Literary Transcendentalism

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Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance. 
Nature as a literary pursuit was an acquired taste for the Transcendentalists, sometimes never acquired at all. The majority of Transcendentalist ministers, for example, were content to celebrate “nature” and “cosmic unity” as splendid abstractions and perhaps dash off a few poems in their spare time on the “tender flush of vernal dawn” or the sublimity of Niagara Falls. The prestige of Walden has taught us to associate Transcendentalism with a “return to nature,” but in fact Thoreau was a less typical figure in this respect than Margaret Fuller, who “delighted in short country rambles” (Ossoli, I, 263) but was too nearsighted, unhealthy, and citified to convey much more than a tourist’s enthusiasm for what she saw. She did write some interesting verse and prose-poetry on natural subjects, and some patches of good descriptive prose; but on the whole nature plays a minor role in her writing, and in her liter-

1 Quotation from Charles T. Brooks, “Spring,” in Poems, Original and Translated, ed. W. P. Andrews (Boston: Roberts, 1885), p. 125. Like most of their contemporaries, the Transcendentalists used the term “nature” ambiguously. Sometimes it denotes the entire empirical world or Not-me (as in Emerson’s Nature); sometimes it denotes the spiritual law working through the Not-me; sometimes it simply means “the outdoors.” At times the term is used in other senses as well. Nevertheless Transcendentalist usage is fairly predictable and easy to convey if one is careful in his phrasing. As a philosophical and literary concept in Transcendentalism, nature means primarily the physical universe as an expression of Spirit.
ary criticism she has almost nothing to say on the subject. Her love of nature was strong, but it did not much affect her literary personality.

Most of her fellow Transcendentalists also have more to say about Genius, Beauty, and Truth than about Nature. Even those who wrote most about nature arrived at their subject only after a preliminary period of meditation on religion, the conduct of life, and other matters similarly abstruse. Although James Russell Lowell was pig-headed in refusing to concede Thoreau much knowledge of nature, he was right that Thoreau had relatively little at the start of his career. Indeed, almost all the Transcendentalists, perhaps even Thoreau, were closer to being humanists than naturalists. At bottom they were more interested in man than nature, more interested in thought than observation. "What is Nature unless there is an eventful human life passing within her?" Thoreau asks (JT, V, 472). "A single good man, at one with God," says Parker, "makes the morning and evening sun seem little and very low." The deliberate appraisals of nature made by all the Transcendentalists fall between these two degrees of qualification. The central preoccupation of the movement was the relationship between self and God; compared to this, nature was of secondary importance.

But though the Transcendentalists were primarily children of the Puritans rather than children of nature, their reverence for the natural creation surpassed their ancestors', and with reason. To begin with, nature was no longer a threat or obstacle to survival. Whereas for the Puritans the "howling wilderness" was a hostile force, for the Transcendentalists it could serve as a sentimentally attractive image of the vigor and spontaneity lacking in their more comfortable existence. Beyond this, their distrust of historical Christianity made them attach an un-

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usually high theoretical value to nature as evidence and analogue of man's relation to God. This attitude, in turn, was reinforced by the romanticist cult of nature, particularly the vision of an organic universe, and by the nationalist cliché of America as nature's nation, which seemed to make romanticist ideology all the more relevant to their situation. As a result, nature tended to become a crucial touchstone in matters of religion, as when Emerson condemned the doctrine of miracles as monstrous because "it is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain (W, I, 129). Some Transcendentalists thought this too radical, but the general drift of the movement was from the rational supernaturalism of the Unitarians to natural religion to the religion of nature.

In their aesthetics, likewise, the Transcendentalists relied heavily upon the analogy of nature whenever they went further than simple celebrations of inspiration and genius and undertook to discuss style and form. As scholarship has conclusively and repeatedly established, they accepted the romantic-expressivist principle of organic form, believing that the work of art, rather than adopt an arbitrary pattern, should take shape like an organism according to the nature of the thing expressed. The locus classicus of this motif in Transcendentalist thought is Emerson's declaration in "The Poet" that "it is not metres,

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but a metre-making argument that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing” (W, III, 9-10).

