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The Death-Hymn of the Perfect Tree: Metaphor, Metamorphosis and the Sublimity of Music in R. W. Emerson's Poems "Woodnotes I & II"

Claude Ziltener

In his essay "Experience" Emerson observes that "[w]e live amid surfaces," and that "the true art of life is to skate well on them." The realization that often we cannot penetrate the physical appearances of things in order to reach a metaphysical realm of ideas was deeply unsettling for Emerson whose ambition it was to interpret the visible changes of the present as the apocalyptic sign of an invisible future order. Emerson identifies this gap between the mind and the world with the fall from paradise which can only be overcome by the intellectual revelations of the genius-poet. In this paper I will argue that the motif of the fall is a rhetorical device which helps to solve the tensions between the apocalyptic depths of the intellect and the post-apocalyptic aesthetics of surfaces. According to an apocalyptic interpretation the fall promises a return to the eternal presence of nature which, however, is rendered problematic by the discrepancy between imagination and expression. In contrast, a post-apocalyptic reading interprets the fall as the moment when the imaginative union between narrator and reader is disrupted by the experience of narrative discontinuity. What remains open to debate is the question whether or not this moment of narrative crisis increases our faith in the trans-human spirit which, Emerson tells us, "communicates without speech." My discussion of the motif of the fall is embedded in a larger discourse on aesthetics opened up by Kant's interpretation of the sublime as the apocalypse of the mind in the *Third Critique* on the one hand, and de Man's interpretation of the Kantian sublime as a post-apocalyptic, linguistic event on the other.

I

It is one of the insights of German Romanticism that there is a fundamental discrepancy between thought and its explication, between the transcendental idea and the communication of this idea within a philosophical or literary discourse. The immediate knowledge that is intended by pure reflection requires a mediation of some sort, a fact that creates an ironic opposition between the absolute, unlimited knowledge and the limitations of its medium, language. As a result of this opposition knowledge can only be understood as a negative category of thought while all representation has to be considered incomplete.

We can observe how the representational dilemma leads to an ironic understanding of the conditions of knowledge in Friedrich Schlegel's essay "On Incomprehensibility" ("Über die Unverständlichkeit") published in the last edition of the *Athenäum* (1800). Schlegel states in this essay that despite his own sincere and entirely un-ironic intentions the *Athenäum* in general and the *Fragmente* in particular have often been considered incomprehensible. Since this incomprehensibility is not intended Schlegel concludes that it occurs whenever we try to express an absolute truth in writing. Writing cannot be understood in the proper sense because by being a mediation of an immediate truth it stands in opposition to this truth. The relation between an idea and its representation in language is ironic (non-identical) because it creates an impression of the insoluble contradiction between the unconditioned and the conditioned, between the impossibility and the necessity of a complete communication ("ein Gefühl von dem unauflöslichen Widerstreit des Unbedingten und des Bedingten, der Unmöglichkeit und Notwendigkeit einer vollständigen Mitteilung") (368).

As becomes apparent in Schlegel's essay the critique of the fragmentariness of texts coincides with a general knowledge of the incompleteness of all communication. The fragmentary status of texts becomes the object of a (sometimes satirical) critique which addresses the fundamental gap between the aspirations of the writers to communicate an ultimate truth and the failure to comprehend this truth in their writing. Such a position is not only typical of the German Romantics but is also found among later writers and philosophers who were influenced by German Romanticism, such as the American Transcendentalists and their critics. James Russell Lowell, for instance, takes a critical look at the possibility of representing absolute, transcendental truths in poetic writing in his ironic account of the lives and works of his contemporary writers, *A Fable for Critics* (1848). Among the authors he satirizes is Ralph Waldo Emerson whose poetry Lowell criticizes for its lack of formal coherence while at the same time showing a concern for the incompleteness of communication and the fundamental gap between absolute, immediate knowledge and the mediation of this knowledge in language:

> In the worst of his poems are mines of rich matter,
> But thrown in a heap with a crash and a clatter;
> Now it is not one thing nor another alone
> Makes a poem, but rather the general tone,
> The something pervading, uniting the whole,
> The before unconceived, unconceivable soul,
> So that just in removing this trifle or that, you
> Take away, as it were, a chief limb of the statue;
> Roots, wood, bark, and leaves singly perfect may be,
> But, clapt hodge-podge together, they don't make a tree. (38–39)

The tree as a symbol of the organic structure of text is well chosen. Emerson himself uses this image to illustrate the organic structure of both nature and art. According to Emerson's pre-Darwinian understanding of nature the diverse phenomena of the natural world are linked with each other by the metamorphic transformation of lower forms of life into higher, more complex forms, from the inorganic realm of chemical substances to the organic realm of plants and animals. The process culminates in the spiritual existence of mankind. This transcendental law of metamorphosis, Emerson argues, becomes immediately comprehensible through aesthetic intuition, which lifts the mind from the perplexing diversity of the concrete to the unity of pure cognition. The painter cannot "draw a tree without in some sort becoming a tree," he writes in "History" (1841). By "watching for a time his motions and plays, the painter enters into his [the tree's] nature and can then draw him at will in every attitude" due to the "deeper apprehension" (*CW II* 10) of nature we gain through art.[1]

