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Occasions: Poetry with Prose 1836-1877

By

Noah Warren

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

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Committee in charge:

Professor Elisa Tamarkin, Chair

Professor Samuel Otter

Professor Geoffrey G. O'Brien

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Abstract

Occasions: Poetry with Prose, 1836-1877

by

Noah Warren

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University of California, Berkeley

Professor Elisa Tamarkin, Chair

Occasions: Poetry with Prose, 1836-1877 begins in an observation: that the reader of texts from this period is always encountering verse when it is least looked for. Misquoted in newspapers, tucked into the busy media environments of the emergent monthlies, deployed in friendship albums, journals, and sentimental novels, and woven into the tissue of the genre we now call literary prose, verse fragments are called on to perform a range of literary and social tasks that are easy for contemporary readings to miss. Though poetry of the period may reach toward the aesthetic independence now associated with “lyricization”, alongside such ambitions *Occasions* recovers a genre that invites, as often, its own decomposition and requotation. Much of the difficulty lies in how Ralph Waldo Emerson has been read. When foundational, but complex, manifestoes such as “The Poet” are read towards an “ideal” or “imperial” poet, the Transcendentalists’ perennially neglected verse may appear slight or stiff in comparison. But Emerson’s essay dwells also at length in the possibilities of minor verse, granted it be close at hand, just as he advocates in another essay for an “adventitious” poetics of “happy hits”, arguing verse gives “greater delight ... in happy quotation than in the poem” (72). It is all these other, less mystified moments of American poetics—intermittent, immanently social, and prone to disappearance—that *Occasions* traces, among the Transcendentalists, and outward in nineteenth-century social and political life.

In the aftermath of the Romantic revolution, “occasional verse” is a cloudy pejorative; Hegel dismisses such pieces as slight, even while recognizing the category may include most lyrics of distinction. To recover a firmer lexicon for Emerson’s “moments” and Henry David Thoreau’s “occasions” of poetry, I return to the rhetorical, commemorative, and oratorical cultures of the early nineteenth century, and to the vivid tradition of Revolutionary and early Republican topical satires derived from them. The influence of these throughlines on Emerson and Thoreau locates the *occasion* and the verse it produces, as the key to a poetic historiography of crisis and response in which the individual speaker is called toward his moment and audience. With this move, *Occasions* participates in the gradual erosion of what Rei Terada calls “the autonomy of the lyric object”—and, I contend, the lyric subject—that has anchored much twentieth-century literary theory. Indeed, in Thoreau’s radical appropriations of other’s poetic property, and in the extremes of anonymity he uses verse to create and court, I locate a transhistorical commons and a resistance to the cordon of single authorship. This anonymity, and

this ability to make the past present, and vice versa, help clarify the explicitly social affordances that Emerson and Thoreau use verse to propose.

One assertion of my readings of Emerson is that “The Poet,” as articulated in the 1844 essay of that name and elsewhere, is shadowed by another model figure of a poet significantly crosshatched by values such as wit, utility, conversation, lightness, and disappearance. Drawing on significant archival research, I suggest the close source of this figure is “Ellery” Channing. Though now a footnote, Channing was in many respects the most prominent exemplum of transcendental poetry in the 1840s; when Emerson withdrew his support of Thoreau’s verse, it was to transfer that endorsement and affection to Channing. I argue that Channing’s poetry and company remain important precisely because of the lightness, the responsiveness to social contexts, and the intermittence that Emerson finds in them. From this angle, the collaborative projects Channing assembles—the unpublished “Country Walks” (compiled from his, Emerson’s, and Thoreau’s journals), and his 1873 biography, *Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist*—are striking for the way they figure the analysis of verse (in the former case) and occasional modes such as elegy (in the latter), as the both the materials and the mode of sociality and life narration.

Occasions turns last to Thoreau’s inheritance of Emerson’s poetics. Thoreau is initially motivated by the imperial powers of the poet, and his sacralizing function with respect to American geography, as is seen in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849); however, the sheer proliferation of verse and verse analysis in that text, which overwhelms its putative physical context, exposes the latent tension in Emerson’s system between the visions of the poet as a translator, and as a reorderer of nature. *Walden* (1854) marks Thoreau’s elaboration of the occasion into an epistemological principle that derives from, and involves poetry, while transcending verse form. I follow finally *Walden*’s sustained poetomachy with Channing, whose poetry Thoreau frequently and dramatically quotes; the central term of the debate is the cultural value to be accorded to the Poet. I argue that the peak of this debate, in the problem chapter “Baker Farm,” marks *Walden*’s rejection of ownership of land as of language, and its turn to a poetics of the commons, influentially modeling poems as malleable sites of linguistic reception and barter responsive to specific historical and local needs.

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Preface

“What is a Poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him? He is a man speaking to men...” (William Wordsworth, “Preface to Lyrical Ballads”)

This project assays two questions congenital with the criticism of poetry as a genre. First is the question of audience and community: *Who speaks the poem, and to whom? What world does the poem make?* The second, with which it is entangled, is that of time and aspect: *When is the poem?*

These are deeply classical questions, but they point specifically to America’s relationship to verse. This is a polity in search of a text to explain, and hold in check, its fission. The text that grounds the polity matters as much as how the community finds itself in relation to that text. Deep past: Winthrop holding up the Geneva Bible midstream, and the echoic returns of his speech. The performative present that vibrates the *Declaration*. Or in the *Constitution*, the unstable “faction” of *Federalist* 10 firmed into structure by conditional futures. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the affective present of political conflict; in *Huckleberry Finn*, its receding past. Or the national haunt of apocalyptic futures: “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” ; “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall.” Not only where, as Emerson asks, but when do we find ourselves? Or perhaps, what modes of finding ourselves in time and in community, do texts enable?

A lay narrative, which teachers are contractually bound to unfold and then halfheartedly dismantle, identifies the parents of an original American poetry in Whitman the stentorian patriarch, Dickinson the metaphysical trickster. Presence and recession; sound and script. Behind the former, Emerson’s dare: “Say ‘It is in me, and shall out.’ Stand there, balked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until at last rage draw out of thee that dream-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity” (“The Poet,” 466). And behind Emerson, the tones of the pulpit and the structure of prophecy. “For now we see *through a glass, darkly*; but then face to face” becomes “The poet turns the world to glass” (456). In that essay, 1844’s “The Poet,” as in *Nature* of 1836, we find if not the earliest, one of the strongest and most influential articulations of how the secular texts we now understand as “literature,” might organize and ground an American polity.¹

But particulars are hard to see when the world’s transparent. There is prophecy in Emerson’s poet, but to privilege it obscures the other models of poetry’s work in the world that we might find in Emerson’s writing. Nor only Emerson’s writing, but equally in the intellectual, moral, and experimenting fervor that circulated around Hedge’s Club from 1836, *The Dial* from 1840, and, enduringly, near the village of Concord. (Dickinson too was, as Emily Fowler Ford attested, “steeped” in Emerson’s *Essays*, cherishing the *Poems*, sending *Representative Men* to

¹ Literature, as entailing cultural value and not just printed matter, is an emergent category, as Raymond Williams records in *Keywords* (“Literature”). On the many claims and contestations of New England literature as the origin and metonym of an American literature more broadly, see Matthiessen; Perry Miller; Sacvan Bercovitch. For a more critical reading of the ideological effects of inscribing regional New England poetry as the curricular core of an immigrant polity, see Angela Sorby.

Higginson's wife, and marking with pencil a passage in "The Poet" that endorses a poetics of recession and brevity.)² Nor is all the thinking about poetry in the moment that this project assays limited to published texts. For experimenters such as George Ripley, Bronson Alcott, and Henry David Thoreau, an indispensable test of the truth of an idea was in its application. Just as with questions of diet and labor, thinking about the work of literature had to be incorporated, "live[d] deliberately," so that, in a critical supplement to print publication, the visible success of such experimental models would ensure the dissemination of the ideas behind them. To follow the richness of this debate about the role of poetry between its several protagonists requires, as a result, its reconstitution in mixed channels not limited to published texts. Arguments about poetics, this project contends, take place just as meaningfully in chatty rambles to the Sudbury Inn, in acts of editorial compilation and collation (*The Dial*; *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*; *Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist*), and, most frequently, not in explicit statements, but in the ways that texts (usually prose) and people (in journals and letters) respond to the irruption of verse. Tracing these rifts in genre, and how they are assimilated, allows us to focus on the dynamic and often socializing work of verse in the quickly transforming textual and intellectual ecosystem of, predominantly, the 1840s and 1850s.³

What do we learn by looking closely, now, at how the Transcendentalists understood the work of poetry? After all, to write criticism in 2024 is to listen to a field that has been deeply renovated in the last thirty years in both its objects and methods. The study of nineteenth-century poetry in particular has tracked larger disciplinary trends in pursuing recovery projects that have made accessible, and refocused readerly attention on, the writing and reading of subjects subalterned by their sex, race, geography, class, and language.⁴ Such renewed attention to context permits, especially in the Dickinson archive, a reconsideration of the social construction of ontological categories "poem" and "lyric" by Barbara Johnson, Susan Howe, and Virginia Jackson. Examining the complex roles poems played in the constitution of social groups, such work primes the reader to reject dichotomies between cultural history and literary criticism, and refuses to alienate, as Yopie Prins writes, "the practice of reading a poem from the histories and theories of reading that mediate our ideas about poetry... [advocating] a poetics that works recursively as a loop, reading simultaneously from inside out and from outside in" ("What is Historical Poetics," 14). What Prins, Jackson, Meredith McGill, Max Cavitch, and others who will surface later in this dissertation offer is thus a way of reading the poem as simultaneously reactive on, and productive of, the levels of form, historical context, political efficacy, sociological networks, and economic possibility. As in Michael Cohen's *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth Century America* (2015), verse read thus returns to its role as a sometimes

² In John Mann's "Emily Dickinson, Emerson, and the Poet as Namer" (1978). The marked passage runs: "Day and night, house and garden, a few books, a few actions, serve us well as would all trades and all spectacles. We are far from having exhausted the significance of the few symbols we use. We can use them yet with a terrible simplicity. It does not need that a poem be long" (472). Marking as recorded by Capps in *Emily Dickinson's Reading*.

³ On the transformations of the American literary marketplace in the period, see Charvat's seminal study. See equally canonically Meredith McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853* (2003).

⁴ This is permitted by important anthologies of women's writing by Emily Stipes Watts (1977), Cheryl Walker (1982) and Alicia Ostriker (1986). Trending slightly later, Joan Sherman's 1992 anthology of African American nineteenth century poetry prepares DeSimone and Louis's *Voices Beyond Bondage* (2014). Interest in poets such as Frances Watkins Harper (editions 1993, 2010, 2021) and George Moses Horton (1997; complete works ed. Richards forthcoming 2025) remains intense.

central, sometimes marginal, instrument by which individual and group actors affirmed and revised complex cultural realities.

These approaches have been invigorating and influential because they present an alternative to a familiar elite canon overdetermined by the work of a few white New England writers. Of course, the Transcendentalist circle is an integral part of this somewhat etiolated and Matthiessen-derived narrative, in which its intellectual iconoclasm functions as the first harbinger of the renovations of form that ensue for the next twenty years. At the same time, while this generation of scholarship has clarified the diversity of interesting writing being produced in literary communities that were in the process of being, in the 1840s and 50s, more clearly federalized—key milestones of which process are, politically, the recapture of Anthony Burns (1854) and, in literature, the burgeoning of the middle-class monthlies—it remains true that when we look at how verse is quoted and metabolized to make sense of a subsequent century of American development, it is often these New England texts that predominate.⁵ Emerson's statements in particular about the work of poetry—which, as we will see, flip ambivalently between democratic and imperial—are inevitable in subsequent formulations of the value of poetry in America. At the same time, this legacy of interest in the writing, and the proximity of this literary circle to well-endowed institutions and benefactors means that various archives preserve with extraordinary vibrancy its social and intellectual activity on the page and beyond. We find, in the Massachusetts Historical Society for example, an 1853 letter from Thomas Wentworth Higginson to the postmaster of Concord, beseeching him to telegraph should William "Ellery" Channing II board a train to Worcester, in an attempt to pursue his briefly estranged wife Ellen Fuller Channing. Or we might compare the manuscript of Thoreau's "Cape Cod" (Huntington Library, later ed. Channing) with Channing's, his traveling companion's, own picturesque narrative of the same 1849 journey (Houghton). In the Francis B. Sanborn collection at the Houghton, we find that literary journalist and Concord historian busily soliciting Higginson, Samuel G. Ward, Edward Emerson, and others on fine points of detail as he actively fashions the influential cultural mythography of Concord's literary golden age.⁶

Occasions brings the methods and wide-angle perspective developed by historical poetics and lyric studies, Americanist thinking about literature as a way of doing things in a specific cultural moment, and a charged dose of philosophically oriented criticism, to bear on this tight knot of writers, texts, and communities. It begins also from a suspicion, shared with Jay Grossman and Meredith McGill, that the diversity of poetics and poetic practices in this formative moment have been grossly underacknowledged by a focus on the "egotistical sublime" and so-called "major poetry."⁷ Its answer has been to exploit the depth of the archive in this locality and moment, extending roughly from 1836 (Emerson, *Nature*) to the early 1870's (the retrospective national moment of Reconstruction; Channing, *Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist*) to constitute a mingled field, in which verse is recognized as producing effects in domains both infra- and extra-literary well before, and long after, any horizon of publication. Such a tight circle

⁵ Timothy Sweet dwells on such practices of extracting in "Tradition through Repetition: 'The Present Crisis,' Social Action, and Literary Excerpt." (2023). Sweet challenges us to see the literary excerpt as a distinct, if primary or simple (in Bakhtin's model) genre. He critics to read excerpts through the lens of pragmatics, for their use value in specific social situations, writing "the history of excerpting long antedates academic literary study and taps into poetry's capacity for aesthetic effects and its value as cultural capital" (162).

⁶ A heroic roster that, Sanborn insists, includes Channing; for his advocacy of the then-senescent poet, see Chapter 2.

⁷ In *Reconstituting the American Renaissance* and "Common Places," respectively.

of objects enables the project to trace more precisely the circulation of verse, and thinking about poetics, between subjects in conversation, journals, and letters. What emerges from such exchange is the integral value of certain kinds of occasional or evanescent verse, which, affirmed by requotation, enact the ecstatic temporality of the movement, and function as a linguistic common ground of its sociality. Not only because of the extrinsic prominence of the Transcendentalists as a metonym for American literature more broadly, but equally because of the intrinsic reflections on the concept of a national community of letters in even the most local Transcendentalist texts—Emerson speaking to the Fugitive Slave Act; *Walden*'s railroad and the martial music that foreshadows the Mexican War—this project gestures repeatedly toward a historiographic question which lies slightly beyond its current iteration: namely, how might the literary occasionality developed by these writers offer an alternative way of grounding (or dispersing) a national imaginary. Through such a lens the Poet-prophet of John O'Sullivan's *Democratic Review* would be less prominent than the affable (and highly popular) literary sociality of O.W. Holmes's *The Autocrat at the Breakfast Table* (1858, serialized first in 1831 and 1832), or the nameless lovers and mothers that populate the anonymous, audience-solicited verse in *Godey's Lady's Book*. We might see, from such a perspective, with the aid of critic Elizabeth Renker, how Emmeline Grangerford's elegies compete with the newspaper as a ground for the community's temporality—female, kairotic, and affective, as opposed to chronological and realist, in *Huckleberry Finn*.⁸ Through such a lens too would George Moses Horton's "Address," delivered at the request of White undergraduates at the University of North Carolina, clarify as a mingled flattery and chastisement of its audience, pointed toward a racialized critique of national occasions and the communities that constitute them.

As the central questions that hang over this preface imply, what emerges from the field of objects and relations that this dissertation gathers are two recurrent concerns: who speaks verse and what does poetry do to those who hear or read it, and when in time do these effects unfold. The answers it arrives at derive largely from a hermeneutic centered around the *occasion*, understood simultaneously as a principle of time, language, and sociality. Tracing the development of this concept alongside its near cognates, the moment and the accident, in these thinkers, all the word's senses and legacies become reactive. The *occasional* is that which responds to and emerges from a specific event as it is that which happens infrequently but recurringly. The verbal senses of *to occasion* make clear that a specific model of causation is also at stake, as is—like the *happy* in *happenstance*—a judgment, implicitly positive, of how effects and objects fit with their time. More formally, to speak of *the occasion* is to invoke a thick rhetorical tradition, dating to Cicero and vibrant through English Augustanism, in which one of the orator's indispensable faculties is the ability to adduce language for its specific moment. At the same time, the functions of occasional language, and occasional or epideictic poetry specifically, are always social insofar that they aim to commemorate event and affirm shared values and communal affective response. And, crucially, the recessive model of poetic authorship associated with this genre of verse presents a strong challenge to the stabilizing lyric subject from which Romantic and post-Romantic verse is usually taken to overflow. In place of this is a recurrent predominance of the object of verse over its subject. In, for example, Thoreau's radical appropriations of other's poetic property, and in the extremes of anonymity he uses verse to create and court, the occasion allows us to locate a transhistorical commons and a resistance to the cordon of single authorship. This anonymity, and this ability to make the past present, and

⁸ In *Realist Poetics* (12).

vice versa, help clarify the explicitly social affordances that Emerson and Thoreau use verse to propose.

Impelled by a historically sensitive attention to the contexts and uses of poetry, but pushing back against the primacy of discrete poetic forms as an analytic, this study attends to verse as a genre that looks towards its own decomposition and requotation. As its first task is the redefinition of Transcendentalist poetics, it rereads familiar root articulations of that poetics such as Emerson's *Nature* and "The Poet," against exempla that range from Emerson's own poems, to the complex absorptions and quotations of verse in his prose and Journals, to his editorship of *The Dial*, to his advocacy for younger poets' work. Thereafter, exploring the concrete manifestations of the idea that Emerson articulates in "Thoughts on Art" (*The Dial*, 1841), in which he advocates an "adventitious" poetics of "happy hits" and flags poems as predisposed to decompose, giving "greater delight ... in happy quotation than in the poem" (72), it passes into consideration of the intertwined careers of his proteges Ellery Channing and Henry David Thoreau. As Emerson's stress on "advent" and "happy"—advertises, the corpus of remediated, ad hoc, and minor verse that results from this focus shows not the independence of the poet and his materials, but his dependence on changing illocutionary and social contexts. And only through attention to the specificity of these contexts, both textual and social, does the reactive work of verse become palpable. As Jerome McGann provokes in a different context, "In poetry, knowledge will appear as a form of activity rather than as a content, a possession, or an idea" (2019, 22). In such a vein, how, we might ask, do incursions of verse reframe the reader as a participant in, not a follower of, the text? How does verse interrupt, repeat, and reorient, continuous narration, or fragment the stable speaker that subtends such narration? How do the affective ecstasies, rhetorical bravure, and the modes of intimate address germane to verse contest, epistemologically, the ratiocinative, hypotactic, and linear skew of formal argument?

These are questions that must be played out at length in their situations. At the same time, they reflect a long tradition of thought—often colored with suspicion—in the Western tradition about how poetry affects the individual and the group. When we attend to this focus, we find that central documents of poetics return to the questions of where poetry comes from and what it does to those who read or hear it, more than what it is. In this sense, the mixed materials this dissertation gathers, and its examination of the working time of verse, reflect the inherent barbell-shaped bias—what Geoffrey Hartman calls the law of "overspecified ends and indeterminate middles"—of poetics as a field.⁹ I want to draw out some elements of this tradition, as oriented toward Emerson's metabolization of it, as speaking particularly to a model of verse as a fragmentary, reusable, and occasional mode that enables other social effects.

Poetry beside persons

For Plato in the *Republic* poetry reproduces, especially in the young, its own confusion with respect to origins and epistemology. "Mothers under the influence of the poets" impress "a bad version of the myths," which "becomes indelible and unalterable," in ductile minds. As a result, poetry intervenes at the origin of the subject to replace the truth, an unmediated idea of the good, with the seductions of its allegory, or the "true lie" (II), and thus, should "epic or lyric verse"

⁹ "The Voice of the Shuttle," 27.

enter the state, “not law and the reason of mankind, which by common consent have ever been deemed best, but pleasure and pain will be the rulers” (X). Poetry “feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up,” and so expresses, for Plato, at once the deep time of national and individual origins, and, through the susceptible subject, the persistent threat of the uncontrolled present. As Plato is ever suspicious of language alienated from a discrete speaker (cf. *Phaedrus*), the genre is also made suspect by its epiphytic relationship to the anonymous corpus of myth, which reproduces itself through a generic tendency to allusion and echo, preserving individual fantasy alongside acts of mimesis. By contrast, while Aristotle also grounds poetry in mimesis, the genre is, as for Hegel, “a more philosophical and a higher thing than history” which clarifies, beyond the accidents of historical event the universal “law of probability or necessity” (*Poetics* IX). In section XXIV, thinking of Homer, he articulates a model of poetic speech that makes of the poet’s recession, a virtue:

The poet should speak as little as possible in his own person, for it is not this that makes him an imitator. Other poets appear themselves upon the scene throughout, and imitate but little and rarely. Homer, after a few prefatory words, at once brings in a man, or woman, or other personage; none of them wanting in characteristic qualities, but each with a character of his own.¹⁰

Thereby, Homer helps us see the distinctness of individuals by getting out of the way. In Aristotle’s metaphor poetry is understood on the model of theater—epic is, for Aristotle, “complex tragedy”—and is thus powered by a native orality and direct address. (A structural metaphor he shares with J.S. Mill, who insists, by contrast, on the degree of alienation and “ignorance” that secures the authenticity of lyric in modernity.)¹¹ To read Homer is thus, in an inversion of Plato, to experience an ontological immediacy: to see directly and hear directly.

Closer to the 1840s and 1850s, the eighteenth-century founding moment of English literary criticism adapts Aristotle and Horace toward a society-wide focus on moral value, and a Protestant distrust of artifice in favor of “simplicity” (Addison, on Milton) and “good sense” (Johnson, on Pope).¹² Poetry is, as Johnson writes via Milton, “the art of uniting pleasure with truth, by calling imagination to the help of reason”—a complement or auxiliary to those masculine values. Alongside the period’s classicism comes a suspicion of the “temporary”; as Johnson writes, Pope, “suffered coronations and royal marriages to pass without a song; and derived no opportunities from recent events, nor any popularity from the accidental disposition of his readers.” This does not mean that poetry ignores the contemporary, but rather, as Addison writes in the *Spectator*, measures and adapts historical difference by adapting classical forms and models, offering readers “Precept[s] of Morality, adapted to the Constitution of the Country in which the Poet writes.”¹³ Tensioning the dourness of an epic poetics read *sub specie aeternitatis*, however, both Johnson and

¹⁰ We see Aristotle’s influence in Adorno, too, for whom the bourgeois ideology of lyric—the idea that lyric poetry is opposed to society, fragile, and removed from historical and political concerns—conceals form’s genuine cultural work, mediating between particularity and totality in the representation of persons.

¹¹ Or, “the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener.” It is a model developed by Jonathan Culler, who insists on apostrophe as the core of the lyric. Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*. (Cambridge: Harvard, 2015. pp. 211 ff.). J.S. Mill. “What is Poetry?” in *The Monthly Repository*, New Series, vol 7, 1833. pp. 64-5.

¹² However, “good sense alone is a sedate and quiescent quality, which manages its possessions well, but does not increase them...” It requires the supplement of “genius; a mind active, ambitious, and adventurous, always investigating, always aspiring; in its widest searches still longing to go forward, in its highest flights still wishing to be higher; always imagining something greater than it knows, always endeavouring more than it can do” (Pope).

¹³ *Spectator* 70.

Addison return to praise the more fleeting and mixed values of “pleasure” and “wit,” both often located in the “epigram” or “lyrick.” Addison, for instance, following Locke, locates the proper province of “Mixt Wit” (equal parts “Reason” and “Extravagance”) in “those little occasional Poems that in their own Nature are nothing else but a Tissue of Epigrams.”¹⁴ In Addison, too, we find counterpoints in praise for folk ballads such as Chevy Chase, and a persistent fascination with the poetic fragment (Simonides, Sappho’s “phrenzy”) and the aleatory nature of its receptions and translations.¹⁵

Romantic poetry has become synonymous with the “egotistical sublime” (Keats, whose negations are treated separately) of a poet who becomes different in kind from his contemporaries, rather than, as in Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets*, thickly enmeshed with them. Harder to perceive behind this skew is that the period’s statements of poetic value are, however, anchored by chains of anonymous transmission on the one hand, and spontaneity on the other--both of which fray the coherence of that ego. Though Shelley, in the *Defense* describes a “prophet” and “legislator” who “beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered,” fragmentation and loss is implicit in the art, and poetry is often located in prose. Poems, such as “Ode to the West Wind,” anticipate futures of anonymity and contingency, as, conversely anonymous fragments of the past conserve morals and sensitivity in ages of decay and decadence.¹⁶ When thinking about the effect on the individual, Shelley flips Plato to argue that the pleasure with which poetry is “ever accompanied” is a positive that “awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought.” This philanthropic love then offers a more intimate ground for community, as “a man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasure of his species must become his own.” Reading poetry literally expands the boundaries of the subject, making others’ emotions our own.

Perhaps most familiarly, only because the Wordsworthian subject “has thought long and deeply” does his “spontaneous overflow” reveal “the primary laws of our nature”: “the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement.” The “purified” situations and speech from common life renovate the reader of poetry’s sensitivity, “blunted” to a “savage torpor” by the “great national events almost daily taking place.” Attention, thus, to this weathered and anonymous store of cultural information (e.g. “Michael” and the “Essay on Monuments”) allows readers of poetry to measure themselves according to a sensitive contemporaneity of affect, not a

¹⁴ Ibid., 62. The epigram is also a reactive category for Johnson; and the “lyrick” (cf. Gray’s “light and airy” productions) is often praised for values that lie slant to “major invention.” See Johnson on Congreve, as merely representative: “Yet this gay comedy, when all these deductions are made, will still remain the work of very powerful and fertile faculties; the dialogue is quick and sparkling, the incidents such as seize the attention, and the wit so exuberant, that it “o’er-informs its tenement... his wit is a meteor playing to and fro with alternate coruscations. His comedies have, therefore, in some degree, the operation of tragedies; they surprise rather than divert, and raise admiration oftener than merriment. But they are the works of a mind replete with images, and quick in combination.”

¹⁵ Ibid., 223.

¹⁶ “The distinction between poets and prose writers is a vulgar error.” In “Ode to the West Wind”: “Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind;” in the *Defense*: “The parts of a composition may be poetical, without the composition as a whole being a poem. A single sentence may be considered as a whole, though it may be found in the midst of a series of unassimilated portions; a single word even may be a spark of inextinguishable thought. And thus all the great historians, Herodotus, Plutarch, Livy, were poets...”

rote one of “information.” And, for all that works like the *Prelude* establish the historicity and centrality of the poetic subject, as frequently Wordsworth seeks to assimilate the voice of the poem into a local folk tradition, as in “The Thorn.” Indeed, one of the central plots of “The Idiot Boy” is to fold the modernity of the audience or reader’s clock time (“’Tis eight o’clock...”) into the immanent local present that the ballad form itself embodies and tells as insistently as the poem’s Johnny: “The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo.”¹⁷ The result is an immediacy of perception that irrupts through the alienation of pathologized states of consciousness and numerated chronology.

It is through these legacies of thinking about poetry’s effects on the subject, what presents/presence it produces, and what kind of speaker it requires, that we can begin to locate the recessive poet that this project traces, and his often paradoxical relationship to his moment. Emerson’s “cheerful” “Shakespeare” does not require an individual to guarantee speech, and abandons the “consciousness of the writer” as *prima facie* unknowable. Facing the omissions of the archive, what we don’t know about the person or the time, Emerson suggests, we recognize a deeper truth, that the individual is accidental even to his own language, and that genius comes “by wide social labor, when a thousand wrought like one, sharing the same impulse” (715). Emerson, too, reads the fact that poetic language is always prior to our awareness of it, that Shakespeare “owes debts in all directions” (713), not as an obfuscation of immediacy, as Plato does, but as its enabler; “tradition supplies a better fable than any invention.” When listening to verse, “one golden word leaps out immortal from all this painted pedantry and sweetly torments us with invitations to its own inaccessible homes” (719). Immediacy is produced by reference, and the result is a lure to further knowledge—or rather acquaintance, such as one gains by dwelling—of the missing links of the society that could create such a text. In the contextual hermeneutic Emerson develops in “Shakespeare” lie the seeds of Eliotic impersonality and the timeless republican present it requires, in which artists are composed of past artworks (“what we know is them”), and in which any single artwork’s “supervention of novelty” requires that “the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted.”¹⁸ As in the radical empiricism of William James, when we attend to the borrowing that constitutes the material of verbal art in particular, we are forced to contemplate that what we know as being may be more properly understood as a masque of relating.

Structure

The first chapter of *Occasions* establishes, then looks aslant on, the idealizing claims Emerson makes for poetry. It traces instead the work of verse, understood as an auxiliary medium, in complex local emplacements. These sites are: 1) the haunt of verse structures, including meter, in prose; 2) tactical deployments of quoted verse and the minor poet; 3) Emerson’s endorsement of proximity over timelessness 4) the identification of poetry with the

¹⁷ “Now Johnny all night long had heard
The owls in tuneful concert strive;
No doubt too he the moon had seen;
For in the moonlight he had been
From eight o’clock till five” (Wordsworth 85).

¹⁸ Eliot, “Tradition,” 72.

movement's temporality of occasions, moments, and ecstasis; and 5) the anonymous sociality associated with these functions, antithetical to lay readings of transcendental individualism. To reconcile these, it develops the centrality of the *occasio* from classical rhetoric to the reception of poetry into American Romanticism in a tradition that passes through Cicero, Hegel, Blair, and the Connecticut Wits.¹⁹ Having revalued what Hegel calls occasional poetry's "position of dependence", as an epideictic affirmation of the priority of social presence, it then reconsiders the latent influence of these on Emerson's founding documents of American poetics, *Nature* (1836), "The American Scholar" (1837), "The Poet" (1844), and, editorially, *The Dial* (1842-44). Though the essays are frequently identified with nationalist appeals for a bardic American poetry,²⁰ the chapter unearths that figure's underside, a model poet that is, like Channing, significantly crosshatched by values such as wit, utility, conversation, lightness, and disappearance.²¹ Having grounded this claim also in biographical and archival materials, the chapter then explores this figure's notable interpersonality. This anchors the hermeneutic of the occasion deployed across the remainder of the project.

The second chapter returns Ellery Channing to the center of the dynamic literary and social exchange that characterizes Transcendentalist intellectual life. While teasing out his influences on Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Thoreau, among others, the chapter explores how the perception of Channing's linguistic spontaneity reflects and underpins the importance of conversation as a literary form adjacent to poetry. Reinscribing conversation as a model for and alternative to print production permits a turn to *The Dial*, which then becomes legible as an experiment in shared authorship. Channing's verse functions as a fulcrum in this conversation, subject to extensive exegesis even as it displays an ambivalence toward the movement's pieties around poetry. Rather, it demonstrates a tendency to subordinate itself to the demands of the poetic occasion, and turn outward into contingent intimacy. The chapter concludes with an extensive consideration of the elegiac and intersubjective poetics that become paradoxically clearer and more central as Channing turns to prose. So it is through the interlocking occasions that the "Country Walking" manuscripts of 1853 trace, and that of Thoreau's death in 1861, that *Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist* (1873) shows Channing challenging most forcefully not only the centrality of a poetic ego to verse, but the boundaries of individual identity tout court.

Thoreau's metaphysics of presence ground the third chapter. Thoreau, it is argued, most extensively and ecstatically develops the Emersonian moment into the occasion as such.²² Understanding the stakes of this development requires acknowledging the parallel deployment of the "accident" in *Walden*, and locating its prehistory in the thinking about the divinity of the present in *A Week on the Connecticut and Merrimack Rivers* (1848). After tracing Thoreau's

¹⁹ Because of the dismissal of such poetry in the tradition that spans Plato's rebuke in *The Republic*, Aristotle's treatment of the occasion as marring the universal nature of poetry (*Poetics* 9.54), and Hegel's ambivalence in the *Aesthetics*, studies of occasional poetry are scarce. Hegel writes, "But by such entanglement with life poetry seems to fall into a position of dependence, and for this reason it has often been proposed to assign to the whole sphere of *pièces d'occasion* an inferior value although to some extent... the most famous works belong to this class." (996)

²⁰ See Jay Grossman on the "composite figure of Emerson/Whitman." See also e.g., Yoder 1978. Katie Trumpener's *Bardic Nationalism* offers a broad exploration of the theme in a continental context.

²¹ Key passages of Emerson's seminal essay "The Poet" originate in Emerson's response, recorded in his *Journal*, to an 1842 conversation with Channing. (*Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, 7:463).

²² For instance, he frames his house at Walden "to improve so good an occasion for neighborliness", and strives "to anticipate, not the sunrise and the dawn merely, but, if possible, Nature herself!" (358, 336).

discussion of time back to Augustine, and exploring how it reflects in an irruptive narratology, the chapter then turns to more recent interpreters such as Stanley Cavell, Branka Arsić, and Meredith McGill, to distinguish how these features depend on the generic and specific legacies of verse. The chapter, and the project, conclude with the application of this apparatus to *Walden's* problem chapter "Baker Farm." In that chapter's carnivalesque acts of poetic requotation and editing, it locates a debate with Channing in which the mercurial narrator, pastiched from reference and ventriloquy, emerges as the crux term in the relationship between land, poetic labor, language, and ownership. The chapter, I argue, marks *Walden's* rejection of linguistic ownership in favor of a poetics of the commons, modeling the poem as a crossroads of linguistic reception and barter responsive to the intermittent local needs flagged by the occasion.

Further Paths

This project, while tracing rather thoroughly a tight circle of poetic exchange and experiment, opens toward investigations that lie beyond its current scope. In examining the overlapping functions of interpersonal exchange and periodical publication, this project's study of *The Dial* opens towards a rich field of criticism concerned with adducing the role of periodicals in coalescing a modern polity. Theoretically, that field draws on Habermasian insights about the public sphere, as influentially developed by Michael Warner, as it develops the granular historicist criticism owed to William Charvat. Such insights allow readers to move past the association of verse with elite culture to recover its popularity in the emergent middle-class monthlies (*Putnam's*, *Scribner's*, *The Century*, *Harpers*), and the terms on which it was read by such audiences. Notable moments of such criticism include McGill's *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting* (2003) and Ryan Cordell's digitally enabled insights in "Reprinting, Circulation, and the Network Author in Antebellum Newspapers" (*ALH* 2015). In such a narrative, *The Dial* becomes a notable experiment poised between high and low culture, and between coterie, regional, and international spheres of circulation, in the context of the rapid transformations in American magazines in the thirties and forties. Further branches of such an investigation would compass peri-bellum periodicals such *The North Star*, *Graham's* under Poe's editorship, and the quietist *Godey's*, to explore how verse objects contribute to these publications' shaping of differently oriented publics, modes of readings, and temporalities.²³ Returning verse to these "hot" media environments throws light on the competing, but timely and anti-bardic visions of poetry's ability to organize mass affective response and to reorient received poems toward new political ends. Such is the hermeneutic work of Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride," (*The Atlantic* 1863), a poem about signaling across space in a time of national conflict, which uses verse technologies such as meter and address to cultivate a unified audience, and to fold the contemporary occasion into a non-linear crisis historiography.

Work originally in the Dickinson archive has also produced a broader field of feminist inquiry that challenges conception of the limits of the poem and how verse works in the spheres

²³ This is also a moment when Tocqueville is exploring the model of popular associationism as a supplement to American government (1835, 1840). Under such a light, the question of how verse organizes political and affective responses in movement-oriented publications in the midcentury is vibrant. The shape of these questions is influenced by recent work on Modernist "little magazines" and the avant garde in the American 20th century, periods to which this study offers a prehistory. See Hoffman, Allen, and Ulrich 1946; *The Little Magazine in Contemporary America* (2015, ed. Diaz and Morris); *The Modernist Journal Project* (2015); Taylor 2020, 2023.

of daily life and exchange into which female intellectual and poetic activity was often cordoned. Such porousness of poetics to systems of exchange and communication is stressed by, for instance, Jan Bervin's *The Gorgeous Nothings: Emily Dickinson's Envelope Poems* (2012), as it is developed in the context of Dickinson's fascicles by Sharon Cameron, Paula Bennett, and Alexandra Socarides, among others.²⁴ Dickinson, indeed, offers a model of poetics that is constantly testing the ability of a self-consciously minor voice ("I'm nobody! Who are you?") and intimate address to enact ephemeral communities (side by side in the grave) and comment ironically on the relationship of national event to subjective reality.²⁵ Studies inspired by similar themes, taking up objects in varied geographical and class contexts, trace the work of poetry, often sentimental poetry, in affirming communal and political identity. So does Erica Dunbar, in *A Fragile Freedom* (2008), explore how the circulation of sentimental poetry in Black communities in Philadelphia maintained tenuous social bonds and provided "an entry point to discuss the social and political issues of their day" (123), and Mary Louise Kete, tracing the highly collaborative processes of mourning poetry in ordinary New England communities, locate how poems affirm "the power of emotional conversation to form communities" (2000, 23), and "break[] down the difference between author and reader" (24). While *Occasions* focuses on a knot of literary relations historically recognized as significant, as will be seen its method is derived from provocations, such as Kete's, that challenge traditional hierarchies of aesthetic merit by returning verse objects to the systems of local cultural exchange and meaning-making toward which they were oriented.

Frederick Douglass, in the "Oration Delivered on the Occasion of the Unveiling of the Freedmen's Monument," positions the occasional moment in question as a way of reentering and reevaluating the historical record—namely, Lincoln's reluctant abolition—and a preemptory defense against Black racism.²⁶ As in "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July," the occasion both creates powerful politically oriented consensuses, even as it measures the alienated ideologies of more abstract constructs—the nation, the fiction of an equal subject ("The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common.") Indeed, the question of how Black poets deployed occasional modes and group identity to advance immanent political ends in the nineteenth century is a highly reactive one which hangs before and in front of the current limits of this dissertation. Mae Henderson tells us Black women "speak in tongues" in that they articulate an experience that is always-already shared, or heteroglossic (1989). Antonio Bly (2018) stresses that Phillis Wheatley's elegies, especially that for Whitefield (1770), capitalize on public investment to make subtle cases for religious syncretism (Protestant, Wolof) and to underscore the society-wide taint

²⁴ Sharon Cameron, "Dickinson's Fascicles" and Paula Bennett, "'Looking at Death, is Dying'": Fascicle 16 in a Civil War Context" (In *Dickinson's Fascicles: A Spectrum of Possibilities* [2014]). Alexandra Socarides, *Dickinson Unbound: Paper, Process, Poetics* (2012).

²⁵ Howe's *My Emily Dickinson*, picks up Dickinson's forms of address to pull the reader into a complex circuit of mutual fashioning, occurring in the space of the poem, that remains cognizant of historical distance even as it permits its local collapse in the intimate zone of contact enabled by sympathy. For Dickinson's Civil War, see Shira Wolosky, *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War* (1984); for the epistemology of the photograph in such a context, see Eliza Richards, "'Death's Surprise, Stamped Visible': Emily Dickinson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Civil War Photography" (2009).

²⁶ "When now it shall be said that the colored man is soulless, that he has no appreciation of benefits or benefactors; when the foul reproach of ingratitude is hurled at us, and it is attempted to scourge us beyond the range of human brotherhood, we may calmly point to the monument we have this day erected to the memory of Abraham Lincoln" (15).

of slavery.²⁷ As work on Frances Watkins Harper makes clear, it is impossible to separate abolitionist verse from the contexts in which it circulated, often revivals, meetings, and subscriptions.²⁸ Thus, likewise, does Virginia Jackson show in *Before Modernism* (2023) how Black and Indigenous poetess Ann Plato—like Wheatley and Watkins before her—navigates a series of interlocked occasions, geographies, and identities in “First of August” (37). Integrating such work, this project’s next encounter will extend to George Moses Horton in Chapel Hill, asking how his virtuosic paid verse articulates the limits of poetry’s ability to modulate racialized voice, and ground sympathetic community. Thinking alongside, also, Saidiya Hartman, and Fred Moten’s recovery of orality from silent objects, *Occasions* will dwell in the nexus of oral composition, transcription, and the possibility of print publication, controlled by sometimes-benign White actors. Horton’s “Address,” delivered to jeering undergraduates, requires the framework *Occasions* offers, which allows the incomplete problem text to be read as employing prolific interjections of poetry and autobiography to unsettle oratorical form, comment darkly on national politics, and offer an embodied, makerly critique of the ideal knowledge it ostensibly praises. Such critiques only intensify in *Naked Genius* (1865), composed on the road with the Union Army, which offers a bitter revision of the White speech and tight social codes he previously ventriloquized.

Occasions locates a single, if influential, moment of the debate that branches variously into these domains. It is to Concord, Massachusetts that we now turn.

²⁷ “On Death’s Domain Intent I Fix My Eyes: Text, Context, and Subtext in the Elegies of Phillis Wheatley” (*Early American Literature*, 2018).

²⁸ See *Early African American Print Culture*, ed Cohen and Stein. Meredith McGill’s “Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and the Circuits of Abolitionist Poetry” is of special acuity. She writes of Watkins’s pamphlet: “Published in small print runs in successive batches to be given away or sold at her antislavery lectures, with no copyright notice overleaf, *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* bears in its format the traces of a strong relationship to oral performance—to the punctual meetings of reformers bent on miscellaneous reforms that were brought under the umbrella of antislavery, and to the songs that were sung and the songsters that provided a text held in common at these meetings.”

Acknowledgments

Occasions is a further, slower branch of the conversations that have shaped my thinking at U.C.-Berkeley. Many of its ideas about dailiness, and an immanent, genial poetics, encode practices and thought borrowed from Lyn Hejinian. She is dearly missed.

For provocations in and beyond number, and for helping me lace these ideas into the present, I thank Geoffrey G. O'Brien. Samuel Otter's gentle corrections, erudite counters, and fields of reference, sharpen and deepen these paragraphs. Elisa Tamarkin has guided this project from its incip, and with great patience, generosity, and sense has trimmed its excesses, and urged it to this its resting point. I am profoundly grateful to each of them.

Chapter 1: “Seasonable Aid”: Emerson’s Poets

One task of Emerson’s later essay “Poetry and Imagination” (1872, though substantially delivered by 1854) is the definition of poetry.¹ It’s a charged task: across his career, Emerson calls us to poetry as urgently as he calls us to leaving, to reconstitution, to presence. And a difficult task, as poetry is a highly contextual value in Emerson’s rhetorical field, often invoked as a formally agnostic marker of linguistic truth. Like any provocation, “poetry” is stable only at a distance, and, in “Poetry and Imagination,” it shifts as it’s approached. In its quest, the essay progresses through a series of gnomic declarations that do not so much as revise or refine each other, but offer as many rebeginnings: “poetry is the only verity”; “Poetry is the gai science”; “Poetry is the consolidation of mortal men”; “Poetry is inestimable as a lonely faith, a lonely protest in the uproar of atheism”; and so forth. (Such is the principle of organization shadowed in “Experience”: “...evolution was not from one central point, but coactive from three or more points. Life has no memory.”) This is how poetry’s chain of reference and slip unfolds a quarter of the way into “Poetry and Imagination”:

Imagination.—Whilst common sense looks at things or visible Nature as real and final facts, poetry, or the imagination which dictates it, is a second sight, looking through these, and using them as types or words for thoughts which they signify. ... Our best definition of poetry is one of the oldest sentences, and claims to come down to us from the Chaldean Zoroaster, who wrote it thus: "Poets are standing transporters, whose employment consists in speaking to the Father and to matter; in producing apparent imitations of unapparent natures, and inscribing things unapparent in the apparent fabrication of the world;" in other words, the world exists for thought: it is to make appear things which hide: mountains, crystals, plants, animals, are seen; that which makes them is not seen: these, then, are "apparent copies of unapparent natures." Bacon expressed the same sense in his definition, "Poetry accommodates the shows of things to the desires of the mind;" and Swedenborg, when he said, "There is nothing existing in human thought, even though relating to the most mysterious tenet of faith, but has combined with it a natural and sensuous image."

Several features stand out as representative of Emerson’s serial reapproaches to poetry throughout his corpus. Most notable are the sheer work of the prose as it grasps at synonymic chains and paraphrase, the gathering and requotation of others’ language this task triggers, the incomplete effort to square these definitions, and the repeated slips from the desideratum “poetry” itself to terms in its vicinity. In place of “poetry” Emerson descants on “the imagination which dictates it,” “poets,” then “human thought,” as poetry vanishes by the end of this unsteady series of equivalences, appositives, and copulatives. Instead, here, as throughout Emerson’s texts, poetry itself resolves into descriptions of effect, and a surprisingly social intertextuality—a convening of sources, subjectivities, and masques of the poet. As “Poetry and Imagination” tells us later, “The world is thoroughly anthropomorphized ... good poetry is always personification.”