To attempt to explore the implications of this analogy for Transcendentalist literary form may at first seem quixotic, in light of the apparent formlessness of much Transcendentalist writing and the notorious vagueness of the idea of nature as an aesthetic model, especially when it comes to the concept of structure. Morse Peckham has even gone so far as to claim that “no one to this day has been able to define organic unity in any useful manner.” 7 Certainly the Transcendentalists did not. Vivian Hopkins rightly concludes that “Emerson's discussion of form shows little recognition of architectonic sense.” 8 As for Thoreau, Fred Lorch is equally decisive: “In deriving intuition from the divine, [he] was quite explicit; concerning the relation between intuition and form he was vague.” 9 The organic analogy generally enters Transcendentalist criticism as a metaphor for the idea of inspiration rather than as a basis for hard thinking about structure.

Nevertheless, Thoreau's use of seasonal myth in Walden suggests that he at least had a practical awareness of what organic form might be; and the same is true, I think, of the other writers discussed in this section. Just as such scholars as M. H. Abrams and Albert S. Gérard have shown how some of the characteristic patterns of romantic consciousness function as formal principles in certain British lyrics, so criticism of Transcendentalist literature—notably Walden—has begun to identify some ways in which the vision of nature gives shape to the writings of Emerson and Thoreau.10

8 Hopkins, pp. 68–89.  
9 Lorch, p. 290.  
10 See M. H. Abrams, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," in From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York:
The basis of Transcendentalist thinking as to the role of nature in art is the idea of a metaphysical correspondence between nature and spirit, as expressed chiefly by Emerson. Man and the physical universe, Emerson says, are parallel creations of the same divine spirit; therefore natural and moral law are the same and everything in nature, rightly seen, has spiritual significance for man. The universe is thus a vast network of symbols—a Bible or revelation purer than any written scripture—which it is the chief task of the poet to study, master, and articulate. He above all others is qualified for this task because, unlike the theologian and the scientist, who attempt to reduce the meaning of nature to a rationalistic system, the poet follows the method of nature herself: he is guided by inspiration rather than logic, and expresses his thoughts in the form of images, in the same way that nature expresses spirit. A good literary work is therefore not an artificial construct, but a "second nature," growing out of the poet's mind as naturally as the leaf of a tree.\(^{11}\)

Historically speaking, Emerson's theory might be described as one latter-day version of the tradition of Christian typology in western thought, leavened by pantheistic influences. He imbibed these traditions from a variety of sources, including the neoplatonic tradition from Plotinus to Cudworth; more recent German, French, and English Unitarian pantheisms as digested and transmitted by Coleridge; Swedenborgianism; seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry; and Goethe's idea of the metamorphosis of plants. But rather than insist on specific sources, it

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\(^{11}\) For Emerson's most significant discussions of correspondence, see W, I, 25–60; III, 3–37; IV, 93–146; and VIII, 3–57. The most thorough scholarly study of Emerson's idea is Sherman Paul, *Emerson's Angle of Vision* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952).
is fairer to say that the idea of correspondence was generally in the air; Coleridge, Swedenborg, Goethe, and the others served primarily as catalysts.\textsuperscript{12} As early as his seventeenth year, Emerson was journalizing about "that eternal analogy which subsists between the external changes of nature & scenes of good & ill that chequer human life" (\textit{JMN}, I, 19). And a century before this, typology was a significant motif in Puritan thought, though it seems not to have descended directly to Emerson and his circle, except in the very general sense in which their heritage conditioned them to see nature in a spiritual light.\textsuperscript{13}

Other Transcendentalists, less interested than Emerson in philosophizing about correspondence, generally accepted the principle of nature as a spiritual analogue to man, as well as the main conclusions about poetic style to which this analogy led Emerson, whether or not they tried to put these conclusions into practice for themselves.\textsuperscript{14} This is understandable. Natural

\textsuperscript{12} On Emerson's sources see, for example, Paul, pp. 28–70; and Kenneth W. Cameron, \textit{Emerson the Essayist} (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1945), I, 17–336.

\textsuperscript{13} Ursula Brumm points out that the parallels between Edwards' and Emerson's thinking about nature and typology are "due to the continuous development of modes of thought of a single cultural tradition rather than to direct borrowing" (\textit{American Thought and Religious Typology}, trans. John Hoaglund [New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1970], p. 102). This work provides the best available overview of the development of typology in American thought.

