points out, are "not fuzzings, but intensifications of knowledge" (73). In fact, "fuzzings" and blurrings of perception are often compensated for (in the Emersonian sense) by the paradox of heightened and enhanced perception. In her article, "The Proteus Within: Thoreau's Practice of Goethe's Phenomenology," Christina Root notes that "like Goethe, [Thoreau] felt that the process of getting to know the natural world involved every faculty, intellectual, emotional, moral, spiritual, and physical" (236). Root explains that Thoreau's journal-keeping allowed him to "chart his observations of nature and his experiments with

different ways of overcoming the habits and routines that prevented him from seeing and experiencing nature afresh . . . he focuses often on what one can see once . . . [natural] objects blur, and other aspects of the landscape become primary, such as fogs, mists, light, and wind" (236).

But "fog, mists, light, and wind" are pervasive in most of Thoreau's nature writing; the difference in "Chesencook" and "The Allegash" is that, in spite of their revelatory potential, they are featured separate from other consistent aspects of liminal context. In "Chesencook," for example, just before the central moose hunting episode, Thoreau remarks that "the harvest moon had just risen, and its level rays began to light up the forest on our right" as the party glided downward in the shade" of the stream (668). But when the wounded cow-moose is finally tracked an hour after being shot, it is "lying dead, but quite warm, in the middle of the stream" (678). Any potential for this stated liminal context (crossing a stream in a transition to moonlight) is not realized however; as Adams and Ross note, Thoreau "perceives the moose not through sympathy or imagination, but by scientifically examining its corpse" (*Revising Mythology* 195). Later, Thoreau's description of the "tragical business" of skinning the moose is similarly objective, and the brief comparison of the lumberman, the tanner, and the poet ("he who makes the truest use of the pine") which follows seems stylistically out of place (685). In the concluding passages of "Chesuncook," Thoreau does conjecture about the changing landscapes of Maine and Massachusetts with liminal images that align the arc of the sky with the curvature of the earth's surface: "As if individual speculators were to be allowed to export the clouds out of the sky, or the stars out of the firmament . . . We shall be reduced to gnaw the very crust of the earth for nutriment" (710). But the closing paragraphs of his coda fail to cite poetic examples to support the observation that "the

poet must, from time to time, travel the logger's path and the Indian's trail" (712), and the descriptions of the liminal lines of the path and trail are absent from the scene. Even the ameliorating prospect of one day establishing "national preserves" is counterbalanced by the more likely fear that, "like villains," we will instead poach our forests and "grub them all up" before they can be used for "for inspiration and our own true re-creation" (712).

In "The Allegash and East Branch," aside from the earlier noted examples of enhanced perception through the liminal mediums of mist and fog, only one notable passage stands out from what Ross and Adams refer to as Thoreau's consistent approach in the text of taking "every opportunity 'to botanize'" (206). When Thoreau discovers the phosphorescent moose-wood log deep within the "dense and damp spruce and fir wood" (730) in which he and his companions were camped, he briefly turns away from botanizing to find correlations between himself and the natural wonder he is observing: "I let science slide, and rejoiced in that light as if it had been a fellow creature . . . A scientific *explanation,* as it is called, would have been altogether out of place there" (Thoreau 731). Adams and Ross argue that Thoreau here "reacts to the light not as a biologist, but as a poet and mythmaker" (206), but it is important to note that the catalyst for this transition is found in the liminal spaces and outlines of the scene as Thoreau perceives it, alone, while his companions sleep:

> I observed, partly in the fire, which had ceased to blaze, a perfectly elliptical ring of light . . . It was fully as bright as the fire, but not reddish or scarlet like a coal, but a white and slumbering light, like the glowworm's . . . I discovered that the light proceeded from that portion of the sap-wood immediately under the bark, and thus presented a regular

> ring at the end, which, indeed, appeared raised above the level of the wood, and . . . it was all aglow along the log. (730)

When Thoreau "cut[s] out some little triangular chips" from the log's glowing surface, he notes a reflective glow in his hand, a light "revealing the lines and wrinkles" of his skin's surface (730-731). The lighted triangular chips—"appearing exactly like coals of fire raised to a white heat"—bring into focus the complexity of corresponding etched patterns on the skin that are all but invisible in other contexts. With his attention drawn to the liminal outlines of this juxtaposition between natural and human surfaces, Thoreau remarks on the realization of a hoped-for revelation: "I was just in this frame of mind to see something wonderful, and this was a phenomenon [which] . . . put me on the alert to see more like it . . . I rejoiced in that light as if it had been a fellow creature" (731). Adams and Ross point out that "this moment of sympathetic perception . . . occurs on the first night of wilderness travel" and it "contrast[s] conspicuously" with other parts of the narrative—but they also note that such moments are anomalies in both "Chesuncook" and "The Allegash": "The moments of imaginative perception fade quickly without affecting subsequent events on the excursions" (207). Thoreau echoes Emerson when he admits that "there was something to be seen if one had eyes" (732), but in this scene only a "few moments" of "fellowship" are possible before the revelation vanishes. "I kept those little chips and lit them again the next night," Thoreau reports in the last line of the episode, "but they emitted no light" (732).

Both "Chesuncook" and "The Allegash and East Branch" are also characterized by a failure to establish a mediating, revelatory role for the hero of consciousness, although Thoreau introduces two flawed Native Americans who ultimately disappoint his expectations of seeing the mysteries of the deep woods fully illuminated. Joe Aitteon in

"Chesuncook" and Joe Polis in "The Allegash" are initially of interest to Thoreau as learned guides who will teach him about the way they interact with the natural world—as he says of Joe Aitteon, I "listened attentively to his observations, for we had employed an Indian mainly that I might have an opportunity to study his ways" (664- 665). But Thoreau finds that Aitteon admits freely that he doesn't know (or won't share) how his canoe is constructed, nor could he "subsist wholly on what the woods yielded"; the idea of living off the land was completely improbable to Aitteon—a way of life that had died out with his ancestors (674). Similarly, while Joe Polis is "not a very good teller of myths, he does approach in 'The Allegash' the status of a mythic hero," Adams and Ross argue, even though "Polis is not the abstract idealized Indian" of [Thoreau's] earlier works" (209-210). Joe Polis has enhanced, intuitive insight (Thoreau remarks on his "sharp eyes"), but he is also "very careless" (Thoreau 815) and hardly stoic: "He lay groaning under his canoe on the bank, looking very woebegone, yet it was only a common case of colic" (Thoreau 817). The narrative concludes with Thoreau and his companions stopping at Polis' "roomy and neat house" after he has unsuccessfully tried to sell them his canoe. "We were not ready to buy it," Thoreau notes matter-of-factly, and the text concludes with an absence of Polis from the scene: "That was the last I saw of Joe Polis. We took the last train, and reached Bangor that night" (822).

In both "Chesuncook" and "The Allegash," the Indians vanish from Thoreau's account, and neither native guide experiences a threshold encounter in which "simultaneous participation in the sacred and the profane becomes available" (Fletcher, *Colors* 167). Thoreau, too, fails to distinguish himself as a mediating hero of consciousness in the final two narratives of the text of *The Maine Woods,* but he seems to seek this role consciously in the first "Ktaadn" section. In the ascent of Ktaadn, Thoreau

pictures himself as, to use Geoffrey Hartmann's words, "surrounded by ancient images of the divine . . . more alone than ever . . . a solitary haunted by vast conceptions in which he cannot participate" (31-32).

Allegories of *The Maine Woods:* Liminal Poetics in "Ktaadn"

"Ktaadn" is distinct from the other two narratives in *The Maine Woods* because of its clear liminal context: first in Thoreau's designation of himself as an allegorical hero of consciousness who mediates and interprets in the "space between," and second in Thoreau's pursuit of the experience of sublimity through conscious liminal positioning along the mountain's natural borderlines and transitional spaces—an experience he finds difficult to articulate. In this sense, Thoreau's liminal endeavors are integrated: for the allegorical role of the hero of consciousness when "pushed to an extreme . . . would subvert language itself," in Angus Fletcher's earlier-cited words, and because "linguistic figurations are tied to liminal settings" (*Colors* 167), it is possible for extreme forms of allegory to lead to the portals of sublimity.

The endeavor to write about the liminal contexts of allegory and sublimity—producing the "work of art" Victor Turner believed to be generated from the *limen* as "a catalyst for the creative impulse" (*Ritual Process* 50)—is also an integrated process. Robert McGregor sees the "treatment of the event" of the ascent of Ktaadn as occurring on "two separate but integrated levels": first the actual journey and ascent, "shaking yet powerfully moving," and second, "the act of describing the experience on paper," a synthesis that McGregor identifies as Thoreau's trajectory away from nine previous years

"of life as a frustrated poet and author" (72). While McGregor's characterization is apt, it is also somewhat misleading: Thoreau's initial journey to the Maine wilderness and the written account of that journey both occurred during the two years he was at Walden Pond, and while he was drafting many of the parts of the text that successfully synthesize experiential nature and written account. I would argue instead that "Ktaadn" marks the expansion of Thoreau's analogies of correspondence to include those more difficult and ambiguous human experiences not readily matched in generative patterns of language drawn from the natural world. In fact, van Gennep's tripartite design of the *rite de passage* – which Joseph Schopp notes as the attempted narrative structure for A *Week's* river voyage—becomes a useful way to address the more difficult journey to the top of the highest mountain peak in Maine.[65]

Thoreau emphasizes from the onset in this section of *The Maine Woods* that his journey to the base of Ktaadn was by the more difficult route on water, even though the "mountain may be approached more easily and directly on horseback and on foot from the northeast side" (593). The idea of a passage marked by danger and discomfort seems important in this narrative, and the arduous aspects of the experience are fronted in a series of quest-like "threshold" encounters in nature. As Angus Fletcher notes in *Colors of the Mind:* "[The] threshold is an edge at which simultaneous participation in the sacred and profane becomes available to the hero of consciousness"(167), and these liminal "edges" and spaces are marked by ritualistic processes emphasizing the difficult stages of the journey as well as the juxtaposition of things sacred and profane. The beginning of the narrative (like the earlier-noted opening sections of both "Chesuncook"

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[65] See page 82 of this study for the full text of Schopp's assertion that "Thoreau clearly designed [A Week's] journey as a *rite de passage"* (96); I argue that *A Week* can be seen as an early example of a developing aesthetic that is more fully realized in *Walden* and "Ktaadn."

and "The Allegash") notes the inclement elements of the scene—the rain and fog and opaque clouds, as well as the wildness of terrain that is so sparsely settled, and so insufficiently interpreted, that even maps of it are characterized by a "labyrinth of errors" (602). Still, Thoreau "in good faith, traced" the liminal signposts of the last edition of Greenleaf's Map of Maine that was made available to him, "carefully following the outlines of the imaginary lakes which the map contains" (602). Humans don't easily interpret this ambiguous form of nature as an Emersonian symbol of spirit, but Thoreau takes on the task of finding language commensurate to the experience with a narrative structure that recalls earlier, archetypal quests.[66]

The first stages of the experience are marked by restlessness as the travelers wait for the rain to break; they express an uneasy awareness of the passage of the first voyagers who have left no trace of their presence, except for a "sally of wolfish-looking dogs," perhaps the "lineal descendants" of an ancient breed (598). At the onset of the journey, Thoreau reassures himself that "the beauty of the road itself was remarkable" with all of its fringed evergreens in liminal lines along the sides, "in some places, like a long, front yard, springing up from the smooth grass-plots which uninterruptedly bordered it" (599). But the smooth borderline also marks the fact that it is "but a step on either hand to the grim, untrodden wilderness" that only wild native animals "can easily penetrate" (599), and the road's liminal positioning accommodates Thoreau's insight into

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[66] Thoreau alludes to Satan's "ancient" quest in Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* at several points in "Ktaddn," comparing his own difficult stage of the ascent of Ktaadn to Satan's "arduous" passage "through Chaos" (638). In *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx compares Thoreau's journeys to the quest motifs of earlier writers such as Bunyon and Dante (xiii), and other quest archetypes for Thoreau may have included *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey*, as well as later American models such as Lewis and Clark's accounts of the journey up the Missouri and then into the western territories (1804-1806). In the closing passages of "Ktaadn," Thoreau remarks on the possibility of journeys which "come to that very America which the Northmen, and Cabot, and Gosnold, and Smith and Raleigh visited," noting that in these quests we are all the descendants of "Columbus . . . Cabot, and the Puritans," although we "have discovered only the shores of America" ourselves (654).

Emersonian polarity with the conceptual juxtaposition of certainty and ambiguity, civilization and wilderness. Thoreau describes the unknown interior he is entering as "a bran-new country," where "the only roads were of Nature's making," a place miles and miles from "institutions and society" where one must "front the true source of evil" (603). Here "ancient hostilities still exist" (612) in nature's shadows, but the first fleeting glimpse of the highest mountain peak in Maine—its liminal outline framed against the sky—is restorative and darkly beautiful: "we had our first, but partial view of Ktaadn, its summit veiled in clouds, like a dark isthmus in that quarter, connecting the heavens with the earth" (616).

Ktaadn is not the only dark isthmus in this wilderness, and even seemingly wondrous liminal expanses here also emerge as *loci* of fear and uncertainty. Looking "through an opening" of the red clouds on the western shore of North Twin Lake, Thoreau is able to see "across the entire expanse of a concealed lake [South Twin] to its own yet more dim and distant shore . . . as if we were on a high tableland between the States and Canada" (618-619). In fact the whole "country is an archipelago of lakes [whose] levels vary but a few feet," so that it is possible to "pass easily from one to another," and in the highest waters where the "Penobscot and the Kennebec flow into each other . . . you may lie with your face in the one and your toes in the other" (619). But in this high confluence of waters it is possible to become disoriented: "when you enter a lake, the river is completely lost, and you scan the distant shores in vain to find where it comes in"; it is a "voyage of discovery first of all to find the river" when one is "lost in the wilderness of lakes" (619). Thoreau emphasizes the anxiety provoked through this process of literal and figurative discovery, but the passage yields insight, and perhaps even the prospect of a gateway to sublimity at the journey's end, "as if by the

watery links of rivers and of lakes we were about to float over unmeasured zones of earth, bound on unimaginable adventures" (620).

Fletcher notes that "the gateway is a sacred *via transitional* in all cultures"; moreover, these "thresholds, which are dangerous, have an ancient, rigorous mythography and rite" (*Colors* 168). During the later stages of his own journey, Thoreau describes the unobstructed view of Ktaadn from Lake Ambejijis as the site "where a demigod might be let down" (625) from celestial heights, and after one of the most difficult portages on the river ("with this crushing weight they must climb and stumble along over fallen trees and slippery rocks . . . such was the narrowness of this path"), Thoreau soon finds himself "in the midst of the rapids . . . more swift and tumultuous than any we had poled up " (628). This liminal positioning is markedly different from *Walden's* watery mid-points on the medium of the pure, reflective pond, and Thoreau acknowledges the danger of the interstitial passage through the powerful, quick-moving rapids: "Frequently the boat is shoved between rocks where both sides touch, and the waters on either hand are a perfect maelstrom" (629). Fletcher cautions that "the intensity of a rite of passage raises an accompanying liminal anxiety [which] feels like a border-crossing emotion" (*Colors* 179), and Thoreau (as the "hero of consciousness") experiences varying degrees of anxiety in each crossing that draws the travelers closer to the actual process of ascent. Thoreau's anticipation of the mountaintop experience—and the accompanying anxiety—are perhaps best understood in the context of Thomas Weiskel's observation that "the sublime . . . will always be found in the ill-defined zones of anxiety between discrete orders of meaning . . . In the sublime moment, we are on the verge of or in passage to a 'higher meaning'" (21). In this sense, Thoreau enacts the allegory of the hero's mountain ascent in search of higher meaning, and the form of allegory as a translating "mode"

provides encoded access, during liminal passage, to multiple levels or "discrete orders" of meaning. That Thoreau *intended* to convey a sublime encounter on the summit of Ktaadn is a valid conjecture, even though, as William Howarth notes, "his climax occurs upon descent, for he never reaches the [actual] summit" (9). But Thoreau's cultural context as Howarth describes it — for "Thoreau lived during the great era of mountain climbing in Europe" (7)—suggests that he was well-read in contemporary accounts of alpine transcendence:

> Thoreau was aware of Alpinism. He read about the climbs of early Swiss naturalists like Gesner and de Saussure; he went vicariously along with English poets and journalists to the highest peaks. He knew John Ruskin's descriptions of Alpine scenery in *Modern Painters* (1849-56), especially his two famous chapters "The Mountain Gloom" and "The Mountain Glory." (Howarth 7)