In view of such claims it is not surprising that Emerson's critics have taken a close look at his poetry and, unable to relate the unity of nature to his poetic writing, have found fault with its form. Indeed, Emerson's rather unsophisticated sense of rhythm, the rhapsodic structure of his longer poems as well as the sometimes heavy-handedness of his rhymes have made his poetry an easy target for satire and, in more recent times, the object of critical debate. Lowell's observation that Emerson's poems lack a "general tone" is shared by many contemporary scholars who argue that the morphological structure of Emerson's verse falls short of his metamorphic vision.[2] Lowell's satire, however, goes beyond a critique of the formal deficiencies of Emerson's poetry. It calls into question the idea of immediate knowledge which informs Emerson's notion of aesthetic perception. The irony of Lowell's satirical comment results from the discrepancy between Emerson's notion of nature as a perfect system of knowledge and the communication of this idea in the imperfect because incoherent system of Emerson's poetic writing. Due to their fragmentary status, Lowell argues, Emerson's poems do not allow a comprehensive understanding of nature so that the quasi-divine idea of a "pervading" and "uniting" "soul" not only remains "unconceived" but "unconceivable" (39) to the reader of his poetry.

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[1] All quotes from Emerson's essays used in this paper except for "Poetry and Imagination" have been taken from the Belknap edition of *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (ed. Alfred R. Ferguson et al.). I will refer to this source with the short form "*CW*" followed by the number of the volume and the page number(s).

Lowell's satire is an invitation to investigate the complications that occur whenever we apply Emerson's poetics to his poetry. The purpose of this paper is to show, on the basis of two early poems by Emerson, "Woodnotes I & II," that Emerson's ambition to gain immediate insight into the nature of reality through the aesthetics of poetic texts – an idea that can be traced back to Kant's notion of the sublime – is an impossible undertaking since every representation of absolute knowledge creates a distance from this knowledge.[3] As a result of this distance, I argue, Emerson is forced to take a more critical position towards his own poetry and poetics.

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[2] Carpenter for instance argues in the *Emerson Handbook* that "Emerson's prosody, or practice of poetry, was closely related to his poetics, or theory of poetry" but "where his theory of poetry was almost identical with his theory of art [. . .] his practice of poetry was often at odds with his theory of poetry." He "preached fairly consistently," he continues, "but he often failed to practice what he preached" (90). Albert Gelpi argues in "Emerson: The Paradox of Organic Form" that his poems are "flawed by loose ends, careless structure and slack diction" (149).

[3] "Woodnotes I & II" were written sometime between 1835 and 1839 and later published side by side in Emerson's *Poems* (1847). Considering the similarity of the titles as well as their placement within Emerson's first collection of poems it seems legitimate to read them as one meta-text. In my paper I will quote from the Oxford edition of the *Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. I will use the short form "*P*" followed by the page number to indicate this source.

II

Emerson was aware that from a formal point of view his poetic writing did not meet the aesthetic demands of his critics yet this did not prevent him from presenting himself as a poet.[4] For Emerson poetry was not primarily a matter of style but of intellectual scope. It is not meters but "meter-making argument, that makes a poem," (*CW III* 6) Emerson argues in "The Poet" (1844). In line with the Romantic rejection of the mechanical and materialist philosophy of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century empiricism Emerson believes that true knowledge is received from inspiration rather than observation, a change of perspective that assigns the poet a central role in the production of meaning.[5] Whereas the empirical scientist apprehends experience through the senses, which implies a certain degree of limitedness, the poet gains an immediate understanding of nature through imagination. For Emerson the poetic mind and the phenomena of nature are identical because they are both metamorphic in structure, which is to say, they form a totality of abstract ideas from which each phenomenon or thought draws its transcendental meaning. The spirit of nature "speaks in all languages, governs all men," Emerson argues in "The Method of Nature" (1841), "so that he [the poet] shall not any longer separate it from himself in his thought, he shall seem to be it, he shall be it." Thus a "greater wisdom is taught him, the sound swells to a ravishing music, he is borne away as with a flood, he becomes careless of his food and of his house, he is the drinker of ideas, and leads a heavenly life" (*CW I* 130).

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[4] Emerson admits in a letter written to his second wife shortly before their marriage that his "singing" is "very husky" and "for the most part prose." Nonetheless he insists that he is "born a poet; of a low class without doubt, yet a poet" (quoted in Carpenter, 91).

[5] Like most Romantic writers Emerson repudiates the epistemological approach of empiricism which to him seems dangerously limited in scope and at the same time despicably incoherent. Instead, he pursues a more dynamic and less formulaic approach to reality, an approach Eric Wilson calls "Romantic organicism" (24). According to Wilson's interpretation the key assumption of this "organicism" is that each element of the world "is not discrete, static, acted on form a distance, but inhabited and animated by a vast holistic force" (24). Laura Walls argues in *Emerson's Life in Science* that the shift from a mechanical to a naturalist understanding of the world correlated with a redefinition of ethics because "*natural* law" did not act "by exercising legislative command from without but by organizing irresistibly from within, and obedience was brought about not by crude mechanisms of force but by innermost conviction of the right and true, the 'moral' path. This shift had the crucial consequence of placing the reactive mind at the center of moral life. As the organizing power of the universe was creative and dynamic, so was the organizing power of the human mind" (5).