\textsuperscript{14} See for example Odell Shepard, \textit{Pedlar's Progress} (Boston: Little, Brown, 1937), pp. 156–157; Sherman Paul, \textit{The Shores of America} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958), pp. 195–196, 257–258; Anthony Herbold, "Nature as Concept and Technique in the Poetry of Jones Very," \textit{New England Quarterly}, 40 (1967), 244–259; and Cyrus Bartol, \textit{Pictures of Europe} (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, 1855), pp. 140–141. Paul and Herbold also point out the limitations of their subjects' interest in correspondence: Thoreau found it more difficult to relate to nature in his later years; Very's belief was strongly qualified by his religious orthodoxy. Actually, similar qualifications can be found in Emerson also, especially of the Thoreauvian sort. It is better to think of correspondence as a characteristic theme in Transcendentalist thought than as an article of fixed and
religion, which Transcendentalism essentially was, has strong
dantheistic tendencies, which inevitably come to the fore when
the devotee turns to nature in a reverential mood. Pantheism,
in turn, is a highly poetic religion. Its central principle, that
God is everywhere, is allied to the symbolic perception in
poetry; and both share a strong mystical bent.

The idea of correspondence as Emerson inherited it was par-
ticularly well calculated to reinforce his vision of the poet-
priest. It seemed to possess both the authority of doctrine and
the flexibility of a poetics. For the Swedenborgians, on the one
hand, the significances of nature were fixed by divine ordinance
and susceptible to dogmatic formulation. The metaphysical
poets, at the opposite extreme, used nature symbolism rather
for its beauty, subtlety, and figurative validity than for its literal
truth. In Emerson's thought, these two interests fuse. His rever-
ence for nature as the primary revelation of God makes him
take the business of typology very seriously, but his emanci-
pated view of traditional theology keeps him from seeing more
than poetry in Swedenborg.

From this ambiguous perspective, Emerson examines the na-
ture of literature in a series of lectures, essays, and ex cathedra
remarks, of which Nature, "The Poet," and "Poetry and Imagi-
nation" are the most important documents. His method is un-
systematic but his results are fairly consistent and, in their own
way, hang together.15

As René Wellek remarks, Emerson's poetic "is on the whole open to
the charge rather of monotony, repetitiveness, and inflexibility" than the
usual allegation of "random eclecticism" ("Ralph Waldo Emerson," in
A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950: The Age of Transition [New
Haven: Yale University Press, 1965], p. 165). Wellek's chapter on Emer-
sion's poetic is probably the best short account, though it exaggerates both
the "one important inconsistency" in Emerson's poetic and its prevailing
"monotony." The most thorough studies of Emerson's aesthetic theories,
generally reliable, are Hopkins, Spires of Form, and Emerson Grant
On the one hand, Emerson develops the notion of a poetics based on nature, attempting to deduce particular critical principles from particular natural laws. His key rhetorical terms have a double reference, both to aesthetics and to natural processes. To take a simple example, “Rhyme” is identified with the principle of iteration in nature, in shadows and reflections in water (W, VIII, 45); rhyming couplets, in “Merlin II,” are linked with the principle of polarity: “Balance-loving Nature / Made all things in pairs. / To every foot its antipode” (W, IX, 123). Through such comparisons, Emerson interprets poetry and nature in terms of each other, thereby also “proving” the correspondence between matter and mind. Poetry is judged according to nature: “A rhyme in one of our sonnets should not be less pleasing than the iterated nodes of a seashell” (W, III, 25). Conversely, nature is comprehended poetically, in terms of rhyme: “Astronomy, Botany, Chemistry, Hydraulics and the elemental forces have their own periods and returns” (W, VIII, 49). The method of poetry is nature; the method of nature is poetry. The rhymes of poetry are therefore seen to have a significance beyond the mere pleasure of their music, to the extent that they govern in nature also; so that Emerson can affirm at least metaphorically that “The rhyme of the poet / Modulates the king’s affairs” (W, IX, 123).

On the other hand, however, Emerson’s “argument” here is itself a metaphor, rather than an inquiry in the usual sense. What excites him is the general sense of reciprocity between poetry and nature rather than any precise deductions about prosody or science. He is neither a theologian nor a critic on

such occasions but rather “an artist in the medium of theory,” in Charles Feidelson’s admirable phrase.\(^\text{16}\) His “poetic” is a poem or myth in itself—a series of desultory celebrations, full of wit and lyricism and sometimes whimsy. One doubts whether Emerson set great store by his “theory of rhyme,” for example. Indeed, the passages quoted above are less characteristic of him than disparagements of rhyme as a minor and artificial grace.