The influence of Ruskin was for Thoreau as important as that of the High Romantic Poets (such as Wordsworth and Shelley) who wrote about mountaintop experiences of the sublime, for Ruskin addressed specific points about the transitional relationship between the perceiver and things perceived. As Robert D. Richardson explains, "Thoreau was interested in Ruskin long before Emerson was, and what really interested him was not so much the grand moral theories of Ruskin as his remarkable technical skill at calling attention to the *processes* by which we take in and register the world around us" (*Life of the Mind* 359). William Howarth is convinced that Thoreau understood these processes as integral to his "higher purpose" as a writer: "When Thoreau describes himself as 'a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot,' he also defined the higher purpose behind his mountain stories" (8). And even though Thoreau fails in this story to

reach Ktaadn's highest point, the foregrounding of the mountain ascent is equally important—serving as a foreshadowing introduction to the "higher purpose" of the narrative. In fact, the experiences leading to the ascent of Ktaadn are replete with instructional rituals intended to offset liminal anxiety; they point to Thoreau's desire both to enact through his writing a heightened form of allegory and to experience an encounter with the sublime.[67]

Instructional rituals are preparation for the possibility of sublimity, in fact, and to some degree these rituals may even enhance the prospect. Victor Turner advises that "performances of ritual are distinct phases . . . whereby groups adjust to internal changes and adapt to their external environment" (*Image and Pilgrimage* 244), and "Ktaadn" features several accounts of the processes of inner adjustment and external adaptation in key stages of the journey. For example, an early communal ritual strengthens the commitment of the travelers to press on together despite the difficulties of "the obscure trail," at the same time as it enhances a relationship of correspondence with the wilderness. When Thoreau and his companions stop at Thomas Fowler's "log-hut . . . at the mouth of the Millinocket River" (612, 611) on their way to the base of Ktaadn, they

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[67] Although most critics writing on "Ktaadn" find that Thoreau either did or did not experience a sublime encounter in the narrative (see Ronald Wesley Hoag's "The Mark on the Wilderness: Thoreau's Contact with Katahdin," John Tallmadge, "Ktaadn: Thoreau in the Wilderness of Words," and pages 12-13 of Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination*, for example), my focus in this study is more on Thoreau's clear pursuit of all the markers of the experience of what he understood as the alpine sublime. I see this patterning of experience as a conscious endeavor on Thoreau's part—he chooses activities that he thinks will lead to the portals of sublimity, just as he chooses to represent those activities through a heightened form of allegory. Thoreau needs the experience to be both extreme and quest-like in order for his literal journey to achieve allegorical significance in the way that Angus Fletcher defines the "oldest idea about allegory: that it is a human reconstitution of divinely inspired messages, a revealed transcendental language which tries to preserve the remoteness of a properly veiled godhead"(*Allegory* 21). For Thoreau, the ascent is allegorical and he designates himself as the allegorical hero in a quest "scarcely less arduous than Satan's anciently through Chaos" (637-638). In this sense, rituals are important preparation for the liminal rite of passage from the ordinary and mundane to the sublime and extraordinary, as well as for distinguishing the levels of allegorical meaning in an interpretation of the journey's significance. See later references to Julie Ellison's "Aggressive Allegory" for additional connections between the Romantic sublime and allegory, especially the way that Emerson encouraged a view in which the "Mind treats nature as it's mirror image, or as an allegory of its own processes" (Ellison 167).

share a fortifying "draught" that seems to be distilled from the green-essenced interiors of the pine trees:

> It was as if we sucked at the very teats of Nature's pine-clad bosom in these parts,—the sap of all Millinocket botany commingled,—the topmost, most fantastic, and spiciest sprays of primitive wood, and whatever invigorating and stringent gum or essence it afforded steeped and dissolved in it,—a lumberer's drink, which would acclimate and naturalize a man at once,—which would make him see green, and, if he slept, dream that he heard the wind sough among the pines. (612)

In this experience, attaining a relationship of correspondence with the natural world is a literal process of ingestion: Nature's "invigorating . . . essence[s] are "commingled" in the body's interior—where they "acclimate[ize] and natural[ize] a man" in a synthesis of correspondence. The human body then responds to the new alignment through enhanced sight ("see[ing] green") and enhanced sleep: in the liminal phase of dreaming, it is possible to perceive patterns that are interfused with nature's *spiritus*. It is important that the draught is communal—sharing it in Thomas Fowler's hut is a ritual that follows an exhausting stage of the journey—and Thoreau and his companions are physically and spiritually strengthened by the humble rite.

In a second communal ritual, the travelers are restored by allusive contact with an ancient mythology, reborn in the waters of the New World, when they fish the "clear, swift, shallow stream which came from Ktaadn" (632). Casting their lines into the mouth of the river, Thoreau and his companions pull out an overwhelming number of "silvery" fish, some of them falling "in a perfect shower" on the shore into "arms . . . outstretched to receive them" (632). These fish are "bright fluviatile flowers" that "glistened like . . .

the product of primitive rivers," and Thoreau understands their talismanic power to be sources in the "truth of mythology, the fables of Proteus" (632). He dreams that same night of trout-fishing (significantly, after ingesting the fish pulled from the waters descending from Ktaadn, and after drinking a strong draught of "arbor-vitae" brewed from the cedars at the water's edge), and in the liminal confusion that dreams provide, wonders if he has not simply "dreamed it all," the fishing of both day and night. Arising before dawn (alone, before his companions awake), Thoreau stands against the "distinct and cloudless outline of Ktaadn" visible in the moonlight, "casts [his] line into the stream" once more, and finds "the dream to be real and the fable true" (634). This time the fish fly "through the moonlight air [in] bright arcs on the dark side of Ktaadn" until daylight, when Thoreau (his mind "satiated") is joined by his companions, and together they start out "for the summit of the mountain" (634).

As the party draws closer to the actual ascent, it falls to Thoreau "as the oldest mountain-climber, to take the lead," and in his written account Thoreau reinforces this role of leadership as the hero of his own allegory of initiation. The course that is chosen is an "indefinite distance" from the mountain, "parallel to a dark seam in the forest" (634), and at this point Thoreau's companions begin to experience a version of Fletcher's "liminal anxiety": The boatmen begin "to despair a little . . . fearing that we were leaving the mountain on one side of us," and then become more uneasy when they lose "faith in the compass" (636). Again a communal ritual allows the travelers to pause and to get their bearings in a fortifying space between: "By the side of a cool mountain rill . . . where the water began to partake of the purity and transparency of the air, we stopped to cook some of our fishes. . . [on] sticks radiating like the spokes of a wheel from one center" (636). But when the party resumes the journey, the summit, instead of drawing

closer, appears "distant and blue, almost as if retreating from us," and they soon become disoriented and "buried in the woods again" (636). The travelers then wearily set up camp for the night, but, in the transition between daylight and darkness, while the others rest, Thoreau decides to "climb the mountain alone," ascending from "a deep and narrow ravine, sloping up to the clouds. . . and hemmed in by walls of rock"(637). The aspiring stance of this activity is unmistakable; Thoreau pulls himself up the steep perpendicular expanse of this "giant's stairway," his task "scarcely less arduous than Satan's anciently through Chaos" (638). The description of the scene is reminiscent of Shelley's "ghastly, scarred, and riven" landscape atop Mont Blanc, and Thoreau wonders if he is viewing "the raw materials of a planet dropped from an unseen quarry. . . [or] an undone extremity of the globe" (640).[68]

Ultimately, Thoreau reaches the "summit of the ridge," but not Ktaadn's actual summit, and finds himself "deep within the hostile ranks of the clouds" (640). He discovers, perhaps via his own disorientation, that humans lose their symbol-naming autonomy in this gloomy realm of the natural world, which now seems a world "such as man never inhabits" (640). Thoreau abjectly notes the diminished powers of "the beholder": "There is less of substantial thought and fair understanding in him . . . his reason is dispersed and shadowy, more thin and subtile (*sic*), like the air. Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty" (640). Although this passage is easily read as a negation of

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[68] Lewis Hyde's annotations to the "Ktaadn" section in *The Essays of Henry David Thoreau* note that Thoreau's reference to Satan's "ancient" task through Chaos alludes to Milton's *Paradise Lost II*. 970-974. Shelley's "Mont Blanc," published in the early 1800's, would have been familiar to Thoreau as one of the earlier-cited examples of alpine transcendence Howarth refers to (see page 105); "[Thoreau] went vicariously along with English poets and journalists to the highest peaks" (7). Various images and word patterns in this section of "Ktaadn" echo Shelley's phrasing in "Mont Blanc."

Emersonian optimism, if not a Shelley-like rejection of nature's beneficence, it could alternatively be read as Thoreau's conscious attempt to represent the liminal point of blockage or the overwhelming of the senses that, in literary tradition, precedes sublimity.[69] It is during the process of descent that Thoreau begins emerge from disorientation, and in a moment of transition that echoes with a biblical cadence of post-visionary experience, he notes simply, "I found my companions where I had left them, on the side of the peak" (642).

In *A Wider View of the Universe,* Robert McGregor observes that these culminating passages of the Ktaadn chapter indicate that Thoreau "was no longer blindly accepting the assumptions that had guided his writing since his first acquaintance with Emerson—that nature was merely symbolic, of secondary importance, perhaps nonexistent" (74). Certainly, the famous "*Contact!"* moment (more generally referred to as the Burnt Lands passage), strongly foregrounds the futility of human efforts to think through the illimitable reaches of the Universe, and, to use McGregor's phrasing, seriously questions "the very idea that wild nature had anything to do with human concepts at all" (74). Here language becomes, in Fletcher's earlier cited terms, "subvert[ed]"; the "extreme allegory" representing this key moment of Thoreau's encounter with the wilderness can only be articulated in an "encod[ed]" form of speech:

> What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries!—Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The *solid* earth! The *actual* world!

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[69] Joseph Moldenhauer notes Thoreau's understanding of eighteenth century discourses on sublimity: "Those passages in "Ktaadn" about the alienating effect of primeval nature . . . stand isolated like set pieces on the Burkean sublime" (136). For a general explanation of sublime blockage, see Neil Hertz's "The Notion of Blockage in the Literature of the Sublime."

> The *common sense! Contact! Contact! Who* are we? *Where* are we? (Thoreau 646)

The passage is marked by profound disorientation—an inability to articulate a sense of place and personal identity—but it also acknowledges, through its catalogue of questions, a sense of awe before the mysteries of the universe, the perception that perhaps one has indeed reached the portals of sublimity. Thoreau longs for "contact" in this disoriented state, but even as he conveys that he is overwhelmed (as he expected he would be), he also implies that, in most contexts, "contact" and the assurance of the solid and the actual in the natural world are human expectations.

Thoreau's insight following his experience is of the "forever untamable *Nature* . . . something savage and awful, though beautiful." He looks "with awe at the ground" beneath his feet, "that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night . . . the unhandselled globe" (645). This experience of a darker perspective gives him the voice to "talk of mysteries" (646) as a witness "on the edge of the wilderness . . . in a new world, far in the dark of the continent" (652). Thoreau's use of the word "unhandselled" invokes a primal archetype; he may have been intentionally recalling Emerson's use of the same word in "The American Scholar":

> Herein [the scholar] unfolds the sacred germ of his instinct, screened from influence. What is lost in seemliness is gained in strength. Not out of those, on whose systems of education have exhausted their culture, comes the helpful giant to destroy the old or to build the new, but out of unhandselled savage nature, out of terrible Druids and Berserkirs, comes at last Alfred and Shakespeare. (Emerson 62)

Nature as Thoreau describes it in “Ktaadn” is both “savage” and replete with “terrible giants”; the Titans that are alluded to at several points in the narrative are seen as inhabitants born to the liminal realm, children of the conjoining of Heaven (Uranus) and Earth (Gaia). In “Ktaadn,” the mountain Titans personify physical features of an extreme landscape—“vast aggregation[s] of loose rocks” and “dark, damp, crags”—and they remind Thoreau “of the creations of the old epic and dramatic poets” (640). Emerson’s scholar “unfolds the sacred germ of his instinct” in the forum of “unhandselled, savage nature” to gain the strength to “destroy the old or build the new” (Emerson 62); Thoreau’s corresponding insight is that “the tops of mountains are among the unfinished parts of the globe . . . [and] only daring and insolent men, perchance, go there” (641). But Thoreau realizes also that “simple races . . . do not climb mountains,—their tops are sacred and mysterious tracts never visited by them” (641). Only the hero of consciousness, when strengthened and “surrounded by ancient images of the divine” (Hartman 31), finds in the threshold experience of the mountain top an access to the “edge” where “simultaneous participation in the sacred and the profane” is possible (Fletcher, *Colors* 167).

In the closing paragraphs of the “Ktaadn” section, Thoreau laments that the human exploration of the expanse of the continent has historically been hasty and insufficient: “We have advanced by leaps to the Pacific, and left many a lesser Oregon and California unexplored behind us” (655). Thoreau’s assessment can perhaps be recognized as a form of Edward Said’s “imaginative geography,” a liminal set of “practices by which human beings give shape and meaning to the planet by delineating it: drawing bounds and attributing qualities differentially inside and outside those bounds” (54-55). Thoreau finds in the culminating passages of “Ktaadn” that significant realms within his America are “still unsettled and unexplored” (654), but it is possible to persist

in the aftermath of the sobering discovery of the "earth as Nature made it . . . Man was not to be associated with it . . . [but] man may use it if he can" (645). The uninterrupted forest of *The Maine Woods* is "more grim and wild" than Thoreau had anticipated, but it is also a region where lakes "lie up so high, exposed to the light," fringed by a fine borderline of trees, "with here and there a blue mountain, like amethyst jewels set around some jewel of the first water" (653). No mere symbol, this natural world needs to be "fronted" like the ever-receding frontier or the horizon marking the liminal space between earth and sky. Having fronted life in the deep interiors of the wilderness, Thoreau is able share his journey through language commensurate to the experience of living essentially. Surely this synthesis of what McGregor first referenced as "the integrated levels" of event and written account marked for Thoreau a moment of exultation in the natural world—"What a place to live, what a place to die and be buried in!" (653)—even in the aftermath of an experience of alienation and contrast atop Ktaadn's desolate summit.

For in "Ktaadn," Thoreau fully realizes the tripartite structure of van Gennep's *rites de passage* as he enacts the allegory of the hero of consciousness who "fronts the natural facts" of the deep wilderness. Rites of initiation, rites of transformation, and rites of reaggregation distinguish Thoreau's journey in this third, expansively allegorical revision of the liminal poetics inherited from Emerson. For the earlier-noted first stages of the journey with their various fears and uncertainties comprise the rites of initiation; the communal rituals leading up to the ascent of Ktaadn, as well as the ascent itself, comprise the rites of transformation; and the descent and subsequent realizations about the journey's significance within a larger context of exploration on the continent comprise the third and final stage of reaggregation in "Ktaadn's" tripartite allegory of inner and outer exploration. Additionally, Thoreau's descriptions of his first exploration of the

Maine Woods illustrate the Emersonian concepts of transition and flow, but more significantly they trace schematically the liminal outlines of compensation and polarity—the two key concepts addressed most frequently in the bleaker narrative patterns of *Cape Cod.* For liminal contexts characterize the stark expanses of the Atlantic coastline throughout *Cape Cod*; Thoreau here sketches scenes "more grim and wild," and more negatively allegorical, than what he had found in the most extreme "uninterrupted forests" of *The Maine Woods.* In *Cape Cod,* Thoreau crosses darker thresholds in pursuit of sublime experience, serving witness to human and natural allegories of contrast and indifference.

Threshold Allegories of Opposition in *Cape Cod*

In perhaps the same way that Thoreau set out to reach the liminal summit of the highest peak in Maine with an expectation of experiencing sublimity, he positions himself along the liminal seaboard with a similar hope of coming to know the sublime of the unfathomable ocean. What he discovers along the natural borderline of the ocean's portals of sublimity is a darker mystery than he anticipated, with the Atlantic coast defining a space between that offers few opportunities for moments of correspondence. Thoreau admits in *Walden* that we are drawn most to the mysteries we can't know, and we advance toward those mysteries with the expectation that our attempts to measure, decipher, and understand will be thwarted: "At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed, and unfathomed by us because unfathomable" (Thoreau 575).

The main difference between Thoreau's "unfathomable" land as he finds it in the ascent of Ktaadn and the "unfathomable" sea discerned from Cape Cod's coast line is in the polarity of desired "contact" and full detachment or opposition. Ktaadn's desolate summit is "inhuman," but still connected (as Thoreau's persona is) with the "*solid* earth"; the Atlantic perceived from Cape Cod's shoreline is "darker and deeper the farther we looked," an "ocean where, as the Veda says, 'there is nothing to give support, nothing to rest upon, nothing to cling to' " (935). Both contexts are ominous and awe-filled: "Ktaadn's" terrain "awful, though beautiful' (645); *Cape Cod's* ocean "awful to consider," with "no relation to the friendly land" (935).