¹ *Works Vol. 8 : Letter and Social Aims*. Edward Emerson, ed. 358n: “In 1841 Mr. Emerson gave a lecture called “The Poet” in the course on The Times, in Boston, some passages of which occur in this essay. It probably also contains some leaves from the lecture “Poetry and Eloquence,” given in Boston in 1847, and in England in 1848. To the lecture called “Poetry and English Poetry,” given in Philadelphia in 1854, it owes almost all of the “Introductory” matter ...”

Tracing the subtending of an apparent, but unattainable ideal of poetry as a vision of Platonic form, by the knotty operations and occasions of the poets that do anchor Emerson's texts and thinking, and the evanescent, intertextual poetics that accompanies them, is the task of this chapter.

"A bard least of bards": Leaving the Major Poet

Whereas "poetry" appears only in passing in Emerson's first articulations of his philosophy in *Nature* (1836), "the poet" is from the first the key conduit between "nature" and "language."² As Virginia Jackson reminds, "nineteenth-century American poetics ... replaced the genre of the poem with the genre of the person" (20). It is "the poet" who inaugurates the holistic perception the text teaches, making nature perceptible to thought at all not as "the stick of timber of the wood-cutter," but as the "integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects." (9) He teaches by seeing. Later, in the postlapsarian mood of the "Language" chapter, a "primary writer," "the poet, the orator, bred in the woods"—that is, neither in society nor in books—returns to "pierce ... rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things," which he is able to do by "hold[ing] fast to nature" with "senses ... nourished by [the woods'] fair and appeasing changes." His role as a passive translator of nature—specifically, *Natura naturata*—is primary, and there is a curious self-authoring quality to the language acts Emerson describes, which, detaching from its speaker, "clothes itself with images"; the poet is kept at a certain distance from actual language.³ But "Idealism" marks a shift toward nature as *Natura naturans*, and the poet's sensitivity to and participation in this nature means he acts *as* nature. Earlier he translated and perceived; now he "delineates" and "conforms things to thought," as he "unfixes the land and the sea, makes them revolve around the axis of his primary thought, and disposes them anew" (34). The political power entailed is overt—Shakespeare's muse is "imperial," and "all objects shrink and expand to serve" the poet's "passion" (35)—but that power is most frequently to negate. Despite paraphrases that assert the transformations of poetry are necessary, asseverational, and "not the fruit of chance," the lines from Shakespeare that Emerson lingers with cut directly against his glosses, offering "Suspect" beauty, eyes that "mislead" the Morn, and Ariel's "dissolving" charm, and "shaking" of the promontory. Shakespeare's specific lines offer a tragedy of fancy, however heroic, and rhetorical inversions, however witty, both collapsing into subordinated reality. Emerson's claims about the poet's ontological authority do not survive the encounter with them in quotation. When Emerson speaks in the abstract he promulgates poets as sources of linguistic security ("holds fast to nature"), but when actual verse and poets enter, they demonstrate rather "the high negative way" (*JMN* 3:517)—the affordances of failure and evanescence.⁴

² "Poetry" is used as a formally agnostic correlative of "philosophy" and "physical and intellectual science," and as the substratum of "fact" and "history."

³ The distinction is Spinoza's, from the *Ethics*: "By *Natura naturata* I understand whatever follows from the necessity of God's nature, or from any of God's attributes, i.e., all the modes of God's attributes insofar as they are considered as things that are in God, and can neither be nor be conceived without God. (Ip29s)." Its contestation and adaptation by Coleridge and Wordsworth is the root of its relevance to Emerson; see William R. Hooton III's "Wordsworth, Coleridge and the Politics of Pantheism." (*Coleridge Bulletin* New Series 14, Autumn 1999, pp.60-72).

⁴ This formulation pays homage to Rei Terada's *Looking Away* (2009), which locates in the "phenomenophilia" associated with Romantic lyric via Coleridge, a recording of, and resistance to, the Lockean epistemology poetry was no longer seen as capable of rebutting on its own terms (44).

This minor underside of Emerson's grand claims for the poet has not been remarked. A critical account advanced by F.O. Matthiessen, Stephen Whicher, and Rachel Yoder, tells us that Emerson's vision of the poet is so major, and persistently detached from the messy business of actual poems, that it impedes both Emerson's, and his followers, actual production in the medium; Matthiessen writes, for instance, that Emerson's theory of art as inspiration is "in sharp opposition" to the idea of art as craftsmanship.⁵ Along the grand lines of this mainline narrative, an 1843 journal entry, with a surprising zeugma, tells us "men of influence & power, the poet & the president, & might head any party & unseat any sovereign, & abrogate any constitution in Europe or America" (*JMN* 9:21), even as actual artifacts are dispensed with: "Poems!—we have no poem" ("Poetry and Imagination"). Meanwhile, in the context of Emerson's recurrent structures, often-cited formulations such as "The poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man . . ." ("The Poet") allow readers to class him alongside his cognates, such as "Man Thinking" of "The American Scholar," as a version of Emerson's self-reliant democratic subject, projected into a commons of language. It is a related chestnut of Americanist study that Emerson's own poetry, attached to atavisms such as rhyme and meter, and impeded by an impulse toward impersonality, stops short before the iconoclastic ideal his essays adumbrate.⁶ Rather, it is Walt Whitman that steps forward to lace these shadowy lineaments into flesh: "I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil."⁷

The simplicity of this narrative is the signature of erasures and omissions, impelled by the pressure to fashion an American literary canon in the wake of the First World War.⁸ Emerson's Orphic ideal is one of many versions of the poet—rarely clearly differentiated—that he floats in essays, poems, journals, and correspondence.⁹ Take, for instance, the 1835 letter to his then-fiancée Lydia Jackson, in which he declares, "I am born a poet, of a low class without doubt yet a poet. That is my nature & vocation. My singing be sure is very 'husky,' & is for the most part in prose." Matthiessen cites the letter as evidence of Emerson's attachment to poetic eloquence notwithstanding his inability to "build an organic form of his own" (46). But it challenges, also, the categories of Matthiessen's thinking. If Emerson can consider himself definitively a poet—presumably, an Emersonian poet—even though his "singing" be low and "for the most part in

⁵ The full passage aligns Emerson with Carlyle's understanding of literature as a branch of religion. It runs, "Assumptions of the superiority of the spirit to the letter, of the vision to the words, of the soul that lies behind all expression to any embodiment of it, characterize the conception of art as inspiration, which is in sharp opposition to that of art as craftsmanship" (25).

⁶ Developing this antithesis, Lawrence Buell argues that a fatal flaw of Transcendental poetry more broadly was its lack of a working theory for craft; in this schematic, inspiration is the master term, leaving little room for revision and labor. As he writes "Such highmindedness prevented them from grappling with the technical problems of craftsmanship as effectively as they might have otherwise. They preferred to jump from fact to essence, from the nuts and bolts of technique to affirmations like 'The true poem is not that which the public read'; 'Life is the Poem; Man is the Poet,' and so forth. Because of this attitude, they quickly became dissatisfied with art as a whole, for it was obvious that even the greatest works do not fully realize the inspiration that gave rise to them." (68).

⁷ In 1860. Trowbridge, 166. ("Reminiscences of Walt Whitman." *Atlantic Monthly* 89 [1902]: 163–175.)

⁸ Jay Grossman, 21.

⁹ In R.A. Yoder's telling, Emerson's search for a form for his own thinking, after his renunciation of the ministry, is pursued under the sign of Orpheus and a particular strain of late 18th century nationalist bardism. Beginning in a relatively untroubled discourse in which, through the 1830s, the poet is associated "eloquence" and "poetic prose," this reaches a pitch in 1839, as poets are recognized as "liberating gods" in the prose, and Emerson's own poems turn formally to metrical irregularity, and in content, to a recognition of nature's opacity (39, 88, 92).

prose,” the class *poet* cannot be restricted only to pure idealists and agents of world history, and we have to differentiate the category to account for the uses of various “classes” of poets. It’s a taxonomy elaborated into 1862, when he writes,

“I am a bard least of bards. I cannot, like them, make lofty arguments in stately, continuous verse, constraining the rocks, trees, animals, and periodic stars to say my thoughts,—for that is the gift of the great poets; but I am a bard because I stand near them, and apprehend all they utter, and with pure joy hear that which I also would say, and moreover, I speak interruptedly words and half stanzas which have the like scope and aim:—What I cannot declare, yet cannot all withhold” (*J*, IX, 472).

As Emerson moves away from stark declarations of the singular Poet, and evaluates what it means to live and attempt to speak in an environment in which the potential of poetry is distributed across a web of agents, significant subtlety enters. This 1862 entry offers us a complex range of acts that are adjacent to poetry, including speaking, overhearing, repeating, ventriloquy, and quotation which are, in fact, operative in his poetics from the first. This aspect or stance of Emerson’s poet, suspended with some passivity between other subjectivities, which he quotes or reinterprets, comes startlingly close to Keats’s description of the protean and unstable “Poetical Character” as “not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing—it has no character.... A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body” (1: 387). Keats’s manifestation of a negative or impoverished version of Romantic poetics has been adduced by Jacques Khalip, via Levinas and Agamben, as a principle of anonymity, and attended by post-Marxian critics such as Joseph Albernaz as an attempt to reconstitute the commons as poetry in the aftermath of enclosure.¹⁰ While we may be accustomed to hearing Emerson’s own protean voicings as effects of sublime dilation, by contrast focusing on these acts near poesis, on the actual workings of poetry, brings out the anxiety of Emerson’s subordinated negations (“cannot all withhold”).¹¹

This tension between an uncompromising magniloquence (usually asserted by a firm but vague copulative) and the affordances of this more varied scale of poetic acts is one of the central and unacknowledged plots of the opening essay of *Essays: Second Series* (1844). Though “The Poet” begins by adducing the true Poet as a negation of the “local” “lyrist . . . [who is] plainly a contemporary, not an eternal man,” by the essay’s middle the “local” “contemporary” becomes the conduit whose access to poetry transforms Emerson, those nearby, and the essay’s linguistic foundations. The passage in which this transformation occurs is worth quoting for the affective and linguistic ecstasis which accompanies its ambivalence, as it scrambles the expected poetic hierarchies of eternal/evanescent, independent/socialized, remote/near:

I remember when I was young how much I was moved one morning by tidings that genius had appeared in a youth who sat near me at table. [...] How gladly we listened! how credulous! Society seemed to be compromised. We sat in the aurora of a sunrise which was to put out all the stars. Boston seemed to be at twice the distance it had the night before, or was much farther than that. Rome,—what was Rome? Plutarch and Shakspeare were in the

¹⁰ Both critics return in our discussion of Thoreau. In *Anonymous Life* (Stanford 2008) and *Common Measures* (Stanford 2024) respectively.

¹¹ Khalip cites Anne Ferry on the evolution of “anonymity” as derived from 1) print contexts enabled by modernizing distribution networks and 2) the experience of urban life: the noun emerged “in the mid-to late nineteenth century out of its more ancient adjectival form, anonymous, or anon, which designated a nameless piece of writing. It subsequently came to describe a writing freed of personality, as well as the conditions of urban life.” (4)

yellow leaf, and Homer no more should be heard of. It is much to know that poetry has been written this very day, under this very roof, by your side. What! that wonderful spirit has not expired! These stony moments are still sparkling and animated! I had fancied that the oracles were all silent, and nature had spent her fires; and behold! all night, from every pore, these fine auroras have been streaming (451).

And yet, for all the intensity of this response, Emerson is responding only to “a youth who sat near [him] at table,” and the passage stages an overt mismatch of cause and effect (and affect) acknowledged in the text by “credulous” and “seemed.” Emerson, at least in retrospect, is well aware of the gap between the ideal Poet the essay has been describing, and the present “youth,” but nevertheless, the transfigurations and inflammations that attend poetry spread through Emerson’s prose, which grows increasingly vivid and voiced, as principles of nature and culture are canceled out under this spell of poetic presence. Emerson expostulates, interrupts himself, negates with increasingly stronger moods “society,” “Boston,” “Rome,” and “Homer,” flips from “we” to “you” to “I.” The force of presence is so strong that halfway through the quoted passage, at “It is much to know...” even the tense is pulled from imperfect into a grammatical present (a surprise restaged with the jump from pluperfect to perfect); soon the forgotten “auroras” of the third sentence are found to be streaming still.

This local linguistic charge and derangement of tense, which, on a thematic level, accompanies the reordering and reimagining of what, and who, the essay previously identified as the archetypal poet, recurs consistently when Emerson nears poets of any stripe, in essays and poems as in the journals and correspondence. The poets in question are contemporary, never major: “I look in vain for the poet whom I describe.”¹² Once we accept the absence of that figure, whom Jay Grossman, scarifying the dominant interpretation of Emersonian poetics, has called an anachronistic “Emerson-Whitman composite,” and recover the immanent poets and poetries that *do* structure his thinking, and that of Transcendentalism more broadly, we find endorsed a far more nuanced and richer range of poetries, and a surprising gamut of functions of those poetries. Though Emerson, undeniably, continues to attend an ideal poet, his thinking and prose are grounded in the immanent effects, uses, and persons, of those poets at hand.

One reason Emerson’s prose ratchets into the present at “It is much to know . . .” in the extract from “The Poet” above is a change of source material. The top half of the anecdote about the anonymous youth in whom “genius had appeared,” which is extracted from a September 1841 journal (*JMN* 8:83), transitions directly to a different rhapsody from precisely a year later (between September 1 and 4, 1842; *JMN* 7:463). This time, the poet in question is clear: Emerson’s journals and letters from the period are threaded with commentary about William “Ellery” Channing II, who was staying with the Emersons in Concord by August 16th, 1842, alongside his sister-in-law, Margaret Fuller, during which time Emerson worked to convince him to move to the village (*L* 3:82). It is under the spell of Emerson’s enthusiasm for, and proximity to, Channing’s poetry that the succeeding, and exquisitely literal passage of “The Poet,” is written (“written this very day, under this very roof, by your side”); other key passages from the

¹² Jay Grossman notes that Emerson, in the much-reproduced letter to Whitman, never describes *Leaves of Grass* as poetry, or Whitman as a poet (22).

essay are as tightly associated with Channing.¹³ Emerson's many intense reactions to, and lifelong endorsement of Channing's poetry—which, as Emerson acknowledged, was of irregular quality—represent another strong clue as to how the ideal bardic Poet remains remote from, and at odds with, Emerson's working or practical philosophy of poetry. This working philosophy may be concretely traced in the tight imbrication of Emerson's own production of verse, his editorial work, and his social and intellectual life.

Surveying, then, these domains with an eye to those figurations of the poet, and those functions of verse, that feature so strongly in this spheres, yet sit uneasily with the messianic model, allows us to develop a fuller picture of the mundane poetics that Emerson relies on as an essential complement to both his prose and his philosophy. This approach follows from the axiomatic recognition that, despite all the paeans thrown its way, to read nineteenth century verse as moated off from other modes, as privileged or difficult, is to anachronistically backfill reading frameworks that date to modernism's recapture of poetry as an elite genre. Such a recognition, that poetry was ubiquitous and socially efficacious in nineteenth century American discursive spheres, participates in the decade-long revision, by Virginia Jackson and others in the field of historical poetics, of processes of *lyricization*. By reconstructing the complex social and textual interactions anchored by poems, and thus a renewed sense of their social legibility, such critics erode the artificial "autonomy of the lyric object" (Terada 196), produced in part by New Critical reading practices, and the alienations of anthology reproduction.

Contexts: Verse's Work

Jackson describes lyricization and its product as "the progressive idealization of what was a much livelier, more explicitly mediated, historically contingent and public context for many varieties of poetry had culminated by the middle of the twentieth century . . . in an idea of the lyric as temporally self-present or unmediated" (9). Returns to such "public contexts" and the circuits of mediation have produced studies of poetry's function as an implement of a national pedagogical project as it evolved in the Reconstruction era (Sorby 2005), as of its central importance in highly diverse cultures of mourning (Cavitch 2007). David Haven Blake brings this focus on poetry's contexts into conversation with the development of the cultural *figure* of the poet in the period. Attending to "the myriad ways in which poetry was consumed," and focusing on its popularity—its orientation toward ideas of the people—he argues that in the antebellum's increasingly abstract media environment, the technologies of intimacy poetry operates by result in the development of fan cultures around poets such as Longfellow.¹⁴

Such porousness of poetry to history and public contexts, and its concomitant capacity to stimulate and be renovated by acts of readerly attention, undergird this study's exoteric stance. Though its thinking about poetry's occasions draws from sources that will be encountered in turn, Michael Cohen's *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth Century America* (2015), deserves mention here, as both closely affiliated with historical poetics and as foreshadowing the

¹³ In a conversation a few days later, Emerson hails and encourages Channing as a born poet ("The poet seems the true & only doctor. He knows & tells." [JMN 7:462]). A year later, in May 1843, the ringing prose that will become the essay's conclusion ("thou true land-lord! . . . he is the Universe in a mask") segues directly to "20 May. Walked with Ellery. In the landscape felt the magic of colour . . ." (JMN 8:405).

¹⁴ "Poetry as a Fan Activity." *American Studies*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2012, pp.99-122.

interest in a temporality organized around the occasions of poetry. Cohen's study traces how outsider efforts in verse concentrate and question social gradients; methodologically, interpretation of poems is subordinated to tracing the communities made visible by the printing, distribution, and circulation of texts, as evidenced in, e.g., collaborative editorial processes of abolitionist poetry. Cohen's account of traveling balladmongers such as Jonathan Plummer and Thomas Shaw stresses that these lower-class figures "illustrate some of the ways in which 'poetry' in the nineteenth century was not a single, coherent category with stable social meanings but was instead a hodgepodge of genres, formats, and media that engaged readers in many different ways" (22). Furthermore, in the case of the balladmongers, this entailed a temporality, both of composition and publication, that depended utterly on the speed and effect with which a popular event could be converted into verse. As John Greenleaf Whittier writes:

No lovesick youth could drown himself, no deserted maiden bewail the moon, no rogue mount the gallows, without fitting memorial in Plummer's verses. Earthquakes, fires, fevers, and shipwrecks he regarded as personal favors from Providence, furnishing the raw material of song and ballad. (as quoted in Cohen, 18)

A different source continues: "Plummer was wise enough to give only that which the occasion called forth, and never stereo typed or seldom published a second edition. He knew the signs of the times, and the tastes and habits of the public" (Knapp, *Life of Timothy Dexter*, 99, as quoted in Cohen 27). Though it is not his focus, Cohen's project of differentiating poetry's different audiences, modes of circulation, and regional tendencies, lands to the soft question of poetry's timeliness, and how assiduously it courts or resists public appetite. Attending to the mundane conditions of poetic making of a different order reminds us that, though such broadsides have been ill-preserved, the social conditions and temporalities they emerge from and create are explicitly formative of a mainstream, as Whittier attests to. Poetry is often a "a mode of socialization," and a poem—often produced in response to an occasion—was itself an "occasion for conversation" (Cohen 30).

A broader perspective such as Cohen's reminds us that Emerson's urgent interest in the poet as a rebuke to, and a renewer of, his society, is not an idiosyncratic concern, but rather adapts the high stakes of a dyadic relationship also being articulated, and experimented with, at various levels through the first half of the nineteenth century. The economics of poetic authorship—and its deep roots in New England—are most thoroughly recorded by William Charvat, who underscores the rapid growth of literacy in the North, the cost reductions of power presses available to the industrializing region, and the crucial rise of the monthly magazine in the period between 1820 and 1850.¹⁵ Indeed, magazines proved to be a crucial incubator for a domestic tradition: Charvat notes that as competition from "British literature made American books less and less profitable in the thirties and forties" American poets "resorted more and more to the magazine. British quarterlies could and did compete with ours, but the weeklies and

¹⁵ For the robust Boston patronage of creative writers, and the rise of public education that created a literate public, see p. 303. On power presses: "The general use of power presses in the thirties still further reduced costs: in 1816 it took three men one day to print 4,000 sheets; forty years later three men, plus machines, turned out 56,000 sheets." (46) On the economics of verse in the context of the rise of domestic weeklies and monthlies: "On the other hand, the long poem has one serious economic disadvantage: it is not suited to magazine publication. By contrast, the lyric is excellent "filler" not only because an editor must cover all his white space with type but because magazine buyers, geared to brevity, read and run. Once magazines began to pay their contributors (increasingly and at higher rates after 1825), poets found that double publication of lyrics in magazine and book form brought double pay." (102)

monthlies which printed poetry could not be imported successfully” (102). It is in reaction to the market pressures and potential rewards of such editorial work as he was engaged in, entailing the galling need to appeal to middle-class audiences, and with nostalgia for the Southern aristocratic literary culture it was supplanting, that Poe asserts in 1836 that artists are “gifted ministers to those exalted emotions which link us with the mysteries of Heaven,” and are infinitely superior to the “vermin” who “crawl around the altar of Mammon.”¹⁶ On a political level, John L. O’Sullivan (of “manifest destiny” fame), in a fiercely nationalistic editorial note to the inaugural number of *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* (1838) concludes by positioning literature as at once the foundation, tutor, and apogee of democratic feeling, then instantly presents William Cullen Bryant’s “The Battlefield” as an instantiation of these claims (14-15). It is my task to reposition Emerson, who, as the icon of Santayana’s bloodless “genteel tradition” has been such a persistent counterpoint to it, as rather conversant with, in part produced by, and influential of the popular and tightly periodical literary production Cohen and Charvat detail.¹⁷

However, finding a ground on which to convene these apparently disparate poetics, and a framework with which to understand the instances of genre-crossing, quotation, and remediation which center this chapter, requires a revision of the formal analytics at the heart of Jackson-influenced historical poetics. For Jackson, the deconstruction of a transcendental lyric (or, ahistorical procedures of lyric reading) is effected by a methodological return to history, and subsequently to form not as an ahistorical category, but as an assemblage that reveals “the processes and structures of mediation through which particular discourses and whole classes of discourse (literary genres, for example) come to represent the real, in the same stroke helping establish that empirical domain as the real” (Levinson, “What is New Formalism” 561). However, Jackson’s procedure, which, in order to break the overtly ideological construct of the “lyric,” subdivides it into increasingly niche formal traditions such as, in *Before Modernism* (2023), the First of August Ode, concludes with a remystification of its own.¹⁸ Jackson claims for specific forms a transhistorical validity that reproduces that which is perforated as “lyric,” as practitioners whose work, even at a squint, approaches a particular form are understood as automatically accessing its literary history (54). Reinscribing the barriers between objects as absolute formal categories, such an approach forecloses the transgressive, magpie practices of working poets on one hand, and, on the other, the broad, sincere declarations by influential figures such as Emerson and Poe, who speak explicitly to the general case of poetry, poets, and romance.¹⁹ An over-scrupulous attention to poetic form falters, too, when treating instances of excerpting and requotation, in which the metadata of formal envelopes and titles are dispensed

¹⁶ Jay B. Hubbell, *The South in American Literature* (Durham, N. C., 1954), Pp. 539. For the rewards of the weeklies: *Graham’s* guaranteed, by 1842, both Bryant and Longfellow \$50 per month for a poem (Charvat 109).

¹⁷ Santayana (1967) expresses the cultural tragedy thus: “Music and landscape make up the spiritual resources of those who cannot or dare not express their unfulfilled ideals in words. Serious poetry, profound religion (Calvinism, for instance), are the joys of an unhappiness that confesses itself; but when a genteel tradition forbids people to confess that they are unhappy, serious poetry and profound religion are closed to them by that; and since human life, in its depths, cannot then express itself openly, imagination is driven for comfort into abstract arts, where human circumstances are lost sight of, and human problems dissolve in a purer medium” (50-51). His discussion of Emerson is considerably nuanced, however; in his reading, Emerson is a “shrewd Yankee,” a “cheery, child-like soul” saved from dreary transcendental systems by his refusal to systematize, and his “return to experience, to history, to poetry, to the natural science of his day, for new starting-points” (48).

¹⁸ The imbrication of which with Whiteness, the New Criticism, and global American hegemony has been examined by Kamram Javadazideh, in “The Atlantic Ocean Breaking on Our Heads,” *PMLA* 134.3 475-490.

¹⁹ As in Poe’s admittedly arch “Philosophy of Composition”

with; as has been richly documented by Ryan Cordell and Meredith McGill, such practices are endemic in the nineteenth century's nascent national literary marketplace.²⁰ This argument, by contrast, follows the anonymity such practices encourage away from discrete formal traditions, toward the horizon of a poetic and linguistic commons, and the aleatory, recurrent temporality of encounter it encourages. "It will not need, when the mind is prepared for study, to search for objects. The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common. What is a day? What is a year?" (*Nature* 47).

Tracing these objects at work in mixed contexts shows how one of the central functions of poetry for Emerson is to model an occasional temporality. In our usage, the three semantic fields of the occasion (intermittence; causation; formal rhetoric) will necessarily overlap, but it is generally the case that a critical stance, and a narratology, that can recognize the lay usage of the first, lay sense, will lead us necessarily to the phenomenological ambivalence encoded by the second, and then to a recognition of how acts of poetic speech emerge from, and organize, the specific topics and publics at hand. Verse read as occasional, as embodying this temporality of moments that pervades Transcendentalism, presents an ethos of responsiveness and geniality. It is not a well-wrought urn or "closed text" (Hejinian 43) but, "open" in the sense that it recognizes the contingency of its meanings on the variousness of its contexts and its fragmentary quotations, inviting the reader to the act—always ephemeral—of interpretation. Reading thus models a way of thinking about poetry not as an exclusive or high genre, but as a historically specific set of affordances invoked occasionally, in heterogenous textual environments, for social, affective, and stylistic affordances. Often, it functions as a challenge to the linear temporality of prose and its metonymies, interrupting these with non-linear associative logics nicked by verse.²¹

Verse and Ecstatic Time in Emerson

These moments, however, in which "poetry and annals are alike," and men become "transparent eye-balls" (10), are as intermittent as they are foundational for Emerson. Still, "there is a depth in those brief moments, which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences." This chapter differs from previous approaches to Emerson's poetry by balancing readings of Emerson's poetics and the poetry ipse, with its occasions—the instantiations and assimilations of verse across the field of his production. When read as a primary enactment of his poetics, quoted verse, absorbed prosody, editorial choices, and public endorsement, most fully bring out the ambivalences toward poetry's independence latent in the major essays and the poems themselves. By constituting a heterogeneous field, this approach intervenes in critical evaluations that have struggled—when they countenance the poetry—to balance Emerson's often-stated commitment to it, with a corpus that, besides the essays, appears relatively slight.

²⁰ In "Fugitive Poems" and *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting*, respectively.

²¹ The distinction between "poetry" and "verse" is an old one, with examples going back to Philip Sydney ("Verse being but ornament and no cause to Poetry" [O.E.D., "versifier" 2]). At the same time, the O.E.D. also includes examples of the two terms being treated more or less synonymously, or defining "verse" as the crucial quality that distinguishes poetry from prose ("verse" 7a). Echoing the bent of this project, *The Cambridge History of American Literature* tends to refer to minor or occasional poetic works as "verse."

Critical interest in his poetry seems fated to suffer revivals as regular as they are halfhearted. For Matthiessen, Emerson's self-image, and self-doubt, as a poet is a constant note of pathos across the career. This finds its most poignant transformation in the alter ego Saadi; in what has since become one of the chestnuts of Americanist study, Whitman becomes necessary to fulfill the promise latent in Emerson's pronouncements (47-51).²² Fifteen years later, Stephen Whicher paints Emerson's hopes as a poet not, as Matthiessen, as a constant, but as suffering a disappointment, and reconciliation, which parallels the fate of his vocational epiphany in the 1830s more largely; Whicher suggests that the initial ambitions toward verse in particular are redirected toward the essays, as Emerson expands the category of poetry to include prose (54). And Stephen Cushman regrettably dismisses Transcendental poetry as an Apollonian cul-de-sac, hemmed in on one flank by its reliance on Emersonian impersonality, which impeded the valuation of particular identity, and on the other by an unselfconscious reliance on common meter as a metonym of nature (2011).²³ In part pushing back against the idea of Emerson's impersonality as debilitating the literary production, a charge which Sharon Cameron leverages most fatefully at "The Poet," Albert von Frank, editor of the 2015 Belknap *Major Poetry*, saves his ward by pulling his poems out of the gnomic aspect in which they have often been read, toward a contingent temporality that echoes the stress on the instant found elsewhere in the corpus: "Emerson discovered early that poetic language is not a common inheritance but rather an innovation caught in the nick of time" (xiv). Von Frank gets at the urgency, transience, and a kind of crisis-witnessing that underlie one aspect of Emerson's poetry, even as he misses the acts of literary reception, often delayed or at a distance, that prove so stimulating.²⁴ At the same time, applying the Thoreauvian "nick of time" (a phrase which stresses physical notching, in other words, the marking of temporal progression by a negating gesture) to Emerson reveals the negations inherent in Emerson's moments, even as it calls forward the echo of Wordsworth's "spots of time"—a much more stable gathering of narrative information.

The "lofty sight" moment in "History" quoted above is representative of the instability that compels Emersonian moments forward. As the imperative "must," and the anxious "attain and maintain" imply, these instances of authority and generic interpenetration are frail, and inextricable from the language of negation into which they decline. The ecstasy of the moment is in part due to the relief from the rule of facts: ". . . man must attain and maintain that lofty sight where facts yield their secret sense, and poetry and annals are alike. The instinct of the mind, the purpose of nature, betrays itself in the use we make of the signal narrations of history. Time dissipates to shining ether the solid angularity of facts. No anchor, no cable, no fences avail to keep a fact a fact. Babylon, Troy, Tyre, Palestine, and even early Rome are passing already into fiction" (240). Poetry, here, is aligned with "the instinct of the mind" and the "purpose of nature"

²² Both the commitment and the humility come through in an 1835 letter to Lidian: "I am born a poet—of a low class without doubt, yet a poet. That is my nature and vocation. My singing, be sure, is very husky, and in the most

²³ Cushman suggests that the formal conservatism of Transcendentalist verse owes in part to a conception of meter as a palpable link between Nature and language. He writes, "In the case of meter, Emerson is explicit: meter is organic, meter is natural, and since for a transcendentalist what is natural symbolizes the supernatural, the power of meter . . . has its part to play in symbolizing the power of spirit or soul." (88-90)

²⁴ See, for instance, "Saadi." Emerson's reception of Islamic and Persian poetry, and then his integration of these with European literature, is Wai Chee Dimock's central example of the surprising diachronicity that often drives literary influence across deep time: "Hybridity . . . was the condition not only of the texts that came to Emerson but of his own making as a reader." (2001, 764).

as revolving around a principle of “use,” more particularly, the creative re-use of a series of potentially resonant, but fungible signifiers: “Babylon, Troy, Tyre, Palestine.” (As “The Poet” reminds, “Language is fossil poetry” [457].) The evanescence of the exhilaration that results from this unmooring of historical fact into fiction is coded in the privation of Emerson’s verbs and litotic structures: “betray,” “dissipate,” “no fences avail,” “pass away.” The “same scene which yesterday breathed perfume . . . is overspread with melancholy today” (*Nature* 33).

The reversion of these moments of ecstatic clearance, and the seeing they entail, to failure and the “detachment or boundary” that “rejoic[es] the intellect,” is one of the most recurrent structures or plots in Emerson’s writing: “our faith comes in moments, our vice is habitual.” It will be found that while “poetry” is one of the terms that describes the apex, techniques of verse often stabilize the descent itself. Ecstatic reversion powers poems such as “Uriel” and “Days,” and essays such as “Compensation,” “Fate,” and “Experience”; jumpcut at the sentence level, the whiplash of the impulse toward freedom, and the rebound of fact and distinction, is palpable in every Emersonian artifact. Richard Poirier reads these moments of linguistic freedom, which I have been calling ecstasis, as “troping,” a heroic turning of language against its own tendencies: “by the turning of it, language can be made into a sign not of human subservience but human power.” In an argument that prefigures Arsic’s “The Way of Life by Abandonment,” Poirier goes on to underscore the negation on which these moments of heroic troping are built: “Emerson suggests we abandon one discourse for another, give up one tone of voice for another, change or trope the vocabulary that has been found to be least useful” (*Renewal of Literature*, 131, 148).

One of the most familiar figurations of this failure is from “Experience,” an essay which, Barbara Packer suggests, working through the problem of “moments,” “tries . . . to describe life from the standpoint of the hyphens rather than the heights” (156). At first sight, it’s not the most obvious site to locate an occasion of verse; but, as the essay’s compulsive meaning-making—its punning, its modal shifts between analysis, figuration, and narrative, its transits of voice and tense—pulls us into rereadings, we feel increasingly how the time of our readerly movement through its action and thinking is metered by verse techniques: the manipulation of prosody, syntax, and parallelism. Emerson writes, “I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition. Nature does not like to be observed, and likes that we should be her fools and playmates.” (473) The first clause of the tripartite sentence, at first firmly iambic, stages the victory of the apprehending ego over transience; the verb “I take” is initially, naturally read as a successful physical grasping of objects that resist being held. In the second, appositive clause, a bodily register (“fingers”) confirms the physical reading of “take,” even as the irregular, filmy stress and the slip from “I” to “our” and “we,” casts the individual’s present indicative “taking” ironically against a habitual aspect of common failure. By the time the third clause begins with the cognitive shock of the split (or slipped) infinitive “to be,” the delay and failure the appositive enacts and tells has palled over the individual’s “taking,” the grip of which has likewise slipped in the interim. The physical “take” we initially posited fails, and must be revised, by way of compensation, into the figurative or transcendent sense of taking as interpretation. The third clause, which as a hanging infinitive lacks an inflected commitment to aspect, tense, mood, or number, completes a downward trajectory in which the distinctness of “I,” falls to “we,” then to “our condition,” and the clear physical presence of “I take” and “fingers” dissolves and is abstracted into “unhandsome.” Its fateful authority, which inscribes

shared abstract language (the con- of “condition”) as the inevitable ground of thinking, is produced by Hamlet-inflected iambs which return with renewed force. In the second sentence, that shared language or “condition,” is renamed “Nature,” and ascends to the subject of a verb, “likes,” that both objectifies and takes as grammatical object the “we,” perfectly inverting the initial agentive relationship expressed in “I take.” The neatness of this inversion, and the stability it arrives at, is reinforced by the parallelism of the sentence’s form: two iambic pentameter lines linked by a comma, or, an Augustan couplet.²⁵

Richard Poirier suggests of “Experience,” that “our reading-writing brings into existence a moment in which we are actively *there* but also a moment in which self-present identity is reportedly lost” (*Renewal of Literature* 201). Language’s ability to create such a moment, which at once enacts a linguistic immediacy, or *thereness*, and, as it were architecturally, stabilizes or hold open a space where identity can be lost—a positive negative—hinges on formal techniques borrowed from verse. Here, iambic beats at first regularize, then, in their sudden abeyance, disorient and draw out the reader’s inhabitation of the text; Emerson writes with a more naturalistic and fluid prosody than is generally acknowledged. The iambic regularity of what I have called the passage’s “couplet” stabilizes this unsteady aftermath of individual vision into a communal linguistic norm made newly palpable by its momentary disruption. Along the same lines as Poirier, Stanley Cavell is thinking about the succession of such moments when he writes (rather, speaks, in the Carpenter lectures): “Emerson’s ‘Experience’ ... is essentially a working out of the violence of the image of change, of the taking of a spiritual step, as it were, as a series of rememberings, say disfragmentings, reconstitutions of the members of, and of membership in, one’s stranded state.” Cavell’s serial kenning and punning, enacting the *work* and the fruitfulness of Emerson’s linguistic project—as well as its ambivalence between the leavings or aversions of orality and the monitory permanence of the grapheme—ultimately “strands” the reader in a “state” whose solitariness is thoroughly structured, or constituted by, a ghostly linguistic commons. It is the sociality of this isolation, its repeated, contingent temporality, and its inflection by the political horizon encoded in “reconstitutions” and “disfragmentings,” that I want to underscore as inextricable from Emerson’s poetics.²⁶ Indeed, this series of transient, stranded “moments”—whose visual corollary is negative space, apertures in cloud—is painted as the structure of shared identity (note the characteristic slip to “we”) in an 1841 *Journal* entry: “what is Me? What but now & then a moment of serenity & independence, an abode in the deep blue sky? Presently the clouds shut down again: yet always we retain the belief that this petty web we weave will at last be overshot & reticulated with veins of the Blue, and that the moments will characterise the days.”²⁷

²⁵ Stanley Cavell, as occasional a thinker as Emerson, argues on this passage that, “Emerson is transfiguring Kant’s key term ‘condition’ so that it speaks not alone of deducing twelve categories of the understanding but of deriving—say schematizing—every word in which we speak together (speaking together is what the word condition says); so that the conditions or terms of every term in our language stand to be derived philosophically, deduced.” (39) He follows Heidegger in conceptualizing thinking as a “handicraft,” and writes: “...the unhandsome is rather what happens when we seek to deny the stand-offishness of objects by clutching at them.” (38, 117)

Emerson’s use of formal rhetorical inversions on this model is frequent. See, for instance, “Modern Literature”:

²⁶ Jay Grossman, in *Reconstituting the American Renaissance*, argues that “. . . Matthiessen’s construction of the Renaissance might be imagined as a kind of writing out of these discourses of the political . . . and so a completion of the task Emerson set for himself in staging an imminent and ‘original relation to the universe’” (14).

²⁷ For Emerson’s acts of waiting, see *JMN* 7:10: “Thus how much of my reading & all my labor in house or garden seems mere waiting: any other could do it as well or better.” Emerson counsils in “Experience”: “Patience, patience, we shall win at the last.”

To make a “moment[] . . . characterise the days” may be one way of phrasing the task of the occasional piece, which, at its most rudimentary level, marks or memorializes an external event. The familiarity and disrepute of the occasion, however, as a principle of mechanical or second-rate literary composition, masks its utility as a way of reframing the conversation between poetry and event. The patterns of occasional broadside and ballad publication that Cohen traces through Plummer and Shaw are a diminished reflection of the Ciceronian *occasio*, a principle of rhetoric that comfortably linked eloquence to event, and which lies behind the European occasional verse stimulated by Humanist revivals. Romanticism, it is argued by John Dolan, kept the primacy of event while reimagining them as internal, while it devalued poetry that explicitly attached itself to historical flux (14). This narrative, however, oversimple to begin with, attaches awkwardly to the American experience characterized by the prominence of sermons and civic oratory, distinct regional publishing cultures, and uneven, incomplete assimilation of English literary movements. Indeed, some of Emerson’s most famous lectures (“The Divinity School Address,” “The American Scholar”) are occasional pieces, others begin as such, and many of his major poems may be best understood as concerned with the power of occasions. These range from commemorations of intimate sociality such as “The Visit,” written for Caroline Sturgis in 1843 (“The duration of a glance/ Is the term of convenance”); long metaphysical meditations forced by circumstance such as “Threnody” and “May-Day”; and public poems that narrate the formation of communities around events, such as “Concord Hymn” and “Ode (Inscribed to W.H. Channing).” As for Emerson moments define both days and persons, so are occasions central to his understanding of how time moves (“we must be very suspicious of the deceptions of the element of time”), how persons come together and divide, and how thinking is generated.

*“Poetry comes nearer to vital truth than history”*²⁸

Eduardo Cadava has been the critic most responsible for enabling the reconsideration of Emerson as a philosopher of history, captured most enduringly in the master figure of weather, which mediates “Emerson’s obsession throughout his writings with the relation between the permanent and the transitory,” and registers “his preoccupation with the central political and social issues of his time” (2, 10). For Cadava, Emerson’s language creates meaning not through accretion around a stable architecture, but—in terms remembering and prefiguring Nietzsche’s “mobile army of metaphors”—

through mobilization of terms from one shifting context to another. This mobilization names an engagement with changing historical and political relations, an intensification of a transformation in progress, wherein language not only works to alter and set in motion the shifting domains of history and politics but wherein the historical and the political leave their traces in language. . . if Emerson’s language works to change

²⁸ Attributed spuriously to Plato in *Nature*. Ralph Orth records the series of transformations that created this ersatz apothegm in the preface to *JMN* 6: “The most striking example of this subtle process involves the two successive quotations “Poetry is something more philosophical & excellent than history” by Aristotle and “Action comes less near to vital truth than description” by Plato, both quoted in *Encyclopedia*. Perhaps because they were together, because they dealt with the same subject, and because Emerson found them in the same magazine article, where they were consecutive footnotes, they became fused in his mind” (xv).

language, it does so in order to . . . actively condition[] the possibility of what we call history or politics (20).

This is a complex revision: Cadava pushes the unstable, but more apparent Emersonian dyad of Nature -Language into a triad, where the master terms are Language - History, with Nature appearing as History's persistent mask. Language is primary, but it is always-already primary *to* History. As Cadava thinks through how language, thus history, mediate each other and are transformed, he returns to the central role Emerson assigns to the poet. In Cadava's reading, the poet self-annuls, and is dissipated into the effect it leaves on the public: "As a child of nature, then, as a witness to nature's transformative and prodigal power, the poet *gives way* to the natural imagery that, as a force of gathering and provocation, compels the minds of the populace to *awaken to the hour's passing events*" (51, emphasis added). However, Cadava's slight divergence from Emerson's language in *Nature*, which he is here paraphrasing, is telling. *Nature* declares the poet's "solemn images" (which he has gathered from the woods in youth) "shall reappear in their morning lustre, as fit symbols and words of the thoughts which the passing events shall awaken" (23). For Emerson, "passing events" are not what is perceived by "minds," as in Cadava, but the grammatical subject that awakens "thoughts." "Passing events," in other words, are not the (grammatical) object of thought in Emerson, but the agentive condition of thinking and its "symbols and words." As a result, in "The American Scholar," are we entreated to "inquire what light *new days and events* have thrown on [the Scholar's] character, and his hopes" (53, emphasis added).²⁹

"Events," whose etymology of pregnancy and gestation Emerson often activates, complement the classical rhetorical tradition he invokes with a language of "occasion"; other cognates include "moments" and "hours."³⁰ "Occasion," which is also Thoreau's preferred term, has the further affordance of underscoring, even or especially in figurative uses pertaining to the individual's experience of time—which is primary in Emerson—the protopublic and communal stakes thought and speech. So it is in "The Method of Nature" (1841) where a shifting syntax and the connotative field it creates, enact the difficulty of, first, locating agency (in the individual? in the *doxa* of the community? in time?) and as a result, of aesthetic judgment:

What is best in any work of art, but that part which the work itself seems to require and do; that which the man cannot do again, that which flows from the hour and the occasion, like the eloquence of men in a tumultuous debate? It was always the theory of literature, that the word of a poet was authoritative and final. He was supposed to be the mouth of a divine wisdom. We rather envied his circumstance than his talent (125).

²⁹ Working a similar vein, but influenced by the post-Marxist reimagining of community under Levinas, Agamben, and Esposito, Pamela Schirmeister points to the indeterminacy between philosophical and literary idioms in the period to argue that Emerson's essays function as topoi of free play and subject formation, that "bridg[e] the dual realms of culture and politics," create "incommensurable" subjects, and "open[] passages between self and other"; in such spaces "incommensurability" can be refashioned as "the basis for a broader sense of community and a reformed politics" (2000, 12, 16, 18; 126 ff.).

³⁰ The most famous correlation of poetry and event is by another iconoclastic thinker of community, Alain Badiou, for whom gathering time into event ("the poetic name of the event") is the work of poetry. The political horizon into which Badiou writes makes more vivid Emerson's slant incorporation of the political crises both domestic and European, that defined the years leading up to 1848 and 1860, and the apocalyptic temporality often used to describe them.