That Emerson is not as hard-nosed a critic as Johnson or Coleridge does not mean, however, that he should be taken lightly. On the contrary, his peculiar combination of sensitivity and insouciance enabled him to get much better results from the correspondential theory than one would expect from Coleridge even if Coleridge had taken the trouble to develop it in detail. Coleridge wanted to see correspondence adumbrated as a metaphysic, which would have removed a good deal of its poetic suppleness. Precisely because Emerson did not care as much about methodological rigor, he was better suited to pursue the poetic implications of correspondence. René Wellek rightly calls him “the outstanding representative of romantic symbolism in the English-speaking world.”\(^\text{17}\) We will best appreciate this if we read him in the same spirit that he read Swedenborg, interpreting much of what he says as figurative but taking very seriously his principle of nature as a model for art.

The core of Emerson’s poetic is the idea of the symbolic image, which is also the basis of the principle of correspondence itself. Largely because Emerson’s thought on this point anticipates modern theories of symbolism, a great amount of attention has been devoted to it.

Emerson sums up the matter beautifully in “Poetry and Imagination”:

As a power [poetry] is the perception of the symbolic character of things, and the treating them as representative: as a talent it is a magnetic tenaciousness of an image, and by the treatment demon-

\(^{16}\) *Symbolism*, p. 158.  
\(^{17}\) *History of Modern Criticism*, p. 176.
In making images, that is, the poet participates in the natural law of spirit “to manifest itself in material forms” (W, I, 34). In the process, Emerson claims elsewhere, the poet restores language to its original state of purity, inasmuch as words themselves are originally derived from nature (or so Emerson and many of his contemporaries believed). In a double sense, therefore, “picturesque language” is of metaphysical value and certifies “that he who employs it is a man in alliance with truth and God” (W, I, 30). The language of poetry should be imagery because imagery is the language of nature and also the nature of language.

Emerson did not exalt the image simply for metaphysical reasons; it was also a matter of instinct with him. In his own experience the feeling of inspiration was linked with the image-making power,18 and in his reading he relished language which was pungent and concrete. Even if he had never heard of the theory of correspondence he would have been an imagist in temperament. Likewise the modern reader may reject the metaphysical basis of his aesthetic and still profit from his criticism. Emerson’s naive ideas about typology and the origin of language led him to some fruitful conclusions about poetic language, just as in our century Ezra Pound was stimulated by Ernest Fenollosa’s equally inaccurate theory of the Chinese character (which owed something to Emerson, by the way).19 If Emerson was wrong in thinking that savages converse in tropes, he was right that there is a fossil poetry in words. If he was wrong in saying that cunning people correspond to foxes and spiteful ones to snakes, he was right about the imaginative fitness and

18 See W, I, 31; and JMN, V, 77, 106. I owe this insight to Bishop, pp. 119–120.
force of such analogies. A happy symbol is “a sort of evidence that your thought is just” (W, VIII, 13).

What raised Emerson’s devotion to poetry from a personal pleasure to the level of something like reverence, however, was not his aesthetic preferences so much as the conviction that the method of the poet is metaphysically true. The power of the image derives from the nature of nature. “The value of a trope is that the hearer is one: and indeed Nature itself is a vast trope, and all particular natures are tropes” (W, VIII, 15). Tying art to metaphysics in this way was both a limitation and a strength. It limited Emerson as a critical theorist, not so much because it prevented him from going into the analytical detail of an Edgar Allan Poe, as because of a vagueness in his idea of correspondence itself. On the one hand, as in the “Language” chapter of Nature, Emerson seems to take the Swedenborgian position that there is an exact system of one-to-one correspondences between natural and spiritual facts. Elsewhere, however, he explicitly rejects this view, stressing that “in nature, each individual symbol plays innumerable parts” (W, IV, 121). This latter position is far more characteristic of Emerson, yet to the last he never entirely abandons the idea that natural objects “are really parts of a symmetrical universe, like words of a sentence; and if their true order is found, the poet can read their divine significance orderly as in a Bible” (W, VIII, 8). Even as he discounts all existing symbolic systems as merely metaphoric, Emerson clings to the belief that there must be a fixed universal order for the poet to perceive.