In fact, Emersonian polarity is at the core of *Cape Cod*'s insights into fearsome sublimity and allegories of indifference. "The great principle of Undulation in nature . . . in the ebb and flow of the sea . . . is known to us under the name of Polarity" (32), Emerson claims in "The American Scholar," and in the essay "Compensation," undulations in nature are, in part, darkly naturalistic: "All things are double, one against another.—Tit for tat; an eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth; blood for blood; measure for measure . . ." (Emerson 293). Thoreau maintains the aggressive, allegorical stance of Emerson's biblical oppositions, pitting humans against the indifferent sea in a battle for survival and primacy in spite of the insurmountable odds. But unlike Emerson, Thoreau in this moment leaves out the positive undulations of polarity's formulation, finding no "love for love.—Give and it shall be given you.—He that watereth shall be watered himself.—" (Emerson 293). Instead, from the liminal spaces of *Cape Cod's* shoreline, Thoreau finds "naked—Nature, inhumanely sincere, wasting no thought on man, nibbling at the cliffy shore where gulls wheel amid the spray" (979). The implied conclusion is that humans won't triumph in this allegorical battle, primarily because in *this* assessment

of the relationship between human beings and the natural world, Nature doesn't care, and no contact is possible.

John Lowney notes that readers have long been divided on "the question of whether *Cape* Cod is a dissociative narrative of failed transcendence or an ironic critique of Transcendentalist idealism" (239), and the critical variance extends as well to the analysis of *Cape Cod's* examples of polarity. Moreover, Lowney is one of only a few critics to allude to *Cape Cod's* pervasive liminal context in his analysis, determining that "Thoreau rhetorically exploits the 'frontier' marginality to unsettle conventional expectations of aesthetic travel narratives" (240). Joseph Schopp addresses the liminal context more directly, and cites Victor Turner in noting that the Cape in Thoreau's narrative represents . . . a 'liminal' stage, 'betwixt and between all fixed points of classification,' [where] soil and sand, sand and water are here in constant flux and reflux" ("A World in Flux" 46). But neither Lowney or Schopp see the liminal experiences of *Cape Cod* specifically in light of Emersonian polarity, although their insights are clearly supported by such a comparison.

Richard J. Schneider points out that Thoreau's *Cape Cod* "is a book built on opposites," but only recently have critics "begun to recognize some of the opposing forces which hold *Cape Cod* together in dynamic tension: indoor versus outdoor views, land versus sea, sublime versus picturesque, death versus life, and transcendental certainty versus scientific skepticism" (184-185).[70] Schneider notes that few critics agree on the purpose or the effect of *Cape Cod's* representations of such oppositions, but his own conviction is that Thoreau discovers that this seascape is unknowable: "a shifting,

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[70] Schneider cites critical analysis by Pops, Maiden, Paul, and Couser in his 1980 essay; subsequent publications noting *Cape Cod's* "opposing forces" (and cited elsewhere in this thesis) include essays by Breitweiser, Schopp, Lowney, and Miller.

unsurveyable wilderness of illusions" (185). I would argue instead that Thoreau's discovery is that the seascape is recognizable through the lens of the more somber elements of Emerson's concept of polarity, and this insight emerges most frequently at literal points of liminal intersect. Poised on the borderline between land and sea, between "known" solid earth and unknown ocean vastness, Thoreau comes to know a new version of what Victor Turner called the liminal space "betwixt and between all fixed points of classification" (*Dramas* 232). For the "shifting" borderlines and interstices of *Cape Cod's* seascapes are not "catalysts for the creative impulse," as Victor Turner elsewhere describes liminal contexts, but rather places of fear and ambiguity, illusion and indifference. Thoreau comes to know the sublimity of the ocean as "a wild, rank place . . . a vast morgue" (979) because of the bleak insights his threshold encounters on the shoreline have yielded. *Cape Cod* is ultimately a sustained example of Thoreau's exploration of the more negative strains of Emersonian polarity as a way to fathom the relationship between Nature and "Human Culture," and he announces this intention in starkly pejorative terms: "I wished to see that seashore where man's works are wrecks" (893).

In fact, Emersonian polarity also becomes the key to understanding Thoreau's use of allegory in *Cape Cod*, for Emerson's prose—especially his use of abstract concepts—"demonstrates the aggressive uses of allegory" (159), as Julie Ellison notes:

> This oppositional tendency is one of the spiritual laws of Emerson's prose. It is most clearly manifest, perhaps, in his use of abstract words, especially philosophical terms . . . In order to represent conflict verbally, Emerson speaks of men and aspects of himself as personified abstractions. The reductions such namings entail can usefully be thought of as allegorical.

> Emerson does not write allegories, but uses allegory as a tactic in the composition of a stylistically and generically miscellaneous prose. (Ellison 160-161)

Thoreau, in turn, takes Emerson's "personified abstractions" and enacts them in an allegorical mode: he places himself in an oppositional stance with the ocean's vastness in multiple scenes of literal and figurative threshold encounter along the Cape's shoreline. In *Cape Cod's* opening chapter, for example, Thoreau explains that he positions himself on the Cape "to get a better view" of the sheer magnitude of sea—accounting as it does, for "more than two thirds of the globe" (851). Well-versed in then "construed" formulations of "*sublimity* . . . after Immanuel Kant, Burke, Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Ralph Waldo Emerson," as Mitchell Breitwieser asserts, Thoreau understood the overwhelming vastness of the sea, as well as "the strenuous discipline of its allure" ("Wrecks" 147). It would not be an overstatement to suggest that Thoreau sets out to experience his own sublime encounter on Cape Cod's liminal shoreline, hoping also to find there (and to write about) a new form of correspondence between human and natural perspectives: "I did not see why I might not make a book on Cape Cod, as well as my neighbor on 'Human Culture.' It is but another name for the same thing" (851). Immediately after announcing this desired synthesis in his narrative, Thoreau launches a stance of narrative aggression and confrontation: first in the selective etymology of "cape" as deriving from the Latin "verb 'to take,'—that being the part we take hold [of] . . . Time's "forelock . . . the safest part to take a serpent by" (851), and next in the presentation of an anthropomorphized topography of the Cape, its "bared and bended arm . . . boxing with northeast storms" (852). The "adversary" in this match is the "Atlantic"—not only as the forum for a hoped-for sublime encounter, but also named as

the metaphoric opponent of "Human Culture"/Cape Cod. "On the surface," Ronald Morrison observes, "this book about human culture seems to be one in which culture and wilderness square off . . . [but] pugilistic imagery notwithstanding, *Cape Cod* attempts to reconcile culture with wilderness, for this opposition is not outside but inside us" (218).

I would argue instead that along the liminal exteriors of the shifting shoreline, Thoreau turns away from the intention he had expressed in *Walden* of reconciling human and natural oppositions, to confront that which is essentially irreconcilable in the space "bewixt and between." In the first three paragraphs of his narrative, Thoreau has transitioned from desired correspondence to enacted polarity, and like the Cape itself, he "stands on . . . guard," his back to the continent (852), a stance he maintains throughout the narrative. The final line of *Cape Cod* bears witness to Thoreau's consistent oppositional perspective—as well as his threshold positioning—as he mediates from the Cape's liminal boundary line between land and sea: "A man may stand there and put all America behind him" (1039).

Isolation is a key feature of many hoped-for sublime encounters, however, [71] and perhaps turning one's back on "all America" is not as much of a negation of *communitas* as the phrasing of the final line would suggest. But Mitchell Breitwieser notes the irony of an unexpected community of the dead crowding Thoreau's first literal encounter with the ocean's anticipated vastness when he approaches the shoreline in chapter one: "he sees, not the sweep of sea and shore, but coffins and a crowd collecting bodies" ("Wrecks" 146). A number of critics have considered Thoreau's emotionless response to

[71] The persona in Shelley's *Mont Blanc* is alone in his ascent, for example, and (as noted earlier), Thoreau intentionally separates himself from his companions on several occasions in the ascent of Ktaadn, climbing the mountain alone" while the others set up camp (637), and then later "climb[ing] alone . . . still edging toward the clouds' after his "companions were lost to [his] sight" (639). In the face of "vast[ness]" Thoreau observes in the ascent of Ktaadn, "some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape . . . as he ascends. He is more lone than you can imagine" (640).

the scene before him as he turns his "measuring eye toward the corpses with no more remorse than when he turns it to the shells of sea-crabs" (Breitwieser, "Wrecks" 146). In commenting specifically on Thoreau's description of the "one swollen and mangled body of a drowned girl," her gashed flesh "exposed, but quite bloodless,—merely red and white" (853), Breitwieser aptly points out that "the reader may properly ask whether it is the thing observed or the observer that is truly 'bloodless' in this passage" (146). Aside from providing an ironic counterbalance to Robert Sattelmeyer's earlier-cited praise for Thoreau's ability in passages of description to "dissolve the difference between perceiver and perceived," Breitwieser's observation calls attention to an unanticipated reversal of Thoreau's second, intermediate use of liminal poetics in *Cape Cod.* On the Cape's desolate shoreline, Nature doesn't often provide objective correlatives to mirror transitions in the human mind, but in this instance the correlative is cold and exact, affirming neither common bonds of human relation nor any anticipated correspondence with Nature's harmonies. "To nominate the corpse for special sentiment is to yield to untenable compassion," Breitwieser observes, and in "divesting himself of such preference, Thoreau goes so far as to celebrate wreckage as a condition of new vision" ("Wrecks" 146). In doing so, Thoreau enacts an allegory of indifference, aligning his dispassionate writing with the emotionless response of the wreckers to the corpses that litter the liminal shoreline of the Cape. *Cape Cod's* "narrator offers several allegorical emblems of himself and his writing," Breitwieser points out, ". . . he knew that as a writer collecting visions, he, too, was at once a wrecker and a wreck" (150, 151). More importantly, perhaps, Thoreau's enacted allegory inverts the paradigm of insight for the hero of consciousness, for the stage of transition and transformation in the hero's *rite de passage* along the liminal shoreline does not lead here to reaggregation or incorporation

at the close of the narrative, but rather to a turning away. As a negatively enlightened hero of consciousness, the Thoreau of *Cape Cod* begins the process of turning away in his opening chapter, in fact, for even the most human elements in "The Shipwreck" are marked by the narrator's response of indifference or futility. After rendering the salvaged eye-witness account from "one who lives by this beach" of a woman who found the corpses "of her child in her sister's arms, as if the sister had meant to be found thus," and then "died from the effect of that sight," Thoreau comments simply, "We turned from this and walked along the rocky shore" (854). "Why care for these dead bodies?," Thoreau asks rhetorically after surveying the full scene: "They really have no friends but the worms or fishes" (857). *Communitas* isn't possible in this liminal context, where "the law of Nature" negates "awe or pity" (Thoreau 856).

In commenting on Walter Benjamin's association of "allegory with time, death, and ruin," Julie Ellison observes that "these themes inhere in allegorical form itself . . . for allegorical representation is [for Benjamin] a kind of death . . . The corpse is not just a memento mori which heightens our consciousness of humanity's sorrowful history, but also the appropriate emblem of allegory's 'cold technique' " (Ellison 161). Thoreau's indifferent response is clearly related to the cold technique of his mode of allegory here, especially with the profusion of corpses littering the beach at different points in the narrative. In each instance the ocean remains the adversary, a "sea nibbling voraciously at the continent" (859), hiding "the bones of many a shipwrecked man" in the "pure sand" of its liminal borderline (861). Moreover, points of liminal intersect in *Cape Cod* are often marked by obfuscation and thwarted, rather than enhanced, perception. "Pure sand" on the Cape's shoreline smooths over the remnants of ships and human bodies alike, and objects seen from a distance on the beach are often mistaken for near polar opposites: a

"solitary traveller for a "loom[ing] giant" (877); a living human "wrecker" for an inanimate scarecrow (912).[72] "Objects on the beach, whether men or inanimate things, look not only exceedingly grotesque, but much larger and more wonderful than they actually are" (923), Thoreau rationalizes in his analysis of the confused and multiple levels of significance in this liminal space between land and sea, hinting at a sublimity possible in the ocean's vastness where the grotesque is aligned with the wondrous.

But initial obscurity in a liminal space or phase should render subsequent (and often unexpected) insights, Garry Wills claims, for "liminal experiences . . . [are] not fuzzings but intensifications of knowledge" (64). Episodes of fog, mist, and rain in *The Maine Woods* are generally followed by moments of enhanced insight, but similar periods of obscurity in *Cape Cod* distort perception, and are rarely followed by either literal or figurative illuminations. "Conscious focusing of inner and outer vision must take place in order to view the landscape which remains after illusion and distortion have been allowed for," Naomi J. Miller argues: "When the seer responds to the seen with a conscious effort at perceptual analysis, obscurity of vision becomes the necessary starting point for a movement toward the clarity of synthesis" (Miller 186). Miller's theory does identify "obscurity of vision" as a starting point, but "clarity of synthesis" is rarely—if ever—an end point in *Cape Cod.*

On the initial stagecoach ride to the Cape, Thoreau is immediately distracted by his perception of barren hills "rising . . . through the mist . . . looming up as if they were in the horizon," only to realize later that the hills are actually quite close by (866). He hears, and then observes for himself, that "fogs are more frequent in Chatham than in any

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[72] See Naomi J. Miller's "Seer and Seen: Aspects of Vision in Thoreau's *Cape Cod"* and Richard J Schneider's "*Cape Cod:* Thoreau's Wilderness of Illusion" for additional explications of Thoreau's distortions of perception, mirages, and mistaken impressions.

other part of the country," and he has only a "misty recollection of having passed through" other nearby villages on the route (867). The second chapter, "Stage-Coach Views" concludes with very few clear viewings, no subsequent illuminations, and Thoreau's final uncertainty of "not knowing whether we should see land or water ahead when the mist cleared away" (869). "The Cape Cod landscape ultimately resists empirical measurement and analysis," John Lowney points out, and "the interaction of land and sea continually creates 'mirages' . . . an apt Romantic trope for dramatizing Kantian questions about perception" (248). Lowney finds that "the 'mirages' of the Cape provoke Thoreau to consider the 'mirror' of his mind, to confront his own reasons for visiting Cape Cod" (248), but these mirages are ultimately failed objective correlatives for Thoreau, and their liminal lines and spaces don't reveal correspondences or illuminations. Thoreau discovers instead, as Richard Schneider points out, that "mirages threaten to suck one into the sand or to lure one crashing onto the rocks. They often occur in fog, mist, or haze, all hindrances to accurate vision. They cast doubts upon even the most sacred transcendental symbols . . ." (Schneider 192). Clearly, the mirages generated in the Cape's obscuring mediums of "fog, mist, or haze" are disorienting illusions, not the end product of liminal "intensifications of knowledge" or revelatory insight, as Garry Wills and others suggest of these intermediary contexts (64).

In fact, the harsher aspects of Emersonian polarity provide Thoreau with the means by which to invert paradigms of insight in *Cape Cod*, and he exploits the landscape's natural forum for inversion at every opportunity. The "roaring of the breakers, and the ceaseless flux and reflux of the waves" (894) drown out rather than project Thoreau's voice, where a "sort of chaos reigns still" between the landscape's "high and low water mark" (897). The resolution of an announced creation myth—

"before the land rose out of the ocean and became dry land"—is inverted, however, for the space between the high and the low on this seascape is one "which only anomalous creatures can inhabit" (897). The "same placid Ocean" is capable of transitioning without warning to its polar opposite, when it is "lashed into sudden fury . . . heav[ing] vessels to and fro" (936), and "probably no such ancient mariner as we dream of exists" who can predict the ocean's "change from calm to storm" (937). "The sea-shore is a sort of neutral ground, a most advantageous point from which to contemplate this world," Thoreau conjectures, and yet this contemplation is focused not on a place of grandeur, but instead on a "trivial place"; the "forever rolling" ocean waves are not "familiar," but "far-travelled and untamable"; the sea itself is a "vast morgue," not a place of birth or renewal, although it is the source of the "sea-slime" of which, Thoreau speculates, we are a "product" (979).

As a self-appointed version of the hero of consciousness Geoffrey Hartman identifies as a "solitary haunted by vast conceptions in which he cannot participate" (32), Thoreau seeks flesh-and-blood models in *Cape Cod* for the affirmation of his allegorical question: "Are we not all wreckers contriving that some treasure may be washed up on our beach . . . ?" (929). The first such "wrecker" he encounters, "a regular Cape Cod man," reflects a correspondence with the landscape he plunders for treasure—with his "face like an old sail endowed with life,—a hanging-cliff of weather-beaten flesh,—like one of the clay bowlders which occurred in that sand-bank" (889). No viable role model for a native hero of consciousness, this Cape Cod wrecker is "as indifferent as a clam" (889), and another wrecker later in the narrative carelessly advises Thoreau to eat a sea-clam without warning him that not all parts were edible: "He told us that the clam which I had . . . was good to eat . . . and [I] ate *the whole* with a relish" (899). The aftermath of

that ingestion is an inversion of the "fortifying draught" episode in "Ktaadn," for although Thoreau at first feels that he is beginning "to feel the potency of the clam" after he eats it whole, the result is no liminal synthesis of correspondence in which Nature's "invigorating essence" is "comingled" in the body's interior (where it "acclimat[izes] and naturalize[s] a man"), as in "Ktaadn's" communal episode at Thomas Fowler's hut (612).