Emerson cracks open the dead physical noun, a “work of art,” to activate the sinewy “work” within it, which as itself a grammatical subject, “requires”—encouraging us to see not a finished artifact, but an ongoing impersonal process. The presumptive creator is minimized as “the man,” and takes a negative verb, whereas “the “hour and the occasion” is posited as the source of “what is best” in the work. Once “occasion” surfaces in the sentence, its inherently public connotations convert “the man” to “men,” and the physical, individual “work” the sentence begins with, is supplanted by a communal scene of verbal flow and contention, a “tumultuous debate.” An occasion, and the public language that flows from it, to which individuals are only adjuncts, replaces not only a lay scene of heroic creation, but a logic of discrete individuals entirely: by seeing the occasion as primary, we see how a physical “work” is in fact a verbal question, and how the “man” that appears to be a creator, is more properly a “men,” all of whom owe their eloquence not to themselves, but to the moment. The next three sentences then rehearse the same supplantation of individual authority, this time of “the poet,” into the primacy of “circumstance” on one hand, and communal language (“we”) on the other. After two passive sentences, this self-conscious and active “we” of the last sentence is called into being by witnessing what appears, at first, to be the poet’s individual effort, but is revealed to be “circumstance.”³¹

Occasional Rhetoric in Emerson’s America

Emerson’s stress on timeliness and the moment in general, and on the occasions of poetry in particular, metabolizes the centrality of occasions of public speech in an American rhetorical and oratorical tradition with deep classical roots. This represents a complement to its more explicit religious origins. From that direction, the Emersonian Poet and his cognates continue the trajectory of Puritan thinking about subjective experience (“witnessing”) as self-authorizing speech, to the secularization of prophecy in the Unitarian experience, most proximately in W.E. Channing’s influential and broadly quoted 1826 essay, “Milton.”³² However, Emerson’s rapid transits between the individual and the society follows a well-used channel derived from the self-conscious and pervasive Roman Republicanism of the Revolutionary and Federal periods.³³ It is in this context that John Quincy Adams articulates the ideological pressures that charged rhetoric with national stakes in his 1806 address upon assuming the Boylston Professorship of Rhetoric at Harvard: “Under governments purely republican, where every citizen has a deep interest in the affairs of the nation, and, in some form of public assembly or other, has the means and

³¹ In “Napoleon,” “circumstance” is revealed as the most potent condition of greatness: Napoleon is quoted, “My son can not replace me; I could not replace myself. I am the creature of circumstances” (731).

³² The essay is mildly heretic: flirting with Gnosticism, Channing argues man’s “whole future” (viz., immortality) is buried in his soul, and “the very foundation and sources of poetry” is a function of its “perpetually stretching beyond what is present and visible ... and seeking relief and joy in imaginings of unseen and ideal being.” Because man’s “intellectual nature [is] framed for progress and for higher modes of being” his unfulfilled energy is “chiefly manifested” in poetry, which, although literally false, “observes higher laws than it transgresses” and “far from injuring society, is one of the great instruments of its refinement and exaltation.” The essay, which absolves the local heterodoxy of Milton’s *De Doctrina Christiana* through a larger claim about individual inspiration, prepares the iconoclasm that Emerson will trumpet, and sets up a clear transit from individual soul, to poetry, to the “refinement and exaltation” of society (*Works*, I, 7-9). For further intellectual context, “That Sainted Spirit”: William Ellery Channing and the Unitarian Milton.” Kevin P. Van Anglen, *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1983), pp. 101-127.

³³ Instances are pervasive; but see Madison’s “Publius.” Gordon Wood, in “Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution” (1990) underlines the influence of Montesquieu and the legacy of Ciceronian virtue as being leveraged by Whig reformers against corrupt government, that prepare the American context (23).

opportunity of delivering his opinions, and of communicating his sentiments by speech; where government itself has no arms but those of persuasion; where prejudice has not acquired an uncontrolled ascendancy, and faction is yet confined within the barriers of peace; the voice of eloquence will not be heard in vain.”³⁴ Adams offers a careful but irenic read, in which the individual’s capacity for clear expression and participation in government is at once the chief desideratum of democracy, even as it emerges—through a chain of double negatives that acknowledge the perils that surround the fragile system—as itself a counterweight to faction and prejudice.

It is this matrix of individual eloquence and nascent democracy that sustains the culture of occasional oratory, such as the July 4th and August 1st addresses, that recent wide-angle Americanist scholarship has brought back into view. Sandra Gustafson writes, for instance, that “Novel styles of oral performance propelled transformations in early American literature, and American literature reveals a peculiarly self-conscious relationship to oral forms... [taking] as a central subject the social meanings of linguistic form” (xix). Such injunctions are inevitable as they are difficult to keep in persistent focus with Emerson, whose sermons and lectures loom so starkly behind his thinking about the capabilities of poetry in the essays and poems. Deliberating before redirecting his listless teaching career toward divinity, he brings together the theatricality of the enterprise with its earnest stakes: “I have hoped to put on eloquence as a robe, and by goodness and zeal and the awfulness of virtue to press & prevail over the false judgments, the rebel passions & corrupt habits of men” (*JMN* 2:245).³⁵ For all the ringing Calvinism in this youthful confession, its grammar gathers agency into the dissociable “eloquence,” which can be “put on as a robe.” Eloquence is ultimately extrinsic from the self, which it then transforms. Long after Emerson begins to understand himself as a poet and writer, the terms eloquence and poetry remain inextricably linked, and often interchangeable.³⁶

Emerson’s lecturing career was sustained by this demand for occasional speech and by the related lyceum network, which his career closely tracks; his first lecture (1833) comes seven

³⁴ James Berlin records the circumstances around the behest, whose delayed enactment and specificity reflect its sensitivity: “Nicholas Boylston had provided 1,500 pounds for a chair of rhetoric at Harvard in 1771, but the endowment was not used until 1806, when John Quincy Adams was appointed the first Boylston Professor of Rhetoric. The statute of the endowment specifically stipulated that the instructor in rhetoric was to follow the classical model in theory and in classroom practice. This meant practically that the heads under which rhetoric was to be discussed had to be in keeping with the treatises of Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, or, at the least, one of their modern imitators. (John Ward’s *A System of Oratory*, an English compendium of classical rhetoric, for example, was probably used as a model in drawing up the Boylston statutes.) Instruction was to focus on invention, disposition (arrangement), elocution (style), and pronunciation” (16).

³⁵ Narratives such as Gustafson’s and Jay Fliegelman’s *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language & the Culture of Performance* (Stanford 1993) valuably revise older critical judgments which alienate print artifacts from the more evanescent acts of performative speech that emerge from the same rhetorical culture, erasing also the uses of language power available to minoritized populations.

³⁶ See also Fliegelman (Stanford 1993). The universality of acts of commemoration is picked up by what Michael Hatten, in *Past and Prologue: Politics and Memory in the American Revolution* (Yale UP, 2020) calls “history culture.” Affirming the importance of a thin but momentous national past, “historical content also served as the glue that bound together various subjects in their educational texts, providing a foundation for an idealized national form of education” (143).

In the exordium of an 1848 lecture before the Portman Square Literary and Scientific Institution, he said, “I have ventured to name my topic ‘Poetry and Eloquence,’ though what I have to say is chiefly on the last. There is much that is common to the two” (*Works* 7:366n.).

years after Holbrook founds the American Lyceum.³⁷ His two eloquence essays (1847/1870 and 1867/1875) return oratory to a central position in the workings of democracy, and proceed to explore, usually, to despair over, the different styles that prevail in specific occasions, from town halls to “the bar, the senate, journalism, and the pulpit.” In the first essay, Emerson argues rhetoric “only flourishes in free countries,” in which “every man is an orator,” and then describes—in a schematic borrowed from Humean sympathy—the workings of linguistic influence in such a country: “The eloquence of one stimulates all the rest, some up to the speaking-point, and all others to a degree that makes them good receivers and conductors, and they avenge themselves for their enforced silence by increased loquacity on their return to the fireside.” This model of excitation by proximity, which is the same operative in the “under this very roof” passage of the “The Poet,” inverts, however, the values of Hume’s model: while for the Scottish thinkers the enthusiast threatens a broader derangement of rational society, Emerson finds in that change of state a necessary heat (the “boiling-point” metaphor recurs) and a renewal of conductivity. It is only the degree of responsiveness to the demands of the occasion that sets apart speaking citizens, who are understood as equal linguistic subjects. At its highest, oratory is indistinct from poetry, and we learn “The orator must be, to a certain extent, a poet.”³⁸ The second essay stresses that language must be carefully suited its audience and context: “Eloquence is the power to translate a truth into language perfectly intelligible to the person to whom you speak” (italics original). If this Horatian principle reads as unremarkable, its focus on geniality and audience is strikingly at odds with the model of oracular speech derived from nature and individual truth, which Emerson had expressed so forcefully in 1834: “Henceforth I design not to utter any speech, poem, or book that is not entirely & peculiarly my work ... [otherwise,] You are your own dupe & for the sake of conciliating your audience you have failed to edify them & winning their ear you have really lost their love & gratitude” (*JMN* 4:334).

With oratory as with poetry, however, the distinction between such pandering and an enabling responsiveness of the individual to himself and his listeners, hinges on whether one is responding not merely to an audience, but to a larger set of exigencies, at once internal and extrinsic, that gets called the *occasion*. (At play, too, is the wise acquiescence of a longer lecturing career). However, Emerson is clear that the positively valued occasion, characterized by sensitivity, linguistic transformation, and an orientation toward the community, emerges in contradistinction to the kind of rote commemoration usually designated as such. Hear the nuance with which he adjusts the category in “The Divinity School Address” where he sends forward his listeners “wherever the invitation of men or your own occasions lead you” (91), as the parallel to “invitations” stresses the internalization of this social category. In “Self-Reliance,” the occasion marks a kairotic and specifically linguistic potential; men need to “let the words go” of past texts, even of the “prophets,” trusting “at any time, they can use words as good when occasion comes” (271). The collective tissue of Biblical revelation becomes the residuum of previous occasions, all of which are to be superseded by those moments of language that hang “at any time” in the future of the individual. In such a phrase too the occasion takes its place as the verso of linguistic abandonment, or kenosis.³⁹

³⁷ See, e.g., Richardson 490 (Ch. 70, on Emerson’s rise alongside the Lyceum system).

³⁸ The essay’s proem lingers in the effect of oratory in terms that might have been lifted from “The Poet”—a concern with ecstasy, personification, and the “unfixing” of nature. Its last lines read: “Yet before the listener’s eye / Swims the world in ecstasy ... Leaves twinkle, flowers like persons be / And life pulsates in rock or tree.”

³⁹ For Emersonian abandonment, see Cameron 1998 (5 ff.); Arsić 2010 (8 and passim).

The first “Fugitive Slave Law” address (1851), picking up this leaving, refers to the passage of the law as a “crisis” which “had the illuminating power of a sheet of lightning at midnight. It showed truth. It *ended a good deal of nonsense we had been wont to hear and to repeat, on the 19th of April, the 17th of June, the 4th of July...* It showed the shallowness of leaders; the divergence of parties from their alleged grounds” (182, emphasis added). Two schematics of national time are here juxtaposed, both of which conceive of the moment as an opening for the articulation of communal values. The difference is in the respective degree of repetition and flexible responsiveness, the ability to hear and heed the “crisis” as a call to transformation and leaving behind (national) identity. Heeded, the occasion of the Fugitive Slave Act inaugurates a new temporality and a new revolution in thought. Accepting the necessity of the revolution comprehended in this occasion, a few pages later, Emerson revises his own thinking about the necessary connections of moments, to morality, to law:

I thought that every time a man goes back to his own thoughts, these angels receive him, talk with him, and that, *in the best hours*, he is uplifted in virtue of this essence, into a peace and into a power which the material world cannot give: *that these moments counterbalance the years of drudgery*, and that this owning of a law, be it called morals, religion, or godhead, or what you will, constituted the explanation of life, the excuse and indemnity for the errors and calamities which sadden it. In long years consumed in trifles, *they remember these moments*, and are consoled. I thought it was this fair mystery, whose foundations are hidden in eternity, which made the basis of human society, and of law; and that to pretend anything else, as that the acquisition of property was the end of living, was to confound all distinctions, to make the world a greasy hotel, and, instead of noble motives and inspirations, and a heaven of companions and angels around and before us, to leave us in a grimacing menagerie of monkeys and idiots (189).

Though this passage from moments to eternity will be familiar by this point, the revisionary anger and tragedy of this quite succinct elegy for a society and a belief seems directed at, specifically, the cloudy figure of a “fair mystery,” which occludes the precise mechanisms that make the individual’s consolation the “basis of human society.” “The Fugitive Slave Law” is perhaps the most explicit of Emerson’s serial recognitions that the individual’s moments are not a sufficient foundation for moral law, and that this simple moment/eternity temporality needs to be revised to recognize the conditioning of eloquence by and toward the exigencies of its society. The occasion is such a revision, an opening of the moment toward other subjects.

Strikingly, Emerson then reifies this reorganization of national time with the second “Fugitive Slave Law,” read to a large audience in New York City on “The Fourth Anniversary Of Daniel Webster's Speech In Favor Of The Bill”—i.e., March 7, 1854. Commemorating Webster’s speech, in a lecture that recounts, as elegy for squandered moral authority, a *different* speech by Webster—the famous Bunker Hill address of 1825—Emerson again juxtaposes the new national time he articulates, produced by the moral revolution the law has effected, with the extinguished possibilities of the revolutionary calendar. This second address, which includes some of Emerson’s most pointed thinking about how a speaker aligns toward the occasion, how the occasion creates an ad hoc public, and asks how “public questions” result in the desertion of poets and poetry, prepares the discussion of the occasion as a historical throughline for poetic production. Though this intellectual revolution is parcel of Emerson’s broad reorientation toward history effected by the injustice of the law and its manifestation in the 1854 Burns trial, it

continues a line of thought which, seen through the ambivalence of the Poet, is long in evidence.⁴⁰

Frequently cited in the notebooks, as in *Representative Men*, Webster is the closest actual approximation to the Poet.⁴¹ An early manuscript poem, “Webster,” makes the resemblance unambiguous: when the senator “launched the genuine Word / It shook or captivated all who heard, / Ran from his mouth to mountains & the sea, / And burned in noble hearts proverb & prophecy” (*PN* p. 23, l. 19-23). This echo continues in Emerson’s exordium, which describes Webster as “the representative of the American continent. He was there in his Adamitic capacity, as if he alone of all men did not disappoint the eye and ear, but was a fit figure in the landscape.”⁴² Furthermore, Webster’s authority as a representative figure is evinced by his self-aware capacity to understand the demands of context—including the aleatory (“if he had them”)—and, by conforming to these, to create the occasion. Emerson tells us “he knew well that a little more or less of rhetoric signified nothing; he was only to say plain and equal things;—grand things, if he had them,—and, if he had them not, only to abstain from saying unfit things;—and the whole occasion was answered by his presence. It was a place for behavior, much more than for speech; and Webster walked through his part with entire success” (995). Occasion, here, is what a speaker “answer[s],” and public language’s central function is as a metaphor for “presence.” Webster’s plain style, which Emerson mimics, so closely shadows silence—“nothing,” the possibility of negation, and abstention—that it creates a curious indifference to linguistic content. Webster could be anyone “walk[ing] through his part,” and his virtue lies in his ability to subordinate style to its situation. Even individual language at its apogee operates as a weak complement to the occasion, which controls what behavior, and what speech, is possible.

His moral death, as staged by the address, asks how we continue in a moral universe without such an anchoring subjectivity; it is the homologous question to how language works without an anchoring Poet. The abandonment is pervasive: “You relied on the constitution... You relied on the Supreme Court... You relied on the Missouri Compromise” (233). This cascade of betrayals means that each listener “must be citadels and warriors yourselves, declarations of Independence ...” (235) and that “He only who is able to stand alone is qualified for society” (235), while at the same time, an impersonal Nature is empowered against slavery, “Nature is not so helpless but it can rid itself at last of every wrong” (238). If this distribution of authority is preceded in Emerson’s philosophy, this still represents an inversion of its usual affective

⁴⁰ For this reorientation, see e.g. Moody 1945, and *Emerson's Antislavery Writings* (ed. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson, Yale 2002).

⁴¹ Carlyle described Webster as “a magnificent specimen. ... As a Logic-fencer, Advocate, or Parliamentary Hercules, one would incline to back him at first sight against all the extant world. The tanned complexion, that amorphous, crag-like face, the dull black eyes under their precipice of brows, like dull anthracite furnaces needing only to be blown, the mastiff-mouth, accurately closed:—I have not traced as much of *silent Berserkir-rage*, that I remember of, in any other man” (*Works* 11, 221n).

⁴² In “The Poet,” that figure “is representative stand[ing] among partial men for the complete man, and appris[ing] us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth,” and is “a Chimborazo under the line,” containing every climate (450). Throughout the “Fugitive Slave Law,” as the corpus, Emerson’s descriptions of Webster strongly echo his language for the Poet. This essay continues: “His wonderful organization, the perfection of his elocution,—and all that thereto belongs,—voice, accent, intonation, attitude, manner, we shall not soon find again. ... In his statement, things lay in daylight;—we saw them in order as they were. Though he knew very well how to present his own personal claims, yet in his argument he was intellectual, and stated his fact pure of all personality, ... And the same quiet and sure feeling of right to his place that an oak or a mountain have to theirs” (996).

charge—individuals (interpellated, significantly, in the plural) and faith in Nature, are here not exaltations, but consolations. Universities, which ought to be havens of valuing, have “forgotten their allegiance to the Muse” (242). As Emerson concludes, poetry is one of the guises of “Liberty” that has to be “rescued and saved” by the audience (“every poetic heart”) that the speech has convened: “Liberty is aggressive, Liberty is the Crusade of all brave and conscientious men, the Epic Poetry, the new religion, the chivalry of all gentlemen. This is the oppressed Lady whom true knights on their oath and honor must rescue and save” (243-44). It is the nipping urgency of this specific “public question,” that summons the specter of poetry—a value at once lost and to come. Turning the argument outward to us as listeners and readers, Emerson offers one version of what poetry looks like in the abeyance of the Poet. With this in mind, we might note that, while the two verse quotations that introduce the address are attributed to Whittier and Browning, once Emerson invokes the Marseillaise, his many (apparent) quotations, including that of a retributive couplet, become overwhelmingly anonymous (“They say...they said” [239]).⁴³ Language’s authority becomes orphaned, contextual.

Genealogy: The Occasion in Western Rhetoric

occāsio: a falling out, a happening, hap ... I. an occasion, opportunity, fit time, convenient season, favorable moment for doing any thing; εὐκαιρία, καιρός. (Lewis and Short)

occasio est pars temporis, habens in se alicujus rei idoneam faciendi aut non faciendi opportunitatem ... in occasione, ad spatium temporis, faciendi quaedam opportunitas intellegitur adjuncta (Cicero, *De Inventione* 1.27, 40)

For all its instrumentality in Emerson and throughout transcendentalism, the dearth of thinking around the *occasion* as an analytic of poetry requires, as we move toward its definition, a dredge of its principles and legacy. Rudolf Wittkower shows that for the early Greeks, propitious occasions (*kairoi*), not linear progression, were the defining aspect of temporality; only in the late Hellenistic period does *kairos* begin to be counterpointed by the linear progression we now associate with *khronos* (313).⁴⁴ It is Cicero who clearly, and most influentially, delineates the *occasio* as an intelligible subunit of *tempus*, which is itself subsumed by *aeternitas*. In the Ciceronian occasion, ‘it is understood that the opportunity to do something is added to the interval of time.’ The occasion is thus a hybrid unit, a mechanical interval (“spatium temporis”) overlaid with a judgment about the possibilities inherent in that interval (“intellegitur”), which incorporates at the level of its definition, an optative mood: that act of doing which is not yet, but is predisposed to be. Cicero further subdivides occasions into 1) *public occasions* such as festivals; 2) *common occasions*, such as harvests; and the more curious 3) *singular occasions* (‘singulare’), a category which extends from weddings, to feasts, to sleep.⁴⁵ (The porous edge of this last category offers an alternative way of thinking about how occasions can usefully help us imagine the social construction of the individual.) For Cicero, language is thoroughly subordinated to its occasion, which it must be appropriate to; later, we’ll

⁴³ The couplet (and a half) runs: “For evil word shall evil word be said, / For murder-stroke a murder-stroke be paid. / Who smites must smart” (239).

⁴⁴ Cf. Dietrich Boschung, *Kairos as a Figuration of Time* (Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München: 2013).

⁴⁵ M. Tullius Cicero, *De Inventione*. Eduard Stroebel, Ed. 1.40-41. Perseus. Translations original.

see how language itself becomes a transcendental occasion. Emerson's first mention of Cicero is in an early (1822) letter to Mary Moody Emerson, in which "Burke is an improved Cicero" (*L* 7:152); by 1831, Thompson notes Emerson had read extensively from the complete works. (2000, 70).

However, the transit from the *occasio* as a principle of epideictic speech, to an analytic category through which poems are generated and interpreted, is considerably more tortuous. Its ubiquity and fuzziness is evinced in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* by the frequent cross-citation of "occasional verse," an entry which, once arrived at, handwaves impressively, beginning, "All literary works are occasioned in some sense," and concluding, "In short, although occasional verse is often taken to be ephemeral or trivial or public . . . to be dismissive is to violate the most serious conceptions of much of the world's lyric poetry, and even narrative and drama may arise from occasion" (2012, 966). More particular investigations of occasional poetry situate it historically, deriving its modern forms from the Renaissance reception of Latin epigrammatic verse, from Horace through Catullus, Martial, Lucan, and Statius.⁴⁶ As Mary Thomas Crane notes, while other poetic modes were distrusted in humanism, "the aphoristic tradition constituted, for most of the century, a valid and sanctioned poetic medium . . . published and public aphoristic poetry, first in Latin and then in the vernacular, functioned as a tool of middle-class mobility and humanist (later, Protestant) political alliance" (137). Crane stresses the imbrication of such a poetics with the practices of humanist pedagogy, in which the principle of *inventio* consists identifying the present situation, then selecting and adapting passages from classical authors either accumulated by the reader, or taken from popular handbooks such as Erasmus's *Adagia* and the *De Copia*.⁴⁷ However singular it might appear, the poem's occasion connects its writer into webs of reference, theme, and sociality. Dustin Mengelkoch isolates the extreme referentiality of this sanctioned form of poetic expression as he traces prominent humanist Angelo Poliziano's (1454-1494) thorough emulation of, and commentary on, Statius's *Silvae* (c. 95 CE); Poliziano's imitation of Statius's occasional epigrams, transmitted through his extensive teaching and correspondence networks, then provides a model for further occasional verse. Because of its imbrication with pedagogical forms, the tradition remains vital through disruptions of the Reformation and the Baroque, in both secular and religious contexts; Manfred Fleischer (1989) shows how Melanchthon's enthusiasm encouraged an outpouring of doctrinally Protestant verse that energized late Humanist learning by weaponizing it against Rome.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Statius's Silver Age work departs from the looser narrative frames of Augustan forebears such as Horace, in tying each poem to verifiable occasions, ranging from epithalamia to poems in praise of specific baths, villas, and banquets.

⁴⁷ In the English tradition, Polonius is the most fully fledged student of the period's numerous rhetorical manuals; in his apt but often hollow sententiae, we see satirized the class aspirations and the servility masked by the wavering equation of rhetorical and mundane power. Such are the promises extended by Agricola's *De Inventione*, which links the rhetorical program of *topoi* it promises with the power relationships attendant upon teaching and advising those "who govern a republic through their advice" (38, cited in Crane).

⁴⁸ Helius Eobanus Hessus frequently tied his poems to occasions, composing six elegies for Martin Luther during his passage through Erfurt; Hessus later composed 84 elegiac couplets on the occasion of Dürer's death (Kühlmann 248; 1108). Humanist Jakob Miccyllius produced frequent occasional verse, including a *Carmen elegiacum de ruina arcis Heidelbergensis* (1534) and his own *Sylvae* (1564). In Fleischer 560–562.

Emerson's generation inherits this specifically literary side of the rhetorical tradition on numerous levels. Students at Harvard, Yale, and the other established colleges worked out of abridgments of Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783) and Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776).⁴⁹ Both texts, coming out of Locke and Hume, share the mechanistic epistemology and concern with faculties germane to the Scottish Common Sense tradition.⁵⁰ Campbell's text places more emphasis on the psychological states of audiences as a prerequisite to communication, and as such positions oratory as the acme of language acts, as it engages more faculties in the listener; Blair's focus, meanwhile, is overwhelmingly on literary style, frequently illustrated by verse exempla. Though his theory of expression sometimes verges proto-Romantic, the text is founded on a system of regular and sympathetic Augustan principles of "taste." Emerson's 1819 intellectual awakening—the beginning of the "Wide World" notebooks—takes place against the backdrop of impassioned lectures of eloquence by Edward Everett (Greek literature) and Edward Channing (Rhetoric), both editors of the *North American Review*.⁵¹

The Wide World journals of early 1825 see Emerson thinking through the affordances of eloquence as he prepares to enroll at Harvard Divinity School (in February). After an analysis of the published version of Edward Everett's recent speech at Salem, in an entry subscribed "Practical Poetry," he writes:

Jan. 23, 1825. Poetry, wise women have said, hath a noble inutility & is loved as the flowers of the field, because not the necessities but the luxuries of life; yet I observe it has sometimes deigned to mix in the most important influences that act on society. The revolutionary spirit in this cold & prudential country it is said was kept alive & energized in 1776 by the seasonable aid of patriotic songs and satirical ballads pointing at well-known names & acts. Of Tyrtaeus & his conquering elegies who has not heard? And Greek history has another more extraordinary instance to the purpose. When Lycurgus meditated the introduction into Sparta of his unprecedented political model, he prevailed on Thales, whom he met as he travelled in Asia Minor to pass to Laconia & compose poems there of such a character as to prepare the minds of his countrymen for the novel schemes of the Reformer. (*JMN* 2:320)

This is a relatively youthful Emerson, but the entry shows him thinking through the explicit social operations of poetry in the long moment of his intellectual foundation. His claim startlingly revises the positioning of poetry as independent of and indistinctly uphill from politics, as in "The Poet." Specific political ends are rather adduced as primary in a tradition that links classical antiquity and American living memory. Poetry is applied locally as a means to both to fire "the revolutionary spirit" (cf. Emerson's heat metaphor, and revision of Hume, in

⁴⁹ Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) is the period's other foundational textbook. A Common Sense interpretation of Locke and Hume, like those thinkers Campbell is often concerned with the psychological reception of language acts. As James Berlin summarizes: "Oratory simply engages more faculties in the speaker and the listener: the understanding, the imagination, the passions, the judgment, and the will. Thus, persuasive oratory transcends even poetry—the realm of imagination and passion—in its inclusiveness, becoming the apotheosis of human language acts" (22).

⁵⁰ In 1822, Hume (as interpreted by Dugald Stewart) presents Emerson with a bugbear of skepticism that he labors to contradict for years; Richardson wonders whether transcendentalism more broadly is not in one aspect "a refutation of Hume" (66).

⁵¹ Richardson, 48.

“Eloquence”) and to prepare specific “novel schemes.” As with Emerson’s revisionary definitions in “Poetry and Imagination,” viewing poetry through historical lenses of society and effect (he was reading Mitford’s 1795 *History of Greece*) incurs a chorus of inputs. The ideal “poetry” of “wise women” crumbles into an interpersonal and auxiliary medium (“mix in”) articulated by specific poets in discrete forms: “patriotic songs and satirical ballads,” “elegies,” “poems.” Cadava’s dialectic between climactic tendency and local weather helps us see that, even in this early thinking, weather organizes Emerson’s thinking about the dependence of the individual and art on its social context: these poetic interventions can only be efficacious on a “cold & prudential country” when “seasonable,” or timed to correlate with other influences. While Emerson’s first two examples consider poetry as called forward in response to a generally recognized crisis of the state, the myth of Thales and Lycurgus offers a vision of how poetry might function as a handmaiden of Law and Philosophy in an occasion, or season, defined not by external contingency, but by the need for the preparation of “minds” oriented toward reform. Both need to be kept in mind as we trace Emerson’s later refining of the principle, which often sees emergent conditions as enabling a *longue durée* revolution of minds.

This invocation of Revolutionary songs and satires offers an early answer to one of the central, and optative, Emersonian questions, namely, what is poetry in America, what its effect on others and the nation, and who are its poets. It shows him thinking beyond a high lyric inherited from English and German Romanticism, to the more distributed popular model of occasional poetry, specifically as a transhistorical tradition with classical roots that has been successfully translated to the recent American experience. His is an intuition that has been taken up, over the past twenty years, by critics of the Revolutionary and Federal periods, who have correlated the emergence, and contestation of the value of, romance, fiction, and verse with debates around independence and the constitution. While Cohen’s examination of Plummer’s occasional ballads, for instance, show us the surprising local and personal capacities of what Raymond Williams calls residual forms, studies such as Thomas Koenig’s *Founded in Fiction* (Princeton 2021) locate, at a national level, “the paratextual gymnastics” that many early nineteenth-century novelists undertook—in, e.g., pseudoeditorial materials, apologies for, or defenses of, fiction—in an attempt to adhere to both the moral and the mimetic imperative” so prevalent in the early Federal period. Koenig’s study traces an arc from the “factual imperative” governing novels such as *The Coquette* (1797) to justifications grounded on “moral virtue,” as in *The Gamester* [1805], to the complex internal remediations of these forms—and the domestic sketch, and children’s tales—by, e.g., Hawthorne, into an ideal of Romance as an aesthetically independent genre nevertheless governed by these residual needs to justify itself. (103-4, 7). However, as a chapter on the fiction of slavery reveals, increasingly confident claims to fiction’s higher truth and value remained vulnerable, as in a proslavery review of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as “a fiction throughout; a fiction in form; a fiction in its facts; a fiction in its representations and coloring; a fiction in its statements; a fiction in its morals; a fiction in its religion; a fiction in its inferences.” (193) Koenig’s arc allows us to see a tentative, but irregular movement toward an ideal of literature’s—often denominated as “Poetry”—transcendence of strict fact, toward abstracted but anxious headings of truth, in the first decades of the nineteenth century.⁵²

⁵² A similar arc is traceable in historical fiction. “Whereas many 1820s historical fictions, such as Hope Leslie and Hobomok, presented such gaps in the historical record as ratifying fiction’s conjectural historiography, later historical fictionists would present such gaps as an occasion for urging readers to approach their narratives as fiction rather than as a form of history” (148). Koenig’s chapter on the fiction of slavery, and the Southern attacks

Colin Wells's *Poetry Wars* (2017) builds on earlier studies of the topical satires and songs Emerson has in mind, such as William Dowling's close framing of the Connecticut Wits as direct inheritors of English literary Augustanism.⁵³ Against a more frequent narrative of verse as a medium of elite reaction, Wells carries forward the broad popularity of the first "versification vogue" (20) of 1774-75, in response to the affront of the Stamp Acts, to tell a story about the society-wide relevance of, and engagement with, occasional forms such as "carrier's addresses, verse parodies, mock epics and epic fragments, ironic celebratory odes and earnest martial hymns" through 1815. In this narrative, topical satires served as a key weapon in the textual war which shadowed the Revolution, a conflict between rival documentary strategies "laying claim to political authority" (33). Medium is key to Wells's argument: such satires, as opposed to earlier colonial pasquinades, leveraged the broad distribution of print-mediated anonymity, and its metonymic representation of the public sphere itself, to speak in the voice of the aggrieved public. In this reading, derived from Michael Warner, Wells shows how the affronts of Vice-Regent Thomas Gage's proclamations produce, in the wave of anonymous, and frequently republished versifications they call forward in broadsides and newspapers from Massachusetts to Virginia, a new intercolonial self-awareness *as a community of verse critics* evaluating rival claims to linguistic authority.⁵⁴ Leveraging the ways verse necessarily calls attention to literary form, writers such as William Livingstone, the sitting Governor of New Jersey, in a first-page satire published just a week after its target, helped audiences dissolve the powerful atavistic narrative of British invincibility, as projected in Burgoyne's hectoring Proclamation of 1777, into mendacious linguistic devices that sought to occlude real strategic vulnerabilities. When, a week later, reports of Burgoyne's weakness and setbacks began to appear, "a poem could seem to transcend the 'merely' literary to emerge as an agent in the historical process. Within the narrative logic of the print public sphere—in which events reported as news appeared alongside other texts in a system of mediation that unfolded temporally—such a timely publication as Livingston's could appear as one of a series of events leading inexorably toward the specific outcome of Burgoyne's defeat" (64). Such a point re-members newspapers as internally complex sites of community affiliation, in which topical verse serves as a key instrument of the timely interpretation of shared event, intervening directly in cultivating the temporal ground of an Andersonian imagined community.⁵⁵

thereupon, shows how claims to moral or sentimental truth—for all their prevalence in the middle of the century—remained vulnerable, as in this review of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "It is a fiction throughout; a fiction in form; a fiction in its facts; a fiction in its representations and coloring; a fiction in its statements; a fiction in its sentiments; a fiction in its morals; a fiction in its religion; a fiction in its inferences" (193).

⁵³ *Poetry and Ideology in Revolutionary Connecticut* (1990), powered by a Raymond Williams-influenced interrogation of the "ideology of the Country" and the Roman Republicanism that enables an ideal of "poetry as demystification" (26) to be leveraged by the first generation of Wits on which it focuses—Trumbull, Humphreys, Dwight, and Barlow. The study spends significant time exploring Walpolean politics and the outraged Tory poets of an earlier generation (10–14, 43–47). Relatedly, Dowling's *The Epistolary Moment: The Poetics of the Eighteenth-Century Verse Epistle* (1991) picks up this argument in an English context, showing how the advent of the modern postal system allowed Tories, dismayed by Walpolean excess, to reimagine themselves as a latter-day Republic of Letters.

⁵⁴ Wells writes: "My addendum to this argument is that this atmosphere of intercolonial cooperation is also evident in the proliferation of versifications, such as those against Gage, that appeared in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia" (293n).

⁵⁵ Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* [London, 1983] influentially positions print culture as a central agent in the development of nationalism. Critics such as Trish

A “poetry war” is, for Wells, an “implicit or explicit attack and counterattack by poets vying for ideological victory” by “alter political reality through the specific mode of *linguistic performativity*” (7-8). In such a definition, and the study’s focus on satiric and ironic modes, looms the impasse—the difficulty of articulating coherent positions—that will diminish the tradition after 1815, as successive crises such as the Jay Treaty or the XYZ Affair are dissolved into increasingly self-referential strategies : revealing discourses of power as merely discourse, claiming to represent the vox populi, and exposing putative ideals as masking the ulterior motives of a small group (what Wells calls a recurrent “poetry of conspiracy” [95]). Still, the perceived efficacy of the strategy during the War of Independence meant that these topical salvos of recursive versification were a prominent feature of the early republic. In the 1790s, for instance, a militant second generation of Connecticut Wits, led by Lemuel Hopkins, Theodore Dwight, and Richard Alsop reprised the Revolutionary successes of “The Anarchiad” with “The Echo,” which, appearing in *The American Mercury* from 1791 to 1794, “led the Federalist satiric campaign for most of the decade” (141) against able counter-satires, such as those penned by Freneau as editor of the Jeffersonian *National Gazette* (1791-93). Wells characterizes—with some latitude—such collective projects as the Echo Poets’ as performing some of the functions of a political party when the party system was still in its nascency, influentially providing a ground on which to correlate political stance (anti-Jacobinism), the affect appropriate to it (equanimous remove), and poetic sophistication, and “s[ee]king] to define the divisions forming during Washington’s first term as depending in large part on style and, by implication, on temperament” (147). The display and propagation of these values, enacted along homologous discursive planes of politics and culture, represents one influential way the mode manages to transcend its recursive partisanship and articulate (para)political content.

This critical narrative reminds us of the vibrancy of occasional verse traditions into the nineteenth century, underpinned by explicit and implicit understandings of verse as a privileged medium for the culture of political, and, more importantly after the Revolutionary period, proto-political structures of feeling. Such a verse tradition derives its force not from the constancy of a subtending Romantic subjectivity, but from the anonymity enabled by publication in newspapers and broadsides, resulting in the important claim, at the level of medium, to represent popular or ordinary sentiment. Concomitant with this anonymity is the intense intertextuality of such verse. When such works are not “versifying” or lampooning an obvious target, the punch of their legibility depends—in, for instance, Trumbull’s *M’Fingal*—thoroughly on the audience’s ability to recognize a chain of epic and mock epic allusions, and the satiric effects that emerge from the ill-fit of these to their context.⁵⁶ At the same time, because these allusions are so overt (and often ironic), and, crucially, because literary features are subordinated to real event, the poem remains exoteric, the ground in which an open-ended community of readers affiliates against a conspiracy

Loughran, in *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building* (New York, 2007) have argued for the regionalism of public spheres, 5–15. Michael Warner’s *Protocols of Liberty* (2013) closely traces the postal dissemination of printed material by American Whigs as a key enabler of political action.

⁵⁶ *M’Fingal*’s winking epic and mock-epic tags are numerous, especially in the full 1782 edition. The poem centers around debates strongly marked by the *Iliad* and *Paradise Lost*; characters are often introduced via deflationary extravagant lineage; and concludes on a vision of national futures. Early lines of Book II run: “And dinner done in epic fashion; / While all the crew beneath the trees, / Eat pocket-pies or bread and cheese; / Nor shall we, like old Homer, care / To versify the bill of fare.” (II, l. 6-10). Passim, but especially at “versify,” the poem asks us to see beyond it to a prosaic reality.

of hidden interest.⁵⁷ Though it isn't Wells's focus, *Poetry Wars* develops a temporal landscape defined by successive crises, which calls forward anonymous poets, and their readers—themselves potential respondents—into a purposive, ad hoc, and ultimately evanescent sociality.

This is the occasional temporality that anchors two of Emerson's most compelling poems about poetry's intermittent and incomplete ability to intervene in the domain of real power, which it does paradoxically, by disappearing—into a formal residuum, and the communities of like-minded individuals it enables. Before turning, however, to the paradoxical muteness of the poet in the conspiratorial "Uriel," which traces the circuits of reception and consequence of heterodox poetic speech, and "Ode (Inscribed to W.H. Channing)," a poem written in response to Channing's impatience with Emerson's reluctance to embrace abolition, I want to dwell briefly on the sociality of language in Emerson, which has to be revalued (positively) before it can be usefully leveraged.

Emerson's dismissals of social being as the antithesis to self-aware individuality can be strident: "But now we are a mob" ("Self Reliance," 272). Though consensus and the merely contemporary are the opening targets of "The Poet," we've seen also how, in that essay's only positive instance of actual poetry, even second-hand news of the poet trembles the "I" into a responsive, listening "we." In "Experience," the individual's failed grasp is likewise gathered, by a prose couplet, into first "our condition," and then a "we." This underscores a broader truth, that "the social" in Emerson's thinking about poetry functions as a recurring redemptive axis, and indeed the horizon of poetic efficacy. Throughout "Shakespeare," in fact, Emerson resolves what appears as genius, into the social and historical processes that compose it, contending "Thus, all originality is relative... The learned member of the legislature, at Westminster, or at Washington, speaks and votes for thousands. Show us the constituency, and the now invisible channels by which the senator is made aware of their wishes, the crowd of practical and knowing men, who, by correspondence or conversation, are feeding him with evidence, anecdotes, and estimates, and it will bereave his fine attitude and resistance of something of their impressiveness" (715). The implications of this Pocockian claim are far-reaching. The prominence and the heroism of the individual, on whom Emerson's philosophy depends, are revealed as functions of incomplete data. His epistemological solidity is a trick of perspective, resolving into a fortuitous collection of "correspondence or conversation"—active processes of linguistic circulation.

Stanley Cavell brings forward this dialectic delicately by revising a lay idea of lyric audience into "sociality," which is in his usage a dynamic field with "no given set of hearers or readers," rather generated internally by the text's work of convening. The text's acts of social sorting that I have been calling "affiliation" are, in a similarly enabling revision, figured as "geniality," the like-mindedness of author and reader which results "if they are congeners, generated together, of one another" (*Claim* 12). The plurality and temporal indeterminacy of these terms is important to note. When we think with Cavell, we come to an awareness of ourselves as readers not as irreducible individuals directly interpellated by Emerson, but dialectically, as a contingent linguistic subject, generated repeatedly by, and immanently to, the

⁵⁷ In *M'Fingal*, Butler's *Hudibras*; in *The Anarchiad*, Pope's *Dunciad*. Wells argues that *Paradise Lost* functions as a broad-based epistemological paradigm for these and cognates satires, offering a model in which verse narratives of conspiracy serves to expose, thus neutralize its force (128).

text. The field of selves that the text, often grammatically, requires us to imagine ourselves as—one of whom is “Emerson”—constitutes its bedrock “sociality.” At the same time, the ability of any individual poetic utterance to transcend the mere givenness of its sociality, and inflect this field, is the measure of its value.⁵⁸ We see this givenness of the social field in “Compensation,” an essay whose grimmer focus on the abeyance of self complements this argument’s interest in the anti-heroic; as the essay instructs, “We cannot part with our friends” (302). Upon “the death of a dear friend, wife, brother, lover,” succeeds “the formation of new acquaintances” (302). If elsewhere, as in Whitman, sociality is often represented as a peopling of the expansive ego in the moment of its brimming over—“The world,—this shadow of the soul, or other me, lies wide around” (“The American Scholar” 60)—here, however, the social is a redemptive process of reidentification and reception by which the individual can fashion an exit from isolation: “If I feel overshadowed and outdone by great neighbours, I can yet love; I can still receive; and he that loveth maketh his own the grandeur he loves” (301). It is a dialectical process: a diminished first person active, followed by an opening to reception, allows the “I” to shift into a consolatory and gnomic “he”—which, rising into homiletic tones, rings in the same tone of its victory, the fine loss that attends self-abandonment.⁵⁹

Emerson’s Occasional Verse

Emerson often uses verse to narrate and enact such loss. It is the insufficiency and failure of poetry that is so striking about “Uriel” or “Ode”; the poet, in both poems, is most efficacious in the moment of, respectively, his silencing and muteness. However, the silence of Uriel, or the lithic “astonished Muse” of “Ode,” is stabilized, and made efficacious, by a formal and sensory residue, registered as a linguistic and prosodic “shudder” in “Uriel,” and by iambic pentameter in the more confident “Ode.” This becomes the assembly ground for the poetic, proto-political sociality Emerson envisions.

The central plot of “Uriel” (1846), whose situation echoes Emerson’s ostracism after the “Divinity School Address,” is the fate of measurement. The poem stages the retributive consequences of a small but heterodox utterance by the angel Uriel, which momentarily disrupts

⁵⁸ These terms reflect the conduit of social transformation via self-transformation Emerson adumbrates most forcefully in “The American Scholar.” However, the proximity of these terms to the langue / parole binary requires a note. It was in the attempt to break this binary that V.N. Volosinov imagines language use as creatively reacting back upon the society and language from which it emerges. Volosinov’s intervention was to break static models of economic organization (the base / superstructure analytic in classical Marxism; the langue / parole divide in Sausurrean linguistic analysis) so as to project a model in which each language act, while being structured by the domains it participates in, also reacts back upon them. Volosinov argued that “consciousness takes shape and being in the material of signs created by an organized group in the process of its social intercourse. The individual consciousness is nurtured on signs; it derives its growth from them; it reflects their logic and laws” (13). Raymond Williams makes explicit how Volosinov aligns language usage with proletarian class consciousness: “much of [Volosinov’s] effort went to recovering the full emphasis on language as activity, as *practical consciousness*” (35). Though the individual consciousness “reflects” the logic of signs, its speech is *fundamentally creative*, and represents a constant intervention, or “struggle” with received semiotics: “The real communicative ‘products’ which are usable signs are, on the contrary, living evidence of a continuing social process . . . to which [individuals] then also actively contribute” (37). Cumulatively, these individual speech acts constitute “a dynamic and articulated social presence in the world” (37-38, emphasis original).

⁵⁹ The language of “self-abandonment” alludes to Sharon Cameron’s influential formation of Emersonian impersonality as passage *through* personality that depends on reiterated acts of abandonment. Its framework is in conversation with Cavell’s “aversion,” and is adapted by Branka Arsić in *On Leaving*.

universal balance, before a “forgetting wind” blows. That utterance, for which he is so punished, is a claim about the arbitrariness of measurement: he “Gave his sentiment divine / Against the being of a line. / ‘Line in nature is not found; / Unit and universe are round’.” Strikingly, the claim is most immanently an argument about prosody.⁶⁰ Its stakes might seem too small to support the poem’s portent, until we recognize that, as a divine Jesus is the “unit” on which the Church is built, so too is the regular line the girder that holds up the edifice of poetry. Uriel knows he is in a poem, where the “being” of the line is the *sine qua non*, and so, revising just this load bearing principle, at the precise center of the poem, when we as readers are most inside the poem with him, he crumbles its ontological integrity, and asks us—in a way that is still provocative in an era of free verse—what a “round” unit of verse might look like, and what poetry it might produce. Against logic, he leverages “sentiment.” The homology between *religion* and *poem* on which the piece’s stakes depend underscores the strict formalism of both of these truth-telling, intuitive mediums—forms which, however originally contingent, are so buttressed by historical continuity and so disciplined by arbiters, that they become fixed and fatal. This strong logical closure, carried in thudding tetrameters, produces the poem’s claustrophobia as it hints at some of the insufficiency of the ontological category of “poem”—understood as an organic whole—for Emerson. We are supposed to feel trapped by artificial rule, and compelled to imagine a fate for poetry beyond, or after, poems.

Once we recognize the large stakes of Uriel’s modest questioning of “the being of a line”—the systemic integrity that hangs on a stable measure—the poem’s very first lines open into a considerably more complex revision of temporality than may be palpable at first.