This leads to a corresponding ambiguousness in Emerson’s poetic. At times poetry is seen as pre-existing in nature and merely discovered by the poet (“poetry was all written before time was”; “poems are a corrupt version of some text in nature with which they ought to be made to tally” [W, III, 8, 25]), while elsewhere the poet is seen as using nature creatively for his own purposes (“He unfixes the land and the sea, makes them revolve around the axis of his primary thought, and disposes
Emerson the neoplatonist was at odds with Emerson the romantic, one might say. In the abstract this contradiction can of course be resolved by invoking the theory of inspiration. The ideal bard will be so sensitive a conductor of the Oversoul that even “when he seems to vent a mere caprice and wild romance, the issue is an exact allegory” (W, II, 34). But in actuality Emerson could find no such poet, nor could he advance as definite a notion of cosmic or poetic form as he seems, in his more optimistic moments, to think exists. To have done so, indeed, would have been to risk the kind of pedantry he disliked in Swedenborg. What excites Emerson in his discussions of nature and the creative imagination, rather, is their fecundity and many-sidedness. His instinct is simply to affirm the principle of cosmic unity-in-diversity on the one hand, and to celebrate the sheer image-making power of the poet on the other. Every particle is a microcosm of the universe; every creature is a modification of every other; “in the transmission of the heavenly waters, every hose fits every hydrant” (W, IV, 121). “The feat of the imagination,” therefore, “is in showing the convertibility of every thing into every other thing” (W, VI, 304), in capturing the sense of cosmic opulence and rapidity of metamorphosis by displaying “in every word instant activity of mind, shown in new uses of every fact and image, in preternatural quickness or perception of relations” (W, VIII, 17). That in two sentences is the emotional center of Emerson’s poetic, and its metaphysical foundation. “The whole fascination of life for him,” as O. W. Firkins says without much exaggeration, “lay in the disclosure of identity in variety, that is, in the concurrence, the running together, of several distinct images or ideas.”

Emerson’s fascination with metamorphosis, combined with his rather blithe assurance that order must exist somewhere, runs him into difficulty on the question of literary form, as his critics have always been quick to point out. Whereas Coleridge sees the

imagination as a synthesizer, Emerson sees it primarily as a multiplier of images. Carried to its logical conclusion, this view deprives him of "any brake on the transmutation of form," as Feidelson says. Emerson's own prose style has often been cited as a perfect instance of such formlessness. Its most familiar pattern is a staccato movement through a succession of analogies, a continuous process of statement and restatement until the topic seems finally exhausted. "Circles" is a (seemingly) clear case of structural miscellaneousness. At the outset Emerson says flatly that the concept of the circle "may conveniently serve us to connect many illustrations of human power in every department" (W, II, 301), and then proceeds to ancient Greek art, engineering, architecture, farming, psychology, friendship, philosophy, war, conversation, literature, religion, ethics, natural science, and other fields as well. At least upon first inspection, it is as if Orville Dewey's sermon "Everything in Life is Moral" had been rewritten in prose run mad. The conception seems excessively simple, the point-by-point movement excessively capricious.

Emerson himself also conceded weakness in the area of form. To Carlyle he admitted regretfully that his sentences were "infinitely repellent particles"; in his journal he frequently speaks with a kind of ruefulness of the importance of form to the writer. "Diamond & lampblack . . . are the same substance differently arranged. Let it teach the importance of Composition," says one journal entry (JMN, V, 233). Like rhyme and language and image, "composition" is another rhetorical term which Emerson defined correspondentially. It means the arrangement of parts either in a work of art or in a landscape. In both cases, the "Each and All" principle should apply: "All are needed by each one; / Nothing is fair or good alone" (W, IX, 4). Just as objects gain in beauty through composition, so too

22 Symbolism, p. 150.  
do our thoughts, "when put together by their natural affinities." 24 Or as the journal puts it: "It is much to write sentences; it is more to add method, & write out 'the spirit of your life symmetrically. . . . To arrange many general reflections in their natural order so that I shall have one homogeneous piece, . . . this continuity is for the great" (JMN, VIII, 49). But here, as in the previous quotation, the key word is "natural." The arrangement must be a "natural order," the thoughts must be tied by "natural affinities," and they must express the "spirit of your life"—nothing insincere will do. Hence we find Emerson saying elsewhere, quite cheerfully, that though it is desirable to be more methodical than he has been able to be, "the truth speaker may dismiss all solicitude as to the proportion & congruency of the aggregate of his thoughts so long as he is a faithful reporter of particular impressions" (JMN, VII, 303). Honesty is the first requisite of authorship; form is important also, but only as honesty permits.