The comparison Emerson makes between the "drinker of ideas" and the otherworldly experience of "a ravishing music" is of particular interest here because it insinuates that thought exists independently of a medium of representation. For Emerson nature is a "work of *ecstasy*" (*Method of Nature CW I* 125); it is a force too immense to be described in logical language. Thus in order for the mind to comprehend nature it must shift from the limited realm of language to a state of pure cognition. The *modus operandi* of this transaction from language to thought is metaphorical speech whose meaning escapes logical (empirical) understanding. The metaphorical reference to a "ravishing music" thus becomes a means by which absolute knowledge becomes comprehensible to the mind.

Emerson's analogy between transcendental knowledge and the metaphor of music depends on two mutually exclusive arguments. On the one hand, Emerson locates the capacity to understand the phenomena of nature in the poetic, which is to say, figurative word; it is through poetic language that we comprehend the deeper meaning of nature. On the other hand, he distinguishes between nature and language by arguing that the identity between the poet and nature is established on the basis of thought alone. Thus poetic language appears as something that is identical with transcendental thought and as its "other," as an obstacle that must be removed in order for the mind to grasp the metamorphic structure of nature, a paradox that cannot readily be solved. There is, in other words, a fundamental gap between Emerson's poetic theory and the practice of writing, between thought and the articulation of thought which Emerson himself does not fully acknowledge. If we take figurative speech as the origin of thought we automatically call into question the existence of transcendental knowledge because what defines this knowledge is precisely the absence of the kind of mediation that occurs whenever we express ideas in language. This makes Emerson's poetics vulnerable to criticism. What is the value of a theory, we may ask, if it is based on a notion of absolute knowledge that denies the possibility of being articulated?

The paradox between Emerson's poetics and poetry, between theory and the practice of writing I have just outlined is important for the understanding of the fall of the perfect tree, the central motif of two early poems by Emerson, "Woodnotes I & II." "Woodnotes I" tells the story of a nature poet, possibly a literary alter-ego of Thoreau, who guided by nature lives a life without worries and duties.[6] In "Woodnotes II" nature itself, now personified as a pine tree, speaks to the poet so that the two poems can be seen as a "question-and-answer encounter between the poet and nature" (Yoder 120). It can be shown that the metaphor of the perfect tree, the personified voice of the universal law of metamorphosis, disintegrates into many contradictory metaphors, a process that subverts Emerson's attempts to turn figurative language into a tool of immediate insight. Instead of creating a harmony of ideas in the manner of a musical composition, a "general tone" (Lowell 38), the multiplication of metaphors leads to moments of "dissonance" between mutually exclusive readings of the fall thus making the text "incomprehensible." As a result, the reader cannot understand the transcendental idea which, according to Emerson, inspires poetic writing.

III

Emerson often refers to the organic growth of plants in general and of trees in particular in order to highlight the metamorphic quality of nature. Paraphrasing Swedenborg's statement that "*Nature is always selfsimilar*" Emerson observes in "Swedenborg, or, the Mystic" (1850) that

> [i]n the plant, the eye or germinative point opens to a leaf, then to another leaf, with a power of transforming the leaf into radicle, stamen, pistil, petal, bract, sepal, or seed. The whole art of the plant is still to repeat leaf on leaf without end, the more or less of heat, light, moisture, and food determining the form it shall assume. (*CW IV* 61)

It follows from these observations that the "true aim" of nature "is the health of the whole tree, - root, stem, leaf, flower, and seed, - and by no means the pampering of a monstrous pericarp at the expense of all the other functions" (Emerson, "Method of Nature" *CW I* 126).

The structure of the tree here stands for an organic vision of nature, a vision that aligns the various manifestations of nature under the universal law of metamorphosis, a law Emerson calls the "art of the plant" (Emerson "Swedenborg" *CW IV* 61). The comparison with art is significant because it underlines Emerson's conviction that the conception of the transcendental, harmonic order of nature depends on an aesthetic intuition of the totality of meaning we find in nature. This sense of totality, Emerson believes, is derived from metaphors.[7] In order for the mind to perceive the metamorphic nature of reality it is necessary to turn it into a "metaphor of the mind" (Emerson, "Nature" *CW III* 21), which is to say, it must be possible for the mind to describe experience according to the unlimited meaning of figurative terms. Emerson here uses the term "metaphor" according to its etymological origin. In agreement with the word *metaphorein* (= "to transfer, to carry over") metaphors relegate one observation or thought to the realm of another, a process that is infinite and finite at the same time. It is infinite because it is essentially an open-ended. It is finite because it produces a field of correspondences that is consistent in itself and can thus be interpreted as the realization of a single, transcendental idea. The poetic mind perceives nature as an "ascending scale," as a metamorphic structure, that leads the way from empirical perception to pure cognition, from figurative language to abstract thought. This shift of perspective is necessary because the ideas contained in nature always exceed the knowledge that can be gained from empirical observation. The transferring logic of metaphors allows the poetic mind to emancipate itself from the sensual realm of representation in order to identify the "celestial natures" ("Swedenborg" *CW IV* 62) of all phenomena. These "natures" are only perceptible to the aesthetically sensitive, "musical" ear:

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[6] See footnotes to "Woodnotes I" in Emerson's works. 608.