It fell in the ancient periods
Which the brooding soul surveys,
Or ever the wild Time coined itself
Into calendar months and days.

This was the lapse of Uriel,
Which in Paradise befell. (l. 1-6)

Most striking about the first quatrain is its syntactic indeterminacy, as it makes only wandering progress toward the articulation of subject; the first word, “it,” is not resolved. (Until the paraphrase of lines 5-6). The third line exemplifies its refusal of closure and a lack of measure. The sonic and semantic stutter “Or ever” can be papered over by reading it as “Ere ever,” and indeed must be, but doing so founds the poem in an original misprision; that erased “or” returns as sound to haunt our subsequent reading with what it might have been (“calendar,” “Uriel”). Prosodically, with a cluster of unstressed syllables, then three hammering central stresses, the line is as indeterminate and surprising as “wild Time.” After this wandering flux, we experience the disappointment and meanness of “months and days,” specifically, the months and days *produced by a “calendar,”* and understood as fungible “coins”: temporal units are explicitly

⁶⁰ Von Frank cites Emerson’s note to Caroline Sturgis enclosed with the manuscript poem: “You have heard news from Saadi, that the most baleful heresy has been broached in heaven at some Epoch not fixed. It seems some body said words like these, that Geometers might say what they pleased, but in Uranometry there was no right line” (*PN*, pp. 711–712, qtd. in Von Frank 15). So, though the “line” in question is also geometric, “the news” is delivered via the poet Saadi—as Matthiessen notes, one of Emerson’s most persistent poetic avatars (46).

figured as the products, and currency, of a print economy. Then, in the couplet, which tries to restart the poem, the deictic ambiguity of “This was...” suggests that one of the many “falls” or “lapses” in the poem is this fall into “months and days.” We can now recognize that the poem’s protest against artificial measurements, grown sclerotic in history, is leveraged as clearly against “months and days” as it is the “line.” If we are trying to imagine a “round” unit of poetry, it might look something like the poem’s opening quatrain, with its grammar tantalizingly refusing closure, its *a* rhyme unfulfilled, and its verbal temporality both suspended, and over before it begins (“it fell.”) We lose ourselves, briefly and uncertainly, in a recursive region near the ballad, which we only become aware of once the poem jolts into motion with the regular narrative couplets that carry it through.

How, then, can we imagine poetic speech beyond the authorized cordons of “days” or “lines”? At its end, in the aftermath of Uriel’s rebuke, the poem helps us reframe the time of poetry and its effect, by realigning its perspective away from the individual heretic, toward, rather, a subsequent, intermittent (“now and then”) community of speakers. It concludes:

But now and then, truth-speaking things
Shamed the angels’ veiling wings;
And, shrilling from the solar course,
Or from fruit of chemic force,
Procession of a soul in matter,
Or the speeding change of water,
Or out of the good of evil born,
Came Uriel’s voice of cherub scorn,
And a blush tinged the upper sky,
And the gods shook, they knew not why (p. 17, l. 47-56).

This is the return of the repressed “or” of the third line, enacting the intermittence the passage describes. Relatedly, the semantic indeterminacy of the first quatrain recurs, here, as a thicket of alternative and appositive clauses, which, though ironed out into grammatical correctness, still effect a similar derangement. Like other linguistic elegies such as Frost’s “Never Again Would Birds’ Song be the Same” and Milton’s “Lycidas,” the poem makes a major case for minor poetry by increasing the duration of its exposure and looking to the unforeseeable effects of slight inflections. Here, Uriel’s echo returns to a distributed field of unexpected noun agents at moments of transition and generation (“procession,” “speeding change”) as a moral haunting, producing a “blush” or shaking. This formal legacy is preserved grammatically, in the appositives and oppositions, and prosodically in the irregularity of the last two lines, which begin with a pyrrhic and a spondee before evening out to iambs. This is a minimal and representative parable of the fate of what we might call pure lyric, or subjective or Romantic poetry in Emerson. Idiosyncratic speech, and the individual it stands for, does not permanently inflect language, but offers a lingering formal ground, and is distributed as tone and formal shudder among a community of “truth-speaking things.”⁶¹ It is a poem held together by its struggle against itself, as the drive to imagine alternatives to its governing ontological conditions—a

⁶¹ Emerson’s prosody is often significantly more expressive and naturalistic than it has been imputed to be (e.g., by Cushman [88]).

“round” line, “wild Time”—which it enacts on several levels of organization, resolves into the occasional affective influence on a social field.

The minimal poet appears again at the charged ending of one of Emerson’s most interesting occasional poems, “Ode (Inscribed to W.H. Channing)” (1846), composed in response to the impatience of William Henry Channing—the Christian socialist, and cousin to Ellery—with Emerson’s hesitation to endorse abolition.⁶² The poem, which often seems to argue against the individual’s ability to sway event, is a thoroughly metapoetic reflection on occasions. Adduced by one timely public context, it responds by enacting a temporality characterized by delay, and a topicality characterized by slant approach through other timely contexts. In the uncertainty these tactics create, the poem relocates itself, and finds optimism.

Complacency is justified by arguing that slavery emanates from an inability to delineate moral questions from commercial and pragmatic ones, and that disunion would thus be a local patch: the “law of things” governs New Hampshire as well as the South.⁶³ And the poem is full of things. The weight of these end-stopped noun phrases, largely organized in nutty trimeter catalogues—which sometimes expands to tetrameter as it becomes didactic, or shrinks to dimeter at its most Orphic—serves to naturalize the immovability of the more abstract moral law. But there is another story running through its prosody and its deployment of poets. Iambic pentameter—like a suit, prosocial in its bona fides—arrives only ironically and out of place, as the poem’s protean speaker protests: “Yet do not I implore / The wrinkled shópman tó my sóunding woóds, / Nor bid the unwilling senator / Ask vótes of thrúshes ín the sólítúdes” (68). The “wrinkles” of pentameter are associated with an exchange economy, then with national political discourse. In both cases, it contrasts directly with the irregular trimeter of the “I,” and is presented as semi-comically invading natural settings through which an inchoate poetic subjectivity is diffused as sound: “woods” and “thrushes.” The poem maintains its principle of discourse needing to be suited to its topos, as the speaker complains in its first lines, where he refuses to “leave [his] honied thought / For the priest’s cant, / Or statesman’s rant.” (2-4) As in “Ode,” metrical regularity signals deadening consensus, and the tension between it and a naturalistic prosody is one of the most reliable structuring fissures in Emerson’s poetry. The dictum, “For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem,” (“The Poet”) helps us hear how meter, like law, is an inchoate value that each poem has to labor to discover—hence their tendencies to wander at their beginnings.

In “Ode,” it’s not until the last line that the poem arrives at a non-ironic iambic pentameter, with the return of the Muse. (The poem had begun with a failed invocation to this Muse, who, scrambling the epic code, had offered “confusion” to the poet in her anger; she is a figure of blockage.) The poem’s only other iambic pentameter line then comes in to stabilize whiplash political reversals. It concludes:

⁶² For a representative summary of Emerson’s stance, see, e.g., *JMN* 8:186: “I should write again to W. H. C. & say, He that unites himself to the race separates himself from the Father but he who by love & contemplation dwells with the father, from him the Race always proceeds filially & new, and the actual race feel in his presence their degeneracy & his salutary redeeming force. Keep thyself pure from the race. Come to them only as saviour, not as companion.”

⁶³ In the light of anti-slavery, the quietism of e.g. “Politics,” is chilling: “We must trust infinitely to the beneficent necessity which shines through all laws. Human nature expresses itself in them as characteristically as in statues, or songs, or railroads, and an abstract of the codes of nations would be a transcript of the common conscience” (566).

The Cossack eats Poland
 Like stolen fruit;
 Her last noble is ruined,
 Her last poet mute:
 Straight, into double band
 The victors divide;
 Half for freedom strike and stand;—
 The astonished Muse finds thousands at her side. (p. 68-9, l. 90-7).

This “last poet” seems to represent the spirit of the nation, paired with the “noble” who stands for its manners and wealth. By this point, we can recognize that, while such a poet is integral to a polity, he is so not as a stoutly democratic “representative man” or an imperial “true land-lord! sea-lord! air-lord!” (“The Poet”), but as an intermittently present victim. These last lines, which echo the equanimity about party division in “Politics” (1844)⁶⁴, which Emerson understands as founded in moral fact, at once acknowledge the round indisputability of historical defeat, and affirm a skittering, nonlinear temporality, a model of slant, distributed agency, and the perpetual surprise that results. Relatedly, figures of poetry return just four lines after the poet’s muting, multiplied out into the “thousands” at the side of “the astonished Muse.” This is poetry as a principle of affiliation, a national version of the stimulating effect of proximity to a rumored poet Emerson details in “The Poet.” The “Muse” that begins the poem as a figure of “confusion,” ends “astonished”—turned to stone. This ending arrests us in a space and a moment of waiting and nonevent, albeit one pregnant with possibility. We do not know what becomes of these “thousands,” only that they are now identifiable as a group by their proximity to the passive Muse. The iambic pentameter, earlier ill-fitting, is recoded by her presence, and translates in this last instant a topical, irregularly metered, affiliation into a firmer, socialized dwelling place.⁶⁵ Though “Ode” begins in a strict occasion, addressed directly in response to a public question, it only finds its strength by attending to the complex regionalism (“O rushing Contoocook!”) that undergirds that question. At its end, while still dwelling in the social potential of its actual moment, it both uses poetic form to stabilize that urgency, and extends its temporality and

⁶⁴ “The same benign necessity and the same practical abuse appear in the parties into which each State divides itself, of opponents and defenders of the administration of the government... We might as wisely reprove the east wind, or the frost, as a political party” (563-4). Cadava discusses this passage alongside Madison’s thinking on faction in *The Federalist Papers*. Cadava writes: “Echoing Madison’s definition of a faction, Emerson explains that the corruption of parties occurs when they fail to “plant themselves on the deep and necessary grounds to which they are respectively entitled,” and instead “lash themselves to fury in the carrying of some local and momentary measure, nowise useful to the commonwealth” (*W*, 3: 209). That parties are as inevitable as the natural laws that give us frost, that they reveal, even if only in a rude way, a “real and lasting relation,” recalls to Emerson that representation in America can never be virtual or inclusive. Always subject to the corruption of personal interest, representation may only be *actual*, that is to say, *provisional and partial*” (86, emphasis added). Cadava brings out the tension in Emerson between what the next pages label mere occasion—“some local and momentary measure”—and the transcendental occasion, that begins in, recognizes, and extends the urgency of the “actual.”

⁶⁵ Albert von Frank, editor of *Emerson’s Major Poetry*, records one probable source for the poem, in a gathering to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of the Polish revolt against Russian occupation on December 1st, 1845, on which Margaret Fuller reported for the *New York Tribune* (269). See also *JMN* 9:383: “Nature is always gainer, & reckons surely on our sympathy. The Russians eat up the Poles. What then? when the last Polander is gone, the Russians are men, are ourselves, & the Pole is forgotten in our identification with Russian parties. A philosopher is no philosopher unless he takes lively part with the thief who picks his pocket and with the bully that insults or strikes him.”

sociality into an open ended future. Behind this transcendental occasion lie a “mute poet” and an “astonished Muse,” absorbed into their effect.

Transcendental Occasions

“A poem is about something the way a cat is about the house.” Allen Grossman, *Summa Lyrica*

Up to this point, I’ve been treating the occasion as an organizing principle of language. Originating in Ciceronian rhetoric, it remains imbricated with humanistic pedagogical practices in their long afterlives, and provides an appropriately decorous framework for Augustan verse production, often serving, throughout this period, to articulate and reinforce far-flung social bonds. In an American context, we see its potency most proximately in oratorical culture and “poetry wars”—occasional verse leveraged topically for political ends in the Revolutionary and early Federal periods. While arguing this residual tradition undergirds the unremarked but fundamental timeliness of Emerson’s poetics, by aligning these with the Romantic reimagination of art’s relationship to society can we identify the particular affordances of such an exoteric stance, and understand how verse transcends the new specter of “mere” occasionality and becomes in Emerson, and then more extraordinarily in Thoreau, an occasion in itself, convening sociality in the text and renewing narrative time.

M.H. Abrams argues in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) that the defining feature of the Romantic revolution in poetry was the shift from a theory of mind as passive and receptive, to one in which consciousness creates the world it intervenes in. The angel of such an associationist psychology, in which mind receives impressions, which are then combined into ideas by the fancy, is Locke, for whom art is mimetic, referential, and dependent on the accuracy of impressions.⁶⁶ Kant, whom Emerson receives partially through reviews in quarterlies such as *The Edinburgh Review*, allows the work of art to be reimagined as purposive, autotelic, and an organic whole in se; the disinterested contemplation of such a work permits the free play of the faculties.⁶⁷ This aesthetic Kantianism, founded on the ontological privileging of the work of art is the prima facie condition of the New Criticism (as a methodologically similar procedure is of Chicago School Aristotelianism) and is as such responsible for the difficulty in recovering the value and function of verse in Emerson, which, directing readerly attention toward continuity, fit incompletely with Continental Romanticism.⁶⁸ (The necessity of holding to history and society are the core affirmation of “The Conservative”: “It affirms because it holds. Its fingers clutch the fact.” [174])⁶⁹ As in *Nature*, art for Emerson is a transitive state of language, less important in itself than as an artifact whose aim is to conduct the reader to knowledge: “The production of a work of art *throws a light upon the mystery of humanity*” (18). This function is carried in poetry’s formal features; for Emerson meter and rhyme are poetic language’s ‘natural’ traits, the

⁶⁶ The bad infinity of which is represented in the jumbled underworld of Pope’s *Dunciad*.

⁶⁷ *Critique of Judgment* §9.

⁶⁸ For a critique of the static dialectics that emerge from the privileging of Kant in American literary criticism (and tracing a Hegelian turn after 1940), see Gregory Jay, “Hegel and Trilling in America” (1989).

⁶⁹ It argues, “conservatism is debonair and social; reform is individual and imperious. We are reformers in spring and summer; in autumn and winter, we stand by the old... The leaves and a shell of soft wood are all that the vegetation of this summer has made, but the solid columnar stem, which lifts that bank of foliage into the air to draw the eye and to cool us with its shade, is the gift and legacy of dead and buried years” (175).

continuous history of which secures the poem's sociable potential and its historical legibility—functions which are ultimately valued above iconoclasm. As he writes in “Poetry and Imagination,” “the beginning of literature is the prayers of a people, and they are always hymns, poetic.... The prayers of nations are rhythmic, have iterations and alliterations like the marriage-service and burial-service in our liturgies.” These formal features—as the irregular prosody of “Ode” and “Uriel” reveals—must be self-consciously reinvented again and again, as the poem opens out into the responsive sociality carried in this inheritance. To such effect, likewise, does Emerson allude to, quote, or spuriously paraphrase past makers (“Saadi”). Such gestures reinforce the poem or fragment's status as a piece of a vibrant textual ecosystem, as an act of “translation,” and as a medial state of language which is passing into its effect on other subjects.⁷⁰

The attitude toward the past enacted by form as in frequent, and frequently anonymous, quotation, is less an allegiance to specific reference than a horizon of historicity. Put in this framework, Emerson's temporality, in which the moment balances and conditions a valuable but sclerotic cultural inheritance, and his use of verse as carrying specific capacities vis a vis the social, are most meaningfully in conversation with the Romanticism not of Kant, but of the Hegel of the *Aesthetics*. Attuned to the pressures of its moment on the work of art, Hegel's makerly account is furthermore clear sighted about the capacities of heroic poetry and “*pieces d'occasion*” that are lost in the Romantic turn inward. He finds the Kantian ideal of the beautiful unsatisfying on these grounds. If “in the beautiful ... universal and particular, end and means, concept and object, perfectly interpenetrate one another,” “this apparently perfect reconciliation is still supposed by Kant at the last to be only subjective in respect of the judgement and the production [of art], and not itself to be absolutely true and actual” (60). By contrast, Hegel makes use of an array of concepts to think about the “particularity” of the specific worldly conditions which a work of art metabolizes in its dialectical work of manifesting Spirit. Against the “inessential accident and caprice” (197) of trivial art, the self-reflective artwork is called forward in dialectical tension with its “situation,” which comprises “(A) the state of affairs as such, particularized so as to have a determinate character, and, in this determinacy, it is (B) at the same time the stimulus for the specific expression of the content which has to be revealed in existence by means of artistic representation” (199). The stance of the work to its situation varies by era and medium, but Hegel goes out of his way to specify that “Many lyric poems have such an occasional situation. A particular mood and feeling is a situation which can be known and grasped poetically, and which, in relation too to external circumstances, festivals, victories, etc., incites to this or that more comprehensive or more restricted expression and configuration of feelings and ideas” (203). This list of the occasions of “lyric poems” neatly matches Cicero's “public occasions.” For Hegel, as it will be for Adorno, the lyric's work is immanently social, in a constructive capacity; he often has in mind Pindar, whom he cites as an exemplum of such work. The lyric emerges not, from an autochthonous Wordsworthian “spontaneous overflow,”

⁷⁰ For the poet as translator, see, *Nature's* discussion of “particular natural facts” as spiritual facts, and see “The poet, the orator, bred in the woods, whose senses have been nourished by their fair and appeasing changes, year after year, without design and without heed,—shall not lose their lesson altogether, in the roar of cities or the broil of politics” (23), and “The Poet”: “A rhyme in one of our sonnets should not be less pleasing than the iterated nodes of a seashell, or the resembling difference of a group of flowers. The pairing of the birds is an idyl, not tedious as our idyls are; a tempest is a rough ode, without falsehood or rant: a summer, with its harvest sown, reaped, and stored, is an epic song, subordinating how many admirably executed parts?” (459).

but a “particular mood or feeling” which, “in relation” to specifically social occasions, “incites”—produces a specific “configuration of feelings and ideas,” the telos of the work.

For Hegel, as I am arguing it is for Emerson, the poem is inexorably dependent on, and reflective of, its moment and *socius*.⁷¹ In its “situation”—a term which also flags art’s medial ontological condition—we see “the middle stage between the universal, inherently unmoved, state of the world and the concrete action, inherently opened out into action and reaction, on which account the situation has to display in itself the character of both extremes and lead us from one to the other” (200). Whereas for Kant, the art object offers the perceiver an opportunity for free play (which Zinkin [2000] understands in terms of the *sensus communis* of §20, an intensive form of sensibility) in Hegel, as in Emerson, the work of the work is ongoing, as, fundamentally dynamic, it “lead[s]” us beyond it. Where are we led or “incited”? In Emerson, we’ve seen how verse is aimed at its own vanishing point, as it produces selves, temporalities, and affiliations that exceed and succeed it. In Hegelian hindsight, poetry is ranged before, and only slightly below philosophy, which, as the only form of the spirit appropriate to modernity, poetry prepares us for. However, as Charlie Altieri argues in *Modernist Poetry and the Limitations of Materialist Theory* (2021), Hegel’s methodological incorporation of the psychology of making at the level of argument makes a significant claim as to the primacy of the reader’s own creative capacities. In Altieri’s telling, Hegel asks us to experience the artwork as an invitation to inhabit the mental states of its maker and to recognize the demands on the work at its origin. As its maker is “solicited by an external incentive, by an event” into “relation with an available given material” (288), so are readers entreated by the work to enter its situation and imagine the affordances of specific makerly decisions.⁷² Though the work of art (and specifically the poem, privileged as it is by its ability to dialectically narrate complex interior states alongside the worldly “situation”) is always emplaced, as a dynamic set of relations it points outwards: leading the reader at once into enabling “configurations of feeling,” and simultaneously toward a self-consciousness produced through encountering works as problems. To make sense of the unfinished (prosodically, elliptically) and fragmentary verse objects they encounter in Emerson, readers are solicited to inhabit cognate states of interpretive potential.

René Wellek records Emerson’s admiration for Hegel; as with Schelling and Oken, his assimilation of principles is “partial” and idiosyncratic. Unsurprisingly, Emerson “was most impressed by Hegel’s philosophy of history and evolution,” and comfortably paraphrases the Hegelian dialectic both in the context of nature and civil history at several points, even as it thorough acquaintance with the work remains unevidenced (Wellek 57). My point in returning to Hegel is rather to recover in its most explicit version this larger conversation in German Idealism about the social capacities of poetry, and the importance of the “situation” as an analytic of poetics, even if Emerson’s reception of particular ideas proved circuitous. Reading Emerson’s “intuitive” dialectics (another partial reception, from Kant) through a more systematic

⁷¹ In yet starker terms: “Yet, on the other side, the greatest works of art have often owed their creation to some quite external stimulus. Pindar’s Odes, e.g., were frequently commissioned; similarly the aim of buildings and the subject of paintings has countless times been prescribed to artists, who yet have been able to acquire the necessary inspiration for executing their commission. Indeed there is even frequently noticeable a complaint of artists that they lack topics on which they could work” (287).

⁷² *Modernist Poetry and the Limitations of Materialist Theory* (2021), 228ff. A cognate alternation between forensic analysis of poetry in society, and the ecstatic provocation of the subjectivity of poesis, is the plot of “The Poet,” and the transition between these rhetorical modes allows Emerson some of his most startling effects *passim*.

dialectician has the effect of allowing us to reconstruct the elided arcs of his dialectical negations, which prepare and sustain his positive affirmations.⁷³ As such, it allows us to see the dialectical scaffolding that continues beneath the apparent intermittence of the poet and his capacities in Emerson's philosophy and embodied practice, as it allows us to piece together the two primary aspects of the Poet, in turn remote and fiercely independent, then immanent and auxiliary.

I am suggesting, thus, that the occasion as developed by Emerson is both transcendental in that it represents the adduction of the occasion as the temporal grammar by which the self recognizes its own contingency, the internalization of its own extrinsic powers, and dialectical, in that it locates in practice those moments when the monological self is supplanted by the heteroglossia of its condition. It is by locating the fissures of genre, time, and style that peak to aporia in these intervals, that we can identify how the a priori ubiquity of verse, as a constituent element of sociality (Cohen), produces the desired absence of the ideal and prophetic Poet, and vice versa, as we have seen in "The Poet." Nowhere is this contradictory and Janus-faced prescription more tangible than in Emerson's endorsement of "Ellery" Channing's work and person, and, subsequently, in the ambivalence of Channing's adaptation of Emerson's poetics. It is to Channing, and the entailed question of how a specifically periodical verse helps produce the literary ideology of *The Dial* (1840-44), that we now turn.

⁷³ "The Conservative" exerts its considerable sympathy among these negated terms, thinking through the dialectic with unusual specificity. Emerson articulates the incomplete transcendence of the "Actual": "Moreover, so deep is the foundation of the existing social system, that it leaves no one out of it. ... For as you cannot jump from the ground without using the resistance of the ground, nor put out the boat to sea, without shoving from the shore, nor attain liberty without rejecting obligation, so you are under the necessity of using the Actual order of things, in order to disuse it; to live by it, whilst you wish to take away its life" (178).

Chapter 2. “Hurrying Light”: Ellery Channing

William “Ellery” Channing (1817-1901) has dropped out of the Transcendentalist canon. He does not appear in the most recent Emerson biography (James Marcus, *Glad to the Point of Fear* [2024]), and is sparse in Richardson’s *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (1995). His traces, in works that continue to be read, are easy to miss. These consist, most prominently, of fragments of his verse, which Thoreau quotes frequently in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) and *Walden* (1854); his anonymous companionship in *Walden* and *Cape Cod*; and a single line—“If my bark sinks, ‘tis to another sea”—which, much quoted in the ‘40s and ‘50s, becomes the well-known Emily Dickinson poem. Still, the reader of the journals and letters of the Concord circle cannot but be struck by his ubiquity. If the frequency with which he is mentioned is in part attributable to a dense ligature of family connection on both the Channing side and through his marriage to Ellen Fuller, as well as to the “moods” that made him a difficult personality, it owes as much to his attested brilliancy in conversation and sharpness of observation. Indeed, in Americanist scholarship that accommodates the interplay between social and intellectual life in Concord as a basis of narrower focus on literary production (Megan Marshall, *Margaret Fuller* [2013]; David Dowling, *Emerson’s Protégés* [2014]) Channing comes necessarily to the fore. In the correspondence of Margaret Fuller as “E” or “C”; in Emerson’s journals and Thoreau’s *Journal*, where he is quietly absorbed as “we” or “my companion”; and in records such as *Cape Cod*, Channing’s startling language and paradoxical personality presents as a cipher at the center of Transcendentalist poetic thinking.

This centrality is attested in the posthumous *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli* (1852), the first volume of which is edited by Emerson, a task which entails composing the extensive narrative and connective passages. Though Channing is unnamed in a treatment of Fuller’s close friends, his profile is unmistakable, and the inclusion of a sonnet he dedicates to her makes the attribution failsafe.⁷⁴ The material is striking for the dense web of interlocation and requotation it stages—Emerson is quoting Fuller quoting her conversations with Channing—as well as for the way it veers from a focus on Fuller, to a focus on Channing. Emerson writes:

She was at this time, too, much drawn also to a man of poetic sensibility, and of much reading,—which he took the greatest pains to conceal,—studious of the art of poetry, but still more a poet in his conversation than in his poems, who attracted Margaret by the flowing humor with which he filled the present hour, and the prodigality with which he forgot all the past.

‘Unequal and uncertain,’ she says, ‘but in his good moods, of the best for a companion, absolutely abandoned to the revelations of the moment, without distrust or check of any kind, unlimited and delicate, abundant in thought, and free of motion, he enriches life, and fills the hour.’ (210)

We remark how closely Channing is associated with those values that are the subject of Chapter One, “the moment” and “the present hour,” and how intensely both Emerson and Fuller associate

⁷⁴ Entitled “To Margaret,” a representative passage reads: “I clutch the gorgeous thoughts thou throw’st away / From the profound unfathomable mine, / And with them this mean common hour do twine...” (212).

him with spontaneous linguistic force. Emerson's paraphrase in the first paragraph, of the Fuller letter which follows immediately, superadds to Fuller's language an insistence that the mode of temporal and linguistic "abandonment" Channing offers in conversation, is also poetry: "still more a poet in his conversation." The attraction of such a relationship to language, stemming from a self-conscious inability to achieve it, is broadly palpable throughout both Fuller and Emerson's correspondence and journals. As this character sketch goes on for three pages, Emerson's commentary recreates conversations between the two, and, dwelling on Channing's apothegms, loses focus on Fuller herself. At its conclusion, Fuller is moved to a rare and metaphysical vulnerability, as she understands—in a letter to Emerson—Channing's ease in thought as a profound challenge to her own "worldliness" and "armor" (212).

Thus the focus, in this tangle of voices, shifts from the spontaneous production of poetic or "unlimited" language, represented by Channing, to the reception of said speech, and its power to pull its nested listeners into new states of cognition. Just as Fuller casts herself as an evaluator and grateful receiver of Channing's intensely present language so, as we have seen, Emerson represents Channing's verse in his journal, as valuable precisely because it impels him, Emerson, to a renewed attention to his own idiosyncratic inner states. Here, Fuller-Emerson's thinking about the power of the moment, and the power of flowing language to "forg[e]t the past" is so interesting because it occurs specifically as elegy, in a collection entitled *Memoirs*. If it is the occasion of elegy that allows Channing's spontaneous language, and the sonnet included in the volume, to gather and rearrange a new community of listeners, it is also the case that the extreme presence of Channing's language in its moment—and Fuller's attraction to it, which is charged in some degree with eros—almost successfully allows us to forget that the text is to be read as elegy. It is this dialectic between the miracle of spontaneous speech—the irruptive occasion that poiesis creates—and the occasion, usually elegy, as the hermeneutic through which verse takes on meaning, that this chapter treats. Whereas Channing at first functions, for others in the Transcendentalist circle, as the acme of such socially responsive and present language, by the conclusion of this chapter we see how he figures himself as the elegiac interpreter of the movement, challenging the discrete boundaries of linguistic selfhood as he knits individuals into a community defined by shared poetic interpretation.

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The task of this chapter is to take in earnest this validation of Channing by more focused writers, and to thereby revise the contemporary hierarchy of value—and bias of the archive—that places formal literary output so far above often atelic and evanescent poetic activity.⁷⁵ It is to continue the critical trends that have, since Stanley Cavell, allowed the Transcendentalist self to be understood, not as cut off from society, but a grammatical unit: performative, transitional,

⁷⁵ Valuing activity in itself and in the contexts available to it in its moment, represents a continuation of insights derived from feminist, Queer, and Black studies. Mary Louise Kete, in *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle-class Identity in 19th Century America* (Duke UP, 2000), traces collaborative, and overwhelmingly female, poetic activity on the margins of cosmopolitan cultural capitals as a means of community cohesion. On the erotics of evanescent aesthetic gestures, see Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*. On Black improvisation as a sustained epistemological challenge to the metaphysical mainline represented by Heidegger, Kant, Wittgenstein, and Derrida, see Fred Moten, *In the Break* (2003).

contingent, and requiring the incorporation of external consciousnesses, both human and not. When our focus shifts from realized thought, to processes of intellection—as in “man thinking” of “The American Scholar”—and from the sharp distinctions of monadic selves, to the play of self against and with its constitutive communities on scales ranging from the minutiae of prosody and syntax, to universal ethical imperatives, Channing’s ubiquity becomes not an embarrassment of the movement, but rather a key that challenges how we value both poetry and talk. The paradoxes of his life and work offer, in their exaggerated and grotesque contours, a window into the extreme, and surprisingly exoteric, implications of Transcendentalist epistemology.

After tracing this importance, I then gamble that Channing’s verse becomes considerably more interesting when read according to the terms it articulates for itself, as a dynamic participant in a cultural and social field which extends beyond poetry itself. Previous readings of Channing’s poetry, however few, see him almost exclusively as a complement to his more famous companions—bringing out, per Lawrence Buell, the problematic of inspiration in Transcendentalist poetics, and in McGill, as a melancholic underside to the worship of Nature evinced in Emerson and Thoreau.⁷⁶ I intend to liberate him from these comparative lenses to the degree possible, and understand the affordances of the increasingly complex relationship of the poet and poetry to his environment across Channing’s output.

Pursuing such a reading, I suggest an enduring tension in Channing, visible through his work, defined by competing readings of Emerson’s Poet, understood both as a hieratic authority, and as a more fleeting vox populi. If, in the early work, the frequency with which Channing invokes “The Poet” in his verse speaks to the social power with which he invests that figure, it is already balanced by an impulse toward the sublation of the individual into the social (and sometimes natural) aspects of the occasion. A chiasmic structure reveals itself, in which, although Channing’s first two books advance claims derived from an idealizing reading of the Emersonian Poet, after 1846, with the publication of *Conversations in Rome Between an Artist, a Catholic, and a Critic* (1847), Channing’s output becomes increasingly governed by the social and conversational forms he explores concomitantly in his prose works. It is in these prose works, the “Letters of a Poet and a Painter” published in *The Dial*, the *Conversations*, and the “Country Walks” manuscript (1853) folded into *Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist* (1872), that Channing’s importance to the broader movement is clearest, as an avatar for the importance of interpersonality, anonymity, and the linguistic transformations that conversation can enable. For though Channing styles himself an impersonal or Emersonian poet in the 1840s, his verse is always received as reflective of his social being, composed of the same fabric as his personality and conversation. I’ll tease this dynamic out by returning to Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller, to explore how Channing is represented in their work and communication as the poet of occasions. Concluding, this chapter looks forward to Thoreau’s reworking of the two men’s friendship and poetics in *Walden*.

Life and Contexts

Appreciating the depth of these formative relationships requires biographical background. Ellery Channing, rebellious nephew to Edward Tyrell Channing, then Boylston

⁷⁶ Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Cornell 1973), pp. 241 ff. Fredrick McGill, *Channing of Concord. A Life of William Ellery Channing II*. (Rutgers 1967). 127 ff.

Professor of Rhetoric, and Boston's most influential Unitarian minister, W.E. Channing, D.D.S., leaves Harvard in a characteristic act of rebellion before the conclusion of his first semester, in 1834.⁷⁷ Thereafter, he departs to stay with relatives on the Artichoke River in Illinois (1834), lives with his father in Boston, desultorily reading and writing (1835-8), then returns to Illinois to pioneer, a task he was uniquely ill-suited for (1839). His schoolfriend, S.G. Ward—whose polymathic precocity was highly prized by the Transcendentalist Club cohort—forwards his poems to Emerson in 1839.⁷⁸ Emerson's journal of that day vividly records their strong effect on him and, simultaneously, his difficulty in identifying precisely the source of that effect.⁷⁹ Emerson proceeds to court an initially coy Channing, even as he urges him to tighten his technique, writing, e.g., "I have seen no verses written in America that have such inward music, or that seem to me such authentic inspiration" (January 30, 1840, *SL* 206).⁸⁰ Emerson's intense support from 1840-44 results in Channing becoming the single contributor most represented in the contents of the *Dial*.⁸¹ After a whirlwind courtship in Cincinnati, where he had gone after abandoning farming for editorial work, Channing marries Ellen Fuller, sister of Margaret Fuller, in 1841, to the dismay of her family. Fired by Emerson's support, and convinced of his poetic vocation, Channing responds enthusiastically to the invitation to resettle in Concord, which is effected, after a winter with Margaret Fuller in Cambridge, in the spring of 1843.⁸² That summer, Channing's *Poems* appears in Boston with James Munroe, the expense covered by Ward.⁸³

Over the next decade, Channing's relationship to both Emerson and Thoreau, and, to only a slightly lesser degree, Alcott and Hawthorne, deepens.⁸⁴ He walks with Emerson sometimes twice a day, and is a constant presence in Thoreau's *Journal*, as the two undertake frequent excursions both close to Concord and further afield. (Their companionship, and mutual

⁷⁷ Poe uses the family relationship as one of his chief cudgels (the other being an attack on prosodic irregularity) in his damning 1843 review in *Graham's Magazine*. He errs in presuming Ellery the son of the elder W.E. Channing. For a representative tranche: "In spite, however, of the customary phrase about a man's 'making a fool of himself,' we doubt if any one was ever a fool of his own free will and accord. A poet, therefore, should not always be taken too strictly to task. He should be treated with leniency, and, even when damned, should be damned with respect. Nobility of descent, too, should be allowed its privileges not more in social life than in letters." "William Ellery Channing," *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe—Vol III: Literati &c.* (1850), 3:229-240.

⁷⁸ Hudspeth 22.

⁷⁹ "The poems I have just been reading of C. are a steady autumnal light. That is not in them which they give me. Over every true poem lingers a certain wild beauty immeasurable; a happiness lightsome and delicious fills my heart & brain" (*JMN* 7:276). Compare Hawthorne's similarly conflicted endorsement, in "Earth's Holocaust": "a great deal of excellent inflammability was exhibited in a thin volume of poems by Ellery Channing; although, to speak the truth, there were certain portions that hissed and spluttered in a very disagreeable fashion." (*Graham's*, 1844).

⁸⁰ Dowling, reading the personal address and formal command evinced in the Spenserian stanzas Channing addresses to Emerson, shows that the courtship is mutual (178-184).

⁸¹ A cross-sourced list of contents and contributors is found in George Willis Cooke, *An Historical and Biographical Introduction to Accompany the Dial as Reprinted in Numbers for the Rowfant Club*. (2 vols.), Cleveland, 1902, II, 166-169, 196-211 and 216-217. See also Dassow Walls, 2017, 144. Emerson's support, however, extends throughout his life. See his promotion of Channing's poems to Thomas Mayo Brewer in December 18, 1846 (*Emerson in His Own Time*, 121).

⁸² Thoreau, *Correspondence*, (ed. Hudspeth): "In spring 1841, he moved to Cincinnati to work for his uncle, James Perkins, who introduced him to Ellen Fuller (1820-1856), daughter of Timothy and Margaret Crane Fuller and sister of Margaret. Channing and Fuller married in September 1841, while he was editor of the Cincinnati Gazette; the couple returned to Massachusetts in September 1843." p. 154.

⁸³ Hudspeth, 30.

⁸⁴ Alcott records Channing's descriptions of Walden pond at some length (*Journals*, ed Shepard, 202); with Hawthorne, Channing was more likely to pursue boating expeditions (Hudspeth 31).

resemblance, is proverbial enough to be the target of James Russell Lowell's pen in *A Fable for Critics*⁸⁵.) Journeys with Thoreau include career-defining journeys such as those to Cape Cod (*Cape Cod*, 1865) to Fire Island to gather Margaret Ossoli's effects,⁸⁶ and tours of Quebec (*A Yankee in Canada*, 1866), the Catskills, and New Hampshire.⁸⁷

Critical attention has been intermittent. Useful biographies by McGill (1967) and Hudspeth (1973) detail the vicissitudes of his personal life and his constantly renegotiated Brahmin bonafides, while offering partial defenses of, especially, his landscape poems.⁸⁸ Hudspeth's readings of the work are surprisingly surface level; Channing's poetry is understood as an uncritical celebration of nature for its capacity to afford sensuous delight, all the while lacking the metaphysical inquiry or the central claim of natural divinity found in Emerson (45). Also in 1973, Lawrence Buell reevaluates Channing's poetry with somewhat more heft in *Literary Transcendentalism*. Buell reads the work as a melancholic supplement to the self-assured verse of Thoreau and Emerson, illuminating a central tension in the movement that is elided in theirs: the frustrations inherent in a poetics dependent on an "overdramatized" moment of inspiration that rarely came (64, 262). Without glossing over defects, Buell is fairest to Channing's strengths, and his explication of the internal tensions of the Transcendentalists' figure of the messianic "prophet-poet" role—a pre-defined boundary Channing struggled to inhabit—offers a broad impetus for this study. At the same time, Buell's focus, following Perry Miller and Sacvan Bercovitch, remains on locating Transcendentalism as a secular offshoot of the Puritan-Unitarian tradition, and squaring its local provocations with a self-consciously national poetic mainline. It depends, as such, on models of lyric speech that quietly replicate a Millsian alienation of the speaker from local contexts, and the fundamental primacy of the written word inherited by the American Calvinist tradition. Both these tenets are challenged by this study, which invites us to read the Emersonian Poet not as a vestigial prophet lingering into modernity, but as modernity's conscience, testing the new public forms of nationhood against the stability of a private or infra-New England subjectivity.

More recently, Channing's selected letters, published by Dedmond in *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1989, 90, 91) permits Kathryn McKee's valuable investigation of his troubled relationship with Emerson: an emanation, in her Freudian reading, of Channing's virtual orphanhood, and an attendant lifelong need for authority and approval (1994). Meanwhile, Dowling's *Emerson's Protégés* (2014) discusses the extended relationship between the two men as a quasi-professional "mentorship," part of a "strategy" by Emerson, in a developing American literary economy to "market" Transcendentalism's legacy (5). While Dowling's Americanist lens and bracketing of literary value offer a radical corrective to self-perpetuating gradients of

⁸⁵ The poets are rendered as nameless and indistinguishable imitators of Emerson, who "skim" his brain and pick the apples from "the prophet's each pocket." Lowell addresses Thoreau (discernible by his short legs): "Can't you let neighbor Emerson's orchards alone? / Besides, 'tis no use, you'll not find e'en a core,—/[Channing] has picked up all the windfalls before."

⁸⁶ The Houghton preserves locks of Fuller's hair gathered by the pair.

⁸⁷ Posthumous publications by Ticknor and Fields, Boston. Channing's presence is generally minimized. His traces are in the narratives' first-person plural, and their occasional references to a "companion."

⁸⁸ The personality swings are extreme, and the behavior as shocking to contemporaries as the modern reader. Channing was largely dependent on family remittances and the support of friends, and his indifference and abuse in the marriage resulted in T.W. Higginson, his brother-in-law, dramatically smuggling away Ellen and the children in 1853. The couple reconciled in 1855.

canonicity and critical attention, the presentism of Dowling's vocabulary and conception of the literary "market"—which emerges, in his account, fully formed, rather than, as Charvatt has demonstrated, defined by contradictory, and frequently anti-market impetuses—as well as his bracketing the texts in question, fundamentally limits its reach (175 ff.).

Dialing Channing, or, to read periodically

Some of the centrality of Channing to Emerson's thinking about the Poet has been dwelled on in the previous chapter.⁸⁹ This section reads the *Dial's* second number, which contains its first sustained statement on poetry and the poet, as a multiply-authored artifact that theorizes and serves as an example of how such a poetics of occasion might look like in practice. Instantiating a model of literary distribution in which texts circulate hand to hand, and imagining the demotic social effects that would flow from such a decentered and immanent poetics, this second issue of *The Dial* turns repeatedly to Channing's figure and verse.

Esra Pound provokes in "Small Magazines," that "each of these publications expresses, fundamentally, one idea and one only" (689-91).⁹⁰ In such a spirit, the first numbers especially of *The Dial* can be read as a self-conscious articulation of the movement's core tenets and their relative importance. The first number, June 1840, organizes itself around the problem of criticism. In the inaugural editors' note, the reader is told that the "influence" of the reforming "spirit of the times" "appears not yet in new books so much as in the higher tone of criticism." (3) It is a preoccupation picked up by the immediately succeeding piece, Fuller's erudite essay, "A Short Essay on Critics," which adroitly positions itself as a receiver of contemporary German thought, and promises to "investigate the laws of criticism as a science, to settle its conditions as an art" (10). For Fuller, the critic must combine (and exceed) the functions of "the poet," "the philosopher," and "the observer," representing an enlightened synthesis of all three. The urgency of criticism, and its power to reform, pervades the issue; for instance, by a review of Brownson's writings, which identifies him as one of the "small class of scholars" who "value literature not as an end, but an instrument to help the solution of problems." (23) Literature, in the first number, flags overwhelmingly applied and moral literature.

Such a lens would ill prepare the reader for the second number, in October, which, tuned by contrast to Emerson's thinking, preoccupations, and editorial labor, is remarkably focused on poetry and the poet. It is a blazon announced by Emerson's "On Modern Literature," which leads the issue: a piece which labors to reconcile a remote and idealized "primary" literature (Shakespeare, the Bible) with limited concessions to "the library of the Present age." The echoes of Schiller's "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry" are loud and unacknowledged, though the application may be surprising. Shelley and Wordsworth—both poets of origins, with Wordsworth

⁸⁹ Other biographical facts might be noted: when Channing desires to tour Europe in 1846, Emerson donates \$75; when he contracts for the publication of his own poetry with James Munroe, he makes the publication of Channing's *Woodman* a condition of the contract; when Emerson assembles his anthology *Parnassus* (Boston: 1875), Channing is represented by no fewer than eight lyrics, while Keats and Coleridge, by contrast, have six each.

⁹⁰ Section VII of the same essay presents the more familiar contention, that "The value of fugitive periodicals "of small circulation" is ultimately measured by the work they have brought to press... The work of writers who have emerged in or via such magazines outweighs in permanent value the work of the writers who have not emerged in this manner. The history of contemporary letters has, to a very manifest extent, been written in such magazines." (701-2)

representing an increasingly influential source for Emerson—are dispensed with as imitative and a poor craftsman (Shelley) or dull (Wordsworth), with only Goethe found to be a satisfying exemplar of the “subjective” revolution. It is with him that the essay reconciles this tension between local truth values, which we might call the *factive*, and truth in itself. Even as the acme of contemporary possibility, “Goethe, then, must be set down as the poet of the Actual, not of the Ideal ; the poet of limitation , not of possibility ; of this world, and not of religion and hope ; in short, if I may say so, the poet of prose, and not of poetry.” (156)

This is a startling delineation of poetry from Emerson, whom we are accustomed to imagine as ultimately limited by an allegiance to inherited forms and prosody. In terms that recall Hegel’s “situation,” and may surprise a rote reading of Transcendentalist poetics, Emerson arrives at a conception of poetry’s essential contingency:

And yet is literature in some sort a creature of time. Always the oracular soul is the source of thought, but always the occasion is administered by the low mediations of circumstance. Religion, Love, Ambition, War, some fierce antagonism, or it may be, some petty annoyance must break the round of perfect circulation, or no spark, no joy, no event can be. The poet rambling through the fields or the forest, absorbed in contemplation to that degree, that his walk is but a pretty dream, would never awake to precise thought, if the scream of an eagle, the cries of a crow or curlew near his head did not break the sweet continuity. Nay the finest lyrics of the poet come of this unequal parentage ; the imps of matter beget such child on the soul, fair daughter of God. (157)

In Emerson’s sustained metaphor of (mis)creation, gestation, and begetting, “the occasion”—a word richly unmodified, suggestive of “_ of thought,” but preparing the succeeding turn toward the lyric—stands as a transcendence of “fierce antagonism” or a “petty annoyance.” It is literature, viz., the lyric, that, born of “the low mediations of circumstance,” becomes itself “event.”⁹¹ Whereas elsewhere Emerson papers over or elides the contradiction between these two pressures on poetry/literature, the ideal and the mundane: here, the “unequal parentage” is absorbed into the concept of the poem itself in a way that helps us see how Emerson’s poetic endorsement accepts, with regularity, imperfect poets.⁹² Nor, with this preparation, is it surprising that when Emerson seeks to expand the category of “literature” beyond the “bare word,” toward a word that would denote both actual language and its effect on the reader and the world, it is Channing he means. Still in “Modern Literature,” he writes:

Observe, moreover, that we ought to credit literature with much more than the bare word it gives us. I have just been reading poems which now in my memory shine with a certain steady, warm , autumnal light. That is not in their grammatical construction which they give me. If I analyze the sentences, it eludes me, but is the genius and suggestion of the

⁹¹ Emerson shares this equation of poetry and event with an unlikely interlocutor, Alain Badiou. As Christopher Nealon writes in “Reading on the Left,” “Badiou’s assimilation of ecstasis to militancy and his assimilation of poems to “the poetic name of the event” severely contracts the imaginable canon of “poetry” even as it elevates the role of “the poetic” to cochairmanship with philosophy in the sciences of the human.”