Similarly, the Wellfleet oysterman is a diminished being who simply drifts into Thoreau's quest for a representative indigenous figure; the old man is yet another native wreck in the narrative, in spite of his darkly "attentive" reading of the Bible. "He seemed deeply impressed with a sense of his own nothingness," Thoreau observes, "and [he] would repeatedly exclaim,—'I am nothing. What I gather from my Bible is just this: that man is a poor good-for-nothing critter, and everything is just as God sees fit and disposes'" (906). At least the oysterman shares with Thoreau the secret of the poisonous portion of the clam, the potency of which "would kill a cat" (909), and he conveys as well the "story of the wreck of the Franklin" (913). In some measure, the Wellfleet oysterman is a liminal figure, with his "strange mingling of past and present in his conversation," but Thoreau eventually tires of his confused rambling, and "cut him short in the midst of his stories" (916). None of the various wreckers Thoreau encounters, or the Wellfleet oysterman, or the keeper of the Highland Light see themselves as simultaneously "nothing and everything" in the Emersonian sense of the hero of consciousness, and each in turn is in part a disappointment to Thoreau for the way that he inverts possible paradigms of insight. But Thoreau also understands that he and his companions are themselves participants in this allegory of indifference, and he does not seem surprised when a passing ship captain "cursed us for cold-hearted wreckers who turned our backs on him" (922).

In fact, an earlier recognition of "inhumane humanity,"—the inversion of a "long-wished for insight"—confirms for Thoreau the perception of widespread human indifference:

> This "Charity-house," as the wrecker called it, this "Humane house" as some call it . . . had neither window nor siding shutter, nor clapboards nor paint . . . we put our eyes, by turns, to a knot-hole in the door, and after looking, without seeing, into the dark, —not knowing how many shipwrecked men's bones we might see at last, looking with the eye of faith . . . for we had some practice at looking inward, [and] putting the outward world behind us . . . we thus looked through the knot-hole into the Humane House into the very bowels of mercy; and for bread we found a stone. (902)

The echo of a biblical admonishment in this discovery calls attention to the absence of any vestige of Christian charity; in fact this advertised "*humane* house" is instead a mere "sea-side box, now shut up, belonging to some of the family of Night or Chaos" (903). The Charity-house is itself positioned in the space between, where it "appeared but a stage to the grave" (900), and Thoreau's dark insight here is gleaned through yet another liminal portal within it. Positioned between inside and outside worlds, the knot-hole looks "into that night without a star" (903), through which the "pupil . . . enlarged by looking" confirms a scene of "nothing but emptiness" (902). Here "night" is paradoxically on the interior side of the threshold, and Thoreau and his companions perceive its void by "turning [their] backs on the outward world" (902). The Charity-house is a product of human indifference and Thoreau reacts to it—at least in part—with a corresponding response of indifference: "My companion had declared before this that I

had not a particle of sentiment . . . to my astonishment . . . But I did not intend this for a sentimental journey" (903).

In perhaps the same way that the Charity-house can be seen in the context of an inversion of the biblical mandate for charity—its interior a darkened "night without a star"—the Highland Light-house paradoxically emits "only a few feeble rays," in spite of the keeper's biblically-epic struggle by every means to "keep his light shining before men" (967, 968). The powers of the Highland Lighthouse are diminished by poor quality lamp oil and glass windows that have been boarded up rather than fixed, and the lighthouse keeper's vigilance is not enough to offset decisions made from a wellspring of human indifference. But a poorly lit lighthouse is no match for "the restless ocean [which] may at any moment cast up a whale or a wrecked vessel at your feet" (978), for the sea is a "voracious" adversary and stark example of "naked Nature—inhumanly sincere, wasting no thought on man" (879). The ocean is literally and figuratively "unfathomable" in Thoreau's depiction, and the recognition of this dark sublimity is overwhelming:

> As we looked off, and saw the water growing darker and darker and deeper and deeper the farther we looked, till it was awful to consider, and it appeared to have no relation to the friendly land, either as shore or bottom,—of what use is a bottom if it is out of sight, if it is two or three miles from the surface, and you are to be drowned so long before you get to it, though it were made of the same stuff with your native soil? . . . There must be something monstrous, methinks, in a vision of the sea bottom from over some bank a thousand miles from shore, more awful than its imagined bottomlessness . . . (935)

Richard Schneider sees this passage as "Thoreau's reply to his own belief in *Walden* that nature is knowable . . . Instead of harmony with nature, Thoreau found at Cape Cod an eternal battle between man, the land animal, and the sea, the bottomless wilderness" (192-193). But "the great principal of Undulation in nature" as Emerson describes polarity (32) is what Thoreau comes to know in *Cape Cod,* and the experience of polarity's dark side is what allows him to confront what is irreconcilable at liminal points of intersect. Ultimately, Thoreau is left as the "solitary haunted by vast conceptions in which he cannot participate" (Hartman 32), but his recognition has nonetheless lead him to the portals of sublimity, a threshold encounter he has consciously sought at the ocean's menacing borderline. In the enacted allegory of *Cape Cod,* Thoreau has expanded his consciousness beyond the "*Ne plus ultra* (no more beyond)" that his senses first accommodated at the shoreline, to a gradual recognition of the "*plus ultra* (more beyond)," and finally the "*ultra* (beyond) residing in the realm of the unfathomable (973-974). In Fletcher's terms, extreme forms of this process resist articulation: "pushed to an extreme the ironic usage [of allegory] would subvert language itself . . . it is a fundamental process of encoding our speech" (*Allegory* 3). In "Ktaadn," Thoreau cries out for "contact" with the "*solid* earth . . . the *actual* world" (646); in *Cape Cod* the ocean offers no solid contact, and "nothing to cling to" (935)—actual detachment as the polar opposite of desired contact.

Cape Cod's grim allegory, then, does parallel the structure defined by the first two stages of van Gennep's tripartite r*ites de passage,* but Joseph Schopp overstates the balanced resolution of the process:

> As all of Thoreau's travelogues, *Cape Cod* may therefore be read as a *rite de passage* describing a liminal phase in the writer's life, betwixt and

> between the ordinary social life when 'the structural arrangements of a given social system' . . . at least for some time, are left behind. Confronting the sea as 'the principle seat of life,' Thoreau regains life and returns transformed and ready to transform America. ("A World in Flux" 53)

Cape Cod was posthumously published in 1865, and between a last expedition in 1857 and Thoreau's death in 1862, the presumably unfinished manuscript "lay dormant until it found its audience in the 1860's," according to Adams and Ross (142). But Adams and Ross also assert that the narrative "was composed before and during Thoreau's conversion to romanticism, when he was experimenting with various attitudes toward nature" (128). As an experiment, then, Thoreau's *Cape Cod* narrative offers a view of nature in polar opposition to the stance of correspondence explored in *Walden*, but unlike *Walden, Cape Cod* is not characterized by a final stage of "transformation" in the narrative's closing lines.

Thoreau clearly passes through liminal rites of initiation in his systematic exploration of the shoreline and its inhabitants, but in some measure these rites are finally thwarted: after a process of "threading" the landscape (988) and seeking out indigenous peoples, Thoreau remains an "alien," admitting that "the stranger and the inhabitant view the shore with very different eyes" (961). His opportunities for transition take place in earlier-noted liminal contexts, but a recognition that the sea is continually "balancing itself" (923) is overshadowed by an acute awareness of the sea as a constant adversary, and Thoreau is not transformed in the "*marge*" of van Gennep's middle phase. He misses what Emerson promises of the mid-point of transition, that "our strength is transitional, alternating . . . a thread of two strands. The sea-shore, sea seen from shore, shore seen

from sea . . . the experience of poetic creativeness [is found] . . . in transitions" (Emerson 641). And finally, van Gennep's third phase of "postliminal rites of incorporation" or reaggregation (11) in a new form of *communitas* is instead, here, as noted earlier, marked by at least a symbolic turning away from the continent from which all non-native travelers on Cape Cod have originated. For on the liminal point of intersect between land and sea, "A man may stand there and put all America behind him" (1039) at the same time as he fronts the ocean's vastness.

All four of Thoreau's major prose works can then be seen in the context of some version of van Gennep's *rites de passage*, but (as noted earlier) only *Walden's* passage is fully realized, and the stages of the rites as they are expressed in *The Maine Woods* and *Cape Cod*, and to a lesser degree, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, are only partially realized. In each major prose example, however, Thoreau finds Emerson's transitional dynamics at work in the landscapes he describes in an effort to discern the varying relationship between human beings in the natural world. And, as in each of these works, Thoreau begins with and refers to Emerson's abstract key concepts to define his positioning through concrete natural images. As Julie Ellison argues in the earlier-cited passage from "Aggressive Allegory," the "purpose of reducing nature to an allegory of spirit for Emerson is to make the allegorist feel powerful by treating the world as an element of his own mind" (164). Thoreau more fully than Emerson seeks to find a ground in nature as the "solid" and the "actual," but he also consciously seeks out opportunities to "front" nature heroically, believing, as Julie Ellison says of "the consciousness of Schiller's hero [and] Emerson's Transcendentalist," that the "mind treats nature as its mirror image, or an allegory of its own processes" ("Aggressive Allegory" 167).

Thoreau rarely seeks *communitas* as a mediating hero of consciousness narrating his allegories of discovery, but he does front Nature in a variety of "experiment[s]" that stand as examples of "endeavors to live the life which he has imagined," as *Walden's* concluding chapter asserts (580). Thoreau views these endeavors as threshold experiences taking place in enlightening liminal contexts, for "if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams," as Thoreau attempts to do in his own narratives of quest, passage, and exploration, "he will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him" (Thoreau 580). Similarly inspired by Emerson's liminal poetics, Walt Whitman will reenact versions of this same pattern of threshold encounter with even greater intensity, but unlike Thoreau he will directly urge and invoke a widely-shared experience of *communitas* as a mediating and interpreting hero of consciousness. In the next chapter, a more complete synthesis of Emerson's foundational concepts within a fully realized pattern for the *rites de passage* will be addressed in key passages from *Leaves of Grass*—where Whitman's liminal poetics contribute in new ways to the enlightened thinking and the artistry of the American Renaissance.

V. WHITMAN'S RESPONSE TO EMERSON'S LIMINAL POETICS

Communitas as a Counterbalance to Emerson's Polarity in the "Preface" to *Leaves of Grass*

In *Poetry and Repression,* Harold Boom points out that Whitman's "intended swerve from Emerson" was to react to the polarity of the Soul and Nature—the "Me" and the "Not Me"—by dissolving the boundaries between these entities. For the "ecstatic union of soul and self" includes the body for Whitman, and in some measure this is factored into Bloom's definition of the American Sublime: when Emerson centered the sublime within the dichotomy of "I and the Abyss," Whitman's alternative response was to imagine a series of sublime encounters in "The Abyss of Myself" (*Poetry and Repression* 266). In expansive ways, however, Whitman counters Emerson's bipolar notions of polarity and compensation in many instances with a much more pronounced impulse towards fusion and synthesizing *communitas,* the "relational quality" Victor Turner identifies as being "full of unmediated communication, even communion, between definite and determinate identities" (*Image and Pilgrimage* 250).

Even the opening paragraph of the "Preface" to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* suggests, however subtly, that Whitman sought a counterbalancing inclusiveness of *communitas* as an alternative to the oppositional stance in Emerson's opening paragraph in *Nature*—"Let us demand our own works and laws and worship"—implying Emerson's critique of the retrospective gaze of his own less-assured nation (Emerson 7). Whitman turns this seemingly exclusionary negative into a calm receptiveness in his own first paragraph of the Preface: "America does *not* repel the past or what it has produced under its forms or amid other politics or the idea of castes or the old religions," and in fact

"accepts the lessons with calmness" (Whitman 5). Moreover, Whitman's immediate emphasis in the "Preface" is on a synthesizing union of old and new, a conjoining of the spirit of nature with human spirit: "The largeness of nature or the nation were monstrous without a corresponding largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen . . . The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people . . . His spirit responds to his country's spirit . . . he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes" (Whitman 6-7).[73] The verb "incarnate" here emphasizes Whitman's characteristic, distinctive sense that the corporeal essence of the human is intrinsic—part and parcel of spirit, and perhaps a subtle negation of the Emersonian desire to transcend a "Not Me" that includes the physical body.

In some respects, the human spirit of the bard (here, Whitman's early version of "The Poet" of Emerson's essay) opens access to the liminal space between natural borderlines in the nation's geography as well as the conceptual borderlines between past and present: The bard "stretches with" the Atlantic coast and the Pacific coast "north or south," but "He spans between them also from east to west and reflects what is between them . . . To him enter the essences of the real things and past and present events" (Whitman 7). The cataloguing between these statements of synthesis highlights the richness and variety of the nation, the inclusion of multiple states of being along with their opposites, all accessible to the "vista" of the bard as self-appointed "equalizer of his age and land" (9). This vision is one of future potential, as the bard "sees the solid and

[73] The use of ellipses in the prose passages from the "Preface" are exact and not indications of omissions; all forthcoming prose passages in quotations are as they appear in-text, and ellipses are as Whitman placed them in-text.

beautiful forms of the future where there are now no solid forms" (8). In this respect, Whitman's response to Emerson echoes Thoreau's response, with its stated desire to ground the abstractions in Emerson's vision of the liminal in solid forms, and to affirm for himself "contact" with "the *solid* earth . . . the *actual* world" (Thoreau 646). But Whitman's broad invitation and expressed desire for synthesis with others in works such as "Song of Myself"—as well as his stated intent in the "Preface" to be worthy of expressing this synthesis as the earlier-cited "bard commensurate with a people"—was not an impulse Thoreau shared with commensurate intensity. Instead, Thoreau remarks in *Walden* on the preferred state of having "commonly sufficient space about us" (425), and advises that individuals should seek "broad and natural boundaries, even a neutral ground, between them" (Thoreau 430). Thoreau may express this form of distancing through an emphasis on liminal borderlines and even a sense of the mid-liminal transitional space of a "neutral ground [betwixt and] between," but there is no promise here that the mediating and interpreting writer will then urge any form of correspondence or communication—and there is certainly a marked absence of reference to Turner's state of openness to "communion." Clearly, Whitman's sense of synthesizing *communitas* as a response to Emerson's poetics is the key element distinguishing him from his nineteenth-century American contemporaries, particularly Thoreau.

But Whitman did share Thoreau's reverence for the natural world, as well as his desire to find in nature's processes a form of Emersonian correspondence, even a "path" to his soul:

> The land and the sea, the animals, fishes and birds, the sky of heaven and the orbs, the forest mountains and rivers are not small themes . . . but folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which

> always attach to dumb real objects . . . they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls. (Whitman, "Preface" 10)

For Whitman, then, the central function of the poet or bard is to immerse himself in natural forms and then indicate the path between these forms and the soul: "The poet shall not spend his time in unneeded work [for] the ground is already plowed and manured . . . He shall go directly to the creation" (11). Moreover, the poet "places himself where the future becomes present" (13); he unites moments in time as a visionary of the ordered harmony of the kosmos.[74] Whitman's further examples cast the poet as "the voice and the exposition of liberty . . . though they neither speak or advise you shall learn the faithful American lesson" (17), and this lesson is for men and women alike: "The messages of great poets to each man and woman are, Come to us on equal terms, Only then can you understand us" (14). Thus the American poet is "the equalizer of age and land" who wants us all to be seen as equal—"We are no better than you. What we enclose you enclose" (14). Whitman then shifts from the messages of great poets to the liminal context of such poets as messengers who allow natural facts to "emit themselves" with an illuminating energy concentrated in transitional times and spaces: "As they emit themselves, facts are showered over with light . . . the daylight is lit with more volatile light . . . also the deep between the setting and rising sun goes deeper many fold" (18).

Whitman seems to be consciously echoing Emerson's understanding of the poet's role as a filtering, mediating agent in this section of the "Preface," for Whitman cautions that the "greatest poet" must have an immediate sense of the present moment to communicate effectively: "The direct trial of him who would be the greatest poet is

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[74] Whitman uses the original Greek spelling for cosmos—the universe as an interrelated, harmonious whole; the American bard is thus the synthesizing agent of this ordered harmony.

today." To meet this test, the poet must "flood himself with the immediate age as with vast oceanic tides" (23). Emerson provides Whitman with the template for drawing upon the "great public power" of the age "by unlocking, at all risks, his human doors, and suffering the ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him" (Emerson 459), and his empowered poet, standing as a model for Whitman's bard, understands "the condition of true naming" because he has "resign[ed] himself to the divine *aura* which breathes through forms" (Emerson 459). That Whitman intended his persona to be a version of the hero of consciousness who is "ring[ed] . . . in an aura"—to borrow Harold Bloom's earlier-cited phrasing—seems deliberate in the "Preface"; like the poet-hero of Emerson's essay, he aspires to speak as the "liberating god" who "unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene" (Emerson 462, 463). Indeed, Whitman's poet in the "Preface" is himself a "liberating god" who transcends time:

> The greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is. He drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet . . . He says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you . . . he places himself where the future becomes present. The greatest poet does not only dazzle his rays over characters and scenes and passions . . . he finally ascends and finishes all. (13)

Whitman's final lines in the "Preface" prepare his readers for the shared confluence of energies urged on the reader at the beginning of "Song of Myself" ("… what I assume you shall assume / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you"), and he underscores the "vital and great" aspects of this exchange in asserting himself as "individual" poet of the nation—a representative figure for the community: "An individual is as superb as a nation when he has the qualities which make a superb

nation . . . The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it" (26). The poet, then, is the liminal filter for all of the nation's solid forms and ephemeral wonders, and in time the poet will return to be absorbed by the same material he once filtered—material now addressed by a subsequent generation. The specific energies of Whitman's hero of consciousness are all concentrated in the spirit of communicating to that subsequent generation in a "communion" of synthesizing *communitas*:

> This is what you should do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, given alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others . . . have patience and indulgence toward the people . . . (11)

In "Song of Myself," Whitman would more specifically task his poet-hero of consciousness with transitioning from seer to sayer, still receptive to all the world's stimuli, but more focused in his instruction of the reader to take up the role of the hero in turn, ready to enact his or her own transitioning rite of passage.