> Creative force [metamorphosis], like a musical composer, goes on unweariedly repeating a simple air or theme, now high, now low, in solo, in chorus, ten thousand times reverberated, till it fills earth and heaven with the chant. ("Swedenborg" *CW IV* 62)

The two poems "Woodnotes I" and "Woodnotes II" are presented to us as such chants. At the beginning of the second section of "Woodnotes I" we are told that the nature poet is a "minstrel" (*P* 45) who reads nature's secret. In "Woodnotes II" the Pine-tree invites the "wild-eyed boy" who in the woods "chants his hymn to hills and floods" (*P* 52) to listen to the ecstatic song produced by the wind that blows through the leaves of the pine:

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[7] Emerson's interest in the idea of metamorphosis dates back to his visit to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris in 1833. "The Universe is a more amazing puzzle than ever as you glance along this bewildering series of animated forms," Emerson writes about this visit. What amazes him is that "the hazy butterflies, the carved shells, the birds, beasts, fishes, insects, snakes [etc.]" are outward expressions of the same "upheaving principle of life everywhere incipient in the very rock aping organized forms." The puzzling perplexity of nature, Emerson believes, requires a non-conceptual, metaphorical understanding of nature, an understanding fostered by the figurative quality of poetry. There is not "a form so grotesque, so savage, nor so beautiful," Emerson writes, "but is an expression of some poetry inherent in the observer" (*Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks IV* 199-200).

> To the open ear it [the wind] sings
> Sweet the genesis of things,
> Of tendency through endless ages,
> Of star-dust, and star-pilgrimages,
> Of rounded worlds, of space and time,
> Of the old flood's subsiding slime,
> Of chemic matter, force and form,
> Of poles and powers, cold, wet, and warm:
> The rushing metamorphosis
> Dissolving all that fixture is,
> Melts things that be to things that seem,
> And solid nature to a dream.
> O, listen to the undersong,
> The ever old, the ever young;
> And, far within those cadent pauses,
> The chorus of the ancient Causes! (*P* 55)

The Pine describes how inorganic matter metamorphoses into living organisms, a process that corresponds to the orchestration of isolated sounds into a universal melody. In order to perceive this inaudible "undersong," Emerson implies, the poetic mind must establish metaphorical analogies that leave behind concrete experience (including the aesthetic experience of language) in pursuit of the transcendental idea which these experiences express.[8]

The nature poet mentioned in "Woodnotes I & II" is such an analogist. We are told in "Woodnotes I" that the poet comprehends the many signs of nature "by secret sight" (*P* 46). Which is to say, he understands that the innumerable phenomena of nature, from the "[p]ondering shadows, colors, clouds" to the "[t]ints that spot the violet's petal" (*P*

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[8] "All thinking is analogizing" (445) Emerson writes in "Poetry and Imagination." He makes a similar point in "Intellect" when arguing that the "intellect pierces the form, overleaps the wall, detects intrinsic likeness between remote things, and reduces all things into a few principles" (*CW II* 193). To think in analogies means to overcome the system of classification typical of empiricism: "the naturalist sees one type under every *metamorphosis*, and regards a horse a running man, a fish as a swimming man, a bird as a flying man, a tree as a rooted man" (Emerson, "Compensation" *CW II* 59).

45), are metaphors of the same metamorphic law and, in a second step, makes use of the non-conceptual logic of these metaphors to reach out to a transcendental understanding of nature.

Considering the degree of insight the nature poet has already achieved it is unclear why he should need further instructions. Indeed, the Pine's "song" in "Woodnotes II" is not so much directed at the "rough and bearded forester" (*P* 51) who "liveth by the ragged pine" (*P* 52) than at the "royal man" who is an "exile from the wilderness" (*P* 57). Suffering from the "city's poisoning spleen" (*P* 52) common man has become a stranger to nature. His ears, we are told, are "stones;" they are deaf to the "tones [w]hich only the pure can hear" (*P* 55). It is because man does not comprehend what nature "speaks so musically" (Emerson "The Method of Nature" *CW I* 134) the knowledge of the nature poet "seems fantastic to the rest" ("Woodnotes I" *P* 45). The challenge of the nature poet is not to perceive the spiritual nature of the forest he inhabits but in the communication of this knowledge to those who are isolated from nature and thus have no deeper understanding of the wisdom it contains. The Pine includes the nature poet in her "song" because she wants to encourage him to transcribe the harmony he perceives in nature into a language comprehensible to common man. Following Emerson's dictum that the "sweetest music is not in the oratoria, but in the human voice" ("Art" *CW II* 216) the poet creates metaphors from which man may draw higher knowledge, one that is not derived from experience but is deducted from a transcendental understanding of nature. "As the eyes of Lynaceus were said to see through the earth," Emerson writes in "The Poet,"