⁹² It is resonant, if not illuminating, to place this discourse of poetry’s grotesque origins beside Fuller’s description of Channing to Emerson in 1842 as “a great Genius with a little wretched boy trotting beside him” (*JMN* 6:323).

whole. Over every true poem lingers a certain wild beauty, immeasurable ; a happiness lightsome and delicious fills the heart and brain ...

The passage is taken, verbatim from Emerson's rapturous first reading of Channing's poems in early 1840, a journal entry already quoted. Representative, too, is the way the passage moves away from the artifact toward a series of environmental and physiological correlates. As Emerson's reading of "our actual state of culture" is fundamentally skeptical, a proximate artifact's porosity to the world, or its capacity to induce an ecstatic annulment of self, can function as a paradoxical reminder of the ultimate, remote value of "literature" understood as a totalizing whole.

The revision of an inherently messianic Poet, to a mortal figure whose work points beyond itself to vistas taken in imagination, and whose value is not measured by the "bare word" but in a continual process of reception, stands in clear parallel to the other theme which braids this second number: the question of Christ's divinity. Through a review of Andrew Wylie (Cranch), and pieces such as "Letter to a Theological Student" (Ripley) and "A Lesson for the Day" (Parker) the "Christianity of Christ" is revised as the "Religion of Reason," and we learn "the influence of real Christianity is to disenthral the man ; to restore him to his nature, until he obeys Conscience, Reason, and Religion, and is made free by that obedience." (207)⁹³ The ethical clarity offered by the example of Christ's life, not his nature, rides above the degraded Christianities (of the Church, of Society [210]) characterized by the corruption inherent in concentrated authority. That the Transcendentalist Poet inherits and secularizes many prophetic functions has been remarked upon by Buell (184) as by others; that the poet's authority may work, however, by a similar mechanics of dissolution and reception, as that posited by radical readings of Christ's mortality and subsequent interpretation, is less prepared.

Emerson's succeeding essay, "New Poetry" (220-234) which culminates with a running commentary of twelve of Channing's poems, represents his most clarion endorsement of occasionality as a fundamental value of poetry. Alongside other *Dial* essays, "Modern Literature" and "Thoughts on Art"—in which verse is presented as prone to decompose, giving "greater pleasure in quotation than as a whole"—Emerson here sets out consistently a vision of poetry and the poet as ways by which we can know and feel for each other and inhabit the fleeting kairotic occasions that are the fundamental component of Transcendentalist temporality. Poems are to be valued specifically because they emerge responsive to their moment, enabling communication and sympathy between subjects in that specific context; these poems advertise the ephemerality and contingencies of the bonds they enable, values which they replicate in themselves. As "New Poetry" continues, the "moods" it ascribes to the anonymized Channing are understood as revelatory of the epistemological principle of "moods," which will become increasingly primary in Emerson's *Essays: Second Series* (1844), notably in "Experience." Reading and writing poetry, in this schematic, teaches us not domination or vision, but submission to "Power."

This explicit turn from "a stricter school of literary faith" to "verses of society" and "household poetry" is presented as a response to the increase in general literacy which has a knock-down effect on Emerson's taste. Such a causality is the inverse of what we would expect:

⁹³ Attributions via *The Walden Woods Project* (<http://www.walden.org>, accessed 4/27/2024)

We own that, though we were trained in a stricter school of literary faith, and were in all our youth inclined to the enforcement of the strictest restrictions on the admission of candidates to the Parnassian fraternity, and denied the name of poetry to every composition in which the workmanship and the material were not equally excellent, in our middle age we have grown lax, and have learned to find pleasure in verses of a ruder strain, to enjoy verses of society, or those effusions which in persons of a happy nature are the easy and unpremeditated translation of their thoughts and feelings into rhyme. This new taste for a certain private and household poetry ... really indicates, we suppose, that a new style of poetry exists. The number of writers has increased. Every child has been taught the tongues. The universal communication of the arts of reading and writing has brought the works of the great poets into every house, and made all ears familiar with the poetic forms... A wider epistolary intercourse ministers to the ends of sentiment and reflection than ever existed before ; the practice of writing diaries is becoming almost general, and every day witnesses new attempts to throw into verse the experiences of private life. (220)

Echoing the decentering of Christ's divinity ("literary faith") poetry is distributed out into "every house," and accepted as fundamentally mixed art. Emerson cycles through metaphors of inspiration or faith, then craft, natural fluency ("strain"), and, finally lands on imitation and "familiar[ity]" with "poetic forms." The effect of this chain of metaphorical analogs is that the scope of literature falls from a timeless universal, to an enduring but artificial object, to "society," and then ultimately to domestic "familiarity" (a value distinct from knowledge) and the dailiness of "diaries" and "every day." As it does so, however, it serves new ends. In the last quoted sentence, Emerson works the back end of this paragraph-long chiasmus from letters, to "diaries," to "verse," correlating the production of "private" verse with a reinscription of "sentiment and reflection" as the "ends" of literature, and the foundational bonds of the newly literate society that he is analyzing. An arc that begins in the denial of the name of poetry, dwells rather sociologically in its center on how various demotic forms enable new versions ("translations") of "thoughts and feelings," and thus new ways of connecting ("epistolary intercourse"), before returning to a renewed ideal of verse as a daily "witnessing," an "attempt" (or *essai*) of this charged Emersonian term, "experiences."

And, when verse is understood as a complement to demotic literacy, rather than a visionary ideal, Emerson stresses, a number of salutary social effects follow. Is not "True progress," he asks, "flagged by the "increasing intellectual and moral interest of men in each other? What can be better for the republic than that the Capitol, the White House, and the Court House are becoming of less importance than the farm-house and the bookcloset?" (221). A revision this complete in society and poetics requires a distinct generic term, "Verses of the Portfolio" (221), by which Emerson highlights both verse's preparatory aspect, and its contiguity with the (social) body; a portfolio is what one carries with one when one goes out, and it is premised on exchange.⁹⁴ This shift in what we read, Emerson suggests, results in a clear shift in what we read for: "If we are losing our interest in public men, and finding that their spell lay in number and size only, and acquiring instead a taste for the depths of thought and emotion, as

⁹⁴ When Emerson assumes the editorship of *The Dial* in 1842, he inaugurates a new feature thus titled—"Verses of the Portfolio"—specifically to showcase Channing's work more effectively (Richardson 186).

they may be sounded in the soul of the citizen or the countryman, does it not replace man for the state, and character for official power?" Emerson's question reimagines literary transmission as a decentered horizontal web of citizens reading each other's literal and figurative "characters." This modest shift in what values we ascribe to poetry, and what kinds of verse we read, swiftly and ultimately rearranges how we relate to others and our own social presence.

As Emerson reveals that these general thoughts on verse as modeling and reinforcing a horizontal society, are prompted by a particular example, he demonstrates how such a decentered web of verse circulation and reception works. Once hierarchies of the public and the visible are rejected, it turns out that the reading of verse depends on the same structure and ends as a "wider epistolary intercourse."⁹⁵ When Emerson writes that he "ha[s] led to these thoughts by reading some verses, which were lately put into our hands by a friend," he stresses the way that poetry glances through the pathways of bonds like friendship. Though we know that S.G. Ward sent Emerson Channing's poems in the mail,⁹⁶ in "hands" we can locate both the aesthetics of physical immanence that is here being elevated, and, in the quiet image of the touching of friends' hands, the reinforcement of the affection that such horizontal exchange of poetry occasions.⁹⁷ The value of verse, however, is not that it merely travels existing networks, but also "leads" us beyond these—both to new thought and feeling, and outward to familiarity with other people. This is not, however, an uncomplicated circuit of sympathy, and Emerson's sentence continues, "... by a friend, with the remark, that they were the production of a youth, who had long passed out of the mood in which he wrote them, so that they had become quite dead to him. Our first feeling on reading them was a lively joy." Emerson has, a paragraph before, called "geniuses" "humble, self-accusing, moody men"; here, as he turns towards the shadow of Channing, who is not named, that key attribute returns to produce Emerson's own feeling, "joy." The estrangements and reversals that structure this third-hand narration, and serve to introduce both Emerson and the reader to Channing, are so marked that the distance-immediacy binary, and the principle of sharp inversion, become the principles of the kinds of sociality that Emerson understands poetry as enabling. If these poems are "produced" proximately by a "youth," still compositional agency resides in an irrecoverable and distant "mood"; becomes the poems are "quite dead" to Channing, Emerson's "first" feeling (harkening back to the origins invoked by "youth") is a "lively" joy. Distance and deadness enable the affective thrill of renewal and surprising immediacy. As we've seen in the first chapter, this repeats the logic of enjambment and paradoxical association of that Emerson associates so strongly with verse form. Such a technology is especially well suited to representing, and crucially reproducing, the sudden totality of "moods," whose force Emerson understands as rearranging the contours of identity tout court. Verse allows us to know another because as we read our selves are produced anew by the "moment's mood" (223) that produced it, and we become the lyric subject.

We may now ask how Channing's verse responds to and intervenes in this top-heavy Transcendentalist theoretic, a contrast which the generic juxtapositions of a serial like *The Dial* underscore. Most palpable throughout the twelve poems that make up Channing's first publication is a characteristic immediacy of proprioception, experienced in the verse as lightness

⁹⁵ cf. Alcott's "Conversation," cited in the next section.

⁹⁶ *JMN* 5:124

⁹⁷ For Emerson's aesthetic of "handsome and unhandsome" see Cavell, *Senses of Walden*. Elisa Tamarkin develops Cavell in *Apropos of Nothing*.

and motion, which is tensioned by rather stiffer and more programmatic Transcendentalist credos, present both as intrusions into the verse (“in me nature wreathes” [232]) and latent in Emerson’s heavy interpretation. Cognate with the verse’s lightness is a persistent interest in passivity and obedience of the will (to the moment) and an attention to unconfirmable and fleeting ocular effects that Rei Terada, positioning the condition as an underside of metaphysics, has characterized as “phenomenophilia” (*Looking Away*, 58). The pieces are, without exception, and as Emerson remarks in his review of the eventual volume, *Poems* (1843) in *The Democratic Review*, “occasional” lyrics, positioned either as epigrammatic, commemorative of a moment, or inscribed to dedicatees.⁹⁸ Channing’s verse locates itself as epiphytic on a preexisting, if sometimes anonymized, sociality, which it inhabits and recreates with an often-marvelous ease.

“To ****” offers the most explicit version of the way Channing’s verse begins from what Stephen Cushman and Sharon Cameron have identified as a thorny crux of Transcendentalist poetics—the problem of the poet’s impersonality—in order to navigate toward a poetics of limited but essential intimacy. The poem reads in its entirety:

To ****

My mind obeys the power
That through all persons breathes ;
And woods are murmuring,
And fields begin to sing,
And in me nature wreathes.

Thou too art with me here,
The best of all design ;
Of that strong purity,
Which makes it joy to be
A distant thought of thine.

The first stanza, setting into incipient motion the Book of Nature trope so influentially promulgated by Emerson’s *Nature* (1836), nevertheless makes sensible the claustrophobia of the closed circuit that results when reading becomes an exercise in literal equivalence (“Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact.” [23]) Despite moments of incipience, when the poem attends to the objective world and real communication seems about to occur in lines three and four, the stanza locks down again in line five by returning to the self-observation (“in me”) that began the poem (“my mind”). The “woods” only inarticulately “murmur” and the “fields” can only “begin” to sing because they are understood as literally contained in the enclosure of self-observation, to which interpretation must return before it has properly begun. Thus the final word, “wreathes,” represents a weaving into a closed circle of that which was self-sufficient and continuous, “the power” that “breathes.” Nor is it an extravagance to link, in a poem that progresses under orders of “obedience”—philosophical, natural, erotic—this “power” not only with *natura naturans*, as articulated by Emerson, but with Emerson himself. Channing “obeys,” in part, by rehashing the party line about impersonal nature, cinching it so tight nature can no longer “breathe.”

⁹⁸ *The Democratic Review*, October 1843, 212.

Yet the first stanza thins, upon the poem's completion, into only the necessary fulcrum by which the looser texture and stranger implications of the second stanza are elevated. Only once another person enters the poem does the title, which has been suspended as not quite relevant in the first stanza, return with a rush, making us aware of the poem as an *object*, a piece of social currency that only takes on meaning in the economy of affective exchange, whether erotic or amicable, that, after the introspection of the first stanza, we also suddenly remember. This objecthood of the poem, its palpability as an entire artifact, is limned in the ambivalent deictic "here," as it is activated by the theology implicit in "design." Some of the force with which this second stanza rearranges our sense of the terms of the poem emerges too from the sudden narrowing of the philosophically undifferentiated "persons," "woods" and "nature" of the first stanza, to the double specificity of "Thou" and "here." The effect is a stark repudiation of the indifference of "all persons" and the concomitant metaphysical solipsism. What ensue, in the specific non-space created by the poem's "here," are acts of dwelling-with—the slow appositives of line seven and eight, then the gathering but still dilated hypotaxis of line nine. These middle three lines, which, tentatively enacting a line-by-line thinking about the nature of the other, carry also an ethics of tender attention, are remarkable too for how they rewrite and supplant the natural theology of the first stanza's middle. Whereas in the first stanza, a "me" contains nature, in the second the "thou" is the site of that observation and speculative force, to the degree that in the last line the speaker himself has been untethered from any fixed body. This fell gesture of recognition of the last line at once: 1) inverts both the central geometry of idealism and the generic expectations of a lyric of address, which captures and objectifies its addressee; 2) underscores how the poem's pervasive metaphysical idiom has been as masque for latent erotic energy all along; 3) returns to, and intensifies, the first line's interest in "obedience," thus "wreathing" the poem as a whole; and 4) wrenches a paradoxical "joy" from the poet's, and the poem's, dissolution into the solipsism of the addressee.

So while the first stanza "obeys," stiffly, Transcendentalist orthodoxy, the second revises and inverts nearly every principle of that orthodoxy as the felt reality of another person's existence steadily supplants the speaker's own. For our purposes, the poem's central act is an exploration of what happens to nature and the poem once it realizes, in its sixth line, that a poem (which, in the Apollo and Daphne myth, is represented by a "wreath") requires the presence of another to break out of a static circuit of self and nature, and in fact seems to speak into being, demiurgic and deliberative, that "Thou" in lines six through nine. The inevitable consequence of this opening of the poem to inhabitation by another is a transition from the ontological primacy of its creator, the poet, who contains and articulates nature, to its addressee or reader, who ends up containing—at an intimate remove—the speaker. Once the poem moves past the primacy of the ego that undergirds both metaphysical idealism and the strong lyric speaker, it is able to experience "joy" in the decentered and intermittent connection with another that verse perpetuates. For, when Channing identifies himself as a "distant thought of thine," it is not only to the addressee but to the reader that he speaks, and whom he ultimately—he has no choice—"obeys." He is a contingent thought of ours; and the effect of this release from the oversight relations is the lightness of joy, the abandonment of self to the sociality that the poem has enabled, its "here." In the way it figures intellection and the written word, as ultimately preparatory to these expansive and tender acts of affective exchange, such a poem gives heft to

Emerson's 1842 journal observation, that all Channing's "verses were proper love poems ... really genuine fruits of a fine, light, gentle, happy intercourse with his friends."⁹⁹

Such reflections on how passivity and objecthood enable affective freedom are woven through the web of Channing's liberated and confident adaption of a central Romantic fluency trope in "Boat Song." In this poem, the enchanted forward motion of the verse, which slows as the evening light dwindles, binds the speaker and his beloved—initially estranged as a "her frame"—into a "we." Finally absorbing not just the lyric speaker, as does "To ****," but the dyadic "we," the poem concludes by entreating a new sensitivity to external "event" and the "hour" the effect of which is to make palpable larger circles of community. I quote the last lines:

- We all are tranquilly obeying Evening's will.

Thus ever love the POWER;
To simplest thoughts dispose the mind ;
In each obscure event a worship find
Like that of this dim hour, -
In lights, and airs, and trees, and in all human kind. (223)

Here too, the poem ends on a note of subservience to time. The ambiguously plural "we all" is enabled by a mutual "obeying" the "Evening's will," but even that "we" is absorbed into a subjectless imperative as it looks towards an even broader sociality. That cyclical temporality is likewise transposed or heightened into the language of occasion, "each obscure event," such as "this dim hour," in which we are instructed to find "a worship." This is a reading of event so proliferative and total that to take the instruction literally, is to overwhelm the capacity for interpretation at all. But, in this poem of motion and fluency, this infinite possibility of poetic event becomes a way of perceiving and indeed an alternative way of dignifying common life. Seeing each object of perception as a possible poetic "event," in other words, which demands we "obey it," becomes a way of ascribing meaning to "natural signs" without the ukase of making these legible as "spiritual signs." The poem's many pleasures—it is sprightly and detailed throughout—offer the sensory and socialized experience of language, its "lights" and "airs," as its clearest value, even as it dissolves with its occasion, the "dim hour."

This central focus on the occasion, in Channing's first published poems as in this second number of *The Dial* as a whole, which is presented as the organizing principle of both poetic composition and experiencing one's own life, finds its most explicit expression in "Our Birth Days." The sixteen-line poem is less fluid, and so more stately and stiff than "Boat Song," for its work is to convert, as it says, these "solemnest days," these occasions, into "knowledge." Channing writes:

OUR BIRTH DAYS.

I. THESE are the solemnest days of our bright lives,
When memory and hope within exert
Delightful reign ; when sympathy revives,

⁹⁹ JMN 8.318

And that, which late was in the soul inert,
 Grows warm and living, and to us alone
 Are these a knowledge ; nowise may they hurt,
 Or cry aloud, or frighten out the tone,
 Which we will strive to wear and as calm nature own.

II. Whatever scenes our eyes once gratified, -
 Those landscapes couched around our early homes,
 To which our tender, peaceful hearts replied,
 To those our present happy feeling roams,
 And takes a mightier joy than from the tomes
 Of the pure scholar ; those ten thousand sights
 Of constant nature flow in us, as foams
 The bubbling spring ; these are the true delights
 Wherewith this solemn world the sorrowful requites.

The poem is curiously funereal, an effect of its insistence on the first-person plural, its adjectival padding, and the “solemn” note of the first and last lines, sealing the poem shut. Though this general or gnostic temporality impedes directness, at the same time the poem self-consciously highlights this static aspect as its central problem, the “soul inert.” It is the work of the occasion to break this impasse, and in both stanzas the figures of lightness, fluency, and joy with which we have learned to associate Channing return as the singular affordance of abandonment to the occasion, “birth days.” A “present happy feeling” converts landscapes to “joy,” and discrete “sights / of constant nature,” losing their distinctness, “flow” and “foam[.]” There are flaws here: the poem is sententious, the end of the first stanza gets contorted, with the referent of the “they” and the “we” unclear, and the second stanza mostly translates, without significantly innovating upon, the first. Still, the poem convincingly affirms these public occasions—which are fleeting—as an epistemic principle that endures beyond the moment proper as a way of “reviving” both the external world and making new the constituent materials of the self, as these “flow.” It functions as a clear thesis arguing for the consolatory force of occasions, in poetry as in the psyche; it is only the knowledge of an occasion that can at all counteract the tyranny of mood, here so grim. this is the dissociable core of “knowledge” that other Channing poems wear in their tissue and transitions.

This light touch in the verse, its ease of motion, is the virtue that remains most palpable to contemporary taste. Indeed, Lawrence Buell remarks that while Emerson and Thoreau’s “rambling, aphoristic style gives their essays the appearance of spontaneity, ... their tone is almost maddeningly self-assured. The reader knows that this contrast between turbid syntax and confident tone hides something; and it takes Channing ... to show what it is.” (247) The obverse of this lightness, the moments when the verse encrusts to state a clear philosophical statement, are the weaknesses not only of Channing’s, but equally of his peers’ verse. We catch in the interplay between these elements the gentle irony so frequently remarked on by his interlocutors in conversation, as in “To *****” the verse dilates away from its initial fixity. Thus, when Channing ventriloquizes the “Earth Spirit” in *The Dial* 3:1 (1843), a figure that we would expect to speak for telluric solidity articulates instead extremes of transience: she tells us “in a voice like a soft water’s song,” that “I have woven shrouds of air / In a loom of hurrying light” and that “I

fall upon the grass like love's first kiss, / I make the golden flies and their fine bliss.”¹⁰⁰ Incorporating a prosodic variability that crosshatches a lilting, rhyming rhythm—features that critics such as Poe disparaged vehemently, but which now reads as liberated and immediate—that poem offers the reader the pleasures of continued surprise and change at the level of craft, even as it advocates these same values as the philosophical principle by which to read the earth itself.¹⁰¹

Having read Channing's poems as the centerpiece of *The Dial*'s presentation of “new poetry,” encircled by a series of interpretative apparatuses, to which they respond ambivalently, I turn now to how the values we've been tracing, namely, the occasion, the communities it enables, and the transience of personal identity, change and flower into Channing's increasing interest in conversation as a literary form. For while he is an emblematic Transcendentalist poet, committed to the genre and hailed as such by his peers, Channing's prose production is also copious, and allows us the opportunity to see how these values native to verse are imported as a way of theorizing a poetics of sentences. The occasional intersubjectivity that is notable in the verse, becomes increasingly dominant when graphed in works such as *Conversations in Rome* (1846) or the “Letters of a Poet and a Painter” (*The Dial*, 1840-44); finally, in *Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist* (1876) the elegiac occasion and conversations about poetry, are the signs under which Channing reimagines homo scriptor, or “man writing,” as an already-plural subject. (Such a formulation is encoded in what Sacvan Bercovitch calls the “communal identity” of the self as understood through New England's Puritan legacy, itself foreshadowed by Kant's *sensus communis*.¹⁰²) By labeling Thoreau “The Poet-Naturalist,” Channing inscribes the title *poet* not as an independent role, but as an affix or a tonal inflection. Its importance then becomes a function of how it inflects other practices, not what it articulates of itself.

Transcendentalist Conversation as Literary Form

“Conversation is my natural element. I need to be called out, and never think alone, without imagining some companion.”—Margaret Fuller, as quoted by James Freeman Clarke.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Themes of weaving and interconnection recur throughout the poetry, figuring nature as a site/sight that connects subjects. Channing uses sunlight in woods as “spidery interlacings,” as the setting sun “drew bright webs out of the twigs” (481).

¹⁰¹ “...he fairly puts the climax to metrical absurdity...” In “William Ellery Channing,” *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe—Vol III: Literati &c.* (1850), 3:229-240.

¹⁰² Bercovitch summarizes in *The Puritanical Origins of the American Self*: “This symbol-figura had provided a model of American identity, a concept of selfhood that was at once unique and inclusive—a “separate, single person,” new-born as an autonomous self, detached from traditional communal affiliations, and at the same time the representative of a national errand, “heir to all the past,” personifying a New World promise. Rhetorically, that American Self combined the Protestant belief in personal salvation and the Hebrew concept of tribal mission with modern nationalism and its credo of progress.” (xxxiv) Against this model of “auto-American-biography: the story of one's self as symbol of America,” Bercovitch locates the economic value “individualism” and the Romantic inheritance of “individuality.” It is Emerson who for Bercovitch “The American model inverted both these concepts. Romantic individuality was transformed from “spiritual aristocracy” to mean a figure of spiritual commonality (whose uniqueness lay in his determination to do his “own thing” his “own way”), and individualism was enshrined as self-interest to signify a cultural ideal of personal self-fulfillment. The grand synthesis of this unlikely fusion of political-spiritual opposites was a chameleon figure, forever mobile and vaguely “middle class” (as denoting a democratic average more than a certain income), a “typical American,” whose private narrative made manifest a national dream” (xxxvi).

¹⁰³ *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, e.d. R.W. Emerson and Channing I. 311.

As we have seen, Channing is identified with, and valued for, the wit of his conversation by the Transcendentalist circle, all of whom marvel at his spontaneity in their journals. Emerson, paraphrasing Fuller in that memorial volume, calls him “still more a poet in his conversation than in his poems.” His poems’ interest in the fluidity of pronouns, and how subjects become present to each other in language, meanwhile, foreshadow the structural role that conversation plays in his prose efforts. But to fully understand why Channing’s faults were overlooked to the degree they were, and why the metonymic composite of man and verse was so prized, it’s necessary to excavate how the ideal of conversation is already inscribed in Transcendentalist thinking as productive of form, and also as a hermeneutic by which the reading of texts may evoke the presence of persons.

It is perhaps rote to remember that Fuller and Alcott are equally noted for their conversation, albeit in different aspects. When seeking to name Fuller’s virtues in the *Memoirs*, Emerson writes, her “powers and accomplishments found their best and only adequate channel in her conversation” (26). This is, of course, in part a gendered observation that ascribes female written language less intentional force than its male equivalents, but it is not only such. For Fuller, precisely because of this gendered association, conversation is also a subversive zone of educational possibility where gendered inequities can be broken down. Held in Boston from the fall of 1839 until April 1844, her Conversation classes aimed to promote women’s independent intellectual and social development, echoing the proposal in *Women in the Nineteenth Century*, that focused efforts at “intelligent conversation” in the household be a demotic way that employers of female domestics might promote their education without impinging on their productivity—a persistent preoccupation of the text (Fuller 232). As she suggested in her introductory lecture, conversation could “provoke the thought of others” in ways that written, or “frozen” language was unable to.¹⁰⁴ And when thinking about the appeal of French literature, she likewise underscores the practice of conversation as upstream of other written forms. Because of the culture’s excellence in speech, they excel in “lectures and journalizing,” and “No other nation can hope to vie with the French in the talent of communicating information with ease, vivacity and consciousness” (175).

Though Fuller reread Plato admiringly before undertaking the Conversations in 1839,¹⁰⁵ it was Bronson Alcott’s Temple School (1834-41) that was her primary model. Alcott and Peabody’s *Conversations with Children on the Gospels* (1836), which was savaged in the Boston press throughout 1837, stresses by contrast the theological inheritance of conversation, understood as a direct inheritor of Calvin’s ideal of prayer as a “conversation with God.” Alcott asks his pupils “to keep [their thoughts] steady as possible; for only by doing so can we have interesting conversations,” and affirms the ideal of spontaneity that the method presupposes: “I shall have new thoughts, that I never had before” (2). But Alcott too explicitly understands conversation as a way of renewing or supplanting written literary forms. In 1842, Fuller

¹⁰⁴ *Memoirs* 1: 329 As she wrote to a participant, “The best that we receive from anything can never be written. For it is not the positive amount of thought that we have received, but the virtue that has flowed into us, and is now us, that is precious. If we can tell no one thought, yet are higher, larger, wiser, the work is done. The best part of life is too spiritual to bear record” (Quoted in Higginson, Ossoli, 118).

¹⁰⁵ Letters of Margaret Fuller, 2:39-40, 54, 59, 102, 104, 106. Hence *FL*

publishes Alcott's diary entry "XII. Conversation" in *The Dial*. There, in response to a familiar Transcendentalist complaint of social alienation, that "souls do not meet," Alcott suggests a return to Biblical models. He writes,

Sincerity in thought and speech can alone redeem man from this exile and restore confidence into his relations. We must come to the simplest intercourse—to Conversation and the Epistle. These are most potent agencies—the reformers of the world. The thoughts and desires of men wait not thereby the tardy and complex agencies of the booksellers' favor, printers' type, or reader's chances, but are sped forthwith far and wide, by these nimble Mercuries. Christianity was published solely by the lip and pen... thus shall the New Ideas find currency... (232).

For Alcott, language is not discourse but "intercourse": so immanent to, and conditioned by, the social relations that it emerges from that it can't be dissociated from them. He suggests that "sincerity and thought and speech," will "restore confidence into... relations," which will then allow the "tardy and complex agencies" of print distribution to be circumvented by the "publication" that "lip and pen" can effect. Though "conversation" is figured as an earlier, purer ideal of communication, it relies on a metaphors of print publication ulterior to it, and what emerges is a hybrid form composed of both "lip and pen," a circuit in which the spoken and the written word are bound together.¹⁰⁶ Alcott's usage shows how a transcendentalist ideal of *conversation*, and the values of private speech and spontaneity it highlights, can come to represent not a negation of print, but a recovery of its original immanence.

We've seen how Emerson endorses verse characterized by sociality and ephemerality; this bent is undergirded by a recurrent link of poetic form specifically to the immediacy of conversation. When he writes in "The Poet" that "every man should be so much an artist that he could report in conversation what had befallen him," it is the litmus of expression by which we can judge the artist's receptivity. In that essay, "conversation" is also the social theater where definitive social judgment about poetic value ("lyrics") is worked out (9); the first and most valorized term in a series of linguistic "ravishments of the intellect" (27-8); and the field where, since poets as "liberating gods" are pointedly not to be found, we can experience "the magic of liberty" (32). The "Language" chapter of *Nature* (1836) is structured around a sustained punning on "conversing" "conversion" "conversation" and "verse."¹⁰⁷ In "Poetry and Imagination," as the poet "listens to conversation and beholds all objects," (17) so is the output of the "true poet" is

¹⁰⁶ Orality, as Walter Ong clarified, is a function of print. See also Maureen McLane on "orality effects" (p. 431) in "Ballads and Bards: British Romantic Orality" (2001).

¹⁰⁷ Emerson writes, "Because of this radical correspondence between visible things and human thoughts, savages, who have only what is necessary, converse in figures. As we go back in history, language becomes more picturesque, until its infancy, when it is all poetry; or all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols. This immediate dependence of language upon nature, this *conversion* of an outward phenomenon into a type of somewhat in human life, never loses its power to affect us. It is this which gives that piquancy to the *conversation* of a strong-natured farmer or back-woodsman, which all men relish." By the paragraph's end, the retrograde savages with which we begun have been converted into contemporary "strong-natured farmers" and "back-woodsmen," as the ephemeral present tense "converse" of the retrograde "savages," has been replaced with a sturdier abstraction, "conversation," which tastes suspiciously like a literary form. But unlike poetry, which in Emerson has a tendency to drift into unownable universal discourse ("all is poetry"), "conversation" is always someone's, or something's, conversation. Its appearance instantly provokes—in the sense of calls forward—a response and a public ("affect us," "all men relish").

there figured not as poems, but by “presence and conversation” (18-19). In the *Journals*, Emerson writes “I think now that the finest sweetest closes and falls are not in our metres, but in the measure of eloquence, which have greater variety and richness than verse” (*JMN* 8:96); and will depict his own process of composition as embedded in a prolonged conversation with both other bards and natural objects: “I am a bard because I stand near them, and apprehend all they utter, and with pure joy hear that which I also would say...” (*JMN* 9:472).

This positioning of conversation’s intimacy and immediacy as latent in, or, in a Derridean sense, unsettling the authority of the *logos*, is so prevalent in the circle that it compels a more extensive revision of the processes, and relations, called into being by the act of reading. The familiar model of Transcendentalist reading is an inversion of the hierarchy implied when reading is understood as an act of hierarchical reception. Emerson in “History” and Thoreau in the “Books” chapter of *Walden*, present reading as a skeptical act of perusal that returns us to an awareness of our own capacities and experience of ourselves, which it both evokes and affirms as more valuable. By contrast, Thoreau, in a July 1843 letter to the Emersons from Staten Island, performs a very different hermeneutic. In part because of his homesickness, Thoreau reads the new number of *The Dial* (3:2) as itself a conversation; its virtues are in its ability to evoke persons’ immediacy. He writes:

I think this is a noble number of the Dial. It perspires thought and feeling. I can speak of it now a little like a foreigner. Be assured that it is not written in vain—it is not for me. I hear its prose and its verse—they provoke and inspire me, and they have my sympathy. I hear the sober and earnest, the sad and cheery voices of my friends—and to me it is like a long letter of encouragement and reproof—And no doubt so it is to many another in the land. So dont [sic] give up the ship—Methinks the verse is hardly enough better than the prose—I give my vote for the Notes from the Journal of a Scholar—and wonder you dont print them faster—I want too to read the rest of [Channing’s] Poet and the Painter. Miss Fuller’s is a noble piece, rich extempore writing—talking with pen in hand—It is too good not to be better even. In writing conversation should be folded many times thick. It is the height of art that on the first perusal plain common sense should appear—on the second serene truth—and on the third beauty—And having these warrants for its depth and reality, we may then enjoy the beauty forever more.—(*Correspondence*, 1:202)

It’s specifically the contradictions of the periodical form—at once a single number, and polyvocal; characterized by “fast” writing and publication, yet pointed toward a horizon of “enduring beauty”—that allows Thoreau to read the number so humanely. Understanding the issue as a living body, Thoreau implicates it in a circuit of sympathy, in which he, as the reader both extends, and then receives (“encouragement and reproof”) in return. In doing so, Thoreau invokes a principle of sentimental literature, and thereafter of fugitive slave accounts, which are characterized by the attempts to produce normative sympathetic identification in their audience, and thus to remediate the newly abstracted distances between writer and reader produced by print circulation;¹⁰⁸ such distance is of course the problem for Thoreau, temporarily exiled on Staten Island. Affective reciprocity is everywhere in his paragraph: *The Dial* “perspires” (used

¹⁰⁸ See, for instance, Ian Watt’s classic account in *Rise of the Novel* with respect to *Clarissa*’s power to adduce tears (174). See also William C. Dowling, *The Epistolary Moment*, for the intimacy of letter writing as a remediation of the Walpolean paper economy.

etymologically) then “inspires”; Thoreau first “hears” then is “provoke[d].” These figures of breath and voice mean that reading is, primarily, “hearing” the “voices of friends” which are distinguished only by their moods or affective signatures. Indeed, this mode of reading is strikingly similar to the terms in which Emerson first reaches out to Channing for permission to publish his poems in *The Dial*, imploring him that his poems “should not be shut up any longer in the portfolios of a few friends but should be set free to fly abroad to the ear & heart of all to whom they rightly belong” (*L*, 2:253).

Both Emerson and Thoreau gesture at how periodical publication as it manifested in *The Dial* also extends and mediates the oral form, “conversation.” If the periodical begins between friends, it must not be only “for” them (as Thoreau reassures Emerson), but needs to translate both temporally, and socially, to “many another.” With this indefinite singular, Thoreau implies not a Habermasian public sphere, but, characteristically, a conversation extended individual by individual. Periodical writing, for Thoreau, is thus a distinct and hybrid genre developed on the model of “conversation.” Yet the forum is a crux of conflicting temporal desires: he acknowledges at once his own demand for “faster” printing of prose, and his own suspicion that “extempore” writing or “talking with pen in hand,” does not entirely suffice for “art.” At the same time, the claim that “in writing conversation should be folded many times thick,” doubles down on “conversation” as the ontological material of “writing,” which a mode of reading such as Thoreau performs, continuously reconstitutes as present, and audible.¹⁰⁹

Occasions of Prose: Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist and Group Biography

“There is always some accident in the best things, whether thoughts, or expressions, or deeds. The memorable thought, the happy expression, the admirable deed, are only partly ours.”—Thoreau, as quoted by Channing in *Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist* (1873, 314)

This prevalent thinking about, and experimentation with, conversation as a literary mode allows us to look forward to this project’s overhanging question: namely, how the occasional poetics that represent one root of Transcendentalist thinking about verse, intervene in, and prepare, a poetics of sentences. How, this next section asks, do requoted and extractable fragments of verse represent an affective and social supplement to narrative prose, how do they inflect our expectations about how sentences leap, digress, and measure, and how, thus, do they challenge us, when reading, to reimagine our own identities, relationships to others, and ways of inhabiting time?

That the writing *I* is constituted dynamically and anew, between subjects, is an idea more vivid even in Channing’s prose than in his poetry. The most notable of these are, briefly, the *Dial*’s serial “Letters of the Poet and the Painter”—which we have seen Thoreau’s admiration for—and the *Conversations in Rome* (1847). The “Letters,” written by three distinct speakers, is at once more juvenile and more successful, taking aim at the pretensions of “Triflecut College” (Harvard) and interweaving its satire with moments of aesthetic analysis, a sincere nescience

¹⁰⁹ With this formation, I am contesting—and arguing that the Transcendentalists contest—the Andersonian contention that understands the newspaper (on the model of the novel) as instantiating a communal experience of “empty time.” Anderson writes, famously and controversially, that “The date at the top of the newspaper, the single most important emblem on it, provides the essential connection - the steady onward clocking of homogenous, empty time” (1985, 33).

before nature, and thinking about friendship. Written before and during Channing's arrival in Concord, and in the early flush of friendships with Fuller, Thoreau, Emerson, and his wife, Ellen Fuller, its mordant wit is balanced by a belief in the force of affective ties. *Conversations* is the overserious product of a farcical adventure to that city, prompted by Channing's sudden need—when Ellen was six months pregnant—to “see buildings, & pictures, & peasantries, part of his poetic education.”¹¹⁰ (After raising \$300 to this end from Caroline Sturgis, Emerson, S.G. Ward, and John Cushing, Channing sails home after only sixteen days, without having adventured beyond the city of Rome.)¹¹¹ Respectively, the work's three mouthpieces, “An Artist,” “A Catholic,” and “A Critic” 1) question how art emerges from the individual (and, to a degree, technique); 2) reverentially react to, and read, artworks as embedded in a continuous social and intellectual tradition, accruing social value thereby; and 3) skeptically deflate the claims of the above, while occasionally presenting sharp observations of the contemporary social reality of the city. Though “A Critic” is most successful, as he locates contrasts between actual poverty and these idealizing aesthetic frames, the speakers in general are rather cartoonishly pinched by these positions, and speak past each other in monologues. Still, the work represents a concerted effort to fix a new literary form for philosophical inquiry that centers the processes, rather than ends, of communal inquiry and refuses the authority of any single speaker. These themes continue, too, in the unpublished manuscript of Channing's *Cape Cod*, composed simultaneously with Thoreau's, which resides at the Houghton. Under the sign of bereavement (with the help of T.E. Higginson, Ellen Fuller Channing had abandoned Ellery, taking the children, in 1853), Channing highlights the companionship of journeying and the vertical literary sociality of a landscape he constructs through Wordsworthian tropes (“a picturesque, antique cottage, the habitation of some lonely dweller on the sea-girt moor”).¹¹²

This chapter concludes by examining how these experiments in multiply-authored prose manifest in two stranger and more successful texts, both defined by their relationships to poetry. These will allow us to ask most pointedly how verse, emergent from and presented under the occasion of elegy, rearranges relationships between the writing and reading subjects and inflects the ways by which we link sentences to each other and to their referents. As such, it takes up a latent, but radical possibility in Emerson's thinking about identity: that the self, especially as constituted in writing, may be composed of others, not through the mediation of an Over-soul, but proximately and locally. As he speculates in February 1850, “It is well worth thinking on. Thus, if Thoreau, Ellery Channing, and I could (which is perhaps impossible) combine works heartily (being fired by such a desire to carry one point as to fuse all our repulsions and incompatibilities), I doubt not we could engender something far superior for quality and for effect to any of the thin, cold-blooded creatures we have hitherto flung into the light” (*JMN* 7:21).

Such speculation, whose thinking about “combination,” “fusion,” “desire” and the “engendering” of “creatures” aches at the limit of the sexual, represents a clear ecstatic irruption beyond the model of friendship-as-distance that Emerson develops in “Friendship” (1844). Fittingly, Emerson does not envision such a project as authored only by himself, but as a collaboration, entrusted to Channing. On May 4, 1853, Channing responds to Emerson's mostly

¹¹⁰ Emerson to Ward. *Letters* 3:327.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² ms. 9, Houghton, F.B. Sanborn collection.

philanthropic proposal—apparently made orally—that Channing should assemble from the journals of Thoreau, Alcott, and themselves, a volume for publication called “Country Walks.” The first page of the letter is businesslike (“I will under take the *mss* in question, to be done by 1st of October next, in twenty chapters at \$5.00 per chapter payable monthly by date”); Channing then flips over the letter. On the verso, he writes as someone else entirely: “I advise you, as a friend (in private) not to accept that mad offer of W.E.C. on t’other page...you will throw away the money...as the W.E.C. has anything to do with the *mss* aforesaid, it will be a plump squash.” Though the contrast of the two leafs is remarkable, the haughty self-seriousness, antic jibing, tendency toward failure, and mutability itself were all widely recognized by his contemporaries as characteristic.¹¹³

Channing’s internalization of this disdainful public gaze by the ‘50s, and his demi-flight from it “as a friend (in private)” though here presented in scherzo, skirts pathos even as it splinters the writing *I* into a serious correspondent on one hand, and “as a friend”—an identity detachable from “W.E.C”—on the other. The recto then pushes this antic jesting to an anxious aporia as it elaborates objections to the project, from Emerson’s perspective:

Again, your journals will get badly overhauled, for I shall not scruple to use of them what I can.' Again, there are great difficulties. If we come out flat-footed, & call our book C. W as you propose, & then put in characters like yours, and A's & T's &c, everyone will know (victim & all) who it is. Will this answer? Again, unless great skill is used, even if we give another name, & call it, "Walks in Addlebury," or [""]Musings on the Piddledees," & the like, the secret will out. Flat-footed C. W. would hardly go. However, it is all one to me, if you order the mss. I will put in the names & the figures, & write as the artist did, under his red cat, chat gries, "This is a Lion."

Channing sets up two threats: himself, as unscrupulous threat to the integrity of Emerson’s physical manuscripts, and that the public should correctly attribute the speakers’ identities in this coterie work. The fear seems to be that implicitly, the project should be hamstrung by being read as gossip merely—a window onto journals—obscuring a right perception of literary value. Even as he demonstrates, in his sharply contrasted voicings and acts of self-alienation in the letter itself, Channing floats pseudonymy—and a title that encourages trivial or light reading—as a partial, but insufficient, defense against this latter danger. Channing imagines a reading public familiar enough to know the “secret” of attribution, yet extending uncomfortably beyond coterie. Much as Thoreau locates conversation as the ontological base of periodical publication and writing more generally, Channing recognizes that criticism and metaphysics, the putative aim of such a volume, are at risk of collapsing back into the primacy of mere “characters.” Such a risk is hermeneutic; he understands his task as controlling how the text is read. To do so, he at once

¹¹³ The source for the genesis of “Country Walking” is Harding, Walter. “Two F.B. Sanborn Letters.” *American Literature*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (May, 1953), pp. 230-234. Compare Thoreau to RWE, 2/23/48:

I see Channing often. He also goes often to Alcott’s, and confesses that he has made a discovery in him—and give vent to his admiration or his confusion in characteristic exaggerations—but between this extreme & that you may get a fair report—& draw an inference if you can. Sometimes he will ride a broom stick still—though there is nothing to keep him or it up—but a certain centrifugal force of whim which is soon spent—and there lies your stick—not worth picking up to sweep an oven with now. (*Correspondence*, 346) Alcott, in 1871, would echo: “Whimsy, thy name is Channing!” (1871).

proliferates personae even as he trains readers not to attach language to a particular consciousness.

<i>Big-endians</i>	<i>Little-endians</i>
Plato	Alcott
Swedenborg	Very
Shakspeare	Newcomb
Montaigne	Channing
Goethe	Emerson
Napoleon	Thoreau

[fig 1: Emerson, *JMN* 11:173 (1849)]

The original draft of “Country Walks,” which Channing assembles assiduously over the summer of 1853 with the aid of journals from both Thoreau (mostly from 1851, though up to 1853-54), and Emerson (excerpted for the purpose from 1848-50), does not survive, nor does it find publication in its original form.¹¹⁴ Any reading of it is mediated by the context in which some of it appears, twenty years later, as the middle section of *Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist* (1873), a hagiographic and grief-stained text. (Nor his only: *The Wanderer* (1871), a book length elegy for Thoreau, returns to landscapes the two had explored together.) In the 1874 edition, this manuscript, renamed “Walks and Talks,” fills the central three chapters of the book. In response, it seems, to the reluctance Channing expresses in his response to Emerson about how a roman-a-clef hermeneutics would impinge on serious reading (“Everyone will know...”), the text refuses any attribution of discrete identity as its speakers wander, conversing on poetic theory, praising natural beauty, and composing original poems. In F.B. Sanborn’s commentary, Channing has succeeded; as he writes in 1904, these “long passages from the journals of Emerson and Thoreau, with bits of actual conversation; sketches and snatches of character by Channing himself, and here and there a poem or fragment by Channing or Emerson” are “so printed that the authors themselves could hardly pick out their own share in this olio” (xiv).