Liminal Contexts and Processes in "Song of Myself"

Whitman's approach in "Song of Myself" can be seen, then, in light of varied elements that emerge from a liminal poetics derived from Emerson's "primary figure" of the "self-evolving circle," but Whitman's explorations of this poetics are much more centrally focused on the discovery and development of a literary form adequate to such a vision. Whitman begins in the introductory sections one through six by calling attention to one specific point of liminal crossing—a place of birth and continual rebirth: his

persona "form'd from this soil, this air" rises out of the atoms of the soil to cross the boundary line between the earth's crust and the air above. At this point of emergence, Whitman's persona begins to enact an extended liminal rite of passage, passing through stages of initiation, transition, and finally, incorporation and reaggregation in sections 7-52. As part of this unfolding of a tripartite passage, Whitman's persona also finally assumes an expansive role as a synthesizing and instructing hero of consciousness, one who leads a community of readers out of stasis and through their own threshold moments of conversion.

A number of critics have addressed aspects of Whitman's writing from a liminal perspective, and several of these arguments are noted more specifically in the section examining Whitman's Civil War poems, especially in the way that many of the war's victims were marginalized, nameless figures.[75] But few critics have developed an overall vision of Whitman's fundamental relation to a liminal poetics, with one notable, albeit specialized, exception—an exception marked by critic Keith Wilhite in "Whitman at the Scene of Writing." Wilhite himself addresses liminal considerations only briefly in his essay, but in that context he identifies "one of the best accounts of liminality in Whitman's writing practices": Michael Moon's *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass.* Wilhite points out that Moon's "analysis of liminal spaces and revisionary practices" in Whitman's writing uncovers a "textual space [which] mirrors the liminal space at the scene of writing," where Whitman has "encoded[ed] subversive desires within conventionally proscribed terms" (Wilhite 945-956). Wilhite rightly stresses Moon's focus on sexual passion, particularly homoerotic sexual passion,

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[75] See note 83 for Andrew Larson's examples of Whitman's focus on the "marginalized" in the ranks of the Civil War—those individuals living on the liminal "margins" of human experience.

but Moon's premise ultimately expands to expose Whitman's "more direct rhetoric of an authorial seduction of readers," in effect "disseminating" the author's passion to his audience (Moon 74). Such an approach offers a helpful point of departure, but it still does not recognize the fundamental role of the dynamics of liminality in every aspect of the poet's work. Although of course giving strong expression to eros, Whitman finally develops a liminal poetics that works on multiple varied levels. The Whitmanian "scene of writing" plays out foundational concepts found in Emerson: an intensive awareness of the power of transition; the pervasiveness of flow; the acceptance and celebration of metamorphosis, compensation, and polarity. In "Song of Myself," Whitman "mythologizes [his] poetic birth and journey into knowing" (258), as Harold Bloom notes in *Poetry and Repression*, and in the process Whitman's self-engendered hero of consciousness enacts a loosely-structured rite of passage and instruction for the reader.[76]

The poem's opening lines affirm the persona's point of origin at the soil's liminal intersect with the air that has also "form'd" him; he is immediately "mad . . . to be in contact" with the "bank by the wood" and all the forms of nature (189). Like Thoreau, Whitman's poet longs for correspondence and contact with the natural world, although unlike Thoreau his form of contact is acutely physical, as he seeks to make himself a liminal medium able to "filter . . . all sides" of fleshly life, and then encouraging the reader to do the same (190). Whitman celebrates polarity from the onset at every opportunity: his own "respiration and inspiration," the opposition of day and night, beginning and end, youth and age, the quasi-dialectical vision "out of the dimness" of

[76] Whitman's template for both instruction and a suggested rite of passage for the reader are loosely structured in that they don't have clearly marked transitional shifts between integration and reaggregation; his progressions are more characterized by Emerson's key concept of "flow," a point addressed in later sections of this thesis.

"opposite equals advanc[ing]" (189-190). Unlike Thoreau's dark exploration of polarity in *Cape Cod*, Whitman's celebratory opening in "Song of Myself" affirms the positive aspects of polarity in exploring the relationship between self and other, finding (like Emerson), "love for love.—Give and it shall be given you.—He that watereth shall be watered himself" (Emerson 293).

The central image of the grass in section 6 is at once "the flag of [the poet's] disposition, out of green stuff woven"; the "handkerchief of the Lord,"; a gift, a child, a "uniform hieroglyphic"; the "beautiful uncut hair of graves" (193), but it is also fundamentally a liminal medium, emerging out of the organic borderline between the soil and the air. Invested with symbolic potential, the image of grass celebrates the positive aspects of polarity, "sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones, / Growing among black folks as among white" (193). As a "uniform Hieroglyphic," it is not unlike Thoreau's "patented leaf" in the "Spring" chapter of Walden, containing within its natural form "all the operations of Nature" (Thoreau 568). The renewing imagery of the grass leads Whitman to speculate on Emersonian transition, especially the primary figure of the self-evolving circle, "rush[ing] on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end" (Emerson 404). Whitman finds that the "smallest sprout" of grass "shows there is really no death," for "all goes onward and outward, nothing collapses" (Whitman 194). The persona of sections 7-15 is increasingly receptive and "absorbing"; his capacity as a liminal agent deepens as he continues to be "form'd" out of the sense impressions received in the natural world: "In me the caresser of life wherever moving, backward as well as forward sluing, / To niches aside and junior bending, not a person or object missing, / Absorbing all to myself for this song" (199). All the varied stimuli of the world "tend inward" to the poet as seer, and he "tends outward to them . . . And of

these one and all I weave the song of myself" (203). In sections 16-32, Whitman's persona transitions gradually from seer to sayer, gaining strength and insight from the template Emerson offers in "The Poet" for the "necessity of [the poet's] speech and song, so "that thought may be ejaculated as Logos, or Word" (Emerson 466). In response to Emerson's call—"I look in vain for the poet whom I describe" (Emerson 465)—Whitman names himself as simultaneously "the poet of the Body and . . . the poet of the Soul" (Whitman 207), affirming that through "me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow, / All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means" (206). In his emerging role as sayer, the poet of "Song of Myself" reconciles opposites; he is a "partaker of influx and efflux," and "extoller of hate and conciliation," finding "one side a balance and the antipodal side a balance" in the "endless, unfolding of words of ages" (209). In spite of often noting dualities only to deny them, the persona of "Song of Myself" is still in the process of becoming "Walt Whitman, a kosmos"—Emerson's poet "in whom powers are in balance . . . who sees and handles what others dream of" (Emerson 448); "through [him] the afflatus [is] surging and surging," for he "speak[s] the pass-word primeval" (Whitman 211).

It is not enough to function as mere sayer, however, for the poet of Emerson's essay is a "liberating god," and in sections 33-44 Whitman's persona expands further to become a visionary prophet who represents and projects the divine potential of humanity. The poet as a transitioning hero of consciousness emerges fully in these sections, and in the initial negotiations of "Space and Time" (219) through contact with the forms of the natural world, Whitman sounds very much like a lyric version of Thoreau's questing hero in "Ktaadn"—negotiating the rugged terrain of the mountain's "walls of rock," and pulling himself up "by the side of perpendicular falls . . . by the roots of firs and birches"

(Thoreau 637). Whitman's hero similarly "scal[es] mountains, pulling [him]self cautiously up, holding on by low scragged limbs" in section 33 (Whitman 220), affirming later in this same section that "I understand the large heart of heroes, / The courage of present times and all times" (224). Angus Fletcher's earlier-cited reference to the threshold or archway as "an edge" for "simultaneous participation in the sacred and the profane" (*Colors* 167) is a useful reference point for the role of Whitman's hero of consciousness in section 33, for the anaphoric "where" identifications of this section often mark occurrences at liminal intersects. The poet finds himself "where sun-down shadows lengthen . . . where the laughing gull scoots by the shore . . . where band-neck'd partridges roost in a ring . . . where burial coaches enter the arch'd gates of a cemetery" (221-222). But the insights of the poet-hero are often negative; in Geoffrey Hartman's earlier-cited terms "the hero of consciousness is a solitary haunted by vast conceptions in which he cannot participate"; as "heroes, they are often more pursued than pursuing" (32). Whitman's hero is distinct, however, in that he knows much of suffering, and participates fully: "All these I feel or am . . . Agonies are one of my change of garments, / I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person" (Whitman 225). Still, even the poet who avows to "take part [and] see and hear the whole" (226) reaches a point of saturation in the face of negative polarities: "Enough! enough! enough! / Somehow I have been stunn'd" (226). In the conscious turn to new transitional powers, the poet assumes a transcendent dimension: "I seize the descending man and raise him with resistless will . . . I dilate you with tremendous breath, I buoy you up, / Every room of the house do I fill with an arm'd force, / Lovers of me, bafflers of graves" (233). As "an acme of things accomplish'd . . . an encloser of things to be"

(239), Whitman's poet then affirms from his threshold positioning: "[T]here is no stoppage, and never can be stoppage . . . my rendezvous is appointed" (240-241).

In sections 45-52, Whitman completes his rite of passage, returning to the diffused atoms of the soil from which he had been engendered in section 1. But first, as the transitioning hero of consciousness, his persona completes a mediating interpretation of human experience for the reader, cautioning in section 46 that "not I, nor anyone else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself " (241). An emphasis on synthesizing *communitas* has been present throughout, for Whitman assures the now questing reader that the road "for the perpetual journey" is "within reach," and there is no need to seek enlightenment alone: "If you tire, give me both burdens, and rest the chuff of your hand on my hip, / And in due time you shall repay the same service to me" (241). Ultimately, however, the reader must take responsibility and assume the role of the instructing hero, seeking his or her own answers and finding individualized solutions to life's mysteries: "You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every moment of your life / Long have you timidly waded holding a plank by the shore, / Now I will you to be a bold swimmer, / To jump off in the midst of the sea . . ." (242). In the spirit of *communitas*, however, Whitman also promises in the closing line of "Song of Myself" to be "somewhere waiting" for the reader, after first "bequeath[ing]" himself to his point of origin, to grow up again in self-evolving circles from the dirt and grass.

"Song of Myself" may not offer a schematically ordered tripartite pattern for the *rites de passage* in its fifty-two sections of varied lengths and intensity, but the persona of this song clearly passes through multiple forms of initiation, transition, and transformation—and ultimately, assimilation and reaggregation—in offering the representative journey of a mediating hero of consciousness to instruct his readers. Both

the impulse and the artistry are characterized by ever-expanding compassion and a desire for the full communion of *communitas* for the community of readers Whitman envisioned for "Song of Myself." That compassion for humanity will be even more fully realized in the great civil war poems Whitman wrote in response to the nation's mid-century crisis, and in *Drum Taps* and later collections Whitman was to expand considerably the mediating range of his liminal poetics in response to Emerson's foundational concepts. Moreover, the Civil War itself—which appeared to Whitman as to many others as a key "threshold moment" of difficult passage in the nation's history—forced Whitman to test, challenge, and then to realize more fully his earlier poetic ideal.

Literal and Conceptual Borderlines in the Civil War Poems

In an 1865 letter to William Douglas O'Connor, Walt Whitman explained what he felt he had accomplished in a collection of Civil War poems, the as yet unpublished text Whitman thought was "more perfect as a work of art" [77] than any of his previous publications:

> Drum Taps . . . delivers my ambition of the task that has haunted me, namely, to express in a poem . . . the pending action of this *Time and Land we swim in*, with all their large conflicting fluctuations of despair and hope, the shiftings, masses, and the whirl and deafening din . . . with unprecedented anguish of wounded and suffering . . . and then an

[77] Harold Aspiz quotes Whitman's characterization of the "more perfect" collection and the text of the letter to O'Connor in *So Long! Walt Whitman's Poetry of Death*. Aspiz describes Whitman's letter as "shed[ding] a valuable light on what the poet intended to achieve in his war poems" (163). I am indebted to Aspiz's analysis in Chapter 5 of his text, but I excerpt only the "liminal" portions of Whitman's letter for this thesis. See volume I of *The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller, for the full text of Whitman's letter.

> undertone of sweetest comradeship and human love threads its steady thread inside the chaos and is heard at every lull and interstice thereof . . . (qtd. in Aspiz, 163-164)

In this single passage Whitman defines his desired role as the lyric interpreter of the Civil War, positioning himself at the borderlines and in the spaces between the war's "large and conflicting fluctuations," and promising to thread compassion inside chaos through lines of poetry. These poems would call attention to the lulls and interstices of the "Time and Land" of a nineteenth-century America at war with itself, and in them Whitman's evolving persona gives voice to the conflicting perspectives of despair and hope. When his collection was finally published (and subsequently reprinted in a more cohesive and polished form in the 1871 edition of *Leaves of Grass*), it included over forty poems addressing a series of wartime spaces, transitions, and passages, many of which can be read as an attempt to position the extremes of war within human contexts, and ultimately within regenerative patterns in the natural world.[78]

These poems offer new perspectives when read specifically in the context of a liminal poetics inherited from Emerson, but Whitman makes use of Emerson's transitional concepts with very specific and instructive purposes in his Civil War poems. In more pronounced ways than Emerson and Thoreau, Whitman expects the cultural forms generated from liminal contexts to produce, in Victor Turner's words, "a set of templates, models, or paradigms which are . . . periodical reclassifications of reality . . . they incite [us] to action as well as to thought" (*Process* 50). It is specifically in this way that Whitman saw his role as lyric interpreter of the war, and a number of the Civil War

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[78] Whitman's Civil War poems include the above referenced collection *Drum Taps,* but also the *Sequel to Drum Taps* and select poems from *Songs of Parting.* Line numbers are as they appear in The Library of America edition of Whitman's *Poetry and Prose.*

poems engage liminal spaces in varied ways to render both the landscapes and the human identities of a nation at war with itself.

George Hutchinson's 1986 text, *The Ecstatic Whitman: Literary Shamanism and the Crisis of the Union,* offers perhaps the most insightful analysis of Whitman's liminal interpretations of the war, and Hutchinson's argument that Whitman's career is best read as "a form of ecstatic prophetism" is impressively sustained by insights on Turner's theories and their relations with literary shamanism. In defining Whitman's role and explicating the war poems, Hutchinson draws most significantly on the concept of c*ommunitas,* defined by Turner (and noted earlier in this thesis) as "a relational quality of full unmediated communication, even communion" (*Image and Pilgrimage* 250). Turner's communitas "posits the existence of 'anti-structure,' a liminal element, free and unbound by social norms," Hutchinson argues, and it is here "we would find Whitman, the 'solitary singer,' in the *limen,* in communitas."[79] Hutchinson explains further that "the great liminal moments of history" (such as the Civil War), often produce the emergence of a shaman or "individual visionary" who identifies and communicates "the solutions to community problems with which the 'church' or 'establishment' seems ill-equipped to deal." Moreover, Hutchinson is convinced that "Whitman clearly perceived himself in this light"—as a "shaman reinforc[ing] social unity while exploring social problems and proposing solutions and prophecies," a role that became "the prototype of the prophet of revitalization" (Hutchinson xxiv).

Whitman may well have desired this role, but as a poet writing about the war he is a better exemplar of the border aspects of liminality than of the reciprocal engagement

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[79] Hutchinson's Introduction explicates communitas as the "anti-structural limen" through which Whitman attempts "to reveal his most essential message" (xxiv).

and "full unmediated communication and communion" of liminal communitas. Whitman witnessed the Civil War from its literal and conceptual borderlines: he did not directly engage in battle: he rendered others' accounts with photographic verisimilitude; he ministered almost exclusively in hospital interiors as opposed to bloodied battlefields. What Hutchinson notes as Turner's "original sense of communitas—a heightened sense of union among group members coinciding with ritual or revitalization," appears here only as a desired sense of union on Whitman's part; his war poems often have a wistful or voyeuristic quality from a perspective marginal to the war's action. That Whitman's war poems mediate in liminal ways is unmistakable—and Hutchinson's conception of the poet as mediator between the triadic structure of poet, audience, and spiritual world is a seminal contribution to this line of thinking—but Whitman's liminal role as enacted here does not sustain the reciprocal communication and social unity of Turner's *communitas*.[80] While he may occasionally gesture towards a potential, desired endpoint of revitalization and social unity—a visionary *communitas* only perhaps one day possible in the fully-emerged democracy of the post-war future—Whitman mainly confines himself to exploring the literal and conceptual borderlines of the war.