> the poet turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession. For, through that better perception, he stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing or *metamorphosis*; perceives that thought is multiform; that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form; and, following with his eyes the life, uses the forms which express that life, and so his speech flows with the flowing of nature. (*CW III* 12 – 13)

Paradoxically, the identity between the morphological structure of language and the metamorphic structure of nature which Emerson describes here, an identity that allows the poet to comprehend nature as swiftly as thought itself, hinges on a strict dichotomy between the concrete structure of figurative language and the transcendental meaning it contains. The poetic mind can only perceive the vastness of meaning we find in metamorphosis if it takes into account "the thought's independence of the symbol, the stability of the thought, the accidency and fugacity of the symbol" (*CW III* 12). It is due to the "independence of the symbol," the unlimited meaning of the metaphor which does not stand in direct relation to the concrete structure of language, that the mind gains an intimation of the totality of knowledge that is found in nature. This intimation explains the feelings of elevation and pleasure the reader takes in reading poetry. "With what joy I begin to read a poem which I confide in as an inspiration!" Emerson writes in "The Poet" and continues:

> And now my chains are to be broken; I shall mount above these clouds and opaque airs in which I live, - opaque, though they seem transparent, - and from the heaven of truth I shall see and comprehend my relations. That will reconcile me to life and renovate nature, to see trifles animated by a tendency, and to know what I am doing. Life will no more be a noise. (*CW III* 7)

IV

Emerson's argumentation is not entirely of his own making. In fact, the analogy he makes between aesthetic pleasure and transcendental knowledge can be traced back to Kant's *The Critique of Judgement* (1790). Kant argues in his third *Critique* that our aesthetic judgment, a form of imagination, allows us to bridge the gap between *understanding* and *reason.* True knowledge of the world, which is to say, that kind of knowledge which is not derived from empirical understanding but is produced by the unrestricted processes of reason, becomes accessible to man through the imaginative representation of beautiful objects. These objects reflect the harmonic order of the world and therefore induce a sense of pleasure.

We experience a similar feeling of pleasure, Kant argues, when we are confronted with sublime objects, objects that are too immense to be imagined. Kant explains this phenomenon as the result of an emancipation of the intellect from aesthetic imagination whose task it is to link the conceptual logic of empirical understanding with the universal logic of transcendental knowledge. The mind infers from the universality of the feeling of pleasure we derive from sublime objects that the failure to imagine sublime objects is a transcendental law in itself. The purely cognitive mind, reason, conceives, so to speak, that it cannot conceive the experience of the sublime. This conception is possible because the cognitive mind recognizes the universal nature of the sublime and thus finds a transcendental structure in an object that, taken for itself, is not a harmonic representation. This knowledge of a harmonic order behind an object seemingly incompatible with harmonic representation, Kant argues, must be produced by the faculty of reason itself because the sublime cannot be represented in one's imagination and therefore does not have any connection with an empirical understanding of the world. The sublime may thus be taken as a proof of the autonomy and superiority of reason:

> All that we can say is that the [sublime] object lends itself to the presentation of a sublimity discoverable in the mind. For the sublime, in the strict sense of the word, cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be excited and called into the mind by that very inadequacy itself which does admit of sensuous presentation. (92)

It seems that Emerson applies Kant's notion of the sublime to the aesthetic effect of metaphorical speech. The meaning of metaphors, he argues, is too vast to be grasped by imagination yet in spite of this lack of understanding we take pleasure in metaphorical language, a fact from which we may conclude that the cognitive mind has come to terms with the failure to grasp the meaning of metaphors. Moreover, the fact that we take pleasure in reading metaphors whose meaning we cannot fathom implies that the meaning of metaphorical speech exceeds the meaning that can be derived from the structure of language. It is this excess of meaning that allows the poetic mind to get an intuition of the totality of ideas that defines the metamorphic nature of reality when reading poetry.