Such declarations, in the context of Emerson's seemingly haphazard prose, have generally kept his readers from taking his philosophy of composition any more seriously than Poe's, except as a confession of personal failure. He has been taken as the philosopher and poet of the aphorism and the image. In varying degrees, the same judgment has been passed on those other Transcendentalists whose rhetoric resembles his, as well as Walt Whitman. The critical consensus has traditionally been that both in theory and in practice these writers were weak in respect to structure—with certain honorable exceptions, of which Walden, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," "Out of the Cradle," and "When Lilacs Last" are the most prominent.

Actually, the assumption that correspondence implies no theory of form is simplistic. Although Emerson has little to say directly about the matter, his implied model is surely the microcosm, or "miniature universe" as Richard Tuerk calls it in his

explication of the structure of *Nature*.\(^{25}\) Just as each object in nature, in Emerson’s most characteristic view of correspondence, epitomizes the whole order of nature, so must the work of art. As both Emerson and Thoreau liked to put the matter, the poet is he who sees the “integrity” of the landscape which other people see part by part. They own their separate tracts; the poet has his “property” in the horizon, in the whole.\(^{26}\) To the perfect perception, “all nature will be *fable*, and every natural phenomenon be a myth,” Thoreau says (*JT*, V, 135). The poet’s individual images should take on universal significance and his work as a whole should reticulate them together so that they “fall within the great Order not less than the beehive or the spider’s geometrical web,” as Emerson puts it in “The Poet” (*W*, III, 19). The kind of literary structure to which these metaphors point would seem to be close to what Frye calls “encyclopedic form”—namely a structure which will be atomistic, discontinuous, yet comprehensive and essentially unified by the artist’s vision of the cosmic order.\(^{27}\)

Given Emerson’s emphasis on the fluidity of nature, this formulation may seem practically useless, just another way of saying that the Transcendentalist concept of form amounts to formlessness. Emerson does, however, present models of universal order in between the extremes of the radically open-ended view of Nature as flux and the uncharacteristically rigid Swedenborgian idea of Nature as a book of types. The most important of these are polarity (as in “Compensation”) and spiritual hierarchy, or scale-of-being order (as in *Nature*). Although Emerson rarely advances these concepts as aesthetic paradigms


\(^{26}\) E.g., *W*, I, 8; *Wa*, p. 81.

\(^{27}\) Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), pp. 55 ff, 315 ff, and passim. To the extent that Frye retains the epic as a prototype for this mode, the analogy does not hold. Perhaps the more overworked “microcosm” is the more satisfactory term after all.
("Merlin II," on polarity and rhyme, is an exception), they frequently serve that purpose in his essays, as in the two just cited. Notwithstanding the cliché Alcott perpetrated about Emerson's prose, "You may begin at the last paragraph and read backwards," it has been shown that Emerson was very successful at his best in ordering his diverse materials into polar and dialectical patterns. The best examples of this are probably *Nature*, where a six-fold layering of approaches to nature are dovetailed into one another, and "Experience," where the seven lords of life are unfolded in such a way as to move from the most superficial level of experience ("Illusion") to the most interior ("Subjectiveness").

Even the seemingly amorphous "Circles" discloses a hierarchical structuring of sorts upon inspection. The apparent miscellany of examples falls under two heads, nature and man, introduced in parallel phraseology: "There are no fixtures in nature" (*W*, II, 302); "There are no fixtures to men" (306). The categories seem confusing because Emerson also talks about man in the first part and nature in the second. The essay becomes clearer, however, when one sees that mankind is discussed as an aspect of the course of nature and history in the first section, while nature is seen as a field of human endeavor in the second. In each section, furthermore, Emerson treats his subjects in roughly ascending order of importance, which is consonant with his main theme that "every action admits of being outdone" (301). Illustrating his first point, he begins with a historical sketch of the impermanence and perpetual advancement of various cultural forms and achievements from Greece

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to the present (302–303), then gives a general overview of man as a creature whose efforts of the moment are continually being superseded by himself and others (304–305). Now, proceeding to his second point, he notes this principle at work in a number of different areas of human behavior, which are again arranged in roughly ascending order of importance: emotional moods (306–307), relations with other people (307–308), philosophy (308–310), conversation (310–311), literature (311–312), religious institutions (313), natural religion (313–314), moral and spiritual growth (314–317).