In this way, two nested occasions, the private and the public, walks in the countryside and Thoreau’s death, become the occasions that enable and make meaning out of the quotation and reuse of language. Despite the prose matrix of the text, it is overwhelmingly characterized by the focus on poetry as the primary root of language—flagged in the book’s title, its copious “elegiac verses,” and its frequent quotation of verse—as it is governed by the sign of elegy, toward whose sign these disparate materials realign. Parallel with this choral rearrangement of verse materials is the rethinking of the individual as communally constructed, and, in the “Country Walks” section, of aesthetic critique as a collective enterprise and a fundamentally interpersonal conversation. Such a process, which is germane to elegy in the broadest strokes, reveals more proximately, as I have been arguing, values central to, but obscured in,

¹¹⁴ Thoreau remarks on Channing’s uncharacteristic diligence in an August 1853 letter. In October, Channing sends a desperate letter to Emerson asking for the promised money.

Transcendentalist poetics. It takes Channing's paradoxical commitment to verse as the governing principle of prose, and life-writing, and indeed the construction of writing self, to reveal such a through line. The central gesture of *The Poet-Naturalist*—which is subtitled, in Gothic script, “with Memorial Verses”—is thus, rather beautifully, the attempt to assimilate the writing *I* of biography into its dead subject, a seepage or translation of the tropes of poetic elegy into prose. As with Emerson and W.H. Channing's *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, we receive an image of Thoreau as a plural and overwhelmingly textual subject—partially composed of the extremely frequent quotations, partially of his biographer, and inflected throughout by the modifier of “Poet-.” This, Channing's most successful book, offers thus the most forceful example of occasional poetics operating as a principle for prose composition, and a vision of the unbounded poetic common stock that undergirds the poetic thought of both Emerson and, as we will see, Thoreau.

THOREAU:
THE POET-NATURALIST.

With Memorial Verses.

BY

WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING.

“My greatest skill has been to want but little. For joy I could embrace the earth. I shall delight to be buried in it. And then I think of those among men, who will know that I love them, though I tell them not.” —
H. D. T.

BOSTON:

ROBERTS BROTHERS.

1873.

(William Ellery Channing)

[fig 2: Title page of *Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist* with Memorial Verses, by William Ellery Channing (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1873).]

Thinking for a moment with this rather sui-generis mixed text, I want to dwell on how the reader enters into the image of the “Poet-Naturalist” promised. Gothic script announces the elegiac tone, which is carried by both “memorial” and “verses”: verse is presented as a

supplement to the biography, requiring a different, sentimental mode of reading. There's a subtle tension between Thoreau's cognomen, "The Poet-Naturalist" and the "memorial verses" that, the proximity of the attribution assures us, are "by William Ellery Channing"—viz., the more entire poet. The ensuing, funereal double entendres of the Thoreau quote thereafter serves as an illustration of "Poet-Naturalist," offering a legibility grounded on natural description ("the earth") even as it offers a way of reading that rewards attention to figure. Its clear attribution ("—H.D.T.") prepares us for the central tensions of the text, at once generic and authorial, between the verse elements and the prose, and between Channing's language and quotations of Thoreau's repurposed toward the master code of elegy. I want to resist thinking of such a rift as a dialectic—the mode is not appropriate to the fitful motion of Channing's process, and the raw grief of the texts leaves palpable textural rifts uncaptured by synthesis—but, in keeping with the tendencies of Channing's verse and prose, as a conversation left purposively unfinished. Though "sketch" is a frequent trope for character portraiture, Channing stresses the term as a description of his project, and frequent relies on its claims to fleeting but immanent verisimilitude to describe both his own poetry, Thoreau's observations, and the book itself.¹¹⁵

An odic "Dedication" by Channing follows the copyright page. Structured as three discretely voiced sections, the impersonal Emersonian strophe summons "our mother, Nature"; the antistrophe falls into Channing's voice as it hails Thoreau, with the intimate thou, as "my friend"; the epode, like the final movement of Gray's "Elegy," fast forwards to a memorial future ("Thus Henry lived...." The epode is of interest for how, as in Shelley's "Adonais," Channing contests Thoreau's investment in nature, and relocates natural "impulses" as originating rather from "Henry's heart." The dedication repeats in miniature the revision to Emersonian ideals of an impersonal nature, toward a focus on persons and brevity, that Channing performs throughout his work, as in pieces such as "To *****."

It is in, however, the two full pages of verse epigraphs, amounting to eleven authors in three languages, and the ensuing prologue that continues this boffination of literary history, presenting extracts from Johnson, Walpole, Byron, Lady Brilliana Harley, and Lorraine, without clearly connecting these to Thoreau, that the formal argument of the work clearly emerges. Though many of these extracts are clearly attributed to known entities, their irrepressible proliferation and lateral arrangement argues for a model of literary personhood, which Channing calls a "biographic thesis," bricolaged from an already-present textual commons. Unfolding such a "thesis," Channing incorporates figures of enumeration, the "account," the "catalogue," and, later, a "patchwork quilt." (x) Literary production is characterized as "iteration," and an author's work is described not as inherent to their person, but, "in a basket behind them,—'the time's epitome.'"

¹¹⁵ See pages 1, 28, 216, and notably 316, where Channing quotes Thoreau's description of Channing himself: "He gets up a water-color sketch of an acquaintance. 'He is the moodiest person perhaps I ever saw. As naturally whimsical as a cow is brindled...'"

"For not a hidden path that to the shades
Of the beloved Parnassian forest leads
Lurked undiscovered by him; not a rill
There issues from the fount of Hippocrene,
But he had traced it upward to its source,
Through open glade, dark glen, and secret dell,
Knew the gay wild-flowers on its banks, and culled
Its med'cinable herbs; yea, oft alone,
Piercing the long-neglected holy cave,
The haunt obscure of old Philosophy."

COLERIDGE.

"Such cooling fruit
As the kind, habitable woods provide."

MILTON.

"My life is but the life of winds and tides,
No more than winds and tides can I avail."

KEATS.

"Is this the mighty ocean?—is this all?"

LANDOR.

"Then bless thy secret growth, nor catch
At noise, but thrive unseen and dumb;
Keep clean, bear fruit, earn life, and watch,
Till the white-winged reapers come."

VAUGHAN.

"No one hates the sea and danger more than I do; but I fear
more not to do my duty to the utmost."—SIR ROBERT WILSON.

"The joyous birds shrouded in cheerful shade,
Their notes unto the voice attempted sweet;
Th' angelical soft trembling voices made
To th' instruments divine response meet,
With the low murmurs of the water's fall;
The water's fall with difference discreet,
Now soft, now loud, unto the wind did call;
The gentle warbling wind low answered to all."

SPENSER.

PREFACE.

DR. JOHNSON says that in the dedication to Harris's *Hermes*, of fourteen lines, there are six grammatical faults. This is as much as we could expect in an English pedant whose work treats of grammar: we trust our prologue will prove more drop-ripe, even if the whole prove dull,—dull as the last new comedy.

In a biographic thesis there can hardly occur very much to amuse, if of one who was reflective and not passionate, and who might have entered like Anthony Wood in his journal, "This day old Joan began to make my bed,"—an entry not fine enough for Walpole. At the same time the account of a writer's stock in trade may be set off like the catalogues of George Robins, auctioneer, with illustrations even in Latin or—

"The learned Greek, rich in fit epithets,
Blest in the lovely marriage of pure words."

Byron's bath at Newstead Abbey is described as a dark and cellar-like hole. The halos about the brows of authors tarnish with time. Iteration, too, must be respected,—that law of Nature. Authors carry their robes of state not on their backs, but, like the Indians seen

[fig 3: The second page of epigraphs, and the beginning of Channing's "Preface"]

How do we make sense of this extreme of discontinuity and rhizomatic reference, what Milton—in the epigraphs—calls the profusion of "cooling fruit"? Channing's most insistent note is the refusal of finality, of time-boundedness: a theme enacted in the discontinuities of the granary form, as in their messianic expectancy: "Till the white-winged reappears come." The poetic principle behind these formal tendencies, which, as we will see, characterize the work in its entirety, constructs a pointedly different model of personal and collective identity than we have been accustomed to find in Transcendentalist thinking. That rote model may be epitomized by an Emersonian reading aimed at activating fuller individual capacities as it reads "Greece and Rome" for the prehistory of the self (as in "History"). Rather, Channing's iterative requotation, collage aesthetics, and a consistent privileging of unresolved tension between elements, expose a different, but equally Romantic—and equally American—skepticism of the primacy of the ego. This tradition, which emerges from the mechanistic model of consciousness found in Burton, Locke, and Sterne, is characterized by an ambivalence toward the past that leans towards irony and nonconsequence, and it flows also into Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, finding later expression in William Carlos Williams's *In the American Grain* (1925) and Eliot Weinberger's epic referential essays, from *Works on Paper* (1987) on.

This reflects a vein in Continental Romanticism that Jacques Khalip has traced magisterially in *Anonymous Life* (2008). In Khalip's account, the skeptical accounts of the self's continuity found in Hume and Locke are the enabling conditions for a Romantic resistance to Enlightenment self-transparency, and a concomitant exploration, in poetry, of the paradoxical sociality that results when we recognize the ego as a "linguistic convenience." Finding one vivid root for the model of "disinterested" community that results, Khalip reads Hazlitt's *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805), to find that "the very lack of personal knowledge between individuals not only should motivate us to intercede on behalf of one another and share a mutual commitment to each other's welfare, but it should also lead us to profoundly question the belief that the self's relation to itself is one of privileged knowledge" (29). Against the coherence of the ego, the speaking I "doesn't stand apart from time but rather is saturated amid a network of interlacing, temporal strands which fantasize the concept of "personhood" into being. In this way, the past and present construct an ideology of selfhood that both recognizes and misrecognizes through acts of fantasy..." (31). These acts of fantasy are correlated with the poetic imagination, which construes, then, a "poetics of ethics"; and this nonproprietary and anonymous poetic self "can come to experience itself only through others"—in a grammatical tense that is always poised on the lip of conditional experience and futurity. Though they be fantastical, recognizing the past materials of individual experience as such liberates the poetic imagination for a disinterested investment in collective sociality. And, when Channing is searching for a justification for the insertion of the "new-old" "Country Walking" material, it is precisely to Hazlittian disinterest in one's own literary production—always experienced as alien—that he turns in an epigraph.¹¹⁶

The particularly poetic nature of this anonymous and communal self finds its most famous expression in a letter of Keats—whose self-ablation Channing cites—to Richard Woodhouse on the "poetical character." If we have been used to thinking the Emersonian or Transcendentalist poet in terms analogous to what Keats calls the "the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime," its counter, "the Poetical Character itself ... is not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing—It has no character.... A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body." Though Keats's formulation is at this point nearly rote, I want to stress here the fact that this thinking emerges in the form of a letter, and seems pointedly activated by the particular malleability of identity, and acts of telegraphic imagination, that epistolary writing demands. Indeed, the entire thesis is an elaborate apology for a perceived slight, a way of disowning speech, as we remember when Keats hails Woodhouse, and the "you" reorients his speculation from the atemporal, to the situational: "*I hope enough so to let you see that no dependence is to be placed on what I said that day.*" Keats's thinking of poetry-as-ventriloquism, thus, emerges in a highly intersubjective medium, and presents itself as an addendum or second-order commentary on an actual moment of conversation. That actual moment returns, along with the idea that poetry is a shadow of sociality: "When I am in a room with People if I am ever free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins to press upon me that, I am in a very little time

¹¹⁶ The epigraph on p. 120 of the biography reads: "'What is it to me that I can write these Table-Talks? Others have more property in them than I have; they may reap the benefit, I have had only the pain. Nor should I have known that I had ever thought at all, but that I am reminded of it by the strangeness of my appearance, and my unfitness for anything else.—Hazlitt'"

annihilated” (1:328). Keats’s statement has been read as presenting poesis as antithetical to society; but equally present is a claim about the ultimately shared nature of that “I” so blithely constituted as proprietary. If others’ language may “annihilate” this ultimately “character”-lessness of poetry also allows Keats to inhabit a fantasy, later in the letter, of being Shakespeare. Thus does a pointedly minor poetics swivel into a statement of major consequence; is a movement that strikingly parallels Emerson’s own reduction of Shakespeare to his social and historical context, as we have seen in the last chapter.

Laura Dassow Walls suggests that Thoreau’s real subject is not nature as such, but “the commons,” and I have elaborated elsewhere how the “Baker Farm” chapter of *Walden* depends on Thoreau’s equivocation to personal property, understood both as enclosed land and as attributed verse.¹¹⁷ The thinking about common literary property that underpins Channing’s own hypertextual citation in his biography of Thoreau is prepared by Joseph Albernaz’s *Common Measures* (2024), which follows Khalip’s impetus to figure poetry in the period as the attempt to enact a “groundless community,” “without any master term, without wholeness, origin, telos, identity, or shared essence, only an originary or ontological sociality” (2). Such “originary sociality,” which exceeds and countervenes a consistent thematization, is the sign under which Channing evokes Thoreau. For Albernaz, as for Channing (in his use of “poet-” as a supplement), poetry is not reducible to a finished artifact, but in fact finds itself more truly and more strange in acts of minor or fragmentary poesis and the versification of daily or common experience. These are the signal sites of an inherently “untimely” poetic “countertradition,” which, “untimely” positions itself as the rejection of the acts of appropriation, enclosure, and—in a more metaphysical key—“measure” that span domains from the ecological, the temporal, the economic, and, in the forms of slavery and wage-dependency, the human (7). As Albernaz writes,

The inoperative field of literary poesis brooks no improvement and no work, no external measure, no owner; it discloses the improper commons of language and the senses. Like the commons, language is essentially used but not owned. In this situated, ordinary, but open field of language that the poem names, another kind of social ontology, another kind of thinking, another kind of (un)measuring flourishes: the communization of excess. As Blanchot writes: “Romanticism is excessive, but its first excess is an excess of thought.” Unlike the thinking seized, held, and enclosed only within concepts (from Latin *capere*, to seize), the excessive thinking of Romantic literature spills over; this poetic procedure attenuates every form of the proper (9-10).

In this model of thinking beyond concepts we find then a way of recapturing the excess of Channing’s citation and narration. The sheer proliferation of verse and of precedent, which inaugurates the text and characterizes its mode of narration, thus opens onto an understanding of personal identity more generally as communally and situationally constituted. Poetic overflow requires and licenses Keatsian “annihilation,” the formal corollary of which is to be found in the malleable and interchangeable persons that stage Channing’s poetic conversations.

Walks and Talks

¹¹⁷ “Who Owns ‘Baker Farm’?” *NCL* 2024.

Under the title “Walks and Talks,” the 1853 “Country Walks” material represents not, as F.B. Sanborn suggests in his subsequent edition, “extraneous matter...literal padding,” but a condensation of Channing’s career-long revision of Emersonian and Thoreauvian poetics. The central terms of this revision are the question of the role of the poet, and the integrity, and stability, of persons, specifically as keys to the interpretation of verse. Channing suggests, with prolific quotation and the intense ambiguity of authorship created by his characters’ pseudonymy, that a proper reading and use of verse resides not in author-centric arcs, nor in the stability afforded by a magniloquent Poet, but as the material of local and occasional thinking and experience. Verse is what occurs to one—to *anyone*—and the leaping of associative conversation is embraced in these middle sections of the biography, becoming a structural principle of sudden transition. The occasions in question in these sections are the putative walks (e.g., “A Walk to Second Division Brook,” “Conantum,” etc.) that Emerson, Thoreau, and Channing undertake, but beyond these, the mantle of elegy that the book as a whole advertises. As the local peripatetic occasions license the recombinatory poetics of quotation and spontaneous generation that drive the sections, so does the larger elegiac occasions enable the renovation and *nowing* of the twenty-year old manuscript as a whole. As we examine the development of this manuscript, from Channing’s copying from Thoreau’s *Journal*, to Sanborn’s editorial restoration of discrete attribution to language that floats between speakers in Channing’s original—a “communization of excess”—, we see how this mixed-genre text offers and enacts a decentered Romantic poetics of anonymity (Khalip) and the commons (Albernaz), in which persons continuously rearrange around language, according to the demands of the moment. I suggest it is this revision of the structure of personhood as a contingent and communal assemblage, significantly structured and enabled by a mode of perception and speech that, even as it proceeds in prose, finds its models in quoted verse, that is the most interesting gesture performed by Channing’s *Thoreau*. In this aim, as in its structure of excursion, it finds significant overlaps with Thoreau’s *A Week*—described by Emerson, relevantly, as “a very slender thread for such big beads & ingots as are strung on it”—and, deeper, with the highly variegated capacities of the early-nineteenth century travel narrative as a genre.¹¹⁸

The biography represents the first exposure of some of Emerson’s journal entries, and many of Thoreau’s; it is telling that the most cogent way of making sense of this material’s discontinuity is understood to be literary conversation. Channing’s justification stresses that the “interlocutory form” offers more “familiar” knowledge: “To furnish a more familiar idea of Thoreau’s walks and talks with his friends and their locality, some reports of them are furnished for convenience in the interlocutory form” (1873, 120). As he privileges values such as “convenience” and “locality,” Channing offers the text—which is strenuously patched together from different years, different compositional contexts, and contains extensive verse compositions—as a “report.” Knowledge, including literary analysis, is presented under the sign of acquaintance and at-handedness, not timeless (as in *sapere*) but—with an etymology that traces to a social act of assembly—“convenient” (as in *cognoscere*). The inherently social terms of this (textual) assembly are stressed in F.B. Sanborn’s representation of Channing’s use of these materials in a note to his 1904 edition of *The Poet-Naturalist*:

¹¹⁸ One of the strangest Transcendentalist examples is Fuller’s *Summer on the Lakes* (1843), which prefigures the emphasis on literary reading—however seemingly remote its topic—as an essential component of placed experience, to be classed alongside encounters with locals, picturesque views, philosophical reflection, travel difficulties, and the like.

Only about half the original manuscript of "Country Walking" was used in this book. I have the original draft in pencil. It was all carefully copied out by Channing and the copy submitted to Mr. Emerson, from whose collection of manuscripts it came to me, but only in part. What became of the rest I know not; but suppose it remained in Channing's hands, and was used by him to print from in 1873. He communicated to me then the general fact *that he had taken the walks described, with Emerson and Thoreau, and that his description of them passed from hand to hand among the three for revision*. I suppose this was strictly true, so long as the plan remained to print the whole as a book; but when that was given up, for what reason I cannot say, the details of the affair seem to have been forgotten by Mr. Emerson. At least, he never spoke of them to me, although he complained that Channing had done ill to print things from his manuscript which he had not yet given to the world. Perhaps he may have fancied—his memory even then being somewhat impaired—that his friend had secretly copied them; but that cannot have been the case. (132n, emphasis added)

We know, from the earlier letter, that Emerson has licensed Channing's reproduction of his journals as part of the enterprise from the beginning; Channing's use of Thoreau's journals will be seen shortly. What's striking about Sanborn's description is how, in the absence of print circulation, these manuscripts and journals circulate (or "pass[] from hand to hand") as the three central characters themselves circulate through the Concord landscape. Though the syntactic ambiguity of "for revision" makes it impossible to ascertain whether the term is meant in the active, scriptorial sense, or the more passive etymological meaning, in either case the labor / cognitive act is absorbed into the fabric of social intercourse (anonymous, habitual), which is presented as primary. Discrete authorship or attribution of particular passages becomes specious, seeming to be a function rather of whose "hands" a text remains in. As social circulation becomes primary, the writing function erodes into a prevalence of "copying"—the most recurrent verb in the passage. Writing, here, is a familiar "report" of socially constituted language, and the whiff of shared authorship that results means that even journal entries written in privacy are understood as products of the "interlocutory form."¹¹⁹ As Channing writes of Thoreau later in the biography, in terms that transparently articulate his own project: "A well-known writer says he looked at *the present moment* as a man does upon a card upon which he has staked a considerable sum, and who seeks to enhance its value as much as he can without exaggeration. Thoreau had a like practice, the great art is judiciously to limit and isolate one's self, and life is so short we must miss no *opportunity* of giving pleasure to one another. No doubt our author's daily writing, his careful observation in his own mind, lay as a mass of gold, out of which he should coin a *good circulating medium for the benefit of other* minds. Nothing which has not sequence is of any value in life" (194, emphases added). This strong emphasis on circulation and "sequence" as the principle of literary value is complemented by the by-now-familiar passage from the present moment to the opportune, and the "limiting" of "one's self" in favor of a horizon of social usefulness.

The strangeness of encountering this anonymized "interlocutory form" is extraordinary. Whereas Alcott's *Conversations with Children*—an early Transcendentalist exemplum of the

¹¹⁹ Emerson's objection, even if factually wrong, reminds us that not everything is fair game, and that "secret" transcription, or publication contrary to another's wishes, remains transgressive.

possibilities of literary conversation—notoriously, and consequentially for the Temple School, preserves “the names of the speakers ... as necessary to identify their different views and statements,” as “to have used assumed names would have impaired the identity of the record, and have diminished its value ... as an historical fact” (xviii), Channing’s text aims at a deliberate obfuscation of difference as the importance of the occasion diminishes that of fixed identities. Character, the text suggests, is something beyond and different from “historical fact.” In these central sections, quotation passes unidentified by marks, resulting in exchanges in which the spirit of repartee takes on a curious ghostliness, even as indentation signals a shift in speaker:

I see the peeping chimney, romance itself. May I hope never to know the name of the remarkable genius who dwells therein.

Very proper, no doubt,—Tubs or Scrubs.

Believe it not, enemy to Blossom-day romance. My soul whispers of a fair, peculiar region behind those embracing bouquets.

Where one should surely find an anxious cook and a critical family.

Hush! hush! traduce not the venerable groves. Here, or in some such devoted solitude, should dwell the Muse and compose a treatise on the worship of Dryads.

Dry as powder-post. Have you seen the scarlet tanager?

No.

(p.128-9)

A persistent but wry poetic idealism, “romance itself,” is staged against ironization and frequent, swiveling deflation. But here, the subject of the debate is to what degree a reader needs to know persons’ identity to locate poetry or “romance.” It is, as such, a direct reflection of our own experience as readers of this obscured text, and it offers two models of reading: the suggestive, in which what is present in the text “whispers” or intimates a further “region,” or the skeptical, which backfills ambiguity with the predictable and vulgar (“Tubs or Scrubs”). Consulting Sanborn’s 1904 edition (p. 144), which often struggles to make sense of the unclear transitions in the text, suggests the speaker that advocates for “romance” is Channing, and Thoreau the gadfly; but to reduce these positions to those characters is to succumb to the way of reading that the text’s central aim is to militate against. For the extravagance of both positions seems the point, as they rub each other to hyperbole before the tone abruptly shifts. And it is, as the Channing figure advocates, not a general moonstruckness, but responsiveness to the sign of a specific “Blossom-day romance”—an occasion, a holiday from daily skeptical perception—that generates the image of the unknown “genius,” and then the “Muse” and her treatise. Inhabitation, whether of a cottage or a grove or a philosophical position, is to this speaker a transient and serial action that, by remaining unspecified, remains open to future acts of timely imagination.

In most passages, however, the differences between three perspectives are more difficult to isolate, and become more so as verse rearranges the matrix of the conversation. The passage below begins by hailing “See, O man of nature! yon groups of weather-stained houses...

stained houses we now o'ertop. There live some Christians, put away on life's plate like so many rinds of cheese; there descend, like dew on flowers, the tranquillizing years, into their prickly life-petals. Save the rats scrabbling along the old plastering, the sawing of pluvial pea-hens, or the low of the recuperating cow, what repose! And in the midst, such felons of destiny,—

"O mother Ida, hearken ere I die."

What avails against hot-bread, cream-of-tartar, and Oriental-company tea, with an afternoon nap? I have met Oenones whom I could have spared better than these horn-pouts of gossip.

Is there a fixed sum of hyson allotted to each sibyl?

"Only a learned and a manly soul
I purposed her, that should with even powers
The rock, the spindle, and the shears control
Of Destiny, and spin her own full hours."

The bluebird, sir! the first bluebird! there he sits and warbles. Dear bird of spring, first speech of the original beauty, first note in the annual concert of love, why soundest thy soft and plaintive warble on my ear, like the warning of a mournful past?

As the poet sings, if not of the new birds:—

"We saw thee in thy balmy nest,
Bright dawn of our eternal day;

We saw thine eyes break from their east,
And chase the trembling shades away:
We saw thee, and we blest the sight,
We saw thee by thine own sweet light.

She sings thy tears asleep, and dips
Her kisses in thy weeping eye;
She spreads the red leaves of thy lips,
That in their buds yet blushing lie:
She 'gainst those mother diamonds tries
The points of her young eagle's eyes."

Excuse soliloquy.

Go on, go on: I can hear the bluebird just the same.

I am glad we are at the sand-bank. Radiantly here the brook parts across the shallows its ever-rippling tresses of golden light. It steals away my battered senses as I gaze therein; and, if I remember me, 'tis in some murmuring line:—

"Thus swam away my thoughts on thee,
And in thy joyful ecstasy
Flowed with thy waters to thy sea."

And the quantity of thy rhyme, I judge. Let us to the ancient woods: I say let us value the woods. They are full of solicitations. My woodlot has no price, full of mysterious values. What forms, what colors, what powers, null to our ignorance, but opening fast enough to our wit. I love this smell that comes from the brush of the pitch-pine, as the spring sun bakes its first batch of violets

[fig. 4, from *Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist* (1873)]

Disjointed to the point of collage, prone to flights of excess, at once exhibitionist and apologetic, and distinctly choral, such a passage is representative of "Walks and Talks" as a whole. In such a potage any reading strategy that aims to identify individual speakers is frustrated; in this example, after a density of unattributed quotations from successively, Tennyson, Ben Jonson, Crashaw, what appear to be the original lines of Channing ("Thus swam away...") are indiscernible as such. What emerges is a sense of speech generated by indistinguishable but occasionally harmonizing "I"s, some putatively present, some present but ventriloquizing, others present only as texts, and still others non-human. The "I" such a passage trains us to see is that of both the "gossip" and the "sibyl"—a recirculator and refiner of speech that begins elsewhere.

I want to train our attention especially on how and where the passage introduces the multiple sources of speech. Natural fluency tropes abound in the bluebird, the sibyl, the "murmuring" brook, and the "solicitations" of the "ancient woods." At the same time, the speakers introduce verse quotations according to the self-consciously tenuous associative and occasional logic, which then structures the extemporizing speech in turn, as when the apostrophe to the bluebird turns to a complaint that the "mournful past" (i.e., these canonical fragments) persists despite the "first"ness of spring. Likewise, the line from Tennyson's "Oenone" casts a pall over the succeeding lines, leading to the alienating contrast of the poetic diction of "Oenones" and "sibyl" with "horn-pouts of gossip," in a nutty Thoreauvian idiom. This is, then, an arena where not only different "I"s (and different models of the speaking subject), but different discourses, poetic and prosaic, social and solipsistic, are staged in overt contrast, and

the end result approximates a Bakhtinian polyphony. This is the reason that “soliloquy” begs to be “excused,” and why it doesn’t need to be. Whereas a printed text can only represent language sequentially, the “Go on...” that answers that request solicits the reader to inhabit an echoic simultaneum. An Orphic model of poetry as monodic and enthralling speech (“as *the* poet sings”) is countered by the lived encounter with verse, in which lines—as they do in this text—function not as centers of attention, but supplements to a multidimensional and socialized conversation.

And these supplements, furthermore, remind us insistently that though the local occasion of this conversation is observation, the greater aegis looming over the text is elegy. The Tennyson line is the dying appeal of that poem’s eponymous speaker; the Jonson extract (“Only a learned and a manly soul...”) is notable for serving also as an epigraph to *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, a memorial text we have already seen. The Crashaw stresses consolation (“she kisses thy tears asleep”) and Channing’s tercet imagines the dissolution, or mingling, in “joyful ecstasy” of individual identity as it projects itself toward the hailed “thee.” Verse, as a medium, models at once a mode of sprezzaturic deferral (of mortality, of the forward drive of narrative), a way of making identity permeable and serially inhabitable (thus, also, resisting death), and the possibility of experiencing time multiply, at once joyfully “ecstatic” and charged with literary history—viz, an occasional temporality.

These are, as I have suggested, the fundamental gestures of the text as a whole, as they are recurring features of Channing’s revision of Transcendentalist poetics more generally, as he builds out a poetics that depends on intersubjectivity and evanescence. It is plainly the case that *Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist, with Memorial Verses* is a difficult and often confusing text. At the same time, when we read its density of reference not as “mere filler” or commonplacing, but rather as making a sustained claim as to of what literary and social materials the *character* of the individual is constituted, the consequences for how we think about the social work of poetry locally, and the structure of identity more generally, are broad and compelling. Read as such, Channing challenges us even more than Thoreau or Emerson—as interpreted, especially, by Arsić and Cavell—to let disjunctive, ecstatic sentences, and the pivots of verse, to irrupt into the illusion of proprioceptive continuity. If the Parfittian fissuring posited by *Bird Relics* and *The Senses of Walden* tends to lead us back into the renewal of perception, directed usually toward an ontologically stable Nature, Channing’s makes tangible the primacy of social relations, however frictive, as the condition of language.

The most poignant illustration of this, with which this chapter closes, is to be found in the F.B. Sanborn collection at Harvard’s Houghton Library. (It is Sanborn who sponsors Channing’s work after the decease of Emerson, and who lodges him in his senescence.)

Chapter 3: Thoreau's Poetic Dwelling

We have now traced, through Ralph Waldo Emerson and Ellery Channing, the origins and some of the effects of the occasions so axiomatic to the work of Transcendentalist writing, and shown how a prosocial poetics of occasions lies alongside a model in which poetry is understood as secular prophecy. Such a poetics looks beyond the integral lyric artifact toward a future and a past of fragmentary reformations, and privileges the utility of verse to the present over the verse itself—as Emerson writes, poetry must “chant our own times and social circumstance,”¹²⁰ and “our writing is the complement to our character, instead of being as it should a superfluity.”¹²¹ Recovering this critical narrative has likewise required taking as objects those acts of poesis that border and exceed published poems, whether these be the extemporaneous conversations that, in the broader Transcendentalist circle, are interpreted as a kind of literature, or the editorial work of *The Dial* and the readings it produces, or the intentional sociality of an activity such as walking. Poetry, and the poet that secures it—if, indeed, a poet is required to secure authoritative speech, as this chapter will ask—becomes valued not for its capacity to ground universal language, but precisely because it is a “superfluity” as occasional as it is local.

As Ellery Channing's elegiac *The Poet-Naturalist*, and Emerson's frequent commentaries on him testify, Henry David Thoreau is an integral source of this project's argument about the fundamental intersubjectivity of “metre-making.” In Emerson's funeral address, the equal palpability and inconsistency of poetry in Thoreau's *modus vivendi* is a central theme. Emerson is careful to position Thoreau as not idealized beyond actual verse, but as produced by it, and occasionally implicated in the sharp questions of its practice. “Thoreau,” he writes, “would pass by many delicate rhythms, but he would have detected every live stanza or line in a volume and knew very well where to find an equal poetic charm in prose.” Thoreau's claim to poetry, in other words, is secured by criticism (“his judgment on poetry was to the ground of it”), but is agnostic as to its genre, and finds, here, its truest expression in “prose” (1021). At times, Thoreau could go so far as to characterize the relationship of poetry and verse as mutually exclusive. In a complex gesture, the “Friday” chapter of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack River* (1848) suggests, in prose, that “the true poem” is “*what [the poet] has become through his work*” before reprising the theme in a proleptic funereal epigram: “My life has been the poem I would have writ, / But I could not both live and utter it” (279, emphasis original).¹²² Such not-quite-repetition of content, translated across a genre gap challenges readers to pit the brash truth claim of a general assertion, against the vibrating first-person pathos of poetic failure and completed grammatical action. As often in Thoreau, a confident, argumentative, prose-native authority is unsettled by the irruption of verse, introducing an aperture in that reasoning, and suggesting alternative grounds on which truth claims might be based.¹²³

¹²⁰ “The Poet,” *Essays* 418

¹²¹ *JMN* 9.22

¹²² Page numbers in *A Week* and *Walden* refer to the 1985 Library of America edition.

¹²³ *A Week*, Friday. Walden declares brashly, in “Economy,” that “In most books, the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference.” However, the coherence of this “*I*” is disassembled and distributed throughout the book, often by means of verse. In “The Ponds,” the narrator, looking into the pond, writes “I see by its face that it is visited by the same reflection; and I can almost say, Walden, is it you?” before breaking into a gnomic poem that speaks as the pond; in “Brute Neighbors,” a comic dialogue between

Equally prevalently, Emerson identifies Thoreau with the insistent claims of the “present.” It would be hard not to: the idea recurs throughout *Walden*’s frequent declarations of its project, most famously in the narrator’s intention to “improve the nick of time” as he “stands on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment....”¹²⁴ In the elegy, Thoreau’s “presence,” Emerson continues, “was poetic, always piqued the curiosity to know more deeply the secrets of his mind” (1022). Indeed, Emerson isolates Thoreau’s radical presencing as one of the key gestures of Thoreauvian language as early as May 1844, writing “Henry Thoreau’s conversation consisted of a continual coining of the present moment into a sentence and offering it to me” (*JMN* 8:148). In such an aperçu we find the by-now-familiar transit from the “present” to a horizon of “conversation” that looks toward writing, here in the form of “sentences,”—which, if they are “coins,” activate a complex pun on the exchangeable “currency” of language.

The currency of *Walden* is the occasion; it is where exchange takes place, where the individual reckons himself in and against the measures of sociable life. By repetitions and modulations of this keyword and its variants Thoreau articulates the value and linguistic capacities of the present, and how the individual ought to find himself in relation to it. The text’s stress on the word, alongside the parallel development of “accident,” which will be treated in the first section, reflects a bracketed or agnostic model of causation, in which the sensible phenomenon is privileged absolutely, while the skeptic narrator contests putatively universal laws. This creates a narratology in which the overwhelming focus on presence results in surprise or the exceptional (‘it occasioned’) even as it intertwines with a poetics of the recurrent (‘occasionally’). Three brief examples show how Thoreau derives a transcendental “occasion” from blurrier concepts of space and time.

In “Where I Lived and What I Lived For,” Thoreau sets up “occasions” as a mediating third term that partakes of both “times” and “places” without being of either: “Men esteem truth remote... In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here” (399). In an otherwise balanced and familiar dualism (“times and places... now and here”) the occasion is an uneasy fulcrum, overlaying what Stanley Cavell calls “the optative mood”—the moral need to *do*—on an analytic. Neither time nor place, the occasion partakes of both while reminding us that it is our attention to the possibilities inherent in our times and places that makes these categories significant; it is thus how the sentence opens to the trace of the reader. Driving more explicitly toward his call-to-wakefulness in “Solitude,” Thoreau’s powerful rhetoric picks up the same language to stress again that by “occasions” he means not a distant category, nor “circumstance” in its mundane sense, but something far more powerful and nearer: “Any prospect of awakening or coming to life to a dead man makes indifferent all times and places... For the most part we allow only outlying and transient circumstances to make our occasions. They are, in fact, the cause of our distraction. Nearest to all things is that power which fashions their being. *Next* to us the grandest laws are continually being executed” (429). The “occasion” here, transcendently understood, is the very grammar of

“Poet” and “Hermit” moves far beyond the “I” into an imagined performance, implicitly questioning whether the book’s narrator can be identified with either figure.

¹²⁴ Thoreau’s “nick” is a clear revision of Emerson’s resonant phrase: “I would write on the lintels of the door-post, Whim. I hope that it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation.”

self-neighbouring; the means by which the essential contingency by which we parse, and dismiss, mundane pursuits, is accepted as the law of the soul recognizing itself as fallen into the world. This transcendental occasion is underscored again in “Sounds,” where chronological time is rejected—“My days were not days of the week, bearing the stamp of any heathen deity, nor were they minced into hours and fretted by the ticking of a clock”—in favor of the kairoitic, culminating in “A man must find his occasions in himself” (412).

The occasion offers, however, not just an aspectual relationship to time, but one constituted specifically by utterance. Chapter One located American cultures of public speech as a root of Emerson’s poetics. Oratory lies as starkly behind Thoreau’s development of the concept, albeit with a different emphasis. Thus in “Reading,” he writes:

However much we may admire the orator’s occasional bursts of eloquence, the noblest written words are commonly as far behind or above the fleeting spoken language as the firmament with its stars is behind the clouds. They are not exhalations like our daily colloquies and vaporous breath. What is called eloquence in the forum is commonly found to be rhetoric in the study. The orator yields to the inspiration of a transient occasion, and speaks to the mob before him, to those who can *hear* him; but the writer, whose more equable life is his occasion, and who would be distracted by the event and the crowd which inspire the orator, speaks to the intellect and health of mankind, to all in any age who can *understand* him (404).

In such an observation we hear the echo of what, elsewhere, he observers of Margaret Fuller, that “in writing talk must be folded many times thick.” That is, even though Thoreau very clearly segregates language by its time, from “daily colloquies” to “transient occasion” to the “equable life” and the “any age” which it accesses, this represents a transcendence only in terms, not in structure, and the fundamental model of language remains the orator’s. At the same time, the “occasion” emerges from its first guise, the adjectival’s “occasional bursts of eloquence,” to reveal that this apparent recurrence marks a more enduring truth, that such eloquence is not the “orator’s” at all, but a function of the “transient occasion.” But when we, like the writer, imagine what it would mean to expand the scope of the “occasion” to an entire “equable life,” we have to work to reconcile the scale of our thinking. Thoreau is challenging us to find transience, hazard, and the impetus to action in what we are accustomed to treat as stable and continuous—the narrativized life, or *bios*. We are challenged to make use: to reenter our experiences by breaking apart the causal links that make sentence of them, and to transfigure them so that they speak to “the intellect and health of all mankind.” This insistent orientation toward audience is not self-sufficiency; indeed, there is a lonely pathos in the hint of “distraction.”

This way of being in time which *Walden* explicitly articulates is simultaneously enacted in the leaps and ecstasies of its narration. One model for this narration, which the above paragraph hints, is the oral, and, beyond it, the music, cries, and sounds that float through the text, redirecting its thinking. Despite the wild pigeons which “give a voice to the air,” the “rattle of the railroad cars” reminds the narrator that he does not “live out of the world”; the “great guns” and “martial music” from the village registers in the sensorium as a “itching and disease in the horizon”; and, when other sounds cease, the screech owls’ cry is “truly Ben Jonsonian ... no honest and blunt tu-whit tu-who of the poets, but, without jesting, a most solemn graveyard ditty, the mutual consolations of suicide lovers remembering the pangs and the delights of supernal love in the infernal groves” (421). The derangement effected by this last “dismal scream” on the

narrator is such that, looking for parallels, he tracks English verse from the 17th and 19th centuries before ending in an overwrought Dantean riff. And, as this hints, the other, interlocking legend of this irruptive narration, and the capacious model of the occasion which secures it, is the specifically fragmentary and exoteric poetics that this project has traced.

The tasks of this chapter are thus three. Returning to the kairotic Transcendental temporality sketched in chapter one, I argue first that it is Thoreau who most extensively and ecstatically develops the Emersonian moment into the occasion as such. This is done by tracing, concomitantly, the closely related troping of “accident” in the text, which emerges as both as a principle of historical action and a resistance to Aristotelian claims about the material of poetry. The “occasion” is the aspectual relationship to time, and the litmus of linguistic audience, by which *Walden* connects an individual with the nested communities in which he takes on meaning: “At length, in the beginning of May, with the help of some of my acquaintances, rather to improve so good an occasion for neighborliness than from any necessity, I set up the frame of my house” (358). Dwelling poetically in the various presents *Walden* opens to the reader, and searching out precedents in works such as *A Week*, I locate then, with Augustine and Ricoeur, the metaphysical and narratological critiques that follow when being is constituted by the radical present, when perception is understood to hang on the chance of occasioning, and when we cease to require of the text, as of ourselves, certain forms of narrative and characterological continuity.

The second section compasses the verse and verse traditions which, as generations of critics have noted, *Walden* metabolizes. Encountering a conception of the occasion and presence in more general terms with Stanley Cavell, I then ask with Branka Arsić how a metaphors of poetry associated with sound and the oral forces us to reimagine the structure of selfhood and the work of reason in *Walden*. Finally, with most granularity, Meredith McGill models a way of thinking about how fragmentary verse extracts in prose offer an alternative, nonmimetic model of literary contemporaneity.

Answering why *Walden* needs poetry requires we linger, thirdly and ultimately, with the particularities of verse in situ, and how it digests its poets. Completing the chapter’s movement from theoretical to particular, this section reads the occasions of poetry in the text, to discover how verse punctuates a linear chronology associated with modernity and economic progress, and recomposes reader and narrator alike. These irruptions of genre are, it emerges, where Thoreau most clearly espouses a decentered and anonymous poetics of the commons. This is a theme that emerges most clearly and vexedly in the poetomachy of the problematic “Baker Farm” chapter, where Thoreau, extravagantly, satirizes the ideal of the prophet-poet, and, collaborating with the thinly veiled figure of Ellery Channing, adduces, via a dramatic edit of Channing’s poem, a radical anarchic critique.

One: “I moments live, who lived but years”: Thoreau’s presents.

“At length, in the beginning of May, with the help of some of my acquaintances, rather to improve so good an occasion for neighborliness than from any necessity, I set up the frame of my house.” (“Economy,” 358)

“When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which, by accident, was on Independence Day, or the Fourth of July, 1845, my house was not

finished for winter, but was merely a defence against the rain, without plastering or chimney, the walls being of rough, weather-stained boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night.” (“Economy,” 390)

“In poetry the taking of measure occurs. To write poetry is measure-taking, understood in the strict sense of the word, by which man first receives the measure for the breadth of his being. ... [measure-taking] gauges the between, which brings the two, heaven and earth, to one another.” (Martin Heidegger, “Poetically Man Dwells,” 120)

This section outlines the implications of the webbed occasions and accidents of *Walden* to locate the intersection of hazard and recurrence: the way that Thoreau uses “accident” (falling toward) to figure external history, and “occasion” (to fall near) for the translation of that principle into the self’s recognition of its connection to such a world. It then explores how *Walden* sees the occasion as a key principle of intersubjectivity: the opening of its intense inward quest toward other minds. Finally, seeking the root of this metaphysics, it turns to *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, where, with the aid of Augustine and Paul Ricoeur, it recovers the theological and metaphysical stakes of Thoreau’s capacious presents and their narratological manifestations.

(A). A list of what the narrator of *Walden* understands as improvable is daunting but enlightening. Against the inert form “improvements,” by which he ironizes the moral vacuity of progress, he provokes men, by the earnestly validated verb form, to “improve” “their lives,” “condition,” and “lot.” But, with overwhelming frequency, the values Thoreau challenges us to “improve” are temporal: men must “improve the earliest opportunity to study” ice; “improve the first moments”; “improve their time”; “improve their advantages” (518, 529, 444, 347). He asks whether, since the railroad, men have “improved...in punctuality” (416). He declares he will “improve the nick of time” and “improve so good an occasion” (336, 348).¹²⁵ And by the time he rises to declare that “...no time has elapsed since that divinity was revealed. That time which we really improve, or which is improvable, is neither past, present, nor future,” (402) we understand how entirely the aspectual relationship to time, not a stable measure, but a sensed or stanced value like *timeliness*, has supplanted lay categories of past, future, and even present. Rather, the “time...which is improvable” we ascertain, must be “advantages,” “moments,” the “occasion.” The “nick” which is then “notch[ed] on [his] stick” has been frequently read as an allusion to Robinson Crusoe’s “tally,” which underscores how the fixed historiography fundamental to the self-narration of imperial capitalism, depends on a single concrete metaphor: one day, one line. By replacing the concrete day with the “nick,”—the improvement, or relativity of which is made legible through the web of cognates arrayed here—Thoreau unsettles capitalism’s underlying historiographical structure, the progress narrative, and the unselfconscious subjects it reproduces. Rather than seeing themselves as passively inside a total history and beholden to immutable cultural values, those same subjects, like Thoreau’s narrator, must learn to perceive their lives as oriented toward the present, and sensitive to its occasions, but ultimately only “near” or beside fixed chronology. Man measures time, and to do so, Augustine suggests, he gives breath to the

¹²⁵ In a coy goad, the anonymized figure of George Minot asks the narrator in “Visitors” whether he has in fact “improved” these: “He would sometimes ask me first on such occasions, if I had made any improvement.”

letter that forms him, speaks aloud a line of poetry¹²⁶; by which, for Heidegger, he “receives the measure for the breadth of his being” (222).