There is, I believe, a fundamental problem with Emerson's attempt to link figurative speech to aesthetic intuition, a problem that becomes apparent in Emerson's excessive use of metaphors in his poetic descriptions of nature. None of the metaphors Emerson applies seems to please him, none of them seems to comprise the vastness of nature in its entirety. As a result, Emerson replaces one metaphor with another. In my view, the reason for this metaphorical replacement has to be sought in the inherent contradictoriness of metaphors. According to Emerson's notion of metaphoricity metaphors are strictly non-conceptual, which is to say, they contradict every reading that tries to pin down their meaning. This has further implications for the act of reading because if metaphors are essentially contradictory they also stand in contradiction to each other so that, as a result, poetic texts cannot be perceived as closed structures. How are we to know, one may ask, that taken together the metaphors Emerson deploys in his poetic texts ultimately lead to transcendental knowledge? Does not the mechanism of metaphorical substitution undermine the identity between the totality of ideas we find in nature and those contained in metaphors? In fact, the multitude of metaphors may be taken as an indication that texts do not allow the kind of totalizing reading one would expect from a metamorphic understanding of nature. If we apply the logic of the sublime to the logic of figurative language, which Emerson does, then we find ourselves confronted with the paradoxical situation that the sublime is strictly nonrepresentational. We cannot relegate the sublime to the aesthetic effect of figurative speech without at the same time depriving it of its transcendental meaning. The same mechanism that according to Emerson allows us to perceive the metamorphic nature of reality, the inherent contradictoriness of metaphors, also undermines the intuition of an infinitely complex *yet* coherent totality that is constitutive of the sublime. Therefore one may argue with Paul de Man who makes a similar point in his essay on Kant's theory of the sublime entitled "Materiality and Phenomenality in Kant" that the failure to articulate the sublime is the distinguishing feature of the sublime and that as a result of this inevitable failure the sublime can never become a transcendental idea. Commenting on the system of metaphorical replacement he finds in Kant's texts on the sublime de Man observes:

> It [the articulation of the sublime] does not, in fact, ever occur and it is the *failure* of the articulation that becomes the distinguishing characteristic of the sublime: it transposes or elevates the natural to the level of the supernatural, perception to imagination, understanding to reason. This transposition, however, never allows for the cognition of totality that is constitutive of the sublime, and it can therefore not supersede the failure by becoming, as in a dialectic, the knowledge of this failure. The sublime cannot be defined as the failure of the sublime, for this failure deprives it of its identifying principle. (75-76)

De Man shows in his article that the distinguishing principle of the sublime, the inability to be represented in one's imagination, also applies to the process of articulating the sublime in language. The sublime cannot be expressed in language precisely because its existence depends on the impossibility of its representation. This also explains why the failure to articulate the sublime itself cannot be a sublime experience. Every articulation of the sublime, de Man argues, deprives the sublime of its foundation, namely an intuition of the totality of knowledge. Since the failure to articulate the sublime does not produce a transcendental understanding of reality, the sublime cannot be identified with an act of pure cognition but has to be located in the act of linguistic expression. Bare of any transcendental meaning the sublime is an empty linguistic performance, an open-ended process of metaphorical substitution. This process of metaphorical substitution results in momentary breakdowns of signification precisely because we cannot assess the overall meaning of the contradictions it contains. The sublime shows itself, de Man argues, in moments of "disruption" or "disarticulation" when the "aporia of the sublime is no longer stated" but presents itself as the "apparently tranquil, because entirely unreflected, juxtaposition of incompatibles." (79) This "juxtaposition of incompatibles" is "devoid of any reflexive or intellectual complication" (82).

At first sight, Emerson's interpretation of the sublime as the aesthetic effect of the "accidency and fugacity of the symbol" ("The Poet" *CW III* 12) seems identical with de Man's notion of a "juxtaposition of incompatibles" (79). There is, however, a fundamental difference between the two. In Emerson's view, the inconsistency of metaphors reveals a higher, universal meaning, a meaning that exists independently of language. For de Man, the sublime has no cognitive value because it is tied to the aporetic structures of figurative language. The sublime merely marks a moment in the process of writing when the infinite chain of metaphorical replacement collapses under the pressure of contradictory readings. More importantly, de Man shows that the nature of the sublime is a dual one. The sublime is either a statement that has no intuitive quality or a linguistic effect without meaning, yet it cannot be both at the same time.

V

The dual nature of the sublime throws a critical light on Emerson notion of metaphorical transferral, a transferral that in Emerson's view allows us to perceive nature as if it was an inaudible music, an abstract thought. The "chants" of the nature poet and the "song" of the Pine are metaphors of the sublime state of mind that is provoked by the figurative language of poetry yet exists independently of any aesthetic representation. The problematic nature of such a theory, I have argued, becomes apparent by the fact that it must be articulated in a language that is self-contradictory and thus irreconcilable with the idea of transcendental knowledge. In the following I will once again return to the metaphor of the tree in "Woodnotes I and II," a metaphor which according to Emerson's poetic theory creates a form of knowledge that is identical with the transcendental knowledge of metamorphosis. However, a close analysis of the metaphorical meaning of the motif of the tree in "Woodnotes I and II" will show that this metaphor consists of contradictory metaphors thus leading to a breakdown of signification. This breakdown coincides with the fall of the perfect tree.