This outline exaggerates the impression of coherence which "Circles" conveys, of course. Emerson is almost perversely casual about transitions, key words, topic sentences, and other such rhetorical signals. And to a large extent he converts this casualness into a stylistic virtue, too. The précis is sterile compared to the prose itself; one of the most distinctive and impressive features of Emersonian style in general is its unpredictable, vigorous fecundity. The point is simply that this quality is controlled in his writing, at least through 1860. Just as in good poetry there is an interplay between an implied metrical pattern and continual deviations from the norm in particular lines, so in Emerson's essays there is generally an implicit framework, which is continually being blurred and defied by improvisation and diffuseness. This tension expresses both Emerson's metaphysical belief in a universe which is essentially purposeful but continuously in the process of change, and also his aesthetic sophistication. "If you desire to arrest attention," he writes in his journal, "do not give me facts in the order of cause & effect, but drop one or two links in the chain, & give me with a cause, an effect two or three times removed" (JMN, VII, 90). This is a beautiful description of the method of his best essays.

Emerson's arrangements of essays within collections also show an eye for order, especially in Essays, First Series and Conduct of Life, as Sherman Paul has pointed out. The former relies
on the principle of polarity: "History" and "Self-Reliance" (the Not-me and the Me); "Compensation" and "Spiritual Laws" (nature's law of opposites and the law of the soul which underlies it); "Love" and "Friendship" (relationships with the female and the male); "Prudence" and "Heroism" (mundane and great action); "The Over-Soul" and "Circles" (the fountainhead of the spirit and the activity which it inspires); "Intellect" and "Art" (the mind and its creation). Conduct of Life, Emerson's most sophisticated book in terms of literary structure, ascends in a three-fold series of triads, in accordance with Emerson's idea that "there is a climbing scale of culture" from the material to the human to the intellectual levels (W, VI, 306). Emerson surveys his subject first primarily on the material or prudential level, then in terms of the formation of character, and finally on the level of intellectual law. In the first part of the book, "Fate" and "Power" are juxtaposed as opposites (and in each essay a further polarity is drawn between the users and the used); "Wealth"—by which Emerson means broadly the art of controlling nature, not just making money (86)—encompasses the first two approaches by showing the ways in which power overcomes fate. The next trio of essays also presents a polarity, "Culture" and "Behavior" (the education of the mind and of manners) subsumed by the third chapter, "Worship," which is defined as the "flowering and completion of culture (204). The three final essays reverse this pattern somewhat. The last two, "Beauty" and "Illusions," examine the cosmic paradox of flux versus permanence from the perspectives of beauty and truth, while "Considerations by the Way," the antepenultimate chapter, is an attempt at a comprehensive description of the ideal life-style. The reason that it is not given the last word in the book, in addition to the fact that it is a mediocre performance, would seem to be that it is ethical rather than philosophical as the last two pieces are. It is both striking and symbolically appropriate for Emerson to end a book which begins by describing the "laws of the world" (4) with the image in "Illusions" of the
transfigured scholar catching a glimpse of "the gods . . . sitting around him on their thrones,—they alone with him alone" (325).