Still, even the margins and borderlines are sites of productive inquiry, and in those liminal spaces and interstices Whitman illuminated the mixed, confusing realities of a Civil War—as he proffered ministry and mediation (as a liminally-positioned

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[80] Hutchinson notes that one of the "virtues of the shamanistic model is that it provides a paradigm for the blending of narrative, dramatic, and lyric modes . . . In the great ecstatic poems, as in shamanic performance, the dramatic situation is fundamental to the artist's discipline; this situation is triadic, involving relationships between the poet, the audience, and the spiritual world" (xx). Hutchinson skillfully applies certain aspects of Turner's "enactment of communitas" to Whitman's role in the war, noting for example, that "the communitas underlying all social bonds and achieved at certain points of ritual performance. . . is typically experienced in an antistructural landscape" where the poet "inhabits a status between or outside of structures" (xxiv). But Whitman is not emblematic of the "essential we" relationship Turner (and others) insist is intrinsic to the shared social bonds of communitas. See pages xx-xxvii of Hutchinson's Introduction for more on the intersection of Turner's theories with Hutchinson's varied readings of communitas in Whitman's war poems.

intermediary) to his readers. The intended recipients of Whitman's mediation included soldiers as well as the families who received the letters and messages he exchanged on the soldiers' behalf, but the mediation also addresses the past, present and future readers of his poetry. In a sense, there is a timeless quality to Hutchinson's triadic structure of the poet, audience, and spiritual world, but there are other three-part structures possible in liminal discourses as well. I would suggest that at the most basic level (evidenced in the more photographic poems), a poetics of liminality provides Whitman with a framing technique, allowing him to sharpen his focus on the verisimilitude of a scene by delineating the outlines and interstices of the natural landscape—making up a symbolic geography apt for these experiences of war-time struggle and opposition. A second, intermediate use of liminal poetics calls attention to hospital spaces as literal and figurative symbols of transition for wounded or dying soldiers, liminal interiors in which Whitman positions himself as a central witness and healer. A third, mystical mode of liminality allows Whitman to further define his role as an interpreting agent from the borderlines and margins of the war—when he emerges as the speaker who gives meaning of the ultimate passage from life into death for all the nation's dead.

Consider Whitman's attention to liminal spaces as demarcating borderlines or margins in the more photographic poems in the collection, poems such as "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," "Bivouac on a Mountainside," and "An Army Corps on the March." Whitman's biographers have pointed out that the rendered scenes in these poems are drawn both from the eye-witness recollections of the wounded soldiers Whitman cared for in wartime hospitals and from newspaper accounts, often using the exact language of

the *New York Times'* telegraphic dispatches.[81] Despite the obvious journalistic parallels (and despite the uncharacteristic physical *absence* of Whitman as witness), these poems offer the point-blank range perspective of a persona fixed on the landscape, defining a scene in which boundary lines are emphasized with photographic verisimilitude.[82] In a sense, attention to boundaries would seem to be counterintuitive for a fluid, boundless, and "absorbing" poet like Whitman, but as an inheritor of Emerson's transcendental thinking Whitman was drawn to points of transition in the natural landscape. In more intensive ways than his contemporaries Thoreau and Emerson, Whitman consciously sought a way to draw enlightenment from what Garry Wills referred to as the "borderlines (limina) in nature," the "margin" of nature that was itself "a charged word, whether used of a field, lake, petal, or cloud" (73).

Margin was certainly a charged word for Whitman—literally as it applies in these photographic poems, but also conceptually in his attentiveness to the marginalized and nameless, the unknown soldiers who served and died in the ranks.[83] In "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," for example, men and horses form a visual borderline winding "betwixt green islands." The scene is imbued with reflected light, both from the sun above and the "silvery river" below; it flashes on the metal blades and barrels of weapons and shines on

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[81] See pages 526-528 of Ted Genoway's "Civil War Poems in 'Drum Taps' and 'Memories of President Lincoln'" for line by line comparisons of "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" and "An Army Corps on the March" with 1864 dispatches from *The New York Times*.

[82] Huck Gutman notes that the opening poems in *Drum Taps* "exploit a mode of seeing associated with the discovery of photography. They possess the same visual clarity, the same precise focus, found in contemporary photographs of the war, such as those taken by Matthew Brady." See Gutman's "Drum Taps," *The Walt Whitman Archive* online. Internet, 19 May 2008, reprinted from *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, ed. J.R. Lemaster and Donald D. Kummings, for additional analysis of Whitman's "precise word-pictures of men at war" (par 5).

[83] Ties between margin and marginalization, social class, and liminality are further explored by Andrew Larson's *Walt Whitman and the Class Struggle*; see pages 8-12 for Turner's identification of the lower middle class as "threshold people," many of whom would have comprised the ranks Whitman describes in *Drum Taps.* Larson additionally notes that "Whitman declaimed the virtues of 'independent manhood' as represented by a particular person with a liminal class location" (11).

the distinct features of “brown-faced men . . . each person a picture” (line 4). In an expanse of seven lines, the inanimate “line in long array” becomes notably alive, the human faces of war illuminated in the liminal space between the banks of the river, as they move fluidly from point to point in a framed scene. In “Bivouac on a Mountainside,” the borderline-configuration of lined soldiers ceases movement, “halting” at mid-point against a terraced mountainside framed by a fertile valley below and the over-arching sky and eternal stars above. Again, a liminal context illuminates distinct and individual animations as shadowy flickering forms of men and horses become visible in the scatter’d light of campfires (lines 5-6). In “An Army Corps on the March” the line resumes the advance, the corps “glittering dimly” in this fixed scene as “dust-cover’d men, / In columns rise and fall to the undulations of the ground” (lines 4-5). These poems are Whitman’s war photographs—or perhaps more appropriately his lyric canvases—and even in the most direct reproductions of the natural landscape they emphasize the human undertones of potential connection threaded inside the chaos of war’s larger contexts—to use the language of Whitman’s earlier cited letter. In these poems (and others like them), the soldiers themselves fill the interstices in the “lulls” between battles. Viewed collectively, their ranks often form literal borderlines on the landscape; positioned in liminal configurations of physical space, they reveal individuated humanity in the face of war’s larger abstractions.

Somewhat ironically, Whitman’s earliest war poems reveal very little of the human face of war, except in idealized form. In the poem “Eighteen Sixty-One,” for example, the single soldier of focus is a “strong man erect . . . with well gristled body” and “sinewy limbs” (lines 4-5, 13), and his “shouting . . . sonorous voice ring[s] across the continent” (line 6). In “Song of the Banner at Daybreak,” the Poet “hear[s] the

jubilant shouts of millions of men" (line 63) and exults in the final section: "My limbs, my veins dilate, my theme is clear at last" (line 121). But in spite of his professed mediating role in lines 13-14 ("I'll weave the chord and twine in. . . I'll put in life"), Whitman has not yet clarified either his theme or his interpretive role in the early war poems. As Harold Aspiz notes, these first poems are "filled with enthusiasm for war"; they embody "the popular concept that war will promote national unity—Hegel's principle that 'by arousing the passions of solidarity and transcendence, war makes nations, or at least revives and refreshes them.'"[84]

In another early poem, "The Centenarian's Story," Whitman attempts to fuse a photographic focus on the landscape's borderlines with a heavy-handed projection of himself as lyric interpreter of two different wars. Luke Mancuso describes "The Centenarian's Story" as "a nostalgic bridge-poem to the Revolutionary War Battle of Brooklyn"; the poem is set in an 1861 training camp where a "decisive Revolutionary battle" was fought on the same landscape "85 years earlier" (302-303). Whitman's persona invites the aged veteran of the Revolutionary War to "speak in your turn," and promises that as poet-persona he will "listen and tell" (line 22). Whitman then recounts the borderlines of the Centenarian's "same ground," the "lines of rais'd earth stretching from river to bay," allowing the veteran to frame the battle scene from that earlier war: "I mark the vista of waters, I mark the uplands and slopes," (lines 36-37). When the battle account concludes, the poet notes his achievement: "The two, the past and the present, have interchanged, / I myself as connector, as chansonnier of a great future, am now speaking" (lines 95-96). But Whitman's mediation between two wars linking past

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[84] Harold Aspiz quotes Hegel as part of his analysis of Whitman's early war poems; see pages 165-166 of *So Long! Walt Whitman's Poetry of Death.*

and present is here only a desired "interchange"; in later poems the physical spaces of wartime hospitals will allow Whitman to develop more fully his mediating role, even if he is still considerably distanced from battlefield immediacy. In *Specimen Days,* Whitman describes his positioning of the hospital as a liminal symbol during the war: ". . . it seem'd sometimes as if the whole interest of the land, North and South, was one vast central hospital, and all the rest of the affair but flanges" (803). In this space between flanges Whitman considers a more definitive purpose for his poetic voice, and hospital spaces provide the literal and conceptual borderlines framing the lyric project.

Wartime hospitals are liminal spaces for the wounded who either pass from life to death within their walls, or (perhaps less frequently) emerge stabilized or healed. It was not until Whitman visited his wounded brother in an army hospital that he was able to understand war in light of specific and individual contexts, and perhaps more importantly, render those contexts in lines of poetry. After accompanying a medical team bringing casualties from Fredericksburg to Washington and witnessing the bloodied aftermath of the battle, Whitman committed himself to the self-appointed role of "wound-dresser," tending to the physical and spiritual wounds of the injured and dying in hospital wards for the remainder of the war.[85] That Whitman saw himself in a mediating role is unmistakable; he positioned himself conceptually between the wounded soldiers and their battlefield experiences, serving witness to their suffering and fear through the language of poetry.

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[85] In "The Wound Dresser," Paul Zweig states that "It is clear that the hospitals were vital places for Whitman. During four years, he rarely missed a day, with his knapsack full of gifts and his florid fatherliness. Even when the war was over, and the country labored to forget its four years' ordeal, Whitman went on visiting the chronic cases that lingered in a few outlying hospitals. He thrived as a bringer of comfort" (154).

George Hutchinson cites a letter Whitman wrote to Margaret Curtis to note the particular liminal positioning of the poet's hospital ministries, quoting Whitman's characterization of himself as "particularly useful to patients 'who are. . . trembling in the balance, the crisis of the wound, recovery uncertain, yet death also uncertain. . . I think I have an instinct and a faculty for these cases.'" (qtd. in Hutchinson, 137). As Hutchinson notes of the "shamanistic disposition" of Whitman's calling: "Whitman became the sort of 'mystical healer' he had hoped to be . . . [and] considered the heart of the national crisis to be concentrated in the hospitals; his own role there was vitally connected, in his own mind, with his ministrations to the Union" (137-138).

Paul Zweig also points out that during the war "Whitman felt that his private life and the life of the nation had become one," and Zweig further characterizes Whitman's ministry in terms that suggest the liminal context of hospital interiors: "The hospitals were the secret of the war; they were its inner life, so to speak, and Whitman moved through them, soothing, helping, writing" ("Generation" 109). In the final stanza of the poem 'The Wound Dresser," for example, Whitman calls upon the liminal space of dreaming for a scene "concentrated" in a hospital setting; there he recreates an intensive past moment of ministry through a recalled dream rendered in language. Garry Wills' earlier-cited observation that "liminal experiences [such as] twilight, dreams, daydreaming, melancholy, premonitions—are not fuzzings" or blurrings of experience, but rather "intensifications of knowledge" (73) is useful here, for Whitman's dreaming persona "threads" himself through the interstices of hospital rooms in the final stanza of this poignant recollection:

Thus in silence in dreams' projections,

> Returning, resuming, I thread my way through the hospitals,
> The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,
> I sit by the restless all the dark night, some are so young,
> Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad . . .
> (lines 60-64)

Hutchinson additionally points out that one of the motifs "derived from Whitman's shamanistic stance include[s] the framing of war episodes within dreams or visions" that often feature highly ritualized processions or liturgical movements (139). In the poem, "A March in the Ranks of the Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown," Whitman combines the contexts of literal margins and borderlines in nature with the conceptual liminal space of a makeshift place of healing—in this case, a church converted into hospital space at a liminal intersection: a line of marching soldiers wearily traverses a "road unknown . . . a route through a heavy wood" (lines 1-2) only to come unexpectedly upon "an open space in the woods" where an "old church at the crossing roads" now serves as an "impromptu hospital." Transitioning into this space (after literally crossing the threshold or limen of the doorway), the persona experiences an intensification of knowledge: "Entering but for a minute I see a sight beyond all the pictures and poems ever made, / Shadows of deepest, darkness black" (lines 7-8). It is a scene of extreme carnage, a panoramic illumination of war's horrors paradoxically rendered in darkness.

The persona's focus is drawn to the dying soldier at his feet, a single human identity among the bodies of the living and the dead, and the undertones of compassion "thread inside the chaos" as the speaker tries to stop the boy's bleeding and then bends toward him just before the pausing soldiers are ordered to resume the march. The

moment coincides with the transition from life to death, itself a liminal passage fixed in the image of the boy's eyes:

> [I] hear outside the orders given, Fall in, my men, fall in;
> But first I bend to the dying lad, his eyes open, a half smile gives he me,
> Then the eyes close, calmly close, and I speed forth to the darkness,
> Resuming, marching, ever in darkness marching, on in the ranks,
> The unknown road still marching. (lines 21-25)

Hutchinson observes that "the youth's death bears the aura of a benediction" in this poem, adding that "the procession that leads the poet through the church-hospital expresses intense communality and bears onward the liminal quality that emerges, indirectly, from [the poem's] drenched sacral atmosphere" (145). Hutchinson's "association of the hospital with the poet's ritual landscape" is impressively drawn, but the "express[ion] of intense communality" seems less appropriate in this sacred scene. The sole processionary figure standing out in the dream sequence is the persona-poet, and his singular focus is on the dying youth in the hospital interior. In a sense, the persona is on the borderline of the experience; he alone seems to leave the ranks of massed soldiers to cross the threshold, "entering but for a minute." Moreover, the persona only "hear[s] outside the orders given" (line 21), a command shouted from *communitas* beyond the walls of the formerly sacred space. His ministrations are solitary—even in the midst of "the crowd of the bloody forms" (line 16)—and directed to the wounded "who are . . . trembling in the balance," to use Whitman's liminal language from his earlier-cited letter.

But the mediating role of the poet does not only emerge in the context of healing and comforting the wounded or dying, and in other hospital poems Whitman is fixated upon the corpse as a liminal symbol between life and death. Jeff Sychterz notes that in

Julia Kristeva's "theorization of the abject . . . "the corpse exists as a 'strange' liminality that threatens the very boundaries . . . between here (meaning) and nowhere (meaninglessness)," and in this sense it exists as "the impossible, lying beyond borders, beyond language, beyond vision, and beyond representation" (22, 23). Sychterz concludes that in Whitman's poetry, "the corpse . . . confounds the abstract meanings that the poet had previously found in the Civil War—Democracy, Union, and brotherly Comradeship—threatening to reveal them as rhetorical illusions" (23). But in calculating the "loss of transcendent meaning precipitated by the corpse" (23) in the war poems, Sychterz fails to account for Whitman's ability to see the transcendent power of death as the ultimate liminal transition.

Still, a dynamic comprised of mediating poet and mute corpses underscores the irony of what Hutchinson sees as Whitman's desire for "communion between the definite and indeterminate identities" in Turner's version of *communitas*. Hutchinson's triadic structure involving the poet, the audience, and the spiritual world does, however, allow the poet to "hold the key position in this triad, mediating between the other two referents of the performance, attending to their diverse demands" (xx)—even if this structure lies outside of full *communitas*. In the poem "A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim," for example, Whitman's mediating poet-speaker "emerges" from his tent at the transitional point of daybreak to see "three forms" on "the path near by the hospital tent" (lines 1-4). "Untended" and fully covered by blankets, these corpses are to remain outside of the hospital space interiors. But Whitman attends to the referent of the human face of war in focusing on the transcendent meaning of each form in turn: first the "dear comrade," next the "sweet boy," and finally the "young man" with the "face of the Christ himself" (lines 10-14). It is this third form that is "Dead and divine and brother of all"

(15), and yet the syntax of this final line suggests that all three forms (now "divine" in spirit, yet linked corporeally in the brotherhood of death), have the same transcendent identity. In this sense, the corpse functions not as "a loss of transcendent meaning" but rather as a liminal marker of the transition between life and death, the corporeal locus of the spirit's crossing over into the realm of the transcendent.