At the beginning of section three we are told that the nature poet's idyllic existence is disturbed by the intrusion of a "lumberer's gang" (*P* 46). The event reaches its dramatic climax when the silence that surrounds the nature poet is suddenly interrupted by the rumbling noise of a falling pine-tree:

> He [the nature poet] heard, when in the grove, at intervals,
> With sudden roar the aged pine-tree falls, -
> One crash, the death-hymn of the perfect tree,
> Declares the close of its green century.
> Low lies the plant to whose creation went
> Sweet influence from every element;
> Whose living towers the years conspired to build,
> Whose giddy top the morning loved to gild. (*P* 46-47)

The nature poet understands that the fallen tree will rot and will thus become the organic material other plants will need to grow. He is capable of seeing this connection between decay and growth, inorganic and organic matter, because he comprehends that the fall of the tree is a metaphor of the universal law of metamorphosis. In Emerson's view the metaphor of the fall is sublime because it allows the poet to see how the infinite course of natural history is held together by the transcendental knowledge of a single law. However, the moment we try to perceive the fall through the eyes of the nature poet, which is to say, the moment we try to locate the sublime in Emerson's metaphorical language we lose sight of the metamorphic idea because what is presented to us as a single metaphor and, consequently, as a single intuition, turns out to be an amalgamation of various, contradictory tropes. We comprehend that the fall is a sublime moment but this knowledge does not strike us as being sublime itself; it is merely stated in the text.

The contradictory nature of the metaphor of the fall becomes evident if we include "Woodnotes II" in our considerations. In "Woodnotes II" the Pine warns man that if a "bough" cut from a "parent stem" and then placed in a "porcelain vase" it will momentarily "swell and rise" but ultimately wither because it does not find the "enlarged supplies" (*P* 53) it needs. In order to grow the twig requires spiritual nourishment, a nourishment it lacks if it is isolated from nature. In analogy to this observation one may argue that the cutting of the pine tree for commercial purposes by the "lumberer's gang" (*P* 46) in "Woodnotes I" shows a disregard for the spiritual order of nature.

In "Woodnotes II" the cutting of the twig is compared to the "old adherent sin" (*P* 53), the eating of the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge by Adam and Eve that leads to their expulsion from Paradise. The fall of the perfect tree described in "Woodnotes I" signifies a similar loss of innocence. It indicates the end of the state of harmony that existed between man and nature before the onset of industrialization. Man's sin here consists in the change of attitude towards nature, from exploring the forest in the manner of the nature poet to clearing woodland, from harvesting the fruits of nature to trading wood for commercial profit. Guided by his "penny-wisdom" ("Nature" *CW III* 43), the practical knowledge of commonsense, man lives in a state of spiritual deprivation.[9] Seen from this point of view, the fall of the tree marks the moment in human history when man takes possession of nature without an intuition of the totality of ideas it contains. Without such a sense of totality, however, man cannot evaluate his actions. Unlike the nature poet who is lead by his "clear spirit" so that "his road" is "illumined and foreshowed" by "God's own light" common man fears the "danger" that "creeps" on his "pathway" ("Woodnotes I" *P* 47). Being an outcast of nature he is doomed to err.

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[9] Emerson gives the following definition of commonsense in "Poetry and Imagination:" "The common-sense which does not meddle with the absolute, but takes things at their word, - things as they appear, - believes in the existence of matter, not because we can touch it, or conceive of it, but because it agrees with ourselves, and the universe does not jest with us, but is in earnest, - is the house of health and life" (440).

It is difficult to see how this pessimistic interpretation of the fall relates to the first reading according to which the fall marks a state of identity between poetic mind and metamorphic nature. One may argue that the nature poet acts as a kind of Christ figure who takes away the sins of man at the end of time thus restoring the "formidable innocence" ("Woodnotes II" *P* 54) that existed at the beginning of the history of mankind. However, this attempt to unite the two contradictory readings under a new reading does not undo the fact that the metaphor of the fall has already disintegrated into many contradictory metaphors. As we read along the metaphors multiply. The possibility to grasp the overall meaning of the text in a single intuition thus is constantly diminished. The articulation of the sublime thought of nature within the language of poetry, it seems, never coincides with the sublime experience itself, a problem the Pine tree addresses in her "song" when pointing out that the "mortal" poet (*P* 55) cannot immediately reproduce the riddles triggered by an oar dipped into water so that his verse seem "unbound" and "unrhymed" (*P* 57).[10]

It seems that Emerson himself is such a "mortal" poet. He does not establish a synchrony of thought and expression that would allow us to intuitively comprehend the metaphysical (metamorphic) nature of reality. One may either read the fall of the tree as an inaudible "death hymn," which is to say, as a statement about the transcendental law of metamorphosis, or one may interpret it as a meaningless linguistic performance, a collision of metaphors that does not signify anything and may thus be perceived as linguistic noise, as a "sudden roar" ("Woodnotes I" *P* 47).

The failure to bring together thought and expression points back at Lowell's remark that Emerson's poems are "mines of rich matter" (38). Indeed, Emerson's poetic texts abound in metaphors yet they lack an organic structure that would unite thought and expression in a single moment of sublime transcendence. As a result of the fundamental discrepancy between experience of the sublime and its articulation Emerson's poems seem to be "thrown in a heap with a clash and a clatter." (38) Emerson himself has sensed this. "I fear the progress of Metaphysical philosophy," he writes in one of his journal entries, "may be found to consist in nothing else than the progressive introduction of opposite metaphors" (*Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks II* 224).