It might be said in objection to the preceding examples that polar, triadic, and hierarchical methods of organization may often be after-the-fact rationalizations rather than integral to the process of composition. To the extent that Emerson seems to bind himself merely on general principles to recapitulating a given pattern, it might indeed be argued that he is not a true literary organicist, even though the pattern in question happens to be derived from nature. But the fact remains that it was instinctive for Emerson to think and order his perceptions in terms of such patterns, and therefore his essays tended naturally to take shape around them. That is the essential point to notice here: the tendency for Emerson's writing to rely on concepts of natural order as structural principles, albeit with varying degrees of success. The same holds true also for a number of works by other Transcendentalist authors. Thoreau's two major books are organized around cycles of nature, which also symbolize the process of spiritual growth; and almost all his other nature writings delineate excursions into nature which fulfil, in some measure, a mythic pattern of quest and return. Ellery Channing builds his major pastorals largely around seasonal cycles; Bronson Alcott uses a scale-of-being arrangement in *Tablets* and a seasonal order in *Concord Days*. The structural pretensions of all of these works deserve to be taken as seriously as *Walden*'s have been taken, though they do not come nearly so close to realizing the possibilities of their design. Do not believe Bronson Alcott's motto in *Tablets*: "For curious method expect none, essays for the most part not being placed as at a feast, but placing themselves as at an ordinary." Alcott tried a lot harder than that, but it was in the transcendental interest to give the impression of thoughts naturally taking shape, rather than being ordered by the impresario.

Perhaps the most striking example of the kind of structure
implied by the idea of correspondence was a work Thoreau planned but never quite wrote, though *Walden* came close. "I think I could write a poem to be called ‘Concord,’ " he says in a well known early journal entry. "For argument I should have the River, the Woods, the Ponds, the Hills, the Fields, the Swamps and Meadows, the Streets and Buildings, and the Villagers. Then Morning, Noon, and Evening, Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter, Night, Indian Summer, and the Mountains in the Horizon" (*JT*, I, 282). This truly would have been the poem of the universe, at least the local universe.\(^{31}\) Of course a perfect realization was impossible. Ideally, each page "should be written in its own season and out-of-doors, or in its own locality wherever it may be” (II, 239). Even if this could be done, "the seasons admit of infinite degrees in their revolutions" (IV, 117); their order cannot be fixed. Or even if they could be, it would be impossible to represent every gradation of feeling which an environment inspires. Though men may have "detected every kind of flower that grows in this township," Thoreau remarks, "have they with proportionate thoroughness plucked every flower of thought which it is possible for a man to entertain, proved every sentiment which it is possible for a man to experience, here?" (IV, 289). Understandably, the true poem of Concord remained an elusive ideal for Thoreau, but a compelling one, against which to measure what he actually did write.\(^{32}\)

In line with Bronson Alcott's gentle duplicity, Thoreau's remarks, as well as the other Transcendentalist attempts to represent the natural order in the works mentioned above, seem

\(^{31}\)Thoreau's plan for a literary book of the seasons was of course not in itself original but a common motif in English literature of nature, e.g., James Thomson's *The Seasons* and William Howitt's *The Book of the Seasons*, not to mention Spenser's *Shepheards Calender*. Emerson toyed with the idea also (*JMN*, V, 25).

\(^{32}\)Ellery Channing notes, however, that the literary calendar idea was "only one of the various plans" Thoreau had in mind (*Thoreau the Poet-Naturalist*, ed. F. B. Sanborn, new ed. [Boston: Goodspeed, 1902], p. 67).
to cherish simultaneously a desire for total imaginative freedom and a desire for metaphysical coherence. Any just appreciation of the quality of their vision must therefore be somewhat double-minded also. It is necessary to do justice both to the extreme care with which they were capable of arranging that vision, and to their moments of exhilaration in the sheer power and spontaneity of natural processes, at which time coherence is purposely undercut or abandoned for lyric flights. At the same time, their very moments of abandonment need to be examined for elements of escapism and concealed self-doubt, for as we have seen from Emerson's own modest appraisal of his achievements he was far from satisfied with his own performance. The same sense of frustrating indefiniteness which inevitably makes up a part of one's response to his writing was, furthermore, an aspect of his own response to nature. "I have intimations of my riches much more than possession," a typical entry in his journal reads. "Every object suggests to me in certain moods a dim anticipation of profound meaning, as if by & by it would appear to me why the apple-tree, why the meadow, why the stump, stand there, & what they signify to me" (JMN, VII, 98–99). The structure, tone and themes of Transcendentalist writing all convey a strong but precarious sense of imminent fulfilment. The possibilities are boundless, but nothing may come of them; the world is full of meaning, but that meaning is yet to be disclosed. Ellery Channing is the end of the Transcendentalist line in this respect, so I have reserved him for last in this section. But some of the sombre, as well as the ecstatic, can be seen even in the early Thoreau and in the most seemingly exuberant of all Transcendentalist forms of expression, the rhetoric of the catalogue, which we shall examine next.