The sensitivity to the propitious that Thoreau aims to inculcate depends on a simultaneous privileging of present sense data and a skeptical reading of occluded causes; as for Hume, for *Walden*’s fey and changeable narrator totality is merely synchronous, verifiable only by the intensity of its presence in the (text’s) sensorium and not by association of past correlations.¹²⁷ *Walden*’s is, sometimes, a world of jest, and the “demoniac laughter” of the loon, which makes the “woods ring far and wide” is the metonymic measure of its “derision” for the narrator’s vain “endeavor[s] to calculate” his emergence (511).¹²⁸ One way to dwell fully in such a world, while recognizing the indifference of its cosmogony to human reason, would be “rest on [one’s] oars” while “straining [one’s] eyes,”—that is, working to sense it, not to influence it, and thus retaining the investment in that world that allows one to be “startled,” and thus to measure oneself, by the gaze, against the heavens (Heidegger 221). The loon of “Brute Neighbors” offers one window into the essential accidenty that *Walden* represents as the deepest principle of realized history—a corollary, I suggest, to the way the occasion emerges as one surd of language.

Another, more explicit strategy for dwelling in a universe governed by accident is offered, famously, in “Economy”:

When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which, by accident, was on Independence Day, or the Fourth of July, 1845, my house was not finished for winter, but was merely a defence against the rain, without plastering or chimney, the walls being of rough, weather-stained boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night (390).

This chapter’s succeeding section will return to Stanley Cavell’s analysis of this passage, which argues that Thoreau can only revise this founding national occasion by inhabiting it as indifferently as those whose acts he overwrites, lest his gesture be mere reenactment, and indeed, how this means that we as readers must inhabit sentences as if “by accident.” The “accident,” in other words, must be reintroduced into the heart of this most axiomatic national occasion if it is to signify. I want to stress here, however, the physical and syntactic porousness to the environment that dwelling according to accidenty results in. Physically, the cabin’s boards are “weather-stained,” and night air enters through the “wide chinks”; syntactically, the “accident” is buried in a relative clause among appositives, in a sentence that begins in the firstness of completed action, but pools out in a habitual past. And, quite beautifully, what we take to signify

¹²⁶ “Does not my soul most truly confess unto Thee, that I do measure times? Do I then measure, O my God, and know not what I measure? I measure the motion of a body in time; and the time itself do I not measure? ... do we by a shorter time measure a longer, as by the space of a cubit, the space of a rood? for so indeed we seem by the space of a short syllable, to measure the space of a long syllable, and to say that this is double the other. Thus measure we the spaces of stanzas, by the spaces of the verses, and the spaces of the verses, by the spaces of the feet, and the spaces of the feet, by the spaces of the syllables, and the spaces of long, by the space of short syllables...” (*Confessions* IX).

¹²⁷ Hume’s suspicion of causation is partly on the grounds that this association, the strongest, “takes us “beyond our senses” (*Treatise on Human Nature* 1.3.2.3/74).

¹²⁸ Thoreau’s loon, whose voice is “the wildest sound ever heard,” and whose “prayer is... answered,” is one of the most privileged mouthpieces for this vision of the jesting universe. The theological force of his uncanny cry scrambles Thoreau’s ability to define it, a limit case of the power of the oral to derange in *Walden*. At the same time, by calling him “indeed a silly loon” (selye, from Selene, dependent on the moon) Thoreau links him with madmen, and, famously, poets.

a “day,” rich in its associations of clarity and knowledge, is secured for Thoreau in fact by the “nights” and “night” the sentence returns to—the porous underside of knowing, here cognate with the embedded accident.

For Thoreau’s motivation of the accident as a principle of dwelling represents also a revision of some of the most influential statements about poetry’s relationship to truth. (Poetry is a formally agnostic category even for Aristotle: “the poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose” [*Poetics* IX].) For Aristotle in the *Physics*, the accident is a contingent property of substance, which is “any being which exists in itself”; it is an opposition taken up as elemental by Aquinas into European metaphysics.¹²⁹ From this bifurcation follows the claim in the *Poetics*, that poetry, as “a more philosophical and a higher thing than history” must “express the universal, history the particular” (IX). This opposition is essentially accepted by Romantic theorists such as Schiller and Coleridge, who adopts, in the *Biographia Literaria* “with full faith the principle of Aristotle that poetry as poetry, is essentially ideal, that it avoids and excludes all accident, that its apparent individualities of rank, character, or occupation, must be representative of a class; and that the persons of poetry must be clothed with generic attributes, with the common attributes of the class: not with such as one sifted individual might possibly possess, but such as from his situation it is most probably before-hand that he would possess” (XVII). For all the traces of English Romanticism that haunt *Walden*—its silent slouching fishermen, its evening reveries over books—the text’s equal investment in the accident and the contingent as a, if not the, inalienable complement of knowing, and in poetic reading as a mode properly conducive to ethical and metaphysical principles, represents at once an assertion of the primacy of poetry—as critics such as Stanley Cavell and Branka Arsić argue in the next section—and a contestation of its characterization on the model of idealizing lyric.¹³⁰

It is as “accidents,” moreover, that Thoreau represents much of the developmental history he compasses, further dismantling a myth of willed progress. It is by accident that fire and yeast are discovered, and recognizing this contingency allows us to reimagine our relationship to these supposed necessities (372). The same angle of attack is used when Thoreau ironizes that even more fundamental code, money and its numbering. Even in democratic New England, he tells us, “the accidental possession of wealth ... obtain[s] for the possessor almost universal respect” (340); very similarly, after he accounts for his expenses in the first year of bean-planting, he concedes, “These statistics, however accidental and therefore uninformative they may appear, as they have a certain completeness, have a certain value also” (370). We are provoked: what appears as a dismissive, “accidental” transits in both cases to the “universal,” the “complete,” because accidentality makes present metonymically in itself the contingency and malleability of fixed orders. Slantily presented, here, is Thoreau’s vision of primitive accumulation, an ultimately aleatory inequality masked behind manners and the myths of government. (While Crusoe has tools, Thoreau has a web of “acquaintances” and “fellow-men” with “an interest in [his] enterprise”; not things, but relations serve as his original stock.) Likewise, his statistics attain to a kind of value—crucially, one distinct from economic or use value—because, accidental, they participate in the large accident of Walden’s settlement. That “certain value” may be aesthetic

¹²⁹ Commentary by Aquinas, 28.

¹³⁰ Rei Terada picks up the broad strokes of this argument in *Looking Awry*, arguing that individual registering of fleeting phenomena represents a minor, and often queer, resistance to this central metaphysical distinction. See pp. 10-12.

value: unfixed from a necessary causal relationship, from purpose, even an account book permits the free play of the imagination. So does “accident” and “nearness” produce not harmony, but a looping rondo in the songs of whippoorwills, in “Sounds,” “four or five at once in different parts of the wood, by accident one a bar behind another, and so near” (421).¹³¹

(Behind these positive revaluations of the accident lies the other, tragic accident that *Walden* hints at: the more than a hundred acres that Thoreau “burned [] myself by accident” by Fair Haven Bay in 1844. The psychological and social effects of this on Thoreau as a citizen of Concord were grave, as Dassow Walls records, so much so that he could not write about the incident until 1850.)¹³² Still, the end result of treating the world as if its most fundamental forms were mere accidents, which each present instant is always about to revise utterly, is liberatory. Recalling the porous cabin of “Economy,” by “Spring,” this cosmology has been worked through to the degree that the narrator can form it into creed: “We should be blessed if we lived in the present always, and took advantage of every accident that befell us, like the grass which confesses the influence of the slightest dew that falls on it; and did not spend our time in atoning for the neglect of past opportunities, which we call doing our duty” (572). With such a synthesis, Thoreau suggests that the act of dwelling “in the present always” (note the rich blur between modifier and modified) makes the work of the senses itself a kind of writing and an avowal of faith, a “confession.” “Taking advantage,” in such a world, has been turned on its head, and registers not the shrewd Yankee exploitation of opportunity, but a passivity so alert to the self’s porosity to world and moment (the inflow of “influence”) that the past is crowded out.

(B.) Many of these “influences” that Walden “confesses” are explicitly social, or are figured metaphorically as such. As previous chapters dwell on the intersubjectivity permitted by the occasion at some length, I want to point here at just one moment when Thoreau offers a rote or jarring model of the individual being gathered into the social occasion, and how he uses verse to improve it. (The association of occasional action with sociality is, however pervasive; see the narrator’s dining at friends’, which is at once “occasional” and therefore, paradoxically, “a constant element,” or his occasional joining of companions to fish.¹³³) Thoreau puns on two senses of the occasional when he writes, “On gala days the town fires its great guns, which echo like popguns to these woods, and some waifs of martial music occasionally penetrate thus far....when there was a military turnout of which I was ignorant, I have sometimes had a vague sense all the day of some sort of itching and disease in the horizon, as if some eruption would break out there soon ... It seemed by the distant hum as if somebody’s bees had swarmed, and that the neighbors, according to Virgil’s advice, by a faint *tintinnabulum* upon the most sonorous of their domestic utensils, were endeavoring to call them down into the hive again” (450). The phenomenology is subtle: at stake is an *occasion within an occasion*, the intermittency of the rote occasion’s (“gala days”) interpellation of the individual, and how this claim on the individual is registered and mediated in the senses. Over the course of the passage, the far, grand (“great

¹³¹ There is, in “Visitors,” likewise a quiet revision of the Apollo/Daphne myth of poetry in the observation that “They who come rarely to the woods take some little piece of the forest into their hands to play with by the way, which they leave, either intentionally or accidentally. One has peeled a willow wand, woven it into a ring, and dropped it on my table.” Here too is the change, effected “by the way,” of the linear, that which ends, into a recursive “ring.”

¹³² Dassow Walls, 172.

¹³³ 370, 461.

guns”), and violent (“penetrate”) claims that this martial time makes on the individual’s consciousness and body are transfigured into a vision of a society constituted by nearness (“neighbours”) that, by a gentle sound-making, “calls” back that “swarm”—the archetypal epic simile of a martial society (*Iliad* II 87-93; *Aeneid* I, VII). Violent outward motion (“penetrate”) ends softened by a domestic “tintinnabulum” and absorbed into Virgil’s hive. Bluntly, a chronology founded on the warlike commemoration of national events produces “ignorance[ce],” “itching and disease,” and produces more conflict (“...would break out there soon” points clearly to the Mexican War). By contrast, a sensorium conditioned by *Georgics* IV, which offers not an entire articulation of society, but a light, contingent adumbration of methods, structured by conditional “ifs” and acknowledging mishap, produces “faint” and appropriate action guided by immediate local need. These two ways of dwelling in time with others, crucially, are constructed around two different modes of aesthesis, sensitivities to either the music of guns or that of plosives and assonance. Locating this effect as a function of poetry, Thoreau anticipates Susan Stewart’s argument that it is the work of verse to absorb sensorial data, which is always historical, into a coherent and socialized concept of the human: “only when poetic metaphors make available to others the experience of the corporeal senses can the corporeal senses truly appear as integral experiences” (15). In a statement that bears significantly on *Walden*’s interest in mirroring and extending society to non-human actors,¹³⁴ Stewart, via the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of Marx, argues that when sense perception is filtered through the impetus of poetic intelligibility and “exists as human sensuousness for one’s self through the other man”—when the individual learns to recognize himself as both subject and object, and the senses as a shared construct, not merely physical but extending to “will” and “love”—the warping effect of private property on consciousness begins to be overcome (40). Ultimately softening Marx’s revolutionary thrust into a liberal humanistic argument, Stewart offers the expanded sensorium, as attuned by poetic reading to history and to itself, as productive of consensus: poetry records “the first-person speaker across and through historical and cultural contexts” and “provides us with a form on the boundary among sense impressions, somatic memory, individuation of agency, and social context.” Lyric, she suggests, “has its task the crossing of thresholds: among persons, positions, and social groups” (41).

(C.) *On the epistemology and narratology of the present.*

In a striking moment from “Where I Lived and What I Lived For,”—a chapter that seeks to articulate the philosophical stakes of the tangible program laid out in “Economy”—the narrator lays out the ramifications of the text’s focus on the present. Commitment to such a temporality entails a pervasive metaphors of emplacement and nearness: “all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment...” (399). Such language is resonant with the background echoes of what Harold Bloom has termed Emerson’s “mere Gnosticism” (as he wrote in “The Divinity School Address,” “That which shows God in me, fortifies me. That which shows God out of me, makes me a wart and a wen...” [81]) behind

¹³⁴ See “The Pond in Winter” and, in “Solitude,” “Yet I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object, even for the poor misanthrope and most melancholy man.”

a more granular engagement with the problem of assimilating the inconstant phenomenological experience of time into a stable cosmological order.¹³⁵

The roots of this problem are deep. When Thoreau declares that “God culminates in the present moment,” I hear him as explicitly developing Augustine’s aporia and subsequent inquiry—“What then is Time?”—in the *Confessions*.¹³⁶ It is a question Thoreau takes up anew in each of his major works, and the vector of its answering represents one of his claims to philosophy. For Augustine, the present is the only intellectually irreducible tense for unaided human faculties, although its fleet nature means it is imperceptible as such: “...that alone is it, which may be called present. Which yet flies with such speed from future to past...”. At the same time, daily usage, and the concepts that follow, prevent us from foreclosing the reality of other tenses. His solution is the “three-fold present,” the “present of things past, memory; present of things present, sight; present of things future, expectation.” Though God, through his prophets, secures the perpetual translation of past, present, future, to approach that measure Augustine arrives at a method of self-scrutiny: “It is in thee, my mind, that I measure times. Interrupt me not, that is, interrupt not thyself with the tumults of thy impressions.” Crucially, it is poetry that functions as the most stable metron of our minds; even measuring silence, “for though both voice and tongue be still, yet in thought we go over poems, and verses, and any other discourse, or dimensions of motions, and report as to the spaces of times, how much this is in respect of that, no otherwise than if vocally we did pronounce them.” However, as Paul Ricoeur argues in *Time and Narrative*, the two branches of this solution, are uneasy, and bequeath that tension to subsequent interpretations; these “cosmological [i.e., secured by God] and psychological [derived from Augustine’s self-observation] theories of time are seen to simultaneously obscure and imply each other.”

This uneasy tension between two ways of grounding time culminates in two distinct concepts of the present, the one subjective and numerable, and the other secured by the community’s shared belief and continuity of texts. It reflects, in part, the influence Aristotle’s own naturalistic understanding of the “instant” in Book IV of the *Physics*, in which time’s irreducible function is its numerability.¹³⁷ Having established the ground of time as numerability, Aristotle then inscribes the phenomenological “instant” as a quantum unit where the individual’s mind tips over into the permanent truths of numeration: “So in so far as the *now* is a limit, it is not in time (except coincidentally), but it is in so far as it numbers.” Such a move ties the unstable subjective mental “instant” as the basal limit of firmer and larger concepts of time-as-succession. Jonathan Martineau makes the point that such a schematic has clear political utility;

¹³⁵ Bloom 1996: “To be empowered by eloquence and vision is what Emerson meant by self-reliance, and is the start of what I mean by “mere Gnosticism,” where “mere” takes its original meaning of “pure” or “unmixed.” Bloom continues that for Emerson, “the moment of *Gnosis* is the mind’s direct perception, a pure movement and event that simultaneously discloses a divine spark in the self, and a sense of divine degradation even there, in the inmost self, because the Gnostic Fall is *within* the Godhead.”

¹³⁶ Compare Augustine: “What now is clear and plain is, that neither things to come nor past are. Nor is it properly said, “there be three times, past, present, and to come”: yet perchance it might be properly said, “there be three times; a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future.”

¹³⁷ “Time is a number in the sense of that which is numbered, not in the sense of that by which we number. That by which we number is not the same as that which is numbered.”

the potential arrhythmia of the individual's experience of time is subordinated to, and secured by, the stable and continuous chronologies of the polis.¹³⁸

But, as Ricoeur argues, though Augustine seems to drive toward stability, the circling of his language and method returns to the gulf that divides the individual's unsecured and unverifiable experience of time and mind, from the divine. Very broadly, Ricoeur argues, the aporias to which thought about time gives rise to represent the original problem and meaning-making work of narrative itself. By stressing the alienation of the subject's experience of time from meaning-making order—Ricoeur: “the more the mind makes itself *intentio*, the more it suffers *distentio*”¹³⁹—Augustine establishes a mundane *narrative* lack that participates in the ontological lack that characterizes human existence without God. As God's presence redeems the individual into the community, not directly but through a central guarantor, so, for Ricoeur, does “narrative emplotment of incidents and events resolve the aporias of time in a poetic rather than a theoretical or speculative mode”.¹⁴⁰ Thus, Ricoeur's reading of Augustine provides a crucial preparation for Thoreau's own interpretation in that it, first, privileges language as the site where the irresolvability of phenomenological or subjective time and more stable becomes perceptible. It is in language, too—specifically, in the poetic work of narration itself—that for Ricoeur this irresolvability is not healed, but made productive of the individual whose capacities for devotion outside himself can heal such a rupture. The modes of aesthetic attention which allow such a reader to perceive and integrate literary elements into a whole are thus, for Augustine as for Aristotle and Kant, propaedeutic and instrumental to the development of moral and theological capacities.

When we see the metaphysical question of how much authority to grant to the present, and how much to privilege a subjective experience of that present over a secured communal chronology, as entailing deep narratological consequences, we begin to see how Thoreau's strategies of profoundly discontinuous narration emerge from his central revaluation of the kairotic present, which he repeatedly refers to as the occasion. The *Confessions* draw us to God; Thoreau refers us to the dynamic field of the present, as it is understood as presenting occasions and opportunities for our self-realization. The most persistent metaphor for this dynamic field in Thoreau's texts is language itself, and in these texts language's most consistent tension is between the ratiocinative and clarifying function by which intended meaning is revealed, and to which form is ancillary, and the doubling, polysemic play of the medium in its independent materiality. Because the self, too, is recognized as dialectically constituted in the instant by the objects it converses with and “neighbours”, just as the Augustinian ego, to be grasped in its full import, requires readerly attention to lead beyond the text to the divine, so does Thoreau's essentially porous self ask readers to attend to language in its capacity to exceed our gloss of it. Only once we have accepted this unknowability as an integral component of our occasional, instantaneous experience of language, can we experience the self too as truly entangled with the real environs that loom metaphorically in language. The “I,” in this light, functions as a

¹³⁸ Martineau, “Aristotle, Augustine and Ricoeur's Aporetics of Temporality in Context.” 62

¹³⁹ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 21. Ricoeur points out that “the three temporal intentions are separate from one another to the extent that the intentional activity has as its counterpart the passivity engendered by this very activity [...]. It is not only these three acts that do not coincide, but also the activity and passivity which oppose one another, to say nothing of the discordance between the two passivities, the one related to expectation, the other to memory. Therefore, the more the mind makes itself *intentio*, the more it suffers *distentio*” (20-1).

¹⁴⁰ Savage, “The Aporetics of Temporality and the Poetics of the Will,” (22).

grammatical lens that must be continually, sharply adjusted to bring objects at different distances into focus. So, in “House-Warming,” does the new ice that “at first appeared” to promise glasslike transparency resolve at extreme proximity into reflections of “your face”—an accommodating pronoun, that quietly folds the reader into the narrator’s experience.¹⁴¹

A Week, though loosely extensive where *Walden* is intensive, and more consistently oriented toward the recoverable past, as against *Walden*’s presents, shows Thoreau developing this thinking about the ability of the occasion to effect such refocusing and adjustments. In light of the previous paragraph, I want to dwell for a moment in the very end of the text, in the “Friday” chapter, when the narrator picks up and revises Augustine’s mode and theme particularly forcefully. After contesting the prestige commonly attributed to Columbian exploration, then the natural sciences and astronomy—a cultural gradient *A Week*’s travel narration ostensibly trades upon—he writes:

Surely, we are provided with senses as well fitted to penetrate the spaces of the real, the substantial, the eternal, as these outward are to penetrate the material universe. Veias, Menu, Zoroaster, Socrates, Christ, Shakespeare, Swedenborg,—these are some of our astronomers.

There are perturbations in our orbits produced by the influence of outlying spheres, and no astronomer has ever yet calculated the elements of that undiscovered world which produces them. *I perceive in the common train of my thoughts a natural and uninterrupted sequence, each implying the next, or, if interruption occurs, it is occasioned by a new object being presented to my senses.* But a steep, and sudden, and by these means unaccountable transition, is that from a comparatively narrow and partial, what is called common sense view of things, to an infinitely expanded and liberating one, from seeing things as men describe them, to seeing them as men cannot describe them. This implies a sense which is not common, but rare in the wisest man’s experience; which is sensible or sentient of more than common (313, emphasis added).

Variants of the word “senses” organize the passage like chords, and we pass from external to internal usages, before a punning deconstruction of both sides of “common sense.” Senses, Thoreau recognizes, register mostly “perturbation”: they alert us not to “uninterrupted sequence” but its rupture. It is this “interruption” that the senses have to be trained (inward) to register, as only thereby can we understand the presence of a “new thing,” or, better, “seeing things as men cannot describe them.” By the end of the passage, sensitivity to such senses displaces the coherence of the ego, which, in the case of the “wisest man,” is characterized by the coming and going of sudden transitions, of the “rare” occasioning of such “sense.” Sentience, finally, *is* sensibility, and what it primarily registers are the “unaccountable transitions” that are discovered

¹⁴¹ The passage runs: “But the ice itself is the object of most interest, though you must improve the earliest opportunity to study it. If you examine it closely the morning after it freezes, you find that the greater part of the bubbles, which at first appeared to be within it, are against its under surface, and that more are continually rising from the bottom; while the ice is as yet comparatively solid and dark, that is, you see the water through it. These bubbles are from an eightieth to an eighth of an inch in diameter, very clear and beautiful, and you see your face reflected in them through the ice” (518).

in the “common train of thoughts” and enacted at every formal level by Thoreau’s leaping penchant.¹⁴²

Thoreau’s method is strikingly similar to Augustine’s in the recurrent effort to test the cosmological, and established linguistic and conceptual usages, against the soul’s phenomenological capacity to measure itself. Augustine, too, dismisses astronomy as a scalar distraction from the more authoritative object of inquiry: “I heard once from a learned man, that the motions of the sun, moon, and stars, constituted time, and I assented not....God, grant to men to see in a small thing notices common to things great and small.” At first glance, Thoreau’s observations strike us as measured compared to the affective aporias that pace Augustine’s analyses (“My soul is on fire to know this most intricate enigma...”). However, whereas for Augustine this affective intensity comes in to mark the insufficiency of unaided human faculties, perforating narration and thereby opening it to the divine supplement (“God, grant to men...”), Thoreau’s progressive reasoning, the “natural and uninterrupted sequence” which characterizes both the thought and the narration of it, is premised on an essential self-sufficiency of the senses as of the soul. The natural state of these is not lack but excess, a plenitude that must be recovered through internal attention.¹⁴³

A moment later in “Friday,” as Henry and John return to Concord, the same even narrative motion (this time apparently spatial) in fact opens us to an awareness of the interruptions that secure these continuities: the “moments.” With the internal attention that registers this, we can “anticipate” or make meaningful otherwise-rote chronologies. The passage moves again from the external, to the internal, to the revision of the ego itself:

...we observed less what was passing on the shore, than the dateless associations and impressions which the season awakened, anticipating in some measure the progress of the year.

I hearing get, who had but ears,
And sight, who had but eyes before,
I moments live, who lived but years,
And truth discern, who knew but learning’s lore.” (284)

The sudden swerve into verse, activated by the pun on “measure,” becomes, as the next section suggests, the narrative’s chief method of such acts of “anticipating,” bending linguistic time from the sentence’s linear thrust to the momentary recursive, and forestalling, with the sudden interruption of white space “the progress of the year.” As for Augustine, verse is how we measure both the “year” and the intricate enigmas of the “I”. In the space of verse that opens, the senses are revised, then the “year” is emptied of significance, and replaced by the experience of “moments.” The cumulative result is a momentary, but consequential, kenosis of the “I” that

¹⁴² Mooney, 2009, picks up a long tradition in calling Thoreau a “philosopher of the senses” (195). Thoreau’s calls-to-sensation are pervasive: in *Walden* he aspires to be “forever on the alert,” and cultivates “the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen” (IV); in a late *Journal* entry he bemoans “How much of beauty—of color, as well as form—on which our eyes daily rest goes unperceived by us,” he laments (*Journal*, 8/1/60).

¹⁴³ Compare with “Friday”: “The senses of the savage will furnish him with facts enough to set him up as a philosopher” (296).

culminates in the ability to “truth discern.” It is not the “I” but the “who” that survives this quatrain: the relative and contingent pronoun that the senses occupy in “moments.”

So it is that when, in Thoreau, the senses are redirected toward the “real, the substantial,”—which comprise those regions of consciousness more usually taken as unreal—what they discover are a grammar of discontinuities. In the passage already quoted, thoughts succeed each other, “each implying the next, or, if interruption occurs, it is occasioned by a new object being presented to [Thoreau’s] senses. But a steep, and sudden, and by these means unaccountable transition, is that from... seeing things as men describe them, to seeing them as men cannot describe them.” Though these “interruptions” enter the grammar as accidents, a conditional alternative case (“or, if...”) it becomes rapidly clear, as the next sentence picks up “unaccountable transitions” as its subjects, that these accidental “interruptions” in fact are the central object of the senses—how the self measures its changes of allegiance. This results in attention to first, new “objects,” and immediately afterwards, a new relationship to language. Dwelling in this chiefly linguistic negation, training the senses to these “unaccountable” transitions—folds in a further sensory capacity, and allows the subject to perceive on the far side of language, things “men cannot describe.” Thus, Thoreau asks us to see lack (of event, of transition) not as absence, but as a positive negative, a meaningful “interruption”; asks us to see not contingency but an “occasion,” and by doing so, leads us via an extraordinary negative gnosis from a sensitivity to the “common,” to the “not common,” to the “more than common.” To arrive, via privation, at this ultimate excess, requires first, however, that we privilege “the occasion” and the “unaccountable transitions” it creates, which are the first signature and linguistic training ground of such perceptive modes.

We see, at these two moments in *A Week*, Thoreau staging the conflict between a forward-driving, linear temporality associated with the sentence, and its lyric ruptures—the irruption of white space that takes the reader from “the progress of the year” to “I hearing get.” The conflict between what we might call, with Roman Jakobson, the metonymic forward motion, and its metaphorical dilations, structures the text at every level, and its skew in favor of the latter term, the y axis, was reflected in the frequent complaints from contemporary reviewers that the text was unreadable.¹⁴⁴ (In Emerson’s comment to publisher James Munroe, that it was “very slender thread for such big beads & ingots,” a subdued image of the rosary stresses not only dilation, but liturgical return, repetition.) Though I largely agree with Daniel Peck, who, characterizing *Week* as Thoreau’s most “insistently and explicitly temporal work” suggests that “the digressions are atemporal whereas the descriptions of the voyage are temporal, so that one sense of time works against another in a contrapuntal relationship throughout the book,” (11) his reductive vocabulary of “atemporality” and “kill[ing] time” is far too limiting a description of the work of these frequent “interruptions.” Simple negation does not account for the enabling capacities—the swivels, the associative leaps, the reconstitutions of speaker and audience—of the white space that so lightens *A Week*, both in the form of the “fogs” and “mists” noted on each morning, and in the ample margins of the frequent verse intrusions. Perhaps the wittiest and most interesting instance of this intrusion occurs in the opening of “Tuesday,” when, reckoning with “this dense fog,” which “we cannot distinguish objects through,” Thoreau first attempts to accommodate the text to with a sung transhistorical lyric—“Voyageurs ’gainst time do row, / Idle noon nor sunset know,”—before pivoting to the deeper past. The very impenetrability of the fog, foreclosing the

¹⁴⁴ xiv. Penguin 1998 (ed. Peck).

forward thrust of narration, permits Thoreau to layer the text with its most dreamlike, and Romantic episode: an ascent of Mount Saddleback, now Greylock, that Thoreau relates, itself found in “an ocean of mist.” Such a signature Romantic ascent, redolent, with its mistaken paths, its obscurities and belated anagnorises, of *The Prologue*, in the precise center of the text, most palpably elevates discontinuous or lyric time over the chronological, and thus the recuperable, woven text, over the finality of loss it emerges from.¹⁴⁵ As we have seen elsewhere, this defining formal gesture is introduced and enabled by what feels like an accident or interruption.

This tension between two equal truths, between cyclical recurrence and ecstatic incommensurateness, is often expressed as a tension between the stabilizing structural level (the week, the season, the year) and the local irruptions of the sentence. These momentary disruptions of the whole are the formal signatures of a mind so committed to presence and the present that it forgets its themes, as its occasional orality—its figures of voice, the brag, the crow—emerge to destabilize the deliberateness of the written word. It is precisely this difficulty in assimilating Thoreau’s interest in spontaneity and activity, with “writing” as we usually understand the term, that Emerson repeats, with some bemusement, in an 1843 Journal: “Ellery Channing says, that writers never do anything: they are passive observers. Some of them seem to do, but they do not; Henry will never be a writer; he is as active as a shoemaker.” Channing’s off-the-cuff remark is revealing even in its exaggeration, showing that the coordination of the written word with activity remains a charged binary even after Emerson’s elevation in “The American Scholar” (1838) of writing-as-work. Indeed, Emerson vacillates on the question, sometimes referring to Thoreau’s poetry pejoratively as “pre-written” (1838); at other times, associating his verse with the breath of “wit” (letter to Moody, 1841). Reframing the same binary is the task of Stanley Cavell’s *Senses of Walden*, which requires us to break out of our association of writing with passivity. For Cavell, a sentence is first and foremost a mode of activity, a way of doing language that brings the breath of speech back into the grapheme. Thoreau’s “puns and paradoxes,” his “fracturing of idiom and twisting of quotation” represent in this way a “keeping faith with both father and mother tongues”: at once making “literal or historical sense” and enacting the capacity for renewing these with the breath of prophetic speech (16).

So, when late in *A Week*, we find ourself poised yet again between sound and silence, speech and mark, it is to the occasion that Thoreau consigns us, declaring that “All questions rely on the present for their solution. Time measures nothing but itself. The word that is written may be postponed, but not that on the lip. If this is what the occasion says, let the occasion say it.” This is his clearest statement identifying the occasion as the linguistic corollary of the ecstatic present of “solution”—in which rings the etymology of the ego’s release, dissolution. After such a dissolution, Thoreau’s sentences are driven by ghostly agents: a human mind is faintly adumbrated trying to measure time, a human lip moves, before, in a marvelous double emergence, the conditional imperative (“If this...let...”) first interpellates the reader/listener/writer as a collaborator in linguistic meaning-making, then brushes her to the side as the occasion itself emerges as the most fundamental grammatical subject. Though the passage, like *A Week* as a whole, hesitates between writing and speech, it commits to the accidentality of the “saying it,” and the extended present this entails—continuously reconstituted by the flow of new

¹⁴⁵ Peck places considerable emphasis on the Saddleback episode, which, he suggests, replaces the expected culminating ascent in “Saturday.” He writes: “To remember other journeys within the context of narrating the primary journey is to make journeying itself archetypal and therefore the property of inward life” (29).

objects and the conditions they create. The occasion, in the sense of the accident and hazard that interrupts the “natural succession” of thought, is what we must attend to register the presence of such newness; when we take the “present” as the primary tense of being, we understand the “occasion” as the site where language, in its contingency, creates thought, and opens the self to the flux of its contexts.

2. Parthian Shot: Cavell, Arsić, McGill on Thoreau’s Poetics

“[The poet] hibernates in this world, till spring breaks. He records a moment of pure life” (*J*, 1:465).

In stressing the discontinuities produced by an extreme allegiance to the present, as the key to Thoreau’s prose, I have been dipping lightly into a stream of criticism that, for the past thirty years, has understood Thoreau as a philosopher of language and an experimenter with the grammar of community. The primary site of much such criticism has been these sudden ruptures and pivots in the text, which, differently read, have become the signature of such experimentation’s willingness to challenge lay understandings of progression (in a Thoreauvian key, “improvement”) and the composition of selfhood. Such a screen of legibility—an attention to what Thoreau himself calls “sudden interruptions”—amounts to a flipping of previous critical attention. For instance, early reviewers of *Walden* such as James Russell Lowell took such gaps in the text as a grave flaw, a sign that Thoreau was a “sorry logician,” whose inability to “digest and assimilate thoughts” resulted in a helpless “sophism” that confounded logical content with rhetoric.¹⁴⁶ In 1946, likewise, a psychoanalytic reading by Joseph Wood Krutch diagnosed Thoreau’s tendency to fragmentation, his mind’s resistance to “chronological order,” his incapacity to organize a “united . . . tight system,” concluding that his illogicality causes the reader to “logically topple.” By contrast, Stanley Cavell, Branka Arsić, and Meredith McGill, brooding on the same gaps, find meaning specifically by invoking poetry and the poetic, albeit under different aspects and with different degrees of remove.

Cavell’s background in Austinian ordinary language, as routed through Wittgensteinian skepticism and, later, Heidegger, produces a corpus as concerned as Thoreau with the metaphysical claims of the literary gesture. Although these two genres are sometimes in competition, Cavell’s central gesture—reading Emerson and Thoreau as the practitioners of philosophy in America—hinges on a conception in which, “the literary is essential to the power of philosophy; at some stage the philosophical becomes, or turns into, the literary” (*IQO* 109). The deep contradictions in both writers mean that such a reading is not, cannot be systematic, but becomes possible because Cavell’s own writing is so structured by skepticism’s suspicion of fictions of continuity (preferring the intensity of a face-to-face encounter with the text) and the latent Romanticism of the philosophical fragment. Indeed, it is impossible to read Cavell’s own claims about these pointedly incoherent writers without recognizing *his* deep occasionality, broadcast in titles such *Transcendental Etudes* as in the frequency by which his essays are written for specific lectures. When he asks with *Walden*, via Heidegger, what it means to dwell poetically, we hear likewise the issue his own elliptic questions pose: namely, how much obscurity must survive each act of clearing or enlightenment, for that act to be legible as such.

¹⁴⁶ As quoted in Arsić, 97

The Senses of Walden argues that Thoreau is teaching us how to read, and that there is no outside to the text that does this.¹⁴⁷ This means that answering the question, not what does a text mean, but “what does a text know?” (IQO 117) requires us to enter a series of connected tropes whose self-reflexivity means they are only graspable within the text’s terms, “part of its subject—e.g., migration, settling, distance, neighborhood, improvement, departure, news, obscurity, clearing, writing, reading, etc.” (13). Entering these tropes fully, we find out how they depend on our own presence, and we follow them as they constitute ourselves as readers in the act of reading. Therefore, the faculties necessary to this daunting task leans not toward the exegetic, but the intimate: reading *Walden* requires “knowing the specific identities of the writer through his metamorphoses, and defining the audiences in me which those identities address, and so create; and hence understanding who I am that I should be called upon in these ways, and who this writer is that he takes his presumption of intimacy and station upon himself” (11). This, perhaps Cavell’s clearest articulation of the task of reading *Walden*, asserts that what might be (thinly) construed as an experiment in autarky must begin between persons, and its largest questions are on what grounds the larger metonymic community—America—is found or founded. This question, Cavell stresses, is an epic one, “a renewed instruction of the nation in its ideals, and a standing proof of its resources of poetry,” and the kinds of reading that it requires are those that belong properly to poetry (6). Reading thusly, Cavell recognizes that the “senses” that Thoreau so frequently calls us to are linguistic: “sensing the specific weight of these words as they sink” (11). Sensing, in this sense, absorbs aesthesis and its judgments into a resolutely embodied and familiar to-hand knowing that Cavell calls elsewhere, “neighboring.” This, he suggests, is what Heidegger’s “poetic dwelling” in part signifies: a being at home beside language, a mode of reading that is routed through the capacities, if not the fact, of poetry.¹⁴⁸

Thinking with Heidegger about such a mode of reading, Cavell writes:

Emerson's and Thoreau's relation to poetry is inherently their interest in their own writing; they are their own Holderlins. I do not mean their interest in what we may call their poems, but their interest in the fact that what they are building is writing, that their writing is, as it realizes itself daily under their hands, sentence by shunning sentence, the accomplishment of inhabitation, the making of it happen, the poetry of it. Their prose is a battle, using a remark of Nietzsche's, not to become poetry; a battle specifically to remain in conversation with itself, answerable to itself. (So they do write dialogues, and not monologues, after all.) Such writing takes the same mode of relating to itself as reading and thinking do, the mode of the self's relation to itself, call it self-reliance (134).

So does Cavell share with Emerson and Thoreau—though not with Heidegger, for whose essay the fact and mystery of Holderlin’s verse remains final—an understanding of “poetry” as an apogee or limit case for language’s self-consciousness, a cognomen that detaches from questions

¹⁴⁷ This central argument of *Walden-as-totality* is also the key to Barbara Johnson influential reading of *Walden*; she writes: “What Thoreau has done in moving to Walden Pond is to move himself, literally, into the world of his own figurative language. The literal woods, pond, and bean field still assume the same classical rhetorical guises in which they have always appeared, but they are suddenly readable in addition as the nonfigurative ground of a naturalist’s account of life in the woods. The ground has shifted.” (“A Hound, a Bay Horse, and a Turtle Dove: Obscurity in *Walden*,” in *Walden*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. William Rossi (New York: Norton, 1992), p. 450.)

¹⁴⁸ Cavell stresses also the winking dependency of the text on “the tradition of topographical poetry - nothing can outdo its obsession with the seasons of a real place. The writer acknowledges this, too, in allowing the mockery- it is filially gentle-to point at himself and, hence, at Transcendentalism generally” (21).

of form, if not genre. Poetry is here *poiesis*, the process of creation and not its artifact, a process whose claims on the physical and social domains are insistently stressed (“build,” “realize”). In the previous paragraph, we saw Cavell heeding the call-to-personhood of *Walden* and figuring himself in the text as an attentive and intimate collocutor; here, poetic reading and writing, equal processes for Cavell, are themselves shadows of the (philosophical) dialogue. Poetic reading is, here, a process in which sentences and claims characterized by sharp contradiction or antagonism (“battle”) are held together by the shared project of “building,” and by the deep sociality of the conversational mode, cast not only onto the reader, but onto “sentence by shunning sentence.” Texts are “works of art we cannot bear not to share” (*PDAT* 9).

And so for Cavell one key into *Walden* is the figure of the *Iliad* left open on the table, and therefore the *Iliad* fractured into each sentence, act of reading, and mode of relating.¹⁴⁹ The torsive antagonism of sentences embodies America’s founding social antagonism, which is available, which must be inhabited entirely, in each act of reading for it to signify. This brings me to the last point I want to gather from Cavell: that the temporality such poetic reading and writing creates depends on is, insistently, the time of the accident and the occasion. When Thoreau tells us, sinuously, the date on which he first “took up his abode in the woods” “by accident, was on Independence Day, or the Fourth of July,” we might gather that, if *Walden* is to reenact “That moment of origin [which] is the national event” it must do so not by dead letter, but “by accident” because “America exists only in its discovery and its discovery was always an accident” (9). This opening to “accident,” this apotheosis of the radical present and its propitious occasions, is not only how, but what *Walden* tells: the time. So, “In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line” (23).

Enacting this story consequentially in our reading of *Walden* requires that we inhabit the text as accidentally as Thoreau inhabits his cabin. As, for Emerson, “all our blows glance, all our hits are accidents. Our relations to each other are oblique and casual,” so when we read Thoreau, We are apt to take this to mean that writing, in a high sense, writing which is worth heroic reading, is meant to provide *occasions for our conjecturing*. That is not wrong, but it is likely to be lukewarm, a suggestion that the puns and paradoxes, etc., are tips or goads to us to read with subtlety and activity, and that we are free to conjecture the writer’s meaning. But in *Walden*, reading is not merely the other side of writing, its eventual fate; it is another metaphor of writing itself. His calling depends upon his acceptance of this fact about words, his letting them come to him from their own region, and then taking that *occasion* for inflecting them one way instead of another then and there, or for

¹⁴⁹ When Thoreau tells us of borrowing an axe in March 1845 and taking it to the woods to fell timber for his house, he adds, “I usually carried my dinner of bread and butter, and read the newspaper in which it was wrapped.”³ Shortly afterwards, as Cavell points out, Thoreau confides: “In those days, when my hands were much employed, I read but little, but the least scraps of paper which lay on the ground, my holder, or tablecloth, afforded me as much entertainment, in fact answered the same purpose as the *Iliad*” (W, p. 42). Cavell wants us to take this last turn of phrase literally: “Thoreau really does mean to say that a scrap of newspaper is as useful to him as epic poetry. If we do not see that reading a newspaper can bestow epic significance upon the everyday events it reports and, conversely, that Homer can make the heroic deeds of an ancient and forgotten civilization speak to our ordinary daily lives, then we have missed the point of reading, and with it the point of reading *Walden*.” (Quoted in Cavell and the Claim of Literature, 27).

refraining from them then and there; as one may inflect the earth toward beans instead of grass, or let it alone, as it is before you are there (28).

The “occasions” that Thoreau is both hailing and producing are thus opportunities not only for “activity” but also for something like recognition or “acceptance.” As the places in the text where reader assumes the duties of author, they are not only the grammar of how we read but how we constitute our relations to each other and to the text. So might we read, when Thoreau tells us the raising of his house is an “occasion” for “neighborliness,” as an open-ended invitation to participate in this act of founding, and the extreme accidentality that is required of us if that act is to remain also, a finding.

I linger with Cavell because the total and intimate mode of poetic reading he enacts guides this project’s engagements and acts of faith at numerous levels. That said, the vision of poetry that haunts his readings of *Walden* is etiolated, the absent father that must be appeased as sentences “battle not to become poetry.” This project is premised, by contrast, on the import of the many ways that actual verse returns, interrupts, and itself occasions language. To restore the visibility of these, and recover a way of not just reading sentences poetically, but reading also the more importunate and less lyric ways (“a lyric cannot be the object of lyric reading”) in which nineteenth-century verse occasions acts of belief and belonging, is here our aim.

Branka Arsić’s *Bird Relics* (2016) is in many ways a radical extrapolation of Cavell’s modes of reading, premised on the assertion that Thoreau “really mean[s] what he says” “in the exact way that he says [it]” even (especially) when the fantastic enters via rhetoric and metaphor (3, 15). Arsić takes earnestly the challenge encoded by these figures, as by the “absence of unity among chapters, the contingent order of paragraphs in chapters, the disconnection of sentences in paragraphs, and the multivocality in sentences” (87) to adduce a fundamental revision of the lay association of language with logic. Hearing in such interruptive grammars a firm refutation of the principle of noncontradiction, Arsić follows this to an epistemological challenge to the tradition that travels from “Plato to Leibniz to Kant.” In Arsić’s sprawling reading, *Walden*’s linguistic play comes to resemble Derrida’s, its interest in non-human language echoes the Spinozan vein of New Materialism, and Thoreau’s celebration of ecstatic moments becomes sharply redolent of Deleuze’s “intensities” and insistence on the noncoherence of the linguistic ego. The ultimate end of this critique of epistemology, is the deep, grief-stained quest, to recover, and speak through, a “nondualistic ontology” (9) and the “nonideational language of things” it generates (7). The two keywords of this quest are “literalization” (of perception, of language and its figures) and the “dissolution” (of genre, of concepts, of the stable ego) (14).

Poetry—the female-associated *aulos* or flute, not the Apollonian lyre—emerges as the central motif of what Arsić understands as Thoreau’s quest to “dissolve” and remake language and its agents. Whereas Cavell absorbs poetry as mode and mood, Arsić is rather more granularly concerned with *poiesis* as the production of disruptive poetic speech, and with verse as a force that deranges the social order and reason we associate with prose, in a litmus case of literalization. As she argues, “the disturbance of prosody is a disturbance of self- identity of personhood... [because] In allowing a self to experience a poem, prosody also enables that self to experience an intimacy with itself, an intimacy of paralinguistic phenomena that constitutes the inner sounding of the “I,” which gives the self its existence” (97). This focus on the gulf between modes of reading, and on the presence of verse in a prose context, as creating a generic

salient that forces the renegotiation of readerly proprioception and mental processes, leads us closer to our question of how Thoreau's specific uses of verse and figures of the poet keep occasional time. The question, then, is how poetry and its paralogical uses of language might structure ordinal thinking; it is this question of breath-as-measure that Heidegger underlines as the essence of the poetic in "Poetic Dwelling"¹⁵⁰, as it is the question that Thoreau broaches when he writes in the *Journal*, "unpremeditated music is the true gage which measures the current of our thought- the very undertow of our life's stream (*J*, 1:320–321).