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[10] Duane Coltharp argues in "Landscapes of Commodity: Nature as Economy in Emerson's Poems" that "the antinomies of imaginative and economic mastery" (283) of nature are solved with the help of "the trope of the sublime" which "break[s] down distinctions, disturb[s] categories, and disrupt[s] oppositional moments." (288) Such an interpretation of the sublime, however, is problematic because it does not take into account that the articulation of the sublime in language deprives it of its transcendental meaning.

It seems that a poet with an unimpaired vision of nature has not yet been born, a fact highlighted by the careful distinction Emerson makes between the voice of the narrator and the voice of personified nature.[11] This distinction, David Porter argues in *Emerson and Literary Change*, is a sign that Emerson is facing "recognition of the separability of the language-making function and the divining function" (117). "At the dark center of his doubt as an artist," Porter writes, "was the specter of the collapse of the miraculous energizing imagination" (111).[12] The fall of the tree marks such a breakdown of imagination, a collapse brought about by the infinite multiplication of metaphors. It is one of the many moments in Emerson's writing when the reader (including Emerson as the reader of his own poetry) recognizes the difficulties of turning language into a cognitive instrument. The reader cannot fully grasp this failure precisely because every reading of the motif of the fall adds another meaning to the potentially infinite number of meanings. To speak of a complete failure, however, would mean to ignore the knowledge that can be gained from the collision of metaphors. The "fall" of the tree thus is situated in between two notions of falling, one that marks a state of union with nature where mind and matter meet in a transcendental thought, and one that coincides with a recognition of the limits of the intellect.[13]

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[11] Emerson is not completely happy with the artistic achievements of his contemporaries. The arts, he tells us in "Art" (1841), "are but initial" and our praise is therefore given to "what they aimed and promised, not to the actual result" (*CW II* 215).

[12] Eduardo Cadava makes a similar point in *Emerson and the Climate of History* when arguing that Emerson's work aspires to provide a transfer of the method of nature into a method of writing while at the same time showing a deep concern for the possibility of such a transfer: "Emerson's entire corpus can be read as both an effort to realize this transfer and a means of registering the consequences of such a transfer – one of which is the difficulty of our being able to bring nature and writing together within a particular configuration or thought. By the term 'configuration' I refer to the systematic organization of a work or corpus around a particular meaning, purpose, or feature. If Emerson suggests that we explore the method of nature, it is not in order to encourage us to understand it within one thought, but rather to ask us to respect its irreducible and singular multiplicity" (3).

In his later essayistic work Emerson becomes more aware of the ambiguity of his poetic theory. In "Experience" (1844) for instance he accepts the fact that life is full of "the clangor and jangle of contrary tendencies" (*CW III* 36). Yet already in his early essay "Self-Reliance" (1841) he argues that

> [a] foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day. – "Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood." – Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood. (*CW II* 33 – 34)

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[13] In "Spiritual Laws" (1841) Emerson argues that all human actions are guided by the law of falling, a law that can also be observed in nature: "When the fruit is ripe, it falls. When the fruit is despatched, the leaf falls. The circuit of the waters is mere falling. The walking of man and all animals is a falling forward. All our manual labor and works of strength, as prying, splitting, digging, rowing, and so forth, are done by the dint of continual falling, and the globe, earth, moon, comet, sun, star, fall forever and ever" (*CW II* 80). What makes the falling movements of man comparable to the falling of the cosmos is not, I argue, the physical movement itself but the identity of the mind of the observer with the observed. This identity is realized in the nature poet. His thoughts are identical with the thought of metamorphosis so that he lives in harmony with the nature that surrounds him. In the words of the nature poet:

> The falling waters led me,
> The foodful waters fed me,
> And brought me to the lowest land,
> Unerring to the ocean sand. ("Woodnotes I" *P* 48)

This notion of falling stands in direct opposition to the definition Emerson gives at the end of "Experience" (1844). "It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped," he writes, "the discovery we have made, that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards, we suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors" (*CW III* 43). The fall here is identical with what B. L. Packer calls the "myth of reflection" (*Emerson's Fall* 149), the knowledge that the mind can only assess its limitedness with regard to the transcendental knowledge of nature.

Emerson's nonchalance is somewhat surprising considering his insistence on a universal, transcendental truth. It seems that to him the incompleteness of communication is an incentive to search for an absolute truth, a truth that is not found in the lower realm of empirical logic. Thus he may argue in spite of the fragmentary nature of his writing that "[u]nderneath the inharmonious and trivial particular" there exists "a musical perfection" (*Experience CW III* 41).

Emerson never fully takes into account the dual nature of the sublime as either an illustrative statement or as a meaningless linguistic performance. At times, however, he comes close to admitting that transcendental ideas have no equivalent in poetic language. "The angels are so enamored of the language that is spoken in heaven," Emerson writes in "Intellect" (1841), "that they will not distort their lips with the hissing and unmusical dialects of men; but speak their own, whether there be any who understand it or not" (*CW II* 204). That this "heavenly music," a metaphor of the transcendental law of metamorphosis, cannot be heard in Emerson's own poetry is an irony that is not lost on the aesthetically sensitive reader. The "dissonances" between thought and expression, it seems, are too obvious to be ignored.

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