M. Wynn Thomas adds that Whitman's reverential attention to the corpses of soldiers expanded his ministry by allowing him to perform "as a surrogate mourner of the dead—one who took it upon himself to do what relatives could not do: to remember the dead man in the very presence of his corpse" (123). The poem, "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night," is, in Thomas' words, "a poem *about* mourning as well as a poem *of* mourning" (123), but Whitman's use of mystical language and his emphasis on symbolic ritual also mark this battlefield burial as a definitive rite of passage. Whitman admittedly saw the full expanse of the Civil War as liminal for the nation's emerging democracy, but difficult *rites de passage* routinely occurred in singular battlefield moments, such as the one commemorated in "Vigil Strange." Van Gennep warns of this jarring shift in states of being: "so great is the incompatibility between the profane and the sacred worlds, that a man cannot pass from one to the other without going through an intermediate stage" involving "liminal rites of transition" (1,11). The profane world of the battlefield threatens to subsume the death of the fallen soldier in this poem, but Whitman's "vigil of silence, love, and death" (line 14) fills the liminal space of transition:

> Long there and in vigil I stood, dimly around me, the battle-field spreading,
> Vigil wondrous and vigil sweet there in the fragrant silent night, . . .
> Passing sweet hours, immortal and mystic hours with you, dearest comrade—
> not a tear, not a word,

Vigil of silence, love, and death . . . (lines 9-10, 13-14).

"To cross the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world" (20), van Gennep asserts, and while Whitman's passage of death in this poem can be read in light of corporeal transcendence—the spirit's transition into some form of afterlife—it is important to note that the corpse itself (reverenced in the ritual of "immortal and mystic hours") is invested with symbolic and transcendent meaning.[86] The persona ends the "vigil final" at the transitional point of daybreak ("indeed just as the dawn appear'd"), first carefully wrapping the corpse in a blanket that "enveloped well his form," and then burying it in a battlefield grave "bathed by the rising sun" (lines 16, 18-22). Harold Aspiz notes that "enshrouding and burying the soldier's body transforms this death . . . into a sacred action" (175), but it is the liminal spaces of daybreak and burial that allow Whitman to transcend the dark night of the battlefield, effecting the transition from the profane to the sacred.

Thomas notes further that "a poem like 'Vigil Strange' cries out to be read against [a] background . . . of the desire to ensure that the battlefield dead are individually recognized, remembered, and mourned" (125). In "Dirge for Two Veterans," Whitman focuses on the ceremonial aspects of the funeral march "down [to] a new-made double grave" for a fallen father and son, neither of whom are named, but whose passing is "recognized, remembered, and mourned":

I see a sad procession,

And I hear the sound of coming full-key'd bugles,

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[86] Harold Aspiz notes that Whitman's *Memoranda During the War* "records his grief for the thousands of unknown soldiers . . . who died alone or without proper burial, or whose fate remained unknown to their loved ones" (*So Long!* 174). "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night" represents, according to Aspiz, "a ritual act of symbolic closure for the nation's unknown dead. . . the word *vigil*, rich in sacred connotations, occurs eight times in the twenty-six line poem" (174).

All the channels of the city streets they're flooding,

As with voices and with tears. (lines 9-12)

As the funerary procession moves through the interstices of city streets, Whitman's persona marks the ceremonial sounds of the music and drums and acknowledges the "sooth[ing]" illumination of the moon on the horizon, "ascending / Up from the east" (lines 5-6), and then notes in the final lines his own contribution:

The moon gives you light,

And the bugles and drums give you music,

And my heart, O my soldiers, my veterans,

My heart gives you love. (lines 33-36)

Here Whitman voices the essential purpose of his lyric mediation: to thread human love and compassion through chaos and sadness, and to sound it at every lull and interstice on the wartime landscape. But Whitman was to reserve his greatest meditation on what van Gennep termed the "incompatibility of the profane and the sacred worlds" (1) for the historic and named rite of passage that followed the war. As George Hutchinson notes of the poem that commemorated "the assassination of the American Osiris" in the months that followed the ceasefire: "'Lilacs' mediates both Lincoln's passage from life to death and the nation's passage from wartime to a peacetime identity" (158). In "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Whitman fuses the ritual and ceremony of Lincoln's funerary procession with the mediating insights on death as the ultimate rite of passage; he also "completes the rite of passage and purification symbolized in the historic event" of the Civil War, as Hutchinson observes in his impressive explication of "Lilacs."[87]

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[87] See pages 149-169 of *The Ecstatic Witness* for a detailed explication of the poem*;* the quoted passages in this section appear on pages 149 and 150.

First published in the sequel to *Drum Taps,* the poem is replete with borderlines, margins, and images of transition; even the three recurring symbols of lilac, thrush, and western star are representative of liminality in the way they juxtapose life and death, or more specifically engender life out of death. The lilac with its "heart-shaped leaves" is a flower of mourning (the persona places a lilac sprig atop Lincoln's coffin) and yet it signals the transitions and new life of spring with its "many a pointed blossom rising delicate," and "every leaf a miracle" (lines 14, 15). The thrush "sings Death's outlet song of life" from its "Bleeding throat," entwining life and death; its recurring image on nineteenth-century headstones symbolized death, but also the flight of the soul into the afterlife.[88] The western star appears in the liminal space of twilight to symbolize the deceased Lincoln's "prescient spirit" (Aspiz 197) in section 8, but it is also, as Whitman identifies it, the "ever-renewing star," the first-shining evening star that marks the end of the winter sky. Even Lincoln's coffin "threads its steady thread" through the landscape interstices of a nation in mourning, "passing the endless grass, / Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown fields uprisen . . . pass[ing] through lanes and streets, / Through day and night, moving westward across the nation's northern states along the straight lines of railroad tracks (sections 5, 6).

Whitman's earlier named task of expressing in a poem "the pending action of this *Time and Land we swim in,* with all their large conflicting fluctuations of despair and hope," is perhaps most fully realized in this poem in the pivotal dream sequence of section 14. Whitman places himself in a literal and conceptual liminal space in these lines—as persona, he is the literal middle figure positioned between two companions in the dream

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[88] Aspiz notes the "song of the thrush embodies the allure that death has always had for the persona" (*So Long!* 195); because of its frequent representation on cemetery headstones and its recognition as a symbol of the soul's flight, the thrush is one of the poem's "images that represent both death and renewal" (195).

sequence, and as poet, he is the conceptual mediator of the mystery of the transition of life into death.

The section opens in the "large, unconscious scenery" of the American landscape at the transitional points of "the close of day" with "summer approaching," and the focus is on the animated rhythms of human experience: "voices of children and women," the "busy. . . labor" of fields, the "minutia of daily usages" in households, the "throbbings" of city streets (lines 3-9), all observations Whitman's poet-persona makes from his borderline positioning in the scene. In the middle of this vibrant animation the charged symbol of the cloud "appear'd," and with it "appear'd the long black trail" (line 11). The repeated use of the verb "appear'd" emphasizes the suddenness of death's coming forth in the midst of life, and the poet names this reality instantly: "And I knew death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death" (line 12). But the larger task is interpreting this reality in language that will convey the "pending action" of life into death, and Whitman offers a liminal dream-parable to instruct the mystery: "Then with the knowledge of death as walking on one side of me, / And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me, / And I in the middle as with companions, and as holding the hands of companions, / I fled forth to the hiding receiving night. . . / Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the dimness" (lines 13-17). The mediating poet-persona here walks in ritual fashion down to the watery shores, taking his place at the literal borderline between his companions "knowledge of death" and "thought of death," and in his liminal role as interpreter serving as the threshold connection between grieving thoughts of death as an end point and a subsequent knowledge of a larger and more cosmic awareness of death as a transition, the "sacred knowledge of death" named in line 12. The rest of section 14 is fluid and moving; the thrush returns to sing a death song as

the "three companions move from the shores of the dark swamp to larger transitional waters: death's "loving, floating ocean" (line 42). The swamp in this dream sequence is, as Harold Aspiz notes, "a realm of darkness and decay," but it is also a "place of metamorphosis—a realm in which death and decay perpetually nuture life and renewal" (201).

Whitman's insights into death's mystery, his attempts to mediate and explain the journey into an "unknown realm that may lie beyond mortality" (Aspiz 205), still remain heavily burdened by the Civil War, however, for shortly after the lyric sequence of mystical insight the speaker is overwhelmed in Section 15 by visions of wartime atrocities, first seen "askant" (line 9), and then directly: "myriad battle-corpses . . . white skeletons . . . the debris of all the slain soldiers of the war" (lines 15-17). In the final section of the poem, the persona awakens, "passing" from night and visionary walks to the daylight realities of Lincoln's death and the war's toll on the still grieving nation. Yet even in grief there are compensatory moments, "retrievements out of the night," (section 16), the visions and songs in liminal spaces that provide intensifications of knowledge. In the final lines of the poem, Whitman's persona notes his reunion with a human grouping—"Comrades mine and I in the midst, and their memory ever to keep"—but his liminal positioning falls short of literal communitas as he mediates only the memories of the dead. Still, these are also "retrievements out of the night," and from the borderlines and margins of liminal experience Whitman here addresses the task that had long haunted him: expressing the time and land of the nation in lines of poetry.

In his 1997 text, *The Wreath of Wild Olive,* Mihai Spariosu asserts that "liminal time-space can lead to an irenic [non-polemical] mentality that transcends all violent conflict" (32). Since the "idea of agon or contest lies at the foundation of the Western

philosophy of difference," Spariosu notes, liminal spaces are important in that they provide "thresholds or passageways allowing access to alternative worlds" (32). In these spaces, the peace-seeking, "irenic" mentality will not "experience difference as a conflict, but rather as an openness and an opportunity toward a responsive understanding of other worlds" (Spariosu 119). In the poem "Camps of Green" Whitman acknowledges the two worlds he "threads" between: "Lo, the camps of the tents of green, / Which the days of peace keep filling, and the days of war keep filling, / With a mystic army" (lines 11-13), and he again sketches the borderlines of dichotomy in the poem "So Long!":

> I have press'd through in my own right,
> I have sung the body and the soul, war and peace have I sung,
> and the songs of life and death (lines 9-11).

In the final poem of the *Drum Taps* collection, "To the Leaven'd Soil They Trod," Whitman's mediating persona claims "I sing for the last, / Forth from my tent emerging for good" (lines 1-2), acknowledging the response of "the average earth, the witness of war and peace" (line 11).

But Whitman was to sing of the war well beyond the original *Drum Taps* collection,[89] threading an irenic mentality in the midst of war's chaos and in its aftermath. In *Songs of Parting* (the collection that includes "So Long!" and "Camps of Green"), Whitman's short poem "Portals" asserts the power of liminal transition in two somber lines: "What are those of the known but to ascend and enter the Unknown? / And what are those of life but for Death?" Clearly, the portals opened by Whitman as the war's interpreter reveal truths both about the human face of war and the meaning of death as the

[89] Ted Genoways states that Whitman's Civil War poetry "was a project he never completed, as he continually added new poems about the war and moved them ever more pervasively into the body of *Leaves of Grass"* (537).

ultimate rite of passage, the transition into the afterlife.[90] The idea of liminal transcendence is clear in "Joy, Shipmate, Joy!," another poem from *Songs of Parting,* one that looks past wartime chaos to the voyage and life that lies beyond:

> Joy, shipmate joy!
>
> (Pleas'd to my soul at death I cry,)
>
> Our life is closed, our life begins
>
> The long, long anchorage we leave,
>
> The ship is clear at last, she leaps! (lines 1-4)

In the poems of *Drum Taps* and later collections, Whitman gives witness to a nineteenth-century America at war with itself, interpreting that passage in language commensurate to what he called the "large, conflicting fluctuations of despair and hope." In the poem "Not Youth Pertains Me," Whitman summarizes his far-reaching role as a compassionate mediator, ministering to the dying he once characterized in a letter as "trembling in the balance" of a specific time and land:

> I have nourish'd the wounded and sooth'd many a dying soldier,
>
> And at intervals waiting or in the midst of camp,
>
> Composed these songs. (lines 6-8)

That Whitman could thread human compassion in the midst of war's "waiting intervals" can yet serve as a modern paradigm for individual responses to military conflict, even when the borderlines between life and death may seem no more than distant abstractions. In the limen of the present moment, to use Victor Turner's words, "everything, as it were,

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[90] In "Death and the Afterlife," William Scheick notes that the afterlife is viewed in Whitman's poems not in "typical nineteenth century Christian belief in an ascent into heaven," but rather a "thoroughly Transcendental understanding of the afterlife . . . Throughout his poetry, Whitman's explicit and implied imagery of ascent conveys a Transcendentalist belief in the soul's ongoing and endless progression along successive orbits expanding infinitely" (339).

trembles in the balance" (*Process* 41), and in these spaces Whitman teaches us through language to find the human face of war . . . even in the transitional moments between death and the spaces beyond.

But perhaps the central case study for Whitman's attempts to construct an aesthetic form leading both poet and readers through liminal "crossings"—as well as into an enlightenment concerning the transitional moments between life, death and the spaces beyond—is found in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," itself a fully realized and enacted rite of passage. In this single poem, Whitman transcends time and space, "furnish[ing] parts toward eternity" as he dissolves the boundaries between poet, persona, and reader, fusing their individual rites of passage into a synthesized truth of human "crossings."

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" as an Enacted Rite of Passage

James Dougherty points out that "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" can simultaneously be "read as a poem in the Romantic tradition, a meditation on a landscape, culminating in a deeper insight into the poet and his circumstances," *and* read as "a poem [that] meditates on how personal experience is conserved and communicated . . . a poem about poetry itself" (484). In linking the meta-lyric aspects of "Crossing" with the phenomenon of its meditation emanating from the correspondence between human consciousness and the movements of the natural world, Dougherty's article illuminates one fundamental element in Whitman's response to Emerson's vision of a liminal poetics: the goal of identifying and representing the complex and varying relationship between transitional dynamics basic to human consciousness and to the flow of the natural world. My study suggests that the specific and changing nature of this relationship is seen to be most fully

revealed at liminal thresholds, and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is centrally focused on exploring and representing the flux and rhythms of transitional crossings.[91] Dougherty rightly notes that "Whitman begins by situating a poem in a moment of powerful response to a landscape"; it includes detailed description that "deepens into meditation, arrives at an insight, and returns to the original setting, with which it has never completely lost touch" (485). But the essential movement here is not merely "circular and repetitive, a ferry-like shuttling between alternatives," as Dougherty suggests (485), but rather a fully enacted rite of passage, one that unfolds from multiple points of threshold insight—for poet, passengers, and readers—and within diverse time frames: past, present, and future.

M.H. Abram's "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric" is a useful starting point for understanding the poem's movement from the outer natural scene to an interior focus—and then to a return to that outer landscape from the perspective of a newly heightened consciousness—a movement structured as an enactment of a particular form of cyclical ritual. Abrams explains that the "repeated out-in-out process, in which mind confronts nature and their interplay constitutes the poem, is a remarkable phenomenon in literary history" (528). Abrams does not use the phrase "rite of passage" in his explication of the Romantic lyric, but a balanced, tripartite structure can be discerned in the repeated pattern that "yield[s] a paradigm for the type":

> The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely

[91] Many published readings of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" detail the poles between which this poem is attempting to make a "crossing." M. Jimmie Killingsworth's *Whitman's Poetry of the Body*, for example, takes a contrasting stance to my emphasis on Whitman's desire for *communitas* in this poem—a view supported in readings by Kerry Larson and M. Wynn Thomas, among others. Killingsworth claims instead that Whitman's "Crossing" expresses "a confessional tone . . . involv[ing] a sense of evil and darkness," in which "the speaker himself claims alienation rather than (or in addition to) projecting it onto others" (49).

> intervolved with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation. (Abrams 528)

Whitman's "Crossing" follows this pattern closely, enacting Abrams' "out-in-out process" (528) in a ritual movement of initiation, transformation, and reintegration. The movement comprises a rite of passage that begins and ends in a recognizable natural scene: the moving "flow" of flood-tide on the East River between Manhattan and Brooklyn.

The poem opens just before the liminal point of sunset, when "flood-tide [is] below" the persona's gaze, and the sun above it, "half and hour high" (307). The speaker of the poem notes his position in relation to the forms around him—spatially in opposition, yet directly engaged "face to face"—and then his "curious" gaze turns to the "crowds" of "hundreds and hundreds that cross" from "shore to shore" (308). The hundreds cross literally from Manhattan to Brooklyn and back, but they also cross through the consciousness of the observant speaker, as well as across the unending flow of the river and of time—both in the present moment of the poem and the projected "years hence" (308). The confluence of it all is one grand "scheme," yet discrete impressions function as "glories strung like beads" on the "smallest sights and hearings" of the poet-persona (308). Whitman's characterization of his own artistry stands in sharp contrast to Emerson's earlier-noted criticism of Thoreau's approach in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers;* Thoreau's "little voyage," that Emerson felt, was a

"slender thread for such big beads . . . as are strung on it."[92] For Whitman's voyage on the East River is in many ways a more expansive one than Thoreau's on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, and Whitman's attempt at a complete *rite de passage* is more fully realized as well.