For Arsić's Thoreau, unlike for Keats, this music though it may appear harmonic and integrating, is neither when we hear it not as "aestheticized sound" but as the "literality of the unfigured" (92).¹⁵¹ One of poetry's central tasks is to "report" with an "unprejudiced ear", and so to critique, by its literalness, the untruths of sound that is "irrecoverably aestheticized,"; "arhythmical and disconnected, the text Thoreau imagines as poetic is more a heap of words than a versified art..." (81, 42, 50, 78). Paradoxically, for Arsić "poetic composition" is in fact a "scattering of the compositional limits that poetics imposes," one that produces "an unwrapped poem" that "risk[s] its coincidence with a cry" (89, 90). What such (de)composition makes present, is the "systematic erosion of the self," which, as a form of "constant grieving," is understood as "the highest poetic act" (87). Were this the entire case, any possibility of meaning making would be remote indeed, but while she positions poetic composition as an attack on versification ("literalization is a critique of the literary"), Arsić relocates the meaning-making center to a minor and mundane version of the poet. This inaccessible poet, who we are encouraged to see as an avatar of John, whose flute-playing Thoreau took up after his death, "does not leap- even in imagination, from Asia to Greece through mid air, neglectful of the fair sea and still fairer land beneath him, but jogs on humanly observant over the intervening segment of a sphere." Likewise, in the poem "The Funeral Bell" this "distant" poet "weaves" the "light burdened air" (viz., the tolling of the bell) "into sweet rhyme" (84). Throughout, Arsić suggests that, "Walking on a circle of time Thoreau's poet sees the simultaneity of what to us is presented at different times; what we understand as succession—of life and death, for instance—he sees as co- present" (54).

This account is useful insofar as it takes in absolute earnestness the legislative function of verse as a regulatory mechanism for mental and physical processes, so that "a disorientation of prosody" results in the dysregulation of "logic more broadly and hence the disturbance of a gathered, logical mind and the self-identity predicated on it" (96). It connects this dysregulation specifically to the "scattering" or fragmentation of poetry. It offers us an image of the minor, emplaced poet that holds out the promise of a radical present tense, connecting Thoreau with the past (in the form of John) as with the more thinly articulated future. And on one level Arsić's gambit insulates her on one level from the critique of inconsistency, as the premise that everything (for Thoreau) is to be taken as literally true, means nothing can be false. However, the account approaches at its extremes the frustrating mysticism with respect to the Poet that

¹⁵⁰ To write poetry is measure-taking, understood in the strict sense of the word, by which man first receives the measure for the breadth of his being. (2001: 219)

¹⁵¹ "Far from generating aestheticized sound, the sound of the flute is here evoked as identical in its effects to the sound rocks release after being blasted. That the sound to which Thoreau compares the sound of John's flute is the sound of exploding stones—the nonarticulated, unfigured cry of the injured earth—suggests that on his understanding the flute's sound is able to be what it is not commonly taken to be: the literality of the unfigured cry." (92).

Thoreau inherits from Emerson, as when Arsić tells us, extravagantly, that “the poet” “is the creature of a (by definition) infinite continuity that connects differences between what is and what isn’t, here and there, mind and body, differences that the ontology of finite mortals renders insurmountable” (54). This is not plainly not the Poet we see operating in Thoreau, and the extravagance of the rhetoric points to the fact that it is not a hole in Thoreau’s cosmogony that this figure is required to plug, but rather one in Arsić’s system. It is in fact impossible to reconcile such a figure with what Thoreau says of the poet in *A Week*, that in contrast with the talented smith, to whom material is pliant, “When the poet is most inspired . . . then his talent is all gone, and he is no longer a poet. . . . Great prose, of equal elevation, commands our respect more than great verse, since it implies . . . a life more pervaded with the grandeur of the thought. The poet often only makes an irruption, like a Parthian, and is off again, shooting while he retreats” (*A Week*, 342). This is not a figure who grounds logic or masters time, but one who perforates. These mysticisms return in Arsić’s argument about versification in fact consisting of its opposite, producing hyperboles about poetry that are difficult to support. For instance, Arsić contends that Thoreau “is suggesting something stranger than the idea that producing form is not the poet’s task. He proposes that poetry might not have much to do with form at all, being instead related to the poet’s capacity to enter what precisely is the dark realm of the unformed,” (95) a statement which leaves behind the many instances in which Thoreau *does* allow the text access to a version of poetry that is very much interested in the recomposition of form and meter.

It is this foregrounding of a stable literary history, in the form of canonicity and poetic form, even when the relationship with that history is antithetical and deconstructive, that Meredith McGill produces in “Common Places: Poetry, Illocality, and Temporal Dislocation in Thoreau’s *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.” Whereas contemporary reading practices of that account may be tempted to treat the extensive epigraphs, “more than 60 of Thoreau’s own poems and translations, as well as the poems of contemporaries such as Emerson and William Ellery Channing” (360) as super-fluous, above the actual current of the narrative and its river, McGill provocatively flips this relationship to argue that “in the nineteenth-century US, the poetry often carried more weight, was of a higher cultural status, than the prose” (359). The gap between the vivid perception of place—albeit sometimes filtered through Wordsworthian tropes of rural life—and the intrusions of commonplacéd verse, enacts a “disjunctive, not a continuous, relation to the past” the maintenance of which “requires the temporal disruption introduced by poetic fragments that are never fully incorporated into the narrative” (358). Such an account relies on McGill’s recovery of the emphasis on cultural continuity promulgated by nineteenth-century poetic common placing, which, though “performed by individuals, it is anti-individualistic insofar as it highlights the means by which subjects, understood to be plural and iterable, are produced” and, by its emphasis on the “quotable” and abridged, “appropriative practice that acknowledges that poetry lives in a culture only by virtue of its repetition” (361-2). This general truth resolves into the experience of *A Week*’s heavy, if fey, poeticizations by means of the generic tendency in American travel narratives to deploy (Continental) poetic inheritance as a way of making legible, and

historicizing, American place,¹⁵² and Thoreau's abortive production, on Emerson's behalf, of an anthology of canonical English verse gathered from the Houghton.¹⁵³

McGill's essay is of great value to this project in that it practically treats the presence of verse fragments in a prose text as the central means by which Thoreau challenges narrative progression and linear time. Neither the self's extravagances, nor the particularities of regional and literary history in which that self takes on meaning, can be explained without recourse to the complementary "extratemporal experience of lyric transport" and the "half-possession which is characteristic of the writing and the reading of poetry—the externality of poetic inspiration to the poet himself" (365). Our experience of both place and time, McGill's Thoreau shows us, is always mediated by the putative placelessness and timelessness of cultural values transmitted by poetry, and the result of our disjunctive projection of these values onto our local presents is the spasmodic colonial violence, the history of which is itself only available to us through the contingencies of an equally fragmentary documentary record (359, 361). Verse fragments intervene in *A Week* as in previous travel narratives, McGill suggests, as ways of "providing moments of meditative arrest, shifting present-tense narration into the alternative temporal register of literary history, and placing lyric time into relation with the unnarratable scope of natural history and the alien temporalities of native cultures" (359). Ultimately, this story offers one way of connecting the (often frustrating) phenomenological experience of reading such a text, to a much larger argument about the occasional temporality created by the conflict between a poetic inheritance graphed as timeless and the fleeting present in which it is received. Like this project, to do so McGill finds herself revising readings of Emerson's "The Poet," that stress Whitmanian breakage of form, and absorption of plural voices into monody; by contrast, she locates not a messianic or nationalist, but a "copybook poetics" characterized by figures of transcription and appropriation, "half-possession." It is this *dérangement* that she understands *Week* as aiming to produce, and this shade of mantle she understands Thoreau as attempting to appropriate from Emerson.

However, it does rather wither the force of this poetics into archival riffling, and the poet that emerges from it is the Burton-esque wine-drunk scholar. Though the essay projects a version of contemporaneity, that value is glossed as "poetry of the past that retains present power," (366) and the seamless adaptation of Mary Crane's description of Renaissance commonplace practices, to a much later context, results in a Renaissance-flavored Classicism in which "timeless" or "extemporaneous" truths/texts measure a decayed present. Stressing the Emersonian claim that language as the "archives of history," and "a sort of tomb of the Muses," without the

¹⁵² A feature of for example, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Outre-Mer, a Pilgrimage Beyond the Sea* (1835) and Margaret Fuller, *Summer on the Lakes*. In his *The American Fugitive in Europe: Sketches of Places and People Abroad* (1855), William Wells Brown begins the account of his voyage out with an epigraph from Byron and folds poetry into the narrative at numerous occasions.

¹⁵³ Thoreau's despair at the relative inertness of the verse he encountered is recorded in the *Journal*: "When looking over the dry and dusty volumes of the English poets, I cannot believe that those fresh and fair creations I had imagined are contained in them." (*PEJ*, 1:337–38) Emerson's anthology, *Parnassus* (1875) is the belated fruit of this effort. Its highly idiosyncratic selections, and extensive abridgments, reflect an "antiindividualistic" conception of poetic value that challenge any model of the poet that depends on a stable or sublime ego. As McGill notes, "Shelley's 'To a Sky-Lark' consists of the eighth stanza only (36), while his 'The Cloud' becomes a three-stanza poem, beginning with the second stanza, skipping to the fourth and then concluding with the final stanza (46–47)." (n3)

countervailing, prevalent, and ecstatic figures of voice and breath, produces an etiolated and dispiriting model for American poetry that accounts for the canonical quotations in *Week*, but certainly not for those eruptions of Thoreau's endogenic lyrics. At the same time, it is true that *Week* is a more scriptorial and labored work, in which the principle of thrift is evident, than the brags, crows, and cries of *Walden*. For the fullest exploration of how the poetics of negation which McGill discovers—"the complex pleasures of *discontinuity* and *anachrony*, and the power of *decontextualization*" (367)—might function not only as a latent or residual challenge to prose, but also as itself the live measure of ecstatic time, and, as for Cavell, the intersubjective "occasions" in which the text opens towards its readers, we require the tighter sounding board of *Walden*.

3. How To Do Things with Poetry

Walden Neighbors Verse

Walden's flexible tonal matrix repeatedly figures how stressing the processes of writing and thinking, reveals new ways of not knowing, but its cousin, "neighbouring."¹⁵⁴ Knowledge is teleological, possessable; neighboring is a dynamic state of frequently-readjusting relationships, entailing frequent acts of turning away, or "aversion." I offer the term here as a way of thinking, too, about how Thoreau incorporates and abandons extrinsic texts, and how this frictional process, reconstituting narrator and reader, both makes us reconsider how persons emerge, and don't, in language, as critics such as Sharon Cameron have influentially suggested, and renews our sense of the ethics of coexistence in a linguistic commons. Poetry especially often enters as a way of dramatizing the insufficiencies of the narrator's single perspective, and perforating the envelope of the book's generic affiliation and its narrative time. "Economy" ends with "complementary verses" that in fact invert the chapter's argument; at the end of "House Warming," the words of Ellen Sturgis Hooper's poem "The Wood Fire" "returned . . . with new force" (525), pointing toward a temporality of return and renovation that remains only a shadow in the text proper. Poignantly, in "The Ponds," immediately after the narrator cries, "Walden, is it you?" the text answers in an altered voice, chastened and stern: "I cannot come nearer to God and Heaven / Than I live to Walden even. / I am its stony shore. / And the breeze that passes o'er" (477). It's a deeply mysterious moment. Time has passed; the *I* seems to have weathered between the cry and the answer. The poem curtails the gnostic impulse toward rapturous identification with nature, with Yankee skepticism; though it limits itself to that which is adjacent to Walden, the "shore" and "breeze," these it inhabits powerfully. Verse offers Thoreau a way of exploring the limits of self, testing how far the grammatical *I* can wander from the body. Verse form, specifically, studded with the gaps and "chinks" (as of his cabin), is an epistemological tool by which the narrator approaches the pond, aligning his pointed nescience with what it is unknowable in se. Dwelling in the failure of this central, theological question, the poem rather charges neighboring entities with meaning.

Such a moment shows Thoreau exploiting the resources of lyric poetry—personae, enjambed or leaping thought, and capacities for rooted sincerity and intense affect, including a genealogical relationship to theological subject matter—as a supplement to the agile tonal and

¹⁵⁴ "And it seems clear that if we fail to *neighbour* ourselves, we will be incapable of *neighbouring* the world" (252). In Mulhall, 2.

tropological play *Walden's* prose has taught us to read for. But the ecstasies and interludes that verse-reading creates produces a heterogenous temporal constitution in the narration, akin to what Ranajit Guha calls the "time-knots" that characterize a historiography sensitive to how individuals contest in daily practices the erasures and injustices of a capitalist present. In *Walden*, this temporal heterogeneity is uneasy. After the brief poem, the prose narrative picks up after the poem by telling us "the [railroad] cars never pause to look at it" (477): verse, requiring a slowness expressed by its conspicuously thick margins on the page, is figured as literally marginal to the infrastructure of modernity.¹⁵⁵ This gesture is twice repeated in "Sounds," a chapter deeply nostalgic for the capacities of lyric fluency, as quoted verse is anxiously severed by the intrusion of railroad time [414,420]; the structure, inflected differently, then recurs with the narcotic "Chalmers' collection of English poetry" which the narrator can't read "without skipping" (528).

We are challenged, therefore, to read the many instances of intermittent, liminal, and absorbed verse as occasions for the text to negotiate different models of selfhood, ways of relating to broader community, and stances toward literary precedent (McGill). Consider, for instance, Thoreau's quotation of William Gilpin (1808) quoting Milton in "The Pond in Winter." Having dismissed popular myths of "Bottomless Ponds," then plumbed the pond's depth ("exactly one hundred and two feet") in highly matter-of-fact language, Thoreau then lets Gilpin, the popularizer of the picturesque, hoist himself on his own bombast. Gilpin's sentimental magniloquence offers a literary parallel to credulous villagers peering into the ice "with watery eyes." The effect is clean, and by quoting Gilpin's subsequent, ornamental quotation of *Paradise Lost* (7.288-90; itself paraphrasing *Genesis*) Thoreau spoils it.¹⁵⁶ Milton's sober, equanimous lines exceed both Gilpin and the interpretive and tonal framework Thoreau has prepared. What he gains, in a chapter that contrasts surface illusions and an assay of the pond's solid "bottom," is a bifocal acknowledgment of how deeply Milton and *Genesis* bedrock English prose, impermeable to light use, and generative of their own resonant histories. Though Milton's lines function as a trailing ornament in Gilpin, as they hinge the reader back into *Walden*, we understand them to be, conversely, a deep wellspring for Thoreau. As the prose narration picks up again, direct proximity to Milton makes Thoreau's sober skepticism legible as a new and old cosmogony of water.

At the same time as Thoreau inherits and tropes on epic, lyric, and especially, as critics since Matthiessen and Leo Marx have suggested, pastoral, the valorization of verse itself in *Walden* remains much more ambivalent than in *A Week*.¹⁵⁷ Specifically, Thoreau goes out of his way to ironize the pretenses to ownership and cultural transmission gathered by the messianic interpretation of Emerson's "The Poet." Rather than the "air-lord," and the acts of poetic possession in *Nature*,¹⁵⁸ the poets actually visible in *Walden* test bathos as their much smaller acts of arrogation crumple. Decidedly comic, too, is the masque of "Poet" (Channing) and

¹⁵⁵ The passage continues on with a faint hope: "yet I fancy that the engineers and firemen and brakemen, and those passengers who have a season ticket and see it often, are better men for the sight."

¹⁵⁶ The lines run: "So high as heav'd the tumid Hills, so low / Down sunk a hollow bottom broad and deep, / Capacious bed of Waters . . ."

¹⁵⁷ Leo Marx, p. 278 and passim. (*The Machine in the Garden*, Oxford 2000).

¹⁵⁸ The poet's "integrating" perception affords him the title to "the best part" of others' fields"; he "conforms things to his thoughts"; and the "imperial muse" of Shakespeare, the type of the poet, "subordinat[es] nature for the purposes of expression" (8, 34).

“Hermit” (Thoreau) in “Brute Neighbors,” which presents both men as moonstruck and forgetful, marginal to their society and difficult to distinguish. At the same time, the fragments of verse that do punctuate the narrative enact the anonymous and “adventitious” poetics of “happy hits” in which verse gives “greater delight ... in happy quotation than in the poem” (72).¹⁵⁹ Though a few original poems survive in the text, among them the appeal to Walden Pond, it is in acts of what Emerson calls “brave quotation” (“Quotation and Originality”) that Thoreau begins to sketch a poetics of the commons that mirrors the political program he advances passim.¹⁶⁰ As part of this task, Thoreau returns three times, increasingly ironically, to the question of what and whether poets can own. Interestingly, this entails a sustained engagement with Channing’s prosocial, but less radical interpretation of the function of the poet.

Though both writers inherit the tension between the messianic and the recessive poet inherent in Emerson’s framing of the poet, as Chapter Two details, Channing, working in verse, remains more attached to the title of poet, and to the cultural authority it connotes. In his second volume, *Poems: Second Series* (1845), for instance, the idealized Poet is frequently kept at a modest grammatical distance from the speaker even as the speaker works to take up that mantle.¹⁶¹ By contrast, Thoreau’s incorporation of poetry into a prose matrix entails a more fluid reconstitution of that authority in situ, and thus the dissolution of fixed prior claims—whether poetic or capitalistic. Ultimately, I suggest, Thoreau’s collaborative quotation of Channing’s poetic material in the problem chapter “Baker Farm,” to which we will turn, models how a decentered poetic commons can promulgate a volitional and occasional sociality. As Virgil offers Thoreau a way of remediating the rote claims of the village gala on sensorium, so does inhabiting Channing’s verse allow him to bring forward its latent politics, undermining the invisible and repressive forms of “possession” that condition agricultural life in that chapter; indeed, his commitment to a doctrine of free, responsible, and evanescent use extends from axes, to land, to language, so much so that what he quotes he neither claims nor endorses, and indeed often abandons his own words behind him.¹⁶²

“Baker Farm,” *Walden*’s frantic and ethically charged middle chapter, offers a rich site for thinking about how verse intervenes in the text. In it, Thoreau’s narrator attempts to apply the philosophy-as-charity argument developed in “Economy” to the itinerant Irish laborers whom he finds occupying the “outlands” of “James Baker’s large farm,” a previously unimproved tract made potentially profitable by the depressed cost of labor and the increased ease of transporting

¹⁵⁹ Emerson, “Thoughts on Art.” *The Dial*, 1841.

¹⁶⁰ Timothy Sweet dwells on such practices of extracting in “Tradition through Repetition: ‘The Present Crisis,’ Social Action, and Literary Excerpt.” *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 11:1 (2023) 149–169. Sweet challenges us to see the literary excerpt as a distinct, if primary or simple (in Bakhtin’s model) genre. He critics to read excerpts through the lens of pragmatics, for their use value in specific social situations, writing “the history of excerpting long antedates academic literary study and taps into poetry’s capacity for aesthetic effects and its value as cultural capital” (162).

¹⁶¹ In “Autumn,” he addresses the season: “And in my heart a Poet’s feelings stir, / To thee a Poet’s fruits I owe.” In “New England,” Channing claims his Puritan descent as a grounds by which to “grasp in [his] hand a Poet’s pen” and “as a Poet their great thoughts decree.” Cultural continuity, here, is the central work of poetry, even if it is convincingly abjured elsewhere.

¹⁶² Emerson puns on various senses of “use” in “The Poet”: “We are far from having exhausted the significance of the few symbols we use. We can come to use them yet with a terrible simplicity.” On Thoreau’s intermittent endorsement of his own writing, as signaled by postural shifts, see Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*.

agricultural commodities in the 1840s.¹⁶³ ¹⁶⁴ Predictably, this errand fails, and the result is an intense ironization of the narrator's hubris, which manifests as the book's tonal pivot from brash reform to an ethics of acceptance and sensitivity in its second half. At the same time as it explicitly negotiates questions of land rights, the value of labor (in the form of wages), and consumption, however, the chapter also enacts these questions through its relationship to poetic precedent. For "Baker Farm" is also the title of the long locodescriptive poem, written as Thoreau was preparing *Walden*, which concludes Channing's volume *The Woodman* (James Munroe, Boston: 1849), and which Thoreau inhabits, edits, and recuts three times over the course of the chapter. Thoreau's "Baker Farm," introjecting Channing's anonymized poem, continually punctures its own narrative continuity to demonstrate how what appears to be a tightly structured episode rides, in fact, on a contested and unstable pastiche of reference. As he shimmers this epistemological question—to what degree is literature bound by its sources?—Thoreau unlocks the disruptive logic of the occasion, and the class critique, present but less forceful in Channing's original. He thus makes a tense but ultimately collaborative argument about poetic authorship, the primacy of which he displaces in favor of an anarchic literary commons.

Reviewing Channing's "Baker Farm" is necessary to measure the effect of Thoreau's gestures. In Channing's 1849 volume as a whole, poetry is modeled on manual labor through the poet's avatar, the "Woodman," connecting the production of verses to the nation's westward expansion. In "Baker Farm," depicting labor as simultaneously manual and poetic is the means by which the poem solves the sensual attraction of landscape with nature's resistance to discrete legibility—one recurrent problem in Transcendental poetry.¹⁶⁵ In the poem's central act, Channing remediates the "artless meadow." Clearly enacting what he exhorts, the poem climaxes:

Pan of unwrinkled cream,
May some Poet dash thee in his churn
And with thy beauty mad
Verse thee in rhymes that burn;
Thy beauty,—the beauty of Baker Farm! (l. 39-43, p. 90)

As "Baker Farm" has been throughout the subject of the apostrophe, the violent consummation here staged is rather circular: the land has to be "dash[ed]" (off) until wrinkles (i.e., poetic lines) appear, but the desired "beauty" exists a priori, and the syllogism lands with a tautological if frenzied thud. However, as in "churn[ing]," the repetitive circuit of reasoning and labor is here

¹⁶³ F.B. Sanborn writes, in a note to the 1902 edition of *Thoreau, the Poet-Naturalist*: "In 1848, when this poem was written, the retreat here celebrated was a most retired spot, the outlands on Fairhaven Bay of James Baker's large farm; in Lincoln, two miles southeast of Concord Village, and a mile or so from Thoreau's Cove and cabin, then standing and but lately deserted by Henry. It is now the frontage of C.F. Adams's villa." Note the intensely interstitial triangulation of the place in both geography and histories of inhabitation. Sanborn invokes a prehistory of non-use, a brief interval of literary and agricultural productivity, and a present tense of leisure. For the price of labor and the rates of transport to Boston, see Gross 1982.

¹⁶⁴ In "Economy," philanthropy, it is argued, must begin in spiritual improvement, lest "If you give [a man] money, he . . . buy more rags with it" (382).

¹⁶⁵ The difficult secularization of the Book of Nature trope is reflected across the movement. For instance, in "Baker Farm" Channing likens a derelict cabin to a "comma" spilt by "kind nature" (87). Notable exemplars of the impulse to read, and the shyness in actually reading natural signs include Emerson's Museum of Natural History revelation in *Nature* (which echoes into the late "Natural History of the Intellect") and Thoreau's "Natural History of Massachusetts."

the point. The sustained duration of the Poet's active verb, to *verse*,¹⁶⁶ interrupts ("wrinkle"; "interfere with circumstance") and alienates "artless" land, as it integrates his attributes into the landscape ("mad," an attribute of the Plotinian poet, seems at first to attach adjectivally to "thy beauty"; rhymes "burn") making newly visible what was already there.¹⁶⁷ The ecstatic occasion of the poem leaves a permanent trace on the physical environment. Having thus introduced himself into the circuit of perception, affect, and naming, Channing's prophet-poet¹⁶⁸ intones: "Thou art expunged from to-day," and, later, in the lines that conclude the poem and the collection: "Value that cannot be spent / Volume that cannot be lent / Passable to me and thee / For Heaven thou art meant!" With this last apotheosis, the physical farm is converted into its representation ("volume"); exchange value is supplanted by its aesthetic corollary. That the "volume" cannot be lent means, I think, that it cannot be owned; after all, it remains "passable" to the poetic counterpublic ("me and thee") the poem itself has cultivated.¹⁶⁹ Whereas earlier in the poem a singular poet is necessary to improve the "artless" tract, by its end—as we have seen elsewhere in Channing's poems—that primacy has been ceded to the object of direct address, and the promise of future inhabitation.

Channing's poet performs a hieratic function associated with the idealized "Poet", even as he ends the poem as a genial amanuensis—the structuring tension of Emerson's articulation. Still, this founding function of the poet is too rarified for Thoreau, who frequently ironizes the Emersonian pretense, advanced in *Nature*, that a poet's perception should "integrate" a landscape. Unsettling this sublimity, Thoreau, in fact, incorporates and reorients Channing's metaphor of land presenting to the poet as cream in the version D draft (1852)¹⁷⁰ of "Where I Lived and What I Lived For."¹⁷¹ By the time he does so, the churning has dropped out, and Channing's earnest versifier is peaked to parody. Thoreau writes:

. . . But I retained the landscape, and I have since annually carried off what it yielded without a wheelbarrow. With respect to landscapes,—

¹⁶⁶ The classical correlation of *versus* and poetic line, labor and poetic labor, is highly active here; c.f. the complex of puns on *labore*, *artem*, and *vertere* in Verg. *Geo.* 1.118-123.

¹⁶⁷ Buell argues that a fatal flaw of Transcendental poetry was its lack of a working theory for craft; in this schematic, inspiration is the master term, leaving little room for revision and labor. As he writes "Such highmindedness prevented them from grappling with the technical problems of craftsmanship as effectively as they might have otherwise. They preferred to jump from fact to essence, from the nuts and bolts of technique to affirmations like "The true poem is not that which the public read"; "Life is the Poem; Man is the Poet," and so forth. Because of this attitude, they quickly became dissatisfied with art as a whole, for it was obvious that even the greatest works do not fully realize the inspiration that gave rise to them." (68). Channing, while invoking the secularized religious discourse that Buell gathers, crosshatches it throughout *The Woodman*, and in "Baker Farm" specifically, with a georgic ideal of sustained labor and poetic production. One feature already present is "a trivial cabin" (l. 29) which "a Poet builded / in the completed years" (l. 27-28). As soon as he introduces the threat of a previous poetic subjectivity, Channing minimizes and naturalizes it: "Should we judge it was built? / Rather by kind nature spilt." (l.31-32).

¹⁶⁸ The poem spends time, in its middle, teasing out the contours of a natural religion: "squirrel's litany," "churches in the steeped woods," etc.

¹⁶⁹ That is, if we resolve the multiplicity of second persons by reading the penultimate line's "thee" as an aside to the reader. I do wonder if the removal of the farm to a higher plane here reflects an elegiac farewell to free passage, and the kind of inhabitation practiced by the Field family, in an era of enclosure and improvement of previously neglected marginal land. For counterpublic, see Michael Warner (2002), 75.

¹⁷⁰ *Digital Thoreau*.

¹⁷¹ The cream metaphor partly reflects the rapid, railroad-enabled reorientation of Concord's agricultural economy toward butter production for the Boston market.

“I am monarch of all I *survey*,
My right there is none to dispute.”

I have frequently seen a poet withdraw, having enjoyed the most valuable part of a farm, while the crusty farmer supposed that he had got a few wild apples only. Why, the owner does not know it for many years when a poet has put his farm in rhyme, the most admirable kind of invisible fence, has fairly impounded it, milked it, skimmed it, and got all the cream, and left the farmer only the skimmed milk. (388)

Here, the movement from prose into a ventriloquized poetic hyperbole (the boast is from Cowper, speaking as a shipwrecked Selkirk—both notably penurious figures) has the curious effect of splitting or alienating Thoreau’s voice. Whereas before he steps into Cowper’s monarchical *I*, the narrator “carrie[s] off” the (literary) yields of landscape, a poet himself, after the excess of the verse interruption his perspective is allied with the farmer, against the Emersonian/Channingian poet who has become a burlesque land speculator. So though the extrinsic quotation seems to emerge metonymically, through an associative logic of commonplaces about poets’ relationship to landscape, the earnestness of its absolute claim ends up inscribing a tonal *nec plus ultra*, from which the narrator recoils. (Almost verbatim actions—skimming cream, filching apples—power James Russel Lowell’s satire of both men in *A Fable for Critics*.)¹⁷² By the time the thread of Thoreau’s prose picks up again, the narrator has exiled the now-ridiculous poet, his semblable, as retrograde and antidemocratic. The only sustainable relationship to place and text here is not exclusive title—which forecloses immanent experience through the alienating discourses of debt finance and the legal processes (“impound”)—but subsistence claims on common usage and gleanings.

“Baker Farm”

Thoreau’s chapter, characterized by intense punning, and whiplash, unmarked ventriloquisms of Biblical and literary sources, shows the narrator at his most carnivalesque. Beginning in a habitual past, “Sometimes I rambled . . .” (483) the chapter thematizes in its first long two paragraphs not settlement but wandering and deviation, alongside cognate themes: imagination, shadows, ephemeral light effects, and fishing, which are refracted through intense Biblical allusion (two rainbows, “the elect”). Its central episode then picks up (“I set out one afternoon to go a-fishing . . .”) with the narrator’s arrival at the physical Baker Farm, which is described via a six-line quotation of Channing’s poem, and then, when the weather turns to storm, another four-line quotation which describes the Field family’s hut. After a few pages in which the narrator volubly fails to impart his philosophy to them, he flees, momentarily doubts himself (“my haste to catch pickerel . . . appeared for an instant trivial . . .” [487-88]) before the voice of his “Good Genius” enters the text to confirm him in his philosophy: “Enjoy the land, but own it not” (488). Immediately thereafter, a lyric apostrophe, “O Baker Farm!,” sets up Thoreau’s dramatic recutting of Channing’s 92-line poem down to a 14-line sonnet with revolutionary politics. Finally, John Field joins the narrator in fishing, but his failure, even when

¹⁷² The men are rendered as nameless and indistinguishable imitators of Emerson, who “skim” his brain and pick the apples from “the prophet’s each pocket.” Lowell addresses Thoreau (discernible by his short legs): “Can’t you let neighbor Emerson’s orchards alone? / Besides, ’tis no use, you’ll not find e’en a core,—/[Channing] has picked up all the windfalls before.”

the men change seats in the boat, becomes the occasion for the narrator's fatal pronouncement on his "derivative old country mode" and inability "to rise in this world" (488-9).

The text's style is striking in its magpie licentiousness, even as the physical topos through which the narrator errs is already triply marked as belonging to others: owner James Baker, Channing's poem, the tenant Field family.¹⁷³ Thoreau's linguistic excesses and transformations must be read as ways of navigating these competing, prior discourses and claims, as its tensions must be traced, in part, to the friction between these layers. Place, in Thoreau, is never an unmediated phenomenological experience, but always approached through its (manipulable) documentary and literary record; the near-pastiche of "Baker Farm" merely highlights the latency of this fact passim.¹⁷⁴ That literary record in this case is overdetermined by Channing's poetry, which represents for Thoreau a tradition he has first been rejected by, and then has sought to transcend. Whereas Channing represents Baker Farm as vacant and in need of the poet's improvement before it can be inhabited, for Thoreau it represents a linguistic commons overfull with stylistic, epistemological, and generic conventions he inhabits to satirize and disown.¹⁷⁵

Quoting the first few lines of Channing's poem as descriptive flavor, Thoreau frames it as generically distinct from his own project, characterized by the quaint and picturesque ("retreat," "sung"), echoing Channing's predilection for verse as romance¹⁷⁶:

I set out one afternoon to go a-fishing to Fair-Haven, through the woods, to eke out my scanty fare of vegetables. My way led through Pleasant Meadow, an adjunct of the Baker Farm, that retreat of which a poet has since sung, beginning,—

"Thy entry is a pleasant field,
Which some mossy fruit trees yield
Partly to a ruddy brook,
By gliding musquash undertook,
And mercurial trout,
Darting about."

I thought of living there before I went to Walden. I "hooked" the apples, leaped the brook, and scared the musquash and the trout. It was one of those afternoons which seem indefinitely long before one, in which many events may happen, a large portion of our natural life, though it was already half spent when I started. (484)

¹⁷³ F.B. Sanborn writes, in a note to the 1902 edition of *Thoreau, the Poet-Naturalist*: "In 1848, when this poem was written, the retreat here celebrated was a most retired spot, the outlands on Fairhaven Bay of James Baker's large farm; in Lincoln, two miles southeast of Concord Village, and a mile or so from Thoreau's Cove and cabin, then standing and but lately deserted by Henry. It is now the frontage of C.F. Adams's villa" (201n.).

¹⁷⁴ As in the "Sunday" chapter of *Week*. This argument expands to a literary scale Laura Dassow Walls's contention that an idea of the decayed, but still-accessible "commons" is Thoreau's actual subject, as opposed to a vaguely defined "Nature," (2017 xiii).

¹⁷⁵ The social indistinguishability of the two men is the thrust of James Russel Lowell's satire of them in *A Fable for Critics*, who are rendered as nameless and indistinguishable imitators of Emerson, who "skim" his brain and pick the apples from "the prophet's each pocket." Lowell addresses Thoreau (discernible by his short legs): "Can't you let neighbor Emerson's orchards alone? / Besides, 'tis no use, you'll not find e'en a core,—[Channing] has picked up all the windfalls before."

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Chapter 2.

Poetry thickens the narrative's simple past. Thoreau's "has since sung" requires us to read his prose as at once anterior and posterior to the lines it quotes, which advance, by contrast, in a direct present. As elsewhere, the verse is instantly associated with a satire of spectral harvesting.¹⁷⁷ The harvest of the prose, here, is the quotation itself, the succeeding paraphrase of which plunders its fruit trees, "leap[s]" or evades its brook, and "scare[s]" off its animals: each line is negated, apotropaically, as it is absorbed in the prose. "Hook," which does not occur in the poem, seems to land in quotation marks because its link to the rhyme scheme alienates it, means it sounds as if it came from elsewhere. The insistence with which Thoreau stresses his own priority to the poem ("since sung"; "before I went"), as he juxtaposes its putative instantaneity with *Walden's* long gestation, reflects in part an anxiety over precedent: a lyric such as Channing's buttresses its fleet moment with the *longue durée* of its powerful tradition, both of which effects Thoreau's prose experiment has to reproduce *de novo*, internally. This proximity to the dilatory effect of lyric time, and its prodigious belatedness, gusts the pathos of ". . . it was already half spent when I started." We recover the possibilities that attended a future anterior as they are superseded.

Two sentences later, Thoreau then brings in Channing again to figure that poetic tradition as shelter—however disused, borrowed, and isolated from the common road. When a storm sends him running for cover, the narrator uses deictics ("here," "therein") to interact with the quoted verse as an object even more explicitly, linking himself and John Field as two (temporary) inhabitants of poetic convention:

I made haste for shelter to the nearest hut, which stood half a mile from any road, but so much the nearer to the pond, and had long been uninhabited:—

"And here a poet builded,
In the completed years,
For behold a trivial cabin
That to destruction steers."

So the Muse fables. But therein, as I found, dwelt now John Field . . . (485)

Poetry is, here, the source of "fables," false but useful, which may nevertheless provide cover. In Thoreau's quotation, Channing's casually picturesque imputation of a previous "poet" as the builder of the "trivial cabin" slips naturally to the most proximate poet, Channing himself. The invocation of a "cabin," of course, makes the situation an uncomfortable and obvious doubling of Thoreau's own house—from which the chapter's gathers some of its satire. But the real question of the passage hovers between "completed," "steers," and "dwelt now." To dwell in poetry (as the animalized John Field does) may be the verso of dwelling poetically, in the Heideggerian sense, as it may be true, as Virginia Jackson claims, that a lyric can never be the object of a lyric reading. Thoreau is contrasting a false completion—an idea of poetry as a finished and antedated object—with what *Walden* offers: the contingencies of an extended present and successive acts of non-proprietary inhabitation. Making John Field the denizen of the cabin "a poet" (Channing) "builded," is both a measure of its decline into parody, and, in its lingering on the uncleanness of the domicile, an exposure of the original class lie implicit in the pastoral tradition. Whereas

¹⁷⁷ Compare *Autumnal Tints*, which stresses not the acquisition, but the cost of the act: "But I walk encouraged between the tufts of Purple Wood-Grass, over the sandy fields, and along the edge of the Shrub-Oaks, glad to recognize these simple contemporaries. With thoughts cutting a broad swathe I "get" them, with horse-raking thoughts I gather them into windrows. The fine-eared poet may hear the whetting of my scythe." (*Atlantic Monthly*, October 1862).

Channing tucks Thoreau away in a “little hermitage,” in the poem “Walden,” Thoreau, in “Baker Farm,” steps inside Channing’s cabin and finds it clacking with chickens and peasants. The messiness of this situation, and the family’s inability to grasp the narrator’s homily, it must be said, represents a rebuke also to the narrator. Thoreau represents the lease on poetic language as short, entailed, and inherently subject to reappropriation.¹⁷⁸

One such reappropriation is his own. Thoreau is also, by this extended engagement, stressing the thinness of the generic boundary that divides his *Walden* and “Baker Farm” from Channing’s “Walden,” and “Baker Farm,” and indeed the degree to which *Walden*, which strives to assay a firm “bottom,” keeps finding instead turtles beneath turtles—Gilpin, Milton, Genesis, or Channing, Wordsworth, Goldsmith. It is in these destabilizing lyric puncta that verse creates, and in the moments before and after, that the prose is most strikingly self-reflexive as it wrestles to reestablish its own linear drive. It is also by the experience of reading these irruptive occasions that readerly surprise enters, and *Walden*’s Yankee pragmatism most visibly strays from its errand of plain speech and the pressures of any mimesis that depends on an unmediated idea of the real.

But in language’s heteronomy, and in the way quotation, especially, reveals the polyphony that composes a first-person singular, are to be located also its liberatory force. This is the message of the “Good Genius” that comes in to assuage the narrator’s dented ego after the failure of his proselytization—which represents also the failure of iconoclastic language against the inertia of habitus. The “Good Genius,” which resembles Socrates’s daimon even as it channels the language of *Ecclesiastes*, is being paraphrased:

Let the thunder rumble; what if it threaten ruin to farmers’ crops? that is not its errand to thee. Take shelter under the cloud, while they flee to carts and sheds. Let not to get a living be thy trade, but thy sport. Enjoy the land, but own it not. Through want of enterprise and faith men are where they are, buying and selling, and spending their lives like serfs.

O Baker Farm!

“Landscape where the richest element
Is a little sunshine innocent.” * *

“No one runs to revel
On thy rail-fenced lea.” * *

“Debate with no man hast thou,
With questions art never perplexed,
As tame at the first sight as now,
In thy plain russet gabardine dressed.” * *

“Come ye who love,
And ye who hate,

¹⁷⁸ Dassow Walls suggests that when Thoreau (as “the navel-gazing Hermit”) is interrupted by Ellery Channing (“the Poet”) in “Brute Neighbors” he “transforms into a lyric poet himself, the neighborhood Orpheus,” whose attention is then drawn out into interdependent people, life forms, and matter (353-55). I suggest, contrariwise, that the masque of “Brute Neighbors” is a deflationary extreme, and that as *Walden* navigates to its rapturous end, it does so by rejecting the tropes of a specific ‘lyric’ tradition as it is received through Emerson and Channing, impelled not by condensation (Pound: “dichten = condensare”) but dilation.

Children of the Holy Dove,
 And Guy Faux of the state,
 And hang conspiracies
 From the tough rafters of the trees!" (489)

A series of alienations are stacked. An extrinsic voice advocates an extreme permeability to accident and language, "tak[ing] shelter under the cloud" (cf. Matthew 6:26). Immediately after this, the signature of lyric overflow, "O Baker Farm!" prepares us to expect an extemporaneous Romantic speaker. But Thoreau then pursues the abnegation of verbal identity and property by fusing his own voice and Channing's, in contrast to the chapter's earlier practice of attributing its verse quotations ("a poet"; "the Muse fables"). We receive instead a Gordon Lish-esque edit, a print-native emulation of spontaneity that retains the seams of its compilation in the form of asterisks. Four parts of Channing's 92-line poem, glimpsed before, arrive as a tight sonnet which cancels out, in both practice and content, any claims to proprietorship.

The politics Thoreau adduces from the text, haunted by the specter of violence, are shocking even for *Walden*. If the generally pastoral octet flips, at the volta, to an explicit program; even in the first eight lines, we perceive a general progression from the landscape in itself, to the increasing presence of people in it, and verbal conflict ("debate with no man.") At the same time, repeated negations ("No one . . . no man . . . never perplexed") and the denial of economic value (" . . . the richest element / is a little sunshine . . ."), navigate away from the mimesis of a physical place, to a utopian present, shadowed by past revolutions, that it is the poem's work to produce. In such always-incipient present, which can only be produced by negation, and which must remain therefore textual and unrealized, received political and religious affiliations are scrambled alongside discrete authorial attribution and the stability of the subject that subtends such attributions.

In locating this significant blazon in another's verse, Thoreau is enacting in language the program he calls for. The chapter's headspinning ventriloquies and tonal pivots culminate in this collaborative and anonymous model of authorship that recognizes that even, and especially, extemporaneity—"O Baker Farm!"—is a linguistic construct. Recognizing the artifice in this signature of authenticity means likewise perceiving how legacies of verse (and those of history, the "state" and "conspiracies") are latent in any experience of "landscape," no matter how "innocent."¹⁷⁹ The ideal of pure observation, and intense attention to the senses, must be supplemented by the proprioceptive matrix that linguistic sensitivity enables; seeing the world through poetic history, no matter how bric-à-bracked, we understand the limits of the individual's sensorium, and its will: a fray of identity that is figured, a moment later, in the narrator's "switching places" with Field in the boat. Even when being a guest in another's verse or "cabin" is textured by "hate" and "peril", Thoreau asks how this tension might redound politically, and create genuinely "new experience and character" (489).

In the close overlay of "Baker Farm" atop Channing's "Baker Farm," *Walden* draws closest to the formative verse traditions Thoreau was slowly renouncing, and thinks most palpably about

¹⁷⁹ So does poet Sara Nicholson, writing in 2023, figure the slow accretion of literature into that most phenomenal of American landmarks: "The littlest tide pools host whole ecosystems. A dribble or ooze, given time, will carve a canyon in the rock. If Niagara Falls could speak it would say, in the words of the great diarist Jules Renard, "I very humbly confess my pride" (*April*, 52).

literary and economic appropriation. Elsewhere in the text, the relationship is often less climactic, even as, as McGill argues, these interpolated poems are always “an occasion for the narrative” (360) to question its own premises. The friction in these acts of textual neighboring generates fields of ethical and epistemological purposiveness, as poetry’s tendency toward polysemy makes it liable to evade the cordon of quotation, as it invokes a deeply vertical temporality at odds with the metonymic skew of prose narrative, and as it deploys meaning along semi-rational vectors such as sound and affect.¹⁸⁰ At the level of genre, likewise, these occasions force the reader to reckon with the twilight authority of poetry as a privileged medium for representing and culturing American geography, with which emergent prose forms such as Thoreau’s had to reckon.¹⁸¹ Even if we understand such verse extracts as a “copy-book poetics,” the authority they retain even in an iconoclastic text such as *Walden*, need not represent diminished instances of majuscule poetry and independent forms; Emerson’s own “The Poet” advocates both stances.¹⁸² Indeed, Elizabeth Renker suggests verse, by endorsing cultural continuity and the claims of intense affect, encodes in its form an epistemological contestation of the swift modernization of American society in the second half of the nineteenth century and the pragmatic realism that supports it. *Walden*, incorporating and reacting intensely to such verse and the complex presents its occasions create, shows this is not a latent or minor challenge, but a necessary equanimity as palpable in an enjambment or asterisk, as in its deepest metaphysical engagements.

¹⁸⁰ Stephen Cushman stresses that Transcendentalist adherence to formal meter was grounded in a semi-mystic sense of its naturalness: he writes, “In the case of meter, Emerson is explicit: meter is organic, meter is natural, and since for a transcendentalist what is natural symbolizes the supernatural, the power of meter . . . has its part to play in symbolizing the power of spirit or soul” (88-90).

¹⁸¹ In speaking of poetry’s twilight I am referencing both E.C. Stedman’s 1882 phrase and Elizabeth Renker’s development of it in “The ‘Twilight of the Poets’ in the Era of American Realism, 1875–1900,”

¹⁸² Mary Louise Kete has rearticulated the many audiences and uses of poetry in the century, especially in *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle-class Identity in 19th Century America* (Duke UP, 2000). The essay “The Reception of Nineteenth-Century American Poetry” offers a succinct formulation: poetry is “a social act that was integral, not incidental, to work, play, and worship” (18, *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*, 2011). For copy-book circulation, see Erica Armstrong Dunbar, “A Mental and Moral Feast: Reading, Writing, and Sentimentality in Black Philadelphia,” in *A Fragile Freedom* (Yale UP, 2011) and Michael Cohen, “Album Verse and the Poetics of Scribal Circulation” in *A History of Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Poetry* (Cambridge UP, 2016).

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