In fact, Whitman calls attention to rites of initiation in section 2 with a focus on both liminal place and process at a threshold point of conversion: there will be many who "will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore . . . fifty years hence . . . a hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence" (308). Each of these crossings is distinct and personal, but all are also the same—marked by liminal sunsets with "the sun half an hour high," as well as ceaseless alternations between "flood-tide [and] ebb-tide"—the background process of flow defined by the river (308). During this passage, the speaker-poet serves as a filter for the common human experience, unaffected by time, place and distance, present for all generations and sharing equally in their impressions, particularly the paradox of simultaneous stasis and movement in section 3: "Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was hurried" (309). In a sense, Whitman enacts Emerson's concepts of both polarity and compensation in these opening sections with the emphasis on ebb-tide and flow tide, stasis and movement, and "bright flow" throughout. In fact, section 3 is particularly image-based, and the interplay of light and movement on human and natural forms occasionally echoes the image-centered patterns in *Walden*—especially Thoreau's "night-hawk [that] circled overhead in the sunny afternoons . . . [an] aerial brother of the wave

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[92] See *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk and Eleanor M. Tilton, for the full text of this earlier-cited letter in which Emerson critiques Thoreau's "big beads" and "slender voyage" (3: 384); Whitman's "glories strung like beads" are accommodated by a larger fluid framework in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry."

which he sails over and surveys, those his perfect air-inflated wings answering to the elemental unfledged pinions of the sea" (Thoreau 449). A pair of hawks becomes an image of correspondence in this scene, "alternately soaring and descending . . . as if they were the [e]mbodiment of [Thoreau's] own thoughts" (449), and Whitman's parallel pattern of correspondence in section 3 matches "glistening" sea-gulls and his own "dazzled" eyes, as well as the circling movements around "the shape of [his] head" reflected in the water:

> I . . [w]atched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls, saw them high in the air
> Floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies,
> Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies
> and left the rest in strong shadow,
> Saw the slow-wheeling circles . . .
> Saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water,
> Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams,
> Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the
> shape of my head in the sunlit water . . . (309)

The scene is enhanced by light and reflection; ordinary forms and mirror images become—in a sense—transcendent, and the speaker's haloed reflection seems almost to be radiating celestial light as energy and inspiration. In some measure, the poet-god with his "fine centrifugal spokes of light" recalls one of the opening images found in Emerson's "The Poet": "For we are not . . . even porters of the fire and torch-bearers, but children of the fire, made of it, and only the same divinity transmuted" (Emerson 447). Attributes of divinity are consistent in "The Poet," and later in his essay Emerson notes

that the naming power of the poet results from "his resigning himself to the divine *aura* which breathes through forms . . . The poets are thus liberating gods" (Emerson 459, 462). In another parallel image in Whitman's "Crossing," the combination of fire and its aura lighting "high and glaringly into the night" emerges again later in section 3, for as darkness descends, the speaker of the poem will highlight the liminal cast of "fire from the foundry chimneys," with its contrasting colors of black, red, and yellow "flicker[ing] . . . down into the cleft of streets" (310). The downward movement into an interstice foreshadows in nuanced ways the fall of "dark patches" in section 6, "the dark [that] threw its patches down upon me also" (311)—embodiments of the poet's own thoughts, not unlike Thoreau's example of correspondence in the soaring hawk section of *Walden.*

But before this pivotal downturn, section 5 marks the literal mid-point of the poem's nine-sectioned rite of passage, itself a liminal space of transition. "What is then between us?" Whitman asks in the opening line of section 5—underlining in a riddle-like identification the point of literal and metaphoric mid-liminal transition in an enacted rite of passage. This is Turner's space "betwixt and between," but Whitman does not name it explicitly: "Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not" (310). From his position on the moving ferry, the speaker himself is betwixt and between the "ample hills" of Brooklyn and "streets of Manhattan island"; like the passengers he writes about and the readers addressed through time, "[he] too had been struck from the float forever held in solution" (310) that engenders us all—an image that suggests a suspended state of midpoint mediation—and which positions the poet as a liminal filter to interpret meaning. "What gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand," Whitman asks in section 8, "Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?" (312). For here, as in Emerson, it is the Poet with his bestowed higher powers who "sees the flowing

and metamorphosis . . . that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form," and who "suffer[s] the ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him" (Emerson 456, 459).

Emerson's "primary figure" of the self-evolving circle" has informed the liminal aesthetics of Whitman's enacted rite of passage throughout this poem, and as a foundational concept it also brings the opening images of "Crossing" into full-circle conclusion in section 9, the final section of the poem. Rising to the public voicing of his conclusion, Whitman here names each image in turn, specifying the concrete forms of place in these rites—the half-circled "scallop-edg'ed waves," the "gorgeous clouds of sunset," the countless crowds of passengers," the "tall masts of Mannahatta," the "beautiful hills of Brooklyn, the "eternal float of solution" (312)—as well as the process of transition: the flow of tides, the crossing of passengers, the movement of gaze, the playing of parts in the procession of human experience. The image of the sea birds reemerges in literal circles in the sky, not unlike Thoreau's circling hawks with their pattern of "seamless cope[s]" (Thoreau 449): "Fly on, sea-birds! Fly sideways, or wheel in large circles high in the air" (Whitman 313). These forms, the "dumb beautiful ministers," are "receive[d] with free sense at last"; they are to be "used" and "plant[ed] permanently within us" (313), to be processed by the intellect as—in Emerson's view—"symbols of the passage of the world into the soul of man" (456). In fact, Emerson's philosophy mandates that the intellect "take[s] its direction from its celestial life . . . when the mind flows into things highest and hardest" (Emerson 459, 460). Whitman's response to "The Poet" expands this possibility for the entire human community in this enacted rite of passage, for the speaker's haloed head with its circle of "fine spokes of

light" recurs in these final lines as well, to "diverge" not just from the poet's reflected image, but from the "shape" of "anyone's head, in the sunlit water" (313).

In the final two lines of the poem, all of the named forms of nature "furnish [their] parts toward eternity; all "furnish [their] parts toward the soul" (313), and the poet receive[s] them in this enacted rite that returns again to the "outer scene" that "end[s] where it began," but with a "deepened understanding" (Abrams 528). In "The Poet," Emerson identifies the liminal context for these places of insight, many of which are echoed in Whitman's "Crossing":

> And this is the reward: that the ideal shall be real to thee, and the impressions of the actual world shall fall . . . to thy invulnerable essence . . . Thou true land-lord! sea lord! air lord! . . . wherever day and night meet in twilight, wherever the blue heaven is hung by clouds . . . wherever are forms with transparent boundaries, wherever are outlets into celestial space" (Emerson 468).

The poet guides the passage from rites of initiation, rites of transition, and final rites of reaggregation in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," but the rites are to be shared with the passengers and readers of past, present, and future at the poet-persona's invitation. These celestial insights into the human experience are possible for all who strive to perceive "fine spokes of light" diverging from their perceptions of self in "sunlit water"—all those who accept the "necessary film . . . envelop[ing] the soul" and the body, with its "divinist aromas" (313).

Victor Turner points out that "rites of passage are the transitional rituals accompanying changes of place, state, social position and age in a culture"; they are balanced in a "tripartite processual structure consisting of three phases: separation,

margin or limen, and reaggregation" (*Image and Pilgrimage* 249). Turner adds that "the first phase detaches the ritual subjects from their old places in society; the last installs them, inwardly transformed and outwardly changed, in a new place in society" (*Image and Pilgrimage* 249). Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" follows this template in literal ways, as both speaker and passengers are "detached" and separated from the shoreline when they cross the threshold point of the ferry gate in the present moment of section 2. But even at this point, the invocation is extended to future participants in the ritual (including, vicariously, the reader), the "others" who will pass through phases of separation, marginal transformation, and reaggregation. Moreover, all participants have the potential to be, like the poet, "inwardly transformed and outwardly changed"—and at least literally transported to a new place at either end of the ferry crossing. That Whitman intended larger transformations and expanded possibilities for "place[ment] in society" seems unmistakable in this poem evoking in bardic tones the vision of a desired c*ommunitas,* with its "relational quality of full unmediated communication, even communion, between definite and determinate identities, which arises spontaneously in all kinds of groups, situations, and circumstances" (Turner *Image and Pilgrimage,* 250). "It is not upon you alone that the dark patches fall" (311), Whitman reassures in section 6; nor are the readers and passengers through time ever alone in their passage in section 7:

> Closer yet I approach you,
>
> What thought you have of me now, I have as much of you—
>
> I laid my stores in advance,
>
> I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born. (311)

There is an almost messianic quality to this reassurance, a suggestion that, like Christ in the New Testament narrative, the poet may have counted every hair on the heads of those

whom he addresses and invites into spontaneous communion.[93] In this sense, Whitman as poet-persona is in the tradition of Hartman's hero of consciousness, "surrounded by ancient images of the divine," a "solitary haunted by vast conceptions in which he cannot participate" (32)—because many of these conceptions transpire in timeframes he has not experienced, or which will take place long after his own has passed. But the poem itself transcends time in its ability to enact endlessly the rites of passage of the common human experience, and in this respect it is consistent with Emerson's "primary figure" of the "self-evolving circle . . . repeated without end . . . the highest emblem in the cipher of the world" (Emerson 403). For "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" confirms the truth of endlessly enacted rites of passage, the tripartite processual structure that Emerson alludes to—albeit in nuanced ways—in his essay "Circles": ". . . that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens" (Emerson 403). Whitman's poem, however, provides a cipher for understanding the world that advances beyond Emerson's designation of cipher as mere emblem or symbol, offering instead an enacted "play" of human experience that expands the forms of nature through the liminal filter of the body. Ultimately, body and soul are conjoined in "Crossing," and the body —as a result of this liberating passage— "receive[s] . . . with free sense at last" and becomes "insatiate henceforward" (313).

For Whitman, the body was both the wellspring of ecstatic sensations *and* the dark source of the Abyss; the body embraces positive and negative polarities at the same time as it dissolves the distinction between the soul and nature (as the "not me"), in Emerson's

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[93] Kerry Larson's *Whitman's Drama of Consensus* perhaps best describes the form of full communion Whitman dreams of in "Crossing." Moreover, Larson's reference to "a space in which the reader and the poem are one" is evocative of a particular liminal synthesis: "Whitman is quite single-minded in his determination to erase all boundaries, to overcome all distance, to create, in effect, a space in which the reader and the poem are one . . . the goal is not so much communication as communion . . . the sheer desire for communication has become synonymous with the content of communication" (10).

poetics. In Harold Bloom's terms, Whitman's unique synthesis marks the "American sublime of influx, of Emersonian self-recognition and consequent self-reliance" (*Poetry and Repression* 249), but Whitman at the same time sets himself apart from both Emerson and Thoreau with his pervasive urge to relationship and *communitas*. For in his role as a fusing and instructing hero of consciousness, Whitman's lyric rites of passage transcend time and place as they speak to the common human experience—leading generations of readers to flow out of time and place-bound stasis into visionary enlightenment.

VI. EPILOGUE: LIMINAL LEGACIES AND THE ART OF THE THRESHOLD

"The intelligent mind is forever coming into its relation with all the objects of nature and time, until from a vital point it becomes a great heart from which the blood rolls to the distant channel of things, and to which, from those distant channels, it returns" —Emerson (JMN, v, 209).

Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman were all drawn to transition in the natural world as a way to define the passage between world and self, but their focus on the endlessly unfolding potential of the aesthetic ideal in the "space between" gave rise to the poetics of liminality that makes them distinct. My thesis has argued that the Emersonian aesthetic of transition emerges in the writing of Thoreau and Whitman in at least three interrelated contexts or modes of liminal process, and that these modes are consistent with the tripartite pattern defined in van Gennep's conception of *rites de passage*, with its three-part design of initiation, transformation, and reintegration. At the center of each mode of liminal process is the synthesizing and interpreting power of human consciousness, or in Emerson's words, the "intelligent mind . . . forever coming into its relation with all the objects of nature and time" (*JMN* v, 209). In Emerson's unfolding system of thought, the mind becomes, in effect, a liminal agent of creative processing, and in that conscious act of creation, it becomes also a "great heart" of affective response. In the process of responding to perceived images and figures in the external world, the intelligent mind makes a passage at liminal midpoint (a "vital point") from seeing to saying, channeling the dynamic energy of natural "flow" into the word-symbols of language. In a phase of initiation, the intelligent mind is the all-seeing transparent eyeball; after the midpoint of transition, the Poet emerges to reintegrate a vision of "the objects of nature and time" and then to communicate these perceived realities to others.

Perhaps one of the greatest shifts in Emerson's thinking—a shift that in turn markedly influenced Thoreau and Whitman—is found in taking a vision of nature's liminal processes as a model for the writer's role as a filter of threshold insights. After transitioning from seeing to saying, Emerson's Poet interprets and communicates "the great limits to knowledge and time and history" we are meant to transcend, to borrow Garry Wills earlier-cited phrasing (73), and the emphasis moves from a focus on nature's margins and borderlines to the greater significance of the writer's ability to give meaning to these liminal spaces in works of art. And by recognizing "power" in the moment of transition, Emerson's Poet sees the essential unity in creation and identifies the catalyzing energy basic to a system of intellectual and spiritual process—one that can accommodate both the positive and negative potential of liminality.[94] In this sense, the writer becomes an allegorical hero of consciousness, interpreting the outlines and spaces of liminal contexts in a "quest," to use Geoffrey Hartmann's earlier-noted term, "to widen consciousness as well as [to] intensify it" (16).

Emerson's system of thought—his poetics of liminality—is significant in that it emerged from or was defined through analogies derived from varied processes in the natural world as it was understood in the nineteenth-century, but its greater contribution is that it provided American writers at the century's midpoint with a foundation for newly vitalized ways of thinking and writing. Drawing from a larger global "spirit of the age," Emerson gave voice to a vision of transition and metamorphosis, grounding it in language emanating from the liminal spaces of the natural world. Thoreau and Whitman expanded

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[94] The Poet's recognition is, at least in part, the same as one made nearly a century later by the poet Dylan Thomas—of a "force" that that "drives" all forms of being in ways that are both transitionally sustaining and potentially destructive: "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower / Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees is my destroyer." The Poet's larger task is to then communicate this essential unity and shared "force"—thus realizing the Emersonian "power" within that is generated at the heart of the transitional moment.

and deepened this vision, sharing a foundational understanding of Emersonian process even as they each developed in significantly different ways from this common point of departure. Later writers who formed their own divergent responses to Emerson's liminal poetics (and who contributed to American life and letters long after the brief era of New England Transcendentalism) reached beyond Thoreau's and Whitman's contemporary responses to include John Muir a generation later, and eventually—in the next century—nature writers such as Mary Austin, Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, and Annie Dillard.[95] But Emerson's foundational notions of transition greatly influenced the contradictory strains of modernist thinking as well, and writers including William and Henry James, George Santayana, Gertude Stein, and Wallace Stevens were all drawn in their own ways to what Jonathan Levin calls the "poetics of transition."[96] I would argue, however, that the catalyst for this poetics is perhaps more essentially the aesthetic of the liminal space between. For the idea of transition and its foundational "power" are at the core of Emerson's poetics, but Emerson's complete system of thought—including the passage from transition to flow, the peripety of metamorphosis followed by the assimilation of polarity and the reintegration of compensation—served to expand and deepen the base notion of change or transition in significant and lasting ways.

Not all critics agree that Emerson's legacy includes a discernable and sustained system of thinking and believing, however, finding instead, for example, that "Emerson

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[95] See Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* for the ways Muir, and later Austin, Leopold, Abbey, and Dillard—and other twentieth-century American environmental writers—responded to the philosophical contributions of Emerson and (perhaps more significantly) responded to the varied templates found in Thoreau's nature writing. My thesis has argued that liminal poetics is essentially an Emersonian "creation" in light of its emphasis on change and potentiality, but Thoreau is by far the best exemplar of the ways to respond in writing to the models of liminal potential found in the natural world.

[96] See Chapters 4-7 of Jonathan Levin's *The Poetics of Transition* for detailed analysis of Emerson's influence on American Literary Modernism.

. . . thrives on his ability to make assertions he will immediately reject or revise" (J. Levin 18). Acknowledging a "series of related contradictions and paradoxes" (but not necessarily a system) emerging from this "ability," Jonathan Levin additionally points out that Emerson "is more interested in the ways in which we believe and doubt, in the actual flow of experience, than in systems of belief" (18). Yet, as my thesis has shown, Emerson's vision of a liminal poetics is founded upon a recognizable system of thinking and believing, and the concept of "flow" is part of that system. That Emerson's system "ends" with compensation (only to begin again) is essential—consistent with Emerson's unfailing faith in the potential of all beings and all experience—and based upon compensatory counterbalances that are continually unfolding, re-begetting, and beginning anew.

Significantly more than a logic and an aesthetic based on the laws of nature, Emerson's liminal poetics emphasizes the "process" of artistry and the path of a creative wellspring sparked and formed in the transitional moment. For the aesthetic perspective that gave rise to a poetics of liminality is, in essence, the art of the threshold: an art generated by the power (but also the indeterminacy) of continual regeneration and renewal. That perspective—an essential attitude of receptivity to the energy of change—was Emerson's gift to Thoreau and Whitman, and it became his lasting contribution to the American creative imagination . . . as a philosophy and an insight commensurate to our capacity for new beginnings.

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